

SEEING GOD WITH BOTH EYES: ASCETICISM, ASCENSION AND POETRY IN THE MAKHZAN
AL-ASRAR OF NIZAMI GANJAVI (D. 1209)

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ABSTRACT

Matthew R. Hotham: Seeing God with Both Eyes: Asceticism, Ascension and Poetry in the
Makhzan al-asrar of Nizami Ganjavi (D. 1209)
(Under the direction of Carl Ernst)

This dissertation investigates the role of the body in medieval Sufism through an analysis of the portrayals of human, animal and prophetic bodies in the first of Nizami Ganjavi's *Masnawi* poems, the *Makhzan al-asrar*. Though the nature of Nizami as poet, mystic, ethicist, and scientist has been a topic of debate for several decades, barely discussed in this ongoing conversation is the first poem in his *Quintet*, the *Treasury of Mysteries*. A mystico-ethical text, it was emulated in both meter and structure by a vast number of Persian poets after him. In spite of its immense popularity and importance, this poem, especially its long introductory sections, are often overlooked in contemporary scholarship. This is in part because they challenge long-held but problematic definitions of Sufism as an antinomian tendency within Islam that is primarily interested in human love as a metaphor for divine proximity. This dissertation argues that these texts can, as Scott Kugle and Shahzad Bashir have pointed out, become sources for learning about medieval Sufi habitus—as sedimented sources of religious mores, bodily comportments, social relations, history, science, and meaning. As such, this dissertation will challenge previous characterizations of medieval Sufism by investigating the importance of bodily practice in a significant medieval poem.

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A NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

Transliteration is a complex phenomenon. Often those who can best make use of diacritics are also conversant in the languages in question, and so do not need them. For those who do not know the languages in question, diacritics are of little use and may hinder readability. For this reason I have opted for a simplified version of the IJMES transliteration convention, marking only the ‘ayn and ’hamza.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In 2004, Martin Lings published a brief collection of translations titled *Sufi Poems*. The volume includes a small sampling of verse from thirteen poets, all written in Arabic, living from the ninth through thirteenth centuries. Lings provides a brief preface and conclusion, discussing the origins of the translations and the contours of mystical union in Islam, but nowhere does he define what makes something a “Sufi poem.” This is not meant as a critique of Lings. Lings had no intention of presenting an exhaustive definition or treatment of Sufi poetry. The exclusion of Persian poets in and of itself precludes that. Rather, I use his book to draw attention to the broader issues at stake in this dissertation. For Lings, the publisher, and the potential audience of his book, there was no need to define a Sufi poem. The definition seems self-evident. As with other apparently self-evident categories (say, for example, “Islam” or “religion”), the term begins to wobble when looked at too closely. Perhaps this is why Carl Ernst notes that “defining Sufi poetry is not easy to do...and despite the massive presence of

poetry in Sufi circles, there is surprisingly little discussion of this question in modern studies of Sufism.”¹

Though Lings is not explicit in the preface of *Sufi Poems*, the book nevertheless implicitly outlines the characteristics of a Sufi poem. We can discern these implicit assumptions based on Lings’ selection of poems, his choice of poets, and what he feels is most critical to recount in each poet’s brief biography. For Lings, certain poetic forms and topoi mark a poem as “Sufi,” alongside the poet’s own religious background. A few examples should suffice to highlight this implicit definition.

For Lings, the mystical poem is first and foremost a “spontaneous...means of relief” from the agony of “the sense of separation from God and the return to the intrusive imperfections of this lower world.”² Since they are spontaneous outbursts in the face of the loss of contact with the divine, mystical poems necessarily must occur in short bursts. Lings prefers to present brief poems, the longest by far is Ibn al-Farid’s “Wine Song,” at 39 lines. This is an extreme outlier, since the average poem length in the volume is about 4 lines. The poems are generally in the *qita* or *rubiyat* form. The brevity and formal simplicity of the poems selected

¹ Carl W. Ernst, “What Is Early Arabic Sufi Poetry? Prolegomenon to a Translation of the Poetry of Al-Hallaj” (Duke Arabic Halqa, Duke University, 2014), <http://www.unc.edu/~cernst/pdf/sufipoetry.pdf>.

² Martin Lings, *Sufi Poems: A Mediaeval Anthology* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2005), viii.

supports Lings' notion that these poems were spontaneous outbursts in response to attaining and then returning from a direct encounter with God.³

In terms of topic, Lings' highlights the plaintive nature of the poems, which are all in the first-person. Most are odes, declaring the poet's love for God, often addressed directly to God, such as in this quatrain from Rabi'a al-Adawiya:

Through me my spirit through and through
Hast penetrated: even so
A thorough friend must thorough be.
So, when I speak, I speak of Thee;
When silent, then I long for Thee.⁴

As should be expected from this early selection of poems, most lack the technical vocabulary and layer upon layer of metaphor that becomes the hallmark of Persian poetry. Nevertheless, we do see references to romantic human love as a metaphor for divine/human love, with several references to the Layla and Majnun, the quintessential star-crossed lovers. A key trope in many of the poems is that love allows one to rend or pierce the veils between lover and beloved, or God and creation, such as when Dhun Nun says:

The Beloved's welcome is the abode wherein they dwell

³ Elsewhere, Lings argues that the Sufi is one who is "conscious of being, like other men, a prisoner in the world of forms, but unlike them is also conscious of being free." This consciousness of this past experience of freedom is what produces the longing expressed in the poems, which is distinct from ecstatic outbursts, which occur because the Sufi has "two centers of consciousness, one human and one Divine, and he may speak now from one and now from the other." Ibid., 14.

⁴ Ibid., 5.

Most penetrant their resolve; by it they have travelled
By it their thoughts pierce to what is hidden by Veils.⁵

Love is metaphorized as a fire which consumes the lover with longing for consummation. This longing is often framed as a thirst, though only in Ibn al-Farid's poems do we see this thirst explicitly framed as thirst for wine, and passionate love compared with drunkenness. In some of the poems, the author frames him or herself as one who longs, but who shows patience or restraint in waiting for (re)union with God. Separation from the world is a key, if understated aspect of most of these poems, such as in this verse by Abu al-Abbad Al-Sayari:

Patiently pleasures I shunned till they shunned me
I made my soul forsake them; steadfast she stood.
The soul's for man to make her as he would:
If fed, she seeks more; else, resigned she'll be.⁶

There is a tendency in the selection of poems to, as Homerin noted, frame "this poetry as verse accounts of Sufi doctrine reflecting a mystic's endeavors to describe an experience of great profundity and overwhelming emotion. Yet, too often, such explanations are based on romantic notions of poetry that focus on an individual's lonely self struggle."⁷ Homerin warns that such a view of mystical poetry threatens to "isolate this poetry from its larger social,

⁵ Ibid., 10.

⁶ Ibid., 48.

⁷ Emil Homerin, *Passion Before Me, My Fate Behind: Ibn Al-Farid and the Poetry of Recollection* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), vii., as quoted in Ernst, "Sufi Poetry."

religious, and literary context.”⁸ One way Lings attempts to attend to the poet’s social and religious context is via biography, specifically through attending to each poet’s spiritual lineage.

For each of the thirteen poets in the collection, Lings provides a brief 1-2 paragraph introduction. Each biography contains information about the poet’s locations and dates, their key spiritual teachings, and, often, information on their institutional Sufi credentials.⁹ For early figures, such as Rabia al-Adawiya, the poet’s interactions with other important early mystics is sufficient. For later poets, detailing their investiture is a key aspect of the biography, such as in the case of Ibn al-Farid.¹⁰ In the case where a historical connection to institutional Sufism cannot be affirmatively made, Lings uses the poem’s content to argue for such a connection, such as with Abd al-Aziz Al-Tunisi: “it gives us the certitude that it could only have been written by a man who had found a Sufi Shaykh and had been initiated into one of the orders of Sufism.”¹¹

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Yashartar notes a link between Persian Sufi poetry and institutional orders, saying: “the Sufi brotherhoods and their hospices also became instruments for cultivating Persian poetry...” Ehsan Yarshater, “The Development of Iranian Literatures,” in *Persian Literature*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1988), 14.

¹⁰ Lings, *Sufi Poems*, 67.

¹¹ Ibid., 51.

Thus, we see that for Lings and his readership, a Sufi poem is most easily defined as a brief, plaintive cry of longing for God written after a mystical experience by someone who is connected to institutional Sufism and its teachings. In the conclusion, however, Lings offers another way a poem can be counted as “Sufi”: a poem which is “not in origin a Sufi poem” can be “annexed into Sufism.”¹² By this he means that a poem not addressed to God, and not written by someone attached to a mystical order, can be later put to use by Sufis—even misattributed to great historical Sufis—and thus become a “Sufi poem.”

Lings book provides a helpful corrective to the study of Sufism and poetry, which has tended to eschew Arabic poetry in favor of Persian works. Ernst, in his forthcoming introduction to a collection of poetry on Hallaj, notes the scant attention given to Arabic Sufi poetry in the West, linking it to early modern racial attitudes.¹³ Ernst, however, eschews Lings’ implicit definition of a Sufi poem, arguing that neither aesthetic nor authorial intent suitable encompass the range of poems and poets we might wish to mark as “Sufi.” He argues that “the problem is that the poetry circulating in Sufi circles in many ways could not be distinguished, in textual terms, from other forms of poetry found in early Arab culture. In other words, Sufi poetry cannot be defined necessarily as the composition of particular authors, nor even as a

¹² Ibid., 91.

¹³ Ernst, “Sufi Poetry.”

definite style or literary genre. It is instead the reception and interpretation of this poetry that connects it to Sufism. Sufi poetry may then be defined as poems that are listened to and understood through the hermeneutics of Sufism, regardless of their origin or authorship.”¹⁴

Defining a poem as “Sufi” based on authorial intent or metaphorical content becomes all the more complex in Persian poetry. A host of commenters have argued that Persian poetry becomes formally fixed by the early 14th century, relying on a fixed set of images and metaphors. Jan Rypka, for example, asserts that during the Timurid period, Persian poetry becomes dominated by an increase in formalism to conceal “lack of originality and poverty of thought.”¹⁵ This formalism is inflected with allegory and an empty mysticism which he claims are “not bold Sufi conceptions but pantheistic ideas.”¹⁶ The question of whether Persian poets of this period were “actually” Sufis, or merely using Sufi imagery out of convention, comes to a head in discussions of the poet Hafiz. Hafiz describes passionate human love, lauds drunkenness, and critiques the Sufi as a hypocrite in his poems. In spite of this, his works are extremely popular in Sufi circles who read them metaphorically and plumb them for mystical insights. This tension between a literal reading of the content of the poem and its later

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Jan Rypka, “History of Persian Literature up to the Beginning of the 20th Century,” in *History of Iranian Literature*, ed. Jan Rypka (D. Reidel, 1968), 283.

¹⁶ Ibid.

interpretation is perhaps most clearly summed up by Ehsan Yarshater, who is highly skeptical of mystical readings of Hafiz:

Attempts at finding a mystical interpretation for Hafiz's praise of wine and drunkenness are not supported by his *Divan*. Many lovers of Hafiz have sought to find clues in his poetry to his mysticism or confirmation of his religious beliefs. As Sufi centers (*khanaqahs*) multiplied and Sufi orders found more and more affiliates, a mystical view of life and the universe and the attainment of Truth by love rather than reason became prevalent and profoundly influenced the Persian world view. It was only natural that a Sufistic interpretation should be applied to the poems of Hafiz, ignoring in the process many indications to the contrary. Some commentators and even some Western translators of Hafiz, notably Wilberforce Clarke, a translator of the *Divān* (London, 1974), satisfied themselves, to the point of utter absurdity, that every single word written by Hafiz had a mystical meaning and no line of Hafez actually meant what it said. The reading of Hafiz as codified poetry implying an esoteric meaning for each line or word propounded the view that his ghazals can be read at two levels, one apparent, the other hidden—the latter representing the intended meaning. Deciphering Hafiz's underlying meaning grew into an esoteric art, not dissimilar to the explanations offered by the addicts of "conspiracy theories" (q.v.) in political affairs.¹⁷

In contrast to Lings' implicit definition and Yarshater's explicit one, Ernst's definition of a Sufi poem bypasses these long-standing debates over the nature of the works of poets such as Hafiz. This dissertation picks up Ernst's expanded definition of Sufi poetry, and does so in order to investigate a poet often left out of the canon of Sufi poets, and a poem most often derided for having little mystical insight. This investigation will reveal the contours of

¹⁷ Ehsan Yarshater, "Hafez I. An Overview," *Encyclopedia Iranica*, accessed June 10, 2016, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/hafez-i>.

contemporary definitions of Sufism, to help explain why Nizami and his first *masnavi* poem, the *Makhzan al-asrar*, get marked as non-Sufi. It will also explore the ways in which Nizami's poem nevertheless engages with familiar Sufi tropes, and has been engaged with by Sufis throughout history.

This dissertation investigates the boundaries of our definitions of Sufism, and its place in our broader understanding of Islam, through examining an understudied and underappreciated work of a central literary figure, Nizami Ganjavi. The analysis will show how issues of the body, the role of poetry, and the figure of Muhammad, play critical roles in framing our understanding of Sufism. Nizami, and the *Makhzan al-asrar*, have been overlooked in discussions of Sufi poetry for two somewhat contradictory reasons: one which holds a negative view of Sufism and seeks to preserve Nizami from Sufism, and another with a positive valuation of Sufism which argues that Nizami is insufficiently or improperly Sufi. In the first case, there has been a long tradition both within Iranian and Western literary criticism to devalue Sufism and its effects on poetic aesthetics. For some of these critics, Nizami's poetic craft precludes labeling him a Sufi. Others point to the psychological complexity of his characters, particularly in his romances, and wish to avoid reducing them to simple metaphors for a mystical encounter with God. Still others seem to wish to mark Nizami as an astute cultural critic, implicitly arguing that to read his works with a Sufi lens might defang his

political insights. For these scholars, the *Makhzan al-asrar* is to be ignored because it is aesthetically inferior to his other works, containing none of the character-building or subtle social commentary of a *Shirin o Khosrow* or *Layli o Majnun*. It's religious didacticism makes it particularly dull to these readers, and E.G. Browne in particular finds its meter grating.¹⁸

The second critique of Nizami comes from those with a generally positive valuation of Sufism. For these writers, it is either the content of Nizami's poetry, the poet's own biography, or sometimes both, which mark him as beyond the bounds of a Sufi poet. In the former case, Nizami's poetry lacks the depth of spiritual insight of a Jalal al-Din Rumi or Farid al-Din Attar. In part this is because it lacks some of the formal aspects inherent in the implicit definition of Sufi poetry discussed in relation to Lings' book above. If, for example, Sufi poetry is marked by introspection and a interiorization, the Persian poetry of Nizami's literary period is marked by "the virtual absence of the private, personal voice."¹⁹ Beyond this, however, is a critique of the quality and quantity of Nizami's mystical insights. This critique is particularly leveled at the *Makhzan al-asrar*, about which Peter Chelkowski, for example, notes that the mystical elements are mostly confined to the introductory sections.²⁰

¹⁸ Edward G. Browne, *A Literary History of Persia: Four Volume Set* (Ibex Pub, 1997), 403.

¹⁹ Jerome W Clinton, "Court Poetry at the Beginning of the Classical Period," in *Persian Literature*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1988), 92.

²⁰ "the mysticism with its symbolism is apparent only in the introduction, which is infused with the essence of Sufi thought. In the main body of the book one can detect scattered mystical overtones, but it is up to the reader

For this second set of critics, the *Makhzan al-asrar* is best viewed as a form of ascetic poetry (*zuhdiyya*). The call for worldly renunciation was not a specifically Sufi one, and was frequently adopted by court poets. Indeed, the line between court poetry and *zuhdiyya* was at times hard to draw. As Bruijn notes, poets who wrote of the importance of renunciation often lived lives that were far from austere and were imbricated in politics and governance, making defining the genre all the more difficult.²¹ In terms of generic distinctions, such ascetic poetry was often explicitly contrasted with the poetry of courtly love and wine-songs which supplied much of the imagery of later Sufi poetry: “One precedent was a tradition of ascetic poetry (*zuhdiyya*)...This kind of poetry was characterized by a moralizing stance critical of the enticements of the world, and it was probably seen as a counterbalance to the secular poetry of love and wine that was so dominant in the courtly culture of the early caliphate.”²² Nizami himself explicitly calls the *Makhzan* a “new poetry” which is freed from the tavern and wine imagery.²³

to arrive at the final interpretation.” Peter J Chelkowski, “Nizami Gandjawi,” ed. P. Bearman et al., *Encyclopedia of Islam, Second Edition* (University of North Carolina: Brill Online), accessed April 22, 2012, http://referenceworks.brillonline.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/nizami-gandjawi-SIM_5948?s.num=1&s.f.s2_parent=s.f.book.encyclopaedia-of-islam-2&s.q=majnun.

²¹ J. T. P. de Bruijn, *Persian Sufi Poetry: An Introduction to the Mystical Use of Classical Persian Poems* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 1997), 47, <http://search.lib.unc.edu?R=UNCb3106919>.

²² Ernst, “Sufi Poetry.”

²³ Nizami Ganjavi, *Makhzan al-asrar*, ed. Bihruz Sarvatiyan (Tehran: Tus, 1984), 44–45.

This distinction between mystical poetry and ascetic poetry seems more important to contemporary literary critics than it does to medieval readers of Nizami's work, however. Some Sufi writers point to Nizami's eschewal of courtly life as evidence that his calls for renunciation were earnest and not merely poetic convention. Indeed, the fact that he spent his life in his hometown of Ganja, as well as his practice of 40-day seclusions are cited as reasons for his inclusion in Sufi *tabaqat* literature, such as Jami's *Nafahat al-uns*. As Ernst and Annemarie Schimmel note in *Eternal Garden*, contemporary Chishti Sufis also cite Nizami's work, using it to support their advice and demonstrate knowledge of the Sufi literary tradition²⁴. Nizami's poetry is also shown to have spiritual efficacy for one Chishti shaykh: "Burhan al-Din Gharib related that once when he was sick, he stayed home and read Nizami's great epic poem Majnun Layli. Nizam al-Din²⁵ visited him and presented him with a hat."²⁶

These brief evocations show the contours of the issues at stake in categorizing and examining Nizami's poetry, particularly the *Makhzan al-asrar*. Before I proceed with discussing

²⁴ In one case, a shaykh advises a disciple to undertake a difficult project, citing a line from *Khosrow o Shirin*: "Freshen me with the hear of David, and make my psalms cry aloud." As cited in Carl W. Ernst and Annemarie Schimmel, *Eternal Garden: Mysticism, History, and Politics at a South Asian Sufi Center*, 2nd edition (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 72.

²⁵ Nizam al-Din Awliya (d. 1325), a prominent Chishti saint.

²⁶ Ernst and Schimmel, *Eternal Garden*, 132.

the poem at hand, however, it will be useful to delve into the variety of definitions of Sufism and how this has become a contested category in contemporary scholarship on Islam.

What is Sufism?

“Today Sufism is a name without a reality, but formerly it was a reality without a name.”²⁷

In his 2015 book *What Is Islam?* Shahab Ahmed poses six questions that challenge researchers and writers attempting to grapple with “Islam” as both an analytical category and an historical phenomena. The vast array of people, cultures, traditions, ideas, practices, and material objects captured by the term “Islamic” threatens to make the word virtually meaningless. Does it make sense, he asks, to label the writings of a Jewish philosopher and theologian who wrote in Arabic under the patronage of Muslim political authorities “Islamic Philosophy”? While the confessional identity of philosophers poses a minor hiccup for definitions of Islamic Philosophy, Ahmed wonders if the term itself might be an oxymoron. Can a tradition based on an exclusivist revelation coherently incorporate an intellectual tradition with conflicting claims about the nature of God, existence, and human access to truth? Ahmed poses this problem of the

²⁷ ‘Alī ibn ‘Uṣmān Hujwīrī and Reynold Alleyne Nicholson, *Kashf Al-Mahjūb of Al-Hujwīrī: The Revelation of the Veiled: An Early Persian Treatise on Sufism*, New ed. reprinted with corrections. (Wiltshire: Aris & Phillips, 2000), 44. As cited in Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Univ of North Carolina Press, 1975), 22.

relationship between philosophy and Islam as the first of six question one must answer when defining “Islam.” The second question he poses regards Sufism. This ordering is not coincidental.²⁸

For Ahmed, the challenge Sufism poses to our definitions of Islam are akin to the ones philosophy poses — focusing on the primacy and/or singularity of the Qur’anic revelation. Though he discusses Sufi bodily practices and institutional structures, he does so in order to quickly pivot to the crux of the matter: philosophical articulations of Sufism found in the writings of Ibn Arabi and supported by a convincing quote from Jalal al-Din Rumi. Although Ibn Arabi and Maulana Rumi disagreed on several issues, perhaps most importantly the role of Muhammad’s model to Sufi practice, Ahmed frames them as unified in their articulation of Sufism—and their articulation of Sufism is at odds with a coherent definition of “Islam.”²⁹

Ahmed, and others before him, have frequently framed Sufism as beyond the bounds of Islam proper. This is done in one of two ways. The first, and most common in both historical and contemporary discourse, is to focus on problematic Sufi practices. Sufis have been accused of

²⁸ Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam?: The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 19.

²⁹ Omid Safi, ““Did the Two Oceans Meet? Historical Connections and Disconnections between Ibn ‘Arabi and Rumi”,” *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society* XXVI (1999): 55–88. Safi notes that the story of Rumi meeting Shams al-Din Tabrizi, which involves a debate about the relative spiritual worth of Bayazid Bistami versus the Prophet Muhammad, is in fact a litmus test of where each man stands on the question of the uniqueness and primacy of Muhammad.

engaging in illicit activities ranging from public drunkenness to pederasty. These characterizations are not without basis. Sufi writings were often full of metaphors drawn from courtly love poetry and the wine-songs of Abu Nuwas, who wrote graphically about week-long binges and seducing, and even raping young boys.³⁰ Theological and poetic writings arguing that pre-pubescent boys were the image of God on earth led to a practice known as *shahid bazi*, gaze-play: the practice of contemplating God through meditation on the physical form of beardless youths. This practice became so common it was known as “the sickness of the Shaykhs” and was said to lead to more than just gazing.³¹ Sufi practices such as *dhikr* and *sema* have been widely caricatured and misrepresented, framed as all-night caffeine fueled orgies. At times, Sufi use of music, not-yet-commonplace psychoactive substances (coffee), and dance left them open to public ridicule and sanction. One Khorasani movement, later incorporated into the Sufi networks, advocated for hiding one’s piety from others during this lifetime. If one became

³⁰ “...by the eleventh century, it became possible to excuse wine in verse as a purely symbolic figure of mystical expression...If Abu Nuwas was a mystic he kept the matter remarkably well hidden from his contemporaries and immediate entourage.” Philip F. Kennedy, *Abu Nuwas: A Genius of Poetry* (Oneworld, 2007), 57. He may not have been a mystic, but it’s unclear if Abu Nuwas was quite as notorious as his poetic persona would lead us to believe. Though many authors, both pre-modern and contemporary, argue that Abu Nuwas’ poems are biographical, Philip Kennedy argues that his work demonstrates an aptitude for playing with poetic conventions and *topoi* that should steer the careful reader away from reading his body of work as literal biography. Of course, his prison record certainly seems to indicate that he enjoyed, and was known for, carousing around Baghdad. *Ibid.*, 12.

³¹ Cyrus Zargar reads Ibn Arabi and Iraqi with a focus upon their notions of beauty, arguing that, for them, beauty finds its apex in the human form, and specifically the youthful male human form, as the most perfect representation of the divine within creation. Cyrus Ali Zargar, *Sufi Aesthetics: Beauty, Love, and the Human Form in the Writings of Ibn 'Arabi and 'Iraqi* (University of South Carolina Press, 2011), 5.

known as particularly pious, an act of ostentatious public impiety was in order, lest one accrue the rewards for piety in this life instead of the afterlife.³² In the medieval period, wandering ascetics engaged in celibacy, body mortification, and dressed and groomed themselves in ways to mark themselves as socially deviant. These practices were both a protest against mainstream piety and the increasing institutionalization of Sufism under the *tariqa* system.³³

While the most radical edges of the Sufi movement have often ostentatiously rejected social norms and mainstream piety, this can hardly describe the whole of a movement which, at one point, could count nearly every adult Muslim male as a member.³⁴ During the modern period, critiques of Sufism have tended to focus on either its irrationality (in contrast to modernist reconstructions of Islam as logical, rational, and scientific)³⁵ or the central role of saint³⁶

³² Ahmet T. Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007). This practice is perhaps most famously depicted in Sufi literature in the “Story of Shaykh Sam’an” in Farid Attar, *The Conference of the Birds* (Penguin Books Ltd, 2005), 57–75.

³³ Ahmet T. Karamustafa, *God’s Unruly Friends: Dervish Groups in the Islamic Later Middle Period, 1200–1550* (Oneworld, 2006), 13.

³⁴ Green, Nile. *Sufism: A Global History*. London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.

³⁵ See, for example, Muhammad Abduh, “Theology of Unity” in Charles Kurzman, ed., *Modernist Islam, 1840–1940: A Sourcebook* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2002), 54–60.

³⁶ Saint is a problematic term given its Catholic valences, especially since it carries the notion that sainthood is recognized and sanctioned by a central authority. The terms most often applied to these holy figures in Arabic and Persian is *Wali* (plural: *Awliya*), which is best translated as “friend.” Thus rather than a saint, who has been officially recognized and sanctioned, the *awliya* are God’s intimate friends. Their status is confirmed not by any central authority, but by their ability to draw devotees through their teachings, network of charities, and spiritual powers.

reverence to the Sufi tradition. Questions of intercession and anxieties over idolatry have a long history in Islamic theology and Muslim political discourse.³⁷ Shrines of saints and relatives of the Prophet continue to act as sites of contestation amongst Muslims in places such as Saudi Arabia³⁸ and Pakistan.³⁹ The Sufi movement incorporated pre-existing practices of the commemoration and veneration of holy men, with some shrines even changing religious affiliation along with the shifting religious identity of the local population.⁴⁰ These saints, due to the proximity with God attained during mystical encounter(s), are said to carry *baraka*, a transferable non-material power, which they could impart to followers and devotees even after death. Some saints became known to provide particular benefits or assistance with specific problems.⁴¹ In other cases the saint's power is said to be generally apotropaic. Traveling to

³⁷ See, for example, concerns over proper veneration of the Prophet Muhammad's image in Jamal J. Elias, *Aisha's Cushion: Religious Art, Perception, and Practice in Islam* (Harvard University Press, 2012).

³⁸ Vincent J. Cornell, *Voices of Islam: Voices of the Spirit* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 2007), 84.

³⁹ See, for example, Jamal J. Elias, *On Wings of Diesel: Trucks, Identity and Culture in Pakistan* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2011).

⁴⁰ Valerie Ramseyer, *The Transformation of a Religious Landscape: Medieval Southern Italy, 850-1150* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006). Ramseyer notes that Jewish, Christian and Muslim saintly hagiographies were often indistinguishable in content: they all were peripatetic, battled demons or jinn, healed the sick, and served/challenged the wealthy. To show how fluid religious boundaries were during this period, Ramseyer notes one case of excommunicated Catholics appealing to the Abbasid Caliph to be reinstated and regain access to a Jewish saint's shrine. Valerie Ramseyer, "Sharing Religious Space: Christian, Jewish, and Muslim Communities in Early Medieval Southern Italy and Sicily" (104 Murphey Hall, UNC-Chapel Hill, April 11, 2011).

⁴¹ When heading to the shrine of Nizam al-Din Awliya in Delhi, multiple Indians, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, asked me to wish for financial success on their behalf while at the shrine - indicating that Nizam al-Din was particularly adept at making these wishes come true.

proximate saints shrines can also act as a form of pilgrimage, especially for those who otherwise could not complete their religious obligation to perform the Hajj, such as women, the elderly, and the impoverished. This was especially true in the pre-modern period, when the Hajj was a significantly larger financial hardship, time commitment, and physical strain than it is today. The existence of and people's attendance at saint's shrines are not the only concern of some Muslim reformers, however. What people *do* in order to garner the saint's attention and blessing are also open to critique. From circumambulating the saint's tomb to performing music on the saints behalf to celebrating 'urs, the anniversary of the saint's death, when they were finally "wed" to God, a host of veneration practices look dangerously close to idolatry to some contemporary Muslims. This critique is especially potent in the South Asian context, where saints' shrines can be inter-religious spaces our spaces of inter-religious tension.⁴²

Sufis, and those in their orbit, have not only been critiqued for their actions, they have also been criticized for what they *do not* do. In contemporary American discourse, the Sufi tradition is often framed as particularly pluralistic. Thirteenth century poet Jalal al-Din Rumi has become a popular internet sage, whose poetry is used in motivational and inspirational images. One popular image quotes Rumi saying "I belong to no religion. My religion is love. Every heart is my

⁴² Rachana Umashankar, "Defending Sufism, Defining Islam: Asserting Islamic Identity in India" (PhD Diss., UNC Chapel Hill, 2012).

temple.”⁴³ Though this quote most certainly did not come from Rumi, it is perhaps only a more emphatic interpolation of similar statements found in his writing.⁴⁴ Rumi is fond of saying that the important aspect of one’s devotion to God is not outward practice but inner orientation. He does not, however, advocate for the abandonment of bodily practice or ritual adherence. In contemporary American pop-multicultural discourse, however, this statement comes to be interpreted as advocating a Protestantized Islam, free of ritual practice and doctrinal distinctiveness. Though seen in a positive light by contemporary spiritual seekers, the perception of Sufis as an antinomian tradition has a longer lineage in Muslim discourse, and often made Sufis the target of criticism. In Rumi’s *Mathnawi-e Manawi* he tells a story of Moses and a shepherd. The shepherd is praising God in problematically anthropomorphized terms:

Where are You?-- so I can become Your servant, and mend
Your sandals and comb Your head.

"(So) I can wash Your robe, kill Your lice, (and) bring
milk in front of You, O Great (Lord).

"(So) I can kiss Your small hand, massage Your small
foot, and sweep Your little (dwelling) place (when) the

⁴³ Eleanor Finnegan, “‘I Belong to No Religion. My Religion Is Love’: Sufism, Religious Studies, and Love,” *Studying Religion in Culture*, March 22, 2016, <http://religion.ua.edu/blog/2016/03/i-belong-to-no-religion-my-religion-is-love-sufism-religious-studies-and-love/>.

⁴⁴ A blogger at Harvard has attempted to track down the original Persian sources for many of the popular Rumi quotes online. This particular quote had no provenance in Rumi’s extant writings: “The Religion of Love | سليمان بن قديس ابن,” accessed March 9, 2016, <http://blogs.harvard.edu/sulaymanibnqiddees/2014/05/30/the-religion-of-love/>.

time for sleep comes.⁴⁵

Moses scolds the shepherd for his heresy, causing the shepherd to run off into the desert in grief over offending God. Then a voice from heaven chastises Moses, saying, among other things, “Inside the Ka`ba, there is no rule for (determining) the prayer direction.”⁴⁶ The implication here is that for one who is inflamed with love for God, like the shepherd, proper ritual performance or adherence to theological doctrines is beside the point. Muslims and non-Muslims alike have taken this to mean that ritual practice is unimportant: but note that in this metaphor, one must first make it to the center of Mecca before one can disregard the direction of prayer. In Jamal al-Din Aflaki’s *Feats of the Knowers of God*, Rumi is questioned by his disciples about the supposed high mystical state of a drunken homeless man who never attends mosque. Rumi’s response is that only God knows an individual’s spiritual status, but if one seeks to garner the attention of God, it is best to hang out where he often looks.⁴⁷ Rumi is aware that, even should one have a high spiritual state, there is risk of being misunderstood by the masses, or persecuted by religious authorities. In one tale, jurists have decided to challenge Rumi’s teachings by objecting to anything he says during his weekly *khutba*. He gets word of this plot

⁴⁵ “Moses and the Shepherd (part One),” accessed August 1, 2016, <http://www.dar-al-masnavi.org/n.a-II-1720.html#1.12/14/16 10:38:00 AM>

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Shams al-Din Ahmad Aflaki, *The Feats of the Knowers of God: Manaqeb Al- Arefin* (Boston: Brill, 2002), <http://search.lib.unc.edu?R=UNCb4154850>.

and decides to say only “There is no god but God and Muhammad is the Messenger of God!”⁴⁸

In another, Rumi’s beloved spiritual teacher, Shams, speaks with a disciple who is persecuted for altering this fixed testament of faith, greeting him in the marketplace saying “”There is no god but God and Shams al-Din is the messenger of God.” Shams advocates for equivocation in this case, saying “did you not know that my first name is Muhammad? You should have said ‘and Muhammad is the messenger of God’” since “people don’t recognize gold that’s not in the form of minted coins.”⁴⁹ In each of these cases, the question of the primacy of proper ritual performance and doctrinal adherence is under debate. Rumi and his circle do not reject ritual or doctrine, but recognize that eventually one develops a relationship with God where formal religious strictures may get in the way. At the same time, they seem to recognize that the general public and religious authorities are bound to misunderstand these occasions, and so must guard their words and actions carefully lest they mislead the uninitiated or invite legal trouble.

But what is “Sufism”? On the first page of a number of introductory textbooks, authors are quick to gloss the term “Sufism” as being equivalent to and coextensive with “Islamic

⁴⁸ Ibid., 260.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 435.

Mysticism.”⁵⁰ The problems with this definition are manifold. The term mysticism itself, as Michel de Certeau has helpfully pointed out, is derived from a particular branch of medieval Christian theology.⁵¹ In its scholastic formulation, it involved rituals of praise and devotion, private reflection and contemplation, as well as techniques of bodily control and ascetic denial. But as the word developed within both Western scholarly and popular discourse through the 18th and 19th centuries, it came to be purged of the external, embodied aspects of medieval practice. Leigh Eric Schmidt traces this development through European and American intellectuals, focusing particularly on William James and Unitarian Universalism as vectors for the interiorization of mystical “experience.”⁵² Thus, the term mysticism in its contemporary configuration excludes a large number of practices, objects, and historical phenomena that might otherwise be captured by the word “Sufism.” Furthermore, this exclusion works in the reverse direction. If we take for granted our inherited definition of mysticism as a form of individual contemplation of and search for proximity with the divine, associating this

⁵⁰ See, for example, A. J. Arberry, *Sufism: An Account of the Mystics of Islam* (Mineola, N.Y: Dover Publications, 2001); Julian Baldick, *Mystical Islam: An Introduction to Sufism* (New York: New York University Press, 1989), <http://search.lib.unc.edu?R=UNCb2309068>; William C. Chittick, *Sufism: A Beginner's Guide* (Oneworld, 2007); Martin Lings, *What Is Sufism?*, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1999); Huston Smith, *Essential Sufism*, ed. Robert Frager and James Fadiman, 1 Reprint edition (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1999).

⁵¹ Michel De Certeau, “Mystic Speech,” in *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other* (U of Minnesota Press, 1986), 80–100.

⁵² Leigh Eric Schmidt, “The Making of Modern ‘Mysticism,’” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 71 (2003): 273–302.

exclusively with Sufism in the Islamic tradition excludes a number of practices and communities that might otherwise count—such as Shi'i notions of *'irfan* or Muslim minority communities, like the Syrian Alawites. Finally, such a stark definition of Sufism as interiority within Islam concedes ground to those who wish to mark the Sunni legal tradition as historically orthodox in its normative prescriptions for structuring human relations and embodied practice. Accounts, such as Marshall Hodgson's, which give the medieval Muslim body to the Sunni *qadi*, leaving the care of the soul to the shaykh, fail to leave space for Sufi challenges to legalistic claims on the proper configuration of body and society.⁵³

If one is seeking an approach to Sufism that moves beyond seeing it as “Islamic Mysticism”—accounts of personal experience of the divine transmitted through texts which can be distilled into their theological meanings—there are several places to turn. Most obviously, as Vasquez notes⁵⁴, contemporary ethnographic work is a primary site for studying the body in Islam. Examples abound in the broader fields of Islamic Studies, from Saba Mahmood⁵⁵ to Lara Deeb.⁵⁶ But what of pre-modern Sufism? A few studies have avoided the

⁵³Marshall G. S Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974).

⁵⁴ Manuel A. Vasquez, *More Than Belief: A Materialist Theory of Religion* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2010).

⁵⁵ Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, With a New preface by the author edition (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2011).

⁵⁶Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon* (Princeton University Press, 2006).

pitfalls of abstracting Sufism as “inner experience” by focusing on the institutional structures and formations of Sufi orders. Spencer Trimmingham’s exhaustive catalogue of Sufi orders⁵⁷ or Ohlander’s book on the foundation of the Suhrawardiyya⁵⁸, for example.

Contrary to other introductory texts on Sufism, Carl Ernst’s *Sufism* begins by rejecting the easy affiliation between Sufism and mysticism.⁵⁹ Rather he wants to use Sufism as a term to capture a number of historical phenomena, including texts, practices, music, movement, and institutional lineages. Ernst delves into the relationship Sufis have with the sacred sources of Islam, but rather than staying there, he moves on to explore the poetic tradition, the development of Sufi orders, music, dance, and contemporary challenges. This pattern of exploration is familiar to Ernst. In his work on Ruzbihan Baqli, he accomplishes this task by analyzing the textual strategies and rhetorical moves utilized by the saint and his followers to build spiritual authority. Rather than reading Ruzbihan’s writings as transparent accounts of spiritual feats and ecstatic encounters, he instead situates these boasts within a social and political context in which they do work for and upon the consumers and producers of such

⁵⁷ J. Spencer (John Spencer) Trimmingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

⁵⁸ Erik S. Ohlander, *Sufism in an Age of Transition: ‘Umar Al-Suhrawardī and the Rise of the Islamic Mystical Brotherhoods* (Leiden ;Boston: Brill, 2008).

⁵⁹ Carl Ernst, *Sufism* (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 2011).

tales.⁶⁰ A similar approach undergirds his *Words of Ecstasy in Sufism*. The story of al-Hallaj's execution is well-known and oft-repeated, but through a close analysis of the trial, Hallaj's own writings, and the regulations constraining ecstatic speech, Ernst shows how this familiar story of mystic persecution by obtuse legalists is actually an historical and political construction.

⁶¹Omid Safi deploys a similar approach, situating Sufi lives within their social and political context. He charts the ways in which Sufi masters exchanged spiritual authority for political legitimacy with the Seljuqs. Such an analysis makes stories, such as that of Baba Tahir's encounter with Tugril Beg, readable as interactions between authorities whose power rested on different but momentarily intersecting planes, rather than as critique of political authority and worldly concerns delivered by a transcendent ascetic.⁶²

Nizami: Poet & Mystic?

Walk in to any bookstore in Iran, and you can find a copy of Nizami Ganjavi's poetry for sale. More often than not, this will be a lavishly bound compendium of his five epic poems,

⁶⁰ Carl W. Ernst, *Rūzbihān Baqlī: Mysticism and the Rhetoric of Sainthood in Persian Sufism* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1996).

⁶¹Carl W. Ernst, *Words of Ecstasy in Sufism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1985).

⁶² See both Omid Safi, "Bargaining with Baraka: Persian Sufism, 'Mysticism,' and Pre-modern Politics," *The Muslim World* 90, no. 3-4 (September 1, 2000): 259-88; Omid Safi, *The Politics of Knowledge in Premodern Islam: Negotiating Ideology and Religious Inquiry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

known collectively as the *Khamisa*. Perhaps only Firdowsi's *Shahname*, Hafez's *Divan*, and Jalal al-Din Rumi's *Masnavi* are more ubiquitous. If one should want to purchase one of these five poems individually, the most common finds are *Layla & Majnun*, *Haft Paykar*, and the *Makhzan al-asrar*. English-language scholarship on Nizami has tended to emphasize his narrative romances, *Layla & Majnun*, though *Khosrow & Shirin* and *Haft Paykar* also receive scholarly attention. In contrast, the *Makhzan al-asrar* remains neglected. The Encyclopedia Iranica, for example, contains an individual entry on each of the other four poems of the *Khamisa*, neglecting only the *Makhzan*.

As with other Persian poets, nationalist claims swirl around Nizami's legacy. In the Holy Defense Museum in Tehran, which commemorates the Iran-Iraq war, Nizami's work is featured several locations. Most tellingly, Iran is associated with Layla, who has been sexually violated by Iraq's penetration into her boundaries.⁶³ Though Nizami wrote in Persian, his place of residence, Ganja, is now located in Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan has actively claimed Nizami's

⁶³ One plaque notes that the first military outpost occupied by Iraqi forces was called "Khan-Leyli," and frames the incident as such: "Entering the Leila's home, the uninvited guests partook the meal and made forays into the blood of thousands of enamored Majnoons..."

mantle, sponsoring a statue in Slovenia,⁶⁴ endowing a center for Azerbaijani studies at Oxford University in Nizami's name,⁶⁵ and naming a medal for scientific achievement after the poet.⁶⁶

Nizami is the penname of Jamāl al-Dīn Abū Muḥammad Ilyās Ibn Yūsuf Ibn Zakī Mu'ayyad, a poet born in the first half of the 12th century (despite some dispute over his exact birthdate, UNESCO has set it as 535/1141, for the purpose of celebrating his 850th birthday in 1991). Relatively little biographical information is known about Nizami compared to his contemporaries, for although his major collections of poetry were all commissioned by royal patrons, Nizami eschewed life at the court.⁶⁷ His selected penname, Nizami, associates him with the stringing of pearls—a common metaphor for versifying in Persian literature. Indeed he is one of the towering figures of Persian poetry.

During Nizami's lifetime, Ganja was located in a culturally vibrant region during a period of political turmoil. His home town, Ganja [red], was known as an incubator of poetic talent, and

⁶⁴ AzerNews, "Statue of Nizami Ganjavi Unveiled in Slovenia," *AzerNews*, accessed June 10, 2016, <http://www.azernews.az/culture/97075.html>.

⁶⁵ "Head of Nizami Ganjavi Scientific Centre at University of Oxford Nargiz Pashayeva Meets New Chief of the University's Oriental Institute Mark Smith," accessed June 10, 2016, http://azertag.az/en/xeber/Head_of_Nizami_Ganjavi_Scientific_Centre_at_University_of_Oxford_Nargiz_Pashayeva_meets_new_chief_of_the_universitys_Oriental_Institute_Mark_Smith-900767.

⁶⁶ "News.Az - Gold Medal Named after Nizami Ganjavi Established in Azerbaijan," accessed June 10, 2016, <http://news.az/articles/official/89828>.

⁶⁷ Chelkowski, "Nizami Gandjawi."

control over the town was a sign of one's cultural bona fides, so it changed hands often. The political rulers were descended from Turkic tribesmen who swept down from the Steppes and conquered the settled peoples in Muslim majority territories. These invasions happened in successive waves, often occurring roughly every three generations, according to the observations and theorizations of Muslim historian Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406). In fact, Nizami died just 10 years before Chengis Khan initiated his war against Khwarzmshah, eventually subduing Ganja, along with the rest of the region. This pattern of invasion led to cultural and religious differences between rulers and those they ruled. To gain political and religious legitimacy, these new rulers would provide patronage to poets and saints, who would then sanction them as properly Muslim and Persianate leaders.

Nizami's patrons included the Seljuks, in their Eastern capital of Hamdan, the Eldiguzids, based in Barda, who pledged fealty to the Seljuks in exchange for being regents to the Seljuk crown prince, and became an independent kingdom after the Seljuk's fall, the Shirvanshahs, based in Baku, who spent most of their 700 year existence as a vassal state, but briefly became an independent kingdom in the 12th century, and the Ahmadillis, whose brief rule over Marageh roughly coincided with Nizami's own lifespan.

Nizami is most well known for his five epic *mathnawī* poems, known collectively as the *Khamisa* (Quintet). These poems were collected and transmitted in an omnibus manuscript, so that

it was rare to read one of Nizami's epics without the other four. With this quintet, he set the standard for poetic compositions in the centuries that followed. Numerous poets attempted to emulate his feat, sometimes writing on the same topics, using the same meters as Nizami. Most succeeded in only completing one or two works in this style, never achieving the full set. The most imitated works from the *Khamisa* are *Makhzan al-asrār* (*The Treasury of Mysteries*) and *Leyli o Manjnūn* (*Layla and Majnun*).⁶⁸ The first of these works is either an ethical or a philosophical-mystical text, depending on how one chooses to interpret it.

Previous research on the *Makhzan al-asrar* in English is limited. There is no full-length monograph on the work itself. An English translation of the work was completed in 1945 and is accompanied by an 87-page introduction, discussing Nizami's biography and the context of his work, more than the work itself.⁶⁹ The translation comes with no foot or endnotes, and was translated without reference to the best edited version of the work available at that time (Dastgirdi, 1934). A more recent edited version of the work, by Dr. Bihruz Sarvatiyan, was completed in 1984. Sarvatiyan has completed a number of monographs and articles on

⁶⁸ Bruijn, J.T.P. de. " *Khamisa*." *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition. Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs. Brill Online , 2012. Reference. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 22 April 2012 <http://referenceworks.brillonline.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/khamisa-SIM_4182>

⁶⁹ Nizami Ganjavī and Gholam Hossein Darab Khan, *Makhzanol Asrār = The treasury of mysteries* (London: A. Probsthain, 1945).

Nizami's poetry, life, and mystical metaphors, including a concordance to the *Makhzan al-asrar*, published in Tehran in 1991. Thus far little of this work has been incorporated in English- or European-language analysis of Nizami's writings.⁷⁰

Those authors who do work on Nizami in English have tended to focus on the three middle epics of his five poem *ouvre*. The *Makhzan al-asrar* is often neglected for its difficult language and terse, proscriptive ethics. The *Iskandar-name*, a massive, two-part tome about the life and works of Alexander the Great is usually ignored entirely, perhaps because of its length and its historical, rather than mystical content. The other three works, *Khosrow wa Shirin*, *Layli o Majnun*, and *Haft Paykar* are all moderately sized love stories, often glossed with a mystical interpretation. The first two focus on a single, central love story—Khosrow and Shirin, a Persian king and his wife, and Layla and Majnun, two Arab school companions from good families who fall in love.

The main scholarship on Nizami's writing is carried out within comparative literature, area studies, and religious studies. Such scholarship is often concerned with whether or not Nizami was himself a mystic, and if it is proper to read his writings as mystical. These debates

⁷⁰ A very brief article on the *Mi'raj* in Nizami's writings appears in a 2001 volume, but is primarily interested in tracing the provenance of the content of Nizami's various ascension accounts. The author also spends more time on the *Mi'raj* account from *Haft Paykar* than the one in the *Makhzan al-asrar*. C.H. De Fouchecour, "The Story of the Ascension (*Mi'raj*) In Nizami's Work," in *The Poetry of Nizami Ganjavi: Knowledge, Love, and Rhetoric*, ed by. Kamran Talattof and Jerome W. Clinton, trans by. Kamran Talattof and Arjang Talattof (Palgrave Macmillan, 2001).

occur around two foci: 1) authorial intent—i.e. is there anything in Nizami’s biography or explicitly stated in his introductory remarks that indicate he intended for these texts to be read in a mystical manner?; 2) historical context—i.e. were the tropes and metaphors Nizami used in his poems firmly established in their mystical meanings during Nizami’s lifetime, or are these interpretations something later generations of readers imposed upon the text themselves?

Julie Scott Meisami, a premier scholar of Persian literature, along with Nizami expert Kamran Talattof and a handful of other writers, argue that there is little evidence to make a case for Nizami as a mystical writer.⁷¹ In Meisami’s case, she uses evidence internal to the text of *Layli o Majnun* to argue against a mystical interpretation of the work. More important to her argument, however, is the question of when the trope of courtly love gained a mystical gloss. Using historical and textual evidence she asserts that Nizami wrote his love epics as a critique of the court and the trope of courtly love. In her reading of *Layli o Majnun*, Majnun is not a mystical hero to be revered, but a selfish boy who indulges in his fantasy ideal of love to such a degree that it thwarts a real relationship with Layla and leads to both of their deaths.⁷² This

⁷¹ See: Julie Scott Meisami, “Kings and Lovers: Ethical Dimensions of Medieval Persian Romance,” *Edebiyât* n.s. 1, no. 1 (1987): 1–27; Julie Scott Meisami, *Medieval Persian Court Poetry* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987); Kamran Talattof, “Nizami’s Unlikely Heroines: A Study of the Characterizations of Women in Classical Persian Literature,” in *The Poetry of Nizami Ganjavi: Knowledge, Love, and Rhetoric*, ed. Jerome W Clinton and Kamran Talattof (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 51–81.

⁷² Meisami, *Medieval Persian Court Poetry*, 171.

reading, which puts Majnun in the good company of other tragic figures such as Romeo and Goethe's Werther, has few parallels within the Persian and Arabic reception history of the tale. In contrast to Meisami's reading of Nizami's work, scholars such as A.A. Seyed-Gohrab and Seyyed Hossein Nasr argue for a thoroughly mystical reading.⁷³ Nasr especially makes pains to connect Nizami to a long theosophical lineage, showing how his use of astronomy connects him to important philosophical figures, from Suhrawardi al-Maqtul back to the Neoplatonists, and with mystical figures such as Ayn al-Qudat and Ahmad al-Ghazali. More compelling than Nasr's attempt to show historical connections between these far-flung individuals is Seyed-Gohrab's evidence that mystical understandings of the trope of courtly love, images of the pearl and shell, and certain aspects of astronomy, were already in circulation at this time. No doubt, asking questions about the contents and context of Nizami's poems is a helpful scholarly contribution. And discerning authorial intent may be critical when compiling manuscripts into an edited volume or determining the best translation for ambiguous words or metaphors. But when such information is used to argue for pre-set fixed limits on the

⁷³S.H. Nasr, "The World View and Philosophical Perspective of Hakim Nizāmi Ganjawi," *The Muslim World* 82, no. 3 (1992): 191–200; A. A. Seyed-Gohrab, *Metaphor and Imagery in Persian Poetry* (Leiden ;Boston: Brill, 2012); A. A. Seyed-Gohrab, *Layli and Majnun: Love, Madness, and Mystic Longing in Nizāmi's Epic Romance* (Leiden: Brill, 2003); A. A. Seyed-Gohrab, "Leyli O Majnun," *Encyclopedia Iranica*, July 15, 2009, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/leyli-o-majnun-narrative-poem>; A. A. Seyed-Gohrab, "A Mystical Reading of Nizāmi's Use of Nature," in *A Key to the Treasure of the Hakīm: Artistic and Humanistic Aspects of Nizāmi Ganjavi's Khamsa*, ed. Christine van Ruymbeke and Johann Christoph Burgel (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2011), 181–94.

interpretive possibilities of a text, and especially when it is used to push back against long-established interpretive histories, as in Meisami's case, this method risks ignoring cogent post-structuralist critiques of authorial intent.

A third, more recent, approach to Nizami's poetry has looked toward it for information about his historical context. Christine van Ruymbeke has mined Nizami's *oeuvre* as a source of information on medieval Persian botany and minerology.⁷⁴ Chelkowski also notes that Nizami's *Khamisa* is one of our principle sources of knowledge of Persian musical instruments and compositions from his time period.⁷⁵ Though such investigations have provided useful scholarship on Nizami's historical context, this dissertation will take a new approach to the study of Nizami's writings, by situating his writings on the *Mi'raj* within the context of pre-existing discourses on the ascension.

Nizami's *Khamisa* (Arabic for "Quintet," also known by the Persian epithet *Panj Ganj* — "Five Treasures") consists of five long epic poems in the *masnavi* form and represented a new height in literary output by a single author writing in literary Persian. For generations after, poets would seek to establish their credentials by penning a response to or emulation of each

⁷⁴Christine van Ruymbeke, "Nizami's Poetry Versus Scientific Knowledge: The Case of the Pomegranate," in *The Poetry of Nizami Ganjavi: Knowledge, Love, and Rhetoric*, ed. Jerome W Clinton and Kamran Talattof (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 141–62; C. van (Christine van) Ruymbeke, *Science and Poetry in Medieval Persia: The Botany of Nizami's Khamisa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁷⁵ Chelkowski, "Nizami Gandjawi."

of Nizami's five works.⁷⁶ His most famous work, *Layli o Majnun*, is certainly the most emulated long narrative poem in Persian literature, with versions and reinventions of the tale penned in Arabic, Turkish, Urdu, and even Kurdish. In spite of *Layli o Majnun*'s popularity and acclaim, Nizami's first major work, *Makhzan al-asrar* (The Treasury of Secrets), might have left a larger literary footprint. A mystico-ethical didactic treatise, in part meant to serve as a Mirror for Princes, it is linguistically difficult and ethically proscriptive. For this reason, Meisami and others claim that it was not widely popular among the general reading public. Such a claim might be contested, however, since the *Makhzan* was emulated by most major poets who attempted to match Nizami's poetic output. Influenced by Sana'i's (d. 1131) *Hadiqat al-haqiqat*, and responded to by such famed mystical poets as Amir Khosrow (d. 1325) and Jami (d. 1492), the *Makhzan al-asrar* clearly drew upon and was drawn upon by writers firmly situated within the Sufi tradition.

Furthermore, Nizami's writings were rarely copied or distributed as separate works and instead were transmitted together in a single codex. His *Khamisa* was a widely distributed manuscript found in major libraries from Anatolia to North India. It was a significant enough work that Mughal emperors made a point of altering the colophon of the imperial *Khamisa* codex upon ascension to the throne, making it one of only a few books (including the *Shahnameh*) to be

⁷⁶Annemarie Schimmel, *As Through a Veil: Mystical Poetry in Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 52.

accorded such political significance. Timurid courts of Mawarannahr and Khurasan had large wall paintings and "a fifteenth-century illustration of Nizami's *haft Paykar* (Seven Portraits) shows a palace room decorated with large wall paintings of seven princesses."⁷⁷ During the Timurid period and beyond, several poetic texts, including the *Khamsa* came to "represent the culmination of a ruling ideology that became a critical common reference point for Timur's successors, defining and articulating a vision of human relations, ethics, justice, and kingship...Articulating what was an already firmly held ethical paradigm, the literature came to serve a central importance in supporting claims of the Mughals in India, where they supplied the dynasty with an articulate and scholarly argument which could be strategically expounded to make possible and to justify the rulership of South Asia within the context of a recognized and legitimate Sunni political discourse, without threatening their formal religious loyalties."⁷⁸

A Treasury of Mysteries or Collection of “Fatuous Truisms and Pointless Anecdotes”

⁷⁷ Lisa Balabanlilar, *Imperial Identity in the Mughal India: Memory and Dynastic Politics in Early Modern South and Central Asia* (London ;New York: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 61.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 149.

Nizami claims that the *Makhzan al-asrar* was written in an attempt to surpass Sana'i's *Hadiqat al-haqiqat*, whose work heavily influences Nizami's own.⁷⁹ Though he identifies the *Hadiqat* as his inspiration, Nizami does not use the same meter, choosing the *sari'-i maṭwiyy-i mawlhuf* rather than the *ḳafif-e mosaddas-i makhbun-i maḥḍuf* meter of the *Hadiqat*. What the two poems do share, however, are their didacticism and organization. Both poems include theoretical discussions of some religious principle exemplified by a story. Unlike the *Hadiqat*, however, which is relatively loosely structured and has significant variations in content and organization across manuscripts, the *Makhzan* is clearly organized and tightly structured. It includes 15 introductory sections, some of which Sana'i also includes, such as sections praising the Prophet Muhammad, a discussion of the zodiac, and praise for the poem's patron. Nizami greatly expands on these introductory sections, however, including an opening chapter on *tawhid*, two brief sections on God's attributes, one highlighting God's wrathful aspects and the other God's forgiving ones. This is followed by six sections praising the Prophet Muhammad, which focus on his pre-eminence in creation, or what Ibn Arabi termed "Muhammadian reality."⁸⁰ Though it appears second out of six sections, the focus of his praise of the Prophet seems to be his section on the ascension: it is where he provides the most extended and

⁷⁹ Heshmat Moayyad, "Lyric Poetry," in *Persian Literature*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1988), 133.

⁸⁰ For more on *Hadiqat al-Muhammadiyya*, see, for example: Annemarie Schimmel, *And Muhammad Is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety* (The University of North Carolina Press, 1985).

complex imagery in his discussion of the Prophet and is central to Muslim understandings of Muhammadan Reality, especially since it marks Muhammad as ontologically unique amongst created beings. We will discuss this aspect of the poem further in chapter 4.

Following the praise of the Prophet, Nizami then includes a brief section praising the patron, a direct address to the patron, a discussion of the significance of the poem at hand, two sections praising the value of poetry for expressing religious and mystical truth. The final three sections of the introduction all revolve around Nizami's own mystical experiences: the first which he obtains while secluded in a garden one night, and which leads him on the path of Sufi discipleship, according to the poem. The next two occur in more formal settings, where his spiritual master guides him through a 40-day seclusion. It is after these introductory sections, which account for roughly one quarter of the *Makhzan*'s total lines, that the body of the poem begins.

It is long-standing tradition when discussing and translating Persian poetry to elide the introductory remarks. There are a number of reasons for this, but perhaps the most frequently cited is that introductions were formulaic and perfunctory, and thus their content unremarkable. Though they may have become perfunctory for later poets, nevertheless, "this entire range of sections was introduced by Nizami Ganjavi. Before his time they were not known...Nizami of Ganja made all these things into an obligation. The treatment of the

ascension of the Prophet (mir'aj)....were introduced by him”⁸¹ De Bruijn elaborates on this, stating that “Nizami systematized technical principles which were used earlier by *masnavi* writers in a looser manner.”⁸² Nizami’s introduction of a mir’aj narrative, for example, was probably influenced by similar sections in Sana’i’s *Hadiqat*, but became all but obligatory for later poets writing in the *masnavi* form.⁸³ If one, as Chelkowski does, isolates the mystical content to the introductory portions, and then dismisses the introduction as purfunctory, a great deal of Nizami’s own assertions about the inspiration for and goals of his poem are lost. Thus in this study, we will attend to the poem as a whole, examining how the introductory materials might inform Nizami’s handling of stories and material in the body of the poem.

The body of the poem itself is often framed as didactic poetry. The earliest Persian poetry was often appreciated for its ability to convey moral norms. A number of scholars attribute this feature of to its early origins in Pahlavi Zoroastrian texts. Arabic poetry developed a similar genre of advice literature, which often focused on “the uncertainties of life and the necessity to prepare oneself for death and the afterlife,” called *zuhudiyat*.⁸⁴ Though the genre is

⁸¹ Ahmed Ali as cited in J. T. P. de Bruijn, *Of Piety and Poetry: The Interaction of Religion and Literature in the Life and Works of Hakīm Sanāʿī of Ghazna* (Leiden: Brill, 1983), 186..

⁸² Ibid., 189.

⁸³ Ibid., 188.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 30.

named after an important Sufi term, Bruijn warns us against assuming that all poems written in this genre are mystical.⁸⁵ He prefers the term “religious” rather than Sufi or mystical to refer to advice literature that is not secular in nature, but not clearly grounded in Sufism.⁸⁶ His reason for this exclusion is framed both around authorial intent and the work’s immediate reception history. Bruijn’s definition of Sufi poetry is perhaps even more exclusionary than Lings’ implicit definition. In regards to Sana’i, Bruijn, for example, argues for both the religious nature of his poetry and highlights his initiation into a Sufi lineage in the poet’s biography. Nevertheless, he argues that Sana’i is best understood as a “‘homeletic’ poet,” which is “more apt than that of ‘Sufi’ poet, because the former term define more precisely the environment where his poems originated as well as the purpose they primarily had to serve.”⁸⁷ He notes that this terminology best reflects Sana’i’s intent in writing the poems and their immediate audience, regardless of their later reception and importance to Sufi poetry.

Nizami’s work, fitting for the poetic period in which he is situated, is marked by “lofty diction, dignified tone, and highly literate language.”⁸⁸ Jerome Clinton notes two key characteristics of poetry of this period: 1) the poetry reflects the world of the court and 2) it is

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 31.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 37.

⁸⁸ Yarshater, “The Development of Iranian Literatures,” 20.

public and ceremonial. It is perhaps this public, formal tone that most jangles with implicit definitions of mystical poetry, for in contrast to other Sufi poems, in poetry from Nizami's period "one is struck by the virtual absence of the private, personal voice."⁸⁹ In spite of this lack of a private voice, some commentators have noted Sufi elements in Nizami's poetry, though they have questioned its authenticity. Jan Rypka, for example, notes that poetry of the Azerbaijan school, including Nizami's, was "only superficially tinged with Sufism and with Sufi criticism of feudal society...Although there can be no real question of a specific Sufi literature, it is the very Sufi mask that allows the poets to give utterance to criticism that under normal circumstances would be impossible."⁹⁰ On this construal, Sufi metaphors and terminology provide pious cover for engaging in secular social criticism and should not be taken at face value.

Some of the dismissal of the *Makhzan* relates to its attempt to emulate and surpass the *Hadiqat al-haqiqat* of Sanai'. As noted above, the works share some formal and thematic features and have attracted similar negative critiques from Western scholars and contemporary readers. E.G. Browne, for example, calls the *Hadiqat* "a moral and ethical rather than purely

⁸⁹ Clinton, "Court Poetry at the Beginning of the Classical Period," 92.

⁹⁰ Rypka, "History of Persian Literature up to the Beginning of the 20th Century," 201.

mystical poem.”⁹¹ More sharply, he calls it “one of the duller books in Persian, filled with fatuous truisms and pointless anecdotes.”⁹² When it comes to Nizami, who Browne esteems more highly as a poet than Sana’i, he is more charitable. Browne praises Nizami highly, writing “In a word, he may justly be described as combining lofty genius and blameless character unequalled by any other Persian poet whose life has been the subject of careful and critical study.”⁹³ He would perhaps disagree with Rypka that Nizami’s Sufism was exclusively a mask for social critique, as he concurs with Sufi *tabiqat* authors that Nizami practiced what he preached, noting that “he was genuinely pious, yet singularly devoid of fanaticism and intolerance.”⁹⁴ Nevertheless, he estimates the *Makhzan* to be a mystical poem after the model of the *Hadiqat*, and he esteems it similarly poorly: “it appears to me inferior in quality...partly due to the fact that I dislike its meter.”⁹⁵

Other scholars are less dissuaded by the poem’s metrical qualities and instead focus on the poem’s didacticism. De Bruin, for example, argues that: “didacticism...is not appreciated very much in the West, nor is the style which specifically belongs to it. This has led to a

⁹¹ Browne, *A Literary History of Persia*, 318.

⁹² Browne notes that he so prefers the writing in Sana’i’s *Divan* over the *Hadiqa*, that he is tempted to attribute them to different authors. *Ibid.*, 319–321.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 403.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

discrepancy of critical standards making it difficult to make a fair and relevant evaluation of works based on the appreciation of the didactic style as an aesthetic value.”⁹⁶ He notes that although contemporary Western valuation tends to overlook Sana’i (and by extension the *Makhzan*), the *Hadiqat* was read and emulated for generations and thus warrants study.

Aesthetic concerns aside, neglect of the *Makhzan* sometimes revolves around a negative valuation of overly devotional some readers wish to preserve Nizami Though Rypka cites Sana’i as a founding figure in the development of Sufi poetry, and just a few pages earlier notes Sana’i’s influence on Nizami, he doesn’t include Nizami in his list of “The Great Sufis.”⁹⁷ Ostensibly this is either because he does not see Nizami as a Sufi, or he does not see him as a great poet. We know the latter to not be the case, since he calls Nizami “the most brilliant poet of the romantic epic....whose freshness and vigor have not been effaced throughout the centuries.”⁹⁸ It would seem, given his negative opinion of Sufism, that Nizami’s lack of inclusion in this list is an attempt to protect his work from the negative attributes he assigns to Sufi poetry.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Bruijn, *Of Piety and Poetry*, XIV.

⁹⁷ He lists three poets here: Sana’i, ‘Attar, and Mawlana Rumi. Rypka, “History of Persian Literature up to the Beginning of the 20th Century,” 236-242. This cataloguing also follows E.G. Browne’s who cites Rumi here, calling the triumvirate the “three arch-mystagogues.” Browne, *A Literary History of Persia*, 264, 317.

⁹⁸ Rypka, “History of Persian Literature up to the Beginning of the 20th Century,” 210.

⁹⁹ Though his entire evaluation of the faults of Sufism is worth a read for its strident and vociferous opinions, this line in particular stands out: “Belief in miracles and in the miraculous powers of saints dulls the masses, the

Chapter Outline

Yarshater notes a “centrifugal tendency” in Persian poetry that involves “frequent peregrinations, delight in exploiting the ramifications of their subjects, and branching off into side alleys,” such as in the works of Nizami and Attar.¹⁰⁰ This “centrifugal” aspect of the work can make them opaque to contemporary Western readers, especially in didactic works such as the *Makhzan al-asrar*. One could argue that the *Makhzan* is open to the same critique Yarshater levels at Sadi’s *Golestan*, that it is a collection of “detached and loosely connected moral maxims and ethical observations from which one can hardly deduce a coherent system of ethical philosophy.”¹⁰¹ One method of addressing the non-linear organization of these poems in recent vogue is ring theory.¹⁰² Though such an approach has proven fruitful for a number of works, it is not the method this dissertation will undertake. Instead, I will follow De Bruijn’s approach to studying Sana’i’s *Hadiqat*. De Bruijn notes that the coherence of the *Hadiqat* can be found

conception of ‘pure love’ promotes homosexuality, and the desire to attain a state of ecstasy leads to the use of intoxicating drugs.” Ibid., 233.

¹⁰⁰ Yarshater, “The Development of Iranian Literatures,” 17.

¹⁰¹ Yarshater, “The Development of Iranian Literatures,” 17.

¹⁰² See, for example, Mary Douglas, *Thinking in Circles* or Safavi and Weightman, *Rumi’s Mystical Design*.

through examining its major themes. He especially highlights the descent of Muhammad during birth through the seven spheres, and his later ascent through the heavens. He argues that these two complimentary sections, Sana'i "not only connect the ideal personality of Muhammad with the ideal of the true Islamic ruler...[but] also the circle of human existence is constituted if the separate fragments of the text are connected."¹⁰³ I will also argue that the *Makhzan al-asrar* can best be understood through a thematic analysis focusing on the role of the body to the mystical encounter, best exemplified in the introductory section on the mi'raj. As Annemarie Schimmel notes, mystical traditions across religions often use a metaphor of the path, which is often framed as a heavenly ascent.¹⁰⁴ This dissertation will also follow the pattern of an ascent and return, beginning with a discussion of the human condition and limitations of the body, then moving on to discuss the preparations required prepare the body for a mystical encounter, we will then discuss Nizami's presentation of the mystical encounter, before moving on to highlight the role of the Prophet Muhammad's ascension as a paradigm for mystical encounters. Finally, we will end with a discussion of what one does with the insights gained from a direct encounter with God once one returns, through discussing the role of poetry as a form for articulating mystical insight.

¹⁰³ Bruijn, *Of Piety and Poetry*, 245.

¹⁰⁴ Schimmel, *Mystical Dimension of Islam*, 4-5.

In the next chapter, I will explore the nature of the human condition for Nizami within the broader context of the importance of the body in Religious Studies and Sufism. Before one can begin the path towards God, one must know what kind of resistance the body might offer and how one might overcome it. Related to this question, is the issue of what kind of body can attain contact with God. We address this in relation to the critical issue of gender in Sufism. Finally, in this chapter, discuss the boundaries of what makes one human and whether or not mystical encounters are limited to humans. While a number of Sufi authors have used animals as metaphors for human personality types or stages along the Sufi path, Nizami's animal characters seem more complex than this. In *Layla and Majnun*, for example, Majnun's proximity to and command over animals increases even as his connection to society dissolves. Nizami presents complex, nuanced animal characters who interact with humans as spiritual superiors or equals. Far from representing base instincts to be overcome, for Nizami animals can offer models and guides to proper bodily comportment and piety.

After discussing the terms and conditions of human embodiment in relation to the mystical path, in Chapter 3, we will explore various definitions of asceticism in the broader field of Religious Studies, and their relative applicability to the study of Islam. Next we investigate the portrayal of asceticism in a variety of early Sufi texts, noting how renunciation moves from an early stage of the path to an advanced one over the course of the 12th and 13th

centuries. Nizami's writing seems to run counter to this trend, by emphasizing the foundational importance of bodily discipline to even the Prophet Muhammad's spiritual attainment.

In chapter 4, we turn to the ascension. Ascension narratives are often used as sites for negotiating religious difference and asserting the primacy of one's own religious claims. This chapter examines the scriptural grounding of ascension narratives and then briefly reviews how they have been put to use in establishing religious identity. It then turns to Nizami's own ascension narrative. Focusing on his portrayal of the Prophet Muhammad's body, this chapter shows how the ascension narrative in the *Makhzan al-asrar* acts as a microcosm for the project of the larger poem and a lens through which to read it. Muhammad's body is presented as essential to his ascent, but also ontologically unique from other human bodies. This allows Nizami to thread an important theological needle, marking Muhammad as an exemplary ascetic and mystic whose model can and should be emulated, while also distinguishing him from prior prophets and later saints due to the uniqueness of his body.

In the chapter 5, we will investigate poetry as a site for discussing of mystical insight centered around proper bodily comportment. We will situate Nizami in a broader discourse about the relative dangers and values of poetry as a means of religious expression. Here we investigate Qur'anic portrayals of poetry and the Qur'an's concern that Muhammad might be

mistaken for a poet. We then turn to *hadith* literature, which somewhat moderates the Qur'an's general condemnation of poetry. Finally, we look at the Islamic philosophical tradition and its ambivalent relationship towards poetry, particularly in light of its proximity to prophecy. We will then explore how Nizami exploits this philosophical discourse to argue for the value of poetry and poets, particularly those properly grounded in the exoteric aspects of religion. For Nizami, this exoteric element is especially focused on asceticism and renunciation.

CHAPTER 2: THE PROBLEM OF THE BODY

Contemporary theorists on the body tend to point towards Renee Descartes as the godfather of modernity's problematic mind-body dualism. The medieval period, they argue, serves as a repository for more complex, non-binary configurations of the human. In *The Use Of Bodies*, Giorgio Agamben points us to the deep philosophical roots of Cartesian dualism. He notes that Plato formulates the idea that the body is an instrument of the soul in the *Alcibiades*:

SOC.: A human being is different, therefore, from his own body?

ALC.: Apparently.

SOC.: Then whatever is man?

ALC.: I cannot tell you.

SOC.: But you can—at least that he is something that uses the body.

ALC.: Yes.

SOC.: Does anything use this other than the soul?

...

SOC.: Since man is neither body nor both together, what is left, I suppose, is either that he is nothing, or if he is something, that it turns out to be nothing other than soul.¹⁰⁵

Key to Plato's distinction between soul and body is the notion that the body is a tool of the soul, much as a cutting knife is a tool to a shoemaker. Aristotle extends this insight in his

¹⁰⁵ Plato and Thomas L. Pangle, *The Roots of Political Philosophy: Ten Forgotten Socratic Dialogues Translated, with Interpretive Studies* (Cornell University Press, 1987), 212–213.

Politics, by likening the body/soul relationship to that between a master and slave. He is more emphatic about the soul's use of the body, arguing that the primary relationship between soul and body is not simple use, but dominion. Agamben notes the mutually-constitutive nature of the body/soul binary, which Aristotle analogizes with both the master-slave and human-animal relationship.¹⁰⁶ Were we to add the male/female binary to the mix, it would constitute a complex of associations around which definitions of the human revolve.

This chapter will examine this gordian knot in relation to Nizami's work. The body presents a problem for Nizami as it is a barrier to a direct encounter with God, but also a tool for attaining such an encounter. Before we can explore Nizami's religious and ethical edicts, we must first examine his understanding of the human condition: what constitutes a human, how is the human different from the non-human, what can one do to transcend one's humanness?

The Body in Religious Studies

Prior to seeking out a direct encounter with God, Nizami argues that one must align one's body properly. Much of the focus of the rest of the *Makhzan al-asrar* is on precisely this topic. Nizami spends much of the poem laying out a proper relationship to worldly desire, which if

¹⁰⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2016), 3–4.

pursued earnestly can lead to a mystical experience, such as the one he has during his 40-day seclusions. Before we discuss the role the body plays in Nizami's work and Sufi studies more broadly, it would be helpful to situate this discussion in the broader field of Religious Studies.

Before delving into contemporary approaches to the body in Sufi studies, let me begin by examining some of the resources available in the wider field of Religious Studies. An early collection of writing on this topic, Sheets-Johnstone's collection *Giving the Body its Due*, arose out of a conference which brought together a number of scholars from diverse fields such as linguistics, philosophy, and psychology. The essays in the collection are Euro-centric in their concern with overcoming Cartesian dualism.¹⁰⁷ As other critics have noted, such studies remain parochial in their assumption that all humans struggle with the Cartesian subject in the same way (or at all). Further critiques have been leveled against the mis-reading or unfair reading of Descartes carried out in studies on the body. Objections aside, the most interesting aspects of this collection investigate the bodily basis for our most cogitative ability—language. Gendlin's essay posits that a number of elements that pop wisdom ascribes to the disembodied self actually arise out of bodily functions.¹⁰⁸ Mary Foster expands upon this, showing how the

¹⁰⁷ Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, *Giving the Body Its Due* (SUNY Series, *the Body in Culture, History, and Religion*) (State University of New York Press, 1992).

¹⁰⁸ Gendlin, a psychologist and philosophy argues that the body "knows" pre linguistically. He gives examples such as when we greet someone without knowing who the person is, but knowing that we know them. In this way the body both precedes and exceeds language. Eugene Gendlin, "The Wider Role of Bodily Sense in Language and

very shapes our lips make in speaking serve an analogic and mimetic function—for example, the *m* sound tends to cluster, across language families, around words associated with coming together or pressing against.¹⁰⁹ One need not be a Lacanian to note the significance of this insight in light of the prevalence of *m* sounds in words for mother, for example. Perhaps the most problematic aspect of this collection is Sheets-Johnstone's breezy presumption that the material body precedes gender, and that sex only marks difference when overlaid with cultural constructions of gender.¹¹⁰

Don Welton's collection, *Body and Flesh*, picks up the thrown gender gauntlet. The book begins with an essay that argues for the biological basis of sex, the cultural basis of gender, and a vast chasm between the two.¹¹¹ This piece is then juxtaposed with not one, but two excerpts from Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, refuting its assertions. Butler makes it clear that such a neat cleavage between body and culture is problematic at best, arguing for a co-constitutive

Thought," in *Giving the Body Its Due* (*SUNY Series, the Body in Culture, History, and Religion*), ed. Maxine Sheets-Johnstone (State University of New York Press, 1992), 192–193.

¹⁰⁹ Mary Foster, "Body Process in the Evolution of Language," in *Giving the Body Its Due* (*SUNY Series, the Body in Culture, History, and Religion*), ed. Maxine Sheets-Johnstone (State University of New York Press, 1992), 208–209.

¹¹⁰ Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, "Charting the Interdisciplinary Course," in *Giving the Body Its Due* (*SUNY Series, the Body in Culture, History, and Religion*), ed. Maxine Sheets-Johnstone (State University of New York Press, 1992), 12.

¹¹¹ Harre Rom, "Sex and Gender," in *Body and Flesh: A Philosophical Reader*, ed. Donn Welton, 1st ed. (Wiley-Blackwell, 1998).

exchange between the two.¹¹² For our purposes, however, perhaps the most interesting essay in the collection is Welton's own, on Biblical conceptions of the body. Here again he takes Cartesian dualism to task, but locates the soul/body divide in Greek thought smuggled in to Christian theology by Augustine and Aquinas.¹¹³ He notes that a careful reading of biblical texts, especially the Book of Job, no clear division between body and soul can be found.¹¹⁴ Rather they are two aspects of the same personality—one inward and one outward. The notion that the inner aspect is the true self and the outward one is just a disposable shell is not present in biblical accounting, according to Welton.¹¹⁵ Another helpful contribution from Welton's essay is his care to distinguish between contemporary English words like "body" and "flesh" and the Hebrew word most often used to describe the body, *basar*.¹¹⁶

Insights into culturally-specific definitions of body and mind also feature prominently in Sarah Coakley's collection of essays, *Religion and the Body*. The volume is an early foray into an across-the-discipline engagement with theories of the body. Unfortunately, the collection is

¹¹² Judith Butler, "Gender and Performance," in *Body and Flesh: A Philosophical Reader*, ed. Donn Welton, 1st ed. (Wiley-Blackwell, 1998).

¹¹³ Donn Welton, "Biblical Bodies," in *Body and Flesh: A Philosophical Reader*, ed. Donn Welton, 1st ed. (Wiley-Blackwell, 1998), 231.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 243.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 246.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 243.

heavily reliant on accounts of the body from the study of Christianity, shunting scholars of other traditions off into their own subsection. While Christianity gets its own subdivision within the book, Hinduism, Shintoism, Buddhism and Islam each get a single chapter. Many of these chapters are dedicated to marking the development of notions of the body within the specific religious and cultural context of the author's field of inquiry. Such an approach is useful, but similarly self-reflexive accounts from scholars of Christianity are lacking, limiting the possibility of cross-subfield engagements on this issue. Similarly, accounts of the body from scholars of women's and gender studies are sorely lacking.¹¹⁷

A more recent work on the body in religious studies is Manuel Vasquez's *Beyond Belief*. The purpose of his work, he notes, is to trace a genealogy of the study of body and religion for his graduate students at the University of Florida.¹¹⁸ In his lengthy introduction, Vasquez notes the historical problems with the field of Religious Studies. Coming out of Protestant thinkers such as Schleiermacher, religion in the Euro-American academy, he argues, is often construed as a form of "belief" which can only be studied through its external manifestations—texts, rituals and institutions¹¹⁹. But even when studying physical objects, the goal of scholars of

¹¹⁷Sarah Coakley, *Religion and the Body* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

¹¹⁸ Vasquez, *More Than Belief*, 16. Vasquez, *More Than Belief*, 16.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

religion, using this approach, is to work through the imperfect material manifestations to unearth the core meanings and beliefs that undergird them. Vasquez rejects this approach, calling for a decolonization of our text-centric, meaning-focused, Protestant methodologies.¹²⁰ While he thinks materiality is a promising avenue forward, he is careful to note that he is a “weak” reductivist.¹²¹ Citing Edward Slingerland as a scholar Vasquez does *not* want to emulate, he notes that the problem with strong reductivism is that the arrow of explanation always points down.¹²² For Vasquez, humans and human society are more complex than quarks.

Vasquez’s interest in religion centers on how humans live their lives knowing angels exist, not how the angels are ordered in heaven.¹²³ Such a materialist study of religion, he argues, must begin with first-person accounts. This makes the work of anthropologists rather simple, but presents a considerably greater challenge to those who study pre-modern texts and contexts. Though we can and should examine texts as “objectifications” of embodied activity arising out of specific political, social, and biological contexts, he worries about the suitability of our current methods to this task.¹²⁴ Post-modernist and hermeneutic approaches

¹²⁰ Ibid., 3.

¹²¹ Ibid., 4.

¹²² Ibid., 14.

¹²³ Ibid., 5.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

to texts, he says, over-emphasize language (in the post-modern accounts, it's language all the way down...), and construe humans as meaning-making and transmitting beings. One curative to this tendency is to pay attention to how texts are produced and circulate. Another might be to focus upon particular aspects of embodied religious life as depicted in these texts—as this dissertation does, following the model of some of the authors below.

Sight

David Morgan's work is central to the study of material religion and Christianity. His most recent book, *The Embodied Eye*, focuses on vision as a way of engaging with the sacred. His goal is to mark seeing as an embodied practice—an important contribution, since sight is so often affiliated with knowledge and the disembodied self.¹²⁵ Morgan is interested in the senses, in part because he sees human biology as a departure point for cross-cultural and trans-historical comparative work. Morgan argues that though the valuations and meaning of sight as a sense might change over time, the structure of the human eye remains relatively stable. Thus, though vision can be manipulated in a plethora of ways—yoga, narcotics, fasting—the

¹²⁵ David Morgan, *The Embodied Eye: Religious Visual Culture and the Social Life of Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

biological processes being manipulated and the way the body responds to these challenges are consistent.¹²⁶

Perhaps more relevant to this dissertation is Georgia Frank's *Memory of the Eyes*. Frank is interested in vision's role in pilgrimage to living saints in late antique Christianity. Keeping in mind concerns over reading hagiographical texts as transparent historical documents, Frank instead approaches her texts, such as *History of the Monks of Egypt*, as performative engagements which both describe and create a pilgrim's experience.¹²⁷ Like David Morgan, she notes that cultural valuations of vision might change but biological processes underlying it don't. For example, in late antique novels, care or disrespect for the eyes served a similar function to white or black Stetson hats in 20th century Westerns.¹²⁸ A character's inner disposition could be evaluated based on his or her outer sensory abilities. Most interestingly, however, Frank notes the importance of exploring the biological understandings of the senses for her authors. A number of other scholars note a shift in the late Antique period from vision to touch as the primary method of engaging with relics and shrines. For many of them, this marks a

¹²⁶ Ibid., xiii. One might challenge Morgan on this point. Some studies have shown that color perception, for example, can be culturally conditioned and gendered. Likewise such a stable definition of vision does little to account for the differently abled, such as the myopic, color blind, synesthetic, or blind.

¹²⁷ Georgia Frank, *The Memory of the Eyes: Pilgrims to Living Saints in Christian Late Antiquity*, 1st ed. (University of California Press, 2000), 5–6.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 21.

perplexing and radical shift. For Frank, this development becomes clearer if one pays attention to theories of extravision prevalent at the time and polemic discourses against pagan forms of worship. She notes that vision *always* included an aspect of touch, because for her authors rays sent forth from the eyes were bringing back sensory data to them. Their eyes “read” saints’s bodies like fingers passing over Braille. This element of touch was important for her pilgrims because it physically connected them to God through the vector of Jesus’ incarnation.¹²⁹ Such physical transmission of divine contact will be important, though in different ways, for Shahzad Bashir’s work on Sufism as well, as we shall discuss shortly. The shift from vision to touch in late Antique Christian practice, for Frank, has little to do with a change in valuation of the senses and more to do with the political implications of touch in a post-Constantine Roman Empire. No longer needing to distinguish Christian practice from state-sponsored religion, worship through touch, previously marked as the province of pagan sacrifice, became licit again. A similar transformation in Christian engagements with incense is noted by Susan Ashbrook Harvey in *Scenting Salvation*.

Scent

¹²⁹ Ibid., 121-125.

One category of historical experience neglected by contemporary scholarship is scent. Alain Corbin's *Foul and the Fragrant* compellingly, and grotesquely, reveals the vast swaths of historical experience that are lost to contemporary scholars should they ignore smell. In his discussion of the stench of 18th century Paris, Corbin notes that vast public works projects, such as indoor plumbing and city sewage systems, were motivated by fears over the deleterious effects of stench. In part thanks to the developments of this era, we live in a world of enclosed sewage systems, daily bathing, frequent clothes washing, and public spaces pumped with designer scents. Contemporary Americans, then, are especially inured to the importance of scent to our daily experience. But this is not true of our premodern predecessors.¹³⁰

James McHugh's *Sandalwood and Carrion* extends Corbin's insights into the South Asian context. Due to language constraints, he limits himself to Sanskrit texts, leaving room for future studies on perfumery and the scent profile brought Muslims. He notes that religious and political elites of the subcontinent were well-versed in the character of odors, components of perfumes, the uses to which certain scents were best put, and the names of particularly evocative concoctions.¹³¹ McHugh's approach to scent has a couple of helpful elements that

¹³⁰ Alain Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odor and the French Social Imagination* (Harvard University Press, 1986).

¹³¹ James McHugh, *Sandalwood and Carrion: Smell in Premodern Indian Religion and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), x.

make it suitable to Vasquez's vision of the study of pre-modern texts and contexts. First, he notes that perfume is seen as an internal-external ornamentation—it can both alter one's interaction with others but also have an effect on one's own state.¹³² Such an insight may tentatively point toward configurations of the body that more closely align with Don Welton's view of the biblical body than a Cartesian automaton steered by the soul via pineal gland. More importantly, however, McHugh notes that he is *not* interested in simply creating a catalogue of scents and what each scent signifies or symbolizes. Rather, he's interested in noting how scents are used to constitute the self.¹³³ Like other authors studying the body in religion and history, McHugh finds it important to outline biological theories prevalent at the time. And like Georgia Frank, McHugh notes that popular theories of scent characterized it as involving physical, and at times intimate, contact with the object or body being smelled.¹³⁴ For his authors, smell was an intermediary sense, lacking the intimacy and proximity of touch, but less rationally directed than sight or hearing.¹³⁵ Finally, McHugh argues that "the 'embodied turn' in the study of culture and religion noted earlier is not incompatible with the more

¹³² Ibid., 3.

¹³³ Ibid., 4.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 25.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 52.

traditional study of texts and doctrines--far from it. This is a small but important point: to move beyond the *exclusive* study of doctrines and scriptures is not to abandon them totally.”¹³⁶

Susan Ashbrook Harvey’s *Scenting Salvation* brings these insights about scent as a historical category to a late antique Christian context. Like Frank, she notes a shift in attitudes toward certain bodily practices after the conversion of Constantine and the declaration of Christianity as the official state religion.¹³⁷ In an effort to mark Christian liturgy off from Roman and Jewish sacrifice, early Christians eschewed incense in favor of perfume. Sweet smells, especially those related to flowers, were viewed as markers of the divine presence. Bad smells, especially derived from illness and decay, were a sign of the devil.¹³⁸ These easy categories were not entirely stable over time, however. Incense became prominent in Christian liturgy after the 4th century once it no longer was seen as a marker of non-Christian practice. Likewise, the growing importance of ascetics in the Syriac church brought a re-evaluation of bad scents. These holy figures were often described textually or associated visually with flowers, incense holders, and other sweet smelling items. Yet their ascetic practice led to open, festering wounds, halitosis, not to mention the foul stench that must

¹³⁶ Ibid., 10.

¹³⁷ Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Scenting Salvation: Ancient Christianity and the Olfactory Imagination*, 1st ed. (University of California Press, 2006), 58.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 46.

collect on an unwashed hair shirt worn in the desert sun. These saintly bodies were viewed as being connected with the divine, but did not emanate the proper smells to mark such contact.¹³⁹ New valuations of odor and fragrance had to be developed to account for such a disjuncture—such as the notion that the stench was a sign of their successful combat with the devil, or an indication of the decay of their material bodies in a quest for a celestial body.¹⁴⁰ Such questions of the relationship between asceticism and stench seem important and are mostly unexplored in the study of medieval Sufism. However, as we shall see shortly, pleasant scents are used by Nizami to indicate spiritual purity and contact with the heavens.

Gender

Finally, a number of the authors have brought gender to the forefront of the discussion of the body in religion. Grace Jantzen seeks to recapture an embodied engagement with Christ's resurrection through the study of medieval women mystics.¹⁴¹ Contrary to William James' mystification of mysticism, Jantzen wishes to reclaim its heritage in the gender and power politics of the medieval church. She seems especially critical of James' four-fold

¹³⁹ Ibid., 201-204.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 213-221

¹⁴¹ Grace M. Jantzen, "Mysticism and Experience," *Religious Studies* 25, no. 3 (1989): 295-315.

definition of mysticism, with its focus on temporary, individual, internal, experiential engagements with the divine that were, according to him, received passively by the mystic.¹⁴² Jantzen wants to reclaim the embodied, active aspect of medieval women's mysticism by focusing on embodied engagements with a sexualized and sometimes feminized Jesus as a way of disrupting male-dominated Church hierarchy that controlled and regulated access to a masculine divine. Jantzen's insights are enriched and expanded by the writings of Caroline Walker Bynum. By looking at the writings of mystics such as Julian of Norwich or Mechthild of Magderburd, she examines the role of courtly love in their loving devotion of Christ and the importance of Christ's wounds as symbolic wombs through which the devotee could be comforted and reborn.¹⁴³ While these accounts of the body in Christian mysticism are very specific to the medieval Christian context, they do call us to: a) a greater awareness of the specific, historical, contextual nature of the phenomena under study; b) be cautious with our received definitions and categories; and c) pay attention to constructions of power and the regulation of access to the divine, especially along gendered lines, in the texts and contexts in which we work. These issues will be taken up in relation to women in Sufism, and Nizami's treatment of women, later in the chapter.

¹⁴² Ibid., 299-301.

¹⁴³ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*, 1st Edition (Zone, 1992).

Body in Sufism

Perhaps one of the first discussions of Sufism interested in investigating Sufi bodies as such was Tor Andrae's *In the Garden of Myrtles*. Focusing on early Muslim and Christian interactions through asceticism, Andrae highlights the importance of Jesus as a role model for early Muslim ascetics, valued for his renunciation of worldly goods and attachments. For much of the 20th century, the study of early Sufi asceticism relied on this affiliation between early renunciates in Iraq and Syriac desert hermits.¹⁴⁴ Ahmet Karamustafa's work has brought greater depth and nuance to our understanding of asceticism and bodily discipline in early and medieval Sufism. In *Sufism: The Formative Period*, he traces the complex path through which a name marking a Baghdadi circle of elites came to collect and subsume a diverse range of practices, organizations and vocabularies focused upon enhancing, extending and enriching one's religious engagements. His discussion of the Malamatiyya, Kharamiyya and Qalandar movements give us avenues into discussing Sufi bodily practice that go beyond simple self-denial along the Syriac Christian model and that don't rest on contacts with desert hermits.¹⁴⁵ Likewise, his work expands the bounds of what might be considered an ascetic practice. Rather

¹⁴⁴ Tor Andrae, *In the Garden of Myrtles: Studies in Early Islamic Mysticism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987).

¹⁴⁵ Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period*.

than focusing on things such as celibacy, fasting, and sleeplessness, his analysis allows us to capture such bodily practices as self-shaming (which, as David Morgan notes, is profoundly imbricated with our understanding of vision and sight¹⁴⁶), piercing, public nudity, etc. His work also alerts us to the continued relevance of embodied practices within Sufism. The development of Junaydian mystical vocabulary and public respectability gained through political sponsorship did not put an end to Sufi asceticism and bodily discipline, we just need to be more nimble in recognizing and coding Sufi attitudes toward the body over time.

Scott Kugle's work, *Sufis & Saints Bodies* is one recent attempt to do just that. Though he begins, on page one, by naming Sufism as "Islamic Mysticism," his introduction quickly moves to problematize and complexify this characterization¹⁴⁷. For Kugle, one must study Sufi characterizations of the body through poetic and hagiographic texts because they are reflections of popular religion. Kugle notes that legal texts would only tell us how Muslims *should* think about the body, according to educated elites. Sufi texts are a reflection of how a vast number of Muslims actually *did* think about and engage with the body. For Kugle, the most relevant authors for building his theoretical framework are Merleau-Ponty on the body and Bordieu's modification of Mauss' concept of habitus. By combining these two thinkers, Kugle

¹⁴⁶ Morgan, *The Embodied Eye*.

¹⁴⁷ Scott Alan Kugle, *Sufis & Saints' Bodies: Mysticism, Corporeality, & Sacred Power in Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

finds himself able to get at and speak about a layered, socially and historically situated body. More helpful still, however, to his thinking about the body, is the writing of Farid al-Zahi, a North African scholar who debates heatedly with Chebel on the nature of the body in Islam. Al-Zahi, according to Kugle, argues for a four-fold nested structure of the body embedded in a four-quadrant system. For Kugle, this structure captures both how a sense of self arises out of the body, and how that self uses the body to engage with the broader world.

Most helpful in Kugle's analysis of the body in Sufism is his focus on gender and sexuality. Applying queer theory to a case study of the writings and persecution of Shah Hussayn, Kugle notes the ways in which shaykh-disciple relations occur along homoerotic lines, utilizing poetic tropes of the lover and beloved, and requiring seduction and/or submission on the part of the disciple. Through this analysis, he notes the potentially transgressive nature of Sufi practices and male Sufi bodies within a predominantly cisgendered, heteronormative, patriarchal legal context. Shah Hussayn's punishment, for Kugle, involves violence, humiliation and rape as a way of enforcing normative categories of gender and sexuality within a patriarchal context—Hussayn is meant to face the full implications of the loss of power his self-feminization activates within this system.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 181-220.

Shahzad Bashir also discusses the relationship between shaykh and disciple using the paradigm of courtly love. In *Sufi Bodies*, Bashir does not, like Kugle, deploy queer theory to plumb his texts for signs of heteronormativity or transgression. Rather, he is interested in re-embodying our understanding of pre-modern Sufism through an examination of the category of the body as a locus of blessing and site for transmission of authority. He begins his work by discussing the importance of the Prophet's ascension as setting up a point of contact between the divine and human realms.¹⁴⁹ Through this ascension, and a hadith in which Muhammad claims that anyone who shakes the hand of a man who has shook his hand, within seven links, will receive intercession on the day of judgment. Such physical transmission of spiritual blessings has a long history in Islam and Arabic culture, but is often neglected in the study of Sufism. Amir-Moezzi, for example, notes the etymological link between the word *Baraka* and a pre-Islamic practice of fathers spitting into the mouths of their young sons in order to transfer protection and symbolize the future transfer authority.¹⁵⁰

Bashir, like Kugle, finds Merleau-Ponty and Bordieu helpful for his analysis of pre-modern texts. He sees bodies, as depicted in his primary source materials, not as symbols to be interpreted, but rather as sedimentations of popular notions of the body in circulation at the

¹⁴⁹ Shahzad Bashir, *Sufi Bodies: Religion and Society in Medieval Islam* (Columbia University Press, 2011), 95.

¹⁵⁰ Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, *The Spirituality of Shi'i Islam: Belief and Practices* (I. B. Tauris in Association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2011), 37.

time. His analysis tells him a few important things about bodies for medieval Sufis: 1) corporeal contact is highly esteemed as a marker of transmission of authority and social connection; 2) increasing intimacy is connected to increased physical proximity. It is here, however, that Bashir, like Ohlander and Trimmingham, strives to situate textual accounts of corporeal contact within the system of lineage and authorization of the *tariqa* system. This leaves us at a loss for what to do with early Muslims ascetics who later generations adopt into Sufi lineages—and those who eschewed human companionship and contact as a source of threat and distraction rather than blessing.

Nizami, Women and Mysticism

If there is a common thread amongst male Sufi authors, it is the use of women as props for the spiritual edification of men. One can note, for example, the bawdy tales in Jalal al-Din Rumi's *Masnavi*, which titillate on one level, and educate on another. A number of scholars on Nizami have debated whether he can be viewed as using women for similarly androcentric ends.¹⁵¹

Discussions of this topic, as with the question of Sufi imagery in poetry discussed in Chapter 1,

¹⁵¹ Talattof, "Nizami's Unlikely Heroines: A Study of the Characterizations of Women in Classical Persian Literature," 52. Some such as Julie Scott Meisami, have argued that he was gender egalitarian, while others, such as Bihruz Sarvartiyān, note that Nizami promoted veiling and used women as symbols rather than fully-fleshed characters, like his male protagonists.

seem to take on a binary character. Either Nizami was a radical feminist, or he was a staunch proponent of patriarchy. Either his women characters are fully-realized with complex emotional arch or they are flat metaphors for the stages of the Sufi path. Since two of Nizami's most famous works involve extended love stories, much ink has been spilled over the question of whether or not depictions of romantic relationships between men and women are exclusively metaphors for union with God.¹⁵²

Several commentators have noted, however, that amongst Persian poets and Sufi authors, Nizami stands out for his treatment of women. Nizami wrote during a time when women were viewed as impaired in intellect, yet his woman characters often outwit their male counterparts.¹⁵³ Some point to his respect for his own wife as the source of this treatment of women, noting that Shirin in *Khosrow and Shirin* is a representation of Nizami's wife, Afaq.¹⁵⁴ Meisami goes so far as to argue that not only is *Layla and Majnun* not a metaphor for divine-human love, it is specifically a refutation of the *udhri* poetic tradition out of which these metaphors derive.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵² Talattof, "Nizami's Unlikely Heroines" 55.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 57.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 54.

¹⁵⁵ Meisami, *Medieval Persian Court Poetry*, 171.

In contrast to his later poems, the *Makhzan al-asrar* is relatively silent on the topic of gender. Most of the major characters are male, and if there is a recurring protagonist in the work it would be the Prophet Muhammad, whose body is exalted to such a degree as to almost become inhuman. Though strong women characters do not appear in the *Makhzan al-asrar*, Nizami also doesn't make women a major stumbling block for his male ascetics. Women are neither depicted as lascivious nor chaste, duplicitous nor virtuous; they simply are not depicted at all. One could read this omission in a number of ways, though as we shall see in the next chapter, it is unlikely that Nizami is using this oversight to denigrate women. Rather than subdivide humans into hierarchical categories, Nizami's commission seems to be lumping them together. In the next section we will explore how he not only resists dividing humans into separate genders based on their potential spiritual attainment, he resists dividing humans from animals along traditional boundaries as well.

Animal Bodies

A growing field of work in philosophy, theology, history, literature, and religious studies seeks to make our definitions of the human explicit through exploring the way the

category of the human is defined over and against the non-human animal. Very few works in Islamic Studies have engaged with the growing field of animality studies, and those that do tend to focus on the Qur'an and normative discourses of law and theology. This chapter expands this body of work by reexamining inherited scholarly understandings of human-animal relationships and animal metaphors in a medieval Sufi text. The chapter challenges our understandings of medieval Sufi cosmology as humanocentric, with an over-reliance on the Aristotelian Chain of Being. Through an examination of animal metaphors in Nizami Ganjavi's *Treasury of Mysteries*, this chapter demonstrates a much more complex relationship between humans, animals, and God than such a linear model allows. In so doing the chapter also challenges Modernist constructions of Islam which emphasize the Qur'an as the only source out of which to construct an authentic Islam, while excluding Medieval Sufism, and in particular Persian literature, from their discussion of what it means to be Muslim.

When Bruijn reviews the main topics of the *Makhzan al-asrar*, he notes that "Nizami preaches on...the supreme rank of man among the creatures of this world," among other topics.¹⁵⁶ It is easy to see why he makes such an argument, Nizami includes a chapter heading called "On the superiority of humans to animals." In this section we will explore the claim that Nizami argues for the superiority of humans over animals and argue that Nizami's

¹⁵⁶ Bruijn, *Persian Sufi Poetry*, 97.

understanding of human/animal relations and animal religiosity is more complex than such a bald chapter heading would seem to imply.

Theorizing the Animal

“Man is the animal that must recognize itself as human to be human” – Carl Linnaeus¹⁵⁷

The dismissal of the role of animals in religious texts has a long pedigree. Discussion of and attention to non-human animals are marked as mere poetic flourish or anthropomorphism, which, as some thinkers have noted, can reinscribe animal subservience to humans and can have detrimental real-life implications.¹⁵⁸ But as Derrida notes, this disavowal has often taken the form of excluding discourses on animals from the categories of philosophy and law, by declaring them *mere* poetry, with little legal or intellectual force.¹⁵⁹ Donovan Schaeffer’s work on affect theory and religion, however, invites us to think of religion as a phenomena beyond

¹⁵⁷ Cited in Agamben, Giorgio. *The Open: Man and Animal*. Translated by Kevin Attell. 1 edition. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2003, 26.

¹⁵⁸ See, for example, James A. Serpell’s “People in Disguise” in *Thinking With Animals*.

¹⁵⁹ Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, 7. Gross, 125.

the legal and intellectual—one that first and foremost engages the affective.¹⁶⁰ Following Tom Tweed, Schaeffer asks us to understand religion as “a repertoire of procedures for pushing around and evoking specific affects.”¹⁶¹ By locating the religious in the attempt to evoke, manage, and direct affects, Schaeffer and other affect theorists argue we will be able to escape the “linguistic fallacy [that] presupposes that language is an apparatus of command that effortlessly articulates with bodies.”¹⁶² As Aaron Gross notes, the contemporary field of religious studies is grounded on the presumption of the human-animal binary. From Durkheim to Eliade to J.Z. Smith, key figures in the field have defined religion as a profoundly *human* enterprise.¹⁶³ By decentering or destabilizing the religious subject as a rational, speaking body, we open ourselves up to new definitions of religion—ones that do not presuppose the human/animal binary. Following Aaron Gross, this study is, in part, an attempt to “reimagine the subjectivities and subjects that count as religious” in light of animality studies.¹⁶⁴

Throughout the works of Animal Studies theorists, however, there is a problematic elision of traditions. Authors often lump the “Abrahamic Traditions” together, noting their shared

¹⁶⁰ Schaefer, *Religious Affects*.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁶² Schaeffer, 35.

¹⁶³ Gross, 60-94.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 96.

insistence on the human/animal divide. Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain traditions, these authors argue, have resources for drawing the human/animal division differently, even if in practice they rarely do.¹⁶⁵ This grouping seems especially problematic in the case of Islam, where resources for thinking differently about the human/animal divide and animal religiosity are abundant. While recent works by a number of young scholars have sought to bring together Animality Studies and Islamic Studies, including a dedicated panel at the American Academy of Religion in 2015, much of this work remains apologetic in nature. Like some of the work in Jewish Studies surrounding animals, current research on animals in Islamic Studies tends to focus on rules of sacrifice and halal butchering practices, justifying them as compassionate alternatives to contemporary industrialized meat production.¹⁶⁶ One exception to this trend is Sarra Tlili's writing, which seeks to contrast the Qur'anic view of animals with that of later Islamic law and theology. In *Animals in the Qur'an*, she extends Amina Wadud's assertion from *Qur'an and Woman* that the Qur'an distinguishes human beings from *one another in terms of "excellence"* based only on their individual piety, and not based on inherent qualities such as

¹⁶⁵ On the problematic uses and abuses of the term "Abrahamic Religions" see Jon Leveson's *Inheriting Abraham*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012.

¹⁶⁶ See, for example, the 2015 American Academy of Religion panel cosponsored by the Study of Islam Section and the Animals and Religion Group: "To Kill or Not to Kill: Islamic Perspectives on Animal Ethics." Additionally the website beyondhallal.com, co-founded by Nuri Friedlander, has contains a number of readable articles and op-eds on this topic, addressed primarily to a Muslim audience.

gender, to argue that the Qur'an, and therefore God, also doesn't distinguish by species.¹⁶⁷ For Tlili, this egalitarian tradition is found in the Qur'an but swiftly ignored and discounted by later theologians and jurists. This chapter shows evidence of a counter-tradition, which picks up on these Qur'anic threads, in a major medieval poetic work.

Animal Piety in Islamic Discourse

This chapter builds on the prior work of both Sarah Tlili in *Animals in the Qur'an* and Richard Foltz in *Animals in Islamic Tradition and Muslim Culture*. Foltz's coverage of animals in Islamic tradition covers much untrod ground. Though when he writes about the depictions of animals in poetry and in Sufi texts, he sets up an unfortunate binary to define what is and is not Islamic. By his definition, only authoritative theological and legal texts are properly Islamic, while Persian poetry and Sufi writings may be disregarded as mere entertainment.¹⁶⁸ Along with this dismissal of popular piety comes a definition of the human as radically distinct from non-

¹⁶⁷ Tlili, Sarra. *Animals in the Qur'an*. Cambridge University Press, 2012.

¹⁶⁸ "though the material in question is produced by Muslims, it may have little or nothing to do with Islam...most such stories are more entertaining than instructive, offering more titillation than morals," Foltz, Richard. *Animals in Islamic Traditions and Muslim Cultures*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2005, 65. One might note that Foltz places the Ikhwan al-Safa's *Case of the Animals Versus Man* in his chapter on philosophy while he places Farid al-Din Attar's *Mantiq al-Tayr* and Jalal al-Din Rumi's *Masthawi al-ma'nawi* in his section on chapter on art and literature. One might quibble with whether or not these two works are for "mere titillation."

human animals. When discussing medieval Sufi poetry, Foltz is quick to highlight the importance of the concept of the *nafs*, or “Animal soul,” and influence of Neoplatonist articulations of Aristotle’s chain of being to Sufi cosmology.¹⁶⁹ Yet, Foltz notes that technically, according to the Qur’an, humans and non-human animals are not ontologically distinct, and that non-human animals, angels, jinn, and humans all partake equally in creatureliness. If humans and jinn are unique amongst creatures, it may only be for their ability to stray from God’s will.¹⁷⁰

Tlili’s work builds on Foltz’ insights into the Qur’an but seeks to excavate the scripture for resources with which to advocate for an Islamic environmentalism and animal rights’ discourse. Tlili relies and expands upon contemporary Qur’an scholars such as Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas who read a previously under-utilized gender egalitarianism in the text.¹⁷¹ According to Wadud’s gender-egalitarian readings of the Qur’an, God distinguishes between men and women based on their differing levels of piety and nothing else. Tlili notes that technically God doesn’t distinguish human beings exclusively by their piety, but indeed all created beings are judged based solely on their piety.¹⁷² Wadud and Barlas both note that the

¹⁶⁹ “among the Sufis a central notion, and a highly negative one, was that of the ‘animal self’ (*nafs*), the source of all the baser instincts...described through all manner of animal imagery, which can hardly be considered flattering or positive in regard to animals.” Foltz, 77.

¹⁷⁰ Foltz, 6.

¹⁷¹ Tlili, 49-51.

¹⁷² Ibid., 223-237.

gender-egalitarian possibilities of the Qur'an were ignored or suppressed by later generations of male interpreters. Tlili similarly argues that human-centric readings of the Qur'an, which developed in part in conversation with Jewish and Christian scriptures, came to cover over the radical creaturely equality of the Qur'an's message.¹⁷³

Rather than concede, with Foltz and Tlili, that divine revelation might contain a message of radical equality forgotten or purposely dismissed by the later tradition, this analysis shows that this egalitarian strand gets picked up by at least one critical medieval poetic text—a text of great significance to the development of later Persian poetry and Sufi discourse.

The *Makhzan al-Asrar* is the first of Nizami's five major *masnavis* (long narrative poems written in rhyming couplets). It does not tell a single sustained story, but instead collects a number of short essays followed by exempla. These essays range in topic from the proper comportment around a king to the value of renouncing worldly wealth. Many of the exempla include prominent animal characters, from pet birds to a dead dog carcass, around which the story's lesson revolves. Far from representing base instincts that must be overcome, often these creatures, especially birds, are fastidiously religious. In these tales, animal religiosity is repeatedly held up as an aspirational standard for human religiosity.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 8-9.

Buraq

There is perhaps no more perplexing or omnipresent hybrid creature in Islam than Buraq.¹⁷⁴ A human-faced animal described as bigger than a mule and smaller than a donkey, he serves as Muhammad's mount on his ascension to heaven. It is commonplace to interpret mules or donkeys as representations of the *nafs* (animal or lower soul) in Sufi literature. On this construal, the human is something layered atop the animal, which it must manage and control. Failure to manage the animal results in devolution back into the animal. Like Pinocchio on Pleasure Island, we risk becoming braying mules if we laugh, drink, and play too much. Read simplistically, Buraq represents what one can achieve through the proper disciplining of the *nafs*. The baser human drives need not be discarded to ascend to heaven, merely controlled and directed.

But in many ascension narratives Buraq is both more complex and more elusive than such a singular reading would allow. In some ascension narratives, he initially refuses Muhammad's attempt to mount him, even chastising him for touching gold—an implicit accusation of idolatry.¹⁷⁵ It's not that Buraq doesn't want to be tamed, it's that he sees himself as

¹⁷⁴ Derrida notes the *monstrosity* of hybrid animals in myth, such as Chimaera and Pegasus, who must be either tamed or killed. He argues that these hybrid animals hint at the monstrosity of the term "animals" itself, which attempts to lasso all non-human animate life into a single monstrous category. Derrida, *The Animals That Therefore I Am*, 41-42.

¹⁷⁵ Buckley, Ron. "The Burāq: Views from the East and West." *Arabica* 60, no. 5 (January 1, 2013): 581.

more pious than those who might want to tame him. After Muhammad explains himself and the angel Gabriel chastises Buraq, he finally assents to be mounted, but not before extracting a promise of intercession from the Prophet on the Day of Judgment.

Such a narrative thwarts Foltz's easy interpretation of the human/animal binary, unless we concede that Ascension Narratives, Sufism, and Persian literature are somehow to be excluded from any understanding of "mainstream Islam," which would be doing considerable violence to our understanding of Islamic history. Buraq is clearly conscious of God, aware of the dangers of the worst of transgressions against God, and concerned with its own status in the afterlife.

God-Dog & Dog-God:

Like Rumi, Nizami also uses counter-intuitive metaphors for the divine. In his *Story of the Dog, the Hunter and the Fox*: it is not a donkey, but a hunting dog that represents God.¹⁷⁶ In Arabic, the words for dog and heart are dangerously close for the clumsy tongue of a non-native speaker [kalb & qalb].¹⁷⁷ Poets and mystics had much use of this near homophone, toying with the notion that the mystical seat of God in humans, the heart, might be sonically

¹⁷⁶ Nizami, *Makhzan al-asrār*, 101-104.

¹⁷⁷ <http://www.ummah.com/forum/showthread.php?241193-Heart-amp-Dog>

confused with or compared to a ritually unclean animal. Nizami Ganjavi, a 12th century poet, took this analogy a step further, using the story of a hunter and his loyal dog as an analogy for the relationship between humans and God.

In this tale, a hunter loves his dog greatly, and the dog provides the hunter with abundant sustenance through his skill at the hunt. One day, the dog runs off and does not return. The hunter is surprisingly sanguine about this turn of events, presuming that his beloved pet had run into a lion and been eaten. A fox appears, emboldened by the dog's absence, to taunt and tempt the hunter. The fox questions the dog's loyalty, implying that he ran off out of ingratitude. He also doubts the hunter's love for the dog, pointing to the hunter's lack of despair at the dog's disappearance. No sooner has the fox finished taunting the hunter than the dog returns in a rush, capturing the fox for his master. This story is the exemplum for sixth discourse on creation, which argues that the world is filled with distractions that will lead us to forget our love of God and God's loyalty to us.¹⁷⁸ Though there are several metaphorical levels on which one can read this tale, in the most simplistic reading places the dog in the role of God.

¹⁷⁸ Nizami, *Makhzan al-asrār*, 98.

The trope of the dog gets picked up again in the Story of Jesus and the Dog¹⁷⁹: In this story, a crowd has gathered around a dead mutt in the street, insulting its mangy fur, foul odor, and hideous face. Jesus joins the crowd, but instead of jeering at its decaying corpse, he praises it's fine teeth. Such a story often gets interpreted as a call to see the presence of God in everything and everyone.¹⁸⁰ This is certainly a compelling and worthwhile interpretation of the story, but in relation to the discourse that it follows, there is more at stake. The story is used to exemplify the coming of the day of judgment. The critiques the villagers make of the dead dog are tinged with their own anxiety over death: "The fear of this brings darkness to the mind" says one. Another "it oppresses the heart."¹⁸¹ Nizami calls on the reader to not fear judgment, but also to not be lulled into a false sense of hope based on comparison with others—in this case animals.¹⁸² He notes that piety looks different for each different species of animal: and if we congratulate ourselves for being more subservient than a dog or more long-suffering than a mule, we will be in for a surprise on the day of judgment.¹⁸³

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 126-127.

¹⁸⁰ Safi, Omid. "Jesus, The Dead Dog, And Recognizing The Presence Of God Everywhere." *The Huffington Post*. Accessed October 22, 2015. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/omid-safi/jesus-and-the-dead-dog_b_1265657.html.

¹⁸¹ Niẓāmī Ganjavī and Gholam Hossein Darab Khan, *Makhzanol Asrār = The Treasury of Mysteries* (London: A. Probsthain, 1945).

¹⁸² Nizami, *Makhzan al-asrār*, 125.

¹⁸³ Nizami, *Makhzan al-asrār*, 127.

Bird-Souls

Birds are a continuing trope throughout Sufi poetry. Metaphorically, birds come to symbolize the soul, and the world or the body is marked as a cage, or even the “abode of snares.” But birds are more than just metaphors for the human soul in Nizami’s work: in the story of Nurshirvan and the vizier,¹⁸⁴ while out riding one day, the king and his chief counselor come across a bird marriage, complete with contractual negotiations over the bride price. One bird is hoping to delay payment of the bride-price until after the marriage, but the other refuses. He argues that the tyranny of Nushirvan means no one can plan on the future, and so must take what they can get now. Nushirvan is shocked by the accusation of tyranny, and worries about how unjust he must seem to his human subjects if his tyranny is the subject of discussion amongst birds. His vizier advises that birds will testify against him on Day of Judgment, and so Nushirvan changes his ways and becomes a just and generous king.¹⁸⁵ As in Tlili’s analysis of the Qur’an, this story shows animals have a complex culture and set of interests beyond and outside of human actions, that nevertheless sometimes interact with human spheres of influence. It also demonstrates that animals will be present at the day of judgment and given the ability to affect

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 80-83.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 82.

the fate of human souls in the hereafter: which clearly undercuts any notion that humans have been granted dominion over animals.

Objections

There are some limitations to this analysis. Perhaps the most obvious is articulated by Foltz: if the animals are just metaphors here, they are once again being pressed into service, this time symbolic service.¹⁸⁶ Tlili addresses this notion in relation to the Qur'an, noting that the Qur'an depicts animals as having language, social relations, and inner-lives independent of their human interactions, and whose complexity cannot be easily reduced or pressed into service of the lesson at hand.¹⁸⁷ Such complexity is likewise a hallmark of Nizami's text, such as when he depicts a bird marriage. Likewise, Tlili argues that the personification of animal depictions in the Qur'an, including their apparent use of human languages and social customs, can be understood through the Qur'an's intended audience—humans. She argues that the Qur'an was revealed in Arabic because its audience was Arabic-speaking, not because only Arabs are worthy of God's attention. So too should we understand moments of seeming anthropomorphism in the

¹⁸⁶ Foltz, 66.

¹⁸⁷ Tlili, 184-191.

Qur'an.¹⁸⁸ Non-human culture, innerlife, and piety surely looks nothing like its human parallels,¹⁸⁹ but we would not understand the inner life of birds if presented to us in bird-language and terms.

A more direct objection might arise from a careless and casual reading of Nizami's section headings: the poet, after all, addresses the matter directly in a chapter called: "Discourse on the superiority of humans [Adami] over animals [haywani]."¹⁹⁰ Here Nizami uses Arabic-derived words, rather than the Persian equivalents, leaning on a Qur'anic and theological valence for his discourse. He marks humans as distinguished from non-human animals by their descent from Adam. The word for "animal," haywan, can carry a pejorative meaning when applied to a human in contemporary Arabic, but at its roots just indicates a something that is living. The word for "superiority" here, *fazila*, is also Qur'anic Arabic. As Amina Wadud has indicated in her work *Qur'an and Woman*, the Qur'an distinguishes human beings from *one another in terms of "excellence"* based only on their individual piety, and not based on inherent qualities such as gender. Thus, many of Nizami's animals, who are more pious than their human counterparts, are inherently more "excellent" than the humans. In case we were in doubt about Nizami's tongue-in-cheek

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 51-54.

¹⁸⁹ Uexküll, Jakob von. *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans: With A Theory of Meaning*. Translated by Joseph D. O'Neil. Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2010.

¹⁹⁰ Nizami, *Makhzan al-asrār*, 105.

title, he gives us these lines: “Whatever exists on this curtain, is worthy of a body and has a value for its life” and “Like you, they are the jewels of this world.”¹⁹¹

Perhaps the clearest way forward is to build on and expand Tlili and Foltz’s research through Jan Bennett’s concept of “vibrant matter.” In Nizami’s work, non-human animals have language, ritual, political opinions, philosophical debates, and can have varying levels of relationships with one another, with humans, and with God. But they aren’t the only non-human figures with such capacities. Especially in relation to their interactions with the Prophet Muhammad, Nizami shows the fixed stars, constellations, flowers, and even stones to shimmer with sort of agency that can alter the fabric of the cosmos. For example, the stone that splits Muhammad’s lip at the Battle of Badr, thanks to contact with Muhammad’s blood, and out of a desire to do penance for its transgression, becomes the progenitor of all rubies.

A number of writers in Animal Studies have pointed to the stakes of drawing a hard line between animals and humans. The same tools that are used to exclude pigs, apes and dogs from full subjecthood have also been used, in the past and present, to exclude women, children, the neurodiverse, and people of different skin color and ethnicity from the category of the human.¹⁹² As Ron Buckley points out in a 2013 article on the mythical creature Buraq,

¹⁹¹ Nizami, *Makhzan al-asrār*, 106.

¹⁹² See, for example, Kim Robert’s “Interlocking Oppressions,” in *Communion of Subjects*.

human-animal relationships and hybridity can take on a civilizational aspect.¹⁹³ For Christian writers encountering Muhammad's ascension narrative, Buraq's hybridity is clear sign of Islam's scientific backwardness—and the credulity of Muslims toward such a creature a sign of their mental insufficiency. Deleuze and Guattari highlight how cultures and civilizations have been placed on an evolutionary continuum based on whether they read their kinship with animals as literal or figurative—based on how strongly they draw the line between the human and the animal.¹⁹⁴ Schaefer notes that contemporary American Islamophobia has a strong affective pull — the affects of fear, rage, and companionship feel *good* for those engaging in Islamophobic rhetoric and acts. Little examined in his work, however, is the ways that relations with animals are used to mark and generate the affective elements of Muslim difference.¹⁹⁵

This section extends the insights of Animality Studies into the critical realm of Islamic Studies, where Muslim engagement with animals plays an important role in contemporary representations of Islam in the American imagination: whether it confirm stereotypes of

¹⁹³ Ron Buckley, "The Burāq: Views from the East and West," *Arabica* 60, no. 5 (January 1, 2013): 587.

¹⁹⁴ Deleuze & Guattari, *1000 Plateaus*, 1730. Gilles Deleuze, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (U of Minnesota Press, 1987), 1730.

¹⁹⁵ See, for example, Donald Trump's recent call to coat bullets with pig fat: Gabriel, Trip. "Donald Trump Cites Questionable 'Pig's Blood' Story on Early Terrorism." *The New York Times - The New York Times Politics and Washington*, February 20, 2016. <http://www.nytimes.com/live/south-carolina-nevada-2016-election/donald-trump-2/>.

Muslim cruelty and incivility through depictions of animal sacrifice, or fuel notions of Muslims “irrational” distaste for pigs and dogs. By applying them to the portrayal of animals and human-animal hybrids in Nizami Ganjavi’s (d. 1209) *Makhzan al-Asrar* (Treasury of Secrets) this chapter challenges the easy human/animal binary presumed by such portrayals. Following Agamben, this section is interested in looking at the way a premodern text, one without access to the “machine” of *homo sapiens* or the devices of Linnaean Taxonomy to produce recognition of the human, uses other machines and devices to do so.¹⁹⁶

Historically, the category of the “human” has been used to exclude, not include. Used as a razor to slice off those beings which are “not us.” It sanctions oppression, enslavement, and murder. So, when we speak of the humanities, the study and cultivation of those attributes which long-lineages of learned *men* tell us separate us from the brutes, we must take a moment to reflect upon the laudable virtues we are here to discuss. What is the goal of the field of Islamic Studies in the humanities? Is it to, as Carl Ernst notes in the introduction to *Following Muhammad*, “offer the thesis that Muslims are human beings”?¹⁹⁷ Or can Islamic Studies be a force for challenging the very definitions of the “human” that have been used to exclude

¹⁹⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell, 1 edition (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2003), 23–27, 33–38.

¹⁹⁷ Carl W. Ernst, *Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

Muslims? Before we debate the role of Islamic Studies in the academy, we must first ask “What is the human?” And how can the field of Islamic Studies help us step outside of our calm assurances about the boundaries and valuation of the term. Any category we use to draw the line between the human and non-human animals can also be used to draw lines between different human animals. Speech, reason, shame (à la Derrida),¹⁹⁸ all socially and culturally inflected, can be denied those who do not fit our understanding of those categories. I hope this section has shown that different, and more complex, attitudes towards non-humans animals can be found in a significant medieval poetic text, and that we misread such texts through our own contemporary human/animal binary at our peril.

¹⁹⁸ Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, ed. Marie-Louis Mallet, trans. David Wills, 1 edition (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

CHAPTER 3: DISCIPLINING THE BODY

Asceticism in the *Makhzan al-asrar*

Now we must turn to Nizami's first *masnavi*, the *Makhzan al-asrar*. Often depicted as overly prescriptive and ascetic in its ethics, the word *zuhd* appears in the *Makhzan* only 5 times...all in the story of the Pir and his students. This story echoes Attar's tale of Shaykh Sanan, but in the form of a bawdy joke. The Shaykh breaks wind and most of his students scatter to the wind. Nizami notes that if one's asceticism is not well founded, it will evaporate at the slightest breeze.¹⁹⁹

The slightly more emphatic term, *riazat* [self-mortification], however, appears 7 times. Twice in the chapter "Describing the Night and Cognizing the Heart," which is a prelude to a section describing Nizami's visions during his first 40-day religious seclusion,²⁰⁰ four times in Chapter Seven, "On the Superiority of Humans to Animals," and once in Chapter 20, "On the

¹⁹⁹ Nizami Ganjavi, *Makhzan al-asrar*, 160–161.

²⁰⁰ Nizami uses the word *Khalwa* for his retreat, which correlates with the *chilla*, a 40-day seclusion mandated as part of the final initiation rites into some Sufi orders.

Shamelessness of People.” In each of these cases it has a positive valence, and is contrasted with the unrestrained impulses of nature: “Relinquish nature’s [*tabi’at*] silver to asceticism [*riazat*]; extract nature’s [*tabi’at*] gold through asceticism [*riazat*].”²⁰¹ Elsewhere in the *Makhzan*, Nizami uses the term *nafs* (ego identity or animal soul) to refer to one’s undisciplined nature. This term has much stronger Sufi valences, and is often likened to a stubborn ass in Persian poetry. Here, Nizami uses as different animal metaphor for one’s nature: “When you tame the wild horse [*tausani*] of nature [*tab’*], the coin of sincerity [*ikhlas*] is struck in your name.”²⁰² Nizami also aligns asceticism with reason, over and against nature. He compares reason [*aqil*] to the perfumer and nature [*tab’*] to the blacksmith in reference to a hadith about selecting friends wisely. One is a friend who brings benefits no matter what—even in the worst case scenario, the perfumer will smell nice. The other brings detriment no matter what.²⁰³

Though the words for asceticism themselves appear relatively infrequently, throughout the rest of the poem, Nizami gives us a good idea of what he means by *zuhd* and *riazat* in their most commendable forms. Just three lines before those quoted above, Nizami

²⁰¹ Nizami Ganjavi, *Makhzan al-asrar*, 107.

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ "The example of a good companion (who sits with you) in comparison with a bad one, is like that of the musk seller and the blacksmith's bellows (or furnace); from the first you would either buy musk or enjoy its good smell while the bellows would either burn your clothes or your house, or you get a bad nasty smell thereof," Sahih Bukhari, Book 3, Volume 34, Hadith 314. <http://www.quranexplorer.com/Hadith/English/Index.html>. Accessed on 09/12/2015.

says “Make your body (*jism*) purer than your soul (*jan*) by imprisoning it for 40 days.”²⁰⁴ Nizami knows the benefits of such seclusion from personal experience. The last two sections of the introduction, before Nizami begins his First Discourse, are titled “First Seclusion (*Khalwa*)” and “Second Seclusion (*Khalwa*).” Each section describes the visions Nizami attained during his 40 day retreat. The second seclusion includes an explicit account of a mystical experience and annihilation in God (*fana*) and the despair which follows it. And just to be sure we understand this is not mere poetry, Nizami writes: “I who have described this night, describe it from my own knowledge (*ma’rifa*).”²⁰⁵

Beyond ritual seclusion, Nizami seems to generally counsel against worldly entanglements. This is in keeping with what we know of Nizami’s own personal life - he choose to remain in his hometown rather than pursue patrons while residing at court (“Like Nizami, seclude oneself [*gushe gir*] from the world”).²⁰⁶ This desire to remove oneself from the world is framed in terms of the threat posed by other human beings: “Gaze upon this globe on which, because of inhumanity (*na mardomi*), humanity (*adami*) is wary of humanity (*adami*).”²⁰⁷ And this threat is a spiritual one, because other humans can “take away spiritual knowledge

²⁰⁴ Nizami Ganjavi, *Makhzan al-asrar*, 107.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 69.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 77.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 86.

(*marifa*).”²⁰⁸ For this reason, the best recourse, according to Nizami, is to flee human company:

“Strike through this world (*jahan*) and live without sorrow. Go far from this sphere and live peacefully.”²⁰⁹

It is not just other humans who are a source of a spiritual threat, however. The world itself is fickle and untrustworthy: “Who desires discourse (*sohbat*) with the world (*giti*)? To whom has it been loyal, that it should be loyal to us?”²¹⁰ Fleeing the world, then, does not just include seclusion from other human beings, but also a host of other practices. Nizami seems particularly taken with two practices: limiting of food and sleep - “There is value in not eating or sleeping.”²¹¹ The value of limiting food seems to have little to do with the hardship of enduring fasting and more to do with the effects such fasting has on the body: “The body’s gem is found in slimness [*tonokee*]; the soul’s value is found in lightness”²¹² Though Nizami argues for a general restriction on food intake, he also advocates limiting intake of certain types of food. He says nothing about avoiding meat, unlike some early Muslim ascetics, such as

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 86.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 128.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 84.

²¹¹ Ibid., 157.

²¹² Ibid., 74.

Rabī'a.²¹³ He is, however, quite concerned with wheat, which, in line with a number of Jewish and Muslim thinkers, he traces to the Fall. In lieu of wheat, Nizami advises one eat barley instead. This preference for barley is often attributed to Jesus in the Sufi tradition,²¹⁴ where Jesus is seen as the prophet who best exemplifies the principle of asceticism.²¹⁵ Wheat also provides a cunning metaphor for asceticism for Nizami: for Adam, like wheat "honor did not come to him until he was broken."²¹⁶ The role of wheat, as well as water, in the diet plays an important role in elevating Muhammad above the other prophets, since he is not dependent on worldly sustenance in the same way, according to Nizami.

Defining Asceticism

Often when discussing Sufism and bodily practice, discussion focuses on asceticism and bodily mortification. Literature on Sufism tends to view this as an early practice supplanted by a series of mystical techniques that advocated moderation in bodily mortification. Thus Nizami's repeated emphasis on seclusion and renunciation seems a bit of a throw-back to a prior era. In this section we will explore some theories and definitions of asceticism before exploring how it is deployed in other Sufi works and in Nizami's poetry.

²¹³ Farid Ad-Din Attar's *Memorial of God's Friends: Lives and Sayings of Sufis* (New York: Paulist Press, 2009).

²¹⁴ Arberry, *Sufism*, 35.

²¹⁵ Andrae, *In the Garden of Myrtles: Studies in Early Islamic Mysticism*.

²¹⁶ Nizami Ganjavi, *Makhzan al-asrar*, 72.

In 1995, Vincent Wimbush and Richard Valantasis edited a volume titled simply *Asceticism*, collecting dozens of essays discussing theories of asceticism and ascetic practice, particularly in Early Christianity. With the exception of one or two authors discussing Eastern Orthodox understandings of the ascetic, and several dealing with pre-Christian Roman asceticism, the book focuses almost exclusively on Western Christianity, which was formed in a unique context of Roman persecution and whose methods were often modeled on early Christian martyrdom and Roman torture methods. Despite these limitations, there are few, if any, more comprehensive resources before or since for the study of asceticism in early Christianity and the construction of a general theory of ascetic practice. A decade later, editor Richard Valantasis collected a body of his own essays on the subject of asceticism in a book titled *The Making of the Self*. Relying on the work of numerous previous thinkers ideas about asceticism, Valantasis constructs a theory of asceticism which he hopes will transcend early Christian contexts and be applicable to other religious traditions and in other time periods, including contemporary ascetic practices. Valantasis' theory of asceticism centers around ascetic practice and the formation of a resistant subjectivity. By implication, asceticism as resistance presumes that textual records of such ascetic practice will serve political ends, generally seeking to domesticate such resistant subjectivity.

After exploring the concept of asceticism as the formation of a resistant subjectivity, this section will then interrogate, the concept of asceticism as resistance in light of the work of Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood. Revisiting Valantasis' theoretical sources, we will challenge Valantasis' location of asceticism in the intent of a subject. Such challenges occur directly, such as in Nietzsche's figuration of asceticism as a tool for channeling *ressentiment*, or indirectly, such as through Bataille's notion of immanence, or Lacan's insights into the mirror phase. By incorporating the works of Bataille, Deleuze, and Foucault in a reassessment of the theory of asceticism. Such an examination will expose the shortcomings in Valantasis' theoretical model, especially when exposed to a non-Christian context.

Richard Valantasis and Asceticism as Resistant Subjectivity

Over a decade later, Valantasis collected thirteen of his own essays on the subject of asceticism, including one that appeared in *Asceticism*, in a book titled *Making of the Self*. In *Making of the Self*, Valantasis proposes a new theory of asceticism which he hopes will give scholars a framework through which to read all the varied manifestations of ascetic practice, Christian and non-Christian, ancient and modern. Through his theory of asceticism as resistant subjectivity, Valantasis reveals the ascetic to be an ideal site for investigating the dominant

social context, as he or she represents a pre-eminent and uniquely creative site of resistance to that context.

Valantasis is Professor of Ascetical Theology and Christian Practice and Director of Anglican Studies at Emory University's Candler School of Theology. Much of his career has been spent analyzing asceticism in its various manifestations and contexts, especially Early Christianity, and developing a theory of asceticism that moves beyond identifying it exclusively with specific self-mortification practices. *The Making of the Self* serves as the culmination of this process, analyzing previous definitions of asceticism, positing a new definition by situating asceticism within academic discourses on power, and finally showing the versatility and applicability of his new definition by applying it to various early Christian texts to show how it provides a useful framework for examining early Christian writings and practices.

The book is arranged into three sections: “Theory,” “Christian Asceticism,” and “Roman Asceticism.” Valantasis' theory of Asceticism is fully laid out in the first section, though he revisits aspects of it in each essay in the consecutive sections as well. Rather than presenting the reader with a single unified theory as a *fait accompli*, the author expands and hones his definition of asceticism through a series of overlapping essays that put his proposed theory in dialogue with various textual and theoretical traditions. Of these five essays, the

second, “Constructions of Power in Asceticism,” is the longest and goes the farthest towards presenting the author's theory on asceticism, with a necessary clarification occurring in the fourth essay, “Asceticism or Formation: Theorizing Asceticism after Nietzsche,” which distinguishes asceticism from enculturation or formation, two terms the author uses interchangeably.

By situating asceticism within discussions of power, Valantasis is able to posit asceticism as, fundamentally, an orientation towards dominant power structures. The set of practices which emerge as a result of this orientation are merely symptomatic and do not encompass the whole of asceticism, which is the mistake made in most previous attempts to define asceticism. Stated concisely, Valantasis defines asceticism as “any performance resistant to an externally projected or subjectively experienced dominant social or religious context specifically intended...and purposefully performed in order to inaugurate a new and alternative subjectivity.”²¹⁷ Later, however, he modifies this definition further, to indicate that asceticism begins not with actual performance, “not with withdrawal itself, but with the dissatisfaction with the dominant perspective that leads to withdrawal.”²¹⁸ Thus asceticism is located at the nexus between a sense of dissatisfaction with the dominant social

²¹⁷ Richard Valantasis, *The Making of the Self: Ancient and Modern Asceticism* (Lutterworth Press, 2008), 101.

²¹⁸ Ibid., 229.

context/available subjectivities and the realization of the possibility of an alternate, resistant subjectivity/social context towards which one may move.

This convergence of dissatisfaction and available alternative is the beginning of a multivalent, dynamic process in which the ascetic moves towards a new intra- and inter-subjectivity, which requires the transformation of social relationships and the construction of a new “symbolic universe...in order to explain and sustain the resistant subjectivity.”²¹⁹ The process is dynamic because, as the subject moves from the rejected subjectivity towards the desired subjectivity, a third, interim subjectivity is created, which negotiates between the two. This third subjectivity changes and adapts as progress is made along the ascetic path. Similarly, as the ascetic negotiates the creation of a new subjectivity, the dominant social context pushes back against the ascetic's resistance to its demands for social relations and rejection of its symbolic universe. The dominant context's resistance to the ascetic takes both internal and external forms, manifesting in everything from metaphors of demons and memories of family, internally, to pleas for assistance or the imposition of political or ecclesiastical power through coercion or force, externally. The ascetic must adapt to the changing social context in order to effectively resist it. Thus asceticism is dynamic for Valantasis because the sites of resistance, both intra- and inter-subjectively, continually shift.

²¹⁹ Ibid., 102.

Like Peter Brown, a seminal 20th century thinker on the figure of the Holy Man in early Syriac Christianity, Valantasis locates the ascetic's power in his/her radical alterity.²²⁰ Unlike Brown, however, Valantasis does not locate this alterity in the strangeness of the ascetic's practices or lifestyle, but rather in the resistant subjectivity toward which these practices point. Furthermore, though Brown identifies the ascetic's power in his/her ability to act as dispassionate negotiators due to his/her location outside of normative social relationships, Valantasis argues that it is the allure of the resistant subjectivity and the threat it poses to the dominant social order which constitutes an ascetic's power. Valantasis asserts that defining asceticism as an orientation towards the dominant social context, its power structures, and the subjectivity the dominant context requires for participation, rather than as a series of practices, better describes the ascetic's journey, provides a definition of asceticism that can be applied across religious, cultural and temporal boundaries, and more aptly encompasses the vast array of ascetic phenomena, from living in celibate communities to standing on pillars, seen in early Christianity and beyond.

After laying out and refining his theory of asceticism, Valantasis proceeds in the next two sections to apply it to a variety of texts. In Part Two, "Christian Asceticism," he uses his

²²⁰ Peter Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, Vol 6, #3 (Fall 1998): 353-376. Alexander D. Knysh, *Islamic Mysticism: A Short History* (Leiden, The Netherlands ; Boston: Brill, 2000), 6-7, <http://search.lib.unc.edu?R=UNCb3527024>.

new definition of asceticism to enter into and attempt to resolve debates about the nature of various Christian writings, such as the *Gospel of Thomas*. For students of Syriac Christianity, Chapter 7, “Daemons and the Perfecting of the Monk's Body,” is useful to understanding the role of demon battles in Syriac literature such as Jacob of Serug's biography of Simeon Stylite. Here Valantasis most directly challenges the usefulness of transposing modern constructions of the self onto late ancient ascetics, the notion of demons as manifestations of a form of pre-modern psychology, and Peter Brown's assertions that the late ancient body was inscribed with social responsibility. In this chapter Valantasis also makes a distinction between literary depictions of asceticism, which are meant to enact the desired ideal subjectivity, versus the documentary evidence, which often seems to conflict with this ideal. This understanding of the genre of ascetic biography as a form of ascetic performance seems to be Valantasis' most problematic assertion, though it helps clarify the differences between the lives of saints as depicted by Theodoret, and the documentary evidence of an ascetic community like that found in the *Liber Graduum*.²²¹ Valantasis' notion of hagiography as textual ascetic performance seems to be based upon a false analogy. Though the body is a text, Valantasis' assertion that what is done to bodies *in* text is equivalent to what is done to bodies *as* text seems to conflate two very

²²¹ Robert A. Kitchen and Martien F. G. Parmentier, trans., *The Book of Steps (Liber Graduum)*, (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Studies, 2004).

different processes. Rather, I view hagiography and biography as separate phenomena which perform different functions than the initial acts of asceticism themselves, and are used to domesticate the threatening character of Valantasis' resistant ascetic subjectivity.

In the final section, "Roman Asceticism," Valantasis shows how his definition of asceticism requires scholars to look more closely at pre- and non-Christian sources and their ascetic practices for insights into the development of resistant subjectivities. In light of his research and theory, Valantasis argues that "scholars of early Christianity cannot seek to define asceticism by first looking to the fourth century Christian ascetics and working backward in time."²²² Though scarcity of textual resources in the intervening period is part of the reason for this traditional scholarly approach, Valantasis asserts that Christianity itself was born as an ascetic movement in response to the Roman social context and what should be examined in light of the rise of 4th century asceticism is not how these practices developed, but how alteration of the dominant social context inspired similar transformations in the expression of resistant alterity. For Valantasis, Christianity itself was an ascetic movement which constructed a new and subversive subjectivity out of the symbolic universe of the Roman world. Later Syrian ascetics resisted social power on several fronts—political and economic authority, ecclesiastical authority, but also the authority of the pagan symbolic

²²² Valantasis, *The Making of the Self*, 297.

world of the countryside into which they withdrew. Thus pillar standing, for example, can be an image of crucifixion, and a co-optation and reconstruction of pagan practices, and a practical method for avoiding the dominant culture's attempt to rein in resistant subjectivity by giving the ascetic a social role through his/her interaction with supplicants. Since asceticism is performative, and the symbolic language ascetics adopt must be communicable, it is reasonable that they would adopt multi-layered symbols if speaking to several audiences simultaneously.²²³

In building his own definition of asceticism, Valantasis provides quick overviews of the work done by seminal thinkers such as Weber, Foucault, Nietzsche, Althusser, Harpham and others. Some critics, whom he acknowledges in his essays, have argued that his theory of asceticism is too broad to be useful, divorced as it is from historical context, religious tradition, or specific practices. This may be true within the field of early Christian scholarship, but Valantasis' goal is specifically to link early Christian ascetic research with theories of asceticism in social semiotics, which are notably broader than the theory Valantasis puts forth. Other critics have argued that his definition of asceticism is too narrow, with its focus on resistance, ignoring acts of personal discipline or self-mortification that seek to bring individuals into greater harmony with their social context. Valantasis addresses these critics

²²³ Ibid., 115.

with his distinction between enculturation/formation and asceticism, though this does mean some figures who may have thought of themselves as ascetics would not fall into Valantasis' definition of ascetic, which seems to indicate that the theory is problematic in at least this sense. For the student or scholar of Syriac Christianity this theory presents both advantages and challenges for one's approach to ascetic figures, biographies of saints, and one's understanding of the social role of ascetics in late antiquity. Its applicability to non-Christian contexts seems to vary depending on the particular religious tradition and ascetic figure under investigation.

The Development of the Ascetic Subjectivity

There are several lenses through which commentators have tried to view asceticism in Early Christianity, all of them based around oppositional dichotomies, such as Roman vs. Christian, City vs. Countryside, Rich vs. Poor, Diffident vs. Devout. What all these characterizations have in common is an emphasis on the oppositional character of asceticism—asceticism is that which sets itself against something else. Peter Brown has suggested a non-oppositional character for the late antique holy man, instead advocating an understanding of the ascetic as mediator and conduit between oppositional forces thanks to

his location above/outside/beyond the social order out of which these dichotomies arise.²²⁴

Although the holy man may be *perceived* to be above/outside the social order by his supplicants by virtue of his rejection of the standard markers of societal participation, his status as holy man re-embeds him in the social context. Though the holy man may be the perpetual outsider, he is only an outsider in relation to that which he stands outside. The characteristics and actions of the ascetic are shaped and bounded both by what it is he resists, and by the patterns others have set for such resistance. So, even in Peter Brown's re-envisioning of the holy man, the ascetic's oppositional character remains central, if enlarged. Brown's holy man does not oppose a single subsection of his society, but rather resists all possible social roles for himself *except* that of the holy man.

The notion of asceticism as a resistant subjectivity, as explicitly stated by Richard Valantasis, and gestured toward by others, forces those studying asceticism to shift their focus from specific practices to categories of action, and the motivations behind those actions. According to James Francis, asceticism does not begin with self-mortification practices, rather “the spirit of disaffection with society comes first, and only then produces novelties of doctrine and behavior.”²²⁵ The ascetic impulse can be halted merely at the stage of disaffection,

²²⁴ Peter Brown, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), 159.

²²⁵ James Francis, *Subversive Virtue: Asceticism and Authority in the Second-Century Pagan World*, (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 158.

however, for it “functions along a spectrum that includes simple dissatisfaction, social or religious crisis, or a desire openly and directly to resist dominant modes”²²⁶ The ability to distance oneself enough from one's own social context to become disaffected with the entire range of available roles offered by one's society, and not simply one's own role, seems limited to only a few individuals. Furthermore, the ability to transform disaffection into action is limited to those for whom a viable alternative seems possible, and for whom the dangers of staying socially embedded seem to outweigh the risks of renunciation/withdrawal. This vantage is frequently linked to class background, and in the 4th & 5th Century Syriac Christian context it is not those with the least to lose from disengagement with society—the lowest classes—who prove most likely to follow the ascetic path. Rather, disaffection which leads to asceticism requires “a person socially aware of his or her ability to disengage from the group of origin. Such persons included converts to fictive kin groups, such as Christian groups before Constantine; and, afterwards, persons with appropriate social status, whether aristocratic or inheriting family members (head of the family, inheriting son, widow) who perceived the sense of taking such a step,”²²⁷ as is the case with both Simeon the Stylite and Symeon the Fool.

²²⁶ Valantasis, *The Making of the Self*, 114.

²²⁷ Bruce J. Malina, “Pain, Power, and Personhood: Ascetic Behavior in the Ancient Mediterranean,” in *Asceticism*, edited by Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 168.

Though disaffection is an essential aspect of the ascetic path, asceticism proper begins with the actions engendered by that disaffection, it “begins to operate when an alternative to the social and religious givens is developed.”²²⁸ This action begins with withdrawal from the dominant context which the ascetic has rejected. For Christian ascetics, the focus of such withdrawal was commitment to God. For them, “devotion to God meant pursuing God's purpose with body as well as soul, starting with the abandonment of society's comforts—family, home, and community.”²²⁹ This withdrawal is necessary for the development of a new subjectivity, the formation of a new social role for the ascetic. Through their hermitage, “Christian ascetics of the fourth and fifth centuries were pioneers in working out what must be done by people who find the ordinary human concerns of household and city an intolerable distraction from their commitment to God.”²³⁰ Thus dissatisfaction with society is couched in terms of distraction from relationship with the divine. The seeming intent of withdrawal is to eliminate distraction for the relatively personal reason of pursuing a closer relationship with God. Since the “self” is a socially embedded entity, or as Drijvers puts it, “the

²²⁸ Valantasis, *The Making of the Self*, 37.

²²⁹ Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Asceticism and Society in Crisis*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), 5.

²³⁰ Gillian Clark, “Women and Asceticism in Late Antiquity: The Refusal of Status and Gender,” In *Asceticism*, Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 33.

concept of the person relates mortal human beings to a social continuum,” the self must be reduced or even eliminated in order to achieve undistracted attention to God.²³¹ Achieving such an intimate relationship requires the ascetic “to rid the self of all social accretions with a view to reducing the self to its psycho-physical components, even to its primordial sensory and motor condition if possible.”²³² Though the ascetic's intent was to achieve a new subjectivity, a self with a new relational orientation, embedded in a society of one—the individual purified and emptied to receive and contain the Spirit—achieving such a mental/spiritual state required a great deal of attention to the body. The goal was not to punish or eliminate the body, as a dualistic interpretation of asceticism would have it, but rather bodily discipline which reduced the relational “self” to nothing but a body.

Though the transformational energy of asceticism appears to be directed inwardly, it necessarily transforms the world around the individual. This is because “asceticism involves the articulation of a subjectivity that defines the identities towards which the ascetic moves and away from which he/she withdraws.”²³³ Not only does ascetic practice identify itself both by what it rejects and what it wishes to become, but the subjectivity it desires to achieve is

²³¹ Hans J.W. Drijvers, “The Saint as Symbol” in *Syriac Christianity*, (London: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 1994), 139.

²³² Malina, 163.

²³³ Valantasis, *The Making of the Self*, 37.

defined through a form negative ontology—its boundaries can often only be traced by what it is not, since those describing it usually have not achieved it, and since its attainment is beyond the realm of common human experience, and therefore the bounds of descriptive language. Because ascetic practice defines itself by what it is not, and what it is not is the rest of human experience, “ascetic behavior, in whatever context it is clothed, is a response—a challenge, a rejoinder—to world.”²³⁴ But although “almost any form of extreme behavior that deviates from the cultural norm may serve as language of challenge or protest,” and ascetic behavior is certainly extreme, it is not the extremity of behavior that makes asceticism protestational.²³⁵ Rather, asceticism's extremity emerges from its oppositional character, rather than vice versa, since “asceticism is of its nature combative [as] it defines itself through negation and exclusion.”²³⁶ For this reason, “ascetic practice may, therefore, frequently be seen as an intentional language of protest”²³⁷ Thus asceticism cannot be defined solely by cataloguing

²³⁴ Gail P. Corrington-Streete. “Trajectories of Ascetic Behavior,” in *Asceticism*, edited by Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 119.

²³⁵ Walter O. Kaelber, “Understanding Asceticism—Testing a Typology,” in *Asceticism*, edited by Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 325.

²³⁶ Averil Cameron, “Ascetic Closure and the End of Antiquity,” in *Asceticism*, edited by Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 157.

²³⁷ Kaelber, 325.

various forms of self-mortification, but rather one must look to the intentions behind such practice, which lie in the rejection of other modes of being in the world.

Although asceticism is cloaked in the language of withdrawal and disengagement, the tropes of “assimilation and resistance presuppose a relationship between two elements in society,” and through resistance/rejection/assimilation not only is the individual ascetic transformed, but also the world around him/her.²³⁸ For the individual practitioner of asceticism, the world transforming effects may be inadvertent and unanticipated: “When St. Benedict hid himself in a cave near Subaico, he wanted simply to save his own soul, and had not the slightest intention of saving Western civilization. But his solitary quest for personal salvation did in fact exercise in the long term a profoundly creative effect on European culture.”²³⁹ How does such a social transformation occur? “In Western traditions of asceticism, the body itself appears to function as a metaphor for the world: the microcosm reflects, and, in a sense, replicates, the macrocosm. By examining the microcosm, the macrocosm can be interpreted, defined (have its boundaries drawn), or even refined (have undesirable boundaries redrawn) and consequently controlled to a degree.”²⁴⁰ Since the body is the text

²³⁸ Brown, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity*, 154.

²³⁹ Kallistos Ware, “The Way of the Ascetics: Negative or Affirmative” in *Asceticism*, edited by Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 6.

²⁴⁰ Corrington-Streete, 120.

upon which social relations are inscribed and in which social obligations are enacted, attention to the body yields insights into the society out of which that body emerges, and changes to the body have the power to enact changes upon society.

Furthermore, since ascetic practice is a rejection of the ascetic's social context, the society being rejected must develop a response to the ascetic's challenge—either by rejection and exclusion (declaring the ascetic a heretic), or by assimilating the ascetic and finding a way to blunt the implicit accusation of ascetic practice (hagiography, enlisting the ascetic as patron). In the case of assimilation, “the trajectory may proceed under the impact of what Weber termed routinization, generating a functionally integrated subculture of its own or even be reintegrated into the cultural mainstream which it sought to leave behind and which it now changes and reforms.”²⁴¹ Asceticism manifests as “a form of taking power, power over the microcosm (the body) when power over the macrocosm is denied or restricted,” but it also opens up a dialogue with the society it rejects, creating an avenue to power previously denied within the macrocosm.²⁴² Thus “the construction of the ascetic body also ha[s] consequences for the body politic”²⁴³ Through resistance and rejection, the ascetic calls for a response from

²⁴¹ Kaelber 325

²⁴² Corrington-Streete, 123.

²⁴³ Cameron, 157.

the society that is resisted/rejected, and through this response, the social context which the ascetic first rejected for its limitations becomes malleable and open to reform.

Audience/Performance/Social Involvement

As we have seen, ascetic practices are most clearly defined by their rejection of social obligations and traditional modes of being in the world. Self-discipline, which seeks to adapt the individual to his/her social context, is not asceticism, but what Valantasis calls “formation” or “enculturation.”²⁴⁴ The key difference between asceticism and enculturation is performance. Practices of enculturation seek to erase difference, whereas asceticism creates it.²⁴⁵ One seeking to erase difference seeks to blend with the dominant context and thus be unnoticed, whereas one who creates difference calls attention to oneself as different: “Ancient asceticism involved escaping group anonymity and its collective orientation, especially by standing out as an individual against the group and its demands for total loyalty and conformity”²⁴⁶ Therefore, asceticism, “while appearing to be the discourse of retreat, and thus of the marginalized...calls for an audience.”²⁴⁷ The ascetic resists marginalization through

²⁴⁴ Valantasis, *The Making of the Self*, 81.

²⁴⁵ Valantasis, *The Making of the Self*, 102.

²⁴⁶ Malina, 167.

²⁴⁷ Cameron, 154.

performance, by placing him/herself at the center of a new social network, through performance. Even in the absence of an audience of other human beings (audience in the traditional sense), asceticism is performed before the audience of the rejected subjectivity which watches on as the ascetic inaugurates a new subjectivity. Alternately, the divine can act as the intended audience. Thus “every kind of asceticism involves an audience (whether personal, social or divine) and, therefore, every asceticism becomes a performance.”²⁴⁸ And just as every form of self-mortification is not asceticism, but only those which reject in order to transform, so too not every kind of performance is a form of asceticism, but only “performances intending to inaugurate a new, resistant subjectivity.”²⁴⁹

The Formation of Ascetic Power

The preceding construction of asceticism presumes that it is composed of two equally important elements: resistance and performance. Any practice of bodily restraint or self-mortification which does not contain these two elements cannot be qualified as asceticism. What is helpful about such a definition is that it highlights the shortcomings of attempts to define asceticism in terms of its outward manifestations. Defining asceticism by creating lists

²⁴⁸ Valantasis, *The Making of the Self*, 39.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 104.

of ascetic activities will always fall short, because “asceticism has meaning not as a behavior unto itself, but in relationship to behaviors that are conceived of as different from, or in opposition to, or complimentary to it.”²⁵⁰ Because asceticism stands in relation to the opposition to the dominant social context, and because it calls for an audience to observe it, ascetic practice becomes a political activity. Essential to politics is the question of “who has control over what is acceptable speech and behavior, and who determines what is right and wrong.”²⁵¹ Ascetics make a strong claim for the reevaluation of the categories of right and wrong, and challenge social restrictions on acceptable behavior. If we “understand politics, then, to be about the relationships and systems of power and authority that exist within a given cultural context,” asceticism is a political activity because it creates a new avenue of power creation within a particular social context.²⁵²

Ascetics create power for themselves through the dual avenues of resistance and performance. As Valantasis notes, “by resisting the power of the dominant context, ascetics amass power for themselves.”²⁵³ Ascetic resistance imparts power to the practitioner because,

²⁵⁰ William Deal, “Toward a Politics of Asceticism” in *Asceticism*, edited by Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 428.

²⁵¹ Deal, 429.

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ Valantasis, *The Making of the Self*, 111.

in its rejection of social norms through self-mortification, it takes the tools of punishment for resistance out of the hands of authorities in power: “To endure pain is to signify that one has no fear of power, that one is impervious to power, and that power wielders can have no effect. Since power wielders are normally those of superior status in society, freely choosing suffering is a claim to superiority over persons of superior status, if not a claim to their power”²⁵⁴

Ascetics differ from martyrs because they do not simply endure, submit to, or abide by punishment, they actually impose punishment upon themselves preemptively. This is one reason why defining asceticism by its manifestation in certain self-mortification practices will always limit the scope of such a definition to a specific cultural context. Since forms of punishment will differ from society to society, based upon what each society holds valuable enough to count as a loss when deprived, ascetic practices will differ accordingly. For example, early Christian forms of bodily asceticism owe much to Roman torture and execution practices, the re-enactment of which ascetics understood in terms of imitation of Christ's passion.²⁵⁵ Since punishment functions through depriving an individual of what is considered valuable to society, by imposing punishment upon oneself, an ascetic asserts that his/her values differ

²⁵⁴ Malina, 171.

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

from those of society at large, and in doing so denies political authorities the ability to punish him/her.

The ability to resist coercive power deprives political authorities of their power over the ascetic, but it does not necessarily generate power for the ascetic. Peter Brown argues that it is the radical alterity of the ascetic which generates his power, for as a figure who “could not be affected by isolation or indoctrination (partisan influence); socially they were available for mediation, arbitration, or whatever else anyone may have sought from a person who was not embedded in a group.”²⁵⁶ Although this is an important manifestation of the ascetic's power, it is not the source of it, for before the ascetic can exercise social power as an “outsider,” he/she must be re-embedded within a social context in which such categories become meaningful. Thus, it is the performance aspect of asceticism from which the ascetic truly draws power, for “the social power of the saint resides in the saint’s empowering of others to imitation.”²⁵⁷ Whereas political authorities wield coercive power, which the ascetic can resist, “the holy man wield[s] non-coercive power,” which, in Althusserian terms, means the ascetic wields ideological power.²⁵⁸ Similarly to the way ascetics impose physical punishment upon

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 167.

²⁵⁷ Valantasis, *The Making of the Self*, 27.

²⁵⁸ Brown, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity*, 162.

themselves, public performance of their alterity is an act of self-humiliation, but “humiliation can be turned to honor...a person is expected to comply under threat of shame with the wishes of the one shaming. If, however, the person does not comply, even in the face of shame and utter humiliation, then the position of the one attempting to humiliate is open to question in the eyes of the public...humiliation endured can thus produce an increase of honor and a sense of solidarity in the eyes of the observing public.”²⁵⁹ Again, however, resistance of humiliation does not generate power, though it does diminish the punitive power of authority. What public humiliation does achieve, however, is solidarity. Furthermore, the public spectacle of ascetic practice has as “its object and its *raison d’être*...advertisement.”²⁶⁰ For, “an ascetic performance was wasted if it did not possess some display value.”²⁶¹ Through public performance, “the ascetic saint on the one hand 'acted out a ritual of social disengagement' (Peter Brown), but on the other stood in the centre of a new society of which he represented the ideal of manhood, in which the divine had come to dwell.”²⁶² The performative aspect of ascetic practice generates power for the ascetic through forming a new social order in which he/she is the center, as an

²⁵⁹ Malina, 171.

²⁶⁰ Cameron, 154.

²⁶¹ Geoffrey Galt Harpham, “Asceticism and the Compensations of Art” in *Asceticism*, edited by Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 358.

²⁶² Drijvers, 152.

idealized figure. As such, “imitability of their practices was crucial,” as the ascetic aspired “to inspire others to similar performance.”²⁶³ Social disengagement was not an end of itself, but rather an avenue to the creation of a new social order with the ascetic at its center. Through performance the ascetic was able to use his/her resistant subjectivity to transform society through inspiring adulation and emulation, which were generated by the extremity of the ascetic's practices, his/her ability to resist coercive power, and his/her utility as the 'ritually disengaged' to the new community which formed around the him/her. Thus the engine which generated ascetic power was not renunciation, nor mediation, but the community formation engendered by the public performance of self-mortification rituals.

Reassimilation through Hagiography

The power of ascetics is threatening to the dominant social order, and thus ascetics must be either resisted or assimilated. As we have seen, coercive power does not work to quell ascetic resistance, since ascetic practice, by its very nature, holds up as virtue the deprivations which are the means of punishment within a given society. Rather the battle between society and ascetic resistance has to be fought on ideological grounds. This could occur either by casting the ascetic as a heretic or by assimilating him into the religious worldview of the

²⁶³ Harpham, 358.

dominant social order. Rejecting the ascetic as a heretic was a difficult proposition, for it required the collusion of ecclesiastical and political authorities—one to make the declaration, the other to enforce its might. Once labeled a heretic, the ascetic loses his audience, thus his resistance to coercive power no longer generates power for him through performance. Resistance becomes mere stubbornness, death cannot tip into martyrdom. There is an additional danger in declaring an ascetic a heretic, however, for if the accusation can be refuted or debunked, heresy charges would damage the authority of the ascetic's accusers. Ideological rejection of an ascetic thus proves more complicated and potentially dangerous route than assimilation, which carries not fewer risks and potential benefits for both political and ecclesiastical authorities.

Asceticism, unlike its earlier corollary Cynicism, is not anarchic, but rather “rejects culture only in order to prescribe higher rules; and is thus also in its very nature authoritarian.”²⁶⁴ Since asceticism proposes some kind of goal towards which it strives, rather than simply rejecting the dominant social order for its own sake, ascetic goals could be co-opted, reframed through biography and hagiography, and made to work for, rather than against, ecclesiastical and political authorities. Narrative accounts of an ascetic's life and practices are a form of what Valantasis calls “textualized performance” of asceticism, which

²⁶⁴ Cameron, 149.

“discuss the rigor, strictness, and steadfastness of the ascetic’s life in order to idealize and dramatize the ascetic's efforts.”²⁶⁵ Like physical performance of self-mortification, “textualized performance constructs an imitable subject, an imitable performance.”²⁶⁶ But unlike physical performances, which center around a living individual, “textualized performances do not actually exist, but are created of the stuff of narrative and metaphor, precisely in order to set up the illusion of a reality to be imitated.”²⁶⁷ Textual performance thus gives the authors of the text authority over the ascetic's performance, and the freedom to construct its meaning in ways they see fit. If performance of an imitable, community-forming act of asceticism garners authority for the ascetic, the retelling of those performances by ecclesiastical authorities can diffuse or redirect that authority.

Though both biography and hagiography are forms of textualized performance, they have different interests in and approaches to managing ascetic resistance—the former seeking to de-radicalize the image of the ascetic through humanizing him/her; the latter seeking to undercut the imitability of ascetic resistance by elevating his/her acts above the possible aspirations of the anticipated audience. In the biographies of ascetics by John of Ephesus, and

²⁶⁵ Valantasis, *The Making of the Self*, 40.

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

even to some extent Theodoret of Cyrrhus, the humanity and fragility of the ascetics is highlighted. What differentiates these biographies from hagiography is not the veracity of the account, or the proximity of the biographer in time and space to his subjects, for “these biographies,” like hagiography, “do not primarily describe the lives and fates of particular individuals, but put them into the framework of current concepts of the human person; as such they are the expressions of collective perceptions.”²⁶⁸ Even in biographies written by authors who knew and met the ascetics, the ascetics are symbols, but in biographies they are symbolic figures not because of the work of the biographer, but rather because the ascetic him/herself has composed their ascetic performance out of symbols and tropes meant to communicate to his/her audience. The job of the biographer is to humanize the ascetic and undermine their symbolic performance. The purpose of such humanizing is to clarify the lines between the ascetic's performative self-mortification and Jesus' renunciations and Passion. The concern of the biographers is that the ascetic's performance not result in deification by the ascetic's audience. Ironically, while undermining the symbolic nature of the ascetics performance through this humanization, the biographer may inadvertently increase the ascetic's power. In these textualized performances, “real lives, it was hinted, should follow the

²⁶⁸ Drijvers, 138.

pattern set in texts, themselves accounts of exemplary lives.”²⁶⁹ The more human and flawed the ascetic became, the more achievable his practices became for the audience admiring his/her performance. The biographer therefore walked a delicate tightrope, attempting to undermine the ascetic's position as outsider by showing him/her to be human, which, as Drijver mentions, re-embeds them in a social context, thus undermining the pillar of ascetic resistance, while simultaneously bolstering the other pillar of asceticism, giving the holy man a wider audience through dissemination of the text, and making the ascetic's performance more imitable by revealing his/her faults, flaws and shortcomings.

In contrast to biography, hagiography seems to be a much more effective and favored method of assimilating threatening ascetics, because it does not seek to undermine asceticism's resistance, but rather undermines the ascetic's source of power, the audience of imitators, by seemingly conceding to the efficacy of the ascetic's performance. Hagiography “presents a portrait of holy men and women who never fail, figures of seamless perfection, and hence removes us from any real contact with them.”²⁷⁰ Idealizing the ascetic would seem to work at cross purposes to the goals of authority figures wishing to restrain ascetic power, but in elevating the ascetic to such a height, hagiography both reduces the imitability of ascetic

²⁶⁹ Cameron, 154.

²⁷⁰ Harvey, 55.

performance, and opens a gap between the performance and the possible achievements of those who may wish to imitate. In this way, “deviance is thus safely locked away as the prerogative earned by the accomplishments of the ascetic few, and emphatically not a prescription for the many.”²⁷¹ The space between what the ascetic, who becomes nearly super-human in hagiography, can achieve and what his/her merely human followers can hope to achieve through imitation, thus becomes the province of the hagiographer, who sets the barrier above which the audience cannot hope to rise and defines what successful imitation looks like in principle if it cannot be achieved through actual mimesis of the ascetic performance. For this reason, “hagiographical accounts of rigorous, even extreme, ascetic mortifications exist alongside treatises and other more theoretical ascetic writings which emphasize the need for moderation.”²⁷² The former elevates the ascetic beyond imitability, the latter prescribes socially approved methods by which the ascetic's audience may emulate the ascetic in the absence of the possibility of achieving full imitation. Hagiography works to neutralize the ascetic's radicalism because, “by becoming characteristic of the rare heroic individual, such practices as poverty and celibacy lose their social character and, therefore,

²⁷¹ Francis, 186.

²⁷² Teresa M. Shaw, “Practical, Theoretical, and Cultural Tracings in Late Ancient Asceticism,” in *Asceticism*, edited by Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 76.

their social threat.”²⁷³ Such elevation of the ascetic is particularly effective for two reasons: first, hagiography is usually written after the death of the ascetic, leaving him/her no chance to respond, but second, and more importantly, hagiography leaves an ascetic only one possible avenue of rebuttal—to admit his/her own fallibility and risk undermining his/her position as resistant “other.” Thus it is through hagiography, and not the monastery, as Francis identifies, that “radical ascetics were shorn of their threat, liminized, heroized, and transformed from rivals to authority (whether emperor or bishop) into allies of that authority and paragons of its values.”²⁷⁴

Problems with the Resistance Model of Asceticism

Though compelling for its explanatory power, the resistance model of asceticism is vulnerable to the same critique that Saba Mahmood levels against a resistance model of feminism. In her book *Politics of Piety*, Mahmood notes that, in feminist scholarship, “there is a tendency among scholars to look for expressions and moments of resistance that may suggest a challenge to male domination.”²⁷⁵ This is problematic for Mahmood, because it

²⁷³ Francis, 107.

²⁷⁴ Ibid., 188.

²⁷⁵ Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 8.

simply defers the question of universality of experience. She does not presume that a particular series of actions can be classified as empowering women across all cultures and time periods, just as Valantasis does not presume that celibacy and restricted diet, for example, can be understood as asceticism in all contexts across all time periods. But if we replace a series of actions with an assumption about the disposition of the subject in relation to those actions, we *a priori* posit a subject with an intent, from which the meaning of his/her actions naturally unfolds. Mahmood instead asserts that “the meaning and sense of agency cannot be fixed in advance, but must emerge through an analysis of the particular concepts that enable specific modes of being, responsibility, and effectivity...agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one *inhabits* norms.”²⁷⁶

Mahmood goes further still, not merely asking us to broaden our understanding beyond the resistance model in order to encompass non-resistive acts, but asserts: “I believe that it is critical that we ask whether it is even possible to identify a universal category of acts—such as those of resistance—outside of the ethical and political conditions within which such acts acquire their particular meaning.”²⁷⁷ This question undermines the presumption that the category of “resistance” can provide a lens through which to examine ascetic practice across

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 14-15.

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 9.

cultures, religious traditions, and time periods freed of the local specificity of particular ascetic practices themselves. Indeed, the category of resistance itself only has meaning within a context for, as Mahmood notes, leaning on Judith Butler, “the possibility of agency [is located] within structures of power (rather than outside of it)...in other words, there is no possibility of ‘undoing’ social norms that is independent of the ‘doing’ of norms.”²⁷⁸ This does not necessarily devastate Valantasis’ critical framework, it simply requires that we use resistance as a more contingent and localized category than we at first would have liked to assume. Mahmood goes further than Butler, however, noting that Butler’s own work focuses almost entirely on the destabilization of norms: “her discussion of agency tends to focus on those operations of power that resignify and subvert norms,” which Mahmood finds problematically one-sided.²⁷⁹ Mahmood argues, citing Talal Asad, “we should keep the meaning of agency open” in order to develop it “within semantic and institutional networks that define and make possible particular ways of relating to people, things, and oneself.”²⁸⁰

In Mahmood’s own work, she looks towards Michel Foucault for a method to analyze agency, referring to his four-fold analytic framework for examining subject formation:

²⁷⁸ Mahmood, 20.

²⁷⁹ Mahmood, 21.

²⁸⁰ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 78.

1) Substance of Ethics—which refers those categories of the self that are subject to ethical judgment, meaning are ethics defined as how one manages one’s body, how intentions undergird actions, the outcome of social interactions, etc.

2) Mode of Subjectivation—how people are “called upon to recognize their moral obligations” (i.e. upon what kind of authority does the ethic rest).²⁸¹

3) Techniques of the Self—what does one have to do to become ethical?

4) Telos—the self one seeks to become through these techniques.

Previous methods of analyzing asceticism have tended to focus on the techniques of the self, arguing that the substance of ethics and the mode of subjectivation are the same for ascetics as they are for all Christians, and what differs are the extremity of techniques of the self. These extreme techniques of self are either construed as the only appropriate avenue towards the desired telos (by the ascetics themselves), an avenue toward an alternate (perhaps superior) telos to those available to other Christians, or in some cases as a hindrance to attainment of the desired telos, as in the depictions of asceticism provided by Theodoret.²⁸²

The resistance model for understanding asceticism argues that asceticism begins with a new telos, the desired subjectivity, and then works its way back through new techniques of self and modes of subjectivation. If there is room for Butler’s notion of ‘doing’ norms while ‘undoing’ them, this would probably be located in the substance of ethics, where the ascetic selects from a range of available categories already in circulation for the sake of making his or

²⁸¹ Mahmood, 30.

²⁸² Theodoret of Cyrrihus, *A History of the Monks of Syria*, R. M. Price, trans., (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 1985).

her message communicable, an essential part of the performative aspect of asceticism in the resistance model. All of this presumes, however, an autonomous subject who can project a new subjectivity in opposition to those subjectivities already available to him/her, and choose to select it and work towards it as an independent agent, against attempts to thwart or hinder such movement by political and ecclesiastical authorities, not to mention the larger cultural context. This fails to address not only Foucault's complexification of the subject, but even Peter Brown's earlier concern that it is problematic to assume that late ancient ascetics understood themselves and their relationship with others in the same terms in which we do today.

Toward a New Genealogy of Asceticism

Hegel (& Weber)

In *Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel discusses the two presumptions of the scientific model of consciousness—it assumes cognition to be both a medium and an instrument²⁸³ (47). The problem in this, for Hegel, is that it presumes a difference between what one is and what one thinks/perceives. With the assistance of Weber, we can argue that the ascetic attempts to overcome this division, but not through resolving the binary, rather through trying to

²⁸³ G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 47.

eliminate one side of the opposition and turn the self into pure instrumentality. For Weber, religious responses are divided into two categories: mystical and ascetic. The mystic path he describes as the path of resignation, the ascetic path as that of mastery. He further subdivides these categories based on their object:

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|---|---|
| <p>Inner-Worldly Mysticism:</p> <p>Living in the world but deny real world experiences any meaning (later Sufism, based around the <i>tariqah</i>)</p> | <p>Other-Worldly Mysticism:</p> <p>Seeks to avoid all subjective desire, which leads to a loss of interest in all worldly concerns (such as with Messalianism)</p> |
| <p>Inner-Worldly Asceticism:</p> <p>Mastery over the worldly component of one's personality and all aspects of the human condition (as exemplified by Calvinism for Weber)</p> | <p>World-Rejecting Asceticism:</p> <p>Mastery over the flesh (Desert Fathers in early Christianity, early Sufis such as Rabi'a)</p> |

For Weber, attempts to transform the self into pure medium are mystical, and attempts to subsume the self into instrumentality are ascetic. Of course Weber's categorizations²⁸⁴ are constraining in a way that may obscure as much as they reveal, especially since many individuals or communities move in and out of several of these categories at various times and on various occasions. Furthermore, what we normally designate as asceticism is only covered by "world-rejecting asceticism," which is not the primary category of interest for Weber, who uses this four-fold division to isolate and discuss the "inner-worldly asceticism" of Calvinism, which gives rise to modern Capitalism.

Nevertheless, what Weber does point to is the association of asceticism with mastery. Weber's linkage of world-rejection and mastery over the flesh anticipates Valantasis' definition of asceticism, where Valantasis adds complexity to the elements of the world the ascetic rejects and the methods through which this rejection can occur. Mastery over the flesh is certainly an element of this later definition of asceticism, but what biological, social, and economic aspects of the body one must control, and how they are mastered changes with context.

²⁸⁴ Talcott Parsons, "Introduction," *Sociology of Religion*, Max Weber (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), lxi.

Turning to Hegel on the question of mastery,²⁸⁵ we may wonder how the ascetic comes to mastery. Is the ascetic a figure who first fears death and seeks to preserve life, but later escapes the master through working on a object the master cannot make use of—him/herself? Or, since according to much hagiography the ascetic comes from a position of wealth and authority, is the ascetic a master who rejects his/her dependence upon the slave to acquire subjectivity? Is asceticism a mode by which a master can internalize the dialectic by making him/herself a slave to him/herself?

Nietzsche

Nietzsche seems to confirm this extrapolation from Hegel—that the ascetic is both slave and master contained in one individual. For Nietzsche, the delight one feels in self-denial is based in its cruelty, just as the suitability of punishment as compensation for an unpaid debt rests in the compensatory pleasure exacting cruelty on the debtor provides to the creditor.²⁸⁶ For Nietzsche, the ascetic ideal is amorphous, and means various things to various people. For him this is indication that asceticism is mastery without an object—it is the will itself.²⁸⁷ But it

²⁸⁵ Hegel, 117-18.

²⁸⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann and RJ Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1989), 88.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 97.

is here that the self-contradictory nature of asceticism becomes apparent. If the will wishes to propagate itself, but does so through denying the means by which the human body can flourish and reproduce, how can this will propagate itself?

Nietzsche appears to give several answers to this question. First, he notes that the will expressed by the ascetic is the will to dominate life itself—by overcoming the necessities imposed upon the individual, through the “three great slogans of the ascetic ideal...poverty, humility, chastity.”²⁸⁸ Each of these imposes limitations on the ability of an individual to expand and propagate him/herself in the economic, social, and biological realms, respectively. On this construal, Nietzsche’s conception of the ascetic helps to support Valantasis’ thesis about the radical alterity of the ascetic—the ascetic is the one who rejects the usual construction of what it means to be human, and this rejection occurs through an avoidance or rejection of entanglements with other human beings. How does this impulse become life-preserving? In one of two ways. First, Nietzsche seems enamored of the notion of sublimation. It would appear that in Nietzsche asceticism inaugurates a dialectic in which the self synthesizes a previous sensuality into something other than sexuality. Nietzsche promises to

²⁸⁸ Ibid., 108.

write more on this subject in a later work, but never completed such an essay on sublimation.²⁸⁹

His second solution to this problem is more in keeping with the theme of *On the Genealogy of Morals*. He notes that asceticism becomes life-preserving to the degree that it redirects *ressentiment*. Thus the ascetic redirects *ressentiment* for the master inward and directs it at the self. On this construal, asceticism is life preserving only to the degree that it maintains a particular socio-economic order. Thus asceticism thwarts biological necessity for the sake of preserving or reinforcing modes of communal living—it is the practical application of the herd instinct.²⁹⁰

Bataille

The question of where the ascetic fits in Bataille's tripartite world of Immanence/Profane/Sacred is complex but potentially fruitful. Beginning with his emphasis on tools and their role in dividing humans from their surroundings, it is useful to observe the degree to which ascetics eschew tools, refuse to plan, and rely on chance to supply their needs, including food. (citations from hagiography about Issa throwing away his comb and cup, Rab'ia

²⁸⁹ Ibid, 111.

²⁹⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), 175.

refusing to cook, etc). Is the ascetic then, as Bruce Malina has suggested, trying to pare away the self in order to return the body to “its primordial sensory and motor condition,” thus returning to Bataille’s animality, experiencing immanence as presence of divinity?²⁹¹ In this case the sacred is not a category of significance for the ascetic, who is trying to return to immanence directly, rather than through the world of the profane. If, however, we see the ascetic act as a self-sacrifice, a sacrifice of the thing most valuable and most utilitarian to us, and a sacrifice not unto death but unto ill-utility, then the ascetic does enter the realm of the sacred and seeks to linger there through resisting being reintegrated into the world of the profane. For Valantasis, however, and to some degree for Nietzsche, the profane world takes the ill-utility of the ascetic and reintegrates it as “role model.” I argue that reintegration, though sometimes enacted by the ascetic him or herself (see Peter Brown on the Holy Man as mediator) is most often accomplished through hagiography.

Lacan

It is difficult to discuss Malina’s conception of asceticism as a return to sensory/motor function without reference to Lacan, who would tell us that once we presume this collection of limbs and functions to be unified in a single, coherent body and to be under the control of the

²⁹¹ Malina, 168.

“I,” we have already posited a subject and removed ourselves from the world of immanence.

Thus the presumption that the ascetic can return to immanence by controlling the body is inherently flawed. Rather, asceticism, if Nietzsche is correct that it is the expression of the will over life, is the mode of subject formation *par excellence*. The ascetic seeks to control or deny even those elements of bodily function that remain beyond the control of the “I” in a human adult—hunger, excretion, sleep, sex.

What remains to be discussed? In terms of the work before us, it seems an investigation of William James on the question of asceticism is critical, as is an exploration of Durkheim’s “Negative Cult.” The question of the relationship between sacrifice, festival, and asceticism is a looming one—is asceticism as self-sacrifice aborted martyrdom? Early Christian scholarship has debated the question of whether martyrdom was the model for later asceticism, though the Syriac context seems to complicate the history of Christian asceticism in a way that excludes or delays the contribution of martyrdom. Finally, if one is to bring in Saussure and Derrida, the question of the Vow of Silence and the relationship between speech and the subject seems pertinent.

As this exploration has shown, asceticism is a complex phenomena that cannot be defined based upon particular practices or social roles. Any definition of asceticism which hopes to encompass ancient and contemporary practice, across a variety of religious and social

contexts, must necessarily look beyond individual practices and the social implications of these actions. Rather than being defined by self-mortification, asceticism is defined as a rejection of the dominant social context which leans toward or aspires to a new configuration of social relations, paired with a performative aspect which invites imitation and begins to form the basis for a new community freed of the distractions and detractions of the society from which the ascetic fled. Furthermore, textual performance becomes a key element of asceticism, both because it is the primary way in which society at large makes sense of and domesticates ascetic rejection and rebellion, and because for some ascetics it is the only way in which their asceticism gets performed before an audience. Textual performance is therefore not separate from asceticism, but in some cases is the necessary performative element that transforms resistant self-mortification into asceticism. Biography and hagiography serve as vehicles by which a society responds to the challenge of ascetic renunciation and rejection, transforming the ascetic performance and the social context which receives it, while shaping the methods future ascetics will use to enact their own resistance.

Asceticism in Islam

The linkage between ascetic practice and resistance to dominant political and social orders is often explicitly acknowledged in research on asceticism in early Islam. The standard

answer to the question of the rise of asceticism in Islam has looked to the sudden growth and prosperity of the Muslim empire and the disillusionment with the excessive wealth that such expansion brought to the still-young religious community. In his introductory survey text, Alexander Knysh gives a concise version of this argument:

The acts of penitence and self-renunciation, which their practitioners justified by references to certain Qur'anic verses and the Prophet's utterances, may be seen as a reaction against Islam's newly acquired wealth that often lead many faithful to abandon the frugal ways and heroic self-denial associated with the primitive Muslim community in Medina. The secular pastimes and lavish lifestyles of the Umayyad rulers and their officials were seen by many as contrary to the original Islamic ideals...They argued that the truly God-fearing person should try to save himself by withdrawing from the overbearing world and its sinful and unjust ways.²⁹²

Other studies have focused less on the sheer opulence of the Umayyad dynasty, and more on the injustices of the Umayyad system: "Until the ninth century, Islamic spirituality fit almost exclusively within the framework of *zuhd*, a word that can be translated as 'detachment' or 'renunciation'...This ascetic movement was mainly a reaction to the worldly character of the Umayyad dynasty, which governed the Muslim community from 661 to 750. It was also a reaction to the many injustices of this dynasty..."²⁹³ The author here discusses the massacre at Karbala as the injustice of primary significance for this development, linking

²⁹² Alexander Knysh, *Islamic Mysticism: A Short History* (Boston: Brill, 2000), 6-7.

²⁹³ Eric Geoffroy, *Introduction to Sufism: The Inner Path of Islam*, trans. Roger Gaetani (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2010), 65.

Sufism to Shi'ism as a form of political protest, like Egger. Knysh likewise mentions such injustices, though he underplays their significance in comparison to Geoffroy: "The latter [voluntary poverty] occasionally had an underlying political intent, as some early ascetics consciously abandoned gainful professions or even refused to inherit in protest against the perceived injustices and corruption of the oppressive Umayyad regime."²⁹⁴ Such arguments about the origins of Sufi asceticism locate it specifically within a class of Arabs who stood to most benefit from the expansions of the empire, through land grants, booming trade, and war booty. Such an argument, which focuses on the economic disparities of the Umayyad system rather than the sheer opulence of the Umayyad rulers, does more to explain the continuation of asceticism after the fall of the Umayyads, for the economic disparities which they inaugurated continued under the Abbasids.²⁹⁵

For the moment, however, we must take with a grain of salt the hagiographic story of a wealthy heir-apparent who renounces it all to pursue a life of poverty and seclusion. As with ascetic hagiographies in Late Antique Syriac Christianity, the trope of the wealthy renunciate may be just that: a literary device used to highlight the severity of the subject's renunciation of material wealth. A quick survey of early Sufi ascetics would also seem to belie this explanation

²⁹⁴ Knysh, 11.

²⁹⁵ Fred M. Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam*, Reprint (Belknap Press, 2012).

of the rise of asceticism—Rabi’a al-‘Adawiyya was a freed slave, for example, and prominent figures such as Bayazid Bistami were Persian, which calls into question how they might have benefited from Arab-centric Umayyad largess.²⁹⁶ Nevertheless, there may be certain political or economic conditions necessary to support wandering ascetics or make such a-communal living feasible, which cease to exist in later times.²⁹⁷

Though we know quite a lot about what early ascetics and Sufis supposedly say about themselves, we do not yet have a thorough explanation for why in some places and during some time periods self-mortification becomes a widespread phenomena, and these individuals gain political or social prestige through their acts of self-denial. It is not a given that extreme fasting, for example, should be coded as indicative of spiritual power—in our own context such behavior, though still coded as threatening, is pathologized.²⁹⁸ As such, an anthropological and historical investigation into the conditions of early renunciates—their locations, practices, interactions with religious and political authorities, engagements with one another—and discussion of how these factors change 300 years later with the decline of ascetic practice, is required to understand the development of Baghdadi Sufism as the dominant mystical and

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

²⁹⁷ Christopher Melchert, "Exaggerated Fear in the Early Islamic Renunciant Tradition," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 21, no. 3 (07, 2011), 283-300.

²⁹⁸ Patrick Anderson, *So Much Wasted: Hunger, Performance, and the Morbidity of Resistance* (Duke University Press Books, 2010).

ascetic movement over and above its rival movements in early Islam. One avenue through which to begin to understand such a development is through examining the category of poverty in early Sufi manuals and texts. By observing how poverty begins as an early stage on the Sufi path, concerned with very practical matters of dress and debts, but by the 13th century comes to be described as an internal state near the end of the mystic path, coterminous with annihilation in God (*fana*), we can begin to understand how notions of asceticism changed in the early Sufi tradition.

Material Poverty in Early Sufism

What seems well researched in the study of early Sufism is what Cohn calls representations: “those situations, to follow Durkheim, in which some members of society represent their theories and systems of classifications and constructs to themselves and others. By representations I mean, among other things, etiquette, codes of conduct, large-scale political/religious rituals, and the various forms of mythics which underlie such representations.”²⁹⁹ The study of Sufi manuals, biographies, hagiographies, and mystical treatises certainly provide us with a wealth of information regarding the ways in which Sufis

²⁹⁹ Bernard Cohn, “History and Anthropology: The State of Play,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol 22 No 2 (Apr., 1980), 217.

represent Sufism to themselves and others. Cohn, however, sees the study of these representations as ultimately aimed at a comparative project: “It is through the study of these phenomena...that we can understand and ultimately compare systems of representation.”³⁰⁰

Very little has been done to evaluate the various competing claims for authority between early Islamic mystical and ascetic groups, and until recently, the vast outpouring of Sufi literature in the 10th and 11th centuries was read primarily as a form of apologia, justifying the “orthodoxy” of Sufism to Sunni authorities. Such an argument is untenable because Sunni consensus was not dominant in all the places we find Sufism (and certainly not accompanied by the political power that might provide for the suppression of oppositional movements). Likewise, once we clear our vision of the fog created by the contemporary pop-cultural obsession with a Wahabbi/Sufi divide, which seems to imply that Sunnism and Sufism are inherently at odds with one another, we see that they managed to co-exist amicably (even symbiotically, if we follow Marshall Hodgson’s reading) for almost a millennia.³⁰¹ When Sufis did encounter strong Sunni political authorities (as in the case of the Seljuks), they tended to provide an essential service of religious authorization for the rulers, and were usually

³⁰⁰ Ibid., 217.

³⁰¹ Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*.

handsomely rewarded with institutional support and *waqf* endowments.³⁰² Furthermore, many exemplary Sufis also made their living as legal scholars within one of the four Sunni *madhahib*.

In light of this realization, more recent work has looked at Sufi writings in the context of arguments against other mystical and ascetic groups. It is especially telling that the key Sufi manuals were written by authors from Khurasan and Transoxania, areas with strong alternative mystical and ascetic movements that differed greatly from Baghdadi Sufism in vocabulary, theology, and practice. Knysh admits that “the gradual expansion and eventual ascendancy of Iraqi Sufism in these areas [Khurasan and Transoxania], which began in the first quarter of the fourth/tenth centuries and gained momentum in the next two centuries, has not yet found a satisfactory explanation in scholarly literature.”³⁰³ Some authors attribute its success to its ability to absorb and incorporate the strengths of its competitors, while others emphasize the support lent to Sufism by political powers who saw it as, at minimum, the least threatening of the mystical movements. Only a few recent works, however, have looked at the representational output of these various groups in a comparative light, as Cohn would advise. An investigation of the concepts of *zuhd* (renunciation) and *faqr* (poverty) will reveal the ways in which debates over the status of the spiritual station of poverty get tied to Junayd’s notion

³⁰² Safi, *The Politics of Knowledge in Premodern Islam : Negotiating Ideology and Religious Inquiry*.

³⁰³ Knysh, 99.

of *fana* (self-annihilation in God), until actual material poverty becomes irrelevant to the Sufi path, and meticulous attention to material poverty becomes evidence of a low spiritual station.

Developing out of early Islamic ascetic traditions, Sufism was closely tied to the notion of poverty during its formative period. Among the various etymologies proposed for the word Sufi, *ṣūf*, meaning wool and indicating the practical and unadorned wool garments of an ascetic, is the most accepted derivation of the word.³⁰⁴ This woolen garment, called a *muraqqa'a* (patched frock) was a personal symbol for the Sufi him/herself reminding of his/her renunciation of worldly desires. It also served as a public symbol, marking the Sufi as a person separate from society. Another frequently posited derivation for the word, though linguistically unlikely, comes from the Arabic *suffa* (bench), indicating a group of early Muslims who lived in the mosque at Medina and who had no possessions, relying on the Prophet's largess to sustain them in their devotion to God.³⁰⁵ Thus two of the most frequently cited derivations for the term “Sufi” emphasize notions of impoverishment and unworldliness.

No biography of an early Sufi saint is complete without descriptions of his or her ascetic practices, whether it be going without food for days on end, sleeping on nothing but a

³⁰⁴ “*Taṣawwuf*,” Lewishon et al. *Encyclopaedia of Islam*. Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel and W.P. Heinrichs. Brill, 2008. Brill Online. Harvard University. 30 May 2008
<http://www.brillonline.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=islam_COM-1188>

³⁰⁵ Ernst, *Sufism*, 22.

reed mat, or wearing the same tattered frock for decades. Poverty was not simply an abstract concept but a lived reality for these early saints. Later commentators grappled with the practical questions surrounding how one enacts a life of poverty including questions of whether or not there should be set floors or ceilings on the personal resources of a Sufi, whether certain extremes of poverty might actually harm the aspirant in their quest for God, and whether a Sufi was required to earn enough to meet prior financial obligations or could leave these obligations behind.

Definitions and stipulations regarding poverty in the early period are as diverse as are the writers addressing the topic. All commentators agree that it is a station along the path towards God, but disagreements arise over where this station occurs along, what it leads to, and its relative value in relation to other stations. For Abu Nasr al-Sarraj, poverty comes in three forms depending upon the spiritual advancement of the practitioner. The most basic form is the poverty of one who renounces all worldly possessions, does not complain about his material want or request assistance, and vehemently refuses aid should it be offered. The second form is actually less stringent, and indicates one who meets the above criteria, but may accept assistance freely offered to them. The third form is yet more relaxed still, meeting the criteria of form two, with the added benefit of being able to ask for assistance when

necessary.³⁰⁶ This scale of poverty, with the strictest form actually being the lowest in spiritual attainment, indicates the way in which post-Junaydi Sufism articulates itself as being distinct from asceticism for asceticism's sake.³⁰⁷ The implication is that poverty is a tool to train a Sufi to no longer desire worldly goods. Those first starting on the path require the greatest restrictions on their access to worldly temptations, whereas those who have already overcome the temptations of food and comfort may accept or even seek it out if it will benefit them in their higher spiritual pursuits, or if lack of one or the other might hinder them. For Sarraj, poverty leads to the station of patience (*sabr*) and comes relatively early along the path, just after renunciation (*zuhd*). Nevertheless, with his demarcation of three separate forms, it encompasses a great deal of spiritual development within a single station.

Other more practical discussion of material poverty are prevalent. Ghazali, attempting to demarcate the minimum bar one must meet to achieve poverty, argues that “poverty is the privation of what is essentially needed by a human being...privation of what is unessential to a person is not called poverty.”³⁰⁸ Other writers might take issue with this definition, however,

³⁰⁶ John Renard, *Knowledge of God in Classical Sufism: Foundations of Islamic Mystical Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), 95.

³⁰⁷ Christopher Melchert, “The Transition from Asceticism to Mysticism at the Middle of the Ninth Century C.E,” *Studia Islamica*, 1996, 51–70.

³⁰⁸ Javad Nurbakhsh, *Spiritual Poverty in Sufism: Faqr and Faqir*, (London: Khaniqahi-Nimatullahi Publications, 1984), 36.

since the goal of poverty is the realization that one really needs nothing but God, so approaching poverty with the understanding that one is giving up something “essentially needed” might seem contradictory to the goals of such privation.

Kalabadhi, highly concerned with minutiae of the life of poverty, discusses whether or not it is appropriate for a Sufi to acquire any earnings whatsoever, resolving that it is permissible should those earnings be used to assist others or to repress desires which might distract one from remembrance of God.³⁰⁹ He goes so far as to argue that earning is compulsory for one who is responsible for dependents, so poverty is not a state that can or should be imposed upon one's family members.³¹⁰ His emphasis rests much more clearly upon material poverty, but reveals his interest in poverty as a path towards spiritual attainment, rejecting its extremes when they may hinder one's development or harm others.

Qushayri generally agrees with Kalabadhi's practical view of material poverty, but supports his arguments with a greater bulk of spiritual reasons. Among his list of spiritual stations, poverty ranks relatively high, but is *followed* by Sufism (*tasawwuf*). Like Sarraj and Kalabadhi, Qushayri engages in arguments about the physical manifestations of poverty, such as from whom, if anyone, one can accept gifts and the proper attitude the poor should

³⁰⁹ Abu Bakr al-Kalabadhi, *The Doctrines of the Sufis*, A.J. Arberry, trans. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 73.

³¹⁰ Ibid, 73.

demonstrate towards the wealthy.³¹¹ He quotes al-Daqqaq approvingly, who says it is “preferable that a man be given enough to sustain himself and maintain himself within those limits.”³¹² The goal of poverty is not impoverishment then, but rather ridding oneself of unreasonable wants. For Qushayri, true poverty is fear of poverty and so the goal of material poverty is to free oneself from the prison of fear.³¹³

With Ansari, we see a greater emphasis on the spiritual attributes of poverty and less concern for its practical attributes. Ansari places poverty relatively low among the spiritual stations, listing it as number 48 out of 100, followed by wealth (*ghani*).³¹⁴ Like Sarraj, however, he divides poverty into three kinds: compulsory, voluntary, and realized.³¹⁵ These three categories do not directly relate to Sarraj's, though there is some overlap. Whereas Sarraj concerns himself primarily with the physical actions one may or may not take and only implies the inner state to which these actions may relate, Ansari's definitions revolve around the attitude one has towards poverty rather than the characteristics of one's poverty.

³¹¹ Abu'l-Qasim al-Qushayri, *Principles of Sufism*, B.R. Con Schlegell, trans. (Oneonta, NY: Mizan Press, 1990), 294.

³¹² *Ibid.*, 293.

³¹³ *Ibid.*, 291.

³¹⁴ Ernst, *Sufism*, 104-5.

³¹⁵ Nurbakhsh, 32.

Hujwiri notes that poverty has both a form (*rasm*) and essence (*haqiat*) and in his writings we see the balance between discussing spiritual and material poverty prevalent in the work of later Persian poet Farid al-Din 'Attar. Like Qushayri and Kalabadhi before him, he notes that “poverty is being empty of desire not empty of provision.”³¹⁶ He addresses a debate about the relative value of the stations of poverty and wealth, as Ansari had previously, but disagrees with those who argue that wealth is superior since it is an attribute of God whereas poverty is not. He argues that material wealth is both created and a means to an end, whereas divine wealth is both uncreated and an end itself, therefore human wealth and God's wealth cannot be compared.³¹⁷ Turning this argument on its head, Hujwiri notes that wealth is not about the acquisition of “benefits, but of acquisition of the benefactor.”³¹⁸ Thus true wealth is really just the opposite side of the coin of spiritual poverty, where the former focuses on the fullness of divine presence, and the latter emphasizes the absence of veils that may hinder the experience of such presence.

All this discussion of the relationship between asceticism and Sufism, especially if we understand poverty as synechdochally standing in for renunciation, comes to a head in the

³¹⁶ Mawlana Ali al-Hujwiri, *Kashf al-Mahjub*, (Reynold Nicholson, trans. London: Gibb Memorial Trust, 2000), 25.

³¹⁷ Ibid., 21-22.

³¹⁸ Ibid., 22.

writings of Farid al-Din 'Attar. By 'Attar's life time, the notion of poverty in Sufism had developed far beyond early Islamic asceticism. Concerned with both the practical aspects of material poverty and the benefits attained through spiritual poverty, Hujwiri's notion of poverty begins to resemble the multi-faceted concept of poverty 'Attar utilizes in his *Manṭiq al-Ṭayr*—a concept which seems complex and expansive enough to warrant 'Attar's placement of it right beside annihilation (*fana'*) as the final stage along the Sufi path.

Spiritual Poverty

In his book on the body in Sufism, Scott Kugle argues that the trials of the spiritual path are “like refining metal through intense heat: heat does not actually destroy the metal but rather burns away the impurities to create a substance that is still metal, but stronger....”³¹⁹ For 'Attar this intense heat is provided by the notion of poverty, because poverty is the uniquely human condition. The primary difference between humans and angels, humans and Iblis, is that “Adam's makeup was molded of need....”³²⁰ The Qur'anic statement that man was made in his own image has historically been interpreted in two ways. Either it means that humans were made to meet a preexisting pattern in the mind of God, implying a system similar to the

³¹⁹ Kugle, *Sufis & Saints' Bodies*, 34.

³²⁰ Chittick, *Sufism*, 159.

Platonic notion of Forms, or it means that humans were created in God's own image. 'Attar favors the latter of these two interpretations, seeing the human souls as actually being derived from divine essence. So how could a creature created in God's image also be a creature of need?

According to one account, when God first created humans, Iblis went to inspect the new creation and discovered Adam to be hollow, which he interpreted as a sign of weakness, not suspecting what that hollowness was meant to be filled with.³²¹ For 'Attar, this hollowness is filled with the Divine breath which was breathed into Adam to animate him. This mystery of creation, that humans should be a frail hollow shell somehow able to contain and encompass a portion of the divine, perplexed even Iblis. Thus “Adam's need distinguishes him sharply from all other creatures, who are satisfied with what they have.”³²² For Ibn Arabi, “poverty is an affair that is inherent in everything other than God,” and while this may be so, it is only humans who realize their poverty because they have been created out of the combination of utter lack and overabundance, earth and divine breath, and thus feel their shortcoming.³²³ Humans are only “possible being” which require the “Necessary Being” in order to actually

³²¹ Kugle, *Sufis & Saints' Bodies*, 38.

³²² Chittick, *Sufism*, 159.

³²³ Ibid.

exist.³²⁴ It is this need that ends up being the greatest asset of humans, since it creates a space for union with the Divine, a space other beings do not have.

When 'Attar speaks of spiritual poverty, it is this level of ultimate need for which he aspires, though there are other elements of poverty along the path. Spiritual poverty must start as material poverty because “initially poverty is renunciation of the world and all in it; ultimately it is annihilation.”³²⁵ Material poverty clears the path for spiritual poverty, because “to the degree that people find wealth and independence in themselves and see themselves as positive and good, they will be empty of love for God.”³²⁶ But material poverty cannot be an end in itself, for one can come to pride oneself on one's asceticism, which would be another barrier separating one from God. Thus spiritual poverty must also be cultivated because “only those who possess no perfection whatsoever can truly love God, for only they have absolute, unqualified need.”³²⁷ The story of Shaykh Ṣan'ān exemplifies the numerous layers of poverty along the spiritual path, and how for 'Attar it is not simply a single waystation near the beginning or end, but rather a constant presence along one's journey, and a necessary prerequisite to annihilation in God (*fana'*).

³²⁴ Nurbakhsh, 6.

³²⁵ Ibid., 9.

³²⁶ Chittick, *Sufism*, 158.

³²⁷ Ibid.

The Story of Shaykh Ṣan'ān

The story of Shaykh Ṣan'ān is the single longest vignette in the *Manṭiq al-Ṭayr* at 434 lines, and perhaps the most famous of the individual stories within the collection. It tells the story of a Shaykh, custodian of the Ka'ba, renowned for his piety, with numerous followers, perfect in his ritual observations, who one night dreams that he is worshiping an idol in Byzantium. Tormented by the thought of this dream, he travels to the city of his dream with his disciples and falls in love with a Christian girl who has no idea the Shaykh even exists. After a month she notices his obsession and decides to test it by asking him to forswear Islam, drink wine, burn the Qur'an, convert to Christianity and finally work as a swine herd for a year to prove his love. During this time his disciples abandon him in order to return to Mecca. When they arrive in Mecca, a loyal disciple and friend of the shaykh listens to their tales and nevertheless scolds them for abandoning their teacher, ordering them to return to Byzantium immediately and continue to follow their shaykh's example, even if that means herding pigs and converting to Christianity. During their return journey they pray daily until the loyal disciple is visited by Muhammad in a dream. The dream reveals that the shaykh has been freed from his obsession over the Christian girl and absolved of wrongdoing. The shaykh leaves Byzantium and is reunited with his disciples, resuming his life as a Sufi. But shortly after his

departure, the Christian girl realizes her love for the shaykh and leaves her royal life behind to pursue him through the desert, perishing from exhaustion just moments after catching up with the group and falling into the shaykh's arms.³²⁸

This story is often read through the lens of passionate love; the Christian girl interpreted as analogous to God, for whom one gives up all sense of self just for a chance at proximity. It is also used to depict the importance of following one's shaykh, no matter how bizarre his/her requests and actions may seem. The most important lesson of the story, however, revolves around the subject of poverty, which it addresses in detail on all its various levels. The thread of poverty may not be obvious at first, because unlike the story of 'Attar's introduction to Sufism, outlined earlier, the story of Shaykh Ṣan'ān does not start with a main character engulfed in worldly pleasures. The shaykh is a long-time Sufi who has worn the patched frock for many years and lives in the Ka'ba in Mecca. One would assume that material poverty is not an issue for such a man. What the story reveals, however, is that though the shaykh was not weighed down by worldly goods, he was burdened with his positive reputation, students, and pride in his own spiritual attainments. The story of Shaykh Ṣan'ān is one in which a Sufi who has outwardly achieved a high station along the path, must begin his journey over again because of hidden barriers that are preventing his attainment of union with God.

³²⁸ Attar, *The Conference of the Birds*, 57–74.

The concept of poverty in Sufism is deep and multi-layered, but took many generations of writers discussing and refining the concept to gain such texture. 'Attar's *Manṭiq al-Ṭayr* uses numerous memorable stories, especially the tale of Shaykh Ṣan'ān, to explore and exemplify the complexity of the concept as it comes down to him. But 'Attar is not merely a recorder of Sufi thought. In his images and metaphors, he provides a rich pool of short-hand references for complex concepts, to which future authors and teachers can refer. Furthermore, by linking the concept of poverty so closely to annihilation (*fana'*), 'Attar gives the concept added importance as a metaphor for the spiritual journey itself.

Previous thinkers had developed concepts of poverty that decoupled it from material poverty, indicating that true poverty is a state of mind; they warned against ostentatious material poverty standing in for true renunciation of worldly desire; but few had gone so far as to make poverty the necessary condition for spiritual attainment. Indeed as early Sufism distanced itself from early Islamic asceticism, the concept of poverty seemed to be losing importance as its definition became more complex and accompanied with greater qualifications. 'Attar reaffirmed the importance of poverty to the Sufi by making it the necessary condition for spiritual attainment. Those Sufis who came after 'Attar did not fail to miss the importance of poverty in his work, or the significance of his contribution to the concept. It is picked up by Rumi, who “often employs the term 'poverty' in a context showing

that it is synonymous with 'annihilation' and 'nonexistence.'"³²⁹ His biographers also clearly understood the importance of poverty to 'Attar's understanding of Sufism, making it a central feature of his introduction to the Sufi path and his death. If we understand poverty as synecdochally representing all acts of austerity and renunciation (*zuhd*), then this analysis has revealed a clear trajectory of development, culminating in 'Attar, in which early Sufi asceticism gives way to a mysticism which elevates the station of poverty above the need to outwardly practice it. But an alternate trajectory is also present, one best exemplified in the writings of Nizami Ganjavi.

Conclusion

As we have discussed in this chapter, rethinking religion and mysticism in terms of the body is an important avenue for better understanding of Sufi texts and contexts. Though materialist approaches to the study of religion encourage us to focus less on elite, textual output and more on the lived experiences of non-elites, several authors have noted a continued place for textual analysis in the growing field of religion and the body. Nevertheless, much discussion of the place of the body in Sufism has focused on ascetic practice, ranging

³²⁹ William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi* (SUNY Series in Islamic Spirituality) (State University of New York Press, 1984), 187.

from sleep deprivation to self-mortification. Implicit within these discussions is the notion that men are speaking to other men about resisting bodily temptation. The varied kinds of bodily transformations sleep deprivation or extreme fasting might induce are framed around the male body. The potential threats the world can offer to distract a mystic often focus upon women and children. Within this conversation, little thought is given to this elevated valuation of the male human body over other kinds of bodies. The next two chapters will discuss the question of what kinds of bodies matter in greater detail, by first exploring the role of gender in the Sufi tradition and Nizami's work. Following this, we will then explore the difference between human and non-human bodies, and Nizami's playful refutation of Aristotelian notions of their relative worth and proximity to God.

CHAPTER 4: ASCENSION AS A MYSTICAL PARADIGM

Devotion to Muhammad

“Show me your relationship to Muhammad, and I’ll show you what kind of Muslim you are,” writes Omid Safi in his account of Muslim devotion to the Prophet’s memory.³³⁰ In *Memories of Muhammad*, Safi posits Muhammad less as a historical figure, and more as a repository for the hopes, dreams, fears, desires, and aspirations of various people over time and across space. Such a close examination of the relevance of Muhammad to Muslims seems timely in the wake of the Danish Cartoon Controversy, Charlie Hebdo, and the shootings in Waco, Texas, but Dr. Safi’s presentation of the Prophet may perplex or upset those who were most vocal in the protestation of these cartoons.

As Jamal Elias highlights in *Aisha’s Cushion*, the cartoon controversy was not about Muslim aniconism, despite what Euro-American media sources might have said. He shows a long heritage of complex Muslim relations with figurative art and depictions of the Prophet.

³³⁰ Safi, *Memories of Muhammad*.

What's more, aniconism wouldn't touch on non-Muslim use of images of the Prophet, where the question of improper worship is not at issue. He notes an early account of Muslims traveling to the Byzantine court. The Byzantine emperor, in questioning these messengers from Muhammad about their leader, pulls out a box containing portraits of each monotheistic prophet. After questioning whether the emissaries recognize the images of Adam and Abraham, the emperor then pulls out a portrait that is the exact image of Muhammad. Unlike with the other portraits, the narrative does not go on to describe the image depicted, but likewise the emissaries do not object to the emperor possessing this portrait. Rather, its existence serves as a confirmation of the Prophet's place in the line of monotheistic messengers.³³¹ As others have noted, the Danish Cartoon Controversy, then, is not about an irrational Muslim aniconism, which wouldn't be at issue in this instance anyway, but rather about disrespectful depictions of the Prophet and the legacy of colonialism, war, Islamophobia, and discrimination that such disrespect highlights.

That said, such defensiveness towards the Prophet's image is somewhat paradoxical given the complicated relationship contemporary Muslims have with Muhammad and his legacy. Some Muslim modernists, interested in positing Islam as a rational system in accord with the scientific, but not cultural, developments of Western modernity have an unusual

³³¹ Elias, *Aisha's Cushion*.

circle to square. Muhammad is a figure of importance, the disrespectful depiction of whom is cause for anger and protest, but he cannot be too important. Saudi authorities who decried the Danish cartoons also strictly control access to the Prophet's tomb and destroy potential sites and relics of devotion to his memory. He is the last great monotheistic Prophet, but, as we discussed in chapter one, the purity of his message is assured by his own passivity in its deliverance.³³² He is utterly human, which affirms the importance of his Sunna—if he can do it, so can we.³³³ Yet at the same time, he is infallible—a position upon which, as Shahab Ahmed has highlighted, even Ibn Tamiyya would disagree with his modern interpreters. Not only do these modernist and Salafist positions hold in tension a simultaneous respect for and devaluation of the Prophet's importance, they are also at odds with the vast majority of historical Muslim engagements with the Prophet and his legacy.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr is acutely aware of the problems of contemporary portrayals of the Prophet, both among Muslim modernist apologists and Christian polemicists. His *Muhammad: Man of God* is written as an English-language introduction to Muhammad's biography for those who don't have access to Arabic source materials. Highly defensive in

³³² `Abd al-Karim Surush, Mahmoud Sadri, and Ahmad Sadri, *Reason, Freedom, & Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of `Abdolkarim Soroush* (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2000), 292.

³³³ Though, as Ibn Khalif discovers in a vision, some things are for the Prophet alone, like the tip-toe prayer. Or as we shall see later in this chapter, embodied ascension. *Farid Ad-Din Attar's Memorial of God's Friends: Lives and Sayings of Sufis*, 386–393.

tone, the book counters Western depictions of the Prophet as a lascivious war-monger, an image honed in Medieval Christian texts but recently re-deployed to fit contemporary geopolitical agendas. Rather than providing a comprehensive biography of the Prophet, he is instead interested in highlighting aspects of his life that Nasr feels are overlooked or underemphasized in contemporary accounts. Of prime interest to him are the spiritual aspects of Muhammad's career. After a brief excursus into Muhammad's first marriage to Khadija, Nasr immediately jumps to the first occasion of revelation. Here, he highlights Muhammad's illiteracy as confirmation of the miraculous nature of the Qur'an. Lest one think this is simply Muhammad-as-Megaphone redux,³³⁴ Nasr follows this chapter with a discussion of the *Mi'raj*.

It is fitting that the ascension should be discussed in close proximity to the first revelation, because it is one of the key events that confirms Muhammad's status as a prophet. It serves a number of purposes in the hadith tradition, from etiological myth establishing daily prayer, to confirming Muhammad's lineage amongst the biblical prophets, to providing a testament of faith. In hadith collections, the ascension often occurs under the section heading *Iman*,³³⁵ since the *mir'aj* is a test of the believers faith alongside other dogmatic matters such as

³³⁴ See chapter 4 for details on this debate.

³³⁵ Ibn Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammad*, trans. A. Guillaume (Oxford University Press, USA, 2002), 181–187.

belief in the Day of Judgement or angels.³³⁶ The ascension thus also becomes a sticking point of belief—in the original narrative Abu Sufyan is cast as the doubter of Muhammad’s trip, Abu Bakr as faithful believer.

Key among the ascensions purposes, however, is to confirm Muhammad’s prophethood. Hadith literature now places the tale of the washing of Muhammad’s heart in early childhood, in part as a shift in views on prophetic infallibility.³³⁷ The ascension was significant enough that in early hadith traditions, however, it was said to occur immediately before the *mir’aj*.³³⁸ By lassoing it to the washing of the heart, and placing it shortly before the *hijra* the ascension comes to represent “an event in which the initiation of the Prophet is completed.”³³⁹

Outline of the Ascension Narrative

³³⁶ Uri Rubin, *The Eye of the Beholder: The Life of Muhammad As Viewed by the Early Muslims--A Textual Analysis* (Darwin Pr, 1995), 10.

³³⁷ As Islamic theology developed, especially in conversation with Christian polemics against Muhammad, the Prophet’s infallibility became ever less tolerable. While the washing of the heart initially occurred before a variety of important events in Muhammad’s life, medieval Muslim tradition settles on a childhood occurrence, to preserve the prophet from “errors” such as idol worship or public nudity. See Rubin, *Eye of the Beholder*, 64-65.

³³⁸ Rubin, 219.

³³⁹ *Ibid.*, 64-65.

Virtually every aspect of the ascension³⁴⁰ has been up for debate at some point in Islamic history. Questions have ranged from whether the ascension was physical, spiritual, or metaphorical to where Muhammad departed and returned from. Modernist thinkers such as Sir Seyyed Ahmed Khan, have objected to *mir'aj* narratives based on their fabulosity. Other contemporary Muslims have discounted the ascension for the problematic influence of Isra'iliyyat in fleshing out the larger narrative. Yet others object to the materialistic descriptions of heaven, arguing that heaven cannot be captured in such mundane imagery. Fazlur Rahman attacks bodily ascension as part of his broader critique of hadith. More recent writers have even plugged the *mir'aj* story into ancient astronaut theories.³⁴¹ Even the date of the occurrence has probably shifted. Traditionally it is placed on Monday, 12 Rabi' al-awwal, but Amir-Moezzi notes that this date seems to be largely symbolic, since it is also the date of his birth, death, first revelation and the hijra.³⁴² It also marks the coming of spring, which, as

³⁴⁰ It is worth noting that though we will discuss the ascension here in the singular, it is not a given that Muhammad ascended to meet God only once. In many Shi'i traditions, Muhammad had as many as 120 heavenly ascensions. Amir-Moezzi, *The Spirituality of Shi'i Islam*, 142. Buckley notes that initially, the Isra and Mi'raj seemed to be discussed as separate occurrences. In Sunni sources, consensus forms around one bodily ascension and multiple spiritual ascensions thereafter. R Buckley, *The Night Journey and Ascension in Islam: The Reception of Religious Narrative in Sunnī, Shī'ī and Western Culture* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013).

³⁴¹ Ibid.

³⁴² Rubin, *Eye of the Beholder*, 190.

we shall see in chapter 5, is a key aspect of Nizami's depiction of Muhammad's ascent through the Zodiac.

What follows is the general outline of the ascension based on Ibn Ishaq's biography of Muhammad. Ibn Ishaq notes that his narrative is pieced together from the accounts of a number of Companions. For our purposes, it is notable that Hasan al-Basri is one of the sources of Ibn Ishaq's account, since he was an important early ascetic who later becomes a foundational figure in the development of Sufism and transmission of Muhammad's esoteric teachings to later generations. Medieval ascension narratives added to, amended, or rearranged elements of this tale according to genre conventions and rhetorical function, but Ibn Ishaq's account will provide us a baseline for comparison.

One night, Muhammad is sleeping beside the Kaba and is awoken by the angel Gabriel. Gabriel escorts the prophet to the door of the mosque and shows him a white "half mule, half donkey" whose strides spanned "the limit of its sight."³⁴³ He mounted this creature, called Buraq, and swiftly travelled to Jerusalem where he meets a number of prior prophets, whom he leads in prayer. He is then offered a choice of drink—in this account he may choose between milk and wine—and chooses the milk. Gabriel then explains that because of this apt choice,

³⁴³ Ibn Ishaq, 182.

wine is forbidden to Muhammad and his people.³⁴⁴ At this point, a ladder descended from heaven and Gabriel and Muhammad climb to the gates of heaven together. The angel Ismail greets them and asks Gabriel if Muhammad has been sent for, which Gabriel confirms. At this, Ismail allows them to enter heaven. He then meets the angel Malik who shows him a vision of hell, which is described as a blast of flames that Muhammad fears will consume all creation. He is then shown a number of people being punished for the sins of stealing from orphans, usury, and adultery. From here, Muhammad leaves the first heaven and ascends the remaining 6 levels of heaven, encountering a different prophet or prophets at each level along the way. In Ibn Ishaq's account the prophets occur in the following order: though we will see how this varies in other ascension narratives later in the chapter:

2nd Heaven: Jesus and John the Baptist

3rd Heaven: Joseph

4th Heaven: Idris³⁴⁵

5th Heaven: Aaron (Moses' brother)

6th Heaven: Moses

³⁴⁴ This appears to serve as an etiological myth explaining the prohibition on wine and clarifying the three differing Qur'anic verses on the topic. Qur'an 4:43 advocates bodily purity in prayer, which includes sobriety. 2:219 argues that wine (الْخَمْرُ), along with gambling, has some benefits, but is a greater source of sin (إِثْم). In 5:90, wine, gambling, idol worship and divination are lumped together as abominations (رِجْسٍ). Ibn Ishaq's biography was penned before the legal tradition had formulated its theories of abrogation to account for seemingly contradictory Qur'an verses, so this part of the ascension story might have served a similar purpose for earlier communities.

³⁴⁵ Idris is often associated with Enoch, father of Methuselah, in the Book of Genesis.

7th Heaven: Abraham³⁴⁶

After meeting Abraham, he is taken to “Paradise” where he meets his companion Zayd’s heavenly wife, a compensation for his failed marriage to Zaynab, whom the prophet later married. Finally, Muhammad meets with God who requests that Muhammad and his people pray 50 times per day. When he returns to the 6th Heaven, Moses notes that this is too much to ask of people and advises that he return to request a reduction. Muhammad gets several incremental reductions to the prayer obligations, with Moses continuing to object to the heavy prayer burden. Finally, when the daily prayer is reduced to five, Muhammad is too embarrassed to request a further reduction.

This is where the ascension narrative ends in Ibn Ishaq. Issues of Muhammad’s return to Mecca from heaven and Jerusalem are notably handled in relation to the first part of the narrative, the night journey to Jerusalem. Here, the emphasis is on the miraculous nature of

³⁴⁶ Frederick Colby and Maria Subtelny have both noted that the location and order of the prophets changes depending on the ascension narrative. Subtelny argues that the order of the prophets can be used as a tool of polemic or conversion, depending upon the religious community to which the ascension narrative is targeted. She states, for example, that ascension narratives circulating amongst Jewish communities with a Christian population will remove Jesus from the first heaven, but place Adam in the seventh, with Adam symbolizing both himself and Jesus, the second Adam—an attempt not to upset Jewish sensibilities, while appeasing Christian ones. Maria E. Subtelny, “Jews at the Edge of the World in a Timurid-Era *Mīrājnāma*: The Islamic Ascension Narrative as Missionary Text,” *The Prophet’s Ascension: Cross-Cultural Encounters with the Islamic Mīraj Tales*, Christiane Gruber and Frederick S. Colby, eds., (Indiana University Press, 2010), 50-66.

Muhammad's swift journey as a testament of faith, as well as the proofs he offered of the physicality of his journey.

Qur'anic Sources for Ascension Narratives

For centuries after Muhammad's death, two Qur'anic verses have been subjected to intense scrutiny and debate by Muslim scholars and intellectual elites across a range of disciplines and theological inclinations. Eventually biographers of Muhammad's life, Qur'anic interpreters, and scholars of Islamic Law came to agree that these verses all referred to a single event involving the Prophet's ascension into heaven in a single evening. It is at this point that agreement ends. Debates as to whether the "farthest mosque" (*al-masjid al-aqsa*) was located in heaven or Jerusalem abounded. Legal scholars and theologians differed on the significance to be drawn from the heavenly journey, the latter arguing that it confirmed Muhammad's pre-eminence among the prophets, the former pointing to it as the moment in which Muhammad negotiated with God over daily prayer requirements. Perhaps the most long-lasting and theologically significant debate, however, involved the question of whether the Prophet ascended to heaven bodily, or spiritually, or only in a dream state. By the 13th century, these

issues were resolved well enough that long works embellishing upon the sparse Qur'anic outlines of the Prophetic ascension narrative were being produced in both Arabic and Persian.

Mi'raj narratives invite a great deal of debate and creativity, in part because the tale itself is so evocative, inviting questions such as: what does heaven look like? Who does Muhammad meet along the way? What does God say to Muhammad? The Qur'an is relatively abstruse on these issues. From the Qur'anic verses that have generally been interpreted as discussing the *Mi'raj*, we learn that 1) Muhammad was shown the signs of God (*Surat al-Isra* 17:1), 2) that Muhammad drew within "two-bows lengths" of God (*Surat al-Najm* 53:8-18) at the Lote Tree of Farthest Limit, and 3) That the Prophet did not turn away from what he saw.³⁴⁷ Beyond these two key passages, a number of other verses have been interpreted as involving the ascension. For example, later exegetes come to interpret verses where the prophet is being guided by God as relating to the *mir'aj*.³⁴⁸ Other information, such as Muhammad's mount, Boraq, his accompaniment by Gabriel, the prophets he met along the way, etc are filled in by biographic and hadith literature. About a century after the Prophet Muhammad's death, by the

³⁴⁷ Even these issues, however, are up for debate. Some commentators have argued that it is the angel Gabriel, not God, that draws close to Muhammad by two bows lengths in *Surat al-Najm*.

³⁴⁸ The theory here is that the prophet was perfect in matters of religious practice and knowledge, and so could not have needed divine guidance for anything but navigating the terrain of heaven. See Rubin, *Eye of the Beholder*, 96.

time of Ibn Ishaq's *Sira*, we have the outlines of a complete journey to heaven and back.³⁴⁹ In this section, I will examine some of the Qur'an verses on the ascension and their impact on later ascension narratives.

Surat al-Isra

Glory be to Him Who carried His servant by night from the Sacred Mosque to the Farthest Mosque, whose precincts We have blessed, that We might show him some of Our signs. Truly He is the Hearer, the Seer.

- Qur'an, 17:1³⁵⁰

The broad contours of the first part of the Night Journey and Ascension can be found in *Surat al-Isra*, the seventeenth chapter of the Qur'an. This Sura is traditionally titled after the third Arabic word in the first verse, which becomes a proper name for the event described in the rest of the verse. Though this verse becomes a Qur'anic touchstone for later ascension narratives, it is worth noting that the meaning of this verse is ambiguous without the details provided by later hadith and biographical literature. Maria Massi Dakake, in her footnotes to *Surat al-Isra* in the *Study Qur'an*, provides over a page of commentary on this one verse,

³⁴⁹ Ibn Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammad*.

³⁵⁰ Seyyed Hossein Nasr et al., *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*, Tra edition (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2015), 694.

outlining this its place in the broader *mi'raj* narrative.³⁵¹ Generally, this verse is said to refer to Muhammad's overland journey from Mecca to Jerusalem.³⁵² Though the identity of "the servant" is not explicit here, Muslim exegetical work has almost universally interpreted this to mean the Prophet Muhammad.³⁵³ The location of the Farthest Mosque (*Masjid al-aqsa*), however, was a subject of debate, opinion eventually settled on the former site of the Temple in Jerusalem.³⁵⁴ This lead to a number of questions about the nature of Muhammad's journey. If he departed at night, and in most narratives was awoken from sleep to make the journey, why did he depart from the mosque in Mecca rather than his bed?³⁵⁵ How was he able to travel such a large distance in one evening?³⁵⁶ As we shall discuss later in the chapter, the difficulty Muhammad's contemporaries have in answering these questions eventually become part of the story of the night journey itself.

³⁵¹ Ibid., 694-695.

³⁵² Some early hadith narratives argue that this verse encapsulates the entirety of the *mi'raj*.

³⁵³ Frederick S. Colby, *Narrating Muhammad's Night Journey: Tracing the Development of the Ibn Abbas Ascension Discourse* (State University of New York Press, 2009), 14.

³⁵⁴ Early sources seem to indicate that the *isra* took place entirely within the precincts of Mecca or that the *Masjid al-aqsa* is located in heaven. The shift to Jerusalem seems to have occurred during the Umayyad period, perhaps as a form of religious competition with Christians. See, for example, Rubin, *The Eye of the Beholder*, 65.

³⁵⁵ Early accounts have him departing either from his own bed or from the house of his relative, Umm Hānī'.

³⁵⁶ Later commentators make this a key point of discussion. For some, belief in the prophet's ability to physically make the journey in one night becomes dogma. Others attempt to argue how such a feat is physically possible. Yet others argue for a metaphorical reading of the passage.

Also of note in this passage is the question of what “show him some of Our signs [ayatna]” might mean. While some have interpreted this, especially because of the use of the word “signs” as an indication of a moment of Qur’anic revelation, others have argued that this refers to the revelation of the daily prayer requirements. Sufi interpretations tend to argue that the content of these signs are left purposely ambiguous, since they are mystical secrets only for the spiritual elite.³⁵⁷

Surat al-Najm

Endowed with surpassing power, who in time manifested himself in his true shape and nature, / appearing in the horizon’s loftiest part, / and then drew near, and came close, / until he was but two bow-lengths away, or even nearer. / And thus did [God] reveal unto His servant whatever He deemed right to reveal. / The [servant’s] heart did not give the lie to what he saw: / will you, then, contend with him as to what he saw? / And, indeed, he saw him a second time / by the lote-tree of the farthest limit, / near unto the garden of promise. / With the lote-tree veiled in a veil of nameless splendor... / the eye did not waver, nor yet did it stray: / truly did he see some of the most profound of his Sustainer’s symbols.

- Qur’an 53:6-18

³⁵⁷ Colby, *Narrating Muhammad’s Night Journey*, 16.

These verses come from Surat al-Najm in the context of defending the veracity of Muhammad's message as "naught but a revelation revealed."³⁵⁸ Thus it can be placed in line with the Qur'anic passages that take pains to distinguish Muhammad's revelations from poetry, soothsaying, and fakery.³⁵⁹ For this reason, some interpreters have argued against reading this passage as an account of the *mir'aj*. They instead argue that the one who "drew near, and came close" is the Angel Gabriel, who is drawing near to Muhammad, rather than Muhammad drawing near to God.³⁶⁰

In spite of this ambiguity, a host of other interpreters, including most Sufi readers, have argued that this is an account of Muhammad's ascension to heaven to have a direct encounter with God. The imagery of this passage is particularly potent for poets and mystics, who reflect on the question of how proximate "two bow-lengths" might be. Likewise, as we see in Nizami's own writing, the image of a tree marking a dividing line between God and material creation, which Muhammad can bodily pass, is particularly evocative for poets and mystics. Nizami, for example, has the Lote Tree subordinate itself Muhammad in various ways, from

³⁵⁸ Qur'an 53:4.

³⁵⁹ See chapter 4 for an extended discussion of these issues.

³⁶⁰ This interpretation is made explicit in some translations of the verse, such as Mohsin Khan's English translation which inserts Gabriel's name in brackets in these verses to remove all ambiguity.

bowing down to him, to becoming and adornment on his shirt.³⁶¹ In each case the indication is that Muhammad's direct encounter with God elevates him above the status of even this symbolic barrier between God and creation.

Ascension Narratives and Muslim Identity

Over the past decade, a handful of monographs and edited volumes have expanded our understanding of the *Mir'aj* and its role in identity formation in the early and medieval Muslim community. Unlike earlier scholarly works on the Prophet's biography, which are interested in source tracing and critical approaches to hagiographic material, these contemporary works are less interested in the "quest for the historical Muhammad" and more interested in excavating historical Muslim engagement with Muhammad's legacy. Brook Vucovic's book title, *Heavenly Journeys, Earthly Concerns*, perhaps most clearly highlights the focus of these new investigations. Rather than focus upon what Muhammad's vision of heaven can tell us about the afterlife or God, she is instead interested in what these accounts tell us about relationships between the Muslims who read, share, expand upon and transmit these accounts.³⁶²

³⁶¹ Nizami Ganjavi, *Makhzan al-asrar*, 24.

³⁶² Brooke Olson Vuckovic, *Heavenly Journeys, Earthly Concerns: The Legacy of the Mi'raj in the Formation of Islam* (Routledge, 2004).

Vucovic states quite clearly that she is disinterested in source-hunting, and instead wants to investigate Muslim engagement with the Prophet's legacy. Of particular interest to her are the ways in which medieval Arabic accounts of the *Mir'aj* are used to define the Muslim community in relation to other monotheist traditions and then define rules of praxis within this clearly bounded community. Citing Fred Donner's work on the early community of believers, she notes that Muslim identity, as distinct from other monotheistic groups, is rather late in coming.³⁶³ As Donner clearly depicts in *Muhammad and the Believers*, the Arabic nature of Muhammad's message, the structure of Umayyad taxation practices, and the disinterest in conversion along with a relatively slow rate of conversion to Islam among conquered peoples, meant that distinguishing Muhammad's followers from other monotheists was not a pressing concern for the early community.³⁶⁴ For Vucovic, continued engagements with Zoroastrians and Christians, as well as political and military encounters with the reduced Byzantine Empire, necessitated such boundary drawing. She highlights how Muhammad's encounter with the Prophets on his ascent serves to subordinate Muhammad's mission to those of previous messengers. This develops alongside triumphalist notions of the "seal of prophecy" as not just a confirmation of Muhammad's mission, but also a lid on future revelation.

³⁶³ Ibid., 42.

³⁶⁴ Fred M. Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam*, Reprint (Belknap Press, 2012).

In Christiane Gruber and Frederick Colby's collected volume, *The Prophet's Ascension*, Maria Subtleney writes on the role of ascension narratives in outreach to and conversion of non-Muslim communities in the Timurid era. She notes that her *Mirajnama* was often bundled with Attar's *Tazkirat al-Awliya*, a text which features delightful stories of the feats of Muslim saints—at times highlighting their engagements with non-Muslim figures. She notes the symbolic overlap between this *Mir'aj* account and images from the religious traditions Muslims are encountering and attempting to convert. Especially important in this work is the unusual order of the prophets in heaven. Jesus is not mentioned in this ascension narrative, which Subtleney reads as an effort not to offend the intended Jewish audience of the text. Adam, however, is placed in the highest, rather than lowest level of heaven. She argues that this is a nod to savvy Christians who would understand Jesus as the Second Adam. Likewise she notes that angelic figures, such as the half-snow, half-fire angel have precedence in Jewish midrashic texts on Moses' ascension³⁶⁵. Similarly, Colby argues in *Narrating Muhammad's Night Journey*, that the rooster angel is derived from Zoroastrian heavenly imagery.³⁶⁶ The supersessionist message directed at these non-Muslim communities is clear: your previous belief system can remain intact, it is just subordinate to Muhammad's revelation.

³⁶⁵ Subtleney, "The Jews at the Edge of the World."

³⁶⁶ Colby, *Narrating Muhammad's Night Journey*.

Colby's monograph takes a different tack to this material. While Colby is not interested in source hunting for the sake of verifying authenticity, he is interested in tracing the hadith materials which inform medieval ascension narratives in order to understand how sectarian debates might have influenced the development of these texts. Earlier scholarship on the Prophet's biography incorrectly identified the *Sira* as a late-developing genre based on hadith. Thus, to discover the "real" Muhammad, one must bypass the *Sira* in favor of hadith literature. Recent scholarship on both *Sira* and *hadith* has revealed that Ibn Ishaq's biography of the Prophet might actually be a relatively early collection of stories about the Prophet, with hadith material being a later accretion of the jurisprudential system.³⁶⁷ Colby likewise notes that Ibn Ishaq's *Sira* is not the beginning and end of the ascension tale, but that hadith material traced back to one transmitter—Ibn Abbas—becomes a source of creative re-interpretation of the ascension narrative throughout the medieval period. By the 15th century, he notes, we have two distinct Ibn Abbas recensions of the *Mir'aj*—one shorter and one longer. Though much remains the same between the two, the order of events shifts a bit, as does the detail into which each narrative goes regarding Muhammad's experience on each level of heaven. Colby is interested both in how this narrative develops Muhammad as an intercessory figure and the ways in which the development of the Ibn Abbas narratives seem to be influenced by

³⁶⁷ See, for example, Rubin's *Eye of the Beholder*.

Sunni/Shi'a debates. In relation to the first topic, he emphasizes Muhammad's selflessness in his encounter with God. Whereas previous prophets trembled in the face of God, asking for personal salvation on the day of judgment, Muhammad asks for salvation for his community. The message to non-Muslim readers is clear—your own prophet will be too frightened to speak up for you on the day of judgment. It is better to throw your lot in with the one who will: Muhammad. In relation to the Sunni/Shi'i debates, he notes that visions of the cosmic Muhammad triumphant seem to come out of a textual escalation in relation to narratives which place 'Ali at the throne of God before Muhammad arrives.³⁶⁸

These Shi'i triumphalist narratives are discussed by Christiane Gruber in relation to Safavid political realities and by Vernon Schubel regarding Bektashi and later Alawite portrayals of the ascension.³⁶⁹ For Gruber, Shah Ismail is especially keen to associate himself with Muhammad as a renewer and redeemer. As such, he commissioned miniatures of the ascension in Nizami's *Khamsa* which feature, for the first time in artistic depictions of the ascension, an oculus in the sky and a veil over Muhammad's face. For Gruber, the veil is meant

³⁶⁸ Colby, *Narrating Muhammad's Night Journey*.

³⁶⁹ Christiane Gruber, "When Nubuvvat Encounters Valāyat: Safavid Paintings of the Prophet Mohammad's Mi'rāj, C. 1500-50," in *The Art and Material Culture of Iranian Shi'ism: Iconography and Religious Devotion in Shi'i Islam*, ed. Pedram Khosronejad (I. B. Tauris, 2011), 25–45; Vernon Schubel, "'When the Prophet Went on a Mirac, He Saw a Lion on the Road,'" in *The Prophet's Ascension: Cross-Cultural Encounters with the Islamic Mi'raj Tales*, ed. Christiane Gruber and Frederick S. Colby (Indiana University Press, 2010).

to obscure the Prophet's face not out of aniconic concerns, but rather to facilitate an elision between the Prophet's face and Shah Ismail's. Likewise, the oculus represents the veil-rending power of the renewer, who provides direct access to God.³⁷⁰ For Schubel, Bektashi and Alawite ascension narratives contrast Muhammad as the exoteric prophet and Ali as the esoteric font of divine wisdom. In these accounts, Muhammad encounters a lion on his ascension into heaven, and gives him his signet ring to ward him off. Later, as he approaches the Throne, he sees Ali has arrived there before him, wearing the same signet ring bequeathed to the lion. This is taken as a symbol both of Ali's place as rightful successor to the prophet and as an indication of his pre-eminence in spiritual understanding—Ali was already a party to mysteries that Muhammad had to have explained.³⁷¹

Finally, both Gruber and Vukovic highlight the role that ascension narratives play in governing community norms amongst Muslims. For Vukovic, the visions of torture and punishment for earthly deeds serves to make explicit Quranic imperatives against backbiting or stealing from orphans, for example³⁷². Such texts were used as teaching tools to instruct new and young Muslims through fearful images of future punishment. In Gruber's monograph,

³⁷⁰ Gruber, "When Nubuvvat Encounters Valāyat"

³⁷¹ Schubel, "When the Prophet Went on a Mirac, He Saw a Lion on the Road."

³⁷² Vukovic, *Heavenly Journeys, Earthly Concerns*.

The Ilkhanid Book of Ascension, Muhammad's ritual encounters on the ascension are of utmost importance. Besides describing *why* one must pray five-times a day, through the common story of Muhammad negotiating with God for a reduction in prayer obligations at Moses' urging, this book also highlights *how* one should pray. Gruber notes that images accompanying the scenes of Muhammad leading the prophets and angels in prayer each highlight proper bodily comportment in each stage of prayer. Such a book then becomes an instructional guide for new Muslims—confirming the ascension's central position in establishing the boundary between their new and old religious communities. Not only does Muhammad's ascension confirm his primacy over previous dispensations, but it brings with it a new and distinct ritual package.³⁷³

Body and Ascension

Returning to Nasr's apologetic account of the ascension, we must note the importance of the body to his understanding of the miraculous nature of the *mir'aj*. Nasr directly addresses contemporary Muslims who are keen to reject the bodily ascension.³⁷⁴ He notes that scientific

³⁷³ Christiane Gruber, *The Ilkhanid Book of Ascension: A Persian-Sunni Prayer Manual* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

³⁷⁴ Arguments for a physical mi'raj begin with Tabari, who shows that the mi'raj as both miracle and non-allegorical necessitate a physical ascension. Arguments from Fakr al-Din Razi onwards focus on whether or not

rationalism can't tell us about higher planes of existence, but that the bodily ascension is necessary to confirm the inherent dignity of creation and the human being. Nasr's approach here is interesting, because it, unlike traditional arguments for bodily ascension, such as those of Tabari or Fakr al-Din Razi,³⁷⁵ separates the material realm into distinct levels. Likewise, rather than emphasize the bodily ascension as an important confirmation of God's omnipotence and Muhammad's uniqueness, Nasr's take on the ascension confers dignity on all humanity, diffusing the intercessory implications of medieval approaches to the *mi'raj* and marking a clear boundary between Islam and Christianity, since the latter does not dignify human embodiment. Here, Nasr is joining a long tradition of authors who use the Prophet's ascension to mark a boundary between Muhammad's community and other monotheists.

In the very next chapter, Nasr devotes his time to emphasizing the importance of the *mi'raj*'s occurrence *before* the *hijra*. He notes that one must have a change of heart before one

fast movement is theoretically possible—he argues it is on both scientific and scriptural grounds (e.g. movement of the sun, speed of eye-rays in extravision, movement of satan). Ibn Sina denies a bodily ascension, arguing it was spiritual and the material elements of the description are metaphorical (more on this in chapter 5). Buckley, *The Night Journey and Ascension in Islam*.

³⁷⁵ Razi, in particular, spills a great deal of ink discussing how the *isra* might have been possible without breaking the laws of the universe. Sighting both the speed of Satan and the speed of eye-rays used in sight, based on a theory of extraversion, Razi argues that since other material objects can and do travel at near infinite speeds, so too might the Prophet have been granted such speed.

can change the world.³⁷⁶ In a dig at modernist Muslims who see Muhammad primarily as a nation-builder, Nasr warns against seeking to change the world without first seeking to change themselves. Such a sentiment is echoed in Omid Safi's concept of the "Muhammadi Revolution" which calls for a revolution of heart on Muhammad's model as an avenue for or precursor to positive political change.³⁷⁷

Buckley focuses much more keenly on the development of notions of a bodily ascension and contemporary rejections of this trope. He traces the historical development of arguments for bodily ascension back to the earliest source materials. Though important Muslim thinkers, such as Ibn Sina, have rejected the bodily ascension, he notes that from very early on both Sunni and Shi'i authors accepted the concept of one bodily ascension, positing multiple spiritual ascensions afterwards. Buckley's tracing of the historical tradition makes contemporary Muslim rejections of bodily ascension all the more problematic, considering the place the *Mir'aj* has historically played as a testament of faith in Muhammad's prophethood. As numerous other authors on this list note, the ascension of Muhammad plays an important role in drawing community boundaries. What Buckley highlights, however, is that before the *Mir'aj*

³⁷⁶ Perhaps a subtle gesture to the cleansing of the heart story, which Uri Rubin helpfully traces through the *hadith* tradition.

³⁷⁷ Safi, *Memories of Muhammad*.

was used to distinguish sectarian or inter-religious identities between monotheists, it was used to mark those who did and did not support Muhammad's mission.³⁷⁸

Several versions of the ascension narrative foreshadow the disbelief with which Muhammad's tale will be met, with various characters warning Muhammad not to share his experience with the Meccans. When he does declare it, he is met with disbelief. Some traditions resolve this disbelief by having the Prophet produce proof of his *'isra*, such as detailed descriptions of Jerusalem or information about caravans travelling between Mecca and Jerusalem which he passed during the night journey.³⁷⁹ Buckley is quick to mention, however, that early traditions seemed to keep separate the *'isra* and *mir'aj*, only later combining them into a single outing in the same night. This combination allows the proofs of the *'isra* to also serve as confirmation of the *mir'aj*. In other discussions of the ascension, however, there is no suitable confirmation of Muhammad's travels—it is an article of faith which divides those who believe, such as Abu Bakr (from whence, by some accounts, he attains his nickname Siddiq) and Abu Jahl. Tabari highlights the importance of the irrational, unproven bodily ascension as proof of Muhammad's prophecy. For Tabari, the *Mir'aj* must be a miracle, and it is only miraculous if it occurs bodily. He notes that were Muhammad's

³⁷⁸ Buckley, *The Night Journey and Ascension in Islam*.

³⁷⁹ Ibn Ishaq, 183.

ascension spiritual or metaphorical, it would not be a miracle. Yet it must be a miracle to confirm Muhammad's special role as Prophet. Through this tautology, he confirms that belief in Muhammad's bodily ascension as a pre-requisite for membership in the Muslim community. From this very early period, then, belief in the bodily ascension of the Prophet, despite lack of proof, becomes a marker of those who are within the Muslim community and those who remain in ignorance.³⁸⁰

Buckley also discusses later thinkers who attempt to rationally prove the bodily ascension is possible. Fakr al-Din Razi, and many after him, focus on the possibility of fast travel as essential to their proofs. For these thinkers, miraculous acts can push the physical laws of the universe to their limits, but cannot break them, so it seems. One question involves the physical wholeness of the spheres. Muhammad must "break through" them in order to ascend to a higher sphere—but such rupture would leave a hole. Questions of whether or not this hole could be repaired or the implication of the hole for the perfection of the spheres abounded. Of greater concern is whether or not this journey could occur in one night. Fakr al-Din Razi turns to both scientific and scriptural sources for such confirmation. Sighting the speed at which the sun moves through the sky, he notes such movement is easily possible. He also relies on a theory of sight involving extra-vision. Noting that eye-rays move at impossibly

³⁸⁰ Buckley, *The Night Journey and Ascension in Islam*.

quick speed in order to facilitate sight, he again argues that such speedy movement is well within God's power within the limits of the material world. In terms of scriptural proofs, Razi cites verses related to Solomon and Bilquis which mention movement between Jerusalem and Yemen occurring within "a twinkling of an eye." He also cites the speed at which Satan can move to spread whispers and deceit among believers.³⁸¹

Such a tradition of scientific rationalization of the bodily ascension obviously runs into difficulty as the scientific understanding of the cosmos changes. As some contemporary Egyptian thinkers have noted, the idea of an ascension through the spheres becomes absurd once astronauts have landed on the moon. Contemporary Muslims are left with a few possibilities for discussing the *Mir'aj*: 1) reject the physical ascension outright; 2) mark the physical ascension as happening in a different realm of reality (as Nasr does); 3) apply Ancient Astronaut theories of alien space visitation to the ascension. None of these solutions are ideal. In the latter approach, Buraq and the *rafrāf* become pre-modern descriptions of alien space vehicles. In Nasr's approach, the line between metaphorical ascension and physical ascension becomes a bit wobbly. And in the former approach, Muslims run into the problem of the miraculous ascension as litmus test of faith. Buckley notes several modernist objections to the physical ascension. Some, such as Sir Seyyed Ahmed Khan, posit the physical ascension as a

³⁸¹ Buckley, *The Night Journey and Ascension in Islam*.

byproduct of the wild medieval imagination. Others note the problematic influence of Israeliyyat in the development of ascension narratives—such rejections go hand-in-hand with denigration of the hadith tradition in general, but are also tinged with a suspicion of Jewish motives and reliability based in contemporary political concerns over the modern nation state of Israel.

In short, though contemporary Muslims may wish to get away from medieval depictions of the Prophet's bodily ascension, the *Mir'aj* remains an important issue with which they must grapple. Buckley highlights that it remains significant because of its early role in defining the boundaries of community. Contemporary scholarly approaches to the ascension further enrich our understanding of just how significant *Mir'aj* accounts were to the development of Muslim identity in the medieval period. In the next chapter, we will explore how the community-drawing aspects of ascension narratives play a role in defining Sufism and the goal of the mystical path.

Ascension as Paradigm for Mystical Experience

In the previous section I discussed the Qur'anic underpinnings of the ascension narrative, its general contours in *sira* literature, and its importance in defining and negotiating

sectarian boundaries in the medieval period. This chapter will explore the role of the ascension in Sufi writing, where it acts as a key metaphor for the Sufi path. A variety of Sufi authors have used the ascension to authorize their own practices, argue for their personal spiritual authority, or even assert the primacy of Sufi piety over other forms of Muslim devotion. In this chapter I will argue that Nizami's ascension narratives fit this paradigm, asserting the centrality of the *mir'aj* in the prophet's career and the superiority of direct mystical knowledge over other forms of piety, knowledge, and authority.

A number of scholars and commentators have noted the important role the ascension has played as a paradigm for mystical experience.³⁸² Several features of the ascension made it particularly fruitful for Sufi exploration and explication. Muhammad's journey through the seven heavens, for example, was frequently analogized to the stages of the Sufi path. His face-to-face encounter with God comes to represent the goal of the Sufi path: mystical union with God.

We see early evidence of the use of the *mir'aj* by Sufis in the writings of Abu Abd al-Rahman Sulami (d. 412 AH/1021 CE). Sulami was an important early biographer of Sufi saints, whose writings helped to consolidate and mark the boundaries of the Sufi tradition. In *Subtleties of the Ascension*, Sulami collects fifty-six sayings by earlier Sufis on the topic of the

³⁸² See, for example, Schimmel, *And Muhammad Is His Messenger*, 168-170.

mir'aj. In Fredrick Colby's translation and commentary on Sulami's work, he notes 4 major themes in the collected sayings:³⁸³

1) The ascension as confirmation of Muhammad's unique position among created beings.³⁸⁴

2) The ascension as an initiatory journey in which Muhammad gets clothed in garments of light.³⁸⁵

3) Muhammad's vision of God as a model for Sufi mystical encounters.³⁸⁶

4) The ineffability of mystical encounters.

Thus, for Sulami, Muhammad is an ontologically unique being who nevertheless provides a model for Sufi practice. He provides a model in four different ways: confirming the necessity of approaching God through stages,³⁸⁷ affirming the practice of garment bestowal as

³⁸³ Frederick S. Colby, *The Subtleties of the Ascension: Lata'if Al-Mi'raj: Early Mystical Sayings on Muhammad's Heavenly Journey* (Fons Vitae, 2006), 16–20.

³⁸⁴ We've seen this theme before, especially in relation to Muhammad's status as intercessor on the Day of Judgment. Many Sufi writers link Muhammad's departure from Gabriel at the Lote Tree as a paradigmatic instance of *fana* or annihilation in God.

³⁸⁵ As we will see later in this chapter, garment bestowal is a typical Sufi symbol of investiture that becomes a critical feature of Nizami's own ascension narratives.

³⁸⁶ For Sulami, Muhammad's ability to see God provides a way around the Qur'anic interdiction of such a vision. See Colby, *Subtleties of the Ascension*, xx. The wording here is especially important, for as Zargar notes in *Sufi Aesthetics*, *ru'yah* is the highest mode of Divine vision and requires a divine unveiling to occur (13-15).

³⁸⁷ For example, in one saying, an anonymous commentator asserts that Muhammad's journey through the seven heavens was "so that he would learn propriety" before encountering God directly. Colby, *The Subtleties of the Ascension*, 41. The implication here is that Sufis too must learn proper manners before a direct encounter with

sign of acquiring spiritual authority, highlighting the dangers of temptation along the path and the importance of rejecting lesser heavenly rewards in favor of a direct encounter with God, and, finally, asserting the difficulty and potential danger in putting into words what one experiences in God's presence. As we shall see, these themes all arise, to lesser or greater degrees in Nizami's writing as well.

In Sulami's work, the ascension is primarily a metaphor for the Sufi path. One might compare and contrast Sulami's understanding of the ascension with Ibn Sina's approach.³⁸⁸ For Ibn Sina, the ascension is not an embodied, but a spiritual occurrence depicted through embodied metaphors. A lengthy discussion of Ibn Sina's psychology and cosmology is beyond the scope of this chapter, but in short, for Ibn Sina, the Prophet's heavenly journey occurred in the *Ilm al-Mithal*, realm of similitudes.³⁸⁹ For Ibn Sina, Buraq is a metaphor for the Active Intellect who descends to take Muhammad for an encounter with the Intelligibles. As a Prophet, describing these non-material forms in language is not a problem—Muhammad's perfected Imaginative Faculty does that work for him. Thus Ibn Sina is able to draw one-to-one

God, and that the stages along the Sufi path provide an analogous experience to Muhammad's encounter with angels and prophets on his ascent.

³⁸⁸ Peter Heath, *Allegory and Philosophy in Avicenna (Ibn Sina): With a Translation of the Book of the Prophet Muhammad's Ascent to Heaven* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992).

³⁸⁹ See chapter 4 for more information on this topic and how it relates to mysticism and Muhammad's role as prophet.

parallels between Muhammad's metaphorical description of his ascent, which is meant for the masses, and his own philosophical understanding of the experience, which can only be understood by the elite. In contrast to Sulami, who argued for the ineffability of Muhammad's encounter with God, Ibn Sina argues that the prophet did not have trouble putting the ascension into words at all. Rather, he put them into the ideal metaphorical terms to convey meaning to the masses.

In other Sufi writings, however, the *mir'aj* functions less as a metaphor and more as a map to guide Sufis as they ascend toward God during their own mystical journeys. Given Ibn Sina's interpretation of the ascension, one can see how it may be difficult to maintain Muhammad's uniqueness while also arguing that his most unique act could be replicated. For many writers, this tension was resolved by insisting on the bodily nature of Muhammad's ascension, in contrast with the spiritual or dream ascensions available to others. As we shall see in this chapter, this approach to the ascension was not always a given, but is key to Nizami's writings on the topic and theorization of the body.

Sufi Ascension Narratives

For Sufi writers, Muhammad's ascension is often a touchstone for their own spiritual practice. As discussed in the previous section, many Sufis read the *mir'aj* as a metaphor for their own spiritual journey. For these Sufis, Muhammad accomplishes in an evening what might take them a lifetime. For others, however, the *mir'aj* is more model than metaphor. In this section we will discuss a few accounts of Sufis who have claimed to replicate Muhammad's journey.

The Ascension of Bayazid Bistami

Bayazid Bistami's ascension narrative is as among the earliest writings in this genre. Like those ascension narratives discussed in chapter 4, Bistami's *mi'raj* is also a site of interreligious and interdisciplinary debate. Within the Sufi context, as Michael Sells notes, "What is at stake in these symbolic worlds is the goal of the mystical path" as framed by the author, whether that be "to become more purely intellectual, more angelic, or more deeply human."³⁹⁰ For Bistami, his ascent is framed as a competition with the angels, who provide a series of tests to see whether he will settle for a reward of lesser worth than a direct encounter

³⁹⁰ *Early Islamic Mysticism: Sufi, Qur'an, Mi'raj, Poetic and Theological Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), 243, <http://search.lib.unc.edu?R=UNCb2932363>.

with God.³⁹¹ Since his focus is on the angels' tests, his description of the heavens themselves are spare—he notes landscape features only to highlight how they were used to tempt him to halt his journey before its completion. He repeatedly relies on phrase that the angels showed him sights that would “wear out the tongue to describe.”³⁹² This allows him to nod to the vast glories of heaven, without expending ink describing them. For Bistami, the rewards of heaven are not only besides the point, they are temptations to be avoided: it would be unfruitful or even dangerously tempting to recount them.

In contrast to Muhammad's ascension, where his meetings with previous prophets are key to affirming his status as Seal of the Prophets, Bistami's ascension features no prophetic encounters. Instead, Bistami encounters a variety of angels who attempt to awe him with their numbers, size, or brightness. Bistami pointedly rejects their overtures, sometimes boasting or demonstrating his superiority to the angels, such as in the Fifth Heaven, when the angels greet him in a number of languages, and greets them back in all the same languages.³⁹³ In each heaven, however, he ends his encounter with respect and humility, declining the angels with

³⁹¹ As Sells notes, this is related to Qur'an 2:30, in which the angels object to God's creation of Adam.

³⁹² Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism*, 245-248.

³⁹³ Presumably this is a testament to his spiritual excellence, not that he is a studious polyglot. Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism*, 247.

the phrase “My goal is other than that which you are showing me.”³⁹⁴ As a metaphor for the Sufi path, Bistami’s ascension narrative warns prospective mystics of the dangers of the Sufi path. Much like Attar’s *Conference of the Birds*, in which each valley represents a danger on the path to union with God, for Bistami, each level of heaven has the potential to harmfully waylay a Sufi.

Another similarity between Bistami’s ascension and Attar’s later work is the role of birds. As discussed in chapter 3, birds as metaphors for the soul, and descriptions of ascension as being like flight, abound in Sufi writings. At the beginning of his ascension, Bistami encounters a green bird in the First Heaven, who takes him to a group of angels. There is no commentary on the nature of this bird or its place in heaven - it is taken as a given that transport by bird should be a feature of heaven. In the rest of Bistami’s narrative, however, this bird is the only non-angelic being he encounters so its inclusion hardly seems incidental. This initial bird encounter is all the more noteworthy because it occurs in parallelism in the narrative. It is a bird who brings Bistami into the presence of the tempting angels in the first heaven and a bird who takes him away from them in the seventh. In the seventh heaven, after rejecting the angels’ final overtures, God turns Bistami into a giant bird whose feathers were

³⁹⁴ Ibid., 245-248.

“greater than the distance from East to West one thousand times.”³⁹⁵ In his bird form, Bistami is able to soar over the vast expanses of the heavens directly to the divine throne. Though he does not describe a transformation back into a human, when in God’s presence, God invites him to “sit upon the carpet of my holiness,” a metaphor which implies a return to human form.³⁹⁶

Perhaps most noteworthy about Bistami’s use of bird metaphors is that the bird doesn’t provide transportation to or from the heavens, but only around various parts of the heavens. At the start of his narrative, he simply finds himself “risen to the heavens.”³⁹⁷ The two-fold focus of his narrative seems to preclude inclusion of an overland journey, or trip through the fixed stars before approaching heaven. The only mention we get of the stars in Bistami’s account is when he encounters the angels in the first heaven, who are “standing with their feet aflame among the stars.”³⁹⁸ Jumping straight into the heaven’s allows Bistami to highlight his competition with the angels, but it also serves a second purpose—to emphasize the spiritual and disembodied nature of his ascension. Accounts of Muhammad’s ascension often spend as much time describing his journey overland and through the stars as his encounters in the

³⁹⁵ Ibid., 248.

³⁹⁶ Ibid., 249.

³⁹⁷ Ibid., 245.

³⁹⁸ Ibid.

heavens. This is because, as discussed in chapter 4, Muhammad's embodied ascension provides proof of its miraculousness. Questions of how he was able to travel so quickly in one night and overcome normal human limitations abound in discussions of Muhammad's ascension. This aspect of Bistami's journey is precluded with a very simple opening: "I saw myself in a dream."³⁹⁹ Bistami travelled to heaven in a dream, so his journey through the material realm becomes insignificant. What matters are the spiritual insights he gained while in the heavens. This critical distinction between Bistami's ascension and Muhammad's would prove important for other Sufis who wished to write about their personal ascensions. His work provided a model for a number of later Sufis writing on the topic, including Ibn Arabi⁴⁰⁰ and Qadi al-Numani.⁴⁰¹ And as well shall see in the next section, failure to properly frame one's ascension as disembodied could have severe consequences.

The Ascension of Muhammad Ghwath

³⁹⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁰ James Winston Morris, "The Spiritual Ascension: Ibn 'Arabī and the Mi'rāj Part I," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 107, no. 4 (October 1, 1987): 629–52; James Winston Morris, "The Spiritual Ascension: Ibn 'Arabī and the Mi'rāj Part II," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 108, no. 1 (January 1, 1988): 63–77.

⁴⁰¹ Christiane Gruber, Frederick S. Colby, and Elizabeth Alexandrine, eds., "The Prophetic Ascent and the Initiatory Ascent in Qadi Al-Nu'mani's *Asas Al-Ta'wil*," in *The Prophet's Ascension: Cross-Cultural Encounters with the Islamic Mi'rāj Tales* (Indiana University Press, 2010).

Muhammad Ghwath was a 16th Century South Asian Sufi whose claim to have had an embodied ascension both allowed him to garner a large popular following and caused him to run afoul of religious and political authorities. In this section, we will examine the contours of his ascension account before turning to the theological controversies to which it gave rise. By doing so, we will see the critical issues which can arise in telling a *mir'aj* narratives, and how Sufis might protect themselves from accusations of heresy in discussing their own mystical ascents.

Muhammad Ghwath's narrative begins somewhat differently than Bistami's, with clear parallels to Muhammad's own *mir'aj*. Muhammad Ghwath states that he spends the night half-sleep and half-awake before hearing a voice calling him to prayer. Instead of being called on his ascent by Gabriel, Muhammad Ghwath is called forth by Khidr. Unlike Bistami, Muhammad Ghwath does not state that this encounter happened in a dream, but instead leaves it ambiguous, noting that he remained in the half-waking, half-sleeping state throughout. One key to the potential embodied nature of Muhammad Ghwath's ascent is that he requires a means of transport up to heaven. In his narrative, all of creation and then the elements water, air, and fire transform into a series of immense human beings upon whose heads he steps to

ascend to heaven.⁴⁰² Allowing Muhammad Ghwath to place his feet upon their heads is a sign of utmost respect for the saint, who “encompasses, completes, and perfects each element.”⁴⁰³ As Kugle notes, these elements also represent the constituent parts of the human body, so “ascending upward is also delving inward, through bodily materiality.”⁴⁰⁴ The very contours of Muhammad Ghwath’s ascent make little sense if he leaves his body behind on the journey.

Once Muhammad Ghwath reaches the seven heavens, his narrative further diverges from Bistami’s, since he meets a number of saints and prophets, not just angels. These figures greet him with warmth rather than temptation and testing. They note that Muhammad Ghwath accompanied Muhammad in spirit on his *mir’aj*, but appear surprised at his current ascent. What most shocks the denizens of heaven is that Muhammad Ghwath is “fully attached to [his] body!” which is “a completely new and different spectacle.”⁴⁰⁵ If we, with Michale Sells, view the stakes of Sufi ascension narratives as revolving around the goal of the mystical path, what does Muhammad Ghwath’s insistence of embodied ascension tell us?

⁴⁰² Scott A. Kugle, “Heaven’s Witness: The Uses and Abuses of Muhammad Ghawth’s Mystical Ascension,” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 14, no. 1 (January 1, 2003): 1–36, doi:10.1093/jis/14.1.1.

⁴⁰³ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁴⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

Throughout the narrative, Muhammad Ghwath attempts to unite or resolve binaries. His body joins his soul on the ascent, he sees a vision of heaven and hell as one form with two essences, he resolves esoteric and exoteric religious knowledge, he places male and female piety on equal footing.⁴⁰⁶ This appears most starkly in his descent from heaven, where, after attaining union with God, the denizens of heaven appear not as distinct entities, but abstract emanations of God. Thus the goal of Muhammad Ghwath's is to attain a loss of self within God which afterwards makes apparent the mystical principle of *wahdat al-wujud*, or unity of being.⁴⁰⁷

Though Muhammad Ghwath's ascension highlights mainstream Sufi principles, and is couched in a number of qualifications,⁴⁰⁸ it nevertheless caused controversy. As with prior controversial Sufi figures, it seems Muhammad Ghwath's theologically problematic claims would not have garnered attention had he not run afoul of political authorities.⁴⁰⁹ Once he did, however, his ascension narrative became a key site of contention. His embodied ascension, for

⁴⁰⁶ Ghwath visits Hell and meets with Eve, whom he is surprised to see in Hell. In some of accounts of Muhammad's ascension, he notes that Hell is mostly full of women. This was taken by a number of male authorities as an indication of women's inferior religiosity. In his own ascension, Ghwath provides a new explanation for it, showing that Eve and her attendants are there to minister to the damned.

⁴⁰⁷ See chapter 1 for more information on this principle in philosophical works. Kugle, "Heaven's Witness," 23.

⁴⁰⁸ He notes, for example, the ultimate ineffability of his experience, stating "this description is really only a tissue of allusions and metaphors for the ungraspable reality of the experience." Ibid., 24.

⁴⁰⁹ See, for example, Ernst, *Words of Ecstasy in Sufism*.

example, threatened the uniqueness of Muhammad's own *mir'aj*. Muhammad Ghwath seems to anticipate this difficulty, for he explicitly preserves the distinction between saint and prophet.⁴¹⁰ He notes:

*When I heard this command call out to Muhammad to rise and ascend, I was confused. I turned to Jesus who was standing beside me, and asked, "I thought that this was the night of my ascension, so why should Muhammad be called up now to ascend to the Divine Throne?" Jesus answered, "Each saint is a member of the community that was founded by a specific prophet. The Prophet must ascend first, so that the saint can follow after him up to the appointed place. That way, the structure of prophethood and sainthood can be established in good order."*⁴¹¹

Of greater concern to the *ulema* than his embodied ascension was the fact that Muhammad Ghwath seems to articulate a form monism, arguing that heaven and hell will be united on the Day of Judgment. Nevertheless, it was only when he conceded that his vision had been a dream, rather than an embodied experience, that his persecution on theological grounds came to an end.⁴¹²

From this brief survey of two non-prophetic ascension narratives, we can draw a few conclusions about the ways in which Sufis deployed the *mir'aj*. First, the structure of the ascent represents a metaphor for the Sufi path to God. Second, the nature of the figures and challenges encountered on the journey tells us how the author perceives the ultimate goal of

⁴¹⁰ See chapter 4 for more on this topic.

⁴¹¹ Kugle, "Heaven's Witness," 21.

⁴¹² *Ibid.*, 34.

the mystical path. Third, when discussing Muhammad's ascension as a model for Sufi practice, Sufis had to be careful to preserve the uniqueness of Muhammad's ascent. They often did so by emphasizing his bodily ascent in contrast to their disembodied or dream ascent.

Shahzad Bashir cautions us, however about drawing overly broad conclusions about "Sufi" depictions of the ascension.⁴¹³ He explores three case studies on the Prophet's ascension—one by Jami, one by Sayyid Muhammad Nurbaksh, and one by Shaykh Ahmed Bashiri. In a long treatise on Muhammad, *Witness to Prophecy*, Jami, like Tabari before him, is concerned with the ascension as confirmation of Muhammad's prophethood. His main critique seems to be aimed at those who, following in the footsteps of Ibn Sina, wish to treat the ascension as an allegory. As we have previously noted, authors wishing to emphasize the embodied nature of the ascension often spend significant time discussing the 'isra. This is true not only in Jami's longer work on the prophet, but also, as we shall see later in the chapter, in his ascension narrative in the introduction to the *Gift of the Noble (Tohfah al-ahrar)*, his response to Nizami's *Makhzan al-asrar*.

In sharp contrast to Jami's approach is Nurbaksh's description of the ascension, which plays on themes of Muhammadan Reality and Nur-i Muhammad⁴¹⁴ to mark himself as a new

⁴¹³ Bashir, "Muhammad in Sufi Eyes."

⁴¹⁴ See Carl Ernst's article in the *Cambridge Companion to Muhammad* and in James Morris' article on Ibn Arabi for more information on this.

physical manifestation of this pre-existent reality. Finally, Shaykh Ahemed Bashiri is a humble Uvaysi Sufi master who uses the ascension narrative as the basis for his own spiritual initiation into a Sufi lineage. For Bashir, this range of uses for the Prophet's ascension over a relatively short time period and geographic range, should cause us to hesitate when making declarations about a single approach to Sufi ascensions. While these qualifications are certainly worth noting, what seems to remain true across Sufi ascension accounts is that they are an important site for highlighting what the particular author most values about the Sufi path. In the next section we will explore Nizami's ascension account in the *Treasury of Mysteries*, and analyze it to better understand how he views the goal of the mystic path.

The Ascension Narrative in Nizami Ganjavi's *Makhzan al-Asrar*

What would you say of a Prophet who, on his ascent to heaven, extinguishes the poison of Scorpio's tail with his Crest-fresh breath, wears Qur'anic verses as khol, has the Throne of God touch the hem of his robe, and listens to Libra who turns her scales to castinets to play him a song? Well, probably a number of things—but one thing you wouldn't say about him is that he left his body behind on earth. In this section we will investigate the rich sensorium of the depiction of the Prophet Muhammad's ascension to heaven (or *mi'raj*) in the introduction

to Nizami Ganjavi's first *Masnavi* – the *Makhzan al-Asrar* (or *Treasury of Secrets*). Through a close reading of this passage, we will see how Nizami's ascension subordinates symbols of kingship and the philosophy to symbols drawn from the Sufi tradition, through very physical interactions.

Ascension as Literary Trope in Persian Masnavi's

Beginning with Vukovic, scholars on the ascension note a rich trove of ascension narratives to be found in the introductions to Persian *Masnavis*, especially those emulating Nizami's *Khamasa*.⁴¹⁵ Vukovic notes that her own language abilities preclude an investigation of Persian sources.⁴¹⁶ Christians Gruber's dissertation includes a chapter on Persian poetic materials, but, due to disciplinary boundaries, after a brief description of the potential sources worth investigating, veers into a discussion of miniature paintings in Safavid editions of Nizami's *Khamasa*.⁴¹⁷ In *The Prophet's Ascension*, Selim Kuru notes that ascension narratives continue in the works of Ottoman poets working in the *masnavi* form—arguing for reading

⁴¹⁵ Vukovic, *Heavenly Journeys, Earthly Concerns*.

⁴¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴¹⁷ Christiane Jacqueline Gruber, "The Prophet Muhammad's Ascension (Mi'raj) in Islamic Art and Literature, Ca. 1300--1600" (Ph.D., University of Pennsylvania, 2005), <http://search.proquest.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/docview/305437413/abstract?accountid=14244>.

these introductory passages as an interpretive lens through which to understand the rest of the text.⁴¹⁸ William Hanaway likewise argues for reading these brief ascension narratives as an interpretive tool for reading medieval Persian romances. Devoting a mere three-pages of an already brief article to the topic, Hanaway emphasizes the importance of *Mir'aj* introductions to our understanding of romances as a mystical genre.⁴¹⁹ Given its brevity, his argument must necessarily paint in broad brushstrokes, neglecting to note that these introductions do not always accompany sustained narrative romances. Likewise, an article by French scholar De Fouchecour briefly examines the ascension narratives in the introduction of Nizami's *Khamasa*.⁴²⁰ His interest is mainly in comparing the ascension narratives across Nizami's work, arguing that the introductory tale found in the *Haft Paykar*, thanks to its conformity with Sufi notions of the ascension, is the model toward which Nizami was aiming but falling short in his other *mir'aj* accounts. This leaves room for further investigation of how these ascension narratives might relate to the broader text which they accompany, following the lead of

⁴¹⁸ Selim Kuru, "Pious Journey, Sacred Desire: Observations on the Mi'raj in Early Anatolian Turkish Verse Narratives," in *The Prophet's Ascension: Cross-Cultural Encounters with the Islamic Mi'raj Tales*, ed. Christiane Gruber and Frederick S. Colby (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), 192.

⁴¹⁹ William L. Hanaway, "Some Accounts of the Mi'raj of the Prophet in Persian Literature," in *Cultural Horizons* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2001), 555–60.

⁴²⁰ C.H. De Fouchecour, "The Story of the Ascension (Mi'raj) In Nizami's Work," in *The Poetry of Nizami Ganjavi: Knowledge, Love, and Rhetoric*, ed. Kamran Talattof and Jerome W. Clinton, trans. Kamran Talattof and Arjang Talattof (Palgrave Macmillan, 2001).

Victoria Holbrook and Selim Kuru, as well as to an investigation of their main features as a genre, distinct from Sufi ascension narratives or *Mirajinama* used as tools of conversion or ritual instruction.

Following the lead of contemporary scholarship on the ascension, and in light of the importance of current debates on the ascension for Muslim reformers, this investigation of the ascension as a literary genre in Persian poetry has several features. First, following the lead of Gruber, Colby and Vukovic, among others, the primary focus is upon what ascension narratives can tell us about the Muslim communities in which they were created and distributed. Persian *Masnawi* introductions, for example, seem entirely uninterested in Muhammad's encounter with previous monotheistic prophets, which indicates that they were not being used in encounters with non-Muslims or recent converts. Likewise, following Shahzad Bashir's lead, this analysis is careful of drawing broad conclusions across multiple sources. Though generic conventions and tropes might help to bind poetic *mir'aj* narratives into a more coherent lineage than the three accounts presented by Bashir, such generic constraints mandate an even greater attention to the subtle differences in presentation, language and imagery in these accounts. Finally, this investigation is careful to respect the bounds of contemporary debates within the Muslim community. Without taking positions on the veracity of Muhammad's bodily ascension, I hope this discussion can nevertheless

contribute to the conversation by highlighting the long history of Muslim engagement with Muhammad's ascension in pre-modern sources, especially in texts that remain touchstones for contemporary Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

Embodiment in the Makhzan's Ascension Narrative

This section explores the ascension narrative from a previously under-examined genre—Persian Sufi poetry. Nizami Ganjavi's (d. 1209) *Makhzan al-asrar* inaugurated a tradition of beginning Persian *masnavis* with a series of introductions in praise of the Prophet (*na'at*). Nizami focuses special attention on the Prophet's ascension (*mi'raj*), but his account distinguishes itself from other ascension narratives through its elaborate description of Muhammad's trip through the Zodiac. Frederick Colby and Christiane Gruber have highlighted how ascension narratives subordinate competing symbolic systems to Muhammad's revelation for the purposes of winning converts and training the newly converted.⁴²¹ Though aimed at a courtly audience, I argue that Nizami's ascension narrative nevertheless fits this paradigm.

⁴²¹ See: Colby, *Narrating Muhammad's Night Journey*; Colby, *The Subtleties of the Ascension*; Christiane Gruber and Frederick S. Colby, eds., *The Prophet's Ascension: Cross-Cultural Encounters with the Islamic Mi'raj Tales* (Indiana University Press, 2010); Gruber, *The Ilkhanid Book of Ascension*; Gruber, "When Nubuvvat Encounters Valāyat: Safavid Paintings of the Prophet Mohammad's Mi'rāj, C. 1500-50."

Through a close reading of nine lines of the *Makhzan*, roughly one for each astrological sign (some signs share a line), I argue that Nizami's *Mi'raj* account: 1) demonstrates the author's thorough knowledge of astrology and 2) demonstrates the superiority of mystical knowledge to philosophy for understanding God and the cosmos.

Within the manuscript tradition, the importance of Nizami's first work, *Makhzan al-asrar*, and the ascension narrative within it, is highlighted by this fact: among the 10-15 full-page illuminations to be provided for most *Khamisa* manuscripts, the ascension narrative in the *Makhzan al-asrar* is usually one of the scenes selected for illustration, and is often the first illustration in the codex.⁴²² This might be because the depiction of the ascension in the *Makhzan* is particularly evocative, with its unique account of Muhammad's tour of the Zodiac and emphatic insistence on Muhammad's bodily ascension. The uses to which ascension narratives were put during Nizami's era, and his unique relationship to courtly culture, might help explain the most provocative attributes of his account.

The ascension narrative in the *Makhzan al-Asrar* is 68 lines long and directly preceded by a brief, 25-line section praising Muhammad in more general terms. This section highlights Muhammad's importance to salvation history and to creation itself: he is the "alef drawn on

⁴²² Yael Rice, "Between the Brush and the Pen: On the Intertwined Histories of Mughal Painting and Calligraphy" (Lecture at UNC-Chapel Hill, March 28, 2013).

the first tablet (*takhte-ye aval*)” whose name spans from the “alef of Adam to the Mim of messiah.”⁴²³ He is the “brightest [roshan-tar] center of the circle [*par-gar* – two compases or a circle made by them] of ‘be thou’ [*Kun*].”⁴²⁴

Existing alongside these descriptions of Muhammad as integral to existence are verses which incorporate imagery of kingship and the bestowal of kingly authority. Thus the letters of Muhammad’s name become a signet ring—Ha, a belt—Dal, and a collar—Mim, marking his authority over the “two worlds,” which bow before him⁴²⁵ Throughout this section Nizami juxtaposes images of humility with those of royalty, inadequacy with super-efficacy—thus Muhammad is the illiterate who is more loquacious [*guyā*] than all eloquent speech [*zaban-i Faṣīḥ*].⁴²⁶

Body/Heart

Muhammad’s pre-eminence in creation and the images of kingship continue in the next section—the *mir’aj* narrative itself. Here, Nizami makes a distinction between body and soul.

⁴²³ Nizami Ganjavi, *Makhzan al-asrar*, 12.

⁴²⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴²⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴²⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

The words he uses form a sonic as well as conceptual binary: body or outward form – qālab and heart/soul – qalb. As early as Hasan al-Basri, Muslim mystics and ascetics began to develop a heart-symbolism out of Qur’anic references to the word qalb. In *Revival of the Religious Sciences*, Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali defines *qalb* as the immortal and spiritual essence of a human being, through which one comes to know God.⁴²⁷

This focus on the physicality of the ascension begins with the metaphors Nizami uses to describe Muhammad’s journey. He notes:

*With the birdcage of his body [qafas-e qāleb] from this place of snares [dām-gah]
the bird of his heart (soul) [mourgh-e del-esh] went to the place of freedom [āzām-gah]*⁴²⁸

The metaphor of soul as bird and the world as a snare is a familiar Sufi trope, deployed in brief treatises by Ahmad al-Ghazali (d. c. 1123-26) and Shahab al-din Suhrawardi Maqtul (d. 1191), and at length in the *Mantiq al-Tayr* of Farid al-Din ‘Attar (d. c. 1221) – a rough contemporary of Nizami.⁴²⁹ He continues to describe the heart’s role in lifting Muhammad to heaven:

His divine bird [mourgh-e alhīsh] filled the cage [qafas]

⁴²⁷ Hellmut Ritter, *The Ocean of the Soul: Man, the World, and God in the Stories of Farid Al-Din ‘Attar* (Leiden: Brill, 2003).

⁴²⁸ Nizami Ganjavi, *Makhzan al-asrar*, 14.

⁴²⁹ See chapter 1 for more on the use of animal metaphors in Sufi poetry broadly, and Nizami’s work more specifically.

His body/form [qāleb-esh] became lighter from his heart/soul⁴³⁰

In these lines, it is not simply the world which is a snare for the soul, but the body itself which is a cage for it. Muhammad's soul, however, is particularly buoyant, and can lift the body out of this world of snares. It can't, however, do all the work by itself:

As he moved on step-by-step,

he was seized and carried further [rubūdan – to rob, seize, carry off] by blessing

[tabarruk]...⁴³¹

So Muhammad's initial impetus is met with an enthusiastic divine response—a reciprocal interaction which echoes that found in the Hadith qudsi: “and if he draws near to Me an arm's length, I draw near to him a fathom's length. And if he comes to Me walking, I go to him at speed.”⁴³²

Perhaps most interesting about this passage is the apparent ambivalence toward the body. The world is a place of snares to be escaped, the body is a cage which traps the heart. Yet even though Muhammad departs from “the seven climes [haft khziat] and the 4 cardinal directions [chār had] and the six orientations [shesh jahāt – up, down, left, right, forward,

⁴³⁰ Nizami Ganjavi, *Makhzan al-asrar*, 14.

⁴³¹ Ibid.

⁴³² Javad Nurbakhsh, *Traditions of the Prophet, Volume 1* (Khaniqahi Nimatullahi Publications (KNP), 1981).

backward],” his ascension is not an escape from the body, it is a journey with it.⁴³³ And it’s not just his body that ascends in Nizami’s account, but Muhammad’s clothing also comes along for the ride.

Clothing and Gift Bestowal

References to clothing and the exchange of clothing as gifts are a prominent feature of Nizami’s ascension narrative. Sometimes Muhammad is metaphorized as an article of clothing himself, such as when “the heavens [siphir] bore him as a crown [taj].”⁴³⁴ Elsewhere the situation is reversed, such as when he enters the presence of God and “His head poked out from the collar [garībān] of nature [ṭabī‘at]”⁴³⁵ and he thus wears all creation as a robe of discipleship. Elsewhere, the stars themselves disrobe in his presence, such as when the celestial sphere [falak] throws down [dar āndākhteh] its patched frock [khirqah] in Muhammad’s presence.⁴³⁶ Some commenters, such as Vahid Dastgirdi, take this line to mean

⁴³³ Nizami Ganjavi, *Makhzan al-asrar*, Sarvatiyan edition, 14.

⁴³⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴³⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁴³⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

that the fixed stars threw off their *khirqas* to begin a *sema* in Muhammad's honor.⁴³⁷ This resonates with Nizami's portrayal of Muhammad's encounter with Libra. Finding that her scales aren't up to the task of weighing Muhammad's infinite worth, according to one interpretation which toys with the definition of *sanj*, she turns the plates of her scales into castinets to play Muhammad a song.⁴³⁸

Other constellations honor Muhammad through the exchange of gifts. Taurus allows Muhammad to ride him as a steed, and Sagittarius slays Aries with his arrow, to lay a feast for the Prophet. More interestingly, however, is a pair of verses in which Cancer and Orion give over their crown and belt to Muhammad as *pesh-kash*, a term that denotes extraordinary gifts given to superiors, especially royal ones. Thus throughout Muhammad's ascension, the signs of the zodiac break, transform or give up their characteristic symbols in order to welcome Muhammad as a guest and in recognition of his superiority to and authority over them.⁴³⁹

Once he leaves the realm of the fixed stars and enters into heaven proper, we discover that Muhammad has not only received clothing as gifts upon his journey, but also brought clothing with him from earth. The furniture of heaven engages with Muhammad physically,

⁴³⁷ Ibid., 14, footnote 7.

⁴³⁸ Ibid., 15.

⁴³⁹ Ibid., 15-16.

just as the fixed stars did. But rather than gifting the Prophet clothing, they instead touch (or even become) his clothes.⁴⁴⁰ For example, “The Lote Tree [sidrat] reached his vest [pīrāhan-esh] / the Throne [arsh] touched the hem of his skirt [dāman-esh].”⁴⁴¹ The terms here have Sufi valences: the pirahan, as Lloyd Ridgeon points out, is associated with *futuwwa* and was worn as a “finishing garment” on top of a khirqa.⁴⁴² As such it represented the outer “form” to the khirqa’s inner form. These physical interactions between the Prophet and the very symbols of Divine proximity are slightly ambiguous, however: is Muhammad receiving blessings through these exchanges, or are the Lote Tree and Throne acknowledging his pre-eminence?

By now we are familiar with the first of Nizami Ganjavi’s (d. 1209) five *masnavis*, The *Makhzan al-asrar* (Treasury of Secrets). The work was emulated in both meter and structure by a host of major Persian poets, including two I’ll discuss in this section: Amir Khosrow (d. 1325) and Jami (d. 1492). The *Makhzan* formalized a tradition of beginning *mansavis* with several lengthy prolegomena, covering topics such as God’s unity (*tawhid*), praise of the patron, and praise of the Prophet. Invocations of the Prophet in the *Makhzan* and its descendants make a

⁴⁴⁰ In a later portion of the introduction in praise of the Prophet, Nizami notes that “The Lote tree [sidrat] is a brooch [arayesh] on your chest [sudrat]; the heavenly throne is an lowly chair in your palace.” Nizami Ganjavi, *Makhzan al-asrar*, 24.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid., 17.

⁴⁴² Lloyd Ridgeon, *Jawanmardi: A Sufi Code of Honour: A Sufi Code of Honour* (Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 82; Lloyd Ridgeon, *Morals and Mysticism in Persian Sufism: A History of Sufi-Futuwwat in Iran* (Routledge, 2010), 79.

point of highlighting Muhammad's heavenly journey (*Mi'raj*) as a separate chapter. As numerous other scholars, including Michael Sells, Annemarie Schimmel, Christiane Gruber, and Elizabeth Alexandrine, have previously highlighted, the *Mi'raj* narratives in Persian *Masnavis* focus upon the ascension as an initiatory model for Sufis to follow.

One thread that runs through each of these poetic ascension accounts is the recurrence of references to garments, garment touching, and the bestowal of garments—especially cloaks and belts. Such an analysis is important for situating Persian *Masnavis* within a larger emerging discourse that takes seriously depictions of and interactions with the body in premodern Sufism, such as those by Shahzad Bashir and Scott Kugle. Likewise, if Selim Kuru is correct when he asserts that *Mi'raj* narratives in Ottoman Turkish emulations of Nizami's *Khamsa* provide a useful lens through which to interpret the rest of the poem, understanding the role of the body and clothing in these narratives can help us better understand what the poets are hoping to achieve through their discourses and exempla in the rest of the work.

Though the *Makhzan* inaugurated a tradition of including *mi'raj* narratives in the introductions of *masnavis*, Nizami's ascension account is nevertheless interesting for its repeated insistence on Muhammad's bodily ascent. Nizami is emphatic that “the bird of his soul flew with the cage [of the body],” and he repeatedly demonstrates Muhammad's physical interaction with celestial entities: his fragrant breath quells the sting of Scorpio's tail, the

throne of heaven bows to touch the hem of his robe, and he returns to earth carrying a new muskiness obtained on his journey. Most notably, Nizami insists that Muhammad saw God with “this eye and that eye of his head.”

Works such as Ahmet Karamustafa’s *God’s Unruly Friends*, Scott Kugle’s *Sufis and Saints Bodies*, and Shazad Bashir’s *Sufi Bodies*, have cleared a space for the body as a subject of study in medieval Sufism. Most relevant to this chapter, Bashir notes a “high valorization of corporeal contact as a marker of social solidarity and transmission of authority in the literature and art” of the medieval period (3). Bashir further states that the texts in his study seem to link “increasing intimacy with greater corporeal access” (Bashir, 5). Bashir’s work alerts us to the importance of the physical transmission of authority in the texts and contexts of medieval Sufism. The significance of this relationship between physical contact, spiritual intimacy, and the transmission of mystical knowledge helps to shed light on Nizami’s repeated reference to the physicality of Muhammad’s ascension.

Frederick Colby and Christiane Gruber have already highlighted how ascension narratives subordinate competing symbolic systems to Muhammad’s revelation for the purposes of negotiating sectarian debates, winning converts, and training the newly converted. Though aimed at a courtly audience rather than potential converts, Nizami’s

ascension narrative nevertheless fits this paradigm, because it subordinates competing discourses of knowledge and authority to the direct encounter with God enabled by Sufism.

In *And Muhammad Is His Messenger*, Annemarie Schimmel highlights *masnavi* introductions as one source for Mi‘raj imagery. She notes that Persian poets used “every conceivable rhetorical device” and “embellished [it] with ever more charming details.”⁴⁴³ Religious studies approaches to Persian poetry can often be dismissive of the rhetorical flair of poetry itself, seeing the artifice of poetry as something to be read *through* in order to reach some straightforward spiritual message. Scholars as august as William Chittick have argued that we should understand of Rumi as a reluctant poet, who used verse to affectively reach an ignorant public.⁴⁴⁴ While Michael Sells has effectively highlighted the apophatic aspects of Sufi writing, and Fatemeh Keshevarz has helpfully applied Sell’s method of analysis to Rumi’s verse, in many ways Rumi is a stylistic outlier, especially in the *Masnavi-ye Manavi*, and a similar defense of the complex, even baroque aspects of high Persian literary style has not been suitably mounted in the context of religious studies.⁴⁴⁵

⁴⁴³ Schimmel, *And Muhammad Is His Messenger*, 165.

⁴⁴⁴ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love*, 270-273.

⁴⁴⁵ Michael A. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*, 1st ed. (University Of Chicago Press, 1994); Fatemeh Keshavarz, *Reading Mystical Lyric* (University of South Carolina Press, 2004).

Mi'raj narratives invite a great deal of creativity, in part because the tale itself is so evocative, inviting questions such as: what does heaven look like? Who does Muhammad meet along the way? and What does God say to Muhammad? The Qur'an is notably quiet on these issues. From the Qur'anic verses that have generally been interpreted as discussing the *Mi'raj*, we learn that 1) Muhammad was shown the signs of God (*Surat al-Isra* 17:1), 2) that Muhammad drew within "two-bows lengths" of God (*Surat an-Najm* 53:8-18) at the Lote Tree of Farthest Limit, and 3) That the Prophet did not turn away from what he saw. Other information, such as Muhammad's mount, Buraq, his accompaniment by Gabriel, the prophets he met along the way, etc are filled in by hadith literature. By the time of Ibn Ishaq's *Sira*, we have the outlines of a complete journey to heaven and back.

Nevertheless, the *Mi'raj* narrative in the *Sira* leaves considerable space for invention and addition. Frederick Colby has discussed the development of what he calls the "Ibn Abbas" model of *Mi'raj* narrative, a collection of works which trace their descriptions of the heavens back to one hadith transmitter, Ibn Abbas.⁴⁴⁶ He notes that some aspects of these texts bear the marking of sectarian debates, specifically asserting that images of the Cosmic Muhammad might have developed in response to proto-Shi'i attempts to co-opt the ascension narrative by

⁴⁴⁶ Colby, *Narrating Muhammad's Night Journey*.

portraying ‘Ali as already waiting at the throne of God when Muhammad arrives.⁴⁴⁷ Beyond being a site of sectarian contestation, Colby and others have noted that *Mi‘raj* narratives were often used in inter-religious discourse, to highlight Islam’s superiority to previous revelations and encourage conversion by incorporating the symbols and holy figures of other religious traditions into the sights and scenes of Muhammad’s ascension. Maria E. Subtelny, for example, shows the ways in which encounters between Muhammad and Jews living at the end of the world were used in missionary encounters with Jewish communities.⁴⁴⁸ Likewise, perplexing but pervasive aspects of the ascension narrative, such as the rooster angel and the angel made of half-fire and half-snow, become scrutable if read in the context of conversations with Zoroastrians or recent converts from Zoroastrianism.⁴⁴⁹ The message delivered in these texts is as respectful of new believers (or potential new believers) as it is clear: your previous belief system is not *untrue*, it is simply subordinate to that of Muhammad. Indeed, during the Sassanian period, doctrinal reforms were authorized and verified through recourse to visions of heaven and hell, and such visions were used to combat and de-authorize threats posed by

⁴⁴⁷ Frederick Colby, “The Early Imami Shi‘i Narratives and Contestation over Intimate Colloquy Scenes in Muḥammad’s *Mi‘rāj*,” *The Prophet’s Ascension: Cross-Cultural Encounters with the Islamic Mi‘raj Tales*, Christiane Gruber and Frederick S. Colby, eds., (Indiana University Press, 2010), 141-153.

⁴⁴⁸ Subtelny, “Jews at the Edge of the World”, 50-66.

⁴⁴⁹ Colby, *Narrating Muhammad’s Night Journey*, 36-37, 102. Subtelby, 56-58.

reformers and prophets such as Mani.⁴⁵⁰ Thus the ascension narrative as a genre for negotiating inter- and intra-religious disputes has a pedigree that would make it familiar and readable to many religious elites and practitioners alike.

Beyond its uses for bolstering claims to doctrinal authority or pious pre-eminence in religious debates, ascension narratives were also used to authorize or de-authorize certain political discourse and figures. Christiane Gruber has helpfully pointed to the changes that take place in pictorial representations of the *Mi'raj* (including illuminations of Nizami's *Khamsa*) during the early Safavid period. Under the patronage of Shah Isma'īl, a veil was added to the Prophet's face and a portal into the heavens was added to depictions of the night sky. Such artistic alterations, Gruber claims, were meant to elide the difference between Muhammad and Shah Isma'īl, highlighting the emperor's role as saint and God-ordained renewer (*mujaddid*).⁴⁵¹ Through her work, it becomes clear that political authorities saw both the ascension and Nizami's *Khamsa* as two places in which to stake their claims to authority and legitimacy.

Given this context, it is not beyond reason to suggest that the *Miraj* narratives in these poems might be used assert the primacy of Sufism over rival modes of knowledge and sources

⁴⁵⁰ Touraj Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia: The Rise and Fall of an Empire* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 80.

⁴⁵¹ Gruber, Christiane. "When Nubuvvat Encounters Valāyat" 49-50.

of authority. To see what this might look like, let's take a closer look at Nizami, Amir Khosrow, and Jami's takes on the *Miraj*:

The beginning of Nizami's narrative describes Muhammad's ascension in general terms and details the Prophet's introduction to his steed, Boraq. Eliding numerous aspects of standard ascension narratives, such as Muhammad's journey to Jerusalem, his failure to heed the calls of strangers along the way, or his leading prayer in the Farthest Mosque, Nizami launches Muhammad into the heavens seemingly directly from his bed. This choice in and of itself indicates that Nizami is not deploying the *Mi'raj* for the standard rhetorical purposes. Instead, Muhammad is "a pearl in the mine of the world set to become the crown of heaven"—his ontological pre-eminence is present before he even begins his ascent.

Once he ascends to the sky, Muhammad trades Boraq out for Taurus as his temporary steed. Unlike Ibn Abbas accounts, in which Boraq shies away from Muhammad's touch until scolded by Gabriel, in Nizami's narrative this scene is not recounted, and Muhammad's worth is so apparent that Taurus recognizes it immediately and allows Muhammad to mount. This trope of Muhammad as the instantly-recognized superior to the constellations is carried through the next distich, in which Cancer and Gemini (or Orion) grant him their crown and

belt as tribute (*pesh-kash*).⁴⁵² Nizami's choice of words for "gift" here is especially telling, as *pesh-kash* are lavish gifts heaped upon a superior, especially a king. The gifts themselves, however, are not simply extravagant, they are the very symbols of kingship and authority. Thus by turning over their crown and belt to Muhammad, Nizami depicts Cancer and Gemini turning over their dominion to him.

Muhammad then moves from the Zodiac to a very brief encounter with the assembled prophets before he encounters the Lote Tree of Farthest Limit, which touches the front of his robe, and the Throne of God ('arsh), which touches his hem (dāman). These signs of honor and respect seem nearly blasphemous, but do the work of subordinating even the furniture of heaven to Muhammad's pre-eminence—a way of highlighting his uniqueness without having to repeat the well-known story of Gabriel's refusal to step beyond the Lote Tree. The physical contact, however, also indicates an intimacy through which blessings are transferred—though in Nizami's narrative, it's not always clear whether Muhammad is receiving the blessings or giving them.

Amir Khosrow expands slightly upon Nizami's account. He includes more details about the *Isra* than Nizami, and like Nizami includes precise details of Muhammad's ascension

⁴⁵² Orion inhabits the same region of the sky as Gemini and the Arabic word Nizami uses here, *Jauza*, can indicate either. He probably intends this double-meaning, since Gemini appropriately fits his tour of the Zodiac, but Orion makes more sense as donor of a belt.

through the Zodiac – this time Muhammad’s breath makes Cancer cheerful instead of taking the sting out of Scorpio’s tale, for example. Unlike either Nizami or Jami, Amir Khosrow mentions prophets by name, such as Issa and Idris. Amir Khosrow does not have the throne or Lote Tree bow down to Muhammad, but instead describes how Muhammad’s light feet quickly ascend from the base of the footstool (kursi), to it’s top, finally reaching the throne (kursi). At this point, Muhammad takes off his sandals to shake the road dust from his feet, sprinkling light below. Here we see the concept of Nur-i Muhammad merge with the intercessory aspects of ascension narratives, a merger negotiated through contact with the Throne and via the Sufi metaphor of the long journey.

Jami’s depiction of the ascension is much briefer than either Nizami or Amir Khosrow’s. Unlike Nizami, he’s not insistent upon or emphatic about Muhammad’s bodily ascension. Jami spends an almost inordinate amount of time on Muhammad’s steed, Boraq, in part because he seems to enjoy the play on word between Boraq’s name and the word for lightning, (barq). Nevertheless, in Jami, as with Nizami, Muhammad begins his journey as a pre-eminent being: the dirt of his feet is the crown of humanity, even before he first ascends to God’s presence.

Unlike Nizami, Jami doesn’t entirely skip over the *Isra’*, though his account is very brief and sketchy. Muhammad’s journey through the lower realms of heaven and meetings with the prophets is elided. Like Nizami, he also shows the throne of heaven bowing down at

Muhammad's feet. Immediately afterwards, Jami describes the body as a Khurqa (mendicant's patched frock) which gets separated from the soul (fikandan – to throw away). He repeats this sentiment in the next hemistich, this time describing his body as a "Robe of Honor" (Khilat). This khirqa gives those who look upon it a strong sense of yearning (shawq). Likewise in Jami's work, the Lote Tree of Farthest Limit again appears, reaching up only as far as Muhammad's chest—a slight upgrade in stature from in Nizami's poem. Here Jami is able to have his cake and eat it too. In his 2011 book, *Sufi Aesthetics*, Cyrus Ali Zargar shows how Arab authors, such as Fakhr al-Din 'Iraqi (d. 1289), attempted to resolve multiple intellectual and philosophical strands of mysticism through their poetic writings. In attempting to resolve a practical and ecstatic love mysticism that calls for direct encounters with God with a philosophically rigorous theoretical mysticism which problematizes the possibility of such an unmediated encounter, 'Iraqi settles on the male human form as the ideal symbolic medium through which divine-human encounters can take place. Jami taps into this poetic and mystical thread, positing the body of the Prophet as an ideal form which inspires yearning for God, using imagery that unites God and Muhammad along a Master-Disciple axis. At the same time, however, he is able to leave aside the question of direct, bodily contact with the divine, as Muhammad sheds this bodily "robe of honor" before entering into the divine presence.

Clearly there is some consonance between Nizami's imagery and that of his emulators. Though this section has focused primarily on garments in these narratives, each of them are rich in sensory description and embodied experiences of heaven. Not much has been written in European languages before on Amir Khosrow's *Matla al-Anwar* or Jami's *Tohfah al-Ahrar*. The main scholarship on Nizami's writing is carried out within comparative literature, area studies, and religious studies and is often concerned with whether or not Nizami was himself a mystic. These debates occur around two foci: 1) authorial intent and 2) historical context.

Julie Scott Meisami, along with Kamran Talatoff and a handful of other writers, argue that there is little evidence to make a case for Nizami as a mystical writer.⁴⁵³ In Meisami's case, she uses evidence internal to the text of *Layli o Majnun* to argue against a mystical interpretation of the work. More important to her argument, however, is the question of when the trope of courtly love gained a mystical gloss. Using historical and textual evidence she asserts that Nizami wrote his love epics as a critique of the court and the trope of courtly love. In her reading of *Layli o Majnun*, Majnun is not a mystical hero to be revered, but a selfish boy who indulges in his fantasy ideal of love to such a degree that it thwarts a real relationship

⁴⁵³ See: Meisami, "Kings and Lovers: Ethical Dimensions of Medieval Persian Romance"; Meisami, *Medieval Persian Court Poetry*; Talatoff, "Nizami's Unlikely Heroines: A Study of the Characterizations of Women in Classical Persian Literature."

with Layla and leads to both of their deaths.⁴⁵⁴ This reading, which puts Majnun in the good company of other tragic figures such as Romeo and Goethe's Werther, has few parallels within the Persian and Arabic reception history of the tale.

In contrast to Meisami's reading of Nizami's work, scholars such as A.A. Seyed-Gohrab and Seyyed Hossein Nasr argue for a thoroughly mystical reading.⁴⁵⁵ Nasr especially makes pains to connect Nizami to a long theosophical lineage, showing how his use of astronomy connects him to important philosophical figures, from Suhrawardi al-Maqtul back to the Neoplatonists, and with mystical figures such as Ayn al-Qudat and Ahmad al-Ghazali. More compelling than Nasr's attempt to show historical connections between these far-flung individuals is Seyed-Gohrab's evidence that mystical understandings of the trope of courtly love, images of the pearl and shell, and certain aspects of astronomy, were already in circulation at this time.

No doubt, asking questions about the contents and context of Nizami's poems is a helpful scholarly contribution. And discerning authorial intent may be critical when compiling manuscripts into an edited volume or determining the best translation for ambiguous words or

⁴⁵⁴ Meisami, *Medieval Persian Court Poetry*, 171.

⁴⁵⁵ Nasr, "The World View and Philosophical Perspective of Hakim Nizāmi Ganjawi"; Seyed-Gohrab, *Metaphor and Imagery in Persian Poetry*; Seyed-Gohrab, *Laylī and Majnūn*; Seyed-Gohrab, "Leyli O Majnun"; Seyed-Gohrab, "A Mystical Reading of Nizāmi's Use of Nature."

metaphors. But when such information is used to argue for pre-set fixed limits on the interpretive possibilities of a text, and pushes back against hundreds of years of interpretation history, perhaps this should give us pause.

Given the similarities and differences between the three short sections discussed in this section, we can in part side with Meisami—Nizami’s bodily encounters with God and the bestowal of authority clearly happen using imagery of subjecthood and kingship, rather than of master and discipleship. At the same time, however, Nizami’s ascension narrative clearly adheres to familiar paradigms of triumphalism within the ascension narrative genre, positing direct encounters with God as the pre-eminent form of knowledge. His narrative likewise contains the most emphatic and insistent account of Muhammad’s direct, face-to-face encounter with God. If Shahzad Bashir is correct that the medieval period demonstrated a “high valorization of corporeal contact as a marker of social solidarity and transmission of authority” and that often this corporeal contact was symbolized through the sharing or passing down of garments, than all three authors we’ve considered today, to varying degrees, rely on this paradigm. In all three cases, though Muhammad already begins his ascension as a unique being, the garment touching and bestowal which occurs along his journey transmits authority to the Prophet, which is then transmitted to the rest of humanity. The implication here is that, if the Throne of God touched Muhammad’s cloak, perhaps through it we can touch

the throne of God. Or better still...perhaps the Prophet has shown us a path to touch it directly ourselves. But such questions are best left for another venue and another day.

Scent

The prophet's uniqueness and purity, even before the ascent, is demonstrated, in part, through the scents he emanates. A number of recent historians have pointed to the importance of scent and perfumery in pre-modern texts. Though our own noses are poorly trained, Jame McHugh has noted that religious and political elites of most pre-modern polities were well-versed in the character of odors, components of perfumes, and the uses to which certain scents were best put.⁴⁵⁶ He notes, tellingly, that scent has both internal and external component—it can alter one's interaction with others but also reflect or even have an effect on one's own state. This is because scent was seen to involve an element of touch – particles of the thing being smelled were understood to enter nose as part of the process of smelling them. Thus it was an intimate sense—And could be more intimate than sight, for example, because of its partially involuntary nature.

⁴⁵⁶ McHugh, *Sandalwood and Carrion*.

Muhammad's scent is key to several verses in Nizami's account. First, he notes that on the night of the ascension "Midnight was filled with the musk of his lips."⁴⁵⁷ Numerous ascension accounts depict Muhammad returning from his ascent with a musky odor—which is understood as the scent of heaven. For Al-Ghazali, heavenly muskiness is a solution to the question of eating and excrement in the afterlife - he has resurrected bodies sweating and belching musk. Nizami inverts this, having Muhammad enter the heavens already emitting a musky scent, with which he perfumes the night. Thus, in some ways, all of heaven is touched by particles of the Prophet on his ascent. His bodily odors do not simply perfume those they touch, however, they also have curative powers. In one evocative line, Nizami has Muhammad exhale his minty breath [dam-e sisambari] upon Scorpio's tale, which cures its poison.⁴⁵⁸

Vision of God

The association of senses with physical contact also plays a role in Nizami's account of Muhammad's vision of God. Nizami insists that Muhammad saw God with "this eye [didam]

⁴⁵⁷ Nizami Ganjavi, *Makhzan al-asrar*, 16.

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid.

and that eye of his head.”⁴⁵⁹ Likewise, when encountered with the brilliance of the divine vision “His Narcissus (metaphor for iris of eye) had the collyrium⁴⁶⁰ of “Mazagh”⁴⁶¹.⁴⁶² Nizami’s repeated, emphatic insistence on the Prophet’s bodily ascension and encounter with God gives us hints about the audience of his poem. The insistence on Muhammad’s direct vision of God has some resonance with Sufi deployments of the ascension narrative. The importance of the ascension as a model for Sufis has been noted by a number of commentators, including by Dr. Colby in his translation and analysis of Sulami’s *Lata’if al-Miraj*. From Bayazid Bistami to Ibn Arabi, Sufis utilized the *mir’aj*. as a model in a number of ways. First, they analogized the stages of Muhammad’s ascent to stages of the Sufi path itself. Second, they pointed to Muhammad’s direct face-to-face encounter with God, and the momentary loss of consciousness that Muhammad experiences in God’s presence, as the preferred goal of human existence. For example, Nizami notes that Muhammad was “bewildered [muttaḥīr]” as he knocked on the door to the court of heaven.⁴⁶³ This bewilderment is an angelic quality for it is compared to the state of the angels Muhammad has left behind at the Lote Tree. Finally, Sufis used

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid., 19.

⁴⁶⁰ Surmah, an eye-treatment made with antimony. Based on hadith accounts, it plays a role in prophetic medicine.

⁴⁶¹ Or “not turning away”—a reference to Qur’an 53:17.

⁴⁶² Ibid., 17.

⁴⁶³ Ibid.

Muhammad's ascension to put an asterisk next to the assertion found in hadith literature that humans will not see their creator before the Day of Judgment. Muhammad did and he did because direct encounters with God happen along a different temporal axis than linear eschatological time. Nizami is emphatic on this point, stating: "God can be seen / may he who says otherwise be blind," which is revealing of his goal in depicting a very embodied ascension.⁴⁶⁴

Critical to our understanding of this aspect of Nizami's ascension narrative are recent insights into the role of the body in medieval Sufism. Most relevant to this chapter is Shahzad Bashir's *Sufi Bodies*, which notes a "high valorization of corporeal contact as a marker of social solidarity and transmission of authority in the literature and art" of the medieval period.⁴⁶⁵ Bashir further states that the texts in his study seem to link "increasing intimacy with greater corporeal access."⁴⁶⁶ His work alerts us to the importance of the physical transmission of authority in the texts and contexts of medieval Sufism. The significance of this relationship between physical contact, spiritual intimacy, and the transmission of mystical knowledge

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid., 19.

⁴⁶⁵ Bashir, *Sufi Bodies*, 3.

⁴⁶⁶ Bashir, *Sufi Bodies*, 5.

helps to shed light on Nizami's repeated reference to the physicality of Muhammad's ascension.

Ascent Through the Zodiac

In the long introduction to this work, Nizami dedicates 67 lines to describing Muhammad's heavenly journey (67 lines in the Sarvatiyan edition. 68 in Dastgirdi).⁴⁶⁷ His Mi'raj narrative comes immediately after a discussion of God's unity and a section praising the Prophet in more general terms. Of this introduction, a mere 9 lines specifically discuss the 12 signs of the zodiac, though it takes 12 lines to complete the story cycle involving the astrological signs. Throughout this section, Nizami demonstrates not only his supreme poetic talent, but also his command of astronomy.

Muhammad's interaction with the zodiac begins in line 13 of the Mi'raj section of the *Makhzan al-asrar*, where he describes the prophet as "crown of the celestial realm" (*sipih*). In the next line, Muhammad enters the Zodiac at the sign of Taurus (*Gav-e felak*), temporarily trading steeds to ride Taurus instead of Boraq. Far from a fanciful dance through the heavens, guided by the logic of rhyme and meter, in the next 8 lines Nizami walks the Prophet through each astrological sign in order. His only concession to poetic license is when he inverts Cancer

⁴⁶⁷ Nizami Ganjavi, *Makhzan al-asrar*.

and Gemini, and Leo and Virgo, though in both cases the two proximate signs, though mentioned out of order, appear in the same hemistich. In both cases, the astrological figures interact with one another as well as Muhammad—Cancer and Gemini simultaneously bedeck the prophet with their crown and belt, and Virgo tosses a garland of flowers around Leo's neck. The only other interaction between two astrological signs is when Sagittarius shoots his arrow into Capricorn—in this case both signs are mentioned in the correct order and in separate hemistiches.

Indeed, Nizami's recitation of the signs of the Zodiac is reminiscent of Thomas Bradwardine's advice on building a memory palace. Bradwardine, a cleric and Oxford University scholar who died in 1349, penned a treatise entitled "On Acquiring a Trained Memory."⁴⁶⁸ Basing his work on the writings of Albert Magnus and Thomas Aquinas, and through them, Aristotle and Cicero, Bradwardine demonstrates the practice of building a memory palace through the example of memorizing the symbols and order of the signs of the Zodiac. Though his interactions are slightly more gory or sexualized than Nizami's, the principle of properly ordering and symbolizing the Zodiac through physical interactions

⁴⁶⁸ Mary Carruthers and Jan M. Ziolkowski, eds., *The Medieval Craft of Memory: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003) 205-214.

between the creatures that symbolize them is shared between the two texts, composed a little over a century apart.

Nizami's knowledge of the Zodiac extends beyond merely recognizing the star signs and their correct order. For example, he shows Libra interacting with Venus. In astrological terms, Libra is ruled over by Venus, which makes their interactions in the *Makhzan* far from incidental. Likewise, Nizami uses an Arabic term for Gemini (*al-Jauza*), which can also mean Orion—both Orion and Gemini occupy the same region of the night sky. By conflating them, Nizami is able to maintain the order of Muhammad's journey through the night sky, while also having Orion donate the Prophet his signature belt. Finally, the Prophet's journey through the zodiac ends with the Pleiades rising in Aries, a symbol of spring. Nizami immediately follows this hemistich with one discussing flowers blooming in the wilderness (*sahra*).

Given Nizami's clear care with the ordering and characteristics of the signs of the Zodiac, his knowledge of the seasons of each sign, and their interaction with other constellations and planets, it is difficult to argue that such a passage is mere poetic flourish. Nizami is not only demonstrating his knowledge of rhyme and meter, and the creativity of his imagination, but also showing his thorough command of astrology. But to what end? One reason for ignoring this rich and unique addition to the *Mi'raj* is that it seems to be an unnecessary aside. Muhammad's adventure through the Zodiac eventually leads him up to

heaven, where he resumes his ascension using the terms, images, and tropes already familiar in other *Miʿraj* narrative. The potential uses of such a passage, however, become clearer if we read it within the context of the rhetorical purposes to which *Miʿraj* narratives were put in the medieval period.

Muhammad's Conquest of the Zodiac Signs

Nizami's description of Muhammad's ascent through the Zodiac is far too detailed and astrologically accurate to just be a rhetorical flourish. Such care makes one wonder what is at stake for him in such a depiction. It is in the context of ascension narratives as a contested space for negotiating competing claims of religious and political authority that we now turn to a close reading of Nizami's account of Muhammad's ascension through the Zodiac. The passage begins in line 13 of Nizami's second encomium to the Prophet. Up until that line, the narrative describes Muhammad's ascension in general terms and details the Prophet's introduction to his steed, Boraq. Eliding numerous aspects of standard ascension narratives, such as Muhammad's journey to Jerusalem, his failure to heed the calls of strangers along the way, or his leading prayer in the Farthest Mosque, Nizami launches Muhammad into the stars seemingly directly from his bed. This choice in and of itself indicates that Nizami is not deploying the *Miʿraj* for the standard rhetorical purposes. Instead, Muhammad is a pearl in the

mine of the world set to become the crown of heaven—his ontological pre-eminence is present before he even begins his ascent.

In the next line, Muhammad trades Boraq out for Taurus as his temporary steed. Unlike Ibn Abbas accounts, in which Boraq shies away from Muhammad's touch until scolded by Gabriel, in Nizami's narrative this scene is not recounted, and Muhammad's worth is so apparent that Taurus recognizes it immediately and allows Muhammad to mount. This trope of Muhammad as the instantly-recognized superior to the constellations is carried through the next distich, in which Cancer and Gemini (Orion) grant him their crown and belt as tribute (*pesh-kash*).⁴⁶⁹ Nizami's choice of words for "gift" here is especially telling, as *pesh-kash* are lavish gifts heaped upon a superior, especially a king. The gifts themselves, however, are not simply extravagant, they are the very symbols of kingship and authority. Thus by turning over their crown and belt to Muhammad, Nizami depicts Cancer and Gemini turning over their dominion to him.

The next line is particularly challenging, as it plays with the multiple layers of meaning behind the name for Virgo. Ultimately, it shows coy Virgo using her hyacinth to calm Leo on Muhammad's behalf. The following line is yet more significant, as it shows Libra unable to

⁴⁶⁹ Orion inhabits the same region of the sky as Gemini and the Arabic word Nizami uses here, *Jauza*, can indicate either. He probably intends this double-meaning, since Gemini appropriately fits his tour of the Zodiac, but Orion makes more sense as donor of a belt.

measure Muhammad's worth. Venus thus takes the weight off of Libra's scales, as her powers of judgment are broken in the face of the Prophet.⁴⁷⁰ Such a scene is an interesting play on the trope of the Prophet as an intercessory figure which is so prevalent in other ascension narratives.

Muhammad next visits Scorpio, whose poison he cures with his breath. The sweetness of Muhammad's breath is a common trope in descriptions of the Prophet's body, but this passage is interesting for the curative powers of that breath, which takes the danger out of Scorpions sting. In the next line, Sagittarius becomes a hunter on behalf of Muhammad, slaying Capricorn and laying the ram (though here described as a calf) out on the sky's tablecloth for a repast. Following this "meal," Muhammad travels through the signs of Aquarius and Pisces. In both cases, he is compared to the sun moving through the Zodiac, while Nizami simultaneously references the stories of Joseph in the well and Jonah in the whale. Here the poet emphasizes Muhammad's prophetic lineage and allows the reader's knowledge of these previous prophets to explain Muhammad's relationship to the two Zodiac signs. In the final line of this section, Nizami concludes by having Muhammad enter the sign of Aries with the Pleiades rising, a sign of the coming of spring—at which point flowers bloom in the wilderness at his arrival.

⁴⁷⁰ One individual who read this line with me argued for reading *sanj* as "hand symbol" in this context, rather than weight. Though may be a stretch, given the surrounding context, I do quite like the image of Venus turning Libra's scales into castanets.

Given Nizami's detailed knowledge of the Zodiac, the rhetorical use to which ascension narratives are so frequently put, and the relatively unique nature of his ascension account, what are we to make of this detailed description of Muhammad's ascension through the heavens? Well before Nizami's time, al-Ḥatīb al-Baghdādī (d. 1071 CE) had rehearsed debates over the usefulness of astrology for predicting events. There were two possible ways this could occur: the first is that the stars actually influence events on earth, the second is that God uses the stars as signs for those with eyes to see. Since there are hadith pointing to a correlation between celestial and human events, such a potential concordance cannot be rejected outright. A number of texts nevertheless reject reliance on the predictive power of astrology out of concern over human error.⁴⁷¹ In spite of this anxiety over the possibility of calculation errors, Muslim astrologers continued to make star charts and predict the appearance of comets in the sky. Likewise, for centuries kings and emperors alike employed astrologers to advise them on propitious times to engage in battle or sire an heir.⁴⁷²

Given the pervasiveness of astrology in Persianate court settings, what are we to make of Nizami's ascension account, which clearly shows familiarity with the specifics of Zodiac

⁴⁷¹ Anton Heinen and Suyūṭī, *Islamic Cosmology: A Study of as-Suyūṭī's al-Hay'a as-sanīya fī l-hay'a as-sunnīya* (Beirut: In Kommission bei F. Steiner Verlag, 1982), 24-34.

⁴⁷² A. Azfar Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign: Sacred Kingship and Sainthood in Islam* (Columbia University Press, 2012), 66-70.

cycles and planetary movements, yet depicts Muhammad overcoming these one by one during his *Miʿraj*? Though patronized by royalty, Nizami spent his life avoiding the court, choosing to live in his small hometown rather than be surrounded by other courtiers. Julie Scott Meisami has argued that *Layli o Majnun* should be read not as a mystical text, but as a critique of courtly love’s excesses—specifically the ways in which courtly love objectifies women, turning them into tools of male emotional and spiritual development.⁴⁷³ If Meisami is correct in her assessment of Nizami’s inherent critique of courtly culture, then his ascension narrative becomes readable both within the context of his own work and within the genre of ascension narratives. Confronted with the primacy of astrological knowledge in a courtly setting, Nizami composes an ascension narrative that subordinates the powers of the Zodiac to Muhammad’s pre-eminence. The predictive and evaluative power of the stars become broken through their encounter with the Prophet, indicating that, after his *Miʿraj*, one can only rely on revealed knowledge obtained by Muhammad through direct contact with God.

Muhammad as Paradigmatic Mystic and Ascetic

⁴⁷³ Meisami, “Kings and Lovers,” and Meisami, *Medieval Persian Court Poetry*, 171.

After the ascension narrative, Nizami includes four sections praising the Prophet (*naʿat*), each framed around the Prophet's body and bodily comportment. In the first *naʿat*, Nizami discusses at length the stone which broke Muhammad's tooth at the Battle of Uhud. Nizami gives the stone's contact with the Prophet's body cosmic significance. The chipped tooth retroactively becomes the progenitor of all pearls, and the stone, once touched by the Prophet's blood, gives rise to rubies in tribute to this moment of contact with Muhammad. Such attention to the spiritual power of physical contact is found throughout the medieval Sufi tradition and early *hadith* literature. Amir-Moezzi notes that the etymology of the word *baraka* contains traces of its embodied origins. He argues an affiliation between *tahnik*⁴⁷⁴ and *baraka/tabarruk*.⁴⁷⁵ Originally *baraka* meant abundant rain, or a place to water camels, or mother camels feeding children pre-chewed food at such a site, but "this latter meaning led to the interpretation of *baraka* as the spiritual energy that the father transmits to his newly born child by placing him upon his knees and putting saliva in his mouth, blessing him, and in this way according him his protection."⁴⁷⁶

⁴⁷⁴ A custom of acknowledging paternity by chewing food and spitting it in an infant's mouth.

⁴⁷⁵ A complex term often translated, not unproblematically, as "blessing" or "grace." For examples of how it functions in the lives of Muslims

⁴⁷⁶ Amir-Moezzi, *The Spirituality of Shi'i Islam*, 37. Contemporary positivists have attempted to give this practice a scientific gloss by arguing that it passes antibodies on to the child, therefore "blessing" them with improved health. For the pop-scientific literature on this topic, see, for example, Rochman, "Mom's Saliva Can Strengthen Babies' Immune Systems," *Time*, May 6, 2013.

Nizami explicitly makes this connection in his second section praising the Prophet. The second *na‘at* begins by immediately focusing on the Prophet’s body: “Your body [*tan*] is purer than pure soul [*jan*].”⁴⁷⁷ Clearly in this line, Nizami enjoys playing off the rhyme of body and soul. But as we have seen previously, this is not merely about a satisfying rhyme. Nizami is happy to contrast body with soul using a variety of homonyms, though he is keen to use pairings of near homophones to highlight the close proximity between body and soul, inner and outward form.

A few lines later, Nizami picks up the thread of the relationship between *baraka* and bodily fluids, saying: “Open your mouth, so that all may eat of your sweet words⁴⁷⁸ / from the fountain of your mouth, feed us moist dates.”⁴⁷⁹ Here Nizami is engaging with a long tradition of venerating the Prophet’s bodily fluids, where Muhammad uses saliva to cure epilepsy, transmit secret knowledge to Ibn Abbas, and convey blessings and virtues upon children and new converts.⁴⁸⁰ Exchanges of bodily fluid can transmit not just spiritual blessing, but also

⁴⁷⁷ Nizami Ganjavi, *Makhzan al-asrar*, 22.

⁴⁷⁸ Here the word-play is quite ingenious, as *shakkar* can mean sweet words, the most literal usage here, but also sugar — a possible meaning which Nizami plays with in the second hemstitch. Likewise, *shakkar* is a homograph of *shuker*, which means “blessing” and is thus a synonym for *baraka*.

⁴⁷⁹ The implication here is that the dates have been moistened because the Prophet has pre-chewed them for us. Nizami Ganjavi, *Makhzan al-asrar*, 22.

⁴⁸⁰ Amir-Moezzi, *The Spirituality of Shi‘i Islam*, 36-37.

knowledge or even religious authority. "We know that in a number of ancient belief systems, body fluids such as blood, sperm, saliva, milk, sweat, are considered agents for thaumaturgic transmission; they can bear and transmit beneficial or harmful elements, faculties, virtues or spiritual influences from the bearer to another, more specifically, by heredity, to their descendants."⁴⁸¹ Notably, this was a power specifically attributed to the *kahin* in pre-Islamic Arab culture.⁴⁸² It also is a mode of transmitting spiritual authority, such that Muhammad's contact with the divine during the ascension can be transmitted to others through bodily fluid transfers.

In concluding his second praise poem to Muhammad, Nizami mourns his physical absence, saying "You of two worlds, why are you beneath the ground? You are not a treasure [to be buried], why are you clothed in dirt?"⁴⁸³ This absence of the Prophet's physical presence, which denies the world of his light, perfume, and voice,⁴⁸⁴ is then turned to political and even apocalyptic ends. Nizami implores the Prophet to return in order to "renew [*tāza kardan*] the world" by deposing those who live in ease, and cleansing the *minbar* of the ritually impure.⁴⁸⁵

⁴⁸¹ Ibid., 31.

⁴⁸² Ibid., 31.

⁴⁸³ Nizami Ganjavi, *Makhzan al-asrar*, 24.

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid., 25.

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid., 25.

Nizami seems particularly interested in the corruption he witnesses in the Persianate world, calling Muhammad to leave the land of the Arabs and come to Persia to enact this purification. On the apocalyptic side, he calls for Muhammad to “Arise and command the Angel of Death [*Israfil*] to blow out these few candles”⁴⁸⁶ and then to intercede for those who call on him on the day of judgement.⁴⁸⁷

In the fourth *na‘at*, Nizami compares Muhammad to prior prophets, arguing for his pre-eminence and superiority to them. One running theme throughout the work is the role that wheat played in the corruption of humans. Here Nizami notes that Adam was defiled by that indigestible grain, wheat. All the other Prophets have their own worldly entanglements, most revolving around food and drink. In this section Muhammad alone amongst the prophets is framed as a ascetic whose worldly renunciation was sufficient to grant him a direct encounter with God. Nizami notes that Muhammad alone “discarded everything,”⁴⁸⁸ and calls on him to “annihilate [*fana*] annihilation”⁴⁸⁹ Thus in these introductory sections we see Nizami frame Muhammad as the perfect ascetic whose denial of worldly desire has granted him unique, embodied, access to God. Blessings from this encounter can be obtained through bodily contact

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid., 26.

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid., 27.

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid., 29.

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid.

with the Prophet, but he is no longer bodily present. Thus through emulating his example, practicing proper withdrawal from the world, Nizami argues one can obtain a direct, though disembodied, encounter with God for themselves.

Conclusion

The *mir 'aj* becomes an important narrative in the development of the image of Muhammad as intercessor. This intercessory power can be characterized in a number of ways—but, as Bashir notes, sometimes intercession can be triggered by partaking in physical contact with God through touching one who has touched God...and in one hadith, this physical connection can be carried through up to seven degrees of remove.⁴⁹⁰

Perhaps most interesting about Nizami's ascension narrative, however, is what it leaves out. Rick Colby and Christiane Gruber have highlighted how ascension narratives subordinate competing symbolic systems to Muhammad's revelation for the purposes of negotiating sectarian debates, winning converts, and training the newly converted. Nizami's *mir'aj* is missing a number of hallmarks of those accounts—he doesn't include a detailed descriptions of

⁴⁹⁰ Bashir, *Sufi Bodies*, 5.

the *isra*, or the tests and challenges Muhammad faced. Likewise, his encounters with previous prophets, sightings of peculiar angels, as well as visions of heavenly rewards and the punishments of hell are all left out. What's more, the common story about Muhammad negotiating for a reduction of Muslim prayer responsibilities, at the behest of Moses, is entirely absent.

Speculating on the reasons for this configuration can be challenging, especially since relatively little biographical information is known about Nizami. Although his major collections of poetry were all commissioned by royal patrons, Nizami eschewed life at the court.⁴⁹¹ Julie Scott Meisami argues for reading his poems through this biographical lens—she asserts that Nizami wrote his romances as a critique of the court and the trope of courtly love. In her reading of *Layli and Majnun*, Majnun is but a selfish boy who indulges in a fantasy to such a degree that it thwarts a real relationship with Layla.⁴⁹² Though this provocative reading has few antecedents within the Persian and Arabic reception history of the tale, it does point us toward Nizami's complex relationship with courtly norms.

If we read the ascension narrative as a genre used to draw religious boundaries, assert the primacy of certain practices and traditions over others, and instruct Muslims in proper

⁴⁹¹ Chelkowski, "Nizami Gandjawi."

⁴⁹² Meisami, *Medieval Persian Court Poetry*, 171.

practice, what might Nizami's account tell us? Nizami's *mir'aj* tale seems to subordinate symbols of worldly authority and knowledge to Muhammad—both astrological (i.e. scientific) knowledge and emblems of worldly kingship are broken before the Prophet's ascent, or gifted to him during his journey. His pure inner state is emphasized by his fresh breath that cures poison, and musky scent that perfumes the sky. He wears a *khirqā* and *pirāhan*, has a direct, embodied encounter with God, a claim which Nizami bolsters through reference to the Qur'an. Likewise, Muhammad is described using the familiar Sufi trope of the heart as a bird, and is granted garments in ceremonies that mark the transmission of authority.

Such a reading of Nizami's ascension narrative fits well with the topics covered in the rest of the poem, which focus on renouncing the world to seek proximity with God. It alerts us to the importance of the heart as a symbol throughout the work, helps lasso together tales of kingly hubris with later chapters about the values of asceticism. What is more, it helps to situate Nizami's work within a larger body of Sufi texts from the era. As Jawid Mojaddedi and Ahmet Karamustafa have helpfully noted, Persian Sufi manuals and hagiographic collections were not attempts to negotiate a space for Sufism in a Sunni world dominated by Islamic law, as much scholarship claims. Rather, such texts instead boldly represent an attempt, among other things, to demonstrate the primacy of Sufi piety over other forms.

CHAPTER 5: THE PROBLEM OF POETRY—IMAGINATION, PROPHECY AND POETRY

Introduction

In his recent book, *The Hatred of Poetry*, American poet Ben Lerner discusses the origin story of the purported first English poet, Caedmon⁴⁹³. According to Bede's *Historia*, Caedmon was an illiterate cowherd not prone to versification. On feast days, it was custom for revelers to contribute a song to the night's celebration. Each time, before it was his turn to provide a song, Caedmon withdrew to the barn. On one of these nights, an mysterious figure, perhaps angelic or divine, appeared to Caedmon and ordered him to sing. Caedmon repeatedly refuses, arguing that he cannot sing. After insisting multiple times that Caedmon must sing, he finally asks "what shall I sing?" The mysterious figure asks him to sing "the beginning of created things," and to his surprise he opens his mouth and produces the first recorded Anglo-Saxon hymn.⁴⁹⁴

This tale bears a striking resemblance to the story of the Prophet Muhammad's first revelation. Caedmon's encounter occurred in the mid-seventh century. It was recorded by

⁴⁹³ Ben Lerner, *The Hatred of Poetry* (New York: FSG Originals, 2016), 6–8.

⁴⁹⁴ The Venerable Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Courier Corporation, 2012), 278.

Bede in the eighth century. Bede wrote disparagingly of Islam, and owned some Muslim-made goods.⁴⁹⁵ Could this be an echo from Muhammad's still in-formation biographical literature? Or are both Muhammad's revelation and Caedmon's inspiration expressions of some universal human understanding of the nature of inspiration and the challenges of expressing it in language.

For both Bede and Lerner, the answer is clearly the latter. Bede states "for verses, though never so well composed, cannot be literally translated out of one language into another without loss of their beauty and loftiness."⁴⁹⁶ Lerner uses this to reflect on the nature of poetry, noting "the poet is a tragic figure...the poem is always a record of failure."⁴⁹⁷ For Lerner, following the reading of Alan Grossman, the poet is tragic because their vision always exceeds their materials. Grossman notes, "poetic vocation is...both possible and impossible: possible in fact—there are, as I say, persons and poems—but strictly, logically, materially, as a matter of deliberation, *impossible*—destined to fail."⁴⁹⁸ Grossman frames this in Nietzschean terms,

⁴⁹⁵ "Saint Bede the Venerable – Muslim Museum UK – Uncover the 1400 Year Relationship between Britain and Islam. Explore the History and Heritage of Muslims in Britain." Accessed June 19, 2016. <http://muslimmuseum.org.uk/saint-bede-the-venerable/>.

⁴⁹⁶ Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 278.

⁴⁹⁷ Lerner, *The Hatred of Poetry*, 8.

⁴⁹⁸ Allen Grossman, *The Long Schoolroom: Lessons in the Bitter Logic of the Poetic Principle* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 15. Emphasis is the original.

arguing “*Bitter* is the sentiment of undecidable conflict, between the will to (re)build the human world, and the resistance to alternative (heterocosmic) making inherent in the materials of which any world must be composed. In this matter, poetics is the bitter (not the gay) science.”⁴⁹⁹ Poets are like world-makers aware of their own limitations, but poetics is the science of pointing out those very failures and the moments in which the poetic materials resist the poetic project.

Bede, Grossman, and Lerner are each framing the limitations of language to capture the poetic vision, though for Grossman, there is more at stake than just words. The poet is a world builder, one who envisions and speaks different ways of being in the world. He likens the poet to a demiurge, who in the Book of Genesis works in language.⁵⁰⁰ For this reason, Grossman argues that “there is no strictly secular poiesis.”⁵⁰¹ This tension between the actual and the possible becomes a source of anxiety for poets and non-poets alike, for “Most of us carry at least a weak sense of a correlation between poetry and human possibility that cannot be realized in poems. The poet...is both an embarrassment and an accusation.”⁵⁰² An embarrassment because the poet is naive in their refusal to accept the reality of human

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid., 16. Emphasis is the original.

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid., 14.

⁵⁰¹ Ibid., 15.

⁵⁰² Lerner, *The Hatred of Poetry*, 13.

limitations. An accusation in that the poet reminds us of our own ideals, relinquished in the face of the world's material resistance to them.

One solution, the most pristine solution, to the disconnect between the poetic vision and the source materials, is silence. We see such invocations of silence in the face of ineffability frequently in the history of Persian poetics, especially in the work of Jalal al-din Rumi.⁵⁰³ As Lerner points out, some of the most praised poets in the English language are those who fell silent or renounced poetry, from Rimbaud who gave up poetry to Keats who died young of tuberculosis.⁵⁰⁴ These poets are praised not only for the good poetry they produced, but also for the perfect poetry we imagine them capable of writing. We need not grapple with mediocre Keats poems, or a decline into self-parody. George Oppen wrote “Because I am not silent, the poems are bad.”⁵⁰⁵ Because Keats did not live to write them, his mature poems are not bad. As with Caedmon's origin story, however, the poet cannot resort to silence. The poet is compelled to sing.

But who or what is it that produces this compulsion? The question of authority often arises in relation to the figure of the poet. Who is the poet to put forth a vision of human possibility?

⁵⁰³ Keshavarz, *Reading Mystical Lyric*, 49-71.

⁵⁰⁴ Lerner, *The Hatred of Poetry*, 23.

⁵⁰⁵ Oren Izenberg, *Being Numerous: Poetry and the Ground of Social Life* (Princeton University Press, 2011), 104.

How can we trust this vision is correct? Anxieties over the ability of the poet to mislead and deceive,⁵⁰⁶ and questions of from whence they derive their authority,⁵⁰⁷ are key to Plato's desire to exile them from the republic. We see similar anxieties expressed in accounts of the Prophet Muhammad's revelation. As discussed in chapter 1, Qur'an and Hadith literature are keen to distinguish prophetic revelation from poetic inspiration. The poet's vision cannot be trusted, for at best the poet is possessed by a jinn and getting second-hand information from the angels.

Key to the debate over the valuation of poetry is the tension between the infinite and the finite, the immaterial and the material. The solution to this tension, proposed a number of Islamic philosophers, is to argue that God mediates this tension, providing the perfect material instantiation of the immaterial. Revelation, unlike poetry, is not "destined to fail,"⁵⁰⁸ as God has provided the Rosetta Stone with which to "literally [translate] out of one language into another without loss of their beauty and loftiness."⁵⁰⁹ These philosophers are not as keen as Plato, however, to outright dismiss the value of poetry. Nizami builds off of these insights, aligning poetry and prophecy as siblings, noting that poetry can "seat you at the Lote Tree

⁵⁰⁶ Plato, *The Republic of Plato: Second Edition*, trans. Allan Bloom, 2 Sub edition (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 278–9.

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid., 316.

⁵⁰⁸ Grossman, *The Long Schoolroom*, 15.

⁵⁰⁹ Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 278.

[*sidrat*]” and give you a Sultanate in the Kingdom of Spiritual Meaning [*ma’na*].”⁵¹⁰ For Nizami the need to write poetry derives from a mystical encounter, but the struggle to produce poetry is also akin to the challenge of the mystical path. Both revolve around a need to discipline the material world to receive something which exceeds it. For Nizami, the ability to produce poetry that can “penetrate the seven spheres,”⁵¹¹ and the ability to have a direct encounter with God are both reliant on properly bodily comportment.

Variations on a Suitcase

A peculiar difficulty arises when discussing poetry as a source for religious attitudes and mores. Contemporary scholars can be dismissive of poetry as a source for historical data or religious insight. This dismissal of poetry can come from one of two directions. The first approach is to impugn poetry’s ability to effectively or concisely convey religious meaning.⁵¹²

⁵¹⁰ Nizami Ganjavi, *Makhzan al-asrar*, 43.

⁵¹¹ *Ibid.*, 42-43.

⁵¹² This is most prevalent in analysis of the works of Jalal al-Din Rumi, whose poetry is often read for its alignment with the theoretical insights at the expense of its aesthetic innovations. In her book *Reading Mystical Lyric*, Fatemeh Keshavarz concisely outlines the argument for reading “through” poetic form, made by Chittick, and dubs it the “suitcase theory.” She asserts that “[t]he poet whose vision revolutionized the Persian lyric has been portrayed as clumsy with poetry and disrespectful of it,” Keshavarz, 13.

Often this critique revolves around understandings of genre conventions. Poetry, with its metrical constraints and metaphorical conventions, is beholden to form first, and meaning second. Some of this devaluation comes from the poets themselves, such as Jalal al-Din Rumi, who says “Take this poetry and tear it up, like old cloth!”⁵¹³ Rather than reading outbursts such as this as expression of frustration in the face of divine ineffability, some commenters instead take this to mean that poetry is an insufficient vehicle for expressing what can more easily be said in another idiom, such as *kalam* or *falsafa*.⁵¹⁴

The second approach is to question the relationship between religiously-inflected imagery and the poet’s own religious convictions. Both Iranian and Euro-american scholarship on Persian poetry has argued that Sufi metaphors so infuse the Persian poetic aesthetic that they should be read as a genre convention rather than expression of Sufi proclivities. A prime example of this approach can be found in Yarshater’s introduction to Hafez in the Encyclopedia Iranica:

⁸ Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love*, 18.

⁹ Ibid., 24.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

⁵¹³ *Divan*, 2592, from Chittick, *Sufi Path of Love*, 271.

⁵¹⁴ Keshavarz, 14.

Attempts at finding a mystical interpretation for Hafez's praise of wine and drunkenness are not supported by his Divān. Many lovers of Hafez have sought to find clues in his poetry to his mysticism or confirmation of his religious beliefs. As Sufi centers (kānaqāhs) multiplied and Sufi orders found more and more affiliates, a mystical view of life and the universe and the attainment of Truth by love rather than reason became prevalent and profoundly influenced the Persian world view. It was only natural that a Sufistic interpretation should be applied to the poems of Hafez, ignoring in the process many indications to the contrary. Some commentators and even some Western translators of Hafez, notably Wilberforce Clarke, a translator of the Divān (London, 1974), satisfied themselves, to the point of utter absurdity, that every single word written by Hafez had a mystical meaning and no line of Hafez actually meant what it said. The reading of Hafez as codified poetry implying an esoteric meaning for each line or word propounded the view that his ghazals can be read at two levels, one apparent, the other hidden—the latter representing the intended meaning. Deciphering Hafez's underlying meaning grew into an esoteric art, not dissimilar to the explanations offered by the addicts of "conspiracy theories" (q.v.) in political affairs.⁵¹⁵

In this case, the question of how to interpret a poet's mystical imagery centers on how we come to understand the poet's biography and authorial intention. If poets such as Hafez could become the object of Sufi "conspiracy theories," these "conspiracies" could form in the other direction as well, with clear Sufi allusions read as solely the product of poetic flourish or genre convention. Chekowlski, in his entry on Nizami in the Encyclopedia of Islam, for example, presents Nizami's mysticism as such: "If there is a mystic strain in Nizami, it is subtle and covert; it never destroys or blurs the sharp psychological and the physical identity of its protagonist. It is virtually impossible to draw a clear line in Nizami's poetry between the mystical and the erotic, the sacred and the profane."⁵¹⁶ Thus Nizami, though his *Layla & Majnun*

⁵¹⁵ Yasharter, "Hafez."

⁵¹⁶ Chelkowski, "Nizāmī Gandjawi."

tells a familiar Sufi tale of human love as a metaphor for love of the divine, is often valued primary as a poet rather than mystic, because the mystical content is harder to separate from the poetic form. This dismissal comes in spite of the fact that Nizami, in the introduction to the *Makhzan al-asrar*, claims to have had two separate mystical experiences during 40-day seclusions. This too can be attributed to genre convention, for “the mysticism with its symbolism is apparent only in the introduction, which is infused with the essence of Sufi thought. In the main body of the book one can detect scattered mystical overtones, but it is up to the reader to arrive at the final interpretation.”⁵¹⁷ Nizami seems to disagree, however. His introduction is not merely a perfunctory proem, but a prolegomena providing the lens through which to interpret what follows. In the section that concludes the introduction to the *Makhzan al-asrar*, titled “The Second Seclusion,” he compares his mystical experience to a mir’aj.⁵¹⁸ In the line immediately proceeding the first discourse, Nizami argues that one should strive to reach the experience of God’s light that Nizami did, implying that the poetry that follows will provide advice on just how to do so.⁵¹⁹

⁵¹⁷ Ibid.

⁵¹⁸ Nizami Ganjavi, *Makhzan al-asrar*, 66.

⁵¹⁹ Ibid., 69.

Part of the difficulty in taking poetry seriously revolves around the relative lack of engagement with Muslim understandings of poetry as a genre for expressing religious truths. As another Nizami reminds us, "poetry operates *affectively*, that is, through the agency of the imagination, which translates (as it were) poetic images into ethical *exempla* in the minds of the audience."⁵²⁰ The key term here is "imagination," which carries important philosophical valences. Chittick notes, "there is generally something insubstantial and "unreal" about images perceived by the imagination. But this is not always the case, for when the image derives from the higher levels of the World of Imagination, it is more real than the mind itself."⁵²¹ Thus, in poetry, a mystic poet attempts to discuss something that is "more real" than the language with which he describes it. In such instances as this, language must necessarily fail. Poetry cannot express the ineffable in his poetry not because of the shortcomings of poetry but because of the very nature of the ineffable. In the following section we will explore the role of poetry in philosophy, especially in regards to prophecy. We will see why Nizami argues that poetry is uniquely suited for expressing mystical insight based on his understanding of Islamic philosophy. Though we do not know what was on Nizami's bookshelf, we do know that "Wisdom (hikmat) is for Nizami a Greek legacy as well as a Qur'anic

⁵²⁰ Nizami Aruzi paraphrased in Meisami, "Kings and Lovers," 2.

⁵²¹ Chittick, *Sufi Path of Love*, 249.

imposition" and that he is interested in the writings of Plato, though less so with Neoplatonists.⁵²² This chapter will discuss the philosophical and theological underpinnings of Nizami's attitude towards poetry as well as the challenges posed by his elevated view of poetry as a medium of mystical expression. We will discuss how poetry comes to be valued only if it adheres to logical principles, and the anxiety that Sufi claims to direct experience of God, and the poetic presentation of those experiences, caused in Islamic theology and philosophy. We will examine dismissive attitudes towards poetry as a source of knowledge about medieval Muslim religious practice, explore the theological difficulties of making religious claims in poetic idiom, and finally examine Nizami's resolute assertion that poetry is in fact the ideal form for discussion mystical truth and advocating for proper religious praxis.

Hadith & Qur'an on Poetry

⁵²² Johann Christoph Burgel, "Nizami's World Order," in *A Key to the Treasure of the Hakīm: Artistic and Humanistic Aspects of Nizāmī Ganjavī's Khamsa*, ed. Christine van Ruymbeke and Johann Christoph Burgel (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2011), 26–27.

In many tellings of the Prophet Muhammad's life, his first revelation comes with an anxiety that it might indicate possession by jinn.⁵²³ In the pre-Islamic Arabian context, jinn possession was claimed a source of inspiration for poets and for soothsayers (*kahin*), who sometimes prophesied in verse. Muhammad was at pains to prove the veracity of his revelation and distinguish his revelations from those of the poets and *kahin*. Perhaps more important to the treatment of poetry in the Qur'an and *hadith* literature was its use by Muhammad's opponents in Mecca to disparage him. Whether it be seen as dangerous, frivolous, or merely put to bad use, the Qur'an and *hadith* literature are generally skeptical of poetry and its usefulness. In this section, we will examine some key prophetic *hadith* and Qur'anic passages on the issue of poetry, and explore how the early scriptural tradition was at pains to distinguish between revelation and poetry.⁵²⁴

Qur'an on Poetry

⁵²³ Stories of how Muhammad overcame this doubt vary. In one case, a Christian monk provides verification of the authenticity of Muhammad's revelation, which links Muhammad to the lineage of monotheistic prophets. In one account, Muhammad's first wife Khadijah confirms that Gabriel is an angel rather than a jinn through engaging in sexual intercourse with the Prophet. The implications of this incident for women's piety and mystical potential are explored more fully in chapter 1.

⁵²⁴ Extensive work has been done on the history and deployment of *hadith* literature. Needless to say, this chapter does not argue for taking *hadith* as transparent historical accounts of Muhammad's sayings and deeds. Rather they reflect the interests and concerns of the generation of compilers in the 9th/2nd century.

The Qur'an is self-aware of the challenge of poetry as a medium for conveying religious meaning. Sura 26, known as "The Poets," deals with this issue in a brief verse near the end of the chapter: "And as for the poets, the errant follow them."⁵²⁵ This verse, however, is placed in the larger context of the story of Moses combatting the Pharaoh's magicians and people being deceived or lead astray in the face of God's message. The poets, then, are mentioned immediately after a verse discussing those upon whom devils descend—liars. The poets are thus not just a problem for their own sinfulness, but also because they lead others astray.

The Qur'an quite emphatically rejects the accusation that it could be poetry: "And We have not taught him poetry; nor would it befit him"⁵²⁶ One of the largest concerns the Qur'an shows regarding poetry is that Muhammad himself might be accused of being a poet: "Yet they said, "Confused dreams! Nay, he has fabricated it! Nay, he is a poet!"⁵²⁷ or "Are we to forsake our gods for a poet possessed?"⁵²⁸ In Surat 52, al-Tur, an extended discussion of Muhammad's

⁵²⁵ 26:224

⁵²⁶ 36:69

⁵²⁷ 21:5

⁵²⁸ The word translated here as "possessed," *majnun*, literally means one possessed by a *jinn*. One understanding of the relationship between poets and *jinn*, which is hinted at in 26:223, is that the *jinn* eavesdrop at the gates of heaven and relay half-truths and misheard information to the poets. A *jinn* may not be purposefully deceptive, but certainly ill informed. 37:36

status as a prophet is discussed in contrast to other potential interpretations: “So remind, for thou art not, by the Blessing of thy Lord, a soothsayer or one possessed. Or do they say, “A poet—let us await the vagaries of fate for him.”⁵²⁹ Soothsaying, possession and poetry are closely aligned in this verse in ways that, as we shall see later in this chapter, become significant in later Islamic philosophy and theology. A similar lassoing together of poetry and soothsaying occurs in Sura 69, al-Haqqah, where the Qur’an states:

So I swear by what you see and by what you see not, truly it is the speech of a noble messenger, and not the speech of a poet. Little do you believe! Nor is it the speech of a soothsayer. Little do you reflect! It is a revelation from the Lord of the Worlds!⁵³⁰

As these verses show, it is not just the linguistic attributes of the Qur’anic revelation that may cause it to be mistaken for poetry, but the fact that poetry is a genre some turn to for moral guidance and predictions about the future. This association is more explicitly outlined in Sura 72, al-Jinn, where the Qur’an discusses jinn listening at the gates of heaven to angelic discourse and misreporting its contents to humans.⁵³¹ The close association of jinn possession with both poetry and fortune-telling is one explanation for the fact that these two are so

⁵²⁹ 52:29-30

⁵³⁰ 69:38-43.

⁵³¹ 72:8-9.

Hadith on Poetry

⁵³² I heard the Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) say: In eloquence there is magic, in knowledge ignorance, in poetry wisdom, and in speech heaviness. قَالَ " يَقُولُ وَسَلَّمَ عَلَيْهِ اللَّهُ صَلَّى اللَّهُ رَسُولٌ سَمِعْتُ قَالَ الْعِلْمُ مِنَ وَإِنَّ سِحْرًا الْبَيَانِ مِنْ إِنْ " يَقُولُ وَسَلَّمَ عَلَيْهِ اللَّهُ صَلَّى اللَّهُ رَسُولٌ سَمِعْتُ قَالَ الْعِلْمُ مِنَ وَإِنَّ سِحْرًا الْبَيَانِ مِنْ إِنْ " Sunan Abi Dawud, Book 42, Hadith 4994.

⁵³⁴ Sahih al-Bukhari, Vol. 8, Book 73, Hadith 175

accounts often show an ambivalence toward poetry, affirming it when used in approved places and modes, and disapproving of it in others. Key to distinguishing acceptable poetry from unacceptable poetry seems to be the possibility for confusing poetry with revelation.

As with the Qur'anic verses on poetry, some *hadith* are interested in whether or not Muhammad ever recited poetry. Some of this concern may relate to a growing consensus as to Muhammad's status as an illiterate blank slate through which God could best transmit revelation without corruption.⁵³⁵ The implication here is that if the Prophet always eschewed poetry, distinguishing between revelation and poetry becomes an easy task. Likewise, proscribing poetry becomes much easier. Several *hadith* transmitted by Aisha, however, seem to reveal that the Prophet had at least some knowledge of poetry. When asked about whether the Prophet ever recited poetry, she responds "He would say parables with the poetry of Ibn Rawahah, saying: 'News shall come to you from where you did not expect it.'"⁵³⁶ In some cases, it seems that it is the uses to which poetry is put that determine its acceptability. For example, one *hadith* recounts the Prophet wife Aisha defending Companion Hasan ibn Thabit's recitation of poetry, saying "Don't abuse him, for he used to defend the Prophet (with his poetry)."⁵³⁷

⁵³⁵ See, for example, Rubin's *Eye of the Beholder*, where he argues that the term *ummi* might have originally meant something closer to gentile than "illiterate" (24). As we shall discuss later in this chapter, this issue of Muhammad's illiteracy arises again in contemporary debates over mysticism and poetry in Iran.

⁵³⁶ Tirmidhi, Vol. 5, Book 41, Hadith 2848

⁵³⁷ Vol. 4, Book 56, Hadith 731

Aisha herself seems ambivalent toward poetry, arguing that “Poetry is both good and bad. Take the good and leave the bad.”⁵³⁸ Other transmitters frame the permissibility of poetry as being related to its proximity to Islam. Abu Hurayra, for example, transmits the Prophet arguing “The truest word spoken by an Arab (pre-Islamic) in poetry is this verse of Labid: “Behold! apart from Allah everything is vain.”⁵³⁹ Likewise, in another account, he is said to ask to hear more and more of Abu Salt’s poetry, compelled by how close the poet was to accepting Islam based on his verses.⁵⁴⁰

Though in some cases the permissibility of pre-Islamic poetry is at times framed by its theological soundness, several other *hadith* discussing poetry are keen to separate it out from religious ritual and space. For example, recitation of poetry and the Qur’an are specifically compared in one *hadith*, where Ibn Mas’ud chastises a man for reciting a sura too quickly, as if it were poetry.⁵⁴¹ Nasa’i collects two conflicting *hadith* on the permissibility of poetry recitation in a mosque. In one account, the Prophet explicitly banned poetry from the mosque.⁵⁴² In the very next *hadith*, however, Nasa’i records a longer account of Hasan ibn Thabit chastising Umar

⁵³⁸ Al-Adab al-Mufrad, Book 36, Hadith 866

⁵³⁹ Sahih Muslim, Book 28, Hadith 5604

⁵⁴⁰ Sunan ibn Majah, Vol. 5, Book 33, Hadith 3758

⁵⁴¹ “Ibn Mas’ud said, “This recitation is (too quick) like the recitation of poetry.”” Sahih al-Bukhari, Volume 12, Book 1, Hadith 742.

⁵⁴² Sunan an-Nasa’i, Vol. 1, Book 8, Hadith 716.

for giving him a dirty look for reciting poetry in the mosque, arguing that Muhammad had approved of such a practice.⁵⁴³

As we have seen in this section, *hadith* accounts of poetry are more ambivalent toward it than the Qur'an, though they nevertheless reflect a concern over poetry's subject matter and the proper time and place for its recitation. These concerns are picked up in the philosophical tradition which expresses a similar ambivalence toward poetry's ability to express truth.

Poetry and Prophecy in Islamic Philosophy

As we have seen, in the early Islamic tradition, views on poetry are ambivalent at best. Nevertheless, poetry remained an important artistic form and cultural touchstone in Arab and Persiante societies. From the 9th/2nd century onward, however, the translation of and introduction of Greek philosophy into the Arabic language and Islamic discourse raised the stakes on attitudes toward poetry, especially in regards to its usefulness as a vehicle for conveying religious knowledge and mystical insight. According to Deborah Black, philosophies, since Aristotle, have generally rejected poetics as either non-syllogistic/non-rational or as

⁵⁴³ Sunan an-Nasa'i, Vol. 1, Book 8, Hadith 717

entirely false, even if rational in method. She notes that Islamic philosophy is notable for its unwillingness to reject poetry outright, and its desire to navigate a middle path between these two extremes. Thus “poetics becomes unique among the syllogistic arts in that it uses a discursive, syllogistic method, but not with a view to evoking the intellect’s assent to its conclusions.”⁵⁴⁴ For some authors, such as Salim Kemal, the importance of poetics in Islamic philosophy is nothing more than a concession to the status of poetry in Arab culture, as well as a component of political philosophy, since poetry can serve as a force for social cohesion.⁵⁴⁵ While such an position is attractive in its simplicity and practicality, it does not explain why poetry must be construed as logical in order to serve such a function, and it also side-steps grappling with problematic clashes between poetry and prophecy that arise out of al-Farabi’s decision to affiliate both so closely with his uniquely robust imaginative faculty.

The relationship between imagination, poetry, and prophecy is a particularly fraught one in Islam, due to the nature of the Qur’an and the cultural and literary context into which it arrived. The Qur’an and prophetic hadith are particularly careful to distinguish between poetic and prophetic utterance, so any philosophy that ties them to the same faculty of the soul and

Deborah L. Black, *Logic and Aristotle’s Rhetoric and Poetics in Medieval Arabic Philosophy* (Leiden ;New York: E.J. Brill, 1990), 181.

⁵⁴⁵ Salim Kemal, *The Philosophical Poetics of Alfarabi, Avicenna and Averroes: The Aristotelian Reception* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 200.

gives them overlapping social functions must proceed carefully. In Jewish tradition, for example, a prophet be denied revelation for moral failures, one of which is reciting poetry. Building off this context, hadith literature records a story of Muhammad being denied revelation for reciting poetry, "implying that poetry and prophecy are mutually exclusive."⁵⁴⁶

In this section, we will explore the implications of al-Farabi's enlargement of the functions of the imagination, his association of prophecy with the imaginative faculty, and his inclusion of poetic discourse in the category of logic. After examining the possible difficulties that arise from such a constellation of changes to Aristotelian philosophy, especially within an Islamic context, we will go on to examine the ways in which Ibn Sina overcomes or avoids some of these problems by fragmenting the imagination and introducing the "Holy Intellect," thus allowing him to maintain al-Farabi's status of poetic discourse as logic, keep it tied to the now fragmented imaginative faculties, while at the same time clarifying any confusion about the relative status and social function of poetry and prophecy. Finally, we will trace how these intellectual threads make their way into Nizami's understanding of poetry as an ideal vehicle for articulating mystical truths.

⁵⁴⁶ Rubin, *Eye of the Beholder*, 121.

The revelation of the Qur'an entered into a society with a well-developed poetic tradition, and for this reason the Prophet is careful to distinguish his linguistic revelation from the words of the poets. The distinction between poetry and prophecy is an important one to make, because they seem to overlap in numerous ways. The situation is complicated by the Arabic term most often used for revelation in the Qur'an: *wahy*. This complex word has multiple levels of meaning, but is not used exclusively to refer to divine communication with prophets. In pre-Islamic poetry, the term referred to discerning traces of the beloved from an abandoned campsite, a common way of opening a *qasida*.⁵⁴⁷ In fact, of the 71 times *wahy* occurs in the Qur'an, only thrice does it refer specifically to the revelation of the Qur'an or scripture.⁵⁴⁸ In terms of communication between humans and the supernatural, poets, diviners, and madmen were sometimes thought to be recipients of *wahy*, which they could receive from Satan, jinn, or even by overhearing the conversations of angels.⁵⁴⁹

⁵⁴⁷ Daniel Madigan, "Revelation and Inspiration," *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, Ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, (Leiden: Brill, 2001-.) Deborah L. Black, "Psychology: Soul and Intellect," in *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*, ed. Peter Adamson and Richard C. Taylor (Cambridge, UK ;New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 313, <http://search.lib.unc.edu?R=UNCb4689159> Table of contents only (<http://www.loc.gov/catdir/toc/cam051/2004049660.html>).

⁵⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁹ A.J. Wensinck, "Wahy (a.)," *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Ed. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel and W.P. Heinrichs. Brill, 2010, [Brill Online](http://www.brillonline.nl), University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 4 March 2010.

Prophecy and poetry do not simply overlap in that they both have their source in inspiration, but also share a form of outward expression in the case of the Qur'an. Though Qur'anic language is not poetic in a technical sense it does share with poetry a rhythmic line, high aesthetic quality, and, in the case of the Meccan Suras, a strong use of imagery. Such technical features of the works allowed both poetry and the Qur'an to be more easily memorized, which helped facilitate their dissemination through public recitation.

Prophetic hadith and the Qur'an itself are careful to distinguish between prophecy, divination, and poetic inspiration, and to sequester the latter two from having access to the same level and accuracy of knowledge as the Prophet. For example, after the time of the Prophet, it is said that the jinn who used to listen at the gates of heaven and report their words through a *kahin* were barred from listening by angels.⁵⁵⁰ Furthermore, prophecy was distinguished from other forms of inspired speech through a series of distinguishing characteristics, some easier to identify than others, including the descent and social status of the speaker, the character and nature of the content of the message, and the ecstatic state of the prophet before receiving revelation, which distinguished it from poetry, though not

T. Fahd, "Nubuwwa," *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Ed. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel and W.P. Heinrichs. Brill, 2010, [Brill Online](#), University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 12 March 2010.

⁵⁵⁰ Fahd, "Nubuwwa."

necessarily from divination.⁵⁵¹ The Prophet further distinguished the Qur'an from poetic speech by emphasizing its inimitable beauty, challenging poets to produce that matched it in significance of content and aesthetic quality. Two other marks of prophecy would definitively set it above all other inspired speech so as to avoid any possible further confusion: its infallibility and accompaniment by miracles and marvels.⁵⁵²

After so much work to separate prophecy from other forms of inspired speech, al-Farabi complicates the matter by elevating the imaginative faculty and tying it closely to both prophecy and poetic discourse. Such a move calls into question the issue of the verifiability of infallibility, since the imaginative faculty operates outside of the realm of true/false dichotomies. Furthermore the social function of prophecy appears to overlap with the potential social function of poetry in al-Farabi. Clearly the status of prophecy relative to poetry and the question of distinguishing the Prophet from poets was not at stake in al-Farabi, nevertheless, the uncomfortable proximity of the two in both his theoretical and political philosophy seems to point to problems with his formulation of the imagination, which he both frees from necessary engagement with the rational faculty, ties closely with the prophetic function, and yet nevertheless brings into the sphere of logic through his writings on *Poetics*.

⁵⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵⁵² Ibid.

Imagination in Aristotle

Aristotle divides the human faculties into five parts, in descending order: the rational, imaginative, desiderative, sensitive, and nutritive. He further divides the rational faculty into three functions: theoretical, practical, and productive.⁵⁵³ In *De Anima*, he notes that thought, imagination, and sensation are separate, but nevertheless dependent on one another, hierarchically.⁵⁵⁴ That is, we cannot imagine without first having sensations from which to build imaginative images, and we cannot think about objects without first having them as images in the imagination. Aristotle argues that even when we think of abstract concepts that have no associated sensation, such as in geometry, we still think in images.⁵⁵⁵ Though dependent on sensation, imagination is nevertheless capable of a “noetic distance” from

⁵⁵³ Majid Fakhry, *A Short Introduction to Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Mysticism*, (Oxford, England: Oneworld, 1997), 42.

⁵⁵⁴ Kemal, 89.

⁵⁵⁵ Ibid.

sensation. In other words, one does not need constant sensory input in order to think, but can utilize latent content of that which has been previously sensed—as with dreaming.⁵⁵⁶

Among the powers that Aristotle attributes to the imagination are self-motion, arguing that syllogism and inference account for the motility of animals.⁵⁵⁷ Thus we see a tentative attribution of a syllogistic function to the imaginative faculty. In spite of this function, the imagination does not appear to be structured syllogistically in Aristotle, because he only gives the imagination the ability to store and recall images, not break them apart and combine them. This power he reserves for reason acting upon the imagination.

Imagination in al-Farabi

Al-Farabi, like Aristotle, attributes five faculties to human beings, though their names and functions do not completely overlap with Aristotle's. In descending order, al-Farabi's five faculties are: the rational, representative (imagination), appetitive, sensitive, and vegetative.⁵⁵⁸

⁵⁵⁶ Ibid., 90.

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid., 91.

⁵⁵⁸ Majid Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 123.

In his characterization of the representative faculty, al-Farabi depends greatly on Aristotle, though with multiple additions and alterations.⁵⁵⁹

In the *Virtuous City*, al-Farabi specifically posits imagination as the link between the senses and reason, which sounds very much like Aristotle's position.⁵⁶⁰ Unlike Aristotle, al-Farabi attributes an appetitive function to the imagination, and argues that this appetitive function is the source of animal self-motivation, *not* the syllogistic nature of imaginative processes.⁵⁶¹ While taking away an argument for a syllogistic function of the imagination, al-Farabi also frees it of reliance on the rational faculty. Unlike Aristotle, who gives the power of manipulating objects to the rational faculty, al-Farabi locates this ability within the imagination itself, thereby expanding its range of powers and reducing its dependence on the rational faculty.⁵⁶² He also attributes to the imagination the ability to discriminate between various aspects of sensation, an important addition if one is to give it the power to manipulate and reassemble images. Furthermore, al-Farabi attributes the imagination with the ability to imitate, which restores syllogism to the imaginative faculty, as imitation works through a

⁵⁵⁹ Kemal, 89.

⁵⁶⁰ Mahdi, 157.

⁵⁶¹ Kemal, 91.

⁵⁶² Deborah L. Black, "Psychology: Soul and Intellect," in *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*, ed. Peter Adamson and Richard C. Taylor (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 313. Kemal, 92.

process akin to analogy.⁵⁶³ These are critical moves in al-Farabi's bid to link prophecy with imagination—the imagination's ability to reorder and discriminate allows it to not only recall images of absent sensory objects, but even to represent Intelligibles and abstract concepts.⁵⁶⁴ Thus, for al-Farabi, imagination is not simply imitative, but also has the ability to assign appropriate images to things that have not presented themselves to the senses.⁵⁶⁵

Relationship between Imagination and Prophecy in al-Farabi

According to the *Encyclopedia of Religion* prophecy differs from mysticism in that it is an oracular ecstasy—thus verbal expression and communication to a community are essential elements of prophecy as such.⁵⁶⁶ Revelation, indicating the self-unmasking of God, is not the best translation for the two primary words used to describe prophetic revelation *wahy* and *tanzil*. Taken together, these two words indicate a conception of revelation not as divine unveiling, which sounds much more like mysticism, but instead of a message or

⁵⁶³ Black, "Psychology: Soul and Intellect," 313.

⁵⁶⁴ Kemal, 93.

⁵⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁶ "Prophecy," *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Ed. Lindsay Jones, (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), 7427.

communication sent down.⁵⁶⁷ When encountering the phenomena of prophecy, Islamic philosophers must grapple first with the question of how the prophet receives such a revelation. In their attempts to show the commensurability of religion and philosophy, many philosophers opt to focus upon the intellect. Doing so resolves any apparent conflict between philosophy and religion, as both involve the same human faculty and deliver the same knowledge. However, if one locates the reception of revelation within the intellect in this way, the question arises as to whether or not the prophet must prepare him or herself by developing his or her rational faculty, as philosophers must. Furthermore, since the knowledge philosophers attain when the acquired intellect connects with the Active Intellect can only be taught to a select few through demonstration, the question of how one translates such knowledge into a form accessible to a mass audience arises.

Al-Farabi solves such a problem by bifurcating prophecy and revelation into two separate movements in the process of divine communication, capitalizing on the *rasul/nabi* distinction.⁵⁶⁸ Thus one may receive revelation without being a prophet, without delivering a message to a people. In this case, it would seem that the revelation is received by the rational

⁵⁶⁷ Madigan.

⁵⁶⁸ Muhsin Muhsin, *Alfarabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001) 164.

faculty alone imparting wisdom to the individual who receives it.⁵⁶⁹ Thus the individual who receives revelation but who is not also a prophet will look much like a philosopher, though without the need for years of training and development of the rational faculty, for as Muhsin Mahdi points out, one of the meanings for the root *w-h-y* is “quickness.”⁵⁷⁰

The imagination plays an especially important role in al-Farabi’s views on prophecy, as for him prophecy is the overflow of the divine mind into the imagination.⁵⁷¹ According to Mushin Mahdi, prophecy does not bypass the rational faculty but rather begins as revelation, which overflows the rational faculty, spilling into the imagination.⁵⁷² It also touches the senses which explains how prophets can speak of physically “seeing” angels and other non-material things.⁵⁷³ Because of the nature of the imagination in al-Farabi, however, it cannot receive Intelligibles themselves, as the rational faculty can. Instead, it imitates them by manipulating images of sensible things that it has stored.⁵⁷⁴ Thus al-Farabi’s attribution of the ability to

⁵⁶⁹ Mahdi, 162 & 164.

⁵⁷⁰ Ibid., 152-3.

⁵⁷¹ Ibid., 162.

⁵⁷² Ibid., 159.

⁵⁷³ Ibid., 162.

⁵⁷⁴ Ibid., 159.

manipulate images and imitate non-material things analogically through such manipulation becomes central to his understanding of the mechanism by which prophecy occurs.

The ability of the imagination to imitate Intelligibles in this method is what allows it to deliver the message of revelation to a mass audience. Thus prophecy becomes important for its communicative value, and for this reason has a political function in al-Farabi. He envisions the ideal political order as a city-state founded by a Philosopher-Prophet-King (though indeed for al-Farabi, any prophet is by default a philosopher as well) delivering philosophical truths to the masses. This formulation, however, leaves out an important question—because, in al-Farabi’s formulation, the prophet is already a king, his prophecy is from-the-start invested with political authority, thus we need not ask what it is about prophecy that inspires someone to give his or her assent to its teachings. Such questions about how the imagination constructs arguments and inspires assent are left to his discussions of poetic logic, to which we will next turn.

In this section we have outlined the ways in which al-Farabi reformulates the imagination and its association with prophecy. In altering Aristotle’s understanding of the imagination and by adding imaginative discourse (poetry) to logic, al-Farabi seems to be attempting to resolve one problem: the question of the relative truth of and relationship between religion and philosophy. In doing so, however, new problems arise regarding the

relationship between poetry and prophecy, because the nature of the imagination in relation to poetic discourse calls into question the philosophic verifiability of prophecy which al-Farabi hopes to achieve in his political writings. In the next section, we will examine the role and nature of poetics in Aristotle and al-Farabi, discuss how the nature of the imaginative faculty required for al-Farabi to classify *Poetics* as a logical discourse seems to create problems for its close association with prophecy, and then examine how Ibn Sina attempts to resolve these problems through the fragmentation of the imaginative faculty and the introduction of the “Holy Intellect.”

Poetry and Prophecy in Ibn Sina

The previous section discussed the proximities between poetry and prophecy in the Islamic tradition, how the Qur’an, hadith, and later thinkers are careful to distinguish between the two phenomena, and how al-Farabi’s focus on the role of the imaginative faculty in prophecy brought poetry and prophecy once again into dangerous proximity. This section will look more closely at al-Farabi’s understanding of poetry, specifically his location of poetics within the syllogistic arts (logic), and discuss the way this understanding of poetry further

compounds the problem of distinguishing between poetry and prophecy from a philosophical standpoint. It will then move on to discuss Ibn Sina's refiguration of the imaginative faculty and his introduction of the "Holy Intellect," which downgrades the importance of the imagination in the reception and dissemination of prophecy. The section will conclude with a brief discussion of the use of this triad—poetry, prophecy, and imagination—in the writings of contemporary thinkers such as Abdolkarim Soroush. Through this examination we will see that the linguistic nature of the Qur'an, in tandem with Islamic philosophy's elevation of poetics to a logic and invocation of imagination as a mechanism of prophecy, continue to cause problems in distinguishing prophecy from other inspired, evocative speech acts. This difficulty leads thinkers to often identify the locus of difference between the two outside the specific mechanism of prophecy and poetry itself, in their source, effect, nature of the bearer, or some accompanying phenomena, such as miracles.

Poetry in al-Farabi

Unlike Aristotle, and his Greek disciples and followers, al-Farabi groups the *Poetics* and *Rhetoric* with the *Organon* in the body of Aristotle's works on logic. The inclusion of poetics

within logic is directly a product of al-Farabi's understanding of the analogic function of the imaginative faculty, which manifests itself in poetry, and further his assertion of the relationship between analogy and syllogism. Though it is its relationship with the imagination that makes poetics syllogistic, it goes without saying that the imagination is explicitly not the source of all syllogism. Rather, what divides the poetic syllogism from other forms of syllogism is its very imaginative nature.⁵⁷⁵ In his attribution of imitation to the imaginative faculty, Al-Farabi makes substitution, thus analogy, one of the prime functions of imagination. Since al-Farabi gives to the imaginative faculty the manipulative and discriminating functions that Aristotle reserves for the rational faculty, poetry, whose operations in language model those of the imaginative faculty, becomes the imaginative discourse *par excellence*. It is important to note that although all poetic discourse is imaginative, not all expressions of the imagination are poetry. Thus, though its imaginative property is what separates poetry from other forms of syllogism, it is not what distinguishes it from other imaginative arts, but rather the conjunction of imagination with the formal and thematic elements common to poetry.⁵⁷⁶

⁵⁷⁵ Kemal, "Aesthetics," 971.

⁵⁷⁶ Kemal, *The Poetics of Alfarabi and Avicenna*, 104.

For al-Farabi, there are five kinds of syllogism: demonstrative, dialectical, sophistical, rhetorical, and, lastly, poetical.⁵⁷⁷ The reasoning for this grouping, however, is a bit complex and perplexing, as al-Farabi himself notes that in terms of logical status, poetic statements are completely false.⁵⁷⁸ Poetry is not, as sophistry, intentionally deceptive in service of achieving a given end. Rather poetry is false because “to imagine something is to exclude it from existence, and as poetry is imaginative speech, nothing imaginative can make a true or false claim about any existing state of affairs, even though the statement may be meaningful.”⁵⁷⁹ Though poetry may not be true or false, it can nevertheless be *valid*. This validity stems from two sources: first, poetry is *meaningful* for al-Farabi, and this meaningfulness is related to his view of the role of the imagination in poetry.⁵⁸⁰ Second, poetry is valid because it makes arguments by analogy. Its syllogistic structure is verifiable, even if its premises and middle term are not. It is this analogic structure that situates poetic discourse within the bounds of logic for al-Farabi.⁵⁸¹

Poetic logic works on a model of contagion, whereby neutral objects, when associated with something we dislike, become repellent to us through this association, not because of

⁵⁷⁷ Sari-Nuseibeh, 817.

⁵⁷⁸ Kemal, *The Poetics of Alfarabi and Avicenna*, 87.

⁵⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁸¹ Ibid., 88.

anything within themselves: “The poetic syllogism succeeds by bringing the subject to see or acquiesce to the resemblance (on the basis of an *imaginative conception of the premises*) proposed in a simile or comparison.”⁵⁸² The validity of poetic discourse rests in a feeling of aptness of association that gives rise to assent. In terms of the imagination, the standard for successful manipulation depends on the use to which the constructed image is put, not how well it reproduces some original experience.⁵⁸³ Thus Deborah Black asserts that al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, and Ibn Rushd all agree that “poetics does not seek to produce assent in the strict sense, since it is not concerned to provide true and accurate instruction about the subjects it represents. It does, however, seek to capture the audience’s imagination and in this way it can be evaluated as successful or ineffectual.”⁵⁸⁴ Since poetry attempts to produce action, it can be judged according to its results. However, unlike Sophistry, which is similarly goal-oriented, poetry obtains its validity outside of a truth/fiction binary. Sophistry aims at producing action through false gestures of truth, whereas imagination aims to produce action without the conviction of truth. Although it operates outside of the true/false binary, it is not irrational, for it still functions as a ractiocinative discourse because of its analogic structure.⁵⁸⁵

⁵⁸² Ibid., 106.

⁵⁸³ Ibid., 94.

⁵⁸⁴ Black, *Logic and Aristotle’s Rhetoric and Poetics*, 184.

⁵⁸⁵ Kemal, *The Poetics of Alfarabi and Avicenna*, 98.

Problems that Arise in the Relationship between Poetry, Prophecy and the Imagination

Al-Farabi's understanding of the function of imagination, and its important role in both poetry and prophecy, gives rise to problems with distinguishing between the two in three primary arenas. First, poetry is primarily a communicative act and thus has social implications, which is also of course an important aspect of prophecy in al-Farabi's political philosophy. Second, because it produces assent, which can bring about moral conviction, poetry's content and result can often look much like that of prophecy. Finally, the above two issues are tied to an inherent epistemological problem with al-Farabi's construction of the imagination: because of its imitative function, imagination inserts itself as a middle-man in all processes of knowing, making it difficult to distinguish between the various modes of knowing that al-Farabi wishes to keep distinct.⁵⁸⁶

Poetry is primarily communicative, rather than an act of bringing something forth from one's own mind. Thus it has social implications.⁵⁸⁷ Al-Farabi distinguished prophecy from

⁵⁸⁶ Black, *Logic and Aristotle's Rhetoric and Poetics*, 201.

⁵⁸⁷ Kemal, *The Poetics of Alfarabi and Avicenna*, 107.

philosophy by reference to this communicative/social function. Philosophy, unlike prophecy, is meant for a small audience. It is taught through demonstration, which can only be understood by those few with specialized training. In his works on political philosophy, al-Farabi notes that the primary distinction between philosophy and prophecy is the broader audience of prophecy. Prophecy is able to reach a broader audience because it is able to represent, through use of the imagination, demonstrative truths by analogy. Poetry, likewise, uses the imagination to represent through analogy. Furthermore, especially in an Islamic context, poetry creates and sustains community between individuals, which is another function al-Farabi attributes to prophecy.⁵⁸⁸ These dual social functions of poetry—instruction through analogy and community cohesion—clearly make it problematic in relation to prophecy in al-Farabi’s philosophical structure.

Imagination becomes relevant to al-Farabi’s political philosophy because it can generate a conviction equal to cognitive conviction. Such conviction creates action in individuals because of the appetitive function that al-Farabi attributes to the imaginative faculty: “If imagination generates and appetition towards objects, this is because the faculty generates at a pre-reflective and emotional level where images lead us to or away from

⁵⁸⁸ Kemal, *The Poetics of Alfarabi and Avicenna*, 87.

objects.”⁵⁸⁹ Prophecy functions to instruct the masses because it is able to produce just such conviction without requiring the masses of people it seeks to reach to be philosophically trained or cognitively developed. Thus the masses can be moved toward accepting demonstrative truths without need to develop their faculties to the point where they can understand these truths demonstratively. Although it can produce conviction, and operates ratiocinatively, the imagination nevertheless cannot produce factual statements.⁵⁹⁰ This is because the claims made by imagination have no ontological commitment to existence.⁵⁹¹ Since poetry likewise operates through the imagination and likewise has social functions, it overlaps with prophecy in this regard. Poetry produces assent to achieve an end, and can therefore be used to achieve moral instruction, although the external validity of these moral judgments cannot be validated. For al-Farabi, assent derives from the wonder and pleasure that arise from utterance itself—a wonder that derives from the feeling of anticipation of full answers.⁵⁹² Al-Farabi defines poetic discourse as “those [discourses] which consist of elements with the function of [generating imaginative assent] to a circumstance or characteristic, good or bad, of the object one speaks about, such as beauty, ugliness, loftiness, baseness, or any

⁵⁸⁹ Ibid., 98.

⁵⁹⁰ Ibid., 95.

⁵⁹¹ Ibid., 96.

⁵⁹² Kemal, *Avicenna on Poetics*, 153.

other similar to these.”⁵⁹³ Thus, through analogy, poetry can make us feel that something is beautiful, ugly, good, or bad, and we can evaluate the aptness of the analogy and its success in giving rise to assent, but poetry does not provide a means by which we may decide if something is *actually* beautiful or ugly, good or bad. Al-Farabi leaves open the possibility that the imagination might be able to make true claims about objects that do not exist, but even so, this truth can only be verified outside of imaginative discourse. This difficulty is the primary reason that one must be careful to distinguish between poetic and prophetic statements—though they both may involve the imagination, operate by analogy, and evoke imaginative assent in order to achieve a moral end, unlike poetry, the validity of prophetic statements must be verifiable *on* a true/false axis. How, then, are we to be able to distinguish between the poet who uses language to move us toward particular actions he *claims* are good, and the prophet who uses language to actually guide us towards the good? It would appear that an outside criterion is necessary.

For al-Farabi, in terms of poetry, the outside criterion for the evaluation of poetry comes from philosophy. He notes 3 kinds of praiseworthy poetry: 1) that which is aimed at improving the rational faculty; 2) that which is aimed at the correction of accidents of the soul related to strength (i.e. anger, pride, cruelty, etc); 3) that which is aimed at correcting

⁵⁹³ Kemal, *The Poetics of Alfarabi and Avicenna*, 104.

accidents of the soul related to weakness (desire, pity, fear, etc).⁵⁹⁴ There are likewise 3 kinds of blameworthy poetry: 1) that which devolves the rational faculty; 2) that which causes accidents in the soul related to strength; 3) that which causes accidents in the soul related to weakness.⁵⁹⁵ This outside criterion of evaluation does little to separate poetry from prophecy, however, since in chapter 10 of the *Book of Religion* al-Farabi also notes that the ideal relationship between religion and philosophy is a situation in which the theology of a revealed religion corresponds with or can be explained by philosophical demonstration. In this way, just as poetic truth is subordinated to demonstrative philosophy, so to is prophecy. The above two problems both point to a more deeply seated problem with al-Farabi's construction of the imagination and his understanding of its role in prophecy. In terms of epistemology, Deborah Black notes:

Making imagination essentially imitative threatens its universal role in all intellectual cognition. For if the intellect must always depend on imagination as a locus in which to think its intelligible forms, intellectual cognition seems to become removed from direct contact with its objects, and able to access them only through their imitations. We are left wondering how the imitation of intelligibles for the masses via the imaginative activities of poets and prophets

⁵⁹⁴ Ibid., 88.

⁵⁹⁵ Ibid.

differs from the philosopher's own activity of contemplating the intelligibles known to him with certitude *in* some corresponding image."⁵⁹⁶

Thus the importance of the imaginative faculty in al-Farabi's philosophy makes it impossible to differentiate between prophetic and philosophic *knowing*, distinguishing between the two only in terms of social function. Unfortunately, many of the social functions of prophecy are also shared by poetry, so such a distinction between prophecy and philosophy only compounds the problem of asserting how exactly prophecy differs from other forms of human knowing and social leadership.

A final epistemological problem that al-Farabi's construction of the imagination gives rise to involves the question of how, and by whom, the *content* of prophecy is produced. The connection between poetry and the imaginative faculty in al-Farabi means that poetry is reflective of the poet's mental operations. This is true in two ways: first, because poetry "being constituted of imaginative representations, cannot be true of the world...but does reveal something of the minds that construct those representations."⁵⁹⁷ As Kemal notes, poetry relates to the other syllogistic arts in the same way that chess relates to war—it shows the rules by which they function by displaying them explicitly. Since the syllogistic arts reflect the

⁵⁹⁶ Black, *Logic and Aristotle's Rhetoric and Poetics*, 201.

⁵⁹⁷ Kemal, *The Poetics of Alfarabi and Avicenna*, 123.

operation of human rational and emotive powers, poetry's structure is thus reflective of the structure of human thought itself.⁵⁹⁸ Secondly, since poetry is constituted of imaginative representations, its content is dependent upon the retained content of the poet's imaginative faculty, for although imitation allows for near infinite recombination of stored images, it is nevertheless still dependent upon sensory data.⁵⁹⁹ Is this also the case for prophecy? To what degree does the prophet's "imitation of intelligibles for the masses"⁶⁰⁰ also reflect the prophet's own mental operations, and how dependent is the content of prophecy on the sensory data at hand? This problem becomes especially important for the modernist thinkers we will discuss at the end of this chapter.

Ibn Sina on Imagination

Ibn Sina must have clearly recognized many of the problems inherent in al-Farabi's Imaginative Faculty, and its vital role in prophecy. He attempts to solve these problems in two

⁵⁹⁸ Ibid., 122.

⁵⁹⁹ Kemal, *Avicenna on Poetics*, 145.

⁶⁰⁰ Ibid.

different ways: by breaking up the functions of the imagination into different faculties, and by reducing the importance of the imagination as the distinguishing characteristic of prophecy. Rather than seeing the Imaginative Faculty as a single unified set of functions, Ibn Sina instead viewed them as a collection of powers bearing a family resemblance.⁶⁰¹ Instead, Ibn Sina creates the “Sacred” or “Holy” Intellect, which seems to exist outside the normal schema of human intellects, is only available to prophets, and clearly distinguishes prophetic knowing from other forms of knowledge.

For Ibn Sina, the imaginative faculty is located within the animal soul.⁶⁰² Unlike Aristotle and al-Farabi, he does not locate the functions of the imagination in a single Imaginative Faculty, but instead distributes them among five faculties: 1) common sense, which receives forms from the five senses; 2) representative faculty, which stores the forms received by common sense; 3) imaginative faculty proper, which can compose and divide those stored forms; 4) estimative faculty, which perceives non-sensible aspects of perceived objects; 5) retentive faculty, which stores estimative intentions.⁶⁰³ While it would seem that the third of these faculties retains most of the key characteristics and properties of al-Farabi’s imagination,

⁶⁰¹ Kemal, *The Poetics of Alfarabi and Avicenna*, 100.

⁶⁰² Fakhry, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, 144.

⁶⁰³ Black, *Logic and Aristotle’s Rhetoric and Poetics*, 202.

Ibn Sina's imaginative faculty is not autonomous and cannot function without necessary support from the other 4 faculties. This further division is also necessary in order to accommodate Ibn Sina's addition of non-material objects, "intentions," to the kinds of perceptual objects available to the mind.⁶⁰⁴ Furthermore, one of the consequences of locating the imagination in the animal soul is to assure that prophecy, working through and upon the imaginations of the masses, cannot provide for the eternity of the soul without also acting upon and developing the rational faculties. This is because "the function of the agent intellect in the production of human knowledge exactly parallels its function in the creation of human souls"—that is to say, immaterial human souls are only generated out of material human bodies through the activity of the active intellect.⁶⁰⁵ For this reason, "the simple-minded soul experiencing the promises of popular religion through its imaginative faculty will at the moment of death, experience death," as that soul has not developed its intellect to a sufficient degree to assure its freedom from materiality.⁶⁰⁶ So not only does Ibn Sina demote imagination from its critical role in the reception and dissemination of prophecy, he also assures that the work of imagination itself is not sufficient for successful prophecy.

⁶⁰⁴ Black, "Psychology: Soul and Intellect," 314.

⁶⁰⁵ Black, "Psychology: Soul and Intellect," *Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*, 319.

⁶⁰⁶ Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes on Intellect*, 113.

Ibn Sina on Prophecy

It would be inaccurate to say that the imagination plays no role in prophecy for Ibn Sina. Though he fragments the imagination and seems to reduce its importance in relation to prophecy, it is only reduced in that it no longer serves as the mechanism by which the prophet receives prophecy, and thus also no longer serves as the distinguishing factor between prophetic knowing and philosophical knowing. The imagination nevertheless continues to play a critical role in the prophet's execution of his public mission as prophet, even if it plays no distinguishing role in how he comes to that knowledge. Thus a prerequisite for prophecy in Ibn Sina is an exceptional imaginative faculty.⁶⁰⁷

Ibn Sina replaces imagination with intuition, which he uses to describe the internal mechanism of prophecy and also to distinguish prophetic from philosophical knowing. For Ibn Sina, insight, or intuition, as opposed to cogitation or imagination, is defined as the ability to bring forth the middle term and syllogism's conclusion instantaneously.⁶⁰⁸ Furthermore,

⁶⁰⁷ Black, "Psychology: Soul and Intellect," *Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*, 319.

⁶⁰⁸ Herbert A. Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes on Intellect: Their Cosmologies, Theories of the Active Intellect, and Theories of Human Intellect* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 99.

because it brings forth the middle term and conclusion simultaneously, insight exempts one from error⁶⁰⁹ since for Ibn Sina error cannot occur in the reception of concepts but only in their combination in the cogitative faculty.⁶¹⁰ In prophets, the “Holy Intellect” is the faculty that accounts for this reception of knowledge through intuition. Unlike al-Farabi, who assigns prophecy to the imaginative faculty, with the “Holy Intellect,” Ibn Sina locates prophecy within the category of reason.⁶¹¹

Though the imaginative faculty is not essential for the reception of prophecy, for Ibn Sina, prophets nevertheless need to use the imaginative faculty to compose images to aid the masses.⁶¹² This public function is a primary aspect of prophecy, as “scientific proofs may guide a Zarathustra up the mountain, but when he comes down again to interact with his fellow humans, he must have mastered dialectic, rhetoric, and poetics as well, or else his descent will be in vain.”⁶¹³ This public aspect of prophecy is integral to his proof of prophecy, so without the imagination to create similitudes for the masses, he cannot demonstrate the necessity of prophecy. Ibn Sina’s proof, in rough outline, states that humans are communal animals, and as

⁶⁰⁹ Ibid., 102.

⁶¹⁰ Ibid., 98.

⁶¹¹ Fakhry, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, 146.

⁶¹² Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes on Intellect*, 120.

⁶¹³ Heath, *Allegory and Philosophy in Avicenna*, 150.

such cannot reach their full human-ness outside of collectives, which he calls “cities.” Since such collectives require humans to interact with one another through a process of reciprocal transactions, these transactions must be governed by law and justice. In order to have law and justice, there must be a figure who dispenses both, and this figure must be a human. Such a figure is known as a prophet. Since a prophet is *necessary* for human existence to occur as *human* existence, and since we can observe law and justice monitoring interpersonal transactions in our own life, there must be such a thing as a prophet.⁶¹⁴ Imagination is integral to Ibn Sina’s proof of prophecy because the prophet can only interact with the masses through similitudes, because not all people are capable of engaging in demonstration and it is improper for a prophet to indicate that he or she has knowledge or understanding hidden from the rest. Therefore this figure must attempt to put these difficult concepts in terms the masses can better understand.⁶¹⁵

Ibn Sina on Poetry

⁶¹⁴ Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of The Healing*, trans. Michael E. Marmura, 1 edition (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 2005), 364.

⁶¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 365.

Like Al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, in his commentary on Aristotle's *Poetics*, located poetics in the context of the *Organon*, making it a part of logic.⁶¹⁶ Al-Farabi's reasoning for grouping poetics among the syllogistic arts proved problematic, however, and a new explanation was needed. For al-Farabi, "poetic discourse is syllogistic because it uses representations or images in a deductive but analogical form."⁶¹⁷ This is not syllogism proper, however, because "it lacks a universal middle premise," but it is nonetheless easy to mistake for syllogism since "it has the same force because its particular middle premise is acceptable."⁶¹⁸ Ibn Sina is able to salvage poetic discourse as a syllogism, however, by showing that poems use "premises inspired by emotion."⁶¹⁹ The primary emotion that concerns him in this context is wonder. Ibn Sina differentiates between demonstrative and poetic discourses not based on their structure (which is shared) but the roles of wonder and pleasure in poetic discourse.⁶²⁰ Wonder in Ibn Sina, unlike al-Farabi, is not simply pleasurable awe but also includes distress.⁶²¹ We are lead to

⁶¹⁶ Kemal, *The Poetics of Alfarabi and Avicenna*, 148.

⁶¹⁷ Ibid., 112.

⁶¹⁸ Ibid., 117.

⁶¹⁹ Kemal, "Aesthetics," 972.

⁶²⁰ Kemal, *Avicenna on Poetics*, 148.

⁶²¹ Ibid., 163.

assent due to the aptness of the comparison made by poetic discourse, and wonder arises because we assent to the comparison in spite of the fact that it seems illogical or untrue.⁶²²

For Ibn Sina, imagination has a peripheral place among the fields of knowledge, and poetry's concern with feelings rather than truth suggests that, within the imagination, it is rather distant from the aspects of imagination that traffic in rationality.⁶²³ While denigrating poetry in respect to the logical arts (while nevertheless retaining its position in the *Organon*) Ibn Sina produces a stronger defense of poetry's potential moral uses than al-Farabi. He notes that "the ability to appreciate harmony in poetry may indicate a potential for virtue," since morality is about grasping wholeness and balance of our characteristics and finding ways of living harmoniously with others.⁶²⁴ Thus, in contrast to al-Farabi who thinks that poetry can both serve to promote virtue and vice, Ibn Sina argues that "evil or immorality may not be poetically beautiful because evil cannot garner that pleasurable awe which is part of the formal character of poems, and so would preclude poetic validity."⁶²⁵ Though stated tentatively, this proposition would mean that poetry's moral teachings might be verifiable without reference to anything outside poetic discourse—a successful poem in and of itself

⁶²² Ibid., 166.

⁶²³ Ibid., 197.

⁶²⁴ Ibid., 214.

⁶²⁵ Ibid., 214.

could be counted upon to provide correct moral guidance because of the very nature poetry itself.

Modernist Takes on Poetry, Imagination and Revelation

It would seem that Ibn Sina's reformulation of the relationship between poetry, prophecy, and revelation was satisfying for most thinkers who followed him up until the modern period. In modernist thinkers, however, the troubling proximity of poetry and prophecy again arises. This problem becomes apparent in the writings of Fazlur Rahman who, in seeking to allow room for the influence of historical context in revelation, revisits the role of the prophet and prophetic imagination. While Rahman and other recent thinkers do not revisit debates on the internal structure of the human soul and how knowledge is received, they do re-examine the Prophet's public function and the way in which prophecy is aimed at helping the prophet succeed in his public mission.⁶²⁶ Such discussions lead us back to the

⁶²⁶ Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an: Second Edition*, 2nd ed. edition (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2009), 83.

question of the difference between poet and prophet, and the Qur'anic attempts to distinguish verbal prophecy from divination and poetry.

Rahman's writings on prophecy attempt to reinvigorate Mu'tazali notions of the createdness of the Qur'an in order to open the text up for contemporary reinterpretation in order to strengthen its relevance for new contexts.⁶²⁷ He critiques theories of revelation that exclude the possibility of prophetic involvement in the shaping of the message, noting the centrality of the Prophet and his life to the content of the Qur'an.⁶²⁸ In his summation of the position of Islamic philosophy on the issue of revelation, Rahman revisits much of Ibn Sina's positions discussed above. Since, however, Rahman wishes to highlight the "psychological and contextual place of the prophet himself [in prophecy] vis-à-vis his community, concerns and aspirations," he especially highlights the role imagination plays in the formation of the prophetic message.⁶²⁹ In a departure from Ibn Sina, which hearkens back to al-Farabi, Rahman states "if at the intellectual level the prophet, the philosopher and the mystic are identical, the prophet is distinguished from the others by a strong imaginative faculty."⁶³⁰ What

⁶²⁷ Abdullah Saeed, "Fazlur Rahman: A Framework for Interpreting the Ethico-Legal Content of the Qur'an," in *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an*, ed. Suha Taji-Farouki (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 42.

⁶²⁸ Ibid., 45, 55.

⁶²⁹ Ibid., 61.

⁶³⁰ Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam: Philosophy and Orthodoxy* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1958), 36.

distinguishes prophetic imagination from imaginations of others is its strength, which allows him to “recapture the intellectual truth by figurization in visual and acoustic symbols in waking life.”⁶³¹ Thus, along with poetry and mysticism, Rahman has added dreaming to the list of human mental states that resemble revelation. Without interrogating the implications of this statement for the structure of the soul or the reception of prophecy as distinguished from other kinds of knowledge, Rahman quickly pivots to the question of the prophet’s social role. Though Rahman’s writings on prophecy are sparse and he therefore does not explore them to their fullest extent, the question of the relationship between mysticism, poetry, and prophecy will continue to arise among other Muslim intellectuals.

Perhaps the most evocative recent discussion of the issue of the relationship between poetry and prophecy in Islam occurs between Abdolkarim Soroush and Ayatollah Ja’far Sobhani in a series of letters exchanged in 2008. Like Rahman, Soroush is at pains to assert a notion of prophecy that recognizes the importance of the Prophet in providing the particulars of the Qur’anic message—particulars which are both personal and contextual, the recognition of which opens the text up to an expanded range of interpretations. Like Rahman before him, Soroush lassos together the three figures—Prophet, mystic, and poet—in order to, through differentiating between the three, gain a better understanding of the role of a prophet in

⁶³¹ Ibid., 38.

prophecy. He notes that all three involve inspiration, which we will remember is a key term for Ibn Sina in relation to prophecy. Soroush, like Ibn Sina, notes that while the mechanism of prophetic inspiration is the same as that which takes place in poetry and prophecy (and presumable dreams as well), the *quality* of inspiration differs—the prophet’s inspiration is of a greater kind.⁶³² Sobhani challenges Soroush on this point, and rather than responding to his critique by referencing Ibn Sina, Soroush points toward al-Ghazali, who argues that satanic temptation is a useful analog to prophetic inspiration.⁶³³ Such a position indicates that inspiration constitutes a sliding scale based on quality and source, and that prophetic inspiration is not radically different, in kind, from other forms of inspiration.

Since one cannot clearly distinguish between poet, prophet, and mystic based on their mode of knowing, he must employ other means. In the main body of the book, outside of his exchange with Sobhani, Soroush asserts the prophetic ‘mission’ as central to distinguishing between prophets and mystics. He cites Abd al-Quddus of Gangoh who, in distinguishing between prophetic revelation and mystical ecstasy, says “‘the Prophet ascended to the heavens and returned; had I been in his place, I would not have returned.’”⁶³⁴ It is in this return that the

⁶³² Abdulkarim Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience: Essays on Historicity, Contingency and Plurality in Religion*, ed. Forough Jahanbakhsh, trans. Nilou Mobasser (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2009), 272.

⁶³³ *Ibid.*, 292.

⁶³⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

imagination comes into play, for at this point the prophet must translate ineffable experience into similitudes that can be shared with a broader audience through the analogic powers of the imagination. Soroush himself does not assert that this is how the process functions, we must instead extrapolate this process based on Soroush's source materials and based on the fact that it is through the imagination that Soroush sees the prophet's context entering into revelation.⁶³⁵ Such contextual influence could only occur if the imagination functions in the ways we have seen described by both al-Farabi and Ibn Sina. In this formulation, however, one is left to wonder about the difference between prophecy and mystical poets—if mystics, such as Rumi, have both experienced divine union, and returned, and written about it effectively using the imaginative faculty, what must one look to next in order to distinguish between them? In Soroush's formulation this point is elided over—the Prophet receives pride of place because of historical primacy and scope of the community affected by his message, but it seems that Soroush sees Rumi's contribution as equivalent to Muhammad's in all other ways.

Soroush later explains the contextual elements of revelation by referring to the Prophet as an instructor, who has lecture notes and a syllabus at the beginning of each semester, but must alter the structure of the course based on his student's needs or interests. It should be noted that while this solution to the problem seems elegant, for it helps

⁶³⁵ Ibid., 296-297.

distinguish between prophets who have a comprehensive revelation in contrast to the partial revelation of mystics, it conflicts with Ibn Sina's notion that revelation is not received all at once, but piecemeal. If the instructor does not in fact have complete lecture notes or a full syllabus at the beginning of the semester, this leaves him likewise constantly returning to God with specific questions as they arise from the students—a situation which Soroush finds to be problematic.⁶³⁶ Sobhani notes a further problem with this metaphor, which is that if we were to permit that the Prophet had received the entire revelation at once and was doling it out piecemeal over the course of his life in response to particular situations, why do we have reports of the Prophet having to retire and wait for revelation to come before answering a question, rather than being able to answer immediately?⁶³⁷ Thus it is unclear that this metaphor, persuasive as it may be, helps clarify the role of the imagination in prophecy in light of Islamic Philosophy, or that it clearly allows us to distinguish between prophecy and the linguistic teachings of mystics.

While Soroush's understanding of the public role of the prophet and the role of the imagination in relation to the formation of the Qur'anic message is compelling, we must ultimately see his work as a break with the philosophic tradition of al-Farabi and Ibn Sina.

⁶³⁶ Ibid., 329.

⁶³⁷ Ibid., 309.

Soroush notes that “all Islamic philosophers, ranging from al-Farabi to Ibn Sina (Avicenna), from Nasir al-din Tusi to Sadr al-din Shirazi, have considered it impossible for the prophet to grasp revelation without the involvement of his faculty of imagination.”⁶³⁸ While such statement might be considered true based on an incautious reading of al-Farabi, this section has shown that such an assertion is not true of Ibn Sina. First of all, it seems likely, given all that he attributes to it, that Soroush’s concept of the imagination is much more robust and unified than Ibn Sina’s and looks much more like al-Farabi’s single faculty. More importantly, however, is the fact that both al-Farabi and Ibn Sina are careful to distinguish between the reception of revelation and the dissemination of prophecy. Thus one can ‘grasp’ revelation without the imaginative faculty coming into play in Ibn Sina. It seems as if al-Farabi wished to take a similar position, but the epistemological problems inherent in his conception of the imagination mean that this faculty seems to insert itself necessarily into the process of all forms of human knowing. As this section has shown, Ibn Sina’s resolution of the problems with al-Farabi’s notion of the imaginative faculty make it much easier to distinguish between the reception of revelation and the dissemination of prophecy, with imagination playing a central role only in the latter process. Modern and contemporary thinkers, however, are revisiting the role of the imagination in prophecy for the purpose of opening up new possibilities in Qur’anic

⁶³⁸ Ibid., 331.

exegesis. In doing so, however, they find themselves caught in debates as old as Islam itself about the differences between prophetic inspiration and other forms of knowing, and between prophecy and other forms of inspired speech. Closer attention to the evolution of these debates in the early period and in the writings of the major figures of Islamic Philosophy might help contemporary thinkers avoid rehashing the same arguments as they attempt to devise a theory of revelation and prophecy that allows them to distinguish prophecy from other human activities while simultaneously permitting them to assert the importance of historical context and prophetic personality in the formation of the Qur'an.

Nizami on Poetry

It is within this context of the anxiety over poetry's truth value and its (potentially) dangerous proximity to prophecy that Nizami enters. He is clearly aware of the need to defend poetry as a genre for discussing mystical experience. As a poet, Nizami is upfront about his high valuation of poetry, including an introductory section on the superiority of poetry to prose. What he adds to the conversation, however, is that he values poetry not just as a human art, but as an apt medium for religious discourse: "The key to the treasure [of the two worlds]

lies under the tongue of the poet.”⁶³⁹ He notes, for example, “The poets are the nightingales of heaven.”⁶⁴⁰ This is not just poetic flourish, however, Nizami clearly thinks that poetry has a special connection to religious insight. He is in fact troubled that poetry has been devalued by unscrupulous poets who versify solely for bread.⁶⁴¹

Though he highly values poetry for religious discourse, Nizami is clear to distinguish between poetry and prophecy while nevertheless elevating poetry to a status just below that of prophecy. He explicitly places poets immediately after the prophets in rank: “Poetry, the veil of intimate secrets, is a shadow of the Prophetic veil / Two ranks stand before God; in front are the prophets, and the poets are behind.”⁶⁴² This is because “When they are agitated by the fire of thought [*fikr*], they become one family with the angels.”⁶⁴³ This seems to be a nod to the notion that poets can access the Active Intellect through the imaginative faculty. Nizami argues that such a poet can only be trusted if he overcomes his base needs, and that such a poet can “pierce heaven’s ear,” “penetrate the seven spheres,” and press the dome of heaven

⁶³⁹ Nizami Ganjavi, *Makhzan al-asrar*, 40.

⁶⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁶⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁶⁴² *Ibid.*, 41.

⁶⁴³ *Ibid.*

to servitude.⁶⁴⁴ Thus, when one finds a worthy poet, one should “attach oneself to his words, because he is a poet.”⁶⁴⁵

But he hedges a bit on this, since not all poets are worthy of such rank, rather one must distinguish between true poetry and debased poets, who versify only for monetary gain.⁶⁴⁶

What might distinguish true poets from the debased? In part it seems to center on the subject matter, since Nizami claims to be producing a “new poetry” freed from the tavern, which will earn him reward on Judgment Day.⁶⁴⁷ He also argues that one should be wary of delving into poetry before first becoming familiar with *Shariah*, but once one is sufficiently versed in the exoteric religious obligations, poetry can “seat you at the Lote Tree [*sidrat*]” and give you a Sultanate in the Kingdom of Spiritual Meaning [*ma’na*].”⁶⁴⁸ It seems clear that part of the issue of poetry for Nizami revolves around the proper comportment of the body. One can’t be prepared for receiving its spiritual insights until one has mastered the external requirements of religion and relinquished desire for worldly things.

⁶⁴⁴ Ibid., 42–43.

⁶⁴⁵ Ibid., 42.

⁶⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁷ Ibid., 44–45.

⁶⁴⁸ Ibid., 43.

This entire introductory section could certainly be disregarded as mere poetic flourish—a craftsman bolstering his own product by denigrating the creations of others. Certainly there is a long history of such poetic boasting.⁶⁴⁹ But to disregard Nizami’s writing on poetry as mere boasting fails to see how critically it frames the rest of the project. As we shall see, for Nizami a true poet is defined by his renunciation of worldly attachments, which gives the poet mystical insight. This is a theme that runs throughout the *Makhzan al-asrar*, such that Nizami is not merely making an argument for the value of his poetry, but the value of poetry in general for revealing mystical insight and conveying religious teachings.

⁶⁴⁹ Annemarie Schimmel, *A Two-Colored Brocade: The Imagery of Persian Poetry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 26.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

Recently rumors have circulated about a Jalal al-Din Rumi biopic, purportedly with Leonardo DiCaprio playing Mawlana and Robert Downey Jr slated to play Shams al-Din Tabrizi.⁶⁵⁰ The film's stated goal is to combat Islamophobia by providing a positive portrayal of a Muslim historical figure. It makes sense that Rumi would be chosen for such a task: he has been on and off the Bestseller list and has certainly sold more copies than any contemporary American poet. He is also a safe choice because of the ways his poetry has been translated into English. Often stripped of historical context, overt religious references, and religious vocabulary, Rumi is presented as a generic Eastern Mystic. When I ask students about Rumi, many have the impression that he is Buddhist. Such a presentation of Sufi poetry, stripped of its religious and cultural specificity, is attractive to American audiences looking to construct their own private religion by mixing and matching from non-Christian sources. It rests on a presumption that Sufis are antinomian pluralists mainly interested in internalized, personal

⁶⁵⁰ Travis Andrews, "Leonardo DiCaprio May Play Persian Poet Rumi in Upcoming Biopic. Hollywood Whitewashing or Bold Casting?," *Washington Post*, accessed June 13, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2016/06/09/leonardo-dicaprio-may-play-persian-poet-rumi-in-upcoming-biopic-hollywood-whitewashing-or-bold-casting/>.

encounters with God, stripped of any exoteric religious trappings. It is notable that such a presentation of Sufism aligns well with Protestant notions of religion, and dovetails with historical attempts to present a “good” Islam, in contrast to a perceived overly dogmatic and ritualistic “bad” Islam.⁶⁵¹

Such a presentation of Sufism, and Sufi poetry, does harm in a number of ways. First, what is the value for combatting Islamophobia in constructing a vision of Islam that only exists in Yoga studios in Brooklyn? Readers of pop-Rumi might be shocked or even angered by more nuanced presentations of his work, or Muslims who disagree with Coleman Barks’ interpretation of the master.⁶⁵² Second, it devalues the particular form of the poetry Sufis wrote. Translators and “versioners”⁶⁵³ attempt to capture the “essence” of the Sufi message, but do so by changing extended, impeded narratives into short aphorisms, and divorcing those narratives from their explication. Finally, such approaches to Sufism reinforce problematic assumptions about mysticism as a primarily male, disembodied, mind-focused practice, ignoring the long history of bodily techniques and practices that invite and allow a fleeting

⁶⁵¹ See, for example, Omid Safi, “Good Sufi, Bad Muslims,” accessed June 13, 2016, <http://divinity.uchicago.edu/sightings/good-sufi-bad-muslims-omid-safi>; Finnegan, “I Belong to No Religion. My Religion Is Love.”

⁶⁵² I have personally witnessed several such outbursts in classroom settings, where student cannot believe that Rumi is Muslim or that he advocated at times for adherence to Islamic Law.

⁶⁵³ That is, poets who know no Persian but write new English renditions of the poetry based on scholarly translations.

encounter with God. It is in these embodied practices, often explicitly referenced and praised in Sufi poetry, that cultural and religious specificity can be most acute.

Sufism and the Body

This dissertation investigates the role of the body in medieval Sufism through an analysis of the portrayals of the body found in the first poem of Nizami's *Quintet*, the *Makhzan al-asrar*. The *Quintet* provides a comprehensive vision for the structure and regulation of Islamic civilization, advocating models of courtly love, mystical experience, and religious ritual, setting forth the requirements for a properly regulated society and outlining the contours of divine kingship. The size and scope of his project was essayed by a host of later poets, who mimicked the subject matter, meter, and structure of Nizami's opus. Nizami's *Quintet* also perpetuated the practice of beginning these epics with a fixed series of introductory remarks, covering topics such as God's unity, praise of the Prophet, and the Prophet's ascension. Though the nature of Nizami as poet, mystic, ethicist, and scientist has been a topic of debate for several decades, barely discussed in this ongoing conversation is the first poem in his *Quintet*, the *Treasury of Mysteries*. A mystico-ethical text, it serves as a prolegomenon to his *Quintet*, outlining the major contours of his poetic vision, and was

emulated in both meter and structure by a vast number of Persian poets after him, most notably Amir Khosrow Dehlavi (d. 1325) and ‘Abd al-Rahman Nur al-Din Jami (d. 1492). These poems were enormously popular—they circulated in lavishly illuminated manuscripts, were displayed in imperial libraries, passed down along Sufi lineages, and were turned into popular songs performed at saints’ shrines. Ownership of and command over Nizami’s *Quintet*, among other texts, was one way that medieval Muslim kings and saints constructed their religious and political legitimacy.⁶⁵⁴

In spite of their immense popularity and importance, the *Makhzan al-asrar* is often overlooked in contemporary scholarship. This is in part because they challenge long-held but problematic definitions of Sufism as a private, interiorizing tendency within Islam that is primarily interested in human love as a metaphor for divine proximity. I argue that these texts can, as Scott Kugle and Shahzad Bashir have pointed out, become sources for learning about medieval Sufi habitus—as sedimented sources of religious mores, bodily comportments, social relations, history, science, and meaning.⁶⁵⁵ As such, this dissertation will challenge previous characterizations of medieval Sufism by investigating the importance of bodily practice in a prominent medieval poem.

⁶⁵⁴ Balabanlilar, 149.

⁶⁵⁵ Shahzad Bashir, *Sufi Bodies*; Kugle, *Sufis & Saints’ Bodies*.

Recent works, such as Ahmet Karamustafa's *God's Unruly Friends*, Scott Kugle's *Sufis and Saints Bodies*, and Shazad Bashir's *Sufi Bodies*, have cleared a space for the body as a subject of study in medieval Sufism. Most relevant to this study, Bashir notes a "high valorization of corporeal contact as a marker of social solidarity and transmission of authority in the literature and art" of the medieval period.⁶⁵⁶ He further states that the texts in his study link "increasing intimacy with greater corporeal access."⁶⁵⁷ Bashir's work alerts us to the importance of the physical transmission of authority in the texts and contexts of medieval Sufism. The significance of this relationship between physical contact, spiritual intimacy, and the transmission of mystical knowledge helps to shed light on Nizami's repeated reference to the physicality of Muhammad's ascension.

In his 2011 book, *Sufi Aesthetics*, Cyrus Ali Zargar identifies the thirteenth century as a particularly important moment for the development of poetic metaphors to describe God in Sufism. Zargar shows how poets, such as Fakhr al-Din 'Iraqi (d. 1289), attempted to resolve multiple intellectual and philosophical strands of mysticism in their writings. In attempting to resolve a practical and ecstatic love mysticism that calls for direct encounters with God with a philosophically rigorous theoretical mysticism which problematizes the possibility of such an

⁶⁵⁶ Bashir, 3.

⁶⁵⁷ Ibid., 5.

unmediated encounter, 'Iraqi settles on the male human form as the ideal symbolic medium through which divine-human encounters can take place.⁶⁵⁸ My own work will expand on and complicate this insight, showing how the ontological pre-eminence of the Prophet Muhammad underlies the notion that the male human form is the closest creation comes to approximating the nature of God. Likewise, my research shows how one Sufi poet uses the *Mi'raj* to thread the needle between various philosophical, theological, and mystical discourses, preserving the uniqueness of the Prophet's encounter with God while also clearing a space for others to attain mystical proximity to the divine.

Colby and Gruber have already highlighted how ascension narratives subordinate competing symbolic systems to Muhammad's revelation for the purposes of negotiating sectarian debates, winning converts, and training the newly converted. Though aimed at a courtly audience rather than potential converts, Nizami's ascension narrative nevertheless fits this paradigm, because it subordinates competing discourses of knowledge and authority (such as astrology) to the direct encounter with God. This study argues that Nizami utilizes familiar Sufi tropes of bodily contact and bestowal of clothing to portray Muhammad as a Sufi initiate who is symbolically granted divine knowledge and authority over the cosmos during his ascension.

⁶⁵⁸ Zargar, *Sufi Aesthetics*.

Such a relationship between Sufism, the body, and literary assertions of spiritual authority would have been difficult to think just a few decades ago. Scholars of Sufism who studied the two centuries preceding Nizami's lifetime have tended to read the textual production of this era as primarily apologetic in nature. Sufi manuals and hagiographic collections were viewed as attempts to negotiate a space for an antinomian Sufism in a world dominated by Islamic law. In the past decade, however, Jawid Mojaddedi and Ahmet Karamustafa, among others, have pointed to the flaws in this argument. In *Sufism: The Formative Period*, Karamustafa, for example, argues that such texts instead represent an attempt, among other things, to demonstrate the primacy of Sufi piety over other forms in Islam.

This dissertation thus situates itself at the conjunction of discourses on 1) the ascension narrative as a genre commonly used for asserting the primacy of one religious identity over another, 2) the importance of the body in medieval Sufism, and 3) the centrality of Persian poetry to the development and dissemination of Sufism. By examining how Nizami positions Muhammad as the paradigmatic mystic, I then use the *Mi'raj* as an interpretive lens through which to understand the role of the body in the rest of their work. In doing so, this dissertation reveals how Nizami deploys familiar bodily tropes to argue for the supremacy of Sufism over other forms of knowledge and authority.

Public perception of Sufism continues to be shaped by 18th and 19th century discourses on Islam. These explicitly colonial and racialized understandings of Islam framed (and frame) Sufism as Persianate⁶⁵⁹, intellectual, mystical, antinomian, and suitable for Western consumption, in contrast to the Arab⁶⁶⁰ strands of Islam, which were legalistic and incapable of philosophical thinking.⁶⁶¹ On this construal, Sufi poets such as Rumi or Hafiz can be extracted from their Islamic religious and cultural context and presented as generic Eastern mystics. One can recite Daniel Ladinsky's "translations" of Hafiz⁶⁶² while meditating before a statue of the Buddha before attending yoga class. While such contemporary recombinations of religious source materials are worthy of study in their own right, one must wonder how an American Hafiz aficionado might respond to translations of his poetry more fully embedded in their historical and religious context.⁶⁶³ Would a Rumi who advocated practice of daily prayer and fasting have become the best selling poet in America?

⁶⁵⁹ And therefore "Aryan."

⁶⁶⁰ In Renan's terms: Semitic.

⁶⁶¹ Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (University of Chicago Press, 2012), 173–174.

⁶⁶² Usually pronounced "Hafeeeez" by American readers, an unintentional but not insignificant sonic distancing of his name from the Arabic honorific.

⁶⁶³ Often market forces and editorial decisions act to protect such readers from acquiring this uncomfortable knowledge. See, for example, Ernst, *Following Muhammad*, xiv.

In contrast to the public perception of Sufism, the academic study of Sufism has transformed itself over the past two decades. Once focused on the intellectual, philosophical, and mystical strands of the tradition, recent works accented the role of the body in both contemporary and historical manifestations of Sufism. According to Rudolph Ware, in *The Walking Qur'an*, this helpful correction to the scholarly study of Sufism may have been an overcorrection. He argues that recent studies of Sufism and the body have posited Sufism as the sole repository for embodied practice, in contrast to an intellectual, textual, Arab Islamic modernism.⁶⁶⁴ In some ways, this is the inverse of Renan's argument. What this approach misses, according to Ware, is that "Sufism draws its bodily approach to knowledge from the broader Islamic ethic, not the other way around."⁶⁶⁵ Central to Ware's argument is that "the human being as a material reality and practices of corporeal remolding are essential for the classical epistemology of Islam to work."⁶⁶⁶ For Ware this is true not simply of Sufi orders, but also Qur'an schools, among other sites of knowledge transmission in Islamic history. In contrast to these prior approaches, Ware argues that his work will "focus on the human body

⁶⁶⁴ He specifically points to Scott Kugle's *Sufis & Saint's Bodies* on this matter.

⁶⁶⁵ Rudolph T. Ware, *The Walking Qur'an: Islamic Education, Embodied Knowledge, and History in West Africa*, 1 edition (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 6.

⁶⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

and the ways Muslims have used it to archive, transmit, decode, and actualize religious knowledge.”⁶⁶⁷

It is with these caveats in mind that my own work proceeds. Nizami, as a figure, is both inside and outside of Sufism proper. He clearly argues for his own spiritual authority and poetic authenticity based on a mystical experience. His poetry is filled with metaphors for the Sufi path and uses imagery that would be familiar to any Sufi. His work, especially the romances, are leaned on by later Sufis and mystical poets as a source of inspiration. In spite of this, Nizami himself was never part of a Sufi order and contemporary scholarship is uneasy about his relationship to the broader Sufi tradition. In the *Makhzan al-asrar*, he argues for a spiritual authority derived from embodied knowledge of God transmitted through the example of the Prophet Muhammad. As Ware points out, “the relationship between the spiritual guide (*murshid*) and the aspirant (*murid*) is but one face of a broader master/disciple relationship in Islamic schooling.”⁶⁶⁸ In Nizami’s poetry, he posits Muhammad as the master *par excellence* who points the way towards an embodied spirituality that allows for a direct encounter with God. Likewise, he marks himself, due to his own bodily discipline, as a vessel for transmitting such knowledge to others through poetry.

⁶⁶⁷ Ibid., 4.

⁶⁶⁸ Ibid., 6.

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