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## **“Between the Yes and the No”: Alternative Ontologies and Literary Depictions of Mysticism in Borges and Mahfouz**

David Shane Elder  
*University of Arkansas, Fayetteville*

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“Between the Yes and the No”: Alternative Ontologies and Literary Depictions of Mysticism in  
Borges and Mahfouz

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies

by

David Shane Elder  
University of North Carolina at Wilmington  
Bachelor of Arts in English, 1992  
University of North Carolina at Wilmington  
Master of Arts in English, 2000

May 2016  
University of Arkansas

This dissertation is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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Professor Adnan Haydar  
Dissertation Director

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Professor Kay Pritchett  
Committee Member

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Professor Sergio Villalobos-Ruminott  
Committee Member

---

Professor Michael Beard  
Ex-Officio Member

## Abstract

Since the advent of the modern era and the subsequent age of Enlightenment, the rational tradition has enabled the West to assert command of a large area of the globe and its population. While advancing the conditions of living for many, rational structures have also been used to control and repress others. The theosophy of the medieval Islamic mystic Ibn al-ʿArabī, with its basis in irrational thought, offers a counterpoint to the rational and empirical traditions, the social orthodoxies to which these epistemologies contribute, and the ontologies with which these epistemologies and orthodoxies are correlated. Yet mystical expression is very often recondite and reliant upon a bewildering array of apophatic stylistic devices in an attempt to convey ineffable gnosis. More than in the reportage of the mystics themselves, irrational gnosis could be transmitted to wide audiences by writers who have gained world-wide fame.

From this point of departure, this dissertation project analyzes the degree to which “literary depictions of mysticism” suggest alternatives to rational ontologies, perhaps more effectively and efficiently than mysticism *qua* mysticism. Indeed, “literary depictions of mysticism,” when juxtaposed with aspects of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s theosophy, can “impolitically” deconstruct or re-conceptualize orthodox, rational conceptions of the ontological categories of time, space, and subjectivity. While an impossibly large number of authors, texts, and genres could be used to investigate how “literary representations of mysticism” challenge these ontological categories, this dissertation—favoring methodological depth over breadth—essays a rigorous examination of only a small sample of the literary production of two “canonical” twentieth century authors: Jorge Luis Borges and Naguib Mahfouz.

By highlighting the authors’ depictions of irrational mystical approaches to the ontological categories of time, space, and subjectivity in their literary production, the present

work concludes that readers who have been alerted to these irrational approaches by critically engaged teachers might then be encouraged to incorporate them into meaningful and productive strategies for resistance to power and towards initiating individual and social transformation. Ideally, such resistance and transformation will contribute to a “speech addressed to the other, recognized as other” and establish a roadmap for the “democracy to come.”

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## **Dedication**

I want to dedicate all the effort behind this dissertation and any merits that might reside within it to all of my grandparents, but in particular my maternal grandmother Gertrude McLaughlin, who passed away February 20, 2015. I know you waited as long as you could for me to finish. I did it Nana!

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### Introduction: “Between the Yes and the No”

In an anecdote well-known to scholars of the medieval Islamic mystic Muḥyī al-Dīn Muḥammad Ibn ʿAlī Ibn Muḥammad al-ʿArabī al-Ṭāʾī al-Ḥātimī (Ibn al-ʿArabī), he recounts meeting in Córdoba, at the age of fifteen, the esteemed rational philosopher Ibn Rushd<sup>1</sup> and begins to explain the arc of their conversation:

As I entered, the philosopher rose from his seat and came to meet me, showing me every possible token of friendship and consideration and finally embracing me. Then he said to me: “Yes.” I in turn replied to him: “Yes.” Then his joy increased as he saw that I had understood him. But next, when I myself became aware of what it was that had caused his joy, I added: “No.” Immediately Ibn Rushd tensed up, his features changed color and he seemed to doubt his own thoughts. He asked me this question: “What kind of solution have you found through illumination and divine inspiration? Is it just the same as what we receive from speculative thought?” I replied to him: “Yes and no. Between the yes and the no spirits take flight from their matter and necks break away from their bodies.” Ibn Rushd turned pale; I saw him start to tremble. He murmured the ritual phrase, “there is no strength save in God,” because he had understood my allusion. (Addas 37)

Ibn al-ʿArabī’s reputation as a mystic by the time of his meeting Ibn Rushd was already starting to spread throughout Andalusia, where he was born in Murcia in 560 AH/1165 CE. Word had traveled about the gnosis acquired by Ibn al-ʿArabī during a series of retreats from the affairs of the world, and Ibn Rushd arranged a meeting with the teenager through Ibn al-ʿArabī’s father: “He wanted to meet me, as he had heard of the illumination which God had granted to me during my retreat; he had expressed amazement on learning what he had been told about me” (qtd. in Addas 34).<sup>2</sup> The context for the conversation related above was a debate between the rational philosopher and the mystic about the question of the resurrection of the body (Addas 37 n. 17);

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<sup>1</sup> Ibn Rushd was known to his medieval European contemporaries and to European intellectual posterity as Averroes. For a concise but thorough summary of the rational speculative philosophy and textual production of Ibn Rushd, see (Urvoy 330–45).

<sup>2</sup> For a chronology and summary of the retreats and the gnosis gained during these retreats by the young mystic, see Addas 33-44.

regardless of the topic, the young mystic's responses and his descriptions of the philosopher's reactions serve well to highlight Ibn al-ʿArabī's dismissive attitude towards rational thought and speculative philosophy.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, as Addas points out, from Ibn al-ʿArabī's writing it becomes clear that the rhetoric and language of rational philosophy "repulsed" him, that "his knowledge of philosophy was very superficial and, what is more, that he had no desire whatever to increase it" (107-8).

In offering this anecdote and brief contextualization to illustrate the gulf in thought between rational, speculative philosophy as it was practiced in medieval Andalusia and "irrational" Islamic mysticism as it was experienced and lived by Ibn al-ʿArabī,<sup>4</sup> I also aim to introduce a central theme of the project which unfolds through the following chapters: that Ibn al-ʿArabī's mystical theosophy, in its embrace of irrational thought, offers a counterpoint to the rational and empirical traditions, the social orthodoxies to which these epistemologies contribute, and the ontologies with which these epistemologies and orthodoxies are correlated. From this point of departure, over the course of the dissertation I will use this central theme to demonstrate how "literary depictions of mysticism" likewise suggest alternatives to ontologies of orthodoxy, perhaps more effectively and efficiently than mysticism *qua* mysticism. In particular, I will analyze how such "literary depictions of mysticism," when juxtaposed with Ibn al-ʿArabī's

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<sup>3</sup> The lack of regard held by Ibn al-ʿArabī for rational, speculative theology is perhaps underscored by the fact that this conversation is the only reference to Ibn Rushd in all of his writings (Addas 108), excepting a mention in I:154 of Ibn al-ʿArabī's *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (henceforth abbreviated over the course of the dissertation as *FM*) that he had attended the philosopher's funeral in Cordoba in 595 AH/1198 CE (Addas 171).

<sup>4</sup> Two biographies of Ibn al-ʿArabī which this dissertation is indebted should be mentioned here. Presently the most rigorously researched and detailed academic history of Ibn al-ʿArabī's life is Addas' *The Quest for the Red Sulphur*. Hirtenstein's *The Unlimited Mercifier* provides a more readable and close look at the Sheikh's life and career, but with less documentation.

theosophy, can deconstruct or re-conceptualize orthodox, rational conceptions of the ontological categories of time, space, and subjectivity. While an impossibly large number of authors, texts, and genres could be used to investigate how “literary representations of mysticism” challenge these ontological categories, this dissertation—favoring methodological depth over breadth—essays a rigorous examination of only a small sample of the literary production of two twentieth century authors: Jorge Luis Borges and Naguib Mahfouz. Moreover, by highlighting the alternative approaches to the ontological categories of time, space, and subjectivity suggested in the works of these two authors, I will suggest ways in which their readers might be encouraged to incorporate these approaches into meaningful and productive strategies for resistance to power by way of individual and social transformation.

### **A Current Problem**

Foucault has previously debunked much of the legacy left by the Enlightenment, demonstrating that “Reason” and “Truth” are neither synonymous terms nor causally linked. Moreover, a large part of his project exposes how rational means are often used by possessors of superior power/knowledge to enact oppressive social control. Yet Foucault holds out hope that whenever and wherever there are power relations, there also exists the possibility of resistance (O’Farrell 152–53). Therefore, theorizing and enacting productive strategies for resistance to overwhelming power/knowledge and for invigorating individual and social transformation might first begin by interrogating rationality and the ontological categories with which rationality is dialectically involved.

Though Foucault more often than not sought to distance his theories from those of Marx, here I would like to bridge anew the two thinkers by suggesting that, at the present moment in universal history, it is capital which controls power/knowledge on a global scale never witnessed

before. Likewise, it is clear from Marx's critique of capital that capital's orthodoxy derives much of its vigor from the very ontological categories informed by—and also informing—rationality and empiricism.<sup>5</sup> Hence capital, through rationally developed methods, pursues accumulation of more capital and more power/knowledge, represses social dissent, and establishes an orthodoxy which is used to manufacture consent within the subaltern classes which it seeks to dominate. Thus, the phenomenon which should be the target of resistance at the present time is the orthodoxy of what David Harvey articulates as the “flexible accumulation” of capital and what Jameson, following the Frankfurt School, refers to as “late capital.”<sup>6</sup> It follows then, that rather than face the orthodoxy of power with a violence of the body, a more productive focal point towards which to aim resistance efforts would be those rationally developed ontological definitions used by capital to construct its orthodoxy.

### **Towards A Possible Solution**

Namely, contesting the orthodox notions of time, space, and subjectivity and the rational structures which maintain them could help to untangle what Harvey has identified as a “substantial nexus of social power” formed by the “intersecting command of money, time, and space” (226). Clearly, according to Harvey, the orthodoxy of capital is aimed towards securing power over both time and space and towards “annihilating space” through the acceleration of time. Harvey relies on Gurvitch's “typology of social time” in order to point out that in the temporal type which characterizes the social form of competitive capitalism and speculation,

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<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the clearest indication of capital's dependence on empiricism and rationality as it seeks to control labor, markets, and consumption, is that Marx's own critique in *Capital*, vol. 1, by necessity employs both empirical and rational methods to conceptualize and attack the capitalistic mode of production and social formations.

<sup>6</sup> See Jameson (xvii–xxi) and Harvey (147–97).



time appears to be “in advance of itself,” “rushing forward,” leading to discontinuity, contingency, the triumph of “qualitative change,” and the perception that “the future becomes the present” (225). Following Gurvitch, Harvey’s thesis is that in the temporal horizon of “time in advance of itself,” speed and acceleration characterize social relations; time is money, “moments” are the “elements of profit” (Marx *Capital* vol. 1, qtd. in Harvey 230), and the quicker the turn-around time that capital has between buying and selling and accumulating more capital, the more power it acquires (229-30). One social outcome of such a time horizon is that “[t]he battle over minutes and seconds, over the pace and intensity of work schedules, over the working life (and rights of retirement), over the working week and day (with rights to ‘free time’), over the working year (and rights to paid vacations), has been, and continues to be, right royally fought” (Harvey 231). Hence, the ontological category of time is a category in which power is hotly contested, and offering people who are subordinated by power some alternatives to the capitalist orthodoxy that is built upon and that reaffirms the ontological view of time as “in advance of itself” can perhaps contribute productively to this “right royally fought” struggle.

In terms of space, Harvey synthesizes key texts from geographical and anthropological discourses which detail the various conceptions, uses, and productions of space that have been employed in human social history, in order to compose his own narrative about the exploitation and production of space by capital. Himself a geographer by training, Harvey’s insights on how capital manipulates space in the present era of “flexible accumulation” are penetrating: “The incentive to create the world market, to reduce spatial barriers, and to annihilate space through time is omni-present, as is the incentive to rationalize spatial organization into efficient configurations of production, ... circulation networks, ... and consumption” (232). Likewise, capital acquires social power by influencing the production of space, because “those who can

effect the spatial distribution of investments in transport and communications, in physical and social infrastructures, or the territorial distribution of administrative, political, and economic powers can often reap material rewards” (233). Another manner in which capital can acquire more social power through its orthodoxy and ontology is in its representations of space to those whom it wishes to dominate; as Harvey argues, “power in the realms of representation may end up being as important as power over the materiality of spatial organization itself” (233).

Challenging power’s rational manipulation and depiction of space—not by vandalizing banks, sabotaging factories, or barricading a highway or railway—but by offering alternative, irrational strategies for conceptualizing and representing space, could in turn lead to the advent of productive strategies for resistance to power and for achieving social transformation.

Both Harvey and Fredric Jameson have been key figures in analyzing how the heightened pace of life and the demands of negotiating the space of “flexible accumulation,” or “late capital,” are both symptomized by and generative of fragmented subjectivities. While this idea resonates with Marx’s ideas about the alienation of the worker, Harvey and Jameson compose a much more detailed picture of the damage done to individual subjectivities from competing in capitalist time and capitalist space. Harvey identifies ephemeral personal values, a “crack-up of consensus,” sensory overload resulting in the “blocking out of stimuli, denial, cultivation of the blasé attitude, myopic specialization, reversion to images of a lost past, and excessive simplification (either in the presentation of the self or in the interpretation of events)” (286). Likewise, Jameson, in his critique of postmodern culture, characterizes the subjectivity of late-capital as manifested by “depthlessness,” an over-reliance on the simulacrum or the image, a weakened sense of historicity, a schizophrenic individual sense of time, and a “deep constitutive relationship of all this to a whole new technology” (6). As with the categories of time and space,

reappraising the ontological category of subjectivity along non-rational lines could enable individuals to discover alternative ideas about the “self,” ideally leading to restored individual subjectivities and emancipated societies.

To resist or transform the rational, orthodox ontology of capital then, the categories of time, space, and subjectivity should be contested or interrogated; indeed, following Harvey, I argue that it is imperative to “challenge the idea of a single and objective sense of time or space, against which we can measure the diversity of human conceptions and perceptions” (203). Of course, any meaningful contestation to ontology must first take into consideration the Kantian notion that far from being absolute “truths,” ontologies are human-made constructs, and as Wittgenstein teaches, these constructs necessarily consist of language. Therefore, as much as it is possible, it is at the level of language where a non-rational or irrational grappling with ontology must begin. Of course, this suggests that concentrated and deliberate linguistic production, such as occurs in literature,<sup>7</sup> is an ideal site for the contestation of ontological categories, especially those of time, space, and subjectivity. These very categories then are the proper grounds on which to challenge, through the medium of language, the orthodoxy of power that is established with these categories. By confronting orthodoxy using its own terms and on the very conceptual, ontological grounds on which its power is founded and from which it is executed, such a challenge of the rational by the irrational would also evoke the operations of what Esposito designates as the “impolitical.”

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<sup>7</sup> I am aware of the ambiguity in this term, as different theoretical schools have different notions of what constitutes literature. “Literature” too is a constructed category and only with great difficulty can a consensus be reached about what literature is, what it does, who produces it, and who reads it. See (Eagleton 1–16).

### **The Impolitical and the Mystical**

Esposito conceives of the “impolitical” as that which radically and intensely engages with power—which he calls “the political”—not from the margins or on the periphery of power, but from within its very center and by using its own categories. Unlike the “anti-” or “a-” political, the impolitical does not oppose, negate, or disavow power; rather, it allows that “the political” is “the *only* reality and the *entirety* of reality” (Esposito xvii). The important intervention of the impolitical is that it counters the political reality by declaring “that it is *only reality*” (xvii). Thus, an important operation of the impolitical is to remind the political of its own “finitude,” returning it “to the very heart of the political so that finitude dwells not only at its margins, but at its very center”(xviii).

With this brief summary of Esposito’s conceptualization of the impolitical in mind, I suggest that mystical literature and reportage should be considered as an exemplary impolitical genre, a notion perhaps supported by Esposito’s inclusion of the mid-twentieth century mystical writer and thinker Simone Weil in his own analysis of “impolitical” thinkers and authors (128–155). My designation of mystical literature as impolitical—and thus as an authentic engagement with power—will be more rigorously supported in the first chapter, but it can briefly be explained here by pointing out how mysticisms derived from the worlds’ faith systems have historically served to engage with religious orthodoxy, even though over time these mystical traditions or aspects may have been eventually incorporated into the orthodox system or “the center.” Mysticism “reminds” orthodoxy of its epistemological and ontological limits, and very often this impolitical gesture itself becomes rooted in and alters the “center” of orthodoxy. Often these mystic traditions are appropriated by orthodoxy to “defuse” their reformist or even dangerously “heretical” energies. Furthermore, mystical concepts are often subsumed into or

integrated with rational discourse, as Seyyed Hossein Nasr points out regarding to Islamic mysticism: “In fact, in the same way that from the Scientific Revolution onwards Western philosophy became more and more the handmaid of a science based on the empirical data drawn from the outward senses, Islamic philosophy became wedded even more closely to the fruits of that other way of knowing which is based on the inner senses and the opening of the ‘eye of the heart’ which can ‘see’ the invisible world hidden to the outward eye” (Nasr 368). Therefore, the mystic as the impolitical, even in its very appropriation by power, can effect change at the center of power and rational orthodoxies used to endorse or increase power.

Yet the history of Islamic Sufism contains several stories of more radical challenges to orthodoxy and power that evade appropriation. The well-chronicled example of al-Ḥallāj (d. 922 CE) provides an early example of a Sufi put to death for revealing publicly the potential transformative energy of his mystical consciousness (al-Sabur). More recently, the Sudanese social reformist and mystic Maḥmūd Muḥammad Ṭaha, in a tragedy all too evocative of the trial and crucifixion in the Christian New Testament, was first vilified by the Sudanese religious orthodoxy of the Muslim Brotherhood and then executed by the political orthodoxy of the regime of the military dictator Jāfar al-Nimeiri in 1985 (Packer). Indeed, the history of Islamic mysticism contains numerous other examples of both Sufis and Shi‘ite esotericists either killed or persecuted for daring to share gnosis gleaned from their mystical experiences in attempts to bring about individual or social transformation.

Ibn al-‘Arabī, the mystic whose anecdote begins this dissertation, is no exception, as his life was threatened during his travels through Egypt for espousing and teaching heresy, and shortly after his death he and his followers were declared heretical and a threat to the faith by orthodox jurists, most famously Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328). His teachings were met with hostility

in Yemen, and the great Arabic polymath Ibn Khaldūn considered Ibn al-ʿArabī’s writing meaningless and heretical (Ates). Moreover, in Egypt in 1337 CE, Mamlūk theologians and jurists forbade anyone from reading, studying or possessing writings by Ibn al-ʿArabī; according to al-Dhahābī, if these works were found in anyone’s possession, they were destroyed and their owners tortured (qtd. in (Hirtenstein 240)). Even his followers acknowledged the dangers attendant upon an uninitiated and unprepared approach to the irrational revelations of Ibn al-ʿArabī, the “Shaykh al-Akbar,” due to the “subtlety of their meanings, the delicacy of their allusions, and the abstruseness of their structure” (Ibn Ḥajar al-Haytamī, qtd. in Chodkiewicz 1).

In terms of his legacy in the present day, Chodkiewicz observes that “...in Islam [his written production] has also been regularly denounced as heretical for more than seven centuries, and these polemics continue at present with the same vigor they did in Ibn Taymiyya’s time” (2), and Schimmel points out that “the orthodox have never ceased attacking him” (Schimmel 263) owing to the fact that his theosophy “is the very reverse of the teachings of orthodox Islam” (273). These generalizations were most recently brought to life in Egypt in the February of 1979, as the Sheikh’s *al-Futūhāt al-Makkiyya (The Meccan Revelations)* were proscribed by the People’s Assembly, a presumptively secular legislative body, due to the supposition that “distribution of his books causes confusion among the Muslim masses, casting them into bewilderment and doubt, and it beguiles the people concerning their religion” (Homerin 463).

Nevertheless, despite the strong rejection of Ibn al-ʿArabī by orthodox Islam and the notorious difficulties which his writings present for the uninitiated, his influence among Sufis is perhaps too great to overstate. Schimmel simply declares that “[f]or most of the Sufis after the thirteenth century, his writings constitute the apex of mystical theories” (263), while Chodkiewicz embarks on a rigorous examination of the Shaykh al-Akbar’s influence on Islamic

mystics across temporal and geographic boundaries, “from the Maghreb to the Far East” (1-18) by emphasizing the depth of this influence: “Ibn al-ʿArabī’s mark was not left only on ‘intellectual’ sufism. It is also detected in a universe of brotherhoods that touched the most diverse social classes and levels of culture” (2). Perhaps Ibn al-ʿArabī’s influence, during and shortly after his death, was greatest in Konya, eastern Anatolia, where his disciple Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qunawī established a school and became close friends with Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī,<sup>8</sup> making likely some amount of transmission of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s theosophy to the great Persian poet and mystic. In terms of his influence then, Ibn al-ʿArabī, can be rightly thought of as “an ocean without a shore,” as Chodkiewicz models him, in to which the tributaries of pre-Akbarian Sufism flow and from which Islamic mystical posterity flows.

Clearly then, Sufism in general and as expressed by Ibn al-ʿArabī in particular, has historically offered unorthodox and irrational methods with which to approach belief, spirituality, and ontology. In the same way that Islam serves as an “other” for the Western orthodoxy of Judeo-Christianity, Sufism presents an “other” dimension within Islam. With respect to Western orthodoxy, then, Sufism might be considered as doubly “exterior.” For this reason, it presents a rich potential as a base from which to launch an interrogation of the ontological categories of Western orthodoxy. However, the category of the impolitical suggests that Sufism is not “exterior” to the West, just as Islam is not exterior to the West; as components of Abrahamic religion, both phenomena are inextricably embedded within the very core of Western orthodoxy. Sufism cannot be neatly extracted neither from the history of Islam nor that of the West, and in fact it comprises an essential kernel of the mystical traditions of both “East”

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<sup>8</sup> Known simply as Rūmī in the West, where the translations of Coleman Barks have lately done much to popularize for a mass audience his mystical poetry.

and “West.” Nicholson perhaps makes this most clear in his brief survey of some of the non-Islamic influences on Sufism, in which he identifies the impact and influence of Christian ascetics and anchorites, Neo-Platonists, Christian Gnostics, Buddhism, and Vedantic mysticism on the historical development of Sufism (10–20);<sup>9</sup> likewise, López-Baralt, following the pioneering work of Asín Palacios, has discovered a line of mystical influence in the opposite direction, as she locates rhetorical and figurative influence from the Andalusian Sufis on the Christian mystics of the Spanish Golden Age (López-Baralt, *The Sufi Trobar Clus And Spanish Mysticism; A Shared Symbolism*)—indeed it was in the West, in the southern Iberian peninsula, where Ibn al-ʿArabī first entered the Sufi path, benefitting from the rich Islamic mystical tradition and a sophisticated network of spiritual guides there (Addas 44–73). With this genealogy in mind, it can be argued that Sufism potentially offers an impolitical and irrational view of the political—the power—of the Western the rational tradition. Moreover, the “gnosis,” or mystical insight, informing this impolitical view suggests avenues for resistance to the orthodoxy of power and pathways towards individual and social transformation.

### ***Ibn al-ʿArabī and Impolitical Ontology***

Thus, Sufism as it is articulated by Ibn al-ʿArabī offers a rich mediatory for an impolitical engagement with the ontological categories of both Islamic religious orthodoxy and the rational orthodoxy of the West.<sup>10</sup> In terms of an embrace of the irrational, it is important to point out that

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<sup>9</sup> Though dating from the early twentieth century, Nicholson’s work continues to occupy an esteemed position in discourse of Sufism. As Schimmel writes in 1975, Nicholson provides the student of Islamic mysticism with a “long list of still unrivaled publications in the field of Sufism” (Schimmel 10).

<sup>10</sup> For a highly suggestive reading of the challenge by Ibn al-ʿArabī to Western ontology, see Almond’s *Sufism and Deconstruction: a Comparative Study of Derrida and Ibn 'Arabi*. I will refer to Almond’s synthesis throughout the dissertation.



in his writing, Ibn al-ʿArabī himself repeatedly relates that *everything* that he writes is derived from mystical experience (W. C. Chittick, “Between the Yes and the No: Ibn Al-ʿArabi on Wujūd and the Innate Capacity” 96). Indeed, he insists that the entirety of the *Fuṣūs al-ḥikam* (*The Bezels of Wisdom*) is a transcription of gnosis provided him by the prophet Muḥammad in a dream (al-ʿArabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom* 45), and he makes clear the highly irrational and mystical nature of his encounter with the otherworldly *fatā* (youth) while circumambulating the Kaʿba (Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn Arabi* 279–81), through whom received the “unveiling” of the entirety of what would become his magnum opus, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makiyya* (*The Meccan Revelations*). Therefore, according the Sheikh al-Akbar, his entire theosophy is primarily built not upon the ideas conveyed to him by teachers or rational thinkers, but more so upon his own subjective and irrational experience.<sup>11</sup>

Of course, although Ibn al-ʿArabī clearly favored the irrational pathway to knowledge, he did not suggest that rational thought was useless. He considered rational thought as valuable up to a certain point; however, he maintains that the rational thinkers can give an accurate picture neither of being-in-itself nor the being-of-persons<sup>12</sup> (Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* 179; 231–32). Instead, he conceives of an ontology of all being—both being-in-itself and being-of-persons—represented by the term *wahdat al-wujūd* (Unity of Being). *Wahdat al-wujūd* is a notion that Ibn al-ʿArabī never actually uses in his own writing, but his followers and

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<sup>11</sup> Ibn al-ʿArabī recounts that he had received all gnosis immediately from the imaginal world and that he “really had no teacher” (Addas 65). He refers to the men and women who instructed him in the worldly discipline and practice of Sufism as both his teachers and his students (e.g. Addas 90). Despite his claim of not needing human aid in acquiring mystical gnosis, he did feel obliged to take instruction in the “way” of Sufism so that he would be qualified to usher others down the path (Addas 44).

<sup>12</sup> Here, for convenience, I have chosen somewhat awkwardly to employ “being-in-itself” and “being-of-persons” as terms signifying what Heidegger called *Sein* and *Dasein* respectively.

commentators on his work credit him as pioneering use of the concept behind phrase. Indeed, the notion of “Unity of Being” pervades everything that Ibn al-ʿArabī writes and can rightly be considered as the ontological basis for all of his thought (Chittick, “Ibn ‘Arabi” 504). *Wahdat al-wujūd* is the notion that the godhead is being-in-itself and being-of-persons; this godhead, which Ibn al-ʿArabī usually refers to as *al-Haqq* (*the Real*), is both transcendent and immanent. This state of the “Unity of Being” presents an irreducible synthesis of the dialectic occupying efforts of theologians past and present, including the rational thinkers, or *mutakallimūn*, of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s milieu as well as those of the twentieth century, notably Heidegger. In this synthesis, the Real is both everything and yet somehow not everything at the same time; the verbal formula often used by Ibn al-ʿArabī to attempt to express this Unity of Being is “He/not He.”

The impolitical thrust of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s system can be detected in his emphasis on hermeneutics. While the concepts expressed by Ibn al-ʿArabī constitutive of *wahdat al-wujūd* were scandalous to orthodox theologians like Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn al-ʿArabī methodically supported much of his thought with close readings of orthodox texts such as *al-Qur’ān* and *ḥadīth*. However, to this he added an oftentimes radical but incisive explication of etymology of the words in these texts, so that his readings of sacred texts are highly subjective and informed by his own mystical experience.<sup>13</sup> By relying on his hermeneutic, perhaps “proto-Deconstructionist,” approach to orthodox texts as a means to point out the limits of Islamic and rational orthodoxy, Ibn al-ʿArabī can likewise be considered as an impolitical author with respect to the Western rational tradition.

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<sup>13</sup> Most germane to the present discussion, an excellent example of this impolitical hermeneutic approach is Ibn al-ʿArabī’s reliance on the shared root of the Arabic words for “reason,” (*ʿaql*) and “fetter,” (*ʿiqāl*). See (I. Almond, *Sufism and Deconstruction* 10) and Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* 107.

### **Difficulty of mysticism in expressing truth**

The most pressing problem with situating Ibn al-ʿArabī as an impolitical author who offers productive engagements with rational ontology is that his writings are notoriously difficult to comprehend, both because of the “subtlety of their meanings, the delicacy of their allusions, and the abstruseness of their structure” pointed out by his commentator Ibn Ḥajar al-Haytamī (Chodkiewicz 1). Among the world’s great mystics, however, Ibn al-ʿArabī is not unique in this difficulty. As chapter one of this dissertation demonstrates, simply attempting to define mysticism is a problematic task that theologians, philosophers, and mystics themselves continue to work out. A large part of the problem is that mystical experience is inherently ineffable, and mystics often struggle to put their consciousness into words that can effectively convey the gnosis, or noetic value, gained from their experiences. Yet many mystics in history have nevertheless felt compelled to report their experiences, in an effort to share their gnosis with fellow seekers of spiritual truths. Moreover, while ineffability is an epistemological and rhetorical problem, there is also a more existential concern which might further cause mystical reportage to be oblique or opaque—for those mystics who feel compelled to convey their experiences to others, this information might very likely be “encoded” or obfuscated in order to protect its authors from orthodox persecution.

Addressing the ineffability which is central to the mystical experience, many mystics across various times, linguistic traditions, and geographical locations who would “report back” to society have therefore relied on apophatic language, which Sells calls “the language of unsaying.” This style, more rigorously explained in chapter one, can be challenging, confounding, and non-sensical; indeed, much of its stylistic power depends on bewilderment of its reader. As a result, much mystical writing remains only in the hands of an esoteric, initiated

few, a situation calling into question whether or not mystical reportage should even be considered as a tool to offer resistance or suggest pathways for social transformation. This question needs to be addressed before the transformative or emancipatory value of “literary expressions of mysticism” can be determined. Hence, the first chapter will offer a working definition of mysticism, consider the problem of language and linguistic expression as it relates to mysticism, and stake out ground on the terrain of contemporary critical theory from which to argue that mysticism, regardless of the problems entailed by ineffability, can work in the cause of resistance or transformation provided mystical expression can reach its audience.

### **Literature as a Transmission Tool for Esoterica**

Therefore, the dilemma of mystics having access to gnosis of alternative ontologies but not being able to communicate that gnosis effectively to a broad audience seemingly diminishes a great deal of the social value of mysticism. However, if mystical gnosis were able to be captured in a language and form to which a larger number of people have access, and in a more readable style and genre in which people will actively consume and enjoy, then this gnosis would have a greater opportunity to be broadcast and to inform individual and social paradigms regarding the foundations of power/knowledge. More specifically, if mystical experience and gnosis were to be conveyed in contemporary forms consumed by a wide reading public—for example, essays or short stories in a magazine, a novel serialized in a newspaper, collections of short stories, or a novel published as a stand-alone artifact—then ideas transmitted by mystic experience and gnosis could very well be more easily grasped and then productively used to underpin theories of individual and social resistance to orthodoxies. Ideally, these theories, suggested or pre-figured by what I designate as “literary depictions of mysticism,” would eventually lead to social transformation.

Yet the problem remains that much of the irrational expression of Sufism continues to be inaccessible—perhaps intentionally so—to a wide reading public. However, Ibn al-ʿArabī was among that class of Sufis, like Rūmī, who sought in some way to merge Sufism and the interpretation and writing of *adab*. In the Islamic cultural context of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s lifetime, *adab* was used to describe “a literary work aimed at being instructive, funny, and erudite all at the same time, and destined for a fairly broad readership of *udabāʾ*, or *literati*” (Addas 100). Ibn al-ʿArabī produced just such a text, *Kitāb muḥāḍarāt al-abrār* (*The Conference of the Pious*), which the Sheikh introduces as

...all kinds of literary stories (*adab*), sermons, proverbs, unusual anecdotes, chronicles of times gone by, the lives of the Ancients and of the Prophets, the history of kings both Arab and non-Arab, noble virtues, marvelous stories, traditions I have been told about the beginning of things and the creation of this world... as well as some talk which is entertaining and amusing while not serving to undermine religion. (*Muḥāḍarāt* I:2 qtd. in Addas 100)

As Addas points out, “at first sight there is nothing to justify this particular work as esoteric” (100), but regardless of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s disclaimer of the text’s entertaining and amusing purpose, the principle of spiritual instruction also governs the Sheikh’s compilation. In this manner, he uses *adab* to transmit, in more accessible form, his received esoteric gnosis, which Addas observes is always “just beneath the surface” (100) of the text. As a result, Addas concludes that “through the medium of a seemingly casual and informal book, Ibn ‘Arabī was attempting to communicate some fundamental notions about Sufism to ‘non-initiates’—and as a result, reach a wider audience” (100-01).

Using Ibn al-ʿArabī’s *Muḥāḍarāt* as a prototype, I wish to suggest that the literary output of writers with global fame and readership—namely Jorge Luis Borges and Naguib Mahfouz—can be interpreted as “communicating some fundamental notions” of mystical gnosis, particularly gnosis that resonates deeply with Ibn al-ʿArabī’s theosophy. This literary output has

the potential to reach a “non-initiated” wider audience by being broadcast in popular literary genres. One outcome of such broadcasting of mystical gnosis could be the embrace, by this wider audience, of some of the ontological alternatives to Western rationalism suggested by Ibn al-ʿArabī’s theosophy, which could in turn be the basis for a platform of resistance to, or a transformation of, the orthodoxies which rely on Western rationality, and its ration-based ontologies, for dominance over other paradigms.

From this tenuous assumption, my analysis proposes that if “literary representations of mystical experience”—like that conveyed in Ibn al-ʿArabī’s *Muḥāḍarāt*— were to appear in a work by an author that has attained privileged status not only among a cadre of aesthetes and critics but also among a world-wide, and even Western, reading public, then these elements of mysticism could lead to the construction of emancipatory social theories. That is, if “canonical” literature could present ontological challenges to the very social machinery that establishes the “canon,” using the canon’s own poetics and forms, then an impolitical engagement with power from within power, as Esposito conceives it, could occur at a level which would reach an audience far wider than that of the expressions of a mystic grappling with the necessity of ineffability. Few are the mystics who are also gifted writers; however, as this study shows, there are indeed gifted writers—producers of “literature”—that are at least mystical thinkers, if not mystics themselves. It is these types of thinkers and writers, I argue, that offer alternative ontologies to the Western rational tradition.

Before introducing the particular mystically inclined writers that I will analyze in the following chapters, a brief recap will be helpful. I have begun from the premise that Sufism, as it is represented in Ibn al-ʿArabī’s theosophy, can serve as a vehicle for an impolitical engagement with orthodox, rational ontological categories of time, space, and subjectivity. This engagement

potentially yields implications for the construction of strategies of resistance to power and the clearing of pathways for individual and social transformation. From this basis proceeds the general argument that “literary representations of mysticism” as they are produced by “canonical” writers are potentially a viable and impolitical manner through which to transmit irrational gnosis, which can then be used to resist or transform the rational and capitalistic manipulations of the ontological categories.

It is crucial here to emphasize that these “literary representations of mysticism” are more than aesthetic features; rather, they are the very seeds of resistance and transformation theory and practice. With this in mind, it is possible to reassess the reputations of authors who formerly were taken to task for lacking “commitment” or for being complicit with those who determine the values of the “canon.” Thus it is necessary that my analysis of “literary representations of mysticism” focuses on certain “canonical” texts, because the position of such texts within a “canon,” sanctioned by orthodoxy, allows these texts potentially broad opportunities to subtly challenge the standards and conventions of the very orthodoxy within which they have been enshrined. To test this general argument, I have selected two authors for close reading who wrote on “the periphery” of the West, but who are also indubitably shaped by and who are now part of the Western tradition: Jorge Luis Borges and Naguib Mahfouz.

### **Borges and Mahfouz**

In actuality, Jorge Luis Borges and Naguib Mahfouz need very little introduction and very little effort is needed to establish the impact each man has had on the history of the written word, in both the context of their respective linguistic traditions and in that of world literature. Numerous biographical works and interviews provide the curious reader or the serious scholar with a plethora of detail about the lives, thoughts, careers, and international acclaim and awards

of these two titans of world literature.<sup>14</sup> There are likewise copious illuminating autobiographical sources<sup>15</sup> which the researcher can consult to learn more about these two men who are widely considered as true pioneers in their respective literary traditions.<sup>16</sup>

A guiding principle for the conception of my project is that, in seeking to distill molecules of resistance and transformation strategies from a synthesis of two authors through the mediatory of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s theosophy, it is important that the authors chosen should have a certain degree of contemporaneity. Borges (b. 1899–d. 1986 CE) and Mahfouz (b. 1911–d. 2006 CE) both lived through most of the twentieth century without being arrested or tortured; perhaps because of their avoidance of egregious political persecution, both men have at times been

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<sup>14</sup> For information about Borges’s life, I have relied extensively on *Jorge Luis Borges: A Literary Biography*; for a more recent and authorized investigation see (Williamson), *Borges, A Life*. For the life of Mahfouz, I have relied heavily on El-Enany, *Naguib Mahfouz: The Pursuit of Meaning*; (Milson), *Najib Mahfuz: The Novelist-Philosopher of Cairo*; and (Beard and Haydar, *Naguib Mahfouz*), *Naguib Mahfouz: from Regional Fame to Global Recognition*.

<sup>15</sup> For a series of illuminating interviews with Borges, see (Guibert), *Seven Voices*; (Barnstone), *Borges at Eighty: Conversations*; Burgin, *Conversations with Jorge Luis Borges*. Borges penned an interesting and lengthy “Autobiographical Essay,” which appears exclusively in the translation into English of *The Aleph*, which the author executed in close collaboration with Norman Thomas Di Giovanni (Borges and di Giovanni 203–62). For Mahfouz in his own words and in English translation, consult (Dawwarah), “A Journey in the Mind of Naguib Mahfouz;” (al-Ghitani), *The Mahfouz Dialogs*.

<sup>16</sup> Even a critic as hostile towards the Argentine as Gerald Martin admits that “...it is Borges, unmistakably, who supplied the sense of precision and structure which permitted the intertextual systematization of that culture and the creation of... Latin American literature” (Martin 152) and that “... if you strip the flesh from many contemporary Latin American novels, you will soon be feeling Borges in the bones” (155). Regarding Mahfouz, Jayyusi, effusively underscoring the role of Mahfouz in the remarkable invigoration of the Arab novel since its first tenuous appearance as a genre for Arabic literary expression, writes: “...this new wealth, this unprecedented activity, this supreme literary assertion, this fantastic explosion of the Arab fictional genius, this unbounded aventure [sic], this flourishing productivity, this liberation, this courage, and this ambition are indebted fundamentally, and in no uncertain terms, to the genius and diligence of a single man: Naguib Mahfouz. He established the novel’s inception in the Arab world; in the course of three decades, he transformed a hesitant, rather naïve art into the preeminent literary form of our time” (Jayyusi 11–12).



accused of lacking sufficient “commitment” to political and social causes.<sup>17</sup> Their lifespans cover most of the twentieth century, an era in which in the economic modes of production discussed at length by Harvey shifted from Fordism to flexible accumulation. Each author witnessed and was effected by the waging and aftermath of two “world” wars, as well as the ensuing contest of ideologies known as the “Cold War.” Furthermore, the dual positionality of each author’s homelands as both geographically and politically “marginal” to the empires or states waging the century’s wars, but still inextricably “centered” in the culture of these empires or states, allows for an impolitical reading of the two authors which should vindicate them as authors more deeply concerned about human emancipation than some critics allow. Finally, as I will demonstrate below, each author had a profound interest in Sufism. All of these conditions allow for an interesting synthesis of Borges and Mafhouz.

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<sup>17</sup> For an example of the criticism charging Borges with political conservatism, complicity with power, and a lack of commitment, see the scathing treatment offered by (Martin 150–65), which includes such judgments of Borges as

a middle-class member of a Third World community who is ashamed of his background, humiliated by his national—and still more his continental—culture, and who has reacted against this existential predicament by emphasizing the futility and emptiness of all human existence ... such an attitude would be more easily admired if it were born of defiance ... but there can be little doubt it was born of embarrassment, shame and a sense of inferiority which is in itself a symptom of a colonial mentality. (164-65)

Mahfouz’s oppositional stance towards power has been somewhat easier to defend, and champions of Mahfouz’s commitment include Said (“Embargoed Literature”), (Greenberg) (*The Aesthetic of Revolution in the Film and Literature of Naguib Mahfouz*), and (Sazzad). However, for a good representation of criticism of Mahfouz’s willingness to compromise his art to censorship and to play a passive and reactionary intellectual role, (Mehrez) 17-38, where the critic ambivalently observes that "Throughout his career as a writer, Mahfouz has walked a fine line between sincere political commitment and an amazing disengagement from politics" (18), and that "Mahfouz assigns himself a passive, rather than an active role; as a writer he reacts rather than taking the initiative" (29).

***“Canonical” authors***

My reasons for selecting these two authors and the method I will apply in my synthesis of their writing will be made more clear if I first provide an understanding of the terms “canonical” and “literary representations of mysticism.” When I teach world literature to undergraduates in the classroom, I assume that the concept of a literary “canon” is a collection of texts that are, for a host of reasons, considered essential for study and which merit being anthologized; I also point out to students that “canon” is a concept fraught with political implications and intentions. I reject the possibility of a canon compiled disinterestedly by critics on the basis of aesthetics alone, as even this aesthetic judgment is clearly a political act of valuing one’s distinction, discernment, and taste of what is “art” over that of others. Indeed, “art for art’s sake” is in itself a political position. Both the construction of and the deployment of literary canons in educational systems are “tinged and impressed with, violated by, the gross political fact,” as Said says regarding the construction of seemingly objective and academic bodies of discourse (*Orientalism* 11). Indeed, Said elsewhere addresses this “gross political fact” as it directly relates to literary canon formation in his critique of Bernard Lewis’s objections to the opening of the Western canon (*Culture and Imperialism* 37).

With this assumption then, I use the term “canonical” when discussing the status of Borges and Mahfouz in a somewhat pejorative or ironic sense to refer to their status as artists enshrined by the Western academy and printed within anthologies of “world literature” published in the West. Doubtless, as the vast amount of ink spilled about them attests, both Borges and Mahfouz are considered as “canonical” in their respective national and linguistic traditions—Argentine and Spanish in the case of Borges and Egyptian and Arabic in the case of Mahfouz; however, I wish to also accentuate their acceptance, and perhaps appropriation, by the West as

voices worth listening to from the “periphery.” Indeed, even a critic as salty, exclusive, and conservative as Harold Bloom has begrudged space to Mahfouz, the Nobel laureate, and more gleefully included Borges in his “canonical prophecy” of texts which he intuitively will survive the “Chaotic Age” (i.e., the twentieth century) from which they were produced (Bloom 528–529). While such a placement within the Western world canon by a critic like Bloom might suggest an author is somehow compliant with or reaffirming of Western power, it is just as likely that in “accepting” a text into the canon, champions of literary and political orthodoxy wish to defuse the thrust and energy of a potentially challenging voice and vision by absorbing it,<sup>18</sup> and, as often occurs in post-modernity, by commodifying it. However, at the same time such a placement in the canon of previously “marginal” authors potentially seeds the canon with subversion and critique of the very Western status quo and power formations that have bestowed those authors and their texts with laurels and praise.

It is this dual nature of the position of “peripheral,” and as I argue, subversive, authors like Borges and Mahfouz within the “Western canon” that allows them an impolitical gaze at the West and an opportunity to deconstruct the textual formation of Western orthodoxy by representing alternatives to the West’s ontological categories and epistemological approaches. In this dual role, the texts produced by these canonical authors occupy a position within the center of power while at the same time performing an impolitical critique from their location *within* power. This positionality allows for a radical critique of the ontology of orthodoxy and suggests theories for resistance to orthodoxy and power, by revaluating the terms used by power to

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<sup>18</sup> Just as many manifestations of mysticism have been integrated into the religious traditions from which they irrupted. For example, the incorporation of the *Upanishads* into the orthodox corpus of Hinduism, or the integration of Sufi brotherhoods into the sphere of public and social power, as protectors of the public’s virtue and faith.

construct ontologies of time, space, and subjectivity. Therefore, I argue that having been enshrined by arbiters of aesthetic taste within the Western canon and the West's version of "world literature," Borges and Mahfouz as "canonical" authors also play a dual role as representatives of the "impolitical genre" of the "literary representation of mysticism."

*Literary representation of mysticism*

By "literary representation of mysticism," I refer to a nexus of phenomena which appear in written texts, sometimes intertwined with one another in various combinations while in some places in varying degrees of independence from each other. As I use the term in my project, the "literary representation of mysticism" will not be applied to literature that informs the discipline and practices of mystics; thus for my purposes, texts that seek to prescribe for initiates the exercises and rituals necessary to embark on or continue along pathways to enlightenment or union with the godhead, such as San Juan de la Cruz's *Subida del Monte Carmelo (Ascent of Mount Carmel)*, Ignacio de Loyola's *Exercitia spiritualia (Spiritual Exercises)*, or Abdul Khaliq Gajadwani's *Kalimati Qudsiya (Sacred Words)*, would not be considered as literary representations of mysticism.

However, in my schematic, "literary representations of mysticism" include texts containing combinations or singular instances of: 1) written attempts by authors to communicate their own actual mystical experiences, or to articulate the knowledge acquired during these experiences; 2) written attempts by authors to reflect upon the gnosis gained from their own mystical experiences and attempts to express the noetic value of mystical experience; 3) depictions of fictional characters moving towards, experiencing, withdrawing from, or meditating upon mystical moments and the gnosis gained from such moments; and 4)

deployments of a figurative language, literary style, or rhetorical strategy with precursors in the discursive tradition of mysticism.

### ***Borges and Mahfouz: a Shared Interest in Mysticism***

In addition to being suitable for a study of impolitical challenges to the West on the basis of their dual positionality vis-à-vis the canon and the “margin,” Borges and Mahfouz are also ideal for an investigation into the interrogation of rational, orthodox ontology through literary representations of mysticism based on their exhibited intellectual interests in mysticism. Both writers, in interviews and autobiographical writing, expressed abiding interests in the phenomenon of mysticism. Though it is presently impossible to demonstrate that either man was a mystic, it can be said in the case of Borges that he was at the very least a mystical thinker, while it is known that Mahfouz studied the phenomenon of Sufism. Therefore, it is not surprising that literary representations of mysticism are prevalent in their production.

### **Borges and Mysticism**

#### ***Borges, a mystical thinker***

Borges’s interest in mysticism is well-documented; as Rowlandson summarizes, Borges “described mystics and mystical texts with a confusing blend of philosophical skepticism, literary awe, metaphysical perplexity and personal fondness” (5); it would be superfluous here to provide a catalog of all the stories, essays, and poems in which Borges makes use of mystical themes or imagery. However, Rowlandson, writing in 2013, points out that there remains “an absence in the scholarship concerning Borges’s close involvement with mysticism and mystical texts” (5). It is my hope that this dissertation can help remedy this absence.

A central concern in studying the appearance mystical themes and characters in Borges’s writing a determination of its sources. One possibility is that Borges himself experienced

mystical consciousness and attained some kind of gnosis from those moments. Another possibility is that his knowledge of mysticism is based on the sheer erudition of Borges. A third nexus of possibility, of course, combines the first two in varying proportions—he both experienced mystical consciousness and he was well read in the literature of mysticism. This problem is perhaps impossible to untangle, but the author does provide some clues to posterity regarding his relationship with mysticism. On one hand, Borges repeatedly disclaimed the idea that he wished to proffer for his readers some kind of consistent metaphysical vision. As he states to Burgin “Many people have thought of me as a thinker, as a philosopher, or even as a mystic. [...] People think that I’ve committed myself to idealism, to solipsism, or to doctrines of the cabala, because I’ve used them in my tales. But really I was only trying to see what could be done with them” (Burgin 79). Yet on the other hand, Borges frankly admitted in interviews and in conversations to having had mystical experiences and having acquired a certain gnosis from those experiences (Barnstone 11; Williamson 443).

On that ground, (Rowlandson) conducts an extensive survey of the scholarship about mysticism’s role in Borges’s writing and personal life, and decides that various attempts by Canto, Jurado, Cohen, Giskin, Wallace, and Núñez-Faraco (Rowlandson 79–87) to determine whether or not Borges was himself a mystic are inconclusive. In determining Borges’s relationship to mysticism, Rowlandson also searches for sources, within the tradition of mysticism, of Borges’s ideas and expressions of literary mysticism; Swedenborg is an important figure in this regard, especially as Borges’s fondness for the eighteenth-century mystic as a writer and thinker appears to be obvious from his essays, stories, and poems (Rowlandson 193–

224)<sup>19</sup>. López-Baralt, based on her own literary analysis of Borges's stories as well as on her own conversations with Borges and with his widow María Kodama (53–59), follows Estela Canto in believing Borges to be at the very least a “mystical thinker” if not a mystic outright; she imagines the author to have been an agnostic who had “atheistic” mystical experiences<sup>20</sup> and concludes that “[t]o a great extent, all of Borges' work is a meditation on the radical impossibility of translating the infinite theopathic experience” (López-Baralt, “Borges, Or the Mystique of Silence: What Was on the Other Side of the Zahir” 53). At best, attempts to pin down with certainty the role of Borges's mystical experience as a source of mysticism in his writing remain at present inconclusive.

### *Borges and Sufism*

More easily determined is Borges's profound interest in the mysticism which arises out of Islamic culture—Sufism. López-Baralt provides personal anecdotal evidence, claiming that Borges was “obsessed with talking to me about” Islamic culture “every time he saw me”, and that as “a young man in Buenos Aires, he gave lectures on Sufism” (López-Baralt, “Borges, Or the Mystique of Silence: What Was on the Other Side of the Zahir” 32). Wingerter, in his study of the “crypto-Arabisms” in Borges's work, believes that Borges had more than just a superficial understanding of Arabic grammar (Wingerter 36); María Kodama, Borges's widow, revealed to López-Baralt that he spent the last days of his life learning Arabic at the hands of a private tutor, “[o]r relearning it, since scholars have been unanimous in admitting that Borges knew somewhat more Arabic than what he might have /picked up from the translations of the *Thousand and One*

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<sup>19</sup> At the outset of his discussion of Swedenborg's influence on Borges, Rowlandson provides a wide-ranging list of all of Borges works which contain “assessments,” “studies,” or “mere references” to Swedenborg (193-95).

<sup>20</sup> Theistic and atheistic mysticism are discussed in chapter 1 of this dissertation.

*Nights*... which he passionately commented on during his life” (López-Baralt, “Borges, Or the Mystique of Silence: What Was on the Other Side of the Zahir” 32). Given Borges’s interest in the phenomenon of mysticism in general and building on her remark that, “[w]e can imagine just how important this language was to him, given the fact that he spent his final days learning it” (32), it can be also be imagined that, while not a Sufi himself, the mystical aspects of Islamic and Arabic culture he had studied so intently were held dear by him as well.

A consistent effort to directly link Borges’s literary output to Islamic mysticism can be found in Garayalde’s slim volume *Jorge Luis Borges: Sources and Illuminations*. Her monograph is illuminating in the connection it makes between Borges’s themes, literary techniques, and style and those found in Sufi stories; however, her study suffers from its sole reliance on Idries Shah as her source of Sufi literature with which to compare Borges. Due to Shah’s part in a notorious forgery scandal in the 1970s involving the poet Robert Graves and a supposed manuscript of Khayyam’s *Rubaiyat*, Schimmel<sup>21</sup> and Knysh<sup>22</sup> warn scholars about the lack of academic rigor and credibility revolving around Shah. Finally, a tenuous direct link between Borges and Ibn al-ʿArabī was posited by Almond, who in his analysis of Borges as a “post-Orientalist” indicates that Borges might have acquired some familiarity with Ibn al-

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<sup>21</sup> Schimmel, in her list of the basic sources for scholarship on Sufism states: “Idries Shah, *The Sufis*, as well as his other books, should be avoided by serious students” (9).

<sup>22</sup> Knysh criticizes the works of Idries Shah as belonging to those “recent accounts of Sufism that introduce the Western reader to what their authors present as its trans-historical and unchangeable spiritual essence” and which “appear inadequate and misleading” (*Islamic Mysticism* 326).



‘Arabī’s theosophy from sources including “Palacio and Smith” (I. Almond, “Borges the Post-Orientalist” 440).<sup>23</sup>

Thus there are several clues which might entice a scholar wishing to investigate Borges’s literary representations of mysticism in general and his application of Sufi themes, ideas, and techniques in particular. Yet, the inspiration for his inclusion of these elements remains debatable. For Naguib Mahfouz, the sources for the appearance of elements of Islamic mysticism in his literary output can be more easily traced.

### **Mahfouz and Sufism**

From a reading of his novels, it is quite easy to detect at even a superficial level the presence of Islamic mysticism. Whether there is a Sufi sheikh moving throughout the story, such as Sheikh Mūṭawallī ‘Abd al-Ṣamad in *The Cairo Trilogy*, or a meditation by one of the characters in front of the *takiyya*, as repeatedly occurs in *Al-Malḥamat al-Ḥarāfīsh (The Harafish)*, Mahfouz’s fiction is populated with characters and set in locations that directly represent aspects of Islamic mysticism. As Milson points out, throughout Mahfouz’s fictional world, “we encounter Sufi characters, Sufi terminology and occasionally, a discourse on the mystical approach to life” (Milson 103 n.13), and El-Enany analyzes closely Mahfouz’s depictions of Sufism in several novels across the span of his career.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Almond does not point his reader to the texts he has in mind. Obviously Palacios’s *Islam cristianizado* would be the most logical source regarding Palacios, but which Smith and which text by Smith are unfortunately not mentioned. Huston Smith, the great scholar of world religion, had just begun his teaching career at the University of Denver in the 1944 shortly before “The Aleph” was written and well after “The Mirror of Ink” was written; these two stories are ones which Almond indicates in his article might have been influenced by Smith. Moreover, Smith’s landmark work *The World’s Religions* was not published until 1958.

<sup>24</sup> These include *Zuqāq al-Midaq (Midaq Alley)*, *Al-Liṣṣ wa al-Kilāb (The Thief and the Dogs)*, *Al-Ṭarīq (The Search)*, *Al-Shaḥḥādih (The Beggar)*, *Ḥikāyāt al-Hāratinā (Fountain and Tomb)*, *Al-Malḥamat al-Ḥarāfīsh (The Harafish)*, and *Ḥaḍarat al-Muḥtaram (Respected Sir)*.

This recurrent motif in work of Mahfouz is not accidental, as Sufism formed an important part of the backdrop of the author's life. Al-Mousa credits Mahfouz's "remarkable attraction to Sufism" not to his membership in any Sufi order, but to the widespread presence of Sufi orders in his Egyptian context (Al-Mousa 37). This context, especially the *Gamāliyya* quarter in which he grew up, includes the *takiyya*,<sup>25</sup> or *tekke*—the dwelling and meeting place (or monastery) of the Sufi "dervishes"—was a distinguishing feature of the landscape and of the young author's cognitive mapping. The Turkish word applied to this building by Mahfouz indicates that in the Cairene context of Mahfouz's boyhood, the Sufis inhabiting and practicing in the *takiyya* were most likely of Turkish or Persian origin (Clayer). Moreover, these mystics were very likely of the *Mawlawiyya* order, based on the distinctive cap (*sikke*) and the long gown (*tenure*) worn by the dervishes, and the emphasis on the chanting of poetry and hymns favored by this order (Yazici, Jong, and Margoliouth) all of which are details provided by Mahfouz in his description of the dervishes of his neighborhood in *Ḥikāyāt al-Ḥāratinā (Fountain and Tomb)* (Mahfouz, *Fountain and Tomb* 11-12-18).

The order was formed out of the theosophy and poetry of the Persian-speaking mystic Jalal al-Dīn Rūmī (Schimmel 322), therefore Persian would have been the language of the chants used by the dervishes during *dhikr*, and "[t]hose mysterious strangers with their mysterious songs made an impression on the budding consciousness of the author which apparently continued to haunt him until it found artistic expression much later in his life" (El-Enany, *Naguib Mahfouz* 1; 3), particularly in his late novel *Al-Malḥamat al-Ḥarāfīsh (The Harafish)* and in the

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<sup>25</sup>The Turkish word *takiyya* should not to be confused with the Arabic word *taqiya*, which is an act of "dissimulation" in which a believing Muslim can deny or denounce their faith without being labeled an infidel, if under the threat of persecution or bodily harm. For instance, *taqiya* was common in medieval Andalusia, as Christian persecution of Muslims increased during the "Reconquista" of the Iberian peninsula.

autobiographical collection of vignettes *Ḥikāyāt hāratinā* (*Fountain and Tomb*). This haunting influence also manifested itself in Mahfouz's studies, as his interest in Sufism took an academic course in which he pursued a master's degree in philosophy and aesthetics, at one point working on a thesis with the title of "Sufism and Islam" (El-Enany, *Naguib Mahfouz* 14), before deciding instead to devote his attention to creative writing in the late 1930s.

The early imprint of Sufism on Mahfouz continued to manifest in his literary production; in addition to the Sufi characters and Sufic settings in the content of his fiction, Milson argues, with respect to the author's technique, that Mahfouz's dependence on and deployment of allegory "has been colored by his study of Sufism under Mustafa 'Abd al-Raziq" (Milson 270). Milson also feels that "Mahfouz's continuous pursuit of the truth is curiously analogous to the Sufi quest. The teachings of Sufism, which... informed Mahfouz's use of allegory, would appear also to have influenced his view of reality. In Sufism, every external phenomena, like words, must constantly be unmasked and decoded" (Milson 275). As an example, Milson considers Kamāl from *The Cairo Trilogy*, who Mahfouz repeatedly noted was his most autobiographical character (e.g. Milson 21) and who at one point questions "Is there a distinction between real and unreal? What is the relationship between reality and what takes place in our head?" (Mahfouz 401). Likewise, El-Enany also thoroughly documents Sufi characters, themes, and terms in Mahfouz's fiction, although he consistently takes the view that Mahfouz assumes a disparaging attitude towards Sufism and that the author depicts the mentality of Sufism as a "self-saving attitude with no genuine social value" (60). Thus, it is one of the intentions of this dissertation to

intervene in this discussion, in order to demonstrate a more favorable attitude on the part of Mahfouz towards Sufism than El-Enany, in particular, allows.<sup>26</sup>

In terms of Mahfouz's points of contact with Ibn al-ʿArabī and Mahfouz, there are no obvious clues, although Mikhail finds an oblique correspondence between Sufis such as al-Ḥallāj, al-Suhrawardī, and Ibn al-ʿArabī, the exposition of Kierkegaardian existentialism, and the theme of the alienated, anguished, and the absurd in Mahfouz's short stories "Taḥt al-miẓalla" ("Under the Bus-stop Shelter") and "Ḥikāya bilā Bidāya walā Nihāya" ("Story with no Beginning and no End"). Mikhail, following ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Badawī, argues that both Kierkegaard and "his Sufi predecessors... specifically al-Ḥallāj, al-Suhrawardī, and Ibn al-ʿArabi ... have used religious texts as myths to interpret their existential concepts" (Badawi qtd. in Mikhail 82).

However, a more enticing possibility for an indirect link between Mahfouz and Ibn al-ʿArabī's thought system can be found in the inclusion of the *Mawlawiyya tekke* as a feature of Mahfouz's literary production. Although the *Mawlawiyya* order claimed Rūmī as its wellspring, Ibn al-ʿArabī's influence on Sufism in Konya, Anatolia, where Rūmī (b.1207 CE–d. 1273 CE) spent much of his life, was equal to or perhaps greater than even that of Rūmī; commentators on Rūmī's *Mathnawi* interpreted his poems through the context of Ibn al-ʿArabī's theosophy rather than through that of Rūmī, and by the time of the Sheikh al-Akbar's death in 1240 CE, Ibn al-ʿArabī's works were used as "text-books" in Ottoman *mudāris* due in large part to the work of

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<sup>26</sup> In assessing Mahfouz's stance towards Sufism as a potentially progressive social phenomenon, I follow the work pioneered in (Yagi)'s unpublished dissertation "Naguib Mahfouz's 'Socialistic Sufism': An Intellectual Journey from the Wafd to Islamic Mysticism" and Kilpatrick, who argues that Mahfouz disregards the traditional role of Islam as being outdated and instead tries to "substitute for it a mystical and metaphysical quest for God which cannot be considered specifically Islamic, even if the modes of search owe much to that religion" (Kilpatrick 182).

his disciple and adopted son Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qunawī (b. 1207 CE–d. 1274 CE), who established a monastery in Konya (Ates). Importantly, Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qunawī was “a close friend” of Rūmī (Austin 15), and it seem impossible that some amount of theosophical influence was not transmitted to Rūmī from the Sheikh’s disciple.<sup>27</sup>

At the very least, Ibn al-ʿArabī’s thought was in the atmosphere of the Sufi community in Konya, and Rūmī would have been influenced by the Sheikh al-Akbar’s thought in at least some aspect. While historically Ibn al-ʿArabī’s influence has been noted in Rūmī’s mystical expressions, there is the danger that this influence is over-exaggerated (Ritter and Bausani); Aflākīs’ *Manāqib*, an early codification of the *Mawlawiyya* order, treats Ibn al-ʿArabī with “contempt,” perhaps due to the proximity in time and place between the two Sufi masters’ theosophies (Yazici, Jong, and Margoliouth). Regardless, the possibility exists for Mahfouz to have acquired some aspect of the tenets of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s thought system through his exposure to the *Mawlawiyya tekke* in his childhood neighborhood or even through his study of Sufism as a graduate student.

Thus, while critics have noted the presence of mysticism in each author’s works and have pointed out the importance of mysticism in their personal lives, it would be very difficult to make the case for Borges and Mahfouz as mystics themselves. Borges has admitted to having had at least two experiences, and Mahfouz denied being a Sufi, although he clearly has interest in Sufism as a topic of inquiry and as cultural manifestation in his society. I am not attempting here to prove they are mystics, nor am I suggesting direct influence by Ibn al-ʿArabī; however, I am

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<sup>27</sup> A similar indirect link exists between Mahfouz and Ibn al-ʿArabī in Mahfouz’s short story “Zaʿbalāwī,” in which passages from a poem by Ibn al-Fāriḍ appear at a pivotal moment in the narrator’s search. Ibn al-ʿArabī and Ibn Fāriḍ were well acquainted, and when Ibn al-ʿArabī asked if could write commentary on one of Ibn al-Fāriḍ ’s poems, the latter replied that “*The Meccan Revelations* was commentary enough” (Austin 15; 15 n. 64)

suggesting what I believe to be a unique claim—that there are distinct correspondences between the thought system of Ibn al-ʿArabī and the literary production Borges and Ibn al-ʿArabī.

Furthermore, I believe that these correspondences, manifested through literary representations of mysticism, can serve as heuristic devices, channels for transmission, and teaching tools for theorizing strategies for resistance to oppression or for the transformation of societies that are shaped by oppression.

### **Overall methods**

To help support the forgoing claims, the opening chapter, “Mysticism is Resistance,” begins by offering a mediation on the phenomenon of mysticism. After providing a careful definition of the phenomenon and a nuanced understanding of how “mysticism” has come to mean what it means, the first chapter will then articulate the role of language in mysticism and demonstrate the potential for mysticism to serve as a resistance strategy by situating the phenomenon and its textual expressions within critical theory.

Following this first chapter, the dissertation analyzes in each successive chapter selected texts from each authors’ oeuvre, through the lens of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s theosophy—which in itself is entirely the expression of an irrational mystical consciousness—in order to explain how the authors’ literary representations of mysticism provide basic ingredients for the conception of alternate ontologies of time, space, and subjectivity and thus the seeds for theories of resistance or social transformation.

Thus, the second chapter, “Borges, Mahfouz, and Ibn al-ʿArabī’s Time Horizon,” identifies intersections between the works of the two authors and the temporal ontology described by Ibn al-ʿArabī. By extracting literary representations of mysticism from the authors’ literary output and then reading them against Ibn al-ʿArabī’s notions of *zamān*, *waqt*, and *dahr*,

the chapter argues that Borges and Mahfouz offer their readers a handful of useful concepts with which to engage with the rationally induced acceleration and manipulation of time by power. In particular, Borges's personal memoir "Sentirse en muerte" and his short story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" sketch out the Argentine's conceptualization of a time horizon resonating with that of *dahr* expressed in Ibn al-ʿArabī's theosophy, while his short story "The Writing of the God" suggests that gnosis realized from attaining awareness of *dahr* is generative of theories for non-violent resistance. Likewise, Mahfouz, in his novel *Midaq Alley* provides an early career depiction of *dahr* as informing the actions of his character Radwan, and his novels *The Harafish* and *Arabian Days and Nights* portray various characters who acquire an irrational gnosis from their experiences in or awareness of *dahr* and who use that gnosis of an eternal realm of flux to transform their societies.

The third chapter, "Ibn al-ʿArabī's Spatial Ontologies at Play in Borges and Mahfouz" first explains how Ibn al-ʿArabī's cosmology is based on the notion of the sphericity of the known universe, and analyzes how this conception of space intersects with literary representations of mysticism in Borges's essay "Pascal's Sphere" and his short stories "The Aleph" and "The Library of Babel." When juxtaposed with Ibn al-ʿArabī's theosophy, Borges's writing can be read as suggesting resistance to the rationally-driven demarcation, production, and appropriation of space by power; this resistance is encouraged by the texts' communicating an essential Unity of Being, reclaiming the production of space, and debunking textual claims to authority over Being. The third chapter also reads Mahfouz's novels alongside Ibn al-ʿArabī's use of metaphors of journeying and moving through physical space to represent irrational approaches to the godhead, in an attempt to repair or transform societies divided by power's rational structures. Through such a reading, Mahfouz's short story "Zaʿbalāwī" and his novels

*The Journey of Ibn Fattouma* and *Arabian Nights and Days* employ metaphors of movement, pilgrimage, or questing across “stations” in physical space to represent non-rational “travelling” through inner space; such journeying indicates that it is through spiritual transformation and non-rational interior quests that humans might attain salvation from the malaise of alienation, political oppression, and materialism.

The fourth chapter considers the ontological category of the self, or subjectivity, and argues that literary depictions of mysticism in Borges and Mahfouz contest the fragmentation of individual subjectivity by the rational structures employed by power. Literary representations of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s irrational notion of the annihilation of the self are discovered in Borges’s essay “The Nothingness of the Personality” and in his short stories “The Writing of the God” and “The Zahir;” these literary depictions of mysticism offer readers a glimpse at an ontological human unity, emphasize the social need for values of altruism and empathy, and in their characterization of subjectivities evocative of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s model of the *wāqifūn*, provide a theoretical basis for passive resistance to power and a refusal to engage with rational orthodoxy. Offering a perhaps more fully realized, albeit fictional, vision of resistance and transformation, Mahfouz depicts characters who embody Ibn al-ʿArabī’s idea of the *rajiʿūn*, or the annihilated subjectivity who returns to society in order to use its gnosis of the godhead for transformative ends. These characters—Radwan in *Midaq Alley*, Sheikh al-Junayd in *The Thief and the Dogs*, Sheikh al-Balkhi in *Arabian Days and Nights*, and Ashur II in *The Harafish*—also perform the role of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s *futuwwa*, as they display a selfless chivalry and an altruistic desire to help others. In particular, Mahfouz’s literary representations of mysticism through al-Balkhi and Ashur II, who are actually instrumental in achieving transformation in their societies, could help to establish a template for the merging of rational and irrational approaches towards “truth,” suggesting at least



one ideology—which Mahfouz has designated as “Socialist Sufism”—through which to realize social progress.

At each step of the analysis I have attempted to avoid overtly political readings of either author, instead focusing on how their literary depictions of mysticism might be used in a variety of historical and geographical contexts outside of their own, by challenging the very ontological bedrock of the ideologies of oppressive power/knowledge. Thus, in my explanations of how the authors’ representations might inform resistance and transformation strategies, I have made an attempt to universalize the lessons which I believe the texts are teaching; as a result, my conclusions in each chapter lack a certain theoretical concreteness in the effort to provide only abstract principles which could be used to promote individual and social transformation in the hands of a skilled teacher or leader.

#### **Note on texts selected for each author**

Regarding the particular texts selected for analysis, some difficult choices had to be made. Though Borges also has an impressive legacy as a poet and Mahfouz as a screen writer, I have avoided an attempt to synthesize the authors through their work in these genres. At the level of narrative description and narrative logic, it seemed most productive and most relevant for the present project to compare the essays and short stories of Borges to the novels and short stories of Mahfouz—even though each of these forms obviously have their own generic conventions that make an absolutely precise comparison impossible.

In my analyses of Borges, I have included in each chapter a discussion of an essay and two short stories. The essays provide prosaic and analytic treatment of the mystical themes which appear in the short stories, yet they also display elements of “literary depictions of mysticism.” For Mahfouz, I have relied on novels from his early, middle, and later career in each

chapter, with the exception of one short story, “Za<sup>c</sup>balāwī,” from the middle years of his career. I have also chosen to pay more attention to the later novels *The Harafish* and *Arabian Days and Nights*, since they currently lack original critical treatment in English, and also because these novels seem to best signify a real embrace of mysticism by Mahfouz, as well as an increased receptivity to irrational thought and epistemology, marking a step away from his stance as a champion of science that many critics detected in his realist novels from the 1940s and his fiction of the 1960s, beginning with 1959’s *Awlād ḥāratinā* (*Children of Gebelaawi*).

I have also attempted in the initial discussion of each text under consideration to provide some critical reception of the texts only in terms of their being read as mystical or as literary depictions of mysticism. I have not attempted to provide thorough surveys of the critical literature on each text analyzed in either English nor the language used by the author to write, because the fields of criticism are vast in each case, and in this regard much of the criticism falls well outside the scope of literary representations of mysticism, resistance, and social transformation.

#### **Note on use of translated sources**

Rather than provide my own translation for quoted passages from a reading of each author in their native languages, due to limited time allowed for this project I opted instead to read the literary production of the authors in translation, attempting to locate renderings considered as authoritative by the estates of each author. In the case of Borges this meant opting for the translations of Andrew Hurley over various others, including the critically acclaimed translations done by Norman Thomas de Giovanni in the 1960s and 1970s, who during translation worked side by side with Borges. Regardless, the professional translations I have

selected for both Borges and Mahfouz are the result of precious hours of work by others and are more than adequate sources for the present purposes.

### **Note on transliteration**

Finally, a few words about the transliteration of Arabic words and titles are required. In representing Arabic names of historical people, Arabic words and technical terms, and Arabic titles in Romanized script, I have attempted to closely follow the scheme suggested by the *Library of Congress Transliteration Guide*. A notable exception is that I have chosen to represent the Arabic letter *ayn* with the character °. While I have attempted to model my own transliteration after the Library of Congress's guide, some inconsistencies persist, especially in the use of the initial *alif* of definite articles and in the transliteration of diphthongs. In these cases, I have attempted to present words with fluidity of reading and ease of pronunciation in mind.

I have also selected to use the accepted English transliteration of Naguib Mahfouz to represent the Egyptian novelist's name instead of adhering to a strict transliteration form Arabic; likewise, I have opted to use the transliterations of characters' names as they appear in the authorized translations. Therefore, when names such as Ashur or Radwan appear, I am aware that they are not transliterated according to the Library of Congress's guide; I have simply chosen to use the names which my own readers will easily recognize if they wish to consult translations of Mahfouz's novels which I have cited.

## Chapter 1: Mysticism is Resistance

### Introduction

Mystics, within their respective religious traditions, have long described alternative approaches to “truth” or to understanding the “real,” claiming to have access to alternative epistemologies, and indeed, to alternative ontologies which underpin the “rational” world or through which the “rational” world operates. For their efforts, mystics throughout history have been persecuted, imprisoned, tortured, or killed for articulating or explaining their experiences, visions, and acquired understanding. But is such martyrdom necessary in order to initiate or enact resistance to the orthodoxies and hegemonies of power? Can mystics, or perhaps people who are mystically inclined or influenced by mysticism, not resist orthodox or hegemonic versions of “the real” and the ontologies that undergird these orthodoxies and hegemonies, and stay healthy and whole? Given that language and interpretation are central to the mystical enterprise, can literary representations of mystical consciousness, as a phenomenon distinct from the interpretations of mystical consciousness by the mystics themselves, offer modes of resistance?

Building upon an understanding of mysticism as an alternative to orthodoxy, in this chapter I will answer these questions by arguing that, in addition to the actual reporting and linguistic interpretation of mystical experience and consciousness by mystics themselves, “literary representation of mystical consciousness” by non-mystics provides reading publics with viable strategies and tactics for a resistance to power. Such literary representations of mysticism offer readers alternative and irrational ontologies to those rational notions of being and existence endorsed by power, and they encourage readers to reconceive epistemologies employed by power, inspiring them to resist the encroachment and domination of power and to work towards

generating social transformation. These alternative ontologies are based on literary reconsiderations of how humans acquire knowledge about time, space, and subjectivity. By articulating resistance through such a deconstruction of ontological categories—a resistance technique subtler than those of more overtly radical or committed authors—authors such as Jorge Luis Borges and Naguib Mahfouz, who employ literary representations of mysticism, and ideally readers who are influenced and inspired by these authors, can live to fight another oppression another day.

To support these claims, I will first define mysticism in light of recent scholarship, offer a genealogy of the term, and then summarize some of the important theoretical approaches to mysticism, all in order to arrive at a conception of the general concept of mysticism as a universally experienced phenomenon offering critiques of the orthodoxies within which they are embedded. In this context, I use the term “orthodox” in its broader sense, as an adjective indicating the quality “(of a person or their views, especially religious or political ones, or other beliefs or practices) conforming to what is generally or traditionally accepted as right or true; established and approved” (“Orthodox” Oxford English Dictionaries); hence, I will use the noun “orthodoxy/-ies” to refer to the institutions that conform to and seek to perpetuate religious and political norms that are accepted, established, and approved as “right or true.” In this sense, orthodoxy is a hegemonic tool for dominant forms of “power/knowledge,” especially those of capital which rely on rational pathways to knowledge.

I will then consider some theories about the linguistic parameters through which mystical critiques of orthodoxies are offered and argue that these linguistic critiques are made effective by their exploitation of orthodox notions of categories central to ontology, such as time, space, and subjectivity, in order to suggest alternative pathways to “truth” or to understanding “the real.” To

conclude the chapter, an explanation of how mysticism intersects with critical theory will highlight how irrational thought systems can be useful critiques of orthodox ontology and epistemology.

### **What is Mysticism?**

The idea that many people have when they hear the word “mystic” might include the “unintelligible statements of an illogical speaker, a schizophrenic’s [or epileptic’s] vision, someone’s hallucinations, a drug-induced vision, ...spiritual ‘showings,’ ...[or] the unspoken, silent experience of God” (Forman, *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness* 4). Yet this perhaps popular understanding of the term is not complete, skewed perhaps by legend and the hagiographies that are inevitably produced by the institutions of orthodoxy in an attempt to co-opt or appropriate the energy of the mystical impulse. Indeed, as Bernard McGinn notes “many mystics have insisted [that these types of phenomenon] do not constitute the essence of the encounter with God” (xviii) and that many of the most influential mystics, at least in the Christian tradition, “have been downright hostile” to “altered states” producing “visions, locutions, raptures and the like” (xvii).

### **Theology**

In part due to the notorious complexity<sup>28</sup> involved with defining “mysticism,” McGinn and others—notably Bernard Lonergan—have called for understanding the mystic’s encounter

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<sup>28</sup> Here, Bouyer’s opening statements prove illuminating: “Very few subjects are as delicate and difficult to deal with as mysticism. When we consider all that has been said about it and the various judgments pronounced upon it, we see that there is no other subject in the whole vast field of religious studies which lends itself to such widely differing descriptions” (Bouyer 42). Likewise, Ruffing embarks on her own study of mysticism by remarking that “The breadth and intensity of the interest in mysticism during the last half of the twentieth century have given rise to many different interpretations of mysticism and many conflicting theories about it” (*Mysticism & Social Transformation* 1)

with the godhead in terms of a variable mode of consciousness, rather than attempt to “overconcentrate” on delimiting the “highly ambiguous notion of mystical experience” (McGinn xiv). The focus on providing a “simple definition of such a complex and controversial phenomenon seems utopian” (xv) and distracts from what McGinn considers to be a more fruitful method for better understanding mysticism: the “careful analysis of the special hermeneutics of mystical texts,” which under the influence of theologians and philosophers bent on reducing the terms of the mystical experience, “have usually been treated without attention to genre, audience, structure, and even the simplest procedures for elucidating the study of the text” (xiv). It is in the spirit of textual analysis contained in McGinn’s remarks that my study of literary representations of mysticism proceeds.

***McGinn’s definition of mysticism: 3 headings***

Nevertheless, some sort of definition of the phenomenon of mysticism is needed in order to analyze mystical texts, and to provide a launching point for my project I summarize here three attempts to define mysticism: one theological and two more purely philosophical.

In framing his authoritative and expansive study of Western Christian mysticism, McGinn cannot avoid offering a theological definition of mystics and mystical practice. While his conceptualization is limited in the sense that it derives only from textual evidence produced by mystics of Western and Eastern Christianity, his definition is worth considering in full for the context of the present study, precisely because McGinn carefully composes his definition so as to encourage close textual analysis of the expressions of mystical consciousness in general. McGinn understands mysticism by considering and discussing it as occurring under three headings (xv):

1) Mysticism is an integral “part or element of religion”—here mysticism is ingrained in the religious tradition, which has at its core “mystical elements as parts of a wide historical whole;” these “elements” are practiced, understood, and felt in varying degrees of intensity by followers and reach varying degrees of development; only when it “reach[es] a level of fully explicit formulation and paramount importance for certain adherents of the religion” can “we speak of a mysticism proper” (xvi)

2) Mysticism is a “process or way of life”—here mysticism is a means to an end, a method to attain a goal: “everything that leads up to and prepares for [the] encounter between God and human, between Infinite Spirit and the finite human spirit.” For McGinn it diminishes understanding of mysticism if the “process” is disconnected from the goal (or “effect”) (xvi)

3) Mysticism is “an attempt to express a direct consciousness of the presence of God”—here McGinn departs from a commonly held idea that the goal of mysticism is “some form of union with God, particularly a union of absorption or identity in which the personality is lost” (xvi). McGinn feels that characterizing mystical experience as one of union or absorption excludes the majority of mystics who have actually documented their experiences, and he argues instead for an expansion of the “notion of union” in order to provide increased nuance for how the term “union” has been understood throughout the history of Western Christianity (xvi-xvii).

As a result of the complex relationships between these three headings, McGinn’s formulation of what the mystic encounters during mystical consciousness depends less on “union” and more instead on the idea of presence: “Thus we can say that the mystical element in Christianity is that part of its belief and practices that concerns the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the reaction to what can be described as the immediate or direct presence of God” (xvii). Moreover, McGinn claims that reporters of mystical consciousness aim not so



much to inform their audiences of the nature of mystical consciousness but aspire more to transform their audiences in order to assist them in reaching the mystical consciousness themselves (xvii). On the whole McGinn's remarks apply to the tradition of Christian mysticism, but I suggest here, before even examining the possibility of any universal feature shared by mystical consciousness in disparate times and cultures, that his definition can rightly be applied to the mystical traditions of other religions and societies. Before demonstrating that there exists a "universal" core to mystical consciousness, which would validate extrapolating McGinn's more theological concept of mysticism, I will first summarize two philosophical definitions of the term.

### **Philosophy**

Current philosophical approaches also highlight the notion of human transformation deduced by McGinn's theological understanding of mysticism; however, they emphasize more explicitly than McGinn that mystics claim access to alternative knowledges. Defined in a very general sense by Jerome Gellman in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, mysticism is "a constellation of distinctive practices, discourses, texts, institutions, traditions, and experiences aimed at human transformation, variously defined in different traditions" (1). For the purposes of my argument, the explicit goal of mysticism in Gellman's definition—human transformation—will be expanded upon to include what is surely an implicit goal in Gellman's formulation social transformation. As far as what might provide the basis for personal or social transformation, and as to how and what mystics might gain in terms of knowledge during mystical consciousness or experiences, Gellman maintains that mystical experience is the acquisition of knowledge by means other than empirical observation or rational thought; for Gellman mystical consciousness or experience is defined as "[a] (purportedly) super sense-

perceptual or sub sense-perceptual experience granting acquaintance of realities or states of affairs that are of a kind not accessible by way of sense perception, somatosensory modalities, or standard introspection” (Gellman “The Narrow Sense of Mystical Experience” para. 1). Less oriented towards the transformational potential of mysticism, but still assigning a prominent level of knowledge acquisition to mystical experience or consciousness, William E. Mann, describes mysticism in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* as “a doctrine or discipline maintaining that one can gain knowledge of reality that is not accessible to sense perception or to rational, conceptual thought” (593).

Corresponding to McGinn’s theological concern with problematizing the notion of “union” with the godhead, both Gellman and Mann distinguish between theistic mysticism and non-theistic mysticism. Mann observes that theistic mysticism is presently found in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions, and non-theistic mysticism within the Buddhist tradition and “some varieties of Hinduism.” (593). Mann perhaps overgeneralizes in terms of the key difference between these types of mystics, when he claims that non-theistic mystics report immersion or loss of self in the godhead, while theistic mystics view union with the godhead as heretical, instead describing only a closeness to, or communion with, the godhead as the key feature of mystical experience. Thus, Mann locates experiences in which “distinctions between the self and reality, or subject and object, are revealed to be illusory” squarely within non-theistic traditions.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, Mann points out that in the theistic traditions the mystical experience is not controlled by the mystic but rather granted by god, whereas in the non-theistic traditions mystical experiences are “more apt to be controlled by the mystic” (593).

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<sup>29</sup> As my sustained study throughout the dissertation of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s theosophy reveals, the Sheikh’s notions of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, derived from a theistic tradition, debunk Mann’s convenient but inaccurate generalization.

On the other hand, Gellman points out that many theistic mystics have reported the loss of distinction between self and reality, or subject and object, just as non-theistic mystics have, though perhaps less frequently. For Gellman “theistic” and “non-theistic” are terms more properly rooted in the idea that for theistic mystics, the experience concerns either communion or union with a god, while for non-theistic mystics, mystical experience concern “an ultimate Reality other than God or no reality at all” (“Categories of Mystical Experiences” para. 3).

The long history of debate informing McGinn’s theological conception and the philosophical definitions of Gellman and Mann’s is rich and offers a myriad of interpretations of what mysticism is and what its features are.<sup>30</sup> For my purposes moving forward, what needs to be distilled from these three attempts to qualify mysticism are two key features: that 1) the mystic expresses a consciousness (either super-sense-perceptual or sub-sense-perceptual) of presence or union (whether theistic or atheistic), and that 2) regardless of the nature of the mystical consciousness or experience, the expressions and interpretations of mysticism contain claims for alternative knowledge and ways of viewing the world, acquired through other than rational or empirical epistemological methods.

### **Genealogy and Historical Usage of “Mysticism”**

#### **Greek mysteries and Latin fathers and French moderns**

Regardless of current theological and philosophical understandings of the term, the idea of mysticism as an irrational avenue to knowledge has been recorded as part of the human experience at least as long as the ancient Greeks. The etymology of the word and its journey into

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<sup>30</sup> See McGinn’s magisterial survey of this tradition of debate surrounding mysticism in his “Appendix: Theoretical Foundations. The Modern Study of Mysticism” (“Appendix: Theoretical Foundations. The Modern Study of Mysticism” 265–343). This review of the theological, philosophical, comparative, and psychological discourse on mysticism lends particular strength to McGinn’s “three-pronged” definition of mysticism summarized above.

English illustrates the complex set of attitudes and long history of “western” culture in dealing with mystical consciousness. In order to conceive of mysticism as an impolitical form of resistance rooted at the very core of Western civilization, it is important to first understand how deeply embedded mysticism is within Western thought and how mysticism has been grappled with by rational orthodoxies operating in the west; thus a genealogy of the contemporary English word “mysticism” follows.

The word “mystery” derives from the Greek word *mysterion*, a noun form of the verb *myein*, which means “to close,” and for the Greeks typically referred to shutting the mouth or the eyes. The noun *mysterion* took on religious significance in the Hellenistic period of Greek history: at least by the time of Alexander the Great, and definitely after, the appeal of the Olympian pantheon and the religious practices associated with it had waned, and Greek-speaking people began to search for alternatives to this belief system (Meyer 1–4). In contrast to the official state Olympian religions, which were expected to be practiced openly with all the attendant public rituals, piety, and sacrifice, many of the new alternatives were practiced in secret by esoteric groups who had “decided, through personal choice, to be initiated into the profound realities of one deity or another” (4). These groups were known as *mysterion*.

Thus, the “closing of the eyes or mouth” took on a dual meaning in the *mysterion*: first, the *mystes* (the initiate) was required to take a vow of silence about the group and its practices, so a closed mouth would be required; secondly upon entry to the *mysterion*, the eyes of the initiate would first be closed to one way of perceiving both *theon* (the gods) and *kosmos* (the world) before being opened to enlightenment (4). The nocturnal initiations of the *mysterion* with “flickering torches accentuating the contrast between light and darkness, made the primal experience of enlightenment that much more vivid to the eyes and the emotions” (4-5). From the

beginning then, it would seem that the root of the word “mysticism” pertained to esoteric knowledge sealed off from the majority of society and to the closing of believers’ minds to orthodox belief or practice. However, Bouyer argues that the word “mystery” and the notion of “the mystical” denoted for ancient and classical Greeks simply the secrets of ritual and liturgical practice which initiates were responsible for preserving, rather than an exclusively held doctrine or esoteric metaphysical knowledge: “In Hellenistic religions the secret which is truly mystical is not the secret of any ineffable religious knowledge, but the secret of a rite in its purely material aspect (Bouyer 43). Here Bouyer’s claims demand scrutiny, as it is impossible to actually know what transpired verbally and was not ever recorded during the mystery rites. Indeed, it would seem that Bouyer, in attempting to give Christianity sole credit for first associating the word “mystical” with an esoteric understanding of the godhead, seems bent on applying a well-documented later use of the word, which gained currency first during the time of Plato and which continued up through the days of the Alexandrine fathers of the early Christian church, to the sense of the word as it might have been used by the actual pre-Socratic practitioners or *mystes* themselves.

Documentary evidence from pre-Socratic Greece clearly show the mystery cults of Eleusis and Orpheus were important features of Greek social life. The “Homeric Hymn of Demeter,” preserved for posterity by Hesiod and believed to be the anchor for the performance of the Eleusinian mysteries can be reasonably dated to the seventh century BCE (Meyer 20), and Herodotus left a description, post-Socrates, of these mysteries after their appropriation by Athens, dating from the fourth century BCE in Book 8.25 of his *History* (Meyer 31). Thus the idea of mysticism as esoteric knowledge of the godhead or the *kosmos* is firmly anchored within the very core of what the West claims as one of its primary sources.

From these ancient Greek origins, the word entered the modern languages of Europe through the early fathers of the Christian church. According to Bouyer, the rituals and vocabulary of the Greek mysteries were simply evoked rather than adhered to by later writers—both pagan and non-pagan—”when describing reflections and research concerning the enigma of the world: all metaphysical thought, whether religious or not, and, still more generally, all laborious discovery, whatever might be its object” (44). For Bouyer, the vocabulary of the mysteries and even the word “mystical” became “commonplaces” in general discourse, far removed from the powerful social valence they once possessed for those initiated into the mysteries; his example of Philo, the Alexandrine philosopher using the terminology of the mysteries to discuss the complexities of Stoic philosophy illustrates his point (45). Again, Bouyer makes this claim in order to refute the idea that neither any features of the Greek mystery religions nor of Neoplatonism underpin Christian mysticism—both of which to my mind remain much more open to debate than he asserts.

Nevertheless, for Bouyer, the patristic writings<sup>31</sup> provide ample evidence for the shift in meaning of “mystical,” from denoting a ritual secret for post-Socratic and early Christian thinkers, to symbolizing a type of understanding of God, a “knowledge of divine things,” and “the spiritual reality of worship... as opposed to the vanity of an exterior religion” (47). Despite his apparent agenda for granting Christianity sole credit for associating the word “mysticism” with a special relationship with the godhead, Bouyer’s detailed study of how the word “mystical” was transposed in meaning by writers spanning from Plato, to the Alexandrine philosophers, and

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<sup>31</sup> Bouyer meticulously documents the use of the term “mystical” in the writings of Clement, Didymus, Cyril, Eusebius, Gregory of Antioch, Procopius of Gaza, Proclus of Constantinople, and Maximus the Confessor, culminating with Origen (d. 254 CE), in whose writing it is first “applied to a certain way of knowing God, directly and as it were experientially” (50).

to the Christian fathers—through their literary exegesis of scripture and their theological articulations of the liturgical and spiritual aspects of the early church—is helpful towards understanding how the word “mystical” and its derivatives came to be used in the Western and Eastern Christian spheres, and hence in the languages of the societies encompassed by those spheres of influence. Thus by the time of the texts left to posterity by the pseudo-Dionysius (written before 532 CE), the term “mystical” had fully acquired the sense of a “certain way of knowing God,” and Bouyer considers pseudo-Dionysius not as an “heir of the Neoplatonists—whatever may be his debt to these—but instead as the heir to the whole Patristic tradition of the use of the word” (52).

The influence of the pseudo-Dionysius on the theology of mysticism in medieval Europe has been well noted,<sup>32</sup> and Certeau, while considering the history of the word “mysticism,” contends that it is the specter of the pseudo-Dionysius, through his descriptions of the “mystical,” which “haunted five centuries of ecclesiastic reformism, to which he offered a speculative utopia” (90). He attributes “the authority of Dionysius” in the Middle Ages as a key component of an anti-orthodoxy which “served as an antidote against history that broke the link between the visible and the invisible, opposing to it a discourse (held to be original) that made it possible to conceive their distinction and to transcend it in a dynamic circularity” (90). Indeed, Certeau documents the appearance, under the influence of the pseudo-Dionysius’s authority, of the word “mysticism” as a substantive for the first time in seventeenth-century France while charting the rise and fall of a science of “mystics” in western Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries (Certeau 76–110). Thus through the influence of pseudo-Dionysius, the idea of

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<sup>32</sup> See Grant, who claims “almost canonical authority” to the pseudo-Dionysius on the Middle Ages (25) and notes a strong “Dionysian influence” on the anonymous author of the mystical expressions in *The Cloud of Unknowing* (136).

mysticism as a set of ineffable and esoteric knowledge, and one that was at the same time anti-orthodox and ontologically alternative was transmitted into the languages of Europe.

### **English usage of “mystic”**

In English print usage, the word “mystic/mystick”<sup>33</sup> appears as an adjective as early as Wycliffe’s use of the term in 1382 in his translation of Jerome’s Vulgate Bible, in which he refers to the epistles of James, John, Peter, and John as “wel mystic as redi” by which Wycliffe meant to convey that these New Testament books were both mystical, in the pseudo-Dionysian sense, and succinct. Here, the meaning follows much of what Bouyer observes about the uses of the term by the Alexandrine patristics; for Wycliffe the word denotes something “spiritually allegorical or symbolical; of the nature of, or characteristic of a sacred mystery; pertaining to the mysteries of the faith.” The term has also retained the sense from the classical Greek of “pertaining to the ancient religious mysteries or to other occult rites or practices; occult, esoteric” with this form of the word appearing in print in English as early as 1615. In 1625 “mystic” was also used to mean “secret, concealed.” A third meaning, from as early as 1639, which perhaps supports Certeau’s theory of the development of a “science” of mystics in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, is that of the “the distinctive epithet of that branch of theology which relates to the direct communion of the soul with God; hence, pertaining to or connected with this branch of theology;” this sense of the word is now more commonly conveyed through the adjective “mystical.” A fifth adjectival meaning, “of hidden meaning or nature; enigmatical, mysterious,” appeared in print in 1631 in a poem by John Donne.

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<sup>33</sup> All definitions in this paragraph are from the entry for “mystic” in *The Compact Oxford English Dictionary* (Simpson, Weiner, and Berg 1142).



In addition to serving as an English adjective, the word “mystic/mystick”<sup>34</sup> is also a substantive, and in this form appeared as early as 1315 in print in English with the meaning of “mystical meaning, mystical representation,” but by 1679 the idea had received the meaning most germane to the current project: “Originally a ‘mystic doctor’, an exponent of; also one who maintains the validity and supreme importance of mystical theology. Hence, in extended application: One who, whether Christian or non-Christian, seeks by contemplation and self-surrender to obtain union with or absorption into the Deity, or who believes in the possibility of the spiritual apprehension of truths that are inaccessible to the understanding.” Less frequently the word is used to refer to “one initiated into the mysteries” of whatever society or group.

Derived from the word “mystic/mystick,” the substantive “mysticism”<sup>35</sup> first appeared in print in 1736 with the meaning of “[t]he opinions, mental tendencies, or habits of thought and feeling, characteristic of mystics; mystical doctrines or spirit; belief in the possibility of divine union with the Divine nature by means of ecstatic contemplation; reliance on spiritual intuition or exalted feeling as the means of acquiring knowledge of mysteries inaccessible to intellectual apprehension.” As might be expected, shortly thereafter the term acquired a pejorative sense as early as 1763 in, to imply “self-delusion or dreamy confusion of thought; ... often applied loosely to any religious belief to which these evil qualities are imputed” and “sometimes applied to philosophical or scientific theories alleged to involve the assumption of occult qualities or mysterious agencies of which no rational account can be given.” As McGinn notes, much of this type of invective force against mystics and mysticism was generated and developed by

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<sup>34</sup> All definitions in this paragraph are from the entry for “mystic” in *The Compact Oxford English Dictionary* (Simpson, Weiner, and Berg 1142).

<sup>35</sup> All definitions in this paragraph are from the entry for “mysticism” in *The Compact Oxford English Dictionary* (Simpson, Weiner, and Berg 1142).

Protestant theologians (“Appendix: Theoretical Foundations. The Modern Study of Mysticism” 267–273).

### **Is Mysticism Universal or Constructed?**

Thus far, it has been demonstrated that mysticism is the consciousness of other ways of knowing and of claiming an alternative access to the godhead, “the real,” or the “truth.” Furthermore, I have shown that mysticism is inextricably embedded throughout western culture and that it has a complex relationship with orthodoxy; my discussion of the evolution of the word in Greek, Latin, French, and English indicates not only the shifts in meaning to the present day but also suggests how the concept signified by the word has been grappled with by forces both within and without orthodoxy in an attempt to master it for discursive deployment.

#### **A universal phenomenon**

Yet mysticism is clearly not only rooted in the culture and language of the “West,” it is also a phenomenon experienced, observed, recorded, and analyzed across the globe. Experiences which can be defined as mystical in the context of McGinn’s, Gellman’s, and Mann’s definitions have been reported in most of the world’s currently active major religious traditions: Jewish, Christian, Muslim with roots in the “west,” and Buddhist, Hindu, Taoist originating in the “east.” Furthermore, contemporary anthropologists and scholars of religion have analyzed mystery societies, mysticism, and reports of mystical experiences in Africa and within the indigenous societies of North and South America and Australia.<sup>36</sup> Clearly, mysticism—at least in the sense

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<sup>36</sup> See Paula Allen’s “American Indian Mysticism” and Kofi Opoku’s “African Mysticism” in (Bishop, *Mysticism and the Mystical Experience*). Traditionally the mystical traditions discussed by Allen and Opoku would have been classified as “shamanistic.” However, Allen contends—and Opoku is clearly working under the assumption—that the term “shaman” is analogous to “saints, yogis, masters, . . . prophets and swamis in Eastern and Middle Eastern traditions” (181). For an example of an academic consideration and comparison of indigenous mystical traditions—unimpacted by contact with the “west”—in Australia and South America, see

that the term refers to a pathway or gateway to some kind of esoteric knowledge—is an experience common to humanity; to some extent it is clearly an irrational universal phenomenon. As such, I am suggesting that despite the plurality of the exoteric forms and vocabularies of mysticism, there remains a core of mystical consciousness which can serve as a useful mediatory for merging binaries such as “east” and “west,” and “us” and “them.” Furthermore, locating a common core of mysticism residing within or beneath plural surface formations will prove useful in establishing a foundation for cross-cultural comparisons of societies and their texts through a truly “humanist” lens—a lens trained on the manifold aspects of human societies in search of “values, history, and freedom” (Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* 14). Ultimately I will argue in the spirit of Derrida that, as a tool through which human cultural production can be synthesized towards the construction of any future “unified” human society, such a comparison and celebration of plurality will be essential to maintaining the unity of the “democracy to come” (Chérif and Borradori 80–83).

### **Two positions in the debate**

Yet at least since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, questions as to the degree to which different “mysticisms” differ or overlap have driven scholarship on mysticism.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, before

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Wilhelm Koppers’s discussion of the mystery rites of the Kurnai people of southeastern Australia and the Kina mystery of the Yamana people of Tierra del Fuego in “On the Origin of the Mysteries in the Light of Ethnology and Indology” (39–49).

<sup>37</sup> While my own summary of this debate is necessarily selective in its range and content, for an excellent survey of the European and North American theological, philosophical, and comparative/psychological voices in this debate from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, see McGinn’s appendix in *The Foundations of Western Mysticism* titled “Theoretical Foundations: the Modern Study of Mysticism” (265–343). A treatment more succinctly focused on the 20<sup>th</sup> century trajectories of this theoretical debate can be found in Bishop’s “Introduction” to *Mysticism and the Mystical Experience* (11–37), and in Ruffing’s “Introduction” to *Mysticism and Social Transformation* (1–25).

moving forward under the assumption that such a core of mysticism exists beneath its diverse surface features, it will first be useful to survey the trajectory of the debate in the theory about mysticism in the twentieth century. The two important contemporary poles in this debate, within the context of my study, are the “pure consciousness approach,” which argues that at least some varieties of mysticism consist of a universal set of common core cognitional elements independent from social and cultural inflection and influence, and the “constructivist” approach, which maintains that it is environment and material conditions that “construct” mystical experiences, so that mysticism is profoundly different from culture to culture.

This debate generates a key problem for my project: given my previous claim that there is at least some core common to mystical consciousness, if mysticism is nevertheless at some level socially constructed, to what degree and for what end would mysticism be truly useful for establishing human unity across cultural comparison? To address this problem, I will proceed by first assuming that there is enough of a universal element in mysticism for it to be contextualized as a unifying rather than a divisive category for all of humanity, despite the substantial differences in surface manifestations and generic, stylistic, and declarative variations in linguistic reportage of mystical consciousness. In fact, I argue that it is mysticism’s plurality, in combination with its universal core, which helps create a theoretical space for not only a viable, global resistance strategy but in turn a polyvocal, “polyvericidal,” and therefore “polydox” societies in the future.

## **Reviewing the debate**

To better explain my own conception of mysticism as somehow simultaneously plural and universal, I will here provide a brief account of the progress of the debate during the twentieth century between the pure consciousness and constructivist approaches. In the early twentieth century, the analysis of mysticism took a turn towards examining descriptions of mystical experience in terms of “states of consciousness.” As Donald H. Bishop notes, it was during this time that debates began to surface among theologians, philosophers, and psychologists “centered around the determinants, nature, form, authenticity, validity, verifiability, and content of the mystical experience, and the language the mystic employs to describe his or her experience” (“Introduction” 25). This shift also provides the foundation for McGinn’s analysis of mysticism in terms of consciousness and cognition but has its roots in William James’s foundational lectures on mysticism.

### **James discredits the Perennialists**

This shift towards understanding mysticism in terms of cognitive experience or consciousness was perhaps initiated by the definition of mysticism provided by William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, a collection of lectures which James delivered at Edinburgh University in 1902. Though a bit dated and ethnocentric,<sup>38</sup> his ideas are still worthy of consideration as they form a base for and continue to inform late-twentieth century and current discourse about mysticism, and his treatment of mysticism provides an instructional point of departure from which to think about the historical development of the perennial/constructivist debate. Rather than attempt to give a concise definition for a phenomenon that he considers to be “at the root and centre” of all personal religious experience, James suggests mystical

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<sup>38</sup> James’s “data,” or literary reports by mystics about the mystical experience, is overwhelmingly Christian, though he does include some discussion of passages of the Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim traditions.

experiences should be defined by “four marks which, when an experience has them, may justify us in calling it mystical” (302). James’s lengthy definition, which is still in large measure useful in the current academic discussion of mysticism, maintains that mystical experiences share the following characteristics: 1) ineffability; 2) noetic quality;<sup>39</sup> 3) transiency; and 4) passivity (302–3). Within his qualifications of each of these characteristics, James submits that the first two characteristics are enough to deem an experience as mystical, and he allows that the latter two are not always, but usually, part of the mystical experience. The mystical experience can come to the mystic sporadically, or it can be cultivated, for example through exercise, ritual, or meditation, so that it becomes more frequent (317). He sums up his ideas about the “mystic range of consciousness” with the following: “It is on the whole pantheistic and optimistic, or at least the opposite of pessimistic. It is anti-naturalistic and harmonizes best with twice-bornness and so-called other-worldly states of mind” (334).

In terms of his essay’s contribution to an understanding of any degree of universal occurrence of mysticism, it is crucial to note that James concludes his thoughts on mysticism with the unequivocal statement that he does not consider all mystical experience to be “unanimous,” or the same across the boundaries of faith and philosophy, in a passage worth quoting at length, as it will help illustrate James’s academic distance from his contemporaries:

The fact is that the mystical feeling of enlargement, union, and emancipation has no specific intellectual content whatever of its own. It is capable of forming matrimonial alliances with material furnished by the most diverse philosophies and theologies, provided only they can find a place in their framework for its peculiar emotional mood. We have no right, therefore, to invoke its prestige as

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<sup>39</sup> This word, uncommon at least to people who are not philosophers of phenomenology, refers to the operations of the mind, from the Greek word for mind, *nous*. James is insisting here that the mystical experience is a state of “insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain; as a rule, they carry with them a curious sense of authority for after-time” (302).

distinctively in favor of any special belief, such as that in absolute idealism or in the absolute monistic identity, or in the absolute goodness, of the world. It is only relatively in favor of all these things—it passes out of common human consciousness in the direction in which they lie. (337)

While his remarks imply that for James there is at least a common feeling of either enlargement, union, or emancipation, it is also clear here that James insists mysticism is not consistently manifested across cultures and that each mystical experience is distinctive, in that it forms “alliances” with whatever conceptual framework that fit the mystical experience’s “peculiar emotional mood.” This emphasis on the “relativity” of mystical feeling gives his remarks something of an avant-garde feel, especially when considered against a group of theorists of mysticism contemporary with James known as the Perennialists, whose theoretical approach towards mysticism should be briefly sketched here in the interest of providing context for the intervention made by James.

Contemporaneous with and oftentimes responding to James’s views on mysticism, theoretical discourse on mysticism in the first half of the twentieth century was dominated by the “Perennialists,”<sup>40</sup> whose core ideas can be summed up as:

- Religious traditions possess similar philosophies that can be applied across cultures; these philosophies do not change over time and are thus “perennial.”
- Religious experiences across the different traditions are similar.
- Religious experiences all represent direct contact with an “absolute principle” which is defined in various ways: e.g. YHWH, Jesus, Allah, the Atman, nirvana.
- All mystical experiences, as religious experiences, are parallel due to the fact that there are parallels between the primordial, foundational, or metaphysical philosophies or theologies of the world’s traditions. (Forman, *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness* 31–32)

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<sup>40</sup> This group includes Aldous Huxley, Rudolf Otto, Evelyn Underhill, Friedrich Schuon, Alan Watts, Huston Smith, and “perhaps W.T. Stace” (Forman 31).

In stark contrast to James's closing remarks on mysticism, the "perennial paradigm" of religious experience and mysticism has become outdated due to the methodological reductionism and academic irresponsibility of the perennialist scholars, who "misquoted, mistranslated, misrepresented, and misinterpreted their sources in order to make them appear identical" (Forman, *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness* 31–32). The result of such scholarship was not just an inaccurate model of mystical experience, but also a stripping down of the individual features of the world's mystics and mystical traditions, so that mystics and their experiences "seemed to disappear into some bland, characterless anonymity" (Forman, *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness* 32).

### **Constructivists emerge**

Gradually the perennialist view was finally and completely discredited by a broader paradigm shift in the academic disciplines towards the view which holds that "there are no human experiences except through the sociolinguistic relations which mediate them" (P. Almond 212). Due to this shift, as mystics and mysticism continued to be studied more closely and more rigorously during the last third of the twentieth century, the problems in defining and theorizing "mysticism" have only become more complex, as have debates about the sources, the contents, and the forms of mystical experience or consciousness. This complexity can be glimpsed in an assessment of the argument being waged since the early 1980s between the "constructivist" and "pure consciousness" scholars.

### **Katz, et al.**

Constructivism is in large measure a reaction against the Perennialist approach to mysticism and a result of the paradigm shift that vitiated them. Working within a paradigm of



“sociolinguistic mediation,” constructivists, most notably Steven T. Katz,<sup>41</sup> are sometimes called “neo-” or “hyper-Kantians” (Hammersholt 471) because they rely heavily on Kant’s proposition that humans are unable to immediately experience reality as it truly is. Kant called this pure, unmediated reality the *noumenon*. Kant insisted instead that humans can only rely on a finite number of “universal” ontological categories, such as space, time, causes, and effects, to confront and acquire knowledge about the noumenon. According to Kant, it is humans who construct these categories and it is these categories that enable humans to experience reality; therefore human experience is mediated by these “constructed” categories (Russell 707–8).

The constructivists also draw substantially from Wittgenstein’s remodeling of Kant’s suggestion. Wittgenstein posited that humans not only “construct” the categories that allow for the “experience” of “reality” and encountering the world, but that “experience” and what is viewed as “reality” itself is likewise constructed through language, which allows for expression of concepts, beliefs, and actions. In his genealogy and critique of the constructivist position, Forman summarizes Wittgenstein’s theory, which echoes that of Vico’s notions of the constructed nature of human history:

The world does not come “at” us... with our concepts passively filtering certain things out. Rather, we more actively “construct” our experience. The world is as we build it. And having built it, we live in what we have ourselves built. In living and understanding it in certain ways—which we learn from language, culture, behavior patterns, etc.—we construct our sense of the real. (3)

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<sup>41</sup> As Forman (Forman, *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness* 2) points out, this group also includes William Wainwright, Ninian Smart, John Hick, Terence Penelhum, Jerry Gill, Wayne Proudfoot, and Peter Moore; interestingly, and perhaps to underscore the ambiguity of the debate about mystic experience, Hammersholt (Hammersholt 468) considers Smart to fall outside of the “constructivist” group. While Smart at times does defend the constructivist position in the important essay “Interpretation and Mystical Experience,” in other places in the same article, he states that “phenomenologically, mysticism is the same everywhere,” and it is only interpretations of the phenomenon which differ (Smart 87) which underpins the various mystical experiences of the world: as such Smart maintains there is a transcendental reality, a position about which Katz is more agnostic (Hammersholt 481).

Therefore, it is both Kant's theory of categories and Wittgenstein's focus on human agency, particularly through language, in the construction of "reality" which leads Katz to argue that "[t]here are NO pure (i.e. unmediated) experiences" (Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism" 26). At the same time, Katz attempts to maintain a certain agnosticism about the verity of mystical experience and the existence of a transcendental reality (22), and even more recently he has stated that to interpret his remarks as suggestive of what Forman calls "complete constructivism"<sup>42</sup> is inaccurate; rather, Katz claims to believe it is more accurate to label his approach as "contextualist" (Katz, "Mystical Speech and Mystical Meaning" 34 n. 9), and that he believes it more likely that "there is a dialectic between our environment and our experience" (Horgan 46). However, at the same time, Katz does not explicitly back away from his earlier suggestion that the experience participating in this dialectic is itself constructed by the mystic's "set," which is defined as the religious background, linguistic context, and conceptual framework that the mystic possesses prior to any mystical experiences (Hammersholt 478–80; 487). Indeed, it would be difficult for Katz to gainsay his assumption that there are "NO pure... experiences" through mere qualification of his terms.

### **PCE voices: Forman, et al**

At the other end of the polemic from the constructivist approach, the "pure consciousness" approach posits that there are events occurring to mystics that *do not* depend on the mystic's "set." These events, dubbed pure consciousness events (PCE) by Forman, can be defined as "the nonspatial experience of a void awareness" ( Forman *Mysticism, Mind,*

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<sup>42</sup> Forman defines complete constructivism as the theory that "the [mystical] experience is one hundred percent shaped, determined, and provided by the set" (Forman, *The Problem of Pure Consciousness* 13).

*Consciousness* 6), or as a “wakeful though contentless (nonintentional) consciousness” (Forman, *The Problem of Pure Consciousness* 8). In other words, the mystic consciousness does not rely on nor originate from sensory or exterior stimuli (8).

In defining the PCE paradigm Forman, using the typology developed by Roland Fishcher, distinguishes between visionaries and mystics. In this model, visionaries report experiences of “hyperarousal,” in which mental and physical activity can be measured at “relatively high levels.” These types of experience, which Forman labels as “ergotropic,” are accompanied by increases in heart rate, skin temperature, “spontaneous galvanic skin responses” and electroencephalogram patterns (Forman, *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness* 4). Familiar examples of people who would be considered visionaries in this classification, based on their own reportage, include Santa Teresa de Avila (when she reports auditions or visions or physical penetration), Joan of Arc, the prophet Muḥammad, Isaiah, and the author of the *Revelation* in the Christian New Testament.

On the other hand, in contrast to visionaries, mystics report states of “hypoarousal.” In contrast to the “ergotropic” experience, measurable cognitive and physiological parameters decrease in individuals who undergo these “trophotropic” experiences (4-5). Forman includes Santa Teresa de Avila (when she reports nonsensory union), Meister Eckhart, the Dogen, and al-Hallaj as individuals who would be defined, through their own expressions and interpretations of their experiences, as mystics.

These two types of consciousness operate along a spectrum, with some visionary experiences being more ergotropic than others and some mystical experiences being more or less trophotropic than others. Forman also contends that with such different physical characteristics between the two types, it is likely that the infinite types of experience possible along the scale

also have different “psychological characteristics, mental features, and... causes.” While the focus on the physically measurable characteristics of mystical consciousness in the conception of this scale ironically adds a patina of empirical authority to Forman’s framework, one flaw here is that Forman does not take up the issue of whether or not these ergo- or trophotropic responses themselves can be rightly considered as being constructed or mediated through a “set.”

Forman agrees with Smart that mysticism, as opposed to visionary experience, is “a set of experiences or more precisely, conscious events, which are not described in terms of sensory experience or mental images” (qtd. in Forman, *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness* 6). Indeed, Forman maintains that “restricting the term *mysticism* to experiences not described with sensory language” corresponds closely to the original meaning of the word “mystic” (Forman, *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness* 6), and by analyzing the textual production and reportage of mystics, like that of the *Bhagāvad Gītā*—expressed in language relatively lacking in sensory language and imagery—Forman develops his notion of at least one type of mystical experience known as a “pure consciousness event” (PCE).

Forman further divides mystical experience divided into two types by relying on W.T. Stace’s distinction between “extrovertive” and “introvertive” mysticism.<sup>43</sup> An extrovertive mysticism is associated with experience of, or at least a perception, of a new relationship with the external world. For example, the individual mystic might perceive an increased unity, a higher level of blessedness, or a greater sense of “realness” in and with the mystic’s world of lived experience. On the other hand, an introvertive mysticism can be further divided into two types: the PCE—again, defined as “the nonspatial experience of a void awareness” marked by a restful, contemplative state in the mystic (Forman, *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness* 6)—and the

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<sup>43</sup> Stace, W.T. *Mysticism and Philosophy*. New York: Macmillan, 1960. 131-33.

dualistic mystical state (DMS), characterized by a level of silence and contemplation which is simultaneously maintained with the “full use of human faculties” (*Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness* 7). Thus the PCE is maintained “only during meditation” while the DMS is sustained through physical and cognitive activity (*Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness* 6). Here, in some varieties of the DMS, James’s notion of the transiency of the mystical experience is dispensed with.

Regardless, Forman focuses on the PCE as his primary object of study because he argues that it is perhaps the most commonly reported type of mystical experience, and as such it seems to be more “rudimentary” which could be then generative of features of “more advanced mystical phenomena;” furthermore, Forman holds the PCE as the best evidence against constructivist positions (*Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness* 7). In attacking constructivist theory, Forman points out a series of logical fallacies at play within the constructivist (or contextualist) position to reveal that constructivists mistakenly apply a “model to the trophotropic states of mysticism that was developed to explain our ordinary, everyday experiences of speaking, perceiving, thinking, etc... Not mysticism” (*Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness* 34;55-80).

### **The universality of mysticism as a basis for comparison**

Mysticism, as it has been surveyed here, resists normatization and efforts of tidy taxonomy, but at the same time it manifests itself across a vast temporal and spatial dimension to the point where it can be said that mysticism is part of the global human experience. Before attempting to conduct my own analysis of literary representations of mysticism, I have gone into some level of detail in this sketch of the current state of theoretical discourse about mysticism in order to first demonstrate the extent and the complexity of the conceptions of mysticism. Secondly, the preceding sketch has provided a useful critical lexicon for talking about literary

representations of mysticism. A third outcome of this perhaps more-detailed-than-desired sketch is that it sheds light on what McGinn terms as an unsettling “stand-off” between constructivists and “trans-empiricists” which has not diminished over time. Therefore it will be one of the secondary aims of this dissertation to contribute to this debate in the hopes that it might in some way constructively contribute to this stand-off, as some part of a solution to what McGinn bemoans as the “lack of conversation between psychological investigators and those involved in the history and theory of mystical traditions” (McGinn, “Appendix: Theoretical Foundations. The Modern Study of Mysticism” 343).

Moving forward, in light of the foregoing study of the horizons of mystical theory and theology, for the present purposes I take a position similar to that of Patrick Grant, who maintains that it is impossible to determine if mystical experience is exclusively the product of “pure experience” or “culture” (4). Perhaps R.A. Nicholson, the famed Orientalist and esteemed scholar of Sufism writing just twelve years after James published his views on mysticism, put it best when he said:

It may be said, truly enough, that all mystical experiences ultimately meet in a single point; but that point assumes widely different aspects according to the mystic’s religion, race, and temperament, while the converging lines of approach admit of almost infinite variety. Though all the great types of mysticism have something in common, each is marked by peculiar characteristics resulting from the circumstance in which it arose and flourished. Just as the Christian type cannot be understood without reference to Christianity, so the Mohammedan type by be viewed in connexion with the outward and inward development of Islam. (2–3)

Likewise, Smart’s final analysis allows for a basis of comparative studies upon which my project finds firm footing:

- 1) Phenomenologically, mysticism is everywhere the same.
- 2) Different flavours, however, accrue to the experiences of mystics because of their ways of life and modes of auto-interpretation.

- 3) The truth of interpretation depends in large measure on factors extrinsic to the mystical experience itself(87)

Thus, informed by these summations of Grant, Nicholson, and Smart, it would at this point of the debate between constructivists and pure consciousness proponents be folly to side resolutely with either the constructivist view or the “pure consciousness” view, due to the highly subjective nature of the only data that can be used to qualify mystical experience or consciousness.

Donald Bishop offers a possible vision of a *détente* between the PCE and constructivist positions, questioning if theoretical study of mysticism could not follow the example of philosophical discourse, which has shifted from “the analytical and language analysis movement” towards “the direction of ‘applied philosophy’ that is concerned with what philosophy or philosophers have to say about the state of the world in which we live” (“Introduction” 32). Such a shift in the nature of the debate, Bishop muses, would “include an investigation of how mysticism can help to soften or minimize the dogmatism of institutionalized religion that has led in single religious traditions to the persecution by the orthodox of the mystic and to conflict between religions whose proponents claim theirs as the only true religion or means of salvation” (“Introduction” 32). Thus for Bishop, the energies of those working on the theoretical and analytical horizons of discourse about mysticism could be more productively harnessed in order to pioneer conceptualizations of mysticism as resistance to orthodoxy as well as a mediatory tool for efforts towards social transformation.

In light of Bishop’s question of “if a pluralism of mystical types and experiences can be agreed on, how can mysticism stimulate a similar pluralism that makes room for unity in diversity among the religious traditions of the world?” (“Introduction” 32), it is one of the goals of the present study to argue that the very plurality and alterity of mystical expressions across the world suggests not only a phenomenon common to all cultures—as different as individual

languages and dialects, but just as commonly human—but also something transcending time and space, uniquely inflected, but potentially shared in a “unity in diversity” obtaining in agonistic political situations as well as religious ones. Indeed, in arguing for the potential of “unity in diversity” through the mediation of mysticism, this dissertation responds to Bishop’s call to action for studies in mysticism to “contribute to the bringing about of a less pugnacious, competitive, and belligerent and a more peaceful, congenial, integrated world, one in which people are more caring, empathetic, unselfish, and loving” (32). It is these noble ideals which the discursive field of mysticism studies should pursue, and therefore it is towards those ideas which the current project is focused.

However, to usher in a more peaceful, congenial, integrated world, it needs to be remembered that the very powers that have brought about and that perpetuate pugnacity, competition, and belligerence must first be resisted, if ever a true transformation to a society guided by care, empathy, selflessness and love can occur. It is resistance, and the role of mysticism in resistance that needs study in this regard. Following from Bishop’s call to action, this dissertation will contribute to the investigation of how mystical experiences or consciousness, and the linguistic expressions of these experiences or consciousness, can provide platforms which humans can occupy globally in order to resist and transform the status quo. To better understand how such mystically generated linguistic expression might contribute to resistance and transformation efforts, it is to a consideration of the linguistic characteristics of mystical expressions to which I will now turn.



## Role of Language in Mysticism

### Ideas about the relationship between mysticism and language

At this point, the role of language in mysticism should come under consideration in order to provide a sufficiently complex basis for my own consideration of literary representations of mysticism and to provide an understanding of some of the ways in which mysticism uses language to contest or resist orthodoxies. I will briefly consider how scholars have studied language and mysticism before moving into an explanation of how mysticism as textual production can work as resistance. The point here is to not only provide a background and a precedent for the consideration of mysticism through close textual analysis of mystical texts, but to allow a certain flexibility and vigor in the use of terms and concepts in my own analysis of literary representations of mysticism.

Why the focus on language? After all, language is only one of the possible media through which humans can communicate consciousness and experience. The fact that mystical consciousness is often described as ineffable, or beyond words, further problematizes the mystic's choice of language to express mystical consciousness. Indeed, this central paradox inherent in the choice to use words to convey the ineffable is often manifested and amplified in paradoxical statements within mystical linguistic expression.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, the language used by mystics is oriented towards conveying the alternative and irrationally acquired truths or esoteric knowledge claimed by the mystic. Ostensibly, the end of this language is to effect social and personal transformation for the audience. Thus, it is important here to consider the range of theoretical explanations of some of the ways in which mystics attempt to use language as a

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<sup>44</sup> Among the many available sources in support of this claim, the introduction by Michael Sells to his *Mystical Languages of Unsayings* (1-13) most informs the present study.

means to transform individuals and societies, before turning my attention to actual literary representations of mystical consciousness in the following chapters.

### **James and the dilemma of ineffability**

As James pointed out, ineffability is perhaps the primary characteristic of the mystical experience; very often both the experience and the subject/object of mysticism itself (the godhead, the unity, or the emptiness) of that experience are rendered in the mystical report as being beyond the descriptive power of words.<sup>45</sup> However, this leads to a dilemma: if the experience and the object of the experience is unutterable, how then to communicate the experience to an audience? Those impelled to linguistically communicate or depict mystical experience and knowledge would seem to depend on “language to proclaim its limitations” (Grant 1). But as it is only through some kind of representation that mystics can describe their experiences and communicate their knowledge, alongside visual and musical strategies of representation, linguistic and literary strategies have arisen. These linguistic strategies used by mystics to convey their acquired knowledge include the use of allegory, metaphor, symbols, and other figurative language, labelled as kataphatic language, and the use of “unsaying,” or negative expression, called apophatic language.

### **Constructivists: language is necessary, and constructed**

Constructivist ideas about mysticism, language, and literature seem inclined to discount the notion of ineffability. Katz questions if ineffability is even an accurate criterion for mystical experience and argues that, as such, the dilemma of ineffability is a false problem. Indeed,

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<sup>45</sup> James not only points this out in his “four markers” of the mystical experience, but he returns to the primacy of “ineffability” throughout his essay on mysticism, e.g. “The handiest of the marks by which I classify a state of mind as mystical is negative. The subject of it immediately says that it defies expression, that no adequate report of its contents can be given in words” (302), and “The incommunicableness of the transport is the keynote of all mysticism” (321).

constructivism rests on Katz's assumption "that the mystical reports *always* mirror mystical experiences and the words in mystical reports are always descriptions" (Hammersholt 487; emphasis mine). However, Katz both develops his hypotheses and confirms his conclusions of the impossibility of unmediated experiences by referring to the available "data" of mystical experiences—the literature produced by the mystics themselves. Therefore, in terms of his methodology, this has opened up his position to charges of circular reasoning. Furthermore, as Hammersholt concludes, it should not be taken for granted that Katz is right when assuming that "mystical reports are valid as data about the mystical experience" (487).

Potential logical fallacies concerning the validity of his data aside, Katz develops the following ideas about language and mysticism in the following passage from his introduction to *Mysticism and Language*, worth quoting at length because it counterpoints theorists who consider apophasis and ineffability as a hallmark of the linguistic expression of mysticism:

Whatever else the world's mystics do with language, they do not, as a rule, merely negate it. Pressed to the limits of the 'sayable' by the transcendental subjects/objects of their concern, yet often assisted by the resources of positive revelation and/or the content of their (and others') 'noetic' experience (including states of consciousness reached through various forms of meditation) and, as a rule, urgently desirous of sharing these extraordinary truths and experiences, they utilize language to convey meaning(s) and content(s) in a variety of amazingly imaginative ways. It is, indeed, their success at just this sort of substantive communication that allows us to speak of, to learn of, and to participate in mystical traditions at all. This fact does not yet explain or resolve the still more recalcitrant logical problems generated by claims of ineffability and the like, but it indicates that resolution must be sought in ways more informed by what mystics actually say about the meaning of language, and its relationship to mystical experience and *realia*, than has hitherto been the case. (Katz, *Mysticism and Language* 33)

It is at the level of language in which the constructivist position has most validity; whatever it is that mystics experience, if they wish to share it then there is no way out except through the "mediation" of language, which itself has been mediated over generations. So, at least the

language-based reports of a mystic, even if conveyed in an apophatic style, would be contextually constructed at a fundamental level.

### **PCE and “unconstruction”**

Yet Katz clearly acknowledges that there are limits to the sayable and that there are problems associated with denying the mystic’s claims of ineffability, and at this point the pure consciousness position of Forman that mysticism is best described as “unconstruction” (*Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness* 109) reveals an important shortcoming in Katz’s theory of the mystical use of language. The mystic, defined by Forman as an individual experiencing a PCE, undergoes an “event” in which there is no sensory material and no imagery can be sufficiently harnessed by language to describe it; in fact, Forman says, there is a process of shedding or “unconstructing” of the mystic’s consciousness which precedes the PCE. Precisely because the subject/object of the PCE is a non-mediated “nothingness,” a “void,” or pure “self/other,” then a mediated and mediating tool like language will fail to convey that event; in contrast to what Katz maintains, language cannot be used by the mystic to accurately and adequately describe the mystical pure consciousness experience.

Nevertheless, mystics, coming out of PCEs do often attempt to express their experiences in language. Of course the very use of language would indicate a mediated experience, as Katz maintains, but as Forman points out, “using language to describe something does not mean that that language was necessarily present in the experience itself” (*Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness* 106–7). Thus, Forman presents the challenge to constructivists that even though the reportage of mystical consciousness—if it is to be comprehended by a target audience—is necessarily mediated, it is nevertheless impossible to deny that the actual mystical consciousness itself could be free of social construction or mediation.

On this basis, Forman can state that “there is, in other words, an epistemologically sound space for nonlinguisticity in mysticism” (106). When language is used to express that “non-linguistical space,” then readers or audiences are “shifted” from one use of language to another: “[m]ystical language may, in other words, be designed to engender an epistemological shift, a shift in the way we use language and in the way that we understand language applies to experience” (107). At this point Forman attempts to supply an answer to the problems and an extension to the limits of the mystic’s use of language perceived by Katz, but more importantly Forman’s comments suggest that mystical language can be used to transform both language itself and epistemology, categories considered to be crucial in contemporary theories of resistance and liberation.

To explain his theory behind the shift in language and epistemology, Forman differentiates how visionaries and mystics communicate their experiences in writing. Forman believes that the physically measurable and psychologically observed differences between visionaries and mystics are also manifested in the different techniques and styles in the literature and reportage of visionaries and mystics. Just as the physiological metrics differ between visionary experience and mystical consciousness, so do the forms, styles, themes, symbols and tropes employed in the writings derived from the two types of experience. Forman includes the following excerpt from Mechthild of Hackeborn, a thirteenth century Christian, as a good example of visionary writing<sup>46</sup>: “The King of glory once appeared in indescribable splendor in the fullness of his joy, wearing a golden robe embroidered with doves and covered by a red mantle. This garment was open on two sides to indicate that the soul has free access to God”

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<sup>46</sup> Excerpted by Forman from Mary Jeremy Finnegan, *Scholars and Mystics* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1962), p. 59.

(qtd. in Forman 5). This visionary passage is notable for its use of sensory detail and its reliance on a perhaps esoteric symbolism.

In contrast to the writing of Mechthild, Forman supplies this excerpt from the *Bhagāvad Gītā*, a text from the Hindu tradition, to demonstrate mystical writing<sup>47</sup>:

But with desire-and-loathing severed  
Senses acting on the objects of sense,  
With (senses) self-controlled, he governing his self,  
Goes unto tranquility.

In tranquility, of all griefs  
Riddance is engendered for him;  
For of the tranquil minded quickly  
The mentality becomes stable. (qtd. in Forman 5)

The syntax of the first verse excerpted from the *Gītā*, in which the senses are described by the compound adjective “desire-and-loathing-severed,” indicates that the individual who has learned to remove the senses from contemplation of “desire” and “loathing” will be able to control the senses, thereby maintaining self-control, establishing tranquility and the “riddance” “of all griefs,” and reaching a stable state of mental activity. There are no sensory details, metaphors, or symbols here, only the abstract itemization of the steps which one takes to control the senses and to achieve tranquility and stability. Of course, it should be kept in mind that Forman has “cherry-picked” this data, as throughout the *Bhagāvad Gītā* the poem relies heavily on sensory images to convey the experience of encountering the godhead.<sup>48</sup> If anything, this demonstrates that mystical expressions are not confined to one modality; a ranging across the spectrum of mystical

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<sup>47</sup> Excerpted by Forman from *Bhagāvad Gītā*, 2:64-5, trans. Franklin Edgerton (New York: Harper, 1944). The date of composition of the *Bhagāvad Gītā* ranges from the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE.

<sup>48</sup> Notably, in the famous “light of a thousand suns” passage in which Vishnu reveals himself to Arjuna.

experience, from visionary to mystical, is clear here. Such a range of expression would suggest that the tidy division of mystical texts into either “visionary” or “mystic” seems inaccurate and reductive.

### **Sells and “unsaying”**

It is at this juncture, at which Forman posits a linguistic and epistemological shift in mystical language, that his ideas dovetail with Michael Sells’s study of mystical language. Sells conceives of a model in which both kataphatic and apophatic mystical expressions can occur (Sells 206), thereby accounting for the range of expression identified along Forman’s visionary-mystical spectrum. Sells investigates the “dilemma of ineffability,” and though it is a false problem for Katz, in Sells’s schematic it clearly provides a tension that invigorates mystical reports. In particular, Sells’s scheme seems applicable to PCEs where there is allegedly no subject or object present in the mind of the mystic; moreover, it is the language of unsaying, or “apophasis,” which not only carries content proclaiming the very fact of ineffability but also attempts paradoxically to enact, or take the form of “ineffability.” Such a radical use of language to express and enact the fallibility of language carries with it potential for untangling linguistically constructed ontological categories and thus resisting the rational hegemonies which they inform, as will soon be demonstrated.

Yet before moving on to consider how apophasis, in the face of the problem of the “unsayable,” can be deployed in theorization of resistance and transformation strategies, a brief outline of Sells’s insights into how mystical texts receive vitality from the dilemma of ineffability will be helpful in understanding the relationship between apophasis and resistance to orthodoxy. According to Sells, when faced with the dilemma of ineffability—or what he calls the “aporia of transcendence”—the mystic, if wishing to describe the experience to others, will

be confounded as to how to report the mystical experience. To this aporia, Sells maintains, there seem to be three responses: 1) silence on the part of the mystic; 2) distinction in the mystic's report between "the transcendent/god-as-it-is-in-itself" and "the transcendent/god-as-it-is-in-creation;" and 3) acceptance of the dilemma and a refusal to attempt a resolution, resulting in a "negative theology" in the sense that "it denies that the transcendent can be named or given attribute" (Sells 2).

The third option entailing a negative theology, when taken by mystics, results in a discourse characterized by infinite linguistic regress, perhaps best demonstrated in the Mahāyāna Buddhist formulation that "all constructs are empty; the construct that all constructs are empty is empty; the construct that all constructs are empty is empty is empty" (5). In such a discourse, each statement made about the transcendent/transcendent experience must be corrected and the "authentic subject of the discourse [the transcendent/transcendent experience] slips continually back beyond each effort to name it or even to deny its nameability" (2). The slipping away of the subject of discourse provides a guiding semantic force behind a "new kind of language," through which mystics can choose to report their experiences; it is this "new kind of language," born from the necessities of a negative theology, that Sells labels "apophasis" (2). Furthermore, in this way, "meaning is generated through the tension of saying and unsaying" (12).

#### *Extended discussion of apophasis*

As a point of departure, Sells bases his analysis of apophasis on the distinction first made by pseudo-Dionysius,<sup>49</sup> between the two types of articulation of the mystical experience:

*kataphasis* and *apophasis*. Kataphasis here is taken to mean "an affirmation" of an experience, a

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<sup>49</sup> As noted, one of the early mystics of the Catholic Christian tradition writing in the early sixth century CE.



“saying” or “saying-with;” apophasis can mean “negation” but also “un-saying” or “speaking-away” (Sells 2-3). Working from this general definition, Sells allows that mystics employ one or both of these modes of discourse in their reports, an observation which corresponds to the range of expression noted between “visionary” and “mystical” writing in Forman’s scale.

Apophatic writing appears as a central discursive feature of “eastern” mystical traditions, most notably those of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism at least six centuries before the Common Era. In the corpus of the Western monotheistic mystical traditions, apophasis can be documented as early as the output of Plotinus in the third century C.E. Through the influence of Plotinus on Augustine of Hippo, writing in the fourth century C.E., apophasis was modeled as an option for expression to many Christian mystics in the medieval period,<sup>50</sup> although this is not to claim that all medieval mystics who employ apophasis in their reports were influenced by or even familiar with either Augustine or Plotinus. At any rate, the precedent was set for the use of apophasis in the reports of mystics working within the Christian traditions, and “by the ninth century C.E., the Jewish and Islamic mystical traditions were developing their own sophisticated varieties of apophatic discourse” (Sells 5), which in large measure were likewise engagements—either commentary on or against—with Plotinian writings and discourse.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Augustine’s *Confessions* are replete with examples indicating the degree to which Plotinus informed the intellectual development of Augustine (TeSelle 19); as to Augustine’s impact on the medieval period, I will echo Szarmach’s assertion: “...so much of the Middle Ages, either in the first instance or in reaction or in subsequent development is Augustinian” (Szarmach 5).

<sup>51</sup> “Although Arabic and Judaeo-Arabic versions of Plotinian writings circulated widely in medieval Jewish and Islamic circles, many Islamic apophatic texts developed as much in competition with Neoplatonism (which was interpreted nonapophatically for the most part in Islamic philosophy) as in sympathy with it. Ironically then, Plotinus may have been at least as influential on apophatic performance in Latin Europe, where he was known only indirectly, as in the Arabic and Judaeo-Arabic [primarily Andalusian] contexts, where he was read in translation” Sells (220, n. 14).

With a brief definition and sketch of the early history of apophasis established, some explanation is in order of what apophasis looks like and what it performs. While he is hesitant to present a “mechanistic” outline or formula for the principles of apophatic language in mystical writing, Sells does venture a schematic to help address a general academic lack of understanding of this “way of thinking and way of writing” (206). Apophatic language according to Sells displays some or all of the following characteristics: 1) the aporia of transcendence; 2) a language of ephemeral, double, and potentially infinitely regressive propositions; 3) the dialectic of transcendence and immanence, in which the “effort to express and affirm transcendence leads to an affirmation of radical immanence;” the “utterly transcendent is revealed as the utterly immanent” and the blurring of the binary between self and other results in a synthesis of subject/object characterized as “mystical union”; 4) an attempt at expressing “disontology” and “nonsubstantialist” deity and an avoidance of “reifying the transcendent as an ‘entity’ or ‘being’ or ‘thing’”; 5) metaphors—often used kataphatically or nonapophatically--of overflowing, emanation, procession, and return; and 6) enactment of semantic transformations, including the “undoing” of distinctions between self-other, before-after, and here-there through fusing of antecedents and pronouns, the blurring of reflexive and non-reflexive action, and the transformation of prepositions of time and place so that they “destabilize the temporal and spatial dimensions upon which they are based” (Sells 207-09).

Sells maintains that these six characteristics or principles of apophatic language comprise the “meaning event” in which apophatic language serves “as a literary mode” and that this meaning event is “a reenactment (within grammar, syntax, and metaphor) of the fusion of self and other within mystical union” (209). This mystical union is mimicked semantically and syntactically through a constant turning back upon or negation of the referential delimitations of

an utterance (8); each proposition or expression of the apophatic mystic is immediately recognized as false and referential/reifying (12). Thus not only does apophatic language attempt to express or convey the “event” of mystical consciousness, but it also seeks, through exploitation of formal linguistic conventions, to reenact it.

It is also important to keep in mind that in mystical expressions, kataphasis and apophasis are frequently used in the same text by the same author. Mildly apophatic language would use one or only a few of the preceding principles listed in Sells’s schematic, while a strongly apophatic text would use most or all of the principles. It is within this range that mysticism can generate or contribute resistance to orthodoxy, yet as Forman privileges non-sensory, abstract, and apophatic “mystical” language over kataphatic language as generative of an epistemological shift, I argue that apophatic language, as Sells defines and characterizes it, is the tool most likely to effectively challenge the ontological and epistemological categories constructed from out of the orthodox, as well as the heterodox, traditions of the mystic’s “set.”

### **McGinn and language**

Informed by Sells’s theorization of apophasis, the call to action by McGinn to analyze mystical expression as linguistic expression receives a “negative” and deconstructive vigor that in turn can be used to energize efforts in ontological resistance and social transformation. McGinn focuses on the linguistic concerns of mysticism and provides a scaffolding from which to mount a hermeneutic analysis of mystic expressions by detailing how the consciousness of the “presence of God” is presented by mystics or their interpreters. As might be expected, he first touches on the notion of ineffability of mystical consciousness and posits that nearly all Christian mystics concur that mystical consciousness “defies conceptualization and verbalization, in part or in whole. Hence, it can only be presented indirectly, partially, by a series of verbal strategies

in which language is used not so much informationally as transformationally, that is, not to convey content but assist the hearer or reader to hope for or to achieve the same consciousness” (xvii). Thus, an attempt must be made by the mystic to somehow communicate that which “defies” verbalization, so that the community can be transformed. In this way, mysticism can be read as a communal, social act of transformation through language.

Concerning the actual techniques and application of language towards these transformational efforts, McGinn points out that mystics have exhausted “all the resources of language” and have frequently attempted to generate new resources to “assist this transformative process.” Thus, that mystics have used “union” as just one of many possible “models, metaphors, or symbols” to describe their experience is not surprising. As McGinn says, “many have used it [the metaphor of union] but few have restricted themselves to it.” McGinn catalogs other attempts at expressing mystical consciousness such as “contemplation and the vision of God, deification, the birth of the Word in the soul, ecstasy, even perhaps radical obedience to the present divine will.” Thus McGinn’s conceptualization of mysticism as the ineffable consciousness of the presence of the godhead struggling towards textual expression lends itself well to critics who wish to actually interpret documentary evidence of mystical consciousness rather than read it as one might read “phone books or airline schedules: handy sources for confirming what we already expect” to find, about what is and is not mystical experience or consciousness (xiv).

### **Philosophical ideas about mysticism and language**

This discussion of mysticism’s complex relationship with language will now conclude with what thinkers who identify first and foremost as philosophers have to say about mysticism and language. Mann concurs with most other scholars of mystical consciousness by prioritizing

the notion of ineffability, pointing out that mystics assert that their experiences cannot be “adequately described in language,” and as a result they must rely on metaphor and simile to describe those experiences, since “ordinary” language is rooted in “sense experience and conceptual differentiation” (593). Expanding on Mann’s perhaps overly abstract description of ineffability, Gellman’s discussion of mysticism and language resonates with that of Sells, carefully sketching out the difference between apophatic and kataphatic mysticism (“Categories of Mystical Experience” para. 8-11). According to Gellman, apophatic mysticism, from the Greek *apophasis* (“negation” or “saying away,”) “claims that nothing can be said of objects or states of affairs which the mystic experiences” and instead that “these [experiences] are absolutely indescribable, or ‘ineffable’”(8).

In contrast to apophatic mysticism, kataphatic mysticism—from the Greek *kataphasis* (“affirmation” or “saying with”)—“does make claims about what the mystic experiences” (8). Moreover, Gellman thoroughly examines the role which language plays in both mystical experience and the communication of that experience, covering the contradictions of the notion of ineffability (“The Attributes of Mystical Experience” para. 1-6) and the paradoxical nature of mystical experience and paradoxes inherent in reportage (“The Attributes of Mystical Experience” para. 7-10). In his analysis of ineffability and paradox in mystical reportage, Gellman’s ideas resonate with McGinn’s theological observations and Sell’s treatment of apophatic language, underscoring the prevalence in mystical reportage the idea of god as a negation of presence and the consciousness of the presence of god as absence.

Regardless, then, of the approach taken by scholars of mysticism—whether oriented by discourse analysis, theology, or philosophy—one of the more important aspects of understanding mysticism is understanding the type of language used in the narration or presentation of mystical

experience. As a result, mystical texts—including those more properly considered as literary expressions of mysticism—are a particularly apt topic for literary analysis.

### **Mysticism *is* Resistance**

Thus far, it is clear that despite the debate between constructivists and their opponents about the notion of ineffability and its attendant problems and contradictions, mystics nevertheless deploy apophatic and kataphatic language in varying ratios when attempting to express mystical consciousness or experience. As the foregoing definition and discussion of mysticism has indicated, these styles of language aim towards communicating alternative, irrationally acquired knowledge and are intended to effect transformation at the personal and social levels. Such transformation not only originates from, but also performs resistance to, statuses quo maintained by and for orthodoxies. Therefore, it is through language, rather than any kind of manifest physical confrontation or practice, that mysticism performs *its most effective* resistance. But how does resistance receive energy and how can transformation arise from the language of mysticism, including literary representations of mysticism?

Before this question is answered, a review of previous scholars' work investigating the performance of resistance by mysticism is needed to establish the ground from which I will construct my own project. There are a number of peer reviewed articles and book chapters which take the nexus of mysticism and resistance as a focal point, many of which concern Tsarist Russia's interaction with Muslim populations: (Kisriev and Ware) investigate the impact of Sufi resistance against Russian hegemony in Dagestan in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century; Michael (Reynolds) investigates Sufi involvement in resistance to tsarist Russian imperial efforts in the North Caucasus; and Alexander Knysh (Knysh, "Sufism as an Explanatory Paradigm") examines "Neo-Sufism" and its role in shaping the response of both Russian imperial and

Western European colonial bureaucracies to resistance movement. Outside of a purely Islamic context, V. V. (Nalimov) discusses the pairing of mysticism and anarchy directed towards combatting the mechanisms of imperial Russia. Even though any consideration of literary representation of mysticism as a tool for resistance movements is lacking in these studies, in this niche of scholarship devoted to the “high age” of European and Russian imperialism, there is nevertheless a precedence for my own application of mysticism as counter-hegemony and counter-epistemology against neo-colonial energies and discourse.

Thus, in terms of how the mysticism relates to resistance and transformation, there is still work to be done.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, such work must struggle against considerable historical and social forces, as pointed out by Janet Ruffing, who, writing in 2001, demonstrates how the “real relationship” between mysticism, ethical behavior and action, and social transformation has been obscured due to 1) the processes of secularization, in which personal religious life is bracketed off from the political and public life; 2) the “modern construction of mysticism in both philosophy and psychology that often fails to account for the social and religious contexts and institutions that influence historical mystics and within which mystics live and communicate;” and 3) the split “within religion itself,” ongoing since at least the fourteenth century, between orthodox theology and mysticism (2) . Moreover, this gap in the critical study of mysticism and resistance is especially glaring with respect to attempts at discovering how literary representations of mystical consciousness—distinguished from literary expressions of mystics themselves—can empower resistance efforts; when compared to the massive corpus of published

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<sup>52</sup> An EBSCO database search using the search terms “mysticism” and “resistance” on Sept. 20, 2015 revealed that since 1885—a span of 130 years—yielded evidence for the existence of 104 English-language journal articles or scholarly books.

research and scholarship on resistance literature *per se*,<sup>53</sup> there is a real scarcity of analysis of literary depictions and treatments of mysticism and of how “literary representations of mysticism” can aid in resistance.

### **Soelle and Ruffing**

Despite this relative dearth of scholarship in English exploring the resistance of mysticism, there are some critics and theorists who have taken up this topic and therefore carved out a foothold for my own study of literary depictions of mysticism as a potential tool for resistance. Most crucially in terms of an initial space-clearing for my own project, Dorothy Soelle’s *The Silent Cry: Mysticism as Resistance* provides a diachronic and multi-cultural genealogy of mysticism as a technique for resistance. In particular, Soelle’s work meditates on the role which a seemingly passive mysticism can play in actually fostering and enacting resistance in a contemporary context. Soelle turns towards texts from the world’s mystical traditions and the “liberation theology” movement to illustrate her central thesis that each of the world’s citizens is potentially a mystic capable of engaging in resistance. Notably, despite her frequent citation of the key ideas and texts of liberation theology, Soelle insists that “the key term for us cannot really be ‘liberation,’ related to specific historical events...[i]nstead, our key term is ‘resistance,’ as the long-term praxis that is learned” (204).

Describing how mysticism can contribute to resistance, Soelle posits that such a “democratized mysticism” (210) aids in a dismantling of the two-chambered “prison” of globalization and individualization and in resisting the three evils which both construct and secure this “prison:” the overdevelopment of ego, an extreme valorization of acquiring and

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<sup>53</sup> An EBSCO database search using the keywords “literature” and “resistance” returned 27,807 results of peer-reviewed scholarly articles published in English since 1898.



“having” possessions, and perpetuation and acceleration of the “spiral” of violence (Sölle 191–278). Soelle’s monograph informs my own work through her call for a “different language” that speaks of the “promise of freedom for all” in terms other than those employed by “experience, analysis, and insight;” over-reliance on the terms and methodologies of empiricism, positivism, and rationality indicate a “kind of naive faith in the goddess Reason” (197). Rather than relying on reason as a compass for daily action, Soelle instead turns to mysticism as a fruitful “negation of everyday reality” which generates a “sense of distance from the common thoughtless intoxication with or captivity to the world” (203). Therefore, Soelle’s model suggests a typology of mysticism as a language-oriented basis for counter-epistemology and therefore counter-ontology. Indeed, in Soelle’s conceptualization, much of mysticism’s negation of everyday reality involves linguistic practice, and my own study will continue the critical trajectory established by Soelle in her theorization, which, though she does not explicitly acknowledge it, draws much of its energy from the practice of literary and linguistic deconstruction:

Ego and ego-lessnes are connected. They are paired in the same way as property and propertylessness, violence and non-violence. In discussing each pair, I cannot isolate the naturally affirming term from the negating term that points to liberation. I need to keep both terms together, for who wants to dissipate in egolessness or be completely without property? It is not a matter of an either-or choice. Instead, it is a growth process that always develops new forms (210).

Such a focus by Soelle on binary terms clearly aligns itself with the process of deconstruction.

Likewise, a collection of essays edited by Janet K. Ruffing, titled *Mysticism and Social Transformation*, provides an initial foray into the theoretical horizon in which mysticism might contribute to social transformation. The anthology charts the past and present lineage of Christian mysticism—demonstrating how it has empowered its practitioners to foster social action—and finally turns an eye to the future as it considers Buddhist and “ecological” mysticism as two “emerging contemporary approaches to social transformation” (Ruffing,

“Introduction” 24). In the introduction to the volume, Ruffing provides an adequate summary of the shape of late twentieth century discourse about mysticism and concludes that mysticism’s strength in generating social transformation resides in its ability to make the individual consciousness aware of its own biases and in its providing “oppositional influence that helps shift the consciousness of the dominant group in the direction of insight and toward the possibility of change of heart and behavior” about particular social issues (“Introduction” 20). In the following chapters, I will build on Ruffing’s emphasis on the role of mystical consciousness—which also recalls McGinn’s observations about the recent direction of scholarship on mysticism—as being in a complex dialectic with physical actions of withdrawal, contemplation, and refusal. Furthermore, my own work draws strength from Ruffing’s focus in her introduction—in a move that again echoes McGinn’s critical interventions—on the contribution to social transformation by hermeneutic analyses of mystical texts. In fact, Ruffing inverts the relationship between transformation and interpretation by suggesting an approach to the hermeneutic process which originates in theories of social change rather than beginning with the text:

“Theories of social change can be used to get at the approaches to mysticism that are insufficiently hermeneutical... These kinds of [mystical] texts cannot be adequately understood without some affinity for the practices and ways of living that an enacted reading of such texts requires... in some sense, the truth disclosed in a mystical text can be appropriated only if the reader is willing to allow the text to evoke a response—a response that entails a changed view of reality, a willingness to try out through participation his or her own understanding of the text as a guide for his or her own living... narratives of [mystical] experience inspire like kinds of responses in entirely new situations if these possibilities for action have not been eliminated from enactment by the way a given community has chosen to interpret such texts” (13-18).

The mystical text, Ruffing suggests, can be interpreted fruitfully if readers assume at the outset that it consists of politically charged narratives and “stories about change” which can be enacted

in turn by the reader (18). This theory needs to be the point of departure for readers, if mystical texts are to be true instruments of change.

Ruffing points out here that by reading mystical reportage through the lens of a theory of social transformation, readers may be better able to read texts as calls to action or resistance. Likewise, texts read from this horizon will also contribute to future theorizations of social transformation. It is this dialectic unifying Ruffing's volume, between mysticism and social transformation theory and action, which will likewise surface in my own treatment of literary representation of mysticism; if the production and publication of literature by an author assumes, at some level, that the author is performing a highly social act in directing literary production towards an audience, then I argue that this literary production also responds to and contributes to the "theories" used by that audience to live and think through their encounters with power.

### **Feminist and Literary Studies**

Feminist discourse has explored mysticism as a resistance strategy in general, and more germane to my project, has pioneered efforts to consider literary representations of mysticism in particular as offering resistance. Clearly illustrating the connection between mystical lives, their texts, and discursive resistance to power, Grace Jantzen contributes an article to Ruffing's anthology, motivated by Foucault's challenge to "assumed universals of Western thought," in which she analyzes the biography and writing of the early fourteenth-century Parisian mystic Marguerite Porète in order to "discover the convoluted triangulation of religion, gender, and the city," and demonstrating that for the mystic, the construct of "religion" differed from and opposed the French royal court's conception, "even though that court was powerful enough to impose its view by force" ("Disrupting the Sacred: Religion and Gender in the City" 30–31).

Likewise, in her book *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism*, (Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*) argues that medieval women mystics challenged the “dominant patriarchal form of religious authority;” importantly, Ella (Johnson) extends Jantzen’s findings in her book to the context of Hindu women mystics, suggesting that “there is cross cultural validity to her hypothesis” and that the development and articulation of mysticism has been, throughout history, “related to gendered power struggles” (“Gender and Mysticism in Hindu Studies” 237). Johnson’s determination of the “cross-culture validity” of Jantzen’s argument will serve as a critical fulcrum for my own project, as I attempt to demonstrate mysticism(s) as a method for the production of counter-ontology across geographic barriers and linguistic traditions. Furthermore, it is from feminist theory that emerges a precedent for my own consideration of the literary representation of mysticism as a resistance strategy, in Chezia (Thompson-Cager)’s use of Jantzen’s work to analyze the conjunction of feminist resistance and mysticism in a 20<sup>th</sup> century Afro-American setting in the fiction of Ntozake Shange .

Apart from Cager’s analysis of Shange’s fiction, additional precedents exist for my own survey of the literary representation of mysticism as a form of resistance. In the context of the 20<sup>th</sup> century literary studies, Hager Ben Driss locates a “discourse of dissent” in the creative production of the Iraqi novelist ‘Azīz al-Sayyid Jāsīm, which provides an “interesting textual combat, wherein politics, sex and mysticism are exploited as tactical maneuvers for critique, subversion and resistance” (71). Likewise, Denis (Matringe) describes the type of concealed resistance possible through mysticism in his chapter “Disguising Political Resistance in The Sufi Idiom: The Kāfīān Of Najm Husain Sayyid Of Pakistan.” In the Latin American context, Alexander Nava documents the life of the “mystic, healer, and apocalyptic revolutionary” Teresa Urrea during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century; even though Urrea was an illiterate woman whose

“sole weapon” was her mystical experience (Nava 517), Nava’s article suggests the infusion of literary study with mystical resistance in that he links Urrea’s oral expressions of mysticism to her community with the written tradition of *lo real maravilloso*, or “magical realism.”

### **Trends and Gaps**

Thus from the aforementioned scholarship, mysticism clearly has the potential to be marshalled against the repressive structures of the state, patriarchy, racism, and conventional representation. In opposing each of these repressive structures, mysticism also challenges orthodoxies and the underlying ontology and epistemology upon which these structures are based. Soelle and Ruffing have supplied the basis for a theorization of mysticism as an act of resistance and as participating in a dialectic with social transformation. Johnson’s suggestion of the cross-cultural validity of the power of mysticism to challenge established power structures, and Thompson’s application of Jantzen’s study of gendered mysticism to literature about mysticism clears space for my analysis of literary representations of mysticisms across temporal and geographic limits. Therefore, the few historical analyses of Islamic and Latin American mystical texts as resistance briefly surveyed here establishes precedence for the idea that mysticism can serve to resist power, while at the same time putting into stark relief the need for more work in studies of mysticism as resistance in Islamic and Latin American contexts.

Yet most urgent is the need to turn the focus towards the literary depictions or representations of mysticism as possible sites of resistance. Indeed, only 22 sources turn up in an EBSCO search using the key terms “mysticism,” “literature,” and “resistance.” Finally, a review of the Academic Search Complete database reveals that since 1999, only two dissertations have

been written about the nexus of literature, mysticism, and resistance.<sup>54</sup> It is not inaccurate to say that scholarship investigating this general intersection is underrepresented. In this regard, it is the aim of my project to outline alternatives to those forms of literary resistance that very often results in the silencing of its producers.<sup>55</sup> My contribution and innovation to scholarship will be to argue throughout the dissertation that literary depiction and deployment of mysticism—or what I have termed “literary representation of mysticism”<sup>56</sup>—offers such an alternative to fatal forms of literary resistance. An analysis of literary representation of mysticism will not only address the broader problem of facing power productively without meeting lethal or severely limiting force, it will also contribute to a body of scholarship that is underrepresented but nonetheless important for what it can contribute to humanism. Thus for the ensuing analyses of literary representations of mysticism, as suggestive of alternative ontologies, I take as a point of departure the space cleared by previous scholars such as Soelle, Ruffing, and Jantzen; however, before doing so I will now explain how epistemology and ontology are used by power in order to facilitate a better understanding of the way in which mysticism challenges orthodoxy and power.

### **Mysticism and Alternative Ontology**

Since there are subtly different ways in which different disciplines use the terms “ontology,” and “epistemology,” I will here offer my understanding of these words and then

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<sup>54</sup> These include: Donald J. (Moore’s), “Mystical Discourse as Ideological Resistance in Wordsworth and Whitman: A Transatlantic Bridge” and Cory Bysshe (Hutchinson-Reuss), “Mystical Compositions of the Self: Women, Modernism, and Empire.” Moore’s dissertation was published as a book in 2006 by Dudley.

<sup>55</sup> These forms of resistance literature are perhaps best theorized and documented in Barbara (Harlow)’s *Resistance Literature* and Edward Said’s chapter “Resistance and Opposition” in *Culture and Imperialism* ((Said, *Culture and Imperialism* 191–281)

<sup>56</sup>See p. 24 for an explanation of how I will employ this term throughout the dissertation.

explain how they will be used in the following chapters. According to *The Columbia Dictionary of Modern Criticism and Literary Theory*, “ontology,” the literal meaning of which is “the science of being,” is a “branch of metaphysics that deals with the study of existence itself, rather than the nature of existence of any particular object” (214-15). More precisely, ontology focuses on “distinguishing between ‘real existence’ and ‘appearance’ (*noumena* and *phenomena*)” and “the ways that entities within disparate logical categories—numbers, objects, abstractions, etc.—may be said to exist” (215). Apart from this definition of ontology as a metaphysical field, I will use the term to indicate a particular view of existence held by different social entities. Hence, there could exist an “orthodox Christian ontology,” an “idealist Platonic ontology,” a “mystical Muslim ontology,” or, as will be frequently used in the present study a “Western rational ontology,” which has very fixed notions about the nature and importance of time, space, and individual subjectivity. Thus, challenges to orthodox religious, social, political, or intellectual power can either be, or perhaps should be, made at the ontological level and by a re-ordering or re-conceptualization of ontological categories such as time, space, and subjectivity.

Epistemology more generally refers to “the branch of philosophy that is concerned with theories of knowledge” and as a philosophical concern concentrates “on the central issues of the nature and source of knowledge and the ability of the subject to possess reliable knowledge” (98). The term will be used more precisely in the present work to denote a specific practice in the acquisition of knowledge and in privileging one or more methods of knowledge acquisition over others; for example, Western positivist, empiricist, and rational epistemology practices are biased towards the collection of data through empirical means and then processing that data rationally against previous observations or experience. This epistemology, taken for granted and “true” by many in the West, has gained perhaps global prominence since the rudimentary

development of the “scientific method” by Roger Bacon in the thirteenth century CE, but such a mode of knowledge acquisition been a prominent feature of Western thought for much longer, at least since the pre-Socratic philosophers. Likewise, the rational tradition is not purely Western as the observations of Egyptian and Sumerian astronomy and medicine indicate a sophisticated development of positivist and empiricist epistemology in those societies, and the Muslim societies of the ninth through the thirteenth centuries, heavily influenced by Greek epistemology, were built upon the foundation of Hellenic star-gazers and medical doctors. However, alternatives to this epistemology have also existed in the historical record side by side with empirical epistemology, particularly in the realm of religion, where revelation and irrational, non-observable, and difficult to record consciousness has in many epochs and societies held greater sway over the minds of people than empirical observation and rational deduction and induction. With this in mind, I argue that it is by offering different ways to learn about and gather information about time, space, and subjectivity that alternative epistemologies offer perhaps the most devastating challenges to the more orthodox rational epistemology and ontology.

It should be fairly easy to discern here that ontology and epistemology are involved in a complex dialectic. Methods of acquiring knowledge and evaluations about the validity of knowledge (epistemology) support or debunk particular views of the nature of existence (ontology). Likewise, particular views of the nature of existence have, throughout history and likely into the future, influenced the acquiring and assessing of knowledge about what is considered to be existence. What is less easy to detect is how ontology and epistemology are the cornerstones of power. The syntheses of the complex dialectic between ontology and epistemology and the subsequent privileging of one synthesis over others throughout human



history results in what I will henceforth refer to as orthodoxies. It is these orthodoxies which have been used to bolster the power base of dominant social groups.

A cursory consideration of human history since the European colonial era reveals how ontology and epistemology, as constitutive of orthodoxy, can be marshalled in the service of power.<sup>57</sup> Ideas about the nature of existence expressed by ontology—a certain God is the only God, a certain Truth the only Truth—provide the fundamental justification for the rule of one group over another; theories about how knowledge is acquired will derive from that ontology—theories which claim, for instance, that sacred scripture and received revelation is how humans know, or that only what is sensory is knowable—and they will be used to propel and steer the gathering of knowledge and the stratification of fields of knowledge into disciplines, fields, and bodies of discourse, all of which, as Said observes regarding the “style of thought” or orthodoxy which he calls “Orientalism,” are already “tinged and impressed with, violated by” the interests of the dominant group’s ontology (Said, *Orientalism* 9–15).<sup>58</sup> It is in this way that ontology and epistemology contribute to the structures of oppression.

Thus, epistemology and ontology interact to produce world views; some world views attain, through various political mechanisms, greater authority—orthodoxy—over others. Questioning the terms and categories of the ontology and epistemology that underpins a

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<sup>57</sup> For just one example, see (Josan and Murea)’s analysis of the agonistic and imperial relationship between Western rationality and the Islamic world in “Progress and Control: Positivism and the European Epistemological Hegemony.” For a more complete analysis, the obvious, and now canonical, treatment of how epistemology and ontology serve and reflect the interests of empire occurs in Said’s *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism*. Though, as a derivative of Said’s thinking, the current work here is also mightily influenced by Foucault’s *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks*.

<sup>58</sup> (Horkheimer and Adorno)’s *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* perhaps best articulates the understanding I have of the project of the European “enlightenment,” both in its operation as a tool of dominance and oppression and as containing the seeds of its own decline.

particular orthodoxy can thus provide a radical challenge to that orthodoxy. It is a key assumption of my argument that mysticism, in its focus on non-rational methods of gaining knowledge and in mystics' insistent, literary claims for the veracity of their consciousness, offers the basis for potent resistance strategies to power, a power which depends on Western positivist, empirical, rational ontology and epistemology.

### **Deconstruction**

Without critical investigation such as that inspired by Gramsci, the Frankfurt School, Foucault, and Said, the structures of oppression generated by theologians, philosophers, and scientists in the Age of Reason might very well be accepted as universal and undebatable truths or trajectories of progress, part of the plan of "God" or the "Spirit" for the historical and accumulative improvement of man under the auspices and guiding hand of a Western European, elite vice-regent ruling by proxy for a Judeo-Christian deity. However, due to such critical efforts, the Enlightenment edifices which might be taken for granted as universal and undebatable have been exposed as artifices of language and of discourse.

With the exposure of the nature of the structure of oppression by Gramsci, Adorno and Horkheimer, et al., as discursive formations, the critical process of deconstruction can be forcefully directed against the discursive production and perpetuation of orthodoxy. Beginning at least with Nietzsche and reaching full flush with the linguistic turn in critical theory ushered in by structuralism in the early 1960s, investigation of the relationship between language, epistemology, ontology, and power has been an important line of inquiry. Following the lead of but often opposing structuralist thought, incisive critics such as Barthes, Derrida, and Foucault and their many disciples have constructed theories of the linguistic basis of human cultural and

social systems and sought critical methods with which to expose and even deconstruct these systems (Booker 55–61; Best and Kellner 20–28).

While I do not wish to attempt a purely deconstructivist reading of the literary representations of mysticism in the “texts” of Borges and Mahfouz, it is useful in light of the work of the post-structuralists to think of the dynamic between mysticism and orthodoxy as a manifestation of some of the guiding principles of deconstruction. Furthermore, at the outset, it must be granted that there is some contradiction to this model I am proposing; mystics claim access to an alternative truth or way of knowing, and this contradicts deconstruction’s struggle against unity and totality; yet Derrida’s stated emphasis on *différence*, on undecidability, and on plurality allows for a generous conceptualization of the conflict between mysticism and orthodoxy.

Thus, in the terms of deconstruction, mysticism could be interpreted as combatting the “logocentrism” of orthodoxy, and working more as a “text” against the idea of an orthodox “book.” The struggles with language displayed by mystics—informed by the sense of the ineffable and exemplified in mystics’ choices of kataphatic, metaphorical, paradoxical, or aphoristic language—evoke the grammatological notions of “*différence*,” the “trace,” and “textuality.” By forcing readers or auditors to reconsider the meanings, or the failures in meaning, of key categorical terms such as “time” “space” and “subject,” mysticism enables a deconstruction of dominant ontologies and epistemologies at a very fundamental theoretical level. Furthermore, the attack of mysticism against whatever orthodoxy in which it is rooted—as a phenomenon of a constructivist mechanism—embodies Derrida’s notion that “any attack on metaphysics must be an attack from within and that such an attack must include self-referential meditation on its own terms and conditions” (Booker 64). Yet this is not quite enough to theorize

mysticism as resistance. While the potential antagonism between mysticism and orthodox metaphysics, ontology, and epistemology is now manifest, the attack of the mystical against orthodoxy should also be analyzed in terms of a challenge of power political.

### **Esposito and the Impolitical**

It is here that deconstruction intersects with political theory, within the ambit of the “impolitical.” As articulated by Italian critical theorist Roberto Esposito, the “impolitical” engages with political power to challenge the political power with its own terms. By framing the relation between mysticism and orthodoxy as an analogue for that of the impolitical and the political, I hope to make more clear the challenge of mysticism to power. Therefore it is via Esposito’s notion of “the impolitical,” as a critique of the “political,” that the literary representation of mysticism interrogates power—not only at its margins or at its limits, but from within its very center, where the impolitical not only resides but where it performs the “transcendence of immanence” (Esposito xxviii): the impolitical, rather than negate the fundamental terms of the political, radically re-examines the concepts and terms held to be fundamental and “immanent” by the political (xvi). Here Esposito’s model resonates sharply with Sells’s aphoristic dialectic between transcendence and immanence, in which these two binaries are collapsed. Although Esposito emphasizes the “transcendence” of that which is immanent and does not conceptualize a synthesis as Sells does, it is just a short leap from his idea to suggest that aphoristic language can work impolitically by unifying “self” and “other,” forcing power to identify with the powerless and the powerless with power; on this common ground a reevaluation of the terms used to harness power—such as time, space, and subjectivity—can occur. And even as Esposito seems to maintain the binary between impolitical and political in his emphasis that in the “impolitical gaze” upon the political, there is no alternate

reality outside of, or against, the reality of the political, there is in an implied synthesis between the two: as Esposito conceives it, the impolitical gaze discovers its own identity within its gaze on the political, by determining that the political is the *only* reality. However, as Esposito remarks, “it is *only reality*” (xvii). By forcing a reevaluation of this “only” reality, the impolitical “reminds” the political of the finiteness of its own terms (xviii), the limits of its own “reality,” and the resulting reformation or uncovering (in the sense of finding something anew, that was already there) of that “only reality” suggests an ontological irruption, or reawakening of repressed ideas about the structure of being. The reorganization of the political serves as resistance against power by subverting, from within, power’s own conception and articulation of itself and its supporting ontologies and epistemologies. In performing a similar function vis-à-vis orthodoxy, literary representations of mysticism can be therefore read as an impolitical genre, and the ontological challenge made by the literary representation of mysticism can then be read as serving to confine or reorganize, within its own terms, of the reality of power political.

### **The Emphatic “No”**

To return to more theological terms, this complex theoretical formulation in terms of the impolitical and political echoes the model proposed by Soelle, who acknowledges that while mystical experiences and representations is clearly “embedded” in the culture and belief systems from which they arise (10; 12), “in all of these forms there is a No! to the world as it exists now” (3). Likewise, this dissertation argues that this “no!” is an impolitical “no!” and that this emphatic negation can be articulated not only by mystics themselves but by literary representations of mystical consciousness by authors with large reading audiences. These representations, by reaching a wide reading public, might therefore inspire a profound and far-

reaching reconsideration of the crucial ontological categories and epistemological subjects of time, space, and the self.

Furthermore, it is through Sufism, a form of mysticism which not only has at its core Western spirituality (thus making it a most impolitical observer of the political) but also which also in turn has informed the history of Western spirituality and orthodoxy, that a most emphatic “no” can be directed against Western positivist, empirical and rational orthodoxy. The following chapters, then, will be devoted to reading the texts of two literary masters—Jorge Luis Borges and Naguib Mahfouz—as representations of some fundamental tenets of Sufi consciousness as it is expressed in the writings of perhaps the most influential Sufi theosophist in Islamic history, Ibn al-ʿArabī; such a reading will reveal radical and impolitical challenges to orthodox conceptions of the ontological and epistemological categories of time, space, and subjectivity.

### **Literary Representation of Mysticism *is* Resistance**

Thus, the remaining chapters will be guided by the following questions: what do the terms of time, space, and self, mean to power? How does mystical consciousness operate with respect to these terms? What would a redefinition or reconception of these terms, through the strategy of the impolitical, through the tactics of deconstruction, and by means of literary depictions of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s mysticism, mean for efforts aimed towards resistance and social transformation? Furthermore, if these literary representations were executed by literary masters, with the powers of their faculties in full bloom and globally recognized for their verbal gifts, what would the increased range and newly social scope of these techniques be? And given a certain theoretical validity to this form of resistance, what is the practical value of such resistance through the means of literary representations of Sufism?

In answering these questions, it will be demonstrated that the resistance energies and impulses detected in the literary representations, by Borges and Mahfouz, of principles of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s theosophy derive from not only the margins of but also from within the Western tradition against which they struggle and aspire to transform. Furthermore, by encouraging readers to rethink “reality” as “only reality” from beyond, but also from within, the terms of the Western rational tradition, literary masters such as Borges and Mahfouz could also encourage an engaged and perhaps secular audience—one wider than that of mysticism proper, whose audience remains relatively confined to the theologically minded—to reconsider the crucial ontological categories of time, space, and self and the epistemologies associated with the construction of these categories and their exploitation by power. Such a reconsideration could lead to the development and articulation of theories of resistance to power and transformation of society. Finally, the practical value of literary representation of mysticism, beyond the potential for contributing to resistance and societal transformation, resides in its provision of a subtler, but no less subversive, form of resistance that allows its authors and its audience to live to fight oppression another day.

## Chapter 2: Borges, Mahfouz, and Ibn al-ʿArabī's Time Horizon

### Outside of Time

First published in an obscure pamphlet in 1928, when he was but 29 years old, Jorge Luis Borges recounts, in passage worth quoting at length for the present analysis, what he would refer to later in life as a mystical experience (Barnstone 11;73):

I wish to record an experience I had a few nights ago: a triviality too evanescent and ecstatic to be called an adventure, too irrational and sentimental for thought. It was a scene and its word: a word that I had spoken but had not fully lived with all my being until then. I will recount its history and the accidents of time and place that revealed it to me.

I remember it thus: On the afternoon before that night, I was in Barracas, an area I do not customarily visit, and whose distance from the places I later passed through had already given the day a strange savor. The night had no objective whatsoever; the weather was clear, and so, after dinner, I went out to walk and remember. I did not want to establish any particular direction for my stroll: I strove for a maximum latitude of possibility so as not to fatigue my expectant mind with the obligatory foresight of a particular path. I accomplished, to the unsatisfactory degree to which it is possible, what is called strolling at random, without other conscious resolve than to pass up the avenues and broad streets in favor of chance's more obscure invitations. Yet a kind of familiar gravitation pushed me toward neighborhoods whose name I always wish to remember, places that fill my heart with reverence. I am not alluding to my own neighborhood, the precise circumference of my childhood, but to its still mysterious outskirts; a frontier region I have possessed fully in words and very little in reality, at once adjacent and mythical. These penultimate streets are, for me, the opposite of what is familiar, its other face, almost as unknown as the buried foundations of our house or our own invisible skeleton. The walk left me at a street corner. I took in the night, in perfect, serene respite from thought. The vision before me, not at all complex to begin with, seemed further simplified by my fatigue. Its very ordinariness made it unreal. It was a street of one-story houses, and though its first meaning was poverty, its second was certainly bliss. It was the poorest and most beautiful thing. The houses faced away from the street; a fig tree merged into shadow over the blunted streetcorner, and the narrow portals—higher than the extending lines of the walls—seemed wrought of the same infinite substance as the night. The sidewalk was embanked above a street of elemental dirt, the dirt of a still unconquered America. In the distance, the road, by then a country lane, crumbled into the Maldonado River. Against the muddy, chaotic earth, a low, rose-colored wall seemed not to harbor the moonlight but to shimmer with a gleam all its own. Tenderness could have no better name than that rose color.

I stood there looking at this simplicity. I thought, undoubtedly aloud: "This is the same as it was thirty years ago." I imagined that date: recent enough in other



countries, but already remote on this ever changing side of the world. Perhaps a bird was singing and I felt for it a small, bird-sized fondness; but there was probably no other sound in the dizzying silence except for the equally timeless noise of crickets. The glib thought *I am in the year eighteen hundred and something* ceased to be a few approximate words and deepened into reality. I felt as if the dead feel, I felt myself to be an abstract observer of the world: an indefinite fear imbued with knowledge that is the greatest clarity of metaphysics. No, I did not believe I had made my way upstream on the presumptive waters of Time. Rather, I suspected myself to be in possession of the reticent or absent meaning of the inconceivable word *eternity*. Only later did I succeed in defining this figment of my imagination.

I write it out now: This pure representation of homogenous facts—the serenity of the night, the translucent little wall, the small-town scent of honeysuckle, the fundamental dirt—is not merely identical to what existed on that corner many years ago; it is, without superficial resemblances or repetitions, the same. When we can feel this oneness, time is a delusion which the indifference and inseparability of a moment from its apparent yesterday and from its apparent today suffice to disintegrate.

The number of such human moments is clearly not infinite. The elemental experiences—physical suffering and physical pleasure, falling asleep, listening to a piece of music, feeling great intensity or great apathy—are even more impersonal. I derive, in advance, this conclusion: life is too impoverished not to be immortal. But we lack even the certainty of our own poverty, given that time, which is easily refutable by the senses, is not so easily refuted by the intellect, from whose essence the concept of succession appears inseparable. Let there remain, then, the glimpse of an idea in an emotional anecdote, and, in the acknowledged irresolution of this page, the true moment of ecstasy and the possible intimation of eternity which that night did not hoard from me. (Borges, “A History of Eternity” 137–39)<sup>59</sup>

Here in this passage, which Borges would refer to as “Sentirse en muerte” (“Feeling in Death”), the author presents a literary recollection and representation of an experience outside of time—at least outside of the “serial time” that is used to measure everyday life. Furthermore, as I will show, this experience can be read as corresponding with the ideas about time of the great Sufi Ibn al-ʿArabī.

Yet before demonstrating this connection between the thirteenth century Islamic mystic and the twentieth century Argentine author, the following analysis will first demonstrate that the

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<sup>59</sup> The version presented is the translation of Esther Allen.

experience described by Borges is indeed mystical and that his reportage of it is a “literary representation of mysticism.” Three elements identified by James as crucial to the mystical experience will first be located: passivity, transience, and noetic vision. A fourth element, ineffability, is indicated by Borges’s nod to the “acknowledged irresolution of this page,” but overall the ineffability of the consciousness experienced by the author is grappled with to some degree of success, and it is this perhaps “glib” treatment of the experience that qualifies it as literary.<sup>60</sup>

The implication of passivity pervades the excerpt. In the beginning of the passage, the reader is made to fully understand the conditions leading up to Borges’s mystical experience of eternity: a random twilight stroll, ostensibly left to chance, but inevitably directed by an elemental force of “familiar gravitation” which pulled the author to an uncanny setting<sup>61</sup> “opposite of familiar, its other face” on the “frontier” between past and present. This notion of being pulled along, and the two statements which bookend the recollection—“[t]he night had no objective whatsoever... I accomplished strolling at random,” and “[l]et there remain... the glimpse of an idea... the true moment of ecstasy... which that night did not hoard from me”—

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<sup>60</sup> The literary nature of this passage is considered thoughtfully by Rowlandson, who muses that “[the passage is highly textual, reading like one of his tales... He feels that he is walking in a landscape already made literature by him... But is it any less mystical for its fictionality?” before concluding that it is ultimately impossible to answer questions “about the relationship between a ‘mystical’ text and text’s author, between the fictionality or the parodic nature of the text and its ‘mystical’ attributes” (Rowlandson 111–14).

<sup>61</sup> Rowlandson observes the perhaps Cervantine allusion in Borges’s phrase describing his destination as those “neighborhoods whose name I always wish to remember” (Rowlandson 111–12), referring of course to the famous opening line of *Don Quijote*: “En un lugar de la Mancha, de cuyo nombre no quiero recorder” [“In a place in La Mancha, whose name I do not wish to recall”].

saturate the passage with the notion of passivity and the sense that the experience was granted to Borges, with no real preparation or effort on his part.

The noetic value of the experience can be located in the essayist's exclamation that he feels free, however briefly,<sup>62</sup> from the bounds of time, detecting in the ambient surroundings and "penultimate streets" a unity in time and place "as unknown as the buried foundations of our house or our own invisible skeleton," existing beneath the surface of the tightly regimented boundaries—the days, hours, minutes, and seconds—of serial time. Yet this freedom from time also carries with it an awe, an "indefinite fear imbued with knowledge that is the greatest clarity of metaphysics." Indeed, the prose expressing the noetic vision, or the pure consciousness event, is notable for the oscillation between the cold intellectual analysis of the experience and the attempt to express visceral, elemental feeling. Accompanying the fairly rigorous description of the conditions leading up to the experience and the analysis of the impact of the experience itself, Borges mentions that three emotionally potent ideas are conflated in the scene imbued with the pink glow of "tenderness:" "ordinariness," "poverty," and "bliss." The sensory details of the setting—the sound imagery of the "timeless crickets;" the olfactory imagery of the "small-town scent of honeysuckle;" the musky scent and almost palpable grit of the "elemental dirt"<sup>63</sup>—make the whole scene, as Borges describes it, "at once adjacent and mythical." Borges's meaning is crucial here: the word adjacent—or as Suzanne Levine has translated it elsewhere, "familiar"

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<sup>62</sup> Borges would later recount to Barnstone that "I don't know how long it lasted, since it was timeless" (Barnstone 73).

<sup>63</sup> In the original Spanish, the phrase is as "barro fundamental" (Borges, *Obras Completas* 367). Levine renders this phrase as "elemental clay," (Borges, "A New Refutation of Time" 325), which I consider an improvement over Allen's translation of "fundamental dirt," but it should be noted that "barro" can mean either "clay" or "mud" and that the word carries the distinct idea of earth mixed with moisture ("Barro"). In any case, "clay" or "mud" would both most likely be much more pungent and as a translation option is more sensorily evocative than "dirt."

(Borges, “A New Refutation of Time” 324)—suggests that mystical experiences like that expressed here by Borges are neither completely esoteric nor inaccessible to the layman.

In addition to its mystical aspect, the setting described by Borges reveals the literary dimension of the experience. The speaker makes an apparently ironic allusion to the opening of *Don Quixote* in setting the scene in the “neighborhoods whose name I always wish to remember,” and he distinctly remembers a lone singing bird, evoking simultaneously Keats’s mournful nightingale (Rodríguez Monegal 210) and that of Persian Sufi poetry, in which the bird represents the ecstasy of mystical experience.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, through such literary allusions, Borges is suggesting the idea of the poverty of finite, individual authorial experience; that due to the impersonality and “poverty” of human experience, all is one; that he is Keats, he is the Persian Sufi, he is experiencing what they *are currently* experiencing. Through a narration that is both intellectually subtle and emotionally powerful in “Feeling in Death,” the reader encounters a vision of time that flies in the face of the rational conception of time that governs the ebb and flow of modern daily life. Such a radical notion of time as that expressed here by Borges, can in turn lead to a questioning of and resistance to power established on and perpetuated by orthodoxies of time.

### **Resisting “time in advance of itself**

With Borges’s recollection as a point of departure, I argue that mystical reports of “timelessness,” “eternity,” or “feeling outside of serial time,” can help construct resistance strategies to power and theories of social transformation. Rethinking or “re-visioning” time could

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<sup>64</sup> López-Baralt’s discussion of Borges’s sonnet “To the Nightingale” astutely points out how in the poem “[t]he erudite Borges, setting the mystical *bolbol* exalted by Rūmī and ‘Aṭṭār against Ovid’s and Heine’s and Keat’s Philomela, succeeds again in contrasting—and merging—the Western and Islamic literary canons” (López-Baralt, “Islamic Themes” 73).

be a liberating intellectual practice for those living in advanced capitalist societies, where, as the saying goes, “time is money.” Attributed to Ben Franklin, this old saw has been used as an aid to inculcate students and workers in the United States to expend their lives working to earn money—for themselves, as the “social gospel” would have it, but also ultimately for the generation of profit for the owner of the means of production. As such, the expression contributes to the hegemony supporting the reproduction and perpetuation of “capitalist orthodoxy.”

This hegemony can be resisted by challenging the very ontological and epistemological categories on which it is founded. The value of money as a goal worthy of devoting one’s creative and physical energies will not be debated here; that should be considered in a more urgent and public forum. However, through an analysis of how two of our greatest authors have handled the concept of time, in a manner which resists its manipulation by ideologies, or “orthodoxies” of power, some of the assumptions about time which underpin “Western orthodoxy” will be challenged here. I previously have discussed Harvey’s demonstration of how capital operates by time-space compression. Inspired by Harvey’s analysis, the fundamental assumption about time which must be challenged is that which states that time is an objective phenomenon. Harvey observes how in “modern society” there is a tendency to measure the flux of everyday life against “a single, objective yardstick of time’s ineluctable arrow of motion” (203), and he argues for the urgency of presenting challenges to this tendency to think of time as a single, objective category to “measure the diversity of human conceptions and perceptions” (203). Therefore, an alternative conception of time to that of late-capitalist accumulation can serve to undermine the operations of capital and potentially the orthodoxies and hegemonies favored by the power behind capital.

I argue then that by conceiving of time as something other than money, as something other than a commodity or part of a value exchange between labor and capital, as something that can evade fragmentation in the service of production, individuals or groups can begin to make a real challenge to the ontology employed by the means of production which prop up power today; by re-thinking how time is perceived and experienced, a forceful challenge to the orthodox manipulation of time can be made. As Harvey points out, “the time horizon implicated in a decision materially affects the kind of decision we make” (202). Thus if humans base their decisions, and decisions about their actions, on “time horizons” alternate to those relied upon by power, then even at the granular level of the individual, a resistance energy comes into being, an individual energy which could carry with it potential for social transformation.

Furthermore, the entire Western empirical and rational tradition relies at its core on the assumption that linear time is an objective and measureable concept. Not only has this tradition used such a notion of time to achieve scientific progress and the improvement of the daily lives of billions of people, but it has also manipulated conceptions and measurements of linear time in order to construct more insidious and oppressive structures, such as colonial bureaucracy and the Atlantic slave trade. Indeed, as Horkheimer and Adorno have argued,<sup>65</sup> the fruits of the Age of Reason oppress just as much as they liberate. Thus, perhaps conceiving and experiencing alternative time horizons might lead to discoveries of a different sort or to resistance to the “orthodox” time horizons employed by oppressors.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> In their ground-breaking text of critical theory, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

<sup>66</sup> Here it must be acknowledged that the impulse to describe alternative time horizons also operates within Western science, perhaps best embodied, for illustrative purposes, by the work of Einstein. What I wish to examine is how this impulse also occurs in literary representations of mysticism as an emancipatory or transformative strategy.

Assuming, then, that rethinking the horizons of time can produce strategies for resistance, emancipation, or transformation, a central problem arises in how to teach or convince individuals and societies to accept, adopt, or implement alternate time horizons in daily life. One rich opportunity for education and encouragement will be found in the reports and treatises of the world's mystics. For this study, the "time horizons" observed and articulated by Islamic mystics in particular offer their followers and audiences alternative visions, or "horizons," of time with potential for generating resistance energy; however, the audience or readership for Sufi time horizons will most likely not be wide enough to foster substantial change at a global level. Thus, by identifying representations of Sufi visions of time in "canonical" works of world literature, this resistance energy acquires increased potential for reaching a wider audience than that of the original Sufi masters.

Based on the global reception and popularity and the wide influence of Borges and Mahfouz, their literary output has the potential to reach a truly global reading public. If their literary production can be considered as containing any ontologically subversive elements, then this production could be read as potentially contributing to a substantial global challenge to orthodox ontologies and thus to the mechanisms of power which rely on these ontologies for epistemological justification and support. With this in mind, I will now demonstrate how Jorge Luis Borges and Naguib Mahfouz employ literary representations of the "time horizon" described by the medieval Sufi Ibn al-<sup>ʿ</sup>Arabī; by doing so I suggest that this literary representation could be read as offering reconsiderations of and challenges to the concept of "conventional" or "serial" time upon which Western rational ontology and epistemology are based. By rethinking time, and ideally in encouraging their readers to do the same, I argue that

the authors contribute to resistance to the ontologies and epistemologies underpinning power in a variety of contexts.

To support this overall argument, I must first discuss some conceptual principles about time from within the Sufi tradition in general, but from the theosophy of Ibn al-ʿArabī in particular. These principles are signified by the Arabic words *zamān*, *waqt*, *dahr*, and *azal*. I will then analyze how these principles, as elucidated by Ibn al-ʿArabī, are represented in Borges’s early essay “Sentirse en muerte” (“Feeling in death”) and two of his mid-career short stories—“Tlön, Uqbar, Tertius Orbis,” and “The Writing of the God.” Following this, I will analyze the literary representation of these Sufi principles of time in Mahfouz’s early novel *Zuqāq al-Midaq* (*Midaq Alley*) and two of his later novels, *Malḥamat al-Ḥarāfīsh* (*The Harafish*), and *Layālī al-layla* (*Arabian Nights and Days*). I analyze works spanning the careers of the two authors to underscore their persistent concern with depicting alternative horizons of time and find that read through the perspective of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s time horizon, the two authors offer their audiences useful conceptual tools with which to construct resistive and transformative theories of engagement with power.

## **Sufi Notions of Time**

### **“Time” in the Arabic Lexicon**

Before analyzing how Ibn al-ʿArabī’s time horizon can be detected in the literary production of Borges and Mahfouz, it is of course necessary to explain the concepts which comprise this time horizon. To explain these ideas, I will present the denotations of three words that each mean “time” in Arabic—*zamān*, *waqt*, and *dahr*—and thoroughly discuss the connotations of these words; as I will demonstrate, it is within the connotations that Ibn al-ʿArabī finds room to maneuver and deconstruct the “objective category” of time wielded by orthodoxy



for purposes of social control. An Arabic word for eternity, *azal*, is also defined to provide further context for Ibn al-ʿArabī’s “time horizon.”

According to the fourth edition of the *Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, *zamān* signifies time, with the connotation of a “duration; fortune, fate, destiny,” (“Zamān”). To achieve a clear understanding of how *zamān* is employed in Sufi thought, the adjectival form of the word *zamanī* provides a better view of this connotation, as it indicates “temporal... worldly, earthly, passing, transient, transitory; secular” (“Zamanī”). This adjectival form suggests that the substantive carries a connotation of a repeating sequence of alternating night and day. In addition to using the label *zamān* to refer to this sequence of days and nights, I will also use the phrase “serial time,” because the arbitrary denotation of seconds, hours, and days, time is broken into discrete units which follow one another *seriatim*. Serial time is the time horizon that allows for a consistent recording of much empirical information and also the horizon which capital governs in order to maximize efficiency and profit; therefore *zamān* can be considered as a tool for Western rationality.

*Waqt* in Arabic also means “time” and “a time span,” but also “a period in time” and a “moment, instant” (“Waqt”). The sense here of a particular moment or instant is the sense seized upon by many Sufi thinkers. In formulating and in describing their relationship to the godhead, early Persian Sufis relied on a non-canonical *ḥadīth nabawi*, or saying of the Prophet, in which Muḥammad states, “I have a time with God” (*lī maʿa Allāh waqt*). Schimmel observes that these Sufis relied upon the expression to articulate the precise moment (*waqt*) “at which they break through created time and reach the Eternal Now in God, when everything created...remains outside and is, in their experience, annihilated” (Schimmel 220). Schimmel also points out that Mohammad Iqbal, writing in the twentieth century, interprets the word *waqt* in the *ḥadīth nabawi*

as signifying the instant in which the “infidel’s girdle,’ namely, ‘serial’ time [*zamān*], is torn and the mystic establishes direct contact with God in a person-to-person encounter” (220).<sup>67</sup> For Sufis, then, *waqt* is a moment of rupture in serial time in which the mystical consciousness realizes its potential for experiencing Being.

*Dahr* in Arabic refers to not only a “course or passage of time; a transient period of time,” but also a “long stretch of time; age; epoch; lifetime; eternal continuance, eternity.” Furthermore the noun *dahr* anchors the idiomatic adverbial expression “*dahra d-dāhirīn*” to describe something enduring forever and not subject to the effects of time; in English this might be rendered as “forever and ever” (“Dahr”). This connotation of eternity is one that Sufis, especially Ibn al-ʿArabī, assign to the signifier “*dahr*.” Related to *dahr* but subtly different in meaning is *azal*, which in Arabic represents the notion of eternity (without beginning) or “sempiternity” (“Azal”). The difference between eternity and sempiternity is negotiable, but Bossart explains sempiternity as “everlasting existence,” which does indeed include the notion of having a beginning, whereas eternity implies “timelessness” with no beginning, end, or any other constriction of time (Bossart 80). Thus *azal* carries both the connotation of being free from the bounds and ravages of time as well as that of having freedom from time but having a temporal *terminus a quo*.

Therefore, while the first three nouns do indeed refer, at one level of meaning, to time in the short term, in the rich lexicon of Arabic, *dahr* clearly takes on a connotation closely related

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<sup>67</sup> In his study of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s notion of time, Gerhard Bowering provides a thorough chain of transmission for the “non-canonical” *ḥadīth* described by Schimmel as central to Persian Sufi practice; he supplies the earliest date of its appearance in Persian Sufi literature as the commentary on Kalābādhi’s *Taʿarruf* by Mustamlī (d. 434/1042) while positing that its earliest appearance in *miʿrāj* literature is most likely the *Miʿrajnāma* (d. 428/1037) of Ibn Sīnā (who was known in pre-modern Europe as Avicenna).

to that of *azal* and not expressed by *zamān* and *waqt*—that of an experience outside of, beyond, and not subject to the conventions of serial time. Meanwhile, *waqt*, in its connotation seized on by Sufis, clearly serves to signify a precise instant or moment between the future and the past. And finally, *zamān* indicates serial time, but the term can also be used to indicate an infinite progression, from a beginning point, of alternating nights and days. The fluidity in Arabic which permits complex ideas about time to be expressed with individual words is manipulated to great effect by Sufis in their considerations of time. While each of these terms have a functional and practical connotation within the Sufi lexicon, they take on added nuance in the hands of Ibn al-ʿArabī, the “Sheikh al-Akbar,” writing in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Ibn al-ʿArabī and Time**

Ibn al-ʿArabī had been concerned with time from an early point in his life, as evidenced by the title of his earliest writings—*Kitāb az-zaman (The Book of Time)*—composed while he was still in the Maghreb, circa 1200 CE, and a work for which no known manuscripts have survived. Nevertheless, Ibn al-ʿArabī distilled some of the key ideas from *The Book of Time* and integrated these into *al-Futūhāt al-Makkiyya (The Meccan Revelations)*, as seen in the citation made by Ibn al-ʿArabī in the *Revelations* to his earlier book (111). In searching for a possible source for Ibn al-ʿArabī’s ideas about time, Bowering locates an origin other than the *ḥadīth nabawi* identified by Schimmel as the base of the Persian Sufis’ idea of time: “I have a time (*waqt*) with God.” Rather than this *ḥadīth*, Ibn al-ʿArabī’s concept of time is informed in large measure by the *ḥadīth qudsī*—or canonical sacred words spoken by the godhead to Muḥammad—in which Allah tells the Prophet “Curse not time; for I am time (*dahr*),” and its variant “God is time (*dahr*)” (“Ibn al-ʿArabī’s Concept of Time” 108 n. 2; 109). Interestingly, Bowering believes that this particular *ḥadīth* “exemplifies the merger of the Qur’ānic with the

*jāhiliyya*<sup>68</sup> world view in *ḥadīth*” (109 n.3). If this is the case, this would be an instructive example of the fusion of competing orthodoxies through a metaphysical expression, a fusion which, taken up by Ibn al-ʿArabī, can be seen as providing the seeds for an alternative to the established Islamic orthodoxy, an “impolitical” alternative clearly produced by a dialectic generated from within the orthodoxy itself.

Germinated from the *ḥadīth qudsī*, Ibn al-ʿArabī’s “vision of time appears as a strand that binds God and man together,” offering a radical “ontological speculation on the unity of being” and a significant development beyond earlier Sufi expressions of “mystical union” between individual Sufis and the godhead (111). To illustrate how Ibn al-ʿArabī’s ideas about time were the anchor for this transformative ontological vision, Bowering analyzes Ibn al-ʿArabī’s exploration of time in his writings and carefully summarizes Ibn al-ʿArabī’s understanding in *The Meccan Revelations* of time as manifesting as *dahr*, *waqt*, and *zamān*. In his study, Bowering concludes that Ibn al-ʿArabī’s “vision of time” as expressed in *The Meccan Revelations* combines an atomistic notion of time as *waqt* and a theological vision of time as *dahr* with a partly cosmological, partly relative understanding of time as *zamān*” (Bowering 112).

Bowering’s analysis reveals that for Ibn al-ʿArabī, *dahr* is both “God’s time,” and the eternal godhead itself. Thus, *dahr* is Real and from an impolitical gaze, it is not “only reality.” As *dahr*, “[God’s] time is everlasting, it is eternity, beginningless and endless (*azal* and *abad*)” (122). Thus, for Ibn al-ʿArabī, *dahr* resides within eternity (*azal*) as an experience outside of any demarcation associated with *zamān* or *waqt*. Yet the notion of *dahr* is not a static one; among its

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<sup>68</sup> *Jāhiliyya*, literally “ignorance” pejoratively refers to the world-view, values, and culture of the Arabs before the advent of Islam.

attributes are transmutation (*tahawwul*) and fluctuation (*taqlīb*), and in this sense, the godhead as *dahr* implies that “[the godhead] undergoes transition in fashioning the forms of creation” (Bowering 117; Chittick 107). The quality of *taqlīb* characterizing *dahr* also explicitly connects this time horizon to the well-known *ḥadīth* which states that God holds man’s heart (*qalb*) between his two fingers, causing it to fluctuate as he wills (Chittick 106). As the human heart—which for Ibn al-ʿArabī is also the “Throne of God” and the “locus for knowledge rather than for sentiments or feelings” (Chittick 106-07)—changes from one mood, or thought, to the next, it mirrors its Creator as *dahr*, which Itself is constantly undergoing transmutation in the forms of the Created. This concept seems rather puzzling if Ibn al-ʿArabī’s central concept of *waḥdat al-wujūd* (“unity in Being”) is not briefly recalled. Simply put, “unity in Being” is the idea that “there is only one Being, and all existence is nothing but the manifestation or outward radiance of that One Being” (Chittick 79). While this simple expression of a very complex idea deserves much more summary and analysis than the present study allows, it should help clarify the meaning behind the paradox that *dahr* is both eternal and also attributed with fluctuation and transmutation.<sup>69</sup> *Dahr*, for Ibn al-ʿArabī, does not mean “eternally immutable,” but rather a constant, eternal transmutation of the unity of Being.

While *dahr* signifies the temporal medium of the unity of Being, in which transmutation and change occur eternally without beginning or end, another characteristic of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s time horizon, *waqt*, is employed by the Sheikh to represent a specific “moment” of “the time of the present state that is neither tied to the past nor linked to the future” (Ibn al-ʿArabī qtd. in Bowering 114). According to Ibn al-ʿArabī, *waqt*, like *dahr*, is “real and objective,” but also a

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<sup>69</sup> For a thorough treatment of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, see Chittick, “Existence and Nonexistence,” 79-96. I have also contextualized this term on pp. 13-14.

particular present state (*ḥāl*) that is a “reflection of God’s eternity, here and now, in man’s mere receptivity or preparedness for God’s action to occur” (122). As a particular, distinct “moment,” Ibn al-ʿArabī defines *waqt* as a “thing between two non-existent things,” i.e. the past and the future, and as “that in which you are without respect to past and future” (qtd. in Bowering 114). Hence, for Ibn al-ʿArabī, *waqt* “is an infinite cluster of moments” in *dahr*, “conceived as ‘time atoms’ without duration, but they are mere instances of preparedness in which are actualized those possibilities that God has ordained to be effected in a human being.” It is this idea of the actualization of one’s potential at the very moment defined as *waqt* that underpins the Sufi aphorism that the enlightened mystic is “the son of his moment” (116).

In contrast to the reality of *dahr* and *waqt*, *zamān* is conceived by Ibn al-ʿArabī as “imaginary” (122). As a term in Ibn al-ʿArabī’s cosmology, *zamān* refers to the twenty-four-hour period marked by the alternation of night and day, or what is also called *al-ayām* (the “days”) in Arabic. In his analysis, Bowering says that the Sheikh relied on the word *zamān* to signify not only night and day but also to allude to the generative power of the union of night and day, a union suggested by the Qur’anic verse “He makes the night to enter into the day and He makes the day enter into the night” (22:61; 31:29; 35:13; 57:6)). In Ibn al-ʿArabī’s usage, the expression “time is the day,” or “*az-zamān hua al-yawm*” is clearly distinct from the phrase that “God is time/time is God” (“*Allahu hua al-dahr*”) because of the distinct Arabic word used in each phrase. The former expression, “time is the day,” indicates that all the myriad and material elements of creation are the offspring of the union of night and day. Without the alteration between night and day, material creatures and objects would not exist (113). However, “in the world to come,” the alternation between night and day ceases, and a shift towards sempiternity

(*dahr*) occurs, as Ibn al-ʿArabī conceives of day occurring without end in Paradise and night persisting eternally in Hell (114).

Yet Ibn al-ʿArabī also thinks of *zamān* in a relativistic sense. The Shaikh conceives of *zamān* as illusory; it is merely a tool used by humans to understand their relationship to each other in *dahr* and tool with which humans have constructed a “mere relation” to God’s time (*dahr*), though a relation that is nevertheless “infinite, just like empty space,” with potential to be “divided into ever smaller or larger time segments in a duration that has neither beginning nor end” (122). In this way, Ibn al-ʿArabī conceives of this “limitless duration of past and future” as a “creature of our imagination, devoid of real existence” (122). Therefore, *zamān* as a construct of serial time, is illusory with respect to the Reality of the godhead, yet in the effort to make sense of its relationship to *dahr*, the human mind carves out an infinite array of units of serial time that can be measured by humans as occurring between alternation of night and day.

To briefly sum up Ibn al-ʿArabī’s time horizon, *waqt* is just as much of the Real as *dahr*, though fragmentary and “a dot without duration” (122); together, the eternal (*dahr*) and the granular present (*waqt*) constitute “now,” and “[i]n the ‘now,’ neither God’s eternity nor man’s moment cease to be. On the contrary they both exist” (121). Hence, *waqt* and *dahr* are two types of time which “transcend what we ordinarily call time,” or *zamān*, which Ibn al-ʿArabī described as “imaginary and subjective, though inspired by the real and objective time of *dahr* and *waqt* ... God alone, everlasting existence, is time, *dahr*, ruling everything, not some imaginary flux of time, *zamān*, though imagination captures a trace of that *dahr* in the time of the present moment” (122). Thus, “what we ordinarily call time” does not exist; it is a construct used by humans to measure flux (123) and understand humanity’s relationship to *dahr*; but as a moment (*waqt*), time is the “virtual and actual object of interaction with eternity” (123) and “reflection of God’s

eternity” (122); here then, by relying solely on the translation and analysis of Bowering, I am able to offer a succinct glimpse into the categorization of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s vision of time as the interplay between two real types of time constituting “now”—eternity (*dahr*) and fragmented moments (*waqt*)—and the unreal illusory construct of serial time (*zamān*). By developing a vision, or “horizon” of time based on the understanding of serial time (*zamān*) as illusory, Ibn al-‘Arabī’s theosophy suggests an alternative ontology to that of Islamic orthodoxy; by interpreting twentieth century literary production with the help of the elements of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s time horizon, alternative ontologies to Western rational orthodoxies can likewise be generated.

## **Borges**

### **Borges’s preoccupation with time**

As an analysis of his stories, essays, and poems will bear out, Borges wrestled mightily with time in his writing. In interviews late in life, he declared that “Time is the essential riddle” (Barnstone 73), and that “...time is such a fine subject. It seems to be the one subject to me. It seems to me to be the essential riddle... I will go on trying to solve these problems, knowing of course that all my attempts will be useless, and that the pleasure lies not in the answer but in the riddle” (Barnstone 158). Yet there is some indication that at least twice in his life, Borges had at a glimpse at the answer to the riddle, as he tells Barnstone:

In my life I only had two mystical experiences and I can’t tell them because what happened is not to be put into words, since after all, words stand for a shared experience. And if you have not had the experience you can’t share it... Twice in my life I had a feeling, a feeling rather agreeable than otherwise. It was astonishing, astounding. I was overwhelmed, taken aback. I had the feeling of living not in time but outside of time. I don’t know how long that moment lasted, since I was outside time... (Barnstone 11).

Here, Borges is indicating the frustration of ineffable experience, but he did indeed attempt to share at least one of these experiences by putting it into the words in “Sentirse en muerte,” the



passage which begins this chapter. The reportage of this particular experience appears in at least three distinct pieces published by Borges, so it is clearly important to his metaphysical and mystical thought system. The passage first appeared in 1929 in Borges's book *La idioma de los argentinos* (*The Language of the Argentines*); it was next published as part IV of the essay "Una historia del tiempo" ("A History of Time") in the 1936 collection *Historia de la eternidad* (*Eternity*), and finally as part of the essay "Nueva refutación del tiempo" ("A New Refutation of Time") published first in 1947 as a pamphlet and then in the 1952 collection *Otras inquisiciones* (*Other Inquisitions*). While each of the essays in which the recollection appears are in themselves meditations on the nature of time, the fragment itself is notable as it serves as an expression of Borges's own consciousness of timelessness. Notably, the unaltered reappearance of the narration in several different pieces over three decades reveals not only the import of the experience being narrated in the passage but also much about Borges's belief in the circularity of time: the "the eternal return." If, as Flynn says, the stories supply aesthetic renderings of complex metaphysical ideas and the essays provide an intellectual working out of those ideas (Flynn 4), then it is often helpful to turn to the essays for an insight into Borges's working out of ideas about time.

### **"Sentirse en muerte"**

Having already identified "Sentirse en muerte" as a literary expression of mysticism in the opening of this chapter, the passage can now serve as an excellent artifact for an attempt at identifying potential correspondences between Borges and Ibn al-<sup>ʿ</sup>Arabī's time horizon. To begin, there is no better place to turn than the introduction to the passage, in which Borges establishes the setting for his mystical experience. Here, the narrator's consciousness is fraught with markers of *zamān* and a reliance on declarative, kataphatic language: "I remember it thus:

On the afternoon before the night..." (137). There is no question that the essayist is still rooted firmly in serial time as the passage beings, and as his evening stroll continues he claims "I took in the night," (137) an indicative remark that underscore his hyper-awareness of time persists in the confines of *zamān*, the alternation of day and night. But this hyper-awareness soon shifts in the essay to an alternate time horizon, and Borges begins to report an experience that is tantamount to an acute awareness of *dahr*. The idea that he is outside of time, experiencing something that "is the same as it was thirty years ago" (138), then forms the climax of the essay, with the declaration that "I suspected myself to be in possession of the reticent or absent meaning of the inconceivable word *eternity*" (138). This sentence is remarkable for its apophasis—the multiple negation implied in Borges's "suspect" possession of an "absent" meaning of an "inconceivable" word are most likely symptoms of the ineffability of the feeling "as the dead feel" in eternity (138). A perhaps more effective illustration of how the passage pulsates with the energy of *dahr* is in Borges's description of the insight gained from his experience: "The elemental experiences—physical suffering and physical pleasure, falling asleep, listening to a piece of music, feeling great intensity or great apathy—are even more impersonal. I derive, in advance, this conclusion: life is too impoverished not to be immortal" (138). The concept of *dahr* as eternal fluctuation of Being is clear here, as Borges attempts to explain how sensations, emotions, even objects in space like the low wall, the honey-suckle, and the mean houses can occur across an expanse of what humans, bound by *zamān*, would term years. It is in *dahr* that the spectrum of human experiences persists, even as humans measures this spectrum of experience with the terms of *zamān*, even as individual humans pass away.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> As will be seen, this idea is also articulated by Mahfouz as "mnemonic time."

However, Borges is fully aware of the limitations of his understanding of *dahr*, as he points out that “time which is easily refutable by the senses, is not so easily refuted by the intellect, from whose essence the concept of succession appears inseparable” (138). It is here, perhaps ironically, in the concluding section of the essay, where in a sentence expressing a resignation to the time that is “not so easily refuted by the intellect”—*zamān*—that the beginnings of resistance energy can be sensed, in Borges’s very identification of the intellect as the root of humanity’s attempts to carve up *dahr* into *zamān*. Thus, while “Sentirse en muerte” does not offer overtly radical challenges to the Western rational ontological view of time, by describing an experience outside of serial time and awareness of the eternal flux of *dahr*, the essay does at least clear space for theorizing such challenges by identifying the rational intellect as the barrier preventing humans from experiencing a “true moment of ecstasy” which is the fruit of an “intimation of eternity” (139). From the essay’s location of the intellect and rationality as the barrier to humanity’s awareness of *dahr*, I will next turn to an analysis of two stories by Borges to pinpoint how they resonate with Ibn al-ʿArabī’s time horizon, and how that resonance might suggest strategies for resistance and transformation.

### **“Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius”**

The first Borges story which I will show to be both resonant with Ibn al-ʿArabī’s notion of time<sup>71</sup> and as offering explicit challenges to Western rationality is “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis

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<sup>71</sup> As I establish clearly in the introduction, I do not wish to suggest that Borges’s radical conception of time derives solely from Sufi ideas. It is well known that Borges was exposed to the Western philosophical tradition at a young age by his father and that he read deeply into this tradition as well as that of more purely metaphysical thought. What I am attempting is, along with Garayalde is “to establish a link between the author and Sufism... not to affiliate him with Sufism nor to show a conscious attitude on his part, but simply to establish points in common between Borges’s writing and this teaching... in this way we shall be able to show that as a writer he fulfils his obligations towards his contemporaries” (Garayalde 12).

Tertius.” One of Borges’s most famous and critically treated tales (Núñez-Faraco 83), the story was first published in *Sur* magazine in May 1940 (Rodríguez Monegal 332) and later included with a collection of several other stories under the title *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan* (*The Garden of Forking Paths*) in 1941 by Editorial Sur. In 1956, Emecé published *The Garden of Forking Paths* together with the 1944 collection of stories *Artificios* (*Artifices*) under the title *Ficciones* (*Fictions*). Following his award, in conjunction with Samuel Beckett, of the inaugural Formentor Prize, it is this latter volume’s translation into both English and French in 1961 which coincided with Borges’s meteoric rise in popularity in Europe and the United States (Rodríguez Monegal 444). The story itself is important in the oeuvre of Borges because it marks the point at which, after the early poetry, reviews, cultural criticism, and “the many hoaxes he had played in two decades of writing,” his work as a writer of “fictions” moves into a more mature phase (Rodríguez Monegal 331; 338).

In brief, “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” describes the encroachment on the contemporary world—the world of Borges as narrator, but also the world of the reader—of material objects and abstract ideas of a civilization from a completely imaginary and ideal<sup>72</sup> plane of existence. This plane of existence is revealed in the story’s postscript to have been constructed completely by academicians and specialists through a series of encyclopedias, and as such the story makes several wry comments about the nature of “reality,” the sourcing and transmission of “knowledge,” and the fluid, non-linear component of time. The story begins with the discovery by Borges, as narrator, and a friend—his real-life collaborator Adolfo Bioy Casares—of an apocryphal encyclopedia article about a land called “Uqbar.” The article seems to be unique to

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<sup>72</sup> The term “ideal” is used in this sentence as it is used in Platonic discourse, referring to a realm in which “Forms” provide the template for the existential things and beings of the material world.

the volume the two men are reading, and the volume itself is part of a pirated edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*; nevertheless, the article available to the two friends reveals that the literature of Uqbar literature consisted solely of texts about a fantastical planet called “Tlön.” The narrator Borges remarks that two years pass after his initial discovery of the Uqbar article, after which he discovers volume eleven of the *First Encyclopedia of Tlön*, which the readers will learn is the collected discourse about the imaginary planet and society created by terrestrial academicians and specialists. From there, the bulk of the story is concerned with the narrator’s relating to the reader the characteristics detailed in “volume eleven” of Tlönian philosophy, metaphysics, language, and literature. The novel’s postscript reveals that Tlönian objects are manifesting in the narrator’s time and the academic “disciplines” of Tlön are beginning to be transmitted on earth. This ontologically and epistemologically upsetting tale, in which the items and ideas of an imaginary society are appearing in “real” life, ends with the narrator apathetically carrying on in his literary pursuits.

As a whole, the story is notable for the way in which past, present, and future are playthings in the hands of the author: as the reader discovers in the postscript, the core of the story is being presented from the future as an “article” from the past. The effect of this narrative technique on the story’s original audience deserves some explanation. As noted, the story was initially published in the May 1940 issue of *Sur* magazine. The post-script to the story is dated 1947; in the original printing of the story in *Sur*, the postscript informs the readers that the “article” which preceded the postscript, which was in actuality the body of the short story relating the narrator’s discovery of the article about Uqbar and his description of the fantastical world of Tlön, was originally published in the May 1940 issue of *Sur*-- the very issue Borges’ intended readers would have been holding, creating a remarkable temporal “mise-en-abyme”

(Rodríguez Monegal 332). Thus the structure of the story, framed with a postscript written in the future and referring back to the very present of the reader, necessarily depends on a playful manipulation of time by Borges, challenging momentarily at least, readers' fixed notions about the linear march of serial time, i.e. *zamān*, which anchors Western rationality and empiricism. Even though the effect of this manipulation of narrative time is somewhat lost in subsequent publication of the story after its original appearance in *Sur* magazine, the structure of the story nevertheless continues to reveal Borges's ludic approach towards time. The complexity of the story's narrative structure and the ideas contained in the narrator's description of Tlön has meant that "Tlön" has been studied from a variety of approaches, from expositions of its Berkeleyian idealism to an interpretation of the story as a commentary on anti-Semitism in Argentina in the 1930s (Núñez-Faraco 83). While Didier T. Jaén traces the ways in which the story engages with the Western esoteric tradition, there is no previous analysis of the story as engaging with the theosophy of Ibn al-ʿArabī .

### **Tlön as "post-Oriental"**

As time is the essential riddle for Borges the author,<sup>73</sup> it is his manipulation of this ontological category which gives the story both its structure and its uncanny effect. Likewise, through the ironic treatment of the discursive construction of knowledge in the story's narration and through the unsettling manipulation of the boundaries between "real" and "fantasy" at the story's narrative core, the tale clearly describes the take-over of Western orthodoxy by an alternative epistemology and ontology. Yet, a claim that in offering such alternatives to Western

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<sup>73</sup> A sense of estrangement in the story is effectively executed at the level of characterization, due to a favorite technique of Borges—that of narrating an ostensibly fictional story from a first-person point of view with the name of Borges. For this reason, I will often refer to "Borges the author" or "Borges as author," and "Borges the narrator" or "Borges as narrator" to distinguish between each persona in stories such as "Tlön" where Borges is the named narrator.

rationality, the story in some way corresponds with Ibn al-ʿArabī’s ideas of time seems, on the surface, far-fetched at best; however, there are several tantalizing clues that suggest that Borges as author wished to point readers of this onslaught against Western rationality towards the realm of Islamic mysticism. To this end, I will first identify some of the elements in the story that are either explicitly or implicitly Islamic or “Eastern” and then I will explain how these elements are more than just ornamentation; indeed, I claim that these nods to Islamic and Arabic culture and mysticism will not only help to discover a correspondence with Ibn al-ʿArabī’s time horizon, but also allow “Tlön” to be classified as a post-Orientalist story, giving it increased energy for resisting the epistemology and ontology of Western rationality.

A useful term to serve my purposes will be that of “crypto-Arabism.” George Wingerter first applied this term to a general study of the oeuvre of Borges, stating that “por lo ‘cripto-arabe’ quiero designar esos elementos que evocan, recuerdan, o parodian lo árabe, sutil y (tal vez) subconscientemente, aunque no parezcan tener vínculo alguno con ello en la superficie” [“by ‘crypto-Arabic’ I mean those elements that evoke, recall, or parody the Arabic, subtly and (perhaps) subconsciously, even though they do not seem to have any link with it at the superficial level”] (31). Wingerter finds crypto-Arabic elements in “Tlön,” notably in the name of the apocryphal land of Uqbar. He points out one possible source for the name of *Uqbar* as being inspired by a city once located on the Tigris River, famed for its gardens but destroyed by flooding sometime in the twelfth century CE (33). Moreover, the allusion to this city could also be coupled with the meaning of the Arabic root *q-b-r*, which signifies “to bury.” As Wingerter points out, the first-person singular passive voice conjugation of this root, *Uqbar*, means “I am buried,” corresponding to the fact that in Borges’s story, the country is interred in an aberrant printing of a pirated master text (34). Wingerter’s rendering of Uqbar is much more satisfactory

than that of Almond, who argues that Uqbar “sounds like *akhbar* or ‘the greatest,’ as in Allah akbar” (455). Unfortunately, Almond’s theory carries less weight not only because of the significant phonetic difference between *akbar* (with a *kaf*) and *Uqbar* (with a *qaf*), but also due to what is at best a misprint, but at worst a poor grasp of Arabic by Almond—*akhbar* (with a *kh* [*kā*]) does not mean “greatest;” instead it means “news,” “information,” or “report” (“Khabar” 264). Furthermore Wingerter’s hypothesis is more attractive because his attribution of the sense of burial to *Uqbar* adds a deep significance to the final lines of the story (Wingerter 34), when Borges the narrator attempts to express apathy about the inevitable encroachment of Tlönian objects and ideas: “The world will be Tlön. That makes very little difference to me; through my quiet days in this hotel in Adrogué, I go on revising (though I never intend to publish) an indecisive translation in the style of Quevedo of Sir Thomas Browne’s *Urne Buriall*” (Borges, “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” 81).

A second crypto-Arabism inherent in the short story, according to Wingerter, is an allusion to the *qasīda* form which governed the composition of classical Arabi poetry. It is well-known that Borges expressed a knowledge of this form,<sup>74</sup> and in “Tlön,” Wingerter argues that the remark by Borges as narrator that the fiction of Tlön “has but a single plot, with every imaginable permutation” recalls the “único e immudable argumento” (“the unique and unchanging argument”) of all *qasīdas* (Wingerter 34). Here, Wingerter’s suggestion reveals his own perhaps superficial knowledge of Arabic literary history, as it is well known that the Arabic poets from the earliest days have actually manipulated the *qasida* to express a variety of arguments about topics as diverse as love, war, ostracization, and tribal unity. While they often

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<sup>74</sup> For example, he mentions this poetic form in “The Search for Averroes,” and in the “The Translators of the 1001 Nights” (Wingerter 34 n. 17).



do follow a strict conventional pattern, *qasīdas* do not always rigorously follow, as Wingerter suggests that they do, the rigid formula of the description of the lover's lamentations over the abandoned campsite of the beloved, the mounted journey through the desert, the arrival of the poet to the abode of his patron and the subsequent praise or ridicule of the patron (Wingerter 34). However, though Wingerter does not state this himself, perhaps he is implying that Borges possessed only a superficial understanding of the form.

A third crypto-Arabism in "Tlön" identified by Wingerter, more convincing than the previous, is in the correspondence between Arabic grammar and morphology and the phenomenon of *hrönir*, which are recorded in *A First Encycloepedia of Tlön* as the "duplication of lost objects" appearing to those who find them in one of twelve subtly differing forms ("Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" 77–78). In Wingerter's view, the twelve variations of *hrönir* evoke the twelve verb forms used in Arabic, and his chart comparing Borges's description of a selection of the *hrönir* with the description of the corresponding verb forms makes a striking argument for this crypto-Arabism. As Wingerter's chart shows, the characteristics of each form of *hrönir* described by Borges bear a suggestive resemblance to the usage of the corresponding form of Arabic verb; for example, Wingerter points out that Borges describes the eleventh-form *hrönir* as exhibiting a "pureza de líneas" (a purity of lineage), while Arab grammarians such as Haywood and Nahmad have observed that eleventh-form Arabic verbs are most often used for "the exigencies of metre, or for the musical effect" (Wingerter 35; 35 n. 19).

Yet there are also more obvious clues, perhaps "superficial" in the words of Wingerter, that Uqbar is a "symbol" of Islamicate culture in the written text itself. It is supposedly located somewhere in the East, as Khorasan, Armenia, and Erzerum (Erzurum, a city in Eastern Turkey) are referenced in the geographical description of the fantastical country (69), and a German text

referred to by the narrator as offering “readable and interesting” advice mentions that Uqbar is or was located in Asia Minor. When considered alongside the battery of crypto-Arabism’s identified by Wingerter, this ostensible geographical location suggests that the knowledge, and ways of knowing, that originate or that are transmitted from Uqbar are bound to be associated with Eastern and Islamic cosmologies, ontologies, and epistemologies. Moreover, another superficial detail in the story suggestive of productive challenges to Western rational thought from the East can be found in the description of the narrator’s discovery of *A First Encyclopedia of Tlön*: “The book was written in English, and it consisted of 1001 pages” (*Collected Fictions* 71). Here again, as with the narrator’s discovery of Uqbar through a pirated *Encyclopedia Britannica* article, the reader is presented with a subversive use of the language of the empire to transmit esoteric knowledge: the conflation of academic discourse in English—the language of the center—with an allusion to Shahrazad’s story-telling techniques from the “periphery,” employed in the *1001 Nights* to subvert a malign use of power by the sultan Shahriyar. This small detail, then, more than displaying Borges’s erudition or merely adding to the estrangement of the text, indicates an embedded and hybrid challenge to the script and semiotics of power.

Clearly then, there are Eastern, Islamic, and Arabic motifs and details in the story, but “Tlön” is not an exception in Borges’s work. Indeed, as Ian Almond points out, “Islam plays no small role in the stories of Borges. When absent from the setting of the story, it nevertheless filters quietly into most of his fiction, manifesting itself solemnly at the most unexpected moment” (“Borges the Post-Orientalist” 436). Of course, one could dismiss these clues in “Tlön” and in other stories as simple ornaments providing a patina of exoticism to the tale, decorative devices perhaps Orientalist in design and packaged up “care of a Captain Burton or Ernst Renan” (436), and aesthetically effective for supplementing narrative estrangement by creating a world

alien to his Latin American or Western European readers. Borges himself might say that he just wanted to tell a good story and that these nods to Islamic culture were merely aesthetic choices intended to entertain.

Yet López-Baralt argues that Borges did not resort to using Islamic motifs or literature “for the purpose of local color, being by admission ‘a user of symbols;’ instead he employs traditional Islamic motifs mostly for their aesthetic connotations and suggestive power” (López-Baralt 69). Likewise, Almond concludes that such a manipulation of Islamic motifs, especially as found in the stories written from 1933-1956, transcends the mere ornamental use of Islamic themes and details and refuses to perpetuate the discursive practice of “Orientalism” as it has been so effectively critiqued by Said; instead, Almond argues:

While Borges is admittedly guilty of Orientalist generalizations about Islamic cultures ... his work does not yield the same impression of a single, generic group of Muslims or Arabs, nor a single, generic thing called Islam, that we find in other writers such as Burton, Lawrence, and even in allegedly modern figures such as Bowles and Camus. (455)

Almond also points out that “the variety of different voices that Borges adopts in his treatment of Islamic/Arabic material reflects [his] disbelief in an ‘invariant essence of Islam’” (454) an essence which generations of Orientalists attempted to locate and circumscribe. Almond believes that this attitude is best illustrated by “La busca de Averroes” (“Averroes’s Search”), where by the end of the story, “Borges seems to have stumbled upon Edward Said’s main point: that whenever Westerners write about the Orient, they invariably end up writing about themselves—their fantasies, their longings, and their failures” (451). Thus, Almond argues that even as there are moments in the oeuvre of Borges in which he uncritically repeats “a tried and tested stock of familiar Orientalisms” (435), in certain stories, his work reaches a post-Orientalist understanding of the East.

As such, Almond conjectures that it is fair to say that Borges's vision of Islam "encompasses a wide number of its [Islam's] varied differences" and that it shows "an increasing awareness of the complexities involved in writing about a collection of metaphors such as 'Islam'" (436). However, despite this awareness, Almond hypothesizes that in "Tlön," Borges was "not able to avoid mingling Islamic metaphors, allusions and references in with his description of reality's invasion by Tlön. Even for a writer as sophisticated as Borges, the image of Islam as encroaching, insidious, malevolent, and somehow imminently apocalyptic still appear to have had some sway" (456-57). This remark by Almond, which comes on the heels of his analysis of Islamic references in "Tlön", is meant to confirm his earlier statement:

There lies within certain texts of Borges a fundamental fear of Islam ... a fear essentially claustrophobic in its overtones ... Islam, it could be argued, still remains a threat to ... the kind of things Europe represents: sanity, intellect, pluralism, rational thought, and freedom. There are shades of the medieval Christina *Urangst* about Islam to be found in one of Borges's most famous stories, 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius.' (455)

Despite the great value in Almond's model of a wide range of attitudes towards Islam and Arabic culture exhibited in Borges's writing, I find here that overall, his analysis of "Tlön" is inaccurate on both a superficial and fundamental level. First, at an admittedly superficial level, his error resides in fine details. As noted, his understanding of the word Uqbar as a cognate of *akhbar* is absolutely incorrect because *akhbar* does not signify "greater" as he claims it does when states that "'Uqbar' sounds like *akhbar* or 'the greatest,' as in *Allah akbar*" ("Borges the Post-Orientalist" 455). Another superficial flaw in detail is that Almond states that Tlön is a realm somewhere in Asia Minor (455); however, this is incorrect, as in Borges's "famous story," it is actually Uqbar which is described as being in Asia Minor, while Tlön is the fictitious planet with which all of the literature of Uqbar is concerned. These two errors—one of using the wrong word in Arabic and the other of misreading the story—are forgivable as typographical errors

perhaps; however, both errors persist in a reprint of the article as a chapter of his 2007 book *The New Orientalists*. Furthermore, the error involving the wrong definition of *akhbar* is actually compounded in the 2007 piece as he says “‘Uqbar sounds like *akhbar* or ‘the greatest’, as in Allah *akhbar*” (“Borges and the Finitude of Islam” 91), so the mistake is actually made worse the later printing. Taken together, this set of superficial errors damages Almond’s argument about Borges’s use of Islamic motifs, since it seems that he doesn’t quite understand the Arabic language or Islamic culture as well as he thinks he does, and that it seems that he doesn’t understand the different frames (Uqbar is a region in Asia Minor, Tlön is a planet in the fiction of Uqbar) which Borges’s story passes through.

More importantly, though, is that I find his argument flawed because I do not believe that “Tlön” in any way reflects a fear of the East or of Islamic civilization. In fact, part of what I am setting out to do in this dissertation is to prove that, instead of fearing an Islamic intrusion into Western values like “sanity, intellect, pluralism, rational thought,” in “Tlön” Borges revels in the idea of such an incursion on the West. Therefore, I will explain how in “Tlön,” Borges weaves Islamic and Arabic symbols into his fiction for more than just a display of erudition, for more than the aesthetic reasons of creating estranging, exotic settings, and for reasons other than to subtly express a “medieval *Urangst*.” Instead, turning Almond’s argument on itself, I will illustrate that Tlön belongs in the same “post-Oriental” category as “Averroë’s Search” by virtue of the former story’s sophisticated understanding of Islamic culture and mysticism and given its consolidation of distinct elements of Islamic culture and Ibn al-‘Arabī’s mysticism into the story’s overall challenge to Western rationality.

#### Clues about Islamic Mysticism in “Tlön”

To recap, I have stated that I believe a handful of “crypto-Arabisms” in the short story does more than generate exoticism or increase the effect of estrangement, and I have suggested

that crypto-Arabisms could also be read as semiotic units offering traces of ways of looking at and of making sense of the world that are “other” than rational and empirical, or at least derived from traditions “other” than those inspired by rationality. Now I will strengthen this position by pointing out some of the correspondences between Borges’s story and Islamic mysticism in general, and more specifically by identifying resonances between the story and Ibn al-ʿArabī’s vision of time. Thus, some of these correspondences reflect a general level of engagement with Sufism and Ibn al-ʿArabī’s theosophy, while other elements of “Tlön” actually suggest a true resonance or literary representation of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s “time horizon” of *dahr*, *zamān*, and *waqt*.

I will begin by pointing out some of the more abstract echoes between the story and Ibn al-ʿArabī’s theosophy and Islamic Sufism before analyzing those which represent the Sheikh’s time horizon specifically. The first of these general correspondences truly can be said to be a “reflection:” the story originates with Borges the narrator recalling a rumination between two friends about the dread power of mirrors (68-69). This use of mirrors, a recurrent motif in Borges’s work (Urraca 153), resonates deeply with Ibn al-ʿArabī’s use of the metaphor of the mirror to explain the ontological relationship of *al-Haqq* (the Real, or the godhead) to mankind (Austin 35; Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* 351). However, it should be noted that even as it corresponds with this crucial component of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s ontology in content, it departs from it in valence. Ibn al-ʿArabī considers enlightened man as a polished mirror reflecting the Real (Austin 35); hence, Ibn al-ʿArabī considers man as the method through which the Real is able to reveal Itself to Itself. The mirror symbol, then, has a positive noetic function for Ibn al-ʿArabī. In contrast, Borges as narrator states early in the story that he feels “that there is something monstrous about mirrors” (“Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” 68). Here, he is obviously in affinity with the gnostic remark, quoted by the character Adolfo, that mirrors, due to their reproduction

of illusion, are abominable. Thus, Borges the narrator has a strongly negative view of mirrors they perpetuate the objects of the material world, which the Gnostics view as chains in the hell that is the material world.<sup>75</sup> Despite the difference in valence assigned to mirrors by Borges and Ibn al-ʿArabī, for both thinkers, the mirror serves as a powerful ontological metaphor.

As Wingerter, and to a less convincing degree, Almond, have suggested, the name Uqbar is clearly a word most likely meant to sound Arabic by Borges the author, due to the phonetic and morphological qualities of the word and owing to the most likely geographical location of Uqbar. As previously noted, Almond attempts to read the word as a cognate for the Arabic work *akbar* (I. Almond, “Borges the Post-Orientalist” 455), which is obviously frequently used to refer to God in Islam. Keeping Almond’s specious hypothesis about the name in mind, it is at least entertaining to consider if Borges’s neologism and the word which inspired it perhaps carry traces of “greater than” and imply a transcendence in quality or substance of one thing or idea over another. Again, while this neologism corresponds at a very basic level with the thought system of Sufism, it falls short of a direct correlation with that of Ibn al-ʿArabī, since the Unity of Being (*wahdat al-wujūd*) which forms the linchpin of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s ontology would in the final analysis eschew notions such as absolute transcendence which a word like *akbar* conveys.

As such, it seems less productive to follow Almond’s interpretation of *Uqbar* as *Akbar*. On the other hand, Wingerter’s translation of Uqbar as “I am buried” carries a great deal of significance in relation to the Sufi tradition, in particular the concept of *bāṭin*, which means “inner, interior, inward, inmost, intrinsic; hidden, secret” (“Bāṭin” 79). The term is often paired in a binary by Islamic theologians and Sufis with the word *ẓāhir*, itself the title of one of Borges’s stories, “The Zahir,” meaning both “mastering, knowing” and “visible, perceptible,

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<sup>75</sup> The Christian gnostic influence on Sufism should be recalled here (Nicholson 14–16).

manifest, obvious, clear; external, exterior, outward” (“Zāhir”). The binarism between the hidden and the manifest is also important in orthodox Islam, as the Qur’an states that two of the divine name for the godhead are *al-ẓāhir* (the Manifest) and *al-bāṭin* (the Hidden) (57:3). Moreover, in both orthodox and mystical Islam, the terms are applied to Qur’anic interpretation; in terms of Sufi textual interpretation of the Qur’an, *ẓāhir* indicates the literal meaning of the text, while *bāṭin* indicates allegorical or less obvious interpretations. For Ibn al-ʿArabī, *al-bāṭin* signifies an immanent god head which is to be “witnessed by the intellects” (FM III 484.35 trans. in Chittick *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* 89)) and which “exercises its properties in knowledge and gnosis” (FM III 65.22 trans. in Chittick 89). Thus an equivalence can be found between Uqbar and *al-bāṭin*, the buried land and the hidden knowledge, in terms of meaning for Sufis.

That Islamic mysticism in general is not far from Borges’s mind as he composed the story is also more directly indicated as the narrator describes his excitement and emotion at discovering *A First Encyclopaedia of Tlön. Vol XI. Hlaer to Jangr*. The narrator remarks that his joy exceeded that of the Islamic “Night of Nights”<sup>76</sup> or “*laylat al-qadr*” (Night of Power), which is a time when “the secret portals of the heavens open wide and the water in the water jars is sweeter than on other nights” (71). Schimmel says that for many Sufis, the *laylat al-qadr*, signifies the “Night of Might in the end of Ramaḍān, during which heavenly light fills the world and becomes visible to the elect who have reached the highest illumination” (Schimmel 430). The choice of Borges the author to describe in Islamic terms his narrator’s excited emotions when first being “unveiled” to the knowledge constituting the world of Tlön—especially terms

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<sup>76</sup> This is a misnomer on the part of Borges; the Arabic name for this night is the *laylat al-qadr*, or the Night of Destiny and often called the Night of Might or the Night of Glory in English. This perhaps reflects Borges, on his way to becoming a “post-Orientalist,” being in the stage identified by Almond as “Borges the Reader of *Kitab Alf Laylah wah Laylah*” (438-41).



fraught with mystical meaning and signifying a time in which the godhead has chosen to communicate to the ideal human—is significant, in that it suggests that Borges the narrator was identifying with the ecstasy of an “elect” Sufi at the moment (the *waqt*) of unveiling of “heavenly light” and the acquisition of “highest illumination.”

**“Tlön,” Ibn al-ʿArabī’s time horizon, and challenges to Western notions of time**

It would be quite easy to suggest that in the story’s portrayal of an unreal Tlön encroaching upon the rational Western “reality” of Borges the narrator, there can be read an allegory for the presence of, or embedding of, the “East” in the “West,” or perhaps a figure for the dialectic between an obscured but emerging East and a repressive but disintegrating West. Supporting such a claim, one need only point to what I have demonstrated to be a backdrop of Islamicate symbology, including a few traces of Sufism latent in the story. Yet none of this in itself indicates any resonance with Ibn al-ʿArabī’s time horizon. Therefore, I must now specifically explain how elements of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s time horizon correspond within Borges’s story.

Perhaps the most direct link between Borges’s imaginary world and Ibn al-ʿArabī’s conception of time is expressed in the story when the narrator reveals what he has learned about the ontology of Tlön, the Tlönian languages generated by that ontology, and the epistemology which obtains from that ontological and linguistic context. The importance of first clarifying the dimensions of Tlön’s ontology before any other information about the “planet” can be offered is made clear by the narrator as he begins to summarize what he has learned from *A First Encyclopaedia of Tlön*: “I might be so bold as to beg a few moments to outline its [the culture of Tlön’s] conception of the universe” (“Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” 72). From here the narrator reveals that Tlönian culture is based on philosophical idealism. This particular idealism asserts that objects do not actually exist in space; instead, they are only an association of ideas in time,

as “mental processes that occur not in space” (73). The idealist notion that the universe is merely a collection of ideas immediately recalls the idea of Ibn al-ʿArabī ‘s *dahr*, where according to Ibn al-ʿArabī it is the essences of objects that exist in eternity—the ideas for the material things that acquire or fade from existence are kept in the mind of God as ideals (Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* 83–84); furthermore, the phasing in and out of material existence of ideas in succession implied in the Tlönian ontology resonates with Ibn al-ʿArabī ‘s conception of *dahr* as an eternal fluctuation of Being and serves as a literary depiction of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s irrational time horizon.

Thus for Ibn al-ʿArabī, the “Son of Plato,” as for the Tlönians, the world is made up of manifestations of archetypes which dwell in eternity as emanations of an Absolute (“Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” 73). As Bowering summarizes the mystical and irrational teachings of Ibn al-ʿArabī:

He taught that ... [i]n His eternal loneliness, the Absolute longed for manifestation and brought forth the universe by emanation of His very being that crystallized, through the medium of archetypes, to form the manifold world of creation. All things emanate from God, in whose mind they are preexistent as ideas, and evolve in stages to form the world of multiplicity. (Bowering 110–11)

This operation receives expression in the story when the narrator surmises that the for Tlönians, the attribution of “thought” to the “inexhaustible deity” is “ a perfect synonym of the cosmos” (73) and in more detail when Borges the narrator describes the utter rejection of materialism by Tlönians (“Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” 75). In the Tlönian triumph of idealism, Borges the author describes an ontology that can only be based on a concept of a timeless monism: “there is but a single subject; that indivisible subject is every being in the universe, and the beings of the universe are the organs and masks of the deity. X is Y and is *also* Z.” One way to read this is that the “organs and masks of the deity” are brought into existence out of *dahr*, from out of a timeless

eternity, where they are stored in the thought of Being. Hence, Borges's description of Tlön's metaphysics can likewise be thought of as a literary depiction of mystical gnosis.

An important consequence of this ontological outlook so rooted in the belief of the non-existence of things in space, according to Borges the narrator, is that the languages of Tlön lack nouns. The *First Encyclopaedia of Tlön* teaches that in the language systems of Tlön, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs are the primary units of meaning and that ideas and things are represented by employing participle forms of verbs or by "stringing together adjectives" ("Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" 73). Since Tlön's ontology privileges the role of time, or timelessness, over that of space, the part of speech most impacted by time—the verb—receives the greatest weight in the languages of the southern hemisphere of the planet: "For example, there is no noun that corresponds to our word "moon," but there is a verb which in English would be to 'to moonate' or 'to enmoon.' 'The moon rose above the river' is *hlör u fang axaxaxas mlö*," or as Xul Solar succinctly translates: *Upward, behind the onstreaming it mooned*" ("Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" 73). Though the connection is not immediately easy to comprehend, these linguistic principles are derived from the idealist and temporally monist ontology: a language emphasizing nouns—individual subjects existing in and moving through space—is an impossible vehicle for representing the ontology of Tlön. Thus, languages that rely on verbs, adverbs, and adjectives are the prominent feature in Tlönian linguistics; the offspring of this marriage between temporal monism and a grammar *sans* substantives is a literature that

... is filled with ideal objects, called forth and dissolved in an instant, as the poetry requires. Sometimes mere simultaneity creates them. There are things composed of two terms, one visual and the other auditory: the color of the rising sun and the distant caw of a bird. There are things composed of many: the sun and water against the swimmer's breast, the vague shimmering pink one sees when one's eyes are closed, the sensation of being swept along by a river and also by Morpheus. These objects of the second degree may be combined with others; the process, using certain abbreviations is virtually infinite. There are famous poems

composed of a single enormous word; the word is a “poetic object” created by the poet. The fact that no one believes in the reality expressed by these nouns means, paradoxically, that there is no limit to their number. (“Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” 73)

Here, in the narrator’s brief characterization of Tlönian poetics, the literary representation of objects existing only as ideas in time, in “sometimes mere simultaneity,” can be analyzed through Ibn al-‘Arabī’s temporal ontology as literary attempts to communicate the immediate consciousness of *waqt*, the moment, “called forth and dissolved in an instant.” Consequently, such a language would seem well-suited to expressing Ibn al-‘Arabī’s notion of *dahr*-as-eternal-flux and the insight granted to Sufis in moments of *waqt*, and Borges’s articulation of Tlönian poetics provides a literary depiction of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s mystical gnosis.

That the “fantastical” world of Tlön, which in the story gains a foothold on the “real” world, offers to readers an alternate irrational epistemology, anchored by a radical reconceptualization of time, is obvious from the story itself. But what kind of knowledge does this epistemology claim to collect and teach? Borges mentions that despite the Tlönian language’s reliance on the concept of temporal succession, the existence of time is questioned by its thinkers:

One of the schools of philosophy on Tlön goes so far as to deny the existence of time; it argues that the present is undefined and indefinite; the future has no reality except as present recollection. Another school posits that all time has already passed, so that our life is but the crepuscular memory, or crepuscular reflection, doubtlessly distorted and mutilated, of an irrecoverable process (“Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” 74)

In this description of Tlönian metaphysics, Borges reveals that these imaginary metaphysicians have realized that language cannot capture the nature of truth or the real. The result leads to a deconstructionist approach to meaning by the Tlönians; as the narrator reveals, the “monism, or idealism” induced by the reign of timelessness over the psychology of Tlön means that “every

philosophy is a dialectical game,” and “metaphysics is a branch of the literature of fantasy” (“Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” 74). Meaning is impossible to pin down and can only be found as a trace ever lurking behind and evading the present, due to the Tlönian view that concrete and abstract nouns do not occur spatially, but rather as a succession of acts linked in time. Therefore, rational “science is rendered null”:

[t]o explain (or pass judgment on) an event is to link it to another; on Tlön, that joining together is a posterior state of the *subject*, and can neither affect nor illuminate the prior state. Every mental state is irreducible: the simple act of giving it a name—i.e., of classifying it—introduces a distortion, a “slant” or “bias.” One might well deduce, therefore, that on Tlön there are no sciences—or even any “systems of thought.” The paradoxical truth is that systems of thought do exist, almost countless numbers of them... There are systems upon systems... the metaphysicians of Tlön seek not truth, or even plausibility... they know that a system is naught but the subordination of all the aspects of the universe to one of those aspects—*any* one of them. Even the phrase “all the aspects” should be avoided, because it implies the impossible addition of the present instant and all those instants that went before. Nor is the plural “those instants that went before” legitimate, for it implies another impossible operation ... (Borges, *Collected Fictions* 74)

While on the surface, such a refusal to pursue truth through operations of language on the part of the “metaphysicians” of Tlön might suggest a line of thought contrary to the very *raison d’être* of Sufis—that of seeking the Truth (*al-haqq*)—by turning deconstruction upon deconstruction, it can be seen that this passage provides a description of the deployment by Tlönian metaphysicians of apophatic language to describe an ineffable gnosis of timelessness. Moreover, although Tlön’s thought systems cannot be adequately expressed, “on Tlön, the subject of knowledge is one and eternal” (“Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” 76), a concept which absolutely resonates with the Ibn al-‘Arabī’s fundamental principle of “unity of Being.” In this alternate epistemology and approach to philosophy and metaphysics can be detected a nexus of Sufism and deconstruction, like that observed by Almond (I. Almond, *Sufism and Deconstruction* 7–

37),<sup>77</sup> all of which suggests literary depiction of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s time horizon on the part of Borges, aimed towards challenging the rational tradition.

In the preceding analysis of “Tlön,” I have identified various details linking the story not only to the “Orient” but also to Islamic mysticism in general; indeed, I have argued that its sophisticated integration of Western idealism and Sufi notions of time and reality make it post-Orientalist. Yet the story really focuses most on making suggestions about time—Borges’s favorite riddle—suggestions which I have shown also resonate with Ibn al-ʿArabī’s temporal constructs. The idealism of the Tlönians, a “fantastical” people whose culture intrudes on narrative “reality,” dovetails at the ontological, linguistic, and epistemological levels with the time horizon of Ibn al-ʿArabī. The basis of the Tlönian language, literature, philosophy, and metaphysics in a monism ruled by time reflects attempts by the Tlönians (and the terrestrial experts who, it turns out, have given birth to this language) to express a theosophically idealist position in which substantives do not operate in space, but only as ideas in either a timeless fluctuation (*dahr*) in the thought of the “inexhaustible deity” or in an individual moment of *waqt*, in which the perceiver of the thought sees the idea as present as an association of ideas. Thus, the theosophy of Ibn al-ʿArabī receives a subtle literary representation in the narrator’s description of Tlön’s language, literature, and metaphysics.

The contributions to resistance to and social transformation of rational orthodoxy inherent in the story’s literary depiction of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s time horizon are implied in their very condition as irrationally derived items of gnosis. Yet this challenge to the rational tradition

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<sup>77</sup> For example: “Both Ibn al-ʿArabi and Derrida, in their own contexts, speak of fetters and freedom. It is no exaggeration to say that a certain emancipatory spirit underlies both their projects—‘emancipatory’ not in any social sense but rather in the emancipation of the knowability of the Real/the uncontrollability of writing from the shackles of rational/metaphysical thought (I. Almond, *Sufism and Deconstruction* 10).

receives explicit expression in the story's postscript, where it is recorded that all the irrationally generated disciplines of Tlön—its history, its geometry, its philosophy, and its language—are beginning to be taught, and that material objects of Tlönian design are beginning to appear on earth. The very irrationality of aspects of a “fictional” and discursively created temporally monist culture appearing within the time and space of the narrator should encourage readers to think deeply about the nature of time as the medium of *dahr* and about how objects and ideas come into and go out of existence in the medium of *dahr*. The story's ending should cause readers to think about their own reality, to think about what is real and what is fiction, and about the possibility that rational measurement of time is an illusory construct. And as Borges the narrator describes the appearance into his “reality” of items from a world completely constructed from mere discourse, careful readers or readers who have been taught to look for such suggestions might pause to reconsider the information that passes for knowledge and “truth” in their own world. As these challenges are brought about in the story by a fictional civilization and culture anchored by temporal monism—or as Ibn al-ʿArabī would say, an awareness that “God is *dahr*”—Borges the author stimulates readers to consider the possibility of such a concept of time and the impact it could have if, like the seemingly fantastic ideas of Tlön, *dahr* were to gain purchase in a world strictly governed by the rational portioning of serial time as *zamān*.

### “The Writing of the God”

Though less obviously corresponding with Islamic mysticism than “Tlön” due to a lack of any “Eastern” surface details, Borges's story “La escritura del dios” (“The Writing of the God”) obviously depicts a mystical consciousness event that deeply resonates with Ibn al-ʿArabī's conceptions of *dahr*, *waqt*, and *zamān*. Published in 1947 in Argentina as part of *El Aleph* (*The Aleph*), the story is narrated by Tzinacán, a Mayan priest held captive by the Castilian

conquistador Pedro de Alvarado, who describes his longing for a divine intervention and reversal of fortune for him and his culture. After some brief description of the torment of his years-long confinement, the story shifts to a literary representation of Tzinacán's long-awaited mystical experience. During the experience, he is granted access to a code that would enable him to reverse the colonial victory over his culture, a formula expressed in the "writing of the god" embedded in the spots in the coat of a jaguar with which the priest shares his subterranean captivity. However, the story concludes with Tzinacán's realization that, despite having access to a power that would allow him to achieve temporal dominance over his conquerors, due to the awareness of the "unity in Being" that he has been granted during his experience, he no longer cares to participate in temporal and egocentric affairs.

That the story serves as a metaphysical allegory and a literary depiction of mysticism is not a novel observation. For example, Alvarez noting the metaphysical aspect of the story, comments that "[l]a correspondencia entre las situación precaria de Tzinacán y la célebre alegoría de la caverna de Platón ... es demasiado obvia para que se considere una coincidencia" [the correspondence between the precarious situation of Tzinacán and the famous allegory of Plato's cave... is too obvious for it to be considered a consequence"] (464).<sup>78</sup> Regarding the element of mysticism in the story, Borges's incorporation of Kabbalistic elements into many of his stories and essays is well documented.<sup>79</sup> Pertaining to "The Writing of the God," Alvarez observes that Kabbalistic influence can be found in the story's central idea (469), arguing that the

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<sup>78</sup> As in "Tlön," it seems highly likely that the overwhelming influence of Plato and neo-Platonic thought on both Ibn al-ʿArabi and Borges is, most likely, a shared point of contact between the two authors.

<sup>79</sup> See Jaime Alazraki's *Borges and the Kabbalah: and other essays on his fiction and poetry* (3–64).



Mayan priest's mystical experience, keyed by the decipherment of the relationship between sacred letters and existence, mirrors that of the Jewish mystical tradition (469-70). However, as of yet there is no source that attempts to integrate Borges's story with Ibn al-ʿArabī's vision of time; furthermore, I believe that the analysis of Tzinacán's narrative through the lens of Ibn al-ʿArabī's time horizon suggests a more potent challenge to orthodox ontology than the Kabbalistic view taken by critics like Alvarez, which operates primarily by pointing out the association of the godhead and the universe with the characters of letters shared by the Kabbala and the story.

Instead, I view the correspondence of "The Writing of the God" with Ibn al-ʿArabī's time horizon as residing at deeper level of the narrative than that of the surface details of the letters found in the jaguar's fur. As such, I suggest that in "The Writing of the Gods," the time horizon of Ibn al-ʿArabī can be located and identified as one of the "subconsciously" appearing "crypto-Arabisms" identified by Wingerter.<sup>80</sup> Indeed, the strength of my own claim about the depth of these crypto-Arabisms is bolstered by Wingerter's statement that "están mucho mejor integrados al pensamiento creativo de Borges que los arabismos a secas; lo más central es

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<sup>80</sup> "Estos cripta-arabismos, pues, pueden representar rasgos de datos olvidados, recombinados con elementos nuevos por la inteligencia creadora de Borges para formar la fábrica de un texto literario." [These crypto-Arabisms, then, can represent traces of forgotten events, recombined with new elements by the creative intelligence of Borges in order to form the fabric of a new literary text"] (Wingerter 36). Furthermore, as Almond has pointed out, Borges could have encountered the basic tenets of Ibn al-ʿArabī's theosophy in his reading history: "Another possible influence however, on Borges's depiction of Averroes as an ultimately failed thinker, trapped by his own limitations, may have well been the thirteenth-century sufi [sic] thinker Ibn 'Arabi. Borges was familiar with Palacios's study of the Sufi, *El Islam Cristianizado*" (458 n. 10). Problematically, Almond does not indicate how he knows Borges was familiar with this work, although Weinberger notes that Borges does include Palacio's *Dante and Islam* in his list of books that were candidates for *A Personal Library*, a series of volumes which he not only selected but for which he wrote the majority of the prologues, published in 1985 and 1986 by Emecé (Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions* 547).

precisamente lo que aparenta no serlo, y lo que sí lo aparenta ser—el averroísmo y el pensamiento oximorónico derivado del árabe—representa algo más superficial” [they [crypto-Arabisms] are much better integrated into the creative thought of Borges than the obvious Arabisms; the most crucial one is precisely that which does not appear to be one, and the one that indeed appears to be... represents something more superficial”] (36, trans. mine). In this regard, I believe that the Kabbalistic allusions identified by Alvarez are superficial “surface details” and that a crypto-Arab correlation with Ibn al-ʿArabī resides at a deeper interpretative level.

Elements of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s time horizon can be located early in the story, as the initial chiaroscuro in the story’s opening passages signifies the gradual passage of Tzinacán between the mediums of *zamān* and *dahr*: “I have lost count of the years I have lain in this darkness; I who once was young and could walk about this prison do nothing now but wait ...” (Borges, “The Writing of the God” 250). The priest no longer inhabits a reality in which *zamān* is neatly demarcated as day and night, but rather he finds himself for the most part confined to a dark and prostrate confinement in which conventional *zamān* has been ruptured. Here Tzinacán is lurching closer towards one aspect of *dahr*, as the prevailing darkness recalls Ibn al-ʿArabī’s cosmological notion that Hell is *dahr* as an eternal night. Tzinacán, as he has progressed spiritually towards mystical consciousness, has been forced to alter his understanding of *zamān*; he does perceive some light at irregular intervals when “[a]t the shadowless hour a small door opens above us, and a jailer (whom the years have gradually blurred) operates an iron pulley, lowering to us, at the end of a rope, jugs of water and hunks of meat. Light enters the vault; it is then that I am able to see the jaguar” (“The Writing of the God” 250). Thus, Tzinacán re-enters the medium of diurnal alternation characterizing *zamān* only at the agency of the colonial overlords when they break the

seal of the prison to provide material sustenance to its inmates. At all other points, the priest is integrating into the medium of atemporality associated with *dahr*.

As the story quickens pace, it is revealed that the jaguar, which with “secret, unvarying paces measures the time and space of its captivity” (251), is both the carrier of the god’s secret, and in a monist sense, the god himself (“I recalled that the one of the names of the god was jaguar” [251]). The narration of the priest makes clear that when he can momentarily see light, only then is the bearer of the secret visible; only in the moment of light, the *waqt*, is the priest able to perceive the godhead as it appears on earth. This moment (*waqt*) of light stands as a fragment ripped out of the corrupted serial time that Tzinacán previously lived in and which his Spanish captors now manipulate; at this moment of *waqt* for Tzinacán, night does not “fully enter into day and cover” it, as Ibn al-<sup>c</sup>Arabī would say, nor can day be “unveiled completely,” as night is not completely stripped from it by the regular diurnal sequence of *zamān* (Bowering 113); thus the moment in which the priest encounters the secret for the first time, is truly a moment of *waqt*, in which the godhead-given potential of the moment is actualized for the priest who has unknowingly prepared for this through the various stages of despair over, reflection on, and ultimate submission to his captivity (Borges, “The Writing of the God” 251–53).<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> These stages of subjective development undergone by the priest in captivity can be interpreted as mirroring some of those in the progress of the Sufi towards *fana*’ (annihilation in the godhead) and *baqa*’ (continuance or abiding in God after annihilation), and including *dhikr* (insistent remembrance of the godhead): “I tried in my darkness, to remember everything I knew... Thus did I gradually conquer the years... One night I sensed that a precise recollection was upon me... Hours later, I began to make out the memory; it was one of the legends of the god” (Borges, “The Writing of the God” 250–51). For a full discussion of the stages on the spiritual path of the Sufi, see Nicholson, *The Mystics of Islam*, pp. 28-49 and Schimmel, *Mystic Dimensions of Islam* pp. 98-186. The role of annihilation and continuance in constructing mystical subjectivity are treated fully in chapter four of the present work.

After this literary depiction of the slippage of *zamān* and the irruption of *waqt*, the strongest resonance in the story with Ibn al-ʿArabī’s vision of time occurs in the climax, with the report by Tzinacán of a mystical unitive experience in which a consciousness of *dahr* and its assimilation of all things into the unity of Being are made known to him. It is of course during one of the daily moments (*waqt*) of light, that Tzinacán finally undergoes the transformation in which he finally accepts his circumstances. This transformation is a result of his long progress through the stations and an appreciation for the trials of his captivity<sup>82</sup>:

One day or one night—between my days and nights, what difference can there be?—I dreamed ... Someone said to me: *You have wakened not out of sleep, but into a prior dream, and that dream lies within another, and so on, to infinity ...* A bright light awoke me. In the darkness above me, there hovered a circle of light ... emerging from that indefatigable labyrinth of dreams, I returned to my hard prison as though I were a man returning home. I blessed its dampness, I blessed its tiger, I blessed its high opening and the light, I blessed my old and aching body, I blessed the darkness and the stone. (“The Writing of the God” 252)

Again, the abrupt appearance of light out of the long, enduring darkness in which *zamān* has gradually become eradicated (“between my days and nights, what difference can there be?”) underscores that the notion of time here is one of *waqt*. In this moment following the dream, the dreamer is awakened, the priest becomes the “son of his moment,” and immediately on the heels of his acceptance and blessing of his miserable and squalid circumstances, he reports a mystical experience in which an esoteric and irrationally acquired knowledge of the universe is unveiled.

The representation of Tzinacán’s experience, worth quoting in full for the purposes of analysis, is one of union with the divinity and the universe and is described by the narrator Tzinacán as one framed clearly by a consciousness of what Ibn al-ʿArabī considered as *dahr*:

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<sup>82</sup> This corresponds also with the expression by the tenth century mystic al-Hallaj during his imprisonment in Baghdad as he not only accepts but embraces his captivity and coming punishment, which he happily perceives as a “House of Migration” in his spiritual journey (al-Sabur 39)

And at that, something occurred which I cannot forget and yet cannot communicate—there occurred union with the deity, union with the universe (I do not know whether there is a difference between those two words). Ecstasy does not use the same symbol twice; one man has seen God in a blinding light, another has perceived Him in a sword or in the circles of a rose. I saw a Wheel of enormous height, which was not before my eyes, or behind them, or to the sides, but everywhere at once. This Wheel was made of water, but also of fire, and although I could see its boundaries, it was infinite. It was made of all things that shall be, that are, and that have been, all intertwined, and I was of the strands within that all-encompassing fabric, and Pedro de Alvarado, who had tortured me, was another. In it were the causes and the effects, and the mere sight of that Wheel enabled me to understand all things, without end. O joy of understanding, greater than the joy of imagining, greater than the joy of feeling! I saw the universe and saw its secret designs. I saw the origins told by the Book of the People. I saw the mountains that rose from the water, saw the first men of wood, saw the water jars that turned against the men, saw the dogs that tore at their faces. I saw the faceless god who is behind the gods. I saw the infinite processes that shape a single happiness, and, understanding all, I also came to understand the writing on the tiger. (“The Writing of the God” 253)

This passage, truly a literary representation of mystical consciousness, begins with a declaration of ineffability and proceeds to relate a noetic experience, two features which clearly situate this passage as a literary depiction of mysticism according to criteria established by James and accepted by most contemporary theologians and philosophers as characteristics of mystical reportage. Yet the connections to Islamic mysticism in general and Ibn al-ʿArabī’s theosophy in particular are more difficult to detect. On the surface, there are nods to several mystical traditions; the symbols discussed by the narrator—the blinding light, the sword, the rose—reveal much about Borges and less about Tzinacán. Perhaps Tzinacán had learned from his Castilian overlords about the experience of Paul (the light), Santa Teresa de Avila (the sword), and various Persian mystics (the rose)<sup>83</sup>, but more directly this is Borges the author interjecting into the narrative voice his own erudition in mystical writing through the voice of Tzinacán. Nevertheless, while the first two images are more clearly allusive to Christian mystical

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<sup>83</sup> See Schimmel (287; 307).

experience, with the mention of the circles of the rose, the mystical experience being described by Tzinacán/Borges is clearly associated with the canon of Persian Islamic mysticism.

Thus there is at least one surface detail that connects this literary representation with the East, but by analyzing the story in more detail a deeper resonance with Ibn al-ʿArabī’s vision of time will be made manifest. In the initial sentences of Tzinacán’s reportage, it is clear that there is a sense of cosmological unity like that described in Ibn al-ʿArabī’s notion of *waḥdat al-wujūd*: the Real is everything and everything is the Real, and the description of a “faceless god who is behind the gods” by Tzinacán echoes Ibn al-ʿArabī’s notion of a single godhead behind any sensory descriptors:

My heart has become capable of every form: it is a pasture for gazelles and  
convent for Christian monks

And a temple for idols and the pilgrim’s Kaʿba and the tables of the Toa and the  
book of the Koran.

I follow the religion of Love: whatever way Love’s camels take, that is my  
religion and faith. (al-ʿArabī, *Tarjumān Al-Ashwāq* 66–67)<sup>84</sup>

Moreover, the description of the Wheel as the symbol of the god resonates deeply with Ibn al-ʿArabī’s notion of the circularity of time<sup>85</sup> in which God’s time (*dahr*) and man’s time (*waqt*) are conflated: each *waqt* is a point on the diameter of *dahr* (Bowering 123). The idea that *dahr* is the pervasive atmosphere of the experience is obvious in the statement that the Wheel

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<sup>84</sup> Students of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s verse will know that this is not a love poem to a human; Ibn al-ʿArabī indicates in his commentary to this verse that “‘I follow the religion of Love,’ [is] in reference to the verse ‘Follow me, then God will love you’ (Kor. iii, 29). ‘Whatever way Love’s camels take,’ etc., i.e. ‘I accept willingly and gladly whatever burden He lays upon me. No religion is more sublime than a religion based on love and longing for Him whom I worship and in whom I have faith.’ (Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Tarjumān Al-Ashwāq: A Collection of Mystical Odes* 69)

<sup>85</sup> Bowering points out that “the point along a circle” is an “image Ibn al-ʿArabī resorts to” to symbolize his temporal construct (Bowering 123). For a sustained analysis of the use of the circle in Ibn al-ʿArabī’s theosophy, see chapter 3 of this dissertation.

was made of all that was, is, and shall be. The Wheel contains the causes *and* effects: the beginnings and endings of all processes. The noetic value of the experience of *dahr* by Tzinacán is that he has acquired understanding of not only the godhead as *dahr* and the illusory nature of serial time, but also of the unity of Being, an outcome which Ibn al-<sup>c</sup>Arabī believes is the whole point of existence: “God brought the cosmos into existence only so that the cosmos might come to know Him” (qtd. in Chittick 76).

Beyond doubt, this is a literary depiction of a mystical experience, one granting awareness of an alternative ontological view of time to that of *zamān* and the Western rational use of time that might have been employed by the conquistadors. The impulse towards resistance inherent in this *dahr*-based ontology countering the orthodoxy wielded by the conqueror Alvarado—and quite likely to that of Tzinacán’s own culture also—is strongly indicated by the narrator’s report of his new-found awareness that, simply by uttering the words included in the writing on the tiger, he can reverse his circumstances. For Tzinacán there is the possession of the potential for power, harnessed by his knowledge of *dahr* and gained from his mystical consciousness:

... all I would have to do to become omnipotent is speak it aloud. Speaking it would make this stone prison disappear, allow the day to enter my night, make me young, make me immortal, make the jaguar destroy Alvarado, bury the sacred blade in Spanish breasts, rebuild the Pyramid, rebuild the empire. Forty syllables, fourteen words, and I, Tzinacán, would rule the lands once ruled by Moctezuma. (“The Writing of the God” 253).

If spoken, the formula will emancipate Tzinacán, undo the damage done during the Spanish manipulation of *zamān*, and it will reverse the hellish quasi-*dahr* of his captivity by bringing about the Paradise of sunlit *dahr*: it would, Tzinacán says, “allow the day to enter my night.” And yet the priest decides that he no longer cares about the temporal struggle against the Spanish:

Let the mystery writ upon the jaguars die with me. He who has glimpsed the universe, he who has glimpsed the burning designs of the universe, can have no thought for a man, for a man's trivial joys or calamities, though he himself be that man. He was that man, who no longer matters to him. What does he care about the fate of that other man, what does he care about the other man's nation, when now he is no one? That is why I do not speak the formula, that is why, lying in darkness, I allow the days to forget me. ("The Writing of the God" 254)

While Flynn argues that Tzinacán's refusal in the end of the story to utter the sacred formula is only one in a series of "failed" or "sterile" mystical experiences in Borges's writing (Flynn 6; 14), I argue instead that some transformative potential can be located, by looking for resonance in the ending with Ibn al-ʿArabī's time horizon. Perhaps one lesson from such a refusal to temporally engage power is that this refusal could allow resisters to theorize more cerebral and less physically confrontational challenges to power. However, to fully demonstrate Tzinacán's abiding in *dahr* at the end of the story as somehow suggestive of resistance requires recourse to the "hagiography" of another Sufi.

To better understand how in the wake of his newly minted mystical consciousness, Tzinacán's rejection of the power to reverse his circumstances can be considered an act of resistance, one need only consider how the same choice was made by the Sufi "martyr" al-Hallaj, who was crucified for his religious and secular beliefs in Baghdad in the tenth century CE. Like Socrates and Jesus before him, al-Hallaj was allegedly given an opportunity to escape captivity and side-step his capital punishment, but he refused to take advantage of a gap in prison security, choosing instead to remain in prison and fully embracing his fate as a martyr. As imagined by the twentieth century playwright al-Sabur, the Sufi was urged by his fellow prisoners to escape and to use his words to incite the poor and oppressed to revolt. But al-Hallaj refuses, choosing instead the martyrdom in dying for what he believes is "truth" (al-Sabur 2.1 p. 42). Thus Tzinacán, via his irrational awareness of and mystical meditation on an alternate universal



structure framed by *dahr*, finds more transformative potential in spurning a compromised freedom in *zamān*, and instead allows himself to be subsumed by *dahr*. Furthermore, it can be suggested that the ideas, or alternate ontologies, of martyrs live on in *dahr*, as an idea outside the lock step and serial progression of *zamān*, potentially challenging those who are exposed to these alternative ontological ideas to reconsider their view of existence and their engagements with the orthodoxy of power.<sup>86</sup> Tzinacán’s refusal and implied martyrdom suggests that the power behind the idea of the martyr—the mythos of the martyr—lives on and only increases in *dahr*, in the collective memory, in the “mnemonic time” that Naguib Mahfouz would depict as a heuristic for *dahr*.

### **Mahfouz**

Having established then, a correspondence between Ibn al-‘Arabī’s horizon of time and two stories by Borges, and by suggesting that this correspondence issues a challenge to rational orthodoxy via a presentation of alternative ontology and epistemology, I will now demonstrate how some of the same principles of *dahr*, *waqt*, and *zamān* can be detected in the fiction of Naguib Mahfouz.

#### **Mahfouz’s preoccupation with time**

Like Borges, Mahfouz’s fascination and exploration of philosophies about time is well-noted by critics. In the introduction to a collection in English of some of Mahfouz’s important short stories, Denys Johnson-Davies, one of Mahfouz’s most prolific English translators, describes how the Egyptian’s “preoccupations with time” stem from his study of and influence by Proust (Johnson-Davies viii); similarly, Rasheed El-Enany observes that “[a] preoccupation

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<sup>86</sup> A more sustained analysis and consideration of the transformative potential of this refusal by Tzinacán, as a subjectivity whose selfhood has been annihilated, appears in chapter four of this dissertation.

with time is at the centre of Mahfouz's work" (*Naguib Mahfouz* 70), alludes to the influence on Mahfouz of Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* (*Naguib Mahfouz* 18), and also concurs with ʿAbd al-Muḥsin Ṭāhā Badr's finding that Bergson, both directly and through the influence of Proust, exerted a great influence on Mahfouz (*Naguib Mahfouz* 14). El-Enany goes beyond Badr, however, and points out that Bergson's "most telling impact on Mahfouz's thought was probably in the sphere of his ideas on time and memory" asserting that Bergson's notion of *durée*, or "duration," of time as a continuum, a perpetual flux (as distinguished from the spatial, measurable conception of time)" underpins *The Cairo Trilogy*, *Children of Gebelaawi*, *The Epic of the Harafish*, and *Nights of a Thousand Nights*. Each of these literary productions manifest "the evolutionary flux of history and the perpetual tug-of-war between the forces of moral progress of life and those of the baser instincts" (*Naguib Mahfouz* 15). Crucially for my study, Mahfouz's application of Bergson's "duration" privileges the "unity and perpetuity of mnemonic time" over "the discreteness and transience of spatialized time" (*Naguib Mahfouz* 15).

Elsewhere, El-Enany quotes Mahfouz as referring to Bergsonian mnemonic time as "logical time" and spatialized time as "psychological time" (*Naguib Mahfouz* 70) which gives an impression of mnemonic time as being objective and at a macro-level detached from and somehow above the subjective human perception of time—much like Ibn al-ʿArabī's notion of *dahr*. On the other hand, spatialized time is linked to "psychological time" and can be considered as subjective, relative, at a micro-level central to the individual experience of reality and very much connected to Ibn al-ʿArabī's use of the word *zamān*. Quoting Mahfouz from a collection of 1977 interviews author, *Ataḥaddath Ilaykum (I Say to You)*, El-Enany points out that "[Mahfouz] insists on the historicity of time and argues that 'time represents the evolutionary spirit of man; it perpetuates the human experience of life. Therefore, while it may mean

extinction to the individual, it means eternity for the species” (qtd. in El-Enany, *Naguib Mahfouz* 70–71). Thus, using the framework of Ibn al-‘Arabī ‘s vision of time, individual extinction can be thought of as an effect of *zamān*, the continual alteration of night and day, but the eternal survival of the species could be considered as a feature of *dahr*, the medium in which occurs the eternal flux of Being into and out of formal existence. In addition to corresponding to Ibn al-‘Arabī ‘s concept of time, Mahfouz’s theory of time also points to the conflation of the collective species with eternity. Thus, by association, “god” is *dahr*, and the collective species resides in *dahr* while individuals exist in *zamān*. In *dahr* can be found collective humanity, while in the individual there is only passing away through serial time. Mahfouz, in the same collection of interviews further indicates this association:

My contemplation of time and death has taught me to regard them with the eye of collective man and not [that of] the individual. To the individual they are calamitous, but to collective man a mere illusion.... What can death do to human society? Nothing. At any moment you will find society bustling with millions [of lives]. (qtd. in El-Enany, *Naguib Mahfouz* 71)

El-Enany, in *Naguib Mahfouz: The Pursuit of Meaning*, has already closely analyzed Mahfouz’s application of Bergson’s *durée* to *The Cairo Trilogy*, *There Remains Only an Hour*, *The Day the Leader was Killed*, and *Qushtumur*, so I will not consider here these novels as representative of any sort of mystical time. Instead, I will look more closely at *The Epic of the Harafish* and *The Night of a Thousand Nights*, two later works suggested by El-Enany as preoccupied with Bergson’s ideas “of ‘duration,’ as time as a continuum, or perpetual flux (as distinguished from the spatialized, measurable conception of time)” (15). Building upon Badr’s and El-Enany’s connection of Bergson with Mahfouz, I will reveal how aspects of these two later novels also closely mirror and depict in literary fashion Ibn al-‘Arabī ‘s vision of time. I will also suggest ways in which these literary depictions of mysticism could contribute to resistance and

transformation strategies. However, before moving into a discussion of the episodic novels from Mahfouz's "post-realist" phase, where it is perfectly clear that non-conventional time is in play, I first wish to point out how this preoccupation with non-conventional time appears in a mystical form even in Mahfouz's earlier, "realist" phase.

### *Midaq Alley*

*Zuqāq al-Midaq (Midaq Alley)*, first printed in Cairo in 1947, stands squarely within a group of novels that most critics<sup>87</sup> have branded as Mahfouz's realistic/naturalistic work. On the surface of the novel there is little to suggest any idea of mystical time at work, as the trajectory of the novel is concerned with depicting the lives of the residents and merchants of a squalid alleyway that stands removed from the bustle and increasingly Westernized main arteries of World War II-era Cairo. Yet, with a closer look, the character of Sheikh Radwan al-Hussainy in the novel offers readers a prefiguring of the type of ontological resistance engendered by a mystical concept of time that more strongly resonates in Mahfouz's less realistic work.

El-Enany observes that Radwan is indeed the "prototype of the many Sufis or mystics who will later play important parts" and his unorthodoxy is apparent in the narration of the novel itself: "Radwan Hussainy's opinions drew objections based on both the literal texts and the scholastic interpretations of Islam" (272). While there is no literary representation of a mystical experience per se in the novel, Radwan envisions experiencing a feeling of being outside of time

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<sup>87</sup> Some critics, such as Jarryusi (13–15), employ a chronological approach in categorizing Mahfouz's work, dividing his career into four phases: historical/romantic, realistic/naturalistic, modernist/experimental, and formally indigenous/traditional. However, this demarcation is challenged by El-Enany, who writing near the end of the novelist's life remarks "... now that [Mahfouz's] achievement is near complete, such an approach based on chronology alone would seem somewhat superficial" (xii). Instead, El-Enany analyzes Mahfouz's work through "groupings of units" such as conflicts between past and present, man and time, god and man, and the individual and society. See El-Enany's "Preface and Acknowledgments" in *Naguib Mahfouz: The Pursuit of Meaning*.

as he talks about his upcoming hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca: “There [in Mecca] one’s mind is filled only with the revelations of eternity. One throbs with the love of God...I long for Mecca and its bright heavens. I long to hear the whispering of time at every corner, to walk down its streets and lose myself... followed by the multitudes of thirteen hundred years ago and those of today, too” (270). Even though the Radwan’s anticipation of experience is clearly informed and constructed by orthodox Islam, the ideas he expresses are clearly infused with a particular gnosis, or an anticipation of mystical gnosis to come, about the concept of *dahr* as formulated by Ibn al-‘Arabī. Furthermore, Radwan’s words also imply a familiarity with the sensation of being outside of serial time such as that related by Borges in “Sentirse en muerte.”

But can this anticipated experience, and Radwan’s departure from the alley, really be considered as offering some transformative or resistive impulse towards orthodox ontology? El-Enany bases his reading of Islamic mysticism in Mahfouz’s fiction in general and the character of Radwan in particular on the idea that in *Midaq Alley*, that there is a clash between old and new, much like that in the colonial context of Borges’s “The Writing of the Gods.” For El-Enany, Radwan represents a retreat to tradition, neglecting to help those around him. In an approach much like that of Flynn’s towards Borges, El-Enany considers the depiction of mysticism in Mahfouz’s novels as a vehicle only for “personal rather than communal salvation” (60).

While I agree with El-Enany’s interpretation of the dialectic occurring between the old and new in the novel, I believe that his reading of Radwan and Sufism as it appears in Mahfouz’s fiction is rather limited. Granted, Radwan’s attempts throughout the novel to help those who seek him are futile—or in Flynn’s words regarding Borges’s literary representations of Sufism, “sterile” or “non-productive”—but he does attempt to help them. Moreover, of all the novel’s

characters he is the one that most effectively escapes the struggle between the traditional Arab and the modern Western approaches to the world and the universe, as in the end of the novel he leaves the alley to go on *hajj* for a brief respite from the misery generated by the clash between the two competing hegemonies and their ontologies. The novel ends on this open note; Radwan is not depicted as permanently vacating the alley, and in fact he alludes to his return on two occasions during his good-byes to his neighbors and friends from the alley (269; 274; 275). And although the narrative ends shortly after his departure from the alley, there are strong indications that upon his return to the alley, he would seek to help other people transform their desperate realities, based on Radwan's precedent behavior:

He had always taken care that not a single day should pass without doing some good deed or receiving in his home some abused or unfortunate person. From his love off goodness and his generosity he appeared to be richly endowed with wealth and property, but the fact was that he owned nothing except the house on the right hand side of Midaq Alley and few acres of land in Marj.... [he was a] kind and fair landlord... compassion for the occupants of modest means... His life... had been filled with disappointment and pain... he had been afflicted with the loss of his children... He had tasted bitterness of disappointment... His faith rescued him... He was filled with an all-embracing love, goodness, and wonderful patience. He stepped lightly over the sorrows of the world, his heart soaring heavenward as he embraced everyone with his love... he gave consolation to others... he was the picture of grace in its most radiant form. (8-9)

Had others followed Radwan's exemplary behavior, they too could have successfully navigated, rather than merely escaped, what El-Enany has identified as the intrusions of the modern, the new, and the European, while simultaneously transcending the constraints of the old and decaying social order. And rather than considering the pilgrimage undertaken by Radwan—which is not described and which does not receive narrative “completion”—as a refuge into the “old” or even the “orthodox,” for mystics like Radwan, the flight could just as easily be considered as a transcending of *zamān* (the context of the battle between old and new) towards a synthesis with the source of enlightenment in *dahr*, or in pursuit of a hitherto un-accessed

knowledge base. Indeed, El-Enany rightly reads Radwan's journey as one "outside time" even though he also seems to interpret it as a journey to "the past, to the quintessentially old" (60). El-Enany can't have it both ways: being outside of time would not be shackled to ideas like past and future.

Beyond this, Radwan plans to return; he is not abandoning his people for an older, simpler, more traditional way of life. Rather, he can be more rightly seen as attempting to contact the divine in a realm characterized by eternity in order to apply what he learns there to social transformation. He clearly states his aim in leaving the alley is to receive "revelations of eternity"—in this case implying a gnosis of *dahr*—and with this knowledge, based on his documented behavior, he would more than likely wish to restore himself and his people. Thus El-Enany's reading of Radwan as an escapist limits, in my view, the potentiality of Radwan as a resistor. My interpretation allows for viewing Radwan as successfully eluding the tensions of the political and ideological context of the alley, more successfully than Hamida, suggested by El-Enany as offering at least one option to survive the agon: "leap into modernity with all your will and might and you could survive" (61). I disagree strongly here with his suggestion that Hamida, who "leaps into modernity" by becoming a whore for British soldiers is a better answer than that offered by Radwan, who at worst leaves the alley for a pilgrimage to Mecca, but who at best will return with the gift of a noetic—and transformative—insight into *dahr* as an ontological alternative to the regimentation of serial time.

### ***The Harafish***

Thus even from an early period, Mahfouz populates his fiction with characters possessing a mystical mindset in which a trace of the transformative power of *dahr* can be located. A turn now to his later work will further underscore the novelist's concern with Bergsonian mnemonic

time and will offer a rich illustration of how Ibn al-ʿArabī's time horizon surfaces in the Nobel Prize winner's fiction. *Malḥamat al-Ḥarāfīsh* (*The Harafish*) is a novel that merits more study than it has so far received. The novel was published in Cairo in 1977 and, like the other novels of the 1970s and 1980s, has received but "scant attention" from critics (El-Enany, *Naguib Mahfouz* xiii), even as it is one of his "most enduring achievements" (130). This lack of critical focus should be remedied over time, as it is widely known by critics and students of Mahfouz that *The Harafish* was the novelist's own favorite work (Cobham 130). In addition to being one of Mahfouz's late career productions, *The Harafish*, named for the "rabble" that populate the novel's setting, can be also grouped among Mahfouz's "episodic novels" (El-Enany 128-30). Over the course of ten sequential and interlinked episodes, the novel presents a "postmodernist" (144) generational chronicle of a family which "[evokes] the human condition from creation to a millenarian future" (130). The setting recalls the unnamed *ḥāra*, or neighborhood alley, of *The Children of Gebelaawi* (1959), and like that earlier novel focuses intently on the use and misuse of social and political power. Furthermore, like *The Children of Gebelaawi*, it is ostensibly the story of a family, similar to the *roman fleuve* of the "realistic" *Trilogy* but one not as rigidly detailed (144). Noting the litany of similarities between *The Children of Gebelaawi* and *The Harafish*, El-Enany deems the latter novel to be a refinement of theme, technique, and style of the former (144):

Rather than creating an allegory in which existing religious myth is deflated, the novelist here creates his own myth out of a very familiar reality. Thus while *Children of Gebelaawi* would be terribly impoverished if read without reference to its preconceived religio-mythological framework, *Harafish* is a self-contained work whose meaning stems solely from the sum of its parts. (144)

Thus *The Harafish* represents a degree of perfection of the mythic vision and of the episodic sub-genre which Mahfouz had been concerned with since the late 1950s.



As can be gleaned from the scholarship that does exist, the notion that *The Harafish* operates within an alternate, and somewhat irrational, vision of time is quite obvious. El-Enany observes that Mahfouz affects a sense of timelessness in *The Harafish* by excluding any “defining points of beginning, end, or a duration of a particular length of time” and by “[isolating]” the *ḥāra* and its inhabitants, the *ḥārafīsh*, from any specific framework of reference in locale or time” (145). In this way the setting and plot are “universalized,” and along with an “infusion” of “subtle symbolism” into the spatial features of the *ḥāra*, Mahfouz creates a “timeless image of the human condition” (145). In this sense, *The Harafish* bears a strong resemblance to another Nobel Prize winner’s novel, Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *Cien años de soledad* (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*). The similarities of *The Harafish* to Marquez’s novel are astounding, particularly in their shared exploration of cyclical time—indicated most obviously in the “eternal return” of character types and namesakes—and in both novels’ depiction of the “unity and perpetuity of mnemonic time” in which, despite a great amount of flux in the characters’ immediate experience, very little changes across the ages that comprise the novels’ temporal spans—that is, the more things change in these novels, the more they remain the same. Furthermore, much like Borges’s observation in “Sentirse en muerte,” the universality of experience across the epochs—the idea that “life is too impoverished not to be immortal” (“A History of Eternity” 138)—is a theme that emanates from Mahfouz’s and Marquez’s novels. While currently I have not located any critical work comparing *The Harafish* to Marquez’s *Cien años de soledad*, Tahia Abdel Nasser has recently compared a later novel by Mahfouz, *Laylali alf layla* (*Arabian Days and Nights*), with *Cien años de soledad*, and I would like to suggest too that the same conclusion drawn by Nasser for the *Arabian Days and Nights* can be also offered for *The Harafish*: “it very clearly reflects Mahfouz’s political context ...

[and] centers on revolutionary new futures in the Arab world” (Nasser 559). I would add too, that these potential “new futures,” in both *The Harafish* and *Arabian Days and Nights*, derive much of their energies from each novel’s exploitation of alternate time horizons, a claim that I will support over the remaining pages.

In addition to treating the issue of “revolutionary new futures,” a comparison of *The Harafish* with Marquez’s masterpiece of magical realism also opens up another opportunity to perceive *dahr* as providing the canvas for Mahfouz’s novel. Though not mentioning or referencing *The Harafish* specifically, Haydar and Beard essay an illuminating comparison between Mahfouz and Marquez, sketching out the difference in the two Nobel winners’ treatment of the city; for Beard and Haydar, magical realism is born of the “[t]he dichotomy between village life—with its folkloric, exuberant modes of storytelling—and city life—with its routine and its bureaucratic style (and its impoverished modes of expression)” (“Mapping the World” 2–3). In the magical realism produced by Marquez, “the city is impersonal, the result of nomadic experience in which various Latin urban settings are more or less interchangeable” (“Mapping the World” 3). This is contrasted with Mahfouz’s portrayal of the cities in his work, which

are, instead, particular, recognizable places, such as Cairo or Alexandria... If any one of his cities is perceived in opposition to something, its other is itself at a different moment in history. In characteristic dialectic of change, the city both is and is not its former self. The nostalgia behind it is not nostalgia for village life but a need for a stable focus. (3)

While this is certainly explicit for the settings of Mahfouz’s realistic, and even what might be called his experimental but naturalistic novels (e.g. *The Thief and the Dogs*, *Adrift on the Nile*), for the more allegorical and mythical—and what Nasser has included as the three “magical realist” novels *Children of Gebelaawi*, *The Harafish*, and *Arabian Days and Nights*—the specific

location is less explicit. While the reader is aware of being in an old Cairene-esque “Mahfouz land” of alleys, monasteries, fountains, mosques, and tombs, the individual locations themselves—the cafes, the bars, the strongman’s home—across Mahfouz’s “magical realist” novels seem to be somewhat interchangeable. Moreover, in these episodic novels, the *khala*, “the edge of the desert” (El-Enany 9) and the sweep of time executed by the novelist renders the cityscape nearly as “impersonal” as that of Marquez’s Macondo or the capital in the *Autumn of the Patriarch*—but more importantly this universalized setting saturates Mahfouz’s “magical realist” work with an eternal, *dahr*-like quality.

Thus the variant of magical realism practiced by Mahfouz in the allegorical/ mythical novels differs only slightly from that of Marquez in terms of the abstraction of setting. Critics and devout readers of Mahfouz’s production will surely know that in these novels he is presenting a very specific setting from his old Cairene childhood neighborhood of al-Gamaliyya, much like the one he depicts in his late episodic and autobiographical work *Hikāyāt Hāratinā* (*Fountain and Tomb*); regardless in the three “magical realist” novels by Mahfouz, the city in which the action is set is never named and the span of time covers a period with no clear beginning and ending points on the spectrum of human history. In each of these novels, global positioning coordinates are insignificant and individuals come and go, but the key features of the social landscape are unchanging: strongmen, injustice, human suffering, and heroism. Each of these, Mahfouz suggests through his use of the universal “alley” setting, are eternal, cyclical, and operate as manifestations of *dahr*, outside of the confines of psychological time, or *zamān*.

This exploitation of time and history in the vein of magical realism reveals Mahfouz’s insistence on seeking alternatives in both the craft of fiction as well his ways in which reality is perceived; yet there are also indications in *The Harafish* that Sufi notions of time are being

tapped into, allowing Mahfouz to offer alternative visions to readers of the orthodoxy of the rational. A very explicit allusion to the *dahr* of Ibn al-‘Arabī—or as Mahfouz would phrase it, mnemonic time—is in the more heroic characters’ turning over the course of the novel to the *takiyya*, or “monastery” as it is rendered in translation, for inspiration. El-Enany notes that the *takiyya* “is an embodiment of man’s age-old yearning for Heaven, the hereafter, the supernatural, the metaphysical, the timeless, the infinite, the spiritual, the ideal, the absolute—or God, for the lack of a better and all-encompassing word” (El-Enany, *Naguib Mahfouz* 157). While individual characters rise, fall, and their younger avatars reappear, and while in the progression of *zamān* day turns to twilight, and night into dawn, the one constant in the *hāra* is the *takiyya* and its chanting, described in the novel’s opening lines: “In the passionate dark of dawn, on the path between death and life, within view of the watchful stars and within earshot of the beautiful, obscure anthems, a voice told of the trials and joys promised to our alley” (*The Harafish* 1). At the outset of the novel then, the anthems—which are never identically repeated but which in different manifestations are constantly inserted into the novel, tailored to the context of preceding scenes from the novel’s narrative threads—are immediately located in the realm of *dahr*. The anthems’ frequent appearance, each time different from the one before, not only suggests but vividly enacts their role as harbingers of the eternal fluctuation in *dahr*, along with the other constants of mnemonic, collective time such as the eternal flux between life and death.

The reader first encounters the *takiyya* when the character Ashur, who will serve as the founding member of a line of strong men serving as the axis connecting the novel’s ten episodes, confronts his uncertain future after being ousted from his home by his “uncle” Darwish. From this point, the *takiyya* throughout Ashur’s tumultuous life serves as a source of comfort, inspiration, and spiritual guidance during his life and career as *al-Naji*, or “the survivor,” and

*futuwwa* (strongman), of the alley. As he is regarded throughout the novel as a legendary heroic figure both representing and protecting the *harafish*, the influence of the *takiyya* on Ashur is constantly shown to be of utmost importance in its ability to guide him to this status: it is outside the *takiyya* where the hero is discovered as an abandoned baby by his foster father and it is in the aura of the anthems that he makes the most important decisions of his life, including the insight to leave the *hāra* before the arrival of a devastating plague (*The Harafish* 35) and his final decision to disappear from his community (60), securing his legendary status and engendering the *Naji* template that subsequent family members will seek to occupy.

With the importance firmly established of the *takiyya* as a locus for the power and the guiding vision of the founding member of his line and hero of his class, an understanding of how the *takiyya* signifies *dahr* will crystallize the manner in which encounters with and within *dahr* offer a source of resistive power to those who obtain awareness of the Reality of eternal flux. A few examples from the novel of Ashur tapping the power from the *takiyya* should suffice to demonstrate this. In a passage remarkably evocative of Borge's "Sentirse en muerte," the kind-hearted and altruistic Ashur, following the death of his foster father, has just been evicted from the only home he has ever known by his corrupt "uncle" Darwish; despondent and searching for an answer for the days ahead of him,

Ashur left the house as dusk settled over the graves and the open country. It was a summer's evening and a gentle breeze blew, smelling of damp earth and basil. He went along the path to the little square. He could make out the archway in the darkness and the dim shapes of the mulberry trees over the walls of the monastery gardens. The songs rose in to the air, impenetrable as always, and he resolved to lay his cares aside.

"Don't be sad, Ashur," he told himself. "You have countless brothers in this world."

The singing echoed in his head:

*Ay furughe mahe hosn az ruye rakhahane shoma*

*Abruye khubi az chahe zanakhthane shoma.* (Mahfouz, *The Harafish* 8)<sup>88</sup>

Here it is worth noting that Mahfouz presents the anthems in Persian, “which nobody [in the alley] understands” (Cobham 125); as Cobham, the novel’s English translator, points out, the text would also have been unintelligible to most of Mahfouz’s Arabic readers, just as it does to readers of the English translation.

This move to present the anthems in Persian dovetails with a subversive application of *dahr* on a few levels. First, these songs are clearly originating from and reflective of the tenets of a Sufi order that by definition offers a counter-teaching to orthodox Islam. Second, this order has its historical origins and base in Konya in central Anatolia,<sup>89</sup> historically on the periphery from the origins of Islam; thus the vehicle and form of the spiritual message is already “other.” Third, the language of the anthems is in Persian; for orthodox Muslims, Arabic is the language of the Qur’an and is the language in which Allah chose to communicate the Qur’anic message to humans; thus, for an orthodox Muslim, Persian would not be a questionable medium through which to communicate theological or salvific “truth.” As such, the medium and the message come from beyond and stand outside of the orthodox view of the world. Mahfouz, writing within

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<sup>88</sup> Compare the setting in Mahfouz’s description with Borges’s backdrop in “Sentirse en muerte:” a frontier region... at once adjacent and mythical... I took in the night... a fig tree emerged into shadow, and the narrow portals—higher than the extending lines of walls—seemed wrought from the same infinite substance as the night. The sidewalk was embanked above a street of elemental dirt... In the distance the road... crumbled into the Maldonado River. Against the muddy chaotic earth, a low, rose-colored wall seemed not to harbor the moonlight but to shimmer with a gleam all its own... [p]erhaps a bird was singing... but there was no other sound in the dizzying silence except for the equally timeless noise of crickets (Borges, “A History of Eternity” 137–38).

<sup>89</sup> Most likely the order inhabiting the *takiyya* is that of the Mevlevi, based on their use of Persian anthems—likely written by the order’s founder Rūmī—and the description of their garb and high felt hats throughout the novel. Schimmel details how this order found footing in Egypt during the Ottoman Empire (324).

a predominantly orthodox Muslim society, has chosen Persian to represent the expression of mystical, noetic experience to his characters. For the characters in *The Harafish* (and, as noted, probably the majority of Arabic readers in Mahfouz's intended audience), the language is unintelligible, "other," and unorthodox. Coming from the enduring edifice of the *takiyya*, the words of the anthems continually change over the course of *The Harafish*, but they never cease to emanate, suggesting that the origin of the gnosis conveyed by the anthems undoubtedly is welling up from the medium of *dahr*.

As the source of these anthems, the *takiyya* with its enduring qualities and unorthodox linguistic production symbolizes *dahr* and the transformative power which an awareness of *dahr* can inspire. The *takiyya* generates within the characters that it inspires an awareness of *dahr* and the unity of Being, thus empowering the characters in *The Harafish* to take action, action with direct impact in the time horizon of *zamān*. Furthermore, in the novel, Mahfouz repeatedly and subtly manipulates the anthems in the manner of a Greek tragedian's use of the chorus to comment on and punctuate episodes. The effect is that while *zamān* is seen as shaping individual experience in the novel, *zamān* is nevertheless enveloped within the *dahr* symbolized by the anthems, and it is in this *dahr* that true power resides. For example, in the ninth tale of the epic "The Thief Who Stole the Melody," before his decision to pursue the position of strongman so that the lives of the "rabble" in the alley might be improved, Ashur II contemplates the vicissitudes and cruelties of *zamān*, and the indifference of *dahr* is palpable through the ending of the scene with the anthems:

At night he still went to the monastery square, wrapped in darkness, guided by the stars. His gaze wandered over the dim shapes of the mulberry trees and the dark mass of the ancient wall. He sat down in al-Nagi's old spot and listened to the dancing rhythms. Didn't these men of God care about what happened to God's creatures? When would they open the gate or knock down the walls?... How much longer would the alley would be poor and oppressed. Why egotists and

criminals prospered, while the good and living came to nothing. Why the harafish were in a deep sleep.

Meanwhile the air was filled with their chanting.

*Did keh bar joz o setam nadasht*

*Beshkast ahd o zoghame ma hich gham nadasht. (The Harafish 392–93)*<sup>90</sup>

Here it is clear that Ashur II sees that the power to transform society is in the hands of an entity or group—the chanting dervishes of the *takiyya*—that cannot or will not deign to use it. As El-Enany believes, this indicates the “eternal indifference” to events in the *hāra* of the “alienating” *takiyya* (157).<sup>91</sup>

While this indication of indifference to the affairs of the temporal, or secular, world might mean that Mahfouz has a cynical view of mysticism, the manner in which Ashur II harnesses the lessons of *dahr* which he has learned from the mystical anthems reveals instead a more hopeful vision of mysticism, through the agency of what Mahfouz has called Socialistic Sufism.<sup>92</sup> Indeed, Mahfouz provides a clear indication that he does not intend to paint the

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<sup>90</sup> This insistent punctuation of important events by inclusion of transliterated Persian anthems occurs throughout the novel (8, 19, 39, 98, 144, 152, 182, 200, 223, 286, 374, 393), suggesting the permanence of the mystical quest as well as the eternal aspect of the “object” of this knowledge. Only at the end, in Ashur II’s vision, is one of the anthems translated for the reader (406). The importance of the *takiyya* and its Persian anthems to Mahfouz’s creative vision is also made clear from his collection of quasi-autobiographical sketches in *Hikāyāt hāratinā* (*Fountain and Tomb*), in the narrator’s recollections of his encounters with the *takiyya*, its mulberry trees, and its sheikh (*Fountain and Tomb* 12;16; 108; 115-17). *Hikāyāt hāratinā* was published in Arabic in 1975, two years prior to *Malḥamat al-Ḥarāfīsh*.

<sup>91</sup> El-Enany supports his assertion with the example that Shams al-Din regards the *takiyya* as “a witness that gives no testimony” (157); it should be noted, however, that this quote (translated by Cobham (60) as “as usual [the monastery] gave nothing away”) regards only Shams’s search for his father who has disappeared after being last seen by the *takiyya* and it does not directly convey a frustration with the *takiyya* as indifferent to the plight of societal ills.

<sup>92</sup> Kumiko Yagi closely examines how this conception was first expressed by Mahfouz in 1960 in an interview with *al-Jumhūīyya*. Mahfouz is asked by the interviewer to explain whether or not he is suggesting a “new philosophy” and he answers:

Mahfouz: This is not a philosophy. ...Please. I’m not a philosopher. But I seek for the kind of life called “Socialistic Sufism.”

Interviewer: ‘Socialistic Sufism’! This is a new slogan. What is its aim and



“indifference” of the *takiyya* as a lack of engagement against the misuse of power, in the scenes after Ashur II attains his status of strongman and hero in which the narrator describes Ashur II’s contemplation of his future: “He wanted to be better than his ancestor. The first Ashur had relied on his own strength, while he had made the harafish into an invincible force. His ancestor had been carried away by his passion; he would stand firm like the ancient wall [of the *takiyya* ]” (*The Harafish* 405). Here Ashur II realizes that an inordinate fascination with *zamān*, the temporal world, where passions—desires and fears—drive the affairs of humankind, led to the decline of his ancestor’s legacy; in contrast he decides to position himself outside or above *zamān*, like the eternal *takiyya* and its anthems. Thus, he clearly envisions a future in which his power would “stand firm” like the *takiyya* wall, linking the power he seeks to attain with the *dahr* represented by the *takiyya* and eternal chanting of the mystical anthems.

The transformative power of Socialistic Sufism, then, can be generated from the fusion of 1) the penetration of the illusion of *zamān*, 2) the attainment of an awareness of *dahr*, and 3) a socially committed subjectivity. The type of transformative power of such a fusion is depicted in the conclusion of the novel’s last episode, when Mahfouz’s narrator describes Ashur II’s renewal of the alley:

Ashur renewed the mosque, the fountain, the trough, and the Quran school, and founded a new school to accommodate the increase in numbers brought about by the arrival of the children of the harafish... he was committed to justice, integrity, peace. He never provoked neighboring chiefs but brought them sharply into line if they initiated hostilities against him, as a warning to others. In this way he established his supremacy without having to fight for it. (405)

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characteristic?

Mahfouz: It is to seek God. ... It cannot be possible unless humans reach the purity that frees their life from corruption and evil. (Yagi 188–89)

Thus, this literary depiction of the fruits of mystical gnosis provide a clear template for the types of social transformation possible from an irrationally acquired awareness of the irrational time horizon of *dahr*.

A final example that Mahfouz intends the *takiyya* and its aura of *dahr* to be socially transformative occurs in the novel's final pages. After celebrating his demolition of Jalāl's minaret, a symbol of one of his predecessors' misguided quest for immortality, Ashur II contemplates his victory and his social achievements as a leader; at this moment he experiences a mystical awakening, preceded by a *waqt* in which what had been hidden is made manifest:

After midnight Ashur went to the monastery square to gather his thoughts alone under the stars in the ocean of songs. He squatted on the ground, lulled by his feeling of contentment and the pleasant air. One of those rare moments of existence when a pure light glows. When body, mind, time, and place are all in harmony. It was as if the mysterious anthems were speaking in a thousand tongues. As if he understood why the dervishes always sang in a foreign language and kept their door close. (*The Harafish* 406)

This moment (*waqt*) of enlightenment leads to the mystical experience of Ashur II which, when depicted by a skilled author such as Mahfouz, suggests the influence of *dahr*—timeless and eternal flux—on the affairs of man and the potential of *dahr* to inform social transformation:

A creaking sound spread through the darkness. He looked at the great door in astonishment. Gently, steadily, it was opening. The shadowy figure of a dervish appeared, a breath of night embodied.

“Get the flutes and drums ready,” the figure whispered, leaning toward him. “Tomorrow the Great Sheikh will come out of seclusion. He will walk down the alley bestowing his light and give each young man a bamboo club and a mulberry fruit. Get the flutes and drums ready.”

He returned to the world of stars and the songs and the night and the ancient wall, grasping at the tail ends of the vision; his fingers sunk into the waves of majestic darkness. He jumped to his feet, drunk on inspiration and power. Don't be sad, his heart told him. One day the door may open to greet those who seize life boldly with the innocence of children and the ambition of angels.

And the voices sang:

*Last night they relieved me of all my sorrows*

*In the darkness they gave me the water of life.* (*The Harafish* 406)

Thus in the final passage of the novel, a representation of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s vision of time can be perceived: through the granting of an awareness of *dahr* in a precise *waqt*, the *futuwwa* approaches the actualization of his potential, and initiates the process of social transformation within the temporal realm of *zamān*. This is a vivid depiction by the novelist of Socialist Sufism.

### ***Arabian Day and Nights***

To underscore the point that Mahfouz’s fiction can be viewed as embodying Ibn al-ʿArabī’s notions of time and such literary depictions of theosophy can offer ontological challenges to Western rationality, I will examine another later and, as of yet, understudied novel, *Layālī alf Layla (Arabian Nights and Days)*. El-Enany rightly assesses the novel as the presentation of “some 13 unconnected tales from *The Arabian Nights [The Thousand and One Nights]*” made “afresh through the techniques of modernism (symbolism, recurrent motifs, stream of consciousness, and even a kind of magical realism). Tales originally independent of each other are so manipulated that they join up in a narrative continuum” (159-60). As described above, Tahia Nasser focuses solely on the author’s use of magical realist techniques and intertextuality, viewing this as a strategy for an “an allegory for politics” that can be applied to Egyptian, Arab, and global contexts (Nasser 547). This allegory is created in Mahfouz’s manipulation and extension of the frame narrative of the original *Thousand and One Nights*, in which the vizier’s daughter Shahrazad, through the art and skill of her story-telling, distracts the vengeful and emotionally traumatized Sultan Shahriyar from his quest to sleep with and then kill a young girl every night as an act of revenge for the infidelity of his first wife. Over the course of the original world classic, Shahrazad transforms the Sultan and pacifies him, healing his damaged psyche and causing him to cease his blood-thirsty campaign and reforming his outlook of his responsibilities as a ruler. As a result, Shahrazad brings about a transformation in society.

Mahfouz's rendering of *Thousand and One Nights* begins precisely at the beginning phases of this social transformation, when the Sultan announces he has decided to marry Shahrazad and to renounce forever the killing of his realm's young girls.

By presenting the 13 episodes as “sequels” to the core narrative of the original world literary classic, Mahfouz makes a statement about leadership, political power, morals, the responsibility of the ruler over the ruled, forgiveness, justice, redemption, story-telling, and the supernatural—constructing a nexus of ideas that suggests an interplay between the material world, serial time, human values, and the unknowable or irrational realm. In addition to providing a fascinating rendering of one of the treasures of the world's literary heritage, this nexus also provokes careful readers to reconsider received or “established” knowledge. Indeed, the sultan Shahriyar could be describing Mahfouz's novel when in the opening of the novel he declares that Shahrazad's fantastic fables “are white magic ... they open up worlds that invite reflection” (*Arabian Days and Nights* 2).

It is significant for the entire novel that the “white magic” being alluded to by the sultan in the novel's opening pages has as its source a Sufi master who clearly possesses some intimate knowledge of *dahr*, for the shift in the Sultan's heart, from cruel vengeance towards compassion, is generated by Shahrzad<sup>93</sup> adhering patiently to Sufi principles. One of the novel's recurring characters, the Sufi Sheikh Abdullah al-Balkhi, is given the credit for teaching the values and the “way” to Shahrzad, preparing her from youth for her miraculous reeducation of the bloody, vengeful Shahriyar. This is made manifest by Shahrzad herself after profoundly effecting

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<sup>93</sup> In the translation of Denys Johnson-Davies on which I rely for this analysis, the protagonist's name is spelled Shahrzad, with no *a* between the *r* and *z*. In most translations of *Thousand and One Nights*, her name includes this *a*. Thus when discussing the novel, I have switched from referring to “Shahrazad” to “Shahrzad.”

Shahriyar through her narrative skill and convincing him to abandon his project of vengeance on the innocent women of his kingdom. Deflecting praise for her skill in placating the Sultan, she declares that her ability to sacrifice her own future and happiness in exchange for a life devoted to softening the sultan's heart and consciousness is all due to the mystical teachings received at the hand of the Sheikh al-Balkhi. Explaining to her father how she plans on enduring a life with a man that she is morally repulsed by, all for the sake of her community, Shahrzad tells him that "As for me, I know that my spiritual station lies in patience, as the great sheikh taught me" (*Arabian Nights and Days* 4). Her comments reflect her internalization of Sufi values, as "station" is a term used by Sufis of all orders to allegorize the spiritual positions occupied by a seeker of gnosis (Reynolds 28-29). Furthermore, such an altruistic patience seems to be a product of an awareness of the *dahr* and its important role in the unity of Being. It is also clear that people in the sheikh's inner circle, familiar with his legacy and his work with Shahrzad, are aware of the sheikh's influence, as the sheikh's good friend and pupil Abdul Qadir observes: "Had she not been a pupil of yours as a young girl, Shahrzad would not, despite what you may say, have found stories to divert the sultan from shedding blood" (*Arabian Days and Nights* 6).

The knowledge transferred to Shahrzad from the sheikh can then likewise be read as having its source in the irrational world of Islamic mysticism. It is very obvious from the conversation he has with his friend, the doctor Abdul Qadir, that the Sheikh has tapped into an alternative epistemology in his progress through the stations of his mystical journey to the godhead. The conversation begins right after the doctor tells the Sheikh that he believes him to be the source of the Sultan's new humane attitude. The Sheikh humbly denies the idea that he is to be credited for saving the realm, and in rebuttal the doctor claims that he has deduced and used his faculties of reason to make this claim that the Sheikh is the source of Shahrzad's

remarkable transformation of the sultan Shahriyar. The Sheikh, revealing his mistrust in the rational epistemology, replies “My friend, the only trouble with you is that you overdo your submission to the intellect” (6). The doctor answers that the intellect is “the ornament of man” (6), but the Sheikh, not to be outmaneuvered, points out that in his understanding, “It is through intellect that we come to know the limits of the intellect” (6). The doctor, championing empirical knowledge and ration, argues that “There are believers, ...who are of the opinion that it [intellect] has no limits.” The sheikh, however, authoritatively concludes that if the doctor insists on holding that position, then he has failed in teaching the doctor about “the Way” (6). Thus from this exchange, conveyed in rapid dialogue between the two friends, it is made clear that the Sheikh—one of the novel’s important central characters, the source of the Sultan’s moral sea change, and the font of the social transformation which occurs after the Sultan’s pacification—regards the world of intellect to be an unreliable compass. While not an idea first conceived of nor held exclusively by Ibn al-‘Arabī, the medieval mystic left ample written evidence that he considered intellect and reason as ultimately restrictive for the seeker of truth (e.g. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* 60; 163; 165; 179-80; 218; 232); thus, both Sheikh Balkhi and Ibn al-‘Arabī consider rational thought to be a limiting factor in the pursuit of ontological awareness and knowledge, and Shiekh Balkhi’s teachings should be rightly considered as being derived from mystical experience.

Further indications in the novel that empiricism and ration are not to be fully trusted are to be found in the episodes in which the supernatural *jinn* discourse amongst themselves about their interaction with the temporal affairs of humans. For example, Sahloul, a *jinn* that is also the angel of death masquerading among humanity as a merchant above reproach, is described by Fadil as “a virtuous exception to a corrupt rule” (71); this remark suggests that the material

world of *zamān* is corrupt, while the inexorable angel of death, an aspect of *dahr*, the eternal fluctuation of Being, is virtuous. Indeed, Sahloul, the “virtuous” merchant of *dahr* himself, tells the young lover Nur al-Din that “He who is master of dreams is master of tomorrow” (87), clearly meaning that knowledge gained irrationally from dreams is more useful for future endeavors than knowledge valued by rational means. In fact, much of the story hinges on the events occurring in the alternate world of the *jinni* Qumqam, Singam, Sakhrabout and Zarmabaha—who weave in and out of the human characters’ lives (77)—and their sometimes hidden, other times explicit interventions in the affairs of humanity. Therefore, with the central role played in the novel by the *jinni*, Mahfouz emphasizes the impact of the irrational and unknowable (for humans) on the rational and observable world. Furthermore, the jinn can be viewed as catalysts or agents of *dahr*, in that as eternal beings they are behind most of the fluctuation undergone by the characters and the society in the novel.

Moving now to analyze more closely the literary depictions of mystical gnosis of *dahr* in *Arabian Days and Nights* as a source for transformation, it is important to recognize first that the novel makes clear that vicissitude and struggle are characteristics of dwelling in *zamān*: “Good and evil are like day and night” the vizier Dandan tells his daughter Shahriyar (55). Just as Ibn al-ʿArabī conceived of *zamān* as the interplay between day and night, so good and evil are cast by the novel as the material of *zamān*. Another clue that *zamān* hinders human development and actualization can be found when Abdullah the Porter tells the disguised sultan and vizier that the young man Fadil “is in fact of noble origin but his path was obstructed by the perfidy of time” (64), which should be read as the perfidy of serial time.

In contrast to the problems brought about to the characters through their dwelling in *zamān*, a literary rendering of *dahr* as a source of happiness and transformative knowledge is

portrayed in Shahrzad's ability to create stories that alter the consciousness of the corrupt and blood-thirsty Sultan. As already noted, her patience in enduring her life sentence as the Sultan's wife and "domesticator" is part of her spiritual journey, as she has learned it from the Sheikh. As such, her patience and understanding have their root in *dahr*, as the sheikh throughout the book indicates that *dahr*, or the unchanging plane of eternity, is the source of his strength. For example, he plainly tells Abdul Qadir that he is free from the winds of *zamān* and the alternation between emotional states that impact the lives of other men: "I give thanks to God, for no joy carries me away, no sadness touches me" (6). Through an awareness of *dahr*, Sheikh Balkhi has been able to resist the desires and demands which are inherent in serial time.

Another literary depiction of the transformative power of *dahr* is in the chapter "The Porter," which tells the story of Abdullah the porter, who is really an avatar for the soul of the former police chief known as Gamasa al-Bulti. Gamasa has been irrationally given a reprieve from death by the *jinn* Singam. At the moment of his appointed execution for killing a corrupt governor, Singam transports Gamasa's soul into the body of Abdullah, an Abyssinian porter: "You are alive—all they killed was a likeness of my own making" (49-50). The *jinn*, as an agent of and dweller in *dahr*, has preserved the soul of Gamasa in a radical act of transformation; furthermore, this transformation has been enacted by the *jinn* so that Gamasa, as Abdullah, can cleanse society of corrupt leaders (48; 54). In this way, through the agency of *dahr*, a physical transformation of the individual will result in action which aims for social transformation.

Moreover, in a scene perhaps most evocative of *dahr*, Abdullah has sought solace and refuge on the "green tongue of land" by the river bordering the quarter. Here, as Abdullah ponders his recent successes as an assassin of corrupt and evil people, he senses that trouble is afoot and that he will soon be discovered by the authorities. At this point, he encounters a



manifestation of *dahr*, who transforms the individual and allows him to escape death again, which in the logic of the novel allows for a continued transformation of the society by the individual. The following literary depiction of an encounter with *dahr* occurs after Abdullah has watched night fall by the river and hears a voice calling him to the water's edge, where he encounters "a spectral form, half in the water and half leaning with its arms against the shore" (73). Abdullah begins by questioning the form:

"Who are you and what do you know of me?" he asked apprehensively.  
 "I am Abdullah of the Sea just as you are Abdullah of the Land, and the grip of evil is tightening around your neck."  
 "Sir, what keeps you in the water? What sort of creature are you?"  
 "I am none but a worshipper in the never-ending kingdom of the water."  
 "You mean it's a kingdom that lives under the water?"  
 "Yes. In it perfection has been attained and oppositions have vanished, nothing disturbing its serenity but the misery of the people living on the land."  
 "Extraordinary are the things I hear but the power of God is without limit," said Abdullah in wonder.  
 "Likewise His mercy, so take off your clothes and plunge into the water." (73)

At this point, Abdullah decides to obey the form's urging and dives into the "never-ending" kingdom of water—a symbol for *dahr*, where "perfection has been attained," "oppositions have vanished, nothing disturbing its serenity"—where he remains for a period of time. He hears a voice telling him to return to land, representing *zamān* with its misery, after which he feels an immediate internal difference; he senses a rare unity with the cosmos, and he later realizes he has once again physically metamorphosed:

No sooner did he feel the ground underfoot than his heart settled itself between his ribs and he felt himself to be as one of the predators of the sky, the earth and the night. He was conscious, too, of a warmth. Then sleep came over him. He slept deeply and peacefully, and it was as if the stars sparkled only that they might watch over him. He woke before daybreak. Looking into his mirror in the first rays of light, he saw before him a new face not known to him before. (74)

Here, Mahfouz provides a literary depiction of submersion in *dahr*, represented as a supernatural water kingdom, in order to portray individual transformation. It is the new persona

resulting from the transformation, Abdullah of the Land, that will endure as his society's moral compass for the remainder of the novel; Abdullah of the Land eventually re-attains Gamasa's role as police chief and assumes the function of arbiter of law and justice, and as the respected moral authority of his community, he comes to be known as Abdullah al-Aqil under the enlightened rule of the Sultan Shahriyar and his governor Ma'arouf the Cobbler (105; 207).

After submersion in the quintessentially *dahr*-like medium of water, Abdullah returns to the land and its *zamān*, and only then his heart “settled itself between his ribs.” This mention of the heart's fluctuation recalls the Sufi idea of the godhead, as *dahr*, holding the heart between the fingers and causing its fluctuations; in this well-known Sufi teaching, especially valued by Ibn al-ʿArabī, the refined mystic's heart, held between the “fingers” of the godhead, serves as the very source of intellect, the seat of knowledge, and the throne of God (Chittick 106-07). Thus while in the water, Abdullah's heart is between the fingers of *dahr* where it is stimulated to achieve new insights. However, after leaving the *dahr* represented by the water and its transformative powers, and returning to the misery of the people living on the land—representing the medium of *zamān*—Abdullah's heart returns to its mortal status and location. Finally, the peace and warmth experienced by Abdullah upon his return is an after effect of the mystical encounter with *dahr*. His internal transformation, again allegorized in this case as an external change, is brought about by an encounter with *dahr*, and as a result, the soul of Gamasa, inhabiting Abdullah of the land, can continue its sacred mission of exacting justice and combatting corruption; however, it is clear that had he remained in *dahr* none of this would matter—it is the re-entry into *zamān* that is a critical feature of Socialist Sufism.

A final striking depiction in *Arabian Nights and Days* of a character's submersion in the medium of *dahr* occurs towards the end of the novel, when Sultan Shahriyar is afforded an

opportunity at redemption. After hearing the amazing tales of Sindbad in his palace (209-216), the Sultan finally decides to abdicate in order to open his realm to “the land of purity” and to begin “aimlessly seeking ... salvation” for his legacy of brutality (217-18). Inspired by Sindbad’s quasi-mystical travel narrative,<sup>94</sup> and leaving his kingdom to his and Shahrzad’s son, he sets out in search of wisdom and redemption, finding his way to the same “green tongue of land” (222) where Abdullah of the Land experienced his encounter with *dahr* and transformation.

After the Sultan’s arrival to the green tongue of land, he observes a small group of men from his city striking a large rock with their fists and filling the air with lamentation. Wondering what could be the cause of this pitiful display of mourning in such a desolate location, the Sultan approaches the rock after the men leave. He pounds on the rock with his hands and hears a strange and powerful sound. A portal opens beneath the rock, and the Sultan enters a seemingly infinite passageway that is described in terms evocative of a paradise. Walking for a while, the Sultan comes upon a pond and he hears a voice tell him ““Do what seems good to you.” (224). At this point, the aging Sultan removes his clothing and dives into the water, where he undergoes his own transformation, “emerging from the water... in the skin of a beardless young man, with a strong and perfectly proportioned body and a handsome face that breathed youthful manliness, with parted black hair and with a mustache just sprouting” (224). It is this transformed Shahriyar who will then gain access to a vast hidden realm clearly existing within the ambience of *dahr*, awareness of which, it turns out, contains the potential to foster individual and social transformation and which offers the hope of a utopian future.

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<sup>94</sup> See pp. 250-53 in chapter three of this dissertation for an analysis of Sindbad’s journey as a literary depiction of mysticism.

Following his immersion and surfacing, he is met by a young girl who will be his guide. Shahriyar immediately becomes aware of an alternate time horizon, as he is mocked for telling the guide that he has been gone from his world, his plane of existence, only an hour: “How weak you are at arithmetic” she tells him (224). The implication is that he has been there for eternity, as he is now experiencing *dahr*. This is underscored in the description of his conversation with the queen of this plane of existence after they have first met. The Sultan discloses that

“... in the past I lived a long life until I approached old age.”  
 “I don’t know what you are talking about,” said the queen sweetly.  
 “I am talking about the grip of time, Your Majesty.”  
 “We are acquainted with time only as a faithful friend who neither oppresses nor betrays.” (225)

Later, when the Sultan asks his new Queen of *dahr* when they might have a child together, she teasingly chides him for being unable to break free from thinking in the imaginary construct of *zamān*:

“Do you think of this when we have been married only a hundred years?”  
 “Only a hundred years?”  
 “No more than that, my love.”  
 “I had reckoned it as a matter of days.”  
 “The past has not yet been erased from your head.”  
 “Anyway,” he said, as though apologizing, “I am happier than a human being has ever been.”  
 “You will know true happiness,” she said to him as she kissed him, “when you forget the past completely.” (226)

Thus, as the Queen explains, achieving full awareness of the time horizon in this *dahr*-like kingdom unlocks the potential for its residents to attain an idyllic and utopian state of existence; of course, the Sultan never reaches the state of because he is unable to completely think outside the construct of *zamān*—of past, present, and future—because he is tempted by a doorway which has been forbidden to him. In a moment of opportunity, he tests the door, through which he is transported back to the green tongue of land and restored to his former aged physical condition:

Shahriyar looked about him wildly.

“Where am I?” he asked.

The desert, the night, the crescent moon, the rock, the men, and the continued wailing. Shahriyar and his stick and the polluted air of the city.” (227)

One lesson to be taken from this episode is that encounters with *dahr* are transient, and only the disciplined are able to remain and subsist in an awareness of *dahr*. While potential exists for all people to experience a moment (*waqt*) in which an awareness of *dahr* is actualized, only those who have prepared themselves and who are disciplined for the experience can subsist.

Finally, in the novel’s final page, Abdullah imparts to the Sultan and to the reader how the novel’s depictions of *dahr* and the characters’ experiences with the gnosis of *dahr* might relate not only to self-transformation but also to social transformation. Hearing the wails of Shahriyar as he mourns his loss of contact with the timeless kingdom, Abdullah appears to offer him advice of one who has also had a mystical encounter with *dahr*, only to return:

I give you the words of a man of experience, who said: “It is an indication of truth’s jealousy that it has not made for anyone a path to it, and that it has not deprived anyone of the hope of attaining it, and it has left people running in the deserts of perplexity and drowning in the seas of doubt; and he who thinks that he has attained it, it dissociates itself from, and he who thinks that he has dissociated himself from it has lost his way. Thus there is no attaining it and no avoiding it—it is inescapable.”

Then Abdullah al-Aqil went off in the direction of the city. (228)

These final words of the chapter carry profound meaning for the search for truth and the reliability of rational epistemology to find truth, especially as they are offered by a man of experience and transmitted by an individual who has made it his life’s work—after his career as Gamasa al-Bulti, the corrupt police chief—to rid society of corrupt leaders and abusers of power. In light of Abdullah’s words, the Sultan’s residence in the timeless realm can also be associated with a residence in the truth, or the “Truth.” It is furthermore symbolic that in the final instance, the enlightened Abdullah leads by example, as he turns back to the city, back to society, to

continue his work there of transforming society so that people might live more fulfilled lives. The message Abdullah conveys therefore serves as one of the morals of *Arabian Days and Nights* and distills the kernel of Mahfouz's concept of "Socialist Sufism"—that truth can be sought passionately but it will not be fully attained by humanity, so that it is crucial for the "man of experience" to go back to "the direction of the city" to share what he has learned about "truth" and time during a brief sojourn in *dahr*.

### **Conclusion**

This rather sprawling and incomplete analysis of the literary output of Jorge Luis Borges and Naguib Mahfouz has sought to locate intersections between the works of the two writers and the time horizon expressed by the thirteenth century Sufi Ibn al-ʿArabī. To identify these intersections, I have attempted to isolate "literary representations of mysticism" as they appear in the production of Borges and Mahfouz, and my analysis has pointed out how these representations illustrate aspects of Ibn al-ʿArabī's notions of *zamān*, *waqt*, and *dahr*. The fruits of such an analysis have then been put into a context of resistance to the orthodox ontologies and epistemologies upon which power depends and towards approaches to individual and social transformation.

Borges's early essay "Sentirse en muerte," depicts a mystical consciousness of timelessness, or *dahr*, and encourages readers to think of the rationality as a barrier to truth or to understanding, while his mid-career short story "Tlön, Uqbar, and Tertius Orbis" subversively digs away at the foundations of the Western rational tradition and deconstructively critiques Western information gathering and dissemination; while this undermining of Western orthodoxy occurs at multiple level of meanings in "Tlön," several "crypto-Arabisms" can be detected in the story which illuminate how Ibn al-ʿArabī's concept of *dahr* lurks behind the temporal monism of

the encroaching civilization to come presented by the narrator Borges. Another mid-career story, “The Writing of the God,” while much less overtly “Islamic” in surface details than “Tlön,” is more properly a story about a mystical experience irrationally occurring outside the confines of serial time (*zamān*). One possible outcome of the character Tzinacán’s consciousness of unity of Being during a moment’s consciousness of *dahr* is that readers are offered strategies for resistance to power and individual transformation: in the Mayan priest’s refusal to utter the writing of the god, Borges’s audience is presented with a refusal to engage with power in its own arena of *zamān* and given a sketch of the beginnings of a passive martyrdom which might foster within a critical audience the persistence of longing for attainment of the liberty of the soul, if not the emancipation of society.

Thus in Borges’s literary production analyzed here, the resistance suggested in his literary representations of mysticism occurs most forcibly at the level of the individual. A direct attempt by the mystical consciousness to apply its gnosis of *dahr* to immediate and impactful social transformation is apparently not part of Borges’s vision of resistance to power. However, reading Borges through the mediatory of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s time horizon does offer some building blocks for resistance strategies: by stimulating readers to challenge rational methods of knowledge acquisition; by undermining rational ontological constructions of time through the provision of alternate time horizons and temporal ontologies; and by providing the groundwork for a passive modality of resistance that is inspired by an individual awareness of timelessness and unity of Being, Borges’s essays and fiction might contribute to a revolution in individual consciousness that must surely precede any meaningful social transformation.

In another vein, Mahfouz’s correspondences with Ibn al-‘Arabī illuminate another pathway to resistance to power and social transformation: Socialist Sufism. From even his early

realist/naturalist novels, readers can see characters like Radwan al-Hussainy serving as a model for the person who pursues the wisdom or gnosis of *dahr*, but who then returns to the community to participate in its transformation. This idea of “one who returns” from a consciousness of *dahr* in order to improve his community receives much more emphasis in Mahfouz’s episodic novels. *The Harafish* explicitly links the power to be tapped from a mystical communion with *dahr* to social transformation, especially in the novel’s characterizations of Ashur and Ashur II and their reliance on the *takiyya* for guidance and strength. Likewise, *Arabian Nights and Days* underscores Mahfouz’s belief that it is necessary for those who have been granted gnosis of *dahr* to return to society to help cleanse it from corruption and suffering; moreover, the novel’s form, intertextuality, and the plot’s reliance on irrational agents such as the *jinni* also provide space for *Arabian Nights and Days* to challenge the ontologies and epistemologies of rationalism.

In sum, the two authors taken together offer a handful of useful concepts with which to engage with power. This engagement can be made at the ontological and epistemological levels by radically reconceiving the time horizons used by the orthodoxy of power. Borges encourages individual readers to think differently about “truth,” “reality,” and the intellect’s role in understanding these abstractions, while also suggesting that to combat power on its own temporal “*zamānī*” playing field is pointless since everything is “one” in *dahr*. Thus, a path of passive refusal, nonviolent resistance, and the transmission across serial time (*zamān*) of the ideas of martyrs who have been steeped in *dahr* is the transformative strategy put forward in this reading of Borges. Mahfouz, like Borges, offers readers platforms from which to question rational temporal ontology, but throughout the Egyptian’s work, he urges those who might have access to mystical consciousness in *dahr* to use their insight about or inspiration acquired from a



sojourn with timelessness, in an effort to transform the daily life that must necessarily be lived out in *zamān*.

### Chapter 3: Ibn al-ʿArabī’s Spatial Ontologies at Play in Borges and Mahfouz

#### Introduction

A literal, or “*zāhīrī*,” reading of the third ode of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s *Tarjumān al-Ashwāq* (*The Interpreter of Desires*) reveals little in the way of mystical gnosis; in fact, the poem seems to be yet another articulation of the trope of the pre-Islamic qasida, of which Arabic literary history certainly possesses a rich trove. The poem’s first two lines begin, for instance, with the apparently obligatory reference to geographic locations and a beloved figure from the speaker’s past:

O my two friends, pass by al-Kathīb and turn towards Laʿlaʿ and seek the  
waters of Yalamlam,

For there dwell those whom thou knowest and those to whom belong my fasting  
and my pilgrimage and my visit to the holy places and my festival. (53)

However, there is much more to the poem than its literal meaning recommends. From remarks contained in a thorough commentary about this poem, provided by its poet shortly after the initial appearance of the *Interpreter of Desires*, readers can better grasp the type of gnosis which Ibn al-ʿArabī was attempting to convey, not only in these two lines, but in each of the 61 odes that comprise his collection of ostensibly erotic odes. For example, referring to the first verse (*bayt*), he explains that “my two friends” is meant to symbolize “reason” and “faith;” that al-Kathīb refers to “the place of contemplation;” that the “waters of Yalamlam” represent “the fountain of life.” Regarding the second verse, the poet contends that when he declares “thou knowest,” by “thou” he refers to “Faith,” not “Reason,” since “knowledge of the Essence [the Real; the godhead] and of its attributes is gained solely by means of Faith;” “those” refers to the “Divine Attributes;” “my fasting” equals abstinence; and perhaps most importantly for the immediate purpose at hand, “my pilgrimage” signifies a “repeated turning towards this pure Essence for the

sake of gaining ... blessing ... This pilgrimage and visitation is incessant, though a man is momentarily going from one Name [manifestation of the godhead] to another” (54).

While only spanning two lines, these verses neatly distill Ibn al-ʿArabī’s technique of using metaphors of movement through space to allegorize mystical experience. For Ibn al-ʿArabī, such metaphors are essential for communicating the gnosis he possessed about the three types of journey which comprise the activity of all life: the journey *to* God, the journey *in* God, and the journey *from* God.<sup>95</sup> Hence, in the odes in *The Interpreter of Desires*, descriptions of movement and space will always serve as descriptions for mystical experience, and any reference to motion or location could be, and should be, fruitfully interpreted as conveying some sort of gnosis about the mystical approach to the godhead.

Can such interpretations of the descriptions of motion and space be applied to the creative output of writers known to have flirted with the mystical, such as Jorge Luis Borges and Naguib Mahfouz? Could such a Sufi interpretation of Borges and Mahfouz then identify previously concealed or understated literary manifestations of mysticism? Could such a revelation lead readers to turn towards new horizons of spatial ontology? And, if such horizons can indeed be glimpsed, could they offer fresh perspectives on the problem of the compression of space wielded by capital?<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> According to Ibn al-ʿArabī, while the journey *to* God and the journey *from* God each have an ending point, the journey *in* God is without end and the visitation upon humans by the “states” of the Divine fluctuates moment by moment.

<sup>96</sup> In the introduction, I treat Harvey’s concept of time-space compression as both a technique and a symptom of capital and its crises. Regarding how capital exploits space, I rely particularly on the chapter “Crises in the Space Economy of Capitalism: the Dialectics of Imperialism” in his book *The Limits of Capital* (413-445).

To answer these questions, I will first discuss Ibn al-ʿArabī’s ontology, rooted and springing out of irrationality but nevertheless expressed in rational terms, which explains the universe as a sphere, and then examine how this idea appears in the literary work of Borges. An analysis of Borges’s creative vision as intersecting with the Sheikh’s spatial ontology reveals literary representations of mystical experience and mystical gnosis at work, and it is this intersection that suggests a “unity of being” and that exposes the operations of logocentrism. The notions contained in Borges’s literary depictions of mysticism might then inform the conceptions of strategies for resistance the orthodoxy of rationalism. Following that, I will depend upon Hämeen-Anttila’s analysis of metaphors of movement in Ibn al-ʿArabī’s *Interpreter of Desires* to locate moments in Mahfouz’s novels where literary representations of mystical experience and gnosis work to encourage the reader to reconsider the rational manipulation or negotiation of space by power; thus, by reading Mahfouz’s literary depictions of mysticism in this way, the notion of the journey can be a foundation for resistance strategies against rational spatial ontology.

These analyses, then, together will bolster my claim that literary representations of mysticism can suggest alternative spatial ontologies to perhaps a wider reading public than that of the reportage of esoteric adepts; in turn, with a broad and global audience, these ontologies can contribute to wide-scale theorizations from multiple sites and centered in multiple locations, which resist the delimitation and manipulation of physical and psychic space by power.

### **Sufi Ideas about Space**

Before launching into an analysis of the creative work of Borges and Mahfouz as intersecting with the spatial ontology of Ibn al-ʿArabī, some discussion of Sufi spatial ontology in general and Ibn al-ʿArabī’s spatial ontology in particular is essential. Without question, the

problems inherent in articulating the godhead's relationship to (or as) space and the godhead's spatial relationship to the mystic have long been central concerns for Sufis. For example, while a literal interpretation of the Prophet Muḥammad's night journey and ascent comprises a central strand in orthodox Islamic theological narrative,<sup>97</sup> for the Islamic mystic this journey symbolizes man's approach towards, and ultimate communion with, the godhead; Sufi literature makes clear that this journey through space is to be duplicated spiritually rather than physically.<sup>98</sup>

Furthermore, the idea that the Sufi is engaged in a journey towards God, occupying specific *maqāmat* (stations) and being occupied by various spiritual *aḥwāl* (states) along the way, is well-documented by scholars of Sufi literature and history.<sup>99</sup> Therefore, metaphors of movement,

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<sup>97</sup> According to *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature*, the body of literature relating to Muḥammad's night journey (*isra*) and ascent (*mi'raj*) to heaven in the company of the archangel Gabriel—in which the Prophet is represented as progressing through the ascent in several stages, at each of which he discourses with various prophets before finally communing with Allah—has its origins in the Qur'anic reference (17:1) to Muḥammad's night journey from “the sacred place of worship to the farthest place;” this reference was then developed in *ḥadīth* and orthodox exegesis early in Islamic history (Meisami and Starkey 526).

<sup>98</sup> *Mi'raj* literature then not only functions as a literary representation of mysticism in its own right (i.e., the mystical experience of Muḥammad as transmitted through *ḥadīth*), but it also occupies a “pivotal position” in forming the basis for Sufi commentary on the mystical experience. Since at least the time of Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī (d. 234/848), the night journey and ascent has been interpreted by Sufis as a journey towards unity (*tawḥīd*) with the godhead and as a “freeing of Muḥammad's soul from the dross of phenomenal existence and his attainment of closeness (*qurb*) to God” (Meisami and Starkey 526). For an introductory discussion of the development and the role of *mi'raj* literature in the context of Sufism, see Sells's *Early Islamic Mysticism* (47–56); Sells also provides a useful contemporary translation of Bisṭāmī's account of his own *mi'raj* (Sells and Ernst 242–250). See also Katz's discussion of the “central role” of the motif of ascent in Sufism and other mystical traditions (Katz, “Mystical Speech and Mystical Meaning” 23).

<sup>99</sup> Schimmel's chapter “The Path” describes the *ṭarīqa* (path, way) as a spur off of the orthodox Islamic *sharīc* (road), passing through several *maqāmat* (stations), and leading towards the realization of *tawḥīd* (unity). Based on a survey of key historical Sufi documentation, her chapter carefully describes the stations, which for the mystics are enduring, and the *ḥāl* (states), a condition or consciousness which “descends from God into a man's heart, without his being able to repel it when it comes, or to attract it when it goes, by his own effort.” (98–186). See

journey, and seeking across space and through a sequence of “stations” appear throughout the history of Sufi literature as rich intertextual metaphors for the mystic’s approach towards, and gnosis of, the godhead. Ibn al-ʿArabī is no exception, either in communicating his own *miʿrāj* experience (Addas 153–57; Hirtenstein 115) or in relying on Muḥammad’s *miʿrāj* as a point of reference and a teaching tool.

### **Space and movement in Ibn al-ʿArabī’s life and theosophy**

However, Ibn al-ʿArabī’s concerns with spatial metaphors are not just focused on interpreting night journeys and ascents. Bowering points out that, in conjunction with the Sheikh’s attempt to articulate the godhead’s temporal relationship to existence,<sup>100</sup> spatial ontology constitutes the primary concern of his theosophy (Bowering 116). The tumultuous context of Ibn al-ʿArabi’s life is useful for illustrating how the theme of movement through space is central to his theosophy.<sup>101</sup> Explaining the influence on Ibn al-ʿArabi of his frequent physical relocations, Bowering has the following to say about the Sheikh’s final departure for the East as a young initiate on the Sufi pathway from his native Andalusia in ca. 1200 CE:

It was a *riḥla*, a journey from the periphery to the central lands of Islam in search of knowledge, a *hijra*, an emigration from his native land to which he was never to return, and a *ḥajj*, a pilgrimage to the holy place in and around Mecca. The

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also Reynolds’s chapter “The Path,” (28–49) which begins: “Mystics of every race and creed have described the progress of the spiritual life as a journey or a pilgrimage. Other symbols have been used for the same purpose, but this one appears to be almost universal in its range. The Sūfī who sets out to seek God calls himself a ‘traveler’ (*sālīk*); he advances by slow ‘stages’ (*maqāmāt*) along a path (*tariqāt*) to the goal of union with Reality (*fanā fi l-Haqq*). Should he venture to make a map of his interior ascent, it will not correspond exactly with any of those made by previous explorers” (28); Sells’s *Early Islamic Mysticism* provides a contemporary translation of the foundational Sufi literature produced by as-Sarrāj (d. 378 AH/988 CE) and describing the stages or stations (196–211).

<sup>100</sup> As discussed at length in the previous chapter.

<sup>101</sup> The impact of travel on Ibn al-ʿArabī’s gnosis and teaching of that gnosis is described at length in several chapters of Hirtenstein’s *The Unlimited Mercifier* (Hirtenstein 109–128).

seats of learning he visited on his actual itinerary were transformed in his consciousness into theaters of mystical visions that marked the map of his own religious geography. These visions set the cornerstone of his spiritual identity, providing him with insight and understanding that decisively shaped his life and teaching. (Bowering 109–10)

Thus the actual voyages undertaken by Ibn al-ʿArabi had not only the more obvious physical and material implications for the Sheikh but very serious intellectual and, more importantly for this study, spiritual implications. Clearly then, instances in Ibn al-ʿArabi’s writing in which he incorporates motifs of journey or movement through space merit special hermeneutic attention from critics and scholars, as these instances can be interpreted as overflowing with both personal significance as well as wider meanings for the Sufi journey towards the godhead and Sufi spatial ontology.<sup>102</sup>

By way of summarizing the relationship between Ibn al-ʿArabi’s spatial ontology and his use of metaphors of movement and travel, Almond points out that

[f]or Ibn ʿArabi, the idea of the return to God means the progression of the soul through a complex series of gradually ascending spiritual stations or *makam* [sic],<sup>103</sup> an ascent which culminates in the dissolution of all attributes [sic] descriptions once the believer has realized their totality. In this sense, the intricate, hierarchical system that Ibn al-ʿArabi has constructed must be understood as a very Wittgensteinian ladder, one which can be kicked away out

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<sup>102</sup> For an extensively detailed consideration of the impact that Ibn al-ʿArabi’s personal travel history had on his theosophy, see Addas’s excellent and engaging biography of Ibn al-ʿArabi, *Quest for the Red Sulphur*, in particular the biographical treatment of Ibn al-ʿArabi’s representation of his own *miʿraj* while the Sheikh was in Fez (Addas 153–160). The entirety of Hirtenstein’s *The Unlimited Mercifier* is also concerned with situating Ibn al-ʿArabi’s theosophy within his biographical context and charting chronologically the expressions of Ibn al-ʿArabi’s Sufism in conjunction with his constant moving from location to location.

<sup>103</sup> Here again, while Almond has proven to be an insightful theoretical and critical thinker, his application or knowledge of Arabic phonemes gives a scholar pause; the proper transliteration of this word should clearly be *maqām*. While his neglect of lengthening the second *aleph* is not so egregious for the understanding of the word he intends, his substitution of the *kaf* (*k*) for *qaf* (*q*) is bewildering and potentially generates unnecessary ambiguity.

from under one's feet after it has been climbed. (I. Almond, *Sufism and Deconstruction* 10)

Here, Almond emphasizes that the point of Ibn al-ʿArabī's intricate hierarchy of spiritual stations is that it is meant to be "ascended" like a "ladder," and used by the Sufi adept to ultimately break free of this, or any other, system.<sup>104</sup> Thus, in any final analysis, Ibn al-ʿArabī's ontology of space, while impolitically relying in some measure on a rational consideration of space and a use of rational hierarchical and directional concepts like "up/ascent" and "down/descent," contributes to his overall project of challenging the rational tradition. All of this seems clear as a general description of Ibn al-ʿArabī's spatial ontology. The metaphors of movement to portray the individual's mystical ascent of the ontological "ladder" will be explored more fully during my analysis of the intersection between Ibn al-ʿArabī's spatial ontology and Mahfouz; however, it is first necessary to dive deeper into the "ocean without a shore" that is Ibn al-ʿArabī's theosophy in order to locate points of contact between Ibn al-ʿArabī and Borges.

#### **Akkach's description of Ibn al-ʿArabī and the circle**

Before attempting to further sketch out Ibn al-ʿArabī's spatial ontology and to determine points of contact between the Sheikh and Borges, it should be re-emphasized here that, like his temporal framework, Ibn al-ʿArabī's conceptualization of space is informed above all by the idea of "unity of Being." Even though Ibn al-ʿArabī never used this phrase himself, he did choose to refer to existence as *wujūd* and "the later tradition" of Sufism considered Ibn al-ʿArabī as "the

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<sup>104</sup> Wittgenstein, famously ends his paradigm-shifting *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus* with:

My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.)

He must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world rightly.

(Wittgenstein 6.54)



founder of the school of *wahdat al-wujūd*” (Chittick, “Between the Yes and the No: Ibn Al-’Arabi on Wujūd and the Innate Capacity” 98). The concept of the unity of existence directly challenges Islamic orthodoxy and its reliance on the idea of a purely transcendent godhead; moreover, this paradigm interrogates the rational faculty of “reason” underpinning contemporary orthodox, rational world view and its primacy on “reason,” which, in Ibn al-’Arabī’s construct, ultimately “fetters” attempts at perception of the Real (I. Almond, *Sufism and Deconstruction* 10).<sup>105</sup> Briefly, this challenge derives from Ibn al-’Arabī’s insistence that the unity of Being means that the godhead, which he frequently terms “*al-Ḥaqq*” (“the Real”), can be qualified as spatially infinite and unbounded. In this concept, existence results from the Real manifesting Itself in an “endless, ever-fluctuating plethora of images and forms;” in this way the Real escapes description and delimitation, and is simultaneously immanent and transcendent (I. Almond, *Sufism and Deconstruction* 15–24; Sells 7; 100).

Nevertheless, as Almond’s remarks about the necessary use of the rungs of the Wittgensteinian ladder suggests, even though Ibn al-’Arabī emphasizes the limiting of perception of the Real by reason and rationality, he does rely on spatial metaphors, themselves firmly anchored to rational terms and thought, in an impossible attempt to explain his gnosis<sup>106</sup> of how

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<sup>105</sup> Here it should be mentioned that Ibn al-’Arabī, in the *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, manipulates the root of the word for “reason” (*’aql*), as it branches from the same root as the word for “fetter” (*’iqal*), to illustrate how reason can shackle and perception or comprehension of the Real (I. Almond, *Sufism and Deconstruction* 10; Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* 147; 159-61; Sells 90).

<sup>106</sup> Chittick points out that “What [Ibn al-’Arabī] writes, as he often tells us, is the embodiment of his mystical vision in an imaginal mode” (Chittick, “Between the Yes and the No: Ibn Al-’Arabi on Wujud and the Innate Capacity” 96). For more on the word “imaginal,” which is important in the context of scholarship on Ibn al-’Arabī’s theosophy, see the pioneering essay on the concept “*Mundus Imaginalis*, or the Imaginary and the Imaginal” (Corbin 1–33). For a full application of the concept to the thought system of Ibn al-’Arabī, see Corbin’s *Creative Imagination in the Sūfism of Ibn al-’Arabī*, now reprinted in English as *Alone with the Alone*.

the Real reveals Itself to Itself, as well as to the world created by the Real. Thus, while Ibn al-ʿArabī adamantly insists that the Real in Itself is incomprehensible, he ventures not only a rational, but a metaphorical—and thus literary—portrayal of the Real and pathways to the Real, in an attempt to convey the noetic value of his mystical experience and to illustrate the “irrational” ontology which is obtained from this experience. As will soon become clear, it is in Ibn al-ʿArabī’s use of a rational metaphor to represent his irrational spatial ontology that a correspondence with Borges’s literary depictions of mysticism will become clear.

Among other rational, figurative attempts to express the ineffable and irrational gnosis of the Real, Ibn al-ʿArabī employs mathematical and geometrical metaphors to describe his belief that physical creation is the “differentiation of primordial Unity” (Akkach 116) but that in Itself, the Real (as Essence) remains neither limited nor divided. Such an abstract notion of the godhead as an “all-encompassing intelligible sphere” is sometimes also portrayed mathematically by Ibn al-ʿArabī as an incomprehensible point or a “zero” from which extension and addition must proceed. But it is in the Sheikh’s use of the geometrical spherical metaphor for the Real that a correspondence with the thought and writing of Borges can be located. For example, the gnosis obtained through irrational experience spurred Ibn al-ʿArabī to describe his spatial ontology and his view of the universe in the following manner in his *magnum opus*, *al-Futūhāt al-Makkiyya* (*The Meccan Revelations*, hereafter abbreviated as *FM*):

In the same order of things, you should know that this Reality is not described as prior to the cosmos, nor is the cosmos described as posterior to it. But it is the root of all existent things. It is the root of substance, *the Sphere of Life*, the Real through Whom Creation Takes Place, and so forth. It is the *all-encompassing intelligible sphere*. If you say that it is the cosmos, you are correct; that it is not the cosmos, you are correct; that it is the Real or not the Real, you are correct. It accepts all of that. (*FM* I 119.3 qtd in Chittick 137; italics added).

Likewise, Akkach summarizes Ibn al-ʿArabi’s cosmological geometry as being dependent on the figure of the sphere:

The world in its entirety was seen as an enormous sphere was thus analogously compared with a geometrical circle within which the determination of geometric figures was compared with the indefinite differentiation of possible beings. Geometrically, the circle is seen as the first comprehensible form of unity which the incomprehensible point takes on in the process of manifestation. (Akkach 116).

Thus from the “incomprehensible point” of the primordial Unity, Ibn al-ʿArabī describes the occurrence of an initial “extension,” leading to the differentiation of the primordial Unity into the figure of a sphere (Akkach 116). This sphere encompasses all of the cosmos and all of existence and non-existence, known and unknown by humans or other beings; thus, this sphere is one whose center can be considered to be everywhere and whose circumference, or limits, nowhere.

Since such a sphere cannot be represented, the Sheikh uses as a heuristic the figure of the circle to represent this idea, in two dimensions, to his readers and students (116). Within this circle, Ibn al-ʿArabi demonstrates how existence is made manifest by describing how an indefinite number of figures or patterns are “inscribed” within the circle by the volition of the godhead, with their vertices touching the circumference of the circle; the circumference can be thought of here as the limits of perceptible manifestation. These vertices are visible manifestations of the “Divine Names,” or specific attributes of the Real, that have been differentiated or extended from the incomprehensible point zero, or center of the circle. These divine names and their resultant vertices located on the circumference of the figurative circle of creation are hence “modalities” of God, and the combination of multiple vertices with one another forms “patterns” which in turn lead to the created world (117).

Although for orthodox Muslims, the names of Allah number ninety-nine, Ibn al-ʿArabī conceived of an infinite number of names to represent, either singly or in combination with other names, all the possible fragmentations and manifestations of the Real; indeed, when considering the ḥadīth “God has ninety-nine names,” Ibn al-ʿArabī feels that this number to be too restrictive for a boundless Unity:

These [ninety-nine names] are ‘mothers,’ like the [360] degrees of the celestial sphere. Then every possible entity has a specific divine name which gazes upon it. The name gives its entity its specific face, through which it becomes distinguished from every other entity. The possible things are infinite, so the names are infinite...” (*FM* IV 288.1, qtd in Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* 42)

Here Ibn al-ʿArabī points out that just as a circle can be subdivided into more than 360 degrees, the Real can manifest Itself infinitely in an infinitesimal progression of attributes or Names. Therefore, as described in the *FM*, the circle symbolizes only *the first* instance of Self-fragmentation by the primordial Unity, and within this first fragment of the godhead—within the circumference of this circle—further, infinite “fragmentations” or manifestations of the godhead, or “names” then occur and assume an indefinite amount of patterns (Akkach 117). The foundational patterns of creation are, for illustration’s sake, marked by Ibn al-ʿArabī as consisting of quadrature (four vertices) and triplicity (three vertices) (117).

On this basis, according to Ibn al-ʿArabi, the potential for a “designative” (120) creation of everything, including the primordial forms or non-existent Ideals for everything ever in existence and everything possible,<sup>107</sup> requires quadrature—within the circle—of the Divine Names of “the Living,” “the Knowing,” “the Willing,” and “the Powerful” (117-118); from the pattern established by this quadrature arises the “act of creation” of non-existent Ideals, or more

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<sup>107</sup> Here the resemblance between the ontologies of Plato and Ibn al-ʿArabī—sometimes known as “Ibn Flatūn,” or the “Son of Plato”—should be recalled.

accurately, a “designation” of the forms of things concrete and abstract, not yet brought into existence but residing in the Divine Imagination. The actual physical and “productive” act of creation—that is, bringing the Ideas from the Divine imagination into existence—then requires a “triplicity” consisting of the “Divine Essence,” the “Divine Will,” and the “Divine Command,” consisting of the word “Be.” (Akkach 120).

This triplicity, as explained by Akkach, complements the quadrature of the “designative” creation of Ideals, and in conjunction with it leads to an elaborate “hexad,” which results from division of the circle’s circumference by the three radii of the “productive” act of creation (i.e., Essence, Will, Command). This hexad, or six pointed figure (Figure 1), forms the basis for a “quaternary pattern” that the Sheikh then employs to explain, for example, the creation of the four elements—air, fire, earth, and water—which comprise all matter (Akkach 119-20; 139-40). Further fleshing out this concept of a hexad, Chodkiewicz points out that in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s cosmology, all “contingent beings” are attached to the six “Names of Essence:” the knowing, the wanting, the powerful, the speaking, the hearing, and the seeing. Six was also the symbolic number of “the perfect human” (Chodkiewicz, *An Ocean without Shore* 97), an Akbarian construct which will be taken up in the following chapter.

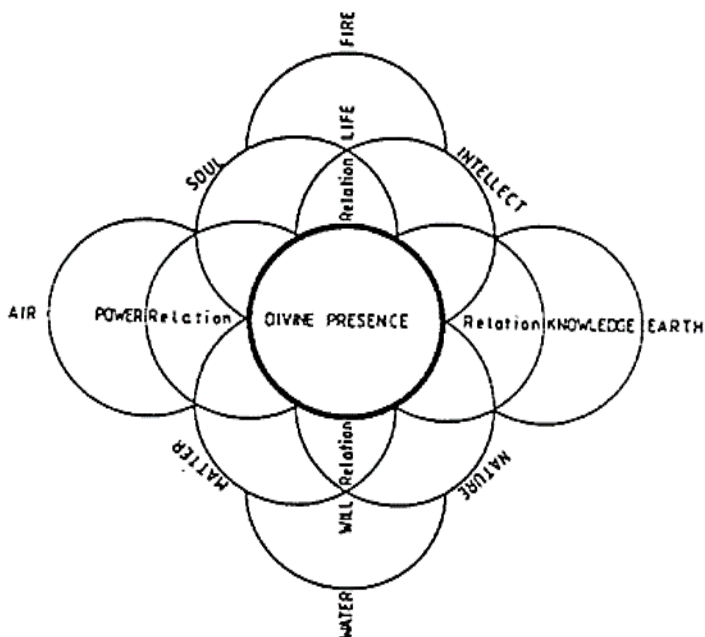


Figure 1: Ibn al-ʿArabī's "Hexad" (Akkach 139).

Generated by the Intersection of Power, Knowledge, Will and Life from out of the Divine Presence, Akkach explains "that the quaternary pattern derives from the *hexad*, the natural division of the circumference of a circle by its radius. The *hexad* is based on triplicity, which represents the pattern that complements quadrature in the cosmogonic process" (Akkach 139, emphasis mine).

To sum up Ibn al-ʿArabī's attempts to express his spatial ontology from a cosmological perspective, the circle, as a mere heuristic "slice" of the spherical dimensions of the cosmos, carries an immense significance for representing the godhead's relationship to creation and conversely humanity's relationship to and knowledge of the godhead. Yet it is the sphere which best represents the cosmos, and the godhead is the omnipresent center of the sphere; thus, while individual components of created existence are but manifestations or delineations of the godhead, the godhead remains "centered" within each existent creation and each non-existent Ideal. Existent creation manifests for Ibn al-ʿArabī as the hexad resulting from the confluence of the quadrature of imaginal, "designative" creation of forms and Ideals and the triplicity of

“productive” creation, which brings the forms and Ideals into existence. It is also important to keep in mind that if this metaphorical representation of the Real and its relationship to creation—both non-existent and existent—creates bewilderment (*ḥayra*) in its audience, the Sheikh has achieved his purpose and allowed his audience, as seekers on the path towards gnosis, to take an important first step in breaking the shackles of reason:

To find God is to fall into bewilderment (*ḥayra*), not the bewilderment of being lost and unable to find one’s way, but the bewilderment of finding and knowing God and of not-finding and not-knowing Him at the same time. Every existing thing other than God dwells in a never-never land of affirmation and negation, finding and losing, knowing and not-knowing. The difference between the Finders and the rest of us is that they [the Finders] are fully aware of their own ambiguous situation. They know the significance of the phrase... “Incapacity to attain comprehension is itself comprehension.” (Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* 3)

### **Borges, Space, Sufism**

Fresh on the heels of a review of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s bewildering spatial ontology, an analysis of select items of Borges’s literary production will underscore the uncanny intersection between the Argentine and the Sheikh; primarily, Borges’s own concept of the universe as a sphere and his subsequent literary representations of mystical experience and mystical gnosis in the context of this sphere-based spatial ontology resonate deeply with Ibn al-ʿArabī’s articulations as a distinct alternative to the rational conception of space.

Borges has said in an interview with Barnstone that “Space is unimportant. You can think of a spaceless universe for example, a universe made of music” (Barnstone 110). Yet his attentions to the spatial makeup of the universe indicate a more serious preoccupation with the nature of space. His extended consideration of the relationship between time and space in Tlön discussed in the previous chapter, his essay on Pascal’s Sphere, and numerous stories, including “The Aleph” and “The Library of Babel” suggest that even as he might have considered the composition of space as “unimportant” in comparison with time, he nevertheless spent a great

deal of time intellectualizing and writing in an attempt to understand spatial ontology and the relationship between the godhead, space, and humanity.

### “Pascal’s Sphere”

Like Ibn al-<sup>c</sup>Arabī, Borges relied upon the metaphor of the sphere to make sense of space. That Borges was caught up in imagining the godhead, or rather all existence, as a sphere is unmistakably articulated in his essay “La esfera de Pascal” (“Pascal’s Sphere”) which first appeared in print as an article in *La Nación* on 14 January 1951 and was later collected in *Otras Inquisiciones* in 1952 (*Selected Non-Fictions* 542). It is notable that Borges frames this essay in a circular fashion, as if using the structure of the essay to illustrate the concepts being discussed, by both beginning and ending his essay with the idea that what he calls “universal history” is the “history” or “various intonations” of a few metaphors (Borges, “Pascal’s Sphere” 351; 353). This return of ideas frames the essay’s consideration of spatial ontology also within the bounds of his gnosis of *dahr*, the eternal process of flux constituted of cyclical phenomenon, that he has expressed in other literary representations of mysticism,<sup>108</sup> reminding his readers that for Borges time is perhaps a more fundamental problem for his intellect than space.

Nevertheless, the metaphor under consideration in the essay which has received “various intonations” in “universal history” is that of the sphere as a symbol of the cosmos, the intelligible universe, and the godhead. The formulation of the metaphor, according to Borges, is that the universe is a sphere whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere, and over the course of the brief essay Borges traces the use of this metaphor in “Western” literary and metaphysical genealogy. He identifies its origin as an ontological metaphor from at least the pre-Socratics and its function as a tool for resistance to orthodoxy as early as “the rhapsodist

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<sup>108</sup> As detailed in the previous chapter.



Xenophanes of Colophon,” who, “tired of the Homeric verses he recited from city to city, denounced the poets for giving the gods anthropomorphic traits and proposed to the Greeks a single God who was an eternal sphere” (“Pascal’s Sphere” 351). Writing forty years after Xenophanes, the pre-Socratic philosopher Parmenides concurred that “‘Being is like the mass of a well-rounded sphere, whose force is constant from the center in any direction’” (“Pascal’s Sphere” 351); it is in the indefinite number of mystical books supposedly dictated by the Greco-Egyptian entity Hermes Trimegistus “on whose pages all things were written” that the late twelfth century (CE) theologian Alanus de Insulis discovered “this formula which the ages to come would not forget: ‘God is an intelligible sphere, whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere’” (Borges, “Pascal’s Sphere” 352). If Borges’s genealogy is to be trusted—and since he did not provide a specific source for this particular claim in the essay, it can be questioned—the idea of the universe as a sphere was likely circulated in some measure around the Mediterranean previous to the birth of Ibn al-ʿArabī in 560 AH/1165 CE.<sup>109</sup>

From the moment of Insulis’s purported “discovery” of this maxim, the influence of the metaphor of the sphere is cursorily followed by Borges, and he concludes that “[F]or the medieval mind, the meaning is clear: God is in each one of his creatures, but is not limited by any one of them” (Borges, “Pascal’s Sphere” 352);<sup>110</sup> However, it should be noted here that Borges meant “for the medieval mind not bound to Ptolemaic cosmography,” as he also

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<sup>109</sup> Here the question of a shared source between Borges and Ibn al-ʿArabī becomes once again relevant; are the correspondences between the two a result of shared influence, common mystical consciousness, or sheer chance? This is a question that is perhaps tangential to the present study and one I hope to continue pursuing in future research.

<sup>110</sup> While this idea can easily be found in sources such as Augustine’s *Confessions* from the late fourth century CE, this idea at the same time is a concise articulation of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s notion of the godhead’s simultaneous transcendence and immanence, the keystone of *wahdat al-wujūd* that is more than just pantheism.

continues in the essay to suggest that Dante's *Divine Comedy* relies on a tightly regimented—although spherical—model of the universe which depended on the absolute transcendence of the godhead, in which the earth is the unmoving center. Next, Borges meditates on the paradigm-shifting Copernican revolution which suggested the idea of the universe as something other than a sphere with a fixed center. In particular, Borges describes the declaration of Copernicus's apologist Giordano, explaining the impact of Copernicus's findings, that ““We can state with certainty that the universe is all center, or that the center of the universe is everywhere and the circumference nowhere (De la causa, principio e urco, V)” and that as a result, “the divinity is near, ‘because it is in us even more than we are in ourselves’” (Borges, “Pascal's Sphere” 352). Thus the notion of the universe as a sphere with an omnipresent center and an indeterminable circumference can be read as both a version contradictory to that Ptolemaic orthodoxy recorded so well by Dante's great poem and an idea counter to—but developing out of and alongside—Western orthodoxy.

In his essay then, Borges's fascination with this recurrent metaphor in Western thought solidly intersects with Ibn al-ʿArabi's use of the metaphor of the sphere to illustrate how the non-existent and existent cosmos projects out from the godhead. There is, of course, nothing in the essay which directly points the reader to any sort of Sufi concept of space; however, this isomorphic correspondence between Borges and Ibn al-ʿArabi is surely more than coincidence, suggesting at the very least that the two share a common mystical or metaphysical way of thinking about the very space in which existence takes place.<sup>111</sup> As it is traced by Borges, the

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<sup>111</sup> This suggests, at best, a familiarity of Borges with the Sheikh al-Akbar's ontology from readings of Palacios and Smith, as Almond posits (I. Almond, “Borges the Post-Orientalist” 440); however, this possibility does not seem likely to me. I believe it more likely that this point of contact results from the influence on both Borges and Ibn al-ʿArabī of Neo-Platonism.

source or well-spring of this literary metaphor in ancient, pre-Socratic Greece is significant, as it locates the alternative ontology mutually, though most likely independently, adopted by Borges and Ibn al-ʿArabi as arising squarely from out of the Western tradition. Thus, impolitically, the seeds for radical breaks from rational spatial ontology (i.e., the earth is the non-moving center of all of creation) have always already been in Western thought. At the same time, the conception of the spherical composition of the cosmos can be considered as a particular type of gnosis acquired from irrational, mystical experience or irrational methods inherent to mystical consciousness; therefore, articulation of this gnosis by Borges can be rightly considered as a literary representation of mysticism, even if the mystical experience leading to this metaphor was not actually experienced by Borges himself—although I will show in the following analysis of Borges’s short story “The Aleph” that his fascination with the metaphor of the sphere seems more likely to be rooted in his own mystical experience of *wahdat al-wujūd*.

### “The Aleph”

Perhaps the most prominent literary representation of mystical space in Borges fiction is that included in his short story, “El Aleph,” (“The Aleph”), written and first published in *Sur* in September 1945. The tale later served as the final story in the eponymously named *El Aleph* (*The Aleph*), published in June 1949 by Losada in Buenos Aires (Rodríguez Monegal 410). Set in the Buenos Aires of the 1940s, the story treats the topics of unrequited and idealistic love and literary competition and fame, but the climax of the story occurs when the narrator, named Borges, recalls his opportunity to view the entire universe at once through a spherical phenomenon known as “the Aleph”—which happens to be located in the basement of his literary and romantic rival—and then attempts to convey what he witnessed to the reader.

*The Aleph*, as a collection, also included “The Writing of the God,” already demonstrated in the previous chapter to be a literary representation of mystical experience, expressed via mystical expressions concerning time. Indeed, several stories in *The Aleph* are suffused with the theme of mystical experience and mystical ways of looking at experience, and the book’s namesake story has merited close inspection within this context. As Echevarría points out, “[i]t seems safe to assume, then, that Borges gave the collection the title *El Aleph* because he thought that particular story was the most significant in the group, the one that best reflected the book’s main themes...” (124) and “[i]t seems clear to me that Borges originally saw [the stories in the book] as a unit” (136).<sup>112</sup> It seems logical then that much of the critical reception of the story “The Aleph” would operate within the context of mysticism. Among these critics, in a negative reading, Flynn considers “The Aleph” to be the description of a failed attempt by a mystic to establish a relationship with the godhead (Flynn 116), while López-Baralt associates some of the stylistic features of the mystical reportage in “The Aleph” with the expressions of St. John of the Cross (López-Baralt, “Borges, Or the Mystique of Silence: What Was on the Other Side of the Zahir” 30 n. 2). A handful of critics quickly point out the story’s apparent relationship to elements of Jewish mysticism, notably Fishburn, who reminds readers that “aleph,” as the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, is considered by Kabbalists to contain “all others, and by extension, the universe” (Fishburn 59).<sup>113</sup> Given the well-documented interest of Borges, the

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<sup>112</sup> In the next chapter, I will consider how a third story from *The Aleph*, “The Zahir,” can be read through Ibn al-ʿArabī’s theosophy.

<sup>113</sup> See also Echevarria, *The Aleph* (Echevarria 125), Monegal (Rodríguez Monegal 414), Almond (I. Almond, “Borges the Post-Orientalist” 440), and (Alazraki 3–64) for additional commentary on the Jewish mystical elements in the story.

writer, in the symbolism and cryptographic methodology of the Kabbala,<sup>114</sup> critics' approach to the story from a Kabbalistic interpretation is not a surprise: even the possessor of the Aleph in the story, Carlos Argentino, comments that it is “[t]he microcosm of the alchemists and Kabbalists.”

However, despite a tendency to approach the story through the lens of the Kabbala, there is ample room to read “The Aleph” from the separate mystical perspective of Sufism. In light of the fact that the first letter of the Arabic alphabet is also called “aleph” (*ālif*), López-Baralt's observation that Borges was more interested in learning Arabic than Hebrew over the course of his life (López-Baralt, “Borges, Or the Mystique of Silence: What Was on the Other Side of the Zahir” 32) could indicate that he may have also been familiar with and just as interested in the Sufi concept, espoused by Ibn al-ʿArabī, of the numerical value of the letters of the Arabic alphabet.<sup>115</sup> Indeed, since Borges famously exploited theological and metaphysical categories in his creative work in order to undermine or mingle them—for instance his placement of “the presence of Kabbalist ideas in the mind of a Mayan priest” (Fishburn 67)<sup>116</sup>—it is entirely possible that the writer's superficial offering of the Kabbala as the context of “The Aleph” could be a literary misdirection or an attempt to conflate Jewish mysticism with other world mystical traditions. What I will attempt here, however, is a more rigorous investigation of the story's

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<sup>114</sup> See for example his essay published in 1932, “Una vindicación de la cábala” (“A Defense of the Kabbalah” *Selected Non-Fictions* 83-86), of which Fishburn says: “he makes clear that it is not the doctrine itself that interests him, but its emphasis on the symbolic nature of language and the hermeneutic and cryptographic elements associated with it” (Fishburn 57).

<sup>115</sup> For a discussion of Ibn al-ʿArabī's gnosis concerning numerical values of letters of the Arabic alphabet, see Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (128–29;); Corbin (234); Hirtenstein (22; 229–31); and Twinch (Twinch 14–15); for a brief description of his contemplation of Arabic letters as images see Corbin (Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn Arabi* 234).

<sup>116</sup> Fishburn here refers to “The Writing of the God;” see the analysis of this story in the previous chapter of the dissertation.

literary representation of mysticism beyond the seemingly obligatory—and too obvious—nod to the Kabbala.

Among the few critics who have identified Islamic elements in “The Aleph,” Elia reads the story as emblematic of Borges’s interest in “Islamic esoteric concepts,” claiming that “references to Islam and the Koran itself abound” in the story alongside Argentino’s mention of the Kabbala, and that the narrator’s struggle with the ineffability of his experience is “a feeling most familiar to the Muslim mystics, or Sufis” (Elia 132–33). While Elia links the “Aleph” to Allah in its symbolism as an emblem of “universal creation” (133), the critic’s most fruitful suggestion is to read the story from a “*bāṭini*” perspective,<sup>117</sup> a reading which goes beyond the literal description of the narrator’s final moments of petulance and resentment of Argentino for besting him in romantic and poetic affairs. In contrast, Elia says that a *zāhīri* reading would “refer to a reluctance on Borges’s part to admit Carlos Argentino’s clear advantage” (136) and would suggest instead that the narrator has become indifferent to and serenely accepting of his material failures to woo Beatriz, to become recognized as a poet, and to acquire the prestige and wealth of the literary prize won by his rival Argentino (Elia 136–37). Another “Islamicate” reading of the story, though one less positive than that of Elia, is provided by Almond, who links “The Aleph” to the earlier and explicitly “Orientalist” tale “The Mirror of Ink” by Borges through the not exclusively Sufi notion of “the idea of omniuniversality.” Almond observes that, in contrast to the earlier story, the idea of omniuniversality in “The Aleph” has been “[l]ifted out of its Islamic context and placed in a completely secular one,” but nevertheless, “the idea of the

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<sup>117</sup> Here it should be recalled that in both orthodox and Sufi hermeneutic traditions, two of the Divine Names are *al-Bāṭin* (the Hidden) and *al-Zāhir* (the Manifest). These names lend themselves to interpretive strategies for reading the Qur’an; orthodox Sunnis would generally insist on a “*zāhiri*” reading, while Sufis such as Ibn al-‘Arabī probe layers of meaning beyond the literal when conducting “*bāṭini*” readings.

aleph seems to provoke themes of sadness and futility rather than any discussion of human sinfulness and pride” like the “The Mirror of Ink” (I. Almond, “Borges the Post-Orientalist” 441).

Despite these critical forays into the Jewish and Islamic mystical allusions in the story, what has not yet been explicitly attempted is an analysis of the story’s obvious literary representation of mysticism as being centrally concerned with offering an alternative spatial ontology. By doing so, I will go beyond the rather generic focus on the narrator’s ineffability, which Elia unfortunately remarks is “most familiar” to Sufis, but which in empirical and documentary evidence clearly is a phenomenon experienced by mystics from all faith tradition. Instead I will explain more explicitly how the story resonates with the theosophy of Ibn al-<sup>°</sup>Arabī, by pointing out how the title piece can be read as elaborating on Ibn al-<sup>°</sup>Arabī spatial metaphor of the sphere. I also wish to demonstrate that Flynn and Almond have misread the role of literary representation of mysticism in the story. Instead of the hopeless or sad outcome that they perceive, a reading through the lens of Ibn al-<sup>°</sup>Arabī’s spatial ontology can suggest—even more than Elia’s *bāṭini* reading, which finds the narrator facing his losses with acceptance—productive pathways to enlightenment and resistance for readers.

The fact that the story is focusing on an interpretation of space counter to that of the rational tradition is quite obvious even before the story begins in earnest, as the reader is alerted to the central concern of the tale by two epigraphs—one “aesthetic” and one “academic,” true to form for the playful and genre-bending Borges. The first epigraph is pulled from *Hamlet*, when the Danish prince replies to Guildenstern and Rosencrantz that “O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and be considered a king of infinite space” (Shakespeare II. ii. 273–75); the second epigraph, from Hobbes’s *Leviathan* (IV: 46), offers a critique of the limitations of the late

medieval scholastic philosophers that “will teach us that Eternity is the Standing still of the Present Time, a Nunc-stans (as the Schools call it); which neither they, nor any else understand, no more than they would a Hic-stans for an Infinite greatness of Place” (Borges, “The Aleph” 274).

Announced in this way, Borges immediately begins to structure the story around the central concern of space. The story begins with the narrator, “Borges,” a struggling poet, relating his feelings for Beatriz Viterbo, a deceased acquaintance for which he felt a strong, unrequited attraction. One of the threads of the story concerns the narrator’s acquaintance and literary rivalry with Carlos Argentino Daneri, who as it turns out is not only the cousin of his beloved Beatriz, but also his former rival for her romantic attentions. As part of an annual personal memorial ritual for Beatriz, Borges visits with and talks poetry with Daneri, and through these yearly conversations, he is subjected to samples of the latter’s plodding, overwrought verse, which form only a small part of Argentino’s *magnum opus*, which aims to put into meter and rhyme a description of the entire physical globe. As an example, Borges the narrator shares one stanza from Argentino’s Australian section:

Hear this. To the right hand of the routine signpost  
 (Coming—what need is there to say?—from north-northwest)  
 Yawns a bored skeleton—Color? Sky-pearly.—  
 Outside the sheepfold that suggests an ossuary. (278)

After reproducing these verses, the narrator communicates to his readers his utter disrespect for the lines, and he conducts a bit of impromptu literary criticism in the story to dismantle Argentino’s literary effort as a “tedious,” “laborious,” “long, formless” sequence of alexandrines governed only by “metrical clumsiness” (277) and “verbal ostentation” (278). It is quite clear from the tone of the narrator towards Argentino’s writing that he considers himself to be a superior poet, and the rivalry between the two men can be read as symbolic of Borges’s own



insecurities about his real-life literary reputation (Rodríguez Monegal 417). The very name of his rival, Argentino, evokes the rational idea of the Argentine nation state, the “everyman” of the nation, and the ideal of national identity; his narrator’s disdain towards Argentino suggests Borges own antagonism against the philistine politics and aesthetic tastes of his Peronist contemporaries. By the end of the story, Borges the narrator ironically or begrudgingly reveals that Argentino eventually attained high honors and acceptance for his inane versification by his society’s arbiters of taste.

Initially amazed at least by the audacity of Argentino’s ambition to sing the entire globe, what Borges the narrator eventually learns is that his poetry is an attempt to express in words what Argentino has seen through the “Aleph,” which “is one of the points in space that contain all points” (280). The device, located in Daneri’s basement, has allowed him to find subject matter for his poetry. Borges-as-narrator learns of its existence after Argentino, mockingly encourages Borges to experience the Aleph for himself, likely out of spite for both the narrator’s refusal to advance Argentino’s literary interests as well as over residual malice for the Borges’s obsession with his cousin (and, as the Aleph will show the narrator, Daneri’s paramour). After being enticed into the basement to view the Aleph against his better judgment, Borges is surprised that he is actually able to experience what Argentino has promised—a glimpse of all points in the universe all at the same time.

An analysis of the reportage of this experience situates it as a mystical one, and therefore its expression by Borges serves as a literary representation of mysticism. In his preface to the recounting of his experience, Borges the narrator clearly associates his experience within the realm of the mystical:

I come now to the ineffable center of my tale; it is here that a writer’s hopelessness begins. Every language is an alphabet of symbols the employment of

which assumes a past shared by its interlocutors. How can one transmit to others the infinite Aleph, which my timorous memory can scarcely contain? In a similar situation, mystics have employed a wealth of emblems: to signify the deity, a Persian mystic speaks of a bird that somehow is all birds; Alain de Lille speaks of a sphere whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere; Ezekiel, of an angel with four faces, facing east and west, north and south at once. (It is not for nothing that I call to mind these inconceivable analogies; they bear a relation to the Aleph.) Perhaps the gods would not deny me the discovery of an equivalent image, but then this report would not be polluted with literature, with falseness. And besides, the central problem—the enumeration, even partial enumeration of infinity—is irresolvable. In that unbounded moment, I saw millions of delightful and horrible acts; none amazed me so much as the fact that all occupied the same point, without superposition and without transparency. What my eyes saw was *simultaneous*; what I shall write is *successive*, because the language is successive. Something of it, though, I will capture. (“The Aleph” 282–83)

The problem of ineffability is stated from the very beginning of the narrator’s set-up of his reportage and permeates the “preface” to his report, as he plainly labels the experience itself “ineffable” and then offers a brief statement on the inadequacy of language to capture his experience. Although the narrator declares that he will attempt to communicate what he experienced to the reader in linear terms, he acknowledges by necessity he can only offer an inaccurate rendering. Moreover, Borges’s narrator situates his mystical consciousness within an indubitably mystical context, prefacing his own reportage by alluding to previous mystical thinkers who have attempted to put into language their noetic experiences. But in the final analysis, Borges concludes that he will be unable to convey the truth of his experience because of the irresolvable problem of the temporality and successive nature of language being used to convey a simultaneous experience. While the experience is narrated in terms of the physical senses, it is obvious from the narrator’s disclaimer that this experience contained a high level of suprasensory data. After these prefatory remarks, there can be little question that what follows will be a literary representation of mysticism.

Moreover, the narrator's prefatory remarks before the report resonate specifically with Ibn al-ʿArabī's conception of space. The narrator's nod to the mystical idea of the universe as a sphere with an infinite center and a non-existent, imperceptible, or unlimited circumference echoes Ibn al-ʿArabī's employment of the circle as a symbol of the cosmos. This noetic value of the experience, yoked as it is to Sufi ontology, can then be discovered in the narrator's statement that the prime characteristic of his "amazement" is that all the "millions" of things that he saw "all occupied the same point." Rationality and empirical science would suggest this to be impossible, and power would be disturbed if this were actually possible—for how could capital effectively appropriate and redistribute physical space in this event? Here then, in the representation of a spherical point that contains all others, are ideas which might seed theorization of challenges to rational spatial ontology.

The linkage to Ibn al-ʿArabī's spatial ontology is made stronger as the narrator begins to describe his actual experience of mystical consciousness:

Under the step, toward the right, I saw a small iridescent sphere of almost unbearable brightness. At first I thought it was spinning; then I realized that the movement was an illusion produced by the dizzying spectacles inside it. The Aleph was probably two or three centimeters in diameter, but universal space was contained inside it, with no diminution in size. Each thing (the glass surface of a mirror, let us say) was infinite things, because I could clearly see it from every point in the cosmos. (Borges, "The Aleph" 283)

The unbounded field of vision and the sphericity of the Aleph echoes the symbolism used by Ibn al-ʿArabī in the description of his ontology as well as in his expression of his own mystical experience. While at Fez in 1197 CE, Ibn al-ʿArabī had an experience he referred to as a "light-vision" while leading prayer at the al-Azhar mosque: "At the *miḥrāb* my entire essence became on single eye; I could see from every side of myself in just the same way that I could see my *qibla*. Nobody escaped my view: neither the person who was entering nor the person who was

leaving, and not even those who were performing the prayer behind me...” (*FM I*: 67, qtd. in Addas 149) ... “[w]hile the vision lasted, I had no sense of direction, as if I had become completely spherical. Any sense of direction I might have had was simply hypothetical, not what I actually experienced” (*FM II*: 486, qtd. in Hirtenstein 115). Likewise, the awareness described by the narrator of “The Aleph”—that “universal space” and “every point in the cosmos” are contained and visible within the sphere of the Aleph, and that he is able to see all things as infinite things, viewing each thing from every point in the cosmos—clearly approaches the perspective and gnosis of the godhead gazing upon the cosmos described by Ibn al-ʿArabī:

The Real’s knowledge of Himself is identical with His knowledge of the cosmos, since the cosmos never ceases being witnessed by Him, even though it is qualified by non-existence. But the cosmos is not witnessed by itself in [in that state], since it does not have existence. This is an ocean in which the considerative thinkers perish, those who have not been given unveiling. His Self never ceases to exist... His knowledge of Himself is His knowledge of the cosmos; so His knowledge of the cosmos never ceases to exist (*FM I* 90:23 qtd. in Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* 84).

Thus, in seeing the cosmos simultaneously as a whole, in the context of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s cosmology and gnosis the narrator has attained a perspective close to that of the godhead.

Beyond this, in the detailed description of his mystical experience, the narrator attempts to provide specific detail to capture the simultaneous consciousness he experienced. This passage is worth quoting in full to demonstrate the ineffability, power, and significance of the gnosis experienced by the narrator in his mystical perception of the universe contained within a sphere:

I saw the populous sea, saw dawn and dusk, saw the multitudes of the Americas, saw a silvery spider-web at the center of a black pyramid, saw a broken labyrinth (it was London), saw endless eyes, all very close, studying themselves in me as thought in a mirror, saw all the mirrors on the planet (and none of them reflecting me), saw in a rear courtyard on Calle Soler the same tiles I’d seen twenty years before in the entryway of a house in Fray Bentos, saw clusters of grapes, snow, tobacco, veins of metal, water vapor, saw convex equatorial deserts and their every grain of sand, saw a woman in Inverness whom I shall never forget, saw her violent hair, her haughty body, saw a cancer in her breast, saw a circle of dry soil

within a sidewalk where there had once been a tree, saw a country house in Androgué, saw a copy of the first English translation of Pliny (Philemon Holland's), saw every letter of every page at once (as a boy, I would be astounded that the letters in a closed book didn't get all scrambled up together overnight), saw simultaneous night and day, saw a sunset in Querétaro that seemed to reflect the color of a rose in Bengal, saw my bedroom (with no one in it), saw in a study in Alkmaar a globe of the terraqueous world placed between two mirrors that multiplied it endlessly, saw horses with wind-whipped manes on a beach in the Caspian Sea at dawn, saw the delicate bones of a hand, saw the survivors of a battle sending postcards, saw a Tarot card in a shop window in Mirzapur, saw the oblique shadows of ferns on the floor of a greenhouse, saw tigers, pistons, bison, tides, and armies, saw all the ants on earth, saw a Persian astrolabe, saw in a desk drawer (and the handwriting made me tremble) obscene, incredible, detailed letters that Beatriz had sent Carlos Argentino, saw a beloved monument in Chacarita, saw the horrendous remains of what had been once, deliciously, Beatriz Viterbo, saw the circulation of my dark blood, saw the coils and springs of love and the alterations of death, saw the Aleph from everywhere at once, saw the earth in the Aleph, and the Aleph once more in the earth and the earth in the Aleph, saw my face and my viscera, saw your face, and I felt dizzy, and I wept, because my eyes had seen that secret, hypothetical object whose name has been usurped by men but which no man has ever truly looked upon: the inconceivable universe. (Borges, "The Aleph" 284–85)

From the narrator's account, readers can understand how his rival Argentino would be able to describe every region of the world in painstaking detail, since Borges relates that he saw all places and all things in those places all at once. The Aleph in Argentino's basement unites within its sphere—at least literarily—time and space. This not only offers a radically different ontology to that of the rational tradition but also dovetails with the idea of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, or Unity of Being, in that the narrator's attempt to enumerate the things he perceived solidifies the connection between this literary representation of mysticism and Ibn al-ʿArabī's spatial ontology. The dazzling multiplicity which Ibn al-ʿArabī explained metaphorically as an infinite pattern formed by the interaction of divine names within the confines of the circle is on full display. The apparent "chaotic enumeration" of the items by Borges's narrator attempts to give just a cross-section of this diversity. Yet all is contained within the sphere, circumscribed by and contained in the *waḥdat al-wujūd*. The paradox related by the narrator of viewing the Aleph within the

Aleph suggests that there is perhaps another narrator, viewing this narrator, viewing the aleph, generating a bewildering *mise-en-abyme* that deconstructs rational notions of spatial relationships. Nonetheless, the narrator's viewing of the sphere within the sphere also corresponds with Ibn al-ʿArabī's description of the vision of the Real as it simultaneously gazes outward and in upon Itself by gazing at the multiform manifestations resulting from fragmentations out of the Real's undeterminable center or point zero.

Assessing the literary nature of this description, the narrator Borges's experience and vision is immediate and striking, and in contrast to Argentino's, his reportage of the experience is much less rational. Argentino's poetry remains within the confines of rational thought, offering an attempt at superficial sensory description of all places, a clunky geography in verse, in details that over-appeal to the empirical faculties. Looking at Borges's record of his narrator's mystical experience from a rhetorical and literary perspective, the anaphora that undergirds the entire sentence (I saw... saw... saw... saw... saw...) perhaps justifies Monegal's characterization of the passage as "Whitman-esque" and "dazzling and chaotic" (Rodríguez Monegal 414). López-Baralt notices the striking similarity between the "febrile rhythms" of the reportage of mystical experience in "The Aleph" and that represented in "The Writing of the Gods." She also links

the splendor of these wildly populated verbal extravagances" to "the verbal outpourings of aphasic writers such as St. John of the Cross, who lavishes the central verses of his 'Spiritual Canticle' with an overwhelming succession of images... [i]t reminds us also of Pablo Neruda, who pursued Machu Pichu with a chaotic proliferation of images knowing perfectly well that he could never truly sing the ancient city" (López-Baralt, "Borges, Or the Mystique of Silence: What Was on the Other Side of the Zahir" 30).

Finally, and perhaps something that should be viewed with more caution, is that Garayalde links Borges's attempts to express "various possible simultaneous viewpoints"

(Garayalde 66) and to present a “mixture of various levels in the narrative”(Garayalde 62) with Sufi techniques of description and teaching described in some of the Sufi tales collected by Idries Shah.<sup>118</sup>

After his narration, he presumably refuses any attempt by Argentino to convince him to comment on what he saw in the Aleph, even later in the post script to the story dismissing it as a false aleph (285)—here readers might sense a measure of petulance on the part of narrative Borges. However, as Elia finds in her “*bāṭini*” reading, the mystical experience represented in such stunning literary fashion by Borges elicits an acceptance of, rather than petulance towards, and indifference to material failures and successes, much like the attitude developed by Qaholom after his experience in “The Writing of the God.” The experience is transient in its duration and in its effects; the narrator informs the reader that despite his fears that “nothing had the power to surprise or astonish me anymore,” and “[f]ortunately after a few unsleeping nights, forgetfulness began to work in me again” (Borges, “The Aleph” 284). Flynn (116) argues that the narrator’s unease and the transience of the effects of the experience provides an example of the failed mysticism of Borges, but I argue instead that the story opens pathways for resistance to orthodoxy, in that this literary representation of mysticism foists a non-rational conception of space upon readers who would be more expectant of something like that produced by Argentino.

The narrator tells readers after his experience that he stepped out into the street and “in the subway, all the faces seemed familiar” (284). Achieving this kind of gnosis could lead to solidarity, empathy, and the ability to unite forces. Inspired by such literary renderings of mystical consciousness, readers could begin to think beyond the empirically supported

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<sup>118</sup> As Schimmel (9 n.5) and Knysh (327) have warned scholars, in light of the infamous scandal in the late 1960s involving a forged manuscript of Omar Khayyam and the poet Robert Graves, any reliance on Shah as an authoritative source for Sufi traditions should be questioned.

conceptions of spatial relationships which are used to divide and conquer, to manipulate and exploit, to redirect and capitalize, the literary depiction of mysticism in the story could lead to the realization that existence is bound together, that people are more alike across the world than power allows them to think. It could lead to awareness of the troubles of others and an identification of hopes, fears, and dreams that all people, as human beings, share: the preservation of beauty, the pursuit of freedom, the welfare of loved ones, the continuity of the species, and the looming specter of death.

### **“The Library of Babel”**

A second story by Borges, “The Library of Babel,” can likewise be analyzed as containing points of contact with the spatial ontology of Ibn al-‘Arabī and as suggesting a basis and counter-ontology from which to develop resistance to power. Inspired by or derived from Borges’s 1939 essay “The Total Library,” “The Library of Babel,” is a “Kafkaesque” narration (Rodríguez Monegal 360) first published in Sur’s 1941 imprint *The Garden of Forking Paths*, and reprinted in *Ficciones* in 1944.<sup>119</sup> The story consists of the narration of a nameless Librarian describing salient characteristics of the Library and meditating on the ontology that governs it.

The Library, the reader learns, *is* the universe; it is composed of an infinite number of hexagons connected horizontally by vestibules and joined vertically by spiral staircases in each of the vestibules penetrating upward and downward “into the remotest distance” (112); four walls in each hexagon are occupied by five book shelves each, and “each bookshelf holds thirty-two books identical in format; each book contains four hundred ten pages; each page forty lines;

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<sup>119</sup> Interestingly, the story was one of Borges’s first to published in a language other than Spanish, as in 1944 it was translated in to French for the Buenos Aires-anchored journal *Lettres Françaises*, although it would not be until 1961, with his award of the Fomentor Prize that his star would begin to rise in France (Rodríguez Monegal 382).



each line, approximately eighty black letters” (Borges, “The Library of Babel” 113). Two important axioms, crucial to understand the Library, are then conveyed: first, that no one knows where the books came from, that the Library has existed forever and will continue to exist forever; second, that every book is made up of combinations of twenty-five “orthographic symbols” which include the period, the comma, the space, and twenty-two letters. There are no rules or patterns governing the lengths of words; the librarian informs us that his father once saw a book that consisted only of the letters M C V “perversely repeated from the first line to the last” and that he has seen another book that “is a mere labyrinth of letters whose penultimate page contains the phrase O Time thy pyramids” (113-14).

Based on the data provided by the librarian, the math involved in thinking of the possible number of books is staggering. William Goldblum Bloch, in his book *The Unimaginable Mathematics of Borges’s Library of Babel*, computes the possible number of books at  $10^{1,834,097}$  (qtd. in Merrell 22). To put this figure into perspective, it has been estimated that it would “only” take  $10^{90}$  grains of sand to fill up the entire known universe (22). Therefore, every possible book has been written, even books in languages such as Arabic or Chinese that do not use the twenty-two letters; their languages have been transliterated into books in the library, and all books in those languages, and even languages that have never existed, reside on a shelf somewhere in the Library. For instance, the librarian recalls the appearance of a book that was determined, after “centuries” of inspection by “decipherers,” to have been written in “a Samoyed-Lithuanian dialect of Guaraní, with inflections from classical Arabic” (114).

Clearly then, “The Library of Babel” is situated within an ontology allowing for nearly infinite space. Less obvious is that the Librarian also describes an ontology for the Library that corresponds to Ibn al-‘Arabī’s spatial ontology. While a specific mystical experience is not

narrated in the story, and while no critics have attempted to approach the story as rooted in mysticism *per se*, what I will suggest here is that the story is indeed a literary representation of mystical gnosis. In this way, I suggest that the story “The Library of Babel” be read as the transmission, in a literary manner, of gnosis resulting from a mystical experience, and as such that it falls in to the category of literary representation of mysticism as I have defined it.

Borges has written in detail, for example in “Sentirse en muerte,” (“Feeling in Death”) about his own experiences with mystical consciousness. He has talked about actually experiencing two “timeless moments” of mystical consciousness (Barnstone 11; 73), and as this chapter has demonstrated, he clearly displayed an intellectual and creative interest in the mystical concept of the universe as a sphere. Therefore, it seems reasonable to suggest that a story built around the very construct of the entire universe being a sphere could be a valid literary representation of mysticism, in that it is being used to metaphorically convey gnosis gained from a mystical experience that Borges could not adequately express in successive language.

While the story has yet to be analyzed in conjunction with either Sufism in general or the cosmogony of Ibn al-ʿArabī in particular, Fishburn locates Kabbalistic allusions in the story, notably in the story’s brief discussion of that particular sect of “librarians,” who “persist in their Kabbalah-driven search for The Book that may hold the elusive clue to the Revelation” (Fishburn 58). However, as I have done with “The Writing of the God” and “The Aleph” I encourage here a reading beyond that of the more easily identified allusions to Jewish mysticism. If there are Sufi tropes and metaphors lurking behind more obvious references to the Kabbala, this could suggest a variety of possibilities: intentional playfulness on the part of Borges the author, common Andalusian source material for Ibn al-ʿArabī’s Sufism and the Kabbalistic thinkers, similar mystical experiences in mystics across two faith traditions that share

foundational stories, or the validity of perennial approaches to mysticism which argue for universal data to be gleaned from mystical reportage.

Nevertheless, justification for reading “The Library of Babel” as an expression of gnosis gained from mystical experience is provided early on in the story, as the narrator, a nameless librarian in one of the galleries of the Library, alerts the reader that what is to be related is indeed a form of mystical gnosis:

The universe (which others call the Library) is composed of an indefinite, perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries ... I declare that the Library is endless. Idealists argue that the hexagonal rooms are the necessary shape of absolute space, or at least of *our perception* of space. They argue that a triangular or pentagonal chamber is inconceivable. (Mystics claim that their ecstasies reveal to them a circular chamber containing an enormous circular book with a continuous spine that goes completely around the walls. But their testimony is suspect, their words obscure. That cyclical book is God.) Let it suffice for the moment that I repeat the classic dictum: *The Library is a sphere whose exact center is any hexagon and whose circumference is unattainable.* (*Collected Fictions* 113)

Here, the narrator clearly identifies the universe with the Library, and he explains his belief that the center of the Library is “any hexagon,” recalling Ibn al-‘Arabī’s metaphor of the hexad as the basic form delineated by the productive (as opposed to the imaginal) creative process. Thus, a correlation exists between the fractal, recurring hexagons of the Library of Babel and Ibn al-‘Arabī’s conceptualization of the hexad as the base pattern for visible existence.

There is further evidence in the passage suggesting communication of an Akbarian gnosis in the Librarian’s description of the Library, a description resulting, ironically, from his skepticism. The narrator first dismisses the idealist philosophers of his culture, who insist that absolute space takes a hexagonal form, and then the mystics, whose testimony he considers as not credible and whose expressions are “obscure.” After debunking other approaches to the Library’s spatial ontology, he espouses a “classic dictum”—a dictum which distinctively echoes with the “universal metaphor” studied by Borges at length in “Pascal’s Sphere.” Indeed, the

dictum of the librarian simply replaces the “universe” of the metaphor contained in “Pascal’s Sphere” with the word “Library” and the word “everywhere” from the essay with the word “hexagon.” In his consideration of the metaphor in his essay, Borges allowed that the sphere frequently serves as symbol for mystical reconsideration of received or accepted knowledge about space. It should be recalled, for example, that in “Pascal’s Sphere,” Borges explicitly links the metaphor of the sphere—the very formula used in the Librarian’s “classic dictum”—to knowledge preserved by the mystical Hermes Trismegistus, a figure used throughout the history of Western thought—including that of Islamic esotericism—as a symbol of mysticism, prophecy, alchemy, and counter-ontology.<sup>120</sup> Moreover, Borges also points out in “Pascal’s Sphere” that the metaphor of the sphere was used more specifically as a tool to communicate resistance or suggest alternatives to orthodox thought, for example as a scourge to the Homeric gods by Xenophanes, and as a shattering of Ptolemaic cosmology by the Copernicans; history has shown too that the Copernican model needed correction and perhaps the metaphor of the sphere transmitted by Hermes Trismegistus influenced in some way the move toward Newtonian physics.<sup>121</sup> Thus the “dictum” termed “classic” by the skeptical narrator in the story can be

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<sup>120</sup> For an engaging treatment of the fusion of Hermes and Thoth, the Greek god of prophecy and the Egyptian god of writing, see Ebeling (Ebeling x–xxx). For a discussion of the incorporation of Hermes and Hermeticism into early Islamic esoterica, see Peters (55–85).

<sup>121</sup> Sir Isaac Newton was known to have collected alchemical and hermetical texts. One can only speculate to what creative flights of speculation and gnosis these texts might have led him; likewise, a scholar more inclined towards physics than myself might investigate how the ontology of “Pascal’s Sphere” might have been employed in the development of general relativity in its growth away from Newtonian physics. In this calculus, the metaphor of the sphere with its ubiquitous center is relevant as a figure for the nature of Reality for all times; however, the articulation of the metaphor requires constant refinement in order to continue approaching or refocusing on truth.

rightly considered a mystical utterance, at least in the context provided by “Pascal’s Sphere,” even though the narrator has disparaged mystics’ claims.

Furthermore, in the context of the “Pascal’s Sphere,” it seems that the Librarian, after debunking previous metaphysicians—philosophers and mystics included—actually improves on the previous mystics’ visions; throughout the speculation in the opening of the story, the concern with infinity, fractal repetition, geometric form, the center, and perimeters is consistent with the mystical visions expressed in “Pascal’s Sphere,” but what is different in the Librarian’s refinement of precedent gnosis his insistence on the omnipresence of the center and the unapproachability of the delimiting circumference. With all of that said, the important thing here is that the Librarian’s conception of the sphere as centered everywhere and limited nowhere also anchors Ibn al-ʿArabī’s spatial ontology, thereby linking the ontological horizon of the story to the mystical gnosis communicated by the Sheikh. It is reasonable, then, to suggest that Borges’s story is a literary representation of mystic, ontological gnosis corresponding to Ibn al-ʿArabī’s theosophy.

Aside from this explicit correspondence between Borges and Ibn al-ʿArabī in the metaphor of the sphere, another link can be discovered in analysis of the style used by the narrator to enumerate the infinitude of books that the narrator comes to realize exist. The anaphora, the chaotic and effusive enumeration, the suggestion of infinity, and the momentary second person point of view contained in the sentence mimics the “febrile rhythms” already analyzed earlier in the case of the mystical reportage in “The Aleph:”

...the Library is “total” ... its bookshelves contain all possible combinations of the twenty-two orthographic symbols... that is, all that is able to be expressed, in every language. All—the detailed history of the future, the autobiographies of the archangels, the faithful catalog of the Library, thousands and thousands of false catalogs, the proof of the falsity of those false catalogs, a proof of the falsity of the true catalog, the gnostic gospel of Basilides, the commentary upon that

gospel, the commentary on the commentary on that gospel, the true story of your death, the translation of every book into every language, the interpolations of every book into all books, the treatise Bede could have written (but did not) on the mythology of the Saxon people, the lost books of Tacitus (115).

Such an attempt to provide a glimpse of the immense material and the apparently infinite compass of the Library echoes stylistically and intentionally with that in “The Aleph” to narrate successively what occurs, in spherical space, simultaneously. The stylistic kinship and the similarities in intention between these narrated descriptions suggest a structural linkage between them as passages overflowing with mystical significance, supporting the conjecture that the particular style of enumeration in “The Library of Babel”—like that of “The Aleph” and “The Writing of the God”—can be read as yet another attempt by Borges to express esoteric truths grasped from mystical experience.

Further analysis of the style of the story continues to point to the expression of mystical gnosis, as Borges resorts to noticeably apophatic language to describe the contents of the Library/universe:

There is no combination of characters one can make—*dhcmlrhtdj*, for example—that the divine Library has not foreseen and that in one or more of its secret tongues does not hide a terrible significance. There is no syllable one can speak that is not filled with tenderness and terror, that is not, in one of those languages, the mighty name of a god. To speak is to commit tautologies. This pointless, verbose epistle already exists in one of the thirty volumes of the five bookshelves in one of the countless hexagons—as does its refutation. (A number *n* of the possible languages employ the same vocabulary; in some of them the symbol “library” possesses the correct definition “everlasting, ubiquitous system of hexagonal galleries,” while a library—the thing—is a loaf of bread or a pyramid or something else, and the six words that define it themselves have other definitions. You who read me—are you certain you understand my language?) (118).

Here the narrator, in his attempt to describe the spatial composition and structure of the universe, uses apophatic language to talk about language: “there is no syllable one can speak that is not filled... that is not, in one of those languages, the mighty name of a god. To speak is to commit

tautologies.” Most notably, this passage fits Sells’s classifications of apophatic language as “a language of double propositions,” and “the turning back upon reifications it has posed” (207-09).

First, Borges’s sublime apophasis suggests the “double proposal” that the books and even the syllables within them can simultaneously possess and lack meaning; this leads to a turning back from language, even as it uses language to talk about language. The apophatic language here effectively declares the failures of language to capture universal truth, remarking that just as language in a given line in a given book communicates one idea in one language, it can either obfuscate, generate chaos, or communicate nonsense, or even communicate a totally separate idea in another, all while using the same lexicon and combination of letters. Although the books in the library are not able to convey precise meaning to all at all times, their combined utterances nevertheless contain the meaning of all things. Astoundingly, in this passage, Borges’s “Library of Babel” suggests that there while there is no reliability in language, the truth of everything is nonetheless expressed in the unimaginable combinations of letters and punctuation somewhere in the Library.

Secondly, the passage’s final parenthetical comments are significantly apophatic, in their “turning back upon the reification” of the Library itself which the Librarian has performed throughout the story up until this point. This reification of the Library is swiftly undone in the very notion that the word Library—and perhaps the concept itself—has no real existence, or that the word Library means different things in different languages. The elusiveness and relativity of meaning portrayed in “The Library of Babel” also receives theosophic expression from Ibn al-‘Arabī, who insisted that any “formulation which attempts to describe the real must assume a delimited, defined, and relative standpoint. What is accepted from one point of view may have to be denied from a second point of view. The Essence alone is absolutely Real, but... forever

beyond our grasp and understanding” (Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* 29). In sum, the apophatic style in the above excerpt is manifest, and while such a style in itself doesn’t necessarily pair Borges to Ibn al-‘Arabī, the Sheikh’s writings are also highly characterized by apophasis<sup>122</sup>, and such an apophatic sensibility is a clear marker for attempts to express mystical experience. Moreover, the Librarian’s insistence that the books contain every possible meaning echoes Derrida’s assertion that instead of texts with fixed meanings, “there are only contexts without any center of absolute anchoring” (Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* 320) which, according to Almond, turns the text into a meaning-machine that can constantly produce new meanings” (I. Almond, *Sufism and Deconstruction* 65). Thus, the Library is a monstrous embodiment of Derrida’s perpetual slippage and play of difference, and from such a reading the story makes a haunting suggestion about the (im)possibility of finding meaning in the world in a society constructed by language.

However, I argue that this possibility should not discourage, it should in contrast serve to liberate; furthermore, it should not discourage the continued search for meaning, or truth, or the Real, an aspiration encouraged by the narrator’s final thoughts about the Library. For the ending to the story suggests the Akbarian notion that it is through journey—as failed and as endless as it might seem—that the seeker finds the mystical “truth.” The Librarian has found the truth that comforts him—the realization of that despite the overwhelming evidence that meaning is impossible to locate, there exists an Order behind or beneath the manifest disorder of the visible world. Clearly the narrator’s belief in an Order governing the Library’s texts, a result of his lifetime of wandering, can serve as a spatially allegorized search for and acquisition of gnosis.

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<sup>122</sup> Sells devotes two of his book’s seven body chapters to in-depth analysis of the apophasis in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s oeuvre (Sells 63–115).



Ibn al-ʿArabī provides one example of such an allegory when he writes about movement—both literal, physical movement and abstract, spiritual movement—as it relates to acquiring gnosis of the godhead’s simultaneous immanence and transcendence:

God has said: ‘It is He who, out of His bounty, has settled us in an abode wherein neither toil nor weariness affects us,’ and He has said: ‘He is with you wherever you are.’ Now traversing distances certainly involves extra effort, indeed a very special effort. Nothing is moving me except my seeking Him: if I did not make Him my aim and goal by this wandering and journeying, I would not be seeking Him. But He has already informed me that He is with me, in my state of moving away as well as in my state of standing still. He has a ‘face’ in everything. So why roam around? Moving with the aim of reaching Him is [simply] a sign of not having found Him in stillness!... We have tasted both these orders, and we have seen that stillness is preferable to movement, and greater in terms of awareness [of God] that comes with the shifting of states at every breath. There is no escaping that shifting [of states]: it is a well-trodden path, in which we are led rather than making our own way. (*FM* II:294 qtd. in Hirtenstein 167)

The Librarian relates just such a process of roaming in search for the truth. He relates that he has employed rational thought in an attempt to comprehend the Library (112), that he has dreamed that the mirrors in the vestibules are “figurations and promises of the infinite” (112), that “in my younger days I traveled: I have journeyed in quest of a book, perhaps the catalog of catalogs,” that he has considered carefully the and that he “squandered” his years on “ventures” such as the search for “the Book-Man,” the “distant librarian” who “...must have examined” “... a book that is the cipher and perfect compendium of all other books, and some librarian must have examined that book; this librarian is analogous to a god” (Borges, “The Library of Babel” 116–17). Here the act of seeking, or traveling, in search of truth, corresponds with Ibn al-ʿArabī’s description of the constantly roaming seeker and the frequent shifts of “states” within the seeker. Ultimately, the truth divined is gleaned not from a real, physical journey, but from one that has occurred on a spiritual plane.

Furthermore, the truth discovered by the Librarian through his incessant roaming and change in states echoes with Ibn al-‘Arabī’s own “truth” that “He has a face in everything:”

I suspect that the human species—the only species—teeters at the verge of extinction, yet that the Library—enlightened, solitary, infinite, perfectly unmoving, armed with precious volumes, pointless, incorruptible, and secret—will endure.

I have just written the word “infinite.” I have not included that adjective out of mere rhetorical habit; I hereby state that it is not illogical to think that the world is infinite. Those who believe it to have limits hypothesize that in some remote place or places the corridors and staircases and hexagons may, inconceivably, end—which is absurd. And yet those who picture the world as unlimited forget that the number of possible books is not. I will be bold enough to suggest this solution to the ancient problem: The Library is unlimited but periodic. If an eternal traveler should journey in any direction, he would find after untold centuries, that the same volumes are repeated in the same disorder—which, repeated, becomes order: the Order. My solitude is cheered by that elegant hope. (Borges, “The Library of Babel” 118)

Realization of this “Order” that pervades everything, imposing a master organization over apparent chaos, gives the narrator “elegant hope” against the overwhelming complexity of the universe and the material conditions of his reality. It is hope for the endurance of the species, of the survival of man in the face of apparent disorder, chaos, and spatial confusion. In this manner, the final thoughts of the Librarian teach that the Order is both an immanent repetition of the hexagons of the Library and transcendent in pattern beyond human comprehension. The Librarian’s closing words imply that the Library’s space has a pattern that is immediate and present within all its books and the residents well as over and above them, organizing the infinite into an Order that is imperceptible to the individual Librarian. This resonates sharply with Ibn al-‘Arabī’s gnosis of the unity of Being and the godhead’s simultaneous immanence and transcendence.

Thus, while not overtly expressed by Borges or the narrator as mystical reportage, “The Library of Babel” can be read as a literary representation of mysticism. Its use of the sphere and hexagon metaphor, enumerative and apophatic style, and its references to an endless journey

leading to gnosis earmark it as a highly literary representation of mystical experience that corresponds closely to the written expression of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s theosophy. Furthermore, Borges’s suggestion of the Order governing an apparent chaos in spherical space and the idea in the story that there is no monopoly on the literary expression or containment of truth can help direct theorization of resistance by encouraging those facing power to conceive of alternative conceptions of spatial relationships. There are multiple versions of the truth of the Order in the Library and there are multiple commentaries on each of those truths. This textual multiplicity dispels the notion of the validity and “correctness” of an “orthodox truth” and exposes the folly of humanity’s attempts to impose order and textual authority on space.

### **Ibn al-ʿArabī’s *Tarjumān al-ashwāq* and metaphors of movement through space**

“The basis of all existence is movement. There cannot be any non-movement in it, for it were non-moving, it would revert to its origin, which is non-existence. Travelling never ceases in the high and in the low worlds. Likewise, the divine realities are constantly traveling, coming and going.” (Ibn al-ʿArabī *Kitāb al-isfār ʿn natʿij al-asfār* 4-6, trans. from the French by Hirtenstein 159-60).

Having established some kind of Akbarian presence in the work of Borges and having suggested how this mystical tinting can inform resistance strategies, I will now investigate how Ibn al-ʿArabī’s spatial ontology might inform Mahfouz’s creative work. To do this, I will first briefly summarize how Ibn al-ʿArabī employs metaphors of movement to signify the spiritual journey of the seeker or disciple (*al-murīd*) towards the godhead in his collection of odes, *Tarjumān al-ashwāq* (*The Interpreter of Desires*). By referring to Ibn al-ʿArabī’s employment of movement metaphors, I will then examine Mahfouz’s depictions of movement in *Riḥla Ibn Fattouma*, “Zaʿbalāwī,” and *Layālī alf layla* as representations of the mystic quest for gnosis. Finally, I will explain how I conceive of this type of representation in each text as forming the basis for strategies for resistance to power.

Since Ibn al-ʿArabi’s spirituality can be viewed as developing in conjunction with his actual physical movement through space (Bowering 16),<sup>123</sup> it is not surprising that his mystical writing employs metaphors of movement based on his esoteric conceptualizations of space. As Michel Chodkiewicz points out in his commentary on a recent translation of the Sheikh’s *Kitāb al-isfār ʿn nat’ij al-asfār (Book of the Unveiling of the Effects of the Voyage)*, Ibn al-ʿArabī felt that all created beings were traveling on a path either *to*, *within*, or *from* the godhead. The fruits of these journeys are suggested by the subtle word-play between the shared root of the key words *asfār* (voyage) and *isfār* (unveiling) in the Arabic title of the Sheikh’s book; for Ibn al-ʿArabī, the voyage is an essential component for the revelation of gnosis (Chodkiewicz, “The Endless Voyage” par. 4-5). For this reason, spatial metaphors in the odes of Ibn al-ʿArabi’s *The Interpreter of Desires* can be read, at the urging of the poet’s commentary on the odes, as representing the soul’s movement towards, within, or away from the godhead.

### **Types of movement allegorized in *The Interpreter of Desires***

Fragments from *The Interpreter of Desires* are perhaps Ibn al-ʿArabī’s best known work outside of Sufi circles; for example, *qasīda* XI from this collection, recently translated by Michael Sells as “Gentle Now, Doves” appears in the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition of the *Norton Anthology of World Literature*, widely used to teach university-level world literature survey classes. Indeed, this particular *qasīda*’s final “stanzas,” or *buyūt*, here presented in a translation by R.A. Nicholson, are also widely quoted by those seeking to demonstrate an essential unity behind the world’s religious traditions:

My heart has become capable of every form: it is a pasture for gazelles and  
convent for Christian monks,

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<sup>123</sup> Hirtenstein’s *The Unlimited Mercifier* is a recent study devoted to fully developing this connection between Ibn al-ʿArabī’s physical journeys and the development and articulation of his theosophy.

And a temple for idols and the pilgrim's Ka'ba and the tables of the Tora and the book of the Koran.

I follow the religion of Love: whatever way Love's camels take, that is my religion and my faith.

We have a pattern in Bishr, the lover of Hind and her sister, and in Qays and Lubnā and in Mayya and Ghaylan. (57)

These stanzas efficiently illustrate the method followed by Ibn al-°Arabī in the odes of *The Interpreter of Desires*, that of using erotic—even maddening--love<sup>124</sup> to serve as vehicle for the expression of esoteric Love between the mystic and the godhead. When Ibn al-°Arabī first published the *Interpreter of Desires*, he was charged with glorifying sensual love and characterized as decadent, to the degree that he was compelled to provide an extensive commentary for each stanza of the 61 odes. In the preface to his odes, Ibn al-°Arabī explains:

[t]hese pages include the love-poems which I composed at Mecca, whilst visiting the holy places in the months of Rajab, Sha'bān, and Ramaḍān. In these poems I point to various sorts of Divine knowledge and spiritual mysteries and intellectual sciences and religious exhortations. I have used the erotic style and form of expression because men's souls are enamoured of it, so that there are many reasons why it should commend itself. (Ibn al-°Arabī, *Tarjumān Al-Ashwāq: A Collection of Mystical Odes* 4)

Yet this apologia did not stop theological critics of the Sheikh from charging him with sliding into eroticism and worshipping the human form over that of Allah. Thus, in the preface to his third recension of the odes Ibn al-°Arabī remarks that his close friend and student Shamsu'ddin

had heard some theologian remark that the author's declaration [of the mystical significance of erotic metaphors] was not true, his declaration namely, that the love-poems in this collection refer to mystical sciences and realities. 'Probably,' said the critic, 'he adopted this device in order to protect himself from the imputation that he, a man famous for religion and piety, composed poetry in the erotic style.' Shamsu'ddin was offended by his observations and repeated them to me. Accordingly, I began to write the commentary ... this was the occasion of

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<sup>124</sup> The list of names in the final stanza is a catalog of lovers famous in Arabic literature who have gone to extremes for the sake of their beloved.

my explaining the *Tarjumān* ... (Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Tarjumān Al-Ashwāq: A Collection of Mystical Odes* 5)

The Sheikh goes on to explain that this commentary ultimately convinced critics “of the good faith of any Sūfīs who should assert that they attached a mystical signification to the words used in ordinary speech” (5).

Thus, in the odes, each place name is imbued with a complex interplay of meanings, as are the classical pre-Islamic Arabic literary images conjured up in the odes, the more prevalent of which are camels, doves, thunderclaps, lightning flashes, and campsites of the beloved. It is worth speculating about why Ibn al-ʿArabī chose to express his theosophy in the mode of pre-Islamic poetry, especially when it is taken into consideration that *The Interpreter of Desires* was written approximately 611 AH. Perhaps his use of the form and subject matter of the pre-Islamic *qasīda* was intended to attract a wider audience; this, incidentally, would put Ibn al-ʿArabī’s collection into the category of “literary representations of mysticism” that I am also seeking to place Borges and Mahfouz. Just as significantly, the pre-Islamic *qasida*’s themes of longing, constant mobility, dynamic change, and its stock of images are particularly well-suited to depict Ibn al-ʿArabī’s vision of the esoteric experience as it relates to journeying through inner space (Hämeen-Anttila 102–03; 107).

In perhaps the most thorough analysis to date of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s reliance on metaphors of movement in the pre-Islamic ode to express his spatial ontology, Hämeen-Antilla finds that in *The Interpreter of Desires*, the Sheikh describes four types of movement-related metaphors: horizontal, vertical, circular, and static (or lack of movement). Each of these metaphorical types, according to Hämeen-Antilla, corresponds to a hierarchy in the types or relationships between a human’s soul and the “Ultimate Reality,” or the godhead: horizontal, vertical, spiritual, and lack of movement/rest (107). The godhead itself is static in this view, free from flux and the

“concepts of time and space” (107), and Ibn al-ʿArabī not only explains in the commentary on the odes the metaphorical import of all of his descriptions of spatial movement (109), he also argues for the “unreality” of all movement (109) in the poem: as the godhead is omnipresent, the center of a sphere which is everywhere, “one cannot, by definition, travel towards it nor away from it as both directions lead simultaneously towards and away from it” (109). Furthermore, in Ibn al-ʿArabī’s gnosis that the material world is not real, but rather only fragmentations of the Real, any movement in the material world could be considered as inherently unreal and illusory.

### ***Horizontal movement***

The most basic level in the hierarchy of relationship between the mystic and the godhead is represented by Ibn al-ʿArabī with descriptions of horizontal movement from *terminus a quo* to *terminus ad quem*, for example depictions or suggestions of movement through physical space towards some kind of sacred space: a mosque, temple, or church for example. Interestingly, as Hämeen-Anttila points out, Ibn al-ʿArabi also often uses horizontal *physical* movement to symbolize vertical *spiritual* movement of souls and states to and from the heavens—though as will be explained, the notions of horizontal and vertical movement are not to be taken literally in themselves (107–8).

### ***Vertical movement***

The next level of relation between the human soul and the godhead is represented by Ibn al-ʿArabī through suggestions/depictions of vertical movement, specifically of spiritual states and divine names as they descend from the godhead to the mystic or as they ascend back to the godhead after a “specific” spiritual state (*ḥāl*) leaves a mystic. As the Sheik explains in his commentary to *The Interpreter of Desires*, he intends descriptions of horizontal journey to stand for vertical movement as a depiction of the soul of the mystic ascending and descending through

various stations and states (Hämeen-Anttila 108). While Ibn al-ʿArabī was surely not the first nor last Sufi to create taxonomies of the states and stations, “no one else has paid as much attention to explaining all their intricacies” (Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* 278). Therefore, it is quite clear that the states, stations, and their metaphorical depiction by the Sheikh were prime concerns in his poetry and that his conceptualizations of states and stations were among some of the most rigorous articulations in Sufi theosophic literature.

### ***Spiritual movement***

Thus, in his “erotic” odes, Ibn al-ʿArabi uses descriptions of horizontal movement to and from geographic place names to figuratively represent “vertical” movement. This vertical movement, this ascent and descent, in turn stands in for the movement of spiritual states (Hämeen-Anttila 108). Although Hämeen-Anttila does not explicitly make this point, the convection—or circularity—characterizing the constant cyclical ascent and descent of spiritual states is fairly obvious, and in this way the Sheikh’s use of metaphorical vertical movement to represent spiritual changes can also be considered as a metaphor for circular/spiritual movement, although again it must be recalled that despite his attempts to do so, Ibn al-ʿArabī felt it “absurd” (108) to attempt to confine “spiritual phenomenon” to terms of spatiality.

### ***Circular motion***

Beyond his suggestion in the commentary that horizontal movement signifies vertical and circular movement, Ibn al-ʿArabī also relies on actual depictions of circumambulations in his poems to represent the relationship of the godhead to the seeker of the Real, as well as the seeker’s place in divine spatial ontology. The literal depiction of circular motion is unsurprising, because Ibn al-ʿArabi reveals in his preface or commentary that he was inspired by his own circumambulation around the Kaʿba to write the *The Interpreter of Desires* (Hämeen-Anttila



119); in addition, Sufis have historically used vigorous movement in a circle as a means of facilitating the achievement of *sama*<sup>c</sup> (118), or the mystical “listening” to the godhead. Ibn al-<sup>c</sup>Arabī is hardly the first or last Sufi to make use of this metaphor as a theosophical heuristic.

Moreover, since Ibn al-<sup>c</sup>Arabī depicts the universe as a sphere and he uses the circle as a two dimensional heuristic in order to convey his understanding of how the Real begins manifesting Itself to existence (Akkach 116), his depictions of circular movement to represent the journey towards gnosis is an easily understood rhetorical choice by Ibn al-<sup>c</sup>Arabī. The entire enterprise of the seeker questing for the godhead can be seen metaphorically as a circle, with the mystic perpetually traveling on the circumference in an attempt to approach the godhead at the center (Hämeen-Anttila 109), which, in the theosophy of simultaneous transcendence and immanence, is already contained in the heart of the seeker (108-09). Thus for Ibn al-<sup>c</sup>Arabī, the true journey within the godhead occurs within the heart of the seeker.

### ***Relativity of Motion***

The paradoxical notion of circular movement aimed towards attaining a center that is already everywhere leads to the consideration of another consistent theme in Ibn al-<sup>c</sup>Arabī’s depictions of movement through space—the relativity of all motion. At the horizontal level, Hämeen-Attila points out the manner in which Ibn al-<sup>c</sup>Arabi illustrates with a horizontal metaphor the movement to and from the godhead of the spiritual states: the Sheikh poetically portrays the lover as “withdrawing” from the Beloved just as the Beloved “departs” from the lover. As Ibn al-<sup>c</sup>Arabī’s commentary makes clear, this is an allegorical rendering of what the Sheikh hopes to express about the Divine Names, or spiritual states, when they “leave the heart only when the heart has already turned away from them” (110).

Ibn al-<sup>c</sup>Arabī also illustrates the relativity of movement by depicting circular movement. For example, as Hämeen-Antilla points out, the description of the moon orbiting the earth during

the pilgrimage in ode 29 of *The Interpreter of Desires* provides an image of circling bodies going around each other which helps to illustrate that from the perspective of each body, the other body appears to be moving; the lesson taught here by the Sheikh ultimately is that directional terms are only one way to view and talk about the world (119). The relativity of movement suggests that the appearance of movement is untrustworthy and is not the Real; motion is for that reason associated by Ibn al-ʿArabī with the physical world of change (120). Since all spatial movement is illusory, the only journey to the Real must occur in the heart of the mystic (120), even though, according to Ibn al-ʿArabī, the seeker will eventually find that the godhead is already there.

### *Circular movement and stasis*

Related to the relativity of movement is the idea of motion that is not motion (119). As a result of the notion of the unity of Being that underpins his entire theosophy, Ibn al-ʿArabi conceives of the Divine Presence as spatially unlimited and undelineated; it is “equally present everywhere” and so “one cannot, by definition, travel towards it nor away from it as both directions lead simultaneously towards and away from it” (109). Therefore, depictions of circular movement in the poems are an attempt to capture this paradox of “travelling on the circumference to attain the centre” (109), the “centre” being the Real. Moreover, as Ibn al-ʿArabī thought of the Real as a limitless and centerless sphere, the journey would never reach the goal intended; one perspective sees the motion as going nowhere, and in this way, as Hämeen-Anttila argues, the object in view appears to be static. Relative to a center that is both everywhere and nowhere and in constant flux, if a body in motion cannot and does not change its proximity to that center, the appearance, relatively speaking, is that the body does not move. Metaphorical representations of the idea of movement in which the seeker does not ever get anywhere, as Ibn al-ʿArabi explains in his commentary, is an attempt to portray the journey towards the Real as a

perpetual and never-concluded pilgrimage, and in this way Ibn al-ʿArabi describes a paradoxical situation in which a subject can be both in motion and at rest at the same time. Hämeen-Antilla sums it up pithily: “The incessant travel and transition highlight the metaphoric character of travelling, a never-ending travel within Nowheresville: always on the way, you are not traveling anywhere” (110). Hämeen-Antilla also points out that the structure of the *Tarjumān* is such that most of the poems concerning static states have garden backdrops or contexts (110-111). Likewise, descriptions in the poems of circular movement, in which the movement does not continually extend horizontally or vertically, is “most often found in the otherwise static garden poems” (111).

***The paradox of movement as not moving and the limits of reason***

The outcome of Ibn al-ʿArabi’s representations of movement, according to Hämeen-Antilla, is that Ibn al-ʿArabi seeks to shatter the rational mindset of his readers and followers in order to free them from the fetters of reason. But what makes Ibn al-ʿArabi a truly interesting study is that the Sheikh seeks to “break the logical structure of the reader’s thinking,” not with stock metaphors like those used by other Sufi poets of being lost and perplexed as a necessary and inevitable part of the Sufi path, but with “[i]nternal contradictions” that “often mark the absurdity of all spatial conceptions” (112). Hämeen-Antilla cites verses three, five, and six in ode fourteen of *The Interpreter of Desires* as good examples of the verses that mark these contradictions: Ibn al-ʿArabi presents a logical problem by describing the Beloved as both residing within the lover’s ribs but also being located so far away that wind-borne missives are required to reach the Beloved (112-13). In this verse too in the original Arabic are grammatical inconsistencies in gender and number between pronouns and antecedents. The net sum of this inconsistency is that the Sheikh demonstrates that the Real is where “opposites coincide” and

where “movement towards is identical with the movement away from, just like the movement on the circumference is simultaneously movement away from the centre and towards it” (113). For Ibn al-ʿArabi, reason can only work within its limits, like the sense of smell can only detect scents and odors; “there is more to Reality than meets the eye of reason” (113). The end result is that through logical and grammatical inconsistencies, Ibn al-ʿArabi generates confusion in his readers, as in his view this is a “necessary step” from logical to supralogical thinking; in other words, the confusion generated by his complex manipulation of movement metaphors and spatial referents offers a genuine challenge to rational epistemology and ontology.<sup>125</sup>

### **Mahfouz and Space**

I will now reveal points of contact between Ibn al-ʿArabi’s deployment of movement metaphors and Mahfouz’s creative writing, pointing out how several passages from his novels and short stories closely correspond with Ibn al-ʿArabi’s figurative descriptions of journey. Just as Ibn al-ʿArabi’s descriptions seek to generate bewilderment and perplexity in order to shatter orthodox rationality, Mahfouz’s employment of these tropes will suggest some fundamental concepts which could be used in the construction of theories of resistance.

#### **“Zaʿbalāwī”**

An interesting correspondence can be located between Ibn al-ʿArabi’s journey to the godhead via passage through various states and stations and what Mahfouz considered as his favorite among the dozens of short stories that he composed (Elad 632). “Zaʿbalāwī” appeared first in print in 1961 but was published in Mahfouz’s second published collection of short stories, *Dunyā Allāh (God’s World)* in 1963. The early 1960s stand as a critical juncture in Arabic

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<sup>125</sup> See also Almond, “The Honesty of the Perplexed: Derrida and Ibn Arabi on Confusion” (Almond 39–62).

literary history. The political, aesthetic, and cultural tensions of the period are acutely reflected in the content of the short stories in *God's World*, with “Za<sup>c</sup>balāwī” clearly reflecting the contrasting worlds of the old and the new in Nasserist Cairo and describing the loss of and search for spiritual or religious faith. These concerns unsurprisingly also occupy Mahfouz’s attentions in his novels of the period, such as *Awlād Ḥāratinā* (*Children of Gebelaawi*) and *Al-Liṣṣ wa ‘l-Kilāb* (*The Thief and the Dogs*), as Amir Elad so adroitly points out (632). Egyptian critic Sasson Somekh has noted not only the phonetic echoes between the names of the Za<sup>c</sup>balāwī and Gebelaawi, the elusive figure of the godhead in the mythical *Children of Gebelaawi*, but also the thematic concern in “Za<sup>c</sup>balāwī” of “man’s search for God, after science has failed to quench his metaphysical doubt,” its “delicate, but devastating counter-attack upon fossilized religious institutions” and its “evocative style” (Somekh, *The Changing Rhythm. A Study of Najīb Mahfūz’s Novels* 57).<sup>126</sup> More pointedly, Johnson-Davies remarks that the story “introduces us to a world of uncertainty, frustration, and contradiction, a world inspired by Sufism... in whose literature Naguib Mahfouz is deeply read” (Johnson-Davies ix). Many critics have pointed to the story’s circular narrative structure (Beard 165; Allen, “Teaching Mahfouz’s ‘Zaabalawi’” 160), incidentally a strategy also employed by Ibn al-<sup>c</sup>Arabī to frame his *Interpreter of Desires* within the “questions of spatiality and direction” (Hämeen-Anttila 111).

This narrative structure provides a subtle clue about the mystical import of the story. The story begins: “Finally I became convinced that I had to find Sheikh Zaabalawi” (Mahfouz, “Za<sup>c</sup>balāwī” 1) and ends with the line “Yes, I have to find Zaabalawi” (14). This loop formed by the terminal points of the story is a structural manifestation of the metaphors of circular

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<sup>126</sup> For analysis of Mahfouz’s literary career up until 1967, the inquisitive scholar could do no better than Sasoon’s “methodical and perceptive” monograph (El-Enany, *Naguib Mahfouz* 259).

movement in Ibn al-<sup>c</sup>Arabī's odes that the journey towards the godhead is a perpetual movement around the center of the sphere (Hämeen-Anttila 118–20). Beyond the suggestive circular narrative structure, it is quite clear that the short story is a compressed allegory for the Sufi search for the Real. The plot is driven by an unnamed narrator's search for a cure for his ambiguously described illness, which, rather than a physical ailment is most likely a spiritual malaise, based on the extensive use of the metaphor of illness to indicate faith crises in Mahfouz's novels from the 1960s (Elad 633): "The days passed and brought with them many illnesses, for each one of which I was able, without too much trouble and at a cost I could afford, to find a cure, until I became afflicted with that illness for which no one possesses a remedy" (Mahfouz, "Za<sup>c</sup>balāwī" 1). In his youth, the narrator heard from his father of the spiritual and curative powers of a man named Za<sup>c</sup>balāwī, and he decides to seek him out hoping he can find some relief for his dis-ease. During his search for the man who might cure him, the narrator moves from one person to the next, gradually getting closer to Za<sup>c</sup>balāwī.

Elad has previously identified the narrator's visits with each of these people as "stations," but his analysis of these stations revolves solely around the identification of each station with either a dimension of new, modern Cairo or old, traditional Cairo (Elad 641) rather than any kind of spiritual station in the Sufi sense of the word; however, there is clearly enough evidence, when read with an awareness of the Sufi reliance on the notion of passing through stations, to render "Za<sup>c</sup>balāwī" as an allegory for the mystical journey towards the godhead. This is made clear if the "stations" are read not only as a move from the "new" to the "traditional," but also as a sequence of the narrator letting go of material, secular concerns and ultimately of rationality.

The first station is represented by Sheikh Qamar, a lawyer who settles legal disputes and provides answers on religious questions through an orthodox interpretation of shari<sup>c</sup>; formerly a

resident of the old quarter but now living and practicing in the material comfort of “Garden City,” a modern Cairo neighborhood, he was “one of those sheikhs who practice law in the religious courts” (1-2). This first station symbolizes humanity’s reliance on the literal word of the Qur’an, or the received, but ultimately material, words of the godhead. This station occupies what Ibn al-ʿArabī referred to as the “journey *to* God by land,” which “has its origin in faith in revelation” (Chodkiewicz, “The Endless Voyage” par. 5).<sup>127</sup> The Sheikh’s name means “moon” in Arabic, and like his namesake, the man representing this first station coldly waxes and wanes in his willingness to help the narrator and in expressing his sentiments about Zaʿbalāwī. The meeting with Sheikh Qamar ends with the narrator retaining only a faint glimmer of hope that his goal even exists: “That was a very long time ago and I scarcely recall him now... We used to regard him as man of miracles” (3). Despite the distant tone of Sheikh Qamar, he is at least able to point the narrator towards the second station, so at least through this encounter with the personification of orthodox shariʿ, the narrator does in some way progress in his quest to be healed.

After departing this station, the narrator next encounters in the Birgawi Residence—located in a run-down quarter of old Cairo—an anonymous bookseller and other random shopkeepers who represent the humanist worlds of knowledge and commerce. The bookseller is mentioned as a peddler of “old books on theology and mysticism” (3), and the narrator’s encounter at this station can be read as a move first towards, and then away from, rational knowledge and discourse as well as written attempts at capturing esoteric knowledge. This provides a good example of the type of motion described by Ibn al-ʿArabī in his commentary to

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<sup>127</sup> Ibn al-ʿArabī also speaks of the journey to God by sea, which is “that of speculative thought, [and] is uncertain and even dangerous” (Chodkiewicz, “The Endless Voyage” par. 5).

*The Interpreter of Desires* ascending and descending convective motion of spiritual states in relation to the seeker. The bookseller's memories of Za<sup>c</sup>balāwī are enthusiastic: "Many were the times he would sit with me talking of bygone days, and I would be blessed by his holy presence;" but the reactions of the other shopkeepers to the narrator's inquiries range from fond recollection to outright derision (3-4). Each bookseller appears to be occupied by a different spiritual state regarding their attitude towards Za<sup>c</sup>balāwī and the gnosis he transmitted. At any rate, the seeker persistently pursues his goal.

In the third station the narrator encounters a "local sheikh" located close to the narrator's own home. The local sheikh has a warm but measured attitude towards Za<sup>c</sup>balāwī, remarking that "He's a baffling man, but I thank the Lord that he is still alive!" (4). Likewise, this station signifies only a slightly closer move towards detaching from the worldly and rational, as the sheikh's small, dilapidated, and humble office nevertheless contains a telephone and a desk, upon which the sheikh proceeds to draft a very detailed map for the narrator so that he can "go about it systematically" (5); here the reliance on rationality continues to intrude on the narrator's journey.

Thus far in the first three stations, the narrator has moved gradually closer to his goal, but as Elad points out, the first three stations "belong to the sphere of reason" (637). Upon leaving the third station, the narrator is directed by the owner of a local ironing shop to consult the calligrapher Hassanein and he begins to more closely approach an irrational experience of the Real. In Islamic culture, the calligrapher's work is devoted to presenting the names of god or Qur'anic verses into beautiful visual productions. The art is painstaking and requires a great deal of training, practice, refinement of technique, and rational decision making. Yet, calligraphy also relies highly on the irrational, or inspiration, to achieve its greatest heights. As <sup>c</sup>Amm Hassanein



exclaims when reminiscing about his own encounters with Za<sup>c</sup>balāwī, “He was so constantly with me... that I felt him to be a part of everything I drew... He had impeccable taste, and it was due to him that I made my most beautiful drawings” (6). Here it is clear that influence of Za<sup>c</sup>balāwī on the calligrapher transcends that of scientific or technical instruction or improvement; the calligrapher’s insistence that he “felt” Za<sup>c</sup>balāwī’s presence in all of his art indicates that the mysterious title character’s impact is more in the realm of the intuitive and the irrational.

As Elad observes, this fourth station at the calligrapher’s marks “a turning point” in the narrator’s search (637), however the artist does not know where Za<sup>c</sup>balāwī can be found. Only after leaving the calligrapher’s studio does the narrator obtain from a pea and legume vendor information leading to the next station, which is the home of the musician Sheikh Gad. Like the calligrapher, the musician’s effusive singing and subsequent praise of Za<sup>c</sup>balāwī provides the reader clues about the nature of the elusive sheikh in this moment recounted by the narrator. Moreover, as Beard points out, the poem sung by Sheikh Gad is a verse suggested by Za<sup>c</sup>balāwī from the *diwan* of Ibn al Fāriḍ, “one of the most important figures in the poetry of Sufism” (Beard 169) and it clearly relies on the metaphor of wine as a symbol for the godhead (Schimmel 49; 75; 275; 283) and drunkenness as the mystical consciousness acquired from encountering the godhead (203; 369), common to much Sufi literature:

He raised his head from the lute and skillfully fingered the opening bars of a melody. Then he sang:

*“I make lavish mention, even though I blame myself, of those I love,  
For the stories of the beloved are my wine.”* (“Za<sup>c</sup>balāwī” 8)

As Beard observes, the above translation by Johnson-Davies does not convey the sense of circular movement suggested by the original Arabic verse: “*adir dhikra man ahwā wa law bi*

*malāmī//fa 'inna ahādīth al-habībi mudāmī'*<sup>128</sup> which Homerin translates more accurately as “Pass round remembrance of one I love// though that be to blame me, //for tales of the beloved//are my wine” (qtd. in Beard 169). Such circular motion suggested by “Pass around remembrance” in Fāriḍ’s verse recalls Ibn al-ʿArabī’s dependence upon circular metaphors to suggest the motion that is not motion, that is, the journey *within* God.<sup>129</sup> Likewise, as Ibn al-ʿArabī conceives of the Sufi saint who has reached God, “there is no movement on his part. He is moved by God: the ‘endless voyage’ is a motionless voyage” (Chodkiewicz, “The Endless Voyage” par. 19); in *The Interpreter of Desires*, Ibn al-ʿArabī uses metaphors of circular motion to indicate this “motionless voyage.” Furthermore, Beard points out that al-Fāriḍ’s verse itself implies the Sufi notion that “to be in a state of spiritual intoxication is to be transported into the sky” (168), recalling Ibn al-ʿArabī’s use of vertical movement metaphors to suggest spiritual changes. Thus there is shared Sufi construct of circular and vertical movement to suggest the journey within the godhead and eternal flux of spiritual states informing the story.

After the recitation of the Sufi al-Fāriḍ’s poem, the reader then learns of the otherworldliness of Zaʿbalāwī’s talents:

With a heart that was weary and listless, I followed the beauty of the melody and the singing.

“I composed the music to this poem in a single night,” he told me when he had finished. “I remember that it was the eve of the Lesser Bairam. Zaabalawi was my guest for the whole of that night, and the poem was of his own choosing. He would sit for a while just where you are, then would get up and play with my children as though he were one of them. Whenever I was overcome by weariness or my inspiration failed me, he would punch me playfully in the chest and joke

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<sup>128</sup> أدر ذكر من أهوى ولو بملامي  
فان أحاديث الحبيب مدامي

<sup>129</sup> It is helpful to recall here the anecdote indicating the friendship and theosophical affinity between Ibn al-ʿArabī and al-Fāriḍ. When Ibn al-ʿArabī asked to write a commentary on a poem by al-Fāriḍ, the latter replied that Ibn al-ʿArabī’s *Meccan Revelations* were commentary enough (Austin 15; 15 n. 64).

with me, and I would bubble over with melodies, and thus I continued working till I finished the most beautiful piece I have ever composed.”

“Does he know anything about music?”

“He is the epitome of things musical. He has an extremely beautiful speaking voice, and you have only to hear him to want burst into song and to be inspired to creativity...” (Mahfouz, “Za‘balāwī” 8–9)

This episode at the fifth station keeps the narrator moving along his journey out of rationality and towards the irrational, but it should also be mentioned that the comments of the men occupying the fourth and fifth stations who share their wisdom with the narrator illuminate some of the attributes of the Real and demonstrate the effects of gnosis of the Real on humans. Clearly, based on the testimonies of the calligrapher and the musician, invigoration and inspiration are the effects of an encounter with Za‘balāwī, and he is the very “epitome” of artistic beauty. Thus from the first to the fifth stations, the narrator has experienced 1) the wisdom and the rationality of shari‘; 2) rational knowledge in books and in daily commerce along with some contact with esoterica and gnosis; 3) reliance on the empirical and geographic and rational cognitive mapping of space; 4) an understanding of the source of visual beauty; and 5) an understanding the source of musical beauty and harmony.

The sixth and final station depicts the narrator’s encounter first hand with beauty and harmony in the spiritual plane and a hint at the wisdom to be taken from gnosis of the Real when the narrator he arrives at the tavern. As noted, Sufis have used wine poetry and metaphors to signify the mystical experience, and the metaphor of wine drinking is symbolic of both divinely granted ecstasy and the sense of taste, or *dhawq*, is in itself a metaphor for an encounter with the godhead. Therefore, the narrator’s description of the tasting of wine and the onset of his drunkenness should be read as symbolic of the mystical experience.

The narrator describes the experience as a dream that he has after consuming a large volume of wine. He passes out intoxicated and begins to dream:

I dreamed that I was in an immense garden surrounded on all sides by luxuriant trees, and the sky was nothing but stars seen between the entwined branches, all enfolded in an atmosphere like that of sunset or a sky overcast with cloud. I was lying on a small hummock of jasmine petals, more of which fell upon me like rain, while the lucent spray of a fountain unceasingly sprinkled the crown of my head and my temples. I was in a state of deep contentedness, of ecstatic serenity. An orchestra of warbling and cooing played in my ear. There was an extraordinary sense of harmony between me and my inner self, and between the two of us and the world, everything being in its rightful place, without discord or distortion. In the whole world there was no single reason for speech or movement, for the universe moved in a rapture of ecstasy. This lasted but a short while. When I opened my eyes, consciousness struck at me like a policeman's fist...  
 ("Za<sup>c</sup>balāwī" 13)

Multi-Douglas refers to this dream as "semi-mystical" and juxtaposes it with "Dream 15" from "Ra'aytu fima yara al-na'im" (I Saw as the Sleeper Sees"), a story from Mahfouz's 1982 short story collection of the same name, on the basis that both dreams are "bathed in a mystical aura, which is then destroyed by the bureaucratic system" (Multi-Douglas 134). While Multi-Douglas does accurately identify the role of the bureaucracy, the machine of rationalist orthodoxy, as the interrupter of both dreams, I would argue that the dream in "Za<sup>c</sup>balāwī" is more than just bathed in a "mystical aura" or "semi-mystical." Instead, the dream experienced by the narrator of Za<sup>c</sup>balāwī should more rightly be considered a prime example of a literary representation of mystical experience.

The precondition for the experience was a drunkenness, a *ḥayra*—a bewilderment or perplexity of the rational mind—which Ibn al-<sup>c</sup>Arabī asserts is a necessary symptom of the journey within God (Chodkiewicz, "The Endless Voyage" par. 5). The passive nature<sup>130</sup> of the experience is made clear, as the narrator recounts his prostrate position and the sensory data of the moment washes over him and fills his ears. However, it should be noted that the fact that the

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<sup>130</sup> Again, it needs to be underscored here that "passivity" is not a universally agreed upon characteristic of mystical consciousness. James considered it so, but many others have argued against this.

narrator was only able to achieve the awareness of mystical consciousness through a concerted effort of moving through space, progressing in Sufi fashion from station to station complicates the notion that the narrator's experience is passive. The noetic value of the dream, "the sense of harmony between me and my inner self, and between the two of us and the world, everything in its rightful place" evokes Ibn al-ʿArabī's notion of the immanent godhead, and the feeling of the narrator that "there was no single reason for speech" indicates the ineffability of the experience; finally, the transience of the narrator's mystical consciousness is overtly stated as "[t]his lasted but a short while." Using James's criteria, the dream is unequivocally a literary representation of mystical experience.

The narrator finds out after he wakes that the person who is the object of his search was with him while he slept, and as such, the dream occurs while the sleeper was in the presence of Zaʿbalāwī. After fully recovering from his dream, the narrator learns that he will be cured by Zaʿbalāwī without a fee and "[m]erely on sensing that you love him" ("Zaʿbalāwī" 13). This evokes the idea of the lover and the Beloved as metaphors so widely used in the corpus of Sufi literature and vividly expressed across the span of the odes in Ibn al-ʿArabī's *Tarjumān*.

Here it should be recalled that the narrator's mystical experience results in large part from a sustained journey through physical space in the story; at this point I want to argue that this narration of jagged horizontal movement through space symbolizes the vertical and spiritual movement of Sufi consciousness in much the same way as Ibn al-ʿArabī depicts it in *The Interpreter of Desires*. Therefore, this zig-zagging between different quarters of Cairo can be read as a metaphorical horizontal movement to represent vertical ascent of the spirit of the narrator through various spiritual stations towards the Real; at the same time this horizontal

movement can be seen as representative or at least suggestive of the “states” which descend upon him during his journey, which allow him to absorb the wisdom of each stage.

This is not to claim that Ibn al-ʿArabī exclusively conceptualized the notion of stations and stages.<sup>131</sup> However, Ibn al-ʿArabī did profoundly influence the transmission of the ideas about stations (or stages) by his “genius” for “systemization” (Schimmel 263) and “no one else has paid as much attention to explaining all their intricacies” (Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* 278). Thus any analysis of texts relying on stations of the journey towards gnosis must take into account his influence. However, an understanding of the classical Sufi ideas about the mystical stations along the mystic’s pathway will be sufficient and easier to manage for the present purposes. Nicholson, citing one of the oldest known texts describing Sufi doctrine, *the Kitāb al-Lumāʿ fi t-taṣawwuf*,<sup>132</sup> lists seven stages as part of the Sufi’s “ascetic and ethical discipline” as repentance, abstinence, renunciation, poverty, patience, trust in God, and satisfaction (29) and the ten states as mediation, nearness to God, love, fear, hope, longing, intimacy, tranquility, contemplation, and certainty.

While Mahfouz’s narrator cannot be accurately read as moving exactly through each of these seven stations and experiencing each of these ten states, there is at least a partial allusion by Mahfouz to this particular sequence of stages. For example, the station of poverty is suggested by Mahfouz’s description of the squalid conditions of the calligrapher’s studio in Umm al-Ghulam: “a deep narrow shop full of signboards and jars of color. A strange smell, a mixture of glue and perfume, permeated its every corner. Old Hassanein was squatting on a

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<sup>131</sup> See note four of the present chapter.

<sup>132</sup> This text is attributed to the eastern Persian mystic Abū Naṣr as-Sarrāj (d. 378 AH/988 CE).

sheepskin rug in front of a board propped against the wall.”<sup>133</sup> Likewise, the station of patience is easily suggested in the advice by Sheikh Gad, the musician, for the narrator that “It is no longer an easy matter to reach [Za‘balāwī], but have patience and be sure that you will do so” (Mahfouz, “Za‘balāwī” 8), while the narrator’s willingness to consume wine in the tavern, against his morals and standards, as a means to approach Za‘balāwī could suggest a strong trust in God. The short-lived mystical experience portrayed as a dream are highly suggestive of the final stage, satisfaction, although this satisfaction, true to many other reports of mystical consciousness, is of course ephemera

By imbuing such quotidian locations as a lawyer’s office, a bookseller’s stall, or a local businessman’s desk as waystations on a spiritual journey, and by suggesting that movement through physical space can be considered as crucial to a journey towards and within the godhead, Mahfouz’s short story can inform strategies for resisting orthodox rational conceptions and manipulations of space. The narrator’s malady symbolizes the inability of rational science or medicine to cure the psychic ailments resulting from the encroachment of Western rationality. The more that his search takes him out of rationally ordered space and into that of irrationality, the more closely he approaches relief. His short-lived dream and encounter with Za‘balāwī suggests that an antidote to the rational existential malaise does exist and that it can be discovered in irrational space.

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<sup>133</sup> Elad points out that in the Arabic, “Old” Hassanein is actually referred to as “Uncle” or ‘Amm Hassanein, which “signifies a person of a certain age from the lower classes” (637). The atmosphere of poverty, with the studio’s physical location in the old, destitute quarter of Umm al-Ghulam, the description of the artist’s studio, as well as in the use of this “title,” is strongly implied here by Mahfouz.

### *Ibn Fattouma*

A second point of contact between Ibn al-ʿArabī and Mahfouz can be located in the latter's short allegorical novel *Riḥla Ibn Faṭouma* (*The Journey of Ibn Fattouma*). Coincidentally, just as Ibn al-ʿArabī employed the pre-Islamic qasida as a model for his *Interpreter of Desires*, Mahfouz turned towards the genre of medieval travel narrative as it was produced by the legendary Arab explorer Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (El-Enany, *Naguib Mahfouz* 168). Such a turn was influenced by the mimicking of “archaic” forms and genres pioneered by al-Ghitani and Mahfouz picked up the older form in tribute to, or at least acknowledging, the innovation of his younger contemporary (Allen, “Mahfouz and the Arabic Novel” 129; Allen, “Mahfouz and the Arabic Novel” 32). Mahfouz's novel has been critically received as a parody of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's travelogue, as in contrast to the medieval writer's work, Mahfouz's novel is “a *riḥla* through historical time rather than geographical space,” and “the *Dār al-Islām*, which is idealized in Ibn Baṭṭūṭa ... is harshly criticized and shown to be in need of radical reform” (El-Enany, *Naguib Mahfouz* 174).

Published in Egypt in 1983 by Maktaba Misr (Library of Egypt) and first translated into English in 1992 by the American University of Cairo Press, *The Journey of Ibn Fattouma* is clearly meant to be read, at one level, as an allegorical examination of the different types of societies that humanity has constructed through the recorded experience of the narrator as he travels across the known world during the course of his life.<sup>134</sup> Over the length of the book, the narrator travels and resides in lands that are governed by matriarchal animism, absolute monarchy, democracy, and communism; each land that the narrator visits is a thinly-veiled allegory for each of these types of social structure. However, it should be remembered that the

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<sup>134</sup> See El-Enany (*Naguib Mahfouz* 168–74); Hassan (Hassan 39)



narrator's journeys are motivated by his desire to find the land of Gebel, which is reputed to be "perfection itself" (Mahfouz, *The Journey of Ibn Fattouma* 6); in this type of allegorical reading, the teleology of the novel's survey of human social systems is that humans will continually aspire to arrive at a Utopia. Yet while the contents of the narrator's journey are clearly meant to be read in one view as an allegory for the progression of human society over the course of history, I argue that when placed in proximity with the metaphorical use of movement by Ibn al-ʿArabī in *The Interpreter of Desires*, the novel can also be read as an allegory for the journey of the spirit through the temptations and distractions of the material world in its quest for contact with the godhead. This reading of the novel as an allegory for the mystic's journey is justified by the novel's beginning, which situates the story within a mystical context, its circular narrative structure, and its climactic ending chapters, which include representation of mystical experience and practice. Enclosed as it is within a "journey" through not just not just social and political "states," but also spiritual ones, it will become clear that the novel can be read through the lens of Ibn al-ʿArabī's spatial ontology.

The novel begins with a chapter called "The Homeland," a fictive spatial location that serves as origin of the protagonist and narrator, Qindil, who explains that due to the advanced age of his father and the relative youth of his mother at the time of his birth and childhood, he was ostracized by his much older siblings from his father's first wife. For this reason, Qindil explains that rather than a patronymic designation, he is known in the world by the name of his mother Fattouma (Mahfouz, *The Journey of Ibn Fattouma* 2–3). The opening lines of the novel are couched in the metaphysical: "Life and death, dreaming and wakefulness: stations for the perplexed soul. It traverses them stage by stage, taking signs and hints from things, groping

about in the sea of darkness, clinging stubbornly to a hope that smilingly and mysteriously renews itself. Traveler, what are you searching for?"

These opening lines, if re-read after complete reading of the novel, reflect an attempt by the narrator, whom the reader discovers is looking backward at his life as he composes the opening chapter, to convey the gnosis gained from his arduous journey through the world's various societies as well as his experiences preparing spiritually for the ascent to Gebel. The word choice here in the opening is powerfully allusive to the Sufi tradition if one is aware of its terminology. The use of the word "stations" immediately brings to mind the Sufi tradition of the soul moving through stations. Moreover, the use of the word "perplexed" is a keyword in the theosophy of Ibn al-<sup>◌</sup>Arabī (I. Almond, "The Honesty of the Perplexed"), and bewilderment and perplexity is viewed by the Sheikh as the condition of "finding God" (Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* 3). Finally, the question at the end of the quoted passage can be viewed as being posed to the reader as a fellow seeker. While not relating a mystical experience, the opening words do help to situate the ensuing pages of the story within the context of Akbarian mysticism. Readers should have this in mind as a counter-point to the more widely adopted reading of the journey as one through different human social forms.

Following this opening, the novel is clearly framed by mystical allusions over the course of the beginning chapter. The initial description of Gebel, the land of perfection which in my reading stands for "the Real" as Ibn al-<sup>◌</sup>Arabī conceives of the godhead, comes from the Sheikh Maghagha al-Gibeili, who teaches the title character as a young boy in the sciences important in medieval Islamic culture: "lessons in the Quran, the Sayings of the Prophet, philology, arithmetic, belles-lettres, jurisprudence, Sufism, and the literature of travels" (3). A few things here suggest that the Sheikh is a Sufi initiating the young man into a mystical pathway. The first

is the obvious mention of the lessons in Sufism. Another subtler clue is the phonetic similarity between the sheikh's name—Gibeili—and “Gebel,” the land of perfection itself/ the godhead. Furthermore, the significance of the relationship of the names with the root *j-b-l* should not be ignored within the canon of Mahfouz. In his pivotal mid-career novel *Awlād Hāratinā* (*Children of Gebelaawi*) the character Gebelawi (Egyptian for “highlander or mountaineer”) clearly symbolizes the transcendent Abrahamic god (Somekh, “The Sad Millenarian: An Examination of Awlad Haratina” 140), and the character Gebel symbolizes Moses, “who delivered his people and attained justice for them” (Somekh, “The Sad Millenarian: An Examination of Awlad Haratina” 139); in *Ibn Fattouma*, “Gibeili” is phonetically very suggestive to the names of these characters from *Children* as well as that of the promised land in the novel. At the very least, this suggests to the reader that the teacher of Ibn Fattouma has approached the godhead himself, although he does tell his pupil that “the circumstances of life and family” distracted him from his own attempt to attain the heights of Gebel; at any rate, it is the Sheikh al-Gibeili, the teacher of Sufism, who “continued to enlighten my mind and spirit, dispersing the darkness from around me and directing my cravings to that which is most noble in life” (7) that instills in young Ibn Fattouma with the longing for Gebel.

The narrator's perception of Gebel, taught to him by his Sheikh, not only helps to frame the narrative and enclose it within a mystical context, it drives Ibn Fattouma's quest and serves as impetus for the unfolding of the novel. He relates that Gebel, as opposed to the material conditions, contingencies, and hypocrisies of life in the narrator's homeland in the *Dar al-Islam*, stands for “perfection itself, incomparable perfection” (6). In a Sufi reading, Gebel can only be referring to the godhead, or in Ibn al-ʿArabī's terms, the Real. Moreover, when the etymology for the name of Gebel is considered, the substantive meaning of the Arabic tri-literal root *j-b-l* is

“mountain; mountains; mountain range” (Wehr, “Jabal”). However, another usage of this root as a verb stem carries the meaning of “to mold, form, shape, fashion; to knead; to create,” (Wehr, “Jabala” 133). When considered in terms of the metaphors of movement used by Ibn al-ʿArabī, the vertical movement—the ascent up the *jabal*—or *gebel* in Egyptian dialect—also suggests change, “re-fashioning,” or “reshaping” occurring in the spiritual state of the voyager or seeker. Thus, in the books ending scenes, as Ibn Fattouma prepares to ascend Gebel, his impending vertical movement also suggests imminent spiritual transformation.

Indeed, it is in the final two chapters of the book—“Ghuroub,” in which Qindil prepares for the journey to Gebel, and “The Beginning” in which the journey to Gebel is undertaken—that solid evidence can be found for reading the text as a literary representation of Akbarian-inflected mysticism. This reading is anchored firmly first in the description of Ibn Fattouma’s short residency in Ghuroub, to where he has journeyed in order to avoid impending war and to further his aspirations to reach Gebel. Ghuroub is clearly a place, whose name in Arabic means “strange” or “foreign” (HW), for the preparation of the seeker for the final approach, an ascent, to Gebel.

Indeed, when contrasted to the previous stages of his journey, the land is strange to Ibn Fattouma in its serenity and lack of vigorous social activity. Instead, Ghuroub is characterized by a stasis and tranquility evocative of the garden odes in *The Interpreter of Desires* which sets the symbolizes and presages the acquisition of gnosis:

...I walked on luxuriantly grassy ground that had been planted with date palms and fruit trees, between which were located springs of water and small ponds. At first the land appeared to be devoid of human beings, until I saw the first person, who was sitting squat legged under a date palm. He was an elderly man with white hair and a long beard; he was silent and was either dozing or in a trance, a recluse with no companion... (134-35)

On a perhaps superficial level, Ibn Fattouma's initial impressions of Ghuroub recall the language of fecundity and stillness from the static garden odes (e.g. XI, XII, XXI) of Ibn al-<sup>°</sup>Arabī's *Interpreter of Desires*. For example, ode XXI is set within a similar landscape:

O garden of the valley, answer the lady of the preserve and her who hath shining front-teeth, O garden of the valley!

And let a little of thy shades o'ershadow her for a short time until she be settled in the meeting-place.

And her tents be pitched in thy midst. Then thou wilt have as much as thou wishest of dew to feed the tender shoots,

And as much as thou wishest of showers and the moisture of clouds passing over her *bān* trees at eve and morn,

And as much as thou wishest of dense shade and fruit, delicious to the gatherer, swaying the bough on which it hangs. (Ibn al-<sup>°</sup>Arabī 90–91)

Yet at a symbolic level, Ibn Fattouma's observations about the tranquil land of Ghuroub can be clearly associated with the setting for mystical experience as Ibn al-<sup>°</sup>Arabī's commentary about his ode explains: the garden of the valley signifies the bush from which Moses received "the Divine light;" the "lady of the preserve" represents a "spiritual degree which the gnostic inherited from Moses;" the "shining front teeth" represents the station of "converse and speech"—which Ibn Fattouma was seeking to attain—and the images of humidity, fruit, and shade denote "gracious sorts of knowledge which nourish the human organism" (Ibn al-<sup>°</sup>Arabī, *Tarjumān Al-Ashwāq: A Collection of Mystical Odes* 91). Likewise, these "gracious sorts of knowledge" are associated with the acquisition of gnosis, or the "manifold sciences" in ode XI, which contains the line "O marvel! a garden amidst fires" (67, line 11); in the commentary, Ibn al-<sup>°</sup>Arabī explains that this garden is a metaphor for the "manifold sciences which, strange to say, are not consumed by the flames of love in his breast. The reason is that these sciences are produced by the fires of seeking and longing, and therefore like the salamander are not destroyed

by them” (Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Tarjumān Al-Ashwāq: A Collection of Mystical Odes* 69). Therefore, the tranquil and ripe landscape encountered by Ibn Fattouma can be considered as the backdrop for the acquisition of gnosis through mystical experience, similar to the portrayed in the odes of the Sheikh al-Akbar.

This association becomes more clear as the novel continues and the setting is established for Ibn Fattouma’s final approach to Gebel. As the narrator stays on in Ghuroub, this space begins to serve as symbol for a constellation of the stations described by Sufis on their movement towards the Real,<sup>135</sup> as is revealed by the narrator’s description of his second day in Ghuroub, when he finally engages the old mystic master in conversation. The old teacher—“the instructor of those who are perplexed” (138)—explains to him the rigors of the preparation for the journey to Gebel, which Ibn Fattouma learns involves “conformity with truth and withdrawal from humankind” (138). The seeker of gnosis Ibn Fattouma also learns that before leaving for Gebel he must “extract the powers hidden within” himself, finding the “treasures that have been covered and which he must search out” (139). The language here to describe the master and the task of finding that which is hidden within each voyager recalls that of Ibn al-ʿArabī, who sought to create a situation of bewilderment and perplexity in his followers to prepare them for meeting the godhead. More directly, Ibn al-ʿArabī frequently refers to a non-canonical *ḥadīth qudsī* to explain the relationship between godhead and humanity: “I was a Hidden Treasure, so I loved to be known.”<sup>136</sup> While the words of the old teacher and the setting is initially “strange” to the more orthodox Ibn Fattouma, he also learns from the mystical master encountered in the forest that the

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<sup>135</sup> As Nicholson has cataloged these mileposts on the Sufi path, the seven stations are repentance, abstinence, renunciation, poverty, patience, trust in God, and satisfaction, while the ten states are mediation, nearness to God, love, fear, hope, longing, intimacy, tranquility, contemplation, and certainty (29).

<sup>136</sup> See Chittick (*The Sufi Path of Knowledge* 66; 126; 128; 131; 204; 294; 391 n.14; 393 n. 44)

orthodox of many traditions have come there to learn new ways of viewing the world: “They are all emigrants. They come from all different parts to avoid depraved desires and to prepare themselves for the journey to the land of Gebel” (138). When the narrator remarks that the seekers gathering in Ghuroub “look as if they are in a trance” (138), the mystic replies using language evocative of the Sufi terminology of the stations and suggestive of mystical union: “Patience in the face of the bitterness of misfortune is the door to the sweetness of intimate discourse” (138). Clearly then, the novel’s allegorical trajectory has shifted from commenting on human social organization and has taken up the arc of spiritual refinement. Thus Ghuroub, as it is presided over by the enlightened sage of the forest, can rightly be seen as not just one, but as a conflation of “stations” on the way to Gebel—abstinence, renunciation, poverty, and patience.

The old master clearly possesses powers gained from his own spiritual training, mystical experiences, and acquisition of gnosis beyond the scope of rationality, and he is keen on teaching these powers to travelers seeking Gebel. He is able to read minds (137; 140-41) and to see the future (143), and to prepare others to find satisfaction in their approach to the godhead. It is during his description of this training that Ibn Fattouma relates his own mystical experiences: “He began singing while we sang in time with him. The singing raised me to another world. At each musical phrase there gushed forth a source of power from my inner consciousness” (142). Ibn Fattouma also relates an experience of a suprasensory experience involving spiritual communication:

One day I awoke before dawn, earlier than my usual time. I went at once to the old man and found him sitting under the light of the stars. I took my seat saying, “Here I am, Master.”

“What has brought you?” he asked me.

“A call that has emanated from you,” I said firmly.

“This is the first step to success,” he said contentedly. “A downpour of rain starts with a few drops.” (143)

Clearly, the episode of the narrator in Ghuroub is pregnant with references to mystical gnosis and it contains direct expressions of the narrator's mystical experience.

Finally, the novel's final chapter, suggestively titled "The Beginning," is also squarely set within the context of mystical experience. Observing the unresolved ending of *Ibn Fattouma*, Wail S. Hassan detects a nod in the to the ending of the great Persian mystic Farīd al-Dīn al-ʿAṭār's *Mantiq al-Tayr* (*The Conference of the Birds*), both of which "[evoke] ... an allegory of the soul's impossibly difficult journey toward perfect knowledge of its creator" (Hassan 39). This impossibly difficult journey and the endless quest for true gnosis of the godhead is also a key trope with which Ibn al-ʿArabī expresses his theosophy; for Ibn al-ʿArabī, this journey ultimately occurs in the heart of the mystic (Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* 106–9).

The final chapter begins with the important acknowledgment of the spiritual import of the journey: for the first time in his travels, the caravan which departs Ghuroub in search of Gebel consists "wholly of travelers and emigrants: not a single merchant was to be found in it" (145). The idea that profit motives and commercial interests have no place in the sheer perfection of Gebel is clearly conveyed here. The caravan travels for a month across "a flat desert" with intermittent patches of light rain, "which kept us company in our loneliness," before beginning a three-week long ascent of Green Mountain, from which they are able to perceive their goal, still far away: "'There is the land of Gebel for you,' said the old man, standing at the edge and pointing" (146). The detail of the rain recalls the old man's cryptic words to Ibn Fattouma during his mystical awakening "that a downpour of rain starts with a few drops," equating the acquisition of gnosis with rain, and the ascension of the Green Mountain and the caravan's gazing upon Gebel symbolizes the attainment of the final spiritual state of "contemplation" before a "certainty" of the godhead descends on the mystic.



The only detail from this contemplation of Gebel, the land of perfection, is that of its “vast domes and buildings bespeaking sublime majesty,” and Ibn Fattouma and his fellow travelers again set off again—this time descending for two weeks and crossing another vast expanse of desert “for many weeks, the distance increased by the hills and elevations that barred our way, forcing us to turn sometimes to the right, sometimes to the left” before finally reaching the foot of mountain at whose summit was Gebel (146-47). Here, in the final pages of the novel, the impossible and never ending spiritual journey is communicated through horizontal and vertical metaphors, corresponding with Ibn al-ʿArabī’s treatment of this theme in *The Interpreter of Desires*. It is not difficult to interpret this horizontal and vertical movement as symbolizing the rigors of the spiritual pathway, the “journey to God” on the pathway described by Ibn al-ʿArabī and Sufis before and after him.

The final approach must occur on foot, as the caravan leader tells the seekers that “The mountain pass is narrow... and gives no room for a camel.” In dismay, Ibn Fattouma seeks out the old spiritual teacher who tells them, “The man is speaking the truth,” and that they will have to continue their voyage “[o]n foot, as those before us have done” (147). At this, the novel draws to an unresolved ending. The narrator explains how he decides to set down into a journal the story of his life’s travels up to that point—the journal just consumed by the reader—and he relates how he intends to give his written record and all of his money to the caravan leader in hopes that the journal will at least be returned to his homeland where it might be used to edify his countrymen. Following this Ibn Fattouma indicates that he will divest himself of earthly concerns, he decides to take the final approach to Gebel, and the novel ends with the intrusion of a wholly new and separate narrative voice, questioning the outcome of Ibn Fattouma’s quest:

No history book makes any mention further of this traveler.  
Did he complete his journey or did he perish on the way?

Did he enter the land of Gebel? How did he fare there? Did he stay there till the end of his life, or did he return to his homeland as he intended?  
 Will one day a further manuscript be found describing his last journey?  
 Knowledge of all this lies with the Knower of what is unseen and what is seen.  
 (148)

Finally, it is the book's circular narrative logic provided by the final chapter which provides a structural—and as I have suggested, mystical—link with the structure of *Za'balāwī*. Moreover, the circular narrative structure of both the novel and the short story provide a structural link to Ibn al-ʿArabī's own narrative strategy to help him allegorize his gnosis. Through arduous travel, the caravan of seekers finally reaches the foot of Gebel. However, the ascent to Gebel is not detailed at all, nor is there any indication if the seekers reached the summit of Gebel; within the novel it is described as difficult and achieved successfully by only the elect of the elect. Yet the title of the section as “the beginning” indicates that a circle has been completed, as the reader arrives at the beginning only at the end of the tale. Clearly, “the beginning” refers metaphorically to the beginning of a new dawn in human or individual history; there is either a Utopian impulse or a theophanic subtext—or both—at work behind the implications of the “beginning” at the end. Such a circular narrative structure is also employed by Ibn al-ʿArabī to organize his own *Interpreter of Desires*, whose first and last odes frame the collection within the context of “spatiality and directions” (Hämeen-Anttila 111).<sup>137</sup> Thus structurally, the novel and the odes rely on a completion of the circle to add mystical meaning to the corpus of their texts.

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<sup>137</sup> “The organization of the *Tarjumān* is not haphazard. The collection has a structure ... [and] ... is framed by its very first and last poems. The first one poses the question of spatiality and directions ... [t]he last poem sees to answer this question, yet without resolving the tension necessarily involved in spatial terms when used of Divine Realities” (Hämeen-Anttila 110–11).

Thus the book begins anchored within a Sufi context. The novel's ensuing narration of journey can be read as the soul's journey as well as an allegory for the evolution of society. Just as each social system in some way operates to restrict Ibn Fattouma's fulfillment of his life's goals, his journey represents a flight from these restrictions and a gradual discarding of the desires and materialisms that drive much of rationally governed society. The book's final chapters are clearly underpinned by literary depictions of mysticism, especially depictions of mystical preparation for approaching gnosis of the godhead and they provide subtle lessons, conveyed through non-rational instruction, for finding the "treasure within" and attaining "the land of perfection itself." As in Ibn al-ʿArabī's *The Interpreter of Desires*, the novel's final chapters rely on the motif of the journey to signify the progress of the soul through stations and states towards the godhead.

### *Arabian Days and Nights*

Like *The Journey of Ibn Fattouma*, Mahfouz's *Arabian Days and Nights* is a novel which gestures mightily to the reliance of the Arabic literary legacy on the stories of *The Thousand and One Nights*. Like the *Journey of Ibn Fattouma*, *Arabian Days* also contains descriptions of voyaging which are rooted in the pursuit of mystical knowledge. In particular, it is in the narration of the porter Sindbad's journeys which allows for a mystical interpretation of the "journey by sea" undertaken by Sindbad, as well as of the gnosis brought back from such sea-borne journeys to the godhead. As Chodkiewicz reminds us, for Ibn al-ʿArabī there are three types of mystical journeys—to God, in God, and from God. The first of these types, the journey to God, consists of journeys to God "by land"—that is through "faith in revelations"—and journeys "by sea," or via speculative thought. The Sheikh considered the latter as the most risky for the well-being of the seeker (Chodkiewicz, "The Endless Voyage" par. 5). Sindbad's voyage

can quickly be assessed as the second kind of “journey *to* God” based on his own reportage of the inspiration for his decision to set out on his quest:

I am fed up with lanes and alleys. I am also fed up with carrying furniture around, with no hope of seeing anything new. Over there is another life: the river joins up with the sea and the sea penetrates deeply into the unknown, and the unknown brings forth islands and mountains... I said to myself, ‘Try your luck, Sindbad, and throw yourself into the arms of the invisible.’ (Mahfouz, *Arabian Days and Nights* 9)

When read through Ibn al-ʿArabī’s metaphor of journeying *to* God by land or sea, the mystical implications in Sindbad’s justification for his travel become clear. The porter clearly expresses his frustration with moving about on land, or rather, in his approach towards the godhead through faith in orthodox transmission of revealed scripture. Further, his focus on the islands and mountains, features which will require disembarkment and ascent resonate with the Sheikh’s use of movement metaphors as symbols for spiritual development. Reading beneath the literal meaning of the words in a true *bāṭini* fashion, Sindbad here can be considered as choosing to enter the Sufi path by departing from a more orthodox “faith in revelation” and throwing himself “into the arms of the invisible” by taking his journey by sea.

After his announcement of his decision to forsake “lanes and alleys” for the sea that “penetrates deeply into the unknown,” Sindbad’s childhood friend Nur al-Din, offers his encouragement by stating that “In movement there is a blessing,” an axiom which the two men have learned as they “sat side by side in the prayer room receiving lessons from our master, Abdullah al-Balkhi” (9-10). Al-Balkhi, it should be recalled,<sup>138</sup> is the teacher portrayed from the novel’s early pages as a “Sheikh of the Way” (5), a great Sufi master who has traveled the stations and acquired gnosis from his own spiritual trekking. Sindbad’s announcement to travel

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<sup>138</sup> Al-Balkhi’s influence as a mystic over the other characters in the novel is detailed at length in the previous chapter.

followed immediately by his and Nur's recollection of sitting at the hand of the Sufi al-Balkhi strongly suggests that Sindbad's decision is derived from the lessons learned from al-Balkhi.

More importantly, the gnosis gained from his "journey by sea" also contains considerable mystical implications. While Sindbad is never portrayed as undergoing, nor does he ever explicitly relate undergoing, a mystical experience, his report to the Sultan in the novel's final pages can be read as a literary depiction of mystical gnosis. Relating to the Sultan what he has learned on his voyage, Sindbad spins a thrilling episode to explain how he has arrived at each nugget of wisdom in his journeys. Each episode of his narration could be fruitfully analyzed as symbolic of mystical experience, but for the sake of concision a catalog of the points of gnosis learned by Sindbad during his sea-borne journey will suffice:

The first thing I have learned... is that man may be deceived by illusion so that he thinks it is the truth, and that there is no safety for us unless we dwell on solid land... we must use such senses and intelligence as God has given us... I also learned... that sleep is not permissible if wakefulness is necessary, and that while there is life, there is no reason to despair... I also learned, Your Majesty, that food is nourishment when taken in moderation but is a danger when taken gluttonously—and this is also true of the carnal appetites... words that I had learned of old in my childhood from my master Sheikh Abdullah al-Balkhi prevented me from eating to excess... I learned too... that to continue with worn-out traditions is foolishly dangerous... I also learned... that freedom is the life of the spirit and that Paradise itself is of no avail to man if he has lost his freedom... I learned too that man may be afforded a miracle, but it is not sufficient that he should use it and appropriate it; he must also approach it with guidance from the light of God that shines in his heart... (*Arabian Nights and Days* 211–15)

Without much effort, these lessons learned can be seen as representing the types of gnosis which might be gained several of the seven stations of the Sufi path: repentance, abstinence, renunciation, poverty, patience, trust in God, and satisfaction.

Yet, despite these lessons, Sindbad soon feels unfulfilled, and he desires to undertake the journey to the sea again, and this time he seeks advice from the Sheikh al-Balkhi, who spells out

for Sindbad the stations that he must pass through if he is to move past the journey to God and begin the journey in God.

...you will not attain the rank of the devout until you pass through six obstacles. The first of these is that you should close the door of comfort and open that of hardship. The second of these is that you should close the door of renown and open that of insignificance. The third is that you should close the door of rest and open that of exertion. The fourth is that you should close the door of sleep and open that of wakefulness. The fifth is that you should close the door of riches and open that of poverty. The sixth is that you should close the door of hope and open the door of readiness for death. (219)

The seventh station, of course, would involve satisfaction in achieving a gnosis of the Real, or as the next chapter will discuss, being annihilated by and subsiding within the godhead. In *Arabian Days and Nights*, this end goal of the mystical journey to God is symbolized by “the roc,” the mythical bird which Sindbad encountered on his first journey but which he forsook flying with because he was “drawn by the sparkle of diamonds” (221). Given the chance to fly with the roc “from an unknown world to an unknown world,” and traveling with it as it leaps from the peak of Waq to the peak of Qaf” (221), Sindbad opted to satisfy his material rather than spiritual desires. Here too is an obvious reference to mysticism, as the peak of Qaf is famously the location of the Simurgh in Attar’s *Conference of the Birds* and is the symbolic location of the imaginal world for other Persian schools of Sufism (Corbin, *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam* 3–7). Thus after his first journey Sindbad chooses to return to the world of desire and material objects, but after speaking with his teacher, he aspires to make another “voyage by sea” in order to again approach the roc, or the Real, with a reinvigorated clarity of spiritual purpose and a purged desire for possessions. Finally, the chapter ends with a literary depiction of mysticism, in its description of Sindbad following reception of his master’s benediction and instruction: when the lesson of the Sheikh teaching him to forsake material things and to aspire for the “rank of the devout” takes hold of him, “it is as if Sindbad had drunk ten drafts of wine” (221). Here then, is

another allusion to the divine intoxication already manipulated to great effect by Mahfouz in “Za‘balāwī.”

The transformative or liberatory value in Mahfouz’s application of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s spatial ontology in *Arabian Days and Nights* lies in its insistence that to attain the “Real,” or perhaps freedom from oppression, individuals must break from obtaining knowledge strictly by orthodox transmission, thereby abandoning the “journey by land.” Instead, the story of Sindbad indicates that a rigorous “journey by sea,” with many ports of calls, or “stations,” on the way, can help escape the fetters of reason. Encouraging readers to pursue knowledge or gnosis through methods other than those produced and approved by rational orthodoxy, teachers of literature could in turn could help transform individuals, just as the Sheikh Balkhi fostered Sindbad’s shift in consciousness and aspirations.

## **Conclusion**

I have argued in this chapter that a juxtaposition of Borges’s and Mahfouz’s creative output with some key elements of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s interrogation of orthodox conceptions of space will help found resistive, transformative or liberatory strategies for a confrontation with the delimiting and manipulation of physical and psychic space by rational orthodoxy. To help distill the ingredients for such strategies, I have analyzed in detail some literary representations of mysticism and literary depictions of mystical gnosis in the oeuvre of Borges and Mahfouz that serve as points of contact with Sufi theosophy in general and Ibn al-‘Arabī’s spatial ontology in particular.

I sense that if Borges had lived to see the advent of the internet, he would have smiled at its potential to approach what he attempted to describe in “The Aleph” and “The Library of Babel.” Allowing users to glimpse a great part of global existence, the world-wide web suggests

an essential connection between all point of the globe occurring in one place. Such knowledge causes one to pause and ponder why humans are constantly divided, and in a state of perpetual discord, seeking to differentiate and oppress each other and the rest of existence. Furthermore, the internet resembles nothing if not a Library containing all possible books; in such a collection, who is to say that power resides in only a few books? With such a vast expanse to search through, who is to say which books contain knowledge and which ones don't; who is to say which books express the truth and which ones do not, especially when not all books have been discovered yet? It is quite clear that Borges relished playing with the notions of intertextuality and difference suggested by the Aleph and the slippage in authority and meaning inherent in the Library of Babel; both stories teach that in the face of perpetual discord and infinite chaos, some comfort can be taken in the suggestion that the universe is governed by a fractal pattern inherent in the unity of Being.

On the other hand, Mahfouz faces the phenomena of chaos and discord with the freeing effects of travel. His stories and novels suggest that one possible escape can be gained through individual transformation, which like Ibn al-ʿArabī in *The Interpreter of Desires*, Mahfouz represents as quests and journeys involving ascent and descent through metaphorical stations. His fiction suggests that through spiritual travel and non-rational journey, salvation from chaos and discord, a freedom from material oppression and the malaise of alienation can be attained. He suggests that his readers can find Zaʿbalāwī, ascend to Gebel, or abandon the jewels and diamonds and choose instead to fly to Qaf.

The results of the analyses in the chapter imply that literary representations of mysticism and mystical gnosis can construct or contribute to alternatives to rational spatial ontology. Literary representations of mysticism can be transmitted to a wider audience than the reportage



of esoteric adepts such as Ibn al-ʿArabī; these ontologies, once broadcast, can then be used in efforts to theorize the resistance to the “fettters” of reason and any orthodoxy informed by the rational tradition.

These building blocks for such a theory are in themselves theoretical. “The Aleph” contributes the radical idea of the unity of being and the simultaneity of existence within a sphere. This concept of the universe as a sphere possessing an omnipresent center and a constantly shift perimeter runs counter to rational views of space; Ibn al-ʿArabī uses this spherical construct to suggest a fundamental existential unity, an idea conflicting with creation and manipulation spatial delimitation that is manipulated so deftly by power. Furthermore, the notion of all of being as a sphere with an omnipresent center and unreachable circumference suggests the egalitarian idea that power is within each of us in any place, and with the right awareness, can be accessed. “The Library of Babel” contributes the reminder that language, while part of a system, nevertheless escapes attempts by power to harness it. Meaning is relative depending on the positions of audience and transmitter. “Zaʿbalāwī,” *Ibn Fattouma*, and *Arabian Days* each use metaphors of movement to teach, ironically, that the most important movement must be an internal one. This suggests that to solve the most pressing problems facing humanist scholars and theorists, change must be generated within individuals, rather than outwardly through shifts in physical locations. Such change can be fostered by engaged instructors of literature who choose to point out the presence in literary texts of alternate conceptions of space such as those conceived in Sufism and fully developed by Ibn al-ʿArabī.

## Chapter 4: Transformation Catalysts: Literary Depictions of Mystical Subjectivity

### Introduction

The preceding chapters have been concerned with examining some literary representations, in terms of the ontological categories of time and space, of the mystical relationship between the godhead (“the Real”) and humanity and in examining literary representations of gnosis about this relationship. In this chapter, the focus will be turned to literary depictions of the mystical (de)formation of human subjectivity and the gnosis associated with the attainment of such mystical subjectivity; I will also consider possible consequences of this mystical subject formation and gnosis about the subject for individual and social transformation.

More specifically, I have up to this point illustrated how Borges’s and Mahfouz’s literary depictions of mystical consciousness and gnosis of time and space have informed the development of characters or literary personae. I will now demonstrate in this chapter that in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s system, experiences with and gnosis of eternal flux (*dahr*) and the gnosis gained from journeying in the sphere of existence results in the development, evolution, or transformation of individual subjectivity. For Ibn al-‘Arabī, individual subjectivity is guided both by a gnosis of “the Real” in the context of *dahr* and by experiencing the many states and acquiring the various stations during a spiritual trek through the centerless sphere.

Ultimately, in the Sheikh’s view, such experience and gnosis will lead to the development of *al-insān al-kāmil* (the Complete Human). This development is achieved through the mystical experience of *fanā’* (annihilation) and then a subsequent arrival at the station of *baqā’* (subsistence within the godhead). In the subsistence within the godhead, the ideal Complete Human will realize its status as Complete Servant to the godhead. Consequently, Ibn

al-ʿArabī proffers that the Complete Servant, after gaining gnosis from self-annihilation and substinance in the Real, is then obliged to return to society in order to transform other individuals living in that society, if not the society itself. In the unity of Being, serving others is serving the godhead. It is this transformative impulse, beginning at the individual level and expanding towards the social through individual action and service to others, that I argue receives expression in literary depictions of mysticism in the writing of Borges and Mahfouz; I will therefore analyze in this chapter such depictions of mysticism, suggesting that when read through Ibn al-ʿArabī’s notions about subjectivity, each author provides key conceptual ingredients for strategies of resisting power through individual and social transformation.

Before beginning, the question of how any examination of subjectivity can challenge or interrogate power should first be briefly outlined. Without delving too extensively into the rich tradition of Western thought of theorizing the “subject,” this will also allow me to briefly explain how structuralist and post-structuralist ideas about the signifiers “subject” and “subjectivity” dovetail with Ibn al-ʿArabī’s theosophy. With the critical notion that the subject is something that is “constituted in and by language and ideology” (J. K. Childers and Hentzi 292–93) as a point of departure, Ibn al-ʿArabī’s theosophy can be read as participating in a dialogue with several important moments in the structuralist and post-structural conception of the “subject,” conceptions which in themselves conduct a rigorous interrogation of “conventional representational schemes of meaning,” and “modern philosophy” (Best and Kellner 20–24); as a result, both Ibn al-ʿArabī’s theosophy and post-structural critical theory are implicitly engaged in an energetic critique and reconsideration of rational thought and ontological orthodoxy.

Thus, considerable potential for operations of deconstruction arise from Ibn al-ʿArabī’s conceptualizations of subjectivity.<sup>139</sup> The Complete Servant who fully comprehends the unity of Being collapses all binaries associated with that of the “subject” and the “object,” uniting self and other, human with godhead, perceiver and perceived. The autonomous subject is “decentered” upon realizing its unity with the godhead, which in itself is represented by Ibn al-ʿArabī as a sphere with an ever-moving, omnipresent center, both inside and outside of creation.<sup>140</sup> Furthermore, this operation calls into question the veracity of the distinction between subject and object and contests the primacy of either term. The Complete Servant realizes that individuality is merely an illusion (Almond 111-12). Thus, in this view of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s theosophy, the subject (Complete Servant) and object (the Real) “supplement” one another, and the mystical experience of *fanāʾ* and *baqāʾ* suggests that such a binary is simply an appearance of contingent reality and merely a rational tool used to make sense of the otherwise inconceivable *wahdat al-wujūd*. Everything, including the individual’s personality and thoughts, is only a manifestation of the Real, a delimitation of the Real, and a symbol of the Real, “lead[ing] back to the primordial abyssality of *al-ḥaqq* [the Real] (I. Almond, *Sufism and Deconstruction* 112). This, Almond maintains, corresponds with Derrida’s ideas about semantic “absence of presence” (132) and the “trace” (130) and, although with some nuance, carries a similarly ontological challenge to rational and orthodox attempts to capture and transmit

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<sup>139</sup> For a book-length examination of the correspondences between the thought systems of Derrida and Ibn al-ʿArabī, see Almond, *Sufism and Deconstruction: a Comparative Study of Derrida and Ibn ʿArabi*. In this paragraph, the concepts of “center” and “supplement” are employed as they are explained in Derrida’s seminal essay “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” (“Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” 878–89).

<sup>140</sup> See chapter 3 for a more detailed discussion of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s view of the “sphericity” of existence.

meaning; when realized by the Complete Servant/Human, the irrational gnosis of *waḥdat al-wujūd* can therefore generate emancipatory energies and suggest alternative theories of agency and individual and social transformation.

Regarding critics of the “condition of postmodernity,” Ibn al-ʿArabī’s decentered subject and notion of *waḥdat al-wujūd* provide relief from what Harvey describes as the social and psychological symptoms of, or responses to the volatility resulting from, the time-space compression of post-Fordian capitalism: ephemeral personal values, a “crack-up of consensus,” sensory overload resulting in the “blocking out of stimuli, denial, cultivation of the blasé attitude, myopic specialization, reversion to images of a lost past, and excessive simplification (either in the presentation of self or in the interpretation of events)” (Harvey 286). These symptoms are similar to what Jameson has identified as

a new depthlessness... a whole new culture of the image or the simulacrum; a consequent weakening of historicity, both in our relationship to public History and in the new forms of our private temporality, whose ‘schizophrenic structure’ (following Lacan) will determine new types of syntax or syntagmatic relationships in the more temporal arts; a whole new type of emotional ground tone—what I call *intensities*—which can best be grasped by a return to older theories of the sublime; the deep constitutive relationship of all this to a whole new technology. (Jameson 6)

In Ibn al-ʿArabī’s concept of the Complete Human and in his models for *fanāʾ* and *baqāʾ*, a model for the restoration to psychological wholeness, or rather the consciousness of wholeness, can be theorized, which could contribute to a recovery from the alienation, sensory overload, and schizophrenia imposed by the culture and society governed by the power and the “logic” of “late capital.”

Having suggested a dialectic relationship between critical theory and the theosophy of Ibn al-ʿArabī in terms of construction of subjectivity, the following detailed examination of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s ideas about the individual subject and its relationship to the godhead or the Real will

help provide additional context in which to analyze literary depictions of mysticism and mystical gnosis in Borges and Mahfouz. After having done so, the chapter will then proceed by relying on critical Akbarian terms of the “Complete Human,” “*fanā*” and “*baqā*” to examine how Borges depicts moments in which mystical experience or gnosis of “annihilation,” shapes subjectivities of his characters and narrators, and I will consider how such ego (de)formation might contribute to processes of individual and social transformation. The chapter will next analyze literary depictions of mysticism in the fiction of Mahfouz, in the context of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s theosophy of the “knowing heir” and conceptualization of *futuwwa*, finding that Mahfouz’s literary depictions of mysticism and mystical gnosis are suggestive of what he has called “Socialist Sufism,” a model merging the rational and the irrational approaches and suggesting one ideology through which to realize social progress.

Therefore, when juxtaposed with critical concepts about subjectivity from Ibn al-‘Arabī’s theosophy, literary depictions of mysticism and mystical gnosis in Borges and Mahfouz offer their readers alternative ways in which to think about subject formation. Ideally, literary representations of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s concepts by Borges will emphasize for readers an ontological human unity and the need for values such as altruism and empathy and suggest theoretical bases for a passive resistance to the ontological and physical violence committed in the name of orthodoxy. Meanwhile, readers of Mahfouz should be encouraged, through his literary depictions of the “knowing heir” and the values of *futuwwa*, to understand how irrationality can generate individual and social transformation.

## **Ibn al-ʿArabī’s model of the subject**

### **Complete man**

When attempting to understand how Ibn al-ʿArabī conceived of subjectivity, it is first important to establish that the *telos* of the Sufi path is finding God (Chittick 3-4). Ibn al-ʿArabī, unlike many Sufis who pursue the path by emphasizing an ecstatic love of the godhead, approaches God primarily through knowledge (Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* 147). However, Sells, in the culmination of his dialectical analyses of Ibn al-ʿArabī, blurs this distinction somewhat in maintaining that Ibn al-ʿArabī actually merges “the way of knowing and the way of love” (Sells 115). Nevertheless, whether through gnosis, love, or both, in Ibn al-ʿArabī’s vision attaining mystical knowledge or gnosis of “the Real” entails that the subjectivity of the individual mystic will be transformed by “assuming the character traits of God” (Chittick 27).

Ideally, in the assumption of the Divine’s character traits—or the Divine Names, as Ibn al-ʿArabī alternatively designates these traits—equilibrium is sought; no one trait should manifest outwardly more than any other. The individual who has assumed such an equilibrium “actualiz[es] the perfect assumption of every trait in the form of which human beings were created. In a word, perfect equilibrium is to be the outward form of the name “Allah,” the Divine Presence” (Chittick 27).<sup>141</sup> The person who embodies the equilibrium of the Divine Presence is

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<sup>141</sup> It is crucial here to point out that “the Real” differs from the Divine Presence. The Real is Essence; Essence gives rise to Divinity, and Divinity is the source of the uncreated “forms” of things as well as their created, existential manifestations. In this sense, Divinity can be thought of as the circle discussed in the previous chapter, as the first delimitation of the unlimited and unbound Essence. The Divine Presence is the visitation of the Divine Names upon existence.

termed *al-insān al-kāmil* (the Complete Human) by Ibn al-ʿArabī.<sup>142</sup> Thus it is one of the aspirations of each gnostic to attain the title of the Complete Human as part of the process of “finding,” “knowing,” or “loving” the Real.

Ibn al-ʿArabī writes voluminously on the topic of the Complete Human, and William Chittick has attempted to condense the Sheikh’s complex thought on the topic, so for the present purpose, there is no need to reexamine this topic with the rigor that he has approached it; however, I will at least attempt to condense his survey of this intricately conceived Akbarian category for the purpose of explaining how this concept can be applied to analyses of literary production as offering strategies for resistance or transformation. A general description by Chittick of the Complete Human and the distinction of the Complete Human from others who have not attained such a status can be discovered in the following passage:

[the] Complete [human] serves God in the guise of the name Allah, not any other name. Just as Allah is nondelimited being, so [the] Complete [human] is the nondelimited thrall of Allah (*al-ma’lūh al-muṭlaq*). He accompanies Allah in every self-disclosure. In other words, the perfect servant, through his nothingness and effacement, manifests all the divine names. He assumes the traits and fully realizes the properties of every name, without being delimited by any one name or group of names. Lesser friends of God, though they realize the name Allah to some degree by being human, manifest in practice only some of the names.

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<sup>142</sup> Most Ibn al-ʿArabī scholars translate this expression—one of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s most famous technical terms (Chittick 29)—as “the Perfect Man,” but in Arabic the term can also be quite appropriately translated as “the Complete Human,” as Sells chooses to do. “Complete” is one of the connotations of the Arabic word *kāmil*, and if Ibn al-ʿArabī had wanted to use a specific gender to describe this subjectivity, he could have used a specifically gendered noun—*rajul* for example—rather than *insān*, in addition to “human” also means “pupil of the eye,” a pun which Ibn al-ʿArabī employs to indicate that the Complete Human is also the mode of perception through which the Real reveals Itself to Itself. Regardless, in light of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s own experience of receiving training in the Sufi pathway from many women (Al-ʿArabi *Ruh al-Quds* passim), his transmission of the *khirqā* to several women (Addas 146), and in light of his belief that women are just as capable of assuming the heights of the Sufi hierarchy (“Men and women have their share in every level, including that of the Pole” [*FM* III p 89 qtd. in Addas 87]), it seems more appropriate to translate *insān* as “human being,” in accordance with Hans Wehr’s *Arabic-English Dictionary*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition (Wehr, “Insān” 139). For the central place of women in the education and the feminine in the theosophy of Ibn al-ʿArabī, see Schimmel (431).



Ordinary mortals assume various traits of the names in disequilibrium and imbalance, leading to deviation from the human norm and preventing them from passing beyond the level of “animal man.” (Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* 371).

For Ibn al-ʿArabī, then, most humans have not attained the title of Complete Human, or perfect servant, and remain instead *al-insān al-ḥayawān*, or “Animal Human.”

According to Ibn al-ʿArabī, there are various types of Complete Humans (Chittick 27). This seems at first to be a problematic statement—if the idea of the Complete Human means a perfect balance of the Divine Names, it would be logical to think that there would be very little variation in the character and behavior of those who have attained the status of Complete Human. Yet Ibn al-ʿArabī explains that the prophets and “friends of god” who have attained the status of the Complete Human “manifest the name Allah in its *relative* fullness” (Chittick 28, emphasis mine); thus, it is in their specific roles in society, among other humans, that one or more of the Divine Names manifests more than others (Chittick 28). This allows for the variety comprising all of humanity and confirms the Akbarian notions that “the divine self-disclosure never repeats itself” and “the Divine Presence manifests itself in different modes to each individual” (28). This variety is necessary, because only the godhead can perceive the cosmos from an absolute point of reference; the different types of Complete Human allow for a “numerous ‘relatively absolute’ standpoints in respect of which knowledge can be acquired” (Chittick 28). This multiplicity regarding epistemological standpoints is a consequence of “Ibn al-ʿArabī’s deconstruction of all doctrinal absolutes” (28) and celebrates infinite existential diversity, while at the same time remaining tethered to the notion of essential unity.

Despite the relative differences described by Ibn al-ʿArabī in how each Complete Human manifests the Divine Names, at some point Complete Humans “actualize every character trait, or every quality of Being” (30) and display

human perfection through [their] essential reality, as the form of the name Allah, and through [their] accidental manifestations, as the outward display of all the individual divine names in the appropriate circumstances. The [Complete Humans] are fixed in their essences, which are not other than the Being of God. But they undergo constant transformations and transmutations by participating in God's ceaseless and never-repeating self-disclosure. (Chittick 30)

Therefore, on the exterior, or in the corporeal world, the Complete Human will not necessarily appear to differ from other humans nor will they appear identical to other Complete Humans; they exhibit the same changes in appearance and mood as other humans undergo. It is in the "in-scape" or interior of the Complete Human that "all things are brought together, whether divine or cosmic" and through which "light retraces its steps and human intelligence rejoins divine knowledge" (30). The Complete Human is "the part and the Whole, the many and the One, the small and the Great, everything and All" (30).

This idea is most clearly expressed in the first chapter of the Sheikh's *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, the dense and abstruse survey of the "wisdom" or Divine Name most associated with each prophet, in which Adam is seen to be the first Complete Human, serving as a polished mirror which provides a reflection of the godhead, for the godhead to gaze upon itself. As expressed in the *Fuṣūṣ*, it is Adam's role as "the polished mirror" that allows for the collapse of the binary of subject and object, self and other, viewer and viewed, and the phenomenon of unity between the polar terms in each binary. It is in the "heart" of the Complete Human that this image of the Unity of Being occurs (Sells 66). Thus, as Sells illustrates, the Divine reveals Itself and looks upon Itself as reflected in the heart of the Complete Human; gazing upon itself, through the pupil of the Divine eye that is *al-insān al-kāmil*, the image of the Unity of Being appears, an image which the Complete Human becomes aware of. The Divine sees Itself through Itself as the Complete Human, and in this context the notion that the Complete Human sees itself as the

Divine can be understood. A fusion of Divine and human, Self and other, Viewer and viewed, is achieved, leading to such notorious exclamations of Sufis throughout history as al-Hallaj's "I am the Real" and al-Bisṭāmī's "Glory to me" (Sells 68–78).

The power of Complete Humans rests in the notion that they are able to "see all things in their proper places" and through their "very nature the correct relationships among things" (Chittick 28), which generally stated means that Complete Humans remain at all times capable of simultaneously maintaining the two contrasting ontological points of view so crucial to *waḥdat al-wujūd*, the twain which can never meet in the rational point of view: that of incomparability and transcendence of the godhead and that of similarity and immanence of the godhead. Thus Complete Humans, while occupying a particular standpoint in terms of their temporal roles and duties in the world, remain always aware of *waḥdat al-wujūd*; as Chittick says, "[the Complete Human] does not know 'how' God discloses Himself, but he sees Him doing so. He understands the truth of God's similarity with all things through a God-given vision, seeing clearly that all things are neither/nor, both/and, but never either/or" (Chittick 29). This gnosis, which at its heart deconstructs binary oppositions, consists of the Complete Human's learning of the "meaning of the text [of the Divine Book], the meaning of the cosmos, and the meaning of his own soul. Hermeneutics is not a rational process, but an encounter with the divine self-disclosure, an opening of the heart toward infinite wisdom" (30). From this, it is clear that the deep ontological and hermeneutic understanding granted to the Complete Human are products of the irrational vision or theophany given to the Complete Human through Divine "self-disclosure" of Itself to the Complete Human.

In terms of its application to theories of social or political resistance, the Complete Human symbolizes the potentiality of humans to transform at a radically ontological level.

Complete Humans have seen the Real through a “direct witnessing” and not as “an unseen reality” (Chittick 351); the encounter with and resultant understanding of the Unity of Being provides an irrational counterpoint to the ontology of rationalism and empiricism. While Complete Humanity can be granted by the Divine at any time, it is through following the Sufi path, according to Ibn al-ʿArabī (Chittick 275), that this awareness is best attained. And though it is inaccurate, with respect to Ibn al-ʿArabī’s theosophy, to think of this path as ever reaching a final point, to acquire the gnosis required for actualization of the Complete Human, the Sufi must pass through the two stations of *fanā’* and *baqā’*.

### **Fanā’ and baqā**

#### ***Fanā’***

One key step to the actualization of Complete Humanity is the station of *fanā’*, or the “annihilation” or “passing away” of the ego. Ibn al-ʿArabī’s theosophy depends greatly on the notion of *fanā’*; Sells points out that Ibn al-ʿArabī relies in particular on the development and refinement of the “doctrine” concerning the station of *fanā’* by his Sufi predecessors al-Bisṭāmī (d. 261/874) and Junayd (d. 297/910). However, Ibn al-ʿArabī’s substantial contribution to this doctrine was in his using it to explain the “mystical paradigm of the passing away of the individual self in union with the real” in order to “effect the identity shift from the dualisms of language and linear logic to an absolute unity” (Sells 95).

Sells demonstrates this contribution in his analyses of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s chapters from *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* and verses from the *Tarjumān al-Ashwāq*, where Ibn al-ʿArabī conceived of *fanā’* as the moment in which the Complete Human and the Real are actually fused, to the extent that the subject/object binary is erased through the “oblique dialectic” operations between transcendence and immanence and mythic cosmogony (operating in eternal time) and the

atomistic mystical experience (operating in the “moment”) indicated in the Sheikh’s writing (63-84).

In the context of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s thought, Addas qualifies *fanāʾ*’ as a technical term for “extinction in God” (Addas 161), while Chittick translates it both as “annihilation” and “passing away from self” (Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* 93), pointing out that Ibn al-ʿArabī actually conceives of seven different types of *fanāʾ*’, all having ontological significance. The highest degree of *fanāʾ*’ is that of the “vision of God as the Manifest within the cosmos. As a result, the traveler can no longer claim that names and attributes belong to God” (93); that is, when “travelers” reach this station of “passing away,” they acquire a realization of the Unity of Being which in turn leads to the gnosis that names and attributes are merely human ways of perceiving and describing the godhead’s manifestation of Itself in the existing world/cosmos. Essentially this “annihilation” teaches that the sensory world is not the “Real.”

In his own words, Ibn al-ʿArabī himself describes *fanāʾ*’: “Through being joined to the Real, man is annihilated from himself. The Real becomes manifest so that He is his hearing and his sight. This is what is called a knowledge of “tasting.” The Real is nothing of these organs until they are burned up by His Being, so that He is there, not they” (*FM* III 298.17 qtd. in Chittick 328). This indicates a condition in which the godhead, the Real, becomes a human’s “hearing and sight;” the subjectivity of the ego is annihilated to the point where the mystic sees, hears, and “tastes” the godhead only *through* the faculties of the godhead: “When the Real is the sight of a servant in this manner, he see Him and perceives Him through His sight, since his sight is the Real. Hence he only perceives Him through Him, not through himself” (*FM* III 298.17 qtd. in Chittick 328). This passage provides a striking example of Sells’s examination of the blurring of pronoun referents and the linguistic “dualisms” in Ibn al-ʿArabī’s apophatic expression about

*fanā'*—in that the “I” or the “he” in Ibn al-ʿArabī’s texts discussing *fanā'* can be considered as referring to not simply either the divine or the human, but to both (Sells 70–76).

Ibn al-ʿArabī describes *fanā'* as a “burning at the sensory level” (Chittick 328), to figuratively explain his notion that, as a result of *fanā'* the Complete Human sees the Real only through the unlimited senses of the Real, while the Real sees the world through the eyes of the Complete Human. This “vision by proxy” is necessary, Ibn al-ʿArabī determines, because “if He were to look at the cosmos with His own sight, the cosmos would be burnt away by the glories of His Face. Hence the Real looks at the cosmos only through the sight of the perfect servant who is created upon the Form. That servant is precisely the veil between the cosmos and the burning glories” (*FM* II 354.19 qtd. in Chittick 329); the Complete Human, as perfect servant, is therefore not only the “pupil” through which the godhead can view creation without annihilating it, but also the axis of the cosmos, without which the cosmos would not have existence (Chittick 410 n. 21), and the isthmus connecting the existent to the non-existent.

Another important type of *fanā'* in Ibn al-ʿArabī’s theosophy, which especially highlights the Sheikh’s challenges to orthodoxy, is his idea of the “annihilation of acts” (Chittick 207), which occurs when “[t]he servant is annihilated from his acts through God’s standing over them” (*FM* qtd. in Chittick 207). Ibn al-ʿArabī articulates this type of *fanā'* by way of a polemic against two rival theological schools of thought: the Muʿtazilites, who he says “are unaware,” that the Real is the source of all acts, “from behind this covering [of manifest existence],” and the Ashʿrites, who Ibn al-ʿArabī says they do “not witness” the fact that all acts arise from the godhead, even though they are aware that the Real is curtained behind existence, because of their deception by the “veil of ‘performance’ [by humanity] through which God has blinded their insight” (*FM* II 513.17 qtd.. in Chittick 207).

In Almonds' attempt to link the "unknowability" of Ibn al-ʿArabī's transcendent/immanent Real with Derrida's "absence of meaning," he also discusses Ibn al-ʿArabī's critique of the rational theologians (*al-mutakallimūn*) of his time, pointing out the Sheikh's

very definite impatience with those who mistake their specific beliefs for knowledge of the Absolute ... with both affirmative and negative schools of theology, both with those who insist God can be predicated by his effects (the Ashʿrites) and those who said nothing could ultimately be predicated of God, only what he is not (the Muʿtazilites). (I. Almond, *Sufism and Deconstruction* 10)

Almond further explains how both groups attempted to use reason as a means to assert their positions. Ibn al-ʿArabī urges his followers to forsake either/or reasoning and to consider "both": that God is knowable from all acts, but also that the Real is ultimately unknowable—the immanence and transcendence polarity that Ibn al-ʿArabī insists on merging or transversing (11). Thus, through his expression of the "annihilation of acts" Ibn al-ʿArabī at the very least offers an alternative onto-theology to the orthodox *mutakallimūn* (rational thinkers) of his time; what remains to be explained however is how the type of (irrational) gnosis acquired from annihilation can be viewed as informing personal and social change.

### ***Baqāʾ***

Attempting to theorize how to apply gnosis gained from *fanāʾ* towards challenging rational orthodoxy, it becomes clear that this kind of gnosis would be useless if the individual were to be completely "annihilated," wiped clean of thought and will. Initially it might appear that "annihilation," or "passing away," as the terms are employed in English, would result in the end of the journey for the Sufi seeker. To explain this, Sufis have long held that complete annihilation of the human ego does not occur as such. The Sufis, and Ibn al-ʿArabī is no exception, theorize that after *fanāʾ*, "human nature subsists in its entirety" (*FM* II 554.3 qtd. in

Chittick 176) while retaining the gnosis gained from *fanā*'. In this view, the point of annihilation is not to remain annihilated, without a presence or identity; the point is to emerge from annihilation in order to attain the station of *baqā*' (remaining in; abiding in; subsistence) in relation to the godhead, but with a practical return to and engagement with the world. It is in this subsistence, or *baqa*' that the potential for social transformation is harnessed.

Ibn al-ʿArabī's theosophy makes this relationship between annihilation and subsistence clear. In describing the key stations of the Sufi pathway, Ibn al-ʿArabī describes the "ladder of ascent and descent" which the "Folk of Allah" take.<sup>143</sup> While the ladder is specific for each individual, Ibn al-ʿArabī says, the steps are the same. In terms of an "ascent" up the ladder towards knowledge of the Real, the final "rung" is annihilation (*fana* '); following the experience of *fanā*' and the concomitant self-disclosure of the godhead, the Sufi descends the ladder, and with respect to the descent, this "rung" is called subsistence (*baqā* '). The "rung" on the ladder is the same but it takes on a different manifestation for the "traveler," depending on the mystic's subjective relation to self-disclosure. Thus, If the self-disclosure is yet to occur, the rung on the "ladder" is *fanā* '; if self-disclosure of and annihilation in the godhead has occurred, this rung is called *baqā* '. After *fanā*' the first step for re-entering the world of the manifest things is *baqa*' (*FM* I 166.4 qtd. in Chittick 219). In Ibn al-ʿArabī's view, annihilation is a transient condition, but subsistence endures (*FM* II 515.33 qtd. in Chittick 321).

Sells points out how Ibn al-ʿArabī thought of *fanā*' and its obverse station, *baqā*', as occurring at each moment in the consciousness of the Complete Human. For Ibn al-ʿArabī, each moment (*waqt*) signifies a "temporal atom" which contains "the continual passing away and re-

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<sup>143</sup> See chapter 3 for a discussion of how Ibn al-ʿArabī employed metaphors of vertical movement to indicate mystical experience.



creation that occurs in *fanā'* and *baqā'* and ... the perpetually self-transforming, self-manifestation of the [R]eal” (Sells 106).<sup>144</sup> Here, in the alternation at each moment between *fanā'* and *baqā'* the mystic unites with the eternal flux (*dahr*) of the Real. In the Complete Human, the ego passes away, and the gnosis of Unity of Being takes its place at *each moment* in an *eternal fluctuation*; for Sells this indicates a situation in which the “dichotomy between eternity and ephemerality is overcome” (108), providing another striking example of how the Complete Human can serve as an agent for the collapsing of ontological binaries and polarities.

More specifically, the fruits of *baqā'* are a function of the seeker’s arriving at the conviction of total servanthood, or *‘ubūdiyya*. As a technical term, Ibn al-‘Arabī relates servanthood to the Divine names, which are considered the “Lords,” while the individual is the “servant” of one or more of the names. Therefore, the Complete Human has become the total servant of all the divine names. The Complete Human in the station of *baqā'* is the Complete Servant, the “mantle” of the godhead because God is hidden in him; the dichotomy between God and human is collapsed, as God is annihilated in the servant and the servant is obliterated by the residence of God (Chodkiewicz, *An Ocean without Shore* 120). The Complete Servant will not only lack any trace of lordship, but in constant contemplation of its servitude, will lose sight of its “otherness” from god, leading to the situation where “It is God who, in the servant, desires himself, loves himself, and knows himself” (125); thus the Complete Servant is one who has come to gnosis of *waḥdat al-wujūd*. Remaining in this awareness is *baqā'*; the outcome of *baqā'* will be the subjectivity that realizes there is no subjectivity.

Hence, the Complete Human can serve as a symbol for the awareness of Unity among all things, diminishing need for competition and struggle. Such completion is achieved in an

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<sup>144</sup> See chapter 2 for a discussion of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s concept of *waqt*.

annihilation of the ego, that darling of Cartesian rationality. Subsistence in the gnosis of Unity, granted from annihilation leads to Complete Humans. Extended from the context of individual experience into a more social setting, an attainment of Complete Servanthood through annihilation and subsistence could eventually lead to an altruistic collective consciousness aimed at serving “others,” since such a gnosis reveals that the “other” is simply another manifestation of the Real, as is “the self.” This awareness would initiate or enhance a dialectic encounter with the rational tools of division, taxonomy, and classification which are used in order to understand existence and often to dominate it. In sum, the general lesson to be applied from the gnosis of the Complete Human/Complete Servant very well could be an enhanced dialectic between subject and object, self and other, and ego and society.

### **Borges and *fanā'***

#### **“The Nothingness of Personality”**

With proper popularization, the Sufi notions of *fanā'* and *baqā'* employed with such detail by Ibn al-ʿArabī in terms of the Complete Servant could be useful in developing theories of resistance or transformation. This claim can be investigated by first examining the nuanced relationship between the emancipatory impulses which impel the mysticism of Ibn al-ʿArabī, the project of deconstruction, and the creative output of Borges. In articulating the deconstructive thought of Derrida with the *waḥdat-al-wujūd* of Ibn al-ʿArabī, Almond discusses Maurice Blanchot’s exemplary status in the “Derridean canon” as a thinker for whom writing (“écriture”) “is more of a means of self-annihilation than self-repression, more an act of destructivity than creativity” (I. Almond, *Sufism and Deconstruction* 119–20).<sup>145</sup> In Blanchot’s writing, Almond

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<sup>145</sup> Perhaps confirming the link between deconstruction, Borges, and Blanchot’s thoughts on the annihilation of the author, López-Baralt identifies Blanchot as a “pioneer” in the analysis of Borges’s writing “from an essentially verbal perspective” (59).

observes, there is a “gradual effacing of selfhood and a renunciation of everything which is not the text;” this is directly tied to a non-rational disappearance of the agent, of the author. The author is merely “an echo of an unseen dynamism” and when the author writes, he is expressing himself not in the manner of “the classical notion of personality nor some form of the ‘universal,’ but rather the fact that, ‘in one way or another, he is no longer himself; he isn’t anyone anymore” (119-20) and in the losing of “the power to say ‘I’” gains the ability to “produce the ‘echo’ of the incessant, of the interminable” (120). Here, then, despite Derrida’s stance against the emancipatory potential of mysticism, in the effacement of the authorial self-ego, can be found a point of contact between deconstruction and *fanā’*, and empowerment in searching for “the incessant” and “interminable.”

Akin to Blanchot—a writer who admired Borges in his own right—in his writing Borges himself generates a confluence of the thought systems of Ibn al-ʿArabī and Derrida. On one hand, despite his fascination with philosophy and metaphysics, Borges—like Derrida—can be read as mistrusting the ability of rational thought systems to strike to the core of “truth.” As Giskin says “[a]ccording to Borges, metaphysics can never expect to encompass reality in its totality, and he considers it risky to assume that words can ever much resemble the universe;” however, unlike Derrida, Borges clings to a definite metaphysics, albeit one that insists that the “world of everyday experience is not real,” and as a result Borges’s writing seems to endorse thought systems that “reject relativism in favour of some form of higher cognition in which the sensory world is transcended, and the individual comes into contact with the sphere of the unchanging One” (Giskin 238). At the very least, Borges and Derrida share a mistrust of the rational project, even as they differ in their approach to a constantly moving and impossible to articulate metaphysical “center.”

Regardless, the loss of the power to “say I” is a condition analyzed by deconstruction, championed by Ibn al-‘Arabī, and explored by Borges, who considers such an erasure of the ego in the aptly titled early essay “La nadería de la personalidad” (“The Nothingness of the Personality”). First published in 1922 in *Proa*, a small literary magazine founded by Borges and his associates in Buenos Aires, the essay was later printed in 1925 in *Inquicisiones (Inquisitions)* and in 1928 in *La idioma de los argentinos (The Language of the Argentines)*. Despite appearing among collections of his prose that he would disparage and attempt to disown later in life, Borges felt strongly that this “was his first fully realized essay” (Weinberger 527). The essay is also noteworthy because it provides an early iteration of the theme of the unreality of the ego or individual, delimited subject that would prove to be a fundamental idea of much of his later fiction (Griffin 7–8).<sup>146</sup>

Although Barili (Barili 240–49) contends that in the essay one finds the seeds of Borges’s interest in Buddhism, other critics have observed that Borges has arrived at this concept via “rigorous, rational, and to an extent nihilist” analysis (Rowlandson 15). While at a more formal level, this assessment of the essay as an example of “hard-line Kantian logic” (Rowlandson 61) might be true, I will show that his essay contains, at other levels of form and content, mystical elements bearing some of the traits of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s theosophy. In its “proto-deconstructionist” stance, the essay reveals Borges’s intuition that “[r]eason and experience are not... necessarily in concord,” and that the essay “may be considered a fundamental response to the dualist binary

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<sup>146</sup> The concept also underpinned many of his essays which refer to or engage with mystical themes; for example, Rowlandson points out the this “consideration for the transiency of the state of ‘I’” in “The Nothingness” informs the content of “La duración del infierno,” the first essay in which Borges directly references the eighteenth century Christian mystic Emanuel Swedenborg and in which “his analysis leads to a conclusion of a uniquely Swedenborgian perspective” (Rowlandson 199).

developed with Enlightenment thought, in which faith and reason, science and magic, history and myth, are assigned firmly contraposed locations” (Rowlandson 37). It is Borges’s “sensitivity” to “the catalogue of binaries” that aligns his thought with, and reveals his admiration for, the “ability of Swedenborg,” the notable eighteenth century Christian mystic, “to harmonize his pursuit of knowledge in the material sciences with his explorations of spiritual realities” (Rowlandson 37). As will be soon demonstrated, this same “sensitivity to binaries” exhibited in the essay which also led to the composition of several stories corresponding with Ibn al-‘Arabī’s thoughts on the annihilation or passing away of the self; however, for the immediate purpose, it will be a key point of analysis to first determine to what degree this essay might be the product of mystical gnosis.

As the title of the essay indicates, Borges intends in the essay “to tear down the exceptional preeminence now generally awarded to the self” (Borges, “The Nothingness of Personality” 3). To underscore this, over the course of the essay Borges insistently utters the apophatic phrase “There is no whole self” at five key seams in the logic of his essay.<sup>147</sup> This phrase serves as a refrain that gives a rhythm to the essay and transports it out of the merely prosaic. It also plays off of the similar but singular utterance of “The self does not exist” late in the essay, after which Borges introduces the opinion of Schopenhauer about the “self” into his discussion. This single instance of the expression “The self does not exist,” which varies in its diction but not in length, style, or essential meaning with the five other rhetorical anaphors (i.e., “There is no whole self”), is an important marker provided by Borges that the inclusion of Schopenhauer is most noteworthy. Thus the single instance of variation in anaphoric rhetorical

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<sup>147</sup> Here it should be recalled that Sells describes how apophatic language negatively and “continually turns back upon the spatial, temporal, and ontological reifications it has posed” (Sells 208). See chapter 1 for a detailed examination of Sell’s typology of apophatic language.

expressions serves much like a metrical substitution in a poem, calling the attention of the attuned reader to the passage that it initiates or sets off.

The importance of the passage following the expression also lies in the fact that in Borges's writing, as Giskin has ably demonstrated, he relies most strongly on Schopenhauer, along with Heraclitus, Plato, Plotinus, and Berkeley, to provide "a base for his own conception of knowledge and as the theoretical underpinning of his literary mysticism" (Giskin 235–36).<sup>148</sup> Borges's discussion of Schopenhauer's thoughts on the "I" should be read, then, as a transmission of mystical gnosis in a most literary and apophatic style:

The self does not exist. Schopenhauer, who often appears to adhere to this opinion, at other times tacitly denies it, I know not whether deliberately or because he is compelled by the rough, homespun metaphysics—rather ametaphysics—that lurks in the very origins of language. Nevertheless, despite this disparity, there is a passage in his work that illuminates the alternative like a sudden burst of flame. I shall transcribe it:

An infinite time has run its course before my birth; what was I throughout all that time? Metaphysically, the answer might perhaps be: I was always I; that is, all who during that time said I, were in fact I. (Borges, "The Nothingness of Personality" 8)

Borges's rumination on Schopenhauer meets Sells's criteria for apophatic language, in its meta-linguistic focus on the philosopher's language as the moment—that "sudden burst of flame"—in which the subject/other dichotomy is "undone;" as Sells explains it, apophatic language is marked by expressions in which "that which is other, is the non-other," and the transcendent object (in this case, humans prior to Schopenhauer and Borges) is not known as an object, but

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<sup>148</sup> "It is, however, Schopenhauer's metaphysics which most strongly influences Borges' belief in the possibility of directly intuiting non-temporal and non-spatial reality ... Schopenhauer stresses transcending the limitations of time and space through contemplation ... Aesthetic contemplation lifts the knower beyond temporal and spatial limitations, who becomes pure will-less subject" (Giskin 238); indeed from Schopenhauer Borges inherits "the idea that will (mind) can come to know itself through a mystical, aesthetic experience" (244).

known by the subject (in this case the “I” of both Schopenhauer’s and Borges’s essays) “through itself” (Sells 207)

But in addition to this markedly literary and apophatic treatment of Schopenhauer’s mystical gnosis about the unreality of the “subject,” Borges alights on Ibn al-‘Arabī’s concept of *fanā’* and the gnosis of the Complete Human who becomes aware of the lack of reality of the self and of the “self’s” ultimate possession by the Real. This is confirmed when, after his discussion of Schopenhauer, Borges turns his attention to a contemporary study on Buddhism, Grimm’s *Die Lehre des Buddha*. In his presentation of Grimm’s study, he points out that Buddhists’ insistence that ““those things of which I can perceive the beginnings and end are not my self”” means that

I, for example, am not the visual reality that my eyes encompass... Nor am the audible world that I hear... Subsequent lines of argument can be directed toward the senses of smell, taste, and touch, proving that I am not the world of appearances—a thing generally known and undisputed—but that the apperceptions that indicate the world are not my self either. That is, I am not my own activity of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching. (8-9)

Here are echoes of the annihilation characterized by Ibn al-‘Arabī’s description of the state of the Complete Human when the Real has taken possession of the senses. Or, as Sells points out in his analysis of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s dialectics of self/Other, manifest/Real that are resolved in *fanā’*: “In the identity shift of *fanā’*, the one manifesting itself (*al-mutajallī*) becomes (is) the one receiving the manifestation (*al-mutajallā lahu*), as the deity becomes the hearing with which the Sufi hears, the seeing with which he sees, the tongue with which he speaks” (Sells 96). It is only through this type of suprarational “perception” and appropriation of the sensory faculties by the godhead that the servant can “apperceive” what is Real. The occurrence of rational sensory perception is a function of the godhead (the Real) observing delimited Being (the cosmos); if the Real gazed on the cosmos without the mediatory of human senses, Ibn al-‘Arabī asserts, the

delimited Being would “burn up”—perhaps with the “sudden burst of flame” with which Borges realizes the import of Schopenhauer’s collapsing of the binary between self and other.

In Ibn al-ʿArabī’s system, the Complete Human will experience two kinds of perception and apperception: empirical/sensory from the perspective of the “I” and irrational/theophanic from the perspective of the Real. Perception and apperception of the Real, through the Real’s “faculties,” is a consequence of *fanāʾ*, a consequence through which the Complete Human/Servant, with gnosis acquired from the subsequent station of *baqāʾ*, will continue to see delimited reality as not the Real. By considering the Buddhist philosophy on the untruth of sensory perception, Borges is transmitting a similar mystical gnosis through literary means. Clearly this essay is not written just to entertain his reader, in the way in which a story would. The essay is composed as an argument, to convince the audience of something which Borges holds to be accurate, or perhaps even “Real.” It is conceivable that he uses Schopenhauer’s denial of the personality and the Buddhist mistrust of the senses to not only augment his own experience but also to attempt to express an ineffable mystical consciousness experienced by the young Borges.

A compelling clue that the essay itself contains an expression of the author’s mystical gnosis can be discovered hidden within his allusion to the “conjunctural Jorge Luis Borges on whose tongue sophistries are always at the ready and in whose solitary strolls the evenings on the fringes of the city are pleasant” (Borges, “The Nothingness of Personality” 4). This, to a careful reader of Borges, calls to mind the narration that the author referred to as “Sentirse en muerte” (“Feeling in Death”)<sup>149</sup>, when he sets out on a solitary evening stroll and encounters the mystical

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<sup>149</sup> For an analysis of the mystical import of this passage in relation to Ibn al-ʿArabī’s concept of *dahr*, see chapter 2.



suspension of serial time as part of his walk. Often in Borges's writing, the narration of or allusion to a crepuscular walk through the city leads to a moment of epiphany, or perhaps theophany, and in "The Nothingness of Personality," shortly after the brief allusion to his ambulatory habits, he disparages personality as the storehouse of personality, claiming that "memory is no more than the noun by which we imply that among the innumerable possible states of consciousness" (4). He acknowledges the "consciousness of being" that "each of us feels in the depths of his soul" of the "being the isolated, individualized, and distinct thing" which might be called the ego; but he firmly denies that "all our other convictions must be adjusted to the customary antithesis between the self and the non-self, and that this antithesis is constant" (4). He then returns the context of his theorizing on the unreality of a true "self" to that of his solitary twilight stroll: "The sensation of cold, of spacious and pleasurable suppleness, that is in me as I open the front door and go out along the half-darkness of the street is neither a supplement to a pre-existing self nor an event that comes coupled to the other event of a continuing and rigorous self" (4). For someone attuned to the tropes and motifs of Borges, the author's linking of his strolls with the expression of his thoughts on the unreality of personality and ego provides echoes of his mystical experience related in "Sentirse," and suggests that his reflections about personality are also the result of gnosis obtained from the same or from similar experiences as those related in "Sentirse."

Another strong indication that the information contained in the essay is the fruit of mystical experience is bolstered by Borges's provision of a personal anecdote, relating the occasion in which he first realized the "nothingness of personality." Borges describes the emotions and thoughts he experienced when as a young man he was taking leave of a friend, probably forever, as he was about to depart Mallorca, Spain, for Buenos Aires, Argentina. Like

“Sentirse,” Borges’s experience in “The Nothingness” operates within a time horizon of eternity: “The present moment was acquiring all the prestige and indeterminacy of the past...” (6). As this feeling of eternity settles in around Borges, he describes his urge to reveal his soul to his friend before leaving when

...all at once, with an unsuspected strength of conviction, I understood that all this personality, which we usually appraise at such an incompatibly exorbitant value, is nothing. The thought came over me that never would one full and absolute moment, containing all the others, justify my life, that all of my instants would be provisional phases, annihilators of the past turned to face the future, and that beyond the episodic, the present, the circumstantial, we were nobody. (6)

This anecdote bears the hallmark of mystical reportage in the ephemeral and sudden nature of the event and in the attempt at describing in successive language the nature of the event and the gnosis granted from his sudden spontaneous consciousness. Flynn also notices the mystical kinship between the two anecdotes in their shared sense of timelessness, but analyzes it no further than to say that she finds the earlier one in “The Nothingness” as “negative ... annihilating any notion of oneness and plenitude” (65–66). In terms of an individual unifying with some transcendental deity, Flynn’s analysis might be correct, yet in another view, the essay does indeed end with the suggestion that humanity is one—unified by the human instincts, traits, and thoughts that all humans experience and which, in specific combinations, individuals call personality. Borges final comments are suggestive of a collective unconscious, or “imaginal world” as Corbin referred to it, which would provide ample basis for “oneness and plenitude” in terms of the human species.

Overall, the essay’s thesis that the “self” is a mirage corresponds with Ibn al-‘Arabī’s concept of the Complete Human. Through the process of *fanā’* and *baqā’* the Complete Human is given the gnosis that there is no true existence other than the Real; the visible and even the rational world are merely manifestations of the delimited Real and only perception and

apperception of the Real can be considered as true. The Complete Human becomes aware of both its nothingness and of its unification with the Real; it is both absent and present (Chodkiewicz, *An Ocean without Shore* 129). The presence with the Real results in the realization by the gnostic—“blind, deaf, and mute” (129)—that the senses cannot be trusted and that the “self” is a fiction in terms of its merely being a manifestation of the Divine Will to Create. The self is not a self; the web of processes associated with individual subjectivity does not exist and is not “real” as such, but it does have belonging within the “Real,” or the Unity of Being (*waḥdat al-wujūd*). All of this is implied in Borges’s essay as he reaches the conclusion, through the literary treatment of personal experience, the ideas of Schopenhauer and a cursory study of Buddhism, that individual subjectivity does not truly exist, that it is a “mere logical imperative, without qualities of its own or distinctions from individual to individual” (9). This conclusion, informed by mystical experience, of the uncertain ontological ground of the self in turn suggests an affinity between Borges’s assertion and Ibn al-ʿArabī’s emphasis on the annihilation of the self and the subsistence in the gnosis gained from annihilation; furthermore, this annihilation is depicted in more dramatically conveyed style in many of Borges’s sort stories. In turn, as will be argued, the popularization of the transformative gnosis acquired from *fanā’* and *baqā’* could be a key ingredient in developing alternatives to the ideologies of otherness, competition, and xenophobia upon which the orthodoxies of Power receive much of their strength.

### ***Fanā’* in “The Writing of the God”**

A prime example of a literary depiction by Borges of *fanā’*—and the gnosis acquired from *fanā’*—occurs at the climax of the short story “The Writing of the God,”<sup>150</sup> when in his

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<sup>150</sup> A brief bibliographic history and summary of the story is provided in the analysis in chapter 2.

moment of theophany, the imprisoned Mayan priest Tzinacán attempts to communicate the gnosis of his mystical encounter with the godhead:

And at that, something occurred which I cannot forget and which I cannot communicate—there occurred union with the deity, union with the universe (I do not know whether there is a difference between those two words) ... I saw the universe and its secret designs... I came to understand the writing on the tiger... But I know that I shall never speak those words, because I no longer remember Tzinacán... He who has glimpsed the universe, he who has glimpsed the burning designs of the universe, can have not thought for a man, for a man's trivial joys or calamities, though he himself be that man. He was that man, who no longer matters to him. (Borges, "The Writing of the God" 253)

This is a clear attempt at an expression of the ineffable gnosis of an awareness of what Ibn al-ʿArabī called *waḥdat al-wujūd*, the Unity of Being, and the most emphatic example in Borges's oeuvre of a literary depiction of *fanā'*, the annihilation or passing away of the self when faced with the godhead.

The gnosis related by the voice of the "former Tzinacán" corresponds with what Ibn al-ʿArabī writes in the *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* about *fanā'* and *baqā'*: "On this question Junayd said, 'When the contingent is linked with the eternal there is nothing left of it.' Thus, when the heart embraces the Eternal One, how can it possibly be aware of what is contingent and created?" (Ibn al-ʿArabi 148). The aporia of the dialectic of transcendence and immanence is here enacted in apophatic style: a narrative voice, still calling itself "I" disclaims any subjectivity in its attempt to convey the experience of *fanā'*. As Sells, in his analysis of Ibn al-ʿArabī's passage in the *Fuṣūṣ* states:

Because the unity cannot be stated directly in language, itself inherently dualistic, it is drawn into ... apophatic practice ... A statement in dualistic terms ... is followed by a fusion of the two terms or an abstraction of one of them from the proposition. The practice is especially effective when combined as it is here, with a metaphor such as the vessel-content image. The normal dualism that the image requires is undermined by the shift of "passing away" so that the vessel is the content or, stated otherwise, there is no longer vessel but only content. (Sells 96)

Thus the paradox of a narrative “I” denying its reality, as occurs in the passage cited, can be understood in light of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s theosophy and Sells’s analysis. The vessel, Tzinacán, has become the content of the godhead, or rather, there is no longer any Tzinacán but only awareness of the godhead and the unity of Being. Borges gives the resulting synthesis of vessel and content expression in apophatic language that seems to undo the Unity of Being by “abstracting” the term “I” out of the “proposition” of *wahdat al-wujūd*. What is occurring, when read through Ibn al-‘Arabī’s conception of the passing away from reality the self, is that the godhead is the “I” speaking. Tzinacán has acquired *fanā’*, *baqā’*, and the “station of departure” so that what remains is the Real, or the Essence (*al-dhat*).

Conceding that the annihilation of the self (*fanā’*) described in the story does not narrate nor indicate Tzinacán’s return to society or the collective initially justifies the arguments of critics like Flynn, who considered the story an example of “failed mysticism” (Flynn 14), and Martin, who polemically charges Borges of being a “classicist and imperialist” (Martin 156) complicity with oppression and power and who denies Borges any trait of a committed author (152-66). Indeed, a simple reading of the story reveals that while Tzinacán’s culture is being destroyed, he has escaped, or retreated from, worldly problems and remains satisfied with a possession of gnosis and a familiarity of the Real. In this light, any possibility of resistance or social transformation seems unlikely since in the context of the immediate, practical realm, Tzinacán’s retreat doesn’t appear to emancipate the oppressed or transform oppressive structures, confirming Flynn’s and Martin’s criticisms.

However, I argue that the annihilation of the individual in this short story does not approve of or comply with power nor fail to transform the individual, but rather that it contains a powerful alternative onto-theology to that of the priest’s Catholic captors (and very likely

Borges's own readers), and in this way the priest Tzinacán achieves a victory of sorts, through his gnosis, over the language, religion, and temporal power of the colonizing Spaniard Pedro de Alvarado; fittingly, the "victory" remains metaphysical and is not brought to bear on the material plane due to the priest's refusal to speak the language needed to transform his reality.

Therefore, in the ending of "The Writing of the God" there are grounds upon which to build or justify a non-violent theory of passive resistance or transformation. The gnosis related by the annihilated narrator claims an understanding the "designs of the universe," the essential unity of humanity, and "the infinite processes that shape a single happiness" (253), and as the priest/godhead narrates, there is no point of physical violence and political resistance when an understanding about these "designs of the universe" and "infinite processes" has been granted: "What does he care about the fate of that other man, what does he care about the other man's nation, when now he is no one?" (253). The realization here of the hollowness of his "individual self" launches the priest into an ontological plane in which he perceives an annihilation of the ego and the complete unity of everything: "I was one of the strands within that all-encompassing fabric, and Pedro de Alvarado, who had tortured me, was another" (253). "That is why," the priest says, "lying in darkness, I allow the days to forget me" (254).

All of this potentially models for readers the perhaps non-productive or non-transformative strategies of self-preserving passivity in the face of disproportionate and overwhelming aggression, an acceptance that things are as they should be, and an escapist finding of sanctuary in a comprehension of the Unity of Being. Yet, in a more nuanced consideration of the literary depiction in "The Writing of the God" of the annihilation of the self and the resulting subsistence in the gnosis gained from the experience, readers could more productively be inspired to theorize a strategy of resistance that first assumes that it is pointless

to attempt to engage physically or violently with power, especially in a world that is mere manifestation and appearance and in which the rules and boundaries are not “Real.” Confronting power head on will most likely lead to a true physical annihilation. Thus, individuals must be convinced of the need to approach power obliquely and to reduce the expense of life and energy in efforts of resistance and social change. This first step, secured by transformations, of individual readers, of the consciousness about subjectivity, would make possible longer life spans for the practitioners of resistance and social transformation. Then, spreading this message of individual transformation to a wider audience, through literary means perhaps, would likely reduce violence and the deaths of the very people who need emancipation. Then the focus of liberators or social transformers could be increasingly turned to educating people about the power of unity. Ideally this unity could be communicated to both oppressors and oppressed, through several channels including literary depictions of mysticism such as the one portrayed in “The Writing of the God.” Presenting readers on all sides of the calculus of oppression with the idea that all can reconceive the ontological category of the subject could help collapse binaries of oppressed and oppressor, and could in turn help institute a new pathway for the realization of the brotherhood of man, in which exploitation, competition, and selfishness would diminish and in which altruism will be the watchword.

### **“The Zahir”**

Being imprisoned or detained for several years is not necessary to obtain the gnosis of the unity of Being, however, and Borges’s fictions provide readers with ample figurative suggestions regarding the processes which constitute the approach to the mystical experience of *fanā’* and *baqā’*. Most notably, these two key elements of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s theosophy are represented in “El Zahir” (“The Zahir”), another story from the collection of short stories, *El Aleph*. “The Zahir”

appears as part of a mystical triad in the collection with “The Writing of the God” and “The Aleph,” appearing in the book immediately before the former,<sup>151</sup> and it clearly serves as a portrayal of the individual subjectivity gradually being “annihilated” through a contemplation of the ontological dimensions of the godhead, thus providing a prime example of another point of contact between Borges’s literary depiction of mysticism and Ibn al-ʿArabī’s theosophical expressions on the individual and subjectivity.

“The Zahir” is narrated by “Borges” and tells of a mysterious coin whose two sides enchant those who have possessed it to the point of obsessive recollection and eventual loss of identity. “Borges” begins by describing the object under consideration in the story, the Zahir, an Argentine twenty centavo piece minted in 1929 with the letters “NT” and the numeral “2” etched into its face. “Borges” also relates that he received the coin as change for the purchase of a drink on the night of the wake of a woman for which he was romantically infatuated; feeling inflicted with weakness and fervid dreams the night of his receiving the coin, he decides to rid himself of it. Even after doing so, however, the story’s narrative arc consists of the narrator’s detailing his increasing obsession with the coin, which ends precisely where the story begins, on November 13, when he first tells the reader that he is “still, albeit only partially, Borges” (Borges, “The Zahir” 242). From contextual evidence and from the fact that the story was first published in *Los Anales* magazine in July 1947, it can be surmised that the setting for this story is from that same year. The coin in the story, “Borges” discovers through research, serves as only one manifestation of the various objects or persons throughout human experience which have

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<sup>151</sup> Here it is useful to recall Echavarría’s comments, noted in chapter 3, that “all the stories are of one piece” and López-Baralt’s remarks about the relationship between the Zahir and the Aleph.



captivated people beholding them to the point of madness (Borges, “The Zahir” 242; 246-47). Thus on one level, the story could be read as a cautionary allegory about obsession.

However, due to the Arabic-like name of the story and its central object, López-Baralt reads the story as an explicit account of Islamic mystical experience and gnosis. It will be recalled that in Sufi teaching, al-Zāhir and al-Bāṭin are two of the Divine Names, signifying attributes of “the manifest, the visible” and “the hidden, the concealed” respectively, as well as the namesakes of two hermeneutic strategies in Islamic and Sufi discourse.<sup>152</sup> Thus “the Zahir” in the story conjures immediately for the attentive reader associations with theological and mystical attempts to describe the godhead and Qur’anic interpretation. Moreover, in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s thought system, “the visible manifestation [the *zāhir*] is the image in which each individual sees the real. The hidden manifestation [the *bāṭin*] is the inner reality or secret of the heart which is at once universal and undifferentiated and, at the same time, determines the particularity and individuality of each individual” (Sells 97). Furthermore, “[o]n another level of dialectic, this hidden manifestation or predisposition is said to be identical to the visible manifestation it determines” (97). This then, is how Ibn al-‘Arabī models the dialectic between the manifest and the hidden: the hidden is the Real, and it makes itself known through and as the manifest. The hidden gives shape to the manifest, but at the same time it also *is* the manifest.

In terms of the mystical import of the story, “The Zahir” is “the story that is closest to ‘The Aleph’” (Echevarria 128) and of which López-Baralt writes:

I have reached the conclusion that the Zahir is the most sincere mystical symbol of all those coined by Borges...We should not read his text as Zahirists, attent only to the literal or exterior meaning of the text. We should first read it as Batinists or true members of the *batiniyya* sect, paying close attention to the many hidden levels of meaning beneath the visible word, represented by the exterior side of the

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<sup>152</sup> See chapter 2 for a discussion of these two interpretative strategies.

Zahir” (“Borges, Or the Mystique of Silence: What Was on the Other Side of the Zahir” 63–65).

According to López-Baralt, “the Zahir” in the story represents also that “enigmatic coin the other ineffable side of which will, by necessity, remain outside the scope of language” (30), and she points out that while “Borges” describes the obverse side of the coin, a narrative silence about the reverse side of the coin pervades the story. For López-Baralt, this silence indicates the attribute of the godhead that exists as a binary pair with al-Zāhir, al-Bāṭin (63), and she concludes that “[t]he silent void that lies behind the symbolic coin of the Zahir is one of Borges’ most successful verbal—rather, nonverbal constructs” (64). This suggests that Borges intended the coin, in both its narrated, manifest side and its elided and hidden side, to represent what Ibn al-ʿArabī conceived of *waḥdat al-wujūd*; contemplating the coin, the narrator gradually loses his self-identity by becoming more focused on the “unity of being” that the coin represents.

Additional textual markers occur which place the story within a Sufi reading including the narrator’s association of the coin with themes common in Sufi mystical: imagery of the “never-ending rose” and allusion to the “rending of the veil” (Borges, “The Zahir” 249). There is also explicit reference by the narrator to the practice of *dhikr*, the Sufi practice of repeatedly reciting one of the Divine Names or repetition of a phrase in order to bring the mystic closer to *fanā*. The narrator mentions these images and the practice of *dhikr* to attempt to make sense of his approach to *fanā* and the erasure not only of his notion of self, but also of any notion of delimitation of the godhead, in an attempt to get “behind” the coin, where the narrator suggests “God” can be found (249).

Elia also treats “The Zahir” by comparing it to “The Aleph,” remarking that “[t]he Aleph is not as material, as obvious a manifestation of Allah [as the Zahir], hence the person who sees it must be closer to selflessness, to a total immersion in God’s creation, to a loss of all that is

proper to his/her individuality. ‘I saw all the mirrors on earth, and none of them reflected me’ ...Borges recalls, thus suggesting that, at least while his vision lasted, his individual existence was uncertain” (Elia 136). López-Baralt instead argues that the Zahir is the more potent symbol of *fanā*’, and her impressively thorough reading of the story points out how each detail of the story is fraught with Islamic and Sufi import by calling attention to how many of the details in the tale are allusions to the binary relationship between the manifest (*al-zāhir*) and the hidden (*al-bāṭin*).

Indeed, after reading López-Baralt there is little question that the story correlates with Sufism and symbolizes Sufi attempts to explain and achieve *fanā*’. López-Baralt even associates *fanā*’ directly with Ibn al-‘Arabī (50) in her essay, even though he was not the first Sufi to employ the ideas of *fanā*’ and *baqā*’. While López-Baralt does at least mention Ibn al-‘Arabī in the context of *fanā*’ as a means with which to conclude that in “The Zahir” Borges “carefully records the authentic state of ecstasy” via a symbolic depiction of “states that represent the loss of conscience and self,” closer attention is needed in order to understand exactly how the story operates specifically on the axis of “annihilation;” therefore, I will supplement López-Baralt’s arguments by explicitly connecting the story to the Sheikh’s ideas about annihilation of the self.

As mentioned, the narrator reminds his audience at the outset that his sense of identity is vanishing since the day that he received the coin that he calls the Zahir: “I am still, albeit only partially, Borges” (242). Immediately after receiving the coin, the narrator begins a later-hour stroll through Buenos Aires, and the reader encounters the same enumerative catalog of items that tend to occur in the texts in which some kind of mystical gnosis is being related:

...among my change I was giving the Zahir; I looked at it for an instant, then walked outside into the street, perhaps with the beginnings of a fever. The thought struck me that there is no coin that is not the symbol of all the coins that shine endlessly down throughout history and fable. I thought of Charon’s obolus; the

alms that Belisarius went about begging for; Judas' thirty pieces of silver; the drachmas of the courtesan Laïs; the ancient coin proffered by one of the Ephesian sleepers; the bright coins of the wizard in 1001 Nights, which turned into disks of paper; Isacc Laquedem's inexhaustible denarius; the sixty thousand coins, one for every line of an epic, which Firdusi returned to a king because they were silver and not gold; the gold doubloon nailed by Ahab to the mast; Leopold Bloom's unreturning florin; the gold louis that betrayed the fleeing Louis XVI near Varennes. (Borges, "The Zahir" 244)

The almost chaotic and erudite recounting of the parade of images which coursed through the narrator's mind as he contemplated the coin bears the hallmarks of those long lists serving as attempts to narrate spontaneous perceptions in successive language, which appear in "The Writing of the God" and "The Aleph."<sup>153</sup> While definitely a stylistic feature of Borges's writing in general, in these particular cases it clearly heralds the advent or occurrence of mystical experience, and the inclusion of such enumeration in "The Zahir" suggests that this too is a moment of mystical experience.

Something about the coin has deeply affected "Borges" and he confesses that "I wandered in a circle; I was just one block from the corner where I'd been given the Zahir" (244). The circular movement is critical here in establishing a connection with Ibn al-ʿArabī; as has been shown in the previous chapter, Ibn al-ʿArabī's *Tarjumān al-Ashwāq* uses circular movement to suggest the mystic's movement within the godhead, movement that, in relation to the "center," is not movement, and which indicates the self's bewilderment, its immersion into the godhead and the godhead's presence in the self. Continuing his stroll, he describes himself as "Possessed, without a trace of sleepiness, almost happy" and embarks on a stream of thought about "money" in general and how "there is nothing less material than money, since any coin (a twenty-centavo

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<sup>153</sup> See the analysis of "The Writing of the God" in chapter 2 and "The Aleph" in chapter 3 for more detail about the correlation between Borges's idiosyncratic enumeration and the literary depiction of mysticism.

piece, for instance) is, in all truth, a panoply of possible futures. *Money is abstract*, I said over and over, *money is future time*” (244). Thus money in general represents something eternal, residing in *dahr*—perhaps the divine presence--within the successive *zamān* of human history. In this reading, the archetypal coin is analogous to the idea of the personality, as the essayist Borges conceives of it in its utter unreality.

Confirming the complete possession of the narrator by the Zahir, “Borges” relates that later that morning, he dreamed that he was himself a pile of coins—with all the allusions just made by the narrator about the abstract, immaterial, and eternal nature of money resonating in any attempt by readers to interpret this dream. Here, the dreamer *is* money, he *is* the Zahir, he *is* the manifest godhead; he has had a dream that foreshadows the gnosis that is acquired from *fanā*’. Chalking up his state of consciousness and his dream of the previous night to intoxication, he reexamines the coin and decides to rid himself of it (245). Here, as López-Baralt already observes, the narrator’s self-described drunkenness calls to mind the Sufī use of intoxication as a metaphor for theophany (36), so in this reading the narrator has “tasted” the presence of the Real and is beginning to approach the station of *fanā*’.

The approach to *fanā*’ does not happen overnight, however, nor with the complicity of the narrator; indeed, as in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s theosophy, *fanā*’ is given to the Complete Human by the Real, it is not simply earned nor requested. In fact, the narrator not only does not want to pursue a pathway to annihilation, he wishes to be free of his constant thought about the coin. He is at this point a reluctant mystic, wishing to forget the “taste” of gnosis given to him thus far and resolving finally to divest himself of the Zahir. Passing the coin to a tavern keeper for a glass of brandy does not achieve his goal however, as the narrator continues to think about the coin throughout the southern winter and into spring. In August he consults a psychiatrist, complaining

that he was “tormented by insomnia and that often I could not free my mind” (246). It is soon after his visit to the psychiatrist that he “exhumes” (makes manifest) a manual from a bookstore that explains for him the nature and historical frequency of his obsession.

Sharing what he has learned from this fictitious manual, “Borges” describes first that “zahir” means “manifest and evident” and Arabic, though as López-Baralt points out, Borges the author has taken some liberties with the Arabic lexicon by having his narrator say that the “masses use the word for ‘beings or things which have the terrible power to be unforgettable, and whose images eventually drives people mad’” (246). In the narrative logic of the story, however, this statement allows “Borges” to explain the manual’s lists of many of the objects in the history of the near and middle east which, as the sole focus of their thoughts, have driven people mad. While the list contains items such as an astrolabe, a slab of marble, a tiger, and prophet from Khorasan, the book proffers the narrator the idea that “there was no creature in the world that does not tend toward becoming a *Zaheer*, but that the All-Merciful does not allow two things to be a *Zaheer* at the same time, since a single one is capable of entrancing multitudes” (247). Yet the most telling passage read by “Borges” in the manual identifies the Zahir most certainly as a symbol of the godhead as pursued by Islamic mystics:

I also recall the remarkable uneasiness I felt when I read this paragraph: “One commentator of the *Gulshan i Raz* states that ‘he who has seen the Zahir soon shall see the Rose’ and quotes a line of poetry interpolated into Aṭṭar’s *Asrar Nama* (‘The Book of Things Unknown’): ‘the Zahir is the shadow of the Rose and the rending of the Veil. (248)

Here the reference is to the famed Persian mystic Farudidin al-Attar, the author of the *Mantiq al-Tayr* (*The Conference of the Birds*), who was a writer heavily reliant on both the image of the infinitely-petaled “Rose” as an emblem for the godhead and the metaphor of the “rending of the Veil” as an allegory for the granting of enlightenment or gnosis to the seeker by the godhead. It

is worth considering, too, why the passage made “Borges” feel “remarkable uneasiness.” Does he anticipate the mystical import of his obsession? It is not insignificant, either, that “Borges” returns at the end of his tale to a speculation about this passage from the “exhumed” book, as will be soon demonstrated.

After reading the book about the Zahir, “Borges” continues to obsessively attempt to visualize the Zahir after he has given it away, and his descriptions of his imaginings indicate that his sustained contemplation on the image of the Zahir is one of the final steps towards attaining *fanā*’ and gnosis of the Real: “First I could see the face of it, then the reverse; now I can see both sides at once. It is not as though the Zahir were made of glass, since one side is not superimposed upon the other—rather, it is as though the vision were itself spherical, with the Zahir rampant in the center” (Borges, “The Zahir” 248). The importance of the sphere in the oeuvre of Borges as the image for the universe, with the godhead as its ubiquitous center—and the same concept’s centrality in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s ontology—has already been demonstrated,<sup>154</sup> and the image conjured by “Borges” of the spherical Zahir makes it clear that the object is becoming for the narrator a manifestation of the *wahdat al-wujūd* that comprises, but is not limited to, the known universe. The more the narrator thinks about the Zahir, the closer he approaches being annihilated by, and in, this awareness.

Such an awareness of the impending annihilation of self helps “Borges” close his story and underscores the persistent echoes of the story with Ibn al-‘Arabī’s thought system:

Before the year 1948 ... I will have to be fed and dressed, I will not know whether it’s morning or night, I will not know who the man Borges was. Calling that future terrible is a fallacy, since none of the future’s circumstances will in any way affect me ... I will no longer perceive the universe, I will perceive the Zahir ... for me, thousands upon thousands of appearances will pass into one ... (“The Zahir” 248)

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<sup>154</sup> In chapter 3, pp. 10-25

This is a fairly straightforward description of the gnosis that is a necessary outcome of *fanā'* anticipated by the narrator. Yet his description reveals that the experience has yet to come, as his thought that the all appearances of the Zahir will be folded into one indicates that the narrator is still thinking in terms of a world of delimited being, one in which names like “the Zahir” can still be applied to “appearances.” In total annihilation of self, as conceived by Ibn al-<sup>°</sup>Arabī, gnosis occurs of the unlimited godhead, not “fragmented” into such objects as a “Zahir.”

It is in the final paragraph in which the complete annihilation of all terms used to delimit and name the cosmos—including the pronoun “I”—is more accurately anticipated, when “Borges” convincingly underscores the connection of the Zahir with the experience of *fanā'* so important to Ibn al-<sup>°</sup>Arabī’s theosophy:

In the waste and empty hours of the night I am still able to walk through the streets. Dawn often surprises me upon a bench in the Plaza Garay, thinking (or trying to think) about that passage in the *Asrar Nama* where it is said that the Zahir is the shadow of the Rose and the rending of the Veil. I link that pronouncement to this fact: In order to lose themselves in God, the Sufis repeat their own name or the ninety-nine names of God until the names mean nothing anymore. I long to travel that path. Perhaps by thinking about the Zahir unceasingly, I can manage to wear it away; perhaps behind the coin is God. (Borges, “The Zahir” 249)

*Fanā'* waits in the wings here for “Borges,” and the narration ends the story with a final literary depiction of mysticism. On the heels of an evening walk, the chiaroscuro effects that frame several of Borges’s other expressions of mystical experience and gnosis (e.g. “Feeling in Death,” “The Nothingness of the Personality,” “The Aleph,” “The Writing of the God”) are again brought to the forefront—it is finally at dawn, when light and darkness are locked in struggle, that the narrator is contemplating the Zahir as “the shadow of the Rose,” meaning that the Zahir can only *symbolize* the manifestations of the godhead. The gnosis of *fanā'* comes closer, as the multifarious universe continues to collapse into one image, that of the Zahir, and this is followed



by the realization that the world of the senses—including its symbols such as the Rose and the Zahir—is a mirage. This signifies one of the final steps towards the “rending of the Veil” through which the seeker enters the station of *fanā’*, encounters the Reality, and is granted gnosis of what had hitherto been concealed.

In his zeal to attain this station, “Borges” expresses his desire, and, one can guess, his intention, to practice a form of *dhikr*, the Sufi practice of reciting the Divine Names or even a phrase in order to usher the seeker into the station.<sup>155</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī held that *dhikr* was one the most important of the practices for seekers on his pathway and he not only suggests but actually employs *dhikr* in his own writing (in the form of repetition of a phrase of prose several times) to “discursively indicate” the idea that “true knowledge” remains in an eternal, constant state of flux (Sells 99).<sup>156</sup> As used by the Sheikh, *dhikr* is a tool to “break the spell of [rational] binding and achieve perpetual transformation: through the incessant process of reminding, the text attempts a momentary release from binding that leads to an increase in knowledge” (Sells 99). It is through the practice of *dhikr* that the narrator hopes to forget about the rational world as well as the Zahir, about the manifest world and its manifold details, and by which he will reach the stage of *fanā’* and come to recognize the *bāṭin*, or the godhead, which lies on the “other side” of the *ẓāhir*, collapsing the binary between the two in the realization of *waḥdat al-wujūd*. Thus the story ends with a decidedly explicit literary depiction of mysticism and a foreshadowing of mystical gnosis.

As López-Baralt has already pointed out, it is beyond doubt that Borges in his story has created a framework allusive to Sufism, and as I have sought to demonstrate, more particularly

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<sup>155</sup> López-Baralt makes this same observation (López-Baralt 40; 42; 62).

<sup>156</sup> As discussed in the discussion of *dahr* in chapter 2

one which is underpinned by the narrator's circuitous journey towards the station of *fanā'*, as it is envisioned by Ibn al-ʿArabī as the final rung on the "ladder" of the mystic seeker or traveler in the "ascent" to gnosis of the Real. But it is not just the notion of "the self" which is deconstructed in the story; in its association with Ibn al-ʿArabī's theosophy, "The Zahir" mimics what Sells observes as Ibn al-ʿArabī's employment of "the dialectical interplay between the hidden and the visible manifestations to set the context for his critique of rationalistic binding and dogmatism" (Sells 97). In this manner, Borges's story can be seen as manipulating this binary for much the same resistive purposes.

Therefore, the knowledge acquired during *fanā'* will lead in turn to the station of *baqā'*, in which the mystic not only aims to resist the "binding" of rational thinking, as Sells has argued, as expressed in the declarations of theological proponents of either transcendence or immanence. As Ibn al-ʿArabī writes in *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* in "The Wisdom of Exaltation in the Word of Noah:"

If you insist only on His transcendence, you restrict Him,  
 And if you insist only on His immanence you limit Him.  
 If you maintain both aspects you are right,  
 An Imam and a master in the spiritual sciences  
 Whoso would say He is two things is a polytheist,  
 While the one who isolates Him tries to regulate Him.  
 Beware of comparing Him if you profess duality,  
 And if unity, beware of making him transcendent.  
 You are not He and you are He and  
 You see Him in the essences of things both boundless and limited.  
 (Ibn al-ʿArabi 75)

Here is an attempt to express gnosis gained from *fanā'* and its subsequent *baqā'*, obtained through meditation on the *ẓāhir* and the *bāṭin*—a meditation that in "The Zahir," leads to awareness of the simultaneous immanence and transcendence of the godhead. It is this gnosis that can serve as a basis for social or political tolerance and as a key component in strategies for

transformation of societies that are built upon techniques of partition, division, definition, distinction, taxonomies, binarisms, and fixed meanings.

**Section summary: *Fanā'* as a resistance or transformation strategy in Borges**

It is clear from the preceding analysis of “The Nothingness of the Personality,” “The Writing of the God,” and “The Zahir,” that the notion of the loss of self and the annihilation of the ego is a crucial concern in Borges’s writing; yet what also clear is that Borges had either not experienced *baqā'* following *fanā'* or theoretically worked out the aftermath of *fanā'* in his own thoughts, or that due to his own experience or his own research, he was most comfortable writing only about the consciousness of the type of mystic that Ibn al-ʿArabī, in his *Risālat al-anwār*, called the *wāqifūn*, or “those who have come to a stopping place” in their “contemplation of the One” (Addas 153). Perhaps too, either his own experience or his reading and research led Borges to conclude that each experience of what Ibn al-ʿArabī would call *baqā'* is unique and that the only way to enunciate it is by living among people.

In this way, by working with what is available in the texts themselves, it can indeed be argued, as Flynn does (14), that Borges’s essays and stories suggest a condition of impotence or passivity following annihilation or “not-being” without any socially redeeming value, and that his literary depictions of mysticism do not point towards mystical consciousness as being salvific or transformative. Nevertheless, such a “*wāqifūn*” stance towards the gnosis of *fanā'* and *baqā'* could in itself be a central component for founding strategies of non-violent resistance, perseverance, and steadfastness in the face of power. At the same time, a *wāqifūn* position could contribute to socially transformative paradigms that must begin at the individual level. If individuals develop an awareness, in part through literary depictions of mysticism, of a theoretical “unity of Being,” then the attitudes and actions of acceptance, love, tolerance for “the

other” (that is at the same time really the “self,” these depictions suggest), then a firm basis for social instruction and a broadcasting of these values could be secured. Further, awareness of the potential for the types of gnosis which result from *fanā’* and *baqā’* could very well encourage readers to think in terms not of “either/or,” but of “both;” such a “synthetic” view of this dialectic can then be used to inform strategies of resistance and transformation at the level of personal identity, as well as incorporated into a wider non-rational educational paradigm at the social level.

### **Ibn al-‘Arabī’s “Knowing Heir” and *Futuwwa***

Thus, while the experience of “annihilation” in the godhead can, at the very least, be considered as a form of individual transformation, many mystics are nevertheless compelled, as Ibn al-‘Arabī teaches, to return to society after having experienced the gnosis of *fanā’*. Following annihilation, the mystic remains in *baqā’* constantly aware of the gnosis of the Unity of Being. The knowledge and state of mind provided by the station of *baqā’*, according to Ibn al-‘Arabī, in many cases should be used to teach individuals and to transform society. That is, once a Complete Human is granted the stations of *fanā’* and *baqā’*, the “illumination of revelation” leads this person to “see nothing in things but God” (Addas 138); the attributes that have been combined so completely in the individual melt away as if in to thin air and the Complete Human recognizes only the Real, while at this same time the Real recognizes itself. There are two types of people who see “nothing in things but God:” those “who only see God in things and the person who sees things and God in them” (Addas 139). These positions correspond, respectively, to the *wāqif* and the *rāji‘*. The *wāqif*, as noted, has come to the station of annihilation, and “halts” within the presence of the godhead—from the time of annihilation, the *wāqif* “knows and sees nothing but God” (139).

On the other hand, the *rāji*<sup>c</sup> is a mystic who “returns” from annihilation in the godhead “to created beings while remaining simultaneously present with God because he sees the Face of God in everything.” Ibn al-<sup>c</sup>Arabī throughout his writing makes clear that the station of the *rāji*<sup>c</sup> is a superior condition; Ibn al-<sup>c</sup>Arabī himself claims that he was sent back to impart his gnosis (Addas 156). Furthermore, among the *rāji*<sup>c</sup>*ūn*—“those who return”—are two types: “On the one hand there is the person who is sent back for himself. . . . Him we call the gnostic (*al-<sup>c</sup>ārif*): he returns so as to perfect himself by following a different route from the one he had taken. On the other hand there is the person who is sent back to created beings for the sake of directing and guiding them by his word. He is the knowing heir (*al-<sup>c</sup>ālim al wāriṭh*)” (Ibn al-<sup>c</sup>Arabī, *Risālat al-anwār* qtd. in Addas 153-54). As Addas’s biography emphasizes, Ibn al-<sup>c</sup>Arabī clearly was a “knowing heir” and throughout his travels and life he attempted to guide seekers through his theosophy to their own personal experiences with the Real (Addas *passim*).

The type of return to society in order to help transform its members, actualized by the “knowing heir,” in turn contributes to the formation of and embodies the code of *futuwwa*. *Futuwwa* ideals were present in Sufism from the earliest times of Sufism (Schimmel 246) and the term has been used to describe Sufi brotherhoods, as well as other kinds of belief-based guilds throughout Islamic history. The root of the word is *fata*: “the young man, the brave youth, generous and faithful” (246). According to the 9<sup>th</sup> century mystic al-Hallaj, the *fityan* (plural of *fatā*) are “those who excel by their absolute faithfulness and loyalty to treaties, including, particularly, Iblis and Pharaoh, who remained faithful to their claims” (246). Thus, in al-Hallaj’s conception, even the “foes” of a Complete Human in search of transformation could be considered as *futuwwa*. Qushayrī, writing in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, says that “[t]he *fatā* is he who has no enemy, and who does not care whether he is with a saint or an infidel; and Muḥammad was

the perfect *fatā*, for at Doomsday everybody will say “I” but he will say “My community” (qtd. in Schimmel 246). Significantly, it is Ibn al-ʿArabī’s thoughts which are accepted by Schimmel as the standard by which to judge the Sufi conception of the *fatā*: “a *fatā* is he who honors those senior to him, who shows mercy to those junior or inferior to him, and prefers those who are his equals to himself. The Sufi ideal of *īthār*, to prefer others to oneself, is brought to its perfection in the *futuwwa* concept” (246).

Regarding Ibn al-ʿArabī’s appreciation for *futuwwa*, he describes one of his Sufi masters as being famous for his “*futuwwa*, or heroic generosity”: ““He was always to be seen busying himself on someone else’s behalf—never for himself. He went to see governors and judges for the sake of other people’s affairs, and his house was always open to the poor”” (Ibn al-ʿArabī *Ruh al-Quds* qtd. in Addas 120). Ibn al-ʿArabī also indicates in several of his writings that the fundamentals of spiritual training include “[s]trict observance of the *sharīʿ* ... acquisition of the ‘noble virtues’ such as leniency, humility, generosity and ‘chivalry’ (*futuwwa*) ... asceticism ... *dhikr*... everything done under the direction of spiritual guide” (Addas 162-63). Thus under al-Sheikh al-Akbar’s training, *futuwwa* was an essential characteristic for the seeker to develop and perfect. Regarding Ibn al-ʿArabī’s own sense of *futuwwa*, Addas remarks that “[Ibn al-ʿArabī’s] compassion was universal: for him the heroic generosity of *futuwwa* of the saint necessarily extends to all created beings—the vegetable and mineral kingdoms included (FM II: 283 qtd. in Addas 205) and that in this regard, Ibn al-ʿArabī considered it his role in life is “firstly in gathering together the treasure of Wisdoms that had been bestowed on him with a view to assuring their protection; and secondly in ensuring their transmission down through space and time ...” (Addas 205). *Futuwwa* is a driving force behind the Sheikh’s role as a “knowing heir,” who returns to educate and transform his society and that of the future.

Of course, for Ibn al-ʿArabī, although there is not a Divine Name associated with *futuwwa*, it is nevertheless a characteristic of the “Divine.” Chittick points out how Ibn al-ʿArabī thinks of *futuwwa* in the context of “Divine Chivalry” as a function of the independence of the Essence. To better understand the relationship between *futuwwa* and the Real, in this context it is useful to think of the Real as “Essence” that is unlimited and without manifestation, while Divinity can be rightly thought of as a “bubbling up,” or the first delimiting, of Essence—Divinity is the manifestation of the Essence that generates the cosmos. “God as Essence has nothing to do with the universe,” Chittick writes in explaining this idea of the Sheikh (Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* 64); it is God as Divinity that gives creation its manifestations and attributes. Essence does not create the cosmos or its existent entities, nor does it “need” to do this. Essence therefore has independence from the worlds, while God as Divinity is not free or independent, since it is correlated in a “double bind” as both an extension of the Essence and as genesis of Its creation (64).

With this ontological relationship in mind, Ibn al-ʿArabī can posit that “chivalry is a divine attribute” (FM II 231.33 qtd. in Chittick 65) since it is the Real as Essence which “generously” allowed Divinity to create the cosmos, as an act of “charity” towards the potential, non-existent things that had not been brought into existence. Ibn al-ʿArabī then intensifies the degree of this Divine Chivalry, by claiming that the Divinity then masked that charity so as not to make it obvious. Rather than creation being for the benefit of the Real, as claimed in a *ḥadīth* that states that God created the cosmos so it could be worshipped, Ibn al-ʿArabī maintains instead that creation of the cosmos was an act of “munificence,” “generosity” and “mercy” towards the things in their non-existent states (FM II 231.33 qtd. in Chittick 65). Thus for Ibn al-ʿArabī, the Divine Chivalry serves as a triplicity of the Divine Names of “the Exceedingly Gracious and

Beneficent,” “the Generous,” and “the Merciful” (*ar-rahmān*, *al-karīm*, and *ar-rahīm*). The *futuwwa* created through the combination of these names is then further made more “chivalrous” in that the Divinity obscures any sense of obligation of creation to Divinity by saying through the Qur’an “I created jinn and mankind to worship Me” (51:56). Thus, according to Ibn al-ʿArabī, the Divinity made it appear that the all existent things in the cosmos were created for His sake rather than for their sake, even though, in addition to creating humanity as an act of charity, generosity, and mercy, “He also created things for us as an act of charity for us” (65-66). Therefore, *futuwwa* is a Divine attribute closely associated with creation and being in Ibn al-ʿArabī’s cosmology and ontology.

Mahfouz famously employs the term *futuwwa* in his fiction in the modern Egyptian sense of “strongman,” depicting characters who are both bullies and thugs as well as champions of the downtrodden. In analyzing Mahfouz’s depictions of *futuwwa* as exemplars of the “knowing heir,” I will employ the term to indicate neither Divine chivalry *per se*, nor a band of brothers, thugs, and bullies, but rather in the context in which Ibn al-ʿArabī uses it to describe the altruistic and respectful character of the Complete Human who serves as a repository for all the Divine Names and attributes. In this usage, then, the *futuwwa* is concerned with honoring and serving others selflessly because the experience of *fanāʾ* and *baqāʾ* has clearly demonstrated to the initiated “knowing heir” the hollowness of the term “self.”

### **Mahfouz, the “knowing heir,” and *futuwwa***

Ibn al-ʿArabī conceived of the mystic’s acquisition of the gnosis of the Unity of Being as a journey to, in, and from God.<sup>157</sup> It is the experience of the annihilation of individual subjectivity *in* and *from* God that will occupy my analysis in this chapter concerning Mahfouz.

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<sup>157</sup> Chapter 3 contains a detailed discussion of this metaphor.



The journey *in* God can be interpreted as the occurring during each moment's *fanā'*, while the journey *from* God should be considered as that of the "knowing heir" during the descent of the ladder of gnosis--the journey from God means a return to the material world, while subsisting (*baqā'*) in the gnosis of the Unity of Being.

El-Enany has consistently argued across the body of his criticism that Mahfouz rejects the possibility of mysticism to offer humanity a pathway for resistance (El-Enany, "Religion in the Novels of Naguib Mahfouz"; El-Enany, *Naguib Mahfouz*). Instead, he cites relevant examples from Mahfouz's body of work to support his claim that Mahfouz envisioned "scientific socialism" as a pathway to a utopian existence for humanity. At the same time El-Enany points out that "in Mahfouz's world individual morality and social morality are indivisible; they are two sides of the one coin. Thus, an individual who is solely concerned with his own personal salvation, showing no regard for other individuals in his immediate environment and in society at large, is an accursed self-seeker who can hope for no place in Mahfouz's heaven" (El-Enany, "Religion in the Novels of Naguib Mahfouz" 21). El-Enany supports his claims with numerous examples, particularly from Mahfouz's earlier novels, such as *Al-Qāhira al-Jadīda* (*New Cairo*), *Khān al-Khalīlī* (*Khan al-Khalili*), and the last two novels from the "Cairo Trilogy," *Qaṣr al-Shawq* (*Palace of Desire*) and *Al-Sukkarīya* (*Sugar Street*). Relying on Mahfouz's own words, Enany's analysis attempts to indicate an outright rejection of Sufism by Mahfouz:

In an interview, Mahfouz proclaims, "I reject any form of sufism achieved at the expense of man's concern with the world and the life of people." He goes on to explain that *sūfī* principles "created by the *sūfī* to be applied to himself or to a superhuman group is no good for the rest of humanity." (qtd. in El-Enany *Naguib Mahfouz* 231 n. 11)

El-Enany also cites the words of one of the characters from Mahfouz's fiction to support his claim that Mahfouz rejects Sufism outright. From the short story "Ayyūb," he quotes:

Sufism is a form of aristocracy, by my way is the people's way. The hierarchy of sufism consists in repentance, renunciation, piety, surrender to Divine will etc., by my way consist in freedom, culture, science, industry, agriculture, technology, democracy and faith. Sufism sees the Devil as the true enemy of mankind, whereas my enemies include poverty, ignorance, disease, exploitation, despotism, falsity, and fear. (qtd. in El-Enany *Naguib Mahfouz* 231 n. 11).

Finally, El-Enany cites the words of Kamal, the protagonist in the Cairo Trilogy who Mahfouz acknowledged was the character from his oeuvre that most completely mirrored his own psychology (Milson 21;28; 73; 111; 259; 268): “Sufism is escapism and so is a negative belief in science. ... Action is necessary, but action needs faith, and the question is how to create for ourselves a new faith in life” (qtd. in El-Enany *Naguib Mahfouz* 233 n. 33).

On the surface of things, and removed from their contexts, each of these examples ostensibly supports El-Enany's claim that Mahfouz, while acknowledging Sufism's potential for effecting individual transformation, considered it to be irrelevant in terms of giving rise to social transformation. Yet, when read through a true understanding of Ibn al-<sup>c</sup>Arabī's model of the Complete Human, one who has undergone *fanā'* and in the station of *baqā'* has assumed the title of the “knowing heir,” and who is driven by *futuwwa* to guide both individuals and society towards progress, it can be argued that Sufism espouses the very thing that Enany claims to be Mahfouz's vision.

Clearly, in the examples provided by Enany, Mahfouz is railing against Sufism as it is practiced in many instances, much like the complaints in Mahfouz's novel *The Journey of Ibn Fattouma* against the hypocrisies of Islam expressed by Sheikh Maghagha ((Mahfouz, *The Journey of Ibn Fattouma* 7) and Ibn Fattouma (125).<sup>158</sup> While each man in the novel condemns the state of Islam in the novel's historical moment, Mahfouz at no point in his literary career or

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<sup>158</sup> Here it should be recalled that both of these characters have been analyzed as characters pursuing Sufi gnosis in chapter 3.

during interviews actually rejects Islam. Thus his and his characters' pronouncements against Sufism can be read in much the same way, as a critique of the teaching of Sufism as it might frequently be practiced or taught in Mahfouz's immediate Cairene context, but in no way a total rejection of the Sufism *in toto*, and in no way is it a dismissal of Sufism as it is theorized and demonstrated in the writing and biography of Ibn al-ʿArabī.

Most notably, in terms of the “knowing heir,” Ibn al-ʿArabī's theosophy encourages the illuminated Complete Human to be a selfless and productive agent for change. I will show here, contrary to El-Enany's otherwise convincing assertions to Mahfouz's dismissal of Sufism as a channel for transformation, that Mahfouz actually does not proscribe a place for Sufism in inspiring change or resistance in his fiction. I will show, rather, how Mahfouz more subtly advocates for a committed Sufism, especially in his novels after 1961. However, I first want to provide an example from one of Mahfouz's early novels, *Al-Zuqāq al-Midaq*, to point out a potential blind spot in El-Enany's reading, after which I will analyze the character of Sheikh Junayd in *Al-Liṣṣ wa al-Kilāb* (*The Thief and the Dogs*) and his later analogue Sheikh Balkhi in *Arabian Nights and Days* as representatives of the “the knowing heir” as theorized by Ibn al-ʿArabī. I will then turn to *The Epic of the Harāfīsh* and analyze the “two ʿAshurs” as additional character types that fully encompass the traits of the “knowing heir” as *futuwwa*.

### *Midaq Alley*

Mahfouz's early novels are frequently cast in the “realist” genre by the critics.<sup>159</sup> As such, they often contain characters with psychologies which Mahfouz considered to be common or easily found in the Cairo of his own experience. These character types include the secular,

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<sup>159</sup> A more sustained discussion of the categorization of Mahfouz's novels is provided in chapter 2.

socialist leaning intellectual, which many have read to be Mahfouz's alter ego and the impassioned, fundamentalist leaning Islamist. Yet in one of Mahfouz's most successful pre-*Trilogy* novels, *Midaq Alley*, Sheikh Radwan is neither of these types. Instead, he can rightly be read as a forerunner of the mystical characters which will populate Mahfouz's later novels.

At the end of the novel, Radwan leaves his degenerating alleyway for Mecca, with the intention of undertaking *hajj* and immersing himself in *dahr*.<sup>160</sup> Though El-Enany reads this an escapist, and thus unsatisfactory response to the battle between Western modernity and Egyptian tradition which forms much of the context for the novel, there is instead every indication from Radwan's own words (Mahfouz, *Midaq Alley* 269; 274-75) that he will return with the intention of continuing the good work for which he is already known in the alley (8-9), thus making him one of the "knowing heirs." Therefore, even from his earlier period as a novelist, Mahfouz depicts through the characterization and words of Radwan mysticism as a source of potential transformation.

### ***The Thief and The Dogs***

The depiction of Sufism as a positive source of social transformation attains more development in Mahfouz's novels which followed the serialization in 1957 of *Gebelaawi's Children*. After the five-year silence of the novelist following the completion of the *Trilogy* in 1952, Mahfouz tells interviewers that "after that, my feeling changed and I was no longer interested in the individual as an individual, possessed of particular characteristics in a particular time and place" (qtd. in Beard and Haydar, "Mapping the World" 5). Thus, his writing after 1957 often takes on a more symbolic and allegorical role in which characters can be read in a universal or mythic context and in which "individuality" can be seen as something approaching

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<sup>160</sup> This pilgrimage is analyzed in the context of *dahr* in chapter 2.

Borges's conception of the term as "signifying nothing" except all of the other "I"s which have preceded a "self."

Therefore special attention should be paid to the role of the mystic in social transformation as it is taken up in Mahfouz's 1961 novel *Al-Liṣṣ wa al-Kilāb*, in which the unflappable Sufi master Sheik Ali al-Junayd provides a stark contrast to the anti-hero and protagonist Said, who spends the course of the novel frantically moving from location to location, struggling in vain to exact revenge against people that he feels have betrayed him as well as against the edifice of power which has previously imprisoned him for ten years. Over the course of the novel, Said's life steadily becomes more unmanageable and his frenzied and ferocious actions lead him closer to his final shootout with the police; in the novel, however, there are several sublime intervals in which Said seeks refuge with and instruction from his father's religious teacher, Sheikh Ali al-Junayd.

The novel's English translator Trevor LeGassick sums up the novel as being "[o]stensibly a psychological crime story, ... [with] evident social-political overtones and ... [a] subtle discussion of mystical Islam" (Le Gassick 4). Kilpatrick rightly reads al-Junayd as a symbol for the "Sufi way of thinking... which embraces death, fate and metaphysical problems in general" (Kilpatrick 99) and as a stark contrast for the novel's anti-hero Said, who has "become materialistic" (99). Likewise, El-Enany chooses to read the interactions between Said and al-Junayd as indicative of the "incompatibility of two worlds that cannot meet; the mystic has achieved peace with the world by completely withdrawing from its harsh reality and creating an inner invisible one for himself, while Sa'id is too enmeshed in the ugliness of reality to be able to see or seek a way to deal with it other than by self-condemning confrontation" (103). While the latter statement regarding Said's condition is more or less accurate, his judgment of the mystic

and “the irrelevance of transcendental escapism” is less so, as the following analysis will demonstrate a sense of *futuwwa*—a self-less, compassionate, and educational consciousness—displayed by the “knowing heir” al-Junayd that is neither irrelevant nor escapist.

In order to establish an argument that Mahfouz’s attitude towards mysticism in the novel is not one of disdain, the positive or productive attributes of the Sheikh should first be discussed. First, the name of the character, al-Junayd, is worth a closer look, as it evokes the mystic known as Abū ‘l-Qāsim Muḥammad al-Junayd (d. 297/910) who is regarded as one of the most influential mystical thinkers in the Islamic tradition. He was regarded as “the pivot” in early Sufism, because his thought and expression unified “divergent mystical schools and modes of thought” and that subsequent Sufis inevitably traced their “initiation chains” back to him. He is also one of the pioneers in characterizing and emphasizing “annihilation” in the godhead and in championing the “second sobriety” of *baqā’*, the state of the mystic after he has recovered from the “intoxication” of annihilation (Schimmel 57-58). Sells points out that within al-Junayd’s intense focus on the annihilation of the self and “the guile of the self-ego ... might be an authentic reflection of Junayd’s view that one can never rest secure in one’s identity” (Sells and Ernst 258). Junayd, then, is a name that evokes the eradication of self, the “sober” subsistence of the mystic in the gnosis gained from annihilation, and ontological doubt about the category of the self.<sup>161</sup>

Evidence that Mahfouz wished to portray al-Junayd in a favorable, rather than a cynical light, can be found in the initial description of the mystic, through the words of the third person narrator. Said’s first sighting of the Sheikh after ten years in prison is marked by quietude: “Said

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<sup>161</sup> For a contemporary translation of Junayd’s treatise on *fanā’* see Sells (Sells and Ernst 257–65)

smiled, slipped in carrying his books, and saw the Sheikh sitting cross-legged ... absorbed in quiet recitation.” His face was “emaciated but radiant with overflowing vitality ... the Sheikh scrutinized him with eyes that had been viewing this world for eighty years and indeed had glimpsed the next, eyes that had not lost their appeal, acuteness, or charm” (26). His first words to Said are firmly established in the temporal context of *dahr* by the narrator: “‘Peace and God’s compassion be upon you,’ said the Sheikh in a voice like Time” (27). The mystic is presented to the reader, from the beginning, as a man of serenity, longevity, charisma, gnosis, and steadfastness. These are hardly qualities which could be called irrelevant or impotent.

It is true that Said’s initial encounter with the Sheikh, perhaps the most important one in terms of Said’s potential for reformation, is fruitless, but only because the Sheikh can see through Said’s designs; claiming “it’s not only a roof” he is seeking, but “to ask God to be pleased with me,” Said in his attempt to find sanctuary has suggested to al-Junayd that he desires to take spiritual instruction from the Sheikh. The Sheikh sees through this, however, and is disappointed: “The Sheikh’s head drooped to his breast. ‘You seek the walls, not the heart,’ he whispered” (Mahfouz, *The Thief and the Dogs* 27). Nevertheless al-Junayd does not give up on Said, and in an attempt to prod Said into changing his motivations, he urges Said to stop dwelling on past recollections and the emotions they inspire—both good and bad—and to focus instead on the present moment (28), advice which resonates with the Sufi notion of the mystic being “a son of the moment.”<sup>162</sup> At the end of the chapter, in response to Said’s request simply for “a kind word,” Junayd counsels Said to read the Qur’an five times if he is indeed serious about returning to the favor of God (31-32).

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<sup>162</sup> See chapter 2 for a discussion of the Ibn al-‘Arabi’s conceptualization of the mystic as being the perpetually being re-subjectified in terms of *waqt* (the moment).

In particular, al-Junayd urges Said to read the verses of the Qur'an "[i]f you love God, then follow me and God will love you" and "I have chosen thee for Myself," and to repeat the words "Love is acceptance, which means obeying His commands and refraining from what He has prohibited and contentment with what He decrees and ordains" (32). These verses and this expression, which are among the discourse characterized by El-Enany as "dialogue worthy of the best traditions of the Theatre of the Absurd" (El-Enany, *Naguib Mahfouz* 103) are clearly not as absurd as the critic would like to portray, as even though they do reveal "the incompatibility" of "two worlds that cannot meet," they do not exactly show the "irrelevance of transcendental escapism," as El-Enany brands al-Junayd's Sufi practice. Instead, these words, expressed to an angry young man fresh out of prison and consumed by anger and revenge, are meant to guide their auditor towards a path of individual transformation, a path rejected by Said rather than concealed or hidden by al-Junayd. Furthermore, had Said been transformed, much of the social context of the novel—the murders, the physical assaults, the exploitation of the female character of Nur, the police dragnet, the public hue and cry—would have been transformed as well. But outside of Said's replies to al-Junayd's statements, replies which are a product of Said's consistent refusal to think outside of his own agenda for vengeance and passion, this counsel of Junayd is not manifestly absurd, and to a receptive listener it would seem to be advice meant to redirect one's energies.

However, Said conjures up excuses each time the Sheikh impels him to read and finally fully retreats into his memory of times past, musing, in a shift to first-person narrative stream of consciousness that "*I am alone with my freedom, or rather I'm in the company of the Sheikh, who is lost in heaven, repeating words that cannot be understood by someone approaching hell. What other refuge have I?*" (33). This is the mental state that begins the path pursued by Said,



over the course of the novel, of active violence in an attempt to resist a law which he feels that he is above (Mahfouz, *The Thief and the Dogs* 132–34), and the depiction of Said’s rapid self-destruction should be rightly read as an indictment against the use of physical and violent resistance against powers greater than the individual rather than a rejection of Sufism. Instead of an explicit incompatibility between two worlds, which is clearly how Said—and El Enany view the situation—there is more correctly a poor decision made by Said to inhabit the world of anger and vengeance derived from what he perceives as assaults on his ego. The choice of Said to pursue this path, rather than the Sufi path suggested by al-Junayd—seems more escapist, or even more properly, defeatist, in this reading.

In the three interludes in which Said seeks shelter and a hiding place from the police with al-Junayd, the Sheikh urges him to abandon his material concerns and emotional impulses and to plunge into a journey towards *fanā’* and *baqā’* in the godhead. Regardless, Said refuses the Sufi path and instead opportunistically seeks refuge and guidance from the Sheikh, who in addition to generous spiritual instruction also exhibits a more material “heroic generosity” and *futuwwa* towards Said, offering him food and shelter throughout Said’s campaign to exact revenge (Mahfouz, *The Thief and the Dogs* 75; 82; 144), gently reminding him midway through the novel that “This is your home” (82). Yet Said refuses the implication of the Sheikh’s invitation—that of following the Sufi path—and opts instead to spend the majority of his time while hiding out in the apartment of his prostitute girlfriend Nur—that is, when he is not out and about late at night, attempting to murder his former mentor Rauf, his former henchman Ilish, and his ex-wife Nabawiyaa.

Regardless, during Said’s brief stays with the Sheikh while evading the police, al-Junayd continues in a spirit of *futuwwa* to offer Said spiritual instruction in an attempt to help him

extricate himself from his self-destructive behavior and thinking (75; 78-83; 151), all of which Said rejects as unintelligible or useless verbiage. Said does not renounce his desire for revenge, nor his need for the companionship, security, and lust he feels with Nur, and he remains bound to the emotions and passions driving him to his destruction. Al-Junayd senses this, and when Said creeps back to the Sheikh's hut just before dawn to hide after his horribly flawed attempt to kill Illish—in which he kills a person by mistake that he didn't know or have a grievance against—the Sheikh recites a *ḥadīth qudsiyya* in the presence of Said regarding the proper spiritual use of passion: “In my view, passion is nothing but ingratitude unless it issues from my witnesses ... the eyes of their hearts are open, but those in their heads are closed” (75). This utterance, expressed during the Sheikh's pre-dawn *dhikr* and *fanā'*-like contemplations of the Real (74),<sup>163</sup> is ostensibly made without the Sheikh's being aware of Said's entrance into his room and can be read as occurring during a suprasensory mystical experience; moreover, it uncannily hits its mark as the lesson which it contains applies directly to Said's emotional state at the time—impassioned, confused, afraid, angry, and defiant. Al-Junayd's words are the mystical gift of a “knowing heir” to one in need, but that needful one cannot or will not absorb the message, as he chooses to stay at the Sheikh's simply for a place to sleep, away from the attentions of the police.

Because he remains utterly fixated on attaining victory over the people and things in the world against which he feels resentment, Said also remains throughout the novel unwilling to follow or unable to understand the Sheikh's mystical utterances, the final of which counsel him that “patience is holy and through it all things are blessed” and that “trusting God means

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<sup>163</sup> “[Said] heard the voice muttering but could only distinguish the word “Allah,” “God!” It went on muttering as if the Sheikh were unaware or perhaps reluctant to acknowledge his presence... [w]hen would this strange man go to sleep? But the strange old man now raised his voice and began to sing...” (74-75).

entrusting one's lodging to God alone" (145) just before Said engages in his final gun battle in the graveyard with the police. This is Said's last chance to embrace the Sheikh's teaching, although by this time, with two murders of bystanders and at least three violent assaults on record and the police dragnet closing in, Said would have had little chance to transform himself before going to prison again.

Al-Junayd's final statements, though they fall on deaf and hopelessly impatient ears, are rooted in mystical consciousness. Mahfouz's literary depiction of the words and demeanor of the Sheikh, a demeanor which characteristic of the Junayd's *baqā'*, corresponds with the Sufi discussion of the station of patience which comprises one of the final landmarks on the way to "satisfaction" of *baqā'*. Ibn al-ʿArabī, for example, writes about the journey *in* God, a concept that is ultimately an endless and "trackless desert," and which should paradoxically be a journey consisting of physical stasis, since the Real, Ibn al-ʿArabī's view, is already present wherever the seeker happens to be (Hirtenstein 162):

God has said: 'It is He who, out of His bounty, has settled us in an abode wherein neither toil or weariness affects us,' and He has said: 'He is with you wherever you are.' Now traversing distances certainly involves extra effort, indeed a very special effort. Nothing is moving me except my seeking Him: if I did not make Him my aim and goal by this wandering and journeying, I would not be seeking Him. But He has already informed me that He is with me, in my state of moving away as well as in my state of standing still. He has a 'face' in everything.

*So why roam around?* Moving with the aim of reaching Him is [simply] a sign of not having found Him in stillness!... We have tasted both these orders, and *we have seen that stillness is preferable to movement, and greater in terms of awareness [of God] that comes with the shifting of states at every breath.* There is no escaping that shifting [of states]: it is a well-trodden path, in which we are led rather than making our own way. (FM II:294, qtd. in Hirtenstein 167, italics and paragraph break mine)

In this way, al-Junayd's words can be read as an attempt, although a futile one in the plot of the novel, to guide another individual to a gnosis about the static journey "in" God that would allow

an individual transformation within Said, that would, in turn, have great social import. Therefore, Al-Junayd can be read as a representative of a mystic, like his namesake and like Ibn al-ʿArabī, who has acquired the gnosis of the journey “in” God, which is characterized first by bewilderment and finally by stasis. It is towards this that al-Junayd attempts to guide Said. Indeed, as Beard has observed, “[Said’s] host, the sheikh Ali al-Junayd, represents a pole of certainty and stillness to balance the constant motion and torturous improvisations of the central character” (Beard 169). The inability of Said to accept this gnosis of stillness and patience, or even to consider it, signals his rejection of the offering of a “knowing heir,” who as a result of the interior voyage has the power, to enrich exterior spatial experience at both the individual and social levels.

The blame for Said’s violent end can hardly be placed on a Sufism that has its head buried in the sand. In fact, al-Junayd is portrayed at the novel’s end as being committed to a form of social engagement leading a *dhikr* ceremony of several of his followers (151-53); he is clearly a “knowing heir” who has returned from *fanāʾ*, and in his journey “from” God attempts to guide others towards transformative experiences which are not necessarily denunciative of social commitments or representative of an “aristocracy.” Indeed, the first step to social transformation must take place at the individual level. This connection is made clear in the Sheikh’s admonitions to Said when the latter has resigned himself to failing in his campaign to exact vengeance on his betrayers:

“Yes. Well you’re certainly a happy Sheikh,” Said said. “The scoundrels have got away,” he went on angrily. “How can I settle down after that?”

“How many of them are there?”

“Three.”

“What joy for the world if its scoundrels number only three.”

“Well then, no one has ‘got away.’”

“I’m not responsible for this world, you know.”

“Oh yes. You’re responsible for both this world and the next!” (144-45)

Quite clearly, from this exchange, it is Said who wishes to turn his back on the world, after his failure, and the mystic al-Junayd who expresses an awareness of and commitment to the “this world.” It follows then that El-Enany’s reading that Mahfouz has created al-Junayd as the prototype of the mystic who abandons the world is inaccurate.

In sum, Sheikh Ali al-Junayd attempts to help Said, but the novel’s anti-hero rejects this. El-Enany reads the sheikh’s passivity in the face of Said’s frenetic activity as a retreat from the world, and he blames the Sheikh’s withdrawal from the world as failing to pull Said back from the brink of self-destruction; however, it is more than clear from my analysis that the sole driving force behind the novel’s tragic trajectory is Said’s obsession for revenge. Although finally free from the literal brick and mortar prison of the government, Said is unable to escape the emotional bondage of resentment the material prison constructed from his attachment to his desire and his pride; he is unable to be healed by divine love (via mysticism) or human love (via Nur) because he is so focused on the material world and on revenge (Kilpatrick 99). As a result, he is ultimately unable to transform his ego and subjectivity.

As Mahmoud has pointed out, the Shaykh sees human salvation—and I argue subject transformation—ultimately as resulting from individual choice; patience is essential and involves “one’s complete immersion in the present moment”, “existential surrender,” and “a negation of one’s ego and assertion of a transcendent ego in which one aspires to lose oneself” (Mahmoud 121). Of course, Ibn al-ʿArabī contends that the “transcendent” is simultaneously “immanent,” but nevertheless Mahmoud correctly reads al-Junayd’s calls for a renouncement of the material and for dependence only on God, or as Ibn al-ʿArabī would have it—the *waḥdat al-wujūd*—for security (122). For al-Junayd, love, trust, and acceptance are the key steps to negating the

individual and rationalistic ego: love of the Real<sup>164</sup> leads to complete—if irrational—faith and trust in the Real, and thus to accepting things that happen as a part of *wahdat al-wujūd*, or as Mahmoud sees it, God’s will (122). In this model of individual transformation, the annihilation of the ego (*al-fanā’*) leads to an inner peace that comes with the ability to subsist (*al-baqā’*) in the gnosis of the Unity of Being.

Yet al-Junayd’s focus on individual annihilation does not come at the expense of his being concerned about others. In contrast to being apathetic to the needs of others, throughout the novel, the Sheikh in the spirit of *futuwwa* offers food and shelter to Said. Moreover, the Sheikh offers ample opportunity for rehabilitation and reformation—for psychic change—but Said continually rejects this, even at one point considering aiming his pistol at his benefactor (79). It can be argued, then, that El-Enany mistakenly reads Said’s rejection of the attempt by the “knowing heir” Sheikh Ali al-Junayd to impart instruction about transformation and resistance through annihilation as likewise a rejection by Mahfouz of the potential of mysticism for offering pathways of resistance. In contrast, I assert that Mahfouz is portraying the grim outcome of a man who has rejected the opportunity to follow the mystical pathway, a pathway cleared and pointed out to him by al-Junayd in an altruistic spirit of *futuwwa* that results from the Sheikh’s own *fanā’* and *baqā’*. Thus, the literary depiction of mysticism through the characterization, words, and actions of Junayd suggests to readers an alternative to the rational pathway for the individual and social progress.

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<sup>164</sup> Mahmoud does not use the term “the Real,” instead the more orthodox term of the “God” is given in translation of the article written by him. I have chosen to use the Real to better make my point that al-Junayd’s theosophy evokes that of Ibn al-‘Arabī.

### *Arabian Days and Nights*

This alternative pathway is brought to a more optimistic terminus through another character from Mahfouz's gallery of mystics. Though Sheikh Balkhi in *Arabian Nights and Days*<sup>165</sup> is dismissed by El-Enany as selfish, "haughty," "escapist," and "solipsistic" (El-Enany, *Naguib Mahfouz* 164) in his attitude towards the injustice and violence of his society, Balkhi's character can be read alternatively as exemplifying the persona of the "knowing heir" who has returned from *fanā'* and *baqā'* in order to guide others towards transformative pathways. Indeed, even El-Enany concedes that Balkhi is "a paragon of wisdom and purity of spirit," even as he discredits the character's social commitment (163).

Clearly it is beyond doubt that Balkhi represents the Complete Human, one who has achieved a profound ontological gnosis through *fanā'* and *baqā'*. The narrator communicates in the beginning of the novel that he is a "Sheikh of the Way, having attained a high plane in the spiritual station of love and contentment" (5). This description requires some explanation: for Sufis, the ultimate height in the station of love is *fanā'* or annihilation in the Beloved (Nicholson 107–19), while contentment is the result of subsistence, or *baqā'*, in the gnosis of the Beloved (Schimmel 122; 125-26). This gnosis allows the Sheikh to be able to read character's hearts, and as Abdullah the porter realizes, he "could see that which was veiled" (57). Even though due to his detachment from material concerns, he refuses to personally intercede or even speak out against the bloodshed and wrath of the Sultan Shahriyar and the corruption of his governors, Balkhi is actually able to catalyze a dramatic transformation in his society by the novel's end, through his transmission of gnosis, as a "knowing heir," to Shahrzad, the daughter of the vizier

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<sup>165</sup> See chapter 2 for a summary of this novel. See chapters 2 and 3 for additional analysis of the mystical portrayals of time and space in this novel.

Dandan who captivates the Sultan's attentions each night and eventually rehabilitates him from his wrathful commitment to kill an innocent girl of his kingdom each night in retribution for the adultery of his first wife.<sup>166</sup>

While al-Balkhi is the teacher and spiritual guide of several key characters in the novel, such as the doctor Abdul Qadir, Fadil, Aladdin, and Sindbad, none are more essential for meaningful social transformation than Shahrzad, who through her story-telling and patient and gentle demeanor is responsible for the rehabilitation of the Sultan's consciousness and spirituality as well as the regime change which his change of heart engenders. As is fully disclosed at the end of the novel, due to Shahrzad's stories, the Sultan develops a new morality, and as a result he abdicates the throne to his and Shahrzad's son, who will ostensibly be raised under the tutelage of his mother. As Sultan Shahriyar tells Shahrzad: "Get up and proceed to your task. You have disciplined the father and you must prepare the son for a better outcome" (218). When Shahrzad objects to the Sultan that "You are exposing the city to horrors," the newly enlightened Sultan calmly replies "Rather I am opening it to the door of purity" (218). Thus, the Sultan has been "disciplined" and rehabilitated by the vizier's daughter Shahrzad to the point where he relinquishes temporal power to her, and their infant son, for the good of his city.

Importantly, the lessons taught by Shahrzad to the Sultan and which she will teach to their son have their roots in mystical gnosis. Just as she led Shahriyar to "listen to the call of salvation, the call of wisdom" (218), she in turn had been taught before by the "knowing heir," Sheikh al-Balkhi. This is made abundantly clear in the early pages of the novel, when Shahrzad,

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<sup>166</sup> The back story to Mahfouz's novel is actually the frame narrative of *The Thousand and One Nights*. The extra-marital exploits of Shahriyar's first wife are never actually related or even alluded to in Mahfouz's novel, but the author is counting on his audience's awareness of this famous episode in Arab and world literature.



in conversation with her father on the morning of the announcement of the Sultan's renouncing his agenda of slaying innocent women each night, claims that it is due to the Sheikh's teaching that she was able to sacrifice her own freedom and happiness in order to rehabilitate the Sultan's wrath against women:

“I sacrificed myself,” she said sorrowfully, “in order to stem the torrent of blood. ... I know that my spiritual station lies in patience, as the great sheikh taught me.”

To this Dandan said with a smile, “What an excellent teacher and what an excellent pupil!” (4)

Yet Shahrzad herself is not the only person who is convinced that the Sheikh is the ultimate source of Shahrzad's repentance. In the scene following Shahrzad's conference with Dandan, the doctor Abdul Qadir is portrayed congratulating Sheikh al-Balkhi for the success of Shahrzad in stanching the wrath of the Sultan:

“Voices are lifted in prayer for Shahrzad, showing that it is you who primarily deserve the credit,” said the doctor.

“Credit is for the Beloved alone,” [al-Balkhi] said in reproof.

“I too am a believer, yet I follow promises and deductions. Had she not been a pupil of yours as a young girl, Shahrzad would not, despite what you may say, have found stories to divert the sultan from shedding blood” (6).

While the Sheikh attempts here, as any Sufi who has attained *fanā'* in the Real would do, to divert the praise to the ultimate source of his own gnosis, it is the doctor, as a representative of the Sultan's subjects, who understands quite well that the chain of transmission from the Real would not have continued had it not been for al-Balkhi. Therefore, despite the Sheikh's self-effacement and rejection of the material world, with its possession and passions (6), he journeys *from* God, and with gnosis from with *fanā'* and in a state of *baqā'*, plays the role of the “knowing heir,” guiding one individual along the mystic path to the degree that she is able to achieve a radical social transformation. Therefore, this literary depiction of mysticism cannot be accurately read as an expression of Mahfouz's rejection, noted above by El-Enany, of “any form

of sufism achieved at the expense of man's concern with the world and the life of people.”

While it is not in question that Mahfouz indeed had no regard for such an “other-worldly” or selfish mysticism, the portrayal of al-Balkhi, if read as an exemplar of the “knowing heir,” can hardly be classified as a Sufism that doesn't positively impact the life of the people.”

### ***The Epic of the Harafish***

*Arabian Nights and Days* illustrates how the gnosis gained by one mystic through *fanā'* and *baqā'* can impact not just individual subjectivities, but those of other individuals and also the structure of greater society, illustrating that Mahfouz's portrayal of mysticism in the novel is not that of a selfish, escapist, socially unaware Sufism. Another later novel, *The Epic of the Harafish*,<sup>167</sup> employs a literary depiction of mystical subjectivity that evokes Ibn al-<sup>c</sup>Arabī's definition of *futuwwa* and suggests that society can be progressively transformed through this concept. Like the literary depiction of mysticism in *Arabian Nights and Days*, the portrayal of the individual subjectivity of the mystic in *Harafish* cannot be correctly read as a negative representation of mysticism by Mahfouz.

In Mahfouz' novels *The Children of Gebelaawi* and *The Harafish* and in his collection of vignettes *Hikāyāt Hāratinā (Fountain and Tomb)*, the title of *futuwwa* is applied to strongmen and “clan leaders” who serve as a de facto body of law among the “people.” Mahfouz's representations of these *futuwwa* is inconsistent in terms of their ethics, morals, and motivations. At times in Mahfouz's fiction the *futuwwa* is ill-intentioned, motivated by greed and power and thinking not of the people in their communities that rely on them for protection and justice, but only of themselves. At other times, the *futuwwa* are portrayed as true protectors of their communities, aligning more with Ibn al-<sup>c</sup>Arabī's definition of *futuwwa*.

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<sup>167</sup> See chapter 2 for a brief bibliographical discussion and plot summary of the novel.

The ambiguity with which Mahfouz portrays the *futuwwa* is based on his own experiences growing up in the al-Jāmaliyya *ḥāra* (quarter) in Cairo. The novelist told Ghitani in an interview that in his youth, every quarter claimed a *futuwwa* whose job was ostensibly to “protect it” rather than “oppress,” although he mentions that “as with some rulers, the protector sometimes turned into a usurper” (qtd. in El-Enany 3). He also points out in the interview the function of the *futuwwas* during popular resistance to British occupation and in supporting the nationalist Wafd party in national elections (3). In terms of his writing, Mahfouz tells Ghitani that the symbolic role of the *futuwwa* in his writing is fully intentional, confirming that in *Children of Gebelaawi* they “stood for brute force” while in the later *Epic of the Harafish* they were “like rulers, sometimes just, sometimes oppressive” (3).

Thus *The Epic of the Harafish* is essentially structured along an axis of representation of a series of *futuwwa* who alternate between benign protectors and corrupt oppressors. The prime representations of the positive or socially committed *futuwwa* can be found in Mahfouz’s portrayals of the first and last rulers of the al-Nagi clan, °Ashur and °Ashur “the second.” More importantly, in the context of what I am arguing here, is that each character’s ascent in the quarter, to the title of *futuwwa* itself a term loaded with Sufi connotations, occurs as the result of mystical experience. Their mystical experience in turn leads to an individual transformation of each character, which will then prove to have significant social impact in the narrative logic of the novel.

The founder of the line, °Ashur al-Nagi, emerges as the first truly benevolent clan leader, or *futuwwa*, due to a mystical vision he experienced, the gnosis of which is that a plague will soon visit his community. Inspired by the suprasensory experience with the spirit of his foster father in a dream, Ashur leaves for the hills surrounding the city and survives the wave of disease

that extinguishes life and activity. His mystical consciousness is initiated in front of the *takiyya*, or Sufi monastery:

Anxiety drove him to the monastery square in the middle of the night. Winter was coming to an end. A gentle, invigorating breeze blew and the clouds hid the stars. In the darkness the anthems floated from the monastery as clear as ever, their serenity undisturbed by a single elegiac note. Don't you know what's happened to us, gentlemen? Have you no cure? Haven't you heard the wailing of the bereaved? Seen the funeral processions going by your walls?

Ashur stared hard at the outline of the great arched door until his head spun. It grew until its top disappeared in the clouds. What's going on Lord? The door undulated slowly in its place and seemed ready to fall. A strange smell reached his nostrils; it was earthy, but governed inexorably by the stars. For the first time in his life Ashur was afraid. (Mahfouz, *The Harafish* 35)

Here, as Ashur meditates in front of the Sufi collective, in an atmosphere, he challenges the mystical way of life as being unaware of the suffering and sickness which is beginning to visit the quarter. At that very moment, Ashur experiences an irrational and multi-sensory awareness, as if in answer to his interrogations.

This awareness is only the beginning of the gnosis which he is to acquire however, as he leaves the monastery afraid for the future and grieving for the events of the recent past (36), and returns to his home to sleep. Here, he has a dream, or perhaps a vision, in which he receives a suggestion from his long deceased foster father Sheikh Afra that he take his family and flee the quarter and its festering plague environment (36). It is this dream-vision, which prompts him to tell his new wife Fulla that they are going to "leave the alley without delay" (36). She argues against this idea as insanity but Ashur explains to her the certainty of his gnosis:

"No. Yesterday I saw death. I smelled its smell."

"It's not for us to resist death, Ashur."

He looked down in embarrassment and said, "We have a right to resist death as well as to die at the appointed time."

"But you're running away from it!"

"Flight can be a form of resistance." (36-37)

Thus the mystical gnosis given to Ashur is one of resistance, even if it entails fleeing the encroaching and inevitable power of death.

Furthermore, Ashur's flight does indeed turn out to be the key to his own individual transformation, as he waits out the spread and retreat of the disease for six months in a cave outside of the city and returns to a completely abandoned quarter in which every material thing is his for the taking; he and his small family immediately take up lodgings in the deserted mansion of the Bannan family, formerly the most important and powerful social institution in the quarter. By default, and by association of his dwelling in the Bannan home, with the gradual return of people to the quarter after the plague subsides, Ashur al-Nagi becomes the *de facto* leader of the quarter:

The days went by and life began to steal back into the alley. The harafish came to squat in the derelict buildings. Every day a new family moved in to an empty house... Ashur was known as the only notable in the neighborhood. People greeted him respectfully, addressing him without irony as "Lord of the Alley."

He was widely rumored to be the sole survivor of the plague and given the name Ashur al-Nagi, Ashur the Survivor. People were eager to sing his praises, seeing him as a good, kindly, and charitable man. He was the protector of the poor: not content with heaping alms on them, he bought donkeys, baskets, and handcarts and distributed them to the unemployed until only the old and insane were without work.

They had never known a rich man like this before and they raised him to the ranks of the saints, saying God had singled him out and spared him for this purpose. (47-48)

Clearly Ashur's encounter with the mystical, in which he has confronted death in the presence of the anthems and received guidance from a dream-vision, contributes substantially to his new-found identity as *futuwwa* of the quickly repopulating quarter. Moreover, his realization of the *futuwwa* subjectivity is one of compassion, mercy, justice, and altruism—values associated with the term by Ibn al-ʿArabī and values which would surely characterize Mahfouz's expressed idealistic vision of "Socialist Sufism" (Yagi 6; 188-91), rather than a dismissal of mysticism as

“irrelevant” or “escapist.” Thus the example of Ashur al-Nagi can be considered as a favorable portrayal by Mahfouz of the results of mystical experience.

Even after he is brought to trial and sent to prison by the restored government for theft of the property of the Bannan family, Ashur is quickly reinstated as *futuwwa* of his quarter upon completion of his one-year sentence. The period of his benevolent rule as *futuwwa* of the quarter is summarized in the epilogue to the novel’s first chapter; which I will quote here in order to better underscore the association between mystical experience and the *futuwwa* values embodied by Ashur:

He obliged all his followers to work for a living, thus eliminating the thugs and the bullies. Only the rich had to pay protection money, which was used to benefit the poor and disabled. He subdued the chiefs of neighboring alleys and gave our alley a new dignity. As well as the respect of the outside world, it enjoyed justice, honor, and security at home.

Ashur would sit in the monastery square late into the night, transported by the sacred melodies. (57)

Here then is the implication that Ashur’s rule and moral compass is informed by his habit of sitting in the presence of the mystical anthems and in the atmosphere of *dahr* which the *takiyya* represents.

The mystical and mythical import of Ashur as the progenitor of the benevolent *futuwwa* is intensified by his sudden disappearance one day while at the height of his powers, and the core of the novel from this point consists of the narration of alternating sequences of *futuwwa* who fall somewhere on the scale between the extremes of “altruistic” and “corrupt.” Mahfouz likewise develops the *futuwwa* character out of mystically-oriented individuals in the earlier *Children of Gebelaawi* and similarly describes their downfall in interludes of *futuwwa* who are guided by selfish desire and greed. Yet the last of the altruistic *futuwwa* in *Children* is eventually usurped by malevolent *futuwwa* who are in tuck with the elite of society, and the novel ends on an

uncertain and even somewhat disenchanting note;<sup>168</sup> in contrast, the final iteration of the *futuwwa* in *The Epic of the Harafish* develops beyond that of the first ʿAshur, who admirably watches over his people like a shepherd, and into that of the “knowing heir,” who wants to not simply protect the interests of his class but also to educate and empower them to learn to protect themselves.<sup>169</sup> Indeed, El-Enany sees the second ʿAshur as Mahfouz’s “second attempt at portraying the Prophet of Islam in fiction”(156)<sup>170</sup> and as the novelist’s “ideal of the superman” (159).

Forced to live outside of the quarter by Hassuna, a corrupt *futuwwa* who wished to remove any threat of the al-Nagi clan from assuming power, ʿAshur begins late at night to adopt the contemplative behavior of his ancestor, sitting in the square of the *takiyya*, listening to the hymns and seeking answers for the troubles endured by the harafish as well as himself (392). Indeed, his plan for returning altruism to the quarter is inspired by his midnight meditations in the presence of the hymns: “In the sandy ground of the country he outlined a way. By the light of the stars of the monastery square he imagined it. In his wanderings and in his sleep, he secretly confided in it. Until it existed for him, as strong, solid, and impressive as the ancient wall” (395). Finally, after being exiled for several years, the second ʿAshur is inspired to assume the mantle of *futuwwa* by a dream vision in which his ancestor, the first ʿAshur, urges him to take action

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<sup>168</sup> El-Enany considers the ending pessimistic (143), while Somekh considers the “outlook” of the novel’s ending as “highly gloomy” (Somekh, “The Sad Millenarian: An Examination of Awlad Haratina” 154).

<sup>169</sup> “Established as unrivalled *futuwwa* of the *ḥāra*, ʿAshūr II does not, however, lose sight of the prime objective: that of making the *ḥarāfīsh* masters of their destiny, and protecting them against setbacks. (El-Enany, *Naguib Mahfouz* 155).

<sup>170</sup> His first attempt at portraying Muḥammad in his fiction, according to El-Enany, was the character of Qāsim in *Children of Gebelaawi* (156).

(396), and he returns to town to challenge Hassuna to a battle for title of *futuwwa* of the quarter. His move to take power is fully realized when a spontaneous and violent uprising of the *harafish* against Hassuna's henchmen breaks out (402). In this case, contemplation in the shadow of the *takiyya*, in the atmosphere of *dahr*, and a suprasensory visitation of a precursor lead to physical resistance and social transformation.

As El-Enany has observed (155), °Ashur the second's project does not end with simply taking the mantle of *futuwwa* from Hassuna. In addition to imposing heavy taxes on the rich and removing any privileges which notable had over the *harafish*, Ashur "imposed two duties on the *harafish*. The first was to train their sons in the virtues of the clan to maintain their power and prevent it ever falling into the hands of hooligans or soldiers of fortune. The second was to earn their living by a trade or a job which he could procure for them with money from the taxes" (404). In this way, Ashur the second not only protects the *harafish* but educates them as to how to protect themselves and to sustain themselves, without his constant oversight.

Finally, Ashur II experiences a truly mystical consciousness in the novel's final pages:

After midnight Ashur went to the monastery square to gather his thoughts alone under the stars in the ocean of songs. He squatted on the ground, lulled by his feeling of contentment and the pleasant air. One of those rare moments of existence when a pure light glows. When body, mind, time, place are all in harmony. It was as if the mysterious anthems were speaking in a thousand tongues. As if he understood why the dervishes always sang in a foreign language ... (406)

This experience, one which eradicates the notion of individual ego and leads to the sensation of unification, or ego-annihilation, in all things: body/mind, time, and space. If all things are in unity, individual things cease to be. This sense of *fanā'* is indicated more clearly when Ashur II reflects on the task ahead of him as *futuwwa*: "his ancestor had been carried away by his passion; he would stand firm like the ancient wall. 'No,' he repeated firmly. That was his sweetest



victory: his victory over himself” (*The Harafish* 405). In this simple conviction, °Ashur indicates his willingness to overcome the desiring self and to stand firm “like the ancient wall” of the Sufi monastery, suggesting that he had at least some “taste” of the experience of *fanā*’ as Ibn al-°Arabī and the great Sufis conceive it. Inspired by an experience of *fanā*’ and guided by the gnosis characterizing the station of *baqā*’, °Ashur the second begins to fit in to the role of the “knowing heir” who is charged with guiding his society to progress.

Furthermore, the gnosis granted from °Ashur’s mystical experience in front of the *takiyya* occurs when °Ashur the second receives the revelation that “the Great Sheikh”—a symbol of the godhead—will visit the harafish, “bestowing his light” of gnosis to them and giving “each young man a bamboo club and a mulberry fruit” (406). Mulberries are a personally sacred mystical symbol to Mahfouz, as his narrations in *Fountain and Tomb* indicate (11–12), and along with the bludgeon, the symbolism of the revelation perhaps indicates that under the mystically-informed rule of °Ashur the second, each person will receive their share of earthly space and an effective means with which to defend themselves against corruption. In this reading, then, can be confirmed the idea that °Ashur the second, the great transformer of his society, experiences *fanā*’ and obtains gnosis which allows him to remain in *baqā*’ as a “knowing heir.” The foreshadowing of an optimistic outcome of °Ashur the second’s time as *futuwwa* is contained in the novel’s ending with the highly optimistic refrain of one of the hymns of the mystic *takiyya*, for the first time translated into the language in which rest of novel appears, as the mystically conscious “knowing heir” and *futuwwa* Ashur II listens:

*Last night they relieved me of all my sorrows  
In the darkness they gave me the water of life.*

Therefore, the two °Ashurs embody the position of the *futuwwa* as the synthesis of “Sufic doctrines of altruism, self-sacrifice, and spiritual salvation” and “socialist principles of

collectivism, social justice, and dedication to promoting common human welfare” (Al-Mousa 39). These individual transformations in turn lead to social change, and as such these literary depictions of mysticism cannot be condemnations of a Sufism which turns its back on the people.

### **Section summary: Futuwwa suggests transformation and resistance in Mahfouz**

Literary depictions of mysticism in the novels of Mahfouz clearly point towards the potential of mysticism to be an important element in individual and social transformation. The lesson of *fanā'* and *baqā'* for the “knowing heir” is to return, and to conduct oneself in the spirit of *futuwwa*. While not realized in narrative form, the intention to return as a “knowing heir” is expressed by Radwan in Mahfouz’s early novel *Midaq Alley*. Meanwhile, the character of Junayd in *The Thief and the Dogs* favorably portrays the “knowing heir,” even though he is unable to rehabilitate Said; that alone doesn’t mean the knowing heir is impotent or socially irrelevant. Just because a “knowing heir” fails to cause transformation in one individual doesn’t mean the gnosis of the “heir” is irrelevant or impotent; each case is important, as the example of Sheikh al-Balkhi in *Arabian Nights and Days* teaches. There, the chain of transmission of the knowing heir, al-Balkhi, to the student Shahrazad eventually produces profound social consequences. Thus the transformation, passed on from individual to individual, leads to greater social and political improvement. Finally, Mahfouz suggests in *The Epic of the Harafish* that an individual properly guided by the values of Akbarian *futuwwa* can lead to a new age for humanity not governed by corruption, materialism, selfishness, competition, and greed but by justice, compassion, altruism, and harmony.

### **Chapter Conclusion**

In conclusion, when read alongside the key Akbarian concepts of *fanā'*, *baqā'*, the “knowing heir,” and *futuwwa*, literary depictions of mysticism by Borges and Mahfouz, in the

context of the “self” or the “subject,” can be read as conveyors of key elements for strategies of individual and social transformation. Borges’s depictions of mysticism in this context indicate concepts which can be applied to individual transformation. His essay “The Nothingness of Personality” suggests that “the self” is non-existent and that the “annihilation of self” leads to a closer approach to ontological “truth,” however decentered that might be in Borges’s view. Conceiving of the possibility of an annihilation of self—and thus self-interest—could lead to the notion of a greater unity or of a different way of thinking about private property. As Borges’s essay concludes, individuals do not own a personality, they are simply playing a role that others have played before. Likewise, Borges’s story “The Writing of the God” suggests that the annihilation of self and the resulting awareness of “unity of being” can lead to strategies for individual passive resistance and to the individual embrace and propagation of empathy, compassion, and brotherhood, while the potential that an understanding of “annihilation of self” could lead to a refusal by individuals to uncritically accept divisive rationalistic ontological binaries can be located in a close reading of “The Zahir.”

Mahfouz’s depictions of mysticism—which I have shown are not dismissive of Sufism—in the context of subjectivity indicate that a transformed individual can in turn have an impact on social transformation. Mahfouz’s character Radwan exemplifies the mystic guided by *futuwwa* and expresses the intention to return as a “knowing heir” in *Midaq Alley*. Sheikh al-Junayd, in *The Thief and the Dogs*, more properly realizes this role, and Mahfouz portrays him in a favorable light, but ultimately his attempt to be the “knowing heir” ends unsuccessfully. In *Arabian Nights and Days*, Sheikh Balkhi, an analogue for al-Junayd, achieves more success as the “knowing heir,” because his teaching actually achieves both individual and social transformation. Finally, the two °Ashurs in *The Epic of the Harafish* embody the *futuwwa*

guided by mystical consciousness to protect their social class and to induce substantial change in their societies, and in the case of the second Ashur, to be the “knowing heir” that teaches people to defend themselves against corruption. “Knowing heirs” will embody and pass along values of Akbarian *futuwwa*, a code of ethics/morals which will provide the consciousness of humanity in which Mahfouz’s “Socialistic Sufism” might be realized.

Thus the lessons suggested by an analysis of literary depictions of mysticism include the promotion of values like compassion, altruism, empathy, species unity, passive resistance/non-violent resistance, and alternative pathways in the inquiry for “centers” or “truth.” After having been individually transformed themselves through *fanā’* and *baqā’*, “knowing heirs” can then guide other individuals to transformation; this chain of individual transformation could then progress to a wider social transformation. Through their depiction in literary mysticism, the values leading to these transformations can be promoted and taught by alternative and irrational approaches to the notion of the subject or the self. These irrational approaches resist Western rationality on the grounds of the rational tradition’s adherence to the ego as the “center” of the structure. While other theories, post-structuralist in origin, have already proclaimed the death of the author, of the individual, and of the human, through its literary depiction by two great authors, mysticism can and should “supplement”—in the very Derridean sense of that word—these theories.

### **Conclusion: Towards the “Democracy to Come”**

Now that I possess the secret, I could tell it in a hundred different and even contradictory ways. I don't know how to tell you this, but the secret is beautiful, and science, our science, seems mere frivolity to me now.

(Borges, “The Ethnographer” 335)

### **Challenging and Transforming the Rational through Literary Depictions of Mysticism**

There is perhaps no more appropriate way to distill the essence of the foregoing project than with the epigraph above. The brief tale encapsulates the graduate school career of the protagonist Fred Murdock, who undertakes a doctoral dissertation project living among a tribe of Native Americans on the Midwestern plains as an ethnographer. During a residency spanning more than two years on the plains, he fully integrates himself into the culture of the tribe and begins to reject Western ways of living and thinking: “He rose before dawn, went to bed at sundown, and came to dream in a language that was not that of his fathers. He conditioned his palate to harsh flavors, he covered himself with strange clothing, he forgot his friends and the city, he came to think in a fashion that the logic of his mind rejected” (Borges, “The Ethnographer” 334–35). Eventually, guided by a shaman of the tribe who helps him interpret his dreams, Murdock arrives via this irrational pathway at a spiritual secret—a gnosis—that he claims makes rational science appear “frivolous” in comparison.

While it would be ludicrous, in light of the many medical and technological advances derived from rational thought since the Enlightenment, to follow Frank Murdock and suggest that “our science” is “mere frivolity” in an absolute sense, what Murdock’s remark implies—and what this dissertation insists upon—is that it would be just as myopic to exclude irrational claims to “truth” from having absolutely no practical value. Indeed, in light of the current expansion of

rational technocracy in the service of the power belonging to capital, it has perhaps never been more timely to consider the extent to which the irrational can offer humanity alternative pathways to power/knowledge. Now, in fact, is the time to investigate how irrational gnosis might ameliorate the conditions which have come to symptomize life under global late capital/flexible accumulation by encouraging challenges to the hegemony of rationality and its regimentation of serial time, its organization and production of space, and the resulting fragmentation and alienation of the individual. Ideally, such an interrogation of the rationally constructed ontological categories of time, space, and subjectivity—which inform and are informed by the orthodoxy of global capital—would likewise produce results on a global scale; as Murdock tells his dissertation director, “What the men of the prairie taught me is good anywhere and for any circumstances” (335).

Thus the twin reminders—that rational thought has its limits, and that irrational gnosis can counterpoint the rational tradition—that have beat like a pulse, diastole and systole, beneath the preceding pages. One approach—if not *the* approach—to irrational gnosis is mysticism. Mystics very often attempt to report their experiences and express the noetic value of those experiences, despite the inherent ineffability of mystic consciousness. Even with the well-documented difficulties in using language to record mystical experience and consciousness, mystics claim not only “truth value” but also “use value” for their experiences. For posterity, then, the mystic’s attempt to record irrational gnosis in language represents one important mode of transmission of these values.

Having assumed that acquisition of irrational gnosis is possible and that its truth and praxis are somehow relatable to others in whatever measure, the question remains as to what the committed humanist can do with an understanding of it. In order to adhere to what Said believes

is “humanism’s rightful concern with the investigation of values, history, and freedom” (Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* 14), it is critical for humanists to understand how irrationally-acquired gnosis might serve this investigation. From this stance, humanism’s teleology seems to point toward fostering a deep understanding of how irrational gnosis might contribute to what Derrida theorizes as “speech addressed to the other, recognized as the other, recognized in his alterity,” speech that “presupposes the freedom to say anything, on the horizon of a *democracy to come* that is not connected to the nation, the State, religion, which is not even connected to language” (Chérif and Borradori 44–45). Yet just as this teleology is determined, a subsequent problem appears, demanding how best to formulate the ways in which humanity might finally arrive at the “democracy to come,” and how humanists might contribute to creating conditions for the “speech addressed to the other.”

In addressing this problem, the preceding chapters have focused on the role which literature might play in creating the conditions of possibility for a democracy to come. It is important to keep in mind the contrast of this future democracy with the current forms of democracy. The conditions for the democracy to come cannot be found in the present conditions of the democracies of today; according to Derrida, “there doesn’t exist in the world a democracy suitable for the concept of a democracy to come” (Chérif and Borradori 43). For example, the forms of government imported by the United States in its many historical attempts at regime change have behind the banner of “liberty and justice for all” the more insidious dogma of profit and accumulation of capital. The democracy to come cannot be birthed from the orthodoxy of the most powerful democracy on earth, and it cannot arise by meeting physical violence with violence. It must arise, Derrida says “without the use of force” (Chérif and Borradori 45).

Therefore, I have attempted in this project to contribute to the creation of conditions for the democracy to come, to posit what Esposito calls an “impolitical” challenge to the current iterations of democracy. To do so, I have conducted an analysis of the “literary depictions of mysticism” as they appear in the output of Jorge Luis Borges and Naguib Mahfouz, two authors who occupy a dual position with respect to the “center” of power. From this doubly impolitical stance—derived from both the relationship of mysticism to orthodoxy, and Borges’s and Mahfouz’s positions in the world “canon”—can be discovered the molecules for forming strategies of resistance to power and a quantum for socially transformative energies.

I have specifically argued that this impulse towards fostering resistance and generating transformative energy, operations not typically observed in the writing of Borges and Mahfouz by their critics becomes quite observable when their literary production is juxtaposed with components of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s theosophy. As he himself claims, Ibn al-ʿArabī’s theosophy, like much mystically derived expression, is ostensibly based upon irrationally obtained gnosis. Therefore, any strategies suggested by or contributed to by an intersection of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s thought system with the literary production of Borges and Mahfouz must be informed by the irrational. As such, Borges’s and Mahfouz’s literary depictions of mysticism, which I have demonstrated as corresponding closely with Ibn al-ʿArabī’s theosophical expressions, can be viewed as resistive and transformative, if critics can emphasize the two authors’ offering of counterpoints to the hegemony of the “rational” and its manipulation of the ontological categories of time, space, and subjectivity.

This manipulation is aptly detailed by Harvey and Jameson, who show that, despite a supposed postmodern mistrust of metanarratives such as that of “Enlightenment,” the postmodern condition results from the rational control by capital of the compression of time and



space and the fragmentation of the individual subjectivity. Thus the postmodern condition, despite its nomenclature suggesting some sort of departure from modernity, could be considered as an outcome of what might be called the “long Enlightenment” and the processes by which it aspires to advance humanity. However, there is a “negative” aspect of the Enlightenment, as the Frankfurt School and Foucault have observed. Their critical theory has argued that oppressive social structures are constructed and maintained through rational means; while the postmodern can be theorized as rejecting these rational structures, for critics such as Jameson and Harvey who detect a link between postmodernity and “late capital” or “flexible accumulation,” these structures continue to be the result of the application of rationality by capital. Thus despite the advances enabled by rational thought, there is a decidedly sinister aspect to reason when it is applied to the oppression or domination of the less powerful by those with greater power/knowledge.

Rather than confront the rational tradition and its machinations head-on, an impolitical pivot as I have attempted to perform engages the rational by revealing its limits; at the level of ontology, impolitical engagement with the rational and the transformation of rational society can first arise from irrational conceptions and articulations of categories of “being.” Such irrational expressions frequently appear in mystical writing—particularly in that of Ibn al-ʿArabī. Yet the efficacy of these expressions in realizing resistance or transformation is often rather limited due to the esoteric nature of the expressions and their intended audiences. As a result, this particular body of literature has so far remained outside of the realm of public taste and has had little purchase on the cold and sterile terrain of Western rationalism. It is more likely through a different means of diffusion that these categories will enter into the individual consciousness of subjects living under the paradigm of Western rationality.

Therefore, this project has located a potential remedy for the historical inaccessibility of mystical expressions and determined how “literary representations of mysticism” can be used to treat these symptoms. In using the phrase “literary representation of mysticism” it should be recalled that I intend to signify an “impolitical genre.” An impolitical genre will challenge power—the political—from the very center of power, much like mysticism might challenge orthodox religion, or as an author enshrined by a “canon” might challenge the canon. The impolitical effect of literary mysticism is inherently deconstructionist, reminding power of its limits, of the absence in power of an ordinary narrative, but re-entrenching the finitude and the absence in the heart of power and reminding it of its aporia. Literary depictions of mysticism, with its potentially wide audience, can then serve as a means to diffuse impolitical mystical ideas. By incorporating difficult, even somewhat ineffable, concepts into literary texts, authors can implant ideas that would not garner sustained attention if they were presented to an audience in more prosaic, theological, or recondite expressions. In this way, the literary skill and potential audience for authors producing literary depictions of mysticism are key for the broadcasting of the impolitical utterances of the mystical.

When authors are “accepted” into the world literature “canon” as it is constructed by the Western academics, their potential audiences increase. Hence, when Borges’s literary star rose so rapidly with his reception of the Formentor Prize in 1961, his creative output was consumed by audiences beyond Argentina and the ideas contained in them were thus broadcast more widely (Rodríguez Monegal 443). Likewise, Mahfouz’s reception of the Nobel Prize in 1988 expanded greatly on the “regional fame” he had enjoyed since the 1950s, enshrined him within the Western “canon,” and presented him a global reputation and reach (Lawall 21–27). Therefore, locating ideas which correspond with elements of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s theosophy in the works of these two

authors would likewise suggest an increased likelihood that these ideas might reach a larger potential audience—much wider, for example, than Ibn al-ʿArabī might garner on his own merits.

It is not unrealistic, then, to claim that Borges and Mahfouz, as authors well translated and received in the West, can be rightly considered as amplifying the transmission of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s theosophy, once components of this theosophy are located in their writing. Specifically, I have demonstrated that these components appearing in the literary production of Borges and Mahfouz are the same as those which are central to Ibn al-ʿArabī’s ontological ideas of time, space, and subjectivity. By presenting alternative conceptions of time, space, and self to a wider Western audience than that enjoyed by Ibn al-ʿArabī’s original expressions, literary depictions of mysticism by Borges and Mahfouz can be conceived of as providing building blocks for resistance to rationally perpetuated power and as contributing to the generation of individual, and thus social, transformation.

### **Irrational Views of Ontological Categories**

#### **Time**

By approaching the ontological category of time through an irrational time horizon, it could be possible to contest the rational manipulation and segmentation of time “in advance of itself” by capital in its current iteration as what Harvey calls “flexible accumulation.” Key to a rethinking of “serial time” and “time in advance of itself” is an understanding of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s perspective of time as *dahr*, or as a realm of eternal flux without a beginning or an end. *Dahr*, as Ibn al-ʿArabi uses the term, is the time horizon implied in the sacred ḥadīth in which the godhead as says “I am time” and in which is grounded Ibn al-ʿArabī’s notion of *wahdat al-wujūd* (the Unity of Being). Thus, for Ibn al-ʿArabī, the true nature of time is *dahr*, a limitless state of

change; in contrast, “serial time,” or *zamān*, is not “real.” Rather, *zamān* is illusory, a rational ontological construct, a mere tool used by mankind to relate the eternal transformations occurring within *dahr* to one another.

Paradoxically, according to Ibn al-ʿArabi, discrete moments time in human life (*waqt*) are real, existing as a fragment without duration but within *dahr*, as the “virtual and actual object[s] of interaction with eternity” (Bowering 123). Ibn al-ʿArabī conceives of the intersection of the eternal (*dahr*) and the granular present (*waqt*) as constituting “now,” and “in the ‘now,’ neither [the godhead’s] eternity nor man’s moment cease to be. On the contrary they both exist” (Bowering 121). By thinking of time simply as “serial time,” but also attempting to perceive it as eternal flux (*dahr*) without limitations consisting of individual moments (*waqt*) as the molecular structure of eternal flux, it is possible that “time in advance of itself” can be throttled down and individuals can learn to focus on the “now” in which the eternal and the momentary coexist in a juncture of possibility. Thinking of serial time and time in advance of itself as an illusion could also help individuals frazzled by the pace of life in the time horizon of late capital to begin to reclaim their lives and to gain a fresh perspective on their moments.

Such a broad theoretical view is suggested by Borges’s literary depictions of mysticism. In his essay fragment “Sentirse en muerte,” he attempts to describe his own powerful experience with “timelessness;” his description of being free from time provides a basis for challenges to rational temporality found in many of his short stories. One of these stories, “Tlön, Uqbar, Tertius Orbis,” contains a detailed description of an irrational metaphysics built upon a time horizon akin to Ibn al-ʿArabi’s *dahr*, or an eternity free from the limits of serial time. The concept of time described in the short story clearly emphasizes that a concept of time resonating with Ibn al-ʿArabi’s *dahr* is the pervasive fabric in which all the threads of life and thought are

woven, and in the story's postscript, this time horizon is found to be encroaching on the rational temporality employed by capitalist ontology. Borges depicts this encroachment as being generated and encouraged by the efforts of an enlightened few, and it is depicted as gaining ground in the world governed by serial time. Thus, the story suggests that with proper awareness and presentation, alternative notions of time, like *dahr*, can fuse or seal the divisions and ruptures created by "serial time." Borges builds upon this idea of a pervasive eternity in the short story "The Writing of the God," where he presents a literary rendering of the mystical experience of the Mayan priest Tzinacán to illustrate the powerful impact a gnosis of *dahr* can have on the individual consciousness. The Mayan priest's experience allows him to glimpse not only the aspect of eternity, but it also permits him insight into the Unity of Being; in the world of everyday existence the concept of the Unity of Being can be used to foster consciousness of the essential unity existing between all existence, leading ideally to an increase in altruism, selflessness, and empathy.

Likewise, Mahfouz provides literary depictions of mysticism through multiple characters who encounter *dahr* or who achieve an awareness or gain a gnosis from the encounter with *dahr*. However, unlike Borges's narrative voice and characters, those of Mahfouz are inspired by their irrational gnosis of *dahr* to bring about positive social transformation consistent with the author's vision of a Socialistic Sufism. In *Midaq Alley*, Radwan intends to experience a mystical transcendence of the merely temporal during his planned pilgrimage to Mecca, although his intention to return is left unresolved after his final appearance in the novel. Nevertheless, as he departs Radwan makes clear his plans to come back to the alley, which is being socially ripped apart by the intrusion of rational modernity, to share with his neighbors the fruits of his gnosis of timelessness. More decisively in terms of characters achieving resistance and transformation, the

later novels *The Harafish* and *Arabian Days and Nights* are populated with several characters who attain gnosis of the timeless realm of *dahr* and who have managed to initiate not only individual transformation but also that of society. The difference between the unresolved intention of Radwan to effect positive change through his gnosis and that of the realized transformations in Mahfouz's later novels reflects a consistently an increasingly positive attitude toward Sufism on the part of Mahfouz: Sufism that is socially conscious is a justifiable pursuit.

### **Space**

The dissertation also demonstrates that the irrational approach to spatial ontology is apparent in the literary depictions of mysticism in Borges and Mahfouz. The value in such expressions of irrational spatial ontology is that they inspire consideration of alternatives to the rationally driven appropriation and production of space by capital; by encountering literary depictions of irrational, mystical spatial ontology, individuals could then begin to rethink how space is distributed and to reassess the justification for private property, a principle that fails in the face of the Unity of Being. From the basis of the Unity of Being in which existence is conceived of as a limitless sphere—in which the godhead as center is omnipresent and its limits are nowhere—an increase in altruism, selflessness, and empathy could be realized. Furthermore, building upon Ibn al-ʿArabi's conception of the perpetual interior journey towards gnosis as the very purpose of movement through, and occupation of, space, individuals can alter the perhaps self-centered goals toward which they aspire and soften their emphasis on possession of physical property as a measure of success and power.

In terms of alternatives to rational spatial ontology, Borges offers readers examples in several of his writings that resonate with Ibn al-ʿArabi's theosophy. In his essay "Pascal's Sphere," Borges provides a literary depiction of mystical gnosis as he identifies the isomorphism

of the sphere in much of Western thought to symbolize the universe. In doing so, he perhaps unknowingly creates a correspondence with the gnosis of Ibn al-ʿArabi, who also bases his mystical cosmology on the concept of the spherical universe, with “the Real” as its omnipresent center and no limits to its perimeter, a figure exceeding the boundaries of rational spatial ontology. Borges offers a moment of gnosis of this very sphere in the literary depiction of mystical experience in “The Aleph,” when the narrator “Borges” realizes that all places can be viewed from one place, shattering rational presentations of space. Likewise, Borges adopts the hexagon as a pattern for his Library of Babel’s fractal structure, mirroring the hexad theorized from irrational gnosis by Ibn al-ʿArabī to represent creation by the godhead of a spatial realm within the Unity of Being. Indeed, this Unity of Being in which Ibn al-ʿArabi’s spatial schematic fits inherently contradicts the “reality” of the spatial division and production by capitalist ontology, and in Borges “library,” the Unity of Being also serves to challenge authority invested in any textual production, to interrogate the presence and absence of meaning, and to perhaps parody the rational appropriation and production of space.

In two allegories, Mahfouz depicts characters’ journeying through space to depict the mystic’s interior journey towards gnosis of the Unity of Being, via stations emphasized by Ibn al-ʿArabi and his followers. The first, his mid-career short story “Za’abalaawi” richly allegorizes the spiritual quest as a means to heal the narrator’s existential malaise; as an end result of his journeying through various “stations” in the physical world of Cairo, a brief respite from the narrator’s suffering and a gnosis about the order of being result from the narrator’s mystical experience. The second allegory, *The Journey of Ibn Fattouma*, contains a clear depiction of the mystical pathway and moments of mystical experience by the narrator. Through a series of stations allegorized by the different modes of production in the material world, the narrator is

seen as letting go of the contingencies imposed by physical space and as preparing for the ascent to the final state of “perfection,” an ascent that must occur “within” the individual consciousness, therefore as “movement that is not movement.” It is worth noting too the circular narrative structure of both of these allegories as evocative of Ibn al-ʿArabi’s use of the circle to represent the first delimitation of the Real as existence is brought into being. Moreover, the late novel *Arabian Days and Nights* provides a literary depiction of Ibn al-ʿArabi’s metaphor of the “journey by sea” to represent the mystic’s journey to the godhead. Ibn al-ʿArabi posits that the journey by sea is richer in gnosis and facilitates the discarding of the “fettters” of reason, and in Mahfouz’s novel, Sindbad’s narration of his water-borne odyssey mirrors the stations of the mystic outlined by Ibn al-ʿArabi and other Sufi theosophists, and Sindbad’s explanation of the gnosis gained at each stop provides a literary depiction of mysticism that interrogates and suggests alternatives to rational spatial ontology.

### **Self**

Lastly, assuming that the end product of an irrational awareness of time and space can consist of irrationally constructed subjectivity, this project has illustrated that literary depictions of mysticism in Borges and Mahfouz suggest irrational notions of individuality and self. The final stages of the mystic’s journeys to, within, and from the godhead are the stations of *fanāʾ* and *baqāʾ*—“annihilation” and “subsistence” in the godhead, respectively. In experiencing an annihilation of the ego and its correlative cogito, and then continuing to subsist in the gnosis of annihilation, the mystically conscious individual might be better able to combat the well-noted rationally induced problems of fragmentation, depthlessness (shallowness), and alienation. In the “innerworldly mysticism” that calls for the mystic’s return to society, the mystic who has been annihilated and who continues with the awareness of the annihilation of the self will attain the



status of what Ibn al-ʿArabi calls the *futuwwa*. Such a *futuwwa* represents the ideal figure of Mahfouz’s Socialist Sufism. Thus, the annihilation of the ego and the retention and application of—the subsistence in—that gnosis of that annihilation aims toward transforming the consciousness of the individual so that the individual or individuals might in turn have a productive and progressive impact at the social level.

As was discovered in an analysis of the authors’ depictions of mystical temporal and spatial ontology, their approach to irrational mystical subjectivity are distinguished from one another by the praxis of their characters. Borges’s narrators and characters exemplify the mystic who “remains” in the state of annihilation (the *wāqifūn*), while Mahfouz’s illustrate the mystic who “returns” to his society to instigate transformation (the *rajiʿūn*). In his essay “The Nothingness of the Personality,” Borges depicts the absence of individual identity, and in his theorizing about this unreality of the ego, he evokes the annihilation and sustenance also theorized in depth by Ibn al-ʿArabi more than any other Sufi before him. In the essay, there are indications that this concept has been acquired by the essayist through an irrationally acquired consciousness; the illusory nature of the ego outlined by Borges indicates the underlying Unity of Being, an ontology that contradicts the rational model of the individual, autonomous consciousness of those around it. In the short stories “The Writing of the God” and “The Zahir,” the two characters—Tzinacán and “Borges”—that undergo annihilation of the self are not seen as taking decisive action to confront power, resist power, or transform society, thus symbolizing the *wāqifūn* described by Ibn al-ʿArabi’s theosophy. Regardless, they do undergo extreme individual transformation, and in itself the depiction of such individual change can help to inculcate building blocks for new ways of thinking about subjectivity and for instituting wider social change. Indeed, the *wāqifūn* move towards withdrawing from the world of material

conditions mirrors the ethical moves of Socrates, Jesus, and al-Hallaj, who, each chose to succumb to power rather than compromise their beliefs, and in the process initiating movements well beyond their own temporal and individual existence. Furthermore, such tactics can be considered as essential first steps towards theorizing and modeling non-violent passive resistance and protest. Because binaries and boundaries collapse in ego de-formation as it is conceived of by Ibn al-ʿArabi and as it is depicted by Borges, the experience of the *wāqifūn* can lead to an irrationally conceived Unity of Being in which non-violence, altruism, and empathy are the values being taught to underpin these theories.

In terms of irrationally constructed subjectivity, Mahfouz more directly depicts Ibn al-ʿArabi's *rajiʿūn* through his *futuwwa* characters who obtain mystical gnosis after arriving at the stations of annihilation and subsistence. Specifically, Mahfouz offers literary depictions of mystical consciousness and gnosis in the characters of Sheik Ali Junayd in *The Thief and the Dogs*, Ashur II from *The Harafish*, and Sheikh al-Balkhi in *Arabian Days and Nights*. Each of these characters choose to return to their social milieu in order to induce transformation, rather than withdraw and remain in contemplation of their own annihilation. Each of the characters, then, represents the *futuwwa* as Ibn al-ʿArabi conceives it. This type of person offers a more active theorization of the confrontation with power and social transformation than those portrayed by Borges; these characters therefore embody agents of Mahfouz's Socialist Sufism. Yet, the different degrees of success experienced by each character in performing their role as *futuwwa* can perhaps be seen as reflective of a development in the author's attitude towards the value of Sufism. In his early novels, the Sufi characters presented by Mahfouz are seen as well-meaning, but ultimately nothing comes of their role as *futuwwa*. However, in the later novels,

Ashur II and al-Balkhi, as a result of their own gnosis, manage to transcend their own annihilations, transforming at a considerably radical level their societies.

### **Conclusions**

Several themes emerge from the analysis of the literary representations of mysticism by Borges and Mahfouz and their synthesis through some of the tenets of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s theosophy. First, by focusing on the ontological categories of time, space, and the subject, the idea of Unity of Being appears to be the underlying principle of the strategies for resistance and transformation which can be extracted from the authors depictions of mysticism. By communicating the features of this particular paradigm, the literary works can be read as communicating the ontological significance of values of altruism, selflessness, empathy, patience, and respect for “the Other,” the Other that the Unity of Being suggests is really ourselves. These values are critical for creating the conditions of possibility for the dialogue and democracy to come envisioned by Derrida.

Specifically, the challenges made to the temporal ontology of the rational and the orthodox by the authors’ literary renderings can help their readers envision a time horizon not governed by capital and perhaps allow them to recover some measure of their “moments” of “now” that constitute existence in the fabric of never-ending fluctuation. Even just the consideration that alternative time horizons are possible can encourage readers and students to break free of the hegemony of “time in advance of itself” and to begin to live more authentically, for motives other than frantically scurrying about in order to earn, spend, and accumulate. Indeed, living more authentically in a time not completely determined by power would ideally lead to patient listening to the “other recognized as other, recognized in his alterity” (Derrida qtd. in Chérif and Borradori 44).

With respect to rational spatial ontology, the authors' representations of literary mysticism suggest some additional principles of resistance and transformation when analyzed through Ibn al-ʿArabi's notion of Unity of Being. Notably, the idea inherent in the Unity of Being that every place is infused with the godhead, which is at the same time ourselves, can encourage improved stewardship of the environment and can foster consciousness of the impact individuals and corporations have on their surroundings. Likewise, a reappraisal of spatial ontology might encourage readers to interrogate the logic driving the distribution and protection of private property. After being exposed to literary renditions of Ibn al-ʿArabi's theosophy, perhaps the rationally formulated laws and regulations about who can go where and who has "rights" to particular patches of real estate will be deconstructed, revealing the shallowness of their textually invested authority and the attendant absences of meaning in those discursive delimitations of space. Moreover, the emphasis of the rational tradition on possession and control of physical space could receive intensified scrutiny by readers who have been exposed to the idea of the interior journey, of "movement that is not movement" as the supreme objective of navigating "space."

Regarding the ontological category of subjectivity—since Descartes perhaps the central category of inquiry for Western rationally formulated ontologies—literary depictions of the mystical erasure or annihilation of the ego forcefully suggests the idea of a unified species within the Unity of Being. This suggestion in turn contains implications of the urgency for transmitting the values of altruism, empathy, patience, and tolerance. Choosing to remain or to purely subsist in the gnosis of annihilation in itself is a political act of refusal and non-participation in the processes of power/knowledge. However, Ibn al-ʿArabi maintains that the transformed individual produced by annihilation is obligated to not simply "remain" in the aura of

annihilation; the more complete person returns to the problems of society, intending to improve the living conditions of those who do not or cannot have access to gnosis. Thus, the lesson for readers of the impolitical genre of literary mysticism about annihilation and subsistence is that it is possible to remain aware of the illusory nature of the self while still actively working for transformation within a world driven by egos. Ideally, readers will model their thoughts and behaviors on those literary presentations of the mystic “*futuwwa*” who works towards social transformation among the people.

The assumption beneath all of these potential building blocks for resistance and transformation strategies suggested by my analysis is that it is essential that social transformation to be first rooted within the individual. Even if the individual does not engage with power outright, the literary depiction of the transformed individual, similar to that provided by Borges, provides heuristic models for readers and students with which to encourage changes in values and world views. However, if transformed individuals are indeed obligated to bring irrationally acquired mystical gnosis back into the community, as Mahfouz depicts them doing, these transformed individuals can apply the gnosis they have acquired towards bringing about social transformation. Regardless, the resistance to power and the transformation of oppressive rational structures must initiate from the individual consciousness; by providing examples of literary depictions of mysticism that offer challenges to rational ontology, authors with global audiences such as Borges and Mahfouz can help transform individual readers’ paradigms, providing that readers are receptive to such ontological challenges.

Thus, the role of the teacher of literature becomes paramount in preserving human dignity and freedom. Teachers who are aware of this immense potential for literary depictions of mysticism, and who can point out these textual moments to readers, carry a responsibility to help

their students to at least think differently about the view of the world which rational orthodoxy serves them. A teacher or critic equipped with an awareness of the subtleties of literarily-depicted mysticism can transmit that awareness, and all of its potential energy, to students who are willing to receive the message. These students, ideally, will thus become part of a wide range of participants in the “speech addressed to the other, recognized as the other” in the movement towards a stateless “democracy to come.” In sum, literary depictions of mysticism can be presented to students as the seeds or primary molecules for resistance and transformation. It is not only producers of literary mysticism and their precursors who are charged with the humanist contribution towards creating conditions for the “democracy to come”; teaching students to read critically, with an attentiveness to the potential of the irrational, is an important part of humanist efforts towards and emancipation and social transformation.

All of this is not to argue against rationality. My project is not anti-rational, but it is anti-oppression. The rational faculty, like all tools of power/knowledge, is a productive force and it has led to a litany of advancements for certain sectors of humanity in terms of their physical and social well-being. However, the rational can also be employed to fetter and impose control on humanity. Attempting to solve the limitations or reveal the blind spots of rational structures by using rational methods seems absurd; wrongly or malevolently applied rational systems probably cannot be greatly improved by rational thought.

What is needed, then, is a tonic for the rational compression of time and space and the fragmentation of the individual in the form of the irrational—not the anti- or a-rational. Conceived as a genre of the “impolitical,” the irrational reminds the rational of its limits and blind spots. The irrational does not suggest an opposition to nor a total rejection of the rational, but instead it offers a re-imagining of the rational ontological playing field. An enhanced and

non-exclusive dialectic between irrational and rational, akin to that existing in Ibn al-<sup>c</sup>Arabi's theosophy between immanence and transcendence, is called for in the service of humanism in order to overcome oppression and to clear ontological space for a democracy to come. With respect to the democracy to come, there are other ways to progress than solely through the rational. Just as irrational views of ontology are not the only the avenues for individual or social transformation, neither are rational ones. To forget this could be perilous, delivering humanity into the hands of rational control mechanisms.

### **Implications**

One important implication for the study just completed is that Borges and Mahfouz should now be reevaluated as authors offering some vision of resistance to power and of providing some ingredients necessary for individual and social transformation. As critics have rightly pointed out, the Argentine and the Egyptian are not particularly outspoken about their social commitment. On the surface of the texts, Borges and Mahfouz do not appear to be inciting any kind of resistance or suggesting pathways to social change. Even though both men at times ran afoul of the political power in their countries, and even as in their portrayal of their contemporary contexts there are often quiet critiques of their socio-political realities, neither writer was outspoken enough in their literary production to ever be imprisoned or even detained by the authorities.

Borges in particular has been charged with abandoning the social concerns of the oppressed of his continent (e.g. Martin). Mahfouz admitted to modifying his published texts in order to placate Nasser's censors (e.g. (Mehrez), and even a critic as friendly to Mahfouz as Gamal al-Ghitani has noted that he was not "provocative in his statements to the press" and that he was both "balanced" and "reticent" in his "positions concerning his relationship with

authority” (al-Ghitani xviii). In their personal lives, too, the authors refrained from any truly socially committed efforts. Borges famously aligned himself with the conservative and brutally repressive military dictatorship which replaced his detested Peronists, and Mahfouz was not only a life-long bureaucrat in the service of the state, but for a short time he himself was in charge of censorship for the Egyptian government. Judging them by their failure to produce sustained and amplified political criticism or to take decisive personal and physical action, a sound argument can be made that each author was indeed complicit with the overreach of power/knowledge.

And yet, with a closer look at the literature they have left behind, Borges and Mahfouz can—and should—be read as offering an impolitical challenge to power, in an oblique interrogation of the very ontological principles upon which power builds its rational control structures. If either man is to be regarded as a subversive or resistant writer, then that subversion must be subtle; such subversion and critique must be communicated ironically or symbolically in order to skirt not only the administrators of the canon, but also censors, inquisitors, jailers, and executioners in repressive political contexts. Hence, a deployment in their writing of the “literary depiction of mysticism,” which can then be doubly masked by the authors’ assigning it mere aesthetic value or by disparaging it in public commentary as mere artifice. Yet, when properly studied, these representations of mysticism reveal a substantial and impolitical interrogation of the very ontology which power constructs and by which power justifies its domination.

Thus, the contemplation of the nature and order of being and its phenomena, veiled through literarily portrayed mysticism, can be read as an engagement with power. In fact, an artist’s or a critic’s examination of how ontology is constructed and manipulated by power, in an effort to counter that manipulation, dovetails perfectly with “humanism’s rightful concern with



the investigation of values, history, and freedom” (14). Framed by this idea, intellectual inquiry into ontology should not be conducted in some sterile silo of the academy nor divorced from the emancipation of those oppressed by power. It is clear that both authors felt this way, so assessing their work as somehow politically timorous or even complicit with repressive power structures is a mistake.

Mahfouz announces social progress and human emancipation as his own credo through his alter ego Kamal in *Sugar Street*, whom he portrays as ruminating after his participation in a nationalist political rally: “An intellectual loves truth, desires honor, aims for tolerance, collides with doubt, and suffers from a continuous struggle with instincts and passions. He needs an hour when he can escape through the embrace of society from the vexations of his life. Then he feels invigorated, enthusiastic, and youthful” (Mahfouz, “Sugar Street” 1016); reflecting on his experience later, Kamal thinks more poetically about his dual occupation of hermetic philosopher and engaged activist:

His body occupied a tiny space on the swarming surface of the earth, while his imagination spun round in a whirlpool embracing all the secrets of nature. In the morning he asked what this word meant and how to spell that one. In the evening he pondered the meaning of his existence—this riddle that follows on puzzle and precedes another one. In the morning his heart was ablaze with rebellion against the English but in the evening it was chastened by a general feeling of brotherhood for all mankind as he felt inclined to cooperate with everyone in order to confront the puzzle of man’s destiny. (Mahfouz, “Sugar Street” 1019)

Likewise, Borges, lashed thoroughly by Martin as non-committed, unconcerned, and complicit with power due to his inaction and his lack of outspokenness in the political sphere, communicates his own ideas about the intellectual’s role in resistance and the potential of the intellectual for catalyzing social transformation in an interview:

Possibly shutting oneself up in an ivory tower and thinking about other things may be one way of modifying reality. I live in an ivory tower—as you call it—creating a poem, or a book, and that can be just as real as anything. People are

generally wrong when they take reality as meaning daily life, and think of the rest as unreal. In the long run, emotions, ideas, and speculations are just as real as everyday events. I believe that all the dreamers and philosophers in the world are having an influence on our present-day life. (Guibert 80)

Therefore, it can be implied that the literary depictions of mysticism communicate at a symbolic level the authors' stated attitudes towards art as a tool for resistance and social transformation, and any future critical reception of Borges and Mahfouz should take in to account their currently underappreciated levels of commitment to the ideals of human emancipation.

A second implication of a synthesis of Borges and Mahfouz through the mediation of medieval Islamic mysticism is that it makes an important contribution to the study of mysticism as an option on the authors' literary palettes from which they might choose. Many critics, as I have made an effort to show, have already noted that the authors have integrated mysticism in to their writing. What the present project seeks to emphasize is the implication that mysticism does not just appear in the literary output of Borges and Mahfouz in order to provide aesthetic richness or because the author was enchanted by mysticism. While surely the presence of mysticism in Borges and Mahfouz's writing can be read as either *exotica* or local color, respectively, other critics have read beyond the superficiality of these details only to observe that the appearance of mysticism in their work serves as a condemnation of mysticism, representing it as a dead end (e.g. Flynn; El-Enany). However, as I have analyzed the presence of Ibn al-<sup>◦</sup>Arabi's mystical theosophy in their work, the depiction of mysticism by Borges and Mahfouz involves some kind of transformation; it is not just there for decoration nor to disparage mystical experience. The implications for my scholarship then is that Borges's and Mahfouz's literary depictions of mysticism are positive and productive additions to their work. Through it characters, and ideally readers, are given emancipatory glimpses at the Unity of Being and presented pathways to initiate transformation.

Given that literary depictions of mysticism in Borges and Mahfouz can indeed inspire resistance and transformation, a third implication is that this type of irrational literary confrontations with rational ontology can be identified within a range of texts from a variety of times and places. Even though Borges and Mahfouz are separated by linguistic and cultural tradition and geography, the shared space they occupy within the sphere of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s theosophy indicates that irrational ontological resistance transcends such limitations of language, time, and place. Moreover, even though at present the conditions I have identified to be resisted are decidedly rooted and occurring in a “postmodern” context, the ontological resistance derived from literary depictions of mysticism need not come from distinctly postmodern works in order to communicate the alternative ontologies which they suggest and the seeds of resistance and transformation which they contain. Thus the ingredients found in Borges and Mahfouz—two writers not widely considered as postmodernists—can be incorporated into postmodern (and perhaps “post-post-modern”) resistance and transformative strategies. Regardless of the time or place of their expression, the messages conveyed from these literary representations of mysticism can be applied to any malaise resulting from the overreach of rational epistemology and ontology.

A fourth and final implication of this project applies to the scholarship on mysticism as I have represented it in the early phases of the dissertation. The shared features of the literary depictions of Borges and Mahfouz and their correspondence with Ibn al-‘Arabi’s theosophy lend weight to the ongoing debate between constructionist and perennialists. The study actually contributes to both sides of the debate. From the isomorphic recurrences identified and analyzed in each chapter can be distilled a point of support for the perennialists. Borges, for example, skillfully suggests perennialism by gifting a Mayan priest with Kabbalistic and Sufi ideas.

Likewise, Ibn al-<sup>o</sup>Arabi's theosophy in general claims that there is a single universal "Real" that informs all aspects of existence, including human cultural expressions such as mysticism.

However, it is also quite clear that the literary depictions of mysticism appearing in the work of each author are overdetermined by cultural factors, including the books and education available to each, the prevailing orthodoxy of their social milieu, and the languages that each spoke.

Regardless of these implications for the discourses on each author, or on aesthetics, or on mysticism, it is hoped that ultimately this dissertation at least communicates the significance contained in literary depictions of mysticism for the teaching of literature. I believe that is imperative that scholars and teachers of literature always keep in mind the ideologies informing their professional work, and I have sought throughout this dissertation to convey my own belief that teaching literature is critical for the confrontation of hegemony and the construction of counter-hegemonies. By bringing to light some alternatives to rationally constructed ontologies suggested by literary depictions of mysticism in Borges and Mahfouz, I have wished to model how these alternatives might be pointed out to readers and students, towards a greater effort to initiate "speech addressed to the other recognized as other," to point out a possible roadmap for the "democracy to come" and to proclaim the emancipatory potential that resides "between the yes and the no."

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