Research Article

Claire Gallien*, Easa Saad

Reading Literature as Theology in Islam. An Introduction and Two Case Studies: al-Thaʿālibī and Ḥāfiẓ

Abstract: Our article serves as an introduction to the larger topic for this special issue of Open Theology titled "Reading Literature as Theology." We make the case that scholarly efforts to understand the history of Islamic theology have been skewed towards the rationalist discipline of ʿilm al-kalām, with insufficient attention to the modes of theological engagements found in fields like literature, where imagination as a hermeneutical tool plays a significant role. We consider some of the causes, both historical and epistemic, for such neglect. Building on the works of scholars of adab and of Islamic poetics and metaphysics, and constructively engaging with the works of Shahab Ahmed and Thomas Bauer, we explore the ways in which literature is fundamentally to be read as theology in Islam – how it has been deployed for the elaboration of theological discourses and how tensions between the prescriptive and the creative are in themselves productive, not prohibitive. The second part of the article offers close readings of al-Thaʿālibī and Ḥāfiẓ. These explorations into authors from the Arabic and Persian world of Islamic letters show us the ways in which a deep engagement with the "literary" can not only co-exist alongside but also facilitate the expression of theological concerns. Scholarship that has found these different modes to be in tension, if not direct opposition, is perhaps suffering from a reductive notion of the theological, ethical, and the pious. What is at stake in our research agenda is not just a better understanding of the literary production of the Islamic world, but a more profound understanding of how Islamic theology was understood, lived, and ultimately expressed in some of the most exquisite works of literature known to mankind.

Keywords: Islamic theology, Islamic Literature, adab, simile (tashbīh)/metaphor (istiʿāra)/allegory (majāz), paradox (mufāraqa), productive tension, contrariness (tanāquḍ), Malāmatī-Qalandarī piety, Abū Manṣūr al-Thaʿālibī (d. 429/1039), Ḥāfiẓ (d. 792/1390)

1 Theology beyond *kalām, adab* beyond Literature

A cursory look at the scholarship concerned with Islamic "theology" will reveal an almost exclusive focus on the discipline of systematic/speculative theology (ʿilm al-kalām), with little or no attention to other modes of theological engagement. For instance, Timothy Winter, editor of the *Cambridge Companion to Islamic Theology* published in 2008, acknowledges that "many issues which most readers will recognise as theological were treated by Muslim civilisation in a wide range of disciplines" and "by limiting themselves to the disciplinary boundaries imposed by medieval Muslims themselves, Western treatments of Islamic theology have often neglected the wealth of properly theological discussions appearing outside the *kalām* [sic] in the civilisation's

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* Corresponding author: Claire Gallien, Faculty of Divinity, University of Cambridge and Cambridge Muslim College, Cambridge, United Kingdom, e-mail: cg858@cam.ac.uk

Easa Saad: Faculty of Theology, University of Oxford, Oxford, United Kingdom

literature."[1] However, this recognition does not translate in the contents of the volume, where research in Islamic theology is conducted mostly through books of *kalām*, *akhlāq* (ethics), and *taṣawwuf* (Sufism), but with no serious analyses of works of imagination.

In 2014, the editor of the *Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, Sabine Schmidtke, proceeds in the same manner. At the end of the introduction, she identifies future strands to be developed in the field, but no reference is made to the other genres and disciplines where Muslims have elaborated a theological discourse, instead emphasising the need to cover more marginalised schools of *kalām* such as the *Ibāḍiyya*, the *Karrāmiyya*, and the *Sālimiyya*.[2]

One way to understand this focus on *kalām* has to do with what Chen-Bar Itzhak has referred to as intellectual captivity in relation to the Euro-American epistemic paths and theoretical formulations of World Literature.[3] Scholars never operate from an epistemic vacuum but deploy concepts which are already at their disposal in order to think through new or different phenomena. These concepts may not perfectly align with the evolving disciplinary boundaries of the historical phenomenon being studied. The case of theology in Islam conceptualised by default as speculative or systematic theology by Western scholars and therefore restricted to the discipline of *kalām* is related to what Marianne Moyaert conceptualises in her latest book *Christian Imaginations of the Religious Other* as "Christian normativity" and the "religionisation" of other faiths.[4] As explained by Claire Gallien in "Exploring Literature in Islam Beyond (Secularized) Christian Normativity in Western Academia":

> In Islam, the science of *kalām* ... has thus been the science that orientalists have solely focused on when studying Islamic theology. However, any scholar taking an emic approach to Islamic epistemology would confirm that *kalām* was never meant to be the sole representative of Islamic theology, that the *mutakallimūn* have never claimed monopoly over theological discourse, and that in fact many theological reflections and positions have been developed outside *kalām*.[5]

Both our article and this special issue as a whole acknowledge that the terms "theology" and "literature" are the products of contemporary Western conceptions of the disciplines and only very partially capture the ways in which Muslim classical scholars conceived of theology and literature. The point is not to pit and judge one system of thought against another; the issue lies in failing to unproblematically apply the concepts we use on to other conceptual formations.

For instance, the authors discussed in our article and in this special issue knew of *adab*, of *sajʿ* (rhymed prose), and of poetry but not of "literature." *Adab* in particular is a semantically dense term that possesses a fundamental ethical and pedagogical dimension. Luca Patrizi explains in "The Metaphor of the Divine Banquet and the Origin of the Notion of Adab" that:

> [...] the pre-Islamic and the first/seventh-century notion of *adab* in Arabic was linked essentially to the meaning of "education," "correction," and "punishment," while the root ʾ-d-b was also used with the meaning of "invitation to the banquet" .... From the beginning of the third/ninth century, Islamic religious literature also began to use the term *adab* with the meaning of "norm," "rule of good behavior," "rule of the accomplishment of religious practices and the reading of the Quran," "attitude of respect toward the religious authority," "rule of behavior between master and disciple during teaching (*adab al-dars*)," and "rules for the accomplishment of the function of the judge (*ādāb al-qāḍī*)." This is a new usage that one might call "technical" ..., [which culminates in classical Arabic literature with] Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ's (d. 139/757) *Adab al-kabīr*.[6]

In *The Literary Qur'an*, Hoda El Shakry perceptively unpacks not just the root meanings and etymological evolutions of the term but most importantly the epistemic consequences of conceptualising literature *as adab*, in particular for the twentieth and twenty-first-century North African novelists discussed in her book. In the epistemic context of *adab*, the artistic drive is by default conceptualised as "an ethical act of creation" a "po/

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1 Winter, "Introduction," 2, 4.

2 Schmidtke, "Introduction," 25–6.

3 Itzhak, "Intellectual Captivity. Literary Theory, World Literature, and the Ethics of Interpretation," 79–110.

4 Moyaert, *Christian Imaginations of the Religious Other: A History of Religionization*.

5 Gallien, "Exploring Literature in Islam," 1/19.

6 Patrizi, "The Metaphor of the Divine Banquet," 532–3.

ethics," and its inherent pedagogical dimension contributes to the cultivation of the self.[7] *Adab*, she writes, constitutes "a valuable corrective" to *literature* as conceptualised in post-Enlightenment Europe "by offering a more generative and inclusive model."[8] As such it troubles the seeming universality of literature and "opens the door to interdisciplinary and comparative modes of analysis ... that cut across literary and theological discourses."[9]

As such, the Muslim scholars whose poetic works are analysed in this article and special issue belonged to a world where literature *was adab* and before this moment cogently analysed by Michael Allan where "adab became literature," which is to say, "became subject to the protocols of modern literary study."[10] In *In the Shadow of World Literature*, Allan notes the challenge now posed by the entanglement between secularism and literature and invites comparatists and specialists of modern Arabic literature "to investigate the grounds from which we know, see, and feel' and 'to ask how secularism frames investments in particular definitions of what constitutes literary reading and sanctions ignorance about modes of textuality, dissent, and discussion within traditions deemed religious."[11]

As authors and editors, we position our article and this themed issue as a whole in the wake of the works of scholars such as El Shakry, but also Mana Kia, Sarah Bin Tyeer, and Nuha Alshaar, amongst others. We write after the de-theologisation of *adab*, after the canonisation of particular models of secular reading, and after what El Shakry calls "the occlusion of religious epistemes, practices, and intertexts."[12] We also recognise the necessity to reclaim the epistemic foundations of *adab*, including its entwinement with the Qur'an[13] and theology, if we are to seriously engage with the literature produced and experienced by the Muslim writers and readers discussed in this volume.

In various ways, the disciplines of *tafsīr*, *fiqh*, the linguistic sciences of grammar and rhetoric, as well as the creative arts of calligraphy, architecture, and of course, literature, have developed their own modes of reflection on and relation to the Divine. This special issue focuses on how literature has been read as theology in Islam and has engaged in the elaboration of theological discourses. We understand literature as encompassing the full plurilingual spectrum of oral and written productions from the Islamicate world which stimulate the readers' imaginative and aesthetic sensibilities, in contrast to works solely concerned with their rational faculties.

We also recognise that orality and performance are important dimensions of many of the texts that have been discussed in this volume, even though we have chosen primarily to focus on the written word, hence the title of "Reading Literature," as opposed or differing from "Listening to" or "Performing" Literature as Theology. The same type of enquiry should be carried out for oral productions, based on what Walter Ong identified as the specific literary characteristics of orality, including reliance on formulas, additive rather than subordinative speech, aggregative rather than analytic, redundancies, conservatisms, closeness to the world, agonistic tonalities, and so forth.[14]

In the literary world we study, the Qur'an serves as a paradigmatic example of the ways in which poetics and literary form facilitates theological and ethical discourse. The role of the Qur'an in shaping aesthetic standards and literary culture in the Islamic world has been explored by the work of Nuha Alshaar and Sarah Bin Tyeer, among others. According to Stefan Sperl, one of the significant Qur'anic influences on subsequent poetic tradition is its cosmological vision which posits two mirroring realms – one material and transient, the other transcendent and eternal.[15] Sperl argues that this vision would "substantially enrich the allusive range of

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7 El Shakry, *The Literary Qur'an*, 4–5.

8 Ibid., 17–8.

9 Ibid., 19.

10 Allan, "How Adab Became Literary," 184.

11 Allan, *In the Shadow of World Literature*, 137.

12 El Shakry, *The Literary Qur'an*, 2.

13 In doing so, we acknowledge the seminal work of Alshaar and the collective volume she edited titled *The Qur'an and Adab. The Shaping of Literary Traditions in Classical Islam*, which unpacks Quranic poetics, that is the role of the Qur'ān as aesthetic model, and the place of the Qur'ān in adab and in Sufi literature.

14 Ong, *Orality and Literacy,* 31–56.

15 Sperl and Dedes, "Introduction," 17.

figurative language not only in Arabic but also in Persian and Ottoman poetry."[16] As shown by Walter Andrews in the same volume, a "doubleness" came to reign in the poetic realm in which material reality is contextualised in a Neoplatonic hierarchy of being and "everything stands for something greater."[17]

This Qur'anic paradigm and its influence on later poetic production suggests a way of thinking about the relationship between literature and theology which is inherent to Islam's foundational text. This semiotic paradigm is encapsulated by the term *āya*, which is used to reference verses but also means sign, miracle, utterance, or word.[18] Both the textual and the extra-textual are unified by virtue of their role as signifiers for a transcendent reality. Hence in positing the capacity for literature to orient its readers towards the transcendent, which this volume explores through various literary contexts, one needs to go no further than the theoretical foundations established by the Qur'ān itself.

2 Beyond "Explorative" vs "Prescriptive"

In addition to reflections on the influence of the Qur'ān and Quranic poetics in the literary productions of Muslim writers, recent years have seen more scholarly works which emphasise the relationship between literary form and theological meaning-making. Two seminal studies that triggered much scholarly reflection and stimulated new debates and publications are Shahab Ahmed's *What is Islam* and Thomas Bauer's *Culture of Ambiguity* (*Die Kultur der Ambiguität*). While Ahmed's and Bauer's interventions have significant differences in aims, scope, methodology, and conclusions, both authors have, to varying degrees, read works of classical Islamicate literature studies with attention to both their literary forms and hermeneutic significance. Both authors also appear to posit an antagonistic relationship between orthodoxy and creativity.

Shahab Ahmed contrasts two registers of historical Islam, one consisting of "exploration, ambiguity, ambivalence, wonder, aestheticization, diffusion, differentiation, polyvalence, relativism, contradiction" on the one hand and the other consisting of "prescription, restriction, homogenisation, monovalency, orthodoxy and agreement." In Ahmed's reading, the former register has been historically marginalised, while the other has been given constitutive pride of place in conceptualisations of Islam.[19]

Bauer's work is concerned with the centrality of ambiguity to classical Arabic literary culture, but considers religious discourse marginal to this effort. He proposes a compartmentalised model of Islamic culture, comprising discrete sub-systems – law, Sufism, theology, hadith, medicine, and literature – each with its own methods, standards, and experts. Religion, he argues, plays a central role in some fields (theology, hadith, law) but is irrelevant in others (medicine, literature).[20] Bauer's argument puts literature outside of the purview of religious concerns. In line with this argument of compartmentalisation of the fields and the push to de-theologise Islamic scientific and aesthetic enquiries, Bauer reclaims a multiplicity of approaches to the *culture* of Islam.[21]

Bauer's model of disciplinary "division of labour" avoids framing religion and secularism as adversarial. He rightly notes that Islamic scholars distinguished between *dīnī* and *duniyāwī* matters, without needing to liberate secular life from a dominant religious authority. To Bauer for instance, there is no need to oppose the religious from the secular in Islam because Islamic secular realms of life did not need to free themselves from an ecclesiastical superstructure.[22] However, Bauer uses this non-antagonistic frame not to focus on complementarities but to suggest a clear demarcation between Islamic literary and theological cultures, arguing as quoted above that "theology plays no role for the men of letters."[23]

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16 Ibid.
17 Andrews, "Ottoman Poetry," 174.
18 El Shakry, *The Literary Qur'an*, 23.
19 Ahmed, *What is Islam*, 303.
20 Bauer, *A Culture of Ambiguity*, 135.
21 Ibid., 89.
22 Ibid., 134–5.
23 Ibid., 135.

This leads him to the notion that when religious scholars such as Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī (d. 852/1449) and Sirāj al-Dīn al-Bulqīnī (d. 805/1403) write poetry and resort to *iqtibās* (in the sense of re-use of Quranic quotes),[24] they *de facto* inhabit different spaces (the theological and the literary) "side by side," which are equally "valid" to them but mutually exclusive.[25] For Bauer, the image of an Islamic society that is completely pervaded by religion (or religious orthodoxy) is a caricature. In his view, the "Islamisation of Islam" has led to the contemporary situation where "if a religious and a nonreligious discourse exist side by side, the religious one is considered as a norm and the other one as a deviation."[26] What Bauer is interested in highlighting are the spaces, scholars, and works where the different norms exist adjacent to one another and *are not* harmonised or in conversation with each other.[27] Our project occupies this space where the literary interacts with the theological in profound ways and where the two are interdependent, co-constitutive, and/or placed in a productive tension.

Shahab Ahmed on the other hand, underlines "the crucial and distinctive co-founding or con-fusing quality of the paradigmatic literary expression of Muslims that is the very opposite of a clear-cut 'secular' versus 'religious' or 'religious' versus 'cultural' distinction."[28] He bemoans the fact that "when Muslims act and speak *exploratively* – as opposed to *prescriptively* – they are somehow not seen to be acting and speaking in a manner and register that is representative, expressive and constitutive of Islam."[29] Yet, in his attempt to reclaim the "explorative" mode to be a legitimately "Islamic" discourse, he posits it as being in conflict with the prescriptive *Sharīʿa* Islam of the jurists.

What Ahmed lacks is an adequate theorisation of how the "explorative" might productively relate to the "prescriptive" and an appreciation of the theological discursivity that literature is endowed with in Islam. Of course, the tensions that Ahmed is speaking about have been conceived of, in different terms, within the tradition itself. As an example, in classical Persian mystical literature, what Shahab Ahmed describes as "prescriptive, *sharīʿa* based Islam" is often represented by the figure of the quibbling jurist (*faqīh*) or the rationalist theologian (*mutakallim*), whose focus on legal minutiae and theological disputation is often ridiculed, and depicted as limiting the attainment of higher truths.

Often, these tensions were rooted in concerns about sincerity and the performative nature of religious practice. Cyrus Ali Zargar speaks of a "poetically informed tension between piety and infidelity that was grounds for Sufi teachings on transcending the normative confines of dutiful public life."[30] Later in this chapter, we will consider how analyses of classical Arabic poetry, as anthologised by Abū Manṣūr al-Thaʿālibī (d. 429/1039) and of the classical Persian poet Ḥāfiẓ (d. 792/1390), allow us to think about how the poetic representations of the tension between the prescriptive and legalistic on the one hand and the explorative and transgressive on the other is itself meaning-making. Thus, rather than understanding the relationship between the two purely in terms of marginalising and marginalised, we instead suggest that the two seemingly contrasting modes are co-constitutive and that the task of scholars is to understand the ways in which these contrasts have been poetically, theologically, and ethically productive.

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24 Marlé Hammond defines *iqtibās* as "the borrowing of phrases from the Qurʾān or *ḥadīth* in poetry or prose more or less word for word and without acknowledgement or indication of the source." In the same dictionary entry, she explains how the theologian ʿAbd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī speaks of three types of *iqtibās*: 1) the acceptable, which are to be found in sermons, eulogies of the Prophet, and other pious texts; 2) the permissible, which are to be found in love poetry, epistles, and stories; and 3) the unacceptable, which display a lack of respect for the holy book or the Prophet, for example in bawdy contexts that seem to twist the sense of the quotation. Hammond, "iqtibās," n/a.
25 Bauer, *A Culture of Ambiguity*, 166.
26 Ibid., 150.
27 Ibid., 165–7.
28 Ahmed, *What is Islam?,* 166.
29 Ibid., 303.
30 Zargar, "Sober in Mecca, Drunk in Byzantium," 278.

3 Literature, Education and Culture

Bauer, despite the limitations articulated above, recognises that "[t]he marginalization of literature in today's view of 'Oriental' history is striking,"[31] and writes:

> While in Arabic and Persian culture, poetry and artistic prose enjoyed a central focus of interest in all periods, and while literary discourse was by far the most important one for many areas of public and private life, contemporary experts on the region frequently believe they can manage without knowledge of the literatures and can simply skip the numerous poems interspersed in historical works and even in Quran commentaries. They are seduced into doing so, perhaps unconsciously, on the basis of a conclusion by analogy with our contemporary situation, where important matters are seldom treated in the form of literature, let alone in that of poems.[32]

Of course, the likes of Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār (d. 618/1221), Ibn al-Fāriḍ (d. 631/1235), and Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī (d. 672/1273) all treated "important matters" in the form of poetry, and over the following centuries their poems were to become an integral part of normative religious discourse.[33] They were trained as "ulamā" and occupied positions at prominent institutions of learning, such al-Azhar in the case of Ibn al-Fāriḍ. Rūmī was a renowned Ḥanafī jurist and regularly delivered Friday sermons in Konya. The fact that these figures were navigating between various spaces to learn and train others suggests a complementarity between the modes of discourse prevalent in institutions of formal learning and other spaces, such as the zāwiya which catered more directly to experiential knowledge.

Even places of formal education, such as mosques and madrasas, integrated poetry into their courses. In The Rise of the Colleges, George Makdisi details how, when, and with whom students would be exposed to pre-Islamic and Islamic poetry. In pre-madrasa times, the mosque preserved its primacy as the ideal institution of learning, and law, its primacy as the ideal religious science. However, the majlis and ḥalqas (study circles) organised in the mosques would cover all the sciences. As Makdisi explains, majlis al-ḥukm meant the place in which a qadi held his hearings, a court-room; majlis al-waʿẓ, the meeting-place for the popular or academic sermon; … other types of meeting-places were: majlis al-shuʿarāʾ, a meeting place of poets; majlis al-adab, for belletrists; majlis al-fatwa, for a jurisconsult, in which he issued solicited legal opinions.[34]

In madrasa curricula, grammar and literature were taught before logic as propaedeutic sciences.[35] As Makdisi underlines, the arts came before specialisation in any particular field. Specialisation in law for instance would follow the study of the Qur'ān, ḥadīth, grammar, and literature.[36] Furthermore, the madrasa was functioning hand in hand with other places of learning, including the homes of shaykhs, the zāwiya, and even cemeteries. Hence, the poetry of Abū Tammām (d. 231/845) could be studied as part of language training in the madrasa, whilst the poetry of Ibn al-Fāriḍ be engaged with through theological lenses in the zawīya, complementing the students' close reading of works of kalām. The picture that emerges then, is a state of

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31 Bauer, A Culture of Ambiguity, 137.

32 Ibid.

33 Concerning Aṭṭār, refer to O'Malley's late contribution in The Poetics of Spiritual Instruction. Farid al-Din 'Attar and Persian Sufi Didacticism; for Ibn al-Fāriḍ, refer to Gallien's, "Exploring Literature in Islam Beyond (Secularized) Christian Normativity in Western Academia" where the author builds on Homerin's translation and study of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poetry and challenges his restrictive interpretation of Ibn al-Fāriḍ as 'inspired oracle' and 'gifted poet'. She argues that this reading still occludes a fundamental aspect of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's Dīwān, namely that it was read by the poet, his contemporaries, and later Muslim theologians, as theology. For contestations of Orientalist and secular readings of Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī, which have excised Quranic references and Islamic theology from his poetry in translation, divesting Rūmī of his Islamic background and theological engagements, see online interviews, reviews and blog posts by Rozina Ali, in conversation with Omid Safi, in "The Erasure of Islam from the Poetry of Rumi" (https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-erasure-of-islam-from-the-poetry-of-rumi), by Azadeh Moaveni "How Did Rumi Become One of Our Best-Selling Poets?" (https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/20/books/review/rumi-brad-gooch.html), and Zirrar, 'Reading Rumi – The Erasure of Islam from Rumi' (https://zirrar.com/reading-rumi-the-erasure-of-islam-from-rumi/). For a full exposition of these contestations, refer to Gallien, Reconfiguring and Appropriating Arabic, Persian, and Indic Literary Traditions, 114–5. For a de-secularised and more perceptive reading of Rūmī, refer to Safi's, Radical Love.

34 Makdisi, The Rise of the Colleges, 11–2.

35 Ibid., 81.

36 Ibid., 85.

affairs where the values and modes of reflection inherent to the creative literary arts were given a place within the wider intellectual culture, supplementing, rather than contradicting or opposing, other modes of reasoning taught in formal institutions of learning.

Therefore, the ways in which scholars such as Ahmed and Bauer have conceptualised the relationship of literature to religious discourse need revision. While Shahab Ahmed in *What is Islam* (2016) and Thomas Bauer in *Die Kultur der Ambiguität* (2011, *trans. A Culture of Ambiguity* 2021) have rightly emphasising the presence of ambiguity and polyvalence in Islamic thought, their studies have contributed to the construction of a binary between two modes of Islam, the prescriptive, orthodox and certainty-seeking, versus the explorative, polyvalent, and ambiguous, without adequately theorising the relationship between the two. We suggest that this is a false dichotomy, and risks back-projecting contemporary tensions on the relationship between theology and the arts, tensions which were alien to many of the Muslim polymaths and poets who are discussed in this special issue.

4 Imagination, Allegory, and Paradox as Modes of Theological Thinking

In *Metaphors we live by*, Lakoff and Johnson argue that metaphors play a crucial role in structuring our experience of the world. In their telling, our engagement with reality is mediated through a number of cognitive metaphors that frame our given experience. In fact, Lakoff and Johnson's intervention echoes the earlier work of Owen Barfield, who argued in *Poetic Diction* (1928) that metaphors, through the elaboration of concepts, are essential to the development of human consciousness and the imaginative recreation of the world in which we live.[37] Both Lakoff and Johnson's and Barfield's works offer insights for thinking about the value of literature, as a place where metaphors are shaped and reshaped, concepts done and undone, and the world humans live in can be re-considered and re-imagined. However, as scholars, they operate within an underlying Kantian framework, where imagination and the reconfiguration of the metaphors we live by affect the phenomenal world we live in, with no access to noumenal reality and therefore no interest for the theological capacity of the literary imagination.

More relevant to our authors is Julie Scott Meisami's conceptualisation of metaphor:

> [m]etaphorical comparison—where the metaphor is essentially an extended or amplified simile—presupposes a gap between man and the universe that contains him, a gap that can be crossed only by grasping at perceived or imagined resemblances. Analogical comparison presupposes a continuity in which similitudes are, so to speak, generic constituents of existence. In a mode of composition based on analogy, metaphor transcends the status of a trope to become a consistent means for signifying the inner substance of things, in a world in which everything is a figure, a sign testifying to the unified and unifying order of creation.[38]

Building on the observations of Marie-Dominique Chenu concerning the court poetry written in twelfth-century Christian Europe, Meisami suggests that the Islamic medieval worldview shared the same underlying cosmology, of the universe as a harmoniously structured hierarchy composed of analogous gradients in which man figures as a microcosmic mirror image of the macrocosmic order.[39] This provides the basis for metaphor to function analogically, the verbal realm sustaining the non-verbal one.

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37 Barfield, *Poetic Diction*, 57.

38 Meisami, *Medieval Persian Court Poetry*, 37.

39 Ibid., 32. Chenu points to a shift in medieval European thought culminating the twelfth century from a "supernaturalistic" view of the universe as an uncontrollable and inexplicable mystery to a perception of the world as an entity in which "the whole penetrates each of its parts," an ordered cosmos in which the various "levels" of creation are parallel and analogous and exist in harmony with one another. The perception of an ordered and hierarchical continuity between man and the cosmos is articulated in the topos of man as microcosmic reflection of the macrocosmic universe. In Chenu's analysis twelfth-century European court poetry pursues this perception of the universe through symbols and analogies, which are not mere metaphors. Chenu, *Nature, Man,*

Muslim lexicographers, grammarians, and poets have conceptualised mental content (*ma'nā*) neither as arbitrarily connected to reality nor in a purely mimetic relation to it, but rather in a productive dialogical tension with it, where *ma'nā* is articulated, manipulated, reconfigured in order to (re-)align mental contents with reality and Truth. In *Language between God and the Poets* Alexander Key analyses 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī's (d. 471 or 474/1078 or 1081) poetics in terms of an attempt to understand not what poetry is (genre, mimesis, biographies of the poets, etc.) but how it works, namely what is its relation to *ma'nā*. While the function of the lexicon and of lexical accuracy is to point at *ma'ānī*, that of grammar is to structure *ma'ānī* in sentences, and syntax manipulates the *ma'ānī* of those sentences. According to these Jurjanian poetics, itself grounded in an Islamic episteme, lexicographers, theologians, and logicians, by pointing, structuring, and manipulating *ma'nā* (mental contents), all want to align *ma'ānī* to the truth of reason, itself connected to the truth of the world, and of God. Poets, on the other hand, "manipulate *ma'ānī* in order to create affect and make audiences feel and understand beauty," and one could add as entailment, feel and understand God as the ultimate Source and Creator of all beauty.[40] In addition, because nothing is arbitrary, the process of coming up with new metaphors (*tamthīl* or the discovery of likeness) involves the discovery of novel truths about the fundamental interrelatedness of seemingly dissimilar aspects of reality.[41] In Jurjānī's telling, metaphors play a crucial role in the realisation of truths about the world and point towards a complementarity and relationality between *'aql* (intellect) and *khayāl* (imagination).

Taking this complementarity as a starting point, metaphor is central to our explorative project to rethink Islamic theology outside the boundaries of *kalām*. First, it must be underlined that the post-Avicenna philosophy of mind has the imagination, the centre of all metaphor-production, operates hand in hand with the rational faculty, complementing it and facilitating the articulation of an experiential theology, beyond or along what the intellect cannot grasp or articulate but is nevertheless Real and True. Thus, in the classical Islamic philosophy of Ibn Sīnā (d. 427/1037), imagination (*al-khayāl* or *al-quwwa al-muṣawwira*) is not separated from reason but functions as one of the five internal senses that constitute human consciousness.[42] While common sense (*al-ḥiss al-mushtarak*) combines what is given in bits and pieces by the external senses into one image, the role of *khayāl/quwwa al-muṣawwira* (retentive imagination) is to store these images received by the external senses and common sense. *Waḥm* (estimation) deals with the particular intentions attributed to the thing observed and that are not available to sense-perception.[43] The memorative store (*al-dhikr* or *al-ḥāfiẓa*) preserves features of things that have been grasped by *wahm*. Finally, the role of *al-mutakhaīyla* (composite imagination) is to manipulate images gleaned from sense perception and *wahm*. Thus, Ibn Sīnā's theory of human consciousness highlights the role of imagination, as it relates to the external senses, in the development of cognitive faculties through the creation and retention of images.

Building on Ibn Sīnā's prior conceptions of the imagination's ability to receive the forms of sensible objects, deconstruct and synthesise them into new forms, Ibn 'Arabi (d. 638/1240) suggests that human imagination (attached imagination or *khayāl muttasil*) is itself connected to an objective imaginal realm (detached imagination or *khayāl munfaṣīl*), representing Divine imagination.[44] The relationship between human imagination and the divine Intellect provides a linkage between human and divine creativity, where the role of the

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and Society in the Twelfth Century, 99–145 [*La théologie au douzième siècle*, Paris, Vrin, 1957]. On further comments on the fundamental distinction between metaphor and analogy in Islamic classical literature, refer to Meisami, *Medieval Persian Court Poetry*, 30–9.

40 Key, *Language Between God and the Poets*, 196.

41 Abu Deeb, *Al-Jurjānī's Theory of Poetic Imagery,* 67; Harb, *Arabic Poetics*, 49.

42 For *Kitāb al-Shifā':* See for the Arabic edition, Rahman, *Avicenna's De Anima*. See also the French translation published, with an accompanying Arabic edition, by Bakos, *Psychologie D'Ibn Sînâ (Avicenne) d'après son oeuvre ash-Shifâ'*. For *Kitāb al-Najāt:* See ed. by Majid Fakhry. See also the English translation of Book 2, Chapter 6 by Rahman, *Avicenna's Psychology*.

43 See Rahman, *Avicenna's De Anima*, 166; Bakos, *Psychologie D'Ibn Sînâ*, 117; Fakhry, *Kitāb al-Najāt*, 202; Rahman, *Avicenna's Psychology*, 301.

44 In fact, Ibn 'Arabi suggests three ontological levels of imagination: [a transcendental, unrestricted level of imagination, which he calls *khayāl mutlaq* (lit., "Absolute Imagination"), an all-encompassing imagination which he calls *khayāl munfasil* (lit., "detached imagination"), and an encompassed imagination or which *khayāl muttasil* (lit., "attached imagination").

former is to conceptualise the forms brought into existence by the latter.[45] This framework articulates a worldview where aesthetic expression is rendered capable of articulating encounters with the Divine realities beyond-form.[46]

These encounters might be described as forms of catharsis, providing human beings with the possibility to express innate and ecstatic encounters with the Divine, within the creative space of literature. Poetic language is both a *catharsis*, in that it gives shape to an experience, which belongs to the realm of the ineffable, and a *catalyst*, in that it intends to produce a response, in the form of recognition and emulation, in the one reading or listening. Thus, Stefan Sperl suggests a reading of the poetry of Ibn 'Arabi in relation to Neoplatonic metaphysics. Placing ineffability at its heart, it privileges poetic language as the most effective means to convey what discursive language cannot comprehend. For instance, Sperl talks about Ibn 'Arabī's use of the *qaṣīda* as the poetic form best suited to render the otherwise ineffable illuminations received by the scholar while facing the *Kaʿba*. The *qaṣīda* is not just the allegorical embodiment of a rite of passage, with its movement from lamentation, to the journey out and return (Stetkevych) but most importantly here a form chosen to convey a movement from separation from the One to union in the One and spiritual emancipation.[47]

Thus the poetic forms of the *qaṣīda* and of the *ghazal* become effective means of catharsis, allowing poets and readers to comprehend the infinite in the finite. Both *qaṣīda* and *ghazal* for instance possess a set rhyme and rhythmic pattern but also contain potentially an infinite number of verses. In addition, with the transfer of the poetic voice or voice of the narrator, literature becomes a catalyst, reproducing in the readers and listeners the theological understanding reached by the poet-scholars. In his analysis of Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī's (d. 587/1191) *Awaz-i parr-i Jibra'il* (The Reverberation of Gabriel's Wing), Mohammed Rustom explains how the poetic voice can be both and at the same time that of the poet and not that of the poet. Through poetic transfer, the listener/reader becomes the seeker of knowledge herself.[48]

Threading together descriptive passages on lyrical rituals in the *Būstān* by Saʿdī and al-Ghazālī's reflections on the permissibility of music (and poetry), Domenico Ingenito defines the performance of *samāʿ* (auditions of litanies and spiritual poetry) as an "aesthetic catalyst for the believer's quest for the supernatural realm," adding:

> One important element pointing to the Ghazalian origin of Saʿdi's theoretical approach to performed music and poetry is the poet's representation of music as an aesthetic experience that is based on anthropological grounds. In other words, for both al-Ghazālī and Saʿdi, *samāʿ*, as a cathartic experience capable of generating an ecstatic response (*vajd*) in the listener, depends on a physiological feature that naturally stirs the innermost essence of human beings.[49]

This idea is further captured by Arjun Nair, in his article "Wine Drinking in Sufi Philosophical Islam," where he suggests that transgressive passages represent a transcendence of (Nair's "supra-nomian") and not an opposition to (Shahab Ahmed's "anti-nomian" understanding of 'Sufi-philosophical Islam) the strictures of Islamic law. Depictions of wine drinking were intended to open up hermeneutical horizons that added depth and texture to one's experience of the outward forms of orthodox Islamic practice, rather than being intended to negate the validity or usefulness of those forms/norms outright:

> [...] what these practitioners actually believed was that by understanding the qualities and attributes of wine, they could gain an understanding of the qualities and attributes of the Divine Reality, the latter being similar to wine in certain respects and incomparable/dissimilar to it in others. To put the matter simply, a supra-nomian exploration of wine-drinking was a process related to meaning not to experience, whereas Ahmed insists on the experience of intoxication with grape wine as well.[50]

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45 Ibn 'Arabi, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, vol. II, 309–13. See Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 219–20.

46 Akkach, "The World of Imagination in Ibn 'Arabi's Ontology," 97–113.

47 Sperl, "Stages of Ascent," 97, 118–24. For Stetkevych's interpretation of the *qaṣīda* as rite of passage, see her 1983 article titled "Structuralist Analyses of Pre-Islamic Poetry." There she reinterprets the tripartite structure of the poetic form in parallel with the three stages of the rite of passage delineated by Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner as separation (lover's complaint on the ruins), liminality (initiatory trials during the journey in the desert) and reaggregation (concluding eulogy celebrating reintegration into the social fold).

48 Rustom, in Guenther, p. 404 onwards.

49 Ingenito, *Beholding Beauty*, 482.

50 Nair, "Wine Drinking in Sufi Philosophical Islam," 12.

We have already discussed the cognitive role played by metaphors, from structuring our experience of reality to discovering novel truths about the interrelatedness of things in the world. However, with the wine metaphor another element is introduced, namely that of contradiction or paradox. The imagery in question exists in tension within the wider theological superstructure of which it forms a part. If we take wine imagery as being communicative of dimensions of Islamic spirituality, the communication of these meanings through the depiction of transgressive behaviours does present something of a paradox. One way to deal with the prevalence of these types of paradoxes in Islamicate cultures is the already discussed approaches of Shahab Ahmed and Thomas Bauer which, their differences notwithstanding, take ambiguity and paradox for granted as features of the culture's discourse and lived reality. While this approach might suffice for a cultural historian, it falls short in making theological sense of how religiously transgressive imagery could be so productively used for the expression of religious sentiments. For instance, Cyrus Zargar in his 2021 article "Sober in Mecca, Drunk in Byzantium" investigates the theological role played by antinomian spaces and transgressive behaviours in classical Persian travel literature and in particular the pseudo-hagiographical narrative of the Shaykh of Ṣanʿān in the poem *Manṭiq al-Ṭayr* (Speech of the Birds) by Farīd al-Dīn ʿAṭṭār (d. 618/1221). The poetic display of paradoxes goes both ways in the poem: the seemingly absurd proving founded and true, and the apparently sound leading to unacceptable conclusions. Normative spaces and expectations of decorum can lead to ostentatious and insincere modes of worship, while spaces of apparent transgression become the background for the articulation of the theme of losing oneself to the divine Other.

In thinking about the co-existence of seemingly mutually exclusive norms, Caner Dagli's discussion on paradox is a welcome addition to the conversation. Dagli suggests that certain complex systems, including religio-cultural complexes such as Islam, can only be thought of in their fullness by contrary concepts being brought together. As he puts it:

> The ambiguity of concepts such as religion and civilization is not only contingent owing to the quantity of individual elements (as in the case of a helicopter) that one cannot think about all at once, but rather is necessary and inescapable because the most unambiguous possible conceptualization is going to begin from mutually implicative contraries, and no powerful enough imagination will ever be able to overcome it.[51]

That is, when approaching these complex systems from our limited vantage points, we are often confronted with the reality that they encompass seemingly contradictory realities. These contradictions do not preclude the system from being a unified whole, but rather are a function of our inability to perceive that wholeness from our own limited perspective. Dagli terms these paradoxes stemming from our limited ability to perceive wholes as "mutually implicative contraries" – distinguishing this from mere contradiction or irrationality.

The notion of "mutually implicative contraries" is a productive one for thinking about some of the paradoxes of Islamic religious culture which Ahmed and Bauer theorised as a dichotomous relationship between an orthodox, prescriptive "theological" outlook vs an explorative, ambiguous, polyvalent habitus. Most decisively, the notion gives us a metaphysical basis for understanding how two seemingly divergent tendencies need not be exclusionary, as Ahmed and Bauer stipulated and/or implied in different ways, but can be part of a unified whole. Tensions in this regard become necessary: they enter a dialectical productive relation, which, far from undermining the system, contribute, by implicating contraries, to reinforcing its metaphysical cogency and integrity.

Poetic forms, theorised as that which precisely receives and accommodates the many, divergent, and even antagonistic, while maintaining integrity, replicate at the level of aesthetics the type of Islamic cosmology and metaphysics adumbrated above. Mana Kia[52] in her monograph on Persianate commemorative literature before the age of nationalism perceptively and systematically translates *adab* as "proper form" for texts, things, and beings in the world. An Islamic aesthetics and worldview would be one that recognises multiplicity

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51 Dagli, *Metaphysical Institutions*, 125.
52 Kia, *Persianate Selves. Memories of Place and Origin Before Nationalism.*

and contradictions, without failing to recognise how they are made coherent and reconciled through hier-
archies of meaning, interdependencies, and as enfolded in the Oneness of God. Literature as *adab* adumbrates
pathways to the Unseen through the manifest, which is at once superficial and absolutely necessary, at once
necessary and transcendable. Kia argues that this Islamic cosmology based on the interplay of the two
coextensive realms of seen and unseen is translated in *adab* as the proper form, which is striving towards
the most harmonious, beautiful and virtuous, the most perfect and the closest to Truth.

With this understanding of the theological function of literature in Islam, we are better equipped to
understand how Muslims leveraged polyvalence, ambiguity, and contradiction as means for genuine theolo-
gical reflection. We substantiate these theoretical reflections with the examination of two case studies of the
poetic productions of Muslim scholars of the classical period, one from the Arabic world of letters, with a
reading of Abū Manṣūr al-Thaʿālibī (d. 429/1039), and the other from the Persian world of letters, namely Shams
al-Dīn Muḥammad Shīrāzī (d.791/1389), more popularly known by his pen name, Ḥāfiẓ.

5 al-Thaʿālibī: Contrariness and Creed

Abū Manṣūr al-Thaʿālibī (d. 429/1039) is described as one of the most prominent figures participating in the
literary efflorescence of the region of Khurāsān in the tenth and eleventh centuries. He lived during politically
turbulent times, which forced him to leave the city of Nīshāpūr and travel away from Khurāsān.[53] These exiles
put him in close contact with multiple scholars and poets, and opened him to various and multilingual literary
traditions, which contributed to shaping his career as an anthologist. He was indeed recognised as an eminent
anthologist and prolific writer, poet, critic, lexicographer, linguistic scholar, historian, and biographer.
al-Thaʿālibī's oeuvre was entirely written in Arabic. Many of his works survive only in manuscript, while
more than thirty authentic works have been published.[54]

In his article, "The Works of Abū Manṣūr al-Thaʿālibī," Bilal Orfali offers an up-to-date bibliography of 86
entries for his entire known oeuvre. This annotated bibliography brings to light the astounding literary
production of the scholar, including works in the genre of lexicography and grammar (e.g. *Kitāb fiqh al-lugha*),
rhetoric (e.g. *Nathr al-naẓm wa-ḥall al-ʿaqd*), history (e.g. *Ghurar akhbār mulūk al-furs wa-siyarihim*, namely an
Arabic chronicle of pre-Islamic Iranian dynasties), biographies, and travelogues (e.g. *Zād safar al-mulūk*),
mirrors of prince and books of ethics (e.g. *Makārim al-akhlāq* and *Ādāb al-mulūk*), and in the genre of
anthology, where the scholar was the most prominent.[55]

Taḥsīn al-qabīḥ wa-taqbīḥ al-ḥasan, which has been lately edited and translated by Geert Jan van Gelder as
Beautifying the Ugly and Uglifying the Beautiful, is a prime of example of al-Thaʿālibī's art as an anthologist and
may be considered as an extended reprise of the Arabic literary maxim "أعذبُ الشّعـر أكـذبه" ("the sweetest
poetry is the one that resonates most falsely"). It is composed of various extracts in prose and verse arranged
in themes with contrary or paradoxical purport, such as praise of miserliness, boredom, sickness, and death,
or condemnation of generosity, intelligence, youth, and music.

The primary function of van Gelder's introduction to the edition and translation of *Taḥsīn al-qabīḥ wa-
taqbīḥ al-ḥasan* is to provide a literary recontextualisation for the work, discussing adoxography (or contra-
riness) in the history of Arabic rhetoric and literature and explaining al-Thaʿālibī's originality and contribu-
tion. According to van Gelder's presentation, literature as practised by al-Thaʿālibī is disconnected from

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53 Orfali, "The Works of Abū Manṣūr al-Thaʿālibī," 273–5.

54 Ibid., 278.

55 These anthologies ranged from collections of sayings illustrative of specific rhetorical figures (e.g. *Ajnās al-tajnīs* on parano-
masia; *Al-iqtibās min al-Qurʾān*; *Kitāb al-kināya wa-l-taʿrīd aw al-nihāya fī fann al-kināya*) to larger anthologies of classical Arabic
poetry arranged thematically or geographically (e.g. *Yatīmat al-dahr* and *Tatimmat al-yatīma*; *Aḥsan mā samiʿtu*; *Kitāb laṭāʾif al-
maʿarif* (tr. "Book of curious and entertaining information"). Orfali dedicated an entire monograph titled *The Anthologist's Art* to
this aspect of al-Thaʿālibī's art as anthologist, and his craft of selection and arrangement of written, oral, and aural sources, focusing
on *Yatīmat al-dahr* and *Tatimmat al-yatīma*.

theology and ethics. He avers that *'ilm al balagha* (science of rhetoric) does not concern itself with ethics,[56] and that al-Thaʿālibī's aesthetic project in adoxography would have been condemned by moralists and theologians alike, on the basis that it amounts to presenting falsehoods in the garb of truth.[57]

Van Gelder recognises that *ḥasan* and *qabīḥ* and their corresponding abstract nouns, *ḥusn* and *qubḥ*, have, "besides an aesthetical denotation ('beautiful/ugly'), a strong ethical component ('good/bad')."[58] In the case of the two concepts, which form the backbone of al Thaʿālibī's anthology, van Geldner recognises the necessity to tie aesthetics with ethics and pragmatics, since all three aspects (beauty, moral righteousness, and practical soundness) are present in the word *ḥasan*.[59] However, instead of reflecting on the meaning of the interplay between these three dimensions (aesthetics, ethics, and pragmatics) of Beauty in Islam, and discussing the type of cosmology it entails, van Gelder deplores such association as backward:

> Of course, it is wrong to confuse these aspects. Alas, in world literature, painting, or films, it is all too common that Good coincides with Beautiful or Useful, and Bad with Ugly or Useless. … The 'confusion' is no doubt one of the universals in literature and language, indeed in human thought as it developed in the course of our biological evolution, where, at least initially, the aesthetical and ethical were subordinated to the pragmatic.[60]

Van Gelder's teleological interpretation of literary "evolution" depreciates the combination of aesthetics, with belief, ethics, and pragmatics as obsolete. According to him, literature enters modernity after having freed itself from the shackles of faith, righteous thinking, and sound action. In other words, literature progresses and realises its full potential only when delinked from theology and ethics.

This teleological approach presupposes a universal drive towards secularisation in the literature, and recognises the value of *adab* – of which the anthologies of al-Thaʿālibī become prime representatives – precisely insofar as it has carved a space for itself independent of theological concerns and articulated a profane relation to the world. In reality, this interpretation of *adab* seems counterintuitive when read against al-Thaʿālibī's *Taḥsīn al-qabīḥ wa-taqbīḥ al-ḥasan* for instance. A more productive critical framework is one offered by Sarah Bin Tyeer in *The Qur'an and the Aesthetics of Premodern Arabic Prose,* where literary engagements with *qubḥ* (ugliness) are analysed as attempts to teach virtue by exemplifying the repercussions of engaging in ugliness.[61] The fact that *Taḥsīn al-qabīḥ wa-taqbīḥ al-ḥasan* is replete with passages from the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth* literature, which provide a theological frame for the anthology, is one aspect of the question of what I would rather describe as a reliance, interplay, entwinement of *adab* with theology. The other pivotal aspect of this case study is to show how theological readings may be deduced from and prompted by the *work* of the lexicon, figures of speech, and forms employed by the anthologist and the poets quoted.

To begin with, the very title of the anthology, *Taḥsīn al-qabīḥ wa-taqbīḥ al-ḥasan*, stimulates theological reflections. The words *taḥsīn* and *taqbīḥ* are constructed on a factitive verbal pattern, meaning to render beautiful or ugly, respectively. The anthologist thus announces that the focus is not the qualities of "beauty" and "ugliness" as attached to things, but the process of becoming beautiful or ugly and the agent in charge of that process. Thus, from the get-go, aesthetics (beauty and ugliness) is interwoven with questions pertaining to ontology (what does it mean to become one or the other, to be one or the other), ethics (what are the moral implications of uglifying the beautify and beautifying the ugly), and theology (God as Beauty and God as Creator and Agent of all changes).

To the theologically inclined readers, the title of the work may trigger a whole set of questions related to causation and creation. How is the nature of a thing made to change from the beautiful to the ugly and *vice versa*? What is the causation process that allows for such a shift in the qualities to take place? Who is the agent

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[56] "[…] the potentially unethical force of this embellishing and disfiguring, which may be a matter of practical and applied criticism, is ignored in ʿilm al-balāghah from which ethics are normally excluded," Van Gelder, *Beautifying the Ugly and Uglifying the Beautiful*, 12.

[57] Van Gelder, *Beautifying the Ugly and Uglifying the Beautiful*, 2–3.

[58] Ibid., 17.

[59] Ibid., 18.

[60] Ibid.

[61] Bin Tyeer, *The Qur'an and the Aesthetics of Premodern Arabic Prose*, 151–3.

of change? Does change occur in things in their essence or does it occur at the level of perception only? If values can be reverted, what of the ontological and axiological stability of a divinely ordained reality? Those questions are not directly and systematically addressed by al-Thaʿālibī in the anthology but they are triggered by the Islamic framework in which it originally operated.

Concerning the overall structure of the anthology, it cannot have been left to chance as van Gelder asserts, when describing the work as a list of topics randomly ordered.[62] Organising their textual material is part and parcel of the anthologist's craft. Structure *is significant* and, for instance, one may surmise that it is no coincidence that both sections of the book start with topics related to knowledge and that the book ends with a chapter on the "Uglification of Gratitude – except to God Almighty." Al-Thaʿālibī frames his anthology in such a way as to recall works of *kalām*, which also conventionally start with chapters related to knowledge. By concluding with the "Uglification of Gratitude – except to God Almighty," the author sets a theological limit for literary play and, quite ironically for a book that was all about the reversal of values, reasserts that God can only be glorified (*jalla jallalahu*) and therefore the believer's gratitude to Him never uglified.

Furthermore, the main theme of the work, namely Good and Evil and the reversal of values, recalls two theological debates in Islam, namely one opposing the Ashʿarī to the Muʿtazilī on the question of *ḥusn* (good-ness) and *qubḥ* (evil) and the other concerning the reversal of values from an eschatological perspective. Concerning the first point, the theological debate consists in assessing whether Good and Evil exist as absolute moral categories independent of Scriptures and the revelation of God's law (as the Muʿtazilites believe) or not (as Ashʿaris believe). To readers with a theological bend of mind, the interplay between *ḥusn* and *qubḥ* showcased in the anthology is not neutral and contrariness is not mere rhetorical play. The constant possibility of reversibility of values as demonstrated in the literary corpus selected by the anthologist emphasises the lack of stability of a moral system founded on reason alone.

The literary device of contrariness reveals how contrary to the Muʿtazilī view, there are many actions and objects, which possess no intrinsic moral value and that judgement of good and evil, if relying solely on human reason, may be easily reversed. In other words, in this anthology dedicated to the rhetorical device of *tanāqud* (contrariness), al-Thaʿālibī offers a rebuttal of the Muʿtazilī's creed that good and evil are intrinsic attributes and can be securely ascribed through rational means, without the aid of Revelation. If anything, what the anthology reveals is that things in themselves are not intrinsically good or evil; otherwise, it would not be possible for poets and litterateurs to reverse the values ascribed to things while still appearing perfectly coherent. Consequently, al-Thaʿālibī would appear to subscribe to the Ashʿari view, which does not consider actions to have intrinsic moral value; rather, Revelation and the Sacred Law form the true and stable basis of all morality.

The prime example furnished in books of *kalām* and *uṣūl al-fiqh* is the interaction between al-Khidr and Mūsā in the Qurʾān, where al-Khidr performs blameworthy and evil actions when envisaged from the per-spective of rational morality alone and Mūsā is shocked by them. However, the Qurʾān exposes these actions as ultimately good. The reason for the discrepancy – one could here say contrariness, or reversal of values – is that human beings only get a partial picture of events as they unfold and only God possesses the full view. When Moses expresses his abjection at seeing al-Khidr making a hole in a boat and drowning the passengers (sūra al-Kahf 18:71), al-Khidr's evocative reply is to say: "Did I not tell you that you would never be able to bear with me patiently?" (Q 18:72). The full picture, God's knowledge, is ultimately revealed later in the sūra, when al-Khidr eventually explains to Mūsā that he marred the boat, which belonged to needy people, because coming after them was a king who was seizing every boat by force (Q 18:79). The full context for the judgement of the morality of an action is only known to God. The intellect does not have access to the entire context, and hence cannot ascertain the moral value of acts, except through revelation and the Sacred Law. The reversal of values displayed in the poetry and prose quoted in the anthology invites readers to follow a hermeneutic path similar to that adumbrated in the Qurʾān. On the face of it, reversals appear egregious, when the ugly is made beautiful, or nonsensical, when the beautiful is made ugly. Only by seeking the full picture can readers reach a proper ethical judgement concerning the actions, things, or characters described.

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62 Van Gelder, *Beautifying the Ugly and Uglifying the Beautiful*, 20.

6 Re-theologising *adab*

Divested of its theological context and hypotext, the literary corpus anthologised by al-Thaʿālibī becomes a mere journey into the carnivalesque, a mere ingenious literary play with contrariness. For instance, in the brief section on "The Uglification of the Rose," the anthologist quotes with barely any comment one epigram by Ibn al-Rūmī, where it is compared to "a mule's arse," and two lines of poetry by Abū al-Fatḥ al-Bustī, where the flower is made to evoke the image of "a runny nose."[63] Clearly, these lines fit into the definition of the carnivalesque and the grotesque as analysed by the Russian structuralist literary critic and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World* (first pub. 1965; first trans. 1968). During a specific time, real places are turned into stages for the reversal of values, where the high becomes the low, is demoted and degraded, and the low engages in irreverent and disruptive acts that push against the order of the nomos. The use of contrariness in classical Arabic poetry would then merely indicate that contrariness and the carnivalesque are cross-cultural phenomena and as such the anthology by al-Thaʿālibī would be a good candidate for World Literature.

While preoccupied with the analysis of comparisons meaningful to World Literature alone, secular literary criticism pushes Islamic theology to a distant – if not irrelevant – background. Yet, in doing so, not only does the attitude of literary criticism evince little consideration for the culture from which these texts emanate, but it also fails to recognise the fundamental mutually creative interplay of poetics and theology in the works under discussion. Bin Tyeer's work constitutes an important corrective to the World Literature predicament, when she called for a considerate reading of the works of premodern Arabic prose, using the critical tools offered by the Qur'ān itself. She writes:

> The universal themes of disorder, chaos, or 'ugliness' found in adab are often read using the Bakhtinian carnivalesque in an attempt to comparatively read and group World literature thematically together. Despite noble intentions, this, more often than not, produces misguided conclusions that often divorce the literary works under discussion from the literary, linguistic, and cultural systems it belongs to in favour of universal and unanimous conclusions, which may not be always accurate. […] [A] Bakhtinian reading of these works is not only doing a disservice to the works and diminishing our literary appreciation of them but also falling into the trap of propagating literary clichés and stereotypes that are counterproductive to the study of adab.[64]

Going back to this section on "The Uglification of the Rose" in al-Thaʿālibī's anthology, it must first be underlined that flowers are endowed with symbolic meaning in Islam, with the tulip associated with God and the rose with Prophet Muḥammad. Although this association of the Prophet with the rose blossomed in the Ottoman mystical-devotional tradition, the metaphor is not original to the Ottoman literary and visual culture. Rather, as the Islamic art historian Christiane Gruber argues: "Throughout the centuries, and regardless of language and literary genre, the Prophet Muhammad has time and again been analogised to the rose, as both flower and color."[65] These floral metaphors hark back to descriptions of the Prophet in *ḥadīth* literature and are, as Gruber notes, "both sustained and pervasive" across devotional literature, for instance in the *Shamāʾil al-nabī* (Characteristics of the Prophet) by the early *ḥadīth* collector Muhammad b. ʿIsa Tirmidhi (d. 279/892), the Persian poet Nizami (d. 606/1209), and Hakani Mehmed (d. 1015/1606).[66]

The association of the Prophet with the rose works not just at the aesthetic level, where his beauty would be comparable to that of a rose, but most importantly at a theological level. Indeed, the analogy is underpinned by the theological conception of Prophet Muḥammad being decisively human while sharing in the qualities of the divine. Hence, just as the rose is a mixture of white and red, so is the Prophet both red as human and white as chosen by God as the best of humankind and as able to transcend purely physical matter. In Islamic

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63 On Ibn al-Rūmī's preference for the narcissus and dislike of roses, and more generally on the topic of rose vs narcissus, refer to Schoeler, *Arabische Naturdichtung*, 207–17; Heinrichs, "Rose Versus Narcissus;" McKinney, *The Case of Rhyme Versus Reason*, 208–23.

64 Bin Tyeer, *The Qur'an and the Aesthetics of Premodern Arabic Prose*, 19.

65 Gruber, "The Rose of the Prophet," 224.

66 Ibid.

paintings, the rose is precisely that which allows artists to doubly laud his corporeal characteristics and spiritual dimensions. As Gruber importantly remarks:

> Because it skirts bodily form, the rose indeed supplies one vehicle through which to explore the gradual disappearance of depictions of the Prophet's body in Islamic artistic production during the modern period … [not so much as signs of] image-shunning beliefs and practices [but] [p]erhaps more significantly [as the] the outcome of a fully fledged devotional doctrine known as the 'rose of Muhammad'.[67]

In such a context, where flowers are imbued with theological meanings, the anthologist's uglification of the rose becomes all the more provocative. How can one enjoy or draw aesthetic pleasure from Ibn al-Rūmī's lampoon of the rose as "silly and despicable," comparing it to "a mule's arse making it jut out like a platter,/ defecating, with some dung remaining in the middle."[68]

Instead of assuming that the anthologist seeks the assent and merriment of readers, one may more persuasively advance the argument that al-Thaʿālibī is interested in displaying the ludicrous limits of contrary play. Ultimately, literary contrariness would be so embroiled in puerile and egregious discussions, that it would work positively towards the reaffirmation of the beauty of the rose, and therefore the confirmation of the theological and spiritual values associated with it. In line with Bin Tyeer's analysis of the aesthetics of *qubḥ* (ugliness) in works of *adab*,[69] a more satisfactory interpretation of the uglification of the rose would perceive that violations of ethical or social norms are not sought in and of themselves, for the celebration of sin, and for attacking Islam and its Prophet, but rather as attempts to teach virtue by exemplifying the theological repercussions of engaging in ugliness.

Finally, one important way to restitch the weft of *Taḥsīn al-qabīḥ wa-taqbīḥ al-ḥasan* with its theological warp is to recall the importance of the topic of the reversal of values from the perspective of the Hereafter. Once more, secular readings do not exhaust all there is to say about the rhetorics of contrariness. Rather, contrariness is also a powerful and necessary tool in Islamic hermeneutics, used by scholars, poets, and litterateurs to unpack theological truths contained in Revelation. Indeed, the Qur'ān draws a fundamental distinction between the world repeatedly described as filled with signs (*āyāt*) of the Divine and undue attachments or bondage to individuals and things possessed in this world, which stand as the opposite as that which points to the Divine, namely as veils placed between the soul and Reality or Truth. From an eschatological perspective, coveted things, attractive positions, and popular individuals become hurdles detracting human beings in their preparation for the eternal Abode.[70]

In al-Thaʿālibī's anthology, the part concerned with *taḥsīn al-qabīḥ* (beautification of the ugly) ends with a section on "The Beautification of Death." Death which is judged abhorrent from a worldly (*duniyawī*) perspective is here endowed with positive values. More specifically, al-Thaʿālibī opens the chapter with two *ḥadīth*-s and an anecdote related by Abū Ayyūb Maymūn ibn Mihrān al-Jazarī (d. 117/735) about ʿUmar ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz, an Umayyad caliph remembered for his piety, which together emphasise the positive values ascribed to death from a dogmatic perspective. These quotations are followed by the sayings of philosophers and couplets from four different poets. The first is anonymous, the second is Manṣūr al-Faqīh (d. c. 304/916), the third Abū Aḥmad ibn Abī Bakr al-Kātib (d. before 429/1037), and the fourth Ibn Lankak al-Baṣrī (d. c. 360/970).[71]

1. May God reward Death on our behalf! It is kinder to us than any kindness and more merciful://It hastens to rid souls from harm and brings us near to the nobler abode.
2. I said, since they had praised life excessively, "Death has one thousand unknown merits.//In having met it one is safe from meeting it and it means leaving behind every unjust fellow man."
3. Some may wish to live, but I wish to die and be free.// "Death has one thousand merits": if they were known it would be natural for it to be loved.

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67 Ibid., 224–5. See also Gruber, *The Praiseworthy One*; and Gruber, *The Image Debate*.

68 Ibn al-Rūmī, *Dīwān*, as translated in Van Gelder, *Beautifying the Ugly, Uglifying the Beautiful*, 159.

69 In particular pp. 151–3 in Bin Tyeer, *The Qur'an and the Aesthetics of Premodern Arabic Prose*.

70 Qur'ān, sūra al-Anʿam 6:32, 6:70, sūra al-'Ankabūt 29:64, sūra Luqman 31:6, sūra Muhammad 47:36, sūra al-Hadid 57:20.

71 al-Thaʿālibī §31 in Van Gelder, *Beautifying the Ugly and Uglifying the Beautiful,* 95–7.

4. We live, I swear to God, in an oppressive age – if we saw it in dreams it would scare us.//People's affairs are so bad that those who die should by rights be congratulated.[72]

Contrariness is a rhetorical device that first surprises listeners and readers into looking at the world from a reversed perspective. However, the surprise effect is not numbing; rather, it triggers, very much like a puzzle, the listeners and readers into searching for the truth hidden in the paradox. In the various texts selected by al-Thaʿālibī, the solution to the puzzle or missing link is to be found in theology, and in particular its description of the Hereafter. Contrariness only becomes meaningful when taking into account the theological underlying structure in which the poets are operating, where death becomes something to be desired in connection with the belief in the Hereafter and in divine Justice.

Similarly, the praise of the negative particle *lā* in the chapter on "The Beautification of Saying No" becomes meaningful only after one has taken into account the credal underlying structure sustaining contrariness. Indeed, the section opens with the first part of the testimony of faith in Islam, namely *lā ilāha illā-Llah*. From a credal perspective, the absolute negation of *lā ilāha* (no god) followed by *illā-Llah* (but God) constitutes the ultimate beautification of negation because it contains the reaffirmation of pure monotheism.[73] In addition to this line from the Islamic credo, the anthologist reproduces a saying from the philosopher al-Kindī and "a certain wit" (baʿḍu al-ẓurfāʾ): "Saying 'No!' wards off woe, saying 'Yes!' cancels bliss."[74] In English translation, the quote sounds arbitrary: why saying "No!" should ward off woe, while saying "Yes!" should cancel bliss? The arbitrariness of the saying is removed in Arabic because of the strong religious connotations that the terms *al-balā* (woe) and *al-niʿam* (bliss) carry with them. In the Qurʾān, *al-balā* refers to the trials, tribulations, and distress experienced in this world and *al-niʿam* to the blessings and grace of God. A glossed translation attuned to al-Kindī's Islamic perspective would render: "Saying 'No!' may save you from the tribulations of this world, while saying 'Yes!' [to the attachments of this world] may very well cancel God's Grace bestowed upon you." Thus, a literal translation such as the one proposed by van Gelder while staying close to the letter of text may actually turn out to be untrue to its meaning and dynamics. It produces a puzzling statement that cannot be resolved by occluding the theological contents (*maʿnā*) implied in the original.

7 Ḥāfiẓ: Piety and Transgression

For Shahab Ahmed, the figure that perhaps best captures the propensity for ambiguity, paradox, and poly-valence that was characteristic of the intellectual and literary culture of the "Balkans-to-Bengal complex"[75] is Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad Shīrāzī (d.791/1389), more popularly known by his pen name, Ḥāfiẓ.

For Ahmed, Ḥāfiẓ's poems are exemplary of "the coherent production and maintenance of inevitable tension and contradiction: namely, metaphor and paradox" which Muslim societies used to "explore and express the potential meanings of the Truth of Islam."[76] What kind of ethical vision might find appropriate expression in this Ḥāfiẓian register?

A central idea for Ḥāfiẓ is *rindī*, a form of piety deriving from "an explosive exuberance of vision so rich, so full, that it cannot manifest itself without breaking the limits defined by the normality of things."[77] Some scholars have interpreted Ḥāfiẓ's *rindī* as implying advocacy of debauchery pure and simple, whilst others have seen him as "an enlightened mystic" above the "dictates of hypocritical spiritual leaders."[78] Lewishon roots Ḥāfiẓ's *rind* in the *Malāmatī-qalandarī* form of piety which proliferated in tenth-century

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72 al-Thaʿālibī §31 in Van Gelder, *Beautifying the Ugly and Uglifying the Beautiful,* 97. See Appendix for the original in Arabic.

73 al-Thaʿālibī §18 in Van Gelder, *Beautifying the Ugly and Uglifying the Beautiful,* 67.

74 Ibid.

75 A term popularised by the late Shahab Ahmed, whose seminal work has been extensively cited in this article.

76 Ahmed, *What is Islam,* 406.

77 Shayegan, "The Visionary Topography of Hafez," 224–5.

78 Lewisohn, "The Mystical Milieu," 32.

Nishapur,[79] a form of piety deeply concerned with avoiding the sins of ostentation (*riyā*) and hypocrisy (*nifāq*), with adherents often going to extreme lengths to prove that their piety is for God alone, inviting social approbation through flaunting public moral conventions. While the term *qalandar*, according to the research of Muḥammad-Riḍā Shafīʿī-Kadkanī initially referred to urban districts inhabited by people flouting social norms, it came to define the individuals associated with those spaces (*qalandarī)* and eventually, a genre of Persian poetry celebrating their values, the *qalandariyyāt*.[80]

Lewis sees the norms of *rindi* as representing a form of social critique, arguing that Ḥāfiẓ "celebrates the rakish libertine lifestyle of the outcasts (*rindān*) as a defiant antidote to institutional corruption and as a spiritual path to true dignity and freedom."[81] The concerns at the heart of the Malāmatī-Qalandarī piety go right to the very heart of Sunni-Sufi discourse, including al-Ghazālī's (d.505/1111) against the danger of ostentation,[82] and al-Hujwīrī's (d. 465/1072 or) discussions of self-righteous conceit (*ʿujb*).[83] We find Ḥāfiẓ himself making the association between *Rīnd* and *Qalandar*, concatenating the terms in several of his *ghazal*s, including

> *bar dar-i mīkadah rindān-i qalandar bāshand*
> *ki sitānand u dihand afsar-i shāhanshāhī*
> At the tavern door are the rogue *Qalandar's*//Who give and take the crown of kingship[84] (479/3)

Another example of this concatenation appears in the second line of *ghazal* 366. The larger poem appears to be concerned with the themes of hypocrisy and sincerity central to the Malāmatī-Qalandarī mode of piety. The first two lines of the poem are as follows:

> *khīz tā khirqa-yi ṣūfī bih kharābāt barīm*
> *shaṭḥ u ṭāmāt bih bāzār-i khurāfāt barīm*[85]
> Rise, let us take the Sufi's cloak to the ruins//Save ecstatic utterances for the marketplace of absurdities
> *sū-yi rindān-i qalandar bih rahāvard-i safar*
> *dalq-i Basṭāmī u sajjāda-yi ṭāmāt barīm*
> To the *rindān-i-qalandar* we go, taking on our travels//the cloak of Bayazid and the prayer-rug of pretentious sayings (366/1-2)

As seen in the verses above, the exemplar of moral sincerity, the Qalandr, is associated with the antinomian spaces of the tavern and the ruins (*kharabāt*), both of which are associated with wine drinking. In "Sober in Mecca, Drunk in Byzantium: Antinomian Space in the Poetry of ʿAṭṭār," Cyrus Ali Zargar argues that in classical Persian poetry, with specific reference to Farīd al-Dīn ʿAṭṭār (d.627/1221) these spaces represent "wonder and a sense of openness that occasioned ethical and theological exploration." References to these spaces are part of "a poetically informed tension between piety and infidelity that was grounds for Sufi teachings on transcending the normative confines of dutiful public life."[86] Zargar recognises the role that impious imagery plays in the articulation of a particular form of piety, rooted in the concerns of the *Malāmatī-qalandarī*.

In the lines above we can see this tension playing out in the contrast between some of the stock images of (superficial) piety in Ḥāfiẓ, the initiatory cloak of the Sufis (*khirqah*) and the prayer rug (*sajjāda*), which are juxtaposed with the *kharābāt*, whose inhabitants are "the representatives of sincerity and true religion."[87] Along with these conventional images of outward religious expression we also have ecstatic expressions (*shaṭhiyāt*) which started out as enigmatic, transgressive statements by the likes of Bāyazīd al-Bisṭāmī (d.261/874) and al-Ḥallāj (d.309/922), which by Ḥāfiẓ's time had become trite expressions, composed according

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79 Ibid., 37.
80 Zargar, "Sober in Mecca, Drunk in Byzantium," 286.
81 Lewis, "The Spirituality of Persian Poetry," 388.
82 See book 28 of his magnum opus, *Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn*.
83 Nicholson, *The Oldest Persian Treatise on Sufism,* 68.
84 Ghazal 479 – numbering is according to the edition of Khānlarī. The complete text of all *ghazal-s* cited is in the appendix.
85 Ghazal 366.
86 Zargar, "Sober in Mecca, Drunk in Byzantium," 278.
87 Brookshaw, *Ḥāfiẓ and His Contemporaries*, 82.

to literary and theoretical patterns.[88] These symbols of piety are fit to be traded in the marketplace of absurdities (*bazār-i-khurafāt)*, itself a juxtaposition of the mainstream and the peripheral, the marketplace being the focal point of urban life, but this centrality is undercut by the absurdity implied in its adjectival description.

Line three juxtaposes pious seclusion and supplication with the exultancy of morning wine and song. The joyful prayer is contrasted later on with the spitefulness of the ascetic (*zāhid*) who "lays thorns on the path."

> *var nihad dar rah-i mā khār-i malāmat zāhid*
> *az gulistānash bih zindān-i mukāfāt barīm*
> If the ascetic places thorns of blame in our path//We will take him from his garden to the prison of recompense (366/7)

Here there is also perhaps a subtle allusion to the well-known Prophetic *ḥadīth 'al-dunyā sijnu al-mu'min wa-jannatu al-kāfir.* (The world is a prison for the believer and a paradise for the unbeliever.[89]) The word used for paradise in Arabic is *"janna"* which literally means "garden." Bearing these resonances in mind, the ascetic being led from his garden to a prison is a journey from belief to unbelief. His carefully cultivated image of piety is being progressively effaced by Ḥāfiẓ. As Ḥāfiẓ continues in another line, despite his claim to be world-rejecting, the *zāhid* is so concerned with appearances that he is happy to claim the prestige associated with those who are known for working miracles (*karāmāt*), and is not concerned with his moral shortcomings symbolised by the dirty cloak (*pashmīna-yi ālūda*).

Following on from Zargar's observations with respect to ʿAṭṭār, in Ḥāfiẓ's Ghazal 373 we also seem to see articulation of a particular spiritual-ethical ideal, through various juxtapositions of pious and impious images. This ideal privileges the ideal of sincerity, untainted by ostentatious, performative religion, resonating with the core values of Malāmatī-Qalandarī piety. This dislike of social and moral conformity and hypocrisy might also explain why many of Ḥāfiẓ's most bitterly anti-clerical *ghazal*s were composed under the "fundamentalist dictatorship of Mubāriz al-Dīn (d. 759/1358) who was nicknamed the 'policeman' *muḥtasib* by the rogues of the city."[90] In another *ghazal* (283) celebrating the more liberal reign of Shah Shuja (d.804/1384) Ḥāfiẓ proclaims

> *saḥar z hātif-i ghayb-am rasīd mujdih bih gūsh*
> *ki dawri-yi Shāh Shujāʿ ast, mī dalīr binūsh*[91]
> At dawn, an angel from the unseen arrived with the good news//Drink freely! We are in the time of Shah Shujah (278/v.1)

This is possibly contrasted with the reign of Mubāriz al-Dīn, through a reference to the *muḥtasib* (also his nickname) in the first hemistich of verse 4.

> *sharāb-i khāna-gī-yi tars-i muḥtasib khurdih*
> The house wine was drunk in fear of the policeman (278/v.4)
> One of the most striking images from this poem occurs in line 5
> *z kū-yi mīkadih dūshash bih dūsh mībūrdand*
> *imām-i khwāja ki sajjāda mīkashīd bih dūsh*
> Last night, from the alley of taverns, they carried the master Imam home, prayer rug slung across his shoulder (278/v.5)

Again, the Imam with his prayer rug, carried home in a drunken stupor by his companions, recalls the kind of juxtaposition of pious and impious imagery that we have already seen in Ghazal 366. In the very next verse of Ghazal 278, Ḥāfiẓ advises:

> *dilā dalālat-i khayrat kunam bih rāh-i najāt*
> *makun bih fisq mubāhāt u zuhd ham mafrūsh*
> … O heart, let me guide you to salvation, do not boast of corruption or pretend at piety (278/v. 6)

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88 Ernst, *Ecstatic Expressions in Sufism*, 22.
89 This *ḥadīth* is found in all the many of the major Sunni collections, including the Ṣaḥīḥ of al-Muslim and the Musnad of Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal.
90 Lewisohn, "The Mystical Milieu," 34–5.
91 Ghazal 278.

This explicit ethical guidance suggests a possible reading of the image in line 4 as being part of the same social critique of performative piety, a critique made necessary by the conditions engendered by the stifling reign of Mubariz Shah the policeman, under which people were forced to put on a public mask of social and moral conformity.

The juxtaposition of contrasting images then is perhaps one way in which Ḥāfiẓ condenses his "explosive exuberance of vision" into the limited vessel of language, to continue the enterprise of "expressing the potential meanings of the Truth of Islam," to once again quote Shahab Ahmed. Another facet of this hermeneutic enterprise, is in Ḥāfiẓ's engagement with literary tradition, in other words, how he might be "reading literature as theology."

8 Hāfiz Ghazal 1: "Reading Literature as Theology?"

In her article "A Life in Poetry: *Ḥāfiẓ*'s first ghazal," Julie Scott Meisami, writing in honour of the late Heshmat Moayyad, argues that one of the defining features of Ḥāfiẓ's oft-discussed "ambiguous" style, is his "literariness." Using the first *ghazal* from his *divān* as a case study, she argues her definition of literariness as consisting of a) "self-conscious attention to style and rhetorical refinement" and b) "self-conscious engagement with the literary tradition and literary milieu in relation to which one produces one's own works." The first verse of the poem consists of an Arabic hemistich followed by a Persian one.

> *alā ayyuhā al-sāqī adir kā'san wa nāwil-hā*
> *ki ʿishq āsān namūd awwal walī uftād mushkil-hā*
> Cupbearer! Bring the cup and pass it around//At first love appeared easy, but then the hardships started[92] (Ghazal 1/v.1)

Mediaeval commentators have generally understood this verse to be a reworking of one by Yazīd ibn Muʿāwiya, which comes from a larger poem in the *khamriyāt* genre. Meisami reads Ḥāfiẓ's *ghazal* as a poetic response (*muʿāraḍa*) to the Arabic and Persian traditions of composing poetry about wine, and indeed love, also noting many allusions to perhaps the most famous exponent of Arabic wine poetry, Abū Nuwās (d.198/ 814). In Meisami's, analysis, the literariness of this poem is in its self-conscious response to and appropriation of a tradition – where the poem is "ultimately about a life lived in, and through, poetry, in which the poet returns to its (his) origins to become both heir to and appropriator of the entire tradition."[93]

The poem continues:

> *bih may sajjāda rangīn kun garat pīr-i mughān gūyad*
> *ki sālik bī-khabar nabvad zi rāh u rasm-i manzil-hā*
> (Ghazal 1/v.4)
> Stain your prayer-rug with wine if the Magian elder says so // As the wayfarer is not unaware of the customs of the stopping stations.

By suggesting that Ḥāfiẓ is here consciously engaging the "secular tradition of Arabic love and wine poetry" Meisami argues "that Ḥāfiẓ's wine cannot be construed as 'mystic wine seems clear both from the taḍmin's profane provenance and from the *ghazal*'s setting – the drinking party – which is established in the first misra" (hemistich/ half-line). Similarly, the "customs of the stopping stations" (*rāh-o-rasm-i manzil-hā*), which some commentators have understood as referring to the stations of the Sufi path, is understood by Meisami as alluding to the "stopping places" (*manāzil) and* traces (*rusūm*) from "ʿImrul Qays" famous hanging ode, spatial metaphors for the lingering memory of the departed beloved. Hence, line 4 becomes a further example of Ḥāfiẓ' "literariness," as defined by Meisami. But does this literariness, this self-conscious engagement with "secular" traditions of poetry, mean that his act of appropriation is not also another articulation of his spiritual–ethical vision?

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92 Ghazal 1.
93 Meisami, "A Life in Poetry," 179.

The wine-stained prayer rug in Ghazal 1/v.4 recalls the juxtaposition of pious and impious imagery which, as we have seen, are a feature of Ḥāfiẓ's poetry. This transgressive piety, rooted in the Malamatī-Qalandarī ideals, nonetheless requires the careful guidance of the elder here signified by the Pīr-i-Mughān who knows the "the stopping stations along the path." As noted by Meisami, *manāzil* in this verse has been understood as both referring to the various stations of the Sufi path and wine taverns in the register of Abū Nuwās. Moving beyond this mystical-profane binary, Meisami argues persuasively that we read these stations as the various stops along Ḥāfiẓ's attempt to trace a path through poetic tradition.[94] Accepting this reading, we may yet ask, to what end? A possible answer is, in the tradition of Arabic and Persian wine poetry, Ḥāfiẓ finds a poetic idiom whose transgressive imagery is germane for expressing a particular form of piety. In calling on the mood of the *khamriyyāt* and the hedonism of the likes of ʿImru al-Qays and Abū Nuwās, Ḥāfiẓ creates a stark contrast with the reference to the symbol of conventional Muslim piety, the prayer rug. The true power of the image of the prayer rug stained with alcohol lies in its bringing together the religious norm and its subversion. This tension is inherent in the Malamatī-Qalandarī form of piety itself, whose emphasis on sincerity and dislike of publicly performative piety, often pushes its adherents to outwardly transgress the boundaries of the Sharīʿa.

Ghazal number 1 ends with:

ḥuẓūrī gar hamī khwāhī az ū ghāyib mashaw Ḥāfiẓ
matā mā talqa man tahwā daʿi al-dunyā wa ahmil-hā
If you desire presence Ḥāfiẓ, do not be absent from him//*When you have encountered the one you desire, leave this world and its trappings!*(1/v.7)

One of the discussion points arising from this verse is the referent of the third-person singular pronoun marker (*ū*). Sūdī (d.ca 997/1600), one of Ḥāfiẓ's Ottoman commentators, rules out the possibility of it referring to God (consistent with his attempt throughout the *ghazal* to downplay mystical interpretations). Meisami speculates on the possibility of Ghazal number 1 having been performed, suggesting that the *ū* could be the *mamdūḥ*, the object of the poet's desire, absent from the performance. She also suggests the "*man tahwā*" in the second Hemistich is an allusion to a *ghazal* from Ibn ʿArabī's *Tarjumān al-ashwāq* (The Interpreter of Desires), where the *Ṣabā*, the lover's messenger, has related a *ḥadīth* to him (*anna alladhī tahwāhu bayna dulūʿikum tuqallibuhu al-anfās janban ilā janb: I am the one you love, dwelling within your chests, turned side to side by your breaths*).[95] Yet beyond speculation over the referent of *ū*, perhaps the key poetic significance of the line lies in its internal construction, rather than external referent. Particularly the use of antithesis (*taḍādd*), bringing together *ḥuḍūr* (presence) and *ghayba* (absence). In *ghazal* convention, presence and absence could be in relation to the court, but particularly if read alongside the possible allusion to Ibn ʿArabī's poem, it is hard to completely sideline the possible mystical connotations. Presence and absence are important states in the mystical path, at once opposite and simultaneous. Ibn Sīnā, for example, speaks of the spiritual aspirant in the course of apotheosis as being both absent and present (ghāʿib, ḥāḍir).[96] In Ḥāfiẓ's poem, absence is cautioned against, but its very mention is enough to evoke a sense of the contrasts thrown up in the path of desire (*hawā*). If the poem was indeed performed, such contrasts and juxtapositions would be central to the aesthetic response of the poem, where these oppositions are held together by the poem's recurring rhyme *ḥā*. Crucially, these contradictions are not merely intra-textual, but are also a function of the poems' engagement with poetic tradition, an engagement which invites competing readings and moods into the same hermeneutic playing field.

While Meisami suggests that Ghazal number 1 is about a "life lived in, and through poetry," I suggest that Ḥāfiẓ is also mapping out the contours of his distinctive spiritual and ethical vision, one which thrives on paradox and contradiction. His poetic universe – where wine stains the prayer rug, the ascetic becomes the object of satire, and the tavern emerges as a site of sincerity – embodies a form of piety that resists the performative and the prescriptive. In his engagement with literary tradition and his use of linguistic, rhetorical, and semantic ambiguity, Ḥāfiẓ explores and expresses the multifaceted truths of Islam, truths which

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94 Ibid., 172.
95 Ibid., 178–9.
96 Kars, *Unsaying God*, 137.

transcend the binary of belief and unbelief. In this, he possibly represents the most compelling example of the hermeneutic possibilities opened up by literature.

9 Conclusion

The examples of al-Thaʿālibī and Ḥāfiẓ show us the ways in which a deep engagement with the "literary" can not only co-exist with, but also facilitate the expression of ethical and theological concerns. Scholarship that has found these different modes to be in tension, if not direct opposition, is perhaps suffering from a reductive notion of the theological, ethical, and the pious. These examples are of course insufficient to reflect the full diversity of the Islamic tradition. Instead, we – along with the remaining papers in this special issue – hope to open a dialogue to which others will feel compelled to contribute: to critique, challenge, and develop the ideas we and our colleagues have put forth.

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Appendix

Extract from "Taḥsīn al-mawt" (Beautification of Death), al-Thaʿālibī §31, in Van Gelder, *Beautifying the Ugly and Uglifying the Beautiful*, 96.

وقال بعض الشُّعَراء، وهو مُتنازَع:

جَزى اللهُ عنّا الموتَ خيرًا فإنّهُ   أَبَرُّ بنا من كلِّ بَرٍّ وأرْأَف
يُعجِّل تخليص النفوس من الأذَى   ويُدْنِي من الدار التي هي أشْرَف

وأنشدني أبو القاسم بن حبيب المُزَكِّي قال: أنشدني أبو المطرِّف الدِّينَوَريّ، قال
أنشدني منصور الفقيه لنفسه

قد قلتُ إذْ مدحوا الحياة وأسرفوا   في الموت ألْفُ فَضِيلةٍ لا تُعرَف
فيها أمانُ لِقائه بلِقائه   وفِراقُ كلِّ مُعاشِرٍ لا يُنْصِف

وقد أخذه أبو أحمد بن أبي بكر الكاتب فقال

من كان يرجو أن يعيشَ فإنّني   أصبحتُ أرجو أن أموتَ لأُعْتَقا
في الموت ألْفُ فضيلةٍ لو أنّها   عُرفَتْ لَكان سبيلُهُ أن يُعْشَقا

وأنشدني أبو الحسن الدُّلَفيّ لابن لَنْكَك البصري

نحن واللهِ في زمانٍ غَشومٍ   لو رأيْناهُ في المَنام فَزِعْنا
أصبح الناسُ فيه في سُوءِ حالٍ   حُقَّ مَن مات فيه أن يَتَهَنّا

Ḥāfiẓ *ghazal* no. 1

اَلا یا اَیُّهَا السّاقی اَدِرْ کَأساً و ناوِلْها

که عشق آسان نمود اوّل ولی افتاد مشکلْها

به بوی نافهای کآخِر صبا زان طُرّه بُگشاید

ز تابِ جَعدِ مشکینش چه خون افتاد در دلها

مرا در منزلِ جانان چه امنِ عیش، چون هر دَم

جَرَس فریاد میدارد که بَربندید مَحمِلْها

به مِی سجّاده رنگین کُن گَرَت پیر مُغان گوید

که سالِک بیخبر نَبْوَد ز راه و رسم منزلْها

شبِ تاریک و بیمِ موج و گِردابی چنین هایل

کجا دانند حالِ ما سبکبْاران ساحلْها؟

همهٔ کارم ز خودکامی به بدنامی کشید آخر

نهان کی مائد آن رازی کزو سازند مَحفلْها؟

حضوری گر همی خواهی از او غایب مشو حافظ

مَتیٰ ما تَلْقَ مَنْ تَهویٰ دَع الدُّنیا و اَهْمِلْها

Ḥāfiẓ *ghazal* no. 278

سحر ز هاتفِ غیبم رسید مژده به گوش

که دورِ شاه شجاع است، می دلیر بنوش

شد آن که اهلِ نظر بر کناره میرفتند

هزار گونه سخن در دهان و لب خاموش

به بانگ چنگ بگوییم آن حکایتها

که از نهفتنِ آن دیگِ سینه میزد جوش

شرابِ خانگيِ ترس محتسب خورده

به رویِ یار بنوشیم و بانگِ نوشانوش

ز کويِ میکده دوشش به دوش میبُردند

امامِ خواجه که سجاده میکشید به دوش

دلا دلالتِ خیرت کنم به راهِ نجات

مکن به فسق مباهات و زهد هم مَفُروش

محلِ نورِ تَجَلّیست رایِ انور شاه

چو قربِ او طلبی در صفایِ نیّت کوش

به جز ثنایِ جلالش مساز وردِ ضمیر

که هست گوشِ دلش محرمِ پیامِ سروش

رموزِ مصلحتِ مُلک خسروان دانند

گدایِ گوشه نشینی تو حافظا مَخروش

Ḥāfiẓ *ghazal* no. 366

خیز تا خرقه صوفی به خرابات بریم

شطح و طامات به بازار خرافات بریم

سوی رندان قلندر به ره آورد سفر

دلق بسطامی و سجاده طامات بریم

تا همه خلوتیان جام صبوحی گیرند

چنگ صبحی به در پیر مناجات بریم

با تو آن عهد که در وادی ایمن بستیم

همچو موسی ارنی گوی به میقات بریم

کوس ناموس تو بر کنگره عرش زنیم

علم عشق تو بر بام سماوات بریم

خاک کوی تو به صحرای قیامت فردا

همه بر فرق سر از بهر مباهات بریم

ور نهد در ره ما خار ملامت زاهد

از گلستانش به زندان مکافات بریم

شرممان باد ز پشمینه آلوده خویش

گر بدین فضل و هنر نام کرامات بریم

قدر وقت ار نشناسد دل و کاری نکند

بس خجالت که از این حاصل اوقات بریم

فتنه می‌بارد از این سقف مقرنس برخیز

تا به میخانه پناه از همه آفات بریم

در بیابان فنا گم شدن آخر تا چند

ره بپرسیم مگر پی به مهمات بریم

حافظ آب رخ خود بر در هر سفله مریز

حاجت آن به که بر قاضی حاجات بریم

Ḥāfiẓ *ghazal* no. 479

سَحرم هاتف میخانه به دولتخواهی

گفت بازآی که دیرینه این درگاهی

همچو جم جرعهٔ ما کش که ز سِرّ دو جهان

پرتو جام جهان‌بین دهدت آگاهی

بر در میکده رندان قلندر باشند

که ستانند و دهند افسر شاهنشاهی

خشت، زیر سر و بر تارک هفت‌اختر پای

دست قدرت نگر و منصب صاحب جاهی

سر ما و در میخانه که طرف بامش

به فلک بر شد و دیوار بدین کوتاهی

قطع این مرحله بی همرهی خضر مکن

ظلمات است بترس از خطر گمراهی

اگرت سلطنت فقر ببخشند ای دل

کمترین ملک تو از ماه بود تا ماهی

تو دم فقر ندانی زدن از دست مده

مسند خواجگی و مجلس تورانشاهی

حافظ خام‌طمع شرمی از این قصّه بدار

عملت چیست که فردوس برین می‌خواهی؟