

AN UNEXPECTED IMAGERY:
THE HEART'S VISION AND OTHER SYNESTHETIC
FUNCTIONS OF THE *DHIKR* INTO THE ISLAMIC TRADITION

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The aim of this paper is to survey how synesthetic craftsmanship of the *dhikr* (ritual invocation) has been passed on until the present day and how this technique has favored an unexpected but crucial role of the images in the Islamic Tradition.

The discussion about the prohibition of images in Islam must be presented in such a way as to point out the multi-faceted complexity of the issue. Islamic Tradition is known for its aniconic heritage that is the result of a religious perspective which excludes the use of images in places of worship.

Modern secular society tends to view worship as irrelevant in the greater context of human activity, which is diametrically opposed from the way Muslim civilization has established the absolute dominance of worship in every aspect of human life.¹ It is important to remember that we are referring to a society which “expresses itself in and through religion. Religion was far too central a reality to be, as in our day, merely a personal matter or an affair of the [mosques].”²

It seems, in this regard, that the act of worship is viewed as the main vocation of the human being — “*wa ma khalaqtu-l-jinna wa-l-’insa illa li-ya’buduni* (We created not the Jinn and Mankind except that they should worship Me)” (*Qur’an, adh-dharyat*, 56) — therefore the presence of images (i.e., statues, icons etc.) which could mislead believers and seduce them instead of inspiring a pure consideration of the Divine Unity (*Tawhid*) should not be allowed.

The prohibition of images has its source in some *ahadith* (as it is widely known, the narration reporting the incomparable nature of prophetic model). One of the most influential of these *ahadith* concerns Muhammad’s beloved wife, ‘Aisha, who reported: “God’s Messenger came back from a journey and I had screened my door with a curtain having (images) of winged horses on it. He commanded me (to remove them). So I pulled them down.” This is the wording narrated by Muslim, 3/1158, no. 5256 whereas Al-Bukhari’s

narration refers: “I had hung a thick curtain having images (*tamathil*). He commanded me to remove them, so I pulled them down” [Al-Bukhari, 7/542]

Jamal J. Elias has reexamined this account of the Prophet’s life:

A famous hadith account describes how Muhammad’s wife, “Aisha, acquired a tapestry with images on it which she hung on a wall in their home while the Prophet was out of the house. When he protested about the tapestry on his return, Aisha cut up the fabric and used it to make cushions, which subsequently were used in their home without any objection from him [...].”³

Previous to this work, Hans Belting recognized an experimental vocation to imagery in Islamic tradition as part of a broader vulgate on the primacy of Medieval Arabic science, in particular looking at the invention of the darkroom.

Yet the German scholar’s opinion does not seem to be entirely convincing — for instance, when he provides a very formalistic explanation of the Divine Word as a subject of debate in Muslims scholarly circles. Belting, indeed, judges in a narrow perspective, the supremacy of Word as supremacy of writing that is not:

Dans l’Islam, le Verbe comme révélation de Dieu par lui-même exigeait un monopole qui excluait les images. On y voyait la manifestation authentique de Dieu, que seule l’écriture pouvait restituer et sauvegarder. Un Dieu invisible, qui ne se manifeste pas sous une forme corporelle visible, «parle» dans l’“Écriture” qui est donc son médium approprié.⁴

The fact is, according to the highest Muslim authorities, the Divine Word has nothing to do with writing and, mainly, is not Allah’s favorite medium, because, being uncreated, it is not a medium at all.⁵ Imam Abu Hamid al-Ghazali said in his *Foundations of Islamic Belief* (*Qawa'id al-'Aqa'id*) published in his *Rasa'il* and his *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*:

The *Qur'an* is read by tongues, written in books, and remembered in the heart, yet it is, nevertheless, uncreated and without beginning, subsisting in the Essence of Allah, not subject to division and or separation through its transmission to the heart and

paper. Musa — upon him peace — heard the Speech of Allah without sound and without letter, just as the righteous see the Essence of Allah Most High in the Hereafter, without substance or its quality.⁶

Considering that the disproportion between man's desire and the unattainable height of God which can be reduced only in the case of Divine Mercy, it is necessary to devote now our attention to the implication of imagery as a privileged instrument of the heart's vision. It is well known how the term "heart" has multifaceted features in the Islamic tradition. It is not simply the organ of emotions, "feelings" and desires, or decisions and opinions, but entails the soul, knowledge, bravery and more. When purified, it is the seat of the intellect, which mirrors the Divine Presence, as is clarified in the *hadith qudsi* (sacred tradition or report): "God created Adam in His image (*khalaqa Allah 'Adam `ala suratiHi*)," narrated from Abu Hurayra by both al-Bukhari and Muslim.

The word "image (*sura*)," here refers to man's "attributes," such as hearing, seeing, knowledge, and so on. Hence, Adam was created possessing attributes by which God has also attributed to Himself with the difference being that those of Adam are contingent and relative while the attributes of God are eternal and absolute.

As the seat of all the cognitive activities, the heart has been called the "true essence of a human being" (Al-Jurjani, 11th century), containing "all levels of inner being" (al-Hakim al-Tirmidhi 9th century), and for the Prophets it is the place of Revelation itself. At first, the "heart" (*qalb*) is something unstable, unreliable, easily changing. There is a *hadith* in which Prophet Muhammad makes a *du'a* (a special act of supplication) to God: "*Ya Muqallib al qulub thabbit qalbi `ala dinik* (O Turner of the hearts, make my heart firm upon Your Religion)." The etymology of *qalb* comes from a trilateral root (Q-L-B) which refers to something that turns around and upside down. The nature of the heart is constantly changing.

The heart can allow a man to reach the highest stations (*maqam*) as the lowest degree. That is exactly the way it is introduced by al-Hakim al-Tirmidhi in *Bayan al-Farq bayn al-Sadr wa-al-Qalb wa-al-Fu'ad wa-al-Lubb* (*The Explanation of the Difference Between the Breast, the Heart, the Inner Heart and the Intellect*).⁷ Concerning God-consciousness, the Prophet Muhammad said, while pointing to his heart: "God-awe is right here" (*al-taqwā hunā*)."

So it is quite clear how pivotal the role of the heart is concerning the opportunity to witness God's Presence.

Although, as it has been reported in the well-known *hadith* "Jibril," it is impossible to see God directly, by an extraordinary paradox, the feature of *ihsan* (the spiritual excellence, as it is expressed in Arabic) consists of looking at God as if you can really see Him even if you cannot really see Him: "*an ta'abud Allah ka annaka taraHu fa in lam takun taraHu fa innaHu yarak*" ("*ihsan* is to worship God as if you see Him, because even if you don't see Him, He sees you").

This excellent degree reveals the Islamic acknowledgment of what perfect faith actually is and allows us to understand why we choose, in particular, the *taḥawwuf* perspective in explaining the subject of the heart's vision which is a specific trait of Sufism.

The attitude of Islamic thought is, in this sense, nothing new or original in a Medieval mentality shaped by a search for Truth, shared by the three branches of Abrahamic Tradition, on the basis of a gaze strategy.⁸ What really changes is the absolute relevance provided to the wide range of the Divine Word's synesthetic possibilities in the Islamic perspective. Is it just something related to the endemic lack of a figurative culture or rather the symptom of a more sophisticated concept?

To answer the question, it is useful to step back to the early time of Muslim civilization.

As it is referred since *Sirat an-nabawiyya* of Ibn Ishaq (8th century), the original experience of Quranic Revelation is recalled as a challenge with the Image that, as God's Presence, is not immediately repeatable nor speakable. So once, at night, during the month of Ramadan, when the Prophet Muhammad was forty, standing in solitude in a cave on Mount Hira, the Archangel Jibril came to him commanded three times: "Read!" and he always answered: "I cannot read" referring to the same, unbearable, weight Moses experienced: "Then Moses said, 'Now show me your glory.' / And the Lord said, 'I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the Lord, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. / But,' he said, 'you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live'" (*Exodus*, XXXIII, 18-20).

The ritual and performative nature of this narration has in its core a synesthetic theatricality marked by the quranic term "*Iqra!*" which evokes a more complex meaning than what we merely translate as "read." In fact, *Iqra* implies the notion of recitation in terms of

an embodied consciousness of what one is reading. Despite the Prophet's refusals, Jibril embraced him so hard that Muhammad got hurt intolerably (this recalls very closely the fight between Jacob and the Angel, when, winning though beaten, the biblical Prophet argues: "for I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved" (*Genesis*, XXXII, 31).

During Jibril's last hug, the unreadable image finally becomes a sound: "*Iqra bismi Rabbika Alladhi khalaq!* (Read in the name of your Lord Who Created!)" (*Qur'an*, *al-'alaq*, XCVI, 1). The text of Ibn Ishaq goes on, then, quoting Muhammad's words: "It was as those words were engraved inside my heart."⁹

Then, the image conceived by the Islamic Tradition lies in a possible relationship between the eternity of the Divine Word and the ephemeral words of creatures. Thus the encounter with a higher level of knowledge, reenacted by the invocation (*dhikr*), becomes possible by its synesthetic function and it is addressed to magnify the strength of this archetypal image, far from dispelling its value (that it will be clearer further).¹⁰

In fact, the result of this encounter is an alchemic possibility of turning the ineffable into a language that everyone can easily understand ("*Innā 'Anzalnāhu Qur'ānān 'Arabīyān La'allakum Ta`qilūna* [Surely We have revealed it — an Arabic Quran — that you may understand]" [*Qur'an*, *Yusuf*, 2]). So, what occurs is properly a transposition from one language into another — something which only synesthesia could accomplish. In fact, Jibril asks the Prophet Muhammad to convey *al-ma'ani l-qadima* (the metaphysical, eternal, entities) and their divine conversation beyond time (*al-mukalamatu al-azaliyya*) and space. Then the Prophet's answer ("I cannot read"), actually means: "I cannot communicate the eternal Word and the Divine speech beyond time using temporary language." So, Jibril taught him how to achieve this. Jibril's hug is sealed by an expression of the Prophet Muhammad: "He held me so tight as to exhaust me" that sounds enigmatically in Arabic language: "*faghatta-ni hatta balagha minni al-jihadu*" that means "he pushed me into that hug pushing me so far past my capacity for pain." Is there just a hint to the ineludible bodily involvement in the Revelation? It may be. In any case, according to the Islamic Tradition, the human being is made up of body, soul and Spirit (*corpus, anima, spiritus: jism; nafs; Ruh*), so the basic ability of the ritual invocation (*dhikr*) is to convene all the sensory characteristics through the pronunciation, rhythmically and repetitively, of a ritual formula. Given this prerogative, maybe another concrete example could serve to acquire

an increasing consciousness. In fact, it is not by accident that the *dhikr* brings into play its synesthetic property as ultimate proof of efficacy:

the good believer who reads the *Qu'ran* is like a lemon, his fragrance is good, his taste is good; the one who does not read the *Qu'ran* is like the date which has not fragrance though his taste is good; the hypocrite who reads the *Qu'ran* is like basil, his fragrance is good, but his taste is bitter; the hypocrite who does not read the *Qu'ran* is like colocynth which has not fragrance and its taste is bitter. (*hadith* reported by Abu Musa Al-Ashari, in the *Ṣaḥīḥ* al-Bukhārī 4732, *Ṣaḥīḥ* Muslim 797)

Therefore, when approaching the Divine Revelation the good believer achieves qualities that are summed up of a vast array of different senses. However, appearances can be deceptive, this is the reason why the best believer is he who only reads the *Qu'ran*, and plays back the Prophet's experience, tasting the fullness of God's Presence. This invocation (*dhikr*), conceived by the heart, convenes all the sensorial range and has the potential to be a great life-altering experience. Such is the authority of this invocation, into the visual field, that the prayer itself is properly defined as "*qurrata 'ayunin* (eyes' relief)" or by another tradition: "*wa ju'ila qurra 'aynī fī salāt* (into the prayer was established my eyes' relief)."¹¹ The synesthetic horizon of this invocation has been identified with "*alam al-mithal* (world of the archetypal forms)" or "*alam al-khayal, mundus imaginalis*" as Henry Corbin called it in his work,¹² inspired by *Kitāb Hikmat al-Ishrāq* written by the shaykh Yahya Suhrawardi (12th century).¹³

In Suhrawardi's perspective, the *'alam al-mithal* is an intermediate world between that of concrete phenomenal reality and the realm of pure intellectual abstraction. Possessing form but not substance, he referred to this intermediate world (*'alam al-mithal*) as the world of likenesses. Connecting it back to the foundations of the Muslim faith, he also frequently referred to it by the *Qur'anic* term of isthmus or interface (*barzakh*). Through its custody of symbols as its mode of communication, this cosmic sphere (or, alternatively, level of existence) was seen to act as an intermediary between God's non-delimited knowledge and our own fragmentary understanding of the universe. It was also seen to act as the interface between the living and the dead and was in this sense understood as acting as the visionary meeting ground for living Sufis and their dead predecessors. As a

proper realm of existence that mediated between different levels of being, the *'alam al-mithal* thus played an important part in the cosmological model which underpinned Suhrawardi's wider mystical epistemology.¹⁴

In this intermediate world ("*isthmus, barzakh*"), as many Shuyukh showed by their teaching method, the Word, because of the heart's invocation, becomes Sign, Icon, Vision:

we deal with the imaginary form of the sound, that is sound itself . So it is conceivable to have sounds and melodies in the heavenly spheres [...] In fact, they have a hearing not conditioned by ears, a sight without eyes, a smell without nose.¹⁵

On the other hand, the imagery's mastery turns invocation into Sign, Vision, gnostic realization. This mastery according to the secrets of *'ilm al-huruf* (Science of Letters) belongs to the distinctive charismas of this realization, as Sahl al-Tustari (11th century) demonstrated. In an emblematic episode of his existence, told by Al-Tustari himself, at night, he saw "the supreme Name of God written in the sky by a green light all along an extent line from east to west."¹⁶

This kind of experience is the major underlying theme of the work of the greatest master (*shaykh 'akbar*) Ibn 'Arabi (d. 1240). To understand how Ibn 'Arabi defined it, one can refer to his expression *al manazir al-'ula* which can be translated as the supreme spiritual vision: "*Manazir* is the plural of *manzar*, from the root *nazara* which means primarily 'to look, to view, to perceive with the eyes'."¹⁷ As I have recalled before, the organ of God's Vision is the heart, often mentioned by Ibn 'Arabi, referring to the *hadith qudsi*: "Neither My Heavens nor My Earth encompass Me, but the heart of My believing servant does encompass me." Moreover, he speaks of the imagination (*khayal*) calling into question a rich panoply of visual art terms, as Chittick argues: "The word denotes both the power that allows us to picture things in the mind and the mental pictures. It implies not only an internal faculty, but also an external reality, as is shown by the fact that the same word is also used for the images seen in mirrors or on a screen."¹⁸ Chittick warns us that the word "screen" here is not anachronistic. In fact, Ibn 'Arabî refers to what a screen (*sitâra*) represents, in the case of the shadow-play, to explain how imagination works according to the Divine power. It is in this case that, as the etymology of the Arabic word (S-T-R) points out, the screen takes the meaning of a protective shield, an aegis under which

the soul (*nafs*) is safe from the risk of losing itself. Ibn al-Fârid, one of the greatest Arabic Sufi poets, speaks of the shadow-play, referring to the same terminology.¹⁹

The Word becomes Vision and the Vision becomes the solid remembrance of God. This remembrance would not be possible without the awesomeness of a theophanic prayer and its ability to visualize in a transient world what is destined to remain hidden in the world of pure entities, to fix in a passing world what is absolutely inalterable:

Everything other than the Essence of the Real undergoes transmutation, speedy and slow. Everything other than the Essence of the Real is intervening image and vanishing shadow. No created thing remains upon a single state in this world, in the hereafter, and in what is between the two, neither spirit, nor soul, nor anything other than God — I mean the Essence of God. Rather, it undergoes continual change from form to form constantly and forever. And imagination is nothing but this. [...] The universe has become manifest only in imagination. It is imagined in itself. It is, and it is not.²⁰

This uncertainty is the fundamental structure of a thought which swings continuously between different domains and different sensorial spheres, choosing, with a final paradox, not to choose and remaining in between. Once again, it is necessary to reaffirm that the Islamic Tradition finds the concrete realization of this paradox in the *dhikr*, or is in the peculiar remembrance technique in which, synesthetically, sight, smell, taste, touch and sound are convened to

see things as they are from the perspective of the Real. In this sense, the prayers are equally a form of invocation on remembrance (*dhikr*). In reciting them, the servant is not indulging in mere mechanical repetition, but consciously acknowledging the Presence of God, opening up to the full force of the Divine Revelation and savouring its manifold “tastes.”²¹

Entering the sacred space of *dhikr* has a precise impact on initiates. One of the most important Sufi orders, the Tariqa Shadhiliyya, founded by Abu-l-Hasan ‘Ali Ash-Shadhili (d. 1258) attaches considerable importance to the repetition of the Name of God, as a tool of

salvation (the Shadhili Masters argue that, when he is absorbed by the *dhikr*, the worshipper is entirely protected from Satan's assault) and transformation in terms of what Victor Turner and Richard Schechner explained when they talked about liminal rituals.²² The performative feature of ritual, in fact, has always been considered from a secular point a view and in a merely cultural perspective. Despite his awareness of what goes beyond ritual appearance, Turner agrees with those tendencies which consider ritual as an excellent tool to explore the multiple facets of a cultural construction: "Ritual for me, [as Ronald Grimes puts it]; is a 'transformative performance revealing major classifications, categories, and contradictions of cultural processes'."²³ Conversely, some examples, as the ones we are referring to, show a hidden, deeper and higher meaning of the ritual horizon: something that still remains right on the center of everyday life, something that people keep on passing down to each other, something that recalls the original, not the lost, time in which a spiritual renewal must have been possible.

The craft of *Qur'an's* recitation recollects the starting point of Revelation when, through the imperative request ("*Iqra*"), the entire imagery of Islamic Tradition was molded into a performative perspective. The ritual circumstances of recitation engage people in an encoded space-time continuum in which some formulas must be recalled and repeated. This method is particularly used putting visual concentration and breath mastery together.

That is why, for instance, Shaykh Darqawi (d. 1823), who revived the Tariqa Shâdhilîyya between the 18th and 19th century, warned his disciples that they must focus on the five letters of the name of Allah, trying to keep on visualizing them endlessly: "If you invoke Him, devoting yourself to the visualization of the Name, you will be visited by so many and such strong intuitions so as to be driven until your Lord's Presence."

In his epistolary, he suggested to his disciple:

You must focus on the five letters of the Majesty's Name (*Allah*) and seek steadily to maintain this visualization. Each time it vanishes, you have to restore swiftly, even a hundred time, if it were. You need to prolong the invocation until the limit: 'Alla...h' without saying fast 'Allah Allah' [...] The purpose of such a visualization of the Name's Letters is to seize your soul in order not to allow it to lose itself in the material world (thus in what is not appropriate), for the material world is the right opposite of the spiritual world and opposites never meet [...] If the invoking one devotes

himself to the Name's visualization, he will be visited by many intuitions, which get stronger and stronger, and take him to His Lord's Presence. There he will receive some blessings and secrets that no one has ever seen nor heard of before, coming from a nonhuman source. That said, this path along the Spiritual Way is not for everybody, for it is suitable only to the shrewd people.²⁴

Far from being merely a concentration technique, this method is very far-reaching in its effects, due to the meanings and secrets which God has attached to the letters of His own Name. The purpose of this invocation is nothing less than *fana fi'llah* — annihilation in God, annihilation into the name, to be more precise, for every name has its specific virtues. It is a venue for the worshipper (*'abd*) and the Worshipped (*Ma'bud*) in a connection that aims to reintegrate man into his center and achieve union with God.²⁵ Before this opportunity, one can consider the intimate relationship articulated by the experience that has always had a crucial function in the teaching of the Islamic Tradition. In this light, the synesthetic device of the *dhikr* endows the believers with a consciousness that goes far beyond mere erudition. In this embodied knowledge's perspective, the lesson of Abū Ḥāmid Ghazali (11th century) is still alive because it has been disseminated among the Sufi Masters, in the contemporary age:

Know that the answers to some of the things about which you asked me are not brought about through writing and discussion. If you attain to that state you will know what they are, and if not-knowing them is an impossibility, in that they pertain to direct experience. The description of anything to do with direct experience is not furnished through discussion, as the sweetness of what is sweet and the bitterness of what is bitter is not known except by taste. Thus it was related that an impotent man wrote to a friend of his to tell him what the pleasure of sex was like. So he wrote back to him in reply 'O so and so, I thought you were just impotent! Now I know that you are impotent *and* stupid, since this pleasure is to do with direct experience — if you attain it you know it — otherwise the description of it is not furnished through talking and writing.²⁶

It is doubtless a weird narration, and it looks like much more astonishing because it is reported by a metaphysical science's Master. Yet, as bewildering as it may seem, the example of the "impotent and stupid man" gives a faithful snapshot of the issue of this paper.

The "taste" of invocation provides the privilege of experiencing the Divine Word, not to affirm the superiority of writing and books (as one might be tempted to believe according to the conventional interpretation of the Abrahamic religions as religions of the Book), but to impose the quality of an unexpected imagery.

In exploring the use of this unconventional imagery, we have naturally gone through a perspective which inherits an esoteric flair for images and does not need to have a strictly artistic impact. This is only partially true, because in a metaphysical and original vision of Islam, Art does not belong to a separate realm but is actually an integral part of a whole vision of the universe where everything is aimed at a better comprehension of God's plan. So, in this perspective, the images, which everyone desires to look at, arise from the archetypes' universe. To practice a thorough contemplation of these archetypal images is one of the best ways to achieve a limitless wisdom.

When the Divine Word is visualized, then it can be perceived, tasted and appreciated in a way maybe impossible to achieve by human words, but easily accessible to the purity of the heart:

For the reality that is the goal of the mystic, and is ineffable, cannot be understood or explained by any normal mode of perception; neither philosophy nor reason can reveal it. Only the wisdom of the heart, gnosis, may give insight into some of its aspects. A spiritual experience that depends upon neither sensual nor rational methods is needed. Once the seeker has set forth upon the way to this Last Reality, he will be led by an inner light. This light becomes stronger as he frees himself from the attachments of this world or — as the Sufis would say — polishes the mirror of his heart.²⁷

Philosophy or rational reasoning can never reach this state: nothing but the immediacy of direct contact suffices. Islamic Tradition displays, by means of the teaching of wise Masters, a primacy of the Divine Word that never ends in Itself, but becomes, because of Its synesthetic authority, Sign, Icon, subtle and concrete Action.

1. We intend to devote our attention to the Islamic religion in a gnostic way, not in the salvation's simplistic terms as, for instance, Shahab Ahmed seems to mean it: "I am precisely *not* seeking to tell the reader what Islam is as a matter of Divine Command, and thus am *not* seeking to prescribe how Islam should be followed as the means to existential salvation. Rather, I seek to tell the reader what Islam has actually been as a matter of human fact in history." — Ahmed, *What is Islam: The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 24.

2. Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 3.

3. Jamal J. Elias, *Aisha's Cushion. Religious Art, Perception, and Practice in Islam*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 1.

4. Hans Belting, *Florence et Bagdad. Une histoire du regard entre Orient et Occident* (Paris: Gallimard, 2012), 93.

5. As it is well known, against the Mu'tazila perspective that proclaimed, under the Caliph al Ma'mun, the created nature of the Qu'ran, Abū al-Ḥasan 'Alī ibn Ismā'īl Al-Ash'arī (d. 935) definitively established the official orthodoxy of Sunni Islam about the Qu'ran as uncreated Word of God. Cfr. Daniel Gimaret, *La doctrine d'al-Ash'arī* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1990).

6. Shaykh G. F. Haddad, *The Uncreatedness of the Divine Speech*, https://www.livingislam.org/uncrq_e.html.

7. A revised translation was published in *Three Early Sufi Texts*, trans. Nicholas Heer and Kenneth Honerkamp, (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2003).

8. "In the Middle Ages sight was not simply one of five senses. It was a physical encounter, a point of contact between rays sent from both the viewing eye and the viewed object. If sight entails contact, seeing is a complex, concrete action which involves all the senses of the body (touch, smell, hearing, taste) at the same time (synaesthetically). Seeing, in other words, is an action which demands internal discipline, a posture of the mind as well as of the body, and an intentional gaze which generates a particular perspective. Seeing means, therefore, coming into contact with an image and activating it; to put it more eloquently, it means taking part in a 'stage of the senses', formed of actions and relationships. Seeing is a performance." — Carla Bino, "Imágenes y visión performative en la Edad Media," *Eikón Imago* 11 (2017): 71.

9. "The greater part of them are agreed that God's speech does not consist of letters, sound or spelling, but that letters, sound and spelling are indications of His speech, and that they have their own instruments and members to wit, uvula, lip and tongue. Now God has no member and needs no instrument: therefore His speech does not consist of letters and sound." — Kalabadhi, *The Doctrine of the Sufis (Kitab al-Ta'arruf li-madhab ahl al-ta'awwuf)*, trans. Arthur John Arberry (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 22.

10. Erica Dodd-Shereen Khairallah, *The Image of the Word: A Study of Quranic Verses in Islamic Architecture* (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1981). It is Denis Gril, "La science des lettres," in Ibn 'Arabī, *Les illuminations de la Mecque*, ed. M. Chodkiewicz, trans. Michel Chodkiewicz (Paris: Albin Michel, 1997), 165-353, who introduces, translates, and analyzes the second chapter of the masterpiece *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiya*. Regarding this point, it is useful to consult Pierre Lory, "Ibn 'Arabī," in *La science des lettres en Islam* (Paris: Dervy, 2004), 115-136. This greatest master had reached such a degree that during the month of Ramadan, in 1201, at Biḡāya (Alger) he sees himself as the groom of every star of the sky and every letter of the alphabet, as in Ibn al-'Arabī's *Kitāb al-bā'*. This event is also mentioned in the *Futūḥāt*, and it has recently translated in french into the introduction of Ibn 'Arabī, *De la Mort à la Resurrection. Chapitres 61 à 65 des "Ouvertures Spirituelles Mekkoises,"* trans. and annot. M. Gloton (Beirut: Albouraq, 2009), 9.

11. See al-Nasā'ī, *Sunan* 3.36: 3949 (al-Qāhira: Dār al-Hadīth, 1999), 729, 731.

12. Henry Corbin, *L'Imagination créatrice dans le soufisme d'Ibn 'Arabī* (Paris: Flammarion, 1977). About a creative use of memory in the Middle Ages, Mary Carruthers noticed how one could not distinguish between different sensorial experiences and how memory could provide this synesthetic feature of knowledge: "According to the early writers, retention and retrieval are stimulated best by visual means, and the visual form of sense perception is what gives stability and permanence to memory storage. They do not talk of 'auditory memory' or 'tactile memory' as distinct from "visual memory," the way some modern psychologists do." — Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 19.

13. "It is Suhrawardi who appears to have been the first to schematize the realm of vision into a proper world of its own, accessed through the mode of knowledge he suggestively entitled the wisdom of oriental illumination (*hikmat al-ishraq*). Suhrawardi laid out this epistemological system in his *Kitab hikmat al-ishraq* and other lesser Arabic works." — Nile Green, "The Religious and Cultural Roles of Dreams and Visions in Islam," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Third Series, 13.3 (Nov. 2003): 295.

14. See M. Amin Razavi, *Suhrawardi and the School of Illumination* (London: Routledge, 1996); H. Ziai, *Knowledge and Illumination: A Study of Suhrawardi's Hikmat al-Ishraq* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1990). Of course, the realm, described by Suhrawardi, has nothing to do with the not better specified "unconscious of the universe" cited by Elias: "Put differently, the realm of figures functions as a kind of 'unconscious of the universe' where things like love, hate, and fear are created as concrete symbols and make the miraculous (or supernatural) into the physical, allowing things from the nonphysical realm to intrude into the physical world" (214). It does not seem appropriate, indeed, this Jungian intrusion, given the fact we are talking about a thinker of 12th century. Unfortunately, the contemporary thinkers are used to apply their modern worldview to every epoch. In this particular case, it is surprising to verify how all that eschews the context of a merely mundane vision, as the *'alam al-mithal*, must compulsorily be ascribed to an inferior domain, never to the heavenly one.

15. Shihâboddîn Yahya Sohrawardî, *Livre de la sagesse orientale*, trans. and annot. H. Corbin (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1986), 221. The historian of Islamic art Oleg Grabar in *The Formation of Islamic Art* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1973) has considered Koranic Arab as key, in the musical sense of the term, because of the formal arrangement of the text and ultimately its comprehension and memorization.

16. Cfr. Sahl b. 'Abd Allâh al-Tustarî, *Tafsîr al-Tustarî (Great Commentaries on the Holy Qur'ân)*, trans. A. Keeler and A. Keeler (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2011), 29; G. Böwering, *The Mystical Vision of Existence in Classical Islam* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1979), 47, in which we can find this little different variant of anecdote (filtered by al-Anṣarî's *Ṭabaqât al-ṣūfiyya*, drafted by his students in Herât, as compellingly J. A. Mojaddedi argues in *The Biographical Tradition in Sufism: The Ṭabaqât Genre from al-Sulamî to Jamî* [Richmond, VA: Curzon Press, 2001], 69-98): "One night, I was in a state of joy, so I took a walk in the desert, as I saw the name of Allâh written in every star of the sky."

17. William C. Chittick, "The World of Imagination and Poetic Imagery according to Ibn al-'Arabi," *Temenos* 10 (1989): 101.

18. William C. Chittick, "The Disclosure of the Intervening Image: Ibn 'Arabî on Death," *Discourse* 24.1 (Winter 2002): 54.

19. For a translation of the relevant passages from Ibn 'Arabî, see William Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-'Arabî's Cosmology* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), 60; and Chittick, "Two Chapters from the Futûhât al-makkiyya," in *Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabî: A Commemorative Volume*, ed. S. Hirtenstein and M. Tiernan (Shaftesbury, Dorset: Element Books, 1993), 102. For the passage in Ibn al-Fârid, see *The Poem of the Way*, translated by A. J. Arberry. (London: Emery Walker, 1952) lines 2130-2237, or R. A. Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1921), 189-191, 260-262.

20. Ibn 'Arabî, "al-Futûhât al-makkiyya," in William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabî's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 118.

21. Pablo Beneito and Stephen Hirtenstein, "Introduction," in Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabî, *The Seven Days of the Heart* (Oxford: Anqa, 2000), 6.

22. "Liminal rituals are transformations, permanently changing who people are." Richard Schecher, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2012), 72. See also Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969).

23. Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1987), 4.

24. Shaykh al-'Arabî al-Darqâwî, *Lettres sur la Voie spirituelle - Al-Rasâ'il* (Paris: La Caravane, 1968), 285-286.

25. "In the teaching of the *darqâwiyya*, the *'ubûdiyya*, being identified as the station of the Prophet, corresponds to the highest spiritual rank (*maqâm*) due to its being the state in which the otherwise unattainable God reveals Himself to man through His Lordship (*al-rubûbiyya*)." — Ruggero Vimercati Sanseverino, "Interpreting the Meaning of Islamic Ritual: The Spiritual Significance of Ritual Prayer According to al-Hakim al-Tirmidhi and Ahmad Ibn 'Ajiba," *The Matheson Trust: For the Study of Comparative Religion* (2010), <https://themathestrust.org/library/vimercati-interpreting>.

26. Al-Ghazali, *Letters to a disciple*, trans. and annot. Tobias Mayer (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 2005), 24.

27. Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimension of Islam* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 4.