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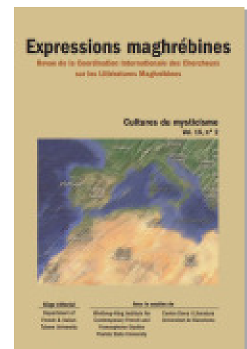

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Abdelwahab Meddeb and the Po/Ethics of Sufism

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> Dieu est beau et il aime la Beauté
>
> (*Hadith*)
>
> Pour dire un islam libre, ouvert à l'altérité, allant vers l'aventure de la création, dans l'audace, la singularité, capable de s'adapter à toutes les évolutions, souverain, dans la certitude et l'orgueil de soi, humble, n'ayant peur ni de soi ni de l'autre, non hégémonique, actif dans le nonagon, allié de l'esprit, donnant réponse aux problèmes que nous vivons, de l'écologie à la conscience citoyenne, antidote contre le fanatisme, l'atteinte à la Nature, à la Beauté, proposant l'alliance avec la Beauté qui est en péril dans nos villes comme dans nos campagnes, faisant l'éloge de toutes singularités.
>
> (Meddeb 2015)

Following September 11th 2011, Tunisian poet, novelist, translator, literary critic, essayist, radio host, Islamic scholar, and art historian, Abdelwahab Meddeb (1946-2014) published a series of books on Islam, politics, and religious violence. These included: *La Maladie de l'Islam* (2002); *Sortir de la malédiction: l'islam entre civilisation et barbarie*, (2008); and *Pari de civilisation* (2009). This body of work diagnoses ideological currents and political events that have been collapsed under the labels of Islamic fundamentalism or religious extremism. Meddeb frames the rise of radical Muslim organizations through the fraught relationship between Muslim-majority nations and the imperial powers of Europe and the United States.[1] These histories, according to Meddeb, reiterate narratives of civilizational, religious, or ideological incommensurability between the Christian West and Muslim East. Beyond the (neo)colonial discourses mediating these geopolitical encounters and interventions, he turns our attention to *hermeneutical* concerns. Directly linking religious violence to interpretive rigidity,

[1] Meddeb cites such organizations as Groupe Islamique Armé, Hamas, al-Qaeda, and ISIS.

Meddeb theorizes a hermeneutics that privileges ambiguity, unintelligibility, and illegibility over exegetical codification.

These concerns translate into a poetic stylization that punctuates Meddeb's literary writing, which at times teeters on the edge of in/comprehension. Across his oeuvre, Meddeb situates this aesthetic within a Sufi intellectual tradition. His two novels, *Talismano* (1978) and *Phantasia* (1986), as well as his poetry chapbooks and prose writing (*Tombeau d'Ibn Arabi* [1987]; *Portrait du poète en soufi* [2014]; *Instants soufis* [2015]), for example, all engage intertextually with prominent Sufi thinkers and texts. Meddeb's two bodies of work –monographs against radical Islam and poetic engagements with Sufism– reveal not only distinct modes of writing and audiences, but also different political projects. His monographs often echo the tenor of European, and particularly French, rhetoric on *laïcité*, Islamism, and violent religious extremism. Sensationalizing violence staged in the name of Islam, this public discourse has led to a reactionary industry of apologist writings on 'moderate' Islam, which is often equated with Sufism. Meddeb's collective body of work echoes this ideological orientation in its staging of a binary opposition between orthodox Sunni Islam and Sufism. This study subsequently takes up a critical nexus of concerns rarely discussed within existing scholarship on Abdelwahab Meddeb. Namely, it interrogates the relationship between his polemical, oftentimes didactic, studies on Islamic extremism and his Sufi poetics. Rather than periodizing Meddeb's oeuvre within global events, shifting intellectual preoccupations, or genres, my analysis moves asynchronously between his critical and literary writings.

While the entrenched distinction between "moderate" and "extreme" Muslims has become a defining feature of contemporary public discourse on Islam, the romanticization of Sufism originates in Orientalist discourse of the 18th century. Islamic scholar Carl W. Ernst writes that

> the term "Sufi-ism" was invented at the end of the eighteenth century, as an appropriation of those portions of "Oriental" culture that Europeans found attractive. British colonial officials, who were the main source of European studies of Sufism in the 19th century, thus maintained a double attitude toward Sufism: its literary classics (part of the Persian curriculum required by the British East India Company until the 1830s) were admired, but its contemporary social manifestations were considered corrupt and degenerate in relation to what was perceived as orthodox Islam. Thus the essential feature of

> the definitions of Sufism that appeared at this time was the insistence that Sufism had no intrinsic relation with the faith of Islam.
>
> (2002: 110)

Orientalist scholarship, alongside the colonial bodies that it represented, exoticized Sufi literature while simultaneously uncoupling Sufism from the diverse social, political, and ethical functions it served within its communities. The anti-colonial resistance of various North African Sufi orders against French imperialism, for example, is often whitewashed in the fetishization of Sufism as an apolitical mystical practice. This is not to say that self-identified Sufi orders and leaders have not shared a complex relationship with the state and state-sanctioned religious institutions, particularly in the last decade, when Sufism is increasingly promoted by state organs across the Maghreb as an antidote to religious extremism. It is important, however, to distinguish these forces from readings of Sufism as intrinsically distinct from Islam "proper".

Sufism functions as one of the many modalities through which I read the expression of Islam as a polyvalent set of practices, beliefs, and doctrinal as well as hermeneutical approaches. While Meddeb employs both *mysticisme* and *soufisme*, my own usage of Sufism echoes Islamic scholar Sa'diyya Shaikh's thoughtful framing of the heterogeneous tradition. She writes:

> Springing from the heart of Islam's spiritual reservoir *Tasawwuf*, or Sufism, can be described as the process by which a believer embraces the full spiritual consequences of God's oneness (*tawhid*). The goal of the Sufi path is to enable a human being, through the cultivation of virtuous excellence (*ihsan*), to commune directly and experientially with her Creator. In the historical development of Sufis, one encounters varied and increasingly sophisticated notions of the mystical path, or *ṭariqa*. Such a path generally entails that the Sufi aspirant, under the guidance of a spiritual master, follows a practical method of purification and refinement of the self, undergoing many states (*aḥwal*) and stages (*maqamat*) that reveal progressive unveilings of the divine reality (*haqiqa*).
>
> (2012: 35)

Shaikh's definition maintains Sufism's polyvalence as both a philosophy and an individual spiritual praxis. Her emphasis on the personal cultivation of virtue, often under the spiritual guidance of a more advanced practitioner, signals its simultaneous phenomenological and pedagogical orientations.

While inscribed within a particular theological genealogy, Sufism nonetheless accounts for diverse iterations and individual unfoldings within the practice. I introduce the concept of Sufi po/ethics to theorize the aesthetic dimensions of *tasawwuf*, in which spiritual experience is at once enacted and expressed through conceptual language and symbolization. Ethics, in this context, speaks to the moral and epistemological registers of the practice, whereby I read the pursuit of knowledge as inseparable from the spiritual cultivation of the self. The vast archive of Sufi philosophical and literary writings upon which Meddeb draws relies upon an ethical investment in poetic language as the privileged site for divine revelatory truth.

In order to situate Meddeb's investment in Sufism, I begin by examining his critical writings on Islam. I then outline my theorization of Sufi po/ethics alongside Syrian critic Adonis' study on the intersection between Surrealism and Sufism. Finally, I place Meddeb's first novel, *Talismano*, into dialogue with the author's broader critical oeuvre. Reading against the grain of critical literature that champions the work as a postmodern novel par excellence, I argue that *Talismano* functions as a Sufi surrealist text. Using the titular trope of the talisman, I analyze the novel's use of Sufi conceptual language and symbolization. I conclude that *Talismano* invites hermeneutical practices aligned with Sufism as an ethical-aesthetic tradition.

Meddebian Hermeneutics

Critiquing the logocentrism that codified the Qur'an as the inimitable word of God incarnate, Meddeb denounces theological myth-making in which "the signifier takes precedence over the signified" (2013: 3).[2] The process of textual "encoding" is reified by a "traditional pedagogical method" that encompasses Qur'anic recitation, in addition to practices such as *tajwid* [psalmody/elocution], *tartil* [hymnody], and calligraphy (5). This results in "the symbolic structuring of individual believers, who

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[2] Algerian scholar Mohammed Arkoun refers to this phenomenon as "Islamic logocentrism", which he situates within a broader theological trajectory than runs through Judaic, Christian, and Islamic thought. According to Safdar Ahmed, Arkoun defines it as "the tendency to confine all knowledge to a narrow selection of religious texts, and the discursive assumptions, commentaries and social/cultural/political worldview attributed to these" (Ahmed 2013: 216).

visualize through the Koran a concrete manifestation of the absolute located within their own physical boundaries, the same envelope of reality" (7). Logocentrism thus effaces a longstanding "fruitful tension […] between aesthetics and exegesis" in favor of "a form of prescriptive reduction" fostered by "the zealots of the text" and their "ideological indoctrination" (8). This standardization, he avers, emphasizes "legibility and intelligibility," over the "symbolic function of the Koran" (8-9).

Meddeb instead calls for restoring the textual openness of the Qur'an, as well as the manifold interpretations it invites to the individual reader-practitioner. This entails "returning the Text to its infinity, which would make interpretation a task without end, never complete, always begun anew" (9). Meddeb genealogically situates this process within the interdisciplinary innovation of Qur'anic exegetes such as al-Tabari (838-923), al-Zamakshari (1070-1143), and Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (1149-1209) over the reductive "oversimplification" of Ibn Kathir (1301-1373) (ibid).[3] He calls upon "modernists and reformers" to revisit the historicity of the Qur'an, alongside the social, cultural, and political context of its emergence (10). This phenomenological hermeneutics accounts for the present moment and subjective consciousness through which the Qur'an is read, interpreted, and embodied. It further seeks to liberate exegetical methodologies that conscript Islamic thought and praxis within hierarchical structures of mediational religious orthodoxy.

Meddeb combines contemporary forms of critical inquiry, which he notably situates among predominantly Western intellectuals and non-Muslim scholars, with early methodologies of Qura'nic exegesis. He reads Sufism's use of symbolization and interpretive openness as a vehicle for "the symbolic survival of the Koran as a signifying object" (*ibid.*). Meddeb's Sufi po/ethics thus champions reading practices and modes of spiritual embodiment that disavow literal, scriptural, or legalistic methodologies.

In this vein, he frequently invokes the renowned Andalusian philosopher, Islamic scholar, poet, and mystic Muhi al-Din Ibn 'Arabi (1165-1240). Known as *al-Shaykh al-Akbar* [the Great Master], Ibn 'Arabi is a canonical figure for Sufi thinkers and practitioners alike. His vast body of literary and critical works further exemplifies the poetic richness of Islamic philosophy. He is nonetheless a controversial thinker,

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[3] On the history of various figures and methodologies within Qur'anic exegesis, see Rippin 1988.

who has been the frequent target of polemical attacks by various theologians, exegetes, and jurists. Much of the criticism lodged against Ibn ‘Arabi has taken issue with how his “metaphysical system disturbingly ruptured the clear boundaries between God and humanity, between human freedom and predestination, between good and evil” (Shaikh 2012: 16).

A recurring figure across Meddeb’s critical and poetic works (*Tombeau d’Ibn Arabi*, *Instants soufis*, *Portrait du poète en soufi*), Ibn ‘Arabi is also a prominent interlocutor in his novels *Talismano* and *Phantasia.* Meddeb writes of the philosopher’s influence on Qur’anic exegesis:

> To carry out such a project, one has to make the Koran one’s own, to renew the energy it inspires by becoming Koran oneself, as if at the time of its reception, playing the role in the presence of the angel, as recommended by Ibn ‘Arabi, who never ceased repeating throughout his works: “Be Koran unto yourself” (*kun qur’an fi nafsika*). This initiative will have us experience the Koran as myth, but will not prevent us from situating it within its historical moment in order to wage the necessary hermeneutic battle and restore to the Text its myriad of meanings out of the deafening clash of interpretations.
>
> (2013: xi)

Ibn ‘Arabi’s invitation to embody the Qur’an as both a prophetic experience and a textual practice is at the heart of Meddeb’s po/ethical project. This approach balances the historicity and context of the Qur’an’s revelation while opening up the experiential wonder of the text to all reader-practitioners. In so doing, it democratizes the acts of revelation, reading, interpretation, and embodiment beyond an elite religious intelligentsia. Ibn ‘Arabi’s celebrated work, *Fusus al-hikam* [The Bezels of wisdom] is reported to have been “inspired by a vision of the Prophet Muhammad, who commanded Ibn ‘Arabi to take a book from the Prophet’s hand and transmit it to the world for the benefit of humankind” (Shaikh 2012: 15). His epic collection *al-Futuhat al-makiyya* [The Meccan openings] was similarly said to be “the product of unveilings given to him by God rather than a product of personal reflection” (*ibid.*). Ibn ‘Arabi’s Sufi metaphysics works dialectically with his poetic stylization, which moves seamlessly across genres and intellectual traditions. Meddeb adopts a similar interdisciplinary style that speaks to an embodied mode of writing whose opacity generates non-heteronomous reading and interpretive practices.

Sufi Po/Ethics

Across the various theorizations of Sufism, there is a shared conceptualization of *tasawwuf* as a path or process towards communion, and eventually unification, with God –a divine being manifested in all of creation.[4] While the precise terminology and ordering of these steps varies according to individual Sufi orders, they generally encompass yearning (*shawq*)/searching (*talab*), knowledge/gnosis (*ma'rifa*), love/desire (*'ishq*), contentment (*al-rida*)/detachment (*istighna'*), union (*itihad*), ecstatic wonderment (*hayra*)/vertigo (*duwar*), and conclude with *fana'* [the annihilation or dissolution of the self] –often alongside *faqr* [material and existential impoverishment].

The conceptual language of states or stages in the process towards unearthing divine reality is foundational to Sufism as not only a spiritual practice, but also a literary one. From poetry to short stories, novels, music, art and narrative films, such works engage both the formal qualities (stages, states, journeys, paths) and the conceptual vocabulary (symbols, imagery, motifs) of the Sufi tradition –often in dialogue with its most celebrated thinkers. Sufi poetics feature extensively within both Arabophone and Francophone literature of the Maghreb. In Tunisia, for example, Sufism is central to the literary and critical writings of Mahmud al-Mas'adi, 'Izz al-Din Madani, Tahir Hammami, and Mahjoub Bin Milad, as well as the films of Nacer Khemir. These Tunisian intellectuals of the mid-twentieth century frequently placed Sufism into dialogue with broader philosophical debates surrounding humanism, existentialism, and literary commitment (*adab al-iltizam* or *al-adab al-multazim*).

Sufi narrative techniques, themes, figures, and motifs also figure in the writings of Moroccan writers Ahmad al-Madini, Leila Abouzeid, Driss Chraïbi, Mohammed Barradah, Bensalem Himmich, Abdelkebir Khatibi, Abdelfattah Kilito, and Fatema Mernissi; and in the work of Algerian writers Assia Djebar, Malek Haddad, and al-Tahir Wattar. In some cases, these writers explicitly model the formal structure of their works after the path of *tasawwuf*; for example, by breaking a text into seven sections or chapters that mirror the seven valleys or stations of the Sufi path (al-Mas'adi, al-Madini, Barradah, Wattar). In others, they engage with the philosophical, aesthetic, or ethical aspects of the practice

[4] On *tasawwuf* as a path, see Ernst 2011; Sells 1996; Schimmel 1975; Shaikh 2012.

(al-Mas‘adi, Haddad, Khatibi). Others still reference persecuted figures associated with Sufism, such as Mansur al-Hallaj, in order to theorize critical subjectivities and alternative epistemologies (al-Mas‘adi, Meddeb).[5] Finally, some writers fictionalize historical figures within Sufism as protagonists within their works (al-Mas‘adi, Himmich).

While the influence of Sufism may be found in literature across North Africa and the Middle East, not all authors engage with its ethical manifestations. The Egyptian Nobel Laureate Naguib Mahfouz (1911-2006), for example, emphasized the sublime aesthetic qualities of Sufism, but was reluctant to ascribe to it a philosophical value. Mahfouz had an early flirtation with Sufism in his 1971 short story "Hikaya bi-la bidaya wa-la nihaya" [Story with neither a beginning nor an ending], which explores the philosophical and spiritual common ground between a Sufi father and an existentialist son. In a 1992 interview, the writer refuted the ethical or political import of Sufism, stating:

> I love Sufism as I love beautiful poetry, but it is not the answer. Sufism is like a mirage in the desert. It says to you, come and sit, relax and enjoy yourself for a while. I reject any path that rejects life, but I can't help loving Sufism because it sounds so beautiful […] It gives relief in the midst of battle.
>
> (n.p.)

According to Mahfouz, while Sufism can be a source of beauty or wonderment amidst the brutalities of human existence, it cannot be a compass for engaged life.

Mahfouz's assessment speaks, in part, to the distinct history of Sufism in the Maghreb. Sufi orders and their attendant practices function quite differently in the Maghreb than in other Muslim-majority countries. In her study on Algerian and Tunisian Muslim notables –defined in her lexicon as a holy personage that manifests as a saint (*waliy*), Sufi, or scholar (*‘alim*)– historian Julie Clancy-Smith dispels the myth that such figures existed outside of the social, political, or cultural orders of their countries. Rather, she argues that the "political behavior" of Muslim notables of the 19th and 20th centuries belied a "moral economy" that spoke to a complex nexus of political and ethical praxes (1994: 4). Sufi orders have long been a ubiquitous feature of spiritual life in the

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[5] The Iranian mystic Mansur al-Hallaj (858-922), who infamously declared *ana al-haqq* [I am truth/the real], was brutally tortured and executed for heresy in Baghdad. See O'Leary (1951: 56-62).

Maghreb, even sharing a relationship with more conventional Islamic institutions. In Algeria, for example, the elite class of Muslim scholars known as *'ulama* (plural for *'alim*) have historically belonged to at least one Sufi order. To quote Clancy-Smith further:

> By the eighteenth century, sufi brotherhoods had long been highly articulated organizations with clear definitions of membership, initiation rites, and elaborate ceremonials. In North Africa in particular, the *turuq* (plural of *tariqa,* literally path or way; by extension, sufi order or brotherhood) tended toward strong leadership; their shaykhs wielded considerable moral authority and social influence. And the vast majority of North African males (and to a lesser extent females) irrespective of region, social status, or occupation belonged to one or even several sufi orders.
>
> (39-40)

Similarly, the ecstatic modes of ritual observance and practice associated with *zawiya*s –Sufi centers that often function as pilgrimage sites and shrines devoted to venerated patron saints or leaders of a *tariqa*– are a central part of the theological imaginary within Muslim communities of the Maghreb.

Abdelwahab Meddeb engages Sufism's socio-political history in the Maghreb alongside its aesthetic repository of poetic, prosaic, and philosophical works. He builds upon its esoteric conceptual language and formal innovations in a literary register that moves between genres and linguistic codes. Meddeb's poetic oeuvre, which I read as a modality of writing, rather than a taxonomy of genre, mobilizes *tasawwuf* as an aesthetic tradition inseparable from its ethical preoccupations. In this regard, his literary project resonates with the work of Tunisian novelist, essayist, and public intellectual Mahmud al-Mas'adi (1911-2004). Al-Mas'adi's extensive body of literary and critical works examines the human condition through an aesthetic ethos imbued with Sufism. The author was infamously credited by Taha Husayn, the renowned Egyptian writer, critic, and major figurehead of the Arab Modernist movement, with the "Islamicization" of Existentialism (Husayn 1974: 243-4). In the epistolary debate that ensued, al-Mas'adi theorized engaged writing as an aesthetic expression of the existential preoccupations of Muslim ethical life (al-Mas'adi 2003: 55-6). This Sufi po/ethics subsequently problematizes the false binaries of the secular/sacred and the political/private that undergird such misreadings.

Unlike Naguib Mahfouz and Taha Husayn, Syrian critic Adonis (b. 1930 Ali Ahmad Sa‘id Asbar) argues that Sufi poetics has the potential to disrupt both epistemic structures and ontologies of being. His critical study, *al-Sufiyya wa-l-surriyaliyya* [Sufism and surrealism], examines the uncanny intersections between Sufism and Surrealism. An unusual pairing at first glance, he finds in them both a preoccupation with the transcendental, the ineffable, the unknowable, dream-states, and the unconscious. Despite the lack of direct “linguistic or historical links”, Sufism and Surrealism share, on the one hand, a mutual suspicion of dogmatic orthodoxy, and on the other, a defiance of “traditional aestheticism” (Adonis 2005: 11; 16). Concerned with interrogating the nature of existence, both Sufism and Surrealism engage with symbolic orders unmediated by official discourses, or binaries of spirit/matter; thought/action; material/immaterial. This anti-positivism foregrounds the relationship between aesthetic, phenomenological, and transcendental experiences, while simultaneously problematizing the representational nature of art and literature.

Ever aware of their mediational qualities, Sufism and Surrealism value artistic expression that emerges from individual experience, the pursuit of knowledge, and an understanding of the “continuing vital interconnection between things and the universe” (12). They subsequently rely upon both ideological skepticism and existential openness. Adonis writes that if one “submerges himself in this ocean, a world will open up to him that is unlimited by things and whose only boundaries are thought and imagination” (13). This play on the Sufi discourse of *tafatuh*, or opening up, highlights the inexhaustible imaginative horizons fostered by both traditions. Adonis’ nuanced co-theorization of Sufism and Surrealism allows each philosophy to inform the framing of the other.

Adonis’ argument troubles the distinction between Surrealism as an artistic movement and Sufism as a religious one. It does so by framing Sufism as an intellectual, spiritual, as well as philosophical tradition based upon symbolic and imagistic language, a critical understanding of representation, and an ethical investment in poetic language. As an aesthetic tradition, Sufism seeks to reflect upon, solicit, or induce spiritual states akin to, or in dialogue with, *tasawwuf*. Adonis writes that:

> Sufism sees poetical writing as a primary way of explaining its mysteries, and poetic language as a primary means to knowledge. This is a continuation of what went before Islam and revelation, and represents the retrieval of the trusted link between poetry and the absence. The Sufis use art in their doctrines about God and existence and man: figurative language and style, symbolism, metaphor, imagery, rhythm, wordplay; the reader experiences the experience, and has a glimpse of their horizons through their art [...] To put it another way, it is virtually impossible to enter the Sufi world by way of explanation, for allusion rather than explanation is the main portal. The language of the Sufis is, to some extent, poetic, and the poetical nature of this language is represented by the fact that everything in it is symbolic: everything in it is itself and something else.
>
> (18)

Sufism's po/ethics are rendered legible in its call to commune with the divine, alongside an acknowledgment of the impossibility of fully representing God. Put otherwise, symbolic excess works dialogically with representational absence. Historically, Sufism has maintained a system of teaching, training, and patronage, in which a *murid* [Sufi aspirant] is initiated into the path of *tasawwuf* with the spiritual guidance of a *murshid* [Sufi master]. As this disciple-master dynamic entails the intergenerational sharing of spiritual knowledge and experience, the narrative act plays a distinct role within Sufism as both a pedagogical practice and a philosophy. The spiritual journey of *tasawwuf* is thus poetic in its experiential manifestation, as well as its verbal articulation.

Similarly, because Sufism relies upon the figurative language of allusion, metaphor, and symbolism for expressing embodied spiritual experience, it has generated a rich repository of conceptual imagery. Describing Sufi literature as "an innovative movement", Adonis writes that its poetics challenged the aesthetic norms and generic taxonomies that governed Arabic literature and its criticism (17). Dwelling within the "unknown and indescribable", as well as "beyond the border of logic and reason", Sufi literature strives to reflect and generate experiential encounters, rather than offer explication (19). Its use of symbolic and figurative language further adds an individual interpretive dimension to each encounter with Sufi texts; for "every reader finds his own poem in every poem he reads and it is the same thing in Sufi writing" (*ibid.*). Sufi poetic language thus accounts for the representational limitations of literature, while simultaneously opening up the hermeneutical horizons of spiritual experience.

This tension between representation and phenomenological experience is central to the aesthetic philosophy that undergirds Sufism. In the words of literary scholar Ziad Elmarsafy:

> [I]nsofar as the very first Sufis seem to have immediately thrown themselves into an exploration of the limits of language and the sayable, that which can and that which cannot be said, written, spoken of, in relation to desire, belief and the sacred […] notwithstanding the long relationship between mysticism and apophasis, [such…] writers […] seem to prove that Sufism enables the *logos* and an expansion of expression.
>
> (2012: 8)

As language is insufficient for capturing the complexity of either individual spiritual experience or divine truth, Sufi aesthetics reside at the threshold of the ineffable. While the symbolic language of Sufism does not rely upon a one-to-one correspondence between the signifier and the signified, it does, however, offer a conceptual aesthetics for conveying sublime experience.

The mediational qualities of literature work in dialogue with Sufism as a philosophical ethos premised upon the hidden, concealed, or transcendental nature of spiritual life. It mobilizes the dialectic within Qur'anic exegesis between the *batin*, or esoteric, and *zahir*, or exoteric meaning of divine revelation. In Sufism, the *zahir* references the external and material world manifested in the body, while the *batin* is the realm of the soul and inner knowledge. The pairing appears across the Qur'an, particularly in the sura *al-Hadid* [the Iron], in which they reference two of God's ninety-nine names/attributes (*The Message of the Holy Qur'an* 2003: LVII.3), and the gate separating true believers from the weak of faith on the day of judgement (LVII.13). In the sura *Luqman*, they refer to the *ni'amahu* [outward/inward blessings] that God bestows upon his believers (XXXI.20).[6] The dialectical concepts of *batin* and *zahir* reveal the overlapping registers of Qur'anic hermeneutics, the divine, and phenomenological spiritual experience. They subsequently call attention to the Qur'an as both a revelatory and literary object, thereby tracing a formal and methodological relationship between aesthetic expression and divine truth.

[6] In addition to the above cited references, the terms *batin* and *zahir* also appear in the sura *al-An'am* [The Cattle] (VI. 120) and *al-A'raf* [The Faculty of discernment] (VII. 33). In both cases, they reference sins that are either visible or hidden.

Sufi poetic discourse troubles binaries of interiority and exteriority, as well as subjective experiences and external worlds. As a hermeneutical practice, it does not presuppose a direct correspondence between revelatory texts and their meanings. This speaks to Adonis' privileging of the *process* of textual production over the archive that it engenders. He writes that

> the significance of Sufism today does not lie in its written dogma (philosophical literature), so much as the path that it follows to attain this writing. It lies in the gnostic domain that is has established and in the principles that it has produced, and they are principles that are peculiar to it and different from those used in research and discovery. It lies in the vast spaces that is has opened up and in the ways it speaks about them, in language in particular […] the importance of the Sufi contribution lies in its re-reading of the religious texts and the attribution to them of other meanings and dimensions; this in turn permits a new reading of the literary, philosophical and political legacy, which has led to a fresh look at language, not only in the religious context but also as a tool of revelation and expression.
>
> (Adonis 2005: 20)

Building upon representations of *tasawwuf* as a process, path, or journey, Adonis frames the literary works and practices emerging from Sufism in opposition to both academic discourse and *shari'a*. Rather than a fixed corpus of dogmatic texts, Sufism fosters interpretive practices that invoke the concept of *ijtihad* –individual "reasoning independent of precedent" within Islamic jurisprudence and Muslim spiritual life more broadly (Haj 2008: 9). It further invites an embodied and experiential semiotics for approaching revelatory texts. Sufism subsequently generates an alternative "form of knowledge" or "intellectual domain" (*ibid.*).

The critical potentialities of Sufism as an artistic tradition, rather than merely a philosophical or spiritual ethos, bear significant implications for literary hermeneutics. They invite us to consider the aesthetic properties that manifest in Sufi writings alongside the reading practices that they foster. This Gnosticism reveals Sufism's suprarational qualities as an episteme based upon the unseen, the ineffable, the unknowable, and the unimaginable. In problematizing material, rational, or representational world orders, Sufi poetics invite literary and hermeneutical innovation.

Revelatory Talismans

As a revelatory object imbued with textual, symbolic, and fetishistic power, the figure and metaphor of the talisman in Abdelwahab Meddeb's 1978 novel *Talismano* synthesizes my argument on the po/ethics of Sufism. Conventionally framed as an experimental, avant-garde, or postmodern novel, *Talismano* simultaneously dwells within a "metaphysics of absence" and an aesthetic of textual excess (Elhariry 2016: 257). Oscillating between the metatextual voice of the narrator-author and the diegetic narrative, the novel recounts the story of an impromptu rebellion under Bourguiba-era rule.[7] The revolutionaries – comprised of the narrator, artisans, sorceresses, magicians, prostitutes, alchemists, and artisans– move through Tunis' labyrinthine medina, or old city, in the compressed narrative time of one day. The rebellion is at once eschatological and political, resulting in the symbolic as well as literal destruction of Tunisia's hegemonic religious, state, and political institutions. Across the novel, the discursive and material sites of religious orthodoxy, such as al-Zaytuna mosque and university, are overturned in a carnivalesque orgy of excess. In their stead, the revolutionaries resuscitate anachronistic practices such as alchemy, sorcery, mummification, and craft guilds. They also revitalize the work of philosophers and theologians associated with Sufism; in addition to Ibn 'Arabi, they reference the tenth century Iranian mystic Mansur al-Hallaj, and the eleventh century Iranian Sufi Shihab al-Din Sohrawardi – both of whom were tried and executed for heresy.

Talismano's resignification of religious texts and practices is perhaps most apparent in the talisman referenced in the title of the novel, as well as in the illustration of a talisman that adorns the text just before the final section. During a visit to Egypt, the narrator encounters a Nubian café owner in Aswan who asks the spiritually skeptical narrator to write a talisman that will rid the café of the "occult powers" that haunt it

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[7] Habib Bourguiba was a leading member of the Neo-Destour [New Constitutional Liberal] party that rose to power during the final years of the French Protectorate. After helping broker independence, Bourguiba became Prime Minister of the newly established Republic in what was to become a two-decade one-party state. Despite being voted "President for Life" by the Tunisian National Assembly in 1975, Bourguiba was eventually declared mentally unfit to rule and unseated from power in 1987.

(Meddeb 2011: 142).[8] Miraculously, his intuition proves prophetic as the narrator awakens from a fitful night's sleep to write the enclosed talisman: "with the force of prophecy [s'imposait à moi], believe it or not, the talisman was revealed [révélée] in its entirety, words, figures, and all, to fulfill the Nubian's request, though I myself did not fully understand its content" (2011: 143; 1987: 136). The talisman is a pastiche that combines stock praises of God and Qur'anic invocations with more unorthodox elements, such as the inclusion of the Taoist compound ideogram meaning "passage" or "the way".[9]

The images that adorn the talisman –described in the text as "male circles and crescents doubled female [croissants dédoublés féminins], assembled, eye gazing upon floating sword, measure of history, qalam reed pen [calame] reassuring the will to write in emulation of the fiat, equivalence between the huwa, itselfness [ipséité] of the Sufi and the Tao ideogram"– demonstrate a close affinity between the textual and the visual (*ibid.*). The images themselves borrow from iconography common to Islamic talismans and amulets: the sword, pen, eye, and crescent. In this context, however, they indicate the divine command to write and read. His use of the French word *calame* [reed pen, quill, or stylus, from the Greek *calamus*], rather than the Arabic term *qalam* [reed pen], calls attention to their homophonic qualities, while also signaling their differentiation. The use of the soft 'c' in *calame* as opposed to the hard 'qaf' of *qalam* further plays on the phonetic resonance with another Arabic word: *kalima* [word]. While they are etymologically divergent in Arabic [*k-l-m* versus *q-l-m*] the use of the French word rather than Arabic in a text that is rife with transliterated Arabic terms, suggests a very intentional play on words.[10] Although *calame* is recognizable to a French reader, the *Arabic listener* encounters an entirely different series of oral and literary associations.

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[8] Citations from Meddeb's *Talismano* reference the Jane Kuntz translation, followed by the original French when applicable.

[9] In an earlier meditation on the relationship between language and writing, Meddeb comments on the unique qualities of Chinese in which the signifier and signified uniquely coincide: "Their words are other deserts; they repudiate the memory of voices to better preserve the alliance with the objects they mean to designate" (2011: 117). He similarly refers to a Taoist calligrapher as being "in harmony with the world" due to his craft (*ibid.*).

[10] Brigitte Weltman-Aron makes a parallel argument with respect to Assia Djebar (2015: 61).

In this regard, the talisman calls to mind two Qur'anic suras: *al-'Alaq* [The Clot] (XCVI) and *al-Qalam* [The Pen] (LXVIII). The first sura said to be revealed to the Prophet Muhammad *al-'Alaq* reads:

> READ in the name of thy Sustainer, who has created
> —created man out of a germ-cell!
> Read—for they Sustainer is the Most Bountiful One
> who has taught [man] the use of the pen
> —taught man what he did not know!
>
> (*The Message of the Holy Qur'an* 2003: XCVI.1-5)

The *qalam* in the sura is an instrument of divine revelation and knowledge, particularly given that the majority of critical literature on early Islam indicates that the Prophet Muhammad was illiterate during the first revelation.[11] By qualifying the talisman with the word "emulation [émulation]," the narrator suggests that although he is inspired by the Prophet's own revelations and Gabriel's divine command of *iqra'* –meaning both read and recite– he merely partakes in "the archetype of revelation [l'archétype de la révélation]" (Meddeb 2011: 143; 1987: 136).

In his commentary on the sura, Muhammad Asad writes of the pen's significance:

> "The Pen" is used here as a symbol for the art of writing or, more specifically, for all knowledge recorded by means of writing: and this explains the symbolic summons "Read!" […] Man's unique ability to transmit, by means of written records, his thoughts, experiences and insights from individual to individual, from generation to generation, and from one cultural environment to another endows all human knowledge with a cumulative character; and since, thanks to this God-given ability, every human being partakes, in one way or another, in mankind's continuous accumulation of knowledge, man is spoken of as being "taught by God" things which the single individual does not –and indeed, cannot– know by himself.
>
> (*The Message of the Holy Qur'an* 2003: 1099, n. 3)

According to Asad, the references to *al-'Alaq* –meaning either germ-cell or blood clot– indicate that man is the product of God's divine creation on a cellular level, while also being imbued with "the will and ability to acquire knowledge" (*ibid.*). The sura thus combines the act of biological creation with the quest for knowledge, as well as spiritual pedagogy with

[11] See Ali 2016 and Lings 2006.

revelation. It frames intellectual pursuits as a constitutional, even biological, divine imperative.

Qur'anic scholars such as Muhammad Asad have argued that the reference to *al-Qalam* in sura LXVIII of the same title alludes to the foundational act of revelation in *al-'Alaq*. It opens with a divine oath sworn on the instrument of the *qalam*: "CONSIDER the pen, and that they write [therewith]!" (*The Message of the Holy Qur'an* 2003: LXVIII.1). Qur'anic commentator Yusuf Ali writes that "the mystical Pen and the mystical Record are the symbolic foundation of the Revelation to man" (*The Holy Qur'an* 1983: 1585, n. 5593). This reading reiterates the divine genealogy of knowledge, beginning with the Prophet Muhammad's miraculous revelation, that lies at the very heart of being both human and Muslim. *Talismano's* reference to divine revelation and the *qalam/calame* situates it within an exegetical model that privileges the sacred pursuit of knowledge through the acts of writing, reading, and interpretation.

The talisman invites interpretation, all the while resisting being fully legible –even to those able to decipher Chinese and Arabic text in a French Tunisian novel. *Talismano* thus champions non-heteronomous reading and hermeneutical practices while teasing the reader with illegibility. Moreover, "[s]imply by infiltrating the French book with Arabic and Chinese writing that demands a physical motion for reading (the book must be turned to decipher the sideways text), *Talismano* reshuffles the dominant hierarchy of value by redrawing the map of reading" (al-Kassim 2001: 118). The insertion of the talisman in the novel unsettles the linguistic and ideological value of the French language, by compelling it to share the stage with Arabic and Chinese. It further imposes an embodied act of reading, in the literal turning of the book to decipher the text, as a form of textual disruption.

The Taoist ideogram is placed next to the Arabic word *huwwa*, a term frequently employed in Sufi iconography and intoned in *dhikr* [the devotional rhythmic repetition of words or phrases in praise of God] as a symbolic placeholder for Allah. In Arabic, *huwwa* is the masculine third-person singular nominative pronoun that most commonly translates to "he". It is also a contraction derived from the end of the phrase *la ilaha illa huwwa* [there is no God but he], which serves as an intimate alternative to the more conventional saying *la ilaha illa allah* [there is no God but Allah]. As spiritual philosophies, both Taoism and Sufism rely upon the symbology of the path or way. This individual journey of

spiritual awareness often entails relinquishing worldly desire, ego-centered notions of the self, and language as a significatory order.

The Arabic text written along the top and bottom edges of the talisman reads "*al-sayf al-qati' wa-l-hillal al-sati' / la sayf mithl al-haqq wa-la 'awn mithl al-sidq*", and is rendered in the original French as: "*L'épée qui tranche / Le croissant qui scintille / Pas d'épée comme la vérité / Pas d'aide comme la sincérité*" (Meddeb 2011: 136). Meddeb does not translate much of the remaining text, particularly the writing along the right side of the talisman, which requires physically turning the book to read. It reads: "*Allah latif bi-'ibadih yarzuq man yasha' wa-huwwa al-qawi al-'aziz raqib qarib*" [Allah is gracious/gentle to his servants; He blesses those he wills; and He is the powerful, the mighty, the exalted, the near]. The lack of a translation makes portions of the text inaccessible to the French reader unfamiliar with Arabic, as with much of the word play throughout the novel.

The talisman contains various invocations of God's divine attributes embodied within his ninety-nine holy names. In this context, the omission imbues the incantation with a symbolic power that exceeds semiotic or translational parsing –not unlike the Taoist ideogram or the word *huwwa*. Along the bottom of the talisman are the names 'Ali, 'Isa [Jesus], Sultan, Yunis [Jonah], Ishaq [Isaac] –a blend of Abrahamic prophets, the name of 'Ali ibn Abi Talib (the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad), as well as the word Sultan.[12] In the upper left-hand corner is the word Allah, with Adam written below it. Notably, the text along the sides is written in *maghribi* script, and specifically, the *mabsut* style generally reserved for the Qur'an. By contrast, the word *huwwa* is rendered in *ruq'a*, a more formal script of the Ottoman period commonly used for seals and official documents.[13] Meddeb's use of different scripts adds a layer of graphic ambiguity to the already multilingual talisman.

This polyphony is further complicated by Meddeb's own presence within the imagistic text. As Dina al-Kassim astutely observes, within the "series of conventional lines praising god, the author has cleverly encrypted his own name, Abdel-Wahab-Me deb [sic], in a series of

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[12] A noble title that etymologically means sovereignty or authority, Sultan has come to indicate the title of rulers –generally within the Caliphate– who hold ultimate power.

[13] On the various scripts within Arabic calligraphy and their usage, see ElAraby 1997 and Van den Boogert 1989.

synonyms" (2001: 117). By graphically imprinting his name within the narrator's talisman, Meddeb literally inscribes himself within the (pseudo) religious text. We must recall, however, that the narrator insists that the talisman, despite his initial reservations, was beyond his own comprehension. It is thus a palimpsest of not only texts, but also of authors, readers, and interpreters.

The talisman in *Talismano* functions not only as a metaphor for revelation, but also as a visual-textual object with a material presence in the book. On the threshold of the legible and the illegible, it moves between languages, scripts, words, images, icons, and symbols. As an object, it compels the reader to engage in embodied acts of reading by disrupting the orientation of the book's pages. As a text, it is in a state of perpetual self-translation, as if in coded dialogue with itself. As a talisman, however, it invokes the magical and the supernatural. And yet, the talisman offers protection and good fortune only to its intended –in this case, the Nubian café owner. As readers, we are left puzzling over an enigmatic object drained of its divine aura. We approach it forensically, picking apart its words and images. We bring ourselves physically and psychically into the analytic space. It is what the talisman demands of us.

The titular talisman functions as a microcosm for the novel as a whole. Hovering on the edge of intelligibility, the talisman/novel foster reading practices that align with Meddeb's phenomenological hermeneutics. This po/ethics relies upon a mode of symbolization that mirrors the Sufi dialectic between the human and the divine, the transcendental and the phenomenological, the exoteric and the esoteric. Meddeb mobilizes textual excess in a metaphysical game of reveal and conceal that generates ethical and imaginative openings. It builds upon the tradition of apophasis by exalting the ineffable dimensions of spiritual experience against the theological logocentrism that Meddeb aligns with orthodox Sunni Islam. Engaging with *Talismano* as a Sufi surrealist text rather than a postmodern or avant-garde novel invites us to reimagine framings of literary modernity as an inherently secular project. In the process, it challenges the attendant assumption that radical critique must originate from a universal disavowal of the sacred. Meddeb's literary project enacts a model of writing, reading, and interpretation as an ethical praxis inextricably linked to the cultivation of the self. This practice, to return to the opening epigraph, pursues "the adventure of creation" in its divine embrace of beauty.

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