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Islam and Psychoanalysis, *edited by* Sigi Jöttkandt and Joan Copjec

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EDITORIAL

Islam and Psychoanalysis

10 the 2002 feature film by the Iranian filmmaker, Abbas Kiarostami, consists of the same elementary formula, “man + car,” as many of his other films, except that in this case there is a woman rather than a man at the wheel; she drives through the traffic-congested streets of Tehran rather than the less densely populated countryside; and the film was shot with two digital video cameras before being transferred to 35 mm film. Like all digital films made now, this one cannot help but raise the question of the referent, of the real, which was thought to be protected by the indexicality of cinema. This medium-specific question of the real, however, acquires in this digital film, *10*, another culture-specific inflection, one brought out by Christian Jambet’s reading of the film.¹ Its most memorable image occurs through the gesture of one of the passengers in the car, a young woman whose fiancé has just broken off their troubled engagement: the grieving woman removes her headscarf and tearfully exposes her shaved head. This image exemplifies, in Jambet’s reading, the status of the image, as such, in the modern world (but here, specifically, in modern Tehran), where images (and indeed the entire order of appearance) have been shorn of any trace of the real, of that hidden dimension (the dimension of the *Deus absconditus* or the hidden Imam) which had once lent appearance its prestige. The balding of appearance which Kiarostami’s film observes takes place, in short, through the effacement not of an exoteric but an esoteric referent.

The aesthetic question raised about the nature of the modern image is thus closely linked to a spiritual concern about the demise of a messianic faith, as well as to social concerns about the position of women, who seem to be abandoned by this modern society to (miniature) malevolent or (relatively) indifferent forms of male authority. The film’s episodic structure lends itself to a constant questioning, rather than the construction of a comprehensive “cover story,” some sort of answer. Thus, while the insistence of the mosque as a site—visited by the disappointed and self-unveiled fiancée; an aged woman, bent by years and her devout posture; and perhaps by the car’s driver—serves as a concrete reminder that piety or mosque movements are said to be on the rise in Islamic countries, we do not know if these various visits should be taken to mean the same thing, to betoken a movement, or whether they are signs of hopelessness or reaffirmations of a traditional form of spirituality. The placement of a woman in the driver’s seat, beside a sputtering and shrunken patriarchy, in the

¹ Christian Jambet, “The Death of Epiphany,” trans. Robert Bononno, *Umbr(a)* 2009, special Islam issue (forthcoming).

form of her scene-stealing son, raises afresh all the questions we have wanted to ask about the precise relation of secular male authority to religious authority in the Islamic world.

But how can we pose these questions in the language of psychoanalysis in which some of us think? Reading psychoanalysis and thinking of Islam can seem radically incompatible enterprises, especially now that the notion of a common humanity has been deservedly trounced and cultures are no longer thought to be bound together by it or judgeable according to its standards. If psychoanalysis can be said to be a theory of “the subject,” does it not rely on this now forsaken notion of common humanity and does it not have to forsake any pretension to be able to utter a valid assessment about matters pertaining to Islam, a culture in which psychoanalysis is not the native tongue?

This editorial is not the place to answer such a large and complex question; it is the place to pose it—as a real and important question rather than as an implied accusation. Fine; put psychoanalysis on the spot. But then allow it to answer. You will find that it has a lot to say on these matters of the separateness or incommensurability of individual subjects and cultures and the problem of judgment. It will explain why its own intervention is not at all a judgment, but a construction and what this difference entails. But even as we open the floor to psychoanalysis, give it a chance to address criticisms, clarify its position, we do not expect that its practice or its theory will remain unchanged by its encounter with the specific issues arising in the Islamic world.

As it turns out, *10* grew out of an idea for a film about psychoanalysis in which an analyst, forced by authorities to shut his doors after a patient complains that her analysis led her to sue for divorce, begins to interview his patients in the closed confines of his car.² Rather than domesticate the film, make it appear more familiar to Western audiences, this anecdote about its supposed origins is unsettling; it explodes the film, opening a host of questions we do not yet know how to answer. What would an analysis sound like, how would it proceed, that actually dealt with the day to day issues confronting the women in the film? Being a prostitute in Tehran while living under its modesty system, for example, cannot give rise to the same sort of psychic challenges as being a prostitute in a non-Islamic city. And this is only the beginning.

This special issue of *S*—together with that of our sister journal, *Umbr(a)*—on the topic of Islam could therefore not be more urgent, nor the timing, coinciding with Robert Bononno’s English translation of Fethi Benslama’s *Psychoanalysis and the Challenge of Islam*, more propitious.³ In his remarkable book, Benslama interrogates the psychoanalytic notion of the father from the perspective of Islam, where God is assumed to have no paternal function. This distinction between God and the father has significant implications for the theory and practice of psychoanalysis in the Islamic world and resonates throughout the essays in this issue. So, too, does the

² Geoff Andrew, *10*, (London: BFI, 2005) 35.

³ Fethi Benslama, *Psychoanalysis and the Challenge of Islam*, trans. Robert Bononno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, forthcoming 2009).

important relation between the flesh and the spirit, conceived as more intimate among Islamic thinkers than it is in the West, as Jean-Michel Hirt usefully underscores.

In training our attention on Islam at this incisive moment in its history, our intent will be to re-tune the structures of the psychoanalytic corpus to several of the keys of the Arabic language, to voice the speaking cure from within the resources of the Muslim treasury of signs. We'll have to begin with the subject of another science, also founded on the cogito, one whose suturing operation delivers not the One of the Cartesian miracle, but a Zero. This alternative form of the cogito—an "I am thought, therefore I am"—conceives the subject as an originary objectivity, the I as thought (by god). What falls out from the Averroesian count-as-One is not an object but the *subject itself*. Islam's nominal definition is, indeed, submission, *infinite abandonment*.

Long overdue in the English tradition, this encounter between Islam and psychoanalysis has an extended and distinguished history in North Africa and France, and several of the essays translated here, most notably Benslama's text, "The Veil of Islam," are utterly foundational in this respect. Proposing the veil as that which averts the eye of god from the feminine body much as the stain averts the gaze, Benslama invites the reader to envision "the possibility of seizing the knowledge that allows the stain-woman to be the condition of representation." In a similar gesture, we hope with this issue to begin to seize Islam as an unseen, averted knowledge through which the stubborn and enigmatic imperative, "Be psychoanalytic!" might be taken up.

Opening, reading, interpreting, translation, revelation, submission: these will be the key words indexing this encounter between Islam and Psychoanalysis in their mutual opening to the field of the impossible.

JULIEN MAUCADE
Translated by Sigi Jöttkandt and Ed Pluth

COGITO AND THE SUBJECT OF ARAB CULTURE

I am going to try to develop the thesis of a confrontation between two rationalities, between two sciences: that of the Western world and that of the East.¹

Islam is rational, but what type of rationality does it involve?

A book was published several years ago: *Contre Averroes*.² According to this thesis, Saint Thomas of Aquinas was forced to respond to his adversaries, teachers of “Latin” philosophy, who had opted for Averroes against all odds, that is, against the Patristic tradition.

The Averroistic theses were circulating at the Sorbonne and becoming dangerous. For Thomas Aquinas, “the double foundation of thought in man and outside man in a relation of internal exclusion to its object,” intended to preserve the immateriality of the subject of thought, and the very thing Averroes claims, seemed a theoretical deficit.

The crippling vice of Averroism is that it is unable to grasp thinking as thinking, but only as thought. For Averroes, there is only a subject as thought by the Other (*il n’y a de sujet que pense par l’Autre*). For the author of *Contra Averroes*, Thomas Aquinas posits with his response the premises of the Cogito.

The Cogito is not the same according to whether it involves a thinking subject or a thought subject. For Averroes, the Cogito is an “I am thought therefore I am . . .” Islamism poses another radical variation which is, “I am thought therefore I am not.” In these variations of the Cogito of the subject of Arab culture and in the Cartesian Cogito, the position of the subject confronted with science and economics (for there is no science without economics) is not the same. In the Cogito of the subject of Arab culture, a paradox is outlined, the paradox of the Cogito of the Arabic language, itself organized by Writing and by the speech of Revelation, that is to say, the Qur’an.

¹ Originally published in French as “Cogito et sujet de culture arabe,” in *La Célibataire, La psychanalyse et le monde arabe* 1.8 (2004): 155-60. Translated with kind permission.

² Thomas d’Aquin, *Contre Averroes*, trans Alain de Libera (Paris: Flammarion, 1999).

The Qur'an is a revelation and a window onto the real. It poses the real of structure through the Revelation. This Revelation performs an extraordinary violence on the subject whether it wants it or not, for the Revelation is conveyed by a sacred speech and, besides, the Qur'an says that if Allah reveals a letter of the Great Book, the source of which the Qur'an is a part, if this letter was revealed at a mountain, the mountain would crumble. The thing that highlights the violence of the Revelation is that the Qur'an as Revelation does not speak to the subject, but speaks of the subject. And here I would like to underline the immense debt that every subject of the Arabic language, whether Muslim, Jew or Christian, owes to the Qur'an. This debt has had a decisive weight in the confrontation of Islam with the Greek sciences and others. Throughout the golden age of Islam (and of its expansion), there were two sciences that directed what would become the Muslim empire: on the one hand, the science obtained from the Greeks, Indians and others, and on the other, the science of the Qur'an; the science of grammatical language, the science of sacred language. One of these two sciences succumbed. The subject of the Arabic language must find a solution to the paradox posed by the "I am thought therefore I am," because the existence of being *qua* thought is threatened: either the subject resigns itself, abandons itself to its fate—and moreover, this is the very definition of the word Islam—or there is the solution of Islamism which is a literal reading, a rationalism, in which it becomes, "I am thought therefore I am not." And on this point, Islamism has nothing to do with Islam—the Islamist in fact is the one who refuses to give up. He fights. The subject of the Arabic language is faced with Islamism, or else the solution of negativity. In order to explain this negativity, I will refer to Kojève's reading of texts by Nietzsche, Heidegger and Hegel.

In 1920, after a night of working in the library at Warsaw, Kojève had a "revelation" identical to that of Nietzsche's in Sils-Maria. He was thinking about two cultures, the East and the West, and aimed to oppose Buddha and Descartes, each seeming to be each other's opposite as "the irony of the Cogito," that is, as the challenge of the inexistent aimed at the ontology of the Ego. It is what he was to define later as negativity: "I think therefore I am not."

Kojève will define negativity through a vindication of Nietzsche's Superman and the worship of "Being toward Death." In Heidegger, this negativity becomes "the great negativity" of all human progress. In reading Hegel, Kojève is going to demonstrate that the itinerary of consciousness is a movement: in order for consciousness to become Spirit, it must accept disappearing as subject of certitude so as to leave space for the work of Spirit as truth without subject.

For Kojève, this effacement of the subject of certitude constitutes the negating subject, and by this effacement, by this negating, this allows it to exercise its negativity through the joint forms of struggle and work. Kojève will add his reading of Marx and of Heidegger and will therefore succeed in giving an anthropological interpretation of the itinerary of consciousness as a movement: this will be the reading of Hegel that takes note of an end of history through an allegorical commentary on the master-slave dialectic. But from this, Kojève will deduce a possible abolition of man himself, which will lead him to return to the theory of insatiable desire, and to negativity in terms of which he had understood humanity in

the beginning of his work. From the beginning, he returns to this topic in order to be able to make man accede to the status of a “sage” and “idle scalliwag.” It is in this way that the true end of History is reached, Being returned to the Nothingness of its animality and having accepted the order of the world as such, with its princes and tyrants. In Hegel, all revolution becomes impossible and the intellectual philosopher (the sage) has nothing more than a choice between two attitudes: either to enter into anonymity and pass into action in the service of the State, or to continue to dream, like the beautiful romantic soul, of a revolution that has already passed. At that time, Georges Bataille, who attended Kojève’s seminars, will refuse this dilemma and reproach Kojève for condemning intellectuals to a “negativity” without use (*sans emploi*). Put differently, to the animality of the sage, he will oppose the extreme form of a Nietzschean madness and a sacred terror capable of subverting anew the social order.

As for Maimonides, what is his definition of negativity? In the *Guide to the Perplexed*, one reads: “when we say that God lives, it means that God is not without life.”

For his part, Eckhart—and his interpretation explains negativity to us a little more—interprets the “negation of negation” as “privation of privation” (*privatio privationis*), “marrow of affirmed being” (*moelle de l’être affirmé*), “attribution of the One as negation of all multiplicity.” Eckhart makes the *negatio negationis* the supreme mode of the “divine predication” (*praedicatio indivinis*). He thus equates “the negative attribution of the One” and “the affirmation of divine being” as an absolute identity. Thierry Freiburg, himself influenced by Maimonides, agrees with Eckhart, making the opposition of affirmation, or being, and of negation, or non-being, “the premier and fundamental opposition,” but he gives another definition of the One. For Thierry de Freiberg, the “privation of privation” is a “negative,” not positive, “suppression” of the “first contrariety.”

Why “negative”? It is negative because a privation remains which, far from “reaffirming” being, subordinates “being” and “non-being” to what he calls the “metaontological” transcendence “of the One.” This might be reminiscent of the two definitions of the One in Aristotle and Plato. Through the theory of the *negatio negationis* we arrive at the distinction between the transcendental convertible One—the “One according to Aristotle”—and the transcendental and non-convertible One—the “One according to Plato,” or again the “One in an other distinction” in the Parmenides.

Let us return to the subject of the Arabic language in its relation to negativity. I refer myself now to two Suras, Al Fatiha and “the Cave,” in which among others, the legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus is told. I will try to bring out these two axial dimensions of Islam that are, on the one hand, the negativity of the subject in relation to the negativity of the Other and, on the other, the negativity of Allah inherent to Islam on account of the debt of the Arabic language toward the Qur’an.

The Al Fatiha Sura (the Opening) is constituted by the mode of a “command” that summons the subject to recognize itself in a negativity, that is to say, that the Arabic language which structures it (in sending it back to the letter) returns it to a

radically prescribed “Elsewhere” as an impossible access for every subject. This sending of the subject to an impossible “Elsewhere” can only be revealed by reading the text in Arabic since the Sura, up until verse 6, deprives the subject of all reference to an existence, with the exception of Allah, in order to reach in the last verse the only container, a negative form. Moreover, in French, it is translated as “*non pas le chemin de cuex qui encourent la colère*” [“*Not (the path) of those upon whom Thy wrath is brought down*”], and the frank negation: *laa*. There would be a lot to say about these two last negations which are not the same for, in the interpretations of the Qur’an, it specifies that the first concerns the Jews and the second the Christians.

Let us say that, in the Al Fatiha Sura, what is expressed in an affirmative (extremely positive) form is that there is no “place of existence” except for Allah.

As for the Cave Sura, it specifies that Ahl El Kitab (the people of the book) challenged the Prophet Muhammad to relate the facts concerning three legends: those of the “Seven Sleepers of Ephesus,” of “Musa and his servant” and of the “Two proprietors of the two gardens.”

Muhammad answered that he would reply the following day. It took fifteen days before the “revelation” manifested itself. Muhammad became the laughing stock of Christians and Jews, to the point of “introducing doubt in his breast.”

The specificity of the Cave Sura lies in the two verses 23 and 24:

Nor say of anything, “I shall be sure to do so and so tomorrow”—

Without adding, “So please Allah” and call thy Lord to mind.³

It is necessary to say, and this is to be developed, that Allah is not God. The second remark of great importance is the translation, “I shall be sure to do so” which introduces a verb that originally in Arabic is nothing more than the word “subject,” which is only translatable by a verb that does not exist in the original formulation of this verse.

The statement of this verse is a “command” to the subject and can be read under the form, “Never say ‘I am subject’ (never say ‘I’) without adding *In Chalah* (So please Allah).” Beyond speech, the transcendent entity, Allah, who defines himself only by absence in “Revelation,” returns the subject of Arabic language to its negativity. By these four negations that form the Shahada, the Other is inscribed in negativity.

I will end on the final invocation of the subject in the last Sura of the Qur’an where, at the beginning and end of this Sura, the same signifier designates the unicity of Allah and names the subject. The signifier *Ahad* designates the absolute unicity of Allah and defines the subject of Arabic language.

A final question: can religion remedy the division of the subject? There is something in Islam that tends towards this attempt at the unicity of the subject and which does not cease to insist, in order to remedy the division of the subject without ever attaining it.

³ *The Holy Qur’an*, trans. Yusuf Ali <<http://www.islamicity.com/mosque/Surai.htm>>

JEAN-MICHEL HIRT

Translated by Kristina Valendinova

TO BELIEVE OR TO INTERPRET

In the Arabo-muslim culture, the visionary dream, *ru'yâ*, is a religious event, —the forty-eighth part of the prophesy, it is confirmed by one of the often quoted *hadith*, Muhammad's speeches—, one that is bound to happen at any moment to great numbers of people. A remarkable book by an expert on Sufism, Pierre Lory, *Le rêve et ses interprétations en Islam*¹ enables us to grasp the scope of this "permanent revelation" through the scale of the material it presents. If one was to retain only a single trait in support of the book's author, and thus of the dream's eschatological importance, it would be the calling to prayer, *adhân*, which was established in Islam thanks to the similar dreams of the two Companions of Prophet Muhammad, 'Abd Allah ibn Zayd of Medina and the future caliph 'Umar. "Hence the meaning," writes Pierre Lory, "of the Companions assembling around the Prophet every morning in order to share dreams: they came to bring the unveilings of the order of the divine Real, *haqq*." Whence the critique of Muhammad's detractors, who in the sura of "The Prophets" reproach him for making up "medleys of dream" (Qur'an, 21: 5).²

For Islam, the last monotheist religion, the dream is an ordinary miracle, destined for everyone, and in the Muslim society, throughout the ages, dream activity, this dimension of psychic and physiological life, of the Prophet, of the Sufis and of the simple believers, has never been overlooked. Yet the particular nature of the visionary dream is to give information about the hidden dimension of the dreamer's existence and especially to help consider the future.

The literature of dream criticism that grew out of these dreams, century after century, is considerable and it testifies to the importance of the relationship between the flesh and the spirit as it concerned the Islamist thinkers—without even mentioning the colossal dream sound box, the indispensable corollary of the Qur'an, *One Thousand and One Nights*. Just like this collection of stories, *Le grand livre de l'interprétation des rêves*³ is anonymous, although it is attributed to Ibn Sirin, the

¹ Pierre Lory, *Le rêve et ses interprétations en Islam* [Dream and its Interpretations in Islam] (Paris: Albin Michel, 2003).

² *The Holy Qur'an*, trans. Yusuf Ali.

³ *Le grand livre de l'interprétation des rêves* [The Great Book of Dream Interpretation] (La Tour d'Aigues: Editions de l'Aube, 2005).

transmitter of both the dreams and the statements of the Prophet at the dawn of Islam. In this text, recently translated by Youssef Seddik, we learn in particular the meaning of dreams about “coupling and all that is connected to it, the sexual act and repudiation, jealousy and corpulence, acquisition of a slave and fornication, sodomy, group debauchery, wantonness, female or male travesty and observation of the female sex,” but also the signification of dreams “of prophets and God’s and Muhammad’s messengers.” This text, similar in its excess to the *One Thousand and One Nights*, shows a continuity between the human and the divine, as well as an interpenetration of the sacred and the profane, leading to some surprising juxtapositions. For example: “He who sees himself in a dream copulating with his dead mother, in her grave, will die, because the Very-High had said: ‘From the (earth) did We create you, and into it shall We return you’” (Qur’an, 20: 55).

The eruption of the dream into a prophecy is the recognition of the necessary subversion of the spiritual by the carnal. Released from the rules of morality, as apt to blasphemy as it is to sacrilege, playing with reason, the dream scene combines the inadmissible and the impossible. In this respect, it resembles what of the divine revelation had reached the Prophet, the strange supernatural dictate that he himself dared not approach critically. The Qur’an will be established a decade after Muhammad’s death (632) by the third caliph, ‘Othman, who will shape a *ne varietur* collection of revelations, to which the living Prophet had often proposed variant versions and which he had refused to fixate—in a verse, God himself declares: “It is for Us to collect it and to promulgate it” (Qur’an, 75 :17).

With a literary construction dating back to the 7th century, but in its modernity yielding nothing to the most innovative western works, the Qur’an is a “*mise-en-abîme*” of biblical, canonical or apocryphal stories, giving us a sensational rereading of them thanks to “dream-work,” the condensations, displacements and figurations it effects. Are we perhaps more able to read the Qur’an today, after having been able to confront ourselves with a work of the English language impregnated by all other human languages: Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake* or the relation of his *Night Journey* to that of the Prophet?

The Qur’an identifies itself as a “reminder” of the monotheist scriptures, all of whose prophets it refers to, yet it stages them differently, exposing both the aspects known from their biblical story and those that are unknown. Like a broken mirror, the Qur’an reflects the fragments of their lives that do not appear in the mirror plane of the Bible. How, then, can we not ask whether the Qur’an is not the dream of monotheist religion, requiring each of its readers to decipher its content in order to access its dream-thoughts? For all the Islamist mystic philosophers—who made no distinction between speculative, dream and visionary activity, all of which lead from the natural to the supernatural—interpretation is decisive, personal and infinite. In their own way, they took up for themselves Muhammad’s prophetic gesture for themselves, aiming to preserve the extreme mobility of the revelations for which he was the receptacle.

Interpreting, *ta’bîr*, is the master-word [*maître-mot*] created by Qur’anic textuality and it consists of passing from the manifest, *zâhir*, to the latent, *bâtin*, which then

itself becomes the manifest of another latent content and so on, the oscillation of *zâhir* and *bâtin* deploying itself indefinitely. Each person engages in interpretation according to his or her own speculative capacity and each Qur'anic verse is likely to be given several meanings, according to the level of the dreamer's spiritual progress and according to his or her clairvoyance, *al-baḥîn*. One easily sees that for the political and religious powers, such unlimited liberty of interpretation is inadmissibly audacious, which many Islamic spiritual thinkers have paid for with their lives.

Thus they carry out the recommendation of a 12th-century Persian thinker, Sohrawardî, to his disciples: "Read the Qur'an as if it had been revealed only for you."

But if the Qur'an constitutes a dream addressed to everyone, leading each reader to interpret it in his own way in order to come to a revelation of the divine dimension concerning oneself—*one's own* God and no longer the God common to all—we understand the conflict arising at the heart of this monotheist religion, a conflict between believing in the dream and interpreting it.

In the Qur'an, this dilemma is reflected in the primal scene of the sacrifice of Abraham's son, which depends here on the missing interpretation of the dream sent to the Patriarch—the father's refusal to sacrifice the child, at the very basis of monotheism's religious difference, thus depends, only in the Qur'an, on his ability or inability to interpret his dream.

The episode is presented as follows:

Then, when (the son) reached (the age of) (serious) work with him, he said: "O my son! I see in vision that I offer thee in sacrifice: Now see what is thy view!" (The son) said: "O my father! Do as thou art commanded: thou wilt find me, if Allah so wills one practicing Patience and Constancy!"

So when they had both submitted their wills (to Allah), and he had laid him prostrate on his forehead (for sacrifice),

We called out to him "O Abraham!

"Thou hast already fulfilled the vision!"—thus indeed do We reward those who do right.

For this was obviously a trial

And We ransomed him with a momentous sacrifice.

(Qur'an, 37: 102-8)

Confronted with the dream, Abraham is subject to the test everyone must face: whether to believe or to interpret one's dream. He chooses to believe and to kill his son, putting both of them, in the final instance, before the judgment of God. In an exemplary fashion, Abraham bears within himself all the subsequent religious conflicts between the faithful, who believe what they read in their referential Scriptures or what the priests tell them about it, and the unfaithful (infidels), who endlessly interpret what they read. The religious world view is constructed with the former and undone by the latter. "The letter kills but the spirit gives life," claims Paul

of Tarsus in his second epistle to the Corinthians; in each monotheistic religion, the antagonism between the defendants of the letter and the defendants of the spirit is all the more perennial in that it derives from psychic life, from the opposition between everyone's religiosity and spirituality.

In the 12th century, the greatest Andalusian Sufi master Shaykh al-akbar, Ibn 'Arabî, believed that every terrestrial act existed simultaneously in several dimensions. The dream is the lived proof of the multiplicity of human states, hence the importance of interpretation, which allows us to pass from one shore of desire to another, from one level of existence to another, from the human to the divine. In *The Book of the Bezels of Wisdoms*, which he claims he had received in his sleep from the hands of the Prophet, Ibn 'Arabî writes: "To interpret means to transpose the perceived form onto another reality."

In this work, what he sees as Abraham's main error is that he adhered to the dream's vision as if to an objective view, one that lies outside of himself. The error is to give in to the manifest meaning of the dream, to reduce it to an action, instead of hearing its latent signification, which would lead one to think the action seen in the dream instead of realizing it. This passage from the dream's viscosity to its spirituality simultaneously represents an instinctual renunciation and a "progress in the life of the spirit." Abraham, explains Ibn 'Arabî, should have understood that the figure of his son in the dream was only a representation of himself, confronted with the enigma and the scandal of individual death striking a life demanded [*voulue*] by God. Commenting on the divine intervention, Ibn 'Arabî sees in it the shadow of a reproach: "God said to Abraham, while he was speaking to him: 'In truth, O Abraham, you believed in a vision,' which is not to say that Abraham, believing he had to sacrifice his son, was faithful to the divine inspiration; because he had taken the vision literally, while every dream demands a transposition or interpretation."

Here we have someone who immediately tosses into the dustbin of History all the refusals to interpret that have been boasted of by so many past and present murderers, usurping the name of God to perpetrate in reality crimes they might have dreamed of in their feverish nights. Opposed to this is the man who, desirous of submitting himself to God alone, escapes from his illusory representation of reality thanks to the dream, thanks to the uncertainty that the dream instills in everyone's language, thanks to interpretation which is bound to the psychic continent and the spiritual ocean, that the dream awaits from him.

FETHI BENSLAMA
Translated by Emiliano Battista and Sigi Jötkandt

THE VEIL OF ISLAM

The *veil and the sign*—around the stormy association of these words a debate has been raging for six years, which has assumed an unprecedented dimension.¹ One should note, first, the breadth and extent of the arguments that have mobilized the great number of participants over a long time, given rise to profuse written and audiovisual productions, implicated state institutions, been the cause of legal actions and judicial writs (tribunals, councils of State, ministerial decrees). In returning to the archive of these events, one can only be struck by the multiple domains of discourse that have been appealed to: law, politics, ethics, religion, language. With a little distance, one immediately notices the glaring disproportion between the fact itself—a handful of young women implicated here and there in certain secondary schools, with numbers reaching a little over a hundred or so in the entire country—and the theoretical, polemical, and explanatory reactions it triggered. *Between the veil and the sign*, something like a semiological construction site of the foundations was immediately opened.

Of course, a construction site of this sort doesn't just spring up anytime, and *a propos* of anything at all. The stakes would have had to have been significant for such a mutually intense deployment. But if we parse through the debate to find out just what is at stake, what we find is the impossibility of identifying any one stake in particular. Such a tangle of reasons and themes running over into one another, each one as important as the last, have been put forward, all of which go to the very core of the principles, values, and indeed the identity of the political system. A statement by the Minister of Education powerfully sums up just what is being brought into question: "the face of France." And, to indicate that this was no grandiloquent expression tossed out by chance, he specifies: "I am a believer, who of course respects other believers. But we must demonstrate that we are also believers in the Rights of Man, in France, and in the Republic. It's just too bad if this sounds a bit solemn and seems unfashionable."² The veil and the face of France: the whole (*tous*) is in question. Beyond the position of a politician who is eager to justify his proscriptive

¹ Originally published in French as "Le voile d'islam," in *Cahiers Intersignes, La virilité en Islam* 11-12 (1998): 59-73. Translated with kind permission.

² Francois Bayrou: "According to whether we defend our ideal or renounce the face of France, in ten, twenty years, the place of Islam, that of the Muslim woman, will not be the same," interview in *Liberation*, 10 October (1994).

decision by invoking his belief, one can recognize the reach of the threatening shadow of the veil throughout the entire debate in the two key notions that are invariably invoked: integralism and integration. The first designates the evil that works through the veil, and the second, the good the veil calls into question, viz.: the political fiction of entering the common body of the nation. Literally, these words boil down to the integrity of a system that is being called into question by the integrity of an other. Why should the veil put the whole into question? Why is the veil a "panic question," as Blanchot puts it?

It is not insignificant that the debate should have crystallized around the sign and its ostentatious nature. Ostentation is *an excess in the way of making visible* (Littré), an excess that causes a disorder that French law wants to proscribe. But, as is well-known, the Council of State has never regarded a sign as ostentatious in itself. For the very essence of the sign is to show (*montrer*), and excess is decided not on the basis of the sign itself, but of the subject who shows with his hand and, let us say, with the play of his hand. This evokes the Western problematic of the sign and of *monstration*, of the hand as what is proper to man and that renders him capable of salutation and of monstrosity. It is important to remember that the Islamic tradition opposes the hand (called *Fatma*) to the eye: while excess is thought as essential to the latter, the hand symbolizes the ethical organ *par excellence*, capable, or not, of withstanding the eye in its excessiveness. Now, the debate has always revolved around this question: at what point does a sign show too much? Is the case the same with it the cross, the star of David, the *kippa*? Or is it the veil that is an excessively monstrating sign? Without seeming to be explicitly aimed at the veil, though it is clear that it had the veil in its sights all along, the Ministerial decree chose to consider the veil as religious sign that is ostentatious in itself.

From the Islamic theological perspective that prescribes it, the veil is not a sign. It is something through which the feminine body is partially or totally occulted because this body would otherwise indicate too much (*ferait trop signe*). Put differently, what religion finds ostentatious is the body of woman. The veil, conversely, is the anti-sign itself. From the beginning, the debate has veered in the wrong direction in treating the veil as a religious sign similar to signs such as the crucifix (is it not rather a symbol?), whose counterpart in Islam is the calligraphy of the name of God, and more specifically, the Qur'an. In effect, for a Muslim, the Qur'an is the only treasury of signs, for the name of the founding components (*ayât*) of this text, with which everyone is invited to identify themselves, is the following: "Be Qur'an." Such is the word of the prophet. The signs of Muslim identity are textual. It would be clear even from a cursory examination that the veil does not belong to this line of interpretation. It belongs, instead, to a theological logic, that of a real *grasping* (*mainmise*) of the body of the woman in order to bring her to reason. But why get sucked into such a long dispute about signs, one that led a philosopher to label the Minister of Education "a semiological censor"?³

Of course, the veil can be taken as a symbol, as it is for the mystics, or as a simulacrum, as it is in Arabic aesthetics and erotics. Or, again, it can be taken as a

³ Jean-Jacques Delfour, "Francois Bayrou, semiological censor," *Liberation*, 20 October (1994): 7.

theologico-political emblem in the Islamist attempt to *re-veil* women. This is not without dangers for the veil's theological essence. In any event, there is no presence of the veil as sign in the semiological corpus of Islam, because the veil is always on the side of overflowing, of obscurity, of a real blinding that negates the body in its immediate presence to sight, not in order to deny it in its totality or to absent it as such, but in order to render it present through this negation. The veil is barred or under erasure. This is undoubtedly why every dictionary of Arabic begins with this simple definition for the word *hijâb*, the canonical term designating the veil: the forbidden, or "*everything that forbids something*."⁴ Veiling is thus the operation of the negation of the body of a woman. Through this operation, woman is elevated into a forbidden or sacred thing, that is to say, into an ideality which at the same time preserves a sensible existence. A *sensible ideality*: that would be the appropriate expression for a classical definition of the nature of the sign itself as a unity of the materiality of the signifier and the abstraction of the signified. The veil is thus not a sign, but that which makes the woman into a sign. It shields her body, which emits a multiplicity of signs, in order to envelop it as a unique sign. Veiling is a theological operation which enfolds woman in order to make her one semiologically. It is a question of a logic of interposition that will cease the monstration of woman and of woman as swarming monster of signs. In this sense, it effects a *de-monstration* of how a woman becomes an obscure sign.

In the debate in which we have ourselves participated, the sign was thus not what one believed it to be. The problem is not the veil as sign, but as prohibition. It would be more accurate to speak, henceforth, of an *inter-seen* (*intervue*), in order to highlight the question of a *sight of interposition* (*une vue d'interposition*), akin to the notion of a speaking of interposition (*dire d'interposition*) at play in the concept of the forbidden. *The veil inter-sees* (*intervoit*) *the woman*. The sight of interposition is this sight that, in seizing the woman as a monstrating being who monstrates too much of herself, turns her into a de-monstration. The demonstration of woman is the abstraction of her body which consecrates it, which establishes it as a spiritual truth. The veil is nothing less than the creation of a spiritual/mental view of woman that attaches itself to her very body. It springs from a double function of the thing and the cause, the thing that interposes itself in order to cause an Other('s) view of her: *it is an eye-veil*.

When one of the veiled students wrote in a letter to the editor: "*As a believer, it is quite simply a question of modesty vis-à-vis God, which is important in my religion . . .*"⁵ This "question of modesty vis-à-vis God," is important, and it demands that we explain it (the sentence at least): what is the feeling of shame women experience in relation to God? Why should they be *more* ashamed than men vis-à-vis the transcendent? Why should a veil be sufficient to avert the sight of God, when his eye is supposed to be all-seeing? We will understand nothing of this declaration of faith if we just see the veil as a thing thrown over the body. We have to allow the dimension

⁴ See the lexical encyclopedia of Ibn Mandur, *Lisân Al'arb*, Beyrouth, Dar Lisân Al-arab edition, I, article *hajaba*, p. 567. In Jurjâni: "*Al-hajib, l'interdit selon la langue*," *le livre des définitions* (Beyrouth, 1977) 82.

⁵ Asma Gmati, Parisian 5th year student, *Liberation*, 18 November (1994).

of the inter-seen to intervene as a cause and introduce an Other('s) view of woman that defuses her as object of the look. The veil establishes a corporeal contact with this vision: hence the woman as demonstration of the Other. And *homo theologicus*' sight wants to be an eye in the eye of God, a sight of his sight, to see woman through her demonstration. "*Man is to God as the pupil is to the eye*," wrote Ibn Arabî.⁶ There is an etymological justification for the expression: in Arabic, "pupil" literally means "man in the eye" (*insân al-'ayn*). Here the mystic grasps the function that most intimately resides in the subject of theology: as a seeing quintessence, as the pupil of God's eye. But if so, why should it be necessary to institute the veil as the Other('s) view of woman, screening the look, opposing the organ to itself? If man was God's visual orifice, by which detour would one come to blind him at the place of woman, that is to say, to make woman the *stain* between God and man? What, therefore, is the mystery of this separation by which the prevention of prohibition interferes with the pupil and its eye. Would woman thus be the castration of the man of God? The point of God's blindness to man? Strange questions to put to theology but, to be honest, they are inherent to it, or at least invaginated in it. In a sense, the mystique is only the invagination of theology.

The foregoing elements can be recovered from Judaic and Christian theologies. According to Saint Paul, for example, "a woman ought to have a veil on her head, because of the angels." Saint Paul interprets this "because of the angels" with respect to which woman is elevated as a sign of power and liberty.⁷ In terms of the previous developments, one can at least understand the source of this power of the veiled woman: the eye that gazes upon her from above demonstrates her.

In the Islamic tradition, there is a scene likely to put us on the edge of our seats: the spectacle of the angels' cause, a scene where the veil intervenes for the first time in the founding narrative of Islam. The episode, recounted by every biographer of Muhammad, takes place before the beginning of the revelation, during the terrifying period of the premises, when the future prophet, doubting his reason, turned to his wife:

That evening, leaving the mountain, Muhammad went to Khadija and said: O Khadija, I believe I am going mad.—Why, she asked? Because, he said, I see in myself the signs of the possessed: when I walk along the road, I hear voices from each stone and each hill; and, in the night, I dream of an immense being in front of me, a being whose head touches the sky and whose feet touch the earth; I do not know it and it approaches me in order to take me [. . .]. Khadija said to him: tell me if you see something of that kind [. . .]. One day, finding himself with Khadija in his house, Muhammad said: O Khadija, this being appears to me, I see it. Khadija approached Muhammad, sat down, took him on her breast and said: do you still see it?—Yes, he said. Then Khadija

⁶ Ibn Arabî, *les Gemmes de la sagesse* (Fuçûs al-hikam), French translation as *la Sagesse des prophetes*, by T. Burckhardt (Albin Michel, 1974) 27.

⁷ Annie Jaubert, "Les femmes dans l'écriture," supplement to *Vie chrétienne* 219 (1979): 40-57.

uncovered her head and her hair and said:—Do you see it now? No, said Muhammad. Khadija said: Rejoice, it is not a demon but an angel.⁸

It is self-evident that the question of the historical reality of this scene is of little consequence. What is significant is that it is presented in the main narrative and that it borrows from the language of primal scenes to manifest, to make visible, to create belief in the *demonstration of woman*. What does it propose? That in Islam the history of truth begins with the unveiling of a woman. And it also begins as an assault on an angel's modesty (*pudeur*). These two affirmations are the heads and tails of the same coin, that of the theological fabric dissimulating the body of the woman and projecting onto her the vision from above. Everything here rests on the final act and its affirmation, namely: that when the woman uncovers herself, the angel hides. For the angel, who vanishes from the visual field of the prophet at the moment of the unveiling, only disappears because, as angel, he is not supposed to be capable of tolerating the seductive vision of Khadija's hair; had it been a demon, it would have held its own in its confrontation with the unveiled woman. Given that it concerns the angel who transmits the true speech of the Qur'an (the archangel Gabriel), the woman's demonstration reveals itself as simultaneously a demonstration of truth and an attack on this truth in the very act of demonstrating it. The angel who flees is the truth that hides from the unveiling of the woman, but this hiding of truth is the verification of truth.

The situation of woman's seems originally bound to the condition of "not seeing," upon which belief itself is founded. Whereas woman believes what she does not see, man does not believe what he sees. He must thus pass through her in order to believe. This last proposition seems to break from the phallocentrism characteristic of the theological construction. Is it the ruse or rather the contradiction that mines it from the inside that she reveals? In any event, what we will henceforth call *the scene of the demonstration* (which has no name in the Islamic tradition) inevitably leads towards the conclusion that, in order to believe in God, man must pass through the woman's belief, and that she possesses a knowledge of the truth that precedes and exceeds the knowledge of the founder himself. She thus founds the truth of the founder. She founds it on a lack of sight, with regard to a visionary excess of the male prophet. Woman, by her lack, makes the truth of being emerge that creates lack. *She is the truth and the lack of truth, in between which lies the veil.*

It is appropriate at this level to connect up the preceding developments where, between the man-pupil and its Divine eye, woman appeared as the locus of a *stain* and this element of the scene where the woman's "do not look" offers itself as the very foundation of belief, from which two consequences arise. It is at the level of *the stain* that the demonstration of truth takes place. However, if man enjoys the vision, to the point of being shocked, one cannot content oneself with defining woman's situation as a privation of this vision, but as the *jouissance* of the stain, the affirmation of a power that detaches/de-stains (*dé-tache*) and muddies (*entache*) the truth.

⁸ Tabarî, *Muhammad, sceau des prophètes* (Paris: Sindbad, 1980) 65-66. There are a number of versions of this scene, but all retain this same structure.

One should pay special attention to the gesture of unveiling that only obtains its value from a verification insofar as the woman, through her body, creates the difference between the angel and the demon, the truth and the lie. The veiled woman has her site as intermediary between two messengers (the angel for the prophet and the prophet for men). She is the intermediary between intermediaries. Now, this *inter* between two *inters* presumes a traversal that Khadija realizes through an operation of interpretation. To the man terrorized by his vision, unable to judge the nature of what haunts him, she opposes an interpretation through acts that flush out its truth. Her interpretation is as resolute as it is resolving. She knows, she believes, she reveals. She reveals the revelation. From that moment, the unveiling of woman appeared as a movement that brings about a decision concerning the truth of being in the undecided subjectivity of man. She gives him certitude of the internal Other that he is not able to recognize by himself. Man is inhabited by the Other but does not recognize it. Without the woman's unveiling, thus without the veil, he would remain *undecided* (*in-decis*); he would live doubting God. The woman gives him the gift of a decisive judgment. What would he be, therefore, without the veiled woman? He would know the truth (of castration) of which he is the bearer. Such, in their extreme consequences, are the suppositions contained in this scene. Theology confers the status of a life-raft onto the woman's veiling-unveiling, man's access to God's *identification* as if, through the woman's corporeal difference, he could seize the body of the difference that haunts him. In short, it is through the stain that the pupil knows the eye whose orifice it is. What is announced at this level is the possibility of seizing the knowledge that allows the *stain-woman* to be the condition of representation, inasmuch as the object of the excess of vision passes through a failure of vision, in order to return under the form of a re-presentation.

But if man only accedes to the certitude of the Other by passing through woman, does not this entire theological construction amount to saying that man's narcissism is more problematic than woman's? Woman presents herself as already *knowing* the truth of the Other, as already being blindly led by him, whereas man must pass through the feminine operation of veiling-unveiling in order to *re-cognize* the sign in himself, and thus to gain certitude of this Other. The veiling of woman would be a disposition against the narcissistic stupidity of man (Nietzsche said that the spiritual fatum is our greatest idiocy): the veil as *circumcisio obscura* of man?

According to Islamic historiography, Khadija is the first to believe in the prophet. The first Muslim was a woman. The demonstration was hymenian. Or again, if you wish, woman is the hymen of faith. Through her, man enters the certitude of his God. This is undoubtedly why the tradition relates that, after this episode, Muhammad said to Khadija: "*the angel sends you his salutations.*" But it is impossible not to notice the change of position here: that (through) which he believes becomes that which believes in him. Woman is thus the origin twice over: the origin of belief and belief in the origin. She is on the side of the origin and of its result. Woman turns. *Veiled, unveiled, reveiled*: these are the three sequences of theology's feminine operation. Veiled originally, unveiled for the demonstration of the originary truth, then re-veiled by the order of belief in this truth of origin; for the instituted

truth aspires to reconstitute the hymen from the tearing it has undergone. Woman is turned.

Such is, in effect, the path that will progressively lead to the massive imposition of prohibition that is the veil in Islam. From the man doubting his reason, to the instituter of theological reason, the angel's salutation transforms into an inconceivably suspicious mistrust. Belief in the woman, at the base of the demonstration of truth, becomes inverted as a dangerous machination of disbelief by which she appears as a being who "*lacks reason and religion*" (Hadith), as a gender "*whose deception is immense*" (Qur'an, 12: 28). Of course, the possibility of such a return was already contained in the scene, since the demonstration was obtained by a monstration (unveiling), and the identity of the angel was verified by an assault on his modesty. Her intermediary site between the intermediaries gives woman an abyssal identity, capable of playing with identities and their principles (a recurrent theme of the *Thousand and One Nights*). But one also sees why, in this system, there is no need to burn the witch—and there are no stakes in the history of Islam—because here the lie and the capacity for reversal that theology attributes to being of woman remains complicit with the truth of the Other, which she retains with the veil that suspends them both *vis-à-vis* one another in the intimacy of the mystery. The veil or the fire? This alternative is not just a hypothesis about a distant past. Isn't one of the slogans of the contemporary Islamist campaign to re-veil women: "the veil or hell"? Woman, obscure or lit.

We cannot go into the underlying reasons for the change in the Prophet Muhammad in any detail here. Of course, one notes that, following the death of Khadija, when he is in fifties, he becomes polygamous, *a lover of women, perfume and prayer* (Hadith). To believe in woman (who believes him) and to love women, the total extent of the change is inscribed between these two propositions. In brief, let us say they correspond to the passage from a position of feminine identification to receive the Other, to the phallic posture congruent with the political institution of the city of God. It is here that the veil drops down and the hymen reconstitutes itself.

The theater of theological prohibition begins when the veil drops. Its complex machinery, several cogs of which we will come to explore, is frequently brought in support of powerful interpretations as these are caught up in the obscure dramas of bodies, of their lives and their deaths. In the case of Islam, the scenario is well-known and the episodes of woman's obscuration, or of her erasure, are too visible for one not to perceive that their divinity is their humanity, that their force is their fragility. They correspond, point for point, to problems of desire of Muhammad the man during the last fifteen years of his life, a period entirely bound up with the construction of the Islamic city. This might appear simplistic but it can be verified in all cases—each time the man-prophet encounters a conflict of desire, or finds himself in an impasse of *jouissance*, God provides him with a legislative Qur'anic solution. The first act performs the story of Aïcha, his favorite wife who separated herself from the caravan one night during an outing to search in the desert for a lost necklace and was followed by one named Safwân. She will be accused of adultery, for Safwân was a good-looking man and, according to witnesses, she had had a relationship with him in the past. The prophet will endure several months of

agonizing doubt . . . but he loves Aïcha. When the verses clearing her and delivering her from suspicion fall, it is the theological curtain that is beginning its inexorable descent. It is evident, then, that the veil is not only the article of cloth thrown over the body of woman, but the organizing hand of an order that is rigorously laid-out between the subject of desire as a seeing subject and the political institution of the city. Veiling turns out to be a powerful system for structuring the body of *jouissance* in the space, time and relations between people. In the Aïcha affair, in this same sura of the Brightness, the public and private will be delimited. Entrance to the house will be subject to authorization at the moment of the three prayers, which require one to strip to perform one's ablutions (dawn, midday, evening); the people to whom women can show "*the exterior of their finery*" will be strictly determined by their relation of kinship. The chief principle of prohibition begins with appearance: the prohibition of the veil concords with the prohibition of incest. This will become clear with the second scandalous affair in the first Muslim community. One day, entering without permission and unnoticed in the house of his adopted son Zayd, the prophet surprises the latter's spouse, who is lightly dressed. He is rattled, captivated by the vision of this woman who it was said was very beautiful. Aware of the prophet's desire and God's intention, Zayd divorces his wife, who immediately goes to the prophet, who is living in the fear and torment of his desire. What then? God not only authorizes their marriage but has the angels celebrate it. This unique case of celestial celebration in Islam will, however, be the prophet's final marriage. In the same movement in which the sura (the Clans, 30: 3) gifts him the wife of the other, it forbids him from taking any others: "It is not allowed to you to take women afterwards [. . .] though their beauty be pleasing to you" (5: 52). At the same moment, adoption is forbidden as an anti-Islamic practice. Zayd was not Muhammad's son: "Muhammad is not the father of any of your men" (5: 40). Having dismissed, by this genealogical maneuver, any grievances (5: 38) against the prophet, the law then strikes at the root of the risk and universalizes the veiling restriction: "O Prophet! say to your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers that they let down upon them their over-garments (*voiles*); this will be more proper, that they may be known, and thus they will not be given trouble" (5: 59).

The entire stakes of the veil as structure might be recapitulated from these two Qur'anic fragments: "though their beauty be pleasing to you" and "let down upon them their over-garments (*voiles*)."¹ Insofar as women are pleasing to men, and can lead them even to commit incest, the prohibition of the veil finds its rationale in checking one of the gravest threats human desire in its extreme poses to the social order. The statement presupposes, of course, an incrimination of the woman, of her beauty or her monstration; but it contains no less a passive position of the man-pupil, who in some way would be incapable of mastering his focus. He "lets down upon them," for lack of letting down upon himself. Man would thus not be in a position to diaphragm his vision with regard to woman. Such an uncontrollable visual orifice is penetrable by the monstrations of the feminine thing, which possesses and subjugates him to the point of making him forget his law. Here, perhaps, something like the need for theological representation permits itself to approach, insofar as representation would come to rectify a diaphragmatic failure in man's visual sense.

Veiled, unveiled, reveiled: these three sequences, which we have previously isolated as constitutive of theology's feminine operation, are the same movements that institute the sovereignty of the representational diaphragmatic, at the very place where man's vision is in excess of his receptivity. This closing of the edges of the veil over women (this is the literal Qur'anic expression) is the eye of representation that replaces the eye of perception and thus contracts man's focus of woman as objective reality in order to filter the illuminated scene of the truth of the real, thereby securing institutionalized obscurity. But are these movements not the same as the night of the world into which men tumble in their fall from paradise? Let us return to Islam's version of this: in the beginning, a veil of light separated Adam and Eve from the sight of their sex; when they transgressed God's command and ate of the forbidden fruit, the veil of light lifted and they discovered their nudity, whence the imposition of clothes to hide it (S. VII). The three movements—veiling, unveiling, revealing—thus correspond to three times of theological representation: the light that blinds, the obscurity that enables one to see, the screen that shields one from the seen object.

If one was to follow the terms of theological reason, after the fall men and women were equal in the night of the world. Something would thus have arisen that altered this equality, to the point where man needed to have recourse to the supplement of the veil to release him from woman's ravishing. What therefore happened? One can deduce from the Islamic narrative that it is the man's appeal for a verification from the woman that turns everything upside down. In front of the woman, man's question is not: "Who am I?" but "What do I see"? Man's appeal in his visual distress creates the event of woman as the proof of truth. And woman, as proof of truth, is truth and the challenge to truth, is its confirmation and simultaneously its flight, is the identity *en abîme* and the turning of the return. It is woman, finally, who does not have something that is proper to her, since what is proper to her would be the power to discriminate between the proper and the improper. What is proper to woman is to be in retreat of the proper, is to be properly undecidable. One might conclude that it is here that the trap closes around the theological hand, leading it to the despairing solution of the veil. *And what if it was here that the cause of man's ravishing lay, in this retreat of the proper, in that which would appear as the properly undecidable truth on the part of woman? And what if the extremity of men's desire was to want to enjoy this place where the truth and the non-truth communicate with each other?* To want THE truth turns out to be incestuous, since the desire for the whole truth contains also the desire for the non-truth which the truth essentially contains. Theological representation thus proposes to deliver us from this ravishment, it intercedes for us, dilates our pupils for us, overcome in the invisible by God, and subjugated in the visible by woman. To us men, it assigns a salutary task: the task of truth or the veiling of woman.



This gives a different aspect to the affair of the veil. The problem is no longer posed in terms of signs but of the prohibition of the referent of these signs. The *prohibition*

does not limit itself to an interdiction that forbids. Rather, it stems from an apparatus (*dispositif*) of truth that digs deep roots of the drives so as to install a legality of *jouissance* on the surface, the imperative of which is a *jouissance* of legality. Once young women find themselves in a space vanquished by the political unworking of God, and once they reactivate the theological imperatives, we are in the presence of a conflict between two prohibitions and the two beliefs that underpin them, both of which are necessarily beliefs in a certain posture, of woman and of truth. They are represented here by the girl who defends her “*modesty vis-a-vis God*” and by the minister who sets this in opposition to “*the face of France*.” At least, of a certain face of France, which is associated with its belief in the Rights of Man. The girl believes in the de-monstration of woman. Which means that in the unconscious of her system, she is represented by the *monster*. This is what we find throughout the imaginary of ancient civilizations under the figure of the Sphinx, for example, as it is staged in the Oedipus myth. Arabo-Islamic culture abounds in these enigmatic and dangerous sphinxes, constantly placed in the masculine hero’s initiating path. The theological solution, as we have seen, is to impose on him the prohibition of the veil as a prohibition of feminine monstration, which is simultaneously a de-monstration by the sight of the Other. But the minister believes that de-monstration is monstration (the veil as ostentatious sign), and thus forbids it. *In so doing, he prohibits the girl’s prohibition*. The quarrel about signs was a diversion from this act. And in creating a sign among signs, one disrobes the veil behind the curtain of religious semiotics, to avoid confronting the terrifying question of *the prohibition of the other’s prohibition*.

But what precisely is the posture of the woman that the minister’s belief is defending, in prohibiting the prohibition of the other woman? Is it a monster (*monstre*) that has the right to monstrate its signs? Or rather a being that would be essentially demonstrated, because no longer subject to legislation by any prohibition of the veil? But what is a woman according this belief? One must return to the body of reference, that is to say, to the text of the Rights of Man. We know that the textuality of these rights is more extensive than the declaration of the same name. But some principles are stated there and, on the point in question, it is clear that woman is a man, man as *anthropos*, or a singularity-type of the species. Sexual difference is not only not an essential trait of this textuality, but is, precisely, one of the discriminations this textuality wants to erase. What counts here is humanity in its difference from other animal species. The man of these rights is neither a man nor a woman, but the *singular identity of their identity and of their difference*. At this level, the originary scission of sex has no currency, which is to say that, essentially, in this universe of reference the question of truth does not depend on the difference between the sexes. In principle, this system wants the truth of sexual difference to become something like a religious truth, a private affair.

We can now understand in what way the question of the veil’s manifestation is a panic question. Girls in veils would not be wearing religious signs but introducing the highest bet for a system at war with another: its apparatus (*dispositif*) for producing truth. The identarian myths of a modern West and a traditionalist Islam, everywhere at war with each other, have thus been brought to raise their bets. This war is not the ancient confrontation of two beliefs in the same truth, such as the

crusades that still haunt our memories, but the war of two truths that criss-cross. If, with the Rushdie affair, the war of truth has taken place through *fiction*, because it dwelled on the textual field of the origin, with the veil it is the entire apparatus (*dispositif*) of prohibition around woman that has been shaken up. It is not by chance that *fiction* and *woman* are what is at stake in the most important conflict between belief and of identity in the world today. For together, by the one and the other, *it is the truth of the body and the body of truth*, as determinants of *the limits of the proper* of a system, a person, or a community, that is *put into question*. It thus concerns the most imperial motive for thinking relations in the world, between worlds. Such is the question of prohibiting the prohibition of the other.

Abyssal question. There is no other without the prohibition that makes him other to himself and to the other. Prohibition is the institution of the other. To prohibit this prohibition is to prohibit it as other. From this perspective, there is no doubt that *dis-institution* is one of the forms of human destruction. There are numerous indications of the increase in this mode of destruction in the history of the world. The identarian movements which are cropping up everywhere are the most telling symptom of this. They are the signs of a generalized global anxiety in the face of the question of prohibition. We must not, however, understand this anxiety in moralizing terms, as a relaxation of morals, etc. This anxiety derives from our sense of being placed in front of something like an ineluctable commitment, that of the imposition of a universality of rights for all humanity and of the creation of an institution for global legislation. There is no place here to go into the details of the formation of this project in the West, of its multiple versions, all of which gravitate around the idea of a humanity prescribed to the community by a universal prohibition and a universality of prohibitions. This project is found today in military, economic, political, scientific, humanitarian discourses. It is a daily fact.

What characterizes these discourses, with the terror and hope that carry or inspire, is that they regard the law as technique and prohibition as order. This thought thus eludes the essential question of prohibition, namely, that it founds itself on an interposition, underpinned (implicitly) by an apparatus (*dispositif*) of truth. What would be the universal speech that would come to interpose itself for all of humanity? In which language would it be articulated, from which place among places could it be spoken? The universal prohibition would presume a position of INTER between every *inter* of human communities, incarnated by an absolute femininity, a Woman-world that would have no identity and would thwart all identities in order to dispense with the difference between truth and non-truth for all: a mother of humanity after the fact (*après coup*) whose language would be maternal at the interior of all languages.

It is important to combat the servitude or the injustice which produces the prohibition of the other, but there is no place for the *enunciation* of the prohibition that would annul the prohibition of the other. There is no *interposing* universal, because there is no master of language. There are only the speeches of interposition. But the identarian myth of the modern West is pegged to this idea to produce the prohibition of prohibitions, to become thus the difference of differences, consequently to rejoin the absolute femininity of the species. The freedom it promotes is radical in

its aim, in going towards this destiny, where truth in conformity with this freedom would rejoin their identity that would be: woman.

The final pages of *Triste Tropiques*, by Claude Levi-Strauss, are doubtless the most limpid utterance of the identitarian mytheme of the West on this subject:

Now I can see, beyond Islam, to India, but it is the India of Buddha, before Mohammed. For me as a European, and because I am a European, Mohammed intervenes with uncouth clumsiness, between our thought and Indian doctrines that are very close to it, in such a way as to prevent East and West joining hands, as they might well have done, in harmonious collaboration.

If the West traces its internal tensions back to their source, it will see that Islam, by coming between Buddhism and Christianity, Islamized us at the time when the West, by taking part in the crusades, was involved in opposing it and therefore came to resemble it, instead of undergoing—had Islam never come into being—a slow process of osmosis with Buddhism, which would have Christianized us still further, and would have made us all the more Christian in that we would have gone back to Christianity itself. It was then that the West lost the opportunity of remaining female.⁹

What the West encounters through Islam is the *interposition*, the stone in its path, that keeps it from realizing its female identarian destiny. The cry of the mythologizing mythology is wrenching: it laments the West that can no longer rejoin its Eastern pole nor close the circle of identity of identity and difference. The other as bad luck, as diversion, as male cutting the female from herself: the anthropological myth of the West thus sees Islam as its veil. Are we thus at the epoch of the unveiling of the West?

Further Reading

In the background of this work on Islam are a number of readings of European thought, among which I would like to cite the following:

On the question of woman and the visual: Jacques Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles/Éperons: Les Styles de Nietzsche*, trans. Barbara Harlow (University of Chicago Press, 1979); Sigmund Freud, "Female Sexuality" (1931), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XXI* (1927-1931), trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1961) 221-244; Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Marion Faber, Intro. Robert C. Holub (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); *Twilight of the Idols: or How to Philosophize with a Hammer*, trans. Duncan Large (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); *The Gay Science*, trans. Thomas Common (Cambridge: Cambridge University

⁹ Claude Levi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, trans. John Weightman and Doreen Weightman, (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1992) 408-9.

Press, 2001); Jacques Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX, Encore*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 1991); "On the Gaze as *Objet Petit a*," in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis; The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1998).

On the question of the prohibition: P. Legendre, *Les Enfants du texte* (Paris: Fayard); *Dieu au miroir* (Paris: Fayard).

On the sign and the hand: Jacques Derrida, "La main de Heidegger," in *Psyche: Invention de l'autre* (Paris: Galilee, 1987) 415-51.

On the question of truth: Martin Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth: On Plato's Cave Allegory and Theaetetus*, trans. Ted Sadler (London: Continuum, 2005).

I take the liberty of referring the reader to two texts of my own on the questions approached here: "La femme immémoriale" *Cahiers Intersignes* 6-7 (1993), and on the Rushdie affair: *Une fiction troublante: de l'origine en partage* (La Tour d'Aigues: Editions de l'Aube, 1994).

NADIA TAZI

JANNAH

Of all the myths in Islam, *Jannah*—the Paradise promised to the righteous in the Qur'an—is certainly the most ineffable. Indeed, it is the very definition of the unimaginable. In the orthodox tradition, *Jannah* is the essence of that which is beyond words as it is beyond mortal experience. Surpassing any form of representation or comparison, it can be thought of only as “the end,” in every sense of the word: the end of thought itself, if not a transcendental idea of the conditions under which the end is possible, as a release expedited by faith. Nevertheless, this apophatic extreme has constantly been subverted; after all, the delights proclaimed in the Qur'an—splendors, light and lavish *sensual pleasures*—irresistibly invite expatiation. *Jannah's* dual function, at the same time sublimational and retributive, and also the contentious issues it raises, places it right at the heart of the faith and of Islamic religious thought. Paradise has permeated every form of discourse, from theoretical musings to erotic fantasies by way of legal quibblings, mystical quests and the polemical or deviant interpretations of the heresies. From the ninth century onwards (the third century after the Hijrah), the Gardens of Paradise were presented as an essentially strategic topos in the order of knowledge, power and their relationship with pleasure. A place not so much situatable as *situative*: you are instantly identifiable by how you approach, debate or catalogue it. For anyone with half an ear, this Paradise is a revelation. It exposes the stages of Being as progressive states of knowledge. It defines frontiers, not only between believers and non-believers but also between disciplines (theology and philosophy, in particular) and between schools of thought. It articulates ideological positions and political differences. And, of course, it has its own songs and stories, pretexts for bawdy escapism and popular merrymaking. Tell me what *Jannah* is to you, and I will tell you who you are and what you desire. I will know if you are a libertine, a scholar, a philosopher or a mystic. Without seeking to appraise your spiritual standing or moral fortitude, I will know the extent of your understanding, the nature of your intellectual and religious affinities and the historical tradition upon which you draw. Last but not least, if you are a man I will know how you view women and the sexual order in general. And from all that I will be able to divine where you stand in relation to modernity.

Somewhere in these compellingly problematic realms, classical Islamic thought lost its way, entangling, embellishing and compromising itself. With that, the theme sank into the dogmatic slumber of theology and entered the base, ribald naiveties of popular culture. How unlikely that it should resurface now under the darkest of

auspices, against the background of the martyrology, Islamic revolution, wars and advanced degeneration which the Muslim world has been experiencing for the past few decades. Spun out in the past by metaphysicians and poets, it demonstrates the remarkable impoverishment of State Islams before marking the upheaval effected by the Islamists on the back of that. The hyperbole of *Jannah* is already etched into the shattered face of our century, underpinned by death, as if the afterlife were utterly suffused with extreme violence. As if, in having secured the eternity of the hereafter, one's death were signifying a climactic moment of an entirely different kind: the total sublimation of the spiritual by the temporal, the conversion of religious faith into a political belief. *Jannah* apparently becomes less inherently unfathomable when seen as expediting an otherwise untenable clash of two different realities, by becoming an instrument of terror. How else to attain the life everlasting, since it goes hand in hand with violence? A violence, moreover, which absolutely demands death in the name of God and which receives it with the pledge of *immediate* coronation in Paradise, without delay, without having to await the end of time. A violence, in other words, which scandalously promises a hyperbolic continuity between this world and the next, between the most mortal of deaths and eternal life. This vision attests to the fatal disorientation of a religion falling prey to political degeneration, to juridism and to a return in strength of the most inept literalism; but also, and indissociable from all that, to the indigence of today's globalized culture. This withdrawal into a non-space of hostility devoid of all sense, an alarming region of psychological reversal, today represents Islam's most vertiginous divide from itself and from the rest of the world. If it is true that *Jannah* can only offend modernity on the dual grounds of the latter's Christian heritage and its killing of God, then we now recognize in this Paradise something other than a slightly kitsch fable. It articulates the eschatological anticipation enshrined in totalitarian slogans, a sectarian messianism and a pathological view of the masculine and the feminine which is quite specific to Islamism. Shrouding an essentially political fracture in its obscurantist sacrality, it rejoices in disaster and paralyzes thought.

I shall only tackle this fascinating theme indirectly, steering well clear of the numerous questions it raises and instead confining myself a very brief and general examination of certain aspects related to *virility*—a quality I should distinguish from masculinity right at the outset, in that it always (and not only in the hereafter) masks hubris, hyperbole and excess. Since Paradise is essentially situative, significative, expressive and scandalous, there could be no better context in which to look at this notion. It thus appears as seen in the mirror held up by *Jannah*, reflected through a series of circular arguments and structural aporiae which pervert sexual politics—and, indeed, politics in general. In passing, I shall also address some other questions of topical relevance.

By focusing the human condition upon the idea of Judgment, the Islamist doxa—true to the dogma—promises to the righteous, sex, sex and more sex, *ad infinitum*. They pass straight from *jouissance* to the beatific vision just as they pass through death, with its overtones of martyrdom, from this world to the next in a kind of permanent ecstasy. The discourse is stripped of all hidden meaning: gone are the allegorical dimension and the *imaginal* landscape which, in the great tradition, reveal

themselves during the long spiritual journey the believer embarks upon down here on earth. No longer is the eschatological promise framed in a metaphorical representation of the Hereafter. And certainly not in esoteric terms, such as the powerful image in Islamic mysticism of an infinity spent fulfilling spiritual desires. Yet neither do these representations incorporate the extravagances of the past. What remains is a vision wide-eyed with fantasy, with exasperation even. On the internet, for example, the exhortation to take the right path—the straight line to Paradise—relies upon the defense and illustration of the *Sharia*. Shrouded in modesty and mist, no longer are the *houri* depicted down to the smallest anatomical detail as they once were, with lustrous eyes, translucent skin and erect nipples. Modernity and puritanism (Wahhabist or Shi'ite) oblige one another in this. In fact, we hardly recognize the *houri* at all beneath the halo of metaphor and circumlocution surrounding them. But their voluptuous silhouettes are still revealed to the heroes and the just, even under seventy veils, and still they sing their wedding songs so loud that there is no doubting their reality.

One thing is certain: the presence of the *houri* only adds to the dissymmetry between women embarking upon the path of righteousness and their male counterparts. We cannot but note that the discourse is considerably less explicit as far as female prospects of sensual pleasures in Paradise are concerned—and that despite all its entreaties they play their part in the “Islamic” revolution or renaissance. When it comes to the Garden of Delights, the same tradition that so forcefully invites women to don the veil, cloaks itself in a chastity, striking in its contrast with the wild stories revealed in by popular culture. We can only suppose that they expected to enjoy a glorious, perhaps even elevated perpetuation of their earthly condition, their bodies incorruptible and their eternal lives spent surrounded by pearls and precious stones. Modesty enjoins silence. God moves in mysterious ways. And the religious authorities have rejected Muhammad Rashid Rida's interpretation, identifying man's spouse in this world with the *houri* in Paradise. Her pale skin notwithstanding, the *houri* is no less appealing as an example to the pious woman as she is enticing for the male believer seeking the Abode of Peace. But what do opuscles and sermons have to say about this perfect maiden, whom we have rather quickly consigned to the world of erotic fables and songs? Her title conjures up an image of blazing eyes, since its meaning is most exact: the contrast between the clear white of the eye and the blackness of the pupil. The pure beauty with which she is endowed, the presumed intensity of her passion (although it is only presumed), her generally restrained manner, and her number, with all the exciting variety that implies—everyone will have at least two *houri* with faces as bright as the full moon, and some seventy-two—not to mention the virtual qualities she is able to derive from her divine medium: all these modern-day embellishments only serve to amplify her mechanical dimension and the submissiveness which has always defined her. The only remaining certainty is her virginity—a quality which, even if it restores an aura of purity, also denotes very prosaically that she belongs exclusively to the Blessed—to those men, fulfilled at last, to whom she pledges her total and absolute availability as befits her functional nature and chattel status. There are none of the descriptions, the details, the admiration which once revealed her; she has become a mere shadow, a pure promise of flesh. So much so in fact that, paradoxically, this *houri* could be to

woman what, in that most far-removed of traditions, patristic Christology, the almost immaterial body of the resurrection is to the mortal body: the faintest, subtlest expression of human incarnation, a spectre representing the stubborn will of a few bearded old men, and ultimately one of the Qur'anic mysteries. Her evanescent contours shaped entirely for male sexual pleasure, like the body glorious she exists for no other reason than to serve as a vehicle (for the desires of the righteous) or a rattle to be brandished during ideological disputes. We can no longer discern the houri's chimerical character from her physical form, nor even from the fascinating mix of chastity and crudity still surrounding her, but it is there nonetheless, in that dyschronous combination of cybersexuality and dogmatic regression which she displays under the guise of the sacred.

The fact remains that, since nothing is removed from the Qur'anic imagery itself,¹ the other world retains all its materialism in the eyes of the moralists. We encounter there none of the imaginary figures, intelligible interlocutors or apparitions from dreams found in Avicenna, Ibn Arabî or Mulla Sadrâ, only at most a few injunctions to caution. The revelation of Paradise is lethargic, with its shady valleys, its rivers, its gold and fine fabrics and its perfumes of Arabia, and with all its sensual imagery invoked with a curious blend of excitement and prudery (it cannot be by chance the tone is set by the perfume, an *essence* rather than a substance, which better than anything else combines subtlety with sensuality). It would be an understatement to say that the righteous triumph; no, they strut and they pose, gleaming with a plethora of astounding qualities. And more: popular belief unashamedly identifies the excesses inherent in virility with the passage to transcendence. Ascribed the virtues of the prophets, the righteous—all of them—achieve the selfsame identity in perfection. And each of them may contemplate his power by exercising it. That is, through sexual enjoyment. As if to redouble the fetishization of the female body, the scopophilic tropism usually rendered off-limits to the male by the interdictions of the faith now envelops the unspeakable (hence the fact that the houri of the past literally was a chimera: a monster composed of an entirely disparate assemblage of parts to be gazed upon eagerly). Not content with conjuring up the power of the second sex, the righteous see themselves in the full glare of their holy predation. Without dwelling upon the erotic, the Islamist discourse still manages to feed upon a male narcissism of utterly unquenched vanity. Islamic culture may harbor the arts of love in its past, amongst them an exquisite courtliness, but they have no place in this Paradise: when the sexual act is not hushed up altogether, it is only ever presented as coitus of never-ending arousal² at a level of absolute intensity without quite reaching orgasm—or rather as a permanent orgasm—in which the woman's only involvement is to reflect male power. When one ventures to question devotees on this topic, its Edenic vision tends to produce nothing more than troubled silence followed by some kind of wild, unstoppable version of the discourse in which the polemical codes inflate, stutter and then collapse in the face of the mental image, which itself degenerates into congealed stereotypes. The pleasure supposedly represents the absolute: more, always more,

¹ See 44:54, 55:72 and 52:20, which refer to the houri.

² See Aziz al-Azmeh, "Rhetoric for the Senses: A Consideration of Muslim Paradise narratives," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 26.3 (1995): 215-31.

infinitely more. The boundlessness of the sexual act being expressible only in quantity, the seventy *houri* articulate never-ending excess. Or, to put it another way, the most eagerly awaited expression of virility. A virility taken to the absolute extreme, redundant in its very power and yet feeding that power, where ultimately it represents nothing more than an ipseity nourished not by some insubstantial notion (that of absolute submission to the Absolute, as implied by the name Islam) but by quite the opposite: by the unbridled plenitude born of fantasy. It is all as if, up there in the sky, the supermale finally manages to lay claim to his true essence, at last fulfilling the dream of unicity, of sovereignty and of self-finality his virility has always pursued: the ability to take pleasure and to dominate forever, beyond all limits and beyond the laws of nature.

To reason the unreasonable in this way, as a bloated tautology, is to smother the other with the self, the spiritual with the carnal (or the intelligible with the sensitive, the hidden with the obvious), the ideal with the fantasy, masculinity with the essentialized identity of the real. In short, Paradise with the misery of world. Quite obviously, this vision is rooted in a militant disposition of a kind defended by Islamism, in all its manifestations, in much the same way as fascist cultures still like to celebrate machismo. This is an ideology which does not confine itself solely to this one patriarchal assumption, and in its pursuit of a return to the supposed origins of Islam neither does it claim any noble values—the sovereignty of the desert, the chivalry of the great age—in the name of the Muslim man, nor share the principles of civility and level-headedness enshrined in classical thought.

In a context of conflict and general dereliction (upon which we should dwell at greater length), the preoccupation of the “brothers” with virility derives from a temptation towards austerity which is always lying in wait for them. By acquiring puritan and combative traits, that virility can operate in the most brutal of ways, trapping strength, purity and judgment. Fed by reactionary passions and a narrow juridism, by certainty and resentment, it expresses itself in the most cursory of ways at or close to the freezing point of thought, by dictating the visibility of bodies and the fixing of minds. Here, where the virile Word and the virile Face come together, the one—being the antithesis of the Face as understood by Levinas—summons and redoubles the other within their confines; although not without casting itself into exteriority, to the detriment of *sirr* (interiority), and overcoming a system of essentialized identity, which in nature would be given as destiny. Pledged to give tangible rewards in return, and to kill and to cage in the name of an authority established by God, these institutions (the Word and the Face) arm and steel themselves to suppress thought and life. Mortal reification. Islamism sweepingly disavows the intelligibility, rooted in both philosophy and mysticism, which identifies the real, the true and the invisible. Its great leap backwards begins with the repudiation of the *zâhir* (the apparent) and the *bâtin* (the esoteric), two fundamental states without which the eschatology—and hence the road to the Hereafter—lose their sense. It would be no exaggeration to say that this literalist and jurist reduction eliminates Islam’s most brilliant speculative legacy. All to benefit a public display that brings together populism, machismo and the modern mass media. The lazier the thinking, the more ostentatious the channels through which it is presented.

The more unimpressive the virility, the greater its tendency to show off with its codes and its posturings: veils, beards, minarets, mass movements, spectacular atrocities . . . And Islamism does not attack knowledge alone, it strikes at the very principle of equilibrium and consensus which has for centuries formed the basis of broad community concordance. That is, the moral and political tenet that the just man or the good caliph is he who takes up *jihad* against passions and who governs himself and others in total justice, finding the *via media*.³ This self-mastery in submission to God is accompanied in principle by a duty of obedience and attendance to one's prince, just as that prince is himself bound to set an example. It is often forgotten that, by contract, the Muslim subject is to the good caliph what the wife is to her husband: a comparable premodern dissymmetry sanctifies the *siyasa* authority of the prince and that of the husband—to wit, the art of governing either the family or the city in accordance with considered principles. In supposedly fighting tyranny and in denouncing apostasy and moral corruption in the community, the Islamists are actually intent upon restoring a dirisible virility in the name of the Law.

Before continuing these introductory comments, it is worth briefly reminding ourselves of how Paradise was presented in the past. And to begin by recalling that *Jannah* was a significant battleground in the great struggle for the truth fought by the philosophers and the theologians. To a great extent, the dispute centered on the delicate question of corporeal resurrection. Like Christianity, in this matter orthodox Islam has had to deal with contradictions between two fundamental sources of inspiration: on the one hand, the Jewish tradition, in which the body is saved, and on the other, the Hellenistic—and above all Platonic—idea that death marks the liberation of the soul from the body. Since Islam recognizes neither original sin nor the earthly incarnation of a God who is himself called upon to rise from the dead, the disputations of its theologians on this issue proved rather less tortuous than they were for the fathers of the Church. Muslims have never been forced to condemn the flesh or to return at the end of time to a “glorious” body which isn't one at all, and which remains suspended in a sublime state like that of the angel, nourished only by the contemplation of God. Not that the scholars of the Islamic law did not have to fight on several fronts at once. For one thing, in spirited listeners *Jannah* evoked a catalog of libertine entertainments, infused with irreverence and irony. The theologians also had to challenge the vaticinations, from the lewd to the partisan, of clergy brazen in packing their sermons at will with embellishments to the Qur'anic imagery of the Hereafter. It is distressing to believe in this day and age, but at one time Islamic preaching could be explicit in the extreme. The erotic frenzy provided a welcome relief from the rigors of everyday life, and proliferated under the guise of a faith claiming to offer less mystery than simplicity for the masses. But how to reconcile this pleasure with the sovereign good? The exuberance of the flesh, the luxury and glitter surrounding it, the liberty and eloquence with which this parade of

³ “The word ‘justice’ means a satisfactory balance, be it in one's own character, in relations with others or in the elements of the administration of a nation,” Ghazâlî, *Mizan al 'Amal* (*Criterion for Action*) (Cairo, 1964).

delights was presented, barely any more ethereal than those of the here and now . . . All this erotic incitement inevitably profaned the very dignity of the religious message, undermining both its soteriological meaning and its practical dimension. It was no easy matter to propitiate these two worlds without indulging them.

These theological scholars also had a hard fight on their hands countering the abstraction defended by the majority of philosophers in the name of an allegorical interpretation of the holy book. At stake was the whole edifice of the revelation in its divine provenance. The theologians engaged in controversies with those who often frequently shared the same Greek sources, but found it easy to denounce the incoherence and vulgarity of literalist interpretations. How could believers be persuaded to adopt the temperance and moderation demanded by the Law when the Hereafter was being depicted as an orgy, albeit one bathed in glory? And how could the faith stress the intent (*niyya*) of the moral act, its intrinsic value regardless of its effects, while at the same time backing the Law of God with a promise—even, as Avicenna put it, belittling it with the supply of merchandise? As well as the “vile pleasures” of *Jannah*, the scholars found themselves arguing about the “market” and the accusation that they had allowed faith to become a “childish toy” through their facile interpretations. These intellectual disputes were limited in range, admittedly, but the underlying notions of salvation and retribution are intrinsic to faith—all faith.⁴

To continue: if this perilous yet desperately attractive theme, without equivalent in the other religions of the Book, could put the faith to the test, then it was supported neither by reason (*Jannah* runs counter to any representation of the cosmos) nor by experience (only the Prophet had ascended into Heaven). And if, even more fundamentally, it engaged morality and the idea of judgment, then it drew support from the expectation professed by every faith.

What does a master of orthodoxy like Ghazâlî, for example, have to say about Paradise? Shifting between the theological, the juridical and the mystical, his thought still merits consultation, even by the Islamists. In his exploration of the next world, Ghazâlî typically manages to retain room for the measure, good sense and conciliation which define the *sunnah*. As a good theologian who must simultaneously excite, persuade and reason in the service of the faith, he skilfully shifts the emphasis of the problem: if there is continuity from one world to the next, then that exists not from the point of view of the object—which, by definition, is unknowable—but in respect of the subject: the perceptive subject and his works. Paradise becomes a horizon, at once a normative point of reference and a place of intelligibility which allows the establishment of a hierarchy (ontological, spiritual, moral, and so on) and the process whereby the soul is elevated, starting from the points of contacts between the visible and the invisible. In the double opposition of divine transcendence and human weakness, of the soul and the body, it is a central

⁴ See Emile Benvéniste, “The act of faith always includes certainty of remuneration,” *Indo-European Language and Society* (Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami Press, 1973) 143.

region which—by analogy or by anticipation—can impart understanding of regulating idealities, spiritual stations and pure bodies, as well as prolonging the states achieved in this world, be they sensual pleasures or the inspirations derived from visions, dreams or revelations.

The fact remains that *Jannah* is to each according to his desires and level of knowledge. Those whose belief is led by their bodies will know a carnal Paradise, whereas those who believe according to the spirit will experience the beatific vision of God and will come to understand that it is this world, not the next, which is pure evanescence. And it is they who will develop spiritual senses that allow them to hear the voices of angels, to smell the enchanting perfumes and to see God. The physical body is no way guilty in itself, but as the seat of animal passions it must know its place and not seek to usurp the supremacy incumbent upon the soul. Nothing in this regime of self-control is anything but extremely classical. As the entire *oeuvre* of Christian Jambet shows, for their part Eastern thinkers have gone much further, by way of the concept, based upon the Neoplatonist tradition, of an interiorization representing “birth into the afterlife.” In Paradise, relieved of corporeal preoccupations and sensory limitations, the soul is finally able to reveal itself, to become aware of itself in its transparency to the Divine, its delight flowing out unchecked in proportion to the perfection of its power, which is the power of knowing. In this sense, Paradise represents the crowning experience of the intimate; it is an undisguised and unlimited experience of intimacy, so intense an effusion of *bâtin* that it reveals the essence of the Divine. But seen from this world, there is a bestial destiny, the manifestation of moral perversion and ignorance, as well as an angelic one. As Sadrâ says, placing himself in the same tradition as Ghazâlî and Fârâbî, “Man becomes an angel in this world if knowledge and higher consciousness (*taqwa*) triumph in him.” If concupiscence triumphs he becomes a brute, and if overwhelmed by violence and anger, a wild beast. “The dog is a dog because of his form, not his substance; the pig is a pig because of his form, not his substance.” The dualist polemic, with all its moral psychology and political extensions, fits into the hierarchy—which is still accepted to this day—between the Islam of the vulgar and the religion of the initiated, enamored of knowledge and wisdom. There is One Truth, but in this respect, as throughout ontology, it has its gradations.⁵

⁵ Although it allows itself a certain elasticity, that is conditional upon the intention at the individual level being pure, or at least striving to be so, and that collectively it avoids *fitna*. In this respect, Ghazâlî does not shy away from tailoring his language to suit the occasion, legalistic or pragmatic, and yet still manages to map out a mystical path which finds its crowning glory in the face-to-face encounter with God. Ambiguity prevails to a certain degree, as it has always done, and as so often in Islam we found ourselves in an area of constant negotiation and recomposition through which sharia (in its literal sense, “the way”) is supposed to be found, but where, in practice, a structure favoring *fiqh* (jurisprudence) and consensus has grown up, although in so doing it raises some formidable questions of demarcation. Where does Paradise begin? Where does the world end? Where is the boundary between the political and the religious? And, in the modern context, where does Islam end and Islamism begin?

If *Jannah* does not quite let go of this world, if it does not necessarily manifest itself as an ideal horizon retaining all its powers of sublimation, then that is not only because its sensual gleam can legitimately be rendered figuratively and discursively. It is also, of course, because it requites loss and death, and because it reflects a remarkably contradictory sexual regime. The theologians having marked time on the philosophers, their burgeoning literalist accounts treated sex with justice and confidence. Subject to moderation, the ethical destiny of the heterosexual⁶ male does leave room for desire. Freely binding that state to the Law, reference is made to a future intoxication representing God's generosity and His love for His favorite creation. None the less, he who exults in the hereafter will more than likely be caught in the grip of want and prohibition in this world. Where the sexual promise is made, so arises the question of woman and all that goes with wanting her, segregated and off-limits as she is. Where the invitation points, that is where the wall of the *harem* is raised, with all the fantasies and pangs for forbidden fruit that it arouses. The Muslim man's relationship with the carnal thus puts him in a *double bind*. The prophetic tradition does not hold out for him the chastity Saint Paul so longed for in Paradise, but quite the opposite: the pleasure of sex and the pleasure derived from sex within the legitimate—and polygamous—framework of marriage. The flesh can and must be pursued for its own sake, be cultivated like an art, be celebrated, be decorated . . . Providing, of course, that the rules of decency and a certain amount of moderation are observed. And not forgetting that its idyllic innocence must be reasserted, if there still be need to do so, according to the example decreed by the Prophet, the impeccable model of sensuality and virility. Or, to be more exact, according to the hagiography—still in full force—of a virility noble enough to tread the full length of the lofty line between unfailing power and flawless justice, and passing a series of wonderful, tumultuous acts of love along the way. That would be the unicity of the Prophet, we are told: the ability to steer the course of virtue even through sexual life.

The profusion of such discourses on *Jannah* illustrates the extent of the *ars erotica* admitted by Islam—indeed, encouraged by it through the application of this model. As in other Eastern wisdoms, the body, and sex in particular, can achieve transcendental status and heuristic value. In fact, even those like Sohravardī and Mullā Sadrā who posit a strict dualism of soul and body, presenting the latter as the place of darkness and non-being which stands in the way of a introspective relationship with the One, do not insist upon the condemnation of sexual enjoyment. “Even sexual pleasure issues from true delights.”⁷ “There are no sexual relations,” comments Jambet, “there is a corporeal light, which animates the bodies in their desire and comes to them from their souls.” In Paradise—that is, in the world of

⁶ With all its abundance and complexity, the question of homosexuality deserves separate treatment. Relatively tolerated, sublimated and lauded in courtly poems and stories, it is nonetheless subject to a strict physical prohibition.

⁷ Sohravardī, quoted by Jambet in *Le Caché et l'Apparent* (L'Herne, 2003) 91 and onwards, developing the complex themes, ill-treated by this brief account, of processive ontology through Sadrā's notion, after Ibn Arabī, that quiddity screens the inherent singularity of being, and Sohravardī's idea, inspired in its way by Avicenna, of a hierarchy of celestial bodies with their light arrayed in two dimensions: “triumph” and “indigence.”

intelligences—the soul unmasked will finally experience the union it gained a prescient awareness of through the act of love in this world, a happiness it previously only knew as the muffled and incomplete echo of a departure from itself. From the substance, in other words. And more precisely for Sadrâ, from the principle of quiddity which obstructs pure existence—that is, the act of being in its total singularity and full power. Expressions of virility such as the pursuit of sovereignty, hyperbolism, the face as narcissistic monstration and the use of force as a physical negation of power run strictly counter to these classifications, as they do to the mystical element in general, inasmuch as it assumes the immanence of the Divine. Based upon a metaphysics of power and in accordance with the opposition of the visible and the invisible, we can categorize the inversions almost trait for trait: sovereignty versus seigniorship or spiritual chivalry (*futuwwa*), narcissistic ritual versus self-effacement in pursuit of the divine Face, ostentation versus discretion, virility-led identity fixation versus infinity into the Other . . . This is not the place to show the extent to which dogmatism and the institutional order in Islam have been unable or unwilling to disavow virilist abrogation of its *via media* and its spiritual direction, both of them highly sensitive when it comes to accommodating the feminine. Suffice it to say that everything leads us to believe that much of the responsibility rests with politics. We shall note only that Islamists can most often content themselves with radicalizing a “phallogocentric” predisposition which already inflicts its diktats everywhere.

As far as woman herself is concerned, while it is true that Islam has never disputed her possession of a soul, on the other hand it instituted the *harem* (as the name suggests) as a sacred place for protection of the weak by the strong—a virilist argument *par excellence*. The presumed sanctity of the private domain is translated into an act of confinement which shaped the Islamic city and sealed the fate of the inmates. To put it systematically, by imposing incarceration and isolation, the *harem* and its corollary, the veil, contributed significantly to reducing women to the status of purely physical beings. Thus they came to be seen as creatures of passion and instinct, complete with all the stereotypes that inferiority evokes. The veil in this context is not the means of depropriating the female body generally portrayed, since to dispel that is simply a matter of noting its ambivalence—of seeing in it, as even the best authors like to do, as the instrument of every incitement, seduction and infidelity. Inasmuch as it represents a means of confinement, the *hijab* signifies this appointment of women to domestic duties, to the domain of emotions, sensations and physical attributes. Denied access to the world and to education (or to very much of it), she can find accomplishment only in her role as lover and, above all, as childbearer. To men, conquest (of the world and of history), to women, preservation (of the species, of the home and of tradition). To men, destiny and adventures of the mind, to women, the permanence of seasons and days and the dullness of the body. The old Aristotelian and Galenic order, which imprisons woman in matter alone, could not have found a better illustration: the feminine finds expression only as a lesser being, in passivity, or, in total contrast, through all-powerful motherhood. Associating patriarchy with polygamy, this means of confinement can only induce power games, rivalries and two-way resistance. The woman becomes the power, the mother fulfilled through her son, who in return endows her with virility. A

dangerous, almost untameable creature who must be protected from her own desire and from whom society must be protected. An insatiable being—cunning, says the Qur'an—who conspires with the forces and the occult and the night, who becomes obsessed and anguished when gazed upon by others. And so we enter an endless hyperbological⁸ circle: the more a wife is denigrated, the more she raises her son in the cult of virility, and so the less potent and independent he becomes. The more the flesh is accentuated, the less fulfilled she can be. The wilder this forbidden women becomes, the less satisfied she is in return. And, coming full circle, the more virility is vindicated . . . Ethos deploying its exaggerations and disjunctions in hubris and mimetic rivalry. It is these pesterings and interdictions, these turns of the screw, each one more prohibitive than the last, these schizze and serial paradoxes (all-powerful slave, fettered or deceived master, ceremonial virility, and so on) that dominate the psyche and poison domestic life.

We can imagine that *Jannah* must seem to men like the ultimate *harem*: a haven of peace and relaxation, free of all malice, in the sovereignty of rediscovered innocence as it was at the beginning of time. People have even wondered whether this garden is the same as Adam's Eden. Without lingering on this lovely Qur'anic story, we must remember that Adam was a caliph: literally, "he who comes after God." After the Fall, he repented and was pardoned. In other words, this is a matter of sovereignty from the outset and everything can be inverted depending on how the notion is interpreted: on the one hand, Islam presents *Jannah* as man's Edenic condition; on the other, it is placed in absolute obedience to transcendence, with sovereignty belonging to God. Man is placed at the summit of Creation before the Fall, even above the angels. But the Absolute separates the beginning from command, creating an infinite chiasmus between them by means of a submission, seigniorial or servile, to the Divine. In honor of his caliphal rank, God gives Adam not only language, which elevates him above the angels, but also woman and the world. His relationship with the world is thus shaped by a favor; it has been entrusted to him in order that he may praise his God, acknowledging the signs of His presence. In making the world a place of hospitality, rather than one of exile or delinquency (*Dasein*), here again Islam is in total opposition to the Christian tradition, and to a certain extent modernity.⁹ For man, the world is a garden rich in offerings and in words. It is this remarkable conjunction between the desired, the given and the thought which defines the domain over which he may reign, as long as he agrees to serve: to serve God as a being endowed with responsibility. As for Adam's companion, that shadow unnamed in the Qur'an, she seems simply to subscribe to a regime of general subordination—with the one exception that she retains her dignity as a believer. He "created me (from you) so that your heart may find rest", al-Tabari has her saying. And so she remains the subordinate of a subordinate, serving God by entertaining His appointed caliph. Responsible for the Fall, but not guilty of it, she submits to Adam and is at his disposal, but is not so much stigmatized at the ontological level as permanently marked with a kind of ancillary inferiority.

⁸ A term coined by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe.

⁹ See the idea of man as the "curate of nothingness" in Heidegger.

However, this prevalence of strong sex and of the hyperbiological chains constraining it does not explain the over-determination of the virile. Affixing itself to the Law is the element of history, a political provision bringing with it a second *double bind*. In deferring to despotic power, this fundamentally separates Islamic society from the classical Greek tradition with which it appears to be allied. The caliphs, shadows of God on earth, played their full part in this division: inherently first of all, in supposedly representing paragons of virility (through their warrior-prince image, as men of strength, sensuality and lavish hospitality, full of vitality, magnanimity, and so on); but also by virtue of the political destitution that they brought about. All too often, these despots took to its apex that inversion that sees word, face and force triumph in the affairs of State, rather than spirituality and justice as originally posited by Fârâbi in his model of the philosopher-king. It should suffice to note here that the prince derives his power from his paternal authority, his religious aura and his distance from his subjects. He embodies a politics of a visibility which demands admiration: an outward appearance and swagger that, on the face of it, make up for the weaknesses stifling virility to display unparalleled pleasure—the pleasure of command, but also that of possession and of consumption as in Paradise, with a libidinous fury presented as the most obvious manifestation of divine sanction.

We know what inventive storytelling and arcane discourse the theme of the seraglio has inspired, and continues to inspire, in East and West alike. Aziz al-Azmeh¹⁰ has shown how, ever since the time of the *Umayyads*, a supposedly egalitarian and aniconic culture has adopted the old, despotic ways of the East as its own—in so doing compromising the sovereignty of the Unique and representing the *harem* as something close to the Hereafter. The luxury of this palace aspires to an aesthetic explicitly derived from *Jannah*:¹¹ plentiful and perfect are the *houri*, the boys, the servants and messengers, the gold and jewels, the fountains, the gardens, the exotic fruits, the banquets, the pavilions and the sanctuaries. The monarch's distance places the political scene on a supernatural plane, one of rapture and dread, where orders and points of reference blur as they pass from one world to another and so bring about an insidious decline of language and customs. He is *by right* the best of men, the wisest and the bravest, God's appointed one, who hears, judges, guides and protects his subjects. His face is everywhere. From the moment he is hidden from the people and assumes all his powers, his attributes can reflect the image of God—unicity, grandeur, majesty, sovereignty, omnipotence, the source of all gifts and providence. Ultimately, the caliph expresses himself through nothing but signs and effusion. He is surrounded by silence even when pouring forth. He sees all, knows all and is capable of everything, yet remains inscrutable and unassailable. Miracles and prophecies are attributed to him. Ordinary mortals kiss the ground he walks on, even though Islam forbids prostration before anyone but God. This pre-eminence is scrupulously imputed to the caliph's superior sense of justice and power of thought, it is true, but the fact remains that the vocabulary used in the panegyrics lauding the works and wonders of kingly dynasties, for example, is more or less

¹⁰ Aziz al-Azmeh, *Muslim Kingship* (London: I. B. Tauris Publishers, 1997).

¹¹ See Gülru Necipoglu, *Architecture, Ceremonial and Power* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991).

interchangeable with the lexicon of the divine: curacy, imitation, emanation, covenant and parity of function, and adulation of a sublime, evanescent master ruling in absentia. While the incantatory approach has retained the mystique of this power, as it has that of virility, we can nevertheless measure its strength by the disastrous extent of its effects.

Removed from public life and stifled, the masculine subject concerned has no choice but to turn his back on politics and, in order to assuage his manly vocation, withdraw forever into the domestic sphere. Even today, although states tyrannize men in one respect, in another they confirm their patriarchal authority through the *Sharia* (or equivalent law). This relieves them to some extent of the burden of being tyrannized, by granting them a semblance of recognition and power. In this sense, every authoritarian regime on Islamic soil has a despotic dimension to it: “domesticating” man in such a way that he is at once emasculated in the public domain and empowered in the private, with each aspect determining the other. Few and far between are the regimes that have freed themselves from this dual straitjacket and sought to guard against a machismo and a domestic delinquency that both have the potential to ambush the state. Most discriminate against women in the name of Islam at the same time as eliminating or controlling the spaces in which men can prove themselves: the arenas of warfare, of chieftdom, of brotherhood and of exertion where self-esteem is cultivated; the places of bravado and parity which once served as fields of honor. Now shaped in the private domain alone, the male secludes himself within the limits of “ordinary life” (Arendt). Here, his virility directs his power into the enslavement of woman, and even into the hatred of all things feminine. Humbled, the man can be virile only *by default*, through the subjugation he imposes upon others: not only women, but also sons and more generally anyone perceived as inferior for whatever reason (ethnicity, religion, professional or patronage relationship, and so on). The duty of obedience to parents, spouses and princes taught by the Qur’an ends up migrating and morphing into a whole constellation of power relationships and urges to control. The *macho*, as we know, becomes more intractable in his perpetual effort to prove himself to himself the more he is put down and humiliated by his own lords and masters. The more he exercises his power, the more he arouses and exposes himself to resistance, and hence the less able he is to prove himself. And so, once again, we encounter the antinomies and the crazy excesses of hyperbology. In all this there is a circular causality linking the sovereign and his subjects: it is only because the prince abuses his power that the “domesticated” male is able to define himself in terms of the patriarchal norm and the subjugation of the feminine. But, conversely, it is also because this subject is permitted to set himself up as a despot in miniature within his own four walls that he submits to the greater authority. And that in God and His law he primarily discerns attributions of power and ideas of judgment. It is because he finds himself emasculated that he cannot stop seeing power relationships everywhere, and always in binary terms: licit and illicit, good and evil, strong and weak, friend and foe . . . Machismo, dogmatic Islam, political oppression: all are bound together, and they can sustain themselves only under the aegis of the One.

Our modern age has done nothing to remove these obstacles confining the male to an alien domestic environment. He remains caught in a whole set of traps related to his desires, to authority in all its forms, to woman, to his parents . . . The hyperbological complications hem him in on all sides, affecting his points of references, his formal roles and his abilities, without his machismo ever letting up on its demands for satiation. It is primarily due to the violence of dictatorships, expert in adopting its coercive techniques and its technologies of control from modernity, that the great male game involving conquests of the self and parity of the masters has ceased, and also that there has, to all intents and purposes, been no modernization (read: democratization) of political life. In the private domain, where the oppressed male is supposed to find refuge and regain authority, his patriarchal position has been undermined by changes to the family, to the moral climate and, above all—with her emergence from the *harem*—to woman. For all this, and unremitting in their submission to hyperbolic and disjunctive logics, macho values are all the more resilient now that they are focused upon the domestic arena. The newspapers are full of stories relating how these constraints and dyschronic developments torment society.

What a wretched picture all of this reveals, of a masculinity and a gender politics pushing the world into reverse. In all the countless dramas affecting the Islamic world—its civil and regional wars, its poverty and the knock-on effects, its failed revolutions and bankrupt ideologies, its “West-hate” (in both senses, as subject and object), its Arab-Iranian propaganda battles—in all this, we can interpret the Islamist position based upon the devastating aporiae of virilist hyperbology and its counter-effects. There comes a time when, caught in the asymptote of the virile, dialectics cease to function and, in response to political tragedies, we allow relationships to be invested by fascist impulses. Fed by a vicious circle of impotencies and humiliations, the game of *double bind* becomes the consuming male passion; the means whereby he, wounded, is able to wound life in return. As has been said often enough, these Islamist movements are essentially reactive. Effectively, as far as they are concerned, the point is to oppose dictatorships and masters, and—in order to restore virility (by whatever name it goes: honor, authority, sacrificial heroism, patriarchy, fraternity, *male bonding* . . .)—to impose themselves upon those women who seek to emancipate themselves. It has to be pointed out, though, that the logic in which they are imprisoned actually imposes a systematic dependence upon woman. Desired, feared, hated and adulated, she is an inherent part of their *virility by default*. A virility that substitutes honor with a morality of hatred, public affirmation of the self and parity with domination of the weak behind closed doors, self-expression and self-exposure with the veiling of the other. And so, against her will, woman finds herself situated at the heart of male subjectivation. It is no surprise, then, that since she can no longer be confined to her own body and to the home, she must show—that is, *visibly display*—her submission to the androcentric order. This is the core principle shared by Islamists of all shades, the one they reassert incessantly, the one from which we can distill the essence of their politics: sexual identity and moral policing. Inasmuch, of course, as they do not find it in simply reflecting other macho integrist, like Bush and his sinister acolytes, to perpetuate the mechanics of their antithesis. That, too, reveals the extent of the shifts needed to escape from this

infernal logic. We must substitute the identity-based terminologies with the ideas and experiences of liberty. And we must take belief into our own heart of hearts while at the same time opening our house wide. Remember that the political question involves the emancipation of both sexes, who are inextricably bound together in the domestic arena.

C H R I S T I A N J A M B E T

Translated by Sigi Jöttkandt

FOUR DISCOURSES ON
AUTHORITY IN ISLAM

Like the other monotheistic religions, Islam, in a sole act of faith, affirms the absolute unicity, transcendence and authority of God.¹ Psychoanalysis, which is what brings us back together again today, lends no support to any figure of unicity, position of transcendence, legitimacy of authority *in itself*. No reality is accorded to the One, if this number has pretensions to some kind of theological validity. Unity, unicity, unification: these concepts, which we find at every stage of Muslim thought, are held by psychoanalysis to be imaginary. No transcendence, if the real is the real of the unconscious. No legitimation of authority of any kind, if it is true that psychoanalysis flushes out and desacralizes every form of the ideal ego. It ruins political belief, the belief in a subject supposed to know, who would unveil the truth in action and determine justice within the political bond. Psychoanalysis sustains propositions inverse to those of monotheism, for the same reasons it critiques the political conception of the world. How could a practice and a doctrine, Freud's, which aims to liberate the subject of identifications from representations of collective mastery, allow for an identification that founds the faithful's collective link to their scriptural revelation?

Freud deduced two propositions about the status of religion from his conception of the unconscious. For Freud, religion can be taken back to an obsessional neurotic representation of the Law, guaranteeing an illusion of a brilliant future. Religious illusion, precisely symmetrical to the imaginary inflation of the paternal figure, is not unlike revolutionary illusion. Revolutionary illusion condenses elements from two mirages, those of the political and the religious illusions. Without any exaggeration, one could say that Freud discredits all revolutionary discourse for the same reasons he made religious hope an illusion. Freud sought to dissipate what he held to be illusion, while explaining its power and the necessity of its rule. This is why psychoanalysts who have sought to account for the meaning and depth of Islam have had difficulties finding their marks. Are they referring to a group of imaginary representations that to a greater or lesser extent structure the discourse of the

¹ Originally published as "Quatre discours de l'autorité en islam" in *La psychanalyse dans le monde arabe et islamique*, ed. Chawki Azouri and Elisabeth Roudinesco (Beirut: Presses de l'Université Saint-Joseph) 39-63. Translated with kind permission of the PUSJ.

analyst? Would they submit the dogmas of this religion to a Freudian interpretation? In both cases, they treat as a miscognition something that the believer, to the contrary, holds to be the real par excellence, God, the Unique, whose speech heralds a promise and issues commandments, the essential conditions of salvation. Exposing the causes of such a belief, they force truth's appearance to vanish. But in so doing, do psychoanalysts not dodge the proper mode of existence of the religious phenomenon? In revealing the truth of the unconscious, the truth that belief represses and consciously modifies, do they not neglect the ontological stakes of truth to which belief testifies? But in consenting to such a positioning of the religious problem, would they not have to renounce Freud?

Introducing psychoanalysis to the Muslim world is a noble ideal, evocative of the Enlightenment. Does it not possess the same weakness, always characteristic of the *Aufklärung*, the division of truth between a consciousness that analyzes its illusions and an objective real stripped of all certainty? Is it a question of summoning Muslims to an analytic praxis whose axioms are atheist? The analysand will have ceased to believe *absolutely*, such that his or her certainty of faith appears, finally, only as a *subjective* certainty, and no longer as objective truth, such that the truth of the faithful is reduced to the truth of his or her conscience, to his or her singular anchoring in the truth of the unconscious. This is essential, if analytic praxis is not to be reduced to an inoffensive psychotherapy. But if the testimony of *the* revealed truth holds firm, not the *subject's* truth but *the* objective truth of God's speech, how will one grant the analyst his well-known paradoxical authority, which throws the discourses on authority into turmoil?

Speaking here as a philosopher and not as a psychoanalyst, my question is not whether the various contents of the Muslim faith are true or illusory, or whether or not the Enlightenment ideal is preferable to these dogmas. Even if the notion of truth, the concept of truth, were to merit a more profound examination here, it is enough to admit, as a provisional postulate, that the dogmas of the Muslim religion correspond to what Kant, rightly, maintained is one of the fundamental constitutions of man, without which, neither moral questions, nor the most basic questions of subsistence could sustain themselves. Kant resumes his account of the enduring question of hope in the Christian heritage and demonstrates its connection with faith. If philosophical critique could only make hope in a sovereign good vanish from the horizon of reason and freedom of the moderns, it remains *a fortiori* at the heart of reason and liberty in the foreign thought systems of this modern reason. Our intention, in the following, is not to decide in favor of Freud's irreducible atheism nor, on the contrary, of the philosophies that accord some weight of truth to religious phenomena. Philosophy and psychoanalysis both accord the greatest importance to the status of authority and, more specifically, to the following question: which subject is supposed to decide what constitutes legitimate authority? Without pretending to an exhaustive inquiry, such is the question we wish to pose here regarding authority in Islam. Let us begin, then, with several elementary observations.

Islam is often presented, correctly, as a legalistic religion. However, to translate the expression "*al-sharī'a*" with "the Law" does not clarify the meaning given to this term. To understand by this the exercise of jurisprudence would be to forget that the

legislation elaborated by the major juridical schools, Sunni or Shi'ite, is not the whole of the Law and even less the whole of religion, but only a part of them. It would be to neglect the horizon of the Law, without which the Law loses all meaning, namely, eschatology. Belief in the Day of Judgment, hope in just retribution, God's satisfaction and what the faithful receive in return are the ultimate reasons and first notions of the Mohammedan revelation. On the other hand, like all religion, Islam poses the question of being in its own way. Who has the right to be? What is the authentically subsisting being? What is it to be? Without examining religion from an ontological perspective, one inevitably misses the seriousness of that religion; it is reduced to a number of superstitions, rites and modes of obedience that have nothing at stake. The Law may well lie at the heart of a revelation that offers a number of commandments one must respect. But it is not the whole of revelation. Before it prescribes, and in order for its prescriptions to be authoritative, the revelation states what the real is, existence par excellence, and *who* the real is. It is from this decision that touches the real, the division between the real and the unreal, that the Law draws its authority.

Consequently, it is worth keeping the distinction between the three terms—revelation, Law, jurisprudence—in mind. Hope, which is a revealed certainty for Islam, is expressed in numerous apocalyptic verses in the Qur'an, heralding the Day of Judgment, Paradise and Hell. It is intrinsically bound to the presentation of human nature, the *fitra* or original conception of man. This original nature is that of a respondent. In the seventh sura, *al-'A'raf*, which is a condensation of the entire prophetic revelation, a celebrated verse states, "When thy Lord drew forth from the Children of Adam—from their loins—their descendants, and made them testify concerning themselves, (saying): 'Am I not your Lord (who cherishes and sustains you)?'—They said: 'Yea! We do testify!' (This), lest ye should say on the Day of Judgment: 'Of this we were never mindful' (7: 172).² What constitutes man, the thing that confers him with both original, non-adulterated, authentic existence and suitable essence is testimony, often called the "primordial pact." Testament to divine lordship, man is fundamentally a servant, *al-'abd*, according to a definition that retains Biblical connotations, insofar as it contains an eminent dignity in the idea of divine service that the angels themselves have no part in. Is the Messiah not announced in the Biblical prophecy of the "suffering servant"? In the highly complex notion of "servant," we find obedience to the Law, of course, but also all that it circumscribes, interprets and amplifies in eschatological meanings or spiritual variations.

We must now recall this fundamental relation between the servant and the Master so as to illuminate the difficulty one encounters in approaching the question of authority in Islam. Are our conceptions of *auctoritas* entirely adequate to the concepts at stake here? I do not think so. They rely too much on the structures of public law and Christian political theology, on the legacy of Roman law and the reforms carried to these structures, both by the doctrines of natural law and its adversaries. If one is looking for an equivalent to authority in terms such as *al-ri'asa*, the political commandment, *al-sultân*, political and religious power, or *al-molk*, royal authority, one restricts one's field of examination to the phenomena of authority. The

² *The Holy Qur'an*, trans. Yusuf Ali.

use of the unique term, “authority,” seems to me to be legitimate and essential only on two conditions: to greatly expand this concept and, consequently, grant it a large number of different meanings; to define authority in its most generally accepted form: as the legitimacy accorded by the faithful to that which is *for them* the correct interpretation of revealed speech. Far preferable to looking exclusively to juridical devices, the question of authority, taken in this sense, enables the psychoanalyst to penetrate the thickets of Islamic religious discourses with greater clarity and distinction.

It seems to me that the first move of the psychoanalyst, the first impulse, which involves a certain familiarity with Freud, is not always the best. Often, it reduces the complexity of Islamic obedience to a love of the Law, in the sense of the Catholic obedience distilled by Pierre Legendre according to the schema of a “love of the censor.” Such a reduction presupposes an implicit juridical definition of the Law. Now, despite the apparent synonymy that the French language introduces, it is not true that the Law of Islam is *ipso facto* a *juridical* representation of religion. Its ordinary meaning is much more expansive, and it enables one to understand how the subject is determined by the juridical interpretation of more complex legalistic injunctions, and what the stakes are between the law and non-juridical norms.

Beginning from this false step, the psychoanalyst cannot help but err: he will want to subject the stakes of the relations between the servant and his Master to this love for the Law, for the deciphered *shari’a* exclusively in terms of the discourse of jurisprudence. Either Law will be the truth of Islam and its diverse forms of non-juridical spirituality relegated to an unessential “interior” religion, or this interior religion will pass as superior to external religion, that which determines legislation. Whichever we choose, we will subject exterior religion and interior religion to a logical relation between two terms that are mutually exclusive. This scenario exists, of course, but it is not unique, general, prevalent. Those who reduce the essential core of the Law to jurisprudence, like those who challenge all “legalistic” approaches in the study of spiritual phenomena, agree on a common postulate, what it means, without doubt, to put it in question. We risk becoming victims of polysemy, the word “Law” meaning “scriptural revelation,” “norms of behavior and thought,” “divine commandments,” “human jurisprudence deduced from revelation. One would do well to recognize that variations in the meaning of expressions “*al-shar*” or “*al-shari’a*” often authorize such homonymic effects.

To this disastrous impulse, I shall oppose a number of prudent arguments. *Shari’a* has concentric meanings. It designates, in its widest sense, the path traced by a brook, the path which leads to God. In this first meaning, *shari’a* is not the discourse of legislation but the revealed guide to the Prophet. *Shari’a* is identified with the right path, *al-sirât al-mustaqim*. We must therefore distinguish between norms of conduct, guidance, and jurisdiction. Prophecy can be very strictly normative, without originarily being legal. It is the source of legality and of legitimacy without being anything other than a system of norms. It may well generate norms of behavior that will nevertheless aspire to be extra-legal, that is to say, which do not pretend to juridical speech. In another sense, by the force and authority acquired by the illustrious founders through precise historical conditions issuing from thousands of

Sunni traditionalists, the integral *sharī'a*, which was first conceived as a divine knowledge (*hikma*), found itself identified with a rational exercise of juridical deduction, *usūl al-fiqh*.

It is notable—to cite only one major example—that in his *Risāla*, Shafi'ī maintains that the essential core of the Book, the Qur'an, lies in its naming of the “statutes,” in other words, the juridical articulations of the divine law. That it makes the contents of knowledge from the science of these “divine statutes,” and from this knowledge all authentic jurisdictional *illumination* of the heart of the faithful. Shafi'ī interprets the pact of adoration that binds the servant to his Lord in the following way: obligations, devotions instituted by the Qur'anic letter, duties imposed by the Prophet, the obligation to make one's own ruling (*ijtihād*). To speak of obligation, is it to speak of law (*droit*)? Yes, but on two conditions: first, that obligation is the concept translating the sovereignty of the divine commandment; second, that the jurist is the subject who expresses the meaning (*bayān*) of this obligation. Shafi'ī contends that the knowing jurist is entitled to explain these four categories of adoration, of the worship rendered to God. It makes the jurist the preeminent authority, institutes a hermeneutic filter for the Book, of the Sunna of the Prophet and the practice of *ijtihād*. The inversion is striking: *sharī'a*, reduced to revealed “statutes” and rationales of Muslim law, has become the foundation of *hikma*, of knowledge and expresses the totality, in the space which contains wisdom, as one of its regions, the juridical statutes. To comprehend knowledge as adequating to the integral revelation accorded to the Prophet as essentially constituted through duties and obligations is to prepare the ground for juridical interpretation in this precise sense: the jurist will, *more than others*, have access to the true meaning, prescriptive of the Book and of the Law. Such is the decision of the discourse of the jurist's authority. It appears only to state what the Book is, what the Sunna is, what *ijtihād* is, and doing so, seems to say nothing other than what the theologians, mystics of other readers of the Qur'an say. But through the turn it gives to the reading of duties and obligations, it surreptitiously introduces a juridical turn that has a very precise function: to situate eminent authority in the jurist himself. Today, it passes as self-explanatory, for a self-engendered reality. It is permitted as such by a number of exegetes, it governs the reflexes of certain psychoanalysts. Thus its genealogy is forgotten, its history occulted, and its validity sacralized. Now, there is no shortage of counter interpretations. One will not be surprised to find them in spiritual exegeses of the Qur'an above all. Thus, *hikma*, knowledge, is considered something much greater than *sharī'a*, which constitutes a degree, but only a degree, seldom the most elevated.

Another imprudent reflex: it is often said that in Islam, political power and authority are not distinguished from each other, and neither can be analyzed without the other. Consequently, Islam would necessarily be a political religion, and the interior life of the Muslim would be governed by the exercise of a public worship indissociable from the organization of the State. Now, we can make an objection to this representation, which has dominated the debates following its adoption by certain contemporary Islamic political theories. It neglects numerous recognized authorities who by no means aspire to to be “political.” These non-political authorities are not without producing some effects, and consequently they are accompanied by a certain power.

But this power is reversible, it can have a secondary political facet and a principal non-political facet, or vice versa. Both stakes must therefore be studied with precision. We can mention, for example, the figure of the master in the Sufi brotherhoods or even certain paradoxical figures in the shi'ite theory of the imamat. At base, this reminds us that the chief historical fact, namely, prophecy, unifies a State by chance, but unifies a community by essence. If one speaks of the social effects of the Muslim religion, the modes of religious authority in public life, one must employ the concept of community rather than that of the State. It would only be to illuminate the difficulties confronting the various Muslim states following the confounding of the caliph with state power, in the delicate exercise of the two, often incompatible, functions: the government of men and of things, on the one hand, and the spiritual guidance of the community of the faithful, on the other. Here, too, we should be attentive to the history of these concepts. Political science, in classical Islam, distributes itself across several disciplines, and it has never enjoyed the independence and unity that we encounter in the West since antiquity. One must recognize this, one comes across it a little everywhere: in certain philosophers, theologians, in the *hadith*, in the writings of "councils," in the poets or the authors of fables and stories, in the art of the novel, even in the mystics. Dispersed and multiple, veiled and discreet as in the court poets, systematically in the philosophers, it is always a science of the foundation of authority, but often a moral reflection on the rules and exercise of power. It is thus not a matter of a general theory of the State but a reflection on the qualities and on the essence of the man of government. Moreover, the State is not the indispensable horizon of these reflections, but only a step between the economy and the postulated universal human community "faithful to God." Downstream of the State, the refinement of moral rules, the counsel of good management; upstream of the State, the universal theory of guidance, the link between authority and truth. The political would only boil down to the image offered by our modern reflections on the sovereignty of the State. Islam is not Hobbesian.

Let us come to what pertains more specifically to the Muslim city. When Hellene philosophers study various political regimes, it is in Platonic terms, respecting Plato's classifications, combined with the moral lessons of Aristotle without the least bit drawn from experience. Their object is not a theory of the *Islamic* State but the re-foundation, in an *apparently* Muslim frame, of the institutions of justice bequeathed by the Sages. There is no explanation of how the infidel State passes into the Islamic State because the question does not arise, resolved by the facts, if one understands by this that the world where such a passage would be judged necessary does not exist at times when Islam has legal preeminence, and the hostile world that surrounds it is entirely a foreign world, a world outside the world of political reflection. When the atheist is an exception, when the polytheist is a species on the way to extinction, how could one consider the necessity of the Islamic State? One questions the essence of the perfect city, the perfect mode of consent between the classes, the political and spiritual guidance of the political man, the corruption of this model, etc. When it became obvious to Fârâbî or to Nasîr al-Dîn Tûsî that their thoughts concerned people already living in the *dâr al-islam*, their aim was to conceptualize the traits of a community ruled by justice and not the conditions under which an Islamic State should be installed. It is *today* that the concept triumphs, on the ruins of a

community become improbable or “ideal,” like a strange fruit on the tree of Western science, to which are grafted modern speculations issuing from the triumph of the jurist’s authority. No speculation, in the classical ages of Islam, has ever treated the Qur’an as if it pertained to a code of public law which replaced infidel constitutions. Never, at least until the situation changed, when Islamic territory appeared existentially threatened, until the supreme authority in public law, that of the caliph or the “Keeper of the Book” faded gravely or entirely, in short, until the contemporary revival of the solitary, and contested in its time, work of the great Hanbalite reformer Ibn Taymmiya. It was necessary for the models of Western political representation to be the occasion for rejection, belief and, consequently, the source of a new interrogation, in view of contesting this representation. Thus it was that a political thought invited the faithful to an *exclusive* valorization of the Qur’an in its literality and turned this literality, like that of the Sunnah of the Prophet, into a political code. A man such as al-Ghazālī would simply not be able to write in such an *episteme*. These are the Sunni religious reformers of the 20th century, quickly followed by certain Shi’ite intellectuals, who constructed a theological-political system where *shari’a*, understood as the wise jurist’s reading of the Qur’an, has pretensions to the status of the sovereign decision in matters of public law. It has often been rightly remarked that the Shi’ite concept of “government by the wise jurist” strictly appropriate to the thesis that emerged from the Sunni milieu according to which the Qur’an must become the constitution of the State, is an *innovation*. This innovation of course has its history, which is that of the slow and sure appropriation of power by the jurists, to the detriment of the traditionalists, mystics, theologians and spiritual philosophers, to the detriment, also, and above all, of the great sovereign figures of the imamat. It has a reality: but no intrinsic sacrality in itself. It is strictly dependent on what it opposes, the modern political *episteme*, liberal philosophies of political *representation*, whereas the question of political representation, and thus its contestation, were incompatible with the classical Islamic *episteme*.

Nothing of the least political consequence, in the modern sense of this term, is expressed in the Qur’anic revelation of divine sovereignty. It is correct to say that only in God do authority and power make One, as certain theologians have had no difficulty in sustaining the thesis of the fundamental unity of the attributes of God: in Him alone, science, the will and power essentially make One, distinguishing themselves from each other only in words (*bi l-i’tibâr*) and not in reality (*bi l-haqîqat*). But what about in man? More generally, how can the absolute sovereignty of God ever found the legitimacy of human authority? The hypothesis of a delegation, of a representation of the divine authority in human authority seems impossible *a priori*. No space opens up between the exercise of divine authority, revealed in prophetic speech, and that of the faithful servant’s obedience. Nothing that resembles a minister or a pope, even less the secularization of religious authority under the leader of a sacralization of the political body.

This apparent difficulty was not absent from Islam’s situation at its origins. When compared with Christianity, the contrasts are striking. Whereas Christianity has operated pretty much according to the schema of orthodoxy/heresy, one finds

nothing like this in Islam. Of the numerous heterodox Christian currents, as numerous as they were, as resurgent and renascent as they appear, there was nothing in the theological desire for truth that was and remains a desire for orthodoxy *in the ecclesiastical sense of the term*. One can deplore or approve of this desire of the ecumenical councils, of the Fathers and Intellectuals, one can recall the violent excommunications of the theologians and Christologians. One can mention the multiplicity of rites and beliefs. What remains is that the schema that orders this variety, that of orthodoxy, designating and stigmatizing heresy, is nothing other than the exercise of the truth in a precise context, that of the revelation of the set of divine truth and a way, a life and a truth that concentrates itself entirely in the figure of Christ, opening the way to the incorporation of the truth. "Who has seen me has seen the Father": the mediation between the hidden and the apparent, the divine world and the supersensible and the access to the divine is guaranteed by the fleshly manifestation of the Word and the divine Man in such a way that this Incarnation is conducted in the mode of manifestation of the subject of the truth that is the "Church." There are no Christian sects, but only expressions of the "Church phenomenon," as reduced and marginal as they may be. Inversely, and even if the diverse currents of Islam mutually refute and condemn, or even curse each other, if each has pretensions as the sole sect that will be saved at the Day of Judgment, this does not play out according to the schema of orthodoxy/heresy, because the problem is not, cannot be, that of the orthodox constitution of the Church phenomenon, of a Church as subject of truth.

On this, Islam presents an astonishing face to our inquiry. Whatever the divisions that separate and oppose them, Muslims today are conscious of belonging to the single and the same community. The multiplicity of beliefs does not affect this universality of the communal consciousness. Unhappy consciousness, living the drama of the *fitna*, of discord, as a permanent drama. Consciousness avid to make an end of things, and anxious to force an historical destiny that dooms it to an intolerable pluralism. Among the simple faithful, this nostalgia for the lost unity encourages attachments to literalist preachings, which promote the return to the letter of the Book and to the Sunnah. Which Book? Which Sunnah? Immediately the division returns, the one sole, inevitable fact of the interpretation of texts. Depending on whether the corpus of the Sunnah is constituted by this master of truth or that, Sunnite or Shi'ite, we will have a different text. Despite the recognition that has amassed to a unique text, with some variations, the Qur'an is not exempt from this multiplicity, if it is true that the text never stands on its own but always in the weave of a commentary, a literal explication or a mystical or moral exegesis whose principle of validity is an authority that itself requires foundation, and which frequently only sublates itself.

The unity of consciousness thus goes hand in hand with the multiplying proliferation of the figures of authority: the Prophet, the Imâm who succeeded him, either in the various senses that the different schools of Shi'ism give him, or in the general sense, admitted in the Sunnite world, of the guide of believers, the Caliph or successor of the Prophet, the Preacher, the missionary, the traditionalist, collector of the *sunnah*, itself variable, the jurist, the *wali*, the friend of God whose qualifications come from

the sanctity of his life or the predestination of testimony, the sage (*al-hakīm*), whether in the strict philosophical sense or inspired by a more globally encompassing knowledge of the secrets of revelation, the ascetic, the scapegoat, the diverse varieties that one conveniently regroups under the heading of *ahl al-tasawwuf*, of Sufism, the inspired poet, the astrologist, the commentator, the rationalist theologian (*al-mutakallim*), etc.

Nevertheless, four main types of authority seem to me to dominate this infinite plurality: the prophetic guide, Prophet or Imām, the theologian, the jurist and the sage. Which authority prevails respectively amongst them, what kind of authority diffuses from them further downstream? The Prophet or Imām authorizes himself through divine inspiration, or the connaturality that unites him with some emanation from the divine world. The theologian invokes the omnipotence of the rational intelligence, itself founded in the truth of divine intelligence. It was necessary that this gesture, this decision by which the Greek *logos*, the mode of deduction of the demonstrative intellect, was identified with the *‘aql* and with certain processes of science that God eternally possesses of the beings he created, in order for theology to affirm its legitimacy. The jurist sometimes invokes a double source of authority: the literal tradition and the deductive intellect. It is the same intelligence, understood in the sense of contemplative intelligence, which founds the activity of the sage. It culminates in a direct vision of the intelligible, and a proximity or a unification with the intelligible.

The intelligence, its problematic union of the intelligible and the act of intellection, thus seems to me to be at the heart of the validatory devices of authority, whether of the sage, the jurist or the theologian. One cannot overestimate the problems posed by the theory of intellectual knowledge, when one interrogates the principles of authority in Islam. It is through the mediation of such problems that the question of the juridical norm, the moral norm and proximity to the divine decree becomes receptive to various constraining solutions. The authority of the spiritual masters of Sufism, like those of the saints, requires a slightly different foundation, visionary imagination, the power of unveiling, vision of the supersensible presence, which moreover does not exclude the power of intelligence. This principle, which we find as well at the origin of prophetic authority or imamology, is the *walāya*. This term is very difficult to analyze, since it designates a “friendship” with God which has a very rich meaning. It signifies as well a perfect conformity to the divine order of a science that is supernatural to the secrets of revelation. It is a symptom of what constitutes, at the end of time, the problem posed by human authority: how to adequately reflect the sole authority that exists, God’s authority? Let us examine this in the context of the Caliphate.

We know this difficulty was resolved in various ways. For the Omeyyade Caliphs, the substitution of the name “Caliph of God’s Envoy” for “Caliph of God” enables us to suppose that the function of the Prophet’s “successor” in the temporal order, the absolute authority of decision of the Caliph, was an authentic exegete of God and of his sovereignty. This, designated by the term *al-amr*, the imperative, the command, the order, is summarized, by a process of rarefaction, with the exercise of a command in the order of the confusion between religious life and civil life, and the successor of

the Prophet found himself named “commander of believers” in both a secular and a religious sense. In this way, the exercise of authority in exterior exoteric matters could not miss carrying it over to spiritual guidance, and the Caliph of the Prophet very quickly became confounded with figures of royalty.

It is this that originally caused the rebellions and uprisings of the various partisans of ‘Alī ibn Abī Tālib, known under the generic term Shi’ite. The very idea of expressing divine authority under the auspices of a state Caliphate power seemed to them to be in contradiction with the authentic, primitive notion of prophecy and of the just imamat, the authority of the guide. In their eyes, this had to have its foundation in God itself, if human authority was to have any chance of avoiding becoming a substitute for God’s authority. More generally, it imposed a division between exterior authority and interior authority, the dimension of the exterior, of the apparent, the exoteric, and that of the interior, the hidden, the esoteric. There are thus three main options possible: an equilibrium between the apparent, the exoteric, exterior prescriptions and the hidden, esoteric; a disequilibrium, weighted in favor of interiority, eventually leading to an indifferent, or even explicitly anti-legislative, authority to the letter of the Law; finally, a repudiation of all esoteric dimensions. It is impossible to address these questions of authority without encountering this haunting and at times meticulous discussion of the possible roles of the *zāhir* and the *bātin*, of the exoteric and the esoteric. But, from another perspective, the protests of the kjarijites or hanbalite traditionalists and their disciples are no less revealing. Every time an all too human authority threatens to substitute itself for the divine imperative, seeming thereby to ruin the eschatological vocation of prophecy, voices calling for a return to the true sense of the prophecy and of the caliphate are raised.

The exercise of authority is like living a contradiction. Absolute divine authority is in itself non-participatory. Now, in order to found human authority, a man of excellence must be able to participate in it, by virtue of his divine election. Here I am choosing to employ terms that are foreign to the Qur’an’s scriptural universe, but which rapidly became familiar to Islamic thinkers, terms which belong to the Platonic lexicons: participation, participatory, participated, non-participatory. I feel authorized to do so by the fact that a number of Islamic metaphysical theologians employ them when they find it useful to think in these hellenic neo-Platonist terms, along with those from the beginning of the third century of the Hijra. Non-participatory is a predicate of God’s absolute unity. The divine One is not the first term of a numeric chain of multiples, but his unity is fundamentally separated from all multiplicity. It involves an ineffable unity, indescribable, hidden and revealed but simultaneously reserved and veiled by the names that God gives himself in his holy Books. Now, according to the Qur’an, it is only with the inexpressible essence of God that divine authority makes One. Authority and creation belong to God (see the Qur’an, 7: 54: “Is it not His to create and to govern?”)—to God in his pure identity, in his mysterious unity. The exercise of divine authority is the foundation, no less mysterious, of what God decrees when he decrees. The notion of foundation encompasses the following meanings: instantaneity, incomprehensible on first examination by human reason, separation from the power that founds, eminent, transcendent, and the founded reality, which is neither necessary in itself nor of the

same ontological rank as the founder. If God founds and exercises his authority in this act of foundation, He remains transcendent to what he founds, which thus does not succeed him in the way an effect succeeds its cause, and encompasses the reality of a part of its cause. But, being non-participatory in what he founds, God thus remains inimitable in the exercise of his authority and all human authority becomes, by definition, contradictory. The divine Real disjoins itself from the symbolic order it founds.

From this perspective, there would be nothing to efface the distance between the divine act and human history. Nothing, if not prophetic discourse. The first discourse on authority, which Islam never stops referring to, in multiple forms, is prophetic discourse. In effect, it is prophecy that manifests a sacred history, situated between the eternity of the divine imperative and the historical progress of the world. This prophetic history has its origin in Adam's pact of obedience and its end in the resurrection (*al-quyâmat al-kubra*). Its historical curve bestows the authentic caliphate with the right to endure until the end of time. But, all the other discourses of authority, the jurist, the theologian, the spiritual master, will have to justify themselves before him as well.

Let us recall that the Qur'an only employs the term caliph, *al-khalîfa*, plural *al-khalâ'if* or *al-khulafâ'*, in the context of a different register to prophetic authority. More properly, the verses 2.30 do not specify what the caliphate is, except by default, or rather through the protest it generates among the angels: "Behold, thy Lord said to the angels: 'I will create a vicegerent on earth.' They said: 'Wilt Thou place therein one who will make mischief therein and shed blood?—whilst we do celebrate Thy praises and glorify Thy holy (name)?' He said: 'I know what ye know not.'" The authority God confers upon man differs from the angels' worship of perpetual adoration. The angels are ignorant of the ends of divine providence, and, consequently, the necessity of prophetic history, while maintaining that they know the evil that man will sow. The caliphate authority of God exercises itself "on the earth."

This successional authority entrusted to Adam is not a simple *potestas*. It is not only directed at things below, but also at the realities of the other world. It connects this nether world, evanescent, temporal, illusory, with the real, eternal world, which is the divine world, that of the Throne of God, of "reconciled" archangels, of the Throne, of Paradise, and Hell. It makes One only through obedience, in such a way that man's authority is a paradoxical authority: it exerts much better than it submits to its Lord. It is the opposite of temporal omnipotence, although at its lowest level it includes temporal power. We know this theme has been fed by every contestation of established power, either through the testimony of spiritual leaders and mystics, or through the support given to the Call (*al-da'wa*) launched by various individuals claiming a certain form of participation in prophetic destiny, most notably in shi'ism, or by traditional discourses refusing any concession to innovation and laicisation.

To cite just one example, let us consider this protest, this appeal to the destination and essence of prophecy in the prologue of the *Book of Oriental Theosophy* by Sohrawardi: "If in a given epoch there is someone who is profoundly devoted to the

divinization of self (*al-ta'alluh*) and study (*al-bahth*), authority (*al-ri'âsa*) is returned to him and it is he who is the caliph of God.”³ Thus spiritual authority asserts its origin in its proximity to the God of the prophets, better yet, an *apotheosis*, a divinization of self that effaces the distance between the divine world and the world of creation, accompanied by “study,” by which we understand the study of truth through gnostic paths, through spiritual knowledge. The non-political, indeed anti-political aspiration of this authority, Sohrevardî makes explicit: “Speaking of the authority returned to the perfect sage, I do not mean the exercise of triumphant temporal power (*taghallub*). Far from it because if the imam invested with mystical experience (or divinization of self) sees his authority publicly recognized, he also remains hidden.” We recognize here the division that political knowledge and Sufism have maintained between *taghallub*, the tyrannous temporal dimension (in the Platonic sense, and Greek term) and the true work of spiritual guidance.

It is equally valid that the conceptual content of prophetic authority is hierarchically distributed across humankind in its totality. Whence the burning questions of election and hierarchy which never cease to pose themselves once the discourse of prophecy must be relayed through other discourses following the death of the Prophet of Islam. The following verse testifies to this: “It is He Who hath made you (His) agents, inheritors of the earth: He hath raised you in ranks, some above others: that He may try you in the gifts He hath given you” (Qur'an, 6:165). The meaning of the elect community is thus the following: to be the caliph in the earth through respect of the primordial pact, and to recognize a hierarchy in itself which is not temporal but essentially prophetic, guarantor of the meaning of the prophecy in its unity. The close relation between the exercise of this authority and the care taken to purify its spiritual interiority are emphasized by the proximity of several major notions: “Verily Allah knows (all) the hidden things of the heavens and the earth: verily He has full knowledge of all that is in (men's) hearts. He it is That has made you inheritors in the earth” (35: 38-39).

Of course, by way of the eminent example it makes of the two prophets preceding Muhammad, the Qur'an indicates that this authority has two essential missions. The case of David must interest us in particular, because it bears in itself all the Biblical promise of the messianic future, entirely synthesizing the function of the judge with the prophetic function. He “judges people based on the Real” says the Qur'an (36: 26). The case of Noah is of no less importance. He is invoked to show how the caliphate is eternal, even when the greater part of humanity perishes through the wrath of God. Muhammad invokes his example in dramatic circumstances, when he is himself the victim of his peoples' mockery and incredulity: “He said: ‘O my people! I am no imbecile, but (I am) an apostle from the Lord and Cherisher of the worlds! I but fulfill towards you the duties of my Lord's mission: I am to you a sincere and trustworthy adviser. Do ye wonder that there hath come to you a message from your Lord through a man of your own people, to warn you? call in remembrance that He made you inheritors after the people of Noah, and gave you a stature tall among the

³ Shihâboddîn Yahyâ Sohrevardî, *Kitâb Hikmat al-Ishrâq, Opera Metaphysica et Mystica*, ed. Henry Corbin, vol. 2 (Tehran: Mu'assasah-yi Mutali'at va Tahqiqat-i Farhangi, 1993 [reprint of the 1945]) 12.

nations. Call in remembrance the benefits (ye have received) from Allah. that so ye may prosper” (7: 67-69).

The juridical authority attributed to David evidently founded prophetic authority in a specific domain: to discriminate the faithful from the rebels in accordance with the highest justice, that designated by the term *al-haqq*, which signifies both the real and the law, not in the sense derived from jurisprudence, but in the sense of the law to which God has the right, in short, obedience to his commandments and to the letter of the Book. Noah’s exemplariness consists in that prophetic authority is transhistorical. From this transhistorical perspective, the caliphate is no longer a temporal responsibility, posing the well-known problems of dynastic succession, but a constant presence, rejuvenating itself age after age, a responsibility of the envoy that, around this envoy, is returned to humanity at large. It is easy to recognize here the Judeo-Christian notion of the True Prophet, through which the transhistorical reality passes from age to age before ultimately being revealed in Jesus. Persuaded of his paracletic mission, Muhammad applies the idea to himself, but not without combining it with the notion borrowed from the Mani, that of the Seal of the prophecy.

It is impossible to give an account here—this was extremely brief—of the considerable number of works by Muslim intellectuals that, in the service of successive imperial powers called caliphates, have borrowed from these original concepts. What we can insist on, however, is the repeated process by which they have tried to emphasize the moral qualities, specific gifts, familial or clan connections, anything that could justify the legitimacy of power, that is to say, the omnipotence of the sovereign. It is clear that the Sunnites, faithful to Omeyyades, made no fewer claims to supersensible powers, to extraordinary powers, than the Shi’ites when it came to justifying the authority of the man of power.

This mystique of authority was nowhere more developed than in the Shi’ite world, particularly in the insurrections that led to the establishment of the Fatimid Caliphate. The Imâm, keeper of the Book, possesses an enlightened nature, and this suprasensible essence makes him the theologian par excellence. Of course, he is not the essence of God, but the manifestation of God, or better, the manifestation of the reality originally founded by God, the universal Intelligence. Thus identified with the temporal manifestation of God’s absolute knowledge, he mysteriously possesses the original expression of the divine imperative in himself. The absolute authority he exercises over the faithful is the authority of the divine “*kun*,” the speech by which God gives existence to things. There is a lesson for us in the very significant speculations of the Ishmaelite Shi’ite intellectuals regarding this authority of the man of God. This authority has a tendency to distribute itself across two different registers, both opposing and interdependent: interiority (*al-bâtin*) and exteriority (*al-zâhir*). If the legitimate guide has authority over the community’s affairs, if he has the right to govern the community, in anticipation of governing the world, it is because he possesses an exterior authority, corresponding to the exterior dimension of reality.

This is why the Shi'ite messianic movements, as rebellious as they were with respect to existing power, could succeed only by means of what they had themselves rejected: a community governed by the power of the elite wise initiated by the supposed science of the Imâm. Divine universal intelligence, manifested in the person of the Imâm, henceforth transmits itself across different gradations and levels of the esoteric hierarchy, and transforms, metamorphoses, into unlimited temporal power. But this temporal authority supports itself on the esoteria of the prophecy, taught by the Imâm, who is the exclusive custodian of it.

The tragedy of power in the Islamic world, in my eyes, finds its truth in this ambivalence of authority, which the Imâmat Shi'ite has experimented with from the 10th century until our era. On the one hand, liberatory authority tended toward the reign of ends, with despotic authority governing, on the other hand, in an indefinite power, according to the double register of the apparent—the exoteric—and the hidden, the esoteric. This reversibility of authority even constituted the essence of Shi'ite political theology, and it explains the more general fate of the theologies of the True Prophet. It is tragic because it expresses two contradictory requirements: either the legitimate guide devotes himself primarily to exteriority, and holds the secret of the esoteric back for an elite. Thus, final ends, the ultimate triumph of prophecy's essential truth in the reign of the awaited resurrector, all this is put off until a later time, perhaps never. Or, the esoteric triumphs, and authority aspires to be authority over hearts and minds, without any concrete historical effectuation. Either absolute power, or pure spirituality. We may well still be at this point.

It strikes me, in effect, that in posing itself in terms of the mediation between the inferior world and the divine world, prophetic authority inevitably bisects between spiritual and temporal authority, in such a way that the different figures of authority who prop themselves up by it assume in a specific way one or other of these missions. I would like to highlight this contradiction, which animates the Muslim experience. On one side, the inevitable pretension of every discourse which particularizes authority. We have seen an instance of this in Shafi'i, when he accomplishes this decisive gesture that reduces and identifies universal knowledge to the exercise of the *shari'a*, understood in a juridical sense. On the other side, the prevalence of what one could call the taste or desire for the *beautiful totality*. Nowhere more than in Islam is it affirmed that the true is the all. Truth, founder of legitimate authority, is everything, must be everything. One will say that this is the hallmark of religion as such. Undoubtedly. It is also the hallmark of philosophy, when it merits its name, at least from Aristotle to Hegel. It is certainly not the conviction of experimental science, or of psychoanalysis, for whom the truth can only be half-said, to borrow Jacques Lacan's expression. Whence this immediate, profound, constant accord between Greek philosophy and Islam, despite all the oppositions coming from the traditionalist or juridical worlds. The true is the all. This is the guiding ideal.

It would be well for us to remember that, in the Islamic world, the phenomena of intolerance, exclusion, or aggressive identification are often born from the miscognition of this statute of truth which is nevertheless unique to it. Contrary to what one all too often imagines, it is not a sectorial reading of the Qur'an and the

texts devoted to the Sunnah, Sunnite or Shi'ite, which founds a freedom and a certain form of detachment between the world of temporal power and that of divine spiritual authority. On the contrary, it often upholds the exclusive choice of a world, that of the exercise of juridical power or, in response, that of the interior life and the interior experience. Certain theologians, today, maintain that it is enough to choose, in the totality of revelation, what seems compatible with "modernity" in order to save Islam while reforming it. Now, this gesture was always, precisely, what was going to engender the violent conflict between theological or juridical authorities, and I would like to draw attention to a strategy that is a little different. This consists in silencing the human authorities who authorize themselves through one part of revelation or another, on behalf of extolling the beautiful totality constituted by the phenomenon of the Book. To thereby void the violence men exercise against one another, the violence of the man who decides he is the authority over other men in religious affairs, who are supposed to grant him their obedience. This is accomplished by a return, in appearance very conservative, to the "beautiful totality" of the Book. It is quite striking that the thinkers responsible for a certain skepticism, or outright opposition, to the omnipotence of the jurist and the political laicization of Islam, its reduction to politics, are those who insist on the laws of the "beautiful totality." These men call themselves *ahl al'irfân*, often translated as "gnostics," which is a little misleading. Let us call them more properly: holders of integral knowledge. Their master, a man who was acutely aware of the paradox we are describing, was the grand master of Sunnite sufism, Ibn 'Arabî. The success, like the attacks, that the Andalusian master's works are known for these days, like those of his disciples, sunni or shi'ite, testify to how he has touched a nerve. I would like, in closing, to give some indications of this, appealing to a work of Qur'anic exegesis, edited in the 17th century by one of the his most faithful readers, who is also, after Avicenna the greatest metaphysician of Islam, Sadroddîn Shîrâzî, commonly known as Mullâ Sadrâ. The work in question is titled *Mafâtîh al-ghayb, Keys to the Divine Mystery*.⁴

It opens with a very thorough examination of the status of the Qur'an. More specifically, of the integral Qur'an, that of which, in the sayings of our author concerning the traditions transmitted by the collections of shi'ite authority, the Prophet Muhammad would have said: "the Qur'an is complete. Nothing is needed after it, and nothing suffices without it." Such is the status of the "beautiful totality," of the true totality. One might believe that it implies a "totalitarian" discourse. We will see that it is the total opposite of this. As the integral truth, the Qur'an is not *simply* jurisdictional. To illustrate the effect of its beautiful totality, Sadrâ employs the concept of spiritual medicine. It is a question of curing, of delivering one from the slavery of the passions, which are "the iron necklaces of burden": the love of people, children, country, riches, passionate attachment to the female sex, cupidity and love of power. Here is the Qur'an thus interpreted in its totality, and on condition of being integral, like an ascetic guide with respect to the bonds that hamper man's existence, and this is done in terms that a disciple of Socrates would find difficult to disown. Not coercion, therefore, but liberation. Not legal exterior norms, but integral moral norms. Placing the greatest emphasis on the letter of Qur'anic writing leads to the

⁴ Sadr al-Dîn Shîrâzî (Mullâ Sadrâ), *Mafâtîh al-ghab*, ed. Muhammad Khâjâvî (Teheran 1984).

inverse of juridical literalism: if the Qur'an is integral, each letter is a universe of symbols: "in each of the letters of the Qur'an, there are a thousand symbols, coqueties and signs." This is why, following the example of a woman, the letter seduces the heart of the faithful, attracts it to the internal meaning that, in restoring his personal secret, the true identity of the subject, liberates him. This is why the letter separates him from the overpowering demands that come to him from others, and from the suggestions made above. It brings him back to himself and to the recognition of how, singularly in him, lies and resides the other beautiful totality, which corresponds to the beautiful Qur'anic totality, perfect man.

My conviction is that the meditations on the perfect man have posed a significant challenge by Qur'anic revelation to the regime of authority. They encompass the theory of the legitimate imamat, the doctrine of the gradations of authorities, and above all a certain re-evaluation of speech, of man as being of language. We see a good example of this here. The perfect man is the true caliph of God, He is thus created according to God's form. His authority is primarily an authority of speech. He converses with God, he speaks of spiritual discourses, he has the hearing of the heart. In achieving intelligence in action, he becomes, says Sadrâ, a "speaking substance." This accession to speech is identification with the imperative power that is God's authority. The perfect man bestows existence on himself, because he participates, by way of meditation on speech, in the act of donation of existence, which is the divine act par excellence. It is not a matter of exercising an authority that runs the danger of becoming a collective *potestas*, but of discovering himself in his position of pure singularity. Sadrâ gives an example of this in the exegesis he proposes of a tradition attributed to Alî ibn Abî Tâlib: "the totality of the Qur'an lies in the *bâ'* of *bismillâh* and I am the point under the *bâ'*."

Here is Sâdra's commentary: "The whole of the revealed pages is in the point of the *bâ* of *bismillâh*. Better yet, the collection of beings is in this point. If you want an example, here is one that will bring you closer to an aspect of this truth. When you say, "To Allah belongeth all that is in the heavens and on earth" (2:284), the totality of what is in heaven and on earth is understood in a single word. But when you try to refer to them by distinguishing one from another, you need numerous books, then you try to connect the expressions and the meanings among them, although the extension of the world of significations, thus the mutual distinction of its unities, are not analogous with the extension of the world of expressions and their distinction. But if it happens that someone leaves this sensible metaphorical existence and heads towards the effective realization of self, by certain intelligible existence, if he would unite himself with the spiritual realm at the point of contemplating the meaning of the verse, "It is He that doth encompass all things!" (41:54), if he saw his own actual self encompassed in this signification, dominated by it, thus he would contemplate his own existence in the point which is beneath the *bâ'*, and he would see this *bâ'* that is in *bismillâh* in a place where the eminent greatness of this signification manifests itself."⁵ This coincidence between the eminent dignity of each person and the infinite totality of the Book is the emancipated response to the challenge of the collective authorities.

⁵ Sadr al-Dîn Shirâzî, 21.

This coincidence of the “self” with the first letter of the Book, in which the total and infinite truth intertwines, has an evidently spiritual meaning: what the infallible Imâm says to himself realizes itself in each of the faithful. This realization of the totality of divine worlds in man is his maximum perfection, his mysterious identification with freedom and the divine lord. Of course, it presupposes an annihilation of God in order to become a permanence in God. Consequently, there is no trace of the individual as natural law thinks it, pertaining far more to an effacement of the partial and superficial consciousness in the ocean of letters and their significations. The subject discovers that he is nothing other than an effect of the letter, that his consistency only makes One with the infinite meaning borne by the letter. The effacement of the I is thus proportionate to the progress of the exegesis, which traces the Book from sensible darkness to intelligible light, and which passes the fidelity of inferior degrees where it tests all constraints of the matter up to the pure immaterial condition. But since we are questioning the discourse of authority, I would like to put the emphasis on another aspect of these pages. Our author, Sadrâ, combines his fidelity to the unique authority of the Prophet and the Imâm with an intuition which he owes to his long meditation on some texts by Ibn ‘Arabî. From it, he takes the following lesson: unique authority, that of the prophecy in its double dimension, expressed by Muhammad and ‘Ali, is the letter of the Book. It enables one to dismiss all other authority (aside from the exegete of these pages, one will say, who is the *‘arif*, the philosophical spiritual sage). The authority that Safrâ asserts thus resides in his fundamental conviction: not to consent to any human authority, if it is not that of the perfect man, who sustains the law of the “beautiful totality.” Now, this perfect man realizes himself in everyone, if he carries out the exegesis of self and of the Book, guided by the Imâm. And respectively, everyone, the semblance of each singular letter, of which the symbol is the total letter, the bâ. The Book is not a guide that addresses everyone collectively, like a political or juridical bond, but all and everyone according to principles of selection and hierarchy. It is helpful to compare this model to that which Michel Foucault recognized in the Christian pastoral tradition: *omnes et singulatim*, each and everyone singularly.⁶ This model differs on one essential point: “all” here designates the invisible community of practicing faithful, effectively the knowledge of self and of God, and not the visible community of a Church. Invisible community, it has reality only in God, erasing itself from this world in order to exist solely in the supreme world of God, the *Jabarût*. On the other hand, singularity affirms itself, emphasizing its rights. Not on the model of the Christian pastoral tradition addressing each sheep of the flock of course, but on its own model of spirituality in Islam, of a Self which is indifferently the divine Self revealing itself to creation or the creaturely Self absorbing itself in God. Such is the gnostic model by which the stakes of authorities finds itself subverted, in a face-to-face “alone” with the One, which is the essence of neo-Platonism. Here, in closing, is Sadrâ’s exposition, following the text which we cited earlier:

⁶ “‘Omnes et singulatim’: Towards a Critique of Political Reason,” reprinted in *Dits et Ecrits* (Paris: Quarto Gallimard, 2001) 953. See also Michel Foucault, *Sécurité, territoire, population. Cours au Collège de France. 1977-1978*, “Hautes Etudes” (Paris: Gallimard Seuil, 2004) 233.

“We others, and those who are like us, we only contemplate the darkness of the letters of the Qur’an, because we are in the world of darkness. . . . Consequently, sight only sees the colors and the meaning only obtains sensible realities, the imagination only configures imaginable things, the intelligence only knows the intelligible. It is thus that light is perceived by each, only by the light and “for any to whom Allah giveth not light, there is no light!” (Qur’an, 24: 40). Because of this blackness of sight here down below, we only see the darkness of the Qur’an. But when we leave this existence of the semblance, this dark sight, emigrating towards God and his Prophet, when we perceive the death of this condition subjected to sensible, imaginative, estimated, intellectual, practical forms, when we remain, by our existence itself in the act of existing in the speech of God, then when we head towards the stability, in an eternal stability, of death toward life, then we see more than blackness in the Qur’an. We see only pure whiteness, pure light and an actual realization, according to this verse: “We have made the (Qur’an) a Light, wherewith We guide such of Our servants as We will” (Qur’an, 42: 52).

FETHI BENSLAMA

Translated by Robert Bononno

THE GLOW

In many traditions, stories about origin contain a sequence involving the founder's birth.¹ It is a way of framing the question, Where does he come from, and how was he conceived? The answer often includes the representation of a moment of vacillation before destiny compels a refractory chance to do its bidding and completes its fulfillment. That the father is not present at the outset but must appear through the fiction of his genesis indicates the need to stage an unfolding through which the language of origin tames the possibility of the impossible.

In Islam, the staging of this question is positioned, through the biographical narrative of the Prophet, on a path between two women.² This choice, the specific scenario that it unfolds, contains information about the mechanism of the Islamic representation of origin, haunted by the attempt to control the other woman.

The Coming into Being of the Founder

The story of Muhammad's conception is told by several authors.³ The context is that Abdullah, the Prophet's father, has just escaped destruction through the help of his own father, who has exchanged his vow to sacrifice the child against a considerable fortune: the slaughter of a large number of camels offered up to the pre-Islamic divinities of Mecca. Consequently, it is a survivor who accompanies his father to the woman his father has chosen for him as his wife—Amina, who will become the mother of the Prophet. The genesis of the father takes as its point of departure the refusal to kill the son and the transcendence of the tyrannical and cruel figure of the primal Father.

In a chapter titled "Mention of the Woman Who Proposed Intercourse to Abdullah," the biographer Ibn Hicham writes,

¹ This is an extract from the forthcoming translation of Fethi Benslama, *La Psychanalyse à l'épreuve de l'Islam* (Aubier Montaigne, 2002), which will appear as *Psychoanalysis and the Challenge of Islam*, trans. Robert Bononno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009). Our thanks to the University of Minnesota Press for permission to publish this chapter.

[Abdullah] walked past a woman known as Ruqayya, the sister of Waraqa, who happened to be in the sanctuary. When she saw his face, she asked him, "Where are you going, Abdullah?" He replied, "With my father." She said "If you lie with me now, I will give you as many camels as served to redeem you." He said, "I am with my father and cannot go against my father or separate from him." He then went to the home of Amina, whose rank and lineage were among the highest in Quraysh, whom he married. It is said that he joined with her sexually and that she thus conceived the Prophet. He then left to see the woman who had offered herself to him: "Why do you not offer me today what you offered yesterday?" he asked her. She replied, "You no longer have the light you had yesterday. I no longer have any desire for you today." Ruqayya knew from her brother Waraqa that there would be an Arab prophet.⁴

According to the same sources, there exists another, very similar, version:

Abdullah entered the home of a woman whom he had in addition to Amina. He went to work at the Clay Works and bore the traces. He made advances to the woman but she did not immediately respond because of the traces of clay. He left, rose, and went to Amina. He returned to the woman, who called him to her, but he refused. He returned to Amina and took her. She then conceived Muhammad. He then returned to that woman and said to her, "Do you want to?" She replied "No. When you passed by me, there was a white glow between your eyes; I called you then and you refused; you entered the home of Amina, she has stolen you."

According to Tabari, Ruqayya, who was a seer and knew from scripture the coming birth of the Prophet, proposed intercourse to Abdullah. He agreed and said to her, "Stay here. I'm going home to speak to my father." When he entered his home, Amina threw herself upon his neck. Yielding to his passion, he coupled with her, and the Prophet was conceived within Amina. The light that had surrounded Abdullah's forehead had disappeared when he returned to Ruqayya. She, no longer seeing the glow on his face, realized that the treasure he had borne within him had departed his body. Having learned from him that he had a wife and had just coupled with her, she said to him, "Go. My desire is gone." Abdullah then left.⁵

² I discuss this episode in *La nuit brisée: Muhammad et l'énonciation islamique* (Paris: Ramsay, 1988) 184. I have borrowed several ideas from it, which I have used to illustrate the hypothesis of the other woman.

³ These authors, considered to be the principal biographical sources for the Prophet, are Muhammad Ibn Ishaq, *Sirat Ibn Ishaq* (seventh century), based on several manuscripts (Maison d'édition et de diffusion de Konya, Turkey, 1981); Ibn Hicham, *Assayrat an-nabawyya* (Beirut: Dar al-ma'rifa, n.d.), vol. 2; and Tabari, *Tarikh ar-rusul wa al-muluk*, translated as *Muhammad sceau des prophètes* (Paris: Sindbad, 1980).

⁴ This story is told in nearly the same terms by Ibn Ishaq, in *Sirat Ibn Ishaq*, 23; and by Ibn Hicham, in *Assayrat an-nabawyya*, 1:164. According to tradition, Waraqa was a learned Christian who was the first to recognize in Muhammad the nomos revealed to Moses.

⁵ Tabari, *Tarikh ar-rusul wa al-muluk*, 56.

Regardless of the variations among versions, what all the stories have in common is the space “between-two-women” as the site where the first acts of generation of the Prophet as a human being occur. It is in this space, through this back-and-forth from one woman to the other, that the Islamic narrative has chosen to set the stage for the most radical question of origin. Let’s examine the elements of this mechanism.

The point of departure is the question of destination proposed by Ruqayya, “Where are you going?” Isn’t this the enigma encountered on the road of existence for all of us, that of destination and knowledge? In a sense, the entire story is presented as a theatrical event—“Where are you going?” The protagonist is the son who becomes a father, and the “where” refers to the place of procreation of the child who establishes origin. The fiction that governs the organization of this narrative claims not only to answer this question but, especially, to answer for the truth and legality of the place.

The Dimensions of the Mechanism

The first dimension of this mechanism is found in Abdullah’s response to Ruqayya’s question. His answer does not directly address her question, however, because it refers not to a destination but to a companion; he confirms at once that he will not leave his father. The reference to the father as the one who prevents him from satisfying the woman’s request—and his own desire, if we are to judge by what follows—immediately establishes the question of the “between-two-women” as held in tension between the subject’s desire and his father’s choice. The narrative could have stopped there, ending with the man obeying his father’s order. But if it goes on, it is because the paternal prescript does not stop the son. For as soon as he is subjected to his father’s choice and deposits the “treasure” he carries with the approved woman, he turns around and returns to the first woman, to whom he is still attracted, the approved woman not having satisfied his desire. Nonetheless, there is no understanding possible between them: when she wants, he does not want, and when he wants, she does not want. Rather than an insurmountable obstacle, the father’s prescript creates a discordance in the time of desire. Apparently, the between-two-women establishes the stage space for this discordance, through which is revealed the distinction between the procreation of the Prophet and his father’s sexual desire, between this desire and the symbolic law represented by the father of this father.

The second dimension is related to the knowledge and desire of the woman with respect to the man. Ruqayya is referred to in several versions as the sister of Waraqa, a Christian monk who recognized the first prophetic signs of Muhammad’s arrival. She is, therefore, both a foreigner and a seer, two Hagarian characteristics of the “other woman,” to which is added the desire to “double” the legitimate woman and receive the father’s child. In the background is the approved woman, the noble woman (from the same tribe as Abdullah but of the highest birth, according to the story), that is, the woman of the Other, recipient of the holy child. Yet, although the foreign woman is presented by the story as possessing the gift of prophecy—and what prophecy! that of phallic illumination—the father of the Prophet is

characterized by ignorance and contempt. Contrary to what he believes, he is not the object of Ruqayya's desire, he is merely the *bearer* of the object of that desire. Abdullah does not know he carries the sign of fecundity that will produce the son, who will be the initiator of origin. There is a light or glow, which is perceived and deciphered by Ruqayya as "signifying" that the son is in the father. The other woman, because she is able to perceive "the son's glow," would like to take him into herself. But she is required to ask the father. She makes use of the fact that she knows what the other does not know, in order to capture his seed unawares. The other woman enjoys a knowledge about light and the body, about the body of light of infantile origin, that is invisible to the father who carries it. Abdullah, who does not know that he carries what Ruqayya wants, namely, the son, believes he is refusing something else. But, while he makes himself an object of desire only to reject the other, that other puts an Other in his place. Abdullah refuses something he is not asked for. The misunderstanding is complete. Through this misunderstanding, fiction stages the question of phallic appropriation. What does it say? That it is neither knowledge nor the possession of the phallus that determines destiny and destination, but the law of the father. No one is master of the light (semen) other than this law, which preexists the birth of the founder of the law.

The third dimension is related to the underlying rivalry between the two women. The narrative emphasizes that the glow Abdullah unknowingly carries refers to the "holy child," who will elevate its recipient to the rank of Mother of the Prophet, that is, woman of the Other. It tries to show that the rivalry between the two women revolves not so much around the man as sexual object as around access to the status of woman of the Other and to the phallic *jouissance* that access confers, that is, the supreme power of engendering the son who will become the founding father. Yet the scene seems to resolve the question: one woman has it and the other does not. One woman will become the Mother and the other will remain the foreigner—empty and "without desire," as she says in the story.

The interpretation of the episode is obvious: it is a fiction that reenacts the genesis of the father in Genesis, but with a "new deal," an originary deal that, while maintaining the separation between the two women, claims to better control the situation and succeeds in dismissing the other woman. The foreigner has not superseded the spouse, and the son has arrived at his legitimate destination; there is only one father and one son. The divine treasure is hidden in the body of the woman of the Other.

A Comparison

Given these elements, the Islamic staging of the scene of the between-two-women differs from the Mosaic one. Here, it is important to note that what is most central is not saving the child. The Islamic fiction emphasizes the question of desire and the law rather than survival. The element concerning the other woman's knowledge is not found in the Mosaic narrative, whereas it is central in the Muhammadan narrative. In the former, the foreign woman remains on the side of power in its most

destructive form, because Pharaoh wants to exterminate the male children of Israel. But it is the return of this woman to the service of the Mother that allows Moses to escape death. The woman of the Other and the other woman are unknowing accomplices in saving the child, who is the savior of his people.

Comparing the two scenes, we find that each tradition is haunted by the risk of its origin, or its originary fault. Ever since the origin of Judaism, the god of the Bible has held out the threat of withdrawing the gift, a threat of the absence of filiation and the destruction of the son. Yet, for Moses, the space between-two-women, that is, the originary Mosaic structural difference, is presented as the site of the fiction of rescue, so that the source of destruction (Pharaoh) becomes the source of salvation.

Islam, ever since the originary repudiation, has been haunted by the other woman, who has threatened to capture the son, making him an illegitimate bastard. Here, the space between-two-women carries with it a fiction that establishes the nobility of the mother's birth, control of the other woman, and preservation of the son's seed through the father. The son's obedience to the father to avoid capture by the other woman goes so far as to risk breaking his ties to his desire, which persists all the same, yet not without a certain ingenuousness. The price of submission to the symbolic law of the father is misunderstanding of the other woman's real desire. That is why the Islamic scene emphasizes the rivalry between the two women—one has the man and the other does not—whereas, in the Mosaic scene, the woman who has him (the mother) allows him to drift toward the woman who does not (the wife of Pharaoh), who returns him to the woman who agreed to give him up, his mother as his nurse. We could say that in this case the child is originally in exile, allowed to wander or subjected to fate, and in that way origin is saved and kept alive, as if the holy child, by becoming a stranger to his mother, enabled origin to split, to separate from itself, escaping the fate of self-identification and mortal self-foundation. In a sense, Freud repeats this gesture by making Moses a stranger to his people. For Islam, born to a foreigner, the opposite is true: the holy child must go toward the destination identified by the father, allowing for the appropriation of origin. In every case, the originary fault watches over and threatens origin at the same time—watches over it through the threat that exposed it to its becoming.

Between-Two-Women in Psychoanalysis

What does psychoanalysis have to say about this notion of “between-two-women”? You may recall that in the first part of his interpretation of the myth of Moses (*Moses and Monotheism*, SE, 23:1-137), Freud connects the two families—the family of high rank and the family of humble origins—to the family romance of the child who oscillates between over-estimation and disappointment concerning his real family, especially his father. He then applies this interpretation to the myth of the hero who rebels against the father who exposed him, while a child, to the risk of death, from

which the child escapes, later to return and kill the father.⁶ How does the Oedipal reading relate to the present case? Abdullah is in a situation of transition or genealogical articulation between father and son, son and father. The sequence of exposing the child is, indeed, present in this version, because, according to the story, Abdullah's father wanted to implement his vow to sacrifice his son, but buys back his life. And the son, now indebted to his father for his life, obeys him, accompanies him, and submits to his law. Thus, we are faced with an Abrahamic counter-Oedipal situation, where the son is connected to his father through sacrificial debt. (See the section titled "Sacrifice and Interpretation" in chapter 4.) And it is this connection that enables him to avoid giving the holy child to the other woman, the foreign woman who sees and knows far too much. The law of the father is an economic law of reciprocity, wherein the son's sacrificial debt entails a phallic debt in favor of the woman of the Other.

Note that there exists, in Freud's self-analysis, an important episode in which he meets the figure of a woman who holds a particular kind of knowledge. She is mentioned in a letter to Wilhelm Fliess; this is the elderly woman who was his nursemaid. Freud situates her in relation to his mother, attributing to her the role of instructor. He describes her as a witch and calls her his "professor of sexuality" (*Extracts from the Fliess Papers*, SE, 1:173-280). Does this mean that Freud received from this woman positive encouragement in the knowledge of sexuality? To judge from the episode, the figure of the "knowing witch," the other woman, would, in some sense, be at the infantile psychic root of the invention of psychoanalysis.

In Jacques Lacan's "The Signification of the Phallus" (1958), there appears a reference that evokes the between-two-women: "If, indeed, man is able to satisfy his demand for love in his relationship with a woman, inasmuch as the phallic signifier clearly constitutes her as giving in love what she does not have, conversely, his own desire for the phallus will make its signifier emerge in its residual divergence toward 'another woman' who may signify this phallus in various ways, either as virgin or as a prostitute."⁷ This statement could apply, in part, to the present case, for the narrative uses the "residual divergence toward 'another woman'" to illustrate that Abdullah bears on his face "the signifier" indicating that he possesses the holy child. The other woman reads "the signifier" and reveals it as such for Abdullah, who did not know what he had: "You no longer have the light you had yesterday," she says to him. In other words, it is only at the moment of loss that he knows what he had.

If the father, according to the story, is the one who gives what he did not realize he had, we can add some refinements to Lacan's statement: it is not only the gift of

⁶ Freud's approach incorporates the analysis found in "Family Romances," SE, 9:235-41 (1908-1909), also published in Otto Rank's *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero: A Psychological Interpretation of Mythology*, trans. F. Robbins and Smith Ely Jelliffe (New York: Brunner, 1952), and originally published as "Der Familienroman der Neurotiker," in Rank's *Der Mythos von der Geburt des Helden: Versuch einer psychologischen Mythendeutung* (Leipzig: F. Deuticke, 1909) 64-68.

⁷ Jacques Lacan, "The Signification of the Phallus," in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2006) 583.

what one does not have that will define love, but the *unknown* gift.⁸ On the one hand, to give what one does not have anchors the problem in the domain of ownership, whether the gift is treated as a debt or as the concealment of stolen goods. This leads us to the economical logic of credit. On the other hand, “not knowing” that one gives falls to one side or the other of the question of ownership of the gift and its economic justification; to give without knowing is an un-thinkable transappropriation in terms of credit, value, and consideration. This transappropriation is part of the logic of the noneconomizable, where the gift is inestimable because it is imperceptible as a gift—unless there is someone (such as Ruqayya) who is supposed to know there is a gift. But the noneconomizable, the inestimable, the imperceptible . . . is the impossible.

The Father According to the Impossible

We have, therefore, two strata for the genesis of the father. The first is that of the economy of sacrifice, where the phallic gift is inscribed in the register of love as “giving what one doesn’t have.” This would refer to the life of the son who is the object of the concealment. We see it again in the gesture of Abdullah’s father, who is ready to proffer death and divert it at the same time. The son, now indebted, releases his semen where his father tells him to. The second stratum reveals the son-father as being unaware of what he has or what he gives, but he does indeed give it to the appropriate recipient, in keeping with the father’s preference. At this point, it is impossible to know that there was a gift before the gift took place, and before the other woman, supposed to know, tells him so. As long as there is no knowledge, the gift is confused with the impossible as elusive, inestimable, and noneconomizable. The formula I proposed in chapter 2 applies here as well: “There is there-is-not.” We could also add a variant form of the expression: “There is he-does-not-know.” But once Ruqayya knows of the gift, the law of the father goes into action. This law, as an economic law of debt, can legislate only ownership and destination, for the impossible escapes its jurisdiction—it predates the law of the *Pater economicus*, who needs to know that there is an *object* to manipulate somewhere.⁹ In short, the impossible is not subject to patriarchal law.

It appears that the god of Islam, as the Prophet understands him at the very beginning, is located on the side of this impossible. Subsequently, the religious institution of which he is the founder will co-opt him, placing him at the service of domestic paternity and phallic *jouissance*. But, as noted previously, the Qur’anic text retains the trace of the affirmation of this god who is not father through a fulguration that Jacques Berque has compared to the Unique God in the poem of

⁸ Jacques Derrida indicates that this expression is not Lacan’s. He apparently borrowed it from Heidegger, who took it from Plotinus, without either of them citing the source. “Fidélité à plus d’un,” *Cahiers Intersignes* 13 (1998): 237.

⁹ The word economy is a borrowing from the Greek *oikonomos*, which is derived from *oikos*, “house,” and *nomos*, “rule, custom, law.”

Parmenides: “unborn and indestructible . . . Whole, unique, and unmoving and complete.”¹⁰

In the fiction of the founder’s procreation, the inestimable impossible is manifested by “the glow.” It is not the light itself but the consequences it brings about in manifesting itself that reveal the mark of the impossible. Note how this glow provokes a split among the protagonists, which results in the fact that what is represented as an object of their desire is negated or concealed: “He has it, but doesn’t know it,” “He knows he had it when it he no longer has it” (Abdullah); “She knows but doesn’t have it” (Ruqayya); “She has what the other does not” (Amina). This last expression seems to indicate full possession; but this is only an illusion of belief in the phallic appropriation and interrogation of the impossible. In fact, even for Amina, there is a split: she has the son’s seed but does not have the desire Abdullah feels for the other woman. The woman of the Other does not have what the other woman has, namely, this supplemental *jouissance* that the man demands of her, in being neither son nor father but someone who is reaching for a supplement that overflows phallic *jouissance*. The inestimable impossible is the result of the glow that produces a universal split and dispossesses everyone of some amount of *jouissance*, which is lost forever. If we follow Lacan’s hypothesis, the glow would not be just any signifier but what he calls “the master signifier,” to the extent that it exposes all of us to this crisis of lack.

Between Emptiness and Fullness

Other psychoanalytic studies have examined the schema of the between-two-women from the point of view of the *jouissance* of the other woman, emphasizing the destructive hatred this figure may provoke whenever there is no working-off of the imaginary rivalry with this figure for a female subject. Michèle Montrelay’s research has helped clarify this issue.¹¹ In an interview on female jealousy, she says,

You lose all desire, you remain a body, a body that is only a body, and, at that moment, the body of the other woman—which is always seen as luminous, it is that body that bears the light of the mother’s desire, of the man’s desire—that body attracts you and you want to dissolve into it. . . . At that moment, you try to reconstruct yourself, and this reconstruction involves the gaze, from the point of view of a woman’s body. It is the body of a woman who is light—elsewhere, jealousy is said to be “blinding”—this brings us back to an altogether archaic period. What you need is the opportunity to give shape to this light, which is now on the other, to create the maternal body. You, you are nothing more than a body, you no longer have the words to express your jealousy, but there is the body of the other woman—it’s highly

¹⁰ Jacques Berque, trans., *Le Coran* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1990) 705. Youssef Seddik has examined this question in his doctoral thesis in anthropology, “L’enfance grecque du Coran” (École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 1995).

¹¹ Michèle Montrelay, *L’ombre et le nom* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1977).

enigmatic—which is like the first step you must take to reconstruct yourself. . . . This kind of blinding clarity that is nothing, which is the void of jealousy, you provide it with the contour of the body of that woman. But this implies that you have had constructive relations with your mother's body. That your experiences of jealousy with regard to your mother were fragmentary and not completely devastating.¹²

We should not be surprised that clinical research finds, through its own meanderings, the same issues expressed by the fiction of origin, sometimes even down to the details. I would like to focus for a moment on Montrelay's reference to light as a desire for the other, who is "void," "nothing," and at the same time something that needs to be given form by the body of the other woman. How does this light reveal voids and solids? By creating a feeling of destruction ("the void of jealousy") such that the only escape is through an appeal to the other woman, which establishes the structure of the between-two-women. The appearance of a binary modality—0/1 or 1/0—appeases the anxiety of destruction brought about by the light, providing the other woman is not destructive in turn.¹³ Jealousy conceals both this anxiety of nothingness and the intent to free oneself by creating the pole of the other woman. This is the function of the glow in the narrative, because through it the two terms of the fundamental structure—"There is a woman who has it" and "The other woman does not have it" (there is there-is-not)—are manifested; as if the glow is an epiphany through which antagonistic forces are revealed, opposite and yet complementary places, so that the founder of the symbolic institution can come into being. However, although there is a place (a womb) that remains empty and another that is full, according to the 0/1 binary schema, it is from this empty place that the glow is visible. The empty place does not receive the glow but creates the gaze that reads it. If the other woman sees, it is because she is not phallically fulfilled, because the lack or persistence of the desire of the other makes her prophetic and knowing. However, we must be careful here when using the concept of emptiness. The emptiness of the other woman (Ruqayya's womb) is a void of privation and not the void of interval that falls between two, the void that indicates the glow, or the vertical bar between 0 and 1. The void of interval is not a place, it is the place beyond (*hors-lieu*) of the impossible. It is not metaphor but nothingness and epiphanic interval, the in-between through which the existence of the structure we are studying is set in motion and becomes possible. Naturally, this is made manifest through the privation of the other woman, who reveals it through the gaze, through desire, through a metapsychological knowledge within the negating struggle with the woman of the Other.¹⁴ But the void of interval belongs to a different order of negativity, one beyond membership, identities, or essences; it is "neither one nor the other": neutral, therefore.

¹² Michèle Montrelay, "Entretien avec Madeleine Chapsal," in *La jalousie*, by Madeleine Chapsal (Paris: Gallimard, 1977) 142–73.

¹³ From the point of view of the genesis of the subject, 1 precedes 0. Pierre Legendre considers this binary function and the position of the void as the very foundation of reason. A binary relation is not the same as a "dual" one, and for good reason, given that the bar of the Third is present. See *La 901^e conclusion*, 209ff.

It should be clear that the Islamic fiction of the origin of the father differs from that in the Bible. By stressing the opposition between the two women, it allows the impossible, the void of interval, this withdrawal from which arises the very possibility of “fictionalizing” the father, to appear. This recalls what we found to occur at the beginning of Islam concerning a nonpaternal god: the original One is, in some sense, an infinite genealogical desert, out of which all origins and their imagination continually arrive. It is here that the ocean of illuminative philosophy and Muslim mysticism touch a (bottomless) bottom. But we also see how this idea is masked by the defensive stance against the other woman that arises from the originary disavowal and the phallocentric patriarchal co-optation of her gaze. By presenting the man as the bearer of the “glow,” the father becomes “pregnant,” phallically certain, whereas the mother, to the extent she may have been displaced by the other woman, appears uncertain: if the father of the father (the patriarch) had not been there to direct the son’s seed toward her . . . Consequently, there is an inversion of the judgment of certainty that is customarily attributed to the mother. Here, paternity is attested by the evidence of the senses (sight) of the other woman.

The Mother as Fiction

In spite of this reversal, or possibly because of it, the narrative contains a problem of interest to the female subject. By making the man uncertain, even for a moment, about his desire for the mother, the narrative introduces a separation into the affirmation of generative certainty, and it is through this separation that the mother as fiction is produced. For such an operation to be possible, a sequence was needed in which the originary “deal” revealed that another distribution was possible, and how the law of the father abolished the accident of the ignorant desire of fate. Conception according to fiction rends the unambiguous space of maternal certainty.

For a period of time, the mother was almost not the mother; another woman could have taken her place. In this “almost” of eventuality, this “caesura of pure jealousy,” a story is produced, a narrative, a signifying construction. Because of the other woman, origin is not only a jet of sperm in the womb of the woman of the Other but also the emission of a fiction between two, that is, the story itself, or even the procreation of the fiction of the procreation of origin. Ruqayya had to delay Abdullah for a short while so there would be time for a story. This gift, through the attraction of the other woman, is necessary for instituting the origin of the founder. A kind of mediation takes place between Ruqayya and Amina, a *différance* (in Derrida’s orthography), that is, the gift of temporality as fiction, in which the procreation of the body of the founder takes place, which is merely the imaginary of the symbolic. For the subject, it is belief in this fiction that *makes* the founder, as body of sanctity or truth. This sanctity resides not in the flesh of the child but in the fiction that confers it upon him. In this sense, fiction is the mother of the sanctity of

¹⁴ Recall that with Hagar, there is a knowledge of alterity through sight and through naming. The other woman would, in a sense, be the starting point for the formation of a speculative theory, a metaphysics, our witch of metapsychology.

the holy child, which is what all fiction tries to achieve and re-create, including in the form we now call literature.

But when we speak of “the possibility that a woman can take the place of an other,” what is the status of this necessary eventuality that fiction is capable of introducing? As shown earlier, this necessary eventuality refers to a preexisting separation in which this permutation can occur, this alternative, a separation in which the possibility of the impossible arises. The “between-two” is a space that emerges not because there is one woman + one woman, an interval, a split created between them or by them; it is they who enter the separation that precedes all polarity, all alternatives, all paternal and maternal certainty. There is a separation that lies at the origin of all origin, an archistructural division around which originary meaning is constituted as jealousy of being. I have referred to this as the void of interval, and fiction is a garment for this void, from which arises the gift of time.¹⁵ The fiction of jealousy is jealousy of the void (in the initial sense of the Italian *gelosia*, a trellis that protects the woman from the gaze of others); it conceals real sovereignty. Fictions are presented as the mothers of an origin of which they are the daughters. Like the crocus in the poem by Apollinaire, they would be “mothers daughters of their daughters.”¹⁶ Would the imaginary be the mother of a real of which it is the child? But the real of origin withdraws from all paternity and maternity; it holds itself back from everything that might be said or imagined about it that is only jealousy.

¹⁵ This idea of interval as temporality is found in a text by Pierre Fédida, appropriately titled “Le vide de la métaphore et le temps de l’intervalle,” in *L’absence* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978) 197–238.

¹⁶ Concerning these lines by Apollinaire, see Claude Lévi-Strauss, “Une petite énigme mythico-littéraire,” *Le Temps de la Réflexion* 1 (1980): 133–41.

FETHI BENSLAMA AND JEAN-LUC NANCY

Translated by Ed Pluth

TRANSLATIONS OF MONOTHEISMS

Ghislaine Glasson Deschaumes¹: In his book entitled *Moses the Egyptian*, recently published in French, the Egyptologist Jan Assmann uses the phrase “the Mosaic distinction” to name Moses’ foundation of monotheism (a foundation that was sketched out, during a short period, by Akhenaton, and then repressed in Egyptian history). He shows that the refusal of translation is foundational to monotheism. The Mosaic distinction brings about a radical rupture in the continuum that constituted the basis of polytheisms, which led these to constantly inter-translate themselves. Does this logic of rupture with respect to a perspective on translation among cultures seem to you also to structure the relations among the three great monotheistic religions, or even the relation between monotheisms and other religions?

Jean-Luc Nancy: Indeed, I think this view on inter-translation or inter-translatability can allow us to tackle the question of monotheism. It must then be remarked that the inter-translation of ancient polytheisms, such as Jan Assmann presents it (I am not able to discuss this presentation here, which seems to me convincing), has two sides. On the one hand, it is opposed to the intra-translatability of monotheism (or, more precisely, monotheism is opposed to it, monotheism rises up against it). On the other hand, it is itself a new phenomenon, proper to Antiquity (more or less late; I will not enter into precise historical considerations here). It implies a similarity among gods, and consequently a sliding of identity toward function, and consequently the possible attribution of different names to similar functions. This is how the *interpretatio latina* of the Greek Pantheon was able to be brought about.² Finally, there is the divine function itself, general and generic, that can itself receive a generic and/or multipliable name, “Isis of ten thousand names,” for example (Assman, 49). This supposes that there was an earlier rupture with other “tribal” religions, in which the divinities are simultaneously less individualized and much more singularized, as divinities of a singular people. With Jewish monotheism, one would thus have a chiasm: the God of a single people, but very strongly individualized, while at the same time taking on all by himself the entire divine function (it remains to be seen,

¹ Brought about at the initiative of Ghislaine Glasson Deschaumes, this exchange was first published as, “In the name of the neutral, translations of monotheism” in *Transeuropean* 23 (2003). This later version appeared in *Cliniques méditerranéennes* 73 (2006) and is translated with kind permission.

and this is undoubtedly the most important point, if this “divine function” is the same as the one in polytheisms, whether of the “tribal” or “ancient” type). Translatability thus supposes a position on the propriety of the proper name. This position is a response to a shift in the apprehension of language: a language that is in an underhanded fashion improper, the impossibility of a pure nomination, of expressing being by its name. The possibility of the debate in Plato’s *Cratylus* is found here. Within a polytheism that was already very translatable (I would even say, already translating itself ever since it was put into writing in myths, in Homer and Hesiod, displacing the address to the gods, nomination as address and cult, toward, let’s say, loosely, a “conceptual” nomination, naming the quality or function of god—thus, noticing that “Zeus” is “the day,” the light . . .). Plato, of course, is also the one who began to speak, sometimes, of “god” or of the “god” in the singular (“it is necessary to escape from this world toward god”—*o theos*—it is said in the *Theatetus*, in a passage whose translation poses a real problem: “the god,” “god,” “the divine”—which to choose? Certainly not “a god” in any case. I believe all the possibilities can be found in the diverse translations that exist).

It would thus be necessary to inquire into the mutation that is brought about in the ancient world, in which translatability makes for a considerable modification in the relation to “god,” a modification that allows a particular god, that of the Jews, already endowed with original traits, to give rise to a cultural cross-fertilization several centuries long, from which Christianity will emerge, and later Islam (and in the interim Manichaeism, another religion of “the Book”). What is remarkable to me is that this mutation accompanies a considerable change of civilization in which alphabetic writing on the one hand and commerce on the other, and finally the appearance of cities, forms, horizontally, networks of communication (internal and external) in contrast to the empires structured in hierarchical verticals (in the proper sense of “sacred authority”). All these traits put together could, perhaps, hastily, lead to this conclusion: the mutation is that of a language that from then on designates its own impropriety, one that makes being (or propriety) flee away from its grasp, or beyond its limit (which perhaps should even be put this way: from then on language is conceived of as a “grasp” or “seizure” rather than an “expression” of or “emanation” from the thing). “Communication” changes meaning: instead of words communicating something of being, they serve to communicate a meaning among its speakers. Translatability is then placed at the heart of language. (Babel is perhaps an echo of this phenomenon.)

As a consequence, monotheism is presented as something that puts the divine on the side of impropriety. The names no longer name gods, the divine escapes words, and monotheism posits what has “escaped” (we can come back later to the difference between the unpronounceable Jewish name and the Christian and Muslim names: this will be precisely an aspect of translatability or intra-translatability among monotheisms). What has escaped corresponds to the turn of language, and not to the sudden appearance of a mysterious unnamable being: the unnamable comes from the name conceived as a designator, replacing the name conceived as an address. If I

² Jan Assman, *Moses the Egyptian: the Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998) 45.

address myself to god, if I address myself to someone (in a call, prayer, summons, etc.), I am not concerned with designating him: I interpellate him, I invoke him. “Invoking” is not naming. Or, I “adore” him (which means, literally, I speak to him!). In this address, the “thou,” [*tu*] (“Oh God, I ask of you” [*je te prie*])—“Hosanna!” which signifies approximately “save us now!”) counts as much if not more than the name of god. Now, the address as such, of course, is not to be translated. (But it can communicate something of its force, its emotion.) I stop here in order to let Fethi respond.

Fethi Benslama: Before getting to what you are saying about “the mutation of language” brought about by the Mosaic distinction, I will make some general remarks about Assmann’s book. This book sheds new light on the process of the deconstruction of monotheisms as it is affirmed in the nineteenth century, while exploring one of the modern idealities of the production of the history of religion in the West, that which is constituted around the antinomy *Israel/Egypt*. This exploration is carried out by a method that is inspired by the Freudian perspective. It is inspired by Freud to the extent that it aims at a *history of remembering* that calls upon the concept of “repression” rather than on a history of facts. It sheds light at the same time on Freud’s most enigmatic book, *Moses and Monotheism*, and validates certain hypotheses in it that seemed to Freud’s own eyes very weak. “Freud is the one who restored the suppressed evidence, who was able to retrieve lost memories and to finally complete and rectify the picture of Egypt,” Assmann writes (Assmann, 216). The rediscovery of Akhenaton will have been, in sum, a return of the repressed that allows us to read the case for Moses as an Egyptian. From this point of view, J. Assmann carries out something like a psychoanalytic thinking of historicity: human memory cannot only be understood from the perspective of a history of consciousness and its constructions, especially when it is a question of events that affect our relation to alterity, such as the fall of the gods; human memory is not perfected by a knowledge of the completed past, but depends on a time saturated by a “now-time,” as Benjamin writes in his developments on the concept of history.³ This saturation by “now-time” is the site of memory for psychoanalysis, the site of a temporal block in which the experience of the past and its writing takes place. Recollection bursts the continuity of history and the linearity of the past, and it is in this sense a leap into the anachronistic, thanks to which the event is appropriated and inscribed. Assmann proposes thinking of the event that he calls “the Mosaic distinction” by understanding memory this way. This act of an intransigence, severity and unheard of intolerance cannot have taken place and been perpetuated except under an irrepressible and durable pressure. It is thus that I understand the interpretation you propose of “the Mosaic distinction” as a “mutation of language.” What you identify as traits of this mutation—a language that designates its own impropriety, the divine escaping from words, the change of register of the unnamable, etc.—assumes, it seems to me, the passage or the retreat of the divine into the register of the real. The elements that Assmann provides show that this passage was brought about by a process of extreme purification: a purification of the

³ The French is “à-présent,” probably for the German “*jetztzeit*,” found in Benjamin [Trans. note].

divine from the world, its purification from the natural and imaginary bodies in which cosmotheism had infused it. The difference between the inscription at Saïs—"I am all that is"—and the one who speaks in the Bible, saying "I am he who is," shows us the operation of an abolition of the referent (in the cosmos) in favor of a pure self-reference [*auto-référentiel*]. There are two consequences to this. On the one hand, an extraordinary concentration of the divine into the order of psychic representation, whereas in cosmotheism it was in some sense more "hystericized," since it was the object of a conversion in the evidence of things; on the other hand, because of the fact that it became purely mental, it escapes evidence, which leads to doubt, anxiety, and fright, since such is the attitude of men in relation to what takes place in the real. Whence, as an after-effect, the pressure to over-symbolize the divine in monotheism, with the aim of attenuating doubt and anxiety. In fact, the change of direction in monotheism can be considered on this basis as a radicalization of obsessional neurosis in civilization, because all of these mechanisms—the purification of the divine from the world, its concentration into a psychic representation, doubt, over-symbolization—belong to the obsessional process that does not come without a logicization and a ratiocination without respite. It is the end of the free association of the gods, which is a corollary to the breakdown of their translation. In the place of inter-translation comes an intra-translation made of ruminations, misgivings, and logical sophistications regarding the one who, by his concealment, flooded psychic space. The soul is no longer anything but the representation of the representation of god. But something like a melancholization of the general regime of representation must have been produced, because this absolute act of retreat into the register of the real had to go through the death of the divine—and the death of god is perhaps nothing other than the very advent of monotheism—for which the psyche became the hidden tomb, or the crypt. The obsessional logic as far as death and the ideal goes is not left behind. The question that can be posed here concerns the attitude of the three monotheist religions with respect to this god withdrawn into the register of the real: that is, the question of the over-symbolizing organizations that are invented about him.

Jean-Luc Nancy: For our exchange we should, in fact, get to the question of the relations among the three monotheisms, and I am going to try to get us there. But first I want to remark that, in terms different from mine because you are speaking from the point of view of psychoanalysis, you confirm what I am thinking, which depends in fact on the "melancholization" of a certain epoch in the West. Now, this idea appears in Freud, in *Moses*, who takes it up from a historian (I forget who it was). In my opinion this is a very significant point, because it means that Judeo-Christianity, and then Islam, did not fall from the sky (of course not!) but were products, called for or enabled by a general state of the culture. It involves as well the entire historical movement that links Mosaic Judaism to an epoch of Hellenized Judaism, then to Judeo-Christianity, and from there to Christianity, to its Eastern and Roman success, and later, in a milieu in which the traces of this entire history are present, the birth of Islam. This requires us to think this entire history in a manner other than how it is always thought by a rationalism according to which it would just be a matter of unfortunate and extrinsic accidents to the grand movement of *logos*.

And to add just a word about Freud: when he takes a moment of history into account like this, and says that “a great sadness seems to have taken hold of the people of the Mediterranean,” he suggests a “psychoanalysis” of civilization: a psychoanalysis of that whose “discontent” is not, according to him, amenable to the psychoanalytic cure—and for good reason!⁴ But with respect to which, also, he remarks, that the commandment of Christian love is the clearest (and most impotent) affirmation of a protest against human violence (in *Civilization and Its Discontents*). There is a line of thinking here that it would be interesting to pursue elsewhere: psychoanalysis stops at the edge of civilization as such, and can only designate beyond its own impotence, another impotence—that of religion.

But I come back to the three monotheisms and their relations to the name of God, to focus on just that point for now. On the one hand, what they have in common is the uniqueness of God, and consequently also the loss of specificity: he is not the god of this or that, he is God of a people (in the Jewish stage). But this particular god, as the only true god, is distinguished from all others, which is something new. Then he becomes universal in Christianity, and likewise in Islam. There follow three ways of naming this God, if I can so describe an operation that cancels out the “proper” name in order to bring about something else. There are three main forms: an unpronounceable name (YHWH), revealed to Moses for his people alone, whose meaning revolves around “I am” (I am skipping over the whole discussion on this point); this name is doubled by other designations (Elohim, the plural of the very ancient name of a superior god, El Adonai, which is “lord,” etc.) that always refer to a position of uniqueness and supremacy and never to a particular function (Yahweh Sabaoth is indeed “Yahweh of the armies” but for one thing this is a rather rare appellation, and for another it still needs to be interpreted: it is still about omnipotence, and is not, like Ares, a god proper to war alone). Second form: the appearance of “God” *tout court* (as in Plato there was the singular *o theos*, rather strange in the Greek context . . .). He is also “Father” or “Lord,” but without going back over these designations here, I just want to point out that the proper name became absolutely improper, because it was common. “God” only states the divine quality, removed from any precise god: here begins the possibility and the necessity of a work on the divine name (in Pseudo-Dionysus on up to Thomas Aquinas and beyond). What does this name say? Does it grab on to anything significant in the word that it summons up, or does it instead dissolve every signification? Finally, Allah: Allah, for its part, brings together something of El, and, according to Youssef Seddik (I refer to him, not knowing if he is the only one to have made this assertion) of Allat, a pre-Islamic goddess.⁵ It is very close to “God,” that is, to the common name becoming proper. Moreover, the formula “there is no other god but God” marks this well. At the same time, this is the God who accrues all the names up to a

⁴ Nancy seems to be referring to the following passage from Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism*: “The consciousness of guilt in that epoch was no longer restricted to the Jews; it had seized all Mediterranean peoples as a vague discomfort, a premonition of misfortune, the reason for which no one knew.” Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism* (London: Vintage, 1967), 174. [Trans. note].

⁵ Seddik, Youssef, *Le Coran, autre lecture, autre traduction* (Barzakh/Editions de l’Aube, 2002).

hundred, the hundredth being inaccessible to us. It handles by the accumulation of excellences (the powerful, the generous, the superb etc.) what the preceding handled by the reduction to "God." There is thus something like a dialectic here: a name, no name, a name that sublates all the names—but always in fact a nomination tending toward a beyond of any personal name, toward an over-nomination of the qualities of being in general; the perfection of power, of goodness, and truth. A remarkable ambivalence is produced by this: everything leads to Being in itself, the Supreme Being conceived as the Producer of all being (creator: the concept proper to monotheism), and thus toward what philosophy can make of it, which no longer has anything to do with a person, nor, finally, with a god. The history of philosophy from Descartes (at least) to Kant is the history of the trouble created by this pseudo-concept and its ultimate liquidation. But on the other side of the ambivalence there is, on the contrary, the unique person who is in charge of the world, and with whom there can be a relation . . .

Fethi Benslama: Firstly, it seems to me important to be more precise about the name of God in Islam. Seddik's interpretation is original, but is not confirmed by lexicographers and historical studies. And because of its brevity (in *Le Coran, autre lecture, autre traduction*), it even risks blurring the monotheistic operation of the founder of Islam, because it could allow one to suppose that the Islamic Allah is very close to the pre-Islamic Allah, if not the same. Now, this is not the case at all of course. The use of the same term hides a shift that passes from the name to what you correctly call "a naming." Allah was certainly the supreme god of the pre-Islamic pantheon, but he shared his powers with other very numerous divinities, some of whom were frequently called upon and even eclipsed him. It has been established that in the course of the history of Arab paganism, this masculine god supplanted the god "Lune" and took over the divine qualities of the maternal feminine on behalf of a creator god. Let's note that the schema of this passage (from the evidence of the maternal to the in-evidence of paternity) is underlined by Freud as being correlative to monotheism and the progress it would accomplish in the spiritual domain.

In fact, at the beginning of Muhammad's preaching, the name Allah is not mentioned in the Qur'an! Nor is it mentioned in the course of what is called the first Meccan period, and also not in the second. The names of god that appear at this time are those of "Lord," "Powerful," "Generous," etc. It is only later that the word "Allah" suddenly appears and is systematized in the Qur'an. This usage coincides with the intensification of the conflict with the polytheistic Arabs, who objected to Muhammad that unlike their divinities, whose names gave some idea of their qualities, his did not have any precise ones at all. Whence the following Qur'anic reply, which appears in different places: "these are only names which you and your father have invented" (XII, 40). This is basically in line, then, with a naming that is a loss of the power of the name ("these are only . . .") or perhaps something like a sublimation of the name. This operation finds its ultimate origin in the fact that, in Arabic, "Allah" comes from "*ilah*" which designates "god," to which the definite article, "*Al*," has been added. Grammarians emphasize that the elision of the "i," or its contraction, makes Allah into "the god" (which one could write all at once as Thegod). Outwardly we have the same name, but the passage from Allah the

supreme god and Allah as unique “*Thegod*” is a hollowing out of the name, in the sense that the sound “Allah” no longer possesses any conventional signification. This is what made Joseph Chelhod write, in *Les structures du sacré chez les Arabes*: “If the Jews gave to their supreme god a name that is not one (*Yahweh*, the one who is), the Arabs left theirs practically without a name. Allah would be in fact simply a contraction of *al-ilah*, the god.”⁶

But what does this entail? The proper name “Allah,” despite all this, still does not become common, because no one can be called Allah. *It is no longer either proper or common*. In other words, it is beyond nomenclature, or else to the extent that its trace subsists in discourse, it corresponds to a hole in nomenclature. It is at this point, at the hole, then, that I take up again the formulation that I proposed of a god who passes into the register of the real. Does this formulation not also have a philosophical relevance? For example, that this mutation in language reveals a “there is” that is independent of the objective scope of the subject, escaping from the subjectivity of the thinking subject. Is there not here a decisive orientation toward a real that is at the origin of scientific knowledge? This is perhaps what leads philosophy to aim for a reconciliation of reason with the real, even to the Hegelian saying about the identity of the real and the rational.

The question I ask myself is the following: does Islam, beginning with the Mosaic acquisition, not push the sublimation of the name of God to the point of leaving a gaping hole in the real? The 99 names of god would only be the edge of this hole. Here is what Chelhod has to say about this: “The Muslims are persuaded that if one succeeded in finding it (the one hundredth name), one could revive the dead, tame the elements, and move at will all of nature” (Chelhod, 100). The lack of a name certainly corresponds to a real that is unable to be mastered.

I reformulate my proposition: the Mosaic counterattack to the translation of the gods reveals the untranslatable as an unbearable real, one that is the effect of a fundamental melancholization due to the encounter of god as real. Three ways of affirming and at the same time covering up this real appear: in a sense, three sorts of malaise that contain the marks of a defense against the melancholia due to the divine. In the case of Judaism, a detour that privileges the law with the ethical development that we all know (the oral law and the written law), but also a legislative extremism with respect to which the Messianic utopia can be seen as an attempt at liberation. In the case of Islam, this detour is in some respects similar to Judaism, but it passes rather by the letter in its function as the border of the real (the letter is “*harf*,” edge, coastline [*littoral*]). There is in Islam an ethic and an aesthetics of the letter, but also an extremism residing in this literalism. The magnitude of Sufism signals an attempt at liberation from this. As for Christianity, I see in it an attempt to get away from the melancholic cruelty of god: certainly by means of love, but this is sustained by an operation that brings god back to the body, makes him die and resurrects him, as if one wanted to substitute mourning for melancholia. Christianity’s extremism goes right at the body, because incorporation is, nonetheless, an extraordinary imaginization of the monotheistic real, weakening its

⁶ Joseph Chelhod, *Les structures du sacré chez les Arabes* (Maisonneuve et Larose, 1964) 7.

rigor, and thus opening the possibility of another treatment of this real. In this sense, the only true humanism is Christian, including this shift in the name towards the name of the father. I wonder if we should explore the track of melancholia further . . .

Jean-Luc Nancy: Reacting immediately to your last words, I will say that for me it is not the “melancholic track” that is the one to follow, because it seems to me to be burdened by a serious flaw, which is to suppose that there is melancholia (or mourning), that there is, first and foremost, loss. Now, the change that leads to monotheism is only a loss insofar as there was something that one can designate in the same order as the one in which the beyond or simply the aftermath of the loss is designated. When someone dies, he is no longer there and his empty place can be shown.

(In all that we are discussing, certainly nothing else is at stake but the relation to death. But precisely, the divinity who assures this relation, whether well or poorly, cannot, himself, die. “God is dead” is only, for Nietzsche himself, properly speaking, an affirmation that applies to the moral God. And the “departure” or “retreat” of the gods of polytheisms is not a death. I do not have a word, incidentally, for these grand mutations in humanity . . . “Revolutions,” definitely, in the cosmological sense: humanity turning in varied orbits, bending itself around the black hole of death, of his own death and the death of the world.)

To get back to what I was saying: the “loss”—or absencing, retreat, passage into the “real” as “impossible,” etc.—presupposes a presence or a prior fullness, and what’s more, a presence situated in a register that is homogeneous to that of absence. But I was trying to say, for example, that the gods of polytheisms are not “present” either (while I did say it often, I know, in order to try to grasp the phenomenon . . .) and that every god is in absence—or in the real—but that each one gives to this absence, or this real, different properties—force, for example, or else desire or love (I conflate the two terms here, but at any rate, what is unchanging is that the triple monotheistic god has a desiring or amorous affair with men and the world, whereas the other gods have no such thing: they have relations to forces, often also erotic, but not the stuff of love).

All of this needs to be considered step by step, and for the moment I would rather stay on the track of the names of God and their (un)translatability, following the original proposition for our dialogue. Before doing this, I will just add a few words about the other point in your last reply, because it goes back to what I just said: I am struck to see you use the words “spiritual progress” with regard to monotheism (you seem to take them from Freud, and I do not doubt that he uses them: my question thus pertains to him too). These words form a *topos* of every discourse on the advent of monotheism with the slightest historical, pre-historical, or para-historical scope. In a parallel manner, there is a *topos* of “progress” towards “reason,” to which the history of the Mediterranean world from Sumer to Athens, including Memphis, Apamee, or even Ephesus, is supposed to testify. Now, this seems to me very weak since the measure of “progress” is only given from an endpoint or destination. This point is us, the civilization that is today globalized—and perhaps precisely for that

reason on the verge of a new “revolution” that would completely liquidate the appearance of a goal, a destination, that the ideas of “reason,” “spirituality,” “ethical life” take on for us . . . This spontaneous tendency to wed “spiritual progress” to the “loss of the gods” is remarkable for its overt contradiction. Perhaps it can be said that the question is to know whether this contradiction must be—and can be—taken on as such, head on, as an inevitable fate of our modern destiny, or else whether, on the contrary, it is necessary to displace it, complicate it, or who knows what. For my part, I just want to emphasize the following: there is a contradiction at the same time as it is strictly impossible to say what “progress” would be, and the same goes for what we are supposed to have “lost.”

But getting back to the divine names: you have not said much about Christianity, and nothing at all about the name of Jesus. Now, it is striking that three “sublimated,” as you say, names enter into play here (by the way, this is a category that is not very clear to me, and I would like to talk about it some more)—because there are three of them, if the Christian “God” is first to be completely named, opening the way for “*al-ilah*.” And do not forget that Christianity gave rise very early on (in Pseudo-Dionysius on up to Saint Thomas, Eckhart and beyond) to an interminable reflection on the name or name(s) of the divine(s), on the possibilities or impossibilities of extracting from the word “god” (*theos*, *deus*—the name of Zeus is there too!) some clues about “God.” Behind all this there is even this “*theos*” in the singular, of which Plato speaks here and there. But at the same time, in this perhaps most radical absence of a name (in the sense that the common name remains there in some way more banally and manifestly common than in the case of *Allah*, but this is a tricky comparison, and is precisely a point about translatability: we could return to this), something else emerges: the name of a man, Jesus, followed by an ancient Jewish honorific, “the Messiah.” Let’s set the Messiah aside for the moment, and stick to the proper name: he is a man, and he is god at the same time. All the debates of the first centuries will work towards establishing and consolidating this “double nature.” But in it the god, or God, disappears—one could say that the distancing or absenting (what I like to call an *absentheism*) happens in the mortal body and not in a distant immortal absolute. Is it a “death and resurrection” in the sense that we usually understand? I am not sure. The “resurrection”—an idea already present in Judaism, then passed on from Christianity into Islam—must be analyzed as something completely other than a regeneration or reviviscence. It is another dimension of life—and of death, and without leaving death behind.

Jesus is the “son of God,” but what does one mean by that (by this absolute scandal for the Jews and the Muslims)? *Genitum, non factum*—says the *Credo*—and *consubstantialiē Patri*. Paternity is opposed to fabrication. Engendering means identity of substance: an implementation of divine substance in its human and mortal retreat.

I refrain from going further in this direction, and get back to our guiding thread: can these divine names or these non-names be translated among each other? It appears at first sight that there is a common kernel of sense that does allow for translation: it is “god” as unique and withdrawn. God of Abraham, of Jesus and Muhammad, one can say, to irritate Pascal (“god of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, God of Jesus Christ!”). But

precisely this translatable or translating kernel, which would allow us to go from one moment to the other of the three monotheisms represents untranslatability itself, in a manner that is completely different from the untranslatability of the most ancient gods (when the god of a tribe is so foreign to the god of another that their names have no way of being put into relation). It is the untranslatability into a *proper name* of the *common name* “god,” which is a common name and the name common to these gods; to the three but also perhaps to all the gods. This untranslatable translatability is what the “people of the Book” (as the Qur’an says) have in common, and at the same time it is the incommensurability of the three religions, because each nicknames what the three together name or un-name. Three nicknames: Yhwh, Jesus, Allah. Three nicknames for the same non-name or beyond-name. Each inevitably tends to seize hold of itself again while turning back in on itself, while at the same time identifying itself as the god-of-those-who-profess-his-name. But that only ever makes for a virtual people, and one virtually universal: that is, not a people, and not a god . . .

There is at least this result: the name “god” is always there, at the place of every divine name, but it marks this place with an ineffaceable, intractable and untranslatable, unpronounceable but necessary name. Can one think a bit more about what is going on with this name (of the) without name? And of the distance or opposition that necessarily occurs if three (or at least two) names appear in this same place? And how to think this triplicity that has remained unshaken for fourteen centuries? (Previously, there was what some have called the fourth religion of the Book, Manichaeism: I note that it disappeared, in sum, rather quickly. As if the third was not the right one, and another third was needed, which would come later . . . I am not trying to construct a Trinitarian or triadic and/or dialectic speculation here, but this grand architecture of the whole intrigues me.)

Fethi Benslama: Your response is swirling with paradoxes. But this is not without a relation to the heart of the matter concerning the Christian god. You reject loss, but about the nature of Jesus you say: “But in it the god, or God, disappears—one could say that the distancing or absenting (what I like to call an *absentism*) happens in the mortal body and not in a distant immortal absolute.” There really is here the idea of a loss that increases, that changes registers according to a historical, and for that matter dialectical, movement. We are not far from what Freud understands by the notion of “spiritual progress.” I share your reservations about the notion of progress in a general fashion (see Benjamin’s pages on history). However, for Freud the progress is without a program, or else it results from a ceaselessly thwarted program, ending up in sometimes insurmountable paradoxes. See on this point *Civilization and its Discontents* and *The Future of an Illusion*. One could say this: the progress that he points to in monotheism is one that is a product of the stripping down of the representation of absence, but I would say rather of *lack*. And moreover, it is curious that we have not spoken of the representation of God (while what you say about representation in *Au fond de l’image* could be brought in here).⁷ This stripping down of the representation of God in monotheism leads to the question of the real, that is,

⁷ English translation is *The Ground of the Image*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005) [Trans. note].

to what will be the object of science. Now, nothing lacks in the real (this phrase designates simultaneously the real of science and also the God of fullness in monotheism); it is when the real is designated by the signifier that it becomes a lack. In other words, a symbol is required to evoke absence. We are perhaps in agreement that it is not so much at the level of what lacks that something happens with monotheism, but rather in relation to the signifying or symbolizing function. We agree that God has always absented himself just as much in polytheism, which is a mode of representation and preservation of the lack. The step monotheism takes, and first of all with Moses, aims at the preservation of the lack with respect to its representation, by formulating an objection to it. What does it say? That men construct a representation of the lack in order to posit it at the origin of their existence, but the representation of the lack takes the place of the lack, or covers it up. Thus, the lack lacks. One thus sees here that whatever the mode of signifying the lack is, one always lacks it, including its name and especially its proper name. In short, there is a sort of unveiling of the function of language, as something that is always a construction with respect to the lack, the impossible, absence, etc.; a construction that risks concealing the essential lack. By doing this, monotheism opens up the possibility of the deconstruction of what is by men called, designated, named, and signified by the term "God." The One is thus not an attribute, but the inhuman (or the human that lacks, what lacks to the human) that makes possible human constructions. What Freud designates as a spiritual progress is this deconstruction of the representation of the lack that occurs with monotheism.

Along these lines, here is how I consider the position of Jesus. What appears through this name, in distinction to that of Yhwh and Allah, is the manifestation of lack in a clearly singular form; not only human, but of someone, whereas the name of God in Judaism and in Islam relates itself to no one. From this point of view, one should not be content with saying that Jesus is the incarnation of God, but rather the incarnation of lack by *someone*. That someone is the lack in his very body and at the same time its symbol; this is what perhaps characterizes the revelation of "Jesus." What man lacks, man who lacks, the inhuman and the human become inextricable; and for each case, in someone. There is more than God in Jesus. Let's note here that for Ibn Arabî, Jesus is the symbol of the infusion of the real in the imaginary. There would be God, man, and what brings them together.

Freud takes on this affair from the point of view of the genealogy of the subject. He shows that for everyone the event of lack resides in the loss of the absolute object of desire. God emerges, in sum, when he no longer is. No one ever gets over this, since one never ceases putting some kind of object, or someone—a representation, a name, a signifier of an unnamable—there where there is a hole becoming a lack, by the symbol, or a fullness, by the imaginary. This is why one never ceases killing God, even though it is too late, he is already dead, and it is always already too late, but it must be done again each time, for everyone. Freud takes different routes in order to try to translate this complexity. He takes the imaginary way of the father (God would be the lack of a father, a nostalgia for him, and in *Totem and Taboo* the father is the man who lacks, the minus one), but he also takes the acquisition of language, considering this event to be an access to the "no" (to negation). Lacan, for his part,

takes up the question by thinking of the father, contra Freud, on the basis of God, considering that God is unconscious—and for good reason, since this is required by linguistic structure. In short, none of this is a simple progressivism. It is something else. What is it? The coming of deconstruction by means of monotheism, which, by stripping down the representation of God leaves open the possibility of thinking that the real is apprehended in three ways: through the real as such, the symbol, and the imaginary.

Islamic theosophy is going to build a theory around this, as if it had taken note of what took place with the name of Jesus. Thus, in the case of Ibn Arabî, one passes from the famous profession of faith, “*Lâ ilâha illâ allâh*” (there is no god but God) to the formula that, in his eyes, saves monotheism from the (poorly understood) paradox opened up by Christianity, namely, “*Layas fi’l-wojûd siwa Allâh*,” or, “in being there is only God.” If I understand correctly, this formula posits that the One is at the level of being (*wujûd*), of which names are the nostalgia, which comes to incarnate itself in the plurality of beings (*al-mawjûd*). Again, the track of melancholia appears here. Ibn Arabî theorizes it this way: he notes that if “Allah” is composed of the word “*ilâh*,” this term stems from the root “*wlh*,” which signifies principally adoration, but also being in stupefaction, an inability to be afraid, taking refuge with someone, according protection and security . . . And to accentuate in this etymology of adoration the sense of being sad, being overcome with sadness, sighing. The name of Allah would thus testify to a god of pathos. And the divine pathos originates in the lack of a name, since the One that is not an attribute has no name. The name thus still testifies to the lack of name.

Jean-Luc Nancy: I am just going to try to present very quickly a few of the reactions to your reply that are important for me—awaiting the chance to take this all up again at my leisure!

First of all, the question of “loss” or “lack” or “absence.” This is in fact a very delicate matter, and I would agree that I came close to a contradiction. However I want to distinguish loss (necessarily of something) as strongly as possible from absence, which I would like to say is “of nothing,” but is itself a mode of presence. The entire theme of lack seems to me burdened by a background of “fullness.” Now, the monotheistic god does not arrive on the basis of the loss of the other gods, but he completely changes the mode of divine presence. Having said that, if we want to succeed in saying that in a manner that is not only negative (loss, lack, which are also *de facto* representations that seem to be ineluctably Western), we must elaborate on “presence” otherwise than as being-present, what is posited-there, the given and also the present-to-itself. Philosophy since Heidegger and Derrida is occupied with nothing other than this. And it can be shown that theology has a role to play in this (especially a certain mystical theology). But that only reopens the question—or not the question but the call to the name “god”: what can he still want of us?

But I leave all that in the background to say this: it is at least normal that one finds philosophy again here, as you do in speaking of “deconstruction.” This concept aims above all at presence: what is to be deconstructed or what deconstructs itself is presence under the triple modality of the in-itself, the to-itself, and the for-another; in

other words, substance, subject, and (represented) object. Because of this, the God-Presence who was the substance, subject, and object of metaphysics (as much as of the religious assertions of these same metaphysics) . . . it is because of this, then, that he is dead: his death is programmed by the monotheistic “god.” Where does he go? That is to say, also, where does he absent himself, or does he lose the divine—and which departure does he take?

If I have understood you correctly, Jesus would represent simultaneously an exposition of lack and a completion of it by the imaginary. Very well. And according to Ibn Arabî, as you read him, there would not be this imaginary completion, but the necessary “nostalgia.” That forms, first of all, to pick up the thread of the point of departure of our dialogue, a frontier of untranslatability, perhaps. And it would also be necessary to draw the Jewish God’s boundary line there—but which? At least, seeing it on this side of the Muslim-Christian divide, such as you sketch it out. On this side, or beyond, but when it is beyond—I mean, the most manifestly outside of religion, as Judaism seems to have been by far the most able to make it (through Spinoza, Marx, Freud, at least)—does it not reconstitute a name, that of “Jew”? It would thus be necessary again to be able to name. It is not an accident if it was a question of ridding humanity of this name and all those who bore it, or those who wanted them to bear it even while they sometimes abandoned it. An affair of the “real,” the real of the name, the name of a certainly tangible and destructible real?

I would like, finally, to evoke just this: my difference with you would consist of the fact that I could not be content with the Lacanian tripartition, at least not without considerably reworking the *partition* (the division—and the contrapuntal composition). Is the imaginary-Jesus so full? Is the Symbolic-one so empty? Is the real-without-name so consistent in its retreat? I will evoke here just another category: that of the *sign* in the sense of “signal” in the German *Wink* or our *wink* [*clin (d’oeil)*] which is also *twinkling/blinking*. An indication without signification, a warning (and at the same time the simple distention of a flashing and of the space around it: a beating/fluttering, an opening/closing). Now, “god”—*dies*—designates the separation day/night: nothing other than the difference or gap. Neither presence nor absence. But I said we needed to finish with that. Excuse me, here is what comes to mind: *clin-dieu* . . . (untranslatable, even in French . . .).⁸

Fethi Benslama: I take seriously what has arrived with “clin-dieu.” It shifts the name “god” away from the field of reference and self-reference. The term is attached to a tacit gesture of the body on this side of, or beyond, sense, but which can still receive it. If I keep going in this direction, I would say that the pulsating sign can be applied to the whole of the body and more particularly to the body with orifices, where, for the child, the most enigmatic apprehension of alterity is at stake. I think also of the way in which we are communicating, in computer code, 0/1, so-called binary, whereas what is not counted or is not taken into account (because it is not countable) is what is between. Between empty and full, between day/night, open/closed, etc. You call that a gap/interval or distancing. I propose leaning it toward the question of

⁸ This neologism, sounding strongly like the French for “wink” used earlier, suggests a winking/signaling/flashing/disappearing God [Trans. note].

the *neutral*. The neutral escapes the negative and the positive, the open and the closed, light and darkness, the visible and the invisible, and in a general fashion possibility, choice, determination, identity, and being displayed. The neutral is without will, without orientation, without ownness, without name: something transparent under the imminence of an appearance, a transposition, an inscription, a sense. The neutral as a condition of translatability is untranslatable. Now, the without will of the neutral is unbearable. It is the silent source of the most radical anxiety, which arouses in us the question: is there someone there? What does he want of me?

What is reserved in your phrase: . . . *the call to the name 'god': what can he still want of us?*” seems to me to be the question of the neutral that has been at work since the beginning of our exchange. In general, everything that is stated, pronounced, or proclaimed “in the name of” (including the Republic and the People) calls upon a will that wants to finish with the non-willing of the neutral. Then to your question—*what can he still want of us?*—abruptly, I would say: he cannot say what he wants, and this is the problem. Not that he does not want, but that he does not have a will. The call of the name of God cannot produce any homogenous will: love and hate, life and death, withdrawal (of melancholy) and projection (of paranoia) surrender to it without decision. That to which the call calls is indecision, but the indecision of the neutral that we must receive is unbearable; it summons the twist, the detour, the trajectory, the sense/direction, the name, the reference. The neutral is perhaps the archaic without *arkhé*, the disorientated jumble; it is probably what Freud designates by “id.”

I leave the subject out of this, because there is the justified suspicion that it belongs to the metaphysics of presence, even though psychoanalysis aims to break away from that. Let's say that there is an Id barred from sense: in other words, on this side of willing and being able to say. A mouth that opens and closes. The cry is already something other than the movement of the mouth; it is already a trace. But we know that there is a saying that precedes it and exceeds it, one that will take body on the basis of the name. The dice throw of the name does not abolish the neutral, but indicates it being subject to the will, or the will to reserve it. At this stage, presence and absence are not contraries but are given the same time. For example, the object (the mother) is absent to perception; memory not only calls upon her, but hallucinates her. Presence and absence coexist, because satisfaction couldn't care less: it wants the non-willing of the neutral. That can go on forever unless the emergence of a necessity stops the addiction to the non-willing of the neutral. What stops it is what one can think of as not wanting to die before one's death, not letting oneself die by the neutral or to the neutral. In short, there is a death by the neutral and a death according to one's death. Necessity is this element of non-homogenous death, of death as heterogenization and appropriation: what happens here is a sacrifice to the neutral that is consciousness. The neutral is kept, however, or becomes the support of appearance. At the level of perception, presence and absence are alternatives, whereas at the level of memory they are simultaneous. The partition of the neutral comes to someone with *its/his/her* death. Thus, it orients the archaic of the neutral. Death in the Id is not able to be represented (there is no representation of its death in

the Unconscious) because according to the neutral, death is not. But there is a representation of its/her/his death in consciousness. Death does not give itself according to the neutral or at the level of the Id; it gives itself at the same time at the level of an Its [*Sa*] (the I as necessity of appropriated death). Not-dead/dead: this is another movement of the mouth.

It seems to me that what religion invokes by the name of god is what remains in death after the orientation; that is, after being put into sense. Here, the term “god” is the name of the occultation of the neutral. What we are aiming for, it seems to me, is the neutral as a suspension of identification, one that falls short of any “*genos*” whether it be Jew, Christian, or Muslim, and what is not able to be assimilated either to the universal or to being.

To close, I copy here a fragment of an interview with an adolescent of Muslim parentage. I find that this adolescent has a strong intuition of what is at stake here:

The first time I entered a church, I must have been six or seven years old, I saw Christ on the cross with the nails, the blood, and his sleepy child-like face. I did not understand why such a thing was in the church, why there were all these images. I was only familiar with mosques in Tunisia and there is nothing inside them. I asked the friends I was with and they made fun of my ignorance, and one of them told me that it is God who died on the Cross. Another told me that it was the son of God, the other, the father. It wasn't clear at all: God or the son of God or the father? This was not what I learned at home. So I asked my father. I asked him: so it appears that God is dead and that we haven't heard yet? No, I don't think I said it like that, I wouldn't have dared. I did not even manage to say it in Arabic. It is not possible to say in Arabic “God is dead”; we do have the words for it, but one cannot translate it like that. I must have said in French: why is the God of the Church dead, or something like that. He told me, for us Muslims God never dies, he is not engendered and he has neither father nor mother, and he is neither a father nor a mother nor a son nor a sister. There is a phrase from the Qur'an that says this quite clearly. Okay, so then why do so many people believe that? Are they crazy? He told me that this was their faith, and in this faith it is the truth. I said to him: so there are many truths, but which one is right? He told me, calmly, that we think it is ours, and they think it is theirs. This was a bit awkward; I said, but why isn't there a single truth for everyone? He said it was because we're all different. Then I asked him a very stupid question, I think just to annoy him: and why are we all different? He told me that I was being a real pain, and said something like: look at you and me, we aren't the same and yet you are my son. Even your two hands are not the same. It wasn't bad, but he messed up afterwards, because he added: there is one God for all. I said nothing, but I thought that it was false. If there was one God for all, why were there so many with their own bit of truth? I thought about my two hands a lot after that, which struck me the most. He and I are not the same, that seemed rather understandable and moreover it's a good thing, but the hands, well, then I looked at my hands in another way. It is obvious, though. But if the left hand does not believe the same thing as the right hand .

. . well, they come together all the same . . . Well, this story of the hands was hard to swallow. One day, years later, I was making a drawing that I kept messing up. I had used many pages, and the story of the hands came back to me. I told myself all of a sudden, if there are so many beliefs, gods, truths, and everyone comes up with their own story, there must be a very very long blank page, and everyone can write on it what he wants. And they all mess up their drawings, which means that there is another who can start it up again, and so on and so on, without end. The truth for all is perhaps the blank page. That's the "God for all" of my father. Well, he didn't think that . . . or maybe he did, who knows? Me, I believe that I put my finger on something very important: God is like a blank page . . . or black, anyway, one can write on it what one wants and it is always there . . . but one does not see it, one only sees the scribbles. I told that to my philosophy professor, and he told me I was an atheist. I don't think so, since I believe in the blank page. The drawing is what makes one Muslim, or Jewish, or Christian. Well, maybe it is a bit crazy, but not any more than anything else; it is something transparent, it doesn't hurt anyone . . .

KEITH AL-HASANI

THE QUR'AN AND THE NAME-OF-THE-FATHER

The subject I would like to focus on today is one that strikes me as being of great interest to many people in different fields, in particular to psychoanalysts and theologians.¹ The subject of discussion: the Name of the Father and Abraham, or more broadly, the figure of the Father in monotheism. My intention is to further explore the questions that arise over ownership of the Name, the Name-of-the-Father, together with issues and complications that have haunted monotheistic communities for several thousand years. Up until now, the Name-of-the-Father in psychoanalysis has mostly been dealt with from the perspective of the Old and New Testaments, and I hope to extend and hence further complicate the topic by examining Abraham in the Qur'an, with open honesty, without trying to conceal the problematic scriptural verses that induce anxiety in us all. Of course, one must be careful about how one speaks of Abraham, of the Abrahamic, without oneself being the subject of sacrifice, especially in these rather bloody times. Is it possible to speak of Abraham's dysfunctional family without oneself being run-through? So, the Name will be introduced in a fresh way, but in the process I will also need to mention Jesus, Muhammad, the Qur'an and Islam, a word that means submission, all within the monotheistic landscape.

The eruption of virulent Islam forces me not so much to trace the concrete political developments that have led to these pathological interpretations of the Qur'an, where destructive political objectives have been supported by scriptural references and quotations, but instead to speak of it in more general terms. Of course, one cannot deny the complicity of global powers in creating many of the conditions that are conducive to contemporary religious fundamentalism, and we would be unwise to claim the cause of all the horror that we witness daily is due to religious differences alone, which is too simplistic, reductive, and naive. Other factors are present, such as the protection of foreign interests in the Middle East involving energy production and political control. At the same time, we need to admit that there are obstacles in the Arab world that need to be considered when dealing with scripture because of the intellectual conservatism that is manifest in this region. In Christianity as well, we see a pathological renewal of global evangelism. So even though Judaism,

¹ This was an oral presentation at the Lacan Circle of Melbourne Study Day, 2006.

Christianity and Islam are all variations of the same religion, these three communities continue to shed blood in the Name of the Father. Lacan said “the three religions of the Book are in perfect harmony; that is why their faithful try so hard—with blood, too often—to differentiate themselves.”² We’re now facing an even more threatening approach at resolving differences between faiths, a tragedy resulting from the widening gap between Muslim and Judeo-Christian countries, a reality that is part of everyday life. Tony Blair was reported to have said, “This war can’t be won in a conventional way, it can only be won by showing that our values are stronger, better and more just, more fair than the alternatives.” One cannot help but suppose he was referring to Muslims, who possess inferior values and hence need to be taught better ones; one way or another, either they or their values need to be eliminated. This reckless and world-domineering fantasy will no doubt result in many catastrophic consequences.

These three monotheisms were born of an event that each remembers as a seminal moment in history, the moment when God appeared to Abraham. The history of monotheism begins at this point, with Abraham’s covenant with God, although the appearance of Islam as a monotheistic religion will not occur until seven centuries after the birth of Christ. Whether called Elohim, God the Father or Allah, it is all the same deity. In the Qur’an, Jews, Christians and Muslims are referred to as the People of the Book. The Qur’an also refers to the Torah and to the Gospel of Jesus, which it considers sacred texts. Many people are astonished to learn that Islam is as much part of Abrahamic monotheism as Judaism and Christianity. However, there is a growing interest to learn about Islam, although much of this seems to be motivated by the desire to find clues about the causes of 911.

With all this in mind, we may now turn to the Qur’an and compare it with the writings of the Bible. I don’t plan to dwell too much on the lexical and syntactical aspects of the text, as this is out of my domain, nor will I talk about its history of canonization, but I will instead touch on some of the thematic aspects found in the Book. Giorgio Agamben once said that “the appearance of a new religion always coincides with a new revelation of language and a new religion means above all a new experience of language.”³ The Qur’an is in fact a series of messages in Arabic, the language of the people to whom Muhammad was speaking, that were revealed in installments and delivered by Muhammad over a period of twenty-two years. The Qur’an says, “We never sent a messenger but with the language of his people.” It then describes itself as an “Arabic proclamation.” Most Arabic words stem from roots that consist of three consonants. For example: *ktb*; *Kitab* (book), *kaatab* (writer), *maktaba* (library), *maktoob* (letter). Classical Arabic script had no indications of vowels during the course of “revelation.” These were introduced later, hence the

² Amadou Guis  e and Alexandre Leupin, “Religion and Mathematics: An Interview with Jacques Lacan” <<http://www.alexandreleupin.com/publications/ReligionandMathematics.htm>> [accessed 23 May, 2009].

³ Giorgio Agamben, “Propos . . .” *Bulletin de l’Association freudienne* 2 (1983): 23, quoted in Gabriel Vahanian, “God and the Utopianism of Language,” in *Lacan and Theological Discourse*, ed. Edith Wyschogrod, David Crownfield, and Carl A. Raschke (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989) 119. References to the Qur’an are to Abdallah Yousuf Ali’s translation, Dar El-Fikr, Beirut

erroneous insertion of vowels may have completely changed the form of some words and therefore their meaning. The first word revealed to Muhammad by Gabriel was the word “*iqra*,” which means “read” or “recite,” and this resulted in the final monotheistic rupture in history. It was this simple command to “read” that led to the genesis of Muhammad’s mission.

The Qur’an is not historical like the Bible, beginning at Genesis and ending with an apocalypse. There is no linear organization of time, revelation and history. Chapters are not arranged in revelatory time but instead grouped according to their length. Also, each chapter title has little or nothing to do with its content. The final hour is not reached at the end, but can break out at any moment. This rejection of linearity involves a rejection of the historical narrative. Verses appear from nowhere, like dreams, continually destabilizing the message and its audience. Muhammad was perhaps the first to have systematically violated the rules of composition, opting instead to arrange chapters non-chronologically. The fact that classical rules of textual composition were ignored by Muhammad means that history played only a minor role in the ordering of both individual and society. This decentering aspect of the composition is also apparent in the very name of the text, for besides referring to itself as the Qur’an, which means reading, the scripture also refers to itself as the “*Furqan*,” from the Arabic root *frq*, which implies the idea of splitting and separating. So the message, one of differentiation, can be said to be the “essence” of the Book. Read (Qur’an) and Split (*Furqan*)! In fact, it is precisely the unevenness of the text that underscores the contingency of the revelations.

The Qur’an portrays humanity as a community existing in between prophecies and disasters, life and death. Its vision of human history is sombre and angst-ridden. Past civilizations are mirrored in the ruins they have left. The Qur’an says, “Man is created with a restless anxiety” (70: 19). It does not claim to be a book of history. In fact the Qur’an reduces the stories of the prophets to their minimum features, favoring the poetic over the narrative, rendering it difficult if not impossible to translate.

Muhammad placed himself firmly within the line of the Abrahamic prophets, but his relation to the paternal logic of Judaism and Christianity is of a different order. Slavoj Žižek states:

In contrast to both Judaism and Christianity, the two other religions of the Book, Islam excludes God from the domain of paternal logic. Allah is not a father, not even a symbolic one—God is one is neither born nor does he give birth to creatures. *There is no place for a Holy Family in Islam*. This is why Islam emphasizes so much the fact that Muhammad himself was an orphan. [. . .]. [This genealogical desert] renders [it] impossible to ground a community in the structures of parenthood or other bloodlinks. [. . .]. In contrast to Judaism and Islam, in which the sacrifice of the son is prevented at the last moment (angel intervenes to Abraham), *only Christianity opts for the actual sacrifice (killing) of the son*. This is why, although Islam recognizes the Bible as a sacred text, it has to deny this fact: in Islam, Jesus did not really die on the Cross. [. . .]. There is effectively in Islam a consistent anti-sacrificial

logic. [. . .] Abraham's decision to kill his son is read not as the ultimate indication of his willingness to do God's will, but as a consequence of Abraham's *wrong interpretation* of his dream.⁴

We read in the Qur'an, "Muhammad is not the father of any man among you" (33: 40). An unfavorable statement in another verse, "That which you worship apart from Him, is nothing but names you have named, yourself and your Fathers" (12: 40). Most of the Arabs, when hearing this, turned immediately against Muhammad and his disregard for the names revered by the Arab tribes.

Many of the key stories and roles we find in the Bible also appear in the Qur'an, but are most often recited Qur'an, enough to create holes in the Symbolic register of the Meccans. Although the Qur'an accepts Jesus' prophethood and refers to him as the Word of God and the Spirit of God, it rejects his divinity. In answer to God, in the Qur'an, Jesus explicitly denies any responsibility for advocating the Trinity, considered by Muhammad an aberration and a departure from the monotheism of Abraham. The Qur'an then states, "They do blaspheme who say God is one of three in a Trinity, for there is no god except one God" (5: 73). It also rejects the idea that Jesus died on the cross. The story now begins to resemble *The DaVinci Code*!

Muhammad kept emphasizing that Islam was nothing other than the religion of Abraham. In Chapter 2, verses 130-36, the Qur'an says,

Who turns away from the religion of Abraham except he whose soul is foolish. Where were you witnesses when death appeared to Jacob, when he said to his sons: "What will you worship after me?" They said, "We will worship your God, the God of your fathers Abraham, Ishmael, and Isaac, and only one God. We submit to him." Say: We believe in God, what was revealed to us, what was revealed to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, the tribes, what was given to Moses and Jesus, what was given to the prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them. We submit to Him.

As a result of his radical return to Abraham, and by constantly undermining all previous traditions, whether Arab paganism, monotheistic Judaism or Christianity, Muhammad became an instant outcast and was forced to leave Mecca and seek refuge in another city called Medina, which is where he was buried. He was labeled a witch, a madman and a heretic by most of the inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula. But he saw himself as a restorer of monotheism, which he felt was in a state of decay, and for this reason he felt his movement needed to be differentiated from other monotheisms. Hence the word "Islam" was coined, Mohammed's neologism.

The biggest gulf between the Bible and the Qur'an comes in the story of Jesus and Abraham. In the Qur'an, Abraham's struggle begins with the negation of polytheism. In chapter 19, verse 41 we read:

Mention, in the book, Abraham. He was truthful, a prophet. When he said to his father: "My father, why do you worship that which does not hear, does

⁴ Slavoj Žižek, "A Glance into the Archives of Islam," <<http://www.lacan.com/bibliographyzi.htm>> [accessed May 23, 2009].

not see, and cannot enrich you with anything?" . . . He [his father] said: "Do you disdain the gods, Abraham? If you do not stop I will stone you. Get away from me for a long time."

Abraham is the only monotheist revered by all three religions as Father. However, the message of the sacrifice of Abraham's son in the Qur'an is strikingly different from what is depicted in the Bible. While the two books tell the same story, there are some significant differences: the Bible says that Abraham took his younger son, Isaac, to be sacrificed. The Qur'an does not mention the son by name, instead leaving it concealed. The majority of Muslims believe that it was Ishmael. Let's read both scriptures and see what other differences can be observed. In Genesis, verses 22:1-13:

Some time later God tested Abraham; he called to him, "Abraham!" And Abraham answered, "Yes, here I am." "Take your son," God said, "your only son, Isaac, whom you love so much, and go to the land of Moriah. There on a mountain that I will show you, offer him as a sacrifice to me." Early the next morning Abraham cut some wood for the sacrifice, loaded his donkey, and took Isaac and two servants with him. [. . .]. As they walked along together, Isaac said "Father!" He answered, "Yes, my son?" Isaac asked, "I see that you have the coals and the wood, but where is the lamb for the sacrifice?" Abraham answered, "God himself will provide one." [. . .]. When they came to the place which God had told him about, Abraham built an altar and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son and placed him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then he picked up the knife to kill him. But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, "Abraham, Abraham!" He answered, "Yes, here I am." "Don't hurt the boy or do anything to him," he said. "Now I know that you fear God, because you have not kept back your only son from him." Abraham looked round and saw a ram caught in a bush by its horns. He went and got it and offered it as a burnt-offering instead of his son.

In contrast, in the Qur'an chapter 37, verses 101-113, we read :

He (Abraham) said: "My son, I have seen in my dream that I am to sacrifice you. What do you think?" He said: " My father, do what you are commanded. You will find me, God willing, to be one of the patient." When they both submitted to God, and he laid him on his forehead, We called out to him: "Abraham! You have fulfilled the vision. Like this We reward those who do good." "This was a clear trial." We redeemed him with a great sacrifice. And we preserved his history for subsequent generations. Peace be upon Abraham! Like this do we reward those who do good. He was one of our believing servants. We brought him the good news of Isaac, a prophet, one of the upright. We blessed him and Isaac."

Notice that the Qur'an never says that God told Abraham to kill his son. It tells us instead that Abraham had a dream in which he saw himself slaughtering his son. Abraham believed the dream and thought that the dream was from God, but the Qur'an never says that the dream was from God. It is as if God in the Qur'an intervened when Abraham failed to correctly interpret the source of the vision. When compared to the Bible, the Qur'an's narrative is light in detail. Details about the

journey up to the mountain with the cutting of the wood, loading the donkey, and Abraham holding a knife are absent. In the Qur'an, it is the message rather than the plot which is of significance. Furthermore, the Qur'anic story does not specify which son it was in the dream that Abraham was to sacrifice. The Qur'an is not interested in genealogy, although the prevailing view amongst Muslims is that Ishmael was the one to be sacrificed. However, Muslim theologians are divided over which son was intended in the Qur'anic rendition. It is the son's willingness to surrender to his father's dream that makes the story into an account of the son's faith more than Abraham's. Whichever scripture we refer to, we can say that both sons were close to being sacrificed. Even if in the Old Testament it was Isaac who was the sacrificial child, Ishmael, Isaac's half brother, is banished from the household and denied his birthright, leaving him deprived of a father, a brother, and even his mother, who is referred to as a slave girl. Hence, Ishmael was sacrificed from Biblical history. By Genesis 22, Isaac is indeed Abraham's only son. In the Qur'an, the wives of Abraham, Hagar and Sara, are both absent, as is jealousy and rivalry between them. The Qur'an does not discriminate between Abraham's two sons based on their mothers. In the Old Testament, a distinction is made between the children of Isaac and the "inferior" descendants of Ishmael. In Genesis 16, God says to Hagar, Ishmael's mother, "You are going to have a son, and you will name him Ishmael. But your son will live like a wild donkey; he will be against everyone, and everyone will be against him." Furthermore, the Qur'anic story presents Abraham's son(s), the tragic hero of the story, as wishing his own death. We need to keep in mind that Muhammad was himself a descendant of Ishmael, born into the house of Hashem, meaning The Name. Claiming itself as universal monotheism, Muhammad delivered this verse from the Qur'an to his followers, which is also his moment of severance from the Judeo-Christian community: "Abraham was not a Jew nor yet a Christian; but he was true in faith, and surrendered his will to God, and he joined no gods with God" (3: 67). Somewhat like Saint Paul, Muhammad concluded that God chooses his people on the grounds of commitment rather than lineage. In Galatians, Paul says, "there is no such thing as Jew nor Greek-slave or free, man or woman" (Gal 3: 28). For Muhammad as well as for St Paul, all genealogical claims to faith were void. As a result, the Arabs immediately lost their tribal privileges, and the Jewish and Christian communities were disenfranchised.

We could compare Muhammad's return to Abraham to Lacan's return to Freud. The Freudian model of ego-id-superego was replaced with the Real, Symbolic and the Imaginary. Lacan rewrites the Saussurean sign, turning the formula on its head. His claim to be an heir to Freud results in his expulsion from the IPA. The world's most innovative and radical Freudian is "excommunicated." Muhammad's relationship with the Biblical Name-of-the-Father, results in the emergence of a radical representation of monotheism and this Name, a Name that is obsessed with the specter of polytheism, going so far as even to reject the affirmation of the Trinity, and yet denying the privilege of God as Father.

BOOK REVIEW

READING BACKWARDS

Constructing God the Impossible in
Psychoanalysis and the Challenge of Islam

BENJAMIN BISHOP

Fethi Benslama, *Psychoanalysis and the Challenge of Islam*. Trans. Robert Bononno.

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In his 1937 essay, “Constructions in Analysis,” Freud reorients the analyst’s work, claiming that instead of offering a series of associative interpretations, the analyst’s task is “to make out what has been forgotten from the traces which it has left behind or, more correctly, to *construct* it.”¹ The shift from interpretation to construction signals an important moment in psychoanalysis in which it becomes irrevocably distinguished from the diachronic narrativization of an individual psychic development. Construction inaugurates a new kind of clinical work that doesn’t simply locate psychic events as causes for one’s symptoms but provides the appropriate place where one’s symptoms can begin to present themselves in their various permutations, thus opening them up to a work of an analysis, rather than a dramatization of one’s history. To be sure, one’s past provides the material for a construction in analysis, and Freud likens the work to archeological excavation. But unlike interpretation, which attaches this material to a prefixed drama—Oedipal or other—this excavation uncovers material not to merely discover and identify it but rather to work with it in conjunction with one’s present symptoms. Freud’s late essay thus gives psychoanalysis an experimental edge where it both risks the effects of and assumes responsibility for its own work: “We do not pretend that an individual construction is anything more than a conjecture which awaits examination, confirmation or rejection.”² Freudian construction calls for a confirmation founded upon analytic effects as opposed to verification of past events.

¹ Sigmund Freud, *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Standard Edition* 23, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1978) 259.

² Freud, 265.

It is within this experimental tradition of psychoanalytic construction, then, that Fethi Benslama's book *Psychoanalysis and the Challenge of Islam*, recently translated into English, makes a welcome introduction into a field that has only begun to take off. Taking up this Freudian task, Benslama delves into the vast archive of Islam, reading many of its literary, ontological, ethical and theological works in order to uncover nothing less than an impossibility at its origin.

Benslama undertakes his investigation of psyche and civilization in order to read and "examine" certain problems of Islam "through the eyes of our universal psychoanalytic knowledge" (*Psychoanalysis and the Challenge of Islam*, 7). Although at first Benslama seems to propose a psychoanalytic "approach" to Islam, he rather undertakes a number of close readings, including acute attention to Arabic etymology, and nicely avoids a flat-footed application of a theory to the material. If one of psychoanalysis's goals—that is, for itself and the material it assumes—is to achieve a clinical effect, then Benslama's book provides a deft and fascinating survey of the challenges Islam poses for the clinic. Benslama acknowledges the clinical stakes of his work as seen, for instance, in the chapter entitled "The Clinic of the Nights," and his advice to analysts working with Muslim analysands is: "be receptive to anger, to identify despair, to analyze its figures" (92). Though psychoanalysis has historically articulated the problems of psyche and civilization through the Judeo-Christian monotheistic tradition, Islam provides its own unique material and, indeed, challenges. To his credit, Benslama approaches these challenges not via a transcendental application of some *a priori* worked-out theory, but through an immanent working through of material already present in Islam. Benslama's work is clinical, then, to the extent that it attempts to *read* Islam's traits and construct its impossible beginning rather than merely interpret them through some unacknowledged hermeneutic. And in its most ambitious moments, *Psychoanalysis* redevelops the theory itself within the Islamic literary, philosophical and theological traditions and thereby ends up posing a challenge back to psychoanalysis: how does this "universal psychoanalytic knowledge" treat and reinscribe itself in an encounter with Islam's singularities?

No doubt the most profound move in *Psychoanalysis* is the argument that, unlike the Judeo-Christian God, the god of Islam is not a father. That is to say, at its inception, Islam has "excluded god from the logic of paternity" (104). This provocative gesture doubles Benslama's project: one, if the god of Islam is not a father, then what exactly is he and what part does he play? Two, as Benslama puts it, "How can we conceptualize the question of the father in a religion in which god is not the father?" (105). To address the latter question, Benslama rereads the figure of Abraham and his first born son, Ishmael. While nowadays one accepts Ishmael as an ancestor of the Arabs, this was not always the case. As Benslama points out, it was not until the birth of Islam that Ishmael becomes an Arab. To be more precise, it was not until Muhammad, long after Ishmael's life, uttered the putatively constative phrase, "Ishmael was an Arab," that this genealogy gets constructed and the father put into place. Muhammad doesn't merely discover some lost truth about the essence of the Arabs' origin—nor does he interpret it—he rather reads backwards into their lost

origin and *makes* Ishmael a father. In this manner, then, the father comes about through a work of construction—a speech act. At the place where no father exists, Muhammad’s performative utterance supplements this lack of essence with a work of fiction. In so doing, or better, so *saying*, Muhammad appropriates for the Arabs what is not quite proper.

This retrospective construction already signals an impossible father at the origin of Islam. But in order to present his work’s most provocative thesis concerning the father, Benslama interestingly turns his attention to the mothers of the monotheistic traditions, Sarah and Hagar. As Benslama claims, the question of the woman in Islam repeatedly articulates itself through his book, and an entire chapter is devoted to Islam’s “Other Woman,” in addition to a fascinating reading of Scheherazade’s use of fiction in her desire to preserve life. Turning to *Genesis*, Benslama argues that because Isaac’s conception occurs through divine intervention—God intervenes in order to impregnate the barren Sarah—the god of the Judeo-Christian tradition functions as an exception, unbound by natural law. The conception of Ishmael, however, occurs very naturally between Abraham and Hagar. Whereas Abraham is the “symbolic father” in Judaism and Christianity, he is simply the “real father” of Islam. So if Abraham naturally fathers Ishmael, then Allah functions in a very different way than the god of the other monotheistic traditions. The “god of Islam is not an originary father,” notes Benslama, “he is the impossible: trans-paternal [*hors père*]” (125).

Just how, then, is the god of Islam impossible? As Benslama puts it,

The fact remains that the god of Islam is connected neither with a sexual relation, nor with its absence of spiritualization through symbolic filiation. Rather, this god should be seen as being *in the background* of relation and non-relation; he is the incommensurable withdrawal of the no-place, through which the place of the father finds its opening. *God is the originary withdrawal of the father.* (126)

Benslama locates the structure of this impossible originary withdrawal in a “mechanism” that suspends the father, the son and the origin through an impossible withholding that he nevertheless writes out: “*there is, there is not*” [*il y a, il n’y a pas*]. And because this impossible articulates the “real of the origin,” Benslama uncovers an invariant which he nicely extends: “there is that there is not,” “there is a there is not,” “there is there is not.” These various permutations each repeat the same thing and reach the “limit of writing the origin,” a limit that “constitutes the radical alterity of every origin” or, in other words, the Other (132).

Turning to Benslama’s own work, it’s interesting to note how *Psychoanalysis* handles the impossible through a Freudian construction. In the last chapter of his work, entitled “Within Himself,” Benslama retrieves a concept of the transfer (*naqala*) in the ethical treatise of the eleventh-century philosopher Ibn Miskawayh in order to bring out a constitutive difference built into identity and identification. Locating a transfer in the filiation between father and son, Miskawayh claims that the father “sees” himself in the son—or more true to the Arabic, the father sees “another himself” (*huwa huwa*). The father’s identity is transferred, claims Miskawayh, to the

son, whose body provides an exterior place for the extension of the father's identity. Importantly, the Arabic word for transfer, *naqala*, can also mean translation and transmission.³ Benslama provides a fine anthropomorphic reading of the transfer of another self (*huwa huwa*) in which he examines how identity is achieved through filiation.

The immediate stakes of this transfer is nothing short of man's (in)capacity to identify with god's essence, that is, god's identity within himself. Benslama focuses on the name that Miskawayh gives to this transfer, *huwa huwa*, one of the many names of Allah. In Arabic, *huwa* is both the third person singular and a proper name for god and the Qur'an consistently refers to god as he. It is also helpful to note as well that the Arabic word for essence and identity (*huwiya*) is derived directly from this name of god, the third person singular *huwa*. Yet each of these cases of identity is brought about by recourse to something else. God's *huwa huwa* is doubled in the other self of Man who engenders a son, making him a doubled "he"—Man and Father. This identity is made possible only through its reduplication: "the principle of human identity is to be separated in two," says Benslama. But, at the same time, this doubling also inscribes an impossibility: "through the son, the father is confronted with something like the possibility of identifying with the impossible" (275).

Importantly, Miskawayh does not specify precisely how this transfer comes about. For instance, where exactly in the son does the father see and recognize himself? The eyes? The hands? The voice? Underneath the transmission of an entire self lie particular traits, material characteristics that both support, yet can also undermine, the recognition of one's self. This identification is made possible and impossible through the manifestation of the traits shared between father and child. And while these markers allow for an identification to occur, they can also disrupt the process:

The relation god/man becomes a double game of doubling thanks to the child, because god's *huwa huwa* is doubled by the *huwa huwa* of the Man-Father once he engenders a child-son, while this child becomes the mediating factor—the unitary characteristic [*trait unaire*] (*einziger Zug*) to use the Freudian concept—that makes the two sides of the equation similar. (275)

Man qua father becomes "another himself" through child qua son. Benslama sets up the anthropological transmission of a trait in terms of analogy: "The Man-Father becomes *huwa huwa* through his child-son, as god is *huwa huwa* in himself." In this way, Man-Father assures his identification with god's essence through an indirect recognition of self in the child-son, who can only function as a "model of god's identify" rather than his essence (275).

Benslama's appropriation and writing out of the Arabic expression for "another self" (*huwa huwa*) ends up grounding the transfer's imaginary procedures within a surface, a crucial move towards the analytic kind of work that Freud calls construction. Rather than leave the transfer at the level of the father's "seeing" himself outside the self, Benslama's text uncovers a doubling of the very name *huwa*

³ All references to Arabic are taken from *The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, 3rd ed., ed. J. Milton Cowan (Ithaca: Spoken Language Services, 1976).

huwa at the heart of this process. Literally translated as “he is he” or simply “he he,” this repetition of *huwa* identity produces at least two selves—*huwa* (1), *huwa* (2).

Because Benslama locates Freud’s *einzigster Zug* in the child, he appears to leave transmission at the anthropological level of filiation. Yet it is through an unusual, though brief, turn to Arabic calligraphy that Benslama extends his anthropomorphic reading of identification to the use of traits in a literal writing and reading. Despite his effort to locate this transmission in a human genealogy “constituted as a chain of unary traits,” this section of Benslama’s own text bears its own traits that ground this discussion of an anthropological linking within a literality (276). Thus another kind of transfer enters a writing that “mirrors” the *huwa* to itself, with impossible effects. “What is it about the identical that is so important?” asks Benslama, before proceeding to an identical writing, “In Islam it is one of the principal names of god. God is, in fact, called: *huwa huwa*, which literally means He He, or He is Himself. Often, in Arabic calligraphy, we find the word ‘identical’ represented by the mirror form of the word *huwa*” (273). Benslama inserts the following figure to illustrate this mirror form:



To make things trickier, recall that Arabic is written and read in the opposite direction as English. The figure on the right side is the correct way to write *huwa*. The figure on the left, of course, is the mirror image, whose shape does not spell anything in Arabic and is, strictly speaking, nonsense. These reversed traits might lack signification but they also lay bare a literality beyond the letter that opens up god the impossible to the possibility of a construction.

God’s identity, that is, his “absolute sovereignty,” says Benslama, becomes “represented” by *huwa*’s doubling in its mirror image. But “once the doubled letter *huwa* is interlaced, the mirror is canceled [*annulé*]” (274). *Annulé* may also be translated as “voided” or “written off.” It indicates not a total suppression of the mirror, but rather its emptying out, which subsequently introduces another surface. The space in which *huwa* is written at first correctly, and then in reverse, grounds these letters and traits on the two-dimensional surface of the page, which is most certainly *not* a mirror. And if the mirror exists, it does so in an imaginary register as an object whose properties of reversal are assumed in order to make a writing in reverse possible. Although it neatly creates a mirror effect, the asymmetric figure on the left irrevocably challenges this “absolute sovereignty” by rendering its very name illegible.

To be clear, this illegibility does not grind Benslama's work to a halt—far from it. Like the “mechanism” that suspends the father, the writing of *huwa huwa* makes the impossible manifest through a backwards reading. Unlike the letters H and W, those that make up *huwa*—هـ (*ha*) and و (*wa*)—are asymmetric and orientable, that is, they require a specific handedness in order to be read and become immediately illegible once their orientation is reversed. Hold up the letters ALLA in the mirror and you'll have no trouble reading what's written. Not so for *huwa*; its doubling as a mirror image does not neatly replicate the Arabic word for he or god. Rather, one asymmetric figure is placed next to another, producing the impossible through an enantiomorphism between the two—each side is identical yet incongruent.⁴ While each figure shares the same intrinsic properties, their difference becomes obvious once one side is superimposed upon the other. Because there is no actual mirror here, these figures remain asymmetrical mismatches of one another inscribed onto the surface of Benslama's text. They are identical yet not the same—an impossibility brought out through a literal construction.

By dint of Benslama's own text, the impossible “absolute sovereignty” of god is no longer left at the level of representation. Rather, its very writing in the figure above presents the impossibility. It is here, where an imaginary mirror's reversal uncovers a trait beyond the word and the letter, that I indicate a construction in analysis in Benslama's book. In this reading backwards, an impossibility which is at first merely interpreted becomes literally constructed.

⁴ This kind of incongruent but identical spatiality is exactly what prevents the pre-Critical Kant from telling apart one hand from the other. Kant's incapacity to think through the difference between his right and left hands requires him to move from a Leibnizian *analysis situs* to Newtonian Absolute Space, paving the way for the Transcendental Aesthetic of the First *Critique*. This transfer from an intrinsic to an extrinsic view of space allows Kant to read the difference between right and left. See Kant's essay “Concerning the Ultimate Ground of the Differentiation of Directions in Space” in *Theoretical Philosophy*, 1755-1770, ed. David Walford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 361-372.

BOOK REVIEW

THE POWERS OF THE NEGATIVE

BENJAMIN NOYS

What does not change / is the will to change

— Charles Olson, “The Kingfishers” (1949)

Sam Gillespie, *The Mathematics of Novelty: Badiou’s Minimalist Metaphysics*

Melbourne: re.press, 2008. ISBN 978-0-9803052-4-1 (paper). 175pp. \$35.00 AUD \$25.00
USD £16.00 GBP

How are we to distinguish mere change from actual novelty? To put this question in Lacanian terms, how are we to distinguish a permutation of the Symbolic *qua* structure from the emergence of novelty as the re-organisation of the coordinates of the Symbolic? It is this question that guides Sam Gillespie’s reconstruction of Badiou’s philosophy circa *Being and Event* (1988).¹ Sam Gillespie’s death, in 2003, was an incalculable loss in all senses. This work has been brought to publication by his partner Michael Mottram, Chris Gillespie, and Sigi Jöttkandt. To do proper justice to this major contribution to thought I treat it in light of Badiou’s suggestion that the space of philosophy belongs to eternity. This involves at once recognizing the profound integrity of this work as it stands, and yet also outlining where the prescient problems it indicates have been addressed by Badiou and other thinkers.

Gillespie sets out to distinguish change from novelty through the by-now canonical contrast between Deleuze and Badiou. As Badiou admits, Deleuze might well be regarded as his “secret sharer”: they both begin from a thinking of multiplicity, they both defend the honor of philosophy against any reactionary slackening of thought, and they both insist that philosophy is defined in terms of its possible inventiveness

¹ Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. and intro. Oliver Feltham (London and New York: Continuum, 2005).

against the pseudo-novelty of contemporary capitalism.² In his reconstruction, however, Gillespie follows Badiou in arguing that despite these similarities they occupy fundamentally different orientations. Deleuze's insistence on his philosophy as an endlessly inventive drawing out of the new through the virtual powers of difference, remains, for both Gillespie and Badiou, a playing out of difference dependent on the folding of the virtual past. Contra to Peter Hallward's recent contention that Deleuze's thinking is resolutely *extra-worldly*,³ in its insistence on subtracting itself from actuality, Gillespie argues that the fault of Deleuze's thinking lies in its *worldliness* (and I would agree). Deleuze defines the virtual and the differentiating effects of novelty against and through the actualization and radicalization of tendencies in the world. What Deleuze lacks, and what therefore vitiates his thinking of novelty, is the capacity to begin from the void—the rupture that marks the inconsistency of Being, disrupts the world as it is, and which is the “strait gate” through which novelty enters the world.

As Gillespie states, and I can only concur, “One might regard Badiou's project, then, as a means of reclaiming the powers of the negative away from the positivity and pure productiveness of Deleuze's system” (Gillespie, 15). In fact we could go further and argue that Badiou provides the elements for a rehabilitation of the negative against the widespread tendency of contemporary theory to make recourse to a thinking of affirmation, a tendency that is not absent from Badiou as well.⁴ What Gillespie does, in a striking fashion and, more unusually, one deeply attentive to the mathematical dimension of Badiou's thinking, is to stress Badiou's own peculiar formalization of the negative. It is only from the void, as the point which inscribes the inconsistency of Being and is an axiomatic element of every set, that we can begin to distinguish the truly new.

Gillespie notes the privilege that Deleuze gives to philosophy as creating the conceptuality for innovation. In contrast, Badiou radically delegates the new to the four conditions of philosophy (art, science, politics, and love), in the moment of the event that ruptures with the world. The conclusion is that for Badiou “philosophy creates *nothing as such*” (Gillespie, 14). This is one of the senses of minimalism that inhabits Badiou's philosophy, the minimal role of philosophy. The other, to which this work is devoted, is Badiou's specification of ontology through mathematics in its most formal and minimal terms. What Gillespie probes sympathetically is this radically reduced role for philosophy, which seems to have nothing to really add, either in terms of defining the new or in terms of defining ontology. He recognizes the neuralgic point of Badiou's subtractive vision: “*Being and Event* does little to theorize the relation between being and its actualization or individuation” (Gillespie, 14-15). What is fascinating is that Gillespie has already offered an analysis of this

² See Alain Badiou, *Deleuze: The Clamor of Being* [1997], trans. Louise Burchill (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

³ Peter, Hallward, *Out of this World: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Creation* (London and New York: Verso, 2006).

⁴ For Badiou as “affirmationist” see, in particular, his “Third Sketch of a Manifesto of Affirmationist Art,” in *Polemics*, trans. and intro. Steve Corcoran (London and New York: Verso, 2006) 133-48.

difficulty *before* Badiou's own attempt to flesh out this question of relation in *Logics of Worlds* (2006),⁵ which deploys the operators of category theory to trace the emergence of the event in transcendental regimes of appearance.

The image of Badiou Gillespie reveals is more uncompromising and disturbing than the one to which in the meantime we may have become safely inured. This is a Badiou whose thinking is predicated on the negative: "Negation is not a denial of the capacity of thought as much as it is the fundamental condition under which thought is enabled" (Gillespie, 28). Without this condition, we are left with a thinking of philosophy "that can only take recourse in a descriptive affirmation of what always already is" (Gillespie, 42). Although writing of Badiou in this instance, such a characterization could easily be extended to not only Deleuze, but also the work of Bruno Latour, Antonio Negri, and a substantial body of contemporary theory.⁶ Of course the difficulty comes in the exact specification of the nature of this void. Is it simply transcendent? This leaves the void as functionally indistinguishable from theological conceptions of God, especially those passing through negative theology. Instead, Gillespie identifies the void as a starting-point—the name of an internal impasse, of indeterminacy, that must be determined through the production of truths. Badiou's thinking is not simply a worshipping of the void, a contemplation of the miraculous possibility of the event, but the attempt to *think through* the void, in order to stabilize a truth.

In this way, Badiou re-formulates exactly that concept of "determinate negation" that, according to Žižek, has been abandoned by recent theory.⁷ To do so, Gillespie argues, we must move beyond the event to examine the generic process by which the militant work of the subject renders "consistent" the inconsistency of the void. The difficulty that this raises is the relation between an event and the situation in which it appears. As Gillespie notes, Badiou's supposition that the event comes from the edge of the void, coupled with the fact that every set contains a void element, would seem to imply an ontological identification and regularity of the possibility of events. In fact, Badiou stresses the rarity of events, and their disconnection from the formal relations of the situation. Given this disconnection, the obvious question becomes, how does a subject become engaged by an event? How does the generic subset emerge as a truth procedure in (and against) a situation? For Gillespie, as also for Simon Critchley,⁸ there remains something of a motivational deficit in this analysis. While we have a formal identification of events and their rarity, something is left lacking in the account: "a supplementary framework is needed to account for what it

⁵ Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, trans. Alberto Toscano (London and New York: Continuum, 2009).

⁶ I make this argument in my forthcoming work, *The Persistence of the Negative: A Critique of Contemporary Continental Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010).

⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London and New York: Verso, 2008) 337–380. See also Badiou's comments on the contemporary "crisis of negation" in "'We Need a Popular Discipline': Contemporary Politics and the Crisis of the Negative," Interview by Filippo Del Lucchese and Jason Smith, *Critical Inquiry* 34 (Summer 2008): 645–59, especially 652–53.

⁸ See Simon, Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (London and New York: Verso, 2007).

is that comes to grip or seize subjects as they encounter events" (Gillespie, 96). What is interesting is that Gillespie's solution to this problem does not, unlike Simon Critchley's, involve the playing-off of the pathos of finitude, everyday human suffering for example, against Badiou's supposedly arid formalism.

Instead, in a gesture that is indebted to Badiou's earlier *Theory of the Subject* (1982),⁹ and which foreshadows Badiou's own recent return to that work in *Logics of Worlds*, Gillespie turns to Lacan's account of anxiety as a possible answer. The importance of anxiety is that it is an affect which is certain. It also marks "a lack of lack," which is to say a contact with the Real that cannot be denied. In this way, almost paradoxically, anxiety means that we lose our own individual relation to lack and are forced to confront, in the guise of the object (a), the empty ground of Being itself. In this way, we can complete the circuit from the claim that "[t]he ultimate ontological support of the world is nothing" (Gillespie, 139), to an experience of that "nothing." For Gillespie anxiety is the bridge between Badiou's radically subtractive, minimalist, and atheist ontology, and the subject as operator of the event.¹⁰ The tension here, not fully resolved in Gillespie's account, is his claim that this affect of anxiety, sign of the emergence of the drive, does not need to assume "morbid or abject vicissitudes" (Gillespie, 117), as it often does in Žižek, for example.¹¹ I am unsure of the certainty of the distinction Gillespie offers between a libidinal interest (subject to such vicissitudes) and an elementary relation—considering *jouissance* is involved in the latter, it is unclear quite how it avoids at least a minimal affective pathos, considering Lacan's definition of *jouissance* as a paradoxical "pleasure in pain."¹²

Leaving this aside, the supplementary function does not only cut one-way. If Lacan provides a minimal phenomenology of the subject, then Badiou raises the critical question of the forcing of this individual relation to anxiety towards a collective realization and instantiation of the generic. Again, one can only profoundly regret that this remains sketched out so rapidly, but it seems to suggest a re-articulation of Lacanian psychoanalysis with a collective politics through the concept of the subject.¹³ What is crucial here, and faithful to Badiou, is the passage through form. Anxiety signals the encounter with indiscernibility, and the necessity to give form to this "nothing" that eludes the speaking subject. In a way, we have the restoration of the category of "determinate negation" slightly displaced from its typical Hegelian coordinates, although much here, of course, depends on how exactly one reads Hegel.

⁹ Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, trans. Bruno Bosteels (London and New York: Continuum, 2009).

¹⁰ In comparison one could consult Ray Brassier's *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), which also departs from the subtractive "nihilism" of Badiou's thought but rather to pass outside the domain of the human subject altogether. Hence, for Brassier, the necessity is not so much for a psychological supplement to Badiou, but rather the dissolution of such a "folk psychology" in the name of a radicalized neurobiological reductionism, such as that of the Churchland's.

¹¹ Bruno Bosteels has made the most thorough critique of Žižek on these grounds, see "Badiou without Žižek," *Polygraph* 17, "The Philosophy of Alain Badiou," ed. Matthew Wilkins (2005): 221–44.

Whatever the difficulties that would be involved, which would no doubt be considerable, Gillespie has patiently worked towards negation as the condition of the possibility for a transformative philosophy.

This is what his whole project works towards, and Gillespie is not averse to asking the difficult questions that result. At the heart of the matter lies the difficulty in coordinating the new with the true. In Badiou's case, this involves the praxis of forcing to instantiate the event, starting from the void. Hence, in Gillespie's account, the event remains a less important category than those of the generic, forcing, and formalization, all these offer determinations of the negative and ways to persist with it.¹⁴ The problem we face is how to engage in this praxis in the face of the continuous "novelties" of capitalism. In the case of Deleuze, we find a worldly immersion that tries to radicalize the existent tendencies of capitalism—to transform capitalist deterritorialization to absolute deterritorialization.¹⁵ I have called this kind of thinking "accelerationism." In Gillespie's account, Badiou offers a radically different solution: "to separate thought and action from conditions that have been set to it by the world, and its historical extension in the global market-place" (Gillespie, 145).

The solution, however, seems to result in aporia. On the one hand, to avoid complicity with the capitalist ontology of the new and philosophical description, philosophy must be detached or disconnected from the "world as I found it." On the other hand, this detachment or disconnection seems to leave philosophy with little way to assess whether an event has really taken place. The very abstract formalization Badiou engages in means that when it comes to his analysis of actual events we are left unsure of how far his philosophy can add to, or explain, how these constitute real events. It is noteworthy that, in a recent review of *Logics of Worlds*, Peter Hallward has raised a similar problem. Despite Badiou's attempt to fine-tune his theory, and to provide, precisely, more detail of the "mediation" between ontology and appearance, his examples, dazzling as they may be, are still left materially indeterminate.¹⁶ While Badiou may now have a "logic" to describe the world, this does not appear to have solved the problem raised by Gillespie. After all, the Paris Commune remains defeated and Alexander remains victorious at Gaugamela, and what has describing these events in terms of category theory added

¹² "What I call *jouissance*—in the sense in which the body experiences itself—is always in the nature of tension, in the nature of forcing, of a spending, even of an exploit. Unquestionably, there is *jouissance* at the level at which pain begins to appear, and we know that it is only at this level of pain that a whole dimension of the organism, which would otherwise remain veiled, can be experienced." Lacan, quoted in Néstor A. Braunstein, "Desire and *jouissance* in the teachings of Lacan," in *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan*, ed. Jean-Michel Rabaté (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 102–115, 103.

¹³ I have discussed this issue in my review of Yannis Stavrakakis, *The Lacanian Left* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007) and Ian Parker's *Revolution in Psychology* (London: Pluto, 2007), *Historical Materialism* 17.1 (2009): 183–90.

¹⁴ Zachary Fraser has also insisted on the importance of formalization, as against the usual fixation on the event, for the reading of Badiou. See Zachary Luke Fraser, "Introduction: The Category of Formalization: From Epistemological Break to Truth Procedure," in Alain Badiou, *The Concept of Model* [1969] (Melbourne: re.press, 2007) xiii–lxv.

to our understanding? Can such description really prove an event has taken place when an event requires subtraction from worldly standards of verification?

Gillespie's answer is quite radical, not least in its consequences for Badiou's philosophy:

It is only by radically separating itself from the world—so radically, in fact, that the question of a philosophical application of thought onto the world becomes an afterthought of sorts—that philosophy becomes an imperative to try out through militant activity. (Gillespie, 148)

Badiou's "philosophy" would therefore become an experimental practice. Unable to truly decide whether anything was an event due to its detachment from the world, this detachment becomes the condition of militant practice. We could argue that this is a torsion of Marx's injunction that "[t]he philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it."¹⁷

The risk is, however, that Badiou's philosophy is rendered merely horatory, which his own model of prescriptive affirmation risks reinforcing.¹⁸ We are constantly called to action and given the reinforcement of descriptions of past events, and the promise of future events, but little means to guide and assess the current possibility of events. Gillespie's contention is that the result of Badiou's work is to suggest that transformation is only possible by giving up reflection on the world (Marx's "interpretation"). This is a resolutely extra-worldly orientation, and not entirely unsympathetic considering the current miseries, which seem to invite despair, hedonist avoidance, apathy, or clinging to survival. The difficulty, raised with most insistence by Peter Hallward, is that to give up on description and interpretation is to foreclose the ability to intervene in any meaningful fashion. From this point of view, Gillespie's reading indicates the persistence of a certain strain of Maoist voluntarism evident in Badiou's work of the 1970s, in which politics takes command at the expense of philosophy, or over other forms of articulating existent power relations (Gramscian "hegemony," Foucault's "power-relations," etc.). It is difficult to be sure whether Gillespie endorses this conclusion, which would seem to entail the auto-dissolution of philosophy into militant praxis. This would seem to leave Badiou as an example of that "speculative leftism" that he critiques in *Being and Event*.¹⁹ Badiou obviously has in mind Guy Lardreau and Christian Jambet's *L'Ange* (1976),²⁰ and argues that such thinking absolutizes the event—detaching us from the world at the cost of posing a perpetual Manichean dualism between revolt and power.

¹⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* [1980], trans. Brian Massumi (London: Athlone, 1988) 88.

¹⁶ Peter Hallward, "Order and Event: On Badiou's Logics of Worlds," *New Left Review* 53 (September-October 2008): 97-122.

¹⁷ Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach" [1845], Marxists Internet Archive 2002. <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm>> [accessed May 23, 2009].

¹⁸ See Alain Badiou, *The Meaning of Sarkozy*, trans. David Fernbach (London and New York: Verso, 2008).

¹⁹ Badiou, *Being and Event*, 210-11.

In fact, Bruno Bosteels has recently insisted on exactly this problem in Badiou's thinking. In his reading, this absolutization of the event is not only correlated with ultra-leftism, but also with Badiou's category of "anti-philosophy." What Bosteels insists on is that this is not merely an external threat, but one intrinsically staged within Badiou's philosophy:

But I would say that antiphilosophy teaches us that the real danger, including for Badiou's own philosophy, is not the religion of meaning but rather the radicalism of the pure event as absolute beginning, or the treatment of the event as some kind of archi-event, that is to say, in the end, the conflation of the event with the act.²¹

For Bosteels, more so than for Peter Hallward, there are dialectical resources in Badiou's philosophy that would allow the containment of this internal "threat." It is difficult to properly assess Gillespie's position, but it would seem to indicate the temptation of antiphilosophy—directed towards a militant politics of the act, which forgets philosophy. This is an almost quasi-Wittgensteinian position, considering Wittgenstein's quasi-Maoist advice to his students to quit philosophy and enter the factory.

Gillespie's recourse to Lacan's concept of anxiety is the attempt to avoid the complete detachment of the subject from the "nothing" of the void. Whether we agree with this characterization, and I feel that this is still hostage to an overly negative conception of affect in the sense of failure or finitude, we see that what Gillespie is straining towards is a new thinking of "determinate negation." In this way, Badiou poses an acute problem to thinking in a transformative way, posing sharply the problem abandoned by phenomenological and pragmatist currents, which remain largely content to leave the world as it is. Here I think a supplementary condition of the present is not only the operation of capital, but also the collapse or retreat of the forms of agency that provided resistance to it. In the lack of such subjective instantiations, it becomes difficult to ground a thinking of radical transformation without conceding to the world as it is. It is the great merit of Gillespie's work to confront us once again with this question.

²⁰ Guy Lardreau and Christian Jambet, *L'Ange: Pour une cynégétique du semblant* (Paris: Grasset, 1976).

²¹ Bruno Bosteels, "Radical Antiphilosophy," *Filozofski Vestnik*, XXIX.2, "Radical Philosophy?," ed. Peter Klepec (2008): 155-87, 177.