FROM POEM TO NARRATIVE IN SUFISM

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There is an inward link between meaning and the form which conveys and transmits that meaning, between what classical Sufi terminology, especially as used by Jalal al-Din Rumi, calls *ma'nā* (meaning) and *surah* (form).[1] This truth is especially true of Sufism itself which is concerned by nature with ultimate meaning, with that is most inward and hidden from the outward seeking eye. That is why from the beginning, the masters of Sufism selected carefully the forms which would be used to express the truths of Sufism and to become the vehicle for realities which these forms could reveal, while these vehicles were by definition confined to the world of outward forms that cannot but be a veil in itself. The Sufis also selected those forms which could be transformed and become transparent so as to be appropriate means for the expression of that meaning, which is none other than the message of inwardness. They chose forms which could become wed to that message in such a way as to lead to the abode of the inward. To this end some chose plastic forms, others musical melodies and yet some remained silent and alluded to the inner truths which they wished to convey through their very presence. Many, however, chose the medium of the spoken and written word and it is to this form of expression that we wish to turn while not forgetting that Sufism has had no verbal forms of expression of the greatest significance varying from calligraphy to sacred music and dance ('samā'), not to speak of that silent music heard only by the wise.

Being the inner dimension of the Islamic revelation, Sufism is related in both form and content to the Noble Quran, and the language of the Sacred Text, its rhythms and rhymes, its metaphors and symbols, have continued to echo in Sufi literature throughout the centuries. The Quran is not poetry in tilt ordinary sense of the word; yet it is supreme poetry with its definite metres and prosody. It is not a systematic exposition of metaphysics; yet it contains all metaphysics and wisdom in condensed formulas and aphorisms such as the first shahādah itself, Lā *ilāha illa'Llāhi* (there is no divinity but Allah). Although brief outwardly, the Quranic formulations possess an, unfathomable depth in their inner dimension leading to the Infinite Reality

[1] See S.H. Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality,* Albany (NY) and London, 1986, pp. 128ff.

from which the Quran has originated.

The first commentary upon the Quran which is the *Hadith,* although very distinct in style from the Word of God, remains faithful in its poetic qualities, the use of aphorisms and symbolic imagery to the Divine Word. This is particularly true of the sacred *hadīths (al-ahādīth al-qud-siyyah)* which are so essential to the genesis and later development of Sufi literature[2]. How often have Sufis spoken of the hidden treasure *(al-kanz al-makhfiy)* following the sacred *hadith* in which this symbol is cited;[3] or how often have the Sufis repeated the prophetic utterance, "I am Ahmad without *mim (m);* I am Arab without 'ayn ('.). He who has seen me has seen the Lord,"[4] expounding its inner significance!

Sufi literature is deeply rooted in the Noble Quran and *Hadīth* for its content as well as form[5]. It is therefore not surprising that the earliest literary

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[2] On these *hadiths* see W. Graham, *Divine Word and Prophetic Word in Early Islam,* The Hague, 1975.

[3] The well-known Hadith which explain the reason for the creation of the world from the Islamic point of view is as follows: "I was a hidden treasure *(kanzun makhfiyyun); I* wanted to be known. Therefore, I created the world so that I would be known." It is, therefore, referred to in the Sufi tradition as the *hadith* of the hidden treasure" *(or Kanzi-i-makhfiy* in Persian).

[4] This *hadith* refers to the inner reality of the Prophet symbolized by his name Ahmad which without "m" becomes *ahad* or the One as *'arab* without *'ayn* becomes *rabb* or the Lord. It also refers to the fact that no one can reach God without the aid of His Prophet. On the significance of the Prophet in Sufism see T. Burckhardt, *Introduction to Sufi Doctrine,* trans. D.M. Matheson, Wellingborough, 1976, chapter twelve; F.' Schuon, *Understanding Islam,* trans. D.M. Matheson, London 1979, chapter 3; al-Jili, *University Man,* trans. T. Burckhardt, Sherborne, 1983; and A.M. Schimmel, *And Muhammad is His Messenger,* Chapel Hill and London, 1985. This last work is devoted to the image of the Prophet as reflected in Sufi literature. See also J. Nurbakhsh, *Traditions of the Prophet -- Ahadith,* London, 1981, which contains those *hadiths* that have been especially important in the development of Sufism.

[5] This does not mean, however, that Sufism derives from the *Shari'ah.* Rather both the *Shari'ah* and Sufism or the Tariqah derive from the Truth or Haqiqah which is the origin of Islam in both its exoteric and esoteric aspects. Moreover, Sufism, being Islamic esoterism, assumes the acceptance and practice of the *Shareah* on behlaf of its followers. See F. Schuon, *Understanding Islam,* pp. 41-42; S.H. Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam* London, 1988 chapter V; and Mir Valiuddin, *The Quranic Sufism,* Delhi, 1977. In a series of work dealing with the relation of the language of Sufism to that of the Quran, Massignon and following him P. Nwyia have clarified that intimate link between Sufism and the Quran not only in meaning

expressions of Sufism are in the form of aphorisms and short mystic utterances soon to be followed by poetry. The first example of these utterances are to be found in the *Nahj al-bālaglẓah* of 'Alī ibn Abī Tālib. This pivotal work which is devoted to divine knowledge as well as piety, ethics and even political instructions, was assembled in the 4th/10th century by Sayyid Sharif Radī, but contains the sayings of the man who was the representative *par excellence,* after the Prophet, (peace be upon him) of that reality which came to be known later as Sufism. The *Nahj al-balāghah* does also contain longer discourses on metaphysical questions similar to some of the longer *hadīths* of the Prophet (peace be upon him). The famous discourse of 'Alī on the Oneness of God during the Battle of the Camel comes to mind as a famous example,[6] but much of the *Nahj al-balāghah is* in the form of short aphorisms which became the norm in so much of the early Sufi literature from Hasan al-Basrī to Bāyazīd, from Dhu'l-Nūn al-Misrī to Junayd.[7]

Early Sufi writings associated with such patriarchs of Islamic spirituality as 'Ali or his grandson Zayn al-'Abidin al-Sajjād, the author of *al-Sahffat al-Sajjādiyyah* are also replete with supplications and prayers which have become part and parcel of Muslim devotional literature in general but are also of special significance as early Sufi literature. Such prayers as *du'a'al-sabāh* (the Supplication for the Morning) and du'ā'al-Kumayl (the Supplication of Kumayl ibn Ziyād) attributed to 'Ali are among the most moving of these early works composed usually in rhymed prose *(saṗ)* and reflecting the profound influence of the Quranic revelation in both its content and form. The opening verses of the Supplication of the Morning,[8]

"Oh God,

Oh He Who extended the morning's tongue in the speech of its dawning, dispatched the fragments of the dark night into the gloom of its stammering made firm the structure of the turning spheres in the

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but also in formal expression. See L. Massignon, *Essai sur les origins du lexique technique de la mystique Musulmane,* Paris, 1954; and P. Nwyia, *Exegese Coranique et langage mystique,* Beirut 1970.

[6] For the translation of this discourse which begins with 'Ali's answer to the bediun who had asked "0 Commander of the Faithful! Sayest thou that God is one?" See W.Chittick, *A Shi'ite Anthology,* Albany (NY), 1981, pp. 37-38.

[7] It must not be forgotten that the sayings and writings of 'Ali and other early Shi'ite Imams are also part of Sufi literature. The Imams up to the eighth, 'Ali al-Riga, were also poles'of Sufism and appear in the silsilah or chain of various Sufi orders.

[8] See Amir al-mu'minin, *Supplications (Du 'a),* trans. W.Chittick, London, n.d., p.6.

measures of its display and beamed forth the brightness of the sun through the light of its blazing!"

creates an atmosphere of poetic beauty which was to characterize Sufi literature over the centuries. This trait is to be seen in its most sublime form in the Sahīfah which for this reason came to be known as the "Psalm of the Family of the Prophet (peace be upon him)" and its supplications came to be read and chanted by Sufis and non Sufis alike over the centuries.[9]

The early hagiographies and compilations dealing with Sufism are replete with the aphorisms, prayers and poetry of the early Sufi sages. Some of these aphorisms contain hidden meanings whose outward form appears as outrageous. They are considered as ecstatic utterances or theophanic locutions *(Math)* such as Bāyazīd "Glory be unto me" (subhānī) rather than the usual Muslim formula, *subhān Allah* "Glory be unto God" or "I am the Truth" *(ana'1-Haqq)* of Hallaj which was to cost him his life[10]. Others point to profound metaphysical or practical truths without possessing a paradoxical form or being uttered in order to shock the adept from his slumber of forgetfulness such as the famous saying of Junayd, "The cup takes the color of the wine" or that of early 1st/7th century patriarch of Sufism Hasan al-Basri, "Be with this world as if you had never been there, and with the other world as if you would never leave it."[11]

This type of Sufi literature was to continue through the centuries and lead to some of the most influential and popular works of Sufism especially in Arabic. One need only recall the Mawāqif of the 4th/10th century Sufi al-

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[9] See the *Psalm of Islam,* trans. W. Chittick, London, 1988.

[10] On these utterances see C. Ernst, *Words of Ecstasy,* Albany (NY), 1285; also H. Ritter, Die Ausspruche des Bayezid Bistami," Westostliche *Abhandlungen, Festschrift fur Rudolf Tschudi,* ed. F. Meier, Wiesbaden, 1954, pp.231-243.

As for Hallaj, the Sufi tradition has seen this assertion not as a heretical utterance but as the sign of perfect *tawhid* or unity for it was not the individual soul of Hallaj but the Divine within him who uttered *ana'l-Haqq.* On Hallaj and the considerable influence he was to exercise on later Sufi literature, see L. Massignon, *The Passion of al-Hallaj* trans. H. Mason, 4 vols., Princeton, 1982.

Ecstatic sayings such as those of Hallaj were assembled by many later Sufis, the most famous compilation and commentary being that of the great saint of Shiraz, Ruzbihan Baqli who wrote the Sharh-i shathiyyat edited by H. Corbin as Commentaire *sur les paradoxes des soufis,* Tehran, Paris, 1966. On this remarkable expositor of Divine Love and Beauty see H.Corbin, *En Islam Iranian,* vol. 3, Paris, 1972, pp.20ff.

[11] See A.M. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam,* Chapel Hill (N.C.), 1975, p.30.

Niffarī, that unique work in which God commands al-Niffarī and addresses him in short aphorisms of great poignancy and power, for example, "The knower seeks proofs of Me, and every proof merely points to himself, not to Me: the gnostic seeks proofs through Me"[12]. Or "Write down who thou art, that thou mayest know who thou art: for if thou knowest not who thou art, thou art not of the people of My gnosis"[13].

This type of literature in a sense reached its peak, at least in the Arabic language, with the 7th/13th century Sufi Ibn'Atā-'allah al-Iskandari whose *Hikam* or *Aphorisms* continue to be read and chanted throughout the Arabic speaking world to this day while the Malay translation of this work is among the most important in the annals of Malay literature. Such sayings as,

"That which shows you the existence of His Omnipotence is that He veiled you from Himself by what has no existence along-side of Him"[14]

have become proverbial even among the general public beyond the world of the disciples of various Sufi orders.

As for supplications and prayers written usually in a highly poetic form, they too become the progenator of a long tradition and over the centuries numerous masterpieces of Sufi literature have appeared in this form. One need only recall the Munājāt or *Supplications* of the 5th/11th century patron saint of Herat, Khawājah'Abd-Allāh Ansārī which is among the supreme masterpieces of poetic prose in the Persian language. When the Pir of Herat, as he is known in the Persian speaking world, says, "0 God, Thou madest Creation gratis, Thou provided sustenance gratis, Have mercy on us gratis, Thou art God not a merchant"[15] he gives expression to both certain aspects of the attitudes inculcated in the Sufi path and at the same time the deepest yearning of the human soul for God. That is why this work and those of a similar nature such as the prayer of Ibn Mashīsh[16] are also re-cited by ordinary pious Muslims, while their most inward meaning is preserved for those who march upon the path of inwardness.

The wedding of the truth of the meaning (ma'nā) of Sufism and poetic

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[12] al-Niffari, the *Mawaqif and Mukhatabat,* trans. A.J. Arberry, London, 1978, p. 47.
[13] *ibid.,* p. 48.
[14] See Ibn 'Ata'illah, *The Book of Wisdom,* trans. V.Danner, New York, 1978, p. 49.
[15] See Khwaja Abdullah Ansari, *Intimate conversation,* New York, 1978, p. 208.
[16] See T. Burckhardt, Mirror of the Intellect, trans. and ed. W. Stoddart, Albany (NY), 1987, pp.183-192.

form which again derives from the inspiration provided by the Quran, begins in the Arab world with the 2nd/8th century woman Sufi saint who lived in Basra as disciple of Hasan al-Basri and was buried in Jerusalem, Rābi'at al-'Adawiyyah. Rābi'ah lived the life of an ascetic much like her mentor but the love of God *(al-mahabbah)* which follows upon the wake of the fear of God (al-nzakhāfah), gushed forth in her being, creating a poetry whose form suited perfectly the yearning and love for the Divine Beloved. Rābi'ah distinguished carefully selfish love from Divine Love so she sang,

"I have loved Thee with two loves, a selfish love and a love that is worthy of Thee.

As for the love which is selfish, therein I occupy myslef with Thee, to the exclusion of all others. But in the love which is worthy of Thee, Thou dost raise the veil that I may see Thee.

Yet is the praise not mine in this or that, But the praise is to Thee in both that or this."[17]

This poetry which acts as the vehicle for the expression of human love for the Divine became part and parcel of Sufi literature. The verses of Rābi'ah are chanted to this day and were followed by poems of great quality emanating from the Baghdad School in the 3rd/9th century, especially the moving poems of Abu'l-Hussyn al-Nūrī who also wrote symbolic prose works of which the most striking is on the seven interior castles of the soul[18].

The greatest early master of Arabic Sufi poetry is, however, the Persian Mansur al-Hallāj whose *Kitab al-tawā-sīn* and *Dīwān* [19] represent the first peak of early Sufi poetry in Arabic. One sees in Hallaj the manifestation of the dimension of illuminative knowledge or gnosis *(al-ma'rifah)* in addition to love in poems of incredible power and directness as for example when he says,

"I saw my Lord with my heart's eye

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[17] M.Smith, *The Way of the Mystics,* New York, 1978, p 223.

[18] Recent scholarship has related this symbolic imagery of Nuri along with that of other Sufis to the well known work of St.Theresa of Avila. See L. Lopez-Baralt, "Santa Teresa de Jesus Y el Islam," *Teresianum, vol.* XXXIII, 1982-I/II, pp.629-678.

[19] Both edited and studied by L. Massignon. See *Kitab altawa-sin,* ed. L. Massignon, Paris, 1913; and *Le Diwan dAl-Hallaj,* Paris, 1955.

And I said to Him" Who art Thou" and He said Thou"[20]

Henceforth poetry became the most intimate vessel for the expression of the truths of Sufism, of states and stations too subtle to be expressed in ordinary prose or the language of everyday life. It was not, however, until the 7th/ 13th century that Arabic Sufi poetry reached its supreme perfection with 'Umar ibn al - Fārid and Muhyī-al-Dīn ibn'Arabī while during the centuries separating Hallāj from these great masters, it was not Arabic but Persian poetry which flowered to reach unprecedented realms of perfection of expression and subtlety of meaning.

With Ibn'Arabī and Ibnal - Fārid the form of Arabic poetry becomes a perfect vehicle for the expression of the most subtle teachings of Sufism. Ibn'Arabi, who was the great expositor of Sufi gnosis, also composed a vast amount of poetry interspersed within his prose works, particularly in *al-Futūhāt-al-makkiyyah,* not to speak of his Dīwān and the *Tarjumān-al-ashwāq.* In this last work especially, a highly elaborate language of symbolism expresses for those who possess the correct perception the mysteries of divine union veiled in the imagery of human love.

"Greeting to Salma and to those who dwell in the presence, for it behoves one who loves tenderly like me to give greeting.

And what harm to her if she gave me a greeting in return?But fair women are subject no authority."[21]

With Ibn al - Fārid Arabic poetic expression reaches its peaks as far as mystical themes are concerned. Such a work as the *Khamriyyah* exemplifies the perfect wedding between meaning and form in which the very sounds and images of the poem in the original Arabic seem flow and lead back to the world of the Spirit, the experience of which is symbolized by wine, an experience which is none other than realized knowledge of the divine realities (haqa'iq). The poem begins with these celebrated verses.

"Remembering the beloved, wine we drink

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[20] This is translated somewhat differently by H. Mason in his rendition of Massignon's' *The Passion of al-Hallaj - Mystic and Martyr of Islam,* vol.3, _p. 301. See pp. 278ff. of this work for a discussion of Hallaj's poetic works.

[21] *The Tarjuman al-ashwaq,* trans. R.A Nicholson, Wheaton (ILL.), 1978, pp. 56-57.
Here Salm, according to Ibn 'Arabi's own commentary, symbolises a state of ecstasy which descended upon him from the station Solomon. As for the second verse, it refers to the fact that God is infinite freedom and does nothing by coersion and constraint.

Which drunk had made us ere the vine's creation.
A sun it is; the full moon is its cup;
A crescent hands it round; how many stars shine forth from it the moment it be fixed ."[22]

Ibn al-Fārid considered his poetry to be inspired by Heaven and even received the title of one of this most famous poems, the *Nazm al-sūlak* from the Prophet in a vision. In this poem also known as the *Ta'iyyāh* are to be found the poetic formulations of the "transcendent unity of being" (*wahdat āl-wājūd)* which was being formulated by Ibn 'Arabī in his doctrinal works about the same time. Ibn al-Fārid sees behind the veil of multiplicity the One who is the essential reality of the manifold like the light illuminating the screen of a shadow play. It is only the Sufi, however, who is able to finally discern the reality of the One beyond the many:

"All thou beholdest is the act of One.
In solitude, but closely veiled is He.
Let him but lift the screen, no doubt remains: The forms are vanished, He alone is all;

And thou, illumined, knowest by His lights

Thou finds it His actions in the senses night."[23]

After these incomparable masters of Arabic Sufi poetry, the vehicle of poetry continued to serve Sufi masters in Arab lands and even in Persia over the centuries which followed and the tradition has continued to this day. Some of the *dīwāns of* Arabic poetry of 14th/20th century masters such as Shaykh al-Alawī[24] and Shaykh Habib have remained popular among members

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[22] M. Lings, "The Wine-Song (al-Khamriyyah) of 'Umar Ibn al-Farid," *Studies in Comparative Religion,* Summer-Autumn, 1980,p.131.

On the *Khamriyyah* and other mystical poems of Ibn al-Farid see also A.J. Arberry (ed. and trans.), *The Mystical Poems of Ibn al-Farid,* London, 1954 and Dublin, 1956; E. Dermenghem, *L'eloge du vin (al-Khamriya),* Paris, 1931; and the rather approximate translation of J.von Hammer - - Purgstall of the work into German poetry as *Das arabische Hohe Leid der Liebe,* Vienna, 1854.

[23] A.M.Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam,* p. 277.

[24] Some of the poems of this great master have been translated into beautiful English poetry by M. Lings in his *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century,* London, 1971, pp.214-228.

of the Shadhiliyyah Order even since their composition and bear witness to the living nature of not only Sufism but also its expression in the form of Arabic poetry.

The development of Persian Sufi poetry was even more diversified than Arabic and led to a vast literature which many have called the richest mystical poetry in the world. Since the canons of Persian poetry as well as the language itself were still being formed during the early Islamic centuries and were in fact part of the process of the Islamization of Persia, in contrast to Arabic prosody which was already well established at the time of the rise of Islam, Persian Sufi poetry was in a sense even more influenced by the form and content of the Quran than its Arabic counterpart.[25] The poetic nature of the Persians, as fecundated by the *barakah,* content and form of the Quranic revelation, gave rise to the vast ocean of Persian Sufi poetry whose pearls have been appreciated from Albania to Malaysia. Persian Sufi poetry in fact played a direct role in the Islamization of much of Asia and had a profound influence far beyond the confines of the Persian speaking world, influencing directly Sufi poetry in Turkish, Sindhi, Bengali, Urdu and many other languages of the Islamic peoples. In fact when one speaks of the rapport between Sufism and poetry in the Persian context, one is also dealing mutatis *mutandis* with Turkish, Sindhi, Urdu, Kashmiri, Bengali, Gujrati and many other forms of poetry of the Indo-Pakistan sub-continent.[26]

Persian Sufi poetry developed several symbolic means for the expression of the truths of Sufism, the most important source of the language of the Sufi poet being the Noble Quran, it inspired commentaries, the *Hadith* and the oral tradition is-suing from the inner teachings of the Prophet. But there developed also a vast poetry based upon the language associated with the transformation of earthly love into Divine Love, as mentioned already in the case of Arabic Sufi poetry, and also the language of wine and music which are concomitants of the experience of that love which Rumi, the supreme troubadour of the Sufi path of love, calls "our Plato and Galen".[27] Then there

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[25] Altogether one can say that Arabic literature is richer in Sufi prose works and Persian in Sufi poetry.

[26] See A.M. Schimmel, *As Thourgh a Veil,* chapter 4.

[27] On Rumi see A.M. Schimmel, *The Triumphal Sun: A Study of the Works of Jalaloddin Rumi,* London, 1978; *ibid, As Through a Veil,* chapter 3; W. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love -- The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi,* Albany, 1983; and S.H. Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality,* pp. 114-147.

is the poetic language base upon the symbolism of the fire-temple and the Magi referring outwardly to the pre-Islamic religions of Persia but inwardly to the universality of esoterism and the in-dependence of Sufism, as the esoteric dimension of the Islamic revelation, from the exoteric formulations of the religion. There is also a whole *genre* of poetry of a gnostic and metaphysical character based upon a language which mostly grew out of the works of Ibn'Arabi and also in some cases Suhrawardī. Some of these various symbolic languages were, however, occasionally combined in the works of a single poet especially the great late masters such as Rumi, Hafiz and Shabistarī.[28]

This boundless ocean of Persian Sufi poetry actually began humbly enough with the simple, mystical quatrains attributed to Abu Said Abi'l-Khayr who lived in the 5th/11th century, although most likely these poems or at least most of them were by his teacher Bishr ibn Yasin.[29] These quatrains as well as those of another early figure of the same period, Baba Tahir, are marked by an intense love for God and possess a devotional tone as can be seen in these verses,

> "Happy are they indeed whose Friend is God, Who giving thank, say ever, 'He is God', Happy are they who always are at prayer, Eternal Heaven is their just reward."[30]

Or in the following quatrain which alludes to the doctrine of the transcendent unity of religious mentioned so often by later Sufis:

> "Drunkards and drunk though we be, Thou art our Faith, Unstable, meak though we be Thou art our faith, though we be Muslims, Gubres,

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[28] For the history of Persian poetry and the style of various schools, the most extensive work to date is Z. Safa, *Tarikhi-adabiyyat-i-Iran,* Tehran, 1338 (A.H.Solar) on. As for works in European languages, see the standard histories of E.G. Browne, *A Literary History of Persia,* 4 vols. Cambridge, 1957; A.J. Arberry, Classical Persian Literature, London, 1958; J. Rypka, History of Iranian Literature, Dordrecht, 1968; and G. Morrison, *History of Persian Literature from the Beginning of the Islamic Period to the Present Day,* Leiden -- Kolm, 1981. These works contain many valuable pages on Persian Sufi poetry, but there is as yet no single work which treats the whole of Persian Sufi poetry both historically and morphologically.

[29] There is a great deal of legend surrounding the life and work of Abu Said. See F. Meier, *Abu Sa'id-i-Abu l-Hair, Wirklichkeit and Legende,* Leiden, 1976. As for the quatrains themselve, see R.A. Nicholson. *Studies in Islamic Mysticism,* Cambridge, 1967, chapater 1.

[30] See E. Heron-Allen, *A Fool of God: The Mystical Verse of Baba Tahir,* London, 1979, p. 54.

Nazarenes, Whate'er the outward Form, Thou art our Faith."[31]

From these simple beginnings Sufi poetry was to grow rapidly in the hands of the great masters of the 6th/12th and 7th/13th centuries such as Sana'i,'Attar and Rumi with whom Sufi poetry reaches its peak as far as the conveying of the teachings of Sufism in all its aspects from ethics to metaphysics and cosmology are concerned. All three figures were poets of great genius, men of vast learning in the Islamic sciences and Sufis of great spiritual attainment, especially Rumi who is one of the foremost spiritual figures in the history of Islam. With Sana'i Persian Sufi poetry begins to develop a didactic language of which the author's masterpiece, the Hadiqat *al-haqa'iq* composed in mathnawi or rhyming couplet form, is the first major example[32]. It also begins to concern itself especially with the journey of the soul to God as seen in Sana'i's short master-piece, *Sayr al- ad ila'l-ma'ad* which some scholars have considered as the forerunner to Dante's Divine *Comedy* that deals with the same subject in a Christian setting. In a famous poem in his Diwan, Sana'i emphasised the difficulty of this journey and the fortitude and patience required for man to reach the state of perfection. He says,

"It takes days for the wool of a sheep To become cloak for an escetic or bridle for a donkey; It requires a lifetime naturally, for a child To become a good scholar or a sweet-worded poet; It requires centuries until out of the semen of Adam A (Sufi like) Abu'l-Wafa Kurd or an Uways-i Qaranī comes into being."[33]

The theme of the journey of the soul to God, which is none other than the Sufi path, the trials of this journey which is made possible by the love of man for God and of course of God for man and the mysteries of gnosis which are the fruit of this journey are expounded further by 'Attar some of whose poems have never been superceded in the annals of mystical poetry. He is the poet to whom Rumi paid the supreme complement by saying,

"Attar has already traversed the seven cities of love, We are still stuck at the corner of the first street."[34]

'Attar composed numerous Mathnawis as well as *a Diwan* and some

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[31] *ibid.,* p.55.

[32] See Sana'i, *The enclosed Garden of the Truth,* ed. and trans. by J.Stephenson, New York, 1975.

[33] A.M. Schimmel, *As Through a Veil,* p. 64-65 (translation somewhat modified).

[34] Rumi also acknowledges his debt to Sana'i and 'Attar when he says.

prose works, but his masterpiece is the Mantiq *altayar* already well-known in the West as *The Conference of the Birds.*[35] This poem develops to new heights the theme of birds flying to return to their original abode, a theme already dealt within a more philosophical vein by Ibn Sīnā and both Ghazzali's, Abu Hamid and Ahmad.[36] The thirty birds *(si murgh)* flying through the dales and valleys of cosmic existence to reach finally the peak of the cosmic mountain Qāf wherein resides the Simurgh, symbol of the Divine, and their realization that in the union of that Divine reality the *si murgh* are the Simurgh, that the self is none other than the Self, constitute the theme of one of the greatest masterpieces of Sufi literature. When 'Attar speaks of this union,

> "To be consumed by the light of the presence of the Simurgh is to realize that, I know not whether I am Thee or Thou art I; I have disappeared in Thee and duality hath perished,"[37]

He is expressing that perfect wedding between the truths of Sufism and poetic form which constitute the greatest achievements of Sufi literary art.

It is with such figures as 'Attar and Sana'i in mind, not to speak of the whole earlier tradition of Sufism and in fact of Islam in general that one must turn to the supreme Sufi poet, Jalāl al-Dīn Rumi, who was a poet in spite of himself.[38] Rumi was a theologian before he became a poet and was a jurist before becoming the founder of the sacred dance of the Sufi order which he founded. Yet, the appearance of Shams al-Din Tabrizi caused such a tidal wave in the soul of Rumi that the outward confinements of language and thought were broken and the ecstatic joy of his soul poured out in poetic form. He composed poetry in spite of his earlier scholarly position either in the forms of *ghazals* composed spontaneously and full of music or didactic verses which comprise his uncomparable Mathnawi.[39] The ghazals named

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[35] Sana'i was the spirit, and 'Attar his two eyes -- We have come after Sana'i and 'Attar." A.M. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam, p.* 303.

[36] See. H. Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital,* trans.-W. Trask, Irving (Texas), 1980, pp. 193ff; and Ahmad Ghazzali, *Spiritual Flight (The Risalat al-Tayar),* ed. by N. Pourjavady, Tehran, 1976.

[37] Trans. by S.H. Nasr in his *Islamic Art and Spirituality, p.* 110.

[38] Rumi writes in his *'Diwan* "What is poetry that I should boast of it I possess an art other than the art of the poets." See Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality,* p. 140.

[39] He also composed a large number of quatrains which express different mystical states *(ahwal)* or themes for meditation. See A.J. Arberry, *The Ruba'iyyat of Jalaluddin Rumi,* London, 1949.

after his mysterious spiritual friend and companion, Shams al-Din Tabrizi, and named *Diwani-Shams*[40] carry the Persian language to its extreme possibilities of expressing the ecstasy of divine Union and the joy of hearing that celestial music which turns body and soul to rapture and transforms the heart with a burning flame fueled by the fire of love for the Beloved. In these g*hazals* the music of the poems act as the perfect vehicle for the content which turns the soul from concern for the world to the remembrance of God.

"The school is Love, the teacher the Almighty -- and we are like students, these words our recitations. Choose Love, Love! Without the sweet life of Love, living is a burden -- as you have seen.
In the two or three days you live in this world -- what a shame to live only by spirit!

Never be without Love, lest you be dead -- die in Love and remain alive."[41]

In the *Mathnawī* poetry serves not as an instrument and means of bringing about spiritual drunkenness but of sobriety which can comprehend the truth that is being expressed. This extensive poem, which is in reality an esoteric commentary upon the Quran, is an ocean of gnosis in which the whole teaching of the Sufi tradition is to be found ranging from doctrine to practical advice. In this monumental work the use of poetry to teach the verities of Sufism in verses which vary from symbolic expression to allegorical narratives to direct metaphysical assertions reaches a peak never to be surpassed but often to be emulated in numerous vernacular languages varying from Sindhi to Turkish not to speak of Persian itself. The opening stanzas of the *Mathnawī,* which follow, have echoed over the centuries in the annals of the Sufi poetry of many languages and climes.

"Hearken to this Reed forlorn, Breathing ever since'twas torn From its rushy bed, a strain Of impassioned love and pain.

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[40] The monumental *Diwan-i-Shams* was edited for the first time by B. Furuzanfar as *Kulliyat-i-Shams,* Tehran, 1346. It has never been translated completely but there is a selection rendered into English by R.A Nicholson as *Selected Poems from the Divani Shamsi Tabriz,* Cambridge, 1898; and by A.J. Arberry, *Mystical Poems of Rumi,* vol. I Chicago 1968 and vol. II, Boulder, 1979.

[41] W. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love,* pp.213-214. This works contains mainly new translations from the *(Diwan)* not to be found in Nicholson, Arberry and other earlier sources.

'The Secret of my song, though near, None can see and none can hear.
Oh, for a friend to know the sign And mingle all his soul with mine.

'Tis the flame of Love that fired me,' Tis the wine of Love inspired me.
Wouldst thou learn how lovers bleed,

Hearken, hearken to the Reed.'"[42]

Persian Sufi poetry could go no further in the expression of Divine Mysteries than where Rumi had taken it, but its alchemical effect as poetry could reach the ultimate perfection possible, a perfection that was to be achieved in the *ghazals* of Hafiz. This supreme poet, who is called the "Tongue of the Invisible" *(Lisan al-ghayb),* produced poems of magic beauty, poems whose imagery and music transmute the lead of the forgetful soul to the gold of the soul which lives in the longing for its Beloved and in the remembrance of that union which pre-dates man's terrestial journey. Hafiz was himself aware that his was not simply a human voice. Rather, his poetry was a celestial song which brought the heavens themselves into a state of ecstasy. That is why he was to sing,

"What wonder if in the heavens through the works of Hafiz, The music of Venus causes Christ to dance."

Even after Hafiz, Persian Sufi poetry continued to produce great masterpiece and to act as a vehicle for the expression of the truths of Sufism. With the spread of the gnostic teachings of Ibn'Arabi, based on the doctrine of the transcendent unity of being *(wahdat al-wujud), a* whole genre of poetry developed in which this truth was expressed through a myriad of symbolic expressions. This poetry ranged from the quatrains of Awhad al-Din Kirmani to the g*hazals* of Shams al-Din Maghribi, from that great masterpiece of Sufi poetry which is a summary of the essential teachings of Sufism, namely the *Gulshan-i-raz* of Shabistari to the numerous works of 'Abd al-Rahman Jāmī, such as the *Lawa'ih.* In such works one sees the remarkably extensive possibilities of Persian poetry to serve as a vehicle for Sufi teachings varying so widely from the description of the love for God to the metaphysical elucidation of the relation of the One to its theophanies.

Nor did this tradition cease with the "seal of *poets" (khatam al - Shu'ar'),*

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[42] A somewhat free translation by R.A Nicholson, *Rumi-Poet* ***and*** *Mystic,* London, 1978, p.31.

Jāmī. It was to continue in Persia and India through the Safavid and Mogual periods and is alive even in our own day as seen in the *Diwan* of the present day master of the *Ni'matallahi* Order, Javad Nurbakhsh, which simply continues the tradition of this order stretching back to the Qajar period and before that to the foundation of this Order with Shah Ni'matallah Wall in the 9th/15th century.[43] Likewise, poetry has continued to serve as a vehicle for Sufism in other Islamic languages whether it be Urdu or Bengali to this day and the tradition of Sufi poetry remains a living one throughout the Islamic world despite the ravages of time and various forms of encroachment upon traditional modes of art and thought in the Islamic world in modern times.

Sufism has of course also made use of prose for the expression of some of its teachings, the prose ranging from the most didactic to the most poetic prose usually dealing with the theme of Divine Love but sometimes also gnosis. There are several types of Sufi literature which usually make use of the prose form. There are first of all the didactic works of usually practical and ethical import such as the *Qut al-qulub* of Abu Turab al-Makki, the *Kitab al-Cum'a* of Abu Nasr al - Sarrāj and the *Ihya''ulum al - din of ^',u* Hamid Muhammad al - Ghazzali all in Arabic,[44] or the Ka*shf al - mahjūb* of 'Ali Hujwiri in Persian. There are also very important prose didactic works which deal with the inner meaning of the Noble Quran starting with the famous commentary of Imam Ja'far al - Sadiq and continuing with the commentaries *of* Sahl al-Tustari, Abu 'Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami, Imam Qurayshi and 'Abd al-Razzaq Kashani[45] all written in Arabic and the commentary *of* Khwajah'Abd-Allah Ansari completed and expanded by Rashid al-Din

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[43] See J. Nurbakhsh, *Divani Nurbakhsh,* New York, 1980. On this order see R. Gramlich, *Die Schiitischen Derwischorden Persiens, Teil I, Die Affiliationen,* Wiesbaden, 1965.

[44] Al-Ghazzali wrote a summary of the *Ihya',* which is one of the monumental works of Sufism, in Persian under the title of *Kimiya-yi sa'adat, a* work which is appreciated greatly to this day not only because of its content but also due to its literary beauty. *See H. Ritter, Das Elixir der Glieckselig-keit,* Jena, 1923. There is a vast literature on al-Ghazzali in European languages including the translation of many books of the Ihya'. On al-Ghazzali's works see M. Bouyges, *Essai de chronologie des oeuvres d'al-Ghazali,* Beirut, 1959.

[45] The two volume *Tafsir al-Shaykh al-Akbar* or *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Karim* printed several times under the name of Ibn 'Arabi is actually by Kashani while the vast commentary by Ibn 'Arabi himself has not as yet been printed. See O. Yahya, *Histoire et classifications de l'oeuvre d'Ibn 'Arabi vol.* I Damascus, 1964, p . 109.

Mibudi[46] written in Persian. This Sufi tradition *of* Quranic commentaries produced a most important technical Sufi vocabulary drawn from the Quran[47], and in some cases such as the commentary of Mibudi one is confronted with one of the great masterpieces of literature.

Sufi didactic works included also hagiographies and personal accounts of the lives of Sufi saints including autobiographies ranging *from* the vast *Hilyat al-awliyā'* of Abu Nu'aym al-Isfahani to the *Ruh al-quds* of Ibn'Arabi and the *Tadhkirat al-awliya' of* 'Attar. Moreover, nearly all Islamic languages are rich in this type of literature which must ultimately include the Sufi biographies of the Prophet. This type of work ranges, moreover, from in depth descriptions of a particular Sufi saint based upon his or her life to legends and stories which convey, through their hyperbolic language in conformity with a tendency among Muslim writers which has been called "oriental hyperbole",[48] a profound lesson without meaning to be taken literally from the point of view of a modern historicism and literalism which is alien to traditional Islamic thought.

Another type of Sufi writings, which has a didactic nature and is closely related to the *genre* of biography, is informal discourses, table talks, letters of spiritual advice and the like which deal with specific problems issues and persons and yet convey the deepest teachings of universal import. Usually these works, which are more informal than other type of Sufi literature, remain popular among members of the particular Sufi order to whose members the instructions are addressed, but sometimes this kind of literature flows beyond the border of that order to become the common spiritual heritage of all Sufis and in fact of all human beings drawn to the spiritual life. In this category one can include the *Fihi ma fihi of Rumi,* the *Letters* of Sharaf

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[46] See A. Habil, "Traditional Esoteric Commentaries", in S.H. Nasr (ed.), *Islamic Spirituality, Foundations,* New York, 1987, pp. 28ff. It would be of great interest if a thorough study were to be made of Sufi Quranic commentaries and also the role of the Sufis in the translation of the Quran in various Islamic languages. A few of the commentaries have been studied in the West such as G. Bowering. *The Mystical Vision of Existence in Classical Islam. The Qur'anic Hermeneutic of the Sufi Shal al-Tustari,* Berlin, 1979 but many Sufi commentaries have not as yet been seriously studied.

[47] See the works of L. Massignon and P. Nwyia cited in footnote 5.

[48] See F. Schuon, "The use *of* hyperbole in Arab rhetoric, "in his *Dimensions of Islam,* trans. P. Townsend, London, 1970, pp. 13-29.

al-Din Maneri and the *Letters* of Shaykh Mulay al-'Arabi al-Darqawi[49]. All these and similar works reveal an intimacy and directness of their own which marks them as a special category of Sufi literature.

In contrast to this genre there is another category of Sufi writings with a didactic and propaedeutic purpose in mind which is quite formal and scholarly. This category consists of compendia and anthologies of Sufi terms, expressions and ideas which are a kind of dictionary often organized alphabetically and sometimes according to ideas. Such works became popular during the later period of Islamic history and were often composed by Turkish and Indian scholars seeking to elucidate the earlier classical works of Sufism, but there were also many works of this category written by eminent Persian and Arab Sufis. Some of these works became important sources for the history of Sufism composed by later Sufis and Muslim scholars in general. Among this category may be mentioned the *Kitab al ta'rifat* of Sayyid Sharif Jurjāni and the Kitab *mi'rāj al-tasawwuf ila haqa'iq al - tasawwuf* of Ahmad ibn 'Ajibah.[50] Nor did this *genre* of literature cease in modern times when dictionaries of Sufi terminology as well as anthologies of sayings of the Sufis clarify sufi technical vocabulary have continued to be produced by Sufis or those connected at least intellectually with the Sufi tradition[51] not to speak of ordinary scholars.

Sufis have also produced encyclopaedic works over the ages to complement the types of literature mentioned above. These works range from the *Ihya "ulum al-din of al-Ghazzali* which is essentially ethical to al-Futuhat-al-makkiyyah of Ibn 'Arabi which is a vast compendium of Islamic esoteric doctrines. One need mention also in this category the later encyclopaedic writes such as 'Abd al-Wahhab al Sha'rani or Shaykh Baha'al-Din 'Al¯ in whose works many aspects of Sufism are present drawn from

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[49] Fortunately all of these works are now available in English . See A.J.Arberry (trans.), *The Discourses of Rumi,* London, 1961; P. Jackson, trans., *Sharafuddin Maneri --The Hundred Letters,* New York, 1980; and T. Burckhardt, *Letters of a Sufi Master,* London, 1973, which contains the translation *of* a selection from the letters.

[50] See J.L. Michon, *Le Soufi marcain Ahmad ibn Ajiba et son ml'raj -- Glossaire de la mystique Musulmane,* Paris, 1973. In the introduction the author deals in depth with this genre of Sufi literature.

[51] See also Sheikh Muzaffer Ozak al-Jerrahi, Irshad, *Wisdom of a Sufi Master,* trans. M. Holland, Amity (NY), 1988, which represents a contemporary example of this genre of Sufi literature written by a Turkish master who died just a few year ago.

earlier sources of very diverse character.[52]

There are finally works . dealing with Sufi doctrine and metaphysics most of which were written in Arabic but also some in Persian and also the vernacular languages. This *genre* of writing begins in a sense with the Mishkat al-anwār of al-Ghaz_zali[53] and the Tamuhidat and *Zubdat al-hags' iq* of 'Ayn al-Qudat al-Hamadāni[54] but reaches its peak with Ibn'Arabi especially his *Fuses al - hikam* which because of its universal influence occupies a unique position in the history of doctrinal Sufism.[55] Written according to the author under divine inspiration, the work is a literary masterpiece, especially the first chapter on Adam. One finds in this work once again that perfect wedding between content and form which is characteristic of the great masterpieces of Sufi literature. A large number of works not only in Arabic and Persian but also in many other languages ranging from Turkish to Malay were inspired by this book and some of them like Sharh-i-qulshan-i-raz of Shams al-Din Lahiji in Persian and the commentary upon the *Fuses al-hikam* of Ibn'Arabi by Ismail Hakki Bersevi in Turkish have great literary significance of their own. Moreover, works inspired by this type of writing, especially the *Fusus,* have inspired the blossoming of a whole literary and spiritual culture as one finds in the case of Hamzah Fansuri and Malay literature.[56]

The doctrinal works of Sufism have not, however, been expressed only in the language of Ibn'Arabi and his school at the head of which stands Sadr al-Din al-Qunyawi, but also in the language of Divine Love mixed with the light of gnosis. This type of literature began in Persian with the *Sawanih* of

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[52] We have in mind the Kashkul of Shaykh Baha'a-Din 'Amili Otherwise he was not an encyclopaedic-writer like al-Sha'rani and his most important contribution to Sufism is his Persian poems in mathnawi form.

[53] See W.H.T. Gairdner (trans.) *The Niche for Lights in* Four Sufi Classics, pp. 57-159 and R. Daladriere (trans.), *Le Tabernacle des Limieres -- Michkât Al-Anwar,* Paris, 1981.

[54] See the edition of 'A. Usayran and his introduction to these works of which the second is of a more philosophical tenure than the first, Tehran, 1962; see also T. Izutsu, *Unicite de l'existence et creation perpetuelle en mystique Islamique,* trans. M-C. Grandry, Paris, 1980.

[55] See the masterly summary translation of T. Burckhardt, La *Sagesse des prophets,* Paris, 1955; and also many selections translated in T. Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism -- A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts,* London, 1983. For a complete translation of the text see Ibn al-'Arabi, *Bezels of Wisdom,* trans. R.W.J. Austin, New York, 1980.

[56] See S.M.N. al-Attas, *The Mysticism of Hamzah Fansuri,* Kuala Lumpur, 1970.

Ahmad Ghazzali, the younger brother of Abu Hamid,[57] and was followed by the Abhar al ashiqin of Ruzbihan Baqli Shirazi,[58] *the Lama 'at* of 'Fakhr al-Din 'Iraqi[59] and the Ashi 'at al-lama 'at of Jami. These fideli d, amore of Islam, as H. Corbin has called them, have created a distinct genre of Sufi literature in both Arabic and Persian, one in which prose of great beauty expresses the mysteries of love from the human to the Divine in a language which itself moves the soul with the nostalgia for the Beloved.

Sufi doctrine has also expressed itself in narratives which range from stories to the visionary recitals of Suhrawardi. When at the very beginning of the *Mathnawi,* Rumi beckons us to listen to the song of the reed, which "hearkens ever since 'twas torn", he used the Persian term *hikayat (bishnu az nay chun hikayat mikunad.* This most telling term means not only to give an account of or to tell a tale but also to provide a recital in which the reader is placed "existentially" in a world or a situation wherein he experiences the doctrinal truths which he is meant to learn. He becomes absorbed in the "event" of the story or recital not at an observer but a participant. Through the recital he is himself transformed while interiorizing the tale within his own being. Sufi literature is replete with stories many of which express the profoundest truths in the symbolic language of tales. This type of literature is crowned by the visionary recitals, in both Arabic and Persian, of Ibn Sina and Suhrawardi which are both of a philosophical and Gnostic nature.[60]

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[57] See Ahmad Ghazzali, Sawanih -- *Inspirations from the World of Pure Spirits,* trans. N. Pourjavady, London, 1986.

[58] Edited with introduction by H. Corbin and M. Mo'in as *Le Jasmin des Fideles D'amour,* Tehran-Paris, 1958.

[59] On 'Iraqi see our preface to his *Divine Flashes,* trans. W.Chittick and P.L. Wilson, New, York, 1982, pp. ix-xiv.

[60] See H. Corbin, Avicenna *and the Visionary Recital.* Corbin shows how, despite the philosophical nature of these works, they exercised an influence upon later Sufi writings such as the works of al-Ghazzali and Suhrawardi. As for the recitals of Suhrawardi which are both Sufi works and important as an integral aspect of his Theosophy of the Orient of Light *(hikmat al-ishraq),* see Suhrawardi, *Opera Metaphysica et Mystica, vol.* III, ed. S.H. Nasr, Tehran, 1977. These recitals have been rendered into a poetic French worthy of their original by Corbin in his *L'Archange empourpre,* Paris, 1976. There is a much more prosaic English translation by W. Thackston which does not even make use of the critical edition of some of the recitals. See his *The Mystical and Visionary Treatises of Suhrawardi,* London, 1982. For a general analysis of this kind of literature see T. Purnamdarian, *Symbolism and Symbolic Stories in Persian Literature,* Tehran, 1984. The latter work in Persian is the most extensive carried out so far in

Suhrawardi's treatises are among the greatest masterpieces of Persian prose and represent once again a perfect wedding between content and form, this time the form being the visionary recital.

In a sense all Sufi literature whether it be poetry, aphorisms, stories or recitals are a narration *(hikayat)* of the yearning of the soul for God, the journey towards Him and the fruit of that encounter with the One which is the ultimate goal of human existence, for it is through *hikayat* that these mysteries of the path are expounded and the pain of separation from our Origin described. During its long history, Sufism has had recourse to many forms of expression from poems to narratives all of which it has elevated to the highest level of literary art. But through all this diversity of experiences, there has been but one meaning and one message. The one meaning is "To God we belong and to Him is our return" *(inna Li'Lahi wa inna ilayhi raji'un)* (Quran II, 156) and the one message is to teach us how to make the journey of return while being alive and in the human state with our own free will, for it is only such a condition, that is worthy of a true lover of that Beloved who is at once Truth, Goodness and Beauty as well as the source of all beatitude.

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the analysis of the symbolic language of these recitals in relation to the language of symbolism and Sufi literature in general. It also devotes a major section to the symbolism of flight as contained in the several treatises on birds or the *Rasa'il al-tayar* by various Sufi authors following the model of *the Risalat al-tayar* of Ibn Sina