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"PAINT THE DESERT PINK": ISLAM, HOMOSEXUALITY AND KAZIM ALI'S LIVING SCRIPTURE

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ABSTRACT
According to Henry Corbin, in Islamic philosophy, "divine language" (a notion that straddles the material and the spiritual) is seen as an inexhaustible creative power that ensures nature's ever-changing configuration. In this essay, I claim that American poet Kazim Ali's compositions show us that there is continuity between divine, natural and poetic language and that it is through the verbal acts of his creatures that God's scripture goes on writing itself. Ali's work is thus in line with Islam's "lettristic" tradition, which shows us religion allows room for the kind of broad-minded views about natural diversity and sexuality that some critics accuse the West of exporting to Islamic countries.
RESUMEN
Según Henry Corbin, en filosofía islámica, el "lenguaje divino" (una noción que abarca lo material y lo espiritual) es visto como un poder creativo inagotable que asegura la condición en constante cambio de la naturaleza. En este ensayo afirmo que las composiciones del poeta americano Kazim Ali nos muestran que hay continuidad entre el lenguaje divino, natural y poético; y que las Escrituras de Dios se escriben a través de los actos verbales de sus criaturas. La obra de Ali está, por tanto, en línea con la tradición del letrismo islámico, que nos muestra que en la religión hay sitio para los puntos de vista

sobre la diversidad natural y la sexualidad que algunos críticos acusan de ser exportados por los países occidentales a los islámicos.

"By bringing themselves closer to God rather than breaking away from him, [the Ismaili] attempted to overcome the law of this God"

Christian Jambet, "The Paradoxical One"

"You were planning to turn traitor to the sky and return home / But the letters you are written in are porous ones / that quiver fickly between liquid and vapor" (*SW* 75). These lines come from "The Argument," a poem in Kazim Ali's most recent book, *Sky Ward*. Doing justice to its title, the poem elucidates the struggle that gives shape to Ali's work: that between Islam, the religious culture he grew up in, and the free expression of his supposedly unnatural sexuality (he is gay), the stern language of God and the supple language of the body.[1] For Ali, the earthly and the divine ought not to stand at odds with each other: "blue water and blue air are the same substance" (*SW* 78). His offending body and the poetic corpus that articulates its desires are as much products of the primordial force of creation as all other phenomena in nature. Ali's compositions suggest that the relation between the word of God and poetic language is not one of slavish and degrading imitation (poetry as representation) but of investigative participation (poetry as re-creation). In other words, paradoxically, his "degenerate" desires and profane poems channel God's generative power and continue his creative work. As we will see by reading Ali's poems alongside the work that Joan Copjec, Tom Cheetham, Christian Jambet and Marina Warner have done on the relation between language and nature in Islamic philosophy, a more extensive understanding of the reach of the divine word allows us to find room, within Islam, for broad-minded views about nature and sexuality that some critics accuse the West of exporting to Islamic countries.

[1] If Ali's poetry has an experimental edge, it is not so much because he intentionally set out to dismantle traditional forms but rather, as he tells us in an interview to *Divedapper*, because his life always felt confusing and alienating. About his book *Bright Felon* he says: "I had no experimental aesthetic to develop or prove in writing that book – it is autobiographically mimetic."

"I trudge along the street unbaptized and criminal according to some religious laws" (*BF* 11), Ali writes in the "Carlisle" section of *Bright Felon*, a collection of autobiographical vignettes, written in prose, about places he visited or where he lived for a period of time. Despite being an American citizen, Ali is bound to a religious culture that, for example, in 2001, sanctioned the arrest of 52 men on board of a floating night club in Cairo, an episode he relates in a piece about the city (*BF* 29). According to Scott Kugle, author of *Homosexuality in Islam*, "the Qu'ran mentions [homosexuals] obliquely and does not assess them negatively [. . .] Where the Qu'ran treats same-sex acts, it condemns them insofar as they are exploitative and violent" (2), as in the case of Sodom and Gomorrah. Ali too makes plain that "There is no place in the Quran which requires acts of homosexuality to be punishable by lashings and death" (*BF* 88). However, Kugle goes on to note that "Islamic culture is based on more than the Qu'ran. Later texts, like hadith reports [oral accounts of Muhammad's life] and fiqh [legal] decisions stigmatize homosexuals and criminalize their relationships" (2-3). Kugle points out that the challenge, for reformist Muslims, is to show that such dictates are superfluous to Islam, products of a retrograde tradition that stifles the life of the faith and invalidates the everyday experience of the faithful. For Ali, a progressive Muslim, attempting to carry the spirit of Islam into the current era may mean disrespecting tradition to some extent. For the poet, tourism ironically emblematizes a more direct and less deferential approach to the past that might yet lead to a more plural Islam. In "Cairo," he extols the artificiality and physicality that culture is injected with by way of tourism:

> Ramses broken, lying down in the eroded empire, ringed by European and Japanese tourists on the second floor, looking over the railing.
>
> It keeps these monuments in the immediate present; sacrilege also the way we walked amongst them, graffiti scarred, people touching everything…
>
> Hard to discern what was original and what was reinforced construction.
>
> In this way the ancient is lashed to the present but simultaneously kept ancient for public consumption. (*BF* 33)

Brought into the present, the past becomes something people can touch and even manipulate, which is key for Ali given that the ability to render meaningless the distinction between what is original and natural and what is constructed and unnatural is central to his poetics.

On a more practical level, in his work the poet actively endorses recent attempts to amend the Islamic corpus. For example, he celebrates the boldness of "a Turkish Mullah who is cancelling 800 different hadith regarding treatment of women found now or believed at least to be untrue" (*BF* 3). In a different piece from the same book, Ali again references this cleric's defiant gesture and entreats his "dear mother in the sky" to "unbuckle the book and erase all the annotations" (*BF* 88). Here Ali reiterates that some degree of manipulation will be necessary to reconnect Islam to its more open-minded figures (past and present) and the indefinite origin that they posit for the faith. Paradoxically, the religion must mutate if it is to preserve its identity and remain vital for socially progressive Muslims.

In a recent article for *The Atlantic*, titled "The Islamic World Doesn't Need a Reformation," Mustafa Akyol points out that "various 'reform' movements have [. . .] emerged in the Muslim world in the past two centuries," some with progressive aims (like so-called "Islamic Modernism") and some with puritan agendas (like Saudi Wahhabism)[2]. More than anything, reform has fragmented Islamic culture and so, Aykol argues

> those who hope to see a more tolerant, free, and open Muslim world should seek the equivalent not of the Protestant Reformation but of the next great paradigm in Western history: the Enlightenment. The contemporary Muslim world needs not a Martin Luther but a John Locke, whose arguments for freedom of conscience and religious toleration planted the seeds of liberalism.[3]

[2] For example, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, in the recently published *Heretic* (2015), proposes five measures for the amendment of the Islamic doctrine: the faithful should stop reading the Quran literally and they should challenge Muhammad's infallible status, their preoccupation with the afterlife should be replaced by a concern with life in this world, sharia should be subordinated to secular law, patriarchal control over the home and the community should be questioned and Muslims should scrap the notion of the jihad or holy war.

[3] In his article, Aykol references Christopher de Bellaigue's recently published book *The Islamic Enlightenment*. According to de Bellaigue, because so many westerners travelled eastward during the eighteenth and the nineteenth century, "the region's

However, as I will argue in this paper, Enlightenment thinking, founded on the primacy of reason over bodily nature and the imagination as well as on the idea that the universe is governed by a set of laws which living beings either instantiate or violate, props up a world that is static and restrictive, intolerant of subtlety and eccentricity and thus at odds with the reality of Muslims like Ali, who believe in the ever-changing nature of things and in a capacious and adaptable Islam. Moreover, as Matthew Melvin-Koushki points out, the ideas of the Enlightenment did indeed impact Islamicate cultures (by way of colonialism), prompting them to adopt unheard of divisions (now under fire in the west) between philosophy and faith, science and occultism, technology and magic, reason and unreason (98), the latter becoming a term that can equally be used to describe, condemn and dismiss political fanaticism and visionary poetry. If, as Aykol contends, religious reform will require a unifying concept, then, according to Ali, the imagination, not reason, ought to be its driving force, once again becoming the fountainhead of Islamic faith.

Some critics argue, however, that people in Ali's circumstances, born and raised in the west, are not authentic Muslims and that their efforts to "liberate" those oppressed by Islam are not much different from imperialist attempts to impose western values in non-western countries. In *Desiring Arabs*, Joseph Massad writes against what he mordantly calls the "Gay International," defined by the insistence of the "hegemonic gaze/gays" to conform to western definitions of homosexuality and its/their attempts to 'save' those who cannot conform. He notes that "while the premodern west attacked the world of Islam's alleged sexual licentiousness, the modern west attacks its alleged repression of sexual freedoms" (37). A number of scholars have, nevertheless, positioned themselves against this line of argument. In *The Homoerotics of Orientalism*, Joseph A. Boone points out that Muslims that take up western gay identities are not necessarily co-opted; global ideas are often annexed into local practices. Dina Al-Kassim, in her epilogue to *Islamicate Sexualities*, notes that "in the name of difference the East is asked to produce its difference from the West across all periods because

elites [realized] that only be adopting Western practices and technologies could they avoid political and economic oblivion" (xix). In a way, then, the Islamic Enlightenment has already happened, says de Bellaigue. According to him, "the violence and ignorance that we see often see today being glorified by a minority of Muslims should in fact be seen as blowback from the Islamic Enlightenment" (xxiii).

cultural difference is assumed to mark a distinction" (302). East and West are not easily separable, however, as made plain by studies like Sara Amer's *Crossing Borders*, which argues that "Old French literary discourses on lesbianism have emerged as prime examples of East-West hybridity, cross-fertilization, as well as cultural and literary exchanges" (161). Looking at a culture through the simplistic lens of "self vs other" renders inaudible its inner turbulence and papers over its unofficial liaisons.

In "Islam and the Exotic Science," Joan Copjec argues that the problem with the "clash of civilizations" thesis, which leads us to portray the Islamic world "as our perpetual outside" (6), is that the "oriental tradition" has, for many centuries, been internally split. During the eighth and ninth centuries, Copjec explains, Greek thought was translated and absorbed by Muslim culture, so East and West have been entangled at least since then. The scholar goes on to observe, however, that ideas of hybridity and historical porosity should not distract us from the fact that cultures are always somewhat opaque even to those that belong to them. In a way, one never really knows what it means to be an American or a Muslim because there is an "exotic force" (8) at work within culture which keeps us at odds with ourselves, this internal margin of separation inciting us to discover our cultural identities by interacting with people and phenomena that are foreign to us. Thus, the exchange of ideas between East and West does not necessarily entail a dilution or corruption of Islamic culture. Rather, as Copjec points out, "some intrusions are salutary and necessary for cultural and individual survival" (9). Also, it is most likely the idea that there is something incomprehensible at the heart of Islam that motivates Ali's fetishization, throughout his work, of ancient scripts and sounds he cannot pronounce. About his trip to Cairo in 2001, Ali tells us that "At a time when brutal strategy is employed against the Arab people in the name of western financial interests, I went into the city looking for untranslatable icons" (*BF* 35). Although seemingly trivial in light of the still ongoing geopolitical conflicts, Ali's is an urgent quest for origins and the other side of the mysterious fissure that splits the dogmatic religion demonized by the west from a more accepting and ecumenical Islam that, lying in a state of dormancy, needs, for the sake of cultural coexistence and communal tolerance, to be rediscovered.

According to Copjec, it was Henry Corbin, a French philosopher who specialized in the study of Islamic thought, who

first drew attention to Islam's internal split. In a talk about the subject, Copjec explains that, in Corbin's estimation, 869, the year of the Fourth Council of Constantinople, was a decisive turning point because the prevailing notion of the spirit as something plastic, at once material and immaterial, was abolished in favour of the simple Cartesian duality of body and soul. The world of visible, palpable and measurable things was in the process of establishing itself as the only real one and so the prophetic imagination was starting to shrivel, the images generated there being regarded as simply unreal, mere fantasy (Copjec "Abbas Kiarostami and the Imaginal World"). As we will see, the power of Ali's poetry derives from the way he reconnects body and spirit, matter and the imagination, figuring his creative process as continuous with that of nature.

However, let us for now stay with Corbin and his musings on the Council of Constantinople. Especially problematic, according to the philosopher, was the Church's decision to view God's appearance as Christ as a unique historical event, invalidating subsequent manifestations of the divine in the world. For the supporters of this new state of affairs, reality's magical dimension had thereby been extinguished; nature's necessary laws could be discovered through the exercise of reason and its particularities catalogued through a discerning use of the senses. This rationalist line of thinking was supported, in the Islamic world, by the followers of Averroes, who held that the soul expresses itself in an intellectual desire to know God. The disciples of Avicenna maintained, on the other hand, that God shows himself at different moments in time and in unique ways to each of the faithful. According to these thinkers, the soul aspires towards the still unrealized, the mysterious source of the unpredictable transformations that inflect our world. In his poems, Ali often alludes to creation's unfulfilled potential, sometimes depicting it as God's silence. From the story of Abraham and Isaac, a tale about the inscrutability of the creator, Ali tells us he "learned God's true language is only silence and breath" (*BF* 87).

This brings us to the question of divine language, the creative Word of God, which, Tom Cheetham, another student of Corbin's ideas, tells us played a central role in the French philosopher's work on Islamic philosophy. According to the Sufi tradition of the *ta'wil* (Arabic for "interpretation"), which Corbin explored in his work, "all reality is like a language that we can perhaps learn to speak" (Cheetham 89). As Seyyed Hossein Nasr points out in *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, a number of Islamic mystics believed that, at the

beginning of time, God "wrote the realities of all things" (17), using His "Divine Pen" (18) to design the "lines and volumes of which the cosmic order is constituted" (18) and write "the letters and words which are the *paradigma* of all earthly forms" (21), their "Divine Archetypes" (21). In Islamic culture, Matthew Melvin-Koushki explains, writing (more than speech) is associated with creation because it makes the invisible visible, renders the immaterial material and, like light, it is instantaneous. He notes, moreover, that Islamic "lettrism," a tradition with unacknowledged ties to Platonic, Pythagorean, Kabbalistic mysticism and the occult metaphysics that paved the way for western science, charges the letter with the capacity to shape "all that is and is not, all that can and cannot be" (67)[4]. This means that divine language determines what is possible, at once dictating the way things are and withholding its full power, leaving the cosmos and its creatures unfinished or in a perpetual state of potentiality.

According to Cheetham, God's Word at once directs and inflects the lives of human beings, brokers the relations between natural bodies and, because "our own languages are . . . continuous with the divine" (89), we find it at work in spiritual texts of various kinds, both sacred and secular. As Ali explains in one of his prose pieces, the Qu'ran itself allows room for the existence of other, still unrevealed, divine texts, "the one hundred and four books of God. Of which only four are known; Qu'ran, Injeel, Tavrat, Zubur" (*BF* 87). There may always be other facets of the divine that we are not yet familiar with. Moreover, since creation is an ongoing process, even modern poems make it to Ali's eclectic list of divine works: "There are a hundred others; Bhagavad-Gita, Lotus Sutra, Song of Myself, the Gospel of Magdalene, Popul Vuh, the Book of Black Buffalo Woman; somewhere unrevealed as such" (*BF* 87). To understand the full extent of God's work, one has to attend to books that are chronologically close to us and not just those of the remote past.

Glossing Corbin, Cheetham adds that it is through the actions of individuals (human and nonhuman), conceived in terms of

[4] Melvin-Koushki argues that "lettrist" thinkers are often ignored by scholars of Islamicate culture because of an "occultophobic bias" that, ironically, "has now largely been retired in the study of early modern Christianate culture" (54). He notes that "the cosmological doctrine of the Two Books, scripture and nature, is widely feted by specialists as the basis for the emergence of 'scientific modernity'" (54). However, because, in Islamic culture, the tradition of the "book of nature" did not lead up to science, it is seen as a token of "Islamic decadence and scientific irrelevance" (55).

the "conjugation" of life-propelling "verbs," that the divine language goes on articulating itself. From this standpoint, the language of the divine projects itself beyond the bounds of sacred books and cosmological tomes and goes on writing the present in a rather improvisational manner. This idea of the world as a text informs many of Ali's poems. Natural phenomena often acquire linguistic contours, appearing before him as awe-inspiring inscriptions that anticipate and sometimes even obviate poetic composition, as in the following text:

> With thick strokes of ink the
> sky fills with rain.
> Pretending to run for cover but
> secretly hoping for more
> rain. (…)
> The pages of my notebook
> soak, then curl. I've written:
> "Yogis open their mouths for
> hours to drink the rain." (…)
> I am a dark bowl, waiting to be
> filled.
> If I open my mouth now, I
> could drown in the rain.
> I hurry home as though
> someone is there waiting for
> me.
> The night collapses into your
> skin. I am the rain. ("Rain" *TFM*)

Ali attempts to make himself a vessel for nature's liquid text but realizes he would be unable to take it all in. However, at the end of the piece he concludes that this is no great loss and that no tortous adjustments would be required of him because he is himself already a part of nature's unfolding poem. His offending desires and his poems are as natural as the rain and, simply by writing about himself, he can rewrite the supposed laws of nature.

Thus, language, for Ali, does not merely represent or replicate nature. Instead, it is continuous with it, channelling and redirecting its creative power. Drawing upon the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in *The Spell of the Sensuous*, David Abraham elucidates the relation between language and nature. He notes that perception among nonhumans is facilitated by a primal form of language; all interactions between bodies have their "own coherent structure,"

relations being at once scripted and open to unforeseen contingencies, a bit like a text that changes to reflect the nit-and-grit of performance. Abram goes on to note that "the disclosure that preverbal perception is already an exchange . . . suggests perception is the very soil and support of that more conscious exchange we call language" (73). According to him, human language has "gestural origins," being "rooted in the body's native capacity to resonate with other bodies" (76). From this perspective, language has a "nonarbitrary connection" (77) to nature, the most basic words arising "as a response to powerful natural events" (76). He notes that "things disclose themselves to our immediate perception as vectors, as styles of unfolding; not as finished chunks of matter given once and for all, but as dynamic ways of engaging the senses and modulating the body. Each thing, each phenomenon, has the power to reach us and influence us" (81). Language thus springs from a desire to soak in and reproduce nature's rhythms.

This view of language was also shared by Charles Olson, one of the most important and influential American poets of the twentieth century. A reader of Corbin and a supporter of the central role the latter had given to hermeneutics (the *ta'wil*) in the investigation of reality, Olson thought that language is most truthful to nature not so much when it tries to describe it in an accurate manner but when it re-enacts it in its vibrancy, giving back the energy that perceiving subjects take in. For example, Mayan hieroglyphs, he tells us in "Human Universe," carry a certain poetic vitality because "they retain the power of the objects of which they are images" (58). Ali expresses a similar idea when he writes, in *Sky Ward*, that "All the sacred verses in the world are like birds wheeling in the sky, who knows where they go" (12). Writing truly becomes life's "twin" (Olson 61) when it channels the unpredictability of the latter's particular occurrences.

Marina Warner, a mythographer with an interest in Islamic art, similarly argues that writing is most vibrant when it captures the possibilities of a "body in motion" (35). In "Signature Measures," Warner examines the work of painter Julie Mehretu in relation to Islamic calligraphy. Mehretu often deploys a kind of compositional line that, according to the scholar, can be best described as a type of writing that does not aim at semantic communication but rather indulges in the multiplication of non-representational forms, a bit like the "vectors" described by Abraham; a mode of inscription that is quasi-primal in its stylized abstractness. Warner opens her essay

with an anecdote about how a Moroccan scholar one time shocked an academic audience at a conference by telling them that animals were the ones who invented writing:

> "It was animals who taught us to read." His words seemed gnomic to some, nonsense to others. "Because we had to learn how to read the marks they made." No only tracks on the ground, but the flights of birds, too. Our foraging, hunting, tracking forebears scrutinized the imprint of a creature's pugs in the earth . . . and these prints and patterns became models for writing; the nib of a reed into wet clay as in Babylonian cuneiform, and the quill itself, taken from a bird to inscribe signs that resemble its own tracks. (32)

According to Warner, the compulsion to duplicate the language of nature is thus what connects Mehretu at the same time to ancient oracles and more recent figures like Stéphane Mallarmé or Hugo Ball, whose visual and musical work attempts to channel the quirky liveliness of the material world. Most pertinent for our purposes, Warner relates Mehretu's work to that of Islamic calligraphists. The scholar explains that

> In Islamic culture, calligraphy becomes the vehicle of the sacred as in the words of the Qur'an, or the signature or *tughra* of the sultan. The exquisite elaboration of the various scripts, each with their own aesthetic on which scribes perform variations, again does not aim at legibility or at communicating what I says as semantic meaning. This is a scribal tradition in which the alphabet functions as a medium of magical power, charged by the actions of the artist-scribe, coiling a rope that binds the event of graphic making to cosmic/divine energy. (37-38)

Like Islamic calligraphy, with its "natural forms [which] metamorphose into letters" (38), Mehretu's painterly writing relays, celebrates and articulates the power of creation[5]. Mehretu's art aspires, in this sense, to a mystical level of abstraction, her model being the "transcendent archetype" that, according to Cheetham, provides human and animal forms of meaning with a "pattern" (93). This does not at all mean, however, that the artist's work unfolds

[5] In *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, Nasr explains that Islamic calligraphy "reflects through the symbolism of its very forms [the] intertwining between permanence and change that characterize creation itself. . . . Hence, 'as in weaving, the horizontal movement of the script, which is a rippling movement, corresponds to change and becoming, whereas the vertical represents the dimension of the Essence or the immutable essences'" (28).

within the confines of a timeless mythical territory. Warner emphasizes the importance of individuality and the ever-changing present moment for Mehretu's disjunctive compositions: "Every graphic mark becomes an accident that evokes unpredictability, each one a throw of the dice that interrupts the continuum and asserts the artist's presence as a generative force" (35). Her uniqueness as an individual and the particularity of her designs are ultimately what gives Mehretu's work its power. Although he too favors a "sculptural" kind of art in which "form" acts as the means of expression of the individual (*BF* 81), Ali's singular circumstances are the driving force of his aesthetic project. Making God's "words" his own, he heretically asserts that "The myths do not write me because *I am I*. There wasn't one before me" (*BF* 75, my emphasis). Because it does not account for the particulars of the present and the mysteries of the future, the official Book of God is incomplete. Ancient "scripture" will have to be complemented through creative "rupture" (*BF* 86).

In an essay about Henry Corbin's influence on American radical poetics, Eric Mottram notes that Olson found commonalities between the French thinker's views on creation and Alfred North Whitehead's notion that nature is in constant processual transformation. According to Olson, "Neither God nor the world reaches static completion. Both are in the grip of the ultimate physical ground, the creative advance into novelty. Either of them, God and the world, is the instrument of novelty for the other" (qtd. in Mottram 116). The idea that the new is retroactively sanctioned by the creator is one that recurs throughout Ali's work. For example, in *Bright Felon*, the author recounts a traditional story that depicts divine law (and the religious community it undergirds) as an ever-stretchable blanket, its proscriptions always open to negotiation:

> Telling the famous Story of the Blanket in which the Prophet covers himself with a Yemeni blanket for his afternoon rest. Joined under the blanket first by his son-in-law Ali, then each of his grandchildren Hassan and Hussain and finally by his daughter Bibi Fatima.
>
> In Heaven Gabriel asks God about the five under the blanket and God says, those are the five people whom I have loved the most out of all creation and I made everything in the heavens and the earth for their sake.
>
> Gabriel, speaker on God's behalf, whisperer to the Prophets, asks God, can I go down and be sixth among them.

> And God says, go down there and ask them. If they consent you can go down there and be sixth among them.
>
> Creation for the sake of Granted is retroactively granted when the group under the blanket admits him to their company.
>
> Is that me at the edge of the blanket asking to be allowed inside.
>
> Asking that 800 hadith be cancelled, all history reordered. (86)

Ali thus tries to argue for his inclusion in the Muslim circle not by appealing to reason and tolerance but rather by claiming that creation is an ongoing and unpredictable process ("Father whose purpose swims while the universe mends itself / . . . / water finishes itself, finishes me / Stream unreeling, you are / the end of the world, an endless horizon": *SW* 33) and that the boundaries of the community ought to expand in a correspondingly supple manner. Contemplating a statue at the Rodin Museum, the poet ponders: "And what of the part of the sculpture which has been cut away. / What still of the rock left unquarried in the earth" (*BF* 60). Seen as an all-pervasive process, creation encompasses forms deemed ideal as well as those that are seen as superfluous or erroneous. To be in tune with the divine principle one cannot exclude any of its creations (Ali puts this inclusive ethos in practice by occasionally interpolating poems with "deleted scenes" from other books of his). But in the preceding passage Ali also puts stock in the future, in that which still has not been given a form. Elsewhere he asks: "How can we speak of ordinary things when my blank chapter is still out there somewhere unaware and unwritten" (*SW* 29). Future designs demonstrate that the force of creation never fully expends itself, there always being room for something surprising to emerge and change our understanding of what natural forms are possible, what social arrangements can be forged and what shapes we can assume as individuals.

Joan Copjec and Christian Jambet, another reader of Corbin, dedicate a significant portion of their work on Islamic philosophy to the elucidation of the concept of the "unrealized." Copjec notes that for the *Falsafa*, followers of Avicenna, "the divine had to be returned to repeatedly, and ceaselessly created. [Theirs] was a world whose ends were not already given" (Copjec 2015). God, according to these thinkers, is thus not a solitary creator that stands outside of time but a plastic power that perpetually engenders the world even

though, Copjec clarifies, it is not itself part of it. God cannot belong to the world because, according to the Ismaili theologians whose work Jambet illuminates, only if "freed from any link with the totality of the existent" can he "signify pure spontaneity, a liberty with no foundation other than itself" (141). The One is simultaneously that which unifies the real and ensures that unity is always multiple and somewhat incomplete. It is the Messianic "nothingness" that creates by command, through the imperative of the Word, the power that gives language its ancestral mystique.

This does not, however, mean that God creates things out of nothing. Corbin equates the force of creation with the imagination, an idea that Copjec glosses as follows: "It is conceived as the power of constraint and separation. It is the constraint of the law which holds itself back from unfolding all at once" (Copjec 2015). She goes on to explain that, according to Corbin

> the imagination does not create new unfounded visions, which is one way it is distinct from illusion. It imagines 'nothing,' or gives form to an absolute non-existence, to that which cannot possibly have a form. The imagination cuts into the world and into time to open duration and in this way creates the possibility for something new to emerge. What it does is to introduce contingency into the law. (Copjec 2015)

The imagination is, in other words, what makes novelty possible in art, thought and nature and it is on it that Ali bases his faith in God's generosity and in the prospect of a more accepting Islam.

In *Stranger Magic*, Marina Warner tells us that despite its multiple references to the Koran, the stories that make up the *Arabian Nights* were not held in high esteem in their countries of origin, being sometimes referred to as "a thousand trifles" because they "represented too colourful a spectacle of magic and jinn, pleasure, transgression and amorality" (8). Popularized in Europe during the Enlightenment, the *Nights* attest, according to Warner, to the insufficiency of reason to do justice to the unpredictability of the world, the magical power that animates the tales, which in her words "[bring] the impossible into embodied life" (9), conjuring up escapist scenarios for the impressionable but also charming the minds of the more inquisitive.[6] Perceiving himself as the product of God's erratic

[6] Melvin-Koushi makes plain that, as in Christian culture, the "book of nature" tradition of Islam was associated with magic. Lettrism was not only a "tool for

generativity, Ali rests his hope for a less intolerant future not so much on reason but on unreason, the unseen and the uncreated: "In this book, the sky is sometimes lavender. In this book are colors you have never seen before" (*TFM* 286). In his writing, Ali continues the creative work of God, giving flesh to forms from the future and expressing, like the Sufi poets that inspire him, spiritual fervor through carnal desire, a desire that, to be sure, may never be reproductive, but which nonetheless gives him the power to "father in a million different ways" (*BF* 9).

According to what his ancestors take to be the laws of nature, he, as a gay man, is a mistake, but if that is so then he must withdraw, even if reluctantly: "I must excuse myself from the formula, nothing adds up to me" (*SW* 76). In order for him to gain full acceptance in his community, nature will have to be reinvented. If "the body / is the equation the sky has written" (*SW* 78), then perhaps there are laws, laid down in "invisible ink" (*SW* 62), that have yet to be unveiled. Ali asks the "blue weaver [to] twist the spine of the world" (*SW* 62) and write a new, more inclusive, book of life. Ultimately, however, the poet knows that it is up to him and other progressive Muslims to sanction a new scripture and make sure that it remains a living text, for it is experience that ensures nature goes on writing itself.

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cosmological speculation" but also for "controlling creation" (67), that is, for realizing the divine's inarticulate potential. By studying the "book of nature," the lettrist adept could learn to "manipulate the letters – the uncreated, creative matrices through which the One self-manifests – [and thus] access and control every epistemological and ontological level of the cosmos, thus constituting a continuum from ultra-rarefied letter theory to purely practical letter magic" (67).

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