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Lost and Found: The Ecstasy of Wordplay

The word “ecstasy” originates from the ancient Greek ‘ekstasis’, which means to leave one’s current state, to be “standing outside oneself”. Ecstasy as it descends on the modern reader from an alternate civilizational language, Arabic, provides a similar displacement: *wajid* as a technical term of the Sufis has been traditionally explained with the scenario of a man’s state when, in the desert, he finds his lost camel.¹ And the corollary displacement compels the ecstatic outburst, “Oh God! You are my slave! And I am your Lord!” For as ardent a monotheistic tradition as Islam is known to be the literal meaning of the man’s outburst is blasphemous, heretical, and within the range of capital punishment. But due to a moment of ecstasy, what we see of this human makes the law silent (Yazaki 78-9), and the silent “c” in ‘crime’ becomes ‘rhyme’. And the latent poetic faculty of humanity itself is visible albeit briefly in a moment of being lost and found simultaneously.

The idea of ecstasy has developed in the modern era to be synonymous with delight, an (over-)abundance of joy, and a sense of helpless happiness. The ecstatic is among a number of natural phenomena pushed to the margins of a utilitarian modernism replete with automation, efficiency, and motorized manners: The sign in the Drive-Thru that says “Thank you”; the ninth-generation photocopy of a list of reasons why you and your loved ones were turned back at the

¹ Sahih Muslim, Volume 7, Hadith 6960, The Book of Repentance: Anas bin Malik narrated that the Messenger of Allah (صلى الله عليه وسلم) said: “Allah rejoices more over the repentance of His slave when he repents to Him than one of you who was on his mount in the wilderness, then he lost it, and his food and drink are on it, and he despairs of finding it. He goes to a tree and lies down in its shade, having lost hope of finding his mount, and while he is like that, there it is standing in front of him, so he takes hold of its reins and says— because of his intense joy: ‘O Allah, You are my slave and I am your lord,’ making this mistake because of his intense joy” (Hajjaj).

Canada-US border—with the ninth iteration of the typos on lines six and ten; the meticulous brush strokes applied to the masterworks of Renaissance painters blurred into pixelated or reprinted versions in mass-produced/mass-consumed media, the original chartreuse appearing now a vomitous yellow. The plastic self of early 2020 has the capacity of a plastic ecstasy, especially in the developed world. To be off of our self-phones during the daylight hours for a month is the new Ramadan. To use our eyes and ears at a dinner table and not lose our selves in the extended nervous system of the 24-hour NEWS cycle and Likes-cycle (Vaynerchuck 00:19:24), this is the activity of the new class of modern monk. Ginsberg’s “The skin is holy! The nose is holy! The [REDACTED]”, is as much a call to return to the sanctity of our (God-)given body *now* as it was a jibe at repressive norms of his day (Tytell 636-646).

Lack of control is implied even in the most positive usages of the word “ecstasy”. As a technical word for spiritualists—Sufis et al—seeking The Divine or something greater than their own selves, the ecstasy often sought is almost a logistical one. How do we depart the realm of the physical and *connect* with the esoteric? And if we do, would we want this connection to be momentary or sustained? Is this process teachable or repeatable, or simply subjective and, perhaps, even unreal (Jerrahi)? Lack of control, or loss of control, suggests a norm that may be problematic. The implication is that we/I/you had control in the first place, but this is highly unlikely. Our static awareness of physicality is so vapid, so unusually simple that it only takes a few of our own rules to debunk our own idea of consciousness. The idea of “up” is simply a trick of the neck and cochlea as humans in Chicago, London, Mecca, and Beijing are all standing at weird angles to each other, everyone assuming the others are not standing “up” (Frank). The speed of light tells us light takes about eight minutes at roughly 300,000 kilometers-per-second to fly from the Sun to Earth (Cain), but this is happening constantly and the bouncing of light

when it hits your eye is more than meets the eye. The continuous deluge of sunlight particles around us dwarfs the scientific significance of race based on eye color and melatonin quotient. Economies of the world get quintillions of dollars' worth of sunlight particles every day, for free; but we squabble about a few trillion here and there. The ecstasy of humanity in the modern era, perhaps, is that single image of Earth known commonly as *Earthrise* taken from space, from a place 'beside ourselves' (Moran). Losing borders, we found that Earth appears as a coin half-sunk in the desert sand.

On a personal level, however, if anyone is truly beside his, her, or their self, then *where* does this other/second/new person stand during the auto-obviation? Where is *outside*? There is a joke that may help gesture us in the right direction.... Although many know the number of sides to a triangle (three) and the number of sides to a square (four), many are ignorant of the number of sides to a circle (two). The inside and the outside. At any rate, the 'outside of oneself' conception of the exceptional state, ecstasy, again implies a norm. Namely, we have an 'inside' of our selves. This inside, I would suggest, is again easily debunked. Much of the electro-chemical and electromagnetic activity of our synapses creates our sense of the world and we, therefore, do not see the cosmos but a paracosmos, an estimated reality that is delayed by the time between stimulus and perception. And albeit an opposite tack, the infinitesimally small size of our bodies and even our limited imagination/ken relative to the true physical size of the solar system, the constellation, the galaxy, the galaxy cluster, and the quantum expanses of the material universe ... we cease to exist except in theoretical equations. We are *that* small. Ecstasy is a slight shift in perspective, then, rather than a difficult cracking of our frame. A joke could do it, or a juke.

The relationship between ecstasy and wordplay—both deliberate and incidental—is an exercise of perception. In practical terms, the tilt of the Earth and the tilt of a whirling dervish's

neck are both slight but important (“Changing Seasons”).² Nevertheless, however important, the tilt is not necessary for either the planet nor the practitioner to exist. Wordplay is a reaction to a state of language just as ecstasy is a reaction or response or departure from a state of being, however limited that state seems to graduate MFA students at art schools. Wordplay and ecstasy are important but not necessary, not foundational. The practicality of invoking ecstasy and wordplay lies in the ease with which we can purchase a moment of transcendence. A joke lightens the mood of trade negotiations as well as wedding ceremony weirdness; a poet’s persistent trauma of homelessness becomes both inspiration and the cause of her panic attacks, but the anagram of her full name becomes “Cinderella X had a lair”; the tragedy of “I want to die” can be eased into “I want to dye ... my hair.” The ecstatic poet’s facilitation of these sorts of shifts in perception can take many forms, but is a sacred trust. By living in the cavernous outside of normal consciousness, the ecstatic artist with a healthy poetic faculty refreshes language, our perception of our own humanity, and the authenticity of our feelings. But non-cavernous consciousness (society, the mainstream, tradition) although benefiting from these sorts of refreshments needs to avoid linear thinking in making rational sense of these outbursts.

The surconscious as a zone has been little explored as distinct from the Jungian archetypes and the Collective Unconscious (Harpham 35); the holy-fool logic is the domain of this cavernous outside, this surconscious that appears to be telling us things without a consistent syntax. The holy fool speaks in rhyme, gibberish, jokes, and other assorted wordplay. The relationship between the self (plastic or otherwise) and the subconscious is profound, but the

² MacDonald, Matthew. *Your Body: The Missing Manual*. Sebastopol: O’Reilly Media Inc., 2009. eBook. pp. 121: First, there are the semicircular canals—three tubes that control your body’s sense of balance. These tubes are positioned at right angles to each other, allowing them to perceive motion in all directions—up, down, left, right, forward, and backward. As you move around, fluid swishes through these tubes, bending the microscopic hairs inside and allowing your brain to determine how your body is moving through space. Spin around long enough, and you’ll temporarily overwhelm this system, which delights small children and gives whirling dervishes a transcendental experience (<http://tinyurl.com/6r9z6c>).

relationship between the self and the surconscious is transcendent. “Corona Virus” becomes “CarniVorous” through the play of letters (Stern). And if the double-you—“w”—is silent, then “where is God” is pronounced as “here is God.”

These tricks are the outward expression of a mind overcome by the possibilities of being, of language, and of the witnessing of [x]. The sound that exists when a word such as “Corona Virus” or “where is God” is spoken by a layperson becomes stretched— “stretched” incidentally the longest 1-syllable word—and there is no sensible phoneme until the word reappears as “CarniVorous”, say, in the mind’s ear of the ecstatic artist. But this cannot be a silence between ripped phonemes and coalescing phonemes. It must be the deafening sound of unending vibration. A phoneme that is exploded, like other phenomena, does not slink into the ether until it is called back. This deliberate deconstruction is pure sound, the deafening creation of the surconscious poetic faculty dragging the Moon-sized letters across the craggy peaks of Earth to generate utter cacophony, utter silence, and then transcendence.

But the utilization of the holy-fool logic above must be momentary. Or else countries are invaded on a whim, populations slain due to skin, and “where is Hitler”, too, can become “here is Hitler.” Were a person to lean too heavily on the transitory fashions of the mind at play a degree of insanity would imbue all acts. Such activity is cute in an infant and criminal in an adult. To no longer believe in the mathematic truth of $1+1=2$ and instead feed on the sentimentally-approved formula for mystic union, $1+1=1$, a person would be unable to pay for milk at the corner store, nor taxes to a government. Although savants such as Daniel Tammet have encouraged the understanding of math, numbers, and even language acquisition by using human intuition more, justice relies on cold calculation. The eye socket is harder than the retina for a reason. Using a razor to shave your tongue is a mistake. Shakespeare’s soothsayer does not rule as Julius Caesar

rules, nor avenge as Mark Antony avenges, but provides transcendent insight (*Julius Caesar*. 1.2.23-35 and 3.1.1-2).

In the same way, the *found* poetry in the word “**Nationalism**” is fortuitous for Muslims (“aNoint islam”) but, too, the elation needs be momentary as all -alisms are about “Islam”. “**Formalism**” is “From Islam” and therefore erroneously assigns rigidity as a distinctly Islamic contribution to the world. “**Beastialism**” is “islam is Beat”, which is good news for Muslim rappers, perhaps, but bad news for champions of Islam—or even Muslims who aim to win a championship. “**Feudalism**” rewritten becomes “islam Feud”, but perhaps that one makes sense as the Crusades depended on the contribution of knights and such to the campaigns. But the scrambling of “**existentialism**” into “tin sex tie islam” connotes BDSM qualities alien to the ethos of safety inherent in the faith as everyone knows tin handcuffs are not reliable. In “**transcendentalism**” we find *transcendent Islam*, which is splendid. In “**multiculturalism**” we note that “I curl Islam tumult”, a mystic (or mistake) statement about handling Islamic rowdiness. **Tribalism** strangely points to one tribe, “Brit Islam”, an unfortunate singularity for degenerates and sages alike debating issues of solidarity in France, India, and Sudan. Perhaps what is needed is a dose of **professionalism**, but therein we find “Islam poisons ref”, which simply cannot be allowed to happen for any sport anywhere, but certainly not for Soccer during the World Cup. **Structuralism** houses the unfortunate “curt Islam rust”; **materialism** has a sickening gesture to “tie ram-Islam” as if to prepare the ram-like Islam for slaughter; and thereafter, perhaps, **idealism** orders the kill because it hides the genocidal imperative “Die Islam”. When this ecstatic wordplay first anoints Islam only to make it die, then holy-fool logic is dislodged and put back into a hole.

The boom and bust of ecstasy may borrow from the rhythms of human migration; Ibn Khaldun’s barbarian-citizen dichotomy at work in the microcosm of the person, or personal

language (Soyer 4-8). The barbarian resides in the cavernous outside of the citizen's civilization. This outside may be space or the desert or the wilderness of some other element. Impractical but illuminating ecstasy lives in the periphery of humanity (and human-ness, if we are to believe the mystics). The space metaphor is interesting as is the desert metaphor. Both suggest living between planets/cities is unnatural. Maybe so. Space is more alien to us than the desert historically, but how is desert life hospitable? We need water to live. The Bedouin do not forego water entirely, nor the Inuit warmth. These human cultures survive (flourish?) in the most extreme climates by exercising the best of human values (hospitality, cooperation, frugality, gratitude, ingenuity). Space will be a similar habitat for the intrepid humans of the future. In the tradition of the Inuit and the Bedouin, the Space-ouin Nation will survive in the breathless space between words—I mean worlds—and observe perpetually the fragility of civilized ecosystems.

It is precisely this human capacity for playful observation—be it absurd, surreal, sarcastic, or transcendent—that ennobles human speech and spurs on the generation of new word combinations. The language acquisition of human infants can be matched by primates and other animals, but the playfulness with language that toddlers possess surpasses their non-human counterparts (Shanker). And with this playfulness, humans excel. This affirms the centuries-old assertion of language as the defining trait *par excellence* of our humanity. Medieval Muslims called humans *al-hayawan al-natiq*, 'the eloquent animal'.³ Even those who admit "poetry serves no evolutionary function" affirm the benefits of poetry in the same breath (Shanker). Poetry's value resides outside of the evolutionary and this suggests the angelic, non-evolutionary aspect of our species uses the poetic faculty. We may feel the awe that angels feel. We may

³ Netton, Ian Richard. *Allah Transcendent: Studies in the Structure and Semiotics of Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Cosmology*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2006. Scanned Print Book. pp. 118-119.

comprehend what it means to be a photon. And we may express a new thought; however, this is all done while we fulfil the needs of sleep, hunger, sex, and patience with webpages as they take more than 5 seconds to load. The vacillation or vibration of this angelic-being-animating-an-animal-form between the Maslovian needs and the self-realizations of Truth beautify our new utterances, our new civilizations. Our humanity is our poetry—*hey! That rhymes! I'm a poet, and I'm not cognizant of the fact!*

The play with language, the refinement of speech, and the befriending of linguistic tools to extend our personalities and idiosyncrasies happens simultaneously as adults. We read stories. We revise essays. We roast colleagues. The play that occurs as adults seldom orbits the silver planet of word creation. We adults can coin new phrases, but we don't make up words as often as toddlers. Our play is in new combinations of sentences, phrases, and other established bits of language. We seldom consider the words themselves—our starting positions—as a scramble. But they are. Words are out of alphabetical order. The English alphabet is as follows: a; b; c; d; e; f; g; h; i; j; k; l; m; n; o; p; q; r; s; t; u; v; w; x; y; and z. All the words in this essay are a scramble of the alphabet. In most languages it occurs thusly. We adults simultaneously indulge in the lost and found performance of language through losing alphabetical order and finding words. We use the alphabet to teach language, to begin, to start the engine so to speak, but in the freedoms of disorder and ecstatic exchanges do we enjoy our poetic faculty. If we kept to (alphabetical) order, we would be in a pristine angelic state devoid of new knowns—or new nouns, for that matter.

As adults, some might argue the alphabet is largely irrelevant in our daily life beyond the relationships we may have with elementary schools. This is true. Most of civilization and even those on the periphery may see alphabetical order as simply one of many tools to quantify (algebra, notation for a chess move, bullet points), but consider the *idea* of alphabetical order;

and consider it against the present global crisis in which we find ourselves. The aforementioned anagram of “CarniVorous” has compelled 1.5 billion humans this year 2020 A.M.N. (*Anno Morbo Nostro*) to stay at home in order to curb the spread of the virus (Geller). But economies are grinding to a near halt because of this order (Gopinath). The stay-at-home order slows economic growth just as the alphabetical order diminishes lexical variety. Meaning and economies both run on disorder.

Words, sentences, and books are all the remnants of alphabets in alphabetical *disorder*. The nuclear detonation of holy-fool wordplay causes a more meaning-filled disorder. No, that metaphor is not quite apt as it has connotations of war. The continuous nuclear detonations, atomic fusions, and ethereal forces that something like our Sun may undergo, this is how the holy-fool wordplay—the poetic faculty of human beings—turns the orderly alphabet into disorderly eloquence (Siegel).

As we lose the alphabetical, then, we find meaning. As we lose our inhibitions, as students or whatever, we garner friends and colleagues—skills, even. The barbarian-citizen dichotomy has its critics as, I imagine, there may be of the assertions I’ve made here about the parameters and trajectories of the ecstatic. Perhaps the criticism is justified, that there is no “rise and fall” of civilizations due to barbarian incursion, because civilizations are not organisms that thrive and decay—nor do “dynasties have a natural life span like individuals” (Ibn Khaldun 343). Perhaps society does not exist as a thing, and instead there are simply humans around us too plentiful and unique to control *without* a label (Thatcher). It stands to reason that such a critique would undermine the ‘vibration’ of the poetic faculty between periphery and center, between the ecstatic and the static, between poets and everyone else, for if everyone is human then everyone is a poet. We would all be both lost and found simultaneously. *Perhaps*. Consider how we have

memorized the alphabet and we have memorized words, but we also create language and find new ways to express ourselves every single day.

This criticism also has that powerful negative item: namely, the Dead-End job—the soul-crushing, repetitive, alphabetically monotonous scripted work of the telemarketer. It is soul-crushing and “dead” because we do not learn new things. We do not grow (in our career, in our character, in our intellect) and that need must be constant if it is felt so gravely. We are in constant need of play, of growth. Hence the hazard of classifying anyone as removed from the need or ability to play. A dulled adult still seeks variety. And yet however we choose to model the relationship of ecstasy with the human experience, it seems to arc toward the most sacred aspects of us.

As a case study of the poet’s sacred work, let us consider the utilization of poetry in the aftermath of the tragic attacks on September 11, 2001. About four weeks after the attacks, *The New Yorker* editor David Remnick wrote the following in his magazine:

Walt Whitman remains the singular, articulated soul of this city, and in “Song of Myself” he seems to have projected himself forward a century and a half into our present woe, our grief for the thousands lost at the southern end of Manhattan, and for the hundreds of rescuers among them, who walked into the boiling flame and groaning steel:

I am the mash’d fireman with breast-bone broken,
 Tumbling walls buried me in their debris,
 Heat and smoke I inspired, I heard the yelling shouts of my comrades,
 I heard the distant click of their picks and shovels,
 They have clear’d the beams away, they tenderly lift me forth.

Largeness of empathy was Whitman’s emotional gift and legacy. It is indecent to look for the good in an act of mass murder, and yet one would have to be possessed of a heart of ice not to **have felt in recent weeks the signs of Whitman's legacy: a civic and national spirit of resolve, improvisation, and kindness** when panic and meanness might also have been expected.

(emboldening mine)

The phrase “articulated soul” gestures at words that capture an esoteric thing, a soul—in this case of a country. And again, words such as “resolve” and “improvisation” invoke the sacrosanct aspects of a country that popularly sees itself as the land of the free and home of the slave—I mean brave. Whitman’s forceful impact on America was in pulling its citizens to attend to the country itself in defiance of a comparative view of America and Britain, of the colony and the United Kingdom (Bloom). To paraphrase Walt: *Do we contradict ourselves? Very well, we contradict ourselves. We contain multitudes.* The heroism of the firemen in America did not invoke their family lineages, nor their creeds, nor race, nor anything really apart from their service to strangers in this country of strangers “pursuing” a measure of happiness freely.

Even those who would contest the epigram of ‘the quintessential American poet’ or even the assumed whiteness in the passage above confirmed the ubiquity of the poet’s verse during this time of profound sadness for the country in the Twenty-First Century. Whitman’s fireman passage was “cited frequently in the days and weeks following 9/11, when New York firemen became the new national heroes for their selfless work and sacrifice in the collapsing World Trade Center buildings,” wrote Ed Fulsom in *Whitman Noir* (4). Even after a decade and a half, the poet’s verse also served as the words used on a 9/11 memorial at the Long Island beach “where people gathered and watched in horror as the distant World Trade Center towers collapsed”:

“They are immortal,
All those stars
Both silvery and golden
Shall shine out again,
The great stars and the little ones
They endure,
The vast immortal suns and
The long-enduring pensive moons
Shall again shine.”

On the Beach at Night

Walt Whitman (Eltman)

This memorial is one of many. It is a reminder of not just the lives lost, but of the sacred duty conducted by the 582 police officers, firefighters, construction workers, cleanup volunteers, and others who spent time in the rubble of the WTC in the months after the attacks, and who also suffered from health problems years later due to exposure to the toxic ash at Ground Zero. And to describe and honor their martyrdom fellow humans utilized the words of a poet.

In the early days, however, the drums of war beat and the long search for the masterminds of the attacks began officially with the deployment of soldiers overseas. The confluence of theories, motivations, politics, and emotion created a hurricane of thoughts, feelings, and action in America. But in the eye of that storm was the poet. In that unintentionally sacred national eye of the storm—Ground Zero—the poet’s word was the palpitating lighthouse. Bereaved humans were tugged back from the brink of genocide, suicide, and criminal apathy by the active soul of a departed citizen from a bygone era. America was beside itself with rage.

America always *had* the nuclear option. Whitman was in the (cavernous) *inside*, in the eye of the storm. Calling Americans back to what made them them.

Following 9/11, America began wars in Iraq and Afghanistan ostensibly to counter this type of attack in the future and to ferret out the origins of the scheme. The deployment, tours of duty, and return of Americans from places like Mosul, Baghdad, and Kabul injected into the vernacular of the United States words from an Arab-speaking world;⁴ words of geography; photographs of *hijabi* women walking the streets; memories of old men with beards and kufis sitting in their stores. Journalists, private contractors, and soldiers facilitated this incidental import of culture as the horrors of war became commonplace.⁵ In this climate of conflict, the popularity of Shaykh Jalal al-Din Rumi grew around the country. Translations of Sufi texts into English had been done throughout the 18th and 19th Centuries, but it was really not until Coleman Barks's translations of Rumi that Sufi poetry became a bestseller (Ali). Rumi lived about eight hundred years ago. His fame for writing odes about love were the stuff of legend in Turkey during the medieval period, required reading toward the end of the Ottoman Empire (Ciabattari). But he been born in Afghanistan and as a child had to flee westward due to the Mongols. As an adult, his odes about love were written in a century of war. His odes about love became bestsellers in the US during a period of war also. It is almost as if the soul of the poet was involved in some sort of sacred duty during war, urging humans to remember what made them them.

Walt Whitman also wrote during war. The American Civil War was a defining and devastating national period. That it occurred toward the end of Whitman's life and when he had

⁴ The Hollywood film *Brothers* (2009) directed by Jim Sheridan explored a soldier's post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after a tour in Afghanistan. The film itself was an adaptation of the 2004 Danish psychological drama *Brødre* by Susanne Bier and Anders Thomas Jensen.

⁵ The Iraq War film *Hurt Locker* won the Oscar for Best Picture in 2010, but it had to "break what producer Greg Shapiro called 'The Iraq War Curse,' referring to all the movies touching on that conflict that had failed to find an audience" (Block).

refined much of his *Leaves of Grass*—and his poetic skill—helped to position his work as a balm to a nation in healing.⁶

When again he is invoked by Americans reeling from the tragedies of the 9/11 attacks, and the subsequent US military operations in the Muslim world, it is a curious rallying cry. For some, the call to national unity (Democrats and Republicans, Whites and Blacks) fortifies the American resolve to counter the Muslim world's (inexplicable) hate toward "The West". The term "clash of civilizations" regained popularity, expressing a visceral animosity toward an incompatible "other" based in the Muslim world (Huntington 1993). But Whitman himself did not see it this way. As a poet, as an ecstatic, he lived in the cavernous outside of many social norms, and there he found in that timeless lobby kindred spirits who themselves were poets and who themselves had lived hundreds of years prior and who themselves were of a mystic bent, but Sunni Muslims nevertheless. Emerson, whom Whitman admired as a guide of sorts, lauded Persian poets and urged America to embrace them (Emerson 1904: 412-422).

The author of *Leaves of Grass* wrote in the mid-1800s when the might of the centuries-old 'Uthmani Khilafate (Ottoman Empire) was waning—engaging in the costly Crimean War with Russia 1853-1856,⁷ and only suffering a revolution to end it all the following century in 1924.⁸ But for Whitman and much of America, the Muslim world must have represented a different kind of Islam than it does today. Then, the Ottoman Empire was the world power, a bastion of knowledge and culture that in many ways provided counterpoint to English imperialism. Looking to this alternate empire was a great way for the upstart nation America to shrug off the influential history of Britain. Indeed, a segment of the Uthmani Caliphate at a distant remove from the capital in Asia Minor (perhaps an existential twin to America's

⁶ U.S. Editions of *Leaves of Grass*: 1855; 1856; 1860-61; **1867**; **1871-72**; **1881-82**; and **1891-92**. (whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/)

⁷ Thiam pp. 193-198.

⁸ Nafi pp. 183-192.

relationship with London) was among the first country to recognize America as a nation among nations. Morocco differentiated British colony ships from American ships. The friendship between America and Morocco, a Muslim nation, endured through the 1800s, through the American Civil War, and to the present such that the only US heritage site outside of America is the US embassy in Morocco (Weible). I found this bit of history remarkable, though much of this legacy was lost on Americans in the storm of emotions and rhetoric after 9/11.

But Whitman's America viewed Islam and Muslims as an elder civilization, something to admire, a template for a nation and its quest to find itself.

The "Persian Lesson" poem that appears in the so-called Deathbed Manuscript of Whitman's work *Leaves of Grass* provides a glowing appreciation of the spirituality that imbued the 13th-Century Sunni Sufi poetry he loved. Some even interpolate the poem's "greybeard Sufi" as the poet Walt Whitman himself (Farzan 582). This appreciation was lost on Americans (and Muslims, too) after 9/11 when Whitman was quoted to rally Americans against the terrorist hatred from abroad, from the Muslim world. And yet, the very same voice the mourners invoked had found America itself *part* of the Muslim world when he, as an American, wrote the following in his magnum opus:

A PERSIAN LESSON.

FOR his o'erarching and last lesson the greybeard sufi,
 In the fresh scent of the morning in the open air,
 On the slope of a teeming Persian rose-garden,
 Under an ancient chestnut-tree wide spreading its branches,
 Spoke to the young priests and students.

"Finally my children, to envelop each word, each part of the rest,
 Allah is all, all, all—is immanent in every life and object,

May-be at many and many-a-more removes—yet Allah, Allah, Allah is there.

(whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/1891/poems/390)

Now, that is quite the master class both in the consummate verve of idea and setting. It is beyond beautiful, it is sublime. Every line conveys vibration, wave, and arc. The word “o’er arching” is grounded by it simultaneously being the “last” lesson; they are in the morning air, so the sun is rising; they are on a slope, so the roses in the garden are bending down slightly; they are under the irregular curves of a chestnut tree’s branches; they are young and he is old. Also, they are in the open air—a room without a ceiling—and yet beneath the branches of a tree. As a prelude to the lesson the setting itself provides a glimpse at the sublime relativity of The Divine Presence.

These undulations are all around us as we speak, as we read, as we live. We are vibratory as much as we are lexical. The vocal cords we use to express ourselves vibrate. The eyes measure the light and color of fleets of photons as they flit about in their transverse waves. The speech of others can spray us from all directions as waves of sound energy pass into our inner ear and play upon our eardrums. And our heartbeat rhythms can be turned into an undulating line in a hospital, a recurring beep the transcription of our life’s most basic vibration. The undulation of breathing, then, makes the “CarniVorous” crisis all the more tragic as it harms the rise and fall of the respiration that we use for breathing as well as speaking (Ashraf).

But as the greybeard Sufi in Whitman urged his students, I would like to emphasize the synthesis of the lesson⁹. We are under a tree but also outdoors, seeing the sun go up as the roses on the slope look down. Allah is perhaps at many “removes” but also “there” in “every life and object”. After the initial public offering of *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman invokes Ralph Waldo

⁹ I am speaking about the motifs and aesthetics of synthesis whereas in his insightful 1976 essay, Massud Farzan spoke about The Persian Lesson as a synthesis of the work of Whitman himself: “Rather [The Persian Lesson] may very well be looked upon as a fitting coda for *Leaves of Grass*, not only because it presents a synthesis and recapitulation of the rest of the book, but also because of the marvelous sense of tranquility and wholeness it conveys. It is here finally that we see the serenity of a man who has said goodbye to his Fancy...” (582).

Emerson in the opening pages as proof of spiritual lineage. As proof of endorsement. Emerson was noted for the full-blooded, sufic even, acceptance of America—of the “multitudes” Whitman wrote that he himself “contained”—and his own writings are no less iconic than those of the writer of *The Persian Lesson*. Here we have Emerson's oft-cited section from the fifth paragraph of the first chapter in his 1849 book *Nature*:

Standing on the bare ground, — my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, — all mean egotism vanishes. I become **a transparent eyeball**; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental: to be brothers, to be acquaintances, — **master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance.** (emboldening mine)

Note the synthesized neutralization of master and servant due to the inner state, the ecstasy. Earlier, we opened this essay with just this kind of “trifle and a disturbance” but one from an earlier tradition wherein a desert fellow who had lost all hope in finding his lost camel and provisions is overwhelmed with extreme joy when the beast of burden is found suddenly. It is no surprise, then, that the twin motifs of this central moment in Emerson’s writing blend non-being with witnessing. These are the two major currents of “thought” in Sufi tradition for the last thousand years: namely, *wahdat al-wujud* (Unity of Being) and *wahdat al-shuhud* (Unity of Witnessing). We lose our own being when we experience the oceanic feeling of unity with The Divine; alternatively, we find all things by the comprehensive vision/light/comprehension of The Universal (Saeed 81). This American ecstasy is not the Puritans’ dogmatic effulgence, nor the Trinitarian ecstasy of medium-oriented salvation: this is the witnessing and the *wajd* of the sufic tradition.

This concept of witnessing has even more transcendent connotations, at least linguistically. A few years ago, a surconscious breeze delivered to me the English language's lost word for witness: "Martyr". Under the purview of solemn ceremonies, eulogists, and the politically savvy, the word martyr has become synonymous with activism, legendary human qualities, and overall badassness. But it comes from the ancient Greek word for "witness". All those 9/11 heroes running toward death and danger for the chance—not the hope, but the slimmest chance—of saving a child from falling debris, those fallen first responders, among the civilians also, are martyrs. What do they witness except something esoteric in nature: The Divine Presence; Truth; Ideals; Choice; Destiny. The laboratorians facing the current risks because of vital corona testing are also on the risky front lines, witnessing the microscopic, facing martyrdom because of it. The Arabic word for martyr is *Shaheed*. It also means "witness".¹⁰

Yet the laboratorian martyr and the 9/11 first responders who were martyrs can both themselves be seen as the subject of witnessing. We honor them so that their heroism is not considered lost. Their legacies sometimes require rescuing. This is the case with some of those 9/11 volunteers, firefighters, and others who survived the attacks but died months and years later due to the toxic ash that they had to breathe into their lungs as they helped their fellows. The transparency of Emerson's eye-ball noted in the passage above recognizes that the eye-ball itself is part of *nature* however invisible. Laboratorians are examining others, but others of their own species. Perhaps to be a martyr is not just to "witness" but also "to be witnessed". We lose ourselves in wonder, witnessing, and find ourselves changed.

¹⁰ Wehr, Hans. "شَهِيد" *The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, edited by J Milton Cowan, Exp. 4th ed. Spoken Language Services Inc., 1994, pp. 571.

The spirit of finding is the spirit of the Internet. We find information shared by others. The engine of the Internet is the search engine. The Index is now the starting point, rather than the appended section at the end of dusty tomes. In print books the index is there to serve us; the table of contents is there to tell us. The quest for knowledge in the Internet Age is non-linear.

And yet no matter what we search for or what we find, we gain self-awareness. Whether the transparent eye-ball symbolizes a Unity of Being or a Unity of Witnessing, it expresses a Unity. Whether the ecstatic is in the eye of the storm, such as Walt Whitman seemed to be during the uncertain times of 9/11, or on the periphery, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson seemed to be when immersed in nature, the ecstatic serves a transcendent function. Perhaps that transcendent function is a prayer, such as was penned by Galway Kinnell when he said, “Whatever / *what is* is what / I want.”

These fancy notions can be boiled down to the meat and potatoes of the real world very simply. In high schools, assessing student talent helps with university applications and finding the right program. In sports, we plan for opponents by scouting them in light of our own skills and idiosyncrasies. Self-awareness can be mystical. The philosopher Douglas Adams has considered this quest for knowledge with a literal question. In his treatise *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to The Galaxy* he explores the challenges in finding the answer to “life, the universe, and everything” while not knowing the *question*. Needless to say, his solution is both brilliant and down-to-earth. (Adams 5-815).

But were we to consider this question or this answer in light of the role of wordplay in the drama of human activity, we may truly wonder how to go about finding both the answer as well as the question. Here, I would defer to the wisdom of Shaykh Jalal al-Din Rumi to gesture us in the right direction: “We are the mirror as well as the face in it,” or, perhaps, *in every deep*

*questioning there is the answer.*¹¹ Thus, I find the question to “life, the universe, and everything” to be simply the primordial question of self-awareness: “Who?” A plausible answer, then, at least to me surconsciously, must be the Divine Name of Allah, “*Hu*” (al-Qadiri).

Inasmuch as there is resonance among languages (“Who” is English, of course, and “*Hu*” is Arabic), there are important differences. While the ancient lexical “genes” can be heard in Alpha, Beta, Gamma and then A, B, C and even Alif, Ba, Tha, I have a bone to pick with the letter “A” in English. I dislike its appearance. Let me be more specific. The original pictogram of the ox was turned upside down until the triangular head stood on the two horns—ostensibly the *legs* of capital “A” in the modern alphabet.¹² But we should not begin the alphabet with a pictogram of an ox. I find this highly disturbing. Oh, sure, one can point to the largest Qur’anic chapter, *Sura al-Baqarah*, and say the Qur’an begins with a chapter named after a class of bovine. Yes and no: The name of that chapter is, indeed, “the cow”, but the chapter itself begins with the letter *Alif*. And it is the second chapter, not the first. But even when we look at the very small *first* chapter, *Sura al-Fatiha*, it begins with the letter *Alif*, also. The *Alif* appears as a vertical line, which is the same as the Arabic numeral “1”. Singularity begins both letters and numbers in Arabic. The pronoun “I” in Arabic begins with *Alif*. The singularity of the number “1”—the point of all mathematics—and the self—the subject of all language—should be kin, but

¹¹ Barks, Coleman. *The Essential Rumi*. Castle Books: Edison, 1997. Print. pp. 106:

We are the mirror as well as the face in it.
We are tasting the taste this minute
of eternity. We are pain
and what cures pain, both. We are
the sweet cold water and the jar that pours.

¹² In Barry Sanders’s Introduction to *A Is for Ox*: “I use the first letter of the alphabet, A, for my title. In its earliest form, in the Phoenician writing system, the letter A, called an *aleph*, stood on its head or its side--<-- intended as a depiction of a cow or ox. (*Aleph* is the Phoenician word for “ox”) A did not represent a vowel for the Phoenicians but a breathing (vowels did not have symbols).” (xiii)

in English it is not. Were the letter “A” to appear as the letter *Alif* does, it would appear to be the uppercase “i”, which is that singularity of self, the fulcrum of all knowledge whether Divine or mundane, and that is, namely, “I”.

It is here, in language, that I lose myself and find myself. It is in the play with words and letters that I feel most at home. I am cognizant of the trickery and the transcendence of wordplay, sometimes simultaneously, but with always a grateful air. I do not feel trapped by jargon, nor rhetorical devices, nor labels. Some find fortune in frontiers farther than our frail breath; I find it here.

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