Arabic, Persian, and Turkic Poetics: Towards a Post-Eurocentric Literary Theory is a pioneering book that offers a fresh perspective on Arabic, Persian, and Turkic literature in their interrelations. The authors challenge Eurocentric paradigms while creating a framework for exploring these traditions on their own terms. Authored by an international team of scholars, the chapters centre the conceptual foundations of their respective literary traditions, with a focus on the discipline of comparative poetics (*ʿilm al-balāgha*) in the Islamic world.

By liberating the study of Islamicate literary texts from Eurocentric theoretical paradigms, the book paves the way for a more inclusive global discourse in literary studies. Specifically, the roots of this collaborative research in comparative poetics and in the rhetorical traditions of the Arabic, Persian, and Turkic worlds will foster new methods of close reading that are in line with the aesthetic standards intrinsic to these texts and their traditions. Engaging and insightful, this book is essential reading for anyone interested in broadening their understanding of world literature and literary theory.

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RASHWAN GOULD ASKARI

ARABIC, PERSIAN, AND TURKIC POETICS

PBA 266

ARABIC, PERSIAN, AND TURKIC POETICS

Towards a Post-Eurocentric Literary Theory

Editors

Hany Rashwan

Rebecca Ruth Gould

Nasrin Askari

ARABIC, PERSIAN, AND TURKIC POETICS

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A generation ago it could still be written in an authoritative work on comparative poetics that 'Neither Arabic nor Persian literature has an originative poetics per se. But they obviously establish a lyric tradition, and the highly developed rhetorical studies seem to serve as surrogates for poetics.' If one thinks that Aristotle's *Poetics* and the traditional Western trinity of drama, lyric, and epic must apply universally, one does not do justice to the Middle Eastern tradition. For Arabic, Persian, and Ottoman Turkish literature a different set of standards is valid, and those literatures must be studied on their own terms. This is done in the present volume, the first of its kind: an excellent and coherent collection of studies of literary theory and poetics in the premodern Islamic world, where each language has a literary tradition with its own character, but where central critical concepts are held in common.

Geert Jan van Gelder, Laudian Professor of Arabic Emeritus,
University of Oxford

Arabic, Persian, and Turkish poetics are too often studied in isolation from one another, or in the stifling shadow of European poetics and European literary theory. This volume does the very opposite. It brings a series of important studies – by a wide-ranging, international cadre of scholars – of distinctive works from the Arabic, Persian, and Turkish traditions into conversation *with each other*. And, by excavating and foregrounding literary-theoretical terms native and inherent to Arabic, Persian, and Turkish, it posits a literary theory that is both post-Eurocentric and non-Eurocentric. This will be required reading for anyone wishing to work within any of or across Arabic, Persian, and Turkish literature and poetics.

Shawkat M. Toorawa, Professor of Arabic and of Comparative Literature,
Yale University

In a world where the literary dialogue has long been dominated by Eurocentric perspectives, this volume emerges as a beacon of enlightenment, daringly challenging the status quo and charting a revolutionary course in the study of Islamic poetics. With unparalleled depth and an unyielding commitment to the rich terminologies and concepts inherent to Arabic, Persian, and Turkic literary traditions, the authors collectively herald a new dawn for post-Eurocentric literary theory. This is not merely a book; it is a clarion call to scholars, inviting them to venture beyond familiar horizons and immerse themselves in the majestic and multifaceted realm of Islamicate literary cultures. By resolutely placing indigenous poetics and theoretical frameworks at the forefront, this volume paves the way for a future of scholarship that honours the profound cultural distinctions of these traditions, while boldly engaging with the wider world of literary discourse. This volume, therefore, is not just groundbreaking – it is indispensable for scholars, students,

and enthusiasts aspiring to truly comprehend Islamic poetics and champion a more inclusive and representative global literary theory.

Mohammad Salama, Professor and Associate Dean of Faculty,
George Mason University

This volume launches from urgent questions in the field of comparative literature: What does it mean to compare? Who compares? Why and when? It highlights rich traditions of premodern comparative practices which challenge the modernist, Eurocentric biases of the field. The volume also transcends, through serious expert engagement with literature and theory in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish, the chronic inferiority complex towards Euro-American literary theory, which has for a long time kept these literary traditions captive, framed by imposed Western theoretical frameworks. These long, rich traditions have always theorised themselves, offering pioneering insights into language, poetics, and rhetoric. The groundbreaking work in this volume resets the entire field of comparative literature, recognising the urgency of studying the literature of the Islamicate world on their own terms, not merely as passive subjects of study but as active and significant participants in the so-called field of World Literature and the study of the Humanities at large. The work here announces the welcome advent of a post-Eurocentric, decolonised literary and critical practice.

Huda Fakhreddine, Associate Professor of Arabic Literature,
University of Pennsylvania

In this groundbreaking volume, the reader encounters a superb collection of studies that detail and illuminate the distinctive characters of the Arabic, Persian, and Turkish literary traditions as well as the numerous and subtle ways in which they have interacted with one another. With depth and nuance, the thirteen chapters convey the integrity and logic of a wide range of types of literary expression, with examples drawn from the tenth to the twentieth centuries, in the three languages. In elucidating the conceptual and aesthetic underpinnings of these varied modes of expression in their own terms, the volume represents a pioneering and much needed post-Eurocentric exploration of central literary categories of the Arabic, Persian, and Turkish traditions and elucidates what might be termed an Islamicate comparative poetics – and thereby enriches the repertoire available for developing a transnational and global literary theory.

Louise Marlow, Professor of Religion,
Wellesley College

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ARABIC, PERSIAN, AND TURKIC POETICS

TOWARDS A POST-EUROCENTRIC LITERARY THEORY

Edited by
HANY RASHWAN, REBECCA RUTH GOULD, AND NASRIN ASKARI

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11

Metaphorical Literalism and the Poetics of Reality

Aḥmad Aḥsāʾī, Figuration, and the World of Images

TODD LAWSON*

> To understand metaphors, one must find meanings not predetermined by language, logic or experience.
>
> (Martin 2012: 863)

Introduction

THE FOCUS OF this chapter is on the ideas about language and figuration found in the writings of an early-19th-century Shīʿī Arab scholar known traditionally as 'Shaykh Aḥmad' namely Aḥmad ibn Zayn al-Dīn al-Aḥsāʾī (1166–1241 AH/1753–1826 AD), hereafter 'Aḥsāʾī'. This study examines what he has to say about the technical rhetorical (*balāghī*; see Rashwan 2020: 351–352) terms *mithāl*, *mathal*, and *mithl*, and shows that his understanding of their use in the Qurʾān and in the words of the Imāms, the *akhbār*, indicates that these terms functioned more as metaphor than simile or parable, inasmuch as metaphor is a more open-ended type of figuration than simile or analogy. While metaphor has something in common with parable, it is clear that we cannot use this latter word to describe the way Aḥsāʾī understands the texts studied below. I will begin by offering a brief sketch of his life and influence before focusing on an extended passage in his magnum opus, the *Sharḥ al-ziyāra al-jāmiʿa al-kabīra*, a title that may be translated as *Commentary on the Major Comprehensive Prayer of Visitation*. The chapter concludes by discussing the pertinence or usefulness of Northrop Frye's 'metaphorical literalism' for the study of such literature.

* I am grateful to several colleagues who read earlier drafts of this chapter and offered valuable comments, criticisms, suggestions, and corrections. These are the anonymous peer reviewers for the publisher, the editors of the volume, and Devin Stewart. I am, of course, solely responsible for remaining errors and infelicities.

Shaykh Aḥmad al-Aḥsāʾī

Shaykh Aḥmad al-Aḥsāʾī was, during his life, the leading theologian in Iran, where his appeal was no doubt enhanced by his status as an outsider (Hamid 2019: 70, 73). This appeal resided in his ability to speak persuasively and clearly about the perennially problematic rational puzzles of Islam, and more specifically those of Ithnā-ʿasharī Shīʿism, such as bodily resurrection, the night journey of the Prophet, and the remarkably long life of the Hidden Imām who now, according to Shīʿī belief, remained alive after nearly 1,000 years and was due to return with his army on the Day of Resurrection, *yawm al-qiyāma*, 'to fill the earth with justice even as it is now filled with injustice' (Momen 1985: 96). He was successful in combining the frequently antagonistic or at least incommensurable modes of reason and mysticism in a convincingly coherent teaching that would appeal to and impress to a very high degree a large audience of Iranian Muslims, from Fatḥ-ʿAlī Shāh himself (r. 1797/1211–1250 AH/1797–1834 CE), to advanced religious scholars and intellectuals in Iran and the Shīʿī shrine cities of Iraq, to educated 'middle-' or merchant-class Iranians, to the general public. His success arose from his unique ability to speak effectively about the spiritual realm, the Unseen (*al-ghayb*), in a language that was simultaneously learned, scientifically compelling, and affective or poetically charged with spiritual and mystical language in a way that opened the door to authentic individual religious experience. His Arabness, rather than being held as a mark against him, ultimately emerged as one of his most powerful credentials.

In addition, his learning in a wide variety of disciplines redounded to his status. No doubt his vast knowledge was also interpreted as evidence of intimacy with the Ahlu'l-bayt (see p. 243, n. 8), all of whom, needless to emphasise, were also pure Arabs. He was known as a master of the Islamicate disciplines of exegesis; theology; mysticism; law and jurisprudence; alchemy; medicine; and, of course, Arabic grammar and prosody. In addition, he was a moderately prolific poet; even his more purely theoretical works are full of poetry citations from a variety of authors (Aḥsāʾī 1424/2003; Lambden 2016–).

Aḥsāʾī was born into a Baḥrānī family who had been followers of Twelver Shīʿism for five generations. From an early age, he experienced mystical visions and encounters with members of the Ahlu'l-bayt, notably the second Imām al-Ḥasan (d. 50 AH/670 CE). At the same time, he exhibited a remarkable interest in more rational pursuits, such as Arabic grammar. He continued to pursue, simultaneously, his love of learning and intimate converse with the Ahlu'l-bayt. A recent account of his life and work stresses that he was eventually able to attain the presence of the Imāms and even the Prophet whenever he wished. This source points out that in 1208 AH/1794 CE he was given twelve diplomas (*ijāzāt*), one from each of the Imāms, during an encounter with the tenth Imām, ʿAlī b. Muḥammad al-Hādī (d. 254 AH/868 CE; see Hamid 2019: 67–68), to whom our text, *al-ziyāra al-jāmiʿa al-kabīra*, is ascribed.

At the age of twenty-one, he left his home in al-Aḥsāʾ to pursue higher studies in the centres of Shīʿī learning known as the *ʿAtabāt* (literally 'thresholds') – the sacred shrines of the Imāms in southern Iraq such as those in Karbala and Najaf, which are thought of as thresholds to the unseen spiritual world, *al-ghayb*, where the Imāms live. He was the author of numerous major works of striking originality, especially in the area of philosophy, or *Ḥikmat*, known also as *ʿIrfān* (Böwering 2020), the distinctive Neo-Shīʿī 'theosophical' discipline, which depended on the Qurʾān and the distinctive corpus of Shīʿī *ḥadīth* literature known in the Shīʿī tradition as *akhbār*, and spiritual experience.[1] Much of this literature also bears the impress of early Sufism; for example, statements of the illustrious and tragic mystic figure al-Ḥusayn ibn Manṣūr al-Ḥallāj (d. 309 AH/922 CE) are frequently ascribed to that other Ḥusayn, the third Imām, and vice versa (Lawson 2018). In addition, *Ḥikmat* bears the impress of major theological developments (Sunnī and Shīʿī) of the classical period, including later Sufi literature and institutional elaborations such as *walāya*; the so-called Illuminationist Platonism, *Ishrāq*, of Suhrawardī al-Maqtūl (d. 587 AH/1191 CE); and the Unity of Being (*waḥdat al-wujūd*) school associated with the name of Ibn ʿArabī (d. 638 AH/1240 CE). There is also much evidence of Ismāʿīlī or Fatimid intellectual culture in *ʿIrfān* and *Ḥikmat* (Lawson 2005, 2018).

During the course of his life he succeeded in radically influencing Shīʿī scholasticism with regard to both its method and results. This was to such a degree that a separate school of Shīʿī thought, including *fiqh*, was identified with his name after his passing. This school, today known as *al-Shaykhiyya*, 'The Shaykhīs', especially by outsiders, may be said to have acquired its identity after the death of Aḥsāʾī's favourite student, the Persian Sayyid Kāẓim Rashtī (d. 1259 AH/1843–4 CE). This designation, *al-Shaykhiyya*, grew out of a heavily charged critique and condemnation of Aḥsāʾī's teaching. Indeed, leading theologians and *mujtahid*s declared him beyond the pale, issuing a *takfīr*, 'excommunication', against him (Momen 2003; Hermann 2017: 49–51). By referring to this school as 'the Shaykhīs', his critics wanted to emphasise what they perceived as a deviation from what might be termed 'orthodox' Twelver Shīʿism, which, by this time, had developed a rather deeply ingrained anti-Sufi stance. By smearing his teachings and followers with the term *al-Shaykhiyya*, his detractors wished to suggest that the Imāms were not really the focus of his thought, as should be the case in Ithnā-ʿasharī religion, also known s *al-Imāmiyya*. This charge is especially striking since the writings of Aḥsāʾī himself are frequently extraordinarily vehement in their critique of Sufism, especially the notorious Unity of Being doctrine associated with the name of Ibn ʿArabi (Lawson

[1] The *akhbār*, or Shīʿī *ḥadīth*, were consolidated in two major phases: the classical period of Twelver Shīʿī scholasticism and the later Safavid period. The term *akhbār* is used to distinguish this corpus from the formally similar Sunni works.

2005). Rather, so they charged, it was the interpretations of the words of the Imāms by Shaykh Aḥmad and Sayyid Kāẓim that had usurped and challenged the traditional authority of the Imāms. This interpretation, they continued, was contaminated with ideas from Sufism (*taṣawwuf*) and Extremism (*ghuluww*).[2] In the same way, Sufi shaykhs had for centuries been seen by their opponents as having unlawfully arrogated to themselves ultimate religious authority (in this context *walāya*, or *al-walāya al-muṭlaqa*) throughout history and lured unsuspecting believers away from true religion.[3]

As so often happens in such cases, eventually the theological odium carried by the term *al-Shaykhiyya* was transformed by usage into a badge of honour for those who had been condemned with the unflattering designation. The admirers of Aḥmad Aḥsāʾī did, however, distinguish themselves within the main 'church' of Ithnā-ʿasharī Shīʿism by using a designation that was actually quite accurate with regard to their general method, belief, and practice. They called themselves 'the People of Spiritual Disclosure': *al-Kashfiyya*, 'the Kashfīs', or 'the Intuitionists' (Corbin 1971–1972, Vol. IV: 231–255).

Akhbārī–Uṣūlī debate

Aḥsāʾī's project may be partly understood in terms of seeking a common ground or a compromise between what might be thought extreme Uṣūlī and Akhbārī positions. Since the middle of the 17th century, there had developed in the bosom of Safavid theological discourse a rather intense debate precisely over how the *sharīʿa* was to be determined or discovered. This gave rise to a sometimes vigorous, bordering on violent, controversy amongst Twelver Shīʿī religious scholars, especially the legal specialists or jurists known as *fuqahāʾ*, or *mujtahid*s. The controversy eventually came to be recognised as the Akhbārī–Uṣūlī debate. This debate centred on the question of *ijtihād* – deriving a religio-legal opinion through the rational consideration of the sources of the *sharīʿa*, the spiritually binding law of Islam. These sources, originally systematised by heros – known as Imāms – of Sunnism, such as al-Shāfiʿī (d. 204 AH/820 CE) and his colleagues, are Qurʾān, Sunna, *ijmāʿ* ('consensus'), and *qiyās* ('analogy'). The proto-Uṣūlī Shīʿī legal scholars eventually adopted a very similar methodology a century or so after the Sunnī system in which the last source (*aṣl*) came to be designated as *ʿaql* ('intellect') in place of analogy (*qiyās*) (Stewart 1998: 15, 40, 191–193, 205–208). The debate affected the

[2] This word has much traction in Ithnā-ʿasharī Shīʿism, hailing, as it does, from the very earliest theological disputes amongst the proto-Shīʿī communities of Iraq. It continues to be used today as a way of defining orthodoxy. See Halm (2020) for the classical background.

[3] This argument had already reached its classical form in the writings of Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728 AH/1328 CE), who was, along with several of his students, nonetheless an active member of Sufi brotherhoods.

status of the *mujtahid*, one who issues a binding religious opinion. In early 17th-century Shīʿism, this method of *fiqh* was roundly condemned by the famous Ithnā-ʿasharī scholar, Mullā Muḥammad Amīn al-Astarābādī (d. c. 1034 AH/1625 CE), especially in his major critique of 'Uṣūlism', *al-Fawāʾid al-madaniyya* (Gleave 2007: 36). At the centre of this debate was the question of religious authority (*walāya*/*wilāya*), its source, form, and function. For the Uṣūlīs, religious authority was mediated by the religious expert learned in *fiqh*, the aforementioned *mujtahid*. Astarābādī criticised this method because, to him, it represented a corruption of original and pure Shīʿism in which each believer, at least theoretically, had direct access to religious authority in the person of the Imām and could participate directly in it through private individual piety and practice, chief amongst which was engaging with the Imām himself and the Qurʾān as, of course, interpreted by the Imām, at least until the twelfth Imām, Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī, went into partial retreat or occultation (*ghayba*) in 260 AH/874 CE and permanent complete occultation in 329 AH/941 CE.[4] After this date, apart from extraordinary instances of spiritual encounter (Ghaemmaghami 2020), access to the Imām and his religio-legal authority was through the inspired sacred words of the Imāms and prayer, especially prayers of visitation, a distinctive genre of Shīʿī devotional literature (on which see now Khetia 2022). The sayings of the Imām had been collected in large numbers since the turn of the 10th century CE and have been preserved in a number of books, analogous to the six books of Sunnī *ḥadīth* collected from the 9th to the 10th centuries CE by great scholars such as al-Bukhārī (d. 256 AH/870 CE). These Shīʿī books are referred to as collections of *akhbār* (singular *khabar*) of the Imāms. There are four classical collections, compiled during the 10th and 11th centuries CE by prominent Shīʿī scholars and community leaders. These are listed with the number of reports or volumes each contains:

(1) *K. Uṣūl al-kāfī* by Muḥammad al-Kulaynī (d. 329 AH/941 CE) – 16,199 reports;

(2) *K. Man lā yaḥḍuruhu al-faqīh* by Muḥammad ibn Bābawayh, *Shaykh Ṣadūq* (d. 380 AH/991 CE) – 9,044;

(3) *K. Tahdhīb al-aḥkām* by Muḥammad al-Ṭūsī (d. 460 AH/1067 CE) – 13,590;

(4) *K. al-Istibṣār*, also by al-Ṭūsī – 5,511.

In addition, there was perhaps a large fifth book by Ibn Bābawayh entitled *Madīnat al-ʿilm*, now lost. In more recent times, several collections were compiled during the Safavid consolidation and politicisation of Ithnā-ʿasharī Shīʿism into what might be accurately thought of as Neo-Shīʿism. Three of these have acquired particular authority:

[4] The twelfth Imām is known by several titles: *al-Mahdī* (the Guided), *al-Ḥujja* (the Proof), *al-Muntaẓar* (the Awaited), *al-Baqiyatuʾllāh* (the Remnant of God), *al-Qāʾim* (the One Who will Arise, namely to fill the earth with justice even as it is now filled with injustice), and *al-Ghāʾib* (the Hidden).

(1) *K. al-Wāfī* by Muḥsin Fayḍ al-Kāshānī (d. 1091 AH/1680 CE) – just under 44,000 reports in three volumes;

(2) *K. Wasāʾil al-shīʿa* by al-Ḥurr al-ʿĀmilī (d. 1104 AH/1692 CE) – 20 volumes;

(3) *K. Biḥār al-anwār* by Muḥammad Bāqir al-Majlisī (d. 1110 AH/1699 CE) – 110 volumes.

In addition to these authoritative collections of *fiqh* material, numerous other devotional texts exist that frequently contain reports and traditions not found in these seven works, or which are presented in different liturgical and devotional settings (Modarressi 2003).

Akhbār is a distinctive technical term that distinguishes the Shīʿī literature from the analogous Sunnī literature of *ḥadīth*. The 'religious weight' of this literature in Shīʿism is much greater than that in the Sunnī instance because of the way in which the Imāms are understood, chiefly as continuers of divine guardianship (*walāya*/*wilāya*) and angelically inspired teachings (*ilhām*). The word *ilhām* is used to distinguish the words of the Imāms from the Qurʾān, which is thought of as revelation, pure and simple: *tanzīl*, or *waḥy*. In Aḥsāʾī's works, and in many other works of Shīʿī scholars, such distinctions ultimately count for very little inasmuch as the words of the Imāms are considered every bit as binding and 'divine' as the words of the Qurʾān (Lawson 2018). While the words of the Imāms are important for the interpretation of the Qurʾān, it will be seen that, in practice, it is also the case that the Qurʾān provides illumination for the words of the Imāms. What might be thought a hermeneutic ellipse or circle is transformed in the context of devotion into a hermeneutic embrace.

For the Uṣūlīs, proper religious guidance could only be dispensed by one trained in the principles of jurisprudence, *uṣūl al-fiqh*, i.e. a 'professional'. This was, precisely, the aforementioned *mujtahid* who was then to be imitated or emulated by the common believer through a sacerdotal relationship called *taqlīd* ('emulation'), translated sometimes as 'blind obedience'. For Astarābādī, this relationship was a contamination of pure Shīʿī religion, *tashayyuʿ*. Such corruption or contamination was seen as nothing other than a radical 'Sunnification' – that is, destruction – of Imāmī Shīʿism (Gleave 2007). This was a development that Astarābādī and his 'school' saw as going against the spirit of such classic and essential religious works as the famous legal manual – one of the four books mentioned earlier – entitled *Kitāb man lā yaḥḍuruhu al-faqīh* by Shaykh Ṣadūq, Ibn Babawayh, a title that may be translated as 'The book for him who has no access to a jurist', understood as meaning 'The book that permits each person to be his own jurist' (Corbin 1993: 107). By the time Aḥsāʾī had begun his advanced studies in the Shīʿī shrine centres of Iraq, the Akhbārī method was losing ground and the Uṣūlī method was gaining ascendancy. This is symbolised by the death of Yūsuf al-Baḥrānī (d. 1185 AH/1772 CE), the last great proponent of Akhbārism in Iraq, and the coming into prominence of the celebrated Uṣūlī scholar, Muḥammad Bāqir Bihbahānī (d. 1205 AH/1791 CE). While it has been pointed out that Baḥrānī was really proposing a moderate

Akhbārism, it was nonetheless the case that with his passing and the ascendancy of Uṣūlism, the role of the *mujtahid* would eventually issue, in the later Qajar period, in the office or institution of *Marjaʿ al-taqlīd* ('Model of Emulation'), later to be understood in terms of the unprecedented rank of Grand Ayatollah, *āyat Allāh al-ʿuẓmāʾ*. The crowning development of this may be seen in Ayatollah Khomeini's (d. 1409 AH/1989 CE) famous doctrine of *wilāyat al-faqīh* ('divinely guided guardianship of the jurist'), in which the charisma and authority of the Imām is directly transferred not to the individual believer, ' him who has no access to a jurist', but to the professional *mujtahid/faqīh,* whose faith and practice were to be imitated by the follower. This is something that likely never could have happened under a strictly Akhbārī regime of religious scholarship and culture. Ultimately, for the Akhbārīs, a distinctive personal-cum-mystical relationship between the Ahlu'l-bayt and the believer was cultivated, even among highly educated and influential sophisticated scholars and philosophers such as Qāḍī Saʿīd Qummī (d. after 1107 AH/1969 CE) and the aforementioned Muḥsin Fayḍ al-Kāshānī, star student and son-in-law of the celebrated philosopher Mullā Ṣadrā Shīrāzī (d. 1045 AH/1635–1636 CE). This makes it impossible, as Henry Corbin observed, to dismiss Akhbārism as just another example of mindless fundamentalism (Corbin 1971–1972, Vol. IV: 129, 211, 250–252).

The words of the Qurʾān have long been recognised as being of a separate order of discourse or speech in which each verse is more like a 'branch of the burning bush' (Padwick 1996: 19) than mere oratory, or even mere Scripture. The Qurʾān is a charismatic text. In what follows we will observe the workings of this charisma in tandem with another body of charismatic Islamic text, namely these *akhbār*: the words of the Imāms of Ithnā-ʿasharī Shīʿism, recognised as divine guides (Amir-Moezzi 1994). In some senses, and indeed, according to the explicit statements of the Imāms themselves, the Imāms are also seen as 'sacred words' – on a level with the words of the Qurʾān – together with those words which They uttered, and which are collected in the aforementioned books of *akhbār* (see, for example, the article '*kalima*' in al-Iṣfahānī 1374/1954: 291–293). They are thus words that speak words. With such a turn, it becomes impossible not to think of the Qurʾān's designation of Jesus as 'word from God' (Q3:39, 4:171). It will be seen that such an association is apt.

A few examples of Their words will help illustrate this point.[5] These reports are reproduced without their accompanying authenticating chains of transmission, their *isnād*s, and are introduced only by the name of the Imām to whom the specific statement is ascribed. Furthermore, these statements and thousands of others like them have been preserved in two major forms: (1) the aforementioned collections, of which there are the four major ones from the classical period, plus the several later Safavid collections, and (2) as exegetical statements provided in a series of

[5] It will be obvious that these statements of the Imāms are also applicable to a number of well-known theological discussions from the early centuries of Islam. This is a subject that will not be pursued here.

tafsīr works of the Safavid period, listed as appropriate explanations for this or that Qurʾānic verse in the course of exegesis, very much along the lines of *tafsīr biʾl-māʾthūr* ('interpretation firmly based on the preserved words of the Prophet and his immediate followers') of the type produced by Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310 AH/923 CE) (Lawson 2004: *passim* and references).

Two characteristic *akhbār*

1 From al-Kāẓim (d. 183 AH/ 799 CE) – the seventh Imām, in explaining part of Q31:27:

> And if all the trees on earth were pens, and the sea [were ink], **with seven [more] seas yet added to it, the words of God would not be exhausted**: for, verily, God is almighty, wise.[6]
>
> وَلَوْ أَنَّمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ مِن شَجَرَةٍ أَقْلَامٌ وَالْبَحْرُ يَمُدُّهُ مِن بَعْدِهِ سَبْعَةُ أَبْحُرٍ مَّا نَفِدَتْ كَلِمَاتُ اللَّهِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَزِيزٌ حَكِيمٌ
>
> The 'seas' are the Spring [*ʿayn*] of al-Kibrīt, the Spring of Yemen, the Spring of Abrahūt [*sic*], the Spring of Tiberias, the Reservoir [*jumma*] of Māsayyidān [*sic*], the Reservoir of Ifrīqiya and the Spring of Nājrawān [*sic*: Nahrawān(?)]. And, We are the 'words': our excellent attributes are not able to be fully comprehended nor perfectly investigated [that is: our true significance, like the words in the verse, cannot be exhaustively understood]. Aḥsāʾī (1999, Vol. I: 378)

Earlier in the text, Aḥsāʾī categorised Q31:27 with the technical term as follows: 'it is a metaphor [*kināya*] indicating the endlessness of the excellence of the Imāms' (1999, Vol. I: 108). This technical term can also mean here 'reference' or 'allusion'.
2 From al-Bāqir (d. 113 AH/732 CE) – the fifth Imām:

> al-Bāqir, a.s., said: 'O Jābir! Upon you be the *Bayān* and the *Maʿānī*!'[7] Jābir said: 'I asked him: "What is the *Bayān* and what are the *Maʿānī*?" ' He said: ''Alī, a.s., said: "The *Bayān* is to recognize and understand that God, (exalted be His glory), is such that *nothing is like His likeness* [Q42:11 (لَيْسَ كَمِثْلِهِ شَيْءٌ)] so worship Him accordingly and do not commit *shirk* with regard to the least thing." As for the *Maʿānī*, We [the Fourteen] are His *maʿānī*: We are His side [*janb*] [Q39:56], We are His hand [e.g. Q57:25], We are His tongue [Q19:50], and His cause/command [*amr*] [Q2:109 and *passim*], and His rule [*ḥukm*] [Q5:43 and *passim*], and His reality [*ḥaqq*] [Q35:5 and *passim*]. When We will something, God wills it, when We purpose something, God purposes what We purpose. So, We are the doubled [*mathānī*][8] [Q15:87] which God gave to our prophet, (upon whom be peace), and We are the face [*wajh*] of God which

[6] Here and elsewhere the **bold** portion is that which is quoted in the source. Unless otherwise indicated, all English translations of the Qurʾān are from Asad (1980).

[7] On these two words, which became literary technical terms much later, see pp. 258–261.

[8] This is a paronomastic *tafsīr* of the Qurʾānic term *al-mathānī*, usually translated as 'the oft-repeated' and frequently understood as a reference to the Fātiḥa, the opening sura, which has seven verses and is probably the most repeated of all the Qurʾān's verses. The heuristic 'pun' resides in the fact that it is also a direct reference to the Ahlu'l-bayt, the Fourteen Infallibles: while there are fourteen separate persons, there are only seven different names: Muḥammad, ʿAlī, Fātima, Ḥasan, Ḥusayn, Jaʿfar, and Mūsā. Thus the Fourteen are the result of seven 'doubled' (*mathānī*) (Lawson 1988: 233–235).

> is visible to you no matter where you turn on the earth [Q2:115]. So, he who knows Us his Imām is certitude [*yaqīn*] [cf. Q15:99], and whoever is ignorant of Us, his Imām is torment [*sijjīn*] [cf. Q83:7&8].' (Aḥsāʾī 1999, Vol. I: 43)

This brief sampling from the vast body of Shīʿī *Akhbār* is neither unusual nor exceptional. The sources are full of similar statements demonstrating that what is at stake in these works is not mere obedience to *sharʿī* laws. Rather, it is the spiritual reality or charisma of the Fourteen Pure Ones that is being inculcated and promulgated. As Corbin said so well, it would be a mistake to think that these books, which have the outer appearance of dry legal tomes, did not also contain many mystical and metaphysical treasures (Corbin 1993: 107). Aḥsāʾī was especially attracted to this aspect of the sayings of the Imāms, sayings that depended heavily on figured and metaphorical language. It will be seen below that Aḥsāʾī, who cites the second report, 'We are the *Bayān*', many times in his *Commentary*, including in the very earliest pages (Aḥsāʾī 1999, Vol. I: 25), applied this specific *khabar* to the question of the Imāms as 'sublime metaphors'. To borrow from a recent study of the term *maʿnā* (plural *maʿānī*) in the general history of Arabic poetics, the Imāms are here seen by the tradition as supplying the 'mental content' (Key 2018) for an otherwise unknowable God. But because 'mental' does not completely satisfy the strong element of charisma and emotion involved, the remarks in Larsen (2018) on the meaning of *maʿnā* are also important. Indeed, attention to the usages that characterise not only the text at hand, but others from the Sufi or 'anagogical' Islamicate literary tradition (cf., for example, the title of Rumi's (d. 672 AH/1270 CE) masterpiece, *Mathnawī-yi maʿnawī*) may help us come to more accurate terms with the formidable question of the meaning of the Arabic word *maʿnā*. It may be that more general studies of the universal phenomena of poetics and metaphor will help shed light on this problem.

Metaphorical literalism and the *Sharḥ al-ziyāra al-jāmiʿa al-kabīra*

Despite his frequent travels, Aḥsāʾī produced a very large and dense body of writings covering a wide range of topics. Here, the concern is mainly with what is considered his greatest work, his *Sharḥ al-ziyāra al-jāmiʿa al-kabīra* (*Commentary on the Major Comprehensive Prayer of Visitation*). Aḥsāʾī's magnum opus is his longest, most famous and controversial work. The highly venerated prayer that serves as the basis for his commentary is ascribed to one of the Ahluʾl-bayt, the tenth Imām, ʿAlī b. Muḥammad al-Hādī ('the Guide', also referred to as al-Naqī ['the Distinguished']). The status of this visitation prayer within Twelver Shīʿism is on a par with the *Nahj al-balāgha* and the *Ṣaḥīfa al-sajjādiyya*, two highly beloved collections of the holy words of the Imāms, because of its sustained and consistent eloquence. On account of such eloquence (*balāgha*), the authorities agree that its authenticity cannot be doubted. There is also no doubt that Aḥsāʾī read it

as the holy words of an Imām, words that, while not classed as divine revelation (*tanzīl*, *waḥy*), are, in Shīʿism, on a par with the Qurʾān and are nonetheless the closest thing to it, being the result of angelic inspiration, *ilhām*. These words may be thought to represent something along the lines of *ḥadīth qudsī*, extra-Qurʾānic divine sayings accepted as authentic, in a Shīʿī context. Although these two 'genres' have yet to be critically compared in scholarship, a major glaring difference is that there are many thousands of these sayings of the Ahlu'l-bayt as compared to the number of actual *ḥadīth qudsī*, of which there are 'at most a few hundred' (Graham 2017; Vilozny 2019 on specifically Shīʿī *ḥadīth qudsī*).

Texts of the actual prayer abound in many editions (e.g. Qummī 1407/1987: 617–640). The one used by Aḥsāʾī was probably the oldest known version collected by *Shaykh Ṣadūq* in the aforementioned *K. man lā yaḥḍuruhu al-faqīh* – a title glossed as 'The book permitting each person to act as his own jurist'. This version of the prayer was commented on by the famous Mullā Muḥammad Taqī al-Majlisī (d. c. 1070 AH/1659–1660 CE), father of the more famous Muḥammad Bāqir al-Majlisī, mentioned earlier, in his perhaps equally mystical but much briefer and much less complex treatment of the same prayer, which he wrote as part of his commentary on the aforementioned work by *Ṣadūq* (Corbin 1993: 108). This commentary is referred to frequently by Aḥsāʾī in the work at hand. In any case, the standard Qummī edition, mentioned earlier, published in the *Mafātīḥ al-jinān*, gives us a sufficient idea of its form and contents.

The basic spiritual orientation is made clear in the prologue of this prayer by the Imām al-Hādī himself, a prologue that becomes also the subject of Aḥsāʾī's commentary (Aḥsāʾī 1999, Vol. I: 33–36). Thus, such texts have an exoteric and an esoteric value. This eulogy functions as a prayer of visitation, a special genre of sacred literature known as *Ziyārāt* 'Prayers of Visitation'. Prayers of visitation are used in pilgrimage to the shrines of the Ahlu'l-bayt, where they are recited with great feeling, passion, and longing, sometimes repeated hundreds of times (Nakash 1995; Khetia 2022). They are also used by the faithful to encounter the Imām in a more spiritual or mystical fashion, especially when actual travel to the shrines is difficult or impossible on account of various circumstances, including religious or political restrictions. In the literature, there are numerous special prayers of visitation for each of the members of the Ahlu'l-bayt. A distinguishing and remarkable feature of this particularly esteemed prayer is that the Imām-author designated it as being applicable for any and all of the members of the Ahlu'l-bayt, thus its title *Comprehensive*/*al-Jāmiʿa*. Aḥsāʾī's commentary proceeds along the lines of a Qurʾānic *tafsīr* in that he uses entire verses, or sections of a verse, as lemmata to be commented upon. The prayer may be helpfully thought of as a litany of epithets of praise and glorification, framed as a greeting in visitation. The modern edition of his commentary is in four substantial volumes (Aḥsāʾī 1999).

Such a theme or feature of totality, implied by the title-word 'Comprehensive' (*jāmiʿa*), is not insignificant, particularly in connection with Aḥsāʾī and his role as philosopher. It may be thought that, from the beginning, Islamic philosophy had

been on a quest, in line with the overwhelming emphasis in the Qurʾān and Islamic doctrine on the theme of oneness, unity, and totality, for something one might term an Islamicate unified field theory, perhaps best indicated by Q41:53 (see below, pp. 249, 253–254, 261). Such oneness is also symbolised and, if you like, existentiated, by the union or meeting of the believer with the Imām in the course of reciting and meditating upon this prayer. Also, this visitation prayer from the Imām may be seen, in some ways, as a parallel to the Qurʾān, especially in its universality and comprehensiveness. In a modern edition, the prayer has been divided into 114 sections, the number of suras in the Qurʾān (Lawson 2011: 33, 156 n. 67, 68, 168 n. 117). In this connection, it is interesting to observe that the Shaykhiyya have not produced their own complete *seriatim tafsīr* of the Qurʾān, as might have been otherwise expected from such a distinctive and productive *madhhab*. It may be that Aḥsāʾī's *Sharḥ al-ziyāra* in some ways fulfilled a need for such thoroughgoing hermeneutical activity.

Aḥsāʾī's teaching is characterised by two major factors: (1) an intense mystical veneration of and devotion to the Ahlu'l-bayt, that is the Prophet, his daughter Fāṭima, and the twelve Imāms of Ithnā-ʿasharī Shīʿism, together with (2) a simultaneous consciousness of God that, with all its own intensity, was nonetheless adamant in its refusal to ascribe attributes directly to God (Corbin 1971–1972, Vol. I: 265–274). For Aḥsāʾī and his followers and admirers, the divine attributes so ceaselessly mentioned throughout the Qurʾān and the *akhbār* had not 'God' as their immediate referent but rather the Ahlu'l-bayt, either as individuals or collectively. Such explicit and unrelenting, perhaps even stark but somehow not cold, apophaticism called down upon Aḥsāʾī and his following the charge of *ghuluww*, or extremism (sometimes, in a more literary vein, translated as *hyperbolism*). Such negative theology comes close to similar theological developments in the otherwise quite foreign cultural context in which the great German mystic Meister Eckhart (d. 728 AH/1328 CE) provocatively, but nonetheless in this case helpfully, insisted: 'When I ponder what God is, I then say: "He is One in contrast to the creature, as an eternal Nothing"' (Berdyaev 2002). This is a Nothing not of divine deficiency but rather of human deficiency. The gap or noetic and existential poverty symbolised by such deficiency is compensated for precisely in metaphor and its function. When Eckhart speaks of God as an eternal Nothing, which is definitely not the same as saying that God does not exist or that there is no such thing as God, it resonates most strikingly with the Qurʾānic pronouncement 'nothing is like His likeness' (*laysa ka-mithlihi shayʾ* [Q42:11]). As has been emphasised in numerous studies of the writings of Aḥsāʾī, it is the adamantine, non-negotiable, strenuously argued and repeated affirmation of God's utter unknowableness that most accurately characterises the basis of his philosophy. For him, the search or quest for God will never end – not, of course, because there is no God, but because God is ever beyond the reach of human minds. Minds are attracted to or informed of God and are also simultaneously barred from perceiving God, as stated most eloquently in a celebrated *khabar* ascribed to ʿAlī and quoted by Aḥsāʾī early in his commentary (Aḥsāʾī 1999, Vol. I: 44):

> Mere minds do not comprehend Him. Rather, He appears to them by means of them, and it is by means of them also that He remains inaccessible to them.
>
> لا تحيط به الأوهام بل تجلى لها بها و بها امتنع منه

It is in this spirit that Aḥsāʾī writes in explanation of the originally Qurʾānic divine epithet 'the most exalted images', which occurs twice in the Qurʾān and as part of a verse in the visitation prayer applied directly to the Imāms. The sense in both instances in the Qurʾān is that God may be described only with the most sublime or exalted parable or figure: *wa li-llāh al-mathal al-aʿlāʾ* ('to God belongs the most sublime metaphor' [Q16:60])/*lahu al-mathalu al-aʿlā* ('to Him belongs the most sublime metaphor' [Q30:27]). The prayer thus functions as a commentary on these otherwise mysterious Qur'anic verses by supplying the answer to the irresistible question: what *is* this most exalted or sublime figure? The Imām al-Hādī, to whom is ascribed the composition of this visitation prayer, plainly states that the Imāms are this most exalted figure. Such is in keeping with the general theme of the *Ziyāra*, which is, as mentioned, a long litany of similar attributes. The gist of the commentary, then, is that the Imāms belong to God by virtue of their status as a 'repository of divine Messengership' (*mawḍiʿ al-risāla*, on which see the extensive commentary, Aḥsāʾī 1999. Vol. I: 42–50), and in what might be considered a double metaphor: they both belong to and pertain to God.

Aḥsāʾī on the Imāms as 'the most sublime metaphors'

The following is a summary and translation of the most relevant passages of Aḥsāʾī's substantial commentary on this passage in the *Commentary on the Major Comprehensive Prayer of Visitation* (Aḥsāʾī 1999, Vol I: 145–152). In it are found a number of the distinctive features of Aḥsāʾī's philosophy. The most important of these is his unwavering and remarkably strong insistence on God's absolute unknowability. Second is the equally remarkable elevation of the ranks of the Imāms to the highest conceivable degree, an elevation that caused him to be accused of extremism (*ghuluww*) by those who were either unsympathetic or downright hostile (Momen 2003). For these important principles, he depends on a distinctive ontology worked out elsewhere in this composition but perhaps most clearly expressed in one of his other works, the *Sharḥ al-mashāʿir*, a commentary on the book by the renowned – perhaps greatest – philosopher after Avicenna, Mullā Ṣadrā Shīrāzī. In this work (Shīrāzī and Corbin 1982), Aḥsāʾī goes some length in expressing his displeasure with Ṣadrā's thoughts, and nowhere is this more conspicuous than in his insistence that God is only partially involved in creation, being far too remote and transcendent for anything else. Rather, His reality, which is referred to as the divine (unknowable) essence (*al-dhāt al-ilāhī*), gives rise to secondary and tertiary ontic principles, called by Aḥsāʾī 'the active command' (*al-amr al-fāʿil*) and 'the acted-upon or passive command' (*al-amr-mafʿūl*), which are, in fact, more directly involved with the creative process. God remains utterly and unimaginably

transcendent. All that can be known of divinity is revealed through the Ahlu'l-bayt: the Prophet Muḥammad, his daughter Fāṭima,[9] and the twelve Imāms (Corbin 1971–1972, Vol. IV: 256–262).

He opens this section of his commentary quoting the earlier one, mentioned above, by Muḥammad Taqī al-Majlisī, who affirms that the vowelling of the word *al-m-th-l* in the prayer should be *al-muthul*, here the plural of *mithāl* rather than *mathal*, since it refers to all the 'Proofs' (*ḥujaj*, singular *ḥujja*), one of the numerous words used in the literature to refer to the Ahlu'l-bayt.

> The 10th Imām, al-Hādī, upon Him be peace, said [in His prayer, that the Ahlu'l-bayt] are *al-muthul al-aʿlā*:
>
> Muḥammad Taqī al-Majlisī said in his Commentary on this that *al-m-th-l* should be vowelled as a plural with two *ḍamma*s and read thus because They [a plural] are the Proofs of God, exalted be He.
>
> قال ع والمثل الأعلى
>
> قال محمد تقي المجلسي في الشرح المثل : محرّكة الحجة والحديث والصفة والجمع المثل بضمتين ويمكن قراءته بهما فإنّهم حجج الله تعالى

Such vowelling preserves the Qurʾān's orthography (minus of course the vowel markings) and suggests a solution for the otherwise unacceptable grammatical error, discussed in detail at the end of this section, in which a singular adjective is used to modify a masculine plural.

The quotation from al-Majlisī continues:

> [So] God, may He be glorified, exalted them and described them with attributes of God, exalted be He. They are His attribute *and* His attributes, according to [acceptable] exaggeration [*al-mubālagha*] as God, exalted be He, likens them in His word [Q24:35] 'God is the light of the heavens and the earth, the likeness of His light [*mithlu nūrihi*] is as a niche.' As it is related in numerous reports [they are this niche and therefore the likeness of His light]. Indeed, even one of our Sunnī friends claims that this verse was sent down about Them.[10] (Aḥsāʾī 1999, Vol. I: 145–146)
>
> الله سبحانه أعلاهم، والمتّصفون بصفات الله تعالى فهم صفته وصفاته على المبالغة أو مثّل الله تعالى بهم في قوله : { ٱللَّهُ نُورُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ ۚ مَثَلُ نُورِهِۦ كَمِشْكَوٰةٍ } . كما روي في الأخبار الكثيرة بل ادّعي بعض أصحابنا الإجماع أيضاً أنّها نزلت فيهم.

Aḥsāʾī points out that this understanding, which must be considered a convincing proof (*istidlāl*), is also supported in many passages of the Qurʾān, as follows. In some instances, I have highlighted the portions of these verses reproduced in Aḥsāʾī's text but have provided the entire verse for the convenience of the reader. For example in the first half of Q29:43 (see also Q59:21):

[9] Known in the tradition by the remarkable epithets *Fāṭima Fāṭir* ('Fāṭima the [masculine] Creator') and *Umm abīhā* ('Mother of her father') (Klemm 2014).

[10] However unfashionable it may be, we retain all doxographic formulae referring to God and/or the Ahlu'l-bayt.

> These are figures [*amthāl*] which We express to humanity.
>
> وَتِلْكَ الْأَمْثَالُ نَضْرِبُهَا لِلنَّاسِ

Aḥsāʾī immediately associates this with Q41:53, with the implication that these *amthāl* are equivalent in meaning to the important Qurʾānic 'technical term' 'sign' (*āya/āyāt*):

> We will show them Our signs [*āyāt*] in the outer world and in their own souls that they might know it is the truth.
>
> سَنُرِيهِمْ آيَاتِنَا فِي الْآفَاقِ وَفِي أَنفُسِهِمْ حَتَّىٰ يَتَبَيَّنَ لَهُمْ أَنَّهُ الْحَقُّأَوَلَمْ يَكْفِ بِرَبِّكَ أَنَّهُ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ شَهِيد

Aḥsāʾī then adds that, unfortunately, not everyone reads these signs correctly, and now cites the second half of Q29:43:

> But none can understand them except those who have knowledge.
>
> وَمَا يَعْقِلُهَا إِلَّا الْعَالِمُون

He continues his discussion of *mathal*, and seamlessly introduces the prophetic figure of Jesus, and his status as 'divine word', who was sent, precisely, as a *mathal* (as distinct from being a divine incarnation) to the Children of Israel:

> [As for Jesus,] he was but [a human] servant [of Ours] and we favoured him [with prophethood], a *mathal* for the children of Israel. (Q43:59)
>
> إِنْ هُوَ إِلَّا عَبْدٌ أَنْعَمْنَا عَلَيْهِ وَجَعَلْنَاهُ مَثَلًا لِبَنِي إِسْرَائِيل

That is, says Aḥsāʾī:

> We honored him with prophethood and We caused him to become a wondrous lesson [*ʿibra ʿajība*] like the rest of the metaphors [revealed] to the Children of Isrāʾīl.
>
> أي شرّفناه بالنبوة و صيّرناه عبرةً عجيبةً كالمثل السائر لبني إسرائيل

Aḥsāʾī then cites Q22:73:

> O Humanity! Here is a figured message, so listen carefully to it. Know that those whom you call upon for help apart from God are not even able to create a fly even if they all combined to assist one another in that task.
>
> يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ ضُرِبَ مَثَلٌ فَاسْتَمِعُوا لَهُ إِنَّ الَّذِينَ تَدْعُونَ مِن دُونِ اللَّهِ لَن يَخْلُقُوا ذُبَابًا وَلَوِ اجْتَمَعُوا لَهُوَإِن يَسْلُبْهُمُ الذُّبَابُ شَيْئًا لَّا يَسْتَنقِذُوهُ مِنْهُ ضَعُفَ الطَّالِبُ وَالْمَطْلُوب

Aḥsāʾī interjects here that God relates such a wondrous story because Arabs love this kind of expression on account of its efficacy, aptness, and striking novelty (*istighrāb*).

> أي ضربت لكم قصة عجيبة وذلك لأنّ العرب قد تسمّي الصفة والقصة الرائقة لاستحسانها أو لاستغرابها مثلًا، نَعَمْ إنما يستعمل المثل بمعنى الحديث، والقصة إذا أرادوا أن يقصّواشيئاً بالتشبيه والتمثيل ويكون بمعنى الصفة كقوله تعالى

He then cites Q13:35, God's depiction of paradise (Aḥsāʾī 1999. Vol. I: 146):

> The image of the paradise promised to those who are conscious of God [is that of a garden] through which running waters flow: [but, unlike an earthly garden,] its fruits

> will be everlasting, and [so will be] its shade. Such will be the destiny of those who remain conscious of God – just as the destiny of those who deny the truth will be the fire. (Asad 1980 slightly adapted)

> مَثَلُ الْجَنَّةِ الَّتِي وُعِدَ الْمُتَّقُونَ تَجْرِي مِن تَحْتِهَا الْأَنْهَارُ أُكُلُهَا دَائِمٌ وَظِلُّهَا تِلْكَ عُقْبَى الَّذِينَ اتَّقَوا وَّعُقْبَى الْكَافِرِينَ النَّار

Thus, Aḥsāʾī argues, does a previously mysterious reality acquire form. A similar process may be read in the celebrated *Ḥadīth* of the Dead, which actually uses *mithl* rather than *mathal*/*mithāl* (each word has the same plural, *amthāl*) as a synonym for *shibh* and *naẓīr* ('likeness', 'similarity').

> أي صفتها وبمعني الصورة كما في حديث الميت (مُثِّل لهُ ما لهُوَوَلدُهُ وعَمَلهُ) الحديث. أي صوِّر له. والثاني وهو المِثل بكسر الميم بمعنى الشبه والنظير

Another example is taken from ʿAlī's words to his famous companion, Kumayl ibn Ziyād, whom we meet again here:

> O Kumayl ibn Ziyād! Those who hoard wealth perish even while they live, but the knowers endure for as long as time subsists; their [material] forms are absent, but their [spiritual yet substantial] images [*amthāl*] in the hearts are present. (Shah-Kazemi 2006: 36)

> ففي حديث كميل عن أمير المؤمنين ع (يا كميل مات خزان الأموال والعلماء باقون ما بقي الدهر أعيانهم مفقودة وأمثالهم في القلوب موجودة).

Aḥsāʾī comments: 'That is, their wisdom and guidance is preserved with their people who then conduct themselves accordingly and are guided by their light.' Their reality is remembered through their spiritual and intellectual contributions. (Aḥsāʾī 1999, Vol. I: 146)

> أي أن حكمهم ومواظهم محفوظة عند أهلها يعملون بها ويهتدون بمنارها، انتهى.

Mithl ('likeness', 'similarity') cannot, however, be used for God, because He has no likeness or similarity, as the Qurʾān clearly says: *laysa ka-mithlihi shayʾ*. In this usage the Imāms themselves are, again, signs (*āyāt*) of God. But the singular *mathal* may be used, as the Qurʾān itself demonstrates on two occasions: Q16:60, وَلِلَّهِ الْمَثَلُ الْأَعْلَىٰ ('to God belongs the most sublime metaphor') and Q30:27, وَلَهُ الْمَثَلُ الْأَعْلَىٰ ('and to Him belongs the most sublime metaphor'), as we saw above. Aḥsāʾī continues:

> If you consider with the eye of spiritual insight you will understand that the Ahlu'l-bayt *are* the stories of God the True One, recounting what has happened in the past, and the veridical information from God about what is coming. And their guidance and examples are the examples [*sunan*] of God … An [unnamed Imām] a.s. alluded to the aptness of this meaning: 'Recognize God through God and the Messenger through the Message and those in authority through the commanding of what is good and the forbidding of what is bad.' (Aḥsāʾī 1999, Vol. I: 147)

> فإذا نظرت بعين البصيرة علمت أنّهم ع قصص الله الحق لما مضى وأخبار الله الصدق عما يأتي وهديهم وسننهم سنن الله وهديه وطريق الحق وسبيله وقد أشار ع إلى مثل هذا المعنى بقوله (اعْرفوا اللهَ بِاللهِ وَالرَّسُول بِالرِّسالةِ وَأُولي الأَمْرِبالأَمْرِ بِالمَعْرُوف والنهي عن المنكر).

As for their being the Exalted Images, *al-muthul al-ʿulyā*, Aḥsāʾī again suggests a comparison with Jesus, as described in Q43:57–60.

> Now whenever [the nature of] the son of Mary is set forth as an example, [O Muhammad,] lo! thy people raise an outcry on this score
>
> وَلَمَّا ضُرِبَ ابْنُ مَرْيَمَ مَثَلًا إِذَا قَوْمُكَ مِنْهُ يَصِدُّون
>
> and say, 'Which is better – our deities or he?' [But] it is only in the spirit of dispute that they put this comparison before thee: yea, they are contentious folk
>
> وَقَالُوا أَآلِهَتُنَا خَيْرٌ أَمْ هُوَ مَا ضَرَبُوهُ لَكَ إِلَّا جَدَلًا بَلْ هُمْ قَوْمٌ خَصِمُون
>
> [As for Jesus,] he was nothing but [a human being –] a servant [of Ours] whom We had graced [with prophethood], and whom We made an example for the children of Israel
>
> إِنْ هُوَ إِلَّا عَبْدٌ أَنْعَمْنَا عَلَيْهِ وَجَعَلْنَاهُ مَثَلًا لِبَنِي إِسْرَائِيل
>
> And had We so willed, [O you who worship angels,] We could indeed have made you into angels succeeding one another on earth.
>
> وَلَوْ نَشَاءُ لَجَعَلْنَا مِنكُم مَّلَائِكَةً فِي الْأَرْضِ يَخْلُفُون

Aḥsāʾī then cites two reports (1999, Vol. I: 148) continuing the idea of the similarity of the Imāms to Jesus, with special reference to ʿAlī, the first Imām:

> 1 (from *al-Kāfī*)
>
> One day the Messenger of God was sitting amongst us and the Commander of the Faithful (that is ʿAlī), a.s., approached. So the Messenger of God, a.s., said to him: 'In you is a likeness of Jesus son of Mary and if it were not that so many of my community would speak of you as the Christians spoke of Jesus son of Mary, then I would say about you something so wondrous that people would then take the dust from under your feet and rub themselves with it for its blessing.' Some of the enemies from the Quraysh who were there said: 'How can he say something like that about his cousin, as if he were Jesus son of Mary?' And then the above verses were revealed to the Prophet.
>
> في الكافي عَنْ أَبِي بَصِيرٍ قَال بَيْنَا رَسُول اللهِ ع ذَاتَ يَوْمٍ جَالساً إِذْ أَقْبَلَ أَمِيرُ المُؤمنِينَ ع فَقَال لَهُ رَسُول اللهِ ع إِنَّ فِيكَ شَبَهاً مِنْ عِيسَى ابْنِ مَرْيَمَ وَلَوْ لا أَنْ تَقُول فِيكَ طَوَائفُ مِنْ أُمَّتِي مَا قَالتِ النَّصَارَى فِي عِيسَي ابْنِ مَرَيَمَ لَقُلْتُ فِيكَ قَوْلا لا تَمُرُّ بملإ مِنَ النَّاس إلاَّ أَخَذُوا التُّرَابَ مِنْ تَحْتِ قَدَمَيْكَ يَلْتَمِسُونَ بِذَلكَ البَرَكَةَ قَال فَغَضِبَ الأَعْرَابِيَّانِ وَالمُغِيرَةُ بْنُ شُعْبَةَ وَعِدَّةٌ قُرَيشٍ مَعَهُمْ فَقَالوا ما رَضِيَ أَنْ يَضْرِبَ لابْنِ عَمِّهِ مَثَلا إلاَّ عِيسَى ابْنَ مَرْيَمَ فَأَنْزَل اللهُ عَلى نَبِيِّهِ ع فَقَال (وَلمَّا ضُرِبَ ابْنُ مَرْيَمَ مَثَلاً) إلى قوله (لجَعَلنا مِنْكُمْ) يَعْنِي مِنْ بَنِي هَاشِمٍ (مَلائكةً فِي الأَرْضِ يَخْلفُونَ) الحديث.
>
> 2 (from *al-Majmaʿ*)[11]
>
> O ʿAlī, your image in this community is like the image of Jesus son of Mary [the rest of the *ḥadīth*]. When they heard this, the hypocrites said 'He only says this so we will worship ʿAlī the way the Christians worship Jesus.' And for this reason, the leaders of

[11] The celebrated *tafsīr* by al-Faḍl ibn al-Ḥasan al-Ṭabrisī (d. 548 AH/1153–1154 CE), *Majmaʿ al-baḥrayn*.

> the hypocrites said: 'He wants to appoint him in authority over us while we are actually in authority over him.'
>
> وفي المجمع (يا علي إنما مثلك في هذه الأمة كمثل عيسى ابن مريم) الحديث، فلما سمعوا ذلك قال المنافقون: إنما ذكر ذلك و شبهه بعيسى ابن مريم لأنّه يريد أن نعبده كما عبد النصارى عيسى. وبهذا المعنى قال أئمة المنافقين إنما نصّ عليه ليتولّى علينا ونحن أولى منه

Aḥsāʾī says that God has spoken to this at Q43:58, especially the question spoken by the hypocrites: 'Are our gods better or is he?'. The author specifies here that what is at stake is precisely the all-important divine institution of charismatic authority and loyalty: *walāya*. He cites an anonymous proverb in further explanation of Q43:58 and its percieved condemnation of disputation, *jadal*:

> As someone has (rightly) said: 'The proof of Truth is the *mathal* and the proof of falsehood is *jadal*.' Nay, rather the True *Mathal* is perfectly suited to a thing because God, exalted be His glory, does not create anything accept that there is a *mathal* for that thing. For example: the world below [*dunyā*] is vile [*danīya*]. God, exalted be his glory, thus coined a perfect expression [*mathalan ḥaqqan*] for it. (Aḥsāʾī 1999. Vol I: 148)
>
> فقوله تعالى حكاية عنهم (أَآلِهَتُنَا خَيْرٌ أَمْ هُوَ) ٤٣:٥٨
>
> أراد سبحانه به الحكاية عن أئمة المنافقين أنهم يقولون (أَآلِهَتُنَا) أولى بالاتباع والعبادة خير أم ولاية عليّ وطاعته قال الله تعالى لنبيّه ع (ما ضَرَبُوه) أي هذا المثل إلا جدلاً فقوله تعالى (جَدَلاً) كما ذكره بعضهم حيث قال : دليل الحق المثل ودليل الباطل الجدل بل قد يكون المثل الحق جارياً على شيئ لأنّ الله سبحانه ما خلق شيئاً إلا وهو مَثَلٌ لشيء وله مثل حتى أن الدنيا الدنية ضرب الله سبحانه لها مثلاً حقا

Aḥsāʾī adduces another example of God's expressive artistry at Q10:24 (entire verse quoted for convenience; Aḥsāʾī quotes only the bold portion):

> **The real meaning of the life of this world is but that of rain which We send down from the sky, and which is absorbed by the plants of the earth** whereof men and animals draw nourishment, until – when the earth has assumed its artful adornment and has been embellished, and they who dwell on it believe that they have gained mastery over it – there comes down upon it Our judgment, by night or by day, and We cause it to become [like] a field mown down, as if there had been no yesterday. Thus clearly do We spell out these messages unto people who think.
>
> إِنَّمَا مَثَلُ الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا كَمَاءٍ أَنزَلْنَاهُ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ فَاخْتَلَطَ بِهِ نَبَاتُ الْأَرْضِ مِمَّا يَأْكُلُ النَّاسُ وَالْأَنْعَامُ حَتَّىٰ إِذَا أَخَذَتِ الْأَرْضُ زُخْرُفَهَا وَازَّيَّنَتْ وَظَنَّ أَهْلُهَا أَنَّهُمْ قَادِرُونَ عَلَيْهَا أَتَاهَا أَمْرُنَا لَيْلًا أَوْ نَهَارًا فَجَعَلْنَاهَا حَصِيدًا كَأَن لَّمْ تَغْنَ بِالْأَمْسِ كَذَٰلِكَ نُفَصِّلُ الْآيَاتِ لِقَوْمٍ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ

Aḥsāʾī then introduces what may be thought a hierarchy of metaphor. saying that these images differ according to degrees:

> The highest ones are those we are concerned with, namely the Ahlu'l-bayt. There is not above them any higher image, so they are *al-amthāl al-ʿulyā* (not *muthul al-aʿlā*). Thus it has been established that they are the exalted images according to divinely inspired designation [*naṣṣ*][12] and consensus [*ijmāʿ*]. (Aḥsāʾī 1999, Vol. I: 148)

[12] *Naṣṣ* (literally 'appointment', 'designation') is the technical term used in Shīʿī sources to refer to the Prophet's designation of ʿAlī as the first Imām, and thereafter each successive Imām's designation of his successor.

إلاّأنّ الأمثال تتفاوت في الدرجات صاعدة حتى تنتهي إلى آل محمد صلى الله عليه وعليهم فكل شيء مثلهم ومثل لهم وليس فوقهم مثل فهم الأمثال العليا ثم أنّه ثبت أنهم الأمثال العليا بالنص والاجماع.

Thus, the meaning of their reality [*kawnihim*] is as metaphors, inasmuch as the *mathal* is divine explication [*bayān*] and divine description [*ṣifa*]. This means there is nothing higher than Them, as explicitly suggested at Q30:27:

فما المراد بكونهم أمثالاً مع أن المَثَل محرّكاً لا يكون إلا بياناً وصفة البيان والصفة لا شك في كونهما أنزل رتبة من المبين والموصوف فإذا لم يكن شيء أعلا رتبة منهم فكيف يكونون أمثالاً

It is He who initiated all creation, then He does it again. This is easy for Him **because the most sublime image [we can imagine] belongs to Him [and nothing else]** in the heavens and the earth. Truly, He is all mighty and all wise.

وَهُوَ الَّذِي يَبْدَأُ الْخَلْقَ ثُمَّ يُعِيدُهُ وَهُوَ أَهْوَنُ عَلَيْهِ وَلَهُ الْمَثَلُ الْأَعْلَىٰ فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَهُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمِ

Aḥsāʾī explains that this is pure transcendence (*tanzīh*). It is axiomatic that God is far too exalted to be described and too glorious for us to understand how He can be. He is more exalted than to be likened to any created thing or to be analogous with any created thing. This is why, in reality, the exalted images actually apply [only] to the Ahlu'l-bayt, and They, in turn, are open-ended, inexhaustible metaphors for God, *al-muthul al-ʿulyā*. This is further supported by the statement from the fourth Imām, ʿAlī ibn al-Ḥusayn (d. 95 AH/713 CE), who said: 'To you, O my God, pertains a oneness that is multiple' (لك يا الهي وحدانيّة العدد). That is to say, oneness (*waḥdāniyya*) applies to your creation and your dominion, it cannot really be said of You. All we can know of God is: لَيْسَ كَمِثْلِهِ شَيْءٌ ('Nothing is like [even] His likeness' [Q42:11]).

The *Exalted Images* [at Q30:27 and 16:60] is itself a *mathal* that proves [absolute divine] transcendence and denies similitude [*tashbīh*], knowability [*maʿlūmiyya*], and comprehension [*iḥāṭa*] from the angle of what He, exalted be His glory, is: that all is His dominion and His creation. This is like what has been said in the words of the fourth Imām, ʿAlī b. al-Ḥusayn: 'To you, O my God, belongs a oneness that is multiple.' That is, this singleness [*waḥdāniyya*] applies to Your dominion and Your creation, it does not apply to You. All we can know of God is *laysa ka-mithlihi shayʾ*, there is no opposite [*ḍidd*] to Him, no equal [*nidd*] and no partner [*sharīk*]. These *amthāl* are things that indicate pure *tawḥīd*, as much as the contingent realm can understand such a concept [*bi-ḥasab al-imkān*] through the knowledge of the soul [*maʿrifat al-nafs*], as in ʿAlī's, a.s., response to Kumayl [in the *Ḥadīth Māʾ al-Ḥaqīqa*, 'What is Reality?]: 'Remove the veils of glory without alluding [to anything].' This is a sign [*āya*] God has coined in order to be known, as He, exalted be He, said [at Q41:53]:

In time We shall make them fully understand Our messages [through what they perceive] in the utmost horizons [of the universe] and within themselves, so that it will become clear unto them that this [revelation] is indeed the truth. [Still,] is it not enough [for them to know] that thy Sustainer is witness unto everything.

That is an exalted image for knowing him [*li-maʿrifatihi*]; it is a revelation [*ẓuhūr*] to His creation to them through them [*lahum bihim*]. This ability to know [through the signs] is in every individual. And the highest of such images is Muḥammad and His

Family, a.s. So they are the exalted images, that is the highest temples of confirmation [*hayākil al-tawkīd al-ʿulyā*]. And they are the foremost temple [singular] of His creation even though they are fourteen [separate] temple(s). (Aḥsāʾī 1999, Vol. I: 149)

إنّ أعلى الأمثال وهو المثل الدّال على التنزيه ونفي التشبيه ونفي المعلوميّة والإحاطة بوجه ما هو له سبحانه، يعني بملكه وهو خلقه مِثل ما قيل في قول علي بن الحسين ع (لكَ يَا إلهِي وحْدانِيَّةُ العَدَدِ) أي هي لك و ملكك و خلقك فلا تجري عليك و يكون المعنى أن التعريف الذي به يعرف الله من أنه ليس كمثله شيء ولا ضدّ له ولا نِد له ولاشريك.

وأمثال هذا من الأمور الدّالة على التوحيد الخالص بحسب الإمكان مثل معرفة النفس على ما أشرنا إليه في شرح حديث كميل في قوله ع (كشف سبحات الجلال من غير إشارة) هو آية ضربها الله يُعْرَفُ بها كما قال تعالى

(سَنُرِيهِمْ آيَاتِنَا فِي الْآفَاقِ وَفِي أَنْفُسِهِمْ حَتَّىٰ يَتَبَيَّنَ لَهُمْ أَنَّهُ الْحَقُّ)[٤١:٥٣]،

فذلك مَثَل أعلى لمعرفته التي هو ظهوره لخلقه بهم وهذا في كل شخص و أعلى هذه الأمثال محمد وآله ع فهم المثل الأعلى يعني هياكل التوكيد العليا وهي أول هيكل خلقه وهي أربعةَ عشر هيكلًا

On the process of creation, Aḥsāʾī says:

He, exalted be His glory, created creation without any previously existing model. Nay, rather, He created all things according to what they required [*ʿalā mā huwa ʿalayhi*]. This is the meaning of the hadith, according to one of its many aspects, in his, a.s., the [unnamed Imām's], statement: 'God created Adam in His own form.' That is, according to what he required [*ʿalā mā huwa ʿalayhi*] from the point of view of his receptivity of forms and delineation [*takhṭīṭ*] and [other] existential factors [*al-kaynūnāt*]. So, the meaning of the assertion that 'They are the Most Exalted Images' is that God, *glorified and exalted as He is*, created them according to the best form [*aḥsan ṣūra*] that it was possible to ordain for anything in the contingent world. And They have been created, therefore, according to what They are [*wa-hiya mā hum ʿalayhi*] with regard to form [*hayʾa*], and being [*kaynūna*], just as He, exalted be His glory, said in His Qurʾān (at Q95:4):

Verily, We created man in the most beautiful *form*

This refers to the Perfect Man [sing.] (*al-insān al-kāmil*] who is [collectively] Muḥammad and his twelve descendants and Fāṭima, a.s.

As for the following verse, Q94:5, it provides a useful contrast:

and thereafter We reduce him to the lowest of low

That is, the most repugnant [*aqbaḥ*] form which the human being can bear. And this is the defective [*nāqiṣ*] human, the most inimical of the Imāms' enemies, God curse them. Therefore the forms that are the most exalted and the most beautiful are the first mentioned: the forms of Muḥammad and his Family. The second are the ugliest forms, the leaders of the hypocrites [*munāfiqūn*]; and there is no connection between the two. All that seeks the most beautiful is most beautiful and all that seeks the most repugnant is most repugnant. And those are likenesses of that, and These are the Sublime Likenesses. (Aḥsāʾī 1999, Vol. I: 149–150)

أنّه سبحانه خلق الخلق على غير مثال سبق بل خلق كل شيء على ما هوعليه، وهو المراد من الحديث على أحد وجوهه قوله ع (أَنَّ اللهَ خَلَقَ آدَمَ عَلى صُورَتِهِ) أي على ما هو عليه باعتبار وقابليته للهيئات والتخطيط

والكينونات فمعنى أنهم المثل الأعلى أن الله جل وعلا خلقهم على أحسن صورة يقتضيها الإمكان وهي ما هم عليه من الهيئة والكينونة كما أشار اليه سبحانه بقوله تعالى

(لَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا الْإِنسَانَ فِي أَحْسَنِ تَقْوِيمٍ)[٤:٥٩] ،

وهو الإنسان الكامل وهو محمد وآله الاثنا عشر وفاطمة ع

(ثُمَّ رَدَدْنَاهُ أَسْفَلَ سَافِلِينَ)[٥:٥٩] ،

يعني أقبح صورة يحتملها الإنسان وهو الإنسان الناقص وهو أعدى أعدائهم لعنهم الله فالصور أعلاها أحسَنُها وهو صور محمد وآله صلى الله عليه وعليهم، وأقبحها صور أئمة المنافقين وما بينهما بالنسبة كلّ ما قرب من الأحسن أحسن وكل ما قرب من الأقبح أقبح، فهم ع أمثالهم وهم الأمثال العليا.

Since He, exalted be his glory, created creation according to what it requires [*ʿalā mā huwa ʿalayhi*], they each received such creation according to the limits of their form, both visible and invisible … And those who are beautiful externally and internally are the highest forms: Muḥammad and His family, a.s., since these are forms that have attained the utmost degree [*ghāya*] of beauty and perfection, inwardly and outwardly, because they are completely made of light: their matter, their individuated forms, their receptiveness, their perfectability – all of it is light. There is no darkness of any kind not even whatever might truly apply on the superficial level [*ʿalā mā tataḥaqqaqu ẓuhūran*]. And this goes along with the way in which God ordered his own [unknowable] Essence, for they are the locations [*maḥāll*, cf. *maẓāhir*] of His Will. So, these forms, and shapes and beings are *almost* absolute with regard to the Imāms, as He, exalted be His glory, alluded, in His Book [at Q24:35, see pp. 262–263 for a full translation of this verse]: [This oil] would well-nigh give light [of itself] even though no fire touched it.

And that is because this oil has been purified from compoundedness, thus He purified it and made it pleasing and specialized and related it to Himself. He made Them special just as he specialized the Kaʿba and related it directly to Himself when He referred to 'My House' [*baytī*] [Q2:125; 22:26; 71:28]. Thus they are 'the most exalted images'.

Just as we can think of the 'meanings' [*maʿānī*] of a human being ('Zayd') as his standing, his sitting, his power, his knowledge, his movement, his rest, his soul, his spirit, his intellect, his being, his quiddity, his essence, his attributes, his acts, his speech, his works, and all of his such states [*aḥwāl amthālan wa-abdālan*] we can also think of Them as the 'meanings' of God [that is, those positive concepts mentioned in the Qurʾān, such as hearing, seeing, speaking]. (Aḥsāʾī 1999, Vol. I: 150)

أنّه سبحانه لما خلق الخلق على ما هم عليه اقتضت قابلياتها على حسب حدودها صوراً ظاهرة وباطنة، فكان فيهم مَن صورته حسنة ظاهراًوباطناً وفيهم من صورته قبيحة ظاهراًوباطناً، وفيهم من صورة قبيحة ظاهراً حسنة باطناً وفيهم من صورته حسنة ظاهراً قبيحة باطناً وهذه الأجناس الأربعة كل واحد منها اختلفت أفرادُهُ على جهة التشكيك لاختلاف المشخصات من مكملات القابليّات فمن كانت صورهم حسنة ظاهراً وباطنا أعلاها صور محمد وآله ع وتلك الصور إنما كانت في غاية الحسن والكمال ظاهرا وباطناً، لأن مادتها ومشخصاتها وقوابلها ومكمّلاتها كلها أنوار لا ظلمة فيها أصلا إلا ما تتحقق به ظهوراً، فكانت طِبْقَ فعل الله لذاته فهم محال مشيّته، فلما كانت تلك الصور والهيئات والكينونات كادت أن تكون مطلقة بحيث لا تتوقف على شرط كما أشار سبحانه إليها في كتابه

(يَكَادُ زَيْتُهَا يُضِيءُ وَلَوْ لَمْ تَمْسَسْهُ نَارٌ)[٢٤:٣٥]

وذلك لتخلّصِها من الأكوان التركيبية اصطفاها واتضاها واختصها ونسبها إلى نفسه فجعلها أمثاله كما اختص الكعبة والنسبها إلى نفسه فقال بيتي فهم أمثاله العليا.

لما كانت معاني زيد كقيامه وقعوده وقدرته وعلمه وحركته و سكونه ونفسه وروحه وعقله ووجوده وماهيّته وذاته وصفاته وأفعاله وأقواله وأعماله وجميع أحواله أمثالًاله وأبدالًاله منه في جهة ما اتّصَفَ‌به أو ما له وقد قالوا أنهم معانيه

These concepts and attributes are given reality and rescued from imaginary (not imaginal) oblivion, on account of God's absolute unknowability (*tanzīh*), by the Imāms themselves. Aḥsāʾī then cites a frequently quoted and somewhat obscure statement from the Imāms, on the authority of Jābir al-Juʿfī (d. c. 127 AH/745 CE; see Dakake 2012), the prominent early follower of the fifth Imām, al-Bāqir:

> Abu Jaʿfar [al-Bāqir, the fifth Imām], a.s., addressed him: 'O Jābir, upon you be the *Bayān* and the *Maʿānī*!' Jābir said: 'So I said: "What is the *Bayān* and what are the *Maʿānī*?"' 'He said: "'Alī, a.s., said: 'As for the *Bayān*, this is to know that God is [such that] Nothing is like His likeness (*laysa ka-mithlihi shayʾ*, Q42:11); therefore, worship Him and do not commit *shirk* towards Him with regard to anything. As for the *Maʿānī*, We [the Ahlu'l-bayt] are His *maʿānī*, and We are his side (*janb*, Q39:56; cf. *janāb*), and his hand, and His tongue and His cause/command, and His wisdom/rule, and His knowledge, and His Truth/Reality. Whatever We will, God wills and He wishes what We wish.'" Heed the rest of the well-known *ḥadīth*.' (Aḥsāʾī 1999, Vol. I: 150)

وقد قالوا أنهم معانيه كما في رواية جابر عن أبي جعفر ع أنه قال (يا جابر عليك بالبيان والمعاني، قال فقلت وما البيان والمعاني؟ قال فقال علي ع أما البيان فهو أن تعرف الله سبحانه ليس كمثله شيء فتعبده و لا تشرك به شيئا وأما المعاني فنحن معانيه ونحن جنبه ويده ولسانه وأمره وحكمه وعلمه وحقّه إذا شئنا شاء الله ويريد مانريده) الحديث.

> So, consider, comments Aḥsāʾī, how he provided a *tafsīr*[13] for the *maʿānī*, namely 'The Ahlu'l-bayt are his excellence (*janb*, Q39:56: whatever is worthy of God, duty to God), his hand (e.g. Q57:29), and so on. So these *maʿānī* are His images and His substitutes (*abdāl*), and He named them his *maʿānī*: so that the *maʿānī* of a thing are its images (*amthāl*) because they are a description of its actual being. And these 'meanings' (*maʿānī*) flow through all created things.

فانظر كيف فسَّرَها بالمعاني وهي جنبه ويده . . . إلخ، وهي أمثاله وأبداله فسمّاها معانيه ومعاني الشيء أمثاله لأنها صفة كينونته وهذا المعانى يجري في جميع الخلائق

We will close this sampling of Aḥsāʾī's comments on the 'exalted images' with a final excerpt:

> [It is said that] the entire world is the name of God, exalted be He. Perhaps this statement, known as 'the hadith of the names', from *al-Kāfī*, proves this: 'God created the names with letters without sound, and with articulations without speech, as when he said: He made it a perfect word with four parts, not one part is more important than the others. And he revealed from it three names for the need of the creatures (*al-khalq*) for them. But He kept one veiled from them.' Heed the rest of the well-known *ḥadīth*, here unquoted.

[13] This technical term is used by Aḥsāʾī because these *maʿānī* are terms found in the Qurʾān.

ما قيل إنّ جميع العالم اسم الله تعالى وربما استدل على هذا بما في الكافي من حديث الأسماء (أن الله خلق اسماً بالحروف غير متصوّت، وباللفظ غير منطق إالى أن قال : فجعله كلمة تامة على أربعة أجزاء معا ليس واحد منها قبل الآخر فأظهر منها ثلاثة أسماء لفاقة الخلق إليها وحجب واحداً منها) الحديث.

So, if we say that the Ahlu'l-bayt are His like, we do not mean that they are like the divine essence, because that would be unbelief and godlessness (*kufr* and *zandaqa* respectively). We insist that they were created as signs pointing out by themselves and proving Him, just as the trace proves the attribute of the one who leaves the trace. From this standpoint, they are his *mathal* which is like the attribute (*ṣifa*) proving him, as the Imām ʿAlī, a.s., said: '[It is] an attribute which [only] indicates Him by discursive reason, not an attribute that utterly reveals Him.'

فإذا قلنا هم مثله لا نريد به مثل الذات لأن ذلك كفر وزندقة وإنما نريد أنهم خَلقَهم آيات يستدل بهم عليه كما يدل الأثر على صفة المؤثر من تلك الجهة، فهم مثله أي مِثل صفةٍ تدل عليه كما قال عليّ ع (صفةٌ استدلالٍ عليه لا صفة تكشف له)

We have mentioned this in a number of our treatises. So, be careful that you do not falsely imagine [*wahama*] that these two terms, whether *mithāl* or *mithl*, imply that there is similarity between Them and the [unknowable divine] Necessary Essence [*al-dhāt al-wājib*], exalted be 'His' essence from any likeness or from any likeness being coined for Him, between a created thing which is merely a trace and between the Act which is the operation of making a trace, and is therefore likened to it [not to the divine essence but to the divine Act/ *fiʿl*]. And everything that pertains to creatures, relation, explanation, consummation and description and knowing is according to this meaning. ʿAlī, a.s., alluded to it when he spoke about the transcendence of the essence, he, a.s., said: 'The created thing ends in its like and the one seeking refuge is drawn to what is familiar to [literally 'like'] him.' So, understand that the Ahlu'l-bayt are the Exalted Images [*al-mathal*/*al-muthul al-aʿlā*] with all the numerous meanings I have mentioned, whether through discrete intimation [*talwīḥ*] or explicit statement [*taṣrīḥ*]. (Aḥsāʾī 1999, Vol. I: 152)

وقد كررنا هذا المعنى في رسائلنا فإيّاك أن تتوهم إذا أطلق المَثَل بالتحريك أو بكسر الميم أن يراد بالمماثلة بينه وبين الذات الواجب تعالى ذاته عن المثل وعن ضرب المثل له إنما ذلك بين الشيء الذي هو الأثر وبين الفعل الذي به التأثير فالمماثلة له، وجميع ما يرد من الخلق من إضافة وبيان وانتهاء وتوصيف وتعريف كذلك وإلى هذا المعنى أشار علي ع في مقام تنزيه الذات قال ع (انتهى المخلوق إلى مثله وألجأه الطلب إلى شكله) فافهم فهم المَثَل الأعلى بكل معنى مما أشرنا إليه تلويحاًوتصريحاً.

The grammatical question that arises here is addressed by reference to ontology. The several members of the Ahluʾl-bayt are simultaneously single and multiple. As Shaykh Aḥmad says, 'they are a fire with fourteen flames' (Corbin 1971–1973, Vol. I: 205). What might be taken as 'a bad solecism' is, in reality, an instance of poetic licence, what I have translated as '[acceptable] exaggeration [*al-mubālagha*]', one that expresses this multiple singleness referred to in the *ḥadīth* cited from ʿAlī b. al-Ḥusayn. From this angle, whatever grammatical error may otherwise be detected is trumped by the philosophical, theological, and spiritual truth it points to: Muḥammad and the Ahlu'l-bayt represent severalness with regard to their individual identities, for example as *al-muthul*, but from the perspective of their role in divine manifestation, generation of the cosmos, and spiritual authority (*walāya*/ *wilāya*), they are one, *al-mathal*. Such oneness is retained and emphasised in both

vowellings by the use of the singular masculine adjective *al-aʿlā*, which acquires special authority because of its Qurʾānic provenance at both Q16:60 and Q30:27. In his commentary on Mullā Ṣadrā's *Kitāb al-mashāʿir* (*The Book of Divine Penetrations* [or *Apperceptions*]), Aḥsāʾī explicates this problem by citing a *ḥadīth* from the first Imām, ʿAlī: 'I am in relation to Muḥammad as light is related to light.' On this, Aḥsāʾī comments that

> This light is totally in Muḥammad, it is totally in the Imām ʿAlī, totally in Fāṭima, totally in the Imām Ḥasan, totally in the Imām Ḥusayn, and similarly in each of the Fourteen Most Pure. Because despite its multiplication [the light] is one. This is what They mean when they say: 'We are all Muḥammad. The first one among us is Muḥammad [i.e. the Prophet]. He who is in the middle is Muḥammad [i.e. al-Bāqir]. The last one among us is Muḥammad [i.e. al-Mahdī].' (Shīrāzī and Corbin 1982: 102, my translation from the French)

Corbin contextualises this statement by pointing to the special status of the universal in Aḥsāʾī's thought: 'a universal which carries particular exemplifications (*amthāl*), in each of which existence resides totally … This existence of all in each, this "monadology" is of capital importance for understanding Shīʿī imāmology' (Shīrāzī and Corbin 1982: 102, my translation from the French). A very brief word should also be said about how this unexpected vowelling and understanding of the Qurʾānic المثل الاعلي is an excellent and literal example of the manner in which the Qurʾān read by the Shīʿa is actually a different book even though it appears to be the same text. Without vowel marks and the esoteric understanding of the meaning outlined here – one that raises our grammatical problem – the text could not be suspected of referring to any but God. The meaning is thus hidden in plain view and, of course, hiddeness is a central sacrament of Shīʿism.

Metaphorical literalism: 'We are the Maʿānī and the Bayān'

The metaphorical process makes connections with the Unseen Realm that could not otherwise have been imagined. It substantiates and makes real to the mind the divine apophatic gap so central to Aḥsāʾī's teaching. It is aesthetically generative and edifying in that it brings into being substantial realities that function at the centre of life, whether spiritual or physical. Aḥsāʾī insists that each individual is responsible for their own metaphorical or spiritual growth (Lawson 2005: 146). To repeat the quotation at the head of this chapter, 'To understand metaphors, one must find meanings not predetermined by language, logic or experience' (Martin 2012: 863). Aḥsāʾī could not have said it better because this statement harmonises perfectly with his basic ontological philosophy. The situation here is the same one that conditioned the ideas of the Akhbāri philosopher Qāḍī Saʿīd al-Qummī (d. after 1107 AH/1696 CE) whose philosophical commentary on the Light Verse (Q 24:35) has recently been studied, especially with regard to the interrelationship between poetics and ontology, offering the following important insight about such literature and such readers: 'Each sensible reality is a *mathal,* an archetype in the visible

world. This metaphysical principle amounts to an exegetical principle, and the Qurʾān, in using sensible symbols, must of a necessity signify [cf. 'sign' (*āya*)] the invisible realities' (Jambet 2016: 585).[14] It is significant that the previously quoted report 'We are the *Bayān* and We are the *Maʿānī*', ascribed to the 8th-century Imām Muḥammad al-Bāqir in the 10th-century work by al-Kulaynī, appears to pertain to wider conversation about technical terminology for the science of poetic eloquence (*ʿilm al-balāgha*) that would not really be consolidated until the celebrated linguistic 'encyclopedia', the *Miftāḥ al-ʿulūm* of al-Sakkākī (d. 626 AH/1229 CE), whose third and final part is entitled, precisely, *ʿilm al-maʿānī waʾl-bayān* ('stylistics and theory of imagery') (Heinrichs 2012) or, more literally, 'the science of meanings and expressions'.[15] At this stage it seems plausible to suggest that what we are dealing with is metaphor, regardless of how the original Arabic words might otherwise be translated. The basic purpose of metaphor is to compare and contrast two things, the tenor with the vehicle. In dealing with the Imāms as *muthul* (plural of *mathal*) we have left behind, quite decisively, the realm of mere simile – *tashbīh*.

In the end, sublimity, as in the case of the sublime metaphors, *al-muthul al-ʿulyā/al-aʿlā*, or even *al-amthāl al-ʿulyā*, so important to Aḥsāʾī, indicates the open-endedness of human thought: that there is no end for imagination and no possibility for a final understanding of truth and/or reality (*al-ḥaqq*). Furthermore, it is up to individuals to engage for themselves in this metaphorical act of communion with the spiritual realm through the poetics of revelation.

In pointing this out, I wish to draw attention to one especially glaring methodological contradiction or *non sequitur* in the teaching of Aḥsāʾī: namely, that although he claims to rely for his philosophy only upon the Qurʾān and the *akhbār*, and that his elaboration should be seen as being in perfect harmony with the teachings and words of the Ahlu'l-bayt, it is also the case that his own intellectual culture had acquired a richness that would have been unimaginable at the time of the Imāms. We see, for example, many correspondences in the writings of earlier scholars, such as al-Qummī. And to continue the speculation about the (certainly crypto-) Ismāʾīlī influence on Aḥsāʾī, it is interesting to observe an equal harmony of thought (though no direct reference has yet been detected) with that of Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī (d. 548 AH/1153 CE), whose most well-known work, *The Book of Religious Communities and Beliefs* (*Kitāb al-milal wa al-niḥal*) is thought to have marked a beginning for the modern science of comparative religion. A recent study of his *tafsīr* (Mayer 2009) and Shahrastānī's disagreements with Avicenna (Mayer 2016) leave little room for uncertainty about his true Ismaʿīlī intellectual culture. With regard to the more purely ontological discussion, we find a remarkable confluence of method and concern with many of the same Qurʾānic verses as were marshalled earlier in this chapter, for example

[14] Translation of ' toute réalité sensible a un *mathal*, un archétype dans le monde invisible. Ce principe métaphysique vaut principe exégétique, et le Coran, usant de symboles sensibles, doit nécessairement signifier autant de réalités invisibles.'

[15] Many thanks to Dr Nasrin Askari for this suggestion.

Q2:17, 42:11, and 51:49. With regard to Q42:11, it is as if we are reading Aḥsāʾī all over again. Shahrastānī's ontology insists that all comparisons are incomplete and that no two things are alike – that nothing, much less God, has a likeness. As Toby Mayer writes:

> For Shahrastānī … existence is not to be viewed as a homogeneous reality encompassing all entities, including God; instead, in line with his commitment to the equivocity of being, he holds that each existent amounts to a separate, unique instance of being … his main motive in formulating his ontology is to underscore God's sheer transcendence and unknowability[. Shahrastānī writes]:
>
> 'His statement (exalted is He): "There is nothing as His likeness" (Qurʾān 42:11) does not entail affirming any likeness [for God]. Nay, since affirming any likeness whatsoever amongst existents is absurd, in relation to Him (exalted is He) it is even more fantastic and extreme in absurdity!' (Mayer 2016: 630)

How can someone whose education had been so enriched read the words of the 7th–9th-century Imāms without 'contaminating' the reading with anachronistic presuppositions and concepts that would have been quite unknown, if not to the Imāms themselves then at least to Their audience? One answer to a similar question was given by the illustrious Shīʿī scholar ʿAllāma Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabāʾī (d. 1402 AH/1981 CE) to the pioneer scholar of Shīʿism Henry Corbin (d. AH/1978 CE). During the early 1960s, the great French scholar asked the Shīʿī sage about the authenticity of the aforementioned *Nahj al-balāgha*, the much-loved collection of speeches and prayers ascribed to ʿAlī, the first Imām of the Shīʿa and fourth of the Rightly Guided (*rāshidūn*) Caliphs of Sunnī Islam, compiled during the 10th and 11th centuries by the leading Shīʿī scholar, al-Sharīf al-Raḍī (d. 406 AH/1015 CE). Corbin mentioned to the venerable philosopher that many western scholars doubt the ascription because of the obvious anachronisms in the text. Ṭabāṭabāʾī serenely responded: 'For us, whoever wrote the *Nahj al-balāgha* is ʿAlī, even if he lived a century ago' (Nasr 1981: 9).

By the time Aḥsāʾī composed his major works, he had, in addition to his other vast writings, produced focused and controversial commentaries on the highly technical philosophical works of Mullā Ṣadrā Shīrāzī and Muḥsin Fayḍ Kāshānī, among others, whose vast and deep intellectual culture was formed by the general scholastic and spiritual history of Islam, including philosophy and theology, both Sunnī and Shīʿī. God, for Aḥmad Aḥsāʾī, connects with the world through divine manifestations or, better translated, loci for the manifestations of divinity, *maẓāhir ilāhī*. Thus, the Ahlu'l-bayt, as the most holy of such manifestations, represent the height of what can be known positively of something corresponding to our word 'God'. The most apposite, effective, efficient means of indicating an unknown is, as it happens, the poetic device of metaphor. In the *akhbār*, there is a long tradition of this metaphorical method: the Imāms interpret the so-called divine names and attributes, which, from the point of view of the Qurʾān, should be seen as 'divine' metaphors. God is, after all, according to such statements as Q112:4 or Q42:11, quite beyond human comprehension:

Nothing is like Him (Q112:4)

وَلَمْ يَكُن لَّهُ كُفُوًا أَحَدٌ

> Creator of the heavens and the earth, He appointed for you spouses and made cattle in pairs. Do you not understand that there is nothing like even His likeness, while He is the All-Hearing the All-Seeing. (Q42:11)
>
> فَاطِرُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ ۚ جَعَلَ لَكُم مِّنْ أَنفُسِكُمْ أَزْوَاجًا وَمِنَ الْأَنْعَامِ أَزْوَاجًا ۖ يَذْرَؤُكُمْ فِيهِ ۚ لَيْسَ كَمِثْلِهِ شَيْءٌ ۖ وَهُوَ السَّمِيعُ الْبَصِيرُ

God may be indicated (not described or revealed) through 'signs' (*āyāt*), according to such statements as that found at Q41:53:

> Soon, We will cause them to behold Our signs in the outer horizons and in their own souls so that it becomes clear to them that it is the Truth. Is not your Lord sufficient above all things, a Witness?
>
> سَنُرِيهِمْ آيَاتِنَا فِي الْآفَاقِ وَفِي أَنفُسِهِمْ حَتَّىٰ يَتَبَيَّنَ لَهُمْ أَنَّهُ الْحَقُّ ۗ أَوَلَمْ يَكْفِ بِرَبِّكَ أَنَّهُ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ شَهِيدٌ

Figured apophaticism

Metaphorical literalism as a concept, and of which the preceding excerpts from Imāmī literature may be considered an instance, is a way of speaking to the polysemous nature of Scripture. One may see a trace of such metaphorical literalism in the celebrated Ashʿarite motto *bilā kayfa* ('without asking how'). That is, such references in the Qurʾān as God's hearing or God's seeing are not rationalised away. Rather, they are accepted as literally true in the discursive mode of 'without asking how this can possibly be' (Heath 2003; Ess 2012). Such reading does not cancel out whatever purely literal intent scriptural words may otherwise have, but encourages the reader to go beyond, to recognise that however true the statement 'Two plus two equals four' may be, it is at bottom 'tautological' precisely because it is simply another way of saying 'Four is two plus two' (Frye 1991: 17–18). Metaphorical literalism entails, among other things, the paradoxical potential of Scripture. As Northrop Frye (d. 1411 AH/1991 CE) says, 'Metaphors are paradoxical, and … we suspect that perhaps only in paradox are words doing the best they can for us' (Frye 1991: 69–72). It may be that, in the final analysis, it is the irresistible attraction and frisson of paradox that helps account for the Qurʾān's hold on the mind and renders it such an important element in what might be called 'soul formation'. At the base of this appeal is what is being petitioned here, also somewhat paradoxically: 'metaphorical literalism'.

Such verbal energy and power are very much at work in the writings of Aḥmad Aḥsāʾī. This energy reaches something of a crescendo when our author combines the two metaphorical 'founts' – the Qurʾān and the *akhbār* of the Imāms – in the course of his imaginative literalism to say something enduring about both texts and what may lie beyond them, in the realm – precisely – of the 'Imaginal': the

World of Images (*ʿālam al-mithāl*).[16] However, even before we reach the Imaginal Realm – Corbin's thoughtful translation of *ʿālam al-mithāl* (which he offered as an alternative to what he considered misleading translations such as 'imaginary world') we observe an extremely interesting development. It appears that there is something of a role reversal in the process of using the holy words of the Imāms to explain the Qurʾān, for in the Akhbārī *tafsīr* the words of the Qurʾān frequently explain the words of the Imāms as well. A blurring of the distinction between text and commentary emerges. Such a blurring calls to mind another important insight: in Shīʿism the angel of revelation is also the angel of interpretation – a paradox of the highest order (Corbin 1971–1972, Vol. IV: 360). This calls to mind another categorical reversal in which the real meaning – the *ḥaqīqī* meaning, of a love poem is actually the metaphor because only in this way can the 'true' love (i.e. God) be indicated. The *majāzī* meaning is just the reverse of what common sense would tell us. This is a poetic phenomenon well known to scholars of Islamic mystical literature, for which the Qurʾān may be thought to function as the first of many volumes (Schimmel 1975: 292–293; Heath 2003).

In the standard definition, a metaphor is a rhetorical or poetic figure that consists of two parts: (1) the tenor and (2) the vehicle. According to this definition, the introductory figure in the incomparable Light Verse, 'God is the light of the heavens and the earth', qualifies perfectly as a metaphor. Here 'God' – who or which, according to the Qurʾān, is utterly unknown and eternally unknowable (as in Q112, quoted earlier), despite the dozens of names and attributes ceaselessly voiced by the Qurʾān to refer to 'Him' – may be considered the tenor: that which was previously unknown. The subordinate qualifiers in this example, 'of the heavens and the earth', may be considered a subset of the vehicle, 'light'. But this is just the beginning; the entire verse may be considered a complex generative metaphor from start to finish precisely because the subject/tenor, which is, one might say, magnificently unknown, remains constant throughout. It will be helpful to quote the verse followed by an English translation.

اللهُ نُورُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ

God is the light of the heavens and the earth

مَثَلُ نُورِهِ كَمِشْكَاةٍ فِيهَا مِصْبَاح

the metaphor for His light is as if there were a niche in which there is a lamp

الْمِصْبَاحُ فِي زُجَاجَةٍ

the lamp inside a glass

الزُّجَاجَةُ كَأَنَّهَا كَوْكَبٌ دُرِّيٌّ

[16] Useful discussions and analyses of this realm, first contemplated by Avicenna, are Corbin (1972), Chittick (1994), and Lawson (2005).

this glass just like a glittering star

يُوقَدُ مِن شَجَرَةٍ مُّبَارَكَةٍ

kindled from a blessèd tree

زَيْتُونَةٍ لَّا شَرْقِيَّةٍ وَلَا غَرْبِيَّةٍ

an olive tree neither of the east nor of the west

يَكَادُ زَيْتُهَا يُضِيءُ وَلَوْ لَمْ تَمْسَسْهُ نَارٌ

whose oil would seem to shine of itself even though no fire touched it

نُّورٌ عَلَىٰ نُورٍ

Light upon Light

يَهْدِي اللَّهُ لِنُورِهِ مَن يَشَاءُ

God guides to His light whomever He wishes

وَيَضْرِبُ اللَّهُ الْأَمْثَالَ لِلنَّاسِ

thus God speaks to humanity [only] in metaphors

وَاللَّهُ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمٌ

God indeed is knower of all things

While the word *mathal*, translated here as 'metaphor', is not usually so understood, it nonetheless may be seen to function as such (Lane 1983, q.v. *mathal*; Sellheim et al. 2012). The normal words for 'metaphor' in Arabic, *majāz*, *kināya,* and *istiʿāra*, are technical terms that began to be elaborated in Arabic poetics long after the Qurʾān had been revealed. Needless to say, these words and others like them, such as *tashbīh* and *maʿānī*, are equally absent from the Qurʾān. If, however, we remain true to the pre-exegetical and prescholastic Qurʾānic 'theory of God, revelation, and humanity', it emerges that we have no choice but to think of the figures in the Light Verse as metaphors in our common understanding of that poetic technical term (Lawson 2020; Hajjaji-Jarrah 2005; Heath 2003). According to the Qurʾān, God is utterly unknowable and, from that point of view, remote. Again, Q 112:4 may be thought especially eloquent on God's unknowable uniqueness: وَلَمْ يَكُن لَّهُ كُفُوًا أَحَدٌ ('there is none like Him'). But, as we have repeatedly seen, numerous other passages reiterate this cardinal principle of what theologians call the Qurʾān's relentless apophaticism. Qurʾān 42:11 explicitly states:

> Maker of the heavens and the earth, He provided for your souls spouses and for cattle pairs, by this means He causes you to multiply. *There is nothing like his likeness* [i.e. He has no corresponding *zawj* and He does not multiply]. He is the All-Hearing the All-Seeing.

فَاطِرُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ ۚ جَعَلَ لَكُم مِّنْ أَنفُسِكُمْ أَزْوَٰجًا وَمِنَ ٱلْأَنْعَٰمِ أَزْوَٰجًا ۖ يَذْرَؤُكُمْ فِيهِ ۚ لَيْسَ كَمِثْلِهِۦ شَىْءٌ ۖ وَهُوَ ٱلسَّمِيعُ ٱلْبَصِيرُ

At the same time, and, in the context, quite miraculously, God is closer to human beings than their jugular vein (Q50:16):

> It was We Who created the human and We know what dark suggestions his soul makes to him. You see, We are closer to him than the jugular vein.

وَلَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا ٱلْإِنسَٰنَ وَنَعْلَمُ مَا تُوَسْوِسُ بِهِۦ نَفْسُهُۥ ۖ وَنَحْنُ أَقْرَبُ إِلَيْهِ مِنْ حَبْلِ ٱلْوَرِيدِ

It should be recalled that from the very beginning (of the *Muṣḥaf*,[17] that is), the Qurʾān warns the reader of this potentially frustrating theological predicament. In the first three verses of Sūrat al-Baqara, the Qurʾān's uncompromising metaphorical regime is made clear:

> Alif Lām Mīm (Q2:1)

ا ل م٢:١

> That/This is the writing in which there is no doubt, a guide to the devout (Q2:2)

ذَٰلِكَ الْكِتَابُ لَا رَيْبَ فِيهِ هُدًى لِّلْمُتَّقِينَ٢:٢

> Those who believe in the Unseen, are steadfast in worship and share what We have provided them (Q2:3)

الَّذِينَ يُؤْمِنُونَ بِالْغَيْبِ وَيُقِيمُونَ الصَّلَاةَ وَمِمَّا رَزَقْنَاهُمْ يُنفِقُونَ٢:٣

Thus the Qurʾān describes itself, in a typical gesture of self reflection, as being only for those who consider the realm of the unknown and unknowable – 'the Unseen' (*al-ghayb*) – as absolutely real: real in a way that apparent reality is not. The Qurʾān's noetic or epistemic tension begins to take form: knowledge of God according to the Qurʾān is not hopeless. However, it is knowledge that will be gained in a way totally different from that with which knowledge of the seen, visible world is gained. Thus, we get closer to a clear understanding of what is meant by metaphorical literalism.

Metaphorical literalism

The term metaphorical literalism was coined by Frye to describe and analyse the workings of the Bible, which he characterises in *The Great Code* as 'a single, gigantic complex metaphor' (Frye 1982: 63). In his last book, *The Double Vision* (Frye 1991: *passim*, esp. 69–74), he meditates at length on something he calls

[17] The Islamic tradition acknowledges that the Qurʾān must be thought of as existing in two modes or forms: (1) as *Tanzīl*, chronological, beginning with the verses revealed earliest (this book is largely theoretical); and (2) the compiled and collected form, the *Muṣḥaf*, in use today, in which the chronological order is in some ways reversed (Lawson 2017).

spiritual language, which, he argues, can only be metaphorical. This is a theme found throughout Frye's work, and though his primary focus is the Bible, especially in his later work, there is a clear resonance in his approach with Qurʾānic studies (Lawson 2017: xi–xxvi and *passim*). Briefly, what might be called the aporetic structure of metaphor haunts figuration. The tenor is never perfectly known or perceived through the vehicle, as in the example cited earlier from the Qurʾān, 'God is the light of the heavens and the earth' – or, on a less explicitly religious level, in the form of simile, Robert Burns' 'O my Luve is like a red, red rose' (Burns 1900).[18] Both statements have in common a reader response acknowledging that not everything that could be known about the tenor is thus expressed: God is not only 'the light of the heavens and the earth' and 'My Luve' is not only 'like a red, red rose'. Both are much more than such figures say or, in fact, can ever say. Thus, the tenor transcends the capability of the metaphor to describe it fully. Therefore, the metaphor has a unique role in language, and especially spiritual or religious language. Through its form, structure, and verbal content, it functions as a (meta-) metaphor for transcendence (cf. Hills 2016; Martin 2012; Martin 2013) and for the growth or expansion of consciousness (Ricoeur 1978, 2000). Such renders the figure exceedingly powerful and, at the same time, renders it remarkably appropriate for the distinctively apophatic Qurʾānic discourse about God (on which see Bausani 1972; for a lucid discussion of transcendence in a Shīʿī context, see Cole 1982).

When Frye refers to the Bible as a 'single … metaphor', one understands this statement to be applicable also to the Qurʾān. which comes to its readers (humanity) from an unknowable, utterly transcendent God through a process it calls 'revelation' (*tanzīl*, *waḥy*) and through which revelation establishes a pattern of relations and categories – literariness – that gives the reader an enhanced sense of who this unknowable God could be and how this suprarational process called revelation works. The understanding that thus emerges depends precisely upon what Frye calls imaginative or metaphorical literalism (Frye 1991: 69), something that is precisely the opposite of what is used to describe fundamentalism, which Frye refers to elsewhere as 'demonic literalism' (Frye 1991: 18) and which gives us insight into just how the words of the Qurʾān and the Imāms, to use another Frygian 'biblical studies' term, 'hang together' (Frye 1982: 151).

The World of Images

I have tried to demonstrate that this basic understanding of metaphor also functions in Aḥsāʾī's thought, with special regard to his use of language. Such language may be more deeply appreciated when we consider briefly his doctrine of the Imaginal Realm or World of Images, the *ʿālam al-mithāl*. This is the realm

[18] A simile, after all, may simply be seen as another mode of metaphor (Martin 2012: 864–865).

or region of the cosmos in which 'spiritual realities become material and material realities become spiritual' (Corbin 1977: 177; see more recently Chittick 2013: 317). It is an inter-realm, corresponding in some ways to consciousness itself, where, in this case, a scriptural image acquires reality. This realm accomplishes numerous tasks and may be thought to function in broader philosophical and scientific discourse as axiom (Chittick 1994). By means of it, for example, the otherwise 'scientifically' untenable postulates such as bodily resurrection, the ascension of the Prophet, and – especially for the Twelve-Imām Shīʿa, the unnaturally long life of the Hidden Imām – are explained and made reasonable (Corbin 1977: *passim*; Lawson 2005). Such a realm as the World of Images seems also to harmonise with another observation of our literary critic, Frye, when, in his revisionist and influential study of William Blake, he observes that the visionary or prophet lives in a spiritual realm where normal objects have become 'transfigured' into symbols (Frye 1947: 8).

Sacramental poetics

There are no sacraments in Islam. The terminology, long associated with an invasive and sometimes hostile or phobic *Kulturkampf*, may even be felt as repellent. However, in line with the general teaching of the Muslim philosophical theologian and visionary Aḥmad Aḥsāʾī, we hold in suspension such reactions and consider the idea of sacrament separated from those otherwise unavoidable and unpleasant cultural and religious associations. A sacrament (a translation into Church Latin meaning 'to hallow or consecrate' from the Greek *musterion* ['mystery']) serves to make present or felt the otherwise invisible and intangible – that is to say transcendent, divine presence or tranquillity. This would seem to be a fair description of what might be thought the 'sacramental poetics' (Perkin 2003: 195, 197) of both the Qurʾān and the *akhbār* of the Imāms. Such is indicated, for just one example, in the Qurʾānic word *al- sakīna* ('divine indwelling, presence', 'tranquility' (السَّكِينَةَ); Q2:248, 9:26, 9:40, 48:4, 48:18, 48:26); for another understanding of this word, see Stewart (2021). But possibly the most instructive example of *sakīna* suggesting an idea of the sacramental in Islam is in the chanting of the Qurʾān itself, during which time, as the Prophet has said, the divine tranquillity (*sakīna*) descends to be experienced by the believer. Thus, in Bukhārī (*The Virtues of the Qurʾān*, no. 5011), we read:

> Narrated al-Baraʾ:
>
> A man was reciting Surat al-Kahf and his horse was tied with two ropes beside him. A cloud came down and spread over that man, and it kept on coming closer and closer to him till his horse started jumping (as if afraid of something). When it was morning, the man came to the Prophet, and told him of that experience. The Prophet (ﷺ) said,

> 'That was the divine tranquility which descended because of (the recitation of) the Qurʾān.'[19]
>
> حَدَّثَنَا عَمْرُو بْنُ خَالِدٍ، حَدَّثَنَا زُهَيْرٌ، حَدَّثَنَا أَبُو إِسْحَاقَ، عَنِ الْبَرَاءِ، قَالَ كَانَ رَجُلٌ يَقْرَأُ سُورَةَ الْكَهْفِ وَإِلَى جَانِبِهِ حِصَانٌ مَرْبُوطٌ بِشَطَنَيْنِ فَتَغَشَّتْهُ سَحَابَةٌ فَجَعَلَتْ تَدْنُو وَتَدْنُو وَجَعَلَ فَرَسُهُ يَنْفِرُ فَلَمَّا أَصْبَحَ أَتَى النَّبِيَّ صلى الله عليه وسلم فَذَكَرَ ذَلِكَ لَهُ فَقَالَ ' تِلْكَ السَّكِينَةُ تَنَزَّلَتْ بِالْقُرْآنِ '.

With this last citation, we come closest to what differentiates a Christian sacrament from an Islamic or Islamicate one.[20] In Islam, unlike in Christianity, operations that resemble sacrament do not require a specially trained professional to administer them. The sacramental experience – that is, a sense of divine presence, tranquillity, or intimacy – may be achieved by the individual through their own private devotions, such as reading the Qurʾān. Indeed, the Islamic understanding of history may be seen as a sacramental (and quite universal) operation or process in which God, from the beginning, has 'connected' with the world through prophets and messengers. The otherwise unknowable God has from the beginning sought to make himself known through the process of revelation to every human community that has ever existed (Q10:47). With the descent of this revelation, the divine spirit also descends (note the use of *anzala allāh* ('God sent down') in five of the six verses quoted) through those chosen to bear the message: the prophets and the messengers, each of whom has been sent to his community in his own language.

To return to the Qurʾān itself, Hodgson has eloquently observed that its form and contents are unique in religious literature, and it functions as devotional text in which affirming its message 'constitutes an act of worship'. 'Its very narratives are not written in the form of stories but in the form of brief, discontinuous statements, holding before the mind the relevance of stories already known or elsewhere explained' (Hodgson 1960: 61; Smith 1959: 47–49), and thus inducing deep engagement with the 'sacred substance' of the words.

Again, a large part of this message is precisely the unknowableness of God and therefore the wondrousness of learning anything at all about 'Him' and the way 'He' works. This remarkable reading experience depends upon imaginative or metaphorical literalism in which each element of the language of the Qurʾān is acknowledged to be divine and so must be received with the highest degree of regard: even if the message is frequently unclear, obscure, or mysterious, there is no doubt that the message being experienced and its discerned challenge are truth (*al-ḥaqq*) from the unseen realm (*al-ghayb*).

[19] https://sunnah.com/bukhari:5011 (accessed 30 June 2024).

[20] 'Islamicate' is a doubly adjectival term on the pattern of 'Italianate', coined by Marshall Hodgson in order to avoid distracting problems of normativity and 'orthodoxy' when speaking of religious and cultural phenomena ranging over the entire Islamic world. If something is referred to as 'Islamic' it may be understood also to be universally adhered to or deemed 'religious' by the entire Muslim world. 'Islamicate' better suits the 'situation on the ground' (Hodgson 1974, Vol. I: 57–60).

Conclusion: Light upon light

العَجزُ عَن دَركِ الإدراكِ إدراكُ وَالبُحثُ عَن سِرّ ذاتِ السِرّ إشراك

في سِر وائِر همّاتِ الوَرى هِمَمٌ عَن دَركِها عَجزَت جِنٌّ وَأَملاكُ

The first half of the first line of the above poem, here ascribed to the Imām ʿAlī (n.d.), may be translated as 'The awareness of the inability to understand is true understanding.'

This verse is also sometimes ascribed to Abū Bakr, as in the case of Ibn ʿArabī in his celebrated *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* (Austin 1980: 65). What it succeeds in communicating, along the lines of a metaphor, is that an overwhelming of light can inhibit perception just as much as darkness can (cf. e.g. Q24:36). And, in light of the rigorous apophatic ontology in and with which Aḥsāʾī was working, it may be best to come to a (temporary) conclusion that perhaps God is manifest in the unknowableness in all things. A *mathal*, whatever else it might be, is also a word (*kalima*). And, as the following report suggests, all words are metaphors, as the sixth Imām, Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq (d. 148 AH/765 CE) said:

> The Name of God [literally *allāh*] is other than Him. For everything to which the name of a thing is applicable is a creation, hence other than God. For whatever the tongue expresses, or is worked on by the hand, is a creation ... everything described is created, and the Creator of things cannot be described within the limits of a named object. Allāh has ninety-nine Names … If the Name were the Named, then every one of the Names would be a god. But Allāh is the one meaning [or 'spiritual reality' (*maʿnā*)] indicated by the Names, and all of them are other than Him. (Shah-Kazemi 2006: 179, citing al-Kulaynī, *al-Kāfī*)

In this spiritually rarified poetic context, it is difficult to know what is more important – the linguistic predicament, or God and the Imāms. In such a realm it is not difficult to see how such confusion – or, better, 'astonishment'[21] – indicated in the phrase 'Light upon Light' can come about. In this storm of light it may be difficult to discern who or what is the tenor and who or what is the vehicle – each is tinged by the other. Yet, as Shahrastānī makes clear in the following quotation, such associations require a third element, which by virtue of its essential (!) role remains utterly intangible and transcendent: 'Shahrastānī evidently favours an argument for God's unicity based on the supposition that paired-up entities need an agent to pair them, thus the ultimate agent of all pairing must not itself be treated in turn as if within a paired relationship' (Mayer 2016: 622). In such a way, these rhetorical and poetic figures may be seen to function a bit like an icon triptych in which the middle screen is absolutely blank. The importance of a 'middle term' in the remarkable motive of duality and opposition in the Qurʾān has been discussed as the conceptual space between such pairings (Lawson 2017: 76–93). This, together with the understanding of metaphor elaborated by Paul Ricoeur in which he points to the

[21] Cf. the well-known ascription to the Prophet: زدني فيك تحيراً ('Increase my astonishment in Thee, O Lord!), as quoted, for example by Ibn ʿArabī (1400/1980, Vol. I: 55).

instrumentality of *epoché* in his analysis of the functioning of metaphor (Ricoeur 2000: 248–249, *passim*), may be seen to carry some of the same functionality and characteristics of such a 'blank screen'.

The role reversal mentioned earlier may also be related to Aḥsāʾī's celebrated ontology in which he reversed the classical terms of hylomorphism (Hamid 2019: 110) so that matter is seen as spiritual, while form is understood as material. If the Imāms shed light on the nature of God, however faint that light may ultimately be, then this blank screen also sheds its, in the context, rather interesting light on the Imāms.

The celebration of the Imāms is also a celebration of language. The world for Aḥsāʾī is a text (Cole 1994), and he likens, as did many before him, the cosmogonic process to writing, beginning with the point (*nuqṭa*), then the *alif*, then all the letters (*ḥurūf*), and finally the utterance (*lafẓ*): 'a complete word is composed of all the letters of existence' (Hamid 1998: 139). Celebrating the relationship between God and the Imāms is celebrating language, and celebrating language is celebrating life and those animals who speak, otherwise known as humanity. In such a context, it is also quite easy to see how language functions as a metaphor for itself (Hills 2016). This metaphorical activity is deeply involved in what some refer to as 'soul formation' and others might just as easily refer to as consciousness.

While it is traditional to think of the tenor as the focus of the metaphorical 'quest', in the course of the highly dynamic literary, metaleptic, and poetic *process* known as metaphor, other things may happen. The more we know about 'the red, red rose', the more we will know about 'my Luve', certainly. But, Aḥsāʾī's exploration and explication of the originally Qurʾānic figure, 'the sublimest images', produces in our consciousness a radical insight. What emerges from our reading of his hybrid analysis, which depends upon several types of scholarly disciplines (*ʿulūm*): Qurʾān, *ḥadīth*, *balāgha*, *kalām*, *falsafa*, and experience – i.e. Sufism (however disguised as *ʿIrfān*) –[22] is that not only do the Imāms, through their words, the *akhbār*, make simultaneously clearer and more remote what the word God, in all its unknowableness, implies. But this word 'God' also makes clearer what is meant by 'the Imāms'. The metaphorical quest, in the end, is a quest for certitude (*yaqīn*) – a kind of salvation (*al-najā* / النجاة) or immortality (*al-baqāʾ* / البقاء), and it is considerably furthered through metaphorical literalism. Here, language is a metaphor for language and its inexhaustible poetic and creative power which is, in turn, another metaphor for You [do not] Know Who and the way 'He' works. Light upon Light. Such meaning (*maʿnā*) is quite independent of dictionaries.

> To Him applies only the ever more exalted image (Q30:27)[23]
>
> ولله المثل الاعلى

[22] Such a combination is what Aḥsāʾī's scholarly tradition refers to as *ʿIrfān*, a word that is frequently translated as Gnosis. What it represents is 'recognition' and 'awareness' of reality (*al-ḥaqq*), which in turn is symbolised by the idea of God and 'His' relation to the world and his creation, chiefly humanity.

[23] We have not broached in this chapter the obvious and important etymological/lexical and therefore potentially *maʿnawī* connection between *Aʿlā* and *ʿAlī*, especially as the name of the first Imām, and its implications.

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