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## The Problem of Listless Lovers in al-Qushayri's Lata'if al-isharat

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## The Problem of Listless Lovers in al-Qushayrī's *Lata'if al-isharat*

A talk given at the "New Approaches to the Qur'an and Exegesis" conference held at George Mason University, October 23-24, 2010

Kristin Zahra Sands

The trope of the lover and the beloved is a common one in mystical traditions. In the Islamic form of mysticism which is most frequently referred to in English as Sufism, there are countless texts replete with poetry about lovers and discussions on the nature of what is understood to be the only true love. While intellectual discourse, ritual practice, and religious law are given their due in these texts, it is the experiences of longing and finding, separation and union that animate them. The thirteenth century Persian poet Jalāl al-Dīn al-Rūmī wrote, "Save love, save love, we have no other work."<sup>1</sup> As evidenced by the popularity of English translations of Rūmī in the United States, this clearly makes for an attractive form of spirituality. But what is the relationship between this kind of Sufi love mysticism, and reading and understanding the Qur'ān? Can we speak of a hermeneutic of spiritual love or desire? Rūmī himself writes of approaching the Qur'ān like a new bride. If you try to tear off her veil, she will recoil from you. One needs instead to woo her.<sup>2</sup> But what exactly would this wooing entail? And what happens when one initially feels desire but then gets tired of wooing? Although Rūmī's metaphor does not address these questions, there is a work that precedes his by some two hundred years that provides very practical guidance in the art of courting meaning.

The work I am referring to is the Qur'ānic commentary written by the eleventh century Sufi master and scholar, Abū'l-Qāsim Qushayrī (d.465/1072), the *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt* (Subtle Allusions).<sup>3</sup> In addition to being a spiritual guide and a scholar, Qushayrī was also a man of letters, an *adīb*, a fact which is amply illustrated by his extensive use of poetry and rhymed prose in his commentary. Although Qushayrī was not the first exegete to use these literary forms in the *tafsīr* genre, he was one of the first to greatly expand their rhetorical possibilities.<sup>4</sup> In writing the *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, Qushayrī greatly de-emphasized

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Annemarie Schimmel, *The Triumphal Sun* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993, p. 332). Schimmel states that the line is from *Kolliyāt-e Shams yā Divān-e kabīr*, ed. Badi 'Ozzamān Faruzānfar, 1475/15557 (Tehran 1957). The Persian is *bi-juz 'ishq bi-juz 'ishq digar kār nadārīm* ([www.parset.com](http://www.parset.com), accessed August 26, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Rūmī's *Fihī mā fihī* (229/236-237), translated by William C. Chittick in *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1983, p. 273).

<sup>3</sup> The study here is based on the six volume printed edition edited by Ibrāhīm Basyūnī (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-'Arabī, 1968-71).

<sup>4</sup> The use of poetry for philological information is common place in Qur'ānic commentaries such as the *Jāmi' al-bayān 'an ta'wīl āy Qur'ān* of Abū Ja'far al-Ṭabarī (d. 923). On the other hand, the *tafsīr* attributed to the Sufi Sahl al-Tustarī (d.896) includes a few poems cited entirely for their content and aesthetic quality (See Annabel Keeler and Ali Keeler's translation of *Tafsīr al-Tustarī*, Fons Vitae 2011. Also available online at [altafsir.com](http://altafsir.com)). Sahl al-Tustarī's citation of poetry precedes what Walid Saleh refers to as the revolutionary

the scholarly norms of *tafsīr* in favor of a literary style he seems to have found more suitable for providing spiritual guidance (*irshād*) to Sufi aspirants.<sup>5</sup> It is noteworthy as well that his commentary follows the Qur’ān line by line, rather than focusing on just those Qur’ānic verses which would seem to be most conducive to mystical interpretation. In following the shifting ethical, legal, theological and metaphysical content of the Qur’ān, Qushayrī demonstrates connections between outward modes of behavior, attitudes and virtues, spiritual practice and knowledge. Although the *Laṭā’if al-ishārāt* can be read as an anthology of Sufi interpretations on the Qur’ān, a close reading of the commentary reveals Qushayrī’s primary objective to be that of teaching aspirants how to read and interpret God’s signs themselves. What this entails is not the mastering of esoteric code but rather the cultivation of a certain way of being that makes one receptive to intimate knowledge of the Real (*al-ḥaqq*), Qushayrī’s preferred term for God.

### Qushayrī’s audience

To better understand how Qushayrī teaches this art, we need to start by identifying his intended audience. The Muslims Qushayrī seeks to guide with the *Laṭā’if al-ishārāt* are those who feel drawn to the spiritual path (*ṭarīqa*) beyond ordinary Muslim practice and belief. What distinguishes these people from other Muslims is their possession of what Qushayrī and other Sufi writers refer to as “spiritual desire” (*irāda*).<sup>6</sup> Those who begin the path of Sufi discipleship are called “those who desire” (*murīdūn*) because this is their key characteristic. The spiritual desire of those on the beginning of the path, however, is rarely like that of those who have matured on it. Qushayrī refers to the latter more frequently as lovers (*muḥibbūn*), and to those with the greatest level of intimacy as the

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use of poetry *qua* poetry in *al-Kashf wa’l-bayān ‘an tafsīr al-Qur’ān* by al-Tha’labī (d.1035), but doesn’t really challenge his categorization of it, since there seems to be little evidence that any exegete before Tha’labī took on the “sacralization of *adab* literature” to the extent that he did (W. Saleh, *The Formation of the Classical Tafsīr Tradition: The Qur’ān Commentary of Al-Tha’labī*, Leiden: Brill, 2004). Qushayrī, who is known to have met Tha’labī in Nishapūr, not only continues this ‘sacralization’ of *adab* literature but makes it central to his commentary. For more on Qushayrī’s use of *adab* as an exegetical tool, see Kristin Zahra Sands, ‘On the Subtleties of Method and Style in the *Laṭā’if al-ishārāt* of Qushayrī’ in the *Journal of Sufi Studies* 2 (2013), 7-16.

<sup>5</sup> For the role of Sufi commentary on the Qur’ān as spiritual guidance (*irshād*), see Annabel Keeler’s *Sufi Hermeneutics: The Qur’an Commentary of Rashīd al-Dīn Maybudī* (London: Oxford University Press, 2006) and “Sūfī *tafsīr* as a Mirror: Qushayrī the *murshīd* in his *Laṭā’if al-ishārāt*” in *Journal of Qur’anic Studies*, 8:1, 2006, 1-21.

<sup>6</sup> Qushayrī does not use the Arabic word for passionate love (*‘ishq*) in his descriptions of the desire humans feel for the divine, confining himself instead to the less controversial Arabic words *maḥabba* and *irāda*. However, this does not mean that he is thinking of a less intense form of longing. In his section on “Spiritual Desire” (*bāb al-irāda*) in his *Risāla*, al-Qushayrī writes, “The real meaning of [*irāda*] is the rushing of the heart to seek the Real (*al-ḥaqq*), glory be to Him. Because of this, it is said it is an anguish of love which overrides every fear” (Qushayrī, *Risāla*, ed. ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd and Maḥmūd b. al-Sharīf, Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Ḥadīth, Vol. 2, p. 435). For a complete English translation of Qushayrī’s *Risāla*, see *Al-Qushayrī’s Epistle on Sufism*, translated by Alexander D. Knysh (Reading, United Kingdom: Garnet, 2007).

“friends of God” (*awliyā’ Allāh*). What is the relationship between these aspirants, lovers and friends of God, and the Qur’ān? Qushayrī answers this question by telling us that the Qur’ān is the book of lovers, but he defines the Qur’ān in two ways: it is both the outwardly revealed text in Arabic that we can listen to or read, and the more hidden Qur’ān which has been inscribed in the hearts of God’s friends in their faith, knowledge, love and goodness.<sup>7</sup> These very rare individuals are the living embodiment of the Qur’ān. The Qur’ān for Qushayrī, then, is both the Arabic text as it was revealed to Muhammad in seventh century Arabia and something that continues to be written into the hearts of a select few.

What about those who are not of this status? Qushayrī compares those who are sincere and mature in their love of God to a lover who receives messages from a beloved that help ease the pain of separation. Commenting on the phrase “*that Book*” which occurs in Qur’ānic verse 2:2,<sup>8</sup> Qushayrī cites a poem in which the messages of revelation are compared to love letters strewn about the bed of one who is heartsick:

*Your writing is all around me,  
it doesn’t leave my bed.  
There is healing in it for that  
which I am concealing.*<sup>9</sup>

Qushayrī speaks here of the Qur’ān and its lovers, but he is nonetheless very well aware that his readers are not mature lovers. If their response to the Qur’ān *was* that of eager lovers, they would have little need for his advice. Rather, the tone and content of his commentary overall suggests that he understands and talks primarily with those who are still raw and limited in their spiritual experiences. In citing this poem, he is telling them that their relationship to the Qur’ān and the seeking of its meanings is not like the scholarly pursuit of meaning. Nor is it the transmission of esoteric information from one individual to another. Rather, the method here – if, in fact, one can speak of it as a method at all – is an unexpected one, for it consists of nothing more than a person in love eagerly awaiting new messages from their beloved and treasuring the old. Longing is the key component in receiving this kind of meaning, and the challenge is therefore one of constancy in desire rather than exertion of effort or intelligence. Qushayrī repeatedly

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<sup>7</sup> Qushayrī, *Laṭā’if al-ishārāt*, commentary on Qur’ānic verse 2:2.

<sup>8</sup> The phrase is interpreted in other *tafsīr* works as referring to either the Qur’ān, the verses revealed up to the point of the revelation of Qur’ānic verse 2:2, or to all the books revealed to prophets.

<sup>9</sup> Although some of the poems in the *Laṭā’if al-ishārāt* are Qushayrī’s own, most are them can be traced to Sufis or secular poets who lived before Qushayrī and are quoted without attribution. Aḥmad Amīn Muṣṭafā has done extensive work locating the original sources for many of these poems in his *Takhrij abyāt Laṭā’if al-ishārāt lil-Imām Qushayrī wa dirāsāt al-manhaj Qushayrī fī’l-istishhād al-adabī* (Cairo: Maṭba’at al-Sa’āda, 1986). He was unable to find another source for the lines quoted here, other than the *Risāla* of Qushayrī (Muṣṭafā no. 2, p. 103).

states that sincerity and commitment are everything here, and to lose one's desire is to lose the only value one brings to the spiritual path.<sup>10</sup> When the Qur'ān (2:19) compares those who ignore the divine message to fearful people putting their fingers in their ears to avoid hearing thunder, Qushayrī responds in his commentary with another metaphor, citing a poem comparing the noble lover to one who has grown tired of his romantic affair:

*Truly when the noble one  
gives you his love,  
he veils the ugly  
and brings the beautiful to light.*

*But when the one who is tired  
wants to break things off,  
he becomes weary of being together  
and says, 'That was that'.<sup>11</sup>*

Here Qushayrī is comparing the deep receptivity of lovers, who find nothing but beauty in what comes to them from the beloved, to the fatigue and resistance of one who has fallen out of love. But the weary lover is Qushayrī's audience – he speaks to those who have entered the spiritual path full of desire but then have experienced the waxing and waning of this desire, and perhaps fear its dying out altogether.<sup>12</sup> The problem, as he explains it, is a serious one because listless lovers cannot hear the words of God. He writes:

Anyone whose spiritual desire (*irāda*) has become weak has a barrier between him and the intimate communications of nearness and whispered confidences.<sup>13</sup>

The objective of Qushayrī's commentary is to advise spiritual aspirants in the ways of protecting and cultivating the spiritual desire that makes them receptive to messages from

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<sup>10</sup> Qushayrī writes in his commentary on Qur'ānic verse 3:152, "The value of each person is his desire (*irāda*)."

<sup>11</sup> Muṣṭafā found the lines cited here in the collection *Muḥāḍarāt al-'Uḍabā'* but without attribution (Muṣṭafā, no. 5, p. 112).

<sup>12</sup> As in Qushayrī's commentary on Qur'ānic verse 2:17, which speaks of the "likeness of one who kindled a fire, and when it illumined all about him God took away their light and left them in the darkness, unable to see" (The English translation quoted here and throughout this article is that of the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2007). Qushayrī comments: "The allusion in this verse is to one who has a beautiful beginning travelling the path of spiritual desire (*ṭariq al-irāda*). He toils for a time and endures one adversity after another. He then returns to this world after having reached the truth and reverts to the darknesses of human nature within him. His stem sprouted but did not bear fruit. His branch blossomed but did not ripen. He hastened the eclipse of listlessness over the moons of His presence..."

<sup>13</sup> Qushayrī, *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, commentary on Qur'ānic verse 2:10.

the divine. The relaying of messages Qushayrī has himself received regarding Qur’ānic meanings, or the messages received by other Sufis before him, are not, in and of themselves, the point of his commentary – reading the love letters of others is a poor substitute for receiving them oneself. Rather, the point is to show spiritual aspirants how to develop their own relationship with the divine.

### **Protecting spiritual desire**

If weak spiritual desire creates a barrier to receiving information, then the first task, and the ongoing task, must be to protect this spiritual desire. If the fire has died down from one’s initial enthusiasm for the path, the glowing embers must not be allowed to die out altogether. According to Qushayrī, the surest way to end one’s spiritual path is to fall back into ordinary ways of thinking and behaving. He repeatedly warns that spiritual desire (*irāda*) cannot co-exist with one’s former habits (*āda*). Anyone who tries to combine the two will find their effort ruined and their resolve blocked.

Just as no individual can be both a hypocrite and one who submits his entire self (*muslim*), no individual can be desirous of the Real and remain with the precepts of the people of habit. Verily spiritual desire and ordinary ways of thinking and behaving are opposites, and it is necessary to distinguish things which are opposites and to distance yourself from that which has no relation to you.<sup>14</sup>

The protection of spiritual desire entails the abandonment of what Qushayrī describes as “habit” (*āda*) and the cultivation of alternative ways of being. What he means by “habit” here is the default position<sup>15</sup> of most human beings in which their appetites and need for comfort<sup>16</sup> are paramount. In this default position, there is a persistent preoccupation with what one has or doesn’t have, and with what one likes and doesn’t like. There is anxiety about what has passed and what is to come, and worry about the opinions of others. Despite all this worry and concern, however, there is an accommodation with one’s self in adhering to the rather minimal requirements of being a “good person”.<sup>17</sup> The state overall is that of reasonably socialized and decent human beings, including ordinary believers. Qushayrī’s urgency in distinguishing between spiritual desire and habit does not stem from salvific concerns,<sup>18</sup> but rather from what he calls the more immediate and more intense punishment of separation<sup>19</sup> for those whose objective is intimacy.

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<sup>14</sup> Qushayrī, *Laṭā’if al-ishārāt*, commentary on Qur’ānic verse 4:91.

<sup>15</sup> One of the meanings of the Arabic verb *āda* is “to revert”.

<sup>16</sup> Two words that Qushayrī uses repeatedly to refer to what might be called human “comfort zones” are “familiar things” (*musākanāt*) and “familiar territories” (*awṭān*).

<sup>17</sup> Qushayrī continually distinguishes between the basic requirements of following religious law (*sharī‘a*) and the higher standards demanded on the spiritual path (*ṭarīqa*).

<sup>18</sup> As compared to Tha’labī (see Saleh, pgs. 108-29).

<sup>19</sup> As Qushayrī says in his commentary on Qur’ānic verse 3:188, “What punishment is more intense than being returned to creation and veiled from the Real?”

For those who feel this urgency, he has several suggestions on how to keep the flame of spiritual desire strong. Perhaps the simplest one is to avoid the dilution of spiritual desire that comes from mixing it with other desires:

Whoever has confused his ultimate objective (*qaṣd*) with his luck in this world (*ḥazz*), and mixed his spiritual desire (*irāda*) with his shallow desire (*hawā*), taking one step forward with spiritual desire and one step backward with worldly concerns and following the lower self – he is neither a sincere spiritual aspirant (*murīd*) nor permanently neglectful (*ghāfil*).<sup>20</sup>

According to Qushayrī, the energy spent in preoccupation with one's needs, wants and appetites causes fatigue and the suspension of spiritual aspirations.<sup>21</sup> In contrast, the lover's energy is entirely directed towards the beloved, and he therefore makes light of his own concerns.<sup>22</sup> The spiritual aspirant, then, would do well to demonstrate his sincerity by abandoning all concerns other than those that relate to seeking the beloved. Qushayrī compares this spiritual quest to making pilgrimage to Mecca, a journey that demands higher than normal standards of behavior. When the Qur'ān (2:197) commands that there should be “*no lewdness, nor wickedness, or disputing in the Pilgrimage*,” Qushayrī comments that what this means for one traveling the path of spiritual desire is

that he should not stop at anything in the path nor mix his spiritual desire with anything. Whoever argues, opposes, or competes with him – he has surrendered everything for everything. He will not dispute with anyone for the sake of this world, nor compete with anyone for some worldly fortune for the self or honor. God Most High said: And when the ignorant address them, they say ‘peace’ [25:63].

Qushayrī's message is a simple one: distracted lovers are poor lovers. But as we have already seen, distracted and listless would-be lovers are his audience. Those who have already surrendered everything for everything are not in need of his advice. What additional advice, then, does Qushayrī give to those who are still clinging to their comforts, their familiar ways of thinking and behaving, and their worldly concerns?

### **Surrendering everything for everything**

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<sup>20</sup> Qushayrī, *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, commentary on Qur'ānic verse 2:10.

<sup>21</sup> In his commentary on Qur'ānic verse 2:208, Qushayrī writes, “He has charged the believer with making peace with everyone except his lower self, for it makes no move except to oppose [the believer's] Chief (*sayyid*).”<sup>21</sup> Anyone who makes peace with himself becomes listless in his spiritual struggles (*mujāhadāt*), which is the cause of the suspension of each seeker and the reason for the lassitude of each aspirant.”

<sup>22</sup> In his commentary on Qur'ānic verse 4:77, Qushayrī writes: “Making light of all the stuff of your lower self for the sake of your beloved is the strongest of the signs of your companionship.”

For those who have not yet surrendered everything, meaning those who do tend to stop along the way and mix their spiritual desire with other kinds of desires, Qushayrī acknowledges the fear behind their clinging to the familiar but urges aspirants to act in an unexpected way. Rather than listening to the whispers that provoke anxiety in their states of weakness, Qushayrī directs them instead to the inspiration that came from God to the mother of Moses: “*If you fear for him, cast him into the waters*” (28:7).<sup>23</sup> It’s hard to imagine advice that makes less sense – telling a mother who is fearful for her baby’s life to entrust him to the currents of a river. But this message to Moses’ mother is called *wahy* in the Qur’ān, a word which signifies a type of direct revelation or inspiration from God. The message to Moses’ mother, which Qushayrī in turn applies to spiritual aspirants who are fearful, is a true and powerful one in a way that anxiety-provoking whispers are not. To surrender everything for everything, Qushayrī follows revelation in insisting that the best thing to do would be to toss one’s baby into the river. What does he mean by this? There are many ways this question could be answered, but the focus here will be on three: giving up expectations, giving up the illusion of control and self direction, and giving up inhibitions.

#### *Giving up expectations*

Qushayrī understands the giving up of expectations as the inward equivalent of giving up one’s wealth in alms outwardly. The Qur’ān (2:261) compares those who expend their wealth in the way of God to a grain of corn that sprouts seven ears of corn, each one of which contains one hundred grains for more corn. In his commentary on this metaphor, Qushayrī plays with words from the same Arabic root to show the continuity between outward and inward forms of giving, saying that just as there are those who give alms (*ṣadaqa*), there are those who give up their inner states in sincerity (*ṣidq*). He defines “sincerity” here as the negation of every worldly concern or portion, being pleased instead with the flow of God’s decrees, “without any frowning of the heart.” This is the sincerity of a true lover, as in the poem he cites in illustration:

*I want to be with him  
but he wants me to depart.  
So I leave what I want  
for what he wants.*<sup>24</sup>

The beginner on the spiritual path judges his states as good or bad, but the more experienced lover makes no judgments because he wants whatever God wants for him, whether that is separation or union, happiness or pain. All external circumstances and

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<sup>23</sup> Qushayrī cites this verse in his commentary on Qur’ānic verse 2:208, which is the basis for the discussion here.

<sup>24</sup> Muṣṭafā says the verse is attributed to Ibn al-Munajjim al-Wā‘iz ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Marwān (Muṣṭafā, no. 18, p. 48).

internal states are the same to him because he moves wherever the divine currents take him. Qushayrī cites another poem which says

*However the glass turns  
we turn.  
The ignorant think  
we have become crazed.*<sup>25</sup>

If patience is understood as the mere toleration of life's vicissitudes, the attitude Qushayrī urges the spiritual aspirant to cultivate is something very different, which is not a grim acceptance of hardship but rather a fearless abandonment of the ordinary norms used for judging life events and the longing for particular outcomes. This is an open-hearted and expansive acceptance, in contrast to the miserly state brought about by clinging to an imagined narrative for oneself. Qushayrī writes:

Whoever makes a habit of worrying about what is past and planning for his future and each new moment – the least of his punishment will be the constriction of his heart through disconcerting worries and the disappearance of the quality of life from his heart because of his forgetfulness and his saying 'if only such and such' or 'maybe such and such'. The result of this kind of thinking is estrangement and grief, the constriction of the heart and separation.<sup>26</sup>

The fearless abandonment Qushayrī is suggesting here is only an apparent sacrifice, for what is given up is the distressing and deadening state of habitual worry. When the Qur'ān says, "*It may be that you hate a thing that is good for you and you love a thing that is bad for you*" (2:216), Qushayrī responds, "It would be better to accept the good news of God's guarantee of ease than the anxious thoughts of lower selves warning of impending difficulty or harm". To cultivate a less fearful and more trusting attitude towards whatever events God has decreed makes the aspirant receptive to a reality beyond ordinary preoccupations. Without this receptivity, it is difficult to comprehend God's messages:

Those who are listless and those who are hostile do not hear that which is the real, because opposing self-oriented desire is difficult for those who are not sincere.<sup>27</sup>

Qushayrī is teaching spiritual aspirants in this statement that knowledge of God is incompatible with habitual self absorption and that the aspirant's best move would be to stop trying to protect the interests of the self. Sincerity here means not only focused

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<sup>25</sup> Muṣṭafā states that the verse is attributed to Mālik b. Asmā' and also to Yazīd b. Mu'āwiya (Muṣṭafā, no. 10, p. 113).

<sup>26</sup> Qushayrī, *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, commentary on Qur'ānic verse 3:156.

<sup>27</sup> Qushayrī, *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, commentary on Qur'ānic verse 4:61.

resolve but also allowing oneself to be vulnerable. The defensive, self-absorbed lover is a bad lover.

*Giving up the illusion of control and self direction*

One way, then, to let go and entrust one's baby to the river is to give up expectations of what should and shouldn't be in one's life, replacing the comfortable narrative one longs for with the more interesting reality of what one has been given. The shift in consciousness it reflects is further strengthened by another type of abandonment, which is that of abandoning the notion of independent human agency. Qushayrī takes very seriously Qur'ānic statements that everything in creation belongs to God, including what we ordinarily assume to be our own power and strength. Everything originates from God – He is the One who causes things to happen, brings things forth and causes them to remain.<sup>28</sup> To think of oneself or others as independently possessing the power or strength to do anything is a hidden form of *shirk*, the Arabic word found in the Qur'ān which indicates the associating of anything with God. Outwardly *shirk* refers to polytheism and the worship of idols, but for Qushayrī, it also refers to the hidden forms of *shirk* in customary modes of thinking:

Those who seek access to Him by their action and think that it is from them, or imagine that His decrees (*s*) are caused by their movements and lack of movements, or pay heed to any created thing or look to themselves – they live in a place of associating other things with Him, according to the people of realities.<sup>29</sup>

Passages such as this one in Qushayrī's *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt* are usually read as examples of his Ash'arite theological positions on predestination, which stand in opposition to the view of those such as the Mu'tazilites who argued for man's free will. Qushayrī did, in fact, write theological treatises that present rational arguments for determinism. But what is different about Qushayrī's theology in the *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt* is that here his determinism is repeatedly tied to the Sufi concept of "annihilation" (*fanā*) of the self. *Fanā* is a concept Qushayrī understands not only as an experience but also as a reality. That is to say, when an individual on the spiritual path experiences *fanā*, the experience does not create a new circumstance but rather exposes the illusion of an independent self making choices and directing the course of events. The error of ordinary thinking is not a benign one, according to Qushayrī, because the one who remains stuck in saying "mine, through me, from me and I" is covering up the divine kindness that always exists and functions prior to any given individual's abilities, possessions, actions and choices. The *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt* presents a view of human agency which radically de-centers the human ego. According to Qushayrī, the affirmation of the self is the worst of the grave sins mentioned in the Qur'ān and is the cause of our greatest suffering. He writes:

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<sup>28</sup> Qushayrī, *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, commentary on Qur'ānic verses 4:36-7.

<sup>29</sup> Qushayrī, *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, commentary on Qur'ānic verse 4:48.

Once you have experienced its negation you will be delivered from the captivity of tribulations...You will no longer see your comings and goings as coming from yourselves but rather you will see the One who has free disposal over your affairs.<sup>30</sup>

To deny the self's independent agency is not to say that exertion on the spiritual path is not necessary, but rather changes the nature of the exertion. Since the Qur'ān says, "*Everything is from God*" (4:78),<sup>31</sup> the appropriate response, according to Qushayrī, is, "*We believe in God* (3:84), not our selves, nor our strength or power."<sup>32</sup> In his discussion of the story of the angels' response to the creation of Adam, he states that Adam's superiority is based upon his capacity for knowledge given to him by God, not on his performance of acts of obedience. Adam's struggle in the experience of his exile on earth, then, is in how to actualize this potential.

The conception of reality Qushayrī presents is one predicated by God's attributes, foremost of which is mercy. The task of human beings has more to do with directly experiencing the effect of their relationships with these attributes than it has to do with what we ordinarily understand as human effort. It is not that Qushayrī considers human acts of obedience or disobedience unimportant. Rather, he is rejecting the idea of a neutral causality, that is to say that obedient acts necessarily lead to felicity and disobedient acts necessarily lead to wretchedness. Instead, all action originates from God's acts and attributes. When the Qur'ān states that those who obey God and His Messenger are those whom God has blessed, and that this is bounty from God (4:69-70), Qushayrī comments

He detached their station from every cause, merit, and tie, for surely what comes to them is and happens to them is the disbursement of His bounty and originates from His generosity.

According to Qushayrī, then, the quality of obedience that can be found in some human beings does not originate in them, but rather is the result of God's generosity. This is also true of intimacy with God and knowledge of his messages. In his comments on the Qur'ānic phrase "*And God took Abraham for a close friend*" (4:125), Qushayrī writes:

He stripped the event from every effort, labor, seeking, and striving when He said this, so that it would be known that friendship is clothing the Real puts on someone, not an attribute the servant acquires.

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<sup>30</sup> Qushayrī, *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, commentary on Qur'ānic verse 4:31.

<sup>31</sup> Qushayrī's commentary expands this to "Everything is from God in creating and originating, producing and inventing, decreeing and facilitating."

<sup>32</sup> Qushayrī, *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, commentary on Qur'ānic verse 3:84.

And in his comments on the Qur'ānic verse addressed to Muhammad, which says, "*This We recite to you of verses and wise remembrance*" (3:58), Qushayrī writes:

*This We recite to you, O Muhammad, to inform you of the meanings of what We have revealed to you. [These meanings did not reach you] through your exertion to attain knowledge, nor by your learning from parables, nor by your deduction by any sort of reasoning.*

No one, not even the prophets, attains intimacy with God or divine inspiration or revelation through their own efforts or attributes. Even the spiritual desire that brings people to the path cannot be said to belong to them or originate in them. Qushayrī insists, "If He had not desired you, you would not have desired Him."<sup>33</sup> The distinction is a crucial one, for as the aspirant comes to recognize that things do not occur as they appear to occur through the false paradigm of "mine, through me, from me and I," what Qushayrī calls the "turbulence of self-direction" abates.<sup>34</sup> Struggles become easier as the aspirant stops viewing the self as the point of origin of power and strength. This changes the dynamic of performing acts of obedience as well, for they are no longer experienced as "obligatory" because the very notion of "obligatory" implies a resisting self.

#### *Giving up inhibitions*

When Qushayrī rejects any direct connection between acts of obedience and necessary results, he is not being antinomian. On the contrary, he continually stresses the importance of performing what God has made obligatory for mankind. He is instead drawing attention to the essential poverty of the self, which has no independent means to do anything. This realization leads, not to the kind of servile and inhibited behavior that some people associate with religious behavior, but rather to the boldness of one who recognizes that there is nothing to lose and everything to gain. Inhibited behavior is self-protective behavior, whereas Qushayrī's advice follows the inspired guidance to Moses' mother – it would be best to throw the baby into the river. He writes, "Anyone who is too shy to ride the terrors will be kept from realizing his hopes."<sup>35</sup> Qushayrī never denies the extreme difficulties of life, but rather only advises a change in attitude towards them. In commenting on the Qur'ānic verse which refers to "*those who, when struck by an affliction, say, 'Surely we belong to God, and to Him we will return'*" (2:156), Qushayrī says

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<sup>33</sup> Qushayrī, *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, commentary on Qur'ānic verse 2:198.

<sup>34</sup> In commentary on Qur'ānic verse 3:159, Qushayrī writes: "The true meaning of reliance [on God] (*tawakkul*) is witnessing the divine preordination (*taqdir*) and the relief of hearts from the turbulence of self-direction (*tadbīr*)."

<sup>35</sup> Qushayrī, *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, commentary on Qur'ānic verse 2:214.

that these are those who “meet the affair with patience, even gratitude. Nay, they are even exultant, boastful.”<sup>36</sup>

This is not the boastfulness of arrogance, but rather of intimacy. Those who truly recognize the value of what is being sought are greedy for it and are therefore not overly weighed down by the struggle to obtain it.<sup>37</sup> To illustrate the ideal attitude, Qushayrī cites poetry from Abū Nuwās, a ninth-century poet as famous for his libertine habits as for the quality of his verse:

*Time is not generous  
with its pleasures  
for those who are reluctant  
to throw off restraints.*<sup>38</sup>

Fearful and inhibited behaviors are antithetical to intimacy. Better to make light of one’s difficulties and to “meet situations laughing,”<sup>39</sup> as Qushayrī says. Better to act in a way that protects spiritual desire rather than one’s self. Time, as the poem suggests, is not on the side of the inhibited lover. Qushayrī writes, “Moments have no substitutes or alternates,”<sup>40</sup> which suggests that, in this area at least, patience is not a virtue. Rather, as the poem he cites in commentary on a Qur’ānic verse on patience<sup>41</sup> says:

*Patience is beautiful  
in all abodes  
except in resisting you,  
for then it is blameworthy.*<sup>42</sup>

## Conclusion

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<sup>36</sup> Qushayrī is playing on another verse from the Qur’an here, transforming a negative description of mankind’s tendency to be ungrateful into a positive description of those who are patient: *And if We cause man to taste some mercy from Us, and then wrest it from him, lo! he is despairing, ungrateful. But if We cause him to taste prosperity after some misery that had befallen him, assuredly he will say, ‘The ills have gone from me’; lo! he is exultant, boastful; save those who endure [patiently] and perform righteous deeds; theirs will be forgiveness and a great reward* [11:9-11].

<sup>37</sup> Qushayrī, *Laṭā’if al-ishārāt*, commentary on Qur’ānic verse 3:142.

<sup>38</sup> Basyūnī identifies this verse as Abū Nuwās’s, and says it refers to a dispute he had with his fellow poet Muslim ibn al-Walid. The verse is not cited in Muṣṭafā.

<sup>39</sup> Qushayrī, *Laṭā’if al-ishārāt*, commentary on Qur’ānic verse 4:65.

<sup>40</sup> Qushayrī, *Laṭā’if al-ishārāt*, commentary on Qur’ānic verse 2:16.

<sup>41</sup> Qur’ānic verse 2:45.

<sup>42</sup> Muṣṭafā lists quite a few individuals to whom this verse is attributed, in several different versions, one of whom is said to have said it when his son died (Muṣṭafā, no. 4, p. 104). Qushayrī cites a slightly different version of the verse in the ‘Section on Patience’ (*bāb al-ṣabr*) in his *Risāla* (vol. 1, p. 399; Knysh translation, p.198).

It may seem at this point that we have strayed far from the topic of *tafsīr*, but in fact the problem of the listless lover in Qushayrī's *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt* suggests a very interesting hermeneutical stance. For Qushayrī, the struggle to find deeper meanings in the Qur'ān, or in God's signs in general, is not an intellectual endeavor but rather has to do with the cultivation of a kind of receptivity. To return to the metaphor from Rūmī we began with, this bride responds only to whole-hearted sincerity. The proper attitude, then, is the one Qushayrī illustrates by quoting a verse from the tenth century poet al-Mutanabbī:

*When tears flow  
down the cheeks  
the one who is crying is distinguished  
from the one who is only pretending.*<sup>43</sup>

Inspiration here is not some vague and arbitrary event but rather is the result of cultivating a way of being that is both vulnerable and bold. Qushayrī goes so far as to say that the finding of meanings becomes easy for one who lacks pretension.<sup>44</sup> The kindness of his teaching, however, is that he directs his attention to those who *are* pretentious, distracted and/or listless. One could read the *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt* as a collection of Sufi interpretations on the Qur'ān, but to do so is to miss the point. What Qushayrī offers his readers is a handbook for interpreting God's signs themselves. If the Qur'ān can be compared, as it is in Rūmī's rather startling metaphor, to a woman in need of wooing on her wedding night, then the *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt* is Qushayrī's gift to would-be lovers.

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<sup>43</sup> Muṣṭafā cites a slightly different version of this verse attributed to al-Mutanabbī (Muṣṭafā, no. 7, p. 90-1). Qushayrī cites the verse in his commentary on Qur'ānic verse 2:88, and again in commentary on verse 3:143.

<sup>44</sup> Qushayrī, *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, commentary on Qur'ānic verse 2:88.