

# The Symbolism of Letters and Language in the Work of Ibn ‘Arabī\*

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To readers familiar with Ibn ‘Arabī’s thinking, the title of this paper may seem over-ambitious. His conception of language and the mystical science of the letters that is its corollary are certainly one of the central, and at the same time the most synthetic and abstruse, parts of the Shaykh al-Akbar’s work and several volumes of analytical study could justifiably be devoted to them. It is therefore not my intention to deal with this huge topic in an exhaustive fashion but simply to present an outline of it and make some modest contributions to our understanding. I shall examine the question of language first of all in relation to the origins of existence, then in relation to the Revelation, and finally in relation to the spiritual role of man.

The vision of the origin of the world that emerges from the writings of Ibn ‘Arabī is inseparable from his conception of language. For him, God’s act of creation is indistinguishable from his act of speech and these two modes of being are organically interconnected. With a word, God brings into being an indeterminate multitude of creatures and these creatures become “words” in the immense divine discourse that is the universe. This is onto-logy in its strictest sense since *being* and the *logos* are one and the same. Let us recall briefly the principal terms used in akbarian cosmology.

## The letters as the origins of existence

I will not dwell on this point, which is well known and has been discussed in detail by some of the most able scholars.<sup>1</sup> It will be recalled that, according to Ibn ‘Arabī, the One, Solitary and Impenetrable Divine Essence creates beings from the Cloud (*‘amā*). At this level, beings only exist in a

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<sup>1</sup> Notably William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, Albany: SUNY, 1989, p.33 et seq. [See also Denis Gril’s translation and commentary of *Futūhāt al-Makkiya* Ch.2 ‘The Science of Letters’ in *The Meccan Revelations Vol.2*, ed. M. Chodkiewicz, New York: Pir Press, 2004 – ED.]

state of pure possibility, as mere thoughts in the mind of God, in the state known as “the immutable essences” (*‘ayān thābita*). What is it that brings beings out of this Cloud, from this state of possibility into a state of manifestation? It is the Divine Word calling things into existence. According to Ibn ‘Arabī, it is through the agency of what he calls the “Divine Names” that manifested beings are organised and arranged. “Names” here should not be taken to mean the specific terms (e.g. the “Merciful” or the “Almighty”) which we utter in human language. Rather, they are the “names of these names” (*asmā’ al-asmā’*), the various modalities through which God impels and organises existence in the universe. These names provide both the energy necessary to bring the being into existence, and the general structure that imposes order and harmony between beings.<sup>2</sup>

In individual terms, the Name of each being corresponds to the Divine Intention which brought that particular being into existence and to the relationship which connects the Essence to every individual concrete existence. Ibn ‘Arabī refers to the Name as the father, and the immutable essence as the mother of each being.<sup>3</sup> This name is the root of its individual act of being, its “Lord” whom it will have to serve and follow throughout its terrestrial journey, and its individual destiny is to realise in this way the potentialities contained in its essence. ‘For every reality in this world there is a corresponding Name which is specific to it and which is its Lord.’<sup>4</sup> This point is cardinal: ‘It must be concluded ... that the divine names are the single most important concept to be found in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s works. Everything, divine or cosmic, is related back to them. Neither the Divine Essence nor the most insignificant creature in the cosmos can be understood without reference to them.’<sup>5</sup>

Each constantly evolving being constitutes a letter in the composition of the great cosmic discourse. The passage of the Letter from potential entity to entity manifested in the visible world takes place through the action of the turning of the spheres.<sup>6</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī explicitly equates this process with

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<sup>2</sup> *Al-Futūhāt al-Makkiyya*, Cairo edn, 1329/1911, III, 441. Partial translation (not of this precise passage) ed. by M. Chodkiewicz, entitled *Les Illuminations de la Mecque: The Meccan Illuminations*, Paris: Sindbad, 1988.

<sup>3</sup> *Fut.*, I, 138 et seq.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>5</sup> Chittick, p.10.

<sup>6</sup> *Fut.*, I, 52; *Illuminations*, 387 and 439.

the process of speech and this “divine phonation” is not merely an allegorical phrase. The correspondence between divine creation and human speech is constantly reiterated. God creates through the “divine exhalation” known as the “breath of mercy”—*nafas al-Rahmān*—which continually maintains the existence of the universe. It is this exhalation that makes the “articulation” of the divine words possible:

The essences of the Divine Words, twenty-eight in number (i.e. the number of letters in the Arabic alphabet) and endowed with multiple aspects, emanate from the Breath of Mercy, which is the Cloud where our Lord stood at the time when He created the world. The Cloud corresponds to the human breath and the manifestation of the world out of the void and into the various levels of being is like the human breath emanating from the heart, spreading out through the mouth and forming letters on the way. These letters are like the manifestation of the world from the Cloud, which is the breath of God the Real and Merciful spreading into the specific levels [of existence] out of a potential and non-physical expanse, that is from the void filled by the creation.<sup>7</sup>

This correspondence between creation and speech is dynamic, since creation is impermanent and mutable, like a discourse that unfolds phrase by phrase.

From this perspective, it is easier to understand the ideas that Ibn 'Arabī puts forward about the letters, particularly in the second chapter of the *Futūhāt al-Makkiya*, which has been partially translated by Denis Gril with a very helpful commentary.<sup>8</sup> In this chapter, the Shaykh al-Akbar lists for us a wealth of ways in which the letters correspond to the levels of existence and to the levels of action of the cosmos, but which have no correspondence with each other. This is because language has the role of a kind of cosmic algebra. ‘The science of the letters could thus be defined as a metalinguistic and metaphysical formulation of the principle of the science of language and of the physical world’, writes Gril.<sup>9</sup> The same letters can be used to explain processes that are completely unconnected—just as the

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<sup>7</sup> *Fut.*, II, 395.

<sup>8</sup> In *Illuminations*, 385 et seq. [As noted these translations are now available in *The Meccan Revelations Vol.2*, ed. M. Chodkiewicz – ED.]

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 410.

same number can appear in an unlimited variety of operations. There is no such thing as a “science of the letters” in the sense of the letters forming the subject of a specific body of knowledge. Rather, the letters are a means of accessing a whole range of esoteric knowledge because of the semantic and symbolic meanings that they bear. In fact,

Each name has two forms. One of them is ours and is formed by our breath from the letters that we assemble: it is through (these Names) that we invoke Him, and they are the names of the Divine Names, like cloaks that they put on. Through the form of these names, we describe the Divine Names. The forms of the latter are close to the Most Merciful in so far as He speaks and is qualified by speech. Behind these forms, there are meanings (*mā'ānī*) which are like the spirits of the forms. The forms of these Divine Names by which God refers to Himself in His discourse (i.e. the Qur'an) have their existence in the Breath of the Most Merciful.<sup>10</sup>

So, having set out Ibn 'Arabī's doctrine of the letters, what can we do with this information? How does it provide a key for the believer, to help him in his spiritual growth and in his understanding of his personal destiny? The first place to look for an answer must be in that part of the Divine Word that is accessible to man: the Qur'anic word.

### **Applications to the interpretation of the Qur'an**

How are the divine cosmic discourse and the Qur'anic word linked? Through allusion (*ishārāt*), Ibn 'Arabī gives us a number of examples of this mystical science of the letters. A “metaphysics of grammar” is outlined in the second section of the second chapter of the *Futūhāt*.<sup>11</sup> In Chapter 198 there is a profound and detailed study of the enunciation of the two letters hā (هـ) and waw (و).<sup>12</sup>

Ibn 'Arabī also provides us with some very coherent analyses of the esoteric significance of certain letters. For example, the “solitary letters.”<sup>13</sup> Or again, the relationship between *Alif* and *Lām*.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *Fut.*, II, 396–7.

<sup>11</sup> *Fut.*, I, 84 et seq.; *Illuminations*, 402 et seq.

<sup>12</sup> *Fut.*, II, 390; *Illuminations*, 402 et seq.

<sup>13</sup> *Fut.*, I, 51 et seq.; *Illuminations*, 393–8.

<sup>14</sup> *Fut.*, I, 75–7; *Illuminations*, 475–80.

If it seems that Ibn 'Arabī's speculations on the spiritual meaning of the letters have a particular significance in his writings, and indeed they are even placed at the beginning of the *Futūhāt al-Makkiyya* as an extensive introduction to the rest of the work, it is because they play a key role in the process of spiritual transformation—which, when all is said and done, is the ultimate objective of all of the Shaykh al-Akbar's work—and are not merely a speculative formulation of doctrine. Ontologically, every man is a Divine Word; in this sense, the unveiling of the esoteric meaning of a term, or of a verse, can enable the Sufi to understand an aspect of his own esoteric dimension. This is particularly true as regards the text of the Qur'an. The Qur'an, as the all-encompassing Divine Word, containing potentially all universal Wisdom, is the counterpart of the human being. Man is in fact a microcosm containing within him the totality of forms manifested in the universe. God created all that exists according to a perfect and complete form, the first being to be brought into existence, sometimes called “the Muhammadian Reality” or “Universal Man”. It can be seen therefore that, in the final analysis, the Qur'an and Universal Man refer to the same all-encompassing Divine Wisdom. As Ibn 'Arabī writes:

The Total (Universal) Man, according to the essential reality, is the incomparable Qur'an descended from the Presence of Itself into the Presence of the One who gives existence ... In the nearest heaven, it became “differentiation” (*furqān*) and came down in a divided form, in accordance with the Divine Realities, for their authority is exerted in many ways and that is why Man also became divided into separate forms ... The Qur'an which descended is Truth as God has so designated it, thus all immediate truth “comprises an ultimate truth,” and the ultimate truth of the Qur'an is Man.<sup>15</sup>

Since human structure is the equivalent of that of the word of God, the objective of the Sufi is to conform as far as he is able to this Divine Word. He is invited to become Qur'an. And, in becoming the Divine Word, he also conforms to the figure of Perfect Man, thus realising his own individual perfection, the Name that is specific to him. It can therefore be seen that the esoteric science of the Qur'an, and in particular that of the letters of which it is composed, is not a matter of simple deductive or inductive

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<sup>15</sup> *Kitāb al-Isfār 'an Natā'ij al-Asfār*. New edition and French translation by Denis Gril entitled *Le Dévoilement des Effets du Voyage*, Combas, 1994, pp.22–3.

speculation:<sup>16</sup> it involves the gnostic in his own process of personal transformation. This perception of individual reality as both human and as the word of God accounts for the emphasis placed on ceremonial practices involving the ritual recital of words (i.e. the recitation of the Qur'an and the various forms of *dhikr*) in the Islamic religion. It explains why the science of the letters has no real connection with the magical significance of letters, which Ibn 'Arabī recognises as effective although at the same time warning of the dangers that it can entail. But it also leads to a real philosophy of Man as a being endowed with the power of speech.

For the study of the Qur'an is not the sole exegesis open to the believer. Since language shapes us, organises us and passes through us, we can also interpret and experience the truth that is expressing itself at every moment in our own person. And our own human language can therefore translate into truth what we are.<sup>17</sup> But this translation cannot really take place through everyday, profane, language, which is capable only of describing the terrestrial dimension and not the "vertical" dimension that is present in every being. It will of necessity occur through the medium of metaphor, poetry, or more often through paradox. The Sufis of the first centuries used the term *shath* to describe what they regarded as inspired paradoxes, uttered in a state of ecstasy, at a time when the mystic was not in control of what he was saying, so that the extravagance of his language was excused. But out of the hundreds of such utterances that have been handed down to us by tradition, the majority were clearly delivered in a deliberate manner and in all probability should be regarded as spiritual teachings. Abū Yazīd writes:

On one occasion, God lifted me up, placed me before Him and said to me: 'Oh Abū Yazīd, my creatures would like to see you!' I said: 'Adorn me with your Oneness (*wahdāniyya*), clothe me with your I-ness (*anāniyya*), raise me up to your Unity (*ahadiyya*), that your creatures say when they see me: "we see you!" and that it is You (that they see) and that I am not there!' Or again: 'At the start of my journey towards His Oneness, I became a bird whose body was Unity and whose two wings were Perpetuity (*daymūma*). I flew continuously for ten years in the atmosphere of quality (*kayfiyya*) only to arrive in a similar

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<sup>16</sup> *Fut.*, I, 57.

<sup>17</sup> Pierre Lory, "Et la chair devint parole", in *La Walāya—Etudes sur le Soufisme d'Ibn 'Arabī*, in *Horizons Maghrébins*, no. 30 (1996), 93.

atmosphere time after time after time. I continued to fly without stopping until I reached the esplanade of Eternity without beginning (*azaliyya*); there I saw the Tree of Unity [Sarrāj; then he described the ground where it stood, its base, its branches and its fruit and said]: so I considered this and knew that all of this was illusion (*khudā*).<sup>18</sup>

The reader will appreciate here that Abū Yazīd is describing an experience that is incapable of expression in everyday language and that he is using that language in a novel way, conveying his meaning through poetry and paradox, whose boldness is at times reminiscent of the immediacy of the koans of Zen Buddhism.

The Shaykh al-Akbar is explicit yet at the same time circumspect on the subject of paradox and of *shaths*. He condemns *shaths* quite harshly, regarding them as linguistically over-extravagant and deplorably pretentious from a spiritual point of view, and liable to mislead ordinary believers. But he does not see them as utterances that are inherently false. What he condemns is that they risk being misunderstood by those who are not Sufis. He himself recounts numerous *shaths* pronounced by his distinguished predecessors, and incorporates the intended purpose of these *shaths* into his own doctrinal vision. So, for example, he gives a lengthy commentary on the reply made by Abū Yazīd Bastāmī when he was asked how he was that morning: '[I have] no morning and no evening; the morning and the evening belong to those who have attributes, and I have no attributes!'<sup>19</sup> He also wrote detailed explanations of the "theopathic" *shaths* attributed to Abū Yazīd, such as "I am God!" or "Glory be to me!"<sup>20</sup> Moreover, he made use of paradoxical statements himself in exactly the same way as his predecessors Abū Yazīd, Hallāj or Shibī. The following verses, which are set out as an introduction to the *Futūhāt*, are among those most often cited:

The Lord is Reality (*haqq*) and the servant is Reality  
May God grant that I may know who is subject to legal obligation!  
If you say: it is the servant, the servant is without life  
If you say: it is the Lord, from where does His obligation come?<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Abū Nasr al-Sarrāj's *Kitāb al-Lumā'*, ed. A. H. Mahmūd and A. B. Surūr, Cairo, 1960, 461.

<sup>19</sup> *Fut.*, II, 646 et seq.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 272 and 618; II, 479; IV, 57 and 90.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 2.

And this other verse, which is so fitting to our discussion of the “logomorphosis” of man:

I am the Qur’an and the seven Oft-reduplicated  
the spirit of the spirit, not the spirit of the instants  
My heart resides with Him whom I know  
and Whom I contemplate, even while I am speaking to you.<sup>22</sup>

Ibn ‘Arabī’s attitude to *shaths* is somewhat different from that of other more ecstatic Sufis, such as Abū Yazīd and Rūzbehān. The latter maintain a distinction between the ordinary vocabulary of the mortal world and the language of those who have perceived eternity and for whom time and space have been turned upside down for good. For them, the *shath* is the mark of a mental breaking away—a leap or a taking-off depending on the imagery—from which it is not possible to hold back. Ibn ‘Arabī, on the other hand, seeks to integrate the two dimensions of language—terrestrial and eternalised—into a doctrinal and exegetic structure which is versatile and subtle but which has neither flaws nor divisions in it.

### **Man as intermediary**

The man who is a believer and a monotheist is put in a delicate position, for he is instructed to speak of God using words and expressions that belong to the material, social world, which may seem ill-suited to describing the very subject-matter of metaphysics. If God is incorporeal, beyond all bodily form and all concept, how can one speak of Him and describe Him? Islamic theology has to battle against this problem of the anthropomorphism of language. To be sure, the Qur’an gives men words, Names (such as “the Merciful,” “the Forgiving”) which enable them to speak of God, and to speak to Him in the act of worship. But is it possible to go beyond that and use language as a whole to sustain the connection between God and the creature He is addressing? The Hanbalis do not accept this; the believer may reproduce the words of the Qur’an but may not add to it any concept which is not found there, even if derived from it linguistically or by analogy.

As we have seen, Ibn ‘Arabī does not allow himself to be confined by such objections. For him, language is not unequivocal and its use is not limited by the rules of syntax or to dictionary meanings. Rather, it has a

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., I, 9.



vertical dimension that goes right back to the origin of things. He is able to convey the experience of the divine through paradox without destroying the proper coherence of the language, which goes back to the very harmony of the creation. It enables man to name things and at the same time take them back to the Divine Names that are their roots, in short to play the role of universal intermediary with which Adam was invested from the beginning (Qur'an 2:31–3). Through inner meditation on the esoteric significance of the letters, the Sufi can in fact apply letters and words to all those things that share the characteristics of the macrocosm and can even make himself master of them. He begins to understand the phrases of this universal language that animates the creation, that passes through him, as it does through all beings in the universe, which is where the concept of “the language of the birds,” and even of the intelligence of the minerals,<sup>23</sup> comes from. The superiority of human language over other languages of the world is analogous to the superiority of man over other creatures. Just as man is a microcosm in which the universe is reflected, so human language provides the key to all that can be spoken, whispered or muttered beneath the nine heavens. At this level, human language becomes a sending back of the Divine Word that initiates and organises existence to its origin.

### Conclusion

From this perspective, the meaning of the vision which Ibn 'Arabī relates of his nuptial union with the letters of the alphabet becomes clearer:

I was at Bougia during Ramadan in 597, when I saw myself (in a dream) having carnal union with every single star in the sky, and deriving immense pleasure from it. When I had finished, the letters were presented to me and I had union with all of them individually and collectively.<sup>24</sup>

To unite physically with the letters of the alphabet is tantamount to identifying oneself with the Divine act of creation itself, and becoming one of those perfect men whose individual will becomes simply an extension of the Divine Will.

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<sup>23</sup> *Fut.*, I, 381-2; *Illuminations*, 52.

<sup>24</sup> *Kitāb al-Bā'*, Cairo, 1954, 11.

It is also in this sense that the science of the letters is a science of Christ, as is asserted in the twentieth chapter of the *Futūhāt*.<sup>25</sup> Jesus is himself, from the outset, the Word of God. The Sufi is, as it were, asked to become through practice and effort that which Jesus was by nature (Qur'an 4:171). Jesus is moreover an eschatological figure, marking the fulfilment of the destiny of Mankind. Likewise, the science of the letters, whilst it takes Man back to the origin of his existence as a created being, also signifies its end, since every word that is uttered is essentially ephemeral. Through His creation, God unfolds His discourse; the Resurrection will mark the conclusion of this great Book, the Book of the Universe.

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<sup>25</sup> *Fut.*, I, 167 et seq.