

All Muhammad, All the Time: Shaykh Ibrāhīm Niāsse’s Prophetic Poetics of Praise in Three Treatises and Poems

*Her Zaman Muhammed: Şeyh İbrâhîm Niyâs’ın Üç Risâlesi ve Şiirleri
Özelinde Nebevî Hamde Dâir Vezinler*

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Abstract

Contemporary poet and scholar Joshua Bennett recently wrote, “If black studies is indeed the rewriting of knowledge itself, an ongoing critique of so-called Western civilization—as Wynter and Robinson and others remind us—then poetry will be absolutely essential. Like the field of black studies more broadly, the teaching of black poetry is not simply additive nor is it a niche concern. Historically poetry is at the center of black social and intellectual life.” Of no literary or intellectual tradition is this more true than that of the Fayḍa Tijāniyya, inaugurated by the Senegalese Sufi Shaykh and scholar, Shaykh Ibrāhīm Niāsse (d. 1975). Described by its initiates as a “flood” of *ma’rifā* (divine knowledge) and *wilāya* (sanctity), the Fayḍa has also produced a veritable outpouring of Sufi literature in Arabic (as well as African and European languages) among its adherents, particularly Arabic poetry in praise of the prophet that both expresses and facilitates access to *ma’rifā* in a particularly effective manner. Through close readings of three short treatises and poems of Ibrāhīm Niāsse, this paper attempts to outline Niāsse’s prophetic poetics of spiritual realization: the closely-linked cosmology, epistemology, and anthropology converging on the Muhammadan Reality (*al-ḥaqīqa al-Muḥammadiya*) that animates and structures his literary oeuvre and shapes the spiritual, social, and intellectual lives of the members of the Fayḍa Tijāniyya. Building on earlier studies of the Tijānī tradition and Maghrebi/West African Sufism, this article concludes with an examination of the implications of this prophetic poetics for the conception of the “human,” and the intervention literature such as Niāsse’s has made and can make in contemporary debates surrounding the ethics of knowledge and the re-evaluation of the modern, “Western” category of the “human”†.

Keywords: Shaykh Ibrāhīm Niāsse, West African Sufism, Prophetic poetics, the Muhammadan Reality.

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Özet

Günümüz şair ve akademisyenlerinden Joshua Bennett, yakın bir zamanda şöyle bir açıklamada bulundu: “Eğer siyahlara özgü çalışmalar (*black studies*), gerçekten de bilginin yeniden yazılması, sözde Batı medeniyetinin devam etmekte olan bir eleştirisiyse, -Wynter, Robinson ve diğerlerinin bize hatırlattığı gibi-, o vakit şiir mutlak bir biçimde gerekli olacaktır. Daha geniş manada siyahlara özgü çalışma alanları gibi, siyah şiirin (*black poetry*) tedrisi, sadece basit bir katkı veya niş bir mesele niteliğinde değildir. Tarihsel olarak şiir, siyah sosyal ve entelektüel yaşamın tam merkezinde yer almaktadır.” Bu tespit, Senegalli Sûfî Şeyhi ve âlim İbrâhim Niyâs’ın kurucusu olduğu Feyzâ Ticâniyye (*Fayda Tijāniyya*) nazariyesinde olduğu kadar hiçbir edebî veya entelektüel gelenek için doğru değildir. Takipçileri tarafından ma’rifet (ilahi bilgi) ve velâyet (kudsiyet) “seli” olarak tanımlanan Feyzâ, müntesipleri arasında (Afrika ve Avrupa dillerinin yanı sıra) Arapça dilinde, özellikle de ma’rifeti etkili bir biçimde hem ifade eden hem de ona erişimi kolaylaştıran Peygamber’i öven hakiki bir tasavvuf edebiyatı teşekkül ettirmiştir. İbrâhim Niyâs’a ait üç kısa risale ile şiirlerinin yakın okuması yoluyla bu makale, Niyâs’ın mânevî idrâkinin nebevî şiire nasıl yansıdığına ana hatlarını şu kavramlarla ortaya koymaya çalışmaktadır: Onun edebî eserlerine hayat vererek külliyyatını yapılandıran ve Feyzâ Ticâniyye mensuplarının mânevî, sosyal ve entelektüel yaşamlarını şekillendiren ortak nokta Hakikat-i Muhammedî ile yakın ilişkisi bulunan kozmoloji, epistemoloji ve antropoloji. Ticânî gelenek ve Mağrip/Batı Afrika tasavvufu üzerine yapılmış önceki çalışmalara dayanan bu makale, bu nebevî şiirselliğin “insan” tasavvuru üzerindeki etkilerinin ve Niyâs’taki gibi edebiyatın, bilgi etiği ve modern “Batılı” insan kategorisinin yeniden değerlendirilmesi etrafında dönen çağdaş tartışmalara yaptığı ve yapabileceği müdahalenin incelenmesiyle son bulmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Şeyh İbrâhim Niyâs, Batı Afrika Sufizmi, Nebevî şiir, Hakikat-i Muhammedî.

First there must be a true human, then
there can be true knowledge
-Chuang Tzu

When I speak of poetry I am not thinking of it as a genre. Poetry is an awareness of the world, a particular way of relating to reality. So poetry becomes a philosophy to guide a man throughout his life.
-Andrei Tarkovsky

Poetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives.
-Audre Lorde

هو الكلّ منه الكلّ حقاً وإنه احد طفاه وأعطاه قديماً ولا حجراً
...
له كلّ وقتٍ من قريضي قصيدة أفوز به في هذه الدار والأخرى

He is all and all's from him,
and this is true for He
Chose him and granted him all this,

from all eternity...
Each moment that I write,
for him, my poetry
In this world and the next,
I'm granted victory
-Shaykh İbrâhim Nîâsse

As poet and scholar Joshua Bennett recently wrote, “If black studies is indeed the rewriting of knowledge itself, an ongoing critique of so-called Western civilization—as Wynter and Robinson and others remind us—then poetry will be absolutely essential. Like the field of black studies more broadly, the teaching of black poetry is not simply additive nor is it a niche concern. Historically poetry is at the center of black social and intellectual life.”¹ Of no literary or intellectual tradition is this perhaps more true than that of the Fayda Tijāniyya, inaugurated by the Senegalese Sufi Shaykh and scholar, Shaykh

1 <https://twitter.com/SirJoshBennett/status/1281584506655383554>

Ibrāhim Niāsse (1900-1975). Described by its initiates as a “flood” of *ma'rifa* (divine knowledge) and *wilāya* (sanctity), the Fayḍa has also produced a veritable outpouring of Sufi literature in Arabic (as well as African and European languages) among its adherents, particularly Arabic poetry in praise of the prophet that is understood to both express and facilitate access to *ma'rifa* in a particularly effective manner. Through close readings of three short treatises and poems of Ibrāhim Niāsse, this paper attempts to outline Niāsse's prophetic poetics of spiritual realization: the closely-linked cosmology, epistemology, and anthropology converging on the Muhammadan Reality (*al-ḥaqīqa al-Muḥammadiya*) that animates and structures his literary oeuvre and shapes the spiritual, social, and intellectual lives of the members of the Fayḍa Tijāniyya. Building on earlier studies of the Tijānī tradition and West African Sufism, the article will conclude by comparing and contrasting Niāsse's poetics of praise with that of Rilke, and examining the implications Niāsse's poetry has for contemporary debates surrounding the re-evaluation of the modern, “Western” category of the “human.”

Whether in the lilting, plaintive modes of Mauritanian reciters, the declarative, soaring Senegalese style, or the rhythmic, or the pentatonic, bluesy melodies of their Nigerian counterparts, Shaykh Ibrāhim Niāsse's Arabic verses of longing and love for the Prophet Muḥammad have become a part of the soundscape of most urban areas in West Africa. These poems are recited and discussed at naming ceremonies, in the evenings after prayers, at public religious festivals (such as mawlid and gammus), and among private gatherings of friends, poets, and scholars from Senegal to South Africa to Sudan. Niāsse is one of the continent's most widely-read poets of the past century, surpassing his Francophone contemporary,

Leopold Sédar Senghor, Anglophone poets such as Wole Soyinka, and even his fellow Arabophone poets Shaykh al-Bur'ai and Ṣaliḥ al-Ja'farī in popularity. Perhaps only the Egyptian poet Ahmed Shawqī surpasses Niāsse in influence and popularity on the continent. Despite this fact, Niāsse's poetry has only recently begun to receive serious attention in Europhone scholarship² (the Arabic-language scholarship is much further ahead in this regard).³

2 For example, see Rudolph Ware, Zachary Wright, and Amir Syed *Jihad of the Pen: The Sufi Literature of West Africa* (Cairo: The American University of Cairo Press, 2018); Mervyn Hiskett, “Community of Grace and its Opponents, the ‘Rejecters’: A Debate about Theology and Mysticism in Muslim West Africa with Special Reference to its Hausa Expression,” *African Language Studies*, 17 (1980): 99-140; Andrea Brigaglia, “Sufi Poetry in Twentieth-Century Nigeria: A Khamriyya and a Ghazal by Shaykh Abū Bakr al-'Atīq (1909–1974).” *Journal of Sufi Studies* 6, 2 (2017): 190-232; Oludamini Ogunnaike, “The Presence of Poetry, the Poetry of Presence: Meditations on Arabic Sufi Poetry Performance and Ritual in Contemporary Dakar,” *Journal of Sufi Studies* 5, 1 (2016): 58-97; Oludamini Ogunnaike, *Poetry in Praise of Prophetic Perfection: A Study of West African Madīḥ Poetry and Its Precedents* (Cambridge: Islāmic Texts Society, 2020).

3 The Senegalese scholar 'Āmir Sāmb has several excellent articles and a multi-volume work on the subject ('Āmir Sāmb, *al-Adab al-Singhālī al-'arabī*, (al-Jazā'ir: al-Sharika al-Waṭaniyya li'l-Nashr wa'l-Tawzī', 1978), while the Nigerian scholar Ibrāhīm al-Maqqarī has several articles in Arabic on the Arabic poetry of West Africa, particularly that of Ibrāhīm Niāsse (see <http://sheikhmaqary.com.ng/h/book-files>), and 'Uthmān Idrīs Kankawī of Kwara State University in Nigeria has an excellent article in Arabic on the *madīḥ* poetry of the region ('Uthmān Kankawī, *'al-Madā'ih al-nabawiyya fī ḡharb Ifriqiyya: Dirāsa taḥlīliyya adabiyya* (A Literary Study on Prophetic Eulogy in West Africa), *Majlat Dirāsāt Ifriqiyya* 51, 2014). Other important Arabic-language studies include Ibrāhīm Sāmb's thesis “‘al-Madā'ih al-Nabawīyya fī'l-Shi'r al-Singhālī al-'Arabī” (Master's thesis, Cheikh Anta Diop University, 2012), 'Alī Abū Bakr's *al-Thaqāfa al-'arabiyya fī Nijīriyā min 1850 ilā 1960 m. 'ām al-istiqlāl*, (Beirut: n. p., 1972), 'Uthmān Kabara's *al-Shi'r al-ṣūfī fī Nijīriyā: dirāsa mawḍū'iyya taḥlīliyya li-namādhuj mukhtāra min intāj al-'ulamā al-qādiriyyīn khilāl al-qarnayn al-tāsi' 'ashar wa'l-'ishrīn al-milādiyya*, (Cairo: al-Nahār, 2004), and Kabīr Ādam Tudun Nufāwā,

This gap is due, in part, to the colonial/academic racialized and disciplinary division of the African continent and Islāmic and Arabic studies, wherein Islām in Saharan and Sub-Saharan Africa and African Arabic literature fell through the cracks between African studies/African literature (dominated by the study of Europhone African literature) and the study of Islām and Arabic literature (dominated by studies of the so-called “Middle East”). Moreover, the lingering legacy of the colonial myth of *Islām noir*, led to the neglect or assumed lack of proficiency in Arabic literary production of Black Muslims,⁴ which combined with the strange theory of 19th-century racial science that poetry was an art of the “white race”,⁵ has led to a profound neglect of traditions of African Arabic poetry, of which Niāsse is the most popular contemporary exemplar.

al-Adab al-‘arabī al- Nijīrī fī al-qarn al-tāsi’ ‘ashar al-milādī, (Kano: Dār al-Umma, 2008).

- 4 For example, see Rüdiger Seesemann, *The Divine Flood: Ibrāhīm Niāsse and the Roots of a Twentieth-Century Sufi Revival* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2011), 8-15; Rudolph Ware, *The Walking Qur’ān: Islāmic Education, Embodied Knowledge, and History in West Africa* (Durham, NC: UNC Press, 2014), 1-38; Ousmane Kane, *Beyond Timbuktu: An Intellectual History of Muslim West Africa*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 21-40; Jean-Louis Triaud, “Giving a Name to Islām South of the Sahara: An Adventure in Taxonomy.” *The Journal of African History* 55, 1 (2014): 3-15.
- 5 Houston Stewart Chamberlain, *Foundations of the Nineteenth Century I*, trans. John Lees (New York: Howard Fertig, 1968), 215. In fact, the 1974 *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* declared, “Negro poetry cannot be labeled as poetry in the strict sense of the term, and therefore is often called rhythmic prose. This terminology originates in the fact that the people of Africa themselves designated poetry as “chant,” much as the Greek and Romans called a poem an “ode”, or “carmen”, or “cantus” Because of recent studies of the languages of Senegal, of the Bantu, Peulh, Dahomey, and Ruanda, it is now known that the chants and dances at religious, social, and domestic ceremonies were actually poems.” (Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, Preminger, Warnke, and Hardison (eds.), (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 556.)

However, while not unconnected to its literary qualities, the popularity of Niāsse’s poetry is primarily due to his claims and reputation as being the pole/paramount Sufi saint of the age (*quṭb al-zamān*) and the *ṣaḥīb al-fayḍa*, the possessor of a prophesied “spiritual flood” that Shaykh Aḥmad al-Tijānī (d. 1815), the founder of the Tijāniyya (the most popular Sufi tariqa on the continent), is said to have foretold would bring people into Islām, the Tijāniyya, and direct knowledge of God (*ma‘rifat Allah*) “group upon group”.⁶ In fact, it is in his poetry that Niāsse makes the clearest claims of his unique saintly rank, connecting it with his poetic acts of praise in in verses such as:

ولم بك للأقطاب قبلي مثل ما أشكر ربّي ليس سزي عاقراً وذلك من حب الرسول وسره فأكسبر هذا العبد حب محمد	لذا العبد من فيض يروق سناء فأضغر أتباعي أنيل فناء بسردي له الأمداح حزت لواء وكنزي أن أثني عليه ثناء
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None of the poles (aqṭāb) before me attained
the like of what this servant has,
from a flood of pure, flowing glory
I thank my lord that my secret is not sterile
For even the smallest of my followers will
attain annihilation [in God]
And that is from the love of the Messenger
and his secret
By my recital of praises for him, I attained
the banner
The elixir for this slave is the love of
Muḥammad
And my treasure is singing his praises⁷

The composition of Arabic poetry, particularly poetry in praise of the prophet, has long been a means for West African scholars to demonstrate their scholarly credentials and

6 See Andrea Brigaglia, “The Fayda Tijāniyya of Ibrāhīm Nyass: Genesis and Implications of a Sufi Doctrine.” *Islām et sociétés au sud du Sahara* 14-15 (2000): 41-56; Andrea Brigaglia, “Sufi Revival and Islāmic Literacy: Tijānī Writings in Twentieth-Century Nigeria”, (2014): 102-111; and Seesemann, *The Divine Flood*.

7 *Āfāq al-Sh‘ir*, I: 266.

devotion and closeness to the Prophet, and therefore spiritual authority. Several of these poems, like al-Buṣṣirī's *Burda*, al-Yadālī's *Ṣalātu Rabbī*, 'Uthmān ibn Fūdī's *Dāliyya*, al-ḥājj 'Umar Tal's *Safīnat al-Sa'āda*, al-ḥājj Mālik Sy's *Khilāṣ al-Dhahab* and several of the poems of Shaykh Aḥmadu Bamba were and are believed to have talismanic properties, their recitals being associated with Mi'rāculous events in many popular legends, enhancing the saintly reputation of the poets.⁸ The performance and circulation of Niāsse's poetry also did much to popularize his own reputation and authority in Islāmic scholarly and lay circles throughout West Africa, North Africa, Sudan and the Horn of Africa, the Middle East, South and Southeast Asia and continues to do so today.⁹ As Zachary Wright explains, "[Niāsse's] 'community of the flood' (*jama'at al-fayḍa*) eventually claimed 60 million followers, perhaps constituting the largest twentieth-century Muslim revivalist movement anywhere in the world."¹⁰ During my own research in Dakar, many young Tijānīs told me that they first became interested in the tariqa upon hearing performances of Niāsse's poetry, wanting to "better understand the mysterious allusions" in the beautiful recitations and "to experience the states described in the verses" and "to see if the claims [of granting aspirants

fanā' (annihilation in God) and *ma'rifa*] were true." Several disciples also reported that their shaykhs had them recite and contemplate certain poems of Niāsse's as a part of their *tarbiya* or *sayr* (spiritual training). But the aesthetic delight of performances of Niāsse's poetry, while not unconnected to its reputed talismanic properties and the poet's spiritual reputation, cannot be reduced to them. Rather the alchemy of Niāsse's verse is due to the way it brings together sensory, intellectual, and spiritual delight to produce "The Elixir of Felicity in Praising the Master of Masters" (*Iksīr al-Sa'ādat fī Madḥ Sayyid al-Sadāt*), the title of one of his diwans.

In addition to a number of prose works, Niāsse penned hundreds of poems, compiled and published in 16 diwans throughout his life, from his first work, *Rūḥ al-Adab* ("The Spirit of Etiquette"), a didactic poem on Sufi etiquette, written when he was 20 years old, to *Sayr al-qalb ilā ḥaḍrat al-rabb bi madḥ al-Muṣṭafā al-ḥibb* ("The Journey of the Heart to the Presence of the Lord through Praising the Beloved Chosen One"), a diwan of qaṣīdas praising the Prophet Muḥammad in a classical style that was completed shortly before Niāsse passed away in 1975. In 2018, after decades of work collecting and editing various versions of Shaykh Ibrāhīm's poetry, the Mauritanian scholar and direct disciple of Ibrāhīm Niāsse, Shaykh Muḥammad ibn Shaykh 'Abdallāh, published all of Ibrāhīm Niāsse's poetry in a 2-volume edition entitled *Āfāq al-Sh'ir 'inda al-Shaykh Ibrāhīm Niyās* (The Horizons of Poetry with Shaykh Ibrāhīm Niāsse),¹¹ so titled due to the vast, encom-

8 See *Jihad of the Pen and Ogunnaike, Poetry in Praise of Prophetic Perfection*.

9 See Brigaglia, "Sufi Revival and Islāmic Literacy" and Seesemann, *The Divine Flood*, 64, 173, 187, 202–208.

10 *Jihad of the Pen*, 5. For the history of Niāsse and this movement in context, see Seesemann, *The Divine Flood*; Ousmane Kane, "Shaykh al-Islām al-hājj Ibrāhīm Niāsse," in *Le temps des marabouts: Itinéraires et stratégies Islāmiques en Afrique Occidentale Française 1880–1960*. ed. David Robinson and Jean-Louis Triaud (Paris: Karthala, 1997), 299–316; Zachary Wright, *Living Knowledge in West African Islām: The Sufi Community of Ibrāhīm Niāsse* (Boston: Brill, 2015); and Brigaglia, "The Fayda Tijāniyya of Ibrāhīm Nyass."

11 Muḥammad ibn al-Shaykh 'Abdallāh, *Āfāq al-Shi'r 'inda al-Shaykh Ibrāhīm Niyās* (Mauritania: Muḥammad ibn al-Shaykh 'Abdullāh, 2018). The publication also contains 3 more volumes of poetry written about Shaykh Ibrāhīm Niāsse. Prior to this publication, in addition to its oral and digital circulation, Niāsse's poetry was primarily circulated in two collec-

passing meanings and beauty of Niāsse's poetry, whose verses form a kind of linguistic canopy, uniting the various perspectives of his disciples' spiritual experiences and contemplation.¹² Most of Niāsse's poetry (11 diwans) consists of poems in praise of the Prophet (*madīḥ nabawī*), which comprise the first volume of *Āfāq al-Sh'ir*. In addition to several versified travelogues (*riḥlāt*), Niāsse wrote two diwans in praise of Shaykh Aḥmad al-Tijānī, another diwan in praise of his own teachers, a diwan of acrostic poems of *tawassul* (intercession) through various verses and suras of the Qu'ran, as well as a diwan of didactic poems of spiritual advice, all of which are collected in *Āfāq al-Sh'ir*'s second volume. Despite their diverse genres, structures, and styles, all of Niāsse's poems are shot through with praise of and longing for the Prophet, as the editor of *Āfāq al-Sh'ir* notes in his introduction, "all of the poetry of Shaykh Ibrāhim Niāsse...testifies to his eternal relationship of love for and reliance upon the Messenger of God."¹³

Through brief discussions of three of these poems and related prose treatises we will attempt to sketch the outlines of these "horizons" of poetry and the kind of reader/listener/reciter they assume and attempt to cultivate.

Inna Khatmal Anbiyā'i: Letters, Riddles, and Poetics

حياتي رُمُوزٌ كلها وإشارةٌ تفسّرُ مَهما ذلك القبرُ بُعْثرا
وكنْتُ حروفاً عالِياتٍ وأسطرا فوقها شخصي متى قام مظهرها

tions: *al-Dawāwīn al-Sitt and Jāmi' al-Jawāmi' al-Dawāwīn compiled and edited by Nigerian scholars and disciples of Niāsse, Shaykh Abu Bakr Atiqu and Shaykh Sani Kafanga, and published in Beirut.*

12 *Āfāq al-Sh'ir* I: 43.

13 Ibid, 41.

My life is symbols, all of it, and an
allusion
That will be explained when the grave
is overturned
I am the exalted letters and lines
So they appear in my person whenever
they appear¹⁴
-Shaykh Ibrāhim Niāsse

One of Niāsse's more commonly memorized and performed poems, *Inna Khatmal Anbiyā'i* was composed in a short-*ramal* meter (unlike most of Niāsse's poems, which are in the *ṭawīl* meter), and illustrates many of the themes and features of Niāsse's oeuvre including the unique use of separated letters, which, in addition to the esoteric alphanumeric (*'ilm al-ḥuruf*) riddles they pose, help call attention to the fact that this is an *abjad* or alphabet poem: each verse before the concluding invocation of prayers upon the Prophet begins with a different letter of the Arabic alphabet in order. This feature is shared by most of Niāsse's diwans, which are organized alphabetically by the first letter of the first verse, each diwan containing roughly one poem per letter. This alphabetical structure of collections of poems or of a single poem itself was a fairly common feature of West African Arabic poetry, having precedents in the popular *madīḥ* collections of the poets al-Fazāzī and al-Baghdādī.¹⁵ Such arrangements seem intended to symbolize a deployment of the totality of language. In the case of post-12th century Sufism,¹⁶ given the popular "science

14 *Āfāq al-sh'ir* II: 282 and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vPxSpuxwUPc>.

15 See Ogunnaike, *Poetry in Praise*, 96-101 and Denis McAuley, *Ibn 'Arabi's Mystical Poetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 160-199. This structure also has parallels in the Hebrew Psalms (such as 119) and Lamentations as well as medieval Latin and vernacular devotional poetry.

16 Or in some cases, more technically, the traditions that later became known as Sufism.

of letters" (*ilm al-ḥurūf*) and its elaborate systems of correspondences between the 28 letters of the Arabic alphabet and the 28 lunar mansions, the signs of the zodiac, the heavenly spheres, the four elements and natures, Divine Names, numbers, etc., such structures suggest a kind of cosmic totality, in Nīasse's case, of praising the Prophet from every possible perspective with every kind of praise.

*Truly the seal of the prophets
Transcended them all by Y's degree¹⁷
A sea of secrets and praise
A sun of righteousness and guidance
My praises of him are my heart's paradise
Of my delights and my riches
And always my love is for you
And my recollection and annihilation
My heart's enraptured, my ecstasy extended
As are my longing sighs and my crying
And my veiling and my burning
In the morning and the evening
A dream phantom visited me
Of my beloved, quintessence's spring
(*'ayn hā'*)¹⁸*

17 The letter *Yā* has the numerical value of 10, which here refers to the 10 particularities granted to the Prophet Muḥammad, and not the other prophets: 1) the universality of his message, 2) his being a mercy (*rahma*) to all of creation, 3) his being safety for his community from punishment, 4) God swearing by his life and not swearing by any other person, 5) addressing him directly by nicknames (and without the vocative *yā*-which is another possible meaning of the *yā'* here), 6) being given the totality of words (*jawāmi' al-kalim*); 7) He was given an intimidating awe (that frightened his enemies) over a distance of one month's journey; 8) God forgave him for all that came before and came after; 9) His Mi'rācle (the Qur'ān) remained after him; 10) The Isrā' and Mi'rāj (see *Āfāq al-Sh'ir*, 2:64).

18 '*ayn Hā'* (75), meaning "the spring of the letter *hā'*," or "the eye of the letter *hā'*" or "the very letter *hā'*." In Sufi letter symbolism, the letter *hā'* commonly represents the Divine Essence (*al-Dhāt*) or Ipseity (*Hūwiyya*) or as the last letter of the name Allāh, a fourth spiritual presence (*ḥadra*) of servitude (*'ubūdiyya*) "immersed in this Essence" (see Ibrāhīm Nīasse

*He has a place in my heart
Impossible for any but him
He appeared [to me] before I attained
my station
Or my life from my blood
Sorrow comes to an end for all but me
For he's my sorrow and he endures
He's majestic and tremendous
And so sweet and so pure
And there's none like him to follow
he's the "s" before the "r"¹⁹
His praises are my intimacy, my wine
My devotions,²⁰ my "b" and my "r"²¹
What an excellent slave he is, elevated
For he has the banner's secret²²
The Real's choicest, God's beloved
My treasury and my richness
My blamer sees my love for him
As just madness or wretchedness
My occupation is my longing for him
For in it is my victory and ascension
My guarantee against those who
blame a shaykh
Who fell in love from the "h" and the "b"²³
[is that] after my grey age, they
consoled me,
The people of intellect and clemency
Truly, by God, all my life long's*

The Removal of Confusion Concerning the Flood of the Saintly Seal Aḥmad al-Tijānī, trans. Zachary Wright, Muhtar Holland, and Abdullahi Okene (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2010), 292). Some members of the Fayḍa also cite the fact that Nīasse lived for 75 years as a sign of his possession of this numerological "secret." Summing each of the letters of the letters (*'ayn*, *yā*, *nūn*, *hā'* alif) yields 136, which reduces to 10 (1+3+6), the same value as *yā'*.

19 *sirr*-secret

20 *Qurbatī*

21 *Birr*, piety (202), possibly *barr*, land.

22 The banner of praise on the day of resurrection, an allusion to the hadiths about the Prophet's intercession at the praiseworthy station (*al-maqām al-maḥmūd*).

23 *ḥubb*, love (10)-numerical equivalent of the *yā'*

*Been spent in the blindness [of love]²⁴
I will be annihilated, but my passion
For the precious one will remain²⁵
My yearning and my burning love
Are my joy and glory
The weight of love is hard to bear
Concealing it amongst the crowd
If a friend blames [you for your love]
Then leave him brusquely
The humiliation of the people of love*

is sweeter

*Than union and elevation
My heart treks openly
Towards the best of the prophets
My coming then my going
Are for my beloved, my felicity
He's my occupation all my life long
In my mornings and my evenings*

24 *al-'amā'* also refers to the primordial "cloud" mentioned in the hadith in which the Prophet was asked, "where was our Lord before He created creation?" And he replied, "He came to be in a cloud (*'amā'*) neither above nor below which was any air, then He created His Throne upon the Waters." This "cloud" became a technical term for the Greatest Barzakh (*al-barzakh al-kubrā*, a name for an aspect of the Muḥammadan Reality (*al-ḥaqīqa al-Muḥammad-iyya*)) both separating and joining God and creation in later Sufi cosmology, as will be discussed below (see William Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 125-126). *Al-'amā'* also names the inscrutable Divine Essence which is beyond all perception and connection (see Sīdī 'Alī Harāzīm al-Barrāda, *Jawāhir al-Ma'ānī wa Bulūgh al-Amānī fī Fayḍ Sīdī Abī 'Abbās al-Tijānī*, ed. and trans. Ravane Mbaye (Dakar: Dar Albouraq, 2011), 843-845 and Shaykh Ibrāhīm Inyās, *al-Sirr al-Akbar wāl Kibrū al-Aḥmar*, ed. Maigari, in Muḥammad Maigari, Shaykh Ibrāhīm Aniyās [sic] *al-Sinighālī hayatuhu wa arāuḥu wa ta'limuhu* (Beirut: Dar al-'Arabiyya, 1981), 434).

25 Note the *ṭibāq* of the common Sufi pairing of *fanā'* (annihilation) and *baqā'* (subsistence) and the common trope of the poet passing away but his love enduring. The line can also be read to mean that the poet's love will remain/subsist by the precious one, an allusion to the state of *baqā'* and the role of the Prophet therein. "Precious one" translates *al-mufaddā-one* for whom one sacrifices or pays a ransom, like a king. In this case, the poet's annihilated self is the ransom for the beloved.

*And my blessings and my greetings
Upon ṬaḤa,²⁶ the giver of gifts
And upon the family and companions
And [every] devoted lover
As long as the kingdom [of God] endures—
Never seen as having an end.*

فأقهم طرا بيا	إن ختم الأنبياء
شمس رُشدٍ واهتداء	بحر سرٍ وثناء
لملاذي وثراني	جنة القلب امتداحي
وانكاري وفناني	دائماً فيك ودادي
وزفيري وبكائي	هام قلبي، طال وجدي
في صباح ومساء	وحيني واحترافي
من حبيبي عين هاء	زارني طيف خيال
مُسْتَجِلاً لسواء	حلّ في القلب مكاناً
وحياتي من دمائي	طلّ من دون مقامي
وهو همّي ذو ثواء	ينقضي همّ سوائي
ومليحاً ذا صفاء	كان فخماً ومهيباً
فهو سينّ قبل راء	لا ترى شبه المقيّ
قُربتي باني ورائي	مدحه أنسي وراحي
قله سرّ اللواء	نعمه عبداً تسامي
لّه كنزي وغنائي	صفوة الحقّ حبيب الـ
في جُئون أو شقاء	عاذلي فيه أراه
فيه فوزي واعتلائي	فاشتغالي بأشتياقي
هام من حاء وباء	ضامني من لام شيخاً
أهل حلم ونهاء	قد تسلى بعد شيب
طول دهري في عماء	رشداً والله إني
بالمفدى ذو بقاء	سوف أفنى وغرامي
بهجتي وهو بهائي	توقاني وهيامي
كتمه عند الملاء	ثقل الحبّ عسير
فاصرمَنها بالجفاء	خُلّة من ذي ملاه
من وصالٍ وعلاء	ذلّ أهل الخبّ أجلي
نحو خير الأنبياء	ظعن القلب جهاراً
في حبيبي وصفائي	غُدوتي ثمّ رواحي
في صباحي ومسائي	شغلتي طول حياتي
نحو طه ذي الحياء	وصلاتي وسلامي
مُجبّ ذي انتماء	وعلى آلٍ وصحب
لا ترى ذات انتهاء ²⁷	مُدّة الملك دواماً

As is typical of Niāsse's qasidas, this poem begins with a lovely and complex *jinās* in the *maṭlā'* (opening line): *ṭurran biyā'i* mirrors *mal-anbiyā'i*. This use of a separated

26 Name of the Prophet and opening letters of the 20th sura of the Qur'ān that bears its name. Its numerical equivalent is 14, the number of the full moon (middle of the lunar month), and the seven-doubled (*sab'an min al-mathānī*) (15: 87), commonly taken to refer to the *Fātiḥa*, the opening sura of the Qur'ān.

27 *Āfāq al-Sh'ir* II: 64-65.

letter evokes the mysterious “separated letters” at the beginning of some suras of the Qur’ān, some of which are traditionally taken to be names of the Prophet (such as Yāsīn and Ṭaḥa, the latter is used to refer to the Prophet in this poem),²⁸ and is the first of a series of *rumūz* (symbolic riddles/mysteries) involving these separated letters in the poem. The sprinkling of these and other mysterious *rumūz* throughout the poem adds to its depth and the delight of the reader/reciter/listener (like the flaps of a pop-up book for children), as Lara Harb recently demonstrated in her wonderful *Arabic Poetics*, remarking that “the aesthetics of rhetorical figures were defined by their capacity to delay the grasping of meaning through various techniques of deception, trickery, and obscuration, which lead to unexpected meanings.”²⁹ Quoting al-Jurjānī’s account of *bayān* to describe this poetics of “discovery” and “wonder”, Harb writes:

The pleasure of the soul is based on being lifted from the hidden to the visible, being presented with the plain after the enigmatic, being moved from the known to the better and more intimately known.... I will call this principle “discovery.” Although al-Jurjānī does not explicitly use this term, it succinctly describes the experience the listener goes through when “being lifted from the hidden to the visible”. Discovery is the listener’s aesthetic experience of *bayān*.

The second principle al-Jurjānī lays out involves human susceptibility to different ways of gaining knowledge: “It is known that initial knowledge comes to the soul first and foremost through the

senses and then through contemplation and intellect. [...] If you moved it through a comparison from something perceived through pure intellect or thought to that which is perceived through the senses and known intuitively [...] you would be like him who appeals for it to a stranger through a close friend, and for a new friendship through an old love.” Information received through the senses or intuitively, therefore, is more easily perceived than that derived through contemplation and reasoning. This principle is relevant for achieving an experience of discovery through simile....³⁰

Niāsse’s poetry, like other lyric Sufi poetry, takes this dynamic a step further, adding unveiling (*kashf*) or direct, mystical knowledge *ma’rifā* as a stage of knowledge above that of the ordinary intellect and that of the senses. Therefore, even these intellectual discoveries are more easily perceived than the direct, existential knowledge (*ma’rifā*), and both intellectual and tangible descriptions can serve as *kināya* (metonymy), *majāz* (figurative speech), *isti’āra* (metaphor), simile (*tashbīh*), and example/analogies (*tamthīl*)³¹ of these higher forms of knowledge (*ma’ārif*) and realities (*ḥaqā’iq*). In fact, Niāsse, drawing on a well-established Sufi convention,

30 Ibid, 141.

31 Although these terms are much debated in the classical literature, *kināya* refers to indirect description, whose literal meaning is still accurate (e.g. “having abundant ashes under his cauldron” (كثير رمد القدر) to signify “generosity”). *Majāz* refers to any figurative association between matters expressed by a phrase or single word, and if this association is based on similarity it is known as *isti’āra* (e.g. “I saw a lion”-(lion here standing in for a brave person)). By contrast, for al-Jurjānī, *tashbīh* is a statement of similarity between two things (e.g. “Zayd is a lion”) in which both things likened or equated are stated. *Majāz* and *kināya* function by signifying indirectly (with the signified unstated), while *tashbīh* functions by making a statement of comparison between two stated things. (see Harb, *Arabic Poetics*, 174-178).

28 Whose significance and meaning Niāsse discusses in his published Arabic tafsir, *Fī Riyāḍ al-Tafsīr and his recorded Wolof tafsir sessions*.

29 Lara Harb, *Arabic Poetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 258.

refers to everything other than God as “metaphorical existents/beings” (*al-kā'ināt* or *al-mawjūdāt al-majāziyya*).³² Thus in Sufi poetics, the delight of discovery that is so integral to “ordinary” Arabic poetics—of using sensory/intuitive comparisons or descriptions to elucidate and discover intellectual meanings—itsself serves as a metaphor or symbol of the delight of mystical unveiling (*kashf*). In addition to serving the usual functions described by literary theorists such as al-Jurjānī, rhetorical and poetic techniques such as double entendres (*tawjīh* and *istikhdām*), subtle *ishārāt* (allusions) and *rumūz* (symbols/mysteries/puzzles) in Sufi poetry such as Niāsse’s also attempts to communicate, provoke, and cultivate the spiritual realization (*taḥqīq*) and unveiling (*kashf*) of supra-discursive knowledge (*ma'rifa*). In this context, poetic devices such as *ṭibāq* (the conjunction or pairing of opposites) takes on added and perhaps more literal significance, and the conceptual “wonder” the rhetorical technique evokes opens up onto the “bewilderment” (*ḥayra*) of the unveiling or supra-rational knowledge (*ma'rifa*) of these spiritual realities (*ḥaqā'iq*). As Niāsse writes, both describing and demonstrating this dynamic:

تأخر بعد الرسل وهو مقدّم ضد بضد حير القلب واللبا³³

He came after the Messengers while he yet preceded [them]

So by the conjunction of opposites he bewildered the hearts and minds

Here the issue is not just that it is more beautiful and pleasing to say something indirectly, but rather that of effectively expressing meanings beyond language, thought, and ordinary experience, which therefore can only be

32 Shaykh Ibrāhīm Inyās, *Jawāhir al-rasā'il wa-yaliyya ziyādat al-jawāhir al-ḥawī ba'd 'ulūm wasīlat al-wasā'il*, ed. Aḥmad Abū'l-Faṭḥ, (Borno: Aḥmad Abū'l-Faṭḥ, n.d.) II: 61.

33 *Āfāq al-Sh'ir* I: 185.

expressed indirectly. As Ibn al-Fāriḍ wrote:

وفي الإشارة معنى ما العبارة حدّت

In allusion there is meaning not contained in plain expression³⁴

And as Niāsse writes in his diwan, *Nūr al-Ḥaqq*, using the common metaphor of drunkenness for the experience of *jadhb* (spiritual rapture) and *ma'rifa* (direct knowledge) to both describe and illustrate this dynamic in self-referentially paradoxical verses:

فتسكر مهما قد هممت ولم تذق مدا ما ولا صوتا سوى الرّكز والهمس
... ومهما تحدثنا لسكر فعندنا علوم تعالت أن تقبّد في طرس³⁵

So get drunk, for whatever you have intended, you have not tasted
Of wine and voice, but a faint sound and whisper

...

Whatever we say about drunkenness is, for us, knowledge, too lofty to be bound in pages

Moreover, Ibrāhīm Niāsse echoed Shaykh al-Tijānī in strongly condemning revealing esoteric secrets in the presence of the uninitiated as being “worse than committing major sins”,³⁶ and so the allusive and elusive nature of this kind of poetry “clothes” the secrets, effectively communicating them to the initiated (who delight in recognizing their experiences or knowledge in them), veiling them from the unprepared, and perhaps even serving as the cause for the unveiling of these secrets for the spiritually prepared.³⁷ As Emily Dickinson wrote in a similar vein:

Tell all the truth but tell it slant —

34 T.E. Homerin, *Umar ibn al-Fāriḍ: Sufi Verse, Saintly Life* (New York: Paulist Press, 2001), 187.

35 *Āfāq al-Sh'ir*, 361.

36 Inyās, *Jawāhir al-rasā'il* I: 19.

37 Indeed, Niāsse’s poems are sometimes used in the process of *tarbiya* (spiritual training) which leads disciples to *ma'rifa*.

Success in Circuit lies
 Too bright for our infirm Delight
 The Truth's superb surprise
 As Lightning to the Children eased
 With explanation kind
 The Truth must dazzle gradually
 Or every man be blind—³⁸

For example, the symbolic riddles of the letter “yā” in the opening line and the letters “‘ayn hā’” of the seventh verse of *Inna Khamtal Anbiyā* serve both as a poetic feature that infuses the poetry with mystery and forces the listener to work to “solve the puzzle” posed by these letters. As Harb, again quoting al-Jurjānī, suggests such features can increase the listener's delight and wonder in discovery:

He argues that the more effort is required by the listener to discover the meaning, the more pleasurable it is: “It is human nature that if something is gained after searching, effort, and yearning, its attainment is more beautiful and pleasurable.”... He thus distinguishes between two kinds of complexity: what he calls “mu‘aqqad” (convoluted), which is speech that puts obstacles in the way of one's understanding, and, conversely, “mulakhkhaṣ” (condensed), which is a kind of complexity that nevertheless helps light the way to the meaning... Beauty in speech is, therefore, the result of what induces thought and contemplation, but without unnecessary complication. Thus, conveying an idea in a way that requires effort to grasp it enhances the experience of discovery and the pleasure resulting from it.³⁹

38 Helen Vendler, *Dickinson* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 431.

39 Harb, *Arabic Poetics*, 144. As Dick Davis and Afkham Darbandi point out in the Preface to their translation of ‘Aṭṭār's *Conference of the Birds*, Bunyan defended the obscurity of allegories in his *Pilgrim's Progress* in

While some listeners may find Nīasse's letter-puzzles convoluted, the commentary traditions suggest that they are perceived as not only a condensed and ingenious way to indicate a particular meaning, such as the 10 particularities of the Prophet Muḥammad that were granted to no other prophet in the case of the letter yā' in the opening line, but in inducing thought and contemplation, may actually evoke multiple esoteric meanings and secrets (*asrār*) and even provoke realization (*taḥqīq*) of these realities. This can be particularly seen in the mysterious ‘ayn hā' letter combination of the seventh line. In Sufi lettrism, the *Hā'* is often associated with the Divine Ipseity (*Huwiyya*), as in the following line from Tijānī “Prayer from the Unseen Upon the Aḥmadan Reality” (*al-ṣalāt al-ghaybiyya fī l-ḥaqīqat al-aḥmadiyya*), which described the prophet as “the one who prays in the niche of the ‘ayn hā' of Huwiyya.”⁴⁰ In one of his commentaries on the *Ṣalāt al-Fātiḥ* (the central prayer of the Tijānī tradition) Nīasse writes, explaining the esoteric meaning of the prayer's opening word, “*Allāhuma*” (O God), “The letter *hā'* is the presence of worshipful servitude [*ubūdiyya*], immersed in Divine Ipseity (*Hūwiyya*)... The presence of *hā'* is a secret that cannot be divulged.”⁴¹

similar fashion:

And to stir the mind
 To search after what it fain would find,
 Things that seem to be hid in words obscure
 Do but the godly mind the more allure
 To study what those sayings should contain
 That speak to us in such a cloudy strain.
 I also know a dark similitude
 Will on the fancy more itself intrude,
 And will stick faster in the heart and head
 Than things from similes not borrowed.

(Dick Davis and Afkham Darbandi, *The Conference of the Birds* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1984), 11).

40 *Jawāhir al-Ma'ānī*, 1439-1441.

41 Nīasse, *Removal of Confusion*, 292. Another verse of Nīasse's employs the same symbol, “He is the ‘ayn, the ‘ayn of *hā'* and the *hā'* is his ‘ayn.”

هو العين عين الهاء والهاء عينه (*Āfāq al-sh'ir* I: 205). Which I would render as, “He is the essence of the Divine Es-

Given the polysemy of the word *‘ayn*, this could then be read as “the source/spring of *hā*”, “the eye of *hā*”, “the essence of *hā*” or “the very letter *hā*” all of which can be interpreted as referring to the cosmological dimensions of the Muḥammadan reality in various ways. To give but one example, the *Jawharat al-Kamāl*, the longer prayer on the Prophet that also forms an integral part of the daily Tijānī litany, begins by referring to the Prophet as “the spring/source of Divine mercy” (*‘ayn al-raḥmat al-rabbaniyya*) for all of creation. We have chosen to translate the *‘ayn hā* as “quintessence’s spring” to allude to the numerical equivalence of the letter *hā* and the number 5.⁴²

For initiates who have undergone spiritual training (*tarbiya*) to achieve *ma’rifā*, the recognition of their own experiences and insights in the subtle allusions (*ishārāt*) and mysterious symbols (*rumūz*) of Niāsse’s poetry is a source of delight, and by provoking contemplation, these poetic features can also elicit new discoveries or unveilings about the meanings of these symbols and the listeners’ own experiences. While for the uninitiated, these obscure allusions or opaque riddles reveal the presence of a secret, prompting further curiosity about its meanings.

sence and the Divine Essence is his essence”; alluding to the doctrine of the Muḥammadan reality being the first, essential, and comprehensive manifestation of the Divine Essence, and the Divine Essence being the essence and origin of this Muḥammadan reality.

42 In addition to these allusions and the Qur’ānic “separated letters”, Niāsse’s use of stand-alone letters also recalls a mysterious statement of Shaykh Aḥmad al-Tijānī, “The gnostic [*‘arif*] becomes a letter/word among the letters/words of the Divine Essence (*ḥarfān min ḥurūf al-dhāt*), for he comes to have the power of disposal (*yataṣarrāf*) through the Divine Essence as does the letter/word, although he is not the source of the letter.” (qtd. in Zachary Wright, *Realizing Islām: The Tijānīyya in North Africa and the Eighteenth-Century Muslim World*. (Durham, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 164).

But these alphabetical particularities aside, like many of Niāsse’s poems, *Inna Khatmal Anbiyā’* deploys many of the classical motifs of the tradition of the *qaṣīda* and prophetic praise: invoking the phantom of the beloved (*ṭayf al-khayāl*) in line 7, the departing of the caravan (*ẓa’n*) in line 26, the blamers who criticize the poet’s love (in lines 16, 18, and 24), the grey hair of old age (*shayb*) in line 19, the struggle to conceal his love (line 24), the burning passion that consumes and annihilates the poet, yet also makes his sweet affliction of passion eternal and more dear than anything else, and standard formulations of praise of, longing for, and devotion to the Prophet. Characteristically, Niāsse’s poem also self-referentially refers to its act of praising the beloved Prophet as the poet’s “heart’s paradise”, “intimacy and wine”, and “devotions”, also describing the Prophet as a “sea of praise” and having “the secret of the banner of praise”, connecting the poet’s praise of the Prophet to the Prophet’s all-encompassing praise of God.⁴³

We will return to this theme of praise later, but for now we wish to turn to the characteristic and complex temporalities of this poem. Fittingly, the poem ends with the word “end” (*intihā*), but in a negation of this ending, asking God to invoke blessings and peace upon the Prophet, his family, companions and devoted lovers, “as long as the kingdom endures, perpetually, endlessly”. In another negation of temporality, the poet proclaims his perpetual love for, remembrance of, and annihilation in his beloved (line 4), and in another common feature of Niāsse’s poetry (and Prophetic *madīḥ* in general) claims that his beloved appeared to him before his life

43 For an account of the traditions about the banner of praise (*liwā’ al-ḥamd*) and some of Ibn al-‘Arabī and al-Jīlī’s influential interpretations of their significance, see Michel Chodkiewicz, “The Banner of Praise,” *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabī Society*, 21 (1997): 45-58.

(line 9), which is “entirely occupied” with his beloved (line 28), “morning and evening”, “coming and going”, to the extent that he has spent his whole life “blind” (line 20) to all else. In another context, this could just be read as the standard *mubālagha* (hyperbole) of the lover’s literary voice, but in the context of Sufi cosmology they take on a much more “literal” meaning, as these other verses of Niāsse’s state more explicitly:

فإني من أهوى وحق صفاته
برغم حسود أو مناول لنا بتنا
قد أحببته حتى أراني كنته
وربي لم يخلق مكانا ولا وقتنا⁴⁴

For I am the one I love, I swear by the
truth of his qualities
In spite of all our enviers and enemies
I loved him until I saw that I was him
While my Lord had not created
space nor time

فهو مختار البرايا
قبل تكوين الكيان
برزت حضرة طه
قبل تكوين المكان
وله عمر طويل
قبل تقدير الزمان
إني قبل البرايا
حُبُه شغل الجنان⁴⁵

He’s the chosen of creation
Before the becoming of all beings
The presence of TaHa emerged
Before even space existed
And he had a life, extended
Before time even was reckoned
And I was before creation
My heart busy with his passion

Similarly, in his introduction to his collection of Niāsse’s poetry, Shaykh Muḥammad ibn Shaykh ‘Abdallāh gives his own account of the near-Mi’rāculous conjunction of elements that must occur to produce a verse of “true love poetry”:

Each verse of love poetry is completed
by the concurrence of the various ele-

ments of sincere feelings. There must be a coming together of the “tripod” of the beloved of the poet, the poet of love, and the love of the poet. **This conjunction must occur from a period of time not measured by the rotation of the sun, but rather it is a branch of the perpetual now (*al-an al-dā’im*) whose beginning and end is unknown.** Love issues to its poet a command to begin the conjunction...and this single verse will only see the light of day after the concurrence of this tripartite “committee” and the mobilization of burning feelings and sincere motives for it, so how much more [incredible is this] if these verses are numerous, over 20,000 in number?⁴⁶

So what is this “time outside of time” that is the stage and origin of the drama of the poet’s love for the Prophet and the birthplace of this poetry?

Time and Sufi Cosmology in Ibrāhim Niāsse’s Prose and Poetry

*Has there come upon man a span of
time (dahr) when he was a thing
unremembered?*
Qur’ān 76: 1

If you gain insight into the secret of your time, you will realize that *the two bows* of beginningless eternity (*azal*) and endless eternity (*abad*) are your heart and your time.

-Aḥmad al-Ghazālī

من حضرة القدس جئنا
كنت قبل الكون كنتا
وإنت فيها لم يزل
والأبد مثل الأزل
مطلقاً كنت فصرنا
بالقيود متجمل

44 *Āfāq Al-Shi’r* 1:363.

45 *Āfāq Al-Shi’r* II: 65.

46 *Āfāq al-Sh’ir*, 49-50. Emphasis added.

You came from the Holy Presence
While you have never ceased to be in it
You were before the cosmos, you were
And the endless eternity (*abad*) is like
beginningless eternity (*azal*)
You were absolute and then you
became
Adorned with delimitations
-Aḥmad al-‘Alāwī

زمانی رسول الله و هو مكانه وذلك حصن العبد إن رايش رانش
...
ثنائي عليه قد كفاني فصلين عليه إلى الأبد فهي المعيش

My time is the Messenger of God and
he is its place
And that is the slave’s fortress if he
takes you under his wing
...

My praises of him suffice me so [God]
bless him abundantly
for these blessings are our livelihood
for endless eternity
-Ibrāhīm Nīāsse

For the more or less brief time the poem
lasts, it has a specific and unmistakable
temporality, it has its own time.
-Giorgio Agamben

The secret wish of poetry is to stop time.
-Charles Simic

This very topic is taken up in a short letter by
Shaykh Ibrāhīm Nīāsse to his close disciple
and companion, Sīdī ‘Alī Cissé:

A question about *Azal* (beginningless
eternity—eternity *a parte ante*)⁴⁷ and

the *Azal* of *Azal* (beginning-less begin-
ning-less eternity) and *Abad* of *Abad*
(endless, endless eternity-*a parte post*)
and how the extent of each one is related
to the other, and what is the reality of
their meanings? Your son, ‘Alī Cissé

The Answer:

My son ‘Alī Cissé, listen to your father.
The *Azals* are three in respect to three
realities. The *Azal* is an expression for
what has never, ever ceased [beginning-
lessly] and *Abad* is an expression for that
which will never ever cease [endlessly].
And you, if you contemplate the reality
of the Inward of the Inward (*buṭūn al-
buṭūn*), you will find that it never ceases,
while as for the Inward (*buṭūn*), its ori-
gin is the same, and as for manifestation
(*ḡuhūr*), it is the same. So it will be clear
to you like this, that the *Azal* is the In-
ward of the Inward (*buṭūn al-buṭūn*), and
the *Azal* of *Azal* is the Inward (*buṭūn*),
and the *Azal* of *Azal* of *Azal* is manifes-
tation (*ḡuhūr*). And what I have to say
about *Abad* follows the same script as
my speech about *Azal*. And this [*Azal*]
is before and that [*Abad*] is after, but

on Time”, *Journal of Religious Thought: A Quar-
terly Journal of Shiraz University* 6, 19 (2013): 135-
164; Mohamed Haj Yousef, *Ibn ‘Arabi: Time and
Cosmology*, (New York: Routledge, 2014), William
Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of
Ibn al-‘Arabi’s Cosmology*, (Albany, SUNY Press,
2015), and Eric Winkel, “Time is Not Real: Time in
Ibn ‘Arabī, and from Parmenides (and Heraclitus) to
Julian Barbour”, *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi
Society* 51, (2012). In a related, but distinct schema,
the Safavid philosopher Mīr Dāmād (d. 1631) built on
Ibn Sīnā’s (and Aristotle and Plotinus’) philosophy of
time as a relational entity to posit three levels of (real
and extra-mental) time: Sarmad-the relationship be-
tween the changeless and the changeless; Dahr-the re-
lationship between the changeless and the changing;
Zamān-the relationship between the changing and the
changing, and used this schema to resolve the phil-
osophical and theological debates about the creation
and/or eternity of the world.

47 For the history and development of these terms and
concepts see Gerhard Böwering, “Ideas of time
in Persian Sufism”, *Iran* 30, 1 (1992): 77-89; “The
concept of time in Islām” *Proceedings of the Amer-
ican Philosophical Society* 141, 1 (1997): 55-66;
“Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Concept of Time.” *Ishraq*, 2 (2012):
108-23; Ibrāhīm Kalin, “From the Temporal Time
to the Eternal Now: Ibn al-‘Arabi and Mulla Sadra

where there is no “before” nor “after.”

As for their limit and their endpoint, there is no limited extent for *Azal* nor limit. For extents and limits cannot attain the reality of *Azal*, particularly the *Azal of Azal* and the *Azal of Azal of Azal*, which is the utmost end of the thoughts of the great. So the intellects are bewildered about this relationship and expressions disappear and vanish because *Azal*, as I mentioned before, is an expression for what has not ceased. One day of its days is like a thousand years of what you reckon, and these are the days of God which we are commanded to remember. God said, *Remind them of the days of God* (14: 5). And these days are concurrent with the days of the world. So the people of this world are in the days of this world and the people of God are in the days of God: *Then there will separate them a wall in which there is a gate, the inner side of which contains mercy, and the outer facing towards torment. They call to them saying, “were we not with you?” They say: “Indeed! But you tempted yourselves, bided your time, and doubted...”* (57: 13-14). The journey of the Knower by his Lord in these days in the unseen does not cease. He only encounters *wujūd* (being/finding), [but] there is no being with him so that he is bewildered in the [Divine] Greatness and Pride, which had they manifested themselves to the Knower, he would become pulverized faster than the blink of an eye. To this alludes [‘abd al-Qādir al-Jilānī] Jīlī’s words (may God be pleased with him), “whoever is familiar with the glory of God cannot withstand the appearance of the Divine Greatness and Pride.”⁴⁸ What is beyond

this is not written on papers, nor seen by eyes, except that there is the journey of endless and beginningless eternity in which all realities and metaphors and times and places and litanies and inspirations and knowledges and experiences have been folded up like the folding of a scroll. Silence prevails over the occupant of this station, save for one whom the All-Merciful gives permission, and he speaks rightly. He only desires pure non-being in order to be devoted wholeheartedly to the station and to make it agreeable to him. *You see the mountains, reckoning that they are fixed but they are passing like the passing of the clouds* (27: 88).⁴⁹ Greetings of Peace.

with Me in respect of either of them I shall cast into the Fire.” and the discussion of it recorded in *Bughyat al-Mustafid in relationship to the station of supreme sainthood of Shaykh Aḥmad al-Tijānī*.

- 49 Nīasse cites this verse often in his writings typically, but not exclusively, to allude to various aspects of what Ibn al-‘Arabī called the doctrine of the renewal of creation at each instant (*tajdid al-khalq*—from Qur’ān 50: 15, *they are in confusion about a new creation*), that everything is in constant flux, being perpetually manifested from and returned to God at every instant. Ibn al-‘Arabī writes, “When you say to someone, You said (*qulta*) this, and, You said (*qulta*) that, the ta [denoting the second person singular], for the person of unveiled sight, of the first *qulta* is different from the ta of the second *qulta*, because the very one addressed has been made anew with every [divine] breath: *Rather, they are in confusion about the new creation* [Q. 50: 15].” (qtd. in Eric Winkel, “Time is Not Real: Time in Ibn ‘Arabī, and from Parmenides (and Heraclitus) to Julian Barbour”, *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabī Society* 51). Similarly Nīasse said, “Rather every individual who has passed through this stage of intoxication (*jadhb*) has had the same experience. All of them have stood at the feet of the Real and made the same conclusion, even if Allāh’s manifestations inevitably differ from person to person. All have become intoxicated with the same One, Living Allāh. Allāh may manifest in a tree, but the next moment this manifestation will move to another tree, or something else. The manifestations of Allāh are constantly evolving and never at a standstill. Certainly, differences between brothers or sisters in the same family must appear, even though they are from the same parents and have the same blood. Allāh says in the Qur’ān, *You see the mountains,*

48 A reference to the hadith qudsī, “Pride is my cloak and greatness My robe, and anyone who competes

Written by Ibrāhīm ibn al-Ḥājī ‘abd Allāh al-Tijānī in Kosi, 1350 Hijrī (1931-1932)⁵⁰

This remarkable and remarkably mysterious missive is a synthesis of discussions of technical terminology of Sufi cosmology and hagiology found in the main Tijānī source-book, the *Jawāhir al-Ma‘ānī* written by Sīdī ‘Alī Harāzīm al-Barrāda (d. 1804) and Sīdī Muḥammad al-‘Arabī ibn Sā’ih’s *Bughyāt al-Mustafīd*. While explaining this short letter comprehensively (if even possible) would require a separate article, or even book, the key to understanding this explanation of different levels of temporality (or, more precisely, atemporality) is the emanationist schema of Divine presences (*ḥaḍarāt*), descents (*tanazzulāt*), and realities (*ḥaqā’iq*) that structure the levels of reality of Sufi metaphysics in general, and Tijānī cosmology in particular.⁵¹

reckoning that they are fixed, but they are passing like the passing of the clouds (27: 88). At this point, those with knowledge of Allāh will be aware that the body that left its home to come to this conference has passed away, and is not the same that will return to its home later tonight. (qtd. in Zachary Wright, *Pearls from the Divine Flood: Selected Discourses from Shaykh al-Islām Ibrāhīm Nāsse* (Atlanta: Fayda Books, 2015), 108-109.)

50 *Jawāhir al-Rasā’il* I: 89-90.

51 In summary, this schema has five cosmological presences (*ḥaḍarāt*), in descending order of reality: 1) The Presence of Ipseity (*Hāhūt*), 2) Presence of Divinity (*Lāhūt*), 3) Presence of Domination (*Jabarūt*), 4) Presence of Dominion (*Malakūt*), 5) Presence of the Kingdom (*Mulk*) or humanity (*Nāsūt*). Another common schema has seven Divine “Descents” (*tanazzulāt*): 1) The level of the Sheer Essence (*al-dhāt al-sādhij*), 2) the level of Unicity (*al-Aḥadiyya*), 3) the level of Singleness (*al-Wahda*), 4) Level of Oneness (*al-Wāḥidiyya*), 5) The level of the Spirits (*al-arwāḥ*), 6) The level of the Images (*al-mithāl*), 7) The level of the senses (*al-ḥiss*). The *Jawāhir al-Ma‘ānī* records Shaykh Aḥmad al-Tijānī’s description of these presences (in ascending order): “The first presence is the world of the presence of humanity (*Nāsūt*), and it is the level of the existence of dense, corporeal bodies. The second is the level of the world of Dominion (*Malakūt*), and it is the level of the effusion of holy lights (*fayḍ al-anwār al-qudsiyya*) and it is from the first heaven to the seventh. It is the world of exemplars/the imaginal realm

Each level of reality or Divine presence has its own corresponding level of time and level of the human being. These form the subject of the next treatise, to which we will shortly turn, but first we would like to consider the meaning of the *Azal* of *Azal* and why the *Azal* of *Azal* of *Azal* is considered the “utmost end of thought”, and what, if anything, do they have to do with poetry?

Nāsse begins by defining *Azal* as the negation of a temporal “beginning point” and *Abad* as the negation of a temporal “ending point,” identifying both with the “Inward of the Inward” (*buṭūn al-buṭūn*). In this sense, *Azal* and *Abad* negate the Divine Names the First (*al-Awwal*) and the Last (*al-Akhir*) since there is no firstness/beginning nor lastness/ending. Likewise, the Inward of the Inward” (*buṭūn al-buṭūn*) has no complementary “outward appearance” (*zuhūr*) to oppose it, and in the *Jawāhir al-Ma‘ānī*, this level is also referred to the Sheer Essence (*al-dhāt al-sādhij*), absolute being (*al-wujūd al-muṭlaq*), which negates and transcends any and all differentiation, multiplicity, and relationality in its “absolute unicity” (*aḥadiyya muṭlaqa*). Now the *Azal* of *Azal* is a negation of this negation, which is an affirmation of Divine Firstness and Lastness, of the Inward (*al-bāṭin*) and the Outward (*al-ẓāhir*), but in

(*‘ālam al-mithāl*) and it is the world of spiritual beings (*rūḥāniyyāt*) and the spheres. The third presence is the world of Domination (*Jabarūt*), and it is from the seventh heaven to the footstool (*Kursī*). It is the level of the effusion of Divine secrets (*fayḍ al-asrār al-ilāhiyyah*), disembodied spirits and the world of the angels. The forth presence is the presence of the world of Divinity (*Lāhūt*) and it is the world of the appearance of the names of God and His attributes and their mysteries and lights and effusions and manifestations. The fifth presence is the presence of Ipseity (*Hāhūt*), and it is the presence of the Inward of the Essence (*al-buṭūn al-dhātī*) and the Blindness of the Essence (*al-‘amā al-dhātī*). There can be no desire to attain this level, only to be connected to it.” (*Jawāhir al-Ma‘ānī*, 843). Also see William Chittick, “The Five Divine Presences: From al-Qūnawī to Qayṣarī” *The Muslim World* 72, 2 (1982): 107-128.

a comprehensive and unified fashion. In the *Jawāhir al-Ma'ānī* this level is referred to as a “First without an end and a Last without an end” (*al-Awwalu bilā nihāyatin wa Akhiru bilā nihāyatin*).⁵² As for the *Azal* of *Azal* of *Azal* it is a negation of the negation of the negation of having a beginning, which is a kind of return to beginninglessness, but in a more restricted modality. If *Azal* can be imagined as an unbroken circle, then the *Azal* of *Azal* is a notched circle or a circle with a dot on its circumference, while the *Azal* of *Azal* of *Azal* is the dot itself.⁵³ In his *al-Sirr al-Akbar*, Shaykh Ibrāhīm Nīasse refers to this reality as “the perpetual now” (*al-ān al-dā'im*), which the *Jawāhir al-Ma'ānī* identifies as the utmost end of knowledge and the knowers (*muntahā al-ma'rifa* and *muntahā al-'arifīn*).⁵⁴

52 *Jawāhir al-Ma'ānī*, 843.

53 Explaining this triple negation, Ibn al-'Arabī writes, “This is what we meant in the first sentence of this book by our words, ‘Praise belongs to God who brought the things into existence from a nonexistence and from its nonexistence.’” (qtd. in Salman Bashier, *Ibn al-'Arabī's Barzakh: The Concept of the Limit and the Relationship between God and the World* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2004), 96). Similarly Shaykh Aḥmad al-Tijānī (citing from Muḥammad al-Shinnāwī's *Jawharat al-Khams*) refers to the second Divine descent as “the nonexistence of nonexistence (*'adam al-'adam*)” (*Jawāhir al-Ma'ānī*, 843).

54 Identifying it with the fourth Divine descent, *Jawāhir al-Ma'ānī*, 845. As to why this dialectic of negation cannot continue on *ad infinitum* and the third negation is the “utmost end”, Ibn al-'Arabī explains that this dialectic produces Being, non-Being, and “the third thing” (*al-shay' al-thālith*) which is a *barzakh* or liminal reality that both unites and divides these opposites. After this there are just combinations of these three kinds of matters, just as, analogously, positive, negative, and imaginary numbers are algebraically closed. Commenting on the verse of the Qu'ran “You threw not when you threw, but God threw” (8: 17), Ibn al-'Arabī writes, “He said: ‘You did not throw when you threw but God threw,’ affirming both that Muḥammad is the only thrower and that Allah is the only thrower. But, then, what has become of Muḥammad? He negated him and affirmed him. Then He negated him [for the second time]. Muḥammad is affirmed in His saying: ‘When you threw’ between two negations: an eternal negation in His saying: ‘You did not throw’ and an ever-lasting negation in His saying:

Drawing on the work of Ibn al-'Arabī,⁵⁵ in his

‘But Allah threw’. Thus, the affirmation of Muḥammad in this verse is like the instant of time (*al-ān*), which is the eternal Being (*wujūd*) between the two times, between the past time, which is a realized (*muḥaqqaq*) Nonbeing, and the future time, which is absolute (*maḥd*) Nonbeing.... He rendered him an affirmed Middle between two negations, so he resembled the instant of time (*al-ān*) that is Being. Being (*wujūd*) belongs to Allah not to Muḥammad, since He is Who possesses permanent Being in the past, in the present state (*ḥāl*), and in the future time. Conjectured (*mutawahham*) delimitation (*taqyīd*) is removed from Him.” qtd. in Bashier, *Ibn al-'Arabī's Barzakh*, 127. Shaykh Ibrāhīm Nīasse has a similar commentary upon this verse in his Arabic tafsīr, emphasizing the Prophet Muḥammad's unique status as a *barzakh* between God and creation as indicated through this affirmation in between the two negations, in contrast to the other people mentioned in the first half of the verse, whose actions are simply negated (you did not slay them, but God slew them) (Ibrāhīm Inyās, *Fī Ri-yāḍ al-tafsīr li'l-Qur'ān al-karīm*, ed. Muḥammad b. al-Shaykh 'Abd Allāh al-Tijānī (Tūnis: Majma' al-Yamāma li'l-Ḍibā'a wa'l-Nashr, 2010), II: 366-367).

55 In his *al-Fūtūḥāt al-Makkiya* Ibn al-'Arabī writes, “What the rational faculty understands from time is something imagined, extended, and lacking the two sides. We judge that what has passed away within it is ‘the past,’ we judge that what will come in it is ‘the future,’ and we judge that what is within it is ‘the [present] state’ (*ḥāl*). This last is called ‘the instant’ (*al-an*). Although the instant is a time, it is a limit for what is past in time and what is future. It is like a point that we suppose upon the circumference of a circle. Wherever we suppose the point to be, origin and end are designated for the circumference. ‘Eternity without beginning’ [*Azal*] and ‘eternity without end’ [*Abad*] are the nonexistence of time's two sides, for it has no first and no last. Rather, it has perpetuity (*dawām*), and perpetuity is the time of the (present) state, while the state possesses perpetuity. Hence the cosmos never ceases to be under the ruling property of the time of the (present) state, and God's ruling property in the cosmos never ceases to be in the ruling property of time. That of it which is past and future never cease to be in the ruling property of the (present) state” (Chittick, SDG, 128-129). and “The cosmos is a *barzakh* between eternity without beginning (*azal*) and eternity without end (*abad*). Through it the one becomes differentiated from the other. If not for it, no property would become manifest for either and the affair would be one and would not become distinct. This is like the [present] state between the past and the future. If not for the state, the past nonexistence would not become distinct from the future nonexistence. This is the property of the *barzakh*, and it never ceases in the cosmos in perpetuity. It is the tie between the two premises. If not for it, no

influential *Sufi Vocabulary* (*Iṣtilahāt al-Ṣufiyya*), ‘abd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī defines the perpetual now as:

The perpetual moment is the extension of the Divine presence in which *azal* (beginningless eternity) enters *abad* (endless eternity). Both of these are in the present moment because of what emerges in *azal* upon moments (*hīn*) of *abad*. Each of their moments (*hīn*) combines *azal* and *abad*, and through it *azal*, *abad* and the present moment (*al-waqt al-ḥāḍir*) are united. Thus it is called the inner reality of time (*bā-tin al-zaman*) and the origin of time (*aṣl al-zaman*). Temporal moments are imprints on it, and its decrees (*aḥkam*) and forms are manifested in temporal changes (*taghayyurat*). But it is fixed in its state perpetually (*dā’iman*) and eternally (*sarmadan*). This has been related to the Divine Presence of “Withness” (*al-ḥaḍrat al-‘andīyya*) in the Prophet’s saying, “With your Lord there is neither morning nor evening.”⁵⁶

Or in the words of Niāsse’s treatise, “all realities and metaphors (*al-majāzāt*) and times and places and litanies and inspirations and knowledges and experiences have been folded up like the folding of a scroll.” This perpetual moment, according to ibn Shaykh ‘Abdallāh, is the origin of all true poetry, whose metred rhythms and rhymes and condensed and integrated language and meanings mirror the features of this perpetual moment. The rhythms and rhymes and structures of poetic time similarly enfold all of its contents into a unity.⁵⁷ In Niāsse’s *madīḥ* poetry in particular

(in contrast to his epistles, longer prose works, and didactic poems), this singular or circular poetic temporality is experienced through the repetition of the poem’s first line at its end (*radd al-‘ajūz ‘alā’l-ṣadr*, which is a feature of many of Niāsse’s poems in written form, and most of them in oral performance) and the common closing, and often repetitive, invocations of eternity within the compressed time of the final lines.⁵⁸ In this poetry, there is no narrative development over time, but rather, the exposition of the various distinct dimen-

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour

Or as ‘Aṭṭār says in his *Conference of the Birds*, “Give up the intellect for love and see/In one brief moment all eternity”

- 58 For example, both illustrating and describing this temporality Niāsse writes:
For if the Beloved is absent from you, know that he is in my heart
So my heart’s core is untarnished by the tarnisher
My time is the Messenger of God and he is its place
And that is the slave’s fortress if he takes you under his wing
...
My praises of him suffice me so [God] bless him abundantly
for these blessings are our livelihood for endless eternity

لئن غاب عنكم ذا الحبيب فإنه \ بقلبي فلم يخذش فوادي خادش
زمانني رسول الله وهو مكانه \ وذلك حصن العبد إن رايش رائش

...
ثنائي عليه قد كفاني فصلين \ عليه إلى الأبد فهي المعاش

(*Āfāq al-sh‘ir*, 191). Or in a typical example, repeating the first *miṣrā‘* of the poem in its last one Niāsse writes:

قضى لي قاضي الحب قدما متى قضى \ محبة طه الهاشمي وقد مضى

...
عليك مدى الأيام ما قال مغرم \ قضى لي قاضي الحب قدما متى قضى

Love’s judge decreed for me when he decreed in
days long gone
Love for TaHa, the Hashimi, and this decree is done
Upon you [be God’s blessings] as long as the
days in which a lover says
“Love’s judge decreed for me when he decreed in
days long gone”

(204, 104, *ri’hs-la qāfā*)

sound knowledge would become manifest.” (Chittick, SDG, 334).

56 ‘Abd al-Razzāq Al-Kāshānī, *Mu’jam Iṣtilahāt al-Ṣufiyya* (Cairo: Dār al-Manār, 1996), 57.

57 In Blake’s famous verses from “Auguries of Innocence”:

sions of the poet's *ḥāl*, which are constantly integrated and returned, through rhythm and rhyme, to the perpetual now of poetic time.⁵⁹ Moreover, *madīḥ* poetry in particular enfoldes the distinct temporalities of the pre-temporal existence of the Muḥammadan Light (*al-nūr al-Muḥammadī*), the eschatological and post-temporal scenes of Prophetic praise and intercession described in the Qur'ān and hadith, incidents from the Prophet's earthly life, as well as the memories and present state of the poet, reciter, and audience into the perpetual duration of its poetic time.⁶⁰

Just as the perpetual moment is a *barzakh* (a liminal reality that both unites and separates) between the past and future, eternity and time, the rhythm of poetic metres is a *barzakh* between eternity and time, stillness and motion; rhyme is a *barzakh* between one sound and many; figurative language (*majāz*) is a *barzakh* between the thing signified and its signifier; and poetry itself is a *barzakh* between experience (*adhwāq*) and expression (*awrāq*), feeling and thought, music and prose, silence and speech. Likewise, in Tijānī cosmology, the spiritual realities of the Prophet Muḥammad and Shaykh Aḥmad al-Tijānī (as the Muḥammadan Reality and the Concealed Seal (*al-khatm al-maktūm*), respectively) also serve as *barzakhs* between God and creation,

and between the Muḥammadan Reality and all creation, respectively, containing and combining everything within them. As a result, time, along with everything else in the universe, comes into being through these realities, and returns to eternity through the same.

In fact, in a commentary on a short didactic poem of his,⁶¹ Shaykh Ibrāhīm Nīasse identifies the *Azal* of *Azal* of *Azal* with this “eternal now”/“perpetual now” (*al-ān al-sarmadī/al-ān al-dā'im*) with an aspect of the spiritual reality of Shaykh Aḥmad al-Tijānī.⁶² So the *Azal* is associated with God, the *Azal* of *Azal* with the Muḥammadan Reality, and the *Azal* of *Azal* of *Azal* with the spiritual reality of Shaykh Aḥmad al-Tijānī. Encountering these realities requires the realization of the knower's non-existence through annihilation (*fanā'*), which is why in the letter, Shaykh Ibrāhīm writes that, “The occupant of this station... only desires pure non-being.” As Ibn al-'Arabī explains, referencing the hadith “God was/is and there was/is nothing with him”:

Absolute [*maḥḍ*] nonexistence is more eminent than relative nonexistence in a certain respect, and that is that, in its magnification of God and in the strength of its signifying Him, it does not receive *wujūd* [being]. It remains in its root and entity, out of jealousy lest it be the associate of the Divine Side in the attribute of *wujūd* and lest the names that are ascribed to God be ascribed to it.... After all, absolute [*maḥḍ*] nonexistence is better at making known what is worthy of God than the relatively nonexistent,

59 This bears some resemblance to Bergson's philosophy of duration (*la durée*) exemplified by the experience of music, and Gilles Deleuze's theorization of cinema through this Bergsonian lens. While there are some important differences between Bergson's conception of time and that of the Tijānī tradition, what I am trying to suggest here is that Nīasse's poetry exemplifies and allows us to experience and think within his philosophy of time, just as Deleuze writes about cinema and Bergson's philosophy of movement and time.

60 Similar dynamics have been discussed in relations to the Qur'ān, for example, see Angelika Neuwirth, “Qur'ān and History—a Disputed Relationship. Some Reflections on Qur'ānic History and History in the Qur'ān”, *Journal of Qur'ānic Studies* 5, 1 (2003): 1-18.

61

آل النبي محمد	جمع أتى في مفرد
وصحبه في دينهم	دين حنيف أحمدي
محمدي أحمدي	وأحدِّي أوجدني
تلك الدوائر تدور	من أحمد لأحمد
تكفي صلاة الحق من	أن لأن سرمدي

62 Inyās, *Al-Sirr al-Akbar*, 433.

because it has the attribute of eternity without beginning [*azal*] in its nonexistence, just as the Real has the attribute of eternity without beginning [*azal*] in His *wujūd* [being]. This is the description of the Real by the negation of Firstness, which is the description of nonexistence by the fact that *wujūd* is negated from it through its own essence. Hence nothing other than God makes God known with greater knowledge than does absolute nonexistence.

Given that nonexistence has such eminence, and given that making claims and associating things [with God] belong to the existent things, God says to us, *I created you aforetime, when you were not a thing* [19: 9], that is, you were not an existent thing. He says: “So be with Me in the state of your *wujūd* by not protesting to the ruling and by consenting to the flow of what is measured out, just as you were in the state of your nonexistence.” He made human eminence to be the return within their *wujūd* to the state of their nonexistence.⁶³

Similarly, in this commentary on the same short poem, Niāsse explains that the “prayer/blessings upon the Prophet and his family and companions” refers to this flow or manifestation of being upon the spiritual realities of the Prophet, other prophets, and the saints and through them, upon the various descending levels and presences of the cosmos:

The meaning of these verses is that the Sheer Essence (*al-dhāt al-sādhij*), which is the essence of effacement and blindness. This Absolute Being manifests itself in all of its levels in the presence of Its secret, the master of being [the Prophet]. The Real has five presences

(*ḥaḍarāt*): the presence of Ipseity (*al-Hāhūt*), of Divinity (*al-Lāhūt*), of Domination (*al-Jabarūt*), of Dominion (*al-Malakūt*) and of humanity (*al-Nāsūt*). The presences are also manifest in the secret of the master of being [the Prophet], and they are five also: the presence of his secret (*sirr*), his spirit (*rūh*), his intellect (*‘aql*), his heart (*qalb*), and his soul (*nafs*). So the presence of Ipseity is manifest in his secret, and they are identical, and the presence of Divinity in his spirit, and they are identical, and the presence of Domination in his intellect, and they are identical, and the presence of Dominion in his heart, and they are identical, and the presence of humanity in his soul, and they are identical. This is the meaning of His prayer/blessing (*ṣalāt*) upon him, and the meaning of Muḥammad, the slave of God, that is, the slave of the Essence. The realities of the lord of being [the prophet] are manifest in the realities of the presence of concealment [Shaykh Aḥmad al-Tijānī] and they are five also: his secret, spirit, intellect, heart, and soul, just as before. So the worlds become their two essences and unseen realities.⁶⁴

This unfolding of the cosmos in and through the realities of the Prophet and Shaykh Aḥmad al-Tijānī explained in greater detail in Niāsse’s “Sixth Treatise on Spiritual Chivalry (*futuwwa*)” (which immediately follows the letter on the *Azal* of *Azal* of *Azal* in collections of Niāsse’s treatises) about the interior levels of the being of the Prophet:

In the Name of God the Merciful the Compassionate. The levels of the interior of the Messenger of God cannot be borne by expressions, but among them are: first, a relation among the relations

63 Chittick, *SDG*, 31.

64 Inyās, *Al-Sirr al-Akbar*, 434.

of the stations of his secret, and it is where God was and there was nothing with Him, and that has never ceased and will never be ceased. And he, in that station, is a secret and holy praise of the Essence. And this is the presence of Divine Ipseity (*Hāhūt*) and Unicity (*al-Aḥadiyya*) by itself. Then there occurs a connection of the [Divine] Will to his being, while that is before manifestation, so he becomes a spirit and Aḥmad. This is the presence of Divinity (*Lāhūt*) and Oneness (*Wāḥidiyya*). Then there occurs an apportionment and overflow from Him (Most High) to Him/him, and that is the manifestation of the Aḥmadan presence (*al-Aḥmadiyya*) in the Muḥammadan presence (*al-Muḥammadiyya*). This is the loci of appearance of the Divine Names and Attributes and the place of configuration and station of diversification. It is the presence of Domination (*al-Jabarūt*). So it is connected to the presence of Divinity (*Lāhūt*). He is satisfied with slavehood (*'ubūdiyya*), so he becomes an intellect and a slave. And then the realities of the prophets, the secrets of existents, the hearts of human beings are manifest, and so he becomes a heart and Muḥammad. This is the presence of Dominion (*al-Malakūt*). Then he descends in the Adamic form, as a well-proportioned mortal, and he becomes a soul and a prophet, and this is the world of the kingdom (*al-Mulk*) and earthly, human existence (*al-Nasūt*).

As for the station of his secret between him and his Lord, it is not manifest to anyone but him. And as for his spirit, it is manifest to the secret of concealment (*sirr al-katm*), and he, may God be pleased with him [Shaykh Aḥmad al-Tijānī], is in that, in that station of the spirit of the prophet, a secret and Aḥ-

mad. In the station of his [the Prophet's] intellect, he is a spirit and a righteous one (*ṣiddīq*), and in the station of his [the Prophet's] heart, he is an intellect and vicegerent, and in the station of his [the Prophet's] soul, a heart and companion. The station of the soul of the concealed [Shaykh Aḥmad al-Tijānī] is the greatest master (*al-shaykh al-akbar*) to all that came before. His words allude to this: *Have you not seen how your Lord has extended the shadow?* (25: 40); *You seen the mountains [reckoning that they are fixed but they are passing like the clouds.]* (27: 88); *Say: If the all-Merciful had a child, then I would be the first of the worshippers* (43: 81) and what is beyond that cannot be contained in expression and the throats are silenced by it.

From the dictation of our shaykh and connection (*wasīla*) to God, Shaykh Ibrāhīm bin al-Ḥājj 'Abdallāh al-Tijānī in the city of Kaolack, 1351 Hijri (1932-33)⁶⁵

To clarify through a metaphor that might be more accessible, these levels of reality are like dreams within dreams within dreams. The Prophetic reality is thus the dream "character" through which the Divine dreamer perceives the dream and maintains its existence (if the dreamer were not in the dream, there would be no dream). In the dream within the dream (the second level of presences) the Prophetic reality must also appear as the presence or character of the Divine dreamer in the dream within the dream, and so on and so forth. The Prophet takes on a different form in each and every level of the dream and reality. To use another example, if there is a dot or pattern on a lightbulb surrounded by several shades, when the light is turned on, that pattern will

65 *Jawāhir al-Rasā'il*, I: 91.

appear in a different way on each and every shade and eventually on the wall.⁶⁶ In this schema, Shaykh Aḥmad al-Tijānī is like a part of this pattern of the Prophet that emerges only on the first or second shade, but appears, in different forms, in all subsequent levels of reality. But such descriptions are not merely conceptual schemas or metaphysical speculations, but were and are rather verified/realized through the direct experiences of these realities. For example, Shaykh Ibrāhīm Niāsse describes his own experience of these realities in the year just prior to that in which he wrote the above treatise:

A momentous occurrence happened to the humble servant writing this in the year 1350 after the Hījah of Muḥammad, upon him be blessings and peace. It was this: I came to abide for a hundred thousand years among the days of the Lord. There I heard the purest, beginningless eternal speech in intimate conversation. I became bewildered and restless, as both rapture and longing were joined in me. Then I plunged headlong into the Divine Presence, and I witnessed there the reality of the reality of the reality, in utter essentiality, exclusivity, and blinding effacement. Nothing was left of sensory feelings. I dwelled like this for two thousand years.

Then something was with me. Existence emerged from me like shadows or

smoke. And I sought after this existence, and then I was with the Messenger of the Divine Essence, the slave of the Divine Essence and Its secret. And he came close to me and stayed suspended until I disappeared in him. He became my essence. Then I was overcome with joy, for I was the beloved of the Divine Essence, Its secret, Its desire. I was he who held Its comprehensive station, to whom the perfection of the Divine Essence was manifest. I resided in my state of rapture for one million years.

In this manifestation in the unseen, I did not find any servant of the Divine Essence except myself. But then there was another manifestation, in the unseen of the unseen, and I saw the Divine Majesty in the Divine Beauty. In this presence of the unseen of the unseen, I was called and named, “O Aḥmad al-Tijānī!” I knew for certain that the Real had no desire for anything, after the secret, except for me. I kept company with this servant of the Divine Essence, and I helped him and aided him for two million years.

Then God made me the father of humanity, and the spiritual support for the entirety of existent beings, the Adam of souls and spirits. I carried the trust (*amānah*), and I was addressed with, *O Dāwūd, surely we have made you the vicegerent (khalīfah) on the earth* (38: 26). I looked at the earth, and saw its state, the worlds of sense and of meaning, and then the celestial gathering. *We built the heaven with might, and We it is who made the vast expanse. And we have laid out the earth. Gracious is He who spread it out! And all things We have created in pairs, that haply you may reflect. Therefore flee to Allah, I*

66 See Oludamini Ogunnaike, “Inception and Ibn ‘Arabi” *Journal of Religion & Film* 17, 2 (2013): 10; Also see Mohammed Rustom, “The Cosmology of the Muhammadan Reality”, *Ishrāq: Islāmic Philosophy Yearbook* 4 (2013): 540-5; and Khalil Andani, “Metaphysics of Muhammad: The Nur Muhammad from Imam Ja’far al-Sadiq (d. 148/765) to Nasir al-Din al-Tusi (d. 672/1274)”, *Journal of Sufi Studies* 8, 2 (2020): 99-175 for other precedents and the historical development of these ideas.

am a warner to you from Him. Set up no other gods besides God. I am a warner to you from Him (51: 41-51). So I came back to my senses, and it was as if the duration of its occurrence was [no more than the distance between] the even and the odd. Glory be to God the Majestic. He selects whom He will for what He wills, and no one outstrips His wisdom. *And He is not asked about what He does, but they are the ones asked.* (21: 23)⁶⁷

In addition to highlighting the compressed levels of temporality of these different realities and levels of being discussed above, these accounts contextualize and clarify the mysterious epithets “secret of God” (*sirr Allāh*), “essence of God,” (*‘ayn Allāh*), “unseen secret of God” (*ghayb Allāh*), secret of the Essence (*sirr al-Dhāt*) “unseen of the unseen” (*ghayb al-ghayb*), “secret of the secret” (*sirr al-sirr*) that are used to praise the Prophet and Shaykh Aḥmad al-Tijānī in much of Nīasse’s poetry.⁶⁸ A dream is at once a manifestation of a dreamer as well as her secret or unseen reality; and the Prophet, as the integral presence or character of the Divine dreamer in the dream of creation, is the direct manifestation of the dreamer’s consciousness in the dream—the eye through which the dreamer experiences the dream and the source of the dream itself—the *‘ayn* of the dreamer (and the dream). As Nīasse writes in another poem:

قد استأصل المحبوب كلي وجملتني
وقلب الوري والذات فيه تجلت
فظاهره عبد وللطن صلت
أفاض له منه إليه فهالني
...
وواصلني والغيبات تولت
وها أن هذا العبد غيب إلها
وصلت عليه فهو بطن وظاهر
محيا رسول الله والعين كلت
...
وآل وصحب ما العيون اضمحلت
صلاة على عين الغيوب وغيها

The beloved uprooted my all and
my totality
And united me and all alterities turned
away [from me]
And lo! This slave is the unseen
secret of our God
And the heart of humanity, since the
Essence manifested in him
And It poured out blessings upon him,
while he was an interior and an exterior
So his exterior is a slave, while his
interior It blesses
He overflowed from Him to Him for
Him, so I was overwhelmed
By the face of the Messenger of God,
my eyes blinded [by his light]
...
A blessing upon the source of unseen
secrets and its secret
And upon the family and companions
as long as things vanish⁶⁹

The Divine Presences and Poetry

This cosmology of the Divine presences and realities plays a significant role in Nīasse’s poetry, both implicitly and explicitly. Implicitly, this cosmological schema serves as the scaffolding for the double entendres, symbolism, and figurative language (*majāz*) of Nīasse’s and other Sufi poetry.⁷⁰ Because

67 Cheikh Tidiane ‘Ali Cissé, *What the Knowers of Allah Have Said About the Knowledge of Allah* (Atlanta: Fayda Books, 2014), 95-97.

68 For example, “Ahmad is the secret of the Essence and the Essence is Its [the Aḥmadan secret’s] secret/the strong are unable to perceive him, even weakly”:

وأحمد سرّ الذات والذات سرّها تقاصر عن إدراكه الجلد وإهنا
(*Āfāq al-sh‘ir* I: 222).

69 *Āfāq al-Sh‘ir*, I: 189. For recitations, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xAbEjDmAm04> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qb3ZTtFLfKQ>. Note-worthy is the closing paradox of invoking blessings “as long as things vanish” eloquently and succinctly combines permanence and subsistence with ephemerality and annihilation in these realities.

70 Indeed, just as the influence of the Avicennan five internal senses (common sense, representation, imagi-

everything in the sensible realm of *Nāsūt* has its roots and origins in these higher realms and realities of being, these tangible expressions (such as wine, drunkenness, light, etc.) can effectively represent or stand-in for these realities, *because that is what they actually are*: outward expressions or manifestations (*tajalliyāt* or *zuhūr*) or imaginalizations (*amthāl* or *takhayyulāt*) of inward or intangible realities or meanings (*ḥaqā'iq* or *ma'ānī*). The figurative language of poetry traces these connections between the different levels of reality, combining and joining them, often without reducing or collapsing their differences so that coherence is maintained at all levels. Julie Meisami terms this an “analogical mode of reasoning” and writes:

Analogical comparison presupposes a continuity in which similitudes are, so to speak, generic constituents of existence. In a mode of composition based on analogy, metaphor transcends the status of a trope to become a consistent means for signifying the inner substance of things, in a world in which everything is a figure, a sign testifying to the unified and unifying order of creation.⁷¹

Or, in the famous words of the poet:

وفي كل شيء له آية تدل على أنه واحد

In everything there is a sign that indicates that He is One.

This allows for all kinds of mystical ambiguities, so for example, when Niāsse says in *Inna Khatmal Anbiyā'*, “I will be annihilated, but my passion for the precious one will remain,”

nation, estimation, and memory) upon classical Persian and Arabic poetry has been effectively explored, further study should be made of the influence of the widely-assumed five-fold Sufi spiritual psychology presented here (*nafs, qalb, 'aql, rūḥ, sirr*) in *Sufi poetry in West Africa and elsewhere*.

71 Julie Scott Meisami, *Medieval Persian Court Poetry* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 37-38.

he can mean that the poet's love will outlast his death, while also referring to his annihilation in the beloved Muḥammadan reality. Or the previous verse, “Truly, by God, all my life long's been spent in blindness”, can refer to the poet being blind to everything but his beloved, while also alluding to the metaphysical realities of “the primordial cloud” (*al-'amā*) and the “blindness” of the Divine Essence (*al-'amā al-dhātī*), which, in a sense, the poet has never left. Typically, this is done implicitly through these kinds of allusions, tropes, and symbols (wine, Layla, battle, wasting away in love, etc.), but sometimes these structures and technical vocabulary are invoked explicitly as in the following poem:

I recall he who is to humanity, all
of them, is nourishment
For pebbles they are, while Muṣṭafā, the
chief, is a ruby, opalescent
For Ṭaha is a disclosure (*tajallī*) of the
Essence, nay he is Its very
essence/emobdiment (*'ayn*)⁷²
For the Kingdom (*Mulk*) of the Most
High is from him, and
likewise, the realm
of Dominion (*Malakūt*)
By that he sojourned, while his sandals
were still on the earth (*farsh*)⁷³
Out of awe, the guide [Jibrīl] bowed
away from him⁷⁴
He set forth, splitting the veils,
unrivaled

72 This line can also be rendered as “he is It Itself” or “he is Its eye”.

73 An allusion to the Prophet's Night journey (*al-'Isrā'*), and his reality encompassing and uniting everything from the farsh (carpet/earth) to the 'arsh (Divine Throne). Some traditions report that the Prophet paradoxically journeyed bodily through all the spheres to the Divine Presence while his feet never left the earth, as alluded to here.

74 An allusion to the Qur'ānic narratives and Prophetic traditions in which Jibrīl halts while the Prophet continues on to the lote tree of the uttermost end (*sidra al-muntaha*) and the Divine Presence.

And there is no servant, but his neck
 is bowed for him
*He drew near, and drew nearer,*⁷⁵
 without any how, for
 The realm of Domination (*Jabarūt*)
 allows neither⁷⁶
 He is a secret that sojourned to the
 secret, by the secret, all alone
 So there was nothing but the Real,
 and the secret is the realm
 of Divinity (*Lāhūt*)
 So what a place of seeing and
 hearing there
 that the Beloved of God embraces,
 and the other messengers
 were not given⁷⁷
 So where is the holy valley (*Ṭūwā*)
 in that? And where is its
 addressee (Moses)?
 And where is the one who whispered
 prayers (Jonah), while
 his masjid was the whale?⁷⁸
 Upon him be the blessing of God,
 and then His peace too
 Through which are facilitated all
 sustenance, life, and food
 Upon him be the blessing of God,
 and then His peace too
 Which illumine, from his bright lights,
 the earthly realm (*Nāsūt*) too
 Upon him, with his noble family and
 companions too
 A blessing from the Merciful and the
 realm of mercy (*Raḥamūt*) too

75 *Taḍmīn of Qur'ān* 53: 8.

76 The realm of the *Jabarūt* is beyond any spatial dimensions or directions.

77 An allusion to the hadith, "I have a time with my Lord not shared by angel drawn nigh nor messenger sent."

78 A reference to the hadith, "You should not say that I am better than Jonah the son of Matta."

تذكّرت من هو اللورى كلهم قوت
 وهم حجر والمصطفى القرم ياقوت
 فطه تجلى الذات بل هو عينها
 فملك العلي منها كذا ملكوت
 لذاك سرى والفرش موطن نعله
 ومن هيبه قد انثنى عنه خريت
 وسار يشق الحجب دون مزاحم
 ولا خادم إلا تنثنى له لبيت
 دنا فتدلى دون كيف فإنه
 تقاصر عن هذينك الجبروت
 فسر سرى للسر بالسر وحده
 فما ثم إلا الحق والسر لا هوت
 فيا لك من مرأى هناك ومسمع
 حواه حبيب الله والرسل ما أوتوا
 فأين طوى من ذا وأين كلمه
 وأين الذي ناجى ومسجده الحوت
 عليه صلاة الله ثم سلامه
 بها يسهل الأرزاق والعيش والقوت
 عليه صلاة الله ثم سلامه
 فتشرق من أنواره الغر ناسوت
 عليه مع الآل الكرام وصحبه
 صلاة من الرحمان والرحموت⁷⁹

As before, the opening verse contains a lovely *jinās* (*qūt* and *yāqūt*), and paraphrases the famous verse in praise of the Prophet:

محمّد بشر وليس كالبشر بل هو ياقوته والناس كالحجر

Muḥammad is a mortal, but not like other mortals, nay he is a ruby while people are like stones.

The Prophet is "food" or "nourishment" for all of mankind because he is the source of Divine mercy and even existence for all things, as the poem later clarifies. The next line explains that the Prophet is the quintessential manifestation of the Essence, and as such, the Qur'ānic pairing of the *Mulk* and *Malakūt*, the visible and invisible realms, come from

79 *Āfāq al-sh'ir* I: 198-199.

him. Reversing direction, the poem then traces the prophet's nocturnal ascent (*ʿIsrāʾ* and *Miʿrāj*), through the various presences (from the *farsh* to the *ʿarsh*), all the way into the Divine Presence. The peak of this ascent is described as a station shared with no angel or other Prophet (recalling another hadith), before the poetic invocation of God's *ṣalāt* (prayer/blessings) upon the prophet (which typically conclude Niāsse's poems) are characterized as the source of life, sustenance, existence, and light. Remembering that in Tijānī cosmology, this Divine *ṣalāt* upon the prophet is the very outpouring (*fayḍ*) of being that brings the various realms of reality into being and animates and sustains them, these closing prayers are at once a poetic statement about the benefits of invoking blessings upon the Prophet, a statement about the metaphysical "act of being" that brings things into existence and sustains them, and an invocation of /participation in this very act.

The epistemological implications of this cosmic act of creation through the Muḥammadan reality are explored in Niāsse's "Seventh Treatise on Spiritual Chivalry" in which he responds to a question about the role of shaykhs in the intellectual and spiritual attainments of their disciples:

In the Name of God the All-Merciful the All-Compassionate....In summary, Do the shaykhs mediate all that comes from God to their disciples of sciences (*ʿulūm*) and Knowledge (*maʿrifā*) and different kinds of crafts (*ṣināʿāt*) or not?

The answer: God, blessed and exalted be He, He is the giver and the withhold-er, and the Muhammadan reality is the apportioner (*qāsim*) as the hadith indicates, "I am the apportioner and God is the giver" (*Anā al-qāsim wa Allāhu muʿī*) The Muhammadan reality has a *khalīfa* (vicegerent) in existence in every

age, and nothing happens in existence except by the mediation of that *khalīfa*. And he has representatives and vicegerents and places of manifestation by whose mediation or presence or *baraka* he gives. So when he notices the heart of a slave or aspirant or student or anyone and finds love of his instruments therein, he gives it whatever God has willed and determined for it to receive from his hand. But if he does not find in the heart of the slave any loyalty or love for him or love for his loci of manifestation, then he has nothing to do with it at that time.

For that reason, the righteous Yūsuf said, "God be my refuge that we should take any save one with whom we have found our property!" (12: 79). God nourishes us and your understanding is about Him, from Him, due to His generosity....

Written by Ibrāhīm bin al-ḥājī ʿAbdallāh al-Tijānī...in Kosi 1351 (1932-33)⁸⁰

80 *Jawāhir al-Rasāʾil*, I: 92. The Saharan Qādirī scholar Sīdī Mukhtār al-Kuntī (d. 1811) similarly wrote, "And one of the knowers said: knowledge has the rank of the sea, out of which a river extends, then from the river extends a stream, then from the stream extends a creek, then from the creek extends a rivulet. And were the sea to flow into the river, or the river into the stream, it would flood it and ruin it ... And the Creator indicated that with His statement: *He sends down out of heaven water, and the rivers flow each in its measure* [13: 17], and the meaning of the water is: what God sent down on his Messenger - May the prayers and peace of God be upon him - is a sea, and the hearts of his companions are rivers, and the hearts of the followers [of the companions] are streams, and the hearts of the legalists are creeks, and the hearts of the masses are rivulets..." and "For the hearts [of the friends of God] are like mirrors, and whomever loves them, their names appear in those polished hearts. And God, May he be exalted and glorified, looks into the hearts of his friends every day with a merciful gaze, and whomever loves them, their names are etched in their hearts and thus they obtain their share of the mercy by which their master looks at them." (Ariela Marcus-Sells, "Realm of the Unseen: Devotional Practice and Sufi Authority in the Kunta community", (PhD diss., Stanford University, 2015), 126). In his Removal of Confusion, Niāsse is

In this way, the cosmological structure outlined above gives rise to this love-based epistemology, in which knowledge, like being, is distributed from the Divine Presence through the channels of the Prophet and his representatives, particularly the unique *khalīfa* of that age. It is love for the Prophet and the Prophet's representatives ("his instruments") that allows one to receive this knowledge, which is the goal of the Sufi path and for Nīasse, of human existence itself. Thus everything depends upon love of the Prophet and his representatives, and this fact points to another important function of Nīasse's poetry in praise of the Prophet: expressing and inspiring love for the Prophet and his representatives, which is the foundation for knowledge and spiritual elevation. As Nīasse writes, explicitly connecting these dynamics of love, praise, Divine bestowal, and spiritual ascension:

ومن يشتغل دهرًا بحب محمد ينل كل ما يهوى من أعلى البرازخ
وقد جاءني منه البشارات أنني بمدحي أسمو فوق كل الشوامخ⁸¹

Whoever is busy with loving
Muḥammad perpetually
Attains all that he desires from the
highest of *barzakhs*
I received glad tidings from him that
By praising him, I have risen
above all heights

And extending this dynamic to the read-

even more explicit, "In every time, the Saintly Pole [*qutb*] has a mandate (*wijha*) for every atom among the existing entities, thus assisting and improving everything in existence, atom by atom. Whenever a worshipper prostrates himself for the sake of Allah, or bows for Him, or stands erect for Him, or remembers Allah, the Saintly Pole is the one who makes this possible for him (*muqīm lahu*). It is through the Saintly Pole that the spiritual master (*shaykh*) performs his glorification, and it is through him that the worshipper performs his worship, through him that one who prostrates before Allah prostrates." (Nīasse, *Removal of Confusion*, 362).

81 *Āfāq al-sh'ir*, I: 273.

ers of his poetry, Nīasse writes:

وإن خطوطي للأنام سعادة فلم يشق يوما من رأني وخطيا
وما قلت هذا دون إذن وإنني لأكنتم سرا لا يباح لغيرنا
وذا كله من حب سيد مرسل عليه صلاة الله ولتعل شأنيا⁸²

My writings are a joy to mankind
Whoever sees me or my writing will not
be miserable, even for a day
I have not said this without
permission and I
Keep a secret not divulged by other
than me
And this, all of it, is from the love of the
lord of the Messengers
Upon him be the blessings of God and
may his affair be elevated⁸³

The blessing or prayer of God upon the Prophet is what brings all things, on all levels of being into existence, and it is through love for the Prophet and his representatives, one becomes receptive to this Divine flux of knowledge, which is then what allows one to ascend through these presences and return to God and the Prophet. As Nīasse writes:

جميع شؤون الخلق من شأن فيلق فعيني وكل كالي وطرسي ولقلقي
قلامي ونفسي قد خدمت لذكره بذكر رسول الله أعلو وأرتقي⁸⁴

All of the affairs of creation are from
that mighty affair
So, my eye and my chest and my paper
and my tongue
And my pens and my ink, all of me has

82 *Āfāq al-sh'ir*, I: 261.

83 And as previously quoted:

None of the poles (*aqtāb*) before me attained
the like of
what this servant has, from a flood of pure,
flowing glory
I thank my Lord that my secret is not sterile
For even the smallest of my followers will attain
annihilation [in God]
And that is from the love of the Messenger
and his secret
By my recital of praises for him, I attained
the banner
The Elixir for this slave is the love of Muḥammad
And my treasure is singing his praises
(*Āfāq al-Sh'ir*, I: 266).

84 *Āfāq al-Sh'ir*, I: 175.

been in service of his
remembrance

By the remembrance (*dhikr*) of the
Messenger of God,
I am exalted and elevated

In this way, Prophetic praise poetry emerges from the intense love for the Prophet that is both the cause and result of direct knowledge (*ma'rifa*), and is also a means for cultivating this love and knowledge. Recognition (*ma'rifa*) of the Prophet's reality leads to love and gratitude expressed through praise, which in turn deepens one's *ma'rifa*, love, and longing, leading to more praise. By deploying and directing the linguistic powers of poetry over imagination and affect, Niāsse uses his praise poetry to both express and cultivate love, knowledge, and the related spiritual elevation, perfection, and felicity. As he says:

لقلبي من الأشواق ما حير الفكر
وأفانيت فيه السجع والنظم والنثر
إلى أحمد شوقي ووجدني ولوعتي
وما لي دوا في غير أن أنسج الشعر
إذا ذكر المختار حنّت يراعتي
لنزين مدح دون أن أعمل الفكر
لأن رسول الله مدح وروحه
فقل فيه ما قد شئت لا تختش الإطرا⁸⁵

My heart has of longing what
bewilders all thought
In it, I've exhausted rhymed prose,
poetry, and prose
For Aḥmad is my longing, ecstasy,
and ardor
And I have no cure save weaving poetry
When Mukhtar is mentioned,
my pens long
To adorn his praise, immediately,
without reflection
Because the Messenger of God is
praise and its spirit
So say about him what you will without
fearing the bounds

And

⁸⁵ *Āfāq al-Sh'ir*, I: 237, Note the implied *jinās* with *itrā'* – praise.

على الخدّ دمعي أكتب الشعر موهنا
على الطّرس في حال تراه موجّع
فما لذّ عيشي في سوى سرد مدحه
وقد شاب فودي وهو قد عزّ مرجعي⁸⁶

On my cheeks, my tears write
midnight poetry
Upon the page, in lament of my agony
For there's no sweetness in life save
in recounting his praise
For my temples have gone grey, and it
would be hard to turn
back now

The Poetics of Praise

In the desert of the heart
Let the healing fountain start,
In the prison of his days
Teach the free man how to praise.
-W.H. Auden

الحمد لله على الإطلاق
وفي الكمال مظهر وعبد
وفي الفرق والجمع نقول الحمد
ومنتهى الجمع نقول العبد
صلّى وسلم عليه الله
في البدء والختم كما نراه

All praise be to God and absolutely
The slave is all God's, the Everlasting
In Beauty and Majesty, he is a praise
And in Perfection, a mirror and a slave
Apart and in union what we say is praise
And in union's end, what we say's the slave
God's blessings and peace be
upon him then
As we see him in beginning and end
-Ibn Mashrī

In the "Sixth Treatise on Futuwwa," as in the above poem, Niāsse describes the Prophet as being "praise" himself, alluding to a celebrated Sufi doctrine in which the cosmos is created as God's self-praise:

God's praise for Himself—which is the most exalted level of praise is His ex-tentiation of every existing thing.... So

⁸⁶ *Āfāq al-sh'ir*, I: 356.

the most exalted and most tremendous level of praise is the level of the Muhammadan Seal, which subsists through the existence of the Seal on account of the Prophet's arrival at the promised praiseworthy station [*al-maqām al-mahmūd*] in His saying, *Perhaps your Lord will raise you to a praiseworthy station* (Q 17: 79). So his hallowed essence is the utmost level of praise through which God praises Himself. This is why the Prophet has been singled out with the banner of praise (*liwā' al-ḥamd*), and was called 'praiser', (*ḥāmid*), 'most praiseworthy' (*aḥmad*), and 'praised' (*maḥmūd*).⁸⁷

Thus the *ṣalāt* of God, the act of Being that brings all things into existence is an act of Divine praise. The Prophet, as the greatest of these acts of Divine self-praise, unites the best praiser, praised, and praise. And just as in invoking blessings (*ṣalāwāt*) upon the Prophet, in praising the Prophet, the poets are imitating or participating in this Divine act of existention itself. This dynamic is exemplified in the eschatological traditions about the Prophet Muḥammad's intercession while carrying "the banner of praise" (*liwā' al-ḥamd*), under which all of humanity flocks, and praising God from "the praiseworthy station" (*maqām al-mahmūd*) on the Day of Resurrection.⁸⁸ In these accounts, God will

teach the Prophet forms of praise completely unknown before, and on the basis of these praises, the Prophet will be able to intercede with God on behalf of all creation.⁸⁹ "The praises go up and the blessings come down," but the praises themselves are a form of blessing sent down from God, and the blessings themselves are a form of praise. Like rain falling and rising back to the heavens, Nīasse's writings, like the broader Sufi tradition to which they belong, present us with a profound cosmopoetics of praise that describes, embodies, and performs these dynamics of praise all at once.

But these dynamics are not just limited to the abstract metaphysical and eschatological spheres, but are deeply involved in the apocalyptic colonial experiences which Nīasse witnessed and fought against.⁹⁰ Nīasse describes his praises as "my weapons",⁹¹ "magic that I consider licit",⁹² and "my litany, my sword amidst enemies."⁹³ In another poem he writes:

مدّحي له طيّبي وروضي وراحتي وكنزي وأعدادي لكل مقام

متى نابني أمرٌ مدحت إمامنا فشمسي حروب الكل سبيل سلام

My praises of him are my medicine,
my gardens, and repose

87 Mohammed Rustom, *The Triumph of Mercy: Philosophy and Scripture in Mullā Ṣadrā* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2013), 66-69.

88 These accounts are frequently referenced throughout Nīasse's *oeuvre*, for example, in the middle of the poem *Sifārī* from the diwan *Sayr al-Qalb*, Nīasse exclaims:

متى قمت وسط الأنبياء مشفقاً \ هنالك أشدو بالثنا والوخ
هناك تذكّر يا شفيع مقصراً \ أسير غرام فيك يشدو ويمدح
When you stand forth amidst the prophets to

intercede

There I will sing your praises and proclaim them
There, O intercessor, remember this poor one
A prisoner of your love, singing your praises
(*Āfāq al-Shi'r*, I: 403-404).

89 As Michel Chodkiewicz writes, "In the *lux perpetua* of the eternal Day, Muhammad will be 'the one who praises' since he will be entirely pure praise. And he will equally be 'the one who is praised' since his praise will be addressed to the reflection of the Divine perfections in his person. Just as he will appear at that time as the *liwā al-ḥamd*, he himself will also be the *maqām mahmūd*: through him and in him the praise which belongs only to God will be endlessly performed."

90 See Seesemann, *The Divine Flood* and Zachary Wright, *Living Knowledge*, 248-286.

91 *Āfāq al-shi'r*, I: 362.

92 *Āfāq al-shi'r*, I: 231.

93 *Āfāq al-shi'r*, I: 110. These statements were not mere literary metaphors as Nīasse instructed his disciples throughout the continent to recite litanies to lift the oppression of colonial occupation.

94 *Āfāq al-shi'r*, II: 27.

And my treasure and my preparation
for every situation

...

Whenever something bothers me,

I praise our Imam

And all battles become paths of peace

This conjunction of the personal, practical, spiritual, and political in prophetic praise is perhaps best seen in one of Niāsse's most popular poems, a longer *qaṣīda* in which he declares his love for and union with the Prophet, defends himself and his spiritual method from critics and invokes the history of the Prophet Muḥammad's struggles against his enemies as the precedent for his inevitable victory in the same fight:

I was shown by the best of creation,
the best of all sights⁹⁵

He banished all doubt and ills and
all strife

He inflamed my longing and love
and pining

And elevated me while the people of
my tent slept

My paper and ink and my tongue kept
me company

Openly, while my heart's intimacy
with him is my healing

Muḥammad, the chosen of God,
his Prophet

Upon him came His *ayāt* (signs/verses)
with praise

I have not followed other than Muṣṭafā,
I only

Recite his remembrance, so cease
blaming, O my audience

Is the religion anything other than
remembrance and the
Sunna which

Come from Muṣṭafā? So this is
my remedy

Is not the obvious difference between
TaHa and other than him

Seen by an intelligent person, not
blind of eye?

O people, quit joking and follow
Muhammad

Or else I will wash my hands of
you forever!

The praised, the best of the worlds is
Muhammad

A trustworthy messenger of splendour⁹⁶
and majesty

Eloquent, articulate, he did not speak
out of caprice⁹⁷

But rather, from the revelation, and the
descent was a heavenly
revelation

Upon you, by the rope of God, the slave
can confidently rely⁹⁸

For a way to distance the remembrance
of the way of misery

And if you say, "is this litany the way
of Muhammad?"

I will say, "yes, my litany is for
obtaining purity"

For what is the litany but remembrance
for God alone

Praying upon the Chosen, the best
of mankind

There is no mention of the shaykh
or mention of anyone else

So my wīrd, for the illness of the slave,
is the source of the cure

So take it easy! Do not reject it,
out of ignorance

Nor injustice, enmity, nor the eye
of antipathy

The Guide has delivered and conveyed
a trust

The guides, the stars of the darkness,

95 Note the *jinās* between *marā'i* (sights) and *mirā'i* (strife) and the implied *marā'a* (mirror).

96 Implied *jinās* between *sanān* (splendor) and *sann* (law) and *Sunna*.

97 Qur'ān 53: 3.

98 Allusion to Qur'ān 3: 103.

follow his example⁹⁹
 The luminaries are leaders by
 following our Prophet
 By following that which he followed,
 without argument
 Whether majestic or vile, we only
 follow him,
 forever, morning and evening
 O the Lord of Jibril, the Faithful,
 established
 The sunna of the Guide in the hearts of
 those [who are guided]
 God did not afflict us with deviance and
 caprice
 I live in hope for the dawning of the day
 of meeting
 The husk of religion is not the share of
 our lovers
 But rather the pith, the pith of the pith,
 as a pure gift
 His spectre appeared faintly, and I all
 but flew
 Out of love and longing for him,
 for passion is my affliction
 Each has his Layla, and Barham is
 afflicted with
 Ahmad, the best of people, the essence
 of glory
 Out of envy, they wronged me, while I
 Have surpassed my peers since the days
 of my youth
 My opening was completed in my cradle
 And all of the men of the unseen¹⁰⁰
 are under my decree
 They only cross the deserts in the
 East and West
 Coming to Mecca to catch a whiff of
 my fragrance
 And why not? For my essence today, is
 the same as Muhammad's

99 An allusion to the hadith, "My companions are like the stars, whichever of them you follow you will be rightly guided."

100 *Rijāl al-ghayb*-the hidden hierarchy of saints that govern the cosmos.

His secret flows through my frame
 and visage
 The people of my time, all of them,
 have succeeded eminently
 Save one who hates my way, a prisoner
 of caprice
 And I have not said this out of ecstasy
 nor as a far-fetched claim
 For I have accepted the fealty of all the
 victorious
 By me the great injustice was lifted,¹⁰¹
 for
 By my flood, the religion raised its flag
 So whoever wants, it will come to him
 before his death
 And whoever wants, let him oppose it
 like the people of
 wretchedness
 So whoever wants to extinguish the light
 of our God
 God has willed that it will not be
 extinguished,¹⁰² in spite
 of the enemies
 The Effacer of Error will humble the
 pride of those
 who see partners (*shirk*) and triplicity,
 the people of loathing
 I demolished that which they
 established, but
 By the secret of the followed one, my
 building will not be destroyed
 They attacked me, but they did not
 achieve their goal, for I
 Tore apart the crowds of enemies,
 by the Effacer
 This group will be defeated truly,
 for they
 Turned their backs on the slaves
 They inflict harm on the servant,
 while he is shielded by
 the Chosen before their blows

101 According to Niāsse's descendants and successors this "great injustice" refers to colonial occupation.

102 Qur'ān 9: 32.

Is the neighbor of the Trustworthy,
his servant, frightened
By the plots of the sons of the people
of prostitution?
The people fabricated a scheme
in the house of assembly
They wrote a document in order to
repel the light¹⁰³
Their horses and men set out to Badr
But they returned in manifest disgrace
and destruction¹⁰⁴
But did they prevent the Effacer from
circumambulating His house
In Mecca on the day of the conquest, at
high noon?
Did they ever prevent the spread
of religion
throughout God's lands as long as
they abide?
A blessing and greetings of peace upon
him, in accordance
with his rank
And upon his family and companions
and the people of loyalty

أريت بخير الخلق خير مرء
نفى الشك والأسوا وكل مرء
وهيج شوقي والمحبة والضنى
وأرقني إذ نام أهل خبائي
يؤنسني طرسي ونقسي ولقلبي
جهارا وقلبي أنسه بشفائي
محمد مختار الإله نبيه
عليه أتت آياته بثناء
فلم أقف غير المصطفى لست تاليا

سوى ذكره كفوا الملام ملاني
هل الدين غير الذكر والسنة التي
عن المصطفى صحت فتلك دوائي
أنصب خلاف بين طه وغيره
يراه لبيب غير عين عماء
أيا ناس خلوا الهزل واقفوا محمدا
وإلا تروني الدهر جد براء
محمد خير العالمين محمد
رسول أمين ذو سنا وسناء
فصيح بليغ ليس ينطق عن هوى
بل الوحي والتنزيل وحي سماء
عليك بحيل الله للعبد واثقا
فنهج يناوي الذكر نهج شفاء
وإن قلت هل ذا الورد نهج محمد
أقول نعم وردي لنيل صفاء
فما الورد إلا الذكر لله وحده
تصلي على المختار خير وراء
فما فيه ذكر الشيخ أو ذكر غيره
فوردي لداء العبد عين دواء
رويدكم لا تنكروا عن جهالة
لبغي وعدوان وعين جفاء
فقد بلغ الهادي وأدى أمانة
حذا حذوه الهادون شهب دجاء
والأعلام قادات بقفو نبينا
لتقفوا الذي يقفوه دون مرء
سواء جليل أو حقير فما لنا
سوى قفوه دهرا صباح مساء
أيا رب جبريل الأمين فثبتن
على سنة الهادي قلوب أولاء
ولا يبتلينا الله بالزيغ والهوى
نعيش على البيضاضا ليوم لقاء
ولا يك قشر الدين حظ محبنا
بل اللب لب اللب محض عطاء
سرى طيفه وهنا وكدت لحبه
أطير اشتياقا والغرام بلائي
وكل وليلاه وبرهام مبتلى
بأحمد خير الناس عين بهاء
ومن حسد جاروا علي وإنني
مبرز أقراني أوان صباي
وقد تم فتحي عند مهدي وأذعنت
جميع رجال الغيب تحت قضائ
فما قطعوا في الشرق والغرب فدفا
إلى مكة إلا لشم شدائي
ولم لا وعيني اليوم عين محمد

103 Document hung in the Ka'aba by the Quraysh detailing a treaty boycotting the supporters of the Prophet, his family (the Banū Hāshim), and the Muslims, preventing the Quraysh from trading, having social relations with, or marrying Muslims and the Banū Hāshim until they surrendered the Prophet. The boycott lasted for three years, when traditions say the Prophet was informed by God that the treaty (except for the bit of parchment containing the name of God) had been eaten by termites. Upon this Mi'raculous report being confirmed by the Quraysh, the boycott was ended.

104 *Taḍmīn* of a hadith about the battle of Badr.

سرى سره في هيكلتي وروائي
وأهل زمانني كلهم فاز راقيا
سوى من قلا نهجي أسير هواء
وما قلته شطحا ودعوى عريضة
وهبت جميع الفائزين ولائي
وبي يرفع الجور العظيم وإنه
بفيضي ينال الدين رفع لواء
ومن شاء بأتية قبيل مماته
ومن شاء ناواه كأهل شقاء
ومن رام إطفاء لنور إلهنا
أبى الله أن يطفئيه رغم عدا
سأرغم بالماحي الضلال أنوف من
يرى الشرك والتثليث أهل قلاء
هدمت الذي قد أسسوه وإنني
بسر المقفى لا يهد بنائي
رموني وما نالوا مرادا وإنني
أمزق بالماحي جموع عدائي
سيهزم هذا الجمع حقا وإنهم
يولون أدبارا رقاب إماء
يسومون ضيما للخديم وإنه
تترس بالمختار قبل رماء
أيخشى على جار الأمين خديمه
مكاند أبناء لأهل بغاء
وقد زخرف الأقوام مكرًا بندوة
وخطوا كتابا قصد دفع ضياء
وجاؤوا ببدر خيلهم ورجالهم
وباؤوا بخزي ظاهر ووباء
وهل منعوا الماحي الطواف ببيته
بمكة يوم الفتح وقت ضحاء
وهل منعوا نشر الديانة دائما
بكل بلاد الله طول بقاء
صلاة وتسليم عليه بقدره
وآل وأصحاب وأهل ولاء¹⁰⁵

While there is not space here to discuss the many significant themes and literary devices deployed in this poem, it is noteworthy that the poem begins by describing the poet's love and longing for the Prophet, and its own nocturnal composition as a form of achieving a "healing intimacy" with the Prophet. The need for this "remedy" is introduced a few lines later with the mention of the "blamers," with whom the poet spends the next dozen

verses remonstrating, before returning to the theme of his extreme love of and praise for the Prophet, exemplified in this lovely verse:

وكلّ وليلاه وبرهام مبتلى

بأحمد خير الناس عين بهاء

Each has his Layla, and Barham is
afflicted with
Ahmad, the best of people, the
essence of glory

And this boast of love leads directly into boasts of the poet's unique spiritual rank and union with the Prophet:

فما قطعوا في الشرق والغرب فدفا

إلى مكة إلا لشم شذائي

ولم لا وعيني اليوم عين محمد

سرى سره في هيكلتي وروائي

They only cross the deserts in the
East and West
Coming to Mecca to catch a whiff of
my fragrance
And why not? For my essence today,
is the same as Muhammad's
His secret flows through my frame
and visage

After this declaration of annihilation in the Prophet the poet declares that he was the cause for the lifting of colonial and spiritual oppression, implying that his closeness to the Prophet is what gave him this power. In an echo of the epistemological schema laid out in the "seventh treatise on chivalry" the promises spiritual illumination to all of his contemporaries, save those who hate him. The poet vehemently warns the enemies of his "flood"—the movement of spiritual training and *ma'rifa*—that God and His Prophet (significantly referred to here by his name *Māhī al-ḍalāl*, the "Effacer of error") will not allow it to be stopped or defeated. The final verses perform the poet's annihilation in the Prophet by smoothly transitioning to descriptions of attacks upon the Prophet and

105 *Āfāq al-Sh'ir*, I: 310-312.

his inevitable conquest of Mecca. The implication is that just as the Prophet and Islām could not be stopped, due to his love for an annihilation in the Prophet, the poet and the “flood” of *maʿrifa* flowing through him will not be stopped. In so doing, this poem enfolds and combines the reciter and audience’s temporality and struggles with those of the poet and the Prophet, situating all of them within the broader Sufi cosmology of eternity and Divine Presences, in which the victory of the Real/the Truth (*al-Ḥaqq*) is both inevitable and ever-present. As the Qur’ān says, *The Truth has come and the false has vanished, for the false is ever vanishing* (17: 81).

Rilke and Reimagining Humanity

دَوَاؤُكَ فَيْكَ وَمَا تُبْصِرُ
وَدَاؤُكَ مِنْكَ وَمَا تَشْعُرُ
وَفَيْكَ انْطَوَى الْعَالَمُ الْأَكْبَرُ
أَتَزْعُمُ أَنَّكَ جُرْمٌ صَغِيرُ

Your remedy is within you,
but you do not see it
Your malady is from you,
but you do not sense it
You claim that you are a small body,
but within you is enfolded
the largest world
-‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib

Niāsse’s poetic project of praise can perhaps be better understood by comparing and contrasting it to that of his European contemporary, Rainer Maria Rilke (d. 1926) who also attempted to respond to the upheavals of modernity through a poetics of praise. Kathleen Komar has argued that the Rilke’s Elegies in particular “explore how the individual human consciousness can respond when confronted with the loss of ordering principles and of access to any unified transcendent realm.”¹⁰⁶ Like Niāsse, Rilke saw praise as

the proper vocation of the poet and artist, writing verses such as:

O say, poet, what you do? – I praise.
But the deathly and the monstrous,
How do you keep going, how do
you take it all in? – I praise.
But the nameless and unnamed.
How, do you keep calling out to them,
poet? – I praise.
Where does it come from, your claim to
be real
In every guise and each mask? – I praise.
And that the stillness and the turbulence
know you like star and storm?
– Because I praise.¹⁰⁷

and
Praise, my dear one.
Let us disappear into praising.
Nothing belongs to us.¹⁰⁸

bridge Companion to Rilke, eds. K. Leeder and R. Vilain (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010), 81. Karen Campbell has written of the Islāmic influences in Rilke’s Duino Elegies. “Rilke’s Duino Angels and the Angels of Islām/ملائكة دوينو وملائكة الإسلام عند ريلكه” *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* (2003): 191-211. More indirectly, Rilke’s work was influenced by Nietzsche’s *The Gay Science* (from which Aimé Césaire also drew heavily in his “Poésie et Connaissance”), which in turn was inspired by the Provençal “Gai Saber”-the poetic art of the troubadour-knights of Provençal, whose tradition was heavily influenced by Andalusian Arabo-Islāmic adab, music, and poetry. (See Walter Kaufman, “Nietzsche and Rilke.” *The Kenyon Review* 17, 1 (1955): 1-22 and Dwight Reynolds, *The Musical Heritage of Al-Andalus* (New York: Routledge, 2020)).

107 qtd. in Mark Burrows, “‘The Poet Alone Unites the World’: The Poetics of Praise in Rainer Maria Rilke’s The Duino Elegies.” *Literature and Theology* 29, 4 (2015), 417.

108 Rainer Maria Rilke, *Uncollected poems: Bilingual Edition*, trans. Edward Snow (New York: Macmillan, 1997), 243. Moreover, these verses from the seventh Elegy recall many of the themes discussed in this article: For each of you there was an hour, or perhaps not a full hour, an experience hardly accountable by the measure of time between two instances—, where you had being. Everything. The veins filled with being. (qtd. in Burrows, “The Poet Alone Unites the World,” 424).

106 Kathleen Komar, “The Duino Elegies” in *The Cam-*

As Mark Burrows writes, Rilke's "poetic vocation, as it emerged during the first decades of the twentieth century, focused on pursuing a new state of being, which he came to refer to simply as 'the Open', a state of being characterised by a vulnerability to the immediacy of human experience beyond the laboured machinations of reason."¹⁰⁹ Nīasse similarly saw his role as the "custodian of the flood" (*ṣāhib al-fayḍa*) to help cultivate a state of being "open" (*maftūḥ*) in his millions of followers, and viewed his poetry as helping to cultivate the resulting direct knowledge of the Real (*ma'rifat al-Ḥaqq*) that transcends reason. However, there is a quite an experiential and existential gulf between Rilke's "Open" and the *Faṭḥ* of the Tijānīyya and the broader Sufi tradition. "What a difference there is between the two Yazīds," as the Arabic proverb says. But to better understand this difference we need to first understand the differing conceptions of humanity from which they spring. Burrows helpfully highlights the central role of the "imagining human"¹¹⁰ in Rilke's task of "uniting the world" inwardly though the creative act of poetic praise, which transforms and refigures the world within us:

Praise, he finally comes to see, is our proper work, steering us toward our vocation as 'artists of being'. For it is through praise that we find the means by which we find ourselves able to constitute a 'new unity of existence', recalling his affirmation of the poet as one who 'unites the world/which falls apart

in each of its parts'. In praising, the poet does not 'make sense' of a shattered world, but bears witness to 'the beautiful' in a manner unprecedented and otherwise indefensible. In so doing, the poet gives voice to an inward seeing, one that 'cleanses what lies in ruins' to the point that even 'the destructive becomes world' within us—that is, as *Weltinnenraum*. How is this to occur? Through praise, or as he puts it in one of the later 'Sonnets to Orpheus', and ultimately this means through song, since song is 'the 'pressing task' by which the earth finds its fulfillment: 'Song is being' (*Gesang ist Dasein*). Praise is a form of song, and song a way of praising.¹¹¹

The conception of praise as being, as a necessary response to, recognition (*'irfān*) and establishment of a relationship with the realities of all things is shared by Nīasse's Sufi cosmo-poetics, as is the function of the human being to "unite the world." In this regard, Nīasse frequently quotes the following verse of Abū Nuwās:

أَنْ يَجْمَعَ الْعَالَمَ فِي وَاحِدٍ
وَلَيْسَ عَلَى اللَّهِ بِمُسْتَكْبَرٍ

It is not difficult for God to gather the
whole world in one [person]¹¹²

And similarly, in his commentary on the Qur'ānic verse "*We will show them our signs in the horizons and in themselves...*" (41: 53), Shaykh Ibrāhīm writes, "There are some who say man is a small world (microcosm), but in reality, he is the large world (macrocosm) since all the worlds are contained in him."¹¹³ These perspectives are affirmed in the works of Shaykh Aḥmad al-Tijānī, who writes:

109 Burrows, "The Poet Alone Unites the World," 416.

110 As Burrows explains, "to approach this from the vantage point of our creative inner consciousness, or *Weltinnenraum*, ours is the task of bringing about a unity of consciousness that connects the world around us with our sense that this outside world is one we are able to transform through an imagining within us. The world 'needs' the imagining human, strangely, to come to itself, or to fulfill its own inherent 'vocation' in and through the 'imagining human'." (Burrows, "The Poet Alone Unites the World," 423).

111 Burrows, "The Poet Alone Unites the World," 426.

112 Nīasse, *Jawāhir al-rasā'il*, I: 47.

113 Nīasse, *Fī Riyāḍ al-tafsīr*, V: 250-1. Similarly in his *ḥikam*, Ibn 'Aṭā Allāh writes, "The cosmos is large in respect to your body, but it is not large in respect to your soul."

But the Adamic bodily presence encompasses the entirety of existent beings. So in reality, each gnostic [*ʿarīf*] contains all of the angels and all of the existent beings, from the heavenly throne to the earthly canopy. He sees all of them in himself, each one individually. If he wanted, he could ascend in the unseen to the guarded tablet (*lawḥ*), and look upon it and examine it within his own bodily presence. Such perfection does not belong to any creation except the Adamic being. From such encompassment (*ihāṭa*), God established the complete and general stewardship (*khilāfa*) [of humanity].¹¹⁴

In his *Removal of Confusion*, Niāsse explains the special function of such perfected humanity:

The essence of the matter is that the Saintly Pole is to the whole of existence as the spirit (*rūḥ*) is to the body. The body has no vitality, no sense and no movement without the spirit. All faculties of the physical body, external and internal, are made possible by the living spirit linked to the body. If the spirit departs from the physical body, all of its faculties cease to function, and it becomes a corpse. The same applies to all the elements in existence, with regard to their relationship to the Saintly Pole. He is for them like the spirit for the physical body. If his spirituality (*rūḥāniyya*) departed from them, the whole of existence would pass into extinction. He is the spirit of existence, and the entirety of its properties. He is responsible for their grouping and their separation, their commonality and their particularity, their liberation and their confinement. None of the elements of existence can survive unless the spiri-

tuality of the Saintly Pole exists within them. If the Saintly Pole's spirituality was removed from them, the whole of existence would cease, becoming a featureless corpse...

While this closely resembles Rilke's sense that "the world 'needs' the imagining human, to come to itself, or to fulfill its own inherent 'vocation' in and through the 'imagining human'", Rilke's starting point is as Komar puts it "the problem of isolated self-conscious humans in search of a new unity of existence."¹¹⁵ While for Niāsse, the unity of existence is a given primordial fact (*tawḥīd*), and the problem is to lead forgetful and negligent people in an age full of confusion, oppression, and spiritual difficulties to recognize and ultimately existentially realize this unity. This difference in starting points between Niāsse and Rilke's is characteristic of differences between traditional Islāmic and "secular" and modern conceptions of the self and poetry, as Talal Asad notes "The self's secularity consisted in the fact that it was the precondition of transcendent (poetic or religious) experience and not its product."¹¹⁶

Moreover, the poetic task of finding sense and purpose in praise, for Rilke, takes place in the "World-inner-realm" (*Weltinnenraum*)

¹¹⁵ Komar, "The Duino Elegies," 82-83.

¹¹⁶ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islām, Modernity* (Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 2003), 52. Mikhail Bakhtin's essay, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel" describes the increasing internalization and isolation of the realms of the emotional and psychological into the sealed-off, individualized modern subject (Mikhail Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. M. Holquist, trans. C. Emerson and M. Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2020). These differing conceptions of subjectivity are also reflected in the differing formal features and performance of poetry, with the standard meters and end-rhymes of Niāsse's poetry lending themselves to musical group recitation and much modern and secular poetry being designed for individual, silent reading off a page.

¹¹⁴ qtd. in Wright, *Realizing Islām*, 109-110.

which, although it is connected to the outer world, is firmly within ordinary human subjectivity and is explicitly not transcendent. Nīasse's Sufi poetics, on the contrary, ultimately collapses all distinctions between transcendence and immanence, inner and outer, "since all the worlds are contained in [the human being]," who is made in the image of the Real (*al-Ḥaqq*) who is both the Outward (*al-Zāhir*) and the Inward (*al-Bāṭin*). For Nīasse, the perfect human being is the meaning of the world and its animating and unifying spirit, both containing and being contained by creation and its Creator.¹¹⁷ For Rilke, *contra* Wittgenstein, the meaning of the world is not found outside the world, but rather within us, within our imagining of the world within us.¹¹⁸

Moreover, for Nīasse, the issue is not "the loss of ordering principles and of access to any unified transcendent realm," but rather the maintenance of these "ordering principles" and the access they provide to "unified transcendental realms" in new circumstances. For Rilke, the poet's task is to transform the shattered and broken outer world in the inward, invisible crucible of the poet's imagination, which then emerges as praise that represents a new consciousness, embodying the world's will to return to a lost unity. For Nīasse, the poet's task is to existentially realize this unity (through annihilation and subsistence in God and the spiritual realities of the Prophet and Shaykh Aḥmad al-Tijānī) and to continue or vivify the Real's act of Self-praise on his or her tongue and pen and in various other ways with all other limbs and levels of his/her being. For Nīasse, the

world only ever appears broken—we may be absent from Divine Unity and the beloved, but It and he could never be absent from us, or we would not exist. The composition, recitation, audition, and reading of poetry can assist in the recovery and recognition of Divine Unity and love buried deep within each soul (constituting its very being), but it is ultimately God, through the Prophet and his representatives that achieves the removal of the illusion of disunity. For Rilke, what is required is a "new consciousness" to restore lost unity and find beauty in the human imagination (*khayāl*), whereas for Nīasse, it is the primordial Prophetic consciousness that has always maintained beauty in and through the Divine imagination (*khayāl*) that is creation (including human imagination). In Rilke's poetics, the recovery of lost unity is potential and aspirational, in Nīasse's, it is realized and actual.

Conclusion: The Praising/Praiseworthy Human (*al-Insān al-Ḥamīd*)

The chronotope as a formally constitutive category determines to a significant degree the image of man in literature as well. The image of man is always intrinsically chronotopic
-Mikhail Bakhtin

از کران تا به کران لشکر ظلم است ولی
از ازل تا به ابد فرصت درویشان است

From horizon to horizon the armies of
oppression are arrayed, but
From no-beginning to no-end is the
time of the dervishes
-Hafez

The unique Sufi cosmo-poetics outlined above in Nīasse's prose and poetry presents us with a very different conception of the human being and its potential perfection.

117 According to the traditions popular amongst Sufi authors, "My heavens and My earth do not contain me but the heart of my believing servant contains me" and "The heart of My believing servant contains Me." See Chittick, *SPK*, 339-41.

118 Burrows, "The Poet Alone Unites the World", 422.

What does it mean to contain all of the worlds within oneself? What do the possibilities of annihilation and *ma'rifa* mean for human individuality and subjectivity? What kind of hierarchies does it establish, and which kinds does it erase? What, in Niāsse's poetry, does it mean to be human?

All genres of literature or performance assume a certain kind of listener, reader, or audience, and thus implicitly construct a parallel "genre" of human being. In broader historical and philosophical terms, Sylvia Wynter has offered a compelling account of how the colonial project and the broader "coloniality of being" have structured current epistemological and sociopolitical orders, producing different "genres" of humanity. For Wynter, the genres of Christian/heathen and Priest/laity that structured the medieval Christian world evolved to produce "Man and his human others" in the "degodded" Early Modern period resulting in "Man/Negro slave/Indio serf" complex based on the "Rational man/Irrational animal" distinction. These genres evolved in the 19th century to produce the "Biological Man" and his human racial others, coded as "naturally deselected," and "less evolved," which, when combined with capitalism, produced a system in which "the value difference between (bourgeois) Man and its working-class Others is [seen] as supraculturally and extra-humanly ordained as is the projected value difference between Indo-European peoples and all native peoples."¹¹⁹ Across all of these genres and shifts, Wynter attempts to demonstrate how a dominant European conception of Man "overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself"—

119 David Scott and Sylvia Wynter, "The Re-Enchantment of Humanism: An interview with Sylvia Wynter", *Small Axe* 8, 120 (2000), 177. Also see Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument", *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, 3 (2003): 257-337.

making itself the measure of all things and relegating its "human others" to "subgenres of humanity." In order to move beyond these formations, towards a "humanism made to the measure of the world",¹²⁰ Wynter combines Aimé Césaire's concept of a new "science of the Word" based on a poetic knowledge uniting science and literature, nature and narrative, with Fanon's insights in "sociogeny",¹²¹ to call for a new order of knowledge based upon the recognition of humankind's ability to create itself and its world, which (borrowing from biology) she terms "autopoiesis".¹²²

What I would like to suggest is that this "science of the Word" already exists in traditions such as Niāsse's, where the poetic and scientific have never been sundered, and whose rites, rituals and literature remake and integrate the world and the human individual, the physical and the spiritual through the unitive, existential knowledge of *ma'rifa*. Despite Niāsse's great intellectual and political differences with his contemporary Léopold Sédar Senghor, the former's poetry epitomizes the latter's observation that "poetic truth is identified, here, with scientific truth, for which the being of the being is energy, that is to say

120 Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001).

121 In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon writes, "beside [the Freudian] phylogeny and ontogeny stands sociogeny" and "I am not a prisoner of History. I should not seek there for the meaning of my destiny. I should constantly remind myself that the real leap consists in introducing invention into existence. In the world through which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself. In the world through which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself." Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove, 2008), 204.

122 See Sylvia Wynter, "The Ceremony Found: Towards the Autopoietic Turn/Overtake, Its Autonomy of Human Agency and Extraterritoriality of (Self-)Cognition", in *Black Knowledges/Black Struggles: Essays in Critical Epistemology*, eds. Jason R. Ambrose and Sabine Bröck-Sallah (Liverpool: University of Liverpool Press, 2015).

rhythm.”¹²³ For Nīasse, all beings are divine words of praise, vibrations in the “Breath of the All-Merciful” (*nafas al-Raḥmān*), created with measure (*bi qadrin*) (Qur’ān 54: 49).¹²⁴

In contrast to what Wynter calls the overrepresentation of an immanent ideal of humanity against which all else is measured, Nīasse’s poetry in particular, and the Sufi tradition in general, presents the transcendent ideal of the Prophet as *al-Insān al-Kāmil*, the Perfect Human, who encompasses all levels of reality, is the *barzakh* that unites and separates Being and non-being, combining all opposites, transcending all delimitations, and even transcending this transcendence to be immanent in all such delimitations.¹²⁵

As such, the Prophetic reality is not only the perfection of the human state, but also the essential perfection of each and every human, and moreover, of each and every thing in the cosmos, being its origin, root, reality,

and sustainer. As the title of one of Nīasse’s first diwans suggests, his poetry is meant to both describe and *Facilitate Arrival at the Presence of the Messenger* (*Taysīr al-wuṣūl ilā ḥaḍrāt al-rasūl*), with this presence being the state of unlimited human perfection. As such, Nīasse’s poetry addresses the Prophet himself, the perfection of being within all beings, and it is this is the “genre” of humanity that his work assumes and attempts to cultivate within its readers, reciters, and listeners. As William Chittick writes, describing the Prophet’s transcendent, non-delimited perfection of the “station of no-station”:

Once it is understood that the proper human role in the cosmos is to manifest the Divine Essence in a global and plenary fashion, it is easy to see that the main currents of modern thought are designed to keep people as far away from the ‘central point’ as possible. This is because science, technology, and the other branches of modern learning—not to speak of politics—are grounded in ignorance of human nature. Modern forms of knowledge falsify the human self by defining it in terms of ever more narrowly focused disciplines—biology, neurophysiology, genetics, anthropology, psychology, history, economics, and so on. Modern intellectual currents, the media, and popular culture make people comfortable with the false notion that they belong to fixed stations. Once people lose sight of the nondelimitation of the true human state, they lose the possibility of thinking about perfection, much less achieving it. Modern knowledge tells us who we are not. It can never tell us who we are. Only a perspective rooted in the Station of No Station can-

123 Léopold Sédar Senghor, “Éléments constitutifs d’une civilisation d’inspiration Nègro-Africaine”, in *Liberté I: Négritude et humanisme* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1964), 281.

124 In this vein, Ibn al-‘Arabī describes the whole cosmos as a poem: “All of the world is endowed with rhythm, fastened by rhyme, on the Straight Path.” (McAuley, *Ibn ‘Arabi’s Mystical Poetics*, 45).

125 As I have written elsewhere, “Since the Perfect Human is made in God’s image and God transcends all limitations, *maḍīḥ* poetry describes the Prophet as similarly transcending all limitations; it encourages its listeners to follow in his footsteps by realizing the perfection of their own essential human nature, which transcends all limitations (and even transcends its own transcendence). This poetry describes, invokes and evokes desire and love for this ineffable state of human perfection that is fluid, infinitely flexible and ever-changing in response to the ever-changing manifestations of the Divine Essence.” (Ogunnaike, *Poetry in Praise*, 120) And “Thus, Sufi *maḍīḥ* poetry serves as a kind of map or description of this indescribable, limitless human potential—the universe in which people evolve towards perfection. Much more than pious flattery, this poetry is nothing less than the description, invocation, and evocation of the fulfilment of the absolute freedom of human perfection, beyond all limitations or endings.” (Ogunnaike, *Poetry in Praise*, 70).

show the way to the central point.¹²⁶

This perspective is the foundation of what Zachary Wright has termed a tradition of “Muhammad-centric ‘Islāmic Humanism’” that runs through various Sufi and Islāmic Philosophical traditions.¹²⁷ While these traditions create a hierarchy of humanity based on knowledge of and closeness to God (with the Prophet at the summit),¹²⁸ for those who ascend these peaks of ethico-onto-epistemological perfection, these hierarchies and differences are collapsed and relativized within the context of the deeper unity and identity of all people and all things. As al-Tijānī said, commenting on a prayer upon the Prophet:¹²⁹

His being, God’s peace and blessing upon him, is the spirit of everything in the universe, and there is no existence for anything without him, even for the non-believers. A second (higher) degree of his being the spirit for all created things is something not common to all, but special to some. This second

degree is the spirituality (*rūḥāniyya*) of all gnostics, truthful ones, saintly poles, prophets, messengers, and any brought close (to God). This spirituality of his is that by which they stand in the presence of God the Exalted, fulfilling His rights and perfecting their comportment (*adab*) with Him. It is that by which they obtain effacement in the [essence of union] (*‘ayn al-jam’*), by which they drown in the oceans of oneness. In this station, they are to God, by God, in God, from God, and for God; unblemished by other or otherness. There is nothing in the entirety of their senses, suppositions, imaginations, remunerations, or perceptions except God the Exalted, the One.¹³⁰

This division between external hierarchy and differentiation and inward unity and integration, and the reasons for it are best summed-up in another quotation of Aḥmad al-Tijānī in which he asserts that exalting oneself over another is equivalent to exalting oneself over God:

Perfect knowledge is that he (the disbeliever) is to be honored, for this is an arrangement (*martaba*) belonging to the Real, exalted is He, in which God mani-

126 William Chittick, “The Central Point”, *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society* 35, (2004), 45.

127 Wright, *Realizing Islām*, 101-141. *Amongst others, this notion builds on the work of Stefan Reichmuth, but should not be conflated or confused with the distinct Western Renaissance project of Humanism.*

128 Michael Muhammad Knight has recently drawn attention to the way in which this Muḥammadan ideal, particularly in its embodied form, has been used to marginalize and delegitimize certain groups of Muslims and non-Muslims. Michael Muhammad Knight, *Muhammad’s Body: Baraka Networks and the Prophetic Assemblage* (Durham, UNC: UNC Press Books, 2020). However, Niāsse’s movement and writings explicitly worked against some of these trends, even including specific appendices refuting anti-black prejudice and sexism in the spiritual path (*tarīqa*) (see Niāsse, *Removal of Confusion*, 347-364).

129 “The Ruby of Realities” *Yaqūtāt al-ḥaqāiq*. The lines commented upon here are: “O God, make him (the Prophet) our spirit and the secret of our worship. Make our love for him a power by which [we] are assisted in venerating him. O God, make our veneration of him the life of our hearts, by which we stand and are assisted in remembering him, and in remembering his Lord” (qtd. in Wright, 117).

130 Ibid. Wright also cites several other passages of al-Tijānī’s that elucidate the “universality” of this perspective:

“Reflecting on the “Muhammadan light” that pervades all of creation, al-Tijānī similarly observed, ‘There is no difference between a believer and an infidel (*kāfir*) in terms of humanity (*fi l-ādamiyy*).’” (Ibid, 102); All of the worlds are included in this love, even the disbelievers (*kuffār*), for they are His beloveds in the presence of His words, “I loved to be known, so I created the creation and made Myself known to them, and by Me they know Me.” Do not imagine that any in creation are excluded from this cognizance (*ma’rifā*). Indeed, all of the souls (*arwāh*) have been created with complete cognizance of God the Exalted. Ignorance only occurred to them with their mixture in the material bodies...so the ignorance that befell the souls is not intrinsic to them. Knowledge of God the Exalted is that which is intrinsic to them” (Ibid. 107).

feasts His judgement (*aḥkām*). He is to be honored internally, but disparaged and fought against externally, for that is the ruling of the Sharī'a (*ḥukm al-shar'*) and divine wisdom (*ḥikma*). This matter is perceived by the gnostic only, not from the perspective of the law. But this understanding is referenced by the Prophet's saying, "Do not exalt yourselves over God by (exalting yourselves over) His lands and His servants. Whoever exalts himself over the servants (of God), exalts himself over God, thinking himself greater (than God)." Truly understanding (*taḥqīq*) this ḥadīth is found in what we said before, which is that all created entities are arrangements (*marātib*) belonging to the Real. One must submit to His ruling and what He has established of it in (each of) His creations, (a ruling) not turned back in anything. Legal rulings pertain to a thing's external nature, not its internal. But this is only for the one who is cognizant of the unity of being (*waḥdat al-wujūd*), for he sees both differentiation (*al-faṣl*) and connection (*al-waṣl*). Being is one essence. It is not divided in parts despite the multiplicity of forms and types.¹³¹

In this way, the external hierarchies amongst and divisions between people are viewed as inevitable results of "divine wisdom" and fate, but are managed by the Sharī'a and transcended internally through spiritual realization of the oneness of Being, which renders exalting oneself over another impossible.

These perspectives and their underlying metaphysics, ethics, cosmology, epistemology, etc. are not only expressed, but also enacted in Niāsse's poetry, whose aesthetic features are employed in the service of cultivating this ideal of human perfection, capable of recog-

nizing itself within everything and everyone. The perpetual now of poetic time enfolds aeons into itself without obliterating the distinctions and contradictions of its constituent elements, even as the perfect human enfolds all the worlds within him or herself in such a way that their distinctiveness is enhanced, not erased. As Aimé Césaire wrote, "There are two paths to doom: by segregation, by walling yourself up in a particular or by dilution, by thinning off into the emptiness of the 'universal.' I have a different idea of a universal. It is of a universal rich with all that is particular, rich with all the particulars there are, the deepening of each particular, the coexistence of them all."¹³² This kind of universal is realized in the person of the Perfect or Universal Human (*al-Insān al-Kāmil*) as well as the poetry written in praise of this reality.¹³³

But these are not merely abstract, academic ideals—Niāsse's poetry is representative of one of the main traditions through which African Muslims conceptualized, articulated, and cultivated their humanity (and continue to do so) in the face of the would-be dehumanizing practices and discourses of the slave trade, colonial and neo-colonial formations. As Cedric Robinson wrote, such traditions formed "the raw material of the Black radical tradition, the values, ideas, conceptions, and constructions of reality from which resistance was manufactured."¹³⁴ Niāsse's verses carry this tradition forward, as love odes to our

132 Aimé Césaire, "Letter to Maurice Thorez", trans. Chike Jeffers. *Social Text* 28, 2 (2010), 152.

133 As in Aḥmad al-Tijānī's previously cited statement, "But the Adamic bodily presence encompasses the entirety of existent beings. So in reality, each gnostic [*ārif*] contains all of the angels and all of the existent beings, from the heavenly throne to the earthly canopy. He sees all of them in himself, each one individually." (qtd. in Wright, *Realizing Islām*, 109-110).

134 Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press, 2000), 309.

131 Ibid. 67.

best nature, meant to kindle a longing for and realization of this highest human potential of seeing and praising perfection everywhere and in everyone and everything. As he wrote in one of his own favorite poems:

The love of Muṣṭafā, Mukhtār,
mixed with my heart
And permeated my all and parts, for he
is my secret and appearance
When the moonlight glows, I turn to his
remembrance
I remember him at every sight and scene
And I remember him in all songs, and
when I taste a sweet
For he is my life, my taste, and my
intoxicating drink
And I remember him in all trials and
in their opposite
and I remember him in my absence
just as in my presence
And I remember him in all beloveds,
and I do not
Forget him at times of troubling enmity
And I see no loveliness save for his face
For there is no beauty but the face of
al-Mudaththir¹³⁵
My desire's for my being to be the same
as Muṣṭafā's
Or else to die in deep longing for him
If not for the delight of his lights in
paradise
None would yearn for eternity among
those of insight
If only the Messenger of God would
kindle
For Barham, an eternal fire, burning
in every blaze!

هو المصطفى المختار خالط مضمر
وكلي وجزئي فهو سري ومظهري
إذا ضاء ضوء البدر ملت لذكره

135 "The Cloaked One" -A Qur'ānic (74: 1) title for the Prophet, the poetic allusion here being that the Prophet is cloaked in the various appearances of the world.

وأذكره في كل مرأى ومنظر
وأذكره عند الأغاني وإذ حلا
مذاق فهو عمري مذاقي ومسكر
وأذكره عند البلا ونقيضه
وأذكره في غيبتني مثل محضر
وأذكره عند الحبيب ولم أكن
لأنساه وقت الأجنبي المكدر
ولست أرى مستحسننا غير وجهه
فليس جمال غير وجه المدثر
مرادي كوني المصطفى عين عينه
وإلا فموتي فيه شوقا لعنصري
ولولا التذاذ في الجنان بنوره
لما حن نحو الخلد كل مبصر
وليت رسول الله كان مسعرا
لبرهام نارا خالدا كل مسعر¹³⁶

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136 *Āfāq al-Sh‘ir*, I: 177.

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