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# Authorship in Sufi Poetry

Michael Frishkopf\*

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The celebrated Sudanese *Shaykh* Muhammad ‘Uthman ‘Abdu al-Burhani, founder of a now-global Sufi order (*tariqa*),<sup>1</sup> passed away on April 4<sup>th</sup>, 1983; several years later, the *tariqa* published his collection (*diwan*) of sacred poetry, *Sharab al-wasl* [*The Drink of Union*] (al-Burhani). Each poem in this *diwan* carries the date of its composition, and poems are presented in chronological order. All of this seems perfectly ordinary. Somewhat less ordinary is the date of the first poem, April 13<sup>th</sup>, 1983, a full week after the death of its putative author. How can we understand such an enigma? What is the meaning of authorship for the Sufis?

## I. Problems of Authorship, and Sufi Poetry

This article is an exploration of authorship, and related concepts of textuality and meaning, in Sufi poetry, based on more than five years’ participant-observation research among Sufis, Sufi singers, and Sufi poets in Egypt. What I intend to do is to interpret the concept of authorship of Sufi poetry as Sufis themselves appear to understand it, without attempting to bracket their beliefs within the confines of a “higher” theory. Rather, I seek to trace the relation between their “emic” (insider) view, and the “etic” (outsider) theories propounded by Western literary philosophers and critics. An analysis of Sufi authorship may help in developing a theory of authorship for sacred literatures, and perhaps even contribute towards theories of authorship in general.

Conventional assumptions about authorship were most famously challenged by Roland Barthes in a highly influential article (Barthes, “The Death of the Author”), in which he melodramatically declared the “death of the author.” But I rather follow Foucault (“What is an Author?”) in problematizing the contours of authorship (the “author-function”), freeing “authorship” from necessary attachment to a singular concept of individualized creative genius. Spurred by such

problematization, ethnographic investigation of Sufi poetic practice can proceed to supply a radically contrastive sociological concept of generalized author. This “interauthor,” as I call it, is precisely the social and emic counterpart to the symbolic and etic intertext (formulated by Kristeva and many others). Where the insider (Sufi) sees a network of spiritual-social relations, transcending the individual author, as a distributed source of textual production, the outsider (critic) sees a network of symbolic-textual relations, transcending the individual text. Both concepts correspond to the relative backgrounding of the individualized author and text, within a broader network of Sufi social and symbolic relations, as compared to the secular Arabic literary tradition. Although (or, as we shall see, because) they are grounded in a traditional (pre-modern) mystical theology, such networks ensure a fluidity and superfluity of meaning, such that every “reading” can be different.

From this analysis, authorship in Sufi poetry appears as surprisingly postmodern, despite its putatively traditional worldview, whereas authorship (if not criticism) in contemporary Arabic secular poetry remains firmly modern.<sup>2</sup> This ironic twist thus calls into question the chronological sequence tradition/modernism/postmodernism so often deployed in contemporary theory.

## **A. Two Literate Poetic Streams in Contemporary Egypt**

A kind of diglossia of literate poetry<sup>3</sup> as social practice prevails in Egypt today. Though the situation in the recent past was more complex, today it is not too much of an oversimplification to label two antagonistic discursive streams “secular” and “sacred.” One is rooted in a discourse of secularist modernism, the other in Islamic traditionalism. These two streams implicitly incorporate each other through an oppositional dialectic (insofar as each tacitly seeks discursive domination over the other), reinforcing their differentiation and mutual segregation.

On the one hand, the secular poetic stream, resulting from the collision of traditional Arab poetics with European literary currents first imbibed in the nineteenth century, is strongly informed by Western aesthetics and secularism in its content, having become part of a homogeneous “global literary system” of production and consumption, in which an individualized author-function (as Foucault would have it) is central. In practice, its authors (despite Barthes) remain widely regarded as the creative geniuses from which literary culture must spring.

On the other hand, there is a deeply rooted sacred stream that continues to maintain traditional Arab poetics, and generally holds Islamic culture in high esteem. Over the last fifty years or so, this stream has dwindled, continuing to flow within the only domain of Arab culture necessarily resistant to secularization: Islam itself. While Sufism does not provide the only forum for Islamic poetry, it is in Sufism that religious poetry is most developed and most utilized in religious practice.

Whereas in the West postmodernism is associated with a critical questioning of all naturalized social structures, and although religious traditions would appear to provide the clearest targets for such critique, within Arab poetry it is precisely the sacred poetic stream which displays most clearly the literary attributes of postmodernism: reader determination of meaning; intertextuality; the decentering of the autonomous author.

The Sufi poetry discussed in this article, a kind of sacred poetry, cannot be classified (and thereby dismissed) as “folk” poetry, since it is not purely oral, does not exist in a primary mode of colloquial Arabic, and is not anonymous. Rather this poetry is written, printed, often published; it frequently takes the form of high Arabic, and adopts classical forms, such as the *qasida* (ode); it receives authorial attributions of various kinds, and is to a large extent considered part and parcel of the Arab poetic tradition. On the other hand, such poetry is by no means a purely “written” tradition either, since its primary role occurs in ritual performance, sung as *inshad dini* (religious hymnody), and since it is frequently learned orally.

## B. Problems in Sufi Authorship

A few examples may help to problematize the concept of Sufi authorship and to motivate the following discussion.

1. *Shaykh*<sup>4</sup> Muhammad ‘Uthman (mentioned above) miraculously conveyed poetry to his disciples posthumously, often through dreams; the results were published (al-Burhani). The disciple receives no authorial credit, since he is considered to be merely a passive vehicle for a sacred text.

2. Contemporary members of his *tariqa* attribute a large corpus of poetry to the thirteenth-century saint *Sidi Ahmad al-Rifa’i*, although Western scholarly sources cannot confirm that he wrote anything at all (Margoliouth; Trimmingham 37).

3. Egyptian Sufis cite the Syrian *Shaykh* Abu al-Huda al-Sayyadi (1859-1909), as having written poetry “‘*ala lisan Sidi Ahmad al-Rifa’i*,” [“from the mouth of *Sidi Ahmad al-Rifa’i*”] implying that al-Sayyadi’s spiritual relation to *Sidi Ahmad* was close enough to speak on his behalf. Authorial credit is shared.

4. Many Sufi authors borrowed the meter, rhyme, and themes of 13<sup>th</sup> century poet-saint al-Busiri’s famous mystical poem, *al-Burda*, in producing their own poetic works. Such poems are termed *nahj al-Burda*, “in the manner of the *Burda*” (see Schimmel, *As Through a Veil* 185ff). Similarly, many Sufis appear to have composed *ta’iyyas* (odes rhyming in the letter ‘t’) in imitation of thirteenth century *Sidi ‘Umar ibn al-Farid*’s famously difficult *ta’iyya*, *Nazm al-Suluk* [“The Poem of the Way”] (Ibn al-Farid); one of the most outstanding examples is attributed to the renowned Egyptian saint *Sidi Ibrahim al-Dasuqi* (see al-Najjar 197-98).

5. A Sufi poet frequently intercalates his own lines with those of another, using a consistent interpolative formula (e.g. *tarbi’*, *takhmis*, *tashtir*) to elaborate and comment upon a more famous poem; the result is a collaborative poem—and authorship is shared. The *Burda* was often elaborated in this way (e.g. ‘Abd al-Hamid Quds).

6. The founder of a Sufi order compiles a *diwan*, perhaps including some of his own poetry, but also selecting poems from the tradition without attributions; the resulting *diwan* is associated with the *shaykh* and thus generally regarded as his work (as compiler-author). Such is the case for the *diwan* of *Sidi Salama al-Radi*, founder of the *Hamidiyya Shadhiliyya* order (al-Radi; on *Sidi Salama* see Gilsenan).

7. The *shaykh* of a Sufi order compiles a set of poems (supposedly gathered from the work of order members) for use among his disciples; many poems are unattributed, given an anonymous attribution (*li-ahad al-muhibbin*, “by one of the mystical lovers”), or even a plural anonymous attribution (*ba’d al-muhibbin*, “some of the mystical lovers”). Such poems are associated with the order as a whole, and with the founder in particular. Several poems in the prayer book (al-Bahi) published by a branch of the *Ahmadiyya tariqa* of al-Sayyid Ahmad al-Badawi (d. 1278) carry anonymous attributions, while others are explicitly attributed to the saint, though scholarship casts doubt on his authorship (Vollers and Littmann). These poems are considered to be “*Ahmadiyya*,” and contribute to al-Sayyid Ahmad al-Badawi’s saintly status. A similar relation obtains between a *Shadhili diwan* of anonymous poems (al-Shadhili), the *Shadhiliyya tariqa*, and its founder, *Sidi Abu al-Hasan al-Shadhili*.

8. *Shaykh* Ahmad al-Tuni, a famous Sufi poet-performer (*munshid*), constructs a unique text in performance. Drawing upon his poetic repertoire, and guided by his aesthetic sense, mystical state, and feedback from the audience, he “collages” poetic fragments from many sources, occasionally inserting material of his own. The result is a truly new text; and because no line carries any authorial attribution, the audience attributes the performed text to the performer.

9. Another Egyptian *munshid*, *Shaykh* Yasin al-Tuhami (Frishkopf, “*Shaykh* Yasin in Performance”), has become famous as a specialist in *Sidi* ‘Umar ibn al-Farid’s recondite poetry, and even for having a personal mystical connection to the poet himself. As a consequence, his listeners often attribute any abstruse poem sung by *Shaykh* Yasin to *Sidi* ‘Umar ibn al-Farid. In one case, a poem so attributed was shown to be the work not of *Sidi* ‘Umar, but rather of a contemporary Sufi poet (*Shaykh* ‘Abd al-‘Alim al-Nakhayli); this fact induced the perception that the latter must be a close spiritual disciple of the former.

10. In a state of ecstasy (*hal*) inspired by contact with Prophet or saint, in which Divine lights become manifest, a *shaykh* spontaneously utters poetry, which is copied down by anonymous disciples; subsequently *shaykh* or disciples may “polish” such poetry to greater technical perfection. Egyptian Sufis say that Ibn al-Farid himself composed poetry in this way; similar accounts of copying and polishing are given for the contemporary *shaykh*, *Sidi* Jabir al-Jazuli, by members of his order.

11. One of *Shaykh* Yasin’s listeners is well known for his priest-like appearance, appearing at the *dhikr* (remembrance ritual) in a long black hooded cloak and beard, and silver chains. Moving wildly in response to *Shaykh* Yasin’s performance, he translates sung poetry line by line into his own consistent sign language of arm and hand signals, occasionally crying out in *suriyaniyya* (the language of angels and jinn). His kinetic-sonic performance draws participants’ attention away from *Shaykh* Yasin, underscoring his comparable role as a producer of poetic text in performance.

### C. Sufi Authorship and Literary Theory

One would like to examine these problems in the light of contemporary literary theory, in the hope that they might be illuminated

by, or illuminate, that theory. It is natural to begin with the first theorist to seriously critique the concept of author: Roland Barthes.

In a concise article, Barthes (“The Death of the Author”) recounts the effacement of the author. Unpacked, this article recounts not one death but four possible deaths, which I take the liberty of classifying and naming as follows: two *a priori* (a philosophical death, a critical death), and two empirical-interpretive (a social death, a textual death).

The philosophical death is established on the basis of a reflection upon the meaning of writing itself. “Writing,” says Barthes, “is the black-and-white where all identity is lost.” Closely related is the critical death—the notion that texts can (and should) be read without reference to their putative authors. This is a “countertheological” move, insofar as those authors are otherwise treated as “Author-gods” determining all meaning. Neither the philosophical nor critical deaths require any empirical justification; they are *a priori* assertions about all writing and reading, rather than reading and writing as situated in society and history.

By contrast, social and textual births and deaths must be established by recourse to social and textual facts, in a particular time and place. Barthes implies that prior to the modern period, there was no author, only a performer of an authorless narrative code; this situation persists in what he terms “ethnographic societies.” The author, as an individualized and autonomous “creator,” is born with “English empiricism, French rationalism, and the personal faith of the Reformation,” (142-43) growing stronger under the influence of capitalism, and reaching the apotheosis of an “Author-god” who determines all meaning.

The textual death results from a new kind of text—reconceptualized, in his later *S/Z* as “writerly”—deliberately constructed so as to allow language itself to speak, revealing itself as “a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture” (“The Death of the Author” 146). Such a text (foregrounding the intertext, though Barthes didn’t use this term) implies the death of the author, and the simultaneous birth of the reader as writer. According to Barthes, Mallarmé was the first to produce such a text.<sup>5</sup>

As opposed to the philosophical and critical deaths, these social and textual deaths are assertions about historical-social-textual reality. One is thus entitled to ask precisely when and where these assertions are true.

Writing in a somewhat less polemical vein, Foucault’s essay

("What is an Author?") more directly problematizes the author, by tracing a socially, historically, and discursively variable "author-function," an individualization evolving with the rise of particular kinds of discourse as property and hence the possibility that writers could become subject to punishment for their attachment to transgressive works (Foucault).

Barthes' social and textual analysis fails to consider the nature of authorship elsewhere in the world, except in terms of his crudely Eurocentric category, "ethnographic society." Restricting attention to European intellectual history not only falsely implies that the author is a uniquely modern and European invention but, worse, risks misconstruing the general relation between social-historical factors and literary concepts. But despite a certain ethnocentrism, Barthes succeeded here in implicitly problematizing the author as a social construction. Foucault also centers his analysis on Western culture, while suggesting that similar analyses might be carried out elsewhere.

Some sort of partially individualized author has long existed in traditional Arab society and literature, certainly long before English empiricism and French rationalism, from famous pre-Islamic tribal poets to the court poets of the Umayyad and Abbasid eras (Imru' al-Qays, 'Umar ibn Rabi'a, al-Mutanabbi, Abu Nuwas, etc.). Certainly Arab society cannot be dismissed as "ethnographic" (indeed it is doubtful that such a concept is ever valid). But following Barthes, and especially Foucault, one is encouraged to probe Arab concepts of literary authorship as potentially complex, and variable, social constructions which need not resemble their Western counterparts. Rather, Arab concepts of authorship (like those elsewhere in the world) need to be traced and understood according to the particular cultural logics, and social-discursive histories in which they are enmeshed. This is no doubt a large undertaking.

The more modest task to be taken up here consists in unpacking the concept of authorship as applied to Sufi poetry in contemporary Egypt. As we shall see, the Sufi tradition from pre-modern times to the present evinces a complex concept of authorship; neither the "null author" of Barthes' ethnographic society, nor the "dead author" of Barthes' imagined interpretive utopia, but rather a metaphysically socialized author who is (ironically) more postmodern than the contemporary secular Arab poet-author.



## D. Authorship and Social Network Theory

Melodramatic metaphors of authorial birth and death, though affectively polemical, falsely imply that authorship is a simple binary variable over history. A more realistic metaphor would allow for degrees and modalities of individualization.

If the fundamental property of the birth of the author is individualization, then its antithesis is perhaps not death, but rather socialization. Here one may profitably take a cue from theories of intertextuality, where a melodramatic “death of the text” is eschewed in favor of a symbolic network of texts, a “fabric of quotations” as Barthes would have it, each text always standing in relation to others. By analogy, I define the “interauthor” as a social network of textual producers. From the network perspective, neither author nor text die, but network connections entail the reduction of autonomy, as they participate within a larger social or textual system.<sup>6</sup>

The interauthor and intertext are related concepts, dual aspects of one phenomenon (recalling for instance the wave and particle aspects of light), depending on whether social practices or symbolic products are foregrounded. When the intertext is foregrounded, authors are backgrounded as interstitial elements mediating a textual network. When the interauthor is foregrounded, texts are backgrounded as interstitial elements, communications mediating a social network. In Sufi poetry (and perhaps in other sacred literatures as well) this phenomenon is particularly salient because both interauthor and intertext are actively supported by Sufi doctrines and social structures.

## II. Sufism

Sufism is the mystical dimension of Islam.<sup>7</sup> While certain voices (and ironically here Islamic conservatives have often concurred with Western Orientalists) hold that Sufism is a foreign accretion, Sufis themselves view Sufism as the essence (*jawhar*) of Islam. In contemporary Egypt, Sufis consider themselves devout Muslims for whom devotional love (for God, for the Prophet and his family, for the saints, for each other, for everyone) is primary, for it is only through love that worship of God can be complete: the Sufi is a lover (*muhibb*). Sufis strive to know and experience God, as the Divine Reality (*haqiqa*), in this life; love is both cause and consequence of that striving. The centrality of love never obviates commitment to Islamic

*shari'a* (Divine Law), however; indeed the least expression of love for God requires performance of the *shari'a*'s prescribed obligations (*furud*). But by performing supererogatory devotions, Sufis hope to raise the spirit (*ruh*) towards its origin in God, while purifying the self (*nafs*) from its baser longings.

Love of God entails (and is entailed by) remembering God (*dhikr*), which is a kind of remembering of original self as well, since spirit is from God, and does not die. Underlying the theory and practice of Sufi love is a general notion of spiritual proximity as remembrance. In pre-creation (*al-'alam al-azali*) God said "*Alastu bi rabbikum?*" (Am I not your Lord?), to which the spirits responded "*Bala!*" (Indeed You are!) (Qur'an VII:172). But after birth into a physical body, they forgot. All Sufi ritual is an attempt to move closer to God by remembering Him, along a path (*tariqa*) from *shari'a* to *haqiqa*.

Sufis position themselves within a vast, well-connected spiritual-social network, tightly bound by love, and connecting active agents both living and dead.<sup>8</sup> Central to the Sufi's reality is the *'alam al-arwah* (world of spirits), within which one may establish personal, affective relationships with other spirits, irrespective of distances in time and space. Belief in this world consequently enables a dramatic expansion of the Sufi's spiritual-social network. Closest to God, the Prophet Muhammad, *mala'ika* (angels), and *awliya'* (saints) extend spiritual help (*madad*) and blessing (*baraka*) to the *muhibbin*, who love them. Foremost among saints is the Prophet Muhammad's immediate family (*Ahl al-Bayt*), followed by founders of the major orders (the *aqtab*). Since most saints are not alive in the ordinary flesh-and-blood sense, only a sub-network of the Sufi's spiritual-social network is realized via ordinary face-to-face social relations between living individuals, a sub-network strongly conditioned by the Sufi *tariqa* to which he belongs.

A new *tariqa* develops around a distinctive spiritual teacher (*shaykh*), typically branching from his original *tariqa*. Leadership is inherited by the *shaykh*'s primary disciple, producing a spiritual chain (*silsila*). To join a *tariqa* as *murid* (seeker) entails taking an oath from a living *shaykh*, who has likewise taken an oath from his *shaykh*; the *silsila* connects the novice to the (often eponymous) founder of the *tariqa*, and ultimately to the Prophet. One's *shaykh* is metaphorized as a spiritual father (*ab ruhi*), and total obedience and devotion is required. One may also maintain other (usually less formalized) spiritual connections to other *shaykhs* and saints. Close fraternal relations to Sufi

colleagues, especially in one's own *tariqa*, are also extremely important, as signified by designations such as *ahbab* (lovers) or *ikhwan* (brothers).<sup>9</sup> The collection of all Sufi *silsilas* thus constitutes a veritable spiritual genealogy, not only connecting all Sufis to the Prophet, but also to one another, in one spiritual family.

In Sufism, frequent Qur'anic injunctions to remember God (e.g. Qur'an VII:205) are semantically and ritually expanded. While Sufis view the conventional Islamic devotions prescribed by the *shari'a*—obligatory prayer (*salah*), supplication (*du'a'*) fasting (*sawm*), pilgrimage (*hajj*, *'umra*), alms (*zakah*, *sadaqa*), Qur'anic recitation (*qira'a*), and religious study (*dars dini*)—as necessary forms of *dhikr*, they also add new ones: recitation of a special prayer (*hizb*) distinctive to each order, chanting of certain Names of God (*dhikr al-asma' al-husna*), and performance or audition of spiritual poetry (*inshad dini*). While certain acts of devotion may be performed individually, a spiritual guide is necessary for spiritual progress, and group devotions provide an important social and emotional basis for the spiritual life. The most prominent manifestations of Sufism's social aspect occur during corporate rituals, especially the weekly *hadras* (liturgical services) held by each *tariqa*, and the yearly saint festival (*mawlid*) centering on the saint's shrine.<sup>10</sup> At these times the melodic recitation of devotional or mystical poetry by religious singers (*munshidin*), often as an accompaniment to *dhikr*, is usually salient (Waugh; Frishkopf), and denizens of the spiritual world are most actively present. The name *hadra* (literally "presence") is a direct reference to the spatio-temporal realization of the spiritual-social network, including God, Prophet, angels, and saints, as well as those ritual participants engaged in face-to-face interaction.<sup>11</sup> Performance of supererogatory devotions promotes spiritual advancement (conceived as a progression of stages, or *maqamat*), and may also confer non-linear flashes of mystical experience (*hal*), especially during *dhikr* and *inshad*.

Sufism's strong spiritual-social network is a joint consequence of ritual practice, formal social organization, and doctrines which condition experience. Corporate rituals affectively energize the social structure of the *tariqa*, and one's relation to the saints. Close relations are understood to assist in spiritual advancement; isolation is dangerous, and may lead to madness (*jazb*). The process of drawing closer to God, via self-purification and love, theoretically culminates in *fana' al-nafs* (annihilation of the base ego), and *baqa'* (abiding in God). More modestly, the Sufi aims for some degree of self-dissolution in

the Prophet, saint, or his own *shaykh* (at least via total obedience), as these can carry him closer to God (Hoffman 200-04). *Fana'* can thus be viewed as a profoundly strong spiritual-social bond; love's end-point. Sufi ritual, social structure, and doctrine all provide a strong formal basis for spiritual-social networks to undermine or replace the notion of an individualized self.

Sufism is also characterized by a graded polyvalence of meaning, tantamount to spiritual elitism. Sufi symbols are semantically open, polysemic; interpretations are produced by their users, varying according to spiritual level (*maqam*), and state (*hal*), ranging from exoteric (*zahiri*) to esoteric (*batini*).<sup>12</sup> *Shari'a* is the necessary exoteric interpretation of *sunna* (Prophetic custom, preserved in *Hadith* reports) and Qur'an suitable for the masses ('*awamm*); with spiritual development one is ready to learn more esoteric meanings reserved for the elites (*khawass*). Whereas multiplicity of form decreases as one passes from the diversity of *shari'a* to the unity of *haqiqa*, multiplicity of meaning increases from the univocal exoteric interpretations of *shari'a* to the infinite semantic density, the singularity<sup>13</sup> of *haqiqa*.

### III. Sufi Poetry as Text

Poetry is Sufism's most important expressive medium, language's closest approach to the subtle fragrances, the ineffable flashes characterizing the Sufi's mystical life. Qur'an and *Hadith* constitute the textual core of the Sufi's spiritual life, as they do for other Muslims. But unlike the Divinely fixed Qur'an, and traditionally fixed *hadith*, religious poetry is fluid, freer to express (and arouse) personal mystical feeling.<sup>14</sup> But this process should not be mistaken for "communication." The social role of Sufi poetry is not to communicate, but to reawaken mystical knowledge and feeling, to cause the reader or listener to remember. Like other forms of *dhikr*, Sufi poetry points back to the archetypal moment of Divine awareness ("*alastu*").

Though Sufi poetry may be defined as poetry used in Sufi ritual contexts, or carrying specifically Sufi meanings, there is no sharp divide between Sufi poetry and Islamic poetry generally, just as there is no sharp divide between Sufism and "mainstream" Islam. Principal themes include descriptions of, and reflections upon, mystical experience; expressions of devotional love and praise for the Prophet and saints; love, glorification and supplication to God; and exhortations to the mystical seeker. Forms are both classical (primarily *qasida*, *tashtir*, and

*muwashshah*), and colloquial (*mawwal*, *sharh*, and *zajal*). In the Sufi orders, poetry is commonly collected into a published *diwan*, from which it is performed or memorized, thus entering oral form. *Munshidin* may memorize poetry from books, but also (orally) from each other. Thus Sufi poetry moves fluidly between the oral and the written.

#### IV. Theory of Poetic Production in Sufism

##### A. Modes of Poetic Production: Virtual, Real

By their very nature (and not simply via a critical move) the social practices of Sufi poetry cannot be sharply dichotomized as creative/passive (e.g. composing/reading), or trichotomized as creative/performative/passive (e.g. writing/singing/listening). Rather every participant in these practices shares to some degree in the process of poetic production, which always takes place within an active spiritual-social network. If everyone is (to some degree) an author, no one is autonomous.

Theoretically, a sharper division among poetic practices separates two socio-temporal modalities of production, differentiated according to the kind of time—virtual (psychic) time or real (clock) time—and the kind of spiritual-social network—virtual (spiritual-psychic) or real (face-to-face interactive)—in which poetic production takes place.

In the virtual mode (“composition”), poetic production is independent of clock time. The author is enmeshed in a spiritual-social network, which plays an active role in poetic production, though not necessarily via face-to-face interactions. In the real mode (“performance”) a sub-network of this spiritual-social network is realized in face-to-face interaction (usually in a ritual context), and coordinated by real clock time; poetic production is here necessarily improvisatory. While certain salient “performers” (e.g. *munshidin*) may dominate poetic production in performance, others also provide significant input, spiritually or via face-to-face feedback (auditory or kinetic) to the “performers.” Poetic production is consequently distributed over the network.

The “virtual” mode corresponds to what is most often labeled as the activity of the “poet” (though he can also become a performer), while the “real” mode includes activities of the performers and listeners, who, however, can also be regarded as authors insofar as their activities produce new textual permutations, or invest them with new meanings. Distinguishing these contexts only as “virtual” or “real” (rather than as compositional or performative) indicates that both are

contexts for the creative social production of poetry.

## B. Degree of Creativity

Before proceeding, I want to establish a technical basis for evaluating linguistic “degree of creativity.” The highest degree of creativity (in all the arts) is too often assumed to correspond to the virtual mode, a false idea deriving from the Romantic notion of the individualized artist-genius working alone; in fact his position is always at least virtually social, and the real mode may be more creative, or even less social—possibilities pertaining particularly to the world of Sufi poetry.

Poetic producers never create *ex nihilo* (a status which, in the Islamic sphere, is reserved for God), but rather produce “new” texts by permuting pre-existing recombinant elements. I presume that the process of poetic production (in both virtual and real modes) entails the assembly of a linguistic sequence by recombining a certain number of prefabricated linguistic elements of variable size (from phones, to phonemes, morphemes, lexemes, adjectival phrases, sentences, etc.), according to a certain grammar which (to some degree) restricts their possible permutations (ranging from an infinitely restrictive linear grammar in which each element determines the following one, to an infinitely unrestrictive non-linear grammar, in which any element can be succeeded by any other), thus producing a “work” of a particular length.<sup>15</sup> It is only the particular recombination, not the elements, which is ever new. I take the “creativity” of that work (not to be confused with its “quality”) as a measure of the number of choices the author made in constructing it, and thus equate “creativity” with “information” in the theoretical sense.<sup>16</sup> Equivalently, one may take the “creativity” of a work as the number of possible textual permutations (of equal length and average unit size) out of which the work in question was selected.

When the number of possible permutations (and hence number of authorial choices) is relatively small, the degree of creativity is relatively low, e.g. if a virtual-mode author (“poet”) creates a poem by recombining entire prefabricated lines; conversely when the number of possible works is relatively large, the number of authorial choices and hence degree of creativity is relatively high (e.g. if a real-mode author such as the *munshid* assembles a text improvisationally, by drawing on all the sonic and lexemic resources of a language, and permuting them in novel ways).

Using this approach, one observes that the difference in creativ-

ity between the avant-gardist (who breaks all the conventional “rules” of linguistic combination), the conventional author (who follows them), and the poetic compiler (who merely selects poems whole) is one of degree, not of kind.

## **V. The Practices and Processes of Sufi Poetry Production**

A general understanding of Sufi poetic texts, while necessary, is insufficient for an appreciation of Sufi poetry’s broader social and textual network properties. In order to understand the intertextual and interauthorial properties of Sufi poetry, it is necessary to understand Sufi poetry as a social practice: its motivations, uses, and processes.

### **A. Motives for the Production of Poetry**

Essentially the same motives apply to virtual and real modes of poetic production. Normatively, Sufi poetry is instrumental: Sufis produce Sufi poetry in order to achieve spiritual goals, not as an aesthetic end in itself. Prime goals are affective catharsis (for self), and spiritual guidance (for others). As a consequence of mystical practices, the Sufi may become supersaturated with spiritual feeling: painful longing for the absent beloved (*shawq*), or the ecstasy of closeness (*wajd*). When such feeling overflows the soul (*fayd*), it becomes impossible to bear, requiring release through cathartic expression. Poetry (written or performed) is but one means of such expression. A second goal pertains both to *tariqa-shaykh* and to *munshid*, each of whom wishes to trigger mystical feeling in others, in order to promote spiritual development among present followers and listeners, and attract new ones, while simultaneously validating the importance of his own network position.<sup>17</sup> This second goal is realized primarily in the real mode.

### **B. Poetic Production in the Virtual Mode**

In the virtual mode, the consistent producer of Sufi poetry is sometimes called “poet” (*sha‘ir*), although this active participle is not typically adopted as a primary status, but rather as a description of a persistent condition, in which poetry appears, uncontrollably, out of *hal*, not craft. As a response to occasional spiritual “overflow,” some mystics compose only a few lines, but Sufis may avoid using the word

“*sha‘ir*” even for prolific producers of such poetry, since the label implies poetry as creative vocation, whose artifice and aestheticism Sufism rejects. Further, in Sufism the act of poetic production is not individual, but always takes place in the context of a strongly connected spiritual-social network.

This “poet” is first of all a Sufi, someone’s disciple; often he is the *shaykh* of a *tariqa*, a spiritual guide for others. Inspirational poetry is itself a sign of a distinguished and well-connected position within the network. Most Sufi poets (even if unconnected to any *tariqa*) are consequently addressed as “*shaykh*.” Great poets (such as ‘Umar ibn al-Farid) are regarded as saints (Homerin) and addressed as “*Sidi*.” Their poetic productions serve as a miraculous sign of sainthood (*karama*). Conversely, followers attribute poetry to nearly all great saints and *shaykhs*, especially the “poles” (*aqtab*) who anchor the major *tariqa* lines.

Virtual mode poetic production is collaborative, a product of the network, not the individual. The author is inspired by his strongest network connections (especially God, Prophet, saints, *shaykhs*). Or, he may be inspired by his own overflowing feeling for the beloved(s) (also situated within that network), especially as experienced in *hadra* (which realizes the network by assembling social and spiritual beings, and via recited poetry remembering them). The spiritual influence of a saint irradiates large sections of the spiritual-social network, inspiring spiritual descendents (sometimes in dreams) to produce poetry (sometimes in the name of the saint). Within this field unattributed poetry, floating free, will tend to be “pulled in,” accruing to the saint. Sufi *shaykhs* may compose pedagogical poetry (often in the form of direct exhortation) for the spiritual edification of their disciples, implying the collaboration of the latter.<sup>18</sup> Because it expresses the conditions of its production, most Sufi poetry represents portions of the spiritual-social network (e.g. via praise, supplication, or conversations—*munajat*—with its members). Conversely, the process of spiritual collaboration itself tends to reinforce the network.

Virtual mode composition is frequently oral and performative, spontaneous linguistic expressions of non-linear mystical flashes, often captured on paper by disciples. Subsequently the poet, or someone else, may polish and organize these recombinant fragments, to become a linearized text concealing its non-linear origins. Most Sufi poetry draws on a common stock of symbols, images, descriptors, phrases, and themes, constantly recycled: the recombinant unit size is



relatively large, as compared to the modern secular poetic tradition, and hence linguistic creativity is technically low. Some *tariqa-shaykhs* may compose a *diwan* out of preexisting poems, and nevertheless be granted a kind of authorship status. This technique of reuse is formalized in *tashtir* (and its variants, *tarbi'*, *takhmis*), and *nahj*. Such textual linkages both imply and reinforce corresponding spiritual-social ones. Hence textual reuse, far from plagiarism, is actually legitimizing, for asserting key spiritual-social connections.

For the virtual mode poet, metaphors of collage and assembly are as apt as for the performer; simultaneously diminishing the individualization of the author-function, and undermining the autonomy of the text. Despite repetition, an author-function persists, since for Sufis the assignment of authorship is not determined by originality, but rather by the perception of sincere expression of true feeling, resulting from connections to the spiritual-social network. On the other hand, such a notion of text and authorship is necessarily networked, not individualized. Indeed, an “authorship paradox” arises, since the stronger the poetic producer’s inspiration via the spiritual-social network, the greater his Sufi-authorial status, but also the more the author-function is distributed across that network. Consequently, it may happen that the poem is not attributed to its immediate producer at all.

### C. Poetic Production in the Real Mode

The *munshid* produces poetry in the real mode, performing poetry in the *hadra*, usually to accompany *dhikr*, either for the semi-private *tariqa hadra*, or (often professionally) in the extra-*tariqa* public *hadra* (typically with musical accompaniment). Typically the *munshid* has taken the Sufi oath in at least one *tariqa*; he may occasionally be the *shaykh* of the *tariqa* for which he performs. Like the poet, the *munshid*’s individual authorial status is overshadowed by his spiritual-social status; the improvising *munshid* is therefore considered a *shaykh* rather than a *sha'ir*.<sup>19</sup> Likewise, the *munshid* (and other participants in *hadra*) are enmeshed in the Sufi spiritual-social network, rendered palpable by both textual and social aspects of *hadra* performance. The spiritual-social network is strongly realized in *hadra*, which is considered a ritual invocation, a call for the presence (“*hadra*”) of metaphysical agents, explicitly so via frequent speech acts of naming, calling, praise, and supplications embedded in poetry as well as other portions of the liturgy.<sup>20</sup> The performance of a saint’s poetry is likewise felt to

intensify his presence in *hadra*.<sup>21</sup>

But the *munshid* is also enmeshed in a more ephemeral face-to-face network constituted by participants in *hadra* performance (*shaykhs*, singers, musicians, performers of *dhikr*, other listeners). Participants move together in a single cybernetic system, interacting in real time, each providing feedback to the others. They express their states through various kinds of verbal or gestural feedback (especially the *dhikr* leader, or *mustaftih*) to the *munshid*, and to each other. While sometimes controlled by a *shaykh*, frequently the *munshid* is relatively free to determine his own text. However he does so in response to feedback signals, selecting poetry to express not only his own spiritual state, but also the states of *hadra* participants. In this way, emotion builds within the cybernetic system, ultimately producing a systemic state known as *nashwa ruhiyya* (spiritual rapture) or *tarab* (a more secular term; see Frishkopf, “*Tarab*”).

The *munshid* effectively produces a new text, by applying collage operations to his poetic repertoire, including juxtaposing, editing, and repeating; embedding a fragment of one poem in another; and occasionally improvising new phrases. Typically, that text is even more strongly intertextual than in virtual mode, since the recombinant units are usually larger; linguistic creativity is hence technically lower. But, in considering *munshid* as author, this fact must be balanced against others. As for the poet, attributions of authorship have more to do with the perception that true mystical feeling is sincerely expressed, than with the technical creativity of the text produced. Like the “poet” in *hal*, the *munshid* wants to express non-linear feeling. But whereas the poet’s text must be linearized in its final printed product, the *munshid*, by continually re-permuting textual material, can demonstrate that non-linearity as performance. The *munshid* can also deploy expressive sonic variables (pitch, timbre, loudness) unavailable to the virtual mode “poet.” Thus despite lower linguistic creativity (in the technical sense), the *munshid* is nevertheless recognized as a poetic producer with legitimate claims to authorship.

Yet this author position is far from autonomous, a fact which is obvious given that the *munshid*’s repertoire admittedly comprises the poetry of others. *Hadra* performance activates the spiritual-social network, as noted above. Within that context, the intertextual network is strongly present due to the large recombinant unit size, and furthermore foregrounded by non-linearity in the performance process itself. This fact further activates portions of the spiritual-social network (and

hence interauthor) perceived as contributing to the emerging text. This situation is explicitly recognized by Sufis, for instance when they state that the *munshid*'s performance is most powerful when he is spiritually connected to the "poets" whose words he sings. The same "authorship paradox" applies here: the *munshid*'s true mystical feeling can only arise via inspiration by the spiritual-social network of which he is a part. Thus the more his text is genuinely inspired, the more the author-function must be distributed over the spiritual-social network.

The operation of a real-time cybernetic system including ritual participants means that the author-function is likewise spread over the face-to-face interacting social group. While centered on the *munshid* (as "voice"), in actuality poetic production is distributed across the entire spiritual-social network (including face-to-face components) activated during performance, since all agents potentially enter into its cybernetic system. In some cases, *shaykh* or *mustafih* may determine poetic production more than *munshid*. While some participants may exert a minimal effect on the text itself, all participants assume an active author role at least by constructing meaning for that text. Just as poetry serves as a "cathartic" device for the "poet" and *munshid*, so does it for the listener, who attaches his own feeling to heard poetry, conforming one to the other. To listen is necessarily a creative act of authorship, for each listener brings a different spiritual state and station to the *hadra*, a source of meanings which must be creatively assembled in performance.

## VI. Of Semiotics and Theology

What is the meaning of Sufi poetry? And how can a derivative poetry of repetition be so rich in meaning? It was one of Barthes' claims that "to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God," to liberate an "anti-theological activity" ("The Death of the Author" 147). But what sort of God halts meaning? I claim that Barthes' statement is true only insofar as a limited being (the author, historically and psychologically bounded) is apotheosized as the source of all meaning for a particular text (a modernist position). But the semantically infinite singularity of *haqiqa* does not halt meaning for the Sufi, though neither does it refuse God. Thus each Sufi can draw an infinity of meanings from a single poem, line, word—all springing from the single well of *haqiqa*. As one Sufi put the matter, "in Sufi poetry, every word is a world of meaning." To experience that world is, in some sense, a greater creative act than to produce the text signifying it.

## A. The Nature of Meaning in Sufism

Meaning in Sufism is paradoxical: simultaneously unitary (as representing the objective spiritual unity of *haqiqa*), and infinitely variable (as that unity is subjectively experienced). For Muslims, all meaning is ultimately grounded in God. But here the Sufi listener or reader differs from the literalist, who claims a single clear meaning for sacred texts, rejecting all others as *kufr* (unbelief). The literalist is a semantic egalitarian: one meaning for all. The Sufi is by contrast a semantic elitist, and a relativist: subjective meaning depends upon one's spiritual state (*hal*) and station (*maqam*) as well as one's particular position within the spiritual-social network, because a property of the sacred text is to be able to speak to everyone, in all times and places, all at once. Anything less would be a limitation on *haqiqa*. Here, God does not halt meaning.

In Egypt, Sufis say that Sufi poetry is always *bikr* (novel), unfathomable, producing new meanings at every reading. What distinguishes such texts is that they result from *hal*, a condition of ego-absence (*ghayb*), during which *haqiqa* becomes partially manifest to the poetic producer. Since *haqiqa* is infinitely meaningful, the text (even as a limited encoding) becomes so as well.

Sufis are fond of quoting the expression "the meaning is in the *batin* (interior) of the poet." The author possesses a meaning which can never be known by anyone else; therefore he is not the source of anyone else's meaning. Rather it is incumbent upon each person to construct meaning for himself, using God-given faculties of spiritual perception (*shafafiyya*) to view (however incompletely) *haqiqa* as reflected in the text. In the final analysis, the "reader" ("listener") produces Sufi poetry by assigning meaning to what can now be viewed as the ultimate "writerly" text (to use Barthes' phrase).

## B. Poetry of Remembrance, Intertext, and Interauthor

If the range of the signified of Sufi poetry is infinite, the range of the signifier is relatively limited, as compared to contemporary secular poetry: the recombinant unit size is relatively large, as textual chunks (words, phrases, lines, poems) are continually repeated whole (in both the virtual and real modes). This property strengthens both the intertextual relations among texts, and the interauthorial relations between authors (whether poets, *munshidin*, or listeners).

To oversimplify a tendency: if the function of secular poetry is to *communicate* (the poet's affects, perceptions, assertions), that of Sufi poetry is only to *remind* of what is already known, using a limited symbolic code designed for that purpose. Sufi poetry does not *transmit* meaning, but rather *activates* it. Repetitiousness does not impoverish meaning, because the source of meaning is inexhaustible. Thus the meanings of Sufi poetry are perceiver-centered, idiosyncratic and diverse, though its textual resources are limited.

## VII. Some Remarks on Creativity, Originality, Evaluation, and Attribution

*Creativity.* A few unrepresentative exceptions aside (e.g. those Sufi poets—such as Ibn al-Farid—recognized as ‘great’ on aesthetic grounds), Sufi poetry *qua* signifier is essentially uncreative; this fact (stemming from its *dhikr* function) has often rendered it unpalatable to secular literary critics. The production of Sufi poetry consists primarily in permuting prefabricated textual blocks (inherited from the Sufi tradition), while assigning them diverse meanings from *haqiqa*. Given this fact, differences between various productive roles diminish in significance. The *munshid* (who “merely” creates a collage of existing works) may be as creative as the virtual mode “poet” (who actually “composes” a text); even the listener may be as creative as the others. All three embody the literal meaning of *sha‘ir* (poet): one who knows or feels. None is truly a creator, since all creation is God’s.

*Originality.* In the secular poetic tradition, the meaning of original as “innovative” implies an author-origin. In this sense, the Sufi “poet,” as much as *munshid* or listener, cannot be original. For the Sufi, the only origin is God; his originality consists of nothing more than a connection to that Origin. This Sufi concept of originality implies a negation of the individualized autonomous author-self (culminating in *fana*). At the same time, the best Sufi authors draw near to each other, even merging, textually and authorially, due both to their joint proximity to a common Origin, and to their influence on each other, via the spiritual-social network linking them together. Radical innovation implies the individualization and autonomy of the author, and consequently the disconnection of spiritual-social relations that would bind that author into a larger whole, to *haqiqa*. But in Sufism all true meaning flows from *haqiqa*, through the spiritual-social network, from which no true Sufi wishes to be cut off.<sup>22</sup>

*Evaluation.* Sufis evaluate Sufi poetry (written or performed) as a means of *dhikr*: according to the degree to which it is perceived to sincerely encode a true mystical experience, and hence according to its power to re-awaken similar feelings in the listener. Technical perfection and creativity (so important to secular poetry and song) are secondary considerations. Western critics often accuse Arabic literature (including Sufi poetry) of having been uninspired and derivative, hence inferior, during the period of its supposed “decline” (roughly, fourteenth-nineteenth centuries).<sup>23</sup> But (at least in regards to Sufi poetry) such a judgment errs by imposing upon it a wholly foreign system of evaluation, without recognizing either the ritual function of Sufi poetry as *dhikr*, or the independence of inspiration from novelty.

Indeed, it is no coincidence that this period corresponds approximately to that in which the Sufi social system crystallized and matured. For the Sufi, this period of “decline” represented rather the perfection of his technical language, the optimization of its ritual efficiency, and the formation of a strong spiritual-social network, expressed and maintained in part by textual repetitions. As Sufism became systematized through the agency of the orders, it was natural that the need for innovation in Sufi language should decrease as long as a conventional phrase could effectively “awaken” meanings. Once an effective language for evoking mystical feeling had been invented and was widely understood, there was no reason to reinvent it, and good reason to repeat it. Because quality judgments rest on neither creativity nor originality, the author function can exist without thereby suppressing either interauthor or intertext.

*Attribution.* The foregoing discussion indicates why the criterion for attribution in Sufi poetry is not “original creation,” but rather “the sincere encoding of true mystical experience” (something which Sufis claim, with *shafafiyya*, to be able to judge); such a non-objective criterion inevitably produces ambiguities, paradoxes of attribution (as mentioned at the outset of this article). But these paradoxes merely reflect Sufi poetry’s essentially interauthorial and intertextual nature. Certain parallels to a Borges short story, influential in postmodern discussions, emerge. In his “Pierre Menard, Author of *Don Quixote*,” Borges suggests that a writer copying a text verbatim might nevertheless receive attributional credit, so long as he enables that text to be endowed with new meaning. For the Sufi that new meaning consists in the fact that a particular individual (“author,” whether poet, *munshid*, or listener) has truly experienced a repeated verbal sequence. True mystical experi-

ence, depending on spiritual-social position, *maqam*, and *hal*, is always unique, hence “new.” To be able to “truly experience,” such that words correspond to inner state, is to receive recognition of a kind of authorship. At the same time the complexities of multiple attributions for the same or similar texts means that the author’s position becomes blurred, open to participation in a broader spiritual-social network.

### **VIII. Summary: The Interauthorality of Sufi Poetry**

We have arrived at the following. The position of “Sufi author” defines a relatively homogeneous field that includes *all* Sufis. Various kinds of author (“poet,” *munshid*, listener) differ in modality (virtual, real), social role, and degree of creativity, but their practices (collaboratively producing a text whose meanings can express an inner state) are functionally similar. Thus there is here no “divorce between producers and users of a text” (Barthes, *S/Z* 4).

A Sufi author exists, but never works in isolation. Rather, he contributes towards the production of poetry within a spiritual-social network, a non-linear collectivity I term (by analogy to intertext) the interauthor. Within this interauthor, the individual author is inextricably connected, neither dead, nor autonomous.

#### **A. Partial Individualization of the Poetic Producer**

This Sufi author is at least partially individualized, in the sense that he is recognizable as such. First of all, it is clear that “folkloric” anonymity is not the rule. Barthes’ “ethnographic society” model, containing only performers of traditional texts, does not apply. In Egypt, for instance, many Sufi “poets” are well-known: Ibn al-Farid, Ibn ‘Arabi, al-Hallaj, al-Shushtari, al-Bur‘i. The *munshid* too is far from anonymous; the public *hadra munshid* typically produces commercial cassette tapes, featuring his own name and photo, and implying (by omitting mention of the “poets” used) an authorial status.<sup>24</sup> Certain listeners too achieve “authorial” status, standing out in a crowd via special dress, movements, and cries, all of which contribute to the production of poetry.

#### **B. The Deautonomization of the Poetic Producer**

But the partially individualized author is a permeable, weakly bounded agent, far from the “Author-god” described by Barthes. The

existence of the poetic producer as author cannot be denied. He is not dead. But a variety of forces serve to reduce his autonomy, and increase his dependence on others. These forces include: Sufi doctrine, the status of poetry and poets, the processes of poetic production, and the nature of Sufi meaning and language.

## 1. Sufi Doctrine

Generally, Sufi doctrines render the individual more open to networked interactions, inhibiting (in particular) an autonomous author position.

In Sufism, humility before God is a precondition to spiritual progress, since it is the ego's self-pride (in effect a minor form of *shirk*, "association" with God) which blocks true remembrance of origin as spirit; selflessness reaches its limit in *fana*'. Denial of the self naturally limits the author position; the true Sufi remains anonymous, attributes his work to others, posits inspiration from others, or (at least) denies that his poetic production indexes autonomous greatness. For Sufis, spiritual greatness can only mean connection. The "poet" or *munshid* senses that the best words speak through him, rather than come from him. This possibility is validated by the Sufi conception of an interconnected spiritual world.

For each Sufi, doctrine supplies a strong spiritual-social network transcending time and space, whose links are strengthened by relations of respect, love, and even self-annihilation. Further, Sufism furnishes both possibility and necessity to make spiritual contact with others as a means of spiritual progress. All this leads to the weakening of individual-self boundaries, and provides a foundation for the interauthorial network. The "poet" or *munshid*'s textual imitation of his *shaykh* or saint further erodes the authorial independence, constituting a declaration of spiritual fealty, a kind of praise, and a humble request for spiritual guidance. Textual "derivativeness," and posture of deference to the earlier poet, also serve to minimize poetic ego. Instead of the individualization of authorship (leading, in the extreme, to an apotheosis), such a value system facilitates an opposed process of author absorbed into a spiritual-social network.

## 2. Status of Poetry and Poets

Ideally Sufi poetry is a spiritual means, not an end in itself. Sufis consider the Sufi "poet" as a Sufi (*shaykh*, saint) who, inspired by his



spiritual-social network, happened to convert mystical experience into poetry. The attribute of poet (*sha'ir*) is secondary to attributes indicating spiritual status, which always locate the poetic producer within the Sufi spiritual-social network, rather than as independent creator-author. Hence the “poet” is not a well-bounded autonomous social position. These facts dovetail with Islam’s general suspicion about poets and poetry (as based partly in Qur’an, e.g. XXVI:224-26), which likewise discourages the assumption of the “poet” status.

### 3. The Processes of Poetic Production

The processes of poetic production are intrinsically collaborative, rendering the author definable more as a position of emphasis than as an independent entity. Both modes of poetic production (virtual and real) depend on a mystical experience in which the boundaries of self are (partly or completely) annihilated, enabling profound connections to others in the spiritual-social network during the creative process. The flexible process of attribution (discussed above) also tends to weaken the autonomy of the author position, opening him up to social connection: poetry is constantly reattributed to those who utter it sincerely.

More practical processual factors also tend to erase the author’s independence. Virtual mode poetry, jotted quickly following mystical experience, often enters into circulation within the Sufi community stripped of explicit attribution. Occasionally it is published for local use by Sufis, usually within the *tariqa*, where its attribution may be suppressed, or assimilated to the greater saint perceived as supplying its inspiration. Sufi poetry moves back and forth between oral and written forms, shedding and acquiring various authorial attributions with ease. Never is it circulated within the global capitalist system of secular literary production and consumption, which functions (for a variety of reasons, all beyond the scope of this article) to produce a strongly individualized and autonomous author-function (the genius “Author-god”). *Inshad* performance likewise has the effect of erasing the virtual-mode author’s name, and breaking down the integrity of his work through collaging techniques. Yet the *munshidin*, constantly recycling each other’s poetry, are not perceived as autonomous authors either.

In these processes, not only is a particular poetic utterance detached from a producer; equally the very notion of individualized authorship is eroded.

#### 4. Poetic Meaning and Language

All Sufi poetry is a form of remembrance of the beloved (fellow Sufi, *shaykh*, saint, Prophet, God), as located within a broad spiritual-social network; every beloved points to that network, and ultimately towards the one reality of *haqiqa*, source of all truth and all meaning. Texts expressing remembrance thus links authors together, positioning them within the common social space of Sufism. The closed position of autonomous author is impossible, because even though meaning is infinitely variegated, the author cannot create a meaning that does not connect him to others.

The language of Sufism is limited, over the centuries having been honed to an extremely economical and effective tool for encoding, expressing, and promoting remembrance. To deviate from that language is not spiritually efficacious. Thus technical creativity is low; the textual space within which Sufi authors might differentiate themselves is extremely confined. Furthermore, to deliberately imitate another's language is also to establish a spiritual relation with him, to praise him, and thus accrue spiritual benefits. Authors ("poets," *munshidin*), meanings, and texts thus draw closely together. Consequently, the author does not speak for himself only. Rather it is the Sufi social and spiritual reality that speaks through him—the equivalent (on the emic side) of Barthes' "language speaking" (on the etic side).

#### C. The Formation of the Interauthor

This permeable, weakly bounded author enables a relatively homogeneous field of poetic producers ("poets," *munshidin*, listeners) operating in the context of a strong spiritual-social network (unlimited by time, space, or death) and a set of regular corporate ritual practices, to interconnect, thus forming the interauthor. The author's weakly bounded self facilitates his absorption into a wider network of social relations, an interauthor over which all authorship is now distributed.

That interauthor is reinforced by flows induced by poetic practice itself. Authors freely recycle each other's texts, overtly (the poet's *tashtir*; the *munshid*'s collage), or more subtly (borrowing, imitating), thereby establishing the intertext, while reinforcing social connections, especially when those texts are performed in *hadra*, where authors participate in a cybernetic system, communicating via face-to-face interaction. Inspiration (*ilham*) flows

through the network, particularly from God, to the Prophet, and the saints. Flows of text, face-to-face communications, and inspiration all reinforce interauthorial links.

Interconnected by bonds of respect, love, and occasionally annihilation, authors produce poetry, whose attribution is consequently distributed over the network. As a consequence everyone is connected, and no author (poet, performer, listener) stands alone. The greater the Sufi author, the stronger his connections, and the less autonomous he becomes.

#### **D. Interauthor and Intertext: Emic and Etic**

Every poetic practice of Sufism is collaborative, involving some portion of a densely connected interauthor, a spiritual-social network itself reinforced by poetic practices, whose by-product is an intertext. Conversely, every poetic product is embedded in the densely connected intertext, a symbolic network sustained by the interauthor, whose linkages are defined by the perpetual permutation of repeated textual elements. These two networks (interauthor, intertext) thus appear as dual aspects of one phenomenon. What the Sufi sees from his perspective as an interauthor the literary critic views from his perspective as intertext.

Problems of literary attribution in Sufism are thus revealed as illusory, artifacts resulting from the attempt to force a modernist concept of individualized authorship upon the strongly connected Sufi interauthor. The reason why *Shaykh* Muhammad ‘Uthman al-Burhani can continue to speak (through his close disciples) after his own death is now clear. The Sufi author is not dead, but rather revealed as an inextricable component within a broader non-linear network of criss-crossing social relations, the interauthor. Likewise, the text is not dead, but rather revealed as an inextricable component within a broader non-linear network of criss-crossing symbolic relations, the intertext.

From a philosophical perspective, literary creation is perhaps always interauthorial, always intertextual. From a critical perspective, perhaps it can always be treated as such. However, considered in their social and textual diversity, different cultures—and different literary discourses within each culture—differ in the degree to which they manifest these qualities empirically. In the case of Arabic Sufi poetry, such “postmodern” features are starkly revealed as such.

## Notes

- \* The author gratefully acknowledges research support received from the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, the Social Science Research Council, UCLA, the American Research Center in Egypt, and the Fulbright Commission of Egypt.
- <sup>1</sup> For a detailed treatment of its globalization see Frishkopf's "Changing Modalities," parts 1-2.
- <sup>2</sup> Barthes, Foucault, and Kristeva are more properly termed "post-structuralist" than "postmodern" theorists; however, many of their ideas contributed crucially to postmodern theory, and consequently to the concept of postmodernism.
- <sup>3</sup> By this term I do not mean to exclude orality (nearly always present to some degree), though I disregard "folk" poetry existing solely in the oral tradition.
- <sup>4</sup> Egyptian Sufis use the honorific title *shaykh* for several religious types, pre-eminently the spiritual guide (*murshid*), religious scholar or teacher (*'alim*), preacher (*khatib*), Qur'an reciter (*qari'*), and religious singer (*munshid*). The titles *sidi* (*sayyidi*) or *imam*, often used for saints, connote an even higher degree of respect.
- <sup>5</sup> But one notes that in such an innovation Mallarmé (ironically) prepared his own individualization, not least because (responding to his novelty) Barthes enshrined him in an influential essay. This example neatly illustrates the independence of social and textual deaths.
- <sup>6</sup> My extensive use of the concept of a non-linear network of social or textual relations represents a loose metaphorical application of the theory of a branch of sociology, social network theory (see Wasserman and Faust). At the core of the network concept is an abstract and broadly applicable mathematical structure called a graph, comprising a set of nodes (or vertices) interconnected by links (or arcs). For an introductory treatment, see Wilson.
- <sup>7</sup> For a general overview of Sufism, see Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*; for a history of the orders see Trimmingham. For Sufism in contemporary Egypt, see Gilsenan, Waugh, Luizard, Hoffman, and Johansen.
- <sup>8</sup> Some Sufis even describe the relational closeness promoted by spiritual love as *tawhid* (unification), a word ordinarily reserved for the affirmation of God's oneness (Hoffman 204).
- <sup>9</sup> Generally, I use male pronouns to refer to any person. However it should be understood that the vast majority of saints, *shaykhs*, Sufi poets, *munshidin*, and *muridin* are male. Nevertheless, important female Sufis belong

to all of these categories, e.g. *Sittina Sayyida Zaynab* (saint); *hagga Zakiiyya* (who led a Sufi group); Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya (poet); *Shaykha Sabah* (*munshida*); and active female members of certain Sufi orders (e.g. the *Jazuliyya*). Furthermore, vast numbers of women participate in Sufism informally, without joining a *tariqa*.

- <sup>10</sup> Though the word *mawlid* literally means "birthday," these festivals often last several days, culminating on the night associated with the saint's death.
- <sup>11</sup> For Sufis, *dhikr* produces an awareness of God's omnipresence and summons Prophet, saints, and angels. Thus a sound *hadith* states that angels attend corporate *dhikr* (*Sahih Muslim* IV: 1414, book 33, no. 6505).
- <sup>12</sup> Thus the great theologian Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111), foreshadowing the post-structuralist attitude, wrote: "it is not incumbent on the hearer that he should consider what the poet intended in his words. For every saying has different aspects, and every man of understanding has his own fortune" (al-Ghazali 707).
- <sup>13</sup> I metaphorically adopt the meaning of this word as used in cosmology: a point of infinite density.
- <sup>14</sup> Thus Abu Hamid al-Ghazali advised: "Then know that singing is more powerful than Qur'an in arousing to ecstasy" (al-Ghazali 738-45); his justification for this statement rests in part on the Qur'an's fixity.
- <sup>15</sup> All this is true for poetry in general, but *a fortiori* for Sufi poetry.
- <sup>16</sup> A readable summary of information theory can be found in Cherry.
- <sup>17</sup> Reputation is especially important for the more expansionist *tariqa*, as well as for the professional *munshid* operating outside the ritual framework of any single *tariqa*. If the *munshid* is connected to a *tariqa*, then his poetic production directly supports his *shaykh*'s spiritual goals.
- <sup>18</sup> Among the most prolific *shaykhs* of this type was *Shaykh* Salih al-Ja'fari (founder of the *Ja'fariyya tariqa*), but many other examples could be cited.
- <sup>19</sup> In the secular context, improvisatory epic singers are called poets; see Reynolds.
- <sup>20</sup> For a detailed textual analysis of three Sufi liturgies along these lines, see Frishkopf, "Sufism, Ritual and Modernity in Egypt."
- <sup>21</sup> Texts performed in *hadra* not only invoke the spiritual-social network, but also imbue it with affect, especially as generated by real social interactions, and the musical dimensions of *inshad*. The ways in which poetic production supports the spiritual-social network by realizing emotional connections are treated more fully in Frishkopf's "Tarab."

- <sup>22</sup> The negative valence attached to “innovation” extends through Islam more generally, where it is labeled *bid‘a* (heresy), whereas the morphologically related term *ibda‘* is positive in the secular sphere.
- <sup>23</sup> Thus Schimmel writes that “true inspiration seems to be lacking in most of the post-thirteenth-century mystical poetry” (Schimmel, *As Through a Veil* 46); Hodgson notes that the Arabs were culturally depressed, and that the “Arabic language had languished except for narrow theological purposes” during the period 1600-1800 (Hodgson 272); Goldziher sweepingly writes off the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries as “the period of decadence” in Arabic literature generally (Goldziher 141-42); likewise, Charles Pellat “confidently” applies the term “decadent” to Arabic literature from 1258 until the nineteenth-century renaissance (Pellat 150-51). Though these critics might be right to point to the lack of innovation in this period, it is less correct to claim lack of inspiration or culture, and unfair to unthinkingly apply pejoratives such as “languish,” or, *a fortiori*, “decadent.”
- <sup>24</sup> Many *munshidin*, most notably *Shaykh* Yasin and *Shaykh* al-Tuni (who have even traveled to perform in European music festivals), have become very famous (see Waugh; Frishkopf, “*Inshad Dini*”).

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