Sufism and Deconstruction

A comparative study of Derrida and Ibn 'Arabi

Ian Almond

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

Sufism and Deconstruction

What possible relationship can there be between a contemporary French postmodern thinker and a twelfth-century Sufi? How closely can Sufi oppositions to rationality in medieval Islamic thought resemble the contemporary, deconstructive resistance to reason and the Enlightenment project? How far is the medieval debate in Islamic tradition, concerning the extent to which we can talk truthfully and meaningfully about God, analogous to the postmodern debate of more recent times, concerning the extent to which we can talk truthfully and meaningfully about the world and the text?

This book provides a fascinating exploration of these questions by discussing a variety of common features in the vocabularies of two thinkers, Jacques Derrida and Ibn ʿArabi, situated almost eight centuries apart. These features include the opposition to systematizing representations of God/reality/the text; a re-emphasis on the radical unthinkability of God and the text; a common conception of rational thought as restrictive, commodifying and ultimately illusory – and a subsequent appraisal of confusion as leading to a higher state of knowledge; a positive belief in the infinite interpretability of the text; a suspicion of representation – and an awareness of its semantic futility, along with a common, 'welcoming' affirmation of openness and errancy towards God and the text.

This book will be essential reading for advanced students and academics of Religious Studies, Arabic and Islamic Studies and those interested in the work of Jacques Derrida and Ibn ʿArabi.

Ian Almond teaches English Literature at Bosphorus University, Istanbul, Turkey. He has published a wide variety of articles in a range of journals such as *ELH, Modern Fiction Studies, The Harvard Theological Review, German Life and Letters*, and *New Literary History*. This is his first book.

Routledge studies in religion

1 **Judaism and Collective Life**
Self and community in the religious kibbutz
Aryei Fishman

2 **Foucault, Christianity and Interfaith Dialogue**
Henrique Pinto

3 **Religious Conversion and Identity**
The semiotic analysis of texts
Massimo Leone

4 **Language, Desire, and Theology**
A genealogy of the will to speak
Noëlle Vahanian

5 **Metaphysics and Transcedence**
Arthur Gibson

6 **Sufism and Deconstruction**
A comparative study of Derrida and Ibn ʻArabi
Ian Almond

7 **Christianity, Tolerance and Pluralism**
Michael Jinkins

8 **Negative Theology and Modern French Philosophy**
Arthur Bradley

Sufism and Deconstruction

A comparative study of Derrida and Ibn ʻArabi

Ian Almond

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2004
by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005.

"To purchase your own copy of this or any of Taylor & Francis or Routledge's collection of thousands of eBooks please go to www.eBookstore.tandf.co.uk."

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN 0-203-69450-3 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0-203-67049-3 (Adobe eReader Format)
ISBN 0–415–32043–7 (Print Edition)

Contents

List of transliterations

Arabic characters

ء	ʾ	ض	ḍ
ب	b	ط	ṭ
ت	t	ظ	ẓ
ث	*th*	ع	ʿ
ج	j	غ	*gh*
ح	ḥ	ف	f
خ	*kh*	ق	q
د	d	ك	k
ذ	*dh*	ل	l
ر	r	م	m
ز	z	ن	n
س	s	ه	h
ش	*sh*	و	w
ص	ṣ		

Acknowledgements

A debt of gratitude should be acknowledged to the English translators of Ibn ʿArabi, in particular Ralph Austin and William G. Chittick, who have made the work of the Great Shaykh known so much more quickly in the Western world. Although I have frequently referred to the Arabic in my treatment of many passages from Ibn ʿArabi, I am certainly indebted to both Austin and Chittick's translations of these texts.

Thanks also goes to State University of New York Press for permission to reprint extracts from William G. Chittick's *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-ʿArabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (1989) and to Paulist Press of New Jersey for permission to reprint extracts from Ralph Austin's *The Bezels of Wisdom* (1980), www.paulistpress.com.

I would also like to thank the research trust (Bogaziçi Üniversitesi Vakif) at Bosphorus University, Istanbul, Turkey for their financial assistance and generosity. A number of their grants and awards have made the economic burden of my research much easier. Parts of chapters 2 and 3 have already been published in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (Oxford University Press), vols. 70: 3 (2002) and 72: 1 (2004). Chapter 1 has appeared in *Philosophy East and West* 53: 1 (2003) – reprinted here courtesy of Hawai'i University Press.

Introduction

> At the time, one of them had claimed that "the existentialist of all time" had been Ibn ʿArabi who'd not only been imitated seven centuries later but also been robbed blind by the Western world…
>
> Orhan Pamuk, *The Black Book*[1]

Perhaps every history of ideas is nothing more than a careful documentation of clandestine theft. From Heraclitus and Augustine to Aquinas, precedents for existentialism are found almost daily, even though Pamuk's long and extraordinary novel, it should be said, finds little sympathy with this practice. Parodying the familiar territorial instinct which, in many critics, seeks to re-appropriate vast sections of modern culture and whole centuries of thought on behalf of a single cultural source (invariably the critic's own), Pamuk uses Ibn ʿArabi as an example of how certain Islamic/nationalist agendas in the 'East' (for desperate want of a better term) have tried to lay claims to the foundations of the West. The Shaykh's alleged influence on Dante's *Divina Commedia* – although Pamuk never mentions the scholar who first suggested this, Asin Palacios, by name – is cited as one example amongst many of such wishful hermeneutics.

'Robbed blind' or not, one thing is certain: Ibn ʿArabi is 'hot'. In the 150 years since the first of Ibn ʿArabi's works were printed in Europe,[2] the body of critical interest in a thinker previously unknown to the West has grown exponentially. With a thriving Society, a plethora of critical studies and a quarterly Journal, Ibn ʿArabi (or the *Shaykh al-akbar*, the greatest master, as he is known in the Muslim world) has become associated with (to name but a few) quantum mechanics, Taoism, St Thomas Aquinas, Swedenborg, New Age mysticism, Kant and Chaos theory. With two central chapters dedicated to him in

Routledge's recent *History of Islamic Philosophy*, it appears that Muhyiddin Ibn ʿArabi (1165–1240) is finally joining the handful of token 'Easterners' (Rumi, Averroes, Avicenna) known to non-experts in the West.

As often happens, this surge of popular Western attention in Ibn ʿArabi has also instigated a certain rearguard action amongst the more orthodox elements in Ibn ʿArabi scholarship. Thus a critic such as Mahmoud al-Ghorab can demonstrate, in twenty pages, how Ibn ʿArabi was neither a Shi'ite, nor a philosopher, nor an Isma'ili, nor an esotericist, nor a figure especially sympathetic to Jews and Christians, but rather a 'Muslim' and a 'Traditionalist (*ṣalafi*)'.[3] Even William Chittick, a towering figure in Ibn ʿArabi studies, appears wary of associating the Shaykh with modern theorists who 'claim that language determines all of reality'.[4] There is an understandable desire for context in all of this (Derrida's 'indispensable guardrail'),[5] even if establishing exactly what that context *is* – and whether Ibn ʿArabi is being read *in* or *out* of it – remains easier said than done.

It is certainly not the object of this book to claim that Ibn ʿArabi was the existentialist – or post-structuralist – of all time, as Pamuk jokes. Rather, we will be trying to understand Sufism and deconstruction, to abuse an analogy from Benjamin, as different fragments belonging to the same, long-shattered vase. In dealing with texts whose origins lie almost eight hundred years and many more kilometres apart, it is *not* the intention of this study to turn a thirteenth-century Sufi into a postmodern theorist, anymore than it is our desire to 'islamicize' Jacques Derrida or transform his writings into a form of Islamic mysticism (producing a 'Jacques of El-Biar', as John D. Caputo has already quipped).[6] Over the past fifteen years, scholars from comparative religion and theology departments around the world have been rediscovering in their own religious traditions various precedents for Derrida's deconstructive writings, a trend there is certainly every reason to encourage. Figures such as Pseudo-Dionysius, Meister Eckhart, Sankara, Lao-Tzu and Ayn al-Qudat Hamadani have all been credited with deconstructing the rigid logocentric assumptions within their own respective faiths, rescuing a more authentic spirituality from the legalistic metaphysics of their times.[7] Certainly one aim of this study is to show how a similar deconstructive process can be found in the writings of Ibn ʿArabi – a demonstration, however, which is far from turning the Great Shaykh into a medieval post-structuralist.

Hopefully, such comparisons will act as a point of departure for this study, and not as a destination in themselves. Rather than simply serving

up a postmodern version of the *Futuhat* and the *Fusus al-Hikam*, a number of more serious questions will be raised: what is the exact relationship between these two thinkers? How analogous can the vocabulary of a Sufi saint be to the work of a contemporary French theorist who, on his own admission, 'rightly pass(es) for an atheist'?[8] Do the metaphors, strategies and motifs of deconstruction change their meaning at all in the context of a comparison with Sufism? Can Ibn 'Arabi teach us how to read Derrida differently (and vice versa)?

Derrida's interest in Islam, it has to be said, has been slight.[9] Apart from a handful of remarks in *The Gift of Death* and some remarks on Algeria, comments on Islam and Islamic thought have been conspicuously absent in a writer who spent the early, formative years of his life in a Muslim country (Algeria). What Derrida *has* been interested in, however, is mysticism – or more precisely, the ways in which many commentators have either tried to re-describe Derrida as a mystic/negative theologian, or have re-proposed figures from the mystical tradition such as Eckhart and Pseudo-Dionysius as predecessors for deconstruction. Over the years, Derrida has spent a considerable amount of text objecting to both these counts – amongst which the most significant work appears to be his 1987 essay, 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials'. In 'Denials', Derrida takes issue with the 'Greek . . . and Christian paradigms' of negative theology and tries to show how, even though 'the onto-theological re-appropriation [of différance] always remains possible',[10] thinkers such as Pseudo-Dionysius and Eckhart are ultimately concerned with something very different – the preservation of a 'hyper-essentiality, a being beyond Being'.[11] Nevertheless, in restricting his choice to Greek and Christian versions of the apophatic, Derrida – who, far from being Greek or Christian, describes himself in *Circumfession* as a 'very Arab little Jew' – is aware of the various traditions he has *not* included in his face-to-face with negative theology:

> I thus decided *not to speak* of negativity or of apophatic movements in, for example, the Jewish or Islamic traditions. To leave this immense place empty, and above all that which can connect such a name of God with the name of the Place, to remain thus on the threshold – was this not the most consistent possible apophasis? Concerning that about which one cannot speak, isn't it best to remain silent?[12]

It is an interesting admission – or o-mission – and one which inspires a number of questions: what exactly is the difference between the

Greek/Christian negativity Derrida is willing to talk about and the Jewish/Islamic versions he feels he cannot? Is Derrida hinting at a certain deconstructive success in Jewish and Sufi mysticism, a success not to be confused with their Greek/Christian counterparts and all their Hellenized dependency on the logos and the *epekeina tes ousia*? Or, on the contrary, does Derrida believe the Jewish/Islamic traditions he is unfamiliar with to be just as metaphysically vulnerable as the Greek/Christian negativity he so confidently deconstructs?

Derrida's allusion to the famous last line of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* (*Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen*) remains unclear – why is the 'immense place' of Judaism and Islam so unspeakable? What gives it special treatment? The 'unspeakable' (*Unaussprechliches*) the young Wittgenstein referred to was a very un-Derridean unspeakability, a place outside the world of facts and things – it seems unlikely that Derrida would use such a transcendental space to locate a genuine alternative to the Greek/Christian paradigm. If the meaning of Derrida's 'cannot speak' lies in the fact that the author does not 'belong' to the traditions he has chosen to pass over, then the omission becomes even more curious: an Algerian Jew who feels 'at home' writing about a Syrian monk, a German Dominican and a Bavarian phenomenologist, but hesitant in offering comments upon his own (albeit abandoned) faith – or, for that matter, on an Islamic tradition (Ibn Masarrah, Ibn 'Arabi, Ibn Rushd) based to a large extent in Moorish Spain, in the very 'Christian Europe' Derrida has quite rightly critiqued elsewhere.

So what is the real reason for Derrida's decision 'not to speak' of Jewish and Islamic traditions, in his counter-deconstruction of negative theology (for this is what 'Denials' is, fundamentally)? Why does Derrida choose to stay in Christian Europe? Perhaps there are no complex reasons, but only straightforward ones: maybe Derrida simply doesn't know enough about the School of Gerona or the *Sefer ha-bahir* or Ibn 'Arabi or Mevlana or Suhrawardi. Perhaps he can't read Arabic or Aramaic. Perhaps he was too enticed by the possible genealogy of three figures such as Pseudo-Dionysius, Eckhart and Heidegger (each of whom has read his predecessor) to wander off into the strange deserts of Kabbalism or Persian esotericism. There may even be the possibility that Derrida, in a distinctly underconstructed moment of political correctness, was more attracted by the deconstruction of a European Christian tradition than a non-European Islamic/Judaic one; after all his talk of 'a Europe united in Christianity' and the 'logocentric impasse of European domesticity',[13] perhaps Derrida felt a more pressing need to

deconstruct Euro-Christian logocentrisms rather than their Islamic or Jewish equivalents.

This all sounds rather cynical, and perhaps unjustly so. Whatever the reasons for Derrida choosing *not* to talk about Islamic mysticism, one thing remains clear: Derrida provides the sort of explanation only a negative theologian would offer. His silence, we are told, is the most 'consistent possible apophasis' he can offer on the question of Islam. Which does suggest, unkindly or not, that 'Islamic traditions' belong to something far too radically *autre* for a French post-structuralist to write about. Islam becomes the unspeakable Other once again, an Other simply out of place in any critique of Christian negative theology.

We will try to show, in response to this, how the work of Ibn 'Arabi, far from being some obscure Sufi esotericism encrypted in mystical Eastern terminology, actually asks the same questions and moves in some similar directions as a number of familiar figures in the West. Ibn 'Arabi's mistrust of rational/metaphysical thought, his awareness of the creative power of language, his keen understanding of the reliance of identity upon difference, his sophisticated hermeneutics and re-evaluation of selfhood . . . all allow him similarities with key figures in the Western philosophical tradition. Which is why the invisible presence of Meister Eckhart (1260–1327) makes itself felt throughout this book as a phantom third figure in our comparative study of Derrida and Ibn 'Arabi. There are two reasons for this: not only is Eckhart the figure most often associated in the West with Ibn 'Arabi, he is also the figure most often associated by Derrida with negative theology.

Ibn 'Arabi has been called, by one critic, the 'Meister Eckhart of the Islamic tradition'.[14] A surprising number of Western studies and translations of Ibn 'Arabi mention Eckhart in passing (see in particular Dom Sylvester Houdehard), whilst scholars like Ralph Austin even speak of 'striking resemblances'. Even without having read a word of either thinker's works, it is not difficult to see why so many scholars seem to link them together. Two thinkers who both attempt a radical synthesis of the mystical with the philosophical – and who subsequently suffer persecution from the authorities as a result; who embark upon lengthy pilgrimages/journeys, lasting years (Seville to Damascus, Erfurt to Avignon); two figures who draw their own set of disciples after them (Suso, Tauler, Davud Al'Qayseri, al-Qashani) to comment upon their works and disseminate their ideas. Even the modern critical debates concerning the two are analogous – arguments over both thinkers' orthodoxy and their denominational status (Shi'ia or Sunni? Catholic or early precedent of the Reformation?), the same allegations of pantheism, the

same questioning of their clarity and coherence as thinkers (Denifle/Affifi), the same comparisons with Far Eastern thought-systems (Suzuki, Ueda/Izutsu)…if one were to try and search medieval Christendom for an Ibn ʿArabi, Eckhart would appear to be the nearest alternative.

Although I have, elsewhere, gone to some trouble to show how Eckhart and Ibn ʿArabi develop from identical points of departure into ultimately different vocabularies, this abundance of comparisons between the Shaykh and the *Meister* is good news for our own examination of Sufism and deconstruction.[15] Although Derrida has not written a word about Sufism, he has written a great deal about Meister Eckhart. As early as 1964, within the pages of *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, Derrida displays a revealing knowledge of 'Maître Eckhart"s vernacular sermons, whilst in 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials' he fleshes out the elementary points he had made concerning Eckhart twenty years earlier. Naturally, this does not mean that what Derrida writes about Eckhart is automatically valid for Ibn ʿArabi as well. What Derrida's fascination with Eckhart does do is give us an idea of where Ibn ʿArabi's points of similarity with Eckhart (mistrust of metaphysics and rationality, insistence on openness, the idea of 'God' as a construct, a hidden divinity in the soul, a radically generous hermeneutics…) would be similarly prone to a deconstructive reading. Eckhart cannot simply be used as a handy Christian synonym for Ibn ʿArabi; the Meister can serve, however, as a useful barometer to measure Derrida's own hostility and sympathy towards the wider ideas of mysticism and negative theology.

1 The shackles of reason

Sufi/deconstructive opposition to rational thought

He who claims to know that God is his Creator
While not being perplexed, this is the evidence of his ignorance.
Ibn ʿArabi, from the *Futuhat al-Makkiyya*[1]

If one were ambitious enough to compile a chronology of oppositions to Western rational thought – a chronology broad enough to include such figures as Al-Ghazali, Meister Eckhart, Rousseau, Blake, Nietzsche and Levinas – it would be interesting to see what kind of common denominators, if any, such a study would produce. Metaphors of wind, breath, spirit and freedom would probably abound; a common emphasis on 'openness' (*futuh*/*ouvert* – an important word for both our thinkers), an aversion towards rigidity and systems, an exaltation of wandering and a defamation of reason as somehow unnatural and restrictive . . . in other words, a rejection of reason which would be almost *aesthetically* motivated.

In this chapter, two such oppositions to rational and metaphysical thought are going to be examined alongside one another: Ibn ʿArabi's critique of *naẓar* or reflective thought, and Derrida's much wider re-examination of the entire theo-philosophical tradition of the West – the 'fundamental conceptual system produced by the Greco-European adventure', as Derrida puts it.[2]

The first thing the attentive reader notices about both Derrida and Ibn ʿArabi is the absolute singularity of their positions. Neither of the two seems willing to attach their writings to a particular school of thought (*madhahib*) or tradition; a curious solitude seems to pervade their work as they critique – sometimes subtly, sometimes openly – practically every thinker they encounter, be they Mu'tazilites or phenomenologists, Ash'arites or structural linguists, esotericists (*al-ḅatiniyya*) or existentialists. Probably the best example of this in Ibn ʿArabi occurs towards

the end of his treatise *Shajarat al-Kawn*, where the Shaykh envisages an omnitemporal Allah foretelling to Muhammad the numerous ways in which subsequent thinkers are going to misunderstand His Essence:

> O Muhammad, I created my creatures and summoned them to Myself, but they differed among themselves with regard to Me. One group among them claimed that Ezra was My Son (IX: 30), and that My hand is fettered (V: 64–69). These are the Jews. Another group claimed that the Messiah is My Son (IX: 30), that I had a wife and child. These are the Christians. Another group gave Me partners. They are the idolaters. Another group gave Me a form. They are the corporealists [the Mujassima]. Another group made Me limited. They are the Mushabbiha. Another group made Me non-existent. They are the Mu'attila. And there is another group who claim that I shall not be seen in the hereafter. They are the Mu'tazilites.[3]

Not surprisingly, passages such as these have earned Ibn ʿArabi the description 'arrogant' on more than one occasion. Not only does the Shaykh distance himself from his contemporaries, he puts his criticisms in the mouth of the Divine. Clearly, the author wants to avoid the two dangers present to any Islamic thinker – the possibility of *ta'til* or complete denudation of God's attributes on one hand, and *tashbih* or overdetermining God with positive attributes on the other. This difficult course which Ibn ʿArabi charters between the apophatic and the cataphatic will have to be followed carefully if we are to understand exactly why the Shaykh remains aloof from every form of reflective thought. The author's objections to the groups of thinkers mentioned in the previous passage – the Mu'tazilites, the Mujassima, the Mu'attila, the Mushabbiha, not to mention the Christians and Jews – are not merely partisan quibbles. Some common error lies at the heart of Ibn ʿArabi's criticisms, some perceived, fundamental mistake motivates Ibn ʿArabi's slightly generic dismissal of five centuries of Islamic thought.

Derrida, likewise, cultivates a certain distance between his own textual strategies and the thinkers he writes about, isolating moments of self-presence in their work which re-consign them to an uninterrupted tradition of logocentric metaphysics. Unlike Ibn ʿArabi, praise and critique in Derrida's writings are often subtly blended together, particularly in dealing with figures whose own aims seem to closely resemble those of Derrida's. Derrida's 1964 essay on Levinas, whilst never renouncing a tone of respect for the thoughts 'assembled and enriched in that great

book *Totality and Infinity*',[4] nevertheless portrays a Levinas 'resigned to betraying his own intentions in his philosophical discourse'.[5] In 'Structure, Sign and Play', Derrida's 'fascination' with Levi-Strauss' 'remarkable endeavour' doesn't stop him from finding the anthropologist guilty of 'an ethic of nostalgia for origins' (*d'éthique . . . de nostalgie de l'origine*).[6] Various figures in Christian negative theology (St Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius, Eckhart), held by many to be a medieval precedent for deconstruction, have received similar treatment from Derrida. On the one hand, Derrida has taken great pains to point out his admiration for negative theology – a 'corpus at once open and closed', and written in a language 'that does not cease testing the very limits of language'.[7] On the other hand negative theology, for all its radical questioning of metaphysics, still 'belongs . . . to the onto-theological promise it seems to break'.[8] It still remains ultimately logocentric in its purpose – to preserve the secret name of God.

In other words: just as Ibn ʿArabi believes that no thinker can provide 'a definition of the Real [*al-ḥaqq*]',[9] Derrida insists that no thinker can escape the history of metaphysics. Even the trinity of Nietzsche, Freud and Heidegger, credited with no less an achievement than 'the critique of the concepts of Being and truth . . . , of self-presence . . . , and the destruction of metaphysics', even these initiators of the dissolution of Western metaphysics remain 'trapped in a kind of circle' (*sont pris dans une sorte de cercle*).[10] Something remains, some kind of special knowledge or realization, which distinguishes Ibn ʿArabi and Derrida from their respective traditions; 'something' both thinkers feel they have understood, some kind of gnosis or situation, an awareness of a hidden complexity which enables them to re-contextualize their predecessors and contemporaries so confidently.

It is to the examination of this special 'something' that the rest of this chapter is dedicated: what exactly motivates Ibn ʿArabi and Derrida's comprehensive rejection of metaphysical thought? Tempted by brevity, one could sum up both thinkers' reasons in two easy responses: for Ibn ʿArabi, the philosophers and the theologians have yet to understand the simultaneous transcendence (*tanẓih*) and immanence (*tashbih*) of God.[11] For Derrida, Western metaphysics has never really problematized the word 'meaning', nor come to terms with the fact that signs do not lead us to 'meanings', but simply to other signs. Such responses, however, would be inadequate. Both Derrida and Ibn ʿArabi's distrust of metaphysics is far more complex, and will involve an analysis of terms such as *al-ḥaqq* and *écriture* if we are to understand their objections at all.

The emancipatory project in Derrida and Ibn ʻArabi: freeing *al-ḥaqq* and *l'écriture* from the shackles of reason

Both Ibn ʻArabi and Derrida, in their own contexts, speak of fetters and freedom. It is no exaggeration to say that a certain emancipatory spirit underlies both their projects – 'emancipatory' not in any social sense, but rather the emancipation of the unknowability of the Real/the uncontrollability of writing from the shackles of rational/metaphysical thought. Indeed, one could say the entire aim of *Of Grammatology* is the liberation of *écriture* from 'the rank of an instrument enslaved to full and originarily spoken language'.[12] Of course, these are not identical gestures: Derrida's liberation is a purely semantic one, whereas Ibn ʻArabi has a more spiritual aim in mind. Nevertheless, the re-affirmation of something vital, inconstant and elusive which defeats all our attempts to talk about it will play a common role in both thinkers' vocabularies, and evolve according to a common structure. A look at the contexts of both Ibn ʻArabi and Derrida's writings may help us to understand this better.

The people of reflection (ahl al-naẓar) *and the idolatry of the sign*

In the *Futuhat*, Ibn ʻArabi points out that the root meaning of the word for reason (*ʻaql*) comes from the same root as the word for 'fetter' (*ʻiqal*).[13] It is a convenient etymology for the Shaykh, whose main objection to the philosophers and theologians is that they narrow and limit a 'Divine Vastness' (*al-tawassuʻ al-ilahi*) that is without attribute or limit. 'Every group have believed something different about God,'[14] he writes, always exuding a very definite impatience with those who mistake their specific beliefs for knowledge of the Absolute. Ibn ʻArabi's impatience here would be with both affirmative and negative schools of theology, both with those who insist God can be predicated through His effects (the Ash'arites), and those who said nothing could ultimately be predicated of God, only what He is not (the Mu'tazilites). Not that the Mu'tazilites and Ash'arites were polar opposites – al-Ash'ari's master, after all, had been the head of the Basra Mu'tazilites (al-Juba'i).[15] A common willingness to use reason as a tool in their arguments also characterized both groups – even if for the Ash'arites reason was an instrument used to justify revelation, and not vice versa. Such debates concerning the unknowability of God would have formed a common background to Ibn ʻArabi's thought, producing such a proliferation of schools, quarrels and

doctrines that one can well sympathize with the Shaykh's words: 'I hear the grinding, but I don't see any flour'.[16] Thus, a believer in the eternal attributes of God such as al-Ash'ari (873–935) can declare:

> We confess that God is firmly seated on His Throne . . . We confess that God has two hands, without asking how . . . We confess that God has two eyes, without asking how . . . We confess that God has a face . . . We affirm hearing and sight, and do not deny that, as do the Mu'tazila, the Jahmiyya, and the Khawarij . . .[17]

Whereas other, more apophatically inclined groups such as the Mu'tazilites are capable of producing statements which, for Western readers, are reminiscent of Dionysius the Areopagite:

> He is no body, nor object, nor volume, nor form . . . Neither is he provided with parts, divisions, limbs, members . . . He cannot be described by any description which can be applied to creatures . . . He is a being, but not as other beings . . .[18]

In a sense these two extreme positions of *tashbih* (anthropomorphism) and *tanẓih* (incomparability) provided the parameters of a very wide debate. How much can we know about God? What is the relationship between the Divine Names (the Merciful, the Generous, the Knower, etc.) to the Divinity – are they simply analogies? Or do they reflect some positive eternal attributes? How much of our beliefs concerning God are actually valid? How can we ascertain this? If there really is, as the Quran says, 'nothing like Him' (42: 11), then how can we know anything about God at all?

Such questions, amongst others, had been debated over the centuries by the philosophers of the Kalam. As Abdel Haleem has shown, the term 'Kalam' is difficult to define with any accuracy.[19] Literally, it means 'speech', and denotes the general discussion of religious issues pertaining to the Quran – not just the extent of God's knowability, but also such questions as the problem of freewill and divine pre-determinism, the status of the Quran and the implementation of the *Shariah*. 'Kalam' was not simply a discussion of religious topics, however – it usually required the presence of an adversary, an opposite position against whom the various arguments could be raised. It is not difficult to see why Ibn 'Arabi wanted to distance himself from the thinkers of the Kalam and dismiss their efforts with words such as 'meddlesome' (*fuḍūl*) and 'obfuscation'. For a thinker whose entire approach to divine epistemology can be summed up in the (to many) cryptic exclamation 'He/not He' (*huwa la huwa*),

a thinker who insists that God is both immanent and transcendent, such polarizing debates would have reinforced the very kind of binary thinking about God which Ibn ʿArabi was trying to escape.

Another aspect of Kalam which Ibn ʿArabi would have resented is its claim to a knowledge of God through reflection and reason (*naẓar,* ʿ*aql*), the kind of knowledge which for Sufis could only by obtained through 'tasting' and 'unveiling' (*dhawq, kashf*). Some past definitions of Kalam are quite telling in this respect – Al-Farabi saw Kalam as 'a science which enables a person to support specific beliefs and actions laid down by the Legislators'; al-Iji goes slightly farther, insisting Kalam does not support but rather 'establish(es) religious beliefs, by adducing arguments and banishing doubts.' For Ibn Khaldun, Kalam is 'the science that involves arguing with rational proofs in defence of the articles of faith and refuting innovators who deviate from orthodoxy', whilst the modern Muhammad ʿAbduh proposes as a definition 'a science that studies the Being and Attributes of God, the essential and possible affirmations about Him.'[20] In all of these definitions, a certain theme is constant: the acquisition of divine knowledge in order to justify social and legal practices, facilitate hermeneutics, systematize theology and ascertain exactly what is orthodox and what is heresy (*ilḥād*).

Ibn ʿArabi's context: placing the Shaykh

Trying to place Ibn ʿArabi's writings in their proper context is not as straightforward as it sounds. The diversity of opinions and interpretations of Ibn ʿArabi is reflected, in part, by the variety of different contexts – Sufi gnostic, Neoplatonist, hadith scholar, philosopher, mystic – critics are willing to place him in. If Burckhardt originally saw Ibn ʿArabi as a 'fundamentally Platonic' thinker, early biographers of the Shaykh such as Ibn al-Abbar (d.1260) saw him rather as a *muhaddith* or scholar of the sayings of the prophet.[21] Whereas scholars such as Netton and Corbin mention Ibn ʿArabi in the same breath as the Persian mystic Suhrawardi – even, in Corbin's case, to the point of suggesting the *Futuhat* may be more comfortably read in a Shiite tradition rather than a Sunni one[22] – Majid Fakhry pairs Ibn ʿArabi with al-Ghazali in his *History of Islamic Philosophy* as two examples of 'synthesis and systemization'.[23] Even the *Encyclopedia Britannica* has a slightly different genealogy to offer, suggesting Ibn Masarrah – and ultimately Empedocles – as one of the primary sources of Ibn ʿArabi's thought.

Ibn ʿArabi was born in Murcia, in the southeast of Muslim Spain, in 1165. Both in terms of time and place, the Shaykh found himself at a

pivotal point in the history of Islamic thought, where philosophy, *kalam* (or scholastic theology) and Sufism were all developing and borrowing from one another. Thus, a wide currency of terms and motifs were already in use (such as emanation, unity, attribute, intelligence), terms which Ibn ʿArabi would be able to incorporate into his own unique system, giving them their own particular meaning. The Shaykh's reading was wide – frequent references not just to the Mu'tazilites, the Ash'arites and the exotericists but also individual figures such as al-Ghazali, Ibn Masarrah and Ibn Qasyi, reinforce the fact that Ibn ʿArabi was articulately familiar with his predecessors. Ibn ʿArabi also knew a number of them in person – the famous female mystic and saint Fatima of Cordoba was his teacher for two years, whilst as a young man he had a famous encounter with the great Ibn Rushd (Averroes). When the two met, it is reported, Ibn Rushd was surprised to see that the young man he had heard so much about still did not have a beard. At the age of 36, Ibn ʿArabi left Spain never to return for the rest of his life, on a journey that would take him, along the coast of North Africa, up through Egypt and Jerusalem as far north as central Turkey, before coming back down to settle in Damascus, where he died in 1240.

Although Ibn ʿArabi was the author of an estimated 350 works, his two most important books, *The Bezels of Wisdom* (*al-Fusus al-hikem*) and the *Meccan Openings* (*al-Futuhat al-Makkiyah*) differ significantly in size. If the *Fusus* is barely a 150 pages long, the *Futuhat* is an enormous work, made of 560 chapters and taking up numerous volumes. If the *Fusus* is a collection of brief, somewhat esoteric commentaries on various figures from the Koran (Noah, Moses, Adam), the *Futuhat* constitutes more of an encyclopaedic, in-depth examination of a wide range of topics – prophecy, stations, divine names, Sufi practices, the delineations of various ontologies, reflections on interpretation and epistemology. While the *Fusus* is a series of brief, mystical essays, the *Futuhat* lies closer, in terms of form at least, to the *Summa Theologiae*. Both works were composed by Ibn ʿArabi during his stay in Mecca, sometime between 1220 and 1230.

Possibly the most basic thing one can say about the context of Ibn ʿArabi's writings is that they belong to an already well-developed tradition of Islamic Neoplatonism. In Ibn ʿArabi's case, this manifests itself in a vast, complicated system of ranked entities, stations and sub-realities, one which has prompted Annemarie Schimmel to call the Shaykh 'a genius of systematization'.[24] The idea of God as a single, pure, ineffable, unnamable source of all things, whose various emanations bring forth things into existence, is a standard scheme in most Sufi writings.

In Ibn ʿArabi's texts, the various levels of creation form an intricate ladder of Platonic hierarchies and categories through which the Breath of mercy – the pulse of creation – is constantly blowing, annihilating and re-creating in each instant. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the term 'unity of Being' (*wahd al-wujud*) has always been associated with Ibn ʿArabi's name, even if his later disciples and followers (Davud al-Qaysari, al-Qashani, al-Qunawi) were more responsible than the Shaykh himself for emphasizing and working out this concern for oneness systematically. Ibn ʿArabi's 'unity of Being' is no pantheism (although it has often been called so), but rather an attempt by the Shaykh to re-ascribe the origins and ontic status of all things to God whilst at the same time preserving their ontological individuality. The purpose of human existence, within such a system of thought, is for the human soul to 'realize' its own divine origins through a gradual, ascending return to God via a series of spiritual stages and stations. The word 'system', however, has to be used quite carefully. It should not lead one to believe (as Hamid Dabashi has suggested) Ibn ʿArabi was a 'grand totalising master narrator',[25] one who imposed a narrow, rigid, nomocentric system upon the divine and its emanations. On the contrary, the whole aim of Ibn ʿArabi's system is to reach a point where one is free of it; the purpose of the Shaykh's hierarchies of names and entities is to help the soul towards a place where those names and entities disappear. For Ibn ʿArabi, the idea of the return to God means the progression of the soul through a complex series of gradually ascending spiritual stations or *makam*, an ascent which culminates in the dissolution of all attributes descriptions once the believer has realized their totality.[26] In this sense, the intricate, hierarchical system that Ibn ʿArabi has constructed must be understood as a very Wittgensteinian ladder, one which can be kicked away out from under one's feet after it has been climbed.

The incomparability of the Real

Ibn ʿArabi's first gesture in reply to the philosophers and theologians is to underline, beneath all the ideas and concepts of God we construct for ourselves, an utterly unknowable, unthinkable God, bereft of all names and attributes (*shifa*). This gesture is by no means without precedent – al-Farabi's 'First Cause', we will recall, was conceived as immaterial, without associate or contrast, and not susceptible of being defined.[27] This unknowable entity, which is the source of all effects and actions but cannot be described by any of them, Ibn ʿArabi refers to as the Divine Essence (*dhat Allah*) or sometimes the Real (*al-ḥaqq*) – a word which,

for Western readers, is not without its Lacanian echoes.[28] 'In our view there is no disputing the fact that the Essence is unknown'.[29] Rather like Eckhart's 'God beyond God' and Plotinus' Ineffable One, it remains forever untouched by every proposition we try to make about it. Hence the error of the rational thinkers, who have mistaken their constructs for the Real itself:

> When a person rationally considers God, he creates what he believes in himself through his consideration. Hence he considers only a god that he has created through his consideration.[30]

Such constructs Ibn 'Arabi refers to, near the end of the *Fusus al-Hikem*, as the 'God of Belief', which changes according to the predisposition of the believer.[31] As we shall see, Ibn 'Arabi has a generally benign attitude towards such constructs, as long as the believer is aware of the 'actual situation' – that is, the artificiality of his/her God. The problem with thinkers such as the Ash'arites is that they have built and elaborated their entire theology upon an empty construct – one that they feel sure to be 'God'. It is here where parallels with deconstruction become most interesting; just as Derrida sees all metaphysical thinkers as basing their thought-systems upon illusory moments of 'self-presence' – a 'centre' which is never really the centre,[32] a signifier which can only ever lead to other signifiers – Ibn 'Arabi sees all reflective thinkers as building their ideas about God on something which is not really God. In both cases, the philosopher falls victim to a certain illusion – the unquestioning conviction that the semantic foundation of the thinker's thought-system ('God', 'experience', 'reality', 'innocence') is somehow sufficient in itself, and requires no further justification.

The infinity of the Real

Apart from the incomparability of the Real which renders every conceptual proposition about the Real potentially idolatrous, there are three other reasons why Ibn 'Arabi feels our rational faculties can tell us nothing about the Real – and all three have to do with the uncontrollability/unthinkability of the Real. The first and most important reason why reflective thought is inadequate for giving us any knowledge about God is, quite simply, its finitude:

> He who does not restrict Him does not deny Him, but affirms His Reality in every formal transformation, worshipping Him in His

> infinite forms, since there is no limit to the forms in which He manifests Himself.[33]
>
> … the intellect restricts and seeks to define the truth within a particular qualification, while in fact the Reality does not admit of such a limitation. It is not a reminder for the intellectuals and mongers of doctrinal formulations who contradict one another and denounce each other … *and they have no helpers* (3: 91).[34]

Although in this passage it is not so much the unknowable Real that is infinite, but rather its manifestations, the problem such infinity presents to the narrowing parameters of Reason remains the same. God encompasses an infinite sea of forms, He 'possesses relationships, faces and realities without limit'.[35] Among this endless, ever-fluctuating plethora of images and forms, the philosophers and thinkers have seized upon one or two images and attempted to found their epistemologies on them, mistaking them for the Real itself. In this sense, all theologies for Ibn 'Arabi are idolatries (*shirk*), if they do not take into account the infinite range of divine possibilities in addition to their own. Although Ibn 'Arabi has many positive things to say about reason, his insistence on the theologians' ignorance of God's infinite semantic richness pervades both the *Fusus al-Hikam* and the *Futuhat*.

If Ibn 'Arabi loses his patience with those who chain the Real to their own meanings and dismiss any other manifestation as heresy, Derrida spends a similar amount of energy exploring the infinite semantic possibilities of a text – and how various thinkers have sought to restrict these possibilities to their own interpretations. For Derrida, the desire to restrict a text and make it say only what *we* want it to is embodied in the 'preface' – the short text with which an author introduces his work, and which is intended to 'sum up' the general aim and intentions of the work that follows, so that no misunderstandings can take place. In *Dissemination*, Derrida is particularly interested in the Hegelian preface – how Hegel sees, and doubts, the *Vorwort* as a way of ensuring that certain *unacceptable* interpretations of his work will never take place. In Ibn 'Arabi's terms, the preface is the attempt to limit the text's infinite possibilities (*baṭin*) to one interpretation only (*ẓahir*), the others being considered heretical. It chains the semantic infinity of the text to one manifestation and one only – that of the author's desired reading. A preface is an attempt to say what is, has been and will be:

> The preface would announce in the future tense ('This is what you are going to read') the conceptual content or significance … of

> what will already have been written . . . From the viewpoint of the foreword, which creates an intention-to-say after the fact, the text exists as something written . . . which . . . a bidden omnipotent author (in full mastery of his product) is presenting to the reader as his future . . . the *pre* reduces the future [possibilities of the text] to the form of manifest presence.[36]

It is this 'reduction' which both Ibn ʿArabi and Derrida, in their own contexts, will object to, even though the reasons for such an objection will not be the same. If Derrida feels the original, reductive purpose of the preface to be an 'essential and ludicrous operation' (ibid.), it is not because the text (like Ibn ʿArabi's God) already has within it an untapped infinity of meanings, but rather because of the uncontrollable semantic play within the text which must necessarily open up new and unexpected readings of the work – new readings which no preface, however careful and comprehensive, can anticipate. On this point, at least, the difference seems clear: Ibn ʿArabi resists logocentric reductions of the Real on the grounds of God's inexhaustible Divinity, while Derrida's objections towards totalizing exegesis stems more from a belief in the un-arrestable play of forces within the text, rather than any theological concept of its infinite unfathomability.

The unrepeatability of the Real

Ibn ʿArabi's second reason why the Real resists all exclusive appropriations lies perhaps somewhat closer to the structure of Derrida's own approach: the fact that the Real, in all its manifestations, never repeats itself. Ibn ʿArabi's main justification of this is the Koranic verse 55: 29 *Each day He is upon some new task*. It is a feature of the Real that, although alluded to only briefly in the *Fusus*,[37] is elaborated upon quite heavily in the *Futuhat*:

> That which is past never returns, since were it to return, something in existence would repeat itself, but there is no repetition because of the Divine Vastness.
>
> [God's] returnings undergo variation (*tanawwu*ʿ), His Self-disclosures are diverse, and His loci of manifestation are multiple, without repetition.
>
> But the gnostics . . . know that 'God never discloses Himself in a single form to two individuals, nor in a single form twice.'[38]

Because, in one sense at least, God is an infinite storehouse of images, the unrepeatability of the Real is directly linked to the infinity of the Divine Vastness. In one single, theological bound, Ibn ʿArabi re-inscribes every act of signification that has ever taken place as only a minute fraction of the infinite capacity of the Divine. Ibn ʿArabi is hardly the first to place such emphasis on the infinity of God – his originality lies, as we shall see, in the way he fleshes out all the epistemological and hermeneutical consequences of such an infinity. If God encompasses all images, graven and holy, then idolatry is impossible when one is aware of the 'actual situation', for all images signify Him. An infinite God who encompasses all images also encompasses all interpretations, hence there is no interpretation of the Koran that God has not already understood and comprehended.

Seen from the viewpoint of the Real, the endlessly diverse flow of manifestations is an effect of the Real itself, stamping its image upon the corporeal world with a different seal each time, infinitely and omnipresently. From the viewpoint of the believer, the Real is almost Protean in its movements, forever changing from one form to another, forever manifesting itself in different ways to different groups, whilst remaining untouched by any of them. If we can keep this view of the Real as a constantly fluctuating source of manifestations in mind, Ibn ʿArabi's dismissal of reason and rational thought as a 'fetter' becomes clearer – like Derrida's preface, Reason fetters constant change, it constrains the Real from repeating itself in a different way:

> In the view of the Verifiers, the Real is too exalted 'to disclose Himself in a single form twice or to two individuals'. The Real never repeats anything, because of His nondelimitation and the Divine Vastness, since repetition amounts to constraint (*dhiq*) and delimitation.[39]

To describe God is to restrict Him; to predicate his Essence is to constrain Him. Whoever practises theology, in effect, forces God to repeat Himself, again and again, imposing a banality and a predictability upon God which, Ibn ʿArabi clearly feels, is misplaced. Rational thought (*ʿaql*), the tool so treasured by the philosophers of the Kalam (*mutakallimun*) as a means to divine knowledge, becomes a way of fossilizing God's dynamic flexibility. The Real, Whom no signifier can signify, Whom no sign can contain, immediately abandons any name or attribute which the philosophers attempt to nail to it, *in substantia*. The Shaykh is not against anyone naming one of God's attributes, providing

they keep the utter unthinkability of the Real in mind. For Ibn ʿArabi, one could even make a distinction between 'authentic' and 'inauthentic' modes of speech concerning God. The authentic thinkers are the Verifiers, those who predicate names and attributes to God, but at the same time are aware that the Real has an infinite range of other names and attributes too. 'Inauthentic' thought would belong to those who, like the Ash'arites or the Mu'tazilites, fix their own rational/theological constructs onto God, to the exclusion of all other perspectives.

Hence the accusation of idolatry (*shirk*) which Ibn ʿArabi levels at the rational thinkers, who mistake their constructs for the Real. The *mutakillimun* all attempt to fix a sign onto the Real, to somehow tie it to their own finite perspective; the possibility that the Real has no sign – that it only moves 'from veil to veil'[40] – does not occur to them. Nor are they in the least disconcerted by the dizzying infinity of God, by the unfathomable reservoir of His forms and faces which, if they were to realize it, would turn their doctrines from incontestable, overarching Truths into just another glimpse of an infinitely manifesting Divinity. In this depiction of Kalam as 'fettering' the infinite unrepeatability of God, Ibn ʿArabi seems to be entertaining the kind of fear which both Maimonides and Meister Eckhart gave voice to – the fear that people desire knowledge of God ultimately for their own worldly purposes. It is a familiar theme in the *Guide of the Perplexed*, where Maimonides chastises the sophists who 'derive [from the scriptures] inferences and secondary conclusions' in order to exploit the 'multitude who listen to these utterances'.[41] Eckhart also spoke of those who 'want to see God with the same eyes with which they look at a cow . . . [they] love it for the milk and the cheese and for their own profit'.[42] The unpleasant speculation that all our theologies may be born not out of a humble desire to better understand the will of God and the limits of our own knowledge, but rather out of a will-to-power, a proprietary desire to familiarize and control something for our own self-aggrandizement . . . such fears fuel Ibn ʿArabi's emphasis on the unknowability of the Essence:

> Were the Essence to make the loci of manifestation (*maẓahīr*) manifest, it would be known. Were It known, it would be encompassed (*iḥaṭa*). Were it encompassed, It would be limited (*ḥadd*). Were It limited, It would be confined (*inḥiṣār*). Were It confined, It would be owned (*mulk*).[43]

Manifest-known-encompassed-limited-confined-owned. Ibn ʿArabi clearly sees a danger in too eagerly constructing sign-systems about the

Real – like the sign-systems of the Ash'arites which, not content with making observations about the various knowable manifestations of the Real (*Allah, al-rabb, al-waḥd*, etc.), trespass beyond such manifestations and make claims about the Real itself.[44] In this sense, Ibn 'Arabi's punning of '*aql* (reason) with '*iqal* (chains) becomes highly apt – when we attempt to rationalize and speculate about God, we treat Him in the same way we treat an animal which we want to chain and tame for our own use. One is reminded of the images of writing and zoology that Derrida playfully juggles with towards the end of *Of Grammatology*: 'writing as zoography, as that painting of the living which stabilizes animality [*fixant l'animalité*]'.[45] The philosophers of the Kalam wish to do precisely this – 'stabilize' the Protean unrepeatability of the Real, standardize the variety of its manifestations, equilibrate and control the unpredictability of its theophanies.

How far any comparisons between Derrida and Ibn 'Arabi's unrepeatability of the sign/the Real can be pushed remains a difficult question. We have already seen how the Real cannot repeat a sign because of the infinite store of its images – for Derrida, the unrepeatability has two much more terrestrial reasons: the play of presences and absences *within* the text which renders it semantically unstable, and the infinite number of different contexts *outside* the text which will forever change how it is read. In different places, Derrida has emphasized one or the other of these factors as a reason for the unrepeatability of the sign/text. Sometimes he stresses the undecidable play of oppositions within a text – what he calls 'a determinate oscillation between possibilities', a feature he is careful to distinguish from 'polysemeia': 'If polysemy is infinite, if it cannot be mastered as such, this is not because a finite reading or a finite writing cannot exhaust a superabundance of meaning'.[46] In other words, if Derrida's text is, like Ibn 'Arabi's *al-ḥaqq*, 'infinite', the reason for such unmasterability has nothing to do with the infinite imaginal richness of its 'deeper meanings', but rather because of 'a certain fold' (*un certain pli*)[47] within the text which forever fissures and doubles the text without repeating it. Derrida's debt to the Saussurean 'discovery' of the essentially differential nature of language – that sign-systems 'work' not through any positive elements but only through differences, hence we only know what something is through what it is not – enables him to see texts as a bristling collection of forces, forever oscillating indeterminately between various parameters of meaning.

In other places, however, Derrida seems to connect the hermeneutic unrepeatability of a text with the uncertain future of its trajectory – the

fact that no-one can say who will appropriate the text or what kind of use it will be put to. Thus 'there are only contexts without any centre of absolute anchoring',[48] which accounts for the large number of wandering motifs in Derrida's work. The text wanders from reader to reader, its signs forever repeating themselves for different audiences with different results, acquiring a different meaning each time the context is changed. The impossibility of repetition for Derrida stems directly from the potentially infinite number of different contexts a text can be read and re-read in.

All this seems a far cry from Ibn 'Arabi's infinitely differing *ẓahir*. If the Derridean text, to use Abu Talib al-Makki's words, 'never discloses itself in a single form to two individuals, nor in a single form twice', such hermeneutic elasticity is certainly not the product of some vast, Neoplatonic sea of images. Probably because of its religious resonance, Derrida has always been careful with the word 'infinite', often preferring the synonym 'non-finite' instead. In *Of Grammatology*, we are warned of the 'profound unity among infinitist theology, logocentrism and a certain technicism',[49] to render God infinite still remains a metaphysical gesture, for it fails to call into question the idea of presence or meaning. This idea of a 'positive infinity' – a phrase Derrida uses in his essay on Levinas as a synonym for God[50] – does not face up to the genuine unthinkability of God but only infinitely defers it, producing no real critique of presence but only an infinite postponement of meaning. Hence Derrida's refusal to connect the utter unpredictability of his text with a 'superabundance of meaning'; far from any idea of plenitude, it is a certain emptiness beneath the text which allows it to double and differ without repeating itself.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to say for sure whether Ibn 'Arabi's God – that is, his idea of the Real or Essence – can be so easily dismissed as just another one of the 'infinitist theologies' which Derrida regards as a closet logocentrism. There are certainly moments in the *Fusus* where Ibn 'Arabi's description of God resembles Derrida's description of the text as a constant play of forces, 'producing a force of dislocation that spreads itself . . . fissuring [the text] in every direction and thoroughly *delimiting* it.'[51] In his chapter on the Wisdom of Eminence in Moses, for example, Ibn 'Arabi gives a similar description of God as a life-giving chaos:

> [True] guidance means being guided to bewilderment, that he might know that the whole affair [of God] is perplexity, which means perturbation and flux, and flux is life. There is no abatement and no cessation, but all is being with no non-being.[52]

A picture of God quite different from the calm, unchanging, transcendental infinity of orthodox theology. As God is the source of all polarities – good and evil, immanence and transcendence, mercy and wrath – reaching Him produces a state of perplexity (*ḥayrah*) in the believer. Nevertheless, this is still a perplexity that *produces*, a primordial confusion which allows order to come into being. To underline this, an analogy is made for God with water, whose unceasing course and flow allows all things to live and flourish:

> The same is the case with water by which the earth lives and moves, as in His saying *and it quivers* in its pregnancy, *and swells* in its bringing forth, *and brings forth every joyous pair*.
>
> (ibid.)[53]

The idea of creation as a consequence of overflowing is typically Neoplatonic – we see it in authors as diverse as Plotinus ('the One is perfect and, in our metaphor, has overflowed and in its exuberance has produced the new . . .'),[54] Eckhart ('God overflows into all creatures, and yet he remains untouched by all'),[55] not to mention Muslim sages such as the Ikhwan al-Ṣafa ('The universal soul is an effusion that was effused from the universal intellect . . .')[56] and Afdal al-Din Kashani ('. . . the intellective world . . . and its good that bubbles up and boils over').[57] Later on, Ibn 'Arabi's disciples (in particular al-Qunawi and al-Farghani) would systematize the overflowing act of creation into a series of three, five and ultimately six stages.[58] Like Kashani and the Brethren, the word Ibn 'Arabi uses for this is *fayd*, an effusion or radiation. The idea is of interest to us because Derrida also uses the same metaphor (*déborder*) to describe the way the oscillating, alternative meanings in a text 'spill over' their boundaries and bring a text to life: 'If the play of meaning can overflow signification . . . this overflow is the moment of the attempt to write' (*si le jeu du sens peut déborder la signification . . . ce débord est le moment du vouloir écrire*).[59] In this use of *déborder*, which means literally to exceed a certain mark or boundary, Derrida is trying to analyse the elusive moment of the act of writing – the moment when, as soon as the mark appears on the page, a multiplicity of meanings overflow the text and transform it, giving life to new, various interpretations. Chaos and indeterminacy, so to speak, give rise to various kinds of order, although how far this corresponds to Ibn 'Arabi's divine, life-giving *hareket* and flux will be examined further on.

The impossibility of the Real: simultaneous immanence and transcendence

The topic of perplexity brings us to the third reason why, according to Ibn ʿArabi, the philosophers and theologians can make no proposition about the Real. Up to now, Ibn ʿArabi has been presented somewhat in the guise of a negative theologian – the three reasons why 'reflective thought' remains forever inadequate to representing the Real all involve a radically apophatic understanding of God as incomparable, infinite and unrepeatable. Given Derrida's interest in negative theology, this is an aspect of Ibn ʿArabi's writing which will become increasingly important as we progress.

To read Ibn ʿArabi as a negative theologian, in the manner of Eckhart and Dionysius, forever stressing the ultimate transcendence and unspeakability of God, makes sense in a certain way: it enables us to understand why the Shaykh criticizes positivist positions such as those of Al-Ashʾari, the corporealists or the Mushabbiha. However, such insistence on the unknowablility of God does not explain Ibn ʿArabi's objections to groups like the Muʾtazilites and the Muʾattila, groups who were equally keen to stress the radical ineffability of God. Far from offering any sympathy towards such positions, Ibn ʿArabi seems to include both positive and negative theologies (both Muʾtazilite and Ashʾarite) in his dismissal of the *ahl al-naẓar* or People of Reflection:

> However, the mistakes of the People of Reflection in the divine things (*ilahiyyat*) are more than their hitting the mark, whether they are philosophers, Muʾtazilites, Ashʾarites or any other sort of the people of consideration . . . [Philosophers] are blamed because they make errors in the knowledge of God by opposing the reports brought by the messengers.[60]

In other words, Ibn ʿArabi's objection against the People of Reflection is not necessarily a theological objection – a disagreement with a certain school of thought over a certain issue or the interpretation of a certain verse, something which would require the taking of a position or elaboration of a doctrine. The philosophers of the Kalam, quite regardless of whatever their own positions are on the eternity of the Quran or the attribute(lessness) of God, are guilty of a much more fundamental error – that of limiting God to only one half of a dualism. When Ibn ʿArabi criticizes the Muʾtazilites and Ashʾarites together, he is criticizing two opposite poles of a very familiar debate – that of the knowability of God. One pole emphasizes the absolute transcendence (*tanẓih*) of God, the other

his immanence, but neither have understood the actual situation – that the Real can actually be both at the same time:

> If you insist only on His transcendence, you restrict Him,
> And if you insist only on His immanence you limit Him.
> If you maintain both aspects you are right,
> An Imam and a master in the spiritual sciences.
> Whoso would say He is two things is a polytheist,
> While the one who isolates Him tries to regulate Him.
> Beware of comparing Him if you profess duality,
> And, if unity, of making Him transcendent.
> You are not He and you are He and
> You see Him in the essences of things both boundless and limited.[61]

To say that God can be two different things at the same time is impossible – and it is precisely this possibility of the impossible, the idea of God as an experience with the impossible, which the thinkers of the Kalam have failed to take into account. In the *Tahafut al-Falasifah (The Incoherence of the Philosophers)*, Al-Ghazali cites this very idea of a simultaneous affirmation and negation ('A is both black and white') as an impossibility which falls within the Law of Contradiction.[62] From a deconstructive angle, Ibn 'Arabi's insistence on the simultaneity of everything being He/not He (*huwa la huwa*) is an important step – it acknowledges the illusion of the dualism, the fundamental mistake of believing God to be either 'this' or 'that', transcendent or immanent, 'out there' or 'in here'. As long as rational thought conceives of God in terms of binary oppositions, 'opposing the reports brought by the messengers' in order to establish 'true' knowledge of God, then 'reflection can only roam in its own specific playing field (*maydān*), which is one of many fields'.[63] Because of its committal to a simplistic, logocentric law of identity ('Is God X or Y?'), reflective thought finds itself a priori unable to grasp the true complexity of God. Moreover, in observing how 'the one who isolates Him tries to regulate Him', Ibn 'Arabi seems to anticipate Derrida's own reasons for his objections to binary thought. Namely, that whenever two terms are opposed to one another (spirit/flesh, nature/culture, speech/writing) a hierarchy always ensues; one half of the term is artificially privileged over the other for ultimately ideological purposes. Ibn 'Arabi seems to be prefiguring this – the Ash'arites will privilege 'immanence' over 'transcendence' in order to justify their own versions of God.

'From the moment there is meaning,' writes Derrida, 'there are nothing but signs' (*Il n'y a donc que des signes dès lors qu'il y a du sens*).[64] Once

again, the danger arises of assuming analogous gestures to be identical ones. Both Ibn ʿArabi and Derrida reject binary thought as illusory and, at worst, potentially tyrannical. Whether their objections stem from a common source remains to be seen. Derrida sees binary oppositions as illusions because of a certain semantic emptiness – signs forever need their opposites in order to negatively define themselves. For Derrida, then, to believe in a word like 'transcendence' is to believe in a certain absence. 'Transcendence' and 'immanence' are semantic vacuities which can only pretend to meaning through contrast with their opposites – in other words, the immanent can only be understood as the non-transcendent, the transcendent as the non-immanent. Ibn ʿArabi, however, is making no such critique of meaning; the above passage from the *Fusus* is not questioning whether signifiers like 'transcendent' and 'immanent' can ever lead to anything other than signifiers. Ibn ʿArabi still believes in the positive, independent signification of such words, and he still believes these meanings to be opposed to one another. However, it is an opposition which is *dissolved* in the Real. Ibn ʿArabi believes in a God paradoxical enough, all-comprehensive enough, *impossible* enough to be both immanent and transcendent at the same time. If Derrida rejects binary oppositions because they veil an absence, Ibn ʿArabi resents the dualism because it veils a presence – the presence of a paradox, the ultimate, unthinkable Oneness of God.

We shall see in a later chapter whether it will still be possible to re-describe this situation in different terms – that is, whether the Oneness of God so central to Ibn ʿArabi's thought is just another logocentric moment of infinite self-presence, or whether such a 'negation of negations' actually moves closer to the Derridean *oeuvre* than anyone could suspect. For now, it is sufficient to merely underline how Ibn ʿArabi sees beneath what we call 'God' something infinite enough, uncontrollable enough, paradoxical enough to re-contextualize and ultimately undermine everything we try to sing, say or scribble about Him.

The emancipatory project in Derrida: freeing the letter from the shackles of the spirit

If Ibn ʿArabi insists upon the unthinkability of God in the face of the philosophers of the Kalam, then Derrida insists on the ungovernable text in the face of the structuralists. This insistence is best examined in one of Derrida's earliest essays, 'Force and signification', which first appeared within the pages of *Critique* in 1963. The title of the essay – a play on the title of the work it deals with, Jean Rousset's 1962 study of Corneille,

Forme et Signification – effectively sums up many of Derrida's basic disagreements with structuralism, described as 'a relaxation, if not a lapse, of the attention given to force' (*une détente, sinon une lapsus, dans l'attention à la force*).[65] Throughout the essay, Rousset's own brand of structuralism, the confidence with which he produces his structural analyses of *Le Cid* and *Polyeucte* ('with such a mastery one wonders whether the credit is due Corneille or Rousset'),[66] is portrayed as a consistent forgetting of a certain energy within the text, a lamentable obliviousness towards the play which is always already at work within Corneille.

Therefore, Derrida's objections to Rousset (whose *Forme et Signification*, it does not take long to realize, ultimately serve Derrida as a springboard toward the chief tenets of structuralism in general) are three in number and interrelated. First, the concept of the structure initially implemented as an aid towards analysis, 'becomes *in fact and despite his theoretical intention* the critic's sole preoccupation'.[67] The text, sacrificed for the sake of structure, simply becomes an excuse to talk about the structure – leading Derrida to speak of Rousset's efforts as an 'ultrastructuralism'.[68] Derrida is keen to emphasize this – one almost expects to encounter the word 'fetishism' – as it brings him to his second objection: so captivating is the attention given to structure, one 'risks being interested in the figure itself to the detriment of the play going on within it metaphorically [*au détriment du jeu qui s'y joue par métaphore*]'.[69] In other words, Rousset becomes so interested in *forme*, he forgets about *force*. In this sense, structuralism can almost be seen as a minimal desire for certainty, the desire for a structure which might eliminate – or at least contain – the chaotic play within a text. 'Structuralism above all insists upon preserving the coherence and completion of each totality at its own level'.[70] For Derrida (third objection), this is the very thing which cannot be done. The desire to preserve a totality, to speak meaningfully and above all consistently about the 'autonomy' of a work, would be to 'attempt to forget difference' (*vouloir oublir la différance*),[71] to forget uncertainty, to forget the dynamic nature of textuality and pretend that things *stand still* within a text.

Although Derrida's essay is a specific response to a specific text, 'Force and Signification' is by no means simply a critique of a contemporary work on Corneille. Derrida clearly has other things in mind – Rousset's version of literary structuralism was simply the nearest logocentrism at hand. In Rousset's obsession with form lies the reason 'why literary criticism is structuralist in every age, in its essence and destiny'.[72] It is an obsession, to paraphrase Derrida, which either denies or forgets

that the play of meaning *always* overflows signification – an obsession hardly exclusive to Rousset.

The most important thing we learn from Derrida's essay on Rousset is that the text is never *present*. No matter how coherent and meticulous a structure is created to explain the text, the interpretation of the text will always be rendered incomplete by 'the impossibility of its ever being present, of its ever being summarized by some absolute simultaneity or instantaneousness'.[73] Just as no sign can ever capture the Real, no theological position can ever regulate the unpredictable, infinite variety of the Real's manifestations, Derrida is careful to show how the ungraspable vitality of the text fissures and threatens every interpretation made of it.

Of all Derrida's work, *Of Grammatology* is probably the most focused and single-minded analysis of this subjugation of writing. Here Derrida explores, in a mode self-consciously reminiscent of psychoanalysis,[74] a Western aversion and resentment towards the written, in favour of the spoken; a consistent desire on the part of thinkers such as Rousseau, Saussure and Levi-Strauss 'to confine writing to a secondary and instrumental function' (*à confiner l'écriture dans une fonction seconde et instrumentale*)[75] – a vehicle of meaning, the humble carrier of a royal message, a semantic go-between, in short writing as (to quote Rousseau) 'nothing but the representation of speech'.[76] Hence Derrida's repeated references to his own project as an emancipatory one:

> [Linguistics'] declared purpose confirms . . . the subordination of grammatology, the . . . reduction of writing to the rank of instrument . . . But another gesture . . . liberates the future of a general grammatology.
>
> This logocentrism . . . has always . . . *suspended*, and suppressed for essential reasons, all free reflection on the origin and status of writing . . .
>
> The subordination of the trace to the full presence summed up in the logos, the humbling of writing beneath a speech dreaming its plenitude . . .[77]

The written sign has always been excluded, suppressed, humbled, subordinated to its spoken meaning, facilitated by a fear of letting our words get out of control and mean something different from what we wanted to 'say'. Such grammophobia, the unshaken conviction that writing is nothing other than the form which delivers the content, lies at the heart of *all* metaphysical and rational thought. Just as the thinkers of the

Kalam continually underestimate the ungraspability of the Real, Derrida shows how various figures in Western thought have repeatedly underestimated the vitality of *écriture*, have repeatedly failed to problematize the idea of writing as 'nothing but the representation of speech'. Just as the Ash'arites feel they can use positive attributes about the Real without any problem, Derrida's structuralists and phenomenologists feel they can refer repeatedly to words such as 'purity', 'experience', 'innocence', 'the text' without any complications whatsoever.

In this sense, both Sufi and deconstructive oppositions to rational/metaphysical thought can be considered analogous, if only because both thinkers are trying to 'restore an originary difficulty' to their respective subjects.[78] Both see something fatally flawed in the arrogant confidence of the system – a presumptuous taking-for-granted of the analysability of God/writing, accompanied by an unconscious reluctance to allow the complexity of their subjects to undermine or derail their projects.

The emancipatory tone which Derrida adopts in *Of Grammatology* is, we gradually learn, an ironic gesture; Saussure, Rousseau and Levi-Strauss all advocate a liberation too, but of the reverse kind – protecting the illiterate non-European from colonial shackles of writing. Saussure speaks of the 'tyranny of writing', which 'impose(s) itself upon the masses',[79] changing spellings and modifying how people speak, whereas both Rousseau and Levi-Strauss go farther, equating the Western introduction of writing skills with a concept of Original Sin and the ultimate imperialist destruction of native innocence: 'the primary function of writing, as a means of communication, is to facilitate the enslavement of human beings' (*la fonction primaire de la communication écrite est de faciliter l'asservissement*).[80] If Derrida objects to this vilification of *écriture*, however, it is *not* because he feels writing to be innocent – which would simply place him on the opposite end of an identical dualism. The point is repeated several times in *Of Grammatology*: '. . . writing does *not* befall an innocent language. There is an originary violence of writing because language is first, I shall gradually reveal, writing.'[81] Thus, the possibility of writing as a tyrannical discourse is not contested; but it is not tyranny over an innocent subject. Writing cannot 'corrupt', 'suppress' or 'distort' real meaning, for there is no real meaning to be corrupted, only an anterior sequence of signs. Language, as Derrida says, is already a kind of writing.

We shall see, further on, how far Ibn 'Arabi's critique of Kalam and the philosophers can be called 'deconstructive' – that is, whether there is not a moment of self-presence in Ibn 'Arabi's own work, a moment where the unthinkability of God is deferred as one might defer the

unveiling of a monument, a secret sign pushed away inside a box. Or whether, alternatively, Ibn ʿArabi in his opposition to the thinkers and theologians is actually calling into question the whole activity of metaphysics by suggesting the Real is something radically other to all our conventional ways of understanding – not simply a secret meaning hidden away from the rest of us, but a less deconstructible metaphor such as a 'flux' or 'void'. Which all depends on whether Ibn ʿArabi is genuinely superseding metaphysics, or merely re-instating it at a higher level with a logocentric 'Oneness of God'.

'La différance'

There is an obvious irony in the fact that Derrida's term 'différance', which was meant to be 'literally neither a word nor a concept' (*à la lettre, ni un mot, ni un concept*),[82] has become very definitely both after three decades of deconstructive criticism. And a further irony in the way many critics have insisted on associating it with 'God' or some kind of apophatic theology, despite Derrida's very careful caveats to the contrary. In the debate following Derrida's 1971 lecture, Brice Parain was the first to stand up and declare différance to be 'the God of negative theology',[83] an assertion Derrida strongly objected to. In the first pages of the essay, we read:

> So much so that the detours, locutions and syntax in which I will often have to take recourse will resemble those of negative theology, occasionally even to the point of being indistinguishable from negative theology. Already we have had to delineate that *différance is not*, does not exist, is not a present-being (*on*) in any form; and we will be led to delineate also everything *that* it *is not*, that is, *everything*; and consequently that it has neither existence nor essence. It derives from no category of being, whether present or absent. And yet those aspects of *différance* which are thereby delineated are not theological, not even in the order of the most negative of negative theologies, which are always concerned with disengaging a superessentiality beyond the finite categories of essence and existence, that is, of presence, and always hastening to recall that God is refused the predicate of existence, only in order to acknowledge his superior, inconceivable and ineffable mode of being.
>
> *Si bien que les détours, les périodes, la syntaxe auxquels je devrais souvent recourir, ressembleront, parfois à s'y méprendre, à ceux de la théologie négative. Déjà il a fallu marquer* que *la*

> *différance* n'est pas, *n'existe pas, n'est pas un étant-présent* (on), *quel q'il soit: et nous serons amenés à marquer aussi tout* ce qu*'elle* n'est pas, *c'est-à-dire* tout: *et par conséquent qu'elle n'a ni existence ni essence. Elle ne relève d'aucune catégorie de l'étant, qu'il soit présent ou absent. Et pourtant ce qui se marque ainsi de la différance n'est pas théologique, pas même de l'ordre le plus négatif de la théologie plus négative, celle-ci s'étant toujours affairée à dégager, comme on sait, une supra-essentialité par-delà les catégories finies de l'essence et de l'existence, c'est-à-dire de la présence, et s'empressant toujours de rappeler que si le prédicat de l'existence est refusé a Dieu, c'est pour lui reconnaître un mode d'être superieur, inconcevable, ineffable*.[84]

Alan Bass' curious use of 'indistinguishable' for *parfois à s'y méprendre* – 'sometimes to be mistaken for' would be the literal meaning – does seem to suggest the theological echoes of différance at the very moment Derrida is trying to deny them. Nevertheless, Derrida in this passage is insistent that the way he is going to talk about différance – its being siteless, nameless, bereft of quality or tangible existence, non-temporal, forever Other yet the source of all meaning – will sound uncannily similar to the way negative theology used to talk about God (and certainly the way Ibn 'Arabi talks about the Real). A similarity, Derrida says, which we shouldn't be deceived by. The 'structured and differentiated origin of differences' (*l'origine structurée et différante dés différences*)[85] which Derrida is going to call 'différance' has nothing to do with God or any other kind of 'superessentiality', however much the elusiveness of the term may lead us to think this. This resistance by Derrida to the theologization of his work will be examined later. For now, regardless whether we agree with Brice Parain or John Caputo ('God is *not* différance . . . différance is especially not a hidden God, the innermost concealed Godhead of negative theology'),[86] we shall take a look at some of the (non)attributes which Derrida gives to différance.

The place of différance in Derrida's thought is important insofar as it is precisely that which makes écriture so uncontrollable, the elusive, never-quite-present force which forever unsettles the text, so that it in turn 'differs from itself, defers itself, and writes itself as différance'.[87] Probably the first and most striking resemblance between différance and the Real is that différance, like *al-ḥaqq*, 'has no name in our language' (*n'a aucune nom dans notre langue*).[88] However mystical this may sound, Derrida is keen to point out that if différance *is* unnamable, it is 'not because our language has not yet found or received this name . . . outside

the finite system of our own'.[89] Although one might be tempted here to think of the Hebrew unnamable name, Lossky's *nomen innomabile*, Derrida is actually alluding to Heidegger. Différance is unnamable because 'there is no name for it at all, not even that of différance'. Having distanced himself from Heideggerian nostalgia with the remark that différance is 'older than Being itself', Derrida goes on in the next paragraph to repeat the dissociative operation, this time with regard to negative theology. The unnamable is 'not an ineffable Being which no name could approach' but rather 'the play which makes possible nominal effects' (*le jeu qui fait qu'il y a des effets nominaux*). It's difficult to say whether this would constitute an accurate appraisal of Ibn 'Arabi's Real. On the one hand the Real ultimately 'has no attributes (*shifa*)' or names (*asmā*)[90] – an assertion which puts Ibn 'Arabi squarely against the Ash'arites and their like, who believed that God did possess attributes, but they were utterly unlike any human attributes we could imagine.[91] In other places, however, Ibn 'Arabi certainly seems to give the impression that, beneath such an absence of attributes, an 'ineffable Being' is still the subject of discussion: 'One comes to know that there is Someone who cannot be known'.[92] Derrida's différance has no need of such a 'Someone'.

Another resemblance between the Real and différance is that both are literally unthinkable: they are terms which, both authors insist, can never acquire presence. 'Reason cannot delimit Him by one of those forms, since He destroys that delimitation by the next self-disclosure.'[93] The Real's refusal to concretely, permanently assume a single form is precisely what makes it unthinkable, this Heraclitean flux of constantly differing manifestations ensures that the Real itself 'remains forever unseen'.[94] In a similar way, the 'a' in 'différance' 'cannot be exposed' because 'différance is . . . what makes possible the presentation of the being-present'.[95] Différance, however, is a kind of play, not a non-manifest entity which brings forth non-beings into being – there is no presence to try and think, and therefore the unthinkability of différance, although superficially identical to that of the Real, is of a radically different kind: 'One cannot think différance . . . on the basis of the present, or of the presence of the present.'[96]

This common ground of nameless and unthinkability with regard to différance and the Real, however differently constituted, does lead us onto a string of similar resemblances, most of which repeat the same basic point again but which are worthwhile mentioning, as they elucidate this point from a variety of different, interesting perspectives. First, both the Real and différance are neither sensible nor intelligible – one

can neither touch nor conceive them. Derrida's famous insistence that différance is 'literally neither a word nor a concept'[97] echoes a Koranic verse which Ibn 'Arabi is fond of repeating: *Nothing is like Him* (42: 11). No sign or symbol exists which could signify or even remotely resemble the Real, being utterly incommensurable – for Ibn 'Arabi, even the word 'incomparable' (*tanẓih*) cannot be used, as the Real is 'absolutely incomparable with every declaration of incomparability that delimits'.[98] In short, the Real is the Absolute Unseen (*al-ghayb al-muṭlaq*).[99] Différance, however, is neither sensible nor intelligible because it 'does not exist, is not a present being (*on*) in any form'[100]; différance cannot be signified because it always already precedes the act of signification, eluding it whilst at the same time making it possible. The hinge in a door, the fold in a piece of paper – différance operates on the edge of language, producing while receding, forever absenting itself in the act of making things present, hence the endless comparisons with negative theology it has provoked. Just as the Real 'remains forever unseen', the movement of différance 'eludes both vision and hearing' and ultimately works within 'an order which no longer belongs to sensibility . . . But neither . . . to intelligibility.'[101]

The immediate consequence of this is that both différance and the Real cannot be expounded upon directly, through what they are, but only *indirectly*, through what they are *not*. Harvey makes much of this in an excellent chapter of her *Derrida and the Economy of Différance*, where she quite literally lists twenty-six things that deconstruction is not, ranging from '(a) metaphysics' through '(m) "un coup des Dés", as per Mallarmé' to '(z) the celebration of a Wake, as per Joyce'.[102] 'I can speak of this graphic difference only through a very indirect discourse on writing'.[103] In a sense, Derrida's lecture on 'La différance' is an attempt to say what cannot be said – in the open pages Derrida quickly demonstrates himself to be articulately aware of this problem. Even lectures on différance fall prey to différance, which explains why Derrida consistently refuses to provide any clear, concise definition of what différance 'means', choosing to abandon the direct approach of naming and defining for the oblique way, the way of inference, allusion, negation.

The idea of negation (*salb*) as the only possibility of description can be found often in Ibn 'Arabi, whose insistence of the unthinkability and intangibility of the Real/Essence forces him to choose the *via negativa* as the only available path for he who would still wish to speak meaningfully about God:

> In our view there is no disputing the fact that the Essence is unknown. To It are ascribed descriptions which make it incomparable with

> the attributes of temporal things (*al-ḥadath*). It possesses eternity (*al-qidam*), and to Its Being is ascribed beginningless (*al-azal*). But all these names designate negations, such as the negation of beginning and everything appropriate to temporal origination.[104]

Thus we cannot say that the Real is 'free', only that It is not a slave, for God 'can only be known through negative descriptions, not through positive descriptions of self'.[105] Ibn 'Arabi encounters the same problem as St Augustine – to call God 'ineffable' still remains an affront to His ineffability. For Derrida, the dilemma has its relevance – if language is unstable, how can we speak within language about the instability of language? If there is no sign which can represent différance, how can we write about it? Further on, we shall see how both thinkers respond to the problems which the common unthinkability of their subjects present – whether the strategy of negation, of indirect discourse, remains a viable one.

It is also interesting to note how, in the passage given, Ibn 'Arabi is careful to keep the Real outside temporality, insisting It has no end (*al-qidam*) and no beginning (*al-azal*). In the text of 'La Différance', Derrida makes a similar gesture, carefully separating différance from any notion of 'origin' or 'result' which would re-inscribe it into a scheme of cause and effect. The fact that différance is the 'differentiated origin of differences' does *not* mean that 'the différance that produces differences is somehow before them, in a simple and unmodified… present'[106] – a move which, in one sense at least, blocks any Neoplatonic description of différance as a First Cause, producing a waterfall of effects which spill out and over into the world below. On the contrary, the 'name "origin" no longer suits it'.[107]

Why is Derrida so keen to remove différance from the temporal – a gesture which would seem to emphasize rather than diminish its theological echoes? If the atemporality of différance is stressed here, it is not to suggest the lofty detachment of a transcendental, omnitemporal deity, calmly watching over the course and unfolding of His Creation. Derrida keeps différance away from all notions of temporality because he doesn't want to fall foul of the same metaphysical trap Husserl fell into – that of basing his entire thought system on a logocentric notion of the 'present'. In 'Genesis and Structure' Derrida shows how Husserl's 'serene use of… concepts' such as 'experience' and 'present' ultimately reveals an 'incompleteness' in his phenomenology.[108] The more Husserl tries to analyse exactly how the world becomes meaningful for the consciousness with terms like *noema* and *hylé* (the latter – the non-intentional,

sensate experience of the world before it is shaped through meaning – being 'primarily temporal matter'[109]), the more Husserl has to rely upon the problematic 'themes of the Other and Time'.[110] The 'experience' of the Husserlian Other necessitates the moment of 'a living present' (*lebendige Gegenwart*), for Derrida the epitome of an illusory self-presence, the metaphysical sands upon which Husserl builds the entire structure of his castle. Hence Derrida's insistence that, even though an 'interval must separate the present from what it is not in order for the present to be itself', this interval – this difference – is related 'no less to what is called the future than to what is called the past.'[111] Words which must represent Derrida's most determined attempt to break with the logocentric (one could even say theocentric) assumptions of the terms 'past', 'present' and 'future'.

The mirror of différance: the invisible production of the visible

The last and most important characteristic of différance, the feature which has most often provoked comparisons with 'the God of negative theology', is a straightforward function: différance *produces*. It creates – or rather, enables creation to take place. It 'lends itself to a certain number of nonsynonymous substitutions',[112] without ever forming any part of those signs it gives rise to. The mirror seems to be Derrida's most apt example of this process. We already know that différance is not a being (*ov*) and 'does not exist'.[113] In a passage from *Dissemination*, quoted by Gasché at the beginning of his own work on what he calls Derrida's 'System beyond being', Derrida offers an important analogy towards the understanding of the role of différance and its relation to nothingness:

> The breakthrough towards radical otherness . . . always takes, *within philosophy*, the *form* of an a posteriority or an empiricism. But this is an effect of the specular nature of philosophical reflection, philosophy being incapable of inscribing (comprehending) what is outside it otherwise than through the appropriating assimulation of a negative image of it, and dissemination is written on the back – the *tain* – of that mirror.[114]

Différance is that which allows identities to produce differences – and differences to produce identities – *ad infinitum*, endlessly disseminating a trace without origins, without ever taking part in the process. The tain of a mirror, Gasché tells us, 'is the silver lining, the lustreless back of the mirror . . . without which no reflection and no specular and speculative

activity would be possible, but which at the same time has no place and no part in reflection's scintillating play'.[115] Différance is this tain – a movement which generates without participating, engenders without appearing. Derrida's cryptic mark which 'alludes without breaking the glass, toward the *epekeina tes ousias*' now becomes clear: writing only ever alludes to, but never trespasses into the non-space beyond being, to the non-space behind the mirror.

How far is Derrida's 'tain of the mirror', this non-space behind to mirror, the site of Ibn 'Arabi's Real, which gives rise to presences whilst forever absenting itself? In a crucial passage from the *Futuhat*, Ibn 'Arabi elaborates upon this process of the Real in terms uncannily similar to those of Derrida's:

> This alerts us to the form of the veil within which the Real discloses Himself. Then He transmutes Himself from it into another veil. In reality, there is nothing but passage from veil to veil, since no divine disclosure ever repeats itself. Hence the forms must be diverse, while the Real is behind all of that. We possess nothing of Him but the name Manifest (*al-ẓahir*), whether in a vision or a veil. As for the name Nonmanifest (*al-baṭin*), it remains forever Nonmanifest.
>
> Hence the Real remains forever unseen behind the forms which become manifest within existence.[116]

From the instant there is meaning, Derrida has written, there are nothing but signs.[117] From the moment there is the Real, there are only manifestations, 'nothing but passage from veil to veil'. As soon as the *batin* is expressed, there are only *ẓahir*, leading to more *ẓahir, ad infinitum*. Although by no means free of the 'hyperessentiality' which Derrida, elsewhere, will try to deconstruct Meister Eckhart with, the elusiveness of the Real, giving rise to presences whilst remaining paradoxically absent, does seem to follow the movement of différance. Ibn 'Arabi even uses the same metaphor of the mirror – often, in fact, altering the metaphor each time to suit the context. Sometimes the mirror is the Real, sometimes it is the heart of the gnostic, sometimes it is a fellow believer. A passage from the *Fusus* probably best conveys the Derridean echoes of this metaphor:

> Try, when you look at yourself in a mirror, to see the mirror itself, and you will find that you cannot do so…
>
> …the recipient sees nothing other than his own form in the mirror of the Reality. He does not see the Reality itself, which is

> not possible, although he knows that he may see only his [true form] in It. As in the case of a mirror and the beholder, he sees the form in it, but does not see the mirror itself… The analogy of a mirror is the closest and most faithful one for a vision of a divine Self-revelation.[118]

As in Derrida's analogy, the Real constitutes that part of the mirror we cannot see (the tain), which remains invisible throughout the entire reflective process, and yet without which we would not be able to see our reflection at all. The analogy, in both cases, gives an almost narcissistic tone to metaphysics. When the theologian looks in the mirror, he mistakes his own reflection for the Real itself; the subjects of both Ibn ʿArabi's and Derrida's critiques fail to consider the tain of the mirror, fail to *see* how what they are looking for must necessarily lie *outside* their field of vision. Of course, mirror metaphors abound in all kinds of religious writing, and Ibn ʿArabi is hardly the first to make use of them – but it is an analogy which underlines Ibn ʿArabi's conviction of the unthinkable otherness of the Real. A Real which produces forms, but somehow can never be glimpsed. In this sense, the underside of the mirror becomes the 'locus of disclosure'[119] for a profusion of forms – just as différance belongs to that 'strange space… *between* speech and writing',[120] the unthinkable moment when *baṭin* becomes *ẓaḥir*, when texts become interpretations, when words become things.

* * * * *

If différance and the Real do seem uncannily analogous, sharing a number of features in common – namelessness, radical otherness, intangibility/invisibility/unthinkability, atemporality, not to mention their paradoxically generative functions – one has to decide how far we can accept the difference (for want of a better word) Derrida still wishes to preserve between his own strategies and Ibn ʿArabi's de-ontologizing gesture of the Real. Différance remains, after all, 'a silent play', a silence as 'silent, secret and discreet as a tomb' (*silencieux, secret et discret comme un tombeau*).[121] If anything, a certain emptiness seems to pervade all of Derrida's work on différance, the infinity of an emptiness which has no need of a 'Someone that cannot be known'. No elusive Something, forever leaving in its wake a succession of forms, but simply an ' "active", moving discord of different forces', to use Derrida's paraphrasing of Nietzsche; in other words, différance simply *happens*. It takes place, producing images as effortlessly as two images might

multiply themselves *ad infinitum*. It is a depthless infinity which seems to haunt all of Derrida's work: 'There is no maintaining, and no depth to, this bottomless chessboard on which Being is put into play [*pour cet échiquier sans fond où l'être est mis en jeu*]'.[122] A chessboard which has no need of any Chess Player, capitalized or otherwise.

We shall see, in a later chapter, how far Derrida's 'protection' of différance from theological 'contamination' can be questioned. For now, however differently constituted différance and *al-ḥaqq* may be, this in no way detracts from the powerful similarity of their effects – a radical re-questioning of rational thought, a re-understanding of all attempts to explain God/reality/the text as being founded on an illusion, a freeing of the uncontrollability of God/the text from the shackles of limiting metaphysics. With such freedom from the narrowing names and categories of rationality comes, inevitably, a degree of confusion – and it is exactly how Derrida and Ibn ʿArabi respond to words like 'perplexity' and 'confusion' that will be the subject of our next chapter.

2 The honesty of the perplexed

Derrida and Ibn ʻArabi on ʻconfusion'

> I mistrust all systematizers and avoid them. The will to a system is a lack of integrity.
>
> Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*[1]

> O Lord, increase my perplexity concerning Thee!
>
> *Fusus al-Hikem*[2]

To confuse, etymologically, is to make things flow together. To remove the boundaries/borders/distinctions which separate things into categories, which enable differences to be. To be confused is to no longer know whether one thing might not be something else, to be uncertain of the identities and meanings of the things around us, to see the familiar suddenly turning to the unfamiliar before our very eyes.

Confusion takes place when we realize that our rational faculties are not enough to understand what is happening. That something has taken place in a language our rational faculties do not speak. In a sense, confusion takes place *because* of our rationality, because we insist on clinging to something which is blinding us to the 'actual situation'. What is to be examined in this chapter is a certain *desire* for confusion in both deconstructive and Sufi thought, a certain perception of bewilderment as a more honest possibility of truth. Words such as 'confusion' and 'bewilderment' enable us to glimpse a similar vein of thought in both Derrida and Ibn ʻArabi – that is, a similar affirmation of confusion as a difficult, courageous and desirable state.

Neither Ibn ʻArabi nor Derrida seem to be afraid of bewilderment – or, for that matter, bewildering. Whether it is the constantly 'exploding semantic horizons' of the disseminating text,[3] or the guidance which means being 'guided to bewilderment',[4] the 'acceptance of incoherent

incoherence'[5] or the God Who is everywhere and nowhere, both Derrida and Ibn ʿArabi part with a philosophical and Koranic tradition which sees confusion synonymous with error, failure, untruth and sin.

In the West, confusion has almost always been seen as the 'problem' of philosophy. Wittgenstein sums this idea up the best: 'The philosopher goes wild, screaming helplessly, until he gets to the heart of his confusion.'[6] Whether it is Spinoza's desire to understand the nature of human actions or Descartes' project to overcome the anxiety of his own scepticism, a fear of confusion and doubt has always been the driving force behind most philosophical projects. Equally negative is the word in Islamic thought, where 'confusion' is used to describe any state of mental or spiritual regression, an inability to understand the will of God – or the consequence of a reluctance to do so. It is the kind of confusion ʿAy al-Qudat Hamadhani felt before finally reading Al-Ghazali: 'My heart was a tumultuous sea with no shores, in it was drowned all the ends and all the beginnings'.[7] Ibn Tamiyah, in his *Muqaddimat al-tafsir*, insists the Prophet was sent to explain clearly (*tubayyin*) everything we need to know.[8] Given such a premise, confusion in Islam can only ever be negative, falling upon those who cannot or will not understand. Therefore, God may well be the Guide (*al-hādī*) for the righteous, but He is also the Misguider (*al-muḍill*) of the wicked, dispersing and confounding those who reject His counsel and follow evil. The fact that Ibn ʿArabi can take such a standard Koranic (not to mention Biblical) motif such as 'confusion' and imbue it with a positive meaning – to the point of making bewilderment a gift from God – not only attests to the Shaykh's daring originality, but also indicates how far Ibn ʿArabi is prepared to radically re-interpret familiar sections of the Koran such as the Surah on Noah (*Nuḥ*). Re-interpretations which, as we shall see, will call into question some of the familiar claims for an 'orthodox' and 'traditionalist' Ibn ʿArabi, centrally located in the mainstream of Islamic thought.

Derrida and Ibn ʿArabi: lovers of clarity or confusion?

The works of Ibn ʿArabi do not simply ennoble confusion – they also confuse. Of course, not everyone agrees on this point. Akbarian scholarship seems to divide itself into two parties over the question of the unity and coherence of Ibn ʿArabi's works. A. E. Affifi was probably one of the first English-speaking critics to discern no 'appreciable degree of coherence or order' in the Great Shaykh's writings,[9] merely a style 'rampant, discursive and badly lacking in form and cohesion'.[10] Later scholars, somewhat more sympathetically, have also testified to

Ibn ʿArabi's works as (to use the Sufi's own words) a place of bewilderment; for Mustafa Tahrali, 'the general rules of discourse, especially that of non-contradiction, are not respected' within the pages of the *Fusus al-Hikam*; it is 'completely natural that [the reader] should be perplexed' when reading it.[11] Alexander Knysh extends this effect of perplexity to all of the Shaykh's works, with their 'confrontation of contradictory metaphysical and theological statements'.[12] On the other hand, scholars more keen on seeing the 'traditionalist (*ṣalafi*)' in Ibn ʿArabi – such as Mahmoud al-Ghorab – insist it is the commentators who are responsible for any confusion surrounding the Shaykh's words.[13] Far from Affifi's confused and inconsistent thinker, al-Ghorab's Ibn ʿArabi is a 'Muhammedan mirror of the utmost clarity, symmetry and straightness'.[14]

A similar gulf separates those of Derrida's readers who argue he has a system and a systematic purpose, from those who feel it is precisely the a-systematic confusion of systems that is Derrida's aim. Both admirers and detractors of Derrida's work can be found amongst the latter group: from Habermas' famous and uncomplimentary charge of 'a mystification of palpable social pathologies'[15] to Mark C. Taylor, who sees deconstructive readings as resulting in an 'unending play of surfaces'.[16] Where John Ellis accuses Derrida of 'mysticism', self-contradiction and general incoherence, Richard Rorty is quite happy to find a philosopher who is no longer 'serious' (in the most Anglo-Saxon sense of the word) – a thinker who has simply dropped 'theory … in favour of fantasizing about [Derrida's philosophical] predecessors, playing with them'.[17]

For such critics, Derrida has not come to bring peace to philosophy, but confusion. The strongest resistance to this chaos-affirming version of Derrida probably comes from a group of admirers (Culler, Gasché, Norris) who see Derrida as being, far from any post-structuralist maverick, a serious philosopher 'in the mainstream tradition from Kant to Husserl and Frege' (Norris).[18] For Gasché, deconstruction neither mystifies nor confuses but *explicates* – it attempts 'to "account" for a heterogeneous variety … of discursive inequalities … that continue to haunt even the *successful* development of philosophical arguments'.[19] In other words Derrida, to borrow Wittgenstein's metaphor, shows the fly the way out of the fly-bottle. Not at all confusing, deconstruction clarifies, illuminates, it sorts out philosophy's problems, settles its accounts.

As the central aim of this chapter is to examine the positive value that both deconstruction and Sufism give to confusion and bewilderment, such a course of action will bring us into conflict both with al-Ghorab's Ibn ʿArabi and Gasché's Derrida. In Ibn ʿArabi's case, Mustafa Tahrali

goes so far as to suggest that the paradoxes and contradictions in the *Fusus* form part of a more spiritual strategy – by literally arousing a state of perplexity in the reader, the *Fusus* begins the long process of detaching the reader from his/her reliance on rationality and logic.[20] In a sense, the bewildering style of the *Fusus* is in itself a preparatory station on the way to a more divine perplexity – the *hayrah* which accompanies all knowledge of God.

Near the beginning of his book on Ibn ʿArabi, William Chittick writes: 'To find God is to fall into bewilderment'.[21] No sentence sums up more accurately the Sufi's attitude towards confusion. Throughout both the *Futuhat* and the *Fusus*, Ibn ʿArabi uses a variety of metaphors for bewilderment: it is, we are told, a station, a gift, a divine name, a tool, a knowledge and ultimately, one suspects, an 'actual situation' which underlies everything we think we know. 'To realise that one cannot know [God] is to know,' says Abu Bakr,[22] a Socratic disclaimer Ibn ʿArabi never tires of quoting, and in a sense Ibn ʿArabi's radically positive view of bewilderment stems directly from this equally radical unthinkability of God.

Therefore, when Ibn ʿArabi quotes the hadith 'O Lord, increase my perplexity concerning You'[23] (as he frequently does), what he is really asking is: O Lord, confuse and confound the simplistic limitations I have attempted to cage You within. Bewilderment becomes the best way the believer has of escaping the metaphysical trap of his own perspectiveness – not, in this case, by the proffering of some extra-linguistic knowledge (a secret name or sign), but rather by presenting and confusing the believer with a multiplicity of different Gods, some orthodox, some heretical, some intimately immanent, others aloof and transcendental. In the alarming, disconcerting contiguity of this myriad of different images, one can truly begin to understand how 'the actual situation of the Divinity does not become delimited or restricted and remains unknown.'[24] For Ibn ʿArabi, a profusion of different beliefs is testimony to God's utter unthinkability. This idea of understanding what God is through a confusion of contrasting images has a fairly long genealogy, one which goes back at least to the first negative theologians of the early Church; it shows the apophatic possibilities of Ibn ʿArabi as a negative theologian, one which become increasingly relevant to Derrida's own critique of the *via negativa*.

Perhaps the sixth century Dionysius offers the most famous example in negative theology of how different constructions concerning God, once dismantled, can actually convey a better sense of God's ineffability. In certain moments of *The Mystical Theology* and *The Celestial*

Hierarchy, he makes the remarkable assertion that to call God drunk or hungover is more suitable than calling God good or wise,[25] for 'incongruous dissimilarities' make us more aware of God's unreachable otherness than equally finite adjectives such as 'almighty' and 'all-knowing'. For the Areopagite, to call God at the same time 'Almighty' and a 'worm', 'wise' and 'drunk', is more accurately to address what one critic has called the 'language-defeating reality of God'.[26] Dionysius self-consciously employs contradictory constructions of the divine Other to convey a more realistic sense of God's utter unthinkability. Constructing and disassembling the various inventions of God that affirmative theology supplies presents an interesting apophatic strategy. Dionysius offers an attempt to understand the Imageless not through the abandonment of images but rather through the contiguity of conflicting ones.

In Derrida, we find a secular version of the same strategy. Understanding the Other involves an 'absolute openness towards the wholly other', a constant interruption, a repeated breaking-up of all the versions of the Other that the Same constructs for itself. Constant interruption is the necessary instability that provides the conditions for glimpsing the otherness of the Other through the broken ruins of one's own constructions:

> By interrupting the weaving of our language and then by weaving together the interruptions themselves, another language comes to disturb the first one . . . Another text, the text of the other, arrives in silence with a more or less regular cadence, without ever appearing in its original language, to dislodge the language of translation.[27]

The *tout autre* works like an utterly unreachable sub-text, forever receding before all our interpretations, while remaining paradoxically the very condition of their possibility. Through the creation and destruction of all our conceptions of the Other, the continual irruption of the truly Other allows us to glimpse a very secular *epekeina tes ousias*: 'At the moment when it erupts, the inaugural invention ought to overflow, overlook, transgress, negate . . . the status that people would have wanted to assign it or grant it in advance.'[28] Through such a subversion of the familiar, the completely unfamiliar may be perceived without any horizon of expectation. How far all of this lies from Ibn 'Arabi's diversity of Gods remains a difficult question. If Derrida sees the authentic relationship to the Other as a constant and necessary instability, a clarifying bewilderment through which one may momentarily glimpse the otherness of the Other, then perhaps Ibn 'Arabi's approach

might be redescribed as a constant shattering of our constructions of God, a necessary iconoclasm that allows one to glimpse the unmediated 'God-ness' of God.

Although Ibn 'Arabi goes to some lengths to show how 'knowledge of God is bewilderment, and knowledge of creation is bewilderment',[29] there are certainly moments in both the *Futuhat* and the *Fusus* where this idea of perplexity as a mystical end-station on the believer's journey is called into question. 'Bewilderment', far from being an essential state of things, is occasionally portrayed by the Shaykh in a different light – more as a temporary and inconvenient prelude to enlightenment ('*arif*') rather than any kind of knowledge in itself. In the middle of a discussion on the 'transcendent reality' which is, at the same time, 'the relative creature',[30] Ibn 'Arabi writes how 'he who truly understands what we are discussing here is not confused' – which means that he who is confused has not truly understood. Thus comprehension, *not* confusion, is the last thing to be experienced before an encounter with the divine. This belief that the desire for knowledge of God ends, epistemologically, in a moment of calm rather than turbulence is underlined further by the ending to the chapter on Lot:

> The Mystery is now clear to you
> And the matter is well explained.
> For that which is odd
> Is enshrined within the even.[31]

The dilemma emerges: which vocabulary has the last word in Ibn 'Arabi, one which sees God as a holy, primordial, difference-dissolving state of confusion? Or one which leads the believer not to but through a confusion, towards an ineffable Something – the 'mystery' (*sirr*) which Ibn 'Arabi so often refers to? Is God Perplexity itself, or rather a Something which lies on the other side of all our bewilderment?

For readers familiar with Derrida (in particular with Derrida's work on negative theology), the question will be of some relevance. For if a giveaway moment of self-presence is to be found anywhere within Ibn 'Arabi's work – if the word 'logocentric' is to be attributed to him at all – it hinges on this conception of God. For Derrida, *all* negative theologies – Islamic or Christian, Greek or Jewish – essentially perform the same gesture. By denying God attributes they claim to do away with the metaphysical shell of God in search of a truly radical encounter with the divine. However, such apophatic strategies do not *deconstruct*, they merely *defer*. For all their boldness, Derrida insists, even after all their

negations, de-negations and auto-deconstructions, such negative theologies still remain ultimately metaphysical – they still keep 'in reserve . . . some hyperessentiality' (*elles semble résérver quelque suressentialité*) and thereby re-affirm the onto-theo-logic.[32] If God is bewilderment itself, then the Shaykh cannot easily be accused of subscribing to a metaphysical, onto-theological idea of God – the very 'hyperessentiality' (*suressentialité*) which Derrida accuses both Eckhart and Dionysius of harbouring. However, if Ibn 'Arabi is merely delineating a series of steps (of which bewilderment is only one) which will lead us, eventually, to some hallowed secret or mystery, then Ibn 'Arabi is not radically questioning the idea of God but merely deferring Him, merely postponing His imminent meaning.

So what is Ibn 'Arabi's ultimate idea of God – confusion or clarity? If the *Fusus* appears to give two different responses to this question – the chapters on Noah and Muhammed suggesting the former, the sections on Enoch and Hud the latter – some help comes from a later commentator of Ibn 'Arabi, the fifteenth century 'Abd al-Rahman Jāmī.[33] Essentially, Jāmī discerns three kinds of bewilderment in the closing chapter of the *Fusus*. The first kind is the 'bewilderment of the beginners'.[34] This, Jāmī says, is a 'common' bewilderment, which most believers feel – the anxiety of those who seek meaning but have no belief or direction in which to travel. This first state of confusion is usually removed by 'the determination of a quest'.[35] For the 'most part' of the people, this leads to tranquillity – some, however, experience the second stage of bewilderment as they look around and see the believers who have 'split up into numerous factions' about them, 'so [the believer] becomes bewildered and does not know which of the beliefs is the most correct in reality'. The removal of this bewilderment takes place when 'no desire remains in [the believer] for the divine presence from a particular aspect or point of view'.[36] Once this abandonment of isms and perspectives takes place, we move onto the third stage – which belongs to what Jāmī calls 'the people of the final bewilderment'. Significantly, this is a station which even 'the greatest spiritual luminaries' do not exceed – 'rather they ascend in it for ever and ever'. Writing almost two hundred years after the *Fusus*, Jāmī sees his predecessor's bewilderment as no temporary bridge to a final, clarifying solution, but rather a strange land beyond God where true gnostics wander in all directions of their own accord. 'So they enter the Trackless Desert in His contemplation, and their bewilderment is from Him, through Him and in Him'.[37]

'Abd al-Rahman Jāmī's comments bring to light three important aspects of the Shaykh's 'bewilderment' – aspects which, we shall see, will reflect

on our comparison with Derrida. First of all, there are different kinds of confusion, different types of bewilderment to be encountered by the believer. In some cases, attempting to overcome confusion is seen to be spiritually necessary; in others, it is futile and foolish. Second, Jāmī rightly (and uncritically) discerns in Ibn ʿArabi a certain elitism – confusion is not for everyone. Apart from those rare spirits who are able to persist in perpetual bewilderment, the greater part of the faithful (Jāmī calls them the 'people of the stopping places' *ahl al-mawaqif*)[38] stop short of the 'final bewilderment' and take shelter in a niche of clarity. One almost discerns a hierarchy of perplexity here, made possible not by knowledge but rather by non-knowledge. Those at the bottom are the ones with the clearest ideas, whilst those near the top are the most confused, the ones who have come closest to the secret of God's mind-numbing unthinkability. Third, the 'final bewilderment' which Jāmī refers to makes us wonder if, in Ibn ʿArabi's *oeuvre*, the true goal is not so much confusion but a certain attitude towards confusion; whether true *ḥayrah* is not so much a state but rather the calm acceptance of a situation, perhaps even the *celebration* of such a moment. Of course, how close such a 'celebration' would come towards the 'Nietzschean… joyous affirmation of the play of the world' (*l'affirmation nietzschéenne… joyeuse du jeu du monde*)[39] we read in those famous closing passages of Derrida's 'Structure, Sign and Play', remains to be seen.

Deconstruction: untying knots, thwarting systems

There is something implicitly negative about the word 'deconstruction', even though elsewhere Derrida has suggested 'de-structuration' (translating Heidegger's *Destruktion*) as more accurately conveying the sense of the term.[40] The variety of images Derrida supplies to describe the effects of différance and dissemination is bewildering in itself: différance is anarchic, it 'instigates the subversion of every kingdom',[41] it 'escapes… and disorganizes structure',[42] it 'disembedds' the text, 'unsews' it,[43] 'explodes the semantic horizon' of its subject.[44] Such terms which illustrate the paradoxical etymology of confusion, with its simultaneous sense of convergence and divergence. Confusion is a word which literally means 'melting together' but which we often use in the opposite sense, to describe a situation in which many things are happening at the same time. Différance at once confuses and makes things simpler. It breaks down complexities, undoes complications, dismantles structures into their various components. At the same time it makes a text difficult to read, disabling its primary sense in order to free

a plethora of secondary ones, robbing the text of its semantic rudder so that it can no longer be said to sail in any particular direction.

This emphasis on différance as something which undoes/unsews/disrupts the text obviously makes use of the origins of the word 'text' (from the Latin *textus*, cloth). The text is a cloth which différance forever threatens to undo. 'Dissemination endlessly opens up a snag [*accroc*] in writing that can no longer be mended…'.[45] No work can escape this stitch, this inherent, ever-present possibility of its complete undoing. It is interesting to note that the Arabic term Ibn ʿArabi frequently uses for 'belief' (*iʾtiqãd, ʿaqida*) has as its root meaning the tying of a knot, or to tie something firmly.[46] Thus, when Ibn ʿArabi says how 'Every group has believed something about God', what he means is 'Every group has tied a certain knot about God'.[47] The bewildering unthinkability of God unties every knot concerning Him, just as the unthinkable movement of différance undoes every text.

Despite the variety of metaphors Derrida offers for différance and dissemination, it should not be forgotten that Derrida, far from confusing the text, is simply showing how the text is already confused in itself. Deconstruction is a revelatory operation, not a stimulatory one. The 'essential drifting of the text'[48] precedes any theoretical intervention – texts are always already drifting. If deconstruction brings anarchy to the text, it is only by showing how these unruly elements have always been seething and brooding underneath a calm façade of unity and coherence. Confusion and instability is the a priori condition of every text, regardless of whether it has been analysed or not. In the same way, for Ibn ʿArabi the essentially bewildering nature of God precedes every attempt, be it Ashʾarite or Muʾtazilite, to talk meaningfully about Him – 'God is the root of every diversity (*khilaf*) in beliefs within the cosmos'.[49] In both Derrida and Ibn ʿArabi, confusion and perplexity seem to precede and underlie every attempt to form a system – a belief which inevitably imbues the desire for confusion with an element of honesty and courage (not to mention Nietzschean 'integrity'), the desire to glimpse a 'truer', more confused state of affairs and not succumb to the temptation of the system. In Derrida's case, this re-appraisal of confusion is most clearly seen in his 1985 essay, 'Des Tours de Babel'.

Derrida on Babel: the tyranny of clarity

Derrida's essay, being itself an analysis of Benjamin's famous essay on translation 'The Task of the Translator', displays its title with an obvious irony, quite apart from the ambiguity of 'Des Tours' (Some tricks? Some

towers? Some detours?). Derrida's essay on translation *has* to begin with Genesis 11: 1–9, the destruction of the tower of Babel which is simultaneously the birth of the translator, the ethnoclastic event which makes translation possible. What is most immediately striking about 'Des Tours' is the way in which Derrida re-interprets the episode of Babel using his own terms, retelling the Old Testament story like a medieval typologist, this time not Christianizing but post-structuralizing the chapter from Genesis to transform it into a deconstructive parable. Genesis 11: 1–9 is no longer just a story about the pride of man thwarted by the Omnipotence of God: it is also a tale about an unfinished structure, a monocultural and monolingual project (the Shemites) with universalist intentions being thwarted not by thunder or earthquakes but by language itself.

'Now the whole world had one language and a common speech' (Genesis 11: 1). The Babel episode, whilst purporting to be a Biblical explanation for the multiplicity of tongues, also marks the beginning of confusion for man in the Bible. It marks the beginning of a fragmentation of cultures, a dispersal of different tongues, the deliberate introduction of a nefarious (and divinely delivered) multiplicity into the totalizing project of the Shemites. Not surprisingly, Derrida discerns clear parallels to deconstruction in all of this:

> In seeking to 'make a name for themselves', to found at the same time a universal tongue and a unique genealogy, the Shemites want to bring the world to reason, and this reason can signify simultaneously a colonial violence (since they would thus universalise their idiom) and a peaceful transparency of the human community.[50]

The Shemites, no longer simply tower-builders, have become system-builders. Believers in universal truths, metaphysical construction engineers, trying to build a structure which would both symbolize and disseminate their supremacy – not only over other peoples ('colonial violence'), but also over *language*. The Shemites want to take over the deistic function of eponymy and 'make a name for themselves' – subdue and control language, decide what they may and may not be called, control which signifieds get allotted to which signifiers. Apart from injecting something strangely Biblical into Derrida's own deconstruction of Western metaphysics (Is Derrida a modern Jeremiah, railing against the Babelian pretensions of structuralism and phenomenology, science and sociology?), the passage emphasizes how the pride of the Shemites blinds them to the futility of their project. For this is precisely what

Babel – to Derrida – represents: 'an incompletion, the impossibility of finishing, of totalising . . . of completing something on the order of system . . . and architectonics.'[51] Derrida has spent a life exploring this impossibility of ever putting a stop to meaning, of ever making a text say one thing, coherently and consistently, and nothing else. Thus, the futility of the Shemites' project is also the futility of Husserl's, whose Cartesian project sought to 'return to the things themselves' and seek out 'the foundation of objectivity',[52] the futility of Foucault's *L'histoire de la folie*, which believes it can talk in a rational–analytical way about madness without ever succumbing to the rational/insane dualism it purports to critique; the futility of Levinas' *Totality and Infinity*, whose aim of re-establishing a 'non-violent' relationship with the wholly Other is revealed by Derrida to be nothing more than a 'dream' – the '*dream* of a purely *heterological* thought' (*le rêve d'une pensée purement* hétérologique).[53] In all these instances, the Shemites' mistaken conviction that their structure can actually get the better of language is replicated.

What is even more interesting than this contemporary allegorizing of Biblical pride is the way Derrida sees God as a synonym for deconstruction. It is 'from a *proper* name of God . . . tongues are scattered, confounded or multiplied'.[54] God is the arch-deconstructor of the story – it is He who confounds the sign-system of the Shemites by fissuring it, fracturing it, causing it to double and triple until the Shemites no longer know who they are or what it is they were planning to do. For all this humbling, abasing and confounding, however, Derrida's God is not simply an agent of deconstruction, but also a God who deconstructs Himself:

> And the proper name of God (given by God) is divided enough in the tongue, already, to signify also, confusedly, 'confusion'. And the war that He declares has first raged within his name: divided, bifid, ambivalent, polysemic: God deconstructs. Himself.[55]

It is a point Derrida has made several times: not even God escapes différance. Or, in more secular terms, even the deconstructive critic must fall prey to the same semantic instabilities s/he has detected in others. The pat distinction between deconstructor and deconstructed is dissolved. For Derrida, no-one or -thing, no God or mystic, neither Husserl's brackets, Heidegger's *Sein* nor Levi-Strauss' *bricoleur* can escape the 'metaphysical complicity' of language.[56] As soon as we begin to deconstruct, we have already deconstructed ourselves. When God

delivers confusion and chaos upon the designs of the Shemites, He is actually inflicting Himself upon them. Derrida has already suggested this at the very beginning of the essay with a quote from Voltaire's *Dictionnaire Philosophique*:

> I do not know why it is said that Babel signifies confusion, for *Ba* signifies father in the Oriental tongues, and *Bel* signifies God; Babel signifies the city of God, the holy city. The Ancients gave this name to all their capitals.[57]

It's not difficult to see why Derrida makes use of Voltaire's 'calm irony' (ibid.): Voltaire is implying, tacitly, what Derrida is later going to declare openly – that both the origin and the nature of confusion (Ba-Bel) is not diabolical, but divine. Of course, Voltaire's alternative etymology of Babel is a clear swipe at Augustine; in *Civitas Dei*, Augustine distinguishes between the city of God (Jerusalem – peace, silence, unity, lawfulness, immutability) and the city of men (Babylon – disruption, noise, discord, confusion, change). Whereas the saint sees divinity as the remedy for confusion, even suggesting 'vision of peace' as an etymology for Jeru-salem, Voltaire sees Babylon as the first and true city of God. Divinity is another name for confusion.

Just as God precedes history, confusion precedes order. Or, as Derrida might say, confusion inhabits order, pervades order, gives *meaning* to order. In Derrida's version of Genesis, no calm, transcendental deity deconstructs the tower – rather, one version of confusion gives birth to another. Which is why 'Des Tours de Babel' is so important for our own argument – it is one of the few places in the Derridean oeuvre where Derrida actually joins Ibn 'Arabi in using 'confusion' as a divine name. What Derrida does in 'Des Tours' is call into question the *simplicity* of God, criticize the standard and fairly simplistic images of deity we have, remind us of the confusing and overwhelming complexity of the thought of God. It is a theme Derrida has certainly touched on elsewhere – twenty years earlier, in his essay on Jabès (in many ways the most Kabbalistic of Derrida's essays) Derrida is comparing the 'God' we can know with the 'God' we cannot:

> If God opens the question in God, if he is the very opening of the Question, there can be no simplicity of God. And, thus, that which was unthinkable for the classical rationalists here becomes the obvious itself. Proceeding within the duplicity of his own questionability, God does not act in the simplest ways; he is not truthful, he is not sincere.[58]

Like Ibn ʻArabi, Derrida is asking us to increase our perplexity concerning God. The 'simplicity' of God – the belief that God acts and works in essentially clear, meaningful ways – is opposed to the distinctly un-classical complexity and confusion of God. Derrida's rejection of such 'simplicity' replicates, to some extent, Ibn ʻArabi's frequent Koranic reminder that God is like 'no thing' that we can know.

Of course after his essay on Benjamin, Derrida will go on to write a great deal about God and confusion – but never again as synonyms. In his later essays on Eckhart and Silesius, not to mention his more recent work on the Czech philosopher Jan Patocka, Derrida is more concerned with God as an infinitely deferred secret or 'hyper-truth', rather than any kind of divine, de-structuring chaos. In a sense, Derrida's gesture in 'Des Tours de Babel' – that of depicting God as a holy confusion, a wild and forever fluctuating source of energy – has a number of precedents both in and outside Western thought, not least among them Boehme (1575–1624) and Eckhart. Derrida mentions Boehme himself towards the end of the essay: 'the God of Boehme . . . who goes out of himself, determines himself in his finitude and thus produces history'.[59] Boehme's own idea of God as a dynamic, turbulent energy is most famously expressed in his idea of the *Ungrund*:

> For all is comprised in the will, and is an essence, which, in the eternal unground, eternally takes its rise in itself, enters into itself, grasps itself in itself, and makes the centre in itself; but with that which is grasped passes out of itself, manifests itself in the brightness of the eye, and thus shines forth out of the essence in itself and from itself.[60]

Given the Protean nature of différance, which is a 'nothing' (*rien*) and yet forever 'differs from itself, defers itself and writes itself as différance',[61] it is clear why Derrida (at least in 'Des Tours') finds the 'God of Boehme' attractive – a writhing, seething force which emerges from a bottomless depth (*Ungrund*) to crystallize itself as history. The God of Genesis, after all, creates history by the destruction of a monument; with the abolition of one language, He gives birth to many more; by foiling the plans of one people, He creates a multiplicity of tribes.

All of which leads to the question: what *exactly* is Derrida saying in 'Des Tours' about confusion? Is it desirable or undesirable? Is it the birth of something new and positive – or an ineluctable fate which terminates every project we undertake?

Confusion, first and foremost, appears to be a punishment delivered in particular upon those who want to get rid of their own confusion.

The Shemites are guilty of this cardinal sin: 'Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower . . . / Let us make ourselves a name,/that we not be scattered over the face of all the earth'.[62] Seeing the world not as a place to affirm but rather to control, the Shemites are unhappy with their wandering, nameless status – and it is precisely this proud dissatisfaction with their nomadic condition which provokes their punishment. There is something faintly paradoxical here – 'True homelessness and confusion will only be inflicted on those who do not desire it', as if learning to love one's perplexity is the only way ever to be free of it.

Part of the Shemites' sin, it would appear, lies in the Shemites' refusal not just to wander but also to accept the multiplicity of language. The only truly 'proper' (*propre*) name is that of 'YHWH'; the Shemites, troubled by the fact that their name may take on different meanings for different people, yearn for a similar unambiguity. In this sense, the tower of Babel is (in the words of Richard Rorty) 'an attempt to avoid relatedness . . . to speak a word which has meaning even though it has no place in a social practice'.[63] The Shemites' sin is the desire for *meaning* itself, pure, unambiguous, repeatable meaning, not to be at the mercy of contexts, or adrift in alien situations. Of course the Shemites fail in this – and Derrida's conviction of the 'impossibility of finishing' such towers only reflects the more general impossibility of *any* proper name (even that of YHWH) to *ever* mean one thing and one thing only.

This desire to have a proper name – whether it is for one's race, one's movement or one's work – does remind one of Freud. Freud certainly had paths he wanted his writings to travel along – as Derrida points out so cleverly in 'Coming Into One's Own' – and was quick to admonish his followers whenever he saw a text straying from its desired trajectory. In his essay on *Beyond The Pleasure Principle*, Derrida examines Freud's paternal hold on his writings, his desire to keep psychoanalysis 'in the family', as it were, not to let any of his texts run about on their own, orphan-like: '. . . the establishment of a science . . . should have been able to do without the family name Freud. Or able, at least, to make forgetting that name the necessary condition and the proof that science itself is handed on, passed down.'[64] The same unambiguity the Shemites want for their own name, Freud wanted for 'psychoanalysis'. Freud shared the Shemites' aversion towards confusion, the fear of being differently understood, a fear which can only spring from a desire for power.

Second, Derrida's essay seems to oppose confusion to violence – at least, to a certain kind of violence, a 'colonial violence'. The Shemites' desire to 'universalise their idiom',[65] of making the whole world speak their tongue and subscribe to their culture, ultimately belongs to what

Derrida had earlier called (paraphrasing Levinas) a thought of 'the One and the Same' – in other words, a metaphysics which is 'the origin . . . of all oppression in the world'.[66] God's gesture, therefore, becomes 'multicultural' in the most ironic sense of the term; the bewildering of the Shemites foils their imperialist intentions, confounding their architects and scattering their armies, disempowering them physically as well as semantically. Confusion, here, means the loss of all the reasons why one would want to control and subdue somebody; the difficulty in forcing someone to conform to one *logos* when a multiplicity of them abound. If rational metaphysics is 'the origin . . . of all oppression', and if confusion is precisely that which disables the will-to-metaphysicize, then it is not surprising to see how Derrida can discover pacific overtones in the idea of bewilderment. Confusion, far from being that which foils justice or creates a breeding ground for injustice, actually becomes a disabler of tyranny, a dismantler of the violent totality, a paralysing spanner thrown into the dictator's machine.

Derrida, in typical fashion, questions this idea as soon as he expresses it. The Babelian project 'can signify simultaneously a colonial violence . . . and a peaceful transparency of the community'.[67] The divine abolition of a single tongue may well foil the aims of a 'linguistic imperialism', but it also removes a form of communication. A difficult question briefly makes its appearance: is Genesis 11: 1–9 about the thwarting of an empire or the destruction of a community? Is the removal of one bigger, 'colonial violence' only the beginning of a number of smaller, interethnic ones? It is a surprisingly generous phrase, given Derrida's antipathy towards words like 'community' (in which he sees 'as many threats as promises'),[68] not to mention the famous crossing of swords with Habermas and his communicative reason. The common idiom, however colonially imposed, would at least reduce the possibility of misunderstanding within the community – expressions, actions, gestures, would all be relatively 'transparent'. The language game of the Shemites would be colonially singular, and its rules transparently (albeit incontestably) clear. Even though Derrida seems to be saying, in 'Des Tours', that God's deconstruction of the tower is an example of what Derrida has elsewhere termed 'just deconstruction',[69] the possible 'peaceful transparency' of the Shemites' community does inject a note of ambivalence into the essay.

If the Derrida of 'Des Tours' appears to be reluctant to come out and out and declare confusion to be a truly pacific state – that is, declaring bewilderment to be the only way of non-violently receiving the Other – we should not be surprised. As we have already seen in *Of Grammatology*,

when using words like 'violence' and 'colonial' Derrida is often careful not to replicate Levi-Strauss' error and fall into the trap of a tyrant/victim, wicked/innocent dualism. Even though Derrida believes no order or community to be free of a certain violence, this does not mean anarchy is some form of blissful utopia. The most we can say about Derrida's attitude towards confusion is that, when we are confused or bewildered, we are less likely to impose a single, reductive image onto the Other – just as Ibn 'Arabi's perfect gnostic, when in a state of complete *ḥayrah* or perplexity, is no longer willing or able to fix any image onto the Real.

Third, Derrida's words on Babel underline one consistent feature of his varied and diverse corpus: a delight in multiplicity at the expense of unity. For Derrida the divergent is infinitely preferable to the convergent, the fragments are more interesting than the whole, the Many is preferable to the One. Bewilderment is to be encouraged, not resisted. The allegations of anarchy which have been levelled at Derrida, whilst exaggerated in tone and mistaken in motive, are correct to some degree: they concern a thinker who is as interested in dissolution as he is in design. The 'dissemination' of the Shemites ('YHWH disperses them from here over the face of all the earth/They cease to build the city'),[70] a working metaphor for the deconstruction of every would-be system, is the very kind of confusion Derrida seeks to affirm. This profoundly anti-Neoplatonic strain in Derrida's writing, rather than seeking an impossible return to the One, affirms the dissolution of the One into the Many – if only because there never was a 'pure', 'unchanging' One to begin with:

> . . . the quasi-'meaning' of dissemination is the impossible return to the rejoined, readjusted unity of meaning . . . But is dissemination then the *loss* of that kind of truth, the *negative* prohibition of all access to such a signified? Far from presupposing that a virgin substance thus precedes or oversees it, dispersing or withholding itself within a negative second moment, dissemination *affirms* the always already divided generation of meaning.[71]

This denial of any original 'oneness' or 'wholeness' ('virgin substance') which might have preceded the multiple probably constitutes the most serious difference between Ibn 'Arabi and Derrida, whose attitudes towards rationality and bewilderment otherwise encounter so many points of similarity. It is a passage which reveals Derrida to be the most un-Neoplatonic of thinkers, surprising only when one considers some of the favourites in the Derridean canon (Benjamin and Blanchot,

for instance). Instead of the One, an emptiness lies at the heart of dissemination, a place where 'there is no longer any depth of meaning'.[72] The 'actual situation' for Derrida is an endlessly proliferating myriad of substitutions, without beginning or end, centre or periphery, in the midst of which the unenlightened forever attempt to build their theories, structures and truths, unaware that their metaphysical towers rest upon interminably shifting sands.

Ibn 'Arabi on the flood: sainthood as perplexity

> Were He to come out of a thing, it would cease to be. And were He to be within a thing, it would cease to be.
>
> (*Futuhat*, II.661.10)

Ibn 'Arabi's treatment of the seventy-first surah of the Koran on Noah (*Nuḥ*) is a good example of how the Shaykh bewilders the reader, by offering interpretations of well-known passages from the Koran which are almost the exact opposite of what they appear to mean. The hermeneutics of the *Fusus* are a lesson in perplexity in themselves: villains and tyrants are treated sympathetically, heroes are shown to be ignorant or misguided, condemnatory verses are reinterpreted as praise, idolaters are shown to be enlightened. As we shall see in a later chapter, Ibn 'Arabi's conviction that 'the Reality of God lies in all things' is perfectly translated into his Koranic commentary; the intention of God's Holy Text lies in all possible readings, even in the most contradictory and outrageous ones. For now, we are merely interested in what Ibn 'Arabi's chapter on Noah in the Fusus says about bewilderment – and ultimately how this compares to Derrida's own thoughts on confusion.

In a way, Ibn 'Arabi's retelling of the story of Noah follows Derrida's version of Babel, insofar as both writers deal with a divinely delivered catastrophe – and both writers choose to redescribe this punishment as more of a blessing than a chastisement, more of a development or an advancement than a termination. The Koranic account of the flood does not differ greatly from that of the Biblical version with regards to the ultimate significance of the event – in response to the rising corruption and sinfulness of man, God resolves to wipe out the unbelievers with a divine deluge, saving only Noah and those around him from the waters because of their righteousness. The Koran differs only insofar as it shows, in some detail, the despair of Noah as he attempts (in vain) to persuade his people to leave their idols and repent, and his request to God that none of the proud unbelievers should be spared.

In order to understand the Shaykh's radical rereading of this *surah*, one has to remember God's persistent emphasis on God as being *simultaneously* immanent and transcendent. In his attempt to reach the unbelievers Noah, far from being praised as a solitary bastion of righteousness in a decadent world, is criticized for only emphasizing the transcendent without mentioning the immanent: 'Had Noah uttered this kind of saying, they would have responded to him . . .'.[73] Even more notoriously, Ibn 'Arabi interprets the final drowning of the unbelievers not as just punishment upon the sinful, but as the drowning of saints in the shoreless oceans of Allah: 'they drowned in the seas of knowledge of God, which is what is meant by perplexity'.[74] The stubborn idolaters, with their bewildering abundance of idols (*Wadd, Suwan, Yaghuth, Ya'uq, Nasr* 71: 23), suddenly became the purveyors of a spiritual *ḥayrah* – one which eludes Noah, a figure still clinging to a one-sided view of a transcendent God.

Ibn 'Arabi's version of Noah is important because it tells us a number of things about the Shaykh's attitude towards bewilderment; first and foremost, multiplicity is seen not as a problem, but as a means towards the solution. The perplexity necessary towards spiritual advancement can only be provided by multiplicity – in this case, the multiplicity of idols which 'cause confusion' amongst Noah's people. Only confusion can bring us nearer to God. One object of worship is not sufficient – it deludes the ignorant with an illusion of clarity, desists from complicating the thought of God, makes the believer think the holy is exclusive to the statue or painting s/he is worshipping. As soon as a multiplicity of idols appears, the locus of the holy – and thereby the nature of the Holy itself – is called into question. Distraction here becomes an anti-metaphysical tool, one used to lever and prize the intellect out of a certain niche and into a freer understanding of things. The perplexity the believer experiences at this multiplication of possibilities provokes a sincerer inquiry into the nature of God, one which will lead (the Shaykh believes) to the all-important realization that *al-ḥaqq* is present everywhere and in everything.

Here, especially, one sees how important a role infinity plays at the heart of both Derrida and Ibn 'Arabi's thought. The forms of the Real, like the possible meanings of the deconstructive text, are infinite in number: there is no end to the 'bottomless chessboard' (*échiquier sans fond*) on which différance is put into play,[75] any more than there is any bottom to the infinite oceans of God ('God possesses relationships, faces and realities without limit'[76]). The confusion which the infinity of the Real/the Derridean text provides is seen by both Derrida and Ibn 'Arabi

to be perfectly desirable, even if they do lead in radically different directions. For Derrida, the bewilderingly infinite possibilities of the text leads to one conclusion: that the text is semantically vacuous, a sheet of symbols bereft of depth. Ibn ʿArabi, however, viewing the perplexing variety of people's beliefs, does not come to the conclusion that there is no God, but rather that there is 'Something which cannot be known' which both embodies and is embodied by all of these infinite manifestations.

A second point to be made is that Noah's evangelical failure to save the unbelievers from the flood stems from his refusal to present God as a divine perplexity:

> Noah summoned his people *by night*, in that he appealed to their intellects and spirits, which are unseen, and *by day*, in that he appealed to the external senses. But he did not unite the two as in the verse *There is none like Him* (42: 11).[77]

Noah literally refuses to con-fuse the idea of God by presenting Him as a simultaneous conjunction of opposites (immanent and transcendent). This monologic attachment to a simplistic understanding of God, essentially this distaste for confusion on Noah's part, causes the unbelievers to 'recoil' and prevents them from climbing onto the boat. It is an unflattering portrayal of Noah for Ibn ʿArabi to present – one which seems to class Noah with the proponents of the Kalam and the other philosophers who fetter (*ʿiqal*) themselves to a single image of God. Perhaps to recover some shred of orthodoxy, Ibn ʿArabi contrasts this implicit ignorance of Noah with the keener wisdom of the Prophet Muhammed, who (in the Shaykh's opinion) clearly understood something about God which Noah did not:

> In the verse *There is none like Him*, similarity is at once implied and denied. Because of this Muhammad said that he had been granted knowledge [of God] integrating all His aspects. Muhammad [unlike Noah] did not summon his people *by night* and *by day*, but by night during the day [an inner summons implicit in the outer one], and by day during the night [the outer truth being implicit in the inner].[78]

Unlike Noah, the Prophet is keenly aware of the 'actual situation' – he emphasizes neither the *ẓahir* nor the *baṭin* at the expense of one another, but rather blurs the distinction between both. Unlike Noah, the Prophet is not afraid of the con-fusion of God; this natural distance between

Noah and Muhammad is not measured in terms of respect or divine favour, but rather in terms of how close each comes to accepting perplexity as a condition of the divine.

One of the more interesting metaphors Ibn ʻArabi uses for such perplexity is that of a deluge, evoking the familiar image of God as a shoreless ocean. It is a metaphor which provides the most scandalous suggestion in Ibn ʻArabi's rereading of the surah; the unbelievers' refusal to join Noah and climb on the boat is no tragic mistake, but rather a spiritually wiser move, one which saves them from the narrow ontotheology of Noah's ark and allows them to drown ecstatically in the wider seas of 'the knowledge of God'.[79] By refusing to join Noah and heed the call to his transcendent God, they reject an unenlightened clarity in favour of their own perplexing truth – and pay for this choice, as Al Hallaj did, with their lives. Nevertheless, the spiritual stage the unbelievers reach as a result of their refusal is far higher than that of Noah. Once swept away by the flood, if they were ever to find land again (as Noah does), it would constitute no rescue but a spiritual descent: 'Were He to deliver them onto the shore of Nature He would be lowering them from an eminent stage…'.[80] For true gnostics, evidently, oceans are preferable to arks.

In the *Futuhat* Ibn ʻArabi performs the same controversial gesture, taking familiar condemnations of the foolish and the proud in the Koran and completely inverting their meaning so that they describe those few, distinct from 'the common people',[81] who have discovered true perplexity. For example, the wayward described by the Koran in verses 2: 17, those 'who do not see', are 'deaf, dumb, and blind' and 'will never return to the right path', are interpreted differently by the Shaykh in the last volume of the *Futuhat*:

> But the *elect* are 'in darkness, they do not see. Deaf, dumb, blind.' (2: 17), they do not understand. Sometimes they say 'We are we and He is He', sometimes they say 'He is we and we are He'…[82] (italics mine)

Darkness, incomprehension and aimlessness are the gifts of the perplexed – '…they will never return to the right path'. Bewilderment, amongst other things, means loss of direction. Suddenly, 'never returning to the right path' seems to be indicative of enlightenment, not ignorance. Ibn ʻArabi infuses the idea of wandering with a positive sense which would be difficult to reconcile with orthodox Islam, given the importance of the path (*al-ṣirāt al-mustaqīm*) and its synonymy with the

codes and traditions of the *Shariah*. In his chapter on Noah, Ibn ʿArabi analyses this difference between the unperplexed – who proceed along a given path towards a goal – and the bewildered, for whom there is no longer any centre to journey towards:

> He who experiences this perplexity is ceaselessly centred on the Pole [God], while he who follows the 'long' path [to a distant God] is always turning aside from the [Supreme] Goal to search after that which is [eternally] within him, running after imagination as his goal. He has an [imaginary] starting point and [what he supposes to be] a goal and what lies between them, while for the God-centred man there is no restriction of beginning or end, possessing [as he does] the most comprehensive existence and being the recipient of [divine] truths and realities.[83]

Ibn ʿArabi's perplexity here is opposed to movement – confusion becomes a paralysing condition, it robs the believer of a goal, an object, an aim. As soon as one discovers that God is (immanently) in oneself as well as (transcendentally) 'Somewhere' outside, one no longer needs to make a pilgrimage, for the shrine is already inside the pilgrim. Hence the paralysis which confusion brings to the 'God-centred' (perplexed) man is by no means negative, but simply the rendering unnecessary of an illusory journey to something one already is.

The final point to be made about Ibn ʿArabi's remarks on Noah concerns the social implications of *ḥayrah* and its subversive potential. The chapter on Noah offers one of the few places in the *Fusus* where the faintly political possibilities of perplexity – discovering the Real within oneself – are alluded to, if not fully explored. Modern critics with political agendas can often be found re-interpreting various medieval mysticisms as revolutionary vocabularies, particularly those which emphasize the divine within the human. The clearest example of this is probably Ernst Bloch's Marxist reading of Meister Eckhart in his *Atheismus im Christentum*. In Ernst Bloch, Eckhart's insistence on the unity of God and the soul becomes a subversive, emancipatory gesture which ultimately sees 'the treasure in Heaven [as] the property of man' (*die Schätze im Himmel als Eigentum der Mensch*).[84] Thus for Bloch, Eckhart supplies not just an 'aspiring subject' but also a 'blown-open, descending heavenly kingdom' (*gesprengter, niedersteigender Himmel*).[85]

All of which does not mean to say a similarly emancipatory reading of Ibn ʿArabi should be attempted – the only chains the Shaykh is keen

to break are purely metaphysical. What deserves comment in Ibn ʿArabi's Noah is the way the presence of the perplexed dissolves a certain social hierarchy – and the way Noah's words (below in italics) presents the confusion of the unbelievers as a possible threat to society, one which might spread if not checked in time:

> *If you spare them*, that is leave them, *they will confuse your servants*, meaning that they will perplex them and cause them to depart from their servanthood to [assert] the mysteries of Lordship in themselves, so that they will consider themselves as Lords after being servants. They will indeed be servants become as Lords.[86]

If God is the dissolver of differences ('He has no attributes (*ṣifa*)'[87]), then everyone carries within them this capacity to dismantle hierarchy, regardless of their social position. Noah's fear lies in this perceived threat of self-discovery; perplexity lifts the servant out of his servanthood, causes everything to shimmer and change, relocating the Divinity not just in the hearts of caliphs and kings, but even down to the lowest rung of the social ladder. It is a passage which reminds us of Bloch's observation – in Ibn ʿArabi, true enlightenment turns servants into Lords.

Conclusion: actual situations

Both Derrida and Ibn ʿArabi's attitude towards perplexity – their repeated mistrust of systems and system-builders, their consistent portrayal of clarity as an illusion based on the ignorance of a certain situation, their understanding of a certain dynamic force which pervades all manifestations/texts without ever revealing itself, along with their belief that the state of perplexity allows one to glimpse an elusive Other which remains invisible to those who are trying to think it . . . all these observations leads us to a number of general points as in the following list.

Perplexity is an 'actual situation'. For both thinkers, confusion is a certain originary state of affairs which seems to precede God/the text and every attempt to talk about them. For Ibn ʿArabi, the true gnostic sees through (without dismissing) the theologizing and philosophizing of his peers; he understands that 'the whole affair [of God] is perplexity',[88] a divine flux which lies beneath every image and concept proffered about the Real. The deconstructive critic replicates this antedating of meaning with confusion by seeing through the apparent calm of the

text and perceiving an '"active, moving discord of different forces" beneath it',[89] always already about to subvert and undermine any and every interpretation.

Perplexity is an inevitable situation. The confusion which both différance and *al-ḥaqq* perpetrate cannot be overcome; no theological vocabulary can tie the Real to one form, safe and constant, just as no hermeneutics can prevent the 'essential drifting of the text'.[90] The Real moves through a bewildering variety of manifestations, from *ẓahir* to *ẓahir*, just as the text moves through an equally bewildering series of differing interpretations. For both Derrida and Ibn 'Arabi, the perplexing effusion of meanings and manifestations can neither be controlled nor resisted; bewilderment is a semantic fact of God.

Perplexity is an honest, difficult situation. The word for *kāfir* ('infidel, unbeliever') comes from the Arabic root *khafara*, meaning to hide or conceal. Etymologically, a *kāfir* is someone who hides the truth in his or her heart.[91] For Ibn 'Arabi, this would mean refusing to acknowledge the perplexity of the 'actual situation' – that the Real both is and is not the creation, that He is simultaneously immanent and transcendent. The secret of the Akbarian soul – that it is a part of the Real – is concealed (*kafara*) thanks to the half-truth of transcendence (*tanẓih*). 'We forbid reflection totally,' writes Ibn 'Arabi, 'since it makes the possessor heir to deceit and lack of sincerity'.[92] 'Covering' or 'concealing' the radical unthinkability of God with our own versions of the deity makes our spiritual lives easier for us; if we desire a true encounter with the Real, we have to be prepared to experience perplexity and not simply seek reassurance in comfortable, familiar images.

In speaking (within a strictly Christian context) of a 'deconstructive theology movement', Derrida has suggested some similar theological applications of deconstruction – more than anything else, of 'uncovering' a spiritual authenticity:

> . . . the point would seem to be to *liberate* theology from what has been grafted onto it, to free it from its metaphysico-philosophical super ego, so as to *uncover* an authenticity of the 'gospel', of the evangelical message. And thus from the perspective of faith, deconstruction can at least be a very useful technique when Aristotelianism or Thomism are to be criticized or, even from an institutional perspective, when what needs to be criticized is a whole theological institution which supposedly has *covered over*, dissimulated an authentic Christian message. And [the point would also seem to be] a real possibility for faith both at the margins and very close to Scripture, a faith lived in a venturous, dangerous, free way. (Italics mine)[93]

Despite the difference in contexts, Derrida is in effect saying something remarkably similar to Ibn ʿArabi: the 'metaphysico-philosophical' constructions with which various institutions (the Ash'arites, the Mu'tazilites) have tried to simplify and regulate the nature of God over the centuries have been based on a 'covering over' of the true Divinity. Ibn ʿArabi's *ḥayrah*, in many ways, provides the Islamic precedent for a 'faith lived in a venturous, dangerous, free way'. A faith free of metaphysics, free of veils, images and idols.

Perplexity is a desirable situation. For both deconstructive and Sufi alterities, the basic point remains the same: when we are confused, we see things which we miss when we think we know what we are doing. We see the difference of difference.

Heidegger often makes a similar point. When something goes wrong – a broken tool, an unexpected accident, an unfaithful partner – and our projects breakdown, we truly see for a moment how our world is structured and contextualized around us to give it meaning. In this moment of 'breakdown' we glimpse, says Heidegger, the 'worldhood of the world' (*die Weltlichkeit der Welt*). The perplexing multiplicity of manifestations enables the stunned believer to glimpse the 'Godness' of God, just as the continually irrupting images of the Other enables Derrida to glimpse the otherness of the *tout autre*. Thus, a common opposition to rational/metaphysical thought in both Sufism and deconstruction also finds a common response: if metaphysics blinds/veils us from the actual situation – and if confusion is that which disables our rationalizing will to a system – then we will only truly begin to 'see' when we learn to desire confusion, not to flee it.

3 Sages of the book

The meaning of infinity in Sufi and deconstructive hermeneutics

> We may conclude this history of hermeneutics with the following remark. The initial purpose of hermeneutics was to explain the word of God. This purpose was eventually expanded into an attempt to regulate the process of explaining the word of man. In the nineteenth century we learned, first from Hegel and then more effectively from Nietzsche, that God is dead. In the twentieth century, Kojève and his students, like Foucault, have informed us that man is dead, thereby as it were opening the gates into an abyss of postanthropological deconstruction. As the scope of hermeneutics has expanded, then, the two original sources of meaning, God and man, have vanished, taking with them the cosmos or world and leaving us with nothing but our own garrulity, which we choose to call the philosophy of language, linguistic philosophy, or one of their synonyms. If nothing is real, the real is nothing; there is no difference between the written lines of a text and the blank spaces between them.
>
> Stanley Rosen, *Hermeneutics as Politics*.[1]

I've chosen to begin this chapter on Derrida and Ibn 'Arabi's ideas of interpretation with Rosen's faintly apocalyptic remarks for two reasons. First of all, Rosen's remarks (although over a decade old) effectively sum up the place contemporary hermeneutics has reached in its exploration of the death of the subject/author/canon and their consequences for the way we read books. Rosen's point is, of course, a familiar one: the collapse of the subject, the mistrust of the object, the demise of various institutions – along with all of their theological *raisons d'être* – has brought about the demise of stable, repeatable meaning. If both readers and writers really are, as one theorist says, nothing more than 'centreless webs of beliefs and desires'[2] then exactly how are human beings to continue reading and writing sheets of symbols no-one agrees upon? It is

a question which, in their respective centuries, faced both Ibn ʿArabi and Derrida, even though in the Great Shaykh's case it is the infinity of the mind of God, rather than any agonistic plurality of interpretative perspectives, which lay as the source of the problem. The point supplies the second reason why our chapter on thirteenth-century Sufi hermeneutics must begin with mention of 'the abyss of postanthropological deconstruction'. Just as Derrida's work on the endless text reminds us of how uncannily contemporary Ibn ʿArabi is, Ibn ʿArabi's understanding of what it means to read the Quran brings to light a much older genealogy in Derrida's work.

One of the aims of this chapter will be to contest, through a comparison of Derrida and Ibn ʿArabi, Rosen's kind of popular, simplistic view of the history of hermeneutics as one long slide from the transcendental unambiguity of the Holy Word to the emptiness of the deconstructive abyss. In this version of history, the freedom of the reader has gradually progressed, thanks to a Weberesque *Entzauberung* of the act of reading, from the ecclesiastical imprisonment of the Book to the semantic freedom of the Text. It is a view we often hear, particularly in relation to the Derridean epoch; Mark C. Taylor, most famously, has re-defined deconstruction as 'the "hermeneutic" of the death of God',[3] implying that it was the undeconstructed ghost of God which still lingered on in the Enlightenment spirit (in the form of Author Intention), narrowing parameters, eliminating alternatives, restricting (sometimes prohibiting) interpretations, forever prodding the would-be-exegete onward in that wonderfully futile search for 'what the (A)uthor is trying to say'. Within such a history, deconstruction arrives as a semantic *coup de grace*, finally dispelling the ghost of the text and freeing us all from the fear of misinterpretation by showing how there is (quite literally) *nothing* to be scared of.

This understanding of Derrida's place in the history of hermeneutics has to change. Not because it is essentially wrong, but because it rests on an unsound and oversimplified understanding of how the medievals actually read their texts. There has been no deconstructive 'freeing' of the text from some ill-perceived domain of the theological – on the contrary, the textual elasticity of the medieval exegete was every bit as versatile and allowed just as many different interpretations as the most radical deconstructive study. This warning not to underestimate the complexities of the medieval mind – by now a fairly standard gesture in the history of ideas – has been most memorably uttered by Borges:

> The idea that the Sacred Scriptures have (aside from their literal value) a symbolic value is ancient and not irrational . . .

> They thought that a work dictated by the Holy Spirit was an absolute text; in other words, a text in which the collaboration of chance was calculable as zero. This portentous premise of a book impenetrable to contingency, of a book which is a mechanism of infinite purposes, moved them to permute the scriptural words, add up the numerical value of the letters, consider their form, observe the small letters and capitals, seeks acrostics and anagrams and perform other exegetical rigours which it is not difficult to ridicule. Their excuse is that nothing can be contingent in the work of an infinite mind.[4]

As eloquent and erudite as ever, Borges comes to remind us that semantic multiplicity is no fancy trend of the twentieth century – it is *old*, as old as the *Zohar* or Philo's *Allegories of the Laws*, the commentaries of Ibn Abbas or St Augustine. In the passage quoted, Borges is referring to the Jewish Kabbalists, but it would not be difficult to extend this to Ibn 'Arabi (and, as Habermas will purport, even to Derrida himself). The 'exegetical rigours' which Borges cites as characteristics of an infinitely readable text – counting up the letters numerologically, deriving meaning from their various shapes and arrangements, the extraction of acrostics and anagrams from apparently straightforward pieces of verse – can all be found as fairly standard features in the hermeneutics of the Great Shaykh himself. Whether it is Ibn 'Arabi's mystical reinterpretation of the date of Almohad's victory over the Christian armies in 1194,[5] or the Shaykh's understanding of a man figure (the Perfect Man, *al-insan al-kamil*) from the letters of the Prophet Muhammad's name (محمد), the all-encompassing infinity of the Divine Mind anticipates every Koranic nuance, every so-called 'chance' or 'coincidence', every hermeneutic variation as one more unspeakable development in the Infinite Will.

Of course, the majority of us no longer read texts like this any more. When we read a novel, the possibility that all our idiosyncratically singular responses to the text (certain characters reminding us of family members, certain personal memories being provoked by certain passages, etc.) have already been anticipated by the novelist would strike us as absurd. And yet the openness the deconstructive reader shows towards the text – the fact that, as Derrida says, 'there are only contexts without any centre of absolute anchoring',[6] which turns the text into a meaning-machine that can constantly produce new meanings – is no different in effect from the openness of the Sufi exegete towards the 'Tremendous Koran'. As Borges rightly points out, the infinite mind of

the Author explodes the Koran, releasing it at once in all kinds of directions, allowing it to say an infinite variety of things to an infinite number of addressees. In both cases, infinitely interpretable texts are the subject in discussion – even if those texts are infinitely interpretable for fundamentally different reasons.

In other words, we are approaching an analogy in which (to quote MacIntyre) 'the gradual accumulation . . . of so many different, heterogeneous, and conflicting bodies of canonical texts'[7] has the same infinitizing effect on the modern text as the unfathomability of the Divine Intent had on the Sacred Scriptures. Both the infinite mind of Allah on the one hand and the infinite range of contemporary contexts on the other result in the same thing: an unending multiplication of meaning. Derrida may have de-transcendentalized the text and exposed its secret – that it has no 'secret'; he has not, however, by any means 'liberated' it from the logocentric clutches of an onto-theological hermeneutics, but rather restored an originary infinity to the text which was already there in the days of St Bonaventure, Rabbi Moses de Leon and Al-Ghazali. Not to mention Muhyiddin Ibn al-'Arabi himself.

This version of a Derrida who has come to return a medieval sense of infinity to hermeneutics has upset some people. Not surprisingly, Derrida has been accused of/complimented with mysticism on a number of occasions, and not simply for essays such as 'Edmond Jabès'. Ironically enough Habermas, relying on Susan Handelmann's rabbinic reading of deconstruction, was one of the first to associate Derrida with 'Jewish mysticism', in particular the 'Cabalists'.[8] Derridean *écriture*, with its infinite deferral, 'renews the mystical concept of tradition as an ever *delayed* event of revelation' (p. 182). The 'a' of différance, we are told, is comparable to the *aleph* of Rabbi Mendel (reported by Scholem): 'To hear the *aleph* is to hear next to nothing; it is the preparation for all audible language, but in itself contains no determinate, specific meaning' (p. 183). Reading Habermas carefully, it does not take long to realize exactly what it is about Derrida – or Kabbalism – that the author of 'communicative reason' finds so offensive: a fascination with 'the absolute readability' of the text (p. 166). A fascination which, ultimately, leads to a levelling of the distinction between philosophical and literary genres – in other words, the profound fear that people will confuse Marx with Tolstoy and Tolstoy with Marx. All of which leads Habermas to the conclusion that Derrida's neo-Kabbalistic hermeneutics conceal 'an anarchist wish to explode the continuum of history'.[9]

Before moving on to a comparison of Sufi/deconstructive hermeneutics, it should be mentioned that, if critics like Habermas and Norris

cannot agree upon whether Derrida belongs to a philosophical tradition or a mystical one, a somewhat similar dispute takes place within Ibn ʿArabi scholarship over whether the Shaykh's ideas on interpretation belong to an excessively mystical or more orthodox exegetical tradition – in other words, exactly how flexible Ibn ʿArabi's hermeneutics actually are. The disagreement centres over the use of a certain term, *ta'wil*, which literally means 'carrying back to' but which generally refers to a rather mystical and esoteric technique of exegesis, more often than not associated with Shi'ia Islam. The practice of *ta'wil* encourages the idea of a text with an infinite number of inner meanings (*baṭin*) – rather than interpreting the text, the *ta'wil* releases it, leading the reader onto a whole new level of higher meanings. The main proponent of such a version of Ibn ʿArabi has been Henry Corbin. As Corbin spent many years teaching in Iran, most critics tend to see Corbin's linking of Ibn ʿArabi with *ta'wil* as part of his general desire to present the Great Shaykh as 'a pure Shi'ite'.[10] Chittick, most notably, opposes Corbin with the observation that most of Ibn ʿArabi's references to *ta'wil* in the *Futuhat* are actually explicitly negative. Of course, Chittick's knowledge of his subject and the quality of his scholarship are beyond question – however, in his opposition to Corbin, Chittick feels compelled to make some slightly incredible claims for the orthodoxy of Ibn ʿArabi's hermeneutics, in particular that he 'displays a tremendous reverence for the literal text'.[11] Any reader of the *Fusus Al-Hikam*, with its mystical numerologies, strange etymologies, obscure interpretations, implicit criticism of Noah and apparent praise for the tyrannical Pharaoh, may be forgiven for thinking otherwise.

Livre and *kitab*: when is an empty text an infinite one?

> Every existent thing finds in the Koran what it desires.
>
> *Futuhat*, III.94

Ibn ʿArabi is certainly by no means the first to suggest an infinite number of meanings for the Koranic text, nor are his stranger interpretations uncommon in any history of Koranic exegesis. Al-Ghazali, in his work on the rules for the recitation of the Koran (*Kitab adab Hawat al-Qur'an*), quotes the familiar *hadith* or tradition of Ali's: 'If I wished, I could load seventy camels with the exegesis of the opening surah of the Koran'.[12] Like Ibn ʿArabi two centuries after him, al-Ghazali disagreed with the limited way in which the exotericists (*arbab al-zawahir*) 'inclined towards closing the door' on esoteric interpretation (ibid., p. 242)

and advocated the legitimacy of esoteric interpretations not only when the verse in question could yield no rational meaning, but even for those verses which could conventionally be understood by the ordinary reader. Indeed, whilst never actually advocating the infinite interpretability of the text, al-Ghazali goes so far as to call a veil of ignorance the belief that the only correct interpretations of the Koran are the exoteric (rational, intelligible) ones. The stranger gestures in Ibn ʿArabi's hermeneutics, therefore, have to be understood with this background in mind.

In comparing Derrida's and Ibn ʿArabi's views on interpretation, it should be stressed that the Great Shaykh's hermeneutics almost entirely concern the Koran. What Ibn ʿArabi says about meaning and interpretation is seldom explicitly extended to other secular works, or to language in general – in contrast to Derrida, the Shaykh will always find one Book to be more special than all the other ones.[13] Nevertheless, there are certain moments in the *Futuhat* where the belief in a God whose Essence is unique but whose determinations are various leads to all texts, Koranic or not, being in some way involved in His revelation:

> There are those among us who see God but are ignorant of Him… Though no-one loves any but his own Creator, he is veiled from Him by the love for Zaynab, Su'ad, Hind, Layla, this world, money, position, and everything loved in the world. Poets exhaust their words writing about all these existent things without knowing, but the gnostics never hear a verse, a riddle, a panegyric, or a love poem that is not about Him, hidden beyond the veils of forms.[14]

If God is truly the omnipresent source of all manifestation, the hidden truth behind every *ẓahir*, then wisdom consists not in trying to find God through one Book, but in trying to see how God has written every book. Such a belief in the hermeneutic omnipresence of God effectively preempts and sabotages every secular attempt at writing a book which is 'not about Him'. Indeed, within such a worldview which sees every *ẓahir* – every 'verse, riddle, panegyric and love poem' – as having divine possibilities, what room can there be for the secular?

Probably the first feature which unites deconstructive/Sufi approaches to interpretation is a simple disbelief in any *ex*clusive, *con*clusive secret to the text – a belief in the text not as a single communication to be reiterated endlessly, but rather as a vehicle which constantly

delivers new meanings according to the situation and moment of the reader. In both writers, this effectively means an unending flow of different meanings. Ibn ʿArabi's most explicit comments on this occur in the second volume of the *Futuhat*:

> We say concerning the senses of a verse that all are intended by God. No one forces anything upon God . . . The reason for this is as follows: The verse of God's speech, of whatever sort it might be – Koran, revealed book, scripture, divine report – is a sign or a remark signifying what the words (*lafz*) support in all senses and intended by the One who sent down His speech in those words, which comprise, in that language, those senses. For He who sent it down knows all those senses without exception. He knows that His servants are disparate in their consideration of those words . . . Hence, when someone understands a sense from the verse, that sense is intended by God in this verse in the case of the person who finds it.[15]

First and foremost the Koran (which is 'God's speech') has no single message, but a variety of messages, each one gauged to the competence and situation of its reader. This variety is infinite – or at least, as multitudinous as the number of the Koran's readership (one can't help thinking here of Isaac Luria's assertion that there were 600,000 'faces' of the Torah – as many readings as there were Jews living in Israel at the time of the Revelation, or also of one scholar's belief that the Koran contained 77,200 sciences, one for every letter on its pages).[16] The infinite mind of the Author can 'gauge' His text to respond to each of His 'disparate' servants – indeed, He has always already performed this hermeneutical fine-tuning. The Shaykh's point here really hinges on the omnitemporality of God – a God who is divine enough to see, in the future, all the ways in which His creatures are going to understand His words. For Ibn ʿArabi, God has already witnessed the Koran's infinite spray of interpretive possibilities, has already understood and anticipated how each one of the multitude is going to respond to His 'inexhaustible words'. This passage from the *Futuhat* is an interesting one, if only because Ibn ʿArabi seems to give a different and more complex reason for the infinite semantic depth of the Koran, one which depends on a kind of retrospective view by God of all the Koran's accumulated readings. As if one were to imagine Shakespeare beginning *Macbeth* already with a knowledge of the 30,000 critical studies that are going to be written about it.

A sea without a shore: the Koran as example *par excellence* of infinite textuality

Of course, all this is facilitated by the peculiarly Islamic conception of the Book as a container of all things. A little later on in the same section of the *Futuhat* we read: 'For the Koran is the shoreless ocean, since He to whom it is ascribed intends all the meanings demanded by speech – in contrast to the speech of created things'.[17] In the sixth surah of the Koran the angels tell the Prophet Muhammed *We have missed nothing in the Book* (6: 38), a phrase Ibn ʿArabi is fond of quoting, particularly in the *Fusus*, where the Koran 'comprises all that has come to pass and all that has not come to pass'.[18] This familiar idea in Islam of the Koran as an 'all-comprehensive Book' means, for Ibn ʿArabi, that one can literally find all things in it. The text of the Koran (a word which in itself comes from *qu'ran*, 'to gather together') contains an infinity of images, a sea of symbols, a repository of all that is thought and will be thought. The Koran, to state the obvious, is the nearest metaphor we have to God.

This possibility that a text, given the right context, might be able to say *anything* – that there exists no single, primary ur-meaning to which the text would have to revert – has probably been the most controversial and most misunderstood feature of Derrida's writing. Derrida's exchange of words (if one can use the term) with the language philosopher John Searle, which produced the essay 'Signature, Event, Context', goes some way to showing why Derrida feels 'the value of literal, *proper meaning* appears more problematical than ever':[19]

> To write is to produce a mark that will constitute a kind of machine that is in turn productive, that my future disappearance in principle will not prevent from functioning and from yielding, and yielding itself to, reading and re-writing.[20]

In a sense, Derrida extends what Ibn ʿArabi has said about the Koran to every book: no text has a single, 'proper' meaning, but rather an infinite possibility of imminent ones, an ever-present capacity to be read and re-read in radically different ways. Whilst acknowledging that contexts enable meaning, Derrida insists they cannot control it – the text must forever carry with it 'the structural possibility of being severed from its referent or signified' (p. 318). Unlike Ibn ʿArabi's God, we cannot anticipate how our texts will be read, nor can we control the hermeneutical circumstances in which they will be encountered. Authors scribble marks onto squares of paper, without really knowing where or by whom or according to what code they will be deciphered.

What constitutes the essential difference between these two versions of the text as 'meaning machine' is the way Ibn 'Arabi continues to see the Koran as an infinite, never-to-be-depleted reservoir of meanings. There is a notion of 'fullness' here (Derrida's favourite word for this is 'plenitude') which is ultimately alien to the deconstructive text, particularly given the repeated warnings in his work against confusing 'dissemination' with 'polysemeia'. The Derridean text, essentially parasitic, is not infinitely rich but infinitely poor – far from being an 'inexhaustible' storehouse of treasures like the Koran, it draws its wealth from its surroundings, having nothing of its own to offer:

> The phantom, the phantasm, the simulacrum of living discourse is not inanimate; it is not insignificant; it simply signifies little, and always the same thing. This signifier of little, this discourse that doesn't amount to much, is like all ghosts: errant. It rolls this way and that, like someone who has lost his way . . . like someone who has lost his rights, an outlaw, a pervert, a bad seed, a vagrant, an adventurer, a bum. Wandering in the streets, he doesn't even know who he is, what his name is . . . uprooted, anonymous, unattached to any house or country, this almost insignificant signifier is at everyone's disposal, can be picked up by both the competent and the incompetent, by those who . . . knowing nothing about it, can inflict all manner of impertinence upon it.[21]

Although we have two parallel examples of texts which can mean all things, Derrida's wandering signs, 'at everyone's disposal', are infinitely flexible because of a certain amnesia. Their semantic flexibility stems from this very loss of identity. Which, in turn, provides another important point: if texts for Derrida threaten to disrupt unity, for Ibn 'Arabi they serve to *express* it. The anarchic nature of the deconstructive text ('errant', 'pervert', 'outlaw', 'adventurer', 'uprooted, anonymous, unattached to any house or country') eludes contexts, undermines systems, 'endlessly opens up a snag';[22] even the most disparate interpretations of the Koran, however, ultimately reinforce the unity and all-comprehensiveness of the Book – they teach us to see 'the details in the whole . . . as part of the whole'.[23] Ibn 'Arabi's insistence that the Book should 'stand up' after being read is the best illumination of the status the Shaykh gives to the Koran:

> . . . others lift up the Book from its bed, since interpretation on the part of the learned (*'ulama*) has made the Book lie down after it had

> been standing. The person to whom God has given success comes and makes the Book stand up after it had been lying down. In other words, he declares it incomparable with his own interpretation . . .[24]

In other words, each time the Koran has been 'used' ('laid down' is synonymous here with being read and understood), it has to be placed upright again – to assert the fact of its semantic inexhaustibility. Surprisingly, Ibn 'Arabi goes farther than this: by attributing the word *tanzih* (incomparable) to the Koran, the Shaykh is not merely describing how we can never finish interpreting the Koran, but goes on to make a slightly different point – that none of our interpretations actually have anything to do with the holy word. The Koran is a book about which we can know nothing – an infinitely well-kept secret that turns all our attempts at interpretation into a series of hopeless guesses.

If Habermas attributed to deconstruction a fascination with the 'absolute readability' of the text, then perhaps the Shaykh can be credited with practising the absolute *un*readability of the text. By extending the word *tanzih* to the Koran, Ibn 'Arabi is almost suggesting the text itself is never touched; it goes on, forever producing meanings without ever revealing itself, in the same way the Real (*al-ḥaqq*) is the ineffable source of all manifestations without ever actually manifesting Itself. It brings to mind another example of a hidden text which remains forever 'incomparable' with all its interpretations – this time from Meister Eckhart:

> . . . there is none so wise that when he tries to fathom it, he will not find it deeper yet and discover more in it. Whatever we may hear, and whatever anyone can tell us, contains another hidden sense.
>
> *. . . vnnd es ist auch niemant so weyss, der sy gründen woll, er fynde sy tieffer vnnd fynde mer darinn. Alles, das wir hie horen mogen, vnnd alles, das man vns gesagen mag, das hat alles eynen anderen, verborgenen synn darinn*.[25]

For Eckhart even the most learned man will never get to the bottom of the scriptures; something will always elude him. It is a situation analogous to the defining of God, who – like Eckhart's idea of scriptural interpretation – is without end, *Ab-grund*. Like Ibn 'Arabi, Eckhart uses the familiar motif of the Sacred Scriptures as a sea (a metaphor which stems back to at least Origen).[26] Where Ibn 'Arabi goes further is to extend the Koranic reminder of God's utter unthinkability (*No thing is like Him* 42: 11) to the Koran itself. It is a gesture which, in one sense, moves the Holy text for Ibn 'Arabi away from the idea of a bottomless treasure-chest and nearer towards a different kind of metaphor – a one-way radio,

perhaps, where the Author would 'switch on' the comprehensibility of the text whenever He wished to communicate something to His otherwise puzzled reader, and then just as abruptly 'switch off' the legibility of the text once the message had been delivered.

Viewed in a contemporary light, another feature of Ibn 'Arabi's hermeneutics which appears to echo certain deconstructive gestures is the strikingly similar way in which the Shaykh talks about God, the Perfect Man (*al-insan al-kamil*) and the Koran – essentially performing what could be described, in more modern terms, as a collapsing of the distinction between author, text and reader. In both the *Fusus* and the *Futuhat*, Ibn 'Arabi talks about these three separate ideas using similar terms and attributes; for example, the metaphor of 'shoreless sea' is attributed both to the soul ('The soul is an ocean without a shore'[27]) and to the Koran ('For the Koran is the shoreless ocean . . .'[28]). The related idea that God/Man/the Koran is the possessor of an infinity of things can be found repeated throughout both works:

> God possesses relationships, faces and realities without limit.
>
> . . . the Tremendous Koran . . . the tremendous totality that has been brought together (*majmu'*) comprising all things.
>
> In the same way, all the infinite objects of knowledge that God knows are within man . . . through this type of nearness.[29]

What we have is a situation where both the Perfect Man and the Tremendous Book offer themselves up as microcosms of God, miniature versions of all-encompassing infinity mirroring the limitless ocean of images which is God.[30] In order to understand how this 'collapses' distinctions between author, text and reader in Ibn 'Arabi, one has to remember the controversial nature of the relationship between God and the soul in the Shaykh's writings – 'controversial' because no-one can agree how far Ibn 'Arabi goes in his assertion of the essential divinity of the self ('He prevented the real secret from being known, namely that He is the essential Self of things'[31]). The secret of the self would be its privileged relationship with God – the clandestine fact that is in reality part of God, hence the saying 'He who knows his self, knows his Lord.'

Of course, many modern critics have already re-interpreted the mystical self-annihilation of the soul within the nothingness of God as an effective and very contemporary deconstruction of selfhood (see most recently Denys Turner's version of St John of the Cross).[32] What is of interest here, however, are the hermeneutical consequences of Ibn 'Arabi's views on God and the soul – how they alter and effect the activity of interpretation. If the reader of the Koran is, in some elusive way,

related or even a part of the Author of the text s/he is reading, then a traditional understanding of the author/reader relationship as the transferral of information from one separate entity to another is no longer applicable. Rather, for the enlightened, to understand something from the Koran is to recollect what the Koran has already *meant*. Probably the most openly Platonic aspect of Ibn ʻArabi's epistemology, everything man knows – including that which he has read – is in fact 'a recollection and a renewal (*tajdid*) of what he had forgotten'.[33] It would be interesting to see how the Shaykh would apply this hermeneutically – what would be the resultant metaphor for such an author/reader relationship? If the Author of the Koran really has 'deposited within man knowledge of all things' (ibid.), then interpretation is above all else a bringing to memory of something dormant, an actualizing of something latent but already existent. To understand the Koran is to participate in its expansion.

Affirmative hermeneutics: celebrations of multiple meaning

If multiple meaning is a common feature in Sufi/deconstructive hermeneutics, then so is the essentially positive, affirmative attitude both figures share towards it. Neither Derrida nor Ibn ʻArabi seem to have any problem with the absolute freedom of their texts. Faced with the fact that every reader finds in their text what they desire, neither thinker seems to exhibit any fear or anxiety. In Ibn ʻArabi's case, this is probably because the Shaykh sees the Koranic generation of interpretations as a movement from *baṭin* to *ẓahir*, an endless actualizing of the infinite potential of the Sacred Book. Given the Shaykh's own understanding of creation as a continual engendering of existent things out of non-existence, it is hardly surprising to find an open, encouraging attitude towards multiple meanings in Ibn ʻArabi's hermeneutics:

> The cause of the speed and lastingness of continual change is that the Root is such. Hence He gives to engendered existence in accordance with the fact that He is ever-creating perpetually because of the reality of His level, while engendered existence is poor and needy perpetually. Hence all existence is perpetually in motion, in this world and the hereafter, since bringing to be does not take place from stillness. On God's part there are perpetual turnings of attentiveness and inexhaustible words.[34]

Ibn ʿArabi's Heraclitean view of a world constantly in flux, involved in perpetual creation, easily finds its microcosmic equivalent in the act of interpretation. As far as the Koran is concerned, 'the situation is new forever': yielding different things to different readers, reading the Koran means constantly translating the *baṭin* of a verse into a *ẓahir* in some way applicable to one's own life. Ibn ʿArabi is thoroughly Aristotelian in this respect (and quite plausibly Avicennian);[35] he replicates the Stagirite's privileging of actuality *over* possibility by introducing 'mercy' (*raḥman*) into his concept of creation. In an act of gratuitous kindness (*imtinān*), God 'relieves' the possible things from the 'misery' of non-existence by bringing them into reality – by bestowing upon them, as Ibn ʿArabi says, 'the sweet pleasure of existence'.[36] An interpreted verse, in this sense, is privileged over an uninterpreted one. To read and understand the Koran meaningfully is, following this logic, to have 'mercy' upon it.

This idea, it should be said, of interpretation as mercifully giving life to a text is suggested by the pneumatic characteristics of Arabic – a standard feature, as we know, of all Semitic languages. The characters محمد (mhmd) mean nothing until we breathe through them مُحَمَّدْ (m**u**h**a**mm**a**d), bringing them to life. In a sense, reading each word constitutes an interpretation, for each word can be breathed in a number of different ways, changing the meaning each time. Therefore, the idea that to read a text is immediately to interpret it finds a very concrete reality in Arabic.

If Derrida shares with Ibn ʿArabi a positive affirmation of multiple interpretation, it is certainly not out of the belief that 'God is at the root of every diversity (*khilaf*)',[37] but rather out of a much more Nietzschean affirmation of the absence of the A/author and the irrelevance of the origin. The work of those interpreters still obsessed with an 'original meaning' in the text – which would control and determine all subsequent ones – Derrida dismisses as 'paleonymy', the pointless desire to preserve fossilized meanings: 'Why should an old name… be retained? Why should the effects of a new meaning…be damped by memory?'.[38] Bereft of all but the marks on the page, Derrida has no time for such nostalgia; his hermeneutics (or anti-hermeneutics) stems precisely from the absence which belies every text. Throughout his *oeuvre*, Derrida has employed a range of metaphors to describe this aboriginality of the textual condition – the text as abyss, bottomless well, orphan, vagrant – without ever lamenting this perpetual adriftness, this constant vulnerability to incessant appropriation, as an

undesirable situation:

> The grapheme, repeating itself in this fashion, thus has neither site nor natural centre. But did it ever lose them? Is its excentricity a decentering? Can one not affirm the nonreferral to the centre, rather than bemoan the absence of the centre?[39]

It is not difficult to see how, within Derrida's work on interpretation, there moves a much keener, almost existentialist emphasis on the demise of that which would guide us – Derrida is challenging us to read texts without worrying about what their authors are trying to say to us. Whereas for Ibn 'Arabi it is infinite *presence* which causes the text to multiply and proliferate – the infinite presence of God in all interpretations – for Derrida it is an infinite absence which gives the text its freedom, 'the infinite absence which founds it'(*l'inepuisable . . . absence de fond*).[40]

Infinite presence/infinite absence: how far can the word 'infinity', in their respective French and Arabic, be said to link these two radically different vocabularies? To what extent do these two words constitute a bridge between the deconstructive 'bottomlessness of infinite redoubling' (*redoublement infini*)[41] and the 'shoreless ocean' of the Koran? Are they really the same word at all? And most importantly: When, in terms of the text, does the ungraspability of the mind of God begin to mean the same as His absence? If both the infinitizing of the divine intent and the removal of it result in the same hermeneutical freedom, should one bother retaining the distinction at all?

Rabbis and poets

One of the difficulties in answering this question lies with the remarkable variety in tone and style of Derrida's writings, a diversity which complicates any neat, simplistic comparison of something called 'Derrida' or 'deconstruction' with another writer. Derrida's two most important essays on the act of interpretation – 'Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book' (1964) and 'Signature, Event, Context' (1971) – are a case in point. Whereas the Derrida of 'Edmond Jabès' seems to be making use of a tradition going back to Abraham Abulafia, Isaac Luria and Rabbi Moses de Leon, the latter essay seems to be nearer, both in form and content, to Wittgenstein, Austin and Wisdom. The Kabbalistic profusion of metaphors (city, forest, desert, the Book, the letter) we find

in 'Jabès' are distinctly absent in Derrida's essentially technical reply to Searle. Even though the two essays make similar points – that the absence of the author is a fundamental condition of interpretation, that there is something ineluctably, *incurably* unstable about the text, that we should not hope to try and control meaning – these points are made in strikingly different languages. If Derrida's essay on Jabès is scattered with rabbinical comments, turning it more into a piece of midrash than a work of criticism, the only rabbi quoted in 'Signature' is J. J. Austin. If, in 'Jabès', we learn that 'God separated himself from himself in order to let us speak . . . He did so not by speaking but by keeping still, by letting his silence interrupt his voice',[42] in 'Signature' the idea is phrased somewhat differently: 'The absence of the sender, the addresser, from the marks that he abandons, which are cut off from him and continue to produce effects beyond his presence . . . belongs to the structure of all writing'.[43] The peregrinary nature of écriture embedded in a phrase such as 'Writing is the moment of the desert as the moment of Separation'[44] is re-presented in 'Signature' as an 'essential drifting, due to writing as an iterative structure cut off from all absolute responsibility'.[45] In other words, essentially similar ideas find themselves expressed in two different vocabularies – in the metaphor-clustered, theological language of the rabbinical commentary tradition which Derrida quite openly imitates/parodies in his essay on Jabès (even to the point of calling himself 'Reb Derissa'[46]), and in the cleaner, more precise terminology of the Oxford School (Austin, Ryle, etc.), with its emphasis on clear-cut examples and clarity of expression.

Exactly which language Derrida feels most comfortable in is anyone's guess. Enough people have already tried to place Derrida within various, carefully pre-arranged Socratic/Semitic boxes, most recently John Caputo with a version of deconstruction 'more prophetic than apophatic, more in touch with Jewish prophets than with Christian Neoplatonists'.[47] There are obvious risks in all of this – the kinds of risks one always takes in offering religious interpretations of avowedly secular thinkers – although Thomas Altizer has probably been the most adept at emphasizing the 'Jewish theological thinker'[48] in Derrida without overlooking the unignorable role which emptiness and nothingness plays in his work. In an essay called 'History As Apocalypse', Altizer equated the deconstructive removal of a text's origins with the *zim-zum*, the Kabbalistic moment where Jahweh withdrew into himself in order to make creation possible. Altizer helps us to understand how, in the essay on Jabès, he does to the Torah in religious language what he has already done to the text in secular terms – in 'Jabès', the freedom of the text is actually

God's gift of silence, God's decision to withdraw from the scene and let His creations make up their own minds. In 'Signature', the phrase 'the absence of the sender' carries with it no such theological reassurances. The 'essential drifting' of the text takes place in a universe bereft of *any* centres or points of reference, hidden or not.

All of which does not bring us any closer to Ibn 'Arabi, for what we have now are *three* reasons for an infinite text: a text which can say anything because it has no Author (Derrida), a text which can say anything because its Author has relinquished control (Kabbala), and a text which can say anything (and 'mean' it) because its Author has intended all of its meanings (Ibn 'Arabi).

In essence, the fundamental difference which we are repeatedly encountering between Derrida and Ibn 'Arabi's infinite hermeneutics hinges on the question of the message. Built into the very foundation of the word 'hermeneutics' (whose etymology, remember, comes from Hermes, the messenger-god), the idea of the text as a message sent from one entity to another to say a single, specific thing accounts for Derrida's distaste towards rabbinic/Rousseauistic interpretation – one which (to use Alan Bass' apt phrase) 'sees interpretation as an unfortunately necessary road back to an original truth'.[49] In other words, there are two kinds of interpreters – poets and rabbis. The rabbi, forever unaware of the 'disappearance of an exceeded God or an erased man',[50] still seeks the origin, still yearn to recover the meaning, still see the text in essentially epistolary terms; as a *certain* message coming from a *certain* place. Derrida's poet, on the other hand, has finally understood the secret abyssality of the text, has finally realized that the sheet of symbols of front of him 'has neither natural site nor natural centre' (*ni lieu ni centre naturels*).[51] One could even speak here, in the memory of the French existentialists, of an 'authentic' response to the text in Derrida; poetic readings, in contrast to rabbinical ones, encounter and affirm a certain emptiness in the act of reading. They are unafraid of the absence of a guide.

If hermeneutics is to be understood as the attempt to reach the *tout autre* of a text, then we can understand why Derrida feels 'a phenomenology of writing is impossible'[52] – and why the poet shares no Husserlian desire to reach the 'foundation' of a text and thereby establish its 'true meaning, the authentic and original meaning' (*le sens véritable… le sens authentique et originel*).[53] The absolute superficiality of the text, refuted by the rabbi, is embraced by the poet. Derrida's most famous words on this choice between the 'two interpretations of interpretation', towards the end of his essay on Levi-Strauss, clearly

shows there is much more at stake here than attitudes towards texts or anthropological research:

> There are thus two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of play. The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play and the order of the sign, and which lives the necessity of interpretation as an exile. The other, which is no longer turned towards the origin, affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name of man being the name of that being who . . . has dreamed of full presence, in reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of play.[54]

Although Derrida does not actually stipulate which path is the path to choose, the word-choice he employs to describe each path makes any explicit suggestion unnecessary: the 'saddened, negative, nostalgic, guilty, Rousseauistic' understanding of the text as something to be unlocked or deciphered is presented, in striking comparison, with the 'joyous', 'Nietzschean', 'active' affirmation of the text, one which leads *not* down the semantic blind-alley of metaphysics but to the 'seminal adventure of the trace' (ibid.). In other words, Derrida makes a basically Romantic distinction between the dull, penitent, monologic dreariness of the rabbi, which seeks to *end* play, and the thrill-seeking, adventurous hermeneutics of the poet, which desires to play on, which never wants to stop playing. Thus rabbis and structural anthropologists do have one thing in common: they see the text as a puzzle, not as an adventure. We must pick up the text and take it back to where it belongs; we can't simply keep hold of it and use it for something wildly different.

Derrida insists these two ideas of interpretation are 'absolutely irreconcilable',[55] and yet what Ibn 'Arabi provides in many ways is a hybrid intermediary between these two positions. The Shaykh is, in Derrida's terms, both a rabbi *and* a poet. His hermeneutics offer, within a medieval Islamic context, a deconstructive rejection of 'authentic' meaning and a thoroughly contemporary freeing of the text, but at the same time still retain the concept of the author as a Sender who is trying to tell us 'something'. The only difference being that this 'something' varies infinitely from person to person, from moment to moment, from place to place. Both thinkers feel texts can mean an endless variety of different things to different people, but only Ibn 'Arabi sees 'meaning' as essentially *transitive* – in this case as information 'sent down' to the reader by 'Something' outside the book.

Secular readers may be starting to find all this rather supernatural, although they needn't. Like Derrida, Ibn ʿArabi simply sees texts more as opportunities to explore than secrets to decode; a moment of 'opening up' (*futūḥāt*) rather than closing down. This can be seen in the way Ibn ʿArabi often links interpretation with metaphors of travel or crossing: 'interpretation', we read in the *Fusus*, 'means to pass from the form of what one sees to something beyond it'.[56] Of course, a thoroughly deconstructible notion of 'beyond' is at work here – as far as interpretation goes, the Shaykh never really problematizes the word 'meaning' the way Derrida will do, although this is not the point: what is significant is the way an element of adventure and uncertainty is introduced into both thinkers' hermeneutics. The text becomes the means to an encounter with something radically other, even if the location and significance of this Other in both thinkers is fundamentally different. This is best expressed not in what Ibn ʿArabi says about interpreting the Koran, but in what he says about interpreting dreams. In the *Futuhat*, he makes use of the root meaning of the word 'interpretation' (*taʿbir*) – from *ʿbr* (عبر) meaning to cross over or traverse:

> Reporting (*ikhbar*) about things is called 'expression' (*ʿibara*) and interpreting dreams is called 'interpretation' (*taʿbir*). This is because the expresser/interpreter 'crosses over' (*ʿubur*) by means of what he says. In other words, by means of his words he passes (*jawaz*) from the presence (*ḥaḍra*) of his own self to the self of the listener. Hence he transfers his words from imagination to imagination, since the listener imagines to the extent of his understanding.[57]

If there is such a thing as the 'deconstructive moment' – a moment in the thinker's *oeuvre* where s/he realizes that signs can only lead us to more signs, while 'meaning' forever remains one semantic step ahead – then Ibn ʿArabi, like Rousseau, often comes disturbingly close to this moment without ever truly replicating it. In this passage, Ibn ʿArabi sees interpretation as nothing more than a transfer of symbols 'from imagination to imagination' – from images to images. The Shaykh erases the distinction between expresser and interpreter – between one who produces signs and one who reads them – by locating both their etymologies in the same root, *ʿubur*, 'crossing over'. To be involved in language, regardless of whether one is interpreting or producing it, means already to be separated from it, to cross a certain threshold between self and other. Interpretation is no longer a matter of extraction, but rather a point of embarkation.

Derrida, too, is fond of itinerative/peregrinary metaphors in his discourse on *écriture*, although whether Ibn 'Arabi's embarkation upon a 'sea without a shore' constitutes anything more than a convincingly superficial resemblance to the Derridean text's 'passage through negative excentricity'[58] – basically the unrepeatable repetition of the sign as it passes from context to context – remains doubtful, however uncannily analogous the side effects of textual openness, adventure and multiple meaning may seem. Of course, the 'adventurous excess'[59] is still the result of a 'crossing over'; severed from an unrepresentable origin and bereft of any 'predetermined itinerary', it has to forge its 'actual infinite way through the desolate swamp' (as Derrida says of Lautréamont's prefaces), producing 'the irruptive track . . . of a path that breaks ground and constructs itself as it goes along'.[60] One gets the feeling that chance, along with an uncontrollable plurality of contexts, has replaced the Real in Derrida's non-hermeneutics, providing a non-theological concept of infinity to multiply the text in the absence of any Sender. The limitless mind of God has been replaced with an equally limitless (but very untranscendental) sea of hermeneutic possibilities; the elasticity of the text, however, remains the same.

Inconsistencies

> Their books are also different . . . Those of a philosophical nature invariably include both the thesis and the antithesis, the rigorous pro and con of a doctrine. A book which does not contain its counterbook is considered incomplete.
>
> Borges, 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius'[61]

Having taken some pains to reveal, in both Derrida and Ibn 'Arabi, a common emphasis on the absence of any single, secret meaning to the text, on the infinity of the text's semantic possibilities, the common disbelief in the *totally* saturating power of the context and the way both writers view interpretation/expression as adventures to be embarked upon, rather than puzzles to be solved . . . a final common characteristic should be mentioned: that of inconsistency.

Such a word should not be construed as an attack on either of these thinkers, but merely an observation on the ineluctable risks one takes in writing, particularly when an author begins to write about texts, and the ways people should respond to them. Moreover, it is only the *fact* of inconsistency which unites Ibn 'Arabi and Derrida – as we shall see, both

these thinkers contradict their own versions of infinitizing hermeneutics in very different ways.

In both cases, certain elements within Derridean/Akbarian scholarship have tried to show that this is not the case – that Derrida and Ibn ʿArabi's various dismissals of certain interpretations as 'wrong' or 'unsound' in no way causes problems with their own theories of the text. What this final section aims to show, very briefly, is an occasional but unmistakable disparity between what these two thinkers *say* about interpretation and how they actually *interpret*.

Although Ibn ʿArabi considers the Koran to be a 'shoreless ocean', this does not stop him from dismissing some of its interpretations as 'corrupt' or 'far-fetched'(*taʾwil, baʿid*).[62] On the one hand, in some parts of the *Futuhat* Ibn ʿArabi is keen to show how we should refrain from labelling certain interpretations or certain ideas 'impossible' (*muḥāl*), for nothing can be declared impossible in the face of God's tremendousness:

> How wide is the Presence of Imagination! Within it becomes manifest the existence of the impossible thing . . .[63]
>
> Since imagination possesses such non-delimitation, though it is a creature created by God, what do you think about the Creator who created it . . . ? How can you wish to judge that God is delimited and say that God is not capable of doing the impossible?[64]

Ibn ʿArabi's target here is the rational thinkers, those who do not rely on 'divine bestowal' (*wahb*) but on their own rational faculties (*ʿaql*) to ascertain what is and is not valid. In a sense, the passage forms part of Ibn ʿArabi's long standing argument with the rational thinkers who dismiss any reading of the Koran which does not concur with their own interpretation as 'corrupt' (*fasād*). What Ibn ʿArabi does here is employ the infinity (non-delimitation) of the Creator to undermine any attempt at rational verification – in other words, he abandons notions of possibility/impossibility as meaningful criteria for judging the phenomena of a God who lies outside the possible and impossible: 'So [if the impossible can take place]where is the judgment of the rational faculty about God and the corruption of its interpretation?' (ibid.). If God is truly infinite and capable of all things, possible and impossible, can we use our finite rational faculties to call any interpretation 'corrupt'?

Nevertheless, Ibn ʿArabi does consider certain interpretations 'far-fetched', for two reasons. In some cases, he is suspicious of motive – the court scholars who 'seek high degrees with kings' and interpret the Koran so as to 'walk with the personal desires' of their benefactors.[65]

Others, more importantly, are criticized because they 'are not moderate but instead plunge deeply into interpretations such that no correspondence (*munāsaba*) remains between the revealed words and the meaning'.[66] Ibn 'Arabi stresses this in several places – there has to be a link between the literal meaning and the interpretation, between the *baṭin* and the *ẓahir*, otherwise the interpreter is merely 'plunging' without any respect for the truth.

This insistence on the interpretation remaining in someway faithful and *linked* to the original text is an important point to remember – particularly when one encounters the kind of passages in the *Fusus* which scandalized Ibn Tamiyya. What Ibn 'Arabi often displays in the *Fusus* is a tendency to re-inscribe popular phrases and stories from the Koran into his own thought-system by imposing radically different meanings upon them. Thus, Ibn 'Arabi can take an apparently straightforward verse like *Fear your Lord* (4: 1) and interpret it to mean 'Make your outer selves a protection for your Lord, and make your inner [reality], which is your Lord, a protection for your outer selves.'[67] One can't help thinking of Heidegger here, who can take a fragment from the Pre-Socratics such as Anaximander's 'Here, too, the gods come to presence' (*einai gar kai entautha theos*) and reinterpret it to mean a much more Heideggerian 'The familiar abode for man is the open region for the presencing of god'.[68] It is difficult to see, in either of these examples, where the *munāsaba* lies between the original and its interpretation. Even the Augustinian principle of interpretation (only interpret allegorically when the sense of the literal is unclear), which Ibn 'Arabi in certain places in the *Fusus* seems to echo,[69] is violated here by the clarity of the verse chosen.

Another feature of Ibn 'Arabi's hermeneutics which may make readers incredulous towards the Shaykh's views on 'far-fetched interpretations' is the careful way he includes the physical arrangement of the letters on the page as part of the meaning to be interpreted. In chapter 17 of the *Fusus*, for example, Ibn 'Arabi considers the fact that the name David (داود) is made up of separate characters, whilst the name Muhammed (محمد) is made up of both separate *and* joined characters. From this observation, the Shaykh informs us that the 'gift' of David's separate-lettered name was intended to 'cut him off from the world',[70] whereas the name of the Prophet, with its mixture of joined and separate letters, was intended to show how God had simultaneously 'joined him [Muhammed] to Himself and separated him from the world, so combining in his name both states' (ibid.). If the Author of the text is Infinity itself, then clearly there can be no room for chance. Every stroke of

every letter, each number of consonants in a stanza or lines on a page, must have a carefully premeditated meaning.

As soon as one enters into this *Weltanschauung*, it's easier to understand why the Shaykh refused to see such exercises as 'far-fetched' – and more difficult to see why he felt others to be so. This belief that every apparent idiosyncrasy present in the text has somehow been divinely preordained is by no means restricted to letter symbolism; even reading a certain passage in different ways can yield different secrets to the divinely guided reader. In the *Kitâb al-Jalâl*, the Shaykh appears to place a peculiar emphasis on self-interruption when reciting a Koranic verse:

> It is necessary for you to be mindful of the distinctions in the Word of Allah Most High when you read it. For instance, they recite
> *When they meet those who believe*
> Then a pause, then
> *they say 'We believe'*
> then a pause, the say:
> *and when they are alone with their devils, they say*
> pause; then say
> *'We are with you; we were only mocking'*
> pause; then say
> *Allah shall mock*. (Baqarah 14–15)
> If you read it in this fashion, you will become acquainted with its secrets and distinguish the circumstances of the addresses and the stories of states, sayings, and deeds, and the harmony of things. So know that.[71]

To read the Koran in a straightforward fashion is not enough: the infinite richness of the Word of Allah yields different meanings when read in different manners – and *every single one* of them is intended. The very unorthodox severing and re-contextualizing, which the Shaykh applies to this passage, offers up 'secrets' that any 'normal' reading would have missed. In essence, if the Koran truly is a 'shoreless ocean', all of whose conceivable meanings are intended by the Author, then the inevitable question follows: can one ever quote an infinite text out of context? Can an 'all-comprehensive' Book ever be *mis*quoted?

If Ibn 'Arabi does dismiss some interpretations as 'far-fetched', it is certainly not because the culprits have 'quoted out of context'. As we have seen, Ibn 'Arabi's objections to such peers are based on either their insincerity or an unwillingness to keep hold of the 'literal sense' (*ẓahir*) as they move onto its inner meaning (*baṭin*). This all leads William

Chittick, easily one of the most competent and outstanding scholars in Ibn ʿArabi criticism, to write that 'Ibn ʿArabi displays tremendous reverence for the literal text'.[72] Ibn ʿArabi's hermeneutics abandon, we are told, 'whatever contradicts the literal sense of the Koran and the Hadith'.[73] If such assertions have to be rejected, this is not because of any *lacunae* in Chittick's scholarship, but simply because the words 'literal sense' in Ibn ʿArabi do not possess any real meaning. If the author of the *Fusus* can read a text which appears to condemn the Pharaoh and respond with a text which praises him – whilst keeping to the letter of the verse – then an extraordinary notion of 'reverence for the literal text' must be at work. If Ibn ʿArabi can carefully reinterpret a *surah* so that the idolaters become saints and Noah misguided, then it is difficult to see what Ibn ʿArabi himself has in mind when he insists on there being a *munasaba* or link between text and interpretation. In either case, an entirely new notion of 'literality' has to be constructed in order to support Professor Chittick's assertions.

Of course, a similar tale of disparity between theory and practice could be told about Derrida – if such a tale had not already been embarked upon hundreds of times by the 'officials of anti-deconstruction' (as Derrida calls them),[74] all of them eager to locate some logocentric blind spot in Derrida's own work and catch the master at his own game. Suffice to say Derrida has always been articulately aware of the risks in writing within language about the instability of language – an awareness, however, which has not prevented him from occasionally revealing a telling sense of ownership over his own texts, particularly when resisting unwanted appropriations of them by others. Apart from being 'disagreeably surprised' at the fortunes of the word 'deconstruction' (indicating a mild displeasure at some of the American uses of his work), Derrida's portrayal of the wandering text has been slightly undermined by his own rather defensive attempts to have his work read in some ways rather than others. This has especially been the case in response to the various theological comparisons with his work – readings which attempt to link différance with 'the God of negative theology', much to the author's *chagrin*. Derrida has spent at least three separate essays explaining why he is neither a Rhineland mystic nor the founder of some secret society. Given Derrida's own remarks on the efforts of Freud to keep his followers in line, it's difficult not to observe Derrida's own manoeuvres without a sense of irony.

In the well-documented debate concerning deconstruction and negative theology, Derrida has not only refused to accept interpretations of his own work that associate it with apophatic theology, but has also

rejected readings of Pseudo-Dionysius and Meister Eckhart which suggest a precedent for deconstruction. The main reason for this, says Derrida, is a notion of 'purity' in the writings of these mystics – an 'experience' which 'does not allow [them] to say just anything' (*ne pas la laisser dire n'importe quoi*).[75] The presence in such apophatic writing of a 'hyperessentiality' (*suressentialité*) means that their texts will always have 'something' to say, a certain direction to travel in, a certain 'pure' reading to safeguard. In implicit contrast with Derrida's writings, they are not truly free.

One could say, however, that it is a desire for purity which Derrida himself displays in his attempt to disassociate deconstruction from the 'locutions, detours and syntax' of negative theology.[76] In a passage from 'Post-Scriptum' which relates how negative theology fulfils 'the philosophical or ontotheological promise it seems to break' (*la promesse philosophique ou onto-théologique qu'elle paraît renier*),[77] Derrida writes:

> Conversely, I trust, no text that is not [negative theology] is someway *contaminated* with negative theology, and even among those texts that apparently do not have, want or believe they have any relation with theology in general. (italics mine)
>
> *Inversement, je n'en crois aucun qui ne soit en rien* contaminé *de théologie négative, et même parmi ceux qui apparemment n'ont, ne veulent ou ne croient avoir aucun rapport avec la théologie en général*.

Derrida's point is this: if negative theology insists that one can only know what God is through what He is not, then all discourse – even that which claims not to have 'any relation with theology in general' – potentially becomes a statement about God. What is of interest to us here, however, is how the word 'contaminated' becomes involved in this potential ontotheological re-appropriation of all discourse. Derrida's reference to 'those texts that apparently do not . . . want . . . any relation with theology in general' presumably includes his own writings – writings which attempt to enact a critique of onto-theology, yet nevertheless remain 'someway contaminated with negative theology'. Why 'contaminated'? one feels forced to ask. Is this because the 'purity' of the deconstructive project must be maintained? And not be infiltrated (and possibly hijacked) by negative theology?

Such questions, no doubt, lead us onto the familiar and somewhat exhausted issue of the status of deconstruction. The point, however,

is not to resurrect once more the contours and conclusions of an already well-documented debate (Gasché/Rorty/Norris *et al*.), but simply to highlight how even Derrida cannot escape a notion of 'purity' and 'contamination'. In his desire to keep an 'infinite distance' between his own writings and those of negative theology (and others), he has to preserve the 'purity' of his own discourse, of différance, and keep it free from any form of metaphysical 'contamination'. Which, for Derrida, inevitably involves the problematic task of deciding which interpretations of his work are 'correct' and which are 'far-fetched'.

Near the beginning of his famous essay on translation, Benjamin ponders the status of a text no-one has ever read or will ever read – and whether one can still say such a text *means* something:

> One might, for example, speak of an unforgettable life or moment even if all men had forgotten it. If the nature of such a life or moment required that it be unforgotten, that predicate would not imply a falsehood but merely a claim not fulfilled by men [*eine Forderung, der Menschen nicht entsprechen*], and probably also a reference to a realm in which it *is* fulfilled: God's remembrance. Analogously, the translatability of linguistic creations [*die Übersetzbarkeit sprachlicher Gebilde*] ought to be considered even if men should prove unable to translate them.[78]

It is a passage which adds a strange, murky tone to Benjamin's essay, with its Zen-like echoes of the unobserved leaf which may or may not have fallen to the ground. What Benjamin essentially does (as DeMan has pointed out)[79] is raise the possibility of language's *inhumanity*. The possibility that language may be something quite independent from man – neither pertaining to him as an origin nor reliant upon him as a destination. The reader, Benjamin seems to be saying, may well be irrelevant to the text.

This idea of the unreachable solitude of the text, a silent inner world glimpsed by no-one or -thing, retains enough ambiguity to appeal to both the divine and the secular. On the one hand, Benjamin haunts us with the possibility of a text which truly has a life of its own, drifting through a void, unread, unseen, perfectly indifferent; on the other, he introduces a God (perhaps to reassure us) much in the manner of Berkeley's Creator, the closure of whose eyelids would annihilate the world. A God whose 'remembrance' would safeguard the meaning of a text even if no human gaze were ever to cross it.

Of course, Zorn has translated *Gebilde* as 'creations', whereas 'images' would probably have been a more accurate – and less theological – word-choice. Nevertheless, I have chosen to end with Benjamin because the idea he espouses applies to both the subjects in our study. In a way, Ibn 'Arabi's *kitab* and Derrida's *texte* find their place on either side of this strange passage, linked by a mutual awareness of the utter independence of their texts, but separated by a different understanding of *why* nobody can control them.

In Derrida, no-one is watching. Whereas the all-seeing gaze of its Author forever monitors the activity of Koranic interpretation, keen to discern who is reading correctly and who is not (this profoundly *ethical* aspect of interpretation will always be a distinguishing feature), in Derrida there is no-one to care how you read. Not even an author. Infinity swirls around both these versions of the infinite text, staggering/fissuring/reflecting them beyond count, but whereas for Derrida this is a peculiarly *earthly* infinity ('…the accident or throw of dice…',[80]) dependant on an endlessly fortuitous series of chance encounters and vagrant appropriations, for Ibn 'Arabi something always remains 'in control' of the text's infinity. If Derrida's reader paternally adopts the text, rears it, nurtures it until it becomes similar to the reader, then Ibn 'Arabi's scholar is engulfed by the text. In this difference lies a definite question of magnitude: to interpret the Koran is to humbly add one more response to an infinite storehouse of readings, to modestly provide one more variant on something inexhaustibly original. For Derrida, to read a text is to change it, to make it utterly special to oneself, to commandeer the text until it becomes an intimate part of the reader. The thought of the original, along with the presence of other interpretations, somehow loses importance as an event…it serves, like Ibn 'Arabi's Koran, as the 'nonrepresentable origin of representation', forever giving rise to interpretation whilst somehow remaining *tout autre* throughout. This idea of the utterly unreachable text seems to mean more to Ibn 'Arabi than it does to Derrida. The Shaykh refers constantly to his original in order to say what he wants to say, whereas Derrida seems to consider *l'origine du texte* as an important but ultimately inaccessible memory – akin to those of early childhood, significant and effective in every moment but nevertheless hopelessly lost to the past.

4 Mystery-tasting and abyssality

The secret in Ibn ʻArabi and Derrida

> The goals we pursue are always veiled. A girl who longs for marriage longs for something she knows nothing about. The boy who hankers after fame has no idea what fame is. The thing that gives our every move its meaning is always completely unknown to us.
>
> Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*[1]

The words *secret* and *sirr* pepper the texts of Derrida and Ibn ʻArabi. Both writers seem to be differently obsessed with their power, keen to delineate the (non)meanings of these words, even to examine the motives of those who would unlock them. Both writers seem to be aware of the possible futility of the secret – which, like Kundera's brides and glory-hunters, only leads from 'veil to veil'. Both writers appear to situate the 'secret' at the heart of their *oeuvre*, as the ultimate metaphor for what they have to say.

Readers familiar with the author of *Dissemination* and 'How to Avoid Speaking' will be unimpressed at the thought of Derrida possessing a 'secret', particularly since Derrida himself has spent so much text saying precisely the opposite. And yet the aim of this chapter is not to put logocentric words in the mouth of Jacques Derrida, turning the post-structuralist into some fanciful mystic. Rather, what this chapter will examine is how the Derridean 'secret', if one can use such a term, actually bears some resemblance to Ibn ʻArabi's *sirr*, insofar as its exposure entails the becoming-aware of a long-existent situation, a genuine de-construction of artificially separate identities and the lifting of an illusion (I use the word *very* carefully) brought about by logocentric/metaphysical assumptions.

Derrida on the secret of the non-secret

> The learned doctors of the Great Vehicle teach us that the essential characteristic of the universe is its emptiness. They are certainly correct with respect to that tiny part of the universe that is the book . . . under all the storm and lightning, there is nothing. It is just appearance, a surface of images – which is why readers may, perhaps, enjoy it.
>
> Borges, Preface to *A Universal History of Infamy*[2]

The illusory depth of the secret – that is, the suggestion that the only secret *is* that there is no secret – is a familiar enough motif. Robbe-Grillet writes 'of having found a locked drawer, then a key; and this key opens the drawer quite impeccably . . . and the drawer is empty'.[3] In Umberto Eco's *Il Pendolo di Foucault*, a group of young academics construct a bizarre conspiracy theory out of Templar lore, Freemasonry, Egyptian pyramids and numerology, attracting unwanted attention from a variety of dangerous parties as they do so. When the unfortunate Belbo is finally trapped by a motley collection of cultists, masons and Crowleyesque aesthetes, he refuses to give them the ultimate secret – that there is no secret, that their entire research has been an elaborate academic hoax – and pays for his silence with an unpleasant death. Such is the allure of the much sought-after enigma, which turns out to be hopelessly irrevocable, a cruel joke or (worst of all) only leading onto an infinite regression of further pseudo-secrets (surely the joke of *The Maltese Falcon*, a film whose entire plot is driven by an object which remains forever off-screen). Stratagems which remind us of the important theological consequences of an all-too familiar trick: a secret does not have to be 'real' in order to exert its power.

In examining the place of the secret in Derrida's thought, perhaps we should begin by saying what everyone else has said about the Derridean secret – that it is a non-secret, an illusion, a semantic surface forever kidding us with a promise of depth. Beneath all sign-systems, writes Carl Raschke, 'is buried the "secret" of all traditions of structured discourse – that they signify nothing'.[4] Morny Joy speaks of a Derrida whose 'disclosure is the absence of any presence – of any secret'.[5] 'The Buddha emphasized that he had no secret,' insists David Loy, wryly alluding to Derrida, 'although that did not stop later generations attributing one to him'.[6] Perhaps Mark C.Taylor puts it most directly of all:

> Since the 'genesis of secrecy' is always missing, there is nothing to tell. I repeat: There is *nothing* to tell. The secret is that there is no secret.[7]

And, just in case someone out there *still* hasn't got the point, John D. Caputo eloquently reiterates:

> This secret – which is *sans savoir* and *non-savoir* – has no semantic content. This secret has nothing to hide. This is an odd sort of secret, something of a non-secret, the secret that *there is no secret* in the sense of some sort of secret knowledge, some secret knowing, some positive content.[8]

There are no secrets – or, if you like, there are only secrets, an endless succession of them, each one promising to be resolved by its successor. And this is precisely what a 'secret', traditionally understood, would be – a sign which would somehow, magically, unproblematically, explain all the previous signs leading up to it in one all-enlightening moment of magnificent self-presence. The disclosure of a secret would be the end of meaning. Nothing more could be said.

The questions, however, still remain: what exactly is Derrida's attitude towards the secret? How does he understand their genesis, their propagation, their (ab)uses? Would the world be a better place without them? And what part does deconstruction play in all this talk of *le secret* – a dismantler of enigmas or a primordial source of them? To what extent is 'deconstruction' really a synonym for 'demystification'?

It is no exaggeration to suggest that the secret, more than any other single motif, dominates the length and breadth of the Derridean oeuvre. Partly because the 'secret' has been used so often as the standard metaphor for the meaning of a literary text; partly because of its indelibly religious significance (the secret name of YHWH which no-one may pronounce, the secret face of God which no man may see and live, the secret hour of the Last Day, etc.); partly because of Derrida's own playful appropriation of the secret, at times self-ironizing, at times utterly serious (in 'La Différance', for example, where Derrida can speak of 'the very enigma of difference', only to declare eight pages on that 'there is nothing kerygmatic about this "word" ').[9] Thus, in essays such as 'Post-Scriptum' and 'How to Avoid Speaking', Derrida examines the role of the secret – the 'topolitology of the secret' – in negative theology, re-affirming his familiar claim that the secret of the negative theologians is, in the end, the very onto-theological God they claim to rid themselves of. In 'Passions', Derrida devotes an entire essay to the subject of the secret, insisting that *il y a du secret* but (in the best apophatic tradition) choosing not to say what the secret *is*, but rather what it is *not*. In 'Of An Apocalyptic Tone' he considers the mystagogue – victim of Kant's

rationalizing diatribe – as the keeper of a secret, and the original meaning of *apokalupsis* as the disclosure of a secret, whilst later works such as *The Gift of Death* explore the relationship between secrecy and responsibility, between secrecy and community. Even in less directly related works such as *Dissemination*, the thought of the secret – and what happens in its absence – permeates all of Derrida's speculations on the text without depth, on the 'as yet unwritten page'. Such are the fruits of Derrida's obsession with the secret – a *cryptophilia* which, as we shall see, is not without its own ironies and ambiguities.

Derrida's several remarks on the secret are varied, arising as they do in a multiplicity of radically different contexts, each proffering subtly different speculations on the notion of what is hidden, veiled or withdrawn. A cluster of them best conveys their diversity:

> There is no secret as such; I deny it. And this is what I confide in secret to whomever allies himself to me.
>
> ('How to Avoid Speaking: Denials')

> Non-presence, the gaping void of desire, and presence, the fullness of enjoyment, amount to the same. By the same token, there is no longer any textual difference between the image and the thing, the empty signifier and the full signified, the imitator and the imitated, etc.
>
> (*Dissemination*)

> *I have forgotten my umbrella* is a statement at once hermetic and totally open, as secret and superficial as the postcard apocalypse it announces and protects against.
>
> ('Of A Newly Adopted Apocalyptic Tone')

> But if, without liking literature in general and for its own sake, I like something *about it*... this would be *in place of the secret*. In place of an absolute secret. There would be the passion. There is no passion without secret, this very secret, indeed no secret without this passion.
>
> ('Passions: An Oblique Offering')

> I refer first of all to the secret shared *within itself*, its partition 'proper', which divides the essence of a secret that cannot even appear to one alone except in starting to be lost...
>
> ('How to Avoid Speaking: Denials')

> Here there is no longer any depth of meaning.
>
> (*Dissemination*)[10]

A number of points need to be drawn from these. Firstly, the secret forever recedes, it is always already lost. If the secret is 'that in speech which is foreign to speech',[11] then divulging the secret only pushes it further away, like Augustine's God ('Whatever we say about God is not true, and whatever we do not say about Him is true').Talking about the secret only serves to defer it – it remains forever 'on the other side' of whatever noises or marks we try to make about it. Secondly, there is no difference between the secret and the non-secret. For Derrida, there are no 'full' or 'empty' signifiers, no texts which are somehow 'deeper' than others, no marks or characters which are more *intrinsically* significant than others. The by-now famous remark at the end of Nietzsche's notebooks – *I have forgotten my umbrella* – illustrates the perfectly dual status of the kerygmatic, a capacity for the ordinary to conceal the extraordinary (and vice versa) which readers of Kafka and Pinter have long been familiar with. Anything, potentially, could be a secret – every signifier could, potentially, signify something radically other than its habitual signified. Thirdly, the illusion of secrecy is analogous to the illusion of depth – which is where we begin to move closer to the theological resonance of Derrida's remarks upon the secret. It brings to mind a passage from Tillich:

> The Name of this inexhaustible depth and ground of all being is God. That depth is what the word means.... For if you know that God means depth, you know much about Him. You cannot then call yourself an atheist or an unbeliever, for you cannot think or say: Life has no depth. Life is shallow. Being itself is surface only. If you could say this in complete seriousness, you would be an atheist, but otherwise you are not. He who knows about depth knows about God.[12]

For Derrida, one can't help feeling that 'depth', sooner or later, always gets associated with 'divinity'. Insofar as all secrets require a knower – and possibly even a Knower – Derrida's denial of textual depth constitutes the denial of anyone or thing 'out there' who might have the Last Word, hermeneutically, on the meaning of a text. For the medieval exegete, poring over the uncial letters of God's Holy Word, there was always a divine mind who had understood something – who would *always* understand something – the reader had not. Regardless of whether we are talking about the scholastic rigours of Dominican exegesis, the mystical *ta'wil* of Islamic hermeneutics, or the *midrash* of the

Jewish commentary tradition, the idea that the Ineffable Author is on the 'inside' – whilst we, humble readers, linger forever on the 'outside'[13] – remains essentially the same. The Derridean synonymy of 'secrecy' and 'surface' effectively erases this distinction between 'insider' and 'outsider'. A phalanx of scribbled symbols on a sheet of parchment – *c'est tout*. In deconstructive hermeneutics nothing is hidden *not* because there is nothing to hide, but rather because there is No-one to hide it.

Whether all this amounts to a 'demystification' of metaphysics in the Enlightenment fashion, the kind of Weberesque *Entzauberung* which replaces the mysterious cause with the visible, remains debatable – as Derrida has clearly commented elsewhere. In 'Of an Apocalyptic Tone' he is searching for a possible 'limit of demystification', one which 'would (perhaps) distinguish deconstruction from a simple, progressive demystification in the style of the Enlightenment'.[14] There are certainly moments elsewhere in Derrida where 'deconstruct' and 'demystify' appear to be synonymous in their early stages, even if they ultimately concern two radically different kinds of analysis (literally from *analyein*, to loosen or untie). What this chapter suggests is that *deconstruction is simultaneously a work of both demystification* and *remystification* – it locates and dissolves the moments of self-presence in a text only to leave in their place a semantic void, one which liberates the text from its single destination and allows it to drift, rudderless, in an infinite number of directions.

What *does* make deconstructive demystification so different from its rational counterparts? 'There is no unfathomable mystery in the world' Moritz Schlick, the Vienna positivist, famously said. For logical positivists like Ayer and Carnap, the mysteries and enigmas of everyday life were simply 'bad' uses of language – the result of using 'nonsense', unclear metaphysical propositions. As soon as we stopped asking the wrong questions and began to use correct, verifiable assertions, the so-called 'mystery' (for logical positivists a word always synonymous with 'problem') would vanish of its own accord. It is difficult to see how such a project of clarification can be attributed to deconstruction. 'To make enigmatic what one thinks one understands by the words "proximity", "immediacy", "presence" ' wrote Derrida in *Of Grammatology*, 'is my final intention in this book'.[15] If Derrida rids the text of its mysterious secret – the *sensus spiritualis* which lies buried like hidden treasure beneath the page – this does not mean he wishes to replace it with one of his own. What distinguishes deconstructive demystification from all the other Enlightenment versions of mystery-murder is precisely this calling into question of the desire to explicate. For deconstruction, to 'explain' is simply to produce another set of signs to describe the first. Solving a secret simply means producing another one. 'From the

moment there is meaning, there is nothing but signs.'[16] The belief that there exists a secret whose meaning, once unlocked and lifted out of its precious casket, would somehow unambiguously enlighten everyone concerned without ever having to use a sign itself – this is surely the naïve dream of structuralism which Derrida so happily takes apart in essays such as 'Force and Signification'. Meaning, like the secret, enjoys a certain semantic inexhaustibility – there is no end to either of them.

'To make enigmatic . . . '. It is a curious phrase of Derrida's, particularly when one bears in mind the kind of clarifying/explicating versions of Derrida offered by critics like Gasché, who see the theorist as a one who resolves 'inconsistencies' in philosophical systems and their exposition.[17] 'To make enigmatic . . . ' Does this mean that deconstruction brings an enigma to the text? After all our talk of demystification, does deconstruction turn texts into secrets once more? Does it restore a kind of Ur-secret to the text as the originary condition of literature? Perhaps . . . but if deconstruction *does* attribute a secret to the text, it is a 'secret de Polichinelle', a secret for no-one.[18] If deconstruction *does* re-mystify the text and liberate it from certain rigid parameters of meaning, it is not by insisting upon a secret, transcendentally hidden interpretation of the text, but rather by restoring an originary darkness (from *ainigma*, lit. 'to darken') to the illusion of clarity. A darkness that no amount of *lumiére* or *Aufklärung* can ever completely dispel. A darkness in which nothing is hidden.

In what does this enigma – this darkness – consist of? It is the darkness of the abyss – a word (*l'abîme*) which seems to recur often in Derrida, usually in the context of the futility of representational thought, the hollowness of the sign which forever empties itself, the abyssality of the signifying chain which can only ever pass on the message without ever understanding its 'meaning':

> Once it [the centre] lends itself a single time to such a representation – that is to say, once it is written – . . . it is the abyss, is the bottomlessness of infinite redoubling.
>
> ('Ellipsis' in *Writing and Difference*)

> The labyrinth, here is an abyss: we plunge into the horizontality of a pure surface . . .
>
> (ibid.)

> Representation *in the abyss* of presence is not an accident of presence; the desire of presence is, on the contrary, born from the abyss (the indefinite multiplication) of representation . . .
>
> (*Of Grammatology*)

> . . . historicity remains a secret. Historical man does not want to *admit to* his historicity, and first and foremost to the abyss that undermines his own historicity.
>
> (*Gift of Death*)[19]

The abyssal secret of the text's utter superficiality remains, paradoxically, something which both threatens the meaning of the text whilst indefinitely multiplying it. *Ex nihilio nihil fit*: nothingness as the source of meaning. The nothingness, the semantic void at the heart of the text enables all its various counter-texts, sub-texts, con-texts to proliferate in a 'bottomlessness of infinite redoubling'. It is the abyss beneath the text – the absence of any supernatural, extra-textual presence that might control it – which enables its meanings to shimmer and multiply.

This removal of the text's depth, however, does not signify the end of interpretation, but merely the end of nostalgia. The secret of the text's 'pure surface' still permits interpretation to take place, but will divide future exegetes into two categories: (i) the uninitiated – those who still haven't realized that the only secret is that there is no secret, the academic detectives who will forever search and scrutinize the signs before them in an attempt to recover the Real Meaning, and (ii) the enlightened – those who will have finally understood the millennia-old illusion of exegesis but decide to carry on with it anyway, out of habit, passion, fear, obstinacy or simply lack of imagination. For this second category, interpreting texts from now on will mean *reacting* to them; bumping into collections of signs and responding to them with some of their own. In a sense, the demise of textual depth leaves the activity of interpretation intact, but simply re-understood in an ironic and slightly self-mocking way (one thinks of Sartre here: 'I never gave or took a command in my life without laughing'). From now on, no-one will read or give an interpretation without smiling – the smile of one who has understood the double-bluff of the game of interpretation, the impenetrability of the text, *not* because its secret has been locked away for good, but because there never was a secret to begin with.

Ibn 'Arabi on the secret of idolatry

> In Lordship there is a mystery, that mystery being you . . .
>
> Sahl al-Tustari, cited in the *Fusus al-Hikem*[20]

In critical theory circles, there is a story by Edgar Allen Poe which has probably enjoyed as much attention as anything he ever wrote, thanks to

a critique by Lacan (an essay in turn critiqued by Derrida and Barbara Johnson). In 'The Purloined Letter', an important letter is successfully hidden from a thorough but unimaginative police chief, who ransacks an apartment three times but fails to find it – if only because the thief has decided to 'hide' it from the investigators by leaving it openly on the table for all to see. Far from being concealed in some hidden drawer, the secret envelope is so obvious and visible to all that no-one guesses its true identity. By its very openness, it retains its secrecy. In Poe's story, the revelation of the hidden has gone unnoticed – no-one is even aware it has taken place.

This tale of the extraordinary being mistaken for the ordinary exemplifies, in many respects, the meaning of the secret in Ibn ʿArabi's work. It could be said that the only real secret for the Shaykh al-Akhbar is the fact that there is *anything* secret at all. Of course, there are 'obvious' secrets in Ibn ʿArabi – moments where some form of information is clearly being withheld from general knowledge – such as the 'Mystery of Destiny' (*sirr al-qadar*)[21] or the 'Mystery of Premeasurement';[22] the secret plans of God which mortals cannot know. However, the most important secret of all – what Ibn ʿArabi refers to as the *sirr al-sirr* or 'secret of secrets'[23] – is a secret so tremendous that, like Poe's innocuous envelope, it lies right in front of our eyes without any of us ever guessing what it is.

Ibn ʿArabi's secret is so successful that most people (the masses, ʿ*amma*) are not even aware there is a secret. The sin of idolatry (*shirk*) offers the clearest example of this. In the *Book of Majesty and Beauty* (*Kitāb al-jalāl wa-l jamāl*), Ibn ʿArabi says of the Koranic declaration 'Your god is One God' (*ilāhukum ilahūn wāḥidun*):

> It is a statement applying to everything deified and worshipped.
>
> This is a secret of Allah's Divinity. If it were not for what every worshipper finds in the object of this worship . . . he would not worship it . . . [the idol-worshipper] is merely the servant of a particular object of worship, the secret of whose divinity itself belongs to Allah Most High. That is the soul of His saying:
>
> Your god is One God
>
> So the statement affirms the essential form of a thing rejected in actual practice. People only adopt these [idols] because of the relationship with the divine that they establish by carving them . . . So understand that: it is a remarkable secret.[24]

Ibn ʿArabi's point is striking: God is the secret of all idolatry. Even the most profane and secular things we can think of contain this secret,

tucked away inside, discernible only by those who see God as something both like *and* unlike creation – someone who has learnt to see with two eyes, as the Shaykh says. Such a secret is not only 'remarkable', it also carries with it a tremendous power – the power to completely reverse the meaning of an *ayat* from the Koran, the power to take a practice regarded by most Muslims to be sinful (the Koran abounds with condemnations of idolatry) and turn it into a form of worship as acceptable and orthodox as any evening prayer-call. Of course, even those 'pagans' who haven't understood the true meaning of their idolatry – the fact that the fire or cow or sun they are worshipping is just one more form of the Real itself – will still 'end up (*ma'al*) with mercy'.[25] The 'preferable' idolatry, however, is practised only by those who have understood the secret of God's bewildering omnipresence – in such cases, one can no longer call such people 'idolaters'. The idol has become a conscious vehicle of worship for the gnostic – no longer merely the last laugh of Allah on the wayward and unbelieving, but rather a radical relocation of the holy in the quotidian and the 'apparently' profane:

> . . . all sensory and supra-sensory forms are His loci of manifestation. He speaks from every form, but not in every form. He is seen by every eye, He is heard by every hearing, but it is He from whom no speech is heard.[26]

Ibn 'Arabi brings God near to man without compromising His incomparability. In deconstructive terms, however, one could be tempted to re-describe this gesture as just another case of semantic deferral. In other words, far from radically dismantling the ontotheological exoskeleton which the philosophers and the theologians have tried to fix onto God, Ibn 'Arabi simply carries on where the others left off by supplying 'God' as a signified to every signifier, without ever being able to say what that 'God' is – precisely the kind of thing Derrida has been saying about the secret all along.

Indeed, one of the problems Derrida has with figures such as Eckhart and Dionysius is this obsession with the secret, with 'the necessity of the secret – to be kept, preserved, shared'.[27] 'Something' (what Eckhart calls '*neizwaz*' or 'I know not what') is always held back, kept in reserve, hidden away – a 'hyper-truth' (*sur-verité*) offering Derrida the perfect example of an anxious logocentrism which uses the excuse of secrecy to conceal the abyss upon which it is built. Apart from the fact that Derrida's views are based, as I and others have tried to show elsewhere, on exceedingly selective readings of Meister Eckhart and Pseudo-Dionysius, it

will become increasingly difficult to level such charges of closet logocentrism at Ibn ʿArabi's 'secret of secrets'.

If God is the secret of idolatry, then He is also the secret of the self. Drawing on both a Koranic- and tradition-based notion of the divine dwelling in/near man (*We are nearer to him than his jugular vein* 50: 16), this linking of the knowledge of self with the knowledge of God can be found as a standard motif in many of Ibn ʿArabi's predecessors – al-Ghazali, al-Biruni and the Ikhwan al-Safa.[28] In effect, Ibn ʿArabi replicates and develops this fairly commonplace Sufi belief in the secret divinity of the individual:

> He prevented the real secret from being known, namely that He is the essential Self of things. He conceals it by otherness, which is you. Otherness asserts that the hearing is Zaid's hearing, while the gnostic asserts that it is the Reality Himself…[29]
>
> …no-one knows the path which brings about nearness to God and bestows endless felicity on the servant except him who knows what is in the Self of the Real.[30]
>
> *The secret of the secret*: That by which the Real One is isolated from the servant.[31]

As we said earlier, the exact nature of this relationship between the soul and the Real is shrouded in debate among Ibn ʿArabi scholars[32] – however, what is important here is how the self becomes the container of a mystery, to echo Sahl al-Tustari's words ('In Lordship there is a mystery, that mystery being you…'). We ourselves are the carriers of a secret, not 'outside' or in the heavens or beyond the mountains, but buried within our own breasts is an enigma waiting to be discovered. The secret lies in the familiar, in the place where we least expect to look for it – truly *heimlich* in this sense, both 'homely' and 'mysterious'.

If, etymologically, the condition of holiness (*quddus*) is understood to be separation, then Ibn ʿArabi's teachings on the secret would ultimately mean an end to any notion of the sacred. For the Shaykh, understanding the secret does not mean to acquire a new, unfamiliar piece of knowledge such as a password or a certain gesture, but rather to see how things have always been. To rediscover in oneself (and here we return to Ibn ʿArabi's essential Platonism) a primordial bond of some kind with the Real, a relationship which has always been existent with God – an 'actual situation'. The secret, one could say, is a forgotten memory; entering into the mystery simply means recollecting what one has always been.

Affifi has probably expressed this best:

> . . . when Ibnul'Arabi talks of mystical union with God he means a 'state' in which an *already existing union* is being *realised* or verified. The *mystic does not become* God, for there is *no* becoming in Ibnul'Arabi's theory, *he is* essentially one with God in the sense everything else is.[33]

Given the fact that the central aim of Affifi's study is to portray Ibn 'Arabi as a 'thoroughgoing pantheist', one could dismiss this surmise of the Great Shaykh's relation to God on the basis of everything else Affifi has said. Nevertheless, it is difficult not to receive this impression from certain parts of the *Fusus* – especially the tenth chapter on Hud, where 'otherness' is understood as an illusion, constructed by God, to hide the true nature of the soul's divinity from itself. This all creates problems for Ibn 'Arabi scholars, for Ibn 'Arabi in some places stresses the independence of God and in others seems to present Him as somehow dependent on His creatures. Ibn 'Arabi's most memorable expression of this is in the fifth chapter on Ibrahim in the *Fusus Al-Hikam*:

> Where then is His Self-sufficiency,
> Since I help Him and grant Him Bliss?
> It is for this that the Real created me,
> For I give content to His knowledge and manifest Him.[34]

This denial of self-sufficiency to God causes some problems, as earlier in the *Fusus* Ibn 'Arabi had isolated precisely this quality as 'an incurable factor of distinction' between God and the soul. God creates us, while 'He is free of all dependence whatsoever'.[35] And so, on the one hand we have a 'careful' Ibn 'Arabi who cautiously attributes all the qualities of God to the soul except for that of maintaining existence; and on the other hand a more audacious version presents us with a soul that not only gives its Maker happiness and Self-knowledge but also enables Him to exist. One could remedy this by saying that the God of the first version is exclusively the Real (*al-ḥaqq*), whilst the God of the second version which the soul supports and keeps in Being is merely the 'God of belief'. However, parts of the *Futuhat* seem to suggest that the soul genuinely could become one with the Real *in substantia* and not simply in grace. In speaking of the spiritually advanced who 'have no station' (*la maqam*) Ibn 'Arabi calls such believers 'the divine ones (*al-ilahiyyun*), since the Real is identical with them'.[36] This seems to

move fairly close to Eckhart's substantial linking of the Eternal Ground of the Soul with the Ground in the Eternal Godhead.

On the consequences of the secret

For Ibn ʿArabi, therefore, the secret doesn't simply lead to God – it also leads to self-annihilation. To learn the 'secret of the secret' is to lose oneself, to glimpse the 'abyssality' of oneself. Derrida speaks of the 'historical man' who does not want to admit to the 'abyss that undermines his own historicity';[37] a similar idea of the abyss underlies Ibn ʿArabi's perfect man. For Derrida, anyone who still believes in a coherent, stable self is unwilling to admit to the fact that s/he is a construction of images. Ditto for nations – isms, races, histories: blind belief in these constructs as concrete, self-sufficient realities can only come from a profound ignorance of how 'meaning' really works. An ignorance of the fact that all such sign-systems are based on *differences*, not absolutes – that their signifiers cannot base themselves on anything which does not already signify something else, *ad infinitum*. Hence the 'abyss' which undermines historical man.

Of course, Ibn ʿArabi's questioning of absolutes and identities leads to an abyss of a very different kind. Ibn ʿArabi's truth-seeker discovers the nameless, faceless, formless Real as the foundation of all things, not a semantic emptiness. Nevertheless, it is interesting to see how these two inquiries into the origin of phenomena compare with each other; whilst not quite stumbling upon the Derridean *abîme* of absolute surface, the perfect gnostic does realize that 'All roots are unseen (*ghayb*)'.[38] Just as for Derrida, 'life' (a word which he has more than once used as a synonym for différance) means the 'non-representable origin of representation', the gnostic's secret lies in discovering how 'the root of the existence of the things is the Real, and He is unseen by them' (ibid.). In both cases, the secret unveiled is that the radically Other lies behind the familiar; the *tout autre* is the source of that which we felt was comfortably, cosily ours.

With Ibn ʿArabi, this means that once one has 'tasted' (*dhawq*) the mystery, one cannot talk about it.[39] The word 'cannot' here is not used in the sense of prohibition, but incapacity – once one has broken through into the mind-numbingly simultaneous omnipresence and incommensurability of the Real, 'there can be no technical terminology' (ibid.). The secret of the Real, as we saw in the first chapter, is a (non)place situated beyond/outside/prior to the world of differences, a space where representation cannot take place. In the *Futuhat*, Ibn ʿArabi goes into

this in some detail:

> . . . it is impossible for a technical term to tie Him down, since that of Him which one individual witnesses is not the same as what another individual witnesses in any respect . . . Hence no gnostic is able to convey to another gnostic what he witnesses of his Lord, for each of the two gnostics witnesses Him who has no likeness, and conveying knowledge can only take place through likenesses.[40]

To repeat a point: the Real is unspeakable not because it is a secret piece of information, say, a certain letter of the alphabet, but rather because of its absolute incomparability. In order to speak about it, one would have to find a letter which somehow meant all of the letters of the alphabet *at once*. The secret of Ibn ʿArabi's secret is no arbitrary curtaining of certain signs from public view – as Derrida would have it in his version of negative theology – but rather the unthinkable root of all identities.

Whether this inability to speak about the secret in Ibn ʿArabi has any resemblance to Kierkegaardian silence is uncertain. In *Fear and Trembling*, Abraham cannot speak when he decides to follow God's command and kill his only son: 'He said nothing to Sarah, he said nothing to Eleazar. After all, who could have understood him?'.[41] Abraham cannot speak about his relationship with God because to do would be to speak a language which contradicts the Law. To be asked by a God of Love and Justice to kill one's own son – Abraham's secret is unique, incommensurable, no-one can understand it. And it is because of this secret that Abraham walks alone. As soon as Abraham understands his task and begins his long walk of silence, he enters into an 'absolute relation with the absolute'.[42] At this point, Abraham begins his own language game, employing a vocabulary which no-one – neither Sarah nor Isaac – is familiar. In the face of this inwardness, Kierkegaard cannot translate Abraham's faith into some sort of intelligible account, for we have nothing with which we might understand it. This idea parts company with the original, much simpler definition of the mystical as a communicable piece of information which is somehow kept from the rest and revealed only to a select few: now the secret is a poem whose untranslatable effect in the original (and here we skirt close to Benjamin) can never be reproduced in any other language. The coincidence of sound and sense isolates it, in the same way Abraham is isolated by his decision: the fortuitous collision in a poem of certain consonants with certain meanings cannot be replicated in any other language, it remains – like Abraham – sadly and uniquely alone.

Nevertheless, although Kierkegaard follows Ibn ʿArabi's work in positing a God beyond dualistic categories of good and evil, the secret of Abraham does not lead to a dissolution of the self. The word in Arabic Ibn ʿArabi uses to describe this is *fanāʾ*, and the Shaykh employs it frequently to describe to final (re)joining of the soul to the Real:

> Through being joined (*ittiṣāl*) to the Real, man is annihilated (*fanāʾ*) from himself. Then the Real becomes manifest so that He is his hearing and his sight. This is what is called a knowledge of 'tasting' (*dhawq*). The Real is nothing of these organs until they are burned up by His Being, so that He is there, not they.[43]

As Derrida might say: the secret of the self is that there is no self. Until we are enlightened we are rooted in something we remain fundamentally ignorant of. How far this Sufi dismantling of selfhood is comparable to the deconstructive laying-bare of the *autos* is a difficult question. Derrida certainly doesn't reveal the groundlessness of identities in order to have them re-incorporated into some bigger, transcendental presence; on the other hand, neither does Ibn ʿArabi. The Real is not an 'entity' in any onto-theological sense of the word. A proper understanding of *fanāʾ* would see it as a dissolution, *not* an addition, nor an in-corporation, for the Real is not a *corpus*. It is a formless, nameless, faceless force, moving through creation, constantly renewing it. When Zayd realizes that his hearing and seeing actually stems from the Real, and not from his 'self', then a different picture of the universe comes into being. Many of Ibn ʿArabi's controversial interpretations of familiar passages from the Koran – lauding villains and disparaging 'good' characters – have been misunderstood for this very reason. Dismissing them as exercises in moral relativism, the Shaykh's critics have failed to take into account the omnipresence of the Real in all things, 'good' and 'bad'.

Of course, the dissolution of the self may also suggest a dissolution of responsibility. If one's traditions and practices (*adab*) are based on a commitment to God as Other, than as soon as this idea of God as Other is dispelled, so are one's ritual obligations: '*Adab* requires the Other. Now, there is a station at which others vanish; *adab* ceases, for there is no longer [any other to relate to].'[44] Learning the secret means discovering that one no longer *has* to do anything, because all notions of obligation are based on a relationship to the Other. 'Tasting' the mystery means becoming the mystery – the mystery of God, becoming as formless, faceless and attributeless as God Himself. On this point, Ibn ʿArabi is

fond of quoting the mystic Abu Yazid al-Bistami (died 878):

> It was said to Abu Yazid, 'How are you this morning?' He replied: 'I have no morning and no evening; morning and evening belong to him who becomes delimited by attributes (*ṣifa*), and I have no attributes'.[45]

We see this echoed in Ibn 'Arabi's own observations on reaching the 'station of light':

> I no longer had back or front, and with this vision I no longer made any distinction between different directions, I was like a sphere . . .[46]

What we see in these examples is truly a deconstruction of selfhood – a fully conscious realization that all of one's attributes, plans, actions, actually belong to something Bigger and Other than oneself. It is not difficult to recognize the contemporary version of this; to finally grasp the secret cultural contingency of all our habits and beliefs, to realize that we see the world the way we do because of the latitude and longitude of our birthplace, because of the first hundred books we read, because of our television habits, our parents' passions and indifferences, because of the thousands of unknowable factors which form a backdrop to the illusion of our 'self'.

'I no longer made any distinctions between different directions . . .' As if one had finally got beyond the binary differences of right and wrong, left and right, East and West, 'good' and 'bad' deeds. It's difficult to escape this idea that stumbling upon the secret in Ibn 'Arabi means somehow glimpsing, in a strangely modern way, the utter arbitrariness of things. Of course, once one has understood how the individual believer is de-centred in the omnipresence of the Real, then some of Ibn 'Arabi's more controversial remarks concerning *salat* and idolatry become easier for an 'orthodox' believer to accept (or, at least, not to dismiss as outright relativism). Taken out of context, there are countless remarks in the *Futuhat* alone whose conclusions could be seen as inescapably 'relativist', perhaps even nihilistic:

> The root of all things is difference (*tafriqa*) . . .
>
> Things are only witnessed in respect of their levels, not in their entities. For example, there is no difference between the King and his subjects in humanity.
>
> . . . were there no forms, no entity would become distinguished from any other.

> If you say that [the Sphere of life] is the cosmos, you are correct; that it is not the cosmos, you are correct; that it is the Real or not the Real, you are correct. It accepts all that.
>
> 'Evil' is failure to reach one's individual desire (*gharaḍ*) and what is agreeable (*mulā'im*) to one's nature.
>
> It may be in reality that crookedness is straightness, like the crookedness of a bow: the straightness which is desired from it is its crookedness.[47]

Some common tendencies seem to run through all of these different assertions – a delight in juxtaposing opposites and showing how, differently understood, they may actually mean the same thing; an awareness that identity and meaning is somehow tied to relationships – and an understanding of the apparent meaninglessness of things outside these relationships. More importantly, there seems to be a profoundly prescient understanding of how identities seem to require their opposites in order to signify – Ibn 'Arabi's definition of Paradise as a place whose happiness is constantly threatened is probably the most memorable example of this.[48] Once the believer has 'tasted' the attributelessness of the mystery, it will be difficult to perceive any values and traditions again in quite the same way. Once the believer has been to a place where there is 'no ranking in degrees',[49] the word 'hierarchy' thereafter will always have a slightly absurd ring.

And yet, the progress of the soul does not end with *fanā'*, nor with an abandonment of one's traditions. Once the believer has glimpsed the secret of the divine abyss upon which everything rests, one of two possible reactions ensue: fear or illumination. For some, the enormity of what they glimpse is simply too much:

> There are those who undergo unveiling and then flee back to the visible world because they see that which terrifies them in their unveiling. One such was our companion Ahmad al-'Assad al-Hariri. When he was taken, he would quickly return to his senses shaking and trembling. I used to scold him and tell him not to do that, but he would say, 'I am frightened and terrified lest I lose myself through what I see . . .'[50]

Many, like Ibn 'Arabi's friend, are frightened of losing themselves – their 'selves' – and even going mad (*majnun*). Those who are more prepared *return* of their own choice to the visible world and to their traditions,

but simply with a different understanding. As we have seen in an earlier chapter, learning of the omnipresence of God perhaps makes the *qibla* (the direction of prayer towards Mecca) unnecessary. However, this does not lead Ibn ʿArabi to declare any direction for *salat* correct; on the contrary, we are told to continue praying towards Mecca, but only on the condition that we realize God is not confined to that place, but lies in all other directions too. This is a repeated theme in Ibn ʿArabi's work; Ibn ʿArabi is keen to warn against the secret leading the believer away from his/her tradition:

> It may happen that the possessor of such an unveiling [i.e. he who learns a secret] continues to practice the outward sense of that ruling, while he does not believe in it in respect of himself. He practices it by stipulating the outward situation (*ẓahir*), saying to himself, 'To this commandment of the law I only give the outward dimension (*ẓahir*) of myself, for I have gained knowledge of its secret (*sirr*). Hence its property in my innermost consciousness (*sirr*) is different from its property in my outward dimension.'[51]

This amounts to what Ibn ʿArabi calls 'throwing away the scale of the Law' (ibid.) – and the Shaykh does not approve of it. Such a radical disparity between *ẓahir* and *baṭin* is unacceptable in the eyes of Ibn ʿArabi. The secret of the self – namely, its selflessness – must never interfere with *adab*. The Shaykh is insistent on this: as we saw in the previous chapter on hermeneutics, there must always be some kind of link between the secret (*baṭin*) and its practice (*ẓahir*). In the passage, given the believer is condemned because the secret (*sirr*) has led him to disbelieve in a certain practice. His knowledge of the secret, rather than enhancing him spiritually and filling him with desire to observe the law, has only bred indifference and complacency: 'Now I know the secret of what I do, there's no need for me to do it anymore.'

Thus, if the secret brings about the annihilation of the individual, it can also dissolve the tradition and customs based on the individual's relationship to such a God. There seems to be a deep-rooted fear here, on Ibn ʿArabi's part, of the all-encompassing and incomparable nature of God somehow robbing the gnostic of his/her traditions – which, after all, are *specific* practices based on a *certain*, delimited understanding of God. A fear that, once people realize the undelimitable Real lies in all things and in all directions (even in themselves), the 'enlightened' will no longer bother with the pilgrimage or the correct direction of prayer. Any religious tradition which extols a radically unthinkable God carries

within itself this capacity for self-dismantling, this possibility for profoundly calling into question the *raisons d'être* of its own practices and customs. It is unlikely that Ibn ʿArabi's fear of appearing to incite laxity and moral abandon (a familiar charge levelled at the Sufis) had any external motive – a desire to appear 'orthodox' or 'sound'. On the contrary, the Shaykh appears to show little inhibition or self-regulation in revealing his most controversial ideas, particularly in the *Fusus*. A genuine anxiety seems to lie beneath Ibn ʿArabi's frequent insistence on not abandoning *adab* after grasping the secret of the Real. Perhaps such anxiety stems from a fear that discovering the mystery of Lordship within oneself may cause arrogance and self-importance to overtake modesty and humility.

Certainly Ibn ʿArabi's most perfect type of gnostic, the 'People of Blame' (*malāmiyya* – a familiar Sufi term) is the perfect example of modesty and non-distinction. Even though they have tasted the mystery of God ('They have achieved all the stations and have seen that God veils Himself from the creation in this world')[52] these gnostics are distinguished by their utter ordinariness. Although 'everything in their view is named Allah' (ibid.), such an awareness of the Real's omnipresence has not caused them to leave their cultural contexts or view them as strange or unnecessary. On the contrary, they fit perfectly into society, mixing among the common people without anyone ever divining their true status:

> They walk in the markets, they speak to the people . . . [and yet] they are alone with God.
>
> . . . The People of Blame do not distinguish themselves from any of God's creatures by anything, so they are unknown. Their state is the state of the common people.
>
> (ibid.)

One could be forgiven for thinking the People of Blame to be a secret society, clandestinely moving among the masses, imitating their ways and practices perfectly whilst remaining intimately in touch with Something absolutely beyond them. Ibn ʿArabi seems to see this inconspicuous condition of the *malāmiyya* as their most perfect virtue – whereas the worshippers (*al-ʿubbad*) are noticeable through their obvious holiness, and the Sufis are recognized by everyone through their 'miraculous breaking of habits', the most advanced group of gnostics remain plain Joe Bloggs, ordinary citizens living ordinary lives to the undiscerning eye.

It is difficult not to think once more of Kierkegaard in this praise of the extraordinary returning to, and passing for, the ordinary. Like the gnostics who are 'alone with God', Kierkegaard's famous 'knight of faith' always stands 'in absolute isolation'.[53] And yet, with equal irony, he belongs almost wholly to society; even though he 'has felt the pain of renouncing everything in the world', only to 'take everything back on the strength of the absurd',[54] even though he stands alone and separate from 'the mass of humans', the knight of faith still remains and participates in the world. The authenticity of his faith reveals itself in no miraculous acts of self-mortification (like Ibn ʿArabi's Sufis and worshippers), but rather with all the utter conformity of the petit bourgeoisie – 'no smartly turned-out townsman taking a stroll out to Fresberg on a Sunday afternoon treads the ground with surer feet'.[55] Like the *malāmiyya*, he is indistinguishable from those around him, even though he is spiritually light-years ahead of his peers: 'if one didn't know him it would be impossible to set him apart from the rest of the crowd'. And yet, says Kierkegaard in one of his most careful analogies, if a skilful dancer can leap in the air and land to assume a position straightaway, the knights of faith cannot quite manage such a smooth transition; they waver for an instant, 'and the wavering shows they are nevertheless strangers to the world'.[56]

Of course, it would be unwise to claim – despite Pamuk's tongue-in-cheek image of Ibn ʿArabi as the 'existentialist of all time' – that the People of Blame and the Kierkegaardian knight of faith are strangers to the world for the same reason. Nevertheless, there is something curiously analogous in this return to the mundane and the everyday after an experience which, by all accounts, should have rendered everything superfluous and unimportant. In both cases, the individuals concerned are returning to people who cannot understand them. In both cases, Kierkegaard's knight and Ibn ʿArabi's gnostic choose to accept this situation, hiding the true level of their advancement so they may blend in with those around them. They walk in the market, along the streets, keeping their secret to themselves. They are truly '*happy*'. For such people, glimpsing the secret does not mean changing one's life, but rather one's attitude towards it – deconstructing the *cur*, but leaving the *quid* intact.

What we have, in other words, is a secret which calls all our previous beliefs and passions into question but which, once we have learnt it, leaves everything intact. Is it possible to make an analogy here with Derrida's own attempt to deconstruct morality without abandoning the ethical? To retain certain Marxist/feminist values, even after one has

learned the secret abyssality of such -isms? Of course, thinkers such as Ibn ʿArabi and Derrida who unconventionally question ideas of 'goodness' and 'justice' have always been accused of immorality – and almost always have to resort to the same kind of ritual defence to reassure critics of their own Muslim hood/sense of the ethical (Heidegger makes a similar defence in *Letter on Humanism*, where he laments how 'because "humanism" is argued against, one fears a defence of the inhuman'[57]). Ibn ʿArabi's insistence that his secret does *not* mean a dispensing with *adab* but rather a richer understanding of it finds some parallels with Derrida, and his insistence that a deconstructive laying-bare of the logocentric secret of traditional moral and political values does not necessarily mean a *destruction* of them, but rather a re-appraisal, a re-opening.

It is an issue which Derrida has written about at length. In 'Passions' he expresses an understandable wariness concerning the 'remoralization of deconstruction',[58] a prospect which, although 'attractive', ultimately risks 'reassuring itself in order to reassure the other' (an allusion to the various charges of amoralism and political indifference directed at Derrida's work) and lapsing logocentrically into a 'new dogmatic slumber' (ibid.). The example of Ibn ʿArabi's perfect gnostic – who grasps the secret of his own selflessness and is still able to live in the real world without any visible change to his own external practices – cannot really be followed through in Derrida. It is difficult to imagine how the orthodox socialist or feminist, having accepted the semantic groundlessness of words such as 'humanism', 'utopia', 'woman', can still carry on as if nothing had happened. When, in *Positions* (1971), Houdebine asks Derrida what effect deconstructive practices will have on the 'current ideological scene', Derrida seems somewhat guarded in his reply, insisting there are 'no grounds for expecting from it . . . an *immediately general* efficacity'.[59] It is going to take time before the real effects of deconstructive practice – the re-analysis of the concept of ideology, a re-understanding of the relationship between 'a determined text or signifying chain' and 'reality' – make themselves felt. As this gradual process takes place, ideologists of all persuasions will finally learn that they 'can no longer restrict [themselves] to prior delimitations' (an irresistibly Sufi phrase). Derrida uses, as he often does, the word 'trembling' (*ébranler*) to describe the effect of deconstruction: 'What are apparently simply "regional" effects of this trembling, therefore, at the same time have a nonregional opening, destroying their own limits and tending to articulate themselves . . . in new modes, without any pretention to mastery'[60] The structure trembles, it is shaken – shaken to the point where one has to think of living elsewhere. There seems to be no idea

here of the secret leading to a *return* to one's culturally contingent beliefs and practices, as with Ibn ʿArabi. Unlike the *malāmiyya*, glimpsing the reality of the metaphysical abyss upon which one's sign-system is founded leads to an opening-up of one's parameters, not a re-affirmation of them; a 'willing-to-be-changed' towards the radically new, 'destroying' previous limits, and not the maintenance – albeit in an 'enlightened', ironic way – of the same practices and customs the believer was chained to when s/he was still 'ignorant'.

Conclusion: Derrida and Ibn ʿArabi on illusion

> If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics for instance; let us ask, *Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number?* No. *Does it contain any experimental reasoning, concerning matter of fact and existence?* No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.
>
> David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, III.12

The word 'illusion' comes from the Latin *illudere*, to play with or mock. When we are the victim of an illusion, something is playing with us, deceiving us, misleading us. The word is, of course, philosophically neutral; it is a word which can be used equally well by mystics, scientists, empiricists, priests and post-structuralists. Which is why we can say that Derrida and Ibn'Arabi, in their own ways, place a similar emphasis on the idea of illusion, have a similar understanding of what perpetrates this illusion, and present a similar urgency on the need to breakthrough this illusion if we are to truly 'know' anything at all.

An illusion, as we all know, is a secret lie, an untruth we have yet to discover. The deluded are subject to a lie whose veracity they have never suspected – on this narrow point Hume, Derrida and Ibn ʿArabi are all in agreement. For Hume, famously credited with waking Kant from his 'dogmatic slumber', the illusion is provided by the unverifiable claims of dogmatic metaphysics (of which, one can imagine, Ibn ʿArabi's would be a prime example). Hume's solution, not surprisingly, is an exclusively empirical concern with 'the matter of fact and existence', and a dispensing with the 'sophistry and illusion' of metaphysical thought.

If both Derrida and Ibn ʿArabi agree with Hume that an illusion is taking place every time we practice metaphysics, they certainly do not agree with him on what constitutes the viable alternatives to this 'illusion'. For both the Sufi and the theorist, rationalism and empiricism are

no less an illusion than dogmatic metaphysics. Derrida's view of Hume's 'illusion' would rest on his mistaken assumption that there is 'something' beyond the sign which metaphysics is misrepresenting. Hume, despite his well-known stature as 'Scotland's most famous atheist', would still be proposing an empiricism every bit as transcendental as the metaphysics he was trying to depose. At least one famous critic of Derrida has confused deconstruction with Hume's scepticism, mistaking Derrida for a French Hume without ever really understanding why the deconstructive critique of logocentrism does not stop with 'divinity or school metaphysics'.[61]

Naturally, there are obvious reasons why Ibn ʿArabi would disagree with an eighteenth-century British agnostic empiricist – namely, that Hume refuses to see how 'everything is named Allah'! But on the specific question of illusion, Ibn ʿArabi would see Hume as correct in saying we are blinded by metaphysics to the truth, but incorrect in suggesting that rationality and experimental reasoning can get us any nearer. Ibn ʿArabi would see no distinction here between the two, convinced as he is of the radical unthinkability of *al-ḥaqq*. In dealing with that which is 'like nothing else', it matters little whether one is an idealist, a rationalist or an empiricist – one is trying to find images to describe that which has no image.

The related motifs of illusion, dream and fantasy run throughout both thinkers' works, and it is interesting to see how an almost *esoteric* brand of scepticism in Ibn ʿArabi and Derrida lead to some similar conclusions about the illusion of reality/meaning. The idea that the world we see is a dream (*ruya*), with its echoes of Calderon, is of central importance to the Shaykh's whole system of thought. Like so many of Ibn ʿArabi's motifs, it is a term often used by Sufis and neoplatonists to describe the state of ignorance the unenlightened occupy when they fail to realize the simultaneous immanence and transcendence of God – a state the Ikhwan al-Safa called the 'dream of negligence'.[62] In his comparative study of Sufism and the Tao, Izutsu dedicates the opening chapter to the subject of illusion in Ibn ʿArabi – beginning with a key passage from the *Fusus*:

> The world is an illusion; it has no real existence. And this is what is meant by 'imagination' (*khayal*), for you just imagine that it (i.e. the world) is an autonomous reality quite different from and independent of the divine Reality, while in truth it is nothing of the sort… Know that you yourself are an imagination. And everything you perceive and say to your self, 'this is not me', is also an imagination. So that the whole of existence is imagination within imagination.[63]

If the Real is the secret of all things, then the illusion is our ignorance of this fact. Our dependence on the unthinkable Real is veiled from us; we are deluded insofar as we think we 'mean' something independently of God. The illusion of our independence is sustained by an equally illusory belief in the simplistic identity of things – including our 'selves', which we feel are separate and autonomous. Izutsu is quite right in commenting how ' "dream", "illusion" or "imagination" does not mean something valueless, something false; it simply means "being a symbol" '.[64] If we were to break through the illusion of everyday meanings, we would realize that everything is a symbol for the Real. All that we perceive leads back to the primordial abyssality of *al-ḥaqq*.

At first, one might feel hesitant in attributing overtly transcendent terms like 'illusion' and 'dream' to Derrida's project, even though such words can be found quite frequently in his own work (all italics mine):

> . . . the effect of language that impels language to represent itself as expressive re-presentation, a translation on the outside of what was constituted inside. . . . Doubtless Western metaphysics constitutes a powerful systematization of this *illusion* . . .
>
> (*Positions*)

> . . . this accident produces a kind of semantic *mirage*: the deviance of meaning, its reflection effect in writing, sets something off.
>
> (*Positions*)

> . . . the *mirage* of the thing itself, of immediate presence, of originary perception.
>
> (*Of Grammatology*)

> Rousseau is suspicious also of the *illusion* of full and present speech, of the *illusion* of presence within a speech believed to be transparent and innocent.
>
> (*Of Grammatology*)

> [Levinas'] *dream* of a purely heterological thought at its source. A *pure* thought of *pure* différance . . . we say the *dream* because it must vanish at daybreak, as soon as language awakens.
>
> (*Writing and Difference*)[65]

Mirage, illusion, dream: Derrida seems to employ a certain somnambulistic collection of metaphors whenever his subjects fall victim to the

lure of 'full, immediate meaning'. In the first four quotations, at least, the illusion seems to be one of referentiality – the belief that every sign is somehow referring to or 'expressing' something more concrete, more 'real'. Victims of this illusion have still not understood that the signified '*is always already in the position of the signifier*';[66] that whenever they speak so confidently about illusion or madness or purity, what they are referring to is already a reference to something else, *ad infinitum*.

In other words, logocentrism *dreams*. It dreams of capturing the logos, the origin, of returning to the garden. Whether it is Levinas' seeking the purity of the Other or Husserl searching for the Cartesian foundations of his 'objectivity', Derrida has spent a long career examining exactly how thinkers 'dream' whenever they seek the 'origin' or the 'reality' of things. There is a famous *hadith* which Ibn 'Arabi quotes in the *Fusus* – and which can be read with a certain irony here: 'All men are asleep in this world; only when they die do they wake up'.[67] Metaphysics would be this sleep for Derrida, a sleep most (though not Rousseau) are not even aware of being immersed in – deconstruction would be the 'awakening' from such a sleep, the 'shaking' (*ébranler*) which would rouse the thinker out of his dogmatic – or at least, logocentric – slumber. Derrida ends *Of Grammatology* with the words of Rousseau:

> You will say I too am a dreamer; I admit it, but I do what others fail to do; I give my dreams as dreams, and leave the reader to discover whether there is anything in them which may prove useful to those who are awake.[68]

Although this is no homage to a superior thinker, or even a compliment to a modest one, what Derrida is doing here is saying 'thank you' for Rousseau's misguided logocentrism. Rousseau the Dreamer has allowed Derrida, the more 'alert' critic of the two (one of 'those who are awake') to make deconstructive use of the dreams he has tried to pass for 'philosophy'. Derrida has understood in the light of day what Rousseau failed to see in the small hours of the night – the semantic emptiness of the dream words Rousseau mistook for reality: origin, nature, innocence.

At this point, one might feel that Derrida's idea of 'illusion' has little to do with Ibn 'Arabi's *hayal*: apart from a handful of similar metaphors, there seems to be little else linking the Sufi view of the world as an illusion with the deconstructive illusion of meaning. Surely Derrida, in stark contrast to Ibn 'Arabi, sees the word 'illusion' itself as an illusion? Isn't Derrida's illusion much more Nietzschean (i.e. the author of *Twilight of the Idols*), refusing to see the world of the senses as an illusion, in favour

of some 'true world' which has merely been 'mendaciously added' (*lugisch hingefugt*).[69]

The answer to these questions can only be: 'yes' and 'no'. On the one hand, it would be ridiculous to assume that the secret of Derrida's illusion is the same as Ibn 'Arabi's *sirr*. Derrida does not see the identity of all things rooted in God, but in differences, in différance. Nor does he see the self as a construct, as an illusion, because it is originally 'God', but rather because it is rooted in a collection of differences which could not ever form any conceivable notion of coherent, stable selfhood. In this immediate sense, Derrida's work is saying something very different from that of a thirteenth-century Sufi. On the other hand, what Chittick has called Ibn 'Arabi's 'ontological ambiguity of all things'[70] cannot simply be dismissed as just another ascetic mysticism, devaluing everything in *this* world as part of one huge semantic deferral of meaning to the 'next'. What Derrida and Ibn 'Arabi share is an understanding of how all meaning is rooted in an abyss (what Derrida calls 'being born from the abyss of representation'[71]). Izutsu, more than anyone else, has probably shown the most interest in the place of the abyss (in Arabic, '*ama*) in Ibn 'Arabi's thought. He dedicates a central chapter of his work to it, 'The Abysmal Darkness', even if the specific term '*ama* appears to be used with greater frequency by Ibn 'Arabi's disciple al-Qâshâni than by the Shaykh himself. Izutsu reads the term 'abyss'/ '*ama* as a synonym for the absolute unknowability of the Real, a silent, motionless, unfathomable place which allows meaning/self-disclosure (*tajallī*) to be without ever revealing anything of itself. It is an 'absolute mystery (*mutlaq ghayb*)', bereft of all 'quiddity (*māhiyya*)', a 'primordial darkness' where there is 'not the slightest movement'.[72] This abyssal darkness is the source of all names and identities, even that of Allah. Such a notion of the abyss resembles a familiar Neoplatonic paradox – the Nameless which gives rise to names, the characterless which enables qualities to exist. Izutsu, for reasons best derived from his own Taoist perspective, succeeds in highlighting, albeit rather thematically, a definite tone of darkness, mystery and abyssality in the Shaykh which many critics have overlooked.

Abgrund, 'ama, abîme: is such a notion of the abyss in Ibn 'Arabi's thought really comparable to the Derridean *abîme*? Can we really say that the unthinkable abyss of the Real, the non-representable source of all phenomena, is to be considered alongside the 'semantic mirage' of différance as it differs and defers from one sign to another, forever producing differences whilst forever remaining utterly intangible? Probably

anticipating such comparisons, Derrida has been careful to distinguish his abyss from the type found in most apophatic mysticisms:

> …*on one side*, on one way, a profound and abyssal eternity, fundamental but accessible to the teleo-eschatological narrative and to a certain experience or historical (or historial) revelation; *on the other side*, on the other way, the nontemporality of an abyss without bottom or surface, an absolute impassibility (neither life nor death) that gives rise to everything that it is not. In fact, two abysses.[73]

The context of the quote is important: placed as it is in an essay whose aim is to distinguish deconstruction from the cryptologocentrism of negative theology, Derrida offers two versions of the abyss – the *Abgrund* mystics such as Eckhart and Silesius have always talked about, and the abyss 'without bottom or surface' which Derrida seems to be equating with the movement of différance. In keeping with his own thoughts on negative theology, Derrida characterizes the first abyss as 'profound' (*not* bottomless) and ultimately 'accessible to the teleo-eschatological narrative'. In other words, an abyss which never really *threatens* the sign-systems it lies beneath, but rather participates in and founds the ontotheology it maintains – a 'familiar' abyss, it would appear, a 'deep' one (with all the metaphysical connotations, a notion of depth can carry). An abyss, unlike différance, situated within the structure of temporality, symbolizing a very theological 'eternity'. Derrida's abyss, on the other hand, is almost the inverse: absolutely 'nontemporal', it is as bottomless and surfaceless as a mirror – and just as impassible. Distinctly lacking any theological characteristics such as 'eternal' or 'ineffable', this second abyss appears to be nothing more than an endlessly displaced effect of language, all *ẓahir* with no *baṭin*. If this truly is, as Raschke says, the 'secret of all traditions of discourse – that they signify nothing', then our comparison with Ibn 'Arabi's *sirr al-sirr* appears to have encountered a genuine disparity.

Conclusion – the post-structuralist dissolution of the subject

Three Neoplatonic moments in the Derridean canon

A conclusion is usually a place where the author ties up loose ends. Points are made, efforts summarized, tentative abstractions ventured. In our comparative study of Derrida and Ibn ʻArabi, there has been plenty to summarize: an analogous mistrust in the ability of rational thought/metaphysics to talk unproblematically about God/meaning; an insistence on the ultimate ungraspability of the Real/writing, despite all philosophical/metaphysical claims to the contrary; a parallel interest in and positive appraisal of 'confusion' as a genuine means of 'breaking through' to the Other/the Real beyond our metaphysical constrictions; a deceptively similar belief in the infinite possibilities of the text – and that those possibilities are modified, in varying degrees, to the actual circumstances of the reader; a comparable idea of a secret abyssality which lies hidden at the root of all identities – and a corresponding idea of the 'illusion' of such identities; and finally, a related disbelief in the autonomous substantiality of the self.

Instead of collating these tentative similarities into some kind of 'formula' and bringing them to converge on a final point, we will end on a note of *widening*, not convergence; by looking at certain moments in the work of three authors from the Derridean canon – Blanchot, Benjamin and Foucault – we shall see how the comparison of Derrida with a Sufi Neoplatonist is no special case, exclusive to Derrida and his well-known fascination with negative theology. On the contrary, de-theologized versions of Neoplatonic metaphors have always been at work in texts such as 'What is an Author?', 'The Task of the Translator' and 'The Essential Solitude'. Whenever such authors reject rational/analytical explanations in their re-examination of concepts such as the self and the text, a certain tone emerges in their work which does bear a guarded resemblance to the term 'Neoplatonic'.

There are obvious dangers in saying all of this. First of all, no one is implying that authors such as Foucault and Blanchot are 'Neoplatonic' – nothing could be further from the truth. The vocabulary of Neoplatonism, from Plotinus' *Enneads*, through its various Augustinian/Dionysian evolutions, its medieval passage into Meister Eckhart and up to its later re-manifestation in the Italian Renaissance (Cusano, Ficino), constitutes a diverse canon, with its Islamic (the Ikhwan al-Safa, the 'Theology of Aristotle') and Jewish appropriations (Maimonides) equally original and irreducible to a simple, pat adjective. Nevertheless, insofar as the basic metaphor of all Neoplatonic writings involves the idea of a pure, ineffable Oneness, forever ready to gather together all errant multiplicities and usher them back into the divine namelessness of the One . . . such a transcendent example of ontotheology would usually serve as a *subject* for most post-structuralist critiques, rather than as an analogy for them.

The second danger lies in mistaking any attempt to locate a Neoplatonic tone in such authors as a replication of Habermas' own harsh remarks concerning Heidegger and his 'mysticism of the New Paganism'.[1] Habermas' dismissal of deconstruction as the 'historical locale where mysticism once turned into enlightenment' (ibid.) is, as we have seen, fuelled largely by a desire to preserve at least some notion of Kantian *Aufklärung* from the perceived 'anarchist wish(es)' of Derrida *et al*. Habermas' pejorative use of the word 'mystic' stems from this very fear of an-archy – it is precisely this idea of groundlessness, of beginninglessness which Habermas sees as ultimately hostile to emancipatory/progressive thought (Derrida's mysticism, remember, 'degrades politics and contemporary history to the status of the ontic and the foreground'). Whenever Habermas uses the word 'mystic', this sense of an irrational, ungrounded and reality-trivializing danger is never far away.

No such defensive agenda informs our own examination of Blanchot, Benjamin and Foucault's 'mystical' moments. If anything, our own inquiry lies closer to Bataille's attempt to find, via Angela di Foligno and Mechtild von Magdeburg, mystical possibilities within the Nietzschean deconstruction of self ('you haven't understood a word of Nietzsche's work without living that dazzling dissolution into totality [*cette dissolution éclatante dans la totalité*]').[2] It is precisely the nature of this 'dissolution' – and what kind of 'totality' it so dazzlingly dissolves into – which brings us first to Blanchot, whose blinding 'light' of writing is also 'the abyss, a light one sinks into, both terrifying and tantalizing'.[3] Blanchot appears to be one amongst many figures in the

Derridean canon for whom *écriture* is more a means of self-annihilation than self-repression, more an act of destructivity than creativity.

Blanchot on *écrire* and the 'breakthrough'

Timothy Clark has described Blanchot's view of writing as 'not essentially a profession or even a 'cultural activity' . . . [but] a vocation pursued with religious intensity'.[4] In reading Blanchot's subtle, difficult prose, the alerted reader can detect (as many critics already have)[5] an almost monastic emphasis on the way writing carries with it a gradual effacing of selfhood and a renunciation of everything which is not the text. 'The Essential Solitude', especially, is an essay where Neoplatonic echoes abound – the idea of the soul as belonging to an ineffable power, an *epekeina tes ousia* which is constantly creating effects whilst remaining uncannily beyond them; the idea of a *return* to a space which robs one of self, a space situated outside time; the idea of the world as a distraction, something to be renounced, abandoned, and the attributing of an individual's actions to 'something' other than the self . . . all of these metaphors work together, in the most secular of ways, to help Blanchot examine how the writer is able to vanish into his work through the act of writing it.

Probably the first Neoplatonic metaphor we encounter in 'The Essential Solitude' is the slightly mysterious presence of an unseen power, which Blanchot calls 'that neutral force, formless and bereft of any destiny, which is behind everything that gets written'.[6] Characteristically Neoplatonic in its utter absence of attributes, this force is at work in all writing, omnipresently enough to justify the word 'incessant'. The seeds of Blanchot's dissolution of the author lie in this attribution of the act of writing not to the writer him/herself, but to 'something' the writer belongs to in a more originary way. 'To write' says Blanchot, 'is to make oneself the echo of what cannot cease speaking' (ibid.). Writing as the echo of an unseen dynamism . . . one cannot help thinking of Plotinus' *Enneads* here: 'As speech is the echo of thought in the soul, so thought in the soul is an echo from elsewhere . . .'[7] Of course, unlike the carefully laddered world of Plotinus' graduated emanations, there is no notion of hierarchy in Blanchot, no pyramidical structure of phenomena. Nevertheless, just as the Neoplatonic soul belongs to and expresses its 'source', Blanchot's author 'belong(s), in the work, to what always precedes the work'.[8] The word 'expression' has to be used carefully here – if the author ex-presses anything here, it is neither a classical notion of personality nor some form of the 'universal', but rather the fact that, 'in one way or another, he is no longer himself;

he isn't anyone anymore'.[9] The metaphor for the author is no longer a font of creativity, but rather a mouthpiece for an alien tongue, a mediator for a formless, faceless 'force', a Heideggerian clearing in which the unfamiliar can make itself manifest.

Such a metaphor for the author allows the activity of writing itself to take on a number of characteristically Neoplatonic functions. The first is that of renunciation: writing means renouncing the world, abandoning it, giving it up as the source of any possible *mimesis*. 'To write is . . . to withdraw language from the world.'[10] The author refuses to demean language by chaining it to mere representation, but instead allows language to speak with its own power, allows it to 'be' instead of slavishly forcing it to 'mean'. An obligation of piety which, we are told, the poet Valéry did not fulfil: 'he found it good to talk about everything, to write on everything: thus the scattered totality of the world distracted him from the unique and rigorous totality of the work, from which he amiably let himself be diverted'.[11] Here Blanchot almost adopts a moralistic, *puritanical* attitude towards representational thought, which is always seduced by the world into representing it, writing about it, 'diverting' it from the one thing needful: the work itself. Valéry is almost judged to have had an impure attitude towards language, a worldly obsession with *écriture* – instead of 'withdraw(ing) language from the world', of keeping language pure and whole, Valéry insisted on shattering it, on mixing it with the world's 'scattered totality'. A thoroughly Neoplatonic notion of the fragment which, we shall see, will become a central metaphor in Benjamin's work on translation.

Paradoxically, what involves liberation also denotes surrender. Just as the Neoplatonic soul must surrender its individuality if it is to return to the One, Blanchot's author must forego any notion of independence if he is truly to belong to *écriture*:

> If to write is to surrender to the interminable, the writer who consents to sustain writing's essence loses the power to say 'I'. And so he loses the power to make others say 'I'. Thus he can by no means give life to characters whose liberty would be guaranteed by his creative power.[12]

An odd paradox is suggested: the writer must surrender the power to create if he is truly to write. Just as the Eckhartian soul must remain 'empty and bare' (*ledic und vrî*) in order to spiritually give birth, Blanchot's author must lose 'the power to say "I" ' if it is to produce the 'echo' of the incessant, of the interminable.

In essence, what happens when Blanchot's author finally puts pen to paper mirrors, in many ways, the loss of self and extinction of difference which ensues the Neoplatonic moment of the 'breakthrough'; the slide of the author's life into 'the distress of the infinite' echoes the moment when the errant soul finally returns from the multiple and the finite into the formless void of the One – 'alone with the Alone', as Plotinus famously says, giving an ironic ring Blanchot's own title. In the closing lines of the essay we read:

> To write . . . is to stay in touch, through language, in language, with the absolute milieu where the thing becomes image again, where the image, instead of alluding to some particular feature, becomes an allusion to the featureless, and instead of a form drawn upon absence, becomes the formless presence of this absence, the opaque, empty opening onto that which is when there is no more world, when there is no world yet.[13]

The string of apophatic adjectives: 'featureless', 'absence', 'empty', 'opaque' underline the eerie resonance of a moment when the author finally 'connects' with that which precedes his/her work. A moment where, by remaining open to language, s/he glimpses the non-space at the root of all differences, where signifiers do not lead onto other signifieds, but simply 'allude' to a void – the void which lies beneath all signification. Blanchot's 'absolute milieu' is this very opacity where the world finishes – where images lose their objects, signifiers their signifieds, where 'things' lose their meanings and authors their selves, because it is a realm where meaning cannot take place. Regardless of whether the subject is Kafka or Hölderlin, this fascination with the unspeakable aboriginality of language – and the necessary humility of those who would approach it – remains probably the most 'mystical' aspect of an otherwise untranscendental writer.

Benjamin's *Übersetzen* as a return to the One

Like Blanchot, voids, forces and infinities permeate Benjamin's work; unlike Blanchot, Benjamin had a definite, documentable fascination with the history of Neoplatonic esotericism, including some careful readings of Origen, Boehme and Ficino's commentary on the *Enneads*. In his essay on translation 'The Task of the Translator' (1923), Benjamin approaches his subject as only a Neoplatonist might. The fallen, transient, fragmentary world of the multiple, only reflecting in sporadic

glimmers the faint, distant radiance of the ineffable One, informs the world of Benjamin's translator, in whose task 'the great motif of integrating many tongues into one true language is at work'.[14] The task of the translator, one might suggest, is to return to the One via the multiple. Of course, this linking of Neoplatonism with Benjamin should come as no real surprise. Various Neoplatonic motifs of unity, oneness and ineffable, ever-receding origins can be found interspersed throughout his work:

> Origin is an eddy in the stream of becoming, and in its current it swallows the material involved in the process of genesis. That which is original is never revealed in the naked and manifest existence of the factual . . .
>
> (*Origin of German Drama*)

> . . . the materials of memory no longer appear singly, as images, but tell us about a whole, amorphously and formlessly . . . in the same way the weight of his net tells a fisherman about his catch.
>
> ('The Image of Proust')

> Dates, place names, formats, previous owners, bindings, and the like: all these details must tell [the book collector] something – not as dry, isolated facts, but as a harmonious whole; from the quality and intensity of this harmony he must be able to recognize whether a book is for him or not.
>
> ('Unpacking My Library')[15]

The vocabulary of Neoplatonism, from Plotinus to Ficino, is a wide one, certainly wide enough to pull apart any attempt at a definition. Its common store of motifs, however – multiplicity and oneness, divine overflowing, the fragment, the source, the return – all permeate Benjamin's work and underlie it, manifesting themselves even in the most un-transcendental applications. One sees in the Moscow journals, for example, how Benjamin analyses the all-encompassing oneness of the Soviet state:

> To endure this existence in idleness becomes impossible because, in each smallest detail, it becomes beautiful and comprehensible only through work. The integration of personal thoughts with a preexisting force-field; . . . organized, guaranteed contact with comrades – to all this, life here is so tightly bound that anyone who abstains . . . degenerates intellectually as if through years of solitary confinement . . .
>
> ('Moscow')

Or in examining the relationship of children and their toys to the larger community, Benjamin's familiar evocation of Something bigger and 'other' than oneself seems to manifest itself once more:

> After all, a child is no Robinson Crusoe; children do not constitute a community cut-off from everything else. They belong to the nation and the class they come from. This means that their toys cannot bear witness to any autonomous, separate existence, but rather are a silent, signifying dialogue between them and their nation.
>
> ('The Cultural History of Toys')[16]

Rather like Kafka's philosopher, who is convinced the knowledge of the bigger things in life lies in the study of the smallest, Benjamin sees the smaller parts of society – its toys, its side-dishes, its kitsch, its street corners – as leading him to a knowledge of the whole. This perception of a hidden unity amongst such fragments, somewhere behind/beyond the world of things, has its obvious Neoplatonic parallels. In contrast to Blanchot, however, what Benjamin does here is begin to *politicize* the Neoplatonic – to translate the vocabulary of Plotinus and Proclus into socio-political terms. In Benjamin's voluminous analyses of culture and culture theory, the State replaces the 'One' as the source of all effects whilst words like society (*Gesellschaft*) and culture (*Kultur*) become substitutions for the emanations of Plotinus' Ineffable.

This political interest on Benjamin's part in the loss of selfhood never really manifests itself in 'The Task of the Translator' – probably the most esoteric of Benjamin's many essays. Although Benjamin offers ten metaphors for the relationship between translation and original – translation as the flower of the original, the ghost/afterthought of the original, translation as a process of ripening, or a window peering onto the original, or a corresponding fragment of a long-shattered vase . . . two of them are of particular interest to us for their Neoplatonic origins. The first is the analogy of the echo which Benjamin uses for translation, the same analogy Blanchot uses for the work of the author. It appears towards the middle of the essay, in a passage where Benjamin appears keen to differentiate between the poet and the translator:

> Unlike a work of literature, translation does not find itself in the centre of the language forest but on the outside facing the wooded ridge; it calls into it without entering, aiming at that single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work in the alien one.[17]

Before commenting on this it will be useful to quote, this time in its entirety, the relevant passage from Plotinus' *Enneads*:

> As speech is the echo of the thought in the soul, so thought in the soul is an echo from elsewhere: that is to say, as the uttered thought is an image of the soul-thought, so the soul-thought images a thought above itself and is the interpreter of the higher sphere.[18]

Plotinus' words bring out a number of points in Benjamin's passage: firstly, that the translator is an entity situated outside something he is desperately trying to replicate. Outside a secret, as it were, the secret of the original's identity – a secret which, in this analogy at least, appears to have a precise location. A step forwards or backwards, a wrong verb or excessive adjective, and the echo is lost. Secondly, the comparison with the *Enneads* reminds us of how Benjamin's analogy is both similar to and different from the familiar Neoplatonic doctrine of similarity with the One. The One can admit no differences – if the errant soul is to return to It, it must become similar. However, if we follow Benjamin's analogy carefully, we discover that what Benjamin initially calls 'the echo of the original' is actually the voice of the translator. The translator, not the original, is the source of the echo. The translator has to change position, of course, before he can perceive the perfect reverberation of his own voice; nevertheless, his efforts are not guided towards imitating an external Something, but rather towards using this Something to reproduce what he already is. The original, far from possessing any contents which have to be 'imitated', simply becomes an ineffable engine that returns a voice to its owner, a hidden power which appears to create and replicate without ever participating in the process of creation.

The metaphor of the translation as a garment covering the naked content of the original reinforces, once more, the apophatic, uncrossable gulf between *Urtext* and *Übersetzung* which Benjamin, at various moments, seems to be describing. The metaphor comes after some meditation on the 'element' in an original 'that does not lend itself to translation':

> . . . the relationship between content and language is quite different in the original and the translation. While content and language form a certain unity in the original, like a fruit and its skin, the language of the translation envelops its content like a royal robe [*wie ein Königsmantel*] with ample folds. For it [the language] signifies a more exalted language than its own and thus remains unsuited to its content, overpowering and alien.[19]

One could seize with deconstructive glee upon a notion of innocence here in Benjamin's essay – the pristine, Edenic unity of the original, whose magical language supersedes both form and content, falls into the multiple world of the translator, where signifiers have been sinfully sundered from their signifieds, where speech is no longer instantaneous with meaning.[20] If Benjamin does see the original as a lost paradise, however, it is not always clear whether the task of the translator is to recover this innocence, or whether the memory of this loss is enough *in itself* to allow the translation to work, independently of the original. Or whether, indeed, the dream of the original only leads to the creation of new paradises, cryptically separate yet somehow still connected to their ancient predecessor. The metaphor Benjamin uses in this instance does not seem so optimistic. It is a metaphor one could find in many places (in Eckhart, for instance: 'The will apprehends God under the garment of goodness. The intellect apprehends God naked, as He is divested of goodness and being.'),[21] although the most appropriate parallel occurs in Ibn ʿArabi himself:

> For the benefit of the many, the prophets express on this matter in an outer fashion, limited as they are by the understanding of the learner . . . Thus . . . one who has no depth of understanding may go no further than the outward forms [of the message] . . .
>
> On the other hand, one of refined understanding . . . says [of the text], 'This is the outer garment of a King'. Thus he examines the quality of the garment and the fineness of its cloth and thereby learns the worth of the one whom it causes, so acquiring knowledge denied to the other, who understands nothing of this.[22]

Although Ibn ʿArabi here is not talking directly about translations nor knowledge of the divine, but how to approach the holy scriptures of the prophets, the question he raises about interpretation is still analogous to that of translation. For the medieval exegete, interpretation *was* translation – not simply Arabic into Persian or Greek into Latin, but the translation of the hidden, divine language (*baṭin*, 'inner meaning') into the comprehensible language of men (*ẓahir*, 'outward meaning'). It is in this sense that both Benjamin and Ibn ʿArabi see the translation/*ẓahir* as the outer garment of an inner truth (*baṭin*). This is where the two metaphors part company, however – in the Sufi version, the outer garment can still give some meaningful information about its owner. The richness of the cloth offers some positive link with the royalty it is intended to signify. In Benjamin's analogy, this does not appear to be the

case: a more problematic disparity, 'overpowering and alien', appears to separate Benjamin's *ẓahir* from his *baṭin*, severing the translation from the original. If the grasp of Ibn 'Arabi's royal robe allows the promise of knowledge, the poor 'unsuitability' of the *Königsmantel* seems to narrow down the possibilities of ever understanding the original through its translation – of ever reaching the One through the multiple.

'What is an Author?': Foucault and the post-structuralist dissolution of the subject

> Do not ask me who I am and do not ask me to remain the same…
> *The Archaeology of Knowledge*[23]

Trying to find parallels between Foucault's semantic dismantling of the self and certain metaphors in Neoplatonic mysticism (Islamic or Christian) is not as odd as it sounds. Like Bataille's work on Nietzsche and Angela di Foligno, there is certainly some scope for trying to understand Neoplatonically how Foucault's author dissolves into a 'juridical and institutional system that encompasses, determines and articulates the universe of discourses'.[24] Studies on the subject of Foucault and mysticism, although by no means commonplace, are certainly not rare. Probably the most important has been Christian Jambet's work on Foucault and Islamic Iranian spirituality. Encouraged by Foucault's own interest in the Iranian revolution and the mystical factors in its origins,[25] Jambet makes use of Foucault's famous phrase 'taking care of the self', finding an equivalent in Suhrawardi's identical expression '*ishtighal bi naisi-hi* – which leads the author to conclude how Foucault's 'elucidation of subjective and objective universes… are an exercise which aims at "release from the self".[26]

Of course, the aim of Foucault's essay 'What is an Author?' is no Sufi 'release from the self', but rather an ultimately political and very practical re-understanding of how that 'self' has come to exist as an 'author-function'. No spiritual exercise in *fanā'*, then, but an attempt to understand the illusion of the author in socio-political terms and thereby elucidate 'the real meaning of his disappearance' (p. 198). What remains eye-catchingly Neoplatonic in Foucault's essay, apart from the vapidity of the self and the enthusiasm with which Foucault is ready to dissolve words such as 'author' and 'oeuvre', is the curious presence of a power which only becomes noticeable once the author has been removed. It is, in a sense, the unasked question of the essay – one which lingers like

a palimpsest beneath every line we read: if there is no (A)uthor, who or what is doing the writing? It is a question Foucault's *n'importe quoi* at the end of the essay doesn't answer, although he had already asked it in *The Order of Things*:

> To the Nietzschean question 'Who is speaking?', Mallarmé replies – and constantly reverts to that reply – by saying that what is speaking is, in its solitude, in its fragile vibration, in its nothingness, the word itself – not the meaning of the word, but its enigmatic and precarious being.[27]

In this reply of Mallarmé (who, we are told, 'was constantly effacing himself from his own language')[28] Foucault seems to find, in absolutely apolitical terms, some of his own resistance towards classical ideas of authorial ex-pression and the vehicular concept of language as a 'meaning-carrier'. In other words a concept of language which, by the time of 'What is an Author?', had 'freed itself from the dimension of expression'.[29] Like Blanchot and his 'neutral, formless force . . . behind everything that gets written', Foucault's Mallarmé seems content to locate this force in language itself, in the enigma of *écriture*, without growing politically suspicious about the origins of this power in the way later post-structuralists will become. This enigmatic force, forever inciting signification without ever signifying itself, crystallizing itself in images even as it recedes, reminds us of the only two moments in Foucault's essay where 'something' even as remotely mysterious as Blanchot's 'formless force' is alluded to:

> Writing unfolds like a game that invariably goes beyond its own rules and transgresses its limits. In writing, the point is not to manifest or exalt the act of writing, nor is it to pin a subject within language; it is rather a question of creating a space into which the writing subject constantly disappears.
>
> In the future development of a science, the founding act may appear as little more than a particular instance of a more general phenomenon which unveils itself in the process.[30]

What is of relevance here are not the subjects of the quotations, but the *verbs*: 'unfolding', 'unveiling'. Verbs which, far from being Hegelian, carry with them all the Neoplatonic echoes which lie at the root of the post-structuralist dissolution of the subject. The now familiar re-description of the self not as an autonomous source of self-presenting

phenomena, but rather a focal space or opening where a variety of constantly differing discourses might congregate endlessly. The illusion of the self in mystics such as Eckhart, Ibn ʻArabi, Pseudo-Dionysius is every bit as a posteriori as the 'author-function' – the texts produce the author, says Foucault, the author doesn't precede the texts. Both the 'self' and the 'author' constitute an attempt at 'appropriation'[31] – for the mystic, selfhood is a futile attempt to appropriate something which fundamentally belongs to God; it is an ignorance of the 'actual situation' of God's omnipresence. For the post-structuralist, authorship is an attempt to appropriate *écriture*; it stems from a desire to resist and control the 'unveiling', 'unfolding', transgressive forces of writing, to limit them and pretend that they come from the author. An author who is no 'creator', but merely a carefully constructed subject artificially imposed upon the turbulence of the work itself.

Allah and *écriture*: the centre is not the centre, 'God' is not the Real

> The centre is at the centre of the totality, and yet, since the centre does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality), the totality *has its centre elsewhere*. The centre is not the centre.[32]

It will come as no surprise that we are finally moving towards the conclusion that the way in which Sufi thinkers like Ibn ʻArabi talk about God is uncannily similar to the way in which post-structuralists like Derrida talk about writing. Neither writing nor the Real ever stands still long enough to be a 'centre' for anything; separated by seven centuries, both thinkers featured in this study have been castigated and vilified for daring to suggest the 'blindness' of their peers to this situation. The Ash'arites failed to understand how the 'centre' of their own theology (an immanent God) was no nearer to the Real than the 'centre' of the rival theology belonging to their opponents, the Mu'tazilites. The structuralists who claimed to perform a critique of empiricism did not see how they themselves shared the same 'centre' as empiricism – a truth 'which can always be completed or invalidated by new information'.[33] Both thinkers have discerned a variety of idols which philosophers and theologians, ever the centuries, have mistaken for a 'centre' – an ultimate point of reference which would justify, incontestably, all the propositions made about it.

If Derrida and Ibn ʻArabi share one thing in common – and they are *very* different thinkers – it is this awareness of how obstructive and

ineluctably misleading representations can be. No surprise, then, that both thinkers speak of metaphysics in terms of chains and 'knots' – and of their own projects as attempts to untie those 'knots'; neither is it surprising how both thinkers seem to see in the state of confusion a possibility for 'truer' knowledge, or how they come to see texts as bearing an ultimately uncontrollable number of meanings, or how they perceive the 'self' (or indeed all autonomous, self-present identities) as being rooted in an 'abyss'... this common store of motifs and metaphors is no patched-together collection of superficial similarities, but simply the consequences of a genuine suspicion of rational/metaphysical thought.

Neither is it surprising that both Ibn ʿArabi and Derrida have been the subject of comparisons with Taoism. Izutsu's famous 1967 study sees the *tao*'s production (*sheng*) of the 'ten thousand things' (*tao* → *sheng* → *wan wu*) as an 'exact Taoist counterpart of the Islamic *ḥaqq*'[34] – that is, the way Ibn ʿArabi's Real manifests itself constantly in the world of possible beings (*ḥaqq* → *tajallī* → *mumkinat*).[35] Similarly, critics such as Michelle Yeh have discerned a common opposition to 'dualistic conceptualization' in the thought of both Derrida and the Taoist sage Chuang Tzu,[36] whilst others such as Donald Wesling have gone so far as to call Derrida's thought an 'incomplete Taoism'.[37] Of the two approaches Izutsu is the more convinced of the veracity of his comparison, with Hongchu Fu more soberly discerning a number of clear differences between Derrida's 'active attitude' and the 'Taoist transcendence'.[38] Nevertheless, both comparisons reflect in deconstruction and Sufism a basic dissatisfaction with the metaphysical, essentialist structure of philosophy, even if the alternatives provided seem to be of a very different nature.

The question remains: what are the implications of any comparative study of Derrida and Ibn ʿArabi for Sufism and deconstruction? When we speak of a radical re-emphasizing of the unthinkable in both God and the text, an analogous mistrust of metaphysical thought and a parallel affirmation of confusion and infinite interpretation, what consequences do such comparisons have for the way we continue to read Derrida and Ibn ʿArabi?

In Ibn ʿArabi's case two important points can be drawn, the first concerning the Shaykh's alleged status as a genius of systematization, the second concerning the ontological status of that system itself. Most recently Hamid Dabashi, in an otherwise admirable study of the twelfth-century Persian thinker and mystic ʿAyn al-Qudat, has spoken of Ibn ʿArabi as a 'grand totalising master narrator',[39] one who produced a 'dead, compromising, politically correct "Sufism"' (ibid.). Dabashi's shallow and ungrounded reading of Ibn ʿArabi, in particular his curious

claim that after ʿAyn al-Qudat, Sufism 'lost' its 'centrality of irony and paradox' and 'impetuous undoing of reason', is never supported by a single quotation from Ibn ʿArabi, whom Dabashi holds single-handedly responsible for the metaphysical murder of Sufism. The only evidence offered for this claim is an unconvincing argument from biography: ʿAyn al-Qudat was executed as a heretic at thirty-three, whereas Ibn ʿArabi 'lived a full and long life', *ergo* the former was deconstructively subversive, the latter in full complicity with metaphysics. What becomes clear, however, from any genuine reading of Ibn ʿArabi, is that his system is no logocentric description of essences and hierarchies inscribed in stone, but rather a series of ladders which ultimately lead one to a 'station of no station'.[40] Ibn ʿArabi's system, far from being an example of metaphysics, actually leads us past it, to a place where (in Abu Yazid's words) there is no morning or evening, no attributes or names.

A second, connected point maybe that in constructing a provisionary system in order to be (ultimately) able to dispense with it – that is, using names and entities to talk about that which ultimately is 'unknown' and without 'definition'[41] – Ibn ʿArabi could be said to be putting terms such as **'~~theology~~'** and **'~~God~~'** under what Derrida calls 'erasure' (*sous rature*). Although this textual strategy of forever deleting the validity of one's assertions as soon as they are written – but nevertheless retaining the gesture one has deleted – has been used on several occasions by Derrida, the term 'sous rature' actually comes from Heidegger's 1956 work *Zur Seinsfrage* (*Towards A Question of Being*). Here Heidegger is trying to reply to Junger's request for a 'good definition of nihilism' (*eine gute Definition des Nihilismus*).[42] Heidegger tells us how 'no information [*keine Auskunft*] can be given about nothingness and Being . . . which can be presented tangibly [*griffbereit vorliegen*] in the form of assertions', which already sounds like Ibn ʿArabi's understanding of the ungraspable Real. Such a problem, insists Heidegger, 'leads us into a realm which requires a different language [*der ein anderes Sagen verlangt*]'.[43] In such a realm, Being could only ever be written as **~~Being~~**, just as Ibn ʿArabi's God can only ever be spoken of as **~~God~~**. Such a crossing out (*Durchkreuzung*) is not merely negative, not simply a reminder of what one cannot say, but also a pointer towards how much infinitely remains to be said. Spivak is quite correct in her remark concerning the different things Heidegger and Derrida put 'under erasure'. Whereas Heidegger's **~~Being~~** refers to an 'inarticulable presence', Derrida's concept of the **~~trace~~** indicates rather 'the absence of a presence, an always already absent present'.[44] Spivak's deconstructive suspicion of Heidegger's 'inarticulable presence' would also apply to Ibn ʿArabi's Real. In

Derrida, words are placed under erasure because of a restless play within language, and not because of some semantic inability to express an elusive signified 'out-there'. Semantic instability – that is, radical indeterminacy within *finite* parameters of play – makes such *Durchkreuzung* necessary, not the presence of some ineffable unsignifiable which constantly makes us lament how 'finite' and 'imperfect' our language is.

Possibly, in any comparison between a medieval Sufi thinker and a French post-structuralist, the consequences for the status, reception and ultimate re-evaluation of Derrida's writing remain more significant, both qualitatively and quantitatively. The first of these must inevitably be a reassessment of the relationship between deconstruction and the spiritual belief systems it has (by various quarters) been set against. Which certainly does not mean the sudden re-packaging of deconstruction as a post-religious mysticism, but simply an awareness of the theological provenance of some of its gestures. Kevin Hart has already shown how deconstruction was first received in the English-speaking world in 'contexts that were at the least secular and at the most determinedly atheistic'.[45] Replacing the usual trinity of Nietzsche/Freud/Heidegger, Hart suggests, one could always try reading Derrida in the context of Jabés, Levinas and Celan. This re-contextualizing of Derrida's work – the possibility that deconstruction might not simply be (in Mark C. Taylor's words) the hermeneutics of the death of God – in turn suggests the re-linking of Derrida with a much longer tradition. Over the past twenty years, a wide variety of scholars have been locating moments of anti-metaphysical decentring in a number of religious traditions – Coward's Sankara, Loy's Nagarjuna, Dabashi's 'Ayn al-Qudat, Caputo's Eckhart, Yeh's Lao-Tzu, to mention but a few. How valid these alleged precedents are (including the example offered by the present study) remains debatable; what is certain, however, is that the familiar anti-religious/nihilistic reputation of deconstruction – considered in the past as 'antitheological scepticism' (Goodheart), 'counter-theological' (Gould), 'non-theological' (Dufrenne) and even 'a swipe at Christianity from *arché* to *telos*' (Schneidenau)[46] – is going to be increasingly revised in the light of such research.

All of which, in turn, does cast doubt on the various 'clarifying' and 'serious' versions of Derrida which have been offered by critics such as Norris, Gasché and Culler. What is most interesting about such readings is that they see Derrida not so much as mystifying but *explicating*, as a method which 'accounts for a heterogenous variety . . . of discursive inequalities . . . that continue to haunt even the *successful* development of philosophical arguments'.[47] An elucidating view of deconstruction's

raison d'être which stands in stark contrast to Derrida's words in *Of Grammatology*: 'To make enigmatic what one think one understands by the words 'proximity', 'immediacy', 'presence' is my final intention in this book'.[48] To 'make enigmatic' means, literally, to *darken* (from the Greek *ainigma*). To re-introduce a darkness into what was previously illuminated; to obscure something which was felt to be clear. In comparing Derrida with Ibn 'Arabi, one cannot help how this parallel suspicion of rational clarity as something both illusory and restrictive leads to a subsequent affirmation of the uncertain, be it God or text, cloud or darkness, *ama* or *ainigma*, an affirmation which in turn would belong to a much wider history of gestures. In his work *Greek Myths and Christian Mystery*, Hugo Rahner describes how the flourishing enlightenment of Greek thought and the arts in the first four centuries after Christ provoked, in turn, the desire for a 'mystery atmosphere' once more:

> . . . the Apollonian brilliance of Greek sculpture . . . the acids of Attic comedy, and later the rationalism of the Stoa, dissolved the traditional belief in gods and goddesses . . . [and] led the Greeks increasingly to seek refuge in the eerie realm of the cults.[49]

The enlightenment certainties in Greek thought aroused in many a nostalgia for the ancient mystery cults, a yearning for what Rahner calls the 'pre-Hellenic darkness' of earlier times: 'What man now seeks is the bizarre . . . as against the Olympian calm of classical times' (ibid.). Which is not to serve up Derrida as the latest swing against systematization in some potted, dialectical history of light and darkness, reason and feeling, structure and mysticism, but simply to show how the deconstructive gesture – and the authentic darkness it restores to our foolish and overambitious clarities – could be re-inscribed into a very metaphysical history of rebellions against the metaphysical.

Perhaps, finally, the most interesting consequence of reading French sixties' deconstruction in the rather strange context of medieval Sufism is the oddly mystical meaning which many of Derrida's terms take on – infinity, endless play, the unnamable, the trace, the elusive force which is ' "older" than Being itself'.[50] Of course, there is no God – not even a *deus absconditus* – in Derrida's universe which would give these terms the kind of meaning compatible with a 'mysticism'. Derrida's infinite text, as we have already said, springs from an infinite emptiness, not an infinite Mind; the Derridean unthinkable lies in the relentless play of differences within the text, and not in some epistemologically ungraspable notion of the Divine. Nevertheless, it is interesting to see how the

use of such terms cannot escape the echoes of God, cannot elude the ghost of the divine; how even remarks concerning 'the consciousness of nothing, upon which all consciousness of something enriches itself…'[51] seem to push différance – as Derrida has already feared – in the direction of the non-present, eternally generative God of negative theology. Derrida's protestations to the contrary resemble all too well the cries of the author who wishes his text to wander in one direction, instead of another.

Derrida and Ibn 'Arabi disconcert. They make us think twice about the things we take for granted; they wake us up to the overconfidence with which, all too often, we dupe ourselves whenever we talk about 'truths' we have never really questioned. They raise in us the unsettling possibility that all the things we have felt so comfortable about ('God', 'truth', 'literature', etc.) may actually be radically unthinkable, formed more from our own beliefs and experiences rather than embodying the things themselves. Much in the manner of Eckhartian *gelâzenheit*, works like the *Futuhat* and 'Structure, Sign and Play' ask us to remain *open* – in Derridean terms, open towards the Other, 'an absolute openness towards what is coming',[52] a voluntary self-dismantling of all our (pre)conceptions about the Other in order to encounter its true alterity. In Ibn 'Arabi's case, this translates as remaining open towards God by 'freeing the locus (*tafrīgh al-mahall*) and sanctifying the heart (*taqdīs al-qalb*) from the stains of reflective thoughts'.[53] Once Ibn 'Arabi's perfect gnostic finally realizes that the centre he has always worshipped is not really the centre, he is able to accept the Real in all Its manifestations, without cluttering up his 'locus' with his own theological constructs. This emphasis on opening in both deconstructive and Sufi epistemologies forms the most thematic – and yet the clearest – link between two writers who, in their own original ways, make us realize that what we call 'God' may not always be God; that what we call 'Truth' may not always be true.

Notes

Introduction

1 Orhan Pamuk, *The Black Book*, trans. Güneli Gün, London: Faber and Faber, 1990, p. 73.
2 See M. Notcutt, 'Ibn 'Arabi in Print', in S. Hirtenstein and M. Tiernan (eds), *Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi: A Commemorative Volume*, Dorset: Element, 1993, p. 335.
3 See al-Ghorab's 'Muhyiddin Ibn al-'Arabi amidst Religions and Schools of Thought', in S. Hirtenstein and M. Tiernan (eds), op. cit., p. 224.
4 W. G. Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-'Arabi's Cosmology*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1998, p. xxxii.
5 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. G. C. Spivak, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976, p. 158.
6 Similarly Oliver Leaman, writing in the context of apparent parallels between medieval Islamic philosophy and certain debates in the European Enlightenment, has already warned against a 'superficial glance': 'For example, it has often been argued that Ghazali's critique of the Aristotelian notion of causality is rather similar to Hume's analysis of the causal relation. In addition, the conflict between Ghazali and the philosophers over the character of the origin of the world is not unlike the sorts of conflict which are represented in Kant's discussion of the antinomies.' Oliver Leaman, *An Introduction to Medieval Islamic Philosophy*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. xi.
7 Hamid Dabashi's essay 'Ayn al-Qudat Hamadani and the intellectual climate of his times' offers just one example of how figures in medieval Islam have made use of a 'soft counter-metaphysics' to deconstruct 'the hard metaphysics of logocentrism that particularly with the advance of Greek philosophy cross-countered Islamic nomocentrism' – see S. H. Nasr and Oliver Leaman (eds), *Routledge History of Islamic Philosophy*, London: Routledge and Kegan, 1996, p. 396.
8 Cited in Kevin Hart, 'Jacques Derrida: The God Effect' – found in P. Blond (ed.), *Post-Secular Philosophy*, London: Routledge and Kegan, 1998, p. 261.
9 This has been changing of late, as Derrida's remarks concerning Algeria ('Taking a Stand for Algeria') and Arabic hospitality ('A Note on Hospitality') in G. Anidjar (ed.), *Acts of Religion* (London: Routledge, 2002,

pp. 301–308, 356–420) attests. Some references to Islam can also be found in Derrida's talk on religion given at a seminar in Capri – 'Faith and Knowledge: the Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone' – trans. S. Weber and found in Gianni Vattimo (ed.), *Religion*, London: Routledge, 2000, pp. 1–77.

10 Jacques Derrida, 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials', – trans. K. Frieden, in H. Coward and T. Foshay (eds), *Derrida and Negative Theology*, Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1993, p. 79.
11 Ibid., p. 77.
12 Ibid., p. 122.
13 Jacques Derrida, 'Post-Scriptum: Aporias, Ways and Voices', trans. J. P. Leavery, Jr, in H. Coward and T. Foshay (eds), *Derrida and Negative Theology*, op. cit., p. 316.
14 R. Netton, *Allah Transcendent: Studies in the structure and Semiotics of Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Cosmology*, Richmond: Curzon Press, 1994, p. 293.
15 See I. Almond, 'Divine Needs, Divine Illusions: Preliminary Remarks Towards a Comparative Study of Meister Eckhart and Ibn al-'Arabi', in *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 10, Fall 2001.

1 The shackles of reason: Sufi/deconstructive opposition to rational thought

1 Cited in S. Hirtenstein and M. Tiernan (eds), *Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi: A Commemorative Volume*, Dorset: Element, 1993, p. 142.
2 '. . . la conceptualité fondamentale issue de l'aventure gréco-européenne', in J. Derrida, *L'Écriture et la Différence*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1967, p. 121. The English translation used is by Alan Bass, *Writing and Difference*, London: Routledge and Kegan, 1978, p. 82.
3 Ibn 'Arabi, *Shajarat al-Kawn*, trans. A. Jeffery, Lahore, Pakistan: Aziz, 1980, pp. 88–89. It should be said that some figures in Ibn 'Arabi scholarship have cast doubt on whether the Shaykh is the author of this text or not.
4 '. . . qui se rassemblent et s'enrichissent dans le grand livre: *Totalité et Infini*', *Writing and Difference*, p. 84, *L'Écriture*, p. 125.
5 Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 151.
6 Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 292, *L'Écriture*, p. 427.
7 Jacques Derrida, 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials', trans. K. Frieden, in H. Coward and T. Foshay (eds), *Derrida and Negative Theology*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993, pp. 295, 299.
8 Ibid., p. 310.
9 *ḥadda al-ḥaqq*. Found in Ibn 'Arabi, *Fusus al-Hikem*, A. E. Affifi (ed.), Beirut: Dar al-kutub al-'Arabi, 1946, p. 68. Trans. Ralph Austin as *The Bezels of Wisdom*, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1980, p. 74.
10 Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 280, *L'Écriture*, p. 412.
11 Ibn 'Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 75.
12 'au rang d'instrument asservi à un langage plein et originairement parlé'. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. G. C. Spivak, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976, p. 29; French Edition *De la grammatologie*, Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1967, p. 45.

13 From the *Futuhat al-Makkiyya*, vol. III.198.33 – found in W. G. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-ʻArabi's Metaphysics of Imagination*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1989, p. 107. The Arabic edition of the *Futuhat* used is Osman Yahia's four volume *Futuhat al-Makkiyya*, Cairo: Al-Hay'at al-Misriyyat al-ʻAmma li'l-Kitab, 1972.
14 W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 336/*Futuhat*, I.266.15.
15 M. Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy*, London: Longman, 1983, p. 204.
16 W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 75/*Futuhat*, II.319.15.
17 Taken from his *al-Ibana*, cited in A. J. Arberry, *Reason and Revelation*, London: Allen and Unwin, 1957, p. 22.
18 Ibid., p. 22.
19 A. Haleem, 'Early Kalam' in S. H. Nasr and Oliver Leaman (eds), *Routledge History of Islamic Philosophy*, London: Routledge and Kegan, 1996.
20 Ibid., p. 75.
21 See Alexander D. Knysh, *Ibn ʻArabi in the Later Islamic Tradition*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1999, pp. 34–35.
22 H. Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ʻArabi*, trans. Ralph Manheim, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1969, p. 26; Richard Netton, *Allah Transcendent: Studies in the Structure and Semiotics of Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Cosmology*, Richmond: Curzon Press, 1994, p. 269.
23 M. Fakhry, *Islamic Philosophy*, p. 246.
24 Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975, p. 263.
25 H. Dabashi, *Truth and Narrative: The Untimely Thoughts of ʻAyn al-Qudat al-Hamadhani*, Richmond: Curzon Press, 1999, p. 604.
26 See W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 376/*Futuhat* II.133.19.
27 See M. Fakhry, *Islamic Philosophy*, p. 117.
28 See Mustafa Tahrali's interesting article 'The Polarity of Expression in the *Fusus al-Hikam*' in S. Hirtenstein and M. Tiernan (eds), *Muhyiddin Ibn ʻArabi: A Commemorative Volume*, Dorset: Element, 1993.
29 W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 62/*Futuhat*, I.160.7.
30 W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 350/*Futuhat* IV.143.2.
31 *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 282.
32 Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 279.
33 *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 149, *Fusus al-Hikem*, p. 121. faman qaydahu ankarahu fi ghayri mā qaydahu bihi, wa aqara bihi fima qaydahu bihi idha tajalla. wa man aṭlaqahu ʻan al-taqīd lam yankurhu wa aqra bihi fi kul ṣurahi yatahul fiha wuyua ʻaṭahi min nefeshi qadra ṣurahi ma tajalla lahu ila ma la yatanāha fa ʻinna ṣur al-tajallī ma laha bihayat taqafu ʻindma.
34 *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 150, *Fusus al-Hikem*, p. 122. al-maqlu qaydu fayḥasuru al-amra fi na'atin wāhdi wa al-ḥaqiqat ta ʻbiya al-ḥaṣra fi nefesi al-amri. famā huwa dhikra liman kān lahu ʻaqlu wa hum aṣḥabu al-ʻatiqādāt aladhina yakfuru ba ʻḍuhum biba ʻḍu wa yal ʻanu ba ʻḍahum ba ʻḍan wa ma lahum min nāṣarin.
35 W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 156/*Futuhat*, II.671.5.
36 Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. B. Johnson, London: Athlone Press, 1981, p. 20.
37 *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 152, *Fusus al-Hikem*, p. 124. faybadu liba ʻḍi al-ʻabādi bakhtilafi al-tajalli fi al-ṣuri ʻand al-ruwayahi khilafi mu ʻtaqadihi

alanahu la yataktrar. 'Some servants have God disclosed to them in various forms, other than those first seen, since Self-manifestation is never repeated.'

38 W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path*, pp. 104–5/*Futuhat* II.185.27; W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 105/*Futuhat*, II.589.28; in the final extract, Ibn 'Arabi is quoting Abu Talib al-Makki, cited in W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 354/*Futuhat*, III.384.18.

39 W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 111/*Futuhat* II.657.13.

40 W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 230/*Futuhat* IV.105.3.

41 A. Hyman and J. Walsh, *Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1973, p. 377.

42 Reiner Schürmann, *Meister Eckhart*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978, p. 102 – taken from the sermon Quasi vas auri.

43 W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 60/*Futuhat* II.597.17.

44 W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 62/*Futuhat* I.160.4.

45 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 292; *De la grammatologie*, p. 413.

46 Jacques Derrida, Dissemination, p. 253.

47 Peggy Kamuf (ed.), *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, Exeter: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991, p. 173; Jacques Derrida, *La Dissémination*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1972, p. 183.

48 Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass, Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982, p. 317. French edition used is *Marges de la Philosophie*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1972.

49 'une unité profonde . . . entre la théologie infinitiste, le logocentrisme et un certain technicisme.' Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 79; *De la grammatologie*, p. 117.

50 Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 114.

51 '. . . produise une force de dislocation se propageant à travers tout le système, le fissurant dans tous les sens et le *dé-limitant* de part en part.' Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 20; *L'Écriture*, p. 34.

52 *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 254; *Fusus al-Hikem*, p. 200. falhuda huwa ana yahatda al-insān ila al-ḥayrati, fiya 'ulama ana al-amr al-ḥayratu wa al-ḥayrah qalaqu wa ḥarakatu ḥayāt. fala sukun, fala mawt, wa wujudu, fala 'adumu.

53 Ibid. wa kadhalika fi al-mali al-dha bihi ḥayat al-arḍi wa ḥarakatuha, quluhu ta 'ali 'fāhtazat' wa ḥamluhā wa qawluhu 'warabat', wa wiladatuha qawluhu, 'wa anbatat min kuli zawjin bahājin'.

54 S. Mackenna (ed.), *Plotinus: The Enneads*, London: Penguin, 1991, section V.2.1.

55 *Got vliuzet in alle creaturen, und blîbet er doch unberüeret von in allen* – found in Schürmann, *Meister Eckhart*, p. 123 – in the German text see Niklaus Largier (ed.), *Meister Eckhart: Werke*, Frankfurt am Main: Kohlhammer, 1993, p. 70 – taken from the sermon *Surrexit autem Saulus*.

56 From the Brethren of Purity's Rasa'il 3: 232, cited in W. G. Chittick, *Heart of Islamic Philosophy: The Quest for Self-Knowledge in the Teachings of Afdal al-Din Kashani*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 76.

57 Ibid., p. 75.

58 al-Qunawi calls this creative effusion of beings 'entification' (ta'ayyun), moving from what he calls 'the uncreated unseen' (the 'God' beyond God, absolutely bereft of all names or attributes), down through the spiritual, imaginal, sensory and ultimately human levels. See W. G. Chittick, 'The Five

Divine Presences: al-Qunawi to al-Qayseri' in *Muslim World* 72: 2, 1982, pp. 106–128.

59 Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 12; *L'Écriture*, p. 24.
60 W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 203/*Futuhat* II.523.2.
61 *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 75; *Fusus al-Hikem*, p. 70. fā 'in qulta bi al-tanzihi kunta maqādan wa 'in qulta bi al-tashbihi kunta maḥadidan/wa 'in qulta bi al-amrani kunta musadidan wa kunta imaman fi al-ma 'arifi saydan/faman qāla bi al-'ishfā 'i kān mushrikan waman qala bi al-ifradi kan mawḥidan/fa 'iyaka wa al-tashbihi inna kunta thāniyan wa 'iyaka wa al-tanzihi inna kunta mufridan. /famā anta huwa: balanta huwa watrahu fi 'ayni al-umur masraḥān wa muqādan.
62 H. A. Wolfson, *The Philosophers of the Kalam*, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1976, p. 587.
63 W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 165/*Futuhat* II.281.15.
64 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 50, *De la grammatologie*, p. 73.
65 Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 4, *L'Écriture*, p. 11.
66 Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 19.
67 Ibid., p. 15.
68 Ibid., p. 16.
69 Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 16, *L'Écriture*, p. 29.
70 Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 26.
71 Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* p. 13, *L'Écriture*, p. 24.
72 Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 5.
73 Ibid., p. 14.
74 A resemblance Derrida is eager to warn against in his essay on Freud: 'Despite appearances, the deconstruction of logocentrism is not a psychoanalysis of philosophy'. Ibid., p. 196.
75 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 8; *De la grammatologie*, p. 17.
76 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 27.
77 Ibid., pp. 29–30, 43, 71.
78 See the opening pages of John D. Caputo's *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction and the Hermeneutic Project*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987.
79 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 41.
80 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 130; *De la grammatologie*, p. 190.
81 'l'écriture ne survient pas à un langage innocent. Il y a un violence originaire de l'écriture parce que le langage est d'abord, en un sens qui se dévoilera progressivement, écriture' Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 37, *De la grammatologie*, p. 55.
82 Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, p. 3, *Marges de la Philosophie*, p. 3.
83 'The Original Discussion of "La Différance" ' in David Wood, *Derrida and Difference*, Coventry: Parousia Press, 1988, p. 184.
84 Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, p. 6; *Marges de la Philosophie*, p. 6.
85 Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, p. 11; *Marges de la Philosophie*, p. 12.
86 Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, p. 7.
87 '. . . elle se diffère et s'écrit comme différance' in Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 78; *L'Écriture*, p. 116.
88 Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, p. 26, *Marges de la Philosophie*, p. 28.

89 'ce n'est pas par provision, parce que notre langue n'a pas encore trouvé ou recu ce *nom*…hors du système fini de la notre.' Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, p. 26, *Marges de la Philosophie*, p. 28.
90 W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 73/*Futuhat* II.499.7.
91 For a comprehensive summing up on the Islamic debate over God's attributes, see Wolfson on Al-Ash 'ari in Wolfson, *Philosophers of the Kalam*, p. 16.
92 W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path* p. 345/*Futuhat* II.472.35.
93 W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 231/*Futuhat* IV.19.22.
94 W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 230/*Futuhat* IV.105.3.
95 Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, p. 6.
96 'On ne peut pas penser la trace…à partir du resent, out de la presence de présent' The Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* p. 21, *Marges de la Philosophie*, p. 22.
97 *Margins of Philosophy*, p. 3.
98 W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path,* p. 110/*Futuhat* II.483.7.
99 W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 164/*Futuhat* II.648.7.
100 Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, p. 6.
101 Ibid., p. 5.
102 I. Harvey, *Derrida and the Economy of Différance*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986, p. 23.
103 'Je ne peux parler de cette différance graphique qu'en tenant un discours très détourné sur une écriture.' *Margins of Philosophy*, p. 4, *Marges de la Philosophie*, p. 4 – Italics mine.
104 W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path,* p. 62/*Futuhat* I.160.4.
105 See W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path,* p. 182/*Futuhat* II.502.21.
106 'Cela ne veut pas dire que la différance qui produit les différences soit avant elles dans un present simple et en soi immodifié.' Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, p. 11.
107 Ibid.
108 Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 157.
109 Ibid., p. 163.
110 Ibid., p. 164.
111 'Il faut qu'un intervalle le sépare de ce qui n'est pas lui pour qu'il soit lui-même…' Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, p. 13, *Marges de la Philosophie*, p. 13.
112 'La différance se laisse soumettre à un certain nombre de substitutions non synonymiques', *Margins of Philosophy*, p. 12, *Marges de la Philosophie*, p. 13.
113 Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, p. 3.
114 Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, p. 33.
115 Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986, p. 6.
116 W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 231/*Futuhat* IV.105.3; IV.18.32.
117 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 50.
118 *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 65; *Fusus al-Hikem*, p. 71.
119 W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 215/*Futuhat* III.116.18.
120 Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, p. 5.
121 Ibid., p. 4.
122 Ibid., p. 22.

2 The honesty of the perplexed: Derrida and Ibn ʿArabi on 'confusion'

1 F. Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, London: Penguin, 1990, p. 35.
2 zidnī fiyaka taḥīran. Found in Ibn ʿArabi, *Fusus al-Hikem*, A. E. Affifi (ed.), Beirut: Dar al-kutub al-ʿArabi, 1946, p. 73. Trans. Ralph Austin as *The Bezels of Wisdom*, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1980, p. 79.
3 Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass, London: Athlone Press, 1987, p. 45.
4 *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 254, *Fusus al-Hikem*, p. 200. ila al-ḥayrah.
5 '. . . acceptation . . . de l'incohérence incohérent', Jacques Derrida, *L'Écriture et la Différence*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1967, p. 224. Transl. Alan Bass as *Writing and Difference*, London: Routledge and Kegan, 1978, p. 151.
6 Anthony Kenny (ed.), *The Wittgenstein Reader*, London: Blackwell, 1994, p. 271.
7 S. H. Nasr and Oliver Leaman (eds), *Routledge History of Islamic Philosophy*, London: Routledge and Kegan, 1996, p. 390.
8 Ibid., p. 115.
9 A. E. Affifi, *The Mystical Philosophy of Ibnul Arabi*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1939, p. xi.
10 Ibid., p. xix.
11 S. Hirtenstein and M. Tiernan (eds), *Muhyiddin Ibn ʿArabi: A Commemorative Volume*, Dorset: Element, 1993, p. 350.
12 Ibid., p. 311.
13 Ibid., p. 219.
14 Ibid., p. 224.
15 J. Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Boston: MIT Press, 1987, p. 181.
16 M. C. Taylor, *ErRing: A Postmodern A/theology*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984, p. 13.
17 J. Ellis, *Against Deconstruction*, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1989, pp. 8, 13, 66; R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 125.
18 C. Norris, *Derrida*, London: Fontana, 1987, p. 156.
19 Rodolphe Gasché, 'Infrastructures and Systematicity', in J. Sallis (ed.), *Deconstruction and Philosophy*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987, p. 4.
20 *Muhyiddin Ibn ʿArabi: A Commemorative Volume*, p. 351.
21 W. G. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-ʿArabi's Metaphysics of Imagination*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1989, p. 3. The Arabic edition of the *Futuhat* used is Osman Yahia's four volume *Futuhat al-Makkiyya*, Cairo: Al-Hay'at al-Misriyyat al-ʿAmma li'l-Kitab, 1972.
22 al-ʿajz ʿan dark al-idrak idrak. *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 65, *Fusus al-Hikem*, p. 62.
23 'zidnī fiyaka taḥīran'. *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 79, *Fusus al-Hikem*, p. 73. Interestingly, an untraceable saying by all accounts – one almost suspects it came from Ibn ʿArabi himself. One also can't help thinking here of Eckhart's 'I pray God to rid me of God' (*Her umbe sô bite ich got, daz er mich ledic mache gotes*).
24 W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 348; *Futuhat*, II.211.29.
25 *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. C. Luibheid, London: SPCK, 1987, p. 58.

26 D. Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 278.
27 '… interrompant le tissage de notre langue et tissant ensuite les interruptions mêmes, une autre langue vient déranger celle-ci … un autre texte, le texte de l'autre, sans jamais paraître dans sa langue d'origine, vient alors en silence, selon un cadence plus ou moins régulière, disloquer la langue de traduction …' P. Kamuf (ed.), *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, Exeter: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991, p. 414; French text used is Jacques Derrida, *Psyché: Inventions de l'autre*, Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1987, p. 168.
28 'Au moment où elle fait irruption, l'inversion instauratrice devrait déborder, ignorer, transgresser, nier … le statut qu'on aurait voulu lui assigner ou lui reconnaître d'avance …' *A Derrida Reader*, p. 217; *Psyché*, p. 33.
29 W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 380; *Futuhat* IV.279.26.
30 *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 87.
31 *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 162, *Fusus al-Hikem*, p. 131. faqad nān laka al-sir waqad aṭḍaha al-amr/waqad adraj fiya al-shafa 'a al-zā qiyal huwa al-watr.
32 Jacques Derrida, 'How to Avoid Speaking : Denials', trans. K. Frieden, in H. Coward and T. Foshay (eds), *Derrida and Negative Theology*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, p. 77.
33 Sometime after writing the *Fusus al-Hikem*, Ibn 'Arabi produced a second work which essentially summarizes and expounds upon the main themes of the *Fusus*. Because of the importance of the *Fusus*, this secondary work (called the *Naqsh al-Fusus* – the 'Pattern of the *Fusus*') also received some attention in the commentary tradition – including, amongst others, Jāmī's own *Naqd al-nusūs fi sharh naqsh al-fusūs* ('Selected texts in commenting on the *Naqsh al-fusus*'), written in 1459. The translation is by W. G. Chittick, 'The Imprint of the Bezels of Wisdom', *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society* 1, 1982, pp. 30–93.
34 Ibid., p. 91.
35 Ibid., p. 92.
36 Ibid., p. 92.
37 Ibid., p. 93.
38 Ibid., p. 92.
39 Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 292; *L'Écriture*, p. 427.
40 N. Midgley (ed.), *Responsibilities of Deconstruction*, Coventry: Warwick Journal of Philosophy, 1997, p. 16.
41 'La différance' in Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass, Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982, p. 22. French edition used is *Marges de la Philosophie*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1972.
42 Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, p. 84.
43 Ibid., p. 85.
44 Ibid., p. 45.
45 'La dissémination ouvre, sans fin, cet accroc de l'écriture qui ne se laisse plus recoudre …' Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson, London: Athlone Press, 1981; French text Jacques Derrida, *La Dissémination*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1972, p. 22.
46 W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 335.
47 W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 336/*Futuhat* I.266.15.
48 Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, p. 317.

49 W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 338/*Futuhat* III.465.25.
50 'En cherchant à 'se faire un nom', à fonder à la fois une langue universelle et une généalogie unique, les Semites veulent mettre à la raison le monde, et cette raison peut signifier simultanément une violence coloniale (puisqu'ils universaliseraient ainsi leur idiome) et une transparence pacifique de la communauté humaine.' *A Derrida Reader*, p. 253; *Psyché*, p. 210.
51 '… un inachèvement, l'impossibilité de compléter, de totaliser … d'achever … quelque chose qui serait de l'ordre de l'édification … du systéme et de l'architectonique', *A Derrida Reader*, p. 244, *Psyché*, p. 203.
52 Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 159.
53 Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 151; *L'Écriture*, p. 224.
54 'Depuis un nom propre de Dieu … les langues se dispersent, se confondent ou se multiplient …' *A Derrida Reader,* p. 249/*Psyché*, p. 207.
55 'Et le nom propre de Dieu se divise assez dans la langue, déjà, pour signifier aussi, confusément, 'confusion'. Et la guerre qu'il déclare, elle a debord fait rage au-dedans de son nom: divisé, bifide, ambivalent, polysémique: Dieu deconstruit. *Lui-même*.' *A Derrida Reader*, p. 249, *Psyché*, p. 207.
56 Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 281.
57 'Je ne sais pas pourquoi il est dit dans le Genèse que Babel signifie confusion; car *Ba* signifie *pére* dans les langues orientales, et *Bel* signifie *Dieu*; *Babel* signifie la ville de Dieu, la ville sainte. Les Anciens donnaient ce nom à toutes leur capitales.' *A Derrida Reader*, p. 245, *Psyché*, p. 204.
58 'Si Dieu ouvre la question en Dieu, s'il est l'ouverture même de la Question, il n'y a pas de simplicité de Dieu. Ce qui était l'impensable pour les rationalistes classiques devient ici l'evidence. Dieu procédent dans la duplicité de sa propre mise en question, n'agit pas par les voies les plus simples; il n'est pas vérace, il n'est pas sincère.' Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 68, *L'Écriture*, p. 103.
59 *A Derrida Reader*, p. 246.
60 Jakob Boehme, *Six Theosophic Points*, cited in W. Kaufmann, *From Shakespeare to Existentialism*, New York: Doublay, 1960, p. 35.
61 Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 75.
62 'Allons, bâtissons une ville et une tour … Faisons – nous un nom/que nous ne soyions dispersés sur la face de toute la terre', *A Derrida Reader*, p. 248.
63 R. Rorty, 'The Reification of Language', in C. Guignon (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 352.
64 Taken from G. Hartmann, *Psychoanalysis and the Question of the Text*, p. 142.
65 *A Derrida Reader*, p. 253.
66 '… origine … de toute oppression dans le monde' Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 83.
67 *A Derrida Reader*, p. 253.
68 'Post-Scriptum: Aporias, Ways and Voices', trans. J. P. Leavery, Jr, in H. Coward and T. Foshay (eds), *Derrida and Negative Theology*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1993, p. 292.
69 Midgley, *Responsibilities of Deconstruction*, p. 34.
70 'YHWH les disperse de lá sur la face de toute la terre./Il cesset de bâtir la ville' *A Derrida Reader,* p. 248, *Psyché*, pp. 206–7.

71 '…le quasi "sans" de la dissémination, c'est l'impossible retour à l'unité rejointe, reajointée d'un sens…La dissémination est-elle pour autant la *perte* d'une telle vérité, l'interdiction *négative* d'accéder à un tel signifié? Loin de laisser ainsi supposer qu'une substance vierge la précède ou la surveille, se dispersant ou s'interdisant dans une négative seconde, la dissémination *affirme* la génération toujours déjà divisée du sens.' Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, p. 268, *La Dissémination*, p. 300.
72 Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, p. 350.
73 *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 76, *Fusus al-Hikem*, p. 70. falau ana nuḥ yātī bimithal hadha al-aya lafẓān ajabuh.
74 *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 79, *Fusus al-Hikem*, p. 73. faghariqu fī biḥāri al-'alam bi Allah wa huwa al-ḥayrah.
75 Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, p. 22.
76 W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path,* p. 156, II. 671.5.
77 *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 76, *Fusus al-Hikem*, p. 70–71. nuḥ da 'ā qawmahun 'laylan' min ḥaythu uqulahum wa ruhā niyatahum fainahā ghayb. 'wanhārān' da 'āhum ayḍān min haythu ẓāhir surahum wa ḥissahum wama jam 'a fī al-da 'uwati mithal 'lays kamithliha shay'.
78 *The Bezels of Wisdom*, pp. 76–77, *Fusus al-Hikem*, p. 71. Austin's notes are in parantheses. fafī 'lay kamithliha shay' ithbāt al-mithal wa nafihi, wa bi hadha qal 'an nafsihi sal Allahi 'alayhi wa salam inahu ūtiya jawalam 'a al-kelim. Fima da 'a Muḥammad sal Allahi 'alayhi wa salam qawmahu laylan nahārān, bil da 'āhum laylan fī nahar wa nahārān fi layli.
79 *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 79.
80 *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 80, *Fusus al-Hikem*, p. 73. fala akhrajahum ilā al-sayf, sayf al-ṭabiy 'at, lanadhil bi ham 'an hadha al-darjat al-rafi 'at.
81 W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 380.
82 Ibid.
83 *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 79, *Fusus al-Hikem*, p. 73. Austin's notes in parantheses. falḥāra lahu al-dur wa al-ḥarakat ḥawl al-quṭb falla yabraḥ minhu, wa ṣalḥab al-ṭariq al-mustaṭil maal kharaja 'an al-maqṣud ṭalaba ma huwa fihi ṣalaḥab khayal ilahi ghayat: falahu min wailla wa ma binhuma. wa ṣalḥab al-ḥarakat al-duriyat al-abdulha fiyaldḥamhu 'min' wa la ghayat fatḥakum 'alayhi 'ila' falaha al-wujud al-alam wa huwa al-mutā juwa ma 'a al-kelam wa al-ḥikam.
84 E. Bloch, *Atheismus im Christentum*, taken from the *Gesamtausgabe*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1968, vol. 14, p. 95.
85 Ibid., p. 287.
86 *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 80, *Fusus al-Hikem*, p. 74. 'inaka tadharhum' ay tad 'ahum wa tatarkum 'yaḍulu 'abādak' ay yaḥiruham fi yakharajum man al-'abudiyat ila ma fihum man al-asrar al-rabubiyat fiyanzarum anfasahum arbābā.
87 W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 73/*Futuhat* II.499.7.
88 *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 254.
89 '…cette discorde 'active', en mouvement, des forces différentes' *Margins of Philosophy*, p. 18, *Marges de la Philosophie*, p. 19.
90 Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, p. 317.
91 R. Austin, 'Meditations upon the vocabulary of Love and Union in Ibn 'Arabi's Thought', *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society* III, 1984, 7.

92 W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path,* p. 203/*Futuhat* II.523.2.
93 Kevin Hart, 'Jacques Derrida: The "God" Effect', in P. Blond (ed.), *Post-Secular Philosophy*, London: Routledge, 1998, p. 262.

3 Sages of the book: the meaning of infinity in Sufi and deconstructive hermeneutics

1 Cited in G. L. Bruns, *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern*, Michigan: Yale University Press, 1992, p. 247.
2 R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
3 M. C. Taylor, *ErRing: A Postmodern A/Theology*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984, p. 6.
4 Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981, pp. 244, 246, taken from his essay 'The Mirror of Enigmas'.
5 See Ralph Austin's introduction to his translation of the *Fusus*, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1980, *Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 5. Arabic text used is Ibn ʿArabi, *Fusus al-Hikem*, A. E. Affifi (ed.), Beirut: Dar al-kutub al-ʿArabi, 1946.
6 Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass, Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982, p. 320. French edition used is *Marges de la Philosophie*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1972.
7 Cited in Bruns, *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern*, p. 248.
8 J. Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Boston: MIT Press, 1987, p. 182.
9 Ibid., p. 182. In the footnotes of *Limited Inc*, Derrida accuses Habermas of not having read a single word of his texts, and of having used instead Johnathan Culler's *On Deconstruction*. See Jeffrey Nealon's 'The Discipline of Deconstruction' in *PMLA* 107, 1992, pp. 1275–6.
10 H. Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ʿArabi*, trans. Ralph Manheim, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969, p. 26.
11 see W. G. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-ʿArabi's Metaphysics of Imagination*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1989, p. xvi. The Arabic edition of the *Futuhat* used is Osman Yahia's four volume *Futuhat al-Makkiyya*, Cairo: Al-Hayʾat al-Misriyyat al-ʿAmma liʾl-Kitab, 1972.
12 Taken from al-Ghazali's *Ihya'* I.260, cited in N. Heer, 'Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali's Esoteric Exegesis of the Koran' in Leonard Lewisohn (ed.), *Classical Persian Sufism: From its Origins to Rumi*, London, 1993, p. 238.
13 W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 244, 'This situation is not found outside God's speech.'
14 W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 181/*Futuhat* II.326.18 minnā man yarāhu wa yajhalahu wa kadhalika al-ḥubu ma aḥabba aḥadu ghayri khalqahu walakinna aḥatajaba ʿanhu ta ʿalli biḥubi Zeynaba wa Su ʿad wa Hindan wa Layla wa al-danyā wa al-durhami wa al-jāhi wa kuli maḥbubi fi al-ʿalam. Fāfanati al-shu ʿar ʿu kalamha fi al-mawjudat wa hum la ya ʿlamuna wa al-ʿārifuna lam yasama ʿua shi ʿrān wala lughzan wala madiḥā wa la taghazu lan . . . min khilfu mahajābi al-ṣur.
15 W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 244/*Futuhat* II.567.19 wa bima qalnā fi al-wujuhi anha maqṣudahu illahi falaysi yataḥakum ʿali Allahi walakinnhu

amru muhaqqaq ‘an Allahi wa dhalika ana al-ayat al-mutalafaẓi biha min kalami Allahi biyaa wajhu kanā min qurāni aw katābi munazlin aw ṣaḥifati aw khabrin al-hiyā fahī ayat ‘alay mā taḥamlahu tilka al-lafẓahu min jay ‘i al-wujuhi ayya ‘alamahi ‘alayhan maqṣudahu laman anza laha bitilka al-lafẓahu al-ḥāwiyahu fi dhalika al-lasinu ‘alay tilka al-wujuhi fānna munzalaha ‘alimu bitilka al-wujuhi kuliha wa ‘alimu binna ‘ibādahu mutafawituni fi al-naẓir fiyahi wannahu kalfahum min khitabihi suā mā fahimuā ‘anhu fiyahi fikula man fahima min al-ayahi wajhan fidhalika al-wujhu huwa muqṣudu bi hadha al-ayahi haqqu hadha al-wajidilahu.

16 G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, New York: Schocken Books, 1974, p. 210; the Muslim scholar’s observation can be found in N. Heer, op. cit., p. 239.
17 W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 245/*Futuhat* II.581.4.
18 *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 109.
19 Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, p. 309.
20 Ibid., p. 316.
21 Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. B. Johnson, London: Athlone Press, 1981, p. 143–144.
22 Ibid., p. 26.
23 *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 46.
24 W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path,* p. 200/*Futuhat* II.594.28.
25 M. O’C. Walshe, *Meister Eckhart:German Sermons and Treatises*, London: Watkins, 1979, vol. 2, p. 250, Sermon 51. For the German text see J. Quint, *Meister Eckhart: die deutschen und lateinischen Werke*, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer Verlag, 1936, 2:467.
26 See Origen, *In Genesin Homiliae*, IX.I where he refers to the scriptures as ‘a mysterious ocean of the divinity’, cited in Umberto Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Hugh Bredin, London: Radius, 1988, p. 145.
27 W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 154/*Futuhat* II.552.12.
28 W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 245/*Futuhat* II.581.4.
29 W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 156/*Futuhat* II.671.5; W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 241/*Futuhat* II.134.21; W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 155/*Futuhat* II.686.4.
30 In line with a common tradition in Islam which sees the ‘character’ of the Prophet Mohammed as synonymous with the Koran, even Mohammed himself is seen to be ‘identical’ with the Holy Book, namely because of the adjective ‘Tremendous’ (*azim*): ‘[whoever] looks upon [the Koran], there is no difference between looking upon it and looking upon God’s messenger’, see W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path,* p. 241/*Futuhat* II.346.12.
31 *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 133.
32 D. Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 237.
33 W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path,* p. 154/*Futuhat* II.686.4.
34 W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path,* p. 102/*Futuhat* II.280.31.
35 The association of ‘non-being’ with ‘evil’ does make one think of Avicenna’s *Risalah fi’l-‘ishq* (*Treatise on Love*), where he speaks of the evil of ‘materiality and non-being’, and how ‘the goodness of reality’ brings things into existence – from which, Avicenna concludes that ‘in such beings love is the cause of their existence’. cited in S. H. Nasr, *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines*, Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1964, p. 262.
36 W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 87/*Futuhat* II.248.24.

37 W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 338/*Futuhat* III.465.25.
38 Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, p. 3.
39 'Le graphème, à se répéter ainsi, n'a donc ni lieu ni centre naturels. Mais les a-t-il jamais perdus? Son excentricié est-elle un décentrement? Ne peut-on affirmer l'irréférence au centre au lieu de pleurer l'absence du centre?' Jacques Derrida, *L'Écriture et la Différence*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1967, p. 432. The English translation used is by Alan Bass, *Writing and Difference*, London: Routledge & Kegan, 1978, p. 297.
40 Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, p. 70.
41 Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 296.
42 'Dieu s'est séparé de soi pour nous laisser parler, nous étonner et nous interroger. Il l'a fait non pas en parlant mais en se taisant . . . Cette différence, cette négativité en Dieu, c'est notre liberté . . . ' *Writing and Difference*, p. 67, *L'Écriture*, p. 103.
43 Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, p. 313.
44 'L'écriture est le moment du désert comme moment de la Séparation.' *Writing and Difference*, p. 68, *L'Écriture*, p. 104.
45 Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, p. 316.
46 Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 300.
47 J. D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*: *Religion Without Religion*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997, p. xxiv.
48 'History As Apocalypse,' in T. J. Altizer (ed.), *Deconstruction and Theology*, NY: Crossroad, 1982, p. 176.
49 Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 311, footnote 3.
50 Ibid., p. 294.
51 Ibid., p. 297.
52 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. G. C. Spivak, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976, p. 68; French Edition *De la grammatologie*, Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1967.
53 Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 156.
54 'Il y a donc deux interprétations de l'interprétations, de la structure, du signe et du jeu. L'une cherche à déchiffrer, rêve de déchiffrer une vérite ou une origine échappant au jeu et à l'ordre du signe, et vit comme un exil la nécessité de l'interprétation. L'autre, qui n'est plus tournée vers l'origine, affirme le jeu et tente de passer au-delà de l'homme et de l'humanisme, le nom de l'homme étant le nom de cet être qui . . . a rêve la présence pleine, le fondement rassurant, l'origine et la fin du jeu.' *Writing and Difference*, p. 292, *L'Écriture*, p. 427.
55 Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 293.
56 *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 99.
57 W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path,* p. 119/*Futuhat* III.454.1.
58 Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 297.
59 Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, p. 54.
60 Ibid., p. 38.
61 Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (eds), *Labyrinths*, London: Penguin, 1987, p. 37.
62 See W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path,* p. 121/*Futuhat* II.312.23 and also ibid., p. 202/*Futuhat* III.69.30.
63 Ibid., p. 124/*Futuhat* II.312.4.
64 Ibid., p. 124/*Futuhat* II.183.8.

65 Ibid., p. 202/*Futuhat* III.69.30.
66 Ibid., p. 201/*Futuhat* II.594.28.
67 *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 56, *Fusus al-Hikem*, p. 56.
68 David Krell (ed.), *Basic Writings: Martin Heidegger*, London: Routledge, 1978, p. 258.
69 In the Chapter on Isaac, we are told that one should begin to interpret visions only when they are manifested 'in a form unacceptable to the reason', *Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 101.
70 *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 200.
71 Translated by Rabia Terri Harris in the *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society* VIII, 1989, 29.
72 W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. xvi.
73 Ibid., p. 256.
74 'Passions: An Oblique Offering', in David Wood (ed.), *Derrida: A Critical Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1992, p. 15.
75 Jacques Derrida, 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials', trans. K. Frieden, in H. Coward and T. Foshay (eds), *Derrida and Negative Theology*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993, p. 110. French text used is Jacques Derrida, *Psyché: Inventions de l'autre*, Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1987, p. 571.
76 Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, p. 6.
77 'Post-Scriptum: Aporias, Ways and Voices', trans. J. P. Leavery, Jr, in H. Coward and T. Foshay (eds), *Derrida and Negative Theology*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1993, p. 310. French text used is J. Derrida, *Sauf le nom*, Paris: Éditions galilée, 1993, p. 81.
78 From the essay 'The Task of the Translator', in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, London: Pimlico, 1999, p. 71.
79 Paul De Man, *The Resistance to Theory*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986, pp. 97–99.
80 Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, p. 54.

4 Mystery-tasting and abyssality: the secret in Ibn 'Arabi and Derrida

1 *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Milan Kundera, London: Faber and Faber, 1988, p. 122.
2 J. L. Borges, *A Universal History of Infamy*, trans. Norman T. Giovanni, London: Penguin, 1981, p. 12.
3 Alain Robbe-Grillet, *For A New Novel*, trans. R. Howard, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1965, p. 83.
4 'The Deconstruction of God', in T. J. Altizer (ed.), *Deconstruction and Theology*, New York: Crossroad, 1982, p. 14.
5 See M. Joy, 'Conclusion: Divine Reservations', in H. Coward and T. Foshay (eds), *Derrida and Negative Theology*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993, p. 266.
6 D. Loy, 'The Deconstruction of Buddhism' in H. Coward and T. Foshay (eds), *Derrida and Negative Theology*, p. 228.
7 Mark C. Taylor, 'nO nOt nO' in H. Coward and T. Foshay (eds), *Derrida and Negative Theology*, p. 184.
8 J. D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion Without Religion*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997, p. 107.

9 Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass, Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982, p. 27.
10 'How To Avoid Speaking: Denials', trans. K. Frieden, in H. Coward and T. Foshay (eds), *Derrida and Negative Theology*, p. 95; *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Jonson, London: Athlone Press, 1981, pp. 182, 350; 'Of An Apocalyptic Tone Newly Adopted In Philosophy', translated by John P. Leavey, Jr, in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, p. 40; 'Passions: An Oblique Offering', trans. David Wood, in Wood's *Derrida: A Critical Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1992, p. 22.
11 Wood, *Derrida: A Critical Reader*, p. 22.
12 Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of The Foundations*, London: SCM Press, 1968, p. 63.
13 These are Frank Kermode's terms, taken from his *The Genesis of Secrecy*, London: Harvard University Press, 1979.
14 Jacques Derrida, 'Of an Apocalyptic Tone Newly Adopted in Philosophy', trans. John P. Leavey, Jr, in H. Coward and T. Foshay, *Derrida and Negative Theology*, p. 60.
15 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. G. C. Spivak, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976, p. 70.
16 Ibid., p. 50.
17 For Rodolphe Gasché, deconstruction is 'an attempt to "account" for a heterogeneous variety . . . of discursive inequalities . . . that continue to haunt even the *successful* development of philosophical arguments', from 'Infrastructures and Systematicity', in J. Sallis (ed.), *Deconstruction and Philosophy*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987, p. 3.
18 Wood, *Derrida: A Critical Reader*, p. 8.
19 Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass, London: Routledge and Kegan, 1978, pp. 296, 298; *Of Grammatology*, p. 163; *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995, p. 4.
20 Ibn ʿArabi, *Fusus al-Hikem*, A. E. Affifi (ed.), Beirut: Dar al-kutub al-ʿArabi, 1946. Trans. Ralph Austin, as *The Bezels of Wisdom*, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1980, p. 106.
21 *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 166, *Fusus al-Hikem*, p. 133.
22 *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 116.
23 See Rabia Terri Harris' translation of Ibn ʿArabi's *al-Istilah al-Sufiyyah* in *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ʿArabi Society* III, 1984, p. 52.
24 Translated by Rabia Terri Harris in the *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ʿArabi Society* VIII, 1990, p. 19.
25 W. G. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-ʿArabi's Metaphysics of Imagination*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1989, p. 338/*Futuhat* III.465.3, 25. The Arabic edition of the *Futuhat* used is Osman Yahia's four volume *Futuhat al-Makkiyya*, Cairo: Al-Hayʾat al-Misriyyat al-ʿAmma liʾl-Kitab, 1972.
26 W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 381/*Futuhat* II.661.10.
27 'Denials' in H. Coward and T. Foshay, *Derrida and Negative Theology*, p. 89.
28 In the first heading of al-Ghazali's *The Alchemy of Felicity*, we find: 'Know that the key to true knowledge of God is true knowledge of the soul' (cited in W. G. Chittick, *The Heart of Islamic Philosophy: The Quest for Self-Knowledge in the Teachings of Afdal al-Din Kashani*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 112). The first part of the Epistles of the Ikhwan

al-Safa (*Rasa'il* I) also offers a similar paraphrasing of self-knowledge as divine gnosis: 'He who knows himself best knows his Creator best' (cited in M. Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy*, London: Longman, 1983, p. 171).
29 *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 133.
30 W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 171/*Futuhat* III.79.28.
31 From the *al-Istilah al-Sufiyyah* in *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society* III, 1984, p. 52.
32 See M. Tahrali's 'The Polarity of Expression in the *Fusus al-Hikem*', in S. Hirtenstein and M. Tiernan (eds), *Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi: A Commemorative Volume*, Dorset: Element, 1993, pp. 351–360.
33 A. E. Affifi, *The Mystical Philosophy of Ibnul Arabi*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1939, pp. 140–141.
34 *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 95, *Fusus al-Hikem*, p. 83. fan bi al-ghana wa ana usā 'iduhu fa 'as 'iduhu?/lidhalika al-ḥaqq awjadani fa 'alamuhu fa 'awjiduhu?
35 *The Bezels of Wisdom*, 55.
36 W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 376.
37 Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996, p. 4.
38 W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 152/*Futuhat* II.101.29.
39 See W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 352/*Futuhat* III.384.18.
40 W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 353/*Futuhat* III.384.18.
41 S. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Alistair Hannay, London: Penguin, 1990, p. 55.
42 Ibid., p. 85.
43 W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path,* p. 328/*Futuhat* III.298.17.
44 See D. Gril, 'Adab and Revelation', in S. Hirtenstein and M. Tiernan (eds), *Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi: A Commemorative Volume*, p. 230.
45 W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 376/*Futuhat* II.133.19.
46 Cited in C. Addas, *Ibn 'Arabi ou la Quête du souffre rouge*, trans. M. Tahrali, Paris: Gallimard, 1989, p. 182.
47 The extracts are taken from W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 67/*Futuhat* II.518.12; W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 48/*Futuhat* III.225.32; W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 137/*Futuhat* I.119.3; W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 291/*Futuhat* III.389.21; W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 302/*Futuhat* II.563.23.
48 W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 106/*Futuhat* II.653.25.
49 Ibid., p. 56/*Futuhat* II.226.2.
50 Ibid., p. 323/*Futuhat* I.276.19.
51 Ibid., p. 257/*Futuhat* II.233.34.
52 Ibid., p. 374/*Futuhat* III.34.28.
53 S. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 6.
54 Ibid., p. 70.
55 Ibid., p. 68.
56 Ibid., p. 70.
57 Heidegger, 'Letter on Humanism', in D. Krell (ed.), *Basic Writings: Martin Heidegger*, London: Routledge, 1978, p. 291.
58 'Passions', in Wood, *Derrida: A Critical Reader*, p. 14.
59 Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass, London: Athlone Press, pp. 89–90.
60 Ibid., p. 91.

61 See M. H. Abrams, 'Constructing and Deconstructing', in M. Eaves and M. Fisher (eds), *Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism*, London: Cornell University Press, 1986.
62 S. H. Nasr, *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines*, Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1964, p. 31.
63 T. Izutsu, *A Comparative Study of the Key Philosophical Concepts in Taoism and Sufism*, Tokyo, 1967, p. 1.
64 T. Izutsu, *Taoism and Sufism*, p. 2.
65 *Positions*, pp. 23, 46; *Of Grammatology*, pp. 157, 140; *Writing and Difference*, p. 151.
66 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 73.
67 T. Izutsu, *Taoism and Sufism*, p. 1.
68 From *Emile*, p. 76, cited in Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 316.
69 Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, London: Penguin, 1990, p. 46.
70 W. G. Chittick, *The Self-disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-'Arabi's Cosmology*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1999, p. xxvi.
71 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 163.
72 T. Izutsu, *Taoism and Sufism*, p. 18.
73 'Post-Scriptum', in H. Coward and T. Foshay, *Derrida and Negative Theology*, p. 315.

Conclusion – the post-structuralist dissolution of the subject: three Neoplatonic moments in the Derridean canon

1 J. Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Boston: MIT Press, 1987, p. 184.
2 From Georges Bataille, *Oeuvre Completes* 6: 22, cited in Amy Hollywood's 'Bataille and Mysticism: A Dazzling Dissolution', *Diacritics* 26: 2, 1996, p. 74.
3 Maurice Blanchot's 'The Essential Solitude' is taken from A. Smock's translation, *The Space of Literature*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982, p. 33.
4 T. Clark, *Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 68.
5 See in particular S. Brent Plate's 'Obfuscation: Maurice Blanchot's Religious Recitation of the Limits' (*Literature and Theology* 11: 3, 1997) for how the language of *Thomas the Obscure* is 'a religious language, and the experience of the limit between binary oppositions a religious experience', p. 239.
6 Blanchot, *Space of Literature*, p. 28.
7 Plotinus, *The Enneads*, I.2, trans. Stephen Mackenna, London: Penguin, 1991, p. 19.
8 Blanchot, *Space of Literature*, p. 24.
9 Ibid., p. 28.
10 Ibid., p. 26.
11 Ibid., p. 22.
12 Ibid., p. 27.
13 Ibid., p. 33.
14 W. Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, London: Pimlico, 1999, p. 77.
15 Taken from W. Benjamin, *The Origin of German Drama*, trans. John Osborne, London: Verso, 1998, p. 45; W. Benjamin, *Illuminations*, pp. 210, 65.

16 Both quotations taken from M. W. Jennings (ed.), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume II: 1927–1934*, London: Belknap Press, 1999, pp. 30, 116.
17 W. Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 77.
18 Plotinus, *The Enneads*, p. 19.
19 W. Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 76.
20 For more on this, see the first chapter of Kevin Hart's *The Trespass of the Sign*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
21 Taken from Eckhart's sermon *Quasi stella matutina*, cited in Jacques Derrida, 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials', trans. K. Frieden and found in H. Coward and T. Foshay (eds), *Derrida and Negative Theology*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993, p. 115.
22 From chapter 25 of the *Fusus al-Hikem*, trans. Ralph Austin as *The Bezels of Wisdom*, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1980, p. 258.
23 Cited in L. D. Kritzman (ed.), *Michel Foucault: Interviews and Other Writings 1977–84*, London: Routledge, 1988, p. 1.
24 All references to 'What is an Author?' taken from D. Lodge (ed.), *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, London: Longman, 1988, p. 205.
25 '. . . in Iran [the understanding of truth] is largely modeled on a religion that has an exoteric form and an esoteric content. That is to say, everything that is said under the explicit form of the law also refers to another meaning . . .', Foucault on Iran in the interview 'Iran: the Spirit of a World without Spirit', cited in Kritzman, *Michel Foucault: Interviews and Other Writings*, p. 223.
26 C. Jambet, 'The Constitution of the Subject and Spiritual Practice', in T. J. Armstrong (ed.), *Michel Foucault: Philosopher*, Brighton: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992, pp. 233–248.
27 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, London: Tavistock Publications, 1970, p. 305.
28 Ibid., p. 306.
29 *Twentieth Century Literary Criticism*, p. 197.
30 Ibid., pp. 207, 198.
31 ibid., p. 202.
32 Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass, London: Routledge and Kegan, 1978, p. 279.
33 Ibid., p. 288.
34 T. Izutsu, *A Comparative Study of the Key Philosophical Concepts in Taoism and Sufism*, Tokyo, 1967 vol. 2, p. 192.
35 Ibid., p. 194.
36 M. Yeh, 'Deconstructive Way: A Comparative Study of Derrida and Chuang Tzu', *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 10, 1983, p. 96.
37 D. Wesling, 'Methodological Implications of the Philosophy of Jacques Derrida for Comparative Literature', in J. J. Deeney (ed.), *Chinese–Western Comparative Literature: Theory and Strategy*, Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1980, p. 79.
38 Hongchu Fu, 'Deconstruction and Taoism: Comparisons Reconsidered', in *Comparative Literature Studies* 29: 3, 1992, p. 314.
39 H. Dabashi, *Truth and Narrative: The Untimely Thoughts of 'Ayn al-Qudat al-Hamadhani*, Richmond: Curzon, 1999, p. 604–5.
40 W. G. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1989, p. 377/*Futuhat* IV.76.27. The

Arabic edition of the *Futuhat* used is Osman Yahia's four volume *Futuhat al-Makkiyya*, Cairo: Al-Hay'at al-Misriyyat al-'Amma li'l-Kitab, 1972.

41 W. G. Chittick, ibid., p. 62/*Futuhat* I.160.7; *The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 74.
42 Martin Heidegger, *Zur Seinsfrage*, London: Vision Press, 1974, p. 80.
43 Martin Heidegger, *Zur Seinsfrage*, p. 81.
44 G. C. Spivak in her preface to *Of Grammatology*, p. xviii.
45 Kevin Hart, 'Jacques Derrida: The God Effect', in P. Blond (ed.), *Post-Secular Philosophy*, London: Routledge and Kegan, 1998, p. 260.
46 All cited in Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign*, p. 23.
47 Rodolphe Gasché's essay, 'Infrastructures and Systematicity', can be found in J. Sallis (ed.), *Deconstruction and Philosophy*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987, p. 4.
48 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 70.
49 H. Rahner, *Greek Myths and Christian Mystery*, trans. Brian Battershaw, London: Burns and Oates, 1963, p. 17.
50 Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, p. 26.
51 Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 8.
52 N. Midgley (ed.), *Responsibilities of Deconstruction*, Coventry: Warwick Journal of Philosophy, 1997, p. 3.
53 W. G. Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 111/*Futuhat* I.289.20.

Bibliography

Abrams, M. H., 'Construing and Deconstructing' in M. Eaves and M. Fisher (eds), *Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism*, London: Cornell University Press, 1986, pp. 127–157.

Addas, C., *Ibn 'Arabi ou la Quête du souffre rouge*, Paris: Gallimard, 1989.

Affifi, A., *The Mystical Philosophy of Ibnul Arabi*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1939.

Almond, I., 'Doing Violence Upon God: Nonviolent Alterities and their Medieval Precedents', *The Harvard Theological Review* 92:3, 1999, pp. 325–348.

——, 'How *Not* to Deconstruct a Dominican: Derrida on God and "Hyper-Truth"', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68:2, 2000, pp. 329–344.

——, 'Divine Needs, Divine Illusions: Preliminary Remarks Towards a Comparative Study of Meister Eckhart and Ibn al-'Arabi', *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 10, Fall 2001, pp. 263–282.

Altizer, T. J. (ed.), *Deconstruction and Theology*, New York: Crossroad, 1982.

Anidjar, G. (ed.), *Acts of Religion*, London: Routledge, 2002.

'Arabi, Muhyiddin Ibn, *Futuhat al-Makkiyya*, O. Yahia (ed.), Cairo: Al-Hay'at al-Misriyyat al-'Amma li'l-Kitab, 1972.

——, *Fusus al-Hikem*, A. E. Affifi (ed.), Beirut: Dar al-kutub al-'Arabi, 1946. Trans. R. Austin, as *The Bezels of Wisdom*, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1980.

——, *Shajarat al-Kawn*, trans. A. Jeffery, Lahore, Pakistan: Aziz, 1980.

——, *al-Istilah al-Sufiyyah*, trans. Rabia Terri Harris, *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society* III, 1984, pp. 27–54.

——, *Kitāb al-Jalā wa-l jamāl l*, trans. Rabia Terri Harris, *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society* VIII, 1989, pp. 5–32.

Arberry, A. J., *Reason and Revelation*, London: Allen and Unwin, 1957.

Austin, R., 'Meditations Upon the Vocabulary of Love and Union in Ibn 'Arabi's Thought', *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society* III, 1984, pp. 6–19.

Bayrakdar, M., *La Philosophie Mystique chez Dawud de Kayseri*, Ankara: Éditions Ministére de la Culture, 1990.

Benjamin, W., *The Origin of German Drama*, trans. J. Osborne, London: Verso, 1998.

Benjamin, W., *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, London: Pimlico, 1999.
——, *Selected Writings Volume II: 1927–1934*, M. W. Jennings (ed.), London: Belknap Press, 1999.
Blanchot, M., *The Space of Literature*, trans. A. Smock, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982.
Bloch, E., *Atheismus im Christentum*, in *Gesamtausgabe*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1968, vol. 14.
Borges, Jorge Luis, *Labyrinths*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981.
Bruns, G. L., *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern*, Michigan: Yale University Press, 1992.
Caputo, J. D., *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction and the Hermeneutic Project*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987.
——, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*: *Religion Without Religion*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997.
Chittick, William G., 'The Perfect Man as the Prototype of the Self in the Sufism of Jami', *Studia Islamica* 49, 1979, pp. 135–157.
——, 'The Five Divine Presences: From Al-Qunawi to Al-Qaysari', *Muslim World* 72:2, 1982, pp. 107–128.
——, 'The Imprint of the Bezels of Wisdom', *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society* I, 1982, pp. 30–93.
——, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1989.
——, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-'Arabi's Cosmology*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1998.
——, *The Heart of Islamic Philosophy: The Quest for Self-Knowledge in the Teachings of Afdal al-Din Kashani*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.
Clark, Timothy, *Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
Classical Persian Sufism: From its Origins to Rumi, L. Lewisohn (ed.), London: Khaniqahi Nimatullahi Publications, 1993.
Corbin, H., *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi*, trans. R. Manheim, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1969.
——, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth: From Mazdean Iran to Shi'ite Iran*, trans. Nancy Pearson, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977.
Dabashi, H., 'Ayn al-Qudat Hamadani and the Intellectual Climate of his Times', in *Routledge History of Islamic Philosophy*, London: Routledge and Kegan, 1996, pp. 374–429.
——, *Truth and Narrative: The Untimely Thoughts of 'Ayn al-Qudat al-Hamadhani*, Richmond: Curzon Press, 1999.
De Man, P., *The Resistance to Theory*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986.
Derrida, Jacques, *L'Écriture et la Différence*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1967, trans. Alan Bass, *Writing and Difference*, London: Routledge and Kegan, 1978.
——, *De la grammatologie*, Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1967, trans. G. C. Spivak, *Of Grammatology*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976.

——, *La Dissémination*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1972, trans. Barbara Johnson, *Dissemination*, London: Athlone Press, 1981.
——, *Marges de la Philosophie*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1972, trans. A. Bass, *Margins of Philosophy*, Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982.
——, *Positions*, trans. A. Bass, London: Athlone Press, 1987.
——, *Psyché: Inventions de l'autre*, Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1987.
——, P. Kamuf (ed.), *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, Exeter: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991.
——, 'Passions: An Oblique Offering', in David Wood (ed.), *Derrida: A Critical Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1992.
——, 'Of an Apocalyptic Tone Newly Adopted in Philosophy', trans. J. P. Leavey, Jr., in H. Coward and T. Foshay (eds), *Derrida and Negative Theology*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1993, pp. 25–72.
——, 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials', trans. K. Frieden, in H. Coward and T. Foshay (eds), *Derrida and Negative Theology*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1993, pp. 73–142.
——, 'Post-Scriptum: Aporias, Ways and Voices', in H. Coward and T. Foshay (eds), *Derrida and Negative Theology*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1993, pp. 283–324.
——, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.
Eckhart, Meister, *Werke*, N. Largier (ed.), Frankfurt am Main: Kohlhammer, 1993.
Eco, Umberto, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Hugh Bredin, London: Radius, 1988.
Ellis, J. M., *Against Deconstruction*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989.
Fakhry, M., *A History of Islamic Philosophy*, London: Longman, 1983.
Foucault, Michel, *The Order of Things*, London: Tavistock Publications, 1970.
——, 'What is an Author?', in D. Lodge (ed.), *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, London: Longman, 1988, pp. 197–210.
Gasché, R., *The Tain of the Mirror*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986.
——, 'Infrastructures and Systematicity', in J. Sallis (ed.), *Deconstruction and Philosophy*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987.
al-Ghorab, M., 'Muhyiddin Ibn al-'Arabi amidst Religions and Schools of Thought', in S. Hirtenstein and M. Tiernan (eds), *Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi, A Commemorative Volume*, Dorset: Element, 1993, pp. 200–227.
Gril, D., 'Adab and Revelation', in S. Hirtenstein and M. Tiernan (eds), *Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi: A Commemorative Volume*, Dorset: Element, 1993, pp. 228–263.
Habermas, J., *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Boston: MIT Press, 1987.
Haleem, Abdel, 'Early Kalam', in S. H. Nasr and O. Leaman (eds), *Routledge History of Islamic Philosophy*, pp. 70–87.
Hart, K., *The Trespass of the Sign*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
——, 'Jacques Derrida: The God Effect', in P. Blond (ed.), *Post-Secular Philosophy*, London: Routledge and Kegan, 1998, pp. 259–280.
Hartman, G., *Psychoanalysis and the Question of the Text*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978.

Harvey, I., *Derrida and the Economy of Différance*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986.

Hirtenstein, S. and Tiernan, M. (eds), *Muhyiddin Ibn ʻArabi, A Commemorative Volume*, Dorset: Element, 1993.

——, *The Unlimited Mercifier: The Spiritual Life and Thought of Ibn ʻArabi*, Oxford: Anqa Publishing, 1999.

Hollywood, A., 'Bataille and Mysticism: A Dazzling Dissolution', *Diacritics* 26:2, 1996, pp. 74–85.

Hongchu Fu, 'Deconstruction and Taoism: Comparisons Reconsidered', in *Comparative Literature Studies* 29:3, 1992, pp. 296–321.

Izutsu T., *A Comparative Study of the Key Philosophical Concepts in Taoism and Sufism*, Tokyo, 1967.

Jambet, C., 'The Constitution of the Subject and Spiritual Practice', in T. J. Armstrong (ed.), *Michel Foucault: Philosopher*, Exeter: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992, pp. 233–248.

Kaufmann, W., *From Shakespeare to Existentialism*, New York: Doubleday, 1960.

Kenny, A. (ed.), *The Wittgenstein Reader*, London: Blackwell, 1994.

Kermode, F., *The Genesis of Secrecy*, London: Harvard University Press, 1979.

Kierkegaard, S., *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Alistair Hannay, London: Penguin, 1990.

Knysh, A. D., *Ibn ʻArabi in the Later Islamic Tradition: The Making of a Polemical Image in Medieval Islam*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1999.

Krell, D. (ed.), *Basic Writings: Martin Heidegger*, London: Routledge, 1978.

Kritzman, L. D. (ed.), *Michel Foucault: Interviews and Other Writings 1977–84*, London: Routledge, 1988.

Kundera, M., *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, London: Faber and Faber, 1988.

Leaman, O., *An Introduction to Medieval Islamic Philosophy*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

Loy, D., 'The Deconstruction of Buddhism', in H. Coward and T. Foshay (eds), *Derrida and Negative Theology*, pp. 227–254.

Midgley, N. (ed.), *Responsibilities of Deconstruction*, Coventry: Warwick Journal of Philosophy, 1997.

Nasr, S. H., *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines*, Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1964.

Nealon, J., 'The Discipline of Deconstruction', *PMLA* 107:5, 1992, pp. 1266–1279.

Netton, R., *Allah Transcendent: Studies in the Structure and Semiotics of Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Cosmology*, Richmond: Curzon Press, 1994.

Nietzsche, F., *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, Penguin: London, 1990.

Norris, C., *Derrida*, London: Fontana, 1987.

Notcutt, M., 'Ibn ʻArabi in Print' in S. Hirtenstein and M. Tiernan (eds), *Muhyiddin Ibn ʻArabi: A Commemorative Volume*, pp. 328–339.

Pamuk, O., *The Black Book*, trans. Güneli Gün, London: Faber and Faber, 1990.
Philosophy in the Middle Ages, A. Hyman, and J. Walsh (eds), Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1973.
Plotinus, *The Enneads*, trans. S. Mackenna, London: Penguin, 1991.
Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works, trans. C. Luibheid, London: SPCK, 1987.
Rahner, H., *Greek Myths and Christian Mystery*, trans. B. Battershaw, London: Burns and Oates, 1964.
Robbe-Grillet, A., *For A New Novel*, trans. R. Howard, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1965.
Rorty, R., 'Wittgenstein, Heidegger and The Reification of Language', in C. Guignon (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1983, pp. 337–357.
——, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
Routledge History of Islamic Philosophy, S. H. Nasr and O. Leaman (eds), London: Routledge and Kegan, 1996.
Sallis, J. (ed.), *Deconstruction and Philosophy*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.
Schimmel, A., *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975.
Scholem, G., *Kabbalah*, New York: Schocken Books, 1974.
Schürmann, R., *Meister Eckhart*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978.
Sells, Michael, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.
Tahrali, M., 'The Polarity of Expression in the Fusus al-Hikam', in S. Hirtenstein and M. Tiernan (eds), *Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi: A Commemorative Volume*, pp. 351–359.
Taylor, M. C., *ErRing: A Postmodern A/theology*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984.
——, 'nO nOt nO', in H. Coward and T. Foshay (eds), *Derrida and Negative Theology*, pp. 167–198.
Tillich, P., *The Shaking of the Foundations*, London: SCM Press, 1968.
Turner, D., *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
Vattimo, Gianni (ed.), *Religion*, London: Routledge, 2000.
Walshe, M. O'C., *Meister Eckhart: German Sermons and Treatises*, London: Watkins, 1979.
Watt, M. W., *Islamic Philosophy and Theology: An Extended Survey*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1965.
Wesling, D., 'Methodological Implications of the philosophy of Jacques Derrida for Comparative Literature', in J. J. Deeney (ed.), *Chinese–Western Comparative Literature: Theory and Strategy*, Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1980, pp. 79–104.

Wolfson, H. A., *The Philosophers of the Kalam*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976.

Wood, D., *Derrida and Difference*, Coventry: Parousia Press, 1988.

Yeh, M., 'Deconstructive Way: A Comparative Study of Derrida and Chuang Tzu', *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 10, 1983, pp. 95–126.

Index