



## The Barzakh of Ecstasy

### *İstiğrakın Berzahu*

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#### Abstract

This article examines the ways in which Syrian poet and artist Huda Naamani expresses the inexpressible of ecstasy. In a Sufi epic poem entitled *Kitāb al-wajd wa al-tawājjud* (The Book of Ecstasy and its Indicators), she acknowledges the impossibility of recording the ecstatic experience in words on a page. The only medium open to such a semantic articulation is *tawājjud* or the indicators, feeble linguistic signposts to the ineffable. Beyond *tawājjud* is the wordlessness of the experience of the silence of God. Invoking the Qur'anic term *barzakh*, a state in which two elements behave as one, she uses sound and color to draw the reader into an experience that cannot be described but only intuited and felt. In her modernist, mystical lyrics she creates the soundscape of *dhikr* rituals. The staccato repetitions and the arrangements of letters on the page compel the reader to recite and hear the sounds of the words beyond their lexical meanings. In so doing, the reader is invited to share in the creative act. Interspersed in the pages of this magical, confessional text are Huda's cloud paintings that document her ecstatic experience from explosion into the *barzakh* of ecstasy to *fanā'* or dissolution in the divine. Hers is an idiosyncratic imagining of the encounter with the divine.

**Keywords:** *barzakh*, *wajd*, ecstasy, *tawājjud*, indicators, cloud, *dhikr*, *fanā'*, *munājāt*, *tajallī*.

#### Özet

Bu makale, Suriyeli şair ve sanatçı Huda Naamani'nin, vecd halinin ifade edilemezliğine yönelik açıklamalarını incelemektedir. Naamani, Kitābü'l vecd ve t-tevâcüd (Vecd ve Belirtileri Kitabı) başlıklı sufi epik şiirde, vecd tecrübesini, bir sayfaya yazılan kelimelerle ifade etmenin olanaksızlığını doğrular. Böylesi bir semantik söyleyişe açık olan tek mecra, tarif edilmesi mümkün olmayana dair zayıf dilsel işaretler olan tevâcüd yahut belirtilerdir. Tevâcüdün ötesinde, ilâhî sükût tecrübesinin sessizliği bulunmaktadır. Yazar, iki unsurun bir gibi hareket ettiği bir durum olan Kur'ânî terim, berzaha başvurarak, okuyucuyu, tarifî mümkün olmayan ancak sezilip hissedilebilen bir tecrübeye dahil etmek için ses ve rengi kullanır. Naamani, modern, mistik güftelerinde, zikir âyinlerinin akustik ortamını yaratmaktadır. Kesik kesik tekrarlar ve harflerin sayfa üzerindeki düzenlemeleri, okuyucuyu, kelimelerin sözlük anlamlarının ötesinde yer alan seslerini duymaya ve okumaya mecbur bırakmaktadır. Böylelikle okuyucu da, bu yaratım sürecine dahil olmaya davet edilmektedir. Bu büyü, itiraf niteliğindeki metnin sayfaları arasına Huda'nın çizdiği bulut resimleri serpiştirilmiş vaziyettedir ki bunlar onun, vecd berzahında tecrübe ettiği "infilak"tan, fenâya veya ilâhî olanda zevâl bulmasına kadar olan süreçte yaşadığı vecd deneyimini belgelemektedir. Tüm bunlar, Huda'nın, ilâhî olan ile karşılaşmasında yaşadığı nevi şahsına münhasır tasavvurlardır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Berzah, vecd, istiğrak, tevâcüd, belirtiler, bulut, zikir, fenâ, münâcat, tecelli.

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In this article, I examine the ways in which Syrian poet and artist Huda Naamani expresses the inexpressible of ecstasy. In a Sufi epic poem entitled *Kitāb al-wajd wa al-tawājud* (The Book of Ecstasy and its Indicators), she acknowledges the impossibility of recording the ecstatic experience in words on a page. The only medium open to such a semantic articulation is *tawājud* or the indicators, feeble linguistic signposts to the ineffable. Beyond *tawājud* is the wordlessness of the experience of the silence of God. Invoking the Qur'ānic term *barzakh*, a state in which two elements behave as one, she uses sound and color to draw the reader into an experience that cannot be described but only intuited and felt. In her modernist, mystical lyrics she creates the soundscape of *dhikr* rituals. The staccato repetitions and the arrangements of letters on the page compel the reader to recite and hear the sounds of the words beyond their lexical meanings. In so doing, the reader is invited to share in the creative act. Interspersed in the pages of this magical, confessional text are Huda's cloud paintings that document her ecstatic experience from explosion into the *barzakh* of ecstasy to dissolution in the divine. Hers is a powerful though highly idiosyncratic imagining of the encounter with the divine.

Born into an elite Damascene family in 1930, Huda Naamani grew up in a religiously conservative environment. Claiming descent from the great saint of Damascus 'Abd al-Ghanī Nabulsī, she committed her writing to political and personal transformation. In 1968, she moved to Beirut, where she joined a vibrant community of writers from all over the Arab world. It was a short year after the defeat of Arab forces in the 1967 June war and Israel's second expropriation of Palestinians that galvanized Arab intellectuals. They decried art for art's sake and called for a heightened sense of political

commitment.

During the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), Huda published several volumes of politically inspired Sufi poetry, hoping that it might serve as the conscience of her society. Eight years after the war was declared over and in a context of continuing chaos, she published her idiosyncratic poem entitled *Kitāb al-wajd wa al-tawājud*, or *The Book of Ecstasy and its Indicators* in 1000 extravagantly bound volumes.<sup>1</sup> So personal and confessional was this poem that Huda did not want it widely available. She sent the book to a few friends she trusted would understand its political ambition and its mystical secrets. In her dedication to me, Huda characterized *The Book of Ecstasy and its Indicators* as "this dream of love and pain for a better world." Did she still hope that poetry might succeed where politics had failed by opening a window onto an uncertain future beyond "the violence of the age"?<sup>2</sup>

I begin this article with an examination of the title of *The Book of Ecstasy and its Indicators* for what it mentions and for what it omits and for the way it structures the *barzakh* of ecstasy. The first term is *wajd*/ecstasy; the second is *tawājud*/the indicators of ecstasy; and the third term from the same Arabic root *w j d*, and crucial in its absence from the title, is *wujūd*/Being and also God. *Wujud* is beyond language but always on the horizon of hope and longing. While Huda Naamani's definition of *wajd* is mainstream, her notion of *tawājud* is idiosyncratic. For her, *tawājud* refers to the *dalālāt*, or indicators of ecstasy. These indicators are all that can be articulated in words on a page that at best only point to the experience of ecstasy.<sup>3</sup>

1 The book has not yet been analyzed or even reviewed.

2 Naamani, *Kitāb al-wajd wa al-tawājud*, 73.

3 Annemarie Schimmel defines *tawājud* as the "attempt to reach an ecstatic state by outward means" (Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islām*, (Chapel

The title suggests that Huda will dwell on and in *wajd*, her experience of ecstasy in the moment of *tajallī*, or God's self-manifestation. But how can she do so in writing when she has claimed that *wajd* is "a state that cannot express itself"? Does she agree with the 10<sup>th</sup> century mystic Mansur al-Hallaj when he writes that the ecstatic vision of Being/God cannot be grasped, remembered, or even said? He writes:

*Ecstasy grasps nothing but a vanished  
indicator,  
and ecstasy vanishes when the vision comes.  
I delighted in ecstasy, though fearfully—  
sometimes it hides me, other times I'm  
present.  
He wipes out ecstasy for those who witness  
Him;  
he wipes out ecstasy, and all remembered  
meaning<sup>4</sup>*

Must the vision of Being, however poorly grasped in the moment of ecstasy, erase itself? Huda would protest that the experience of ecstasy is not wiped out but persists. Even when closest to apprehension of Being, when in *munājāt* or intimate heart conversation with God, attentive to the sound of His voice and the colors of His words, Huda remains suspended in the *barzakh*, the "*bayn al-bayn wal-bayn*" (between the between and the between)<sup>5</sup> or "*min bayn wa baynūna*" (from between and betweenness).<sup>6</sup> How can the experience of ecstasy at the moment of *tajallī*, or God's Self-Manifestation, that

Hill: UNC Press, 1975), 179), including singing and dancing. Rūzbihān Baqlī considers *tawājūd* without *wajd* to be an error that befalls wayfarers, who think they are experiencing ecstasy, but in his judgment, they are not (Baqlī, *The Unveiling of Secrets: Diary of a Sufi Master*, trans. Carl Ernst, (Chapel Hill: Parvardigar Press, 1997), 146).

4 Hallāj, *Poems of a Sufi Martyr*, (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2018), 159.

5 Naamani, *Kitāb al-wajd wa al-tawājūd*, 38.

6 Ibid. 66.

links and differentiates the physical from the metaphysical realms be expressed when it is inexpressible? Hinted at in the only possible writing, namely, the indicators whose words resonate across the wordlessness of the *barzakh* of ecstasy to the silence of Being, ecstasy is amplified in sound and color.

### Not the Third

What is the *barzakh*? One of the few words in the Arabic Qur'ān that is not Arabic, *barzakh* appears three times only. In its first iteration in Q 23: 100, the *barzakh* refers to the simultaneity of life, death, and the Day of Resurrection, and at the same time their absence. This contradictory existential state does not produce a third, as in the Christian notion of purgatory. The *barzakh* appears two more times in the Qur'ān with reference to two seas, "*the one potable and sweet, the other salty and bitter*" (Q 25: 53) that "*meet, yet between them a barzakh that they cannot overpass*" (Q 55: 19-20). There is no brackish water intervening between these two seas to dissolve their difference. In Arabic, the word for two seas is *bahrain*. The two seas mentioned in the Qur'ānic verses probably do refer to the island of Bahrain in the Arabian Gulf where the coming together yet utter separation of these two different waters produced precious pearls. Those pearls traded across the Indian Ocean as early as the third century BCE were the main source of the wealth and power of the Dilmun Empire. Ibn 'Arabī mentions the "secret to the special luster of Gulf pearls is probably derived from the unique mixture of sweet and salt water about the Bahrain."<sup>7</sup> The Egyptian artist Ahmed

7 Cited in cooke, *Tribal Modern: Branding New Nations in the Arab Gulf*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 185. The sweet water flows from the fossil aquifers deep in the Arabian Peninsula debouching into the Arab Gulf where it meets but does not dissolve into the salt water around Bahrain.

Mustafa has rendered this latter verse in a calligraphic artwork that repeats “*between them a barzakh that they cannot overpass*” in mirrored dancing reflection. The red and the green seas meet in the single diagonal *alif* linking and separating the repeated *la* (not). This artwork visualizes the *barzakh* that holds opposites without dissolving them into a third.



Another example of the *barzakh* in the Qur’ān, though without using the word, concerns sleep: “*God takes the souls of people at the hour of their death and of those asleep who are not dead. He keeps the souls of those for whom He has decreed death, and the others He sends back until an appointed time*” (Q 39: 42). Like the dream that is the place and time of the soul’s repose in God’s hands waiting to be returned to waking reality or to be absorbed into the greater reality of Being, the sleeper is awake and asleep and neither awake nor asleep.

*Barzakh* epistemology participates in millennia of debates about the non-contradiction of contradictions. While these philosophies and the place of *barzakh* epistemology in them do not concern me here, I need to distinguish my understanding and application of *barzakh* epistemology from two conceptualizations that bear it a family resemblance, G.W.F. Hegel’s *Aufhebung* and Jacques Derrida’s *khora*. Hegel’s speculative dialectic resolves

the opposites of thesis and antithesis in a synthesis, a third element that enables the opposites to be neither destroyed nor continued. For Derrida, the *khora* oscillates among opposing types of being, for example sensible/intelligible, visible/invisible, form/formlessness: “One cannot even say of it that it is neither this nor that or that it is, at the same time, both this and that. [It is] the anachronic in being, better, it is the anachronic of being. It anachronizes being.”<sup>8</sup> The *khora* involves a kind of thinking that exceeds polarity in a *triton genos*, “a place apart, a spacing that keeps an asymmetric rapport with everything ‘in it’.”<sup>9</sup> Both philosophical concepts grappling with contradictions call for a third kind, a separate place connecting but unevenly related to what it contains. Huda’s poem does not.

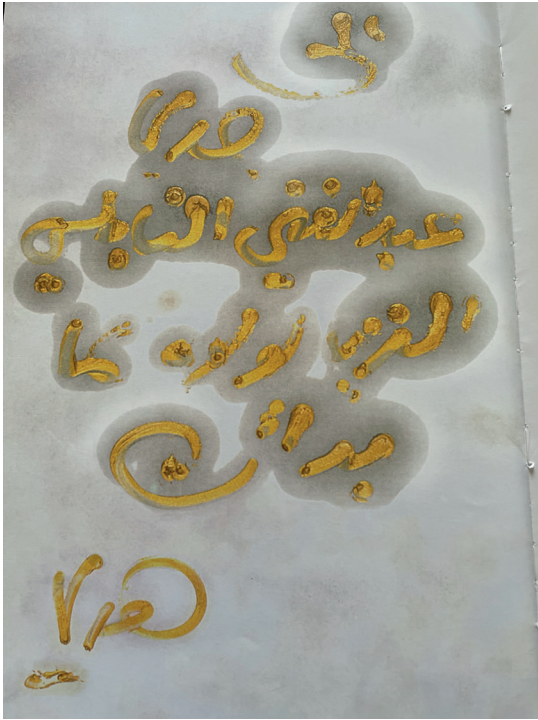
#### The Book of Ecstasy and the Dhikr Effect

Huda Naamani dedicated her *Book of Ecstasy and its Indicators* to “My grandfather ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nabulsī. Had it not been for him I would not have begun.” She painted this dedication in letters of gold. To do so, she ground gold leaf into gold dust that she mixed with turpentine oil. The oil spread out around the letters and impregnated the paper in such a way that it created a kind of nimbus. The cloud, a trope of her paintings that I discuss below, adheres to the letters while itself enclosed in the white space of apparent emptiness. By including her signature in bold gold letters at the bottom lefthand corner, Huda inserts herself into the image.

8 Derrida, *Khora*, (Paris: Galilee, 1993), 16, 19, 25.

9 Ibid. 20, 59, 92, 94.





In fact, ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nabulsī (1641-1731), the 17<sup>th</sup> century scholar and saint of Damascus, is more than her great-great grandfather, he is her mystic guide to saintliness. Like her, he lived to be 90; both were granted a long life of experiences and reflection. Before venturing into this text, it is instructive to read one of al-Nabulsī poems that Huda cites:

Whoever says to us: Where is Allah?  
 We say to him Where?  
 Whoever says to us: How is Allah?  
 We say to him How?  
 Whoever says to us: In which thing is He?  
 We say to him In  
 Whoever says to us: According to what is  
 He? We say to him According.<sup>10</sup>

With these words of her grandfather/guide, Huda has prepared us for our reading of this incantatory poem with its subtitle: “Before the light there is Something/After the light there is Something”. Do not ask Huda what that Something is since her reply, surely dictated to her by her grandfather ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nabulsī, will be “Something”. Any ques-

10 Naamani, *Kitāb al-wajd wa al-tawājjud*, 15.

tion we pose will be answered with another question.

Over 145 pages, Huda penned and painted her ecstatic experience through and beyond language to sound. Why sound? The poetic rhythm of words and phrases repeated in staccato form—*qul, qad, kun, huwa, anta, maut, al-haqq*—compel a reading that is heard and then chanted, whether aloud or in one’s head. On one page, *hādhā* (meaning “this”) is repeated nineteen times at the end of each line. The soft initial letter *ha’* echoes the first letter of the name Huda but importantly also the first letter of *huwa*, or He/God, and *huwallah*, He is God, the repeated phrase in most performances of *dhikr*.

The repetitions, beyond the intoxicating sounds they produce, may also be semantic. Again and again, Huda calls on God for help, inspiration, and guidance using derived Form X (*ista-*) verbs of entreaty to create consonance: *astanjiduka ‘āshiqatan* (I ask Your help as a lover), *astawhika ma’shūqatan* (I ask for Your inspiration as one enraptured), *astadilluka murtā`atan* (I ask for Your guidance awe-struck).<sup>11</sup> Then, she intensifies this rhythmic pattern by repeating four times the verb *astahlifuka* (I entreat You).<sup>12</sup> These prayers read like incantations, like *dhikr*. The inexpressible spiritual state is channeled and intuited in the suspension between sound and meaning indefinitely deferred. The “sonic surface or the structural harmony in a poem (...) contribute to a work’s aesthetic effect (...) subjective impressions are given verbal representation to supply the music for the performing imagery.”<sup>13</sup> The aesthetic effect recurs and organizes the impulse deep within this poem in such a way that the words

11 Naamani, *Kitāb al-wajd wa al-tawājjud*, 128.

12 Ibid. 129.

13 Keshavarz, *Reading Mystical Lyric: The Case of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī*, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), 102-105.

supply the music of *dhikr* that can then be performed. In sounding out what she reads even without understanding, the active reader is drawn toward an ecstatic state.

### Munājāt al-unūtha

The entire epic poem echoes with the sounds of her prolonged *munājāt al-unūtha* or feminine heart conversation with God.<sup>14</sup> Words of love and passion like *ishk*, *hubb*, *hawa*, *atayyam*, *shaghaf*, *walah*, *law`a*, and *daylam* (catastrophic love) indicate her enraptured state to which God responds. He addresses Huda by name or in the second person feminine singular.

(God) I said Huda  
 (Huda) Your name is the Truth, Truth,  
 Truth, Truth  
 (God) I said I am the Truth.<sup>15</sup>

This call and response recur, with Huda, saying “You are...” and God repeating what she has said as though to confirm the correctness of what she has just said. God assures her that in her praying and perishing, in the perfection of her trust, “it is not in your power to return.”<sup>16</sup> In the *barzakh* of ecstasy, she hears God’s words that tell her that her *fanā’* has become *baqā’*; she will never be as she had been before her ecstatic experience. Later, however, she wonders whether this experience, as in an echo chamber, had been real or imagined. Did God really speak to her? Or was she the one who had articulated the words, then heard their echoes in her chants? Like Hallāj over a millennium earlier, she asks God twice: “Am I or are You the Truth?”<sup>17</sup> Is hers a heresy of the kind that cost Hallāj his life? Or, as Fatemeh Keshavarz observes,

14 Naamani, *Kitāb al-wajd wa al-tawājjud*, 120.

15 Ibid. 48.

16 Ibid. 78.

17 Naamani, *Kitāb al-wajd wa al-tawājjud*, 80. See Hallāj, *Poems of a Sufi Martyr*, 167.

is it the power of poetry to overlook “canonic conventions and adopt unorthodox schemes.”<sup>18</sup>

The theme of her slaughter at God’s hands pervades this *munājāt al-unūtha*. Like Abraham’s dream about slaughtering his son, God dreams about slaughtering Huda, the “chosen *dhabiha* (sacrifice)”.<sup>19</sup>

(God) I see in the dream that I am slaughtering you (f.)!<sup>20</sup>

(Huda) You slaughter me! You stand beyond the *barzakh* sternly and You beckon...

Are you bringing me into presence tenderly so that I might be born in You for the duration of the dream?<sup>21</sup>

Far from being erased, the *barzakh* of ecstasy is recalled as a dream in which the mirrors of human and divine reflect each other infinitely frame within frame within frame in a mise en abyme. Then, from beyond the *barzakh* of ecstasy, God beckons her to death in a life wound in a shroud and drenched in blood.<sup>22</sup>

(Huda) I write You in blood / You write me in blood

You slaughter me and I acquiesce / You slaughter me, and I laugh...

You slaughter me, drive the stars toward me

You drive the night toward me.<sup>23</sup>

Her words betray her terror but also her submission in ecstasy. This death is not to be dreaded, God assures her, for in the *barzakh* of ecstasy, at the moment of *tajallī*, she is protected.

18 Keshavarz, *Reading Mystical Lyric*, 64.

19 Naamani, *Kitāb al-wajd wa al-tawājjud*, 131.

20 Huda paraphrases Abraham’s dream the night before he was to slaughter his son: “I saw in a dream that I was slaughtering you...” (Q 37: 102).

21 Naamani, *Kitāb al-wajd wa al-tawājjud*, 81.

22 Ibid. 110.

23 Ibid. 85-86.

(God) I protect you (f) I protect you (f)  
 From your pining away through me ...  
 If I am not called upon in my entirety  
 I would end!<sup>24</sup>

The relationship of human and divine is reciprocal: the immanent God needs Huda to call upon Him, for without her call He would end—at least, for her. As He had once asked Adam “Am I not your Lord?” (*Alastu bi-rabbikum*), God now asks Huda if she has experienced His presence:

(God) You saw me! Did you not see me?  
 You heard me! Did you not hear me?

These lines echo a *Hadith Qudsi*, where God describes Himself as a Hidden Treasure. Desiring to be known, He created the world that it might know Him, and He might see Himself in the mirror of creation. God’s call to Huda to acknowledge Him by affirming her vision and hearing recalls the Primordial Covenant.<sup>25</sup> Huda asserts that she has witnessed Him:

(Huda) I saw You when Your face flooded my face  
 I heard You when Your voice erased my voice...  
 Why, why do the mountains around me not crumble when You address me?  
 Why, why, why do the heavens not collapse above me when You address me?  
 I heard You I saw You while the universe slept.<sup>26</sup>

Like Adam before her, she alone while the universe slept saw and heard Him. But after Adam had witnessed God’s lordship the world had exploded into the *kun* (Be!) of creation. How is it, she asks God, that her witness of

24 Ibid. 103.

25 The “goal of the mystic is to return to the ‘Day of Alastu’ when only God existed” (Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islām*, 24).

26 Naamani, *Kitāb al-wajd wa al-tawājjud*, 94.

*tajallī* had not shattered the universe? Like all spiritual searchers, Huda longs for annihilation, and God promises that in a time to come she will exist through Him:

In a time to follow you will live through my living  
 You will dwell through my dwelling, see through my seeing  
 You will hear through my hearing, speak through my speaking ...  
 You will laugh through my laughing  
 Walk through my walking, sleep through my sleeping  
 Eat through my eating, drink through my drinking...<sup>27</sup>  
 When I saw your face (2pf) I drew you to me  
 I opened your breast  
 I removed doubt from your heart  
 I made it a throne for me!<sup>28</sup>

In the polished mirror of her heart that He had just opened, God removed doubt and dwelt there.<sup>29</sup> Since something so momentous has happened, Huda asks God (one might even say that she commands Him since she uses the imperative) to “descend upon me and erase my blame (...) Do not provide dwelling openly to anyone but me (...) no one has preceded me to You.”<sup>30</sup> Like Hallāj who was “jealous of one who knows my Lord”,<sup>31</sup> Huda does not want to share this experience with anyone.

27 Ibid. 99.

28 Ibid. 109. See Rūzbihān Baqlī: “You look by my glance, hear by My hearing, speak by My tongue, judge by My wisdom, love by My love.” (Baqlī, *The Unveiling of Secrets: Diary of a Sufi Master*, 85).

29 “Go sweep out the chamber of your heart  
 Make it ready to be the dwelling place of the Beloved  
 When you depart out, He will enter it.

In you, void of yourself, will He display His beauties (Mahmūd Shabistarī, *Gulshan-i-raz*, cited in Aradalan & Bakhtiar, *The Sense of Unity: The Sufi Tradition in Persian Architecture*, Chicago: U.P., 1973), 8).

30 Naamani, *Kitāb al-wajd wa al-tawājjud*, 104, 109.

31 Hallāj, *Poems of a Sufi Martyr*, 161.

This feminine heart conversation with God intensifies at the end of the poem when God instructs her “to persist in *ishk* (divine love), *hubb* (human love) is the *manzila* (waystation) *Allahumma innaki Allahumma inni*” meaning “Oh God it is you (feminine) Oh God it is I.”<sup>32</sup> Is someone other than God being addressed? How can the invoked God, *Allahumma*, be feminine unless it is Huda calling on the feminine in God or God calling on Huda? Or is this a call and response in the echo chamber of the *barzakh* of ecstasy where voices intermingle and behave as one? To understand it as such, I split the one line into four:

Oh God  
It is you (Huda)  
Oh God  
It is I (God)

In this double call and response, the feminine you is annihilated in the I. There is no longer woman or man but only God. At the height of *tajallī*, the experience of ecstasy, Huda recalls Rūmī’s “still point of ecstasy”:

... no more words  
Hear only the voice within, and without  
The first thing He said was:  
*We are beyond words*<sup>33</sup>

Returning from the silence of the *barzakh* of ecstasy to *tawājjud*, the only space of writing but where words indicate beyond themselves, she glorifies God who is all that is:

The spring of water and the spring of  
fire is You!  
  
Fierceness is You! Justice is You! You  
who slaughter me is You!  
  
The suns are You! The moons are You!

32 The first instance of *Allahumma* comes on p.70 after Allah has listed some of his innumerable sources: “*Allahumma hah*/from *Allahumma/Allahumma hah* You are from *hah*”—is this the *hah* of *huwa* or Huda?

33 Star and Shiva, *A Garden beyond Paradise: The Mystical Poetry of Rūmī*, (NY: Bantam Books, 1992), 132.

Paradise is You! Eternity is You!

The Real is You! The Real of Reality is  
You!

In her witness to God’s majesty, she evokes the Day of Alastu, the day before God said “*kun*”, the day before creation when there was nothing but He. Using the words available to her only in *tawājjud*, she writes Nagarjuna’s Paradox, “the paradox of expressibility [to say] the unsayable.”<sup>34</sup> But communication need not be linguistic only.<sup>35</sup>

### Cloud/Barzakh Paintings

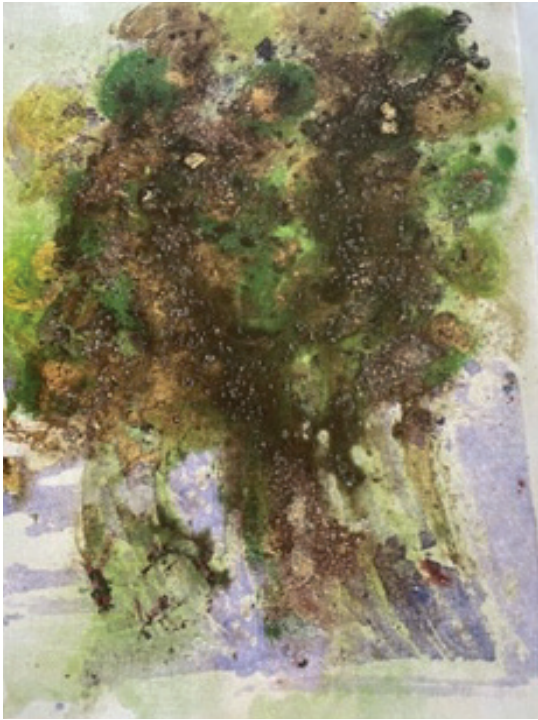
Huda Naamani said the unsayable in the incantatory sounds that the written words echo off the page and in the cloud paintings that illuminate her poem recording her experience of *tajallī*. Her cloud paintings, imagined while in ecstasy, exceed linguistic inexpressibility to the silence beyond silence of God. These paintings trace a progression from creation to annihilation, their purposeful use of color, to cite Nader Ardalan and Laleh Bakhtiar, “creates order where otherwise chaos might exist in the mind of the beholder.”<sup>36</sup>

34 Garfield and Priest, “Nagarjuna and the Limits of Thought”, *Philosophy East and West* 53, 1 (2003), 13, 18.

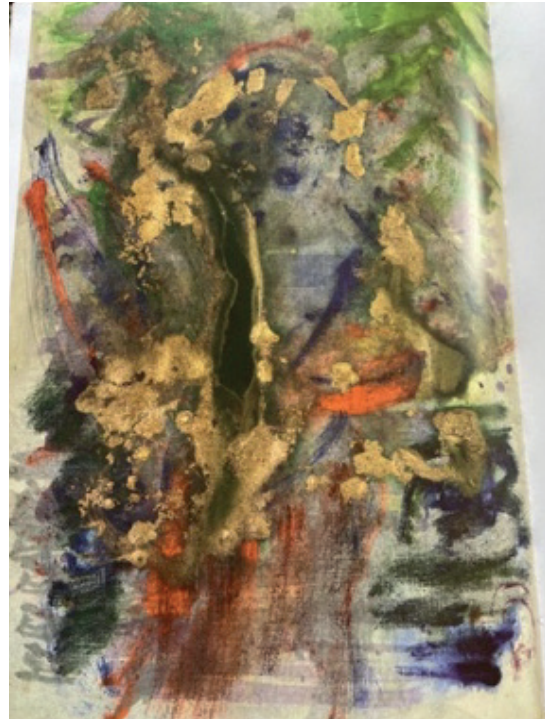
35 Amitav Ghosh writes, “we are constantly engaged in patterns of communication that are not linguistic... yet we don’t think of them as communicative acts. Why? Is it perhaps because the shadow of language interposes itself, preventing us from doing so?” Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, (Chicago: U.P., 2016).

36 Ardalan and Bakhtiar, *The Sense of Unity*, 50.





This first cloud painting in the book represents the Big Bang, of *kun*, or creation out of the Day of Alastu. This is the beginning of Huda's experience of the *barzakh* of ecstasy. The atoms of the cloud dust are in constant reciprocal construction through and in the cloud/*barzakh* to prevent the natural tendency toward dissolution and chaos. Browns of earthly materiality mix with the greens of serenity, of Moses' guide Khidr, of Muhammad. "The green is You" (89), Huda says to God. These colors explode out of the white of nothingness and the pale purple that figures more prominently later to indicate the highest form of consciousness. Huda does not include her name in this image of creation because in this morning of the Day of Alastu there is only God.



In the fourth cloud/ *barzakh* painting, Huda whirls in the cloud above her maroon signature. Huda whirled while praying, then writing, then chanting, then hearing her words and then painting. Each act of creativity inspired the others. Listen to the sound of Huda whirling:

*Zuhūr wa duwār*    *rukū` wa duwār*  
*Sujūd wa duwār*    *sumūd wa duwār*  
 Manifest and whirl    Kneel and whirl  
 Prostrate and whirl    Stand firm and whirl<sup>37</sup>

At the moment of *tajallī* flashes from the polished mirror in her heart glint gold that reflects back to the mirror of the divine, hinted at in the daubs of deep purple. God's mirror reflects His own image back from the polished mirror of enlightened humans' hearts and souls. Ibn 'Arabī writes: "Whenever the Real discloses Himself to you within the mirror of your heart, your mirror will make Him manifest to you (...) Place Him before you as the mirror within which you gaze upon

37 Naamani, *Kitāb al-wajd wa al-tawājjud*, 125.

your own form and the form of others.”<sup>38</sup> The polishing of the mirror in the hearts and souls of enlightened humans brings together divine and human: “the identity *between* human and divine is realized in the image in the polished mirror, and the identity of *both* human and divine is constituted within that image.”<sup>39</sup> The suggestion of long curly hair lit by ecstatic vision and the lapis of two eyes and the hint of a mouth bring Huda into the center of the painting above her maroon signature.



The next cloud/*barzakh* painting with its bright letters comes toward the middle of the book. Against the white of nothingness, gold and red letters and a large, brown *nun* dance. The image suggests *al-lawh al-mah-fūz*, the Preserved Tablet in heaven that Huda imagines when she writes about “Writing on the Tablet before the Tablet was created.”<sup>40</sup> She is painting the primordial writing

38 Ibn ‘Arabī, *Futūhāt*, III: 251.3 qtd in Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989) 352.

39 Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*, (Chicago: University Press, 1994), 88-89.

40 Naamani, *Kitāb al-wajd wa al-tawājjud*, 62.

before writing of this Tablet on which the Qur’ān was inscribed before its revelation to Muhammad through the Angel Gabriel. This writing preceded even the celestial words on the Preserved Tablet. The bent black line in the bottom right-hand corner suggests the first stroke of the *ha’* of her signature.



The last cloud/*barzakh* painting in this book is all purple shot through with gold, illustrating the verse of annihilation that ends the poem.

Oh God  
It is you (Huda)  
Oh God  
It is I (God)

The mirror of the enlightened human’s heart and soul reflects gold to and from the purple in the mirror of the divine. Addressing God toward the end of the poem, Huda writes that He is the purple mirage, the purple torment, the purple scream, the purple death.<sup>41</sup> During *tajallī* while in the *barzakh* of ecstasy, Huda and her apprehension of the divine behave as

41 Naamani, *Kitāb al-wajd wa al-tawājjud*, 129-132.



one in a *mise en abyme*, the infinite interplay of reflections framed inside each other, frame within frame within frame. Without a signature, Huda is no longer differentiated, but annihilated in the cloud/*barzakh*, the mirror of the divine.

There is a precarious disorientation in the *barzakh*/cloud paintings that echoes in the sounds of the written words Huda hears as God's words addressed to her. In the "*barzakh* of Your Voice, in the whirling of Your Voice, in the improvisation of Your Voice, I glorify You, bewildered."<sup>42</sup> Bewildered to find herself in a state that the Voice has engendered, she experiences the *barzakh* of ecstasy. The secret that stops the pen resounds in the *dhikr* echoes from her not-yet written script and shines out of her paintings. Huda writes what her chanting voice, whirling body and painting hand dictate. Three forms of creativity feed each other. In the appearance of colors on the canvas, movement in her body, and *dhikr* sounds that ring off the page, Huda articulates and records her intimations of the silence beyond silence of God.

The *barzakh* of ecstasy in this poem is the principle that holds and is held in the dynamic entropic interaction during *tajallī* and persists even when it has passed. It cannot be disentangled from the mutually reflecting mirrors of *tawājjud* and *wujūd*. In her idiosyncratic evocation of the experience of *tajallī*, Huda Naamani behaves as one with the divine and does not resolve the apparent contradiction with a third, separate element.<sup>43</sup>

42 Ibid. 53.

43 For example, Toshihiko Izutsu writes: "the Absolute and the world are *contradictorily* identical with one another [creating] the greatest *coincidentia oppositorum* observable in the structure of Being ... there is no relation of priority and posteriority between the two. Everything occurs at one and the same time." These contradictions are resolved through a "recipient," an "intermediary" element that receives God's trans-temporal self-manifestation. The intermediary

## Conclusion

In *The Book of Ecstasy and its Indicators*, Huda designs the architecture of the *barzakh* of ecstasy in such a way that human and divine behave as one.<sup>44</sup> Huda Naamani's non-contradiction of contradictions at the moment of *tajallī* elaborates a *barzakh* epistemology reminiscent of "particle entanglement" in quantum physics where two behave as one.<sup>45</sup>

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"third thing is neither existent nor non-existent. It is not the world, and yet it is the world. It is 'other', and yet it is not 'other'" (Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism: A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 89, 153, 157, 160, 162, 170, 175-191). Izutsu theorizes "triplicity" that connects the Creator with "the thing to be created. Creation is actualized only when the active triplicity perfectly coincided with the passive triplicity" (199). Izutsu concludes: "the whole world of Being is represented as a kind of ontological tension between Unity and Multiplicity" (473), and this ontological tension he illustrates in a triangle with *tajallī*, the Self-Manifestation, on top of a static, one-way arrow directed from *haqq*, the Truth/God, to *mumkinat*, possible beings. It is worth noting that the arrow that does not point back to the Truth denies the desire of the Hidden Treasure to be known: "since the Attributes become real only when they are externalized, it becomes necessary for the Absolute to see itself in the 'other'. Thus the 'other' is created in order that God might see Himself therein in externalized forms." (220). *Tajallī*, the Self-Manifestation is visibly the intermediary, the separate third that freezes the dynamic potential of thinking contradictions together and rescues the incomprehensibility of contradictions that exceed language. Further, it suggests that God and humans can exist without each other until joined by the third. And the notion that "the true nature of anything intermediary is impossible to describe adequately by language." (Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism*, 163).

44 Ibn 'Arabī writes, "since the Real is their mirror, their forms become manifest within a mirror (...) in accordance with the shape of the mirror. Nor are those forms identical with the mirror, since in its own essence the mirror does not possess the differentiation of that which becomes manifest from them" (Ibn 'Arabī, *Futūhāt*, II: 529.19 qtd in Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 322).

45 The three 2022 Nobel laureates in quantum physics proved that two particles, even when cosmically separated, can connect without need of a signal or a third to behave as one. Rob Picheta and Katie Hunt describe particle entanglement as a "phenomenon when two particles behave as one and affect each

Intertwining dancing, painting, praying, writing, and chanting in an endless loop, Huda builds a frame for the mysterious, mystical experience that cannot be expressed in letters on a page, only in *dhikr* echoes and in the colors of the cloud/*barzakh* paintings. *Tawājud* and *wujūd* mirror each other infinitely in “the ecstasy of what was never nor ever will be found.”<sup>46</sup> Unlike Hallaj for whom the vision of God wipes out the ecstatic experience and remembered meaning, Huda’s *barzakh* of ecstasy holds on to the experience in sound and color. Across and in a mystical state that cannot express itself, Huda has built a sentient structure that simultaneously connects and separates the expressible indicators and ineffable Being in an infinitely recurring sequence of reflections and echoes. Self-reflexive repetition constructs the vortex of a mise en abyme, a “structure of a super-impression without a base (...) creating a vertiginous feeling on the border of chaos (...) a series of mythical fictions encased in each other.”<sup>47</sup> Sound and color fill in the silences that stop the pen struggling to compose the poetic structure of Huda’s *barzakh* of ecstasy that stretches into infinity beyond language but not beyond apprehension. Hers is an extinction with multiple traces, a transcendence lingering in the shadows of existence.

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other, even though they can be at a vast distance to one another, on opposite sides of the planet or even the solar system.” <https://www.cnn.com/2022/10/04/europe/nobel-prize-physics-winner-2022-intl-scn>.

46 Naamani, *Kitāb al-wajd wa al-tawājud*, 142.

47 Derrida, *Khora*, 49, 65, 69, 96.

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