

Sufi Poetic Discourse and the Reproduction of Meaning: Readings in Ibn Arabi's Poem "Marīdat al-Ajfan"

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Abstract

This article explores the problematic nature of **receiving Sufi discourse** as a "transcendent" medium characterized by an excess of meaning and semantic gaps that provoke the reader. The research addresses a fundamental question regarding the strategies employed by the recipient to fill these voids, classifying readers into three levels (the General Public, the Elite, and the Elite of the Elite) based on their cognitive competence in Sufi lexicon and their subjective spiritual experience. In its application to the poem "**Maridat al-Ajfan**" (The One with Languid Eyelids), the study demonstrates how the "General Public" interpret it as a sensory ghazal poem mimicking ancient Arabic poetic heritage. In contrast, the "Elite" transcend the literal surface toward inner gnostic signs and symbols. As for the "Elite of the Elite" (with Ibn Arabi as a model), they reproduce meaning through "**Inspired Knowledge**" (al-ma'arif al-laduniyya) and deep semantic transformation, where terms like Layla, Zeinab, and "the

full-breasted maidens" (al-kawa'ib) are transformed into symbols of spiritual stations and divine truths. The article concludes that understanding this discourse fluctuates between literal literary reading and inner spiritual interpretation, emphasizing the role of the "reading contract" in guiding the interaction between the text and the recipient.

Keywords : Sufi Discourse – Reception - Interpretation - Reproduction of Meaning.

Introduction:

As is well known in the field of linguistics, discourse is constituted by linguistic sequences linked together for the purpose of communication. Discourse becomes *literary* when it is distinguished by a "surplus of meaning"—characterized by metaphorical activity—whereby its significations transcend mere utilitarian function. It is marked by a *poeticity* realized through this semantic surplus—a surplus that reaches its zenith when the literary discourse takes the form of poetry,

and particularly *mystical poetic discourse*. In such discourse, the message is "charged with a transcendent address; its creative value intensifies precisely as the sender succeeds in transmitting a sequence of discursive units whose signifieds transcend pure reality and rise above truth as it exists in its natural state."¹. This process creates gaps and voids that challenge the reader, rendering it impossible to fully circumscribe or exhaust the intentions and significations of the poetic discourse. Indeed, "even the author himself—reading his own text—will never be able to exhaust all the semantic possibilities latent within it."². When confronting mystical poetic discourse, we are met with questions—provoked by these gaps and zones of indeterminacy—that render the act of reading a difficult undertaking. Furthermore, the quest to grasp its meanings and formations becomes a daunting journey, fraught with the fissures and stumbling blocks that characterize mystical poetic discourse—a consequence of its employment of a language marked by semantic fragmentation. These questions probe the interplay between the "blackness" (the written text) and the "whiteness" (the voids and silences) of the mystical poetic discourse—a discourse that harmonizes the aesthetic beauty of expression with the gnostic depth of allusion. It is at this juncture that we pause, seeking to address the central problematic arising from the foregoing discussion: What is the nature of the questions that stir within the recipient while reading

mystical poetic discourse? What are the specific stimuli that prompt the reader to formulate these inquiries? And, finally, what strategy does the reader employ when engaging with this particular form of discourse?

Seeking answers to these questions can prove arduous in the face of the ambiguity that generally shrouds Sufi poetic discourse. Consequently, we have selected Ibn Arabi's poem *Marīdat al-Ajḡān* (She of the Ailing Eyelids) as a case study. We pause to examine its enigmatic concepts, its obscure symbols, its implicit allusions, and all the "white spaces" left for the reader to fill—contrasting them with the ink that darkened Ibn Arabi's pages as he settled down to inscribe the words of his poem upon them.

01- Sufi Discourse and the Recipient:

It is a well-established convention that once an author concludes a work—having imbued its words with specific connotations—the resulting discourse, when placed before a reader, may yield a variety of meanings and divergent significations. This phenomenon is often revealed through the very language employed; indeed, these meanings may remain latent, such that a reader—even one well-versed in the lexicon and the mechanics of word-interconnection—cannot fully circumscribe the discourse's meanings. For the language, in this context, serves less to guide the reader than to—paradoxically—obscure the path; true reading demands a level of consciousness that transcends the mere ability

to decipher linguistic units. We are here confronted with Sufi poetic discourse—a mode in which the poet has ventured into the "spiritual realm," carrying with him tools and imagery drawn from the material world to serve as his arsenal for depicting this new domain³. Standing in awe before this transition from the sensory world to the spiritual, the reader searches amidst the utterances, allusions, and signs for clues that might serve as a guide to that spiritual realm into which the Sufi poet has ascended. Did the Sufi poet, then, leave behind sufficient signposts to guide the reader toward that realm? Or did he, in the very act of producing his poetry, leave behind only voids and fissures? The Sufi poet is not concerned with precise definitions; rather, he constantly resorts to a strategy of "substitution"—replacing concrete details with evocative signs embedded within his linguistic formulations and thematic representations. It is here that the role of the recipient emerges: through the acts of perception and the mechanisms of comprehension, the reader undertakes the tasks of responding, interpreting, substituting, and filling the gaps.

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Thus, we find that the recipient and reader of Sufi poetic discourse must possess a specific set of competencies to attain the intended objectives envisioned by its producers—provided, of course, that the recipient agrees to the "reading contract" and accepts the conditions embedded within the discourse's opening or margins. This entails accepting the

specific language that the discourse imposes and frames; for this constitutes an implicit, indirect contract that decisively dictates the mode of reception. Should the reader discern this contract and accept its terms, he thereby submits to the interpretive framework pre-programmed for him—for, as scholars have noted, "the literary text pre-programs the manner of its reception by proposing to the reader a set of agreed-upon general rules, to which the reader commits himself to adhere and apply; this is what critics have termed the 'reading contract.'⁵ Conversely, anyone who fails to heed this contract and its stipulations risks falling into the predicament of interpretive disorientation; bewildered by the discourse, such a reader may grasp nothing more than its superficial meanings. In this regard, Ibn Arabi—having keenly recognized this dynamic—presented his own reading contract to the recipient at the very outset of his poetic collection, **Tarjuman al-Ashwaq** (The Interpreter of Desires), within the introductory treatise **Fath al-Dhakhā'ir wa-l-Aghlāq** (The Opening of Treasures and Locks). This presentation takes the form of a poem in which he enumerates the specific terminology he has employed and clarifies the intended significance behind each term; he concludes this poem with the following lines:

فاصرف الخاطر عن ظاهرها وأطلب الباطن حتى تعلموا

"So, turn your mind away from its outward form,

*And seek the inner essence, until you truly know."*⁶

Consequently, recognizing this "reading contract"—and adhering to it—is considered the foremost of competencies.

As for the second competence, it entails a thorough familiarity with Sufi language and the specific manner in which terminology is employed within it. Were it not for the inherent opacity of Sufi terminology—and the bewilderment in which the recipient might otherwise lose their way—many scholars dedicated to the field of lexicography would not have undertaken the task of compiling specialized dictionaries of Sufi terms. These works serve to elucidate the usage of such terminology within Sufi discourse in general, and within Sufi poetic discourse in particular. By way of illustration—though by no means exhaustively—we may cite: **The Dictionary of Sufi Terminology** (Muʿjam Iṣṭilāḥāt al-Ṣūfiyyah) by ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Qāshānī (edited by ʿAbd al-ʿĀl Shāhīn, published by Mukhtār Publishing and Distribution Foundation, Cairo); and **The Dictionary of Sufi Terms** (Qāmūs al-Iṣṭilāḥāt al-Ṣūfiyyah) by Ayman Ḥamdī (published by Dār Qubāʾ for Printing, Publishing, and Distribution, Cairo). The third competence is the presence of **subjective experience**—for, as Iser asserts, "the reader's subjective experience plays a participatory role in the construction of meaning"⁷. Based on this premise, the presence of subjective experience within the recipient serves to guide their understanding.

Thus, discourse is comprehended and interpreted in accordance with the recipient's

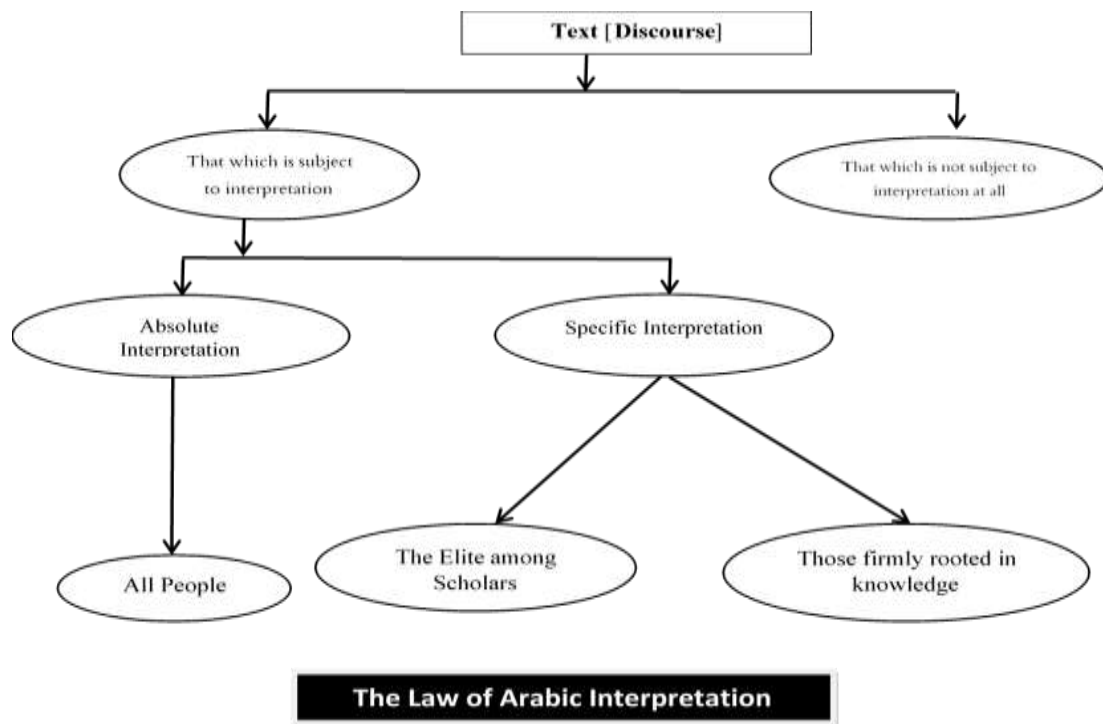
own subjective experience; this experience may lead them to engage merely with the **exoteric** aspect of the discourse and its literal language; yet, should that experience **ascend** to the level of the Sufi mystical experience, it will then guide the recipient toward the **esoteric** realm. In this regard, Ibn ʿArabī states: "Dive deep into the Ocean of the Essence, and you shall behold wonders that have never been revealed to the naked eye."⁸ Such is the experience requisite for a true understanding of Sufi discourse. What the Sufis term the "Science of States"—signifying that the recipient transitions from one spiritual state to another—is such that "there is no avenue to it other than through direct experience (**dhawq**). No rational person can define it, nor can one adduce any proof whatsoever to substantiate one's knowledge of it—much like the knowledge of the sweetness of honey, the bitterness of aloe, the pleasure of conjugal intimacy, the pangs of passionate love, the yearning of longing, and other such forms of knowledge. Indeed, it is impossible for anyone to truly know these matters unless they personally embody them and taste them firsthand."⁹ We find this same concept articulated in a somewhat simpler manner by Walter Stace, who observes: "The impossibility of conveying the mystical experience to a recipient who has never undergone such an experience is akin to the impossibility of conveying the nature of colors to a person born blind."¹⁰

As previously noted, there is a strong insistence on the necessity of the recipient possessing specific competencies and mechanisms in order to access the intended intentionality of Sufi poetic discourse—whether that intentionality is sought by its producers (the Sufis themselves) or by the literary establishment. This serves to confirm the existence of an audience of recipients and readers whose understanding extends only to the surface level of the discourse, drawn to it primarily by its aesthetic qualities.

02- Classifications of the Recipient of Sufi Discourse:

We recognize that discourse is segmented into distinct elements: a message directed from a

sender, transmitted via a communication channel carrying a specific code within a particular context, to a recipient. This framework aligns with Roman Jakobson’s model¹¹. Consequently, the recipient is regarded as a fundamental constituent of discourse. From this premise, we examine the recipient of Sufi discourse—whether viewed as a producer of the discourse’s meaning or as its interpreter—and observe that their categories vary according to several criteria. We find that Ibn Rushd "proceeded from a major binary division [of discourse] to arrive at a multi-relational schema, namely:¹²



This is precisely what Professor Ahmed Bouziane addressed, classifying the recipient of Sufi discourse based on their familiarity with fields of substitutive semantics. For Sufi

discourse possesses a specialized language in which signifiers diverge from their signifieds; consequently—in accordance with the Sufi lexicon—the signified of a given signifier is

subject to substitution. Furthermore, he introduced a second criterion for classifying the recipient: their epistemological sources. Specifically, the presence of a spiritual "state" (*ḥāl*) or divine "unveiling" (*kashf*) may

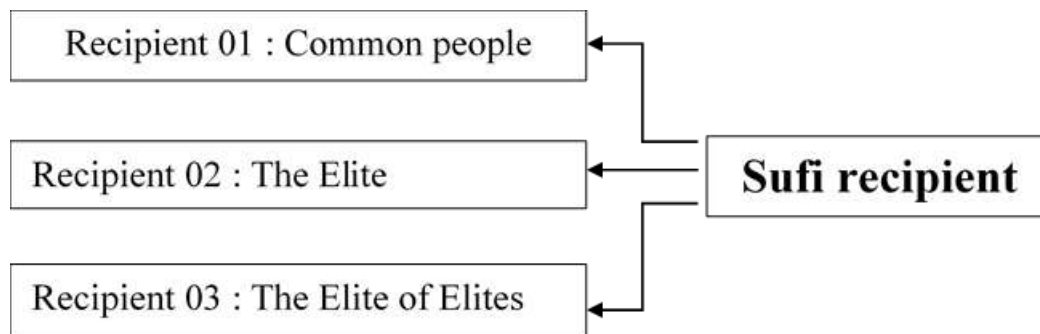


Diagram: Categories of Recipients of Sufi Discourse

Based on this diagram, we will examine various models of recipients of Ibn Arabi's poem **Marīdat al-Ajḡān** (She of the Ailing Eyelids), classifying them accordingly. We will also explore their readings of this poem as actual readers. In this context, the study posits—for each category—a specific type of actual recipient, defined according to the aforementioned criteria, which are enumerated as follows:

01-The Recipient at the Level of the Commoners (*al-ʿAwāmm*): We posit that this reader is unfamiliar with the Sufi lexicon of symbolic substitution and lacks personal experience of the Sufi path; nevertheless, we distinguish this reader from the **naïve** reader—one who is ignorant of the fundamental mechanisms of literary interpretation.

02-The Recipient at the Level of the Elite (*al-Khāṣṣah*): We posit that this reader

inspire the recipient to apprehend the intended semantic formations embedded within the discourse. He summarized this concept in the following diagram: ¹³

possesses a substantial body of knowledge regarding the Sufi lexicon of symbolic substitution, as well as a foundational Sufi frame of reference.

03-The Recipient at the Level of the Elite of the Elite (*Khāṣṣat al-Khāṣṣah*): We posit that this reader possesses a substantial body of knowledge regarding the Sufi lexicon and a foundational Sufi frame of reference, in addition to having access to sources of **ladunī** (divinely inspired, esoteric) knowledge.

03- Reconstructing Meaning According to the Varying Levels of the Recipient

In this study, we have selected a poem that Ibn Arabi inscribed in ink within his poetic collection, **Tarjuman al-Ashwaq** (The Interpreter of Desires)—a collection he subsequently supplemented with a commentary in a volume titled: **Fath al-*

Dhakhair wa al-Aghlaq: Tarjuman al-Ashwaq*.

We undertake a critical examination of our chosen poem, seeking to liberate it from the constraints of the linear chain of signifiers. We attempt to stir its dormant elements—those very aspects that provoked the reader to initiate "the process of extracting meaning from a state of latency into a state of manifestation; for reading is not a passive reception, but rather a creative interaction and a genuine engagement between the text and the reader."¹⁴ What elevates reading beyond such passivity—transforming it into that creative interaction—is the keen perception of points of indeterminacy, or what are termed "blanks." These blanks serve to stimulate the reader's intellect, for "they activate several functions within the recipient: foremost among them is the organization of the referential field for interacting projections, establishing specific relationships between the 'blanks' and the 'ink' within the text, as well as the function of linking textual segments to construct a referential field that encapsulates the specific moment of reading."¹⁵

First: Reconstructing the Meaning of the Poem from the Perspective of the Lay Reader:

Based on the foregoing, we observe that the recipient of Sufi discourse—specifically, one belonging to the general public—remains unaware of the transformations that have occurred within the Sufi lexicon. Consequently, in constructing meaning, such a

reader relies solely on the apparent surface of the discourse, drawing upon their own general knowledge and reading experiences to formulate and shape their understanding of the text. As stated: "The recipient cannot establish communication with the Sufi sender unless they possess the discourse's code and are knowledgeable of its attendant circumstances, nuances, and intellectual underpinnings... otherwise, the discourse remains merely a text bearing connotations alien to its true nature—such as those of wine or romantic love¹⁶. Thus, we find that the lay recipient of Sufi poetry—uninformed of its specific context and specialized vocabulary, and lacking any personal experience of the Sufi path at the moment of reception—engages with the text at its literal level. They accept and derive pleasure from it based on their own specific frames of reference, reading history, and subjective experiences. This process is facilitated by an "operational correlation between the elements of linguistic transmission and the functions thereof, as articulated by Jakobson; it also opens the door to objective certainties and subjective insights, thereby delineating poetic boundaries in a non-normative manner¹⁷. In doing so, the reader liberates themselves from the specific intentionality originally envisioned by the discourse's creator—a liberation necessitated by their status as a lay recipient. For, as the argument holds: "Once a text is detached from the intentionality of the subject who produced it, it is neither the duty nor within the capacity

or conceptual grasp of the reader—or readers—to adhere to the dictates of that absent intentionality"¹⁸.

Thus, the actual—or "implied"—reader¹⁹, upon encountering our poem, might interpret it as a love lyric (*ghazal*) that has consciously emulated the formal conventions of classical Arabic poetry—specifically, in its opening lament over the ruins (*al-talal*) and its use of the dual address. This is precisely what we observe in the poem's opening lines, where the poet declares:

مرضي من مريضة الأجفان علّاني بذكرها
علّاني

*My malady stems from one with ailing eyelids;
Soothe me with the mention of her name—oh,
soothe me!*²⁰

This interpretation, however, presupposes that the implied reader—acting as an actual reader—possesses a familiarity with the classical literary heritage; for instance, with verses such as those by Imru' al-Qays²¹:

عوجا على الطلل المحيل لعنّا نبكي الديار كما بكى ابن
خدام

*Turn aside toward the desolate ruins; perhaps
We may weep over these dwellings, just as Ibn
Khudhām once wept.*

Or his lines²²:

قفا نبكي من ذكرى حبيب ومنزل بسقط اللوى بين
الدخول فحومل

*Halt—let us weep in remembrance of a beloved
and a dwelling,*

كم رأت من كواعب حسان

*At Saqṭ al-Liwā, situated between al-Dakhūl
and Hawmal.*

Examples abound in the discourse of the dual—a grammatical form frequently employed to open ancient Arabic poems—for, as is held, "perceiving the meaning of a literary phenomenon is grounded in understanding and stems from the pure, subjective energy that encompasses it; this is what is termed *transcendence*... This transcendence invariably entails two structures: one fixed—which Ingarden terms *schematic*—serving as the foundation for understanding; and another variable—which he terms *material*—constituting the stylistic basis of the literary work. Thus, meaning—as Ingarden posits—is the product of the interaction between the structure of a literary work and the act of understanding."²³ Consequently, we observe that the actual reader—or the *implied reader*—at this level of reading may rely upon both the literary structure and the act of understanding to construct the meaning or intentionality of the poem. Indeed, the poem is found to have disrupted the "horizon of expectation" of this recipient, who repeatedly finds himself transported back to the traditional poetic stance of "standing by the ruins"—a recurrence evident at various points throughout the poem, such as in the fifth verse²⁴:

يا ظلولا برامة دارسات

O ruins at Rama—now faded and worn—

How many fair, youthful maidens have you beheld!

Then, in the tenth verse, he returns to this theme, saying²⁵:

وَقفا بي على الطلـول قليلا نـتـبـاكي بل أبـك مما دهاني

Halt with me awhile by these ruins,

That we may feign tears—nay, rather, let me weep for the woes that have befallen me.

In this transition between description and the return to standing amidst the ruins—the *atalal*—fissures emerge that compel the reader to confront certain interpretive questions: Are these ruins actual physical sites upon which the poet stood, or are they merely poetic conventions? Consequently, the reader is left to fill these voids based on their own intellectual predispositions and their accumulated cognitive and cultural capital. Thus, we observe a divergence in the answers provided to these questions—as well as to

وسـليـمي وزينـب وعـنان

*And recount to me the tale of Lubna,
Of Sulayma, of Zaynab, and of ‘Anan.*

Who, exactly, are Lubna, Sulayma, Zaynab, and ‘Anan? Should the reader discover—through the annals of literary history—that these names belong to figures celebrated as beloveds, immortalized within the verses of their impassioned lovers, he might then ask himself: Why were they not mentioned here alongside their respective suitors? It is at this juncture that he begins to bridge these gaps, drawing upon his own cultural reservoir as well as his personal psychological and social

others imposed by the discourse—among actual, hypothetical readers. For, as noted: "their responses to a literary text vary due to a diverse array of psychological, social, and cultural factors."²⁶ Driven by these very factors, the actual, hypothetical reader may proceed to construct a meaning for the poem—perceiving it as a reflection of their own subjective experience—thereby engaging with the text and beginning to answer the discursive questions generated by the "blanks" and indeterminate spaces left open within it, such as²⁷:

و اذـكـر لي حـديـث ولـبـنى

context. He may attribute this separation to the unfulfilled nature of those romances—perhaps because he himself has endured a similar experience, or because he remains, to this day, a lover himself. This line of inquiry may, in turn, lead him to pose further questions: Why were these specific names chosen over others? Was their selection merely arbitrary? Or does it stem from a deliberate, underlying intent? These and other questions may arise; yet, the attentive reader—the ideal recipient of these verses—is subsequently taken by surprise

when the beloved is, in fact, paired with her lover in the lines that follow²⁸:

وبسمي والمبتلى غيلان

And mourn me now with verses of Qays and Layla,

And with those of Mayy and the afflicted Ghaylan.

With this particular verse, the *implied reader's* reading strategy may well be disrupted; questions of comprehension—posed by the discourse itself—begin to crowd in upon him. Such questions include: Why did the poet group these two beloveds together? Was this selection arbitrary, or was there a specific intentionality behind it? Why did he

ونظام ومنبر بيان

*Long has been my yearning for a maiden—
Mistress of both prose and verse, and of the
pulpit of eloquence.*

She is the one described as "the Eloquent"—characterized by her mastery of both prose and verse, a commanding presence upon the pulpits, and a true mistress of rhetoric. Such is

من أجلى البلاد من أصبهان

"Of the daughters of kings, from the realm of Persia;

From the most noble of lands—from Isfahan."

Is she, then, truly eloquent and a composer of poetry? Or is this merely a matter of hyperbole in her praise? The answer affirms that she is,

من أجلى البلاد من أصبهان

وأنتها ضدها سليل يمانى

*[She is] one of the daughters of kings, hailing
from the realm of Persia—*

و اندباني بشعر قيس وليلى

invoke lamentation through these specific pairs? Is there a connection between the experiences of these two pairs and the poet's own subjective experience? Indeed, the questions are numerous and variable, shifting from one actual or implied reader to another—each according to their individual reading competence, as well as their intellectual and cultural background. Yet, the central question seeking an answer remains: Who, exactly, is this woman for whom his longing has grown so intense? As he states in Verse²⁹:

طال شوقي لطفلة ذات نثر

the question that stirs within the consciousness of the reader—the actual, implied audience—upon encountering the significance of this verbal sequence; this is particularly true given that the discourse continues to describe her in the following³⁰:

من بنات الملوك من دار فرس

indeed, both eloquent and a poet. This interpretation is further reinforced by her characterization as "she of the pulpit"—for pulpits are ascended only by those endowed with true eloquence.

And in his verse³¹:

من بنات الملوك من دار فرس

هي بنت العراق بنت إمامي

From the most noble of lands: Isfahan.

She is a daughter of Iraq, the daughter of my Imam;

Whereas I—her counterpart—am a scion of Yemen.

We find that the actual, implied reader of this discourse—upon encountering these two verses—is compelled to revisit the text's contexts and historical underpinnings to interrogate them: Who is the poet? Who is his Imam? This inquiry serves to bridge the gap left within the discourse—a void resulting from the silence and the deliberate omission of the beloved's name—by drawing upon the reader's existing knowledge base or through further research. Naturally, the figure left unmentioned—the one whose name remains unstated—is Nizam bint Abi Shu'ja' ibn Rustam al-Isfahani. Filling this void compels the recipient to re-examine the preceding

أَنْ ضِدِينَ قَطٍ يَجْتَمِعَانِ

Have you ever seen or heard, my lords?

Of two opposites ever coming together?

The poet then continues³³:

وبأحجار عقله قد رماني
عمرك الله كيف يلتقيان
وسهيل إذا ما استهل يماني

The poet who spoke before me lied—

And with the stones of his own intellect, he cast stones at me.

O you who would wed the Pleiades to Canopus—

verse: What is truly implied by describing her as a mistress of both prose and verse—and, specifically, by employing the name "Nizam" rather than other terms that might simply denote poetic prowess? Does this usage signify a direct reference to her by name—an attempt to break free from the traditional poetic convention among Arabs of avoiding the mention of a beloved's name to avert the ill omen of unrequited love? Or is she, in fact, genuinely accomplished in both poetry and prose? Furthermore, other questions may arise in the recipient's mind: Did a union ever take place between the poet and his beloved? Did he marry her? This line of inquiry is particularly pertinent given that the discourse itself explicitly raises the question of such a union—specifically in light of their seemingly antithetical natures—in the following lines³²:

هل رأيتم يا سادتي أو سمعتم

كذب الشاعر الذي قال قبلي
أيها المنكح الثريا سهيلا
هي شامية إذا استهلته

May God grant you long life! —how could the two ever meet?

For she is of the North whenever she rises

While Canopus, whenever he rises, is of the South.

Beyond the aesthetic appeal of the intertextual allusion employed here—which transports the recipient back to the era of Umayyad poetry and the verse of Umar ibn Abi Rabi'ah—it conveys a specific nuance to the recipient familiar with Umar's history and the philosophy underlying his addresses to his beloved: namely, that his discourse does **not** belong to the tradition of chaste love poetry. Alternatively, this nuance is grasped by one familiar with his romance involving Thurayya—a woman of surpassing beauty who ultimately married Suhayl. Thus, the poet's refutation of Umar ibn Abi Rabi'ah's assertion serves as an indication that union with his own beloved is indeed possible, notwithstanding the geographical—and consequently social—disparities that exist between them.

We conclude, therefore, that the "actual" or "ideal" reader approaches this poetic discourse at face value; they successfully construct its meaning and discern its underlying intentions, interpreting it as a work of chaste love poetry—a genre rooted in classical Arabic verse—in which the poet extols the virtues of his beloved, Nizam. Furthermore, they engage with the text as a literary artifact, attending to its surface features while interacting with it through a purely literary lens—one characterized by a sophisticated cultural sensibility and a rich reservoir of knowledge regarding the historical evolution of Arabic poetics.

Secondly: The Reconstruction of Meaning in the Poem According to the Level of the "Elite" Reader:

Based on the aforementioned Diagram³⁴—which categorizes the levels of reception for Sufi discourse according to specific reception competencies—the reader belonging to the "elite" category is deemed conversant with the Sufi lexicon, cognizant of the semantic shifts occurring within it, and fully aware of the symbols embedded throughout this discourse. Indeed, this perception of the meanings of the Sufi symbol constitutes a "synthesis of numerous readings and interpretations—a convergence of the gnostic, the ethical, the aesthetic, and the critical—augmented by individual tastes and subjective temperaments."³⁵ Within this reading strategy, the reader—or recipient—stands as an equal counterpart to the writer before the text. Consequently, the act of reading achieves a dynamic quality, generating meaning in a perpetually renewed fashion. This is accomplished through "the reader's intensified effort; for the contemplation of [the symbol] is not confined merely to its explicit form, but extends to deeper connotations—meanings he deduces from the unspoken elements or the 'white spaces' of the text."³⁶ These meanings may vary depending on whether the discourse is approached via its exoteric (outward) or esoteric (inward) dimension. To access these "white spaces" while reading such discourse—and assuming the recipient belongs to the **khāṣṣah** (the spiritual elite) and is oriented

toward the text's esoteric core—it is essential that he possess the requisite proficiency. We classify such a recipient as belonging to the *khāṣṣah*—that is, one who belongs to the Sufi circle—those for whom: "there exist specific codes of conduct and specialized terminologies circulating exclusively among them."³⁷ Furthermore, he must master the ability to discern the subtle *ishārāt* (allusions/signs) scattered throughout the text. These allusions function as a communicative channel distinct from the purely linguistic channel—even though they employ linguistic signifiers—thereby enabling one to "convey one's intended meaning to others without recourse to explicit verbal expression."³⁸ The recipient belonging to this elite category cannot access these allusions within the discourse without drawing upon his accumulated reading experiences as well as his command of the specialized Sufi lexicon. Thus, by directing his attention to these "white spaces" and zones of indeterminacy, the recipient acquires the interpretive mechanisms that enable him to "organize a referential field for interactive projections, and thereby construct a specific referential framework at the very moment of reading."³⁹ In doing so, his own Sufi experience is activated—an experience that constitutes one of the fundamental competencies required for the reception and comprehension of Sufi discourse.

In what follows, we attempt to trace various readings of the poem *Marīdat al-Ajfan* (She

of the Ailing Eyelids), proceeding from the premise that the readers belong to the intellectual elite.

The hypothetical reader of this caliber focuses on the originator of the discourse—that is, Ibn Arabi—viewing him specifically as a Sufi poet: *al-Shaykh al-Akbar* (The Greatest Master) and *al-Kibrīt al-Aḥmar* (The Red Sulphur), a veritable pole (*quṭb*) among the luminaries of Sufism. For such a reader, this specific context serves as a threshold—the very first clause, as it were, of the "reading contract." Consequently, it becomes incumbent upon him to summon forth the poet's Sufi experience and to turn, without hesitation, directly toward the inner depths of the discourse. He must awaken his associative lexical memory, identifying the semantic fields that structure the text in an effort to interpret them through the lens of their intended Sufi significance, relying throughout this interpretive process upon his own intellectual frame of reference. Thus, in the very first verse of the poem—in which Ibn Arabi states⁴⁰:

مرضي من مريضة الأجان عَـلَانِي بِذِكْرهَا
عَـلَانِي

My malady stems from the maiden with languid eyelids;

Soothe me—oh, soothe me—with the mention of her name.

At this level, the hypothetical actual recipient finds himself in confrontation with the implied reader of this discourse. This is because the

discourse revolves around the female figure—whom the recipient, drawing upon his own knowledge and reading experiences, perceives as a symbol pointing toward the meanings of wisdom and beauty. Indeed, "the symbolic context of the Sufi female diverges entirely from that which was established by amatory poetry—whether of the chaste ('Udhri) or erotic variety. She stands, rather, as a symbol of wisdom and love; her beauty is merely an indication of the absolute, eternal Beauty"⁴¹. Through this implied reader, the discourse begins to guide the hypothetical actual recipient—specifically one belonging to the elite ('al-Khawass')—toward its Sufi objectives: transcendent meanings that rise above the realm of the senses, even though the aggregate of signifiers appears, on the surface, to point toward the latter. The discourse thus associates the meanings of wisdom and Divine Love with *Dhikr* (remembrance), which is defined as: "the steadfast practice of intimate communion [with the Divine], supplication, and the embodiment of Divine attributes"⁴². Consequently, following this pattern of guidance, we find the text evoking concepts regarding the transmigration of souls and their ascent through the various stages of yearning and spiritual ecstasy (*Wajd*). For the *Hamam* (doves) and *Waraq* (pigeons) are birds—and birds—or rather, the entire semantic field of birds—represent souls in the Sufi tradition. We observe this semantic field encompassing the vocabulary of the second verse in the words of Ibn Arabi⁴³:

هفت الورق بالرياض وناحت
شجو هذا الحمام مما
شجاني

*The pigeons cooed in the meadows and wailed;
The sorrow of these doves echoed that which
grieved my own soul.*

Adopting this strategy—which relies on a "substitutive lexicon" shifting from conventional language to Sufi idiom, and which evokes the Sufi experience—the hypothetical actual recipient attempts to construct the poem's meanings by bridging its gaps and filling its voids. This occurs through an interactive, dialogic process—one generated by the questions that emerge in light of this substitutive lexicon. An example of this interactive, dialogic dynamic can be found in the words of Ibn Arabi⁴⁴:

بأبي ثم بي غزال ربيب
يرتعي بين أظلمي
في أمان
ما عليه من نارها فهو نور
هكذا النور
مخمد النيران

*May my father—nay, may I myself—be a
ransom*

*For a gazelle, tenderly reared, grazing
amidst... O Adhali, remain in safety;*

*For whatever touches you of her fire is, in
truth, light—*

*Such is the nature of light: it extinguishes the
flames.*

In these verses—wherein the speaker reflects upon the interplay of light and fire—he portrays light as a force capable of ascending

to the realm of spirits. This interpretation is derived from the speaker's narrative cues within a depiction that casts the heart as a prisoner of the body. Through this imagery, the reader is implicitly guided to recognize that—despite the heart residing in a place of safety, shelter, and care—the ribs serve as prison bars, standing as a barrier between the heart and its freedom. Such is the plight of the prisoner confined behind bars: though he lacks nothing in terms of food and drink, and remains shielded from external harm, this very state of confinement leaves the heart scorched by the fires of existence. Trapped within the "phantoms"—the physical bodies—it yearns for annihilation, seeking release through weeping. This is the significance grasped by the text's implicit reader: weeping here signifies a plea for release, while the motif of the *talal* (ruins) serves as a metaphor for that which has perished and faded away—precisely the state of annihilation for which the speaker yearns.

The discourse guides the recipient toward a state of ecstasy—the rapture of passionate love and infatuation—by evoking the tales of lovers and the torment they endured. This suffering stemmed from separation and the intense anguish they experienced—the pangs of longing, yearning, and nostalgia for their beloveds. Indeed, the mere mention of their beloveds' names left behind a rift and a void; a sentiment we find echoed in the words of Ibn Arabi⁴⁵:

وَأذْكَرُ لِي حَدِيثَ وَلْبَنِي وَسُلَيْمَى وَزَيْنَبَ
وَعَنَّانَ

*And speak to me of the tale of Lubna,
Of Sulayma, of Zaynab, and of 'Anan.*

By filling in the textual gaps and mending the narrative fissures—by recalling the stories in their entirety and giving voice to their poetry—the recipient engages in an act akin to the tale of *Al-Majnun*. When he asked Layla's husband, "Did you ever taste the sweetness of her lips?" and received an affirmative reply, *Al-Majnun* instinctively grasped a burning ember; oblivious to the pain, he held it until he lost consciousness. He transcended his physical form, enduring the agony—or rather, ceasing to perceive it altogether—as his hands became one with the glowing coals. Had the body not possessed its inherent limitations, he would never have uttered a single complaint regarding the fire's torment. This serves as a profound intimation to the "ideal reader" we have posited—guiding them toward a state of spiritual union and the highest degrees of *fana* (self-annihilation), wherein they transcend the boundaries of the rational, the perceptible, and the tangible. This transcendence is achieved through the immersion in one's own subjective mystical experience, facilitated by the very articulations of the discourse that lead the reader to such a state—most notably in the words of Ibn Arabi⁴⁶:

هل رأيتم يا سادتي أو سمعتم
يجمعان
لرأيتم ما يذهب العقل فيه
يمن والعراق
مجمعان

*Have you ever seen, O my masters—or ever
heard it told—*

*That two opposing forces could ever truly
meet?*

*Here, you would witness a sight that utterly
beguiles the mind:*

*Yemen and Iraq, brought together in a single
place.*

In the realm of the senses, it is an impossibility for Yemen and Iraq to converge—separated as they are by vast cities and lands. How, then, could these two nations ever meet? Would the very earth be folded up for such a purpose? Such a notion is utterly inconceivable within the world of rational thought. Therefore—as the *implied reader* suggests to the *actual reader*—you must venture into the realm of the Unseen and of Symbolic Signification to discover that, within the world of Gnosis (*‘Irfan*), even opposites may indeed converge. This understanding is further reinforced by the words of Ibn ‘Arabi⁴⁷:

كذب الشاعر الذي قال قبلي
وبأحجار عقله قد
رماني

*"False was the poet who spoke before me,
And who cast stones at me using the very
stones of his intellect."*

Upon interrogating that which the text leaves unstated, we discern that the poet in question is ‘Umar ibn Abi Rabi‘ah—the celebrated bard of sensual love poetry. Thus, Ibn ‘Arabi explicitly refutes his visions and his sensual orientation, thereby affirming a definitive turn toward the spiritual realm.

Thus, the actual recipient’s engagement with this discourse—imbued with the presence of a subjective mystical experience—guides him toward those divine realms. These interactions are reinforced by responding to the discourse’s inquiries, filling its gaps and voids, bringing to light that which remains unspoken, and following the directives of the implied reader—the foremost step of which is recognizing and assenting to the reading contract proposed by the discourse itself.

Third: The Reproduction of Meaning in the Poem According to the Reader of the "Elite of the Elite" Category.

We observe that the reading strategy for this category relies—in addition to the elements utilized by the previously mentioned categories of readers—upon *Ladunni* knowledge; that is, divine inspirations employed to comprehend the text and attain the intended purpose envisioned by its creator. Consequently, one cannot posit an *actual* reader in the conventional sense, for such knowledge is a divine gift bestowed exclusively upon those belonging to the category of the "Elite of the Elite." In order to trace the contours of such readings, we found

precisely what we sought in Ibn Arabi's own reading of his poem, for he stands as the ultimate authority on *Ladunni* sciences and luminous knowledge. Drawing upon our examination of his work *Fath al-Dhakha'ir wa al-Aghlaq* (The Opening of Treasures and Locks)—specifically his commentary on *Tarjuman al-Ashwaq* (The Interpreter of Desires)—we turn to his marginal notes as he proceeds to interpret the poem *Maridat al-Ajfan* (She of the Ailing Eyelids):

Anyone who traces Ibn Arabi's reading of the poem *Maridat al-Ajfan* will discover that he resurrects his verse through the medium of Gnostic language, situating it within a world that is quintessentially spiritual. He achieves this resurrection—following an initial act of "explosion" wherein he deconstructs the poem and brings its existence within its *primary* world to a close—by meticulously tracing the map of symbols embedded within the text and detonating their semantic significations. He breathes new life into the poem, emerging from the very fragmentation that results from this explosion of symbols and the deep immersion required to trace their meanings. This process serves to deepen the textual lacunae inherent in Gnostic discourse and to expand the zones of indeterminacy within it. Indeed, this transformative shift—which suddenly overtakes the discourse and lays bare the vast chasm separating the poetic utterance from the interpretive act—is the direct product of the complex interplay between the discourse (in its manifest linguistic form), the Sufi

mystical experience, the ideological presence, and, finally, those very *Ladunni* sciences and divine inspirations.

We have arrived at this outcome by adhering to a strategy rooted in semantic icons—specifically, by vertically extracting from them whatever aligns with the Sufi mode of understanding. This extraction is guided by the resonance inherent in the linguistic substratum, by tracing the usage of specific terms across other contexts within the Quranic discourse and Prophetic Hadith, and even by examining their application in other forms of traditional Arabic lore. Ultimately, these elements are employed in accordance with the interpreter's own philosophical frameworks, Sufi insights, or—alternatively—as dictated by their divinely bestowed knowledge.

However, this reading by Ibn Arabi remained captive to the poetic discourse itself; indeed, his interpretation amounted to little more than a tracing of the directives embedded within the discourse's topography—specifically, the structural junctures that constitute it. In doing so, he pursued a strategy of filling voids, bridging gaps, and answering the very questions that the discourse poses during the act of reading at this particular level.

In the table below, we trace the relationships obtaining between certain textual icons—or specific discursive utterances—and the underlying meaning upon which Ibn Arabi grounded his interpretive discourse of the poem.

Number	Location of the Utterance	The Utterance	Path of Semantic Transformations	The resulting meaning focus of reading
01	Verse 01	The disease	Love is an attachment of the heart, and this attachment results in a constant inclination, and the latter is considered a disease.	Love
02	Verse 05	Kawaib	The term "ka'ib" refers to a woman whose breasts have recently developed, and breasts are a source of milk, and the milk that the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) chose is based on instinct.	The instinct
03	Verse 06	Ghazal	The term *ghazal* is derived from *al-ghazl*—meaning comparison, amorous verse, and love.	The Beloved Manifest
04	Verse 13	Zainab	Zaynab was one of the daughters of the Prophet (peace be upon him).	The station of prophethood
05	Verse 15	Layla	The name Layla is derived from *al-Layl* (the Night)—the very time of the *Mi'raj* and *Isra'* (the Prophet's Ascension and Night Journey), during which the Messenger ﷺ received divine ordinances in the celestial heavens.	A station among the Sufi stations for receiving Divine subtleties.

We observe that Ibn Arabi delves into the utterance and traces its meanings, subtly manipulating the nuances of language in the first verse⁴⁸:

مرضني من مريضة الأجنان علاني بذكرها علاني

My illness is from the one with the ailing eyelids,

She afflicts me with her memory, she afflicts me.

This is what we find in his explanation, where he says: “A kind of manifestation is the heart’s attachment at that moment, and thus love and a lasting inclination arose, and this is the praiseworthy illness.”⁴⁹. Here we find him relying on the usage of the utterance, moving from one connotation to another, and so on, delving into the depths of language to reveal the intended meaning of that word. We find this repeated in several places, as we illustrated

in the table above. However, he did not always employ the same approach to arrive at his desired conclusion. Sometimes he traces the verbal derivation, as in the word “gazelle,” where he says: “The beloved is referred to as a gazelle for two reasons: one is its derivation from ‘ghazal,’ which means simile, love, and affection; the other is the wild animal that frequents the desert.”⁵⁰. And before that, in the fifth verse, he relied on the fact that “maidens” (referring to the maidens) is an allusion to innate nature, as he traced the origin The naming, and he would sometimes slip between the refrain to the refrain of the refrain, and at other times to a historical event, an event for

the Messenger, may God bless him and grant him peace - the incident of Isra and Mi'raj - related to the refrain of the refrain, and that is by saying, "And the maiden whose breasts became like the ankle, and it is the beginning of the young girl's youth, and the reference to the breast of this wisdom is because it carries the milk that is the natural drink of the Messenger of God, may God bless him and grant him peace, on the night of his ascension."⁵¹

These are some examples that illustrate those semantic shifts and the methodology used to analyze utterances within the framework of discourse sequences.

But this is a difficult matter, and attaining it requires considerable experience and a strong presence of mystical experience. It is virtually impossible to proceed backward in tracing the utterance, as the reader, at each transition, finds themselves confronted with numerous implications and connotations for each utterance. Which should they choose? Let's take the utterance of "the maidens" as an example. The connotation Ibn Arabi chose is the source of milk from her. However, the connotations of this utterance are numerous, including: the freshness of youth, arousal, femininity, a transitional stage between childhood and youth, etc. An error in choosing at any stage of tracing the meanings of the utterance or its connotations leads us to a new understanding. Faced with this bewilderment that may afflict the reader, we can only

attribute Ibn Arabi's choice to those divinely inspired knowledges or subtle insights. This relational cycle between the utterance and its meaning, which Ibn Arabi's reading of the discourse's axes reached, led to a deepening of the gaps and a widening of the silences in the poetic discourse, which he then filled with what his philosophical background dictated. His mystical experience, as well as his divine inspirations and intuitive knowledge, an example of which is his reading of the following verse⁵²:

واندباني بشعر قيس وليلى
وبسمي والمبتلى
غيلان

And I lament with the poetry of Qays and Layla,

And with Mayy and the afflicted Ghaylan

Ibn Arabi's reading of this verse first established the semantic shifts of the words, transforming them into vertical axes upon which understanding rests: Qays: the dam, the male; Layla: the time of the Ascension; Ghaylan: he is Dhu al-Rummah, and al-Rummah is the old rope, and also a thorny tree. He then proceeded to fill those gaps in the horizontal axis of understanding, bridging the divides between them, based on the results of the semantic shifts of these axes. These divides deepened after the semantic shift, as we find that the verse speaks of hardship, the night, the old rope, the thorny tree, and May: the clumsy one who does not do her work well.

We find that the semantic connections linking these meanings are almost nonexistent. The question of understanding then becomes: what is the relationship between all these concepts? We see that Ibn Arabi interacts with the discourse to produce a new discourse, fragmented in meaning, in which he draws upon all his interpretive capabilities. We find this in his words: "And lament me with the poetry of lovers like me in the realm of sensation and witnessing, like Qays, who is intensity and the pen of creation. So draw attention to it through Qays, for Qays means intensity in the language, and Qays also means remembrance. And Layla is from the night, which is the time of the ascension, the night journey, and the divine descents from the Throne of the Merciful with hidden graces to the heaven closest to the longing heart. And May is the clumsy one who does not do well, and whoever does not do well, the doer is someone else. 'And Allah created you and what you do' [As-Saffat: 96], meaning what appears through your hands of deeds that are created by God Almighty. And Ghaylan is Dhu al-Rummah, and al-Rummah is the old rope, and the rope is the means that we are required to hold fast to." And the reliance and attribution of it to the Ancient One is a certain matter, for it is the rope of God, and He is the Ancient, the Eternal. And he mentioned the ghouls: which is a thorny tree that clings to whoever approaches it and holds him from moving away from it out of love for it and preference for it. And in it is mercy that this tree is specific

to the deserts where there is no vegetation, which are deadly with the strength of their sand and heat, so there is no shade for the traveler except these trees, the trees of the mother of the ghouls, so he finds them in that place as mercy, so he throws his garment over them and takes shelter, and they hold him with their thorns so that the winds do not pass over him and he is exposed to the heat of the sun. Likewise, what he finds of the hidden divine favors in the station of purifying monotheism and sanctifying the sanctification, so he made the appropriate analogy from this aspect. This is why he asked them to mention to him these people of lovers so that he may combine the state of love with the knowledge of the realities of these mentioned people, because they were lovers."⁵³

Following this interpretation, which the poetic discourse did not explicitly state, either in its outward form or after the semantic shifts established by Ibn Arabi, reveals a profound interaction between the vertical and horizontal axes of the discourse in its second phase. This interaction bridged all gaps and filled all voids, responding to the resulting ambiguity and clarifying the obscurity that had befallen the discourse. This is evident in his invocation of the story of the Isra and Mi'raj (Night Journey and Ascension) and its utilization to produce a new understanding. It is also apparent in the simile inspired by his personal experience, whether lived or acquired through knowledge, in depicting the Umm Ghaylan tree and the deserts with the traveler passing through them

in the scorching heat, projecting this image onto a similar mystical state. We observe this subtle manipulation of language, which makes it the axis of understanding, from which unexpected questions are discerned. He answers these questions based on Sufi philosophy, and again from the presence of Sufi experience. However, in many instances, we attribute the matter to his divine knowledge and esoteric sciences.

Fourth: Academic Readings and Commentaries on Ibn Arabi's Poetry.

In this section, we examine the readings of some who have engaged with Ibn Arabi's poetic discourse. We observe that these readings fall outside the classification upon which we based our previous analyses. This group of readers combines academic expertise in reading literary discourse in general, and Sufi poetry in particular, with knowledge of Sufi terminology. We do not know whether their personal experiences influenced these readings or whether their approach was objective and impartial.

- Asma Khawaldiya: [Ibn Arabi justifies his composition of his Diwan "Tarjuman al-Ashwaq" with an allegorical justification, saying: "I explained what I composed in Mecca the Honored, from the love verses... I allude to divine knowledge, heavenly lights, spiritual secrets, intellectual sciences, and legal warnings, and I made the expression of that in the language of love and flirtation so that souls would fall in love with these expressions, and

the motives would be available to listen to them." We would not have doubted the truth of this claim with regard to Tarjuman al-Ashwaq were it not for the fact that we found many of his poems more in line with the direct love meaning, and when we interpret them with a Sufi interpretation, we would have been arbitrary with the meaning, while there are other poems that seem more in line with the Sufi interpretation than with the direct love, as there is a third category of poems in which the two directions are almost balanced, as they are consistent with the direct love as they are with the Sufi interpretations to the same degree.]⁵⁴

This reading suggests a call to avoid certain arbitrary interpretations when reading poetic discourse, such as labeling it Sufi simply because its author belongs to this school of thought. It also acknowledges the spiritual dimension and Sufi interpretation of poetry, whether the Sufi vision is explicitly present or merely reflects the apparent meaning of the poetic discourse.

- German Orientalist: Weidens Stefan: "Read Sufi poems like any other literary works and let them speak for themselves." He criticizes many translators for interpreting Ibn Arabi's poems from a Sufi perspective, arguing that this has led his poems to appear, even now, primarily under the light of Islami spirituality.⁵⁵

This perspective from the German scholar Weidens Stefan, who translated Ibn Arabi's "Tarjuman al-Ashwaq" into German,

advocates for granting the reader freedom in how they interpret Sufi poetic discourse, and for refraining from condemning it by removing the aura of sanctity surrounding it due to its constant association with Islamic spirituality.

Conclusion:

After examining some of the theoretical aspects of Sufi discourse and its reception, as well as the various readings of Ibn Arabi's poem "The Sick Eyelids," this study summarizes the above in the following points:

- Sufi poetic discourse is a flexible discourse characterized by fluidity and semantic shifts.
- Receiving Sufi poetic discourse requires a specific competence from the recipient to achieve its intended meaning. This competence includes, firstly, knowledge of the Sufi lexicon; secondly, a presence of Sufi experience; and thirdly, esoteric knowledge and divine insights, which constitute a source of knowledge for Sufis and upon which they base their readings.
- Recipients of Sufi discourse are classified according to these competencies they possess, resulting in three categories: the general public, the elite, and the elite of the elite. - Semantic shifts in Sufi discourse depend on the Sufi lexicon, as well as the appropriation of utterances in other contexts, or one of its implications, thus taking the symbol to what must align with the two axes of the discourse.
- While Sufi discourse has been characterized by secrecy and ambiguity, there are renewed

calls to make it an open discourse. - During our research, we found several uses of Sufi discourse on social media and in love songs. This allows for research and raising questions about this phenomenon, whether in terms of its reception and interactions as a renewed digital literature, or as a Sufi discourse in its sacred form.

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Footnotes:

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- 17 Bushra Musa Saleh, *Reception Theory: Principles and Applications*, Arab Cultural Center, Casablanca, Morocco, 1st ed., p. 27
- 18 Umberto Eco, *Interpretation Between Semiotics and Deconstruction*, p. 124
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- 30 *The Diwan*, p. 106
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- 32 *The Diwan*, p. 107
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- 34 Diagram: Categories of Recipients of Sufi Discourse as previously described
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