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“IF ALL THE TREES ON EARTH WERE PENS...”

(QUR’ÂN 31:27)

In the *Futûhât*, Ibn ‘Arabî casually recounts an anecdote that might conceivably serve as an exergue to the remarks that follow. The hero of the anecdote is Mâlik, the imam founder of one of the four principle schools of Sunni jurisprudence.

Mâlik b. Anas was asked: “What is your opinion about the lawfulness of the flesh of the water pig” [*khinzîr al-mâ*: an expression that refers to cetaceans in general, but dolphins in particular]? He replied [*fa-aftâ*: a judicial consultation, not a simple exchange of words] that it was illegal. An objection was made: “Does this animal not belong to the family of marine animals [literally, “fish,” whose flesh is lawful]?” “Certainly,” he said, “but you called it a pig [*khinzîr*].”¹

Some might be tempted to class this ambiguous cetacean among the taxonomic fantasies of a maniacal casuistry. But Ibn ‘Arabî’s mention of it on two different occasions shows it to be something completely different for him. What is in question here is the authority of the name (*hukm al-ism*) and the secret of naming (*tasmiya*), which leads us to the very heart of Ibn ‘Arabî’s hermeneutics.

Accusations like atheism (*zandaqa*) and libertinism (*ibâha*, in both its philosophical sense and in common usage) are commonplace in heresiology. A close look at the writings hostile to the Shaykh al-Akbar from the thirteenth century up to the present day, however, shows the regular appearance of another accusation: *sac-rilege*. The sacrilege in question is *tahrîf ma’âni l-qur’ân*, the “twisting of the meaning of the Qur’ân.” The case is seen as early as Ibn Taymiyya, who is practically the founder of “anti-Akbarian polemics” and who supplies the structure for later diatribes.² It is also present in Husayn b. al-Ahdâl’s (d. 1451) *Kashf al-ghitâ*³ and in the *Tanbîh al-ghabî*⁴ of Burhân al-dîn al-Biqâ’î (d. 1475). The

case is again enthusiastically taken up by Sakhâwî (d. 1497), who constructs a catalogue of previous condemnations in his voluminous, unedited *Al-qawl al-munbî*.⁵ And, whether they accuse him or praise him, the works of modern university scholars dedicated to Ibn 'Arabî generally echo the opinions of Muslim writers on this point, as is noted in the works of Nicholson,⁶ Landau,⁷ or 'Afîfî.⁸ Henry Corbin, for his part, often admiringly presented the Shaykh al-Akbar as the man of *bâtin*, the hidden sense—he who shatters the rigidities of the Letter in order to attain, by means of a free esoteric interpretation, a *ta'wil*, new meanings of Revelation. It does not take much to imagine what use certain Islamic currents are making of this dangerous apology today.

Ibn 'Arabî affirms that “everything of which we speak in our meetings and in our writings comes from the Qur'ân and its treasures.” In an unpublished work (*Radd al-matîn*⁹) in which he takes the Shaykh al-Akbar's defense, 'Abd al-Ghanî al-Nâbulusî underscores, referring to the *auto-da-fe* of Ibn 'Arabî's works barred by certain jurists who sought out heresy with indefatigable zeal, that those who desire to execute such sentences find themselves in a paradoxical situation: if they leave the countless Qur'ânic quotations in Ibn 'Arabî's books that they are tossing into the flames, they end up burning the word of God. On the other hand, if they erase the passages before the burning, then the works to be burned are no longer those of Ibn 'Arabî, for the Qur'ân is such an integral part of them.

In fact, any reader of Ibn 'Arabî notices an abundance of scriptural references page after page. It must further be noted that Ibn 'Arabî's bibliography has an immense lacuna due to the disappearance of the great *tafsîr*, the *Kitâb al-jam' wa l-tafsîl fî asrâr ma'ânî l-tanzîl* referred to above.¹⁰ But besides the publication of a heretofore unpublished text, the *Ijâz al-bayân*,¹¹ which is a small *tafsîr*, we are indebted to Shaykh Mahmûd Ghurâb for the recent publication of a collection of four large volumes in which he has regrouped and arranged Ibn 'Arabî's exegetical texts by suras and verses.¹² By virtue of its size alone this impressive anthology suggests that Nâbulusî's observation is not irrelevant.

These quantitative considerations, though deserving of being formulated, are certainly secondary. It is not a question of appealing to the judgment of the *fuqahâ* (or rather, certain of them: in the volu-

minous catalogue of *fatwa* there is no lack of favorable *fuqahâ*¹³. Instructed by the same methods, a new trial, regardless the outcome, would be no more than just another judiciary peripeteia. If the *fuqahâ* and nothing more are the guarantees of orthodoxy, then the case is heard. Even though Dhahabî (d. 1348) maintains that the spread of Ibn 'Arabî's works was relatively late and that his heresies were noticeable only from the eighth/fourteenth century on,¹⁴ the author of the *Futuhât*'s difficulties began quite early. The story, told by comparatively recent biographers, in which his life was in danger in Cairo in 602/1206 and was spared only by the intervention of one of Saladin's brothers is probably a fabrication.¹⁵ But other events—for example the one that led him to write a commentary on his *Tarjumân al-ashwâq*¹⁶—give evidence that he was under suspicion. It is true that he did not treat the *fuqahâ* in the kindest of manners: "They (the *fuqahâ*) have always been to those who have attained spiritual realization (*al-muhaqqiqûn*) what the pharaohs were to the prophets."¹⁷ The Mahdî, the "rightly guided one," when he comes at the end of time, will have no enemies more bitter: "If the sword were not in his hands, they would give him the death sentence."¹⁸ In their attempts to please princes and the powerful, they do not hesitate to work out a casuistry that is a mockery of the Sacred Law whose interpreters they wish they were.¹⁹ If he exposes the too frequently perverse practices of the function of the *faqîh*, Ibn 'Arabî nevertheless does not call into question either the necessity of *fiqh*—juridical reflections—or the duty of vigilance incumbent upon the *fuqahâ* (even when they speak of saints, when the remarks of the latter could lead weak souls astray), provided they refrain from condemning as infidelity (*kuf'r*) all that they are incapable of understanding.²⁰

But it would take more to appease the anger of a group jealous and suspicious of these privileges. Two articles appeared in April 1990, one week apart, in the Egyptian daily *Al-Akhbar*. The articles, both quite benevolent, were inspired by recent publications and respectively entitled "Ibn 'Arabî in France" and "The Ibn 'Arabî Phenomenon in France." The "Ibn 'Arabî phenomenon," to use the article's expression, is actually far from being limited to France: studies on the Shaykh al-Akbar are proliferating throughout the world including, for example, Japan, the former Soviet Union,²¹ and, as has already been pointed out, Muslim countries.²² For

whatever reason, basing his arguments on the interest that Western researchers have in Ibn 'Arabî, the author of a brochure recently published in Cairo had been denouncing a "cultural invasion" engendered by these suspect enterprises.

The spread of this criticism was really nothing more than another episode in a very old quarrel: a "Letter to the Minister of Culture," again in the columns of *Al-Akhbar*, signed by Kamâl Ahmad 'Awn (director of the institute of Al-Azhar in Tantâ), reopened the quarrel in November 1975. The author was indignant over the publication of a blasphemous work sponsored by the ministry. The work in question was the critical edition of the *Futûhât* that O. Yahia was preparing. This "letter" was only the first salvo in a furious polemic to which we have already alluded and that has continued for several years.²³ In February 1979, the Egyptian Parliament decided to discontinue the edition in progress, as well as the distribution of those volumes already published. The decision, made under legally questionable conditions, was finally revoked after vehement disputes. What is worth noting is that, when the accounts of this polemic are examined, the majority of those in either camp who publicly took part in the affair had never read Ibn 'Arabî's writings *in extenso*, nor, for the most part, did they know his thought other than through second-hand and generally hostile accounts.

Besides these unfruitful controversies, we should mention a more serious debate on the origin of the patrimony that Ibn 'Arabî left his inheritors. Have the pious servants of God who have taken their inspiration from Ibn 'Arabî's teachings throughout the ages been abused? Is the repository of which Ibn 'Arabî named himself the guardian really the one which is founded upon Revelation? Isn't the affirmation according to which his work "proceeds from the Qur'ân and its treasures" nothing more than a concession dictated by attention to community norms, a concession that would veil quite different sources of inspiration? Is the Qur'ân, for Ibn 'Arabî, a text or a pretext? One might guess that the questions are purely rhetorical for the author of these lines, but they do deserve precise answers.

Plunge into the ocean of the Qur'ân if your breath is sufficiently powerful. And if not, limit yourself to the study of the commentaries on its apparent sense; but in this case do not

plunge, for you will perish. The ocean of the Qur'ân is deep, and if he who plunges into it did not limit himself to those places which are closest to the shore, he would never come back toward the creatures. The prophets and the guardian-inheritors [*al-waratha al-hafaza*] take these roles as their goal out of pity for the universe. As for those who remain back [*al-wâqîfûn*], who have reached the goal but have remained there without ever returning, no one profits from them and they profit from no one: they have aimed at the center of the ocean—or rather it has aimed at them—and they have plunged for eternity.²⁴

The mention of the "apparent sense" (*zâhir*) also suggests the contrary: *bâtin* (that which is hidden) is the opposite of *zâhir*. Both words belong to the traditional series of Divine Names. But among heresiographers the *bâtiniyya*, and Ibn 'Arabî has often been classified by his adversaries in this outcast category, are those who, in the name of *bâtin* (of the hidden sense that they are attempting to define) revoke the *zâhir* (the obvious) and kill the letter in order to give life to the spirit. However, when taken alone, the interpretation that the just-cited passage best lends itself to hardly stands up if what Ibn 'Arabî says elsewhere about the very process of Revelation to the Prophet is taken into account:

He was told: transmit that which has been revealed to you! And he did not stray from the very form of that which had been revealed to him, but rather transmitted to us exactly what had been told to him: for the meanings that descended upon his heart descended in the form of a certain combination of letters, of a certain arrangement of words, of a certain order of verses, of a certain composition of those suras whose totality comprises the Qur'ân. From that moment on God gave the Qur'ân a form. It is that form that the Prophet has shown, such as he himself had contemplated it...If he had changed something, what he brought to us would have been the form of his own understanding, and not the revelation that he had received. It would not be the Qur'ân, as it came to him, that he transmitted to us.²⁵

The preceding allows the reader a glimpse of the importance that the very letter of divine discourse has for Ibn ‘Arabî. He says, “Know that God addressed man in his totality, without giving precedence to his exterior (*zâhir*) over his interior (*bâtin*).”²⁶ If he thus blames those who worry only about legal rules applying to our “exteriors,” he is even more severe with the *bâtiniyya* who are pre-occupied only with the symbolic meanings of Revelation and who scorn its external meaning: “Perfect happiness belongs to those who join the external meaning with the internal meaning.”²⁷ In his eyes, a little knowledge of the *bâtin* leads away from the *zâhir*, whereas a lot of knowledge of *bâtin* leads back to it.

A number of passages from his work illustrate the absolute sovereignty of the letter to which, we have seen, the Prophet himself is submissive. Having thus alluded to the verse *Wa huwa ma‘akum aynamâ kuntum* (And he is with you wherever you are [57:4]) in the *Futûhât*, where he inadvertently used *haythumâ*—which has the same meaning—instead of *aynamâ*, the Shaykh al-Akbar immediately asks God’s pardon for having strayed from the literality of the sacred text. “It is not in vain,” he says, “that God takes one word away to prefer another to it.” Any offense against the letter is thus a form of this *tahrîf*, of the alteration of the Word of God for which the Qur’ân (2:75; 5:13) reproaches the People of the Book.²⁸ This concern for literal strictness applies also to the hadith, and Ibn ‘Arabî praises those who, calling to mind the words of the Prophet, are careful to not put a *wa* in the place of a *fa*, even though these two particles are often interchangeable;²⁹ when they are reported “according to their meaning” (*alâ l-ma‘nâ*) only, what the Prophet said is not being reported, but only what one has understood of what he said.³⁰

This scrupulous attention to the *form* of the Word of God—for the form, being divine, is not only the most adequate expression of the Truth, it *is* the Truth; it is not only the bearer of meaning, it is the meaning—, is that which guides all of Ibn ‘Arabî’s reading of the Qur’ân. It is not incorrect to consider that the work of the Shaykh al-Akbar, as we presently know it, is in its entirety a Qur’ânic commentary. This commentary is, moreover, a method of interpretation that does not look for what is beyond the letter elsewhere than *within* the letter itself. Thus, just as God is at one and the same time *al-zâhir wa l-bâtin*, “the Apparent and the Hidden,” just as

universal Reality is similar to the construction known as a Möbius strip (which appears to have two faces, one internal and one external, while in fact it has only one), in this same way it is absurd to distinguish—and *a fortiori* to oppose in the Word of God the letter and the spirit, the signifier and the signified. We are far from an allegoric interpretation in the manner of Philo of Alexandria, for example, as can easily be seen by comparing his commentary on the biblical story of Genesis with that given by the Shaykh al-Akbar in parallel Qur'ânic verses. For Ibn 'Arabî it is the laying bare of each word of divine discourse that renders all of its meaning.

However, there is an obvious paradox: the rigidity of the letter seems to impose a univocal reading. Once it came, Revelation left a message that seemed destined to be nothing more than repeated. Is it then to be concluded that any hermeneutic should be dismissed in advance? To do so would be to forget that "if all the trees on earth were pens, if the seas were ink—and if they were added to by seven other seas—the Word of God would not be exhausted" (Qur'ân 31:27).

The Qur'ân, says Ibn 'Arabî,

is perpetually new for any of those who recite it....But no reciter is conscious of his descent [*nuzûl*], because his mind is occupied with its natural condition. Then the Qur'ân descends upon him hidden behind the veil of nature and produces no rejoicing in him. It is to this case that the Prophet alludes when he speaks of reciters who read the Qur'ân without it going any farther than their throats. That is the Qur'ân that descends upon tongues and not upon hearts. God said the contrary about him who tastes [this descent]: The faithful spirit descended with it [the Qur'ân] upon your heart [Qur. 26:193]. Such a man is he in whom this descent causes an immeasurable sweetness that surpasses all joy. When he experiences it, he is [truly] the person upon whom the ever new Qur'ân has descended. The difference between these two kinds of descent is that if the Qur'ân descends upon the heart, it brings comprehension with it: the being in question understands that which is being recited even if he does not understand the language of Revelation; he knows the significance of that which is being recited even if the meaning that

the words have outside of the Qur'ân are unknown because they do not exist in his own language; he knows what these words mean in his recitation, and at the very moment that they are being recited. The station of the Qur'ân and its state being what we say, it happens that each one finds in himself that to which he aspires. It is for this reason that shaykh Abû Madyan said: the aspirant [*al-murîd*] is really an aspirant only when he finds in the Qur'ân all to which he aspires. And word not endowed with this plenitude is not really Qur'ân.³¹ When the Qur'ân, which is a divine attribute—and the attribute is inseparable from that which it qualifies—, descends upon the heart, it is then He Whose Word the Qur'ân is that descends with it. God said that the heart of his believing servant contains Him:³² it is of this descent of the Qur'ân upon the heart of the believer that the divine descent in the heart consists.³³

None of the faithful, no saint will ever hear words other than those that were heard and transmitted by the Prophet: “The Words of God do not change” (*lâ tabdîla fî kalimâti Llâh* [Qur'ân 10:64]). The perpetually revealed Qur'ân is at the same time both rigorously identical to itself—and yet unheard: it continually brings new meanings to hearts prepared to receive it; none of these meanings annuls the preceding ones, and all of them were inscribed from the beginning in the plenitude of the Qur'ân's letter.

It behooves you to distinguish between understanding the Word and understanding him who is speaking. It is the latter form of comprehension that must be researched: it is obtained only when the Qur'ân descends upon the heart, while the former belongs to the community of the faithful. Those gnostics who receive their understanding from him who speaks understand the Word. Those who understand only the Word do not understand clearly, either wholly or in part, what he Who spoke meant...The servant whose inner sight [*al-basîra*] is enlightened—he who is guided by a *light from his Lord* [Qur'ân 39:22]—obtains with each recitation of a verse a new understanding, distinct from that which he had during the preceding recitation and that that he will obtain

during the succeeding recitation. God has answered the request that has been addressed to him with the words *Oh Lord, increase my knowledge!* [Qur'ân 20:114]. He whose understanding is identical in two successive recitations is losing. He whose understanding is new in each recitation is winning. As for him who recites without understanding anything, may God have mercy on him.³⁴

But it is he who speaks, and he alone, who is responsible for the infinite profusion of meanings that wells up during recitation of the Qur'ân. The *'abd* (servant) could not reach this goal even with the greatest efforts of his faculties of reflection. Moreover, this effort would not only be in vain; it would deprive him of any chance of being receptive to the meaning that God has destined for him at that exact moment. He must, then, suspend the use of his forces and leave the way open for the Divine Verb, the true Recitant.

It is I, he says, who recite my Book for him with his tongue while he listens to me. And that is my nocturnal conversation with him. That servant savors my Word. But if he binds himself to his own meanings, he leaves me by his reflection and his meditation. What he must do is only lean toward me and leave his ears receptive to my Word until I am present in his recitation. And just as it is I who recite and I who make him hear, it is also I who then explain my Word to him and interpret its meanings. That is my nocturnal conversation with him.³⁵ He takes knowledge from me, not from his reason and his reflection; he no longer cares to think of paradise, of hell, of accounting for his actions, of the Last Judgement, of this world or of that which is to come, for he no longer considers these things with his intellect, he no longer scrutinizes each verse with his reflection: he is content to lend an ear to that which I tell him. And he is at that moment a witness, present with me; and it is I who take charge of his instruction.³⁶

We are shown the modalities of this divine instruction in an exceptional text. The text is that which describes the fundamental event in the course of which Ibn 'Arabî reads the *Futûhât* before writing them. This singular passage, which helps us to understand

what Ibn 'Arabî is telling us when he claims to have taken all of his work from the "treasures of the Qur'ân," is that which, after the doxology (*khutba*) and the introduction (*muqaddima*),³⁷ makes up the first chapter of the work.³⁸ The passage has been studied a number of times, and its contents were commented on in one of our earlier works,³⁹ but one point must be highlighted because of its direct relation to the purpose of this book. This is where Ibn 'Arabî relates his encounter beside the Ka'ba, near the black stone, with a "young man" (*fatâ*) described by a number of contradictory attributes. This *coincidentia oppositorum* clearly means that we are here dealing with a theophany: he is "living and dead," "simple and compound"; he "contains everything" and "everything contains him"; he is "the contemplator and the contemplated," "the knowledge, the knower, and the known." He is "the one who speaks" (*al-mutakallim*, a term the importance of which will be seen) while at the same time he remains silent (*sâmit*). From him comes all that Ibn 'Arabî will transcribe in the *Futûhât*.

Apparently, the "young man" is the manifestation of what the prefatory poem of chapter 2 calls "the august and sublime secret" of the Ka'ba, the "House of God" (*bayt Allâh*). The Ka'ba is of course the sacred place to which the "illuminations of Mecca" (*al-futûhât al-makkiyya*) are expressly linked. But several things allow a more precise definition of the young man's identity. Some of these are found in the initial chapter. Others are to be seen some two thousand pages later, in the penultimate chapter (*al-bâb al-jâmi'*, the chapter of synthesis), where Ibn 'Arabî announces that he has encapsulated the quintessence of what the 558 preceding chapters contain. We are not dealing here with a "summary," even though Ibn 'Arabî uses the term *mukhtasar* (abridgement) in the table located at the beginning of the *Futûhât*, but rather with a succession of flashes that cast a sometimes blinding light upon jewels encased in the mass of the text. One paragraph, the wording of which is sometimes quite obscure at first glance, corresponds to each chapter of the *Futûhât*.⁴⁰ The one that corresponds to the first chapter⁴¹ informs us that the enigmatic "young man" that Ibn 'Arabî greets at the threshold of the Ka'ba located, according to Ibn 'Abbâs, in the "umbilicus of the earth"—thus, a visible image of the supreme spiritual center—is the "manifest Prototype," or the

"explicit Model" (*al-imâm al-mubîn*): a Qur'ânic expression to refer to the Book in which "all things are numbered" (Qur'ân 36:12), the one in which "nothing is omitted" (Qur'ân 6:38).

In Ibn 'Arabî, the *imâm mubîn*, according to the point of view from which he is seen, is sometimes likened to the divine Pen, or to the guarded Table (*al-lawh al-mahfûz*) upon which the Pen distinctively inscribes the knowledge that it withholds in a synthetic fashion; sometimes he is likened to the Perfect Man (*al-insân al-kâmil*):⁴² different names for the same function of mediating between the universe and the impenetrable mystery (*ghayb*) of the divine darkness. But as a passage in chapter 22⁴³ (to which we shall return) suggests, he is also the Qur'ân itself. One further, clearer, indication comes to us at the moment that the *fatâ* invites the pilgrim to delve with him into the Ka'ba,⁴⁴ and where he states: "I am the seventh of what surrounds the universe." This statement, which appears sibylline when taken out of context, is explained by the symbolic correspondance established during a preceding dialogue between the seven prescribed ritual circumambulations of the Ka'ba and the seven names that, in Muslim theology, correspond to the attributes of the Divine Essence. The "seventh," which the young man is identified with, is evidently here the name *al-mutakallim*, "He who speaks." If, in Islamic tradition, the Verb becomes the Book, one sees that, in appearing to Ibn 'Arabî in the guise of the *fatâ*, it appears in the shape of a man.⁴⁵

It is thus *in his very form*, "in the detail of his constitution," that the *fatâ* orders Ibn 'Arabî to decipher the knowledge that he has to pass on to him. The *fatâ* certainly is a book, but a *mutus liber: mutakallim sâmit*. It is his *person* that must be read: "What you see in me, incorporate it in your work and teach it to those whom you love."⁴⁶ At that moment the *Futûhât Makkiyya* were born. "A light deep within him," says Ibn 'Arabî, "brought to my eyes the hidden knowledge that he contains and envelops in his being. And the first line that I read, the first secret of this line that I understood is that which I am going to transcribe at present in this second chapter." The second chapter is, quite logically, that which Ibn 'Arabî will devote to the "science of letters" (*ilm al-hurûf*), that which teaches the fundamental principles of the deciphering of revelation, that which gives the keys to the "treasures of the Qur'ân."⁴⁷

The divinely inspired hermeneutic which, in perpetual renewal, allows the discovery of unprecedented meanings in each recitation holds in the strictest sense to the "body" of words, as we have said. Ibn 'Arabî defines the rules on numerous occasions.

As far as the Word of God is concerned, when it is revealed in the language of a certain people, and when those who speak this language differ as to what God meant by a certain word or group of words due to the variety of possible meanings of the words, each of them—however differing their interpretations may be—effectively comprises what God meant, provided that the interpretation does not deviate from the accepted meanings of the language in question. God knows all these meanings, and there is none that is not the expression of what he meant to say to this specific person. But if the individual in question deviates from accepted meanings in the language, then neither understanding nor knowledge has been received...As for him to whom understanding of all the faces of the divine Word has been given, he has received *wisdom and decisive judgement* [Qur'ân 38:20], that is, the faculty of distinguishing among all these faces,⁴⁸

in other words, that of determining, according to the circumstances, which of the possible meanings is pertinent.

Given the extremely rich polysemy of Arabic vocabulary, rigorous fidelity to the letter of Revelation does not exclude but, on the contrary, it implies a multiplicity of interpretations. Ibn 'Arabî insists on this point on a number of occasions, emphasizing that there is a general rule applicable to all the revealed Books: "Any meaning of whatever verse of the Word of God—be it the Qur'ân, the Torah, the Psalms or the "Pages"⁴⁹—judged acceptable by one who knows the language in which this Word is expressed represents what God wanted to say to those who interpret it so."⁵⁰ As a corollary, none of these meanings is to be rejected, regardless how surprising or even how scandalous it might appear, for God, in uttering this verse, had to be aware of the diversity of possible interpretations for each word or group of words. To deny the validity of this rule is to limit divine knowledge.⁵¹

However, it must not be forgotten that these instructions are

in no way to be understood as an invitation to engage in erudite philological exercises during recitation: "The commentators report that the Qur'ân in its entirety descended as far as the heavens of this world, all at once, and that from there it descended in a shower of stars upon Muhammad's heart. That voyage will never cease as long as the Qur'ân is recited, in secret or aloud. From the servant's point of view, the lasting *laylat al-qadr* [the night of Revelation]⁵² is his own soul when it is purified."⁵³ This is the purification by which the being becomes *ummî*.

The word *ummî*, usually translated as "illiterate," appears a number of times in the Qur'ân, in the singular, to refer to the Prophet himself (7:157–58) and, in the plural, to refer to the members of the community toward which it has been sent (62:2). We will not attempt an exegesis of these verses here, for that would lead us too far astray. Let us however keep in mind, by way of clarification, that *ummî* comes from the root *'mm*, from which the word *umm* (mother) is derived, which leads the author of the *Lisân al-'Arab* to define *ummî* as "he who is as when his mother gave birth to him."⁵⁴

The eminent theologian Fakhr al-dîn Râzî (d. 1209) one day came upon a saint (*walî*, pl. *awliyâ*) no less illustrious than himself—it was Najm al-dîn Kubrâ—and asked to enter on the Path under his direction. The saint had one of his disciples set Râzî up in a cell and ordered him to devote himself to the invocation. But he did not stop there: we are told that, projecting his spiritual energy (*tawajjuh*) upon Râzî, he stripped him of all the book knowledge he had acquired. Now when Râzî became aware that all the knowledge of which he had been so proud was being suddenly erased from his memory, he began shouting with all his force: "I can not, I can not." The experience stopped there. Râzî left his cell and took his leave of Najm al-dîn Kubrâ.⁵⁵

This anecdotal detour gives a more precise view of the state of *ummiyya*, "spiritual illiteracy." In hagiography, when one speaks of a saint as *ummî*, it is always an uncultured saint or one who is literally illiterate. We have already mentioned one remarkable case, that of 'Abd al-'Azîz al-Dabbâgh. But the examples are numerous. The great Berber saint Abû Ya'zâ, still quite revered today, learned no more of the Qur'ân than the *Fâtiha* and the last three suras, which are among the shortest. He needed an interpreter to converse with his Arabic speaking visitors, and yet that did not keep

him from miraculously detecting the errors in recitation of the Qur'ân committed by the imam who led prayer. Abû Ja'far al-Uryabî, the dearly loved first of Ibn 'Arabî's teachers, was an Andalusian farmer who knew neither how to read nor how to count; and we might also remember in this regard the well-known saint Abû Yazid al-Bistâmî, who claims that he had to initiate his initiator, Abû 'Alî al-Sindî, in the elementary rules of ritual practices; or the further case of Abû l-'Abbâs al-Qassâb, one of the great spiritual masters of Transoxiana. In the entourage of Muhammad al-Hanafî, the prestigious figure of Cairan sufism at the end of the fourteenth century, one meets another *ummî* saint, Shams al-dîn Muhammad, also called al-Bâbâ, about whom we are told that he became *qutb al-zamân* (the Pole of his epoch) moments before his death in 1565. Among the teachers of Sha'rânî are two *ummî* saints about whom he spoke at length in two of his works: Ibrâhim al-Matbûlî (whom he did not know personally) and 'Alî al-Khawwâs, always mentioned with affectionate veneration. These individuals—the first was a vendor of chick peas, the second an oil merchant—are seen in the numerous pages that Sha'rânî devotes to them validating or invalidating the prophetic traditions of disputed authenticity, solving subtle problems in unaffected language, and interpreting obscure verses that perplex the exegetes. They know divine decrees and predict the date they will come to pass. A learned and prolific author, Sha'rânî continually appeals to the authority of these to dissect the questions that trouble him.

But for Ibn 'Arabî, who dedicates a chapter of the *Futûhât* to the concept of *ummiyya*, one can be *ummî* without being illiterate from the moment that the intellect is capable of suspending its operations ("For us, *ummiyya* consists in renouncing the use of rational speculation and judgement in order to give rise to meanings and secrets"⁵⁶). As did the Prophet, the virginal receptacle of Revelation, a being should open himself entirely to the lights of grace. This does not imply that all intellectual activity should be forbidden as contradictory to this disposition toward welcoming supernatural illumination: 'Abd al-Karîm al-Jîlî, among many other disciples of the Shaykh al-Akbar, insists, rather, on the importance of books as supports for the *baraka* and as instruments of spiritual perfection,⁵⁷ and Nâbulusî, in an unpublished treatise, defends the same point of view.⁵⁸

But there is a time for everything and God does not speak but

in the creature's silence. To hear Him, man must thus return to the "state of infancy"—an expression that might after all be the most exact translation of *ummiyya*. This state of infancy is what the Qur'ân describes in the following terms: "God had you come out of the womb of your mothers and you knew nothing" (16:78). Among the possible meanings of a word, of a verse, there is no choice at the end of a mental process: the "true" meaning—that which is true at that very moment for that very being—is that which wells up, in the nakedness of the spirit, from the very letter of divine speech. It is to this letter and to it alone that he whose heart is ready to welcome that "shower of stars," which will cease only on the day that the Qur'ân is no longer recited "in secret or aloud," will listen.