



THE BOOK OF CLOUDS

هو

Abū Razīn said, “I asked, ‘O Messenger of God, where was our Lord before He created His creatures?’ He replied, ‘He was in a Cloud, under which there was no wind and above which there was no wind....’”⁴

“The existence of the cosmos was only made manifest in the Breath of the All-Merciful, namely the Cloud.”⁵

*

As the blessed Prophet’s words indicate, the cloud is connected to the “space” wherein God resides, and which transforms into the rain of mercy (*rah̄ma*) that pervades all things. As a metaphysical reality, Ibn ‘Arabī explains that the primordial Cloud (*‘amā*) is the ontological basis of the Muhammadan Reality (*ḥaqīqa Muḥammadiyya*) and directly corresponds to the Breath of the All-Merciful (*nafas al-Rahmān*) within and through which all of God’s words—the stuff of the cosmos—are articulated and formed. In its vapor-like state, a cloud is both here and not here, and hence denotes the principle and substance of manifestation which is simultaneously absent and present throughout the created order.

Given the metaphysically symbolic fecundity of the image of the cloud, in traditional Islamic thought it fittingly represents in-between-ness, imagination, flow, and subtlety, as well as creativity, life, and capaciousness. And what discipline can better encapsulate these qualities than poetry? If Sufi poetry with all its linguistic inflections is known for one thing, it is likely its ability to bring abstract and theoretical teachings to life through the art of imaginalization (*tamaththul*), thereby communicating these verities in concrete and supple linguistic forms and images. Imaginalization by its nature communicates absence through presence, meaning through form, and doctrine through practice. As vehicles for imaginalization, Sufi poetry distinctively reveals the intricate layers of subtlety that interpenetrate the human experience, allowing its audiences to participate in that cloud-like nature which is our very witnessing of and immersion in Divine Reality.

Oludamini Ogunnaike’s remarkable volume of English Sufi

4. Tirmidhī, *Sunan*, no. 3394, in *Jam‘ jawāmi‘ al-aḥādīth wa’l-asānīd wa-maknaz al-ṣiḥāḥ wa’l-sunan wa’l-masānīd*, vol. 6 (Vaduz: Jam‘īyyat al-Maknaz al-Islāmī, 2000).

5. Ibn ‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1968) 2:415.





Foreword

poetry is thus aptly entitled *The Book of Clouds*. These poems are a gift to their author and are likewise a gift to his audience, just as rain is a boon to its recipients. These poems revive the barren land of our hearts which have become dried up by scholasticism, selfishness, social media, and secularism. They distinctively draw on the rich traditions of Arabic and Persian Sufi poetry, while also articulating a Sufi vision that speaks to contemporary audiences whose language is English, and whose worldview is shaped by English. Ogunnaike brings his connection to the living tradition of *taṣawwuf* and distinctive accomplishments as a leading scholar and Muslim thinker to bear on each of this volume's poems, demonstrating not only the vitality of Sufism in English but also a profound relationship to and continuation of the entire tradition of Sufi poetry found in every major Islamic language, past and present.

*

Readers of Sufi poems often note their subtle and overt resonances with various Islamic intellectual traditions in general, and the Quran and Hadith—the bases of all Islamic learning and genuine Muslim activity and ways of being—in particular. The poems enshrined in *The Book of Clouds* are no exception. They in many ways form a veritable commentary upon the Islamic tradition in riveting English verses of great sophistication, rhythmic beauty, and even humor, written in our time and for our time, but which transcend all time. Consider, for example, these verses:

Beware, beware the smiling shaykhs
 with breath more offensive than mace
 Black hearts, white turbans, and two-faced
 sweet speech by pride's poison debased

There is a world of meaning in these lines, and indeed the entire poem is pregnant with subtle allusions to traditional Islamic scriptural passages and sayings of the great Friends of God (*awliyā' Allāh*). These lines in particular take us to a traditional trope in Sufi poetry: the distinction between the outward form of things and their inner reality. In the first instance, these lines are a commentary upon Quran 30:7, *They know an outward aspect of the life of this world, but of the next world they are heedless*. There have always been those who seem to know the nature of things but who actually do not. Such claimants are referred to in the Sufi tradition





THE BOOK OF CLOUDS

as “knowers of this world” (*‘ulamā’ al-dunyā*); they stand in stark contrast to those who are “knowers of the next world” (*‘ulamā’ al-ākhirā*).

These “smiling shakys” have “breath more offensive than mace,” which is to say they can be found in states of constant ascetic practice (their foul breath being an allusion to a famous Prophetic saying concerning fasting); but in truth, there is nothing real about them apart from their outward trappings. Their hearts are black (symbolizing attachment to the world and immersion in sin) and their turbans white, but their hearts should be white (symbolizing detachment from the world and purity of soul) and their turbans black (symbolizing spiritual descent from the Prophet through the *silsila* or initiatic chain of Sufism). They are “two-faced,” as opposed to someone whose entire being is turned toward God through *tawajjuh* (attentiveness), and this because of his awareness that God is constantly facing him (an allusion to several Quranic verses, such as Quran 2:115, *Wheresoever you turn, there is the face of God*).

The reference to the “sweet speech” of such un-knowers calls to mind a famous Hadith in which the Prophet speaks of a people who will recite the Quran but whose meanings will not pass their throats. What does pass these un-knowers’ throats is the poison of their pride and egoism, which in the end will cause their destruction and ignominy, as the master of the first and the last says, “There is not a single person but that there are two angels with him, grasping him by his reins. If he elevates himself, they pull them back and say, ‘O God! Humiliate him.’ And if he humbles himself, they say, ‘O God! Elevate him.’”⁶

*

One of my favorite poems in this collection, which is very much in line with the tradition of Arabic and Persian Sufi poetry but distinctively unique in English, comes in the form of a “Wine Ode” (*khamriyya*):

This life’s too hard to live sober
 so drink and try to die a drunk
 For heaven’s but a hangover
 for those who drink from your mouth’s cup

6. Translated in Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *The Condemnation of Pride and Self-Admiration*, trans. Mohammed Rustom (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2018) 15.





Foreword

And when I miss your lips I mix
 love's memories with words in verse
 To warm my soul with little sips
 and cool the sharp pain of my thirst
 So pour love's lightning in my heart
 and grind my bones to gleaming sparks
 All dancing like stars on the tides
 my life's shores end where your love starts

If you spent your life for a drop
 that's cheap—it won't have been in waste
 And all your life has been for naught
 if you die now without a taste

So all I have's a burning heart
 fed by tears flowing like the rain
 Lips scalded by love's tongues of flame
 can never taste death's bitter pain

In trying to explain the significance of these verses I can do no better than to cite two passages, one on drunkenness and the other on love, from the great Persian Sufi master 'Ayn al-Qudāt:

Be in the tavern for one month to see what the tavern and the tavern-dwellers do with you! O metaphorical drunkard! Become a tavern-dweller! Come so that we can go along for one moment!

Without the fire, the moth is restless, but in the fire it does not have existence. So long as the moth flutters around the fire of love, it sees the entire world as fire. And when it reaches the fire, it throws itself in its midst. The moth does not know how to differentiate between the fire and other than the fire. Why? Because love itself is all fire.⁷

*

Allow me to end by offering some brief remarks on the poem entitled "Khalwa":

At the peak of my soul's depths
 I sit in silent reverie
 The sun above, weather below
 The bright blue breathes in, out of me

⁷ Translated in Mohammed Rustom, *Inrushes of the Heart: The Sufi Philosophy of 'Ayn al-Qudāt* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2023) 233 and 235 respectively.





THE BOOK OF CLOUDS

These verses bring *The Book of Clouds* to a close, just as the *khalwa* or spiritual retreat brings a wayfarer's interaction with the world of distraction to a close. There is a finality in these verses, both in terms of their placement in the book and in what they are trying to convey: the goal of the spiritual life is to be with God, to be alone with the Alone, which is why the retreat is a *sine qua non* of the spiritual life. Notice, also, how the state the poet finds himself in, in the depths of his retreat, is something of an interstice: between God and the world there is his soul, and between the sun above and the weather below, there is the cloud from which emerges not only this poem but also the very breath that allows the poet to repeat the divine Name in the *khalwa*.

Wa mā tawfiq illā bi'Llāh

Mohammed Rustom
al-Madīna al-Munawwara
24 Dhū'l-Qa'da 1444

