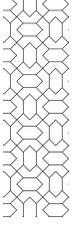


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# THE POSSIBILITY OF TRAVERSING THE IMAGINAL KNOWLEDGE- REMARKS OF MUHAMMAD B. ABD AL-JABBĀR AL-NIFFARĪ ON VISION (RU'YAH) AND ABSENCE (GHAYBAH)

Nazari Bilgide Geçişlerin Mümkünlüğü-Muhammed b. Abdulcebbâr en-Nifferî'nin Rüya ve Gayb Hakkındaki Görüşleri

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### Özet

Sûfî dünya görüşünü biricik kılan birçok yön arasında, nefsin tezkiyesi yoluyla elde edilen yakın ya da ilim, hayati bir önem taşımaktadır. Zira bu dünya perspektifinin kökleri vahye dayanmaktadır. Yöntemlerdeki farklılıklara rağmen tasavvuf düşüncesinin temsilcileri, bu deruni ilmin tabiatıyla alakalı görüş birliği içindedirler. Yöntemler ise onu talep edenlerin kapasitesiyle uyumlu olarak farklılık arz etmektedir. Bununla birlikte, sûfî dünya görüşünün sahihliği de salıkların insan-ı kâmil'in hayatına benzer bir hayat sürmelerine imkân tanımaktadır.

Sûfiler, bu deruni ilme erişmek için çeşitli perdeler ardında gizli olan hakikati anlama usullerini tarif eden nazari irfan üstatlarının görüşlerine müracaat etmektedirler. Bu üstatlardan biri de *el-Mevâkıf ve'l-Muhatabât* isimli eserin müellifi Muhammed b. Abdulcebbâr en-Nifferî'dir. Nifferî'nin *Mevâkıf*'i, anlaşılması hayli güç bir dille yazılmış *mevkif* ya da duraklardan oluşmaktadır. Nifferî ayrıca *vakfe*, *hicâb*, *ma'rife*, *rü'yet* gibi çok sayıda tasavvufî terimi mahirane bir biçimde ele almaktadır.

Bu makalede, hakikate vasil olmanın akılüstü bir vasıtası olarak *rü'yet* bağlamında 'perde' (hicâb) ve 'keşf'in mahiyeti üzerinde durulacaktır. Daha sonra hayal bağlamında *rü'yetin* rolü tespit edilmeye çalışılacaktır. Nihayetinde de 'rü'yet'in 'gaybet'le ilişkisi tespit edilmeye çalışılacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Vakfe, rü'yet, gaybet, ma'rife, hicâb

### Abstract

Among the various aspects those make the Sûfî world view unique, the lore or the knowledge attained through the purification of the self plays a vital role. For, it has its roots in Revelation. Despite the diversity in methods (*usûl*), many representatives of Sûfî thought are in agreement concerning the nature of this profound knowledge. The ways differ in accordance with the capacity of the ones who demand it. However, the authenticity of it enables seekers to lead a life akin to that of the Perfect Man.

In order to gain this sort of inward knowledge, the sufis appeal to the opinions of the masters of theoretical Sufism (*irfân-i nazari*) who define the ways to understand the truth that lies behind the veils. One of these masters is Muhammad b. Abd al-Jabbâr al-Niffarî, the writer of *al-Mawaqif wa al-Mukhatabat*. Niffarî's work consists of *mauqifs* those written in an almost abstruse language. Niffarî explains many sufi terms including the staying, veil, gnosis, vision, etc. skilfully.

In this article, we will try to explain the nature of veils and unveiling in the context of vision as a suprarational means of attaining the truth. Then we will try to find out the role of vision through imagination. Finally, we will try to explain the relation of vision with the absence.

Keywords: Staying, vision, absence, gnosis, veil

### KAYNAKÇA

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## Introduction

Throughout the history of Sūfī thought, there have been many attempts to explain the teachings and the methods of various schools those lead their members to grasp the meaning of man and universe. These attempts, in turn, brought about a deep concern not only for a profound understanding related to the affairs taking place in this realm but also for the mysteries belonging to the domains those seem numinous for the public. The general outlook towards Sūfī way of life tends to reckon it without its theoretical aspects and deal only with the practical issues. Nonetheless, theoretical Sūfism (*irfān-i nazari*) handles numerous complicated matters in an integrated manner. What is significant in terms of the history of Sūfī thought is that many individual Sūfī writers composed such works without any outer impact and even before Sūfī orders (*tariqah*) came into being and became institutionalized.

A great deal of the writings in classical Sūfī treatises is known to be devoted to the elaboration of the spiritual journey, the final destination of which is to attain the *Edenic* nature of man before his descent (*hubūt*) to this lower realm. This spiritual journey necessitates a certain motion that proceeds from the outward to the inward by means of removing the veils of darkness within and find ways to unveil the innermost reality divinely inscribed to the very nature of human beings. What is expected for a seeker or wayfarer is then to seek ways to reach beyond the constraints of earthly desires and remain in the Presence of God constantly.<sup>1</sup> In the case of ordinary man, the life proceeds in its usual course and there is no need to differentiate between the outward and the inward levels. However, it behoves the spiritual man to delve into the depths and seek the sole reality which is not other than the Truth of God Almighty by means of a deeper understanding stemming from vision and gnosis.

It is a fact that each century witnessed many Sūfī masters of impressive teachings those illuminate our lives, and the tenth century

<sup>1</sup> Gardet, L., "Kashf", in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs. Consulted online on 14 June 2016 <[http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912\\_islam\\_COM\\_0458](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0458)> "Kashf".

of Sūfī thought never lacked for luminous and remarkable sages as such. We see al-Junayd's disciple Abū Bakr al-Shiblī (d. 334/946), Abū Bakr al-Wasītī (d. 331/942), Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Jabbār al-Niffarī (d. circa 350/961) and many others, the lives of whom had a deep impact on the later history of Sūfī viewpoint. Among them, Niffarī is of great importance due to his writings out of divine inspiration and his fecundity so as to express what he witnesses through vision in a specific terminology.<sup>2</sup>

### I. Niffarī and His Stayings

As a wandering dervish of tenth century, Abd al-Jabbār al-Niffarī tried to expose the subtle realities related to gnosis (*ma'rifah*) in an almost abstruse language. Niffarī's magnum opus *al-Mawāqif wa'l-Mukhatabāt*<sup>3</sup> (Stayings and Addresses) consists of 77 "staying"s (*mawqif*) and also Divine Addresses (*mukhatabāt*). One of the major themes that marks Niffarī's work is the staying (*waqfah*). The seeker (*sālik*) of the spiritual path stays or halts between two stations (*maqām*) to complete the lacking parts of his former station and to gain a gist of the methods and manners required for the station to come. During the staying, he/she is bestowed a certain awareness to attain the Divine Presence.<sup>4</sup>

The aphoristic sayings of Niffarī are full of inspirations most probably uttered in a state of spiritual awareness and ecstasy (*wajd*). They appear as the concise expression of the unprecedented experiences by those Sūfīs during their spiritual struggle for passing beyond the veils (*hijāb*) between the human and the Divine.<sup>5</sup> Each staying consists of brief sentences but has a substantially technical vocabulary.<sup>6</sup> Niffarī draws things from the meanings they conveyed and embel-

<sup>2</sup> A. J. Arberry, *Sufism- An Account of the Mystics of Islam*, Routledge, London and New York 2008, p. 64.

<sup>3</sup> Throughout the article, we will quote from the English translation of *Mawāqif* by Arthur J. Arberry in *The Mawāqif and Mukhātabāt of Muhammad Ibn 'Abdi Al-Jabbār Al-Niffarī*, ed. Arthur J. Arberry, London: Messrs Luzac & Co., 1935.

<sup>4</sup> Reynold A. Nicholson, *The Mystics of Islam*, World Wisdom, Bloomington 2003, pp. 51-53.

<sup>5</sup> See Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill 1978, pp. 80-83.

<sup>6</sup> Arberry, *Sufism- An Account of the Mystics of Islam*, p. 64.

lishes them with new images they did not express before. Thus, his Book of Stayings (*Kitāb al-Mawāqif*) can readily be distinguished from the works by other Sūfis due to its ambiguous and complicated style; for, Niffarī does not appeal to the signs, meanings and images established by the previous writers. He embraces a distinctive language whose words assume new relationships among each other<sup>7</sup> such as vision (*ru'yah*) and absence (*ghaybah*).

Niffarī's *mawqifs* may be likened to *munāzalas* those described at length by Ibn al-'Arabī (1165/1240) as a station in which the servant ascends and God descends to certain a meeting point. It is in this station that God addresses to the servant behind a veil in accordance with the following verse, "It belongs not to any mortal that God should speak to him, except by revelation, or from behind a veil."<sup>8</sup> In this sense, the *mawqifs* of Niffarī and the *munāzalas* defined by Ibn al-'Arabī can be interpreted as the conveyance of the Divine Address to the human being. In order to be the locus of this address, some Sufis sought to have an insight concerning the attainment of the reality that lies behind the veils:

*Why doth Allah cast the veils and covers  
Of course to make it possible to attain the Veiled.<sup>9</sup>*

Although many Sūfī writers dealt with the definitions of some certain sufi terms such as veil and unveiling, only a few of them elaborated the issues concerning especially the veil directly as Niffarī and Ibn al-'Arabī did. Due to the subtlety of his suprarational speech, there is a need to interpret the allusive *mawqifs* of Niffarī. Although Ibn al-'Arabī expounded the very nature of *munāzala* in his Meccan Revelations (*Futūhāt al-Makkiyya*) in details, Niffarī's *mawqifs* were not explained explicitly and require a minute interpretation. Owing to the implicit discourse in his explanations, Niffarī has not received

<sup>7</sup> Adonis, *Sufism & Surrealism*, Saqi Books, trans. Judith Cumberbatch, Beirut 2005, pp. 155-159.

<sup>8</sup> Q 42:51.

<sup>9</sup> Ibn al-'Arabī, Muḥyī al-Dīn, *al-Futūhāt al-Makkiyya*, Dār al-Kutūb al-'Arabiyyah al-Kubrā, Egypt 1911, vol. II, p. 553.

a proper interest despite the fact that he was among the Sūfī writers those contributed to the blossoming of theoretical Sūfī thought.

Niffarī states that the Truth may become accessible as a result of the direct vision (*ru'yah*) that enables the seeker to unveil (*kashf*) the veiled (*mahjūb*). It may then rightly be said that a kind of quintessential knowledge is needed for attaining the veiled that is no other than the Truth. As a complementary phase, the staying here paves the way for vision (*ru'yah*) which is above the ordinary knowledge (*'ilm*).<sup>10</sup> Thus, it is of great importance to clarify the essential nature of veils before understanding what is implied through them. In order to understand the role of vision as a means of removing the veils and attaining the truth *per se*, one should have necessary information about their nature. According to Niffari, to know the nature of veils enables us to come nearer to unveiling.<sup>11</sup> Only in this way that the suprarational knowledge would be accessible for those who try to have a certain degree of realisation and traverse (*'br*) this suprarational knowledge to the lower world of ours.

## II. The Veil and the Veiled

What lies behind the veils has always been an essential concern for the seekers of the Truth. Thus, they take a well-known Hadith as their starting point for their spiritual journey: “One who knows his self, knows his Lord”<sup>12</sup>. The realization this knowledge depends on “seeing” and “knowing” the truth, the ultimate goal that lies behind the veils. “To know” and “to see” were not separated from each other in most of the ancient languages so as to imply the twofold means of realisation (*tahqīq*). In some ancient languages, the imagination and certain concepts related to the higher states of realisation show the existence of a deeper understanding not limited to

<sup>10</sup> Mawqif 8.27, “Staying is the gate of vision: whoso is therein, sees Me, and whoso sees Me, stays; but whoso sees Me not, stays not.”

<sup>11</sup> Mawqif 29.1–2, “Ignorance is the veil of vision, and knowledge is the veil of vision: I am the Manifest without veil, and I am the Hidden without unveiling. Whoso knows the veil, is near to the unveiling.”

<sup>12</sup> Although there are some objections concerning the authenticity of this hadith, ibn al-‘Arabī mentions it as a hadith in his *al-Futūhāt* in various contexts; for example, see *al-Futūhāt al-Makkiyya*, vol. II, p. 490.

the ordinary events of this world. Hence, the verbs “to know” and “to see” are used alternately and sometimes are interwoven as we see in the term “Veda”. In Sanskrit, the verb root “vid” denotes a twofold meaning of “seeing” and “knowing” from which the word “Veda” is derived. In Latin, *videre* refers to seeing or knowing as it is in the case of Greek “ἰδέα” (*idea*). This word has various cognates such as *wit*, *intuition* and *vision*. In this respect, vision implies –in a broad sense– seeing and knowing the inward reality that govern the imagination. We must bear in mind that the sight come into use as a symbol of knowledge in the sensible realm and is conveyed into the intellectual domain as we see in “intuition” which is akin to “inward vision”.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, the term *darshan* in Hindu terminology also refers to “the visions of the divine” and is derived from the verbal root of *drish* (i.e. to see). This fact is also a proof of a never ending desire to know or see the very nature of our relation with the Divine. The truth is expressed in most of the ancient languages in a plain and simple manner owing to their relative proximity to the language preserved from earthy defects.

The general outlook underlying Niffarī’s *mawqifs* is that everything other than God (*mā siwā*) constitutes a veil. By the same token, everything including the universe, knowledge, the self, and the unveiling itself may become veil. It may seem quite strange that Niffarī defines ordinary knowledge as a veil, too.<sup>14</sup> For, the vision comprises an act above the ordinary knowledge which is stated in a verse of Qur’an: “...They deny that whose knowledge they cannot comprehend and whose interpretation has not yet come to them.” And lifting of these veils depend on –to use Niffarī’s terminology– the servant’s advance through knowledge, gnosis and vision. Along with the staying (*waqfa*), Niffarī expresses the urgency to abstain from the fire of otherness (*siwā*) on the way of discernment and expounds the barriers or the veils those prevent the seekers from

<sup>13</sup> See René Guénon, *Man and His Becoming According to the Vedanta*, trans. Richard C. Nicholson, Sophia Perennis, Hillsdale New York 2004, ff. 9 p. 9.

<sup>14</sup> Mawqif 8.1–2 Ignorance is the veil of vision, and knowledge is the veil of vision: I am the Manifest without veil, and I am the hidden without un veiling.

having an immediate access to the Truth.<sup>15</sup> In doing so, the servant would busy himself with none other than Him in all circumstances even in recollection (*dhikr*). Otherwise, Divine Wrath inflicts on him/her.<sup>16</sup>

These veils, in a sense, take upon a task of pointing at the Veiled at the same time. The veil, in addition to its quality of covering by its nature, points at the Veiled behind it. Once this fact is realized, the seekers of truth draw nearer to the act of unveiling:

*If there were not any veils those hid the mysteries  
It would be impossible to know that I have an intention and aim.*

*Allah hath cast the veils and covers  
Whose reason is a great thing to be expressed.*<sup>17</sup>

The Beauty immanent in the Veiled makes the act of vision quite natural. In other words, the veil may be a road sign for the vision of the Beauty veiled as well. In this case, the veil seems to be transparent rather than being opaque, and by allowing a pale glimpse of light, it implies the very existence of what is behind it. According to Niffarī, these veils are raised for the seeker to have a direct vision of Him.<sup>18</sup>

The veils are not necessarily the material ones; what diverts the heart of spiritual man in the guise of “beautiful” here can become a veil of darkness that separate the created and the Creator. The darkness is portrayed, in most cases, as having a state of covering that stems from the quality of density. On the other hand, there are also veils of light that enable the light to permeate among the veils despite the fact that the light does not reveal a connotation as such.

<sup>15</sup> Mawqif 8.4-5, “If any attraction of otherness remains for thee, thou stayest not. In staying thou seest other, at its proper limit, and, seeing it, departest from it.”; and also Mawqif 8.10, “Staying is the fire of otherness. If I consume otherness with it, it is well; if not, I consume thee with it.”

<sup>16</sup> Mawqif 23.6, “The recollection of Me in the vision of Me is an outrage: what then the vision of other than Me, or what the recollection of Me together with the vision of other than Me?”

<sup>17</sup> *al-Futūhāt al-Makkiyya*, vol. II, p. 553.

<sup>18</sup> Mawqif 60.6: “For this have I raised the veils, that thou mayest see Me: and I empower thee to see heaven, how it is split, and to see what is sent down from heaven, how it is sent down; in order that thou mayest see that, how it comes, even as night and day come. So stay: and cast upon Me all that I manifest to thee.”

The lights of veil remain higher than the scope of physical eye, but their authority resides within the heart. These veils – such as the lights of *izzah*, *kibr* and *azamah* – are veils from the point of vision of the Truth which can be seen only by unveiling (*mukashafah*). However, the servant (*‘abd*) may become raptured at that moment due to the existence of their authorities within their hearts. If their authority becomes extinct, the servant is likely to see himself during the vision.<sup>19</sup>

As soon as they remove the outer shell, they will be able to unveil the hidden treasures thereof. For, the veil continues to conceal the Veiled provided that it remains unknown. Knowing here stands for realizing the essence. That the human beings are granted a “piercing sight” to unveil has its roots in the following verse, “*Now We have removed from you your cover; so today your sight is piercing.*”<sup>20</sup> The veil (the word *ghita* used in the verse is a synonym of *hijáb*) here is believed to be the barrier that prevents one reaching the truth beyond it whose attainment would be possible by a certain death whether be it the death known to all and the voluntary death in this life.<sup>21</sup>

There occurred many disputes among the theologians and philosophers concerning the possibility of vision of God. Some groups accepted the possibility of vision in the hereafter, and some groups including those of Sūfīs agreed that this vision is possible in both worlds. Despite the fact that theologians and the philosophers have discussed the reality of vision, Sūfīs have taken a saying of the Prophet as a proof of their main goal in view of the truth: “*Die before you die.*” As a matter of fact, the Sufis want to realise the attainment in this world by means of vision through the voluntary death. If the vision of the truth occurs at this phase, a kind of supraformal knowledge, which should be translated or traversed into the existing moment, will be achieved.

In classical Sufi treatises, one can find numerous examples of con-

<sup>19</sup> *al-Futūhāt al-Makkiyya*, vol. II, p. 170.

<sup>20</sup> Q 50:22.

<sup>21</sup> William Chittick, “The Paradox of Veil in Sufism” in *Rending the Veil: Concealment and Secrecy in the History of Religions*, ed. Elliot Wolfson, Seven Bridges Press, New York 1999, pp. 60-61.

stant admonishments about veils or barriers. It is stated in these treatises that the course of events during the spiritual journey (*sulūk*) comprises countless obstacles that impede the seeker from the direct vision of God. Some Sufis appeal to a well-known *hadith* according to which there exists “seventy-thousand veils of light and darkness”<sup>22</sup> cast upon the path leading Divine Presence. Those who are on the path thence should be aware of the fact that the veils consist of multiple forms. The prayers such as “*Oh Lord, show us the things as they are,*” indicate the desire to gain a certain awareness of the reality concealed behind those multiple forms. It is here that the vision provides in its informative aspect the lore needed to unveil and view whatsoever concealed.<sup>23</sup>

We see the interpretation of the same reality in al-Ghazālī’s (d. 1111) *The Alchemy of Happiness*. According to al-Ghazālī, the knowledge maintained by sensory things busies the seeker from leading the spiritual path. For him, the heart is like a reservoir and the senses are like five streams reaching the reservoir outside. In order to drink pure water, one should block the streams and clean the reservoir full of mud. Here mud is the sediment accumulated there like the traces of previous ideas and imaginings. Once this sediment is removed and the outsider streams are prevented, pure water from within comes out.<sup>24</sup> In al-Ghazālī’s parable, the pure water would be achieved a result of the purification of the reservoir from the outer effects. The same applies to the act of vision in which –according to Niffārī– the heart of the stayer is cleansed from the ideas or intentions that are not innate. Therefore, the vision may seem an act of seeing by the heart, the medium of knowing and seeing, through which the existentiating realization (*tahqīq*) becomes actualized. One can gain insight towards the Truth if he/she cleanses his/her heart from whatsoever other than Him. Ibn al-‘Arabī skilfully links visions with

<sup>22</sup> See Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkat al-Anwar*, trans. W. H. T. Gairdner, Ashraf Press, Lahore 1952, pp. 157–171.

<sup>23</sup> Mawqif 19.1–2, “Cleave unto certainty, and thou wilt stay in my station. Cleave unto good thinking, and thou wilt journey in my highway: and whoso journeys in my highway, reaches unto Me. Become concentrated through the name of certainty upon certainty.”

<sup>24</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *The Alchemy of Happiness*, trans. Henry A. Homes, Albany Institute, Albany NY 1873, p. 31.

imaginative faculty and divine inspiration. From the metaphysical point of view, Imagination is interrelated with the intermediate world. Within the imagination, essential realities belonging to our being (*haqāiq al-wujūd*) appear to be manifested. Thus, we should explain the essence of imagination in order to understand its central role in view of the vision.

## II.II Imagination and Vision

Following the Age of Enlightenment -even before it- the microcosmic realities were reduced into mere profane entities whereas being human is not limited to this lower world. However, human being is created with an aptitude to think of his/her position in view the created order and with an ability to discover the worlds beyond. Thus, to envisage human being consisting of only corporeal elements is a baseless standpoint. The so-called modern world view failed to interpret the complexity of religious outlook towards the relation between the human being and God. Due to this intricacy, religions have sought to explain the fundamental elements those constitute human beings in terms of cosmic manifestation. At this point, the human beings sought to find the traces of reality in another realm, namely in imagination.

To speak of visions and dreams amounts to speaking of Imagination. For, most of the subtle events such as vision and dream take place in here. The world of Imagination (*al-‘ālam al-khayāl*) is believed to be the realm where some metaphysical events including visions take place on a different plane. So they need to be traversed (*ta‘bir*) or interpreted. That’s why the dream interpreters (*mu‘abir*) are supposed to have the authority to correlate what is seen in the world of imagination and that of this world; in other words, they have the capacity to find out what corresponds to the visionary events in reality. We can find many instances of traversing what is seen in the imaginary world in the life of the Prophet. In this context, Ibn al-‘Arabī narrates the example of milk that in a true dream corresponds to real knowledge.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>25</sup> See *al-Futūhāt al-Makkiyya*, vol. II, p.183.

Imagination is among those terms which have been frequently discussed about in many disciplines including the history of religions. However, it is not easy to express its central role in Sūfī thought only by inferring from the definitions found in the writings intended to summarize this subtle matter within the context of bodily events. It is claimed that one of the main functions of the Imaginary World is to corporealise what is incorporeal and transform the corporeal into the spiritual. Thus, the imagination is experienced in its most direct manner during dreaming. Establishing a connection between what is seen in dream and the corporeal realm constitutes the basis for the attempts towards generating a movement leading the aforementioned direct vision. By this way, the meanings witnessed in dream are independent of material proofs but are in the guise of the veil of substantial foundation (*mawadd*).<sup>26</sup> Therefore, we can say that the role of the imagination is to transform the incorporeal thing within the dreamer.

Concerning imagination, the great Sūfī of 13<sup>th</sup> century Ibn al-‘Arabī adopts a non-dualistic framework that transcends the relative aspects of cosmic manifestation namely high and low, subtle and dense, etc. Nonetheless, they ought not to be thought of as absolute in that they also reveal a relativity to some extent. In order words, one thing may seem spiritual according a point of view but may be taken as corporeal from another the earth is lower from the point of heaven but is high seen from the perspective of non-existence. When this relativity is taken into consideration, the imagination can be defined as an intermediate reality which is to say that all things may have a trace of qualities belonging to the other. From the ontological point of view, the imagination is similar to a line that separate spiritual and corporeal domains. It has an existence due to the very existence of these two aspects. As a result of being on the boundaries of them, it gains the characteristics of both realms. It is between the unity and multiplicity macrocosmically whereas it is between the spirit and the body microcosmically.

<sup>26</sup> William C. Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God*, SUNY Press, Albany 1998, p. 333

Some scholars and sages including Ibn al-‘Arabī define the imagination as an intermediary state, an *isthmus* (barzakh) between the imaginal world and the corporeal one as well. This idea seems to influence the very belief that everything in the universe is an imagination and a simile in the face of the sole Truth.

*Creation is surely of imagery  
It is the reality in Truth  
If one comprehends it deeply  
Attains the very mystery of path.<sup>27</sup>*

The imagination can be evaluated in its two aspects, namely in its cosmic function in accordance with its degree of Presence and as an imaginative potency in man. As for its character as an imaginative potency, it functions as an intermediary between the Divine and the world of multiplicity. Given that they are intermediary, they symbolize within the worlds they mediate.<sup>28</sup> It is in this intermediary sense that visions and dreams act as an intermediary between consciousness as we understand today and the real conscious which is alluded in a well-known hadith, “People are asleep; when they die, they awaken”<sup>29</sup>. According to this hadith, death does not imply falling asleep; it is rather an awakening both in mystical and physical senses. It may also be conferred that the dreams seen in sleeping at night and visions occur during the day are equal in that they are in the language of another world and require a due interpretation or “hermeneutic”. Therefore, Ibn al-‘Arabī’s definition of this world as a ‘bridge’ finds its expression as such.<sup>30</sup> Among the philosophers, some claimed that the human soul may have a contact with the unseen on the condition that it gains a proper purity not only in wakefulness but also in dreams. Since the imagination transforms the spiritual truth into symbols, these symbols have to be interpreted (*ta‘bir*). This

<sup>27</sup> Ibn al-‘Arabī, Muḥyī al-Dīn, *Fusūs al-hikam*, ed. ‘Abū al-‘Alā ‘Afīfī, Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī (Beirut, n.d.), p. 159 (17).

<sup>28</sup> Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabī*, Routledge, New York 2008, p. 256.

<sup>29</sup> al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-Dīn*, Dār al-Sha‘b, Cairo: Dār al-Sha‘b, w. d. (Silsilat Kitāb al-Sha‘b), n.d. vol. XI, p. 2105.

<sup>30</sup> Henry Corbin, *Temple and Contemplation*, KPI ltd., London 1986, p. 114.

is, in a sense, a reverse process used in *ta'wil* which means carrying back to the source<sup>31</sup>.

al-Ghazālī states in his *The Revival of Religious Sciences (Ihyā al-Ulūm al-Dīn)* that vision is of a mystery related to the creation of mankind. The senses enter in a dormant state during sleeping. One remains alone after leaving the sleep and imagination. It is at this very moment that the veil between the “Guarded Tablet” (*Lawh al-Mahfudh*) is lifted. Al-Ghazālī likens this state to the reflections seen between two mirrors. When the veil between two mirrors is lifted, something of them is reflected unto the other. The same applies to the Guarded Tablet. That’s to say, something of the Guarded Tablet is reflected on the heart of that person in question. The heart then illustrates those reflections into symbols. At the end of this process, the imagination preserves it to be remembered after the person wakes up. That’s why one can remember these symbols even after waking up. In order to interpret the bits of information inherent in them, the interpreter has to correlate these images and what was seen during dreaming. According to al-Ghazālī, sleeping causes a halt only for the senses not the imagination itself. As a matter of fact, only the form in imagination remain in memory.<sup>32</sup> The heart plays an essential role in the transformation of being due to its function as the locus (*maḥall*) of manifestation. It is like a mirror or speculum unto which the realities are reflected and thus speculated in the original sense of the term.

Ibn al-‘Arabī states that vision is created to let human beings experience the world of imagination in this lower world. The most famous example of imaginary reality can be found in the analogy of images on mirror.<sup>33</sup> As the central principle underlying the mainstream Sūfī circles –especially those follow line of Ibn al-‘Arabī– is that there is one Truth –the Truth of the All-Truth– the seekers may attain the Truth by the removal of all veils on their ways. Here, vi-

<sup>31</sup> Fazlur Rahman, “Dream, Imagination and ‘Ālam al-Miḥāl.” *Islamic Studies*, vol. 3, no. 2, 1964, p. 167.

<sup>32</sup> al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā ‘ulūm al-Dīn*, vol. XVI, p. 2928.

<sup>33</sup> For example, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, vol. III, p. 80.

sion (*ru'yah*) is interrelated with another notion, namely the absence (*ghaybah*). Generally speaking, the absence emerges as a result of remembering God's promise of reward and taking His punishment into consideration.<sup>34</sup> As a result of this remembrance, one becomes nearer to the Truth to the extent that he/she becomes far from the creation. In normal circumstances, the absence is mentioned as the obverse of presence (*ḥadrā*)<sup>35</sup>; however, it is mentioned along with vision in Niffarī's terminology. Therefore, we need to understand the significance of absence in the context of vision.

### III. Vision and Absence

The absence implies a sudden state which occurs within the heart of the seeker. When the senses of the seeker become occupied with the sudden inspiration (*warid*), he/she loses the awareness related to the creation. In other words, the senses become occupied with the spiritual realm and loses the conscious and sensitivity towards the corporeal realm consequently. In many occasions concerning the state of absence, one is annihilated from everything other than God (*siwā*) especially by the association of an event or an object witnessed. In some cases, the witness transcends himself or herself and becomes unconscious.<sup>36</sup>

According to Niffarī, there is a close relation between the vision and the absence. If the seeker stays in patience and remains in absence, that's to say, becomes far from all other than Him and directs his vision towards Him, he/she is accepted as dear for associating none during the vision.<sup>37</sup> Following the vision, the viewer is accepted among the dear friends of God and becomes worthy of His conversation.<sup>38</sup> Consequently, God

<sup>34</sup> see *al-Qushayrī's Epistle on Sufism*, trans. Alexander D. Knysh, Garnet Publishing, UK 2007, p. 91-92.

<sup>35</sup> MacDonald, D.B. and Hodgson, M.G.S., "Gḥayba", in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs. Consulted online on 15 June 2016 <[http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912\\_islam\\_SIM\\_2479](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_2479)>

<sup>36</sup> *al-Qushayrī's Epistle on Sufism*, 92-93.

<sup>37</sup> Mawqif 25.18, "And those that persevere for our sake, they are those that see Me: when I was absent, they veiled their eyes jealously, lest they should associate anything with Me in their vision."

<sup>38</sup> Mawqif 63.7, "When thou seest Me, and belongest to my people, and to the people of my name, and 1 converse with thee (and that is a knowledge), and make Myself known to thee (and that is a knowledge): then between Me and thee there supervenes a knowledge, and between thee and knowledge there supervenes a certainty."

manifests Himself not because the servant may see Him but because He loves His dear one those call upon Him sincerely.<sup>39</sup> These dear friends are only with Him and do nothing else.<sup>40</sup> They only prepare for the next World.<sup>41</sup> It should be noted here that the knowledge and everything it includes is contained in absence, not in vision.<sup>42</sup>

Niffarī states that it is He Who is intended for the servant. If He is not the Intended, it is as if unbelief.<sup>43</sup> Because He ordains the submission of one's entire will.<sup>44</sup> During the vision, the seeker should not demand any other thing except for God Himself. The same applies to the state of absence. It is better to refrain petitioning (*su'al*) during the vision. For, this amounts to be deprived of gnosis.<sup>45</sup> Vision necessitates a certain steadiness in Divine Presence. If the attention of the seeker is directed to any other side, he/she is consumed.<sup>46</sup> That's why the heart of the Sūfi is never occupied with the creation during manifestation. For, the viewer has no power out of the vision of Him<sup>47</sup>; and those who know Him have no life out of the gnosis of Him. The viewer should also be aware of the fact that He is beyond all limitations.<sup>48</sup>

So, it may be said that the absence is from the creation for the sake of truth. At the end of the absence, the Sūfi becomes ready for the Divine Presence. This state can also be summarized as leaving

<sup>39</sup> Mawqif 23.3, "When thou seest Me, consider Me, and I shall be between thee and things. When thou seest Me not, call upon Me, nor that I may manifest, and not that thou mayest see Me, but because I love my friends to call upon Me."

<sup>40</sup> Mawqif 27.2, "By my Power! Verily I have dear friends who eat not in my absence, and drink not, and sleep not, and busy not themselves."

<sup>41</sup> Mawqif 27.8, "I have dear friends, who have no present world, that there should be for them a world to come."

<sup>42</sup> Mawqif 29.19, "Science and all that it contains are in absence, not in vision."

<sup>43</sup> Mawqif 27.3, "Who shall protect thee from Me, if thou sayest that whereby I am not intended? So beware, for this I shall not forgive."

<sup>44</sup> Mawqif 27.6, "By my Power! I am the guest of my dear friends: when they see Me, they spread out for Me their secrets, and veil from Me their hearts, and submit to Me their wills."

<sup>45</sup> Mawqif 23.2, "When thou seest Me, do not petition Me during the vision nor during the absence. If thou petitionest Me during the vision, thou makest it a god beside Me; and if thou petitionest Me during the absence, thou art as one that has no gnosis of Me. Now thou must needs petition, and I am wrathful if thou dost not petition: therefore, petition Me, when I say to thee, "Petition Me."

<sup>46</sup> Mawqif 35.14, "Depart not from this vision, or the visible things will carry thee away: ami let not thy quality depart from this vision, or thy quality will carry thee away."

<sup>47</sup> Mawqif 53.4, "Whoso knows Me, has no life left save in the gnosis of Me: and whoso sees Me, has no power left save in the vision of Me."

<sup>48</sup> See Mawqif 38.2, "He who sees this not, is not bound by my reality: but whoso sees this, has been bound by my reality. Whoso is bound by my reality, and addresses other than Me, is an infidel. All limitation is a veil from behind which I do not appear: and there is nothing in the vision of my reality save the vision of it..."

the creation and become present with God. The presence occurs when the remembrance of God occupies the heart of the servant. Then in presence, God will unveil what He has prepared only for him.<sup>49</sup> The duration of absence may vary in accordance with one's spiritual state. In some cases, it is only an instant whereas it does not last for other.

Ibn al-'Arabī explains the absence as a state being witnessed in consequence of the divine manifestation:

*I am absent from Him when I have an eye to witness  
For, the absents are not present in absence.  
There is none other than Him both in absence and witnessing  
Look at the absence and this you go on contemplating.  
This is the absence and here is its state  
The absence of the heart is a state not in effect.  
Absence from whom? Is there any other than Him?  
There is no other substance or any evidence. He is the only Being!*<sup>50</sup>

### Conclusion

We see that Niffarī's main concern in his *Mawāqif* is the exploration of the sole reality hidden behind the veils. For Niffarī, this reality may become accessible as a result of the direct vision (*ru'yah*) that enables the seeker to see beyond the veiled (*mahjūb*) after the act of unveiling (*mukashafah*). In certain contexts, the vision denotes a specific sort of unveiling. As the seeker remains in sobriety (*sahw*) through his Lord, he hears and sees nothing but Him. As a result of this loyalty, his sight and hearing would be controlled by God. In various *mawqifs*<sup>51</sup>, Niffarī seems to allude the oft quoted Divine Saying in which we see the statement that God will be the seeing and hearing of His sincere servants as a divine bliss: "My servant does not grow closer to me with anything more beloved to me than

<sup>49</sup> *al-Qushayrī's Epistle on Sufism*, p. 93.

<sup>50</sup> *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, vol. II, 543.

<sup>51</sup> For example, *Mawqif* 19.4, "Whomsoever I cause to contemplate, through him I cause to contemplate; to whomsoever I grant gnosis, by him I grant gnosis; whomsoever I guide, by him I guide; whomsoever I indicate, by him I indicate."

the duties I have imposed upon him. My servant continues to draw near me with extra works until I love him. When I love him, I am his hearing with which he hears, his seeing with which he sees, his hands with which he strikes, and his foot with which he walks...”<sup>52</sup> In this context, the attainment of the knowledge of God is possible only after the seeker’s vision followed by His Self-Disclosure.<sup>53</sup> It is in this sense that Niffarī expresses the importance of a graduation concerning vision, witnessing and unveiling. In other words, the vision can be higher than witnessing whereas witnessing is higher or lower than unveiling. Along with Niffarī’s line of thought, vision is superior than gnosis and gnosis is superior than knowledge. This hierarchy is expressed in various parts of the *al-Mawaqif*.<sup>54</sup> The position in which Niffarī juxtaposes the staying, gnosis and knowledge is in accordance with his own experience at the time of speaking. There are many instances of hierarchies as such. For example, Qushayrī narrates from Muhammad b. al-Husayn concerning the intellect, wisdom and gnosis. He says, “To the intellect belongs argumentative proof, to wisdom allegorical allusion and to mystical gnosis direct witnessing.”<sup>55</sup>

What makes Niffarī’s explanations on vision striking is that he wanted to convey his own experiences in subtle words but comprehensively. It is probable that many representatives of theoretical Sufism including Ibn al-‘Arabī appealed to his systematic approach on the attainment of the truth which does not have any synthetic elements. For, he seems to have exercised gnosis and learnt the way of staying which cannot be defined in details unless one attains it. It can be conferred from the *mawaqifs* of Niffarī that the seekers should purify their minds and hearts from anything other than God at the

<sup>52</sup> Bukharī, Riqāq/6137.

<sup>53</sup> For a detailed explanation on God’s Self-Disclosure, see William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, SUNY Press, Albany 1989, p. 228.

<sup>54</sup> See, for example, Mawqif 53.12, “When the master of theory sees the master of gnosis, he believes in his beginnings, but disbelieves in his endings; when the master of gnosis sees him who sees Me, he disbelieves in his beginnings and his endings. The master of vision believes in the beginning of everything, and believes in the ending of everything; there is no veil upon him, and no disbelief in him.”

<sup>55</sup> *al-Qushayrī’s Epistle on Sufism*, p. 5.

beginning. As a result of this purification, the barriers or veils those conceal the Truth will be lifted. Consequently, the attainment will take after a complex process of vision that occurs at any time whether at night or during the day. Only through vision that the seeker or those who wants to be dearer may realise the ultimate goal of life:

“... Those my dear friends (who see everything) through Me, attain everything: but those my friends (who see everything) for Me, do not obtain everything. Consult Me as regards the things thou seekest, and I shall sever from thee all that is connected with the things thou seekest.”<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Mawqif 27.10-12.

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