CHAPTER FIVE

THE HERMENEUTICS OF EROTICISM

(Phallocentric) Esotericism and Eroticism

In Sufi ontology, creation in its entirety is an arena of the self-disclosure/elaboration of the Divine through symbols that can be perceived by the intermediary function of the imagination, symbolically located in the heart. In performing this function the imagination may proceed in ways that I have sought to demonstrate are erotic or gendered according to the hermeneutics of imagination. In certain instances, as in the tale of the prankster and the preacher, these hermeneutics are expressed in phallocentric terms, whereby a phallic motif is used for the communication of esoteric secrets and to effect a transformation of subjectivity. The position of “being the phallus,” as postulated by Lacan, may be applied to the symbolic position of the mystic in relation to the phallus as the signifier of esoteric secrets. We may draw a parallel between the Divine creative power and the phallus. However, since this is only an analogy, not all the implications of the Lacanian notion of being the phallus necessarily dovetail with Rūmī’s understanding of the mystic’s relationship to the Divine creative power. Taken symbolically, the position of being the phallus that Lacan argues to be a feminine position, is similar to the position of the mystic in the encounter with the Divine, as attested by many examples in the Mathnawī. The subject does not have to be a woman to take on this position, nor is a man excluded from this position of power. Precisely because it is a symbolic position, a woman is not automatically allotted to this position, nor is a transvaluation of masculinity deemed necessary for a male mystic—like the one that, according to Wolfson’s interpretation, is found in kabbalistic sources.1

As an example, in the encounter with the Divine the male mystic does

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not assume the characteristics of the female in order for the phallus of the Universal soul to “touch” his imaginal womb. Rather, the female biological function of birthing is appropriated as an analogy for mystical creativity generated by the Divine contact. As will be discussed in this chapter the female is liquidated in favor of a phallocentric system of signification that asserts the male as the ontologically independent gender and privileges the male body and masculine in all arrangements of signification.

There are, however, clear indications that the transformation of subjectivity is the result of the encounter with the Divine, as in the case of the magicians in the tale of the prankster. When Moses’ staff and hand “became as one” for the magicians (V:3337), they did not care about the punishment (V:3338). These are references to the “liberation,” or transformation of the magicians’ subjective self (V:3339). In many other passages in the Mathnawī, Rūmī discusses the recognition of the locatedness of subjectivity within the culturally constructed norms as a necessary stage for the realization of symbols and ideals. It is precisely a self located in (or “resisting”) the delimiting strictures of subjectivity, such as being embodied and gendered, that may be likened to a blank sheet of paper prepared to receive the creative power of the Divine pen (V:1963). Rūmī compares the cultural constructs of subjectivity to clothes that can be taken off as easily as they are put on: “The time has come for me to become naked (‘uryân) / to quit the form (naqsh) and become wholly soul (jân)” (VI:613). He disputes the linguistic constructs of gender, even though the Arabic term for “soul” (rūh) is feminine:

Do not worry that the soul (jân) is feminine
the rūh [soul] has no association with man or woman
It is higher than feminine and masculine
It is not that soul (jân) which is composed of dryness and moisture (i.e., is material)
This is not that soul which is increased by bread (i.e., eating)
or which is sometimes like this and at other times like that (I:1975–76).

The passage in the Mathnawī about the Divine Pen (qalam) that ennobles the human subject (V:1960–64), quoted at the end of the previous chapter, is an example of the hermeneutics of imagination expressed in phallic terms. In this passage, the gender symbolism of the (Divine)

\[\text{\textsuperscript{2} The idea of “resistance” will be discussed further in this chapter.}\]