FROM AL-ḤALLĀJ
A POEM BY ‘ABD AL-WAHHĀB AL-BAYĀTĪ

Translator’s note

‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Bayātī, a socialist, was born in Baghdad in 1926. He trained as a teacher, taught for a while, and later became a newspaperman. He was exiled by the royalist government, but returned to Baghdad after the overthrow of the monarchy in 1958 and became Cultural Attaché at the Iraqi Embassy in Moscow. He left that post to teach at the Afro-Asian Peoples’ University in Moscow. His mini-epic, “Al-Ḥallāj”, on the mystic martyr crucified in 922 A.D., appeared in his book, Sifr al-faqr wa-al-thawrah, Beirut, 1965.

I. Al-Murid, pp. 11-13

The Novice

You fell in the darkness, in the void,
Your soul is spattered with paint,
You drank from their well,
You got dizzy,
Your hands were soiled with ink and with dust.
And here I am, seeing you bent over the ashes of this very fire;
Your silence is the cobweb; your crown is the prickly pear.
You who butcher your only she-camel for your hungry neighbor,
You knocked on my door after the singer had gone to sleep,
After the lyre stopped.
What’ve I got? And you are in the presence of God seeking enlightenment.
Where will I end up? And you are in the beginning of the end.
Our rendezvous is the Day of Doom. Do not break the seal of the wind’s words over the water.
And do not touch the udder of this scabby goat.
For the hidden of all things
Is their manifestation. So think what you want to.
What have I got? Their fire which is in the infinity of the desert
Danced and went out.
And here I am; looking at you pleading with tears
At the Altar of Light, drowned, wordless, praying to the dusk.
II. *Rihlat ḥawl al-kalimat*, pp. 14-16

_A Journey around the Words_

How dark is the night, once the lamp is out:
Packs of wolves, and the hunters of flies and their scavengers have
eaten the bread of the hungry workers,
And the garden of the dawn was ravaged
By the black clouds and the rains and the winds;
And Fall has stripped these hills,
And Fall is creeping in the arteries of the Infernal Tree, *ząqqūm*,
in the fog thicket.
O you who intoxicate me with your love,
Who confound me with your closeness;
O you who close the gates:
The poor have made me a gift of these rags,
And these sayings.
So stretch out your hands across the years of death, the years of siege,
Across the silence, and the exile of the search for roots, for wells,
And rip apart the veils of darkness
To let the executioner come forth;
For I butchered my she-camel and the guests ate
And went away.
And here I am fingering the empty shells,
Perhaps they are rose leaves the wind has lifted off a dead body;
Could they be ghosts?

III. *Fusayfasā*, pp. 19-21

_Mosaic_

Once upon a time,
A long time ago,
There was a Sultan’s fool
Who played the lute,
Who walked on the edge of the sword,
Who walked on smoke,
Danced on the tight-robe,
Ate broken glass,
Swayed while singing drunkenly,
Mimicked the ape,
Carried children piggy-back in the garden,
Stuck his tongue out whenever the sun extended his hand to him,
Spoke to the stars, spoke to the dead,