THREE BOOKS ON SUFISM

(Review article)

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Why concern thyself so much with words? If thou art a man of valour enter boldly into the state of mystics. If thy heart finds peace in words how can it acquire fame through the condition of true men? These words are after all nothing but a shell; seek, like a true man, to attain to the mystical state. Thou hast spent all thy precious life in talking—when wilt thou act? However perfect poetry may be, when thou considerest it is but the menstruation of men. If thy heart had but the slightest morsel of knowledge thou wouldst have nothing at all to do with story-telling. But I see that thy poetry is always thy idol; thy sole occupation is idolatry.

—'Attār

In words like these have many mystical poets undervalued their own medium of communication. Speaking about mysticism in general or Şūfism in particular is by definition a paradox—the inef-fable cannot be described but must; the experience cannot be communicated but one has to try. The verbal formulations of experience that one studies, and uses, undermine their own validity or at least remain dim reflections of their subject. Speaking about mysticism always involves a search for a correct authorial voice, a correct way to evoke what one’s only sources cannot fully describe. The dilemma has been confronted recently by Frits Staal, who has suggested that the study of mystical experiences be separated from the study of the description and interpretation of them, and that the latter, which he calls “superstructures,” be recognized as such. It is the presentation of “superstructures,” highly emotive and evocative, often used for therapeutic and other behavior-altering purposes, that demands a special voice.

Although the works under review can be arranged to tell us about the history of the field and the state of its art, they can also be made
to show us the various "voices" their authors have adopted to deal with the problematic of mystical studies. A number of elements affect the nature of these authorial voices: the amount of material an author attempts to cover, the balance between his/her quotation and paraphrase of sources and his/her own contributions, the nature of the author's conceptual framework and methodology and his/her willingness to impose it. In Boyle's translation of ʿAṭṭār, a single Şūfi poet speaks for himself; and yet the translator's own voice is present in the style of translation and the contents of footnote and gloss. Smith seems to rely heavily on quotation and paraphrase, and to intervene as little as possible; but her own voice is nevertheless present in her very reliance; in her general approach, particularly her assumption that to restate is to explain; and in the comparisons that she suggests with other, particularly Christian, mystics. Schimmel relies heavily on quoted material, often wonderfully translated by her, to convey meaning, but is covering much more ground in a much more synthetic way, using individual Şūfis as illustrations of stages on the mystic path or elements of the mystical world-view. Although she too appears to keep her own voice to a minimum and the Şūfis' to a maximum, in fact her own personal voice is the most present of the three, as she orients readers to her material and shares her taste with them. One would assume that the more the Şūfis speak for themselves, the more the reader can get close to them; ironically, Schimmel's book is the most evocative of the three. The sections that follow develop these overall impressions case by case and are in turn followed by concluding remarks of a general nature.

*An Early Mystic of Baghdad*, the oldest of the three works under review, is Margaret Smith's close study of a key figure in the early development of Şūfism, al-Muḥāsibī. She wrote it at a time when many of the printed editions of Islāmic texts that we now take for granted were not yet available. Her absorption in the manuscripts is evident; and like many other Orientalists of her day, and ours, she stays very close to the texts throughout. Her book is organized around various aspects of Muḥāsibī's life and work: environment and early life, mystical conversion, disciples and associates, works, sources, psychological theory, ascetic theology, moral theology, devotional teaching, mystical teaching, and influence on other