

Using Mysticism to Teach “Zaabalawi”

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Naguib Mahfouz’s famous short story, “Zaabalawi,” concerns an unnamed narrator’s search for Zaabalawi, a mystic, or a holy person, or a healer, who can supposedly cure the narrator’s incurable disease. The text outlines the narrator’s search through the streets, alleys, and offices of Cairo, until the narrator and Zaabalawi encounter one another in a dingy bar. This highly allegorical text can be used to illustrate significant commonalities in two religious traditions, the mystical strands evident in Islam and Christianity. With this text we can show students the common threads of these traditions, thereby illustrating the fundamental concept behind why we study this literature: it unveils and addresses common human experiences that cross cultures and can be understood by all.

I begin by telling students that no one can teach them mysticism, for, according to both Muslim and Christian traditions, the direct, unmediated experience of the Divine is something that is not possible for humans to produce. That is, it is a gift, and erstwhile mystics can only make themselves available to receive this gift, they cannot ensure that it will be given. Given the relative dearth of understanding students have concerning Islam, this text works well to show them that the People of the Book have much in common.

Definition Of Mysticism

Throughout both the Eastern and Western religious traditions, the term “mysticism” has meant a variety of things. I propose a very pointed definition: direct, unmediated experience of the Divine. This can be either unitive or communicative, but at its core it is extrasensory,

paradoxical, and, ultimately, ineffable. This coincides nicely with John Hick's Pluralistic Hypothesis concerning the nature of the Divine within world religions. He argues that the great world faiths embody different ideas and perceptions of one reality that he calls "the Real." The Real itself is never experienced directly, but has "masks" or "faces" which are experienced differently within different cultures, depending on how a particular culture or religion thinks of the Real. The Real itself is, therefore, neither personal nor impersonal, neither immanent nor transcendent, these categories being imposed upon the Real within different cultural contexts. Hence, the typical experiences of the major faiths are to be taken as valid experiences of the Real, through cultural and religious mediation, the "local face" of the Real.

Sufism

William Chittick, arguably the most prominent scholar of Islamic mysticism in the West, explains the place of mysticism in Islam thus:

In short, Muslim scholars who focused their energies on understanding the normative guidelines for the body came to be known as jurists, and those who held that the most important task was to train the mind in achieving correct understanding came to be divided into three main schools of thought – theology, philosophy, and Sufism. . . . Most Muslims who devoted their major efforts to developing the spiritual dimensions of the human person came to be known as Sufis. They taught that people must attune their intentions, their love, and their sincerity to the divine will.

A Sufi is someone who is striving to or has mastered his or her ego and attained a higher state of consciousness and union with the

Godhead. The goal of the Sufi Path is for the drop of water (the individual self) to merge with the Ocean of Being from whence it came. This spiritual path (*tariqah*) encourages one to perform this or make this transition consciously while still in the body.

The central Sufi theory is *Wahadat ul Wajud*, the Unity of Being, or oneness of existence. This summarizes the Sufi quest of not just seeking a union with the Divine Being, but the realization of the truth that the mystic is one with the Divine. To teach this, the Sufi poets used the imagery of the lover and beloved in the love poetry or the romances. According to Hujwiri, the first Sufi in India, “He who is purified by love is pure, and he who is absorbed in the Beloved and has abandoned all else is a Sufi.”

Experiences Of The Divine

While the Sufi tradition has many analogies to explain the direct, unmediated experience of the Godhead, there is only one which I am interested in, the state of *Sukr*, drunkenness. As should be obvious from the text, the narrator’s eventual drunken state is the key to his mystical experience. Insofar as he is drunk, this *haal*, this state or condition, this temporary state of consciousness which is a product of spiritual practices, is the completely gratuitous ultimate goal of Sufism.

Christian Mysticism

While the Christian mystical tradition is a bit more complicated than the Muslim tradition, we can focus on the classical tradition, specifically the *scala perfectionis*, the Ladder of Perfection. The lowest rung on this ladder is the Purgative Life, “the process whereby the mystic detaches himself from the tyranny and distortion of the senses.” (Cox 28). Detachment, renunciation, contrition, confession, asceticism, and self-

mortification -- these are the main characteristics of the Purgative Life. The famous Spanish mystic John of the Cross borrows heavily from Thomas Aquinas when he describes it thus:

To reach satisfaction in all
desire its possession in nothing.
To come to possess all
desire the possession of nothing.
To arrive at being all
desire to be nothing.
To come to the knowledge of all
desire the knowledge of nothing.
(103-104)

The Illuminative Life, or a consciousness of the Absolute, is the product of the Purgative Life. Within this life comes the acceptance of the *docta ignorantia*, “learned ignorance.” Nicolas of Cusa offers this explanation:

Does not he who ascends beyond ends enter into what is indeterminate and confused and so, with respect to the intellect, into ignorance and darkness, which are characteristic of intellectual confusion? Therefore, the intellect must become ignorant and must be situated in a shadow if it wishes to see You. But how, my God, is the intellect in ignorance? Is it not with respect to learned ignorance? Therefore, O God, You who are Infinity cannot be approached except by him whose intellect is ignorance—i.e., whose intellect knows that it is ignorant of You.
(704)

The soul, in this state, dwells in sublime ignorance, in darkness. There is nothing for rational analysis, and understanding is not the product of thought, but the gift of contemplation. “As the mystic progresses in spiritual refinement he reaches the heights of contemplation, where his knowledge is so complete that it is, paradoxically, a sublime nothingness” (Cox 31).

The final step on the Ladder of Perfection is the Unitive Life, the ultimate attainment of the mystical way. Evelyn Underhill sums it up as “that perfect and self-forgetting harmony of the regenerate will with God” (27). The mystic, in this stage, is one with the Divine, yet remains himself or herself. God is always other and the creature is always unique. That is, this experience is unitive, implying one being, and communicative, implying two distinct beings. Within this process, the self is shed, and the mystic achieves total immersion in the present moment, in the Divine of the Now. There is no past, no future, no desire beyond union and communion.

However, the problem of the mystical experience is not primarily with its ineffability. Rather, it is with the nature of humanity. Just as prayers of supplication are in fact frowned upon in all Abrahamic faiths, so too this *scala perfectionis* is something beyond human ability. What mystics are doing here, and doing within the Sufi tradition as well, is merely making themselves available for the reception of a gift. They are, in a word, disponible. So, while achievement of ecstatic union may be the goal of the mystical experience, the only thing that they experience can guarantee is disponibility, availability, presence in the Now, and purgation of all human desires.

“Zaabalawi”

Mahfouz illustrates these processes, both Sufi and Christian, in two ways. First, he gives us the confinement in the present, illustrated in the search

for Zaabalawi throughout Cairo, and the loss of the self, illustrated in the bar scene.

The Movement Toward Evanescence

Our narrator's search throughout Cairo, besides moving from West to East, as evidenced in the dress of those whom he meets, is also a movement towards timelessness, evanescence, the eternal now. He begins by meeting a religious lawyer and scholar, Shiekh Qamar. This is interesting because it points in two different directions. First, this is a man well-versed in the *Sharia*, as all Sufis must be. But this man is also a manifestation of the ossification of a lived religious experience. His dress and his office furnishings give him away as a man tainted by non-Islamic influences. Of course, he is unsure if Zaabalwi is even alive. He has long since lost touch with him. The next person our narrator encounters is the seller of books on theology and mysticism. While he is moving closer to the lived religious experience, the decay of the surroundings, and the fact that this mere prologue to a man is engaged in commerce surrounding what should be a non-commercial activity, tells us that we are still far removed from the mystical experience. The other shopkeepers in the area only reinforce this reading, as they have either not heard of Zaabalawi or they openly make fun of him. Here are two institutions which are hardly momentary. That is, the *Sharia*, *Hadith*, and other interpretations of the *Qur'an* and the Prophet's life have been around since the inception of Islam.

The local magistrate of the district is the narrator's next stop, and he is presented with a well-drawn-out plan for canvassing the entire area. A map is gridded with coordinates and he must approach this search as scientifically as possible. Again, the attempt here is to codify and regularize what is essentially ineffable. However, we know that we are getting closer to the truth, because this man, at least, knows that

Zaabalawi is still alive. He recognizes that Zaabalawi has no permanent residence, for he cannot be captured and pinned down. The prayer of supplication which the Sheikh offers is the first time any one of our narrator's erstwhile helpers has mentioned God. This is fortuitous, for immediately following this ejaculation (please pardon my Christianizing of such spontaneous prayer, but Sufism has no term for this; it is not a Sufi practice or discipline), he offers our narrator this advice: "Look carefully in the cafes, the places where the dervishes perform their rites, the mosques and the prayer rooms and the Green Gate, for he may well be concealed among the beggars and be indistinguishable from them." In mentioning the dervishes, the Sheikh has introduced one of the great strands of Sufism, and alluded to *Hadhra*, one of the five major Sufi practices. But again, the Sheikh is a political leader, a field hardly concerned with the momentary, but rather interested in creating institutions which will last.

A calligrapher is the next stop for the narrator, and here we move closer to the capture of the present moment. This artist illustrates passages from the *Qur'an*, or embellishes the name of god. The narrator interrupts him at his easel, only to find that Zaabalawi has not been to see him in a long time. However, we also see that Zaabalawi has been the inspiration for the artist's most beautiful creations. Here, in the realm of art, beyond politics or commerce or law, we are coming closer to Zaabalawi's true residence. Of course, we run into a great contradiction, concerning the timelessness of art, but I'd like to address that below.

It's not until the narrator meets Sheikh Gad, the composer, that we get great detail about the absent mystic. And here, with the musician, in the evanescence of music, we learn the most about him. We could take Schopenhauer's approach, where music is the most pure expression of the Universal Will, and it analogously reflects, within its harmony, melodies, rhythm and meter, the structure of the physical world. This will serve to illustrate the great power of music, but it does

not address why Mahfouz places it here, near the core of our narrator's experience. Ernst Roth, the great music publisher, offers an explanation as to why this is so:

The musical score, or whatever the graphic representation of music may be called, does not constitute the work in the same simple sense as a canvas or a printed page constitutes a visual or literary work. This is the fundamental difference between music and the other arts: its glory and, if you will, its tragedy. Recreation is not a mechanical process, just as a good cookery book is not a guarantee of good cooking. "The real beauty of music cannot be put down on paper," wrote Liszt, and this is not only true of beauty. Neither can the real meaning be laid down once and for all, as in the other arts; it must be guessed at or sensed. There is a void, a space, left in every work of music, which must be filled by the re-creator. (Preface)

This recognition of the presentness of music, of the existence of music only in the now, is Mahfouz's first use of the mystical state. Music, then, is both in time and out of it. You cannot find it in the past or the future, only in the present. When you think on it, you are not thinking on music, but only on your experience of it, your memory of it. We have moved from law to commerce to politics to calligraphy to music, and at every step we have come closer to the evanescent, and the ineffable. If we don't get it, Sheikh Gad rams the point home by stating that Zaabalawi himself "is the epitome of things musical."

The Drunk Scene

Sheikh Gad gives the narrator one final lead: the Star Bar, and Hagg Wanas, or the man who would be your friend. Wanas, through his

actions, reaffirms Mahfouz's recognition of the Sufi tradition. A good Muslim, one who follows the jurists mentioned above, would never consume alcohol. And yet Sufism recognizes drunkenness as one of the major analogies for spiritual ecstasy.

Our study bears close attention to this passage, so I must quote it extensively:

He filled me a glass, which I meekly took and drank. No sooner had the wine settled in my stomach than it seemed to ignite. I waited patiently until I had grown used to its ferocity, and said, "It's very strong, and I think the time has come for me to ask you about . . .

He filled up my glass for the second time. I glanced at it in trepidation, then, overcoming my inherent objection, I drank it down at a gulp. No sooner had the wine come to rest inside me than I lost all willpower. With the third glass, I lost my memory, and with the fourth the future vanished. The world turned round about me, and I forgot why I had gone there. The man leaned toward me attentively, but I saw him – saw everything – as a mere meaningless series of colored planes. . . . I was in a state of deep contentedness, of ecstatic serenity. There was an extraordinary sense of harmony between me and my inner self, and between the two of us and the world, everything being in its rightful place, without discord or distortion. . . . the universe moved in a rapture of ecstasy.

The process of drunkenness here mirrors exactly the *scala perfectionis*. The first thing our narrator loses is his will. This loss of the seat of desire is the ultimate achievement of the Purgative Life. Next he loses his memory, or past, and then loses his future, another aspect of

desire. It is in the eternal present, the timeless Now, that the narrator is finally available to experience the Divine. He has become disponible. The effects are obviously ineffable. Mahfouz's eye for detail has left him here, and we end up with nebulous statements that would not seem out of place in a work like *The Cloud of Unknowing* or Julian of Norwich's *Showings*. The narrator has achieved inner harmony, and harmony between himself and the world. Even though he still suffers, there is no discord or distortion. The universe is enraptured, the drop has returned to the ocean, the spark of the self is immolated in the Divine fire. Yes, the human condition still exists. We are still born, and we still die. This is the disease for which there is no cure, as much as we desire one. And so, in the face of his urgent desire to find Zaabalawi again, our narrator can finally utter, with Julian of Norwich, the mystical truth that

all will be well
and all will be well
and every kind of thing will be well.
(225)

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