Hermeneutics and Sufi Texts:
A Literary Analysis of the Sufi Poetry inThe *Dīwān* of ʿUmar Ibn al-Fāriḍ (576-632 AH/ 1181-1235 AD)

By

Dr. Shaimaa Mohamed Mohamed Hassanin

Lecturer in English Literature, Horus University- Egypt.

drshaimaa.hassanin@gmail.com

Dr. Ahmed Hasan Anwar Hasan

Associate Professor of Islamic Philosophy and Sufism, Faculty of Arts, Port Said University, Egypt.

ahmed5658103@yahoo.com

Prof. Giuseppe Scattolin

Professor of Islamic Sufism at PISAI (The Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies) Rome, Italy.

scatt68@hotmail.com

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Abstract:

The present paper offers a new approach to the poetry of the Egyptian Sufi poet ʿUmar Ibn al-Fāriḍ (576-632AH/ 1181-1235AD). This approach is based on the text of Ibn al- Fāriḍ's Great Sufi Poem, *al-Tā'iyyat al-kubrā*, in which the poet has expressed in full his spiritual experience.

First, the basic hermeneutical question is discussed, e.g., what is the way of approaching a literary text in order to understand the experience of the poet? In the present paper, we deal with a Sufi text and its context. We deal, first of all, with the basic relationship between text and experience. To what extent does the author express his inner world in verbal expressions? In the end, we find that there is always a distance between the interior experience of a Sufi and his verbal expression.

Then we find the three steps one has to cross in order to reach the final understanding of the text through the 'fusion of horizons' proposed by Gadamer, in which an understanding of the poet's experience is achieved, these are:

- The contextual or the synchronic level.
- The historical or the diachronic level.
- The meta-historical or the transcendental level.

Finally, this method is applied to the poetry of Ibn al-Fāriḍ. Ibn al-Fāriḍ describes his Sufi experience as a journey that goes through three steps: from separation (*farq*) to unity (*ittiḥād*) to universal union (*ǧamʿ*).

On such a partition, ten basic units are highlighted, forming the structure of the Ibn al-Fāriḍ's Sufi poem. Then, these basic ten units are examined with some quotations taken from each of them. In this way, the reader can have a quite complete picture of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's mystical experience. This is a good premise for a fruitful dialogue among religious experiences, here that of a spiritual experience.

Keywords: ʿUmar Ibn al-Fāriḍ, Sufi Heritage, Mysticism, Sufi Poetry, Hermeneutics.

Dr. Shaimaa Mohamed Mohamed Hassanin
Dr. Ahmed Hasan Anwar Hasan
Prof. Giuseppe Scattolin

الهِرْمِنيوطيقا والنصوص الصوفية
تحليل أدبي للشعر الصوفي في ديوان عمر بن الفارض
(٥٧٦ ـ ٦٣٢هـ/ ١١٨١ ـ ١٢٣٥م)[1]

د. شيماء محمد محمد حسنين

مدرس الأدب الإنجليزي– جامعة حورس– مصر.

د. أحمد حسن أنور حسن

أستاذ مساعد الفلسفة الإسلامية والتصوف– كلية الآداب– جامعة بورسعيد– مصر.

أ.د. جوزيبي سكاتولين

أستاذ التصوف الإسلامي بالمعهد البابوي للدراسات العربية والإسلامية– روما– إيطاليا.

ملخص:

يهدف هذا البحث إلى قراءة ومقاربة هِرْمِنيوطيقة جديدة لقصيدة "**التائيـة الكبرى**" للشـاعر المصـري الصـوفي الشـهير عمـر بـن الفـارض الملقب بــ "**سلطان العاشقين**"، مقاربة تهدف إلى: قراءة وفهم لغتـه ومصطلحاتـه الأدبيـة والصـوفية من

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[1] إيمانًا من المؤلفين بأهمية التكامل بين العلوم الإنسانية يأتي هذا البحث، وهو عمل مشترك بالتساوى بين المؤلفين الثلاثة؛ استغرق العمل فيه مدة تجاوزت عامًا كاملاً، اشترك فيه المؤلفين الثلاثة في تجميع المـادة العلميـة، وكتابـة المقدمـة، واستخلاص النتـائج، وقـام كل مؤلف بمراجعة العناصـر التـي قـام بها زملائـه في العمل، علمًا بأن مرحلة المراجعة استغرقت ثلاثة أشهر كاملة، وقد ركز المؤلف الأول على تخصص (الشعر والأدب)، في حين ركز المؤلفان الثاني والثالث على تخصص (الشعر والتصوف). وتأتي مساهمة كـل مؤلف حسب النقاط التالية:

- كل المؤلفين: المقدمة والنتائج وقائمة المراجع.
- المؤلف الثالث: العنصر رقم (١) ورقم (٢).
- المؤلف الثاني: العنصر رقم (٣) ورقم (٤).
- المؤلف الأول: العنصر رقم (٥).
- المؤلف الأول والثالث: العنصر رقم (٦)، و(من ٧.١ إلى ٧.٣).
- المؤلف الثاني والثالث: (من ٧.٤ إلى ٧.١٠).
- المؤلف الثاني والثالث: العنصر رقم (٨).
- المؤلف الأول: مراجعة لغوية متخصصة لكامل الورقة البحثية.
- المؤلف الثاني والثالث: مراجعة فنية متخصصة لكامل الورقة البحثية.

ومن الضروري الإشارة: أنه لولا اشتراك المؤلفين معًا لما خرج هذا البحث (باللغة الإنجليزية) بهذا الشكل، خاصة بعد قيامنا برصد المصطلحات الصوفية، ثم ترجمتها إلى اللغة الإنجليزيـة، ثم توحيد طريقة الترجمة لهذه المصطلحات، ولنا أن نتذكر أن لغة عمر بن الفارض لغـة صعبة ومعقدة حتى في نصوصها الأصلية باللغة العربية.

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ناحيـة، والبنيـة الأدبيـة والصـوفية للقصيدة مـن ناحيـة ثانيـة، وصـولا إلى اسـتخلاص
مراحل رحلتـه الصـوفية مـن ناحية ثالثة. ومن المعروف أن هذه القصيدة قد أخذت عـدة
مسميات في التراث الصوفي الأدبي منهـا: **"نَظْمُ السُّلُوك"**، و **"التَّائِيَّة الكُبْرَى"** ومن
الملاحـظ أنهـا أطـول قصيدة شـعرية صـوفية فـي التراث الصـوفي الكلاسيكي المدون
باللغة العربية حتى نهاية القرن العاشر الهجري، حيث تتكون القصيدة من ٧٦١ بيتًا
شـعريًا تأتـي في قافيـة شـعرية سـميت بـ **"التَّائِيَّة"**، وقد عبَّر الشـاعر فيهـا بصـياغة أدبيـة
ذوقية وفريدة عن تجربته الصوفية على أكمل وجه.

وفي ضـمن أهداف الورقة البحثية اكتشاف وإبـراز الكلمـة المركزيـة (-focus
word) للقصيدة كلهـا، ممـا قـد يـؤدي إلـى اكتشـاف عـددٍ مـن الكلمـات المحوريـة
(pivotal words) التـي سيتأسـس عليهـا بنيـة الخبرة الروحيـة والصـوفية للشـاعر،
وسنكتشف كيف سيتشكل وينتظم المعجم الدلاليُ للقصيدة كلها مما سيؤدي إلى الكشف
عن رؤية المؤلف/ الشاعر في وحدتها وتماسكها الداخلي.

وترتبط **الفرضية الأساسية** للدراسـة **بـالمنهج المستخدم**، وكأنهمـا وجهـان
لعملـة واحدة، فكيف يمكن الاعتمـاد على الهِرْمِنيوطيقا كآليـة منهجيـا لمقاربـة النص
الأدبي الصوفي بهدف فهم التجربـة الروحيـة والصـوفية للشـاعر؟ وكيف يمكن قراءة
نص تراثي قديم كتب منذ أكثر من سبعة قرون بمنهج حداثي هيرمنيوطيقي؟ دون
إسقاط آية مصطلحات أو مفاهيم لا تحتملها لغة عمر بن الفارض الصوفية.

وقد جاءت أبرز **نتائج البحث** في اكتشاف أن القصيدة تتكون من عشر
وحدات أساسية أدت بتجمعها إلى تشكيل مراحل الخبرة الروحيـة عند ابن الفارض، ثم
كشفت النتائج عن أن مصطلح (**الأنا**) هو **"الكلمة البُؤرة"** (focus word) في كامل
المعجم الدلالي للقصيدة، وأن حركـة (**أنـا**) الشـاعر تـأتي علـى شـكل **"سـفَر"** متعدد
المراحل والأهداف، يتجه فيه الشاعر إلى أعماق الـ**"أنـا"**، كي يرتفع منهـا إلى عاليات
الجمع وصـولاً إلى التحقق بـ **"النـور المحمدي"**. كما يثبت الشاعر أن الـ**"أنـا"**، أو
"ذاته"، كان حاضرًا في الأزليـة عند أخذ ميثـاق الـولاء والشـهادة لله بالربوبيـة، حيث
كان الجمع تامًا بين المخاطِب (أَلَسْتُ) والمخاطَب (بَلَى) بغير فصل أو فرق (*التائية
الكبرى* ٤٩٥ـ ٤٩٦). وفي هذا الموقف إشارة واضحة إلى الآيـة القرآنيـة الكريمـة:
﴿وَإِذْ أَخَذَ رَبُّكَ مِنْ بَنِي آدَمَ مِنْ ظُهُورِهِمْ ذُرِّيَّتَهُمْ وَأَشْهَدَهُمْ عَلَى أَنْفُسِهِمْ أَلَسْتُ بِرَبِّكُمْ
قَالُوا بَلَى شَهِدْنَا أَنْ تَقُولُوا يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ إِنَّا كُنَّا عَنْ هَذَا غَافِلِينَ﴾ [سورة الأعراف، الآيـة:
١٧٢].

الكلمات المفتاحية: عمر بن الفارض، الشعر الصوفي، التصوف، التأويل.

Dr. Shaimaa Mohamed Mohamed Hassanin
Dr. Ahmed Hasan Anwar Hasan
Prof. Giuseppe Scattolin

Introduction:

ʿUmar Ibn al–Fāriḍ (d. 632 AH/ 1235 AD) is a well–known poet in the Arabic Islamic Sufi and literary milieu. For his unprecedented lofty poetic expression of the Divine Love, the Egyptian Sufi poet was deservedly called *sulṭān al–ʿašiqīn* (i.e., the Prince of Lovers). A careful reading of his poetry shows that love is not the essential theme of his Sufi poetic experience, though it seems so, and that his poetry hides more secrets than it tells. This is why the grandeur of his love mystique has probably driven many ancient commentators and modern researchers to approach his difficult and mysterious language; in fact, there are numerous explanations and studies on Ibn al–Fāriḍ's poetry, trying to decipher its meaning. Correspondingly, the present study adopts the hermeneutical and semantic approach in order to highlight the meanings of words in the direct context of the text without recalling the 'foreign' readings, if any. The present researchers, thus, focus on some significant results of their own research work on Ibn al–Fāriḍ's *Dīwān*, especially those related to their hermeneutical analysis of "*al–Tā'iyyat al–Kubrā,*" so that they should call for a new approach of comprehending and analyzing Sufi texts in general.

Ibn al-Fāriḍ's Sufi poetry has already been the subject of plentiful serious debates between his commentators and researchers throughout history. They are triggered because of the lack of a clear–cut method of analysis, suitable for reading and understanding Ibn al-Fāriḍ's Sufi poetry. Countless awkward meanings have been ascribed to him through his poetry by his commentators and researchers' unjustified readings, about which he is not guilty. Three reasons could explain the misreading dilemma, however. Firstly, Ibn al–Fāriḍ, to the

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best of the researchers' knowledge, wrote nothing but his collection of poems to distill his Sufi experience. Secondly, biographies and data about his life are very few, let alone untrustworthy. Thirdly, his poetic language proves vague and/or mysterious, as mystical as Sufi (i.e., mystical) experience ought to be.

Even worse, the disciples of al–*šayḫ* al–akbar Ibn al–ʿArabī (d. 638 AH/ 1240 AD) incorporated their master's ideas and terminology into their explanations of Ibn al–Fāriḍ's poetry in a manner that projected Ibn al–ʿArabī's Sufi theory onto Ibn al–Fāriḍ's poem "*al–Tā'iyyat al–Kubrā*." That method was widely adopted by Ibn al–ʿArabī's school to enrich the Sufi tradition with insights and ideas and to attribute them all to the big canonical works of their master. Consequently, Ibn al–Fāriḍ's Sufi experience risked losing its particular identity and genuine vision when explained and comprehended in Ibn al–ʿArabī's Sufi terms and vision, not in Ibn al–Fāriḍ's counterparts. Ibn al–Fāriḍ's poems gradually became merely a pre–text, or just a chance for Ibn al–ʿArabī's disciples to elaborate on their master's vision, regardless of the context of discourse and its compatibility with those meanings imposed on them.

Here comes the significance of re–reading Ibn al–Fāriḍ's poems in general, and his masterpiece "*al–Tā'iyyat al–Kubrā*," in particular. A clear and specific approach should, thus, help reveal his special Sufi poetic language that unveiled his experience, his central terms, the conceptual meaning of love and its various levels in "*al–Tā'iyyat al–Kubrā*," and the main phases of his Sufi journey in his masterpiece poem. Careful not to impose a particular interpretation on the text, the present researchers seek to avoid projecting their viewpoints onto the text at hand, so as not to slip into the same vicious circle of many ancient and modern studies.

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1. A Biography of ʿUmar Ibn al–Fāriḍ (576–632 AH/ 1181–1235 AD)

Šaraf al–Dīn Abū Ḥafṣ, or Abū al–Qasim, ʿUmar Ibn Abī al–Ḥasan ʿAlī Ibn al–Muršid Ibn ʿAlī al–Ḥamawī (i.e., Syrian) al–Maṣrī (i.e, Egyptian) was born in Cairo on 4 Ḏu l–Qaʿda, 576 AH/ 1181 AD. He is Ḥamawī by origin, yet Egyptian by birth, life, and death. All who have translated his biography agreed that his name was ʿUmar, his nickname Abū Ḥafṣ or, according to some other sources, Abū al–Qāsim, his title Šaraf al–Dīn, and family name Abī al–Ḥasan ʿAlī Ibn al–Muršid Ibn ʿAlī. He descended from a family that was proud of their lineage to Banū Saʿd, which was the tribe of Ḥalīmat al–Saʿdiyyat, the breastfeeding nurse of Islam Prophet Muḥammad (Scattolin and Hasan, 2008, p. 503).

ʿUmar Ibn al–Fāriḍ witnessed the Ayyūbid Sultans' glorious events. He grew up in Egypt in the blooming days of the heroic leader King Ṣalādin al–Ayyūbī, al–Nāṣir Ṣalādin Yūsuf Ibn Ayyūb (d. 589 AH/ 1193 AD). He lived there under the reign of King al–Kāmil Nāṣir al–Dīn Muḥammad Ibn Sayf al–Dīn Ahmad al–Ayyūbī (Ṣalādin's brother), who was called henceforth al–Malik al–Kāmil al–Ayyūbī (d. 635 AH/ 1238 AD). During his last four years in Cairo, Ibn al–Fāriḍ became so famous as a Sufi and a poet throughout Egypt that he attracted al–Malik al–Kāmil's attention. Then, he died many years before the fall of the Ayyūbid at the hands of the Mamlūks (Scattolin, 2013, p. 406).

His father ʿAlī Abū al–Ḥasan, as reported, was originally Syrian, from the Syrian city Ḥamāt (cf. Ḥamawī, Ibn al–Fāriḍ's family name). When he settled in Cairo, he worked as a jurist, especially responsible for proving women's *furūḍ* (i.e., shares) or inheritance rights from men, until he assumed the Juri Consultancy and was known as al–Fāriḍ, after which his son was nicknamed Ibn al–Fāriḍ. ʿAlī Abū al–Ḥasan was, then, asked to assume the highest position of

judging and be the chief judge in Egypt, but preferred to devote himself to God in *ḫalwa* (i.e., long periods of retreat) at Dar al–Ḥaṭābat (i.e., the House of Preachers or the speech hall) of al–Azhar Mosque until he passed away (Scattolin and Hasan, 2008, p. 504).

These incidents indicate that the scientific and Sufi life was not strange to Ibn al–Fāriḍ's family. His father, after all, was a man of knowledge and piety, preferring asceticism and seclusion to such delights of life as fame and prestige. Indeed, he was introduced into the Sufi way of life by his father, who always leaded him in *siyāḥa* (i.e., spiritual wandering) and *ḫalwa* over there at al–Muqattam hills, east of Cairo, and who initiated him into the religious sciences of the time (Scattolin and Hasan, 2008, p. 504).

ʿAlī, *sibṭ* (i.e., son of a daughter) of Ibn al–Fāriḍ, recorded in his Preamble to his grandfather's *Dīwān* that the poet began his Sufi journey early. In effect, Ibn al–Fāriḍ used to go up to Wādī al–Mustaḍʿafīn in al–Muqattam hills, and then to return from his trip to his father, who used to oblige his son to sit with him in circles of judgment and learning.

Ibn al–Fāriḍ was also taught hadith by the Shāfi'ite scholar Abū Muḥammad al–Qāsim Ibn ʿAlī Ibn ʿAsākir al–Dimašqī (d. 600 AH/ 1203 AD), one of the great hadith scholars of his time (Scattolin, 1999, p. 122). That was how Ibn al–Fāriḍ belonged to the Shāfi'ite school of thought, and nicknamed al–Shāfi'ī.

It was also reported that Ibn al–Fāriḍ got the idea of going to Mecca, the center of Islamic life, from a mysterious *šayḫ* (i.e., spiritual guide) named al–Baqqāl who told him once they met that there he would get the *fatḥ* (i.e., revelation) of Divine Reality, the ultimate goal of the Sufi life. He could also have met the great Andalusian Sufi master al–*šayḫ* al–akbar Ibn al–ʿArabī (d. 638 AH/ 1240 AD) when he passed by Egypt on his journey to the East (around

598 AH/ 1201 AD), though later accounts argued that they did not meet. A young novice trainee under his father's guidance as he was, Ibn al–Fāriḍ should have been influenced by al–šayḫ al–akbar (Scattolin, 2013, p. 407).

Typical of Sufi traditions, he stayed at the Holy City of Mecca for about fifteen years, seeking the divine revelation that he had not attained in Egypt. He lived there among the valleys of Mecca for approximately fifteen years. Perhaps he went there twice, once when he was in the thirties (613 AH/ 1216 AD), and then when he was in the fifties of his spiritual maturity (628 AH/ 1231 AD). His relevant poems clearly reflect how far he was influenced by the experience of living where Prophet Muḥammad lived and where the prophetic inspiration was granted; in the minor poems, in particular, he frequently mentioned the Hijaz locations in a bitter tone of nostalgia and longing (Scattolin, 2004, p. 2).

Back to Cairo, Ibn al–Fāriḍ kept to Dar al–Ḫaṭābat of al–Azhar Mosque as a devoted secluded worshipper, just as his father had done before. It was then when he managed to compose and dictate his Dīwān in full. Among his best poems is "Naẓm al–Sulūk," or, with reference to its rhyme, "al–Tā'iyyat al–Kubrā" that is recorded as his longest (761 verse lines) and his Sufi masterpiece manifesto. Nothing else is written by Ibn al–Fāriḍ; no treatises or books to unfold his Sufi way have been found to date (Scattolin, 2013, p. 407).

Four years after his return to Egypt, however, he died fifty–four years old, exactly on Tuesday, the second of Ǧumādā l–Ūulā, 632 AH/ 1235 AD. He was buried the next day in Qarāfat, at the foot of al–Muqattam hills, by the stream bed, beneath a place on the mountain known as al–ʿĀrid, where his tomb is notably located to become a famous shrine since then (Scattolin and Hasan, 2008, p. 504).

One of the truest things written about Ibn al–Fāriḍ is that the

verses written by his grandson ʿAli (d. 735 AH/ 1335 AD), about a century after the death of his grandfather in remembrance and glorification of him, indicate the depth of his Sufi experience and the transcendence of its hidden meanings:

> Pass by the cemetery at the foot of al–ʿĀriḍ,
>
> Say: Peace upon you, Ibn al–Fāriḍ!
>
> You have shown in your *Naẓm al–Sulūk* marvels
>
> And revealed a deep, well–guarded mystery.
>
> You have drunk from the cup of love and friendship,
>
> And quaffed from a bounteous, unlimited Ocean.
> (Scattolin, 2004, P. 9)

Generally, Ibn al–Fāriḍ's poetry has even been a subject of admiration and interest for researchers, whether Arabs or non–Arabs, down here in the East or over there in the West. For centuries, researchers have attempted many commentaries, explanations, constructions, and studies to decipher the secrets of Ibn al–Fāriḍ's Sufi experience, such that the present account could not list, let alone present in detail.

Ibn al–Fāriḍ is, by all means, a mature *šayḫ*, with special spiritual guidance. He undertook a long painstaking spiritual journey of strict Sufi training until he came home safe as a great spiritual figure, skilfully incorporating his Sufi *ḏawq* (i.e., taste) for spiritual realities with his poetic *ḏawq* (i.e., sense) of beauty. By that perfect blending, he profoundly perceived the Divine Beauty in all the manifestations around him, and artistically expressed his Sufi experience of responding to it in his outstanding Dīwān.

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2. The Hermeneutical Question: Text and Experience.

Understanding any literary text is a difficult task. A distance always lies between our epistemological world and that of its author. Overcoming such a distance means undertaking a risky but inescapable journey from our spiritual world to that of the author, and vice-versa from the author's spiritual world to ours. This is a dangerous, but necessary travel, if we want to understand the other's world. One must try, to enter into the author's epistemological world as well as to make the author's epistemological world enter into ours so as to achieve some understanding of the author's mind. Such a work or, say, such a travel, is what is meant by hermeneutics. Hermeneutics, in fact, is the way of going through such a perilous journey between different epistemological worlds or spiritual horizons, trying to reach what one of the greatest hermeneutics of our time, Hans-Georg Gadamer (d. 2002), calls 'the fusion of horizons'. (Gadamer, 2013, p.2)

In modern and contemporary philosophy, hermeneutics has been given increasing attention to become a central issue in all fields of human expression. Many prominent thinkers have worked on such an important topic and have developed new insights into it. Some of the well-known names in this field are Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), Wilhelm Dilthey (1883-1911), Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005), Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), and others. As a consequence, hermeneutics has become a central topic in all sciences, even the so-called positive, experimental sciences, such as physics, chemistry and others. These used to rely almost exclusively on the mathematical-experimental method, but now they too have become concerned with hermeneutics in order to have a fuller understanding of their achievements.

In the light of such new hermeneutical insights, it has become clearer that not only 'translating' a text always means 'interpreting' it (or 'betraying it', as a well-known saying points out), but all our human acts, such as reading, thinking, talking, etc. are actually 'interpretive acts', namely hermeneutical approaches to reality. Through such acts, in fact, we try to have hold of and appropriate the exterior reality, i.e., everything that lies outside our own self and across which we come in our experience, and to 'translate' it into our own inner world of concepts, feelings and words, a world familiar and comprehensible to us. The whole human process of understanding and knowledge, but the whole of human activity as such, are now seen and understood as a fundamental hermeneutical approach to reality, an approach always encumbered with a number of problematics. From such an understanding of the human condition, one may conclude that the famous definition of human being, given by the great Greek philosopher Aristotle (m. 322 B.C.), as a *logikòs* being, i.e., a being that 'thinks', can, but should be re-worded in a more comprehensive one we suggest here: the human being is essentially a 'hermeneutical being', i.e., a being that must translate reality, i.e., whatever exists and comes across in his experience, into his own world in order to understand it.

Thus, human being appears to be the great and central 'interpreter' of the whole reality. Here, we join some of the deepest insights about the ontological constitution of the human being, found in many ancient and modern thinkers. This is also the final vision of human being proposed by one the greatest modern philosophers of hermeneutics, Martin Heidegger (m. 1976), who defined human language as 'the house of Being'. Being expresses itself through *logos* as thought, and finds its dwelling house in human *logos*, as word.

In light of all these epistemological developments, one has to overcome first of all the naive idea that a text is the simple and

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straight mirror of the author's inner world, words representing a direct expression of the author's vision so that understanding the literal meaning of a text automatically one understands the author's mind. Further, one has to overcome also the romantic idea of an ʿinnate link' or a 'direct correspondence' between the reader and the author (or, say, the author's spirit), so that by simply relying on one's own personal inner intuition or empathy, one can perceive and understand the author's interior mind, as if through direct inspiration from him/her (or, say, the author's 'spirit'), reaching in this way to the true meaning of the mystical text.

We have now become much more aware that such an approach actually finds only one's own inner world projected into the text, not the author's actual vision and mind. Approaches like these are still very common among many amateurish readers of Sufism, as well as of mysticism in general. Those readers easily jump from one author to another, from one current to another, finding everywhere the same visions and experiences, and whatever else they want to find in it. But even in reading some scholarly and serious works on Sufism one is often led to ask: on what ground has the scholar chosen such a text to support his/her viewpoint? Is it just out of personal intuition and taste, or because such text proves to be of primary importance in the context of that particular Sufi's work? In any case, such a claim should be proved and not merely presumed. Finally, one has to avow that very rarely a satisfying answer is given to such questioning on the part of scholars. It appears clear that there is a necessity of fixing some basic principles for a hermeneutic reading of Sufi texts.

In fact, one finds now quite a large consensus among scholars on the obvious fact that we can have no access to the author's inner world or vision but through the actual text that has come to us from him/her, and in no other way. Respect for the ʿobjectivity' of the text is seen now as the first and fundamental step for any hermeneutical

work. All exterior information may be helpful in knowing something about his/her life and time, but, eventually, the basic reference remains the text itself. Moreover, modern hermeneutics has shown that every literary text has its own inner cohesion and structure that must be respected. Each term is linked with the other terms in specific relationships intended by its author, and only in them does a given term or expression acquire the true and full meaning it had in the author's mind. Consequently, in order to understand a text, it is very important to find out first of all its inner structure, the position each term holds in it, the way they are connected and related to each other, finding out the particular meaning they gain in such relationships inside the sequence or, say, the texture of the whole text. Thus, clarifying the linguistic structure of a text appears to be the first and basic step to be taken in order to have access to its contents, and finally (and only 'in some way', one should always add) to the inner world or mind of the author. In fact, only in their semantic network of relationships words and linguistic expressions can be read and understood, approaching, as far as possible, the meaning they had in the mind of the author when composing the text.

Moreover, one has to consider that every author is part of a historical context. Therefore, his/her language unavoidably becomes an expression of a historical linguistic situation. Such a point has become of the greatest importance in modern hermeneutics. Ibn al-Fāriḍ, for example, has not invented the Sufi language, but he has received it from its linguistic tradition, interacting with it to express his particular vision and experience. Thus, one should try, as far as possible, to rebuild the author's historical context and his/her interaction with it in order to get a better perception of the dimensions and, possibly, the originality of his/her experience and vision.

As, previously mentioned, hermeneutics has made us all the more aware of the fact that a human being is always a 'historical

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being', living, developing and interacting within a particular historical situation in which it must be understood. To achieve this purpose, a sound hermeneutical approach should lead at the end to the so-called 'fusion of horizons', the author's and ours, to use Gadamer's famous expression, crossing over historical distance. At this point, one can say that the journey to and from the author's spiritual world has been accomplished and communication between the two worlds has been established. Nonetheless, one should be always aware of the fact that such a 'fusion of horizons' will never be total. Actually, one finds him/herself in a work of continuous 're-interpretation' of texts, as if in a spiraling growth of understanding and comprehension of them, because our horizons of comprehension become ever wider and deeper every time we read them. This is what has been called by Friedrich Schleiermacher the 'hermeneutical circle', in which the comprehension of a text grows through a continuous re-reading of it in its totality and in its parts. (Schleiermacher, 1959, p.4). It has been in such hermeneutical perspective of continual re-interpretation of the spiritual world, i.e., the vision and experience, of the great Egyptian Sufi poet ʿUmar Ibn al-Fāriḍ (d. 632/1235), well known for his enigmatic and obscure language, that my work has taken place. The purpose here was not that of discussing hermeneutical questions in abstract, but to touch upon some hermeneutical issues through the work carried out on Ibn al-Fāriḍ's Sufi poems:

"Pass by the cemetery at the foot of al ʿĀriḍ,

Say: Peace upon you, oh Ibn al-Fāriḍ!

You have shown in your *Naẓm al-sulūk* marvels

and revealed a deep, well-guarded mystery.

You have drunk from the cup of love and friendship,

and quaffed from a bounteous, unlimited Ocean".
(Scattolin, 2004, P. 9)

These verses are read on the tomb (*ḍarīḥ*) of Ibn al-Fāriḍ, located at the foot of al-Muqaṭṭam mountain, East of Cairo, which is still an attractive center for his devotees, particularly on his feast (*mawlid*). The verses quoted above point to a mystery that surrounded Ibn al-Fāriḍ's Sufi experience during his lifetime and that still lingers in the beautiful verses of his poems. Such mystery hovering over the verses of the Egyptian Sufi has drawn the interest of many ancient commentators as well as several modern scholars. Among the firsts are to be mentioned Saʿīd al-Dīn al-Farġānī (d. 699AH/ 1300AD), ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Kāšānī (d. 730AH/ 1330AD), Dāwūd b. Muḥammad al-Qayṣarī (d. 751AH/ 1350AD). Badr al-Dīn al-Būrīnī (d. 1024AH/ 1615AD) and ʿAbd al- Ġānī al-Nābulusī (d. 1143AH/ 1731AD). Among the most outstanding modern scholars who dealt with Ibn al-Fāriḍ's mystical poetry are: Ignazio Di Matteo and Carlo Alfonso Nallino, in Italy; Reynold Alleyne Nicholson and Arthur John Arberry, in England; Louis Gardet, in France; Muḥmmad Muṣṭafā Ḥilmī, ʿĀṭif Ǧawdat Naṣr, and ʿAbd al- Ḫāliq Maḥmūd ʿAbd al-Ḫāliq, in Egypt.

In reading these commentaries or studies on Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poems one finds that an important question has been raised time and again, a question considered a classical one in Islamic Sufism: Which kind of mystical union is the one described in Ibn al-Fāriḍ's mystical poems? Is it a sort of ontological monism, designated by the classical formula *waḥdat al-wuǧūd*, (i.e., union of being or existence), of which Ibn al-ʿArabī (m. 638AH/ 1240AD) is accredited to be the most outstanding representative? Or is it only a psychological union, at the level of mystical state (*ḥāl*), denoted by the other classical formula *waḥdat al-šuhūd* (i.e., the union of vision), which is found in many Sufis, like al-Ḥallāǧ? Different answers have been given to such a question.

3. The Sufi Approach: Experience and Language.

In dealing with a Sufi text, "one has to have some acquaintance with the Sufi language, its formation, and its complexity." (Gilliot, 2002, p.110) The Sufi language, in fact, developed in the course of history into a vocabulary of its own, reaching a great degree of symbolism, understood many times only by those initiated into it. Therefore, some general traits of Sufi linguistic development must be outlined here, offering a general overview of its scope. The Koranic text has been from the very beginning the center of Muslim life. From the beginning of Islamic history, understanding the Koranic text has been a main concern for Muslim scholars, and its exegesis (*tafsīr*) has been a major issue for them. (Massignon, 1999, P.104) In the same way, the Koranic text has been the starting point of the Sufi experience and language. This fact is now generally accepted by scholars, East and West. Louis Massignon (d. 1962) rightly pointed to the important role the continuous recitation (*tilāwa*) of the Koranic text, its interiorization (*istinbāṭ*) through repetition and meditation played a great role in the life of the first Muslim ascetic circles, similar in this to the practice of the *lectio continua* (the continuous reading of Scripture) of Christian monks. (Nwyia, 1970, pp. 312-313)

On his part, Paul Nwyia, while agreeing with Massignon on the importance of the technique of *istinbāṭ*, underlines also the weight personal experience (*taǧrība*, *ḏawq*) had as a way for Sufis to 'delve' into the Koranic text in search of its deepest meanings. Sufi language, he says, has been born out of a lived experience, in which words and realities are reconciled, and images and symbols are continuously re-created by ever-new experiences. In his view, Sufis much more than poets and scholars managed to create a true language of experience. (Nwyia, 1968, pp. 181-230) Nonetheless, in the formation of Sufi experience and language, one has to take into account some external influence, particularly from Middle Eastern Christian and Gnostic

milieus with which Sufis, according to many historical records, had a constant exchange. These points, after past disputations, are now commonly accepted by scholars.

In the light of such an approach to the Koranic text, new insights developed called by Sufis, one of the most important being 'the knowledge of hearts' (*ʿilm al-qulūb*). Inner introspection of the human soul found great interest in the Sufi circles leading to a new science, that of spiritual 'stations and states' (*māqmāt wa-aḥwāl*), such as *riḍā* (satisfaction), *tawakkul* (trust), *ṣabr,* (patience), *ḫawf* (fear), *waraʿ* (scrupulosity), *ḥubb* (love), etc. Such Sufi introspection, however, was not carried out on the basis of pure psychological analysis, as in modern science. In Sufi introspection, the psychological analysis is always done in the light of the Book of God, the Koran, which is in their view the real guide for human behavior and the perfect mirror of the secrets of the human soul. From such exploration of human interiority, a rich spiritual vocabulary was developed in Sufi literature, particularly in the Sufi treatises on spiritual stations and states. (*Massignon*, 1922, p. 4)

Sufi language developed also in other two important directions. The first is the science of letters *(ǧafr)*, dealing with the symbolic meaning of letters; the second is the language of love (*ḥubb*), which took the traditional love images of Arabic love literature as symbols for Sufi love. Such developments appeared already quite clear in Sufi authors of the III/IX c., such as Abū l-Ḥasan al-Nūrī (d. 295AH/ 907AD), al-Ḥusayn al-Ḥallāǧ (d. 309AH/ 922AD), al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmiḏī (d. 320AH/ 932AD), later on in Abū Ḥāmid al-Ġazālī (d. 505AH/ 1111AD) and others. In this way, Sufis managed to create a special language, full of inner allusions (*išārāt*), that only the people of the 'way' (*sulūk*, *ṭarīqa*) could understand. Such symbolic language grew into very elaborate skills through which Sufis could express and conceal at the same time their personal experiences (*mawaǧīd*), inner

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knowledge (*maʿārif*) and revelations (*mukāšafāt*), avoiding declaring them in an open way and so to be exposed to public condemnation brought upon them by people of the exterior letter (*ẓāhir*), especially the jurists (*fuqahāʾ*).

Sufi hermeneutical effort was taken to its highest level by the 'greatest Sufi master' (*al-šayḫ al-akbar*) Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 638AH/ 1340AD). (Ibn ʿArabī, 1966, pp. 43-44)   Ibn al-ʿArabī, in fact, had a large recourse to symbolic language throughout his enormous literal output, adding new developments and insights. A typical example of his symbolic exegesis is the commentary he wrote on his own collection of love poems (*Tarǧumān al-ašwāq*), which he composed in Mekka, in praise of a beautiful princess he fell in love with. Ibn al-ʿArabī explains every single word of his verses (such as doves, branches, colors, sounds, shapes and nouns of places, etc.) to signify various spiritual states and Divine manifestations. (Scattolin, 1993, p. 331) Ibn al-ʿArabī's example and method were largely followed by his disciples who adopted his exegetical skills to explain all sorts of literary texts, even pre-Islamic poems, charging them with the highest Sufi meanings.

In this way, Ibn al-ʿArabī's school produced a considerable number of commentaries and explanations, enriching the Sufi tradition with new insights and ideas. However, one has to remark that such an exegetical work was always in danger of simply projecting Ibn al-ʿArabī's Sufi vision in all Sufi texts, making them say whatever one wanted from them. In this way, any Sufi text could become just a pre-text in order to express Ibn al-ʿArabī's Sufi views, far beyond the capacity of the textual wording. This was the method Ibn al-ʿArabī's school adopted in its approach to Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poems. The Akbarian symbolic exegesis was taken as the best tool to unravel the secrets of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's Sufi poetry. The most outstanding Akbarian commentators of Ibn al-Fāriḍ are: Saʿīd al-Dīn al-Farġānī (d. 699AH/

1300AD), ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Kāšānī (d. 730AH/ 1330AD), Dāwūd b. Muḥammad al-Qayṣarī (d. 751AH/ 1350AD), Badr al-Dīn al-Būrīnī (d. 1024AH/ 1615AD) and ʿAbd al-Ġanī al-Nābulusī (d. 1143AH/ 1731AD).

At this point, however, a basic question had to be asked, a question that intrigued us in the first approach to Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poems: Does such an Akbarian method reach the real meaning of the poems of an Egyptian Sufi poet, as intended by him? Or doesn't such an Akbarian symbolic approach jeopardize the meaning of Fāriḍian verses projecting into them concepts and ideas foreign to Ibn al-Fāriḍ's vocabulary? This question has become the starting point of the current research and it has become clear through a close exam of one of the most important of those commentaries, the one carried out by Saʿīd al-Dīn al-Farġānī on Ibn al-Fāriḍ's great Sufi poem, *al-Tā'iyyat al-kubrā*. (Scattolin, 1999, 119-148)

Also, a number of modern scholars took a great interest in Ibn al-Fāriḍ's Sufi poetry and tried to shed some light on its understanding. Among them are: Ignazio Di Matteo (d. 1948) and Carlo Alfonso Nallino (d. 1938) in Italy; Reynold Alleyne Nicholson (d. 1945) and Arthur John Arberry (d. 1973) in Britain; Émile Dermenghem (d. 1971), and Louis Gardet (d. 1986) in France; Muḥammad Muṣṭafā Ḥilmī (d. 1969) in Egypt. More recently, other scholars have given important contributions to the Faridian studies, such as: Issa J. Boullata in Canada, Thomas Emil Homerin in the United States, Giuseppe Scattolin in Italy, Jean-Yves l'Hôpital in France, ʿĀṭif Ǧawdat Naṣr and ʿAbd al-Ḫāliq Maḥmūd ʿAbd al-Ḫāliq (d. 2006) in Egypt. (Nicholson, 1921, pp. 166-167)

These studies have surely helped a great deal with a better understanding of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's mystical experience, especially in his historical context. However, Ibn al-Fāriḍ's language has proved to be a particularly complicated and intricate problem for a number of

reasons. Firstly, we don't know very much about the poet's Sufi background. Then, we are left with only his collection of poems (*Dīwān*), and nothing else that could help us in understanding his Sufi vision. In fact, many of these scholars avow that Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poetical language was for them a particularly challenging test. The Italian scholar, Carlo Alfonso Nallino, confessed that for him Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poetical language was "a continuous puzzle"; the British scholar, Reynold Alleyne Nicholson, noted that "much of it is enigmatic to the last degree", as if done so as "to put to the test the cleverness of any reader" (Nicholson,1921, pp. 166-167); and, finally, another British scholar, Arthur John Arberry avows that he found it "a peculiarly stubborn problem" (Arberry, 1952, p. 7).

4. Three Levels of Reading a Sufi Text.

In light of such difficulties and the new hermeneutical insights, mentioned above, it appeared that new ways should be followed in approaching Ibn al-Fāriḍ's Sufi poetry. One has to try first to understand Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poetical and Sufi language as found in the text itself, without projecting into it one's own mind, as was the case of many ancient and modern studies. In other words, one must try first to explain, as far as possible, 'the text through the text itself', before resorting to any 'foreign' terminology and interpretation that could jeopardize the contextual meaning of its terms. In the work, Ibn al-Fāriḍ's great mystical poem, the *Great Tā'iyya* (*al-Tā'iyya al-kubrā*) has been carried out and we tried to find a new hermeneutical approach to his language. (Saussure, 1955, p,11) From the work done, it appears now that three are the basic steps one should go through in reading and interpreting Sufi texts. These steps or levels can be indicated as follows: the contextual or synchronic, the historical or diachronic, the meta-historical or transcendental. (Izutsu, 1964, p.30)

4-1. The contextual or the synchronic level.

The first and basic step to be taken to understand a literary text is the semantic approach to it. The terms of any text must be read first of all in their actual context, in their mutual connections and relationships. They must be situated in their semantic fields in which they are knitted together inside the fabric of the text, from which they draw their basic and truest meanings, providing the key to a faithful understanding of the author's mind and vision. Such semantic analysis should lead in the end to build up the 'semantic vocabulary' of a text. As known, a 'semantic vocabulary' is not just the arithmetical sum of the words of a text, but the sum of its words shown in their contextual relationships and with the meanings they acquire in them. The semantic vocabulary, in fact, shows the way words are organized and interconnected according to the author's inner perception and vision expressed in the fabric or texture of the text. Only on such a semantic basis, one can hope to approach the author's mind and vision, getting near as far as possible to the meaning a certain word, say love (*ḥubb*) , had in his mind when conceiving and composing the text.

Further on, one should try to link together the semantic fields of the text, highlighting their reciprocal relationships through which the general structure of the text is shown. In this way, the inner vision of the author comes to light, a better clarification of his language is achieved, and one gets a closer insight into the author's interior perception and Sufi experience. The final aim of such analytical work is to point out in the end, as much as possible, the central focus word (or maybe a number of pivotal words) around which the whole semantic vocabulary of the text is organized, and through which the author's vision in its inner unity and consistency is shown. The semantic analysis of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's Sufi poem, The *Great Tā'iyya*, has been inspired to a great extent by the semantic approach the Japanese scholar, Toshihiko Izutsu, employed in his study of the Koranic text.

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(Izutsu, 1964, p.31) At the end of his very careful research, T. Izutsu could state that:

> "To say the truth, the word *Allâh* is the highest focus word in the Koranic vocabulary, reigning over the entire domain. And this is nothing but the semantic aspect of what we generally mean by saying that the world of the Koran is essentially theocentric". (Izutsu, 1964, p.35)

In a similar way, at the end of the semantic analysis of the *Great Tā'iyya*, we came to a parallel conclusion finding that the very term *anā* (I, Myself) is the focus word of the whole semantic vocabulary of the poem. Actually, this is the term that presides over all its semantic fields conferring them and the terms knitted in them their specific contextual meaning. Thus, the vocabulary of the *Great Tā'iyya* appears to be essentially *self-* (*anā*, I, Myself)-centric, as much as the Koranic text appears to be essentially *theo-* (*Allāh*, God)-centric. Such a semantic analysis has achieved the basic result of clarifying the vocabulary of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's Sufi poem, highlighting the meaning its terms have in its specific vocabulary through which the poet has expressed his Sufi vision and experience. It has been pointed out above that only through his actual text can one have access to the author's experience. Now, in the light of such a semantic approach, one can have a better insight into Ibn al-Fāriḍ's Sufi vision and experience, avoiding the danger of introducing 'foreign concepts' into it, as has been the case for most of the past commentaries and studies.

Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poetical language presents a serious problem for any reader. It is a quite elaborated and highly enigmatic language which for Nallino was "a continuous puzzle," (Nallino, 1940, p. 193) for Nicholson "it intended to put to test the cleverness of any reader," (Nicholson, 1952, p. 7) and for Arberry was "a particularly stubborn problem". (Arberry, 1952, p. 7). Eventually, one has to face the puzzling problem of trying to grasp the meaning intended by the poet,

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through his elaborated terms and expressions, with only the aid of the text itself. Looking for an outside interpreter is certainly tempting, but this would ultimately jeopardize both a more objective approach to the text as well as a more accurate comprehension of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's personal mystical experience. It seems, therefore, that one has no other alternative than trying to interpret the text of Fāriḍ's poems, as much as possible, through the text itself.

Among the odes of his _dīwān_ a special place must be given to the one entitled _Naẓm al-Sulūk_ (i.e., _The Order of the Way_), commonly known as _al-Tā'iyyat al-kubrā,_ because of its rhyme in _tā'_. With its 761 verses, it occupies a substantial part of the _dīwān_. In this poem Ibn al-Fāriḍ has expressed his mystical vision in the most complete and systematic way and, therefore, it can be considered the very core of the whole _dīwān_ providing the key concepts for its true interpretation. A result of the particular relevance of such an approach has been that of highlighting the role three terms that can be designated as 'key terms' play in the poem. These terms are used by Ibn al-Fāriḍ himself to designate the three main stages of his mystical journey and, thus, they are of particular importance in understanding his Sufi vision.

The Structure of the Poem: Finding a structure in the 761 verses of the Tā'iyya is no easy task. Its verses seem, at first reading, to have been heaped up together with no apparent order. The poet seems to enjoy leaping, without any evident explanation, from the first to the second and to the third person in a very twisted and apparently confusing way. Some attempts at outlining the poem's structure have been made by Nallino, Nicholson and Arberry in their studies. The results, however, do not appear to be satisfactory, as they themselves admit. A clear guiding principle seems to be lacking in such attempts. For this reason, we tried another way following some intuition that came to me reading the text.

Firstly, we tried to point out the passages in which the highest state of the mystical union is described. These must be considered the focus points of the poem. From such a premise, we assumed that the preceding and the following verses must be read either as a preparation or a consequence of that union. In this way, the poem can be divided into ten major sections, which can be further subdivided into smaller units. The subsequent analysis of the text has proved the validity and consistency of such intuition.

As a result of this partition, the main stages of the poet's mystical experience have been highlighted and expressed in the terms the poet himself used in his text. These three stages are:

al-farq **(separation):** at this stage, the poet experiences to be in a state of separation from his Beloved.

al-ittiḥād **(absolute unity):** at this stage, the poet experiences to be in a state of absolute unity with his Beloved, expressed in formulas such as: "I am She" and "She is My-self", ending in absolute self-identity "I am My-self".

al-ğamʿ **(universal union):** at this stage, the poet experiences to be in a state of universal union or synthesis of the One and the Many, the Self (*anā*) and the Whole.

These three stages follow each other and are interwoven in each other in ten units of the poem, in a progressive movement that represents the progressive journey of the poet in the discovery of the dimensions or the true identity of his own self (*anā*). It must be noticed also that the movement of the three stages in the poem is not just horizontal, nor merely ascendant, but actually is like a spiral movement, elevating towards higher stages.

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In this way, it appears that the poet has described his mystical experience in the poem as a sequence of stages that takes the shape of a journey (a quite common concept in the Sufi language), or as a dynamic progression from the state of division and duality to that of the utmost unity, *al-ğamʿ*. The subsequent analysis of his language has clarified the contents of these stages and their basic terms and highlighted their internal coherence. Anyhow, from the proposed partition one can already get an idea of the poem's structure, its linguistic and conceptual contexts in which its terms are situated and must be analyzed. Eventually, the poet claims to have plunged alone into the depths of the most profound level of union, the sea of universal union, because he dared where no previous Sufis dared, and from that all-comprehensive union (*ğamʿ*) he can bestow out his Sufi knowledge to his novice (*murīd*):

> And take (the mystical knowledge) from a sea into which I plunged,
>
> while those of old stopped on its shores, in reverence to me
>
> (Ibn al-Fāriḍ,*al-Tāʾiyyat al-kubrā*, v. 288)

So, that sea of universal union that (*ğamʿ*) clearly appears as the very climax of the poet's mystical journey and experience. This union is to be grasped beyond the rich and large profusion of images, symbols and allusions used by a poet well acquainted with all the tunes and images of Arabic erotic poetry.

4-2. The historical or the diachronic level.

Nonetheless, the semantic or the synchronic approach to a literary text, important as it is, does not yield in full the extent and depth of its vocabulary. The terms and the words of any literary text must also be put in the frame of their historical development. Any language, in fact, and thus every specific domain of it such as 'the Sufi

language', is not a static sum of words constituting a fixed whole that remains unvaried in time. On the contrary, linguistic research shows that each word undergoes a continuous transformation in meaning due to its ever-new usages brought about by changes that constantly take place in its cultural milieu. Not only the single word is continuously changing in meaning, but also the whole semantic system of vocabulary in which such a word is situated is in continual transformation. Actually, the whole vocabulary of any cultural milieu, as well as of every specific domain of it, undergoes a permanent mutation: old elements keep dropping off, and new elements keep coming in. This is the 'history' of a language, a necessary *datum*.

Therefore, in order to fully understand the language of a given author, in our case Ibn al-Fāriḍ, one must try to situate his vocabulary within the history of his specific language. Ibn al-Fāriḍ comes, in fact, at a certain point in the history of the Sufi vocabulary, i.e., in the VII/XIII c. Therefore, his terms and expressions cannot be fully grasped outside their historical development and frame, or, say, outside the author's epistemological horizon. In fact, Ibn al-Fāriḍ proved to be quite knowledgeable of the Sufi literature before him, from which he took a number of his basic concepts and terms. One can easily guess that a comprehensive dictionary of the history of the Sufi language' would be of the greatest utility to such purpose, i.e., to point out to what extent Ibn al-Fāriḍ was innovative or just repetitive compared to previous Sufi tradition. Notwithstanding the lack of such a precious tool, we tried to draw up the broad lines of the historical development of some important Sufi concepts, such as love *(ḥubb)*, unity (*ittḥād*, *waḥda*), the 'Perfect Man' (*al-insān al-kāmil*), with which Ibn al-Fāriḍ's Sufi experience shows to be clearly connected and which constitute the historical background in the light of which his terms and expressions must be read and understood.

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4-3. The meta-historical or the transcendental level.

Moreover, one must avow that both the synchronic and the diachronic approaches, necessary as they are, do not reveal the whole depth of the mystical experience expressed in a literary text. These two approaches, in fact, are limited to what can be qualified as the 'historical-phenomenological' level of understanding of the text, which amounts to a just descriptive and exterior approach to the experience of the mystic. One has to proceed further to what may be called the 'ontological level' (according to its original meaning, *onto-logos*, i.e., understanding the existent at the level of ʿbeing'), where the deep meaning of a thing is perceived. This level can be named ʿmeta-historical' or ʿtranscendental' because through it one comes in touch with deepest dimensions of human experience that transcend the pure phenomenological level, and reach into the depth of the constitution of the human being at its ontological level. In fact, any true mystical experience, and thus also the Sufi one, intends to ultimately be an 'experience of God', the Absolute Reality.

God, the Absolute, has been called by many names in the different religious traditions, and the experience of Him has been described in many different ways. However, a true 'mystical experience' intends to be, in its ultimate purpose, 'an experience of the Absolute', or it is not 'mystical' at all. Any true mystical experience in fact advances the claim of interpreting the human experience at the level of its utmost aim or goal, i.e., in the light of the Absolute Himself, beyond all levels of being. Therefore, the deepest meaning of any mystical experience, and thus of the Sufi one, can only be grasped when it is read at its transcendental level, i.e., as an interpreter or hermeneutics of human experience according to its ultimate meaning or purpose. Here, one necessarily has to go beyond the pure linguistic field entering into philosophical or theological dimensions where the help of these disciplines is needed for a fuller understanding of a

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mystical text. Particular attention should be given to the peculiarities of the Sufi language, especially its symbolic dimensions if one wants to reach an understanding of the ultimate purpose of a Sufi text.

Here, there is no intention to enter into the discussion of the different hermeneutical theories. Many of them would not agree with my way of reading and interpreting mystical texts, preferring to limit themselves to the pure phenomenological level. Nonetheless, a mystical text cannot be read as a mere product of social and linguistic factors, in which the personality of the mystic is somehow obliterated or dissolved into impersonal cultural, social and religious structures. Without denying the importance of such factors, all mystical experience, and thus also the Sufi one, appears to be, from what mystics narrate of themselves, a highly personal experience that can only be understood when read at its deepest level, i.e., as an experience of the Absolute, God. This does not exclude, on the contrary, it upholds that the mystical experience is necessarily mediated by the cultural horizons of the mystic. These, however, do not exhaust the whole meaning of a true mystical experience.

Therefore, if we want to comprehend the total epistemological horizon of a mystic, we must always consider it under both dimensions: the cultural-historical and the personal-transcendental. In fact, according to what mystics relate of their actual experience, coming close to the Absolute, to God, is never just a general, common *datum*, available to all at all times. On the contrary, such an experience appears to be a highly personal, not interchangeable encounter with the Absolute, achieved most of the time through dramatic and arduous interior struggles. In fact, it is in front of the Absolute that mystics discover their deepest identity and come in touch with their truest, always unique and non-repeatable, 'personal' dimension. Consequently, only at such a level can a mystical, and thus also a Sufi text, be fully understood. In fact, only at this level the two

epistemological horizons, the mystic's and ours can meet or, better, attempt to merge into a new, more comprehensive epistemological horizon. This will lead in the end to a new understanding not only of the mystic's personal experience but also of human experience in general at its ontological level. By 'onto-logical' level, we mean here the comprehension of 'being' through an experience in which its deepest dimensions are revealed. At such a level true comparison among different mystical experiences can be drawn, pointing to possible similarities without overlooking the differences existing between their particular epistemological horizons.

A deeply personal experience, such as the mystical, must necessarily be reflected at the linguistic level, shaping and structuring the mystic's vocabulary. T. Izutsu remarks, in fact, that: "... every system worthy of the name must have a patterning principle on which it is based…" dealing with the Koranic vocabulary he points out that:

> "... the whole system of the Koranic concepts comprising within itself all the layers of associative connection are based on a pattern which is peculiar to the Koranic thought, i.e., which makes the latter essentially different from all non-Koranic systems of concepts, whether Islamic or non-Islamic". (Izutsu, 1964, p. 31)

This is what another well-known linguistic scholar, Edward Sapir (d. 1984) calls the 'structural genius' of a linguistic system, that is 'a basic plan', 'a certain cut' or, one could say, 'a fundamental mode', which overrules and determines the nature and the dynamics of a given linguistic system in general, as well as of a particular field of it, such as the Koranic or the Sufi. On such premise, Toshihiko Izutsu could conclude:

> "To isolate this fundamental plan, or as Sapir himself has named it, the 'structural genius' governing the nature and working mechanism of the whole Koranic system must

constitute the ultimate aim of a semanticist approaching this Scripture, as long as he understands the discipline of semantics as a cultural science. Only when we succeed in doing this, can we hope to succeed in bringing to light the *Weltanschauung* of the Koran, which will, philosophically, be nothing other than the very "Koranic ontology...". (Izutsu, 1964, p. 35)

Such a semantic approach proves to be valid not only for a language in general or a particular field, but also for the language of a single author, in our instance Ibn al-Fāriḍ. In fact, the ʿstructural genius' of a language derives from the basic experience upon which such language with its vocabulary has been built. Therefore, understanding the inner structure of the vocabulary of a given text, highlighting its ʿstructural genius', means getting an insight into the fontal experience on which the author has built his/her particular vocabulary. In this way, one can achieve, as far as possible, a truer and fuller understanding of the author's vision and experience, in our instance, of the Egyptian Sufi poet, ʿUmar Ibn al-Fāriḍ.

It has been from such premises we tried to carry out a semantic analysis of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poem, *al-Tā'iyyat al-kubrā*. Such an analysis showed beyond doubt that the term *anā* (I, Myself) is the central focus word on which the whole poet's linguistic system has been built, *anā* (I, Myself) is in fact the absolute focus word of his whole vocabulary. Therefore, the term *anā* (I, Myself) must be considered the ʿstructural genius' of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's vocabulary, the term around which this has been built and organized, and, thus, the key term for understanding his Sufi experience. In light of all this, we could conclude by:

"...the core of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's mystical experience must be sought, first of all, in the poet's personal and deep assimilation of the concept of the 'Perfect Man' (*al-insān al-kāmil*). Through such a realization, the poet has reached full awareness of having

attained his most profound aspiration, the source of all mystical experience, namely, union with the Absolute. He found that his empirical 'self' (*anā*), perceived (*wuǧūd*) at the beginning of the path in the stage of multiplicity and duality (*farq*), has passed away into the pure vision and transparency (*šuhūd*) of the true, unique 'Self' (*anā*), the absolute One. Now, in the stage of universal and all-comprehensive union (*ǧamʿ*), the poet experiences only one absolute 'Self' (*anā*), which is the unique center and source of all qualities and movements in the universe. Into such absolute 'Self' (*anā*) the poet has completely merged, with no traces left of his previous, empirical 'self' (*anā*). In such a new, transparent awareness (*šuhūd*) the Sufi poet realizes that whatever is said or done in the universe, has its source in that One and Absolute Subject, the unique Center of All, the only One who can say in Reality ʿ*anā*' (I, Myself)". (Scattolin, 2004, p. 4)

5. The Journey Beyond Love

Ibn al-Fāriḍ has been celebrated in Sufi literature as the Prince of Lovers (*Sulṭān al-ʿāšiqīn*), as if love were the main topic of his mystical experience. Contrary to all that tradition, on the basis of an accurate semantic analysis of the poem, such an interpretation, appears inaccurate. From the analysis of the eighteen roots of the synonyms of love, it has clearly appeared that the vocabulary of love in the poem is centered on three main roots:

i - (Ḥ B B): from which important terms, such as 'love' (*ḥubb, maḥabba*), 'lover' (*muḥibb*), 'beloved' (*habīb*) and, of course the verb 'to love' (*aḥabba*), and other derivatives come.

ii - (H W Y): from which drive terms such as 'passion' (*hawā/ pl. ahwāʾ*) and the verb 'to be passionate' (*hawia, yahwā*), and other derivatives come.

    iii - (W L Y): from which terms such as 'friendship' (*walā'*), a basic term in Sufism meaning 'nearness to God or sainthood' (*walāya*), and 'friend of God or saint' (*walī*) come. The semantic analysis has also shown that precisely the derivatives of the root (*W L Y*) have the most extensive semantic usage. These terms, in fact, occur in all three stages of the mystical journey, while the derivatives of *Ḥ B B* are used only in the stages of *farq* (division) and *ittiḥād* (absolute unity or self-identity), and those of *H W Y* are found only in the stage of *farq*, and not in the other two stages. And the same must be said for all other synonyms of love.

An explanation for such particular linguistic usage can be found in the very semantic connotation of love. Love, no matter how deep it may be, always implies a certain duality between the lover and the beloved, even when it comes to mean, as in some parts of the poem, love of the poet for him-self (*anā*), as in the verses:

I have ever been She, and She has ever been I, with no difference,

nay, my essence has ever been loving my essence

(or better:*ḏāt-ī*, i.e. my-self, has ever been loving *ḏāt-ī*, i.e. my-self).

(Ibn al-Fāriḍ, *al-Tā'iyyat al-kubrā*, v. 263)

While the derivatives of the root (*Ḥ B B*) are not used beyond the second stage, the terms of the root (*W L Y*), on the contrary, have a larger semantic spectrum, which covers all three mystical stages. The reason for such preference is given, throughout the poem, in the relationship of the terms of the root (*W L Y*) with the pre-eternal covenant (*mīṯāq*) between God and human souls, mentioned in Koran 7, 172. For many Sufis, especially since al-Ǧunayd (III H/X CE), such pre-eternal covenant has been considered the starting point as well as

the ultimate goal of their Sufi experience. In fact, they saw in that primordial bond the original witness of the Divine and transcendent Unity of God that has been sealed forever in human souls, through the mysterious dialogue between them and their Lord mentioned in the Koranic verse: "Am I not your Lord? They answered: Yes, indeed! So that you will not say in the day of resurrection: I did not know" (*A lastu bi-Rabbi-kum? Qālū: balā!; allā taqūlū yawma al-qiyāma: innā kunnā ʿan ḏālika ġāfilīn*). In this way, the Sufi experience becomes a remembrance and a revival of that pre-eternal convenant. To that dialogue, and in its very words, Ibn al-Fāriḍ makes explicit reference in his verses:

The secret of 'Yes' (*balā*) - to God the mirror of its revelation! -

and to affirm the reality of union (*ǧamʿ*) is to deny any 'beside-ness' (*maʿiyya*)

(Ibn al-Fāriḍ, *al-Tāʾiyyat al-kubrā*, v. 496).

And resorting to the image of milk, as symbol of Sufi knowledge, he says:

From me and in me the bond of friendship (*walāʾ*) appeared in the seed (= before time);

to me and out of me the milk of the breast of union (*ǧamʿ*) has been flowing.

(Ibn al-Fāriḍ, *al-Tāʾiyyat al-kubrā*, v. 503)

On this basis, it seems that the traditional designation of Ibn al-Fāriḍ as *Sulṭān al-ʿāšiqīn* does not fully express the highest point of his Sufi experience. Presumably, this title should be changed to that "The Poet of Universal, all-comprehensive Union (*ǧamʿ*). Love, important as it may be in his poetry, is but a stage in his mystical path towards such universal union, a stage that must be overcome for a higher one, as he himself explicitly declares:

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> I have crossed the boundary of passion (*hawā*), love (*ḥubb*) is to me even as hate:
>
> from unity (*ittiḥād*), the peak of my ascension (*miʿrāǧ*), begins my journey (*riḥlat-ī*).
>
> (Ibn al-Fāriḍ, *al-Tāʾiyyat al-kubrā*, v. 295)

In his mystical journey, the poet has passed far beyond both the stage of love (*ḥubb*) in all its manifestations and forms, and beyond the stage of absolute self-unity (*ittiḥād*), aiming at the highest stage of universal union (*ǧamʿ*), which his supreme goal and loftiest aspiration.

6. Into the Seas of Universal Union

Plunged into the seas of universal union (*biḥār al-ǧamʿ*), Ibn al-Fāriḍ gives expression to his extraordinary experience in a bewildering variety of terms and images as if soaring up in complete freedom into a world not subjected to the usual laws of our daily experience. He indicates to his novice his exalted state, saying:

> And haughtily sweep with thy skirts, the skirts of an impassioned lover,
>
> who in his union (with the Beloved) trails over the Milky Way.
>
> And pass through the various degrees of Oneness (*ittiḥād*) and do not join a party,
>
> that lost their life in something different (from that Oneness)
>
> (Ibn al-Fāriḍ, *al-Tāʾiyyat al-kubrā*, vv. 300-301)

Out of the great variety of words and images, the poet uses to describe this stage, a number of them play a fundamental role in

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defining the characteristics of such stage of universal union (*ğamʿ*), and they clearly constitute the basic semantic vocabulary of this section of the poem. These words are derivatives of a number of linguistical roots on which the poet builds the vocabulary of this section. They are:

  i. (*W Ğ D*): from which terms such as *wağd* (ecstasy) and *wuğūd* (the act of finding, existence) derive.

  ii. (*Š H D*): from which terms such as *šuhūd* (vision) and *mušāhada* (contemplation) derive.

  iii. (*W Ḥ D*): from which terms such as *ittiḥād* (union as self-identity) and *tawḥīd* (the profession of unity), *waḥda* (unity) derive.

  iv. (*Ğ M ʿ*): from which terms such as *ğamʿ* (universal union) and other terms derive.

It is to be noted that, in Ibn al-Fāriḍ's verses, the term *wuğūd* is always related to the language of multiplicity and duality, and so to the first stage of his mystical ascension, that of separation (*farq*). In the poem, in fact, the term *wuğūd* connotes the encounter (*wuğūd*, from *wağada*, "to find, to come across") or the experience of reality, but still in a stage of multiplicity, division, and so of imperfection. The experience of *wuğūd*, therefore, is described as a state that must be overcome reaching the true and real vision (*šuhūd*) of reality, that of unity (*waḥda*). Only through such a true vision does the poet enter into the world of unity, in which he discovers firstly his identity with his Beloved (*ittiḥād*), and then reaches the full awareness of his universal union (*ğamʿ*). The two terms *wuğūd* and *šuhūd*, in fact, are always opposed in the poem as two contradictory states of experience and never is *wuğūd* connotated with ontological qualifications such as real (*ḥaqq*), absolute (*muṭlaq*) and universal (*kullī*). Therefore, one should translate the Fāriḍian *wuğūd* not with 'being', but as an

'empirical finding or experiencing' of realities of the perceptible world of senses, while the Fāriḍian *šuhūd* should be translated as the 'true vision of the Real in its deepest unity'. In this sense, it appears impossible to speak of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's Sufism in terms of *waḥdat al-wuǧūd* (unity of existence or being), because *wuǧūd* in his vocabulary is never qualified with ontological qualification such as *waḥda* (unity), as it does in other Sufis' vocabulary, such as that of Ibn al-ʿArabī. In fact, *wuǧūd* does recur in the poem only in the contexts related to division and multiplicity (*farq*), which is the first stage of the poet's mystical journey, a stage that must be overcome in the true vision of unity (*šuhūd*).

The second stage of the same journey is characterized by the experience of unity, in the sense of self-identity, indicated by the derivatives of the root (*W Ḥ D*) and, in particular, by the term *ittiḥād*, which is one of the key terms of the poem. In this stage the poet becomes aware of his union, but of his identity with his Beloved. At this point he also discovers and sees (*šuhūd*) his true reality, a reality present from the beginning but of which he was not aware: the two, he and the Beloved, have always been the one and the same since eternity. This process of discovering his own self-identity is expressed in carefully correlated formulas such as:

> *anā iyyā-hā* (I am She)
>
> *hiya iyyā-ya* (She is I)
>
> *anā iyyā-ya* (I am I, My-self)

This experience of this union plunges the poet into a state of spiritual intoxication (*sukr*), in which his individual self and self-awareness are completely obliterated in his self-identification with his Beloved. Strange effects occur at that stage, and the poet tries to express them in expressions that reflect his total intoxication and bewilderment, such as:

And I was seeking Her from myself, though She was ever beside me,

I marveled how She was hidden from me by myself.

(Ibn al-Fāriḍ, *al-Tāʾiyyat al-kubrā*, v. 512)

Ultimately, finding his ultimate truth says in strange tunes:

And I caused myself to behold myself, as in my beholding

there existed none but myself

who might decree the intrusion (of duality).

(Ibn al-Fāriḍ, *al-Tāʾiyyat al-kubrā*, v. 528)

Sublime as such a state of intoxication might be, the Sufi poet is quite aware that this is not the summit of his spiritual ascension (*miʿrāǧ*). In fact, far above the peaks of *ittiḥād* lie the seas of *ǧamʿ*. At this stage, the derivatives of the root (*Ǧ M ʿ*) are clearly predominant in the poet's description of his new mystical experience, designated as *ǧamʿ,* which should be translated as 'universal union'. In such an experience the poet experiences that the opposites come together, the One and the Many merge in a synthesizing and dynamic unity, the poet's own self and the whole universe become one and the same reality in a movement of reciprocal merging and inclusion.

At this stage, the poet finds that his *anā* (I, My-self) is not only the source of everything, but it is in everything, beyond all limits of space and time. Awake to this new vision of reality and merged into it, the poet can sing now new melodies, strange and provocative for us, shocking for the shortsighted faithful, but highly fascinating and enchanting:

But for me, no existence (of the visible world) (*wuǧūd*) would have come into being,

nor would there have been vision (of unity) (*šuhūd*),

nor would religious covenants (ʿ*uhūd*) have been taken in fidelity.

There is no living being but his life is from mine,

and every willing soul is obedient to my will.

There is no speaker but tells his tale with my words,

nor any seer but sees with the sight of my eye.

There is no listener but hears with my hearing,

nor anyone that grasps but with my strength and might.

And in the whole creation there is none save me,

that speaks or sees or hears.

(Ibn al-Fāriḍ, *al-Tāʾiyyat al-kubrā*, vv. 638- 642)

The ultimate source of such an extraordinary and transcendent union is to be found in the reality of *ǧamʿ* of which the poet is now fully conscious, as he declares:

And I dived into the seas of *ǧamʿ*, nay, I plunged into them in aloness,

and brought out many peerless pearls (i.e., its extraordinary effects):

That I might hear my acts with a seeing ear,

and behold my words with a hearing eye.

(Ibn al-Fāriḍ, *al-Tāʾiyyat al-kubrā*, vv. 725-26).

At this point, a clear correlation and a manifest convergence can be found among the three most important semantic fields of the

poem's vocabulary, namely the semantic field of love, centered on the root (*W L Y*), that of vision, centered on the root (*Š H D*), and that of union, centered on the root (*Ǧ M ʾ*). The derivatives of these roots constantly recur in strict correlation and in the same contexts of the poem. This fact clearly highlights that their connotations are intimately linked with each other in the interior vision of the poet and from that link their strict semantic affinity derives. Further research could point out that the ultimate reason for such strict semantic affinity lies in the explicit relationship of those three roots with the pre-eternal covenant, in which the Sufi poet had the original experience of the total union (*ǧamʾ*), as he declares:

> The 'Am I not' (a lastu) (K 7, 172) of yesterday [pre-eternity] is not other
>
> [from what will be manifest] to the one who enters upon tomorrow [the day of resurrection]: verily, by now my darkness has become my dawn and my day my night.
>
> And the secret (sirr) of 'Yes, indeed!' (balå)
>
> - to God belongs the mirror of its revelation -
>
> and affirming the reality of union (ΔamÆ)
>
> means denying any kind of 'being-with' (maÆiyya).
>
> (Ibn al-Fāriḍ, al-Tā'iyyat al-kubrā, vv. 495-496)

The secret of the Sufi union, sought after in the present life of apparent, empirical perception (*wuǧūd*) of existence, is to be traced back to that first pre-eternal union when there was no 'otherness' because the One who questioned and the ones who answered were one and the same. But, the true and complete revelation and vision (*šuhūd*) of that sublime reality is to be disclosed on the day of Resurrection. Consequently, the Sufi experience in the present temporal existence is

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a continuous struggle (*muǧāhada*) to revive the remembrance (*ḏikr*) of that pre-eternal Day and to obtain a sort of anticipation of the final Day, the Day of resurrection, that in the Sufi vision (*šuhūd*) may occur in the present life too.

Up to this point of our paper, the terms of the semantic fields of love, vision and unity have been highlighted. There are, however, some others that play an important role in the poem and to which those semantic fields are constantly referred: they are 'soul' (*nafs*), 'spirit' (*rūḥ*) and 'essence' (*ḏāt*). These terms are called 'pivotal terms', as they are constantly referred to the whole vocabulary of the poem. They have been often understood as expressions of concepts such as One Being, One Soul, One Spirit, and One Essence as if a monistic language was the basis of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's vocabulary. Here too, I had to question whether such interpretations do justice to the particular semantic universe of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poem.

To begin with, the analysis of the terms *nafs* (usually translated as soul) and *ḏāt* (usually translated as essence) shows in fact that they constantly recur in the poem in correlation to the term *anā* (I, my-self), to the extent that they can replace it in all its stages. Furthermore, they appear very often in the pronominal construction *nafs-ī* and *ḏāt-ī*, in which they are clearly used as names of affirmation of the self-identity of the pronoun *anā* (I), meaning my-self, not my soul or my essence.

On the other hand, the term *rūḥ* (translated as spirit) has a different usage, inasmuch as it never appears as an identity term of *anā*. In fact, it usually denotes only some qualities of *anā*, the spiritual ones as opposed to the sensible ones, which then are correlated to the term 'soul' (*nafs*). In these contexts, *rūḥ* is correlated to the term 'idea, meaning' (*maʿnā*), and opposed to the term 'soul' (*nafs*), which then is correlated to the term 'visible image, form' (*ṣūra*). Moreover, the term 'spirit' (*rūḥ*) has a special meaning in religious contexts, as the

designation of the prophetical revelation, manifesting a clear influence of the Koranic vocabulary in it. Ibn al-Fāriḍ's usage of these terms appears on the whole quite consistent with the traditional usage of them in Arabic vocabulary and Sufi tradition.

7. The Main Partitions of Ibn al- Fāriḍ's Great Sufi Poem, *al-Tā'iyyat al-kubrā*

To help the reader with a better understanding of Ibn Fāriḍ's mystical experience expressed in his great mystical poem, *al-Tā'iyyat al-kubrā*, a partition of the poem is offered here, worked out according to the three main stages (*farq - ittiḥād - ğamʿ*) of the poet's mystical journey. Other partitions have been put forward by many commentators and scholars. However, the one presented here, as a result of our semantic analysis, seems to be more consistent with the textual sequence of the poem.

7.1. The Love Prelude or the final Introduction (vv. 1-116)

Resorting to the traditional language of Arabic love poetry, since long adopted by Sufis to express their spiritual experience of Divine love, the poet proclaims his ardent love for his Beloved. Imitating the stock vocabulary of love poets, he describes the pains of his passion: this is burning inside him, wasting him away, moreover, the poet swears to be well prepared to die and be utterly annihilated for his Beloved's sake. Answering him back, the Beloved, resorting likewise to the traditional vocabulary of love poetry, rebukes the poet, showing that his words are not sincere and that he is still far away from true self-annihilation (*fanā'*) in love. In this poetical prelude, Ibn al-Fāriḍ makes use of images and expressions that constitute the main topic of his minor poems to the point that one can consider this love prelude as a summary or a synthesis of his minor poems.

The hand of my eye has given me to sip
    the ardent wine of love,
        my cup was the face of Her
        that [all] beauty transcends.
Through my inebriated glance
    I made my friends fancy
        that in quaffing their wine
        my inner soul had been filled with joy.

                (Ibn al-Fāriḍ, *al-Tā'iyyat al-kubrā*, vv. 1-2)

7.2. A First Description of Union (*ǧam'*) (vv. 117-196)

    In a crescendo of images, the poet discloses the feelings stirred in him by the Beloved's presence in his inmost self. Finally, it is in prayer that his secret comes to light: in prayer, the poet discovers and becomes fully aware of his radical identity with his Beloved: in prayer lover and Beloved become one and the same, each of them being prostrated to their one reality. Moreover, the poet realizes that such a union has been the one and the same since eternity: in fact, the poet becomes now aware that since eternity he has been in love with his Beloved and since eternity both, lover and Beloved, have been one and the same reality. After such a sublime revelation, the poet concludes this section by explaining to his disciple the way he must follow to reach he too such a lofty state.

In reality, I stood before my *imām* [the leader of prayer]
    and all mankind stood behind me;
      there She was,
      wherever I turned my face [to pray].
In prayer, my eye beholds Her
    in front of me,
      whilst my heart beholds me
      that I am *imām* of [all] my *imāms*.
        (Ibn al-Fāriḍ, *al-Tā'iyyat al-kubrā*, vv. 148-149)

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7-3. Further Description and Explanation of His Mystical State (vv. 197-285)

After the teaching imparted to his disciple, the poet comes back to describe again to him how he has reached the stage of union with his Beloved. He explains that it was after a long ascetic journey that he could reach the state of true vision where all visible perceptions are obliterated. In such a state of union, he has become aware too of his own deepest reality, because in it, as he says: "My essence (*ḏāt-ī*) became endued with my essence ((Ibn al-Fāriḍ, *al-Tā'iyyat al-kubrā*, v. 212). This stage of union is called here *ittihād*, which means 'union of identity' because in it the poet discovers his identity with his Beloved: the two are one essence. This stage of 'union of identity' (*ittihād*) follows that of separation (*farq*), described in the first section of the poem.

Then (vv. 219-240), through some examples taken from common experience, the poet tries to explain to his disciple how it is possible that 'the two be one', a statement that appears to be absurd to the ordinary rational mind. Having proved this point, the poet takes his disciple on a fantastic flight through history, naming some of the most famous lovers in Arabic erotic literature and coming to the astounding conclusion that all those lovers were but manifestations of a unique love, i.e., the love between himself and his Beloved and, in the end, the love of his own essence (*ḏāt-ī*) for itself. This section can be entitled 'The proclamation of the unity of love' in all its manifestations. Concluding, the poet takes care to prove that such astounding statements are in full accord with the religious teaching of the text of the Koran and the prophetic tradition (*sunna*) (vv. 277-285).

> Until then, I have been an impassioned lover of her,
>   but when I renounced to my own desire,

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She did desire me for herself

and love me.
Then, I became a beloved,
nay, one in love with one's own self,

and not, as I said before,

that my soul was my Beloved.

(Ibn al-Fāriḍ, *al-Tā'iyyat al-kubrā*, vv. 204-205)

7-4. The Sublimity of Such a Mystical State (vv. 286-333)

The poet begins describing the sublimity of the mystical state he has reached and proclaiming that such a state has lifted him beyond all qualifications of love. Now, he has passed beyond the state of unity-identity of 'I am She' (*anā iyyā-hā*) and "I am I, My-self" (*anā iyyā-ya*), and his journey points towards the seas of the universal and all-comprehensive union. He has reached what in Sufi technical terminology is called 'the sobriety of union' or 'the second separation' (*al-farq al-thānī*) which is the loftiest of the mystical states. In such a state the poet comes in possession of all the privileges granted to the prophets and he becomes aware too that all the qualities and the actions of the universe are but the effusion (*fayḍ*) and overflowing of his own qualities. He concludes by declaring that no Sufi qualification is now suitable to him: he is now beyond all such designations proper to particular Sufi states. From this section on the rest of the poem can be read as a long description of the sublimity of the poet's mystical state of universal and all-comprehensive union (*ǧamʿ*), approached from different angles.

For the valley of her friendship,
my friend of sober heart,
lies in the province of my command

> and falls under my rule
> The realm of the highest degrees of love
> is my possession,
> their realities are my army
> and all lovers are my subjects.
> (Ibn al-Fāriḍ, *al-Tāʾiyyat al-kubrā*, vv. 292-293)

7-5. The Wonders of Union: The Contraries Become One in the Poet's *anā* (I, Myself) (vv. 334-440)

With this section, the poet begins to expose what can be called 'the wonders of union'. He opens it with a new 'love prelude (*taġazzul*)' (vv. 334-387) which corresponds to the one at the opening of the poem (vv. 1-116). But, by now, the meaning of the love symbols has become clearer: the two, lover and Beloved, are one and the same essence that reveals itself to itself and loves itself through itself.

The poet describes the first marvel of union: the contraries come together and are reconciled in an astonishing synthesis. The domain of the sensible qualities or the visible phenomena (symbolized in the poem by the character of the 'railer' of the love stories) is usually opposed to that of the spiritual qualities or the interior meanings (symbolized in the poem by the character of the 'slanderer' of the love stories). On the contrary, now the poet witnesses that between the two worlds, visible and invisible, exists a profound correspondence and harmony. This harmony is clearly experienced in the 'Sufi music', in which the two worlds are felt to be in deep accord. The poet ends this section with a passionate defense of the Sufi practice of musical dance (*samāʿ*), a practice that has been often and bitterly opposed by a number of strict Sunni scholars, such as Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328).

Were She to dissolve my body,

> She would see that in every atom of it
>> there is every heart,
>> in which there every love dwells.

Then, the most marvelous thing I found in Her,

> what the interior disclosure (*fatḥ*)
>> has abundantly bestowed on me
>> through a revelation that dispelled all doubt,

(Ibn al-Fāriḍ, *al-Tā'iyyat al-kubrā*, vv. 387-388)

7-6. The Wonders of Union: The Poet's *anā* (I, Myself) as the Supreme Pole of Existence (vv. 441-503)

In this section the poet widens his horizon till he reaches the full awareness of being the center of the whole universe: it is around him that all the spheres of worlds turn since he is the supreme Pole (*quṭb*) of existence. The poet resorts here to a well-known Sufi terminology, without bothering to explain it, taking for granted that it was well understood by his audience. Being the Pole of existence, towards him all religious cults are addressed, from him the whole creation receives its movement and by him, all spiritual degrees are bestowed throughout history in the spiritual qualities of prophets and saints. In the end, the poets make clear that the source of such a sublime state is the 'covenant of friendship' mentioned in the Koran (K 7, 172). This passage tells of a primordial witness to God's supreme Lordship and transcendent Unity impressed since eternity in the human souls. Such a covenant has become, since al-Ǧunayd (d. 298/910), one of the main topics of Sufi reflection. The poet now declares that he was present at that time, in pre-eternity, when God asked human souls: "Am I not (*a lastu*) your Lord?", and they answered: "Yes, indeed (*balā*)!" (K 7, 172). Moreover, the poet is now aware that he was at that point both the one who asked the

question and the ones who answered it: in fact, at that time no duality or 'to be with' existed, but only absolute unity. In the end, the poet acknowledges that such a mystery (*sirr*) can only be revealed in the state of union.

> I have indicated by means
>   of what the expression can yield,
> and that which remains hidden
>   I have made it clear by a subtle allegory.
>   The 'Am I not' (a lastu) (K 7, 172) of yesterday [pre-eternity] is not other
>   [from what will be manifest] to the one who enters upon tomorrow [the day of resurrection]: verily, by now my darkness has become my dawn
>   and my day my night.
>   (Ibn al-Fāriḍ, *al-Tāʾiyyat al-kubrā*, vv. 494-495)

7.7. The Wonders of Union: Essence (*ḏāt*), Attributes (*ṣifāt*), Names (*asmāʾ*) and Acts (*afʿāl*) are one in the Poet's *anā* (I, Myself) (vv. 504-588)

This section too opens with some love verses (*taġazzul*) in which the poet sings his love for his Beloved, but now in complete intoxication (*sukr*) of union. Now, all pronouns are turned into the first person, creating strange but enchanting melodies of sounds and images. Then, taking a more theological tone, the poet declares that his state of the union is far above all the distinctions known in classical theology, i.e., the distinction between God's essence (*ḏāt*) and his attributes (*ṣifāt*), names (*asmāʾ*) and acts (*afʿāl*). The poet affirms that all these terms designate in him only one reality. Besides, in such a state of union, each one of his physical faculties is qualified by all the qualities of all the other faculties: a complete 'inter-change' of operations takes place in him. This is another marvel of the sublime state of the union.

> I ask Her of myself,
>> whenever I encounter Her,
>>> and inasmuch as She bestows on me [true] guidance,
>>> She misleads me [in my quest].
> I seek Her from myself,
>> though She was ever beside me:
>>> I marveled at the way
>>> She was hidden from me through myself.
>>>> (Ibn al-Fāriḍ, *al-Tā'iyyat al-kubrā*, vv. 511-512)

7.8. The Wonders of Union: The Poet's *anā* (I, Myself) Extends Through Space and Time Beyond All Limits (vv. 588-650)

In such a state of union, the poet becomes all the more aware that, since he is the supreme Pole (*quṭb*) of the universe, his action reaches beyond all limits of space and time. It was he who performed, in every place and time, all the miracles (*muǧizāt*) attributed to the prophets and the wonders (*karāmāt*), attributed to the saints. But, above all, in him the highest Divine qualities are displayed, namely the qualities of majesty (*ǧalāl*), beauty (*ǧamāl*) and perfection (*kamāl*) in a reciprocal inclusion. Now, he can perceive and contemplate these qualities in all phenomena which are, in the end, but manifestations of himself to himself. Some of the most astonishing and controversial verses of the poem are found in this section.

> I survey all the horizons [of the earth]
>> in a flash of thought,
>>> and I pass through all the seven layers of heaven
>>> in one step.
> Such is the soul: if she casts off her [lower] passion,
>> her powers are multiplied,
>>> and it can endow every atom [of existence]
>>> with all her energy.
>>>> (Ibn al-Fāriḍ, *al-Tā'iyyat al-kubrā*, vv. 593-600)

7.9. The Wonders of Union: Examples and Explanations of Such a Sublime State (vv. 651-731)

In this section of the poem, the poet intends to explain again to his disciple his mystical experience that may sound absurd to a rational mind: How is it possible that unity and multiplicity are found together? How is it possible that he is in everything and everything is in him? This section is parallel to that of vv. 219-285 in which similar explanations are given.

To this purpose, the poet resorts to some examples taken from common experience. Then, in a long passage (vv. 677-706) he introduces a description of the 'play of the shadows' (*ḫayāl al-ẓill*) as the most suitable example to illustrate his intent. In this play, the unity of the agent (the showman) with the multiplicity of forms (the shadows of the puppets on the screen) are clearly known beyond any appearance. Thus, is the union between himself and the whole universe: multiplicity is apparent, and oneness is real. This passage has become very famous in Sufi and non-Sufi literature.

The poet concludes this section extolling again the sublimity of his state of union (*ǧamʿ*): he is the light of existence, he is the source of all actions in the universe, every being bears witness to his transcendent unity (*tawḥīd*).

> Whatever you have contemplated [in the play]
>   was in fact the act of only one, alone [agent],
>   only [enwrapped] in the veils of occultation.

> So, when he removed the curtain,
>   you beheld none but him,
>   and no confusion remained
>   about the forms [of the shadows].
>   (Ibn al-Fāriḍ, *al-Tāʾiyyat al-kubrā*, vv. 704-705)

7.10. The Wonders of Union: The Poet's *anā* (I, Myself) is the Goal of All Religions which are but Its Self-Manifestations throughout Human History (vv. 732-761)

The poet now widens still furthers his horizon to include the whole history of religions throughout the ages. In his mystical state of all-comprehensive union, he discovers that he has always been the true goal of all religions and acts of worshipping, even if the worshippers themselves were unaware of such a reality. This idea is called 'the unity of religions' and has been very often the object of Sufi speculation, as in Ibn al-ʿArabī's mystical philosophy.

More specifically, the poet affirms that he has been manifesting himself throughout the religious history of the prophets and of Islam in particular. In fact, he has come to the awareness of having been, before all visible manifestation, the 'Eternal Light', existing since all eternity as the transcendent source of all visible lights.

Concluding his poem, Ibn al-Fāriḍ seems to unveil something of the profound mystery that has lingered on in his verses up to this point. He affirms quite clearly that he has become aware that be one and the same with that 'Eternal Light', a known Sufi designation of the 'Eternal Light of Muḥammad' (*al-nūr al-muḥammadī*) or the 'Eternal Reality of Muḥammad'. This same idea has been largely developed in Ibn al-Fāriḍ's time by the 'greatest Sufi Master' (*al-Šayḫ al-akbar*), Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 638/1240), with the idea of the 'Perfect Man' (*al-insān al-kāmil*). It seems to us that this is the basic concept underlying Ibn al-Fāriḍ's mystical experience and the clue to understanding the paradoxical expressions, intended to convey in his verse.

> In all religions humans' eyes
> > have not gone astray,
> > > neither have their thoughts deviated
> > > in every religious belief.
>
> Those who heedlessly fell in love with the sun
> > lost not their way,
> > > since its brightness comes from the light
> > > of the unveiling of my splendour.
> > > > (Ibn al-Fāriḍ, *al-Tāʾiyyat al-kubrā*, vv. 738-739)

Eventually, however, when dealing with mystical texts, one should be always aware that one crosses over into the world of silence, the mystical sublime silence since a true experience of the Absolute can never be really and totally expressed in human words. Human words and all linguistic skills are for mystics just traces and pointers to indicate a Reality that always exceeds and transcends all human understanding and linguistic expression.

8. The Mystical Experience of Ibn al-Fāriḍ

From the analysis of the text of the *Tāʾiyya*, one can conclude with some assessment of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's mystical experience, evaluating what commentators and scholars have written about him. It seems that through this semantic approach concepts and terms foreign to Ibn al-Fāriḍ's vocabulary projected into it, distorting the true meaning of its terms, have been clarified. In fact, we tried a closer approach to the text, trying to read the text through the text itself. This is the first necessary step to be taken in order to do justice to the true meaning of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's experience.

On the other hand, those authors have pointed out some general themes present in the poem. One finds that in their writings they

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mention the 'divine love' (*al-ḥubb al-ilāhī*) of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poems (although the term *Allāh* as such does not recur in his verses), the 'absolute union' (*al-waḥda*), and the 'perfect man' (*al-insān al-kāmil*, also this term as such does not occur in Ibn al-Fāriḍ's verses). All these general themes were already present in the Sufi tradition in Ibn al-Fāriḍ's time and have most probably influenced his mystical vision. In fact, in his poetry, there are evident traces of Arabic love poetry which, by his time, had already been adopted by Sufis to express their mystical love. The character of Maǧnūn Laylā, the famous lover of Arabic literature, had already become the highest symbol of the Sufi drunken and lost in the love of God. Likewise, many verses of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poems echo the typical Sufi questioning on the true 'profession of unity' (*tawḥīd*) in which the *muwaḥḥid* (the one who witnesses) and the *muwaḥḥad* (the one who is witnessed) must be one and the same, avoiding any shadow of dualism.

In conclusion, if we were to indicate the core of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's mystical experience, we have to find it first of all in his personal and deep assimilation of the concept of the perfect man (*al-insān al-kāmil*). Through such realization, the Sufi poet has come to the full awareness of having attained his most profound aspiration, which is the source of all mystical experience: the desire for union with the Absolute. Having gone through all the stages of love which led the Sufi to the complete annihilation of his personal qualities (*fanā'*) in order to reach the permanence in the qualities of the Beloved (*baqā'*), the poet has grown to new awareness. He finds that his first empirical 'self' (*anā*), which at the beginning of his path was still living and experiencing reality (*wuǧūd*) in the stage of multiplicity and duality, has passed away in pure transparency and vision (*šuhūd*) of the true, unique 'Self' (*anā*), the Absolute One. At this stage, he experiences such Absolute 'Self' (*anā*) as the unique center of all qualities and

movements in the whole universe. In this Absolute 'Self' (*anā*) the poet has completely merged to the point that there are no traces left of his previous, empirical 'self' (*anā*). Now, in a new transparent and transcendent awareness (*šuhūd*) he realizes that whatever he says or does, is done by that One and Absolute Subject, the only Center of all, the only One who can say in Reality *anā* (I, my-self). Having attained the Source of everything, the poet finds himself in everything and everything in himself, from him and for him. Moreover, he finds himself in everything in a new, cosmic awareness, beyond all limits of space and time. Completely merged in that union, he tries to convey in his poetry something of such extraordinary experience, drawing from the literary and religious culture of his time. His expressions might sound absurd, even hubristic, to the understanding of the common faithful, one who has not gone through the poet's deep, interior transformation, such expressions are for the poet the only possible articulations in the human language of that Reality in which he now exists. In fact, conscious that words can never totally express that transcendent Reality, the poet warns:

> Those two [railer and slanderer] are one with us [Beloved and I]
>
> in inward union (bå†in al-∆amÆ),
>
> though [we two and those two] are counted four
>
> in outward separation (Ωåhir al-farq).
>
> (Ibn al-Fāriḍ, *al-Tāʾiyyat al-kubrā*, v. 398)

The ultimate Reality experienced by Sufis always lies far beyond any rational capacity (*ʿaql*). Only interior intuition and taste (*ḏawq*) can give some understanding of it. Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poems are to be read as just an allusion to that mysterious, inexpressible Reality. Ultimately, however, in the silence of death, the poet took with him

the very secret of his mystical discovery, in his return to the mysterious sources of his mystical journey: to that "Sea of love and friendship", to that "bounteous and unlimited Ocean", where he found his true, real 'Self". His poems have been left to us to be read as traces (*āṯār*) of a path to follow ("Order of the Way" is the original title of his Great *Tā'iyya*) towards the same, transcendent Reality.

> "Ultimately, however, in spite of all effort, one has to acknowledge that the Sufi poet took with him the secret of his mystical experience as he returned through the silence of death towards the mysterious sources of his mystical journey: that "Sea of love and friendship" and that "bounteous and unlimited Ocean" in which he found his true, real 'Self' (*anā*). He left us his poem to be read simply as traces (*āṯār*) of a path to follow (*The Order of the Way*, this is in fact the meaning of one of the titles of the poem) towards that transcendent and ultimate Reality in which he found his utmost fulfillment". (Scattolin, 1987, p.51)

9. Conclusive Remarks.

Hermeneutics is a never-ending work. In fact, it is an approach to reality through language, but reality always lies beyond any language, any expression and any interpretation. Here, one unavoidably enters into the well-known hermeneutical circle, i.e., hermeneutics as an ever-going process of interpretation. In fact, after all the work is done, one becomes all the more aware that in order to understand reality, one should become that reality. Being and *logos* are one, said the Greek philosophers, and only in such unity true understanding is reached. The 'fusion of horizons', prospected by Gadamer, can never be really achieved, unless there is also a 'fusion of beings'. Here lies the basic problem of hermeneutics, which eluded many times in many ways. A pure intellectual, technical approach to

mystical texts (as well as to any other true expression of human experience), though necessary, will never be adequate to understand the mystical experience expressed in them. One must achieve first an interior affinity with that experience. On their part, mystics have always pointed out the insurmountable distance that always lies between their interior experience and their verbal expressions. ʿAbd al-Ğabbār al-Niffarī, an Iraqi Sufi (d. 354/965 or 366/976-977), has well expressed such hermeneutical aporia in an impressive sentence: "The more the vision (*ru'ya*) widens, the more the expression (*ʿibāra*) shrinks". (Arberry, 1935, p.51). Therefore, to understand mystical texts, along with the 'analogical' approach based on abstract intellectual analysis, one must also engage in an 'anagogical' approach, trying to reach a spiritual experience and taste similar to that of the mystic author. Such truth proves valid also in other fields of human experience such as the poetic, the artistic, the etics, etc. It seems quite obvious, even if it is not always taken into account, that without some inner affinity with these realities, one cannot hope to reach any true understanding of them. For this reason, Sufis always insist that their truth can only be understood by those who have some interior experience and mystical 'taste' (*ḏawq*) of it. Without such interior experience, the deepest meaning of their texts will always elude a pure intellectual reader. In a remarkable verse (*al-Tā'iyya al-kubrā* v. 397), Ibn al-Fāriḍ, conscious that words always fall short of expressing the transcendent Reality of his mystical experience, clearly warns his readers:

> By allusion (*talwīḥ*), understands what I mean
>   the one who has the taste (*ḏawq*) of it:
>   he can dispense with clear explanations
>   [required] by a fastidious inquirer.
>   (Ibn al-Fāriḍ, *al-Tā'iyyat al-kubrā*, v. 397)

One can see that approaching mystical texts is not an easy task. A number of steps are to be taken, as shown in the present research. One must start from the 'objectivity' of the text through a synchronic-contextual and diachronic-historical approach, avoiding any arbitrary projection of foreign ideas into it. But this does not suffice in order to reach the experience expressed in the text. One must go on delving into the meta-historical and transcendental level of it, i.e., into the ontological dimensions of the mystical experience expressed in the text, without this it cannot be grasped in its interior and ultimate depth. Such a work must be done both at scientific and experiential levels, to get a fuller understanding of it. In the end, however, any honest researcher should always avow that he/she cannot pretend to have reached a full understanding of the mystical text, since such an understanding could only be possible through an ontological identification with its author's experience, and this is actually impossible. In fact, there will always be an ontological unsurpassable distance between the author and his reader. Thus, our understanding of mystical texts will always be inadequate, limited, and in need of further scrutiny, going deeper into the mentioned 'hermeneutical circle'. Moreover, at the end of all work done, any true researcher in the mystical field should enter into the mystical silence, out of respect for the experience of a Reality that transcends any human expression.

In the end, an interesting and important to mention a highly expressive saying attributed to ʿAlī b. Abū Ṭālib (d. 40AH/ 661AD), the cousin of Muḥammad, the Prophet of Islam. During the battle of Siffin (37AH/ 657AD), the army of Muʿawiyya (d. 60AH/ 680AD), his opponent, raised some sheets of the Koranic text on the top of their spears, claiming God's judgment upon the dispute for the caliphate. ʿAlī's supporters were impressed by such a move and were inclined to accept the proposal. Then, ʿAlī pronounced his famous sentence:

"This Koran is a text written (*masṭūr*) between two covers; it does not speak, it is in need of an interpreter (*tarǧumān*). It is people who speak on its behalf". (Alī b. Abū Ṭālib, 1951, p. 5) This sentence summarizes, in my view, in a nice way the very core of the hermeneutical question. Texts, even the revealed ones, are in themself silent, it is their readers that make them speak, for good or evil. They are the interpreters of the texts. Any reading, even the one that pretends to be the most literal, is unavoidably an interpretation of the texts. The hermeneutical question comes unavoidably to the front.

Finally, it has become quite clear now that the hermeneutical question cannot be eluded in approaching literary works, especially mystical texts, and it always remains a crucial challenge for any reader. Our hope is that the present paper may help with some clues for a better and more useful approach to the mystical texts in general and those of the Sufi tradition in particular. In this way one can get nearer to the experience their authors, the mystics, intended to express and convey to their readers through their linguistic expressions.

Dr. Shaimaa Mohamed Mohamed Hassanin
Dr. Ahmed Hasan Anwar Hasan
Prof. Giuseppe Scattolin

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