

Of Islamic Grammatology: Ibn Turka's Lettrist Metaphysics of Light*

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Abstract

As Derrida charged, Plato's famous declaration of speech's superiority to writing would seem to have resonated with inheritor cultures similarly transitioning from orality to literacy, and especially the Islamicate; despite the explosion of writerly culture from the 2nd/8th century onward, Arabic scholarship continued to evince a categorical, if increasingly rhetorical, mistrust of writing. In the 8th/14th century, however, as the age of encyclopedism dawned throughout the Islamicate heartlands, the superiority of writing to speech was formally and categorically asserted by Arabic and Persian encyclopedists, including most prominently Ibn al-Akfānī (d. 749/1348) of Mamluk Egypt and Shams al-Dīn Āmulī (d. after 787/1352) of Ilkhanid Iran. It is hardly coincidental in this connection that the same century also witnessed the burgeoning popularity among scholarly and ruling elites of lettrism (ʿilm al-ḥurūf), kabbalah's coeval cognate—the occult science that posited the cosmos itself as a text to be read, even rewritten. Synthesizing these literary and occult-scientific currents, in the early 9th/15th century a network of Muslim neopythagoreanizing lettrists—chief among them Ibn Turka of Isfahan (d. 835/1432)—developed the first formal metaphysics of writing.

This article analyzes Ibn Turka's unprecedented valorization of writing over speech in terms both epistemological and ontological, as well as the sociocultural ramifications of this move throughout the post-Mongol Persianate world. Letter-number, he argued, is a form of light eternally emanated from the One; hence vision, that faculty of light, must be the sense most universal; hence visible text must be the form of the One most manifest. In support of this thesis, he synthesized the Avicennan-Ṭūsian doctrine of the transcendental modulation of being (tashkīk al-wujūd) with its illuminationist upgrade, the transcendental modulation of light (tashkīk al-nūr), to produce his signature doctrine of tashkīk al-ḥarf: letters of light as uncreated, all-creative matrix of the cosmos, gradually descending from the One in extramental, mental, spoken and finally written form. Far from being a peculiar intellectual rabbit trail of no enduring significance, I argue that Ibn Turka's lettrist metaphysics of light was embraced by subsequent thinkers in Iran as the most effective means of conceptualizing and celebrating Islamicate writerly culture; these include the famed philosophers Jalāl al-Dīn Davānī (d. 908/1502) and Mīr Dāmād (d. 1040/1630), founder of the so-called school of Isfahan. Nor was its

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influence limited to Aqqyunlu-Safavid philosophical circles; I further argue that Ibn Turka's system informed the explosion of Persianate book culture more generally, and by extension Persianate visual culture, from the early Timurid period onward. A telling example in this context is the emergence of the album preface as a new genre of art history-theory in early Safavid Iran, a phenomenon that has been well feted and studied by art historians; but they have wholly elided high lettrism as the genre's most immediate philosophical context. This principle may be extended to the Persian cosmopolis as a whole: two of the most seminal discourses on writing developed in the Ottoman and Mughal contexts, by Taşköprüzāde (d. 968/1561) and Abū l-Faḡl 'Allāmī (d. 1011/1602) respectively, are demonstrably Ibn Turkian.

Like Derrida was to do half a millennium later, in sum, early modern Muslim lettrists rejected Plato's speech-writing hierarchy; unlike Derrida, for whom writing can have no ontological edge, they put forward a profoundly humanistic neopythagorean ontogrammatology as core of the philosophia perennis—and that so trenchantly that it served to shape Islamicate intellectual and aesthetic culture alike for centuries. The modern ideologues of East-West rupture notwithstanding, moreover, I propose this cosmology as a major node of Islamo-Christianate cultural continuity even to the present.

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The pen is the most powerful of talismans, and writing its [magical] product.¹
—Apollonius of Tyana

The one who will shine in the science of writing will shine like the sun.²

[T]he science of writing—*grammatology*—shows signs of liberation all over the world, thanks to decisive efforts.³
—Jacques Derrida

In the *Phaedrus*, Plato famously declared speech superior to writing, that bastard child of the soul.⁴ Yet he made this declaration *in writing*; and so it has reverberated to the present. This paradox expresses the central anxiety in cultures transitioning from orality to literacy, in this case Greek: Does writing diminish our humanity—or enhance it? Does it denature philosophic or moral authority—or preserve it intact over time? Is not the divine *fiat lux* eternally spoken, not written? More worryingly, once writing, that Pandora's box, attains to cultural hegemony, can we ever again think or speak beyond its seductive strictures? Can there be any escape from logocentricity graphemically embodied? Certainly not, says Derrida, while diagnosing a terminal metaphysical distrust of writing in Western culture, from Plato to the present, and epitomized by Saussure's Platonic damnation of writing as a perversion of speech, as tyranny.⁵ But Derrida upends

1. *Al-qalam al-ṭilasm al-akbar wa-l-khaṭṭ naṭījatu-hu*. This line is attributed to Apollonius (*Balīnās*) in al-Tawḥīdī's (d. 1414/1023) treatise on calligraphy (Rosenthal, "Abū Ḥaiyān al-Tawḥīdī on Penmanship," 25).

2. This ancient Egyptian description of a scribe, taken from the 1963 colloquium essay *L'écriture et la psychologie des peuples*, opens *Of Grammatology* (3).

3. *Ibid.*, 4.

4. *The Works of Plato*, tr. Jowett, 322-27.

5. It should here be borne in mind that a distrust of writing is common to ancient Greek, Zoroastrian and

this hoary hierarchy and bids us obey our perverting tyrant. For writing writes us; the world is a litter of its hieroglyphs of light.⁶

What of Islamicate culture, then, half Western, heavily Hellenic, just as thoroughly logocentric, and reputedly even more phonocentric? Did it too fail to develop a grammarology?

The answer, quite simply, is no: Derrida's diagnosis is inapplicable to Islam.⁷ As I argue, despite the high degree of genetic continuity between Christianate and Islamicate cultures, Muslim scholars came to valorize writing over speech to a greater degree than many of their counterparts to the west, such that by the 9th Islamic century (15th century CE) a formalized neoplatonic-neopythagorean *metaphysics of writing* had become hegemonic from Anatolia to India—precisely as printing was emerging in Renaissance Europe. Like Derrida, these thinkers inverted the semiotic hierarchy;⁸ unlike Derrida, they asserted written language to be superior to spoken both epistemologically and ontologically, universal in its reliance on the comprehensive faculty of vision: written letters as forms of light fully descended from the all-emanating One. The latter, in short, were hardly the forerunners of Derridean hyperstructuralism, yet propounded—and that with remarkable success across much of the early modern Afro-Eurasian ecumene—a semiological physics-metaphysics that may be styled hyperstructuralist with equal justice.⁹

Vedic and Rabbinic Jewish contexts—in the latter two writing was even considered ritually impure (Zadeh, “Touching and Ingesting,” 462).

6. Derrida, *Of Grammarology*; idem, “Plato’s Pharmacy”; Goody, *The Power of the Written Tradition*, 111. Most significantly for the purposes of this study, for Derrida *writing precedes being* “insofar as writing conditions history and all genesis”; hence his term *arche-writing* (Lawlor, “Eliminating Some Confusion,” 84). It must be emphasized, however, that his definition of writing, *écriture*, is far broader than the standard empirical one. As Geoffrey Bennington summarizes: “[T]he concept of writing [for Derrida] exceeds and comprehends that of language ... Writing or text in Derrida’s sense is not discourse or any other recognizable determination of language, but the beginning of the in-determination of language into the absolute generality of the trace-structure.” As such, he is “primarily concerned to bring out the conditions of *impossibility* of any grammarology” (“Embarrassing Ourselves,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 20 March 2016 <<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/embarrassing-ourselves>>).

7. To be clear: I invoke Derrida here as somewhat of a straw man; his project to fundamentally deconstruct Western culture pointedly excludes Islam—precisely because Western modernity itself depends on the recasting of Islam as the eternal, oriental *tout autre*—, and is not historiographical in the slightest. (His perplexing contention that Islam, like Judaism, is not *logocentric*—a qualification he reserves for Christianity alone—stems from his idiosyncratic definition of the term as referring to the essential independence of reason, *logos*, from linguistic mediation (Lawlor, “Eliminating Some Confusion,” 79).) That proviso notwithstanding, I conclude this study with an attempt to put Derrida in conversation with the Islamo-Judeo-Christian lettrist-kabbalist tradition, and particularly its Ibn Turkian formulation, of which his deconstructionist project is curiously reminiscent. On the theme of Derrida and Islam see Almond, “Derrida’s Islam”; Anidjar, *Semites*.

8. This similarity, of course, is merely terminological; Derrida “does not wish to reverse a binary opposition” between speech and writing, but to disappear that opposition altogether by redefining language, whether written or spoken, as a necessary absence, a mark whose structure “has the attributes often given to writing” (personal communication from Gil Anidjar).

9. Derrida’s project has been variously described as poststructuralist, antistructuralist, ultrastructuralist and hyperstructuralist (see e.g. Dosse, *History of Structuralism*, 2/17-31). The handle hyperstructuralist has

A growing number of studies investigate the social and literary aspects of the development of Islamicate *writerly culture* during the “classical” and “postclassical” eras both, though focusing almost exclusively on the arabophone Abbasid and Mamluk contexts, and art historians have thoroughly explored the physical and metaphysical ramifications of *calligraphy* as the Islamic art of arts. But the specific mechanics of this Islamicate metaphysics of writing shaped by and shaping such social and aesthetic phenomena have yet to be schematized. The present article is a preliminary offering in this direction. For reasons of space I limit myself to a representative case study of one of the most influential metaphysicians of writing in Islamic history, Ibn Turka of Isfahan, this as prompt to further research; examples could easily be multiplied.

I introduce our thinker below. But first, some context: When did Islamicate writerly culture emerge and reach maturity? And why has its contemporary metaphysical framework been largely ignored in the literature to date?

From Prophetic Orality to Encyclopedic Textuality

Following in the footsteps of its Greek exemplar, burgeoning Arabic-Islamic culture, centered in Abbasid Baghdad, underwent the transition from orality to literacy from the 2nd/8th century onward; by the middle of the 3rd/9th century books had become a full-blown obsession.¹⁰ A technological revolution in papermaking and the concurrent Abbasid translation movement together gave *visual* form to an Arabic *philosophia perennis*, the surviving, recorded wisdom of the Greek, Egyptian, Hebrew, Persian and Indian ancients.¹¹ At the same time, many scholarly exponents of this new, synthetic Arabic-Islamic culture, predicated in the first place on the explicitly oral revelation that is the Quran and the vaster corpus of Hadith, resisted this seachange, continuing to assert the superiority of speech over writing in all matters doctrinal and legal, and by extension grammatical, medical and philosophical—presuming, that is, in increasingly anachronistic fashion, a strict and permanent equivalency between Arabic-Islamic culture and oral *isnād* culture.¹² As Gregor Schoeler observes:

[I]n Islam in particular, scholars upheld the idea—or sustained the fiction—that writing should have an auxiliary function at most in the transmission of learning (and in establishing legally valid proof). Until the time in which literary books as we

similarly been applied to Lacanian psychoanalytical theory.

10. The famed bibliomaniac and litterateur al-Jāḥiẓ is here a case in point; see e.g. Montgomery, *Al-Jāḥiẓ*, 4. On the burgeoning of Abbasid writerly culture more generally see Toorawa, *Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr*.

11. The authoritative study here is Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture*. Saliba has proposed an earlier beginning to the translation movement, i.e., in the Umayyad period (*Islamic Science*, 27-72); whether or not his argument holds, the importance of writing already under the Umayyads has likely been underestimated (my thanks to Antoine Borrut for this observation).

12. Hirschler, *The Written Word*, 11. On legal debates over the *materiality* of the Quran as text—including its magical-medical and talismanic applications from the 2nd/8th century onward—see Zadeh, “Touching and Ingesting.”

know them emerged, and even beyond that time, the true transmission of knowledge remained oral, from person to person—at least in theory.¹³

But as sociocultural realities change, so must theory. Social historians have shown that the initial explosion of writerly culture in the Abbasid caliphate in particular only gained in intensity and scope in the arabophone west with the rise of the Ayyubid and then Mamluk Sultanate, such that the heart of the Arabic cosmopolis shifted definitively from Iraq to Egypt and Syria.¹⁴ Most notably, during the transformative 7th/13th and 8th/14th centuries, which saw the mass immigration of Maghribi and Mashriqi scholars alike in the face of invasion and plague, Mamluk Cairo and Damascus emerged as Islamdom's intellectual center of gravity, which had theretofore been in Iran; the Mongol conquest on the one hand and the Reconquista and general political turbulence on the other forced a mixing of eastern and western intellectual traditions that had been developing semi-independently for centuries.¹⁵ This Arabo-Persian synthesis in turn generated an Islamic cultural florescence more explicitly and thoroughlygoingly *textual* than any that had preceded it: the age of encyclopedism had begun.¹⁶

It is hardly surprising, then, that the encyclopedic classifications of the sciences (sg. *taṣnīf al-ʿulūm*) produced during this period testify precisely to this definitive triumph of writing over speech as preeminent vehicle of scholarly authority in Islamic culture. That is, while the fictitiousness of writing's status in Arabic letters as mere auxiliary to speech had become patent long before, encyclopedists did not begin to assert its superiority to

13. Schoeler, *The Oral and the Written*, 85; see also Cook, "The Opponents of the Writing of Tradition"; MacDonald, "Literacy in an Oral Environment." The theory, or fiction, of speech's superiority to writing became increasingly and clearly rhetorical from an early period. Shi'ī hadith specialists, for instance, were privileging written elements in collected traditions and wisdom sayings already in the 2nd/8th century (see Crow, "The Role of *al-ʿAql*"). It should be noted that Europeanists have investigated this theme at much greater length; see e.g. Patrick Geary, "Oblivion between Orality and Textuality." (My thanks to Antoine Borrut and an anonymous reviewer for the latter references.)

14. Hirschler's *The Written Word* is the definitive study on the Mamluk context; and see now his *Medieval Damascus*. On Arabic book culture more generally see e.g. Rosenthal, *Muslim Scholarship*; Pedersen, *The Arabic Book*; Bloom, *Paper before Print*; Leder, "Spoken Word and Written Text"; Atiyeh, ed., *The Book in the Islamic World*; Schoeler, *The Genesis of Literature in Islam*; Günther, "Praise the Book!"; and see now the two volumes of *Intellectual History of the Islamicate World* (4/1-2 (2016) and 5/1 (2017)), edited by Maribel Fierro, Sabine Schmidtke and Sarah Stroumsa, dedicated to Islamicate book cultures, from the Fatimids and the Cairo Geniza to 18th-century China and 20th-century Egypt.

15. It should be noted that this larger process was first set in motion by a 4th-5th/10th-11th-century climate change event. As Richard Bulliet has shown (*Cotton, Climate, and Camels*), the Big Chill wrecked the cotton industry in Iran (a primary basis of the ulama's wealth), creating a diaspora of persophone scholars—whence the vast Persian cosmopolis; it also precipitated the epochal mass Turkish migration south- and westward. Both developments transformed the face and sociopolitical structure of Islamicate civilization and eventually shifted its cultural center of gravity back to the eastern Mediterranean, where it remained until the rise of the great Turko-Mongol Perso-Islamic empires of the early modern era. Ibn Turka is here representative: like a host of his fellow persophone elites, the Isfahani scholar completed his education—and was transformed into a *lettrist*—in Mamluk Cairo.

16. See Hirschler, *The Written Word*, 19; Muhanna, "Encyclopædism in the Mamlūk Period"; idem, "Encyclopaedias, Arabic," *EI3*; Gardiner, "Esotericism," 276.

speech *categorically* until the 8th/14th century. Ibn al-Akfānī (d. 749/1348), for instance, succinctly asserts in the first section of his *Guidance for Seekers of the Sublimest of Goals* (*Irshād al-Qāṣid ilā Asnā l-Maqāṣid*), an immensely influential Arabic instance of the genre that served as model for the subsequent Mamluk-Ottoman encyclopedic tradition:

The benefit [of writing (*kitāba*)] is manifest; for this science, together with [the science of reading (*qirāʿa*)], is trained on a single purpose: to provide knowledge of how writing signifies speech. Know that all things that can be known can only be made known in three ways: by gesturing (*ishāra*), speaking (*lafz*) or writing (*khatt*). The first requires one to be directly witnessed [by the addressee]; the second requires the addressee's physical presence and their ability to hear; but writing requires nothing, for it is the most universal and the most excellent [form of communication], and the only one exclusive to humankind.¹⁷

Though he declined to elaborate, the Cairene physician-chemist could not be clearer in his verdict: writing not only far outstrips speech in practical terms (a principle that had been held since the High Abbasid period), but is also the only means whereby we can *realize our humanity*.¹⁸

Nor are such assertions of humanistic textual universalism exclusive to the Mamluk Arabic tradition; contemporary Persian encyclopedists take the same point further. Most notable among them is Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad Āmulī (d. after 787/1352), Ibn al-Akfānī's cognate in Ilkhanid Iran, who proposes in his equally influential and far more comprehensive *Jewels of Sciences Delightful to Behold* (*Nafāyis al-Funūn fī 'Arāyis al-'Uyūn*) a wholesale epistemological restructuring of the religious and rational sciences—one in which writing alone stands as the foundation of the edifice of human knowledge.¹⁹ Like Ibn al-Akfānī, he devotes the first section of his encyclopedia to the literary sciences

17. *Irshād al-Qāṣid*, 26-27. On this encyclopedia see Witkam, "Ibn al-Akfānī." In the *K. al-Ḥayawān* (1/33-34), al-Jāḥiẓ identifies four modes of communication—speech (*lafz*), writing (*khatt*), gesturing (*ishāra*) and finger counting (*'aqd*)—, and notes that some authorities count five.

18. Al-Jāḥiẓ's famous section in his *K. al-Ḥayawān* in praise of books suggests the same humanistic conclusion, although it is not stated so clearly or succinctly; see Montgomery, *Al-Jāḥiẓ*. But as he rhetorically asks: 'What could be of greater benefit, or a more assiduous helper, than writing?' (*K. al-Ḥayawān*, 1/48). Similarly, Abū Rayḥān Bīrūnī (d. after 442/1050) opens his celebrated *Tahqīq Mā li-l-Hind* with praise for writing that is yet tellingly qualified (1):

Truly has it been said: second-hand reporting cannot compare to direct observation (*laysa l-khabar ka-l-'yān*). For observation entails the immediate perception by the eye of the observer of that observed in a single moment and place. But were reporting not subject to the buffetings of ill circumstance, its virtue would exceed that of observation; for the latter is restricted to the moment of perception, and cannot extend to other moments in time, whereas reporting encompasses all moments equally, whether those past or future, and indeed all that exists and does not exist. And writing (*kitāba*) might almost (*yakādu*) be [judged] the noblest of all types of reporting; for how could we learn of the histories of nations (*akhbār al-umam*) were it not for the pen, whose traces perpetually endure?

19. On the *Nafāyis al-Funūn* and its status as model for most subsequent Persian encyclopedias see Vesel, *Les encyclopedies persanes*, 38-41; Melvin-Koushki, "Powers of One."

(*‘ulūm-i adabī*); unlike his Egyptian peer, however, who despite his valorization of writing does not give it explicit pride of place in this section,²⁰ Āmulī formally classifies it as the first of his 15 literary arts (*fann*)—he is the first encyclopedist in the Islamicate tradition as a whole to do so²¹—and argues for writing’s epistemological supremacy with proofs both traditional and rational. Given its status as watershed Persian statement on this theme, I translate the relevant passage in full:

The first art of the first discourse of the first section of this book, *Jewels of Sciences Delightful to Behold*, is the science of writing (*‘ilm-i khaṭṭ*), meaning the knowledge of graphically representing utterances with the letters of the alphabet, the manner of their construction and the conditions that pertain thereto. This is a craft most esteemed and a science most instructive; through it beauty and elegance is perennially achieved, and all hold it in the highest respect. In every place it presents itself boldly; for every group it is the keeper of secrets. It is always the engine of fame and honor; the tyrannical cannot overmaster it. It is recognized in all lands and leaves its imprint on every edifice. Indeed, the magnitude of its excellence is epitomized by the declaration of the Lord of Lords, His Names be sanctified, in His revelation most true: *N. And by the Pen, and what they inscribe* (Q 68:1). And again: *Recite: And your Lord is Most Generous, Who taught by the Pen, taught man what he knew not* (Q 96:3-5).

The Pen that produced the Book suffices for all honor
to the end of time: for God has sworn by the Pen.

Said [‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālīb] (upon him be peace): “Write beautifully, for it is a source of provision.”²² And said a certain sage: “Writing is a form of spiritual geometry (*al-khaṭṭ handasa rūḥāniyya*) manifested by means of a physical instrument.”²³ It has also been described as “the breeder of thought, the lamp of remembrance, the language of distance, the life of the seeker of knowledge.” Jāḥiẓ declared: “Writing is the hand’s tongue, the mind’s emissary, the repository of secrets, the expositor of reports, the rememberer of achievements past.”²⁴ It has further been said: “Writing is black to sight but white to insight.”²⁵ Again: “Excellent speech recorded in beautiful

20. Under the rubric of *‘ilm al-adab* Ibn al-Akfānī gives equal treatment to speech and writing as vehicles of communication, with emphasis on poetry and rhetoric, treating sequentially of *lughā*, *taṣrīf*, *ma‘ānī*, *bayān*, *badī‘*, *‘arūd*, *qawāfī*, *naḥw*, *qawānīn al-kitāba*, *qawānīn al-qirā’a* and *manṭiq* (*Irshād al-Qāṣid*, 22-29).

21. See Vesel, *Les encyclopedies persanes*.

22. *‘Alay-kum bi-ḥusn al-khaṭṭ fa-inna-hu min mafātīḥ al-rizq*. This and many of the following dicta in praise of writing are also found in, for example, Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī’s treatise on the subject, translated and transcribed in Rosenthal, “Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī.”

23. Al-Tawḥīdī attributes this statement to Euclid (*ibid.*, 15/25 no. 56): *al-khaṭṭ handasa rūḥāniyya zaharat bi-āla jasadiyya*.

24. This sentence is not present in modern editions of the *K. al-Ḥayawān*, suggesting it as a later addition.

25. Al-Tawḥīdī attributes this statement to one Hāshim b. Sālīm (Rosenthal, “Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī,” 13 no. 42).

writing is delightful to the eye, sweet to the heart and fragrant to the spirit.” [In sum], it is [universally] held that writing is superior to speech: for writing, unlike speech, profits those near and those far alike.²⁶

Scholars disagree as to who invented writing. Some are of the opinion that when the Real Most High *taught Adam all the names* (Q 2:31)—that is, taught Adam (upon him and our Prophet be peace) the names of every thing and the virtues of each—he also taught him about the virtues of the pen, and Adam then communicated this to Seth, who invented writing. Other scholars cite the saying *The first to write* (khaṭṭa) *and sew* (khāṭa) *was Enoch* (Idrīs) to argue in favor of Enoch’s (upon him and our Prophet be peace) status as the inventor of writing (and sewing).

It is also transmitted from ‘Urwa b. al-Zubayr and ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Amr al-‘Āṣ that Adam, a hundred years before his death, assigned a language to each of his children [and their offspring] as a separate group; [to this end], he inscribed on a mass of small sheets like rosepetals the script appropriate to each language and its basic rules, then baked them [for preservation]. But the sheet for the Arabic language was lost in Noah’s Flood, and its people forgot how to write and speak it until the time of Ishmael (upon him be peace). Ishmael, having made his home in Mecca and there acceded to the honor of prophethood, dreamed one night that a treasure was buried on Abū Qubays mountain [outside the city]; on the morrow he therefore arose and walked around that mountain, searching it assiduously until he discovered the sheet. But because it was tall and wide and filled with strange markings, he was greatly confused. He therefore called out: “O God! Teach me its secret!” The Real Most High accordingly sent to him Gabriel (upon him be peace) to provide instruction in the matter; and so Ishmael came to know the Arabic language and its script. ‘Abd Allāh ‘Abbāsī (God be pleased with him) has similarly transmitted that the first person to establish Arabic and its script was Ishmael.

It is transmitted from [Hishām] Kalbī, however, that [Arabic] writing had three inventors: Marāmir b. Marra [or Marwa], Aslam b. Sidra and ‘Amir b. Jadhra.²⁷ The first invented the letterforms; the second invented their conjunctions and separations; the third invented their diacritical points.

Still others hold that members of the Ṭasm clan invented Arabic writing; they were the rulers of Midian during the lifetime of Seth (upon him and our Prophet be peace). Their kings were [six], named as follows: Abjad (*ABJD*), Hawwaz (*HWZ*), Ḥuṭṭī (*HṬY*), Kalman (*KLMN*), Sa‘faṣ (*S‘FṢ*) and Qarshat (*QRShT*). They put these names into graphic form, and to them added two further constructions from the remaining letters, termed auxiliary: Thakhadh (*ThKhDh*) and Ḍazagh (*ḌZGh*).²⁸ [For his part], Abū Ja‘far Ṭabarī transmitted from Zayd b. Arqam and Ḍaḥḥāk that these six are rather the names of the six days of creation wherein the Real Most High created the

26. Cf. *ibid.*, 11 no. 27, where the same principle is attributed to one Ibn al-Taw’ām.

27. Cf. Ibn al-Nadīm, *al-Fihrist*, 12, where slightly different versions of these names are given.

28. I.e., the original 22 Hebrew letters plus six additional Arabic ones. The same is report is transmitted in Ibn al-Nadīm, *al-Fihrist*, 11.

heavens and the earth—hence the fact that all instruction must needs begin with the ABCs (*Abū Jād*).

Of all the well-known scripts, including Arabic, Greek, Uyghur, Indian and Chinese, the Arabic script is the loveliest and most elegant; [the techniques] whereby it is refined and beautified are firmly established. In former days, the standard script among the Arabs was the Ma‘qilī script, after which the Kufic script was developed. As for the type that is now most common, some say Ibn Muqla developed it; others credit [‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib], Commander of the Faithful. The latter say [in this regard] that when [‘Alī] was teaching ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Abbās [how to write] he instructed him: “‘Abd Allāh, widen the space between each line, bring the letters close together, preserve the correspondence between their forms and give each letter its due.”²⁹ Thereafter a group of those who strove to further refine this craft, including Ibn Bawwāb and others, created a diverse range of calligraphic styles, including *muḥaqqaq*, *thuluth*, *naskh*, *riqā‘*, *‘uhūd*, *tawqī‘*, *ta‘līq*, *rayḥānī*, *manshūr*, *mudawwar*, *ṭūmār*, *musalsal*, *muthannā*, *ghubār*, *habā’*, and so on.³⁰

This celebration of writing draws heavily on Abbasid bibliophilic precedent, al-Jāhīz (d. 255/869) and Ibn al-Nadīm (d. 380/990) in particular, including in the first place its valorization of textuality over orality. But Āmulī’s case for an Islamic textual universalism goes beyond earlier formulations to fully textualize revelation itself; and textualized revelation as a perpetual historical process in turn constitutes the genesis and basis for a sacralized, universal intellectual history: the *philosophia perennis*. Writing is the primordial prophetic act; men are to wield pens as God wields the Pen. Literacy, that is, is here elevated to a sacred calling, and writing to a metaphysical category. It is an embodied *spiritual geometry*, says the sage—and so an aperture onto supernal realities.

In short, encyclopedists like Ibn al-Akfānī and Shams al-Dīn Āmulī are far past the orality-textuality tension that defined early Islamicate scholarship; by the mid-8th/14th century writerly culture reigned supreme in Mamluk Egypt and Ilkhanid Iran alike.³¹ This did not entail the obsolescence of oral methods of transmitting knowledge, to be sure, especially in the context of education or with respect to disciplines more esoteric or elite; but the epistemological hierarchy that prevailed in the first centuries of Islam was now inverted: textuality had become primary and orality auxiliary—the preferred mode, at least ostensibly, for *keeping secrets*.³²

29. Al-Tawḥīdī gives a different version of this saying (Rosenthal, “Abū Ḥaiyān al-Tawḥīdī,” 18-19 no. 88).

30. *Nafāyis al-Funūn*, 1/22-24. For similar treatments see Roxburgh, *Prefacing the Image*, 112 n. 113.

31. Symptomatic of this definitive textual turn is the fact that early legal debates over the medical and magical potencies of the quranic text and their application as part of Prophetic medicine (*al-ṭibb al-nabawī*)—practices strongly favored, for example, by Abū ‘Ubayd b. Sallām (d. 223/838) in his *Faḍā’il al-Qur’ān*, but just as strongly rejected by contemporary scholars—finally gave way to a consensus in favor of such practices in the 7th/13th and 8th/14th centuries, exemplified by jurists like al-Nawawī (d. 676/1277) and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 751/1350) (Zadeh, “Touching and Ingesting,” 465-66).

32. Works on the occult sciences serve as the best index of this epistemological textuality-orality inversion. Even during the great florescence of occultism that swept the Islamicate heartlands from the late 8th/14th century onward, whereby the production and copying of occult-scientific texts was increasingly

As a majority of scholars now recognize, the so-called postclassical era (a polemical misnomer) was in no way one of cultural decadence and stagnation, but rather scene to a remarkable cultural florescence, one intensely textual in orientation; book production massively increased and new commentarial practices and arts of the book were born.³³ The sheer mass of surviving texts—at least 90% of them unpublished and still more unstudied—is indeed overwhelming;³⁴ previous generations of orientalists, perpetuating colonialist declinism, accordingly found it more convenient to dismiss “postclassical” Islamicate intellectual and cultural history out of hand as derivative, baroque and sterile than to risk drowning in that immense textual ocean.³⁵ Over the last decades, however, specialists have begun the rehabilitation process on many fronts, from philosophy, poetry, painting and law on the one hand to political and social history on the other, such that some now identify the post-Mongol era not simply as one of equal brilliance to the formative high caliphal period but indeed as the era of Islam’s greatest cultural, political and economic flourishing, its apogee of henological imperial-intellectual universalism. The studies cited

heavily patronized by ruling and scholarly elites, such texts still feature the formulaic injunctions against revealing their contents to the unworthy, lest powerful techniques fall into the wrong hands and cause the breakdown of society, that had long been standard; yet the burgeoning of an occultist writerly culture would seem to render the traditional preference for oral transmission obsolete. As Noah Gardiner has shown (“Esotericism in a Manuscript Culture,” 78-160), books themselves became teaching and initiatic instruments within the “esotericist reading communities” that coalesced around the letter-magical writings of Aḥmad al-Būnī (on whom see below) in Mamluk Egypt during the 7th/13th century; in this context, the primary technique for keeping secret the occultist lore the sufi mage divulged in his works was no longer oral transmission, but rather *intertextuality*. That is to say, his reliance on *tabdīd al-‘ilm*, the ‘dispersion of knowledge,’ whereby the keys to understanding any individual work were scattered across his corpus as a whole, rendered mere possession of a single Būnian text by the uninitiated an insufficient condition for mastering its contents. Rather, it was only through membership in an esotericist reading community that had access to and mastery of the corpus that one could understand each of its components.

By the 9th/15th century, then, when books emerged in Mamluk-Timurid society as “standalone sources of knowledge” (159) and the de-esotericization of occultism was rampant, it was precisely intertextuality, not orality, that served as the primary means of keeping occultist secrets for the protection of society. On this orality-textuality tension in Shi’ism see Dakake, “Hiding in Plain Sight”; on the same in Jewish kabbalah see Halbertal, *Concealment and Revelation*; Wolfson, “Beyond the Spoken Word.”

33. On the illegitimacy of the term “postclassical” in an Islamicate context see e.g. Bauer, “In Search of ‘Post-Classical Literature’”; on the later Islamicate commentary culture see e.g. Ingalls, “Subtle Innovation,” 1-31.

34. Estimates of the current number of surviving Arabic manuscripts only (to say nothing of Persian or Turkish) range from 600,000 to several million—these, of course, representing a small fraction of what was originally produced (Gardiner, “Esotericism,” 17). The first estimate is far too low, moreover; until recently almost 400,000 manuscripts were preserved in Timbuktu alone.

35. Fuat Sezgin (b. 1924) is here representative. His magisterial *Geschichte des arabischen Schrifttums* (1967-) is not merely positivist in approach, but blatantly triumphalist, eurocentric and whiggish, and pointedly excises what he deems the religio-intellectual cancer that is occultism by acknowledging only the achievements of valiant Muslim thinkers laboring to preserve “real” science—Greek, not eastern (Persian and Indian), and certainly not occult; thus only was Arabic science able to transmit the torch of the classical Greek heritage to Europe, subsiding into irrelevance after 430/1038 (for further examples see Lemay, “L’Islam historique”).

above on the explosion of writerly culture in the Arabic heartlands during the Middle Period are here cases in point.³⁶

Yet there persists in the literature that peculiarly modern penchant for divorcing sociopolitical currents from their intellectual-spiritual contexts and vice versa, a reflexive insistence on decoupling manifest from occult, *ẓāhir* from *bāṭin*—a strategy that does great violence to our sources and renders the worldview of our historical actors illegible.³⁷ This problem is most acute precisely with respect to the period 1200-1900, and to disciplines now considered intellectually illegitimate, including in the first place the *occult sciences* themselves; the intellectual and social history of mainstream, heavily patronized, natural-mathematical disciplines like astrology, alchemy or geomancy has yet to be written.³⁸ Needless to say, such scholarly vivisectionism but perpetuates the Enlightenment- and especially Victorian-era attempt to separate out “science,” “magic” and “religion” as distinct categories, this in order to valorize the first, damn the second, quarantine the third

36. While “Middle Period” is much preferable to “medieval,” the eurocentric adjective most frequently used in the literature for post-1100 Islamicate developments, its implication as to the “postclassicalness” of phenomena so described makes it problematic. Nevertheless, I use it here for the sake of convenience, while holding that alternate periodizations like “High Persianate,” spanning the 8th/14th century to the 13th/19th and in some regions the 14th/20th, are more neutral and appropriate for the post-Mongol context (for a discussion of this term see Melvin-Koushki and Pickett, “Mobilizing Magic”).

37. Shahzad Bashir’s recent *Sufi Bodies*, for instance, exemplifies the analytical benefits that accrue from recoupling *ẓāhir* to *bāṭin* in the study of Islamicate societies. On this theme more generally see now Shahab Ahmed’s posthumous masterpiece, *What Is Islam?*, which argues for *contradiction* and *ambiguity* as primary structuring principles of Islamicate civilization, and especially its Persianate or Balkans-to-Bengal subset; and Mana Kia’s forthcoming *Sensibilities of Belonging: Transregional Persianate Community before Nationalism*.

38. The standard Arabic term for the occult sciences more generally, including astrology (*aḥkām al-nujūm*), alchemy (*kīmiyā*) and a variety of magical and divinatory techniques, is *ʿulūm gharība*, meaning those sciences that are unusual, rare or difficult, i.e., elite; less frequently used terms are *ʿulūm khafīyya* and *ʿulūm ghāmiḍa*, sciences that are hidden or occult. These terms are routinely used in classifications of the sciences, biographical dictionaries, chronicles, etc. Its 19th-century European flavor notwithstanding, the term “occultism” is used here simply to denote a scholarly preoccupation with one or more of the occult sciences as discrete natural-philosophical or mathematical disciplines. *Occultism* is thus to be strictly distinguished from *sufism* and *esotericism*, for all that scholars from Corbin onward have habitually and perniciously disappeared the former into the latter.

A number of scholars are beginning to address this gaping lacuna with respect to Islamicate occultism in the post-Mongol period: on Ottoman astrology see, for example, Şen, “Reading the Stars”; on Mughal astrology see Orthmann, “Circular Motions”; on Mamluk alchemy see Harris, “Better Religion through Chemistry,” and on its Ottoman continuation see Artun, “Hearts of Gold”; on Ilkhanid-Timurid-Mughal-Safavid geomancy (*ʿilm al-raml*) see Melvin-Koushki, “Persianate Geomancy”; on Mamluk lettrism see Gardiner, “Esotericism,” and Coulon, “La magie islamique”; on its Timurid continuation see Melvin-Koushki, “The Quest”; on Ottoman lettrism and geomancy see Fleischer, “Ancient Wisdom”; on Ottoman astrology, lettrism and geomancy see Şen and Melvin-Koushki, “Divining Chaldiran”; on Ottoman talismanic shirts and oneiromancy (*ʿilm al-taʿbīr*) see Felek, “Fears, Hopes, and Dreams”; on Deccan Sultanate talismanic shirts see Muravchick, “Objectifying the Occult”; on Ottoman physiognomy see Lelić, “*ʿIlm-i firāsat*”; on Safavid oneiromancy and various divinatory practices see Babayan, “The Cosmological Order”; on Safavid bibliomancy see Gruber, “The ‘Restored’ Shīʿī *muṣḥaf*”; on Safavid geomancy, lettrism and alchemy see Melvin-Koushki, “The Occult Sciences”; and on Mangit lettrism see Melvin-Koushki and Pickett, “Mobilizing Magic.”

and disappear the sociopolitical context of all three. Many critical theorists have shown, of course, that this project was the primary theoretical engine of European colonialism, a natural extension of its (wildly successful) *divide et impera* strategy—and hence worthless as a heuristic for studying human societies, past and present, east and west, civilized and savage: for it is the *mission civilisatrice* itself that orientalizes and savages.³⁹

Why then are scientific positivism and occultophobia still so sorcerously hegemonic in academe generally and the study of Islam specifically? Why are the Islamicate “positive sciences” such as astronomy still studied in strict isolation from their immediate sociopolitical and intellectual contexts? Why do we not speak of a metaphysics of empire?⁴⁰ Why has no history of the *practice* of Islamicate philosophy been written?⁴¹ And as for the great Middle Period explosion of writerly culture here in view, the social, literary and aesthetic aspects of this transformation have been and are being masterfully explored;⁴² but should we not also seek for a metaphysics of writing?

As noted, this article proposes to complement the social, literary and aesthetic history of Islamicate writerly culture during the 7th-10th/13th-16th centuries by supplying its original *letter*-metaphysical context. In so doing, it constitutes a historical-philological extension and correction of the seminal studies of Annemarie Schimmel and Seyyed Hossein Nasr on the metaphysics, or spirituality, of Islamicate calligraphy,⁴³ and a confirmation and refinement of the more recent work of Gülru Necipoğlu and David Roxburgh on Persianate visual theory.⁴⁴ I argue that Ibn al-Akfānī’s celebration of textuality as the key to our humanity and Āmulī’s renewed emphasis on writing’s status

39. See e.g. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*; Taussig, *The Magic of the State*; Bracken, *Magical Criticism*; Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible*; Styers, *Making Magic*; Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*.

40. On this theme see Melvin-Koushki, “Early Modern Islamicate Empire.”

41. Rizvi, “Philosophy as a Way of Life”; this question is pursued in Melvin-Koushki, “World as (Arabic) Text.”

42. On its literary aspects see e.g. Losensky, *Welcoming Fighānī*; Bauer, “Mamluk Literature.”

43. These include Schimmel’s *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture* and *Deciphering the Signs of God* (particularly the chapter “The Word and the Script”) and Nasr’s *Islamic Art and Spirituality*. While these studies are broad in scope, they overwhelmingly focus on sufism to the detriment of occultism, often disappearing the latter into the former, and hence do not discern the increasingly *philosophically systematic* valorization of writing over speech in Islamicate culture for which I argue here. Most problematically, Ibn Turka, chief among Muslim metaphysicians of writing, is wholly absent from Schimmel’s account, while Nasr does indeed cite him in passing—but only as a *sufī* thinker. The latter even acknowledges Ibn Turka’s signature doctrine of the three levels of the letter (*Islamic Art*, 32-33); but because it is excised from its original philosophical context, Ibn Turka’s fundamental point that written language is *ontologically superior* to spoken is lost. Cf. Samer Akkach’s reading of Islamicate architecture in Ibn ‘Arabian terms (*Cosmology and Architecture*) and Carl Ernst’s discussion of a Timurid sufi treatise on calligraphy (“Sufism and the Aesthetics of Penmanship”), as well as Oliver Leaman’s general introduction to the topic (*Islamic Aesthetics*).

44. In his *Prefacing the Image*, for instance, Roxburgh surveys its theoretical and literary-historical context, with some attention to physics-metaphysics; Necipoğlu focuses on the latter aspect in her recent and magisterial programmatic article “The Scrutinizing Gaze,” wherein she updates her findings in *The Topkapı Scroll* (1995) to argue for an early modern Islamicate *hyperrealism* (over against Renaissance naturalism) predicated on the emergent theoretical primacy of “sight, insight, and desire,” this by way of a synthesis of neoplatonic, aristotelian and sufi discourses on beauty and the power of imagination and vision.

as spiritual geometry are in no way mere rhetorical conceits or mystical gushings, but rather directly informed by contemporary philosophical developments in Mamluk Egypt and Ilkhanid Iran; they must be taken seriously as such. Doing so will not only enhance our understanding of this major social transformation, but also bring to light cultural connections and discourses that have been largely or wholly occluded in the literature to date. Quite simply: restoring the *bāṭin* of Arabo-Persian textuality to its *zāhir* reveals a rather different picture of Islamicate culture during this pivotal period—one more *occult* than is usually acknowledged.

To illustrate the interdependence of social and intellectual history posited above, then, I offer a brief case study of an outstanding thinker active in late Mamluk Egypt and early Timurid Iran: Ṣāʿin al-Dīn ʿAlī b. Muḥammad Turka Iṣfahānī (770-835/1369-1432), longtime resident of Cairo, Shafīʿi chief judge of Isfahan and Yazd and the most influential occult philosopher of the 9th/15th-century Persianate world. Most significantly for our purposes here, Ibn Turka appears to be the first in the Arabo-Persian philosophical tradition as a whole to propose and systematize, in expressly neopythagorean-neoplatonic terms, what may be called a *lettrist metaphysics of light*. He did so, moreover, explicitly to lionize and explain the explosion of Islamicate textual culture as vehicle of the *philosophia perennis*: for only writing can constellate that golden chain that is intellectual-prophetic history; only *light*—and by extension the human faculty that perceives it, *sight*—is universal; hence only *written text* can fully manifest the One. As I argue, this is the most relevant theoretical context for understanding the unprecedented degree of text-centrism in Middle Period Islamicate culture, exemplified by encyclopedists like Ibn al-Akfānī and Āmulī and their heirs. The warm reception of Ibn Turka’s system in philosophical circles in Iran, from the Aqquyunlu-Safavid period through the late Qajar, as well as its reverberations in Mughal India and Ottoman Anatolia, further suggests it as perhaps the most successful Islamic metaphysics of writing to have ever been developed.

Reading the Two Books in Islam: Lettrism

The study of later Islamicate societies remains in its infancy; yet even so, that those metaphysicians most obsessed with understanding the *world as text*—lettrists—have been systematically elided in studies of Islamicate writerly culture to date is an irony particularly striking, and a classic symptom of the vivisectionist, occultophobic bias identified above. Compounding this irony, the same bias has now been largely retired in the study of early modern Christianate culture, particularly that of the Renaissance and the so-called Scientific Revolution; the cosmological doctrine of the Two Books, scripture and nature, is widely feted by specialists as the basis for the emergence of “scientific modernity”—the upshot of Europeans (and no one else) reading the world as text. The kabbalistic decoding of this text becomes *science*; its recoding, originally by way of magic, becomes *technology*.

Yet contemporary Muslim neopythagorean-occultists were no less committed to reading the world as (Arabic) text, including in the first place Ibn Turka and his colleagues and heirs; but because their brand of kabbalist hermeneutics did not lead to scientific

modernity, did not *progress* beyond its literalist-transcendentalist-magical reading of the world, they may be safely disappeared from this hallowed teleology. This remains the case even for those scholars and theorists who have successfully shown “modernity” to be a profoundly logocentric and illusory, even *sorcerous*, construct.⁴⁵ But eurocentrism in this respect is unavoidable: the almost total absence of scholarship on relevant Muslim thinkers makes it impossible for nonspecialists to account for cognate developments in Islam.

Christian kabbalah is here a case in point. First advanced by Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (d. 1494) as the core of his humanistic philosophy—indeed as the best means of divinizing man, of finally marrying Plato and Aristotle—, this Hebrew-cum-Latin science is now widely recognized to have been a central preoccupation of and inspiration for later heroes of the European Renaissance, including Giordano Bruno (d. 1600) and John Dee (d. 1608), major exponents of the Two Books doctrine and devoted kabbalists; they in turn laid the groundwork for the “Scientific Revolution” (more properly a mathematical revolution, being largely confined to astronomy and physics) as spearheaded by committed neopythagorean-occultists like Johannes Kepler (d. 1630) and Isaac Newton (d. 1727), whose *Principia Mathematica* then became the basis for scientific modernity.⁴⁶ Yet *lettrism*, kabbalah’s coeval Arabic cognate, enjoyed a similarly mainstream status in the Islamicate world during precisely this period, rendering the Two Books doctrine equally salient to Muslim metaphysicians—but not a single study to date has acknowledged, much less attempted to analyze, this striking intellectual continuity.

It is therefore imperative that the double standard that still prevails among historians of science be retired, whereby Pico’s or Dee’s obsession with kabbalah, and Kepler’s self-identification as a neopythagorean, heralds the modern mathematization of the cosmos, but Ibn Turka’s obsession with lettrism heralds but Islamic decadence and scientific irrelevance: for Islam produced no Newton. (It also produced no Oppenheimer.) Most perniciously, this double standard elides a major problematic in global history of science and philosophy. Triumphalist teleologies notwithstanding, that is, it is remarkable that, in the absence of direct contact, the quest for a universal science was universally pursued along neopythagorean-kabbalist lines throughout the Islamo-Christianate world during the early modern period—a trend that became mainstream significantly earlier in the Persianate context, where the cosmos was first mathematized.⁴⁷

In sum: If we seek a formal Islamicate metaphysics of writing, it is to the lettrists we must turn. Given how thoroughly lettrism has been occulted in the literature, however, a definition and brief historical overview of its development are first in order.⁴⁸

While the Arabic ‘science of letters’ (*‘ilm al-ḥurūf*), like its Hebrew cognate,⁴⁹ is properly

45. See n. 39 above.

46. Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola’s Encounter*.

47. Melvin-Koushki, “Powers of One.”

48. An adequate survey of lettrism’s development over 14 centuries is of course well beyond the scope of this article; for a fuller treatment see Melvin-Koushki, “The Quest,” 167-283.

49. See e.g. Wasserstrom, “Sefer Yeşira and Early Islam”; Ebstein, *Mysticism and Philosophy in al-Andalus*; Anidjar, “Our Place in al-Andalus.”

an umbrella category covering a wide range of theories and techniques, some of them being transformed or shed over time, the term (sometimes in the form *khawāṣṣ al-ḥurūf*, ‘the active properties of letters’) is nevertheless regularly used in the sources to identify a discrete science from the 3rd/9th century onward. As such, lettrism encompasses the two modes of applied occultism as a whole in its basic division into letter magic (*sīmiyāʿ*) on the one hand and letter divination (*jafr*) on the other. Letter-magical techniques include most prominently the construction of talismans (sg. *ṭilasm*), usually defined as devices that conjunct celestial influences with terrestrial objects in order to produce a strange (*gharīb*) effect according with the will (*niyya*, *himma*) of the practitioner.⁵⁰ The engine of a talisman is usually a magic square (*wafq al-aʿdād*), which may be populated with letters or numbers relevant to the operation at hand; these are designed to harness the specific letter-numerical virtues of personal names, whether of humans, jinn or angels, phrases or quranic passages, or one or more of the Names of God. (The latter operation, it should be noted, is a typical example of the sufi-occultist practice of ‘assuming the attributes of God,’ aka *theomimesis* (*takhalluq bi-akhlāq Allāh*)—hence the divine Names as a major focus of lettrism, often termed for that reason *ʿilm al-ḥurūf wa-l-asmāʿ*, or even simply *ʿilm al-asmāʿ*, ‘the science of names.’) Letter divination, for its part, includes most prominently the construction of a comprehensive prognosticon (*jafr jāmiʿ*), a 784-page text containing every possible permutation of the letters of the Arabic alphabet.⁵¹ From such a prognosticon may be derived the name of every thing or being that has ever existed or will ever exist, every name of God in every language, and the knowledge of past, present and future events—especially political events—to the end of time. This divinatory aspect of lettrism is associated in the first place with the mysterious separated sura-initial letters in the Quran (*muqaṭṭaʿāt*), similarly held to contain comprehensive predictive power, and to have inspired the basic lettrist technique of *taksīr*, separating the letters of words or names for the purposes of permutation. Most letter-magical and letter-divinatory operations are profoundly astrological in orientation, moreover; careful attention to celestial configurations is essential for the success of any operation, and letter magic often involves the harnessing of planetary spirits (*taskhīr al-kawākib*) (together with angels and jinn). Fasting, a vegetarian diet, seclusion and maintenance of a state of ritual purity are also regularly identified as conditions of practice in manuals on these subjects.

Among the occult sciences that became permanently intertwined with Islamic culture from its very inception, including in the first place astrology and alchemy, it is lettrism that underwent the most complex evolution. Most significantly, it eventually emerged as the most *Islamic* of all the occult sciences, this despite its explicitly late antique, non-Islamic parentage—or rather because of it. That is to say, lettrism’s reception as an essential component of the *philosophia perennis*, this through its association with

50. This is the definition standard from Ibn Sīnā onward. See e.g. his *R. fī Aqṣām al-ʿUlūm al-ʿAqliyya*, 75; and Quṭb al-Dīn Shīrāzī, *Durrat al-Tāj*, 155-56.

51. A completed comprehensive prognosticon has 784 pages, with 784 cells and 3,136 letters per page, resulting in 87,808 cells and 2,458,624 letters in total (Fahd, *La divination arabe*, 221 n. 1; note that a misprint gives the incorrect figure 2,458,424).

the prophet-philosopher-king Solomon and a host of other ancient prophets and their sage disciples, especially Hebrews like Daniel, Greeks like Pythagoras and Plato, Egyptians like Hermes, Persians like Zoroaster and Indians like Ṭumṭum and Sāmūr, mirrored the status of the Quran itself as the culmination of prophetic history.⁵²

Historically, lettrism first entered the Islamic tradition by way of two main vectors: 1) the symbolical cosmogonical speculations and sorcerous proclivities of so-called extremist (*ghulāt*) Shi'i circles of 2nd/8th-century Iraq, largely inspired by late antique Hellenic "gnostic" movements;⁵³ and 2) the divinatory texts associated with the House of the Prophet, including the original Comprehensive Prognosticon (*al-jaf̄r wa-l-jāmi'a*) and the Codex (*muṣḥaf*) of Fāṭima.⁵⁴ It is the second vector in particular that prepared the way for lettrism's definitive *islamicization*, with 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib and Ja'far al-Ṣādiq being routinely identified in later lettrist tradition as the science's supreme exponents for the Islamic dispensation. It then underwent a progressive *philosophicization* within a neoplatonic-neopythagorean framework, particularly on display in the 3rd/9th-century Jābir b. Ḥayyān corpus and the 4th/10th-century *Rasā'il* of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'; during this phase lettrism became associated with Isma'ilism in North Africa, which combined its cosmogonical and magical-divinatory applications as eclectically explored during the fraught emergence of Shi'ism. (The semi-Isma'ili *Epistles* famously declare magic, together with astrology, alchemy, medicine and astral travel (*'ilm al-tajrīd*), the queen of all sciences and ultimate goal of philosophy.⁵⁵) Seminal Maghribi grimoires like Maslama al-Qurṭubī's (d. 353/964) *Ghāyat al-Ḥakīm*, enthusiastically received in the Latinate world as the *Picatrix*, were direct products of this Ikhwānī philosophical-spiritual current.⁵⁶

During the same period and primarily in the same place—North Africa and al-Andalus—lettrism underwent a process of *sanctification*, this entailing its recasting in specifically sufi terms rather than either natural-philosophical or Shi'i. This move was part of the larger sufi challenge to Shi'ism, whereby sufis began to position themselves as rival claimants to the Shi'i category of *walāya*, the 'sacral power' peculiar to the Imams; this category was therefore massively expanded by sufi theoreticians to designate Islamic sainthood in general. Most notably for our purposes here, and perhaps due to residual Isma'ili influence, the same sufi theoreticians elevated lettrism to the dual status of science of the saints (*'ilm al-awliyā'*) and science of divine oneness (*'ilm al-tawḥīd*) *par excellence*: simultaneously a tool for cosmological speculation and for controlling creation, as well as vehicle of mystical ascent or return to the One.

52. See e.g. Melvin-Koushki, "The Quest," 318-28; van Bladel, *The Arabic Hermes*.

53. See Tucker, *Mahdis and Millenarians*. The handle "gnostic," of course, is an almost unusably flabby one (my thanks to Dylan Burns for clarifying this point); see Smith, "The History of the Term Gnostikos." On late antique gnosticizing and platonizing Christian number symbolism see Kalvesmaki, *The Theology of Arithmetic*.

54. Modarressi, *Tradition and Survival*, 4-5, 18-19.

55. *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity: On Magic I*, 95-96.

56. See e.g. de Callataj, "Magia en al-Andalus"; Fierro, "Bāṭinism in al-Andalus"; Saif, *The Arabic Influences*.

This sanctification process began in the late 3rd/9th century and came to full flower in the work of two authorities in particular: Aḥmad al-Būnī (d. 622/1225?), the greatest mage of Islam, at least in his later reception, representing applied lettrism (i.e., letter magic); and Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 638/1240), the greatest mystical philosopher of Islam, representing theoretical lettrism (i.e., letter metaphysics). The oeuvres of both authorities together thus represent the definitive synthesis of all the preceding lettrist currents; in their hands lettrism became the most quintessentially Islamic of sciences, yet without losing any of its old occult potency—indeed, that potency was amplified, now combining both philosophical-scientific and spiritual-religious legitimacy. In short, by the 7th/13th century lettrism was emerging as a universal science, the marriage of ancient and modern, Hellenic and Islamic, the ideal vehicle for neoplatonic-neopythagorean philosophy on the one hand and the performance of sainthood on the other.

Significantly for our purposes here, the suficization of lettrism was accomplished by “esotericist reading communities,” as Noah Gardiner has called them, that coalesced around the writings of al-Būnī in Mamluk Cairo and those of Ibn ‘Arabī in Mamluk Damascus over the course of the 7th/13th century.⁵⁷ While these reading communities were highly secretive (hence the handle esotericist), at some point in the 8th/14th century al-Būnī’s lettrist treatises in particular suddenly exploded on the Cairene scene as favorite objects of elite patronage; production of manuscript copies of his works sharply increased in the second half of that century and remained relatively high through the end of the 9th/15th.⁵⁸ In other words, the unprecedented elite reception precisely of *suficized lettrism* played a crucial role in the explosion of Mamluk writerly culture; and Cairo’s new status as intellectual hub of the Islamicate world (as well as Damascus to a lesser extent) meant that this western Būnian-Ibn ‘Arabian science was rapidly propagated eastward by the many persophone scholars who came to the Mamluk realm to study—including, of course, Ibn Turka. Having initially come to Cairo to study law, the Isfahani scholar there became the star student of Sayyid Ḥusayn Akhlāṭī (d. 799/1397), Kurdish Tabrizi lettrist-chemist and personal physician to Sultan Barqūq (r. 784-92/1382-90). While his own surviving writings on lettrism are scattered and piecemeal, Akhlāṭī nevertheless stands as the greatest occultist of his generation, pivot to a vast occultist network operative between Anatolia and Iran via Cairo. Most notably, he was responsible for training the two most influential and prolific occultist thinkers of the early 9th/15th century: ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Biṣṭāmī (d. 858/1454), chief architect of Ottoman occultist imperial ideology;⁵⁹ and Ibn Turka, who sought to fill the same role for the Timurids.⁶⁰

This, then, was the context in which Middle Period encyclopedists like Ibn al-Akfānī and Shams al-Dīn Āmulī constructed their writing-centric classifications of knowledge. That of the former, a Cairene physician-chemist who perished in the Black Death epidemic of the

57. Gardiner, “Esotericism,” 43-46, 78-160.

58. *Ibid.*, 263-70, 347-50.

59. Fleischer, “Ancient Wisdom”; Gardiner, “Esotericism,” 329-40.

60. Melvin-Koushki, “The Quest,” 16-18, 47-49. I examine the political-imperial ramifications of this lettrist revolution in my forthcoming *The Occult Science of Empire in Aqquyunlu-Safavid Iran: Two Shirazi Lettrists*.

mid-8th/14th century,⁶¹ is accordingly heavily occultist in tenor, this despite its Avicennan framework; it posits an astrology-talismans-magic continuum⁶² as the very backbone of natural philosophy, running the epistemological-ontological gamut from celestial simple bodies to terrestrial or elemental composite bodies, and allowing the competent philosopher-scientist experiential control of the cosmos.⁶³ Despite his clear letter-magical proclivities, however, Ibn al-Akfānī's highly succinct treatment of these sciences does not directly reflect the burgeoning popularity of specifically sufi lettrism; but that of his Ilkhanid colleague does. As noted, Āmulī's encyclopedia offers a far fuller and more comprehensive treatment of the religious and rational sciences; the theory of knowledge and classificatory scheme it advances is unprecedented in the Arabo-Persian encyclopedic tradition as a whole.

What makes the *Nafāyis al-Funūn* truly pivotal in the present context, however, is its status as the first encyclopedia to register a) the rise of sufism to sociopolitical hegemony, and b) the sanctification of occultism. Āmulī flags these twin developments by first elevating the science of sufism (*ʿilm-i taṣavvuf*) to the status of supreme Islamic science, equal in importance to all the other religious sciences (including jurisprudence, hadith and theology) combined, then designating lettrism the supreme sufi science.⁶⁴ At the same time, he retains the category of *sīmiyā*, letter and talismanic magic, as an applied natural science, further classifying it as one of the 'Semitic sciences' (*ʿulūm-i sāmīyya*)—i.e., positing a connection to Hebrew kabbalah.⁶⁵ Yet even there he stipulates that proficiency in *sīmiyā* is predicated on, among other things, a mastery of astronomy (a mathematical science) and astrology (a natural science).⁶⁶ Āmulī's sophisticated and nuanced classification here thus signals the emergence of lettrism as a simultaneously Islamic, natural and mathematical science—that is to say, a *universal* science—and a defining feature of the religio-intellectual landscape of the Islamicate heartlands from the mid-8th/14th century onward.

61. It should here be noted that the sudden explosion of elite interest in Būnian lettrism occurred in tandem with the Black Death catastrophe, followed by recurring plague outbreaks and consequent famines for decades thereafter. This was hardly coincidental; I suggest that the apocalyptic conditions that prevailed in Mamluk Cairo, where half of the population perished virtually overnight, are precisely what created this elite demand for books on letter magic, presumably in a bid to establish a measure of control over a world politically, socially, economically and biologically in flux.

62. Respectively, *ʿilm aḥkām al-nujūm*, *ʿilm al-ṭilasmāt* and *ʿilm al-siḥr*.

63. See Melvin-Koushki, "Powers of One."

64. *Nafāyis al-funūn*, 2/91-110.

65. *Nafāyis al-funūn*, 3/183. Ibn al-Akfānī gives an etymology of the term *sīmiyā*' (> Gr. *sēmeia*) as deriving from the Hebrew *shem Yah*, 'the name of God,' indicating the science's association with the divine names as loci of magical power (*Irshād al-Qāṣid*, 51).

66. *Nafāyis al-funūn*, 3/191.

Seeing the Text: Ibn Turka's Lettrist Metaphysics of Light

The supernal Pen is made of light and extends from heaven to earth.⁶⁷

—Ḥusayn Vā'iz Kāshifī

The eye, that is the window of the soul, is the principal way whence the common sense may most copiously and magnificently consider the infinite works of nature.⁶⁸

—Leonardo da Vinci

[V]ision is tele-vision, transcendence, crystallization of the impossible.⁶⁹

—Maurice Merleau-Ponty

Such was the state of the art when a young Ibn Turka left his native Iran around 795/1393 to study Shafī'i law in Cairo—and there was so intellectually captivated by sanctified Ibn 'Arabian lettrism that he made it the focus of his life's work.⁷⁰ Unlike the Andalusian master, however, his prime exemplar, Ibn Turka sought to formally *systematize* this lettrist tradition so as to open it to philosophical-scientific-imperial use; to this end, he drew on his broad mastery of Avicennan and illuminationist philosophy on the one hand and theoretical sufism on the other to synthesize a wholly unprecedented lettrist metaphysics of light. Integral to this new system was Ibn Turka's categorical assertion, equally unprecedented in the lettrist tradition, of the epistemological and ontological superiority of writing to speech, which he explicitly advanced as a framework for explaining the rise of Islamicate writerly culture as culmination of the *philosophia perennis*.

For all his reliance on mainstream Avicennan-illuminationist philosophy, however, Ibn Turka sought to fundamentally undercut it by delegitimizing its exponents' preoccupation with such concepts as existence (*wujūd*) or quiddity/essence (*māhiyya*). In several of his lettrist works he advances the premise that drove his intellectual project as a whole: these faux-universal concepts of Avicennan-illuminationist philosophical speculation notwithstanding, only the letter (*ḥarf*) encompasses all that is and is not, all that can and cannot be; it alone is the *coincidentia oppositorum* (*ta'ānuq al-aḍḍād*); hence lettrism is the only valid form of metaphysics.⁷¹

67. This assertion is part of Kāshifī's explication, in his popular Quran commentary *Mavāhib-i 'Alīyya*, of God's swearing by the Pen in Sūrat al-Qalam (4/320): *Ḥaqq subḥāna-hu sūgand yād farmūd bi davāt u qalam va bi qalam-i a'lā ki az nūr ast va ḥūl-i ū mā bayn al-samā' va-l-arḏ*. Ḥusayn Vā'iz Kāshifī (d. 910/1505), Sabzavari polymath extraordinaire, Naqshbandī sufi and chief preacher of Herat, was the most important writer on lettrism and the other occult sciences of late Timurid Iran, and author of the first thoroughgoingly lettrist tafsīr, *Javāhir al-Tafsīr*, unfortunately unfinished, which features Ibn Turka as a source (see Melvin-Koushki, "The Quest," 261-67). On Kāshifī's *Asrār-i Qāsimī*, a grimoire that became hugely popular in the Safavid period, see Subtelny, "Sufism and Lettrism" (my thanks to Professor Subtelny for sharing a working draft of this article).

68. Quoted in Summers, *Judgment of Sense*, 73.

69. *The Visible and the Invisible*, 273.

70. As noted, his teacher in Cairo was Sayyid Ḥusayn Akhlāṭī, who dispatched his star student and fellow persophone scholar back to Iran to promulgate lettrism among Timurid elites.

71. That is to say, letter-number, as the *coincidentia oppositorum*, renders the immaterial material; unites

At the same time, the Isfahani occult philosopher commandeers the distinctive Avicennan doctrine of *tashkīk al-wujūd*, the transcendental modulation of existence, as the basic framework for his lettrist metaphysics. This doctrine was first proposed, in a form unknown to Hellenic philosophy, by Ibn Sīnā (d. 428/1037) in his *Mubāḥathāt* as a means of avoiding the conclusion that the essence (*dhāt*) of God, defined as the Necessary Existent (*wājib al-wujūd*), is composite of and dependent on the two concepts existence and necessity, which violates the principle of absolute divine oneness (*waḥda*) and self-sufficiency (*istighnā*).⁷² It should be noted, however, that by *tashkīk al-wujūd* the Shaykh al-Raʿīs means only the transcendental modulation of the *concept* of existence (*tashkīk fī mafhūm al-wujūd*), not the *reality* of existence (*tashkīk fī ḥaqīqat al-wujūd*).⁷³ In his upgrade of Avicennism, Suhrawardī (d. 587/1191) accordingly enlarged the scope of this concept, proposing rather the doctrine of *tashkīk al-nūr*, the transcendental—and *real*, not conceptual—modulation of Light, the ground of all being, as the basis for his essentialist answer to Ibn Sīnā.⁷⁴ But it is only with Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī (d. 672/1274) that the levels of such transcendental modulation, whether of existence or light, are formally identified as *semantic*; *writing* thus becomes the level of being furthest from extramental reality. In his seminal commentary on Ibn Sīnā’s *al-Ishārāt wa-l-Tanbīhāt*, an expansion of Fakhr al-Dīn Rāzī’s (d. 606/1209) commentary on the same, Ṭūsī asserts the following in explication of the *ishāra* on the relation between a term (*lafẓ*) and its meaning (*maʿnā*) as it pertains to logic:⁷⁵

Because there is a certain connection between a term and its meaning. I say: Things possess being in extramental reality (al-aʿyān), being in the mind (al-adhhān), being in [spoken] expression (al-ʿibāra) and being in writing (al-kitāba). Writing thus signifies [spoken] expression, which in turn signifies a meaning in the mind. Both [writing and speech] are conventional signifiers (dalālatān waḍʿiyyatān) that differ as conventions differ, whereas mental meanings signify external [realities] in a natural manner that is always and everywhere the same. Thus between a spoken utterance (lafẓ) and its meaning only an artificial connection obtains; hence his statement

Occult (*bāṭin*) with Manifest (*ẓāhir*), First (*awwal*) with Last (*ākhir*); makes the One many and the many One; marries heaven and earth. The verse *He is the First and the Last, the Manifest and the Occult* (Q 57:3) is hence the central motto of Ibn Turka and his lettrist colleagues.

72. Treiger, “Avicenna’s Notion,” 329.

73. Eshots, “Systematic Ambiguity of Existence.”

74. On the place of Ibn al-Haytham’s (d. ca. 430/1039) theory of optics in Islamicate discourses on vision see Necipoğlu, “The Scrutinizing Gaze,” 34-40; on the metaphysics of light in its European receptions see e.g. Cantarino, “Ibn Gabirol’s Metaphysic of Light”; Lindberg, “Kepler’s Theory of Light.”

75. The *ishāra* in full (*al-Ishārāt wa-l-Tanbīhāt: al-Manṭiq*, pt. 1, 53-56):

Because there is a certain connection between a spoken word (*lafẓ*) and its meaning, such that the modalities of its utterance may affect those of its meaning, the logician must therefore be sure to deploy a term in its absolute sense, as it is in itself, undelimited by the usage (*luḡha*) of any one group.

a certain connection, for the only true connection (*al-‘alāqa al-ḥaḥqīqiyya*) is that between a [mental] meaning and its extramental reality.⁷⁶

Here Ṭūsī reiterates, in short, the standard conventionalist definition of writing as signifier of a signifier. (Saussure would be pleased.) As Sajjad Rizvi has shown in his monograph on the subject, it is this Avicennan-Suhravardian-Ṭūsian fourfold schema of the semantics of being that Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1045/1635) drew on in formulating his signature doctrines of *tashkīk al-wujūd* and *aṣālat al-wujūd*, the two cornerstones of his radically existentialist philosophy. In his logical epitome, *al-Tanqīḥ fī-l-Manṭiq*, for instance, the Safavid sage restates Ṭūsī’s formulation essentially verbatim: ‘The being of a thing is extramental (*‘aynī*), mental (*dhihni*), uttered (*lafzī*) or written (*katbī*).’⁷⁷

The celebrated Sadrian synthesis, usually taken to represent the culmination of all preceding philosophical and mystical currents in Islam, Sunni and Shi‘i alike, would thus seem to provide for an adequate metaphysics of writing. Yet we are still far from a properly lettrist metaphysics—necessarily radically anticonventionalist—wherein letters transcend the very categories of existence and essence themselves. We have seen that lettrism had become intellectually mainstream in Iran by the Ilkhanid period; given that philosophy was emphatically not a hermetically sealed discipline in the way it is in the Euro-American academy, and philosophers were often acclaimed as powerful occultists in service of state and society (Suhravardī, Fakhr al-Dīn Rāzī and Ṭūsī all being cases in point), we might therefore expect it to have been incorporated into philosophical discourse on the nature of writing during the three-century interval between Ṭūsī and Mullā Ṣadrā.

Enter Ibn Turka. As I argue, his emanationist-creationist lettrist system may be said to pivot on the twin doctrines of *aṣālat al-ḥarf*, the ontological primacy of the letter, and *tashkīk al-ḥarf*, the transcendental modulation of the letter in written, verbal, mental and extramental form.⁷⁸ That is to say, Ibn Turka sought in his challenge to philosophy to replace the Avicennans’ *wujūd* and the illuminationists’ *māhiyya* and *nūr* with *ḥarf* in all respects, and found *tashkīk* a concept eminently suited to this end.⁷⁹ Ibn Turka was clearly a master of the philosophical curriculum standard by the early 9th/15th century; his doctrine of *tashkīk al-ḥarf* should thus be considered an innovative critique of and formal alternative to the Avicennan-Suhravardian-Ṭūsian model of the semantics of being, whose conventionalism it utterly rejects. In Ibn Turka’s reading of the world as text, letter-number is the uncreated, all-creative matrix of reality, transcending both being and essence—and hence the only conceivable subject of metaphysics. More to the point: letter-number, he argues, is a form of *light* eternally emanated from the One—and so his *tashkīk al-ḥarf* is equally *tashkīk al-nūr*, the signature illuminationist doctrine now reformulated in explicitly occultist-lettrist terms.

76. Ibid., 53-54. See Rizvi, *Mullā Ṣadrā*, 1.

77. *Al-Tanqīḥ fī-l-Manṭiq*, 19; trans. in Rizvi, *Mullā Ṣadrā*, 1-2 (slightly modified here).

78. The Isfahani lettrist nowhere uses the terms *aṣālat al-ḥarf* and *tashkīk al-ḥarf*, though the connotation of each matches his philosophical position precisely; I suggest them here as useful heuristics.

79. Mullā Ṣadrā himself may be said to have simply replaced *nūr* with *wujūd* in his own formulation and reinforced the proofs offered by Suhravardī (Eshots, “Systematic Ambiguity,” 2).

Of Letters

Ibn Turka's lettrist metaphysics of light, then, is entirely predicated on this fourfold *tashkīk* schema; the latter accordingly structures his most important lettrist works. For reasons of space only two will be examined here.

His earliest such work is the Persian treatise *Of Letters* (*R. Ḥurūf*), written in Shiraz in 817/1414 for the Timurid (occult) philosopher-king Iskandar Sulṭān (r. 812-17/1409-14), grandson of Temūr (r. 771-807/1370-1405) and main competitor with Shāhrukh (r. 807-50/1405-47) for control of Iran.⁸⁰ The *R. Ḥurūf* divides lettrists into two broad camps: the *ahl-i khavāṣṣ*, concerned with the practical applications of the science, associated with al-Būnī in particular; and the *ahl-i ḥaqāyiq*, concerned with its theoretical basis, associated with Ibn ʿArabī in particular; the treatise provides for its royal patron a survey of the latter approach.⁸¹ The author then proceeds to lay out his core doctrine of the three (or rather four) descending levels of the letter, which alone constellate the Chain of Being in its emanation from the One, and allows for the ascent and descent thereof: spiritual-mental (*maʿnavī lubābī*), spoken-oral (*lafẓī kalāmī*) and written-textual (*raqamī kitābī*). (The fourth and highest extramental (ʿaynī) level is not assigned a separate section here, but is clearly operative.) As he states in the introduction:

Now three loci of self-manifestation (*majlā*) have been created for the letterform, through which it manifests and reveals the end and the essence of every thing. The first is the faculty of sight (*baṣar*), to which the ʿayn in the word ʿabd (ʿBD, servant) refers; the second is the heart (*qalb*), to which the *bā* in ʿabd refers; the third is the faculty of hearing (*samʿ*), to which the *dāl* in ʿabd refers. By this measure, then, the letter may be divided into three categories (*qism*):

- 1) The written-textual (*raqamī kitābī*) form, which through the agency of fingers and hands is given form upon the open spread of white pages and reveals realities to both sight (*abṣār*) and insight (*baṣāyir*) as its proper loci; the exponents of this mode are *those possessed of hands and vision* (*ūlū l-aydī wa-l-abṣār*) (Q 38:45).⁸²
- 2) The verbal-oral (*lafẓī kalāmī*) form, which through the agency of the tongue and the various points of articulation that modify the breath is embodied and

80. While he lost this contest to his more conservative, Sunnizing uncle, Iskandar Sulṭān nevertheless stands as an early and important model for the new forms of universalist Islamicate kingship, explicitly predicated on occult-scientific principles, that were developed in the post-Mongol Persianate world; see Melvin-Koushki, "Early Modern Islamicate Empire."

81. On this treatise see Melvin-Koushki, "The Quest," 88-90; an edition and translation are provided at pp. 463-89. In it Ibn Turka refers to a major lettrist work in progress, likely to be identified with his *K. al-Mafāḥiṣ*. He also refers to his important commentary on Ibn ʿArabī's *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, unique among the host of commentaries on this text in its overtly lettrist approach, and completed in 813/1411, presumably for Iskandar Sulṭān as well (ibid., 112-13).

82. Cf. *R. Shaqq-i Qamar*, 111, 116, where this phrase refers to the Imams as repositories of all occult knowledge.

expresses realities to the hearing (*asmā'*) and to reason (*'uqūl*) as its proper loci; its exponents are *the folk of verbal remembrance (ahl al-dhikr)* (Q 16:43, 21:7).

3) The spiritual-mental (*ma'navī lubābī*) form, which through the agency of the rational and imaginative faculties (*quvvat-i 'āqila u mutakhayyila*) is analyzed within the broad realm of meaning with the heart as its proper locus; its exponents are *those possessed of minds (ūlū l-albāb)* (Q 2:179, etc.): *He gives wisdom to whomever He will, and whoso is given wisdom has been given much good; yet none remembers save those possessed of minds* (Q 2:269).

Each of these categories is specific to one of the three primary human faculties, to wit, the heart, the hearing, and sight. It is in this respect that quranic verses typically refer to all three together, usually giving precedence to either the heart (as in the verse *Surely in that there is a reminder to him who has a heart, or will give ear with a present mind* (Q 50:37), and the verse *There is nothing His like; He is the All-hearing, the All-seeing* (Q 42:11)) or to the hearing (as in the verse *And He appointed for you hearing, and sight, and hearts* (Q 16:78, 9:32, 67:23)). The first order reflects the fundamental and essential precedence of the heart with respect to the other members, and indeed with respect to all things in existence, whereas the second order reflects hearing's precedence at the moment of creation, inasmuch as it was the faculty singled out to receive the [spoken] command *Be! (kun)* from among the various members and faculties of perception. However, because the accepted usage in teaching (*ta'lim, tafhīm*) involves giving precedence to that which is the most manifest (*aẓhar*)—as for example in the verse *How well He sees! How well He hears!* (Q 18:26)—it is here more appropriate and useful to treat first the written form of the letters. (Indeed, the fact that the imperative form is used in the verse just cited suggests precisely the objective of teaching.) Yet it must be noted that despite the fact that its written form is more manifest and its spiritual form more occult (*akhfā*), the first is not self-evident and must be learned, whereas knowledge of the second need not be; that is to say, knowledge of the numbers and their degrees is innate, in contrast to knowledge of the written form of the letters and their shapes, which cannot be understood until they are learned. This is so because of a basic principle of divine oneness (*tawhīd*), as those who have studied this know.⁸³

Here Ibn Turka, in short, overturns lettrist precedent by promoting the written form of the letters over the oral, which had long been awarded epistemological precedence in the tradition due to its association with prophetic revelation⁸⁴—including by the Ikhwān

83. R. Ḥurūf, 478-79.

84. A similar dynamic long obtained among Jewish kabbalists; as Elliot Wolfson observes in his magisterial *Language, Eros, Being* (78):

In spite of the persistent claim on the part of kabbalists to the oral nature of esoteric lore and practice—a claim always made in written documents—at least as far as historians are concerned there is little question that kabbalah as a historical phenomenon evolved in highly literate circles wherein writing was viewed as the principal channel for transmission and embellishment of the

al-Ṣafāʾ themselves;⁸⁵ his *tashkīk* schema even departs from Ibn ʿArabī, who is aware of the Ṭūsian formulation but assigns it little importance.⁸⁶ Most significantly, this new theoretical framework allows the Isfahani lettrist to associate prophethood (*nubuwwat*) strictly with the spoken level of the letters, and sacral power or sainthood (*valāyat*), its actualization, with the written and mental both; Ibn Turka’s innovation here is his bold assertion of the superiority of written to spoken, of *walāya* to *nubuwwa*, to the same degree that vision is superior to all other physical senses: for light (*nūr*), unlike sound, is incorruptible and universal, the directest aperture onto the One. In so doing, he is giving lettrist form to the infamous Ibn ʿArabian doctrine of the superiority of sainthood to prophethood.⁸⁷ This lettrist physics-metaphysics of light in turn explains ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib’s status as primary vector of *walāya* during the Islamic dispensation, for he was responsible for perfecting the written shapes of the 28 (or 29) Arabic letterforms, matrix of the uncreated Quran, which alone allow for the transmission of words through time and space—and also inventor of the prognosticative mathematical science of *jafr*, which allows us to *write the history of the future*.⁸⁸

In other words, Ibn Turka posits writing as simultaneously an exclusively Alid patrimony and primary vehicle of the *philosophia perennis*, from Adam to the end of history. At the same time, he holds number (*ʿadad*)—the mental-spiritual form of the letter—to represent the core of the prophetic revelation as actualized by the elite among the saints in every generation, including in the first place Pythagoras as foremost disciple of Solomon.⁸⁹ Yet here too Ibn Turka designates this perennial doctrine a special patrimony of the House of the Prophet. As he states:

[T]he ancient sages held the science of number to be the alchemy in whose crucible

traditions.

85. As Necipoğlu summarizes (“The Scrutinizing Gaze,” 31-32):

The Brethren regard hearing and sight as “the best and noblest of the five senses,” reminding their audience of the Koranic affirmation that God endowed humans with the gift of “hearing, sight and hearts” (Koran 23:78). Nonetheless, their Neoplatonic view of mimesis (recalling the Parable of the Cave) accords a superior status to hearing: the species that inhabit this world are only representations and likeness of forms (*ṣuwar*) and beings of pure substance that inhabit the higher world of the celestial spheres and heavens, “just as the pictures and images [*al-nuqūsh wa-l-ṣuwar*] on the surface of walls and ceilings are representations and likenesses for the forms” of animate beings of flesh and blood.

86. It should be noted that Ibn ʿArabī offers no such consistent lettrist schema; in his *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, for instance, the Andalusian master refers twice in merest passing to Ṭūsī’s formulation (1/45, 4/315).

87. See e.g. Elmore, *Islamic Sainthood*, 147, 155-60.

88. R. Ḥurūf, p. 481. I have discussed elsewhere the *imamophilia* intrinsic to the Sunni lettrist tradition, especially in the Timurid context (Melvin-Koushki, “The Quest,” 69-77). It must also be emphasized in this connection that lettrist theory is necessarily predicated on the doctrine of the uncreatedness of the Quran; Ibn Turka accordingly bemoans the contemporary popularity of Zamakhsharī’s (d. 538/1144) *Kashshāf*, singling out his failure to recognize the intrinsic ontological majesty of the quranic letters for special censure (Melvin-Koushki, “The Quest,” 59, 54, 76, 116, 342).

89. See Melvin-Koushki, “The Quest,” 315-20.

all other sciences are produced and the elixir [productive] of all manner of rarities and marvels. The holy Imam Ja‘far [al-Šādiq] (upon him be peace) also greatly vaunted this science, and those who cleave to the threshold of his *walāya* have penned numerous works on the subject.⁹⁰

But celestial-mathematical realities cannot be preserved except in written—which is to say, talismanic—form.⁹¹ Ibn Turka accordingly identifies the greatest exponents of the perennial philosophy, the Imams and the ancients, together with their disciples in every age, with the quranic phrase *ūlū l-aydī wa-l-abšār: those possessed of hands and vision, or men of main and vision*—to wit, the coterie of inspired thinkers who have preserved for posterity prophetically revealed neopythagorean-neoplatonic philosophy in written form. Evidence suggests that from Ibn Turka onward this phrase entered common usage as a designation of sages and philosophers in general.⁹²

The Book of Inquiries

Shortly after completing *Of Letters*, and again almost certainly at the instance of Iskandar Sulṭān, Ibn Turka began writing his *magnum opus*, the *Book of Inquiries* (*K. al-Mafāḥiṣ*): the first Arabic *summa* of Islamic neopythagoreanism. This book, completed in 823/1420 and revised and expanded in 828/1425, represents the fullest expression of his lettrist metaphysics.⁹³ As such, it massively expands on the fourfold schema first proposed in his earlier treatise, treating of the meanings of the letters according to their three forms, numerological (*iḥsā‘ī*), symbolical (*kitābī*) and phonological (*kalāmī*), as well as the letters as they are in themselves (*fī anfuṣi-hā*). As Ibn Turka elsewhere states, knowledge of these three forms is the sole preserve of the companions and true heirs of the Prophet (*aṣḥāb al-khātam wa-warathatu-hu*)—i.e., those *men of main and vision* occupying the highest rank in his intellectual hierarchy, the Imams and their lettrist followers.⁹⁴

The primary purpose of this work, the author asserts, is to demonstrate the roots of

90. R. Ḥurūf, 472. The alchemical references are here significant; Ibn Turka has in mind Jābir b. Ḥayyān in particular, whose *Science of the Balance* (*‘ilm al-mizān*), the basis of Jābirian alchemy, is fundamentally lettrist in approach (Melvin-Koushki, “The Quest,” 180-82, 353).

91. In her discussion of calligraphy in *Deciphering the Signs of God*, Schimmel emphasizes the talismanic and divinatory applications of the quranic text (152-54); and Nasr observes (*Islamic Art and Spirituality*, 30): “Since the verses of the Quran are powers or talismans, the letters and words which make possible the visualization of the Quranic verses also play the role of a talisman and display powers of their own.”

92. In Sharaf al-Dīn Yazdī’s *Munsha‘āt* (85), for instance, *ūlū l-aydī wa-l-abšār* is used in a letter written for Ibrāhīm Sulṭān b. Shāhrukh (d. 838/1435) to denote the leading lights of the Muslim community charged with the preservation and transmission of the Quran. Similarly, in his popular *Akhlāq-i Jalālī* (320-21) Davānī applies the phrase to the ‘famed sages’ (*ḥukamā-yi nāmdār*), and in his *R. Khalq al-‘Ā‘māl* (68) to the *al-‘imma al-kibār*, here meaning the leading theologians and philosophers (*man mārāsa šinā‘ataya l-ḥikma wa-l-kalām*) who have dealt with the subject of the creation of human actions. It should be noted in this context that the Shirazi philosopher, following Ibn Turka, also explicitly associates the written form of the letters with the *men of main and vision* (*R. Tahlīliyya*, 65).

93. Melvin-Koushki, “The Quest,” 97-99, 330-78.

94. Melvin-Koushki, “The Quest,” 315-20.

all manifestation in the One and schematize the mechanics of multiplicity's derivation therefrom. This information, in turn, will allow the adept to manipulate the letters—the uncreated, creative matrices through which the One self-manifests—to access and control every epistemological and ontological level of the cosmos, thus constituting a continuum from ultra-rarefied letter theory to purely practical letter magic. The supreme dignity of its object necessarily renders lettrism the supreme science:

The subject of the science we have here in view is the One (*al-wāḥid*) insofar as it is one, regardless of the form in which it manifests in all the variety of its significations. The all-pervasive, all-encompassing nature of One with respect to existence being obvious, this science is therefore necessarily superior to all other sciences by an order of magnitude.⁹⁵

He proceeds to make an invidious comparison between the object of lettrism and the concept of absolute existence (*al-wujūd al-muṭlaq*), the standard focus of Avicennan philosophy; because this concept is only relevant to things that exist, and is forever relativized by its opposite, it can hardly serve as the object of a universal metaphysical science. Only the letter encompasses all that is and is not, all that can and cannot be; it alone is the *coincidentia oppositorum*, the intellect's only vehicle of return to the One.⁹⁶ (It should be noted in this context that the Isfahani lettrist is here updating the Ibn 'Arabian concept of the creative imagination (*khayāl*) as all-encompassing faculty, making explicit what the Andalusian master left relatively implicit by privileging the role of the letters with respect to the creative imagination's mechanics and outworkings.⁹⁷)

In the exordium that opens the *Mafāḥiṣ*, Ibn Turka therefore flatly declares metaphysics the supreme science, and lettrism—that branch of metaphysics focused on the One rather than existence or essence—the only valid form of metaphysics:

The metaphysical sciences (*al-ʿulūm al-ilāhiyya*), in all their methodological varieties and with all their programmatic differences, represent the highest object to which [human] ambition aspires and the ultimate point to which the chargers of generous natures are led. But it is only a science that admits of not the slightest insinuation of doubt that can truly show the [different] rankings [of its practitioners] as the finest riders compete on its racing grounds for the palm: [the science of letters] ... It is this [science] that God has spread out in the abode of His Islam as groundcloth for the

95. MS Majlis 10196 f. 53b.

96. See e.g. MS Majlis 10196 ff. 55a, 58b, 76a; Ibn Turka cites the concept of the marriage of opposites variously as *taʿānuq ʿiddayn*, *taʿānuq al-aṭrāf*, *majmaʿ li-l-ṭarafayn wa-muʿtanaq li-l-mutaqābilayn*, etc. The Latin term was coined, intriguingly, by Ibn Turka's later contemporary Nicholas of Cusa (d. 1464); on the latter's equally thoroughgoing neopythagorean project see Albertson, *Mathematical Theologies*. More generally, on the *coincidentia oppositorum* as a pivotal concept in the History of Religions movement see Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion*.

97. That is to say, letters, as the most fundamental of images, represent the atoms of the imaginal realm (*ʿālam al-mithāl*) (personal communication with William Chittick). On the similar importance of the creative imagination to thinkers in late medieval and early modern south India, for example, see Shulman, *More than Real*.

repast of His Speech, favoring His servants with the varieties of growth that sprout forth from the ground of their aptitude at the banquets of His *Lawāmīm*, feeding them so as to strengthen them and bring them to maturity with the delicacies of the doves of His *Ḥawāmīm*, giving them to drink of [the water of] *Tasnīm* so as to revive them to an everlasting life from the cups of His *Ṭawāsīn*.⁹⁸

He then classifies lettrist metaphysicians as historically belonging to one of three camps: 1) those focused on speech; 2) those focused on writing; and 3) those focused on number, the heirs of ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, inventor of *jafr*. While all access a measure of supernal truths with their chosen method, writing is far superior to speech, and number far superior to both—yet it has been curiously neglected. Ibn Turka therefore issues a call for scholars to return, in effect, to the neopythagorean project of the *Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ*, who in their *Rasāʾil* likewise found all of human knowledge on the science of number. At the same time, he updates and fully islamicizes their model by synthesizing it with the Ibn ‘Arabī theory of *walāya*, then giving the whole a distinctively imamophilic-perennialist cast:⁹⁹

How often have consummate and vigorous [thinkers] among the leading figures of this community sought to acquire [this science]; driven by the burning cravings of their aspiration, they were not willing to settle for the toughened, jerked meat left by those who have gone before but rather strove to reach ripe and succulent truths from the boughs of each second of each hour, from now to eternity. Such individuals include those who make for the East of expansiveness and manifestation (*baṣṭ, zuhūr*) and succeed in picking the ripe fruits from the crown of the tree of His manifestation by way of speech (*kalāmī*), limiting their diet to this and seeking nothing further. They also include those who rather make for the West of constriction and occultation (*qabḍ, khafāʾ*) and are fortunate enough to amass priceless pearls from the submerged hoards of His manifestation by way of writing (*kitābī*)—and upon my life, it is the latter who inherit the choicest truths (*khaṣāʾiṣ*) from the holy Seal (*al-ḥaḍra al-khatmiyya*).¹⁰⁰ These include the oral (*matluwwa*) wealth he passed down

98. MS Majlis 10196 f. 52a. The *muqaṭṭaʿāt* references here stand metonymically for lettrism as a whole.

99. While Ibn Turka’s Sunni identity is not in doubt, it is testament to his lettrist-imamophilic proclivities that he breaks with Ibn ‘Arabī’s identification of the *khātām al-walāya al-muṭlaqa/al-ʿamma* as Jesus, in this appearing to follow the Shiʿi mystical philosophers ‘Alī b. Sulaymān al-Baḥrānī (d. ca. 670/1271), Maytham b. Maytham al-Baḥrānī (d. after 681/1282) and Ḥaydar ʿAmulī (d. after 787/1385), who similarly awarded this status to ‘Alī as part of their project to synthesize Ibn ‘Arabī theory with Twelver theology (see al-Oraibi, “Rationalism in the School of Bahrain,” 333-34).

100. The theme “west is best” similarly runs through Ibn ‘Arabī’s writings, and particularly in the *ʿAnqāʾ Mughrib*, where he identifies the Mahdi, for example, with the ‘sun rising in the west’ (*shams al-maghrib*) as sign of the Last Hour (see Elmore, *Islamic Sainthood*, 163-95). As Ibn ‘Arabī states in his *R. al-Intiṣār* (trans. in *ibid.*, 175):

For the spiritual Opening of the West (*fath al-maghrib*) is unrivalled by any other Opening, since its allotted existential time is the Night (*al-layl*), and [the Night] precedes the Daytime (*al-nahār*) in the Glorious Scripture in every passage. In [the Night] the ‘Night-Journey’ (*al-isrāʾ*) takes place for the Prophets, and therein the spiritual Benefits (*al-fawāʾid*) arise [for the Saints], and the Self-Revelation of the Real shall come to pass for His Servants ... For the ‘Virgin-Secrets’ (*abkār al-asrār*)

to his heirs (*aqrabīn*), having himself inherited it from his noble forefathers, i.e., the preeternal Speech (*al-kalām al-qaḍīm*) taught him by one terrible in power, very strong, [who] stood poised (Q 53:5-6), as well as the new rarities he possessed, ripe fruits [unique] to the Seal's garden, i.e., the temporally-originated Speech (*al-kalām al-ḥadīth*) that he read from the [eternal] Tablet of *He revealed to His servant what He revealed* (Q 53:10). God reward these [pioneers] on our behalf with the greatest reward.

However, in restricting the path of superabundance to these two nodes, both among the Seal's most prized possessions, and making them the [only] path, [the leading scholars of the community] neglected the third [node], which is the rarest and choicest and serves to strengthen [the first two].¹⁰¹ It is through this last that the gate of veriest truth (*ʿayn al-ṣawāb*)¹⁰² is opened, and behind this gate are the treasures of the Seal's glory and the protected space of his intimacy (*qurb*) which contain necklaces of precious jewels (*ʿuqūd farāʿid al-jawāhir*) and all else laid there in store. [The Seal] collected all this and provisioned therewith his son [ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib], the Seal of Sacral Power (*walāya*) and standard-bearer of understanding and guidance. These necklaces (*ʿuqūd*) are numerical knottings (*al-ʿuqūd al-ʿadadiyya*), the spiritual-intellectual form of the Book that was sent down from the highest Pen to the noble Tablet. Number (*ʿadad*), then, is the best means of acquiring sciences of great benefit and numerous as grains of sand, the primordial mine preserving the gems [at the core] of all the standard and mainstream sciences.¹⁰³

As noted, the *Book of Inquiries* as a whole is structured according to the fourfold schema Ibn Turka first deployed in his *Of Letters*; but now the *substance* (*mādda*) of the letter is identified as *light*, which alone makes possible his revolutionary lettrist valorization of writing over speech. Space does not here permit a full analysis of this extremely dense and complex work—naturally still unpublished and unstudied despite its status as a seminal work for centuries.¹⁰⁴ For the purposes of the present study, however, a paraphrase of the introductory subsection of each of the four levels of the letter provides an adequate outline of Ibn Turka's unprecedented lettrist metaphysics of light:

are only 'deflowered' with us [in the West]. Thereafter, they emerge before you in your East (*mashriq-kum*) as 'Divorcees' (*thayyibāt*) who have ended their period of waiting. Then you marry them at the horizon of the Orient. For we share equally in the pleasure of 'marriage,' but we [in the West, particularly] win the pleasure of 'deflowering'!

101. Cf. Q 36:14: *When We sent unto them two men, but they cried them lies, so We sent a third as reinforcement* (*fa-ʿazzaz-nā bi-thālithin*).

102. *Ṣawāb* (ṢWAB) = 99.

103. MS Majlis 10196 ff. 52a-b. Note that *ʿadad*, translated here as 'number,' is also the standard term for arithmetic as part of the quadrivium.

104. A preliminary analysis is offered in Melvin-Koushki, "The Quest," 330-78. I am currently preparing a critical edition and translation of the *Mafāḥiṣ*.

Section 1: On the mental form of the letters

In order to analyze the cosmos at the macro level it is necessary to use the most general, comprehensive categories possible; hence the use in metaphysics of such concepts as existence (*wujūd*), oneness (*waḥda*), quiddity (*māhiyya*), etc. Philosophers hold absolute existence (*al-wujūd al-muṭlaq*) to be the most comprehensive of all such general concepts. Yet even by the philosophers' own standard this concept cannot be all-encompassing, since it, like most philosophical concepts, is offset and relativized by its opposite, in this case forms of absolute nonexistence (*al-a'dām al-muṭlaqa*); forms of relative existence are likewise counterbalanced by forms of relative nonexistence (*al-a'dām al-muḍāfa*). In short, every positive category is twinned with its negative inversion. The sole exception to this rule is the concept of *waḥda*, the state of being one; because it cannot be thusly relativized, the One alone is all-encompassing. That is to say, every other concept, even multiplicity (*kathra*) itself, may be understood in terms of its singularity—it is *a* concept.

It is the One that necessitates, qualifies and constitutes the Many (*al-kathīr*); it alone is capable of being united with its opposite without impairing its essential integrity. Furthermore, the concept of One and its ascending numerical degrees is wholly self-evident (*badāha*), unlike the concept of existence, whose supposedly self-evident status nevertheless requires demonstration. This is why all the revealed prophetic books dwell exclusively on the One, not on existence as such.

Let the researcher therefore set aside his various misconceptions and inquire into the matter of number, for it is the fountainhead of all the sciences, the quarry of all realities, an ocean of insights both manifest and occult.¹⁰⁵

Section 2: On the written form of the letters

The written form is the most manifest (*ajlā*) of the letterforms and the most fixed in its manifestation. The author first counterposes the view that this distinction belongs rather to the spoken form of the letters, in that speech is more universal than writing—indeed, even animals communicate through sound—, whereas only the educated elite of humanity, very few in number (*shirmidha khāṣṣa min aṣnāf al-insān*), become capable of expressing themselves through writing after years of training and laborious effort, and must spend further years developing the methods of critical thought. Ibn Turka states in response to this that two considerations obtain here:

- 1) The prophetic mission must indeed rely on the spoken form of language in order to reach the greatest number of people, especially as its point is to exhort them to physical acts of piety; spoken words may also powerfully affect listeners

105. MS Majlis 10196 f. 56a-b. Ibn Turka is here restating almost verbatim the declaration of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' at the beginning of their *Rasā'il*: 'the science of number is the root of the sciences, the essence of wisdom, the foundation of knowledge and the [principal] element of all things' (*Rasā'il*, 1/21–22; trans. in Endress, "Mathematics and Philosophy," 133).

precisely because they are fleeting. Spoken letterforms are thus most appropriate to the prophetic mission.

2) By contrast, the responsibility to guide laid upon those possessed of sacral power (*walāya*) is far better suited to the written form of language, since it is only through this medium that the full complexity of that contained implicitly within the prophetic mode may be expounded, this in a form that endures and is capable of communicating to each generation the central revelatory truths (*al-ḥaqāʾiq al-kashfiyya*).

The written form also has the distinction of being that form that fully intermixes (*imtizāj*) with the perception of it to the point of total identification (*ittiḥād*), unlike any other sensible form. This is because written letterforms are communicated to the light of vision (*nūr al-baṣar*) by light (*diyāʾ*), and the meeting of separate rays of light results in total union rather than mere conjunction. Thus one can see two clashing colors at the same time without either being denatured (*fasād*) by the other, unlike all other types of sensory data such as sounds, smells, textures and tastes, wherein clashing instances are mutually denaturing when they occur simultaneously; if one hears two inharmonious sounds at once, for example, one cannot make out either, since their medium is air rather than light. In other mediums discrete sensory data must follow in succession to be perceived properly, whereas visible things may be seen simultaneously and still maintain their integrity. Written letterforms are thus not bodies and cannot clash, and for this reason they stand unique among sensory objects in their abstraction (*tajarrud*) from denaturing and obscuring material constraints (*al-mafāsīd al-hayūlāniyya wa-qādhūrāti-hā l-ẓulmāniyya*). By the same token, spoken letterforms as communicated through airwaves (*al-tamawwujāt al-hawāʾiyya*) that pass with the elapsing of each moment are susceptible to such denaturing by virtue of their medium.

In addition, the more descended (*anzal*) such forms are, the more they are complete, encompassing and comprehensive of special characteristics (*akmal wa-ajmaʿ li-l-khaṣāʾiṣ wa-ashmal*).¹⁰⁶

Section 3: On the spoken form of the letters

While it is the written form of the letter alone that remains imprinted on the pages of time across the ages, all peoples from ancient times to the present laboring to record and preserve the choicest insights of humanity in the form of various sciences, the spoken form of the letter, for its part, encompasses every mode of expression, both rational and irrational, that gives voice to the consciousness of man and animal. The final level of descent from existential oneness (*al-waḥda al-wujūdiyya*)—itself the shadow of the true or divine oneness (*al-waḥda al-ḥaqīqiyya*)—down through the chain of being that comprehends all is described

106. MS Majlis 10196 ff. 72b-73b.

by the technical term of oneness of genus (*al-waḥda al-jinsiyya*). This level in turn involves descent through levels of its own through which its fullness is expressed, this descent terminating in the low genus (*al-jins al-sāfil*), its fifth and final stage ... This lowest level, moreover, is reflected in another type termed oneness of species (*al-waḥda al-nawʿiyya*), the category comprising man as microcosm (*al-kawn al-jāmiʿ*). When this process of descent is complete, the last level becomes host to the divine Name the Living (*al-ḥayy*) and site of the manifestation of its properties, as well as those of all the Names subsidiary thereto. The first thing that is engendered from this blessed union (*jamʿiyya*) is a perfect existential form that discloses the contents of consciousness termed the voluntary voice (*al-ṣawt al-ikhtiyārī*); this is what first manifests from an animal upon birth ...

Now it may be asked: How can vocal expression (*ṣawt*) be existential, for it is clear that it is but a transitory accident, a fleeting engendered thing? I answer: This refers only to the voluntary voice associated in the first place with the animal; it is evident that voice is necessarily attributable to existence when it constitutes a reality expressive of what is contained in the hidden levels of existence, yet remains an engendered accident insofar as it is borne to the hearing by soundwaves. The two properties are not mutually exclusive. This is the view of the speculative [philosophers and theologians] (*ahl al-naẓar*); in terms of sapiential insight (*al-wajh al-ḥikmī*), however, the voice is a corporeal representational form (*ṣūra jasadāniyya mithāliyya*) subsisting existentially in itself, regardless of the fact that it manifests through airwaves, in this respect being similar to light (*dawʿ*) (which topic was discussed in the section on the written form of the letter). For this reason the philosophers hold contradictory views on the subject, with some being of the opinion that the two are separate bodies. It is, however, clear to the intelligent that it cannot be a body qualified by flowing and moistness (*ruṭūba*) and subject to superficial alterations.

Given this premise, then, know that the spoken form of the letter is an accidental form pertaining to the voice and compounded of parts and vocalizations that serve to distinguish [utterances] according to context. This may be known from the fact that air, due to its subtle and balanced nature, is uniquely fitted to enter the kingdom of the human constitution as servant, there to wait upon its caliph, the holy secret (*al-laṭīfa al-quḍsiyya*), and withdraw upon its command arrayed in robes of light. Thus no majlis or other gathering is worth the name if luminous words be lacking. The quranic reference here: *Surely good deeds will drive away evil deeds; that is a remembrance unto the mindful* (Q 11:114). That is to say, good things—the light of existence—must needs drive away evil things—the darkness of nonexistent engendered beings.

Insofar as the spoken form of the letter represents speech, then, it conveys the holy lights that negate the darkness of the material realms. It is for this reason that most of the religious duties God imposes on His servants have to do with this spoken

form, such as ritual prayer and other forms of worship—this fact alone suffices to indicate its great dignity.¹⁰⁷

Section 4: On the letters as they are in themselves, i.e., the material substance (mādda) underlying the letters' three forms as discussed above

Having discussed the three aspects of the letters together with the properties, effects, accidents and concomitants of each—this discussion representing the choicest intellectual fruits of the age and providing the framework for extracting exalted types of wisdom from the revealed heavenly letters—, we must now turn to the letters themselves to explicate their supreme eminence in the sensible realms of engendered existence; for the letters are the straight path for all seekers.

Every fixed substance and transient accident that exists in the visible world falls into one of two categories. The first comprises those that are luminous (*nūrānī*), i.e., those which are apparent in themselves and manifest other objects through their effects, such as the sun. The second comprises those that are dark (*ẓulmānī*), i.e., those which are nonapparent in themselves and obscure other objects, such as gross bodies (*ajrām kathīfa*). Given this premise, it will be clear to anyone with a modicum of discernment that only things that are in the first category may serve to provide us new information about what is unknown.

However, the first category comprises many subcategories, since substances and accidents differ widely in the extent to which they furnish such information. Some things only illuminate their immediate surroundings, such as a lamp, while others illuminate all sensible objects, such as the sun and moon. Despite their difference in degree, however, these two instances do not fundamentally differ in that both reveal objects to the perception without themselves perceiving; this category therefore represents the first level of light (*nūr*).

The second level of light comprises those things that are capable of perceiving objects in their own right as well as making the same objects perceptible to other things, such as the light of vision (*nūr al-bāṣira*) with respect to colors and luminosities. This level is superior to the first, yet is still incapable of fully expressing the category of light: for such things cannot perceive themselves nor occulted or absent objects, and those objects they do perceive they frequently perceive inaccurately—moving things as motionless, large things as small, etc.

The third level of light comprises that which is capable of perceiving itself as well as all other existents, whether sensory or immaterial, present or absent, occult or manifest, and of making such objects perceivable to others: this is the intellect or reason (*al-ʿaql*). Yet it too, despite its great facility in revealing objects as they are, suffers from a certain incapacity in fully expressing the divine name Light (*al-Nūr*), since by its nature it tends towards what is interior (*buṭūn*) and hence is best able to perceive universals and the categories of transcendence and incomparability (*taqdīs, tanzīh*); when it attempts to analyze that which is external (*ẓāhir*), however,

107. MS Majlis 10196 f. 83a-b.

involving rather a comprehensive awareness (*jam'iyya*) of engendered particulars and the category of similarity (*tashbīh*), it is incapable of doing so directly and must rely upon other faculties. Given the necessity of such reliance, reason cannot but fall prey to various types of ambiguity and confusion (*talabbus*, *tashawwush*) and thereat hesitate and vacillate (*taraddud*, *tadhabdhub*). This is because the faculties upon which reason relies are often at cross purposes with each other, which leads to conflicting and contradictory data (*taqābul*, *ta'āruḍ*). More, in seeking the assistance of these faculties reason's own power is compromised and it cannot maintain its control over them; they rather interfere even in the arenas proper to reason and confuse its perception, such that it is rarely able to carry out its office free of doubt.

Finally, the fourth level of light comprises that which is able to reveal things as they are in an absolute sense, and pertains solely to the revealed heavenly form which is wholly unsusceptible to error from within or without: this is the letter. To it alone belongs the all-comprehensive sublimity (*al-ʿuluww al-iḥāṭī*) that allows it to transcend all dichotomies (*mutaqābilāt*), through it alone are the scales of judgment preserved from any deviation or irregularity of measurement proper to most engendered beings. For every nature (*ṭabīʿa*), excepting the letter itself, must needs occupy one of two opposed categories (*mutaqābilayn*). The letter therefore stands to all dichotomies in the manner described by the verse: *Praise be to God Who has sent down upon His servant the Book and has not assigned unto it any crookedness* (Q 18:1). For this reason the letter is uniquely capable of making perceptible not only things that exist (*mawjūdāt*) but also things that do not or cannot exist (*maʿdūmāt*, *mumtaniʿāt*), and this in equal measure. It alone may reveal the Absolute (*al-iṭlāq*) that otherwise transcends all perception and thought. The preeminence of the letters is such that God has included them (i.e., the *muqattaʿāt*) among those holy substances He sent down to His servants by way of His prophets to guide them to felicity. The letter is the enlightening elixir (*al-iksīr al-munīr*); were a drop of it to strike the vaults of dark bodies that fill the realms of contingency (*al-ʿawālim al-imbkāniyya*), it would forthwith dispel their intrinsic darkness and transform their substance from base to noble, rendering those gross bodies pure light to illumine the dark realms of matter and becoming.¹⁰⁸

As Ibn Turka argues, in sum, every level of the letter is a construct of eternally emanated divine light, both ontologically and epistemologically—even speech. Yet writing is its most manifest form, for it alone is apprehended by vision, that human faculty proper

108. MS Majlis 10196 ff. 88b-90a. After citing these demonstrative analogies and rhetorical-poetical proofs as to the ontological and epistemological supremacy of the letter, Ibn Turka proceeds to list selected quranic verses and hadiths that support his point, followed by sayings from the Companions and Successors (including ʿAlī and Ḥusayn) and from the righteous *salaf*, such as Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal and al-Shāfiʿī. The author ends the opening section of part four by singling out Zamakhshari's failure to recognize the intrinsic majesty of the quranic letters for special censure. The remainder of part four pursues this theme by applying it in various ways to the three forms of the letters established above. It treats successively the supreme Name Allāh (*ALH*), the *basmala*, and various grammatical and rhetorical considerations, ending with an examination of the ontological and epistemological status of prosody.

to light and hence most universal.

For all that Plato is lionized by lettrists like Ibn Turka as preeminent exponent of the *philosophia perennis*, then, and original model of the theosized sage, in the early 9th/15th century they finally called his Phaedrean bluff: far from being the guarantee of philosophical integrity, speech is metaphysically *the least reliable form of the letter*; but its written-numerical form—epitomized by the quranic *muqattaʿāt*—is the very key to the cosmos.¹⁰⁹

Lettrism and Sociocultural History

Needless to say, Ibn Turka's revolutionary metaphysics of writing was hardly worked out in vacuum, but rather reflective of equally sweeping sociocultural and political changes taking place in the Islamicate heartlands during the 8th/14th and 9th/15th centuries—including in the first place the burgeoning of Arabo-Persian writerly culture. Tabulating such changes is of course well beyond the scope of this article, which simply proposes Ibn Turkian lettrism as their relevant metaphysical context. Nevertheless, the pairing of intellectual history with sociocultural or political history I called for above has the potential to enrich, perhaps even transform, many current scholarly lines of inquiry. Though their ramifications cannot be pursued here, those relevant to the study of Middle Period Islamicate writerly culture include:

Post-Mongol Imperial Ideology

I have elsewhere argued at length that Ibn Turkian lettrism, together with astrology, was an essential component in the construction of a Timurid universalist imperial ideology; this dual astrological-lettrist platform in turn served as template for the Aqquyunlu, Safavid, Mughal and Ottoman versions of the same. That is to say, post-Mongol Islamicate imperialism, to a far greater degree than its pre-Mongol iterations, was heavily occultist in tenor. This political transformation began under the Ilkhanids, as reflected, for instance, in Āmulī's *Nafāyis al-Funūn*, but only became systematized in the early 9th/15th century. Ibn Turka played a pivotal role in this process: he almost certainly wrote his *Of Letters* and began his *Book of Inquiries* for Iskandar Sulṭān, his first Timurid patron, who despite an abortive reign came to stand as model of *universal (occult) philosopher-kingship*, a status pointedly claimed by the millennial sovereigns of the early modern Persianate world. As such, the theory and practice of post-Mongol Islamicate imperialism simply cannot be understood without reference to lettrism.¹¹⁰

Furthermore, the sharp increase in elite patronage of occultist texts during this period significantly impacted writerly and manuscript culture: works on lettrism and the other occult sciences constitute as much as ten percent of the massive corpus of surviving

109. This is not to imply a direct reception of the *Phaedrus* in Arabic, which does not appear to have occurred (Gutas, "Greek Philosophical Works," 811).

110. I develop this theme in Melvin-Koushki, "Early Modern Islamicate Empire."

manuscripts, still almost wholly untapped.¹¹¹

Ibn Turka's philosophical-scientific works on lettrism aside, even those of his treatises that are more strictly literary in tenor stand as index of this dramatic shift in post-Mongol imperial ideology—as well as the unconscionable neglect in scholarship to date of sources of the closest pertinence to this theme. His *Debate of Feast and Fight*, naturally still unpublished and unstudied, is here representative. Completed in 829/1426 for the Timurid prince-calligrapher Bāysunghur b. Shāhrukh (d. 837/1434), the *Munāzara-yi Bazm u Razm* is an ornate Persian work that expressly imperializes the venerable feast vs. fight (i.e., court vs. military) trope within a lettrist-literary framework. For the first time in the centuries-old Arabo-Persian *munāzara* tradition, that is, which had never before allowed a debate's resolution, Ibn Turka *marries the opposites* in a manner clearly meant to be instructive to his Timurid royal patron: he is to perform the role of Lord Love (*sultān ʿishq*), transcendent of all political-legal dualities.¹¹² This lettrist mirror for princes is thus not simply unprecedented in Persian literature, a typical expression of the ornate literary panache of these scientists of letters, but also serves as key to Timurid universalist imperial ideology itself in its formative phase.¹¹³

History of Science

Ibn Turka and his student and friend, Sharaf al-Dīn ʿAlī Yazdī (d. 858/1454), the Timurid dynastic historian and mathematician, were friends and colleagues to the preeminent astronomer Qāzizāda Rūmī (d. 835/1432), first director of Ulugh Beg's (r. 811-53/1409-49) Samarkand Observatory; Yazdī even worked there for a time. Now historians of science acclaim Qāzizāda, together with his student ʿAlī Qūshchī (d. 879/1474), as being responsible for the revolutionary mathematization of astronomy by ridding it of aristotelian physics—the freeing of astronomy from philosophy, as Jamil Ragep has summarized their project.¹¹⁴ The same scholar has argued that this newly mathematized astronomy served in turn as a primary inspiration for Copernicus.¹¹⁵ These remarkable findings aside, the current historiography of science nevertheless wholly abstracts these Timurid astronomers from their lived, sociopolitical context—a context in which lettrists and mathematician-astronomers appear to have professed a common, expressly neopythagorean purpose, maintaining a correspondence with one another and sharing their treatises to this end. In

111. See Melvin-Koushki and Pickett, “Mobilizing Magic.”

112. It is here significant that al-Qalqashandī (d. 821/418)—Ibn Turka's contemporary and fellow resident of Cairo—penned for one Amir Abū Yazīd al-Dawādār al-Zāhirī, favorite of Sultan Barqūq and like Bāysunghur a skilled calligrapher, a debate on the variant theme of sword vs. pen (*mufākharat al-sayf wa-l-qalam*) that rather concludes with both parties formally making peace of their own accord and declaring their perfect equivalence (*Ṣubḥ al-Aʿshā*, 14/231-40). Barqūq, of course, was likewise Akhlāṭī's patron, and seems to have had a keen interest in the occult sciences in general and lettrism in particular.

113. For an edition and translation of this work see my forthcoming *The Lettrist Treatises of Ibn Turka*; for an analysis see my forthcoming “The *Coincidentia Oppositorum* Imperialized: Ibn Turka's *Munāzara-yi Bazm u Razm* (1426) as a Lettrist Mirror for Timurid Princes.”

114. “Freeing Astronomy.”

115. Saliba advances a similar thesis in his *Islamic Science*.

such a context, in other words, it was only natural for a neopythagorean like Qāzīzāda—or Kepler after him—to seek to mathematize the cosmos; and his warm friendship, from childhood, with Ibn Turka cannot but have shaped his thinking.¹¹⁶ It will be recalled that the Isfahani lettrist began pushing precisely for a return to a *mathematical* cosmology, this in his *Mafāḥiṣ*, in 823/1420: number as key to the cosmos and highest expression of *walāya*. In the same year construction of the Samarkand Observatory was begun. There is thus every reason to suspect that Qāzīzāda had read and taken inspiration from the *Book of Inquiries*, and his letter thanking Ibn Turka for sending him a copy of the latter’s lettrist *Sharḥ al-Basmala*, dedicated to Ulugh Beg, is extant.

Indeed, there survives a great deal of Ibn Turka’s correspondence with the spiritual, intellectual and political elites of his day, which allows for a reconstruction of the sociopolitical networks in which he and his colleagues and students moved—an Islamicate republic of letters, as Evrim Binbaş has called these networks.¹¹⁷ The explosion of Islamicate writerly culture, in short, also entailed an upsurge in epistolary culture; we may therefore speak of scientific-philosophical networks in the Islamicate world, just as later emerged in Europe. Such social networks, then, are the proper context for studying mathematical astronomers like Qāzīzāda Rūmī—together with their lettrist colleagues.

Comparative Intellectual History

I noted above the remarkable degree of intellectual continuity between the Islamicate and Christianate realms in the early modern period, with lettrism/kabbalah as a major vector. Why the sudden obsession with world as text in 15th-century Iran and Italy?

Scholars have yet to explain this signal cultural shift, common to the Mediterranean zone, or identify its mechanics. While a few European scholar-occultists, like Ramon Llull (d. 1316), did know some Arabic, there is no evidence of direct east-west transmission before the 17th century,¹¹⁸ and certainly not Persian-Latin (though perhaps Persian-Greek); rather, Islamic and then Reconquista Spain would seem to be the pivot.¹¹⁹ That Ibn ‘Arabī, the greatest lettrist theoretician in Islam to that point, was himself an Andalusī is telling in this context. Although very little research has been done on the relationship

116. Melvin-Koushki, “Powers of One.” On Kepler as neopythagorean see e.g. Hallyn, *The Poetic Structure of the World*.

117. See his *Intellectual Networks in Timurid Iran*, which focuses on Yazdī as Timurid historian and committed lettrist.

118. Exceptionally, the Jesuit polymath Athanasius Kircher (d. 1680), “the last man who knew everything,” devotes a full chapter of his celebrated *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* (Rome, 1652-54, 2.1/361-400) to *Cabala Saracenicā et Agarena*, Saracenic-Hagarenic (i.e., Islamic) kabbalah, subtitling it *de superstitiosa Arabum, Turcarumque Philosophia hieroglyphica*; it immediately follows a chapter on Hebrew kabbalah (*Cabala Hebræorum*) (my thanks to Liana Saif for alerting me to this text; see Stolzenberg, *Egyptian Oedipus*).

119. The eastern Byzantine-Ottoman connection was presumably also an important vector for the transmission of Islamicate occultism, and perhaps even lettrism, to (Greek) Christendom, though this possibility has been little studied. Most notably, Gemistos Plethon (d. 1452) himself, the great Byzantine paganizing neoplatonist, seems to have become acquainted with the New Brethren of Purity during his purported sojourn in Ottoman territory; see Siniossoglou, “Sect and Utopia.”

of kabbalah to lettrism, the two currents seem to have coevolved from the beginning of the Islamic period, reaching maturity together in 6th/12th-century Islamic Spain.¹²⁰ With the Reconquista, however, and the ultimate expulsion of Jews and Muslims from Spain, kabbalah was carried north and east to France and Italy, while lettrism was carried due east to Egypt and Syria, and thence the Persianate world. (Ibn Turka, again, became a lettrist in Cairo.) The sudden presence of Jewish kabbalists in Italy in particular led to the invention of Christian kabbalah by Pico in the late 15th century, which neopythagorean discipline would go on to inspire the most feted thinkers of early modern Europe—as well as, in some part, the doctrine of *sola scriptura* itself, war-cry of the Protestant Reformation.

It is just as well that Hebrew kabbalah and not Arabic lettrism was transmitted to Europe; unlike the other Arabic occult sciences received so eagerly in the Latinate world, by the 7th/13th century lettrism—the most *Islamic* of the occult sciences—was wholly predicated on the ontological supremacy of the Quran. This would clearly have been a sticking point for Christian occultists, had they been aware of lettrism as a science; they therefore turned to the Hebrew Bible instead as key to the cosmos. This slight divergence notwithstanding, the fact remains: *something* happened in Islamic Spain to engender the common lettrist-kabbalist cosmological doctrine of the Two Books, which by the 10th/16th century was espoused by thinkers as far afield as Delhi and London, Paris and Shiraz.

Literary Culture

The 9th/15th century likewise saw the florescence of highly “artificial” Persian poetic genres in Iran, including in the first place the *mu‘ammā* or logogriph and the *qaṣīda-yi maṣnū‘*. Although both have long been cited by scholars as proof of Timurid-Turkmen cultural decadence, Paul Losensky in particular has shown them to rather epitomize the period’s structuralist-textualist turn, bent on the codification and amplification of the whole of the Persian poetic tradition.¹²¹ But whence this new obsession with the *written* form of poetry, this ubiquitous interest in *names*? To what extent was the ‘fresh style’ (*ṭarz-i tāza*) then emergent in Persian poetical practice and dominant by the Safavid-Mughal period informed by the new lettrist-semiological sensibility sweeping the persophone world? Whence many of its literary stars’ determination to ‘speak the new’ (*tāza-gū‘ī*)—and render it in complex *visual* form?¹²²

I have observed elsewhere that the *mu‘ammā* in particular, far from being an empty pastime for vapid litterateurs, was reconfigured by Ibn Turka’s student and friend Sharaf al-Dīn Yazdī in his seminal treatise on the subject, *Embroidered Robes* (*Ḥulal-i Muṭarrāz*), which explicitly presents the logogriph as a useful skill in the lettrist’s technical repertoire—an immediate, poetic means of analyzing a person’s name in order to discern their character, perhaps even their fate.¹²³ (Similarly, chronograms, properly constructed, offer insight into the texture of history.) Logogriphs were most commonly deployed as

120. Ebstein, *Mysticism and Philosophy in al-Andalus*; Anidjar, “Our Place in al-Andalus.”

121. *Welcoming Fighānī*, 154-64.

122. *Ibid.*, 198-205, *et passim*.

123. Melvin-Koushki, “The Quest,” 379-89; Binbaş, *Intellectual Networks*, 48, 81-89.

social calling cards, to be sure; but their extreme popularity testifies to a broader social consciousness, informed by influential Timurid letrists like Ibn Turka and Yazdī, that the world is *semantic*, and hence deconstructable—and reconstructable—at a formal level. The same observation may be extended to contemporary Mamluk Arabic literary culture, wherein a preoccupation with the formal also prevailed as expression of a general Mamluk “linguistic consciousness” that achieved the “poetization of everyday life.”¹²⁴ It is hardly an accident in this context, then, that Ibn Turka himself was a leading exponent of the hybrid Mamluk-Timurid ornate literary culture of the early 9th/15th century.¹²⁵

Arts of the Book

As is well known, patronage of the arts of the book, especially calligraphy and painting, boomed under the Timurids. Responding to this cultural transformation, by the end of the Timurid period historians began to pay far more attention to calligraphers and painters, from the reign of Shāhrukh onward, than had ever before been merited; and in the 10th/16th century, under the successor Safavids, an entirely new art-historical genre was born: the album preface.¹²⁶ This genre is naturally of primary importance for understanding Timurid-Safavid writerly-artistic culture, and has been celebrated by Islamic art historians as such; I accordingly look briefly at two Safavid album prefaces in the next section to gauge the extent to which their discourse on writing exhibits letrist influences.

For now, however, I will simply observe that letrists have here again been wholly elided in the historiography on Timurid-Safavid arts of the book; for reasons that should now be obvious, they must not be. The abovementioned Timurid prince Bāysunghur b. Shāhrukh, for instance, achieved renown as a calligrapher; he also commissioned one of Ibn Turka’s most important letrist treatises, *Query of Kings* (*R. Suʿl al-Mulūk*), wherein the Isfahani thinker lays out his vision for a Timurid occultist imperialism (as in his *Debate of Feast and Fight*, written for the same prince). Ibn Turka’s valorization of the category *ūlū l-aydī wa-l-abṣār*, *men of hands and vision*, would also seem to be highly significant in this calligraphic context. By the same token, Ibn Turka’s unprecedented declaration of the epistemological-ontological superiority of sight to hearing, on strictly letrist grounds, can be read as a

124. Bauer, “Mamluk Literature,” 109, 130.

125. Melvin-Koushki, “The Quest,” 379-407. Ibn Turka’s *Sharḥ-i Naẓm al-Durar* is a case in point: it represents the first Persian adaptation of the new Mamluk anthology-as-commentary genre first developed by Ibn Nubāta (d. 768/1366) and emulated by al-Ṣafadī (d. 764/1363) and Ibn Ḥijja al-Ḥamawī (d. 837/1434), the Isfahani letrist’s contemporary. It is also significant in this connection that the *Mafāḥiṣ* ends precisely with a discussion of prosody (*ʿarūḍ*). Most notably, Malik al-Shuʿarāʾ Bahār (d. 1370/1951) presents Ibn Turka as one of the greatest stylists of ornate Persian prose (*naṣr-i fannī*) of the 9th/15th century, and identifies him as the first Arabic and Persian writer to use an ornate literary (*adabī*) style for scientific (*ʿilmī*) subjects (*Sabk-shināsī*, 3/352; he devotes a separate section to Ibn Turka at 3/233-34).

126. Roxburgh, *Prefacing the Image*, 125, *et passim*. It bears noting that the album preface derives from the *tazkira* preface as parent genre, and so the latter is of equal salience here. Nor is it incidental in this connection that Dawlatshāh Samarqandī’s (d. 900/1494 or 913/1507) *Tazkirat al-Shuʿarāʾ*—the model for most subsequent instances of the genre—valorizes Ibn Turka and Yazdī as the two most prominent intellectuals of Shāhrukhid Iran (Melvin-Koushki, “The Quest,” 17).

preface most appropriate to the burgeoning of Persianate visual culture from the Timurid period onward. That is: it is hardly an accident that the advent of Ibn Turkian lettrist hyperstructuralism directly preceded that culture's embrace of *hyperrealism*.¹²⁷

Popularization

As Konrad Hirschler has shown, textualization and popularization were interdependent processes in the arabophone west from the 7th/13th century onward.¹²⁸ The same happened, of course, in the persophone east—and within the high occultist tradition itself. That is to say, the esotericist reading communities that coalesced around the writings of al-Būnī in Cairo and Ibn ʿArabī in Damascus during the 7th/13th century gave way to increasing levels of elite patronage for the production of copies of occult-scientific texts from the mid-8th/14th century onward; responding to this elite interest, lettrists like Ibn Turka and ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Biṣṭāmī wrote their most influential works in a Persian or Arabic style accessible and attractive to their royal patrons. Both al-Biṣṭāmī's Arabic works on lettrism, encyclopedic in the signature Mamluk style, and Ibn Turka's Persian and Arabic treatises on the same, pellucidly clear and systematic, fly in the face of the perennial injunction to secrecy pervading the Islamicate occultist tradition to that point.¹²⁹ In other words, over the course of the 8th/14th century and especially the early 9th/15th occultism was effectively *de-esotericized* to an unprecedented extent.¹³⁰ I suggest that this remarkable development was part and parcel of the textualization-popularization process taking place in the Mamluk-Timurid realms during this period.¹³¹

Moreover, in *Sharḥ-i Naẓm al-Durar*, his hybrid Mamluk-Timurid ornate Persian commentary on the *al-Tāʾiyya al-Kubrā* of Ibn al-Fāriḍ (d. 632/1235), a major teaching text of the Ibn ʿArabī school, Ibn Turka applies his *tashkīk al-ḥarf* schema to the question

127. On the neoplatonic, aristotelian and sufi discourses increasingly used to celebrate and promote this visual culture see Necipoğlu, "The Scrutinizing Gaze." Her usage in this context of the term *hyperrealism*, as *versus* European Renaissance *naturalism* (see n. 44 above), is not to be confused with, for example, its application to the critical theory of Jean Baudrillard (d. 2007), who posited history as simulation model (see e.g. *The Illusion of the End*, 7). On the tired theme of Islamic iconoclasm, Nigār Zaylābī has recently argued that early Islamic prohibitions on painting had solely to do with its association with the manufacture of idols on the one hand and *talismans* on the other, and hence did not hinder the development of Persian book painting in particular ("Payvand-i Ṭilismāt u Şūratgarī dar Islām"). I here argue, however, that it was precisely the *occultist* renaissance in the Islamicate world from the 8th/14th century onward that partially inspired and informed emergent Persianate visual culture.

128. *The Written Word*, 112.

129. Where al-Biṣṭāmī seeks to present the lettrist tradition as exhaustively as possible, however, Ibn Turka mentions but few authorities (Ibn ʿArabī, Saʿd al-Dīn Ḥamuvayī, Jābir b. Ḥayyān), and is far more concerned to rationalize and systematize the tradition for philosophical-scientific-imperial use.

130. Gardiner suggests the descriptor "post-esotericist," given that the formerly esoteric nature of the occult sciences only added to their prestige during this period ("Esotericism," 55); see n. 32 above.

131. Similar arguments have been made with respect to the later impact of mass printing on language and literary practice and form (my thanks to Mana Kia for this observation). On printing's transformation of traditional scholarship in the late 13th/19th and early 14th/20th century, for example, see El Shamsy, "Islamic Book Culture."

of popularization. He there summarizes his arguments as presented above, arguing for the primacy of sight vis-à-vis hearing: the latter is biased toward the spiritual realm and therefore cannot render a wordform in its fullness, unlike vision, which registers spiritual and physical objects with equal accuracy.¹³² At the same time, the faculty of hearing is the only means whereby the illiterate masses may be spiritually enlightened—hence the orality of prophecy. Ibn Turka therefore deems the recent explosion in production of sufi poetry to herald a new age of human development: for the masses, who constantly listen to this poetry performed to music, now have access to accurate knowledge of the structure of reality, which is therefore no longer the preserve of the intellectual and spiritual elite.¹³³

Aqquyunlu and Safavid Receptions

The implications of incorporating Ibn Turkian lettrism into the sociocultural and political historiography of Persianate societies are thus far-reaching indeed. What, then, of post-Timurid intellectual history? Did Ibn Turka have heirs in the later Islamicate philosophical tradition? And to what extent was his metaphysics of writing mainstreamed in Persianate scholarly culture as a whole?

To understand the receptions of Ibn Turka in the Persianate world in the centuries after his death, we must first bracket out his receptions in 20th-century scholarship, Iranian and Euro-American alike, which have served only to occlude and elide his occult philosophy as sketched above. In the influential reading of Henry Corbin and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Ibn Turka is but a *sufi-Shi'i* thinker serving as a modest, nondescript link in the intellectual chain of ascent from Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī to Mullā Ṣadrā; as I have shown in detail elsewhere, such a designation radically misrepresents the Isfahani lettrist's project—he was certainly neither sufi nor Shi'i.¹³⁴ Similarly, 'Allāma Ṭabāṭabā'i (d. 1402/1981) celebrates Ibn Turka in his *al-Mīzān* as a preeminent synthesizer of Avicennan philosophy and theoretical mysticism (*'irfān*), ranking him in this regard with Fārābī and Suhrawardī; that is to say, he recognizes him as a neoplatonist, but not as a neopythagorean, and in no way an occultist.¹³⁵ Departing somewhat from this consensus, the late Muḥammad-Taqī Dānishpazhūh (d. 1417/1996), while more willing to acknowledge Ibn Turka's lettrist commitments, declared him rather the 'Spinoza of Iran.'¹³⁶ ('Abd al-Ḥusayn Zarrīnkūb (d. 1420/1999), in response, took issue with this title as being misrepresentative of Ibn

132. *Sharḥ-i Naẓm al-Durr*, 38-39.

133. Melvin-Koushki, "The Quest," 401. Note that in early modern Persian *tazkiras* poets are routinely portrayed as having access to supernal truths (my thanks to Mana Kia for this observation). Cf. Thomas Bauer's proposal that Mamluk literature represents a shift to a *participational* aesthetics away from the monumental representationalism standard in the Abbasid period ("Ayna hādihā min al-Mutanabbī!").

134. Melvin-Koushki, "The Quest," 6-8.

135. *Al-Mīzān fī Tafṣīr al-Qur'ān*, 5/282-84. His association of Ibn Turka with Suhrawardī is not entirely inappropriate, however, given that, as I argue, the former commandeered the latter's doctrine of *tashkīk al-nūr* for lettrist purposes.

136. "Majmū'a-yi Rasā'il-i Khujandī," 312; specifically, he asserts Ibn Turka to be the 'Spinoza of Iran' to rhetorically underscore the necessity of publishing and studying his works. Needless to say, it is a rather ironic choice, given Spinoza's own project, essentially antithetical to Ibn Turka's, of biblical criticism.

Turka's mystical and lettrist concerns.¹³⁷) All such readings are well-intentioned, to be sure, but err in their assumption that lettrism forever remained a minor subset of sufism—in this ignoring a massive body of evidence to the contrary, including the Arabo-Persian encyclopedic tradition itself. For Ibn Turka's project is expressly revolutionary: he sought to demote sufism and philosophy both from their wonted positions at the top of the epistemological hierarchy and install his lettrist metaphysics-physics in their place.¹³⁸

For all that this basic point is lost on modern scholars, it was manifestly clear to his contemporaries and heirs throughout the Persianate world; and these include a number of thinkers far more feted in the scholarship than Ibn Turka himself. Indeed, the best index of the centrality of lettrism to Ibn Turka's project is the fact that he was received *solely* as a lettrist until the 13th/19th century.¹³⁹ Nor was the scope of his influence limited to Iran during his own lifetime and after; in one later work, for instance, he declares himself

a seeker of knowledge whose writings are borne abroad by the north and east winds and are well received in all regions and on all shores, with travelers from India (*Hindustān*) and Anatolia being dispatched in search of copies of his treatises and books, and whose students come to him from all lands, including Shiraz, Samarkand, Anatolia and India (*Hind*).¹⁴⁰

In other words, Ibn Turka's lettrist corpus, like al-Būnī's before it, quickly emerged as an important node in the explosion of Persianate manuscript culture; many early copies of his *Mafāḥiṣ* may indeed be found as far afield as Istanbul,¹⁴¹ and lettrist treatises like the *R. Ḥurūf* were equally popular—it is included, for instance, in MS Fatih 5423 (TIEM 2054), a gorgeous, deluxe collection of Ibn Turka's works copied in 1439 for an elite Ottoman patron.¹⁴² This would seem to be an unusually fitting fate for works that advance, for the first time in the Islamicate context, a systematic metaphysics of writing.

Here again, a full account of Ibn Turka's students and heirs is beyond the scope of this article; but I offer a few select examples to show that his lettrist metaphysics remained current in philosophical circles in Iran through at least the early 11th/17th century—whence it permeated scholarly understandings of the nature and epistemological-ontological supremacy of writing throughout the Persianate world, from Anatolia to India, during the same period.

The philosophers of Aqquyunlu-Safavid Iran most openly indebted to Ibn Turka are

137. *Dunbāla-yi Justujū dar Taṣavvuf-i Īrān*, 142.

138. Melvin-Koushki, "The Quest," 330-33.

139. On Ibn Turka's reception in Safavid and Qajar Iran see Melvin-Koushki, "World as (Arabic) Text."

140. *Nafṣat al-Maṣdūr-i Duvvum*, 209-10. Note that *Hind* variously designates those regions of the Subcontinent under Muslim rule, the Subcontinent as a whole, or the Indo-Gangetic region of north India only (my thanks to Mana Kia for this observation).

141. For a preliminary list of surviving manuscript copies in Iran and Turkey see Melvin-Koushki, "The Quest," 97-98.

142. My thanks to Maria Subtelny for examining this *majmū'a* on my behalf. For a preliminary list of surviving manuscript copies in Iran and Turkey see Melvin-Koushki, "The Quest," 88-89.

two: Jalāl al-Dīn Davānī (d. 908/1502) and Mīr Dāmād (d. 1040/1630). Both are widely acknowledged in the literature to be both pivotal figures in their own times and among the most influential philosophers in Islamic intellectual history more generally. The latter, hailed as the Third Teacher (*mu'allim-i ṣālis*) (i.e., after Aristotle and Fārābī), intimate of Shah 'Abbās I (r. 995-1038/1587-1629) and mentor to Mullā Ṣadrā, is usually considered the founder of the so-called philosophical school of Isfahan; as such, most of his works have been published and studied extensively. This Safavid philosopher embraced Ibn Turka's lettrist metaphysics in at least three works, including his seminal *Firebrands and Meeting Stations* (*Jazavāt u Mavāqīt*), a Persian summary of his philosophical system as a whole; citing the *R. Ḥurūf* in particular, Mīr Dāmād even adopts the fourfold *tashkīk al-ḥarf* schema analyzed above.¹⁴³ Given persistent scholarly occultophobia, however, this crucial fact has been flatly ignored in the literature to date.

For his part, Davānī is celebrated as an eclectic illuminationist-Ibn 'Arabian-Ash'ari thinker, the last major heir of Fakhr al-Dīn Rāzī, and together with his great rival Mīr Ṣadr al-Dīn Dashtakī (d. 903/1498) and the latter's son Mīr Ghiyāṣ al-Dīn Dashtakī (d. 949/1542) accounted the most important source for Safavid philosophy.¹⁴⁴ Davānī's influence in India, whence hailed a number of his students, was similarly outsize, and likewise in Ottoman scholarly circles.¹⁴⁵ The Aqquyunlu philosopher penned two popular Persian lettrist works, one of which, *On the Declaration of Divine Oneness* (*R. Tahlīliyya*), effectively reasserts Ibn Turka's lettrist hierarchy of knowledge, whereby lettrism serves as supreme metaphysical science, superior to both Avicennan-illuminationist philosophy and sufi theory; and his presentation of this science follows Ibn Turka's to the letter—including, naturally, its signature *tashkīk al-ḥarf* schema.¹⁴⁶ Yet here too Davānī's embrace of Ibn Turkian lettrism has been wholly elided in the literature. Nevertheless, that two of the most influential philosophers of Iran, both in service to, respectively, Aqquyunlu and Safavid ruling elites, pointedly adopted Ibn Turka's metaphysics of writing suggests it to have been well-known and attractive to scholarly elites more generally; it should therefore be detectable as a cultural discourse well beyond philosophical circles.

I have argued elsewhere that Mīr Dāmād's reception of Ibn Turka, pivoting consciously on Davānī's, is the crucial context for understanding the striking *neopythagorean turn* in Safavid philosophy, whereby even Ibn Sīnā himself, the second Aristotle, was

143. *Jazavāt u Mavāqīt*, 134, 143-34; see Melvin-Koushki, "World as (Arabic) Text."

144. On the formative Davānī-Dashtakī rivalry see Bdaiwi, "Shi'i Defenders of Avicenna."

145. Rizvi, "Mīr Dāmād in India"; El-Rouayheb, *Islamic Intellectual History*, 52.

146. Melvin-Koushki, "The Quest," 256-61. Davānī's summary of these levels is useful in this context (*R. Tahlīliyya*, 65-66): 1) Spiritual-mental, wherein the letters take form in the human mind before being expressed, in this corresponding God's knowledge of realities before their coming into being; these letters are called the high letters (*ḥurūf-i 'āliyyāt*) or thought letters (*ḥurūf-i fikriyya*). 2) Oral, wherein the letters are expressed in audible form; these are called the medial letters (*ḥurūf-i wuṣṭā*). 3) Written, wherein the letters are made visible to *men of might and vision* (Q 38:45); these are called the low letters (*ḥurūf-i sāfilā*). Furthermore, letters have spirits, bodies and hearts. Their spirits represent their numerical values, their hearts their oral form, and their bodies their written form.

transmogrified into a neopythagorean-occultist;¹⁴⁷ I further suggest it here as an important factor in the equally striking florescence of Safavid *book culture*.¹⁴⁸ Most emblematic of Safavid perennialist bibliophilia, even bibliomania, is the sharply increased production of philosophical anthologies (which often feature lettrist texts), on the one hand, and the consolidation of a new genre of art history-theory, the album preface, on the other.

A telling example of the first is British Library MS Add. 16839, a classic 11th/17th-century Safavid anthology of philosophical and mystical texts that features a heavy lettrist emphasis; most significantly, it conjuncts a number of lettrist and other treatises by Ibn Turka, including the *R. Ḥurūf*, with Mīr Dāmād's *Jazavāt*, together with treatises by a range of other authorities, from Ibn Sīnā and Ṭūsī to Davānī and Mullā Ṣadrā.¹⁴⁹ A celebrated instance of the second is Qāzī Aḥmad's (d. after 1015/1606) *Rose Garden of Art (Gulistān-i Hunar)*, an unprecedentedly comprehensive work of art historiography-biography completed around 1006/1598 (revised 1015/1606) and dedicated to Shah 'Abbās. This is a curiously hybrid work, simultaneously a technical treatise on writing and a biographical dictionary of calligraphers, but also functioning, according to David Roxburgh, as a "gargantuan album preface."¹⁵⁰ I wish to call attention to two features of the *Gulistān-i Hunar* relevant to the present context.

First, Qāzī Aḥmad opens his work by copying and slightly reworking the beginning of Shams al-Dīn Āmulī's section on writing as translated above—a borrowing not previously noticed. That the *Nafāyis al-Funūn* is drawn on so prominently as a source for emulation is of special significance here: it implies that Qāzī Aḥmad was well aware of its status as the first Persian encyclopedia of the sciences to a) formally valorize writing over speech, and b) elevate sufism, and by extension lettrism, to the status of queen of the Islamic sciences. As I argue, these two departures from precedent are intimately connected, and would presumably have been understood to be so by a consummate scholar like Qāzī Aḥmad. His opening assertion of the supremacy of writing, moreover, like Āmulī's, is categorical: 'It is evident to the minds of those with insight that the finest thing a person can possess is excellence and skill (*faẓl u hunar*), and that no [skill] is finer than the ability to write beautifully (*ḥusn-i khaṭṭ*).'¹⁵¹

Second, Qāzī Aḥmad, like all other Safavid album preface writers of the 10th/16th century, places great store by 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib's status as inventor of the Kufic script, as well as inspirer, through a dream vision, of Ibn Muqla (d. 328/940), the Abbasid vizier universally considered to be responsible for codifying the 'six scripts' (*al-aqlām al-sitta, shish qalam*)¹⁵² derived from Kufic and hence the patron saint of Arabic calligraphy as such.¹⁵³ (Qāzī Aḥmad also expands on this theme to praise Imam Ḥasan and Imam Zayn

147. Melvin-Koushki, "World as (Arabic) Text."

148. See e.g. Endress, "Philosophische Ein-Band-Bibliotheken."

149. Rieu, *Catalogue of the Persian Manuscripts*, 2/833-35.

150. *Prefacing the Image*, 2.

151. *Gulistān-i Hunar*, 4.

152. I.e., *thuluth*, *tarqī'*, *muḥaqqaq*, *naskh*, *rayḥān* and *riqā'*.

153. Roxburgh, *Prefacing the Image*, 188; on the reforms of Ibn Muqla see Tabbaa, "The Transformation."

al-‘Ābidīn ‘Alī as potent calligraphers and copyists of the Quran in their own right.) Of Imam ‘Alī he declares:

That script (*khaṭṭī*) that, like kohl, salved and illumined the eyes of *men of vision* (*ūlū l-abṣār*) in communicating the divine inspiration and commands and prohibitions vouchsafed the holy Messenger (God bless and keep him and his House) was the Kufic script. There survive to this day some of the letters (*arqām*) produced by the miraculous pens of the holy Shah of Sacral Power (*shāh-i valāyat-panāh*) (the peace of God be upon him)—how richly do they illuminate the eye of the soul and burnish the tablet of the mind! None has written more beautifully than that holy eminence (the blessings and peace of God be upon him), who produced the finest examples of the Kufic script ever written ... Masters [of this art] therefore identify that holy eminence (the blessings of God be upon him) as the originator (*sanad*) of that script and trace its chain of transmission back to him.

The first to marry beautiful writing to beautiful conduct was Murtaẓā ‘Alī, and that mightily.

For this reason said [the Prophet] (God bless and keep him and his House): *Writing is half of all knowledge* (*al-khaṭṭ niṣf al-‘ilm*). That is, for whomever writes well, it is as though he has mastered half of all sciences.

Whose writing did the chief of the prophets,
in his knowledge and wisdom, declare the *half of all knowledge*?
The Prophet declared it
of the writing of Murtaẓā ‘Alī.
Murtaẓā was truly the king of all saints (*shāh-i awliyā*);
but when the caliphs usurped [his right]
he made seclusion his practice,
for a time eschewing all intercourse,
preferring rather to copy the Quran (*kitābat-i muṣṣaḥf*)—
hence the great honor and majesty that redounds to writing!
For how could writing like his be within human power?
His script was beyond human, his writing *other*.¹⁵⁴

Given the imperial Twelver Shi‘i context in which Qāẓī Aḥmad and his fellow album preface authors were writing during the 10th/16th century, most scholars have reflexively assumed such encomiums for ‘Alī as simultaneously the inventor of Kufic and “king of the saints” to be both *historical fictions* and quintessentially, uncontestably *Shi‘i*. But such a conclusion is rash and unwarranted, especially if our goal is to recover the

It is significant in this context that Āmulī simply reports that scholars differ in crediting the invention of Kufic to either ‘Alī or Ibn Muqla, without supplying, like Qāẓī Aḥmad, a dream-vision narrative to resolve the attribution in favor of ‘Alī.

154. *Gulistān-i Hunar*, 13-14.

Safavid metaphysics of writing. For Ibn Turka—a committed *Sunni* imamophile—appears to have been the foremost authority in Safavid Iran on matters letter-metaphysical, as we have seen; and his metaphysics of writing is founded on the doctrine that writing and mathematics are the directest expressions of *walāya*, whose preeminent exponent during the Islamic dispensation is ‘Alī—inventor, Ibn Turka says, of the Kufic script and *jafr* both. Such a neat congruency between Ibn Turka’s pneumatic-grammatic theory and Qāzī Aḥmad’s rhetoric is thus hardly coincidental. That is to say: lettrism was the *Sunni* intellectual current most utilizable by Shi‘i scholars seeking to construct a new imperial Safavid Shi‘i culture; any account of the transformative *shi‘ization* of Iran that elides Timurid-Aqquyunlu lettrist precedent must therefore remain incomplete.

But the *Gulistān-i Hunar* does not explicitly employ the neoplatonic-neopythagorean schema systematized by Ibn Turka in Ibn ‘Arabian terms; for this we must turn to the most famous of the Safavid album prefaces, that of Dūst Muḥammad (d. after 972/1564), written for the album prepared for Bahrām Mīrzā (d. 957/1549), brother of Shah Ṭahmāsb (r. 930-84/1524-76). The ornate opening passage of this preface has been analyzed masterfully by David Roxburgh in particular;¹⁵⁵ but no art historian has yet noted its overtly *lettrist* framework.¹⁵⁶ It begins:

The noblest writing ... is praise of the Creator, by Whose Pen are scriven and by Whose tracing are limned the High Letters (*ḥurūf-i ‘āliyāt*) and the supernal forms (*ṣuvar-i muta‘āliyāt*). According to the dictum *The Pen exhausted its ink with [writing all] that will be until Doomsday*, the coalesced forms and variegated shapes of the entifications (*a‘yān*) were—according to the dictum *I was a hidden treasure*—secreted in the treasury of the unseen beyond time; then—according to its continuation *I craved to be known, so I created creation in order to be known*—He snatched with the fingers of destiny the veil of nonbeing from the countenance of being, and with the hand of mercy and grace and the pen of *The first thing God created was the Pen* painted them masterfully on the canvas of existence.

[It is praise of] the Maker, Who in the workshop of *God created Adam in His form* rendered the totality of the human form—a microcosm (*‘ālam-i sānī*) in its all-comprehensiveness of forms and meanings—upon the page of creation in the most beautiful guise, wiping the dust of nonexistence from the tablet of his being with the polish of favor, then [set him to] ascend the levels of *Assume the attributes of God* [by] making the mirror of creation the site of manifestation of His Names and traces.

155. *Prefacing the Image*, esp. 189-98.

156. As Roxburgh notes (*ibid.*, 165), while

most scholars agree that the content of Dust Muhammad’s preface is particularly remarkable ... [i]ts turns of phrase and figures of speech were thought to be hackneyed (and incapable of signifying anything other than their life as literary devices), and the narrative content of its stories were considered *topoi*, the product of pure rhetoric, and never taken seriously. Without thoroughgoing analysis of the preface, its immediate meaning—viz. the licitness of depiction—and rationale—a justification for depiction and explanation of Safavid art in the present—came across to some scholars as somewhat flimsy, perhaps even as anachronistic.

[It is praise of] the Almighty, Who embellished the seven heavens—which are inimitable on the model of the Seven Repeated (*sab^c al-maṣānī*),¹⁵⁷ nay, by way of organization and stellation (*tanjīm*)¹⁵⁸ on the model of the pages of the Quran [as a whole]—with the verse-signs (*āyāt*) of the gorgeous stars and the tenth and the fifth [markers] that are the Sun and the Moon,¹⁵⁹ and, having made rulings with the lines of light rays (*khūṭ-ī shu‘ā‘ī*), with the white ink of dawn and the vermilion of sunset established on the azure page of the celestial sphere a template for the four Tablets.¹⁶⁰

Most significantly, Dūst Muḥammad here invokes the doctrine of *tashkīk al-ḥarf*: he posits the Pen as first existent, whence are first produced extramental forms (*a‘yān*), which coalesce downward into the High Letters (*ḥurūf-i ‘āliyāt*)—Davānī’s technical term for the mathematical-mental level of the letter—,¹⁶¹ until finally their physical-elemental reality, which is to say the written form of the letter (and by extension painting), is manifested. It is striking that he ignores the level of speech altogether—creation is here entirely the product of the Pen, not the divine utterance *Be!* Of similar significance is his poetic equation of the cosmos to the Quran; this, of course, is a classic expression of the Two Books doctrine. A few decades later, Mīr Dāmād restated this doctrine in strictly philosophical terms in his *Jazavāt*: the totality of macrocosm and microcosm together constitute the Book of God, inscribed by the Pen or Universal Intellect, with all existents being letters, words, sentences, verses and suras in that cosmic scripture.¹⁶² Finally, Dūst Muḥammad associates the neoplatonic doctrine of man as microcosm with the Ibn ‘Arabian-Būnian doctrine of the cosmos as manifestation of the infinite Names of God (*asmā’ Allāh*), whereby human beings can reascend to the One, can self-divinize or achieve *theosis* (*ta’alluh*), by way of *theomimesis* (*tashabbuh bi-l-bārī*)—fully incarnating the Names through lettrist *praxis*.

157. I.e., the Fātiḥa.

158. This term usually denotes astrology.

159. In illuminated manuscript copies of the Quran, every fifth verse (*khams*) is marked with a gold rosette or Kufic *H*, equal to 5, and every tenth with a gold medallion containing the word ten (*‘ashr*) (Gacek, *The Arabic Manuscript Tradition*, 22, 54).

160. Dūst Muḥammad’s preface, preserved as Topkapı Sarayı Müzesi H.2154, is transcribed and translated in Thackston, *Album Prefaces*, 4-17; the translation here, which renders the technical terminology more accurately, is mine. The four Tablets are identified by ‘Abd al-Razzāq Kāshānī (d. 730/1330) in his *Ta’wīlāt* as follows (trans. in Murata, *The Tao of Islam*, 155):

There are four tablets: The tablet of precedent decree [*qaḍā’*] towers beyond obliteration and affirmation. It is the First Intellect. The tablet of measure [*qadar*] is the Universal Rational Soul, within which the universal things of the First Tablet become differentiated and attached to their secondary causes. It is named the Guarded Tablet. The tablet of the particular, heavenly souls is a tablet within which is inscribed everything in this world along with its shape, condition, and measure. This tablet is called the ‘heaven of this world.’ It is like the imagination of the cosmos, just as the first [tablet] is like its spirit, and the second [tablet] is like its heart. Then there is the tablet of matter, which receives the forms of the visible world. And God knows best.

161. See Davānī’s definition of the four levels in n. 146 above.

162. *Jazavāt*, 21-24; see Melvin-Koushki, “World as (Arabic) Text.”

By lettrist praxis I mean, of course, letter or talismanic magic, which, tellingly, was hugely popular in Safavid Iran.¹⁶³ Now it will be remembered that lettrism was first sanctified by Ibn ‘Arabī and al-Būnī precisely through their fusion of neoplatonic-neopythagorean cosmology with the sufi doctrine of Names—hence lettrism’s alternate designation as *‘ilm al-asmā’*, and hence Āmulī’s reclassification of lettrism as the supreme sufi science. (Any technical reference to the Names of God after the 7th/13th century, such as in Dūst Muḥammad’s preface, can therefore be safely assumed to have a lettrist resonance.) As a consequence, the practice of magic overwhelmingly became the practice of Būnian sufi-letter magic, focused in the first place on the divine Names, and by extension the names of angels, jinn, or any other being or thing in existence; a given Name is made operational by mathematically processing its letters in a magic square, which then becomes the engine of a talisman, to be engraved or written on an appropriate medium. A talisman, in short, represents the marriage of text and number, of celestial and terrestrial; it epitomizes Ibn Turkian *walāya*. It is thus hardly surprising that Persian writers on writing increasingly cast their subject in magical terms. A representative example is, once again, Qāzī Aḥmad. In his work’s introduction he indites in praise of the pen:

[The pen] is a skilled worker, and finely sees,
accomplishing its work with the might of its right hand;
Its art is the miracle of a mage (*mu‘jiza-yi sāḥirī*):
it is now a Moses, now a Samaritan (*sāmīrī*).¹⁶⁴

Ottoman and Mughal Receptions

So far the Aqquyunlu-Safavid metaphysics of writing; to what extent did Ibn Turka’s lettrist system inform scholars in the broader Persianate world? A considerable one, it would seem. Two examples must here suffice, one Ottoman, one Mughal.

As Cornell Fleischer in particular has shown, Ottoman imperial culture under Sultan Süleymān Kanuni (r. 926-74/1520-66) was profoundly occultist in orientation, and especially lettrist. This outlook was rooted in the first place in the voluminous occultist-apocalypticist corpus of ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Biṣṭāmī of Antioch, Ibn Turka’s fellow heir of Akhlāṭī and contemporary cognate in Anatolia. Most notably, al-Biṣṭāmī’s *Key to the Comprehensive Prognosticon* (*Miftāḥ al-Jāfr al-Jāmi‘*) appears to have served as Ur-text in the construction of Ottoman imperial identity; it is primarily on its basis that the Ottoman self-understanding as Last World Empire was formed.¹⁶⁵ Given the great currency of Biṣṭāmian lettrism, then, we may assume there was a eager market for Ibn Turka’s lettrist works as well; and indeed, the latter’s claim that his writings were popular in Anatolia is borne out by the presence of many surviving copies thereof in Ottoman archives—the *Mafāḥiṣ* chief among them. While al-Biṣṭāmī was rather more prolific on topics occult, his

163. See Melvin-Koushki, “The Occult Sciences in Safavid Iran.”

164. *Gulistān-i Hunar*, 9. In the quranic narrative, a Samaritan was responsible for magically animating the golden calf for the Israelites to worship in Moses’s absence (Q 20:83-97).

165. Fleischer, “Ancient Wisdom.”

lettrism is equal parts Ibn ‘Arabian-Būnian—that is to say, half theory and half praxis—and not philosophically systematic; his Isfahani colleague’s *magnum opus*, by contrast, represents the first systematic treatment of lettrist metaphysics in the Islamicate tradition, as well as the fullest expression of Ibn Turka’s signature *tashkīk al-ḥarf* schema.

It is therefore striking, but not surprising, to find this schema adopted by Muṣṭafā Taşköprüzāde (d. 968/1561), the greatest Ottoman encyclopedist of the 10th/16th century. His seminal Arabic classification of the sciences, *Key to Felicity and Lamp to Mastery* (*Miftāḥ al-Sa‘āda wa-Mişbāḥ al-Siyāda*), is closely modeled on Ibn al-Akfānī’s *Irshād al-Qāşid*, but expands on it massively—especially with respect to the occult sciences, including lettrism.¹⁶⁶ It served in turn as model for Ḥājjī Khalīfa (d. 1067/1657) and other subsequent Arabic encyclopedists.¹⁶⁷ Like Āmulī, moreover, but unlike Ibn al-Akfānī, Taşköprüzāde formally valorizes writing over speech as the foundation of all human knowledge by classifying it as the first science of the first section (*dawḥa*) of his work. Also like Āmulī, he adds to the core humanistic maxim as to the superiority of writing (to wit, that it trumps speech because the latter is fleeting and local but the former is durable and portable, and is the only means by which we can historically realize our humanity) a selection of standard traditional and rational proofs in corroboration:

On the virtue of writing, our need for it and the circumstances of its invention

As for its virtue according to tradition:

[In the first place], the saying of the Most High: *Recite: And your Lord is Most Generous, Who taught by the Pen, taught man what he knew not* (Q 96:3-5). He further attributed the teaching of writing to Himself, graciously bestowing it on His servants—which alone should suffice to prove its excellence: *N. And by the Pen, and what they inscribe* (Q 68:1). Thus did He swear by *what they inscribe*. It is transmitted from Ibn ‘Abbās (God be pleased with him) that he explicated His saying *or a trace of a science* (Q 46:4) to refer to writing (*al-khaṭṭ*). It is further transmitted that Solomon (upon him be peace) asked an afrit as to the nature of speech. The latter replied: “A passing wind.” Said Solomon: “Then what can bind it?” Said he: “Writing.” ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Abbās described it thus: “Writing is the hand’s tongue.” Ja‘far b. Yaḥyā: “Writing is the string of wisdom (*simṭ al-ḥikma*): thereon are its pieces set off [to greatest effect] and its dispersed parts brought into order.” Said Ibrāhīm b. Muḥammad al-Shaybānī: “Writing is the hand’s tongue, the mind’s glory, the intellect’s emissary, thought’s legatee, knowledge’s weapon; it confers fraternal intimacy during separation and

166. See Melvin-Koushki, “Powers of One.”

167. Interestingly, Khaled El-Rouayheb has shown that Ottoman scholars of the 11th-13th/17th-19th centuries identified less with Taşköprüzāde and his contemporaries and more with Persian scholars like Davānī (*Islamic Intellectual History*, 52)—a fact that may be significant in lettrist terms, given Davānī’s status and Safavid reception as an exponent of the Ibn Turkian brand of the science. That the Shirazi philosopher’s reception was equally warm in Mughal India during the same period suggests a continued familiarity with his lettrist writings there as well. More generally, El-Rouayheb has argued for the emergence of a more impersonal, *text-based* transmission of knowledge in Ottoman scholarly culture from the 10th/16th century onward (“The Rise of ‘Deep Reading’”).

allows brothers to speak over great distances; it is the repository of secrets and the record of all things.”

As for [its virtue] according to reason:

Even were the excellence of writing to be testified to only by the fact that God Most High revealed it to Adam (or Hūd, upon them both be peace), and that He sent down written codices to His prophets, and that He gave inscribed tablets to Moses (upon him be peace), that would be sufficient. Yet [its excellence as rationally construed is universal]: for anything that one can mention as to passing thoughts, intellectual inclinations, intimations of understanding, limnings of imagination or sensory perceptions can be entrusted to writing, which orders it and expresses it truly.

Nor can any community depend on another in this respect, or any nation exempt another [of the responsibility to patronize writing]. For writing allows us to realize our very humanity; it distinguishes us from all other animals, gives us the ability to preserve intact sciences over time, to transmit information from age to age, to transport secrets from place to place.

Furthermore, writing guarantees rights and discourages rebellion among rational individuals by compelling them with recorded testaments and correspondence between people over great distances, ensuring far more accuracy than can be attained by the bearer of a message or through an interaction in person even if the individuals in question remember perfectly and express themselves with the greatest eloquence. Therefore has writing been declared superior to speech: for speech informs those present only, while writing informs those present and those not.¹⁶⁸

Taşköprüzāde’s treatment of writing would thus seem to be little more than a modest embellishment on Arabic and Persian bibliophilic precedent; needless to say, the simple fact that he is strongly pro-occultist does not necessarily entail a familiarity with high lettrist theory.

But familiar he certainly was: for the Ottoman scholar breaks with Āmulī, Ibn al-Akfānī and every other exponent of the Arabo-Persian encyclopedic tradition to propose a radically new hierarchy of knowledge as his primary structuring device for the work as a whole—*tashkīk al-ḥarf*. The first four sections of his encyclopedia, of seven, are thus as follows:

- 1) On the sciences of writing (*fī bayān al-‘ulūm al-khaṭṭiyya*)
- 2) On the sciences connected with speech (*fī ‘ulūm tata‘allaq bi-l-alfāz*)
- 3) On the sciences that investigate mental objects (*fī ‘ulūm bāḥitha ‘ammā fī l-adhhān*)

168. *Miftāḥ al-Sa‘āda*, 1/79-80. It must here be emphasized that in Islamic political theory the power to maintain personal connection despite absence is considered a primary foundation of social order—hence the great virtue and necessity of *adab*, simultaneously a system of writing conventions and a code of ethics (see Kia, “*Adab* as Literary Form and Social Conduct”).

4) On the science connected with extramental realities (*fī l-ʿilm al-mutaʿalliq bi-l-aʿyān*)¹⁶⁹

This *khatt-lafz-dhihn-ʿayn* series, of course, is unmistakably Ibn Turkian. Taşköprüzāde’s innovation here is his recognition of the inadequacy of the large set of traditionalist and rationalist proofs, relatively stable from the Abbasid period onward, for the task of demonstrating the *ontological* supremacy of writing to speech. In the *Miftāḥ al-Saʿāda*, in other words, we have a conservative reiteration of the text-centric perennialist-traditionalist culture already long entrenched in the Islamicate heartlands by the 8th/14th century—yet by the 10th/16th century its epistemological-philosophical context had profoundly changed. That is to say, Taşköprüzāde does not flag the new lettrist context for his otherwise standard valorization of writing over speech; but he certainly expected it to be obvious to his fellow *men of main and vision*.¹⁷⁰

What of Mughal India? Although much further research remains to be done on Ibn Turka’s reception in the Subcontinent (not to mention his reception in general), it would appear his lettrist metaphysics of light received just as warm a scholarly welcome there as in the far west of the Persianate world. Certain Safavid and Ottoman scholars, as we have seen, drew eclectically on his lettrist theory, each to their own ends. The former emphasized his imamophilic doctrine of writing-number as vector of *walāya*, especially

169. The last three sections, in sequential order, are on practical philosophy (*fī l-ḥikma al-ʿamaliyya*), on the religious sciences (*fī l-ʿulūm al-sharʿiyya*) and on the interior or spiritual sciences (*fī ʿulūm al-bāṭin*).

170. In a recent article (“Writing, Speech, and History”), Ali Anooshahr has applied Derrida to Taşköprüzāde’s *Miftāḥ al-Saʿāda* to analyze the latter’s metaphysics of orality and writing; he argues that Taşköprüzāde was responsible for overturning the initial valorization of speech over writing in Ottoman historiography of the 9th/15th century. This suggests, in effect, that Ottoman scholarship locally reprised the transition from speech-centric to text-centric that had already taken place centuries before throughout the Islamicate heartlands. While a compelling thesis, it is unfortunately weakened by Anooshahr’s failure to situate the *Miftāḥ al-Saʿāda* within the Islamicate encyclopedic tradition itself, which leads him to claim a revolutionary status for Taşköprüzāde on very different, and mistaken, grounds. That is, he presents the Ottoman encyclopedist’s assertion of the superiority of writing to speech as being unprecedented, and describes his concluding statement—“Therefore has writing been declared superior to speech: for speech informs those present only, while writing informs those present and those not”—as both “remarkable” and “outstanding” (59). As we have seen, however, this statement was already standard in Arabic and Persian encyclopedias both by the early 8th/14th century; it represents Taşköprüzāde’s strict fidelity to precedent, and especially to Ibn al-Akfānī’s *Irshād al-Qāṣid*, and is not revolutionary in the slightest. As I argue, it is rather Taşköprüzāde’s importation of Ibn Turka’s *tashkīk al-ḥarf* schema that is unprecedented in the tradition.

In other words, Anooshahr’s approach here shows the dangers of reading Ottoman scholarship in isolation from its original Arabo-Persian context in general and its Timurid-Mamluk context in particular, as is still regrettably the rule. But the fact that Taşköprüzāde found it necessary to import Ibn Turka’s metaphysics of writing to counter earlier Ottoman historiographical trends only serves to strengthen Anooshahr’s larger thesis, and especially his contention that the great 10th/16th-century scholar was responsible for reformulating Ottoman history in a manner that destabilizes all dualisms, that obliterates all “binary opposite pairs” (44). Which is to say: Taşköprüzāde would seem to be applying the lettrist principle of the *coincidentia oppositorum* to dynastic historiography itself—a strategy that is indeed both remarkable and outstanding.

useful to the Safavid project of shi'izing Iran; the latter found his *tashkīk al-ḥarf* schema crucial for bringing a final *Ottoman* organization to the great mass of human knowledge, the *philosophia perennis*, in preparation for the end of history. Their Mughal counterparts, by contrast, responding to different imperial needs, chose rather to highlight the post-illuminationist *tashkīk al-nūr* component of Ibn Turka's system.

Perhaps the most manifestly Ibn Turkian treatment of writing produced in India is that by Abū l-Faḥr 'Allāmī (d. 1011/1602), vizier to Emperor Akbar (r. 963-1014/1556-1605) and chief architect of the new Mughal imperial culture. The famous section on writing and painting in his monumental *Akbarian Institutes* (*Ā'īn-i Akbarī*) (which, like its Safavid counterparts, treats the second as being strictly derivative of the first) opens as follows:

In truth, [writing (*khatt*)] is for those who love beauty the site of manifestation of delimited light (*nūr-i muqayyad*), for the farsighted the undelimited world-reflecting cup (*jām-i gītī-numā-yi muṭlaq*). The talisman that is writing is a form of spiritual geometry from the Pen of creation (*ṭilism-i khatt rūḥānī handasa'ī-st az qalam-i ibdā'*), a celestial writ from the hand of fate (*āsmānī kitāba'ī az dast-i taqdīr*). It is the secret-bearer of speech; it is the hand's tongue. Speech (*sukhan*) communicates the heart's potency to those present only; writing informs those near and far alike. Were it not for writing, speech would be lifeless, the heart ungifted by those who have gone before.

Those who see only bodies think [writing a mass of] mere inky shapes; but the servants of spirit (*ma'nā*) deem it the radiant lamp of knowledge (*charāgh-i shināsā'ī*). It is darkness despite its million rays for the pupils; it is a light with a black mole against the evil eye. It is the limner of intelligence, the loamy farmlands feeding the capital of meaning (*savād-i shahristān-i ma'nā*). It is a sun to night-pitchy [ignorance], a dark cloud heavy with [enlightening] knowledge. It is a mighty talismanic seal (*shigarf ṭilismī*) on the treasury of sight. Though mute, it speaks; though immobile, it travels; though fallen, it soars.

[The mechanics of its manifestation are thus:] From the fullness of divine knowledge shines a ray into the rational [human] soul (*nafs-i nāṭiqā*); the heart then communicates this onward to the realm of the imagination (*khayāl*), the intermediate plane (*barzakh*) between the immaterial (*mujarrad*) and material (*māddī*), where its immateriality is tempered with materiality and its undelimitedness with delimitation; and so it becomes manifest. If this occurs by way of the tongue, it enters the ear by aid of air; there it delivers itself of its burden, then flees back whence it came. But if that celestial traveler (*musāfir-i āsmānī*) journeys by aid of the fingers, traversing the lands and seas that are pens and ink visible to the eye (*nūr-dīda*), it finally sets down its burden in the pleasure-houses that are pages and retires from the highway of vision (*dīda*).¹⁷¹

This passage has been rightly celebrated by art historians: as a treatment of calligraphy it is unique in the Arabo-Persian encyclopedic tradition, for it adds to the standard tropes

171. *Ā'īn-i Akbarī*, 1.1/111-12.

and maxims a simultaneously poetic and precise metaphysics-psychology of light. What has not been recognized, however, is the fact that Abū l-Faʿl is manifestly relying on a specifically *Timurid* lettrist doctrine to this end.¹⁷² Following Ibn Turka, either directly or via Davānī, he asserts the letter to be a form of light emanated by the divine essence down through the four levels of being, from most occult to most manifest—the only cosmological model that explains the epistemological-ontological superiority of writing to speech: for only writing engages vision, that faculty of light, that highway to heaven.

Nor is his categorical equation of writing and talismans a rhetorical conceit, but rather a definition expressly *scientific*.¹⁷³ As textual letter-magical devices based on number, talismans allow their maker to harness light at the celestial level for terrestrial purposes, to marry heaven to earth, to operationalize the cosmic aporia; this, Abū l-Faʿl argues, is precisely what writing does—“though fallen, it soars.” The same applies to his bold oppositional light-dark imagery: the inky, calligraphed letter, deepest Endarkenment, is the royal road of Enlightenment. This, of course, is but a poetic expression of Ibn Turka’s signature doctrine of the letter as *coincidentia oppositorum*.

Abū l-Faʿl’s unprecedented modification of the Euclidean dictum *Writing is a form of spiritual geometry*, constantly repeated by encyclopedists from al-Tawḥīdī onward, is thus of great philosophical-scientific significance; that is to say, it is surely the pithiest index of the intellectual and cultural seachange that transpired in the Persianate world between the 8th-10th/14th-16th centuries, during which period Muslim scholars began to take this ancient concept of writing—a spiritual geometry manifested by means of a physical instrument—very seriously indeed.¹⁷⁴ “The talisman that is writing is a form of spiritual geometry from the Pen of creation,” declares Abū l-Faʿl, by which he means: written letter-number, simultaneously operative on the elemental and mathematical levels of being, can alone crystallize light, constellating the *philosophia perennis*; it alone is the gate of *walāya*, the ladder of theosis; it alone allows ascent back to the originary, all-writing One.

And as for the imperial needs this indefatigable Mughal vizier was here serving: Akbar understood himself as a talismanic being, a divine avatar of the Sun, a holy body of light;¹⁷⁵ what better prop to his claim to Indo-Timurid millennial kingship, then, than a Timurid lettrist metaphysics of light?

172. It should be noted that Blochmann’s own translation of this passage (*The Ain i Akbari by Abul Fazl ‘Allami*, 1/97-98), frequently cited by specialists, is in places quite inaccurate, further obscuring its intellectual context. Yael Rice observes that overreliance on Blochmann’s mistranslation has also given rise to the false notion that Abū l-Faʿl deems writing far superior to painting (“Between the Brush,” 149).

173. Abū l-Faʿl similarly calls painting (*taṣvīr*), an extension of writing in his treatment (if a lesser subset), a mighty magical operation (*jādūkārī shigarf*) (*Ā’in-i Akbarī*, 1.1/116).

174. Cf. the dictum attributed to Apollonius (*Bālīnās*) by al-Tawḥīdī (and to Plato by Qāzī Aḥmad), “The pen is the most powerful of talismans, and writing its product” (Rosenthal, “Abū Ḥaiyān al-Tawḥīdī,” 25).

175. Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign*, 137-46; Truschke, “Translating the Solar Cosmology.”

Conclusion

Being is a Grammar; ... the world is in all its parts a cryptogram to be constituted or reconstituted through poetic inscription or deciphering.¹⁷⁶

—Jacques Derrida

This article does not pretend to be an “Islamic answer to Derrida,” or deconstruct deconstructionism: that is the task it has set itself. My approach here has rather been strictly historiographical and philological.¹⁷⁷ But any *history* of Western grammarology that elides, that *writes off*, its mainstream Islamicate formulations—as is still regrettably and perniciously the default—is at best half complete.

To supply this major historiographical lacuna, I have therefore presented a range of textual evidence for the emergence and persistence over centuries of a systematic Islamic metaphysics of writing, an alternative Western grammarology, this in response to the great Middle Period burgeoning of writerly culture throughout the Islamicate world—a phenomenon that has been studied to date in strict isolation from its original *occult*-philosophical context. Such an occultophobic, vivisectionist strategy, I argue, has occluded connections crucial for understanding the cultural, political and intellectual transformation of Islamicate societies between the 7th-11th/13th-17th centuries. But if we *read it carefully*, the world Muslims so fully wrote into being in the post-Mongol era appears to be far more interconnected—far more intertextual—than has yet been appreciated. Hence the hegemony of *commentary culture* and *encyclopedism* on the one hand and *literary ornateness* and *speaking the new* on the other, hence the fateful push to *read the Two Books*, to *mathematize the cosmos*: all pivot on the supremacy of the written, not spoken, word in Islam. While this basic principle was first formulated by the bibliomaniacs of the High Abbasid period, they did not supply a metaphysics to sustain and enforce it; but the occult philosophers produced by the Mamluk-Timurid burgeoning of writerly culture did. The metaphysics of writing the latter developed seems to have spread like wildfire, moreover, such that by the 10th/16th century Islamicate discourses on writing, however literary, scientific or art-historical their context, came to bear an unmistakable lettrist stamp.

Such is the narrative that must now be recuperated as integral to the history of Western grammarology, which (post-Enlightenment colonialist-orientalist chauvinism notwithstanding) has long been and continues to be Hellenic and Islamic, Jewish and Christian, in equal measure, and a primary basis for the metaphysics of early modernity, modernity and postmodernity alike. At the same time, it must be emphasized that this science, for all its coherence as a Western tradition from Pythagoras and Plato to the present, was and is a hotly contested site of cultural convergence and divergence, a pendulumic barrage of con- and contradiction, a permanent *complexio* of oppositions—

176. “Edmond Jabès,” 94.

177. Cf. Paul de Man’s observation that deconstruction is simply a form of philology (“The Return to Philology,” 24): “[I]n practice, the turn to theory occurred as a return to philology, to an examination of the structure of language prior to the meaning it produces.”

making its comparative study equal parts hazardous and historiographically, even morally, pressing.¹⁷⁸

To hazard a brief comparison of the science's signal 15th- and 20th-century iterations, Ibn Turkian and Derridean respectively (assuming, for the nonce, that grammatologists as radically culturally different as Ibn Turka and Derrida can legitimately and profitably be approached as members of the same Western tradition):

Like Derrida, it is true, if only terminologically, lettrists like Ibn Turka sought to prove writing's superiority to speech;¹⁷⁹ but unlike Derrida, they hailed text not as tyrant but as theosizing talisman: inlibration as illumination, as salvation from the dark realms of matter and becoming.¹⁸⁰ Ibn Turka's doctrine of *tashkīk al-ḥarf* thus erects the neopythagorean ladder of return to the One. It is precisely this doctrine against which Derrida categorically railed half a millennium later:

The trace is the difference which opens appearance and signification. Articulating the living upon the nonliving in general, origin of all repetition, origin of ideality, the trace is not more ideal than real, not more intelligible than sensible, not more a transparent signification than an opaque energy and *no concept of metaphysics can describe it*. And as it is *a fortiori* anterior to the distinction between regions of sensibility, anterior to sound as much as to light, is there a sense in establishing a "natural" hierarchy between the acoustic imprint, for example, and the visual (graphic) imprint? The graphic image is not seen; and the acoustic image is not heard. The difference between the full unities of the voice remains unheard. Invisible also the difference in the body of the inscription.¹⁸¹

According to Derrida's aporetic logic, that is, there can be no *ontological* superiority of writing to speech as empirically construed; he collapses the hierarchy to make transcendence of the text—and hence a grammatological metaphysics—impossible. And number figures not at all, light is a mere thud on the sensorium. There is no One, only the Many; and they babble (Babel) on forever. Yet he collapses this semiotic hierarchy of being precisely to confine us in *text*. Is our French-Algerian post-Jewish deconstructionist then simply a latter-day renegade kabbalist?

Perhaps so.¹⁸² As that may be, however, Ibn Turkian deconstruction was itself rather

178. As Christopher Lehrich notes (*The Occult Mind*, 46):

Comparative methods, which always uncomfortably mingle the synchronic and the diachronic, are thus not only useful but necessary. There is no way to avoid them. When we study people of other cultures or times, we ipso facto make comparison to ourselves, if only negatively or under the aegis of translation. To be sure, the claim that comparison implies identity, the Eliade-Yates reactualization, annuls important difference. But the pseudohistorical claim against comparison as intrinsically bad method is bigotry masquerading as rigor.

179. With the proviso, again, that Derridean *écriture* is not to be understood in an empirical sense (see n. 8 above).

180. The term "inlibration" was coined by Harry Wolfson (*The Philosophy of the Kalam*, 244-62).

181. *Of Grammatology*, 70.

182. Elliot Wolfson argues that the kabbalistic features of Derrida's work are a product of convergence, not

renegade in its own day, as we have seen, and like Derrida's attacked the very basis of Western metaphysics. The former's neopythagorean doctrine of letter-number as *coincidentia oppositorum* undercut and transformed neoplatonized aristotelianism like the latter's hyperstructuralist-antistructuralist doctrines of *écriture* and *différance* undercut and transformed structuralism. Whether performed in French or Persian, Hebrew or Arabic, deconstruction, quite simply, seeks to marry all opposites through perpetual revolution, eternal textual play, universal aporia.¹⁸³ Derridean writing thus conceptually corresponds not to Ibn Turkian writing, but to the neopythagorean letter-number itself.

So much for theory; what of praxis? Unlike its poststructuralist successor, which has unaccountably disowned magic, lettrist-kabbalist deconstruction made the marriage of opposites *experimentally operational* (and thus perennially attractive to scholarly and ruling elites): the prognosticon, the talisman. That is to say: it is also *reconstructionist*, for in place of the physics-metaphysics terminally deconstructed it supplies a new one most useful for working in and on the world, especially imperially.¹⁸⁴

To accomplish his subversion of the metaphysics of modernity, in sum, Derrida took Western language conventionalism—common from Aristotle onward and embodied in the 20th century by Saussurian linguistics—to its furthest extreme; his lettrist and kabbalist forebears went to the opposite extreme. Not only did they posit a radically anticonventionalist theory of language (based in the first place on the traditionalist doctrine of the *uncreatedness* of the Quran or the Torah),¹⁸⁵ but asserted that language, carrier of consciousness and body of light, constellates a metaphysics-mathematics-magic continuum that marries heaven to earth and the One to the Many. In practical terms, letter-number—because it alone constructs and orders every level of being eternally emanating from the One, thereby erecting time and space—must contain within it the knowledge of past, present and future (hence the prognosticon), must allow for the changing, by means of human consciousness, of physical reality itself (hence the talisman)—and that in measurable, falsifiable, *scientific* fashion.¹⁸⁶ Indeed, that magic—like Islam—remains a stumbling-block for latter-day deconstructionism, wherein it figures merely as *not-science* and *not-religion*, of use only for mocking metaphysicians,

direct influence (“Assaulting the Border”); Moshe Idel rather posits “a certain residue of Kabbalistic thought” in deconstruction, and characterizes Derrida as “a thinker who has been influenced by Kabbalistic views of the nature of the text” (*Absorbing Perfections*, 77, 83).

183. A classic example here is Derrida's deconstruction of the term *pharmakon* in “Plato's Pharmacy,” signifying both “poison” and “antidote” (as well as “charm” or “spell”), which he uses to symbolize writing as constituting “the medium in which opposites are opposed,” and therefore allowing for the exploding of Plato's construction of binaries (127).

184. On this theme see my *The Occult Science of Empire*. Cf. Ian Almond's comparative study of Derrida and Ibn 'Arabī (the latter, of course, being a primary source for Ibn Turka's lettrism), *Sufism and Deconstruction*.

185. See n. 88 above.

186. Naturally, I here use “scientific” and “experimentalist” in the much broader early modern sense of these terms.

is strategically unfortunate.¹⁸⁷ For to take the explicitly experimentalist claims of lettrist-kabbalist deconstruction-reconstruction seriously is to fatally subvert modernity in general and the scientific disciplines of the modern academy in particular; it is to write a different West in a way that might fairly rejoice Derridean cockles.¹⁸⁸

Derrida himself, of course, made no pretense of being a historian: thus his diagnosis as to the superiority of speech to writing in Western culture—and crypto-kabbalistic, aporetic overturning thereof—is as historically inapplicable to Islam as it is to Judaism. This is despite the fact that Islamicate civilization was, as it were, strongly Western in its Orientation; Ibn Turka styled himself a *Pythagoras redivivus*, disciple of Solomon and ʿAlī. More problematically for his deconstruction of Western culture, Derrida’s diagnosis likewise elides the Christian kabbalists of Renaissance Europe (and their Jewish teachers), who from the late 9th/15th century onward sought to reconcile the Socratic and the Hebraic;¹⁸⁹ their success in this project heralded in some measure “scientific modernity.” But a hundred years earlier, their lettrist peers to the south and east, living under the banner of post-Mongol universalist-perennialist Islam—the religio-imperial *coincidentia oppositorum* that had long since married Hellenic and Abrahamic, Shiʿi and Sunni, Persian and Arab, nomad and settled, east and west—, established lettrism as the occult-manifest center of Islamic knowing, the Solomonic-Imamic Pythagorean-Platonic core of the *philosophia perennis*, constellatable only through *writing*.

I must here again emphasize the astonishing degree of Islamo-Christianate intellectual continuity during the 15th and 16th centuries, and that largely in the absence of direct contact. Equally astonishing is the fact that this phenomenon is still essentially unstudied. That the upshot of Christians—relying on Jews—reading the world as mathematical text was scientific modernity, but that of Muslims doing the same was not, cannot be cited (though it continues to reflexively be) as proof of the decadence, the *weak reading*, of the latter, or the inherent, eternal *medievalness* of Islam. To state the obvious, that is, this outcome was simply a consequence of different cultural priorities as pursued within the strictures of different sociopolitical structures. Triumphalist, whiggish backreading, to be sure, posits a great divergence, at the culture-genetic level, whereby (in Spenglerian

187. For Derrida, magic, for all that it does haunt his discourse, in the end can but be “a cheap deconstructionism, an ill-informed Derrideanism, a false show of deconstructive elegance and insight that blinds itself to its impotence ... But it may nevertheless act as a liberator by its protest against the deceptive demand for presence and truth with which magic’s various opposites (science, religion) mystify their operations” (Lehrich, *The Occult Mind*, 171, 176).

188. Wouter Hanegraaff in particular has argued for esotericism (including occultism in the sense I use it here) as the primary Other upon whose undead frame Western modernity has been and continues to be constructed (*Esotericism and the Academy, passim*; see also von Stuckrad, *Locations of Knowledge*, 200). Taking a more strictly theoretical-critical approach, Lehrich holds that “magic may be seen as a kind of prophecy of a structural thought yet unborn”; while it “cannot be defined as differance,” magic “often plays the part of its sign or, to be more precise, coexists with the thinking of or toward differance” As such, and despite his own inadequate definitions of the term, “Derrida offers us the best analytical tools for thinking (about) magic. It is by standing upon Derrida’s perhaps unwilling shoulders that we can learn to evade through recognition the destructive effects of magic as an object of thought” (*The Occult Mind*, 166, 175, 177).

189. Cf. Derrida, “Edmond Jabès,” 89.

terms) Apollonian-Faustian Christian linearity, a genius for division, for rupture, outpaced Magian Islamic circularity, a genius for wholeness, for synthesis, for ambiguity, for continuity.¹⁹⁰ Yet for all Europe's infatuation with Aristotle and his materialist creed (via Arabic *astrology*, ironically),¹⁹¹ it was largely the disciples of a semiticized Plato, a Solomonic Pythagoras, who emerged as the philosophical-scientific elite of early modern Islamdom and Christendom alike; and most espoused a *constructionist ontogrammatology*. Newton's *Principia Mathematica*, in other words, is as intrinsically an Arabic text as it is a Latin; and Pico found he could only marry Plato and Aristotle via kabbalah. Its irreducible Islamicness aside, Ibn Turka's *Book of Inquiries* would have been perfectly legible as a *Liber Quaestiones* had it made the further crossing from Anatolia to Italy.

But there was no Enlightenment in Islam—and so no equal and opposed Endarkenment—, which is to say: no divorce of reason from revelation, occult from manifest, magic from science, heaven from earth, mind from body, man from nature, man from man. For Enlightened materialist-positivist Europeans, writing, that talisman of light, now went dark—whence the Endarkenment of the Romantics, occultists all: the *incoincidentia oppositorum*. The same did not happen for Muslims until much later, and then only in the wake of the largely externally-imposed cultural rupture that was colonialism (made possible by the collusion of Muslim scripturalists, to be sure).¹⁹² Manuscript culture, a significant subset of it lettrist, hence persisted in most parts of the Islamicate world through the early 14th/20th century; it persists in pockets even now. Ibn Turka's ontogrammatology, his lettrist metaphysics of light, is thus emblematic of the cultural continuity, not rupture, that defined Islamicate civilization from its inception.¹⁹³ Staunchly perennialist in its own right, this synthetic Alid-Pythagorean-Solomonic doctrine became, as we have seen, broadly influential from the early 9th/15th century onward, from India to Anatolia, and endured as a mainstream philosophical discourse in Iran until at least the 13th/19th.

So much for divergence; what of reconvergence? Surprisingly, or perhaps not, forms of what may be styled *neo-neopythagorean ontogrammatology* are coming back into vogue in Euro-American culture, high and popular alike, pockets of which have continued to have fits of pique with the Enlightenment for locking it away in the prison of dark matter—and claiming to have thrown away the key. It was precisely the mid-20th-century linguistic turn in critical theory, moreover, culminating in Derrida's curiously kabbalistic hostility

190. The organic continuity of Arabic literature, for instance, as well as other great literary traditions, including Persian, Sanskrit and Chinese, stands in sharp contrast to the “catastrophic” and rupturous form of change unique to European literary history (Bauer, “Mamluk Literature,” 112). Expanding on this argument, Bauer has recently shown that the synthesizing ethos of Islamicate civilization also entailed a high tolerance for ambiguity—legal, social, sexual, philosophical, etc.—, this, again, in sharp contrast to Christendom (*Die Kultur der Ambiguität*). The same is a central thesis of Shahab Ahmed's *What Is Islam?*

191. See Lemay, *Abu Ma'shar and Latin Aristotelianism*.

192. For a case study see Melvin-Koushki and Pickett, “Mobilizing Magic.”

193. Islamicate civilization was not simply the greatest heir of late antique Eurasian cultures, that is, and especially the Hellenic, Persian and Abrahamic, but rather their direct continuation and culmination (Bauer, “In Search of ‘Post-Classical Literature,’” 142; Fowden, *Before and after Muḥammad*).

to and subversion of modern structuralist metaphysics, that effectively cleared the way for the emergence in the academy of a new-old Western physics-metaphysics pivoting on language and consciousness.

A number of recent developments are here especially suggestive: Peircean semiotics—wherein every existent is a sign—has become a cottage industry in philosophy;¹⁹⁴ geneticists persist in speaking of chemical life in textual terms;¹⁹⁵ and some cognitive scientists have mathematically hypothesized a monistic-panpsychist *conscious realism*, whereby perception alone erects time and space and quantum-mechanically codes what we take to be physical reality.¹⁹⁶ The latter trend in particular derives from the new discipline of physics—which long since displaced metaphysics, including its kabbalist/lettrist branch, as queen of the sciences in the West—now burgeoning: the *physics of information*.¹⁹⁷ This ontogrammatological turn is epitomized by Princeton physicist John Wheeler’s famous 1989 dictum *It from bit*—that is to say, “all things physical are information-theoretic in origin and this is a *participatory universe*.”¹⁹⁸ Most strikingly, this emergent cosmology

194. As Peirce (d. 1914) summarizes the central position of his pragmaticist semiotics (“The Basis of Pragmaticism,” 394): “The entire universe ... is perfused with signs, if it is not composed exclusively of signs.”

195. See e.g. von Stuckrad, “Rewriting the Book of Nature.” The American geneticist Francis Collins (b. 1950), past director of the Human Genome Project and current director of the NIH, is an avowed Christian kabbalist; see e.g. his *The Language of God*.

196. As Donald D. Hoffman, cognitive scientist at the University of California, Irvine, and author of *Visual Intelligence* (1998), summarizes this model in his “Hoffman’s Law”:

Hoffman’s First Law: A theory of everything starts with a theory of mind.

Quantum measurement hints that observers may create microphysical properties. Computational theories of perception hint that observers may create macrophysical properties. The history of science suggests that counterintuitive hints, if pursued, can lead to conceptual breakthroughs.

Hoffman’s Second Law: Physical universes are user interfaces for minds.

Just as the virtual worlds experienced in VR arcades are interfaces that allow the arcade user to interact effectively with an unseen world of computers and software, so also the physical work one experiences daily is a species-specific user interface that allows one to survive while interacting with a world of which one may be substantially ignorant.

He elsewhere reiterates the Planckian doctrine of mind as matrix of matter (“Consciousness is Fundamental”):

I believe that consciousness and its contents are all that exists. Spacetime, matter and fields never were the fundamental denizens of the universe but have always been, from their beginning, among the humbler contents of consciousness, dependent on it for their very being ... If matter is but one of the humbler products of consciousness, then we should expect that consciousness itself cannot be theoretically derived from matter. The mind-body problem will be to physicalist ontology what black-body radiation was to classical mechanics: first a goad to its heroic defense, later the provenance of its final supersession.

197. See e.g. Vedral, *Decoding Reality*.

198. “Information, Physics, Quantum,” 5. The passage in full:

It from bit. Otherwise put, every it—every particle, every field of force, even the space-time continuum itself—derives its functions, its meaning, its very existence entirely—even if in some contexts indirectly—from the apparatus-elicited answers to yes or no questions, binary choices, *bits*. It from bit symbolizes the idea that every item of the physical world has at bottom—at a very

requires us to recognize the universe as a “metareality of information structures,” and the unidirectional flow of time and the strict limits of space as human constructs; hence the ability of human consciousness, *logos* processor that it is, to quantum-mechanically change physical reality by the mere act of observation, even in the past.¹⁹⁹ Information structures, of course, are *embodied*, are a form of writing; and observation is a *vision of light*. Evolutionary theologians have seized upon this new physics of information in turn as the only workable means of reconciling the Christian doctrine of creation with Darwinian evolution (shades of Pico’s embrace of kabbalah in pursuit of a project equally paradoxical): the universe as meaning-generating device.²⁰⁰

All of which sounds suspiciously *talismanic*; Ibn Turka would have grounds to be smug. *Pace* Derrida, then, Western lovers of writing, Muslim or Christian, and however devoted to Plato, have roundly called and do call foul on the *Phaedrus*.

deep bottom, in most instances—an immaterial source and explanation; that what we call reality arises in the last analysis from the posing of yes-no questions, and the registering of equipment-evoked responses; in short, that all things physical are information-theoretic in origin and this is a *participatory universe*.

Echoing Bauer’s observation as to a similar transition in Mamluk literature (see n. 133 above), as well as Hanegraaff’s theorization of a modern “disenchanted magic” (“How Magic Survived”), perhaps we can speak of a turn in physics from the cold representationalism of the Newtonian model to the more intimate participationalism promised by the physics of information?

199. Vallée, “A Theory of Everything (Else).”

200. For examples see Davies and Gregersen, eds., *Information and the Nature of Reality*; Melvin-Koushki, “The Quest,” 447-48.

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