

Article

Desiring the Sweet Perfume of Closeness in the Oscillating *Tawajjuh* of the Letter *Rā*

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Abstract: This article delves into the concept of *tawajjuh* through a poem and a prayer ascribed to the Arabic letter *rā*, which expresses key themes in the Akbarian tradition. Using the hermeneutical approach of Ibn ‘Arabī to interpret word polysemy in the texts, the article sheds light on the science of letters and key metaphysical ideas cultivated in this tradition. The letter *rā* represents various aspects of cosmic duality and hence a strong desire for intimacy. The Arabic word *tawajjuh*, meaning the projection of spiritual energy, orientation, or attentiveness, refers to turning to face God. There is contemplation and continuous turning, like the phases of the moon facing the sun.

Keywords: Ibn ‘Arabī; *tawajjuh*; breath of the Merciful; orientation; intimacy; prayer; science of letters; cosmology; polysemy

1. Introduction

In the opening line of the poem ascribed to the letter *rā* in the ‘Discourse on the Letters,’ Muḥyiddīn Ibn ‘Arabī (d. AD 1240) points to an elevated state of divine proximity in the spiritual station of arrival (*maqām al-wiṣāl*):

The *rā* is in the station of lovers together, beloved,
always in the abode of his good fortune, never forsaken.¹

This poem opens a concise passage in which Ibn ‘Arabī expounds upon the Arabic letter *rā* in the extensive and dense chapter devoted to the ‘science of letters’ (*ilm al-ḥurūf*). This poetic line calls to our attention the simultaneity of separation and closeness between created beings and God. It is precisely because of this seeming duality, a polarity of subject-object, that a yearning desire emerges within the lover to perpetually be in the presence of the Beloved.

In this article, we will be reading the above poem intertextually with a prayer called ‘The Orientation of the Unpointed Letter *Rā*’ (*tawajjuh ḥarf al-rā al-muhmala*).² The contemplative letter-prayer is most likely a later attribution to Ibn ‘Arabī after his death.³ It is a poetically rendered, whispered prayer (*munājā*) undertaken by a supplicant with spiritual aspirations to attain self-perfection and God’s nearness. The one who heeds the message of the Quran, which states, ‘Call on your Lord, humbly and secretly; He loves not transgressors.’⁴

The selected prayer is one of the twenty-nine contemplative prayers (*awrād* sing. *wird*) in an Arabic prayer book titled *The Orientations of the Letters* (*Tawajjuhāt al-ḥurūf*). This book enjoys wide circulation in both printed and freely downloadable forms on the internet. Such extensive distribution attests to the enduring legacy of Ibn ‘Arabī and, by extension, reflects the continued relevance of the Akbarian tradition in contemporary spiritual practices. Each prayer is ascribed to one of the twenty-nine⁵ letters of the Arabic alphabet, with each letter having its own dedicated prayer. The prayer sequence begins with *alif*, the letter that is not a letter,⁶ *hamza* is excluded, and it ends with the combined letter *lām-alif*.



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Despite its distinct Akbarian character, this text has not received considerable attention among scholars, most likely due to its apocryphal status. Although these prayers have circulated widely in the original Arabic form, the first English translation is likely *The Seven Days of the Heart* by Pablo Beneito and Stephen Hirtenstein, published in 2000. While scholarly interest in Ibn ‘Arabī’s works has been clearly increasing, the prayers attributed to him have not been the focus of a comparable number of studies. Therefore, this article aims to contribute to the study of this textual genre and spiritual practice from the Akbarian Sufi tradition by employing a hermeneutic and intertextual polysemy approach to fill a gap in the existing scholarship.

2. Structures

The arrangement of prayers in the *Tawajjuhāt al-ḥurūf* closely resembles the alphabetical sequence of the twenty-nine ‘original letters’ identified by Sībawayh, the renowned grammarian of the Arabic language (d. ca. AD 796).⁷ The only difference is in the first and final letters: Sībawayh starts with the glottal stop *hamza* and excludes the *lām-alif*. The *lām-alif* is also not included in the standard *abjadī* or the *hijā’ī* alphabetical sequence used in contemporary dictionaries and reference books. Notably, the letter arrangement in the *Tawajjuhāt al-ḥurūf* (Table 1) shares similarities with the second chapter of the *Futūḥāt*’s on the ‘Discourses on the Letters.’ However, Ibn ‘Arabī places the *hamza* after the *alif*,⁸ effectively covering thirty letters.⁹

Table 1. Letter sequence from right to left on a seven-by-five grid, listing each letter per prayer in the *Tawajjuhāt al-ḥurūf*.

ق qāf	خ khā’	غ ghayn	ح ḥā’	ع ‘ayn	ه hā’	ا alif
ر rā’	ل lām	ي yā’	ش shīn	ج jīm	ض ḍād	ك kāf
س sīn	ز zāy	ص ṣād	ت tā’	د dāl	ط ṭā’	ن nūn
و wāw	م mīm	ب bā’	ف fā’	ث thā’	ذ dhāl	ظ ḏā’
						لām-alif

Sībawayh arranges the twenty-nine letters according to their respective points of articulation, which are determined by the constrictions in the vocal tract that either partially or completely obstruct the airflow. The sequence follows an ascending order, starting from the far end of the vocal tract and ending at the front with the lips. Ibn ‘Arabī conforms to the early Arabic classical arrangement and delves deeper into the science of letters, correlating the emergence of Arabic letters at each location in the articulatory system to the order in which God created the cosmos. As God emerged from His essence, the cosmos was made visible through the letters spoken upon His breath. Just as the vocalized letters of the alphabet came from human breath, all existing things emerge from the exhalation of divine breath. He made crucial connections between letters, breath, and the heart. He explains that breath, which is the spirit (*rūḥ*) of the life force, is the air that exits from the heart (*qalb*), spreading out through the mouth and forming letters on the way.¹⁰ In this scheme, the human heart corresponds to God’s essence, which is the source of all things in existence. As such, all the letters emerge from the heart just like the universe emerges through the creative process based on God’s imperative Be! (*kun*).¹¹ Ibn ‘Arabī maintains that the true cause for human hearts (*qulūb* sing. *qalb*) being passionately in love (*muta’ ashshiqā*) with the breath is due to the latter’s co-relation to the breath of the Merciful. His advice to the spiritual aspirant is in keeping with the saying of the Prophet Muhammad, ‘Surely God has fragrant breaths (or ‘breezes’, *nafahāt*), so go toward the fragrant breaths of your Lord (*rabb*).’¹²

The Arabic alphabet is the key to comprehending the structure of the letter-prayers in the Akbarian tradition.¹³ Through its twenty-nine letters, the alphabet provides a way to

examine the connections between the human breath and the creative breath of the Merciful (*nafas al-rahīmān*), which brings into manifestation the unlimited potential of the letters. This understanding of the letters as expressions of divine breath is significant to the Akbarian view of the cosmos and its relationship to the divine. By examining the structure and meanings of the letter-prayers, one gains insight into concept of *tawajjuh*, the projection of spiritual energy and attentiveness towards God. In this sense, the alphabet serves as a key that reveals the deep connections between language, breath, and the divine.

3. Ibn ‘Arabī’s Alphabetic Cosmography

For Ibn ‘Arabī, mastery of the science of letters is a way of participating in God’s creative command.¹⁴ He also frequently employs the word ‘spirit’ as a synonym for the meaning of letters, which can also refer to the power that these letters possess. His approach to the science of letters is rooted in a hermeneutic perspective derived from the Quran.¹⁵ This approach provides a means to discern revelatory signs in nature and all the beautiful names and attributes of God in the created beings. His works do not discuss the practical applications of letters, which is the domain of sympathetic medicine or alchemy. Rather, they explain a cosmogonic and cosmological scheme in which letters are the fundamental building blocks of everything. Thus, for Ibn ‘Arabī, the letters become the hermeneutic principle not only of the Quran but of all realities.¹⁶

Ibn ‘Arabī consistently emphasizes the importance of seeking the inner secrets of letters to his students. He reminds them that ‘The meaning of these letters is unknown to the scholars of the outward (who ignore the inner dimensions), but is revealed to the family (the children) of the moments,’¹⁷ referring to the Sufis, who have deep spiritual insight. These spiritual elites understand the intricate relationship between the knower, the thing known, and the knowledge itself.¹⁸ In the Akbarian tradition, the science of letters provides a metalinguistic and metaphysical approach to advance along the path of spiritual initiation.¹⁹ Ibn ‘Arabī advises his earnest students, saying, ‘We have told (*qiṣṣa*) you what you, yourself, should put into practice concerning the world of letters; it will lead you to spiritual unveiling (*kashf*)’²⁰ of the world, and information about its realities, and comprehend the meaning of His exalted word: “there is nothing except it celebrates Him with His praise, but you do not understand their praising” [Q.17:44].’²¹

Dunja Rašić summarizes Ibn ‘Arabī’s explanations of the properties of each letter, which are determined by three aspects: the letter’s shape, its locus of articulation, and the spirit (*rūḥ*) that governs it.²² Certain Sufi litanies make extensive use of the Arabic letters. In some practices, the repetition of specific letter combinations may be used as a vehicle to transport aspirants to higher levels of awareness. Although this is not the case in the *Tawajjuhāt al-ḥurūf*, there is a strong emphasis on the use of the letter within each prayer. For example, in the edition we consulted, we found fifty-one uses of the letter *rā’* in the rather short prayer ascribed to this letter. However, the poem in the *Futūḥāt* contains very few letter forms or phonations of the *rā’*.

The letters, according to Ibn ‘Arabī, are spirit beings (*rūḥānīya*); hence, in the passage following the poem dedicated to the letter *rā’*, he describes the multiple aspects of its nature. For instance, Ibn ‘Arabī explains that the *rā’* belongs to both the visible (*mulk*) and the intermediary realms (*jabarūt*). The latter is an isthmus (*barzakh*), which simultaneously joins together and keeps separate the invisible (*malakūt*) and the visible. Correspondingly, the *rā’* belongs to the category of eighteen letters that ‘stay with the angels,’ belonging to the step level (*martaba*) of angelic letters.²³ Similarly to the role of angels, these letters represent the subtle connections (*raqā’ iq*) or intermediaries between the two realms.²⁴

Furthermore, the *rā’* exists amongst the most special letters that form the *basmala*, specifically as the letter unit of the divine names, the All-Merciful (*al-rahīmān*) and the All-Compassionate (*al-rahīm*).²⁵ It is also one of the ‘luminous’ (*ḥurūf nūrāniyya*) or disjoined (*muqaṭṭa’āt*) letters that appear at the beginning of 29 out of the 114 chapters of the Quran.²⁶ According to Ibn ‘Arabī, in the universe that the community of the letters inhabit, they are

accorded a ranking. The luminous letters are the favored (*khāṣṣa*) letters. In this hierarchy, the letter *rāʾ* is also described as amongst ‘the pure, extracted favored of the favored’ (*ṣafāʾ khulāṣat khāṣat al-khāṣa*)²⁷ and having ‘the Heights’,²⁸ which are associated with the great, early Sufi masters, Rābiʿa al-ʿAdawīyya (d. ca. AD 801) and Abū Yazīd Bisṭāmī (d. ca. AD 874),²⁹ who are famous for declaring that their worship was not for the desire of heaven nor for fear of hell.

In a dense explanation of how the Creator manifests the shape and sound of each letter, Ibn ʿArabī compares their development to the waxing and waning moon phases (Figure 1):

‘According to us, from the door of *kashf*—when some of them come out from being . . . the first is more elevated (*ashraf*)³⁰ than the second; and it is this way for each subsequent one until the halfway mark . . . The last and the first are the most elevated that come out. . . and in this way up to the night of the new moon during the first of the month and his setting during the end of the month. The waning moon night is then equal to the full moon (*badr*) night—so understand.’³¹

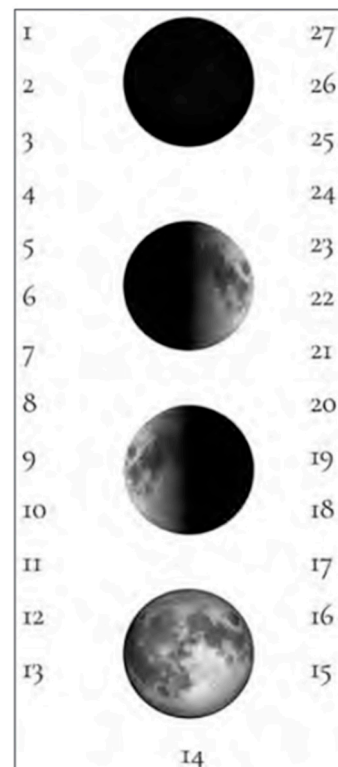


Figure 1. Moon diagram. The 28 letters and their moon mansions. Reprinted with permission from Ibn ʿArabī and Eric Winkel, *The Openings Revealed in Makkah al-Futūḥāt al-Makkīyah Books 1 & 2*, New York: Pir Press, copyright [2020] by Pir Press, p. 276.

Ibn ʿArabī uses the term *ashraf*, which also means ‘an eminence rose into view’, to describe the manifestation of the letters in the cosmos. He emphasizes the eminent status of the first (*alif*) and the last (*lām-alif*) letters and points out the metaphysical significance of the phases between the full moon and the new moon.

When the moon diagram (Figure 1) and the alphabetical sequence (Table 1) are viewed together, they reveal a connection between the letters *rāʾ* and *wāw*, which correspond to the fourteenth and twenty-eighth prayers in the *Tawajjuhāt*, respectively. The fourteenth prayer (*rāʾ*) is analogous to the full moon, while the twenty-eighth prayer (*wāw*)³² is analogous to the darkest waning phase. The diagram does not depict the moon on the twenty-eighth (*wāw*) and twenty-ninth (*lām-alif*) days. This absence alludes to the most subtle knowledge

of the ‘spirit completed’ (the perfectly completed human being, *insān al-kāmil*) represented by the *wāw* and of the ‘intimate lovers’ of the *lām-alif*.

Ibn ‘Arabī compares the Arabic alphabet to the moon mansion and equates the twenty-ninth position of the *lām-alif* as that of the *quṭb*³³ (a pivot and the ‘tent pole’ holding up the cosmos). The significance of these aspects are underscored in his saying, ‘If not for that twenty-ninth, the (other) twenty-eight would not be stabilized.’³⁴ He also asserts that the *lām-alif* and the moon share the same quality, which he refers to as ‘the night of secrets’ (*layla al-sirr*).³⁵ The placement of the *lām-alif* at the final sequence in the *Tawajjuhāt* (Table 1) alludes to God being described as the First and the Last, the Outward and the Inward.³⁶ The knot of the *lām-alif*, which depicts a figurative shape of the entwined bodies of two lovers, is a symbol of the divine omnipresence and that He is to each person ‘Closer to him than the jugular vein.’³⁷ Beneito and Hirtenstein, referring to the *Tawajjuhāt*, perceive that the ordering of twenty-nine letters indicates a cycle that begins and finishes in the same point, with the *alif* signifying the Essence Itself. They underline the relationship between the twenty-eight Arabic letters and the twenty-eight days of the lunar cycle, where each letter has a unique ‘temper’ and inherent meaning in reference to the entire cosmological cycle.³⁸

Interestingly, the *rāʾ* and the *wāw*, which are made to face one another in Figure 1, correspond to Beneito and Hirtenstein’s calculation of the letters’ numerical values. They observe that the *rāʾ* is equal to or has the same quality as the *wāw*. Of significance to our discussion in the subsequent sections, the authors pointed out a special relationship between these two letters: ‘*Wāw* and *rāʾ* may be combined to produce *rūḥ* (spirit) or *rawḥ* (joy).’³⁹

As previously mentioned, *rāʾ* is one of fourteen disjoined or ‘luminous letters’ of the Quran. According to Beneito and Hirtenstein, the luminous letters belong to the unseen semi-circle in the ‘mystery of the circle’ (of being),⁴⁰ while the *wāw* and the other fourteen letters are known as dark letters (*hurūf zulmāniyya*) that belong to the manifest semi-circle.⁴¹ However, as depicted in Figure 1, *wāw* is positioned on the ‘dark’ and thus invisible side, while the *rāʾ* is situated on the ‘bright’, visible side. The classification of these letters as bright and dark evokes an imagery of division, as they appear to divide the universe into darkness and light, just as Revelation becomes comprehensible only when these letters are combined, offering a complete sight. The number fourteen is significant in relation to the lunar cycle, as it is a symbol of the most complete beauty, where the light of the sun is fully reflected. It stands for the perfect human soul (*nafs kāmila*) that is fully receptive to the action of the divine spirit.⁴² Each phase of the moon exhibits a different degree of light and absence of light. Ibn ‘Arabī employs the full moon as a symbol of purity and the ascent of the heart in God’s presence.⁴³

The human heart, as the receptacle of God’s instruction and guidance, possesses an immense capacity. Given this capacity, a supplicant seeks God’s attention through supererogatory prayer, which would carry him or her to the stations of proximity (*maqām al-qurb*) and arrival (*maqām al-wiṣāl*), as mentioned in the *Tawajjuhāt*’s prayer and in the *Futūḥāt*’s poem, respectively. In chapter 330 of the *Futūḥāt*, a longer poem with the *rāʾ* as the rhyming letter (*rawī*)⁴⁴ in each line (*bayt*)⁴⁵ speaks of the station of the moon and the knowledge of concealed divine essence. According to Ibn ‘Arabī, the moon’s station is an intermediary station, as depicted by the cycle of increasing and decreasing light in the viewer’s eye. He draws a semantic link between the word for moon crescent, *hilāl*, and words with the same Arabic trilateral root h-l-l that describe pilgrims proclaiming, ‘There is no god but God’ during the *ḥajj*. However, there are days when the moon is obscured, such as on the twenty-eighth and twenty-ninth. The opposite is true in the mid-cycle of day fourteen, during the full moon (*badr*) when our eyes will not miss the ‘true, visible, not concealed’ universalization (*umūm*) of light over the moon’s essence (*dhat*).⁴⁶ This imagery portrays the total receptivity of the devoted supplicant, now at the mid-station of the *rāʾ*, facing the opposite end where the *wāw* is stationed:

‘A *wāw*: You alone, more holy than my being,

and more precious!
 He is a spirit completed (*rūḥ mukkamāl*),
 and he is a secret six-fold . . . ⁴⁷

4. Word Polysemy

Using intertextual polysemy, we can examine the poem and the prayer to explore the rich semantic fields of the selected key words. Arabic words derive their basic lexical meaning from roots that can be modified to produce different derivatives, resulting in a rich constellation of meanings. For example, the trilateral root, r-w-ḥ, which features frequently in the letter *rāʾ* prayer, has a variety of forms and meanings, such as *rūḥ* (spirit), *rīḥ* (breeze, wind), *rawḥ* (ease, relief, repose, joy, breeze), *rāʾ ih* (back and forth), *rāʾ iḥa* (perfume), *rawḥa* (journey in the early evening), *rayḥān* (sweet basil or aromatic plant), and *rūḥānīya* (spirituality).

Federico Salvaggio observes that polysemy is a significant aspect of Ibn ʿArabī's hermeneutics, and every meaning of a single term, if it follows the rules of the Arabic language, can represent an acceptable explanation, even if it contradicts common understanding and challenges agreed-upon interpretations of scripture.⁴⁸ William Chittick remarks that for Ibn ʿArabī, each Arabic letter of the Quran is significant because it manifests divine realities in both form and meaning.⁴⁹ Furthermore, Michel Chodkiewicz suggests that the extensive polysemy of Arabic vocabulary, coupled with rigorous adherence to the letter of Revelation, does not preclude but rather necessitates a plurality of interpretations.⁵⁰ Concurring with Chodkiewicz, Salvaggio highlights that for Ibn ʿArabī, form is meaning, and vice versa: meaning necessarily needs to acquire a form to be communicated. Ibn ʿArabī's interpretative methods suggest that it is only through form that a plurality of possible meanings can be simultaneously and synthetically contemplated. However, the ultimate confirmation of the correctness of any interpretation lies with the divine speaker Himself, who takes charge of the instruction of His servant, and if the latter is endowed with a prepared heart, He will explain and interpret what is really meant:⁵¹ 'It is I who take charge of his instruction.'⁵² From the position of the servant, this point is reflected in the letter *rāʾ* prayer, where the supplicant implores God to take charge of his or her upbringing and education.

Ibn ʿArabī frequently establishes semantic connections between words, not only through the conventional Arabic linguistic method of exploring words that share the same root, but also when the words share less than three radical letters in a different order.⁵³ An example from the prayer is the variation between the three different roots, r-d-d (*raddada*, *radda*), r-d-y (*ridā*), r-ḍ-y (*riḍwān*), and w-r-d (*mawārid*):

' . . . oscillate (*raddada*) me between a 'hopeful longing' for You and a 'reverent fear' of You. Restore (*radda*) to me the cloak (*ridā*) of satisfaction (*riḍwān*) and bring me to the wellsprings (*mawārid*) of the welcome.'

Besides the rhythmic movement of the consonant [r], the near sounding [d] and [ḍ], the long and short vowels, and the polysemous derivations from these roots, this example also features a contranym. The term *radda* can mean to return or to restore something to someone, as well as to repel or to turn away. Similarly, *ridā* (cloak) can sound like *riḍā* (satisfaction) and, while not a strict contranym, shares the same root with *radan*, which means perished or destruction.

Another term derived from the same root is *mawārid*, which is related to *wird* (pl. *awrād*), referring to a private supererogatory prayer, a portion of the Quran recited on this occasion, or a watering place. The Quranic term *warīd* (jugular vein), mentioned earlier, is also derived from the same root and has multiple meanings, including to arrive or approach, or the first flowers that blossom. These linguistic connections emphasize intimacy, as the prayer is a personal petition to be brought to the station of closeness to God, while the poem announces freshness and an arrival.

According to Salvaggio, Ibn ‘Arabī’s hermeneutical method is not arbitrary but rather based on his understanding of the intricate structure and ontology of the universe. There are multiple levels of existence corresponding to the multiple levels of meaning that can be discovered behind linguistic and cosmological phenomena. Thus, Ibn ‘Arabī presents a methodology that is both textured and elastic, able to accommodate both the semantic and trans-semantic components of reality. Teachers and students in the Akbarian tradition have delighted in playing with the lexical roots of words and their derivatives, since these often bring together seemingly unconnected words, often highlighting previously unsuspected links.

5. The Poem and the Prayer

In both the poem and the prayer, the spiritual aspirant accepts the two fundamentally distinctive levels: the presence of the Lordship (*rubūbiyya*) and the ontological poverty (*faqr*) of humanity’s servanthood (*‘ubūdiyya*).⁵⁴ However, the two texts indicate a varying degree of closeness to the divine presence. In the poem, Ibn ‘Arabī speaks of the conditional ‘if’, alluding to varying levels of *kashf* and spiritual stations, thereby implying an infinite movement towards higher stations of nearness: ‘Someone brought so close, and beloved, and most complete’, akin to the reunion of the last *lām-alif* with the first and the transcendent *alif*. The prayer, meanwhile, represents the servant seeking for the agency of Mercy in order to accomplish the spiritual ideal of absolute servitude to God and in God, which entails the effacement of all illusions of autonomy. ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī (d. circa AD 1329–35), one of the chief disseminators of Ibn ‘Arabī’s teaching, believes that the letter *rā* is ‘An allusion to the Mercy that is the Muḥammadan essence.’⁵⁵

5.1. Poem: Among Them Is the Letter Rā (*wa-min dhālika ḥarf al-rā*)⁵⁶

‘The *rā* is in the station of lovers together, beloved (*maqām al-wiṣāl*), always in the abode of his good fortune, never forsaken.

One time he says, ‘I am the single one (*al-wahīd*),

and I do not see other than me!’ And another time, ‘O me, you were never ignored!’

If your heart were with your Lord in this way,

you would be someone brought so close (*muqarraba*), and beloved, and most complete (*akmal*).’

According to Ibn ‘Arabī, the *rā* and *wāw*, together with eleven other unpointed letters arranged in a specific order, belong to the ‘station of unification’ (*maqām al-ittiḥād*).⁵⁷ These letters are *alif*, *hā*, *dāl*, *rā*, *ṭā*, *kāf*, *lām*, *mīm*, *ṣād*, *ayn*, *sīn*, *hā*, and *wāw*. Denis Gril notes that the combination of the first three letters formed the word *aḥad* (unique).⁵⁸ The notion of the ‘unificationism’ of two independent beings is considered a heretical doctrine.⁵⁹ Likewise, Ibn ‘Arabī rejects this outright. When the term ‘union’ (*ittiḥād* or *wiṣāl*) is used, it is in the sense that things are non-existent and what seems to be their existence is in reality God’s. In another instance, the term is used in reference to the experience of oneness with God.⁶⁰

5.2. Prayer: The Orientation of the Unpointed Letter Rā (*tawajjuh ḥarf al-rā al-muhmala*)⁶¹

‘O my Lord (*rabb*), instruct me (*rabba*) with the subtle benevolence (*laṭīf*) of Your Lordliness (*rubūbiyya*), as one who is conscious of being in total need (*muftaqir*) of You should be instructed (*tarbiya*), as one who never claims to be independent of You. Watch over me with your eye of attentive care (*ri‘āya*), vigilantly protecting (*muraqaba*) me from all the knocks that may befall me, or anything that may afflict me or cause me to be troubled at any moment or in any perception, or that may write one of the lines upon the tablet of my destiny. Provide me with the ease (*rāḥa*) of intimacy with You and raise (*rāqqa*) me to the station of closeness (*maqām al-qurb*) to You. Revive (*rawwih*) my spirit (*rūḥ*) with Your remembrance and oscillate (*raddada*) me between a ‘hopeful longing’ (*raghab*) for You and a

‘reverent fear’ (*raḥab*) of You.⁶² Restore (*radda*) to me the cloak (*ridā*) of satisfaction (*riḍwān*) and bring me to the wellsprings (*mawārid*) of the welcome (*qabūl*). Grant me Mercy (*raḥīma*) from You, re-establishing harmony in my disorder, rectifying where I am deviating, perfecting where I am lacking, restraining me when I am astray and guiding my perplexity (*ḥā’ira*).

Indeed, You are ‘Lord of every thing’ and its instructor (*murabbīh*). You mercify (*raḥīm*) the essences [of all beings] and You elevate (*rafa’*) the degrees. Your closeness (*qurb*) is the joy (*rawḥ*) of the spirits (*arwāḥ*), and the perfumed sweetness (*rayḥān*) of joyous satisfaction (*irtiyāl*); the epitome of true prosperity, and the repose (*rāḥa*) of all those who are at ease (*murtāḥ*).

May You be blessed, Lord of lords. Liberator of slaves (*riqāb*)!⁶³ Lifter of suffering! You ‘embrace everything in mercy (*raḥīma*) and in knowledge.’⁶⁴ You forgive wrongdoing with loving tenderness and clemency. You are the most kind (*ra’ūf*), the compassionate (*raḥīm*).

May the blessing of God be upon our master Muhammad, the prophet, and upon his family and companions.’

The prayer’s title-heading foregrounds the shape of the *rā’* (*ḥarf al-rā’ al-muhmala*), known as *muhmala*, which refers to all the letters of the Arabic alphabet without diacritical dots, also called ‘neglected’ or ‘unpointed’. These dots are used to establish the difference between letters like *rā’* (ر) and *zāy* (ز). Ibn ‘Arabī describes the dot on a letter (*i’jām*) as its face, used to recognize and distinguish one letter from another. He categorizes letters without diacritical marks as unpointed, dry letters, stating that ‘The unpointed letter is the one you recognize by looking at it, or alternatively, by transmitting its special qualities.’⁶⁵ This seems to parallel the Sufi’s terminology of direct recognition or gnosis (*ma’rifa*). In turn, the *rā’* appears in its pure simplicity, engendering the state of ‘direct witnessing’⁶⁶ as we witness it unambiguously and without obscurity, like true lovers, who recognize each other instantly. Ibn ‘Arabī calls the ‘orbit of direct witnessing’ (*mushāhada*) the ‘station of the Heights’ personified by Abū Yazīd Bisṭāmī, who, like the letter *rā’*, is also ‘unpointed’.⁶⁷

This intimate prayer focuses on a personal relationship with God through open and heartfelt communication. It is a mode of contemplation and self-reflection in the interiority of the heart. The lyrical verses of the prayer interlace divine names and Quranic verses, mediated by the sounding of *rā’* with the aim of filling the heart with spiritual meaning. In Quranic terminology, adhered to in the Akbarian’s doctrine, the heart is the seat of faith, the place of witnessing, and the wellspring of intention.

The prayer’s structure prescribes certain words and good manners (*adab*) for approaching God, with the praise and glorification of God taking precedence. Although not explicitly written in this particular text, every prayer commonly starts with the *basmala*, a formula for praising God and mentioning His attributes, the Merciful and the Compassionate. Addressing the personal ‘my Lord’ (*rabbī*), the supplicant proceeds with states of humility, repentance, confession, neediness, gratefulness, and seeking good outcomes and noble traits, before ending the conversation by praising God and invoking blessings on the Prophet Muhammad.

The letter *rā’* prayer begins by invoking God’s subtle Lordship, affirming that the supplicant is in total need and submission, pleading for protection, guidance, and acceptance. As the name of the book suggests, the prayers of the letters entail an orientation, *tawajjuh*, meaning the turning of the face. In Sufi texts, the face (*wajh* pl. *wujūh*) relates to a variety of meanings, such as attention, will, and essence. Ibn ‘Arabī states that God ‘possesses faces,’⁶⁸ in reference to the verse, ‘Wherever you turn there is the face of Allah.’⁶⁹ These prayers, therefore, express the desire of the supplicant to turn towards God, and that God would turn towards the supplicant. In his discourse on the shape of the letter *lām-alif*, Ibn ‘Arabī contends that ‘turning to face’ (*tawajjuh*) is the condition of the impassioned one (*ma’shūq*) seeking out his or her object of passion (*āshiq*).⁷⁰ Thus, the letters are the

material configuration of the words⁷¹ uttered in the prayers, conditioning this movement of orientation of lover and Beloved to each other.

The prepositions that weave together the verbs, adverbs, nouns, and adjectives can be seen as indicators of the servant's orientation towards God. Of particular relevance is the often-repeated preposition 'bi' in the prayer. Ibn 'Arabī relates this preposition to humility and lowering oneself, which is the condition of servanthood. He says that 'every humble person is broken' and that the movement of prostration (*sujūd*) signifies servanthood.⁷² The sound /i/ from the vowel *kasra* (which means breakage) is often repeated throughout the letter *rā'* prayer, intimating the servant's awareness of his or her broken nature.

The letter *rā'* is specifically associated with words that express its nature, such as spirit (*rūḥ*) and Mercy (*raḥma*), which are derived from the same roots. According to Ibn 'Arabī, 'The cosmos is identical with Mercy, nothing else.'⁷³ In the prayer, the supplicant seeks Mercy and requests harmony and guidance through Mercy's intercession 'by Her' (*bi-hā'*). *Raḥma*, which shares a root with womb (*raḥim*), is repeatedly invoked as the grammatical feminine noun, through which such blessings may be bestowed. Additionally, as the first letter of the divine names *al-Raḥmān* and *al-Raḥīm*, the letter *rā'* in the prayer turns one's attention to the encompassing nature of Mercy and how 'all people and creatures end up with Mercy.'⁷⁴ This echoes the Quran's chapter *al-Raḥmān*, where one hears of the plentiful bounties bestowed by God in this world and the next. Both in the chapters *al-Raḥmān* and in the following *al-Waqī'a* ('The Inevitable'), there is a sense of freshness from the fountains and the extended shade in the gardens. Like in the prayer of the letter *rā'*, there is a desire for relief, repose, and proximity to God.

Based on Ibn 'Arabī's description of the nature of letters, the three consonants that form the word *rūḥ* (spirit), *rā'-wāw-ḥā'*, indicate a movement of the breath of Mercy. The hot and dry *rā'*, the hot and moist *wāw*, and the wet and cool *ḥā'* illustrate a movement from the heat towards a fresh, fragrant, and fertile rest, as *raḥma* soothes all things.⁷⁵ Ibn 'Arabī speaks of Mercy as bringing relief by 'eliminating straightness and constriction,' which are identical to non-existence.⁷⁶ He describes this relief through Mercy as applying both to the divine names and to all beings. When a thing knows its possibilities but does not yet exist, it is in a state of constriction and only the Merciful's breath can relieve it by bringing it into existence.⁷⁷

In various chapters of the *Futūḥāt*, Ibn 'Arabī recurrently cites the prophetic saying, 'A breath of the Merciful comes to me from Yemen,' referring to the joy of relief after experiencing one's chest constricted due to exile from homeland and enduring oppression.⁷⁸ This leitmotif reappears in a *qaṣīda* in chapter 49 titled 'A Breath of the Merciful', echoing the earlier counsel to turn and follow the trace of God's fragrant breath. In this poem, the letter *rā'* serves as the *rawī*, maintaining the sound /ri/ throughout the *buyūt*, accomplished through the grammatical form of lowering (*khafḍ*) indicated by the *kasra*.⁷⁹ As previously mentioned, the repeated sound /i/ from the *kasra* vowel alludes to the servant's awareness of his or her 'lowly' and 'broken nature'. Notably, the poem reciter⁸⁰ singled out the reason for choosing the letter *rā'*.⁸¹

"Ibn Thābit said, "... My eyes and my breasts are impassioned by sleeplessness; tears fall on my place of weeping and my place of pooling."

Now, my mother was illiterate, related to the Anṣār, so I say:

For this I made his narrative a *rā'*, which

is one of the letters of restoration (*raddi*)⁸² and reiteration (*takrār*)⁸³

... The choosing one alluded to the breath which

came to him from Yemen, at the fated moment.'

In the *Tawajjuhāt* prayer, the letter *rā'* highlights the supplicant's total dependency on his or her Lord for liberation from a state of constriction. Within the prayer, the recurrent verbalization of words with the letter *rā'* guides the supplicant towards humility, prostra-

tion, the recognition of his or her need for guidance and protection, and the recognition of the presence of Lordship (*rubūbiyya*) and the absolute lowliness of servanthood (*ubūdiyya*). There is a constant sense in the prayer that *rahma* turns harshness into softness, difficulty into ease, and pain into delight. The concept of *tawajjuh*, or the turning of the face towards God, is illustrated by the verb *raddada* in a plea from the servant to be oscillated between desire and fear, alluding to the image of the heart being turned between God's two fingers.⁸⁴ Here, it is made clear that the position of the supplicant must be flexible, so that he or she does not ignore certain divine names by being fixed on a certain face.

This notion is further emphasized when, in the prayer, God is invoked as the Liberator of slaves (*riqāb*). However, a literal reading of this expression reveals the meaning of the Liberator of necks. The noun *raqaba* (pl. *riqāb*) also means 'the nape of the neck'⁸⁵ or 'thick neck'.⁸⁶ *Riqāb* appears several times in the Quran, mostly as a figure of speech to mean slave or bondsperson.⁸⁷ The word is commonly associated with restriction and the necessity for humility. When the neck is shackled (bondsperson) and constricted, movement is impeded, preventing the individual from freely turning. Conversely, freedom of the neck allows the face to turn towards the signs of God, which in turn activates the senses of sight, smell, hearing, and taste. Therefore, a literal reading of this passage invites an understanding of the essence of *tawajjuh* and of the way that the letter *rā* carries the Mercy that relieves fixity.

When God created Adam from clay with His two hands,⁸⁸ He breathed unto him the breath of Mercy, relieving him of fixity and granting him life. Out of dry, fixed clay, into moist flexibility, humans were given the ability to move and to turn. To be hard and unmoving is to be dead. In his works, Ibn 'Arabī often points towards the need to understand polarities, such as those of the divine names, or what stands between 'a yes and a no'.⁸⁹ His writings on the faculty of imagination and the realm of *barzakh* imply the flexibility required in our attempt to perceive the lofty knowledge of what is and is not (existence and non-existence). The ritual prayer (*salah*) concludes with the action of turning one's face to the right and then to the left, although the person's orientation (*qibla*) remains fixed towards the Ka'ba, the 'navel of the earth' from which space and time unfold: 'the place of the Placeless'.⁹⁰ Here, we perceive an embodied orientation that remains flexible.

Tawajjuh, as an orientation, has a close connection to *taqallub*, a fluctuation, which in Sufi terminology is regarded as a property of the heart capable of turning and changing. The turning of the heart is what allows for the perception of the different divine names, and the plurality in the One. Therefore, the heart, neck, and face represent the faculties that turn towards the signs of God. Thus, a voyage, essentially, is an act of turning and orientating oneself. As Ibn 'Arabī describes, the Prophet's night journey is undertaken 'In order to show him some of Our signs.'⁹¹ Therefore, in the context of prayer, when the servant calls upon the Liberator of necks, he or she is not pleading to be freed from the essential condition of servanthood (*ubūdiyya*), but rather to be liberated from the restraints that prevent them from turning to witness and recognize the signs of God.

Both the prayer and the poem of the letter *rā* convey a sense of movement akin to that of a simple pendulum, oscillating between the divine names or different directions or different faces. The imagery of an oscillating pendulum invites an imaginative vision of the supplicant-lover turning and moving between polarities in his or her desire for closeness with the divine. It is interesting to note that the Arabic word for pendulum (*raqqās*) shares the same root (r-q-ṣ) with dance (*raqs*) and trembling heart (*raqṣa*). Just like the length of the pendulum's thread influences its oscillation period, a longer thread requires more time to complete each oscillation, while a shorter thread results in shorter swings between the opposites. The magnitude of oscillations decreases as the mass at the bottom of the pendulum's thread approaches the dot from which it hangs and depends. We can thus see the human being as the swinging pendulum that dances between the opposite aspects of creation, pleading to be brought closer to his or her Beloved. The closer to the source of the pendulum's thread, the faster the *tawajjuh*, and the more frequent the awareness of the polarities. A long thread implies hanging far from the source, potentially necessitating a lifetime to complete a single swing. On the other hand, a constricted pendulum loses its

ability to oscillate at all. Thus, the prayer of the letter *rāʾ* speaks of the servant's need to be liberated from the shackles that hinder his or her continuous turning and swinging.

This also applies to the understanding of the Quran, as Ibn ʿArabī states, 'Every revealed verse has two senses (*wajh*): A sense which they see within themselves and a sense which they see outside of themselves.'⁹² The breath of the Merciful blows and moves the pendulum, relieving it from fixity. Furthermore, *rahma* is the movement that pulls and shortens the pendulum's thread, drawing the lover closer to the Beloved. As the servant turns his or her attention to the signs within himself or herself and on the horizon, it is worth observing that a pendulum does not always move in a single linear trajectory. Due to the earth's rotation, it appears to change trajectory and actually draws different lines within a circle, thereby encountering different pairs of opposites at different times. Similarly, the servant at different times may be turning to different pairs of letters, signs, or divine names. These variations in the pendulum's movement stem from the forces of gravity and inertia, which exert a pull from the center of the earth and a pull from the origin where it hangs from, just like the human being experiences the pull between spirit and clay.

Sufis speak of direct knowledge from God (*maʿrifa*), which entails both outwardness and inwardness at the same time, and opposites are resolved in God. Thus, Ibn ʿArabī recounts that it had been asked of Abū Saʿīd al-Kharrāz (d. AD 899):

"Through what have you known God?" He replied, "Through the fact that He brings opposites together." So every entity qualified by existence is it/not it. The whole cosmos is He/not He. The Real manifest through form is He/not He. He is the limited who is not limited, the seen who is not seen.'⁹³

The same statement is also cited in the *Futūḥāt*'s chapter 24, titled 'Existence-Based Knowledge,' where it concludes with, 'Then he [al-Kharrāz] recited, "He is the First, and the Last, and the Outward, and the Inward."⁹⁴ Considering the potential confusion that may arise from turning back and forth between opposites, the supplicant petitions God to guide his or her perplexity. The pulsating movement of a pendulum appears in the poem, marking different moments of revelation. It says '*waqtan . . . waqtan*', indicating the shifting nature of perception, that at one time something is perceived, and at another time something else comes into awareness.

'One time (*waqtan*) he says, 'I am the single one,
and I do not see other than me!' And another time (*waqtan*), 'O me, you never ignored!'

All three *buyūt* of the poem end with the letter *lām-alif*,⁹⁵ which signifies proximity. Comparable to the prayer of the *lām-alif* in the *Tawajjuhāt*, the servant proclaims, 'Until it does not exist in me a vision of other except You.'⁹⁶ In the first *bayt*, Ibn ʿArabī writes that the letter *rāʾ* resides in the station of union (*maqām al-wiṣāl*). The notion of *waṣl*, denoting a joining or union between two, implies a sense of duality. This alludes to the Quran verse (57:4): 'He is with you wherever you are,' emphasizing God's perpetual state of *waṣl* with created beings.⁹⁷ The shape of the *lām-alif* (ﻻ) visually represents an embrace between the two letters, symbolizing the desire expressed in the prayer and the poem for closeness (*qurb*) and intimacy (*uns*) between servant and God, the lover and the Beloved. In the prayer, one feels the thread of the pendulum becoming increasingly shorter, moving towards the desired union. The shared root of *insān* (person) and *uns* (intimacy) reflects the essential desire of human beings for such intimacy. However, this movement towards closeness is not realized by the servant's own effort or merit, but only through the Beloved's Mercy.

Due to the semantic and symbolic meanings it carries, the letter *rāʾ* serves as a means for accessing vast spiritual knowledge. In this sense, the letter acts as an intermediary in both the prayer and poem, leading to a heartfelt awareness that 'God is closer than the jugular vein (*warīd*).' As mentioned previously, *warīd* also means the first flowers and it resonates beautifully with the evocation of the sweet fragrance (*rayḥān*)⁹⁸ in the prayer. The word 'fragrance', which is often found in many Sufi texts, hints at a blissful trace of the

Beloved's presence. In the poem, this trace leads to the *lām-alif* embrace at the end of each *bayt*, symbolizing union and reunion.

When the *alif* and the *lām* unite, they form a shape resembling the letter *hā'* (ه) at the base of the embrace.⁹⁹ Therefore, the *lām-alif* (ل) is seen as containing all the letters of the word Allah (*alif*, *lām*, and *hā'*). The *lām-alif* is considered by Ibn 'Arabī to be the beginning and the end of everything,¹⁰⁰ just as all begins and ends with *rahma*. Thus, poetically, one sees how it all begins and ends with the Merciful embrace. In the last *bayt* of the poem Ibn 'Arabī states that 'If your heart were with your Lord in this way, you would be someone brought so close . . . most complete (*akmal*).' Moving from a perception of not seeing other than me to not seeing other than You, the twirling embrace of the *lām-alif* represents the mutual turning of the lover and the Beloved towards one another. Chodkiewicz reminds us that 'Taken to its farthest degree, 'ubūdiyya is cancelled out, is reabsorbed into 'ubūda, which is pure presence with God, with no trace of duality,' and that perfect prayer therefore happens when 'The person who prays is absent, leaving all the place to God.'¹⁰¹

6. Conclusions

This article has presented an overview of the contemplation of *Tawajjuhāt al-hurūf* using the example of the fourteenth letter to illustrate a thematic example of the entire series. Through a close reading of the prayer jointly with the poem on the letter *rā'* in the *Futūḥāt*, several key themes have emerged, and we have outlined a few prominent ones. The recurring sound of the letter *rā'* in the prayer, as well as in the poems found in chapters 49 and 330 of the *Futūḥāt*, directs our attention back to the function of the alphabet and the power of language in relation to the origins of existence, the revelation of the Quran, and the role of human beings. While the poetic medium condenses these ideas mnemonically, the language of the prayer is direct. In both modes of expression, the speakers are able to express themselves earnestly and eloquently.

In Akbarian cosmology, letters are the fundamental building blocks of creation, originating from the divine sigh that brings forth beings from the Mist, from this state of potentiality into manifestation. The divine exhalation, known as the breath of the Merciful (*nafas al-rahīmān*), that continually maintains the existence of the universe, corresponds to the human speech. Throughout the *Futūḥāt*, Ibn 'Arabī elucidates how the letters correspond to the various levels of existence and action of the cosmos. The letters serve as a means of accessing a whole range of knowledge due to their semantic and symbolic meanings. Notably, Ibn 'Arabī encourages his students to learn about the letters and experience them for themselves. The collection of twenty-nine prayers in the *Tawajjuhāt* focuses the attention and intention of the spiritual aspirants on their own process of personal transformation through contemplation. In this practice, the science of letters does not have any real connection with the magical significance of letters, which Ibn 'Arabī recognizes as effective while also warning of the dangers.¹⁰² Rather, the science demonstrates key ideas in the Akbarian tradition; namely, the metaphysics of Mercy.

In this article, the letter *rā'* has been contemplated as an orientation or guide in the oscillating movement towards intimacy, following the sweet fragrant traces towards the Merciful embrace. Since in the Akbarian tradition prayers and poems are forms of condensed wisdom and teaching, it would be insightful to see in the future more explorations of intertextuality between these two textual expressions regarding the other letters of the Arabic alphabet.

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Notes

- ¹ Ibn 'Arabī and al-Manṣūb (2010), *al-Futūḥāt*, 1/216; Ibn 'Arabī and Winkel (2020a), *The Openings Book 1 & 2*, p. 231.
- ² Ibn 'Arabī (n.d.), *Tawajjuhāt al-ḥuruf*, pp. 25–26.
- ³ It is beyond the scope of this article to conduct authorship analysis of Sufi prayer literature. For analysis of misattribution in Sufi texts, see e.g., Ibn 'Arabī et al. (2021), *Prayers for the Week*, pp. 1, 14, 20–22; Beneito and Hirtenstein (2021), *Patterns of Contemplation*; S. Taji-Farouki, *A Prayer for Spiritual Elevation and Protection*. Oxford: Anqa, 2006; M. Ebstein and S. Sviri, "The So-Called *Risālat al-Ḥurūf* (Epistle on Letters) Ascribed to Sahl Al-Tustarī and Letter Mysticism in Al-Andalus," in *Journal Asiatique* 299, no. 1 (2011): 213–70.
- ⁴ Quran 7:55. The term *munājā* describes a petition to be brought nearer to God. By engaging in supererogatory acts, the supplicant exercises a free choice, thus, he or she is a voluntary slave ('*abd*') or a slave by free choice.
- ⁵ Sibawayh's ordering starts with *hamza* followed by *alif* and ends with *wāw*. Sibawayh, *al-Kitāb* 4 vols. ed. A. S. M. Hārūn, Cairo, 1966–1975, p. 431 cited in al-Naṣṣir (1993), *Sibawayh the Phonologist*, p. 19.
- ⁶ Ibn 'Arabī states that *alif* is not a letter as according to the knowledge gained by, 'One who smells the truths,' unlike, the opinion of the general population whom, he says, considers it as a letter. In Ibn 'Arabī and al-Manṣūb (2010), *al-Futūḥāt*, 1/207; Ibn 'Arabī and Winkel (2020a), *The Openings Books 1 & 2*, p. 219.
- ⁷ See note 5.
- ⁸ According to Rašić (2021), in Ibn 'Arabī's various works on the science of letters, he typically places the *lām -alif* last, and the *alif*, to a lesser extent, at the first place of the sequence of twenty-nine letters, *The Written World*, p. 96.
- ⁹ Ibn 'Arabī and al-Manṣūb (2010), *al-Futūḥāt*, 1/207–32; Ibn 'Arabī and Winkel (2020a), *The Openings Books 1 & 2*, pp. 219–59.
- ¹⁰ Ibn 'Arabī and al-Manṣūb (2010), *al-Futūḥāt*, 1/508; Ibn 'Arabī and Winkel (2020b), *The Openings Books 3 & 4*, p. 36.
- ¹¹ Ibn 'Arabī and al-Manṣūb (2010), *al-Futūḥāt* III, pp. 526–27 cited in Rašić (2021), *The Written World*, p. 82.
- ¹² Ibn 'Arabī and al-Manṣūb (2010), *al-Futūḥāt*, 1/546; Ibn 'Arabī and Winkel (2020b), *The Openings Book 3 & 4*, p. 113; Morris (2007), *The Reflective Heart*, p. 69.
- ¹³ This point has been observed in Ibn 'Arabī et al. ([2000] 2008), *The Seven Days*, pp. 14–15.
- ¹⁴ Gril (2004), "The Science of Letters."
- ¹⁵ Gril (2004), p. 146.
- ¹⁶ Gril (2004), p. 147.
- ¹⁷ Ibn 'Arabī and al-Manṣūb (2010), *al-Futūḥāt*, 1/193; Ibn 'Arabī and Winkel (2020a), *The Openings Books 1 & 2*, p. 190.
- ¹⁸ Ibn 'Arabī and al-Manṣūb (2010), *al-Futūḥāt*, 1/297–301; Ibn 'Arabī and Winkel (2020a), pp. 319–24;
- ¹⁹ Gril (2004), "The Science of Letters," p. 126.
- ²⁰ Unveiling; *kashf* is a type of direct experience through which knowledge of Reality is revealed to the heart of the servant ('*abd*') and lover, in Armstrong, *Sufi Terminology*, p. 109.
- ²¹ Ibn 'Arabī and al-Manṣūb (2010), *al-Futūḥāt*, 1/191–92; Ibn 'Arabī and Winkel (2020a), *The Openings Books 1 & 2*, pp. 187–88; Gril (2004), "The Science of Letters," p. 163.
- ²² Rašić (2021) citing Ibn 'Arabī's works that deals with the science of letters, *The Meccan Revelations (al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya)*, *Bezels of Wisdom (Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam)*, *The Book of Alif (Kitāb al-Alif)*, *The Book of the Letter Bā' (Kitāb al-Bā')*, *The Book of Mīm, Wāw and Nūn (Kitāb al-Mīm wa-l-Wāw wa-l-Nūn)* and *The Book of Majesty (Kitāb al-Jalāla)* in *The Written World*, p. 7.
- ²³ Ibn 'Arabī and Winkel (2020a), *The Openings Books 1 & 2*, p. 171; Gril (2004), "The Science of Letters," pp. 155–56.
- ²⁴ Ibn 'Arabī and Winkel (2020a), *The Openings Books 1 & 2*, pp. 172–73; Gril (2004), pp. 110, 156.
- ²⁵ The invocation *bismi' llāhi al-raḥmān al-raḥīm*.
- ²⁶ The Quranic chapters where the letter *rā'* appears in the combination of '*Alif Lām Rā'*' are: "Yūnus," "Hud," "Yūsuf," "Ibrāhīm," "al-Ḥijr"; and once in '*Alif Lām Mīm Rā'*' in the chapter "Al-Ra'd."
- ²⁷ Ibn 'Arabī and al-Manṣūb (2010), *al-Futūḥāt*, 1/191; Ibn 'Arabī and Winkel (2020a), *The Openings Books 1 & 2*, p. 186.

- 28 “The Heights”, *Al-‘Arāf*, as described in the chapter of that name in Quran 7: 46.
- 29 Ibn ‘Arabī and Winkel (2020a), *The Openings Books 1 & 2*, p. 282.
- 30 Winkel translates *ashraf* as ‘panoramic’ which conveys a sense of height and extensive view, as well as continuous unfolding phases, *The Openings Books 1&2*, p. 276.
- 31 Ibn ‘Arabī and Winkel (2020a), *The Openings Books 1 & 2*, p. 276. The word ‘being’ is italicized in the original translation.
- 32 See “Symbolism of *wāw*” in Ibn ‘Arabī et al. ([2000] 2008), *The Seven Days*, pp. 117, 119–23. For extensive discussion on the *wāw* see Beneito and Hirtenstein (2021), *Patterns of Contemplation*.
- 33 *Qutb* (pl. *aqṭāb*) literally meaning pole or axis generally refers to the highest spiritual station of the friends of God (*awliyā*). The *qutb* is the central axis around which the spiritual hierarchy revolves, and their presence is believed to be essential for the spiritual well-being and guidance of the world.
- 34 Ibn ‘Arabī and Winkel (2020a), *The Openings Books 1 & 2*, p. 191.
- 35 Ibn ‘Arabī and al-Manṣūb (2010), *Al-Futūḥāt*, 6/307.
- 36 Quran 57:3, also mentioned in Rašić (2021), *The Written World*, p. 96.
- 37 Quran 50:16.
- 38 Ibn ‘Arabī et al. ([2000] 2008), *The Seven Days*, p. 15. For more on the significance of number twenty-eight see Rašić (2021), *The Written World*, p. 76.
- 39 Ibn ‘Arabī et al. ([2000] 2008), *The Seven Days*, p. 15.
- 40 Beneito and Hirtenstein (2021), *Patterns of Contemplation*, 38, note 29, p. 171. The circle or the two arc is symbolized by the letter *nūn*, which the authors discuss extensively throughout the book.
- 41 While we emphasize the association between the letter *rā* with the full moon, the luminous letters and the number fourteen, we also note that *rā* is classified as a ‘sun letter’ and *wāw* belongs to the ‘moon letter’ according to the grammatical categorization of the Arabic alphabet. This categorization entails an equal division of fourteen sun letters (*ḥurūf shamsiyya*) and fourteen ‘moon letters’ (*ḥurūf qamariyya*). From a grammatical standpoint, these two groups primarily differ in their treatment of the definite article ‘*al-*’ in spoken Arabic. Sun letters undergo assimilation with the definite article ‘*al-*’, resulting in the replacement of the ‘*l*’ (*lām*) sound in ‘*al-*’ with the respective sun letter. In contrast, moon letters do not trigger this assimilation, and the pronunciation of ‘*al-*’ remains unchanged. It is undoubtedly intriguing to explore the intricate connections that may exist between the luminous and dark letters, the sun and moon letters, and the number fourteen. These various references invite us to reconsider the logic and paradox inherent in each distinct mode of discourse they represent. However, this examination exceeds the scope of the present article.
- 42 Beneito and Hirtenstein (2021), *Patterns of Contemplation*, p. 9; the authors discuss the significance of number fourteen.
- 43 Rašić (2021), *The Written World*, p. 105.
- 44 In traditional Arabic poetry, the lines carry the same final consonant until the end of the poem, called *rawī*, for rhyming effect.
- 45 A single line of poetry consisting of two hemistichs or half lines, is called a *bayt* (pl. *buyūt*), a metrical unit of poetry in Arabic, Urdu, Indian and Sindhi traditions. Corresponds to a line in English poetry.
- 46 Ibn ‘Arabī and al-Manṣūb (2010), *al-Futūḥāt*, 8/48; Ibn ‘Arabī and Winkel, “On Ma’rifah of an Alighting Place of the Moon—the *Ḥilāl*, the *Badr*; from the Muḥammadi Presence,” *The Openings Revealed in Makkah* (New York: Pir Press, forthcoming).
- 47 Ibn ‘Arabī and al-Manṣūb (2010), *al-Futūḥāt*, 1/226; Ibn ‘Arabī and Winkel (2020a), *The Openings Books 1 & 2*, p. 247.
- 48 Salvaggio (2021), “Polysemy as Hermeneutic Key”, p. 55.
- 49 Chittick (1989), *The Sufi Path*, p. xv.
- 50 Chodkiewicz (1993), *An Ocean without Shore*, p. 30.
- 51 *Futūḥāt* I, p. 267 in Salvaggio (2021), “Polysemy as Hermeneutic Key”, p. 62.
- 52 *Futūḥāt* vol.1, p.239, in Chodkiewicz (1993), *An Ocean without Shore*, p. 27.
- 53 Salvaggio (2021), “Polysemy as Hermeneutic Key”, p. 56.
- 54 Ibn ‘Arabī and Winkel (2020a), *The Openings Books 1 & 2*, p. 167
- 55 al-Kāshānī and Hamza (2021), *A Sufi Commentary*, p. 303. For the Arabic original, refer to: ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī, *Ta’wīlāt Al-Qur’ān*, published as *Tafsir Ibn ‘Arabī*. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-Ilmiyya, n.d.
- 56 Ibn ‘Arabī and Winkel (2020a), *The Openings Books 1 & 2*, p. 231.
- 57 Ibn ‘Arabī and al-Manṣūb (2010), *al-Futūḥāt*, 1/191; Ibn ‘Arabī and Winkel (2020a), *The Openings Books 1 & 2*, p. 187.
- 58 Gril (2004), “The Science of Letters,” p. 206.
- 59 Armstrong (2001), *Sufi Terminology*, p. 96.
- 60 Armstrong (2001), p. 96.
- 61 This translation, for the most part, is based on Ibn ‘Arabī et al. ([2000] 2008), *The Seven Days*, p. 34, except for a small variation in wording in the *rā* prayer in the *Tawajjuhāt al-ḥurūf*, pp. 25–26.

- Quran 21:90.
- We suggest a variant reading, ‘freeing of necks’, as discussed in the subsequent section.
- Quran 40:7.
- Ibn ‘Arabī and al-Manṣūb (2010), *al-Futūḥāt*, 1/244; Ibn ‘Arabī and Winkel (2020a), *The Openings Books 1 & 2*, p. 281.
- Ibn ‘Arabī and Winkel (2020a), *The Openings Books 1 & 2*, pp. 232, 281, 285.
- see note 66.
- Chittick (1993), “Two Chapters”, p. 105. Ibn ‘Arabī frequently made references to Quranic verse 28:88, which states, “All things perish, except His Face.” According to Chittick, Ibn ‘Arabī presents two ways to understand this verse. In the first instance, it is read as referring to the face of God in the thing, and in the second instance to the face of the thing in God. Despite the apparent differences, these interpretations ultimately converge, highlighting the same face identical to the intrinsic reality or immutable entity of the thing. Ibn ‘Arabī employs the term ‘specific face’ (*al-wajh al-khāss*) to elucidate this concept, which refers to the unique face of God exclusively turned towards each individual existent, endowing it with its own uniqueness (Chittick, p. 120 note 52).
- Quran 2:115.
- Ibn ‘Arabī and al-Manṣūb (2010), *al-Futūḥāt*, 1/228; Ibn ‘Arabī and Winkel (2020a), *The Openings Books 1 & 2*, p. 251.
- Ibn ‘Arabī and Winkel (2020a), *The Openings Books 1 & 2*, p. 292.
- See Ibn ‘Arabī and Jaffray (2015), *The Secrets of Voyaging*, pp. 65–66. Ibn ‘Arabī refers to Q. 17:1, ‘Glory be to Him, who carried His servant (*bi-abdihī*) by night from the holy mosque to the further mosque.’ Specifically, he refers to the Prophet Muhammad’s prostration in the two mosques (sing. *masjid*, having the same root as *sujūd*). This is the essence of servitude, which is ‘lowness’ (*dhilla*) and ‘lowering’ (*khafḍ*). Noting that *khafḍ* is also a grammatical lowering for pronouncing the final consonant of a genitive case with /i/.
- Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkīyah* II 437.20 in Chittick (1989), *The Sufi Path*, p. 131.
- Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkīyah* III 420.2 in Chittick (1989), *The Sufi Path*, p. 130.
- Rašić (2022), “Celestial Mechanics”.
- Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkīyah*, 459.1 in Chittick (1989), *The Sufi Path*, p. 131.
- see note 77.
- E.g., ch. 24, titled ‘On the hearts who are impassioned by the breaths’ in Ibn ‘Arabī and Winkel (2020b), *The Openings Books 3 & 4*, p. 113; Al-Manṣūb, *al-Futūḥāt*, 1/546. And ch. 49 entitled, “On Ma’rifah of His (peace be upon him) word, “I indeed have found a breath of the *al-Raḥmān* from the side of Yemen,” in Ibn ‘Arabī and Winkel (2020b), *The Openings Books 3 & 4*, p. 469; Ibn ‘Arabī and al-Manṣūb (2010), *al-Futūḥāt*, 2/72.
- In Arabic grammar, *khafḍ* is a term that refers to the grammatical concept of ‘lowering,’ which manifests itself through the shifting of vowel placement, specifically from *fatḥa* /a/ or *ḍamma* /u/ to *kasra* /i/, resulting in a lower sound.
- The poem is recited by a friend of Ibn ‘Arabī who lived in Damascus, Yaḥyā bin al-Akhfash, in Ibn ‘Arabī and al-Manṣūb (2010), *al-Futūḥāt*, 2/73; Ibn ‘Arabī and Winkel (2020b), *The Openings Books 3 & 4*, p. 472.
- Ibn ‘Arabī and al-Manṣūb (2010), *al-Futūḥāt*, 2/74; Ibn ‘Arabī and Winkel (2020b), *The Openings Books 3 & 4*, pp. 474–75. The poetic form of *qaṣīda* opens with a brief elegiac mood (*nasīb*), followed by a recounting (*raḥīl*) of the poet’s personal life and his people, the *Anṣār* (lit. ‘the helpers’ or those who bring victory’) who took prophet Muhammad and his followers into their homes when they fled prosecution from Mecca, and finally the main theme (*madiḥ*) in which he pays tributes to himself, his community and his Prophet.
- See discussion on the words *raddada* and *radda* that share the root r-d-d.
- Takrār*: besides the idea of recurrence and return, it also means purifying and clarifying.
- Sahih Muslim* 2655, Book 46, *Ḥadīth* 29. In examining the significance of the terms ‘face’, ‘fingers’, ‘hands’ of God, it is important to note the historical polemics within Islamic theology (*kalām*) surrounding *tanzīh* (God’s incomparability or transcendence) and *tashbīh* (God’s similarity and anthropomorphism). Different theological movements and schools have accused one another of emphasizing either transcendence or anthropomorphism. Regarding the problem of the anthropomorphism of language, Lory remarks that, ‘Ibn ‘Arabī does not allow himself to be confined by such objections. For him, language is not unequivocal and its use is not limited by the rules of syntax or to dictionary meanings. Rather, it has a vertical dimension that goes right back to the origin of things...to convey the experience of the divine through paradox without destroying the proper coherence of the language,’ [n.p]. Ibn ‘Arabī adopts these two terms from *kalām*, but he insists on affirming both God’s similarity to and difference from our perceptible world. Despite their apparent contradiction, he asserts that the Quran effectively conveys the truth of God’s simultaneous transcendence and immanence. This truth is exemplified by the Quranic names of God, particularly *al-Bāṭin* (the Hidden) and *al-Zāhir* (the Apparent), which encompass both the inward and outward aspects, the manifest and unmanifest. According to Ibn ‘Arabī, human beings derive their reality from the ultimate reality of God. While the divine attributes may appear anthropomorphic from our limited human perspective, they are, in fact, theomorphic. This signifies that human attributes reflect the nature of God, rather than the other way around, as the creatures were created in God’s form. He employs the metaphor of the polished mirror to illustrate the idea of mirroring between the image of God (His) and the image of the servant (his). The polished mirror symbolizes the mystical union and is constituted within the heart of the ‘complete human’

insān al-kāmil). For discussions on anthropomorphism in Ibn ‘Arabī’s works see e.g., Chittick (1989), *The Sufi Path*; Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God*, Albany: SUNY, 1998. P. Lory, “The Symbolism of Letters and Language in the Work of Ibn ‘Arabī,” *JMIAS* XXIII, 1998 [n.p.], <https://ibnarabisociety.org/symbolism-of-letters-and-language-pierre-lory/> (accessed on 12 May 2023); T. Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism*, Univ. of California Press: Berkeley, 1983; M. A. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

- 85 McAuliffe (2001), *Encyclopaedia of the Qurān*, p. 57.
- 86 Bakhtiar (2011), *Concordance of the Sublime Qur’ ān*, p. 228.
- 87 The single instance that it specifically means ‘neck’ is in the verse Quran 47:4.
- 88 Quran 38:75.
- 89 Ibn Rushd asked young Ibn al-‘Arabī, ‘How did you find the situation in unveiling and divine effusion? Is it what rational consideration gives to us.’ Ibn al-‘Arabī replied, ‘Yes and no. Between the yes and the no spirits fly from their matter and heads from their bodies,’ in Chittick (1989), *The Sufi Path*, xiii.
- 90 Chodkiewicz (2015), “The Paradox of the Ka’ba”, n.p.
- 91 Ibn ‘Arabī and Jaffray (2015), *The Secrets of Voyaging*, p. 63.
- 92 *Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkīyah* I 279.7 in Chittick (1989), *The Sufi Path*, 247; and a reference to Quran 41:53, ‘We shall show them our signs on the horizon and in themselves.’
- 93 *Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkīyah* II 379.3 in Chittick (1989), *The Sufi Path*, p. 116.
- 94 Ibn ‘Arabī and al-Manṣūb (2010), *al-Futūḥāt*, 1/545; Ibn ‘Arabī and Winkel (2020b), *The Openings Book 3 & 4*, p. 111.
- 95 Compared to the poem in chapter 330 of the *Futūḥāt* with the consonant *rā’* as *rawī*.
- 96 Ibn ‘Arabī (n.d.), *Tawajjuhāt al-ḥurūf*, p. 34.
- 97 Armstrong (2001), *Sufi Terminology*, p. 261.
- 98 *Warīd* (jugular vein) draws our attention to God’s sheer intimacy with each creature.
- 99 We are grateful to Mostafa Zekri for bringing this crucial information to our attention.
- 100 Ibn ‘Arabī and al-Manṣūb (2010), *al-Futūḥāt*, 1/227; Ibn ‘Arabī and Winkel (2020a), *The Openings Books 1 & 2*, pp. 248–59.
- 101 Chodkiewicz (1993), *Ocean Without a Shore*, pp. 127–29.
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