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The Black Mirror of the Pupil of the Eye: Around the Eye that Sees and Is Seen: Ibn al-^ḥArabī, Bill Viola

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Abstract: The present article traces the symbols of the eye (Greek: κόρη [maiden, concubine, pupil of the eye]; Latin: *pupilla*; Hebrew: *īshōn bath ‘āyin* ('apple of the eye' or the 'pupil of the eye' [lit. 'daughter of an eye'], i.e., the feminine divine Presence [*Shēkhīnāh*]); Arabic: *‘ayn*; Persian: *chashm*) and the black pupil of the eye (Arabic: *īnsān al-‘ayn*; Persian: *mardum-i chashm*) in Sufism, both—in the context of Andalusian Sufism, specifically in Ibn al-^ḥArabī's poem entitled 'I saw a Girl... ', in whose dark pupil or abyssal blackness (Arabic: *ḥawar*; Hebrew: *īshōn*), pleasure of the gaze (*nazar*) and repository of the secret (*sirr*), resides the Beloved—as in the medieval Persian gnosis of the followers of *al-Sahykh al-Akbar*—Fakhr al-Dīn ‘Irāqī and Maḥmūd Shabistārī—, and the mystical poet Ḥāfiẓ Shīrāzī. Ibn al-^ḥArabī and Shabistārī have had an explicit influence on the work of the reputed American video artist Bill Viola (Queens, New York, 1951), specifically in his two video/sound installations—*He Weeps for You* (1976) and *I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like* (1986), in which the common image of the mirror pupil of the eye summarizes the entire ancient Neoplatonic conception of the *θεωρία* (*contemplatio, speculatio*).

Keywords: Sufism; Ibn al-^ḥArabī; Bill Viola; mirror pupil of the eye; inner vision

1. Introduction

"I stood in the 'light of the invisible' (*nūr al-ghayb*) [...]"

That to contemplate God, one must become the pupil of His eye.

"O eye of my eye!"

Muḥyī l-Dīn ibn al-^ḥArabī, *Kitāb al-tajalliyāt* (*Book of Theophanies*), theophanies 75, 84 (Ruspoli 2000, pp. 201, 215)

"Actually, I meant in the sense of images of invisible things".

"I felt like I had glimpsed an invisible image".

"Well, *Five Angels for the Millennium* concerns what you can't see [...]"

"As an artistic problem, how to use a visual medium to represent invisible things greatly attracted me. Video was showing me invisible things all the time [...]"

Bill Viola, in conversation with Hans Belting (Walsh 2003, pp. 191, 195, 216, 219)

The renowned American video artist Bill Viola (Queens, New York, 1951)—as shown in his video/sound installations *He Weeps for You* (1976) and *I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like* (1986)—is interested in the treatment of vision as it is developed in the Neoplatonic tradition, specifically the Greek term *θεωρία* and the Latin *contemplatio*, which connotes understanding through sight (Brenk 1992, pp. 39–60). In his work (Neutres 2014; Ross and Sellars 1997; Townsend 2004; Viola 1996), among other spiritual traditions, there are frequent evocations and references to Sufism. As is known, the Arabic word *‘ayn*, which means «eye» (Persian: *chashm*; *dādah*: 'eye', 'look'), can also mean, in the tradition of Islam, a particular identity, a 'source' or an 'essence.' In the line of al-Ḥallāj, the great Andalusian mystic and poet Muḥyī l-Dīn ibn al-^ḥArabī (d. 638/1240), in his *Kitāb al-tajalliyāt* (*Book of Theophanies*), asks: "When the Beloved reveals, with what eye do you see Him? With his



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eye, not with yours, for none other than He sees Him". Man is a mirror where the inverted reflection of divine Reality (*Haqq*) appears. It is the reciprocity of the act of vision—a unifying ray between the gaze of God and that of man. Because it is also God who, by giving man his own look, truly becomes the "pupil of his eyes" after having made him blind to the world and to everything that is not Him. Hence the desire of the following chapter (theophany 85): "Please be my eye so I can see through you". In this theophany, the lover and the beloved are united by the same gaze, each of which contemplates the other. This meditation is inspired by the *ḥadīth qudsī*: "I am the eye through which my servant sees". In his commentary, the *Shaykh* specifies that God reveals Himself to you according to your essence. Because the Beloved sees you with your eye, as you see him with his eye. This is a typical formula of Ibn al-ʿArabī's epistemology. This is the very consequence of the "*tawḥīd* of divinity" which excludes any real vision or knowledge of God by others. Here again, in a sometimes-forgotten sense, the adage is confirmed: "He who knows himself knows his Lord". Not in the sense of the personal Lord determined by his faith, but he knows himself as "become God" and realizes who and what in him is God; that God has become his eye, his being, and his thought. The distinguished Persian Sufi poet Maḥmūd Shabistārī (d. ca. 737/1337), a follower of *al-Shaykh al-Akbar*, writes in two lines of his famous and lovely short *mathnawī* poem entitled *Gulshan-i rāz* (*Garden of Mystery*) (Shabistārī 2007, p. 48; cf. Shabistārī 1880, p. 15):

*Nonbeing is a mirror, the world is its reflection, and man
is the eye of this reflection, beholding the hidden Viewer.
You are the reflection's eye, and it is the light of the eye.
The Light of the eye is seeing itself through your eye!*

The lens of the video camera is also—for Bill Viola—like the pupil of the owl's eye, an eye that he sees and is seen through, through which He sees himself.

The human being (*insān*) relates to the Real (*al-ḥaqq*—God) as the pupil (*insān al-ʿayn*) relates to the eye, and through the pupil seeing (*naẓar*, *baṣar*) occurs (Chaumont et al. 2003). Hence, he is called *insān* (meaning human being and pupil), because through him the Real looks (*naẓara*) at His creation and has mercy (*raḥīma*) on them.

2. "You Are Seeking Me and I Am Seeking You"

"Guard me like the apple of your eye (*shomreni ke-īshōn bath ʿāyin*)".

Psalms 17:8

This image recalls David's request in Psalm 17:8: "Guard me like the apple of your eye (*shomreni ke-īshōn bath ʿāyin*)". See also Deut. 32:10, Prov. 7:2. The Hebrew word *īshōn* means 'pupil' and is the diminutive of *īsh*, the Hebrew word for 'man', thus denoting 'the little man of the eye' (Köhler et al. 1994–2000, 1:44; cf. Morrissey 2020, 2021). God wants his commandments to be the apple of our eye. The Hebrew word *īshōn*, which is translated as "apple", also means the "pupil" of the eye. God wants his laws to be the central focus of our behavior. The magical forty-two-letter name of God is based on a Sabbath prayer that begs God to keep the children of Israel as the apple of his eye. While the benevolent eye of God gives loving protection, it can also be full of jealous wrath. Here read metaphorically as that which is most hidden in the eye (Wolfson 2005, p. 383).

In a beautiful close-up of the film *Lancelot du Lac* (1974, dir. Robert Bresson), the eye of the camera pays attention to the eyes of Queen Guenièvre (Laura Duke Condominas) that are reflected in the mirror in which she herself is contemplating during the bath (Figure 1). Her face is reflected in her eyes; her eyes do not look directly at the viewer but, slightly transversally, question him through the scopic gaze (Jay 1993, p. 362). In a nocturnal sequence from the same film, we see the extreme close-up of the black pupil of Lancelot's horse as we hear in voiceover: "The Grail eludes us". (Figure 2).



Figure 1. “I saw a girl . . . staring at me with an eye that was all a dark pupil” (Ibn al-ʿArabī) (*Lancelot du Lac*, 1974, dir. Robert Bresson).



Figure 2. The pupil of the mystery, of the totally Other (*Lancelot du Lac*, 1974, dir. Robert Bresson).

Faced with Lancelot’s affirmation that he was looking for the Grail, Guenièvre will outline the limits of his endeavor: “Ce n’est pas le Graal. C’est Dieu que vous vouliez. Et Dieu n’est pas un objet qu’on rapporte. [“He is not the Grail. He is God what you wanted. And God is not an object that is brought”]. To then draw the picture that led to this meaningless adventure: “You have acharné, you have tué, pillé, incendié, et puis vous avez jetés les uns contre les autres comme des fous, sans vous connaître” [“You fought each other, you killed, looted, burned, and then you threw yourselves against each other like madmen, without knowing each other”]. No less disturbing will be the way in which Bresson is going to comment, at the beginning of the film, on Lancelot’s evaluation of his failure before Artus: “Mes mains sont vides” [“My hands are empty”]. The insert of a very close-up of the indifferent eye of a horse follows, unexpectedly, the declaration of the knight. (Zunzunegui 2001, p. 196)

By superimposing Arthur’s remark over the eye of the horse, the notion of a mystery that must remain unsolvable may be equated with the quest for something that must remain unattainable. (Pipolo 2010, p. 294)

The fact that God is only a word in the mouths of the characters does not mean that he occupies a place of pure convention in their universe. [. . .] God is part of

a reality (mythical, legendary, historical, whatever) that no one disputes but that cannot be represented. (Amiel 2014, p. 90, cf. pp. 41–45)

Lancelot du Lac can also be seen through the eye of the horse. [. . .]

Three times, the black, immense, exorbitant eye of a horse will signal a loss, a rout, or a failure. [. . .]

“The domain of the cinematograph is the domain of the unspeakable”. [Robert Bresson] (Gauville 2017, pp. 25, 26, 28)

Two years earlier, on another shot, in this case *Solaris* (1972, dir. Andrei Tarkovsky), the third feature film by the renowned Russian director, who especially appreciated Bresson’s filmography, had made the mirror motif a symbol with an equally significant meaning. It is a shot in which the leading couple, Kris Kelvin (Donatas Banionis) and Hary (Natalya Bondarchuk), see themselves reflected in the same mirror (Figure 3). Both in Bresson’s and Tarkovsky’s films, as before in Ozu’s or Cocteau’s, the mirror, or the pupil as a mirror, is the intermediate imaginal plane of transit from the sensible to the intelligible world, from the visible to the invisible.



Figure 3. “I behold (*mī-nigaram*) you through your eyes”. (Sayf-i Farghānī) (*Solaris*, 1972, dir. Andrei Tarkovsky).

In an emblematic sequence from the mysterious, poetic, and allusive black and white feature film *Werckmeister Harmóniák* (*Werckmeister Harmonies*, 2000), a celebrated film directed by the prestigious Hungarian director Béla Tarr, we find yet another well-known example of this form of scopic vision, very similar to the shot of the eye of the horse in *Lancelot du Lac* that we have just discussed. Its protagonist, the young János Valuska, in the abyssal darkness of the box of a traveling circus truck transporting an enormous whale, in an almost initiatory scene, approaches the eye of the cetacean in close-up, as if seeking an answer to the impenetrable and inexplicable (Figure 4). Béla Tarr’s cosmic gaze turns this enormous black pupil into a mirror of the world in which all the horror of destruction and desolation is concentrated. At the same time, however, this shot makes the whale an image of the dark god of the Gnostics, an Absolute that is at once distant and close, “the visitation of the Stranger” (Louis Massignon), “the Absent One of history” (Michel de Certeau), an image of the unfathomable mystery, in whose black, tearful orb is reflected, poetically speaking, the man who looks and is seen. Indeed, a strange glow shines on the iris of the eye, as if from elsewhere—the radiance of the invisible. Valuska explains this in the memorable cosmological and visionary sequence in the bar at the beginning of the film: “infinite emptiness reign. And just imagine that in this infinite sonorous silence, everywhere is an impenetrable darkness”. “And then. . . complete silence”.



Figure 4. *Werckmeister Harmóniák* (Werckmeister Harmonies, 2000, dir. Béla Tarr).

In the description of a visionary event recounted by the great Persian mystic Rūzbihān Baqlī Shīrāzī (d. 606/1209), born in Fasā and died in Shīrāz, the “city of poets and saints” (Ḥāfīz, Sa‘dī, Mullā Ṣadrā), in his *diarium spirituale* titled *Kashf al-asrār wa mukāshafāt al-anwār* (*The unveiling of the secrets and the apparitions of lights*), written in the year 585/1189, we could find the ultimate hidden meaning of the two aforementioned plans that Bresson and Tarkovsky offer us in open specular vision:

Truth-glory be to Him-spoke to me on the following Friday night, while I was in one of those states I have mentioned, and said to me, “Were you conscious that I was sitting beside you last night in My majesty and beauty? My face was next to yours, with a mirror in My hand reflecting My face and yours. I was looking into your face and through your face I was looking into the mirror, in which both faces appeared”. It was as if I was looking at the glory of Truth-glory to Him. I cried out and wept repeatedly. I sighed and implored His perfect goodness and extreme generosity, until He adorned [manifested] Himself with the garb of His power, and thus He saw me through Himself, for He knew that the temporal is unable to confront the eternal and the glories of pre-eternity during the manifestation of oneness and eternity. In the dawn of His majesty, time, temporality, and space vanish like the feathers of a bird in the fire of Abraham. He transcends all speculation and every thought that crosses the hearts of any of His creatures. (Baqlī Shīrāzī [Rūzbihān 2015](#), p. 289)

The organ of perception is the eye, and perception occurs in the eye. However, phenomenologically, one has the illusion of “seeing outside”. According to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, we are beings looked at in the spectacle of the world. What makes us conscious institutes us at the same time as the *speculum mundi*. The spectacle of the world is offered to us as “omnivoyeur” ([Jay 1993](#), p. 382). Vision, that is, the eye that sees the object, is on the side of the subject, while the gaze is on the side of the object. When I look at an object, the object is always looking at me beforehand, from a point at which I cannot see it. For Lacan, unknowing is inseparable from the very process of the constitution of the gaze since the subject can never locate itself at the point of the gaze.

In this way, the visual field ceases to be a mirror and becomes a screen. Not only do we have the illusion of “seeing outside” but we also “we see from one point, but in our existence, we are looked at from everywhere”:

The Sufi poets and mystics are another inspiration to Viola, among them the twelfth-century Sufi master Rūzbihān Baqlī: “he appeared to me in the form of divinity, holiness, and transcendence. . . . Then he said, ‘You are seeking me, and I am seeking you; if you look, you will find me in yourself, without taking the journeys of the hidden.’” (quoted in [Steinbock 2009](#), p. 89). Baqlī’s statement anticipates Viola’s quest to discover the holy through art. ([Hanhardt 2019](#), p. 29)

The face of the Louvre Museum’s famous seated polychrome limestone scribe, 5th dynasty, ca. 2400 BC (height 53.7 cm; width 44 cm), found in 1850 in the vicinity of the Serapeum of Saqqara in excavations conducted under the direction of the French Egyptologist Françoise Auguste Ferdinand Mariette, a scribe who undoubtedly represents a high court official, in an attitude of concentrated attention, interpellates us with his hypnotic frontal gaze. Her special, marvelous, glazed eyes are made of rock crystal, white veined magnesite, and ebony. In the burial galleries under the 3rd Dynasty step pyramid of Djoser at Saqqara, about 30,000 stone vessels carved from alabaster, breccia, rock crystal, serpentine, and other materials were found, perhaps chosen for decorative or symbolic reasons. Eyes of the seated scribe that have been looking at us for some 4400 years. Among the Egyptians, the *udjat* eye (shaved eye) was a sacred symbol found in almost all works of art. In all Egyptian traditions, the eye is revealed to be solar and igneous in nature, a source of light, knowledge, and fertility. This is a conception that will be found again, transposed, in [Plotino \[Plotinus\] \(1982–1985\)](#), the Alexandrian philosopher and Neoplatonist of the second century A.D., for whom the eye of human intelligence could not contemplate the light of the sun (the supreme spirit) without participating in the very nature of that spirit sun.

In a writing entitled “Dentro gli occhi”, the singular Italian visual artist Claudio Parmiggiani (Luzzara, 1943), whose work is permeated by mystery and the vision of the invisible, writes of the eyes of the scribe ([Parmiggiani 2010](#), p. 270):

Dentro gli occhi di cristallo
dello scriba di Saqqara,
riflessa nelle sue pupille d’infinito,
lenta ho visto passare un giorno
una nuvola del cielo di Parigi.
Attraverso una nuvola gli occhi,
dentro gli occhi millenni
[Inside the crystal eyes
of the scribe of Saqqara,
reflected in his pupils of infinity,
slow I saw pass one day
a cloud from the sky of Paris.
Through a cloud the eyes,
within eyes millennia]

The Persian term *chashm* is translated in Arabic by *‘ayn*, the latter word also meaning, as we have just seen, “the essence” of something; hence, *chashm* is sometimes used to refer to the Reality of the Eternal, that is, the sacred Essence of God.

For the mystics, our world is but a dream; the world and true reality are to be found in the divine One; God is the one true, only real, and ultimate source from which all things arise. One thus employs *‘ayn* (eye) in its double sense of real and spring to indicate the

supra-existence of the deepest essence of God. This sense is found in Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna), who speaks of those who penetrate the *‘ayn* in contemplation of the intimate nature of God.

3. The “Eye” by Which God Sees Himself: The Contemplant Is the Contemplated

Hence this is clear: I behold (*mī-nigaram*) you through your eyes”.

Sayf-i Farghānī (d. 749/1348) 1341–44/1962–65, 2: 308–3 (Ingenito 2020, p. 215)

An early work by Bill Viola with clear references to Sufi gnosis is the video/sound installation entitled *He Weeps for You* (1976) (Lauter 1999, pp. 108–20; Hanhardt 2017, pp. 25, 42, 52, 53–58, 285; Hanhardt 2019, pp. 82–89). The elements of this work are: a drop of water from a copper pipe; a live color camera with a macro lens magnifying the image of the drop; an amplified drum; and video projection in a darkened room (Figure 5). The artist, through the water drop and the macro lenses, suggests a cosmological vision of the universe, establishing a relationship between macrocosm and microcosm. This idea is already present in another video installation with audio entitled *Rain* (1975), consisting of an amplified drop of water falling from the ceiling onto a metal surface that reflects the optical patterns of the wave on the wall; a black and white video projection of a live camera mixed with a previously recorded action; water-worn stones; and a heat lamp. In the macro reproductions of the work, *He Weeps for You*, the artist’s face is seen reflected in the drop of water. In a darkened space, a copper pipe runs down from the ceiling, terminating in a small brass valve from which a single drop of water slowly emerges. A live-color video camera, fitted with a special lens attachment used for extreme close-up magnification, is focused on this drop. The camera is connected to a video projector that displays the swelling drop of water on a large screen at the rear of the space. The optical properties of the waterdrop cause it to act like a wide-angle lens, revealing an image of a room and those within it. The drop grows in size gradually, swelling in surface tension until it fills the screen. Suddenly it falls out of the picture, and a loud, resonant sound is heard as it lands on an amplified drum. Then, in an endless cycle of repetition, a new drop begins to emerge and again fill the screen:

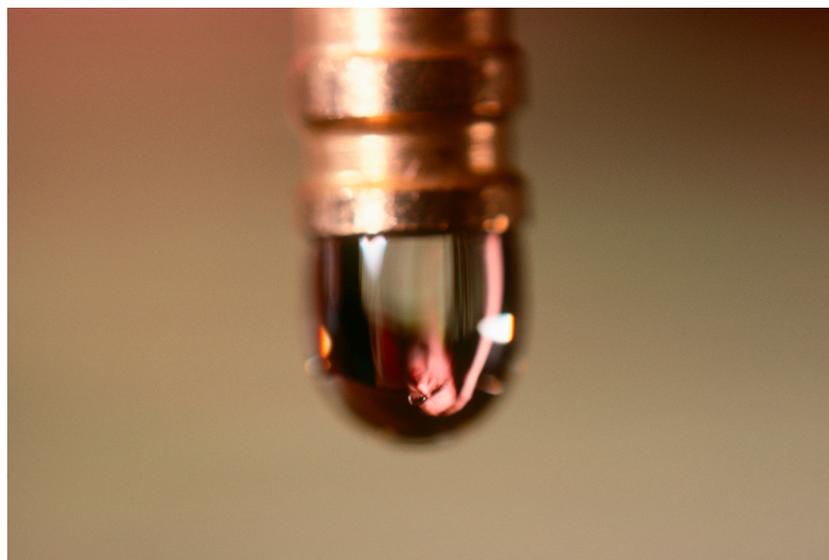


Figure 5. Bill Viola, *He Weeps for You*, 1976. A drop of water from a copper pipe, a live colour camera with a macro lens magnifying the image of the drop, an amplified drum, and video projection in a darkened room.

The simultaneous scales represented in the live video/water system draw a connection to the traditional philosophy or belief that everything on the higher order of existence reflects, and is contained in, the manifestation and operation of the lower orders. This idea has been expressed in ancient religious terms as the

symbolic correspondence of the mundane (the earth) and the divine (the heavens) and is also represented in the theories of contemporary physics that describe how each particle of matter in space contains knowledge or information about the entire system. (Hanhardt 2019, p. 83; cf. London 1987, p. 29)

Many are the descriptions of Bill Viola's installation, *He Weeps for You*. Here, I shall simply borrow the one that best expresses what I feel about the work. I find my own feelings reflected in the words of Andrew Solomon: "*He Weeps for You*, from 1976, is lyrical and upsetting. You enter a dark room and, more or less by instinct, walk to a small, spotlighted area. In front of you is a copper pipe, at the end of which a drop of water is slowly forming. Behind the pipe is a video camera. On the wall to your left is a giant video projection that shows a drop of water. As you stand there, trying to make sense of this, you notice that there seems to be a human figure contained in the drop of water. You peer quizzically at it, and it peers quizzically at you. It is your reflection in the water droplet, and as the droplet gets bigger and fatter, your image becomes larger and clearer until it nearly fills out and falls from the pipe, and you see your image shattered. The drop hits an amplified drum, and a deep boom sounds through the room, as though a small bomb had fallen. By the time you have reoriented yourself, the next drop is beginning to swell from the tip of the copper pipe, and on the wall, there you are, in it again". [Andrew Solomon, "Bill Viola's Video Arcade", in *The New York Times Magazine*, 8 February 1998, p. 6]. (Lauter 1999, p. 108)

It has surely been the great French Islamologist and Iranologist Henry Corbin who has best analyzed in his studies the subject of the eye of the heart in Ṣūfism, of the mystical eye, of inner vision, the imaginative witnessing vision (*shuhūd khayālī*) that becomes vision of the heart (*shuhūd bi l-qalb*), both in the work of the Andalusian mystic and poet Ibn al-ʿArabī as in that of the Persian Rūzbihān Baqlī:

The Gnostic's apprenticeship consists in learning to practice fidelity to his own Lord, that is, to the divine Name with which he, in his essential being, is invested, but at the same time to hear the precept of Ibn ʿArabī: "Let thy soul be as matter for all forms of all beliefs". One who has risen to that capacity is an ʿārif, an initiate, "one who through God sees in God with the eye of God". Those who accept and those who decline are subject to the same authority: the God in function of whom you live is He for whom you bear witness, and your testimony is also the judgment you pronounce on yourself. [...]

On the other hand, God can be known to us only in what we experience of Him, so that "We can typify Him and take Him as an object of our contemplation, not only in our innermost hearts but also before our eyes and in our imagination, as though we saw Him, or better still, so that we really see Him. [...]"

If then you perceive me, you perceive yourself.

But you cannot perceive me through yourself.

It is through my eyes that you see me and see yourself,

Through your eyes you cannot see me. [...]

In short, this "mystic physiology" operates with a "subtile body" composed of psycho-spiritual organs (the centers, or Chakras, "lotus blossoms") that must be distinguished from the bodily organs. For Ṣūfism the *heart* is one of the centers of mystic physiology. Here we might also speak of its "theandric" function, since its supreme vision is of the Form of God (*ṣurat al-Ḥaqq*)—this because the gnostic's heart is the "eye", the organ by which God knows Himself and reveals Himself to Himself in the forms of His epiphanies (not as He inwardly knows Himself, for in its quest of the Divine Essence even the highest science can go no further than the *Nafas al-Rahmān*). [...]

If the heart is the mirror in which the Divine Being manifests His form according to the capacity of this heart, the Image that the heart projects is in turn the outward form, the “objectivization” of this Image. Here indeed, we find confirmation of the idea that the gnostic’s heart is the “eye” by which God reveals Himself to Himself. We can easily conceive of an application of this idea to material iconography—to the images created by art. When contemplating an image, an icon, others recognize and perceive as a divine image the vision beheld by the artist who created the image, it is because of the spiritual creativity, the *himma*, which the artist put into his work. Here we have a compelling term of comparison by which to measure the decadence of our dreams and of our arts. [. . .]

And since Creation means essentially theophany, the relation between the creativity of the heart and perpetually recurrent Creation can again be defined by the idea that the gnostic’s heart is the “eye” by which the Divine Being sees Himself, that is, reveals Himself to Himself. [. . .]

The spiritual progression from the state of simple believer to the mystic state is accomplished through an increasing capacity for making oneself present to the vision by the Imagination (*istiḥdār khayālī*): progressing from mental vision by typification (*tamthīl*) by way of dream vision (*rūyā*) to verification in the station of *walāya*, imaginative witnessing vision (*shuhūd khayālī*) becomes vision of the heart (*shuhūd bi’l-qalb*), that is to say, vision through the inner eye (*baṣīra*), which is the vision of God by Himself, the heart being the organ, the “eye”, by which God sees Himself: the contemplant is the contemplated (my vision of Him is His vision of me). (Corbin 1997, pp. 118–19, 146, 174, 221–22, 224, 228, 232)

The Spanish poet Antonio Machado puts it this way in “Proverbios y cantares”: “El ojo que ves no es / ojo porque tú lo veas; / es ojo porque te ve”. [‘The eye you see is not / an eye because you see it; / it is an eye because it sees you.’] (Machado [1969] 1970, p. 355).

In *He Weeps for You*, the drop is a metaphor for vision, for the eye that sees and is seen. In this sense, al-Ḥusayn ibn Manṣūr al-Ḥallāj (d. 309/922), the celebrated martyr mystic who did not distinguish life from death, posits the unity of being in the eye or in the single gaze: “I saw my Lord with the eye of the heart, and I asked Him, ‘Who are You?’ He answered me, ‘Yourself!’”. (*muqatta’a* 10 [1]; Massignon [1931] 1955, pp. 45–46). It is the cry of the Sufi martyr, who in his *Dīwān* ends by exclaiming, “Where then do You hide Yourself?” (*yatīma* 1; Massignon [1931] 1955, p. 106): “Thine image is in my eye and Thy remembrance in my mouth, and Thy abode in my heart, where then dost Thyself hide?”. And in another poem (vv. 2, 3, 4): “In the where there is no place for Thee, and there is no where with respect to Thee/ And the imagination of Thee has no image, that it may know where Thou art/Thou who dost encompass every place, wherefore there is no place, where art Thou then?” (al-Ḥallāj 2002, pp. 79, 81).

In the line of al-Ḥallāj, in the Theophany 84 of his *Kitāb al-tajalliyāt* (*Book of Theophanies*) Ibn al-ʿArabī asks: “When the Beloved reveals Himself, with whose eye do you see Him? With His eye, not with yours, for none but He sees Him”. (*Rasāʾil Ibn l-ʿArabī*, r. 23; Ruspoli 2000, pp. 215, 349–50; Chodkiewicz 1993, p. 62). Man is a mirror in which the inverted reflection of divine Reality (*Ḥaqq*) appears. This is a typical formula of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s gnoseology. This is the very consequence of the “*tawḥīd* of divinity” which excludes any real vision or knowledge of God by others. Here again is confirmed, in a sometimes-forgotten sense, the adage: “He who knows himself, knows his Lord”. Not in the sense of the personal Lord determined by his faith, but he knows himself as having “become God” and realizes who and what in him is God; that God has become his eye, his being, and his thought.

Likewise, Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 672/1273), considered one of the greatest Persian mystical poets, writes in a *rubāʿī*: “Man reaches this state in which, with every breath, without using his eyes, he succeeds in seeing the Friend”. (Rūmī 1987, p. 176).

It is the Socratic theme of “self-knowledge”, *γνωθι σεαυτόν*, transposed to mysticism. The *νοῦς*—the intellectual eye, whose characteristic is that it sees whatever may be

presented to it, originally referred to the ability to immediately apprehend what is true by means of an intellectual vision, different, therefore, from mere sensory vision—the purified man reflects God. For the Beloved sees you through your eye, as you see Him through His eye. God shows Himself through the mirror of the creature: Ibn al-^ᶜArabī: “The eye perceives naught but Him/Only He is determined [by Himself]”. (*Fuṣ*. VII, [Ibn al-^ᶜArabī 1980](#), p. 136). For Ibn al-^ᶜArabī seeing becomes seeing itself, and that which is seen is the Absolute apprehending itself:

Thus, He suggests that knowledge of Him is inferred from knowledge of ourselves. Whenever we ascribe any quality to Him, we are ourselves [representative of] that quality, except for the quality of His self-sufficient Being. Since we know Him through ourselves and from ourselves, we attribute to Him all we attribute to ourselves. [...] He describes Himself to us through us. If we witness Him we witness ourselves, and when He sees us, He looks on Himself. (*Fuṣ*. IV, [Ibn al-^ᶜArabī 1980](#), pp. 54–55)

In chapter 63 of the *Futūḥāt*, “Concerning Inner Understanding of (How) People Remain in the Barzakh Between, This World and the Resurrection (at the Last Day)”, in the translation of James W. Morris, we can read:

II] Now there are some people who perceive this imaged-object (*al-mutakhayyal*) with the eye of (physical) sensation, and there are others who perceive it with the eye of imagination. Of course, I’m referring here to (our perceptions) in the waking state, since during sleep (everyone) definitely perceives with the eye of imagination. [...] For you perceive what is imagined (*al-khayal*) with the eye of imagination, not with the eye of (physical) sensation. [...]

Regarding that we (wrote these verses):

When my Beloved appears to me, with
which eye do I see Him?

With *His* eye, not with mine: for none
sees Him but Him!

(This is only) in accordance with the transcendence of His Station and confirming His Words, since He says: “*The gazes do not perceive Him, [but He perceives the gazes]*” (6:103), and He did not specify any particular Abode (of this world or the next), but sent it as an Verse unrestricted (in its applicability) and as a definite, confirmed matter. For none other than Him perceives Him, so it is with *His* eye—may He be praised!—that I see Him, as in (the famous divine saying in) the sound *ḥadīth*-report: “. . . I (God) was his gaze through which he sees”. ([Morris 1995](#), p. 107; cf. [Morris 2005](#), *s.v.* «eye», *‘ayn*, *baṣīra*, *baṣar*, «vision», specific p. 146)

In the careful translation of the mentioned verses of the *Futūḥāt* into Spanish by the Arabist and specialist in Ibn al-^ᶜArabī and the Akbarī school, Prof. Dr. Pablo [Beneito \(2005](#), p. 89):

“Cuando se muestre mi Amado,	<i>Idā taḡallā ḥabībī</i>
¿con qué ojo Le veré?	<i>bi-ayyi ‘aynin arā-Hū?</i>
Con Su ojo, no mi ojo,	<i>Bi-‘ayni-Hī lā bi-‘aynī,</i>
pues no Le ve sino él”.	<i>fa-mā yarā-Hū siwā-Hū.</i>

The Sufi understands in *al-‘ayn* (entity, eye), analogically, the reality of things captured by intuition as a vision of the most hidden or internal (cf. [Morris 2005](#), index *s.v.* “eye”, *‘ayn*, *baṣīra*, *baṣar*, “vision”, in particular p. 146). The author uses both meanings (entity/eye) to interweave a network of symbolic allusions that allow us to intuit the reality of Love and Beauty in their essential unity. Thus, we can understand that the Sufi expression *‘ayn al-qalb*, literally, “the eye of the heart”, can be understood analogically as the organ of intellectual intuition or, as Ibn al-^ᶜArabī does regarding the expression *‘ayn al-yaqīn*, attributing to it the meaning of source of certainty of ocular or visual testimony (Ibn al-^ᶜArabī, *Kitāb iṣṭilāḥāt al-ṣūfiyya*, Hyderabad 1948 [[Ibn al-^ᶜArabī 1948](#)]):

Those who love God occupy, in relation to the cosmos, a position analogous to that of the pupil in the eye. [The pupil is called in Arabic, literally, ‘the man of the eye’].

Although man is endowed with multiple organs, he does not contemplate and see except through his eyes exclusively. Well, then, the eyes occupy in him a position analogous to the one that lovers have in the cosmos. (Beneito 2005, p. 158)

As for favors or gifts of the first kind, they can result only from a divine Self-revelation, which occurs only in a form conforming to the essential predisposition of the recipient of such a revelation. Thus, the recipient sees nothing other than his own form in the mirror of reality. He does not see reality Itself, which is not possible, although he knows that he may see only his [true] form in It. As in the case of a mirror and the beholder, he sees the form in it but does not see the mirror itself, despite his knowledge that he sees only his own and other images by means of it. God makes this comparison so that the recipient of a divine Self-revelation should know that it is not Him Whom he sees. The analogy of a mirror is the closest and most faithful one for a vision of a divine Self-revelation.

Try, when you look at yourself in a mirror, to see the mirror itself, and you will find that you cannot do so. This is so much the case that some have concluded that the image perceived is situated between the mirror and the eye of the beholder. This represents the greatest knowledge they are capable of [on the subject]. [. . .] In your seeing your true self, He is your mirror, and you are His mirror, in which He sees His Names and their determinations, which are nothing other than Himself. (“The Wisdom of Expiration in the Word of Seth”, Ibn al-‘Arabī 1980, p. 65)

In a similar perspective, Maḥmūd Shabistārī writes in two verses of his *Gulshan-i rāz* (*Garden of Mystery*): “is as the reflected eye of the unseen Person./You are that reflected eye, and He the light of the eye,/In that eye His eye sees His own eye” (Shabistārī 1371 h.sh./1992; Shabistārī 1880, p. 15).

In this sense, Stephen Hirtenstein analyses the role of the eye of imagination in the work of Ibn al-‘Arabī:

While we might take this as speaking metaphysically of the transcendent God being witnessed in His manifestation, the context in which this poem actually appears in Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Futūḥāt* is much more far-reaching, revealing, and pertinent to our discussion of *nazar*. He begins Chapter 63 (on the remaining people in the *barzakh* between this world and the resurrection) by identifying imagination as the crucial element in the Prophet’s saying, ‘Worship God as if you see Him’. The nature of a *barzakh* (isthmus), he writes, is to separate known from unknown, non-existent from existent, by virtue of the faculty of imagination. As a metaphor for the inability of the human mind to perceive the truth itself directly, he uses one of his favorite examples, an image seen in a mirror: while the observer does not change, the image seen varies according to the size and type of the mirror—the image may appear huge or tiny. The form is simultaneously oneself and not oneself; what one observes is both an accurate image and an illusion at the same time. Such is the nature of observing images, whether in the sensory world or the dreamworld, for in this sense, the forms that are seen in a dream.

Ibn ‘Arabī goes on to discuss how those for whom reality is unveiled (*kashf*) can directly see the truth of things in this world and how some of them possess a subtle knowledge that allows them to distinguish between their two eyes, the eye of imagination and the eye of the senses. He notes that *nazar* has a very particular function in fixing the object of perception:

The people of unveiling can see in their waking state what dreamers see in their sleep, and they can see the dead after they have died, just as they see in the next world the forms of actions being weighed and evaluated. . . [T]here are some

people who perceive this imagined form with the eye of the senses, and there are some who perceive it with the eye of imagination. Here I am talking about the waking state, for during a dream, it is always with the eye of imagination. When a human being wishes to distinguish in the waking state what something is, in this world or on the Day of Resurrection, they should look at (*yanzur ilā*) the imagined form, and they should tie it down with their observation (*nazar*). [Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Futūḥāt*, vol. 1:305] (Hirtenstein 2022, pp. 77–78; cf. 79–80, 83)

The real nature of the human “face”—or rather of the divine “Eye” and Spiritual Essence (*ʿayn*) of the Spirit that is the primordial Heart of each human being—and therefore of many Qurʾānic references to the “turning” of one’s face toward or away from God, is further elaborated in the following chapter 2 of the *Futūḥāt* (II, 82–83), where Ibn al-ʿArabī explains:

So know that the heart is a polished mirror—all of it is a face—that does not (itself) ever “rust”. So if someone should say about it that it rusts—as in the Prophet’s saying: “Certainly hearts tarnish like iron”, in the hadith that concludes “the polishing of the heart is through remembrance of God and recitation of the Qurʾān. . .”—that is because the heart has become preoccupied with knowing the secondary causes (*al-asbāb*), the apparent workings of this world, instead of with knowing God. So, its attachment to what is other than God has “rusted over” the face of the heart in that it blocks the Self-manifestation (*tajalli*) of the Truly Real in that heart.

The divine Presence is perpetually manifesting Itself, and one could never imagine It ever veiling Itself from us. So when this heart fails to receive that (divine Self-manifestation) from the directions of the praiseworthy and revelatory divine “addressing” (speaking to us), because it has received something else instead, then its act of receiving that something else instead, then its act of receiving that something other (than God) is what is referred to (in the scriptures) as “tarnishing”, “veils”, “looking”, “blindness”, “rust”, and the like. For in fact, the Truly Real Himself is (perpetually) bestowing this knowing on you in the heart, except that (your heart) is (preoccupied with) knowing something other than God—although the Knowers of and through God know that in reality, (that distracted heart) too is actually knowing of and through God. (Morris 2005, pp. 131–32)

Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, in which one of the most recurrent images of his mystical poetry is expressed, that of the “eye of inner vision” (Persian: *chashm-i baṣīrat*), a discerning “eye of the heart” (*chashm-i dil*) (Hamadhānī, *ʿAyn al-Quḍāt al- 1341/1962*, introduction, p. 45; Lewisohn 2014, pp. 47, 180, 212; Daʿadli 2019, p. 48) of the contemplative as a subtle organ of visionary perception, *i.e.*, the soul burnished by ascetic practices and thus turned into a smooth mirror (of the moon) of the invisible. It is the operation performed by the Physician of the Heart (*ṭabīb-i dil*) for the purifications of the heart so that the eye of the heart (*chashm-i dil*) may be opened. The consequence of such an opening is most revealing, as is said (VI:4419) (Lewisohn 2014, p. 227):

ān ki ū rā chashm-i dil shud dāḍibān
dād kh^w āhad chashm-i ū ʿayn al-ʿayān

[He whose heart’s eye becomes his very watchman,
his eye will see the acme of clairvoyance.]

The inscrutable term *ʿayn al-ʿayān*, lit. “eye of eyes”. The heart is considered as the mirror of the Divine in the same way that the moon is the mirror of the sun. According to a recurring symbolic image in Sufism (Van Lit 2017), the polished mirror (*mirʾāt*) of the Gnostic’s heart (*qalb al-ʿarīf*) is comparable to the moon (Arabic: *qamar*, Persian: *māh*), which, like a frosted surface, reflects the light of the sun (of the Absolute, *al-Ḥaqq*) more or less perfectly according to its position in space. The moon is the soul (*nafs*), which is illuminated

by the pure spirit (*rūh*), but is still a prisoner of the temporal, so that it undergoes a change (*talwīn*) in the level of its receptivity (*qabūl*) or disposition (*isti'ādā*). For the moon, like the mirror (*speculum*), has the property of reflecting the totality of the image before it, without the image inhabiting the mirror or being linked to the natural substance of the mirror. When Rūmī refers to the man “without the slightest colour” (Michaeli 2019, p. 263), he is surely alluding metaphorically to the servant who has reached the stability of transitory mystical states, whose perfectly polished heart is comparable to the full moon:

[497] Likewise, one day Mowlānā was expressing subtle points about the meaning of: ‘*The believer is a mirror of the believer.*’ He said: ‘One of God’s names is the Believer, and similarly the bondsman is called a believer. “*The believer is a mirror of the believer*” means therefore that his Lord reveals Himself in it.’

The Creator of souls made a mirror of water and mud

And then He held it up in front of Himself.

Whenever the sun shines into a mirror,

What can the mirror do but say: ‘*I am the sun*’?

[19] [...] Mowlānā said: “By God, it is just as your blessed eye beheld. For God forbid your eye (*dāda*) would ever report what it had not seen (*nā-dāda*)! And every eye (*dāda*) which confides in this visionary eye (*dāda-ye dādār-dāda*) will become one of the people of vision (*ahl-e dāda*) so that invisible matters are seen (*dāda*) by it”.

Your eye that sees the unseen is a master like the Unseen.

May this vision and gift not decrease in the world.

The man (*mardom*) who cannot see has a black face.

The man with [higher] sight is a mirror of the moon (*māh*).

But who in the world sees the man of your (inward) eye

(Aflākī 2002, pp. 354, 535)

Ādam (man) was created from the elements of earth and water in the likeness of God. God wishes to see Himself reflected in man. In other words, to gain true mystical insight, one must use “the heart’s eye” (*chashm-i dil*) rather than ordinary physical perception (which is inevitably flawed). Thus, the veil (*hijāb*), by occluding one’s mundane faculty of sight, actually heightens one’s access to esoteric Truth by forcing one to focus inward and thus serves, paradoxically, almost as a magnifying glass (*ainak*) for one who has real “vision” (*bīnā*). When Ādam was taught “the names of things” (Qur’ān 2:31), he became the locus (*mazhar*) of divine manifestation in the world. This knowledge was accordingly deposited in his heart (*qalb* or *dil*), the organ of spiritual perception akin to the mind (*khīrad*), whose visionary capacity is often captured by medieval Persian writers and mystics in the metaphor of the mirror (*āyīna*) (Subtelny 2002, pp. 137–44). The veil obscuring inner insight or vision (*baṣīrat*) is no other than the carnal self. As Aḥmad al-Ghazzālī puts it, “In the hearts of words lie the edges of a sword that cannot be seen except by inner insight (*baṣīrat-i bāṭinī*)” (Lumbard 2016, pp. 154, 188). The mirror (or eye) of the heart (*chasm-i dil*) is in constant need of “polishing”, since its capacity to reflect is distorted by the carnal soul (*nafs*), which mystics compare to dust or verdigris on a metallic mirror.

In this sense, Bill Viola states:

Learning to see the form of the world as a huge, distorted reflection is one of the main points of Buddhist teachings. You can trace this idea even farther back to the Upanishads, the foundational Hindu texts that are among the primary sources of the self-knowledge tradition. One of the central teachings they emphasize is for the Knower to “know the Knower”. It is learning to recognize the mirror, the water surface, within ourselves. We live with these realities, but they are invisible because we don’t know how to step outside of ourselves in order to see them for what they really are. (Bill Viola, in conversation with Hans Belting; Walsh 2003, p. 207)

The “people of vision” (*ahl-i shuhūd*): are those Sufis familiar with inward revelation and presential vision (*ahl-i kashf u shuhūd*), that is to say, to Sufis who have purified their hearts, every aspect and mote of Being acts as a theophanic receptacle (*mazhar*) and illustration (*mujallā*) of that Reality, which is seen to be displayed and revealed throughout all forms. Are those Sufis who experience visionary revelations and contemplative vision. *Al-shuhūd* is the vision or contemplative consciousness; it is the direct vision (*ruʿya*) of the True by the True. The “people of the hearts” (*ahl-i qulub*), those who possess a heart (organ of lucid perception), “the people of the heart” (*ahl-i dil*), “the holders of the heart” (*sāhib-dilān*), people who trust in “the seeing eye” (*dāda-yi dādār-dāda*), men who increases sight (*mardum-i dāda-fazā*), the “people of vision” (*ahl-i dāda*), “the clairvoyants” (*dil dārān*), are those perfect men whose heart harbours God.

In Persian, *mardum-i chashm* means “pupil of the eye”, and *mardumak-i chashm* literally means “small person of the eye” or “people-like [part] of the eye”. The Persian Sufis establish a play on words between *mardān-i khudā* (“the men of God”) and *mardum-i chashm* (“the pupil of the eye”) to imply that they are the ones who increase vision (*mardum-i dāda-fazā*):

When God’s gaze reached Moses, Moses’ being was annihilated: God looked at Himself through his gaze.

To see a spiritual event (*vāqēʿe didan*) is also to receive a message from beyond. Opening the eyes (*chashm bāz shodan*) is the highest step towards God. It comes after the stage of knowledge (*ʿelm*), and then that of the imaginative faculty (*khayālātī*). The Encounter of the Divine Real is the divine Real’s view of Himself from His servant. The spiritual master looks through the light of God. The believer is a seer. He sees in full vision, having arrived in the Presence of God. Only he who enters the gaze of God can see them. (Charles-Henri de Fouchécour, in *Shams al-Dīn Tabrīzī* 2017, p. 478)

This image of the mystic transformed into eyes is recurrent in Persian Sufism. The Persian Sufi master Aḥmad Ghazzālī (d. 520/1126), to speak of the passion of pure love and inconsolable desire, in his love breviary entitled *Sawānīḥ al-ʿushshāq* (*The Inspirations of Lovers*), writes of the lover that all of him has become the pupil of the inner vision (*baṣīrat*):

(1) If he happens to see (the beloved) in (his) dream, it is because he has turned his face toward himself. His whole being [or realization (*yāft*)] has become the eye, and the eye has totally become the face, and he has turned the face to the beloved, or to her form, which is imprinted on his being. [. . .]

(3) Now, when the lover sees (the form of) the beloved in his dream, what happens is that he sees something on the surface plane of the heart, and thus he transmits the awareness to knowledge so that he has a notion of what is behind the veils. (Ghazzālī 1986, ch. 31, pp. 48–49)

Shifting from Semitic tradition, in the context of rabbinic literature, a *midrāsh* describes the world as an eye and the Temple as its center. Here too, the Temple is viewed as an integral part of nature, compared to a human organ. It should be noted that our world looks like a series of concentric circles. ʾAba ʾYōsēy bar Ḥanan says in the name of Shēmūʿel ha-Qaṭan (Samuel the Small): ‘This world, what is it like? (It is like) the eyeball of flesh and blood. The white which is in it is the ocean, which surrounds the whole world. The dark colour (*i.e.*, the iris) is the inhabited world. The pupil in the dark colour (*i.e.*, the iris) is Jerusalem (the *komet* of the black [the pupil]). The reflected face (*partzuf*) in the pupil (*komet*) is the Temple. May it be Your wish that it will be rebuilt speedily in our days.’ (*Derekh ʾEreṣ Zūṭā* 7:38, 9:13, also *Tanḥūmāʾ pequdei* 3) (Sed 1981, p. 185; van Loopik 1991, p. 312). It is the radiation hidden in the pupil of the eye that becomes “the appearance of the likeness of the glory of YHWH” (*Zōhar* 1984, 1:18a–b). Without alluding to prophetic or mystical vision, the *Zōhar* (1:226a) explains that the eye, with the help of its colours, represents the cosmos and reflects it ([*The*] *Zohar* 2003–2017, vol. 4, pp. 80–81). For example, the word *bath ʿāyin*, the pupil of the eye, can symbolize the *Shēkhīnāh*, the feminine divine Presence

(cf. Zōhar 1984, 2:204a, and cf. 1:226a). The *Shēkhīnāh*, as the locus of vision (Wolfson 1994, pp. 41–51), is symbolized as a mirror or prism (*hezū*) in which “all the supernal images (*diyoqnin* ‘*ila’in*), are seen”, (Zōhar 1984, 1:91a) or, alternatively expressed, she is “the prism in which the upper forms are seen, like a mirror in which all the images are seen”. (ibid., 88b) (Wolfson 1994, pp. 310–11). The *Shēkhīnāh* which is the beauty of everything and the reflection of everything:”

For the human eye represents the world with its various colours. The outer circle of white corresponds to the sea of Ocean that surrounds the other world. The next colour represents the country which is surrounded by the sea. A third colour in the middle of the eye corresponds to Jerusalem, which is the centre of the world. Finally, there is the pupil of the eye, which reflects the beholder and is the most precious part of all. It corresponds to Zion, which is the central point of the universe, in which the reflection of the whole world can be seen and where the abode of the *Shēkhīnāh*, who is the beauty and focus of the world, is found. Thus, is the eye the inheritance of the world, and when the father leaves it, it is inherited by the son. (Zōhar 1984, 1:226a)

The pupil of the eye (Hebrew: *bath* ‘*āyin*, ‘pupil of the eye’ [lit. ‘daughter of an eye’]): “As the apple of the eye:” *c’ishōn bath* ‘*āyin*. The eye is called ‘*āyin* from a root that means “to flow”; for this reason, the same word ‘*āyin* is also used to denote a well of water. The usual expressions are *bath* ‘*āyin* Lament. 2:18 (or Zech. 2:12) and *ishōn* ‘*āyin* (Deut. 32:10; Prov. 7:2; the compound expression occurs only here. *Īshōn* (‘little men’) is prob. a diminutive of *ish*, a man, the pupil being so called from the little image seen in it; cf. Greek: κόρη, κορασίδιον, Latin: *pupilla*, and Arabic: *inshān al-‘ayn*. In Prov. 7:9 we find *ishōn lay’lāh*, and in 20:20 *ishōn chōshec*. In such passages *ishōn* is probably used figuratively, the dark central pupil representing the blackness of midnight (*schachor* of the eyeball). That *ishōn* denotes *Blackness* or *Darkness* directly is a theory devised to meet the difficulty of these passages. This interpretation of *ishōn* has the support of Rashi (on Deut. 31:10), and the Coptic term for “the pupil” is κακε εκ βαλε, *The dark of the eye*. But it has no etymological basis whatsoever. *Bath* ‘*ayin* is generally understood to be lit. “The daughter of the eye”, cf. κορασίδιον above; but *bath* is more probably a contraction of *bābhāth* (Zech. 2:12), lit. “The opening of”, the pupil being regarded as the cavity, aperture, entrance, or gate to the chamber of the eye (Jennings and Lowe 1884, p. 63). The term *bābhā* (the apple [pupil], i.e., ‘the gate of the eye,’ which is really the entrance or gate of the inner eye) (Esther 5:14; Zech. 2:12) as a pet name or word expressing fondness is found both in Hebrew and in Arabic writings in the same sense and is sometimes used by the Aramaic translations for *ishōn*. Similar designations for the pupils also exist in other languages. *Bābhā*—feminine active participle of an unused root meaning to hollow out; something hollowed (as a gate), i.e., pupil of the eye:—apple (of the eye)—can be compared to the English word “baby” and *bath* ‘*ayin* to the Greek κόρη (girl) which the Septuagint uses for *ishōn* (Deut. 32:10; Psalms 17:8; Proverbs 7:2 and 20:20), and to the word παρθένος (‘virgin’) in Aretäus, *pūpilla* (‘girl’, ‘underage orphan’), *pūpūla* (‘pupil [of the eye]; eye’):

4.8. Centr. Sem. **ba/u*(³)/*ba/u*(³)-(at)- ‘pupil of the eye’: Heb. **bābā* ‘eye-ball’ (KB: 106; in the phrase *bābat hā-‘ayin* ‘b. of the eye’), Jud. *bābītā*, *babtā* ‘pupil of the eye’ (Ja.: 136; in combination with ‘*ēnā* ‘eye’), Syr. *bābētā* ‘pupilla (oculi); oculus’ (Brock.: 62), Arab. *bu’bu’* ‘prunelle, pupille (de l’œil)’ (BK: 1 78; attested without, and in combination with, ‘*ayn*- ‘eye’). [...]

4.9. Egyp. (Pyr.) *hwn.tīmy.tīr.t* ‘Pupille’ (EG III: 53), lit. “the girl that is in the eye”: *hwn.t* ‘Mädchen, Jungfrau’ (ibid.); *īmy.t*, an adjective (nisbah) meaning “that one (f.) which is in, she who is in”, derived from the proposition *īm* ‘in’ (ibid. I: 72); *īr.t* ‘Auge’ (ibid.: 106).

A similar semantic shift is attested in Indo-European:

4.10. Lat. *pūpula*, *pūpilla* (WH: 2 390; < *pūpa* ‘Mädchen; Püppchen’). Borrowed into English (*pupil of the eye*), German (*Pupille*) and other languages. (Kogan and Militarev 2003, p. 294)

This symbol of the pupil of the eye is also present in the Jewish mystical tradition to refer to the *Shēkhīnāh*, the feminine divine Presence and the light from which she receives the light of knowledge (*’ōr ha da’at*) which is associated with the three central *sēfirōt*: *Ḥesed* (Mercy), *Dīn* (Judgement), and *Raḥamīm* (Compassion) (Wolfson 1995, pp. 241–42, n. 69; p. 244, n. 92). The Hebrew use of *bath* rather than *ben* in this case may be connected with the fact that names of parts of the body that go in pairs are feminine in Hebrew. As explained by Elliot R. Wolfson:

Finally, consider *Tiqqunnei Zohar*, § 37, 78a, wherein it is stated explicitly that the three colors of the rainbow correspond to the three colors of the eye, which correspond in turn to the three shells of the foreskin surrounding the *Shekhinah*, or the three shells of the nut. Precisely through these colors, the *Shekhinah* assumes the title “pupil of the eye”, *bat ’ayin*, the point that is the sign of the covenant concerning which it is said, “I will see her to remember the everlasting covenant” (Genesis 9:16). (Wolfson 2021, p. 451)

Also relevant in this context is another passage in *Perush ha-Merkavah*, MS Paris–BN 850, fol. 69a (cf. 74a) and the parallel in Sode Razayya, ed. Weiss, p. 151, where Eleazar connects the word *sod*, “mystery”, with *’ayin*, the Hebrew letter whose numerical value is seventy, the same as *sod*. The word *’ayin*, however, also refers to the eye. More specifically, Eleazar notes that “in the pupil of the eye is the countenance of the cherub”. (Wolfson 1994, p. 229 n. 166)

In western Europe, around the year 1230, an obscure Jewish luminary writing under the nom de plume Rabbi Ḥammai, composed a short yet profound theological treatise, probing the recondite nature of the Divine realm. Ḥammai, it should be noted, is an Aramaic epithet signifying “seer” or “visionary”. He entitled his trenchant essay *Sēfer ha-’Iyyun* (*The Book of Contemplation*). In a passage of it, we can read:

Blessed and exalted is the Name, which is majestic in valor, for He is One, who unites with his powers, like the flame of a fire that is united with its colors. Moreover, His powers emanate from His Unity like the light of the eye, which issues forth from the pupil of the eye. These are emanated from those, like a scent from a scent or a candle-flame from a candle-flame, since this emanates from that and that from something else, and the power of the emanator is within that which was emanated. The emanator, however, does not lack anything. (Verman 1992, p. 99)

In addition, the fourteenth-century commentary of Moshe Botaril on *Sēfer Yešīrāh* compares the source and emanation of divine light to the light that beams out of the darkness of the pupil of the eye:

This is what the Sages meant about the verse “*And the Lord passed by before him, and proclaimed*”. He is one and united as the flame of fire that is unified in its hues as hinted in this verse, “*that the Lord thy God, is a consuming fire*”, and all the emanation from him is emanated as the light outgoing from the blackness of the eye. (*Sēfer Yešīrāh* [Jerusalem: Yeshivat Kol Yehuda, 1988], 35; *apud* Valabregue-Perry 2017, p. 96)

This image can already be found in early Kabbalah. For example, we see in the *’Iyyūn* literature of the thirteenth century: “This light was generated from His innermost, like the light of the eye, which issues forth from the pupil of the eye, from which the light sparkles”. (Verman 1992, p. 78).

4. “The Eye in Which I See God Is the Same Eye in Which God Sees Me”

“I beg you, be my eye that I may see you through you [...]”.

Muḥyī l-Dīn ibn al-ʿArabī, *Kitāb al-tajalliyāt*, Theophany 85.

O Lord, when you look upon me with an eye of graciousness, what is your seeing other than your being seen by me? In seeing me, you, who are *deus absconditus*, give yourself to be seen by me. No one can see you except insofar as you grant that you be seen. To see you is not other than that you see the one who sees you.

Nicholas of Cusa, *De visione dei*, chap. 5, § 15. (Hopkins 1985, p. 130)

In this sense, in the *Kitāb al-tajalliyāt* Ibn al-ʿArabī beseeches his Lord: “My reality is not knowing. It is, then, an unavoidable ignorance. I beseech you, be my eye that I may see through you and praise Him Who is seen without being known”. (Theophany 85; Ruspoli 2000, p. 216) This ignorance is evidently superior to all knowledge, for it implies a complete identification with the “secret of God”. Theophany 91 confirms this perspective. In the same way, the *walī* (‘friend of God’, saint) aspires to become the eye of God. Expression similar to that of Meister Eckhart (*Predigt 12: Qui audit me...*):

A person who is so established in the will of God wants nothing else but what is God and what is God’s will. If he were sick, he would not want to be healthy. All pain is a joy to him; all multiplicity is simplicity and unity, if he is really steadfast in the will of God. Even if the pain of hell were connected to it, it would be joy and happiness for him. He is free and has left himself, and he must be free of everything that he is to receive. If my eye is to see color, it must be free of all color [Aristotle, *Soul* 2.7 (429b). Cf. *Comm. Jn.* n. 100 and *Bened.* 1 (*Essential Eckhart*, pp. 100, 220)]. If I see blue or white, the sight of my eye, which sees the color, this very thing that does the seeing, is the same as what is seen by the eye. The eye in which I see God is the same eye in which God sees me. My eye and God’s eye are one eye and one seeing, one knowing, and one loving”. [Objected to by the Cologne censors. Eckhart replied by quoting Augustine, *Trin.* 9.2. Cf. *Comm. Jn.* n. 107]. (Meister Eckhart, in McGinn 1986, pp. 269–70)

Eckhart makes a last attempt to describe the higher nature of the intellect: he reminds his audience that according to Aristotle, the eye has to be devoid of color to be able to see all colors (*De anima* II 7, 418b 27). The knower must not already be what he is supposed to become in knowing. The eye must not contain the color within itself that it is supposed to receive. In the fullness of its significance, the absolute poverty or innermost poverty (*die eigenlichste Armut*) of which Eckhart speaks is the prefiguration of ecstasy:

When the soul is blind and sees nothing else, it sees God, and this has to be the case. A master says, “The eye in its purest state, when it is free of all color, sees all color”.

It is not just the case that the eye as a whole must be free of color. It must also be free of color as a part of the body if one is to recognize color. Whatever is free of color enables one to see all color, even if it were down below as part of the foot. God is that kind of being that contains all beings within itself. (McGinn 1986, p. 324)

The experience of *ekstasis*, described by Plotinus in this one very striking passage, when the soul is raised outside of itself, is also described in terms of vision and light. [VI 9, 11, 23] Although he says that it would be better not to speak in dualities, the light metaphor is the best way to describe that which is scarcely visible except in an unknown mode. [VI 9, 11, 22–23]. Plotinus explains the vision as a unity of seer and seen: ‘for there is no longer on thing outside and another outside which is looking in, but the keen sighted has what is seen within. [V 8, 10, 35–36; see also V 8, 11] Thus, the object and the act of vision have become identical. [VI 7, 25, 14–16] To become sight, that is, to become nothing but true light, is to become ‘the eye which sees the great beauty’. [I 6, 9, 24–25] Unity, expressed in terms of vision and sight, tends to always give the impression that there must be an object of the vision, but Plotinus is emphatic that the act of

vision itself is the object of the vision. Meister Eckhart likewise explains unity with God in such metaphorical terms as ‘*oculus in quo video deum, est ille idem oculus in quo me deus videt. Oculus meus et oculus dei est unus oculus et una visio vel videre et unum cognoscere et unum amare*’. (Carabine 1995, p. 143)

Also, Nicholas of Cusa focuses particularly on our experience of looking into the icon’s depicted eyes as an experience where, at the same time, it apparently looks into ours. He proposes that God’s seeing and God’s being seen are identical (*De visione dei*, chap. 5, § 15, Hopkins 1985, p. 130; on God’s vision, cf. Beierwaltes 1978, pp. 5–33; Hopkins 1985, pp. 17–19; Christianson and Izbicki 1996, pp. 244–45).

The scholar Stéphane Ruspoli, in his edition of the *Kitāb al-tajalliyāt* in French, comments the theophany 84 in the following terms:

That God alone can see and know Himself is an adage of universal significance that is stated with its own nuances by the spiritualities of East and West. [...] This eternal truth is what Ibn ‘Arabī notes in the present chapter. “I, you cannot see me through this eye, which is yours, therefore I give you the divine eye. Look, then, at my sovereign yogic power”.

This remarkable theophany of the eye is conceived in interrogative form, as are two other brief chapters (Th. 88 and 92). Other sentences on the mirror-heart and visionary reciprocity foreshadowed the answer to the question, “By what eye do you see Him?” (See Th. 24, and Th. 81, § 135: By my eye you see Me and yourself). If “no one has ever seen God” (St. John, prologue v. 18), and if “eyes cannot reach Him” (Qur. 6:103), knowledge of who He is requires a complete disappropriation of self. The ephemeral cannot reach the Eternal unless it absorbs its non-being into its true being. This places the follower of the union before the necessity of total annihilation in order to assimilate to Him. In this sense, it is possible to say that God “admits similitude” (Th. 94, n. 2). [...]

It has been noted that *tawhīd* implies the identity of the Contemplator and the Contemplated who is God (Th. 66, § 111). [...]

Let us admire the rhythmic balancing of these propositions, which mark the reciprocity of the act of vision, the unifying ray between the gaze of God and that of man. Since it is God who, by lending man his own gaze, truly becomes the “apple of his eye” after having made him blind to the world and to everything that is not Him. Hence the vow in the next chapter [Theophany 85]: “Please be my eye so that I may see you through you. In this theophany, the lover and the beloved are united by the same gaze, each of which contemplates the other. This meditation is inspired by the *ḥadīth qudsī*: “I am the eye through which my servant sees”. In his commentary, the Shaykh clarifies that God reveals Himself to you in accordance with your essence. For the Beloved sees you through your eye, just as you see Him through His eye. If He revealed Himself in accordance with His majesty, you would succumb and be annihilated. Ḥallāj said it in his own way in this verse: “I saw my Lord with the eye of my heart, and I said to Him, who are You? He said to me: You”. (Ruspoli 2000, pp. 349–50)

As Samer Akkach explains, the ‘eye’s man’ (*insān al-‘ayn*) is the receptor of light (*nūr*); it is, as it were, the spirit of the power of vision (*baṣar*) with which humans see (Akkach 2015, pp. 79–95):

Vision, the human sensor of light, is conflated with light because there is no vision without light, and if God is the light of heaven and earth, as the Quran affirms, then seeing can only occur through a divine agency. Thus, in the mystical approach, the core element of the scientific discourse, *baṣar*, becomes the necessary divine agency of seeing. In this sense, *baṣar* becomes the very spirit or secret of human vision, without which seeing is not possible.

Nazar is then the necessary framework within the bounds of which visual recognition of forms becomes possible, while *ru³ya* is the act of seeing through which visual perception of external reality takes place.

The semantic peculiarities of the Arabic language, expressed through several terms, concepts, and metaphors associated with the act of seeing, contribute to the spiritual understanding and interpretation of the nature of visual perception. The Arabic word *a³yān*, plural of *‘ayn*, literally ‘eye’, is used to refer to external entities as well as to notable personalities. The pupil, the eye’s aperture, through which light penetrates to make vision possible, is called *insān*, literally ‘man’ or ‘human being’. Thus, the ‘eye’s man’ (*insān al-‘ayn*) is the receptor of light (*nūr*); it is, as it were, the spirit of *baṣar* with which humans see. Metaphorically, the act of seeing captures the binding relationship between divinity and humanity: God sees the world through man (*insān*) and it is the light of divinity that penetrates the eye’s human center in order to make vision possible. Explaining the meaning of *insān* (‘man’ and ‘pupil’), Ibn ‘Arabī writes [*Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, ed. by Abu al-‘Ala ‘Afīfī (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī), 1946, 50]:

[H]e is to God (*ḥaqq*) as the pupil (*insān al-‘ayn*) is to the eye, with which vision (*nazar*) occurs and which is referred to as *baṣar*. It is for this reason he is called *insān* (at once pupil and man), for God sees his creatures through him (being the pupil of God’s eye) to show his mercy upon them. (Akkach 2022, p. 27; cf. p. 28)

Fakhr al-Dīn ‘Irāqī (d. 688/1289), the distinguished *qalandar* mystic poet, follower of the doctrine of the Oneness of Being [Existence] (*waḥdat al-wujūd*), in the line of al-Ḥallāj, and *al-Shaykh al-Akbar* himself, considers that on the fact that the lover (*‘āshiq*) is the mirror (*mir³āt*) of the Beloved (*maḥbūb*, *ma³shūq* . . .), and vice versa; each appears in the stage of the other and is not delimited by its own peculiarities. ‘Irāqī writes in a few lines of his famous masterpiece *Lamā³āt* (*Divine Flashes*, VI):

The end of the affair: The lover sees the Beloved as his own mirror, and himself as the mirror of the Beloved. [. . .]

Sometimes the Beloved’s quest grasps the skirt of the lover, saying, “Is not the desire of the pious drawn out endlessly, their desire to meet Me?” And sometimes the lover’s desire raises its head from the neck of the Beloved’s cloak and declares, “Verily I desire them more than they desire Me!” (HQ). Sometimes the Beloved Himself becomes the lover’s sight, that He might say, “I saw my Lord with the eye of the Lord. I asked ‘Who art Thou?’ and He answered ‘Thou.’” Sometimes the lover becomes the Beloved’s voice and says, “Grant him protection till he hears the words of God” (IX:6). (‘Irāqī 1982, pp. 83, 84)

As ‘Irāqī points out, this station—which is the end of the Path for most of the Perfect Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*)—possesses two characteristics: On the one hand, the lover, or the Perfect Man, sees the beloved as his own mirror, so he witnesses all his own perfections and properties reflected in God; and on the other hand, the lover sees himself as the mirror of the Beloved, so he contemplates all the Attributes of God in himself. (‘Irāqī 1982).

5. The Heart of the Gnostic Is like a Mirror in Which the Microcosmic Form of the Divine Self Is Reflected

It is the Perfect Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*), who is the true spiritual Ādam, the uncreated essential Muḥammad (prior to the emergence of the Ādam made of clay and breath). The universality of Ādam is such that it cannot become an object of thought since this universality is precisely the basis and precondition for all thought. As Ibn al-‘Arabī explains in the first chapter of the *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* entitled ‘The Wisdom of Divinity in the Word of Ādam’:

This [knowledge] cannot be arrived at by the intellect by means of any rational thought process, for this kind of perception comes only from a divine disclosure, from which is ascertained the origin of the forms of the Cosmos receiving the spirits. The [above-mentioned] formation is called Man and Viceregent [of God]. As for the first term, it stems from the universality of his formation and the fact that he embraces all realities. In reality, he is the pupil of the eye through which the act of seeing takes place. Thus, he is called *insān* [meaning both man and pupil], for it is by him that Reality looks on His creation and bestows Mercy [of existence] on them. He is Man, the transient [in his form], the eternal [in his essence]; he is the perpetual, the everlasting, the [at once] discriminating and unifying Word. It is by his existence that the Cosmos subsists, and he is, in relation to the Cosmos, as the seal is to the ring, the seal being that place whereon is engraved the token with which the King seals his treasure. (Austin 1980, p. 51)

The word of Ādam, or the Universal Man as the *Logos* of creation, serves as the “pupil” of the eye through which God looks upon creation and upon himself. Ibn al-ʿArabī states in this sense:

We can fairly say that for Ibn ʿArabī the human self is to be properly viewed as essentially and unequivocally a point of vision (or a locus of awareness) which acts as a mirror in the unitive Divine act of Self-Expression. [. . .]

Man is to God that which the pupil is to the eye (the pupil in Arabic is called “man within the eye”), the pupil being that by which seeing is effected; for through him (that is to say, the Universal Man), God contemplates His creation and dispenses His mercy. (Coates 2002, pp. 124, 164)

God is the dark, nonmanifest ground that makes possible all self-manifestation and self-disclosure. God resists all attempts to make him or his Essence an object of reason, just as the mirror resists all attempts to be seen. Yet, it is as the mirror of the self or soul (*nafs*) that God makes self-reflection possible and, in that sense, is more intimate to the soul than it is to itself. Thus, the gnostic can never know God as an object, precisely because God is both the subject and object of all the knowledge of the gnostic. The gnostic can know God only insofar as God is reflected in the essential mode of the gnostic himself. In the famous opening passage of the first chapter of the *Fuṣūṣ*, Ibn al-ʿArabī describes the world as a mirror in which God can see himself and identifies Ādam, the first Perfect Human, as “the very polishing of that mirror” (*ʿayn jalāʾ tilk al-mirʾāh*), who enables God to witness His own essence. Moreover, exploiting the fact that the Arabic term for ‘human being’ (*insān*) is also the word for ‘pupil’ of the eye, Ibn al-ʿArabī inform us that Ādam was called a human being because “through him, the Real gazes upon His creation (*yanzur al-ḥaqq ilā khalqihī*), and has mercy upon them” (*apud Morrissey 2021*, p. 38).

When the veil (*ḥijāb*) is lifted, in the state of unveiling (*kashf*), the heart of the Gnostic is like a mirror in which the microcosmic form of the divine Self is reflected. The saint becomes a pure mirror in and through which God is reflected. In the mirror of the divine intellect, the soul comes to know itself as a reflected Name of God. As a pure, polished mirror, the Sufi saint sees the Real with the “heart”. In other words, the saint is simply a transparent image or vehicle in and through which the divine Essence sees and knows itself. The reflection is mutual. The servant sees his own essence reflected in the divine Mirror while God sees his Names reflected in the mirror of the servant’s essence, which, of course, is nothing apart from the divine Essence itself. While the “self” that the gnostic sees in the mirror of the divine hides the divine, it also, in another sense, manifests it, just as the image in a mirror manifests the presence of the mirror:

As Ibn ʿArabī explains in the chapter on Ādam (to be treated in the next section), the entire universe, as the manifestation of the divine Names and Attributes, is also a mirror of God; but it is the human being who polishes (potentially) this mirror and brings together all the “discrete things and properties that have been diffused and scattered all over the immense universe” into sharp focus in the

mirror of his intellect so that God may view His Names and Attributes in it. For, although God needs no mirror other than Himself in order to “view” and know Himself, nevertheless, as Izutsu explains, “the Absolute has also an aspect in which it is an Essence qualified by Attributes. And since the Attributes become real only when they are externalized, it becomes necessary for the Absolute to see itself in the ‘other’. Thus the ‘other’ is created in order that God might see Himself therein in externalized form” (Izutsu, *Sufism, and Taoism*, 220). This divine image, therefore, comes into sharpest focus in the heart of the gnostic, which, being well-polished by detachment from created things, reflects without distortion the divine Names and Attributes. (Dobie 2010, p. 175 n. 35)

6. Bill Viola and the Abyssal Look of the Pupil of the Eye

“The ideal mirror, around since the beginning of humankind, is the black background of the pupil of the eye”. [...] The pupil is the boundary, and veil, to both internal and external vision”.

Bill Viola, “Video Black—The Mortality of the Image” (Viola 1995, pp. 205–6)

In another video creation entitled *I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like* (1986), videotape, color, stereo sound (Viola 2005), whose title is a loose translation of a Sanskrit verse from the *R̥g-Veda* (I.164.37), an ancient collection of hymns and commentary that constitutes one of the four canonical sacred texts of Hinduism, the artist again turns to the theme of the eye that sees and is seen through the device of self-reflection, in this case in the pupil of an American owl (*Bubo virginianus*) (Melcher et al. 2000, pp. 20, 30–32; Lauter 1999, pp. 140–43; Hanhardt 2017, 107–12; Hanhardt 2019, pp. 54–79, 90–103) (Figure 6):



Figure 6. Blackness, the luminous black, as throughout the *Tarjumān*, indicates the deep interior of something, a place of intimacy, the repository of the secret or mystery (*sirr*), the innermost core of the heart. In that deep space, the Beloved resides. (Bill Viola, *I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like*, 1986, videotape, color, stereo sound).

I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like is a personal investigation of the inner states and connections to animal consciousness that we all carry within. The work is in five parts and functions like a map of the animal psyche. Images of animals mediate a progression from an initial stage of “pure being” (a herd of bison moves

within a vast open landscape, the camera confronts the glaring eye of an owl), proceeding through stages of the rational and the physical orders (a researcher is at work in his study, images flicker past at the limits of perception), finally arriving at a state beyond logic and the laws of physics (devotees participate in a Hindu fire ritual; a fish comes out of a mountain lake, soaring over the treetops to come to rest on the floor of a pine forest).

As the gateway to the soul, the pupil of the eye has long been a powerful symbolic object in the search for knowledge of the self. The color of the pupil is black. It is on this black background that you see your self-image when you try to look closely into your own eye or into the eye of another. It is through this blackness that we confront the gaze of an animal, partly with fear, with curiosity, with familiarity, and with mystery. We see ourselves in its eyes while sensing the irreconcilable otherness of an intelligence ordered around a world; we can share in body but not in mind. (Hanhardt 2019, p. 91)

Black is a bright light on a dark day [cf. Sabistārī verse], like staring into the sun, the intensity of the source producing the darkness of the protection of the closed eye. It is the black we “see” when all the lights have been turned off, the space between the glowing electron lines of the video image, the space after the last cut of a film, or the luminous black of the nights of the new moon. If there is a light there, it is only the light searching in the dark room that, limited by the optical channel within its beam, assumes there is light everywhere it turns. (Viola 1995, p. 143)

Bill Viola entitled his 1986 story of creation in video images, *I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like*. In this wide-ranging search for the self, Viola allows room for speculation. He begins with the creation of the world. “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the Earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters”. [The first book of Moses (Genesis)]. The US artist places himself on the edge of the age-old earth in order to confront the questions of identity with the answers provided by tradition.

Bill Viola fixed the lens of his camera on the lens in a bison’s eye; the lid does not close, the camera comes closer slowly, and fearfully, the eye closes. Cut. Shots of the eye of a fish with dots and a thick-lipped mouth, a pelican, and an owl follow. The eye is not only the interface between light and dark; it is also our most important organ of perception.

The eye is the symbol of the Holy Trinity, like the eye from which the glycerine tear drops in Man Ray’s most famous photograph. The human eye is reflected in the eye of the camera. The owl sees in the dark; the artist has switched on the lamp and is sitting at his desk. It is still night. [. . .]

Bill Viola presents his claim that *I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like* in the form of a journey [the title of the second section of the video is ‘The Language of Birds’, inspired by Farīd al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār’s *Mantiq al-ṭayr* (*The Language of Birds*)]. It is a visual reflection on and off the inside [*bāṭin*] and outside [*zāhir*], birth and death, nature and its manifestations, time, and the slowing down of time. Viola drives his sentence through true abysses in the quest for identity. The gates are opened, and the Ego is hounded or carried over glowing embers without coming to any harm. (Lauter 1999, pp. 140–43)

However, although Viola celebrates the power of images to reveal connections, he also leaves room for mystery. Humans, as the world’s great religious traditions affirm, are both part of the natural world and uniquely separate from it, an idea that Viola dramatizes in one of the work’s most compelling sequences. He films a horned owl at mid-distance, zooming in slowly and steadily as the animal looks directly into the camera. After about two minutes, we begin to discern Viola’s reflection on the surface of the owl’s enormous eye. Viola then cuts abruptly to a close-up of the owl’s black pupil, surrounded like an icon by its golden cornea, as Viola moves inside it. Here, Viola’s attempt to penetrate the

owl's inner world is blocked by her own reflected image. His search for self-understanding fails to produce not the illumination of wisdom but the awareness of what he calls "the irreconcilable otherness of an intelligence ordered around a world we can share in body but not in mind". As Viola told Jörg Zutter in 1992:

I relate to the role of the mystic in the sense of following a *via negativa*—of feeling the basis of my work to be in unknowing, in doubt, in being lost, in questions and not answers—and recognizing that personally, the most important work I have done has come from not knowing what I was doing at the time I was doing it. (Syring 1992, p. 104; Viola 1995, p. 250)

As Thomas A. Carlson discusses in his essay "*I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like*. Bill Viola and the Creative Power of not Knowing":

The generative work of unknowing—the illuminating power of obscurity, the life-giving character of emptiness, or even annihilation—entails several related operations that we can see as central to both the Rigveda's riddle hymn and Viola's work: above all, the operation of likeness, or resemblance, and the endlessly creative association, reference, and resonance entailed in that operation. [...]

And then unexpectedly, in the mirror of an owl's eye—in a recognizable, and thus partly familiar, but still, in the end, deeply foreign gaze—the artist records, through the technology of his zoom lens, his own reflected image. He thus makes visible to himself a self-image that is grounded in the darkness of this animal mystery (and he also makes visible to us, the work's viewer, the otherwise invisible co-creator of the image we are seeing). He comes to see himself through the reflection of a gaze he can acknowledge but not inhabit or occupy.

Through this technologically mediated experience of animal enigma, Viola sees a logic he signals likewise in the spiritual practice of Eckhart's mystical tradition, where emptiness or void is a ground of reception and therefore generative. The image depends on a darkness that exceeds—by preceding and succeeding—any and every image, and that unimaginable darkness finds an image, which itself is an image, in the pupil. Viola comments on two striking and suggestive phenomena entailed in the experience of pupil gazing, both of which disallow my ever grasping the ground of my own image: first, the operation of infinite reflection, which Viola calls to our attention as "the first visual feedback". Because "the tiny person I see on the black field of the pupil also has an eye within which is reflected the tiny image of a person. . . and so on", I can never actually get to the bottom of my own image. A second principle of pupil gazing that Viola notes is that the more I "lean in" to see and comprehend, to grasp or take hold of my own image in its ground, the more the image itself grows and thus eclipses my vision of that ground. [Viola, "Video Black—The Mortality of the Image", 1990, in Viola 1995, p. 206] The image is a function, then, not only of darkness but also of distance.

The kind of infinite reflection that Viola records through the human-animal encounter in *I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like* relates directly to forms of spiritual practice that have long been central to the mystical theological traditions that inspire his work. "The black pupil", he writes, "also represents the ground of nothingness, the place before and after the image, the basis of the 'void' described in all systems of spiritual training. It is what Meister Eckhart described as 'the stripping away of everything, not only that which is other but even one's own being.'" [Viola, "Video Black—The Mortality of the Image", in Viola 1995, p. 207] Such stripping away, as Viola notes in a short text on *I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like*, is essential to the kind of self-knowledge that both he and the traditions of mystical theology—and their distinctive anthropology—explore: We find ourselves in otherness, enigma, or darkness because, and insofar as, the

image in which we become visible to ourselves is grounded in the unimaginable and conditioned by the invisible.

As a gateway to the soul, the pupil of the eye has long been a powerful symbolic image and evocative physical object in the search for knowledge of the self. The color of the pupil is black. It is on this black that you see your self-image when you try to look closely into your own eye, or into the eye of another. . . the largeness of your own image, preventing you an unobstructed view within. [Viola, "I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like", 1986, in [Viola 1995](#), p. 143]

In *I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like*, it is the gaze of an animal that functions as the artist's mirror—much as the gaze of God can function as the soul's mirror in the traditions of mystical anthropology, where, created in the image and likeness of God, I am imaged in and likeness. "We see ourselves in its eyes", Viola writes, "while sensing the irreconcilable otherness of an intelligence ordered around a world we can share in body but not in mind". [Viola, "I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like", 1986, in [Viola 1995](#), p. 143]

Through this encounter with a nonhuman gaze and against the background of his engagement with the traditions of mystical theology and anthropology, Viola can be understood to find broader principles of human self-knowledge. ([Hanhardt 2019](#), pp. 56, 71–72)

In Early Islamic Mysticism, perception of the exterior world takes place by means of the spirit (*rūh*) that sits in the pupil of the eye and whose light encounters the sheen of the colors of things:

Life is with the spirit, with reason, and with *ma'rifa*. Moreover, the spirit is a light, the reason is a light (3), and *ma'rifa* is a light (4). Every light has sight. The sight of reason is connected to the sight of the spirit and the fine substance of the spirit. It is set apart and pure, being located in the eye. If you look at the pupil of the eye, you will see the delicacy and the fine substance in the black of the pupil. This is the fine substance of the spirit, which is like water. The sight of the spirit is in the pupil of the eye. Indeed, that shining light within the pupil is the sight of the spirit, whereas the brightness (*daw'*) [of things] comes from outside. Perception of the colors takes place between the light that is in the pupil and the brightness that is outside. As long as these two do not come together, a person cannot perceive colors with his eyes. (5) This is so for all men in general. ([Radtke and O'Kane 1996](#), p. 237)

7. Blackness, the Repository of the Secret or Mystery (*sirr*)

"As the Sufi say, 'Know darkness in order to understand the light'".

Bill Viola, in conversation with Hans Belting ([Walsh 2003](#), p. 191)

Bill Viola has worked with darkness and black for his entire career. The video artist confesses that for the first time he also had the impression of having achieved a truly realistic image on video: he recorded an image that described an inner memory rather than an inner perception.

What guided me towards this exercise was a statement by the Sufi master of the 20th century, Hazrat Inayat Khan, who had said: "The Sufi studies darkness to understand light". So I started studying darkness, constantly thinking about

blackness, and I found very interesting things, particularly in which refers to the traditional color theory in the East". (Walsh 2003, p. 191)

Maḥmūd Shabistārī writes in the verses of his *Gulshan-i rāz* (1317) about the Supreme Darkness of the Divine Essence (vv. 123, 124, 127–29, Shabistārī 2007, pp. 46–47; cf. Izutsu 1971a, pp. 14–15; 1971b, pp. 288–307):

Blackness [*siyāhī*], if you but knew, is the Light of the Essence;
 Within the darkness flows the Water of Life.
 Blackness absorbs the eye's weak light.
 Abandon vision since this isn't its place.
 The dervish's "black face in the two worlds"
 reaches the all-comprehensive Supreme Darkness [*sawād-i a'zam*].
 What can I say about this most subtle secret
 of a luminous night within a dark day [*shab-i ruwshan miyān-i rūz-i tārik*]?
 In this revelation, which is luminous theophany,
 I have many words, but silence is better.

Ibn al-ʿArabī states that "darkness is a kind of light" (Ibn al-ʿArabī 1972–, II 648.4). The color black is a symbol of dominance (*iswidād al-siyāda*, writes the *al-Shaykh al-Akbar* [Ibn al-ʿArabī 1972–, IV, p. 349]). Let us remember that the word *aswad* (black) derives from the word *sāda* from which *sayyid* (master) and *siyāda* (mastery) derive. The face of the Perfect Man, the happiest of men, is black in the hereafter as in this nether world because, immersed in an eternal vision, he sees the darkness of the universe through the light of the mirror of the True (Allāh). (Ibn al-ʿArabī 1969, p. 54). As for the designation of any manifestation of the *Qutb* (Pole) as black Stone, it is a usage anterior to Ibn al-ʿArabī. Thus, when Abū Madyan (d. 594/1197) was asked if the Black Stone felt any effect produced upon it by the people who touched it and kissed it, he replied: "I am the Black Stone" (Affifi, *Mystical Philosophy*, p. 76, n. 1) (Corbin 1997, p. 367, n. 44):

Unlike the rest of Islam, Shiʿism possesses a highly developed religious iconography. Among the circle of the Sixth Imām, Jaʿfar Ṣādiq (d. 148/765), it will be worth our while to mention the curious and endearing figure of Hishām ibn Sālim Jawālīqī (Shahrastānī, *Milal*, pp. 87–88). He seems to have been one of those who drew all the implications from their Imāmism, clashing head-on with the prudish dialectic to which the first theologians of orthodox Islam constrained themselves. He taught that God has a human form and a body, but a subtle body consisting neither of flesh nor blood. He is a brilliant, radiant light. He has five senses like a man and the same organs. Abu ʿIsā al-Warrāq (d. 247/861) notes in the doctrine of our Imāmite a trait which shows a remarkable sense of the *coincidentia oppositorum*: God possesses abundant black hair, which is black light (*nūr aswad*). One wonders whether Stoic terminology is concealed beneath the statement that God is a "body" (an immaterial body, to be sure, since it is in the subtle state). (Corbin 1997, pp. 381–82)

It is the symbolic color of the spirits that carry the black flags. The great Iranian *kubrawī* master ʿAlāʾ al-Dawla al-Simnānī (d. 736/1336) inaugurated a subtle physiology, whose seven subtle organs (sheaths or centers) of light (*latāʾif*) are typified by "the seven prophets of thy being". Each has a specific color. Whereas the subtle center of the *arcantum*, the "Jesus of thy being" has luminous black (*aswad nūrānī*, "black light") as its colour, the colour of the supreme center, the "mystery of mysteries", the "Muḥammad of thy being", is green. According to al-Simnānī, "the subtle center of the arcana, the 'Jesus of your being', has for its color luminous black (*aswad nūrānī*, the 'black light')" (*Risāla-yi nūriyya*, 45a; Corbin 1978, pp. 99–120; Elias 1993, pp. 72–74; Elias 1995, pp. 138–39).

Similar to the "black light" of the Persian tradition (Arabic: *aswad nūrānī*; Persian: *nūr-i siyāh*); Hebrew: ʾōr ḥashakh, the 'darkened light'), in a writing belonging to the cabalistic

circle of 'Iyyun, the *Ma'yan ha-Hokhmāh* (*The Fountain of Wisdom*), one reads that of the primordial ether—corresponding in other descriptions to the first *səfirāh*—, above which there is no higher level—two sources arise, one of darkness and the other of light; they then extend downwards in numerous plays of colors whose details remain mysterious. The author of the text in question explains that the primordial source evidently represents the unity of the two aforementioned sources and that it is called 'ōr *ha-mabbua'* (light of the source). This source is also called “the light that is too dark to shine”. However, the ten lights that are probably parallel to the ten *səfirōt* and that arise from the primordial source are not colors but lights with other qualifiers such as “scintillating”, “wonderful” (*ha-'ōr ha-mufla'*), “hidden”, “limpid”, “clear”, “radiant”, etc. This dark light, also called darkness, is the fullness of light that dazzles the eye. This light is actually called darkness, not because it is really dark but because no creature, neither angel nor prophet, can bear or grasp it. It is the fullness of light that blinds the eye. These definitions of the “dark light” agree with those of the nothing that we already find among the Kabbalists; It is called that, as has been seen previously, for the sole reason that it is hidden from the knowledge of all created beings (Verman 1992, index s.v. “darkness”):

At the time that the Holy One, blessed be He, created it. He extended it like a pavilion, as stated, “For can any understand the extensions of the clouds, the tumults of His pavilion” (Job 36:29). “The extensions”, this is the light that sparkles from the Marvelous Light [*ha-'ōr ha-mufla'*, i.e., the first of a series of the lights, which emanated from the primordial darkness], extended by the power of the Unity like a garment. Its brilliance strengthens and shines on the hidden Unity of this marvelous power. Therefore, it is the Marvelous Light itself, for from the magnitude of its shining light that shines brilliantly, it is darkened from illuminating in relation to human perception. It is like the strong sun, since no one can gaze on the essence of its brilliance; for if one would gaze on it, the pupils of his eyes would darken, and he could not open them owing to the magnitude of the brilliant light, which grows stronger and shines. Thus did the Holy One, blessed be He, darken this Marvelous Light from the perceptions of every creature. Nor did He allow any creature in the universe to perceive its truth as it really is. [...]

When it arose in the mind of the Holy One, blessed be He, to prepare the planting of the supernal flags, the Marvelous Light spread out over His Unity. Thus, it is stated, “He spread His cloud above him” (Job 26:9). Immediately, He brought into being all the creatures that emanated from the power of the Marvelous Light—a bright light shining with a green color that shines with all types of radiance, shininess, and strong radiance. Then the Holy One, blessed be He, shone this light in a pure, brilliant radiance that gained strength and became known through the purity of the Marvelous Light. This light was generated from His Innermost, like the light of the eye, which issues forth from the pupil of the eye, from which the light sparkles. This light, which is known by the color iridescent green, is called *hashmal*. When it was created, it grew stronger in the brilliant and pure light and shone brightly from the pressure of the Marvelous Light that is fixed in the Unity. (Verman 1992, pp. 73–74, 77–78)

In this sense, Bill Viola notes in his text titled “Video Black—The Mortality of the Image”:

In many countries throughout the world, black is the color of mourning. Echoing this ineffable finality, in European culture, black is considered to be an outside color, the condition of the “absence of light”. The focal point for black in our lives is the pupil of the eye, a portal to the tiny chamber in the center of the eyeball, where darkness is necessary to resolve the original parent of the artificial image. Since the means of the artistic creation of images are now the laws of optics and the properties of light, and the focus is the human eye, it was only a matter of

time before someone thought to hold up a mirror. The ideal mirror, around since the beginning of humankind, is the black background of the pupil of the eye. There is a natural human propensity to want to stare into the eye of another or, by extension, oneself, a desire to see seeing itself, as if the straining to see inside the little black center of the eye will reveal not only the secrets of the other but of the totality of human vision. After all, the pupil is the boundary and veil for both internal and external vision.

Looking closely into the eye, the first thing to be seen, indeed the only thing to be seen, is one's own self-image. This leads to the awareness of two curious properties of pupil gazing. The first is the condition of infinite reflection, which is the first visual feedback. The tiny person I see on the black field of the pupil also has an eye within which is reflected the tiny image of a person . . . and so on. The second is the physical fact that the closer I get to having a better view into the eye, the larger my own image becomes, thus blocking my view within. These two phenomena have each inspired ancient avenues of philosophical investigation and, in addition to the palpable ontological power of looking directly into the organs of sight, were considered proof of the uniqueness and special power of the eyes and the sense of sight.

Staring into the eye is an ancient form of autohypnosis and meditation. In the *Alcibiades* of Plato, Socrates describes the process of acquiring self-knowledge through the contemplation of the self in the pupil of another's eye or in the reflection of one's own.

Socrates (describing the Delphic inscription "gnothi seauton"): I will tell you what I think is the real advice this inscription offers. The only example I find to explain it has to do with seeing. . . . Suppose we spoke to our eye as if it were a man and told it, "See thyself" . . . would it not mean that the eye should look at something in which it could recognize itself?

Alcibiades: Mirrors and things of that sort?

Socrates: Quite right. And is there not something of that sort in the eye we see with? . . . Haven't you noticed that when one looks someone in the eye, he sees his own face in the center of the other eye, as if in a mirror? This is why we call the center of the eye the "pupil" (puppet): because it reflects a sort of miniature image of the person looking into it. . . . So when one eye looks at another and gazes into that inmost part by virtue of which that eye sees, then it sees itself.

Alcibiades: That's true.

Socrates: And if the soul too wants to know itself, must it not look at a soul, especially at that inmost part of it where reason and wisdom dwell? . . . This part of the soul resembles God. So, whoever looks at this and comes to know all that is divine—God and insight through reason—will thereby gain a deep knowledge of himself. (Viola 1995, pp. 205–7)

To illustrate this, Viola quotes verses from Maḥmūd Shabistārī (Viola 1995, pp. 42–43). The vessel of the heart is the mirror of theophanies: "He who contemplates becomes like the object of his contemplation", says Plato in *Timaeus* (90d). Thus, according to the Neo-Platonist Ibn al-ʿArabī, it is God who, by taking man by his own gaze, becomes the "pupil of his eye" after having made him blind to the world and to all that is not Him. The multiplicity inherent in the creature cannot, in fact, apprehend the One. From which it follows that "it is God's gaze that grasps God and sees Him and not yours" (*Fut.*, Būlāq, 1329/1911, IV, p. 2). "He is He who sees, He who is seen and that by which He is seen" (Ibn al-ʿArabī 1972–, IV, p. 38). Therein lies the paradox of vision (Chodkiewicz 1993, p. 169).

Bill Viola is interested in the treatment of vision as it is developed in the Neoplatonic tradition, specifically the Greek term *θεωρία* and the Latin *contemplatio, speculatio*, which connotes understanding through sight (Cimino and Kontos 2015, p. 187). The mirror's

characteristic of being revealed is illustrated by a famous passage from the *Alcibiades* of Plato (133), in which the transition from psychological knowledge to the transcendental plane takes place. In it, Socrates explains to Alcibiades that, just as in order to see oneself, it is necessary to look into a mirror or into the pupil of an eye opposite, in the same way, in order to know one's own soul, as the Delphic oracle recommends, it is convenient to look into the intellectual part, which is all divine, of another soul (Viola 1995, pp. 206–7).

Indeed, in Plato's *Alcibiades* the pupil is that part of the eye in which a visible reflection is formed.

How a soul can know itself is explained by thinking of how an eye can see itself. An eye can see itself by looking at its reflection in the pupil of another eye; similarly, a soul can know itself by contemplating its 'reflection' in the intellect of another soul. Moreover, an eye can see itself best by looking at its reflection in a mirror; similarly, a soul knows itself best when it uses the best of intellectual mirrors and contemplates the way that it is reflected in God. [...]

ε5 τῶι ὀφθαλμῶι ... 6 ἔνεστί τι τῶν τοιούτων: The immediate point is, of course, that reflections are visible in the pupil of an eye, as in a mirror. But we should also recall that the mirrors used in ancient Greece had a reflecting surface that was round, like the pupil: see the diagrams in Lenore O. Keene Congdon, *Caryatid Mirrors of Ancient Greece* (Congdon 1981, p. 5) [...]

132a2 ὄψει 'pupil'. That ὄψις is here applied to the pupil is shown by comparison of the ὄψις with a mirror: the pupil is that part of the eye in which a visible reflection is formed. The word can, however, be applied not only to the pupil and other organs of sight (LSJ s.v. ὄψις ii.c–d), but also to more or less anything connected with vision: the sensory capacity itself, its operations, and its objects. See 132e5n. on ᾗ ὁρῶμεν for a guess about why such an ambiguous word is used. **α3 ὁ δὲ καὶ ... καλοῦμεν:** Since the mirror is not itself the image but the place where the image is formed, ὁ here must have for its antecedent, not the single word κατοπτρῶι, but the phenomenon described by the entire phrase τὸ πρόσωπον ... κατοπτρῶι. (Plato 2001, pp. 229, 232 [Commentary])

Even the dullard Alcibiades sees what Socrates is driving at: our only analogy to self-knowledge is self-vision, and for that we require a mirror. But rather than pick up the nearest mirror, Socrates instead advises a course of action that further cements his relationship with his beloved. The pair needs no artificial instrument, for they each already have a mirror.

Socrates: ... And isn't there something like that in the eye, which we see with?

Alcibiades: Certainly.

Socrates: I'm sure you've noticed that when a man looks into an eye his face appears in it, like in a mirror (*hōsper en katoptrōi*). We call this the 'pupil' (*korē*), for it's a sort of miniature (*eidōlon*) of the man who's looking. (132e)

The eye is not so much a window into the soul of the beloved as a mirror of the soul of the lover himself. Looking into the beloved's eye—at the pupil, to be exact—the lover sees himself reflected in miniature (*eidōlon*). But of course, this is an analogy, for the lover is in fact supposed to look at the beloved's soul, not the eye: "Then if the soul, Alcibiades, is to know itself, it must look at a soul, and especially at that region (*topon*) in which what makes a soul good, wisdom, occurs, and at anything else that is similar to it" (133b). Just as the eye has a pupil, so the soul has a "region", its best part (*beltiston*), than which nothing is "more divine" (*theiōteron*), namely "the part in which knowing and thinking (*to eidenai te kai phronein*) take place" (133c). In fact, "this part of [the soul] resembles the divine (*tōi theōi*), and someone who looked at it and grasped everything divine (*pan to theion gnous*)—vision and intelligence (*thean te kai phronēsin*)—would have the best grasp of himself as well" (133c). To behold the best part of the soul

of another is to behold all that is divine, and to behold such is to behold and comprehend oneself, as if in a mirror, as if seeing oneself reflected in the pupil of another's eye. [...]

In *Alcibiades I*, instead of the mirror making possible a preening, ocular self-cultivation (à la Diogenes Laertius's Socrates), we witness "the idea of reflection as an impersonal way for us to 'see' the divine in all of us". (Stang 2016, pp. 43–44)

This is shown in Bill Viola's *Migration* (1976), a video installation in which the subject disappears before the specular surface of water. In Sufism, along the lines of the *Alcibiades* text mentioned above, it is said that the *qalb*, within the breast, or *ṣadr*, resembles the black part of the pupil of the eye, in the middle of the whiteness of the pupil. To behold God, one must become His pupil. Shabistarī says that this specular eye is a drop of black blood in the niche of the heart.

Real knowledge was always regarded as essential to fixing the otherwise unfocused, drunken passion of love. It is sobriety that shines through in a further poem by Ibn al-ʿArabī (*Futūḥāt*, ch. 63, vol. 1:305):

When my Beloved reveals Himself, with what eye do I see Him?

With His eye, not mine, for none other than Him sees Him. (Ibn al-ʿArabī 1972–)

As Professor Michael Sells comments on the deeper meaning of this symbol of the blackness of the pupil of the eye from his own translation of the *Tarjumān*:

In the poem and the *Tarjumān*'s final verses, the poet declares he has fallen for a girl in Ajyād (a height near Mecca), then immediately and emphatically corrects himself, stating that she lives instead deep in the *suwād* (black) of his liver. As mentioned above in reference to poem 17, the term evoked the black humor (*melancholia*) of Greek medicine. At the same time, blackness here, as throughout the *Tarjumān*, indicates the deep interior of something, a place of intimacy, the repository of the secret or mystery (*sirr*), the innermost core of the heart. In that deep space, the beloved resides. In his chapter on love in *Meccan Openings*, Ibn ʿArabī quotes two unattributed verses expressing the contradictory realities faced by the lover-mystic: the lover complains that the beloved is somewhere far away when that same beloved lives deep within. In the *Meccan Openings* poem, the loved ones are found within the black (that is, the pupil) of the lover's eye and beneath his ribs (Ibn al-ʿArabī 1972–, vol. 5, ch. 178, pp. 593–94). The lover looks without, but they are in the dark center of his perception. He sighs for those who dwell near (or within) his lungs.

How strange that I yearn for them and longing

ask about them while they're with me

My eyes weep for them but they're there

in their blackness. I sigh and they line my ribs

A similar dynamic occurs near the end of Ibn ʿArabī's Nizām preface: "She dwells among the noble; and she camps among the brave—and in the black pupil of the eye, and deep within the heart". (Ibn al-ʿArabī 2021, p. 279)

Around this abyssal blackness of the pupil, Viola writes:

The medieval Neoplatonists practiced meditating on the pupil of the eye, or *speculation*, a word that literally means "mirror gazing". The word *contemplation* is derived from the ancient practice of divination, where a *templum* is marked off in the sky by the crook of an auger to observe the passage of crows through the square. *Meditation* and *concentration* both refer to the centering process of focusing on the self.

The black pupil also represents the ground of nothingness, the place before and after the image, the basis of the "void" described in all systems of spiritual train-

ing. It is what Meister Eckhart described as “the stripping away of everything, not only that which is other but even one’s own being”.

In ancient Persian cosmology, black exists as a color and is considered to be “higher” than white in the universal color scheme. This idea is derived in part from the color of the pupil. The black disk of the pupil is the inverse of the white circle of the sun. The tiny image in “the apple of the eye” was traditionally believed to be a person’s self, his or her soul, existing in complementary relationship to the sun, the world-eye. [...]

So, black becomes a bright light on a dark day, the intense light bringing on the protective darkness of the closed eye—the black of the annihilation of the self.

Fade to black ... (Viola 1995, pp. 207–8)

These words by Bill Viola are probably based on the color analysis of the following passage from Nader Ardalan and Laleh Bakhtiar’s essay on the Persian Sufi tradition that the New York artist is familiar with:

Colors are like the world of existence. Above them lies white, which symbolizes Being (the principle of all states of cosmic reality) and unites all the colors, and below them is black, which symbolizes nothingness. Black, of course, possesses another symbolic significance—that of the non-being of the Divine Essence, which lies above even the plane of Being and is dark only because of the intensity of its light. It is referred to by some Sufis as the black light (*nūr-i siyāh*). Between these extremes of light and darkness lies the spectrum of colors, like the degrees of existence. [...]

As it is through white that color is made manifest, so through black it remains hidden, “hidden by its very brightness”. Black is “a bright light in a dark day”, as only through this luminous black can one find the hidden aspects of the Divine. This perception comes through the black of the pupil, which, as the center of the eye, is symbolically the veil to both internal and external vision. Black is the annihilation of self, a prerequisite to reintegration. It is the cloak of the *Ka‘bah*, the mystery of Being, the light of the Majesty, and “the color of the Divine Essence”. (Ardalan and Bakhtiar 1973, pp. xiv [foreword], 48; Ardalan and Nasr 1988, p. 332)

Denis E. McAuley analyzes another poem by Ibn al-‘Arabī’s *Dīwān*, where he describes a dream in which the black pupil is shown as the center of Gnostic knowledge. This poem is placed in a series about people—including women—on whom Ibn al-‘Arabī conferred the *khirqā*, but appears in fact to be about a sensual vision of a woman that the poet had near the Ka‘ba:

As often in Ibn ‘Arabī’s poems, the word ‘*ayn* can mean ‘the very self’ (as translated here), but also ‘the eye’ or ‘the essence’. The eye has lyric and sensual connotations. The essence belongs to Ibn ‘Arabī’s metaphysics. [...]

The next poem [‘I saw a Girl...’] [Bulāq, pp. 310–11/Basaj, p. 291] again encompasses three thematic environments: the love lyric, the Qur’anic paradise, and Ibn ‘Arabī’s own metaphysical terminology. The key term here is sight (*naẓar*), the one world that recurs throughout the poem and ties it together while gaining a more metaphysically charged meaning as the piece progresses. The poem can be understood as consisting of three sections of three verses each, finished with a one-line cap. in the first three verses, the poet describes a vision:

1. I saw a girl in my sleep, unadorned and most beautiful, who has no sister in humanity,
2. staring at me with an eye that was all a dark pupil (*ḥawār*), so that I died in ecstasy for her from that dark pupil.

3. When I looked at her (*naẓartu ilayhā*), while she was looking at me, I died out of love for her from the pleasure of her gaze (*naẓar*).

In the first part of the poem (vv. 1–3), the lyric vocabulary predominates, while Qur’anic and metaphysical terms are alluded to. The visit of the *khayāl* or image of the beloved, is a common theme in love poetry. The female visitor is accordingly described as ‘unadorned and most beautiful’. Verse 3 keeps up the lyric connotations: poets frequently describe themselves as being murdered by their beloved’s glance. However, their term *ḥawar* (the darkness of a pupil) also recalls the houris of paradise, suggesting a more tangibly Qur’anic context. In terms of Sufi metaphysics, annihilation (*fanā*) is often described as a sort of death—one answer to the problem that one cannot see God before death. (McAuley 2012, pp. 118, 121, 228 [Arabic text])

Dark pupil (*ḥawar*). The related word *ḥawrā* means ‘a woman whose big black eyes are in contrast to their whites and to her white skin’ (A. J. Wensinck, ‘Ḥūr’, *EI*²). In their French translation, the Arabist poets Omari Hammami and Patricia Mons add to McAuley’s comments:

[*Ra’aytu jāriya, Dīwān*, p. 291]

The root of *ḥawar* has, among other things, the meaning “to be of a well pronounced black and white so that the one brings out the other better (said of eyes whose bloom is round and dark black)”, from which the Qur’anic expression *biḥūrīn ‘īnīn* is derived, evoking the eyes of the beautiful creatures populating Paradise, the houris (44, 54; 52, 20). This image already appears in ante-Islamic poetry, but it contains an obvious Qur’anic allusion that should be retained in the translation because it immediately marks an ambiguity and a shift in meaning between the lyrical and the mystical register, foreshadowing the paradisiacal evocations of verses 7 y 8.

[*Ra’aytu jāriya, metro al-basīṭ*]

Contrary to McAuley, and although the name *Al-Kabīr*, “the Infinitely Great”, is one of the Divine Names, we believe that Ibn ‘Arabī here refers to Man and not God. If all creation is manifestations/image of God (verse 10), Man is His most perfect image (only he can apprehend Him), and in this he virtually contains divine perfection. This is, of course, Man as God’s lieutenant or representative (*khalīfa*, “caliph”, Qur’an 2:30), whom Ibn ‘Arabī calls “the perfect Man” (*al-insān al-kāmil*), personified by the Prophet Muḥammad but present in potential in every human being. The *ḥadīth* tells us, “God created Adam according to His form”. As such, man is the “confluence of the two seas”, the one in whom the higher and lower realities are united, the intermediary (or “isthmus”, *barzakh*) between God and the universe. In Arabic, the word *insān* means “human being” but also “apple of the eye” because, says Ibn ‘Arabī, “he is in relation to God what the pupil is in relation to the eye: it is through him that God looks upon the world and shows mercy” (see poem 15, “The Freshness of the Eye” [*Mā qurratu l-‘ayn*], note III). One cannot fail to recall Pascal’s famous text on man between the two dizzying infinities, the infinitely great and the infinitely small. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2016, pp. 111, 117–18)

The Perfect Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*), in relation to divine mercy, is like the pupil of the eye, through which one sees. The Perfect Man is an intermediary between God and the world. On the plane of Divinity, he is like the pupil for the eye and acts as an intermediary between the Seer (*al-Baṣīr*), the All-seeing One, and the seen. The Perfect Man is the eye of the world and the reflection of the Being of God, who is the light of that eye; that is, God is the pupil of that eye, which is the Perfect Man. The pupil of the eye is that part of the eye through which vision is experienced and symbolizes the inner vision. In other words, man is to God what the pupil is to the eye, and just as the compendium of the eye, the pupil,

is that which conveys the vision of the outer world, so the compendium of the existent is Ādam, the human being, through whom the divine mysteries and gnosis are seen or revealed.

8. “God Is the Seer, the Seen, and Sight Itself”

Authors should discuss the results and how they can be interpreted from the perspective of previous studies and the working hypotheses. The findings and their implications should be discussed in the broadest possible context. Future research directions may also be highlighted.

The lens of the video camera is also—for Bill Viola—an eye that sees and is seen. It is the parable of the bowl of water, in whose reflection the subject dissolves; in this annihilation, turned into nothing and blind to the world, it has become light. The light of the soul, the eye with which the soul sees, and the visible object are all one and the same. Viola, in connection with this video installation, quotes the following lines from Maḥmūd Shabistārī, who in his poem *Gulshan-i rāz* (*Garden of Mystery*)—poem that constitutes in the Persian language the most comfortable and excellent introduction to the Sufism of Ibn al-ʿArabī—states that, at the end of the soul’s journey towards God, the spiritual traveler discovers that “Everything is in everything”. Shabistārī’s explanation of the place of humanity as the pupil of the eye of the Beloved in the reflected image of the Beloved on the macrocosmic level was influenced by Ibn al-ʿArabī and ʿIrāqī:

Nonbeing is the mirror of Absolute Being. *v. 133*
 The Real’s brilliant reflection appears in it. /... /
 Since nonbeing was in its own essence pure, *v. 137*
 from it appeared the ‘Hidden Treasure.’ /... /
 Nonbeing is a mirror, the world is reflection, and man *v. 139*
 is the eye of this reflection, beholding the hidden Viewer.
 You are the reflection’s eye and It the light of the eye. *v. 140*
 The light of the eye is seeing itself through your eye! /... /
 When you look well into the heart of this matter, *v.142*

God is the seer, the seen, and sight itself.

(Shabistārī 2007, pp. 47–48)

*Know the world is a mirror from head to foot,
 In every atom are a hundred blazing suns.
 If you cleave the heart of one drop of water,
 a hundred pure oceans emerge from it.
 If you examine closely each grain of sand,
 A thousand atoms may be seen in it.
 In its members a gnat is like the Nile.
 The heart of a barley-corn equals a hundred harvests,
 A world dwells in the heart of a millet seed.
 In the wing of a gnat is the ocean of life.
 In the pupil of the eye a heaven:
 What though the grain of the heart be small
 It is a station of the Lord of both worlds to dwell therein.*

(in italics, the verses 144–150 quoted by Viola 1995, p. 43)

Mole (*khāl*), the black beauty spot, the center of the universe, means the point of Unity—the “hidden Ipseity” (*huwīyat*), the divine Self, single in itself but embracing all phenomena. The point of Unity is fixed and stable, but the heart is disquieted by constant

change of emotions, brightened by Divine epiphanies, and darkened by the veil of plurality, now in the spiritual mosque, now in the formal synagogue, now sunk in the hell of carnal affections, now raised to the heaven of spiritual emotions:

I'm no sure if her beauty mask is my heart's reflection v. 793
 or if my heart mirrors the mark on that lovely Face,
 if my heart came from the reflection of her mole, v. 794
 or if the reflection of the heart is manifesting There.
 Whether heart is on her Face or She within the heart v. 795
 is a secret that is utterly concealed from me.
 Yet if this heart of mine is the mirror of her mole, v. 796
 why should I have so many varied states?
 (Shabistārī 2007, p. 144; cf. Shabistārī 1880, pp. 14–15, 77)

In that eye, His eye sees His own eyes (Shabistārī). Compare a somewhat similar passage in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 8.7.4 (Mishra and Jha 1942, pp. 449–51). Bill Viola recognizes the meaning of the ancient *Upaniṣad* in his work (Bill Viola, in “Bill Viola Interviewed by John G. Hanhardt”, Hanhardt and Villaseñor 2002, p. 98; Hanhardt 2019, p. 27).

‘*Ayn*, the eye; the source; essence; entity; the thing that actually exists. *Chashm*, the eye; the inner eye, *chashm-i bāṭin*, which enables man to see the eternal (cf. Herbert 2002):

On the other hand, the enlightened gnostic Sufi (‘*ārif*) who bothers to verify the reality of things (*muḥaqqiq*) “beholding Divine Unity before him, sees the inward light of (Divine) Being everywhere”, Shabistārī tells us in the *Garden of Mystery*. (GR 9). Lāhījī, interpreting this line, characterizes this perfect mystic or “realizer (*muḥaqqiq*)” as a “perfect being to whom the reality of things as they truly are is manifest. This ideal reality (*ma‘nā*) however, is only fathomed by one who has realized the degree of Divine unveiling (*kashf-i ilahī*) and in sheer clarity of Vision (‘*āin al-‘ayān*, [literally, through the ‘Eye-of-Eyes’] witnesses that God (Ḥaqq) is the Reality of everything, perceiving that no other being besides the One Absolute Being exists—the existence of all other entities being something merely superimposed and relative”. (SGR 58) (Lewisohn 1992, p. 394)

Said work is commented on by a Persian mystic who introduced the work of Ibn al-‘Arabī, the eminent *kubrawī shaykh* Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad Lāhījī (d. 912/1507), to whom in a mystical vision the universe appeared submerged in a black light (*nūr-i siyāh*). Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad Lāhījī, in his work *Mafātīḥ al-‘i jāz fī sharḥ-i Gulshan-i rāz* (*The interpretation of the ‘Garden of Mystery’*), commenting on some lines of the poem related to the eye (*dīdah*) and vision (*baṣirat*), writes:

*Non-being is a mirror,
 the world is the image reflected in it and man
 is like the eye of that image
 in which the invisible Person is hidden.*

The term “world” (‘*ālam*) means that by which something is known, in the sense that it is a means, an instrument for knowing God. In the previous verses, it has been said that non-being, the archetypal essence, represents a mirror and is itself non-existent. What is reflected in that mirror is the image of a unique Reality, of an absolute Being.

In this verse, the master says that the “world” is the image of that unique Being reflected in the mirror. And since the human being is the sap and perfection of this image, if we compare the world reflected in the mirror to a person, the human being is the eye of this person, and God, who is the Person whose image is reflected in the mirror, is like the pupil of this eye.

*You are the eye of the image, and He is the light of the eye;
with the gaze of that eye, He sees Himself.*

[In the second part of the verse, Shabistari repeats the term *dīdah* four times. In Persian, the word *dīdah* means both the eye and the glance].

The world is the image of God's Being reflected in the mirror of non-being; the human being is the eye of this image, and God is the light of this eye, the faculty of vision of this eye.

When a person looks at himself in the mirror, everything that is in the person is in his reflection in the mirror; therefore, the image also has an eye, and just as in the eye of the person who looks there is his whole image, so also in the eye of the image there is the whole person, but invisible in him. Therefore, the faculty of vision of the eye, which is God, is hidden in the eye of the image, which is the human being, and this means that God looks at and contemplates Himself through the human being. In other words, God beholds His beautiful face through the eyes of man. (Shabistari 2008, pp. 163–64)

“Man”, says Lāhijī, “is the eye of the world, whereby God sees his own works”.

The whole Sufi system follows as a logical consequence of this fundamental assumption. Sense and reason cannot transcend phenomena or see the real Being that underlines them all, so sense and reason must be ignored and superseded in favor of the ‘inner light,’ the inspiration or divine illumination in the heart, which is the only faculty whereby men perceive the Infinite. Thus enlightened, men see that the whole external phenomenal world, including man's ‘self,’ is an illusion, non-existent in itself, and, in so far as it is non-existent, evil because a departure from the one real Being. Man's only duty is to shake off this illusion, this clog of Not being, to efface and die to self, and to be united with and live eternally in the one real Being—“The Truth”. In this progress to union, external observances and outward forms profit little because they keep alive the illusion of duality, of man's self-righteousness, of his personal agency and personal merit, whereas the true course is to ignore all reference to self—to be passive, that God may work—and then the Divine Light and grace will enter the chamber of man's heart and operate in him without impediment, draw him to “The Truth”, and unite him with “The One”. [...]

Reason, looking at the Light of lights, is blinded by excess light, like a bat by the sun. This annihilation of the mental vision caused by its proximity to the Light of lights—this consciousness of its own nothingness caused by its approach to Being—is the highest degree of perception that a contingent being can attain. When the contingent seer attains this state of annihilation of his phenomenal self, the true light is revealed to him as a spiritual illumination streaming in on his soul.

The phenomenal world is in itself Not being, wherein are reflected, as in a mirror, the various attributes of Being. By a species of radiation or effluxion of waves of light from Being, each atom of Not being becomes a reflection of someone's divine attribute. These effluent atoms of being are ever striving to rejoin their source, but so long as their phenomenal extrusion lasts, they are held back from reunion with their divine source. (Shabistari 1880, pp. ix–xi)

In Islam, of the many worlds of Reality, only the highest, the world of the Divine Essence (*‘ālam al-dhāt*), is absolutely Real. The other worlds are multiple reflections in the mirror of non-being. This is the only image that can convey to some extent the ineffable aspect of Truth, for the transition from Unity to multiplicity is a fundamental mystery that no human language or thought can hope to express adequately and fully. From a negative point of view, each lower world may be said to be the ‘shadow’ (*zill*) of the one above it, and each shadow is paler and further removed from the Absolute Reality as one descends

from the world of Essence, through the intermediate spheres, to that of earthly existence, the lowest in this hierarchy. The world can thus be regarded as the shadow of God.

Ibn al-ʿArabī also viewed the process of the unfolding of Multiplicity from Oneness as an uninterrupted and perpetual succession of theophanies (*tajalliyāt*) that are continually renewed. The water that has the color of the cup that contains it, or else the drop—which is the fluctuation of man’s heart—in the Ocean—the eternal stillness of God’s Existence (*wujūd*)—are symbols of the mysticism of reflection, images of man as an epiphanic mirror of the Invisible. As the drop that falls into the ocean is not annihilated even if it ceases to exist individually, so the disembodied soul becomes indistinguishable from the universal divinity. This idea also appears in the work of Shāh Niʿmat Allāh Walī Kirmānī (d. 834/1431), one of the greatest figures in Persian theosophy and mystical poetry. Niʿmat Allāh Walī, founder of the Niʿmat Allāhī Sufi order, was an adept and commentator on Ibn al-ʿArabī’s metaphysics of the “oneness of existence” or “transcendent unity of being” (*waḥdat al- wujūd*), as shown in his mystical poems (Shāh Niʿmat Allāh 1347/1969, *ghazal* no. 184, *mathnawī* no. 8):

Water is our source and our mirror,
 there is no duality between us and the sea;
 the world, from one end to the other, is a mirror,
 but look well, this mirror is none other than ourselves.
 Pay attention and look in my eye (*ʿayn*),
 and you will see our reality identical to Reality (*al-Ḥaqq*).
 In all mirrors there is only a reflection,
 behold this Reflection and clear your doubt.
 Look at the drop, the stream, the wave,
 then look for the sea and recognise your identity in all water.
 Make a cup made of wine and fill it with wine,
 yes, water and the glass of water are identical.
 I expound to you the secret of Oneness (*tawḥīd*),
 One Self and infinite reflections.

These beautiful verses express theophany (*tajallī*) in its multiple modalities. The drop of water, both in these poems and in Viola’s video installation, constitutes one and the same parable: the drop reflects the multiple phenomena of existence and unifies them on its surface as a single image, thus constituting a symbol of the ‘oneness of existence’. As a poet, Niʿmatullāh Walī sings, tirelessly and in a thousand forms, the mysticism of reflection as a manifestation of the One (*al-aḥad*), for beyond the colors and forms reflected in the water of a pond is the open sky that dilutes them as an image of divine Oneness. In turn, the also-*shaykh niʿmatullāhī* Shams al-ʿUrafāʾ states:

The reflection of [God’s absolute] Self shines in the Nothingness [of the created universe] as in a mirror [...] So does a layer of water [the heart of the Gnostic] in which the rays of the sun [the spirit—*rūḥ*—of God] are reflected shine with a thousand radiances. But if the star disappears over the horizon or is covered with clouds, all radiance is extinguished, for its existence is dependent on the sun, whereas the sun is not dependent on the layer of water or the reflection. The layer of water is the mirror of the sun, just as nothingness is the mirror of absolute Being, and the images formed on the surface of the water show the universe of creation. [...]

The Universe is an image of absolute Being, that is to say, of God, an image reflected by the mirror of nothingness, and man is an eye upon this image. If we look into the glass, we can perceive our minuscule image reflected in our pupil; in the same way, man, who is that eye, reflects God. Man carries in his heart the reflection of God—the reflection of infinite Beauty. (Rypka 1951, p. 105)

The second paragraph of the quoted words of Shams al-^Urafā³ perfectly explains the metaphysical value of the vision that Bill Viola wanted to manifest in *He Weeps for You*. But the video installation in question also expresses the theme of the *mors mystica*.

According to Rūzbihān Baqlī Shīrāzī, when your own gaze is the eye through which God contemplates Himself, then you are in the state of the vision of vision. For man's vision of the world is the same as that which the divine gaze perceives. Thus, this vision postulates an ἔκστασις, a way out of oneself. An exit that is admirably expressed in this paradox of Rūzbihān: *man bar man bī man 'āshiq-am* ("it is myself who, myself absent, am the lover of myself"). A supreme paradox that also sums up the whole ambiguity of the science of vision. The gaze that the lover contemplates in the mirror is his own gaze, and yet it is not him, since it is the gaze of the other, and yet, ultimately, it is not the other but himself. *Vision of vision* (Corbin, Henry 1971–1972, pp. 3:140 ss.) and mystery of that which is and that which is not, and yet is and is not at the same time, of that which ultimately remains in suspense between being and non-being. It is this degree of vision that attests, moreover, to the famous ecstatic paradox of al-Ḥusayn ibn Manṣūr al-Ḥallāj, who said: "I am the Truth" (*anā l-Ḥaqq*). In a famous essay on Rūzbihān Baqlī, Henry Corbin comments:

In a formula of extreme conciseness, Rūzbehān declares: "From now on the mystic, absent himself, sees God through God (*bī-khōd Ḥaqq-rā be-Ḥaqq bīnad*). He sees, indeed, but at the same time, it is not he who sees. It is God who sees for him; he is the eye through which God contemplates himself, which again means: "The above has become the below, and vice versa". Now, at the extreme limit of its ecstatic perfection, the experience of love is expressed in the same terms. This is why the exemplary couple of Majnūn and Layla, the Tristan and Isolde of Persian and Arabian "romanticism", has been offered inexhaustibly to the meditation of the Faithful of Love among the Sufis.

An anonymous glossator, a rūzbehānian of the Safavid period, in order to illustrate the case of the mystical lover, totalising in himself, through the perfection of his love, the two modes of being, that of the lover (*'āshiqī*) and that of the beloved (*ma'shūqī*), introduces here two famous verses attributed sometimes to Majnūn, sometimes to Ḥallāj: "I am the one (or the one) I love; the one (or the one) I love is me; we are two spirits immanent in one body". "Then", he says, "when this spiritual state reaches the limit of its perfection, it is *God himself who, through his own eternal gaze, contemplates his own eternal face*". The mystical lover, Majnūn, is the eye through which God contemplates Himself, and for this reason, he is the love through which God loves Himself as the object of this love. "All that is not this indivisible instant, declared Rūzbehān, "is only the world of the duality of objects. Meditate on this strange thing: it is myself who, myself absent, is the lover of myself (*man bar man bī-mān 'āshiq-am*). I never cease to contemplate myself, while being absent myself. So, who am I then?" The only possible answer is suggested by this allusive poem:

In search of the Grail of Jamshīd [*jām-i Jam (shīd)*] I roamed the world,
Not a day did I rest, not a night did I sleep.

But when I heard from the master the description of the Grail of Jamshīd
That Grail that reveals the world, behold: it was myself.

(Corbin 1981, p. 165)

Rūzbihān explains: "When you have attained the vision of vision, every atom of your being proclaims: 'I am God' (*anā l-Ḥaqq*)". For then every atom of creation is an eye of God (*apud* Corbin 1971–1972, volume 3, p. 141). But if all atoms are the eyes of God, the reason is that the acts of creation are also divine contemplations (*nazarāt*). In fact, all the categories of creation are not distinct objects of God but the very organs of His creation. Every creation constitutes a divine *eye*, for without this organ of vision, nothing could have been shown. In this sense, every creation is a theophany. In the state of the vision

of vision, a coalescence occurs so that, says Rūzbihān, “the coalescence of the gaze [...] of the lover and the gaze [...] of the Beloved, is involved in the gaze of coalescence (*‘ayn-i jam‘*) which is the essence of love” (Corbin, Henry 1971–1972, volume 3, p. 141). This is a homo-chromatic (*ham-rang*), co-natural state between the lover (*muḥibb*) and the Beloved (*maḥbūb*), a *symmorphosis* or a *synchromatism* (*yak-rangī, ham-rangī*), says Corbin (Corbin, Henry 1971–1972, pp. 3:97, 143), thanks to which the mystical lover contemplates the eye that contemplates him as if he himself were this eye. By the union of the light of the pure creatures of the *malakūt* and the light of inner vision and perception, which is the very source and archetype of beauty, the soul has acquired the quality of a pure mirror, of *mazhar* (epiphanic place); she has become connatural with love; she has taken on its color (*ham-rang, yak-rang, homo-chrome, monochrome*). The identity of the mutual gaze in the work of Rūzbihān Baqlī is magnificently analyzed in the aforementioned essay by Henry Corbin:

It is this occultation, this return of the creature to himself, that Rūzbehān, analyzing it with the penetration of the greatest masters of Sufism, designates as the supreme Test, the Test of the Veil. On all planes of being: Angels, prophets, Friends of God, and earthly pilgrims—the drama reappears. One emerges victorious only on the condition that the paradoxical meaning of the famous Sufi maxim is resolved experimentally: “He who knows himself knows his God”. Only then does divine jealousy cease, because if it is true that God wants to be known eternally (*i.e., now*) by a Witness (*shāhid*), this Witness cannot be other than himself. Therefore, the knowledge that this Witness has of Him must be nothing other than the knowledge that He Himself has of this Witness. The gaze of this Witness, like that of the Prophet in his supreme vision, must “not deviate or overstep (53/17)”. This Witness must realize that if he is God’s Witness, it is because he himself is the *mirror, the eye*, through which God contemplates himself. Because God alone can know God and God alone can attest to God, the Contemplator (*shāhid*) becomes the Contemplated (*mashhūd*), the lover becomes the beloved. Through this transfer of contemplative and testimonial activity to the real Subject, it can no longer be said that God is looked upon by the creature; but the latter, having been brought to a state of pure transparency by the effacement of his egotistical *self*, is now, in and through his own gaze, looking at God himself. Creation, as divine contemplation, is not an *object* distinct from the very act of this contemplation; it is the organ, the mirror, and the *eye*, since without the organ of vision, nothing is seen. When the Veil has become a mirror, and then the test is overcome. But Rūzbehān also knows it: the common man ignores it, and the drama of the human condition is there in this unconsciousness. [...]

Now, for there to be an Other, there must be this opacity, this darkness of a being stopping at itself, at the non-being of its pretensions, its ignorance, even its devotions. If he poses as an Other, he cannot look at God, since God can only be looked at by himself. God can only look at a world that looks at itself—that is to say, at his own eyes that look at him in this world. That is why the world that wants to be *other* (whether by agnosticism or by piety) is not a world that God looks at. It is literally a *world that God does not look at*. [...]

These are simultaneously the focal points of the divine Gaze among the earthly and the eyes through which God contemplates his creation, or rather, contemplates himself in it. They are simultaneously the eyes through which he contemplates them, for they are like so many mirrors on which the sun’s ray falls to reflect itself on the world. It is through them that other eyes come to open to the Gaze, of which they then also become the contemplation. At the heart of Rūzbehān’s doctrine, we find the same essential intuition as that expressed by one of the greatest mystics of the West, Master Eckhart, in the fourteenth century, in this statement: “The gaze by which I know God is the same gaze by which God knows me”. The identity of this mutual, mutually conditioned gaze is the secret of the theophanies that filled Rūzbehān’s life: his enchantment, his loving

ecstasy before all forms of beauty, can only be understood in the light of this Gaze. (Corbin 1981, pp. 159, 160)

Michel Chodkiewicz, to speak of the “transparency” of the saint and his role as a privileged theophanic place, comments on the Rūzbihān Baqlī texts studied by Henry Corbin:

A little further on, there is a long account of a spiritual event that took place while Rūzbehān was in his *ribāṭ* (“convent”) in Shirāz. “Then”, he writes, “He clothed me with His Attributes and made me one with His Essence. Then I saw myself as if I were Him (*thumma raʿaytu nafsī ka-annī huwa*). . . Then I returned from that state and descended from the degree of Lordship (*rubūbiyya*) to that of servitude (*ʿubūdiyya*)”. [*Kashf al-asrār*, p. 111]. Let us quote again this last confidence in relation to what we have said about the “transparency” of the saint and his role as a privileged theophanic place: “Once, I was sitting during the first half of the night with my son Aḥmad who was suffering from a violent fever, and it was not long before my heart melted with anxiety. Behold, suddenly I saw God in His aspect of Beauty. He showed kindness to my son and to me. Ecstasy and agitation seized me [. . .] I said to Him, “O my God, why do You not speak to me as You spoke to Moses? He answered me, “Is it not enough for You that he who loves You loves Me and he who sees You sees Me?” [*Kashf al-asrār*, p. 117] (Chodkiewicz 1986, p. 61)

Thus, the ultimate meaning of the symbol of the pupil of the eye in the mentioned poem of the *Dīwān* of Ibn al-ʿArabī (1996) and the passage of the mirror in which the mystic and God himself are reflected in the *Kashf al-asrār* of Rūzbihān Baqlī is the same: God sees himself together with the mystic in the pupil of the eye (Ibn al-ʿArabī) or in the mirror that God himself holds (Rūzbihān Baqlī); in both cases, a vision of God himself. This witness must become aware that if he is God’s witness, it is because he himself is the mirror, the eye, through which God contemplates himself. The most frequent expression in *The Unveiling of Secrets* is “I saw him” (*raʿaytuhu*). It is no exaggeration to say that vision (*ruʿya*) is the most important general category for mystical experience in Rūzbihān’s vocabulary (Ernst 1996, p. 18; Papan-Matin and Fishbein 2006, p. 25; Murata 2017, p. 32). In this sense, the specialist in Persian and Turkish Sufism, Paul Ballanfat adds in the introduction to his own translation of the *Kashf al-asrār*:

The “vision of the mirror” (*Unveiling*: 84) is particularly significant in the relationship that God has with the saint. God is obliged to mention this vision to Rūzbehān who had not perceived it. God sees himself at the same time as Rūzbehān in the mirror (*Unveiling*: 84). “Did you not understand that I was sitting by your side last night in the aspect of beauty and majesty? My face was facing yours. I held a mirror in My hand that reflected My face and yours. I was looking at your face, and I was looking from your face to the mirror in which My face and yours appeared. The mention of this vision immediately provokes a wonderful ecstasy. However, this is a vision that Rūzbehān did not experience because it is a vision of God himself. [. . .]

The key to the aesthetic relationship is thus to be found in the nature of the vision, of which the mystic is unaware. It is God who sees himself in the mirror. God, in seeing himself, redoubles himself. But he does not only see himself. He also sees the saint. His doubling produces a doubling. For God, the I of the saint is instituted without his knowledge by the double vision of the original face of Rūzbehān and of his reflection next to that of God in the mirror. Significantly, while God sees himself only in the mirror, he sees both the reality of others and his own reflection. God thus asserts himself in the vision only by doubling himself, while the saint is perceived in his reality and his double. Paradoxically, the absolute, the only one that is, God, is not perceived as reality, whereas the relative, the one who is not really, the saint, is perceived as irreducibly there, but only by another. The condition for the maintenance of the mystic’s I is that he is

not for himself. Thus, only God is in relation to himself and can say he is I and determine his place. To be an I, the mystic is reduced to being the you of the one to whom the discourse is addressed. The creaturely I can therefore always be only a you, and the creative project is in this absence of substance of the mystical I, this I that can never truly perceive itself otherwise than through the discourse of an absolutely other, God. (Rūzbihān 1996, pp. 42–43)

In Persian mystical poetry, the energetic source of poetic vision is the eye of the heart (Arabic: *‘ayn al-qalb*; Persian: *chashm-i dil*) of the poet, the inner heart (*al-qalb al-ḥaqīqī*), the “inner vision of the heart” (*baṣīrat-i qalbiyyi*), which is both the point of origin (*nuqṭa*) of the whole vibration of the soul (the subtle centre of the heart: Arabic: *qalb*; Persian: *dil*) and the center “spatialising” the space of vision. This coincidence of the planes of vision is, moreover, the beginning of the dialectical movement of the soul, since this vision is supplemented by a continuous back-and-forth movement between the heart (*qalb*, *dil*) of the poet, the initial point from which the restlessness of the soul emerges, and the primary source from which it draws its inspiration; In other words, a perpetual oscillation between the one who reveals by concealing and conceals by revealing, between a beauty (*jamāl*) that repels by repelling and a majesty (*jalāl*) that repels by attracting. Why is the heart the point of origin of this movement? Because it is the subtle center par excellence of Gnostic knowledge.

Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad Ḥāfiẓ (d. 792/1389), one of the greatest Persian poets, in a manner typical of his lyric, expresses this very relationship by making the pupil of the beholder a reflection of the mole of the beloved (Ḥāfiẓ Shīrāzī, Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad 1359/1980, *ghazal* 400, *bayt* 9):

This black spot (*nuqṭa-yi siyāh*), which is the center of light, is a reflection of your mole (*khāl*) in the garden (*ḥadīqa*—or the small pupil [*ḥudaiqa*]?) of (my) gaze.

In this *bayt* Ḥāfiẓ precisely expresses a classic comparison in Persian lyric, that of the black pupil of the lover’s eye with the mole of the Beloved, the pupil being the reflection of the mole, by means of which, in the Sufi tradition, symbolizes the Center or First Point (*nuqṭa-yi awwal*) of the absolute divine Unity (*aḥadīyat*). In the original Persian Ḥāfiẓ uses the term *ḥadīqa* meaning “enclosed garden”, which shares the same lexical root as the Arabic term *ḥadaqa* (‘pupil’; from the Arabic root *ḥadaqa*, to see; Hebrew: *ḥedeqah*) meaning the “pupil of the eye”. In the verse of Ḥāfiẓ it is about the «garden of vision». The mole (*khāl*) is related to the unitary vision of the world. This “black point” which itself becomes the axis of light, is nothing else—the poet tells us—than the “image of Your mole in the garden of vision” (Shayegan 1995, p. 23). Therefore, the axis of the poet’s vision is linked to the visionary unity of this black spot (*nuqṭa-yi siyāh*) from which he receives the resplendent light. Leaving aside various aspects of this ingenious verse, we retain the idea that the poet’s eye, as an instrument for perceiving the beauty of the world, is its mirror. We only have to internalize this relationship to perceive its full scope. Freeing oneself from the two worlds is equivalent to freeing oneself from the opposition between *azal* (pre-eternity) and *abad* (post-eternity), which makes no sense except in relation to the tension that exists between the two worlds of God and man. Well, for the one who is the slave of Love (*banda-yi ‘ishq*) and has detached himself from the two worlds, the two original points of the two arcs of descent and ascent, originating respectively from God and from man, coincide in the ever-present eternity of the Instant of the gaze; instant that is, now, the point of coincidence of an anteriority without beginning (*azal*) and of a posteriority without end (*abad*); translated to the visual plane, this instant is the “black mole” of the pupil of the divine eye, which is also the eye of the heart of the one who sees, thanks to the divine eye:

As an entrée as to how and why Love creates creation, let’s start with the beloved’s cheek, the beauty mark, or mole on it, and the relationship Hafiz establishes between this beauty mark (sounds better than mole) and the pupil of the eye. In the process, we will also encounter Hafiz’s referential poetic style, wherein

referring to and comparing the qualities of one thing establishes, at least in part, the qualities of another.

In this case, nothing is better suited for expressing the infinity of the infinite and how it relates to the finiteness of creation than the pupil of the eye. The eye's pupil is round, minute, and black, yet it is able to contain vast vistas of sight and the effulgence of light. Hafiz makes it clear that the pupil's ability to contain limitless sight is because it is a reflection of the beauty mark on the Beloved's cheek, and by doing this, Hafiz establishes this beauty mark as representing all of creation:

I hold
the pupil of
my eye
dear as
it is
a copy of
your
Hindu
beauty mark.

I hold in great esteem the black of the surface of my eyes, because for the soul it is a copy of the drawing of Your mole of a Hindu [beauty] black [mark].

If you want to eternally decorate the whole world,

tell the zephyr to remove the veil (*burqa*) from Your face for an instant!

On the page of the gaze (*luh-i baṣar*) the point of Your mole cannot be drawn, except by resorting to the black of the ink (*midād*) of the pupil of the eye.

(Masciandaro and Booth 2017, pp. 93–94)

“The black of the surface of my eyes” (*sawād-i lawḥ-i bīnīsh*) is a way of describing the “(black) pupil of the eye” (*mardum-i chashm*). It is traditional that she is the image, on the eye-mirror of the lover, of the mole (*khāl*) of the Beloved, who looks at himself in it. The “black mole” on the pupil of the divine eye is also the “eye of the heart” of the seer (*chashm-i dil*), thanks to the divine eye. *Lawḥ* is literally the tablet on which it is written; *bīnīsh* names ‘glance’, sight, the fact of seeing, but eventually he can name the organ of sight. While black is “hidden in its sheer brilliance”, it is through white that it becomes manifest. This perception comes from the black of the pupil, which, being in the center of the eye, symbolically designates the veil, both for internal and external vision. In Sufism, it is said that the “heart” (*qalb*), inside the chest (*ṣadr*), resembles the black part of the pupil of the eye, in the center of the whiteness of the eye. The heart (*qalb*) is the cradle of faith, the place of light, intellect, and inner vision. The abode of vision (*fawād*) is the cradle of contemplation and the place of divine vision, symbolized by the dark dot in the center of the pupil of the eye. Black is the color of the annihilation of the ego (*fanā*), prerequisite for reintegration (*baqā*), but also the light of Majesty (*jalāl*), and the color of the hidden Divine Essence (*al-dhāt*).

Compare Ibn al-ʿArabī's verse “staring at me with an eye that was all a dark pupil (*ḥawar*)” and Ḥāfiz's *bayt* “the black of the surface of my eyes (*sawād-i lawḥ-i bīnīsh*)”, i.e., the “(black) pupil of the eye” (*mardum-i chashm*), with Pr 7:9 where it is used to denote what is the center (American Revised Version, “in the middle of the night”; the English Revised Version, “in, the blackness of night”; margin “Hebrew pupil [of the eye]”:

ap'-'-l: The eyeball, or globe of the eye, with pupil in center, called “apple” from its round shape. Its great value and careful protection by the eyelids automatically closing when there is the least possibility of danger made it the emblem of that which was most precious and jealously protected. The Hebrew terms for it

were *‘ishon*, diminutive of *‘ish*, “man”, little man, or mannikin, referring perhaps especially to the pupil, probably from “the little image one sees of himself when looking into another’s pupil” (Davies’ Lexicon). “He kept him (Israel) as the apple of his eye” (De 32:10); “Keep me as the apple of the eye”, literally, “as the apple, the daughter of the eye” (Ps 17:8). “Keep my law (the Revised Version, margin “teaching”) as the apple of thine eye” (Pr 7:2). Compare Pr 7:9 where it is used to denote what is the center (American Revised Version, “in the middle of the night”; the English Revised Version “in, the blackness of night”; margin “Hebrew pupil [of the eye]”); *babhah* perhaps an “opening”, “gate”; others regard it as a mimetic word akin to Latin *pupa*, *papilla* (“He that toucheth you toucheth the apple of his eye”, i.e., Yahweh’s; Zec 2:8); *bath-‘ayin*, “daughter of the eye”; “Give thyself no respite, let not the apple of thine eye cease” (La 2:18), which means, either “sleep not”, or “cease not to weep”. *kore*, “young girl”, “pupil of the eye”: “He (the Lord) will keep the good deeds (the Revised Version (British and American) “bounty”) of a man as the apple of the eye” (Ecclesiasticus 17:22); the Septuagint also has *kore* in all instances except La 2:18, where it has *thugater*, “daughter”.

(W. L. Walker Apple, of the Eye—International Standard Bible Encyclopedia)

The mole (*khāl*) is a symbol used to refer to the sacred Essence of God in Himself, for, in the same way that there is no visibility in absolute blackness, neither does anyone know the sacred Essence of God; it is also an allusion to the divine Unity of the absolute Essence. For travelers on the Path, the mole is an allusion to the point of absolute Unity, both for its characteristic of being hidden and for being the origin and end of multiplicity. Since the mole, by its blackness, resembles the hidden Ipseity (*huwāyat*) of God, which is hidden and beyond all perception or understanding.

“Recourse to the black of ink”: the pupil of the lover’s eye stops at the mole of the Beloved; she is the reproduction of this mole on the eye. The point formed by this mole cannot be drawn well except with the black ink that is the color of the pupil. In a typically Ḥāfīzian way, the poet expresses this same relationship by making the lover’s pupil a reflection left by the Beloved’s mole.

The Perfect Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*), in relation to divine mercy, is like the pupil in relation to the eye, through which it is seen. The Perfect Man is an intermediary between God and the world. On the plane of Divinity, he is like the pupil to the eye and acts as an intermediary between the Seer (*al-Baṣīr*), the All-Seer, and the seen (Shāh Ni‘mat Allāh, IV, p. 340). The Perfect Man is the eye of the world and the reflection of the Being of God, who is the light of that eye; that is to say, God is the pupil of that eye that is the Perfect Man. Cf. Lāhījī, *Mafātīh*, 111. The pupil of the eye is that part of the eye through which vision is experienced and symbolizes inner vision. In other words, man is to God what the pupil is to the eye, and just as the compendium of the eye, the pupil, is what transmits the vision of the external world, the compendium of the existent is Adam, the human being, through whom the divine mysteries and gnosis are seen, or revealed. (*Rukn al-Dīn Shīrāzī, Mas‘ūd ibn ‘Abd Allāh 1359 h.sh./1980*, p. 76).

As Hiwa Michaeli, a researcher in Comparative Literary Studies, exposes in his book *Goethe’s Faust and the Divan of Ḥāfīz. Body and Soul in Pursuit of Knowledge and Beauty*:

In the beginning of another *ghazal*, Ḥāfīz once again illustrates the relation between the eye and the heart: ‘Mein Augenmann hat nur dein Angesicht im Blick, | mein wirres Herz gedenkt nur deiner.’ Wohlleben’s translation of *mardum-i dāda* as Augenmann (pupil of the eye) can be traced back to Hammer-Purgstall’s translation. Rosenzweig-Schwannau also uses this translation. The modern reader may overlook the intellectual significance and poetic potential of *mardum-i dāda*, which appears to be an archaic variant of the commonly used word *mardumak-i chashm* (pupil of the eye). On closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that this word combination is a calque of the Arabic *insān ul-‘ayn*. Bearing this fact in mind allows us to better understand the couplet cited above. The loan translation is

constructed as follows. The first component, *insān*, is translated as *mardum*, based on the literal meaning of the Arabic word—‘human’. Along the same lines, the word *‘ayn* is translated as *čašm* or *dāda*. In his lexicon, Lane glosses *insān ul-‘ayn* as follows: ‘The image that is seen [reflected] in the black of the eye’ and ‘what is seen in the eye, like as is seen in a mirror, when a thing faces it’. Then Lane offers the following translations: ‘pupil’ or ‘apple of the eye’. The same explanation can be found in lexicons from the ninth century onward, such as *Adab al-kātib* (ninth century), *Kitāb at-talhīs fī ma‘rifat-i asmā’ al-ašyā’* (tenth century), and *Šarḥ maqāmāt ul-ḥarīrī* (thirteenth century). Exploring these lexicons further clarifies the image that Lane mentions in his lexicon: the reflection on the black mirror of the pupil of the eye is the image of the person who looks into it. In the first chapter of *Fuṣūṣ ul-ḥikam*, Ibn ‘Arabī describes the self-disclosure of the One as Its casting of Its own image upon the mirror. In this image, the relation between humans and the One is likened to the relation between the pupil of the eye (*insān ul-‘ayn*) and the eye; the pupil is the window through which sight is possible. In a *qaṣīda*, ‘Irāqī describes the primordial state in which his being is formed. In the penultimate couplet, he poses a rhetorical question: ‘If I am not the pupil of the eye of that Beloved, | Why of all the world I bear the name human.’ In another verse in one of his famous strophic poems, he asserts, ‘I am the pupil of the eye of the world’. At first, this may appear to mean simply that humans are the creatures most dear to the universe—the apple of its eye. Yet the verse has a deeper meaning. We can better understand this verse by consulting Šabistarī’s *Gulšan-i rāz*. (Šabistarī was a Sufi master contemporary to Ḥāfiẓ and the work in question was written in verse.) This book clarifies the principles of Sufism and gives an allegorical interpretation of some of the tropes found in Sufi love poetry. [. . .]

Šabistarī suggests that the One’s reflection, cast upon the mirror of non-being (*‘adam*), generates the image of the whole universe in the shape of a person. Each atom of this cosmic image contains the same image, but there is only one mirror (in the cosmic image itself) capable of reflecting the image in its entirety—*i.e.*, the pupil of the eye of this cosmic image. This dark mirror in the cosmos is humanity: ‘Non-being is the mirror, the universe, the image and the human | Like the pupil of the image in which the person is concealed’. Šabistarī describes the image of the Beloved in the pupil of the eye as the light by which the eye perceives; what it sees is the face that is in front of it. Finally, he mentions: ‘If you take a deep look into this matter, | It is He who is the seer, the eye and the sight’. ‘Irāqī claims that the human is the *insān ul-‘ayn* of the Beloved as well as of the world; the likeness humans bear to the whole image of the Beloved is their essence (*‘ayn*), and this image is active in their eyes (*‘ayn*) perceiving the world of the diversifications of the One through the light that is again the image of the One itself. This claim is another articulation of the inner connections between the humanity of humans, the heart (*‘ayn* in the meaning of ‘essence’ and ‘likeness’), and the eye that perceives the One in Its diversifications. The relation between the eye and the heart allows us to appreciate Ḥāfiẓ’s couplet quoted above, in which he claims that the pupil of his eye gazes upon nothing but the face of the Beloved and that his heart, as an intellectual faculty, is ruled by nothing but the images of the Beloved. This view of the sight and perception of the phenomena corresponds to Ḥāfiẓ’s turn toward natural and human beauty, which he understands as a noble act that entails going beyond one’s limited selfish interests and recognizing the Beloved as the only source of Beauty. In the following couplet, Ḥāfiẓ describes his view of being a lover. He personifies the image of the Beloved in his pupil (*mardum-i čašm*) while his heart actively explores the garden of the world (*bāğ-i ‘ālam*): ‘Was ist das Ziel des Herzens bei Betrachtung des Weltgartens? | Mit Hilfe [mit der Hand] der Pupille von deiner Wange Rosen zu pflücken.’ The image of the Beloved comes to life, extending His or Her Hand beyond the reflecting

surface of Ḥāfiz’s pupil (*mardum-i čašm*) to gather flowers from the garden of the world, which is identified with the face of the Beloved. Ḥāfiz thereby becomes what he claims to be in the opening verse of this *gāzal* (385)—the famous lover in the city of Shiraz. The pupil of the eye extends its activity between the heart that is formed by the Beloved (and that desires the Beloved) and the world that reflects the Beloved. (Michaeli 2019, pp. 289–93)

Interestingly, a small-format video diptych by Bill Viola is entitled *The Locked Garden* (2000). In Ḥāfiz’s verse, it is about the “garden of vision”. Leaving aside various aspects of this witty verse, we retain the idea that the poet’s eye, as an instrument of perception of the beauty of the world, is the mirror of it; we have but to internalize this relationship in order to perceive its full extent. To free oneself from the two worlds is to free oneself from the opposition between *azal* (pre-eternity) and *abad* (post-eternity), which only makes sense in relation to the tension that exists between the two worlds of God and man. For the one who is the slave of Love (*banda-yi ‘ishq*) and has detached himself from the two worlds, the two original points of the two arcs of descent and ascent that originate respectively from God and man coincide in the ever-present eternity of the Instant of the gaze; The instant, which is now the point of coincidence of a beginningless anteriority (*azal*) and an endless posteriority (*abad*); translated into the visual plane, this Instant is the “black mole” of the pupil of the divine eye, which is also the eye of the one who sees, thanks to the divine eye:

I mentioned that the mole [*khāl*] stands for the Beloved on its most infinite, non-entified level. I also pointed out that ‘Irāqī, uniting the traditions of A. Ġazzālī and Ibn ‘Arabī, holds that the beloved has a direct presence in the lover’s faculty of appreciation of beauty. Next, I examine whether this relation extends to the relation between the mole and the Beloved and the eye of the lover.

Ḥāfiz illustrates the relation between the mole of the Beloved and the eye of the lover in the following verses:

Savād-i dāda-yi ġam-dāda-am ba ašk ma-šuy

Ki naqš-i hāl-i tu-am hargiz az nazār na-ravad

Do not with tears wash out the black of my grief-experienced eye,
Because the reflection of your mole should never leave my sight.

Īn nuqṭa-yi sīyāh ki āmad madār-i nūr

‘Aksīst dar ḥadīqa-yi bīniš zi hāl-i tu

This black spot that has become the pivot of light,
In vision’s garden-plot is a reflection of your mole.

As we see in these verses, the mole [*khāl*] is mentioned in direct relations to the eye [*dāda*]. The pupil (or *insān ul-‘ayn*) of the lover is repeatedly described as a reflection of the mole of the Beloved. This reflected image is repeatedly described as a reflection of the mole of the beloved. This reflected image is repeatedly referred to as a permanent mark. Furthermore, this image of the mole is described as the source of light and sight. Early instances of these two metaphors can be found in the works of Sanā’ī and ‘Aḡḡār. [...]

The other pivotal principle in Sufi adoration of beauty that finds articulation in ‘Irāqī’s work is the relation between the eye [*dāda*] and the heart [*dil*] of the lover. Both contain an image of the Beloved, which unites the faculty of appreciation of beauty (the eye) and the ontological ground of humanity (the heart). But the relations between the eye and the heart of the lover, I argue, are mediated by the (distinct) connection that each has to the mol of the Beloved. In the previous sub-section, I discussed the first of these connections—the connection between the mole of the Beloved and the eye of the lover. In this sub-section, I show that the heart of the lover likewise bears a connection to the Beloved’s mole. [...]

Cast in the depths of the human heart, the image of the mole of the Beloved is the ontological ground of the human being (*zamīr*). The image of the mole also forms the pupil of the eye, which allows the human being to recognize the unity (of the mole) in the multiplicity (of the down and tress). (Michaeli 2019, pp. 303–5)

Only love encounters God “without veils”, only love can tear the veil that stands between consciousness and God. Then God Himself draws aside the veil of knowledge and allows Himself to be seen and contemplated by the one who loves Him and whom He loves. In the words of Rūmī: “We are both the mirror and the face”.

Ḥāfiẓ speaks of “fire and water in the heart and in the eye” (Persian: *ātash u āb i dil u chashm*). We can evoke here the exhibition by Bill Viola titled precisely *Bill Viola: Fire, Water, Breath* (New York: Guggenheim Museum SoHo, 18 January–23 March 1997) (Hanhardt 1997). The physical eye sees water and clay (*i.e.*, the material world), but the eye of the heart (*chashm-i dil*)—like through the cup (*ka’s, qadah, sāghar, jām*) of Jamshīd (*jām-i Jam [shīd]*) or the cup of Kay Khusrau, the cup that shows the world (*jām-i giti namā*), the cup of world-vision (*dād-i jahānbīn*), reflection of the face of the Beloved, which is the mirror of the universe but which in itself cannot be seen—see the innermost secret (*sirr*). This cup of knowledge (*jām-i ma’rifat*) is our own heart (*qalb, dil*). For this reason, the chalice represents the heart of the Perfect Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*): an invisible and colorless cup capable of reflecting the whole of the Universe, the wisdom of the things of the spiritual world, and finally God. The true Self that flows through all non-existent things and cannot be perceived without these shadowed entities becomes clearly identified with the mystic. Thus: “The inner eye recognizes the lofty rank of a man”. The eye of this splendid white hawk regains the vision of the horizon of the intelligible, a vision as vast as the sea: “The eye that has transcended the objects of sense perception and has obtained the kisses of the vision of the Invisible”. For as long as the heart does not open the “eye of the secret” (*chashm-i sirr*), the “witness of love” (*shāhid-i ‘ishq, i.e.*, the Beloved) will not show His face. All the limbs of the servant become eyes (*dāda*) in order to see a sign (*nishān*) of the Friend (*dūst*: for the Persian mystics, one of the names of God). Since the ordinary eye cannot see Him, the faculty of seeing (*dāda*) needs another eye with which to see Him. Then the eye of the heart (*‘ayn al-qalb*) becomes light (*nūr*), and the secret (*sirr*) of the hidden (spiritual) world (*‘ālam-i ghayb*) is revealed to him:

The heart of the lover, therefore, which holds up the mirror in which the Beloved views Her or His own attributes, is the locus of this ontological ground. The significance of the eye and its relation to the heart is evident from Ḥāfiẓ’s frequent mentions of his pupil and its activity. I situated the metaphor of the pupil in the *Divan* within its larger allegorical context—namely, Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Fuṣūṣ*, ‘Irāqī’s poetic works, and Šabistari’s *Gulšan-i rāz*, which describes the phenomenal world as an image of the Beloved cast upon the mirror of non-being (*hyle*). In that image, the Beloved’s pupil represents humanity, uniquely receptive to the whole image of all the attributes of the Beloved and able to reflect on the One that is facing it—in the mirror’s reflected image, only the pupil is still a mirror. (That is why the pupil is the apple of the eye of the universe.) The inner connection between the heart and the eye shows that the human being’s appreciation of beauty and pursuit of love are the activities of the immanent image of the One, capable of recognizing that all phenomena share a likeness to the One Beloved. This active faculty also constitutes the humanity of humans and accounts for Ḥāfiẓ’s ability to perceive the divine acts of diversification in everything he perceives. This perception accounts for his constant practice of ogling (*naẓar-bāzī*)—literally, ‘glance-playing’—which makes him the eternal lover that he is. (Michaeli 2019, p. 315)

9. Conclusions

Nearly all of Bill Viola’s writings and catalogs contain some allusion to Sufism. Viola himself has recently referred to Ibn al-‘Arabī as one of his favorite thinkers (Viola,

“LOVE/DEATH”). Consider the two quotations that frame his collected writings, *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House*, on the first page of which the only text is, “If you engage in travel, you will arrive.—Ibn ʿArabi (1165–1240)” and on the very last page of which we read, “The Universe continues to be in the present tense.—Ibn ʿArabi (1165–1240)” (Viola 1995, pp. 1, 304). The names of the great Sufi masters—Shihāb al-Dīn Yaḥyā Suhrawardī (m. 587/1191) (Walsh 2003, p. 247), Muḥammad al-Ghazzālī, Ibn al-ʿArabi (Walsh 2003, pp. 172–75; Hanhardt 2017, pp. 222, 225), Rūmī (Walsh 2003, pp. 175–76, 207), Shabistarī—recur repeatedly in his writings (cf. Viola 1995, index s.v. “Arabi, Ibn”, “al-Ghazzali”, “Masnavi, The (Rumi)”, “Rumi, Jallaludin”, “Shabistari, Mahmud”, “Sufi[sm]”).

The first chapter of *Reasons for Knocking*, consisting of a series of facsimiles from Viola’s notebooks, features several lengthy extracts from Rūmī, a paragraph from the introductions to *Kitāb al-ṭāwasīn*, and *pīr* (Persian: lit. ‘elder’ = Sufi master) Hazrat Inayat Khan on perception (Viola, *Reasons* 22–6). Or, consider the exhibition catalog, *Going Forth by Day* (Deutsche Guggenheim Museum, Berlin, 2002), where the very first page (which consists, like the following seven pages, of reproductions from Viola’s notebook for the installation) contains an illustration, a plan of the room in which the installation is to be mounted—a vertical rectangle in the center of the page—accompanied by the text: “God has inscribed Beauty upon all things”. KORAN” [this saying is, in fact, found in the *ḥadīth*, not the Qurʾān). Another notebook entry opens the closing set of notes, this time a single unillustrated citation: “The bird of vision in flying towards you on the wings of desire”. (Hanhardt and Villaseñor 2002, pp. 1, 137). This is a quote from Rūmī’s *Dīwān-i kabīr* that alludes to inner vision: “The bird of vision in flying towards You on the wings of desire”. (Rūmī, *Jalāl al-Dīn 1336/1957*, poem 833). The catalogue also contains an interview between Bill Viola and John G. Hanhardt, on the first page of which we find two epigraphs, one from Hermann Broch’s *Death of Virgil* (“Nothing ripens to reality that is not rooted in memory”). And the other, unsurprisingly, from Muḥammad al-Ghazzālī’s *Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God*. “The sea of things He knows has no shore” (*Going* 85). Needless to say, there are various allusions in Viola’s work to other religious traditions (Bernier 2014), but the consistent returns of Sufism are remarkable.

Shihāb al-Dīn Yaḥyā Suhrawardī’s own mystical experiences, as generally deduced from his writings, were fundamentally visual, that is, they were perceived with the inner eye (*dīda-yi andarūnī*). The outer vision (*dīda-yi zāhir*) to which Suhrawardī alludes is what Ibn al-ʿArabi, and so many Sufis, refer to as the things we perceive with our sensory eyes, or our “sight” (*baṣar*), while the inner vision (*dīda-yi andarūnī*) of the *al-Shaykh al-Ishrāq* (the “master of Eastern theosophy”) (Suhrawardī 1976, 375 ss.; Marcotte 2011, pp. 68–79; Sinai 2015, pp. 279–97), is what our Andalusian mystic considers the higher places of vision, the things we perceive by means of the inner, spiritual faculty called “inner vision” (*baṣīra*), “discovery or unveiling” (*kashf*) and “tasting” (*dhawq*). The organ through which a human being perceives invisible and higher things is the heart (Arabic: *qalb*; Persian: *dil*). As William C. Chittick so aptly sums up:

Manāẓir is the plural of *manẓar*, from the root *n.z.r.*, which means primarily “to look, to view, to perceive with the eyes”. The literal sense of the term *manẓar* is “a place in which a thing is looked upon” or a “locus of vision”. *ʿUlā* is the plural form of the adjective *aʿlā*, meaning “higher”. Hence, the *manāẓir al-ʿulā* are the “higher loci of vision”. As a technical term in cosmology, “higher” is contrasted with “lower” (*afsal*). The “higher world” is the invisible real world, inhabited by angels and spirits. The “lower world” is the visible realm, inhabited by bodies. Hence the “lower loci of vision” would be the things that we perceive with our sensory eyes, or our “sight” (*baṣar*), while the “higher loci of vision” are the things we perceive through the inward, spiritual faculty called by such names as “insight” (*baṣīra*), “unveiling” (*kashf*), and “tasting” (*dhawq*). The “organ” through which a human being perceives the invisible and higher things is the heart (*qalb*). Even God Himself may be seen with the heart, and in his commentary, the Shaykh frequently reminds us of the famous *ḥadīth qudsī*, “Neither My heavens nor My

earth encompass Me, but the heart of My servant with faith does encompass Me". (Chittick 1994, pp. 68–69)

The *mundus imaginalis*—*‘ālam al-mithāl* (*mundus imaginalis*) of Sufism, the realm where invisible realities become visible and corporeal things are spiritualized (Chittick 1989, ix, xix; index s.v. “imaginal”, “imagination”; Chittick 1994, s.v. “imagination”; Chittick 1998, s.v. *mithāl*, *‘ālam al-*; “imagination”) and the *‘ōlām ha-demūt* of the Jewish Kabbalists (Idel 1988, pp. 73–89 and, especially, 75; Wolfson 2005, index s.v. “Sufism”; Wolfson 1994, pp. 61–62, 280), the realm of the active imagination (Hebrew: *dimyōn*, ‘image’; Wolfson 1994, index s.v. *dimyon*), “the intention of the heart” (*kawwānāt ha-lēv*), mystical contemplation and vision (Wolfson 1994, pp. 147–48)—constitutes an isthmus or interworld (Arabic: *barzakh*; cf. Bashier 2004; Karbassian 2018, pp. 86–95) mediating between the intelligible and the sensible world which allows—through the “eye of the heart” (*cordis oculis*: Arabic: *‘ayn al-qalb*; Persian: *chashm-i dīl*; Hebrew: *‘ein ha-lēv*, which renders in turn the Talmudic *‘ovanta de-libba’* (“discernment of the heart or mind”), exactly parallels the commonplace Sufi term *ru’yat al-qalb*) (Wolfson 1994, pp. 169–71; Subtelny 2002, pp. 137–40); “is a vision of the heart (Hebrew: *re’iyat ha-lēv*) and not a vision of the eye (*re’iyat ha-‘ayin*)” (Wolfson 1994, pp. 147, 159); “this vision is not a corporeal seeing (*mar’eh ha-‘ayin*), but a contemplative seeing (*mar’eh shiqqul ha-da‘at*), which truly constitutes the vision(s) of God (*mar’eh ‘elōhīm*, pl. *mar’ot ‘elōhīm*)” (Wolfson 1994, p. 161); the inner heart (*al-qalb al-ḥaqīqī*), “the inner vision of the heart” (*baṣīrat-i qalbiyyi*), o “the understanding of the heart” (Hebrew: *be-‘ovanta de-libba’*), the “contemplation through the heart” (Hebrew: *hawwānāt ha-lēv*) or “the vision of the heart” (Arabic: *al-ru’ya bi l-qalb*) (Amir-Moezzi 1992, pp. 112–45; Amir-Moezzi 2006, p. 260 ss.; Valentini 1993)—the “eye of the world-beyond (*chashm-i barzakhī*)”, that is, an organ of vision which is itself a part of the absolute activity of the soul and which corresponds to our *Imaginatio vera* (Henry Corbin), the ‘subtle’ vision (*latīf*) of the invisible (*al-ghayb*), or the subtle hearing of the inaudible:

A number of years ago, Viola handed me a text from his library. Its title was *History of Islamic Philosophy*, and the following passage was underlined in pencil, with the words “of ideas” added in Viola’s finely penciled script at the end:

This realm is called the Realm of Ideas and the mundus imaginalis. It is beyond the world of sense perception and beyond extended space [makān] but below the realm of intellect [‘ālam al-‘aql]. It is an intermediary realm between the two. Everything imagined by the mathematicians, such as shapes (round, oblong, square, etc.), quantities (large, small, one, two, etc.), and bodies (cubes, tetrahedrons, spheres, etc.) and whatever relates to them such as rest, position, idea shape [hay’ah], surface, line, point and other conditions all exist in this intermediary realm. This is why philosophers refer to the [study of] it as “intermediate philosophy” or “intermediate science”. . . . Everything seen [and heard] in dreams such as oceans, lands, loud noises and persons of stature, all of them are suspended Forms not in space nor situated. . . . Archetypes of all known things on Earth exist as luminous Forms in this realm. . . . [of ideas]. (Maḥmūd Shahrāzūrī, quoted in Ziai 1996, p. 479)

The author of the passage is the thirteenth-century thinker Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Maḥmūd Shahrāzūrī [d. after 688/1288], writer of an enormous philosophical encyclopedia called in English *Metaphysical Tree* [*al-Shajarah al-ilāhiyyah*]. In that book, according to Hossein Ziai, “the intermediary realm [*al-‘ālam al-mithāl*] is considered a ‘real’ place where all manner of extraordinary phenomena, both good and evil, are said to occur”. (Ziai 1996, p. 479) This passage intrigued me, as it seemed to shed light on much of what I experience in Viola’s art—on the “luminous forms” that we experience in *Ascension* and the extended catalog, or should I say encyclopedia, of experiences witnessed in *I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like*. The dreamland may be the place inhabited in Viola’s *Pneuma*, with its immersive environment of projected images. (Hanhardt 2019, pp. 27–28)

The purpose of this article has been to show that the eye (*‘ayn, chashm*) and the heart (*qalb, dil*) are intimately connected in the sufism of Ibn al-^ᶜArabī and the Persian mystic poets who are his followers (*‘Irāqī, Shabistārī*); in many cases, they appear to be almost identical. The image of the Beloved that resides in the human heart is actively present in the eye, which recognizes the likeness of the Beloved in the multiplicity of phenomena. The phrase *mardum-i dāda*, is a similar expression to the Arabic *insān ul-^ᶜayn* (pupil of the eye). The image of the Beloved reflected in the pupil of the eye is a metaphor for the immanence of the One in human beings. The frequently used symbol of the pupil of the eye (*insān al-^ᶜayn*) in the Ḥāfiz’s *Dīwān* also alludes to the concept of God-likeness. Unlike man’s physical body, the external eye (*chashm-i zāhir*) cannot see the heart, whereas only inner vision (*baṣīrat-i bāṭin*) accesses it (Ingenito 2020, p. 368).

The pupil of the eye is that part of the eye through which vision is experienced and symbolizes inner vision. In other words, man is to God what the pupil is to the eye, and just as the compendium of the eye is the pupil, the pupil is what transmits the vision of the external world. The center of the pupil, its abyssal black core, is the heart itself, a theophanic mirror and organ of inner vision. Indeed, in Plato’s *Alcibiades*, the pupil is that part of the eye in which a visible reflection is formed: “132a2 ὄψελ ‘pupil’. That ὄψις is here applied to the pupil is shown by comparison of the ὄψις with a mirror: the pupil is that part of the eye in which a visible reflection is formed”.

In the first chapter of *Fuṣūṣ ul-ḥikam*, Ibn al-^ᶜArabī describes the self-disclosure of the One as Its casting of Its own image upon the mirror. In this image, the relation between humans and the One is likened to the relation between the pupil of the eye (*insān ul-^ᶜayn*) and the eye; the pupil is the window through which sight is possible. The pupil of the eye extends its activity between the heart that is formed by the Beloved (and that desires the Beloved) and the world that reflects the Beloved.

The point of departure and return for this essay has been Ibn al-^ᶜArabī’s poem entitled ‘I saw a Girl. . .’, in whose dark pupil or abyssal blackness (Arabic: *ḥawār*; Hebrew: *īshōn*), pleasure of the gaze (*naẓar*), and repository of the secret (*sirr*), resides the Beloved.

Blackness, the luminous black, as throughout the *Tarjumān*, indicates the deep interior of something, a place of intimacy, the repository of the secret or mystery (*sirr*), the innermost core of the heart. In that deep space, the Beloved resides. In the *Meccan Openings* poem, the loved ones are found within the black (that is, the pupil) of the lover’s eye and beneath his ribs (Ibn al-^ᶜArabī 1972–, vol. 5, ch. 178, pp. 593–94). The lover looks without, but they are in the dark center of his perception. He sighs for those who dwell near (or within) his lungs. A similar dynamic occurs near the end of Ibn al-^ᶜArabī’s *Niẓām* preface: “She dwells among the noble; and she camps among the brave—and in the black pupil of the eye, and deep within the heart”. (Ibn al-^ᶜArabī 2021, p. 279).

We have already explained that Ibn al-^ᶜArabī states that “darkness is a kind of light” (*Fut.* II 648.4). The color black is a symbol of dominance (*iswidād al-siyāda*, writes *al-Shaykh al-Akbar* [Ibn al-^ᶜArabī 1972–, IV, p. 349]). Let us remember that the word *aswad* (black) derives from the word *sāda* from which *sayyid* (master) and *siyāda* (mastery) derive. The face of the Perfect Man, the happiest of men, is black in the hereafter as in this nether world, because, immersed in an eternal vision, he sees the darkness of the universe through the light of the mirror of the True (Allāh). (Ibn al-^ᶜArabī 1969, p. 54).

We have seen that, around this abyssal blackness of the pupil, Viola writes: “The medieval Neoplatonists practiced meditating on the pupil of the eye, or *speculation*, a word that literally means ‘mirror gazing.’ [...] In ancient Persian cosmology, black exists as a color and is considered to be ‘higher’ than white in the universal color scheme. This idea is derived in part from the color of the pupil. The black disk of the pupil is the inverse of the white circle of the sun. The tiny image in ‘the apple of the eye’ was traditionally believed to be a person’s self, his or her soul, existing in complementary relationship to the sun, the world-eye”.

Indeed, black, according to the Shabistārī verse, is “a bright light in a dark day”, as only through this luminous black can one find the hidden aspects of the Divine. This perception

comes through the black of the pupil, which, as the center of the eye, is symbolically the veil to both internal and external vision. Black is the annihilation of self, a prerequisite to reintegration. “The black of the surface of my eyes” (*sawād-i lawḥ-i bīnīsh*) is a way of describing the “(black) pupil of the eye” (*mardum-i chashm*). It is traditional that she is the image, on the eye-mirror of the lover, of the mole (*khāl*) of the Beloved, who looks at himself in it. The “black mole” on the pupil of the divine eye is also the “eye of the heart” of the seer (*chashm-i dil*), thanks to the divine eye.

Hence, video artist Bill Viola observes, in a few words already quoted, which serve to summarize our tour of “the visionary body”, the “mystical eye” (Stoichita 1996, pp. 11–12, 151–81, 184): “The ideal mirror, around since the beginning of humankind, is the black background of the pupil of the eye”.

To conclude, can be recalled here the final sequence of the film *Vai e Vem* (2003, dir. João César Monteiro; polyphonic vocal music by Josquin des Prez [ca. 1450–1521], motet no. 48, “Qui habitat in adiutorio altissimi” [from Psalm 91:1, Latin Vulgate], for 24 voices [performed: Huelgas Ensemble; dir.: Paul van Nevel]) in which we contemplate an eye that fills the entire screen and gazes steadily and immutably at the viewer (Font 2006, p. 10) (Figure 7). The lens of the video camera is also—for Bill Viola and for João César Monteiro—, like the pupil of the eye, an eye that sees and is seen, through which it is seen.



Figure 7. “That to contemplate God one must become the pupil of His eye”. (Ibn al-^ᶜArabī) (*Vai e Vem*, 2003, dir. João César Monteiro).

In the sustained shot that closes *Vai e Vem*, the last—and most beautiful—film of his life, his spiritual testament, the stinging effect caused by the prolonged fixation of that eye that encompasses the entire screen and the simultaneous deep luminosity of his pupil and the polyphonic music of Josquin. Twenty-four voices that end up becoming a solo voice, like a single eye. This plan sums up very well the meaning of our trip to the clairvoyant dark cave of vision: the dark pupil or abyssal blackness (*ḥawar, īshōn*), the luminous blackness of midnight; the cavity, aperture, entrance, or gate to the chamber of the eye, which is really the entrance or gate of the inner eye. ‘I saw a Girl...’

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