

Bernardo Bortolin Kerr

**The Death of Death:
A Study of Self-Annihilation and Suicide in the Light of
Sufi Thought and Bahá'u'lláh's Early Texts**

Everyone on earth perishes; all that remains is the Face of your Lord.
Qur'an 55:26-27¹

The above passage from the Qur'an serves as the scriptural foundation for the correlative notions of *faná* and *baqá* in the Islamic mystical tradition. *Faná* can be variously translated as "passing away" or "perishing" and has been broadly used to refer to the mystical state of annihilation in God. Inextricable from this state of annihilation is the state of *baqá*, which can be translated as "remaining" or "subsistence" in God. In Sufism the meeting of these two states, that is, the reality of death and life, is a single ineffable state. To quote Halláj, the infamous ninth to tenth century mystic who was executed for heresy: "When you become obliterated, you arrive at a place in which nothing is obliterated or confirmed... It is the divine erasings and effacements... It is inexpressible."²

In this essay I will be looking at the ways in which these notions of mystical death in the annihilation of the *nafs*, or "lower self", might be useful in reappraising the narratives of suicidal ideation. I will not propose a specific therapeutic method but rather write in the hope that the physical act of suicide, as it is imagined, no longer be taken for granted as the only possible outcome of these narratives. This is intended for those who would hope to dissuade a suicidal person from the act itself and also intended more broadly as a reminder that images are only a means towards Truth and that to merely imitate them is not to reach the heart of their meaning.

In my experience of suicidal ideation I have encountered what I consider to be a failure to accept and engage properly with the narratives of such thought and, rather than addressing them fully, a tendency to avoid them and thereby fail to properly assess their meaning. I see this as a result of the way in which language tends to be treated as a set of rigid images, which thereby constrain us and cause the world around us to be taken for granted. It comes to be made up of reasons for our happiness and unhappiness. Ludwig Wittgenstein, the hugely influential linguistic philosopher of the twentieth century, wrote that "a *picture* held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably."³ This is no more so the case than in suicidal ideation and its frustrated straining against the bonds of this imagined reality. With this essay I hope to gesture to a tradition of thought that has continually dealt with the extremes of human passion in a striving to reconcile all aspects of human life.

I will begin by introducing more thoroughly the concepts of suicidal ideation and *faná* before going on to suggest an approach towards their reconciliation, drawing crucially on the apophatic principle of the ineffability and unimaginability of Truth. I will

¹ Here and elsewhere all Qur'anic passages are taken from the translation of Abdel Haleem.

² Ruzbihan al-Baqli, *Sharh-i Shathiyat* (Bibliothèque Iranienne, 12. Tehran, 1966), ch. 254, as quoted in Carl Ernst, *Words of Ecstasy in Sufism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), 29

³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972), 48

then look at three relevant figures of Sufism – Hamadhání, Bistamí and Junayd – before moving on to the early writings of Bahá'u'lláh, the founder of the Bahá'í Faith.

Suicidal ideation and *faná*

Suicidal ideation is essentially a narrative of thought that centres upon, is driven by and concludes with an image of suicide. While there are of course endless variations of such narratives and the emotions attached to them, for the purposes of this essay I will be addressing the basic form of such narratives in which the image of suicide is thought to correspond ultimately with and be entirely fulfilled by a physical act that resembles it. I am particularly interested in the way in which suicidal ideation can take a position that could be described in almost theological terms, its image standing as a sort of idol. In what is perhaps its purest form suicidal ideation has no reason and becomes the ultimate end of imaginable life. Indeed, when reality seems to consist of rigid images, death is the image of the imageless, pointing to a possibility that cannot be encroached upon by the intransigencies of a reality, including that of our own personalities, from which we seem to be shut out. It is an unconditional, all-conditioning answer to all questions and seems to provide a sort of solace by its apparent inviolably personal nature. It appears to make sense of everything by lending it a teleology that is firm and immovable. It offers life as the reason for suffering and shapes life's extremities as the reasons for joy. It seems to be the only correct response to a misery the reason for which cannot quite be placed and which at the same time, were it to be placed, would invalidate the comfort of death's solution because the solution would become a conditional one.

As we can see, the language of suicidal ideation at its most pure, when it becomes the foundation for thought, has many parallels to theological language. It evidences a profound yearning for something beyond anything the imaginable world can offer in all its conditionality, even though the physical act itself is the conditional response of a person still existing in this world of conditionality and takes its place only because it appears to be unconditional. Indeed, it is allowed to keep this place because those around us treat death in the same way, as something that fundamentally cannot be reconciled with life. Moreover, unimaginability is not reconciled with imaginability, silence is not reconciled with speech, solitude with friendship. There is a deeply rooted aversion to dealing with paradox and that which cannot be imagined. So, in the "picture that holds us captive" we fail to recognise the workings of suicidal ideation.

On the one hand it is indeed the sign of a profound yearning and of the human capacity to drive constantly through and past conditional reasoning, but on the other hand it takes account only of images and strives all the harder because it cannot find the unconditional in these images. Suicidal thought sees the goal only past the final image of the narrative and subtly imagines it as distinct, forming a sort of pocket of empty space, after the "end" but still linearly placed. All the solace it offers is by its maintaining this position, but this is also the unrecognised reason for the suffering it is meant to end. In this position, far from standing as a genuine solution to the implacable suffering it seemingly responds to, it is in fact the seal of all things that keep the suffering in place. It stands as the final confirmation that all things are fundamentally separate and not necessarily relational and that every man is indeed an island. While seeming to be the truest escape, in fact it generates the need for true escape. At the same time that it stands

as an end to suffering, for as long as it is not immediately replicated in action, its image simply delays the inevitable, and allows one never to come face to face with the root of suffering. It keeps unhappiness attached to particular experiences and happiness attached to others and retains the ambivalence between the two, offering no earthly hope of getting to the heart of either.

I would argue that *faná* is a notion responding to the same profound yearning that drives suicidal ideation. Its narratives use the same language but in such a way that continually pushes its meaning beyond the merely imaginable, constantly driving for a meaning beyond conditionality. As Nicholson writes in reference to the term “*waqfat*”, meaning the end of search in union with the goal and used by Niffarí (d. 965) in the place of “*faná*”, “it changes the phenomenal values of all existent things into their real and eternal values”⁴. With a glimpse of the goal we come to the inescapable recognition that what we desire must be unconditional, unimaginable and therefore ever-present; the attainment of our goal need not rely upon our committing one particular imaginable action, but in surrendering our will to the unconditional Will of Being, beyond being. Izutsu describes *faná* as “the total nullification of the ego-consciousness, when there remains only the absolute Unity of Reality in its purity as an absolute Awareness prior to its bifurcation into subject and object”⁵. To put it differently, everything conditional about the human being, that is, the “ego-consciousness” that defines itself on the condition that it is *not* what it defines as others, has indeed come to an end in *faná*. The great power of these ideas is that by their very nature they point to an answer that is to be found everywhere at every moment if only we give ourselves up to it.

As a result of the way in which *faná* treats the goal of longing for total annihilation as a goal beyond images it is suitable that it be spoken of in connection with *baqá*, subsistence in God, its paradoxical twin. Seyyed Hossein Nasr quotes Abi'l-Khayr (d. 1049) who places these two stations as the twenty-first and twenty-second of his particular system of forty. As Nasr notes, this is unusual because *baqá* “is usually considered as the highest station since it is that of union with God” but goes on to write that “the stations that follow may be said to be so many stations in the journey *in* God (*fi'lláh*) after the traveller has ended the journey *to* God (*ila'lláh*)”⁶. These variations in Sufi spiritual schema are characteristic of the diverse ways in which the Sufis address the nature of approaching union with God in His absolute unknowability. As Nicholson notes of the Sufi traveller, “should he venture to make a map of his interior ascent, it will not correspond exactly with any of those made by previous explorers”⁷ – it must be remembered that these narratives are written as means of speaking the ineffable. Indeed, we could say much the same thing of the way in which suicide must be approached; the narratives of suicide are often aggressively subjective, but in their being voiced in shared human language they call to be engaged with by simultaneously objective means. Moreover, for the Sufis, in recognition of God’s absolute and ineffable presence, this

⁴ Reynold A. Nicholson, *The Mystics of Islam* (London: Arkana, 1989), 156

⁵ Toshihiko Izutsu, “The Basic Structure of Metaphysical Thinking in Islam”, in *Collected Papers on Islamic Philosophy and Mysticism*, ed. Mehdi Mohaghegh and Hermann Landolt (Tehran: Institute of Islamic Studies, 1971), 39, as quoted in Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 143

⁶ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Sufi Essays* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1972), 82

⁷ Nicholson, *Mystics*, 28

false dichotomy of subject and object does not exist except as words towards the wordless. In any case, Abi'l-Khayr's description of the two stations in question is clear and illuminating:

The twenty-first station is annihilation (*faná*). They melt their carnal souls in the crucible of annihilation and become annihilated from all that is below Him. Their tongues do not speak of things of this world. There is nothing upon their tongues save His Name. Their bodies do not move save to obey Him and their minds do not spring into action save for Him.

The twenty-second station is subsistence (*baqá*). If they look to the right they see God and if they look to the left they see God. They see Him in whatever condition they are. They subsist through His subsistence. They are satisfied with what He has ordained for them. They are joyous because of His grace and bounty.⁸

Of particular interest in these passages is that God is seen in all things and is the very Reality by which the Sufi must comprehend his existence, as with the Qur'anic verse, "all that remains is the Face of your Lord". This is of course an ineffable state that can be spoken of ultimately only in inaccessible paradoxes and blinding tautologies. However, it can also be understood as the state to which all human states must lead in that it lies at the very heart of our conception of reality, is revealed in all our notions of truth and as such we can lead towards it through all narratives. As Schimmel puts it, "*baqá*, persistence in God, is concealed in the very centre of *faná*"⁹. To express it in a way that perhaps brings it closer to more widely shared concepts, God is found at the core of the present moment. In Qushayri's (d. 1074) treatise on the moment, *waqt*, he quotes ad-Daqqaq (d. 1021), who says that "the moment is a file. It files you down without effacing you." Qushayri then qualifies this by writing that "were it to efface you and make you pass away, you would be – in your passing away – liberated"¹⁰. Schimmel makes the point that *faná* is not to be conflated too simplistically with nirvana, as it "is not the experience of being freed from a painful circle of existence [...] *Faná* is, in the beginning, an ethical concept"¹¹. While I would agree in the extent that it is necessary to use the particular narratives of the traditions as they are given, I would add that in Sufism at its best, liberation and ethics are one and the same thing. A full reconciliation of the outcomes of the two traditions' particular soteriological narratives might be left to a different study, but suffice it to say that both share a sense of the transcendence of imagined time into an ever-present. To quote Shibli (d. 946): "Pass beyond a thousand years of the past and a thousand years of the future. Behold them! It is the present – and do not be deceived by phantasms!"¹² Indeed, do not be held captive by pictures.

One more notion that remains to be examined is that of the station that comes prior to *faná* and which pushes the seeker of death forward into the extremity of self-annihilation. This station is usually listed as something akin to wonderment or perplexity

⁸ Nasr, *Essays*, 80

⁹ Schimmel, *Dimensions*, 144

¹⁰ Michael Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism: Sufi Qur'an, Mi'raj, Poetic and Theological Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), 101

¹¹ Schimmel, *Dimensions*, 142

¹² al-Baqli, *Sharh*, 147, as quoted in Ernst, *Ecstasy*, 30

and is variously transliterated as *hayrat* and *hayrah*, although this appears to be one of the stations with less of a fixed terminology and position. It is also comparable to *hayba* or awe. Burckhardt, in *Letters of a Sufi Master*, describes *hayrah* as “dismay or perplexity in the face of a situation apparently without issue, or in the face of truths which cannot rationally be reconciled – a mental crisis, when the mind comes up against its own limit”. He goes on to say that if in this condition we practise “persistent meditation on certain paradoxes”, it “may open out into supra-rational intuition”¹³. In such a description we see a strong resemblance to descriptions of the psychological perplexity encountered in profound depression and suicidal thought, but again with the crucial difference that in Sufism there is always a more profound solution that fully accepts and takes account of the limits of reason. The Sufi resolution is always an unconditional one, continually pushing towards a fundamental unity. As Abu Yahya al-Shirazi puts it, “wonderment (*hayrat*) has a beginning, and an end. Between the two wonderments knowledge is revealed. [...] Beyond that (knowledge) wonderment within wonderment becomes manifest, and one never comes out of that wonderment.”¹⁴ Reaching this limit of comprehension calls for a surrender in *faná* to that which is inescapable and therefore beyond comprehension. Indeed, in a famous saying of Abu Bakr al-Siddiq (d. 634), a companion of Muhammad, we find it said that “inability to attain comprehension is true comprehension”¹⁵. Ruzbihan (d. 1209), relating this incomprehension to *faná* and *baqá*, writes that “when the seeker of the goal becomes annihilated in his seeking through the quality of impotence, he becomes one who comprehends himself”¹⁶.

As Lings rather poetically puts it, “the tightly closed bud of perplexity (*hayrah*) will open, if given the right conditions, into the flower of wonderment (*tahayyur*) and the essential of these conditions is ‘light’”¹⁷. While much could be written on light it suffices to say that in the mystical language of Sufism it is always a light beyond the dichotomy of our conceptions of light and dark – it is a light that takes account of and is the fulfilment of our passage through worldly darkness. It is interesting to note that Abi'l-Khayr in his *Forty Stations* seems to treat fear (*khawf*) and hope (*rajá*) in a similar way to *hayrat* and *tahayyur*, placing them as the antecedents to *faná* and *baqá*¹⁸. This is a reminder that when directed towards God these notions meet – described in oppositional terms they are reconciled at an ineffable point of denial and affirmation. Later in the essay we will look at Junayd’s treatment of these two stations in relation to *faná* and *baqá*.

If the relation between the Sufi yearning for annihilation in God and ordinary notions of suicide might still be questioned, let us turn to a brief excerpt from an early poem by Bahá’u’lláh (d. 1892) that is typical of the mystics’ expression of profound suffering in worldly existence:

My spirit disappeared, My heart dissolved;
My soul boiled from the pain of misery.

¹³ Titus Burckhardt, *Letters of a Sufi Master* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 1998), 11, as quoted in Martin Lings, *What is Sufism?* (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 2006), 67

¹⁴ al-Baqli, *Sharh*, 184, as quoted in Ernst, *Ecstasy*, 35

¹⁵ al-Baqli, *Sharh*, ch.21, as quoted in Ernst, *Ecstasy*, 32

¹⁶ al-Baqli, *Sharh*, 66, as quoted in Ernst, *Ecstasy*, 33

¹⁷ Lings, *Sufism*, 73

¹⁸ Nasr, *Essays*, 80

I was left with no spirit, heart or soul;
 That I existed at all startled Me.
 My secret's loftiness convicted Me;
 I wish that My creation never rose.
 For thus have difficulties wiped Me out,
 And thus was I encompassed by My woes.¹⁹

The theological response to suicidal thought

All mystical notions (indeed, I would be tempted to say simply *all* notions) of reality, of life and death, can be grounded in the principle of God's absolute immanence and, by exactly the same token, absolute transcendence. God is that which cannot be escaped and therefore cannot be spoken of except through all words. As Sells puts it in his commentary on Ibn 'Arabi (d. 1240), "the most distinct is that which is distinct by its very lack of distinction; the highest station is the station of no station"²⁰. In this remark Sells not only refers to God, but also to the paradoxical station whereby a seeker attains to God, by holding "no station". In Qur'anic terms, "No vision can take Him in, but He takes in all vision" (Q. 6:103), "nothing is like unto Him" (Q. 42:11) and yet "We [God] are closer to him [Man] than his jugular vein" (Q. 50:16). With the recognition of God there is a recognition of the nature of Truth, *al-Haqq*, as ineffable, unimaginable, but at the heart of all language and thought. If we strain away from this ineffability, at the very extremes of our comprehension we find ourselves again faced with incomprehensibility and ineffability. To quote Sells again, "the dilemma is accepted as a genuine *aporia*, that is, unresolvable; but this acceptance, instead of leading to silence, leads to a new kind of discourse"²¹. This discourse is conditioned at every moment by the inescapable recognition of Truth's ineffability. It is, in a sense, a silent discourse in that it is at every moment passing away from itself, as "no single proposition concerning the transcendent can stand on its own"²². It thus renders life itself a discourse, seeking relation between all things and recognising that no imaginable thing stands absolutely independent. To put it differently, each thing's relative independence from other things can be spoken of only if spoken of as dependent on God's absolute independence from all things; we may only speak of things if we speak of God through them.

This principle, that is, the meaning of the word "God", the understanding of which is a life entirely conditioned by its recognition, is related to suicide in that it must take into account all narratives, images and uses of language. In acknowledging the ineffability of Truth we must acknowledge, not merely that all language is relative and in flux, but that it is in relation at every moment to its ineffable core. A true suicide, then, is one that cannot be imagined and must therefore be *revealed* at every moment as the heart of the moment. To return to Qushayri's treatise on the moment (*waqt*), quoting ad-Daqqaq again, he writes, "No one truly dies who finds rest in dying. / To truly die is to live your death."²³ Inasmuch as suicidal ideation speaks the objective language of human

¹⁹ Bahá'u'lláh, "Ode of the Dove", 1856(?), translation by Juan Cole, accessed 13 May 2014, http://bahai-library.com/bahauallah_ode_dove_cole

²⁰ Michael Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 113

²¹ *Ibid.*, 2

²² *Ibid.*, 3

²³ Sells, *Early*, 101

thought, it refers to something that must already and always be referred to – the desired death must not be one that has a beginning or can come to an end; it must be revealed as ever-present or else it does not truly fulfil the desire for rest. Indeed, the rest that suicidal thought yearns for is the rest of surrendering to an existence conditioned by the recognition of the paradoxical absolute existence and absolute non-existence (in the sense that any earthly thing is said to exist) of God. As Schimmel puts it, “non-existence, ‘*adam*, is the ineffable divine essence”²⁴ – it exists absolutely and therefore cannot be spoken of as existing in any conventionally linguistic or imaginable sense.

While it could be said that such a response to suicidal ideation does not fulfil the expectation of suicide’s image, it must be recognised that in fact nothing that can be expected in such a narrative can properly respond to it. The mechanism of the suicidal narrative is to render all things impotent in relation to that final glowing image that responds to all possibilities with a resounding silence. The purpose of mystical thought is to burn through those dull images and reveal that resounding silence as ever-present. On the part of those in contact with someone fixated on suicide this revelation must be brought about by an untiring love, but a love that resists attachment to particular people and instead seeks to reflect the Heart of all things. This love must not merely offer conditional solutions to suffering, but it must reflect that for the human being, in whom there is the innate recognition of unconditionality, suffering can be found in all things, and this is precisely why we may also find joy and rest in all things if we give ourselves up to a Reality beyond our rigid images of reality. Although physical suicide might result from suicidal ideation it is in a sense an accident that has come about through a failure to get to the Heart of the meaning of the suicidal narrative.

Facing and recognising this Heart of meaning is done at all times in unconditional love and this is the natural state of the human being, but when one has come to see only the shallowness of a love attached to weak and unsustainable conditions and not the true love this earthly love reflects through its veils, then it becomes necessary to be faced with a powerful revelation of one’s very core by burning through all conceptions of being. The hadith of Ibn Mas’ūd (d. 652) and its commentaries (*tafsir*) are particularly illuminating in gaining an understanding of this. From al-Tabarī’s (d. 923) *Jāmi al-bayān*: “The messenger of God said, ‘The Qur’an was sent down in seven *ahruf*. Each *harf* [singular of *ahruf*] has a back (*zahr*) and a belly (*batn*). Each *harf* has a border (*hadd*) and each border has a lookout point (*muttala*).”²⁵ Typically this hadith has been used by Sufis with regard to Qur’anic interpretation, taking the “*zahr*” to refer to the apparent meaning (*zahir*) and the “*batn*” to refer to the esoteric meaning (*batin*), but in a sense the very interpretation and understanding of life is Qur’anic when conditioned by recognition of God, *al-Haqq*, in all His ineffability. Al-Tabarī quotes ‘Umar ibn al-Khattāb (d. 644): “If everything in the world belonged to me, assuredly I would ransom myself with it against the terror of the lookout point (*muttala*).”²⁶ In this rendering of the *muttala* we have a denotation similar to Burckhardt’s description of *hayrah*, bearing in mind its correspondence to fear (*khawf*), in which “the mind comes up against its own limit”. In

²⁴ Schimmel, *Dimensions*, 322

²⁵ al-Tabarī, *Jāmi al-bayān ‘an ta’wīl āy al-Qur’an* (Egypt: Mustafá al-Bābī al-Halabí, 1954-7), 12, as quoted in Kristin Zahra Sands, *Sufi Commentaries on the Qur’an in Classical Islam* (Oxon: Routledge, 2006), 8

²⁶ al-Tabarī, *Jāmi*, 32, as quoted in Sands, *Commentaries*, 9

another commentary, by al-Tustarí (d. c896) we read a rendering of the *muttala* as “the elevated places of the heart (*qalb*)”²⁷. I would argue that between the two readings there is the paradoxical union in God of absolute punishment and absolute mercy. The *muttala* is the ineffable heart of the human being – the “border delimited by God which no one may go past”²⁸. By attaching ourselves to a conditional definition of our being that is not conditioned by recognition of God’s unconditionality we have strayed from our own hearts seeking a limit, but upon reaching that limit we are faced with ourselves and the terror of separation from ourselves. In this moment of terror we perish and true life is revealed.

Death and *faná* in Sufism

One particularly interesting figure in Sufism on the subject of death is ‘Ayn al-Qudát al-Hamadhání (d. 1131), on whom Firoozeh Papan-Matin has written *Beyond Death: The Mystical Teachings of ‘Ayn al-Qudát al-Hamadhání*.

For ‘Ayn al-Qudát, death is the event that takes us to our humanity. He explains that man is the coming together of the flesh and the light of God. It is in death when the soul has departed from the body, that the true identity of man, the light inside (*‘aná’íyatuhu*) shines on him. In ‘Ayn al-Qudát, the effect of death (not “dying”) calls into question the categorical confidence we place in the rational processes of cognition, reason, and the individual’s articulation of the self in relation to faith.²⁹

It is important to note that, as Papan-Matin emphasises, Hamadhání is not merely speaking of death as it might be imagined, but of “the effect of death”, the *meaning* of death, which is to say the imageless *reality* of death sensed by a “supra-rational intuition”, as Burckhardt might put it, at the limits of comprehensible life. This recognition of a new understanding of death, which corresponds more fully to the meaning of death than any temporal act could, shapes our comprehension of reality. As Papan-Matin goes on to say, “therefore, death is a process of identification and not an absolute and final event”³⁰. To put it differently, it *is* an absolute and final event but, rather than the reality of the event being chronological and passing, it is the ever-present event at the heart of time – the moment of Revelation, Doomsday – and death is its revelation.

As the wayfarer greets this death, his own Doomsday appears before him. [Hamadhání] defines the Doomsday as an individual and personal experience and not a communal cataclysmic event destined to take place at a designated juncture

²⁷ al-Tustarí, *Tafsir al-Tustarí* (Beirut: Dár al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2002), 16, as quoted in Sands, *Commentaries*, 9

²⁸ al-Tabarí, *Jámi*, 32, as quoted in Sands, *Commentaries*, 8

²⁹ Firoozeh Papan-Matin, *Beyond Death: The Mystical Teachings of ‘Ayn al-Qudát al-Hamadhání* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 75

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 81

in time. [...] Moreover, it is individual because it unveils the contents of one's heart and all that one has invested in it.³¹

Doomsday of course entails within it an experience of mortal terror – precisely “the terror of the lookout point (*muttala*)”. Papan-Matin recounts a story of Kubrá (d. 1220) in which, while journeying through the spiritual stations, “he was confronted with an orb-shaped presence that blocked his passage. Kubrá intuitively perceived that the only way through is by means of death. [...] He involuntarily proceeded through this veil and at this juncture, experienced death as terror (*hayba*).”³² While “*hayba*” is generally translated as “awe” the meaning is essentially that of having reached a limit of comprehensibility at which point it is necessary to give up. We might say that this search for unconditional Truth is the magnetic force of the human heart seeking its fulfilment and at such a moment as that of Kubrá's story this moment pushes us onward of its own volition. Such a fullness of Being as the one sought is necessarily outside any bounds of imaginability, precisely because it is Reality itself. As Hamadhání puts it, “I know that these words do not exist in your world of habit”³³ and yet it is incumbent upon the human being to “know that there is a death above the death of the body”³⁴.

In chapter 126 of Sarráj's (d. 988) *Book of Flashes (Kitáb al-Luma)* he offers a commentary on the sayings of Bistamí (d. 874), who speaks not only on the station of *faná* but on the station of *faná al-faná*, or passing away of passing away – the death of death. In this station one is not only annihilated, but the annihilation itself is annihilated in an ever-deepening ineffability. If death is to be spoken of and imagined in human language then there is no more unconditional death than this. It is the death even of the notion of death – a rendering in words of that which is absolutely beyond life and death and lies more deeply within the image of death than any temporal physical act. It is a narrative of death that drives continually deeper than any suicidal narrative composed of imaginable events. Sarráj quotes Junayd (d. 910), who relates this from Bistamí:

I came upon the domain of nothingness (*laysiyya*). For ten years I continued flying in it until I arrived from nothing in nothing through nothing. Then I came upon perdition, which is the domain of *tawhíd* [Oneness of God]. I continued to fly through nothing in perdition until I was lost in the loss of being lost.³⁵

It could be said that such a narrative is only a poetic description of something experienced within the physical life of Bistamí and therefore does not correlate with the desire expressed in suicidal thought, which is to end physical life entirely. However, this would be to miss the point of such a narrative. The notion of “ending physical life entirely” is a poetic one itself; it is reliant upon a definition of life that is false in its rigidity. This false notion is treated as definitive and thus holds us captive, as it is an ontology that calls for all things to be treated in a similarly restrictive manner. The narrative of suicidal ideation is spoken from behind this veil of images in the moments

³¹ Ibid., 130-131

³² Ibid., 115

³³ Hamadhání, *Tamhídát* (Tehran: Manúchehrí, 1991), 320, as quoted in Papan-Matin, *Death*, 82

³⁴ Hamadhání, *Tamhídát*, 319, as quoted in Papan-Matin, *Death*, 81-82

³⁵ Abú Nasr Sarráj, *Kitáb al-Luma fi t-Tasawwuf* (London: Luzac, Gibb Memorial Series, 1914), 380-395, as quoted in Sells, *Early*, 222-223

when the speaker sees a light beyond their rigidity, but, mistaking this light for yet another imaginable act, and this being confirmed by those around them, sees no escape but in physical death – the image of death. Bistamí’s narrative and those of the Sufi tradition speak of an escape that is truly unconditional in recognising that if it is to be so it must address the call of every word at every moment. It must, in fact, be inescapable. In Junayd’s commentary he says of this death,

This is the reality of the nonexistence (*faqd*) of everything and the nonexistence of the self after that, and the nonexistence of nonexistence in nonexistence, and the becoming dust in obliteration, and the disappearance from disappearance. This is something that has no duration nor any ascertainable moment.³⁶

Looking more closely at Junayd, then, we find a Sufi with very highly developed notions of *faná* and *baqá*. Indeed, as Baldick notes, “Junayd’s doctrine is built around two pillars: the Covenant and ‘passing away’”³⁷ and as we read in Junayd’s definition of Sufism, “Sufism is that God makes thee die to thyself and become resurrected in Him”³⁸. Of particular interest to this essay is the way in which Junayd links hope and fear with *faná* and *baqá*. His writing, as we saw previously, is dense and labyrinthine, so that the very act of reading is the act of living its meaning. As Sells points out, Junayd writes as though “the hearer or reader is able to enter that experience, or some re-creation of it – at the moment of encounter with Junayd’s words”³⁹. In one of his essays on tawhíd he writes, “Fear grips me. Hope unfolds me. Reality draws me together. The real sets me apart. When he seizes me with fear, he annihilates me from myself through my existence, then preserves me from myself. When he unfolds me in hope, he returns me to myself through my loss, then orders my preservation.”⁴⁰ We can read in this a profound sense of union between fear and hope when directed entirely towards God. Neither is conditional, attached to particular things, but rather both occur simultaneously and resolve in a realisation that for the human being both states may be found in all things. In order to truthfully place either, both must be placed at once in ineffable Reality. Given that hope is that which is continually expansive, “hope unfolds me”, its condition is that it have no conditions. Meanwhile, fear is of that which is ultimately faced in fear, which is to say, the conditions of hope; it is reliant on rigidity of conditions – “fear grips me”. Therefore, if both are directed towards God – if both are unconditional – then fear is of conditions of hope and thus the state of fear is the unconditionality of hope. In another essay on *tawhíd* Junayd reminds the reader to “know that you are veiled from yourself by yourself. You will not attain him through yourself.”⁴¹ It is precisely through our conceptions of self and desire that we are alienated from reality and only in facing the imageless can this separation be resolved. He emphasises this further in his *Book of Faná (Kitáb al-Faná)*:

³⁶ Sarráj, *al-Luma*, 380-395, as quoted in Sells, *Early*, 223

³⁷ Julian Baldick, *Mystical Islam: An Introduction to Sufism* (London: Tauris Parke Paperbacks, 2000), 44

³⁸ Faríd al-Dín ‘Attár, *Tadhkirat al-awliyá*, (Leiden: Brill, 1905), 35-36, as quoted in Nasr, *Essays*, 69

³⁹ Sells, *Early*, 252

⁴⁰ A. H. Abdel Kader, *The Life, Personality and Writings of al-Junayd* (London: Luzac, Gibb Memorial Series, 1976), 53, as quoted in Sells, *Early*, 254

⁴¹ Abdel Kader, *al-Junayd*, 54, as quoted in Sells, *Early*, 255

I am the most harmful of things to myself: Woe to me from myself! [...] My presence was the cause of my loss. The gratification I took in witnessing turned to absolute struggle. [...] Then he made annihilation present to them in their annihilation and he had them witness existence in their existence. What he made present to them and had them witness of themselves was a hidden veil and a subtle curtain. Through it they perceived that the choke of loss and the yoke of struggle were due to the veiling of that which does not accept reasons, by making present that which accepts reasons and takes on the traces of his attribute.⁴²

In this passage, in language highly evocative of the distress of suicidal thought, we see the transition from the struggle of existing in isolation to the realisation of the nature of this struggle, witnessed from the very edge of existence. It reveals both the truths and falsehoods of suicidal thought. On the one hand there is a profound need for the annihilation of the imagined self, while on the other hand this annihilation cannot be imagined and is instead the revelation of the falsehood of the imagined self. At the limits of comprehensibility it is revealed “that the choke of loss and the yoke of struggle were due to the veiling of that which does not accept reasons” – that is, the unconditional veiled by the conditional – the veil of images. In another sense, especially as we read on, struggle is rendered in its unconditional form and we have a similar reconciliation as that which we witnessed in the case of fear and hope. Struggle in the state of annihilation in God is the unconditional struggle of unconditional freedom, which is to say accepting that freedom must be independent of conditions. In other words, it is the struggle of giving up our unsustainable notions of freedom to the freedom afforded by engaging lovingly with all circumstances.

Before turning to the writings of Bahá'u'lláh it is worth noting that physical death does often appear to take on the meaning of a certain liberation in the spiritual life of the Sufis, with Halláj famously dancing in his chains on the day of his execution and chanting, “Kill me, O my trustworthy friends (*Uqtuluni, ya thiqati*), / for to kill me is to make me live; / My life is in my death, and my death is in my life.”⁴³ Or as Nawáz describes Halláj's death: “In the midst of annihilation's feast he who drains the cup of permanence / will grab the rope of *Aná'l-Haqq* and swing from the gibbet.”⁴⁴ However, it must be understood that this is not a suicide committed in the misery of entrapment in one's own image of reality, but an acceptance of death. It must also be noted that for the Sufi there are no acts that are private “as opposed to” public – every act is a means of singing the ineffable. So, in Halláj's joyful public acceptance of death he is acting in a public discourse with the rigid notions of life and death and pointing to an ever-present union of both. In al-Daylamí's *A Treatise on Mystical Love* we find two chapters at the end of the book that draw the distinction between “those who killed themselves for love” and “the death of divine lovers”. In this distinction he makes it clear that those who commit suicide for earthly reasons, such as a fixation upon another human, have done so because of a failure to fully recognise the incomprehensibility of love, whereas the divine lovers accept death at all times as the ever-present partner of life.

⁴² Abdel Kader, *al-Junayd*, 31-39, as quoted in Sells, *Early*, 259

⁴³ Louis Massignon, *Halláj: Mystic and Martyr* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 285

⁴⁴ Peter Lamborn Wilson and Nasrollah Pourjavady, *The Drunken Universe: An Anthology of Persian Sufi Poetry* (New York: Omega, 1999), 115

The difference between divine lovers and natural lovers is that the latter have stopped at the level of means, and that their love is the result of the love of one nature for another. They do not find contentment in any state, and their love brings them to physical death. But divine lovers have risen to the world of the spirit and of absolute survival.⁴⁵

The Early Writings of Bahá'u'lláh

On this theme we find several interesting allusions to suicide in Adib Taherzadeh's account of Bahá'u'lláh's life. In amongst the tales of martyrdom there is also mention of those followers who "decided to take their own lives if deprived of accompanying Him on His journey" of exile from Baghdád to Constantinople, but to whom "Bahá'u'lláh addressed [...] words which consoled them and enabled them to resign themselves to the will of God"⁴⁶. One of his companions "attempted to cut his own throat"⁴⁷ on hearing that he could not accompany Bahá'u'lláh to the prison in 'Akká, but was treated and healed and allowed to follow Bahá'u'lláh into imprisonment. However, of these stories that of Dhabíh is most famous because he successfully committed suicide by cutting his throat with a razor and was given by Bahá'u'lláh the title of "King and Beloved of Martyrs". Taherzadeh is quick to note that "this cannot be compared with ordinary suicide, nor can this episode be taken to mean that Bahá'í belief condones the taking of one's life. On the contrary, suicide is strongly condemned in the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh and is clearly against His Teachings."⁴⁸ While a study of this notion alone would make for an interesting paper, at this point it suffices to say that such a suicide is not one committed in the dichotomised circumstances of imagined reality that this paper is intended to address. It is instructive in this context to turn to a passage from al-Ghazálí's *Deliverance from Error (al-Munqidh min al-Dalal)* in which he states that "beyond the light of prophecy there is no light on earth from which illumination can be obtained"⁴⁹. In other words, the Prophets of God are Themselves the most perfect Embodiment of the light of total comprehension found at the edges of comprehensibility – there is no greater recourse for suffering that can be sought in Their physical lifetime than Their physical presence.

The texts of Bahá'u'lláh that can be most easily placed within a Sufi context are *The Seven Valleys* and *The Four Valleys*, although *The Hidden Words* and *Gems of Divine Mysteries*, as well as numerous tablets can also be placed in this tradition. *The Hidden Words* was the first of these to be revealed and it is also known as *The Book of Fatimih* in reference to a book said in Shi'ite theology to have been revealed for Fátima after Muhammad's death. It is a collection of aphorisms and short sayings that are essentially intended "to detach man from this mortal world and to protect his soul from its greatest enemy, himself"⁵⁰. There are several explicit references to annihilation but perhaps the one that most obviously reflects the traditional notion of divine death is the

⁴⁵ al-Daylamí, *A Treatise on Mystical Love* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd., 2005), 184

⁴⁶ Adib Taherzadeh, *The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh: Baghdád 1853-63* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1975), 97

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 98

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 103

⁴⁹ al-Ghazálí, *al-Ghazálí's Path to Sufism: His Deliverance from Error (al-Munqidh min al-Dalal)* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2006), 57

⁵⁰ Taherzadeh, *Revelation*, 75

seventh of the Arabic passages: “O son of man! If thou lovest Me, turn away from Thyself; and if thou seekest My pleasure, regard not thine own; that thou mayest die in Me and I may eternally live in thee.”⁵¹ In this passage we are exhorted to give up all that is fleeting for that which we truly seek, which is in fact beyond the changeability of earthly conditions. In another passage He reminds us that what we seek is indeed ever-present and not only beyond us but within us: “Turn thy sight unto thyself, that thou mayest find Me standing within thee, mighty, powerful and self-subsisting.”⁵² This reflects the notions expressed earlier of a turning to face one’s own heart and thus encountering the true meaning of death.

If we turn, then, to *The Seven Valleys* and *The Four Valleys* we find a classically Sufi exposition of the spiritual journey. The text is itself based on ‘Attár’s famous *Conference of the Birds*, which has within it seven valleys of the same names. It is in the last valley, the “Valley of True Poverty and Absolute Nothingness” that we find our theme most clearly referred to. “Now hast thou abandoned the drop of life and come to the sea of the Life-Bestower. This is the goal thou didst ask for; if it be God’s will, thou wilt gain it.”⁵³ As the passage suggests, this station of death in God is the fulfilment of the longing for an end to earthly life and leaves behind nothing but the Absolute, which is beyond any mortal conception of reality. Again the crucial thing in this text is the way in which the idea of “nothingness” and “death” is pushed to its limit at which point it can only be understood as ever-present and ineffable Reality. It is precisely the absolute presence of this true Reality that conceals it and estranges us from ourselves but at the same time offers total salvation. As Bahá’u’lláh writes, beginning with a hadith, “‘His beauty hath no veiling save light, His face no covering save revelation.’ How strange that while the Beloved is visible as the sun, yet the heedless still hunt after tinsel and base metal.”⁵⁴ Given this revelation of the ever-present we may also read the meaning of the seventh valley at the heart of the previous valleys; they are all images towards the imageless.

Earlier in the book, in the “Valley of Knowledge”, Bahá’u’lláh recounts the story of a man, who in separation from his beloved, is indeed on the verge of suicide. “At last, the tree of his longing yielded the fruit of despair, and the fire of his hope fell to ashes. Then one night when he could live no more, [...] he went out of his house and made for the marketplace.”⁵⁵ A watchman chases him and after climbing over a high wall he finds himself in a garden, where his beloved has been all along. This is in itself a condensed rendering of the search for true death. Pushed forward by a despair and hopelessness in all the things around him he seeks an end to his misery and having been driven on by the impossibility of his thoughts he finds himself at the boundary of his existence, whereupon he discovers his heart, his beloved, both hidden and present.

(Without) Conclusion

⁵¹ Bahá’u’lláh, *Writings of Bahá’u’lláh* (New Delhi: Bahá’í Publishing Trust of India, 2001), 40

⁵² *Ibid.*, 41

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 19

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 8

I hope it has been possible through this study to see the links between suicidal ideation and the narratives and concepts of *faná*. The crucial thing that must be kept in mind is that by shunning these destructive narratives we always leave the possibility for their images to be imitated but never fulfilled. It would be accurate to say that recognition of God is necessary for leading these images beyond themselves and into an unconditional affirmation, but this is not merely the God of an imaginable narrative in which one merely believes. This is God in the sense of absolute inescapable Reality – inescapable and therefore incomprehensible. It is necessary to recognise that the truth of all language is beyond images and that faith is not another picture of reality, but the remembrance that all things lead to the same Point that has no location – death is beyond us, in our hearts.

Bibliography

‘Attár, Faríd al-Dín. *The Conference of the Birds*. Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1984.

Bahá’u’lláh. *Gems of Divine Mysteries*. Aeterna Publishing, 2010.

Bahá’u’lláh, “Ode of the Dove”, 1856(?), translation by Juan Cole, accessed 13 May 2014, http://bahai-library.com/bahauallah_ode_dove_cole.

Bahá’u’lláh. *Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*. New Delhi: Bahá’í Publishing Trust of India, 2001.

Baldick, Julian. *Mystical Islam: An Introduction to Sufism*. London: Tauris Parke Paperbacks, 2000.

Corbin, Henri. *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*. New York: Omega, 1994.

al-Daylamí. *A Treatise on Mystical Love*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd., 2005.

Ernst, Carl. *Words of Ecstasy in Sufism*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985.

al-Ghazálí. *al-Ghazálí’s Path to Sufism: His Deliverance from Error (al-Munqidh min al-Dalal)*. Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2006.

Lings, Martin. *What is Sufism?* Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 2006.

Massignon, Louis. *Halláj: Mystic and Martyr*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994.

Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. *Sufi Essays*. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1972.

Nicholson, Reynold A. *The Mystics of Islam*. London: Arkana, 1989.

Papan-Matin, Firoozeh. *Beyond Death: The Mystical Teachings of 'Ayn al-Qudát al-Hamadhání*. Leiden: Brill, 2010.

Peters, F. E. *A Reader on Classical Islam*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994.

Sands, Kristin Zahra. *Sufi Commentaries on the Qur'an in Classical Islam*. Oxon: Routledge, 2006.

Schimmel, Annemarie. *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975.

Sells, Michael. *Early Islamic Mysticism: Sufi Qur'an, Mi'raj, Poetic and Theological Writings*. New York: Paulist Press, 1996.

Sells, Michael. *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994.

Taherzadeh, Adib. *The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh: Baghdád 1853-63*. Oxford: George Ronald, 1975.

Wilson, Peter Lamborn and Pourjavady, Nasrollah. *The Drunken Universe: An Anthology of Persian Sufi Poetry*. New York: Omega, 1999.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972.