



The Futility of Competing Corruption: The Poetics of Resistance and Counter-Hegemony in Al-Hallaj's *Al-Tawasin*

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APA Citation:

El-Sawy, A. (2022). The futility of competing corruption: the poetics of resistance and counter-hegemony in Al-Hallaj's *Al-Tawasin*. *Journal of Narrative and Language Studies*, 10(19), 38-49.

Abstract

Husayn ibn Mansur Al-Hallaj (857-922 AD) is one of the most famous poets in medieval history. He was an exemplary figure who was persecuted for his revolutionary insights. Al-Hallaj is considered to be an object of debate, creative inspiration, and spiritual insight whose resistance to the corruption and oppression of the political society of the Abbasid Caliphate can be seen as a struggle of competing hegemonies. The Caliphate authority was built on a feeble and "minimal" hegemony, with limited ideological assimilation and understanding between the ruling class and the poor one. Hence, prevalent antagonism was raised to construct counter-hegemony and oppose the corrupt authoritative domination of the state. Among such efforts was Al-Hallaj's attempt to resist and construct an ideology that voices the anxieties of the poor and demands. He is considered to be one of the most captivating and controversial figures in early Sufism and as one of the greatest mystical figures of Islam. His provoking dialogue, both about justice and on the defense of Qur'anic based Islam, was determined in this powerful period. He is best known for his saying: "I am the Truth" (انا الحق), which many saw as a claim to divinity, while others interpreted as an instance of annihilation of the ego which allows God to speak through the individual. Al-Hallaj's story is one of the awesome mysteries and guides across the ages to those who would pursue the truth of our human existence to its deepest and most exacting profound source. Thus, this paper analyses Al-Hallaj's *Al-Tawasin* in which he presented a summary of his mystical thought. The uniqueness of ideas, their strangeness, and their departure from the prevailing cultural and intellectual pattern in the cultural and historical context in *Al-Tawasin* called for a special expressive language that relied on ambiguity and abstraction.

Keywords: Abbasid Caliphate, *Al-Tawasin*, hegemony, resistance, Sufism

Husayn ibn Mansur Al-Hallaj (857–922 AD) is one of the greatest mystical figures of Islam and most enchanting controversial figures in early Sufism. Al-Hallaj adopted Sufism as a method of jihad to support the truth and voice the oppression of the people. Sufism was not, in Al-Hallaj's view, an individual devotional path but a view developed to launch a revolution against tyranny, corruption and injustice in society. Al-Hallaj has been a subject of debate, artistic inspiration, and spiritual vision whose resistance to the oppression of the Abbasid Caliphate can be seen as a struggle of contending hegemonies. As a result of his thoughts and

opposition to the tyrannical domination of the Abbasid ruling class, he was persecuted, imprisoned, and tortured till his death. Thus, the drama of Al-Hallaj's life and death has been considered a reference point in Islamic history.

Widespread effort has been exerted as counter-hegemony to challenge the persecution of the authority and bring about a crisis for the dictatorial Abbasid state. Among such oppositions was Al-Hallaj's distressing one to give voice to the poor and downtrodden people. Nonetheless, his ideas and toil were not fruitful. Amany El-Sawy states in "The Tragic Incarceration and Martyrdom of Al-Hallaj: A Spiritual Passage from Suffering to Glorification" (2021) that Al-Hallaj's effort in competing the Abbasid Caliphate hegemony "proved to be a sheer failure which ended up with his incarceration, torture, and death – a failure at least on the face of it" (p. 155). Al-Hallaj never lost hope and kept exerting all his effort in opposing oppression. The bars of his prison did not hinder him from expressing his beliefs; however, he had to resort to the power of signs or images to deliver his messages. Al-Hallaj's last work, *Al-Tawasin*, written during his imprisonment summarizes his Sufi thought and triggers the contemplation of its readers. This paper will answer the following question: who is Al-Hallaj?, What is the chief reason of his persecution?, and How far does *Al-Tawasin* challenge the hegemony of oppression, corruption and ignorance of the Abbasid power?

It is worthy to be noted that through the research of Louis Massignon that Al-Hallaj has been outspokenly recognized by the modern Western scholars of Islam. El-Sawy highlights that "the revival of his fame among modern Muslims has also been in part due to Massignon's impact" (El-Sawy, 2021, p.155). According to Massignon, Al-Hallaj was born around the year (244 AH - 858 AD) in the village of Al-Bayda in the area called Al-Tur, south of Persia, or what is currently known as the State of Iran. He gained his fame as "Al-Hallaj" from his father's work as a cotton carder (*hallaj*), a profession thought to be occasionally practiced by the son, and henceforth his name. There are other opinions about the reason for his nickname, including that he was called Hallaj Al-Asrar because of his knowledge of the secrets of the hearts.

Al-Hallaj moved with his family, accompanied by his father, to visit the textile centers in Ahwaz due to the deterioration of his financial conditions and his constant search for a job that would support his family until he reached the city of "Wasit" in Iraq, where he memorized the Qur'an when he was twelve years old. Al-Hallaj grew up in Wasit as a student in its scriptoria and mosques, and this city at that time was a center of intellectual and cultural radiation. That period of his life coincided with turmoil and unrest that shook the country because of the Shi'ite Zanj movement that began in 255 AH / 869 AD and lasted for about fourteen years during which the state was exhausted. Al-Hallaj was at that time only eleven years old. Such political circumstances may not directly affect the life of an eleven-year-old boy, but the effect of such unrest will reverberate much later in his life when the Qarmatian revolution erupted and he was accused of aiding and advocating for them. Despite the social and political turmoil, the science movement flourished and grew so that Al-Hallaj grew up in that scientific environment, so his eyes opened to the love of science and knowledge and he began by memorizing the Holy Qur'an and deepening his understanding of its meanings. Attracted from a young age by meditation and Sufi thought based on belligerent and elevating the spirit, he left for the town of "Tustar" (Shushtar, Iran) to accompany Sahel bin Abdullah al-Tastari, who died in 283 AH / 896 AD, one of the most famous Sufis at the time, and the author of the book "Sufi al-Tafsir al-Ishari" from whom he learned the principles of Sufism. "Al-Hallaj retained throughout his life the stamp of Sahl's practices and ideas" (Massignon, 1994, p. 30), including the ascetic discipline and struggle with the soul. Al-Hallaj did not profess Sufism (*tasawwuf*) until he moved to Basra where he met another master in Basra, "Amr Al-Makki," who became his idol. In Basra, he adopted the woollen

cloak that became identified with Sufis. According to Massignon, Al-Hallaj was leading at that time a profound ascetic life. However, he did not have a reclusive existence in Basra; rather, he met notable people in society. That is, Al-Hallaj's Sufism did not prevent him from visiting "society people," such as scribes, scholars, princes, and wealthy individuals who were attracted to him through his reputation for his cultural experience and wide scientific knowledge.

Al-Hallaj sturdily believed in pluralism and diversity in political opinions to bring social equality to his world. Consequently, due to his social views, Al-Hallaj's influence on the personages and intellectual elites of society was suspiciously viewed with distrust by the Abbasid bureaucracy that considered his views as an alarming threat and frightening challenge to their tyrannical and despotic rule. The Abbasid Empire was governed by corrupted bureaucracy that "came to be dominated by cliques and factions, formed among the functionaries, whose main interest was to exploit bureaucratic office for private gain" (Lapidus, 1988, p.128).

There was a huge gap between the Abbasid tyrannical society which consisted of the bureaucrats, the high class who dominated the whole empire and the wretched poor people. Accordingly, the Abbasid supremacy can be described as a "political society," using Antonio Gramsci's term, an authoritarian system employed to control the oppressed people (Gramsci, 1971). Gramsci was anxious to explain the catastrophe of the proletariat or the poor to contest capitalist exploitation through socialist revolution, which is the problem of Al-Hallaj's time.

Al-Hallaj was thoughtful to the social gap between the poor and the rich in society, so he advised people to feed orphans, to clothe them and to make them happy instead of spending lots of money in pilgrimage (Massignon and Kraus, 1975, p. 36; Schimmel, 1975, p. 71). Al-Hallaj was courageous to speak vehemently about the problems of his society and by doing so, he was considered to be a sinner against both the conformist community and the Sufi brotherhood. The silent language of Sufism did not gratify his senses, but he pursued to express the dilemma of his society in the ardent and impassioned language that Sufism has never accepted. Consequently, and as a result of his voice, Al-Hallaj was denounced as a heretic, arrested in Sus and imprisoned in Baghdad (911–922 AD). Al-Hallaj was crucified and brutally tortured to death on March 26, 922 AD, yet his demise did not diminish his voice. He left behind memorable works and cohorts who courageously affirmed his beliefs and knowledge.

Al-Hallaj's death is described by Farid al-Din Attar as a heroic act, as when he was taken to court, a Sufi asked him: "What is love?" He answers: "You will see it today, tomorrow, and the day after tomorrow." They killed him that day, burned his body the next day, and threw his ashes to the wind the day after that. "This is love," Attar says. His legs were cut off, he smiled and said, "I used to walk the earth with these legs, now there's only one step to heaven, cut that if you can." When his hands were cut off he washes his face with his own blood, when asked why, he says: "I have lost a lot of blood, and I know my face has turned yellow, I don't want to look pale-faced (of fear)" (Ramli, 2013, p. 107–08).

Al-Hallaj was persecuted for saying his most appalling utterance, "Ana al-Haqq," "I am the truth," which is considered to be an insolent disrespect of Islam and Muslim canonical law. However, "Massignon . . . succeeded in showing that in the theology of [Al-Hallaj], God's pure transcendence is maintained" (Schimmel, 1963, p. 346). Moreover, Muhammad Iqbal defends him, highlighting the true story behind "Ana al-Haqq":

The contemporaries of [Al-Hallaj], as well as his successors, interpreted [his] words pantheistically, but the *Fragments of Hallaj*, collected and published by the French Orientalist L. Massignon, leave no doubt that the martyr saint could

not have meant to deny the transcendence of God. The true interpretation of his experience, therefore, is not the drop slipping into the sea, but the realization and bold affirmation in an undying phrase of the reality and permanence of the human ego in a profounder personality. (Iqbal, 2001, p.96)

Iqbal agrees with Massignon that Al-Hallaj's execution was not because of his utterance "Ana al-Haqq" that was interpreted as (I am the Absolute Truth, i.e., God) which brought about his execution, but rather his social theories and effort in challenging the Abbasid despotic power (Massignon, 1994, p. 271–37; Schimmel, 1975, p. 30).

Al-Hallaj's writings are full of passion and faith, especially his poems written in prison in which he gives voice to the distress he felt because of injustice and tyranny. El-Sawy states that "Al-Hallaj uses the word "prison" not only to refer to the actual one he is incarcerated in, but also to the dark vast jail where all the oppressed suffer in: that is life":

O my Holy (love)! I have embraced with the whole of my
Being Your whole Being. You manifest to me till You are as if in me.
When I think of things other than You
I feel nothing but disgust.
I feel at home only in Your company.
But alas! I am in the prison of my life
Deprived of Your intimacy.

Take me out, I pray, from this prison. (Massignon & Kraus, 1975, p. 57–58)

This poem is crystal clear evidence of his discharge of blasphemy and a reflection on his repugnance of injustice and worldly corruption. Nevertheless, his revulsion and disgust never put an end to his effort to speak up and inspire others. Al-Hallaj's book *Al-Tawasin* was written during his imprisonment which provided a summary of his Sufi thought and concepts, and it is the last thing that al-Hallaj wrote before his murder.

Al-Tawasin contains eight chapters, and each of them is called "ta-sin," "after the mysterious letters at the beginning of Sura 27, which are said to indicate divine majesty and power" (Schimmel, 1975, p. 69). In these Tawasin, Al-Hallaj presented a summary of his mystical and linguistic thought. The uniqueness of ideas, their strangeness, and their departure from the prevailing cultural and intellectual pattern in the cultural and historical context, called for a special expressive language that relied on ambiguity and abstraction. Al-Hallaj expressed his ideas in *Al-Tawasin* through two methods: the first; vague verbal expression by alienating the vocabulary from its original use, placing it in structures far from the prevailing and circulating linguistic awareness. Thus, his language is a language of disclosure, not a language of description. On the contrary, it digs in the recessed layers on which clarity perches and hides. His use of abstract pictorial drawing as an alternative tool for verbal language is the second method that Al-Hallaj followed in writing the book of *Al-Tawasin*. This method is a departure from all the usual and recognized formats in the artistic context, whether it is formal or intellectual. This technical leap that Al-Hallaj took as an artistic necessity motivated by the mystical revelation, in itself, expresses the impotence of language and the incompatibility of its material nature with the nature of spiritual or mystical knowledge, and thus explains the nature of that knowledge, as well as revealing the nature of language. By doing so, Al-Hallaj stirs the imagination of the recipient, and makes him follow the implications of abstract ideas inside his mind, the mystical truth is not taught, but rather stems from the soul of man without reason. Al-Hallaj compels his readers to exert effort to

think, contemplate and criticize; consequently, he inspires people to be active participants in their societies.

Al-Hallaj departed from the usual artistic pattern by inventing a completely new and different artistic style in its artistic construction from all the art forms known in its context. *Al-Tawasin* does not fall under the name of poetry, and at the same time, the rules of Arabic prose do not apply to them in its historical context. Rather, they came as an innovative mixture expressing a scattered poetics that transcends the rules and determinants of poetry, which makes it tantamount to preaching the modern prose poem as it converges with it in several points that can be deduced. Al-Hallaj deviates from the alphabetical linguistic expression to abstract drawings that leave the recipient in the abyss of interpretation and creation of meaning. He is considered to be the leader of visual poetry from which “Concrete Poetry” had sprouted and is used in modern times.

The origins of what is known in the West as the “Concrete Poetry” movement can be traced back to two simultaneous declarations of principles, the first of which was by the Swiss poet “Eugene Gomringer” in 1954 under the title “From Line to Constellation” and the second of the “Noigandres Group” The Brazilian poetics with its three poets, Harlodo Dr Campos, Augusto de Campos, and Decio Pignartari (1958) entitled: “A Brief Plan for Stereoscopic Poetry.” As the English critic Stephen Bann explains in the later quotation, these poets agreed to name their new poetic project “Concrete Poetry” after a meeting between Gomringer and Pignartari in 1955; Stephen Ban, in *Concrete Poetry: An International Anthology*, says:

The international movement of concrete poetry owes its origin to a meeting which took place at Ulm in 1955. It was in this year that Eugen Gomringer made the acquaintance with Decio Pignatari who was spending two years in Europe. Both had in fact considered using the word ‘concrete’ in connection with their work, but they had been entirely unaware of each other’s existence. (Bann, 1967, p.7)

Critic Mary Allen Solt explains in *Concrete Poetry: A World View* that:

Although the Noigandres Group wrote as a group, each developed in his own way despite the fact that the Brazilian concrete poetry exhibits certain general characteristics which make it a distinctive school. It is not difficult to see that Gomringer’s ‘constellations’ do not look like the Noigandres ‘ideograms’. (Solt, 1970, p.14)

The new poem in Gomringer’s vision is “something that can be seen and used” in a way that he sees as closer to a real “game” than to serious business. He sees the poem as “a play area of fixed dimensions” where the poet decides “The area of the area designated for play and determines the play-area . . . and suggests its possibilities” (Gomringer, 1970, p. 67), and behind it the new reader of this new poetry, after realizing the idea of the game, decides to enter into it and interact with it. Gomringer’s poem “Silence” is a perfect example:

Silencio Silencio Silencio

Silencio Silencio Silencio

Silencio Silencio

Silencio Silencio Silencio

Silencio Silencio Silencio. (Gomringer, 2008, p,14)

The empty square in the middle of the poem gives the impression of stillness. Visually, it largely represents the feeling of silence. “Objectivity” here from Goeringer’s point of view is

the perceptibility of a visual structure embodying its specific content - that is, the similarity between the empty square in the middle of the figure and the connotation of “silence” as a pointer.

Similarly, abstraction manifests itself in transforming the written word into a geometric form and taking it out of its linguistic context to acquire another hypothetical context such as a geometric form; the singular word, free of a verbal context, gives it its significance and opens a door for the recipient to understand and interpret it. It takes its context by repeating it in writing in a certain way, adding the space in the middle of the form to its synthetic virtual reality, and the interaction of the recipient with it visually.

Arabic poetry has surpassed itself since the pre-Islamic era; for example, the optical formation has been taken into account in the ancient Arab – although in an initially – poetic epics in the water of gold and suspended the Kaaba, carrying this act as an aesthetic that moved poetry from being an auditory art to being a visual art as well, and influenced the arts. In the Umayyad era, we find Walada Bent El-Moustakfy (994 AD – 1091 AD) who embroidered her dress with two poems, as if the form of the written words carries with it a semantic energy that is added to its identical meaning. Moreover, in Andalusia, many visual arts related to poetry, such as geometric poetry and embroidery which are based on writing as a tool for visual influence which initiated of a new form of human consciousness in its vision of artistic work in particular, and of the world in general. As for the Mamluk and Ottoman era, Abelatif Al-Warary points out in “Visual poetry and Tautology” that “the poets of the era, with the Arabic poem, which had reached the peak of its aesthetic development during the second Abbasid era, turned to other banks . . . as they created new poetic arts . . . I felt in it the beautiful, the embroidery, the tapestry, the riddles, the riddles and the formal games” (Al-Warary, 2013, p.105-106). It was truly a title for another stage in which the art of touching and seeing replaced the art of listening and flattering, or visual formation in place of vocal formation. In short, these poetic forms that were developed during those eras from the history of Arab poetry, especially the Mamluk and Ottoman eras, reveal to us that visual poetry or concrete poetry was invented by the Arabs hundreds of years before the Europeans. Thus, Al-Hallaj preceded all these poetic ages, and had cast the seed of visual formation in his *Al-Tawasin*, and hence he can be considered truly to be the pioneer of visual and concrete poetry.

This is what Al-Hallaj did in *Al-Tawasin* when he depicted abstract meanings with lines and drawings, referring to them in a denoting sentence, and interpreting them as embodying those meanings, and manifesting them in a tangible physical way. He considered drawing in his *Tawasin* as well as a means or a tool for representation. This means that he has replaced it with the verbal language and cast on it the cultural heritage of the written language that qualifies it to carry out the task of motivating the reader and attracting him to the whirlpool of interaction with the text. For example: the image of “The Ta-Sin of the Self-Awareness in Al-Tawheed” (figure 1) compels the recipients to clarify the implications of this drawing, which is made up of units based on two written forms of the letter Al-Ain (ع), distributed in a balanced manner on a horizontal line.

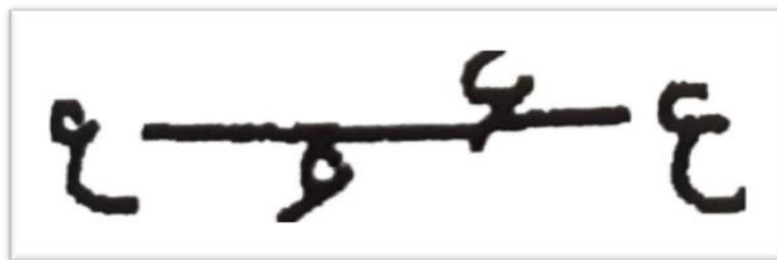


Figure (1)¹

Al-Hallaj refers to it as a picture of the trappers of secrets in monotheism, which opens the indication to this picture on several possibilities for interpretation. It may be a symbol of the letter Al-Ain (ع), to the human eye through which he sees; with its symbolism, it refers to the insight and intuitive vision around which Sufi thought revolves and Sufi poets have always mentioned in the context of mystical knowledge; an example of this is the statement of Al-Hallaj himself: “I saw my Lord with the eye of my heart” (Al-Hallaj, 1974, p.22), and his saying: “Contemplate with the eyes of the mind what I am describing . . . the mind has ears, eyes and eyes” (Al-Hallaj, 1974, p. 33). And he said in another place: “I have a heart that has eyes for you . . . looking at you, and it is all in your hands” (Al-Hallaj, 1974, P. 35). Through the previous examples, the significance of the eye in mystical thought appears, as we mentioned above, with insight and intuition. Through the previous examples, the significance of the eye in mystical thought appears, as we mentioned above, with insight and intuitional mystical knowledge. Concerning the letter Ain (ع), it has two distinct denotations. The first has to do with the organ eye; that is the sensual sight. The other one relates to the insight that sees the truth from behind the veils and, accordingly, reveals the secrets of existence. Therefore, the insight (ع) realizes the oneness of God through this spiritual knowledge that returns the soul to its essence, and transcends the concepts of the material world, and makes the mystic transcend the body, so it is liberated. Al-Hallaj says:

If I saw ‘the Tawhid emanates from Him’ then I double the Divine Essence, and I make an emanation of itself, co-existent with it, being and not being this Essence at the same time.

If I say that it was hidden in Allah, and He manifests it, how was it hidden where there is no ‘how’ or ‘what’ or ‘this ‘and there is no place (‘where’) contained in Him.

Because ‘in this’ is a creation of Allah, as is ‘where.’

That which supports an accident is not without a substance. That which is not separated from a body is not without some part of a body. That which is not separated from spirit, is not without some part of a spirit. The Tawhid is therefore an assimilant. (Al-Hallaj, 1974, P.19-20)

The mystic sees the truth in the oneness of its essence, so he cannot say, nor is he able to express, because this context is not reached by imagination, surrounded by incomprehension, and there is no limit for it to be perceived. Therefore, the mystical truth and its expression (the uttered and the truth) do not meet, as Al-Hallaj says, as language does not have the ability to express it. Jean François Lyotard expressed, in *The Postmodern Condition: A report On Knowledge*, this state of the inability of language to express the concept of (transcendence):

We have the idea of the world (the totality of what is), but we do not have the capacity to show an example of it. We have the idea of the simple, (that which cannot be broken down, decomposed) but we cannot illustrate it with a sensible object which would be a “case” of it. We can conceive the infinitely great, the infinitely powerful, but every presentation of an object destined to “make visible” this absolute greatness or power appears to us painfully inadequate.

¹ Al-Husayn ibn Mansur Al-Hallaj, *Al-Tawasin*, trans. Aisha Abd al-Rahman al Tarjumana (Berkeley, CA, and London: Diwan Press, 1974), 19.

Those are ideas of which no presentation is possible. (Lyotard, 1984, p78)

Moreover, in “The Ta-Sin of the Circle”, Al-Hallaj offers this form, shown in Figure (2) with words that are not less mysterious of the drawing referred to, and tries to provide an explanation through verbal language but increases the confusion and closure on what is meant, and adds ambiguity to its vagueness.

The first door represents the one who reaches the circle of Truth. The second door represents the person who reaches it, who after entering it comes to a closed door. The third door represents the one who goes as tray in the desert of the Truth-Nature of the truth.

He that enters the circle is far from the Truth because the way is blocked and the seeker is sent back. The point on high represents his yearning. The lower point represents his return to his point of departure, and the middle point is his bewilderment.

The inner circle does not have a door, and the point which is in the center is Truth. (Al-Hallaj, 1974, P.7)

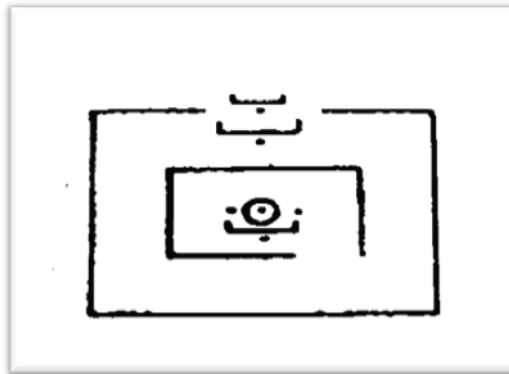


Figure (2)²

This image or this figure is an embodiment of meanings that the written language cannot perform using the known words within the language. It opens up to its interpretation of semantics, as well as to the interpretation of this expressive deviation in which Al-Hallaj departed from the traditional linguistic expression. This leads us to the fact that the purpose of language is to influence whether the recipient is able to reach a meaning or not. Since its influence on the recipient is inevitable, he necessarily interacts negatively or positively with language. Thus, there is no relationship between the realization of the existence of meaning, and the extent of the impact of language on the recipient, since the absence of meaning is not from the nature of language, but rather it is a result of a set of social contexts that make the pronunciation or linguistic structure uncirculated and surprising and thus loses meaning to the recipient. Ludwig Wittgenstein says: “When you say about a phrase that it is devoid of meaning, this does not mean that its meaning is devoid of meaning, but that a certain combination of words has been excluded from the language or taken out of the circle of circulation” (Wittgenstein, 1997, p. 227). The meaning, then, is from what is necessarily known from speech, even if there is no meaning.

Parts of *Al-Tawasin* are splendid hymns in honor of Prophet Mohamed (peace be upon him). El-Sawy maintains that “if there is any doubt as to whether Al-Hallaj was a faithful

² Al-Hallaj, *Al-Tawasin* (see note 1), 7.

Muslim, one need only read his description of Prophet Mohamed in “The Ta-Sin of the Prophetic Lamp” (El-Sawy, 2021, P.158):

A lamp appeared from the Light of the Unseen. It appeared and returned, and it surpassed the other lamps. It was a ruling moon, manifesting itself radiantly among the other moons. It was a star whose astrological house is in the Empyrean. Allah named him ‘unlettered’ in view of the concentration of his aspiration, and also ‘consecrated’ because of the majesty of his vicinity. (Al-Hallaj, 1974, P.1)

In “The Ta-Sin of Understanding,” Al-Hallaj describes the fate of the moth that comes near the flame and eventually gets burned in it. He might refer here to his own state and destiny after speaking about his beliefs:

The moth flies about the flame until morning, then he returns to his fellows and tells them of his spiritual state with the most eloquent expressions. The he mixes with the coquetry of the flame in his desire to reach perfect union. The light of the flame is the knowledge of reality, its heat is the reality of reality, and Union with it is the Truth of the reality . . . He was not satisfied with its light nor with its heat, so he leapt into it completely . . . But at that moment, he was being utterly consumed, reduced, and dispersed into fragments, and he remained without form or body or distinguishing mark. (Al-Hallaj, 1974, P.3)

This part anticipates what will happen to him because of his recognition of reality. Al-Hallaj’s eloquent expressions was imprisoned and then “dispersed into fragments.”

In “The Ta-sin of Purity”, Al-Hallaj highlights that the traveler, after passing through the stations of striving, has been promoted to the high levels of the states that the Sufis call “knowledge” and “reality,” where the student becomes a knower, and it is realized that knowledge, the knower, and the known are one thing. This is not achieved for the traveler except by his mental contemplation within himself to reach the truth. Thus, knowing the self as a manifestation of the manifestations of existence is the way to know God; Sufism does not require that we leave existence and ourselves, but rather on the contrary, it requires us to enter more into existence and into our souls. Al-Hallaj is governed by the existence of knowledge and is burdened by the inability to express, so he is silent, and he is between this and that compliant with the requirements of the situation and the change of forms, he sees behind it the light of truth, and witnesses the secret of existence. In his speech, he is not concerned with making anyone understand; his thought in this is that mystical realization or reaching the truth is not achieved for the traveler except with a pre-condition, which is that this knowledge emanates from himself without a reason. The one who refrains from his signs, the enigmatic with his words, the revealer of his secrets.

Al-Hallaj inspired many people when he was alive and had many followers after his death. About three years after his execution in 924 AD, some of his followers were crucified on the East Bank. Their severed heads were exhibited on the prison walls on the West Bank as a means of terrorization to all non-conformists. This public crucifixion and torture assisted the despotic government to enforce its hegemony over all dissents that threatened the oppressive power of the Abbasid government. Thus, the hegemonic stratum poses challenges for all revolutionary engagements which are considered weak in comparison to the supremacy of the government.

Al-Hallaj’s affiliation with the bourgeoisie did not stop him from bringing about social reform; he felt the appalling condition of the poor and considered such atrocious state as evil. El-Sawy states that “[a]s a result of speaking about the unspeakable and criticizing the status

quo, Al-Hallaj was silenced, and his punishment, imprisonment and execution were the undeviating results of his beliefs in defying the despotic hegemony of his time ” (El-Sawy, 2021, p 162). Mason in his dramatic narrative of the death of Al-Hallaj envisions the consequences of his martyrdom, and how it had been influential, always “carrying with them a kind of enigma about the meaning of his death” (Mason, 1974, p.37). Mason gives voice to Hamid, Al-Hallaj’s son, who witnesses his father’s execution and narrates the torture inflicted on him. Hamid portrays the pain his father endured on the day of his execution:

On the morning of the execution
He was taken from his prison,
Put on one of the pack mules,
Led away, jostled by grooms
Who ran alongside him
Shouting at the crowd which formed
A mob. . . .
The executioner beheaded His body
His body was wrapped in his mantle
And doused with oil and set aflame
Together with his books . . .
His head was carried to the caliph’s palace
Across the Tigris on the Bridge of Boats.
It was hung on a gate for everyone to see. (Mason, 1974, p.37)

Hamid stresses the fact that Al-Hallaj was executed in front of the mob. The Abbasid government aimed at displaying the tortured body of the revolutionary soul to make the people aware of the “unrestrained presence” of the sovereign and the horrible consequences of violating their oppressive rules (Foucault, 1979, p. 49). This cruel spectacle is similar to what Foucault believes to be a punishment and “exercise of terror” (Foucault, 1979, p. 12). Torture, according to the Foucauldian conception of the spectacle of torture horrifies the spectator, or it may make the spectator feel complicity or guilt by watching it.

It is noteworthy that the figure of Al-Hallaj has recently gained fame and recognition, especially among poets who incline to shed light on his resistance to the evil of his society which is considered to be the main cause of his accusation of blasphemy. Prominent among them is the Syrian poet and translator Ali Ahmad Said Esber known as Adunis in his “Elegy for al-Hallaj” (1961). The title “Marthiyat al-Hallaj” (Elegy for al-Hallaj) alludes to the martyrdom of the Al-Hallaj who launches a war with his pen in favor of the oppressed and against the oppressors. Al-Hallaj’s name has become a symbol for love, suffering, and freedom; he is presented in Adunis’s poem as a bird, alluding to one of his own verses:

وطار قلبي بريش شوق مركب في جناح العزم

[And my heart flew with quills of yearning / fixed on a wing of determination].³

Adunis compares Al-Hallaj’s soul to a bird, a mystical imagery frequently found in the writings of Muslim writers such as Avicenna (970 AD –1037 AD), al-Ghazzali (1057 AD – 1111 AD), and Rumi (1207 AD –1273 AD) (Schimmel, 1975, p.306–07).

³ This is my translation of Al-Hallaj’s line which is part of his poem in *Diwan: Al-Husayn ibn Mansur al-Hallaj*, *Diwan*, ed. Kamil Mutafa al-Shaybi (Baghdad: Matbaat al-Ma’arif, 1974), 53.

Moreover, Al-Hallaj is associated with the idea of death and rebirth. After the death of the old, the new, powerful, and young is reborn. His death and rebirth is, according to Adunis, a concrete allegory of the dying Arab nation and its future resurrection. The spatial context of the poem is expressed not only by the fact that the poem was written in the 1960s in Arabic for Arabic readers, but also by the “star rising from Baghdad” (lines 3, 9), the place at which Al-Hallaj was executed as well as symbolizing the glorious medieval Arab and Muslim civilization; “this land” (lines 14, 17); “our land” (line 5); “our history” (line 4) stress the Arabic and Islamic context of the poem (Badawi, 1975, p. 237).

Accordingly, the meaning of rebirth and revival, connected to the figure of Al-Hallaj (who was executed more than a thousand years before the poem was written), accentuates the significance of the poem for present and future generations. Adunis’s poem, a lamentation for a historic figure, is considered to be a vision of the Arab nation’s rebirth. Since the star is rising now from Baghdad, the death of Al-Hallaj, as Al-Bayyati designates, “is the bridge which civilization and mankind cross to reach a more perfect existence” (Al-Bayyati, 1968, p.41). Thus, Adunis’s poem voices the resistance of Al-Hallaj and his thoughts which are captivated by the hegemonic power of the Abbasid caliphate.

To conclude, Al-Hallaj is presented in this paper as a courageous archetype of the intellectual who values words more than his own life, an iconic figure who would die willfully and courageously for his words to live after him. Al-Hallaj took the responsibility of the deprived community in his society and spoke about their conditions. He considered himself a voice for the voiceless. Al-Hallaj’s voice is not just a revolutionary speech, but a power that expresses a vision. Al-Hallaj is an icon of a dauntless tragic hero who refused to surrender; he is a smart intellectual whose work denies acquiescence. Al-Hallaj courageously chose the way of protest and patiently struggled hard to keep his dignity as a human till the end. Thus, his work is worthy to be explored to live and survive in the memory of intellectuals and ordinary people from different cultures.

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