

Concerning the “Barzakh”

by

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I

A VERY explicit example of the double meaning of symbols¹ is provided by the use of the expression *barzakh* in Islamic esoterism. In Islamic theology the word *barzakh* is generally taken to mean a certain intermediate state in the posthumous evolution of the human being. But esoterism gives it a much less restricted meaning, while moreover basing itself strictly, on the metaphysical interpretation of the Koranic verses containing the term *barzakh*. One of these verses is from the sura *Ar-Rahmān*: “He bringeth forth the two seas, which meet; between them is an isthmus (= *barzakh*), which they do not go beyond.” Another verse is from the sura *Al-Furqān*: “He it is who bringeth forth the two seas; one is fresh and drinkable, the other is salt and bitter; and He hath made between the two an isthmus (= *barzakh*) and a closed barrier.”

According to interpretations well-known in Sufism, the two seas symbolize respectively Quiddity and the Qualities², or, according to other interpretations, the non-manifested and the manifested, the formless and the formal, immediate knowledge and theoretical knowledge, etc. In short the two seas can represent two more or less exalted, but always consecutive, degrees in the hierarchy of Being (*wujūd*).

As for the *barzakh*, which, seen “from the outside”, must necessarily have the definite meaning of “partition” or “separative element”, it cannot be merely this for a perspective which applies to it the principle of non-otherness. Looking at it in regard to its ontological situation, if one may so put it, it appears as a simple partition only from the point of view of the degree of lesser reality, whereas seen “from above”, it is the very mediator between the two seas.

It can thus be compared to a prism which breaks down the integral light of a higher world into the varied colors of a lower world, or again to a lens which concentrates the rays from above by filtering them through a single point of inversion.

¹ See the article by René Guénon: “Du double sens des symboles” in *Etudes Traditionnelles*, July 1937.

² These terms are explained in the extracts from the book *De l’homme universel (al-insān al-kāmil)* translated by Titus Burckhardt, Paris 1975, Dervy-Livres.

The *barzakh* is thus separation only in that it is itself the starting point of a separative perspective, in the eyes of which it appears to be a limit. And this finds an analogy in what is called the “blind spot” in the physical eye, at the very place where the optic nerve perforates it.

These considerations regarding the two complementary aspects of the *barzakh* sufficiently explain why in Sufism this expression is sometimes used synonymously with *qutb*, “pole”.

“What is called the *barzakh* of a given realm of existence,” says the Shaykh Si Muhammad Tadiḷī of Djadīdah, “is nothing other than the pole that governs this realm and gives it its growth.”

As can be seen from the use of the expression “growth”, the Shaykh Tadiḷī had above all in mind the cosmological applications of the theory of the *barzakh*:

“In the image of the hierarchy of the worlds contained in the *kawn al-kabir*³, every world or every degree of human individuality is presided over by a *barzakh*, in the same way as every human faculty is governed by a certain pole.”

This is most easily seen in the faculties of mental conception, in which the *barāzikh* (plural of *barzakh*) constitute the pivots of the complementaries “subject” and “object”, as well as in the faculties of sensible perception.

The Shaykh Tadiḷī also says: “All the *barāzikh* of man depend on his central *barzakh*, which is the heart (*qalb*)⁴, mediator between the domain of the Spirit (*Rūh*) and that of the individual soul (*nafs*).”

Moreover, the physical aspect of the heart very clearly expresses the different characteristics of the *barāzikh*, for, according to Shaykh Tadiḷī, “these *barāzikh* of the human hierarchy can be symbolically represented as so many imperceptible points from which a luminous vibration emanates, alternately of concentration and of expansion, continuously and spontaneously. Each pulsation of the *barzakh* produces a transformation of the vital light. In order that this transformation does not become upset and does not, through individual negligence, become fatally ‘downward tending’, it must always be determined by spiritual orientation and sustained by means such as *dhikr* (invocation) or by methods that depend on the science of respiration. “These methods are based, from a certain point of view, on the analogy between the phases of respiration and the pulsation of the *barāzikh*.”

³ The macrocosm. According to a Sufi saying, “the Cosmos is like a big man and man is like a little cosmos”.

⁴ In this connection it is very significant that the root of the word *qalb*, Q-L-B, implies the idea of “turning upside down”, whereas the root Q-B-L implies that of “placing one in front of the other”, whence the expression *qiblah* (ritual orientation); the word *qalb*, moreover, also has the meaning of “mold”, given the inversion of “negative” and “positive” in the process of molding.

As for the *dhikr*, it should be noted that this word also means “recall” or “remembrance”, which allows us to see analogies between invocation and the call to the *barzakh* of memory, situated between the “seas” of remembrance and forgetfulness.⁵

II

The two-faced nature of Janus which is characteristic of the *barzakh*, its double function in a vertical sense of junction and Separation, is expressed on the horizontal plane by the alternations of expansion and contraction. These are obviously further aspects of the same complementarism. Reduced to an elementary logical expression, these dualities can be represented respectively by affirmation and negation.

This leads us to a corresponding application of the formula of the *Shahādah*,⁶ which itself can be called the doctrinal *barzakh* par excellence.

The *Shahādah* is generally divided into two parts, of which the first, the *Lā ilāha*, is called *an-nafy*, negation, or *as-salb*, suppression, and the second, the *ill’ Allāh*, is called *al-ithbāt*, affirmation.

But in order to apply the *Shahādah* even more explicitly to the theory of the *barzakh*, it must be divided into three parts: *Lā ilāha*, *illā*, and *Allāh*.⁷ And in order better to understand the nature of the *barzakh illā*, which is situated between the “sea” of negation, *Lā ilāha*, and the “sea” of affirmation, *Allāh*, it should be broken down into its constituent elements: the particle *in* (=if), which expresses a condition, and *lā* (= no), which expresses a negation.

Now, when one has understood that the particle *in* is a conditioned affirmation, since it gives back reality to *ilāhun* (nominative of *ilāha*),⁸ on the condition that this is not other than the reality of *Allāh*, it will be seen that the affirmation and the negation are present in the *illā* in the reverse order to the affirmation and the negation which “frame” so to speak the whole formula.

This reversal is naturally not a simple question of the order of words, for, as we have just indicated, the particle *in* is the “point of reflection” for the grace of *Allāh* which reaches as far as the illusory *ilāhun*; one can see this if one replaces the term *ilāha* by any positive notion

⁵ The use of tense in the Arabic language pertains to the same order of analogies: it is not the present tense of the verb that is used to symbolize the eternal, but the past definite, or rather what corresponds to this in Arabic.

⁶ The “testimony”, that is to say the fundamental formula *Lā ilāha ill’ Allāh*, “There is no divinity if it is not The Divinity”. The word-for-word translation is as follows: *Lā* = no; *ilāha* = divinity; *in* = if and *lā* = not (contracted into *illa*); *Allāh* = The Divinity. According to Arab grammarians, the name *Allāh* was originally composed of the definite article *Al* and to the noun *ilāhu* (nominative of *ilāha*).

⁷ “There is no divinity”; “it is not”; “The Divinity”.

⁸ *Ilāhun* = divinity, a divinity; *al-ilāhu* = The Divinity; *ilāha* = the accusative of negation.

whatsoever; this will then be denied in so far as it affirms itself, at least illusorily, alongside the ipseity of Allāh, and it will be affirmed in so far as it is identified essentially or principally with the ipseity of Allāh. On the other hand, the second element of the *illā*, the negative particle *lā*, is in a sense the “point of reflection” of the first part of the *Shahādah*, namely the negation *Lā ilāha*: the first *lā* of the formula denies the notion of “divinity” expressed by the indeterminate form *ilāhun*, whereas the second *lā* singles out this same notion in the determinate form *Allāh* (“The Divinity”), which symbolizes here non-comparability, and not determination in the restrictive sense of this term.

Thus the expression *illā* demonstrates very clearly the two functions of the *barzakh*, which on the one hand consist in meditation in an “ascending” sense, in other words in the passage from the manifested to the non-manifested, a passage or transformation which always traverses the blind spot of an extinction, or of a death; while at the same time this point is the point of reversal of relationships.

The *Shahādah* shows that these two apparently opposed aspects can be integrated into the conception of “non-otherness”, a conception which obviously transcends the domain of reason and which thus gives to its expression, the *Shahādah*, a certain appearance of pleonasm.⁹

The different aspects of the *barzakh* are further represented in the diagram of the Seal of Solomon, and this leads us to consider the relationship of the *barzakh* with *al-insānu ’l-kāmil*, “universal man”, who, by expressing the constitutive analogy of the microcosm and the macrocosm, is truly the *barzakh* par excellence, or, what amounts to the same thing, the symbol par excellence.

Universal man, in Islam, is *Muhammadun*, who includes in himself all *hamd*,¹⁰ the positive aspect of existence. His role as *barzakh* is expressed by the second of the two *Shahādāt*: *Muhammadun rasūlu ’Llāh*, “Muhammad (is) the messenger of Allāh”.

When one compares the two fundamental formulas: *Lā ilāha ill’ Allāh* and *Muhammadun rasūlu ’Llāh*, one sees that, in the first, the *barzakh* appears above all in its transforming aspect (*illā* = if it is not), and, in the second, in its aspect of meditator and conserver (*rasūl* = messenger).

We must also mention here a Sufi interpretation of the following verse from the sura *Ar-Rahmān*: He bringeth forth the two seas, which meet; between the two is an isthmus (*barzakh*) which they do not go beyond.” The interpretation in question is related to Universal Man and

⁹ This has given rise to a number of fantastic translations of the *Shahādah*, of which one of the least false is the following: “there is no god except Allāh”, a translation which, by its inadequacy, has induced many people to see in the *Shahādah* only the affirmation of a very simplistic “monotheism”.

¹⁰ The most essential names of the Prophet are: *’Abd Allāh*, “servant of Allah”, *Ahmadun*, “the best of glorifiers”; and *Muhammadun*, “the best of the glorified”. *Ahmadun* is considered as the esoteric aspect of *Muhammadun*.

consists in the affirmation that the Prophet is the “isthmus”, and that the “two seas” are respectively *Sayyidnā ‘Alī* and *Sayidatnā Fātimah*.¹¹

III

The *Risālatu ‘l-Qushayriyah* (the Qushayrī Epistle), the famous treatise of the Shaykh Abū ‘l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī,¹² contains amongst other things a sort of compendium of certain “technical terms” peculiar to Sufism. Orientalists have wished to see in these a sort of religious psychology and this is because, in fact, some of the terms commented on by Qushayrī pertain to the symbolism of the sentiments. It is not wrong to see in this a “psychology”, in other words a science of the human psyche, since the development and control of the psychic elements or energies necessarily form an integral part of the *Tarīqah* (“way” or method), but it would be wrong not to be aware of the symbolical perspective implied in this Sufī science of the psyche, a perspective that gives it all its spiritual significance.

If we apply the considerations that we have just formulated regarding the *barzakh* to some sections of the Qushayrī Epistle, the essentially metaphysical nature of what some have called a “religious psychology” will be readily apparent.

We have seen that the double nature of the *barzakh* is reflected at a cosmic level by the alternation of the two phases of concentration and expansion. In the realm of the emotions, these two phrases can be seen most directly in the two primordial ways in which the psyche reacts to what it considers to be “reality”: on the one hand, with fear, which is a contraction towards the center of consciousness, and on the other hand, with joy or hope, which is an expansion.¹³

Now when it is a question of consciously integrating these two phases into the universal order, they can no longer be related to something that could be conceived of as being exterior to themselves. When fear (*al-khawf*) and hope (*ar-rajā*) are orientated towards Allāh or Universal Essence, they are not for that reason effaced from the psychic domain, but they are in a certain sense rhythmized, being no longer subject to disordered impulses; it could be said that they are

¹¹ ‘Alī is the esoteric *Khalifah* (= lieutenant) par excellence; Fātimah is the daughter of the Prophet and wife of ‘Alī.

¹² Al-Qushayrī was a disciple of Abū ‘Alī ad-Daqqaq and lived from 376 to 465 of the Hegira, i.e. from 986 to 1074 A.D.

¹³ This expansion which is proper to joy is expressed in a completely spontaneous manner in Arabic in the verb *insharaha* “to rejoice” which literally means “to expand”, in speaking of the breast filled with joy. The verb *inbasata*, which also means “to rejoice”, also possesses, etymologically speaking, a meaning of “expansion”. For the analogy between fear and contraction one could cite verbal images from several languages; let us note only, as a particularly clear example, the relationship between the German word *Angst*, “fear”, and the Latin word *angustus*, “narrow”.

determined, in a certain fashion, by the “Present” in time and by the “Center” in space, the pole which rules them and the end towards which they tend having become one and the same reality.

If the phases of fear and hope are thus determined and absorbed by the permanent actuality of the immediate present, in such a way that the *faqir*¹⁴ who realizes them has become “son of the moment” (*ibnu ’l-waqt*), they will manifest more essential aspects, and they can be denoted by expressions that have a more general cosmological meaning, such as “contraction” (*qabd*) and “expansion” (*bast*).¹⁵

They can be transformed, further, into the complementary states of *haybah*, an expression which can be approximately translated as “terror of majesty”, and of *Uns*, “intimacy”.

Whereas it is said of the two phrases “contraction” and “expansion” (*qabd wa bast*) that one is in proportion to the other which indicates that they must be considered as being manifested on one and the same plane, it is said of the state of *haybah* that it is identified with that of *ghaybah*, “absence” or “rapture”. It is here that there takes place a passage from the horizontal to the vertical; and by inversion through the narrow door of the *barzakh*, absence (in the world of *farq*, or separativity) becomes Presence (*Hudūr*) (in the world of *jam’*, or union).

Al-Qushayri quotes the following words of al-Junayd:¹⁶ “The fear of Allāh contracts me (*qabd*), hope directed towards Him enlarges me (*bast*); the Truth (*haqīqah*) unites me, and Justice (*haqq*) separates me. If He contracts me through fear, He extinguishes me from myself (*afnanī ’annī*), and if He enlarges me through hope, He returns me to myself. If He unites me by the Truth, He puts me into His Presence (*ahdaranī*), and if He separates me by Justice, He makes me witness of the other-than-myself, and veils me thus from Him.”

(Original editorial inclusion that followed the essay:)

All worldly pursuits have but the one unavoidable and inevitable end, which is sorrow: acquisitions end in dispersion; buildings, in destruction; meetings, in separation; births, in death. Knowing this, one should, from the very first, renounce acquisition and heaping-up, and building, and meeting; and faithful to the commands of an eminent guru, set about realizing the Truth.

Milarepa.

¹⁴ The “poor” in Allāh or for Allāh.

¹⁵ Among the names of Allah are: *al-Qābid*, “He who contracts” or “He who grips” and *al-Wāsit*, “He who enlarges”.

¹⁶ Abū ’l-Qāsim al-Junayd. who came from a Persian family, lived in Baghdad, where he died in 277 of the Hegira, i.e. 910 A.D. He was one of the very great masters, and was called the “lord of the troop” and the “peacock of the wise”.