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BRIEF COMMUNICATIONS

The Spirit of Islamic Calligraphy: Bābā Shāh Iṣfahānī's Ādāb al-mashq

Bābā Shāh Iṣfahānī's *Ādāb al-mashq*, a seventeenth-century Persian treatise on the *nasta'liq* style of calligraphy, contains an unusually full description of the techniques and teaching methods of the calligrapher's art. This article focuses on the inner meditative aspect of calligraphy, which Bābā Shāh explains with a terminology derived from mysticism. In poetically expressive language, this artist of the Safavid period portrays the highest level of calligraphy in terms of psychological states that transcend style. Calligraphy in this view is an art deriving from the Qur'anic revelation as a visual theophany of the divine word.

An eloquent description of the spiritual basis of Islamic calligraphy is contained in an old and beautiful Persian manuscript in the Punjab University Library, Lahore. Entitled *Ādāb al-mashq* ("Manners of Practice"), this book is an autograph written in the seventeenth century by the Iranian calligrapher Bābā Shāh Iṣfahānī.¹ Despite stains and wear, it is still clear and legible, and the first two pages have fine gold illumination. Mawlavī Muḥammad Shafī' *marhūm* edited this work and published it, with a valuable introduction in

Urdu, in the first volume of his collected papers.² The present article is a discussion of Bābā Shāh's explanation of the secrets of his art. *Ādāb al-mashq* is an unusually complete presentation of the aesthetic and religious basis of Islamic calligraphy, and it reveals in particular a visionary method of concentration strongly influenced by Sufism. Bābā Shāh's treatise also comprehensively illustrates the stages in the development of a master calligrapher. It is no exaggeration to say that *Ādāb al-mashq* is one of the most revealing documents of the later development of Islamic calligraphy.

Bābā Shāh Iṣfahānī was famed as a master of the *nasta'liq* style of calligraphy, the beautiful Persian hand developed primarily at the Timūri and Uzbek ateliers in Herat and Bukhara. A modern authority on calligraphy has remarked, "By general agreement of historians contemporary with and later than Bābā Shāh, no calligrapher had reached his level in writing *nasta'liq* before Bābā Shāh appeared. He was adorned with an elegant style and a sweet hand, and even the great calligraphers recognized his mastery."³ The dates and details of his life have been subject to some dispute.⁴

¹ Manuscripts of *Ādāb al-mashq* are evidently common in Iran, but are generally attributed to Mīr 'Imād, and the text has been printed in Iran with this attribution (*Ādāb al-mashq, bā-risāla-i naṣā'ih al-mulūk* [Tehran: Kārkhāna-i Mashhadī-yi Khudādād, 1317/1938]). Nonetheless, Mahdī Bayānī has pronounced the Lahore copy to be an authentic and undeniable example of Bābā Shāh's handwriting, and he has shown that unscrupulous book dealers falsely ascribed the work to Mīr 'Imād because of the great demand for specimens of the latter's work. Cf. Mahdī Bayānī, *Aḥwāl u āsār-i khwush-nivīsān-i nasta'liq-nivīsān*, Intishārāt-i Dānishgāh-i Tihārān, No. 1045/1 (Tehran: Dānishgāh-i Tihārān, 1345/[1967]), I:87. Another copy of *Ādāb al-mashq*, correctly attributed to Bābā Shāh but with the title *Risāla dar khaṭṭ*, is preserved in the library of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, Calcutta, in ms 1623, fols. 73–86; its identity with *Ādāb al-mashq* is certain from the opening words. A manuscript of *Ādāb al-mashq* in Qum (lacking the author's name) is described in *Fihrist-i nuskahā-yi khaṭṭī-i kitābkhāna-i 'umūmī-i Ḥaẓrat Āyat Allāh al-'Uẓmā Najafī-i Mar'ashī*, ed. Aḥmad Ḥusaynī and Maḥmūd Mar'ashī, 10 vols. (Qum: Khayyām, 1360/1982), 9:226, ms 3439/2, copied 3 Dhī al-Hijja 1305.

² "Risāla-i ādāb al-mashq az Bābā Shāh Iṣfahānī," in *Maqālāt-i Mawlavī Muḥammad Shafī'*, ed. Aḥmad Rabbānī (Lahore: Majlis-i Taraqqī-i Adab, n.d. [1967]), I:247–75; the article originally appeared in the *Oriental College Magazine* 101 (1950).

³ Bayānī, I:85.

⁴ The confusion over Bābā Shāh's dates has been noticed already by Annemarie Schimmel, *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 1984), 174, n. 99.

According to modern authorities like the Turkish scholar Ḥabīb Effendī, Bābā Shāh Iṣfahānī had begun the study of calligraphy from the age of eight, and studied night and day for eight years with the celebrated Mīr ʿAlī Haravī (d. 951/1544–45), who perfected the *nastaʿliq* style in Herat and Bukhara. Ḥabīb Effendī further states that Mīr ʿImād (d. 1012/1603), perhaps the most admired master of *nastaʿliq*, derived his style from Bābā Shāh.⁵ If correct, this information would put Bābā Shāh's birth at least sixteen years before Mīr ʿAlī's death, or no later than 940/1533–34.⁶ On the other hand, Muḥammad Quṭb al-Dīn Yazdī wrote that he had met Bābā Shāh Iṣfahānī in 995/1586–87, when the latter was still a young man, and he was amazed to see that he already excelled most of the calligraphers of the day. Quṭb al-Dīn said that if he had lived longer, Bābā Shāh would have surpassed Sultan ʿAlī Mashhadī and Mīr ʿAlī Haravī, and to achieve so much he must have had a divine gift.⁷ This information obviously conflicts with the statement of Ḥabīb Effendī, according to whom Bābā Shāh would have been over fifty at the very time when Quṭb al-Dīn commented on his youth; Quṭb al-Dīn's statement also implies that Bābā Shāh died young, before realizing his full potential. Following the researches of the modern Iranian scholar Mahdī Bayānī, we should accept the eyewitness account of Quṭb al-Dīn, so that Bābā Shāh must have died in Baghdad in 996/1587–88; the modern attempt to link Bābā Shāh into the chain of the two greatest masters of *nastaʿliq* cannot be demonstrated.⁸ Arthur Pope has maintained that Bābā Shāh was a painter as well as a calligrapher, and has referred to a fine specimen of his work, an illustrated manuscript of Jāmi's *Silsilat al-Zahab*, dated to 977/1569–70, and

⁵ Ḥabīb Efendī, *Khaṭṭ wa Khaṭṭātān* (Constantinople, 1305), in *Shafīʿ*, 239.

⁶ Although Bābā Shāh Iṣfahānī quotes the poetry of Mīr ʿAlī Haravī (*Ādāb al-mashq*, 268), we cannot be certain that he was a student of the latter. Mīr ʿAlī Haravī's date of death has been put anywhere from 924/1518 to 976/1568, but the date of 951/1544 is found in a contemporary *tazkira* written in Herat, *Muzakkir-i Aḥbāb* by Ḥasan "Nisāri"; cf. Muḥammad Bakhtāvar Khān, *Mirʿāt al-ʿālam, tārikh-i Awrangzib*, ed. Sajida S. Alvi, Publication of the Research Society of Pakistan, no. 55 (Lahore: Research Society of Pakistan, 1979), II:477, n. 1.

⁷ Muḥammad Quṭb al-Dīn Yazdī, *Risāla-i Quṭbiyya*, in *Shafīʿ*, 249.

⁸ Bayānī, I:86. ʿAlī Efendī's report that Bābā Shāh was the student of Mīr ʿAlī's best pupil, Sayyid Aḥmad Mashhadī (d. 986/1578–79), also appears unlikely, since Bābā Shāh seems never to have left Isfahan (ibid., 46).

preserved in the former royal library in Tehran.⁹ This appears to be an error, however, for the colophon to the manuscript, the earliest known with Bābā Shāh's signature, states only that Bābā Shāh was the copyist.¹⁰ Regardless of the confusion about dates, the sources are all agreed that in addition to his natural ability, Bābā Shāh had received supernatural assistance in his art. One authority wrote, "The subtlety of his writing was of a miraculous order. . . . He had an inborn talent for calligraphy, but the beauty of his writing was a divine gift. The enthusiasm of the people of Isfahan for his writing is on such a level that they firmly believe that Mother Time has never brought forth a famous calligrapher child like Bābā Shāh."¹¹ Iskandar Beg, the historian of the Ṣafavī court, maintains that Bābā Shāh was without rival in Iraq and Khurasan. He devoted all his hours to penmanship, from which he made his living, and he left many examples of his work in books, albums, and individual pieces. Although many people in Iraq had specimens of his work, it became difficult to find any that were still available, because demand had driven the price very high.¹² His formal title in the court of Shāh Tahmāsp was Raʿīs al-Ruʿasā, "Chief of Chiefs."¹³

The autograph copy of *Ādāb al-mashq* now preserved in the Punjab University Library was once the property of the royal library in Bijapur. The ʿĀdil Shāhī kings were noted connoisseurs of calligraphy, and had enticed talented calligraphers to the Deccan

⁹ The date of this manuscript makes it hard to place Bābā Shāh's birth much later than 960/1553, so that he would have been around thirty-five at the time of his death; it is possible that he could still at this age have appeared to be a young man cut off in his prime.

¹⁰ Bayānī, I:90. Bayānī refers to three page specimens of Bābā Shāh's calligraphy in Istanbul, and mentions several manuscripts in Bābā Shāh's hand: a copy of *Naṣāʾih al-mulūk*, dated 980/1572–73, a manuscript with the *Khamsas* of Niẓāmī and Khusraw (994/1585–86), *Chihil kalima-i nabavī* (Ramazān 978/Jan. 1571), and *Tuḥfat al-abrār* (982/1574–75), all in the former royal library in Tehran. Cf. Arthur Upham Pope and Phyllis Ackerman, ed., *A Survey of Persian Art from Pre-historic Times to the Present* (reprint ed., New York: Oxford University Press), II:1738 (*Shafīʿ*, 250, mistakenly gives "II: 1378"), citing the illustrated Jāmi manuscript according to L. Binyon, J. V. S. Wilkinson, and B. Gray, *Persian Miniature Painting* (London, 1933), 143.

¹¹ ʿAlī Efendī, *Munāqib-i hunarvarān*, in Bayānī, I:85.

¹² Iskandar Beg Munshī, *Tārikh-i ʿālam-arā-yi ʿAbbāsī* (Tehran, 1314), 125, in *Shafīʿ*, 248.

¹³ Ḥabīb Efendī, in *Shafīʿ*, 249.

from the Ṣafavī court in Iran.¹⁴ Bābā Shāh undoubtedly would have approved of the presence of his book in Bijapur, since he maintained that the finest and most expensive paper for calligraphy, “which the craftsman calls a rose without a thorn,” was made in the Ṣādīl Shāhī kingdom.¹⁵ It is worth noticing in passing that Bābā Shāh found another Deccan paper, the Sultānī of Daulatabad, to be next best after the Ṣādīl Shāhī; the ancient paper factory of Kaghazipura, between Daulatabad and Khuldabad, has maintained a tradition of producing fine paper from the Tughluq period to the present day.¹⁶ From Bijapur Bābā Shāh’s book fell into the hands of Awrangzīb when he conquered the city in 1097/1686 and took over the royal library.¹⁷

Bābā Shāh wrote several works on calligraphy. One was a *masnavī* poem of a thousand lines on the method of writing the *nasta‘liq* style, for the use of beginners. Here is a sample, explaining the formation of individual letters:

Listen to a word gained from experience on the
placement of the *nasta‘liq* script.

The height of *alif* should be three dots, but with the
same pen with which it came.

One dot is enough for the width of *bā*; six dots is the
length of the body of *bā*.

Some of Bābā Shāh’s verses, written under the pen-name “Ḥālī,” showed his dexterity in using the poetic conceits of calligraphy to endow the art with a religious meaning. In a lyric (*ghazal*) verse quoted by Rāzī, Bābā Shāh made the standard pun on the double meaning of *khaṭṭ* as both “writing” and the “down” of a young man’s new beard; in this way spiritual lovers who contemplate the loops of Arabic script (*khaṭṭ*) are in effect gazing upon the curly down (*khaṭṭ*) on the beloved’s face: “The pupil of the eye became all light in body as in soul, to look upon the sweet curls of his

down (writing).”¹⁸ Although not unusual in itself, this verse in fact sums up Bābā Shāh’s attitude toward calligraphy as a highly concentrated practice of contemplating the divine beauty, which he explained in greater detail in *Ādāb al-mashq*.

Ādāb al-mashq belongs to a special class of writings by calligraphers about calligraphy, but it stands out by its relatively greater emphasis on the internal aspects of the art.¹⁹ Even philosophers and aestheticians seem generally to have placed more importance on the formal aspects of calligraphy than on the act of concentration.²⁰ Bābā Shāh’s originality in this respect is evident from his distinction, discussed below, between the acquired and the unacquired “parts of script”; the acquired aspects begin with stylistic features, but culminate in intellectual mastery, purification of the heart, and intense love. Bābā Shāh deliberately distinguishes these qualities from the formal categories of the classical Arab calligraphers. We can also get an idea of Bābā Shāh’s originality by comparing his work to Sultan Ṣalī Mashhadī’s poem on calligraphy, which Bābā Shāh admired and used as a model for *Ādāb al-mashq*, in

¹⁸ Aḥmad Rāzī, *Haft iqlīm*, ms Punjab University Library copied in 1045/1635–36 in Isfahan, fol. 354b, in *Shafī‘*, 247–48. For the script/down pun, see Schimmel, 130ff.

¹⁹ Other works by calligraphers include Sirāj al-Dīn Ya‘qūb ibn Ḥasan, *Tuḥfat al-muḥibbin* (ca. 858/1454), ms 386 suppl. pers., Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris (Blochet, *Catalogue*, II, no. 1113), cited in Pope and Ackerman, 1737 [the author, a native of Shiraz who went to India, is supposed to have been a disciple of the Sufi master Rūzbihān al-Baqlī (d. 606/1209, *sic*); Majnūn ibn Kamāl al-Dīn Maḥmūd Rafīqī Haravī, *Risāla-i khaṭṭ u sawād*, ed. Yāsīn Niyāzī, *Oriental College Magazine*, vol. 11; also ed. Riżā Māyil (Kabul: Anjuman-i Tārīkh-i Afghānistān, 1355/1976); idem, *Risāla-i rasm al-khaṭṭ* (dated 909/1503–4) in 400 couplets, ms 2449 Raza Library, Rampur; also ms 2277, Khudabakhsh Oriental Public Library, Patna. The last two references are given by Nazir Ahmad, “Timurid Manuscripts of Artistic and Historical Value in Indian Collections,” paper delivered at the International Symposium on the Art of Central Asia during the Timurid Period, held in Samarkand, 1969. Schimmel (p. 184, n. 233) also mentions a work on calligraphy written for Akbar, Khalifa Shaykh Ghulām Muḥammad’s *Haft iqlīm-i Akbarshāhī*, ms Or. 1861, British Museum.

²⁰ Edward Robertson, “Muhammad ibn Ṣabd al-Rahman on Calligraphy,” *Studia Semitica et Orientalia* (Glasgow, 1920), 57–83; Franz Rosenthal, “Abu Haiyan al-Tawhidi on Penmanship,” *Ars Islamica* 13–14 (1948):1–30; Tashkuprizada, in Ḥājji Khalifa, *Kashf al-zunūn*, 153, as cited in Pope and Ackerman, 1740.

¹⁴ Schimmel, 70.

¹⁵ *Ādāb al-mashq*, 272.

¹⁶ Rawnaq Ṣalī, *Rawzat al-aqṭāb al-ma‘rūf ba-maḥzar-i Āṣāfiyya* (Lucknow: Dilgudāz Press, 1349/1931), 282–83; Syed Badshah Hussain, “Hand made paper industry in H. E. H. the Nizām’s Dominions in the 18th and 19th Centuries,” in *Proceedings of the Deccan History Conference* (Hyderabad, 1945), 350–52; *Inksmith Artists’ News* (Seattle: Daniel Smith Inc., 1985), II.2: 1, 3–4. Daniel Smith currently markets this paper as “Indian Village Watercolor Paper,” but it does not seem to match the medieval standards.

¹⁷ *Shafī‘*, 251–52.

which he quotes or refers to Sultan ʿAlī by name more than a dozen times.²¹ Sultan ʿAlī’s poem, in some two-hundred-odd verses, begins with a brief invocation and some autobiographical observations, and proceeds to discuss various aspects of calligraphy, mostly regarding preparation of materials (pen, ink, paper) and stylistic formation of letters. Sultan ʿAlī only makes a few comments on the development of inner concentration, and on the nature of calligraphic practice (*mashq*), perhaps feeling that these subjects should be reserved for oral teaching.²² By comparison, Bābā Shāh’s extensive commentary on the ethics, internal discipline, and levels of mastery of calligraphy amounts to a major disclosure of the master-calligrapher’s practice.

Here we may review the contents of the treatise. As in the *masnavī* poem mentioned above, Bābā Shāh apparently wrote *Ādāb al-mashq* with the novice calligrapher in mind. The author says in his introduction that in his youth he, “in *faqīr-i ḥaqīr-i fānī*, Bābā Shāh-i Iṣfahānī,” once happened to be studying the *nastaʿliq* script. “In searching for the light of the true beloved’s beauty, he trod the path of the representation of script.”²³ Then he happened to see some verses in the superb hand of Sultan ʿAlī Mashhadī, perhaps the calligraphic treatise mentioned above; the formation of the letters in this sample illustrated the *nastaʿliq* style in a most enchanting way. “His *aliḥ*s were like the tall sapling-figures that give peace to the soul, and the eye of his *ṣād* was like the eye of youthful sweethearts. His *dāl* and *lām* were like the tresses of heart-ravishing beloveds, and the circles of the *nūn* were like the eyebrows of devastating beauties. Every one of his dots was like the pupil of the dark-eyed, and every one of his strokes was like the water of life in the darkness of

running ink.”²⁴ In short, seeing these lines inspired Bābā Shāh with the desire to achieve perfection in the art of writing, so he apprenticed himself to masters of the profession. Now in writing this treatise he wished to communicate the fruit of his experience and practice, so that the beginner should be made happy and pray for the welfare of the author. The book comprises six parts: first, on avoiding blameworthy qualities; second, on the parts of script; third, on the excellence and duties of copying; fourth, on cutting the pen; fifth, on the manner of composition; and sixth, on the preparation of paper.

Although the technical and stylistic parts of *Ādāb al-mashq* are certainly valuable, we wish to concentrate here on Bābā Shāh’s expression of the spiritual aspects of calligraphy. His concern for the symbolic aspect of the penman’s art is evident from the opening invocation. Here the faculty of reading and writing is God’s gift to humanity through Adam. The ability to comprehend the divine message is not merely intellectual, however, but involves the heart as well. The merest reflection of God’s writing on Adam’s heart has inspired the world’s greatest lovers:

Recollection and praise be to the lord who created the simples and compounds of the world and chose Adam out of all beings for the nobility of his capacity for knowledge, and who inscribed some letters with the pen of might on the page of his fortunate mind. The gleam of the sparks of that writing’s light cast a glimmer of the sun of Joseph’s beauty into the heart of Zulaykhā, and made her famous throughout the world as a lover. And a scent from the bower of that writing found its way from the rose of Laylā’s face and was scented by Majnūn, so that he fled in amazement to the desert of disgrace. And a letter from the notebook of that writing’s beauty came from Shīrīn’s lip to the ear of Farhād, who tore the clothes of life in the mountains of madness.

Bābā Shāh reserves special praise for the Prophet Muḥammad, whom he describes in traditional Islamic terms as the meaning of the book of existence, and as the source of the cosmological principles known as the Tablet and the Pen; thus the Prophet is that intelligible essence without which the world would have no meaning or existence:

²¹ Sultan ʿAlī Mashhadī’s poem, which is known by several titles (cf. Schimmel, 37), has become well known through the English translation in Qāzī Aḥmad, *Calligraphers and Painters*, trans. V. Minorsky (Washington, D.C., 1959), 120ff.; this translation was not available to me. Bayānī (I:253–54, with a list of the poem’s headings) mentions that the Persian text has been published in Mirzā Sanglākh, *Imtiḥān al-fuṣṣalāʾ* (Tabriz, 1291 A.H.), and that Galina Kostinova published a facsimile edition of the autograph ms in Leningrad, with an introduction in Russian, in *Studies of the National Public Library*, vol. 52 (Leningrad, 1957). I have used the manuscript in the Punjab University Library (P i VII 46), which curiously bears the same title as Bābā Shāh’s work, *Ādāb al-mashq*.

²² The last heading in the Lahore manuscript is “on the beauty of script, which is [by] oral instruction” (*ān taʿlīm ast zabān^{an}*).

²³ *Ādāb al-mashq*, 256.

²⁴ *Ādāb al-mashq*, 256. The last phrase, an allusion to Dhū al-Qarnayn and the search for the water of life in the land of darkness (cf. Qur. 18), is based on a line in Sultan ʿAlī’s poem. Cf. also Schimmel, 122.

And blessings without end be on the luminous shrine of the Prophet, for if [he,] the object of the appearance of the book of existence, had not come from the hidden world to the world of appearance, the Tablet and the Pen would not have arisen, and were it not for [him,] the reason for the production of the parts of the script of that book, neither the form of length in heaven nor the form of width on earth would have appeared.²⁵

Bābā Shāh reminds us of the calligraphic art with all the terms he uses to describe the intelligibility of the world; the Pen and Tablet are the metaphysical principles to which Islamic theologians ascribe the working out of creation and destiny, while the “length (*dūr*)” and “width (*saṭḥ*)” of letters are two of the twelve “parts of the script” mentioned later in the text, which he says “must be copied from the script of the master.”²⁶

The treatise’s brief first section summarizes the ethical aspect of calligraphic practice. Bābā Shāh’s main point is practical; the practice of the calligraphic art requires moderation and balance in the soul, without which the expression of the divine beauty with pen and ink becomes flawed.

Because blameable qualities in the soul are the sign of imbalance, God forbid that work proceed from an imbalanced soul, for there will be no balance in it.

[Verse:] The same thing that is in the jug pours out of it.

So the scribe should completely shun the blameable qualities and acquire the praiseworthy qualities, so that the luminous effects of these blessed qualities appear on the beauty’s cheek of his writing, and it becomes sought after by the connoisseurs’ temperament.²⁷

Bābā Shāh’s stress on the ethical requirements of his art is undoubtedly an example of Sufi practice at work.

In the second section, “on the explanation of the parts of script,” Bābā Shāh Iṣfahānī describes the stylistic and psychological basis of calligraphy, first making a distinction between the parts that are acquired (*taḥṣīlī*) and those that are not. The acquired parts may be gained by persistence, application, and maturity,

while the unacquired parts come without any effort. The unacquired parts of script are in fact nothing but the five elements of writing according to the famous calligrapher Yāqūt (d. 1298), namely inking (*sawād*), fair copying (*bayāz*), preparation (*tashmīr*), real rise (*su^cūd-i ḥaqīqī*), and real fall (*nuzūl-i ḥaqīqī*). Bābā Shāh does not think these worthy of much comment, since everyone who picks up a pen to write must employ these “parts,” so he mentions them only for the sake of good manners toward past masters.²⁸ Of the twelve acquired parts of script, the first nine have to do with style. This is true of composition (*tarkīb*), equal height of similar letters (*kursī*), proportion (*nisbat*), “weakness (*ẓa^cf*)” in round strokes, “strength (*quwwat*)” in long strokes, width (*saṭḥ*), length (*dūr*), apparent rise (*su^cūd-i majāzī*), and apparent fall (*nuzūl-i majāzī*).²⁹

Yet the last three “parts of script” go beyond style and clearly indicate attainment of mastery. The tenth part, “principles (*uṣūl*),” is based on a skillful control of the nine stylistic parts:

“Principles” is a characteristic which is gained from the balance in composition of the previously mentioned nine parts. All writing that contains even a little of this quality is precious, and easily will be held dearer than jewels. When this quality becomes conspicuous in writing, it is appropriate if it is loved more than life itself. It is no secret that the [first] nine parts of script are in the position of the body, and “principles” are in the position of the soul.

[Verse:] By God, you will not know the flavor of this wine until you taste it!

The eleventh part, “purity (*ṣafā²*),” is primarily a quality of the heart that is the inner source of beauty.

“Purity” is that condition which makes the temperament happy and refreshed, and makes the eye luminous. One cannot attain it without cleansing the heart. As the Mawlānā [Sulṭān ‘Alī] said,

[Verse:] Purity of writing is from purity of heart.

Through this quality there is complete possession of [the art of] writing. Just so the human face, no matter how proportionate, is not attractive if it lacks purity. It is no secret that if principles and purity are joined with “authority (*sha²n*),” some call it “taste (*maza*),” and some also call it “effect (*āsār*).”

²⁵ *Ādāb al-mashq*, 255–56. Bābā Shāh, who was a Shi‘ī, also included a blessing on the family of ‘Alī and Fāṭima, “who are the center of the circle of sainthood.”

²⁶ *Ādāb al-mashq*, 261. For the symbolism of the Pen and Tablet, see Schimmel, 79; for the world as a book, see *idem*, 146.

²⁷ *Ādāb al-mashq*, 257–58.

²⁸ *Ādāb al-mashq*, 264–65.

²⁹ *Ādāb al-mashq*, 260–62.

“Authority (*shaʿn*),” the last of the twelve parts of script, is the step that makes calligraphy into a part of mysticism, and this vocabulary is actually part of the Sufi terminology for the specification of divine manifestations into form.³⁰ The very act of writing, at this stage, is contemplation of the divine beauty.

“Authority” is that condition in which the scribe becomes enraptured from its display when it is found in writing, and he has done with egotism. When the scribe’s pen possesses “authority,” heedless of the pleasures of the world, he turns his heart toward practice (*mashq*), and the luminous sparks of the real beloved’s beauty appear in his vision.

[Verse:] Everywhere the sparks of the beloved’s face are found.

And it is fitting, when such a scribe sets his hand to a white page and writes a letter on it in his practice, that he reddens that paper with bloody tears from the extremity of his love for that letter. This characteristic, with the aid of the praiseworthy attributes, becomes the face (*ʿarīz*) of the human soul (*nafs*), and by the power of the pen its form is drawn on the paper page. Not everyone can comprehend this quality in writing, although he may be looking at it. Likewise, even if everyone saw Laylā, Majnūn saw something that others did not see.³¹

At this point, the calligrapher goes beyond his art to a perception of the invisible inner nature that is only partially revealed in script. Only those endowed with “eyes to see” have the ability to see this inner beauty.

The third section contains Bābā Shāh’s original analysis of the three levels of competence in calligraphic practice (*mashq*), corresponding to the progress from discipleship to mastery. In the first stage of “visual practice (*mashq-i naẓarī*),” the apprentice studies the master’s writing and benefits from learning its spiritual characteristics. This also has the effect of eliminating bad habits in weak scribes. “The beginner should be told to do this practice for a while, so that his nature becomes attached to spiritual pleasures. After that, he is told to do pen practice, but even during the days of pen practice he should do this prac-

“The second stage of apprenticeship is pen practice (*mashq-i qalamī*) “which is copying (*naql*) from the master’s writing.” Here the student begins by copying large specimens of isolated letters in the master’s hand, so that he understands the form of every letter in the style in which it was written. Even if the copying is not easy, the student will derive considerable educational benefit from studying the large letters. After that, short compositions (less than one hundred lines) may be given to the student. Before doing anything else, the apprentice must contemplate the seventeen acquired and unacquired parts of script in the master’s model, seeking help in concentration (*himmat*) from the departed spirits of the masters of calligraphy. It goes without saying that the proper techniques of trimming the pen, making ink, and preparing paper will be followed. In pen practice it is of utmost importance that the student pay no attention to writing that is in conflict with the model to be copied, since that would be very harmful. Nor should he do any other exercise until his writing is thoroughly in the traditional style; to reach this point, no less than a full year is necessary. When the apprentice’s pen practice has been accomplished to this degree, it is possible to attempt the third stage of “imaginative practice (*mashq-i khayālī*)” for a day or two at a time, after preparing by doing several days of pen practice. “Imaginative practice” is not based on copying, but means that the calligrapher uses his purified imagination as the stage on which the forms of beauty appear. Ordinary thinking, which is necessary for pen practice, becomes an obstacle to the spontaneous power of conception of the calligraphic imagination.

“Imaginative practice” is when the scribe writes not according to a model but with reference to the power of his own nature, and he writes every composition that appears [to him]. The benefit of this practice is that it makes the scribe a master of spontaneity (*taṣarruf*),³² and when this practice mostly takes the place of pen practice, one’s writing becomes non-reflective (*bī-maghz*). If someone makes a habit of pen practice and avoids imaginative practice, he lacks spontaneity, and is like the reader who grasps the writing of others but himself cannot write. Spontaneity is not permitted in pen practice.³³

³⁰ “When God manifests himself to the human, from the point of view of God the name of that manifestation is ‘divine authority (*shaʿn ilāhī*),’ and from the point of view of the human it is called ‘[mystical] state (*ḥāl*)’”: Shāh Sayyid Muḥammad Zawqī, *Sirr-i Dilbarān* (Karachi: Maḥfil-i Zawqīyya, 1405 A.H.), 81.

³¹ *Ādāb al-mashq*, 262–64.

³² *Taṣarruf* in Persian, normally, in this kind of context, means “power, control; influence, art, cunning” (Steingass); but here I translate it as “spontaneity” to emphasize that it is a talent without external cause or deliberation, since it is “non-reflective (*bī-maghz*),” literally “without brain,” in contrast with the intellectual discipline of pen practice.

³³ *Ādāb al-mashq*, 265–68.

Through the discipline of total adherence to the models of tradition, and the spiritual influence of the great masters, the student moves towards the pinnacle of the calligraphic art. Here, the meditative contemplation of the divine beauty overflows into the intricate forms of ink on paper. Bābā Shāh ends his treatise abruptly after giving three more technical sections on cutting the pen, composition of letters, and the preparation of paper, so any conclusion about the inner aspect of calligraphy is now up to us to formulate.

Bābā Shāh's whole intent in describing calligraphic concentration is to focus on the visual contemplation of God's beauty as conveyed by the intricate shapes of black letters on white paper, and the aesthetic basis for this contemplation appears to be closely bound up with Sufi mysticism. It is well known that Islamic calligraphy has been closely involved with the development of Sufism, and that many calligraphers were trained as disciples by Sufi masters.³⁴ Bābā Shāh himself was known for his inclination toward mysticism, and it has even been suggested that he belonged to an esoteric order known as the Nuḡṭaviyya, a little-known group that was strongly influenced by letter-mysticism.³⁵ With this background in mind, we can review some of the religious sources of Islamic calligraphy, and then recapitulate the main features of Bābā Shāh's treatise, in order to determine the points of impact of Sufism on his vision of the calligraphic art.

The religious aspect of Islamic calligraphy springs from the Qur^ʾān, the word of God as expressed to Muḥammad, which of necessity had a strongly visual component. The Qur^ʾān itself frequently alludes to the pen and writing, generally in contexts that emphasize writing as a medium for conveying the divine message to humanity. The earliest Qur^ʾāns exhibit large letters on parchment in the austere yet graceful Kufic style, so that the relatively small number of words on the page appear more like a visual icon than an ordinary book. Visualization of the actual form of the Arabic script in the Qur^ʾān seems to have played an important role in

Muslim religious experience from an early date, centered as it was on recitation from the holy book.³⁶ The controversies that raged over whether the Qur^ʾān was co-eternal with God are an indication of the extraordinary position that the scripture assumed for the Muslim community. As Anthony Welch has written, "The written form of the Qur^ʾān is the visual equivalent of the eternal Qur^ʾān and is humanity's perceptual glimpse of the divine."³⁷ Visual concentration on the Qur^ʾān as the word of God was the closest possible approximation on earth to seeing God face-to-face.

The mystical aesthetic of Islamic calligraphy derives in particular from what Schimmel calls "the tendency to equate human figures to letters," a symbolism that links the human to the divine through the medium of writing.³⁸ Regardless of its precise origin, the depiction of the human face or form as comprised of letters is a fascinating artistic phenomenon. The cabalistic faces comprised of the names of ʿAlī, Muḥammad, and Allāh testify to a fundamental conviction that the human being is essentially composed of spiritual elements. This seemingly abstract concept is a graphic representation of an intuition of the intelligibility of the world. Everything is made of the word. The equation of the human face with the Qur^ʾān itself is both a scriptural understanding of human nature and a calligraphic illustration of the ḥadīth of the Prophet, "Do not disfigure the face, for God created Adam in his own image (*lā taqabbahū al-wajha, fa-inna allāha khalaqa ādama ʿalā šuratihi*)."³⁹ Not only can the human face be understood as scripture, but also the form of the sacred writing is a manifestation of the divine essence. To save a symbol like the "face of God (*wajh allāh*)" from anthropomorphism, the Sufis understood it symbolically as the theophany of positive divine attributes that sustains the world in existence.⁴⁰ In this symbolic configuration, the "face" of the divine being's positive or gracious attributes is framed by the black tresses of the negative or wrathful attributes, a contrast that immediately suggests white paper covered with black letters. When punning poets constantly compare the writing (*khatt*) on the page with the dark

³⁴ Pope and Ackerman, 1733; Schimmel, 47, and ch. III on calligraphy and Sufism, in general.

³⁵ Bayānī, I:86, citing Taqī al-Dīn Kāshānī, *Khulāṣat al-ashʿār*, ms partly in his collection and partly in the National Parliament Library, Tehran. The *nuḡṭa* is the rhomboid dot or point made by the tip of the pen, which is the measure for construction of all the letters of the alphabet. A study of the Nuḡṭavī movement, which is evidently still active, has been promised by N. Mudarrisī Chahārdīhī, *Sayrī dar taṣawwuf, sharh-i ḥāl-i haftād tan az mashāyikh wa aqṭāb-i šūfiyya* (Tehran, 1980).

³⁶ Martin Lings, in Schimmel, 82.

³⁷ *Calligraphy in the Arts of the Muslim World* (Folkestone, Kent: Dawson, 1979), 22.

³⁸ Schimmel, 110, cf. p. 134.

³⁹ Badīʿ al-Zamān Furūzānfarr, *Aḥādīs-i masnavī* (Tehran: Dānishgāh, 1334 A.H.), 115, no. 346.

⁴⁰ ʿAyn al-Quzāt Hamadānī's theory of the "face of God" is discussed in my *Words of Ecstasy in Sufism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), 76ff.

down (*khaṭṭ*) on the white cheek of the beloved, they surely intend this metaphor of the book as the manifestation of the divine countenance.⁴¹ But metaphor is not anthropomorphism. The Sufis clearly understand the image of the written divine face to mean both the intelligible factor in human nature and the revelation of the divine nature. Thus the modern Sufi Shāh Zawqī writes, “the divine face . . . comprehends the totality of manifestations of the essence and unlimited knowledge, gnosis, and secrets.”⁴² Like gazing at beautiful human faces, contemplating the beautiful faces of calligraphy is a metaphorical love (*‘ishq-i majāzī*) that can lead to real love (*‘ishq-i ḥaqīqī*).⁴³

Bābā Shāh Iṣfahānī’s *Ādāb al-mashq* clearly stands in this tradition of mystical appreciation of calligraphy. When Bābā Shāh recalled his rapture on seeing Sultan ‘Alī’s calligraphy, with letters like heart-ravishing beauties, it was not merely a figure of speech, but a passionate recognition of the divine manifestations in writing. In the primordial encounter of God and Adam, God “taught by the pen, taught man what he did not know” (Qur. 96.4–5). The letters inscribed on Adam’s heart, according to Bābā Shāh, are the source of Zulaikhā’s love for Joseph, Majnūn’s love for Laylā, and Farhād’s love for Shīrīn. Beyond the ethical balance required of the calligrapher are the “principles” that form the soul of the lifeless mechanics of writing, and the “purity” of heart without which mere external proportion lacks beauty, whether in the human face or in the letter on the page. Mystical experience of the divine manifestations occurs in the state of “authority,” in

which the beloved’s face is directly transformed into letters on the page. Even in the training of the apprentice, contemplation of the master’s letters leads directly to the spiritual world, as geometry did, according to Plato. Calligraphic practice, for those who have mastered its “imaginative” level, is the spontaneous result of non-reflective contemplation. This Sufi training in calligraphy unites the intellect with the heart in contemplating beauty. Where gnosis is tied to love, the very intelligibility of writing becomes passionate.

For the calligrapher of the spirit, then, the world is a book, and the writing in that book, that is, the intelligibility that is inscribed upon matter, is the manifestation of the divine essence. To understand this writing is to know God, and knowing God is love’s passionate recognition of the features of the beloved. Bābā Shāh described his exposure to *nasta‘liq* calligraphy as beginning with intellectual recognition, but culminating in a longing that overwhelmed him. “When my heart found out the news of the existence of that water of life, and its savor took root in my palate, it realized that it was overcome with thirst, and the cry of ‘thirst, thirst!’ reverberated in the chamber of my breast.”⁴⁴ Bābā Shāh Iṣfahānī was by no means the first in the Islamic tradition to experience the rapture of calligraphic beauty, but he has given us one of its finest descriptions.

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⁴¹ “This script on the face of the beloved so attracts with loveliness and grace that it has formed the totality of all subtleties and points of comeliness and beauty, and no loveliness of face or sweetness could surpass it” (Shāh Zawqī, 155).

⁴² Shāh Zawqī, 177.

⁴³ Cf. Schimmel, 133.

⁴⁴ *Ādāb al-mashq*, 256. With reference to the ink of the “water of life” (above, n. 24), Zawqī’s observation underlies the Sufi associations of this imagery: “The specifications of the spirits (*ta‘ayyunāt-i arwāh*) are that darkness in which the water of life is concealed. In this very darkness there is a hint of the signless sign, or the absolute essence; thus it is called ‘the water of life’” (p. 155).