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Jannah

Of all the myths in Islam, *Jannah*—the Paradise promised to the righteous in the Qur'an—is certainly the most ineffable. Indeed, it is the very definition of the unimaginable. In the orthodox tradition, *Jannah* is the essence of that which is beyond words as it is beyond mortal experience. Surpassing any form of representation or comparison, it can be thought of only as "the end," in every sense of the word: the end of thought itself, if not a transcendental idea of the conditions under which the end is possible, as a release expedited by faith. Nevertheless, this apophatic extreme has constantly been subverted; after all, the delights proclaimed in the Qur'an—splendors, light and lavish *sensual pleasures*—irresistibly invite expatiation. *Jannah*'s dual function, at the same time sublimational and retributive, and also the contentious issues it raises, places it right at the heart of the faith and of Islamic religious thought. Paradise has permeated every form of discourse, from theoretical musings to erotic fantasies by way of legal quibblings, mystical quests and the polemical or deviant interpretations of the heresies. From the ninth century onwards (the third century after the Hijrah), the Gardens of Paradise were presented as an essentially strategic topos in the order of knowledge, power and their relationship with pleasure. A place not so much situatable as *situative*: you are instantly identifiable by how you approach, debate or catalogue it. For anyone with half an ear, this Paradise is a revelation. It exposes the stages of Being as progressive states of knowledge. It defines frontiers, not only between believers and non-believers but also between disciplines (theology and philosophy, in particular) and between schools of thought. It articulates ideological positions and political differences. And, of course, it has its own songs and stories, pretexts for bawdy escapism and popular merrymaking. Tell me what *Jannah* is to you, and I will tell you who you are and what you desire. I will know if you are a libertine, a scholar, a philosopher or a mystic. Without seeking to appraise your spiritual standing or moral fortitude, I will know the extent of your understanding, the nature of your intellectual and religious affinities and the historical tradition upon which you draw. Last but not least, if you are a man I will know how you view women and the sexual order in general. And from all that I will be able to divine where you stand in relation to modernity.

Somewhere in these compellingly problematic realms, classical Islamic thought lost its way, entangling, embellishing and compromising itself. With that, the theme sank into the dogmatic slumber of theology and entered the base, ribald naiveties of popular culture. How unlikely that it should resurface now under the darkest of

auspices, against the background of the martyrology, Islamic revolution, wars and advanced degeneration which the Muslim world has been experiencing for the past few decades. Spun out in the past by metaphysicians and poets, it demonstrates the remarkable impoverishment of State Islams before marking the upheaval effected by the Islamists on the back of that. The hyperbole of *Jannah* is already etched into the shattered face of our century, underpinned by death, as if the afterlife were utterly suffused with extreme violence. As if, in having secured the eternity of the hereafter, one's death were signifying a climactic moment of an entirely different kind: the total sublimation of the spiritual by the temporal, the conversion of religious faith into a political belief. *Jannah* apparently becomes less inherently unfathomable when seen as expediting an otherwise untenable clash of two different realities, by becoming an instrument of terror. How else to attain the life everlasting, since it goes hand in hand with violence? A violence, moreover, which absolutely demands death in the name of God and which receives it with the pledge of *immediate* coronation in Paradise, without delay, without having to await the end of time. A violence, in other words, which scandalously promises a hyperbolic continuity between this world and the next, between the most mortal of deaths and eternal life. This vision attests to the fatal disorientation of a religion falling prey to political degeneration, to juridism and to a return in strength of the most inept literalism; but also, and indissociable from all that, to the indigence of today's globalized culture. This withdrawal into a non-space of hostility devoid of all sense, an alarming region of psychological reversal, today represents Islam's most vertiginous divide from itself and from the rest of the world. If it is true that *Jannah* can only offend modernity on the dual grounds of the latter's Christian heritage and its killing of God, then we now recognize in this Paradise something other than a slightly kitsch fable. It articulates the eschatological anticipation enshrined in totalitarian slogans, a sectarian messianism and a pathological view of the masculine and the feminine which is quite specific to Islamism. Shrouding an essentially political fracture in its obscurantist sacrality, it rejoices in disaster and paralyzes thought.

I shall only tackle this fascinating theme indirectly, steering well clear of the numerous questions it raises and instead confining myself a very brief and general examination of certain aspects related to *virility*—a quality I should distinguish from masculinity right at the outset, in that it always (and not only in the hereafter) masks hubris, hyperbole and excess. Since Paradise is essentially situative, significative, expressive and scandalous, there could be no better context in which to look at this notion. It thus appears as seen in the mirror held up by *Jannah*, reflected through a series of circular arguments and structural aporiae which pervert sexual politics—and, indeed, politics in general. In passing, I shall also address some other questions of topical relevance.

By focusing the human condition upon the idea of Judgment, the Islamist doxa—true to the dogma—promises to the righteous, sex, sex and more sex, *ad infinitum*. They pass straight from *jouissance* to the beatific vision just as they pass through death, with its overtones of martyrdom, from this world to the next in a kind of permanent ecstasy. The discourse is stripped of all hidden meaning: gone are the allegorical dimension and the *imaginal* landscape which, in the great tradition, reveal

themselves during the long spiritual journey the believer embarks upon down here on earth. No longer is the eschatological promise framed in a metaphorical representation of the Hereafter. And certainly not in esoteric terms, such as the powerful image in Islamic mysticism of an infinity spent fulfilling spiritual desires. Yet neither do these representations incorporate the extravagances of the past. What remains is a vision wide-eyed with fantasy, with exasperation even. On the internet, for example, the exhortation to take the right path—the straight line to Paradise—relies upon the defense and illustration of the *Sharia*. Shrouded in modesty and mist, no longer are the houri depicted down to the smallest anatomical detail as they once were, with lustrous eyes, translucent skin and erect nipples. Modernity and puritanism (Wahhabist or Shi'ite) oblige one another in this. In fact, we hardly recognize the houri at all beneath the halo of metaphor and circumlocution surrounding them. But their voluptuous silhouettes are still revealed to the heroes and the just, even under seventy veils, and still they sing their wedding songs so loud that there is no doubting their reality.

One thing is certain: the presence of the houri only adds to the dissymmetry between women embarking upon the path of righteousness and their male counterparts. We cannot but note that the discourse is considerably less explicit as far as female prospects of sensual pleasures in Paradise are concerned—and that despite all its entreaties they play their part in the "Islamic" revolution or renaissance. When it comes to the Garden of Delights, the same tradition that so forcefully invites women to don the veil, cloaks itself in a chastity, striking in its contrast with the wild stories reveled in by popular culture. We can only suppose that they expected to enjoy a glorious, perhaps even elevated perpetuation of their earthly condition, their bodies incorruptible and their eternal lives spent surrounded by pearls and precious stones. Modesty enjoins silence. God moves in mysterious ways. And the religious authorities have rejected Muhammad Rashid Rida's interpretation, identifying man's spouse in this world with the houri in Paradise. Her pale skin notwithstanding, the houri is no less appealing as an example to the pious woman as she is enticing for the male believer seeking the Abode of Peace. But what do opuscules and sermons have to say about this perfect maiden, whom we have rather quickly consigned to the world of erotic fables and songs? Her title conjures up an image of blazing eyes, since its meaning is most exact: the contrast between the clear white of the eye and the blackness of the pupil. The pure beauty with which she is endowed, the presumed intensity of her passion (although it is only presumed), her generally restrained manner, and her number, with all the exciting variety that implies—everyone will have at least two houri with faces as bright as the full moon, and some seventy-two—not to mention the virtual qualities she is able to derive from her divine medium: all these modern-day embellishments only serve to amplify her mechanical dimension and the submissiveness which has always defined her. The only remaining certainty is her virginity—a quality which, even if it restores an aura of purity, also denotes very prosaically that she belongs exclusively to the Blessed—to those men, fulfilled at last, to whom she pledges her total and absolute availability as befits her functional nature and chattel status. There are none of the descriptions, the details, the admiration which once revealed her; she has become a mere shadow, a pure promise of flesh. So much so in fact that, paradoxically, this houri could be to

woman what, in that most far-removed of traditions, patristic Christology, the almost immaterial body of the resurrection is to the mortal body: the faintest, subtlest expression of human incarnation, a spectre representing the stubborn will of a few bearded old men, and ultimately one of the Qur'anic mysteries. Her evanescent contours shaped entirely for male sexual pleasure, like the body glorious she exists for no other reason than to serve as a vehicle (for the desires of the righteous) or a rattle to be brandished during ideological disputes. We can no longer discern the houri's chimerical character from her physical form, nor even from the fascinating mix of chastity and crudity still surrounding her, but it is there nonetheless, in that dyschronous combination of cybersexuality and dogmatic regression which she displays under the guise of the sacred.

The fact remains that, since nothing is removed from the Qur'anic imagery itself,[1] the other world retains all its materialism in the eyes of the moralists. We encounter there none of the imaginary figures, intelligible interlocutors or apparitions from dreams found in Avicenna, Ibn Arabî or Mulla Sadrâ, only at most a few injunctions to caution. The revelation of Paradise is lethargic, with its shady valleys, its rivers, its gold and fine fabrics and its perfumes of Arabia, and with all its sensual imagery invoked with a curious blend of excitement and prudery (it cannot be by chance the tone is set by the perfume, an *essence* rather than a substance, which better than anything else combines subtlety with sensuality). It would be an understatement to say that the righteous triumph; no, they strut and they pose, gleaming with a plethora of astounding qualities. And more: popular belief unashamedly identifies the excesses inherent in virility with the passage to transcendence. Ascribed the virtues of the prophets, the righteous—all of them—achieve the selfsame identity in perfection. And each of them may contemplate his power by exercising it. That is, through sexual enjoyment. As if to redouble the fetishization of the female body, the scopic tropism usually rendered off-limits to the male by the interdictions of the faith now envelops the unspeakable (hence the fact that the houri of the past literally was a chimera: a monster composed of an entirely disparate assemblage of parts to be gazed upon eagerly). Not content with conjuring up the power of the second sex, the righteous see themselves in the full glare of their holy predation. Without dwelling upon the erotic, the Islamist discourse still manages to feed upon a male narcissism of utterly unquenched vanity. Islamic culture may harbor the arts of love in its past, amongst them an exquisite courtliness, but they have no place in this Paradise: when the sexual act is not hushed up altogether, it is only ever presented as coitus of never-ending arousal[2] at a level of absolute intensity without quite reaching orgasm—or rather as a permanent orgasm—in which the woman's only involvement is to reflect male power. When one ventures to question devotees on this topic, its Edenic vision tends to produce nothing more than troubled silence followed by some kind of wild, unstoppable version of the discourse in which the polemical codes inflate, stutter and then collapse in the face of the mental image, which itself degenerates into congealed stereotypes. The pleasure supposedly represents the absolute: more, always more,

[1] See 44:54, 55:72 and 52:20, which refer to the houri.

[2] See Aziz al-Azmeh, "Rhetoric for the Senses: A Consideration of Muslim Paradise narratives," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 26.3 (1995): 215-31.

infinitely more. The boundlessness of the sexual act being expressible only in quantity, the seventy houri articulate never-ending excess. Or, to put it another way, the most eagerly awaited expression of virility. A virility taken to the absolute extreme, redundant in its very power and yet feeding that power, where ultimately it represents nothing more than an ipseity nourished not by some insubstantial notion (that of absolute submission to the Absolute, as implied by the name Islam) but by quite the opposite: by the unbridled plenitude born of fantasy. It is all as if, up there in the sky, the supermale finally manages to lay claim to his true essence, at last fulfilling the dream of unicity, of sovereignty and of self-finality his virility has always pursued: the ability to take pleasure and to dominate forever, beyond all limits and beyond the laws of nature.

To reason the unreasonable in this way, as a bloated tautology, is to smother the other with the self, the spiritual with the carnal (or the intelligible with the sensitive, the hidden with the obvious), the ideal with the fantasy, masculinity with the essentialized identity of the real. In short, Paradise with the misery of world. Quite obviously, this vision is rooted in a militant disposition of a kind defended by Islamism, in all its manifestations, in much the same way as fascist cultures still like to celebrate machismo. This is an ideology which does not confine itself solely to this one patriarchal assumption, and in its pursuit of a return to the supposed origins of Islam neither does it claim any noble values—the sovereignty of the desert, the chivalry of the great age—in the name of the Muslim man, nor share the principles of civility and level-headedness enshrined in classical thought.

In a context of conflict and general dereliction (upon which we should dwell at greater length), the preoccupation of the "brothers" with virility derives from a temptation towards austerity which is always lying in wait for them. By acquiring puritan and combative traits, that virility can operate in the most brutal of ways, trapping strength, purity and judgment. Fed by reactionary passions and a narrow juridism, by certainty and resentment, it expresses itself in the most cursory of ways at or close to the freezing point of thought, by dictating the visibility of bodies and the fixing of minds. Here, where the virile Word and the virile Face come together, the one—being the antithesis of the Face as understood by Levinas—summons and redoubles the other within their confines; although not without casting itself into exteriority, to the detriment of *sirr* (interiority), and overcoming a system of essentialized identity, which in nature would be given as destiny. Pledged to give tangible rewards in return, and to kill and to cage in the name of an authority established by God, these institutions (the Word and the Face) arm and steel themselves to suppress thought and life. Mortal reification. Islamism sweepingly disavows the intelligibility, rooted in both philosophy and mysticism, which identifies the real, the true and the invisible. Its great leap backwards begins with the repudiation of the *zâhir* (the apparent) and the *bâtin* (the esoteric), two fundamental states without which the eschatology—and hence the road to the Hereafter—lose their sense. It would be no exaggeration to say that this literalist and juridist reduction eliminates Islam's most brilliant speculative legacy. All to benefit a public display that brings together populism, machismo and the modern mass media. The lazier the thinking, the more ostentatious the channels through which it is presented.

The more unimpressive the virility, the greater its tendency to show off with its codes and its posturings: veils, beards, minarets, mass movements, spectacular atrocities . . . And Islamism does not attack knowledge alone, it strikes at the very principle of equilibrium and consensus which has for centuries formed the basis of broad community concordance. That is, the moral and political tenet that the just man or the good caliph is he who takes up *jihad* against passions and who governs himself and others in total justice, finding the via media.[3] This self-mastery in submission to God is accompanied in principle by a duty of obedience and attendance to one's prince, just as that prince is himself bound to set an example. It is often forgotten that, by contract, the Muslim subject is to the good caliph what the wife is to her husband: a comparable premodern dissymmetry sanctifies the *siyasa* authority of the prince and that of the husband—to wit, the art of governing either the family or the city in accordance with considered principles. In supposedly fighting tyranny and in denouncing apostasy and moral corruption in the community, the Islamists are actually intent upon restoring a dirisible virility in the name of the Law.

Before continuing these introductory comments, it is worth briefly reminding ourselves of how Paradise was presented in the past. And to begin by recalling that *Jannah* was a significant battleground in the great struggle for the truth fought by the philosophers and the theologians. To a great extent, the dispute centered on the delicate question of corporeal resurrection. Like Christianity, in this matter orthodox Islam has had to deal with contradictions between two fundamental sources of inspiration: on the one hand, the Jewish tradition, in which the body is saved, and on the other, the Hellenistic—and above all Platonic—idea that death marks the liberation of the soul from the body. Since Islam recognizes neither original sin nor the earthly incarnation of a God who is himself called upon to rise from the dead, the disputations of its theologians on this issue proved rather less tortuous than they were for the fathers of the Church. Muslims have never been forced to condemn the flesh or to return at the end of time to a "glorious" body which isn't one at all, and which remains suspended in a sublime state like that of the angel, nourished only by the contemplation of God. Not that the scholars of the Islamic law did not have to fight on several fronts at once. For one thing, in spirited listeners *Jannah* evoked a catalog of libertine entertainments, infused with irreverence and irony. The theologians also had to challenge the vaticinations, from the lewd to the partisan, of clergy brazen in packing their sermons at will with embellishments to the Qur'anic imagery of the Hereafter. It is distressing to believe in this day and age, but at one time Islamic preaching could be explicit in the extreme. The erotic frenzy provided a welcome relief from the rigors of everyday life, and proliferated under the guise of a faith claiming to offer less mystery than simplicity for the masses. But how to reconcile this pleasure with the sovereign good? The exuberance of the flesh, the luxury and glitter surrounding it, the liberty and eloquence with which this parade of

[3] "The word 'justice' means a satisfactory balance, be it in one's own character, in relations with others or in the elements of the administration of a nation," Ghazâlî, *Mizan al 'Amal* (*Criterion for Action*) (Cairo, 1964).

delights was presented, barely any more ethereal than those of the here and now . . . All this erotic incitement inevitably profaned the very dignity of the religious message, undermining both its soteriological meaning and its practical dimension. It was no easy matter to propitiate these two worlds without indulging them.

These theological scholars also had a hard fight on their hands countering the abstraction defended by the majority of philosophers in the name of an allegorical interpretation of the holy book. At stake was the whole edifice of the revelation in its divine provenance. The theologians engaged in controversies with those who often frequently shared the same Greek sources, but found it easy to denounce the incoherence and vulgarity of literalist interpretations. How could believers be persuaded to adopt the temperance and moderation demanded by the Law when the Hereafter was being depicted as an orgy, albeit one bathed in glory? And how could the faith stress the intent (*niyya*) of the moral act, its intrinsic value regardless of its effects, while at the same time backing the Law of God with a promise—even, as Avicenna put it, belittling it with the supply of merchandise? As well as the "vile pleasures" of *Jannah*, the scholars found themselves arguing about the "market" and the accusation that they had allowed faith to become a "childish toy" through their facile interpretations. These intellectual disputes were limited in range, admittedly, but the underlying notions of salvation and retribution are intrinsic to faith—all faith.[4]

To continue: if this perilous yet desperately attractive theme, without equivalent in the other religions of the Book, could put the faith to the test, then it was supported neither by reason (*Jannah* runs counter to any representation of the cosmos) nor by experience (only the Prophet had ascended into Heaven). And if, even more fundamentally, it engaged morality and the idea of judgment, then it drew support from the expectation professed by every faith.

What does a master of orthodoxy like Ghazâlî, for example, have to say about Paradise? Shifting between the theological, the juridical and the mystical, his thought still merits consultation, even by the Islamists. In his exploration of the next world, Ghazâlî typically manages to retain room for the measure, good sense and conciliation which define the *sunnah*. As a good theologian who must simultaneously excite, persuade and reason in the service of the faith, he skilfully shifts the emphasis of the problem: if there is continuity from one world to the next, then that exists not from the point of view of the object—which, by definition, is unknowable—but in respect of the subject: the perceptive subject and his works. Paradise becomes a horizon, at once a normative point of reference and a place of intelligibility which allows the establishment of a hierarchy (ontological, spiritual, moral, and so on) and the process whereby the soul is elevated, starting from the points of contacts between the visible and the invisible. In the double opposition of divine transcendence and human weakness, of the soul and the body, it is a central

[4] See Emile Benvéniste, "The act of faith always includes certainty of remuneration," *Indo-European Language and Society* (Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami Press, 1973) 143.

region which—by analogy or by anticipation—can impart understanding of regulating idealities, spiritual stations and pure bodies, as well as prolonging the states achieved in this world, be they sensual pleasures or the inspirations derived from visions, dreams or revelations.

The fact remains that *Jannah* is to each according to his desires and level of knowledge. Those whose belief is led by their bodies will know a carnal Paradise, whereas those who believe according to the spirit will experience the beatific vision of God and will come to understand that it is this world, not the next, which is pure evanescence. And it is they who will develop spiritual senses that allow them to hear the voices of angels, to smell the enchanting perfumes and to see God. The physical body is no way guilty in itself, but as the seat of animal passions it must know its place and not seek to usurp the supremacy incumbent upon the soul. Nothing in this regime of self-control is anything but extremely classical. As the entire *oeuvre* of Christian Jambet shows, for their part Eastern thinkers have gone much further, by way of the concept, based upon the Neoplatonist tradition, of an interiorization representing "birth into the afterlife." In Paradise, relieved of corporeal preoccupations and sensory limitations, the soul is finally able to reveal itself, to become aware of itself in its transparency to the Divine, its delight flowing out unchecked in proportion to the perfection of its power, which is the power of knowing. In this sense, Paradise represents the crowning experience of the intimate; it is an undisguised and unlimited experience of intimacy, so intense an effusion of *bâtin* that it reveals the essence of the Divine. But seen from this world, there is a bestial destiny, the manifestation of moral perversion and ignorance, as well as an angelic one. As Sadrâ says, placing himself in the same tradition as Ghazâlî and Fârâbî, "Man becomes an angel in this world if knowledge and higher consciousness (*taqwa*) triumph in him." If concupiscence triumphs he becomes a brute, and if overwhelmed by violence and anger, a wild beast. "The dog is a dog because of his form, not his substance; the pig is a pig because of his form, not his substance." The dualist polemic, with all its moral psychology and political extensions, fits into the hierarchy—which is still accepted to this day—between the Islam of the vulgar and the religion of the initiated, enamored of knowledge and wisdom. There is One Truth, but in this respect, as throughout ontology, it has its gradations.[5]

[5] Although it allows itself a certain elasticity, that is conditional upon the intention at the individual level being pure, or at least striving to be so, and that collectively it avoids *fitna*. In this respect, Ghazâlî does not shy away from tailoring his language to suit the occasion, legalistic or pragmatic, and yet still manages to map out a mystical path which finds its crowning glory in the face-to-face encounter with God. Ambiguity prevails to a certain degree, as it has always done, and as so often in Islam we found ourselves in an area of constant negotiation and recomposition through which sharia (in its literal sense, "the way") is supposed to be found, but where, in practice, a structure favoring *fiqh* (jurisprudence) and consensus has grown up, although in so doing it raises some formidable questions of demarcation. Where does Paradise begin? Where does the world end? Where is the boundary between the political and the religious? And, in the modern context, where does Islam end and Islamism begin?

If *Jannah* does not quite let go of this world, if it does not necessarily manifest itself as an ideal horizon retaining all its powers of sublimation, then that is not only because its sensual gleam can legitimately be rendered figuratively and discursively. It is also, of course, because it requites loss and death, and because it reflects a remarkably contradictory sexual regime. The theologians having marked time on the philosophers, their burgeoning literalist accounts treated sex with justice and confidence. Subject to moderation, the ethical destiny of the heterosexual[6] male does leave room for desire. Freely binding that state to the Law, reference is made to a future intoxication representing God's generosity and His love for His favorite creation. None the less, he who exults in the hereafter will more than likely be caught in the grip of want and prohibition in this world. Where the sexual promise is made, so arises the question of woman and all that goes with wanting her, segregated and off-limits as she is. Where the invitation points, that is where the wall of the *harem* is raised, with all the fantasies and pangs for forbidden fruit that it arouses. The Muslim man's relationship with the carnal thus puts him in a *double bind*. The prophetic tradition does not hold out for him the chastity Saint Paul so longed for in Paradise, but quite the opposite: the pleasure of sex and the pleasure derived from sex within the legitimate—and polygamous—framework of marriage. The flesh can and must be pursued for its own sake, be cultivated like an art, be celebrated, be decorated . . . Providing, of course, that the rules of decency and a certain amount of moderation are observed. And not forgetting that its idyllic innocence must be reasserted, if there still be need to do so, according to the example decreed by the Prophet, the impeccable model of sensuality and virility. Or, to be more exact, according to the hagiography—still in full force—of a virility noble enough to tread the full length of the lofty line between unfailing power and flawless justice, and passing a series of wonderful, tumultuous acts of love along the way. That would be the unicity of the Prophet, we are told: the ability to steer the course of virtue even through sexual life.

The profusion of such discourses on *Jannah* illustrates the extent of the *ars erotica* admitted by Islam—indeed, encouraged by it through the application of this model. As in other Eastern wisdoms, the body, and sex in particular, can achieve transcendental status and heuristic value. In fact, even those like Sohravardî and Mulla Sadrâ who posit a strict dualism of soul and body, presenting the latter as the place of darkness and non-being which stands in the way of a introspective relationship with the One, do not insist upon the condemnation of sexual enjoyment. "Even sexual pleasure issues from true delights."[7] "There are no sexual relations," comments Jambet, "there is a corporeal light, which animates the bodies in their desire and comes to them from their souls." In Paradise—that is, in the world of

[6] With all its abundance and complexity, the question of homosexuality deserves separate treatment. Relatively tolerated, sublimated and lauded in courtly poems and stories, it is nonetheless subject to a strict physical prohibition.

[7] Sohravardî, quoted by Jambet in *Le Caché et l'Apparent* (L'Herne, 2003) 91 and onwards, developing the complex themes, ill-treated by this brief account, of processive ontology through Sadrâ's notion, after Ibn Arabî, that quiddity screens the inherent singularity of being, and Sohravardî's idea, inspired in its way by Avicenna, of a hierarchy of celestial bodies with their light arrayed in two dimensions: "triumph" and "indigence."

intelligences—the soul unmasked will finally experience the union it gained a prescient awareness of through the act of love in this world, a happiness it previously only knew as the muffled and incomplete echo of a departure from itself. From the substance, in other words. And more precisely for Sadrâ, from the principle of quiddity which obstructs pure existence—that is, the act of being in its total singularity and full power. Expressions of virility such as the pursuit of sovereignty, hyperbolism, the face as narcissistic monstration and the use of force as a physical negation of power run strictly counter to these classifications, as they do to the mystical element in general, inasmuch as it assumes the immanence of the Divine. Based upon a metaphysics of power and in accordance with the opposition of the visible and the invisible, we can categorize the inversions almost trait for trait: sovereignty versus seigniory or spiritual chivalry (*futuwwa*), narcissistic ritual versus self-effacement in pursuit of the divine Face, ostentation versus discretion, virility-led identity fixation versus infinition into the Other . . . This is not the place to show the extent to which dogmatism and the institutional order in Islam have been unable or unwilling to disabuse virilist abrogation of its *via media* and its spiritual direction, both of them highly sensitive when it comes to accommodating the feminine. Suffice it to say that everything leads us to believe that much of the responsibility rests with politics. We shall note only that Islamists can most often content themselves with radicalizing a "phallocentric" predisposition which already inflicts its diktats everywhere.

As far as woman herself is concerned, while it is true that Islam has never disputed her possession of a soul, on the other hand it instituted the *harem* (as the name suggests) as a sacred place for protection of the weak by the strong—a virilist argument *par excellence.* The presumed sanctity of the private domain is translated into an act of confinement which shaped the Islamic city and sealed the fate of the inmates. To put it systematically, by imposing incarceration and isolation, the *harem* and its corollary, the veil, contributed significantly to reducing women to the status of purely physical beings. Thus they came to be seen as creatures of passion and instinct, complete with all the stereotypes that inferiority evokes. The veil in this context is not the means of depropriating the female body generally portrayed, since to dispel that is simply a matter of noting its ambivalence—of seeing in it, as even the best authors like to do, as the instrument of every incitement, seduction and infidelity. Inasmuch as it represents a means of confinement, the *hijab* signifies this appointment of women to domestic duties, to the domain of emotions, sensations and physical attributes. Denied access to the world and to education (or to very much of it), she can find accomplishment only in her role as lover and, above all, as childbearer. To men, conquest (of the world and of history), to women, preservation (of the species, of the home and of tradition). To men, destiny and adventures of the mind, to women, the permanence of seasons and days and the dullness of the body. The old Aristotelian and Galenic order, which imprisons woman in matter alone, could not have found a better illustration: the feminine finds expression only as a lesser being, in passivity, or, in total contrast, through all-powerful motherhood. Associating patriarchy with polygamy, this means of confinement can only induce power games, rivalries and two-way resistance. The women becomes the power, the mother fulfilled through her son, who in return endows her with virility. A

dangerous, almost untameable creature who must be protected from her own desire and from whom society must be protected. An insatiable being—cunning, says the Qur'an—who conspires with the forces and the occult and the night, who becomes obsessed and anguished when gazed upon by others. And so we enter an endless hyperbological[8] circle: the more a wife is denigrated, the more she raises her son in the cult of virility, and so the less potent and independent he becomes. The more the flesh is accentuated, the less fulfilled she can be. The wilder this forbidden women becomes, the less satisfied she is in return. And, coming full circle, the more virility is vindicated . . . Ethos deploying its exaggerations and disjunctions in hubris and mimetic rivalry. It is these pesterings and interdictions, these turns of the screw, each one more prohibitive than the last, these schizze and serial paradoxes (all-powerful slave, fettered or deceived master, ceremonial virility, and so on) that dominate the psyche and poison domestic life.

We can imagine that *Jannah* must seem to men like the ultimate *harem*: a haven of peace and relaxation, free of all malice, in the sovereignty of rediscovered innocence as it was at the beginning of time. People have even wondered whether this garden is the same as Adam's Eden. Without lingering on this lovely Qur'anic story, we must remember that Adam was a caliph: literally, "he who comes after God." After the Fall, he repented and was pardoned. In other words, this is a matter of sovereignty from the outset and everything can be inverted depending on how the notion is interpreted: on the one hand, Islam presents *Jannah* as man's Edenic condition; on the other, it is placed in absolute obedience to transcendence, with sovereignty belonging to God. Man is placed at the summit of Creation before the Fall, even above the angels. But the Absolute separates the beginning from command, creating an infinite chiasmus between them by means of a submission, seigniorial or servile, to the Divine. In honor of his caliphal rank, God gives Adam not only language, which elevates him above the angels, but also woman and the world. His relationship with the world is thus shaped by a favor; it has been entrusted to him in order that he may praise his God, acknowledging the signs of His presence. In making the world a place of hospitality, rather than one of exile or delinquency (*Dasein*), here again Islam is in total opposition to the Christian tradition, and to a certain extent modernity.[9] For man, the world is a garden rich in offerings and in words. It is this remarkable conjunction between the desired, the given and the thought which defines the domain over which he may reign, as long as he agrees to serve: to serve God as a being endowed with responsibility. As for Adam's companion, that shadow unnamed in the Qur'an, she seems simply to subscribe to a regime of general subordination—with the one exception that she retains her dignity as a believer. He "created me (from you) so that your heart may find rest", al-Tabari has her saying. And so she remains the subordinate of a subordinate, serving God by entertaining His appointed caliph. Responsible for the Fall, but not guilty of it, she submits to Adam and is at his disposal, but is not so much stigmatized at the ontological level as permanently marked with a kind of ancillary inferiority.

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[8] A term coined by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe.

[9] See the idea of man as the "curate of nothingness" in Heidegger.

However, this prevalence of strong sex and of the hyperbological chains constraining it does not explain the over-determination of the virile. Affixing itself to the Law is the element of history, a political provision bringing with it a second *double bind*. In deferring to despotic power, this fundamentally separates Islamic society from the classical Greek tradition with which it appears to be allied. The caliphs, shadows of God on earth, played their full part in this division: inherently first of all, in supposedly representing paragons of virility (through their warrior-prince image, as men of strength, sensuality and lavish hospitality, full of vitality, magnanimity, and so on); but also by virtue of the political destitution that they brought about. All too often, these despots took to its apex that inversion that sees word, face and force triumph in the affairs of State, rather than spirituality and justice as originally posited by Fârâbî in his model of the philosopher-king. It should suffice to note here that the prince derives his power from his paternal authority, his religious aura and his distance from his subjects. He embodies a politics of a visibility which demands admiration: an outward appearance and swagger that, on the face of it, make up for the weaknesses stifling virility to display unparalleled pleasure—the pleasure of command, but also that of possession and of consumption as in Paradise, with a libidinous fury presented as the most obvious manifestation of divine sanction.

We know what inventive storytelling and arcane discourse the theme of the seraglio has inspired, and continues to inspire, in East and West alike. Aziz al-Azmeh[10] has shown how, ever since the time of the *Umayyads*, a supposedly egalitarian and aniconic culture has adopted the old, despotic ways of the East as its own—in so doing compromising the sovereignty of the Unique and representing the *harem* as something close to the Hereafter. The luxury of this palace aspires to an aesthetic explicitly derived from *Jannah*:[11] plentiful and perfect are the houri, the boys, the servants and messengers, the gold and jewels, the fountains, the gardens, the exotic fruits, the banquets, the pavilions and the sanctuaries. The monarch's distance places the political scene on a supernatural plane, one of rapture and dread, where orders and points of reference blur as they pass from one world to another and so bring about an insidious decline of language and customs. He is *by right* the best of men, the wisest and the bravest, God's appointed one, who hears, judges, guides and protects his subjects. His face is everywhere. From the moment he is hidden from the people and assumes all his powers, his attributes can reflect the image of God—unicity, grandeur, majesty, sovereignty, omnipotence, the source of all gifts and providence. Ultimately, the caliph expresses himself through nothing but signs and effusion. He is surrounded by silence even when pouring forth. He sees all, knows all and is capable of everything, yet remains inscrutable and unassailable. Miracles and prophecies are attributed to him. Ordinary mortals kiss the ground he walks on, even though Islam forbids prostration before anyone but God. This pre-eminence is scrupulously imputed to the caliph's superior sense of justice and power of thought, it is true, but the fact remains that the vocabulary used in the panegyrics lauding the works and wonders of kingly dynasties, for example, is more or less

[10] Aziz al-Azmeh, *Muslim Kingship* (London: I. B. Tauris Publishers, 1997).

[11] See Gülru Necipoglu, Architecture, *Ceremonial and Power* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991).

interchangeable with the lexicon of the divine: curacy, imitation, emanation, covenance and parity of function, and adulation of a sublime, evanescent master ruling in absentia. While the incantatory approach has retained the mystique of this power, as it has that of virility, we can nevertheless measure its strength by the disastrous extent of its effects.

Removed from public life and stifled, the masculine subject concerned has no choice but to turn his back on politics and, in order to assuage his manly vocation, withdraw forever into the domestic sphere. Even today, although states tyrannize men in one respect, in another they confirm their patriarchal authority through the *Sharia* (or equivalent law). This relieves them to some extent of the burden of being tyrannized, by granting them a semblance of recognition and power. In this sense, every authoritarian regime on Islamic soil has a despotic dimension to it: "domesticating" man in such a way that he is at once emasculated in the public domain and empowered in the private, with each aspect determining the other. Few and far between are the regimes that have freed themselves from this dual straitjacket and sought to guard against a machismo and a domestic delinquency that both have the potential to ambush the state. Most discriminate against women in the name of Islam at the same time as eliminating or controlling the spaces in which men can prove themselves: the arenas of warfare, of chiefdom, of brotherhood and of exertion where self-esteem is cultivated; the places of bravado and parity which once served as fields of honor. Now shaped in the private domain alone, the male secludes himself within the limits of "ordinary life" (Arendt). Here, his virility directs his power into the enslavement of woman, and even into the hatred of all things feminine. Humbled, the man can be virile only *by default*, through the subjugation he imposes upon others: not only women, but also sons and more generally anyone perceived as inferior for whatever reason (ethnicity, religion, professional or patronage relationship, and so on). The duty of obedience to parents, spouses and princes taught by the Qur'an ends up migrating and morphing into a whole constellation of power relationships and urges to control. The *macho*, as we know, becomes more intractable in his perpetual effort to prove himself to himself the more he is put down and humiliated by his own lords and masters. The more he exercises his power, the more he arouses and exposes himself to resistance, and hence the less able he is to prove himself. And so, once again, we encounter the antinomies and the crazy excesses of hyperbology. In all this there is a circular causality linking the sovereign and his subjects: it is only because the prince abuses his power that the "domesticated" male is able to define himself in terms of the patriarchal norm and the subjugation of the feminine. But, conversely, it is also because this subject is permitted to set himself up as a despot in miniature within his own four walls that he submits to the greater authority. And that in God and His law he primarily discerns attributions of power and ideas of judgment. It is because he finds himself emasculated that he cannot stop seeing power relationships everywhere, and always in binary terms: licit and illicit, good and evil, strong and weak, friend and foe . . . Machismo, dogmatic Islam, political oppression: all are bound together, and they can sustain themselves only under the aegis of the One.

Our modern age has done nothing to remove these obstacles confining the male to an alien domestic environment. He remains caught in a whole set of traps related to his desires, to authority in all its forms, to woman, to his parents . . . The hyperbological complications hem him in on all sides, affecting his points of references, his formal roles and his abilities, without his machismo ever letting up on its demands for satiation. It is primarily due to the violence of dictatorships, expert in adopting its coercive techniques and its technologies of control from modernity, that the great male game involving conquests of the self and parity of the masters has ceased, and also that there has, to all intents and purposes, been no modernization (read: democratization) of political life. In the private domain, where the oppressed male is supposed to find refuge and regain authority, his patriarchal position has been undermined by changes to the family, to the moral climate and, above all—with her emergence from the *harem*—to woman. For all this, and unremitting in their submission to hyperbolic and disjunctive logics, macho values are all the more resilient now that they are focused upon the domestic arena. The newspapers are full of stories relating how these constraints and dyschronic developments torment society.

What a wretched picture all of this reveals, of a masculinity and a gender politics pushing the world into reverse. In all the countless dramas affecting the Islamic world—its civil and regional wars, its poverty and the knock-on effects, its failed revolutions and bankrupt ideologies, its "West-hate" (in both senses, as subject and object), its Arab-Iranian propaganda battles—in all this, we can interpret the Islamist position based upon the devastating aporiae of virilist hyperbology and its counter-effects. There comes a time when, caught in the asymptote of the virile, dialectics cease to function and, in response to political tragedies, we allow relationships to be invested by fascist impulses. Fed by a vicious circle of impotencies and humiliations, the game of *double bind* becomes the consuming male passion; the means whereby he, wounded, is able to wound life in return. As has been said often enough, these Islamist movements are essentially reactive. Effectively, as far as they are concerned, the point is to oppose dictatorships and masters, and—in order to restore virility (by whatever name it goes: honor, authority, sacrificial heroism, patriarchy, fraternity, *male bonding* . . .)—to impose themselves upon those women who seek to emancipate themselves. It has to be pointed out, though, that the logic in which they are imprisoned actually imposes a systematic dependence upon woman. Desired, feared, hated and adulated, she is an inherent part of their *virility by default.* A virility that substitutes honor with a morality of hatred, public affirmation of the self and parity with domination of the weak behind closed doors, self-expression and self-exposure with the veiling of the other. And so, against her will, woman finds herself situated at the heart of male subjectivation. It is no surprise, then, that since she can no longer be confined to her own body and to the home, she must show—that is, *visibly display*—her submission to the androcentric order. This is the core principle shared by Islamists of all shades, the one they reassert incessantly, the one from which we can distill the essence of their politics: sexual identity and moral policing. Inasmuch, of course, as they do not find it in simply reflecting other macho integrists, like Bush and his sinister acolytes, to perpetuate the mechanics of their antithesis. That, too, reveals the extent of the shifts needed to escape from this

infernal logic. We must substitute the identity-based terminologies with the ideas and experiences of liberty. And we must take belief into our own heart of hearts while at the same time opening our house wide. Remember that the political question involves the emancipation of both sexes, who are inextricably bound together in the domestic arena.