

THE TRADITION OF VEILED EXPRESSION IN CLASSICAL CULTURE AND POETRY

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Abstract

Classical Islamic literary and artistic traditions often privileged indirect, allusive, and multilayered expression over direct statement. This article conceptualizes this tendency as the “tradition of veiled expression” and examines its development in classical poetry. It argues that two intellectual and aesthetic forces were especially influential: the rhetorical and semantic model of the Qur’an, and the metaphysical vocabulary and symbolic practices of Sufism. Drawing on rhetorical treatises, poetic statements, Sufi discourse, and biographical anthology (tezkiire) literature, the study traces how figurative meaning, allusion, symbolic imagery, and the distinction between majāz and ḥaqīqa contributed to the formation of a poetic meta-language. Examples from classical and modern poetics show that ambiguity was not necessarily an aesthetic game or obscurity for its own sake; it could also function as a means of conveying meanings understood to exceed direct language. The article concludes by distinguishing the Qur’anic ideal of measured rhetorical richness from the more intensely coded forms of expression that could emerge within Sufi poetry.

Keywords: Classical Islamic Culture, Poetry, Qur’anic Rhetoric, Sufism, Veiled Expression, Poetic Meta-Language.

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Introduction

Classical works on rhetoric repeatedly articulate a principle central to the aesthetics of expression: “In speech or poetry, figurative meaning is preferred to literal meaning, metaphor to simile, and allusive or indirect expression to direct statement.” In this formulation, rhetorical excellence depends not simply on what is said but on the mode by which meaning is mediated. Ibn al-Muqaffa’ similarly associates eloquence with saying something in a manner that cannot be readily reproduced by everyone.¹ Because literary, religious, and artistic practices developed within a shared intellectual environment, comparable preferences for stylization, indirection, and layered signification can be observed across several artistic forms.

¹Hulûsi Kılıç, “Belâgat,” DİA, vol. V (Istanbul, 1992), p. 380; Numan Külekçi, Edebi Sanatlar (Ankara: Akçağ Yay., 1999), p. 5.

The central question, then, is why the classical Islamic literary and artistic tradition so often privileged indirection over direct statement and concealment over explicitness. What intellectual, aesthetic, and spiritual conditions made mediated expression not merely permissible but desirable?

One way to make this question concrete is to consider the *Rūmī* motif, a prominent stylized form in Turkish-Islamic ornament from the Seljuk period onward. Appearing in manuscript illumination, bookbinding, tilework, and textiles, the motif exemplifies a broader artistic process in which natural forms are transformed, abstracted, and incorporated into a symbolic visual vocabulary. The resulting image does not merely reproduce an object from nature; it reorganizes visible form so that aesthetic and conceptual meanings can coexist. As stylization increases, the relation between the visible motif and its presumed natural referent may become less immediate, and interpretation correspondingly depends on familiarity with the conventions of the artistic tradition. The point is not that every motif carries a single fixed hidden meaning, but that classical ornament frequently invites the viewer to move beyond straightforward representation.

If we approach the same issue through poetry, the process of transformation becomes more pronounced. Poetry, like music, is comparatively abstract and therefore especially receptive to suggestion, symbolism, and semantic layering. Premodern and modern poets and critics alike have often described poetic language as mysterious, coded, or as a “meta-language within language.” Such conceptions are not unique to the Islamic East; comparable theories appear in many literary cultures. The crucial question here, however, is functional: why is meaning withheld, displaced, or layered? In some movements, indirection may operate primarily as an aesthetic strategy; in others, it may arise from the nature of the subject matter or from a philosophical or spiritual understanding of reality. Veiled expression should therefore be evaluated not simply as a degree of distance from ordinary language, but in relation to the purpose that such distance serves.

This article argues that veiled expression in classical poetry is best understood not as obscurity for its own sake but as the product of an aesthetic and intellectual logic. It focuses on two especially influential sources: Qur’anic rhetoric, with its semantic density and layered modes of signification, and Sufism, with its distinction between appearance and reality and its reliance on symbolic discourse. Drawing on rhetorical writing, poetic statements, Sufi texts, and *tezkire* literature, the discussion traces how these traditions contributed to a poetic meta-

language in which literal and figurative meanings could remain simultaneously active. The aim is not to reduce the history of poetic indirection to a single cause, but to clarify the principal cultural mechanisms through which indirectness acquired both aesthetic value and epistemic function.

Poetic Mystery and the Aesthetics of Indirect Expression

We may begin by briefly considering the views of modern poets and critics on “secrecy, mystery, or ambiguity in poetry,” and the positions from which they articulate those views, before turning to the attitude of classical culture. Behçet Necatigil, for example, emphasizes mystery in poetry, comparing it in one place to “a single fabric woven in intricate and multiple layers,” and elsewhere to “a prisoner on a deserted island.”² Paul Valéry characterizes poetry as “a meta-language within language” and argues that its elements must be combined in so hidden and mysterious a fashion that sound and meaning can never be separated from one another. Posner, in explaining the difference of poetic language, uses the expression “aesthetic code.”³ Hilmi Yavuz, discussing the maturation of Behçet Necatigil’s poetry, distinguishes two periods. Necatigil’s early poems resemble a game whose rules are known and therefore contain no essential uncertainty; his later poems, by contrast, resemble a game whose rules are unknown. For Yavuz, it is the latter that constitutes poetry in the fullest sense.⁴

Ahmet Haşım states that poems understandable to everyone are written by lesser poets and compares great poems to “fortified city gates with bronze wings.” In his poetics, poetry resembles “roses seen in twilight” and can therefore be apprehended only as a *nīm-shakl*, a “half-form.”⁵ Necip Fazıl likewise emphasizes the importance of symbolism and mystery in poetry. For him, poetry, like an “inextricable knot,” seeks “something condemned to remain behind something else.”⁶ Asaf Halet and Hilmi Yavuz also affirm ambiguity in poetry, although their understanding of it should not be confused with that of Ahmet Haşım. Haşım darkens visible objects and draws a veil of mist over them; he regards meaning and idea as, to some extent, dispensable. Yavuz, however, does not simply cover the visible and stop there. He points from the visible toward the invisible. Meaning is essential to poetry in his view,

²Behçet Necatigil, *Sanatçının Ruh Yapısı* (Istanbul, 1961), p. 53.

³Doğan Aksan, *Şiir Dili ve Türk Şiir Dili* (Ankara: Engin Yay., 1985), p. 24.

⁴Hilmi Yavuz, *Yazın, Dil ve Sanat* (Istanbul: Boyut Yay., 1996), p. 15.

⁵Ahmet Haşım, *Bütün Şiirleri* (Istanbul: Dergâh Yay., 1994), p. 76.

⁶Necip Fazıl Kısakürek, *Çile* (Istanbul: Büyük Doğu Yay., 1996), p. 476.

because every poem possesses a “matrix,” and the poem is the verbal expression of that matrix. At this point it is useful to recall Şeyh Gâlib’s comparable views on the concealment of meaning. In the *sebeb-i telif* (account of composition) of *Hüsni ü Aşk*, while criticizing Nâbî’s *Hayrâbâd*, Şeyh Gâlib also describes what an ideal poem should be: it should contain ambiguity and should avoid complete explicitness.

Olmaya sözü bedîhî-i tâm
Elde nice tecrübeyle itmâm
“Let the utterance not be wholly self-evident; / Let it attain completion only through repeated
reflection and experience.”

For Gâlib, moreover, the true poet is not the one who wins the approval of everyone, but the one recognized and appreciated by those competent to judge poetry. Conversely, a poet who is so easily understood as to please everyone is merely an ordinary poet:

Bir ehl-i sühan ki ede tahsîn
Bin çarh değer o beyt-i rengîn
Dâim bunu der ki elde hâme
Âfet bana itibâr-ı amme
Çün kârı himâyet eylemekdür
İfhâme riâyet eylemektür
“If a single connoisseur of eloquence offers praise, / That colorful couplet is worth a
thousand heavens. / With pen in hand he always says: / Public acclaim is a calamity to me. /
For the task is to preserve the art / And to observe the demands of meaningful
communication.”⁷

As these examples show, ambiguity can be a deliberate poetic choice. In some modern poetic traditions, the movement from shared conventions toward highly individualized imagery has made interpretation increasingly dependent on the poet’s private symbolic system. Indeed, certain poetic movements that emerged in the twentieth century went further, in terms of ambiguity, than divan poetry, which itself had often been criticized for obscurity. The traditional *mazmûn* system—the conventional network of poetic images and conceits that constitutes one source of mystery in divan poetry—can, with some effort and by following contextual clues, be deciphered. “Modern *mazmûns*,” however, are personal and therefore can be fully known only by the poet who created them. Some critics have even spoken, in relation to such poems, of “as many interpretations as there are readers.”

⁷Şeyh Gâlib, *Hüsni ü Aşk*, ed. Orhan Okay and Hüseyin Ayan (Istanbul: Dergâh Yay., 1992), lines 336–340.

Classical Conceptions of the Poet and Hidden Meaning

The mysterious or secret character of poetry and poetic speech was also frequently emphasized by earlier poets and critics. This can be inferred from the figures to whom poets were commonly compared. Among the most prominent are magicians, alchemists, and divers. In ancient Arabic poetry, poets were also thought to enter into contact with jinn and devils, and were thereby invested with a supernatural aura.⁸ In some couplets, the poet is represented as a mysterious alchemist attempting to produce gold from iron and copper. Elsewhere, when poetry is compared to the sea and the meanings hidden within it to pearls, poets appear as divers who descend into the depths to retrieve those pearls. The claim that such a task has been entrusted to poets is reinforced, beginning with *Lubāb al-Albāb*⁹ and recurring frequently in biographical anthologies (*tezkires*), by a report stating: “The treasures of God are beneath the Throne, and their keys are on the tongues of poets.” These are the treasures of the unseen, disclosed only through inspiration to poets. Even the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was accused of being a poet and a sorcerer because of the Qur’an’s highly suggestive and non-ordinary mode of expression.

From Pre-Islamic Directness to Qur’anic Rhetoric

We may now return to the central historical question: how and why did divan poetry come to privilege mediated, allusive, and layered expression? A useful point of comparison is pre-Islamic Arabic poetry. The poems of the *Mu‘allaqāt* poets are, in many passages, comparatively concrete in their imagery and direct in the representation of experience. Their similes frequently draw on everyday life, and scenes of love, separation, travel, and conflict are often rendered with striking sensory immediacy.

With the emergence of Islam, Arabic literary expression entered a new rhetorical and intellectual environment. The Qur’an provided an unprecedented model of semantic density, figurative possibility, and layered discourse, and later literary culture repeatedly treated its language as exemplary. Within the scope of the present argument, two dimensions are especially important for the subsequent development of veiled expression: Qur’anic rhetoric and the symbolic-metaphysical vocabulary of Sufism. These should not be understood as the

⁸Muhammed b. Sellām el-Cumahî, *Tabakātu’ş-Şuarâ* (Leiden: Brill, 1913), p. B; Ahmet Subhi Furat, *Arap Edebiyatı Tarihi* (Istanbul, 1996), p. 181; M. Sadi Çöğenli, “Ebû Zeyd El-Kureşî—Cemheretü Eş’ari’l-Arab,” *DİA* (Istanbul, 1993), p. 324.

⁹Muhammed Avfi, *Lübâbü’l-Elbâb*, ed. Edward G. Browne (Tehran, 1984), p. 17.

only causes of indirect poetic language; rather, they constitute two of its most influential intellectual and aesthetic sources. In some Sufi traditions, concealment could become especially pronounced, producing utterances—such as certain *shaḥiyyāt* (ecstatic utterances)—whose meanings presupposed a restricted interpretive community. Nor was highly coded expression confined to Sufi verse; classical literary culture also cultivated forms such as the *mu‘ammā* (enigma), in which indirection and decipherment are built into the structure of the composition.

A major source of this transformation was the Qur’an. When Qur’anic discourse is set beside much early Arabic poetry—while recognizing the diversity of both corpora—a different rhetorical density becomes visible. The text repeatedly mobilizes figurative usage, allusion, ellipsis, analogy, and semantic polyvalence, inviting readers to attend closely to context and to multiple levels of signification. Rumi captures this conception of layered meaning as follows: “Know that the words of the Qur’an are visible; beneath these visible words and the outward meaning derived from them there lies a powerful and profound inner meaning. Beneath that inner meaning lies another inner meaning; beyond it, a third meaning before which intellects lose themselves. As for the fourth inner meaning of the Qur’an, none has seen or understood it except God, who has no equal. O son, do not look only at the familiar outward meaning and outer face of the Qur’an. Satan too looked only at the outward form of Adam and saw that he had been created from clay; he failed to see the inner reality within him. The outward form of the Qur’an resembles a human being: a person’s figure, face, height, and stature are visible, but the spirit is hidden and cannot be seen.”¹⁰

Among the disciplines that developed in close engagement with the Qur’an—alongside exegesis (*tafsīr*), theology (*kalām*), and jurisprudence (*fiqh*)—was rhetoric (*balāgha*). A major impetus behind the development of this discipline was to analyze the subtleties of *ma‘ānī*, *bayān*, and *badī‘* in Qur’anic discourse and thereby to facilitate a deeper understanding of the text. These branches developed in close relation to exegesis and theology before becoming increasingly systematized as fields of rhetorical analysis. The Qur’an was widely regarded by poets and prose writers as the highest model of eloquence and became a central point of reference for writers seeking excellence of expression. Questions such as how explicit meaning should be, to what extent it should remain concealed, and whether an intended meaning should

¹⁰Mevlânâ, *Mesnevî Tercümesi*, ed. Şefik Can, vol. 5 (Istanbul: Ötüken Yay., 2003), p. 54.

be stated directly or communicated indirectly were frequently negotiated with reference to Qur'anic style. Poetry and art thereby entered a different expressive environment.

Sufism and the Poetics of Concealment

Another major source that shaped poetry and art with respect to the balance between clarity and mystery was Sufism. From the perspective of the present discussion, how did Sufism impart mystery to poetry? The answer requires an understanding of the Sufi worldview. In Sufi thought, such questions as created things, the cosmos, the creation of existence, the purpose of creation, the Creator Himself, and His relation to the universe are approached from distinctive perspectives. Regarding the Creator and His relation to the cosmos, for example, Sufis describe God as “Absolute Being,” simultaneously manifest and hidden. The cosmos does not possess existence in and through itself; rather, it is a reflection whose source is Absolute Being. Absolute Being is reflected in the mirror of non-being, and images appear there. The entities we perceive therefore depend essentially upon Absolute Being, become visible through His reflection, and reflect Him according to the capacity, purity, and clarity of their own mirrors.

The Sufi, looking at the universe and existence, attempts to move from the visible to the invisible—or, more precisely, to reach the truly visible Reality behind appearances. He seeks to decipher the secrets of existence and to draw aside the veils that conceal them. For Sufis who view beings and events in this way and regard them as containing mysteries that must be deciphered, the principal aim is to perceive and resolve these mysteries. Sufi thought therefore distinguishes two dimensions in all created things: *majāz* (figurative or metaphorical appearance) and *ḥaqīqa* (truth or ultimate reality). Thus one may speak of the real world and the metaphorical world, the true Beloved and the metaphorical beloved, true love and metaphorical love, and so forth.

Sufis also experience various states while passing through the stages and stations of the long and arduous Sufi path. These states contain metaphysical or extraordinary dimensions and, in Sufi formulation, can only be experienced, not fully described. Nevertheless, many Sufis—among them al-Hallāj, Rumi, and Nesîmî—attempted, at least in part, to communicate such states through the veiled language of poetry. If we also take into account the objections raised by some madrasa scholars to certain Sufi doctrines or utterances, veiled language may in some contexts have served a prudential function as well. Sufi discourse thus had several internal reasons—experiential, epistemological, and at times social—for preferring suggestion to exhaustive explanation.

Poetry's encounter with Sufism, whose structure has been outlined above, opened new possibilities for poetic expression and enabled poetry to draw nourishment from this intellectual and spiritual world for centuries. For roughly six hundred years, this poetry continued its development by using largely the same materials while modifying, reconfiguring, and deepening them. The fact that many of the great poets of the earlier period—Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār, Sa'dī of Shiraz, Sanā'ī, Rumi, and others—were also major Sufi figures accelerated poetry's entry into this world.

As noted at the beginning, poetry is also, by its very nature, an abstract art grounded in emotion. Its preference for subtle meanings, deep imaginative structures, symbols, and distinctive modes of expression differentiates it from prose. When the stylistic transformation Eastern poetry underwent through the Qur'an was combined with the profound mystery of Sufism, poetic language changed even more radically.

From the Visible to the Invisible: A Classical Aesthetic Logic

The style that developed in the arts of the post-Islamic East seeks not so much the immediately visible aspect of being as the “other meaning” or “transcendent meaning” within it. Yet in searching for the transcendent or allusive meaning of existence, this style never severs itself completely from the existent itself, because existence is precisely its point of departure. At the same time, the classical artist does not aim merely to describe things as they are: art is not a mirror whose task is to move across and reproduce the surfaces of natural objects. It neither focuses exclusively on the visible world nor abandons that world altogether. Rather, it strives to articulate the mysterious journey from design to Designer, from multiplicity to unity, from physics to metaphysics, and from metaphor to truth. Its central aim is to communicate these mysteries to those who are not yet aware of them. Rumi states this purpose of art with particular clarity: “No painter creates an ornamented image merely for the sake of making an image and without any purpose. No potter makes a jug merely in order to make a jug rather than for it to contain water. No calligrapher writes merely for beauty and not so that the writing may be read. The outward pattern or form exists for the sake of the inward character and meaning.”¹¹

Across much of the classical Islamic literary sphere, this aesthetic helped construct a bridge from the visible to the invisible and sustained that bridge across centuries. The forms and

¹¹Mevlânâ, *ibid.*, p. 67.

emphases of the tradition changed, sometimes considerably, but the recurrent movement from sensible form toward meanings understood to exceed it remained a durable organizing principle.

The Formation of a Poetic Meta-Language

Poetry, by virtue of its structure, possesses the capacity to create “a different language within language.” When that capacity intersects with Qur’anic models of layered signification and with the symbolic vocabulary of Sufism, poetic images become increasingly open to simultaneous and sometimes competing readings. An important distinction, however, must be maintained between Qur’anic rhetorical density and the forms of concealment that later developed within Sufi discourse. The Qur’an’s rhetorical power does not make obscurity an end in itself; its discourse seeks to communicate, admonish, persuade, narrate, and guide while employing highly measured forms of expression. Classical Arabic rhetorical theory likewise tended to value a balance among meter, rhyme, diction, and meaning and to treat intelligibility as compatible with figurative richness. Veiled expression, in this sense, should not be equated automatically with opacity.

Sufi discourse, however, often placed greater pressure on the limits of ordinary language. Experiences described as direct spiritual apprehension were frequently represented as exceeding discursive explanation. When such epistemological claims interacted with Persian literary conventions, including a pronounced use of hyperbole and symbolic imagery, Sufi poetry could develop an especially dense coded idiom. This idiom also entered non-Sufi verse and contributed to the formation of a broader poetic meta-language. Within *divan* poetry, that language often enables movement from *majāz* to *ḥaqīqa*—from figurative appearance to an ultimate or “real” meaning—without requiring the literal level to disappear. Both levels can remain operative within the same couplet, and the resulting plurality of interpretation becomes a source of poetic richness. Maḥmūd Shabistārī, for example, speaks in *Gulshan-i Rāz* of the subtle truths of the realm of meaning and argues that such truths can enter language only through symbols. He also makes another important observation: the Sufi “meta-language” created for the expression of these meanings later came to be used in ordinary or literal senses as well. As he puts it: “The realm of meaning has no end. How could speech see its end, and how could it express it? How could words convey a meaning born of spiritual taste? When the people of the heart speak of meaning, they express it through something analogous to it, because the things we perceive through the senses are like shadows of the realm of meaning.

In my view, these expressions that admit interpretation were first used to convey the meanings we intended; their use in the separate, commonly understood senses known to everyone came later. But how are ordinary people to know which meaning is intended?"¹² The same dynamic is captured memorably in Yunus Emre's complaint concerning this poetic meta-language:

Bizüm hâlümüzden bilen kimdür 'ışka münkir olan
Bizüm sevdüğümüz Hak'dur bu halka göz ü kaş gelür

"How can one who denies love know anything of our state? / The One we love is the Truth; to these people He appears as eyes and brows."

Conclusion

This study has approached veiled expression not as a synonym for obscurity but as a historically situated poetics of mediation. Across classical Islamic culture, indirectness could serve several purposes at once: it could intensify aesthetic pleasure, require interpretive participation, protect meanings regarded as unsuitable for indiscriminate disclosure, and provide a verbal form for metaphysical claims thought to exceed ordinary description. Poetry was especially suited to this function because its figurative resources allowed visible images and non-visible meanings to remain active simultaneously.

The argument has emphasized two major sources of this poetics. Qur'anic discourse supplied a powerful model of rhetorical density, semantic layering, and the disciplined use of figurative language; Sufism expanded the demand placed on that language by construing the visible world as a field of signs pointing beyond itself and by distinguishing majāz from ḥaqīqa. Their interaction helped shape a poetic meta-language whose vocabulary could operate on literal, symbolic, and metaphysical levels at once. Yet the distinction between these sources remains important: Qur'anic rhetorical richness should not be reduced to deliberate obscurity, and Sufi concealment cannot be explained solely as imitation of Qur'anic style.

Seen from this perspective, the ambiguity of divan poetry is not simply a defect of accessibility nor merely an ornamental game. It is part of an aesthetic system in which meaning is staged as something to be approached through signs, correspondences, and interpretive movement. The enduring productivity of this system—from Rumi and Shabistarī to Şeyh Gâlib and Yunus Emre—lies precisely in its capacity to preserve more than one semantic horizon within the same verbal form. Veiled expression therefore emerges as a central mechanism

¹²Şebüsterî, Gülşen-i Râz, trans. Abdülbaki Gölpınarlı (Istanbul: MEB, 1989), p. 160.

through which classical poetry transformed inherited religious, philosophical, and literary concepts into a distinctive art of layered meaning.