The Double Ontology of Islamic Calligraphy: a Word-Image on a Folio from the Museum of Raqqada (Tunisia)

Valérie Gonzalez

3. Read: And thy Lord is the Most Bounteous,
4. Who teacheth by the pen,
5. Teacheth man that which he knew not.

Qur’ān, XCVI, Al-‘Alaq

The universal principle set forward by Edmund Husserl, according to which the word constitutes not only a graphic sign but also an object, a proper body (Leib) or a spiritual corporeality (geistige Leiblichkeit), was never so widely applied as in the Islamic calligraphy of modern times. This is especially true for Ottoman art that used to designate calligraphies under the highly significant Arabic term Surah (picture, image, form). Indeed, artists worked writings and words as entities made flesh, standing or floating in space; and from then on, they treated them also like a figurative subject. Conversely, they transformed representational patterns into scriptures, thereby transgressing the boundaries between the conceptual and the material, the ideal and the real—a practice that is still very successful today. As a result, these calligraphies can be considered pictures—pictures of words or word-images, securing the role of both linguistic incarnation and iconography. A double ontology,

---

1 Surah of "The Clot", The Holy Qur’ān, English translation of the meanings of the Qur’ān with notes by Mohd M. Pickthall (Delhi, Milat Book Centre, 1994).
linguistic/conceptual and visual/corporeal, and a double aesthetic nature, abstract and representational, that an illustrated folio from the Museum of Raqqa, powerfully displays. Through the study of this illustration, I wish to discuss the aesthetic phenomenon of making the visible correlative to the legible, by displacing or connecting up the sphere of language to that of icon. As a matter of fact, this phenomenon is proper to calligraphy in general, but characterizes in a very single manner Islamic calligraphy, as Uğur Derman's work magnificently demonstrates. This reflection is thus our way to celebrate this artist and scholar in this volume.

The folio is part of the small collection of Islamic objects from various periods and sources in the aforementioned museum. Located in a medieval site nearby the city of Kairouan, in Tunisia, the Museum of Raqqa is a small and new institution that, therefore, does not yet provide all the required elements for an exact identification of the object under consideration. There is no date, nor name to indicate the place from which it comes and eventually by whom it was made. Nor is there any indication as to the type of book to which it once belonged. Consequently, to make the necessary presentation of the folio, there is no other choice but to describe it and to guess, according to the visual information it supplies, the kind of work with which we are dealing. In addition, the only document I could get is a drawing after the real, made spontaneously by myself in situ.7

The illustration is made of monochromatic black ink on a white thin paper that seems quite recent, probably from the late Ottoman period, the eighteenth or nineteenth century. It measures approximately 12 x 7 centimeters. A unique feature on the ground-page, it represents in minimalist terms a minbar seen from one side within a rectangular framework. Though this picture is the very first pattern delivered to the gaze, it turns out that it is entirely designed by calligraphy—the monogram Allah—namely by a scriptural morphology. In fact, even for those who are used to this sort of visual games, phenomenologically the writing does not appear immediately to the eye since the letters that compose it are hidden by the distortion imposed by the representation, and so disappear in a certain way within its outlines.4 This is a characteristic that, as Oleg Grabar explains in his study on calligraphy, all artistic writings share beyond their diversity, and which consists in rendering access to the textual content difficult, or complicating its reading, or often attributing a secondary importance to content, even no importance at all. In this sense, calligraphy obviously opposes plain writing that intends to communicate clear messages.

Thus, on the Tunisian manuscript, the alif generates the framework that follows all along the edges of the folio. Then, the double lam spreads vertically in two long and narrow curves while the final letter, the ta marbuta, thanks to its basic triangular shape, draws the minbar itself, standing in one vertex of the rectangle of the frame. The two curves form a kind of very synthetic anthropomorphic pattern, like a vague figure of two people facing the pulp. The whole composition

---

5 The conditions in which I made the drawing were not favorable for an exact reproduction of the folio. Consequently, though the general structure is clearly respected, the number of stairs and squares in the minbar depiction as well as the precise dimensions of the various pictorial elements may not correspond, as they should, to the real object. Nevertheless, for lack of a photograph, this sketch constitutes a basic informative document.

6 There is a need here to insist on the fact that the pictorial arrangement appears positively for the first time. We do not believe indeed that this assertion is the result of a culturally determined eye that, by habit, detects in a more immediate manner representational figures than scriptural subjects.

form and linguistic content. It concerns more accurately the typical case, in Islamic calligraphy, of the image that perceptually absorbs the scripture, or of the scripture perceptually eclipsed by the image. However, the geometry of the picture’s composition, comprised of three vertical lines on the right side, namely the combination of the twin curves and the design of the frame completed by the triangle on the left side, corresponds in the absolute to the geometry of the graphics of the Sacred Name. There exists no other possibility of interpretation for, as Ludwig Wittgenstein argues about the concept of scriptural identity, the mere look of a printed line is itself extremely characteristic—it presents, that is, a quite special appearance, the letters all roughly the same size, akin in a shape too, and always recurring; most of the words constantly repeated and enormously familiar to us, like well-known faces.

So due to this inscription in the geometry of the word Allah, in its “morphological ideality,” the picture does not take place in the material space on which the world of figuration usually relies, but proceeds instead from this specific graphics subtending the physiognomy of the word that determines in the bi-dimensionality of the line the conceptual space proper to meaning. This corporeality of the word is defined, again by Wittgenstein, by comparing it precisely to the forms of a picture, both objects and subjects of gazing:

Though—one would like to say—every word has a different character, in different contexts, at the same time there is one character it always has: a single physiognomy. It looks at us—but a face in a painting looks at us too.

Nevertheless, and therein lies all the complexity of the folio’s aesthetic ontology, this geometrical territory of letters initially constitutes the formal site of meaning of this fundamentally ideal and conceptual

---

6 See Grabar, *The Mediation of Ornament*, chapter II, for a bibliography on the subject, see note 8.
9 This theme is amply developed by Wittgenstein, in *Philosophical Investigations*, Part II, vi, p. 181.

---

I. The Folio’s Double Ontology: an Image Taken in the Word

Although—as we observed above—what one sees at first glance is a perfectly autonomous figurative image within a frame, comprising two major immediately recognizable patterns (the minbar and the two anthropomorphic signs) by “mono-optic experience,” this image has no existence except through the word inscribed on the page background, the name Allah. Matter, materiality and immateriality are given simultaneously, literally, in a plastic structure that joins together figure,
object that the word primarily is, in the following sense stated by Jacques Derrida:

the word (mot) has an ideal Objectivity and identity, since it is not identical with any of its empirical, phonetic, or graphic materialization. It is always the same word which is meant and recognized through all possible linguistic gestures.13

In the sensible embodiment operated by the graphic sign, there occurs the localization in physical space and time of this word’s ideality, its semantic content, which is by its being-sense “unlocated and untemporal.”14 This concretely signifies that, on the Maghrebi manuscript, the calligraphic geometry realizes the embodiment of the absolute free (unlocated and untemporal) ideality of God, the highest, purest and most free of all idealties in Islam, within the necessarily “bound” ideality of the linguistically identified word, the Arabic name Allah, and within matter by writing, this name’s own corporeal exteriority, its scriptural morphology.

Starting from these observations, it is henceforth possible to define more subtly the aesthetic ontology of the Tunisian illustration. Contrary to appearances, the whole arrangement is of a scriptural order, and by extension, in the first place, of an ideal and conceptual nature. As such, it signifies primarily by means of the written unit, and only secondarily by means of figuration. Actually, it belongs to the category of the so-called “word-bound image” proposed by Meyer Schapiro15—an extreme case of that sort, we should say, since the image, being made up of the graphic substance of the word, not only depends on it to exist and

make sense, but is positively, ontologically this word. So that the latter acquires the authority of the generic image and the represented picture, as disguised word, gets the signifying power of the idiom: a peculiar plastic proposition that we will qualify as “an iconographic alphabet” or “an alphabetical image.” In other words, picture and scripture are one and the same entity with two faces, two properties and two natures, one textual and the other figurative, i.e. a double ontology with a primary (scriptural/ideal) ontology and a secondary (figural/material) ontology. This fact commands the entire analytical approach to the aesthetic system of the manuscript. For its meaning must be understood on the basis of its textual/ideal semiotics, in correlation with its figural semiotics, not the other way around. But before any further discussion, one has first of all to distinguish the type of work this manuscript represents from another one that belongs to the same generic group of figurative calligraphy, except that it follows different aesthetic rules.

This other type of calligraphy is in the first place and occurrence a figural ontology, not a linguistic ontology, and so constitutes the opposite of the latter. As a matter of fact, the word or the text is “taken in the picture,” not in the reverse order as on the Tunisian manuscript, insofar as the writing supplies an additional feature to an arrangement fundamentally rooted in the sensible space of visual forms. In Oleg Grabar’s book, The Meditation of Ornament, one finds two representative pictures of that sort.16 One picture shows a funeral procession in which a human figure and a camel are literally filled with Arabic characters, like colours in certain drawings. The term “filled” itself expresses very well the important distinctive feature that characterizes this kind of calligraphy, with respect to that of the Tunisian work. This point is that the letters are contained in the figurative shapes, constituting a separate body of features from the representational field instead of being organically bound to it. So there is insertion of an element into another, a contained element and a container that necessarily form two entities (replacing the unique one characteristic of the Raqqida calligraphy). As always in such configuration, the determining element for the structural organization of the work is the container. Therefore it is the figuration, not the script, that governs the whole calligraphy, following its own, specific laws which are those of the concrete world. The picture’s background, sprinkled with flowers, strengthens this aesthetic inscription of the calligraphy within the realm of existing things. Moreover, the treatment of the writing itself follows the representational aesthetic that the figures dictate, through an emphasis on the purely perceptual

14 Derrida quotes Eugen Fink’s words about speech: “In sensible embodiment occurs the “localization” and the “temporalization” (temporalization) of what is, by its being-sense, unlocated and untemporal.” (“Die Frage nach dem Ursprung der Geometrie als intentional-historisches Problem” in Revue Internationale de Philosophie 1, 2 [January 15, 1959], p. 210) in Edmund Husserl’s Origin of Geometry, p. 89.
15 It is the phenomenological concept of the ideality bound to the sensible world and factuality (for example the ideality of the culturally determined language) as opposed to that of the absolutely free and objective ideality (for example the ideality of divine truth). Derrida very explicitly says: “The forms of graphic and vocal signs must have a certain ideality which is imposed and recognized each time in the empirical fact of language. Without this always intended and approximate ideal identity (that of letters and phonemes, for example), no sensible language would be possible or intelligible as language, nor could it intend higher (idealties). Naturally, this morphological ideality is still more “bound” than the word’s ideality.” (Edmund Husserl’s Origin of Geometry, p. 89.)
16 Hubert Darras quotes Meyer Schapiro in Les Mots et les images, foreword, p. 12. 

Gonzalez, The Double Ontology of Islamic Calligraphy
properties of the letters, to the detriment of their properly linguistic values, almost ungraspable without decipherment. Such treatment makes the graphic characters act more as plastic patterns than as genuine scriptures featuring a textual intention. Clearly then, the writings perform their role of linguistic sign solely at a second level of perception. More than that, the appreciation of their textual semantic appears as quite accessory. Consequently, in terms of aesthetic ontology, these writings are in the final instance both distinct and qualitatively analogous to the representational patterns with which they share a pictorial ground, i.e. they appear similarly invested with representational qualities and values. The other picture is of a bird whose body is made up of a basmalah. The sacred sentence spreads itself in accordance with the fowl’s silhouette, within its flesh in a sense, and it consequently submits to the regime of the figure. So that again, it is positively the latter that defines the pictorial field as a true morphology taken from the real. In the Tunisian folio, let us remember, it is on the contrary the graphic sign that rules the figure, determines its shape, and so defines the general scriptural regime of the drawing.

To underline this important distinction between the two types of artistic writing, we will qualify the first as “figurative calligraphy of the scriptural regime,” as opposed to the second, “figurative calligraphy of the representational regime.” This distinction is suggested by Grabar in the captions of both these illustrations and another picture similar to the Raqqada page.18 Regarding the two calligraphies of the representational regime, the title mentions in the first place and explicitly the figurative content, and then goes on to indicate the presence of scriptures: “Funeral procession of letters”; “Bird in the shape of a basmalah.” Conversely, the caption of the third picture, one that displays Kufic letters composing the figure of a ship, mentions the two topics in reverse order: “Writing in the shape of a boat”. In this fashion, the author specifies the fundamental scriptural nature of the illustration, as a “figurative calligraphy of the scriptural regime.” Returning to our manuscript, the question is now to shed light on the modalities of interconnecting and inhabitation of the pictorial pattern in the scriptural one, given that they specifically form a double ontology.

18 Oleg Grabar, The Meditation of Ornament, illustration 60, p. 89.

II. Scriptural Figuration and Figurative Scripture

Reduced to a few, easy to grasp features, the image works as—borrowing another meaningful expression from Schapiro—a “pictorial title”19 which invites the viewer to play the game of binding the semiotics of the visible with that of the legible. The mosque furniture and the evocation of human presence indeed provide elements of signalization, on the levels of both form and meaning, which set the rules of this phenomenologically complex experience involving the coordinated acts of seeing and reading. Let us begin with the formal level, the ground upon which everything occurs, and all the activities comprised by the aesthetic experience initially take place.

Through simple lines quickly embraced by sight, at this primal and overall perceptive state and following this collectively consented acceptance thanks to which one understands effortlessly a system of signs (Grabar’s so aptly named “optisemic level”20), the figurative patterns make appear almost simultaneously—but not without a certain unpredictability—their scriptural roots. Under their apparently minimal

representational network, that hides but momentarily their authentic identity, arises, in all the transparence of old cultural acquisitions, the instituting evidence of the Divine Designation through its characteristic graphic shape. We will dare to say that there occurs "a scriptural epiphany," with all that this kind of "event" conveys in terms of perplexity, emotions, and sensations. The manuscript's figurative topics thus enter into lexical order, indicating in this way their founding linguistic ontology in an enjoyable effect of astonishment (in Arabic, 'ajāba). Let us recall that astonishment or surprise is one of the aesthetic qualities required to produce a good calligraphy according to some common Islamic artistic norms. So the visual topics are stating and announcing signs (in Arabic 'ayat) that in a sense "make a sign" themselves to the word they conceal, initiating the sliding process from the occurrence of the picture to that of the writing. The image thereby reveals itself as a true scriptural figuration or a figurative scripture.

This is the key process that yields to the promising and playful discovering of the complex cognitive reality of the illustration as, again, not a monolithic and plain icon, but a stratified statement displaying the plurivocality of a word and an image visually crossed. To which concrete reality does this statement correspond?

This question unavoidably raises the crucial problem of "figurability" (figurabilite, Darstellbarkeit), a concept of expression famously developed by Sigmund Freud and which indeed traverses all interrogation on visual arts associated in one way or another with texts or words. As Hubert Danish writes,

in its form as well as its substance, in its scriptural foundation, all linguistic expression more or less proceeds from the reign of image one will qualify as 'pictorial.'

However, starting from this general postulate, it is necessary to specify how the concept of figurability operates regarding the particular case of our manuscript as scriptural figuration, for, in the art of figurative calligraphy in general, there exist several possibilities.

In the Tunisian folio, as a matter of fact, this concept acts strictly within the realm of the sensible, namely on the surface—"the texture of the world" to use an eloquent phenomenological expression—on which

---

31 Grabar accurately talks about "creative expectation" in *The Meditation of Ornament*, chapter II.
32 Danish, "La peinture prise au mot," in *Les Mots et les images*, p. 27.
course many illuminated manuscripts. In principle, the visual transposition imposes a "mirror-relationship" that involves a reflexive identification between the pictorial and the textual fields by means of various manners of symbolization or designation, through the path of images common to both. But in the Tunisian drawing, the arrangement of the different composing elements does not offer any path for such a mirroring relationship. The two modes of designation (by writing and figuring) turn out to designate two different topics with no possible representational link—as we just pointed out—although they belong to the common realm of religious meaning. Neither are there otherwise two represented features between which the mirroring relationship could eventually be established, since the word constitutes the sole and unique aesthetic being of the page (of a double nature). This means that the Raqqada manuscript displays a calligraphic configuration notably distinct from other figurative calligraphies in which visual transposition truly occurs. To clarify this idea, let us consider these works.

One can classify these figurative calligraphies in two categories: the category of calligraphy displaying a unique represented entity (equally a double ontology), whose two modes of designation designate the same content; and the category of calligraphy displaying two coexisting represented entities whose two modes of designation point to the same content. The feature common to both cases that fundamentally distinguishes them from the Tunisian page, is clearly the mutually shared signification by picture and scripture, whether the aesthetic configuration relies on a double system of designation by a single represented entity or by two autonomous represented entities. In the first category, the mirroring relationship takes place through the double designation, while in the second one it is produced by equality of meaning between the two autonomous entities. So that in both configurations, forms and letters visually and semantically reflect each other. In other words, these calligraphies are tautological propositions that use the two modes of expression of figuring and writing to say one and the same thing, thereby increasing the rhetoric power of the linguistic statement. In the art of scripture in general, these works are called "calligrams," i.e. basically writings that are arranged in such a fashion as to form a picture illustrating their topic and so intend to lodge the same statement in two premises, the word and the visual shape, in order to render visible the scriptural sense or to provide it with a visible equivalent. In light of this theoretical statement, it appears that the Maghrebi drawing is not properly speaking a calligrammatic construction. A comparison with concrete

---

25 About illuminated manuscripts, see Meyer Shapiro, *Words and Pictures.*
examples of the both mentioned categories of calligraphy/calligram will
sustain this argument.

Concerning the first group, in Islamic calligraphy, one can
imagine, for instance, a picture of bird shaped by the graphic lines of the
Arabic word that names this animal, """"usfur."""" The shape of bird and the
name form the one and the same being, like the scene of mosque and the
monogram Allah composing the Tunisian work. But unlike the latter, the
name’s content is identical to the shape’s content in this depiction of a
bird, that is, its content is doubly signified by shaping and naming. In the
totally different cultural context of modern Western literature, the type of
calligram called “figured verse” presents a structural scheme similar to
the Islamic scheme discussed earlier, which we will define symmetrically
as “figured word.” The French poet Guillaume Apollinaire, famously
interested in the secret and enigmatic relationship between forms and
language, inaugurated this kind of aesthetic practice lying halfway
between picture and poetry, between figure and script. One of his
beautiful works, dating from 9th February 1915, consists of a poem
beginning by the declarative sentence “cette adorables personne c’est
toi...” (“this adorable person is you...”) that generates the design of a
female portrait wearing a hat. 25 The poem realizes the double procedure
of designating through language its object and drawing in the bi-
dimensionality of the page the body of this object with which it forms a
single morphology, in such a manner as to identify the linguistic
proposition to the visual one. We can say in summary that compared to
these two examples of the first calligrammatic group (with double
ontology), the Raqada folio shapes not a figured word, nor a figured
verse, but a figurative word: what we called a figurative scripture or a
scriptural figuration.

Then, to illustrate the second category of calligram comprising
two distinct represented entities, one cannot fail to mention René
Magritte’s celebrated painting entitled “Ceci n’est pas une pipe” (“This is
not a pipe”). The sentence “Ceci n’est pas une pipe” occurs beneath a
representation of the cited object that, precisely as image, is not the object

24 Let us notice that this is not the case with the aforementioned picture of a bird in
Ghuraba’s book, since there, as in the Tunisian folio, the visual and textual semantics are
not identical.

25 See “Calligraphy and Games with Letters,” in Georges Jean, Writing: The Story of
Alphabets and Scripts, translated from the French by Jenny Oates (New York: and
Figurative calligraphy of the figural regime: Funeral procession in which the veiled Caliph Ali is leading a camel carrying his own coffin and sword, followed by his sons Hassan and Husayn. (Ottoman, nineteenth century; from Turkish Arts: Calligraphic Figures [Istanbul], Ada Press Publishers, n.d.).

The word *Allah*: a fact that justifies the qualifications “scriptural figuration,” “alphabetical picture,” or “figurative scripture,” instead of “figured scripture” or “figured word.” These definitions nevertheless need further development before we can undertake a properly semantic analysis of the whole work.

The Raqqada calligraphy is a scriptural figuration or a figurative scripture insofar as its visual features constitute formal *extensions* generated by the metamorphosis of the textual body, or *extend* the writing under figurative forms. These features allow the scripture to exist and to signify in a space no longer possessing the neutrality, the abstractness and the inert blankness of the page, but in a living space the viewer physically penetrates, through sight. In other words, the iconography is built on what this textual body comprises in terms of figuring and visualizing properties, as true object of perceptual experience, by virtue of its natural inscription in the material space. These graphic and representational properties permit words to commit themselves to this silent activity at the margin of the strictly linguistic expression that Michel Foucault admirably called “*le sordid travail des mots*” (translated as “the subterranean work of words,” and could be rephrased as “the soundless or deaf work of words”).

This soundless work of words in matter, this purely sensible phenomenon that at a certain ontological level renders visual representations and graphic characters of language identical, is accurately what the Maghrebi illustration points out and plays with through iconographic extensions or figurative developments, the graphic sign *Allah* shows itself in the full corporeality of this graphic body-being that is both ideal and carnal, which possesses the peculiar ability of a double designation, by the abstract content of the word and the fiber of its form. More than that, the illustration positively signifies because the writing, originally the receptacle of an ideality by definition addressing the mind, is equally and fully an object of visibility. Only as such can the monogram *Allah* refer to the natural existent and give shape to worldly things, strengthening the carnal union of the sensible form, constitutive of the “bound” ideality of the linguistically determined word, with the

---

26 This masterpiece of the Belgian painter Rene Magritte was commented on in a very enlightening essay by Michel Foucault who discusses these philosophical and aesthetic problems raised by forms and words: Michel Foucault, *This is Not a Pipe*, translated and edited by James Harkness, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, University of California Press, 1984). See particularly the chapter “The Unraveled Caligraph,” pp.19–31. This painting is also reproduced and commented on in Richard Calvocoressi, *Magritte* (London, Phaidon, 1992), p. 91.

27 This is the original title of chapter 4, “Burrowing words,” in Foucault, *This is Not a Pipe*, p. 36.

28 Following the Husserlian conception of the word as flesh and proper body.

29 It concerns this type of ideality linked to that reality that is language, against the totally free, totally “ideal ideality” (the Divine truth or mathematics for instance are free ideality). For a discussion on the ideality embodied in word and writing see Chapter VII in Derrida’s *Edmund Husserl’s Origin of Geometry*. See also the other celebrated
sensible matter, constitutive of the image and the written unit. In this way, thanks to the protective intermediary of the word’s envelope, the sacred ideality of God is preserved from all illicit association with the material world.

From this analysis we can deduce that the folio’s meaning itself can only be produced by a cognitive system of semantic derivation—not semantic transposition or translation—from the linguistic topic to the pictorial one, in logical accordance with this plastic configuration of morphological derivation. This deduction leads to our next subject for consideration, the cognitive system of the manuscript. As this system rests on the written Sacred Name, we define it by the expression “visual dhikr.”

III. Cognitive System and Experience of the Folio as Visual Dhikr

A clue of significance as a first approximation, the figuration, which is—let us recall—the first proposition offered to the gaze, declares the global content of the manuscript dealing with the semantics of Islamic faith. More precisely, through the attractive and appealing medium of the visual staging (mise en scène), of artistic mimesis in the broader sense, that projects the viewer onto the solemn atmosphere of the place of worship, the figuration manifests and announces the very intention of the calligraphic work going far beyond the mere perceptual game. This intention is clearly to summon the mind to spiritual meditation through the recognition of the written name of God; going back to the title of Michael Baxandall’s book, the pictorial configuration constitutes here a “pattern of this intention.”

In the specific terms of Islamic thinking, the work’s intention is to prepare the viewer to a dhikr of visual order, i.e. to realize in favorable physical and psychic conditions the mental procedure of remembrance of the Divine Existence. Like the kind of dance and choreography practiced in the ceremonies of dhikr, the calligraphic picture supplies the specific framework of an aesthetic experience to this procedure, in order to increase its spiritual power. More accurately, the indirect access to the vision-reading of the Divine Designation through the picture and the experience of beauty it induces, strengthens the rhetorical effectiveness of this vision-reading and enhances its spiritual resonances with dramatic emotions and sensations—emotions and sensations that plain script, or a mere oral statement, could not arouse, for only aesthetic creations are suitable to do so. This experience of visual dhikr generated by the Raqqada manuscript works according to a peculiar process.

A scene of pious life nudging the viewer toward a devotional figural reverie, the pictorial composition initiates a sort of natural movement of cognition that refers firstly to the usual religious environment, and that changes content as soon as the Holy Name appears, with no break, through the soft path of derivation, to operate in the conceptual field of the Divine Idea. The viewer thus moves on from the thing seen to the thing read, incessantly going back and forth between vision and reading, between the sphere of corporeal forms and that of pure meaning: a perceptive movement that converts in both directions the scriptural figuration into a figurative scripture, the alphabetical image into an iconographic alphabet. The switching process is endless to the point that the legibility of the name Allah—which usually, by virtue of the cultural principle of linguistic collective recognition, rests on the sole sight of its graph—on the folio now proceeds only from the visual assimilation of the pictorial statement. Consequently, the graphic emergence occurs only in the spatiality of the picture. In concrete terms, the corporeality by which the written unit signifies is perceived through the visual combination of the minbar, the anthropomorphic curves and the frame. So that the cognitive system through which the Tunisian folio fully makes sense consists in recovering within the illustration and its formal signalization, the trail, the path of reading that leads up to the recognition of the Sublime Name as an altogether linguistic entity, specific graphic morphology, and pure meaning. This recognition that we called “visual dhikr” allows the indefinite repetition of the constitution in the concrete world of the transcendental Divine Truth and its ideal validity, exactly as does the vocal repetition of the term Allah. For, as Wittgenstein points out, “remember that the look of a word is familiar to us in the same kind of way as its sound.”

In other respects, this complex cognitive system fulfills the same double function of preparatory intellectual work and poetic invitation to grasping deep and difficult ideas, as the parable or the tale in literature.

---


Indeed, as fiction with a similar binary semantic structure—the literal, and the hidden or latent, levels—the parable or the tale yields to abstract predicates by the enjoyable and accessible means of images, in the event, images in language, the narrative. Certain forms of this literature proceed likewise, as the visual representation of the manuscript opens a door, in concrete and earthly terms of things familiar by use and habits, to an immaterial realm of ineffable thought, the thought emanating from the disguised Sacred Name. Nevertheless, for the full understanding of the folio’s cognitive system, one has to take into account a fundamental difference that distinguishes the two elements in comparison. Unlike the parable or the metaphorical text, what corresponds in the Tunisian calligraphy to the narrative discourse of the work—to its immediate appearance or its rhetorical aspect, i.e. the discourse of the figuration—clearly does not represent or symbolize the abstract terms of the second level of significance, the content of the written pattern. The visual discourse of the figuration, distinct from that of the ideal discourse of the writing, is connected to the latter only insofar as it occurs within the same religious semantic field. As we said above and will demonstrate hereafter, one derives from the other. This means that the signification relationship between the two discourses or levels of signification does not rest on similar schemes in the Tunisian work and the metaphorical texts; likewise, calligrams also organize differently their double expression, the figural and the scriptural. On the Raqada page, then, the pictorial statement is definitely not the literal/figured sense of the proper meaning contained in its ideal/scriptural counterpart, nor does it involve a mirroring relationship to it. By extension, its cognitive organization is not that of the parable or metaphorical tale, which consists of one and the same designation (by figured language, i.e. by narration) of a double sense, nor that of the calligram which consists of a double designation (by figuration and textual statement) of one and the same sense; it is a double designation33 (by figuration and textual statement) of a double sense. (See Chart I). In short, the double meaning of the Tunisian calligraphy emanates from the double discourse of the figuration and the name.

IV. The Double Discourse of the Figuration and the Name

Just as it determines the plastic structure and the ontological identity of the picture, the Divine Designation necessarily determines the conceptual field in which the latter signifies, in the event, the field of the religious.

Nevertheless, we observed that within this same field the picture covers a semantic territory that is its own and does not overlap with that of the inscription. While the monogram Allah expresses the supreme ideality in Islamic thought, God Himself, the representational ramifications of its graph express symmetrically, we might say, through the evocative image of worship, the practical implications of this absolute postulate in the reality of the believer’s life, the religious practice. So while the writing refers to the timeless and immaterial Divine Being, the absolute ideality, the depiction of a mosque refers in contrast to the factual and material reality of human existence, namely what we could call in phenomenological terms “the absolute reality,”34 or what corresponds in theological terms to the absolute concreteness. These two opposed conceptual poles, constitutive of all religious thought, organize the semantics of the Raqada folio under the specific form of a perfect binary scheme of two discourses, joined and in accordance with each other, but absolutely distinct: the double discourse of the figuration and the name whose content can be described as illustrated in Chart II.

Between the depiction of a mosque and the name of God—and, beyond that, the unapproachable idea of the Divine Truth—there takes place a chain of interconnected significances that rely on the various ontological grounds the word explores through its multiple forms, thanks to its combined signifying, graphic, and iconic properties. More accurately, these significances are gathered within the two spheres of meaning, or ontological grounds, defined by the two conceptual poles of the concrete and the ideal to which each perceptual component of the folio refers. The first sphere is naturally the linguistic/ideal one that comprises the various idealities embodied in the monogram Allah: at the most elevated rank, so to speak, the pure ideality of the Divine, the Divine Truth or God Himself, then gradually the ideality of the word, the Name of God, and its already real identity in language or the so-called “bound” ideality of the Arabic designation Allah. The other sphere, necessarily correlated to this linguistic and ideal sphere, is that of perceptual signs in which occur both the real-significant events of the writing of the name Allah and the representation of the pious scene. This chain of signifying

33 Let us quote Hassert’s phenomenological definition of the real: “We call real in a specific sense all that which, in real things in the broader sense, is, according to its sense, essentially individualized by its spatiotemporal position.” (Experience and Judgement: Investigations in a Genealogy of Logic, translated by James S. Churchill and Karl Ameriks [Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1973], pp.265–266.

COGNITIVE SYSTEMS OF FIGURATIVE WRITINGS

Figurative calligraphies of the scriptural regime
(The Raqqada folio, writing in the shape of a boat)
One being (double ontology)
Double designation
Double meaning

Figurative calligraphies of the figural regime
(Funeral procession of letters, bird in the shape of a Basmalah)
Two beings
Double designation
Double meaning

Calligrams 1
(Figured verse, Apollinaire’s calligram, and figured word, picture of bird—Usfur)
One being (double ontology)
Double designation
One meaning

Calligrams 2
(Magritte’s painting “Ceci n’est pas une pipe”)
Two beings
Double designation
One meaning

Parables-tales
One being
Single designation
Double meaning

Chart I.

SEMANTIC SCHEME OF THE RAQQADA FOLIO

GOD
(The absolute ideality)

↑↓

THE WORD “GOD”
(The ideality of the word)

↑↓

THE ARABIC NAME OF GOD, ALLAH
(The bound ideality of the word in language)

↑↓

THE MONOGRAM ALLAH
(The embodied ideality of the written word)

↑↓

THE REPRESENTATIONAL EXTENSIONS
(The empirical reality of the visual representation)

↑↓

HUMAN EXISTENCE
(The absolute concrete reality)

Chart II.
elements connects the absolute contingent to the absolute ideal and generates a movement of meaning, going back and forth from one to the other, that puts both in a sort of dialectical perspective: a semantic configuration that obviously comes from the specific articulation of the discourse of the name with that of the image. What are exactly the terms of this articulation?

The discursive articulation of both topics proceeds from derivation. In detail, the figurative discourse derives from the nominal discourse just as iconography perceptually derives from the scriptural graph. Moreover, the figurative discourse prolongs the nominal discourse whose semantic field it broadens; it is, borrowing Paul Ricoeur’s term, “an iconic augmentation” of it, as its visual corporeality extends into figurative space the linear spread of the written character. We can apply to this peculiar semantic morphology Wittgenstein’s striking remark about general semiotics:

it is almost as if ‘seeing the sign in this context’ were an echo of a thought. ‘The echo of a thought in sight’—one would like to say.35

Thus, the picture prolongs the nominal discourse insofar as it puts the reading of the name Allah, the very element carrying the supreme meaning of the folio, into the visual context of the familiar atmosphere of a place of worship. In this sense, the picture makes itself the echo of the ineffable thought of God in the factual believer’s existence that it represents. This leads us to point out the accurate function of the picture in respect to the name in the semantics of the calligraphy.

Even though the writing’s presence per se already implies a process of incorporation of the ideal (proper to words) into the real (proper to perceptual signs), the iconic extensions introduce into the abstract field of linguistic cognition of the monogram Allah a dimension that it did not originally have, namely the dimension of the pure contingent, of the strictly concrete real. For writing by itself does not completely penetrate factual life, while contingency is the territory par excellence of all visual representation. Indeed, figurative images are tied much more tightly to the empirical subjectivity of the historical time than script. This means that—within this real that, by nature, the letter deposits on the manuscript’s ground or within this spatiotemporal of the written page—the figurative extensions of the graph Allah open another horizon: that of the factual real of life (shown through the scene inside a mosque).


By opening to it this horizon of pure factuality, the picture widens this reality proper to the written sign that, by itself, is still interrelated with the objectivity of the word’s meaning, but yet is freed from contingency insofar as it conveys the possibility of reproduction and translation, or has the property of translatability.37 This opening to the very contingent by the visual image’s presence provides the global dialectic discourse of the calligraphy with all its depth in terms of religious sense. This actually is the last point to treat, the interpretation of the work’s deep meaning.

Above all, the designation of the Raqqada folio is clearly named and consequently is the meaning of a name, that “primitive sign”38 that conceals an invisible presence. The postulate according to which the name is an “integral resorption of all discourses into a sole word”, as Michel Foucault explains,39 is all the more apt for the Tunisian calligraphy since it concerns the sacred designation of God itself. As a matter of fact, the Arabic term Allah contains also the verbal statement of being and so gathers all the essence of language. It is the being of thought itself in Islam. Through this initial and pure iteration,40 the origin of all discourse, and in the silence of its graphic expression, what the monogram Allah attempts to perform is the transcendental reduction that consists in depositing in factual reality the absolutely ideal and objective Divine Sense that, by definition, is freed from all types of empirical subjectivity. Like the vocal repetition of the Sacred Designation, the visual dhikr of the Raqqada folio realizes the spatiotemporal embodiment in the finitude of the world of what belongs to the infinite and the ineffable, and so is out of grasp. However, this act obviously irretrievably conceals a kind of failure or impossibility. For all factual writings, in which truth could be sedimented, will never be anything in themselves but sensible ‘exemplars,’ individual events in space and time (which is only true to a certain degree for ‘bound’ idealities). Since truth does not essentially depend on any of them, they could be all destroyed without overtaking the very sense of absolute ideality.41

37 On these notions of translatability and translation, see the discussion on writing’s ideal identity, in Derrida, Edmund Husserl’s Origin of Geometry, pp.70–75.
40 See the analysis of the language of action in Foucault, Les Mots et les choses, p. 120.
41 Derrida, Edmund Husserl’s Origin of Geometry, p. 94.
This failure is in a sense suggested or expressed by the sophisticated composition of the scriptural graph with the devotional picture. Through the series of channeled embodiments including the visual representation, i.e. by covering all the degrees of concreteness proper to both the linguistic and perceptual spheres, the figurative calligraphy tries all the available possibilities to set down and “to communalize” (metre en communauté)\(^2\) the ineffable truth in the spatiotemporality of earthly reality. It is as if these embodiments would intend to fill up, by all licit means, the incommensurable distance between the purest ideal and the material world, in order to engrave the former into the latter, down to the most empirical and uncertain of realities, human daily life. From then on, the true meaning of the Tunisian work can be interpreted through two epistemological approaches that will serve as a conclusion to this study.

The first approach is logically the theological one. As an object of expression of the Islamic faith, the calligraphy’s sense clearly lies in this

metaphysical tension toward the ungraspable and supreme being, God—an impossible task whose trail the scriptural and figural patterns draw within the limits of sensible reality, within the limits of the possible, which are those of the acts of saying and showing (les limites du dire et du montrer).

The second approach, which cannot fail to raise some philosophical questions with respect to the previous one, proceeds from phenomenology.\(^5\) What the Tunisian calligraphy intends to operate by the transcendental reduction explained above, or what constitutes its meaning as a phenomenological object by essence, is to gather the optimal conditions for the internal completion of the ideal Objectivity of the Divine, the absolute ideality. For phenomenologically, although ideal objectivity possibly exists per se independently of any type of embodiment, it can only be fully constituted by a procedure of incarnation or deposition in matter, so, paradoxically, against the empirical subjectivity of worldly reality. Following Husserl, Derrida accurately states that:

writing is no longer only the worldly and mnemonotechnical aid to a truth whose own being-sense would dispense with all writing-down. The possibility or necessity of being incarnated in a graphic sign is no longer simply extrinsic and factual in comparison with ideal Objectivity: it is the *tine qua non* condition of Objectivity’s internal completion. As long as ideal Objectivity is not, or rather, *can not* be engraved in the world—as long as ideal Objectivity is not in a position to be party to an incarnation (which in the purity of its sense, is more than a system of signals *signalisation* or an outer garment)—then ideal objectivity is not fully constituted. Therefore, the act of writing is the highest possibility of all constitution, a fact against which the transcendental depth of ideal Objectivity’s historicity is measured.\(^4\)

In this sense, the graphics of the Sacred Name—as well as the vocal *dhikr* in other respects—that embody the being-sense of the religious truth, are positively a procedure for realizing the ultimate or complete constitution of this truth as such, i.e. its total freeing from worldliness (and *a fortiori* against it). We will add that on the Maghrebi manuscript, the peculiar conjunction of writing and figuring phenomenologically “constitutes” the

---

\(^2\) Phenomenological expression used by Husserl, Derrida, and others.

\(^5\) Nevertheless, the phenomenological approach is justified, imposes itself we should say, for artistic works are by themselves objects of phenomenology as objects of perceptual experience.

\(^4\) Derrida. *Edmund Husserl’s Origin of Geometry,* p. 89. But to better understand this complex phenomenon of the possibility of being written of identities, see Chapter VII, pp. 87–107.
Divine Ideality, each at different degrees and with different modalities of incarnation. If writing is the condition sine qua non, figuring supplies the complementary condition that increases the possibilities of such constitution.

Nevertheless, one immediately sees the problem posed by this analysis when one considers the religious context in which the calligraphy was produced and the type of ideality the latter incarnates. It is obvious that, in theological and metaphysical terms, the ineffable Divine Being—as the absolute permanent ideal objectivity, as pure transcendence—cannot be constituted or measured. The rational procedure of constitution "occurs" or works as long as one puts the artefact, as positive phenomenon, not the entity to which it refers, into the very heart of the analysis from which all the deductions proceed. To make both approaches coincide, we could perhaps state that the process involved in the calligraphy is a re-constitution in the sensible ground, for the human community, of an ideality that by definition has always been constituted or was never constituted, that of the infinite being. Indeed, “the authentic act of writing”, and so the sacred act of writing the name Allah “is a transcendental reduction performed by and toward the we,”43 by and toward the believer. We shall not, then, resist the temptation of returning to Derrida’s penetrating idea for the final term of our discussion. If “to constitute an ideal object is to put it at the permanent disposition of a pure gaze,”44 the Raqıqa folio, thanks to its peculiar visual expression mixing forms and letters, “re-constitutes” the ideal Divine Truth. “Constitution” or “re-constitution,” is the fundamental question raised by the artistic work not that of how to express pure transcendence?

---


---

 Atatürk ve Geleneksel Türk Sanatları

Hüseyin Gündüz

Hepiniz milliyevekilili olabilirsiniz, bakan olabilirsiniz, hatta Cumhurbaşkanı olabilirsiniz. Fakat sanatçı olamazsınız.1

Türk milletinin tarihi bir özelliği de güzel sanatların ve ona bağlılyomur. Bunu içinde ki, millileminin güzel sanatlara sevgisini devam ve her türlü vasta ve tehditlerle besleyerek geliştirmek millî kültürümüzü z.2

Millî mücadele fikrini ilk kez ortaya atan, orduuna ve milletine güç verecek Mustafa Kemal Atatürk hiç kuşkusuz büyük bir Kumanlıdendi. Millîleri sosyal ve uygur reformlarına kavuşuran Atatürk büyük bir önder olmasının yarısı, sanat ve sanatçıları destekleyen ve onları yönleştiren bir sanat severdi.


---

2 *Akademi Metnleri*, Cumhuriyetin 50’incisi yıl dönümü özel sayıs.