

ESSAY

“Worlds Together Shined”: Bīdil, Traherne, and Collaborative Comparison

TIMOTHY M. HARRISON AND JANE MIKKELSON

TIMOTHY M. HARRISON is associate professor in the Department of English and the John U. Nef Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago. He is the author of *Coming To: Consciousness and Natality in Early Modern England* (U of Chicago P, 2020) and, with Elizabeth D. Harvey, *John Donne's Physics* (U of Chicago P, 2024). With Jane Mikkelson, he is writing a book tentatively entitled “Horizons of the Mind: Experiences of Self and World in Early Modern Persian and English Poetry.”

JANE MIKKELSON is lecturer and associate research scholar in the Departments of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations and Comparative Literature at Yale University. Her research focuses on theories of literature, philosophy and literature, translation studies, and entangled early modernities. Recent publications discuss planetary poetics, a geopolitical turn in seventeenth-century literary criticism, and the ambient availability of Avicenna's philosophy for early modern Persian poets. Since 2019, she and Timothy M. Harrison have been writing a book about Bīdil and Traherne that offers a new account of the role played by poetry in early modern models of the mind.

In the waning decades of the eleventh Islamic or seventeenth Christian century, two poets who were never in contact experimented with the same remarkable and anomalous idea. Although they wrote while separated by more than five thousand miles, both poets believed that imaginatively reinhabiting one's own originary experiences or earliest biographical beginnings could secure self-knowledge and unlock enlightenment. Pitching themselves against the limits of human memory, phenomenological possibility, and common sense, these writers claimed to remember their own first moments: being in the womb, birth, infancy, nursing, early childhood. In rural England, Thomas Traherne (1045–85 AH / 1636–74 AD) described in “The Salutation” the experience that accompanied the moment when “I in my mother's womb was born” (6: 4 [line 38]), an idea he explored in an encyclopedia, theological treatises, books of devotional meditation, and dozens of poems. And in Mughal India, Mīrzā ‘Abd al-Qādir Bīdil Dihlavī (1054–1133 AH / 1644–1720 AD) devoted the first pages of his autobiography to the earliest stretches of his life, when he felt that

سواد نسخه شعور صورت بیاضی داشت
(4: 10)

the black rough draft of the manuscript of awareness had the form of a clean white commonplace book.¹

Reflections on human origins abound throughout Bīdil's corpus, which includes thousands of lyric poems, a prosimetric autobiography, and philosophical works in narrative verse. As far as we know, there are no widespread precedents for first-person accounts of infant

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Modern Language Association of America

PMLA 138.5 (2023), doi:10.1632/S0030812923001025

1127

experience in the Islamic, Greco-Roman, Christian, Hindu, or Hebrew traditions that were available to Bīdil or Traherne.² How can we make sense of the fact that these poets explored the same anomalous idea during many of the same orbital circuits that the earth made around the sun?

Traherne and Bīdil present an intriguing case of what Carlo Ginzburg, in dialogue with Bruce Lincoln, calls "conjunctive anomalies," representations or utterances or actions that are anomalous within their respective contexts yet "resemble each other closely" (Ginzburg and Lincoln 170). One might examine conjunctive anomalies through morphological comparison, a method that "disregard[s] space and time" (111). In Lincoln's view, this method should consider only structural and formal similarities, where any resemblances are taken to be "nonfamilial . . . common responses to similar problems and circumstances" (141). Yet the near simultaneity of Traherne's and Bīdil's accounts invites what Ginzburg, following Marc Bloch, calls "historical comparison," a method that allows for "the possibility of mutual influences, of a common filiation, and so forth" (111). Historical comparison requires that the things being compared, or comparanda, belong to a common whole. Examining Bīdil and Traherne within the framework of historical comparison presupposes that they belonged to a shared world.

Is such a presupposition true? Seen in one way, it seems unlikely. Each poet was shaped by distinct constellations of languages: Traherne by English, French, Latin, Greek, and perhaps a bit of Hebrew; and Bīdil by Persian, Arabic, South Asian vernaculars, and perhaps Sanskrit.³ Both composed within distinct literary traditions.⁴ Bīdil inhabited a centuries-long tradition of Persian poetry, and his writing was influenced by earlier luminaries like Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, Ḥāfiẓ Shīrāzī, Sa'dī Shīrāzī, Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār, Ṣā'ib Tabrīzī, and others.⁵ Traherne wrote in the wake of the European *canzone* and lyric developed by Dante, Petrarch, John Donne, George Herbert, and Henry Vaughan. Both poets also inhabited seemingly discrete (though contiguous) religious worlds.⁶ Traherne publicly followed the line promoted by the Church of England, while articulating Pelagian views about

the relation of infancy to Edenic innocence.⁷ Bīdil's beliefs fell within Mughal-sanctioned forms of Islam, whose doctrines Bīdil inflected in standard ways with Sufism and Islamic philosophy and also in creative ways with ideas from Hinduism.⁸ Each poet seems ensconced within more or less independent linguistic, literary, and religious realms.

Seen in another way, however, Bīdil and Traherne undoubtedly lived in a shared geopolitical world.⁹ Both wrote after Thomas Roe's embassy (1023–28 AH / 1615–19 AD) to the Mughal Empire, during what Zoltán Biedermann calls the "(dis)connected" period of entanglement that would later lead to British colonial rule in India (14). Several important recent studies compare early modern literary works produced in this period. The world examined in these studies is *the* world. This world's wholeness and coherence are constituted by economic, sociopolitical, imperial, colonial, commercial, and material interconnections, as well as by the gaps these connections fail to bridge. Ning Ma links the rise of the novel in East Asia and Europe to a unified set of globalizing economic developments unfolding across Eurasia. Su Fang Ng's studies of English and Malay writings in the context of global interconnections routed through the Ottoman Empire disclose economic and political contexts for global literary history (*Alexander* and "Dutch Wars"). Such comparisons reorient readers to a more expansive early modern world underpinned by entangled military, imperial, and economic trajectories. Other scholars discover connections that are more suggestive. Rivi Handler-Spitz examines anxious early modern responses to eroding concepts of truth and authenticity. Comparing Li Zhi with Montaigne reveals a diffuse Eurasia-wide skeptical worldview that may be symptomatic of various "instabilities in the social and economic spheres" (7), and Handler-Spitz argues that these diverse responses to instability may have "shared an etiology" (10). In such studies, comparison uses socioeconomic and geopolitical frameworks to reveal the Afro-Eurasian world anew.¹⁰ We embrace the political, intellectual, and institutional stakes of these comparative endeavors, which unseat assumptions about the centrality and exceptionalism of Europe as a center of gravity.

Yet although Traherne and Bīdil lived in this larger Afro-Eurasian world, their writings do not dwell on economic, diplomatic, or sociopolitical matters. Nor do they furnish shared material realities that might ground comparison. Traherne mentions India twice, both times gesturing vaguely toward exotic wealth.¹¹ And in the handful of times that Europe (*farangistān*, “the land of the Franks”) appears in Bīdil’s poems, it names a remote, exotic province of tempting beauty, or a place hostile to Muslims, or simply an abstract limit—the western counterpart to the eastern boundary of China.¹² While connections forged through trade, diplomacy, and incipient violence yoke the established Mughal Empire and the inchoate British Empire together within a shared geopolitical world, this alone does not provide an explanatory framework for Traherne’s and Bīdil’s endeavors.¹³ These poets are not conjoined through language, literary history, or religion; if common affiliations condition this conjunctive anomaly, they are not reducible to the machinations of empire and global commerce—even if they are caught up in and, to a certain degree, enabled by those machinations.

The kind of world that encompasses Bīdil’s and Traherne’s explorations of originary experience is, we argue, of a different order.¹⁴ Our conjunctive anomaly finds its principle of coherence in an important but neglected intellectual world that emerges from the diffuse legacy of Ibn Sīnā (370–428 AH / 980–1037 AD), known as Avicenna in Latin, whose philosophical corpus in Arabic and Persian synthesizes Aristotelianism, Neoplatonism, and Islamic theology in innovative and influential ways. In the centuries following his death, Avicenna’s interventions in psychology, medicine, metaphysics, logic, and other fields circulated throughout Afro-Eurasia and beyond, transforming intellectual cultures across the globe.¹⁵ It is no doubt true that Bīdil and Traherne were also connected through the diffusion across Afro-Eurasia of such intellectual traditions as Aristotelianism, Neoplatonism, Galenism, and various forms of occult or hermetic writing.¹⁶ Pursuing such diverse connections brings to light multiple “significant geographies” to which Traherne and Bīdil both belong. Unlike the vanishingly vast categories

of “world literature” or various “global” phenomena, what Francesca Orsini calls “significant geographies”—which can be both real and imaginary—are not imposed from above, but instead emerge through careful scholarly attention to literary cultures in their locally grounded particularity (346–47). In this essay, we focus on the significant geography corresponding to one idea: Avicenna’s notion that each human soul possesses intrinsic awareness of itself (*al-shu‘ūr bi-l-dhāt*).¹⁷ This concept, we argue, provides special insight into the particular historical and cultural conditions of possibility that underpin our conjunctive anomaly and reveals how our two poets belong to a shared world shaped by Avicenna’s thought.

In *التعليقات* (*al-Ta‘līqāt; Notes*), Avicenna writes that the human soul “مطبوعة على” (“naturally inclines toward”) awareness of existent things (57).¹⁸ The soul can gain awareness of some existent things either “بالطبع” (“naturally”) or “بالاكتساب” (“through a process of acquisition”; 57). Avicenna immediately clarifies that the soul’s awareness of itself belongs to the first category: “فشعورها بذاتها بالطبع” (“self-awareness is something that happens naturally”; 57). Indeed, this natural and immediate form of self-awareness—what Deborah Black terms “primitive self-awareness” (64)—is “من مقوماتها” (“one of [the soul’s] constitutive features”; Avicenna, *al-Ta‘līqāt* 57). Furthermore, it is something that happens “بالفعل لم يزل” (“in actuality and without abatement”; 57); in other words, it is not a potentiality or capacity that may at times be dormant. However, beyond the soul’s unceasing natural awareness of itself there is also a second-order form of self-awareness: Avicenna calls this “شعورها بأنها تشعر بذاتها” (“the soul’s awareness that it is aware of itself”; 57; our emphasis). This process is *not* immediate and constant; instead, it falls under the category of knowledge that is “اكتساب” (“acquired”; 57). Avicenna writes, “ولذلك قد لا تعلم أنها شعرت بذاتها” (“for that reason, the soul does not know that it is aware of itself”; 57). Although primitive self-awareness is innate and ever-present, Avicenna recognizes that this linchpin of interior human activity goes unnoticed by most people most of the time (Black 67–68).¹⁹ However, once readers become alerted to this facet of their

own experience, they can begin cultivating higher-order forms of awareness.

This layered concept of self-awareness remained an enduring part of Avicenna's legacy, even as his works were interpreted and creatively reimaged by later philosophers, poets, and theologians. His ideas traveled through an astonishingly vast network. Although this travel was underpinned by trade and migration and the collection and translation of manuscripts, the Avicennan thought world we aim to reveal is not reducible to such material principles of connection—even if those principles enabled its existence. Initially propelled by the critiques of such philosophers as Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī and Ibn Rushd (Averroës) and the subtle appropriations of Ibn 'Arabī, Avicennan thought soon crossed linguistic and doctrinal boundaries, notably through the Arabic-Hebrew-Latin translation movements in al-Andalus and Sicily. It was also in medieval al-Andalus that Ibn Ṭufayl composed *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān* (*Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān*), a philosophical allegory that engages closely with Avicenna's thought.²⁰ Around the same time, Avicennan ideas influenced Christian philosophers like Albertus Magnus in the Holy Roman Empire, Thomas Aquinas in the Papal States, and, later on, Francisco Suárez on the Iberian Peninsula, all of whom freely blended Avicenna and Augustine.²¹ In less acknowledged ways, Avicenna informed thinkers like Giordano Bruno, René Descartes, and Thomas Hobbes.²² Similarly complex routes of influence branched out across the eastern Islamic world. For unbroken centuries, Avicenna remained a touchstone (or a point of departure) for Persian philosophers like Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī, Mullā Ṣadrā, and others; Avicennan ideas also filtered through the works of Persian poets (Rūmī, Sa'dī, Fayz Kāshānī, 'Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī, and countless others).²³ These heterogeneous encounters with Avicenna's thought across Persian and Arabic traditions introduced innovative and imaginative methods of engaging with philosophical ideas that had lasting effects on early modern cultures in Safavid Iran, the Ottoman Empire, Central Asia, Mughal India, Europe, and beyond.²⁴

When grasped as historically contemporaneous inheritors of Avicenna and his concept of self-awareness, Bīdil and Traherne emerge unmistakably as members of a shared world of ideas.²⁵ Both poets embed philosophical explorations of self-awareness within autobiographical accounts of infancy, and in doing so they actualize a mimetic possibility that had long been available in the conceptual matrix of Avicennan thought. If self-awareness is innate, present from the very moment the self "comes to be," then originary experience must necessarily accompany the first moment of human existence. There is, in other words, something it is like for a human life to begin.²⁶ While neither poet is a dogmatic exponent of any school narrowly construed, both Bīdil and Traherne locate the foundations for their idiosyncratic spiritual and philosophical pursuits in their own originary experiences. In doing so, they activate the literary potential of the connection Avicenna makes between philosophy and the first-person perspective.²⁷ Avicenna himself recognizes the importance of reaching readers through nondemonstrative means. His vast corpus contains reasoned proofs and arguments for the centrality of self-awareness, but elsewhere he acknowledges that some readers need to be prompted, persuaded by allegory, guided imaginatively, or startled into an intuitive insight. His famous "Flying Man" thought experiment about the innateness and primacy of self-awareness does just this when it asks readers to imagine themselves created instantly as fully formed adults, suspended in midair, deprived of all sensory input, with no memories, and lacking even physical awareness of their own bodies. This imaginative exercise is meant to elicit the realization that, even in this extreme state of stripped-down experience, they would still be aware of something—of themselves *as selves*. It is telling that Avicenna describes his thought experiment as a "*tanbīh*" ("admonition" or "reminder"), not as a formal argument.²⁸ Already in Avicenna, then, analysis of self-awareness proceeds not only by making the standard philosophical maneuvers with premises and proofs, but by inviting readers to turn inward. When pushed to think about a concept in the first person, one

might notice something foundational about oneself that was there all along—a realization that, in turn, prompts further inquiry. In distinct styles shaped by the languages, traditions, sources, and ideas that were both directly and ambiently available to them, Bidil and Traherne extend Avicenna's explorations of self-awareness by turning to the moment the first-person perspective began.²⁹ Refracting a philosophical idea through imaginative literature, both poets harness the resources of poetry and lyrical prose to articulate first-person accounts of originary experience with distinct aims. Traherne seeks to return to a state of prelapsarian purity, to find Adamic delight in the radical novelty of a world revealed to an innocent beholder with boundless capacity for joy. Bidil scrutinizes his infancy in lyric and prose because this marks the beginning of an arduous lifelong project of becoming acquainted with his own cognitive architecture, where the ideal end—often just out of reach—is to attain self-mastery and enlightenment through imaginative introspection. While their aims diverge, a strong cord of communion binds them together: Traherne and Bidil both contrive imaginative, experimental, participatory approaches to exploring Avicennan primitive self-awareness.

Our aim in this essay is twofold. First, through close reading and contextualization, we show how Traherne and Bidil explore Avicennan self-awareness in intriguingly similar ways. We pursue a philologically attentive mode of close reading because, in our view, this is the best way to render phenomenology historical—by revealing the relationship between poetic form, mimetic particularity, and the abstract conceptual structures through which human life is understood and expressed. We work immanently within a given text, explaining it and unspooling it, tracing the threads from which it was woven out into its immediate contexts and beyond. Second, through this exercise in collaborative comparison we reveal Bidil's and Traherne's membership in a shared world, the primary nature of which is not geopolitical. Made of endlessly ramifying ventures of thought, method, and value, the world of Avicennan ideas that is revealed by our conjunctive anomaly allows us to see how poetic

and intellectual worlds are not straightforwardly reducible to economic, commercial, imperial, or other forms of direct material contact between peoples, even if this intellectual world is, of course, closely related to these other forms of contact. In framing our use of the concept *world* in this open, multiple, and malleable way, we attempt to avoid reducing one poet to the other, privileging a given normative or explanatory frame, or falling into the trap of recapitulating old binaries (such as centers and peripheries) even as we strive to evade them.³⁰

Our use of *world* is warranted by forms of thinking about plural worlds that were available to Bidil and Traherne alike. Extending Nicolaus Cusanus's insight about the unthinkable vastness of the universe, Blaise Pascal followed Bruno's lead by transforming an old Latin articulation of God's nature into a reflection on the nature of the world. It is, Pascal claims, "pointless trying to inflate our ideas beyond imaginable spaces," because "the whole of nature . . . is an infinite sphere whose center is everywhere, whose circumference is nowhere" (66)—a statement that conveys simmering unease about the human mind's ability to compass the universe.³¹ More than a decade before Pascal's *Pensées* was published, Muḥammad Dārā Shukūh included a similar statement about the infinity of worlds at the end of *مجمع البحرين* (*Majma' al-baḥrayn*; *The Confluence of the Two Oceans*), a treatise in which he attempts to align Islam and Hinduism. He stages a conversation between the prophet Muḥammad and the angel Gabriel as they witness an incredible sight. An endless caravan of camels, with no visible beginning or end, traverses the night sky; each camel is saddled with two bags, and each bag contains a world—and in every world there is a prophet Muḥammad. When Muḥammad asks about the meaning of this vertiginous spectacle, Gabriel replies that even he does not know the ultimate meaning of this infinite procession of worlds; as far as he knows, it has always been this way (116). We have argued elsewhere that Traherne and Bidil probe in similar ways the possibilities suggested by an increasing acknowledgment of plural or even infinite worlds. We showed how both poets activate concepts of *world* that are malleable, multiple, and

subjective; for them, a world is something that appears to someone who can access and meaningfully interpret its appearance. Here we recover a similar kind of world, one that is subjective and relational—an intellectual world cocreated by the endeavors of two remarkable poets as it appears to us, in and through our collaborative comparison.³² Worlds are relative to the phenomena the act of comparison brings into focus. In this essay, we present one such world.

[1]

In *Commentaries of Heaven*, Traherne describes what would appear to a little “stranger newly come into the world”: the “Beauty of the World is [the infant’s] first Entertainment. The Light and Glory of it seems a Sphere into which he enters, out of the Obscuritie of an Eternal Abyss, which is called *Nothing*” (3: 436). The “first” phenomena encountered are the beauty, light, and glory of the world, which “seems” to be a “Sphere into which” the tiny creature “enters” upon awakening. Emerging from the “Obscuritie of an Eternal Abyss,” each neonatal human being enters existence as the center of a world. The enwombed infant’s “Life is the first Thing of which he is sensible, he is in his own eyes a Sphere of Light filling the World with Apprehension” (3: 436). The phenomenal world first appears alongside the ego’s birth in utero.

This is not the world of trees and sky. It is instead an empty world, a structure of phenomenal transcendence. Sometimes Traherne describes this emptiness in familiar terms. In *Select Meditations*, he claims that comprehension is “a Rasa Tabula Prepared in Him [that is, Man] For the Drawing afterward of all the Pictures in Gods kingdom” (5: 355). Moving from this mature “afterward” to his earliest moments, Traherne imagines a blank slate awaiting “Pictures” drawn by perception. “An Empty Book is like an Infants Soul, in which any Thing may be Written,” he claims in *Centuries*: “It is Capable of all Things, but containeth *Nothing*” (5: 7).³³ Yet although this initial state “containeth *Nothing*,” it does not go unexperienced. As he writes in *Commentaries of Heaven*:

The soul is an abilitie of becoming all Things. It is an empty Chaos of faculties and Powers, that can no where be imagined or conceived to exist, till it does actually contemplat som object. It is not what it is till it consider it self: for it is a Capacitie infinit . . . [but] till it reflect on it self, it self is not aware of the Power which it is. The Soul being so meer a Capacitie of resembling, that till it think on its Power to contain all, it is not like it self: but when it does the Image of infinit Space may be seen within it. (3: 261)

The soul “is not what it is till it consider it self,” Traherne states, articulating a version of Aristotle’s claim in *De anima* that the mind “can have no nature of its own, other than that of having a certain capacity. Thus that in the soul which is called thought . . . is, before it thinks, not actually any real thing” (1: 682). For Aristotle, thought emerges from the soul’s contact with its objects. Traherne extends this idea to the soul, which only becomes “what it is” when it “consider[s] it self.”

Traherne explains in *Commentaries of Heaven*: “The first Thing which the Body feeleth is it self; and the Soul is by Nature the first Object of its own Apprehension. For by feeling it self it feeleth all other Things. The next thing it feeleth is its own Vacuitie, whereupon it is moved to go out of it self, to enquire after Fulness in other Objects” (3: 179). At first, body and soul possess different feelings. When each enters into existence, it feels “it self.” But the self-feeling of soul is of a different, essential order. It is “by Nature” that the soul feels “it self.” In doing so, it “feeleth all other Things.” When the soul feels “it self,” when it encounters its own pure capacity, it is also exposed to “every Thing” insofar as the soul is nothing less than an “abilitie of becoming all Things,” capable of registering “every Thing.” When the soul feels itself, it feels all things as they exist *in potentia*. But fullness *in potentia* remains emptiness *in actu*, and as the soul discovers “its own Vacuitie,” it moves outward to body and external world.

Traherne puts such claims in an autobiographical context in *Centuries of Meditation*, stating that it is only by God’s “special favor” that he can

“remember” the “pure and virgin apprehensions I had from the womb, and that divine light wherewith I was born” (5: 93). He frames this originary experience in terms of his own soul’s initial self-encounter in the poem “The Preparative”:

I

My Body being Dead, my Lims unknown;
 Before I skild to prize
 Those living Stars mine Eys,
 Before my Tongue or Cheeks were to me shewn,
 Before I knew my Hands were mine,
 Or that my Sinews did my Members joyn,
 When neither Nostril, Foot, nor Ear
 As yet was seen, or felt, or did appear;
 I was within
 A House I knew not, newly clothd with Skin.

II

Then was my Soul my only All to me,
 A Living Endless Ey,
 Just bounded with the Skie
 Whose Power, whose Act, whose Essence was to see.
 (6: 11 [lines 1–16])

The speaker of “The Preparative” recalls a moment when body and soul existed parallel but separate. The ego “was within” the “House” of the body, “newly clothd with Skin” but unaware of the body and its “unknown” limbs. Nothing of the body was “shewn.” But the speaker nevertheless enjoys originary experience: “Then was my Soul my only All to me.” The soul’s self-awareness was its “Power,” its “Act,” its “Essence.”

This self-feeling soul is indebted to Avicenna, who differs from Aristotle in two respects picked up on by Traherne.³⁴ First, Avicenna rejects Aristotle’s hylomorphism by crafting what Jari Kaukua calls “substance dualism”: the “individual human essence is an immaterial substance” (soul), which animates but remains distinct from body (24). For Aristotle, soul is the actualization of bodily life. Avicenna argues that although soul is related to body, its essence excludes body. But this does not mean that soul exists without body, for Avicenna holds that body and soul emerge simultaneously.³⁵ Second, Avicenna positions self-awareness against

Aristotelian cognition. Aristotle argues that the intellect is actualized when presented with an object; knowledge of objects precedes knowledge of self. Avicenna rejects this view, arguing that soul or self is innately aware of itself: “The self’s self-awareness is never potential but rather innate to it; the human self is an aware self and its awareness of itself is natural to it. Since this is the case, it is not acquired. . . . Self-awareness is essential for the soul, it is not externally acquired: it is as if when the self occurs, awareness occurs with it” (qtd. in Kaukua 52).³⁶ Whereas knowledge of body and external world begins with sensation, awareness of self or soul is essential and immediate. Both substance dualism and self-awareness feature in Avicenna’s “Flying Man” thought experiment, in which readers imagine a man created mature, hanging in a void. Featured early in Avicenna’s *Kitāb al-Nafs* (*Book of the Soul*), which sits between the sections devoted to physics and metaphysics in the *Kitāb al-Shifā’* (*Book of Healing*), the most famous version of Avicenna’s experiment asks readers to imagine a man deprived of all sensation. Although this man “will not affirm [the existence of] any of his limbs, any of his internal organs, [his] heart, [his] brain, or any external thing,” he can nevertheless affirm “[the existence of] himself,” which is nothing other than his soul, unrelated to body (“Avicenna’s *Kitāb al-Nafs*” 205).³⁷ The existence that the self of the flying man affirms as “proper to” himself is, in fact, identical to himself; this self is, as Avicenna puts it, “different from his body and his limbs whose existence has not been affirmed” (205). The flying man is immediately self-aware, but this awareness is not bodily.

Both Avicenna and Traherne present a view of human mindedness in which body and soul are distinct, soul is the locus of identity, and self-awareness is essential to soul. Both also appeal to originary experience as a privileged site for revealing these aspects of human existence. Whereas Avicenna’s flying man is created mature, Traherne describes embryos bursting into consciousness. Avicenna’s influence is palpable: “The first Thing which the Body feeleth is it self,” Traherne writes, “and the

Soul is by Nature the first Object of its own Apprehension" (3: 179). The phrase "by Nature" is telling; self-feeling is essential to soul.

Scholars have long studied Avicenna's influence on medieval European thought: his authority in philosophy and theology, his centrality in universities from Padua to Paris to Oxford. It was long assumed that European engagement with Islamicate thought diminished in the Renaissance. But as Nancy G. Siraisi and Dag Nikolaus Hasse have shown, Avicenna's reception in fact reached its high-water mark in that period. His works were printed and reprinted in seventy-eight distinct translations, published in Padua, Venice, Lyon, Paris, Frankfurt, and other hubs between 1485 and 1674.³⁸ Avicenna's reception in early modern England has yet to be written. But one thing is clear: despite the absence of English presses printing Avicenna's works, library shelves were stocked with continental editions.

Traherne mentions Avicenna, claiming in *Commentaries of Heaven* that "the Arabian Commentators, Averroës, Avicenna, etc. make most use of him [Alexander of Aphrodisias] in their illustrations of that High Philosopher [Aristotle]" (3: 194). Averroës and Avicenna used the work of Alexander in their treatments of Aristotle. This level of detail suggests knowledge. Traherne could have read Avicenna's works in Latin translation while at the Bodleian or at the libraries of friends and patrons. He would also have encountered Avicenna while at Brasenose College. To be sure, exposure does not lead to accurate knowledge. Consider this error-riddled passage:

After the Grecians followed the Arabian Commentators on Aristotle. Averroës who flourished in Spain An. 650. He was a famous Physician, but no Friend to the Christians, yet have the Scholemen made his Comments on Aristotle the Foundation of all their Schole Divinity. Hornius Histor. Philosoph. lib. 5, cap. 10. Avicenna was his Contemporarie. And these had the principal place among the Arabians. (3: 195)

Averroës lived from 1126 to 1198 (not around 650). He was also not contemporary with Avicenna, who

lived from 980 to 1037. Traherne took this mistaken information from Georgius Hornius's *Historia philosophica* (1655), a text featuring a chapter on Islamicate philosophy that draws on a tradition of Latin biography in which Averroës and Avicenna were framed as contemporaries, often rivals.³⁹ Errors aside, however, Traherne's interest seems clear: he cites Hornius's *Historia* only once in his corpus, in relation to Islamicate philosophy.

Traherne's originary experience bears the imprint of Avicenna's argument that self-awareness is an essential aspect of the soul's existence. Whether Traherne's exposure to Avicenna was unmediated or stemmed from the availability of Avicennan thought from other sources, his originary experience comes into focus when understood as part of an intellectual world that cohered around Avicenna's innovations. Consider these lines from "Fullnesse":

That Light, that Sight, that Thought,
Which in my Soul at first He wrought,
Is sure the only Act to which I may
Ascent to Day:
The Mirror of an Endless Life,
The Shadow of a Virgin Wife,
A Spiritual World Standing within,
An Univers enclosd in Skin.
My Power exerted, or my Perfect Being,
If not Enjoying, yet an Act of Seeing.
(6: 30 [lines 2–11])

The first line enacts a double process of refinement introduced by successive uses of the demonstrative determiner *that*. First, it moves from an external medium ("Light"), through the sensory act registering that medium ("Sight"), to the state in which medium is apprehended ("Thought"). Second, it moves from figurative to literal: "Light" is a metaphor evoking what "first" appears; "Sight" is a more concrete metaphor for the capacity receiving "Light"; and "Thought" names that through which originary experience unfolds. This "Thought" emerges simultaneously with soul, which exists apart from yet alongside body; the "first" thought is a "Spiritual World Standing within, / An Univers enclosd in Skin." The disclosure of this empty "Spiritual World" is passive ("wrought" by God)

but also a state of activity, an “Act of Seeing.” This doubling describes the structure that, for Traherne in *Commentaries of Heaven* conditions apprehension: “We call it an Act, because tho the Soul be Passive in its Conceptions, yet in the Passion whereby it suffers, when it takes in the Impression of any Object, there is an Act without which it were Incapable of that Impression” (3: 169). Apprehension is both passive and active. What makes our “virgin apprehensions” better is that they are “wrought” by God. In our originary experience, we do not respond actively to created objects. No, “at first” we are nothing less than an “Act of Seeing” that is both our “Power” and our “Perfect Being,” an act that “sees” the soul, which is an expression of God’s eternity and infinity. In the beginning, we *are* self-awareness; it is our “Essence,” as he writes in “The Preparative” (6: 11 [line 16]). Here and across his corpus, Traherne works out the logic of an idea first articulated by Avicenna: “Our awareness of our self is our very existence” (qtd. in Kaukua 51).

Traherne’s articulations of originary experience excavate the past while being pitched toward the present: his “first” thought “Is sure the only Act to which I may / Ascent to Day.” Adults can still “Ascent” to the “Act of Seeing” that was initially “wrought” by God. Such “Ascent” crosses an epistemological bridge. Traherne’s accounts of infant experience extend from his initial apprehensions to language acquisition, which corrupts by introducing fallen cultural norms. In *Centuries*, Traherne describes his early encounters. “The Corn was Orient and Immortal Wheat, which never should be reaped, nor was ever Sown,” he recalls, claiming that he “thought it had stood from everlasting to Everlasting” (5: 93). Since he had not yet experienced aging or decay, mutability remained unknown, a fact that makes it possible for the young Traherne to “kn[o]w no Bounds nor Divisions” (5: 94). But this way of seeing was not to last. As he began to speak, “the Customs and manners of Men” “totally Ecclipsed” the “first Light which shined in my Infancy” (5: 96). Traherne’s first thoughts were unfallen, open to the God-made world: “Certainly Adam in Paradi-

ce had not more sweet and Curious Apprehensions of the World, then I when I was a child” (5: 93). By contrast, his later childhood involved a fall into the “Bondage of Opinion and Custom” (5: 97), which teaches mistaken values: gold over water, money and prestige over human life. After this vitiation, one forgets how one first saw both oneself and the world, thereby losing one’s paradisaical nature.

Originary experience enables Traherne to claim that human beings are naturally innocent. In the poem “Innocence,” he describes an infancy when “I felt no Stain, nor Spot of Sin” (6: 8 [line 5]), when “A Joyfull Sence and Puritie / Is all I can remember” (6: 9 [lines 10–11]), when the “ancient Light of Eden did convey / Into my Soul” (6: 10 [lines 55–56]) so that “I was an Adam there, / A little Adam in a Sphere / Of Joys!” (lines 56–58). Traherne’s originary experience undermines Augustine’s anthropology, which figures human beings as essentially vitiated by original sin. In his *Confessions*, Augustine cannot relate his own infancy in first-person terms: he “cannot remember” his time in the womb, how he was born, or anything from his infancy, all of which is “lost in the darkness of my forgetfulness” (6 [1.6.7]). Unable to recount his own beginnings, Augustine makes inferences from other babies to argue that original sin is innate. Traherne’s originary experience short-circuits this position by providing first-person evidence for the goodness of human nature. Augustine is right insofar as “our Corruption [is] Derived from Adam[,] in as much as all the Evil Examples and inclinations of the World arise from his Sin” (5: 97), but this corruption stems from nurture, not nature. Our natural goodness is not irrecoverable; one can “Ascent” to it today. This ethical project of recovery is the telos that organizes Traherne’s translation of Avicennan self-awareness into so many first-person accounts of originary experience.

[II]

Like Traherne, Bidil anchors his exploration of self-awareness in human beginnings. Describing waking up for the first time “در غبار نیستیها” (“within the dust of nonexistences”; 3: 416 [line 11332]), Bidil asks,

"Who am I?") ("کیم من"). In this philosophical poem, *Tilism-i hayrat* (*The Enchanted World of Wonder*), Bīdil's voice animates an abstracted human prototype who awakens to life as "کفی خاک" ("a handful of earth, tending toward dispersal"; line 11334). This first human stumbles into a form of "نشاطی" ("happiness") that is instantly "در هزار اندوه معدوم" ("obliterated by a thousand sorrows"; line 11335). The human soul experiences the first pangs of self-awareness concurrently with an overwhelming sense of inadequacy:

نه گیرایی به دست جرات من نه جولانی به پای طاقت من
(line 11351)

My brave hands grasp nothing
My feet have no strength to run

Bīdil's human mourns its limitations. All endeavor seems stillborn:

چو صبحم بس که جوش ناتوانی است
اگر دامن فشانم خودفشانی است

شرر کردار اگر بالی گشودم
به هر جا پر زدم در سنگ بودم
(lines 11340–41)

I am like dawn, all agitated inability
If I extend my hem, begin to move—I disperse

Like a spark, I spread my wings, and yet
In every place I flew, I stayed stonebound

Dejected, the mind turns inward, calling on its own powers for assistance:

به وهم اندوده‌ام ای هوش بشتاب به هیچ آلوده‌ام ای جمله دریاب
(line 11370)

O conscious mind, make haste! I'm sullied with illusion
Stained with *nothing*; try to understand it all!

Bīdil obsesses over self-awareness and self-knowledge, concepts he explores in the third person throughout his works. Another long philosophical poem, *Tūr-i ma'rifat* (*Mount Sinai of Gnosis*), begins by defining "human" (*ādam*) in Avicennan-Sufi-Neoplatonic terms:

ظاهر و باطنش حدوث و قدم جوهرش معنی عقول و نفوس
عرضش رنگ عالم محسوس

(3: 3 [lines 8 and 11])

Externally, [humans] are constituted by worldly events unfolding in time; but inwardly, they are eternal. . . . Their essence [*jawhar*] is the meaning of all intellects and souls / Their attributes are colors of the sensible world.

But in his prosimetric autobiography, *Chahār 'unṣur* (*The Four Elements*), Bīdil investigates human beginnings in the first person.

His remarkable account of his own infancy is more experimental than notable precedents. For instance, al-Ghazālī writes in his philosophical autobiography *al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl* (*Deliverance from Error*) that "جوهر الانسان" ("the substance [*jawhar*] of a human being"), when considered from the perspective of its "فطرة" ("natural disposition"), is something "خلق خالیا سازجا" ("created [in a state that is] empty and simple"); such blankness reflects a person's initial "لا خبر معه من عوالم الله" ("lack of information about God's worlds"; al-Ghazālī 87).⁴⁰ This original *fiṭra* (فطرة)—a term meaning "nature," "temperament," or "natural disposition"—marks how humans begin from nothing. Subsequently, of course, a store of knowledge gets built up over time; however, "تقلید" ("uncritical emulation") of existing ideas intervenes in this process (qtd. in Griffel 1). Al-Ghazālī recalls a vivid illustration of the shaping force of inherited customs: as a young child, he used to observe "the boys of the Christians always growing up embracing Christianity, and the boys of the Jews always following Judaism, and the boys of the Muslims always growing up adhering to Islam" (qtd. in Griffel 1). His own philosophical project is an attempt to scrape away the accretion of received ideas, thus clearing the way for an unsullied pursuit of "العلم بحقائق الامور" ("knowledge of the truths of things"; al-Ghazālī 41). This need to get at truth as directly as possible, al-Ghazālī tells his readers, was not an acquired impulse; he felt it for as long as he could remember. The earliest intellectual milestone al-Ghazālī recounts—the moment when he began to free himself from the bonds of

received knowledge—is traced to his own adolescence, not earlier; his autobiography contains no first-person descriptions of infancy (al-Ghazālī 41–42). Avicenna also inscribes an ideal program of philosophical inquiry into his brief autobiography. But he too passes over early childhood, locating the first spark of his intellectual journey in his tenth year, when “I had mastered the Qur’ān and a great deal of literature to such an extent that I evoked great amazement” (qtd. in Gutas 12). Another philosopher, Najm al-Dīn Rāzī (d. 1256), made such frequent use of nursing in his works that he earned the nickname “Wet Nurse” (دایه; *Dāya*). His descriptions of breastfeeding are sometimes quite detailed; for example,

مادر مهربان پستان در دهان طفل نهد، ذوق شیر به کام او رسد،
بتدریج با شیر انس میگیرد
(Dāya 106)

The kind mother places her breast into the child’s mouth; the taste of milk reaches [the infant’s] tongue and gradually [the infant] becomes accustomed to milk.

However, this third-person account clearly functions as an extended metaphor for the human soul’s gradual habituation to the material world (and concomitant forgetting of its origins) beginning from the moment of birth.

In contrast, Bīdil starts his autobiography at the absolute beginning of life—from the very moment that his soul becomes enmattered—and narrates everything in the first person. This coming-into-the-world is described as a ripple in the fabric of eternity:

پیکر بینشان قادریت کسوت آب رنگ عیودیت به خود پوشید و صفای
آئینه حقیقت با رنگ کدورت مجاز جوشید. . . .
(4: 9)

The traceless form of Divine Omnipotence clothed itself in the brilliant garments of Servitude; the pure clear-polished mirror of true reality boiled and seethed with the colors of metaphor’s opacities. . . .

Thus summoned into being, Bīdil awakens to his new environment and immediately asks,

کجا هوشی که . . . معنی . . . استنباط نماید
(4: 10)

Where is the conscious mind, capable of extracting . . . meaning?

This question marks the beginning of his lifelong quest for self-knowledge through gradual imaginative acquaintance with his body and mind. The first capacity experienced by the newborn Bīdil is a desire for sustenance—the nutritive capacity identified by Avicenna (echoing Aristotle) as a basic faculty shared by plants, animals, and humans:

نخستین آرزویی که از نقاب بیخواهشی سر کشید . . . حسرت غذای
رفیقی که آبیاری نشو و نمای ریشه حیوانی تواند بود . . . و آن مشمت
خونی بود در کسوت شیر نمودار و شفقی داشت آئینه صبح در کنار.
(4: 10)

The first desire that raised its head from behind the veil of desirelessness . . . was an impatient anxiety for delicate nourishment—something capable of irrigating the roots of growth and development in all living beings. Such nourishment was found in that handful of blood, just visible within the garb of milk. The mirror of white dawn kept red daybreak hidden at its side.

Bīdil depicts this neonatal desire for nutrition through densely figured prose. The reference to “that handful of blood, just visible within the garb of milk” poetically alludes to Galenic-Avicennan medical theory, which understands blood to be the invisible humoral essence of breast milk. But here Bīdil also hints at something he unfolds throughout his works: the idea that human beings constantly strive beyond the limits of their capacities. As the infant Bīdil nurses, he simultaneously absorbs non-nutritive information about himself and the world. Even if it cannot yet understand, the infant mind encounters evident and hidden causes, difference and change, the nature of desire, even the force of analogy (the red blood in breast milk is *like* the redness in white dawn).

Such experiences—even if they are not yet fully grasped—are recorded in the manuscript of the infant's soul. Initially a passive receptacle akin to Traherne's blank slate waiting for perception's "Pictures," this manuscript becomes an object of careful study later in life, when, as an adult, Bīdil realizes that this first taste of the world "رمزی بود فهمیدنی" ("was a symbol worth understanding"; 4: 10). Bīdil justifies this project of "decoding" these earliest symbols that were etched upon his soul's manuscript by declaring himself to be a world, an entity that requires exploration and interpretation:

احوال دیگران ز چه بر خود فزوده ای
 بیدل ز خود بگو که تو هم کم نبوده ای

 برگ گلت هزار چمن عرض رنگ و بوست
 آیینه خودی و جهانی نموده ای
 (4: 9 [lines 1 and 3])

Why dwell on others' lives?
 Speak about yourself, Bīdil, for you are no less worthy

 A single petal of your self contains a thousand gardens
 of color and fragrance
 You are a mirror of yourself
 you reveal a world

Defining "world" (عالم) as something that discloses "پیام خود" ("a message about itself"), Bīdil likens human life to a text that brims with meaning. He asks, "چه از خود شنوده ای" ("What have you heard about yourself?"; 4: 9).

Bīdil's autobiography responds to this prompt by demonstrating how every experience in infancy activates a cascade of new capacities:

بر زبان درس روانیهای موج شیر بود
 جنبش مژگان بی‌نم خامه تحریر بود

چون ذایقه توجه از الفت تعلق شیر برید و قوت تصور به کنار امتیاز
 والدین آرمید معمای ربوبیتی به اسم "ام" و "اب" و اشکافت و لغز
 ابنیتی به غور مراتب این و آن دریافت.
 (4: 11)

[My] tongue tasted lessons from the flowing waves of milk
 [My] eyelashes, unmoistened by tears, were pens—
 busy writing

When sense of taste turned its attention away from intimate attachment to milk, the faculty of imagination rested in the lap of distinguishing between [my] parents: it solved the riddle of divine lordship with the words "mother" and "father," and deciphered the conundrum of filial servitude through deep reflection on the distinction between "this" and "that."

Bīdil subsequently discusses more standard childhood recollections—his mother teaching him to read and write, his first acquaintance with Persian and Arabic canons. But it is remarkable, and perhaps unprecedented, that he begins with such an ornate description of his own infancy.⁴¹ Why does he revisit his originary experiences?

In the preface to his autobiography, Bīdil claims that what is recorded in our minds is worth studying and that "مطالعه این اوراق" ("careful study [*muṭāla'a*] of these pages"; 4: 7) can culminate in a profound visionary experience (مشاهده; *mushāhada*), an activity of witnessing that offers an unmediated encounter with truth. This practice of absorbed study, *muṭāla'a*—what Khaled el-Rouayheb calls "deep reading"—is etymologically connected with dawn (*ṭulū'* is the "rising" of the sun) and with the technical term for the first couplet of a lyric poem (*maṭla'*, literally "the place of rising"). Bīdil explores such interconnections with minute poetic attention. Dawn, that blazon of all beginnings, figures the emergence of a spatially and temporally bounded phenomenal world—the beginnings of the self—as a text. Bīdil writes that in infancy

مدتی سواد نسخه شعور صورت بیاضی داشت و رقم خامه ادراک
 همان دفتر سادگی مینگاشت. نگاهی بود چون حیرت آیینه بینباز از
 جوهرشناسی و هوشی به رنگ مطلع صبح منزله از کنورت اقتباسی.
 (4: 10)

For a while, the black rough draft of the manuscript of awareness [*nuskha-yi shu'ūr*] had the form of a clean white commonplace book, and the notations made by the pen of apprehension were inscribed into that very volume of pure blank whiteness. There was a gaze. It was like the wonder of a mirror that reflects, unencumbered by knowledge of its essential substance. There was a conscious mind whose color was like the opening line of dawn [*maṭla'-i ṣubḥ*], free from interpolated impurity.

The infant's mind begins as a *tabula rasa*, a page with no writing; a pure surface of awareness (*shu'ūr*). Gradually, with the passage of time, the notebook of the mind becomes a record of accumulated experiences, its originary whiteness now blotched with "interpolations." Throughout his works, Bīdil explores concepts of self-awareness, introspection, and enlightenment through this central organizing metaphor: human experience is *textual*. In the passage above, when Bīdil invokes his concept of "the manuscript of awareness" ("نسخه شعور"; *nuskha-yi shu'ūr*), he makes a claim that is at once philosophical and poetic. As a technical term in Persian and Arabic, *shu'ūr* (شعور) means "awareness" of objects in the world, including the self (as in Avicenna's "self-awareness" [الشعور بالذات; *al-shu'ūr bi-l-dhāt*]). The word *shu'ūr* (شعور) is also directly linked by its Arabic etymological root with the word *poetry* (شعر; *shi'r*). It is no accident that Bīdil textualizes the first inklings of infant awareness in this way; for Bīdil, the adult's task of finding enlightenment hinges on the successful, conscious entwining of philosophical, philological, and poetic inquiry. To acquire higher-order forms of self-awareness, one must constantly reread the manuscript of one's own soul. As Bīdil's autobiography demonstrates, perhaps one must even rewrite it.

Bīdil may have been drawing on and imaginatively deepening an existing tradition of discussing the human soul's development through extended comparison with the craft of writing. For instance, in the *كتاب النجاة* (*Kitāb al-Najāt; Book of Salvation*), a concise summa of major branches of philosophy, including psychology, Avicenna distinguishes between three levels of potentiality. First there is "absolute potentiality," such as "the capacity of an infant to write," where the infant does not yet possess the ability to read and write, although the capacity to learn these skills is there (*Avicenna's Psychology* 33). Next comes "relative potentiality" (33), as when "an older child . . . has learnt the use of the pen and the inkpot and knows the value or meaning of the letters" (33–34) and has thus acquired the necessary "instrument" (34) of literacy. Finally, Avicenna identifies the highest stage, what

he calls "the perfection of potentiality" or "*habitus*," which comes about when "the instrument has been perfected"—like "a scribe who has reached perfection in his art" (34). Like Avicenna and al-Ghazālī, Bīdil presents himself as an adept self-interpreter of conscious experience, and, like these philosophers, he is invested in building a system of inquiry from autobiographical materials. But Bīdil is both a philosopher and a poet. Examining his own life as a philosophical example, re-creating the moment when the slate was truly blank, he remains aware that the very idea of a "beginning" is also a lyric topos. In his discussion of how examples can function differently in philosophical prose and philosophical poetry, John Hollander argues that poetic imagination treats examples with full awareness of their rhetorical possibilities, whereas "philosophy will often pretend that there is no topos and will be infuriated at the irrelevance and perhaps the mischievousness of calling attention to it in the first place" (219). Bīdil's project of attaining higher self-awareness does both: it is a philosophically ambitious enterprise that is also self-consciously inflected by poetic thinking.

Bīdil's ghazals are meticulously crafted philosophical poems, difficult lyric objects that demand time, attention, and rereading. Often the final couplet gestures back to the first, encouraging readers to reread the poem from the beginning. Ghazal 898, whose refrain is "dawn" (صبح), makes this form of lyric rereading explicit. The poem's first couplet begins with an impersonal universal view of daybreak:

از کواکب گل فشاند چرخ در دامان صبح
آفتاب آینه کرد در ره جولان صبح
(1: 419 [line 1])

Turning spheres
scatter star-flowers
into the hem of dawn
The sun sows mirrors
into the path
of dawn's movements

The next couplets extend this elegant meditation on the zero-sum nature of dawn, where each "سود"

("gain") accruing to the sun is a "نقصان" ("loss") for darkness (line 4). This abstract universal is folded into an experience of individual particularity in the poem's middle lines:

بیخودی سرمایہ ناموسگاہ وحشتم
میتوان داد از شکست رنگ من تاوان صبح
(line 7)

Losing myself
this is what I win
in the battlefield of my wildness
Dawn's loss
can be redressed
by my color's fracture⁴²

The sun's luminosity performs a different task at the end of the poem, banishing a small candle's light into insignificance:

محو انجامم دماغ سیر آغازم کجاست
بر فروغ شمع کم دوزد نظر حیران صبح
(line 8)

I am erased by ending
where is a mind
that can wander back
to my beginning?
A dawn-struck gaze
no longer cares
about the candle's splendor

In Sufi traditions, human striving is typically oriented toward the finality of the annihilation of the self in God (*fanā*). But Bīdil here insists on the richness of beginnings:

آنچه آغازش فنا باشد ز انجامش مپرس
میتوان طومار امکان خواند از عنوان صبح
(line 9)

Don't inquire about the end
of something whose beginning
is annihilation
One can read the whole scroll
of the created world
from the rubricated heading of dawn

Perhaps beginnings, not ends, are the true archives of enlightenment. The penultimate line of Bīdil's ghazal expresses solidarity with the candle, which is doomed to fade into nonbeing at daybreak:

نسخه شمع که از برجستگیهای خیال
مقطع برتر گذشت از مطلع دیوان صبح
(line 11)

I am a candle's text:
my final line rose higher
from imagination's flickerings and leaps
Than the opening couplet
in the collected verse
of dawn.

This "candle's text" or "manuscript" (نسخه; *nuskha*) is small and limited. But because it is endowed with extraordinary imagination, in spite of its mortality—the inevitable cutoff after its "final line"—it can achieve something magnificent, outcomposing and outshining the "opening couplet" (مطلع; *matla*) of dawn itself. The poem's final couplet declares allegiance with all ardent seekers "اهل سوز" ("those who burn"), and closes with this hemistich:

شمع را تیغ است بیدل جنبش دامان صبح
(line 12)

Dawn rustles. The movement of its hem
spells the candle's death
by sword

This is a pointed reference to the "مقطع" (*maqṭa'*; literally "the place of cutting off"), a technical term for the final line of a lyric poem. No longer an exalted regal procession, dawn is redescribed here as a deliverer of death. But there is a lingering incandescence in these final lines; although the poem is spent, its beginning beckons, demanding to be reread.

Bīdil composed *The Four Elements* in the gloaming of middle age, over the course of many years. He ends his autobiography not by merging his narrative with the present moment of writing, but with an account of a dream he witnessed in his mid-twenties. In this dream, he attained enlightenment, only to lose it again upon waking up. For

Bīdil, coming to terms with this loss of total knowledge and complete self-awareness means applying practices of lyric rereading to the text of his own life. In his visionary dream, Bīdil is guided by the prophet Muḥammad, who sits at the head of Bīdil's bed; in this moment, Bīdil describes feeling as content "چون طفلی که در کنار پدر" ("as a child at his father's side"; 4: 302). Bīdil's dream retraces the stages of the universe as it emanated into being, and in the course of his journey, he learns everything: at last,

حقیقت . . . به عرض تحقیق رسید
(4: 300)

truth . . . was within inquiry's grasp.⁴³

This experience is a perspective-expanding achievement, a profound encounter with the boundless inner space of the soul:

عالمی بودم محیط تحت و فوق و پیش و پس
غیر پایم زیر پا و جز سرم بر سر نبود
(4: 300 [line 9])

I was a world
Like an ocean, I comprised
above below
before behind

These lines resonate with Bīdil's descriptions elsewhere in his corpus of God before the universe's creation. In *Ṭilism-i ḥayrat* (*The Enchanted World of Wonder*), he writes that before time, before there were any beginnings, God's existence was lonely, singular, curious. God feels a desire to discover himself but, possessing neither spatial nor temporal extension, he cannot do so. There are no beginnings, no ends, no space or time:

نه فوقی جلو هگر بر سطح تحتش
نه تحتی آشکار از فوق بختش
.....
چنان اول که او را آخری نیست
چنان باطن که با او ظاهری نیست
(3: 407 [lines 11090 and 92])

No above
appearing
on the surface
of its below
No below
emerging
from its soaring fortune
high above
.....
Such a beginning
that it has no end
Such an inner realm
that it has no outward parts

Bīdil's dream-vision attainment of complete knowledge echoes this vertiginous description of monistic changelessness, but in the tragic past tense: "عالمی بودم" ("I was a world"; 4: 300; our emphasis). Before he can understand this dream's interpretation, Bīdil awakens. Enlightenment slips through the fingers of memory and remains "مضمّر" ("hidden in the manuscript of the imaginary"; 4: 303).

A quatrain in Bīdil's account of nursing sheds light on why infant experience is central to the practice of rereading one's life. Three objects of fire are conjured, and each of them is told, through direct address in the moments following their "birth," that they are finite beings:

ای شمع داغ شو که نظر باز کرده‌ای
از خود رو ای سحر که نفس ساز کرده‌ای
ای شعله سر کشیده‌ای از سوختن منال
آخر نگاه کن که چه آغاز کرده‌ای
(4: 10)

Become burn-scarred, candle;
you have kindled your own gaze
Go, dawn—leave yourself, exhale
you have tuned your instrument
prepared your breath
Small flame, you've raised your head
don't cry now
about burning out
In the end, look—
what a beginning
you have made⁴⁴

The quatrain’s pivotal third hemistich offers a palliative possibility, a way to reframe that first apprehension of pain, inadequacy, and mortality. Don’t cry, the poem tells the flame; now that you’re here, look back to your beginning. In a beautiful conjunction of idea and form, each principal line of the quatrain begins with ا (*alif*), the first letter of the alphabet, and ends with ع (*yā*), the last letter—fallen, coiling, looking back toward the beginning.

Bīdil’s autobiography progresses from the first glimmerings of infant self-awareness, through gradual acquaintance with capacities, toward higher-order forms of awareness and self-knowledge. This arc is philosophical. It is also textual, hermeneutic, and poetic. By rereading the manuscript of the self through devoted study (*muṭāla‘a*), Bīdil shows readers how they too can become active, capable, and self-aware interpreters of the “manuscript of the imaginary.” In rare moments, like in Bīdil’s dream, they can even witness truth (*mushāhada*). Self-awareness is never static or final. Working toward enlightened awareness of the self is a lifelong process, one that begins by returning to infancy and rereading one’s own life, like a difficult lyric poem, again and again.

[III]

Bīdil and Traherne resist a phenomenological universal by claiming the ability to recall the earliest stretches of their lives. Describing the Adamic state of early childhood in “Silence,” Traherne explains why originary experience is central to human life:

A vast and Infinit Capacitie,
Did make my Bosom like the Deitie,
In whose Mysterious and Celestial Mind
All Ages and all Worlds together shind.
(6: 26 [lines 75–78])

Like Bīdil, Traherne holds that each person is the center of a world, that this fact is first disclosed through self-awareness, and that attention to this phenomenon can reveal the immensity of existence, the “vast and Infinit Capacitie” that makes one analogous to God. If the mind of God is that within which “All Ages and all Worlds together shind,” then insofar as thought is analogous to this aspect

of divinity—capable of thinking all thinkable things—this capacity is the ground on which comparisons between different “Ages” and “Worlds” are able to “shine together.”

Our explorations of Bīdil and Traherne articulate a version of a claim made at the intersection of twentieth-century American philosophy and psychology: worlds are mentally constructed out of other worlds, and there is no ontologically prior bedrock reality or ur-world. Building on Nelson Goodman’s constructivist theory of worldmaking, Jerome Bruner says that, given the absence of any “aboriginal reality,” scholars must strive to understand how human beings go about constructing their worlds (46; see 93–105). Our close reading of Bīdil and Traherne reveals how each poet’s pursuit of enlightenment and salvation takes the form of self-aware experimental and revelatory worldmaking. When Bīdil lingers over the first dawning of his own infant consciousness, he employs figurations and ideas that are compulsively reprised throughout his lyric corpus, where countless suns rise and set on worlds that exist for a day or for the duration of a poem. And his climactic though tragically fleeting realization that “I was a world”—comprising everything in the entire universe—powerfully speaks to his belief (one shared with Traherne, albeit in a different affective key) that worlds are pliant, creatively assembled wholes, simultaneously subjective and objective. Both poets imaginatively experiment with worlds in order to attain life-reorienting knowledge.

We have argued that our conjunctive anomaly reveals morphological similarities while also, through the poets’ use of the concept of self-awareness, revealing shared membership in an Avicennan thought world. In conclusion, we want to underscore the methodological insights that emerge from our collaborative comparison of Traherne and Bīdil. This essay attempts to bridge the gaps between two comparative methods: first, what Lincoln calls “weak comparison” (11), and second, historical comparison as defined by Ginzburg. Weak comparisons are “inquiries that are modest in scope, but intensive in scrutiny, treating a small number of examples in depth and detail, setting

each in its full and proper context” (Lincoln 11). Eschewing forms of “strong comparison” that flatten particularities so that comparanda can be accommodated to a given theory, Lincoln’s approach explains similarities not through historical relations of diffusion, influence, or genetic descent, but rather by way of similar “forces and conditions” (40). Weak comparison contextualizes comparanda to show how similar elements of form or content are not the product of historical connection between works, but instead arise in response to similar environments. Weak comparison enables us to examine our conjunctive anomaly in ways alert to distinctions and divergences. For instance, originary experience grounds each poet’s program for self-transformation, but within different temporal orientations. Traherne looks to the past, leveraging his description of infant experience to dispute Augustine’s anthropology. Bidil looks to the future, making the soul’s discovery of its own infant capacities the starting point of his lifelong quest to curate higher-order forms of consciousness. But if weak comparison is promising with regard to many features of this conjunctive anomaly, it is unable to account for the historical simultaneity of Traherne’s and Bidil’s representations of originary experience. By claiming that both poets were distant inheritors of Avicenna’s concept of self-awareness, we allow our method of weak comparison—performed through contextualized close reading and in this essay’s very structure—to be modulated by a historical approach. Keeping in view the branching pathways by which Avicenna’s ideas diffused throughout Afro-Eurasia, we argue that Traherne’s and Bidil’s accounts of originary experience belong to a shared world of Avicennan thought. Working immanently, we contextualize each poet’s works so that weak comparison edges into a form of historical comparison that is not imposed from without but rather unspools itself from within.

This plural approach aligns with how Roland Greene conceives of literary history in the Americas. Greene promotes thinking in terms of “obversive history rather than a common outlook”; such a history “involves two or more obverses—faces or surfaces, like the face of a coin—that are not opposites or reversals of each other but

alternative versions of a common question of knowledge” (“Inter-American Obversals” 620). Our study of Bidil and Traherne extends such obversal history toward the limitless. Like the unknowably infinite worlds of Dārā Shukūh and Pascal, the surface of literary history has too many facets for any one scholar to behold. Jonathan Z. Smith puts the problem succinctly: the scholarly activity of comparison relies on the highly unreliable “unbidden” experience of “*déjà-vu*,” where a lone scholar recollects similitudes—something Smith dismisses as being “more a matter of memory than a project for inquiry” (26). We argue that collaborative comparison stages encounters of mutual witnessing between distant archives in ways that lessen the difficulties of discovery described by Smith.

We frame our collaborative work through the organizing ideal of *mushāhada*. An Arabic verbal noun rooted in the activity of “seeing,” *mushāhada* is an experientially enhanced form of witnessing that is transitive (and sometimes interactive), denoting an encounter with a particular object. The eleventh-century theorist ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Qushayrī defines *mushāhada* as an unmediated way of apprehending divine truth, a method that does not depend on demonstrative proof or other evidence.⁴⁵ Later thinkers describe it as contemplation, intuition, illumination. Jacques Derrida argues that what “distinguishes an act of bearing witness from the simple transmission of knowledge, from simple information . . . is that someone *engages* himself with regard to someone else, by an oath that is at least implicit” (82). *Mushāhada* is precisely such an act of witnessing; it gathers comparanda into a shared world. Our essay enacts *mushāhada* at two levels. First, through collaborative comparison, the act of witnessing another scholar’s work grants access to an archive that is not one’s own. Second, working collaboratively makes it possible to experience Traherne and Bidil bearing witness to each other. As these two obversal responses to an Avicennan idea encounter one another, we allow the resonances and divergences between our poets to be observed for the first time.

For our poets, worlds are experienced and interpreted by agents of worldmaking. Bidil’s works brim with worlds that flicker in and out of existence in

ways that can be enchanting or terrifying, monitory or reassuring. Traherne is optimistic that seemingly sundered worlds can be brought together by a capable mind. Embracing the entwinement of active agency and discovery, Traherne and Bīdil create, compare, discover, interpret, and inhabit a plurality of worlds. Collaborative comparison likewise creates and discovers worlds. In this essay, our collaborative comparison reveals one important nonspatial early modern world: a significant geography of Avicennan thought that stretched across Afro-Eurasia and beyond, powerfully inflecting creative ventures of self-knowledge in seemingly distant traditions. As they witness one another, Bīdil, Traherne, and the various traditions they express all work to evoke and constitute that world.

NOTES

This essay has been years in the making, during which time we have benefited from many colleagues' generous and incisive comments: we thank Finn Barry, Edgar Garcia, Adrienne Ghaly, Rivi Handler-Spitz, Sonam Kachru, Ellen MacKay, Glenn Most, Noémie Ndiaye, Mark Payne, Ayesha Ramachandran, Ben Saltzman, Haun Saussy, Joshua Scodel, Nigel Smith, Richard Strier, and Kevin van Bladel. We thank Prashant Keshavmurthy for reading our essay in 2021. We are very grateful to Domenico Ingenito for the invitation to present an early draft at a public *Zoom* talk at the University of California, Los Angeles, in 2019 and to participants at the Renaissance Workshop at the University of Chicago in 2023.

1. All translations are ours unless otherwise noted.

2. For Traherne's originary experience in context, see Harrison, *Coming To*. For embryonic development, birth, and infancy in European traditions, see Needham; Justin Smith; Brisson et al.; Amerini; Wilderbing; Singer. On gestation, childbirth, nursing, and milk kinship in Arabic and Persian traditions, see Gruner 363–71; Schine; Keshavarz; Law and Sasson; Lewis 66.

3. Important recent studies of Bīdil include Kovacs; Pelló, “Two Passing Clouds,” “Atmosfera,” and “Looking.”

4. But see Mallette on the intertwined histories of Latin and Arabic literatures.

5. On forms of literary reception in the early modern Persianate world, see Losensky; Sharma.

6. For Jewish, Christian, and Islamic religious adjacency, see Nirenberg. For early modern orientalist scholarship and the gradual appearance of Arabic and Persian in European universities, see Mills; Bevilacqua; Hamilton; Jaski et al.

7. See Harrison, *Coming To*.

8. On Bīdil and Hinduism, see Kovacs; Pelló, “Two Passing Clouds.” For the wider context of Persian discussions of Hindu ideas, see Alam; Ernst; Gandhi; Ganeri, *Lost Age*; Nair.

9. On geopolitical connections throughout early modern Afro-Eurasia, see Ng, “Dutch Wars” and *Alexander*; Alam and Subrahmanyam; Chakravarti.

10. The works cited here focus on the connections studied by Subrahmanyam (*Explorations* and *Empires*) across what Hodgson calls the Afro-Eurasian landmass. For studies of other areas of the world in early modernity, see Chakravarti; Greene, “Inter-American Obversals” and *Unrequited Conquests*; Gruzinski; Johnson; Padrón; Richards.

11. See Traherne's *Commentaries of Heaven* (2: 379) and “The World” (6: 110 [line 59]).

12. On the opposition of Europe and Muslims, see Ghazal 1418 (Bīdil 1: 661–62); see also Ghazal 965 (Bīdil 1: 451), which describes a hypothetical conquest of Anatolia and Europe (*rūm u farang*) on the model of Ḥāfiẓ's famous poem about a conquering Turk. On Ḥāfiẓ's poem and the geo-poetics of Persian lyric, see Ingenito, “Hafez's ‘Shirāzi Turk.’”

13. See Subrahmanyam, *Empires*.

14. Our sense of the wide amplitude of what precisely can constitute a “world” is motivated by work in the history of science, anthropology, philosophy, and literary studies. In the history of sciences, see Kuhn, *Structure* and “Afterwords”; Hacking; Lehoux. In anthropology, see Viveiros de Castro. In philosophy, see Goodman. In literary studies in general terms, see Pavel; Becroft; for a European historical bent, see Ramachandran, *Worldmakers*; for a South Asian historical bent, see Shulman; for a comparative poetics of worlds, see Ramachandran, “Worldmaking,” as well as Harrison and Mikkelsen. In literary studies, see Orsini. In this essay, we develop a philosophically inflected version of the idea articulated by Casanova: “The central hypothesis of this book . . . is that there exists a ‘literature-world,’ a literary universe relatively independent of the everyday world and its political divisions, whose boundaries and operational laws are not reducible to those of ordinary political space” (xii).

15. For reconstructions of Avicenna's thought and reception, see Black; Gutas; Michot; Rapoport; Wisnovsky.

16. We examine such contexts in the book we are currently writing. For an exciting recent discussion that places Bīdil and the Persianate South Asian traditions that inform his work in the wider context of Italian Renaissance thought and a “global Baroque,” see Pelló, “Looking.”

17. On this concept, see Black; Kaukua.

18. Avicenna discusses self-awareness throughout his corpus (see Black); the passage from the *Notes* discussed here offers a particularly concise overview of the concept.

19. Avicenna's concept of “primitive self-awareness” marks a significant departure from Avicenna's Greek sources (most obviously, Aristotle's *koine aesthesis* or common sensation). On the differences between Aristotle's common sensation and Avicenna's self-awareness, see Kaukua 12–42.

20. On Ibn Ṭufayl's reworking of Avicenna, see Gutas; Hughes; Kukkonen.

21. See Gilson; Hasse, *Avicenna's "De Anima" and Success*; Siraisi.
22. See E. Bloch; Druart 27–48; Harrison, “Fictions.”
23. On the direct availability of Avicenna in India, see Ahmed.
24. For Avicenna and Persian literature, see Ingenito, *Beholding Beauty*; Landau; Mikkelsen, “Flights”; O’Malley.
25. For Avicenna and Traherne, see Harrison, “Fictions.” On Avicenna and Bidil, see Mikkelsen, “Flights.”
26. For an account of the phrase “what it is like,” see Nagel. For earlier attempts to think through the relationship between Nagel’s idea and the beginning of human life, see Harrison, *Coming To and “Fictions.”*
27. On Avicenna, Bidil, and philosophy in the first person, see Mikkelsen, “Flights.”
28. Adamson and Benevich 150. Avicenna’s “Flying Man” thought experiment belongs to a genre of philosophical writing that Avicenna himself sets apart from more formal styles of argumentation because of its intuition-pump-like appeal to the reader’s imagination; on “pointers” (*ishārāt*) and “reminders” (*tanbihāt*) and their place in Avicenna’s corpus, see Adamson; Adamson and Benevich; Black; Kaukua; Ganeri, *Inwardness*; Gutas; Rapoport; Wisnovsky.
29. On the ambient availability of Avicenna’s philosophy in the early modern Persianate world, see Mikkelsen, “Flights”; on Avicenna and the medieval Persianate world, see Ingenito, *Beholding Beauty*.
30. For avoiding normative frames, see Garcia. On the geopolitics of comparative literature, global philosophy, and world literature, see Gould; Harrison and Mikkelsen; Orsini; Stepien; Ramazani; Saussy; Trumpener.
31. Like many before him, Pascal took this formulation from the second definition of God in the anonymous *Liber viginti quattuor philosophorum*: “Deus est sphaera infinita cuius centrum est ubique, circumferentia nusquam” (*Libro* 56 [II]). We owe this connection to an e-mail correspondence with Haun Saussy. For an earlier substitution of the cosmos for God, see Bruno 291. On Cusanus and emerging early modern concepts of infinity, see Brient.
32. We discuss collaboration in more detail in the concluding section of this essay. For comparison and collaboration, see Detienne.
33. For the relationship between Traherne’s book metaphors and notions of capability or capacity, see Defries.
34. See Gutas for Avicenna’s relation to Aristotle. Defries argues compellingly for the importance of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola’s ideas on human beginnings to Traherne’s understanding of capacity. Although we agree that Pico is indeed central to Traherne’s thinking, we suggest that Traherne’s insistence on the embryonic apprehension of his own capacities marks his work as indebted, either directly or indirectly, to Avicenna.
35. See Avicenna, *Avicenna's Psychology* 56–64. See also Druart 27–48.
36. See also Black.
37. We quote here from Tommaso Alpina’s literal translation. For one of the Latin texts in which Traherne may have encountered

Avicenna’s thought experiment, see Avicenna, *Avicenna Latinus* 36.

38. See esp. Hasse, *Success* 8, 359–64.

39. See Hasse, *Success* 35–36.

40. This passage is also quoted and discussed in Griffel 1. For an overview of the term *fiṭra* in al-Ghazālī, al-Fārābī, and Avicenna, and particularly about how *fiṭra* is given to each human when they are in the womb, see Griffel 2–6.

41. One possible precedent could be Mullā Shāh’s (d. ca. 1661) رساله نسبت (*Risāla-yi nisbat; Treatise on Relation*). This narrative poem ranges across a variety of religious and philosophical topics and contains an autobiographical discussion of the author’s own infancy and nursing. Mullā Shāh was a Qādirī Sufi based in Kashmir, and his pupils included Dārā Shukūh, whose ideas likely influenced Bidil. Unfortunately, we have not been able to access this work. We are grateful to Supriya Gandhi for making us aware of this passage. For brief descriptions of Mullā Shāh’s poem as preserved in several manuscripts, see Ethé 862–63; Aḥmad 32–33.

42. On the topos of “color’s fracture” in early modern Indo-Persian poetry, see Mikkelsen, “Color’s Fracture.”

43. For a pathbreaking study of the function of *taḥqīq* (“inquiry”) in Bidil’s poem *Mount Sinai of Gnosis* and in his system of thought overall, see Pellò, “Looking.”

44. The third hemistich can be parsed in at least two ways: “Small flame, you’ve raised your head [سر کشیده ای]—don’t cry now about burning [از سوختن منال],” or “Small flame, you’ve turned away from burning [سر کشیده‌ای از سوختن]; don’t cry.” The raveled syntax makes it possible to identify the addressee as either a newborn candle or its opposite—an old guttering flame. This ambiguous looping of time, age, and identity is likely intentional, given the quatrain’s theme of looking back toward beginnings.

45. In contrast, two other states described by al-Qushayrī are “presence” (محاضره; *muḥādāra*), which relies on (demonstrative) proof (برهان), and “unveiling” (مکاشفه; *mukāshafa*), which also depends on such rational evidence as “proof” or “clear indication” (بیان) and “sign” or “proof” (دلیل). See Qushayrī 226.

WORKS CITED

- Adamson, Peter, editor. *Interpreting Avicenna: Critical Essays*. Cambridge UP, 2013.
- Adamson, Peter, and Fedor Benevich. “The Thought Experimental Method: Avicenna’s Flying Man Argument.” *Journal of the American Philosophical Association*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2018, pp. 147–64.
- Aḥmad, Zuhūr al-Dīn. آثار و افکار ملا شاه بدخشی: *Mullā Shāh Badakhshī: Āsār u afkār*. Translated by Faḥl al-Raḥmān Fāzil, Mayvand, 2004.
- Ahmed, Asad Q. “The *Shifā*’ in India I: Reflections on the Evidence of the Manuscripts.” *Oriens*, vol. 40, 2012, pp. 1–24.
- Alam, Muzaffar. “Strategy and Imagination in a Mughal Sufi Story of Creation.” *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 49, no. 2, 2012, pp. 151–95.
- Alam, Muzaffar, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam. *Indo-Persian Travels in the Age of Discoveries, 1400–1800*. Cambridge UP, 2007.

- Amerini, Fabrizio. *Aquinas on the Beginning and End of Human Life*. Harvard UP, 2013.
- Aristotle. *Complete Works*. Edited by Jonathan Barnes, Princeton UP, 1984. 2 vols.
- Augustine. *Confessions*. Translated by Henry Chadwick, Oxford UP, 1992.
- Avicenna. *Avicenna Latinus*. Edited by G. Verbeke, Peeters Publishers, 1972.
- . “Avicenna’s *Kitāb al-Nafs*.” Translated by Tommaso Alpina. *Subject, Definition, Activity: Framing Avicenna’s Science of the Soul*, by Alpina, De Gruyter, 2020, pp. 190–238.
- . *Avicenna’s Psychology: An English Translation of Kitāb al-Najāt, Book II, Chapter VI*. Translated by Fazlur Rahman, Hyperion, 1952.
- . التعلیقات [*al-Ta’līqāt*]. Edited by Sayyid Ḥusayn Mūsaviyān, Mu’assasa-yi puzhūhishī-yi ḥikmat va falsafa-yi irān, 1391 [2013].
- Beecroft, Alexander. *An Ecology of World Literature: From Antiquity to the Present Day*. Verso, 2015.
- Bevilacqua, Alexander. *The Republic of Arabic Letters: Islam and the European Enlightenment*. Harvard UP, 2018.
- Bīdil Dihlavī, Mirzā ‘Abd al-Qādir. کلیات ابو المعانی میرزا عبد القادر بیدل دهلوی [*Kulliyāt-i Abū l-Ma‘āni Mirzā ‘Abd al-Qādir Bīdil Dihlavī*]. Edited by Khalilullāh Khalīlī, Intishārāt-i Ṭalāya, 2010/2011. 5 vols.
- Biedermann, Zoltán. “(Dis)Connected History and the Multiple Narratives of Global Early Modernity.” *Modern Philology*, vol. 119, no. 1, 2021, pp. 13–32.
- Black, Deborah. “Avicenna on Self-Awareness and Knowing That One Knows.” *The Unity of Science in the Arabic Tradition: Science, Logic, Epistemology and Their Interactions*, edited by Shahid Rahman et al., Springer, 2008, pp. 63–87.
- Bloch, Ernst. *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left*. Translated by Loren Goldman and Peter Thompson, Columbia UP, 2019.
- Bloch, Marc. *The Royal Touch: Sacred Monarchy and Scrofula in England and France*. Translated by J. E. Anderson, Routledge, 1973.
- Brient, Elizabeth. “Transitions to a Modern Cosmology: Meister Eckhart and Nicholas of Cusa on the Intensive Infinite.” *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, vol. 37, no. 4, 1999, pp. 575–600.
- Brisson, Luc, et al., editors. *L’embryon: Formation et animation: Antiquité grecque et latine, tradition hébraïque, chrétienne et islamique*. Vrin, 2008.
- Bruner, Jerome. *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*. Harvard UP, 1987.
- Bruno, Giordano. *De immenso. Opera latine conscripta*, vol. 1, pt. 1, Frommann, 1962.
- Casanova, Pascale. *The World Republic of Letters*. Translated by M. B. Debevoise, Harvard UP, 2004.
- Chakravarti, Ananya. *The Empire of Apostles: Religion, Accommodatio and the Imagination of Empire in Modern Brazil and India*. Oxford UP, 2018.
- Dārā Shukūh, Muḥammad. مجمع البحرين [*Majma‘ al-baḥrayn*]. 1929. Edited by M. Mahfuz-ul-Haq, Asiatic Society, 1998.
- Dāya, Najm al-Dīn Rāzī. مرصاد العباد [*Mirṣād al-‘ibād*]. Edited by Muḥammad Amīn Riyāḥī, Intishārāt-i ‘ilmī u farhangī, 2004.
- Defries, Brett. “Love, Capacity, and Traherne’s Idea of the Book.” *SEL*, vol. 61, no. 1, pp. 103–26.
- Derrida, Jacques. “Poetics and Politics of Witnessing.” Translated by Outi Pasanen. *Sovereignties in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, edited by Thomas Dutoit and Pasanen, Fordham UP, 2005, pp. 65–96.
- Detienne, Marcel. *Comparing the Incomparable*. Translated by Janet Lloyd, Stanford UP, 2008.
- Druart, Thérèse-Anne. *Arabic Philosophy and the West: Continuity and Interaction*. Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, 1988.
- El-Rouayheb, Khaled. “The Rise of ‘Deep Reading’ in Early Modern Ottoman Scholarly Culture.” *World Philology*, edited by Sheldon Pollock et al., Harvard UP, 2015, pp. 201–24.
- Ernst, Carl. *Refractions of Islam in India: Situating Sufism and Yoga*. Sage, 2016.
- Ethé, Hermann. *Catalogue of Persian Manuscripts in the Library of the India Office*. Oxford, 1903.
- Gandhi, Supriya. *The Emperor Who Never Was: Dara Shukoh in Mughal India*. Harvard UP, 2020.
- Ganeri, Jonardon. *Inwardness: An Outsider’s Guide*. Columbia UP, 2021.
- . *The Lost Age of Reason: Philosophy in Early Modern India 1450–1700*. Oxford UP, 2011.
- Garcia, Edgar. *Signs of the Americas: A Poetics of Pictography, Hieroglyphs, and Khipu*. U of Chicago P, 2020.
- Ghazālī, Abū Ḥamid Muḥammad al-. المنقذ من الضلال [*al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl*]. Edited by ‘Abd al-Mun‘im al-‘Ānī, al-Ḥikma, 1994.
- Gilson, Étienne. “Les sources gréco-arabes de l’augustinisme avicennisant.” *Archives d’histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen âge*, vol. 4, 1929–30, pp. 5–149.
- Ginzburg, Carlo, and Bruce Lincoln. *Old Thies, a Livonian Werewolf: A Classic Case in Comparative Perspective*. U of Chicago P, 2020.
- Goodman, Nelson. *Ways of Worldmaking*. Hackett, 1978.
- Gould, Rebecca. “The Geography of Comparative Literature.” *Journal of Literary Theory*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2011, pp. 167–86.
- Greene, Roland. “Inter-American Obsersals: Allen Ginsberg and Haroldo de Campos circa 1960.” *The Lyric Theory Reader*, edited by Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, Johns Hopkins UP, 2014, pp. 618–32.
- . *Unrequited Conquests: Love and Empire in the Colonial Americas*. U of Chicago P, 1999.
- Griffel, Frank. “Al-Ghazālī’s Use of ‘Original Human Disposition’ (*fiṭra*) and Its Background in the Teachings of Al-Fārābī and Avicenna.” *The Muslim World*, vol. 102, 2012, pp. 1–32.
- Gruner, O. C. *A Treatise on the Canon of Medicine, Incorporating a Translation of the First Book*. Luzac, 1930.
- Gruzinski, Serge. *The Eagle and the Dragon: Globalization and European Dreams of Conquest in China and America in the Sixteenth Century*. Polity, 2014.

- Gutas, Dimitri. *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition: Introduction to Reading Avicenna's Works*. Brill, 2014.
- Hacking, Ian. "Working in a New World: The Taxonomic Solution." *World Changes: Thomas Kuhn and the Nature of Science*, edited by Paul Horwich, MIT Press, 1993, pp. 275–310.
- Hamilton, Alistair. "The Study of Islam in Early Modern Europe." *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte*, vol. 3, 2001, pp. 169–82.
- Handler-Spitz, Rivi. *Symptoms of an Unruly Age: Li Zhi and Cultures of Early Modernity*. U of Washington P, 2017.
- Harrison, Timothy M. *Coming To: Consciousness and Natality in Early Modern England*. U of Chicago P, 2020.
- . "Fictions of Human Nature in Seventeenth-Century Poetry and Philosophy." *English Literary Renaissance*, vol. 52, no. 3, 2022, pp. 358–70.
- Harrison, Timothy M., and Jane Mikkelsen. "What Was Early Modern World Literature?" *Modern Philology*, vol. 119, no. 1, 2021, pp. 166–88.
- Hasse, Dag Nikolaus. *Avicenna's "De Anima" in the Latin West: The Formation of a Peripatetic Philosophy of the Soul, 1160–1300*. Warburg Institute, 2000.
- . *Success and Suppression: Arabic Sciences and Philosophy in the Renaissance*. Harvard UP, 2016.
- Hodgson, Marshall G. S. *Rethinking World History: Essays on Europe, Islam, and World History*. Edited by Edmund Burke, Cambridge UP, 2009.
- Hollander, John. *Melodious Guile: Fictive Pattern in Poetic Language*. Yale UP, 1988.
- Hornius, Georgius. *Historia philosophica*. Leiden, 1655.
- Hughes, Aaron W. *The Texture of the Divine: Imagination in Medieval Islamic and Jewish Thought*. Indiana UP, 2003.
- Ingenito, Domenico. *Beholding Beauty: Sa'di of Shiraz and the Aesthetics of Desire in Medieval Persian Poetry*. Brill, 2021.
- . "Hafez's 'Shirāzi Turk': A Geopoetical Approach." *Iranian Studies*, vol. 51, no. 6, 2018, pp. 851–87.
- Jaski, Bart, et al., editors. *The Orient in Utrecht: Adriaan Reland (1676–1718), Arabist, Cartographer, Antiquarian and Scholar of Comparative Religion*. Brill, 2021.
- Johnson, Carina L. *Cultural Hierarchy in Sixteenth-Century Europe: The Ottomans and the Mexicans*. Cambridge UP, 2011.
- Kaukua, Jari. *Self-Awareness in Islamic Philosophy: Avicenna and After*. Cambridge UP, 2015.
- Keshavarz, Fatemeh. "Pregnant with God: The Poetic Art of Mothering the Sacred in Rumi's Fihi Ma Fih." *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, vol. 22, nos. 1–2, 2002, pp. 90–99.
- Kovacs, Hajnalka. "'No Journey Is Possible outside of the Heart': The Story of King Lavaṇa in Bedil's Muḥit-i a'zam." *Journal of South Asian Intellectual History*, vol. 2, 2020, pp. 73–115.
- Kuhn, Thomas. "Afterwords." *World Changes: Thomas Kuhn and the Nature of Science*, edited by Paul Horwich, MIT Press, 1993, pp. 311–41.
- . *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. 2nd ed., U of Chicago P, 1970.
- Kukkonen, Taneli. *Ibn Tufayl: Living the Life of Reason*. Oneworld, 2014.
- Landau, Justine. *De rythme et de raison: Lecture croisée de deux traités de poétique persans du XIIIe siècle*. Presses de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2013.
- Law, Jane Marie, and Vanessa R. Sasson, editors. *Imagining the Fetus: The Unborn in Myth, Religion, and Culture*. Oxford UP, 2009.
- Lehoux, Daryn. *What Did the Romans Know? An Inquiry into Science and Worldmaking*. U of Chicago P, 2012.
- Lewis, Franklin. "Mawlānā Rūmī, the Early Mevlevī and the Gendered Gaze: Prolegomenon to an Analysis of Rūmī's View of Women." *Mawlana Rumi Review*, vol. 8, 2017, pp. 43–71.
- Il libro dei ventiquattro filosofi*. Edited by Paolo Lucentini, Adelphi, 1999.
- Lincoln, Bruce. *Apples and Oranges: Explorations in, on, and with Comparison*. U of Chicago P, 2018.
- Losensky, Paul E. *Welcoming Fighani: Imitation and Poetic Individuality in the Safavid-Mughal Ghazal*. Mazda, 1998.
- Ma, Ning. *The Age of Silver: The Rise of the Novel East and West*. Oxford UP, 2016.
- Mallete, Karla. *Lives of the Great Languages: Arabic and Latin in the Medieval Mediterranean*. U of Chicago P, 2021.
- Michot, Jean R. "La pandémie avicennienne au VIe/XIIe siècle." *Arabica*, vol. 40, no. 3, 1993, pp. 287–344.
- Mikkelsen, Jane. "Color's Fracture: Translating Fugitive Experience in Early Modern Persian Poetry." *The Routledge Handbook of Persian Literary Translation*, edited by Pouneh Shabani-Jadidi et al., Routledge, 2022, pp. 247–85.
- . "Flights of Imagination: Avicenna's Phoenix ('Anqa) and Bedil's Figuration for the Lyric Self." *Journal of South Asian Intellectual History*, vol. 2, 2019, pp. 28–72.
- Mills, Simon. *A Commerce of Knowledge: Trade, Religion, and Scholarship between England and the Ottoman Empire, 1600–1760*. Oxford UP, 2020.
- Nagel, Thomas. "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" *Philosophical Review*, vol. 83, no. 4, 1974, pp. 435–50.
- Nair, Shankar. *Translating Hinduism: Hindu-Muslim Intellectual Interactions in Early Modern South Asia*. U of California P, 2020.
- Needham, Joseph. *A History of Embryology*. Cambridge UP, 1959.
- Ng, Su Fang. *Alexander the Great from Britain to Southeast Asia: Peripheral Empires in the Global Renaissance*. Oxford UP, 2019.
- . "Dutch Wars, Global Trade, and the Heroic Poem: Dryden's *Annus mirabilis* (1666) and Amin's *Sya'ir perang Mengkasar*." *Modern Philology*, vol. 109, no. 3, 2012, pp. 352–84.
- Nirenberg, David. *Neighboring Faiths: Christianity, Islam, and Judaism in the Middle Ages and Today*. U of Chicago P, 2016.
- O'Malley, Austin M. "Rhetoric, Narrative, and the Remembrance of Death in 'Attār's *Mosītab-nāmeḥ*." *Iranian Studies*, vol. 51, no. 1, 2018, pp. 23–46.
- Orsini, Francesca. "The Multilingual Local in World Literature." *Comparative Literature*, vol. 67, no. 4, 2015, pp. 345–74.

- Padrón, Ricardo. *The Indies of the Setting Sun: How Early Modern Islamic Spain Mapped the Far East as the Transpacific West*. U of Chicago P, 2020.
- Pascal, Blaise. *Pensées and Other Writings*. Translated by Honor Levi, Oxford UP, 1999.
- Pavel, Thomas G. *Fictional Worlds*. Harvard UP, 1986.
- Pelló, Stefano. "Atmosfera Indo-Persiana: Cumulonembi, bolle, e avatāra monsonici in Mīrzā 'Abd al-Qādir Bīdil (1644–1720) e nella sua scuola." *Come la freccia di Ārash: Il lungo viaggio della narrazione in Iran*, edited by Nahid Norozi, Mimesis, 2021, pp. 291–311.
- . "Looking through *Tahqīq* Glasses: Early Modern Imagination and the Unveiling of Nature in Mīrzā Bīdil's *The Sinai of Knowledge*." *Journal of Early Modern History*, vol. 27, no. 4, 2023, pp. 368–83.
- . "Two Passing Clouds: The Rainy Season of Mīrzā Bīdil and Amānat Rāy's Persian Version of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa." *Iran and the Caucasus*, vol. 24, 2020, pp. 408–18.
- Qushayrī, 'Abd al-Karīm al-. الرسالة القشيرية [Al-*risāla al-qushayrīyya*]. Vol. 1, Dār al-Kutub al-ḥadītha, 1966.
- Ramachandran, Ayesha. *The Worldmakers: Global Imagining in Early Modern Europe*. U of Chicago P, 2015.
- . "Worldmaking and Early Modernity: Cartographic Poesis in Europe and South Asia." *The Cambridge History of World Literature*, edited by Dejana Ganguly, Cambridge UP, 2021, pp. 109–31.
- Ramazani, Jahan. *A Transnational Poetics*. U of Chicago P, 2009.
- Rapoport, Michael. *Science of the Soul in Ibn Sīnā's Pointers and Reminders*. Brill, 2023.
- Richards, John F. *The Unending Frontier: An Environmental History of the Early Modern World*. U of California P, 2003.
- Saussy, Haun. "Axes of Comparison." *Comparison: Theories, Approaches, Uses*, edited by Rita Felski and Susan Stanford Friedman, Johns Hopkins UP, 2013, pp. 64–76.
- Schine, Rachel. "Nourishing the Noble: Breastfeeding and Hero-Making in Medieval Arabic Popular Literature." *Al-'Uṣūr al-Wuṣṭā*, vol. 27, 2019, pp. 165–200.
- Sharma, Sunil. *Mughal Arcadia: Persian Literature at an Indian Court*. Harvard UP, 2017.
- Shulman, David. *More Than Real: A History of the Imagination in South India*. Harvard UP, 2012.
- Singer, Julie. "Fetal Personhood and Voice in Medieval French Literature." *PMLA*, vol. 136, no. 5, Oct. 2021, pp. 696–710.
- Siraisi, Nancy G. *Avicenna in Renaissance Italy: The Canon and Medical Teaching in Italian Universities after 1500*. Princeton UP, 1987.
- Smith, Jonathan Z. *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*. U of Chicago P, 1982.
- Smith, Justin E. H., editor. *The Problem of Animal Generation in Early Modern Philosophy*. Cambridge UP, 2006.
- Stepien, Rafal K. Introduction. *Buddhist Philosophy as Literature, Buddhist Literature as Philosophy*, edited by Stepien, State U of New York P, 2020, pp. 1–31.
- Subrahmanyam, Sanjay. *Empires between Islam and Christianity, 1500–1800*. State U of New York P, 2020.
- . *Explorations in Connected History: From the Tagus to the Ganges*. Oxford UP, 2005.
- Traherne, Thomas. *Works*. Edited by Jan Ross, D. S. Brewer, 2015–18. 8 vols.
- Trumpener, Katie. "World Music, World Literature: A Geopolitical View." *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*, edited by Haun Saussy, Johns Hopkins UP, 2006, pp. 185–202.
- Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo. *Cannibal Metaphysics*. Edited and translated by Peter Skafish, U of Minnesota P, 2017.
- Wilderbing, James. *Forms, Souls, and Embryos: Neoplatonists on Human Reproduction*. Routledge, 2017.
- Wisnovsky, Robert. *Avicenna's Metaphysics in Context*. Cornell UP, 2003.

Abstract: At the same moment in the seventeenth century in two distant parts of the globe, two poets who did not know of each other's existence both confronted an ancient philosophical question—How does human knowledge begin?—by imaginatively reconstructing their own originary experiences. In poetry and autobiographical prose, Thomas Traherne (in England) and Mīrzā 'Abd al-Qādir Bīdil Dihlavī (in India) describe being in the womb, birth, nursing, first thoughts. Deeply original with respect to their own contexts yet strikingly similar to each other, these accounts demand comparison. In this essay, we draw on Carlo Ginzburg's concept of "conjunctive anomalies," Bruce Lincoln's "weak" comparison, and Roland Greene's "obversive poetics," among other frameworks, to reveal the overlooked early modern world of Avicennan thought. By collaboratively comparing traditions that do not fully belong to either of us, we attempt to dislodge the siloed ways of thinking that have come to structure the study of early modern literatures.