

Disfiguring the Martyr: A Critical Review of Carl W. Ernst's

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Translating the poetry of Ḥusayn b. Manṣūr al-Ḥallāj (244–309 / 858–922) is no ordinary literary endeavor. To render into another language the ecstatic expressions of one of Islam's most enchanting mystic-martyrs is to engage with a body of speech that is simultaneously devotional, metaphysical, highly stylistic, and liturgical. It is not merely poetry, but verbal unveiling (*kashf*), spiritual invocation (*munājāt*), and metaphysical testimony (*shahāda*). To extract Ḥallāj from the sacred orbit of these dimensions is to flatten his legacy and misrepresent his voice.

In *Hallaj: Poems of a Sufi Martyr*, Carl W. Ernst offers a modern English rendering of 117 poems attributed to al-Ḥallāj, along with a lengthy introduction and scholarly apparatus. A respected scholar of Islamic mysticism, Ernst approaches the *Dīwān* with a stylistic and conceptual framework that he explicitly defines as literary, rather than theological or hagiographical. While this decision may be understandable from a modern academic standpoint, it raises serious concerns from the perspective of those committed to the integrity of Sufi tradition and the inner grammar of its poetics.

This review critiques Ernst's translation project on several grounds: its secularizing epistemology, its misreading of poetic structure, its reductive treatment of mystical vocabulary, its problematic judgments against previous scholars—particularly Louis Massignon—and its failure to capture the performative, theological, and martyrial voice of Ḥallāj. In addition to structural critiques, the review will offer direct comparative analysis of select translations, revealing the extent to which Ernst's rendering at times distorts or misrepresents the sacred force of the original.

Secularization of a Sacred Corpus

Carl Ernst's most consequential error lies in his framing of Ḥallāj's poetry as "literature," distinct from both hagiography and theology. He writes, "This translation is presented not as hagiography but as literature, and the poems are read as poems, not as theology, sacred text, or direct transcriptions of personal experience" (p. 52). This framing is not only methodologically problematic—it is theologically incoherent when applied to a figure like Ḥallāj. His poetry does not merely express emotion or reflection; it *performs* *ḥaqīqa* (realization), *tawḥīd* (unification), and *fanā'* (annihilation). To "read the poems as poems" without their sacred context is to engage in a kind of textual desecration.

Ernst's secular-literary reading contradicts the ethos of the very tradition he is attempting to translate. The Sufi poetic idiom is not simply an aesthetic genre—it is a mode of transmission (*tawṣīl*) that depends on ontological proximity to the Divine, communal states often realized through *samā'*, and the echoing force of divine names. To present Ḥallāj's verses as stand-alone literary artifacts is to dislocate them from their *maqām* (spiritual station). The poems do not merely describe states—they *enact* them. They are acts of mystical unveiling, not lyric fragments.

Moreover, Ernst's choice to remove the poems from their martyrial context directly contradicts the interpretive consensus of both historical and modern spiritual works. He acknowledges this tension when he writes, "While it is impossible to entirely separate the poems of Hallaj from the story of his martyrdom, one can temporarily bracket out those narratives and focus instead on the poems themselves as powerfully crafted literary productions" (p. 52). But such bracketing is not neutral—it is an epistemic violence that severs the utterance from the event, the speaker from his sacrifice, and the name *al-Ḥallāj* from his blood-soaked invocation *anā'l-Ḥaqq*.

Misunderstanding of Rhyme and Poetic Form

Among the more subtle yet telling signs of Carl Ernst's methodological distance from the inner mechanics of Arabic mystical poetry is his treatment of poetic form, especially rhyme. In his introduction, Ernst dismisses the traditional ordering of Arabic *dawāwīm* by end rhyme as irrelevant to English-language presentation. "The arrangement of the traditional Arabic *dirwān* or collected poems is alphabetical by end rhyme," he explains, "which makes no sense for an English version" (p.50). He replaces this with thematic clustering into eight modern categories such as "Mystical Love Poems," "Martyrdom," and "Metaphysics."

This move is not a matter of pragmatic adaptation—it is a philosophical

rupture. Ernst's dismissal of end-rhyme ordering as nonsensical reveals a lack of appreciation for the multidimensional function of rhyme in Arabic poetics, especially within Sufi traditions. Rhyme is not merely a mnemonic convenience; it is an ontological device, an auditory structure of resonance, echo, and closure that participates in the poem's meaning. Classical Arabic rhyme often performs mystical logic: it closes the semantic circle, reopens symbolic repetition, and guides the listener through stages of affect, remembrance (*dhikr*), or annihilation (*fanā'*).

Moreover, rhyme is intimately connected to Arabic root morphology and semantic play. Many of Ḥallāj's verses employ paronomasia, rhythmic spirals, and letter-sounds that mirror the theological paradoxes he articulates. As Annemarie Schimmel notes in her insightful *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*:

The mono-rhymed forms of Arabic, and consequently Persian, Turkish, and Urdu poetry, are ideal vehicles for mystical experience, whether it be in the long *qasīda* (mainly a praise poem) or in the short ghazal (love poem). Outside the Arabic-speaking world, the rhyme was often extended by the addition of a *radīf*, an additional rhyme word or even a whole sentence that is repeated. Thus, the mystical poet can go on reiterating one of the divine names in the *radīf*, or by carefully chosen words emphasize his main goal. His longing seems to be more eloquent if repeated dozens of times in the same poetical utterance. The whole poem turns around one central idea, which is, by the different rhyme words, reflected from different angles, broken up, brought into a new pattern, at times uprising, at other times becoming a monotonous hammering. The constant call to God, the intense yearning and longing, fear and hope, are most impressively heard in the poetical prayers written in the Muslim world. A hybrid form, which became typical of later Persian poetry, combines love poem and prayer so that it is often difficult to judge which level of experience the poem reveals. Rūmī's ghazals are wonderful specimens of this ambiguous style, which was refined by Ḥāfiz, in whose poems it achieved a fascinating iridescence. The poetical elaborations of classical prayers as found in the great mystical epics, like Attar's work or Rūmī's *Mathnawī*, are some of the finest examples of religious poetry in the Persian-speaking world. (p. 162-163)

By discarding this formal system in favor of Western thematic categories, Ernst superimposes a secular taxonomic order on a spiritual corpus. Thematic rubrics such as "Conventional Love Lyrics" or "Union" not only mislabel poems whose metaphysics often transcend their apparent content, but also implicitly encourage a modern reader to approach the text with the wrong

set of assumptions—namely, that meaning is surface-level and categorically discrete. In doing so, the translation fails to convey the internal musicality and metaphysical symmetry that made the *Dīwān* not just readable but chantable, repeatable, and performative across centuries.

Reducing Mystical Vocabulary

Ernst's classification of these poems as "conventional love lyrics" is not merely unsound—it borders on the sacrilegious. To strip these verses of their mystical core on the grounds that they exhibit "hyperbole and antithesis" or lack "overt indication" of spiritual meaning is to misread the very mechanics of Sufi poetics. In the mystical tradition, hyperbole is not ornament—it is necessity. When the soul beholds the Real, its language falters into excess: "Love has emptied me of my self." This is not rhetorical inflation; it is ontological truth.

To call such utterances "clichés" is to judge the *Qur'ān* itself, which speaks in paradox and excess when revealing the mysteries of divine love, wrath, mercy, and annihilation. Ḥallāj's idiom belongs to that sacred register. The fire and ice, longing and destruction, madness and lucidity found in these verses are not tropes—they are signs of proximity to the divine. To recode them as courtly love poetry is not merely a critical mistake; it is a desecralization of the very experience that Ḥallāj lived, wrote, and ultimately died for. Even Ernst's attempt at nuance—"this does not exclude the possibility that such poems may have circulated in Sufi circles and been read with additional layers of meaning"—reinscribes the error. These were not mundane verses retrofitted by mystics. They are the work of one already consumed. The "additional layers" are not secondary overlays; they are the primary stratum. The divine beloved veils Himself in metaphor precisely so that only the brokenhearted and the annihilated may glimpse His Face.

As Ibn 'Arabī teaches in Chapter 178 of the *Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, love is not an emotion but a divine *tajallī* (self-disclosure)—a flame that reveals the *ghayb* (un-perceivable) through its burning. It does not speak in its own name, but in the voice of the One who seizes and transforms the lover. He writes: "When my Beloved appears to me, with which eye do I see Him? With His eye, not with mine: for none sees Him but Him." He explains further:

[This is only] in accordance with the transcendence of His Station and confirming His Words, since He says: The gazes do not perceive Him, [but He perceives the gazes...] (Q 6:103), and He did not specify any particular Abode (of this world or the next), but sent it as an Verse unrestricted (in its applicability) and as a definite, confirmed matter. For none other than Him perceives Him, so it is with His eye—may He be praised!—that I see Him, as in (the famous divine saying in) the sound hadith-report (the hadith al-nawāfil): '...I (God) am his gaze through which he sees.'

This is the register of Ḥallāj: he does not describe *maḥabba* (love); he is described by love. His poems are not “about” divine love in the way a courtier sings about his beloved—they are love’s own speech, uttered through the mouth of one annihilated in *al-Ḥaqq* (the Real). To judge such verses by the metrics of secular lyricism is to confuse divine *nūr* (effulgence) with courtly posture. To call such poetry “conventional” is to deny the conditions of its birth. And to deny those conditions is not only unsound—it is a trespass against the sanctity of what these verses testify to: that the soul, in loving the Real, speaks from the edge of the grave, already having died once. If Ḥallāj’s corpus is to be translated faithfully, the translator must treat rhyme and sonic architecture not as peripheral, but as constitutive of meaning.

Misreading of Massignon and Historical Responsibility

Nowhere is the dissonance between Ernst’s project and the tradition he attempts to translate more painfully evident than how he treats one of the most important modern link in the chain of transmission of *Diwān al-Ḥallāj*: Louis Massignon (1883-1962). Despite Massignon’s towering contribution to the recovery, editing, and interpretive framing of Ḥallāj, Ernst repeatedly characterizes his work in dismissive, even derisive terms. “On a very practical level,” he writes, *The Passion of al-Hallaj* “is almost unreadable. Dense textual analyses trail off in footnotes that lead nowhere. Broad claims and intimations of Massignon’s famous intuition often end up resembling unfinished ‘notes to self.’”⁵

Such comments are not only ungenerous; they are intellectually negligent. They ignore the deep architecture of *The Passion*, a work built upon over five decades of multilingual, intertextual research across Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Syriac, and Christian traditions. Massignon’s method may not conform to current academic minimalism, but to reduce it to “notes to self” betrays a failure to grasp the hermeneutic of excess that defines his approach—an excess modeled not on Western positivism but on Ḥallāj’s own *istighrāq* (mystical absorption). The spiraling structure of Massignon’s *Passion* is not a flaw; it is a mirror of Ḥallāj’s existential circularity, the way his utterances return to and unravel from *al-Ḥaqq*.

Ernst further claims that Massignon’s translator, Herbert Mason, admitted *The Passion of al-Hallaj* to be unreadable, citing Mason’s remark that “his obsession with evidence, with truth itself, marred his performance as a biographer and historian, from a literary standpoint” (pp. 45-46). But this quotation is selectively extracted and grossly misleading. In the very same paragraph of the “Foreword to the English Edition,” Mason writes: **“It remains a monument of his own ever-expanding knowledge and understanding, and is terminated perhaps without a conclusion but rather a sense of ongoing**

collection and insight.” He goes on to characterize Massignon’s work not as flawed, but as requiring editorial assistance to shape and simplify what he calls a “remarkably analogous” world of thought—one in which all times become timeless. Far from discrediting Massignon, Mason celebrates his “genius,” his “penetration of sources,” and his refusal to impose theory upon the sacred “other reality” of what he encountered.

This was not merely public diplomacy. In a private letter to this reviewer, Mason confided his own spiritual attachment to Ḥallāj, writing, “He will influence my work in less overt, more private ways.” In that same letter, dated December 7, 1988, he described the fatigue of defending Sufis like Ḥallāj, Rābi‘a, and Rūmī in a hostile academic setting, even as he reaffirmed his enduring admiration: “I remain personally fond of Hallaj, but I choose not to write any more about him.” These words—intimate, wearied, yet reverent—stand in stark contrast to Ernst’s reductive framing. Mason, who had more reason than most to critique Massignon’s stylistic excesses, instead remained devoted to the sacred intensity of both the martyr and his most fervent European interpreter. For Massignon, historical evidence and spiritual truth were not opposed but entangled. His refusal to draw easy separations between textual data and mystical experience made him an exception among Orientalists—and, paradoxically, one of the few to deserve that title with dignity.

It is worth emphasizing that Massignon never claimed objectivity in the modern sense. He described his work as a *témoignage*—a testimony, a witnessing. “I annex even to historical facts,” he wrote, “the further meditations that they have suggested.” This is not an abandonment of scholarship; it is a declaration of epistemological humility, one informed by both Islamic *adab* and Christian *kenosis*. Massignon’s “obsession with truth” was not a literary flaw; it was a form of spiritual fidelity to Ḥallāj’s own ecstatic imperative.

By contrast, Ernst’s ostensibly “neutral” reading is itself a subjective act—grounded not in reverence but in scholarly detachment. The implication that Massignon’s interpretive framework is flawed due to personal involvement fails to recognize that the same charge could be leveled, more insidiously, at Ernst’s own secular distancing. One must ask: is it better to approach Ḥallāj as a subject of inquiry, or as a voice to which one responds? Massignon chose the latter—and in doing so, brought the *Dīwān* back into the circle of dynamic meaning for our times.

Epistemic Violence and the Myth of Objective Reading

Carl Ernst’s decision to “bracket out” the martyrdom, theological vocabulary, and mystical function of Ḥallāj’s poetry in order to present it “as literature”

may appear to be an act of academic neutrality, but it is, in fact, an instance of epistemic violence. To isolate a sacred text from the conditions of its utterance is not to illuminate it, but to amputate it. In the modern academic imagination, this process often masquerades as objectivity, but in reality, it enforces a secular hermeneutic that flattens sacred speech into cultural artifact.

This is not simply a matter of preference or perspective—it is a matter of ontological truth claims. The mystical discourse of Sufism, and particularly that of Ḥallāj, is rooted in *taḥqīq* (realized truth), not conjecture. Its language is not representational but performative; its referent is not symbolic but actual. When Ḥallāj says *anā man uḥibbu wa-man uḥibbu anā huwa* (“I am the one I love, and the one I love is I”), he is not engaging in metaphor. He is declaring *waḥdat al-wujūd* as lived annihilation. To translate this as an idiom of romantic self-loss, as Ernst’s rendering sometimes suggests, is not merely inaccurate—it is a betrayal of the very metaphysics the poem enacts.

Ernst’s translation and commentary repeatedly attempt to desacralize the poems. For example, he refers to certain verses as “highly conventional love lyrics,” others as “sermons,” and still others as “riddles,” as though genre categories can adequately contain the multidimensional mystical resonances embedded in these texts.⁸ The framing of the *Dīwān* through modern thematic clusters, while seemingly helpful for accessibility, ends up reinforcing a notion of textual autonomy alien to Islamic hermeneutics.

This myth of the autonomous text—the idea that poems can be read “on their own terms”—has a long genealogy in European secularism. But such autonomy is precisely what Ḥallāj’s corpus resists. His verses were embedded in *maqāmāt*, *ḥāl*, *sharḥ*, and *wasīya*—they were recited, heard, glossed, lived, and transmitted. They survive not because they are “good literature,” but because they transmit *nūr* (divine light) and *ḥaqḥ* (truth). The scholar’s task is not to extract meaning from them, but to receive their meaning in the correct disposition of soul.

Indeed, the very impulse to “understand” Ḥallāj through dissection rather than through surrender (*taslīm*) is what his Sufi contemporaries warned against. As Rūzbihān al-Baqlī wrote, “People were amazed at the aims of his speech, not knowing the subtleties of his allusions.” Ernst’s translation fails to meet those allusions on their own terms. It hears, but it does not listen.

His central methodological claim—that “one can temporarily bracket out those narratives and focus instead on the poems themselves as powerfully crafted literary productions”²—is not only naive; it is hermeneutically incoherent. Can one bracket out Jesus from the Gospels and expect to preserve the force of his words? Can one separate the Prophet Muḥammad, upon him blessings and peace, from the corpus of ḥadīth and still claim to understand

what he taught? What remains in either case is not meaning but artifact—fossilized utterance, severed from life and witness. The same applies to Ḥallāj. His *kalām* is inseparable from his *maqām*—his words from his station, his speech from his crucifixion. To sever them is not to translate, but to betray.

The Danger of Genre: Mislabeling Divine Love as “Conventional Lyrics”

Ernst opens his selection of translations with a category titled “Conventional Love Lyrics,” which he defines as poems with “no overt indication of any mystical interpretation” (p. 61). That framing is a categorical error.

The spiritual idiom of early Arabic Sufi poetry is often purposefully veiled (*ishārāt*, allusions), where divine love is expressed through the language of longing, distance, sickness, and union—forms also found in secular ghazal, but with entirely different ontologies. To classify these verses as “conventional,” and thus bracket their sacred valence, leads to mistranslation and interpretive misdirection.

Let us consider two such poems:

“Strengthen Me from the Sickness”

*Qawwini yā raḥīma fī maradī,
fa-innī marīḍun bi-ḥubbika qadīm.*

Ernst: *I am sick with your love, from long ago.*¹³

Faithful: *I am long-stricken with the sickness of Your love.*

“The Cure of Love”

*Dāʾuʾl-ḥubb fīya wa-dawāʾuh,
wa-anā ʿajūzun ʿalā al-istiḳāmati.*

Ernst: *I am helpless in keeping straight.*¹⁴

Faithful: *I am incapable of uprightness before it.*

Both translations falter because the poems have been miscategorized. *Qadīm* refers not to emotional duration but to divine pre-eternity; *istiḳāma* is not moral composure but spiritual constancy—referencing Qurʾānic states (Q 41:30). In both, Ernst flattens sacred terrain into literary sentiment.

Translation as Misrepresentation: Four Case Studies from the *Diwān*

1. “Kill Me, my friends...” (*Uqtulūnī yā thiḳātī*)

Arabic (transliterated)

*Uqtulūnī yā thiqātī fī ḥubbiḥī,
fa-qatalī fī ḥubbiḥī ḥayātī.*

Ernst's translation

*Kill me, my friends, in his love,
for being killed in his love is my life.*

Critique

Ernst's version is literal but uninspired, flattening the spiritual paradox into a soft romanticism. The use of "his" instead of "His" (capital H) obscures the fact that this is a divine invocation, not a human entreaty. The line is not a metaphor for emotional loss; it is a *shahāda*—a declaration that annihilation in the Divine is the only real life. Our rendering retains the metaphysical force of *fa-qatalī fī ḥubbiḥī ḥayātī*, capturing both the imperative and the paradoxical reward of ecstatic martyrdom.

2. "I am the one I love..." (*Anā man uḥibbu wa-man uḥibbu anā huwa*)

Arabic (transliterated)

*Anā man uḥibbu wa-man uḥibbu anā huwa,
naḥnu rūḥānī ḥalalnā badanā.*

Ernst's translation

*I am the one I love, and the one I love is I.
We are two spirits dwelling in one body.*

Critique

Ernst's translation reduces this icon of Sufi metaphysics to a simple statement of mutual love. It ignores the Sufi doctrine of annihilation of the self (*fanā*) that reaches a level where one's self becomes so miniscule that all one sees is the Divine self, a state this verse so forcefully asserts. The poetic rhythm and theological daring of the original—*wa-man uḥibbu anā huwa*—are collapsed into a modern idiom that lacks reverence and resonance. The suggested rendering retains the balance of intimacy and ontological fusion, recognizing that this is not metaphorical cohabitation but the Sufi realization of *wahdat al-wujūd*.

3. "I saw my Lord with the eye of the heart..."

(*Ra'aytu Rabbī bi-ʿayni qalbī*)

Arabic (transliterated)

*Ra'aytu Rabbī bi-ʿayni qalbī
 jā-qultu: man anta? qāla: anta.*

Ernst's translation

*I saw my Lord with the eye of the heart.
 I said, "Who are you?" He said, "You."*

Critique

This verse is one of the most sublime moments of mystical unveiling in the Islamic tradition. Ernst's translation, though again literal, trivializes the theological gravity by choosing an informal tone—"You" instead of "Thou," losing the scriptural cadence. More importantly, his rendering does not cue the reader to recognize that this exchange enacts *fanāʾ* (the effacement of self), whereby the seer becomes the seen. Our version invokes the classical register and recovers the performative intimacy of *ḥaqq*, in which identity collapses and subsistence in Allah is realized.

Toward a Faithful Hermeneutic of Ḥallāj

What is at stake in the translation of Ḥallāj is not merely literary integrity, but spiritual truth. A faithful hermeneutic of the *Dīwān al-Ḥallāj* must be rooted in humility, reverence, and participation in the sacred logic that animates the text. This means recognizing that these are not poems in the modern Western sense, but invocations—words transmitted through fire, prayer, blood, and paradox. They are sacramental utterances, not aesthetic experiments.

Carl Ernst's *Hallaj: Poems of a Sufi Martyr* succeeds only in the most limited sense: as a contemporary academic introduction to a figure whose significance it fails to convey. Its secular framing, literary reductionism, and philosophical detachment make it unsuitable for readers who seek to encounter Ḥallāj as the tradition has known him—not as a lyricist of longing, but as a *shahīd al-ḥubb*, a martyr of divine love.

A truer translation would embrace the following principles:

- **Theological integrity:** preserving and highlighting terms such as *ḥaqq*, *fanāʾ*, *wujūd*, and *dhāt* without dilution.
- **Formal fidelity:** recognizing rhyme and meter not as dispensable devices but as mystical structures of repetition, rhythm, and divine echo.
- **Spiritual positioning:** translating not from the stance of the observer but from the humility of the disciple.

- **Contextual embeddedness:** keeping the poetry bound to its martyrial, liturgical, and Qur'ānic sources of authority.

In the final analysis, Ḥallāj is not a literary artifact to be dissected but a burning voice to be listened to, tremblingly. To hear him truly is to feel the nearness of the Divine speaking through a throat prepared for both poetry and the sword.

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Key Terms of the Qur'ān: A Second Critique

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In a previous review of *Key Terms of the Qur'ān: A Critical Dictionary*, it was noted that the work might have become a major contribution to Qur'ānic studies had its content fulfilled the promise of its title.¹ The dictionary was announced as “a historically oriented dictionary of key Qur'ānic terms and phrases,” yet much of it devolves into old and tiring discussions of pre-Qur'ānic precedents and Biblical parallels through Sinai's inconsistent engagement with the classical Arabic lexicons, whose treatment of Qur'ānic roots forms the bedrock of premodern semantic analysis. While *Key Terms of the Qur'an* gestures toward semantic history and occasionally cites lexicographical authorities such as al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad (d. 175/791) or Ibn Fāris (d. 395/1004), these references remain selective and largely subordinated to a self-constructed ad hoc framework of modern historical linguistics. There is little sustained engagement with the semantic principles operative in works like *Ma'ānī al-Qur'ān*, *Kitāb al-ʿAyn*, or even *Mufradāt al-fāz al-Qur'ān*, despite the fact that these works—often acknowledged as foundational in Qur'ānic contextualization—represent the earliest and most conceptually proximate efforts to articulate Qur'ānic

1. *Islamic Sciences*, Vol. 16 (Winter 2023) No. 2, pp. 168-171;
https://jisarchive.cis-ca.org/_media/pdf/2023/2/jis_16_2_key_terms.pdf, accessed April 22, 2025.