

## DIVERSE PERSONALITIES OF THE ECSTATIC SUFI AN-NŪRĪ ACCORDING TO THE EARLIEST SOURCES

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Besides the most prominent figures of the so-called intoxicated Sufis, Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī (d. 874) and al-Ḥusayn ibn Maṣṣūr al-Ḥallāğ (d. 922), a less-known early representative of ecstatic Sufis (*arbāb al-mawāğīd*) was Abū l-Ḥusayn an-Nūrī (d. 907/8). He was a contemporary and friend of al-Ġunayd (d. 910), an emblematic moderate or ‘sober’ Sufi, with whom he exchanged letters and engaged in discussions, although not without critical overtones, and with whom he maintained an intimate relationship, asking for his advice and seeking to benefit from his mystical knowledge. An-Nūrī is best known for his poems and short gnomic sayings, for the trial he underwent because of the accusations by Ġulām Ḥalīl (d. 888), and for bleeding to death due to the wounds caused by his ecstatic straying in a freshly cut field of reeds while repeating a line from a love poem. In modern scholarship, he is usually introduced as one of God’s ‘lovers’, who took pleasure in suffering from unrequited love that tempted them even into apparently blameworthy acts.<sup>1</sup>

His biography was reconstructed in detail by Richard Gramlich on the basis of dozens of sources ranging from the 10th to the 16th centuries (Gramlich 1995: 381–389). Needless to say, Gramlich’s contribution was enormous, especially because he gathered information from an extraordinarily wide range of sources in Arabic and Persian. However, when combining the information scattered in the numerous sources into a single account on an-Nūrī’s life, Gramlich did not wish to offer a diachronic perspective on the material, and he regarded the latest sources just as authentic as the earliest ones. Furthermore, if a certain event was described in different sources in different ways (for example, the inquisition against Sufis in the caliphal court provoked by Ġulām Ḥalīl), he supposed that the varying narratives corresponded to distinct occurrences (Gramlich 1995: 383). This can indeed be true, but it can equally be supposed that several elements, such as an-Nūrī’s denouncement to the religious authorities, the inquisition against him by Ġulām Ḥalīl, and some of his controversial or even scandalous utterances, became loosely associated in the course of transmission, and so the same event is narrated in the

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Knysh 2000: 60–63; Schimmel 1975: 60; Arberry 2008; cf. Nicholson 2002: 76–77.

different sources in diverse forms. The inconsistency of the narratives concerning an-Nūrī's life is most obvious in the case of his death. According to one narrative, it occurred in a reed bed, while, according to another, in the Šūnīziyya mosque, and the circumstances of his death are even more varying than its location (Gramlich 1995: 387–388).

Gramlich also collected and interpreted an-Nūrī's sayings, poems, and the anecdotes about him scattered in various sources. The lack of a diachronic perspective is equally characteristic of Gramlich's presentation of these texts. He outlined the personality and the teachings of an-Nūrī on the basis of the totality of the sources, without distinguishing between earlier and later, and without taking into account the contexts in which the traditions are narrated. Consequently, he offered a portrait that would never arise from any specific source and indeed never existed as such in any historical period.<sup>2</sup>

Naturally, another approach to an-Nūrī's figure can be offered, one that is intended here. It might be of interest to study the sources one by one, to compare the materials contained in them, and to realise the differences between the distinct pictures of an-Nūrī that emerge from each of them. The divergence of the sources manifests itself not only in the discrepancy of the materials they comprise but also in the different ways of presenting the limited number of traditions they share, as well as in the key Sufi technical terms they employ. Obviously, a short article does not make it possible to study all the available sources. Therefore, the following discussion is limited to seven of the earliest works in which traditions attributed to an-Nūrī appear. These are the following works: *Kitāb at-ta'arruf li-madhab ahl at-taṣawwuf* by Abū Bakr al-Kalābādī, *Kitāb al-luma' fī t-taṣawwuf* by Abū Naṣr as-Sarrāġ, *Ṭabaqāt aṣ-ṣūfiyya* by Abū 'Abd ar-Raḥmān as-Sulamī, *Hilyat al-awliyā'* by Abū Nu'aym al-Iṣfahānī, *ar-Risāla al-quṣayriyya* by Abū l-Qāsim al-Quṣayrī, *Kitāb al-bayād wa-s-sawād min ḥaṣā'ish ḥikam al-'ibād fī na't al-murīd wa-l-murād* by Abū l-Ḥasan as-Sīrġānī, and *Salwat al-'arīfīn wa-uns al-muštāqīn* by Abū Ḥalaf aṭ-Ṭabarī. Although exact dates are not available for most of the sources, all of them were written within a hundred years, between the late 10th and the late 11th centuries.

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Nwyia also treated the personality and teachings of an-Nūrī extensively, but his discussion was based almost entirely on a problematic treatise titled *Maqāmat al-qulūb* and attributed to an-Nūrī. The treatise, preserved in two 19th-century and two undated manuscripts in Istanbul, was published by Nwyia, who never called an-Nūrī's authorship in question, see Nwyia 1968, 1970: 316–348. In my opinion, the authenticity of the treatise is dubious for several reasons; first, its concepts, style, and structure are not compatible with the rest of the traditions attributed to an-Nūrī, and second, it shows marked similarities to other Sufi works that became popular from the 13th century onwards.

These sources contain altogether about a hundred traditions attributed to an-Nūrī, a quarter of which are poems, while the rest are short sayings and anecdotes.<sup>3</sup> None of the traditions are quoted in all seven compilations, or even in six of them. There are only two traditions that appear in five, and about ten that are quoted in four. More than half (59) of the traditions appear in only one of the studied sources. This raises questions about the authenticity of the traditions and the accuracy of the picture that emerges from each of the compilations, let alone the veritableness of an-Nūrī's portrayal as it can be reconstructed by combining all the information contained in the sources. Traditions collected in the earliest sources are not necessarily more authentic than those quoted in works compiled some decades later. The fact that a saying is quoted and attributed to an-Nūrī in various sources does not, in itself, prove that it is more original than one preserved in a single source only.

As for the textual overlap between the sources, the following observations can be made. The four earliest sources do not overlap remarkably (with the partial exception of the *Ḥilyat al-awliyā'* by Abū Nu'aym that has several parallels with the *Ṭabaqāt aṣ-ṣūfiyya* and the *Risāla quṣayriyya*). The number of shared traditions in any two of the four earliest sources is usually three or four, in the case of the *Kitāb at-ta'arruf* by al-Kalābādī and the *Ṭabaqāt aṣ-ṣūfiyya* by as-Sulamī it is only one, while the *Kitāb at-ta'arruf* and the *Ḥilyat al-awliyā'* have no identical tradition. However, half of the traditions collected in the *Ḥilyat al-awliyā'* are quoted in other early sources as well, namely in the *Ṭabaqāt aṣ-ṣūfiyya* and in the *Risāla quṣayriyya*. The two later sources, the *Kitāb al-bayāḍ wa-s-sawād* by as-Sīrḡānī and the *Salwat al-'arifīn* by aṭ-Ṭabarī, contain numerous traditions shared both between them and between some of the four earlier sources.<sup>4</sup> These two sources depend in great measure on the four earlier ones, especially on the *Risāla quṣayriyya* and the *Ṭabaqāt aṣ-ṣūfiyya*.<sup>5</sup> The exact relation between the four early sources is still under study; it is known, for example, that al-Quṣayrī depended heavily upon as-Sulamī (who was his teacher for a short period), and that the biographical part of the *Risāla quṣayriyya* is modelled upon the *Ṭabaqāt aṣ-ṣūfiyya*. However, this dependence is barely discernible in the case of the traditions attributed to an-Nūrī, for as-Sulamī's and al-Quṣayrī's works share only two such traditions. The same holds true, to a certain extent, for Abū

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<sup>3</sup> Exact numbers cannot be given, since various traditions occur in more or less divergent versions, and sometimes they are divided into parts in some of the sources while presented as one continuous text in others.

<sup>4</sup> The number of traditions shared between the *Kitāb al-bayāḍ wa-s-sawād* and the *Salwat al-'arifīn* is 15. The greatest overlap is between *Salwat al-'arifīn* and the *Risāla quṣayriyya* (17 traditions), but the coincidence between the *Kitāb al-bayāḍ wa-s-sawād* and the *Kitāb al-luma'* (13 traditions), or that between the *Salwat al-'arifīn* and the *Ṭabaqāt aṣ-ṣūfiyya* (10 traditions) is also considerable.

<sup>5</sup> See the discussion by Gerhard Böwering and Bilal Orfali on the sources of the collection in aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Salwa* 24–26.

Nu‘aym, who studied under as-Sulamī for a longer period and relied upon as-Sulamī’s *Ṭabaqāt aṣ-ṣūfiyya* when composing his monumental *Ḥilyat al-awliyā’*. Conversely, Abū Nu‘aym adopted only four traditions attributed to an-Nūrī from the *Ṭabaqāt aṣ-ṣūfiyya*.

## 1 A short description of the sources

### 1.1 *Al-Kalābādī* (d. 990 or 995), *Kitāb at-ta‘arruf li-maḏhab ahl at-taṣawwuf*

The *Kitāb at-ta‘arruf* is one of the earliest sources in which an-Nūrī’s ideas are preserved. It is a polemical work explaining the basic tenets of Sufism, while also defending the Sufis against suspicion and attacks by those who would denounce them as heretics. Little is known about the life of its author, Abū Bakr al-Kalābādī, besides that he was a Ḥanafī jurist and wrote a commentary on the traditions of the Prophet, which survives in various manuscripts.<sup>6</sup> According to Arberry, he was a disciple of Fāris,<sup>7</sup> and al-Kalābādī indeed quoted him several times in the *Kitāb at-ta‘arruf*, introducing the quotations with the remark “I heard Fāris saying”, which proves the direct relationship between them (Arberry 1935: XIV–XV, n. 3). Al-Kalābādī might not have been a mystic himself, but evidently had first-hand knowledge on Sufism, and did not refrain from promulgating even its more controversial tendencies. An-Nūrī is mentioned in the *Kitāb at-ta‘arruf* about twenty times, and the relatively large proportion of poems among these traditions is characteristic of al-Kalābādī’s collection. It comprises ten poems, nine sayings, and two anecdotes.

### 1.2 *As-Sarrāğ* (d. 988), *Kitāb al-luma‘*

Although the author, Abū Naṣr ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Alī as-Sarrāğ, was a native of Ṭūs in Khorasan, he exposed the teachings of mainly Iraqī Sufis, to whom he was personally related.<sup>8</sup> He was a disciple of Ğa‘far al-Ḥuldī (d. 959) from al-Ğunayd’s circle, and acted as an overseer of the mystics associated with the Šūnīziyya mosque in Baghdad. The *Kitāb al-luma‘* is an apologetic work, and its peculiarity is that it discusses in much detail controversial mystical concepts and practices, ecstatic behaviour, apparently blasphemous utterances (*ṣaṭaḥāt*), heterodox sects, and the errors committed by them. While the *Kitāb al-luma‘* does not include a biographical part, because of the accusations of heresy an-Nūrī had to face, it dedicates a chapter

<sup>6</sup> For the scarce information available about his life and works, see Arberry 1935: IX–XV.

<sup>7</sup> Arberry most probably meant Fāris Abū l-Qāsim ad-Dīnawarī, a disciple of al-Ḥallāğ.

<sup>8</sup> On as-Sarrāğ’s life, see the introduction to the *Kitāb al-luma‘* by Nicholson, III–V; cf. Knysh 2000: 118–120.

to him.<sup>9</sup> Besides that, numerous sayings and poems attributed to an-Nūrī are scattered in the book, quoting altogether some 30 traditions related to him.

### 1.3 *As-Sulamī* (d. 1021), *Ṭabaqāt aṣ-ṣūfiyya*

*As-Sulamī*'s biographical work became a model for later books presenting the generations of mystics in chronological order.<sup>10</sup> Unlike the manuals composed by al-Kalābādī and as-Sarrāġ, the *Ṭabaqāt aṣ-ṣūfiyya* is not a theoretical work but a biographical lexicon comprising very concise biographies of 105 Sufis, accompanied by a selection of their sayings. *As-Sulamī* was initiated into Sufism by Abū Sahl aṣ-Ṣu'lūkī, and invested with the Sufi cloak (*ḥirqa*) by Abū l-Qāsim an-Naṣrābādī, a disciple of Abū Bakr aṣ-Ṣiblī from Baghdad. He later became the head of a small Sufi lodge in Nishapur. The *Ṭabaqāt aṣ-ṣūfiyya* contains a biographical entry on an-Nūrī, collecting some 15 traditions related to him.

### 1.4 *Abū Nu'aym al-Iṣfahānī* (d. 1038), *Ḥilyat al-awliyā'*

The *Ḥilyat al-awliyā'* is a monumental biographical work by Abū Nu'aym, who was a *ḥadīth* scholar and not a Sufi master.<sup>11</sup> He studied under *as-Sulamī* in Nishapur, and, especially in the tenth volume of the *Ḥilyat al-awliyā'*, adopted a considerable number of Sufi traditions from *as-Sulamī*'s *Ṭabaqāt aṣ-ṣūfiyya*. The same applies to the biographical entry on an-Nūrī, which includes 17 traditions (sayings, stories, and poems), four of which also appear in *as-Sulamī*'s *Ṭabaqāt aṣ-ṣūfiyya*,<sup>12</sup> and one in the *Kitāb al-luma'* by as-Sarrāġ.<sup>13</sup>

### 1.5 *Al-Quṣayrī*, *Risāla* (written in 1045)

Abū l-Qāsim 'Abd al-Karīm al-Quṣayrī (d. 1072), a Sunni scholar and Sufi master belonging to the tradition of Baghdad, wrote his famous *Risāla* in 1045.<sup>14</sup> It summa-

<sup>9</sup> The section on an-Nūrī is missing from the edition by Nicholson but was published in 1947 by Arberry from a manuscript preserved in the Bankipur Library; see as-Sarrāġ, *Luma'* [ed. Arberry].

<sup>10</sup> On *as-Sulamī*'s life, see Knysh 2000: 125–127. On the *Ṭabaqāt aṣ-ṣūfiyya*, see Mojadedi 2001: 9–39.

<sup>11</sup> On his life and work, see Knysh 2000: 128–129. On the *Ḥilyat al-awliyā'*, see Mojadedi 2001: 41–67.

<sup>12</sup> *as-Sulamī*, *Ṭabaqāt* 167–168 (on an-Nūrī's and al-Ġunayd's reaction to illness), 165–166 (on an-Nūrī looking at a boy in Baghdad), 166 (on a saying about love).

<sup>13</sup> Sarrāġ, *Luma'* [ed. Nicholson] 327 (on an-Nūrī demanding a miracle from God).

<sup>14</sup> On al-Quṣayrī and especially on his *Risāla*, see Alexander Knysh's introduction to his English translation; al-Qushayri, *Epistle* xix–xxvii; see also Knysh, 2000: 60–63; Algar 1992;

raises the Sufi doctrines, discusses their technical vocabulary, and contains a biographical part presenting 83 early masters, including an-Nūrī, in chronological order. It quotes about 30 traditions related to an-Nūrī, some in the biographical entry on him and some in the theoretical part of the manual. The *Risāla quṣayriyya* is one of the most well-known Sufi works until today.

1.6 *Abū l-Ḥasan as-Sīrġānī* (d. 1077), *Kitāb al-bayāḍ wa-s-sawād*

The *Kitāb al-bayāḍ wa-s-sawād min ḥaṣā'is ḥikam al-'ibād fī na't al-murīd wa-l-murād* is a handbook on basic Sufi concepts, similar to the *Kitāb at-ta'arruf*, the *Kitāb al-luma'*, and the theoretical part of the *Risāla quṣayriyya*. It contains some 40 traditions related to an-Nūrī, most of which, however, were already collected in the earlier sources. Little is known about its author's life and works. As-Sīrġānī was a disciple of Abū Ismā'īl Aḥmad aṣ-Ṣūfī, and after the death of his master, he undertook the guidance of his own disciples in a *ribāṭ* in Sīrġān.<sup>15</sup>

1.7 *Aṭ-Ṭabarī* (d. c. 1077), *Salwat al-'ārifīn* (written in 1067)

The *Salwat al-'ārifīn wa-uns al-muštāqīn* was compiled by Abū Ḥalaf aṭ-Ṭabarī, a scholar of Ṣāfi'ī law, who lived in Nishapur.<sup>16</sup> Apparently, the *Salwat al-'ārifīn* was his only book related to Sufism. It was written in 1067 on the request of Abū 'Alī Ḥassān ibn Sa'īd al-Manī'ī (d. 1071), the leader of the *futuwwa* confraternity in Nishapur, who patronised various religious institutions and Sufi communities. The *Salwat al-'ārifīn* is partially patterned on the *Risāla quṣayriyya*, and includes Sufi biographies based on the *Ṭabaqāt aṣ-ṣūfiyya* and the *Risāla quṣayriyya*. It contains more than 40 traditions related to an-Nūrī, though only seven of them were not collected in the other sources discussed above.

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Mojaddedi 2000; 2001: 99–124, and the entire volume 2:1 of the *Journal of Sufi Studies* (2013) dedicated to al-Quṣayrī. For a list of al-Quṣayrī's published works, see Gramlich 1989: 17.

<sup>15</sup> On as-Sīrġānī's life and work, see the introduction by Bilal Orfali and Nada Saab to as-Sīrġānī, *Bayāḍ* 1–5.

<sup>16</sup> On aṭ-Ṭabarī's life and collection, see the introduction by Gerhard Böwering and Bilal Orfali to aṭ-Ṭabarī *Salwa* 1–14.

## 2 An-Nūrī's biography

### 2.1 According to al-Kalābāḏī's Kitāb at-ta'arruf

Unlike the rest of the sources, the *Kitāb at-ta'arruf* does not contain biographical entries, however, some sporadic information about an-Nūrī can be gathered from two anecdotes, both of which feature al-Ġunayd. In one of the stories, an-Nūrī experienced a long ecstasy in the Šūnīziyya mosque, after which al-Ġunayd explained that ecstasies were saved by God from religious laxity in their state of ecstasy (al-Kalābāḏī, *Ta'arruf* 9). In the other story, al-Ġunayd addressed an-Nūrī with the honorific title “commander of the hearts”, asking him to speak, and when an-Nūrī rebuked him for talking deceptively to the people, al-Ġunayd did not deny that (al-Kalābāḏī *Ta'arruf* 112). Both traditions can be considered as apologetic: the first one defends an-Nūrī – or, in general, the intoxicated Sufis – against the charges of religious laxity, while the second one places him above the moderate Sufī al-Ġunayd, whom an-Nūrī reproaches in the presence of his disciples.

### 2.2 According to as-Sarrāġ's Kitāb al-luma'

Although the *Kitāb al-luma'* does not contain a proper biographical section, it dedicates some chapters to controversial Sufis, such as Abū Yazīd al-Biṣṭāmī, aš-Šiblī, and Abū Ḥamza. Among these chapters, one on an-Nūrī is included, characterising him as follows: “He was one of the ecstasies (*wāġidūn*) and one of those who spoke with subtle allusions (*ahl al-išārāt al-laṭīfa*). He has various sayings and a lot of poems” (as-Sarrāġ, *Luma'* [ed. Arberry] 6). Most remarkably, the chapter narrates a version of the Ġulām Ḥalīl incident, according to which an-Nūrī was accused before the caliph for claiming that God was in passionate love with him, and that God was with him in his home. Furthermore, he allegedly said blasphemous things when he heard a muezzin's call to prayer, but answered with “*labbayka*” (‘here I am’) to a dog's barking (as-Sarrāġ, *Luma'* [ed. Arberry] 5). His relationship with al-Ġunayd is also emphasised: the *Kitāb al-luma'* contains a short quotation from a letter written by an-Nūrī to al-Ġunayd, praising him for his clarity of expression. It also mentions their correspondence on the topic of tribulation (*balā'*), and quotes al-Ġunayd reproving an-Nūrī for requesting a miracle from God. Finally, it recounts an-Nūrī's death in the reedbed (as-Sarrāġ, *Luma'* [ed. Nicholson] 239, 290, 327, 353).

### 2.3 According to as-Sulamī's Ṭabaqāt aš-šūfiyya

The *Ṭabaqāt aš-šūfiyya* is a biographical lexicon of Sufis, and, as such, provides some basic information about an-Nūrī. It mentions the various forms of his name (Abū l-Ḥusayn an-Nūrī Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad or Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad), his

place of birth (Baghdad), family's origin (Buğšūr), teachers (Sarī as-Saqaṭī and Muḥammad ibn 'Alī al-Qaṣṣāb), and the year of his death (907/8). As-Sulamī characterises an-Nūrī as follows: “No one was better than him in the [mystical] path (*tarīqa*), and no one was more brilliant in speech than him” (as-Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt* 164). As-Sulamī did not expound upon the circumstances of an-Nūrī's death, nor did he refer to his conflicts with the religious authorities. The traditions collected in the *Ṭabaqāt aṣ-ṣūfiyya* are fairly moderate, most of them contain no provocative or suspicious detail, except for the anecdote about an-Nūrī flirting with a young boy in Baghdad (as-Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt* 165–166). Similar to the *Kitāb at-ta'arruf*, a certain tension between al-Ġunayd and an-Nūrī is attestable in the *Ṭabaqāt aṣ-ṣūfiyya*, in a story relating their different ways of behaviour during illness. However, the apparent contradiction is readily dissolved by poems suggesting that both of their reactions were correct.

#### 2.4 According to Abū Nu'aym's *Ḥilyat al-awliyā'*

The *Ḥilyat al-awliyā'* is also a biographical work, in which the details revealed on an-Nūrī's background are even more limited than in the *Ṭabaqāt aṣ-ṣūfiyya*. Abū Nu'aym mentions an-Nūrī's full name (Abū l-Ḥusayn Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad, known as an-Nūrī and as Ibn Baġawī) and teachers (“he met Aḥmad ibn Abī l-Ḥawārī and he accompanied as-Sarī as-Saqaṭī”), and characterises him as a person whose “healing tongue speaks with clarity about the inner hearts (secrets) of those who turn towards the Creator” (Abū Nu'aym, *Ḥilya* X, 249).

Abū Nu'aym relates a version of the Ġulām Ḥalīl incident, which is not identical with the one quoted in the *Kitāb al-luma'*. According to this version, when Ġulām Ḥalīl accused the Sufis of heresy, the caliph gave order to decapitate them. An-Nūrī then stepped forward, offering himself to be killed first, and saying that he preferred his companions to live longer, even if only for a few moments. The execution was suspended, and the caliph commanded the judge (Ismā'īl ibn Ishāq) to clarify the matter. He posed questions about Islamic law to an-Nūrī, which he readily answered, and so the Sufis were released. Abū Nu'aym also reports that during the unstable years of persecution provoked by Ġulām Ḥalīl, an-Nūrī settled in Raqqa, withdrawing from the people. By the time he returned to Baghdad, he had already lost his followers and companions. He refused to talk because his eyesight was weak, his body exhausted, and his nourishment restricted to the minimum (Abū Nu'aym, *Ḥilya* X, 249–250).

Similar to the *Ṭabaqāt aṣ-ṣūfiyya*, the *Ḥilyat al-awliyā'* also includes the story about an-Nūrī flirting with a young man in Baghdad. The relationship between an-Nūrī and al-Ġunayd manifests itself in the anecdote about their contradictory behaviour during illness, in the latter's reproach of an-Nūrī for demanding a miracle, and in an-Nūrī's letter to al-Ġunayd asking him about a mystical matter. In the light of

these three traditions, an-Nūrī seems to be of a somehow subservient position to al-Ġunayd.

### 2.5 *According to the Risāla quṣayriyya*

In this work, the biographical data concerning an-Nūrī are limited to his name (Abū l-Ḥusayn Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad an-Nūrī), date of death (907/8), place of birth and formation (Baghdad), place of origin (Baġwa), prominent teachers (as-Sarī as-Saqāṭī and Aḥmad ibn Abī l-Ḥawārī),<sup>17</sup> and most important colleague (al-Ġunayd). The author also remarks on an-Nūrī's personality, characterising him as "of great importance", and describing him as a person of "gentle attitude and speech" (al-Quṣayrī, *Risāla* [ed. Zurayq] 438–439).

Al-Quṣayrī narrates the Ġulām Ḥalīl episode in a version that roughly corresponds with the one by Abū Nu'aym, though adding some extra details. For example, the author says that al-Ġunayd escaped from the death sentence – and thus refused to share the destiny of fellow Sufis – by claiming that he was a jurist. The version of the tradition quoted in the *Risāla quṣayriyya* contains the names of the other Sufis detained with an-Nūrī. On the other hand, it omits the name of the judge (al-Quṣayrī, *Risāla* [ed. Zurayq] 248–249). Similarly to the *Kitāb al-luma'*, the *Risāla quṣayriyya* also quotes an-Nūrī's blasphemous reactions to the muezzin's voice and the dog's barking, without, however, associating these allegations with the charges brought against him before the religious authorities (al-Quṣayrī, *Risāla* [ed. Zurayq] 258–259).

The positions of al-Ġunayd and an-Nūrī in relation to each other is balanced in the *Risāla quṣayriyya*. Al-Ġunayd's rebuke of an-Nūrī's opinion on miracles is counterbalanced by revealing al-Ġunayd's full appreciation of an-Nūrī,<sup>18</sup> and also by quoting a tradition that equates them as the most perfect servants of God.<sup>19</sup> Finally, the *Risāla quṣayriyya* gives an account of an-Nūrī's death, but, in addition to what can be found in the *Kitāb al-luma'*, also quotes his last words (al-Quṣayrī, *Risāla* [ed. Zurayq] 306–307).

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<sup>17</sup> The list of an-Nūrī's teachers, as presented in the *Ṭabaqāt aṣ-ṣūfiyya* by as-Sulamī, is slightly different. As-Sulamī does not regard Aḥmad ibn Abī l-Ḥawārī as an-Nūrī's teacher (he mentions only as-Sarī as-Saqāṭī and 'Muḥammad ibn 'Alī al-Qaṣṣāb), although he remarks that an-Nūrī "saw Aḥmad ibn Abī l-Ḥawārī" without explaining what that actually means. Since Aḥmad ibn Abī l-Ḥawārī was the foremost Syrian Sufi master of his time, in the later tradition concerning an-Nūrī, he probably took the place of the less known Muḥammad ibn 'Alī al-Qaṣṣāb.

<sup>18</sup> "Al-Ġunayd said: 'Since an-Nūrī died, no one has given a report about the true reality of trustworthiness'; al-Quṣayrī, *Risāla* [ed. Zurayq] 439.

<sup>19</sup> Abū Aḥmad al-Maġāzilī said: "I have never seen a more perfect servant of God than an-Nūrī.' He was asked: 'Not even al-Ġunayd?' He replied: 'Not even al-Ġunayd'; al-Quṣayrī, *Risāla* [ed. Zurayq] 439.

## 2.6 According to as-Sīrġānī's Kitāb al-bayāḍ wa-s-sawād

The *Kitāb al-bayāḍ wa-s-sawād* does not contain individual biographical sections (with the exception of seven prominent Sufis), but enumerates some 70 other mystics according to the geographical areas in which they were active. An-Nūrī is mentioned among the sheiks of Iraq in the following words: “He was one of the sincere ones of his time, and one of those who spoke about the Real [God] in each of the diverse ways” (as-Sīrġānī, *Bayāḍ* 251). With regard to an-Nūrī's name, as-Sīrġānī remarked: “He used to devote himself to the service of God in a hermitage in the desert, and the people got up to look at him at night, and, behold, light (*nūr*) was radiating from his hermitage, and he was called an-Nūrī (‘the luminous’) because of that” (as-Sīrġānī, *Bayāḍ* 16–17).

## 2.7 According to aṭ-Ṭabarī's Salwat al-‘arīfīn

The *Salwat al-‘arīfīn* contains a biographical entry on an-Nūrī, written on the basis of the *Ṭabaqāt aṣ-ṣūfiyya* and the *Risāla quṣayriyya*. It mentions his name (Abū l-Ḥusayn Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad an-Nūrī), place of birth and formation (Baghdad), place of origin (Khorasan), teachers (as-Sarī as-Saqāṭī and Aḥmad ibn Abī l-Ḥawārī), most important colleague (al-Ġunayd), and date of death (907/8). As for an-Nūrī's general characterization, aṭ-Ṭabarī limited himself to remark that an-Nūrī was one of the important Sufi masters.<sup>20</sup> The traditions scattered through the work include the Ġulām Ḥalīl incident (in the version narrated by Abū Nu‘aym and al-Quṣayrī), an account of al-Nūrī's death and last words (in the version narrated by as-Sarrāġ), two traditions on his relationship with al-Ġunayd (their behaviour during illness and al-Ġunayd's words of esteem), and the episode with the young man in Baghdad (as-Sīrġānī, *Bayāḍ* 124, 450, 489–491).

## 3 An-Nūrī's main themes

### 3.1 In al-Kalābāḍī's Kitāb at-ta‘arruf

Nearly a quarter of the traditions collected in the *Kitāb at-ta‘arruf* are related to the contemplation of God (al-Kalābāḍī, *Ta‘arruf* 73, 78, 87). While, in later Sufi terminology, the term for contemplation is usually *muṣāhada*, in the traditions attributed to an-Nūrī in the *Kitāb at-ta‘arruf*, *muṣāhada* and *ṣuhūd* seem to be practically synonymous; the meaning of the words, in any case, overlap. Basically, *ṣuhūd* means

<sup>20</sup> For the biographical entry, see aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Salwa* 489.

‘seeing’, while *mušāhada* covers a wider range of meanings: ‘seeing with one’s own eyes, sensory perception, witnessing’, and, in Sufi usage, it mostly refers to ‘insight, mental perception’. An-Nūrī’s poems apparently play with these shades of meaning, employing the two terms once in this and once in the other sense, while conveying both connotations to a certain extent.<sup>21</sup>

The other frequently treated subjects are ecstasy (*wağd*) and absence (*ğayb* or *ğayba*) (al-Kalābādī, *Ta’arruf* 9, 82, 87, 88). The latter concept might refer to God’s hidden or unseen world, or to the mystic’s withdrawal from the world as a means of approaching God.

### 3.2 In as-Sarrāğ’s *Kitāb al-luma’*

The central topic in an-Nūrī’s poems and sayings recorded in the *Kitāb al-luma’* is love (*maḥabba*), including passionate or even carnal love (*‘išq*).<sup>22</sup> As-Sarrāğ presents an-Nūrī as a Sufi who has not attained spiritual perfection and thus unable to control his passion for God. Nonetheless, as-Sarrāğ does not criticise or refute an-Nūrī’s words and acts. In as-Sarrāğ’s view, an-Nūrī’s apparent imperfection does not exclude him from the circle of respectable and fully acceptable Sufi masters.

### 3.3 In as-Sulamī’s *Ṭabaqāt aš-šūfiyya*

The traditions collected by as-Sulamī and attributed to an-Nūrī are so diverse that no central topic can be highlighted in them. They include several definitions of Sufism, sayings on intimacy, love, and looking at something carefully (referring either to intellectual contemplation or gazing lustfully at another person), a poem on affliction, and another one on uncontrolled thoughts (as-Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt* 166, 167, 169). In comparison with the other collections, the traditions collected in the *Ṭabaqāt aš-šūfiyya* employ the fewest number of Sufi technical terms, which might imply that these traditions originate from an earlier period of Sufism when its terminology was not yet established.

### 3.4 In Abū Nu‘aym’s *Ḥilyat al-awliyā’*

A great number of the traditions quoted in the *Ḥilyat al-awliyā’* are related to the inner heart (*sirr*) (Abū Nu‘aym, *Hilya* X, 250, 253, 254); the word *sirr* appears some

<sup>21</sup> See especially al-Kalābādī, *Ta’arruf* 78, 87.

<sup>22</sup> as-Sarrāğ, *Luma’* [ed. Nicholson] 59, 125, 248, 304–305. The poem on p. 248 imitates the *nasīb* of the pre-Islamic *qasīda*, expressing longing and nostalgia. The version of the poem quoted on p. 125 is also included in the *Rawḍat al-qulūb* by aš-Šayzarī among secular love poems; aš-Šayzarī, *Rawḍa* 221. See also as-Sarrāğ, *Luma’* [ed. Arberry], 5 (on passionate love between an-Nūrī and God).

twenty times in the traditions. The inner heart, the organ of contemplating God, is the core part of the heart (*qalb*). While it is also open to people, the very centre of the inner heart (*sirr as-sirr*) is accessible exclusively to God. The word *sirr*, while also meaning ‘secret’, is generally employed in Sufi usage to denote the intimate content of each mystical state, which is a secret between God and the mystic and should not be communicated to the world. The double meaning of the word invites mystics to produce puns, especially in poetry, and an-Nūrī took full advantage of that possibility.

### 3.5 In the *Risāla quṣayriyya*

An-Nūrī’s sayings in the *Risāla quṣayriyya* include several definitions of Sufism, some of which express sharp criticism of the contemporary situation (al-Quṣayrī, *Risāla* [ed. Zurayq] 278, 281, 282, 341, 439). The terms most frequently employed in the traditions related to an-Nūrī are heart (*qalb*), contemplation (*muṣāhada*), and ecstasy (*wağd*), which also define the most important topics of his sayings. Notably, the *Risāla quṣayriyya* is the only collection that does not cite any of an-Nūrī’s poems, contrary to al-Quṣayrī’s general method of illustrating the clarified concepts also with poems. He narrates a relatively large number of anecdotes about an-Nūrī, some of which seem to be in direct contradiction with others.<sup>23</sup> The same holds true to some of his sayings.<sup>24</sup>

### 3.6 In *as-Sīrğānī’s* Kitāb al-bayāḍ wa-s-sawād

The most remarkable peculiarity of this collection is that it includes a chapter on ‘looking’ (*naẓar*), which is a double entendre: it may refer to looking at another person lustfully (which is prohibited), or it may stand for ‘considering, studying’ mystical or other branches of knowledge (which is permitted or even commendable). In the first sense of the word, it alludes to an issue that is considered to be one of the major vices of Sufis, namely intimate relationships with handsome young men.<sup>25</sup> An-Nūrī is mentioned frequently in this chapter, and additional traditions related to ‘looking’ (in both senses of the word) and attributed to him are also scattered in other parts of the book (as-Sīrğānī, *Bayāḍ* 16–17, 236–240, 251). The overall picture that emerges from these traditions is intricate. On the one hand, an-Nūrī proves to be a person much exposed to the temptation of looking at young boys, which he might even find irresistible. On the other hand, when reading the thoughts of another

<sup>23</sup> For example, the anecdotes about his attitude towards miracles contradict each other; al-Quṣayrī, *Risāla* [ed. Maḥmūd] 575.

<sup>24</sup> See al-Quṣayrī, *Risāla* [ed. Zurayq] 287, 324.

<sup>25</sup> See as-Suhrawardī, *Ādāb* 39, 42; al-Quṣayrī, *Risāla* [ed. Maḥmūd] 627–628; aš-Ša‘rānī, *Anwār* I, 74.

person, he discerns the latter's inclination towards such *naẓar*, and advises him to desist from it, describing it as “the worst veil [separating man from God]”.

The *Kitāb al-bayāḍ wa-s-sawād* also contains traditions attributed to an-Nūrī on the concept of *murīd* (‘seeker’, the disciple of the Sufī master who wants to reach to the closeness of God), which are unattested in the above-discussed collections. The attribution of these traditions to an-Nūrī seems to be dubious. The *Kitāb al-bayāḍ wa-s-sawād* collected a relatively large number of traditions related to this issue,<sup>26</sup> most probably since the concept of *irāda* is marked in its title (*Kitāb al-bayāḍ wa-s-sawād min ḥaṣā’iṣ ḥikam al-’ibād fī na’at al-murīd wa-l-murād*), specifying it as a central theme in the book. It might be suggested that the author, as-Sīrġānī, attributed some anonymous sayings concerning this matter to well-known Sufī masters, including an-Nūrī.

### 3.7 In aṭ-Ṭabarī’s *Salwat al-’ārifīn*

The *Salwat al-’ārifīn* contains nearly 40 traditions attributed to an-Nūrī, most of which are taken from the *Risāla quṣayriyya* and the *Ṭabaqāt aṣ-ṣūfiyya*. While their overlap with the *Kitāb al-bayāḍ wa-s-sawād* is significant (14 traditions shared between them), the topic of ‘looking’ so prominent in that work is missing almost completely from the *Salwat al-’ārifīn*. Nonetheless, it cannot be claimed that aṭ-Ṭabarī aims to construct a one-sided image of an-Nūrī, eliminating his controversial aspects. On the contrary, the author also quotes some contentious sayings attributed to an-Nūrī.<sup>27</sup>

## 4 An-Nūrī’s poems

The authenticity of the poems attributed to an-Nūrī is even less certain than that of the sayings or other types of traditions. From the 26 known poems, 18 (that is, 69 per cent) are quoted in only one of the sources, while the same proportion is *circa* 50 per cent in the case of the other traditions. Some of the poems are imbedded in the context of stories, for example in the anecdote about al-Ġunayd’s and an-Nūrī’s illness,<sup>28</sup> or in the one about an-Nūrī flirting with a young man in Baghdad, in which

<sup>26</sup> Chapter 55 of this book, titled *Bāb al-murīd wa-l-murād*, explains that the *murīd* is the Sufī disciple who seeks God from his own will, while the *murād* is the Sufī whom God attracts to Himself irrespectively of his actions; as-Sīrġānī, *Bayāḍ* 308–311.

<sup>27</sup> On love, see aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Salwa* 198; on a quasi-blasphemous utterance, see *ibid*, 156.

<sup>28</sup> Abū Nu’aym, *Hilya* X, 252; as-Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt* 167–168; as-Sīrġānī, *Bayāḍ* 226–227; aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Salwa* 490–491.

case the poem is recited by the youngster.<sup>29</sup> When a narrative context exists, their association with an-Nūrī is more plausibly established. These poems are quoted in three or four of the sources, while poems without such context appear in only one or two of them. It might be suggested that anonymous poems were ascribed to an-Nūrī because of his supposed personal sensitivity to poetry – even his death was caused by ecstasy induced by a love poem – and because of his reputation as a poet.

The lyrical character of an-Nūrī is particularly remarked in al-Kalābādī's *Kitāb at-ta'arruf* and Abū Nu'aym's *Ḥilyat al-awliyā'*, in both of which half of the traditions attributed to him are poems. This is in sharp contrast with al-Quṣayrī's *Risāla*, which does not cite a single poem by an-Nūrī, even though it includes poems by other authors. It contains about 30 traditions, which is a third more than what can be found in al-Kalābādī's or Abū Nu'aym's collections. From among the sources studied here, as-Sulamī's *Ṭabaqāt aṣ-ṣūfiyya* quotes the fewest (15) traditions related to an-Nūrī, a quarter (4) of which are poems. As for the rest of the sources, all of them contain 30 or more traditions (*Kitāb al-luma'*: 30; *Salwat al-ārifīn*: 37; *Kitāb al-bayāḍ wa-s-sawād*: 42), but the proportion of poems among them varies between 10 and 20 per cent. Conversely, the short biographical entry on an-Nūrī in the *Kitāb al-luma'* characterises him as having written "various sayings and a lot of poems" (as-Sarrāğ, *Luma'* [ed. Arberry] 7).

Considering these numbers, the discrepancy between an-Nūrī's different portrayals, as reconstructed from the divergent sources, is striking. He appears to be a poet on the basis of the *Kitāb at-ta'arruf* and the *Ḥilyat al-awliyā'*, a person engaged in poetry according to the *Ṭabaqāt aṣ-ṣūfiyya*, someone who composed "a lot of poems" (only five of which are quoted) considering the *Kitāb al-luma'*, and a person who wrote some poems according to the *Salwat al-ārifīn* and the *Kitāb al-bayāḍ wa-s-sawād*. However, in the light of the *Risāla quṣayriyya*, he never composed a single poem, and his affinity to poetry manifests itself solely – as a complete surprise for the reader – in the story of his death.

## 5 Conclusion

The portrayals of an-Nūrī, as recorded in the different sources, are inconsistent and seem to depend on the authors' main motives for compiling their works. Al-Kalābādī presents an-Nūrī as an enraptured lover of God, but he omits the accusations and trials an-Nūrī had to face in the caliphal court precisely because of that. Presumably, al-Kalābādī's aim was to show that Sufism is compatible with orthodox Islam. As-Sarrāğ, however, who includes the Sufis' controversial and scandalous sayings in his

<sup>29</sup> Abū Nu'aym, *Ḥilya* X, 254; as-Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt* 165–166; as-Sīrğānī, *Bayāḍ* 240; aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Salwa* 489.

book, treating them as a heterodox sect, does not hesitate to record the legal procedures. He explicitly places an-Nūrī among the not fully accomplished Sufis unable to control their passion for God. As-Sulamī, on the other hand, tends to eliminate the traces of nonconformity from an-Nūrī's portrayal, introducing him as a rational thinker, who was fond of creating formalist categories and definitions. Themes such as ecstasy, love, intoxication, or drunkenness are excluded from the text. Even the poems he quotes are connected to affliction, pain, or theoretical problems like the nature of cognition. An-Nūrī's portrayal, as sketched by Abū Nu'aym, is multifaceted: the poems he quotes are partly emotional and partly intellectual, though the eccentric aspects of his life are also included in the compilation. Similarly, al-Quṣayrī presents an-Nūrī as a composite character, counterbalancing his scandalous acts and utterances with moderate and perfectly acceptable traditions, the latter of which may even outweigh the former. Conforming to the didactic purpose of al-Quṣayrī, his book lacks the ambiguous mystical poems and abounds in instructive anecdotes featuring a clear moral message. As-Sīrġānī and aṭ-Tabarī were less original compilers than the earlier authors, that is, the number of new traditions they collected is quite limited. Besides, the authorship of these traditions is doubtful, some of them may have been attributed to an-Nūrī merely because the word *nūr* occurs in them. However, it is worth noting the great number of 'frivolous' anecdotes collected by al-Sīrġānī, which attest to an-Nūrī's somehow fallible character, and which make him tangible and familiar to medieval and modern readers alike.

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