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Language

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DREAMS ARE MESSAGES from the deep. Thus begins Denis Villeneuve’s adaptation of Frank Herbert’s *Dune*. In his dream visions, Paul Atreides repeatedly imagines his own death and the death of others. In his encounter with the Reverend Mother’s gom jabbar, for instance, he confronts a scorched corpse, warriors kneeling in defeat, and a bloody crysknife, the fabled knife of Arrakis made from the tooth of Shai-Hulud. Lady Jessica’s telepathic liturgy instructs Paul during his ordeal to not fear: “Fear is the little death that brings obliteration.” For if Paul were to succumb to the fear of death in his dream

visions, it would surely herald his annihilation. Significantly, the crysknife, a cipher and Death Maker, appears in all of Paul’s visions, including when he envisages his own death after first breathing in the spice and, again under its sway, when he sees a burning pile of corpses foretelling “a holy war spreading across the universe like an unquenchable fire.”

In these visions, Paul travels along an isthmus (*barzakb*), encountering the dead across time and space. Such an isthmus was conceptualized by the medieval mystic Ibn ‘Arabi as a space between the existent and the nonexistent, the known and the unknown. All humans engage with this “imaginal” world (*‘alam al-mithal*, a term that appears in Herbert’s novels as well); it is made manifest in the realm of sleep and dream, modes of being known as the lesser death. Separating waking and sleeping life, the living and the dead, the corporeal and the spiritual, the *barzakb* is a liminal zone, the dividing line between our world and *al-ghayb*. Dreams allow us to travel to the edge of the domain of *al-ghayb*, which helps elucidate Paul Atreides’s status as the foretold *lisan al-ghayb* (Lisan al Gaib).

The term has a complex history, only partly captured by Herbert’s definition (in the voice of Lady Jessica) as “the voice from the outer world.” *Al-ghayb* — the unknowable, the unseen, the unthought, the hidden mystery — exceeds the domain of knowledge. Within the Islamic religious sciences, *al-ghayb* is a somewhat technical term referring to that which is inaccessible to human knowledge, both to reason and the senses, and hidden in the divine. In the Qur’an, God alone “knows the unseen [*al-ghayb*],” disclosing it to no one. *Al-ghayb* goes by many names. Wilfred Bion, a psychoanalyst who had served as a tank commander in the Great War, called it O. O — the ultimate reality, sometimes termed “absolute truth, the godhead, the infinite, the thing-in-itself.”

The Bene Gesserit, through House Atreides, aspire to control Arrakis. They see it not only as a source of the spice on which they depend for the exercise of their powers, but also as an obligatory passage point through which they can access *al-ghayb*. The native Fremens are instrumental, and the arrival of House Atreides on Arrakis is part of “preparing the way” to *al-ghayb* through the voice (*lisan*) of Paul. Their Kwisatz Haderach, who some believe (and others fear) is Paul, wields “organic mental powers [that] would bridge space and time” in order to master the unknown (*al-ghayb*). What hubris is this? The Bene Gesserit are a mere conduit of forces far greater than themselves, which contain both the ancestral mnemonic traces of previous generations and the faint glimmerings of prescience. All who truly attempt to approach *al-ghayb* know full well that its mastery is, ultimately, a chimera.

Those who attempt to harvest melange must also encounter the possibility of their own death through the Shai-Hulud, the awe-inspiring sandworm of Arrakis. Shai-Hulud — “Old Father Eternity” — or more metaphorically, the eternal thing, that which cannot be destroyed, a chasm, an impossible primordial object around which the subject circumambulates. Shai-Hulud evokes *das Ding* in another parlance, representing both an impossible good and a radical evil from which we must keep our distance and yet around which we must ethically orient ourselves. The pursuit of Shai-Hulud is precisely the place where *Dune*’s characters encounter their own disappearance and death drive as they confront the eternal thing. Can Shai-Hulud be mastered? Can it be known? Or does it, likewise, travel along the edge of *al-ghayb*?

Dune, some say, is a parable for our times. Colonial exploitation, resource extraction, US imperialism, even its ethnocentric representations and Orientalist musical score are pieces of our world. But absolute verisimilitude is the death knell of science fiction and the dream world alike. *Dune* is at its best when it evokes the dream world, rather than when it represents the worlding of the world. What, then, if we understood Villeneuve’s vision as an invitation, a summoning for both amateurs and aficionados alike, to the unseen and unknowable world of *al-ghayb*?

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Art by [Kenneth Mills](#).

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Omnia El Shakry is a cultural and intellectual historian of the modern Middle East and the author of The Arabic Freud: Psychoanalysis and Islam in Modern Egypt (Princeton University Press, 2017) and editor of Understanding and Teaching the Modern Middle East (University of Wisconsin Press, 2020). She is professor of History at the University of California, Davis and is writing a book tentatively titled Decolonizing Psychoanalysis.

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