The Problem of the Authenticity of Al-Ghazali's Works and its Relation to the Nature of his Sufism

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ABSTRACT

This article attempts to disclose the problem of the authenticity of some of Imam al-Ghazali's works and its relation to the nature of his view on sufism. Western writers, for instance Watt, Macdonald, Goldziher and others disputing over some of books using al-Ghazali's name such as Mishkat al-Anwar, al-Risalah al-Laduniyyah, Rawdah al-Talibin *and others. Their arguments are based on the inconsistencies of al-Ghazali's idea on sufism (including theoretical and philosophical sufism) in those books with his general attitude towards sufism.*

ABSTRAK

Artikel ini cuba memaparkan masalah kesahihan sesetengah karya Imam al-Ghazali dan hubungannya dengan sifat semulajadi pandangan beliau mengenai tasawuf. Penulis Barat seperti Watt, Macdonald, dan Goldziher mempertikaikan sesetengah tulisan yang menggunakan nama al-Ghazali, seperti Mishkat al-Anwar, al-Risalah al-Laduniyyah, *dan* Rawdah al-Talibin. *Hujah mereka adalah berdasarkan tidak konsistennya pandangan al-Ghazali tentang tasawuf (termasuk teori dan falsafah tasawuf) dalam buku tersebut dengan pandangan umum beliau terhadap tasawuf.*

INTRODUCTION

Al-Ghazali is one of the most prolific writers on Islam. His writings covered many angles of sciences such as theology, philosophy, jurisprudence, sufism and others. Many studies were carried out on his writings and resulting in different stands being taken among researchers. One of the issues is the controversy over the authenticity of a few of his writings and then, relating to the nature of his sufism. Any survey on the nature of al-Ghazali's sufism would not be complete without carefully examining and distinguishing between the authentic and the spurious works which are often attributed to him. Watt observes that "a great difficulty in the study of al-Ghazali's thought is that, while he undoubtedly wrote many books, some have been attributed to him which he did not write" (Watt 1965: 1039). This issue seems to be vital because

scholars agree that the works which its authenticity has been doubted are mostly works expressing advanced sufistic and philosophical views which are at variance with the teachings of al-Ghazali in the works generally accepted as authentic. For example, Watt shows the contradiction between many statements in the veils-section of the *Mishkat* and al-Ghazali's general position. As a result, Watt argues that "the contradiction amounts to incompatibility and is not apparent but real, and that therefore the veils-section is not the work of al-Ghazali but a forger..." (Watt 1949· 566). Watt, on many occasions as far as I can see, seems to repudiate the views of al-Ghazali which he thought were not in parallel with al-Ghazali's general position, and this might have been in order to avoid inconsistencies in al-Ghazali's thought. However, I tend to accept these inconsistencies or contradictions in al-Ghazali's thought as being only apparent [on the surface], not real and just a matter of difference in interpretation concerning the issues which al-Ghazali discussed. The first person who discussed the problem of contradictions was Ibn Tufayl. In order to solve the problem he suggested that al-Ghazali wrote in a different manner for ordinary men than for the initiate, and this accords with my view. More recently, these apparent inconsistencies or discrepancies in the writings of al-Ghazali have been used by some modern scholars in an attempt to undermine his reputation – they have even described him as an inconsistent popularizer (Julian Baldick 1989· 10).

Theories on sufism is the area where most cases of false or dubious authenticity occur, therefore, it is very important to have a general idea about this issue. I will not try to deal with all of the disputed works but highlight a few of them. My objective at this stage is to provide an exposition rather than a detailed analysis. I believe any further research relating to this problem could profitably concentrate on various literary problems connected with it which, as far as I am concerned, have not yet been comprehensively or adequately studied.

THE SCHOLARS TENDENCIES TOWARDS
SOME AL-GHAZALI'S BOOKS

Modern scholars such as I. Goldziher, M. Bouyges, Palacious, Hourani, and Watt have already conducted some studies and found a valuable platform for further research. Nevertheless, among the scholars themselves, there does not seem to be a clear-cut agreement concerning some of al-Ghazali's works as to whether or not they are genuine. There are even disagreements over the genuineness of sections of the books considered as genuine. So, certain books might be considered as authentic to one scholar yet spurious to another. As a result, some writers seem do not bother much about authenticity while discussing al-Ghazali's thought. For instance, A.J. Wensinck's studies use books

like *Ma'arij al-Quds, al-Madnun al-Saghir, al-Durrah al-Fakhirah*; and likewise, M. Smith uses *Rawdah al-Talibin* and *Tahsin al-Zunun,* and others. These scholars might believe that the books were genuinely written by al-Ghazali as otherwise they have used them. Conversely, Watt is the person who is most concerned about this issue and advises... if anyone wants to make statements about al-Ghazali on the basis of these [spurious] works, he must first do something to justify his usage of such material (Watt 1952: 31). The question becomes more complicated when scholars, who have compiled the enormous scientific studies on al-Ghazali have used the doubtful writings as reliable sources for the study of al-Ghazali's doctrine, expression, style and so on (Hava Lazarus-Yafeh 1975: 22). However, Muslim scholars seem to be less sensitive about this issue, and they incline to accept what is doubted by western scholars such as M.A. Quasem and M.A Sherif. This is apparent when they use such books as reliable sources in their presentation and argument, and also try to refute the views which dispute such books. Quasem, for instance "... considers the *Mizan* in its entirety as a genuine work by al-Ghazali" (M.A. Quasem 1976: 11). Sherif explicitly allocates the specific section in his appendixes in order to refute Watt's arguments, which I will discuss below.

Watt's provisional list of al-Ghazali's spurious works is the longest. He adds more works than those listed by Palacious and Goldziher who preceded him. Goldziher argues against the authenticity of *Sirr al-'Alamayn*; D.B. Macdonald recognized the possibility of the circulation of al-Ghazali's *al-Madnun* [al-Saghir] as false; and Palacious listed five other writings of what he calls works of "apocryphal or doubtful authenticity", namely *al-Durrah al-Fakhirah, Minhaj al-'Arifin, Mukashafah al-Qulub, Rawdah al-Talibin,* and *al-Risalah al-Laduniyyah* (Watt 1952: 25). Watt tries to find solid ground in his attempt to describe al-Ghazali's real view, suggesting a general criterion for the authenticity in the works which are undoubtedly by al-Ghazali, for instance *Tahafut, Ihya'* and *Munqidh.* Watt uses three criteria. The first is the post *Ihya'* period in which al-Ghazali affirms the superiority of prophetic revelation and religious intuition over reason; consequently, no work ascribing primacy to reason can belong to that period. The second criterion refers to how al-Ghazali arranges his works in an orderly and logical fashion so as to provide a clear elucidation. Books which are collections of disparate materials put together without any clear principle cannot have been composed by him. The third criterion is the attitude towards orthodox dogma and practice which al-Ghazali still firmly held after conversion, despite the possibility that some time during this period he inclined to accept the Platonic or Neoplatonic thought (Watt 1952: 26-30).

Watt also used al-Ghazali's book *Iljam al-'Awwam 'an 'Ilm al-Kalam* which appeared to be his last work completed before his death, as a parameter to fix al-Ghazali's intellectual development and position. This book

shows that al-Ghazali never abandoned Ash'arism or became a Neoplatonist as has often been assumed during the last days of his life. Watt mentions that:

This book, completed a few days before his death, shows him thinking and arguing essentially as an Ash'arite; even if he had earlier gone beyond Ash'arism in some of his speculations (such as those about the nature of prophethood and the "immediate experience" of the mystics), he has not abandoned any Islamic dogma or any of the central positions of Ash'arism. (Watt 1963: 150)

In view of this fact, Watt argues that the works of a Neoplatonist character ascribed to al-Ghazali must be regarded as spurious because it is not in concordance with this thought, and the careful study of dates by Bouyges obviously cuts the ground from under the idea that al-Ghazali turned to Neoplatonism, and adopted much of its theory and doctrine in his latter years.

In addition, Hava Lazarus-Yafeh introduces a literary-stylistic method of research as one of the criteria to distinguish not only between the authentic and spurious among the many of al-Ghazali's books, but also to recognize the specific parts which most probably al-Ghazali copied or edited from previous writers such as al-Makki and al-Muhasibi. The latter becomes important when researchers recognize that al-Ghazali quoted extensively from the *Qut al-Qulub* in his *Ihya'* L. Massignon says, "... whole pages [in this book] of which were copied by al-Ghazali in his *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* (L. Massignon 1965: 153). One may try to distinguish the principal characteristic features by studying the concordance of all his writings, especially concerning various aspects of both linguistics and style [vocabulary, syntax, images and metaphors, parables, terminology, etc.], as well as of literature and event contents [structure of writings, organization of material, methods of debate, means of addressing the public, methods of persuasion, names etc.] (Hava Lazarus-Yafeh 1975: 16). This study would be helpful in regards with the chronological authenticity and, to some extent, comparing the various numbers of subjects written by al-Ghazali. This is because, as Lazarus-Yafeh believes, there should be static elements in his style of writing which are apparent in all periods. However, as the scholar remarks about this method:

Conclusions drawn on the basis of linguistic, stylistic and literary data, are always unsatisfactory in any discussion of the chronological order of a series of books, or their degree of authenticity and neither should be used as a sole criterion. (Lazarus Yafeh 1975: 13)

This is because of the fact that, in spite of its development and its being broken up into sub-divisions, this science is still affected to a large extent by the intuition and considerations of the scholars and by the extent of their general or specific familiarity with the subject rather than with the writer in question.

EXAMPLES OF THE DISPUTED TEXTS

Let us now deal with some of the disputed texts of al-Ghazali. Among the most important texts are *Mizan al-'Amal, Mishkat al-Anwar,* and *al-Risalah al-Laduniyyah.* Firstly, I shall sketch the disputation over *Mizan* which Watt claims is not authentic. This book could not have been written in its present form by al-Ghazali although there may be Ghazalian material in it (Watt 1952: 38). From the chronological list of al-Ghazali's works, it is plain to me (Watt) that the *Mizan* must have been written before *Ihya'* [perhaps completed during the writing of *Ihya'*] but after *Mi'yar* as it contains much of the discussion on purification of the soul and the division of human intellects and passions; as well as how to use them to achieve happiness both in this world and the hereafter by stressing the combination of knowledge and practice. Al-Ghazali discussed the concept of "dhawq" and sufi doctrine and, accordingly, Watt argues the book must belong to the later days of al-Ghazali. The earlier book, *Mi'yar* gives the criteria for sound knowledge, so another one needs to have been written which will give the criteria for sound action (Hourani 1959· 228). Hourani puts the conclusion from H. Hashim in his paper which shows the argument for a later date of *Mizan*:

Hashim's argument rests on the book's denial of a bodily resurrection, contrasted with al-Ghazali's condemnation of such denial in his other works and as late as *Munqidh.* He concludes that al-Ghazali must have changed his views after *Munqidh* and that *Mizan* belongs to this very late time. (Hourani 1959· 228-229)

However, from the Hourani arrangement, I believe that al-Ghazali started to write the work in Baghdad in 488-1095M, but postponed it until he completed his spiritual retreat and finished it probably at the same time or during the writing of *Ihya'*

The *Mizan* also seems to contain esoteric teachings [in parts judged spurious by Watt], for, at the end of it, al-Ghazali, explaining how to interpret opinions, divides opinions [ra'y] into three classes; i] an opinion in which one agrees with the multitude; ii] an opinion that conforms to instruction of students and seekers of counsel; and iii] an opinion that one holds intimately within himself and does not disclose except to those who share his convictions (Sherif 1975: 173).

By applying the criteria as mentioned above, Watt reaches the following conclusions about *Mizan*: i] in most part of the book the primacy of reason seems to be accepted without question; ii] the argument of the book is extremely confused and full of contradictions and, therefore it is difficult to construct a firm standpoint of al-Ghazali's real position; thus, in consequence, the book falls under suspicion. According to Watt, this suspicion ripens into certainty that the *Mizan* is not an authentic work when two passages of the book are compared with two parallel passages of the *Ihya'*, "indeed, it will

become clear, I hope, that the *Mizan is* an unintelligent compilation from very varied sources" (Watt 1952: 39).

Watt comments on al-Ghazali's allegory of a slave performing the pilgrimage which appears in the section of the *Mizan* in comparison with the similar story from the *Ihya*'s Quarter 1, book 1. The lessons drawn from the allegory, argues Watt, are different in the two books. The illustration is excellent in the *Ihya*' whilst on the other hand, they are clumsy in the *Mizan*. Then, Watt infers from the basis of this comparison that the allegory in the *Mizan* is spurious: "I have no doubt that this interpretation is spurious, work of a forger who objected to something in the interpretation of the allegory in the *Ihya*', the passage must therefore be subsequent to the *Ihya*'" (Watt 1952: 39). This argument is debatable however, since the *Mizan,* as is generally agreed, must have been written before the *Ihya*', and it is quite an acceptable argument that the earlier is a poor version of the later. However, it does not mean that the earlier is not authentic. Moreover, the presence of two different interpretations of the same allegory does not necessarily mean that one of them must be spurious. Indeed, it is not strange in al-Ghazali's writings for him to have drawn different lessons from repetition of the same parables and stories; for examples, he repeats stories and gives them different meanings in the *Ihya*' Yet, the *Ihya*' is unanimously accepted as authentic (Sherif 1975: 175). Lazarus-Yafeh writes that "al-Ghazzali copied himself, and repeated his own sayings in different books, sometimes even in the same book" From the statement above, I might add that al-Ghazali seems to draw the different lessons from the same allegory. It happens not only in different books but also in the same book. What most important is the repetition of his general views.

The other passage Watt discusses is the autobiographical one. Watt notes that the pp. 44-48 of the *Mizan* is closely parallel to *Ihya*', III book 2, bayan 8f. pp. 17f and 19f. "The two passages are not identical, but for the most part they have the same form of words with only slight grammatical changes, such as from the third person to the second person" (1952: 39). According to him, the most important difference is that the words of which they are not found form tends to make the passage autobiographical [i.e. which are in the first person] are not found in the *Ihya*' Then, Watt proposes various possible theories about the relation between these two passages. In Watt's view, the most substantial possibility is that the existing autobiographical form is " a fraudulent invention, and that the whole passage has been copied from the *Ihya*' with slight modifications. In view of what the rest of the *Mizan* is, I think this is most probably the case" (1952: 40). In view of these arguments, however, I do not see why the reshaping which gives certain related passages a different form, should make any of these passages spurious.

On the other hand, I find the authenticity of *Mizan* is accepted by traditional Muslim sources and many modern scholars. Sherif quotes that al-Subki, al-Zabidi, al-Aydarus, Tash Kubra Zadah, Hajji Khalifah, and 'Abd al-Rahman

Badawi listed it as a work by al-Ghazali. Massignon, Bouyges, and Hourani also accept it as genuine. In order to prove the authenticity of this book, Sherif states that many passages and sections in it bear close resemblance to certain parts of the *Ihya'* and even some of the titles, especially Quarter I, book 1, Quarter III books 1,2,3, and 4; and Quarter IV, book 2 and 10. The correspondence between the two works seems to result from the fact that both deal primarily with ethics and cover the same subject matter, but they stress different priorities according to the specific aim of each book (Sherif 1975: 175).

The second book is *al-Risalah al-Laduniyyah*. Watt rejects the whole book because he thinks that the case against *al-Risalah* is very strong. The third book is the veils-section of the *Mishkat*. The main objection that can be cited against Watt's methodology is that he defines the real al-Ghazali in terms of the views expounded in the *Tahafut, Ihya',* and *al-Munqidh*. By doing so, he is begging the question as to what al-Ghazali's authentic views are. Watt's stated criteria depict al-Ghazali's intellectual and religious position correctly. But he is wrong in concluding that the *Mizan, al-Risalah,* and *Mishkat* fail to satisfy the criteria. He arrives at the conclusion because he identifies Islamic orthodoxy with the teachings embodied in the books mentioned. However, traditional Muslim scholars like Ibn Rushd and Ibn Tufayl maintained that al-Ghazali's orthodox writings contain both exoteric and esoteric teachings. W H. T. Gairdner argues that "Ibn Tufayl has no doubt that al-Ghazali had an esoteric doctrine, but he evidently considers that it would not be so very alarming, .. (1914: 147) [Gairdner adds, perhaps Ibn Tufayl, however, was not a very capable judge in such matters]. The *Tahafut, Ihya',* and *al-Munqidh* perhaps would be classified as comprising al-Ghazali's exoteric teachings. His esoteric views are contained in works like *al-Risalah* and *Mishkat*. He himself often alludes to the latter views in a number of his works including the *Ihya'*

According to Ibn Tufayl, al-Ghazali's writings contain both exoteric and esoteric teachings, and his esoteric teachings express themselves in the form of symbols and allusions, which are meant to be understood by those who are endowed with great intelligence and willing to listen to al-Ghazali's own explanations. It would be good to bear this in mind, although Watt says the contradiction between the veils – section and the rest of *Mishkat* are real, but he will not accept that al-Ghazali held esoteric views which opposed the exoteric; " there is no good ground for thinking that in principle al-Ghazali distinguished between esoteric and exoteric teaching in any way " (Watt 1949· 21). From my viewpoint, Watt is aware of al-Ghazali's distinction between esoteric and exoteric teachings but he claims that the distinction cannot amount to a real contradiction between them. Watt seems to forget the reality that al-Ghazali so often insisted that esoteric teachings were not to be divulged except to the initiate few, thus clearly showing that there is opposition or contradiction between them. Al-Ghazali definitely recognized the esoteric

teachings so long as they remained within the bound of orthodoxy, in the line with what is permitted by the Shari'ah; and so the problem of an opposition between the esoteric and exoteric teaching does not arise. Al-Ghazali accepts the truth and validity of the exoteric one at its own level. This fact is fully realized by al-Ghazali and his aim is to restore the equilibrium between exoteric and esoteric dimensions of Islam. This is also what many modern scholars argue.

An examination of the Middle Age period of Islam discerns the same conclusion that, in traditional Islamic scholarship, opposition between the exoteric and esoteric is acknowledged. It is in the light of the traditional distinction between the two kinds of teachings that Ibn Rushd and Ibn Tufayl deal with discrepancies between al-Ghazali's exoteric works and esoteric ones. Consequently, it is not sufficient to judge esoteric works attributed to al-Ghazali solely on the basis of exoteric orthodoxy.

Relating the second text *al-Risalah,* Watt follows the conclusion of Palacious and Macdonald in grouping it as inauthentic. Watt maintains that "it cannot be authentic because two passages in the treatise are also found in Ibn 'Arabi's *Risalah fi al-Nafs wa al-Ruh*" (1952: 33). From his statement, the above coincidences the deduction are sufficient to show that it cannot be an authentic work of al-Ghazali. However, the textual similarities alone are not sufficient to be considered as a strong evidence because there are internal and external factors which could have influenced someone in his writings, and Watt's conclusions which prove his case are still debatable. In fact, we do not know precisely, how much al-Ghazali's writings on Sufism influenced Ibn 'Arabi. Nevertheless, it by no means free, as S.H. Nasr observes "in some of his [al-Ghazali] more esoteric treatises, like *Mishkat al-Anwar [The Niche for Light]* and *al-Risalah al-Laduniyyah [Treatise on Divine Knowledge],* he began to discuss the doctrines of Sufism in a manner which foreshadowed the works of Ibn 'Arabi" and in another place elucidating about Ibn 'Arabi " .. and al-Ghazali whose works he followed and whose themes he expanded in many ways" (1969· 89 & 101). Therefore, it is possible that the latter reproduced the passages in question from al-Ghazali's works.

Watt furthermore queries the period when the *al-Risalah* was written. According to Watt, it could not be the work of the last period because it ascribed the primacy of reason. Neither could it belong to the earlier period as well because in *al-Risalah* a distinction is drawn between revelation [*wahy* – the source of prophet knowledge] and inspiration [*ilham* – the source of Sufi knowledge]. In view of this fact, Watt argues: "Now, if al-Ghazali had once been so interested in this distinction, it is strange that he should ignore it so completely in the *Munqidh* and *Mishkat.* Watt concludes that the works cannot belong to any stage prior to that of the *Munqidh.* In response to this, I see this matter differently because al-Ghazali surely believed in the superiority of prophetic revelation over reason and no part of *al-Risalah* is found

to contradict this fact; therefore no case arises. However, the superiority is described in esoteric terms. Revelation and reason both seem as microcosmic manifestations of the Universal Intellect [al-'aql al-kulli] in man. Nasr explains:

The Intellect, ... which is at once the source of revelation and exists microcosmically within man, must not be mistaken for reason alone. The *'aql* is at one both *intellectus* or *nous* and *ratio* or reason. It is both the supernal sun that shines within man and the reflection of this sun on the plane of the mind which we call reason. (Nasr 1973: 54)

Concerning Watt's statement about the peculiarity of al-Ghazali having been interested in distinctions between "wahy" and "ilham" and then ignoring these distinctions as he seems to in *Munqidh* and *Mishkat*. My view is that it is not logically necessary for al-Ghazali to deal with the distinction in the latter two works. Indeed, he had written the three works [*Tahafut, Ihya', and Munqidh*] with different objectives in mind.

Finally, onto the question of the authenticity of the veils-section of the *Mishkat*. Gairdner was the first western scholar to raise the problem of doctrinal consistency between the *Mishkat,* especially the veils-section, and al-Ghazali's more well-known and popular writings. Gairdner, however, believes that the *Mishkat* is authentic, as do Goldziher, Macdonald, Bouyges, Jabre, and F Shehadi. Of course, they realized the apparent contradiction, but probably they assumed it is not as real as Watt claimed. Watt based his judgement upon some of the problems raised by Gairdner. Watt presents three main arguments to support his view under the heading, non-Ghazalian character of the veils-section: i] the doctrine of the divine attributes in the veils-section is opposed to what al-Ghazali says in the rest of the *Mishkat* and his later works like *al-Munqidh*; ii] there is no mention of prophethood or the prophetic spirit in that section, although elsewhere these have been a central place in the thought of al-Ghazali; and iii] while the rest of the *Mishkat* is a closely argued whole, it appears to be unrelated to the veils-section (Watt 1949· 6-11).

It is true that several doctrines in the veils-section contradict al-Ghazali's position in the *Munqidh*. This contradiction, however, results from the fact that the *Mishkat* is an esoteric work dealing with highly subtle metaphysical issues which the masses cannot understand. As C.R. Upper quotes in distinguishing the level of understanding by al-Ghazali: i] "the traditions of one's parents and the region in which he lives; ii] the doctrine one uses in exhortation and teaching which is variously adopted according to the different levels of one's pupils; and iii] the doctrine one believes within oneself, which remains the secret between the self and God" (1952: 30-31). Al-Ghazali himself held the view that the adept had three different doctrines which show the different ability of understanding. This problem, however, might be solved when a distinction is made between the exoteric and esoteric dimensions of

al-Ghazali's writing. Watt's first and most important argument is that the doctrine of the divine attributes in the veils-section contradicts the rest of the *Mishkat*. In his later writings, al-Ghazali often mentions several of the Attributes of God in the course of his explanation of the phrase that Adam was created in the Image, the Form of the Merciful, and then "Allah, out of His grace and mercy, gave to Adam a summary 'image' or 'form',..." (Gairdner 1952: 134-136). Yet the author of the veils-section, in the manner of the Neoplatonists, claims that the ascription of attributes to God denies his unity. However, there is a synthesizing of the two positions as had been done by Sufis. Al-Ghazali is presenting the two conceptions of Divine Attributes from different standpoints. In the veils – section, al-Ghazali is primarily concerned with what veils man in various degrees from God as the absolutely transcendent, and from God in his of absolute unity. From this point of view of absolute transcendence [tanzih] and absolute unity, God is above all qualities. To ascribe attributes or qualities to God is therefore to negate His absolute transcendence and unity.

CONCLUSION

The final remark about al-Ghazali's works is that, in spite of the books and articles written on this issue, I believe there are still many things to be done in order to solve the problem of authenticity. Along with that, of course, there are also many difficulties because the works attributed to him – which probably are genuine – contain no indications of date, have remained inaccessible, existing only as manuscripts, or are known only by their title from references to them in later Arabic writers. Other works are probably spurious, including some which have been printed. Since the authenticity issue is closely connected with his Sufism, whether "sober" or "drunken", some researchers have shown that both tendencies will be found in his writings, and therefore, come to the conclusion that he was both "sober" and "drunken" In fact, an analysis of al-Ghazali's thought from the different perspectives and motives of the scholars themselves seems in accordance with scholars' objectives. What I mean to say here is, from the large number of his writings, there is an indication that both of the assumptions can be seen fit to him, both "sober" as well as "drunken" But, the term "drunken" which I use in the present discussion must not be interpreted in the ordinary sense which employed the meaning of unification with God or merely uttering mystical ejaculation.

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