

Seeking God's face: Ibn 'Arabi on right action and theophanic vision: part 2

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'Seeking God's Face'

Ibn 'Arabi on Right Action and Theophanic Vision

Part 2*

James Winston Morris

III THE PERSONAL STARTING POINT: THE 'SPLENDOR OF HIS FACE'

Among the spiritually significant dreams that Ibn 'Arabi recorded in his short (and undated) 'Epistle of Good Tidings'⁶⁹ is his brief description of a litany or formula of *dhikr* which God gave to him during one such visionary incident:

I saw while I was sleeping as though God was calling out to me, saying to me: 'O My servant, if you want to be close to Me, honored and enjoying delight with Me, then constantly say "*My Lord, cause me to see, that I might look upon You!*" Repeat that for Me many times.'

We cannot know for sure whether the bestowal of this *dhikr* actually preceded the Shaykh's own transforming vision of the divine Face, or whether this dream itself simply expresses the central importance the quest for that spiritual realization eventually came to have in his own teaching and religious experience. But in either case, Ibn 'Arabi does clearly state that the *Futûhât* itself grows out of his own very personal experiences of 'learning to see' and that dramatically autobiographical dimension continues to underlie even his most abstract theological formulations of those revelatory lessons.

Ibn 'Arabi's first mention of the divine 'Face' comes at a decisive moment at the very beginning of the *Futûhât*, in the short autobiographical poem at the end of the introductory

* Part 1 appeared in Volume XVI.

'Epistle' to his Tunisian Sufi friend 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Mahdawi⁷⁰ in which he explains his motives for composing this book:

Now when I persisted in knocking on God's Door
 I was always attentive, nor was I distracted,
 Until there appeared to my eye⁷¹ '*the Splendor of His Face*'
 until – O wonder! – there was nothing [or 'you were
 nothing'] but It.⁷²
 So I encompassed in knowing (all) Being – nor did we
 know in our heart any other than God.

Somewhat later, in Chapter 36,⁷³ Ibn 'Arabi explains that the 'vision of the divine Face' granted him at this moment was the source of everything expounded in the *Futûhât* – and that the special theophanic awareness he discovered in that moment of inspiration has since been never-ceasing:

Thus God bestowed on us – through this state-of-arising (*nash'a*) in which God constituted us in this path – the Face of the Truly Real (*wajh al-Haqq*) in every thing. So for us, in our vision, there is nothing existing in the world but that we directly witness it with the Eye of the Truly Real (*shuhûd 'ayn Haqq*), through which we are glorifying Him. So we do not blame anything at all in the world of being!

As we shall see (Section V below), the connection between that transforming theophanic vision of the divine Presence in all things and Ibn 'Arabi's final remark here about his consequent inability to 'blame' or 'accuse' God (of any fault or imperfection in His Creation) will be essential to his later explanation of the inner distance between the spiritual states of 'Hellfire' (*al-nâr*) and the beatific bliss (*na'îm*) of those who have reached the paradisiac state of 'surrender-to-peace' in the Garden. But already this brief description suggests a very practical touchstone that helps to eliminate certain misconceptions about what we might otherwise take as 'theophanic' states, while suggesting that the possibility and reality of this sort of experience (at least as a momentary revelatory spiritual 'state', *hâl*) is something much more widely shared than we might at first expect. This is brought out more openly in

another, longer passage, later in the *Futûhât*,⁷⁴ which seems to describe key aspects (or spiritual consequences) of the same transforming experience that are alluded to in more eschatological language in the passages translated in Section V below:

In this (spiritual stage) there is a knowledge which removes the burden of anguish⁷⁵ from the soul of the person who knows it. For when one looks at what is ordinarily the case with (peoples’) souls, the way that all the things happening to them cause them such anguish and distress, (it is enough) to make a person want to kill himself⁷⁶ because of what he sees. This knowledge is called the ‘knowledge of blissful repose’ (*‘ilm al-râha*), because it is the knowledge of the People of the Garden (of paradise) in particular. So whenever God reveals this knowledge to one of the people of this world (already) in this world, that person has received in advance the blissful repose of eternity – although the person with this quality (in this world) still continues to respect the appropriate courtesy (*adab*) (towards God) concerning the commandment of what is right and the prohibition of what is wrong, according to their rank.

And in this spiritual stage is the knowledge that what God made manifest to vision in the bodies (of all things in this world) is an adornment for those bodies; (the knowledge) of why it is that some of what appears (in the world) seems ugly to a particular person when that person regards it as ugly; and (the knowledge) of *which* eye it is that a person sees with when they see the whole world as beautiful, when they *do* see it, so that they respond to it spontaneously with beautiful actions.⁷⁷ Now this knowledge is one of the most beautiful (or ‘best’) and most beneficial forms of knowledge about the world, and it (corresponds to) what some of the theologians say about this, that ‘there is no Actor but God, and all of His Acts are beautiful.’

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The second mention of Ibn ‘Arabi’s vision of the Face comes considerably later in Chapter 1 (I, 222–3), during the

Shaykh's famous dialogue with the mysterious 'eternal Youth' (*fatâ*) who is at once God, His personal 'Lord' (*rabb*), the inner Reality of the Ka'ba (the primordial Temple), and Ibn 'Arabi's own deepest 'I' and true essence (*'ayn*). Here already he makes the essential *practical* connection between the different degrees of theophanic vision symbolized in the hadith of God's 'transformation through the forms (of the creatures)' and the actual accomplishment – at once spiritual, aesthetic, ethical and intellectual – of the crucial virtue of *ihsân* ('right-and-beautiful-action') as the fully realized fruit of faith (*îmân*). At the same time he also brings out clearly the endlessly varied individual ways through which that realization and enlightened vision is forever coming to be:

I said (to the divine Youth): 'Know. . . that when I had arrived with Him through faith and had settled down with Him in the spiritual Presence of *ihsân*, He brought me to rest in His sacred places and acquainted me with His innermost sanctuaries.'

And (the Youth) replied: 'The rituals (of pilgrimage) are only so many out of the desire (for the pilgrims) to seek the Connection (with God): so if you hadn't found Me here, you would have found Me there! If I had been veiled from you at one station, I would have revealed Myself to you in another. However (in reality) – as I have taught you in many of your spiritual stopping-places and indicated to you many times in some of your inner states – even though I have "veiled" Myself (from most people), I *do* have a Self-manifestation that not every Knower recognizes, except for whoever has encompassed in knowing the spiritual awarenesses *you* have encompassed.

Don't you see Me revealing Myself to them, in the Rising,⁷⁸ in a form other than the form and distinctive sign that they recognize. So they deny My Lordship and seek refuge from that form – even though they are actually seeking refuge *with* it, **except that they don't realize it (2:12)**! Yet they keep on saying to that theophanic form of manifestation: "We take refuge from you with God! For here we are, waiting for our Lord!" So then I appear before them in the form that they were waiting for, and they all affirm My lordship and their own servanthood.

But they are really worshipping and serving their own "totem" (of divinity, 'alâma), witnessing (only) the image (of God) that has become established among them! So whoever among them says that he is worshipping Me is "saying a lie" (58:2) and has absolutely amazed Me! For how could that be true of him, since when I revealed Myself to him he denied Me!? Indeed whoever restricts Me to one form rather than another is really only worshipping what they themselves have imagined!'

Given the special attention so many modern commentators have given to the central role of 'imagination' in Ibn 'Arabi's thought, it is important to note as well the spiritually decisive distinction he draws here between each individual's 'self-deluding imagination' (*takhayyul*) and the ongoing divine 'Imaging' (*khayâl*) underlying all creation. All the practical and religious dimensions of the Shaykh's teaching depend on acknowledging the profound reality of this basic distinction and the corresponding necessity for human beings to begin to discover and conform to the forms of the *divine* Imagination, rather than following the self-imposed 'idols' and unconscious images alluded to in that Divine Saying the divine Youth is restating here.

[He continues:] That 'imaginary image' (*takhayyul*) is the reality that person has secretly established and given power in their heart. So they imagine they are worshipping Me, while they are actually denying Me! But as for the true Knowers (of God), I cannot possibly be hidden from their regard, because they are absent from created things and their own inner selves (in their complete absorption with Me). So that for them, nothing appears to them other than Me, and they understand nothing of the existent things but My Names. Thus whatever thing appears to them and manifests Itself (*tajallâ*), they say: 'You are the Praised One, the Most-High!'

So the (two inner conditions) are not at all alike. But most people are (in a state) between witnessing and being heedless, except that for them it is all one thing!

A few lines later in the same conversation with the divine Youth (I, 226), Ibn 'Arabi adds one further essential clarification, when he speaks of 'turning away *the face of my Heart*'. This important understanding of the essential reality of the human 'face' is greatly amplified in a later passage in Chapter 69 (on 'The inner secrets of Purification', V, 188), where Ibn 'Arabi is explaining the spiritual lessons to be drawn from the prescribed ritual ablution of the face:

Therefore the human being should pay close attention to his actions and inactions, both outwardly and inwardly, and should attentively observe the influences of his Lord in his heart. Because the face of his *heart* is what is essential here. For the 'face' of the human being – or of anything else – is its true reality and its essence and its unique individuality ('*ayn*). Hence when someone speaks of the *wajh* ('face', or essential aspect) of a thing or a question or a legal judgment, they mean the intrinsic reality or essence or concrete specificity of the thing to which they're referring.

God said: '**Faces that Day glowing with light, gazing toward their Lord! And faces that Day scowling, suspecting something disastrous is befalling them.**' (75:22–5). Now the 'faces' located on the front of human beings are not described as 'suspecting'; the act of suspecting or supposing only comes from the inner reality of the human being.

This interpretation of the Heart of human being⁷⁹ as the true inner 'face' of each person is consistently presupposed throughout the rest of the *Futûhât*. As the Shaykh's allusion in the above passage indicates, it also opens up important perspectives for understanding and interpreting the many Qur'anic passages concerning the human 'face' that were discussed earlier (Section II, Part 1).

IV 'SURPRISED BY HIS FACE': POLISHING THE MIRROR OF THE HEART

The real nature of that human 'face' – or rather of the divine 'Eye'/Essence ('*ayn*) that is the primordial Heart of human being⁸⁰ – and therefore of the many Qur'anic references to

the 'turning' of one's 'face' toward or away from God, is further elaborated in the following Chapter 2 (II, 82-3), where Ibn 'Arabi explains:

So know that the heart is a polished mirror – *all* of it is a face – that does not ever 'rust'. So if someone should say about it that it rusts – as in the (Prophet's) saying: 'Certainly hearts tarnish like iron', in the hadith that concludes 'the polishing of the heart is through remembrance of God and recitation of the Qur'an. . .' – that is because the heart has become preoccupied with knowing the secondary causes (*al-asbâb*, the visible workings of this world), instead of with knowing God. So its attachment to what is other than God has 'rusted over' the face of the heart, in that it blocks the Self-manifestation (*tajalli*) of the Truly Real in that heart.

For the divine Presence is perpetually manifesting Itself, and one could never imagine Its ever 'veiling' Itself from us. So when this heart fails to receive that (divine Self-manifestation) from the direction of the praiseworthy and revelatory divine 'Speaking'⁸¹ (to us), because it has received something else instead, then its receiving that something else is what is referred to (in the scriptures) as 'tarnishing', 'veils', 'locking', 'blindness', 'rust' and the like.⁸² For in fact the Truly Real Himself is (perpetually) bestowing this knowing on you in the heart, except that (your heart) is (preoccupied with) knowing something other than God – although the Knowers of-and-through God⁸³ know that in reality (that distracted heart) too is actually knowing of and through God.

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As Ibn 'Arabi goes on to explain in a revealing passage in Chapter 17 (III, 51-3), this uniquely human possibility of turning away from the ongoing Self-revelation and vision of God explains why most people are ordinarily 'surprised' by the sight of God's Face, often when they least expect it:

For there is no change or transformation (*taqallub*), whether it be in the higher or lower worlds, but that it proceeds from God's Intending (or 'Facing': *tawajjuh ilâhi*) of a special

Theophany (*bi-tajallin khâss*) to *this* particular eye (or individual: '*ayn*) according to its preparedness for that Theophany which is given by its own inner reality.

. . . Now the outward form of this shifting [of the heart's 'attention' between God and particular created things] is that a human being happens to be seeking, to begin with, the knowledge of some existent thing (*kawn*) or another, or some sign pointing to what they are seeking, which is also a particular existent thing. But when they attain what they were seeking, suddenly the Face of God (*wajh al-Haqq*) appears to them in that thing, even though they weren't seeking that Face.⁸⁴ Once the seeker becomes connected with that (Theophany), they forget about what they were originally seeking, and that Knowing shifts (them) to seeking what is bestowed on them by that (divine) Face.

Now among them are those (Knowers) who are *aware* of that shifting [between the particular form they perceive or seek and the divine 'Face' lying behind it], while others are actually in that state, but are unaware of what it actually is (their spiritual attention) is shifting from or toward.

The 'others' here, Ibn 'Arabi concludes – in a reference to his central metaphysical thesis of the 'perpetually renewed creation' (*khalq jadîd*) and related ideas familiar to all readers of his *Fusûs al-Hikam* – are ultimately anyone who imagines that the world is constituted of self-subsistent things, without noticing what (or rather Who) is actually *sustaining* all those recurrent appearances:

Does what is bestowed by the (divine) Realities remain in the same state for even one breath, or one instant of time – so that the Activity of the Divinity with regard to (sustaining) those things becomes useless!? This is inconceivable . . . since this perpetual shifting concerns the 'likenesses' of things (*amthâl*), so that there is this shifting from the thing to its likeness at every instant. . . . It is like our saying 'So-and-so never stopped walking all day and didn't sit down' – although without a doubt that walking consists of a great many repeated motions, none of which is exactly the same as any other, although they are 'alike'. So your knowing shifts with the constant changes

of those (created likenesses).

* *

Ibn 'Arabi begins to explain the practical 'secret' of those rare Knowers who are able to maintain that transformed state of theophanic vision in Chapter 5 (II, 143). The importance of the subject is aptly indicated by his insistence there that 'this is the spiritual station of the Inheritors (from the prophets), and there is no higher station than this one, because *it is an unchanging direct witnessing (of God)*'. The secret of those 'Friends of God', it turns out, is nothing but the inner meaning of Muhammad's already remarkable teaching about the reality of *ihsân* ('right-and-beautiful-action'), in the famous hadith on the three dimensions of Religion:

And this is the station in which the states of the spiritual voyagers are dissolved and the stations of the spiritual travelers disappear, until [in the words of a famous Sufi saying] 'The one who was not vanishes, and He Who always *is* remains.'⁸⁵ (For them) there is no 'other' to affirm His Self-revealing (*zuhûr*), and no darkness remains with His Light. [So according to the Prophet's famous explanation of *ihsân*]: '. . . *If you are not, then you see Him!*' Recognize the true reality of 'if you are not,' and you yourself *are* the (divine) 'Be!'⁸⁶

The initial shock of Ibn 'Arabi's playfully creative (and grammatically justifiable) reading of the well known concluding phrase from this hadith – which is ordinarily read as 'Even if you *did not see Him*' – should not obscure the fact that what he is pointing to here is nothing other than the more familiar and fundamental Qur'anic conception of *islâm*, of the inner 'surrender' or disappearance of the ego-self (the '*you*' of this hadith) within the divine Will. However, this is not the only place where Ibn 'Arabi reads the same description of *ihsân* in this remarkably complex⁸⁷ and revealing fashion: this revelatory experience of 'disappearance (of the ego-self) in the act of witnessing (God's Presence)' is analyzed at much greater length in his popular treatise of the same title.⁸⁸ And the centrality of this particu-

lar Prophetic teaching in his own spiritual perspective is especially evident in his later discussion of the same hadith in Chapter 36,⁸⁹ where he points out the special role of the injunction to worship God ‘as though you see Him’ already in the Qur’anic account of Jesus and his teachings, and by extension in the spiritual awareness of all those spiritual ‘heirs’ among the saints who are ‘Jesus-like’ in their religious aptitudes and capacities. ‘Therefore’, he concludes:

You should know that what is ours through a revelation (*shar‘*) other than that of Jesus – Peace be with him! – is (the Prophet’s) saying: ‘For if you are not, then you see Him; and certainly He sees you.’ For this is one of (his true followers’) fundamental principles.

* * *

In Chapter 23 (III, 154–5), ‘on the inner knowledge of the spiritual “Poles” (among the saints) and their secrets’, Ibn ‘Arabi goes on to explain that the full realization of this theophanic vision is limited to the ‘Solitaries’, the *Afrâd*.⁹⁰ These rare individuals who truly exemplify the state of *ihsân* are described here in the following terms drawn from another famous divine saying (*hadîth qudsî*):

They are not known for their miracles or prodigies, nor singled out for praise, nor are they pointed out for their ‘piety’ (*salâh*), at least as that is commonly understood by most people, although there is nothing corrupt about them. They are the hidden ones, the innocent ones, (God’s) trustees in the world, concealed among the people. As God’s Messenger reported from His Lord: ‘For Me, the most blessed of My friends (or “saints”, *awliyâ’î*) is the person of faith who is unburdened (by attachments), who takes pleasure in prayer, who has truly realized the state of *ihsân* in devotion to his Lord and eagerly served Him both in secret and openly. And that person was concealed among the people.’⁹¹

As Ibn ‘Arabi goes on to explain, what inwardly distin-

guishes those saints who have realized this highest spiritual station is above all the constant 'turning' of their face toward God, their sincere recognition of *all* their experience as theophany. If an earlier Sufi, emphasizing the paradoxical secrecy and necessarily hidden nature of this realization, went so far as to say that these individuals were "'blackened of face"⁹² in this world and the next', the Shaykh adds that such an expression – 'if it was intended to refer to the spiritual states of this group' – means simply that:

All of their moments, both in this world and in the other, are completely absorbed in (contemplating) God's Self-manifestations to them. For in our view a human being sees in the mirror of the Truly Real, when He manifests Himself to that person, nothing but his own soul/self and his spiritual station, which is one of the existing (created) things (*akwân*). And an existent thing (*kawn*), in the Light of the Truly Real, is darkness (or 'shadow', *zulma*): therefore that person witnesses nothing but their own 'blackness'.

For the 'face' (*wajh*) of a thing is its essence and its true reality. So *only* for this group, in particular, is the divine Self-manifestation perpetual and never ending, *since they are always with God (al-Haqq)*, in this world and in the other world, through that ongoing divine Self-manifestation we mentioned. For these are the 'Solitaries', the *Afrâd*.

* * * *

All of this is intriguing enough, but also – at least for those readers who have not yet realized such a state – still expressed in fairly abstract and theoretical terms. Only in Chapter 47 (IV, 140–1) does Ibn 'Arabi begin to develop the more accessible, spiritually practical dimensions of this problem, in what might at first appear to be a quite unrelated context, his explanation of the enigmatic hadith that 'voluntary self-giving is a Proof (from/of God)':⁹³

As for this connection between the (divine) 'Proof' and voluntary self-giving, it comes from the fact that God made human

beings selfish (*shuhh*: 'greedy' or 'miserly') by their natural⁹⁴ disposition . . . in the very source of their created constitution (*nash'a*) . . . Now the root of this (divine 'Proof' exemplified in true acts of charity) is that human beings take their very being from God, so that they have been given the natural disposition to *take advantage* (from others), not to be helpful to them. Hence their natural reality (*haqīqa*) does not in itself explain their voluntarily giving of themselves. Therefore when someone does *voluntarily* give of themselves, their voluntary charity is a proof that they have overcome the inherent selfishness and greed of their carnal self (*nafs*) that was implanted in them by God. So this is why he said 'Voluntary self-giving is a (divine) Proof.'

The inner connection of this overcoming of the ego-self to the realization of theophanic *vision*, for Ibn 'Arabi, is just as allusively suggested in another, equally succinct section of the same hadith: 'Spiritual perseverance is a radiance (*al-sabr diyâ*)'. As he goes on to explain, by drawing a connection between this 'radiant light' and the famous hadith about the 'veils of light and darkness' concealing the divine Face:

Spiritual 'unveiling' is only possible through the *radiance* of (God's) Light, not through the Light itself. Because it is the property of Light that it can only obliterate the darkness, while unveiling actually takes place through the Light's 'radiance'. So (in that sense) the Light is a veil, just as the darkness is a veil, as the Messenger of God said, in regard to his Lord, that 'His veil is the Light' and his saying that 'God has 70 – or 70,000 – veils of Light and darkness'.

Therefore he called spiritual perseverance,⁹⁵ which is (exemplified in) fasting and the pilgrimage, 'a radiance'. That is, if you clothe yourself in *sabr*, through it will be revealed the spiritual perception of those things that are bestowed by the inner reality of its radiance.

* * * * *

Finally, in Chapter 54 (IV, 263), on the understanding of spiritual allusions (*ishârât*), Ibn 'Arabi reminds his readers of

the deeper dangers of failing to pursue this unveiling, dangers that will be more amply discussed in the following chapters on Gehenna and the sufferings of the Fire. At the same time, of course, this brief reminder is itself a profound 'allusion' to the deeper functions and transforming spiritual role of human suffering within the all-encompassing, cosmic framework of divine spiritual 'pedagogy' that he finds expressed in all the eschatological language of the Qur'an (Section V below).

Whoever is unaware of the Face of God (*wajh al-Haqq*) in all the things is overcome and mastered by (unconscious) pretensions.⁹⁶ And that ego-pretentiousness is the very essence of (spiritual) sickness ('*ayn al-marad*'). But the people of spiritual Realization (the *muhaqqiqûn*) have established that there is nothing in being but God. As for us, although we do exist, still our being is only through Him. And the (ultimate) state of someone whose being is through another is non-existence ('*adam*').

Of course Ibn 'Arabi's concluding words here are themselves an obvious allusion to his own earlier metaphysical reading of Muhammad's definition of *ihsân* as an essential condition for the realized vision of God's Face: 'If you are not, then you see Him.' But there is another, subtler allusion here, in his identification of our unconscious pretensions to some kind of ultimate 'divinity' (the inner state of *da'wâ*) as the very 'essence of sickness'. The full importance of that aside will only come into perspective when we have made the further essential connection with the divine saying that begins 'I was sick, yet you did not visit Me . . .', and with Ibn 'Arabi's even more extraordinary claim that those divine Words are themselves the ultimate source of Hell.

V LIFTING THE VEILS: FROM GEHENNA TO THE 'DUNE OF VISION'

Ibn 'Arabi's extended discussion of the scriptural symbols of Islamic eschatology in Chapters 61–5 of the *Futûhât* – especially when it is illuminated by explanations from other parts

of that work – turns out to be a truly awe-inspiring, panoramic perspective on all the stages and forms of human spiritual realization, from both the individual and the divine, supra-temporal or macrocosmic points of view. Thus it is highly significant that in his opening Chapter 61 (IV, 366), entitled ‘On the inner awareness of Gehenna, *where most of the creatures are, with respect to their suffering*’ – a place which he later openly identifies with the entire material world – he begins (IV, 369–70) by explaining that:

God created Gehenna from the Self-manifestation of His saying, (as recorded) in the *hadīth (qudsī)* of Muslim: ‘I was hungry, but *you* did not feed Me. And I was thirsty, but *you* did not give Me drink. And I was sick, yet *you* did not visit Me.’ Now this is the most prodigious of God’s acts of descending to His servants (*a’zam nuzūl al-Haqq*) in His Loving-Graciousness (*lutf*) toward them. And it is from this Reality that Gehenna has been created!

Surely few phrases could be more typical of Ibn ‘Arabi’s distinctive rhetoric, or of the remarkable demands it places on each serious reader. When one encounters such a passage for the first time, what is immediately and inevitably highlighted are all the normally implicit, ‘hypocritical’ dualisms (of Creator and created, Attributes of Beauty and Majesty, ‘self’ and ‘other’, heaven and hell, fear and hope, and so on) that in fact – as the hadith itself was intended to point out – continue to govern each person’s unconscious patterns of striving and action in the world. In a very theoretical and abstract way, of course, those apparent oppositions are resolved for readers more familiar with Ibn ‘Arabi’s metaphysics of the divine Names and Self-manifestations (*tajaliyât*); but the consolations of such a purely philosophic understanding are necessarily rather limited. A more spiritually effective commentary on this particular passage might be provided by today’s headlines or evening newscast, or the latest conflict at work or home: in any case, those are the mundane particular objects of ‘contemplation’ that must be faced, again and again, in order for the full reality and implications of what Ibn ‘Arabi is saying here to begin to sink in.

Everything else in his long chapters on eschatology, including his extraordinary musical descriptions of paradise and the beatific Vision, is only a sort of extended commentary on the theophanic blindness – but also the possibility of true and revelatory 'seeing' – implied in this outwardly simple hadith:

For all the pains that are created there (in Gehenna) and which are found by those who enter there [and Ibn 'Arabi later, following the Qur'an (at 19:71), pointedly insists that there is *no one* who does not first enter Gehenna before moving to the higher states of the Rising] come from the attribute of the divine 'Wrath'.⁹⁷ Those pains *only* come to be there through the creatures, human beings or jinn, who enter there, when they enter there.

Citing the Qur'anic exhortation '[Eat of the good things We have given you-all as sustenance,] and do not transgress in regard to that, lest My Wrath come to rest upon you – and whoever has My Wrath resting upon them has surely fallen!' (20:81), Ibn 'Arabi explains that this means that:

In other words, 'My Wrath descends *through* you'. For God referred this Wrath to Himself (as His Attribute), so that when It (or 'He') descended with those people, *they* were the locus (or 'resting-place', *mahall*) for It – and Gehenna is only a *place* for them, where they are descending. But they are *themselves* the locus for the (divine) Wrath, since It (or 'He') descends *through them*. For the (divine) Wrath, here, is the very essence of their pain!

However, Ibn 'Arabi quickly goes on to point out here (IV, 377–8) and in subsequent chapters that the very same 'place' (of human existence) is also the potential locus of manifestation for all the positive qualities of divine Lovingmercy (*al-rahma*):

God created for Gehenna 'seven doors, for each door of them a separate portion' (15:44) of the world and of suffering. Each of these seven doors is also open (to one of the

Gardens of paradise), but Gehenna has an eighth door in it that is locked and does not open: that is the door of being-veiled (*bâb al-hijâb*) from the Vision of God.

In the context of the preceding hadith, of course, it is clear that that ultimate, impenetrable 'veil' is precisely our ignorance – or refusal – to *recognize* in reality and in practice the divine Face in all the suffering that surrounds us. At the same time, Ibn 'Arabi's allusion here to the possible lifting or rending of that veil takes us back to the opening, autobiographical poem about his own transforming theophanic Vision, his persistent 'knocking on God's Door', with which we began.

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However, his first explicit discussion of the other, more hopeful aspect of this problem, about opening that essential Door to the beatific vision, only occurs much later, near the end of Chapter 64, 'on the spiritual 'Stopping-places' of the Resurrection'. There (IV, 465), after pointing out that 'the ultimate sources of the seven gates of the Fire are (the same) for the seven gates of the Garden', he adds that:

There is also an eighth gate, *which opens onto the Garden of the Vision* (of God, the highest of the Gardens of paradise). And that is the *same* locked gate that is in the Fire, which is the Door of being-veiled (from God): for it is never opened [for the residents of Gehenna as long as they are there], since the people of the Fire are veiled from their Lord.

But Ibn 'Arabi is not content simply to point out how, in the divine scheme of things, the soul's ultimate 'punishment' is always simultaneous with – if indeed it does not inwardly precede – its more visible 'crimes'. He is also concerned with clarifying, more profoundly, how this painful inner 'veiling' is itself a *necessary* prelude to the full appreciation and eventual realization of theophanic vision. Thus in his discussion at the very end of Chapter 64 (IV, 472) of the eschatological 'Bridge' (*al-sirât*, described in several hadith) over the Fire which every soul must eventually traverse on its way to paradise, he explains:

Now since the Bridge is through the Fire (of Gehenna) – and there is no way to the Garden except by crossing It – God said: 'There is not one of you-all but that they are entering (the Fire)! That is certain and decreed with your Lord!'(19:71). So whoever truly knows the meaning of this saying recognizes the place of Gehenna and what it is.

If we all necessarily know very well, as Ibn 'Arabi implies here, just *where* Gehenna is, we all have an equally understandable and pressing personal interest in finding this saving 'Bridge', and in learning how to cross it. Part of his answer concerning its identity, at least, was already suggested in the very title of his Chapter 63, 'concerning the inner understanding of the abiding of humanity in the *Barzakh*', or 'connecting boundary' between this world and the 'other world' of the Rising. One of the fundamental principles of the Shaykh's thought, familiar to all readers of the *Fusûs al-Hikam*, is of course the identity of that *barzakh* with the cosmic, divine 'creative Imagination' (*khayâl*, not our often dangerously illusory individual *takhayyul*). As he exclaims in the opening poem of that Chapter (63), 'Were it not for the *Khayâl*, today we would be in nothingness!' And that divine 'Imagination', he continues (IV, 406–7), is none other than the secret of the hadith of *ihsân* and the true Door to the realized vision of God's Face:

The Dominion of Imagination (*sultân al-khayâl*) is the very essence of the '*as though* (you saw Him)', and it is the real meaning of (the Prophet's) saying (in explaining *ihsân*) 'worship-serve God as though you saw Him . . .'

Here (IV, 412–13) is also where Ibn 'Arabi first openly makes the essential inner connection between the spiritual practice of *ihsân* and the hadith of God's 'transformation through the forms'. The secret to actually recognizing the divine Presence behind each of its Self-manifestations, he indicates, is suggested by the words of that saying:

This is how you may understand what is mentioned in that sound report (from the Prophet) concerning the Creator's

'Manifesting Himself (to the souls) in a form farthest from the one in which they (normally) saw Him', and concerning His transforming Himself into 'a form that they recognize (as something other than God)', while they have denied that form and taken refuge with Him from it. So you must know with *which* 'eye' you see Him! For I have already taught you that the (universal cosmic) Imagination is perceived through Itself – I mean through the eye of the Imagination (or 'through Imagination itself': *ʿayn al-khayâl*) – or it may be perceived through (merely physical) sight (*al-basar*). So which of those two 'eyes' is the sound one that we can rely on?

Now we said in that regard:

When my Beloved reveals Himself
 With which eye do you see Him?
 With *His* eye, not with my eye
 For no one sees Him but Him.'

(We only said this) to exalt His station and to confirm His Words, since He said: '(their) eyesight does not perceive Him . . .' (at 6:103–4).⁹⁸ And He did not specify one particular abode [for this theophanic spiritual insight, such as this world, as opposed to paradise]. Instead He sent these Words as an absolutely valid Sign (*âya mutlaqa*) and a matter that is completely specific and fully verified! Therefore no one perceives Him but Him. And it is with *His* eye that I see Him – (as God says) in the sound report [at the end of the *hadîth al-nawâfil*]: 'I was his eye with which he saw'.

So wake up, you heedless sleeper, from being (veiled) like this, and take this to heart! For I have opened up for you a Door to the forms of awareness (of God) that thinking cannot even reach – even though intellects can at least come to accept it – either through providential divine Caring [that is, through a special sudden state of Grace] or (as in the hadith) 'by polishing the hearts with Remembrance (of God: *dhikr*) and recitation (of the Qur'an).'

A few pages later (IV, 417–18) in this same remarkably dense chapter – which carefully sets out the essence of Ibn 'Arabi's understanding not so much of any particular

'religion', as of the potential religious *dimension* of all the arts and humanities – he underlines even more explicitly this central theophanic role of the divine 'Imagination':

For it was in regard to this (*khayâl*), from its Presence, that the Prophet says (in his explanation of *ihsân*), 'Worship God *as though* you see him' and (in another hadith) 'God is in the *qibla* of the person praying'. That is, (he is telling you) 'imagine Him before you in prayer, while you are facing Him, so that you will feel His Regard upon you and be humble before Him. And observe the appropriate inner attitude (*adab*) with Him in your praying . . .'

For if the revealer of the Way (*al-shâri'*) had not known that within you there is a reality called 'Imagination' which has this quality, he would not have said to you 'as though you see him' with your eyesight (*basar*) . . . since the (physical) eyesight doesn't perceive anything (during prayer) but the wall (in front of you)! Yet we know that the revealer of the Way addressed you (telling you) to *imagine* that you are facing God directly before you in prayer, making it incumbent on you to accept that. And God says: '**So wherever you-all turn, then there is the Face of God!**' (2:115).⁹⁹ For the 'face' of something is its true reality and its essence (or 'eye': '*ayn*).

Then Ibn 'Arabi goes on (IV, 419) to explain the inner connection between this divine reality of Imagination and the infinitely varied individual experiences of theophanic 'recognition' of God's Face:

For light is a condition (*sabab*) for unveiling and manifestation, since if there is no light, the physical eyesight (*basar*) doesn't perceive anything. So God made this Imagination a light through which is perceived the bringing-into-forms¹⁰⁰ of every thing, whatever it may be. Thus His Light penetrates the absolute non-existence and transforms and shapes it into the forms of Being (*yusawwiruhu wujûdan*). Thus the (divine) Imagination is more deserving of the Name '**the Light**' (24:35) than all the created things that are (usually) described as luminous, since His Light (of the cosmic Imagination) does not resemble the (created) lights. *And through It the theophanies are perceived.*

* *

In Chapter 65, on the inner understanding of Paradise, Ibn 'Arabi moves on to his most extended poetic description of the ultimate vision of the divine Face, described here in the context of the 'Visit' of the blessed with God at the 'Dune of the (beatific) Vision' mentioned in the famous hadith (see Section II and Appendix, in Vol XVI of this journal). Here we can cite only some of the most relevant highlights of this dramatic, emotionally charged word-painting – a complex set of images, largely drawn from the eschatological symbolism of the Qur'an (and related hadith), which is at the same time clearly intended as a poetic description of the whole course of human existence. That account begins (V, 78) with a divine Messenger (*rasûl*, the same term applied by the Qur'an to the prophets who founded the different revealed religions):

Then a messenger comes to them from God and says: 'Prepare yourselves for the vision of your Lord!' – and already He is there, revealing Himself to them! Then they begin to get ready. So God¹⁰¹ is revealing Himself, and there are three veils between Him and His creatures: the veils of His Glory, Majesty and Immensity. But they are not even able to look upon those veils.

So He says to the greatest of His chamberlains¹⁰² in His Presence: 'Lift up the veils between My servants and Me, so that they can see Me.' Then the veils are raised up, and God reveals Himself to their vision from behind a *single* veil, whose Name is 'The Most Beautiful, the Most Subtle-and-Gracious' (*al-jamîl al-latîf*) – and all of them are a single act-of-vision!

Then He pours out upon them a Light that flows invisibly¹⁰³ through their innermost essences, so that through It they all become completely Hearing (*sam'*), and they are completely overwhelmed by the Beauty of the Lord. Their innermost essences are completely illuminated by the Light of that Supernal Beauty.

Next, quoting the Prophet's own description in the final section of the long hadith of the fifty 'Stopping-places of the

Resurrection'¹⁰⁴ – the saying which provides the framework for Ibn 'Arabi's entire narrative of humanity's spiritual perfection in these concluding eschatological chapters – the Shaykh describes a scene¹⁰⁵ where God addresses the people of Paradise directly:

'O My servants who have surrendered (to Peace: *Muslimûn*): You have surrendered to Peace, and I *am* Peace (*anâ al-salâm*), and My Dwellingplace is **the Abode of Peace** (*dâr al-salâm*, 10:25). *Now I shall show you-all My Face*, just as you have heard My Speech. So when I have revealed Myself to you and I have removed the veils from My Face, then praise Me! And enter, all of you, into My Abode, no longer veiled from Me, entering in Peace and Faith. Now enter in upon Me and sit down around Me, so that you are all gazing upon Me and so you are seeing Me up close!'

'... I am your Lord: you were all worshipping Me, and loving Me and fearing Me – even though you did not see Me! . . . Truly I am most Pleased with you all, and I love you, and I love what you love. With Me there is for you whatever your souls desire and whatever gives pleasure to your eyes (or: 'essences'). With Me there is for you whatever you have claim to, and whatever you may wish – and whatever you wish, I also wish! So just ask Me – and do not be ashamed or timid or feel left alone!'

'This is My Dwellingplace where I have brought you all to live, My Garden where I have lodged you, and *My Self which I have caused you all to see* . . . I am gazing upon you all, never turning My Sight away from you. So ask Me for whatever you wish and whatever you desire. Already I kept close to you with My Self (or: 'My Breath') – and I am your closest Companion and most intimate Friend! So after this there is no need, nor any lack; no sorrow, no poverty, no sickness, no decrepitude, no resentment, no anxiety, no loss – forever and eternally ever after!'

Then, after completing the elaborate description of the inexhaustible blessings of Paradise in this same long hadith, Ibn 'Arabi concludes (V, 82–3) with his own personal, more original description of the Vision of God's Face and its

ongoing consequences (itself based on the canonical 'hadith of the Intercession'):

Then God (*al-Haqq*), after telling them that, lifts up the Veil and reveals Himself to His servants – and **they all bow down in prayer** (17:7).¹⁰⁶ But He says to them: 'Lift up your heads! This is not the right place for bowing down! O My servants, I only invited you all here so that you might take delight in witnessing¹⁰⁷ Me!' Then there overcomes them in that (witnessing) whatever God wills.

Next He says to them all: 'Is there anything else for you (that you still desire) after this?'

And they answer: 'O our Lord, what thing could yet remain, when you have rescued us from the Fire and brought us into the Abode of Your Contentment, settled us in Your Proximity, clothed us in the garments of Your Grace, and caused us to see Your Face?!

Then God says: 'But there is something more for you . . . My everlasting Contentment (*ridâ'î*) with you all: never will I ever be angry with you!'

'What sweeter words could there be!', remarks Ibn 'Arabi at this point. 'For He created us with His Speech, when He said 'Be!',¹⁰⁸ so that the very first thing we ever had from Him was Hearing (*al-samâ*'), alluding also to 7:172). And now He concludes with that with which He began. For He said this address (in Paradise), and then He concluded with the Hearing – which is precisely this Good News (*bushrâ*)! And the people differ greatly in the degree of their seeing him [as described in the hadith of the "Dune of Vision"],¹⁰⁹ and there is an immense difference among them in this respect, according to their respective degrees of knowing (God): so among them (are the "high" and the "low").' Ibn 'Arabi's following remarks here (V, 84–5) about the *visibility* of the outward signs of this event, as the blessed return from their Vision (or 'Audition') of the divine Face, are worth pondering again and again:

Then He says to the angels: 'return them to their palaces (in the Gardens of paradise)!' (That is because) they no longer

know the way back, as a result of two things: the drunkenness that has overcome them from the Vision (of God), and because of the greater Good which has increased for them through their Path (to God), so that they no longer recognize that (earlier) way.¹¹⁰ So if it were not for the angels guiding them, they would not even recognize their own homes!

Then when they reach their dwellings and their people are there before them, the young maidens and young men, they see that all they possess has become enrobed in the resplendent light and beauty and radiance from their faces, flowing forth upon what they possess with an essential radiance.¹¹¹ So they say to their people: 'But you have increased in light and beauty and radiance! We did not leave you like this!'

And their people answer them back: 'But the same thing has happened to *you*! You have increased in radiance and beauty, quite unlike how you were when you first left us!' And they all delight in each other.

Those acquainted with Ibn 'Arabi's writings and his complex understanding of the ongoing cosmic role of the prophets and 'friends of God' will recognize here a clear allusion to his many descriptions of the special function of those highest saints, including the prophets, who 'return' (*al-râji'ûn*) from their own enlightenment and realized proximity with God to further the transformation of their fellow souls.¹¹² And even readers unfamiliar with Ibn 'Arabi's own ideas on this subject, or the symbolism of Qur'anic eschatology, will recognize the extraordinarily detailed and powerful evocation of everything he has described here in the recent film *Bagdad Cafe*.¹¹³ His concluding words here again evoke the mysterious interplay of divine 'Wrath' and Lovingmercy that leads each soul toward this realized Vision of God's Face:

So know that Rest and Lovingmercy (*râha wa rahma*) are absolute throughout *all* of the Garden.¹¹⁴ And even though (the divine) Lovingmercy is not itself an existent 'thing' (*amr wujûdî*) – but rather *an expression for whatever gives rise to pleasure and joy and delight in the (human) object of that Lovingmercy* – still those [that is, the manifestations and occasions of that joy and delight] are existent things. So everyone in the Garden

is filled with delight. And everything in It is joyful bliss (*na'im*)!

VI LEARNING TO LOOK: 'THE SECRETS' OF REALIZATION

If it is tempting to stop here with Ibn 'Arabi's dramatic eschatological descriptions of the beatific Vision, more inquisitive readers cannot help but notice that he has hardly begun to speak of just *how* that ultimate spiritual station might be fully realized and lastingly attained. Not surprisingly, all the rest of the *Futûhât* quite literally constitutes his ever more complex answer to that basic existential question. But it is also worth noting that his practical answer *begins* with his discussion, in the immediately following chapters (68–71) of the spiritual 'secrets' or 'inner mysteries' (*asrâr*) of the obligatory acts of worship (the *'ibâdât*).

One of his most striking and metaphysically comprehensive allusions to the practical spiritual process of 'seeking God's Face' is the following passage from Chapter 69, on the inner secrets of the ritual Prayer. Here the Shaykh weaves together the hadith of the 70,000 divine 'veils' with a memorable section in the long 'hadith of the Intercession' describing how the 'ashes' of those souls *'who had never done anything good at all'* are nevertheless washed in the 'River of Life' and mysteriously transformed by that divine Lovingmercy into beautiful 'Pearls' in the Gardens of paradise. In Ibn 'Arabi's far-reaching interpretation (VI, 351), these poetic sayings become a powerful description of the ways the self-imposed 'torments' of those who have estranged themselves from God are themselves the ultimate, if unintended, means to their own painful spiritual purification:

But the divine Presence is described as being 'jealously solicitous'¹¹⁵ about Its Being, with respect to the (unwarranted) claim of this pretentious claimant (to divine status).¹¹⁶ So if the pretense (of divinity) had not originated with this person, that (divine 'Jealousy') would not have overwhelmed them. For it is inevitable that with the lifting of the veils (to quote the hadith): 'the Splendors (of God's Face) will burn up what-

ever created thing (*al-khalq*) is encompassed by (His) Gaze' – meaning (by 'created thing') whatever belongs to the bodily nature. Because the 'World of the (divine) Command' is (purely spiritual) 'lights' that are not burned up, but rather are harmoniously included within the Greatest Light – and the World of the Command has no pretensions within it!

So the world of created things *does* burn up and become 'ashes', and the very non-existence inherent in (its being created) does remain ashes, without any more pretense (to self-subsistent being). Therefore nothing is reduced to non-existence but those pretensions themselves, through the transformation of that individual essence (or 'eye', 'ayn), whose innate predispositions had given it its pretensions, into an essence/eye *without* those pretensions.

Further on in Chapter 69 (VI, 172–4), Ibn 'Arabi makes it clear that the essential practical key to more fruitfully and self-consciously – and less painfully – 'seeking God's Face' is contained above all in the second, *humanly active* part of the Divine Saying that begins 'I was sick and you did not visit Me . . .' – the same hadith whose opening words, as he had earlier explained (Chapter 61), were the ultimate Source and description of Hell. In other words, for him the rest of this saying also alludes to the ultimate 'cure' of that all *too* visible affliction of the human condition, but in a way that is far from immediately obvious to most of those who encounter this divine prescription:

The inner meaning of that is that it is incumbent on every person of (true spiritual) intelligence to veil the divine Secret, because unveiling It might drive whoever is neither (spiritually) knowing nor intelligent to a lack of proper respect for the divine Majesty . . . Likewise, it is essential for the (spiritual) Knower to conceal from the ignorant the inner secrets of God (*asrâr al-Haqq*) in things like His Saying: 'There is no meeting of three but that He is the fourth of them . . .',¹¹⁷ and His Saying 'and We are closer to him than the jugular vein' (50:16), and His saying (in the *hadith al-nawâfil*): 'I was (the servant's) sight and hearing and tongue . . .' For if the ignorant person heard that, it might lead them to a prohibited

understanding of divine incarnation (*hulûl*) or an undue restriction (of God's Manifestations).

So likewise with the Divine Saying 'I was hungry and you did not feed Me . . .':

(The Knower) should veil their awareness of the inner meaning of this from the ignorant and not add anything beyond the explanation that the (divine) Speaker Himself gave, just as God veiled (that Secret) in His Saying: 'And as for so-and-so, He was sick, and if you had visited him, you would have found Me with him . . .' For this is more difficult than the first part (of the same hadith)!

Yet for those who Know *through* God [*al-'ulamâ' bi-llâh*: the Shaykh's usual term for the highest saints], with this explanation (of the first part of the hadith) He granted them *another* awareness of Him that they had not yet possessed.

As we might expect, Ibn 'Arabi cannot resist giving some further hints about that second, deeper understanding of this hadith – the 'simple' practical secret of theophanic Vision – somewhat later in Chapter 69 (VII, 203):

Now the divine *Prostration* (*al-sujûd al-ilâhî*) is the greatest of the divine Acts-of-Descent through which the Truly Real makes Himself come down to the level of His servant. And it is (expressed in) His Saying: 'I was sick, but you did not visit Me; and I was hungry, but you did not feed Me; and I was thirsty, but you did not give Me drink.' There could be no divine Descent greater than that! Then God goes on to explain that (by saying) that 'So-and-so was sick, and so-and-so was hungry, and so-and-so was thirsty', and He caused Himself to descend to *their* levels through *their* states and connected all that to Himself through His describing Himself by those states.

So whoever perceives that, all of it, on the part of the Truly Real during their Prayer has indeed perceived the 'Divine Cycle of Prayer'¹¹⁸ through having the Truly Real as their Imam! And the (true) servant responds to that [direct revelation of God's Presence] with the thankfulness this gracious divine Favor deserves.

Ibn 'Arabi is even more explicit in his summary of this 'secret' later in Chapter 70 (VIII, 360), on the inner secrets of charity, of 'purifying self-giving' (*zakât*). Here he openly brings out the inner connections between the hadith on the true realization of *ihsân* ('if you are not, then you see Him') and the mysteries of this remarkable Divine Saying:

So if the servant is with his Master like this [that is, fully realizing his intrinsic 'servanthood', '*ubûdiyya*], then the servant vanishes and it is the Master who appears. For the very source of manifestation is pretension (to self-subsistent 'Lordship', '*rubûbiyya*'). Therefore the Master, in this state, takes on the attribute of the servant in this other (person), as an honor to the servant. And this (is expressed in) His saying: 'I was sick and you did not visit Me, I was hungry and you did not feed Me', since both hunger and sickness are among the attributes of the servants. And likewise God said in His reply (to the hypocrites' protests): 'So-and-so was sick, but you didn't visit them; for if you had visited them, you would have found Me with them!'

Now *God is with the servant who is like this*, and the servant whose attribute is like this [that is, who *does* respond actively and appropriately to that 'illness, thirst and hunger', at all the levels of being] *was already* with their Lord. *So understand!*

Finally, all these threads of Ibn 'Arabi's argument are brought together in his description of the 'truly sincere lover' (*al-muhibb al-sâdiq*) in Chapter 276 (II, 596):

Now the truly sincere lover is the person who changes to (take on) the attributes of the beloved, not someone who brings the beloved down to their own attributes. Don't you see that God, the Truly Real, out of His Love for us, descended to us through His hidden subtle-acts-of-Grace (*altâfuh al-khafîya*), which are appropriate to *us*? [And He does all this out of Love] even though His Majesty and Greatness are exalted far above that. Hence He descended to 'smiling happily' with us [as described in another hadith] when we come to His House seeking intimate conversation with Him. And (He descended) to 'being filled with joy' at our repenting and returning to Him after we

have turned away from Him. And (He descended) to His taking our place in our being hungry and thirsty and sick, to making Himself descend to our level and taking our place whenever one of His servants is ill, so that He said to some of them 'I was sick, and you did not visit Me . . .'

For these are the fruits of (His) Love when He descended among us. And that is why we said that true sincerity in love makes the lover take on the attributes of the beloved. So the sincere servant (of God) is like that in their love for their Lord, in 'taking on the qualities'¹¹⁹ of His Names. Therefore they take on the (divine) qualities of 'being independent' of everything other than God, of 'being strong' for God, of 'giving bountifully' with God's Hand, and of *safeguarding the Eye of God* . . . because of their love for Him.

VII CONCLUSION: IMAGINATION AND THEOPHANY

This much, then, the Shaykh tells us about the vision of God's 'Face' in the opening sections of his 'Meccan Revelations': what it really is; how it is even possible; why we ordinarily fail to realize it; what that perception is actually like (whether or not we initially recognize such theophanic Seeing and Hearing); and finally how – and *with whom* – we can truly begin to 'seek His Face'. In each case the practical key to that realization of theophany turns out to be *ihsân* – and *ihsân* in the etymological, root sense of that extraordinarily fertile Arabic term: first coming to know, and then creating and putting into action, what is *truly* good and beautiful. In other words, without that real – and necessarily individual and spontaneous – inspired awareness of the divine Presence reflected in each instant of our lives, the 'active contemplation' so accurately described in Muhammad's answer to Gabriel's question, what we usually conceive of as *ihsân* (as 'doing good') is at best only a second-hand, socially and culturally conditioned imitation of the one real thing.

Therefore it is not surprising that in one of Ibn 'Arabi's longer dramatic accounts of his own personal spiritual ascension, in Chapter 367 of the *Futûhât*,¹²⁰ his enlightened aware-

ness of the full extent of the spiritual fruits of *ihsân* described in all the Qur'anic accounts of paradise only comes at the very climax of his journey, when he has passed beyond the cosmic Temple and entered the 'Garden of Proximity (to God)' (*jannat al-ma'wâ*) that immediately precedes his culminating experience of unitive Vision:

So when I had left (the celestial Temple), I came to **the Lotus-Tree of the Limit**¹²¹ (53:14), and I halted amongst Its lowest and Its loftiest branches. Now '**it was enveloped**' (53:16) in the lights of (right) actions, and in the shelter of Its branches were singing the birds of the spirits of those who perform those actions, *since that Tree is in the form of Human Being*.¹²²

Obviously Ibn 'Arabi was not seeking philosophic, logical 'proofs' for such revelations or for the scriptures which were his inspiration in this and all his other undertakings. Instead, one might say that his method is one of using the sacred Imagination – in the sense of the archetypal images and stories provided by his own religious tradition – to awaken each reader's individual spiritual imagination, to illuminate and reveal the recurrent 'reflections' of those scriptural 'likenesses' in the 'ever-renewed creation' of his readers' own unique experiences. For him, those archetypes – like all the divine Names – can *only* be (re-)discovered through their own *realized* and ever-renewed images. With that method, and that aim, it is not really surprising if Ibn 'Arabi's writings came to provide the favorite theoretical explanation for the essential 'theo-phanic' endeavors of subsequent artists and creators in all the Islamic humanities (poets, mystics, musicians, and their audiences) for so many centuries. Nor is it very surprising if a Sufi poet like Rumi, in the quatrain with which we began, could manage to evoke in those few words what is so endlessly elaborated throughout the pages of the *Futûhât*.

Yet the lasting fascination, and the peculiar persuasive claims, of Ibn 'Arabi's own understanding of the theophanic Imagination are brought out with a special intensity whenever one encounters its workings in more distant and outwardly alien settings: such memorable discoveries are always

a potent example of what he described (in Section IV above) as being 'surprised' by God's Face. One illustration of that sort of revelation is in the following verses, whose underlying question so closely mirrors Rumi's quatrain. This more recent poet's words, like all of Ibn 'Arabi's, invoke 'Presences,/ That passion, piety or affection knows, and that all heavenly glory symbolize'. And his 'labour' beautifully conveys all the Shaykh also sought to teach about the mystery of *ih̄sân*:

Labour is blossoming or dancing where
 The body is not bruised to pleasure soul,
 Nor beauty born out of its own despair,
 Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.
 O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,
 Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
 Oh body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
 How can we know the dancer from the dance?¹²³

Notes

69. *Risâlat al-Mubashshirât*: the title of this treatise alludes to a famous hadith where the Prophet explains that these 'good tidings . . . are the dream of the muslim, either what that person sees or what is shown to them, which is one of the parts of prophecy.' The following translation is based on the text of this short work included in Yusuf al-Nabhani's *Sa'âdat al-Dârayn fî al-Salât 'alâ Sayyid al-Kawnayn* (Beirut, n.d.), pp. 472–8 (photocopy kindly provided by Prof. Denis Gril). The Epistle is No. 485 in O. Yahya's *Histoire et Classification de l'œuvre d'Ibn 'Arabi* (Damascus, 1964), Vol. II, p. 394, where it is noted that the work is mentioned in both Ibn 'Arabi's *Fihris* (No. 71) and his later *Ijâza* (No. 76). This particular formula of *dhikr* certainly contains an implicit allusion to the famous hadith 'O my God, cause me to see things as they really are'.

70. Volume I, p. 73. This and all subsequent references in this article to Chapters 1–73 of the *Futûhât* are to the ongoing new critical edition (Cairo, 1971–present) by O. Yahya, currently including Volumes I–XIV, with the volume number in Roman numerals followed by the page numbers of the translated or summarized passage. References to chapters not yet available in that edition are of

course to the older, frequently reprinted four-volume lithographed edition.

71. *Al-'ayn*: Ibn 'Arabi's untranslatable pun here on the multiple meanings of this key Arabic term – which also means 'essence', 'source', 'concrete reality', etc. – is repeated many times in the *Futûhât*, *Fusûs al-Hikam* and all of his poetry. In all of those settings – and certainly here – he is consciously intending all of those meanings, which might be partially suggested by the English pun between 'I' and 'eye'. His intended reference to the disappearance of his individual 'ego' in the ultimate Reality of the one 'See-er' (and Seen) is vividly portrayed in his more extensive autobiographical account of this transforming experience of union (or 'annihilation' of the ego) in Chapter 367 of the *Futûhât*. See our annotated translation of that account, and an earlier parallel passage in his *Kitâb al-Isrâ'*, in our article on 'The Spiritual Ascension: Ibn 'Arabi and the *Mi'râj*', in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 108 (1988), pp. 63–77, as well as further details in C. Addas' biography, *Ibn 'Arabi, ou la Quête du Soufre Rouge* (Paris, Gallimard, 1988), Chapter 3. (English translation by Islamic Texts Society, Cambridge, 1993.)

The phrase 'the Splendor of His Face' here alludes to the end of the famous hadith on the '70,000 veils' of light and darkness (see Appendix in Part 1, Volume XVI), where that divine 'Gaze' is said to 'burn up' any creature who would behold the divine Face.

72. That is, that one divine 'eye' and ultimate Subject/Object ('*ayn*: see preceding note) which is the knowable, manifest dimension of *al-Haqq*. The last half-line of poetry includes a complex pun drawn from the key concluding line of the hadith of *Ihsân* explained in the following section (IV), an understanding of which is critical to Ibn 'Arabi's own conception of the mystery of theophany.

73. At III, 362: the immediate context of this confession is Ibn 'Arabi's explanation of the way his own spiritual path involved the successive revelation or 'opening' of the spiritual stations associated with Jesus, Moses, Hud, 'all the prophets', and finally Muhammad – allusions which are apparently amplified in his account of his own spiritual Ascension in the *Kitâb al-Isrâ'* and Chapter 367 of the *Futûhât* (note 71 above).

74. Chapter 366 (on the spiritual station of the 'Mahdi's Helpers'); the short passage translated here is from Vol. III (Beirut edition), pp. 338–9.

75. 'Burden of anguish' = *haraj*, referring here to the inner state of constraint, oppression, anxiety, distress, etc. that usually accompa-

nies and underlies (whether consciously or not) much of our everyday psychic and outward activity. A number of Qur'anic verses stress that there is 'no **haraj** for you in Religion' (22:78; etc.) or in the '**Book sent down**' from God (7:2), and that this state of inner distress is a sign of those '**wandering astray**', while it is removed from those whom God '**guides rightly**' and who inwardly surrender to Him (6:125).

76. This phrase could also be translated as 'to kill one's *nafs*' (the ego or 'carnal soul' responsible for this sense of oppression and anxiety), in the hope of eliminating this torment.

77. Or 'good' or 'virtuous' actions: the Arabic root *hasan* (translated here with forms of 'beautiful') covers much the same semantic range as the Greek *kalos*; it is the root of the expression *ihsân* discussed throughout this article. The phrase immediately preceding this note could also be understood, with equal justification, taking God as the subject: '. . . for He comes to meet (the true seer), by His very Essence, with beautiful Actions.' Both meanings are clearly relevant to Ibn 'Arabi's description of this theophanic state.

78. Another explicit indication that all the 'eschatological' states discussed in greater detail in Section V are also clearly understood as symbolizing levels of spiritual realization or the lack thereof.

79. *Qalb al-insân*: as always in Ibn 'Arabi – again based on Qur'anic and hadith sources – the 'Heart' has the extended sense of the (necessarily metaphysical) locus of all experience and perception, of whatever sort. See the further explanations in our study 'Listening For God: Prayer and the Heart in the *Futûhât*', in the *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society*, XIII (1993), pp.19–53.

80. The *locus classicus* for Ibn 'Arabi's discussion of the 'Heart' in this sense is the famous Chapter XII (on *Shu'ayb*) in his *Fusûs al-Hikam*, pp. 147–55 in the translation by R. Austin: *The Bezels of Wisdom* (NY, Paulist Press, 1980).

81. *Al-khitâb al-shar'î al-mahmûd*: this typically dense expression, which would require many lines for a more adequate translation, is especially revealing of Ibn 'Arabi's profoundly 'etymological' understanding of the reality of the divine '*shar'*' (and related key terms like *sharî'a* and *shâri'*) as a universal, ongoing metaphysical process or relation between the human 'heart' and its divine Source, a kind of revelatory '*opening of the Way*' always linking the divine 'Subject' and Its manifestations. While Ibn 'Arabi certainly aims for his peculiar use of these key religious expressions to transform or illuminate

the accepted popular usages for properly receptive readers, the frequent Western translation of these terms as 'Law', 'lawgiving', 'revelation' and the like (reflecting their common usage in more familiar legal, political and theological contexts) cannot possibly begin to convey to uninitiated readers their actual meanings, and often profoundly 'subversive' intentions, in the Shaykh's own writings.

82. The immediate references are to the following verses: 'We have placed veils over their hearts' (6:25, 17:46, 18:57, 41:5); '... or are there locks on their hearts?!' (47:24); 'It is not their eyes that are blind, but blind are the hearts in their breasts' (22:46), along with many other Qur'anic references to spiritual blindness; and 'Indeed, what they were acquiring has rusted over their hearts!' (83:14).

83. *Al-'ulamâ' bi-llâh*: Ibn 'Arabi's technical usage of this expression here refers to those rare, fully enlightened souls who are able to perceive the divine Presence in all things, for whom all experience is realized theophany, because they perceive 'with' and 'through' God. *Allâh* is being used here in the technical sense of the 'Comprehensive Name' that encompasses all the manifest divine Attributes.

84. One of the most dramatic illustrations of this basic spiritual principle in Ibn 'Arabi's writings is in Moses' explanation to him, during his own spiritual Ascension recounted in Chapter 367 (III, 342) of the *Futûhât*, of how he 'accidentally' discovered the Burning Bush while seeking fire to warm his family (alluding to the Qur'anic account at 28:29). In Chapter 336 of the *Futûhât* (III, 336), Ibn 'Arabi discusses in this connection both Moses and the case of al-Khadir – who is also said to have discovered the 'Water of Life' while searching for a drink for his fellow soldiers – explaining that this principle is realized by 'all of the righteous leaders (Imams)'. See our translations of both passages in *Les Illuminations de la Mecque/The Meccan Illuminations*, (ed. M. Chodkiewicz, Paris, Sindbad, 1988).

85. In the opening story of his important autobiographical work *Rûh al-Quds* (p. 66 in R. Austin's translation, *The Sufis of Andalusia*), Ibn 'Arabi attributes this saying to the earlier Spanish Sufi teacher Ibn al-'Arif (d. 1141).

86. *Kun*: that is, the imperative divine 'Command' that continually brings all creation into being, referred to eight times (2:117, etc.) in the celebrated Qur'anic expression '... He only says to it "Be!" and it is.'

87. 'Complex' because Ibn 'Arabi's particular reading here, as applied to the highest spiritual state of the true Knowers, continues to presuppose the applicability of the ordinary, 'unenlightened' reading of that same description to the state of most individuals' understanding and application of *ihsân*. It is also important to keep in mind that for Ibn 'Arabi the first, 'practical' part of the Prophet's description – 'that you worship/serve God *as though you saw Him*' – remains equally applicable to *everyone*, even as the meaning of the 'as though' is itself inwardly transformed through each stage of spiritual growth.

88. *Kitâb al-Fanâ' fî al-Mushâhada*, in *Rasâ'il Ibn 'Arabî* (Hyderabad, 1367/1948), I, pp. 2–9; now available in an English translation by S. Hirtenstein and L. Shamash, pp. 1–17 in the *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society*, IX (1991). The discussion of this hadith occurs at the very end of that treatise, which more clearly stresses the ongoing, real ontological distinction between the contemplator, even in this state of 'annihilation', and the ultimate divine Reality or Essence which can never be entirely grasped: what is 'seen' in this contemplative state, the Shaykh concludes, is precisely, and necessarily, only a particular divine 'Face'.

89. III, 320–4, 'concerning the inner knowing of the "Jesus-like" saints . . .' (*al-'isawîyûn*). In this chapter of the *Futûhât*, as in many parts of the *Fusûs al-Hikam*, Ibn 'Arabi's interpretation of this metaphorical 'as though' is connected especially to the fundamental role of '(divine) Imagination' (*khayâl*) in making possible all manifest creation and spiritual experience.

90. This is the same elite group of saints which he elsewhere calls the *Malâmîya* or 'people who reproach (their carnal souls)'. For a detailed explanation of Ibn 'Arabi's understanding of both of these spiritual groups, drawn from discussions throughout the *Futûhât*, see the index references for both terms in Michel Chodkiewicz, *Le Sceau des Saints: Prophétie et Sainteté dans la Doctrine d'Ibn 'Arabî*, Paris, Gallimard, 1986. (English translation by Islamic Texts Society, Cambridge, 1993).

91. This hadith is included, with minor variations, in the canonical collections of Tirmidhi, Ibn Maja, and Ibn Hanbal. See the complete text of this hadith (which further emphasizes the 'hiddenness' and lack of public notoriety of these saints) and additional explanations in W. A. Graham, *Divine Word and Prophetic Word in Early Islam*, The Hague, Mouton, 1977, pp. 120–1.

92. *Musawwad al-wajh*: an Arabic idiom suggesting their social anonymity and invisibility, with possibly a note of 'non-conformity' going beyond the kind of simple, humble life suggested by the hadith itself.

93. *Al-sadaqa burhân*: this is the second half of a frequently quoted hadith which begins with the phrase 'prayer is a Light (from God)' (*al-salât nûr*). (It is included in most of the canonical hadith collections: see Wensinck, *Concordance*, I, 177, which cites versions in Muslim, al-Nisa'i, Ibn Maja, Ibn Hanbal and al-Darimi.) The notion of the divine 'Proof' (*burhân*) is Qur'anic, and the point of the hadith turns on the contrast between *zakât*, as the general duty of religiously obligatory charity or almsgiving, and *sadaqa* as further voluntary, 'supererogatory' giving and sacrifice – symbolizing the same extraordinary inner spiritual state described in the famous hadith of the *nawâfil* (see Appendix in Part 1) or other well known hadith stressing the spiritual significance of the spontaneous inner desire for prayer (*tatawwu'*).

94. Throughout this passage the Arabic term *tabî'a* and its derived forms (translated as 'natural', etc.) are used according to their common technical sense in much Sufi literature, to refer specifically and narrowly only to the *carnal*, *animal* 'nature' and inclinations within human beings – not to human 'nature' in any wider sense (as in the philosophic tradition and the usual English associations of the term).

95. Or 'self-abnegation', *sabr*: that is, the same divinely bestowed ability to transcend our animal nature that is manifested in the voluntary or supererogatory acts of charity (*sadaqât*) discussed in the immediately preceding passage.

96. *Al-da'wâ*: that is, a kind of self-deifying egoism, in the technical usage of Ibn 'Arabi and earlier Sufi tradition; see his further discussion of this key concept in the passage from Chapter 69 (VI, 351) translated at the beginning of Section VI below. The same term is more commonly used for a *legal* 'complaint' or grounds for a lawsuit, and as such is central to the (negative) protagonist found throughout classical Sufi poetry (most notably in Hafez), the *muddâ'î*, the unconscious 'critic' or 'plaintiff' against God. Ibn 'Arabi's remarks translated above (at notes 73–5, from Chapters 36 and 366 of the *Futûhât*) describing the extraordinary lack of any inner 'complaint' or quarrel with God in those who have experienced true enlightenment and theophanic vision help to highlight the widespread inner spiritual condition he is pointing to here.

97. *Ghadab*: there is no good English equivalent, since 'anger' or 'wrath' are far too inadequate and anthropomorphic in this context; the essential point is that this attribute encompasses every manifestation of the 'opposite' or lack or negation of the divine *Rahma*, God's all-encompassing, creative Lovingmercy.

98. Ibn 'Arabi's allusion here presupposes the remainder of these two verses, with their forceful contrast between physical 'eyesight' (*basar*) and inner spiritual 'insight' (*basîra*): '. . . **but He encompasses (all their) seeing (*al-absâr*), and He is the Most-Subtle, the All-Aware. There have already come to you spiritual insights (*basâ'ir*) from your Lord, so whoever has seen, that is for the good of his soul, and whoever was blind, that is against it – and I am not a guardian over you!**'

99. This is apparently Ibn 'Arabi's first explicit citation of this key verse in the entire *Futûhât*.

100. *Taswîr kull shay*: here Ibn 'Arabi employs the same Arabic term that is commonly applied to 'painting', and could easily be extended, in this context, to sculpture, filmmaking, literature and each of the arts.

101. Here and throughout the rest of this passage (unless otherwise indicated) Ibn 'Arabi actually uses the Arabic *al-Haqq* ('The Truly Real' or 'Absolute Reality'), an expression that more accurately conveys the full universality of this process, but tends to sound very stilted (and more 'un-theological' than is actually the case with the Arabic term) when used repeatedly in this sort of setting in English.

102. *Al-hajaba*: here that rank of courtly protocol might be translated more literally as the divine 'Veil-keepers!'

103. *Yasrî*: a powerful Qur'anic expression, from the same root as *isrâ*, the 'nocturnal' spiritual journey of the Prophet, which Ibn 'Arabi often uses to suggest the secret 'invisible' inner relationship between the Creator and the manifest universe.

104. *Mawâqif al-qiyyâma*: see the longer discussion of this hadith and Ibn 'Arabi's uses of it in the *Futûhât* and his *Mishkât al-Anwâr* in the Appendix in Part 1.

105. V, pp. 78–80: the selections translated here are restricted to passages directly bearing on the theme of the Vision of God's Face; the entire highly poetic passage, with lengthy references to eschato-

logical imagery from the Qur'an and hadith, is more than twice as long as these excerpts.

106. The same verbal construction is used repeatedly in the Qur'an (e.g., at 7:143, 38:24, 12:100, etc.) to describe the reaction of the prophets (and others) to the direct experience – or recognition – of a particular theophany.

107. *Bi-mushâhadatî*: Ibn 'Arabi frequently stresses, in other contexts in the *Futûhât*, that this technical Sufi expression in fact extends to *all* possible forms of spiritual awareness, including all the spiritual senses (hearing, smell, taste, etc.) as well as 'sight'.

108. *Kun*: see note 86 above and the passage from Chapter 5 quoted there. Here the reference may allude more specifically to the famous divine Words of the primordial Covenant, addressed to all human souls (7:172): *alastu bi-rabbikum*, 'Am I not your Lord?!

109. In addition to the complete version of that hadith included in the Appendix in Part 1, see our translation of several sections describing Ibn 'Arabi's interpretation of the inner meaning of some of those images and 'ranks' of spiritual vision, from Chapter 73 of the *Futûhât*, in *Les Illuminations de la Mecque/The Meccan Illuminations*. (ed. M. Chodkiewicz, Paris, Sindbad, 1989), pp. 176–84 and 523–30.

110. Ibn 'Arabi's characteristic insistence on the uniqueness and ongoing transformation of each soul's 'path' (*tariq*) to and with God is well illustrated in the following account of his own conversation with the prophet John (the Baptist, *Yahyâ*) included in his account of his own spiritual ascension in Chapter 367 of the *Futûhât*:

I said to (Yahya): 'I didn't see you on my path: is there some other path there?'

And he replied: 'Each person has a path that no one else but they travel.'

So I said: 'Then where are they, these (different) paths?'

Then he answered: 'They come to be through the traveling itself.'

111. This passage clearly alludes to such Qur'anic descriptions of the 'faces' of the blessed on the Day of the Resurrection (see Section I in Part 1) as 'shining white' (3:106), 'glowing radiantly, gazing upon their Lord' (75:22), 'blissful and contented with their striv-

ing' (88:8), or 'shining forth, laughing and joyful' (80:38).

112. See his *Risâlat al-Anwâr* 'Treatise of the Lights', in *Rasâ'il Ibn 'Arabî*, (Hyderabad, 1367/1948), II, no. 12, pp. 1–19, translated as *Journey to the Lord of Power*, R. T. Harris, (London, East-West Publications Ltd, 1981), and especially the detailed commentary (with extensive cross-references to related sections of the *Futûhât* and other works) and French translation by M. Chodkiewicz, *Le Sceau des Saints*, pp. 181–221.

113. Directed by Percy Adlon, 1988.

114. See Ibn 'Arabî's more phenomenological description of this 'knowledge of the People of the Garden', from the conclusion of Chapter 366 of the *Futûhât*, translated at the beginning of Section III (notes 74–7) above.

115. *Ghayra* is ordinarily used, in human situations, to describe positively the virtue of being righteously 'jealous' in defense of one's rightful honor and self-respect. Even on the purely human plane, not to mention its use as a divine Attribute, this particular expression does not have the negative connotations associated with 'jealousy' in English (which are expressed by other, different Arabic terms).

116. *Al-muddâ'î*: see note 96 and the related passage from Chapter 54 above on this ordinarily unconscious human 'pretension' (*da'wâ*) to judge and criticize God by our own standards and interests, implicitly raised to the level of divinity. This naturally self-destructive 'claim' to divine 'Lordship' (*rubûbîya*) is of course the opposite of the ultimate human qualities of 'servanthood' (*'ubûdîya*) which Ibn 'Arabî views as the essential keys to theophanic vision, as he makes clear in the remaining passages included in this section.

117. Qur'an 58:7. The remainder of the verse, alluding to what Ibn 'Arabî often calls the mystery of the divine 'with-ness' (*ma'îya*), is clearly assumed here: '**. . . nor of five but that He is their sixth, nor of more or less but that He is with them wherever they may be. Then He informs them of what they did, on the Day of the Rising . . .**'

118. *Al-Ruk'a al-ilâhîya*, where the three stages of the cycle of ritual prayer are taken to symbolize the whole Origin and End of human destiny, in the three cosmic 'movements' of God's 'descent' and 'prostration'— both described in this *hadîth qudsî* — and the third

culminating stage of the 'Rising' (*qiyâma*: the same term ordinarily applied to the eschatological 'Resurrection', as described in Section V above). The image of 'God as Imam' – that is, standing immediately in front of the person praying – directly recalls the injunction in the hadith on *ihsân*, to 'worship God as though you see Him.'

119. This passage is alluding to the famous hadith: 'take on yourselves the qualities of God.'

120. III, 350, 20–32: see the more complete translation and analysis of this key autobiographical document, as well as the corresponding and earlier account of the same experience from his *Kitâb al-Isrâ'*, in the concluding section of our article 'The Spiritual Ascension: Ibn 'Arabî and the *Mî'râj*', in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 108 (1988), pp. 63–77, as well as the related discussions in Claude Addas' recent biography, *Ibn 'Arabî, ou la Quête du Soufre Rouge* (Paris, Gallimard, 1988).

121. That is, what he elsewhere calls the cosmic 'Tree of Existence', *shajarat al-Kawn*, the 'universal Human Being' with its roots in heaven and its 'branches' and 'fruits' manifest here on earth, which is all of it divine Imagination. This *sidrat al-muntahâ* (where Muhammad 'saw Him in another descent') is part of a longer, classic Qur'anic description (at 53:2–18) of two extraordinary occasions of revelation (*wahy*) to Muhammad. See also the translations of the closely related cosmological treatise often attributed to Ibn 'Arabi, the 'Tree of Existence' (*Shajarat al-Kawn*), by A. Jeffery, 'Ibn 'Arabi's *Shajarat al-Kawn*', in *Studia Islamica*, X, pp. 43–78, and XI, pp. 113–60, and by M. Gloton, *L'Arbre du Monde*, (Paris, 1982). The same cosmological symbolism is developed in more detail in Ibn 'Arabi's early (and authentic) *R. al-Ittihâd al-Kawnî*, translated by D. Gril as *Le Livre de l'Arbre et des Quatre Oiseaux*, (Paris, 1984).

122. That is, comprising all the same planes of being (*nash'a*) contained within the universal 'Complete Human Being' (*al-insân al-kâmil*), both spiritual and bodily or material. The metaphysical and spiritual equivalencies that this implies, especially the essential correspondence between the Universal Human Being and the Reality of Muhammad, are elaborated in Ibn 'Arabi's works mentioned in the preceding note.

123. W. B. Yeats, final lines of the poem 'Among School Children'.