

Ibn 'Arabi: Traité de l'amour

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REVIEWS AND NOTICES

Ibn 'Arabi. Traité de l'Amour. Translated by Maurice Gloton. Paris: Albin Michel, 1986. 320 pages.

The importance of Ibn 'Arabi's extensive discussion of divine and human love in chapter 178 of the *Futûhât* was already recognised by Asin-Palacios and Henry Corbin, both of whom had translated substantial excerpts in their pioneering studies of the Shaykh al-Akbar. (Indeed the whole of Corbin's 'Creative Imagination' can be seen as an extended meditation on the central theme of *khayal* in this chapter.) And many readers will surely agree with Mr Gloton's description of this text as a 'masterpiece', since it is difficult to think of any other translated work of Ibn 'Arabi that does such justice to all the key dimensions of his thought and teaching. His metaphysical doctrines, religious and scriptural concerns, and practical spiritual outlook are here continually interwoven in a way that constantly reminds each reader of the relevance of each of those perspectives to his own innermost experience and conceptions of the world.

The structure of this largely self-contained treatise is relatively straightforward. As in each chapter of the *Futûhât*, Ibn 'Arabi begins with a poetic introduction summarizing all the major themes taken up in the later discussion as they have been realized and transmuted in his own experience. That is followed by what is at once a phenomenological evocation of the full range of aspects of the experience of love and an initial outline of the essential vocabulary and symbolism, drawn from both the remarkably subtle language and imagery of Arabic love-poetry and the equally rich scriptural indications in the Koran and hadith, that provides the basis for Ibn 'Arabi's subsequent analysis of the inner reality of love. The following chapters (pp 67-134) then develop, still in fairly abstract or highly symbolic terms, his complex understanding (as usual, both ontological and theological) of the ultimate reality of divine Love and its

human manifestations in spiritual and 'natural/physical' love. And the remainder of the discussion (pp 135-262) turns to the practical means of fully realising and integrating that divine reality as they have been described and manifested by the prophets and saints.

What makes Ibn 'Arabi's discussions here so consistently alive and fascinating is his artful combination of abstract metaphysical analysis and scriptural allusion with striking anecdotes and accounts of his own spiritual experiences and those of other Sufis (here especially of women mystics, including some of his early Andalusian teachers). Since that 'experiential' side begins with detailed discussions of romantic love and attachment (drawing mainly on the language of earlier Arabic poetry) in terms recognisable to virtually everyone, each reader - including those with no consciously spiritual or 'religious' interest in this subject - is artfully drawn into Ibn 'Arabi's dialectic, and only gradually brought face-to-face with the full practical implications of his contrast between the integrative wholeness of 'divine love' and more familiar human experiences of dissociation, incompleteness, illusion. As such, this work is itself a beautiful illustration of that providential divine 'ruse' (*makar*) by which, as he points out (p.139), 'God treats those who love Him (i.e. all His creatures), bringing them back to Him by their own will or by force.'

Now of course the central role of Love (not just man's awakening love of God, but the very Ground of all being) was also celebrated endlessly, and often incomparably, in the famous mystical poets of the Eastern Islamic world. And the full richness and density of this work - as well as the particular emphases and characteristic intentions of Ibn 'Arabi's teaching - will emerge most clearly for readers who are able to make that comparison. As always, one of those most striking characteristics is his continual insistence on the perspectives evoked here as being in fact the central, all-encompassing aim of the prophetic Message, and on the practical consequences of that insistence, a focus that continually forces his attentive reader to reconsider apparently familiar aspects of the Koran and hadith.

Mr. Gloton deserves special thanks for his generally reliable translation of an often extraordinarily difficult text, especially where the complex linguistic distinctions of Arabic love poetry are concerned. His notes help to explain the numerous allusions to hadith

and Koran, as well as Ibn 'Arabi's frequent use of Arabic etymologies, and the index of Koranic citations and index/glossary of Arabic technical terms will be especially useful to students comparing this with the Shaykh's other writings. Given the importance of this text, one may hope that his contribution will one day inspire a full English translation (from the original Arabic) and commentary, which would be a great service not only to those interested in Ibn 'Arabi or Sufism, but to students of Islam more generally.

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