

Aḥmad al-Ghazālī, Remembrance,  
and the Metaphysics of Love

JOSEPH E.B. LUMBARD

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Chapter 5

Aḥmad al-Ghazālī's  
Metaphysics of Love

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To understand the content of Aḥmad al-Ghazālī's writings and sermons, one must also examine their form. In his attempts to transport his audience to the truth of which he is certain and to actualize the realization of it within them, Aḥmad al-Ghazālī is ever aware of the limitations inherent to words. My analysis of his teachings will therefore begin with an examination of his attitude toward language, since he often reminds the reader to be conscious of the relativity of the words with which he communicates. Having examined al-Ghazālī's reflections on the nature of language, I will then discuss his use of themes from the secular literary tradition, demonstrating how he transports them into a Sufi context. This will be followed by an examination of his attitude toward interpretation (*ta'wīl*) and of his allusive method of citing Quran, Hadith, and poetry.

The second half of the chapter provides a careful examination of the teachings in the *Sawānīh*, wherein all manifestations of love are said to derive from one eternal Love. Love begins before creation, descends into creation, and returns through the created order back to its uncreated origin. The beginning of love is God's love for the human being, who is privileged above all else to be God's beloved. But in creation the human being becomes the lover seeking to return through the beloved, which is the God of beliefs, to love itself, the God beyond all beliefs and all knowledge. Aḥmad al-Ghazālī's main concern is to assist the wayfarer on the path through the stages of love: loving what is other than the beloved; loving what is attached to the beloved; and loving the beloved until one goes beyond the beloved and is immersed in Love Itself.

## 1 Between Form and Meaning

2  
3 Though Shaykh Aḥmad al-Ghazālī recognizes the need for words  
4 and expressions in order to convey his message, he often reminds  
5 his reader of the shortcomings that they cannot but entail. His is  
6 not a sustained apophatic discourse in which the premises he poses  
7 are repeatedly undone by what follows.<sup>1</sup> Rather, his often affirma-  
8 tive mode of expression indirectly and directly confirms the positive  
9 role of cataphatic religious discourse in both the exoteric and esoteric  
10 domains, as was seen in Chapter 3 in his attitude toward the Shariah.  
11 He does, however, maintain that there are fundamental limitations  
12 to cataphatic discourse and thus pushes the limits inherent to lan-  
13 guage. To his mind, the subject of spiritual discourse is by definition  
14 beyond the rational faculty. It is not grasped through thought, but  
15 through submission, tasting, burning, and immersion. As he writes  
16 in the *Sawānīḥ*:

17  
18 Love is hidden, none has seen it revealed.  
19 How long will these lovers boast in vain?

20  
21 Everyone boasts of what he imagines love to be;  
22 Love is free of imagination, and of this and that.<sup>2</sup>

23  
24 In *at-Tajrīd fī kalimat at-tawḥīd* the insufficiencies of language are  
25 at times addressed. This theme is then somewhat more prevalent in  
26 the sessions. But in the *Sawānīḥ*, it becomes a central component of the  
27 text, such that many passages could be read as an apophatic discourse  
28 wherein what is attributed to the state of the lover is laid to waste  
29 before the beloved, and what is attributed to the beloved becomes  
30 naught in the Face of Love, whose reality is itself ineffable.

31 As discussed in Chapter 2, Aḥmad al-Ghazālī was well trained  
32 in Quran, Hadith, the religious sciences, and Arabic poetry. Like his  
33 brother Abū Ḥāmid, he displayed a marked mastery of the art of  
34 eloquence (*balāghah*) in Arabic and Persian, indicating both training  
35 and native ability. Despite such proficiency, he ascribes no value to  
36 language in and of itself; its words and expressions are at best allu-  
37 sions (*ishārāt*). They are tools by which one may convey a glimpse of  
38 a higher reality that then incites one to move toward that reality, but  
39 they must never be mistaken for that reality itself. His only intention  
40 in employing words is to move the reader or listener toward the ulti-  
41 mate reality to which no words can attain and from which no report  
42 can be given. In the first of his collected sessions, Aḥmad al-Ghazālī

chides his audience, "You hear the verses but do not know their meaning."<sup>3</sup> Other such admonitions are found throughout the sessions. But his most penetrating discussion of the limitation of words is in the prologue of the *Sawānīḥ*: "Love cannot be expressed in words or contained in sentences, for the realities of love are like virgins, and the hand of grasping words cannot reach the skirts of their pudenda."<sup>4</sup> Here the virgins can be seen as allusions to the pure maidens promised to believers as a reward in the Hereafter, as in 55:56: *Therein are maidens of modest gaze, whom neither man or jinn has ever touched.*<sup>5</sup> For Aḥmad al-Ghazālī, the virgins do not represent mere sensual delights, but rather spiritual delights. The experience of inner spiritual realities is an experience of such heavenly realities. Words as we know them in the temporal world of form and contingency can never attain to the realities of this higher world, for words pertain to form (*ṣūrah*), and meanings or realities (*maʿānī*) are by definition supra-formal. The task of one who uses words to provide guidance is thus a daunting one, "Though our task is to join the virgin realities to the men of words in the seclusions of discourse, the outward expressions (*ʿibārāt*) in this discussion are allusions to various realities."<sup>6</sup> Here "men" translates *dhukūr*, which can also mean "penises," as rendered by William Chittick,<sup>7</sup> or have an implication of virility. Leili Anvar thus renders it "virile males."<sup>8</sup> These renderings indicate more emphatically that to "join virgin realities to the men" or penises "of words" is an impossible task, since the realities would then lose their virgin nature. Thus outward expressions are but allusions, for the men of words must be elevated beyond the realm of forms (*ʿalam aṣ-ṣuwar*), which is the level of words and expressions, to the realm of meanings and realities (*ʿalam al-maʿānī*) in order to even glimpse the virgin realities. "In the seclusions of discourse" alludes to the heart, the organ through which realities are perceived. When one has arrived at the heart, one has in a sense already gone beyond the realm of form, since the heart can perceive and no longer needs reports. As Maybudī observes, "When a heart finds delight in His grasp and is inundated by face-to-face vision, what will it do with reports?"<sup>9</sup>

This link between seclusion and the heart is alluded to in one of Shaykh Aḥmad's sessions: "Where is this seclusion (*khalwāh*)? Within the cavity of your heart."<sup>10</sup> Following this remark, Aḥmad quotes from a well-known saying often cited in Sufi texts wherein God addresses the Prophet David, saying, "David empty for Me a house that I may dwell in it. When you refine and empty your inner being, and your inner being becomes the heart of life, then in that will I dwell."<sup>11</sup> From this perspective, it is in the seclusion of a heart that has been emptied

1 for God that spiritual realities are joined to the men of words, or pen-  
 2 etrated by the penis of discourse. Only when one has attained to heart  
 3 consciousness that is free of attachment to outer expressions is one able  
 4 to perceive the realities to which the expressions allude. But until one  
 5 reaches the seclusion of the heart where there is no longer any need for  
 6 forms to convey meanings, the forms of language can serve to move  
 7 one toward the heart by conveying some of its meanings and realities.

8 This conception of words is essential for understanding Aḥmad  
 9 al-Ghazālī's writings and the intention behind his citations of Quran,  
 10 Hadith, poetry, and Sufi sayings. As with Sufis before him, he sees a  
 11 crucial divide between the forms (*ṣuwar*) of the words and their mean-  
 12 ings or realities (*ma'ānī*). To explain this subtle relationship between  
 13 words and realities, he speaks of "the allusion of an outward expres-  
 14 sion" (*ishārat-i 'ibārat*), wherein a seemingly straightforward citation  
 15 actually alludes to many layers of inner meaning. He then flips these  
 16 terms around to say that one must also be aware of "the outward  
 17 expression of an allusion" (*'ibārat-i ishārat*), wherein a spiritual real-  
 18 ity is given direct expression in simple terms, such as in the famous  
 19 saying delivered in the form of a *ḥadīth qudsī*: "I am with those whose  
 20 hearts are broken."<sup>12</sup> With "the allusion of an outward expression" the  
 21 true meaning may be veiled by an apparent meaning. With "the out-  
 22 ward expression of an allusion" the direct message may be obscured  
 23 by overanalysis. As much as words, expressions, and allusions may  
 24 be a support that moves the wayfarer toward the witnessing of higher  
 25 realities, it is only by insight (*baṣīrah*) that such realities are perceived.  
 26 As al-Ghazālī puts it, "In the hearts of words lie the edges of a sword  
 27 that cannot be seen except by inner insight (*baṣīrat-i baṭīnī*),"<sup>13</sup> meaning  
 28 only through insight can one pierce the forms and thus attain to the  
 29 realities that they convey.

30 In discussing the secrets of realization through both the written  
 31 and oral mediums, Aḥmad al-Ghazālī understood his function to be  
 32 that of a guide whose tongue and pen had the power to evoke long-  
 33 ing for the beloved and remembrance of the Divine. Regarding the  
 34 tongue, he says in one of his sessions, "Whoever comes to me with  
 35 ears pertaining to the spirit, I present to him the secrets of the king-  
 36 dom."<sup>14</sup> Regarding the pen, he tells us that the *Sawānīh* was written  
 37 so that the reader who experiences the pain of not attaining full union  
 38 "can read the book to keep busy and employ its verses to take hold."<sup>15</sup>  
 39 That is "to take hold" of the path of wayfaring in love. This intention  
 40 predominates in all of his words. Aḥmad al-Ghazālī likens the nature  
 41 of his writings to that of the Quran, which does not provide didactic  
 42 explanation but rather *was sent down as guidance to mankind* (2:185). In

this way he is more a guide and preacher than a formal instructor. 1  
 His mode of discourse is like that of the Quran: terse, immediate, and 2  
 allusive.<sup>16</sup> He does not explain his words or citations; rather, his inten- 3  
 tion is to create the spark of insight by which the fire of knowledge, or 4  
 recognition, is ignited. He selects images not only for aesthetic value 5  
 but to evoke an image of the Absolute that the wayfarer receives as 6  
 a reflection of his beloved upon the screen of his own heart. This can 7  
 be a wink, an eyebrow, a cheek, or the beloved's tress. In each case, 8  
 "[it] is an indication of that searching of the spirit and the heart, and 9  
 it is far from bodily deficiencies."<sup>17</sup> 10

In Aḥmad al-Ghazālī's frame of reference, the rational faculty 11  
 corresponds to the level of knowledge (*'ilm*), which is below the 12  
 level of recognition (*'irfān*), according to the technical terminology 13  
 employed in his sessions, or below the level of love, as expressed in 14  
 this passage of the *Sawānīh*: 15

The end of "knowledge" is the shore of love. If one is on 17  
 the shore, some account from it will be his share, and if 18  
 he steps forward, he will be drowned. Now how can he 19  
 give any report? How can the one who is drowned have 20  
 any knowledge? 21

Your beauty is beyond my sight. 22  
 Your secret is too deep for my knowledge. 23  
 24

In loving You, my singleness is a crowd. 25  
 In describing You, my ability is impotence. 26  
 27

Nay, knowledge is the moth of love. Its knowledge is the 28  
 outer aspect of the affair. In it the first thing that burns is 29  
 knowledge. Now who can bring a report from that?<sup>18</sup> 30  
 31

The place of knowledge in relation to recognition is addressed in the 32  
 sessions when Aḥmad al-Ghazālī is asked about the meaning of a 33  
 famous saying of 'Alī ibn Abī Tālib, regarded by some as a *ḥadīth*: 34  
 "He who knows himself, knows his Lord."<sup>19</sup> To which he replies: 35  
 36

Knowledge has become confused for you with recognition. 37  
 Do you know what recognition is? [It is] the burning of 38  
 moths in the flame of the candle. Do you see who informs 39  
 you of the moth's state? Moses said, "Perhaps I shall bring you 40  
 a burning coal therefrom, or find guidance at the fire" (20:10). 41  
 42

1           Then someone said, “When it burns who comes?”  
 2           He replied, “Fleeting thoughts pertain to the soul and  
 3           have no path to the heart. Knowledge pertains to the heart  
 4           and has no path to the spirit.<sup>20</sup> And recognition is in the  
 5           spirit. The flame is from the spirit burning in the fires of  
 6           longing. If the flame speaks, know that you have arrived.”<sup>21</sup>  
 7

8 That which is described as the fire of love in the *Sawānīh* is thus  
 9 described as the fire of recognition in the *Majālis*. Just as in the “Book  
 10 of Love” of Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī’s *Revival*, for Aḥmad the stage of  
 11 ‘*irfān* and the stage of ‘*ishq* are one and the same and lie beyond  
 12 the stages of knowledge. From this perspective, knowledge cannot  
 13 penetrate the secrets of ‘*ishq* and ‘*irfān*, for “this reality is a pearl in  
 14 a shell, and the shell is in the depths of the ocean. Knowledge can  
 15 only advance as far as the seashore, how could it reach the depths?”<sup>22</sup>  
 16 In the final analysis, knowledge is what can be transmitted, while  
 17 recognition and love must be experienced or tasted for oneself. As  
 18 noted at the end of Chapter 4, for Aḥmad al-Ghazālī this limitation  
 19 applies even to the Prophet Muḥammad: “Whenever the Messenger  
 20 of God was carried to the ocean of knowledge it would flow forth,  
 21 but when he was cast into the ocean of recognition he said, ‘I do not  
 22 know, I only worship’ (*lā adrī innamā a‘budu*).”<sup>23</sup>

23           As Shaykh Aḥmad’s only concern is love or recognition (‘*irfān*)  
 24 and not knowledge in and of itself, the purpose of his words is to  
 25 guide, not to transmit. From his perspective, recognition is not dis-  
 26 cursive; it is not a thing obtained and possessed at the level of the  
 27 spirit; rather, it is an actualization of the spirit, the true essence of the  
 28 human being that is breathed into him by God (Quran 15:29; 38:72).  
 29 As al-Ghazālī’s goal is never to offer didactic lessons regarding par-  
 30 ticular questions of doctrine or to establish a philosophical, theoretic-  
 31 al, or metaphysical systematization, the Quranic verses, *aḥādīth*, and  
 32 poetry cited in his works are not the objects of commentary, but loci  
 33 that function as gateways to the contemplation of higher realities. It  
 34 is often left to the reader or listener to make the connection between  
 35 the citation and the point that the shaykh is discussing, as with the  
 36 Quranic verse cited above (*Moses said, “Perhaps I shall bring you a burn-  
 37 ing coal therefrom, or find guidance at the fire”*: 20:10). Here the *burning  
 38 coal* is seen as an allusion to partial knowledge brought as a report  
 39 from the fire. It is far from the recognition alluded to in the words  
 40 “find guidance.” The allusion is made even more elusive when he  
 41 does not finish the citation, but relies on one’s previous knowledge  
 42



of the context in which the verse occurs to make the full connection, 1  
as the verse comes just before Moses is told to remove his sandals 2  
and stand before God. 3

In this manner of citation, al-Ghazālī is following in the path 4  
of many Sufis before him, such as Sahl at-Tustarī (d. 283/869), Ibn 5  
‘Aṭā’ (d. 309/922),<sup>24</sup> and the author of the commentary attributed to 6  
Ja‘far b. Muḥammad aṣ-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765),<sup>25</sup> as well as many others 7  
whose commentaries are found in the *Ḥaqā’iq at-tafsīr* (The Realities 8  
of Exegesis) of ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān as-Sulamī. As Gerhard Böwering 9  
observes, for the Sufis the verses and phrases of the Quran serve 10  
as keynotes that strike the Sufi’s mind, signaling “the breakthrough 11  
to God, revealing Himself in His divine speech and opening a way 12  
to Himself through and beyond His divine word.”<sup>26</sup> For Aḥmad 13  
al-Ghazālī, as for many others, Hadith and poetry can also open a 14  
way to God. When employed with such an intention, what appear to 15  
be commentaries are in fact allusions, often taken up in isolation from 16  
their particular textual context, such that the outward meaning of the 17  
text may seem to be at odds with the inner reality that the spiritual 18  
guide or aspirant may see within it. 19

### Poetry 20

Many examples could be drawn from Aḥmad al-Ghazālī’s extensive 23  
use of poetry, especially in the *Sessions*, where verses from famous 24  
poets such as Kuthayyir ‘Azzah (d. 105/723), Abū Nuwās (d. ca. 25  
198/814), and al-Mutanabbī (d. 354/965) are cited side by side with 26  
verses from the Sufi tradition and anonymous verses, which may 27  
have been authored by Aḥmad al-Ghazālī himself. The Shaykh is par- 28  
ticularly indebted to the traditions of wine poetry, or *khamriyyah*,<sup>27</sup> 29  
and longing love, or *‘udhrī ghazāl*.<sup>28</sup> Like al-Qushayrī before him and 30  
‘Umar Ibn al-Fāriḍ (d. 632/1235), Ibn al-‘Arabī, and Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī 31  
over a century later, he weaves themes from the secular belletristic 32  
(*adab*) tradition into a thoroughly spiritual discourse. This provides 33  
a tapestry whose colors and texture would be familiar to any edu- 34  
cated reader or listener, but whose aim and function are of a spiritual 35  
nature, such that the signified shifts from a secular, outward meaning 36  
to a spiritual, inward meaning. 37

While examples of verses from the *khamriyyah* tradition are 38  
scattered here and there, themes from the *‘udhrī ghazal* tradition are 39  
prevalent throughout the *Sawāniḥ*. As Roger Allen writes of the *‘udhrī* 40  
*ghazal*: 41

1 The poet-lover places his beloved on a pedestal and worships  
 2 her from afar. He is obsessed and tormented; he becomes  
 3 debilitated, ill, and is doomed to a love-death. The beloved  
 4 in turn becomes the personification of the ideal woman, a  
 5 transcendental image of all that is beautiful and chaste. The  
 6 cheek, the neck, the bosom, and, above all, the eyes—a mere  
 7 glance—these are the cause of passion, longing, devastation  
 8 and exhaustion.<sup>29</sup>

9  
 10 All of these elements are to be found in the *Sawānīh*, as well as  
 11 Sam‘ānī’s *Rawḥ al-arwāḥ*, Maybudī’s *Kashf al-asrār*, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s  
 12 *Tamhīdāt*, and the Persian Sufi love tradition that was to follow. Within  
 13 these texts the Divine becomes the supreme beloved for whom the  
 14 wayfarer must give his very self, and “the glance of beauty” (*kirishmah-*  
 15 *yi ḥusn*) from the beloved is the means by which the lover is drawn  
 16 toward the beloved and beyond until being annihilated in love. Like  
 17 many authors of the Arabic literary tradition and other Sufi writers,  
 18 Shaykh Aḥmad al-Ghazālī employs the renowned Majnūn-Laylā leg-  
 19 end. Like writers of the Persian tradition, he also takes the legendary  
 20 love of Sultan Maḥmūd of Ghaznah (d. 421/1030) for his servant Ayāz  
 21 b. Aymaq (d. 449/1059) as an example of the complete self-sacrificing  
 22 love that a person of serious spiritual intent must have for God. In  
 23 the example of Majnūn-Laylā, it is the love of a man for a woman;  
 24 in the example of the Sultān, it is the love of a man for a man. What  
 25 matters for Aḥmad al-Ghazālī is not the gender of the beloved but  
 26 love itself, which is beyond the duality of gender. Unlike the authors  
 27 of the secular literary tradition, wherein the love between two parties  
 28 is celebrated or lamented, Aḥmad al-Ghazālī sees the relationship  
 29 between the lover and the beloved as a transient phase on the spiritual  
 30 path that must be surpassed in order for one to be immersed in the  
 31 oneness of Divine Love. Whereas the secular literary tradition is filled  
 32 with stories of those who were martyrs to love, Aḥmad al-Ghazālī,  
 33 like Sufis before and after him, wrote not of the physical death that  
 34 occurs because of love, but of spiritual annihilation (*fanā’*) in Love  
 35 Itself.<sup>30</sup>

36 While the *‘udhrī ghazal* tradition provided fertile soil for the central  
 37 teachings of Aḥmad al-Ghazālī, in both his letters and the *Sawānīh*,  
 38 the influence of the *khamriyyah* tradition is less profound. The best  
 39 example of his extracting verses from their context in order to allude  
 40 to Sufi teachings is found in the use of verses from Abū Nuwās in  
 41 the following passage:

42

But one cannot eat the nourishment of awareness from that  
 which is the hard cash of his spirit, only in the reflection  
 of the beauty of the beloved's face.

Give me wine to drink and tell me it is wine.  
 Do not give me drink in secret if it can be done openly.<sup>31</sup>

The union with the beloved is eating the nourishment of  
 awareness from the hard cash of one's own spirit, not  
 finding.<sup>32</sup>

Abū Nuwās was known for leading a profligate life. Despite his  
 at times penitent voice, there is little doubt that for him the meaning of  
 these verses was literal. But for Aḥmad al-Ghazālī, as for al-Qushayrī  
 and al-Hujwārī before him and many after him, these verses allude to  
 the wine of realization, of which al-Ghazālī writes:

Of that wine which is not forbidden in our religion  
 You'll not find our lips dry till we return to non-existence.<sup>33</sup>

The verses of Abū Nuwās are thus cited in this context as an allusion  
 to the nourishment that the lover—the wayfarer—receives from his  
 divine beloved on the spiritual path.

#### *Interpretation*

Aḥmad al-Ghazālī's allusive manner of employing other textual tra-  
 ditions, both religious and secular, is common to Sufi discourse and  
 an intrinsic component of his writings and sermons. Many Sufis rec-  
 ognize such hermeneutics as allusions or inferences (*istinbāt*) drawn  
 from one's relationship with the text, rather than exegesis (*tafsīr*) pro-  
 duced by reflection (*fīkr*) on its meaning—the latter being the method  
 of more exoteric exegetes.<sup>34</sup>

Aḥmad al-Ghazālī had contempt for the confining nature of  
 most exegesis. This is exemplified in an invective he launches against  
 interpretation (*ta'wīl*). In response to an inquiry as to who knows the  
 interpretation of miracles, he responds:

Whoever says that there are interpretations for the miracles  
 which have occurred through the prophets is an unbeliever;  
 there is no doubt regarding his unbelief and no doubt

1 regarding the unbelief of one who doubts his unbelief. Do  
 2 not doubt that the moon was cleaved by the Messenger  
 3 of God—peace and blessings be upon him—*The hour has*  
 4 *drawn nigh and the moon has been cleaved* (54:1). There is no  
 5 magnanimity for the man of reason who interprets this. And  
 6 Jesus—peace be upon him—brought the dead to life *by the*  
 7 *leave of God* (3:49; cf. 5:110). There is no magnanimity for  
 8 one who says: “He meant by it the revival of the heart.”  
 9 Likewise for one who shuts the door of Islam and roles  
 10 up the carpet of the law and opposes some one hundred  
 11 and twenty thousand prophets.<sup>35</sup> It is incumbent upon you;  
 12 yes, it is incumbent upon you to watch over the guarded  
 13 sanctuary in order that you do not fall into it.<sup>36</sup>  
 14

15 This last line is an allusion to a famous *ḥadīth* of the Prophet:

16  
 17 The permissible (*ḥalāl*) is clear and the forbidden (*ḥarām*) is  
 18 clear and between them are ambiguous issues which few  
 19 people know. Whosoever is wary of ambiguities seeks to  
 20 keep his religion and his honor pure, and whosoever falls  
 21 into ambiguities falls into the forbidden, like the shepherd  
 22 who pastures (his flock) around a guarded sanctuary verging  
 23 on grazing therein. Verily for every king there is a guarded  
 24 sanctuary. Verily God’s guarded sanctuary is that which He  
 25 forbids. And verily there is a lump of flesh in the body which,  
 26 when it is sound, the entire body is sound, and, when it is  
 27 corrupt, the entire body is corrupt. Indeed, it is the heart.<sup>37</sup>  
 28

29 This *ḥadīth* is known to many as one of the axiomatic *aḥādīth* of the  
 30 Islamic tradition. Many in his audience would therefore be familiar  
 31 with the allusion. Al-Ghazālī is thus drawing upon their knowledge  
 32 of law to equate the proclivity for *ta’wīl* with the snares of Satan that  
 33 pull one to the edge of that into which they should not venture. He  
 34 goes on to say:

35  
 36 Most of the diseases of human beings are of this kind. They  
 37 see the beginnings (of the sciences [*‘ulum*]) radiating and  
 38 uncontested issues appear in the introductions of books. So  
 39 they have a good opinion of the one who proclaims them  
 40 and seek to acquiesce to what is behind them without any  
 41 proof.<sup>38</sup>  
 42

Such is the path of the exoteric sciences and, in Aḥmad al-Ghazālī's vocabulary, the way of *ta'wīl*. But according to him, the way of truth and thus the way to recognition is to follow:

It is incumbent upon you to follow the book of God and the *sunnah* of His Messenger, and to act according to one verse: *Whosoever believes in God, He guides his heart* (64:11). Whosoever seeks guidance from other than the door of faith, he is astray, leading astray.<sup>39</sup>

In other words, faith should not be mistaken for acquiescence to doctrinal expressions of particular creeds, nor for the acceptance of particular spiritual and metaphysical teachings and concepts. Rather, faith is accepting God's guidance without particular preconceptions of where that guidance must lead and how it must come about.

Given this approach, Aḥmad al-Ghazālī, like many Sufi authors who write in this same vein, rarely provides an introduction for citations of Quran and Hadith, poetry, love stories, and Sufi sayings. He introduces them in the middle of his discourse as if there were a seamless continuity between the message of his words and the cited passage(s). In the *Sawānīh*, only the reader steeped in early Persian poetry can distinguish between the author's poetry and that of his predecessors. In his writings and sermons, he rarely sets off citations with conventional expressions, such as "As God says . . .," "As the Messenger of God says . . .," or "As the poet says. . . ." Rather, they are so interwoven with his own words that they can elude even the most erudite and meticulous of scholars.<sup>40</sup> Nowhere is this organic fluidity more apparent than in his *ʿAynīyyeh*, where, in the Quranic style of rhyming prose (*sajʿ*), al-Ghazālī rhymes Persian prose with Arabic citations from Quran and Hadith and follows verses of Arabic poetry with verses of Persian poetry comprised of many of the same words and themes. Unfortunately, such rhetorical subtleties can almost never be captured in translation.<sup>41</sup>

Considering Aḥmad al-Ghazālī's conviction that language and interpretation have no access to higher realities, his teachings on love should not be read as an exposition of the phenomenon. Rather, love is the means by which he draws the reader to the deepest mysteries of the spiritual path. This immediacy is intended to pierce the reader's consciousness and penetrate the very soul so as to draw one toward the mysteries of love and recognition (*ʿirfān*). In both his writings and sermons, Aḥmad al-Ghazālī's one aim is that the reader join all his

1 aspiration (*jamʿ al-himmah*) and focus his entire being with complete  
 2 sincerity (*ikhlaṣ*) upon his only task: the remembrance of God. Joining  
 3 together one’s aspiration(s)—*jamʿ al-himmah* or *jamʿ al-ahimmah* is an  
 4 important concept in Sufi texts. Regarding this, Aḥmad al-Ghazālī  
 5 cites a saying that he attributes to Abū Bakr aṣ-Ṣiddīq: “One round  
 6 of prayer from he who joins together his aspirations is weightier with  
 7 God than one hundred horses fighting in the path of God.”<sup>42</sup> With  
 8 this as his goal, Shaykh Aḥmad does not present his words as com-  
 9 mentary or interpretation but as signposts for wayfarers on the Sufi  
 10 path who have the insight with which to pierce their forms and attain  
 11 their meanings.

12  
 13  
 14  
 15

### The Oneness of Love

16 As demonstrated in Chapter 4, there are fragmentary precedents for  
 17 Aḥmad al-Ghazālī’s understanding of love in the writings of previous  
 18 Sufis, though for many early Sufis we do not have complete details  
 19 of their teachings. In Aḥmad al-Ghazālī’s teachings we find a more  
 20 complete metaphysics of love. His is not a systematic account but a  
 21 tapestry of allusions and openings woven for wayfarers who have  
 22 already set out to travel the spiritual path, based on his position that  
 23 “opening a door is sufficient for a discerning intelligence.”<sup>43</sup> Much like  
 24 the Quran, the *Sawānīh* may appear to the uninitiated as a disjointed  
 25 collection of aphorisms pertaining to a particular set of themes. The  
 26 underlying order is discerned only through close reading.

27 Here I will present Aḥmad al-Ghazālī’s views on love in a more  
 28 systematic manner, tracing the progressive stages and stations of love  
 29 as they appear in many different sections of the *Sawānīh*. As the text  
 30 is at times terse and elusive, I draw on other texts of this genre to  
 31 flesh out its observations. These will be the *Kashf al-Asrār* of Maybudī,  
 32 the *Rawḥ al-arwāḥ* of Samʿānī, the *Tamhīdāt* of ʿAyn al-Quḍāt, and the  
 33 *Lamaʿāt* of Fakhr ad-Dīn ʿIrāqī. The *Tamhīdāt* is closer to the *Sawānīh*,  
 34 and its technical vocabulary is similar. As he was al-Ghazālī’s disciple,  
 35 ʿAyn al-Quḍāt is concerned with many of the same issues, especially  
 36 in Chapter 6, “The Reality and States of Love,” and Chapter 7, “The  
 37 Reality of the Spirit and the Heart.” Fakhr al-Dīn ʿIrāqī describes his  
 38 *Lamaʿāt* as “a few words explaining the levels of love in the tradition  
 39 of the *Sawānīh*, in tune with the voice of each state as it passes.”<sup>44</sup>  
 40 Like al-Ghazālī, ʿIrāqī provides a subtle metaphysical discourse based  
 41 on the idea that “the derivation of the lover and the beloved is from  
 42 Love,”<sup>45</sup> and sees all of reality as an unfolding of Love wherein all is

either lover or beloved and their duality is eventually subsumed in the reality of Love Itself. He explains metaphysical issues that pertain to both the school of Ibn al-ʿArabī and the teachings of Aḥmad al-Ghazālī in a manner that employs the technical vocabulary of both traditions, while retaining the dramatic tension of the *Sawānīh*. Nonetheless, in his overall metaphysics, ʿIrāqī is more a follower of his teacher Ṣadr ad-Dīn Qūnawī (d. 673/1274) and the school of Ibn al-ʿArabī than of Aḥmad al-Ghazālī. Ultimately, there can be no one-to-one correspondence between texts written at this level. As ʿIrāqī puts it:

There is no doubt that every lover gives a different sign of the beloved, every recognizer provides a different explanation, and every verifier makes a different allusion. The declaration of each is:

Our expressions are many and Your loveliness one,  
Each of us points to that single beauty.<sup>46</sup>

From this perspective, although the texts may diverge in their modes of expression, they complement one another because they each point to the beauty of God, which for these authors is the one beauty from which all other beauty derives.

#### *Love's Two Beginnings*

In the context of the *Sawānīh*, love could be said to have two beginnings: the first before creation, and the second within creation. The beginning within creation is the movement of the wayfarer toward love. That before creation begins with God's love for the human being, which is also the source of man's love for God. From the perspective of wayfaring, the human being is the beloved. This beginningless love is what distinguishes the human being from the rest of creation. As Aḥmad al-Ghazālī writes, "The special character of the human being is this: is it not enough that one is beloved before one is a lover? This is no small virtue."<sup>47</sup> Like many other Sufi authors, he maintains that this beginningless state of being beloved is what is referred to in the Quranic verse: *He loves them and they love Him* (5:57). Drawing upon this verse, he writes:

The root of love grows from eternity. The dot under the letter *bā'* (b) in *He loves them* (*yuhibbuhum*) was planted as

1 a seed in the ground of *they love Him*. No, rather, that point  
2 was planted in *them (hum)*, for *they love Him* to come forth.<sup>48</sup>

3  
4 Aḥmad al-Ghazālī, like many before and after him, explains this love  
5 by referring to the Quranic story of the pre-temporal covenant with  
6 God made while all human beings were still in Adam's loins. As the  
7 Quran states:

8  
9 *And [remember] when thy Lord took from the Children of*  
10 *Adam, from their loins, their progeny, and made them bear wit-*  
11 *ness concerning themselves, "Am I not your Lord?" They said,*  
12 *"Yea, surely, we bear witness" —lest you should say on the Day*  
13 *of Resurrection, "Truly, we were heedless of this" (7:172).*

14  
15 This event is known in Islamic literature as "The Day of the Covenant"  
16 and in the Persian Sufi tradition as *rūz-i alast* (The Day of "Am I not  
17 [your Lord]?"). It is understood by Aḥmad al-Ghazālī and others as  
18 a covenant fashioned in love and through love. When God said to  
19 all human beings, "*Am I not your Lord,*" this was His love for them.  
20 When human beings responded by saying "*Yea*" (*balā*), this was their  
21 love for God. From this perspective, only through God's making them  
22 beloved did human beings become lovers, and all of human love and  
23 striving for God originates from God's pre-temporal love for man.  
24 As Aḥmad writes, "*He loves them* is before *they love Him*—no doubt.  
25 Bāyazīd [al-Baṣṭāmī] said, 'For a long time I imagined that I desired  
26 Him. He Himself had first desired me.'"<sup>49</sup>

27 From this perspective, the human being's love for God is the  
28 self-same love that God has for the human being. Although human  
29 love finds expression in the temporal order, like the human being him-  
30 self, love's origin is beginningless and its goal is endlessness. Shaykh  
31 al-Ghazālī alludes to the fundamental unity of love in all of these  
32 phases through a metaphor, "When the jasmine of love came forth,  
33 the seed was the same color as the fruit, and the fruit was the same  
34 color as the seed."<sup>50</sup> The seed, the tree, and the fruit can each be spo-  
35 ken of as different entities, but they are in reality the same substance  
36 in different forms. The whole of the *Sawānīḥ* is about the derivation  
37 of all love's many branches and fruits from this one eternal seed of  
38 love and the inevitable return of all modes of love to Love in Love  
39 and through Love. As the Shaykh writes:

40  
41 Love is its own bird and its own nest, its own essence and  
42 its own attribute, its own wing and its own wind, its own



arc and its own flight, its own hunter and its own game,  
 its own direction and what is directed there, its own seeker  
 and its own goal. It is its own beginning and its own end,  
 its own sultan and its own subject, its own sword and its  
 own sheath. It is garden as well as tree, branch as well as  
 fruit, nest as well as bird.<sup>51</sup>

The entirety of this discussion thus regards the many faces that Absolute Love assumes as it unfolds Itself. In this sense, al-Ghazālī goes a step beyond the teachings on love attributed to al-Ḥallāj by ad-Daylamī. Whereas al-Ḥallāj is said to have spoken of *‘ishq* as an attribute pertaining to the Divine Essence and ad-Daylamī alludes to the same teaching while using the word *maḥabbah*, al-Ghazālī, like ‘Ayn al-Qudāt and ‘Irāqī after him, treats it as the Divine Essence Itself. Not only does God love man, God has fashioned everything through love. As ‘Irāqī writes, “Love flows in all existents . . . all is love.”<sup>52</sup> So love is in fact the very essence of the lover. This same understanding may be implied in the teachings of al-Ḥallāj, ad-Daylamī, and Anṣārī, but none of them develops an extensive explanation. They do imply that all aspects of creation are manifestations of love, but they do not provide a detailed explanation wherein every phase of spiritual wayfaring is presented in relation to love.

The process by which the Divine Love-Essence unfolds Itself comprises two phases: the path of descent and the path of ascent. The former is the path from the Divine and the latter is the path of return to the Divine. The descent is the path from the love which begins before creation and the ascent is from the love which begins in creation. Most of the *Sawānīh* is concerned with the path of ascent because its many obstacles confront the lover and dilute his experience of love for that which is eternal with love for that which is contingent and temporal. Nonetheless, there is some discussion of the path of descent, since in order to fully understand his predicament the spiritual wayfarer must be aware that this affair began in beginninglessness (*abad*), attains to endlessness (*azal*), and cannot be fully realized in the temporal realm. As Aḥmad al-Ghazālī writes:

O chivalrous one! The grace that eternity put in beginninglessness, how can contingency receive it all except in endlessness? No, rather contingency can only fully receive the grace that eternity placed in beginninglessness in endlessness.

1 O chivalrous one! Beginninglessness has reached here [this  
2 world], but endlessness can never reach an end. The grace  
3 that descends will never reach complete exhaustion. If you  
4 gain insight into the secret core of your moment, know that  
5 the *two bows' length* (53:9) of beginninglessness and endless-  
6 ness are your heart and your moment (*waqt*).<sup>53</sup>  
7

8 The reference to “two bows’ length” is taken from the Quranic  
9 account of the ascension (*mi‘rāj*) of the Prophet Muhammad into the  
10 Divine Presence: *Then He drew nigh and came close, until he was within*  
11 *two bows’ length or nearer. Then He revealed to His servant what He revealed.*  
12 *The heart lied not in what it saw* (53:8–11).<sup>54</sup> For Aḥmad al-Ghazālī,  
13 as for many Sufis, the two bows represent the arc of descent from  
14 beginninglessness and the arc of ascent to endlessness. Together they  
15 comprise the entire circle of existence. Beginninglessness is the point  
16 from which the arc of descent begins and endlessness is the point  
17 to which the arc of ascent returns. But in reality they are one and  
18 the same; the term employed is a question of perspective. As one  
19 descends into the corporeal world, various modes of manifestation are  
20 actualized. In order for these modes to be integrated and unified, one  
21 must return upon the path of ascent. To say that the path of descent  
22 from beginninglessness and the path of ascent to endlessness are the  
23 wayfarer’s heart and moment is thus to say that one’s true nature is  
24 determined by where one stands in the process of return. As will be  
25 explained below, the heart is the faculty of love whereby beauty and  
26 the beloved are perceived as many derivations of love, and this act of  
27 perception is the very process of spiritual reintegration. The moment  
28 is the state that alters in accord with the wayfarer’s position as he  
29 moves through the phases of his or her journey. This moment will  
30 vacillate between pain and relief, sorrow and happiness, and expan-  
31 sion and contraction until the wayfarer is annihilated in Love Itself  
32 beyond its manifestations as lover and beloved.

33  
34 *The Descent of the Spirit*  
35

36 A crucial moment in the path of descent occurs when the spir-  
37 it descends into the temporal order. For Aḥmad al-Ghazālī, as for  
38 Maybudī, Sam‘āni, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, and all representatives of the  
39 “School of Love,” this spirit is what God refers to when He says,  
40 *Say, “The spirit is from the command of my Lord,”* (17:85) and *I breathed*  
41 *into him of My spirit* (15:29, 38:72). They take these verses to indicate  
42 that the spirit is the core of the human being, through which one is

eternally connected to the command of God. As Sam ʿānī writes, “On 1  
the day He said, ‘I breathed into him of My spirit’ [15:29], He set in 2  
place the human beings’ qualification. In beginninglessness He had 3  
decreed that sheer servanthood would contract a marriage with com- 4  
plete lordhood: “Am I not your Lord?” [7:172].<sup>55</sup> As such, the spirit is 5  
not subject to the words *Be! And it is (kun fa-yakūn; 2:117; 3:47; 6:73; 6  
16:40; 19:35; 36:82; 40:69)* by which God creates.<sup>56</sup> For ʿAyn al-Qudāt, 7  
the spirit is in fact the command itself: “It is the commander, not 8  
the commanded. It is the actor, not the deed done; the conqueror, 9  
not the conquered.”<sup>57</sup> According to al-Ghazālī, “When the spirit came 10  
from non-existence into existence, love was awaiting the spirit-mount 11  
on the frontier of existence.”<sup>58</sup> The spirit was awaiting love because 12  
it is fashioned for love alone and is the only mount that is fit for 13  
love. As ʿAyn al-Qudāt writes, the spirit “has the quality of begin- 14  
ninglessness.”<sup>59</sup> Thus Shaykh al-Ghazālī writes, “love does not appear 15  
as a rider on anything except the mount of the spirit.”<sup>60</sup> The spirit 16  
always maintains a position above the heart because the latter fluctu- 17  
ates between the dispersion of the soul and constancy of the spirit. 18  
As observed in Chapter 3, the heart, though more subtle and more 19  
exalted than the soul, nonetheless represents the outermost aspect of 20  
the wayfarer’s inner being. The spirit and the secret core are more 21  
exalted and subtler dimensions of one’s inner nature. As will be seen 22  
below, much of the journey is traveled within the heart as it moves 23  
closer to the spirit, but love can appear only in the spirit because only 24  
the spirit has the capacity to fully manifest love. 25

Since the wayfarer is veiled by many of the obfuscations that 26  
arise in the process of creation, the relation between love and the spirit 27  
upon which it is mounted can take on many forms. As al-Ghazālī 28  
writes: 29

Sometimes the spirit is for love like the earth, such that 31  
the tree of love grows from it. Sometimes the spirit is 32  
like the essence, such that the attribute subsists through 33  
it. Sometimes it is like the partner in a house, such that 34  
love also has a turn in subsistence. Sometimes love is the 35  
essence and the spirit is the attribute, such that the spirit 36  
will subsist through it.<sup>61</sup> 37

These multiple relationships arise because “the spirit is the shell of 39  
love,”<sup>62</sup> so in seeking love the wayfarer must encounter the spirit 40  
before fully encountering love. Therefore, the spirit will sometimes 41  
appear to be riding on love, while love will appear to be subsisting 42

1 through it, whereas in reality love is riding on the spirit and the  
 2 spirit is subsisting through love. For most people, perception remains  
 3 delimited by the contingencies of temporality, thus the relationship  
 4 between love and the spirit appears distorted. Its reality is only per-  
 5 ceived when one has entered what Shaykh al-Ghazālī refers to as  
 6 “the world of the second affirmation” beyond effacement,<sup>63</sup> that is,  
 7 when the individual existence of the lover is consumed and the lover  
 8 abides in love alone.

9

10 *The Heart*

11

12 The faculty whereby the spiritual journey is undertaken is the heart,  
 13 for the heart has been made to love alone, as mentioned previously:

14

15       The function of the heart is being a lover. So long as love is  
 16       not, it has no function. When it becomes a lover, its affair  
 17       will also become ready. It is thus certain that the heart  
 18       has been created for love and being a lover and knows  
 19       nothing else.<sup>64</sup>

20

21 Aḥmad al-Ghazālī thus likens the heart to a nest for the beginning-  
 22 less bird of love:

23

24       The secret of this—that Love never shows the whole of its  
 25       face to anyone—is that it is the bird of beginninglessness.  
 26       What has come here [in this world] is the traveler of end-  
 27       lessness. Here it does not show its face to the vision of con-  
 28       tingent beings, for every house is not a nest for it, as it has  
 29       hidden a nest from the magnificence of beginninglessness.<sup>65</sup>

30

31 In so far as one attempts to perceive love with the faculties of percep-  
 32 tion or to understand love with the mind, one will fail. As William  
 33 Chittick observes, “Scholars and thinkers have no entrance into this  
 34 realm unless they also become lovers.”<sup>66</sup> To know love, or rather to  
 35 taste love, one must know the heart and learn to see with it, for it  
 36 alone can perceive manifestations of Love’s attributes in the realm  
 37 of contingent beings. In the temporal order, the wayfarer experienc-  
 38 es the heart as the locus of the beloved’s beauty, even when he is  
 39 ignorant of this function. As Shaykh al-Ghazālī writes, “And it may  
 40 be that the lover himself does not know this, but his heart itself is  
 41 the locus of that beauty and seeks observation until it finds.”<sup>67</sup> This  
 42 is why he says that the lover “only drinks from the bowl of the

heart."<sup>68</sup> For although his nourishment in love is from the beauty of the beloved, this beauty is only witnessed upon that screen by which love contemplates its own self-disclosures through the lover's witnessing of them, that is, the heart, since "the heart is the locus of [love's] attributes."<sup>69</sup>

Aḥmad al-Ghazālī's many allusions to the function of the heart are scattered throughout the *Sawāniḥ*. In his *Tamhīdāt*, 'Ayn al-Qudāt provides a more lucid and concise discussion. Here he enjoins the reader to seek the heart, as it is in the heart that one's true nature is found:

Seek the heart! And seize it! Do you know where the heart is? Seek the heart "between the two fingers of the Compassionate."<sup>70</sup> Alas! If the beauty of "the two fingers of the Compassionate" were to lift the veil of pride, every heart would find the remedy. The heart knows what it is and who it is. The heart is the object of God's gaze. And the heart itself is deserving of "Verily God does not look at your forms, nor at your deeds, but He looks at your hearts."<sup>71</sup> O friend, the heart is the locus of God's gaze. When the [bodily] frame (*qālib*) takes on the color of the heart and becomes the same color as the heart, the [bodily] frame is also the object of the gaze.<sup>72</sup>

In witnessing the traces and images of the beloved, the lover becomes the means by which God witnesses the attributes of His love, which are all composed of His beauty as it is reflected on the screen of the lover's heart. As the wayfarer progresses in love, the body itself takes on the color of the heart, for a subtle heart results in the Divine Love or Light penetrating into the Adamic clay.<sup>73</sup> Regarding the witnessing of the Divine within one's own heart, Aḥmad al-Ghazālī records these verses:

You yourself, O beloved, are in the heart night and day.  
Whenever I want you, I look in the heart.<sup>74</sup>

The heart is, however, only the locus for the manifestation of love's attributes, not of Love Itself, since Love is the Divine Essence, and the Essence can never be fully manifest. This is why Aḥmad al-Ghazālī states, "love never shows the whole of its face to anyone." The various stages and degrees of the path can be understood as the various ways in which Love's attributes become manifest. But

1 as Fakhr ad-Dīn ‘Irāqī observes, here the attributes also function as  
2 veils:

3  
4 His veils are His own names and attributes. As the author  
5 of *Qūt al-qulūb*<sup>75</sup> puts it, “Essence is veiled by attributes,  
6 attributes by acts.” Ultimately, He Himself is His own veil,  
7 for He is hidden by the very intensity of His manifestation  
8 and covered by the very potency of His light.<sup>76</sup>  
9

10 The veils are essential for manifestation. Without them, all that exists  
11 would be eradicated by God’s immediate and overwhelming pres-  
12 ence. In this sense, it is through God’s own limitation of Himself that  
13 manifestation comes forth. Hence ‘Irāqī writes, “These names and  
14 attributes must not be raised, for if they were, the unity of the Essence  
15 would blaze forth from behind the screen of might, and all things  
16 would be totally annihilated.”<sup>77</sup> The inability to perceive God may  
17 therefore not be due to distance, but rather proximity. As al-Ghazālī  
18 writes, “All that is unreachable is not so because of greatness and  
19 exaltedness. It is also from subtlety and excess of proximity.”<sup>78</sup>

20 The spiritual wayfarer’s first intuitions of love come through the  
21 perception of God’s self-delimitations. By strengthening the inner fac-  
22 ulties of perception and passing through the veils of the Divine attri-  
23 butes, the lover is gradually able to witness the Divine in a more direct  
24 manner. But this is a painful and arduous process, for not only must  
25 the outer veils be removed, so too, must the inner veils be removed.  
26 As Shaykh al-Ghazālī writes, “The inner worlds cannot be realized so  
27 easily. This is not so easy because there are screens, veils, treasures,  
28 and wonders there.”<sup>79</sup> As such, he maintains that the spiritual path is  
29 characterized more by pain, affliction, and oppression than by ease,  
30 comfort, and consolation: “In reality, love is affliction, and intimacy  
31 and comfort in it are strange and are borrowed.”<sup>80</sup> He goes on to say  
32 both that “Love is affliction” and that “affliction is the heart.”<sup>81</sup> So  
33 to experience affliction in the heart is in the very nature of having a  
34 heart and part of its maturation. As Maybudī puts it, “When some-  
35 thing is burnt, it loses value, but when a heart is burnt, it gains in  
36 value.”<sup>82</sup> Affliction is a divine mercy that leads the spiritual wayfarer  
37 and helps one transcend many veils. Witnessing the beloved on the  
38 screen of the heart is the constant persecution of the lover by the  
39 beloved and is how the lover drinks nourishment from the cup of his  
40 heart. As al-Ghazālī writes, “Since love is affliction, its nourishment  
41 in knowledge is from the persecution which the beloved performs.”<sup>83</sup>  
42

Indeed, "the perpetuity of witnessing [the beloved] appears in the perpetuity of affliction."<sup>84</sup>

*Beauty and Love*

The central terms in Aḥmad al-Ghazālī's discussion of the relationship between the lover and the beloved are beauty (*ḥusn*) and love (*‘ishq*). Without the latter there can be no lover, and without the former there is no beloved. Love is the seed of the lover's attributes, and beauty is the seed of the beloved's attributes. But as Nasrollah Pourjavady observes in his commentary on the *Sawānīh*:

Seen from the point of view of the Absolute they are but one. The Ultimate Reality . . . has both these seeds in itself in perfect union. In fact it is one seed which will branch out in the forms of the beloved and the lover. The branch leading to the form of the beloved is *ḥusn* and the one leading to the form of the lover is love.<sup>85</sup>

To support this observation, Pourjavady cites a passage from *Husn va-‘ishq* by the Sufi master Nūr ‘Alī Shāh Iṣfahānī (d. 1212/1798):

People of mystical knowledge say that *ḥusn* is the final cause of creation and love constitutes *ḥusn*'s foundation. Moreover, it is obvious to everyone in possession of Intellect that *ḥusn* is nothing other than love. Though they have two names, they are one in essence.<sup>86</sup>

For Aḥmad al-Ghazālī, "the beginning of love is this, that the seed of beauty is planted in the ground of the heart's seclusion by the hand of witnessing."<sup>87</sup> Such is the beginning of the affair of love because that beauty is the means whereby the lover witnesses the manifestation of Absolute Love in the delimited form of the beloved. The beauty of each thing is called by al-Ghazālī "the brand of creation." This beauty is the secret face which faces Absolute Love and by virtue of which all things truly exist. For if they did not have a face turned toward the Absolute, there would be no way for them to derive their existence from it:

The secret face of everything is the point of its connection, and a sign hidden in creation, and beauty is the brand of

1 creation. The secret face is that face which faces love. So  
 2 long as one does not see that secret face, he will never see  
 3 the sign of creation and beauty. That face is the beauty of  
 4 *and there remains the Face of thy Lord (55:27)*. Other than it  
 5 there is no face, for *all that is upon it passes away (55:26)*.  
 6 And that face is nothing, as you know.<sup>88</sup>

7  
 8 In witnessing the beauty of the beloved, the lover-wayfarer is  
 9 thus witnessing manifestations of the Divine. Addressing this same  
 10 point, Fakhr ad-Dīn ʿIrāqī says that the face is the meaning or reality  
 11 (*maʿnā*) of a thing that is “the self-disclosure of God” (*tajallī Allāh*).<sup>89</sup>  
 12 He then addresses the reader:

13  
 14 O friend, when you know that the meaning and reality of  
 15 things is His Face, then you will say, “Show us things as  
 16 they are”<sup>90</sup> until you see clearly that

17  
 18 In everything there is a sign  
 19 Indicating that He is one.<sup>91</sup>

20  
 21 But it is only the human being and, moreover, only the heart of the  
 22 human being that is able to perceive the Divine countenance in beauty  
 23 and thus able to read these signs. In this way, the beloved is entirely  
 24 dependent on the lover for its beauty to be fully realized; otherwise,  
 25 it would not be beloved:

26  
 27 The eye of beauty looks away from its own beauty, for it  
 28 cannot find the perfection of its own beauty except in the  
 29 mirror of the love of the lover. In this way beauty must  
 30 have a lover so that the beloved can eat nourishment from  
 31 its own beauty in the mirror of love and the seeking of the  
 32 lover. This is a great secret and the secret of many secrets.<sup>92</sup>

33  
 34 Bearing in mind the previous discussion of the heart, beauty  
 35 assumes a form on the screen of the lover’s heart by which a par-  
 36 ticular aspect or attribute of love is revealed as the beloved. From  
 37 this perspective, only the lover is truly derived from love because  
 38 the whole of the affair of love is the reflection of the beauty of the  
 39 beloved on the screen of the lover’s heart. Since the beloved is in fact  
 40 reflections of beauty within the heart, it is from his own heart that the  
 41 lover drinks the nourishment that is said to have been drunk from  
 42 the beloved. Regarding the derivation of love from the lover and the  
 derivation of love from the beloved, al-Ghazālī writes:



The name of the beloved is borrowed in love and the name of the lover is the reality in love. The derivation of the beloved from love is a metaphor and is calumny. In reality derivation belongs to the lover, for he is the locus of the realm of love and its mount. But the beloved definitely has no derivation from love.<sup>93</sup>

In the early phases of love it appears that love derives from the beloved, but in reality all love is derived from the lover. The whole of the affair is an inward journey. The many phases of the relationship between the lover and the beloved can be understood as the manner in which Love is loving Itself through the manifestation and self-disclosure of Its own beauty within the heart of the lover.

Although beauty is the means whereby the lover witnesses the beloved, beauty in and of itself is beyond the beloved and does not turn toward creation. Considered in this light, witnessing the beloved is provisional and witnessing beauty itself is to see directly with the eye of the heart. Nonetheless, witnessing beauty through the intermediary of the beloved marks advancement on the spiritual path, though it is still only a stage of relativity and contingency. In alluding to this al-Ghazālī writes:

The glance of beauty is one thing and the glance of belovedness is another. The glance of beauty has no face toward an other and has no connection with what is outside. But as for the glance of belovedness, amorous gestures, flirting, and coquetry, that is a reality which derives its support from the lover; without him they will find no way.<sup>94</sup>

As the glance of beauty “has no face toward an other and has no connection with what is outside,” it cannot be witnessed by the lover while the duality of lover and beloved remains. So long as there is duality between the lover and the beloved, the lover must endure the trials of flirting and coquetry that come from the glance of belovedness, or rather from the divine manifestations of the attributes of Love on the screen of the lover's heart. For al-Ghazālī, the flirting and coquetry are what result in the many states of spiritual wayfaring, such as expansion (*bast*) and contraction (*qabd*), sorrow and happiness, and separation (*firaq*) and union (*wiṣāl*), all of which are defined in relation to an opposite. In enduring these colorations, the wayfarer is, nonetheless, moving closer to the perfection of love and beauty. Shaykh al-Ghazālī likens this process to cooking: “O chivalrous one! The glance of belovedness in beauty and the glance of beauty must

1 be like salt in the pot, in order that the perfection of saltiness be  
 2 connected to the perfection of beauty.”<sup>95</sup> Only the fully cooked and  
 3 seasoned heart—that is to say, the heart that is spiritually mature—is  
 4 able to perceive the fullness of pure beauty beyond the interplay of  
 5 lover and beloved.

6  
 7  
 8  
 9

### The Stages of the Path

10 Once Love has descended into the world, it begins to seek itself  
 11 through the love of the lover. The love realized within the lover per-  
 12 tains to the second beginning by which the path of ascent from the  
 13 created temporal order to endlessness is traveled. For love to reach ful-  
 14 fillment along the path of ascent requires four stages: (1) that wherein  
 15 one loves what is other than the beloved; (2) that wherein one loves  
 16 what pertains to the beloved and is attached to it; (3) that wherein  
 17 one loves only the beloved; and (4) that wherein one is immersed in  
 18 the ocean of Love, beyond all duality. Though separable in theory,  
 19 these stages are not always distinct from one another in practice.  
 20 As the lover-wayfarer travels the path, he will fluctuate, sometimes  
 21 residing completely in the witnessing of the beloved only to return  
 22 again to love its shadows. Only when the lover has become com-  
 23 pletely immersed in the oneness of Love is he beyond ascending and  
 24 descending—increase and decrease. The following section examines  
 25 these stages in ascending order.

26

#### *Love for What is Other*

28

29 Even when one loves what is other than the beloved, his love is for  
 30 the one single beloved, though he may not be aware of this. As ‘Irāqī  
 31 writes, all forms of love are the same in substance:

32

33       It is not fit to love anything other, rather it is impossible.  
 34       Because whatever they love after essential love, whose  
 35       necessary cause is not known—whether they love beauty  
 36       or doing what is beautiful (*iḥsān*)—these two could not be  
 37       other than it.<sup>96</sup>

38

39 But unlike ‘Irāqī and his brother Abū Ḥāmid, Aḥmad al-Ghazālī  
 40 does not discuss this initial phase of love. Those who have already  
 41 devoted themselves to spiritual wayfaring have done so because they  
 42 are cognizant of the fact that there is only one beloved. This initial

awareness is thus assumed to be the starting point, and the *Sawānih* focuses upon the subtleties of the multifaceted relationship between the lover and the beloved, since the phases of this relationship are the phases of the spiritual path.

*Contrast Between the Lover and the Beloved*

So long as they exist, the lover and the beloved are bound to each other in a continuous interplay of union and separation. Both are derived from love, but each manifests different qualities. They are in fact polar opposites:

The beloved is the beloved in every state, thus self-sufficiency is its attribute. And the lover is the lover in every state, thus poverty is its attribute. The lover always needs the beloved, thus poverty is always his attribute. And the beloved needs nothing, for it always has itself. Therefore, self-sufficiency is its attribute.<sup>97</sup>

Sometimes the lover and the beloved are drawn to one another; sometimes they are opposed to one another; and sometimes one opposes the other, while the other is drawn to it. But at all times they are dependent on one another. It is easy to imagine how the lover who is all poverty and need can be dependent on the beloved who is entirely self-sufficient, but it is more difficult to see how the beloved is dependent on the lover. Regarding this relationship, Aḥmad al-Ghazālī writes, "These attributes of the beloved do not become manifest except through the manifestation of their opposites in the lover—so long as the poverty of this is not, its self-sufficiency does not appear."<sup>98</sup> Ultimately, the lover and the beloved are two components of a complementary duality. It is through their interplay that love and beauty are perceived upon the screen of the heart, bringing it to seasoned perfection. Like different ingredients boiling in a pot, their positions are constantly changing. Eventually, their many modes evaporate and all that is left is what al-Ghazālī refers to as a roasted heart (*dilī biryān*), which resides in the oneness of pure love.

*The Two Faces of Desire*

So long as his heart is not fully "roasted," the lover-wayfarer must fully embrace the reality of his poverty in the face of the beloved so that he ceases to believe that he exists through his own self. As

1 al-Ghazālī writes, “To be self through one’s own self is one thing, and  
 2 to be self through one’s beloved is another. To be self through one’s  
 3 own self is the unripeness of the beginning of love.”<sup>99</sup> While the lover  
 4 is in this state of unripeness, he continues to love for himself, even  
 5 though his love is directed toward the beloved: “The beginning of  
 6 love is such that the lover wants the beloved for his own sake. This  
 7 person is a lover of himself through the intermediary of the beloved,  
 8 but he does not know that he wants to use her on the path of his  
 9 own will.”<sup>100</sup> Even his desire to find the beloved or to advance on the  
 10 spiritual path can be a hindrance, since such desire can be a deleterious  
 11 reaffirmation of self. Desire may in some way help to initiate  
 12 this path, but in later stages, one must be free of all desire and allow  
 13 the path to unfold. Seen from the end of the path, “Desire is entirely  
 14 calumny. Calumny is entirely deficiency. Deficiency is entirely shame.  
 15 And shame is entirely opposed to certainty and recognition and is the  
 16 same as ignorance.”<sup>101</sup> Nonetheless, “desire has two faces: one is its  
 17 white face and one is its black face. That face which is turned toward  
 18 generosity is white and that face which is turned toward claiming  
 19 worthiness, or the calumny of claiming worthiness, is black.”<sup>102</sup> In so  
 20 far as the lover believes there is something within him which is other  
 21 than the sheer poverty and blameworthiness which he has received  
 22 from love, his desire is black, for he continues to believe he is a lover  
 23 through himself. He can have desire for mercy from the beloved, but  
 24 eventually even this must be eradicated through the pain of love.

25

26 *The Pain of Love*

27

28 When the lover-wayfarer remains in the unripeness of love where he  
 29 seeks the lover for himself, he thinks that this relationship with the  
 30 beloved is one of comfort and ease. But as mentioned in the discus-  
 31 sion of the heart, this is not the reality of love. The more mature, or  
 32 “cooked,” lover-wayfarer becomes aware that pain and hardship are  
 33 central to love, for “suffering is what is essential in love and comfort  
 34 is borrowed.”<sup>103</sup> The relationship between the lover and the beloved  
 35 is one of pain and hardship because they are always two and duality  
 36 necessarily implies opposition. As Aḥmad al-Ghazālī states:

37

38 Know that the lover is an adversary, not a companion, and  
 39 the beloved is also an adversary, not a companion, since  
 40 companionship has been bound to wiping away their traces.  
 41 So long as there is two-ness and each self is a self through  
 42 itself, adversaries will be absolute. Companionship is in

unification. Thus it will never happen that the lover and the beloved become companions of one another, for that they must not be. The suffering of love is entirely from this, for companionship will never be.<sup>104</sup>

From this perspective, ease and comfort are the desiderata of an unripened or uncooked self. So long as the lover seeks after them, he is at the mercy of his limitations, fluctuating between the realities of love and his illusory desires:

Love comes and goes; it has increase, decrease, and perfection; and the lover has states in it. In the beginning he may deny it, then he may submit to it. Then he may be disgraced and again take to the path of denial. These states change according to the moment and the individual: sometimes love increases and the lover denies it; sometimes love decreases and the one who possesses it denies the decrease.<sup>105</sup>

Thus increase and decrease slowly break the illusions of independence and show the lover the relativity of his self, preparing him to accept the absoluteness of love; "For love must open the castle of the lover to have a house for itself within, so that the lover becomes tame and surrenders."<sup>106</sup> Through the trials of this path, love subdues the lover, bringing him from his illusory self to his true self. Alluding to this stage of the path, the Shaykh writes, "Affliction and oppression are castle-conquering, its mangonel is the baseness of your you-ness until you become it."<sup>107</sup>

Until love has subdued the lover through pain, affliction, and oppression, the lover remains the son of the moment, subject to whatever it decrees:

Whatever edict the moment has he must follow the edict of the moment's color: the moment paints the lover according to its color and the edict will belong to the moment. In the path of annihilation from self, these edicts are wiped out and these opposites are removed, because they are a gathering of covetousness and defect.<sup>108</sup>

It is at this point between being a self through one's own self and being drawn to the beloved that the lover begins to obtain some knowledge (*'ilm*). Such knowledge is from "observing a form which has been fixed within" the heart through the reflections of love's

1 attributes in the form of the beloved. From the perspective of wayfar-  
 2 ing, observing such forms upon the screen of one's heart is progress,  
 3 but from the perspective of perfection, it is still a limitation. For the  
 4 state of perfection is beyond the duality implied by knowledge; rather  
 5 perfection can occur only when the lover is completely immersed in  
 6 love. In juxtaposing knowledge and the perfection that lies beyond  
 7 it, al-Ghazālī writes:

8  
 9       So long as love has not taken hold completely, something  
 10       from the lover remains, such that he brings a report  
 11       about it back with the externality of knowledge so that  
 12       he may be informed. But when it takes over the realm  
 13       [of the wayfarer's heart] completely, nothing remains of  
 14       the lover to give a report in order to derive nourishment  
 15       from it.<sup>109</sup>

16  
 17 The lover who is not yet immersed in love continues to be enraptured  
 18 by the images that flash upon the screen of his heart and to progress  
 19 until he sees the beloved in all things. This is still what al-Ghazālī  
 20 refers to as the beginning of love. It is, nonetheless, beyond the stage  
 21 wherein the lover loves the beloved for the lover's self alone. In this  
 22 second phase, "wherever he sees a likeness of this affair, he brings it  
 23 back to the beloved,"<sup>110</sup> meaning that he relates all things back to the  
 24 beloved rather than to himself. He now loves what is related to the  
 25 beloved, seeking consolation from it. Then "the sword of the beloved's  
 26 jealousy" falls, cutting him off from all that is other than the beloved.

27  
 28 *Union between the Lover and the Beloved*

29  
 30 The beloved, though superior to the lover in principle, is dependent  
 31 on him for its own existence in the here and now. As the Shaykh  
 32 expresses it:

33  
 34       As regards the reality of the affair the beloved has no profit  
 35       or loss from the lover. But as regards the wont (*sunnah*)  
 36       of love's generosity, love binds the lover to the beloved.  
 37       Through the connection of love, the lover becomes the locus  
 38       of the beloved's gaze in every state.<sup>111</sup>

39  
 40 This occurs because "the love of the lover is real and the lover of  
 41 the beloved is the reflection of the shining of the lover's love in [the  
 42 beloved's] mirror."<sup>112</sup> When the lover witnesses the beloved, this can

stir up the aforementioned "white face" of desire by which he advances on the path. Here "agitation arises within him, because his being is borrowed and has a face toward the *qiblah* of non-being. His existence becomes agitated in ecstasy, until he sits with the reality of the affair. Yet he is still not completely cooked."<sup>113</sup> That the lover is not yet cooked means that he has not yet matured in love. Such immaturity arises from the fact that one has not surrendered completely, and is thus a hypocrite in love:

So long as he is still himself, he is not free of hypocrisy and he still fears blame. When he has become tame, he has no fear and has been saved from every kind of hypocrisy.

The hypocrisy with the beloved is that the light of love shines within him and hides the outward, to the extent that for a while he hides love from the beloved, and while hiding from her, loves her. But when the defect withdraws and surrender comes, the light of love also shines upon his face, for his whole being has been lost in the beloved.<sup>114</sup>

When the lover has become lost in the beloved, he has arrived at "union." "This is that step where the lover knows the beloved is perfection and seeks unification, and whatever is outside of this will never be satiated."<sup>115</sup> Here the reality of love appears, and

When the reality of love appears, the lover becomes food for the beloved. The beloved does not become food for the lover, because the lover can be contained in the craw of the beloved, but the beloved cannot be contained in the craw of the lover.<sup>116</sup>

Now that the lover has given himself completely to his beloved, he becomes the beloved:

For one moment he becomes his own beloved, this is his perfection. All of his flying and circumambulating were for this one moment. When shall this be? Before this we have explained that the reality of union is this—one hour the attribute of "being fire" welcomes him and soon sends him out through the door of "being ash."<sup>117</sup>

From one perspective, the lover is contained within the beloved; from another perspective, he is even more the beloved than the beloved:

1 Here, where the lover becomes more the beloved than the  
 2 beloved the wonders of the attachments of connection are  
 3 prepared, on condition of the non-attachment of the lover  
 4 with himself. Love's connection will reach to the place where  
 5 the lover claims that he himself is the beloved: "I am the  
 6 Truth" and "Glory be to me" are this point.<sup>118</sup> And if he is  
 7 in the midst of banishment, separation, and unwantedness,  
 8 he imagines that he is indispensable and that he himself  
 9 is the beloved.<sup>119</sup>

10  
 11 But as seen before, such proclamations are not considered by Aḥmad  
 12 al-Ghazālī to be the full maturity of love; for they pertain to union  
 13 between the lover and the beloved. But separation is more exalted  
 14 than union in so far as there is a union beyond separation, mean-  
 15 ing that after union the lover continues to bear the fullness of love  
 16 through having realized union, but the lover no longer needs to be  
 17 with the beloved in order to realize and manifest the fullness of love:

18  
 19 Separation is beyond union by a degree because so long  
 20 as there is no union there is no separation, for it is con-  
 21 nected to it. In reality union is separation from self, just as  
 22 in reality separation is union with self, except in defective  
 23 love where the lover has still not been completely cooked.<sup>120</sup>

24  
 25 In fact, just as all of existence can be seen as a play of lover and  
 26 beloved, so too, can it be seen as an intricate interplay of separation  
 27 and union. The lover is the means of separation and the beloved is  
 28 the instrument of union:

29  
 30 Of all that the lover can have there is nothing that can  
 31 become the means of union. The beloved can have the  
 32 means of union. This is also a great secret, for union is the  
 33 level of the beloved and her right. It is separation which  
 34 is the level of the lover and his right. Thus the existence  
 35 of the lover is the means of separation and the existence  
 36 of the beloved is the means of union.<sup>121</sup>

37  
 38 While it is not directly evident in the text, separation is beyond union  
 39 because union on the plane of duality is illusory. There is not even  
 40 true familiarity:

41  
 42 The beloved never becomes familiar with the lover, and  
 at that moment that he considers himself to be closer to



her and her to be closer to him, he is farther,<sup>122</sup> because  
 the sultanate is hers, and "the sultan has no friend." The  
 reality of familiarity is to be at the same level, and this is  
 impossible between the lover and the beloved, because the  
 lover is all the earth of baseness and the beloved is all the  
 sky of exaltedness and grandeur.<sup>123</sup>

To realize the reality of separation is thus beyond union because it  
 is to perceive the true nature of the relationship of the lover and the  
 beloved.

Pain is essential for the path because it is the suffering of con-  
 tinuous separation from the beloved within one's own breast. As the  
 pain of realizing separation from the many images of one's beloved  
 increases, the lover is becoming closer to the reality of love: "Every  
 moment the lover and the beloved become more alien to each other;  
 although love is becoming more perfect, the alienation is becoming  
 more."<sup>124</sup> Pain occurs because the lover is more familiar with love  
 itself than with the beloved. The lover's existence is derived from  
 love and in relation to the beloved he is always other: "Although the  
 lover is familiar with love, he has no familiarity with the beloved."<sup>125</sup>  
 Realizing the fullness of love is thus to go from the separation before  
 union with the beloved, through union with the beloved, into the  
 separation from the beloved that lies beyond union: "When on the  
 path of ripening he does not belong to himself and arrives away from  
 himself, then he has arrived beyond it [the beloved]. Then he arrives  
 beyond himself with it [the beloved] and beyond it."<sup>126</sup>

At this stage pain does not decrease but rather becomes com-  
 plete, because the end of the path and the perfection of love lie in  
 the increase of affliction until there is no longer room for increase or  
 decrease. Thus the Shaykh asks rhetorically, "But when he becomes  
 completely and perfectly tame before love and the sultanate of love  
 has taken over the realm completely, how will increase and decrease  
 have a way there?"<sup>127</sup>

### *Complete Love*

The full perfection of love is attained when nothing but love exists,  
 such that all is perceived in its true nature as a modality of love. Here  
 the lover has moved beyond the illusions that arise from the contin-  
 uous play of lover and beloved. The lover-wayfarer is now immersed  
 in the complete love that has nothing to do with the contingencies of  
 separation and union. Of this stage Aḥmad al-Ghazālī writes, "Love  
 Itself, in Its essence, is far from these attachments and defects, for Love

1 has no attributes from union and separation. These are the attributes  
 2 of the lover and the beloved."<sup>128</sup> The lover now realizes that union  
 3 with the beloved is the same as separation from the beloved: "Union  
 4 and separation are one for him, and he has passed beyond deficiencies  
 5 and accidents."<sup>129</sup> He has transcended the coloration (*talwīn*) of  
 6 moving from state to state in the lover-beloved duality and is now in  
 7 the fixity (*tamkīn*) of love wherein nothing of his own being remains:

8  
 9       Whatever leaves the lover in the coloration of love, he  
 10       finds the substitute for that from the beloved in the fixity  
 11       of love. But not everyone reaches this station, for this is  
 12       quite a high station in love. The perfection of fixity is that  
 13       nothing has remained of the lover's being.<sup>130</sup>

14  
 15 Aḥmad al-Ghazālī maintains that all the states the lover had previ-  
 16 ously experienced were modalities of complete love, bestowed upon  
 17 him as substitutes until he was fit for "the robe of love" itself. From  
 18 this perspective, all that he has ever received came to him "from the  
 19 beloved as replacements for the robe of love."<sup>131</sup> Now that he is fit  
 20 for that robe, he has no need for the beloved qua beloved.

21       The lover-wayfarer who has attained to this level does not cease  
 22 to exist in the temporal world, but he is no longer subject to its illu-  
 23 sory limitations. Rather than being veiled by love's names and attri-  
 24 butes, he now sees them for the self-disclosures of love that they are,  
 25 for he is beyond the delimitations of union and separation. As Shaykh  
 26 al-Ghazālī writes of the one who has returned from immersion in the  
 27 oneness of love:

28  
 29       When He brings him from himself into Himself, his road  
 30       to himself is from Him and by way of Him. Since his road  
 31       to himself is from Him and by way of Him, these prop-  
 32       erties do not come over him. What would the properties  
 33       of separation and union do here? When would receiving  
 34       and rejecting entangle him? When would expansion and  
 35       contraction and sorrow and happiness go around the court  
 36       of His empire? As these verses say:

37  
 38       We saw the structure of the universe and the source of  
 39       the world.  
 40       And passed easily beyond cause and caused.  
 41       And that black light which is beyond the point of *lā*,  
 42       We also passed beyond this; neither this nor that remains.

Here is the father of the moment (*abu'l-waqt*). When he descends to the sky of the world he will be over the moment. The moment will not be over him, and he will be free from the moment.<sup>132</sup>

The point of the *lā* referred to in the third verse is where the *lām* and *alif* are joined in the *lā* (no) of the first testimony of faith (*shahādah*)—*lā ilāha illa'Llāh*—No god, but God. Aḥmad al-Ghazālī sees this *lā* as the word of ultimate negation (*nafti*) in which attachment to everything save God is obliterated. The point of the *lā* is the very essence of negation, for were it not for that point, the *alif* and *lām* would not be joined. It is the archetype of annihilation (*fanā'*), beyond separation and union. The black light is then an allusion to the station of subsistence (*baqā'*) in which one abides with the Divine alone, beyond all dualities, all stations, and all states, what later Sufis refer to as “the station of no station.”<sup>133</sup> Until one reaches the *lā*, one remains “a son of the moment” (*ibn al-waqt*), a slave to the edicts of separation and union, expansion and contraction, sorrow and happiness. But once in the black light of subsistence, the wayfarer is the “father of the moment,” for the edicts of coloration cannot bear the effulgence of the black light. When the lights of all other colors are subsumed in the black light, there can be no more coloration as occurs when the wayfarer is subject to the vicissitudes of states and stations along the path. Regarding this stage no knowledge can be obtained, because it is beyond all distinctions and can be perceived or tasted only in the transpersonal depth of one's being, that is, in the heart when it has been brought into conformity with the spirit. But although everyone has a heart, not everyone reaches the point where they see with the heart and live in the heart. As Aḥmad al-Ghazālī writes:

Not everyone reaches this place, for its beginnings are above all endings. How could its end be contained in the realm of knowledge, and how could it enter the wilderness of imagination? This reality is a pearl in a shell, and the shell is in the depths of the ocean. Knowledge can reach no more than the shore. How could it reach here?<sup>134</sup>

It is no coincidence that in writing of the black light that is beyond all else Aḥmad al-Ghazālī uses an expression similar to that which he uses to describe love. Love, he writes, “is free of this and of that,” and the black light beyond the *lā* is where “neither this nor

1 that remain.” Both mark the end of the path where all is immersed  
2 in the beginningless and endless oneness of Love that transcends all  
3 dualities. It is the end beyond all ends and the beginning before all  
4 beginnings.

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