

On the Divine Love of Beauty¹

Pablo Beneito

When my Beloved appears to me,
with which eye do I see Him?
With His eye, not with mine:
for none sees Him but Him!
Ibn 'Arabi²

The world has been created, primarily, so that
God may be known, remembered and loved.
Ramon Lull³

We are going to deal, not with a philosophical theory of aesthetics or art, but with a mystical conception of Beauty in its ethical and metaphysical forms, that is to say, with the human relationship with the divine attribute of Beauty; an aesthetics of the spirit, an art of contemplation.

To try to understand what it is that Ibn 'Arabi and other Sufi writers have called Beauty, in Arabic *jamâl*, it is useful to become familiar with some of the concepts that will appear frequently in the texts translated here. Ibn 'Arabi, in his glossaries on the technical terms of Sufism,⁴ explains the meaning of two contrasting terms: if the word *jamâl* signifies 'divine Beauty', that is, 'the extrinsic attributes of the compassion (*rahma*) and the grace that arise from the divine Presence by virtue of His Name *al-Jamil*, the Beautiful . . .', the word *jalâl*, on the other hand, signifies 'divine Majesty', that is, 'the extrinsic attributes (*nu'ût*) of the irresistible Power (*qahr*) which arises from the divine Presence and by virtue of which existence (*wujûd*) comes about'.

'It is the Majesty that can be contemplated in the cosmos (*al-mashhûd fî-l-'alam*), that is, the Majesty of Beauty, which is opposed to, and corresponds to this Beauty (*jamâl*) of the attributes of grace', and not the pure transcendent and unconditional Majesty of the unknowable Essence, to which would be opposed the absolute Beauty that makes up both aspects of Beauty and Majesty of Beauty - if it is possible to talk of opposition.

¹ First presented, in Spanish, to 'Amor Divino, Amor Humano', the 3rd International Congress on Ibn al-'Arabi, in Murcia, 2-4 November 1994.

² Ibn 'Arabi introduces these verses into Chapter 63 of the *Futûhât al-Makkiyya*, which deals with the *barzakh*, saying: 'You should know with *which* eye you are seeing Him! For I have already let you know that (the divine) Imagination is perceived either through itself -I mean through the eye of imagination - or through the (physical) vision. And which of those two is the sound one on which we rely?!' Cf. J. W. Morris, 'Divine Imagination and the Intermediate World: Ibn 'Arabi on the *barzakh*', *Postdata*, XV, Murcia, 1995, p. 107.

³ Cf. R. Lull, *Proverbis de Ramon*, ed. in Spanish by S. Garcias Palau, Madrid, 1978. V, 'On the creation', 36: 6. This Lullian proverb evokes the prophetic tradition of the hidden Treasure, in which God Himself - we are talking of a *hadîth qudsî* - manifests His will to make Himself known.

⁴ I translate the definitions which appear in the *Futûhât al-Makkiyya* (ed. O. Yahya), Cairo, 1990, vol. XIII, pp. 221-3, in the section dedicated to the technical terminology of Sufism (pp. 160-235), adding in square brackets a fragment of a previous, independent treatise on the same topic. Cf. Ibn 'Arabi, *Istilahât al-Shaykh al-Akbar Muhyi-l-Din Ibn al-'Arabi: Mu'jam istilahât al-sufiyya*, introd. and ed. by Bassan 'Abd al-Wahhab al-Jabi, Dar al-Imam Muslim, Beirut, 1990, pp. 58. The text of this *Futûhât* edition, in any case, is more correct and corresponds to the classification which is explained below.

Furthermore, when describing two complementary, and at the same time contrasting spiritual states, 'reverent fear' (*hayba*) and 'intimacy' (*uns*), the Shaykh al-Akbar explains that 'intimacy is the result of the contemplation of the Majesty⁵ of the divine Presence in the heart, that is to say, the Majesty of Beauty (*jalâl al-jamâl*), in relation to which there is no fear', since, on the other hand, 'fear is the result of the contemplation of the Beauty of God in the heart.'⁶ Ibn 'Arabi adds that most Sufis who reflect on the subject 'consider that both intimacy and expansion (*bast*) are a product [of the contemplation] of Beauty, which, properly understood, is not the case', as will be explained below.

To begin with, and to go more deeply into the study of the correspondence of the two pairs of terms that have been contrasted, I will translate and comment on some excerpts from the *Book of Majesty and Beauty*.⁷ After a concise but dense introduction in rhyming prose, Ibn 'Arabi comments on the meaning of these terms as follows:

Majesty and Beauty are two notions which have aroused, among the Sufis, the interest of the 'verifiers', the 'knowers of God'. Each one of them has spoken about both divine aspects according to their state, (p. 3, 1.10)

The people who have the authority to speak about these mystical realities are those, therefore, who have verified them by first-hand experience (*al-muhaqqiq*), those wise ones who know them through divine instruction, by their direct knowledge of God (*al-'âlim bi-Llâh*). To each mode of knowledge, proper to a specific spiritual rank, corresponds a particular form of expression. Muhyiddin goes on to say:

Most of them have established a correspondence between intimacy and Beauty, on the one hand, and between reverent fear and Majesty on the other. Now, although in one sense this correlation is correct, [in another sense] the question is not exactly as they have expressed it.

It is true to say that Majesty and Beauty are both divine qualities, while fear and intimacy are both human qualities. It may also be said that when the essential realities of the gnostics contemplate Majesty, they then feel reverence and constriction, whereas when they contemplate Beauty they feel spiritual relaxation and expansion. Therefore they have established that Majesty corresponds to coercive divine Power and that Beauty corresponds to Compassion, basing their judgement on the experiencing of this relationship in their own interior.

In fact, Sufi authors before Ibn 'Arabi - amongst others, the Persian Hujwiri⁸ (died between 1063 and 1076), in his famous *Kashf al-Mahjûb* - referred in their works to such a correspondence, presenting the idea, without explaining much more about it, that the perception of divine Beauty produces a state of intimacy and expansion in the contemplator, whereas, on the contrary, on encountering the aspect of Majesty, the mystic experiences a state of fear and constriction in the soul, all of which, even though it may be right, can still lead to error.

From a first reading it could be deduced that, when faced with a manifestation of pleasantness and friendliness on the part of the Beloved, the Sufi would react with familiar geniality and

⁵ In O. Yahya's edition it says *jamâl*, 'Beauty', which is correct but can be confusing.

⁶ Although it can also be said with respect to the Beauty of Majesty (*jamâl al-jalâl*), following another text (see n. 2).

⁷ Ibn 'Arabi, *Kitâb al-Jalâl wa-l-Jamâl, Rasâ'il Ibn 'Arabi*, Vol. I, Hyderabad, 1948, 2nd treatise, 17 pp. This brief treatise has been translated into English by R. Terri Harris, *JMIAS*, VIII, 1989, 5-32. For an entirely new translation into another language it would be preferable to begin by preparing a critical edition of the text.

⁸ Concerning *uns* and *hayba*, see the translation of this work by Hujwiri, *Somme Spirituelle*, Paris, 1988, pp. 426-7.

loving intoxication, whereas in the presence of the fearful and imposing he would adopt a manner of sobriety and reverential respect. Such an interpretation, as we shall see, is hasty.

After these clarifications, which refer to the definitions explained above, and before dealing in depth with the commentary on the esoteric allusions contained in certain passages in the Qur'an, to which he will dedicate a major part of the treatise, Ibn 'Arabi explains, in expressive language (*'ibara*) and in a wider perspective, the proper meaning of these two realities:

Majesty, insofar as it is a divine aspect, is a meaning that comes from Him (God) and returns to Him alone, the knowledge of which He has made inaccessible to us. On the other hand, Beauty is a meaning proceeding from Him, but directed towards us, and it is this aspect which allows us to accept the knowledge that we have of Him, making possible the descents, the contemplations and the states that He offers us.

In its turn, this divine aspect of Beauty manifests itself in us in two ways: either as reverential fear or as intimacy. This is due to the fact that this Beauty has [two forms of manifestation]: 'elevation' and 'proximity'. We call elevation the Majesty of Beauty, and it is to this that the gnostics refer when they talk [simply] about Majesty, since, on its manifesting itself to them, they imagine that it is the first Majesty, which we have mentioned above, that is being discussed, although in reality it is the Majesty of Beauty, which is associated with intimacy, as far as we are concerned. On the other hand, it is to this Beauty, which is proximity, that reverent fear is associated, as far as we are concerned, (p.3)

Schematically, this could be expressed by a double dichotomy:

1. Majesty

(From Him to Him) Absolute Majesty
(*al-Jalâl al-mutlaq*)

The Ipseity of the unknowable
Essence

[Majesty of the Majesty]

Incomparability

2.1 Majesty

Attributes of Power Elevation (*'ulûw*)
Majesty of the Beauty

Intimacy

2. Beauty

(From Him to us) Absolute Beauty
(*al-Jamâl al-mutlaq*)

The knowable Existence of the
essences (*'ayân*)

Beauty of the Majesty

Similarity

2.2 Beauty

Attributes of Grace Proximity
(*dunûw*) [Beauty of the Beauty]

Fear

When considering what has already been explained, one should bear in mind, as Ibn 'Arabi goes on to say, with masterly clarity, that:

When the theophany of the Majesty of Beauty reveals itself to us we should respond with intimacy, since if this were not so we would perish, as Majesty and fear together do not allow anything to subsist. As this is the case, it is necessary to face the Majesty that comes from Him, for our part, with an attitude of intimacy, thanks to which we

can maintain a state of balance throughout the contemplation, so that we may be able to understand what we see without being amazed or disconcerted.

On the other hand, as Beauty is the 'open and affable manner' (*mubâsata*) of the divine Truth (*al-Haqq*) with us, and Majesty is His 'glorious power' (*'izza*) in relation to us, when the theophany of Beauty is revealed to us in a state of contemplation, we should then receive His expansion (*bast*) with us in His Beauty with reverent fear, since expansion received with expansion leads to a lack of courtesy, and inappropriate behaviour in the [divine] Presence is the cause of distancing and isolation [which, in this respect is forced on he who does not know how to behave himself].

It was for this reason that one of the verifiers who knew this meaning said: 'Sit down [to contemplate Beauty] on this carpet (*bisât*), but beware of laxity (*inbisât*)!⁹

The word-play in this last sentence is worthy of comment, since, as a synthesis of what has gone before, it is particularly significant. The word *bisât* (prayer-rug) - from the same lexical root (*b-s-t*) as *bast*, 'expansion', 'elation' - as well as alluding to the 'place' *par excellence* (be it physical or symbolic) in which the mystic settles down to contemplate, also evokes the qualities of simplicity, modesty and plainness (*basâta*), which keep the contemplator from a state of euphoria or excessive laxity, in the expansion (*inbisât*) which could lead him to discourtesy and, subsequently, isolation.

In order to reach the pinnacle, the wings of fear are just as essential for the flight as the wings of hope. It is good, in this sense, to compensate for the excesses of intemperance with the moderation of sobriety, since, Ibn 'Arabi continues, 'just as when His Majesty [of Beauty] is revealed to us, our intimacy protects us from lack of courtesy in the [divine] Presence,¹⁰ so our reverent fear protects us from unsuitable behaviour in [the contemplation] of His Beauty and His expansion with us.'

'Abd al-Razzaq Qashani (from Samarkand, died 1330), defines Majesty and Beauty in his treatise on Sufi terminology following Ibn 'Arabi's guidelines. Referring to absolute Majesty, he says,

Majesty is the concealment of God with regard to us by means of His Glory, in such a manner that we cannot know Him by His essential reality and His Ipseity in the way in which He knows His own Essence, because nobody can know His Essence as it is except He Himself.

On the other hand, referring to absolute Beauty, he says,

Beauty is the manifestation of God to His Essence by means of His Countenance. This absolute Beauty has a Majesty which is His Power of submission over everything that exists on His revealing Himself through His Countenance, as a result of which no being can see Him; this corresponds to what is called the elevation of Beauty; furthermore, His Beauty also has a proximity through which He can approach us, which is His exteriorisation in everything.

In relation to this, Qashani quotes a verse (from al-Shaybani):

Your Beauty is revealed
in all reality;
Nothing can hide it
but Your Majesty.

⁹ This allusive sentence appears in the *Risâla* by Qushayri, ed. Beirut, 1990, p. 59, without any mention of the author. *Qâlû qif 'alâ-l-bisât... . They said: Rest on this prayer-rug . . .'*

¹⁰ I have corrected the text of this edition, as it is obviously wrong, to give sense to the expression. Where it says *fa-inna jalâla-Hu ft anfuni-na* (p. 4, line 6), I read it as *fa-inna unsa-nâ ft jalâli-Hi*, in accordance with the expression *kamâ anna haybatanâ fi jamâli-Hi*. . . which follows it (lines 6-7).

This Beauty, [Qashani adds], has a Majesty that is its concealment in the determinations of created beings, in such a way that to every beauty corresponds a majesty, and behind every majesty there is beauty.

Up to this point the author reflects, with a conciseness proper to a glossary, the ideas already explained by Ibn 'Arabi. However, Qashani does not adopt the inversion of terms which the Shaykh al-Akbar proposes, and persists with the following formulation of the correspondences:

Accepting that there exists within Majesty and its extrinsic attributes an idea of concealment and strength, this implies elevation and power on the part of the divine Presence, and humbleness and reverential fear on our part. Conversely, accepting that there exists within Beauty and its attributes an idea of proximity and unveiling, this implies grace, compassion and sympathy on the part of the divine Presence and intimacy on our part.¹¹

Let us return to Ibn 'Arabi's text, which explains this disparity between the formulations thus:

The mystical unveiling of our companions [that is, the Sufis, whether they were prior to, contemporary with, or, like Qashani, came after the Shaykh] is correct, but they were mistaken, in accordance with what has been explained, in thinking that Majesty restricts and Beauty expands. Notwithstanding, as their unveiling is veridic, this error [of formulation] is unimportant.

This last observation, so characteristic of the Akbarian teaching, could go unnoticed due to its brevity, although it expresses an idea of the utmost importance in understanding various aspects of Sufism and, more concretely, its allusive language. The relative terminological imprecision of some of his companions in their theoretical treatment of this matter does not invalidate the reality of their direct experience, an authentic, and eminently practical, foundation of their knowledge, which is presented to us, above all, not as a mere intellectual exercise, but as an effective spiritual realisation.

'And this, then, is the Majesty and the Beauty according to what the realities [of both] manifest', concludes Muhyiddin.

Later on he says: 'Nothing can exist without something else which is its opposite existing.' (p. 4). By applying this principle of opposition (*muqâbala*) to the Names of God, Ibn 'Arabi explains that if a Name indicates an aspect of Majesty, that is, the Majesty of Beauty, another Name will have an opposite meaning to this and will indicate an aspect of Beauty; and by analogy, if a verse of the Qur'an or a Prophetic Tradition contains a mercy (*rahma*), there will always be another verse or another related tradition, of opposite sense, containing a punishment (*naqma*) which is its contrary (cf. pp. 4-5).

After mentioning seven conflicting examples of Majesty and Beauty from Qur'anic verses (*âyât*), and quoting others as a scriptural basis for such a dual nature, Ibn 'Arabi describes the contents of the second part of the *Book of Majesty and Beauty*, explaining at the same time how these notions can be applied to the reading of the Qur'an, an application which can be extended to the interpretation of signs (*âyât*) in general, both in the interior of the souls and on the horizons,¹² in the reading of that other Book of existence. The master says:

I would now like to quote some of the verses which correspond to the respective aspects of Majesty and Beauty, and comment on them in the style appropriate to symbolic allusion (*ishârâ*) [and not in the expressive language (*'ibâra*) which has been used up to now], in accordance with the comprehension proper to the intellect

¹¹ 'Abd al-Razzaq Qashani, *Istilahat al-suftyya*, ed. Kamal Ibrahim Ja'far, Cairo, 1981 (under '*abâdila*).

¹² Allusion to Q. 41:53.

that, liberated from animal passions and troublesome worldly distractions, is free to search for mystical meanings.

The Shaykh names the different sections 'allusions' (*ishârat*) and begins each one with one or more comments alluding to a verse of Majesty, following it with comments on its corresponding Beauty, and so on.

One has to bear in mind that, in principle, each verse (itself) contains in turn (the two) aspects of both Majesty and Beauty, and thus, by integrating such ambivalence within itself, becomes susceptible to two opposing and complementary commentaries, from the union of which may result a third aspect, perfection (*kamâl*), a combination and synthesis of the other two, which links and balances the antitheses, fulfilling the dialectic of the contraries in unity.

This sequence *jamâl-jalâl-kamâl* occurs frequently in the Akbarian writings. However, in this treatise on hermeneutics in the Qur'an, Ibn 'Arabi has preferred to emphasise its dual nature and ambivalence, without resorting to the third implicit factor in the triad, to find a solution to this conflict of duality. The Shaykh later goes on to say (p. 7),

If the Beauty of a verse is revealed to the heart of the verifier, his state will respond in that moment, on the contrary, to the meanings relative to Its Majesty, whereas, conversely, if the Majesty of that same verse is revealed to his heart, at that moment his state must respond to the meaning of Its Beauty, and likewise in all revelation.

Almost at the end of the treatise (p. 17), there is an observation (*tanbîh*) about the two different ways in which God addresses men in revealed scripture:

. . . the verses in which He addresses us to show us the states of others and that which is concerned with them, what is our origin, what our end may be, and similar questions; and, on the other hand, the verses in which He addresses us directly, in order that we in turn may know how to address Him through them. These latter verses are divided into two categories, depending on whether they refer to action or diction, that is to say, whether to the acts which have to be carried out, or to the words which have to be said.

Now, in the second part of this paper we are going to concentrate specifically on the study of the Name *al-Jamîl* and for this purpose we will follow, step by step, the commentary which Ibn 'Arabi wrote about it in a section (translated here in full) of his work the *Fuûihât al-Makkiyya*. Nonetheless, by way of introduction I would like to begin with an earlier Sufi text which sheds light on some implicit terms of reference in the Akbarian treatise, albeit from a more restricted perspective.

COMMENTARY BY GHAZALI ON THE NAME *AL-JAMÎL*

In his treatise on the Ninety-nine Names of God, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058-1111) also comments on the Name *al-Jamîl*, like Qushayri and other earlier writers, in the section concerning the Name *al-Jalil*.

The Majestic One (al-Jalil) is he who is qualified by the attributes of Majesty. These attributes are strength, sovereignty, sanctification, knowledge, wealth, power, and others mentioned previously. He who reunites these in their totality is The Absolute Majestic One (al-falil al-mutlaq), whereas the majesty of anyone who is qualified by only some of these attributes depends on the measure in which he has received them. Thus, only God is The Absolutely Majestic One.

With regard to perception by intellectual insight (*basira*) - which comprehends the intellectual perception (*idrak*) without it, in its turn, being encompassed by it - His Name The Great' (al-Kabir) refers to the perfection of the Essence, and His Name The

Majestic One' (al-Jalil) to the perfection of His attributes, while His Name The Tremendous One' (al-'Azim) refers to the perfection of the Essence and the attributes together.

Up to this point, what has been dealt with has been related to Majesty, in an explicit manner that does not require explanation. Ghazali goes on to comment on the Name *al-Jamîl*:

On the other hand, when the attributes of Majesty are related to the intellectual perception which grasps them, then they are called 'Beauty', and whoever is characterised by such attributes is called 'beautiful' (jamîl).

In its origin, the term 'beautiful' was applied to any external form perceptible by means of sight (basar) and which was in harmony with it. Later it became the interior form which intellectual perception grasps, in such a way that it is possible to talk of 'good and beautiful' behaviour, or to talk about somebody's character as 'beautiful', all of which is perceived by interior vision, not by the sense of sight.

So, the interior form, if it is complete, well-proportioned, and reunites all the perfections which are fitting for it, providing it combines them in an adequate manner, is then beautiful with respect to the interior vision that perceives it, conserving for it such harmony that, on seeing it, whoever perceives it experiences much greater pleasure, jubilation and emotion than someone who sees a form beautiful only to external vision.

What is clear is that only God is absolutely and truly Beautiful, since all the beauty, perfection, splendour and goodness in the universe proceed from the lights of His Essence and from the traces of His attributes. Apart from Him there is nothing in Existence, neither actual nor potential, which possesses absolute perfection without competitor. Therefore, whoever knows Him and perceives His Beauty experiences such delight, joy, pleasure and happiness that, compared to this, the delights of the Garden [of Paradise] and the beauty of sensible forms are considered negligible. It is clear, then, that there can be no comparison between the beauty of external forms and the beauty of the meanings grasped by the inner perception [. ..].

In this way, as it has now been established that He is Majestic and Beautiful, and since all that is beautiful is loved and desired by whoever perceives its beauty, so God is loved - although only by the gnostics - in exactly the same way that beautiful external forms are loved (and desired) by those who can see them, but not by the blind who do not see them.

As in the other cases, Ghazali concludes this section with an observation (*tanbih*) about human participation in this Name:

The majestic and beautiful servant is he in whose attributes - owing to their inherent goodness - those hearts gifted with discernment take pleasure. Moreover, apparent beauty has less value.¹³

Let us return to the Shaykh al-Akbar, whose commentary is called:

On the Name 'the Beautiful' (*al-Jamîl*):
The divine Presence of Beauty
(*Hadrat al-Jamâl*)¹⁴

¹³ Cf. Ghazali, *al-Maqṣad al-ʿasnâ*, ed. Beirut, 1971, pp. 126-7.

¹⁴ Cf. the *Futûḥât al-Makkiyya*, ed. Cairo/Beirut, 1911, IV, 269-70.

Ibn 'Arabi introduces his commentary on this Name with two verses that complement and anticipate in a poetic key the essential elements of his subsequent theoretical development. Beauty is associated with 'perfect realisation', that is, divine 'beneficence' (in an etymological sense), and corresponds to the manifest aspect of phenomenal existence, in which, by the grace of love, Man contemplates inherent divine wisdom. He puts it like this:

The Beautiful One is He whose nature (shima)
is perfect realisation (ihsân);
He whose value (qîma)
is well-known by begotten beings (akwân);
and when he sees Him
- he from among us whom
He graced with His love -
he sees the being/Existence (wujûd) in such a way
that in him is revealed His wisdom (hikma).

The multi-faceted ambiguity of the last hemistich is deliberately preserved: the lover graced with divine love (be it the Envoy, the prophets, the gnostics in general, or the Perfect Man as microcosmic synthesis) contemplates in the cosmos and in himself the divine wisdom which is revealed in both.

Next, after alluding to the ontological indigence of the servant with respect to his Lord, as he does in each of the sections relating to divine Presences, Ibn 'Arabi quotes and briefly explains, as a scriptural basis to his commentaries, some passages from the Qur'an and from Islamic Tradition (*sunna*), directly or indirectly related to Beauty. These will be referred to constantly throughout the text.

The participant in this Presence is called 'Servant of the Most Beautiful One' (*'abd al-Jamîl*).

According to an account of Muslim, a man once said to Muhammad: 'Oh, Envoy of God! I like my shoes and clothing to be beautiful (hasan)', and in reply to these words, he answered: 'Indeed God is Beautiful (jamâl) [and] loves beauty'... .

In another tradition it is recounted that Muhammad said: 'God is the one most worthy of courtesy and adornment.' Because of this divine Presence God ascribes to Himself adornment and finery (*zîna*), and has ordered us to beautify and adorn ourselves for Him. In this sense God has said: '... attend to your finery', that is to say God's finery, 'in every place of prostration',¹⁵ that is to say, 'at the moment of His Confidence', which is freshness of the eye (*qurrat al-'ayn*) for Muhammad and for every believer because of the witnessing that it entails, as 'God is in the qibla of he who prays'. And the Prophet also said:¹⁶ 'Worship God as if you saw Him.'

With these words, the Shaykh al-Akbar reiterates the legitimacy of love of beauty, and postulates not only the justness, but also the necessity of beautifying oneself for God, taking care of one's behaviour and manners with the greatest care and respect (*hayba*) 'as though you could see Him'. There is here, in this brief indication, 'as though you could see Him', an essential method of spiritual adornment and contemplation of Beauty. The Shaykh continues:

If to Beauty, undoubtedly loved for itself, we further add the beauty of finery (*zîna*), then it becomes Beauty upon Beauty (*jamâl 'ala jamâl*) just as 'Light upon Light' (Q. 24:35), and likewise Love upon Love (*mahabba*).

¹⁵ 'Oh Sons of Adam, attend to your adornment whenever you pray!', literally, 'in every place of prostration (*'inda kulli masjid*)' (Q. 7:31).

¹⁶ When Gabriel asked him about *ihsân* (in this case 'perfect adoration').

The affinity of Beauty, Light and Love is essential. Like Light, inasmuch as it is existence, Beauty is and makes perceptible, at the same time being and making lovable and knowable. Ibn 'Arabi says:

Whoever loves God for His Beauty, which is nothing other than the beauty which can be contemplated in the universe, [let him remember that] God gave it existence in accordance with His own form, so that in this same way, he who loves the world for its beauty loves God alone, since divine Reality has no place of transcendence and manifestation except the cosmos. There is here a divine secret with [the knowledge of] which - appropriate to the rank of prophetic dignity - I have been distinguished, notwithstanding the fact that I am not a prophet but an heir (wârith).

The author here makes a play of allusions between God, man and the cosmos. With the expression 'He gave it existence according to His form' he refers to the universe (the macrocosm) but also to Man (the microcosm) who is likewise created in the image of God.

On declaring the singularity of his knowledge, the Shaykh al-Akbar alludes to his privileged condition as full spiritual heir and Seal of the Muhammadan Sainthood, to the realisation of which his spirituality and teaching are consecrated. In some lines of verse he says:

I have been distinguished by a secret (sirr)
which nobody knows but me
and he whom we follow
by the fulfilment of the revealed Law,

that is to say, the Prophet,
the Apostle of God,
His best Knight (fatâ), whom we follow
in accordance with all that is prescribed.

Later he goes on to affirm in prose, as did Ghazali and other Sufis before him, that this world, created by God in His image, is the best of all possible worlds, a mirror in which God contemplates and loves Himself.

God gave existence to the universe in the fullness of its beauty and perfection (kamâl) as His own creation and invention (khalq wa-ibdâ'). He loves Beauty in such a way that, as there is no Beautiful One other than He, in reality He can love only Himself. But He wanted to see Himself in another than Himself. Therefore He has created the universe in the image of His beauty and He has looked upon it, loving it [on contemplating it] with the love of someone who is captivated by what he sees.

From a new perspective, Muhyiddin makes a fundamental distinction between absolute, eternal Beauty, and relative and accidental beauty. He later goes on to talk about the divine love of Beauty and explains how to beautify oneself for God when following the Prophet in the way of love:

Within the absolute and unconditional Beauty which is diffused throughout the universe, God later arranged an accidental, relative and conditional Beauty, by virtue of which some beings are more beautiful than others, as God Himself observes in the Word that His Prophet has transmitted to us. In the hadith reported by Muslim which we have mentioned, the Envoy says that 'God is Beautiful'. Therefore, He is even more worthy of your love, since, as you yourself well know, you love beauty.

Also 'God loves beauty', in such a way that, if you beautify yourself for your Lord, He loves you, and you do not beautify yourself for Him except by following the Prophet, since following him is your adornment, according to these words of Muhammad: 'God has said: "Say: If you love God, follow me"', that is to say, adorn yourselves in my finery and 'God will love you' (Q. 3:31), since 'God loves Beauty'. Saying this has

excused the lovers, because the lover does not see his beloved other than as the most beautiful thing in the world in his eyes, and he only loves, by reason of an inescapable disposition, the beauty which he finds in him (his beloved).

With regard to a verse from the Qur'an, and recreating an imaginary situation from the Day of Judgement, the Shaykh illustrates this divine dispensation conferred on lovers of the beauty of finery:

Have you not considered the word of God, when He says: 'How can he whose bad behaviour has been adorned, so that he consider it good, . . . ?' (Q. 35:8) Well, he does not want to say that he has considered his incorrect behaviour to be good, but only that he has seen the adornment which made it beautiful. This being the case, when the Day of Judgement arrives and he sees the ugliness of his work, he will renounce it. Then it will be said to him, 'This is what you loved so ardently.' To this the believer will reply, 'It did not have this form when I loved it, nor this appearance. Where is the finery that adorned it and made me love it? I refuse to accept this. I was only enchanted by the finery and not by this thing itself. Although it is true that when this was the place where it showed itself my love belonged to it by way of the disposition of nature.' Then God will answer, 'My servant has told the truth. If it had not been for its finery he would not have considered it good, so give it back its finery.' In this way, God will change the bad deed of the sincere believer into a good deed, thus restoring to him the love that he had for it. God has only said these words, 'his bad behaviour has been adorned', to make His servant understand, if he is shrewd, this argument, and it is not fitting that the awakened believer neglects nor overlooks any aspect of the Word of God nor the word of he who informs us of Him.

After this curious dialogic scene in which the magnanimity and hesitation of God are revealed, Ibn 'Arabi changes tone and, distinguishing between amorous passion for beauty and the frivolity of the superficial, warns that:

God, in the Qur'an, without referring to passion, censures those who 'treat their religion as a distraction and an entertainment' (Q. 7:51), they being, in our times, those who dedicate themselves to that so-called '(musical) audition (samâ'), the people of the tambourine and the flute. God keep us from error and illusionment.

Referring to those whom he calls, in a derogatory way, 'people of the tambourine and flute', Ibn 'Arabi describes in another of his works,¹⁷ in a picturesque way, a session of false 'audition' in the following terms:

As far as those Sufis are concerned who . . . perform exercises of religious chanting in order to provoke ecstasy, in reality they are treating the faith as if it were a play-thing or an entertainment. You never hear them say anything but 'I have seen God and He has told me this or that!' But if you ask them about this, about what exactly is the mystical reality, the knowledge of which God has granted them, or what exactly is the mystery that He revealed to them in their ecstatic trance, you will encounter only sensual delights and satanic voluptuousity. It is the devil who is really shouting through their mouths; and while that other poor deluded fellow, the singer, continues to squawk out his verses, they fall into a trance.

After this paragraph, written as a parody, and returning to the text of the *Futuhdt* which now concerns us, I shall translate the verses in which Ibn 'Arabi talks about true mystical 'audition':

¹⁷ Ibn 'Arabi, *Vidas de santones andaluces*, trans. M. Asin Palacios, Madrid, 1935, p. 23. See *Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi: A Commemorative Volume*, ed. S. Hirtenstein and M. Tiernan, Shaftesbury, Dorset, 1993, pp. 51-2.

Religion is not to be found in the tambourine,
the sound of the pipe, nor in music;
religion is to be found in the Qur'an,
in courtesy and behaviour (*adab*).

On hearing the Book
of God, that hearing stirred me and
drew me close to the veils;

at such proximity
that I could contemplate He who is not seen
by the eyes, except those which contemplate
the lights (that shine) in the revealed books.

He it is who, in my spirit,
made the Qur'an descend,
without weariness or effort, on the fifth day.

Were it not for the care of my Lord,
when He transmits them
to my innermost being from close by,
even more closely would He speak to me.

You are the guide who, over the mistaken one,
lays the veil of his intercession.

You are the secret in the idols,
and if not for You, [the idolaters]
would neither adore the tree nor the star
nor would they do as many good works as they do.¹⁸

This is as far as the poem goes. The Shaykh later continues to talk about the beneficent character of the revealed Word (divine grace in favour of the human being, and not a punishment against him), in the verses of which the shining lights of meaning are contemplated, and explains the role that reverent fear plays with regard to Beauty and audition (*samâ'*):

On the other hand, the word of he who has informed us about God [that is to say, the Prophet], has reached us only as a mercy for he who hears it; if he were wise, he would know that the prophetic word is for him, but if he were a donkey, it would be but a burden to him.

[We know that] Beauty by itself is venerated with fear; [on the other hand, we also know that] God fears nothing and that the wise Prophet has described Him saying that 'He is Beautiful'. So, reverent respect carries out the function of making whoever experiences it abandon that which was around him at the moment of the dialogue within the soul, thus preventing discourtesy towards his Beloved during the reunion and the intimate encounter with Him. It is understood, then, that the reverent fear of Beauty (*haybat al-jamâl*) protects him from the suggestions that his own soul transmits to him.

God has ascribed to Himself the attribute of shyness towards His servant when He meets him. This shyness or divine hesitation is, with regard to God, analogous to reverential fear with regard to humans. In this way, although there is something in the servant's state of being which requires that God punish him, when God meets him He hesitates, and sets aside his punishment. Therefore [God] has said about those whom He will punish: That day they will be separated from their Lord by a veil', (Q. 83:15)

¹⁸ Like the four before them, these verses are in the *basît* meter.

so that they will not be able to see Him, because if the vision of Him occurred, hesitation would also occur, which is to God what beauty is to man or creation. In this way the propriety is one, but the cause is different.

Finally, Ibn 'Arabi recommends that the pilgrim beautify himself by adopting the attributes that every situation on his voyage requires, in such a way that the divine love towards him may be deserved by virtue of this assumption of beauty, so that it is no longer an effect of grace and gratuitous favour received by the so-called 'special way' or 'private face.'¹⁹

Verify and realise this Presence [of Beauty]; adorn yourself and beautify yourself, at some times with your extrinsic attributes of littleness, poverty, humbleness, submission, prostration and reverence, and at other times with His attributes of nobility, grace, compassion, tolerance, mercy, magnanimity, indulgence, or others of God's attributes and of His finery which He has not forbidden to His servants. Then, if you proceed in this manner, God will love you for as many attributes as beautify you. This is the [necessary] love in which there is no divine favour (*minna*), since beauty requires it, just as the repentance of the sinner requires pardon. While the gracious pardon is given to him who does not repent, there is no grace in the pardon to the repentant [only justice], since the servant's contrition requires pardon on the part of God, whereas the [divine] pardon to him who does not repent is pure divine grace.

God has said about His obliged pardon: 'I will inscribe it [His compassion that embraces all things] for those who fear God and give alms.' (Q. 7:156).

Those who are not fearful of God, and who are not of the repentant, have to ask for God's compassion and His pardon through grace itself.

So adorn yourself, if you want the divine favour received in this special way (*al-wajh al-khass*) to be withdrawn, so that you will be satisfied with the gift which you have deserved because of the level of beautification that you have attained with the divine attire, something which is only possible through God's compassion, according to His word [referring to Muhammad]: 'You have been gentle with them because of mercy which has come from God.' (Q. 3:159). And God tells the truth and guides [us] along the way (Q. 33:4).²⁰

After these readings it will be easier to understand the Akbarian doctrine on the divine love of Beauty, expressed with mastery in a passage from the *Futûhât*²¹ where the process of existentiating of the *a'yân*, or immutable individuations, through the effusion of divine Light is explained synthetically. It has to be remembered that, as in the poem quoted at the beginning, the word '*ayn*' may mean not only 'essence', but also 'eye'. The author makes use of a couple of double meanings to interweave a network of symbolic allusions that help us to approach intuitively the reality of love and Beauty in their essential unity:

ON THE DIVINE LOVE OF BEAUTY

Divine love stems from His Name 'The Beautiful One' and from His Name 'The Light'. 'The Light' proceeds towards the [immutable] essences (*a'yân*) of the possible and

¹⁹ For the various meanings of this technical term (*al-wajh al-khâss*), see S. Hakim, *al-Mu'jam al-sûfî*, Beirut, 1981, pp. 1139-41. Also see the article by S. Hirtenstein in this volume. ['Between the Secret Chamber and the Well-trodden Path: Ibn 'Arabi's exposition of the *wajh al-khâss*', S. Hirtenstein, *JMIAS*, Vol. XVIII, 1995.]

²⁰ This final verse, with which Ibn 'Arabi concludes (as on many other occasions), does not exclude anyone. God tells the truth (in such a way that all things, in so far as they are divine words, are truths), and gives guidance along the way, the straight and inclusive way, to all beings. Cf. R. L. Nettler, 'The Wisdom of Divine Unity', *JMIAS*, XVI, 1994, 39-49.

²¹ Ed. O. Yahya, vol. XIII, § 498, 577-8.

[when it shines on them] frees them from the darkness of their self-absorption and their [state of] possibility, conferring on them a vision which is His own vision, since He cannot be seen except by Himself. Then divine Reality is revealed in the presence of that essence/eye by means of His Name 'The Beautiful One', in which case that *'ayn* of the possible becomes enchanted with love for God, and transformed into a receptacle of His epiphany.

The *'ayn* of the possible is completely absorbed in Him. It is annihilated in respect to itself, so that it does not know that it is His lover, or it is annihilated in respect to Him through itself, despite its existence in that condition, so that it does not know that it is His place of manifestation. It finds from itself that it loves itself.

Everything is moulded according to self love. And there is nothing manifest but Him in the *'ayn* of the possible. Thus [it may be affirmed that] none loves God other than God Himself.

Ibn 'Arabi refers to two forms of annihilation in this text: the disappearance of one's own identity in the divine, and the concealment of the divine identity in one's own. In either case, the reality experienced by the mystic in this prodigious framework of lights and mirrors is unique: the experience and knowledge of the essential reality whose unity does not, however, nullify the reality of the multiple, in whose unfathomable mystery Love, Light, Beauty, Word, Wisdom and Existence become manifest, causing us to know, according to each person's disposition, the infinite richness of that hidden Treasure preserved in the heart of Man.

Published in the Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society, Vol. XVIII, 1995, pp. 1-22.