

Firoozeh Papan-Matin. *Beyond Death: The Mystical Teachings of ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt al-Hamadhānī*. Islamic History and Civilization Series, vol. 75. Leiden: Brill, 2010. x + 242 pages, appendix, bibliography, index. Cloth. ISBN: 978-90-04-17413-9. US \$139.00.

The one area of inquiry in Islamic intellectual history which has largely been neglected is the phase between Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) and Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 638/1240). This period is particularly problematic owing to its indebtedness to the earlier Islamic philosophical tradition, particularly the work of Avicenna (d. 428/1037), as well as a variety of currents in Sufism. Although there are a number of key authors who belong to the era in question, one of the most important is the great martyr ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt Hamadhānī (d. 525/1131). This figure is famous for having been the student of Aḥmad Ghazālī (d. 520/1126), and for having been put to death by the Seljuq government, ostensibly on charges of heresy.

In contrast to what we have on ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt in Persian, European-language scholarship has a long way to go. To date, there are a number of translations of his works (either partial or whole) in English, French, and German, but only two monographs on him, both of which are in English. The first of these, written by Hamid Dabashi, portrays ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt as a proto-postmodernist, and attempts to wrestle him away from his actual historical, intellectual, and religious context.¹ This work has rightfully been severely criticized for these and other reasons, and thus sorely fails to pass the standards of modern academic scholarship.² The second book on ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt and the subject of the present review, *Beyond Death* by Firoozeh Papan-Matin, is indeed an improvement from what we find in Dabashi.

One of the great merits of Papan-Matin’s study is that it sheds a good deal of light on a major aspect of ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s legacy, namely his reception amongst several key Chishti authors in India (chapter 5). The author is also able to offer readers a jargon-free analysis (in chapter 2) of how ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s lived experience of imprisonment and exile informs his perspective on the manner in which the soul is trapped in the body, and the way this realization acts as an aid to his project of death and dying. This insight is then helpfully connected with other similar “exile” accounts in the writings of Plato, Avicenna, and Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī (d. 587/1191).

¹ Hamid Dabashi, *Truth and Narrative: The Untimely Thoughts of ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt Hamadhānī* (Richmond: Curzon, 1999).

² See, for example, Joseph Lumbard’s review of this book in *The Muslim World* 96 (2006): 532–4.

Yet *Beyond Death* also demonstrates a general unfamiliarity with a host of pertinent secondary scholarship essential to any monograph on ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, such as the work of Parwīz Adhkā’ī, Ghulām Riḍā Afrāsiyābī, Gerhard Bowering, ‘Alī Riḍā Dhakāwātī Qarāguzlū, Raḥīm Farmanish, Nargis Ḥasanī, Omar Jah, Forough Jahanbakhsh, Hermann Landolt, Joseph Lumbard (for Aḥmad Ghazālī), Najīb Māyil Hirawī, Christiane Tortel, and Tim Winter (for Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī). Even in the book’s first chapter, which presents a standard summary of ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s life and writings, the opportunity is missed to meaningfully engage with the work of Omid Safi.³ The failure to do so results in a fairly unnuanced presentation of the circumstances that lead to ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s execution.

Although Papan-Matin’s study contains a number of spelling, translation, and transliteration errors, my focus here will only be on her misreadings of those key Sufi terms and concepts which have a direct bearing on her overall point in the book. The central argument, to be found in chapters 3 and 4, can be summarized as follows:

- (1) ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt was a unique medieval author who had access to the unseen (*ghayb*) by virtue of having undergone “mystical death” (*mawt-i ma’ nawī*), which is a precursor to the Sufi notion of “annihilation” (*fanā*).
- (2) Since “death” entails multiple, altered states of consciousness, it is fitting that ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, having gone through two kinds of “death” (i.e. mystical death and annihilation) and been resurrected, can be said to have come to a special kind of knowledge of God, namely gnosis (*ma’rifā*).
- (3) As someone who has this gnosis and access to heightened states of consciousness through the unseen, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt comes to a vision of reality which allows him to emphasize its suprarational nature.
- (4) But, paradoxically, this state of knowledge also calls into question ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s own “certainties,” because qua embodied human being he still has to live within the confines of such dogmatic categories as “faith” and “belief.”
- (5) The upshot of ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s going through this process of knowing and then a kind of unknowing is that he becomes more “human.”

³ Omid Safi, *The Politics of Knowledge in Premodern Islam: Negotiating Ideology and Religious Inquiry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), chap. 4. Although Safi’s study is not cited anywhere in the book, it does appear in the bibliography, but not with its correct title.

To be sure, aspects of Papan-Matin's presentation do resonate with what 'Ayn al-Quḍāt wants to say. But her entire argument is tainted by her fundamental and contrived distinction between "mystical death" and "annihilation," which is explained as follows:

Mystical death is not synonymous with annihilation (*fanā'*); it is the preliminary state before *fanā'*. It is the stage when the consciousness of the wayfarer is transcended but not annihilated and is in the consciousness that he perceives to be the consciousness of God (3; cf. 162, 217).

Is the author trying to say that mystical death is a stage in which the wayfarer has transcended his consciousness but has not totally lost his sense of self, and yet, paradoxically, is conscious that he is somehow an aspect of God's consciousness? If this is what she would like to suggest, then this seems more like an attempt to explain the standard Sufi concepts of *fanā'* and *baqā'* (subsistence), but with *baqā'* as precedent to *fanā'*, which is not tenable.

In translating *mawt-i ma'nawī* as "mystical death," Papan-Matin seems to be following Leonard Lewisohn's seminal study on 'Ayn al-Quḍāt.⁴ Yet in this article Lewisohn makes it clear that *mawt-i ma'nawī* and *fanā'* are synonyms for the same thing, that is, "death to the self" or "spiritual death," which corresponds to what the Islamic tradition calls "the voluntary return" (*al-rujū' al-ikhtiyārī*), as opposed to the compulsory return (*al-rujū' al-idṭirārī*) or biological death. The reason Lewisohn does not posit mystical death and annihilation as somehow different is because 'Ayn al-Quḍāt himself does not make such a distinction, nor does any other Sufi for that matter. The ten or so times *fanā'* appears in 'Ayn al-Quḍāt's *Tamhīdāt* (his most important work) clearly indicate that he is referring to the Sufi concept of the passing away of one's qualities, or the annihilation of the ego. Going through *fanā'* then sets the stage for the individual's subsistence in God, the aforementioned *baqā'*, which is when one lives in God as not wholly "other" than God and not as identical to God, but more like an extension of the divine consciousness, or, to use a well-known Sufi image, as a ray of light of the divine sun. As for the expression *mawt-i ma'nawī*, it only appears in the *Tamhīdāt* twice, and in both instances it does not take on a particular, technical significance that is in any way different from what 'Ayn al-Quḍāt has to say about *fanā'*.⁵

⁴ Leonard Lewisohn, "In Quest of Annihilation: Imaginalization and Mystical Death in the *Tamhīdāt* of 'Ayn al-Quḍāt Hamadhānī," in *The Heritage of Sufism*, ed. idem (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000), 1:285–336.

⁵ See 'Ayn al-Quḍāt, *Tamhīdāt*, ed. 'Afif 'Usayrān (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Manūchihīrī, 1994), 320 (§ 318), 322 (§ 321).

It is clear that Papan-Matin wants to see a difference between mystical death and annihilation since it allows her to venture into the territory of the “unseen” and stages of consciousness. By creating a false dichotomy between these two concepts and making one the necessary precursor to the other, she can then emphasize the manner in which death is a deepening of sorts of the human existential situation. Although such an insight on its own terms is not incorrect from one perspective, its application is, since it conveniently dovetails with one of Papan-Matin’s sub-arguments, namely her desire to emphasize ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s “contradictory” state in which he is thrown into “question” on account of having gone through several stages of death but, at the same time, remains trapped in his corporeal form. This in turn fits neatly into Papan-Matin’s framework which posits a deep tension between the soul and body—a tension which for ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt as well as numerous other Sufi authors, is simply not present when it comes to the higher reaches of the Sufi path.⁶

The above critical points aside, *Beyond Death* nevertheless offers readers a glimpse into the sublime nature of ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s vision. And this is surely because Papan-Matin’s translations from the *Tamhīdāt* are often able to capture, with considerable beauty, the soaring and tantalizingly elliptical nature of ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s Persian prose.

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⁶ For a penetrating inquiry into the positive role of the body in the spiritual life, see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), chap. 7.