

THEO-FĀNĪ: ʿAYN AL-QUDĀT AND THE FIRE OF LOVE

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Introduction

When we think of love in Islam, we normally associate this virtue with the likes of the great Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 672/1273).¹ Yet there were many authors well before Rūmī's time, a number of whom supplied much of the stock imagery and symbolism that would become common in Rūmī's own day. Figures such as ʿAbd Allāh Anṣārī (d. 481/1089), Aḥmad Ghazālī (d. 520/1126), Rashīd al-Dīn Maybudī (d. ca. 520/1126), and Aḥmad Samʿānī (d. 534/1140) were major theologians of love in Islam.² And they were seen in this way by their contemporaries, their successors such as Rūzbihān Baqlī (d. 606/1209), Farīd al-Dīn ʿAṭṭār (d. 617/1220),³ and Rūmī, and generations of Muslims from the subcontinent, Central Asia, Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, and other regions right up to our own times.

1. The clearest exposition of Rūmī's theology of love remains William Chittick's *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983).

2. For whom, see respectively, Rawan Farhadi, *ʿAbdullāh Anṣārī of Herāt (1006–1089 C.E.): An Early Sūfī Master* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 1996); Joseph Lumbard, *Aḥmad al-Ghazālī, Remembrance, and the Metaphysics of Love* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016); Annabel Keeler, *Sūfī Hermeneutics: The Qurʾān Commentary of Rashīd al-Dīn Maybudī* (Oxford: Oxford University Press in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2006); Aḥmad Samʿānī, *The Repose of the Spirits: A Sufi Commentary on the Divine Names*, trans. William Chittick (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019).

3. For an excellent recent study of Baqlī, see Kazuyo Murata, *Beauty in Sufism: The Teachings of Rūzbihān Baqlī* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2017). A new approach to ʿAṭṭār can be found in Cyrus Zargar, *Religion of Love: Farīd al-Dīn ʿAṭṭār and the Sufi Tradition* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, in press).

It would have been rather normative for the people just mentioned to have viewed the goal of life through the lens of love. After all, the fundamental human experience of love is central to the Quranic worldview and hence to Islamic spirituality, as has been demonstrated by William Chittick in his groundbreaking book, *Divine Love: Islamic Literature and the Path to God*.⁴ Among these authors, one of the greatest lovers was the Persian sage, philosopher, jurist, and martyr ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt Hamadānī (d. 525/1131), who was the famous student of Aḥmad Ghazālī. So renowned was he for his emphasis on divine and human love that he earned the title “Sultan of the Lovers” shortly after his death.⁵ Like the love theologians who came before and after him, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt spent a great deal of time writing about the nature and full implications of a life given over to love for God and God’s creatures.

Since ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt was heir to a long tradition of theoretical reflection on love and was himself an important conduit for the transmission of love theology for the many major poets and prose writers who came after him, his writings on love represent one of the most coherent and profound treatments of the topic in all of Islamic and even human civilization. In what follows, I will therefore present one dimension of ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s multifaceted and complex understanding of love.⁶

Seeking Love

Readers of Rūmī will be familiar with his emphasis on the inability of language to define love. Consider, for example, these famous lines from his *Masnawī*:

Whatever I say about love by way of commentary and exposition,
when I get to love, I am ashamed at that.
Although the explanation with the tongue is clear,
that love which is tongue-less is even clearer.⁷

Like Rūmī, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt never attempts to define love on the grounds that the reality of love is simply ineffable. This means that our ordinary ratiocinative faculties do not have a way of access to the mysteries of love. And that explains why he says that “when the sun of love comes, the star of the intellect is obliterated.”⁸ Since rational theologians and legal scholars both engage in intellectual hair-splitting, their trade is entirely insufficient for the business of love:

Here, what can “do” and “don’t do” do? The rulings of lovers are one thing, and the rulings of intellectuals quite another!⁹

4. Chittick, *Divine Love: Islamic Literature and the Path to God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

5. For his life and teachings, see Mohammed Rustom, *Inrushes of the Heart: The Sufi Philosophy of ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt* (Albany: State University of New York Press, in press).

6. For the full range of ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s love theory and its relationship to other aspects of his thought, see Rustom, *Inrushes of the Heart*, chapter 10.

7. For this poem in context, see Rustom, “The Ocean of Nonexistence,” *Mawlana Rumi Review* 4 (2013): 188–199 (at pp. 188–189).

8. ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, *Nāma-hā*, ed. ‘Alī Naqī Munzawī and ‘Afīf ‘Usayrān (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Asāṭīr, 1998), 2:219, § 327.

9. ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, *Nāma-hā*, 2:219, § 328.

Do not think that you and your likes have known love, apart from its trappings without reality! Love is only obtained by the one who obtains recognition [*maʿrifat*].¹⁰

Rather than attempt to define love, ʿAyn al-Quḍāt insists that we must make do with our imperfect resources of human expression:

An explication of love cannot be given except through symbols and images, and this so that love can be spoken of. If not, what could be said of love and what should be spoken?¹¹

In one instance, ʿAyn al-Quḍāt tells us that love is a veil between the lover and the Beloved.¹² In another, he characterizes the cosmos as being filled with tragic actors on the stage of love:

The world cannot obtain the secret of love, but is enamored and confounded by love. And love knows what has been done to the world—it is always in a state of sadness and grief.¹³

When ʿAyn al-Quḍāt discusses the characteristics of love, his first point of entry is in identifying its primary indicator: that of leaving one’s own selfish and egotistical inclinations and preferring the object of love, and indeed love itself, over oneself:

Alas! What can be said of love? What trace should be given of love, and what indication can be provided? In taking the step of love, a person is submitted for she is not with herself. She abandons herself, and prefers love over herself.¹⁴

The derangement [*sawdāʿ*] of love is of better worth than the cleverness of the world! . . . Whoever is not a lover is a self-seer To be a lover is to be without selfhood and without a path.¹⁵

Since love is of such a totalizing nature, ʿAyn al-Quḍāt explains that it consumes the lover entirely: “Love has a power that, when it permeates the beloved, the beloved spreads itself and consumes the entirety of the lover.”¹⁶ Yet before being consumed by love, one must seek to cultivate love within oneself:

The seeker’s task is to search in himself for nothing but love. The lover’s existence is from love. How can he live without love? Recognize life from love, and find death without love!¹⁷

Seeking love within the self is an abstract concept and a distant possibility for most people. Thus, the surest way into the world of love is to develop a relationship with God, and the easiest way this can be done is to foster love in one’s heart for God’s creatures. In other words, through loving people and other sentient beings, one can come into the purview of the vast scope of love: “One loves every existent

10. ʿAyn al-Quḍāt, *Nāma-hā*, 2:153, § 224.

11. ʿAyn al-Quḍāt, *Tamhidāt*, ed. ʿAfif ʿUsayrān (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Manūchihrī, 1994), 125, § 174.

12. ʿAyn al-Quḍāt, *Tamhidāt*, 127, § 176.

13. ʿAyn al-Quḍāt, *Tamhidāt*, 108, § 153.

14. ʿAyn al-Quḍāt, *Tamhidāt*, 96–97, § 137.

15. ʿAyn al-Quḍāt, *Tamhidāt*, 98, § 140.

16. ʿAyn al-Quḍāt, *Tamhidāt*, 100, § 141.

17. ʿAyn al-Quḍāt, *Tamhidāt*, 98, § 139.

thing since every existent thing is His act and handiwork.”¹⁸ Insofar as human beings exist and love is a synonym for existence (as indeed it has been for so many of Islam’s foremost sages), human beings are characterized by love, just as they are characterized by existence:

For every person, love is an obligation upon the path. Alas! If you do not have love for the Creator, at least cultivate love for the creatures so that the worth of these words are obtained by you.¹⁹

Wimps and Worthies

The notion of cultivating love naturally raises the question of how this can be done. For ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, as with so many other authors in the Persianate Sufi tradition, the answer is rather straightforward. One must let love be his guide and master: “Be a student! Love itself suffices as your teacher.”²⁰ Love, which is God, will take one to God, who is the ultimate Beloved. The better one’s training in the school of divine love, the more beautiful (and thus beloved) will the Beloved be to the student:

The first collyrium with which the seeking wayfarer [*tālib-i sālik*] must be anointed is love. Our master²¹ said, “There is no master more penetrating than love”—there is no master more perfect for the wayfarer than love. One time, I asked the master, “What is the guide to God?” He said, “Its guide is God Himself.”²²

I say that, for the beginner, the guide to knowledge of God is love. Whoever does not have love as a master is not a traveler upon the Path. Through the Beloved, the lover can reach love, and by virtue of love, he can see the Beloved. The more perfect one’s love, the more beautiful does the Beloved appear.²³

Becoming a student of love is a rather tall order. This is why ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt frankly states that love is “forbidden to wimps [*na-mardān*].”²⁴ By definition, “wimps” are not cut out for enduring difficulties, and there is nothing more difficult than the trials and tribulations that accompany the path of love. Rather than merely endure the trials of love, one must welcome tribulation and indeed become tribulation itself. That is to say, one must become nothing so that he can take steps towards becoming everything:

Alas! You imagine that tribulation is given to every person? What do you know of tribulation? Wait until you reach a place where you sell your spirit for God’s tribulation.²⁵

The believer must suffer from tribulation so much that he becomes tribulation itself, and tribulation becomes his very self. Then, he will be unaware of tribulation.²⁶

18. ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, *Tamhidāt*, 140, § 191.

19. ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, *Tamhidāt*, 96, § 137. See also *Tamhidāt*, 107, § 151.

20. ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, *Nāma-hā*, 2:128, § 188.

21. That is, Aḥmad Ghazālī.

22. ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, *Tamhidāt*, 283, § 368.

23. ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, *Tamhidāt*, 284, § 367.

24. ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, *Nāma-hā*, 1:22, § 24. See also *Tamhidāt*, 110–111, § 157.

25. ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, *Tamhidāt*, 243, § 318.

26. ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, *Tamhidāt*, 244, § 318.

But why must the path of love come with such tribulation, the greatest of which is the pain of separation from God Himself? Half of the answer, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt tells us, is because it allows for the would-be lover to ripen and mature so that he may transform from being a lover in potentiality to being a lover in actuality:

The sign of love is sincerity. You do not know what I am saying? In love, harshness and faithfulness are needed until the lover becomes cooked by the gentleness and severity of the Beloved. If not, he will be raw, and nothing will come of him.²⁷

Alas! Do you know why all of these curtains and veils are placed upon the Path? So that, day by day, the lover’s vision ripens until he can bear the burden of encountering God without a veil.²⁸

The other half of the answer to why tribulation must obtain on the path of love is that it allows the men to be distinguished from the boys. That is, there are many who make claims about love for God, but there are very few who are really willing to endure the hardships that are entailed by this love relationship. To illustrate his point, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt draws on the well-known imagery of the rose (*gul*) and the nightingale (*bulbul*). The nightingale cries and laments out of separation from the rose. Since it cannot bear separation from the rose, it naturally throws itself into it. But in the rose bed there are also deadly thorns. Seeing these thorns, the nightingale who claims love for the rose halts its flight in an attempt to save itself. It claims love, but when it comes to accepting the suffering that comes with love, it remains concerned with itself more than with love. In ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s words, the nightingale is not fit for the business of love because it remains a self-seer who has not yet become nothing:

Have you not seen that the nightingale is a lover of the rose? When the nightingale gets close to the rose, it cannot bear it—it lunges into the rose. But the thorns under the rose have a station—they cause the rose to kill the nightingale. . . . If the rose were without the thorns’ torment, every nightingale would have made the claim of being a lover [*da‘wā-yi ‘āshiqī*]. But given the thorns, not a single one out of a hundred thousand nightingales can make the claim of being a lover of the rose.²⁹

Yet there are those rare nightingales who make good on their claim of love for the rose, accepting the pain, suffering, and annihilation that accompanies their flight into the rose bed.³⁰ When one is like that nightingale who prefers the rose over itself, he is no longer a “wimp” with respect to love as he has gladly accepted love’s tribulations. This brings about a certain quality of soul in the lover—worthiness (*ahliyyat*).³¹ On account of this worthiness, one can then enter into a love relationship with God. As the pre-Socratic doctrine tells us, only like can know like. On this logic, the true lover will naturally know the language of love and

27. ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, *Tamhidāt*, 221, § 283.

28. ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, *Tamhidāt*, 104–105, § 148.

29. ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, *Tamhidāt*, 341–342, § 453.

30. See ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, *Tamhidāt*, 207, § 266.

31. ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt develops the notion of “worthiness” in another context, namely his treatment of the Quran. See Rustom, “‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s Qur’anic Vision: From Black Words to White Parchment,” in *Routledge Handbook on Sufism*, ed. Lloyd Ridgeon (London: Routledge, 2021), 75–88.

consequently be able to speak as lovers speak:

Whoever is not deserving of love is not deserving of God. Whoever is not worthy of love is not worthy of God. Love can speak to the lover, and the lover knows the worth of love.³²

The Path of Majnun

As should be clear from the foregoing, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s key insight about the path of love for God is that it will inevitably come with pain and suffering, the worst of which is the agony of distance from the Beloved. This is because the so-called lover, insofar as he is other than the Beloved, still maintains some kind of independent ontological status in his own eyes. He is still in search of the Beloved. And insofar as he remains an aspirant in search of the Beloved, he will suffer. ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt succinctly states the problem like this: “The lover is still an aspirant, and in this world, the aspirant is placed atop the tree of separation.”³³

The more the gap is closed between lover and Beloved, that is, the less of the lover there is and the more of the Beloved there is, the less separation there will be. And the less the separation, the less the pain of separation. But, by the same token, the less the separation, the more are the categories of “subject” and “object” and “I” and “You” done away with. And the more these categories are done away with while an affirming subject still remains, the more will love reveal itself to be an affair of drunkenness, stupor, bewilderment, and madness. With this point in mind, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt draws on the trope of the proverbial lovers Layla and Majnun. He tells his readers that if they want to reach God, they have to be like Majnun—eternally beholden to the very mention of his beloved in spite of himself:

O dear friend! Reaching God is obligatory. And, undoubtedly, whatever it is through which one reaches God is itself obligatory for seekers. Love causes the servant to reach God. Thus, for this reason, love is an obligation upon the path. O dear friend! One must be of the quality of Majnun [*majnūn ṣifātī*], who, by hearing the name of Layla, could lose his spirit! For the unattached one, what concern and care for the love of Layla would he have? It is not an obligation for the one who is not a lover of Layla—it is an obligation upon the path for Majnun.³⁴

O dear friend! Do you know what the beauty of Layla said to the enamored love of Majnun? It said, “O Majnun! If I give a wink, even if there are a hundred thousand people like Majnun who all come forth by foot, they will be slain by my wink.” Listen to what Majnun said: “Worry not! If your wink will annihilate Majnun, arrival and your generosity will give him subsistence.”³⁵

32. ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, *Tamhīdāt*, 111, § 157.

33. ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, *Tamhīdāt*, 222, § 285.

34. ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, *Tamhīdāt*, 97–98, § 138.

35. ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, *Tamhīdāt*, 110, § 156.

‘Ayn al-Quḍāt undoubtedly took on the qualities of Majnun, and in one place in his writings he offers a commentary on his situation as he is overcome by the madness of love. He paradoxically proclaims that “Love’s madness has left me so selfless and entranced that I do not know what I am saying!”³⁶ Notice how ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt says that the madness of love has left “him” selfless to such an extent that “he” does not know what “he” is saying. This kind of love in ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s lexicon is known as in-between love (*‘ishq-i miyāna*). It is an as yet imperfect form of love insofar as it still operates within the confines of a subject-object dichotomy, however much the distinction between these two is blurred:

In in-between love, a difference can be found between the witness and Witnessed. As for the end of love, it is when a difference cannot be found between them. When the lover at the end of the path becomes love and when the love of the witness and the Witnessed become one, the witness is the Witnessed and the Witnessed the witness. You consider this to be a form of incarnationism [*ḥulūl*], but this is not incarnationism. It is the perfection of union and oneness! According to the religion of the realizers, there is no religion other than this.³⁷

Elsewhere, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt explains that at the end of love “there remains neither madman, nor lover, but only madness and love.”³⁸ He also calls the end of love “major love,” which is defined as God’s love for His creatures.³⁹ Although this form of love seems to imply the existence of subject and object, in reality, it is the highest form of unity. This is because it takes us to love itself which, properly speaking, is concerned with neither subject nor object. To illustrate this point, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt offers a unique reading of Q 5:54, *He loves them and they love Him*:

O dear friend! Listen to *He loves them and they love Him* [Q 5:54]. When *they love Him* is put in place, it can face *He loves them* in its entirety. Then it says *He loves them*, for it has arrived with all that it is. The sun can illumine the entire earth since its surface is vast. But, so long as the house of your heart does not turn the entirety of its face towards the sun, not a single ray of the sun can be its share. “And among His signs is the sun”⁴⁰ itself testifies that *He loves them* has such an attribute of vastness that it can be for every person. But, as long as the entirety of *they love Him* is not given to it, the house of your heart will not find the rays in their entirety. In the cloister [*khalwat-khāna*] of *they love Him*, *He loves them* itself speaks of what love is, and of who the Beloved is.⁴¹

36. ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, *Tamhidāt*, 237, § 307.

37. ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, *Tamhidāt*, 115, § 162.

38. ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, *Tamhidāt*, 237, § 307.

39. See ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, *Tamhidāt*, 101–102, § 143.

40. Cf. Q 41:37.

41. ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, *Tamhidāt*, 128, § 177.

All is Fire

Nowhere is ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt clearer on the implications of the end of love than when he equates love to fire. Fire is a perfect symbol for love because it is all-consuming: whatever it comes across it burns and reduces to nothing. Thus, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt says, “Love is a fire—every place where it is, none but it can remain; every place that it reaches, it burns and turns into its own color.”⁴²

In explaining the final end of love, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt most commonly draws on the stock pairing of moth (*parvāna*) and candle (*sham‘*). The moth, which symbolizes the human soul, is by nature a lover of the candle’s flame, which symbolizes God/love. As a moth is wont to do, when it sees the candle’s flame it cannot but plunge into the flame with the entirety of its being:

Without the fire, the moth is restless, but in the fire it does not have existence. So consumed is the moth by the fire that it sees all of the world as fire. When it reaches the fire, it throws itself in its midst. The moth itself does not know how to differentiate between the fire and other than the fire. Why? Because love itself is all fire When the moth throws itself in the midst of the fire it becomes burned—all becomes fire. What news does it have of itself? So long as it is with itself, it is in itself.⁴³

Since love consumes everything, in the final analysis there can be no talk of a separate lover. This is because when there is a lover, there is a separate “I” which is posited next to God, the supreme “I.” As long as one insists on his own “I-hood,” he remains trapped within the confines of his own ego and is, in reality, dead. But when he steps outside of himself he can then live, not as a separate “I,” but as his real “I”:

Alas! What will you hear?! For us, death is this: one must be dead to all that is other than the Beloved until he finds life from the Beloved, and becomes living through the Beloved.⁴⁴

Whoever does not have this death does not find life. I mean, what you know to be death is not that real death, which is annihilation. Do you know what I am saying? I am saying that when you are yourself and are with your self, you are not. But when you are not with yourself, you are all yourself.⁴⁵

True love therefore does not implicate the lover in the relationship of love because the lover is nothing in the face of love. Insofar as he is, he is not a lover. And insofar as he is not, there is nothing but love. Since love entails complete selflessness, which also means losing one’s own sense of self, the moth is a perfect symbol of the ideal lover: looking to neither the right nor the left, and with neither consequence nor prize in mind, it simply throws itself into the fire, which is its sole goal. The very fire that receives the moth reduces it to nothing, and is all that there is:

42. ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, *Tamhidāt*, 97, § 137.

43. ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, *Tamhidāt*, 99, § 141.

44. ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, *Tamhidāt*, 288, § 374.

45. ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, *Tamhidāt*, 287, § 374.

If you want me to give an example of this, listen! The moth, who is a lover of the fire, has no share at all of it so long as she is distant from the fire's light. When she throws herself into the fire, she becomes self-less and nothing of moth-hood remains—all is fire.⁴⁶

Conclusion

Listening to what 'Ayn al-Qudāt has to say about love can help inform the academic study of Islamic mysticism. At the same time, it very much pertains to our own lives, especially since love for many people today is regarded as nothing but a fleeting human sentiment. As we have seen, for 'Ayn al-Qudāt, nothing could be further from his vision of love. Love is not merely to be found among people in their everyday lives, nor is it just an expression of the human longing for the divine. It is far more expansive, taking in all of reality because it itself is the ground and stuff of all reality.

Where most human beings find themselves along the continuum of love has everything to do with their situatedness at that particular moment as individual lovers. The further along they move in their specific encounters with love, the more prepared they become for the encounter with Love itself, which is God. Yet for 'Ayn al-Qudāt, the sooner one can see that it is none other than the Beloved that he loves even in his objects of love, the quicker will his experience of love be more deeply rooted and self-less. This can only happen when one is totally consumed by the fire of love. It is then that he will come to see himself and all things as so many fleeting traces of the image of the eternal Beloved.

46. 'Ayn al-Qudāt, *Tamhidāt*, 242, § 316.

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