

Interlibrary Loan/Document Delivery
Picklist Report (Lending)



Responder ILL #: 7940148

Printed Date: 19-JUN-2014

Status: In Process

Original Call Number: NX1 .T44
Responder Call Number:

Title: Temenos
Author:
Publisher:

ISBN/ISSN: 0262-4524

Date (Monograph):

Edition:

Volume/Issue: 10

Pages: 99-119

Date (Serial): 1989

Article Title: The World of Imagination and Poetic Imagery According to Ibn al-ʿArabī
Article Author: William Chittick

DETAILS

Requesting Library: Library, Carleton University
Requester Symbol: OOC01
NLC-BNC Code: NLC-BNC:OOC
Ariel Address: 134.117.10.52

Supplying Library: Toronto Robarts Library



JUN 2 2014

Requester ILL #: 7939248

Patron Name: Mohammed Rustom
End User Barcode: OOC-000806536
Patron Category: OOCEF
Patron Department: Religious Studies

Media Type: Photocopy/Copie
Max Cost: 0
Expiration Date: 25-JUN-2014
Need By Date:

Service Level: Normal - Local Search
Service Type: Copy/Copie
Delivery Method: Ariel
Sponsoring Body:

Pickup Location: Email
only

Request Note:

This copy was made in accordance with the University of Toronto's
Fair Dealing Policy, and the exceptions granted under
Section 29 of the Copyright Act. In keeping with the
Fair Dealing guidelines, you are allowed to make one copy
for the sole purpose of research, private study, criticism,
review, news reporting, education, parody or satire. If the
copy is used for the purpose of review, criticism or news
reporting, the source and the name of the author must be noted.
Use of this copy for any other purpose may require the
permission of the copyright owner.

The World of Imagination and Poetic Imagery according to Ibn al-Arabi

WILLIAM C. CHITTICK

As Henry Corbin has shown in his pioneering studies, imagination plays a fundamental role in the world views of many important Muslim thinkers. The great Sufi Ibn al-Arabi (d. A.H. 638/C.E. 1240) considered imagination as the underlying stuff of both the universe and the human soul and insisted upon placing imaginal perception on an equal footing with rational understanding. In Ibn al-Arabi's view, reason or intellect ('aql) can provide knowledge of only one-half of reality; unless the seeker after knowledge sees with both the eye of intellect and the eye of imagination, he will never understand God, the cosmos, or himself.

Ibn al-Arabi was the author of several hundred prose works, including the monumental *Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*. He was also one of the most prolific of Arab poets, composing at least three diwans and many thousands of additional verses scattered throughout his prose writings. As the greatest Muslim theoretician of imagination, he was able to utilize the possibilities of poetical expression gained through the active imagination with perfect awareness of what he was doing. Poetry, he knew, was a gift to the poet from the sphere of Venus and the prophet Joseph, and he himself had received this gift during his ascents through the celestial spheres to God.

So far as is known, Ibn al-Arabi has not explained systematically or in detail the relationship between imagination on a cosmic scale and the mode in which the poet's imagination makes use of the possibilities of language to express invisible realities. However, he alludes to this process in many passages of his works and discusses it rather explicitly in *Dhakhā'ir al-ā'lāq*, his own commentary on his diwan, *Tarjumān al-ashwāq*. R. A. Nicholson realized the importance of these two works eighty years ago and published a complete translation of the *Tarjumān* with selections from the commentary.¹ However, Nicholson provides no theoretical introduction to the translation, nor does



he make any attempt to explain the technical nature of much of the terminology employed. In fact, if we want to appreciate the depth and complexity of Ibn al-Arabi's commentary in the context of thirteenth century Islamic thought, we would need a major book on Ibn al-Arabi's concept of imagination including a detailed discussion of the manner in which it relates to his metaphysics, cosmology, and psychology. Since that book has not yet been written, I would like to provide here its introduction, outlining some of the many topics which would have to be covered.² I suspect that only this type of analysis will allow us to begin to unravel the world of meanings behind the literary forms of the Sufi poets, not only in Arabic, but also in Persian, Turkish, and other Islamic languages. At the same time, we may be able to learn something about the imagery employed by poets who had no claims to Sufi affiliations. Given the deeply Islamic character of the intellectual context in which poetry was composed, certain dimensions of the Islamic world view are always portrayed, and the roots of these were best expressed by Islam's own mystical theoreticians.

As is well known, Ibn al-Arabi wrote his commentary on the *Tarjumán al-ashwáq* to refute the claim of a certain jurist that the work did not deal with the 'divine mysteries' but rather with sensual love. Nicholson, in contrast to some earlier scholars, had no doubt as to Ibn al-Arabi's sincerity, and he expresses his gratitude to the skeptic who caused Ibn al-Arabi to write the commentary. As Nicholson remarks, 'Without [Ibn al-Arabi's] guidance the most sympathetic readers would seldom have hit upon the hidden meanings which his fantastic ingenuity elicits from the conventional phrases of an Arabic *qasída*.' Then Nicholson tells us that the author has 'overshot the mark' and 'take[s] refuge in far-fetched verbal analogies and . . . descend[s] with startling rapidity from the sublime to the ridiculous'.³ While expressing our gratitude to Nicholson for his pioneering contribution to scholarship in translating this work, we may still be allowed to question his evaluation by asking how Ibn al-Arabi's commentary on the *Tarjumán* would have been perceived within the intellectual climate of his own day, and more particularly, within the context of Ibn al-Arabi's own teachings. From this perspective, Ibn al-Arabi's 'ingenuity' does not seem nearly so 'fantastic' as Nicholson believed, since, in the *Futūhāt al-makkiyya* alone, Ibn al-Arabi provides about

15,000 more pages of the same sort of 'far-fetched verbal analogies'. If one were to drop *Dhakháir al-díq* into the middle of the *Futūhāt*, no one would notice. The only thing 'ridiculous' here is that Nicholson should have judged Ibn al-Arabi from within the cognitive blinkers of British rationalism.

In providing selections from Ibn al-Arabi's commentary, Nicholson leads us to believe that he has given us all the significant sections. He says, 'I have rendered the interesting and important passages nearly word for word'.⁴ But Nicholson's evaluation of the 'interesting and important' rested on the concerns of the scholarship of his day. It is sufficient to read Ibn al-Arabi's commentary in relation to the *Futūhāt* to see that in fact Nicholson left out most of what was 'interesting and important' for Ibn al-Arabi and his followers and that much of what Nicholson no doubt considered as a 'descent to the ridiculous' provides the key to situating the poetry within the context of Islamic thought. Everything that Ibn al-Arabi says about his *qasídas* has a firm grounding in the Koran and the Hadith, mystical theology, cosmology, and the Muslim experience of God.

* * *

The first line of the *Tarjumán* reads, 'Would that I were aware whether they knew what heart they possessed!' Ibn al-Arabi's commentary tells us that the word 'they' refers to *al-manázir al-'ulá*, a term which Nicholson translates as 'the Divine Ideas', without any explanation as to what these ideas might signify. Though often called by different names, these 'ideas' reappear in the commentary with frequency. But our first mistake, which precludes any understanding of what is going on in the rest of the work, is to translate *manázir* as 'ideas' and *ulá* as 'divine'. *Manázir* is the plural of *manzar*, from the root *nazara*, which means primarily, 'to look, to view, to perceive with the eyes'.⁵ The literal sense of the term *manzar* is 'a place in which a thing is looked upon' or a 'locus of vision'. *'Ulá* is the plural of *'ilá*, meaning 'higher'. Hence, the *manázir al-'ulá* are the 'higher loci of vision'. As a technical term in cosmology, 'higher' is contrasted with 'lower' (*asfal*): the 'higher world' is the invisible realm, inhabited by angels and spirits. The 'lower world' is the visible realm, inhabited by corporeal bodies. Hence the 'lower loci of vision' (*al-manázir al-suffá*) would be the things which we perceive through our eyes or sight (*basar*), while the 'higher

loci of vision' are the things we perceive through the inward, spiritual faculty called by such names as insight (*basîrâ*), unveiling (*kashf*), and tasting (*dhawq*). The 'organ' through which a human being perceives the invisible and higher things is the heart (*qalb*). Even God Himself may be seen with the heart, and in his commentary Ibn al-Arabi frequently reminds us of the famous *hadîth qudsî*, 'Neither My heavens nor My earth encompass Me, but the heart of My believing servant does encompass Me.'

Ibn al-Arabi employs the form *manzar* or 'locus of vision' to indicate that here we are dealing in fact with two realities, a reality which is seen (*manzûr*) and the level (*marâtib*) at which it is seen. The ultimate object of vision is God Himself. But God in Himself is absolutely invisible and undefinable: He is seen not in His unknowable Essence (*dhât*), but in His manifestation (*zuhûr*) or self-disclosure (*iqdâf*), and this takes place within a form, which is the 'locus' (*mahall*) in which vision occurs. The form may be called by many names, such as 'imaginal form' (*shûra khayâlîyya* or *shûra mithâlîyya*), 'locus of witnessing' (*mashhad*), 'locus of manifestation' (*mazhar*), 'locus of self-disclosure' (*majlâ* or *mutajallâ fih*), 'spirituality' (*rûhânîyya*), and so on. Each of these terms has special nuances and needs to be discussed in its own context. The present paper will allow us only to touch on some of them.⁶

The 'higher loci of vision' which Ibn al-Arabi mentions at the very beginning form the subject of the whole commentary. In effect, each poem represents the description of God's self-disclosures as they appeared to the poet in the invisible world. By not providing an introduction and beginning the commentary with the term 'Divine Ideas', Nicholson makes it nearly impossible for anyone not thoroughly versed in Ibn al-Arabi's world view to realize what the commentary is all about, and thus Nicholson's claim that the interpretations are 'far-fetched' seems quite reasonable.

It was natural enough for Nicholson to talk of 'ideas', given the context of Western intellectual history, where all thinking considered significant has been based upon logic and ratiocination. Nor was it strange for him to translate 'higher' as 'divine', given the fact that the intermediate worlds have been all but banished from the mainstream of Western thought, so that we are left basically with only two levels of being, God and the physical realm. But given the studies of Corbin

and others, it is now generally known that the Muslims never lost sight of the worlds that separate the visible from God Himself. These are basically two, the world of the spirits or angels and the world of imagination. Ibn al-Arabi's works have to be read with a clear understanding of the nature of these intermediate realms of existence. In the present paper, we will concentrate on imagination, since it is closer to our own perception and has a more immediate effect upon poetic imagery.

One of the basic differences between 'ideas' and 'loci of vision' or 'images' is that the former are thought about, while the latter are seen, heard, touched, tasted, and smelled. The imaginal realm is a sensory realm, while the rational realm is disengaged from all sensory attributes. The rational faculty – *al-'aql* – works by a process of stringing concepts together and drawing conclusions, but the imaginal faculty – *al-khayâl* – works through an inward perception analogous to sense perception. For an Ibn al-Arabi the subject matter of poetry is not something that one thinks about as one might think about a problem in scholastic theology (*Kalâm*), but it is something which is seen with the inward eye and heard with the inward ear, and only then described.

These basic points may not seem strange to those familiar with the 'poetic imagination' in general, but most people are certainly not familiar with the elaborate and extremely detailed metaphysics, theology, cosmology, and psychology upon which Ibn al-Arabi bases his views. In this brief introduction, it will only be possible to provide the barest outline of a few of the concepts necessary to grasp Ibn al-Arabi's position on the relationship between the poet's imaginal world and the thinker's rational world – between 'ideas' and 'loci of vision'.

Imagination

Ibn al-Arabi's concept of imagination needs to be approached from at least two directions: as a subjective human experience and an objective phenomenon in the cosmos. We will have a better chance of grasping the nature of imagination by situating it within Ibn al-Arabi's overall view of the universe, since imagination's cosmological situation determines the manner in which human beings experience it. It should be remarked in passing that most of what Ibn

al-Arabi says concerning imagination has precedents in earlier Muslim thinkers.

But first, how can imagination be defined, without regard to the place within which it manifests itself? In Ibn al-Arabi's view, the outstanding feature of imagination is its intrinsic ambiguity, deriving from the fact that it dwells in an intermediary situation; it is a *barzakh* – an 'isthmus' or 'interworld' – or a reality standing between two other realities and needing to be defined in terms of both. Ibn al-Arabi, like others, commonly points to dreams as the most familiar example of imaginal realities. The image seen in a dream needs to be described in terms of both our subjective experience and the objective content. If you see a friend in a dream, you are seeing your friend on the one hand and your own self on the other; the content of your dream is subjective, yet it also has a certain objective validity, since you are seeing that particular friend and not another. We must affirm your vision as both true and untrue, since in one sense you see a specific thing, and in another sense you do not. In the following passage, Ibn al-Arabi explains the ambiguous nature of imagination by describing the image seen in a mirror, one of the most common examples provided in the texts.

Imagination is neither existent nor nonexistent, neither known nor unknown, neither affirmed nor denied. For example, a person perceives his own form in a mirror. He knows for certain that he has perceived his form in one respect and he knows for certain that he has not perceived his form in another respect . . . He cannot deny that he has seen his form, and he knows that his form is not in the mirror, nor is it between himself and the mirror . . . Hence he is neither a truth-teller nor a liar in his words, 'I saw my form, I did not see my form.'⁷

In short, wherever we meet imagination, we are faced with ambiguity. If we affirm something about it, we will probably have to deny the same thing with only a slight shift in point of view. This same feature marks imagination when it is considered on a cosmic scale. Here Ibn al-Arabi employs the term in two basic senses. In the first sense, everything other than God is imagination, since the universe or what we commonly call 'existence' is that which stands between the Absolute Being of God and absolute nothingness. If we say that God is 'existent', we cannot say the same thing about the cosmos in the same

sense, so the cosmos must be considered 'nonexistent'; yet we know that it does exist in some respect, or else we would not be here to speak about it. As a result, the universe is neither existent nor nonexistent; or it is both existent and nonexistent. Moreover, we know for certain that the cosmos, while being 'other than God', tells us something about God, since God's 'signs' (*āyāt*) – which reflect His names and attributes – are displayed within it. In other words, the cosmos is in some sense the self-manifestation or self-disclosure of God. Hence, when Ibn al-Arabi calls the universe 'imagination', he has in view the ambiguous status of all that exists apart from God and the fact that the universe displays God, just as an image in a mirror displays the reality of him who looks into the mirror. This is the sense of the following verses from the *Fuṣūṣ*:

The engendered universe is nothing but imagination,
yet in reality, it is God.
He who understands this point
has grasped the mysteries of the Path.⁸

In a second cosmological sense, imagination is the intermediate world between the two fundamental created worlds, that is, the spiritual world and the corporeal world. The contrast between spirits and bodies is expressed in terms of many pairs of opposites, such as luminous and dark, unseen and visible, inward and outward, non-manifest and manifest, high and low, subtle and dense. In every case imagination is an intermediary reality or *barzakh* between the two sides, possessing attributes of both. Hence the 'World of Imagination' needs to be described as 'neither/nor' or as 'both/and'. It is neither luminous nor dark, or both luminous and dark. It is neither unseen nor visible, or both unseen and visible.

For example, the *jinn* are intermediate beings, dwelling in the World of Imagination. Hence they are neither angels nor corporeal things, while they have qualities that are both angelic and corporeal, both luminous and dark. This is expressed mythically by the idea that the angels are created of light, mankind of clay, and the *jinn* of fire. Fire is an intermediate state between light and clay: it is subtle and dense at one and the same time. Fire shows its freedom from clay in the way it shoots up towards the sky, but it is tied to clay by the substance which burns. So also the *jinn* are both luminous and dark,

subtle and dense, unseen and visible. They have bodily forms, so they are corporeal, yet they can change their bodily forms at will, so they are free of many of the characteristics of corporeality.

We said above that a distinguishing feature of imagination is its intermediate status and intrinsic ambiguity. When we observe the lesser world of imagination – the intermediary realm between the world of spirits and the world of corporeal bodies – we see that this distinguishing feature has to do with the fact that imagination brings spiritual entities into relationship with corporeal entities. The way in which imagination does this is to display the incorporeal realities at its own level by giving them the attributes of corporeal things. In other words, imagination brings about the corporealization (*iqāssud*) of immaterial things, though they do not gain all the attributes of corporeality, remaining 'both/and'. In Ibn al-Arabi's own words, 'The reality of imagination is to embody that which is not properly a body'.⁹ Thus, for example, in dreams we see our own souls embodied in the form of images. It is only because of imagination that unseen realities can be described through attributes pertaining to the visible world, as when angels are described as having wings. But this description is not metaphorical, since unseen things actually take on visible forms in the imaginal realm independent of the observer. Thus within the world of imagination the angels assume bodily shape and appear in visions to the prophets and the friends of God, and within this same world the souls of human beings become corporealized after death to experience the delights and torments of the grave.¹⁰

When we look at imagination as a reality within the human microcosm, we see the term being used in two closely related meanings. In the first sense, imagination is the inward realm of human beings which acts as the intermediary between the luminous and immaterial divine spirit – which God 'breathed' into man (Koran 32:9) – and the dark and dense body, made out of clay. But spirit and body – light and clay – have no common measure by which they might come together. The spirit is one, luminous, subtle, high, and invisible, while the body is many, dark, dense, low, and visible. Hence God created the soul as the *barzakh* or interworld between spirit and body. It is both one and many, luminous and dark, subtle and dense, high and low, invisible and visible. The soul, in other words, is built of imagination, which helps explain its affinity to the *jinn* – Satan in particular. In this

broad sense, imagination is the microcosmic equivalent of the World of Imagination in the outside world. The human task is to strengthen the luminous side of the soul by moving in the direction of the spirit and to weaken the controlling power of the body. Since the spirit is one reality while the body is built of many parts, the strengthening of the spiritual dimension of the soul is a process whereby man moves toward unity and integration, while the domination of the corporeal side of the soul is a movement toward multiplicity and dispersion. In the next stage of life – the *barzakh* or interworld between death and resurrection – the happiness and wholeness of the human state depends upon the degree of integration which has been achieved in this world.

Finally, in the fourth and narrowest sense, imagination corresponds more or less to the human faculty known by this name in English. It is a specific power of the soul which builds bridges between the spiritual and the corporeal. On the one hand, it 'spiritualizes' the corporeal things perceived by the senses and stores them in memory; on the other hand, it 'corporealizes' the spiritual things perceived in the heart by giving them shape and form. The 'storehouse of imagination' (*khizānat al-khayāl*) within the soul is a treasury full of images derived both from the outward and the inward worlds. Each image is a mixture of subtlety and density, luminosity and darkness, clarity and murkiness.

Imagination versus Intellect

Whether we consider imagination as the whole universe, as the domain lying between spirits and bodies, as the human soul, or as a specific faculty of the soul, its ultimate significance can only be understood in terms of its relationship to the Divine Reality from which it comes forth. One of the most important of the many concepts through which Ibn al-Arabi describes the coming into existence of the cosmos and the soul is the above-mentioned *taḡallif* – 'self-disclosure' or 'self-unveiling' (from the same root as *jilwā*, or the unveiling of a bride on her wedding night). Both in the macrocosm and the microcosm, God discloses Himself by manifesting the properties of His names and attributes.

The Muslim scholastic theologians place tremendous emphasis upon God's transcendence or 'incomparability' (*anzāh*), while the

Sufis, Ibn al-Arabi in particular, stress equally God's immanence or 'similarity' (*ashbih*). 'Wherever you turn,' Ibn al-Arabi likes to quote from the Koran, 'there is the face of God' (2:115). Because everything in the cosmos is God's self-disclosure, we gain a valid knowledge of God through studying the cosmos and seeing God's face in all things. God is 'similar' to all things because He manifests His own qualities through them. But He is 'incomparable' with all things because in Himself He stands infinitely beyond every created thing. At one and the same time He is both transcendent and immanent.

In Ibn al-Arabi's view, intellect (*al-'aql*) – the primary tool of the theologians – easily proves God's incomparability, but cannot grasp His similarity. In contrast, imagination perceives His similarity, but knows nothing of His incomparability. Imagination is able to 'see' God in His self-disclosure and similarity, while intellect 'knows' God in His incomparability. In Ibn al-Arabi's words,

The sensory and imaginative faculties demand by their essences to see Him who brought them into existence, while intellects demand by their essences and their proofs . . . to know Him who brought them into existence.¹¹

Perfect knowledge involves both knowing God through intellect and perceiving Him through imagination. We cannot understand God as both transcendent and immanent unless we employ the two faculties at once. Either faculty employed alone provides us with a distorted picture of reality. Exclusive stress upon incomparability cuts God off from the cosmos, while exclusive stress on similarity makes a person lose sight of the unity of the Real and leads to polytheism and 'associationism' (*shirk*).

God's *tajallif* or self-disclosure embraces everything that exists: From the human point of view, it has two dimensions, the manifest and the nonmanifest. The manifest dimension is the visible world, and the nonmanifest dimension the invisible world. Human beings are micro-cosms containing within themselves all the worlds. Hence the human body is a visible self-disclosure of God, spirit is an invisible self-disclosure, and soul stands half-way between the visible and invisible realms.

In the spiritual journey, the Sufis strive to integrate the body and the soul into the spirit, such that unity dominates and man becomes a

perfect mirror reflecting the whole of reality. The movement toward integration takes place within the soul, and the soul is an intermediary reality, woven of imagination. The psychological and spiritual states of the soul, which are the self-disclosures of God to the human micro-cosm, cannot be satisfactorily described through the rational approach, since intellect's genius lies in abstraction. In other words, intellect understands only God's incomparability, so it strips qualities away from Him by declaring that 'nothing is like Him' (Koran 42:11). But this is only half the knowledge of God. Perfect knowledge demands knowledge of similarity as well as incomparability. Through knowing their own souls, the adepts gain knowledge of God's self-disclosure, of His similarity and immanence in themselves. Ibn al-Arabi interprets the famous prophetic saying 'He who knows himself knows his Lord' to mean that through knowing oneself, one knows God's self-disclosures in one's body, soul, and spirit – though one can never know God in Himself, in His very Essence, since, as intellect affirms, He is incomparable with all things. And, on the level of the soul, this knowledge of God's self-disclosure can only be grasped through imagination, which perceives concretely by an inward vision that is both spiritual (since inward and invisible) and corporeal (since sensory in form).

In the *Futūḥāt* Ibn al-Arabi provides countless examples and illustrations of the nature of the self-disclosures of God that take place in the hearts of the gnostics. Sufis long before him had already divided the types of self-disclosure into a large number of categories, often describing these in terms of the 'stations' (*maqā'āt*) of the spiritual path. Ibn al-Arabi expands upon these categories in lengthy passages, all the while tying in earlier material with his own particular mode of expressing the nature of reality. In effect, the *Futūḥāt* is an enormous compendium on the science of visions and the knowledge of God's incomparability; it maps the spiritual stations and visionary experiences of the 'friends of God' in tremendous detail. In relation to the *Futūḥāt*, the *Tarjuman al-ashwāq* appears as an illustration of a few of these stations in the poetical and imaginal language which pertains to the visionary realm. In order to provide a taste of the type of description and analysis of the world of imagination which Ibn al-Arabi provides, I will quote a few short passages from the *Futūḥāt* and the commentary on the *Tarjuman*.

Self-disclosure and Witnessing

Within his own self, a human being has access to all the worlds. Through his external senses, he perceives only the visible world, but through his internal senses, he is able to perceive the whole of the microcosm, which includes the levels of body, soul, and spirit. God may disclose Himself to man at any of these levels, but to the extent that perception of the inward worlds is expressible in human language, it must pertain to the imaginal realm of the soul. In other words, the traveller may perceive God's self-manifestation at the level of the spirit, but if he is able to speak of this, he will do so through the imaginal effect which this perception leaves within his soul.

One question that the sceptical reader will immediately ask concerning the use of imagery to refer to the divine self-disclosures is why Ibn al-Arabi does not say what he means. If he is referring to God and not to beautiful women, why should he not say so? There are a number of answers to this question. One is that these are divine self-disclosures, not God Himself. By definition we are dealing not with God as such but God inasmuch as He shows Himself. Hence the adept speaks in terms of his perception of God's manifestation, and this perception takes place through the medium of imaginal forms. This is the level of *tashbih*, of the divine similarity to the soul, and *tashbih* can only be grasped in relationship to created things, so creation determines our point of reference. God in Himself is beyond human knowledge.

Second, the poet wants to convey his vision to the reader in a language which the reader will be able to understand. He cannot use the language of theology, since that is the language of intellect and abstraction and has no way to express the divine self-disclosures, preferring rather to deny them. The perception of God's self-disclosures takes place within the imaginal realm in terms of the five senses, so it is only sensual language which can express what has been perceived. Rational explanation of the imagery would take the reader away from the reality of the self-disclosure, rather than closer to it.

Third, Ibn al-Arabi felt that he had a message to deliver to his contemporaries concerning the spiritual life, so he tried to speak in a language which would attract his listeners and bring about some sort of awakening in those souls who had sufficient spiritual aptitude. As he himself remarks:

I allude [in the *Tarjuman al-ashwâq*] to lordly gnostic sciences, divine lights, spiritual mysteries, intellectual sciences, and Shari'ite admonishments. But I have expressed all this in the tongue of erotic love and amatory affairs, since souls are enamored of such expressions.¹²

A fourth important point has to do with 'courtesy' (*adab*), which is one of the primary attributes of the perfect human being (*al-insân al-kâmil*), intimately connected with his 'wisdom' (*hikm*), which puts everything in its proper place. Ibn al-Arabi stresses the role of courtesy in speaking of God while discussing his words in the *Tarjuman*, 'her speech restores to life, as tho' she, in giving life thereby, were Jesus'.¹³ He explains that this is a reference to the Koranic verse, 'I breathed into him from My spirit' (15:29) or to the verse, 'Our only word when We desire a thing is to say to it, "Be!", and it is' (16:40). The reason 'her speech' is compared to Jesus and not to the life-giving breath of God expressed in these verses is 'courtesy': 'For we do not resort to declaring anything similar to the Divine Presence unless we find nothing in created existence to which similarity can be declared'.¹⁴

However this may be, Ibn al-Arabi tells us frequently in the commentary that he is in fact describing God's self-disclosures. In the context of visionary experience, he defines these 'self-disclosures' as 'the lights of unseen things that are unveiled to hearts'.¹⁵ He frequently describes self-disclosure in terms of the locus of manifestation (*mazhar*), that is the 'place' or form within which God manifests Himself. The term *mazhar* derives from the same root as the divine name *al-zâhir*, the 'Manifest', which contrasts with God as *al-bâ'in*, the 'Nonmanifest'. As the Essence, God is forever incomparable and nonmanifest, but as the self-revealing God, He is similar to created things and His face is visible within the forms of the sensory and the imaginal worlds.

The divine loci of self-manifestation (*al-mazâhir al-ilâhiyya*) are called 'self-disclosures'. The fundamental Light [of the Essence] is nonmanifest within them and unseen by us, while the forms in which self-disclosure occurs are the places wherein the loci of manifestation become manifest. Hence our sight falls upon the loci of manifestation.¹⁶

In the *Tarjuman*, Ibn al-Arabi often employs the term *mithāl* or 'image' and its derivatives to refer to the World of Imagination, which he calls *hadat al-mithāl* (the 'Presence of Images') and *ālam al-tamhīl* or *ālam al-tamdhīl* (the 'world of imaginalization'). For example, in explaining a verse which begins, 'she said', he writes, 'In other words, this divine reality within this imaginal form (*al-sūrat al-mithaliyya*) said . . .'.¹⁷ In commenting on another verse, he writes, 'Various sciences became manifest to me in corporealized form within the world of imaginalization'.¹⁸ He speaks of the realities of the 'high spirits' which enter into the heart, while making reference to the hadith according to which Gabriel used to appear to the Prophet in the form of Dīḥya Kalbī, the most beautiful man of the time: 'The realities become manifest within imaginal bodies in the world of imaginalization – like the form of Gabriel within the form of Dīḥya'.¹⁹

The divine loci of vision wherein God's self-disclosures are seen are often referred to as *mashad*, 'locus of witnessing' (from *shahd*, an important technical term). 'Imaginal witnessing' takes place within the world of imagination or *barzakh*. Explaining the significance of the word 'moon' (*qamar*), Ibn al-Arabi writes, 'The poet compares God to the *qamar*, which is a state between the full moon (*badr*) and the crescent moon (*hilāl*). This is a *barzakhi*, imaginal, formal locus of witnessing apprehended by the imagination'.²⁰

Vision of the divine self-disclosures provides the spiritual traveller with knowledge of God. To support this claim, Ibn al-Arabi frequently makes reference to various hadiths which speak of the visionary experiences of the Prophet and his companions. One in particular is especially explicit. The Prophet reported that in a dream he was given a glass of milk, so he drank it. He was asked how he interpreted the milk. He replied, 'Knowledge'. Ibn al-Arabi refers to this hadith in explaining a series of verses whose imagery refers to various degrees of sciences bestowed upon the gnostic through his visions of the unseen realm. He wants to explain why a certain specific imagery is employed in the following two verses:

[Boughs] trailing skirts of haughtiness, clad in embroidered
garments of beauty;
Which from modesty grudge to bestow their loveliness;
which give old heilooms and new gifts.

He writes that the imagery of the verse represents the actual form in which he perceived the knowledge which was given to him through the self-disclosure.

Since these gnostic sciences are provided to the gnostic from the Presence of Imagination – just as knowledge was provided [to the Prophet] in the form of milk – the poet describes the sciences in the form in which they disclosed themselves to him.²¹

He alludes to the same hadith in commenting on the verses, 'A woman slender, lissome, of fresh beauty, for whom the heart of the sad lover is longing. The assembly is filled with fragrance at the mention of her, and every tongue utters her name'.

The poet says: 'This knowledge [given by the vision being expressed in the poem] has as its object a [divine] attribute which, when it discloses itself in the world of imaginalization, is harmonious in character, inclining toward him who loves it, and fresh in beauty. Hearts in which the fire of uprooting (*isṭilām*) has been kindled long for it. Whenever it is mentioned in an assembly, its mention fills the assembly with fragrance, because of the pleasantness of its aroma. Hence it is loved by every tongue, for each is refreshed by speaking about it.'

Hence this [divine] attribute is one which can be grasped by verbal expression (*ibāra*). The reason for this is that it becomes manifest within the world of imaginalization and becomes delimited by description. However, the knowing listener recognizes that to which allusion is made through the description which is expressed, just as the reality of knowledge is recognized in 'milk'.²²

In an interesting passage in the *Futūḥāt*, Ibn al-Arabi makes an explicit connection between poets and the world of imagination through a visionary description of the ascent (*mi'rāj*) of the soul to the divine presence. Following the hadiths concerning the Prophet's *mi'rāj*, Ibn al-Arabi places a specific prophet in each of the celestial spheres, then discusses the special sciences pertaining to that prophet and acquired by the traveller when he reaches that sphere in his own ascent. The third sphere, that of Venus, is inhabited by Joseph, the great dream interpreter. Hence in this level one acquires knowledge of the world of imagination and how to interpret images, and it is from this sphere that the poets gain their inspiration.

When the traveller reaches the planet Venus, Venus takes him before Joseph, who casts to him the sciences which God had singled out for him, that is, those connected to the forms of imaginalization (*yamathud*) and imagination (*khayāl*). For Joseph was one of the great masters of the science of interpretation (*ta'bir*), so God made present before him the earth which He created from the left-over of Adam's clay, the Market of the Garden, and the imaginal bodies of the spirits made of light and fire and of the high meanings (*al-mu'āni al-'ilwiyya*).²⁵ He made known to him their yardsticks, measures, relationships, and lineages. He showed him years in the form of cows, the fertility of the years in the form of the cows' fatness, drought in the form of their leanness, knowledge in the form of milk, and firmness in religion in the form of a fetter.²⁴ God never ceased teaching him the corporealization of meanings within the forms of sense perception and sensory objects, and He gave him the knowledge of interpretation (*ta'wil*) in all of that.

This is the celestial sphere of complete form-giving (*al-taswir al-tāmm*) and harmonious arrangement (*al-nizām*). From this sphere are derived assistance (*imādā*) for poets. From it also arrive arrangement, proper fashioning, and geometrical forms (*al-siwar al-handasiyya*) within corporeal bodies and the giving of forms to these bodies within the soul. . . . From this sphere is known the meaning of proper fashioning, correct making, the beauty whose existence comprises wisdom, and the beauty which is desired by and agreeable to a specific human constitution.²⁵

Not every self-disclosure of God enters into verbal expression, since self-disclosure may take place within the spirit beyond the world of imagination and leave no expressible trace within the soul. Ibn al-'Arabi often attributes this sort of self-disclosure to the Divine Essence, which is utterly incomparable and inexpressible. In both the *Tarjumān* and the *Futūḥāt*, he commonly compares this self-disclosure of the Essence to 'lightning'. He explains the rationale for this comparison by saying, 'Flashes of lightning are compared to the loci of witnessing the Essence (*al-mashāhid al-dhātīyya*) in that they have no subsistence (*baqā'*).'²⁶ In the *Tarjumān*, while commenting on the verse, 'Thy lightning never breaks its promise of rain except with me', he writes,

Here the poet alludes to the fact that he attained to a high station to which none of his peers had attained. 'Lightning' is a locus of

witnessing the Essence. Its giving rain refers to the gnostic sciences to which it gives rise when they are actualized within the heart of him who witnesses it. To say that it gives rain tells us that it is a locus of witnessing the Essence within an imaginal veil (*ḥijāb mumaththad*), just as God has said concerning Gabriel: 'He imaginalized himself to her [Mary] as a man without fault' (Koran 19:17). Through this imaginalization, Gabriel gave Jesus to her. In the same way, God gave various forms of gnostic sciences through 'rain' within the locus in which lightning was witnessed to everyone but me.

The poet says, 'For thy lightning breaks its promise'. In other words, no knowledge is actualized in the soul of the witnesser through this locus of witnessing the Essence, since it is a self-disclosure without material form (*ṣūra mādīyya*). Hence imagination has nothing to retain and intellect has nothing to understand, since this self-disclosure does not enter under 'how', 'how many', state, description, or attribute.²⁷

Ibn al-'Arabi amplifies his explanation of the difference between 'lightning' or the locus of witnessing the Essence and imaginal unveiling in his commentary on the line, 'And when they promise you aught, you see that its lightning gives a false promise of rain'.²⁸ The 'they' under discussion are the 'winds', which refer to different forms of self-disclosure which arise from the Divine Breath.²⁹

The poet says, 'when they make promises, it is like the lightning which breaks its promise', that is, the lightning which has neither thunder nor rain, so it produces no result, like the 'barren wind' (Koran 51:41). Here 'their promise' comes through a locus of witnessing the Essence, which is why it is compared to lightning. The locus of witnessing the Essence yields no result in the heart of the servant, since it is not retained; nothing is actualized through it except the heart's witnessing, while the heart bears wildly. For this locus of witnessing is far exalted above being constrained by any created thing. It contrasts with self-disclosure within a form in the world of imaginalization, since in the latter case the viewer retains the form of that which discloses itself to him and he is able to express it – as shown by many examples in the hadith literature of things which have no sensory form.³⁰

In the *Futūḥāt* Ibn al-'Arabi frequently refers to the relevant hadiths, derived mainly from the standard collections, such as the already

mentioned milk in the form of knowledge. Other examples are death in the form of a piebald ram, Islam in the form of a dome or a pillar, the Koran in the form of butter or honey, religion in the form of a cord, and God in the form of a light or a human being.

Self-disclosure within the locus of witnessing is determined and defined by two sides, as befits an imaginal reality. On the one hand, God discloses Himself. On the other hand, the servant perceives Him. But as Rûmî has reminded us in a similar context, 'If you pour the ocean into a cup, how much will it hold? One day's store.'³¹ The vision of God always becomes delimited by the preparedness (*isti'âdâ*) of the viewer. Moreover, God reveals Himself under an infinite variety of aspects, in keeping with the axiom, 'Self-disclosure never repeats itself' (*â takrâr fî'l-tajallî*). Nevertheless, there are modalities or general categories of self-disclosure, as we have just seen in the distinction between the locus of witnessing the Essence and witnessing within the imaginal, *barzakhî* world.

In the *Futûḥat* Ibn al-Arabi classifies self-disclosures and loci of witnessing in great detail and from many different points of view. In order to provide a taste of this sort of discussion, I quote a typical visionary passage in which he explains the difference between two different types of light which are perceived through self-disclosure, light which is 'radiant' (*shāshadnî*) and light 'which has no rays' (*ma lahu shu'â*). In his usual fashion, Ibn al-Arabi finds sources for these terms in the prophetic literature. At the end of the passage, he shows how these two visions are connected to incomparability and similarity. Since God is incomparable, the eyes are blinded, but the intellect is able to understand this; since He is similar, the eyes are able to see Him, but the intellect cannot fathom how this is possible. Perfect knowledge involves both perceptions at once.

Lights are of two kinds: a light which has no rays, and a radiant light. If self-disclosure takes place within radiant light, it takes away the sight. The Messenger of God alluded to this light when it was said to him, 'Hast thou seen thy Lord?' He replied, 'He is a light. How should I see Him?' In other words, He is radiant light, since the rays take away sight and prevent the viewer from perceiving Him from whom the rays derive. This is the same light to which the Prophet alluded when he said, 'God has seventy thousand veils of light and darkness; were He to remove them,

the splendors of His face would incinerate everything perceived by the sight of His creatures.' Here the 'splendors' are the lights of His Reality (*ḥaqīqah*), for the 'face' of a thing is its reality.

As for the light which has no rays, that is the light within which self-disclosure takes place without rays so that its brightness does not go outside of itself; the viewer perceives it with utmost clarity and lucidity without any doubt, while the presence in which he dwells remains in utmost clarity and limpidness, such that nothing of it becomes absent from him. Concerning this self-disclosure the Prophet said, 'You shall see your Lord just as you see the moon on the night when it is full.' Hence he declared the seeing of God similar to seeing the moon; one of the things he meant by this is that the moon itself is perceived because the rays of the moon are too weak to prevent it from being perceived. . . .

Then the Prophet said in the continuation of the same *ḥadīth*, 'or just as you see the sun at noon when there is no cloud before it.' At this time the sun's light is strongest, so all things become manifest through it and sight perceives everything it falls upon when this noonday sun is unveiled to it. But when sight desires to verify its vision of the sun in this state, it cannot do so. The comparison shows that this self-disclosure does not prevent people from seeing one another, that is, they will not be annihilated. That is why the Prophet made the comparison with both the vision of the full moon and the vision of the sun, and he did not restrict himself to one of the two. He emphasized that people will subsist in this locus of witnessing by his words in the rest of the *ḥadīth*, 'You will not be harmed and you will not be crowded.'

When I entered into this waystation, the self-disclosure in the light without rays fell upon me, so I saw it knowingly. I saw myself through it and I saw all things through myself and through the lights which things carry in their essences and which are given to them by their realities; not through any extraneous light. I saw a tremendous place of witnessing, in sensory form – not intelligible form – , a form of God, not a meaning (*ma'nâ*). In this self-disclosure there became manifest to me the way in which the small expands in order for the large to enter into it, while it remains small and the large remains large, like the camel which passes through the eye of the needle.³² That is contemplated in sensory, not imaginal, form.³³ The small embraces the large: you do not know how, but you do not deny what you see. So glory be

to Him who is exalted high beyond a perception that satisfies intellects and who preferred the eyes over intellects! 'There is no god but He, the Mighty, the Wise' (Koran 3:6).

Through this self-disclosure – which makes the power of the eyes manifest and prefers them over intellects – God made manifest the incapacity of intellects. And through His self-disclosure in radiant light He made manifest the incapacity of the eyes and the power of the intellects, preferring them over the eyes. Thus everything is qualified by incapacity, and God alone possesses the perfection of the Essence.³⁴

In short, when Ibn al-Arabi says in the first line of the *Tarjuman*, 'Would that I were aware whether they knew what heard they possessed!', this is not some poetical conceit, but a description of an inward, imaginal experience. When he tells us that 'they' refer to the 'higher loci of vision', he is making this statement within the context of a metaphysical, cosmological, and psychological world view which has been developed by himself and earlier Muslim authorities to high degrees of sophistication. There is nothing 'far-fetched' or 'ridiculous' about his explanations, so long as one takes the trouble to study the visionary experience and doctrines upon which it is based.

Notes

- 1 The *Tarjuman al-Ashwāq: A Collection of Mystical Odes by Muhyi'd-din Ibn al-Arabi*, 2nd edition, London: Theosophical Publishing House, 1978.
- 2 Corbin's *Creative Imagination in the Sūfism of Ibn Arabī* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969) brings out the importance of imagination in Ibn al-Arabi's writings but provides relatively little discussion of how imagination relates contextually to Ibn al-Arabi's teachings.
- 3 *Tarjuman*, pp. 6–7.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- 5 It is true that we have *nazar taqī*, which can be translated as 'rational speculation' or simply 'reason' and was a primary concern of the theologians, and Nicholson may have thought that it was this sort of *nazar* that Ibn al-Arabi had in mind. But Ibn al-Arabi rarely suggests that the Muslim theologians achieve anything of real value through their rational approach to the analysis of scripture.
- 6 Fuller explanations can be found in W. C. Chittick, *The Sūfī Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1989.

⁷ *Al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*, Beirut: Dār Sādir, n.d., vol. I, p. 304.16; also, ed. Othman Yahya, Cairo: al-Hay'at al-Misriyya al-Āmma li'l-Kitāb, 1972, vol. 4, p. 407.

⁸ *Fusus al-Hikam*, ed. A. Afifi, Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Arabi 1946, p. 159; cf. R. W. J. Austin, *Ibn al-Arabi: The Bezels of Wisdom*, New York: Paulist Press, 1980, p. 197.

⁹ *Futūḥāt* II 379.3.

¹⁰ On the grave as an imaginal realm, see W. C. Chittick, 'Death and the World of Imagination: Ibn al-Arabi's Eschatology,' *Muslim World LXXVIII*, 1988, pp. 51–82; also Chittick, 'Eschatology,' in S. H. Nasr, *Islamic Spirituality: Foundations*, New York: Crossroad, 1987, pp. 378–409.

¹¹ *Futūḥāt* II 307.21.

¹² *Dhakhā'ir al-dīqāq*, ed. M. Abd al-Rahmān al-Kurdi, Cairo, 1968, p. 5.

¹³ *Tarjuman* 49 (II 4).

¹⁴ *Dhakhā'ir* 13.

¹⁵ *Futūḥāt* II 485.20.

¹⁶ *Futūḥāt* II 575.17.

¹⁷ *Tarjuman* 57 (IV 6); *Dhakhā'ir* 27.

¹⁸ *Tarjuman* 124 (XXXIX 1); *Dhakhā'ir* 204.

¹⁹ *Tarjuman* 112 (XXX 31); *Dhakhā'ir* 188.

²⁰ *Tarjuman* 98 (XXV 5); *Dhakhā'ir* 143–44.

²¹ *Tarjuman* 107 (XXIX 3–4); *Dhakhā'ir* 169.

²² *Tarjuman* 117 (XXXI 5–6); *Dhakhā'ir* 192.

²³ The world created from the remainder of Adam's clay is a visionary, imaginal world experienced by the gnostics (cf. Chapter 8 of the *Futūḥāt*). The 'Market of the Garden' mentioned in the hadith literature, is a market in paradise wherein are displayed beautiful forms; when one of the felicitous desires a form on display, he enters into it. Ibn al-Arabi frequently discusses this market as an explicit reference to the ruling power of imagination in the next world (e.g., *Futūḥāt* II 183.22, 312.26, 628.3; III 518.22). Spirits of light are angels, while spirits of fire are jinn; the 'bodies' of both appear in the imaginal world.

²⁴ The Koran refers to Joseph's dream interpretation in 12:46–49. By deriving the last two examples of Joseph's knowledge from prophetic hadith, Ibn al-Arabi alludes to the permanence of the symbolic forms in the imaginal world.

²⁵ *Futūḥāt* II 275.12.

²⁶ *Futūḥāt* II 98.21.

²⁷ *Tarjuman* 96 (XXIV 4); *Dhakhā'ir* 138.

²⁸ *Tarjuman* 111 (XXX 17).

²⁹ *Dhakhā'ir* 180.

³⁰ *Dhakhā'ir* 182–83.

³¹ *Madnawī* I 20.

³² Allusion to Koran 7:40: 'Nor shall they enter the Garden until the camel passes through the eye of the needle.'

³³ Since Ibn al-Arabi describes imagination itself as a 'sensory' (*ḥissī*) realm, it is not clear why he contrasts the sensory and the imaginal (*khayālī*) in this passage, unless perhaps he is contrasting individual 'imagination' (technically called 'contiguous imagination', *khayāl mutassil*), which may be dominated by the distorting vision of the ego, and the World of Imagination ('discontiguous imagination', *khayāl munfasil*), in which vision is determined far more by the objective contents of imagination than the ego's subjectivity.

³⁴ *Futūḥāt* II 632–33.