Research Article

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Was That Layla's Fire?: Metonymy, Metaphor, and Mannerism in the Poetry of Ibn al-Fāriḍ

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Abstract: Regarded as one of the greatest poets of the Arabic language, and the greatest and most influential Arabic Sufi poet, ʻUmar ibn ʻAlī ibn al-Fāriḍ, set the standard for Arabic Sufi poetry after him. Known as the "Sultan of the Lovers" (*Sulṭān al-ʻĀshiqīn*), ibn al-Fāriḍ's works inspired numerous commentaries, especially amongst the school of Ibn al-ʿArabī, many of which are considered masterpieces of Islamic metaphysics. Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poetry continues to be sung, taught, and commented upon down to the present day and is considered one of the greatest expositions of spiritual realization, Sufi metaphysics, and psychology. This article will consider the role of the figure of Layla in some of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poetry, exploring the relationship between the exquisite form of his poetic language and the meanings to which they allude in an attempt to understand an aspect of how the "licit magic" of his poetry works to express and inspire realization. That is, of all the various genres and modes of expression, why did so many Sufi figures find the genre of the romantic or even erotic Arabic ghazal, especially the exquisite verses of Ibn al-Fāriḍ, to be so felicitous for expressing the deepest truths they had realized?

Keywords: Arabic poetry, Sufi poetry, Arabic poetics, Sufism, ibn al-Fāriḍ, mannerism, metonymy, Mysticism, Mystical poetics, Islamic philosophy

1 Introduction

Regarded as one of the greatest poets of the Arabic language, and the greatest and most influential Arabic Sufi poet, ʿUmar ibn ʻAlī ibn al-Fāriḍ, set the standard for Arabic Sufi poetry after him. His poetry was famous and commented upon even in his own lifetime, and several commentators even claimed that while non-poetic language was perfected in the inimitable Qur'an, six centuries later, Arabic poetry was perfected in the inimitable verse of Ibn al-Fāriḍ.[1] Known as the "Sultan of the Lovers" (*Sulṭān al-ʻĀshiqīn*), Ibn al-Fāriḍ's works inspired numerous commentaries, especially amongst the school of Ibn al-ʿArabī, many of which are considered masterpieces of Islamic metaphysics. Saḍr al-dīn al-Qūnāwī (d. 673/1274), Ibn al-ʿArabī's stepson and successor taught Ibn al-Fāriḍ's magnum opus, the 760-verse qaṣīda, *Naẓm al-Sulūk* ("The Poem of the Sufi Way") to his circle of students, two of whom, Saʿīd al-dīn al-Farghānī (d. 699/1300) and ʻAfīf al-dīn al-Tilimsānī (d. 690/1291) published commentaries upon the work. The *Naẓm al-Sulūk* and Ibn al-Fārid's *khamriyya*, or

1 See Homerin, *From Arab Poet to Muslim Saint*, 27–8; and Boullata, "Verbal Arabesque," 153. In his Persian commentary on Ibn al-Fāriḍ's *Naẓm al-Sulūk*, Al-Farghānī wrote, "[S]uch grace, delicacy, sweetness and deliciousness in verse cannot be not given to anyone of the people of craft, nor indeed is it destined for anyone in mankind," and as Denis McAuley notes "Al-Kāshānī and al-Qayṣarī both push the comparison further, using terms (*al- ityān bi-mithlihā* and *lam ya'ti bi-mithlihā*) that deliberately echo the Qur'an's challenge to come up with a single *sūra* resembling it" (McAuley, *Ibn 'Arabī's Mystical Poetics*, 219).

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wine-ode, also inspired commentaries of later major intellectuals, such as ʻabd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī (d. 730/1330), Dāwūd al-Qayṣarī (d. 751/1350), ʻAbd al-Raḥman Jāmī (d. 898/1492) ʻabd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī (d. 1143/1730), and Aḥmad ibn ʻAjība (d. 1224/1809) amongst others. al-Farghānī's (d. 699/1300) commentaries were particularly celebrated, becoming "bestsellers"[2] and Jāmī praised al-Farghānī's Arabic commentary by writing that, "no one has ever been able to explains the problems of the Science of Reality in such a systematic and orderly manner."[3] Verses of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poetry were and are quoted in countless works of philosophical Sufism, especially those influenced by Ibn al-ʿArabī and his school, from Fakhruddin ʻIraqī's thirteenth-century Persian masterpiece, the *Lamaʻāt* to the influential accounts of Shaykh Aḥmad al-Tijānī's teachings in the nineteenth-century *Jawāhir al-Maʻānī*. The historian al-Maqqarī cites the following popular, but most likely apocryphal, story illustrating the close relationship assumed between Ibn al-ʿArabī's writings and Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poetry in the later tradition, "[T]he shaykh Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-ʻArabī sent to the master ʻUmar [Ibn al-Fāriḍ], asking his permission to comment on the *al-Tāʾīyah*. But (Ibn al-Fāriḍ) said, ʻYour book entitled *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkīyah* is a commentary on it.'"[4]

Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poetry continues to be sung, taught, and commented upon down to the present day and is considered one of the greatest expositions of spiritual realization, Sufi metaphysics, and psychology. Rare are the post-thirteenth-century works of Sufism that do not quote or allude to his poetry, and Ibn al-Fāriḍ's verses found their way into works of *tafsīr* (Qur'anic commentary), *kalām* (rational theology), *falsafa* (Islamic philosophy), inspiring and featuring in important debates across these disciplines.[5] This article will consider the role of the figure of Layla in some of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poetry, exploring the relationship between the exquisite form of his poetic language and the meanings to which they allude in an attempt to understand an aspect of how the "licit magic" of his poetry works to express and inspire realization (*taḥqīq*) and recognition (*maʻrifa*). That is, of all the various genres and modes of expression, why did so many figures find the genre of the romantic or even erotic Arabic ghazal, especially the exquisite verses of Ibn al-Fāriḍ, to be so felicitous for expressing the deepest truths about reality?[6]

Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poetry is marked by a seamless synthesis of the tropes and conventions of the pre-Islamic qaṣīda, the ʿUdhrī and Ḥijāzī ghazal poetry of the likes of Majnun Layla, Jamīl Buthayna, and ʿUmar ibn Abī Rabīʿa, the badīʿ ʿAbbasid court poetry of the likes of Abū Tammām and al-Mutannabī, early Arabic Sufi poetry like that of al-Ḥallāj and Suhrawardī al-Maqtūl, and of course references and allusions to Qur'an, ḥadith, and Sufi doctrines and terminology. While Ibn al-Fāriḍ's 760-verse magnus opus, *Naẓm al-Sulūk* ("The Poem of the Sufi Way"), mentions Layla and is probably the best embodiment of the dynamics discussed in this article, we will instead briefly discuss verses from two shorter poems that begin by mentioning Layla before translating and discussing a third poem. Then, we will conclude by describing Ibn al-Fāriḍ's and broader Sufi poetics, comparing and contrasting it with the related "mannerist" poetics of the time period. Finally, building on Arjun Nair's pioneering study,[7] we will briefly discuss how this traditional theory of Sufi poetics differs from those employed by many contemporary scholars of this poetry and its commentarial traditions.

2 Layla in Arabic Poetry

While the name Layla was popular amongst other names such as Salmā, Sulaymā, ʻAzza, ʻAlwa, etc. as a literary figure, the embodiment of beauty in pre-Islamic and early-Islamic poetry, her name became something of archetype, embracing all of these other literary beloveds by virtue of the ascendance of the legend and poetry of her lover, Qays ibn al-Mulawwaḥ, better known as Majnun Layla ("Layla's madman"). While we have

2 Clark, "Early Bestsellers in the Akbarian Tradition;" and Chittick, "Spectrums of Islamic Thought."
3 Qtd. in Chittick, "Spectrums of Islamic Thought," 207.
4 Qtd. in Homerin, *Passion Before Me,* 239.
5 For example, Gallien, "Exploring Literature in Islam Beyond (Secularized) Christian Normativity in Western Academia."
6 Ogunnaike, *Curls in the Night of Meaning: The Layla poetry of the Shādhiliyya.*
7 Nair, "Poetry and Sufi Commentary."

little historical evidence for the "real" Qays and Layla, and many scholars even doubt their existence, their legend is set in the first Islamic century and based on frame stories built around popular verses attributed to Qays. According to these legends, Qays and Layla belonged to the nomadic Bānū ʿĀmir tribe of Najd, meeting and falling in love as children while herding sheep together. The tenth-century *Kitāb al-Aghānī* records many anecdotes about their love, such as this one, in which Majnun's father sends him to Layla's family's tent to bring back some fire:

> I came to them another night asking for fire, and I was wrapped in a garment. She brought a rag on fire and gave it to me. Then we stood there talking. When the rag was burned up, I tore out a piece of my garment and set it on fire. As soon as that piece had been burned up, I tore out another piece and set it on fire, until I did not have any clothing left on me, except what covered my genitals. I did not know what I was doing.[8]

As they grow into handsome and eloquent youths, the already passionate Qays is driven mad due to Layla's family's refusal of his father's marriage proposal and runs off into the wilderness, tearing his clothes to shreds, living in caves with animals, composing poetry and wailing Layla's name. Thus he became known as "Majnun Layla," Layla's madman. When people came to speak to him, he would not or could not understand anything they said unless Layla was mentioned, at which point he would become as lucid and eloquent as ever.[9] Majnun's father takes him on a pilgrimage to Mecca to pray for his affliction of love-sickness and madness to be cured, but in front of the Ka'ba, Majnun only prays for his love for Layla to increase. When they reached the valley of Minā, Majnun heard someone calling out to another woman named Layla, and the sound of his beloved's name made him grow restless, inspiring the following verses:

وَداعٍ دَعا إِذ نَحنُ بِالخَيفِ مِن مِنىً فَهَيَّجَ أَحزانَ الفُؤادِ وَما يَدري
دَعا بِاِسمِ لَيلى غَيرَها فَكَأَنَّما أَطارَ بِلَيلى طائِرًا كانَ فِي صَدري
إِذا ذُكِرَت يَرتاحُ قَلبي لِذِكرِها كَما اِنتَفَضَ العَصفورُ بُلِّلَ مِن قَطرِ[10]

When we were at Khayf in Minā, someone called out
Unknowingly stirring up the sorrows of my heart
He was calling another by the name of Layla
But it is as if by mentioning Layla, he set flight to a bird in my chest
...
When she is mentioned, my heart thrills in her memory,
Like a little bird fluttering when drenched by rain

Majnun then runs off to the wilderness, where his relatives later find his dead body in a rocky valley. Early Sufis like al-Shiblī (d. 334/945) found in the legends and poetry of Majnun Layla a fitting example or symbol of their own physio-psycho-spiritual states, citing, reinterpreting, and adding to the legend in their own way. For example, Aḥmad al-Ghazali's *Sawanih* cites a legend in which Layla's separation from Majnun was caused not by family politics, but by his inability to remain conscious in her presence.[11] Al-Shiblī recalls a similar anecdote popular in many Arabic and Persian sources (especially Sufi writings), "Whenever Majnun of the Banu ʿĀmir was asked about Layla, he would say, 'I am Layla.' Thus, by means of Layla, he would absent himself from Layla, until he remains present to his vision of Layla, and absent to every sense, and thereby sees everything present through Layla."[12]

As Abdelfattah Kilito explains, the choice of name for an emblematic beloved in Arabic poetry is never random, but rather evokes the tradition of literature mentioning that name, as well as the linguistic

8 Qtd. in Khairallah, *Love, Madness, and Poetry*, 86.

9 Ibn Qutayba writes, "[Layla] would shun him and converse with others, to the point where he was hurt. When she realized that, she turned to him and said: In front of other people, we both display hatred, while each of us is entrenched in the other's heart. Things worsened for him so much that his reason left him, and he wandered aimlessly with the wild beasts. He would not put on any garment without tearing it to pieces, nor he would understand anything unless Layla was mentioned to him. Once she was mentioned, he would recover his reason and talk about her without dropping a letter." qtd. in Alharthi, *The Body in Arabic Love Poetry*, 206.

10 Al-Yūsī, *The Discourses*, 29.

11 Al-Ghazālī, *Sawanih*, 45.

12 qtd. in Khairallah, *Love, Madness, and Poetry*, 102.

resonances of that particular name.[13] In the case of Laylā, her name is a homophone with (and comes from the same root as) *layla*, meaning night, and its many symbolic associations (blackness, darkness, rest, coolness, mystery, non-manifestation, the unseen, secrecy, covering) are also attached to this name of the beloved. But according to the classical Arabic dictionaries, *laylā* technically means a kind of intoxication (*nashwa*) that is the beginning of drunkenness (*sukr*)[14] because it is a kind of veiling or obscuring of the intellect. Thus *Umm Laylā*, the mother of Laylā, is a name for wine, which causes this intoxication, and *Abū Laylā* is used to refer to the mentally infirm, due to their intellects being veiled or absent. The name *Laylā* also refers to the condition of being veiled, inaccessible, protected, or barely seen, "like a subtle phantom (*ka'l-ṭayf al-laṭīf*)." To invoke the name of Layla in a poem is to deploy all of these resonances of love intoxication, night, madness, darkness, and especially inaccessibility and ineffability, as in these famous verses attributed to the pre-Islamic poet 'Alqama:

طَحا بِكَ قَلبٌ في الحِسانِ طَروبُ بُعَيدَ الشَبابِ عَصرَ حانَ مَشيبُ
تُكَلِّفُني لَيلى وَقَد شَطَّ وَلْيُها وَعادَت عَوادٍ بَينَنا وَخُطوبُ
مُنَعَّمَةٌ لا يُستَطاعُ كَلامُها عَلى بابِها مِن أَن تُزارَ رَقيبُ

A heart turbulent with passion has borne you off,
Long after youth has passed and the time of old age come.
Thoughts of Laylá trouble me, though her dwelling is now far,
Though there have come between us hostile fates and grave events.
She lives in guarded luxury, all talk with her forbidden,
At her door a guard wards off all visitors.[15]

3 Layla in Ibn al-Fāriḍ's Poetry

As Abdelfattah Kilito notes, "to mention Layla is to cite by implication all the poems where the name appears, and to signal one's continuity with a tradition… Instead of designating any particular woman, [her name] become[s] an emblem that designate[s] the whole genre of erotic poetry."[16] This is precisely what Ibn al-Fāriḍ does in his poetry, evoking all of these resonances and the long tradition of Arabic love poetry about Layla. Layla is thus an example of *kināya*, or metonymy, with her name representing an entire genre of literature. The first poem we will consider begins by mentioning the specific, proper name of Majnun's beloved, implicitly identifying the poet (and thus, the reciter/reader of the poem) with her lover:

أوَميضُ بَرْقٍ بالأُبَيْرِقِ لَاحا أم فِي رُبَى نجد أرى مِصباحا
أم تلكَ ليلى العامريّةُ أَسْفَرَتْ ليْلًا فصيّرَتِ المساءَ صباحا[17]

Did lightning flash in the many-colored cloud gleaming
or do I see a lantern in the hills of Najd?
Or did Laylā of the Banū 'Āmir unveil her face at night
transforming evening into morning?

On a literary level, this evocative opening recalls the lines of a famous qaṣīda by the pre-Islamic poet, Imru'l-Qays:

أَصَاحِ تَرَى بَرْقًا أُرِيكَ وَمِيضَهُ كَلَمْعِ الْيَدَيْنِ فِي حَبِيٍّ مُكَلَّلِ
يضِيءُ سَنَاهُ أَوْ مَصَابِيحُ رَاهِبٍ أَمَالَ السَّلِيطَ بِالذُّبَالِ الْمُفَتَّلِ

13 Kilito, *The Author and His Doubles,* 55.
14 As in this line from Rilke's first Duino Elegy, "For beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror, which we can scarcely endure."
15 Stekevych, *The Mantle Odes*, 7–8. Note the paradox of the poem speaking about how Layla cannot be spoken of.
16 Kilito, *The Author and His Doubles*, 55.
17 Al-Nābulusī, *Sharḥ Dīwan Ibn al-Fāriḍ*, 372–3.

Friend, do you see yonder lightning? Look, there goes its gleam
flashing like two white hands in the heaped-up, crowned stormcloud
Its glimmer illumining the sky, or like the flicker of a monk's lamp
When, tilting it, he soaks with oil the tightly twisted wick.[18]

While "the many-coloured cloud" (*al-ubayriq*) of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's opening line could also be the diminutive form of *al-Abraq*, which can serve as a proper place name of a *ḥimā*, a protected grazing ground/watering place, north of Medina; or it can also name a mottled mountain or hard patch of ground of mixed black and white color. *A-Abraq* also appears in a poem attributed to Majnun:

خَليليَّ مُرّا بي عَلى الأَبرَقِ الفَردِ وَعَهدي بِلَيلى حَبَّذا ذاكَ مِن عَهدِ[19]

O my two companions, take me by the solitary Abraq,
And my time with Layla – how wonderful that time was.

And in a verse of Ibn al-'Arabī's Tarjumān al-Ashwāq:

لستُ أَنسى إذْ حَدا الحادي بهم يطلبُ البينَ ويَبْغِي الأبْرَقا

I'll never forget how they left for Abraq
to the chants of guides chanting them on their way[20]

In his commentary, drawing on the fact that *al-Abraq* comes from the same root as lightning (*barq*), Ibn al-ʿArabi explains that in his poem, *al-Abraq* represents the place where God manifests His essence.[21]

These same tropes of lightning and Layla unveiling are found at the beginning of another poem of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's:

أبَرْقٌ، بدا من جانِبِ الغَورِ، لامعُ أم ارتَفَعتْ عن وجه ليلى البراقِعُ
نعم اسفرتْ ليلى فصار بوجِهها نهارًا به نورُ المحاسنِ ساطِعُ[22]

Was it a flash of lightning that appeared from the side of the valley, gleaming
Or did the veils lift from Layla's face?
Yes, she unveiled herself at night and made it day
With the light of her shining beauty

'Abd al-Ghanī al-Nāblusī (d. 1143/1731), author of the most influential Sufi commentary on Ibn al-Fāriḍ's *Dīwān*,[23] explains that the lightning in the verses from both of these poems can allude to the in-breathing of the spirit (*al-rūḥ*) into the human body or the initial encounter of the spiritual wayfarer with the blinding light of the spirit. Layla's unveiling and turning the night to day can either allude to God manifesting all of the worlds into existence through his light, replacing the night of non-existence with the day of creation, or, if this creation is understood as shadows or veils of God, then Layla unveiling refers to everything, including the illusory ordinary self of the poet-lover, passing away, *and there remains the face of your Lord, possessed of Majesty and Bounty* (55:26). Either way, *God is the light of the Heavens and the Earth* (24:35) *wheresoever you turn, there is the face of God* (2:115), and Layla's unveiling makes the light of her face omnipresent.[24]

18 Arberry, *The Seven Odes*, 66.
19 Ibn al-Mulawwaḥ, *Dīwān Majnūn*, 89.
20 Sells, *The Translator of Desires*, 58–9.
21 Nicholson, *Tarjuman*, 77.
22 Al-Nābulusī, *Sharḥ Dīwan Ibn al-Fāriḍ*, 395.
23 Al-Nāblusī's commentary incorporates much of the earlier commentary of Badr al-Dīn al-Būrīnī (d. 1024/1615).
24 Al-Nābulusī, *Sharḥ Dīwan Ibn al-Fāriḍ*, 55–6, 71–2, 194, 345–6. In a similar vein, Ibn al-Fārid describes the transformation of night to day in his *Naẓm al-Sulūk* with references to the Qur'anic verses about the pre-temporal covenant of "'Am I not your Lord?', they replied, 'Yes, indeed, we bear witness'" (7:172) and the post-temporal "day when they come forth with naught concerning them

Just as lightning both grants and snatches away sight (Qur'an 2:20), this double meaning of veiling as a manifestation or its removal is alluded to in the first and last words of the opening verse of this poem, which contain a lovely partial *jinās* or pun combined with a *ṭibāq* (antithesis) in that the roots of the words for lightning (*barq*) and veils (*barāqiʿ*) differ only by a single letter at the end of the latter word, and that letter is *ʿayn*, which means essence. So the lightning of the manifestation of the essence (*barq al-ʿayn*^{i}) veils the essence (*tabarqaʿa al-ʿayn*^{u}), even as the revelation of these breathtaking verses both manifests and conceals, all at once, the supreme silence of the Divine Essence. As al-Ghazālī writes in his *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, "It is as if the intensify of light's disclosure prevents it from being perceived, and the intensity of manifestation keeps it hidden. Manifestation may be the cause of hiddenness. When a thing passes its own limit, it reverts to its opposite."[25]

Moreover, the term used by al-Nāblusī to explain the symbolism in these verses is *kināya*, which can be translated as "metonymy" or "allusion," or to name something in a kind of roundabout (*tawriya*) but still literally correct way, as in using a *kunya* (same root) such as *Umm Mālik* ("The Mother of Mālik"), which Majnun uses to refer to Layla. As Lara Harb explains, "The main difference between *kināya* and *majāz* is that the secondary meaning does not negate the accuracy of the literal meaning in the case of *kināya*. Whereas in *majāz*, the literal meaning cannot be taken as literally accurate."[26] So for example, saying that someone "has a cowardly dog that doesn't bark" is a form of *kināya* or roundabout way of saying that they are very hospitable (dogs usually bark at strangers, but if a person is constantly hosting strangers, her dog will get accustomed to them and stop barking), while saying that "Zayd is a lion" to mean that Zayd is brave is a form of *majāz* since it is not literally true.

Thus, it is significant that al-Nāblusi uses the term *kināya* and the verb *kanā* to refer to the symbols of Layla, lightning, veil, valley, cloud, and hills. In Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poem, all of these symbols hang together and are literally true on the apparent level, as well as on the intended, more subtle levels of meaning. Part of what makes the poem so powerful is that, in line with Sufi cosmology, Layla's beauty is directly connected to and a literal consequence of Divine Beauty much as "having many ashes under your cauldron" (another classic example of *kināya*) is directly connected to and a literal consequence of hosting and feeding many guests. Layla's beauty is a manifestation of the quality of Divine Beauty, just as the plentiful ashes are a manifestation of the otherwise invisible quality of the hospitality of the host.

As Jaroslav Stetkevych comments on the question animating these opening verses of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's:

> [This] type of questioning... is based on a parallelism of alternatives. It is not a purely rhetorical device, however. The resulting "either-or" has its tension between a physical phenomenon and a thought, a name, a desire. The poet does not see or smell with the senses alone. His senses are invariably associative with what totally occupies his heart and mind. The transfer of meaning is a process which for him is contained in the external phenomenon itself. One could call this the conviction of metaphor. When there is a light over the horizon, the poet's first thought is: the beloved! When there comes a breath of perfume, the poet's sense of smell knows only one response: the beloved! The alternative questions, as far as the poet's feelings are concerned, should even be reversed. The poet actually asks himself: Are these the apparitions of my beloved or are they but deceptive physical phenomena?[27]

Except, for Ibn al-Fāriḍ, all physical phenomena, in fact, all existent things, are apparitions of the beloved, and the structure of the beautiful questions that open these qaṣīdas serve as a *barzakh* to unite and separate these two perspectives: on the one hand, everything reminds the poet of the beloved, and even is the beloved, but on the other, nothing is like his peerless beloved. As Ibn al-ʿArabī writes, explaining the Qur'anic verse, *There is*

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hidden from God. To whom belongs the sovereignty this Day? It is God's, the One, the Paramount." (40:16):

وَلَيْسَ أَلَستُ الأمسِ غَيْرًا لِمَنْ غدا وجِنحِي غدا صُبحِي ويومِيَ لَيْلَتِي
وسِرُّ بَلى لله مِرْآةُ كَشْفِهَا وإثْبَاتُ مَعنى الجَمعِ نَفْيُ المَعيّة

The "Am I not?" of yesterday is none other than the "To whom?" of tomorrow;
my night's darkness became my morning, my day, my night.
The secret of "Yes indeed," "to God" is the mirror of its unveiling;
the affirmation of union's meaning is the negation of withness.

25 Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, 22.

26 Harb, *Arabic Poetics*, 189.

27 Stetkevych, *The Zephyrs of Najd*, 84–5.

nothing like unto Him, and He is the Seeing, the Hearing (42:11), it is necessary to see with the "two eyes" of reason and imagination in order to comprehend both halves of this verse, both God's dissimilarity (*tanzīh*) and similarity (*tashbīh*).[28] Did lightning flash or did Layla lift her veil? The answer is that every flash of lightning is Layla lifting her veil as well as a veil covering Layla, Layla is both revealed and concealed in the lightning, and the structure of these opening verses allows the poet to say both at once without collapsing one into the other.

In any event, the main scene of the openings (*maṭla'*) of these poems, of seeing Layla's light in the darkness recalls a famous qaṣīda by the *mukhaḍramī* poet al-Shammākh ibn Ḍirār (d. 22/643?), sometimes attributed to Majnun:

وَكُنتُ إِذا ما جِئتُ لَيلى تَبَرقَعَت لَقَد رابَني مِنها الغَداةَ سُفورُها
وَأَشرِفُ بِالقورِ اليَفاعِ لَعَلَّني أَرى نارَ لَيلى أَو يَراني بَصيرُها[29]

Whenever I came to Layla, she would veil herself
But her unveiling in the morning she made me doubt that
I would climb the heights of the cliffs hoping
To see Layla's fire or be seen by her lookout

As well as the opening of one of the most famous qaṣīdas attributed to Majnun that tells of their first fateful encounter:

تَذَكَّرتُ لَيلى وَالسِنينَ الخَواليا وَأَيّامَ لا نَخشى عَلى اللَهوِ ناهِيا
وَيَومٍ كَظِلِّ الرُمحِ قَصَّرتُ ظِلَّهُ بِلَيلى فَلَهّاني وَما كُنتُ لاهِيا
بِثَمدينَ لاحَت نارُ لَيلى وَصُحبَتي بِذاتِ الغَضى تُزجي المَطِيَّ النَواجِيا
فَقالَ بَصيرُ القَومِ أَلمَحتُ كَوكَبًا بَدا في سَوادِ اللَيلِ فَرِدًا يَمانِيا
فَقُلتُ لَهُ بَل نارُ لَيلى تَوَقَّدَت بِعَليا تَسامى ضَوءُها فَبَدا لِيا
فَلَيتَ رِكابَ القَومِ لَم تَقطَعِ الغَضى وَلَيتَ الغَضى ماشى الرِكابَ لَيالِيا[30]

I recall Layla and the years gone by
And the days when we feared no one forbidding our delights
Many a day I spent, like a spear whose shadow I shortened, distracted by Layla
While I am not one easily distracted
Layla's fire appeared at Thamadayn while my companions
Were in the valley of al-Ghaḍā (euphorbia trees) a driving the camels forward
The lookout of the group said, "Did I catch a glimpse of a star
Appearing alone in the blackness of night towards Yemen
I replied to him, "no, rather it is Layla's fire lit on high
Its glow rose up and appeared to me."
I wish that the caravan had never cut through the euphorbia grove
Or that the trees traveled with the caravan for nights.[31]

This theme is echoed in the opening of another profoundly influential qaṣīda by Ibn al-Fāriḍ[32] (it served as the model for al-Buṣīrī's *Qaṣīdat al-Burda*, probably the most popular poem in history):

28 Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 112, 172, 228, 354, 360–9.

29 https://www.aldiwan.net/poem45314.html.

30 Ibn Mulawwaḥ, *Dīwān Majnūn Laylā*, 230.

31 There is a complex play of associations here as the *ghaḍā* or Euphorbia tree was known for its long-lasting firewood, connecting it with the fire, but it is also known to give camels a stomachache, foreshadowing the poet's intense internal pain to come. Moreover, *al-ghuḍuww* (same root) means the intense darkness of night and the verb *aghḍā* means to close one's eyes. So the poet is wishing that he never saw Layla's fire because it would burn him like the proverbially hot and long-lasting coals of the *ghadā* tree.

32 Homerin's work has demonstrated that this qaṣīda also builds substantially on an earlier Sufi qaṣīda, the *Mawṣiliya*, by Ibn al-Shahrazūrī (d. 511/1117) that develops the same theme:

لمعت نارهم وقد عسعس اللي- -لُ وملّ الحادي وتاه الدليل
فتأملتها وفكري من البين عليل ولحظ عيني كليل
وفؤادي هو الفؤاد المعنى وغرامي ذاك الغرام الدخيل
ثم قابلتها وقلت لصحبي هذه النار نار ليلى فميلوا

هل نارُ ليلى بدَتْ ليلًا بذي سَلَمِ أمْ بارقٌ لاح في الزوراء فالعَلَمِ
أرْواحَ نَعمانَ هَلّا نَسمةٌ سَحَرًا ومِاءَ وَجرةَ هَلّا نهْلة بفَمِ
يا سائق الظعّنِ يَطوي البيدَ مُعتسِفًا طِّي السّجلّ بذاتِ الشّيح من إضَم
عُجْ بالحِمى يا رَعاكَ اللهُ مُعْتَمِدًا خميلةَ الضّالِ ذاتَ الرّندِ والخُزُم
وقِفْ بسلعٍ وسل بالجزع هل مُطِرَت بالرّقْمتَيْنِ أثيْلات بمُنْسَجِم
ناشدتُكَ اللّهَ إن جُزْتَ العَقِيقَ ضُحىً فاقْرَ السّلَامَ عليهِمْ غيرَ مُحْتَشِم
وقُلْ تَركْتُ صريعًا في دِيَارِكُم حيًّا كَميْتٍ يُعيرُ السُّقْمَ للسّقَمِ
فَمِنْ فؤادي لَهيبٌ ناب عن قَبَسٍ ومِن جفونِيَ دَمْعٌ فاض كالدّيَمِ
وهذه سُنّةُ العُشّاقِ ما علِقوا بِشَادِنٍ فخَلا عُضْو من الألَمِ
يا لائِمًا لَامَني في حبِهّمْ سفَهًا كُفّ الملامَ فلوْ أحبَبْتَ لم تَلُمِ
وحُرْمَةِ الوصْلِ والودّ العتيق وبال عَهْدِ الوَثيقِ وما قد كان في القِدَم
ما حُلْتُ عنهمْ بسُلْوَانٍ ولا بَدَلٍ ليسَ التبدّلُ والسُّلوانُ من شِيَمي
رُدّوا الرّقاد لجَفني علّ طَيْفَكُم بمضجعي زائر في غفلةِ الحُلمُ
آهًا لِايّامِنا بالخَيف لو بَقِيَتْ عَشْرًا وواهًا عليها كيف لم تَدُمِ
هيهاتِ وأسَفي لو كان ينفعُني أو كانَ يُجدي علي ما فاتَ وانَدَمي
عنيّ إليكُم ظِبَاءَ المُنْحَنىَ كرَمًا عهِدْتُ طَرْفِي لم يَنْظرْ لغَيْرِهم
طَوعًا لقاضٍ أتىَ في حُكمِهِ عَجَبًا أفْتى بسَفْكِ دمي في الحِلّ والحَرَمِ
أصَمّ لم يسَمعِ الشكوى وأبكَم لم يُحِر جوابًا وعن حالِ المَشوقِ عمي[33]

Was it Layla's fire that shone at night in Dhū Salam?
Or did lightning flash at al-Zawrā' and Mt. ʿAlam?
O winds of Naʿman, don't you have a sigh at dawn?
O waters of Wajra, don't you have a sip?
O driver of the loaded camels rolling up the barren sands
like a scribe rolls up scrolls[34] by the sagebrush of Iḍam
Turn aside at the protected ground, May God shepherd you,
Seeking the lote thicket with myrtle and lavender
Halt at Mt. Salʿ and ask the ravine, has the flowing rain
Reached the tall tamarisks at al-Raqmatayn?
I implore you by God, if you pass by al-ʿAqīq in the morning
Greet them for me without shyness
And say, "I left a wounded man in your lands
Alive as a corpse, adding sickness to disease

Their fire shivered as the night grew dark.
The camel-driver was weary; the guide confused.
I hoped to see it, but it was so far from me.
My concentration was broken, my sight weak.
And my heart is that captive heart,
my affliction that inner passion.
Then I looked to the fire and to my companions said:
"This is Laylā's fire; turn there!"

نارنا هذه تضيء لمن يس- -ري بليل لكنها لا تنيل
منتهى الحظ ما تزود منه ال- -خط والمدركون ذاك قليل

"This, our fire, shines for him who
travels by night but you will never reach it.
The most it offers is a glance,
but those who grasp that are few."

(Homerin, *My Passion Before Me*, 109, 112).

33 Al-Nābulusī, *Sharḥ Dīwān Ibn al-Fāriḍ*, 373–4.

34 Qur'an 21:104.

For from my heart, there leaps a flame that can replace a torch
And from my eyes, the tears are flowing like the ceaseless rains
This is the lovers' *sunna*, when bound to a fawn in love
No limb is ever free of pain
You blamer, who blame be for loving them foolishly
Stop your scolding, for if only you could love, you wouldn't blame
By the sanctity of union and the ancient affection
And the steadfast pact and what was in eternity
I have not turned from them seeking solace or a substitute
For it is not my nature to replace or relent
Return rest back to my eyes, for perhaps your specter
Will come visit me in bed in the drowsiness of dreams
Ah, for our days at al-Khayf, if only they had been ten more!
Alas, why could they not endure?
If only my grief could cure me
Or remorse could recover what has passed
O gazelles of the curved dunes, please turn away from me kindly
For I have pledged that my eyes will look on no one but them
Complying with a judge who decreed an astounding ruling:
The shedding of my blood both in free grounds and sanctuaries
Deaf, he didn't hear my plea, dumb, not able to reply
To the state of one longing in love's throes, he is blind.[35]

While Homerin has provided his own translation and helpful commentary in another work, explaining many of the symbols, Qur'anic references, and place names of the poem,[36] here we will simply consider a few aspects of the poem that are relevant to our overall discussion. The literal story of this poem is relatively straightforward: the poet catches a glimpse of light in the darkness of night (*layla*), and this light may be connected to his beloved, Layla, perhaps her campfire. This fateful gleam of light sets into motion the poet's journey, either physical or in the poet's memory, in pursuit of the distant beloved, and the journey of love and its trials wear the ever-faithful poet down, as he repudiates blamers, nay-sayers, and distractions, his recollections and reminders to himself of bygone days of intimacy and pledges of faithfulness the only fuel for his burning passion in his never-ending and relentless quest for union unto death. But what a great difference there is between this prosaic description and the actual poem!

On the symbolic level, Layla is often taken as the Divine Essence, her fire to be the first determination of things in God's knowledge (*al-taʿayyun al-awwal*) or some other level of Divine manifestation, a similitude of His light (*mathal nūrihi* (24:35)), or the glimmer of awakenings marking the beginning of the spiritual path. The symbolism of the various place names and natural features (Dhū Salam, winds of Naʿman, Iḍam, lote trees, etc.) derive from a combination of their associations in Arabic poetry,[37] geography (especially proximity to Mecca and Medina), visual

35 Refer to an alternate translation by A.Z. Foreman here: https://poemsintranslation.blogspot.com/2011/11/umar-ibn-al-farid-was-that-laylas-flame.html.

36 Homerin, *From Arab Poet to Muslim Saint,* 5–10.

37 For example, the winds of Nu'mān are evoked in these two poems attributed to Majnūn, whose structures bear a close resemblance to that of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's:

O two mountains of Nu'mān, by God, let the breeze of the east wind
Reach me, let its breeze come to me.
For the east wind is a breeze, when it breathes
Upon a sorrowful heart, it lightens its burdens.
I feel its coolness, or it heals the heat within me
Upon a liver of which only the core remains.
O mountains of the valley of 'Uray'ira, which
Has moved far away from my people's distance, its arrival is fated.

appearance and uses in desert life, mention in Qur'an and hadith, as well as puns based on their names.[38] For example, Dhū Salam, mentioned in the poem's opening verse, names a valley just south of Medina that the Prophet passed through on his hijra from Mecca, but some commentators, because of its name, also take it as a symbol of the "sound heart" (*qalb*^{un} *salīm)* mentioned in the Qur'an as the only useful possession on the Day of Judgement: "[…] *a day when neither wealth nor children will avail, save for him who comes to God with a sound heart*." (26:89).[39] The "sanctity of union," (*ḥurmati'l-waṣl*) "ancient affection," (*al-waddu'l-ʿatīq*) "steadfast pact," (*al-ʿahdi'l-wathīq*) and "what was in antiquity/eternity" (*mā kāna fi'l-qidam*^{i}) (in the 11th verse is noted by commentators not just for its lovely internal rhyme, dignified diction, and pleasing structure, but also to refer to our pre-temporal intimacy with God (mentioning 5:54, *He loves them and they love Him*), as well as the pre-temporal covenant of the "Day of Alast" mentioned in 7:172: *And when thy Lord took from the Children of Adam, from their loins, their progeny and made them bear witness concerning themselves, "Am I not your Lord?" they said, "Yea, we bear witness*."[40]

At this poem's stunning end, many of the commentaries identify the judge with love or desire (*al-hawā*)[41] because of its implacable, irresistible domination (described in the terms of Qur'an 2:172, "deaf, dumb, and blind"). As Abū Bakr al-ʿAydarūs (d. 914/1508) writes in a verse:

الهوى قد صار دينى كيف عن حبّه تحوّل

Oh, let the path of the south wind be clear, perhaps
Its breeze will soothe my heart from its burning passion.
But how can the wind heal a longing that persists
And eyes that are long drenched in flowing tears?
Say to the riders of Tamim, who have departed
To the House (Kaʿba), hoping that their wounds will settle,
That among the tents of sand, there is a stranger
Overcome with sorrow, long afflicted with insomnia.
Her insides torn apart by the passion of love
And the torment of longing that clings to her, never leaving her.

And this similar poem:

O mountains of Nu'mān, by God, let the path
Of the east wind reach me, let its breeze come to me.
I feel its coolness, or it heals the heat within me
Upon a liver of which only the core remains.
For the east wind is a breeze, when it breathes
Upon a sorrowful soul, its burdens are lifted.
The nights our people spent in Nu'mān as neighbors,
And when we would please them by staying in a home we built.
O wind, pass by the homes and tell me:
Are they still standing or have their traces vanished?
Oh, my ailments with Layla are old,
And the deadliest sickness of lovers is an ancient one.
I remembered the union with the women of Naʿja in the morning
And the delight of a life whose bliss has passed.
And you, who stirred my eyes to tears,
Flooding them so the tears flowed long and steadily.
My eyes have been afflicted with Layla, and followed
Their affliction, and affliction may come upon the eyes.
O my two companions, rise and bind the bandage
Upon a liver of which only a fragment remains.

38 See J. Stekevych's *The Zephyrs of Najd* for a more detailed discussion of this important feature of classical Arabic poetry.
39 Al-Nābulusī, *Sharḥ Dīwān*, 51–3.
40 Nasr et al., *The Study Qur'an*.
41 Al-Nābulusī, *Sharḥ Dīwān,* 83.

Desire had become my religion
How could there be any deviation from his love?

In his *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, Ibn al-ʿArabī comments upon the Qur'anic verse *Have you seen him who has taken his desire for his God?* (45:23) to explain that desire has a kind of universal dominion – everyone acts and worships only out of desire:

وحق الهوى إنّ الهوى سبب الهوى لو لا الهوى في القلب ما عُبِدَ الهوى

The truth of desire is that desire is the cause of desire
If not for desire in the heart, desire would not be worshipped

> Do you not see how perfect God's knowledge of things is, how He perfects one who worships his desire and takes it has his divinity? … He sees this worshipper worshipping only his desire, complying with its command to worship the individual whom he worships. Even his worship of God comes from his desire. If he did not have desire for the Divine—which is a will based on love—one would not worship God, nor would he prefer Him to another. Likewise, anyone who worships some form of the world and makes it a divinity only does so because of desire. The worshipper is forever under the influence of his desire […].[42]

This implacable judge makes licit the poet's execution in the sacred precincts (around Mecca and Medina) where hunting and shedding blood are prohibited, as well as in the ordinary spaces. In the legend of Layla and Majnun, this refers to the death sentence issued against Majnun for violating the honor of Layla and her family, and even that of his own family, as Niẓāmī has him declare, "Yes, I am a thorn in the flesh of my people, and even my name brings shame upon my friends. Anyone may shed my blood; I am outlawed, and who kills me is not guilty of murder."[43] But in the context of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poem, this unique death sentence allows for a number of symbolic interpretations: annihilation in the Essence of God (the sacred precincts) as well as annihilation in the Divine Attributes and Acts (ordinary spaces); annihilation in God as well as the Messenger (Mecca and Medina), or the ability to perceive and have intimacy with God (and thus be annihilated or slain) in all of his manifestations, not just the central manifestations of the rites and rituals of the Sharīʿa (e.g., to see God everywhere, not just in the *qibla*), but my favored commentary on this verse would have to be this Persian verse attributed to Aḥmad-i Jām:

کشتگان خنجر تسلیم را هر زمان از غیب جان دیگر است

For the victims of the dagger of surrender
There is a new life at every moment from the unseen

Or this verse from Ibn al-Fāriḍ's Naẓm al-Sulūk:

إذا ما أَحلَّتْ في هواها دَمي فَفي ذُرَى العِزّ والعلْيَاءِ قَدري أحلَّتِ[44]

When She declared my blood licit in desiring Her,
She made my rank dwell in the summits of glory and elevation.

That is, the poet is "slain" or annihilated at every second, in every place, along with everything else, as it is all returned to God at every instant, and then re-created or manifested by Him in a different form according to the doctrine of *tajdīd al-khalq fī'l ānāt* or "the renewal of creation at each instant," most famously articulated by Ibn al-ʿArabī, but also found in the writings of numerous other Sufis.[45]

While the poem begins with a vision of a flash of light at a distance, it ends with the silence and blindness of the judge and his impending decree. If the judge is identified with Layla, then her blindness can be understood as that of love: as the hadith says, "your love for a thing makes you blind and deaf,"[46] and/or

42 Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam,* 415.
43 Nizami, *The Story of Layla and Majnun*, 38.
44 Ibn al-Fāriḍ, *Dīwān*, 78.
45 Chittick, "The View from Nowhere," 4.
46 Sunan Abī Dāwūd, Book 43, Kitāb al-Adab, Bāb al-Hawā, Hadith 5130.

that of nearness: if something is too close to your eyes, you cannot see it, let alone your own eyes, which are impossible to see. If the longing lover has achieved union with Layla, then he is no longer longing and is no more. His plea is her decree of death, which silences him and renders him/them/her unable to reply. As Ibn al-Fāriḍ writes in his *Naẓm al-Sulūk*, describing the intense "jealousy" of union:

لِسانيَ إن أبدى إذا ما تَلا اسمَها لهُ وصفُهُ سْمعي ومَا صَمَّ يَصِمُتِ
وأُذْنيَ إن أهدَى لِسانيَ ذِكرهَا لِقلبي ولم يستَعبِدِ الصَّمتَ صُمِّتِ[47]

My tongue recites her name, and if my hearing
is not deaf to it, my tongue falls silent

And my ear—if my tongue gives her remembrance to my heart
without employing silence—goes deaf

In this reading, the poem begins with the *coincidentia oppositorum* of Layla's fire shining in the dark of night and lightning flashing in a cloud (*bāriq*) and then comes full circle, ending with the "black light" of the blindness (*ʿamān*) of union, like the cloud (*al-ʿamā'*) of the hadith in response to Abū Razīn's question "Where was our Lord before he created creation?": "He was in a cloud (*al-ʿamā'*) below which was air (*hawā'un*) and above which was air," but around this blindness of union, there is only intense desire (*al-hawā*).

In addition to the long tradition of the Arabic qaṣīda and love poetry, through its tropes, allusions, and vocabulary, this poem of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's also puts itself squarely in conversation with these verses (9-16) from Sūrat ṬāHā of the Qur'an:

> Hast thou heard tell of Moses, when he saw a fire and said unto his family, "Stay here. Verily I perceive a fire. Perhaps I shall bring you a brand therefrom, or find guidance at the fire." Then when he came to it, he was called, "O Moses, Verily I am thy Lord. Take off thy sandals. Truly thou art in the holy valley of *Tuwa*. I have chosen thee, so listen to what is revealed. Truly I am God, there is no god but I. So worship Me, and perform the prayer for the remembrance of Me. Surely the Hour is coming. I would keep it hidden, that every soul might be recompensed for its endeavors. So let not he who believes not and follows his desire turn thee away from it, or thou wilt perish."[48]

Indeed the word translated as "torch" above (*qabas*) that blazes in the poet's heart is the same as the word translated as "brand" in this Qur'anic passage. Like Moses, the poet spies a fire off in the distance, goes off in search of it, and has to strip away his old self (his sandals/his life/himself), after which, he addresses the beloved (in the poem, this comes after the poet has accepted the lovers' *sunna* of endless pain and chased off his blamers) speaking of their sacred union and ancient affection, swearing he has been true to his pact, mentioning their rituals, and repudiating again those who would turn him away from it before accepting Love's decree that he will perish. In this and other Qur'anic accounts of this encounter (27:7-14, 28:30) God address Himself to Moses with the pronoun "I," and in Sūrāt ṬāHā, declaims the *Shahāda* in the first person, *lā ilāha illā Anā*, "There is no god but I," which many Sufi commentators take as an indication of identity with the Supreme Self. In another poem of his (often cited in *tafāsir* about these Qur'anic verses)[49] Ibn al-Fāriḍ connects this episode of the burning bush to Moses' encounter with God on Mt. Sinai (7:143), describing his annihilation in God:

وسِرّكُمُ في ضَميري والقلبُ طُورُ التّجَلّي
آنسْتُ في الحَيّ نارًا لَيْلًا فَبَشّرتُ أهلي
قُلْتُ امْكُثُوا فَلَعَلّي أجِدْ هُداياَ لَعَلّي
دَنَوْتُ مِنها فكانَتْ نارُ المُكَلِّمِ قَبلي
نوديتُ مِنها جِهارًا رُدّوا لَيالِيَ وَصلي
حتى إذا ما تَدانَى ال ميقَاتُ في جَمْعِ شملي

47 Ibn al-Fāriḍ, *Dīwān*, 81.
48 Nasr et al., *The Study Qur'an*.
49 For example, refer to Ibn 'Ajība's, *al-Baḥr al-Madīd,* vol. 3, 380.

صارَتْ جِبالِيَ دكًّا مِنْ هَيْبَةِ المُتَجَلّي
ولاحَ سِرٌّ خَفِيٌّ يَدْرِيهِ مَنْ كَانَ مِثْلِي
وصِرْتُ مُوسَى زَمَانِي مذ صارَ بَعْضِي كلّي
فالموتُ فيهِ حياتِي وفِي حَياتِيَ قَتلِي
أنا الفقيرُ المُعَنّى رِقُّوا لِحَالِي وذُلّي[50]

Your secret is in my consciousness
And my heart is the Mt. Sinai of manifestation (*al-tajallī*)
I perceived a fire in the encampment
At night, so I told my family the good news
I said, "stay here, perhaps I
Will find guidance, perhaps."
I drew near to it, and it was
The fire of the addressee before me [i.e. Moses]
I was called from it openly
"Return the nights of my union"
Until when the appointed time
For my reunion drew near
My mountains became crushed
Out of awe of the manifestor (*al-mutajallī*)
A hidden secret flashed
Known to one like me
I became the Moses of my time
Since part of me became my all
For death, in it, is my life,
and in my life is my slaying
I am the poor afflicted one
Have pity on my state and humility

But on a metapoetic level, Ibn al-Fārid's Layla poetry is also like a burning bush. This figure consists of three phenomenal elements: the bush itself, the fire, and the voice.[51] The bush is natural; the fire appears natural, but its location and nature turn out not to be, and the voice is not natural. The bush is the language of the poetry; the fire is the love contained within and the light of beauty radiating out from its verses, and the Divine voice is the spiritual meaning that speaks through the burning tree of love poetry. The light of the fire is what attracts Moses, just as desire and love for beauty is what draws us to these verses (and to everything else), but as Ibn al-ʿArabi and Ibn al-Fāriḍ assert, all beauty is really just the Real's and all love really just love for Him or Her. Upon closer inspection, Moses finds that the tree is not burning, but rather he burns and transforms in the fire of the Divine Presence until *he finds nothing there, and finds God there instead* (24:39), as Maybudī writes in his Qur'an commentary:

> Moses was seeking a fire to light up a tent. He found a fire that burns spirit and heart. All fires burn the body, but the fire of friendship burns the spirit. No one can be patient with a spirit-burning fire. Fires are of different sorts: the fire of shame, the fire of yearning, the fire of love. The fire of shame burns away dispersion, the fire of yearning burns away patience, and the fire of love burns away the two worlds such that nothing remains but the Real. The evidence of having found friendship is that the two worlds are burned away. The mark of the realizer is that he does not attend to anything other than the Real. The mark of nonbeing is to reach oneself. When rain reaches the ocean, it has reached it. He who reaches the Patron reaches himself.[52]

50 Al-Nābulusī, *Sharḥ Dīwān Ibn al-Fāriḍ*, 394.

51 Elementally, the tree consists of earth and water, and the voice, air (or water and air), and so the burning bush combines all four elements in itself, just as Ibn al-Fāriḍ invokes all four elements in the first two verses of the poem "Was it Layla's fire that shone," indicating totality.

52 Maybudī, *Kashf al-Asrār*, 488–9. In his *Mathnawi*, Rumi writes, "Moses went to fetch fire, he found such a Fire that he escaped from fire" (Nicholson, *Mathnawi 1*, 2788).

When Moses has stripped off the two worlds with his two sandals, and has left himself behind, then he can approach and hear the Divine Speech coming through the burning bush speaking from and proclaiming the Divine "I-ness." Similarly, if the lover or listener or reader of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poetry or other Sufi Layla poetry can bracket their assumptions and enter into the world of this poetry,[53] they will find their love in its love, and find its love in theirs, and find themselves transformed in it, and like a pool of water, see their transformed selves therein. Then they will be able to understand the dynamic spiritual symbolism and messages coming through this poetry. Like the burning bush, the structure, text, and language of these poems are relatively stable, but living, but the fire of love animating them is livelier still, dancing and gleaming ever-fresh, while the voice of inspiration has never ceased communicating fresh meanings.

As mentioned above, part of what makes Ibn al-Fāriḍ's Layla poetry so remarkable (and its spiritual meanings so inscrutable to some), is that it works so well on an "ordinary" level. The leaves and branches of the bush are not burnt by the fire of Divine love animating it, and this can be seen in the commentators' use of *kināya* or metonymy to describe the symbolism of Layla and the poem's other elements, instead of *majāz* or "metaphor." The love and drama of Layla and Majnun is not obliterated in Ibn al-Fāriḍ's verse, but rather polished to translucence; they are presented as delimitations of an unspeakably non-delimited love and beauty that embraces all such delimitations. As cited above, Ibn al-Fāriḍ gives a superb definition of *kināya* (metonymy) in this verse:

وصِرتُ مُوسَى زَمَانِي مذ صارَ بَعْضِي كلّي[54]

I became the Moses of my time
Since part of me became my all

Here, the part becoming all refers to the wave "becoming" the sea, the delimited self "becoming" the non-delimited Self, the mountain of Moses' "I" being crushed and restored by the revealing of the Divine "I" that speaks through and to him and the burning bush. There is no real becoming because the part is simply revealed to have been the whole all along.[55] In such poetry, Layla and Majnun's love is still literally true, but in such Sufi appropriations, the realm of literal truth has shifted to the ineffable Divine, and their love and poetry are like dreams that come true in the Real. For poets like Ibn al-Fāriḍ, "mystical" and "romantic" love are not separate, but rather only seemingly distinct delimitations of the same absolute reality. As Ibn al-Fāriḍ writes:

وصّرِحْ باطْلاقِ الجَمالِ ولا تَقُل بتَقْيِيدِهِ مَيلًا لِزُخْرُفِ زِينَة
فكلُّ مَليحٍ حُسنُهُ منْ جَمالها مُعارٌ لهُ بل حُسْنُ كلّ مَليحِة
بهاؤُقَيسُ لُبْنى هامَ بل كلّ عاشق كَمجنون لَيلى أو كُثَيِّرِ عَزَّة
فكلُّ صَبا مِنهُمْ إلى وَصْفِ لَبْسِها بصورةِ حُسنٍ لاحَ فِي حُسنِ صورة
وما ذاكَ إلّا أن بدَتْ بمَظاهِرٍ فظَنّوا سِواها وهي فيها تجَلّتِ
بدَتْ باحْتِجابٍ واختَفَتْ بمَظاهِر على صِبَغِ التّلْوينِ فِي كلّ بَرْزَةِ

Declare beauty absolute! Do not profess to bind it
by being drawn to ornaments and tinsel.
Every charming man, every pretty girl
Their loveliness is lent to them from her beauty
For her Qays was mad for Lubnā, and just so all the other lovers
Like Layla and Majnun, 'Azzah and Kuthayyir
Each of them desired the quality she had wrapped
In a form of loveliness shining forth in a loveliness of form
Because she appeared manifest in those sites
They thought they were other than her, but she merely revealed herself in them

53 Goethe writes, "Whoever wants to understand poetry/must enter the land of poetry;/Whoever wants to understand the poet/must walk around in the poet's land." qtd. in Unseld, *Goethe and the Ginko*, 33.

54 Al-Nābulusī, *Sharḥ Dīwān Ibn al-Fāriḍ*, 394.

55 As in the famous *ḥadīth al-nawāfil* which uses the verb *kuntu*, "I ***was*** his hearing, sight, etc.".

In veils she came forth, hidden by external guise
Each showing shaded with shape shifting[56]

In his *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiya*, Ibn al-ʿArabī similarly explains, "Though no one loves any but his own Creator, he is veiled from Him by the love for Zaynab, Su'ad, Hind, Layla, this world, money, position, and everything loved in the world. Poets exhaust their words writing about all these existent things without knowing, but the gnostics never hear a verse, a riddle, a panegyric, or a love poem that is not about Him, hidden beyond the veils of forms."[57] Or as Fakhruddin 'Iraqi writes, including both the poet-lover and beloved in this vision of absolute *tawḥīd*, "God, with Majnun's eye, looks upon His own beauty in Layla, and through Majnun He loves Himself."[58]

While many scholars have misunderstood and criticized such "mystical" commentaries on poetry as "farfetched" or treating poems "as if they were a mystical code to be deciphered,"[59] I argue that this is to misunderstand the nature of the *kināya* at play here because the technical Sufi terminology into which such commentaries "translate" or "decode" the poetry is also a *kunyā*; it is also a "code," not the reality as such, which is beyond all of these terms and names (but also being beyond them, is also mysteriously immanent in and as them). Both the technical Sufi vocabulary and the standard poetic symbols refer to each other and to spiritual realities beyond language. Poetry such as Ibn al-Fāriḍ's draws attention to this fact and takes it into account, by drawing attention to the beauty, forms, and relationships amongst the words themselves, it highlights its role as a *barzakh*, both uniting and separating meaning and linguistic form, signified and signifier. Technical prose runs a greater risk of conflating and confusing words and concepts and concepts and reality. Just because one uses a Sufi term like *tajallī* does not mean that one has understood it, let alone realized the realities to which it points.

Seemingly paradoxically, such prosaic uses of language also tend to "tie-down" reality into various abstractions, separating signifier and signified further and further, making meaning and reality itself so abstract and distant as to be virtually non-existent, so that reference collapses into sense, with concepts and words only leading to other concepts and words, never beyond themselves; beyond the play of signifiers there is no longer any signified perceptible, so, like Pharoah, the signifiers arrogate the role of the signified for themselves. In short, poetic language tends to point beyond language and concepts, mysteriously uniting meaning and form, while prosaic language tends to point to more concepts and words. In this latter mode, one runs the risk of getting tangled and trapped in language and concepts, even to the point of mistaking such knottings for freedom. But, to paraphrase al-Ghazālī, what a difference there is between knowing the biochemistry of drunkenness and actually being drunk, between clicking through Wikipedia and *journeying upon the earth* (29:20), between knowing a definition of love and falling in love, between a theological definition of God and the Divine Reality Itself, which is too encompassing to be encompassed by a definition (including this one). But poetry maintains this productive tension and fusion between reality and language, meaning (*ma'nā*) and form (*ṣūra*), reason (*'aql*) and imagination (*khayāl*), transcendence/dissimilarity (*tanzīh*) and immanence/similarity (*tashbīh*) both uniting and diving them like the *barzakh* that it is. As Ibn al-Fāriḍ writes:

وفي مَن بِها وَرَّيتُ عنيِّ ولمْ أُرِدْ سوايَ خلَعَتُ اسمي ورَسمي وكُنيتي
...
فلا وَصفَ لي والوَصفُ رسمٌ كذاكالاس- -م وسمٌ فإن تَكْني فكَنِّ أوِ انْعَتِ

56 Homerin, *Sufi Life, Saintly Verse*, 145–6. Translation modified by the author based on Arabic original.
57 Chittick, "The Spiritual Path of Love in Ibn Al-'Arabi and Rumi," 10.
58 Iraqi, *Divine Flashes*, 86.
59 Nair, "Poetry and Sufi Commentary." What these commentaries present are the keys or pointers to a reading of the poem, not *the* reading of the poem. Sells has pointed out that Ibn al-ʿArabi gives very different interpretations of the poems of the *Tarjumān* in different places. While 'Ayn al-Quḍāt al-Hamadānī takes an even more radical position, "O chevalier! Take these poems to be like a mirror. After all, you know that in a mirror there is no form in itself – but whoever looks at the mirror will be able to see his own form. Likewise, you should know that poetry in itself has no meaning at all – but anyone can discern his present state and own perfection from it. If you were to say that the meaning of poetry is what the poet wants it to be and that others can derive other meanings from it, that would be like someone saying, "The form of the mirror is the face of the polisher whose form first appears in it." (ʿAyn al-Quḍāt, *Nāmahā*, vol. 1, p. 260, para 350) qtd. in Rustom, "Sleepers Awake! Rumi on the People of the Cave."

By "Her" I alluded to myself and I meant none but me;
For her sake I stripped off my name, delineation, and nickname (*kunyā*)
...
I have no description, for a description is a delineation,
As a name is a brand, so if you must nickname (*taknī*) me, do so allusively or depict me.[60]

This is what separates reading an encyclopedia entry about love from reading a love poem, or better, singing along to a love song: in the latter case, one participates in the experience and the reality of love, as the song or poem walks the tightrope between the ineffability of the experience of love and the sounds and words describing it. The poem embodies love in names and words while pointing beyond itself to nameless, wordless love,[61] and its allusions to other texts or experiences are put in service of this pointing beyond, while the encyclopedia entry (or poor academic article) defines and delineates and categorizes love while pointing to other, related articles.

4 Mannerism and Sufi Poetics

A related discussion is developed insightfully by Stefan Sperl in his *Mannerism in Arabic Poetry*. Building on a distinction first elaborated by E.R. Curtius in his study of medieval European literature, Sperl distinguishes two distinct attitudes to language manifest in Arabic poetry: classicism and mannerism. Classicism is based upon a concord between signifier and signified, a coherent and sensible extra-linguistic reality reflected in the poem and poetic convention. In this view, "reality is the correlate of poetry." In mannerism, however, such extra-linguistic reality only serves as a catalyst for explorations of intra-linguistic play, and "literature is the correlate of poetry," based on the discord between signifier and signified, as "the representational character of language becomes increasingly insignificant."[62] Mannerist poetry seems to refer to a reality outside of itself, but it is really referring back to its main object: language, or itself.[63] The classist style can be discerned in pre-Islamic odes and those of more "conservative" poets al-Buḥturī (though not in all verses), who aim to reinforce the traditional attitudes and virtues of the poetic tradition towards reality. By contrast, the mannerist style is characteristic of the *badīʿ* style of the innovative ʿAbbāsid poets like Abū Tammām and Abū ʿAlā al-Maʿārrī and the even more ornate stylings of Ayyūbid and Mamlūk poets, who aim to evoke wonder at and through their creative explorations of the formal possibilities of the language of the poetic tradition. As Sperl explains, quoting the modern Arabic poet Adonis, "According to Adūnīs, one of the tasks of poetry consists in 'opening paths to that hidden world which lies beyond the world of appearances.' These [mannerist] poems do indeed give expression to such a 'hidden world'; however, it does not lie in any perceptible reality language might mirror, but in the texture of literary language itself."[64]

But where does Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poetry fall in this schema? His style certainly seems mannerist, with its profuse deployment of wonder-inducing rhetorical features, linguistic marvels, and compound, creative, and imaginative metaphors and reworkings of the poetic tradition; however, Ibn al-Fāriḍ and his fellow Sufis who

60 Homerin, *Sufi Live, Saintly Verse*, 167. Translation modified by the author based on the Arabic original.

61 As Rumi writes at the beginning of the *Mathnawī*, "Although the commentary of the tongue makes (all) clear, yet tongueless love is clearer./Whilst the pen was making haste in writing, it split upon itself as soon as it came to Love./In expounding it (Love), the intellect lay down (helplessly) like an ass in the mire: it was Love (alone) that uttered the explanation of love and loverhood./The proof of the sun is the sun (himself): if thou require the proof, do not avert thy face from him!/If the shadow gives an indication of him, the sun (himself) gives spiritual light every moment" (Nicholson, *Mathnawī 1*, 113–6).

62 Sperl, *Mannerism in Arabic Poetry*, 155.

63 Sperl elaborates, "language in mannerist style represents the sole abode of meaning. It, and not reality, is perceived to be the seminal core of all order so that artistic search for sense and coherence turns towards language itself rather than towards its referent, to the signifier rather than the signified. Therein lies the meaning of literature's being the correlate of poetry in mannerist mimesis as maintained by Friedrich and Heinrichs" (Sperl, *Mannerism in Arabic Poetry*, 160).

64 Sperl, *Mannerism in Arabic Poetry*, 2.

sung and commentated upon his poetry with such enthusiasm, even in his lifetime, take the stance that his poetry refers not just to language, but to the Real and the realities of spiritual wayfaring. From one point of view, it puts mannerism in the service of a kind of mystical classicism. But to truly understand this, one has to consider the ways in which the standard Sufi understandings of "reality" and "language" differ from those underpinning Curtius and Sperl's studies. For Sufis like Ibn al-ʿArabī and Ibn al-Fāriḍ, the reality is ultimately God, the Real, the One and Only, and all that appears to be other than Him Is His speech. Ibn al-ʿArabī states, "We emerged from speech. That is His word, 'Be!,' so we came to be. Silence is a state of nonexistence, and speech is a state of existence." Commenting on this, Chittick explains, "Created things are the speech of God, and the words they speak are spoken through them, not by them."[65] (like the burning bush). As Ibn al-Fāriḍ writes,

وألسِنَةُ الأكوانِ إن كُنتَ واعيًا شهودٌ بتَوحيدي بحالٍ فصيحَة[66]

The tongues of the existents, if you take heed,
are witnesses establishing my unity in an articulate state.

In fact, for Ibn al-ʿArabī, because the cosmos is Divine speech and is created with measure (*biqadr*^{in}, 54:49), and speech ordered by meter and rhyme is poetry, then all of existence is poetry. He writes, "All of the world is endowed with rhythm, fastened by rhyme, on the Straight Path."[67]

Since all of created existence is language (or poetry), and human language is an echo of that existential language, everything is a signifier of the one Divine signified, while ultimately not being other than that signified. There is nothing outside of language because beyond creation there is only God, who is no "thing." In Qur'anic terms, this can be seen in the symbolic ambiguity of the Qur'anic term *āyāt* – which means both the symbols of God "*on the horizons and in [our] souls*" (41:53) and the verses of the Qur'an – illustrating the doctrine of "the three books" of the human soul, the cosmos, and revelation that reflect and illuminate one another, conveying the Divine message of the nature of the Real. Sufi poetry is an extension or echo of revelation, drawing or revealing connections between microcosm, macrocosm, and metacosm, or in Adonis' formulation, "opening paths to that hidden world which lies beyond the world of appearances." In Ibn al-Fāriḍ's own words:

وماذا عَسى يَلْقى جَنانٌ وما بِهِ يفُوهُ لِسانٌ بينَ وَحيٍ وصيغَة[68]

What could a heart encounter in itself
That a tongue could utter between revelation and formulation?

But for Ibn al-Fāriḍ, these "hidden worlds" exist extra-mentally, and are more real than the world of appearances, rising up to the Divine Reality, which is the meaning of all of these worlds and words. Yet from another perspective, both the hidden and apparent worlds are nothing but different aspects of this Reality: *He is the First and the Last and the Apparent and the Hidden* (57:3). Thus the paradoxes, elaborate metaphors, puns, antitheses, ambiguities, and other wonder-evoking rhetorical figures of the *badīʿ* style that induce the astonishment of discovery find their close counterpart in the Sufi "rhetoric of realization"[69] that aims to induce spiritual realization (*taḥqīq*), recognition (*maʿrifa*), and bewilderment (*ḥayra*) through explorations of the various relationships amongst these worlds and realities. Sperl writes:

> a different and perhaps profounder view of the relationship between reality and convention in mannerist style is possible: absorption into the literary cosmos may be seen as an act of magic which reveals the mysterious multivalence of reality. As such, the fantastic conglomerates of metaphor are not mere illusion but capture the very ambiguity of the world of appearances.[70]

65 Chittick, "The Sound of Silence," 17.
66 Ibn al-Fāriḍ, *Dīwān*, 138.
67 Denis McAuley, *Ibn ʿArabī's Mystical Poetics*, 45.
68 Ibn al-Fāriḍ, *Dīwān*, 115.
69 Morris, "Ibn ʿArabī's Rhetoric of Realisation."
70 Sperl, *Mannerism*, 160.

This "profounder" view is much closer to that of Sufi poetics, which also uses the magic of its verses to "reveal the mysterious multivalence of reality," but I believe there is still a subtle distinction to be made between the mannerist and Sufi stances. For instance, take the classic example of Arabic mannerism, an epigrammatic verse of al-Maʾmūnī that describes a baker's oven as:

> A spring whose base has been inhabited by a sister of the sun, whom the Magi worship
> if that isn't what it is, why should it take in moons and give out suns?[71]

This epigram transforms the seemingly mundane act of turning dough ("moons") into loaves of bread ("suns") in an oven into a wonder of cosmic proportions, but it tells us nothing more about baking bread, nor does it infuse the act with any deeper significance or meaning; in fact, the object of the epigram is not really the baker's oven, but rather the linguistic and conceptual virtuosity and dexterity of the epigram itself, which serves as the source of wonder and delight. This can be contrasted with a Rumi's verse from Rumi's *Diwān-i Shams*:

> The stove of my mind has again begun to heat
> the pot that cooks the raw: the Image of the Beloved's Love[72]

Here we have all the metapoetic self-reference one would expect from a mannerist verse: Rumi's poetry is itself the image of the invisible love of the Beloved; it is the pot that cooks the raw listener/reader with the fire from the "stove of his mind." Rumi is announcing that he is warming up to compose more soul-shattering poetry, in a verse of moving poetry. This verse also alludes to and plays on the culinary theme of going from raw to cooked so present in his oeuvre. For example, he writes:

> The result of my life is not more than three words:
> I was raw, I became ripe, I was burnt[73]

And comparing his heart to a cauldron and his tongue to its lid:

> I put a lid on the cauldron of faithfulness
> So that not every raw person may smell it[74]

Or the extended parable of cooking chickpeas in his *Mathnawī*:

> Look at a chickpea in the pot, how it leaps up when it is subjected to the fire.
> At the time of its being boiled, the chickpea comes up continually to the top of the pot
> and raises a hundred cries,
> Saying, "Why are you setting the fire on me? Since you bought (and approved) me,
> how are you turning me upside down?"
> The housewife goes on hitting it with the ladle. "No!" says she:
> "boil nicely and don't jump away from one who makes the fire.
> I do not boil you because you are hateful to me:
> nay,'tis that you may get taste and savour,
> So that you may become nutriment and mingle with the (vital) spirit:
> this affliction of yours is not on account of (your) being despised.
> You, when green and fresh, were drinking water in the garden:
> that water-drinking was for the sake of this fire."
>
> ...

71 Heinrichs, "Review of Bürgel, *Die ekphrastischen Epigramme des Abū Talib al-Ma'mūnī*," 177.
72 Chittick, *Sufi Path of Love*, 260.
73 Schimmel, *Triumphal Sun*, 197.
74 Ibid., 148.

The dame says to it, "Formerly I, like thee, was a part of the earth.
After I had drunk a (cup of) fiery self-mortification, then I became an acceptable and worthy one.
For a long while, I boiled in (the world of) Time;
for another long while, in the pot of the body.
By reason of these two boilings I became (a source of) strength to the senses:
I became (animal) spirit: then I became thy teacher.[75]

But here, the act of cooking becomes a source of wonder, not just for Rumi's poetic dexterity, but rather this poetic and conceptual skill is meant to construct or rather, reveal, the symbolism of cooking as the alchemy of spiritual transformation through the suffering and trials of life and love, preparing one for the eventual consumption by and union with the Beloved. As he writes elsewhere in his *Mathnawī*:

A certain man came and knocked at a friend's door:
his friend asked him, "Who art thou, O trusty one?"
He answered, "I." The friend said, "Begone, 'tis not the time (for thee to come in):
at a table like this there is no place for the raw."
Save the fire of absence and separation, who (what) will cook the raw one?
Who (what) will deliver him from hypocrisy?
The wretched man went away, and for a year in travel (and)
in separation from his friend he was burned with sparks of fire.
That burned one was cooked: then he returned and again
paced to and fro beside the house of his comrade.
He knocked at the door with a hundred fears and respects,
lest any disrespectful word might escape from his lips.
His friend called to him, "Who is at the door?"
He answered, "'Tis thou art at the door, O charmer of hearts."
"Now," said the friend, "since thou art I, come in,
O myself: there is not room in the house for two I's."[76]

The alchemy of Rumi's verses transform, or rather, reveals the act of cooking as an *āya* (sign), similitude (*mathal*), symbol (*ramz*), and reminder (*tadhkira*) of suffering, spiritual transformation, and union. According to Rumi, "Meaning is God,"[77] and thus cannot be tied down by simplistic allegory or codes, but flashes forth with new meanings at every moment: *Every day he is upon a [new] task* (55:29). Meaning transcends all forms, linguistic and otherwise, but all of these forms are self-disclosures (*tajalliyāt*) or delimitations (*taqayyudāt*) of this Divine meaning. As Julie Scott Meisami writes, contrasting metaphorical and analogical reasoning:

> Metaphorical comparison—where the metaphor is essentially an extended or amplified simile—presupposes a gap between man and the universe that contains him, a gap that can be crossed only by grasping at perceived or imagined resemblances. Analogical comparison presupposes a continuity in which similitudes are, so to speak, generic constituents of existence. In a mode of composition based on analogy, metaphor transcends the status of a trope to become a consistent means for signifying the inner substance of things, in a world in which everything is a figure, a sign testifying to the unified and unifying order of creation.[78]

Or, in the famous verse of the poet:

وفي كلّ شيءٍ له آية تدلّ على أنّه واحد

In everything there is a sign that indicates that He is One.

Or

عباراتُنا شتى وحسْنُك واحد وكُلٌّ إلى ذاك الجَمالِ يُشير

75 Nicholson, *Mathanwi*, *3*, 4159–65, 4204–6.
76 Nicholson, *Mathnawi 1*, 3056–63.
77 Chittick, *Me and Rumi,* 73, 187.
78 Meisami, *Medieval Persian Court Poetry*, 37–8.

> Our expressions are many, while your loveliness is one
> And everything alludes to that Beauty

In Sperl's presentation, mannerism is more characterized by Meisami's "metaphorical," while Sufi poetics is more like the "anagogical"; however, given the vast mutual influence and interpenetration of Sufi and non-Sufi poetry especially during and after the 'Abbāsid period, both Meisami's metaphorical and analogical can be found in the works of a single poet or even a single poem, and the two stances exist on a sort of continuum rather than in opposition.

In any event, to return to Adonis' description of poetry as "opening paths to that hidden world which lies beyond the world of appearances," because Sufi poets like Ibn al-Fāriḍ perceive everything in this "world of appearances" having its roots and origins in these "hidden worlds" and "higher" realities of being, tangible descriptions of lovesickness, wine, drunkenness, human beauty, sex, etc. also effectively describe spiritual realities, because *that is what they actually are*: outward expressions or manifestations (*tajalliyāt* or *ẓuhūr*) or imaginalizations (*amthāl* or *takhayyulāt*) of inward or intangible realities or meanings (*ḥaqā'iq* or *ma'ānī*). For many Sufi commentators on the Qur'anic verse, *God's hand is over their hands* (48:10), "God's hand" is the real hand (*al-yad al-ḥaqīqī*), while "their hands" are the metaphors or likenesses, reversing more common understandings of this relationship. From this point of view, God is not described with anthropomorphic language, we are created theomorphically, in the image of God (who is beyond image).[79] Al-Ghazālī's discussion of the relationship between the Divine Light and all other lights is illustrative of this point: "All other lights are borrowed, the only true light is His. Everything is His Light – or rather, He is everything. Or rather, nothing possess a "he-ness" other than He, except in a metaphorical sense. Therefore, there is no light except His light."[80]

Using *majāz* ("metaphor") in the sense of Meisami's "analogy," the created world of signs (*ayāt*) is the realm of metaphor (*majāz*), the existence and qualities of everything seemingly other than God is *majāzī* (metaphorical), and its reality (*ḥaqīqa*) is found in the Real (*al-Ḥaqq*). In any case, the analogical language of poetry such as Ibn al-Fāriḍ's traces out these connections between the different levels of reality, combining and joining them, often without reducing or collapsing their differences so that coherence is maintained at all levels. According to the famous Sufi saying, *al-majāz qanṭarat al-ḥaqīqa*, "the metaphor is the bridge to the reality,"[81] and bridges only work if both sides are maintained, permitting crossing back and forth. But the point of this poetry is not the poetic language or tradition itself, as the great twelfth-century poet, preacher, and scholar Aḥmad al al-Samʿānī writes, returning us to our theme:

> Sometimes they give out this talk as the locks and mole of Layla, sometimes as the distractedness of Majnun's state; sometimes as intoxication, sometimes sobriety; sometimes annihilation, sometimes subsistence; sometimes ecstasy, sometimes finding. These words, expressions, and letters are the containers for the fine wine of realizing the meanings. Those in the ranks of lovers are busy with the wine itself. The unworthy are in bondage to the cup.[82]

But from one point of view, these cups themselves are frozen wine, the result of the overflow of the ineffable, nondelimited, formless content into the delimited forms of the manifest containers of words and expressions. As Ibn al-Fāriḍ wrote in his *khamriyya*:

ولُطْفُ الأواني في الحقيقة تابع لِلُطْفِ المعاني والمَعاني بها تَنْمُو
وقد وَقَعَ التفريقُ والكلُّ واحد فأرواحُنا خَمْرٌ وأشباحُنا كَرْم[83]

79 However, as characteristic of mystical dialectic, this point of view is usually complemented by the "opposite" perspective of God revealing himself in accordance with the limitations of the human recipient. When we come to the mirror of Divine language, we perceive a human form, and just as mirrors can shape and color the reflection that appears within them, the Divine manifestations in our hearts are shaped and colored by our delimitations. As Junayd said, "The color of water is the color of its container." Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 22–6, 286, 341–4.

80 Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, 20.

81 Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 292.

82 Chittick, *Divine Love*, 319.

83 Al-Nābulusī, *Sharḥ Dīwān Ibn al-Fāriḍ*, 385.

The subtlety of vessels, in reality, follows from
Their meanings, and these meanings are heighted by the subtlety of their vessels
Things have been made different, while all is yet one
For our spirits are wine and our forms are vine

And at the conclusion of his *Naẓm al-Sulūk*:

وَمِنْ فَضلِ ما أسأرْتُ شربٌ مُعاصري وَمَنْ كانَ قَبْلِي فالفَضائلُ فَضْلَتِي[84]

My contemporaries drank from the overflow I left behind
And the virtues of those before me are my leftovers

5 Conclusion

Giusseppe Scattolin, the editor of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's *Dīwān* and, along with Homerin, one of the most important contemporary Europhone scholars of Ibn al-Fāriḍ, is highly critical of al-Farghānī's (and by extension, nearly all other Sufi commentaries) on the Sultan of Lovers' *Naẓm al-Sulūk:*

> one cannot avoid questioning the validity of al-Farghānī's way of interpreting Ibn al-Fāriḍ's Sufi poetry. Does al-Farghānī really convey the original meaning of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's Sufi poetry, or does he force his own thoughts, basically taken from Ibn al-ʿArabī's Sufism, into Ibn al- Fāriḍ's verses? Moreover, is such an assimilation of Ibn al- Fāriḍ's poetry into Ibn al-ʿArabī's Sufism, though supported by many other commentators, historically correct and justified?[85]

As I hope the discussions above indicate, I believe Scattolin is mistaken here, misunderstanding the way Ibn al-Fariḍ's poetry works and the purpose of commentaries like al-Farghānī's.[86] According to the schema detailed above, there is not a single "original meaning" of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's verses, nor is al-Farghānī attempting to discover a single discursive meaning. The "original meaning" of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's lyrics is Layla herself or the Real Itself, the source of all meaning, and his poetry beautifully enfolds oceans of meaning springing from his own experiences of love, of treading the Sufi path, his own travel experiences, as well as numerous allusions to the Arabic poetic tradition, the Qur'an, and ḥadīth, all of which are generative of shoreless oceans of meaning. Just as the cosmos is composed of beautiful *ayāt*, signs, or *takhayyulāt,* imaginalizations, of the One, ineffable, Real that can be "read" and interpreted in a variety of ways, Ibn al-Fāriḍ's beautiful verses all allude to and symbolize different aspects of Layla and his experience of love for, annihilation in, and subsistence through Her.

Commentaries like al-Farghānī's are not meant to "tie-down" Ibn al-Fāriḍ's verses to a single interpretation,[87] but rather, by translating them from one system of metaphors to another, from the romantic, lyrical language of the *ghazal* or qaṣīda to the more philosophical language of Ibn al-ʿArabī's systems and arguments, it hopes to elucidate the realities to which both systems of metaphors point and give the reader keys for further interpretation. Analogously, Ibn al-ʿArabī explains that the prophet Yusūf's dreams didn't "come true" when his parents and brothers bowed before him, but rather the same reality was manifest in two different presences of imagination (*khayāl*), the waking state and the dreaming state, and so both are merely related,

84 Ibn al-Fāriḍ, *Dīwān,* 143.

85 Scattolin, "The Key Concepts of al-Farghānī's Commentary on Ibn al-Fāriḍ's Sufi Poem," 35.

86 As Homerin, Meisami, and Frishkopf (amongst others) have amply demonstrated, the notion of and concern with "original meaning" and individual, authorial intent is a particularly modern, Western concern of literary analysis that does not always travel well to the literatures of other times and places, not least of all, classical Islamic poetry (see Frishkopf, "Authorship in Sufi Poetry").

87 This corresponds to a common misunderstanding of Ibn al-ʿArabī's work a representing "a mystical system," when in fact, Ibn al-ʿArabī is a profoundly anti-systematic writer who attempts to "untie the knots" of all systems, leading readers to the bewilderment (*ḥayra*) of the dynamic station of no-station (*maqam lā-maqām*) in which the perfect receptivity of the person's heart mirrors the Absolute nondelimitation of the Real. See Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge,* 1–33, 375–81.

mutually-illuminating dreams that "come true" only in the Real.[88] Sufi commentaries like those of al-Farghānī or al-Tilimsānī or al-Nābulusī reflect the insights these verses provoked for these commentators at a particular time, which they express in various ways, typically through recourse to Ibn al-ʿArabī's terms and arguments, but often by referring to other verses of Sufi poetry, references to the Qur'an, ḥadīth, Sufi sayings, and arguments form other Islamic disciplines such as *kalām* (theology), *falsafa* (philosophy), *uṣūl al-fiqh* (jurisprudence), and even *naḥū* (grammar). The mistake Scattolin and so many other scholars make when approaching these commentaries is that they conflate these explanations with the trans-discursive realities to which they allude.[89] *Al-majāz qanṭarat al-ḥaqīqa,* "the metaphor is the bridge of the reality," and these commentaries represent so many other bridges of metaphors constructed by the commentators to help the readers access the realities alluded to by these verses. As al-Ghazālī writes in the first chapter of his *Mishkāt al-Anwār*: "From here the gnostics climb from the lowlands of metaphor to the highlands of reality, and they perfect their ascent. Then they see-witnessing with their own eyes – that there is none in existence save God and that 'Everything is perishing except His face' [28:88]."[90] These commentaries do not abolish the outward form of the poem, just as the *ḥaqīqa* does not abolish the *sharīʿa* in Ibn al-ʿArabī's perspective. For example, al-Ghazālī writes:

> Do not suppose from this example and this way of striking similitudes that I permit the abolishing of outward meanings and that I believe in their nullification, so that I would say, for example, that Moses did not have two sandals, and that he did not hear God address him with the words, 'Doff your two sandals (20:12).' God forbid!. Those who look only at the outward are literalists, those who look only at the inward are Bāṭinites, and those who bring the two together are perfect.[91]

However, these misreadings of the commentaries are also instructive of the advantages of the poetic form of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's qaṣīdas over the prose of these commentaries. It is much easier to misread these prosaic commentaries as "tying down" and fixing definitions to the realities they are trying to discuss, allude to, and put into concepts (and the more prosaic they are, the easier it is to misunderstand them in this way) than Ibn al-Fāriḍ's beautiful verse, the very form of which reflects and communicates something of the beauty of these realities. As Boullata writes in his seminal article on Ibn al-Fāriḍ's "arabesque" style:

> Writing the ode in this state, the poet offers what may be called an "objective correlative," to use the language of T. S. Eliot. What he presents as meaning is presented in a style that embodies the meaning. Elements of order and harmony predominate in the style of this passage which speaks about order and harmony. The verbal patterns in it are not mere otiose or superfluous ornamentation but are themselves an expression of the meaning intended [...]
>
> As the structure begins to build up a montage of semantic effects, one begins to sense that the patterning of ideas and of words leads to a construction of a harmonious whole. Artistic symmetry and balance begin to express spiritual harmony and order. A Sufi vision of the world emerges. Based on Islamic tenets, it expresses a mystic view of God and the universe in which art and thought blend to create impressions of unity and infinity as they comprehend physical plurality and phenomenal multiplicity within an eternity of harmony and order that evoke no other art as strongly as they do arabesque. It may be said indeed that verbal arabesque has been used here to describe mystical union: style and meaning have coalesced.[92]

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88 In his commentary on this section of the *Fuṣūs*, Al-Kāshānī writes, "As for Muhammad, he regarded the sensible forms existing in the outer world also as products of imagination (*khayaliyah*), nay even as imagination within imagination. This because he regarded the present world of ours as a dream while the only 'reality' (in the true sense of the word) was, in his view, the Absolute revealing itself as it really is in the sensible forms which are nothing but so many different loci of its self-manifestation. This point is understood only when one wakes up from the present life which is a sleep of forgetfulness after one dies to this world through self-annihilation in God." qtd. in Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism*, 10.

89 In another work on al-Farghānī's commentary, Scattolin writes, "On this basis we could consider Ibn ʿArabī's vision a kind of 'demythologization' of Islamic thought, since philosophical concepts are adopted in it as the true meaning and interpretation of revealed words and symbols" (Scattolin, "al-Farghānī's Commentary on al-Tāʾiyyat al-Kubrā," 375). Anyone with more than a cursory knowledge of Ibn al-ʿArabī's own writings and his insistence on multivalent, both/and modes of interpretation (e.g. "seeing with two eyes") would realize that this is far off the mark. In fact, Ibn al-ʿArabī is highly critical of such stances, which he attributes to the *falāsifa* and some theologians (*mutakallimūn*). For example, refer to Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 356–4.

90 Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, 16.

91 Ibid., 32.

92 Boullata, "Verbal Arabesque," 162, 166.

The sense one gets from these commentaries (and especially Ibn al-Fāriḍ's own metapoetic verses) is that his poetry is akin to a telescope or vehicle or intoxicating substance or mirror that enables listeners and readers to explore the mysteries of human selfhood, the Divine, love, and spiritual realization. As Eve Feuillebois explains 'Ayn al-Quḍāt Hamadānī's theory of three levels of understanding the relationship between poetic form and meaning:

> Some individuals strive to uncover the meaning through the form by going beyond the latter. For others, the meaning is only attainable through the form. For the most advanced group, when the soul has reached perfection, it no longer perceives any difference between form and meaning. The audition and interpretation of poetry relate to the third mode of perception. Herein arises the theory of the poetry-mirror: poetry has neither an intrinsic value nor a specifically defined meaning, it is only meaningful to a given person at a given moment; it is the reflection of the soul and the spiritual state. Once recited by the poet, it is freed from any relation to its author and assumes diverse significations according to the ear upon which it falls.[93]

In Hamadānī's own words:

> "O chevalier! Take these poems to be like a mirror. After all, you know that in a mirror there is no form in itself—but whoever looks at the mirror will be able to see his own form. Likewise, you should know that poetry in itself has no meaning at all—but anyone can discern his present state and own perfection from it. If you were to say that the meaning of poetry is what the poet wants it to be and that others can derive other meanings from it, that would be like someone saying, "The form of the mirror is the face of the polisher whose form first appears in it."[94]

Just as a polished mirror enables us to see our eyes, which would otherwise be invisible to us, Ibn al-Fāriḍ's polished poetry allows us to explore the ineffable mysteries of the depths of our own consciousness, its relationship to the Divine, and the love that drives it all. The distinct poetic diction of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's verse, with its intricate and wonder-inducing wordplay, multiple levels and shades of meaning, musicality, beauty, and allusions, makes it a fitting container for the formless wine of recognition (*ma'rifa*).

Just as Majnun transformed Layla into intoxicating love poetry and the burning bush transformed Moses, the special alchemy of Ibn al-Fāriḍ's verse transforms his spiritual realization into a kind of intoxicating wine that allows its readers to virtually participate in his union with Layla. Remembering that Laylā literally means a kind of intoxication, what al-Qayṣarī writes of the wine described in Ibn al-Fāriḍ's *khamriyya* also applies to the love of Layla as well as its embodiment in Ibn al-Fāriḍ's verse:

> [...] by means of it, the drinker loses his sense of self as all of the properties of his human nature disappear along with his natural traits regarding the designations of actions, characteristics and essence. For the ruling property of duality disappears from him as he becomes one with the Divine Essence that was from the beginning when there was nothing with it.[95]

Or as Ibn al-Fāriḍ himself writes:

وما زِلْتُ إيَّاها وإيايَ لَمَ تَزَلْ ولا فَرْقَ بل ذاتي لذاتي أحَبَّتِ[96]

I was forever She and She was forever I
No distinction, rather, my essence loved my essence.

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93 Feuillebois-Pierunek, "Persian Mystical Literary Theories," 17.
94 ʿAyn al-Quḍāt, *Nāmahā*, vol. 1, p. 260, para 350) qtd. in Rustom, "Sleepers Awake! Rumi on the People of the Cave."
95 Homerin, *Sufi Life, Saintly Verse*, 55.
96 Ibn al-Fāriḍ, *Dīwān*, 93.

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