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AVICENNA'S *RISÂLA FÎ ʿL-ʿIŠQ* AND COURTLY LOVE

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COURTLY love as the principal theme of the lyrics of the troubadours appeared in the south of France around A.D. 1100. The essential characteristics of courtly love are the belief in the ennobling force of love, the elevation of the beloved woman above the lover, and the restriction of "true" love to a ceaseless desire that is never to be realized. Also, courtly love is love for love's sake.

The origins of this concept have been widely argued. Arab influence on form and style of troubadour lyrics has been ascertained beyond doubt. The underlying ideology still challenges investigation.

Recently, Father Alexander Denomy asserted that it was not in Arabic literature but rather "in Arabian philosophy and specifically in the mystical philosophy of Avicenna" that the roots of courtly love are to be found. Denomy points out that in his *Treatise on Love* Avicenna "assigns to human love, the love of the sexes, a positive and contributory role in the ascent of the soul to divine love and union with the divine." Overcoming the traditional separation of the orbits of activity of the animal and rational souls in man and the consequent separation of natural

and spiritual love, Avicenna "assigned to the lower soul a role of partnership with the rational soul whereby love of external beauty, sexual love, served as an aid in approaching the divine. Joined to the rational soul, the animal soul gained in excellence and nobility through its alliance with the higher faculty." The morality of man's love is contingent on its aiding his progress toward union with the absolute Good.¹ In Avicenna's own words: "Whenever (man) loves a pleasing form with an intellectual consideration . . . then this is to be considered as an approximation to nobility and an increase in goodness. For he covets something whereby he will come nearer to the influence of that which is the First Source of influence and the First Object of love, and more similar to the exalted and noble beings. And this will dispose him to grace, generosity and kindness."²

Clearly, of the four elements of courtly

¹ Summarized from A. J. Denomy, *The Heresy of Courtly Love* (New York, 1947), pp. 29-32.

² *Risâla ft ʿl-ʿišk*, ed. A. F. von Mehren in: *Traitées mystiques d'Avicenne*, III (Leiden, 1894), 15; trans. E. L. Fackenheim, *Mediaeval Studies*, VII (1945), 221. Very different is Avicenna's treatment of love as a sickness in his *Canon*. Cf. H. Crohns, *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte*, III (1905), 66-86, esp. pp. 71-75, who analyses Avicenna's position and finds it its proper place in the history of medicine.

love, only its ennobling power is directly posited and explained by Avicenna's reasoning, although the idea of "love for love's sake" as well as the exaltation of the beloved lady can be traced in Arabic literature (but not in Arabic philosophy) two centuries and more before Avicenna wrote. The concept of love as desire never to be fulfilled is at times implied by the poets but never endowed with the weight of a doctrine. It is, however, inherent in the idea of desire as a motive force of self-purification and the ascent of the soul toward the divine which is central to the ethics of Neo-Platonism. One feels tempted to see in the extension to earthly love and the attribution to it of a moral—not to say, pedagogical—effect the secularization of that nostalgia of the soul for God which, in Plotinus' thought, is congenitally inherent in the soul as a need to rise through self-spiritualization in the hierarchy of beings from its ambiguous position in this life to the incessant contemplation of the One, of Being itself.³

Did Avicenna then attempt in his *Treatise on Love* to erect a philosophical foundation for the Arab counterpart of courtly love? Or is his analysis to be understood as an essay in psychology (in the sense the term had in his time)?

There is no evidence in the treatise itself to indicate that Avicenna was oriented toward literature when he wrote it. The tightly knit presentation suggests that Avicenna was applying his general doctrine of the soul and its constituent parts to a specific problem or phenomenon and trying to find its proper place within his system. Throughout the treatise he operates with concepts more fully set forth in other (and presumably earlier) works of his. He adds to his doctrine by further

division of the parts of the soul and attunes it delicately to the problem on hand. But love is not the point of departure of his thinking. In the larger context of the history of Arab psychology, it has been Avicenna's special achievement to uncover a hierarchic harmony of the higher and the lower parts of the soul where his predecessors had been able to view their relationship but in terms of a permanent antagonism. The moral duty for Avicenna is no longer the suppression of the lower parts but rather their integration in the soul's struggle toward perfection. As long as direction remains with the rational part, the animal soul has its legitimate function and man's perfectibility is not identified with his power to crush it. In historical terms—and somewhat overstated—the step taken by Avicenna could be termed a shift from a Platonic to an Aristotelian attitude.⁴

Ibn Sinâ was not without precedent when he decided to treat of love. The *Theology of Aristotle*,⁵ Jâhîz and al-Kindî in the ninth, Ibn Dâ'ûd az-Zâhirî, Fârâbî and the Iḥwân aş-Şafâ in the tenth century, had dealt with the subject more or less systematically. Kindî's study is lost; Jâhîz does not probe below the surface of anecdote and conventional character description; the *Theology of Aristotle's* and Fârâbî's concern with love is only incidental. Ibn Dâ'ûd (d. 297/909), the son of the founder of the Zâhirî *madhab* and himself a jurist of this rite, has knowledge of Hellenistic philosophy but is no philosopher. Rather he is a lover of the sentimental, "courtly" type who tries to articulate his emotion by illustrating it

⁴ Similarly, Fackenheim, *loc. cit.*, p. 211.

³ For the concept of *desire* in Neo-Platonism cf. especially R. Arnou, *Le désir de Dieu dans la philosophie de Plotin* (Paris, n.d. [1921]).

⁵ P. Kraus, *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, CXIII (1936), 211–12, agrees with A. Baumstark that the *Theology of Aristotle* was composed by a Syriac writer belonging to the Neo-Platonizing Jacobites of the sixth century who used extracts from Plotinus *Enneads* iv–vi in the recension of Porphyry. It was translated into Arabic ca. 225–235/840–850.

through sayings and verse of kindred hearts. He conveys his own views mostly through the chapter headings that are reminiscent functionally not only of the *tarājim* through which Buḥārī in the *Ṣaḥīḥ* suggests his own outlook but of the *lemmata* in which a Western jurist like the bishop Anselm of Lucca discreetly puts forward his theories in his collection of canons.⁶

The two remaining tracts, Ibn Sīnā's *Risāla* and that forming part of the Encyclopaedia of the Iḥwān,⁷ are philosophical works in the strict sense of the term and worlds away from the literary reflections of that love attitude for which, in certain respects at least, they offered the theoretical foundation. In fact, as consultation of the largest poetical anthology of the period, Ta'ālībī's (d. 429/1038) *Yatīmat ad-dahr* (with its supplement, the *Tatīmma*), will readily show, "romantic" love no longer inspired much of contemporary poetry when Avicenna wrote. Tauḥīdī (d. 414/1023) comments on the romantization of love in the good old days and attributes its decline in part to the excessive sensuality of the present generation and in part to the disillusionment with the Bedouin among whom the poets had been wont to place their romantic lovers.⁸ Even Ibn Dā'ūd had had to illustrate his tenets largely with verse composed by poets one or two centuries his seniors. Indeed, the poetry of love and the thinking about love had been contiguous only in the early ninth century.

Mas'ūdī⁹ tells of a *majlis* in Yahyà b. Ḥālid al-Barmakī's palace in which twelve Muslims and one *mōbad* present in

sententious form their views on the nature of love. The historicity of the session is hardly relevant. The conformity of the ideas expressed with those proffered by the poet, al-ḌAbbās b. al-Aḥnaf (d. 190/806), is too striking not to guarantee, by and large, their contemporaneity albeit not their attribution to the individual thinkers named by Mas'ūdī.¹⁰ It is, of course, not the stylistic peculiarities of ḌAbbās' verse that are paralleled by the speakers in the *majlis* but their ideological background. So their comparison will not adequately describe ḌAbbās' amatory lyrics; it will, however, document the intellectual harmony that, at this point in the development of Arabic literature, obtained between love as conceived by the thinker and by the poet, a harmony which was, in the East at least, never again to be achieved.

These are the personalities which Mas'ūdī introduces as speakers:

- (1) ḌAlī b. al-Haiṭam, an *imāmī* and one of the *mutakallamīn* of the Shī'a;¹¹
- (2) al-Mālik al-Ḥaḍramī, a *ḥārījī* of the *ṣurāt*;¹²
- (3) Muḥammad b. al-Ḥudāil al-ḌAllāf, leader of the Mu'tazila of Baṣra, d. 226/841 or 235/850, almost a hundred years old;
- (4) Ḥiṣām b. al-Ḥakam al-Kūfi, the *ṣaiḥ al-imāmiyya fī waqti-hi*, d. 199/814;
- (5) Ibrāhīm b. Sayyār an-Nazzām, *mu'tazilī* of Baṣra, d. 231/845;
- (6) ḌAlī b. Maṣṣūr, *imāmī* and *ṣāḥib* of (4);¹³

⁶ *Murūj ad-dahab* (Paris, 1861-79), VI, 368-86. The edition, Cairo, 1303/1885, II, 202-3, records only four of the thirteen views on love included by the Paris edition.

¹⁰ The special position of al-ḌAbbās b. al-Aḥnaf's work in Arabic love poetry has first been pointed out by J. Hell, *Islamica*, II (1926), 271-307.

¹¹ He appears in a discussion about Shī'ism before Ma'mūn in 205/820; cf. Ṭabari, *Annales*, III, 1040 = Aḥmad b. abī Ṭāḥir Ṭaifūr, *History*, ed. trans. H. Keller (Leipzig, 1908), p. 28 (trans. p. 13).

¹² Perhaps identical with Abū Mālik al-Ḥaḍramī, who appears among the *rawāfiq* in Aṣ'arī, *Maqālat al-islāmiyyin*, ed. H. Ritter (Istanbul, 1929-30), p. 42.

¹³ Cf. *Maqālat*, p. 63.

⁶ Cf. C. Erdmann, *Die Entstehung des Kreuzzugs-gedankens* (Stuttgart, 1935), pp. 225-26. Anselm's *Collectio Canonum* was prepared between 1081 and 1086.

⁷ Ed. Bombay, 1305/1887, III, 63-75.

⁸ *Kitāb al-imtā' wa'l-mu'ānasa* (Cairo, 1939-44), II, 55-56.

- (7) Muṭamir b. Sulaimān, *muṭazilī*, d. 187/803;¹⁴
 (8) Biṣr b. al-Muṭamir, *muṭazilī*, d. 210/825;
 (9) Tūmāma b. Aṣras, *muṭazilī*, d. 213/828;
 (10) as-Sakkāl, *imāmi* and *ṣāhib* of (4);¹⁵
 (11) aṣ-Ṣabbāḥ b. al-Walid, *murjiʿī*;
 (12) Ibrāhīm b. Malik, an "independent" from Baṣra, juriconsult;¹⁶
 (13) an unidentified *mōbad*.

These men are jointly and severally credited with the following ideas. In twelve out of fifteen instances it has been possible to indicate matching ideas from the *dīwān* of al-ʿAbbās b. al-Aḥnaf (printed in Constantinople, 1298; the references are to pages and lines).

(i) Love is the result of a *muṣākala* between lover and loved: 1, 2 (it originates *bi-ẓ-dīwāj an-nafsain wa-mtizāj aš-šaklain* and it indicates *tamāzuḥ ar-rāḥain*), 4 (it originates *min i-tidāl aṣ-ṣūra wa-takāfu fī ʿt-tariqa wa-mulāʿama fī ʿl-himma*), 6 (it originates *min nāḥiyat al-muṭābaqa wa-l-mujānasa fī ʿt-tarkīb wa-ṣ-šanʿa*), 7 (it originates through *muṣākala* and *muṣābaha*), 9 (*muṣākala*, *munāsaba*, *muṣākana* of the *jawāhir an-nufūs*), 10 (*musāmaḥa*, *munāsaba*, *tajānus*), 11 (*tašākul*), 13 (love causes the *tamāzuḥ al-arwāḥ*).—ʿAbbās: 133.18, 139.5; love indicates the commingling of the souls or makes the two lovers like body and soul: 7.7; 42.18; 48.11–12; 58.7; 60.2–3; 63.3.

(ii) The subtlety of love (its *latāfa* or *riqqa*): 1, 2, 3, 5 (the last three by indirection: love penetrates the heart like rain the interstices between grains of sand, and like similes).

(iii) Love is limitless: 3.

¹⁴ Cf. J. Schacht, *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* (Oxford, 1950), p. 346; not to be confused with Muṭamir b. Sulaimān at-Taimī, d. 143/760; cf. Ibn an-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, p. 183²³ and II, 74.

¹⁵ Probably mistake for as-Sakkāk known to have disputed with Jaʿfar b. Ḥarb (d. 236/850); on as-Sakkāk cf. *Maqālat*, pp. 63 (where he appears with Hīšām b. al-Ḥakam) and 213, and W. M. Watt, *Free Will and Predestination in Early Islam* (London, 1948), pp. 56–57.

¹⁶ Perhaps identical with Ibrāhīm b. Malik b. Biḥbūd al-Bazzāz (d. 264/877–8; cf. al-Ḥaṭīb al-Baghaddādī, *Taʿrīḥ Baghdād* (Cairo, 1349/1931), VI, 186 (No. 3241).

(iv) Excessive love will damage the body: 1, 7.—ʿAbbās: 2.8a; 6.15; 122.18; 123.22.

(v) Love is magic: 2.—ʿAbbās: 23.9 (the beloved is *as-sāḥir al-ḥalūb*); 25.8; 71.8–9; 76.5; 79.17.¹⁷

(vi) Love is more hidden than the heat in the coal and hotter than such heat: 2, 11.—ʿAbbās: 11.3; 42.8; 49.22; 55.13; 79.8; 152.18.

(vii) Love's omnipotence and control of reason: 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8 (it renders the lover worthless and a slave of his desires), 10 (it is overpowering like drunkenness).—ʿAbbās: 54.7; 162.14–16.

(viii) Only the noble will love: 3, 4, 10 (love ennobles), 11, 13.—ʿAbbās: 70.6; 86.2; 107.19; 112.3; 125.11.

(ix) Love's affinity with death: 3, 4.—ʿAbbās: 15.14; 110.16; 113.15.

(x) Love paralyzes eloquence: 3.—ʿAbbās: 43.2.

(xi) The lover is enslaved: 4.—ʿAbbās: 12.12; 26.2; 47.9; 108.16; 162.11 (the beloved is *maulāt-ī*).

(xii) The lover is humbled before his beloved: 4, 8, 10 (humiliation precedes his triumph).—ʿAbbās: 37.12.

(xiii) Love's destructive power is beyond cure: 5, 6, 7.—ʿAbbās: 7.2; 7.23.

(xiv) The lover suffers: 4 (melancholy; sleeplessness; his complaints are his only nourishment), 7 (he suffers either from separation or from fear of the slanderers, *wuṣāt*), 8.—ʿAbbās: numerous examples, e.g. 22.11; 58.10; 97.9–13; 138.10–11. In 22.13 ʿAbbās declares love the most noble cause of destruction.

(xv) From the harmony of the souls a light originates that warms the sources of life. The pure flame that attaches itself to the soul is called love: 9; cf. 13: love is a fire originating in the pericardium.¹⁸

The interest in creating an unambiguous terminology of the several grades and

¹⁷ Cf. also *Theology of Aristotle*, ed. F. Dieterici (Leipzig, 1882), p. 72, where the craft of the magician, *ṣināʿat as-sāḥir*, is contrasted with the natural "magical" attraction exercised by a beautiful woman on a man.

¹⁸ Of the ideas that had influenced contemporary love poetry and that are conspicuously absent in the pronouncements of the thirteen, reference needs to be made to that of the Martyr of Love and to that of *militat omnis amans*.

shades of love which is clearly visible as early as Jâḥiẓ continues down to Avicenna's period,¹⁹ although personally he does not seem to have shared it. It was, however, taken up and developed in the Muslim West, where by his time the ideology of "romantic" love had found its center of growth—in its theory as well as in its literary representations. Pure and ennobling (but concupiscent) love, a modified *ḥubb ʿudrî*, which had already in the ninth century introduced its imagery and phraseology into mystical poetry,²⁰ found together with the cult of passion as man's decisive experience its most brilliant spokesman in Andalusia in the person of Ibn Ḥazm (384/994—456/1064). Like Ibn Dâʿūd of Baghdād more than a century before him, Ibn Ḥazm of Cordova combined a taste for belles-lettres and the cultivation of the emotive life with a rigoristic attitude in theology. He may have written his beautiful *Ṭauq al-ḥamâma* while still affiliated with the Shâfiʿites. But the fact that he, like Ibn Dâʿūd in his day, became the leading exponent of the *Zâhirî madḥab* retains its significance in any case.²¹

Mundîr b. Saʿîd al-Bollûṭî (born in 265/878–9),²² who seems to have been responsible for the introduction of the

¹⁹ Cf., e.g., Abû ʿl-Faṭḥ an-Nûsajânî (alive in 372/983), in Tauḥîdî, *Muqabbasât* (Cairo, 1347/1929), p. 363; for his lifetime cf. *ibid.*, p. 88. He is not mentioned by Samʿânî, *Ansâb*, p. 571a. *Imdâʿ*, II, 14, refers to one Abû Sulaimân an-Nûsajânî without further identifying him.

Taʿâlibî, *Fiqh al-luḡa* (Beirut, 1885), p. 171 (translated by B. Farès, *Revue des études islamiques*, X [1936], 223, n. 1), and Ibn Ḥazm, *Ṭauq* and *Kitâb al-aḥlâq* (analyzed by A. R. Nykl, in the Introduction to his translation of the *Ṭauq* [Paris, 1931], pp. xxv–xxvii), reflect the subtlety of the distinctions that had been developed in the terminology of love and passion when Avicenna composed his treatise.

²⁰ Cf. L. Massignon, *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, IV, 990.

²¹ It deserves notice that Ibn al-ʿArabî, too, followed the *Zâhirî* rite.

²² I. Goldziher, *Die Zâhiriten: Ihr Lehrsystem und ihre Geschichte* (Leipzig, 1884), p. 114, writes: Mundîr b. Ziyâd.

Zâhirî madḥab to the West and to Spain in particular, is known to have been interested in the love poetry of ʿUmar b. abî Rabîʿa²³ and has been described as a *šâʿir balāgh*.²⁴ He became *qâḍî ʿl-jamāʿa*, chief judge, in Cordova, and died in 355/966. His student was Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. al-Jasûr al-Umawî, of Cordova (319 or 320/931 or 932—26 Dû ʿl-Qaʿda 401/July 2, 1011), whom Ibn Baškuwâl describes as *adîban šâʿiran*.²⁵ Ibn Ḥazm²⁶ refers to him as his teacher; his function as carrier of *Zâhirite* influences has not, as far as I can see, been noted.²⁷ Muḥammad b. Sulaimân al-Ḥaulânî who came to Andalus as a merchant in 423/1032 was another representative *Zâhirî* contemporary with Ibn Ḥazm who is characterized by his biographer as *min ahl ad-dakâʾ wa-l-ḥifẓ wa-š-šîʿr al-ḥasan*.²⁸

It is of the greatest importance that Ibn Ḥazm never once in the *Ṭauq al-ḥamâma* either refers to Avicenna's *Treatise on Love* or expounds psychological views of the kind Avicenna developed in this treatise. In other words, as far as we can judge at this moment, the growth in Andalus of a love concept akin in several respects to that of courtly love is possibly to be explained by the influence of the cultural tradition of the *Zâhirîs*, but certainly not by that of Avicenna.

This observation affects Father Denomy's hypothesis only indirectly. More directly relevant may be the fact that the *Risâla fî ʿl-ʿiṣq* was not known to the

²³ Maqqarî, *Analectes sur l'histoire et la littérature des Arabes d'Espagne*, ed. R. Dozy et al. (Leiden, 1855–61), I, 808.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, I, 240; nine verses of his, I, 241.

²⁵ *Kitâb aṣ-ṣila*, ed. F. Codera (Madrid, 1883), I, 24–25 (No. 37).

²⁶ *Ṭauq al-ḥamâma*, ed. D. K. Pétrof (Leiden, 1914), pp. 136ⁿ and 144ⁿ.

²⁷ Cf. e.g., C. van Arendonk, *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, II, 384.

²⁸ Ibn Baškuwâl, II, 541 (No. 1196).

European Middle Ages. Avicenna's psychology, of course, was. But the translation of *De anima*²⁹ is to be dated between 1135 and 1153.

Furthermore, a Latin counterpart of Avicenna's *Treatise on Love* was accessible to the age of the early troubadours in Apuleius' *De Platone*, Book ii, on love as a source of good; and with it, the period possessed the Latin *Asclepius*, often attributed to Apuleius, where "pious carnal love" is discussed.³⁰

In postulating Eastern influences to account for a phenomenon of Western culture in the period under consideration, it is frequently not sufficiently thought out what it means that, to a very large extent, medieval Orient and medieval Occident arose from the same roots. (Neo-)Platonism, for one thing, is an integral component of that common intellectuality of the post-classical Mediterranean world which survived as an active and vital element in all three of its succes-

or cultures, the Latin, the Byzantine and the Muslim. The Pseudo-Areopagite in the Greek- (and Syriac-) speaking East, then Eriugena (*ca.* 815-*ca.* 877) in the West, finally Avicenna and his predecessors in the Arabic East mark successive high points in the medieval development of this particular constituent of the common heritage.

When Europe allowed herself to be affected by Avicennian philosophy, she welcomed a more fully matured offshoot of a seed that had, in earlier days, borne fruit on occidental soil. The interaction between East and West in the Middle Ages will never be correctly diagnosed or correctly assessed and appraised unless their fundamental cultural unity is realized and taken into consideration. It is that essential kinship of East and West that will account both for Europe's receptiveness to Arabic thought and to the (more or less) independent growth in the Occident of ideas and attitudes that on first sight appear too closely akin to their oriental counterparts not to be attributed to mere borrowing.

UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

²⁹ Constituting one part of the *Physics* contained in the *Šifa*.

³⁰ Cf. Th. Silverstein, *Modern Philology*, XLVII (1949), 123; on p. 118, Silverstein gives a complete list of Denomy's studies on Courtly Love.