

In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful.

In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful.
All praise is due to Allah, the Lord of the Worlds.
The Beneficent, the Merciful.
Master of the Day of Judgment.
Thee do we serve and Thee do we beseech for help.
Keep us on the right path.
The path of those upon whom Thou hast bestowed favors.
Not (the path) of those upon whom Thy wrath is brought down,
nor of those who go astray.



Mehdi de Graincourt

ON THE PATH OF IBN AL-'ARABI,
THE REVELATIONS
IN FEZ AND MARRAKESH

Preface by Jibrâil Mandel Khân



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AL-ANDALUS



*O Lord, let me enter
the depths of the Ocean
of Your infinite unity.*

Ibn al-'Arabi, Prayer.

UNTITLED, oil on canvas,
Gharbaoui, 1969.

The Farid Ben Bark Collection, "Fulgurances Gharbaoui", Fondation ONA Editions.

MY CHILDHOOD IN MURCIA

Our house was right in the heart of Murcia, in the middle of a maze of streets. High windowless walls protected the enclosed gardens from prying eyes. At the centre of each patio, water flowed from marble fountains and then followed little channels to the square flower beds where jasmines and roses bloomed. In springtime, I loved to hear the humming and buzzing of innumerable bees, wonderful bees who gave us the honey that we used as food and to heal sores. I loved to listen to birdsong and the cooing of turtle doves; my mother used to say their cooing was a prayer. "Listen my son", she would say, "The doves are saying *al-Ḥamdulillāh yā Rab!*, ceaselessly praising Allah". That is how I discovered that animals have their own language, and that they too, offer up thanks to their Creator, as do flowers, speaking to us through their scent. Often the lemon tree would enthrall me with its delicious scent, sometimes light and summery, sometimes heavy and brooding, reflecting the mood of the tree, for it too felt sorrow and happiness.

Living within a garden in this way taught me to listen with open ears, to understand more than just our own language. And then, high above, above our house, the sky, full of clouds and dazzling sunlight. The pattern of each day followed the sound of the call to prayer from the minaret. From a very early age, I would walk the thirty or so metres from our house to the mosque. I would remove my shoes, wash in the stone basin and then unroll my prayer mat on the plaited straw floor covering of the mosque. These were peaceful, happy moments. The old imam spoke in a scratchy voice and coughed constantly, but it was of no consequence. I could sense the existence of another world; a universe of love and plenty.

I would feel this same access of love and devotion when my father harnessed his horses. *Mbaraka* filled baskets with provisions and the whole family set off together to a farm and some orchards that my father owned, a few leagues from the city. The air was fresh and soft, it was almost Spring and my heart was filled with joy. Nature enchanted me; men working in the fields, orchards full of blossom. We would settle down under a group of palm-trees, and I would taste each moment of such happiness. All these moments were thanks to the wisdom of my father who wanted to escape the palace and the watchful eyes of the prince. He too needed to feel the earth between his fingers; and we shared these moments of peace and tranquillity. It was rare for men of his class to be so close to their wives and families. Customs were quite liberal in Murcia, but nevertheless the usual thing was for women to spend their time amongst themselves and for men to stay with their friends. Of course, my father respected these customs; he just bent the rules a little bit because he wanted to be with us. He would tell me that in Allah's eyes there is no difference between men and women. There was nothing shocking about wise and literate women according to him, quite the opposite. He respected poetesses and erudite women who studied science, and even those who posed questions to the stars. In order to convince me, he would recite the names of queens and concubines, sometimes even the names of slaves who became favourites. He



KALĪLA WA DIMNA,
13th century Persian or Turkish manuscript.
Bibliothèque Royale, Rabat.

THE KING WHO BECAME AN ASCETIC

My mother was a Berber princess. Everything about her was proof of her nobility, from her delicate features and her pale complexion that emotion caused to blush a momentary pale pink colour to her calm deliberate movements. Her hair was arranged in the style of the court, with long plaits folded onto each other to form an elegant chignon covered by a light veil, almost transparent. She kept a great deal of jewellery and gold parures in wooden caskets, but rarely did she wear them. No doubt her innate simplicity sprang from her childhood in Tlemcen, where she had grown up in close contact with Nature. She would tell me of long horse rides, and strolls through villages; she would visit country dwellings and share a bowl of milk and a few dates with the villagers.

Her departure for Andalusia felt like an exile, for she had never met my father, to whom she had been given in marriage. Alliances forged by marriage to Andalusian nobles were regarded as highly desirable, as they offered opportunities for lucrative trade links. Love was out of the question, and yet, "When I saw your father for the first time, my heart began to beat so fast, he was so handsome, with his black beard, his sparkling eyes and his hawk-like nose. I should never have consented to live enclosed in a harem and he trusted me from the very beginning. I love him and I admire him. He has never taken other wives. He used to say that the Prophet, peace be upon him, only allowed believers to take other wives if they could treat them all equally, and then he would say that his heart was filled with thoughts of me and that no other woman could take my place."

I grew up in this atmosphere of mutual respect. I could have become like so many other children of rich parents, interested in nothing but wealth but I had the example of my father, who never made use of his position in the royal household for personal ends, and of my mother who avoided ostentation of any kind. She would also tell me about her brother, Prince *Yahya ibn Yūghān al-Ṣanhāji*.

"When our father, the king, died, *Yahya* succeeded him. He became completely drunk on the power he had been so longing for. He was young, and Allah had given him gifts of intelligence and beauty. Although he was to be king, he had always submitted to his father. When he came before him, he bowed his head and knelt, kissing his hand. He, who had appeared to be so gentle, became cruel. He took revenge for all the years of suffering, having been kept away from the affairs of state. I tried to reason with him but I was nothing but his sister and he ignored my advice and my love for him. I prayed for him, asking God to open his eyes. I used to tell myself that this drunkenness, like any other drunkenness, would pass, and one day I would find him restored to his former self.

One day, as he went to the mosque at midday surrounded by his courtiers, he crossed paths with a hermit who lived alone, far from our city. His name was *Abū 'Abd Allah al-Tūnusī*. *Yahya* was dressed in all his finery, in clothes covered in embroidery like a woman's as he paraded amidst his court on his prancing





I had many teachers as I followed the Path. Some of them were inspired by the word of God, but some of them were not. There were those into whom He had breathed His grace, while there were others who searched endlessly, finding nothing. An illiterate man could have more science than a wiseman, and a woman could have as much as a man. A flower or a bird can also be a teacher: all we need to do is to observe them. The bird who sings His praises is pious, as is the flower that offers up its perfume.

Abū l-Ḥasan was one of those who shared their knowledge with me when I had just discovered the Path I was to follow. He was strict, but good. He always wore a brown burnous made of a thick prickly material and behaved in a rough and ready way that hid great gentleness. His Arab blood boiled in his veins yet he was a blend of enthusiasm and reserve, of passion and delicacy. He had not achieved all he hoped to achieve but he was sincere. Nevertheless, his imperfections made me impatient and caused me to become irritated in a way that I could not hide. One day, he told me about one of the town beggars whom he considered to be a wiseman. I disagreed violently with his opinion,

“No, master! The man you are talking about is nothing but a dirty, repulsive drunkard!”

“*Muḥyī al-Dīn*, your words surprise me! How can you, of all people, trust appearances? Do you not know that poverty is not just a question of clothes, that hidden beneath gold and silk there can be even greater dirt! Who has told you that this man whom you despise is not to be numbered among the friends of God?”

Of course, I agreed with *Abū l-Ḥasan*, when he spoke in general terms, but the man in question was so very repugnant, his scalp eaten away by ring-worm and his hands black with grime, his body giving off a foul smell while his breath stank of wine.

“God loves all His creatures, *Muḥyī al-Dīn*, every single one of them! Do you not believe that he who gives a coin to this man, he who offers him a bowl of soup, is doing a good deed? It is a *ḥasana* which will be accounted for on Judgement Day.”

I thought about the poor wretch, and how I would avoid him if I saw him in the distance. As I left my teacher that evening, I could not help feeling a sort of mounting indignation. I walked the streets, blue in the moonlight, when a raucous voice made me jump, “*Muḥyī al-Dīn!*”, I turned round. A pair of gleaming eyes glowed in the shadows. “Come, come closer!” I recognised him, it was the beggar, covered in rags.

“How do you know my name?”

He laughed, showing some black decaying teeth. As he approached me, I stepped back.

“*Muḥyī al-Dīn!* What if your teacher were right?”

“How do you know what *Abū l-Ḥasan* said to me?”

The beggar opened his arms, stretched them up towards the sky then lowered them, resting them on my shoulders and then folding me in his arms. Almost instantly, the disgusting smell that he gave off changed

*I reached the maqām of the Light in 593, in Fez,
during the communal afternoon prayer
in al-Azhar mosque.*

*I perceived it as a light that seemed to reveal
that which was in front of me; although on seeing it
I lost all notion of 'behind'.*

*I was no longer aware of my back
and during the vision I could not distinguish directions.*

*I was nothing but a sphere, so to speak,
only hypothetically, not physically,
aware of my position in space.*

Ibn al-'Arabi, Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya.



lifted my eyes to the person who had awakened me. It was *Muḥammad ibn Qāsim al-Tamīmī*, the imam of the mosque who had allowed me to take his place that day. He was standing close to me, holding a heavy book in his hand. "Now that the prayer has finished", he said, "come with me, I must speak to you." And he took me away with him. As we walked through the narrow streets, I felt the urge to tell him about this voyage that I had just experienced. But an inner voice advised me, "Keep quiet, keep quiet for the imam will not understand you! Sometimes silence is better than words". I accompanied *Muḥammad* to his house. We shared some fried batter dipped in honey, then, after quenching his thirst, the imam washed his hands and opened the book that he had written about the friends of Allah, who had lived in Fez, and whose tombs he intended to show me.

The next day, we went to *Ibn Ḥayyūn's* garden together. A wiseman called *Al-Qabā'ili* was waiting there for us. He was a foreigner, who had been born in Bougie and none of the savants who used to have such heated discussions on interpretations of the sacred Book paid him the slightest attention. I had already met him several times and I appreciated his humility and his gentle ideas. He never raised his voice. The night before, in a vision, Allah had revealed to me how dear this person was to Him. I could not keep my eyes off his right hand and his withered arm. *Al-Qabā'ili* noticed, and said to me "Ibn al-'Arabi, I can tell you that I do not long for the time when I when I was able to hold a *qalam* in my hand, and run it across the parchment! At that time, I was a sinner, I was blasphemous, I denied the existence of God. All these trials were necessary, a brutal fall to the ground during a fight and being run over by a cart, for Him to appear to me at last in all His glory. For such a revelation, I would have given up still more to Him! There is no price to be put on finding Him! And on the Day of Judgement, my body will be returned to me whole and healthy, and what is much more, my soul will be saved." I nodded but the others did not let me reply. They besieged me with questions, "Ibn al-'Arabi, in your opinion, which of us is the most outstanding in the eyes of Allah?" My eyes met those of *al-Qabā'ili*, who was trembling, but I said simply, "My brothers, God has allowed me to meet the man whose name you ask for, but I shall not reveal his name." When we parted, *al-Qabā'ili* came to me and embraced me. He held me in his arms for a long time. It was adieu, for we were never to see one another again in our lives on earth.



بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَى سَيِّدِنَا مُحَمَّدٍ وَآلِهِ وَسَلَّمَ

كِتَابُ خُصْبَةٍ

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

في كيفية ترتيب العالم وشكله
الحمد لله الذي ليس له أول ولا أولاد ولا أولاد
الذي له الأسماء الحسنى والصفات العلى الأرباب
الكبير ولا يساويه ولا أمر كباته ولا أرض مرجية ولا سماوات
العالم في العمارة بجميع المعلومات والقادر الذي لا يعجز
عن الجائزات المراد الذي لا يقصر فتعجزه المعجزات
المتكلم ولا حروف ولا اصوات السميع الذي يشع كلامه
ولا كلام مشع بالحروف والتعلمات البصير الذي رأى ذاته
ولا مرييات مطبوعة لزوات الحى الذي ويخت له مفان
الدوام الاحدي والمقام الصمد فتعال بهذه السمات
التي جعل الآسنان اشرف الموجودات واتت الكلمات
والصلاة على سيدنا محمد خيرا لبريات وسيد الجسمانيات والروانيات
وصاحب الوسيلة في الجنات الفر كوسيات والمقام
المجود في اليوم العظيم البليات الاله الرزيات
اما بعد لما شاء سبحانه ان يوجد الامثيان من غير موجود

وان يبرزها في اعيانها بما تقتضيه من الرسوم والحزود
لظهور سلطان الاعراض والخواص والفصول والانواع والاختصاص
الرافعين شبه الشكوك والرافعين حجب الالتباس بوسايط
العبارات الشارحة والصفات الرسمية والذاتية البيرة التباس
فجلى في صورة العلوم صور الجواهر المتمثلات والاعراض المختلفة
والمتمثلات والمتقابلات وفصل بين هذه الزوات بين
المتحيزات منها وغير المتحيزات ثم جلي في ذوات الاعراض
والجواهر صور الهيئات والحالات بالكميات وصور المقادير
والاوزان المتصلات والمنفصلات بالكميات وصور الادوار
والحركات الزمانية وصور الاقطار والاحكام الكانيات
والصور الحافظة الملاسلات نظائر العالم الحاملات اشباب
المناقب والمثالب الغرضيات واسباب المذامح والمخام
الشرعية واسباب الصلاح والفساد الوضعية الحكيميات
وصور الاضافات بين الماهيات والمملوط والآباء والابناء والبنات
وصور التليب بالعبيد والآباء والمخارجات والحسين والجمال
والعلم الداخليات وصور التوجهات الفعلية القائمة بالفاعلات
وصور المتفعلات التي بالفاعلات والفعل مرتبكات وقال



KALĪLA WA DIMNA,
13th century Persian or Turkish manuscript.
Bibliothèque Royale, Rabat.

It was *Majd al-Dīn* who really persuaded me to consort with kings. I had recognized him immediately when I saw him coming towards me in Mecca, in the year 600. Although I had never met him, God had already allowed me to see his face. It was a long time before, in the year 580, when I was leaving Algeciras to reach Ceuta, where *Sayidnā Mūsā* had joined forces with *al-Khidr* in order to rebuild the wall of the two orphans. Before setting off, I implored God to show me some of my future and to reveal to me what my destiny was to be. He sent me His messages in a dream and I saw a man opposite me. I heard his name: *Majd al-Dīn Ishāq ibn Yūsuf al-Rūmī*. He was tall, slender, with rough-hewn features and an extremely pale complexion. His body was a testament to his austerity. A fiery light like a lively flame blazed in his grave eyes. "This is the man who will be your companion!" said the voice.

I did not know that I would have to wait another twenty years. And when I met the man, he had aged; his face was deeply lined but if his eyes had changed it was only to blaze even more brightly.

He had come to accomplish the pilgrimage. He too had foreseen our meeting in a dream. We greeted one another and we embraced like brothers. Throughout my life, I have marvelled at the invisible threads that bind living creatures one to another, and at the chance encounters that make our hearts race. He asked me, "Which country do you come from, *Ibn al-'Arabī*?"

"From the Kingdom of the Almohads, which stretches from North Africa to Andalusia. And you, where do you come from?"

"I have come from Syria, but Syria is but my adoptive home. My true homeland is Anatolia."

A short time later, *Majd al-Dīn* received a long missive that affected him deeply. He handed it to me, his eyes brimming with tears. It bore the royal seal of *Kaykhusraw*, the Seljuk monarch of Anatolia. I stubbornly refused to read it.

"No, my friend, I have always remained apart from men who run the affairs of this world. I have no wish to know their secrets, or yours, nor do I want to know what binds you to one another!"

"Then at least share my joy! *Kaykhusraw*, who has been on the throne since 588, has only now come into his true power. Until now, and much against his will, he has had to share power with his enemy *Rukn al-Dīn*. Today he enjoins me to return from exile to my native country."

Majd al-Dīn gazed at me intently.

"God has put obstacles in my way for He wants to try my patience, and the hours of penitence will henceforth be forgotten. I am to see the land of my birth once again, my wife and my son."

Then he added,

"You, *Ibn al-'Arabī*, who are now my friend, do you believe that God brought us together only for us to part so soon? It is impossible, is it not? Accompany me on this long journey! My delight at seeing my loved ones again will be all the greater with you at my side."

Even though Allah had revealed my future to me when I set off for Ceuta so many decades ago, He only traced the outlines of my fortune. I myself am surprised at the turns my life has taken. I have nothing to complain of, quite the contrary! I praise Him and thank Him for these twists and turns.

When I was in my prime, I imagined that I would die one day at the roadside, an eternal pilgrim. I thought that my death would be the death of a vagabond with no attachments, no family, no roof over his head, like one of those madmen who roam aimlessly. Happily, I was quite wrong. For today, there is nothing I love more than my hearth and home, the presence of my wife, the laughter and squabbles of my children and my grand-children. As I come to the end of my years, I have given so much love as I made my way through life, a smile, a caress, a gentle look; and I have received so much love. God's love, of course, that it has pleased Him to bestow directly upon me, and also the love of His creatures, their love is a reflection of His love. He has sent me devoted and faithful companions, who have been my support in times of weariness and affliction. Each difficulty that has tested my faith has strengthened it. Light springs from them all. But above all, we must accept everything that comes our way, everything that passes through us. We are nothing but flutes, and He is the wind.

I knew that Damascus represented for me the end of the journey. I had crossed the sea, survived storms, worn out my sandals on so many roads, walked until my feet bled, until my eyes were blinded by the glare of the sun, exhausted by heat or shivering with cold. Mistreatment had hardened my body. Now it is only the weight of the passing years that bows my body, but I hold my head high, I look up to Him and address my praises to Him with greater conviction than ever.

Each stage in a man's life brings its own rewards. I do not mourn for the passing of my youthful liveliness, not for the strength I had in my prime. Remaining still and contemplating all around me is a joy that I taste now. And so it is that even though I no longer travel, except in my mind, I receive many visitors. Henceforth, their news suffices. Sometimes my wife tells them I am asleep. It is not true: I am writing, hidden away in a secluded room. I am nothing but His scribe. Nothing that I write originates within me; the words I write pass through me. I empty my mind, I send away all my thoughts and in the ensuing emptiness He speaks to me. And so it is and so it will be until I draw my last breath and my children shall withdraw the quill from my hand for the last time.

THE ARCHANGEL GABRIEL,
from "The Wonders of Creation", a manuscript from Egypt or Syria, 14th century.
The British Museum, London.



