



LOVE AND BEAUTY

*The Fire That Attracts and Consumes,
the Peace That Calms and Liberates*

He loves them and they love Him.

Quran 5:54

To God belong the most beautiful Names.

Quran 7:180

God, ever mighty and majestic is He, says:
“O child of Adam, it is thy right from Me that
I be a lover for thee. So, by My right from thee,
be for Me a lover.”¹

Hadīth

God is beautiful and He loves beauty.

Hadīth

The intelligent are the turning point of the
protractor of existence,
But love knows that they are confounded in
this circle.

Hāfiẓ, Dīwān



THE ROLE OF LOVE AND BEAUTY IN THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

Journeying on the road to the Garden of Truth requires not only acquiring and realizing unitive knowledge, but also being immersed in love and attracted to beauty at its highest level. God has made possible for us human beings to gain access to Him not only through knowledge but also through love and beauty. The Garden is the Garden of Truth, but it is also the Garden of Love, whose Beauty is above and beyond all that we can imagine or have experienced as lovable and beautiful here on earth. The Gardener is also the Beloved, who must not only be known but also loved and contemplated in Her infinite beauty, which consumes the beholder and leads to the ecstasy of union as well as ultimate peace. Men and women experience all kinds of love and behold many beautiful objects in this life here below, but most do not reach the Garden of Truth through such experiences. We must therefore ask ourselves what love and beauty are in the context of Sufism and why the Sufis, who emphasize so much principial and illuminative knowledge, speak so much of love and beauty, which are inextricably bound to each other.

Before answering these questions, it is of great value to quote a sacred saying of the Prophet concerning the relation of knowledge and love:

Who seeketh Me findeth Me.
Who findeth Me knoweth Me.
Who knoweth Me loveth Me.
Who loveth Me, him I love.
Whom I love, him I slay.
Whom I slay, him must I requite.
Whom I requite, Myself am his requital.²

The path to the Truth results in discovery of the Truth, which means knowledge of It. Moreover, the Truth is such that one cannot know It without loving It. And that love leads finally to the embrace of God, Who in turn loves those among His servants who love Him. In the metaphysical sense, however, it is God's love that precedes human love, as we shall see below.

THE NATURE OF LOVE

What good does it do to write about love? One has to experience love in order to understand what it is. As Rūmī said, when it comes to describing the nature of love, the pen breaks and ceases to write. Nevertheless, although dealing with words and concepts, writing about love can awaken a certain awareness in the mind and soul of the reader, which in turn can cause him or her to become prepared to experience love on some level. But love itself cannot be reduced to its description no matter how lucid and poetic, while at the same time words that have come from those who have really loved can bring about recollection and awaken within some people the love that resides within the soul of all men and women. The fire of love can become kindled through appropriate words if the substance of the soul is ready to burn in the fire of love, without which life becomes deprived of value, for again to quote Rūmī: "Whoever does not possess this fire, let him not exist."³

Let us start with the metaphysics of love. Love is part and parcel of reality. It is that which attracts beings to each other and to their Source. It is none other than the fire whose light illuminates and whose heat enlivens the heart and bestows life. It is also the storm that can turn the soul upside down and uproot ordinary existence. Love is life but can also be death. It involves yearning and pain of separation as well as the ecstasy of union. Love is also inseparable from existence in its modes. Not only in Christianity is God considered to be love, but according to the Quran also one of His Names is Love or *al-Wadūd*. And since love is part of the Divine Nature, all of existence, which issues from Him, is permeated by love. God is the light of the heavens and the earth, as the Quran asserts. The luminosity of this light is related to knowledge and its warmth to love. There is no realm of existence in which love is not found, save from a certain point of view on the human level, where God has given us the free will to love or not to love; but even on the human plane it can be said that even those who do not love God or the neighbor still love themselves. As far as the cosmos is concerned, love can be seen everywhere if only we become aware of its reality. The branches of trees grow in the direction of light because of love, and animals take care of their young as a result of love. Even the heavens move because of the force of love, which we reduce to the mere physical and quantitative and call gravity. As Dante wrote at the very end of the *Divine Comedy*, the ultimate spiritual union involves the experience

and realization of “*l’amor che move il sole e l’altre stelle*,” that is, “the love that moves the sun and the other stars.”⁴

Love flows in the arteries of the universe, as does grace, and we as human beings can and do love, the object of our love ranging from an earthly creature, particularly a person, to God Himself. But as already mentioned, in reality love originates with God and not with us. In his two basic commandments Christ ordered his followers first to love God who loves his creation and then to love the neighbor. The Quran provides the metaphysical basis of this love by asserting that God will bring a people “whom He loves and they love Him” (5:54). This verse, which has been quoted many times by Sufis writing about love, makes clear that first of all God loves His creation and as a consequence of this love we can love Him. Moreover, as the two commandments of Christ state, the love of God has primacy over the love of the neighbor, which means all creatures and not only human beings.

There are therefore, from the human point of view, stages of love understood metaphysically and as explained by the Sufis. There is first of all the love of God for Himself and then His Love for His creatures, including us, as a result of which love permeates the very substance of beings in all levels of existence. Subsequently, there is our love for the Divine, and finally there is our love for other beings, which for those who believe is derived from the love for God. This spiritual understanding of love therefore transcends the love of the ego for itself, a false love that has become habitual in most men and women. Only through this hierarchy and the relation between its various levels can the spiritual and transformative power of love, which can even transform the love of the ego for itself to the love for God and the other, be understood. But there is a further element of a more subtle nature involving the instrument as well as the content of revelation binding us to God. Can one love God as a Christian without loving Christ? The answer is quite obvious. The same truth holds for Islam, where the love for the Prophet is a prerequisite for the love of God. One might summarize this truth as follows: to love God, He must first love us, and God does not love the person who does not love His prophet or messenger and his message.

Since love originates in God and issues from Him, real love in this world is ultimately none other than the love for God. Early Christians spoke of *agape* and *eros* to distinguish divine and human or cosmic love, and this distinction is still central to much of Christian theology,

especially Catholic theology. The Sufis take a different route. They do not draw a sharp distinction between *agape* and *eros*, considering the second as a shadow of and also ladder to the first. Rather, they speak of real love (*al-‘ishq al-ḥaqīqī*), that is, the love of the human being for God, and metaphorical love (*al-‘ishq al-majāzī*), which includes all forms of love that appear to be outside and independent of the bond of love between God and human beings. According to this view, most of what we consider to be love is not real love at all but is love only in the metaphorical sense. Furthermore, there is another hierarchy in love stretching from various levels of metaphorical love to real love, which always involves God and can include the love of someone or something, but in God. Yet even metaphorical love is a glimmer of real love for finally there is but one Love with many grades of manifestation.

Sufis also speak of another form of the gradation and hierarchy of love. They begin with the ordinary human condition and end with the state of the saint. The lowest state of love from this point of view is the love of the ego or the self for itself. This is still love, but because of the imprisoning nature of its object, it becomes stifling and prevents the growth of the soul and the possibility for it to reach higher levels of love. Then there is the love of others, whether they be human beings, animals, or objects such as plants, minerals, and also human artifacts, especially works of art. But this level of love is still limited and finite as well as in most cases transient. Often it brings about an attachment to the world that prevents the soul from experiencing higher levels of love, which must paradoxically also involve detachment from worldliness. Then there is love for the sacred realities, including messengers, revealed books, saints, sacred art, and so forth, which, coming from God, turns the soul to Him, provided human beings remain aware of the Source of all that is sacred. Finally, there is the love for God, the Sacred as such, which is boundless and liberating rather than binding since the object of this love is the Infinite. The highest level of love is the love of God for Himself, and it is this Love that makes all other forms of love possible. In fact, all forms of love are reflections, albeit often faint ones, of this supreme Love.

From the spiritual point of view the levels stated above can all be positive, and each lower level can lead to a higher one rather than being limitative. The love of oneself *can* lead to the awareness of the evanescent and at the same time deceiving nature of the ego and its imprisoning effect, leading the person to search for his or her higher

self. The love of others can lead to pain and suffering and help the soul to search for that love that does not perish. The love of the natural world can lead to a sense of wonder in the wisdom of God and love for the Creator of the creatures who are the objects of our love. As for the love of sacred objects, theophanies and the like, they almost always lead to the love of the Being Who is the source of the grace and beauty present in them. The hierarchy of love can therefore be seen both as a ladder for ascent to the Divine Empyrean and as description of ever greater limitation and imprisonment of the soul as one descends to the lower levels of the hierarchy.

THE SPIRITUAL SIGNIFICANCE OF HUMAN LOVE

To have truly loved is to have truly lived, and the person who goes through life without having loved has not really lived a fully human life. This belief of the Sufis points to the important truth that not only is love part of life, it also plays a very significant spiritual role in our inner development. As already mentioned, the power of love is transformative. It has an alchemical effect upon the soul and can transmute its very substance. The alchemical wedding between sulfur and mercury that produces various concrete substances (according to alchemy) symbolizes the inner transformation that the embrace of love brings about in the soul, enabling it to gain union in a concrete manner with the Spirit.

A human being can experience many forms of love. We can love our parents, children, and relatives. We can love our town, country, and culture. There is love of nature and art. There is love of religion and the sacred, all leading to the love of God. All these forms of love involve going beyond one's ego, performing sacrifice and suffering, giving and giving again. Also all forms of love are signs of a deep yearning in the soul for that pure love that is divine. But there is one kind of love that is the most powerful on the human plane—and not of course in relation to God—and that is love of a man for a woman or of a woman for a man. Conjugal and romantic love is the testing ground for the growth of the soul emotionally and spiritually, and it is related directly to the love and ultimate union between the soul and the Spirit. This assertion does not of course negate the possibility of detachment from such a love for the sake of God, as we see in the celibacy practiced in certain religions.

Real and authentic love in the romantic sense, and not merely sexual attraction, is a form of grace and a gift from Heaven. It rips through our soul like a powerful hurricane, uprooting our usual attachments and habits. It yanks the roots of our soul from the soil of complacency and self-centeredness. It causes joy as well as pain, ecstasy as well as longing. It detaches the soul from other entanglements and attaches it to the object of one's love, even overcoming the mind's scattered thoughts and concentrating the mind on that single object. Something of the absoluteness of the love for God becomes reflected in such a human love that requires utter selflessness and unlimited giving. Such a love, if authentic, does not diminish if the beloved becomes less beautiful outwardly and loses his or her external attractiveness because the object of that love is the person and not his or her attributes, which may be pleasing to the lover at one moment and not so later on. That is why authentic romantic love grows rather than diminishes as time goes on. Such a love is a gift from God to His creatures, whom He created in pairs, as the Quran asserts, and this love cannot in the deepest sense be separated from the love for God and God's love for us. Hence the spiritual significance of human love.

The sexual dimension of love is itself impregnated with spiritual significance. Sexual union is an earthly reflection of a paradisaical prototype. The male experiences the Infinite and the female the Absolute in this earthly union, which returns, albeit for a moment, the human being to his or her androgynic wholeness. The bliss of sexual union is also a foretaste of the bliss of the union of the soul with the Spirit, about which Christian Hermeticism as well as certain other schools of Christian mysticism speak. As mentioned above, the soul can of course withdraw from this earthly attraction through asceticism to seek direct wedding to the Spirit, as we see in monasticism and many forms of Christian spirituality, but the sexual union remains spiritually significant, especially in Sufism, which like the rest of Islam sees sexuality as a sacred reality, hence to be governed by the Sacred Law, not as a sinful act simply resulting from the fall. Sexual union can lead to the experience of *fanā'* or annihilation and therefore liberation, however momentary, from the bonds of separative existence and limitations of ordinary consciousness. From the Sufi point of view, the urge for sexual union, which is the most powerful sensuous urge within most human beings, is in reality the search of the soul for union with God, especially when human union is combined with love. Every beloved

is ultimately a reflection of the Beloved or *ma‘shūq*, as the Sufis say, who is God in His inner reality, a reality to which Sufis often refer in the feminine. The Essence of God is called *al-Dhāt* in Arabic, and it is grammatically feminine in gender. Seen as the Beloved, the inner dimension of the Divine is that feminine Beauty for which the male soul yearns. In His aspect as Creator and Sustainer of creation, however, God is seen as masculine. From the purely metaphysical point of view, the Divine is of course above the male-female distinction in the same way that in Far Eastern doctrines the supreme Tao transcends the dualism of yin and yang.

The Quran uses words derived from the root of *ḥubb* when referring to love. The Sufis also use such terms, but they add to them the term *‘ishq*, which implies intense love, and they claim that the Quran, being sacred scripture, does not use this term because of its extremeness and intensity. The word *‘ishq*, according to traditional sources, is derived from the name of a vine that twists itself around a tree and presses so hard upon its trunk that the tree dies. This poetic etymology refers to the profound truth that intense love involves death. As Rūmī says, “the Beloved is alive and the lover a dead being,” while there is the famous Latin saying *amor est mors*, “love is death.” One is reminded here of the famous “Love-Death Song” (*Liebested*) in Wagner’s opera *Tristan und Isolde*.

The great love narratives usually end in death, as we see for example in Western literature in the stories of Tristan and Isolde and Romeo and Juliet. Their deaths are outwardly related to external forces and circumstances but inwardly point to the relation between intense love and death. It is said that for every man there is a woman—and vice versa—who is such a perfect complement that if the two were to meet here on earth the intensity of their love would cause them to die. Human love even below this extreme stage is always combined with some degree of dying—dying to one’s ego, to one’s desires, to one’s preferences for the sake of the other. And this is so because human love is itself a reflection of Divine Love, which we can experience only after the death of our ego, and can lead to the Divine those souls who are fortunate enough to have experienced this love. That is also why legendary love stories are outwardly about human love and inwardly about the love for God and of God and therefore often end in the earthly death of the hero or heroine or both.

There is many such a tale in Sufism, and perhaps the most famous is the story of Laylā and Majnūn. The original story, which has many later versions, was a simple one. A young Arab Bedouin called Qays meets Laylā at a gathering of women. The effect of this meeting upon him is profound. He falls in love with her and sacrifices his camel for the feast. When a man called Manāzil comes to the gathering, the attention of all the women is turned toward him except that of Laylā, who returns Qays's love for her. He then asks for her hand from her father, but her father refuses, saying that she is already betrothed to someone else. In deep anguish and sorrow, Qays loses his mind and reason and goes into the wilderness half-naked to live with wild animals. The appellation Majnūn, meaning crazed or mad, by which he became known, arose from this behavior. His father takes him on pilgrimage to Mecca with the hope that he will be cured, but this experience only intensifies his love for Laylā. When lucid, Majnūn composes some poems expressing his love for her, but he sees her only once more before his death.

On the basis of this anonymous poem, many prose versions were written. They became popular in Arabic literature and later became part of the Persian literary tradition. Perhaps the greatest masterpiece based on this story, but much elaborated, is by the twelfth-century Persian poet Nizāmī, who turned it into one of the masterpieces of Persian lyric poetry. Sufis such as Aḥmad Ghazzālī, 'Aṭṭār, and Rūmī transformed this tale into an example of Divine and human love as understood in Sufism. Amīr Khusrāw, the great fourteenth-century Persian poet of India, also composed a work titled *Laylī and Majnūn* (*Laylī* being the Persian version of *Laylā*) and dedicated it to Nizām al-Awliyā', the celebrated saint of Delhi. Furthermore, the fifteenth-century Sufi poet Jāmī composed a major work with this title. The story of Laylā and Majnūn became well known also in the literature of not only Arabic but also the Turkish, Kurdish, Pashto, and several other languages. In the Sufi versions of this famous love story, Laylā or Laylī is understood to symbolize the Divine Essence. The name Laylā/Laylī comes from the Arabic word for night (*layl*), and it means the beauty of the night, which is dark, hence its association with the "black light" of the Divine Essence, which is black because of the intensity of its light, standing above visible light, which symbolizes manifestation. As for Majnūn, its usual meaning as one who is mad is seen symbolically. Now, love also involves a kind of madness, and even ordinary human

love often goes against logic and common sense and appears to those not stricken by it as a kind of insanity. The person who loves God with all his or her being certainly appears to be afflicted with some form of craziness by those who consider normal the state of indifference toward Divine Love that characterizes much of the public at large. The beautiful story of Laylā and Majnūn is therefore the vehicle for the expression of Divine Love couched in the language of human love.

DIVINE LOVE

It has already been mentioned that God first loves us before we have the possibility of loving Him. This ontological priority must be always remembered. God could have created beings who could not but glorify Him, and He did so in creating the angels. But in the case of human beings, He created persons endowed with free will, beings worthy of loving Him consciously but also capable of not loving Him. There is no such thing as love through coercion. Divine Love is a reality that permeates creation by virtue of the very act of creation by the Divinity who is also Mercy, Compassion, and Love. But from the human side, it is possible not to love God as it is possible to reject His very existence. Life in this world is not only a test of our faith, as the Quran asserts, but also of our love for God and the possibility of reciprocating on our own limited level His love for us. As the sacred saying quoted at the beginning of this chapter asserts, it is the right of men and women that God be a lover for them. On the basis of this reality, God asks us to be a lover for Him in the fullness of our free will.

The great impediment to responding positively to this divine invitation is that there are so many other things that can become objects of our love, starting with our own ego. God is aware of this situation, hence the revelation of religions and the spiritual power contained within them, which can disentangle the love of the soul for the transient and the perishable and turn it toward God. When the Sufis speak of love, or *'ishq*, they are thinking of its liberating and not confining aspect. To love God fully is to possess complete freedom from every other bond, and since God is absolute and infinite, it is to experience absolute and infinite freedom.

In one of his most famous *ghazals*, Ḥāfīz, the supreme master of lyric and mystical poetry in the Persian language, sings:

I reveal and am content with my words,
I am the bondsman of love and liberated from both worlds.
I was flying in the sacred Garden, how can I describe
my separation?
How I became ensnared in the trap of this world?
I was an angel and exalted paradise was my abode,
Adam brought me to this monastery of the city of ruins.⁵

Divine Love liberates us from not only this world but also the next, understood in ordinary religious language as a world whose inhabitants are judged and compensated according to good or evil actions in this world. Through Divine Love we are returned to that sacred Garden in which we were in Divine Proximity before our Fall, that sacred Garden which is also the Garden of union above all the purgatorial states, above both infernal and heavenly abodes as usually understood.

MUST ONE LOVE TO REACH THE GARDEN OF TRUTH?

Since the Garden of Truth is reached through illuminative knowledge discussed in the last chapter, it might be asked whether love is a necessary concomitant of the path of gnosis. In order to answer this basic question it is necessary to distinguish between love as emotion and the metaphysical significance of love. There are mystical paths based solely on love that lead human beings, through the use of the emotion of love directed toward God, to God Himself. Most of Christian mysticism is a mysticism of love, as is the Hindu *bhakti margā*. Sufism is not such a path despite the constant talk by most Sufis about love. In Sufism love is the complement of gnosis and is related to the reality of realized knowledge. Of course, some Sufis emphasize love and others knowledge, but both knowledge and love are always present in any integral Sufi teaching, as is the element of action, with which we shall deal in the next chapter. Rūmī was one of the foremost troubadours of love in Sufism, and his *Mathnawī* begins with verses replete with the praise of love, and yet the same book is called "the ocean of gnosis" by those who know his work well. Others, such as his friend Ṣadr al-Dīn Qunyawī, emphasized gnosis but did not neglect love. In any case, the path of Sufism combines knowledge and love, and rarely does one find

a person or a school in Sufism whose teachings, even if emphasizing love, would not possess a sapiential dimension and be purely *bhaktic* and of the same genre as much of Christian mysticism and also certain forms of Hindu spirituality.

In answer to the question whether one can reach the Garden of Truth without love, the answer is no, but at the same time it must be emphasized that sentimental piety, although valuable on its own level, is not sufficient by itself for such a task. There must be realized knowledge, but this realization involves the whole of our being and therefore must include the reality of love. Furthermore, love leads to union, and God loves His creatures; therefore, there is no way to reach God without experiencing the fire of that love, which immolates our separative existence and turns us into cinders, from which the immortal soul emerges with a new life. Consequently, it can indeed be said that he or she who has not loved has not lived.

BEAUTY—DIVINE, HUMAN, AND COSMIC

Beauty and love are two aspects of the same reality from a certain point of view, one possessing primarily an active nature and the other a passive one. One is like burning fire and the other a calm and placid lake, although there is a dimension of tranquillity to love once realized and beauty can also be beheld in thunder and lightning. There is a complementarity within the first complementarity, that is, a passive element within the active nature of love and an active element within the passive nature of beauty. One could in fact easily apply the Far Eastern doctrine of the complementarity of yin and yang and the presence of yin in yang and yang in yin to this fundamental relation between love and beauty. In any case, the two are inseparable on a certain level, for how can one not love the beautiful and how can that which we love not be beautiful on some level (and not necessarily only in its external and outward form)?

In the same way that the Quran and *Ḥadīth* speak of love, they also speak of beauty, and in fact the Quran does refer to the Names of God, which reveal His Attributes to us, as being beautiful. As for the collection of *Ḥadīth*, the Prophetic saying “God is beautiful and He loves beauty” is practically the foundation of Islamic aesthetics. Moreover, the Names of Divine Mercy taken together are called the Names of Beauty. The two basic terms used for *beauty* in the foundational sources

of Islam in general and Sufism in particular are *ḥusn* or *iḥsān* and *jamāl*. The latter is a Divine Name, as mentioned in the already-cited *ḥadīth*—and is also mentioned in the Quran—while the first concerns both God and human beings as well as the path to Him. *Ḥusn* in Arabic means at once beauty, goodness, and virtue, which is from the Sufi point of view nothing other than the beauty of the soul. Sufism itself is defined as *iḥsān*, which, as described by a sacred *ḥadīth*, is to worship God as if we see Him and, if we see Him not, as if He sees us. The path to the Garden of Truth is covered with forms of beauty that are all theophanies of the Beauty of the Face of the Beloved, and this path cannot be traversed save by one who embellishes his or her soul with beauty. How then do Sufis understand this key reality in the life of the spirit?

Like being, beauty is a universal reality that cannot be delineated, and logical definitions do not embrace all of its reality. One can point to it in contrast to ugliness, but that is not sufficient for in its essence beauty transcends duality, including the duality of ordinary beauty and ugliness, which we experience through our senses. Some sages, however, have sought over the ages to define beauty. One of the most famous is by Plato, who said, “Beauty is the splendor of the Truth.” The Sufis would readily accept this assertion except that they would add that since Truth is also Reality in their perspective, as seen in the word *al-ḥaqīqah*, which means both, beauty can be said to be the splendor of Reality itself. All reality issues from the One, Who is the sole absolute Reality, which is also absolute Beauty. As the One manifests the many on various levels of cosmic existence, this absolute Beauty is also manifested along with existence, of which it is the splendor like the aura around the sun. What appears to us as ugly issues from nonexistence parading in the guise of existence. Since existence itself emanates from the Real, whose aura is beauty, what appears as ugliness is the result of the deprivation of the light of Being and the shadow cast as a result of the distancing from the Source of this light.

Sufis also agree fully with Plato when in the *Philebus* he asserts that beauty is part of the reality of things and not dependent upon our subjective appreciation or perception of it. Beauty is part of the objective reality of each being. It is not dependent upon the beholder except to the extent that each beholder perceives beauty according to the particularity of his or her soul and to the extent that his or her soul is beautiful and able to appreciate beauty. But that does not mean that beauty is

based simply on our subjective appraisal any more than our ignorance of the geological structure of a mountain due to our lack of knowledge of geology makes that structure subjective. Yes, we must cultivate our eyes and ears to see and hear beauty, and that can only be done, spiritually speaking, provided the soul has been trained and cultivated and made beautiful through the acquiring of virtue. This training is not, however, the only condition as far as appreciation of the universal manifestation of beauty is concerned. It is, of course, also necessary to master the formal language in which certain types of beauty are manifested. A Persian does not usually appreciate the beauty of the *Sanctus* of Bach's Mass in B Minor nor a German the beauty of an Indian *rāg* without training in the formal "language" involved. Yet certain other types of beauty are universal and cut across cultural particularities. For those who appreciate the beauty of nature, the Himalayas manifest incredible majesty and beauty, which human beings appreciate whether they are from Brazil, Nigeria, or Japan. And the beauty of a human being is perceptible wherever that person goes on the globe. Even in the domain of art, where each civilization possesses its own distinct formal language, certain great masterpieces display beauty of a universal order. One need only think of the Chartres Cathedral, the Alhambra, or a Sung painting. In any case, the training of the soul in the formal language of various arts must accompany in many cases the soul's embellishment with inner beauty while God has manifested beauty in such a way that certain other types of it cut across all cultural boundaries as if to remind us that the Beautiful as such belongs to the Formless and transcends the particularities of all formal "languages."

In Sufism aesthetics is not separate from spiritual discipline and ethics. One cannot be carried on the wings of beauty to the freedom of the spiritual world without that discipline and without being aware and loving the absolute Beauty of God for which the soul yearns, whether it is aware of it or not, in its quest of every form of earthly beauty. This quest cannot simply be carried out without ethical and spiritual discipline. As Plotinus, whom Muslims called the *Shaykh*, or spiritual master, of the Greeks, once said, the soul strives after beauty and beauty is a manifestation of that spiritual power that animates all levels of reality. The Sufis agree completely with this view, which once dominated Western aesthetics but was marginalized in the West, along with Neoplatonic teachings on the subject, in the eighteenth century.

How is this beauty after which the soul yearns perceived and experienced? Since beauty resides in the depth of the soul, and at the same time the soul yearns for it, God has made possible its experience through all the faculties, both outward and inward, that belong to the soul. All of our external senses can experience beauty, especially our seeing and hearing faculties. In fact, most of the time when we refer to beauty, it is audible or visible beauty that we have in mind. But the inner faculties of the soul can also perceive beauty that is hidden from the eye of outwardness. The imaginal faculty can perceive beautiful images. The mind can behold the beauty of mathematical forms in the purely mathematical world independent of the material realm. It can also discern harmony, which is inseparable from beauty. The intellect that shines within us can contemplate the beauty of the purely intelligible world and the angelic realms. As for the heart, when its eye is opened, it can behold the Beauty of the Face of the Beloved itself. Through whatever means our consciousness makes contact and becomes aware of objective reality, there is the possibility of experiencing beauty, a quality that permeates all levels and modes of existence.

Although beauty is ubiquitous, whether we are aware of it or not, there is a hierarchy of beauty, as there is of reality, being, and love. The supreme beauty is the beauty of the Supreme Reality; absolute beauty is the beauty of the Absolute. Even the most intense beauty experienced in this world in the beautiful face of a loved one or a supreme work of art or of virgin nature or even the perfume of the soul of a saint is a reflection of divine Beauty. At once absolute and infinite, this Beauty can be experienced but not described in human words, being a truly ineffable reality. This Beauty is the crown of the hierarchy of beauty and at the same time the source of every form of beauty. Below it in the hierarchy stands the beauty of the purely intelligible and angelic worlds and below them the beauty of certain forms in the imaginal world and then of the spatiotemporal realm that reflect the archetypal and intelligible world most directly. This latter category of forms bound by time and space includes, of course, virgin nature as created by the Supreme Artisan and therefore reflecting in a stunning fashion the beauty of its Maker. Sacred art that is based on heavenly inspiration and that makes possible the direct experience of the spiritual world in material forms also belongs to this category.

According to the famous Hermetic saying, "That which is lowest symbolizes that which is highest." This principle also pertains to the

experience of beauty. Although the material realm is the lowest in the hierarchy of existence, it reflects the highest realm. The beauty of a material form can therefore reflect the highest beauty and ultimately the Divine Beauty. Many Sufis over the ages have been fully aware of this truth and have looked upon every beautiful form as a reflection of the Beauty of Her Face.

As for human beauty, it is important to clarify where it stands in this hierarchy. Since the human state contains all levels of existence within itself, it might be said that the human being can embrace the whole hierarchy. The human being can possess physical beauty, beauty of character, beauty of soul, beauty of mind and intelligence, and beauty of heart. In the terrestrial realm, human beauty is in fact the highest form of beauty, especially the beauty of the Universal Man, in whom all human possibilities are realized. As for physical beauty of ordinary people, it is God-given, especially when one is young. As we grow older our actions based on our choices and free will become evermore reflected in our outward countenance, and inner beauty, in the case of those who possess such beauty, begins to dominate the outward while the original God-given outward beauty usually fades away. But outer beauty is far from being insignificant. It is in fact a great gift from God, bringing with it much privilege but also great responsibility. The Sufis have often said that contemplating the beauty of the face of a woman by a male Sufi is the most direct means for contemplating Divine Beauty, and the reverse also holds true. Ibn 'Arabī and Shabistārī, for example, write how each feature of the female face reveals a Divine Quality and unveils a Divine Mystery. Ibn 'Arabī writes that while in Mecca he met a young Persian woman and in beholding her face all esoteric knowledge was suddenly revealed to him. In any case, not only are Sufis, both male and female, lovers of God, but they are also lovers of beauty, which is inseparable from the Divine Reality and which, being related to the infinitude of the Divine, brings about total peace and liberates the soul from all fetters of restrictive existence.

Although many Sufis have been incessant pursuers of beauty and beautiful forms, some have warned against this quest for the beautiful if the soul has not readied itself for the total experience of Beauty through beautiful forms by ridding itself of inward imperfections and ugliness. Precisely because beauty attracts the soul, it can also ensnare it and act as a powerful means of distraction from the Source of all beauty. That is why some sages and mystics in all religions have considered

beauty to be a double-edged sword and have tried to restrain themselves from appreciating beautiful external forms at a certain stage of the spiritual journey. Such people are called ascetics (*zuḥḥād* in Islam), and there were many such people in the early history of Sufism before the full flowering of the dimensions of love and knowledge. These figures, in fact, prepared the necessary ground for that flowering. What such saints and seers were doing and saying was that nothing finite should trap the soul and prevent it from its ascent in the degrees of perfection. And so they concentrated only on God as the One beyond all realms of manifestation and all forms.

The danger with which they were concerned relates to the error of taking a finite form of beauty as an independent reality, independent from God as the Source of all beauty. Precisely because of the nature of beauty, it has the power of attracting the soul unto itself in such a way that the soul forgets the Source of this beauty and also the fact that the beauty of all earthly forms is transient. Few people have been distracted from God because of something ugly. Usually what occupies the soul and turns it away from the Garden of Truth is a form that possesses some type of beauty, to which the soul is then attracted. The shadow of the Beauty of Her Face begins to compete in the soul with that absolute Beauty, and through ignorance the soul cannot distinguish between the Real and its reflections. In any case, in the integral vision of Sufism, beauty remains a central reality in the spiritual life. The Garden of Truth is beautiful, and no one can enter it who does not appreciate beauty and who is not inwardly beautiful, who cannot distinguish between beauty and ugliness, which corresponds to discerning the difference between the real and the unreal, the false and the true.

Beauty is inseparable from the real and the true because, like them, it accompanies the reflection of the One in the many. It opens the door of the finite unto the Infinite and frees the soul from the confines of finite forms, although it is manifested in the formal order. Harmony is the result of the reflection of the One in the manifold, and therefore it is closely related to beauty. Objects of beauty possess qualitative harmony associated with such realities as colors. They can also possess not only qualitative but also quantitative harmony. This can be found, for example, in music, which, in addition to the quality of sound, is related quantitatively to measurement and mathematics, disciplines studied in the science of harmonics. Islamic art is characterized by the harmony of proportions, mathematical clarity, and various degrees of symmetry.

In other spiritual worlds the asymmetrical can also be a vehicle for beauty, as one sees in the Zen garden, but in the Sufi perspective symmetry is usually seen as being related to harmony and harmony to beauty. This kind of beauty involves the intelligence, and intelligibility, including the mathematical, is seen as a beautiful quality perceived on a high level. Below it lies sensuous beauty and above it the ineffable beauty of the world transcending all forms. But as already mentioned, all of these levels of beauty are reflections of the supreme Beauty of the Beloved's Face, which we human beings experienced when we were in the Edenic state.

The experience of that beauty still lies deep within the soul. One of the functions of beauty in human life is to bring about remembrance of that celestial Beauty. If understood spiritually, beauty becomes itself the means of recollection and the rediscovery of our true nature as God had created us, the nature we still bear deeply within ourselves although it has been forgotten as a result of our falling into the state of ignorance and no longer knowing who we are. Having become completely exteriorized, we tend to look only at the external form and seek external beauty, whereas the Sufis contemplate, through external forms, their inner meaning and the inward beauty contained therein. As the thirteenth-century Persian Sufi poet Awḥad al-Dīn Kirmānī said,

So I look with optic eye on earthly face,
 For outward form bears the seal of inner Meaning.
 The world's but form and we must live in forms:
 One cannot outward Meaning see but in form.⁶

According to a *ḥadīth* of the Prophet, God has written beauty upon the face of all things. This is the face that each creature has turned to God. Spiritual realization means seeing this face and the beauty written upon it as well as hearing the beautiful music of the invocation of each creature, which constitutes its very existence. It means seeing forms in their metaphysical transparency and not their outward opacity. That transparency is inseparable from beauty because it is like a window through which the Light of the Infinite and with it a reflection of Its Beauty enters into the very substance of forms, making them vehicles that, through their beauty, carry us to the Formless and to the Source of all beauty.

O Lord Thou knowest that even now and again,
We did not gaze but upon the beauty of Thy Face.
The beautiful in this world are mirrors of Thy Beauty,
We have seen in the mirror the Face of the Exalted King.⁷

To accomplish this end of contemplating Divine Beauty in earthly forms, however, the soul must regain the beauty of its primordial reality, which is none other than *ihsān* and which therefore means also becoming embellished with the virtues—virtues that beautify the soul and that ultimately belong to God. The beautiful soul is attracted to Divine Beauty as the moth to the candle and does not fail to experience in every earthly beauty that Divine Beauty of the Gardener of the Garden of Truth, an experience that is inseparable from the ultimate goal of human life.

Kings lick the earth whereof the fair are made,
For God hath mingled in the dusty earth
A draught of Beauty from His choicest cup.
'Tis *that*, fond lover—not these lips of clay—
Thou art kissing with a hundred ecstasies,
Think, then, what must it be when undefiled!⁸

Rūmī

PEACE

We cannot discuss the spiritual significance of beauty without turning to the subject of peace. Beauty attracts the soul, and therein the soul finds all that it seeks. Why then go elsewhere? Why be agitated? The beholding of beauty involves rest and repose, serenity and peace. In the formal order, as long as the soul is attracted by the beauty of the form in question, it remains in a state of peace, but in many cases the soul is soon confronted with the existential limitation of the form and, finding this limitation stifling, turns its attention elsewhere and in agitation leaves the state of peace. For the Sufi, however, formal beauty is a symbol and reflection of its celestial archetype, which he or she contemplates through the form. Formal beauty thus leads such a person to the countenance of Infinite Beauty, wherein real peace is to be found. In

Infinite Beauty lies no existential limitation, and nothing can disturb the state of experiencing such supreme peace by turning the attention of the soul elsewhere because the soul is in a state where there is in fact no elsewhere to which it could turn. This state is called by some of the Sufis of Central Asia universal peace (*sulh-i kull*). It is the peace reached when one becomes immersed in the Reality that is beyond all tension and duality, where opposites meet, the *coincidentia oppositorum*.

It is remarkable that the human soul yearns for peace while living in a world full of strife, contention, opposition, struggle, and war. When we ponder the terms *pace*, *shalom*, *shanti*, and *salām* in Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, and Islam respectively and their ubiquitous usage by the followers of these religions, as well as terms with the same meaning used elsewhere, we become aware of the universality of this yearning. Sufism emphasizes the significance of this yearning within the soul and the importance of realizing the goal of this yearning. But the Sufis insist over and over again that peace cannot be found in the world of opposition and dualism while we remain bound to this world; it can be found only by transcending this world and reaching the Divine Reality, which, being absolute Beauty, is also absolute peace. As Rūmī says:

Except in the spiritual retreat of the Divine Truth (*ḥaqq*)
there is no peace.

According to the Quran and a saying of the Prophet, the greeting of the people of Paradise, of the Garden, is *salām*, or peace; hence the ordinary Muslim greeting, *al-salām* ‘*alaykūm*, or “peace be upon you.” Now, the Garden shines with the splendor of beauty, which we beheld before our Fall and the blessed shall experience again after death. Such beauty could not but be combined with peace and tranquillity. The soul that cannot repose in Divine Beauty is not worthy of Paradise. He or she must in fact bring the inward serenity and peace of the soul to the paradisaal realm through attaining the spiritual virtues in order to enter the Garden and to be able to benefit from the peace of the realm into which the blessed soul has gained entry. In the same way a blessed soul must add something to the beauty of the paradisaal Abode if that person is to be worthy of being there.

In any case, peace (*al-salām*) is on the highest level a Divine Name, and God is both peace itself and the bestower of peace, as He is beautiful and the source of all beauty. The Quran asserts in a verse that plays an important role in Sufi practice, "It is He who made the Divine Peace (*al-sakīnah*) to descend upon the heart of believers" (48:4). This *sakīnah*, which has its correspondence in the *Shekinah* of the Kabbalists, is a peace that is heavenly and is combined with grace, God being its direct source. But we have to be ready to receive this great gift by conforming to the Truth, having faith in and love of God, and turning our soul to the Source of all beauty through acquiring virtue. To behold the Beauty of the Face of the Beloved is inseparable from absolute and unconditional love of That which Itself is absolute and infinite, and it is inseparable from the experiencing of that peace "that surpasseth all understanding."

Let us remember that the spiritual path involves knowledge, on the one hand, and love and beauty, on the other. The consequence of following these paths, however, also results in the attainment of peace for which the soul yearns. Moreover, as we shall see in the next chapter, the paths of knowledge, love, and beauty require correct action and goodness, without which one could neither realize fully divine knowledge nor be able to love God and behold His Beauty with the fullness of one's being. Consequently, without goodness and virtue one cannot attain the peace that on the profoundest level is inseparable from beauty and that we all seek deep in ourselves even amid the din, chaos, and tensions of the world in which we live.

