

Introduction

A Sage in Exile

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Life

Abū'l-Ma'ālī Muḥammad¹ b. Abī Bakr Muḥammad al-Miyānajī al-Hamadānī, more commonly known as 'Ayn al-Quḍāt Hamadānī, was born in the western Iranian city of Hamadan in 490/1097.² His family originally hailed from Miyana, which is in present-day Iran's province of East Azerbaijan. The sources all point out that 'Ayn al-Quḍāt was born into a family of learning. His grandfather Abū'l-Ḥasan b. 'Alī (d. 471/1079) was a well-known scholar and judge in Hamadan who was executed in Baghdad for reasons that are not entirely known.³ 'Ayn al-Quḍāt's father Abū Bakr Muḥammad was also a judge in Hamadan, and by his son's own testimony was a practicing Sufi.⁴ 'Ayn al-Quḍāt may have had a son named Aḥmad.⁵ If this was the case, we do not have any information concerning his son's whereabouts after the demise of his father.

'Ayn al-Quḍāt received his legal education in the Shāfi'ī tradition and his training in theology in what was by his time the most widely available form of rational theology (*kalām*), namely Ash'arism. It is clear from his writings that 'Ayn al-Quḍāt excelled in all of the Islamic sciences, along with mathematics, and had an especially strong attachment to Arabic language, poetry, and literary culture. Some sources mention that 'Ayn al-Quḍāt had studied with the great philosopher and mathematician 'Umar Khayyām (d. ca. 517/1124).⁶ This is plausible,⁷ although Najib Mayel Heravi rejects this claim on

account of the fact that ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt does not mention Khayyām in his writings.⁸

We are not sure when ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt received his title of distinction (‘Ayn al-Quḍāt means “the most eminent of judges”), although it indicates that he rose to a considerable level of prominence in his function as a judge and religious figure at some point in his short life and career. It can fairly be surmised that this must have been when ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt was still a young man, perhaps before he was twenty, since he had already begun writing books in the Islamic intellectual sciences at around that age.⁹

We know from an autobiographical note in his Arabic work *Zubdat al-ḥaqā’iq* (*The Essence of Reality*)¹⁰ (written in 514/1120) that ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt had gone through a period of intellectual crisis in roughly 506/1112 on account of his preoccupation with rational theology.¹¹ He credits a close to four year period of immersion in the writings of Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111)—presumably his monumental *Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn* (*The Revival of the Religious Sciences*)—as having rescued him from his predicament and for compelling him to turn more fully to Sufism.

‘Ayn al-Quḍāt dictated the text of the *Essence* to scribes while he was under the palpable spiritual influence of a certain Shaykh Baraka Hamadānī.¹² He kept this master’s company for seven years and had the utmost reverence for him.¹³ Shaykh Baraka could barely recite the Quran and had no formal learning, but he was very advanced along the Sufi path. He died in around 520/1126 at the age of eighty.¹⁴

‘Ayn al-Quḍāt also speaks admiringly of two other teachers: Muḥammad b. Ḥamūya al-Juwaynī (d. 530/1137)¹⁵ and Shaykh Faṭḥa. The latter was the spiritual master of Shaykh Baraka¹⁶ and someone whom ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt did not meet in the flesh.¹⁷ Nevertheless, he tells us that Shaykh Baraka sent him on his first visit (*ziyāra*) to Shaykh Faṭḥa’s tomb—a pilgrimage that proved to be of great benefit for ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt.¹⁸ We know from one of ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s letters that this was a practice he himself encouraged a student to habitually perform in order to thwart worldly afflictions. And, in a different letter, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt admonishes his student not to deem the two nights that he had spent at Shaykh Faṭḥa’s tomb to be an insignificant matter.¹⁹ So spiritually efficacious was the tomb of Shaykh Faṭḥa that ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt would write some of his letters to his disciples both during and after pilgrimages to it.²⁰ Furthermore, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt was also inspired to

write letters after visiting the grave of the great Persian Sufi poet of Hamadan Bābā Ṭāhir ‘Uryān (d. 418/1028),²¹ who himself was the master of Shaykh Faṭḥa.²² It is clear that ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt placed a great deal of emphasis—both for himself and his students—upon making regular pilgrimage to the tombs of Bābā Ṭāhir and Shaykh Faṭḥa, so long as these weighty undertakings were accompanied by the right kind of intention.²³

In 513/1119²⁴ ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt became the disciple of Ghazālī’s younger brother and foremost Sufi master of his day, Aḥmad Ghazālī (d. 520/1126), during one of the latter’s visits to Hamadan.²⁵ Aḥmad Ghazālī had some formal tie to Hamadan, perhaps even having had a Sufi lodge (P. *khānaqāh*) or at least a gathering place of sorts in the city. Having spent less than three weeks in his master’s company, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt received a great spiritual opening that left an indelible mark upon his soul.²⁶

‘Ayn al-Quḍāt continued to receive instruction from Aḥmad Ghazālī even after he left Hamadan. This is evidenced by a treatise that the master dedicated to his disciple,²⁷ as well as a series of correspondences between them that exhibit their mutual love and affection for one another.²⁸ On account of ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s significant accomplishments on the Sufi path under the formal guidance of Aḥmad Ghazālī and through his association with the likes of Shaykh Baraka, he was appointed by Aḥmad Ghazālī as one of his spiritual successors. Given the fact that Aḥmad Ghazālī died in 520/1126, and assuming that ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt took up his assigned function after the death of his master, he would have been roughly twenty-nine years old when he himself became a Sufi shaykh.

While still earning his livelihood as a judge, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt operated a Sufi lodge where he trained his disciples.²⁹ He also taught daily classes in the Islamic sciences to a wider audience; at times, he tells us, these classes numbered seven to eight a day.³⁰ Another means through which ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt trained his disciples was by way of formal correspondence. Among his writings are a precious collection of nearly 160 letters, to which we have already alluded. Commonly referred to by the Persian title *Nāma-hā* (*The Letters*), these letters by ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt to his disciples and students were often written in response to their spiritual and intellectual questions. They offer us a wealth of autobiographical and biographical information and give us a rare glimpse into ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s social and political context, both

of which are essential to coming away with a clearer picture of the circumstances surrounding his death.

Execution

In around 522/1128 certain accusations were made against ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt in Hamadan, likely at the instigation of a local scholar or group of scholars. In a passage in his magnum opus the *Tamhīdāt* (*Paving the Path*), ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt notes that his close friend and student Kāmil al-Dawla³¹ wrote to him and told him that the specific accusation leveled against him had to do with his supposed claim to divine status.³² Although the people in Hamadan had a fatwa or legal edict issued against him with this specific charge in view, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt notes in his *Letters* that he was also accused of styling himself as a Prophet.³³

Anyone familiar with ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s writings and persona would clearly understand why some may have been put off by his words and manner of being. For starters, he was an unapologetic follower of the great Sufi martyr Ḥallāj (d. 309/922), which would have troubled not a few scholars.³⁴ ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt would also have been viewed as arrogant or as a person who makes grandiose spiritual claims (something not unrelated to the charge of his so-called claims to divinity). To be sure, Ayn al-Quḍāt’s mode of oral and written communication is best characterized as “drunken,” and his own writings show that he had been endowed with the ability to perform miracles. The best example of this power involves a story, told by ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt on two separate occasions, in which he brings a dead person back to life.³⁵ These two considerations would explain why a number of people came to regard him as a kind of sorcerer or magician.³⁶

Speculating over the accusations against ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, his consequent imprisonment in Baghdad, and his eventual execution would take us down an all-too-familiar path in the secondary literature (which derives in part from medieval hagiographic sources³⁷): ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, like Ḥallāj, was a heterodox thinker who had to pay for his nonconformist views by being killed. The details of his death then take on a proportionately exaggerated form: ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt was imprisoned and eventually brought back to his homeland of Hamadan only to be flogged, doused in oil, and then burned alive, or skinned alive, or symbolically hung in front of the very school in which he taught his “dangerous” ideas.³⁸ Taking these kinds of accounts at face

value does a gross injustice to the other factors that were at work in bringing ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt to his demise—factors that are corroborated by external historical sources and ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s own writings.

There is no doubt that ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt was accused of heresy and that this was the ostensible means on account of which he was killed. But what was so heretical about his views? Not surprisingly, the charges laid against him had nothing to do with what would seem like the more eyebrow-raising aspects of his mystical theology, such as his exalted view of Satan or his open support of such controversial Sufi figures as Ḥallāj and Abū Yazīd Baṣṭāmī (d. ca. 260/874).³⁹ Even the aforementioned accusations to the effect that ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt was claiming divinity, or that he was a sorcerer, were not brought forth as the reasons justifying his execution. The explicit charges laid against ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt had to do with some statements that he had made in the *Essence*. Yet of all of ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s writings, this would be the one book that one would *not* want to cite in an attempt to build a convincing case against its author in support of the charge of heresy.

The only contemporaneous public record that we have of the kinds of accusations leveled at ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt are featured in his *Shakwā’l-gharīb* (*The Exile’s Complaint*), which he wrote in prison in defense of these charges.⁴⁰ These accusations by those who wanted to see ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt executed were clearly haphazard. For one thing, and somewhat ironically, the ideas in the *Essence* are in line with statements made by Ghazālī, who was championed by the very state that had ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt killed. This is precisely the same point that ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt makes in *Exile’s Complaint*.⁴¹

According to ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, the accusers said that he (1) upheld some kind of belief in the eternity of the world that is related to (2) his view concerning God’s being the Source of existence (*maṣḍar al-wujūd*) while also (3) not knowing particulars (*juz’iyyāt*) but only universals (*kullīyyāt*). A related charge to (2) was that (4) ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt (a Sunni) approved of Ismaili teachings, which was reflected in his emphasis on the absolute dedication of the Sufi disciple to his spiritual master. Finally, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt was accused of (5) proclaiming himself to be a Prophet⁴² and also (6) asserting that the Friends of God (*awliyā’ Allāh*) are above the Prophets and Messengers, and this because he believed that there was a certain epistemic standpoint to which the Friends of God were exclusively privy.⁴³

In *Exile’s Complaint* ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt presents a very convincing case in refutation of these claims, often citing the *Essence* itself.⁴⁴ And his

Letters also reveal a number of instances in which these charges are shown to be completely untenable. At the same time, in *Exile's Complaint* ʿAyn al-Quḍāt provides us with an inventory of his writings⁴⁵ but suppresses any mention of *Paving the Path* and the *Letters*, from whose contents an accusation of “heresy” could much more easily have been constructed. In their case against ʿAyn al-Quḍāt the Seljuq government’s assembly (*maḥḍar*) likewise did not mention these works.⁴⁶

Grounding his inquiry in a thorough study of the *Letters*, Omid Safi has convincingly argued that the cause of ʿAyn al-Quḍāt’s death was intimately bound up with his unrelenting critique of the Seljuq regime’s corrupt administrative practices.⁴⁷ After all, it would have been one thing had he been a sideline critic of the Seljuq regime. But he was a man with significant social standing and, as his *Letters* demonstrate, many of his own disciples occupied very high positions at the Seljuq court.⁴⁸ ʿAyn al-Quḍāt often uses harsh language to characterize their relationship with the Seljuq authorities, particularly the young Sultan Maḥmūd b. Muḥammad b. Malikshāh (d. 525/1131), more commonly known as Sultan Maḥmūd II.

On one level, ʿAyn al-Quḍāt’s concerns are consistently straightforward in his *Letters*: the Seljuqs in general and Sultan Maḥmūd II in particular are not really defenders of Islam and are morally corrupt.⁴⁹ No matter how financially lucrative service at the Seljuq court may be, working there is not an option for those on the Sufi path. In one letter to a disciple who worked for the Seljuqs in some capacity, ʿAyn al-Quḍāt voices his disappointment with this student, severely chastising him for what he took to be open excesses and even affronts to the spiritual pact he had taken with him.⁵⁰

Alongside ʿAyn al-Quḍāt’s criticisms of his students’ mistaken view that they will financially benefit from service at the Seljuq court, his position against the Seljuqs is informed by another financially informed perspective: in contrast to ʿAyn al-Quḍāt’s emphasis on the merits of charity⁵¹ stood the Seljuqs’ open hoarding of people’s wealth and property.⁵² This was particularly true of the ruthless Seljuq vizier Qawwām al-Dīn Abū’l-Qāsim Dargazīnī (d. 527/1133).⁵³

Among all of ʿAyn al-Quḍāt’s disciples who worked for the Seljuq state, a finance officer (*mustawfī*) by the name of ʿAzīz al-Dīn (d. 527/1133) was a bitter foe of Dargazīnī.⁵⁴ It was thus in the best interest of Dargazīnī to discredit ʿAzīz al-Dīn’s teacher who was already critical of the Seljuqs and was undoubtedly seen as a corrupting influence upon ʿAzīz al-Dīn, a Seljuq state employee. This was a carefully

thought-out strategy that, as Safi explains, had a “double effect”: (1) if ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt was accused of heresy, his disciple ‘Azīz al-Dīn would have been further discredited; and (2) the death of ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, who was an influential public figure insofar as he was a judge and religious teacher in Hamadan, meant that ‘Azīz al-Dīn would have been all the more vulnerable.⁵⁵ Dargazīnī successfully had his enemy imprisoned and put to death two years after the execution of ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt.⁵⁶ Ironically, shortly thereafter Dargazīnī was himself brutally put to death by the Seljuq ruler Tughril of Azerbaijan on concocted charges of Ismaili affiliations.⁵⁷

Following a brief period of imprisonment in Baghdad in 523/1129, where ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt wrote the *Exile’s Complaint* and a private letter to one of his disciples,⁵⁸ he was returned to his native Hamadan, still as a prisoner of the state. He was publicly executed on the order of Sultan Maḥmūd II on the evening of the 6th/7th of Jumādā Thānī 525 AH, which corresponds to the 6th/7th of May 1131 CE.⁵⁹ He was aged thirty-five lunar years or thirty-four solar years at the time of his execution. The historian Ibn al-Fuwaṭī (d. 723/1323), to whom we are indebted for dating ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s birth, mentions that he made a pilgrimage to ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s grave in Hamadan and that it was commonly visited by others.⁶⁰ Although ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s tomb was destroyed in the Safavid period,⁶¹ today Hamadan hosts a large cultural center established in his honor that contains, among other things, his symbolic tomb.⁶²

Writings

Having lived such a short life, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt was nevertheless an extremely prolific author in a variety of subjects. By his own testimony in *Exile’s Complaint*, he wrote a total of eleven works in such fields as scriptural exegesis, rational and creedal theology, mathematics, Arabic prosody and grammar, and Sufism.⁶³ Most of these works have not survived. If we add these to the other books that he wrote but did not mention in *Exile’s Complaint*, the total list of his writings (excluding *Exile’s Complaint*) would be closer to fifteen titles.

There are also a number of works that ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt certainly did not author but that have been wrongly attributed to him for one reason or another.⁶⁴ Chief among these is the *Lawā’ih* (*Flashes*), which is inspired by Aḥmad Ghazālī’s *Sawānīh al-‘ushshāq* (*Incidents of the*

Lovers) and parts of ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s *Paving the Path*. It therefore certainly belongs to the Persianate “School of Love” (P. *madhhab-i ‘ishq*).⁶⁵ Having said that, there are many internal textual and stylistic reasons why ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt could not have been the author of this treatise.⁶⁶ And then there is the manuscript evidence that, beginning with Hellmut Ritter,⁶⁷ has led some scholars to leave the question of authorship open or ascribe it to a Sufi figure other than ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt.⁶⁸ A number of scholars, particularly Nasrollah Pourjavady, have maintained that the real author of *Flashes* was an Indian disciple of Mu‘īn al-Dīn Chishtī (d. 633/1236), Ḥamīd al-Dīn Nāgawrī (d. 641/1244).⁶⁹ Thanks to the conclusive findings of Muḥammad Shādrūymanish, we can now be certain of this ascription.⁷⁰

‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s extant books number seven in total and would run to just over 1,700 pages in modern print. These works are mostly in Persian, with three shorter titles in Arabic. At any rate, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s Persian writings are heavily filled with Arabic passages, consisting mainly of citations from the Quran and Hadith, the words of the great Sufi masters of the past, Arabic poetry, technical philosophical discussions,⁷¹ and even verses from the Bible.⁷²

‘Ayn al-Quḍāt had a great mastery of Arabic and his mother tongue Persian. Many of his own poems, commonly in the form of quatrains (*rubā‘iyyāt*) when they are in Persian, are peppered throughout his writings. He also cites various past and contemporary poets in both the Arabic and Persian poetic traditions.⁷³ In total, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt cites about 695 poems in all of his writings. 475 of these poems are in Persian,⁷⁴ and the rest are in Arabic. One of these Arabic poems is a thousand lines long and accounts for a small fraction of our author’s extant literary corpus (see section 7).⁷⁵ ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt often cites the verse of a famous contemporary who lived on the opposite end of the Persian-speaking world: the great Sufi poet Sanā’ī (d. 525/1131) whom he mentions by name in one of his letters.⁷⁶ Incidentally, Sanā’ī’s work was patronized by the same Dargazīnī who was responsible for ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s execution.⁷⁷

1. *Tamhīdāt (Paving the Path)*

‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s Persian prose style is very unique. It is at once poetic, multilayered, and exhilarating, carrying with it a strong sense of profound learning, wit, lyricism, irony, symbolism, and spiritual and

intellectual rigor. Leonard Lewisohn has described it very well: “‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s prose is intimate and spontaneous, while also quite complex, combining oracular utterance, passionate rapture and the weighty symbolic diction of poetic inspiration, with philosophical depth, prolix theological lore and rich mystical anagogy.”⁷⁸ This characterization is particularly apt for ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s masterpiece *Paving the Path*, which was written almost entirely in Persian and completed on the 9th of Rajab 521 AH / July 21st, 1127 CE.⁷⁹ According to Fritz Meier, most manuscript sources give the title of the work as *Zubdat al-ḥaqā’iq fi kashf al-khalā’iq* (*The Essence of Reality: On Unveiling Created Beings*).⁸⁰ The term in the subtitle, *khalā’iq* or “created beings,” is clearly a misreading. In ‘Affī ‘Usayrān’s edition of *Paving the Path*, which is not without its errors,⁸¹ ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt introduces the book by the same title but with the more sensible *daqā’iq* or “subtleties” in place of *khalā’iq*:

A group of friends requested that some words be put together for them so that it may benefit their days. Their request has been granted. This book, *The Essence of Reality: On Unveiling Subtleties*, has been completed in ten chapters so that it may benefit its readers. (T 1, §1)

We are fortunate that the work came to be known as *Tamhīdāt* since *Zubdat al-ḥaqā’iq* is, as we have seen, also the title of ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s major work in Arabic. In its printed edition, *Paving the Path* is 354 pages long and consists of 470 sections. These sections are spread out over ten chapters that collectively provide foundational sets of insights that help “pave the path” (*tamhīd*) for spiritual adepts. A careful study of *Paving the Path* reveals the profound manner in which much of it is concerned with the theme of self-recognition (P. *khwud-shināsi*; *ma‘rifat-i nafs*) and nonduality at the highest level.

‘Ayn al-Quḍāt states that the book represents the essence (*zubda*) of the inspirations he receives as they come to him in real time; consequently, it is not arranged according to any particular order,⁸² although the author undoubtedly edited the final draft of the work. This is clear on account of the internal references in parts of *Paving the Path* to other parts. Hence at the beginning of the fourth chapter of *Paving the Path*, which is on self-recognition, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt notes that the topic’s most complete exposition is to be found in the book’s tenth and final chapter.⁸³ It can easily be argued that the tenth chapter

serves as the axis around which the other chapters revolve, which is perhaps why ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt singles it out with these words:

Alas! What do you know? In this section that paves the path, I have left behind several thousand diverse stations. From all of these worlds, I have brought an essence in the cloak of symbols to the world of writing. (T 309, §406)

The distinct chapter titles and divisions that were inserted by ‘Usayrān into his edition of *Paving the Path*⁸⁴ can at times be misleading. As the manuscript tradition of *Paving the Path* indicates, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt did not title the book’s chapters and may not have even divided the work into chapters per se.⁸⁵ This possibility is perfectly sensible, given that the ideas in the text flow in a way that defies easy categorization. At every turn of the page, the reader gets the clear sense that he must somehow be “like” the author in order to understand the import of his statements. ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt says as much in the book’s very last paragraph:

Wait until you arrive at my world, where the torment of humanness does not interfere and where I myself can speak to you about what is being spoken. In the world of letters, more than this cannot fit into expressions. (T 354, §470)

Nevertheless, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt only writes under “inspiration.” The net effect is that he says things at the beginning of the book that are not entirely clear until pages later. There are also indications in *Paving the Path* that ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt composed the work by penning it himself and having others write down his oral discourses.⁸⁶

Without doubt, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt follows his master Aḥmad Ghazālī’s *Incidents* on several key points related to the fundamental doctrine of love. This is hardly surprising since *Incidents* is in many ways the foundational work on the metaphysics of love and loverhood in the School of Love. However, *Paving the Path* is an entirely unique composition and thus is quite different from *Incidents* in terms of form, content, style, and length. The foundational text for the defense of Iblis in the Sufi tradition, namely Ḥallāj’s *Tawāsīn*, is cited by ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt in *Paving the Path*, but not by name.⁸⁷ At any rate, there is no doubt that Ḥallāj’s defense of Satan, along with that of Aḥmad Ghazālī, shaped ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s Satanology. Yet even here ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt offers a much more nuanced

view of Satan that is deeply connected to his formal theology on the one hand, and his mystical theology on the other.⁸⁸

Paving the Path contains almost every major aspect of ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s Sufi teachings in its fully developed form. In this text we are given the author’s mature expositions on such matters as the nature of the master-disciple relationship, the role of the Prophet Muhammad in the spiritual life, the true meaning of knowledge and the various psychological faculties involved in its reception, “esoteric” interpretations of the rites and pillars of Islam, Satanology, a highly developed and stylized understanding of beauty, and a profound doctrine of love. The only major idea in ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s Sufi worldview that does not receive as extensive a treatment in *Paving the Path* as it does in another of his works is his original understanding of the Quran. For this, one would have to turn to the *Letters*.

2. *Nāma-hā* (The Letters)

The *Letters* represent ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s most extensive body of writing, and he refers to them in passing at one place in *Paving the Path*.⁸⁹ Many scholars have noted the similarities between passages in *Paving the Path* and the *Letters*.⁹⁰ A close analysis of both texts shows that at least fifteen percent of the *Letters* contain materials that are also found, in one form or another, in *Paving the Path*.⁹¹ It would be impossible to derive a hard-and-fast formula for the carryover of passages from one text to another since *Paving the Path* was written concurrently with at least some parts of the *Letters*. At times, the *Letters* contain expanded discussions or slightly altered points that are found in *Paving the Path*, and in such cases the texts from *Paving the Path* seem like more primitive forms of the corresponding sections in the *Letters*. In these instances, it can safely be assumed that the respective texts from *Paving the Path* precede the corresponding texts in the *Letters*.

There are other technical cues that can give one subtle and at times overt indications as to when a particular letter was written, and this can at times lead to ultimately trivial points of observation concerning which text preceded which in time. What is more interesting is the manner in which *Paving the Path* and the *Letters* complement one another, with the latter shedding light on the political and historical context that is normally absent from the former. The *Letters* are also an incredible source for ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s ideas if only for the fact that they highlight a dimension of their author that is not easily discernable

in *Paving the Path*, namely his concrete spiritual advice to disciples and his candid solutions to their many problems.

The modern edition of the *Letters* is in three sizeable volumes and amounts to 1,136 printed pages. There are 159 letters in total, all of which but the last two are written in Persian.⁹² Assuming that ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt began to write them when he became a Sufi master, we can be fairly confident in stating that most of the *Letters*, with the exception of one in particular (see section 3), were written between 520/1126 and 525/1131. The last of them, as already mentioned, was penned while ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt was imprisoned in Baghdad.

Like *Paving the Path*, the *Letters* are written under inspiration, which is a point ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt makes throughout the work. Often, a letter will end abruptly since its author has run out of paper. Thus, it is common to find such statements as “Alas! The paper is full!,” or “Bring paper right now!,” and “Right now, there is no more paper!”⁹³ At times, the requested paper gets to the writer, but his task is already complete: “The paper has arrived, but this is sufficient!”⁹⁴

‘Ayn al-Quḍāt knew the value of each of his *Letters*, which is why he tells one recipient, “Read this letter every day for blessings—God willing, each word will do its work at the right moment.”⁹⁵ He instructs a different student, “Read these *Letters* attentively, and ask about whatever is obscure.”⁹⁶ Beyond his students, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt declares his inspired correspondences to quite literally contain something for everyone:

In these *Letters* of mine are so many wonders that, were the first and last generations of people to have been alive, they would have taken nourishment from them! (*N* II, 206, §304)

Even under inspiration ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt is careful to refine his words in his *Letters* and add important clarifications along the way. This explains why, as he states, a letter of typical length (about ten pages) takes him from about an hour after the late afternoon prayer (‘*aṣr*) to just before the sunset prayer (*maghrib*) to compose,⁹⁷ which would amount to something like two and a half to three hours per letter.

The *Letters* are not as haphazard to the naked eye as is *Paving the Path*. This is partly because ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt wrote much of the *Letters* in clusters, and over closely related periods of time, often in

response to a particular question that was addressed to him by one of his disciples. Thus, *Letters* 1–9 are generally on the topic of intention (*niyya*), dealing with both its inward and outward manifestations and its relationship to the pillars of Muslim practice.⁹⁸ *Letters* 10–27 form a commentary on the exclamatory phrase *Allāhu akbar* (“God is the Greatest!”).⁹⁹ This cluster of the *Letters* generally have to do with an extended discussion of the divine Essence, names, and attributes as they relate to the divine name *Allāh*, with the last of this portion of the *Letters* comprising a commentary on the phrase *akbar*. *Letters* 25 and 26 clearly state that the theology and technical discussions in *Letters* 10–24 deal with the outward nature of things, and that *Letters* 25 and 26 address their inner reality. This is a clear indication, if there was ever any doubt, that ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt saw his rational theology as profoundly subordinate to his mystical theology.

When viewed as a whole, the *Letters* are often quite theological in nature. In *Letter* 75, for example, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt engages in a critique of Ismailism, and *Letters* 92–95 deal with the manner in which the teachings of previous religions have been altered (*tahrīf*).¹⁰⁰ Other parts of the *Letters* point to ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s specific concerns in rational theology, taking in such topics as proofs for the existence of God, how it is that human beings are both free and constrained in the realm of action, and why in the final analysis one should never uphold a view that imputes injustice to God for what may seem like wrongs that occur in the world.¹⁰¹ That ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt would dedicate so much time to matters of formal theology indicates that at least some of his students were neophytes who were still concerned with matters of theological doctrine, which, as ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s writings on love reveal, he would sufficiently problematize for all of those closer to the end of the Sufi path.

As we have seen already, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt is particularly critical of the Seljuq state in a number of his *Letters*. When we bring all of these passages together, a rather coherent picture emerges with respect to his concern and care for his students, as well as his unrelenting stance against political and social injustice.

Other features of the *Letters* that merit close study are ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s many interpretations of particular Quranic verses¹⁰² that are found throughout the collection. A particularly rewarding area of investigation here would be the many instances in which ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt offers interpretations of the opening chapter of the Quran, the *Fātiḥa*.¹⁰³

3. [*Wāqi 'a-hā*] ([*Apparitions*])

In at least two concrete cases the *Letters* incorporate entire Persian texts that were previously written by ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt. As already pointed out, we have a handy set of correspondences that took place between ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt and Aḥmad Ghazālī. In actuality, they are almost all in the form of letters written by Aḥmad Ghazālī to ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, with references that clearly indicate earlier conversations and non-written modes of communication to which ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s master was responding. In only one instance in these correspondences does the teacher directly address a letter by his student.

This letter by ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, which we will refer to with the Persian title *Wāqi 'a-hā* (*Apparitions*), can be found in the printed edition of Aḥmad Ghazālī’s letters to ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt.¹⁰⁴ It is also available, in the exact same form, in ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s *Letters*, namely *Letter 148*.¹⁰⁵ In his letter, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt comes as a disciple, seeking to verify the truth of some of his visions and seeking answers to a few of his questions.¹⁰⁶ *Apparitions* therefore represents the only instance in all of the *Letters* wherein the author is himself a student who poses questions to his teacher.

4. *Risāla-yi Jamālī* (*Treatise Dedicated to Jamāl al-Dawla*)

The second concrete case in which an entire text written by ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt refigures in the *Letters* is that of his treatise on theology, the *Risāla-yi Jamālī* (*Treatise Dedicated to Jamāl al-Dawla*), which accounts for *Letter 127*.¹⁰⁷ At the beginning of this treatise, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt mentions a no-longer-extant Arabic treatise that he wrote in order to refute misguidance in matters of creed: the *Risālat al-‘Alā’ī*.¹⁰⁸ This text was dedicated to a certain Tāj al-Dīn¹⁰⁹ of the ‘Alā al-Dawla family who had been ruling over Hamadan since 450/1058.¹¹⁰ In all likelihood, Tāj al-Dīn would have been a friend of ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, but not a disciple per se.

The *Treatise Dedicated to Jamāl al-Dawla* was written in Persian and dedicated to the Hamadānī prince Jamāl al-Dīn Sharaf al-Dawla.¹¹¹ This work is divided into three parts and addresses two main points:

(1) The Prophets are like physicians, people are like patients, and the Quran is like the medicine cabinet. Some people follow the physicians in this life and others do not—the latter resultantly increase

in illness. For the people in this world, the illness they increase in when not following the Prophets is spiritual illness and heartsickness. Likewise, the believers benefit from their physicians. Ultimately, different people receive different medicines from their doctors—some receive more and some less, some bitter medicine and some sweet. So the Quran gives different prescriptions to each type of person in accordance with what their souls require in order to improve their spiritual condition.¹¹²

(2) The Prophets and the religious scholars (*‘ulamā’*) must administer medicine to the community; this also explains why, when innovation (*bid‘a*) and misguidance entered into the religion, many of the vanguards of Islam had to resort to unusual means to assuage these difficulties. The argument here is a justification for the use of rational theology, but not for the masses, which is in line with Ghazālī’s emphasis on the utility of rational theology for scholars and its danger for lay people.¹¹³ With this in mind, the study of rational theology is legitimate and helpful for a person whose faith in God and His Messenger has been shaken by religious innovators and cannot be helped by a preacher or teacher.¹¹⁴

5. *Zubdat al-ḥaqā’iq* (*The Essence of Reality*)

‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s mastery of rational theology is on full display in the *Essence*. This work of one hundred short chapters also fuses rational inquiry with “tasting” (*dhawq*), thereby bringing its findings more in line with what is now commonly referred to as “philosophical Sufism.”¹¹⁵ ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt completed the *Essence* at the age of twenty-four¹¹⁶ in a matter of two or three days.¹¹⁷ This is rather remarkable, given the density of this Arabic work. The work is essentially concerned with the three principles of religion, that is, the oneness of God (*tawḥīd*), prophecy (*nubuwwa*), and eschatology (*ma‘ād*).¹¹⁸ In the introduction, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt describes it as follows:

It is a complete provision for seekers and an ample means for the aims of those traveling to *the knowledge of certainty*.¹¹⁹
(Z §2)

‘Ayn al-Quḍāt also notes that the book was written primarily for people who have already attained a high level of theoretical knowledge of God

by way of rational theology; unlike most intellectually inclined theologians, however, they do not merely wish to know God with their minds.

Their bewilderment in knowledge of God only increases their resolve to pursue this knowledge, their longing to augment their insight, and their quest for what lies beyond knowledge and the intellect. (Z §28)

In the *Essence*, our author takes a position against the notion that the divine names and attributes are superadded to God's Essence. He makes the familiar argument that they inhere in God's Essence but in a way that does not make God more than one. The names and attributes are thus not God, but they are not not God. 'Ayn al-Quḍāt also displays his deep indebtedness to Ghazālī when he argues against the Avicennan notion of God's inability to know particulars (*juz'īyyāt*) except in a universal way, and the idea that the universe is eternal (*qadīm*). Concerning the latter, 'Ayn al-Quḍāt states in his *Letters*, "In *The Essence of Reality* I have given a complete exposition of this point that I had not seen anywhere, and which I had not heard from anyone."¹²⁰

A key philosophical position in the *Essence* has to do with God's "withness" (*ma'īyya*), which is to say that He is with things but that nothing is with Him. This discussion gives a greater context for the more mystically oriented ideas in the book, particularly that creation is in a perpetual state of renewal (*tajdīd*) and that there is, in reality, nothing in existence but God.

The *Essence's* single most important teaching has to do with the nature of the intellect and its limitations in knowing God, prophecy, and particularly what comes after death. The doctrine alluded to in the passage from the *Essence* just cited, namely that there is something "beyond the stage of the intellect" (*warā' ṭawr al-ʿaql*), finds its most sustained exposition in this work.¹²¹ Since the intellect can affirm eschatological realities but not grasp them in any real and concrete way, 'Ayn al-Quḍāt maintains that we can only witness them if we transcend the intellect, since the afterlife corresponds to a realm that is itself beyond our ken and imagination.

6. *Shakwā'l-gharīb (The Exile's Complaint)*

We have already had occasion to discuss this short Arabic work of less than fifty pages, as well as its date of composition. Here, it is

worth citing ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s justification for why he took up the pen in defense of himself:

Since not a single one of the scholars or Sufis responded to these accusatory statements—on account of an excuse of theirs that I accept, but that I cannot mention because it would be too long-winded—I myself have taken hold of the pen—upon which I rely—and have responded to the statements of my critics, defending myself before them in this treatise. (*Sh* 31)

This was a self-defense that was to fall upon deaf ears, and the tone of the work from the very beginning is one of a clear recognition of this fact on the part of the author. He nevertheless writes, and by all accounts the degree of eloquence of this work, in terms of both its Arabic prose and poetry, ranks it as among the great masterpieces of Arabic literature.

Exile’s Complaint is characterized by the aforementioned “sanitized” inventory of ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s writings to be found in it, as well as his author’s attempts to explain how some of his statements in the *Essence* match up with a number of enigmatic Sufi sayings and some statements made by the Prophet’s Companions. These, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt argues, cannot be understood without recourse to Sufism, which has its own terminology and technical vocabulary.¹²²

As a historical document, *Exile’s Complaint* provides us with a window into how a major Sufi author understood the history of Sufism and its relationship to the other Islamic sciences, while also painting a picture of something like a “who’s who” of the Sufi tradition. It is particularly interesting to note in this context that ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt lists no less than six Sufi women as among the foremost guides of the path, beginning with the famous Rābi‘a al-‘Adawiyya (d. 185/801)¹²³ and ending with Fāṭima b. Abī Bakr al-Kattānī, who famously died in front of the great Sumnūn al-Muḥibb (d. 287/900) as he was discoursing on love.¹²⁴

7. *Nuzhat al-‘ushshāq (The Lovers’ Excursion)*

In *Exile’s Complaint* ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt states that he wrote a one-thousand-line poem over the span of ten days under the complete title *Nuzhat al-‘ushshāq wa-nuzhat al-mushtāq (The Lovers’ Excursion, and the*

Beloved's Chance).¹²⁵ Also referred to as the *Wajdiyyāt* (*Poems of Ecstatic Love*), ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt penned this collection of Arabic love poetry at the instigation of his companions. Their specific request was that he muster his talents and put together “verses that would cause the one who relates them to quiver, constantly turning his gaze upon them.”¹²⁶ It is generally believed that ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt wrote *Lovers' Excursion* in his youth. This would put the date of this work's composition to some point before or even during his intellectual crisis in 506/1112, when he was roughly sixteen years old. Casting aside an argument in favor of the early authorship of *Lovers' Excursion* because it is based on several calculation errors and some unsound speculation,¹²⁷ we do have a very good reason to infer that this book goes back to an earlier period in its author's life. And that is his own testimony in *Exile's Complaint*, where he states that his youthful immersion in belles lettres was permanently replaced by his preoccupation with a much more serious and all-consuming science: traveling the Sufi path. As we will see in chapter 10, it is the inner life that allows ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt to take the amorous and sensual discourse in a work like *Lovers' Excursion* to an entirely new level, allowing him to ground every kind of experience in God, the supreme Lover and Beloved.¹²⁸

Reception

The fourteenth/twentieth-century Ni‘matullāhī Sufi hagiographer Ma‘ṣūm ‘Alī Shāh Shīrāzī (d. 1344/1926) aptly characterized ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt as being “Christ-like in perspective and Ḥallājīan in approach” (*‘Īsawī al-mashhad wa-Manṣūrī al-maslak*).¹²⁹ Despite this exalted image of ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt nearly eight hundred years after his death, it is rather difficult to textually trace his influence upon writers contemporaneous with him. This is why we find no mention of him in the Persian Sufi works of Rashīd al-Dīn Maybudī (d. ca. 520/1126), Sanā’ī, and Aḥmad Sam‘ānī (d. 534/1140).¹³⁰

It has been argued that ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt's Persian writings were first drawn upon by the Kubrawī author Najm al-Dīn Rāzī (d. 654/1256) in his famous Persian book on Sufism, *Mirṣād al-‘ibād* (*The Servants' Lookout*).¹³¹ But this claim does not stand to scrutiny because ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt is never mentioned by Rāzī in this text. Indeed, the one instance in which Rāzī cites a poem that is identical to what is to

be found in ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s writings does not originate with ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt but with another well-known figure who preceded him and is linked to his spiritual network;¹³² thus, both ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt and Rāzī were drawing on common (and likely oral) sources.¹³³ Most importantly, there is nothing in *Servants’ Lookout* that clearly resonates with ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s ideas, neither in form nor in content. Be that as it may, one aspect of ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s teachings that could have been influential upon a different Kubrawī figure is his highly original explanations of the nature of the Quranic detached letters (*al-ḥurūf al-muqaṭṭa‘a*) and primordial dots. They may have been drawn upon by the founder of the Kubrawī order Najm al-Dīn Kubrā (d. 618/1221) in expounding his profound synesthetic teachings.¹³⁴

‘Ayn al-Quḍāt does appear in other medieval Persian Sufi texts in more concrete ways. There are, for example, references to him by such major figures as Shams al-Dīn Tabrīzī (d. 643/1246), who in the *Maqālāt (Discourses)* seems to take issue with him on at least one of his statements.¹³⁵ ‘Azīz al-Dīn Nasafī (d. before 699/1300) discusses ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s treatment of the soul in one of his treatises¹³⁶ and was probably the first person to refer to him with the title *sulṭān al-‘ushshāq* or “Sultan of the lovers,”¹³⁷ a different form of which is commonly reserved for the famous Arab Sufi poet Ibn al-Fāriḍ (d. 632/1235).¹³⁸ And, in his Sufi hagiography *Nafahāt al-uns (Breaths of Intimacy)*, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī (d. 898/1492) extols ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s spiritual status, approvingly citing the account of his raising a dead person back to life.¹³⁹

Among later, premodern authors, the great Safavid philosopher Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1040/1640) often drew on ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt in his Arabic writings, and in one important instance reworked his exposition of the detached letters into his main theoretical book on the Quran, but without citing his source.¹⁴⁰ ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt was also being read in Ottoman Turkish, with *Paving the Path* having been translated twice into that language by the tenth/sixteenth century.¹⁴¹ It is thus not surprising to learn that in his Sufi Quran commentary, the Ottoman spiritual master Ismā‘īl Ḥaqqī Burūsawī (d. 1137/1725) praised ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s understanding of the detached letters and sought to defend it from any charge of unbelief.¹⁴²

On a more speculative level, arguments can be made for some form of engagement with ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s Persian Sufi writings in the works of such major medieval authors as Ruzbihān Baqlī (d.

606/1209), Farīd al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār (d. 618/1221), Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 672/1273), Fakhr al-Dīn ‘Irāqī (d. 688/1289), and, most significantly, Maḥmūd Shabistarī (d. ca. 720/1320).¹⁴³ Among Rūmī’s followers in Konya, it is said that they used to read ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s *Paving the Path* alongside a commentary upon the *Mathnawī* by Ḥusayn-i Khwārazmī (d. 840/1436).¹⁴⁴ Interestingly, Khwārazmī refers to ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt as being “Christ-like in doctrine” (P. *‘Isawī-yi mashrab*),¹⁴⁵ which is a clear precedent to Ma‘šūm ‘Alī Shāh’s characterization cited earlier.

We can trace ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s influence upon the Arabic literary tradition more concretely. This is because of the fact that in the late sixth/twelfth century, the *Essence* was naturalized into the curriculum of the Madrasa Mujāhidiyya in Maragha. At this important school, it was included in and taught as part of a philosophical anthology comprised of several major works in philosophy, logic, philosophical theology, and philosophical mysticism. Among the students who studied at the Madrasa Mujāhidiyya, and who likely read these works, were such luminaries as Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī (d. 587/1191) and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210).¹⁴⁶ Given the theoretical sophistication of the *Essence*, it is rather natural that the polymath Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī (d. 672/1274) would have undertaken to translate it into Persian, likely during the time he spent in Maragha at the court of Hülegü Khan.¹⁴⁷ Unfortunately, this translation has not survived. The *Essence*’s cogent case for the superiority of the Sufi approach to problems in metaphysics and epistemology drew the attention of Sa‘īd al-Dīn Farghānī (d. 699/1300)¹⁴⁸ and especially Jāmī, who made good use of its arguments in his famous *Durrat al-fākhira* (*The Precious Pearl*) and in his own glosses upon it.¹⁴⁹

Indeed, the *Essence* was known to intellectual and spiritual circles throughout the Muslim east. In a work that dates to the time he had settled in Damascus, for example, Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 638/1240) makes a passing reference to ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt that at least indicates his familiarity with the *Essence*’s underlying argument.¹⁵⁰ However, a later Arab follower of Ibn ‘Arabī and contemporary of Burūsawī, the theologian and mystic ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī (d. 1143/1731), does refer to the *Essence*’s Sufi epistemology with particular approval.¹⁵¹ We also find the *Essence* cited in a treatise on Sufi metaphysics by Faḍl-i Ḥaqq Khayrābādī (d. 1277/1861), a major philosopher and mystic active in British India.¹⁵²

The one place where ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s Persian writings took firm root was in premodern India, particularly among Sufis in the Chishtī