

“The Grove of Imagination”: Re-reading Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Barzakh* as a Spiritual Ecology

ANDI HERAWATI

Abstract

This paper re-examines Ibn ‘Arabī’s concept of the *barzakh* through the lens of spiritual ecology, arguing that it functions not only as an eschatological or metaphysical intermediary but as a dynamic, growth-oriented realm integral to the soul’s development. Moving beyond previous structural and ontological readings, the paper highlights the *barzakh* as an active, vegetal-like ecosystem where the human being—understood

Andi Herawati, Ph.D., is a Senior Fellow at the Center for the Study of the Middle East, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana. Her work explores the intersections of Islamic and indigenous cosmologies, and her current research traces concepts of imagination (*khayāl*) through the writings of Ibn ‘Arabī and their resonances in the living traditions of Indonesia.

Herawati, Andi. “‘The Grove of Imagination’: Re-reading Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Barzakh* as a Spiritual Ecology.” *American Journal of Islam and Society* 43, nos. 1-2: 66–93 • 10.35632/ajis.v43i1-2.3974
Copyright © 2026 International Institute of Islamic Thought

as a “plant-like” entity (*nabāṭī*)—matures through embodied, experiential engagement with the natural world. Drawing on Ibn ‘Arabī’s descriptions of the “Vast Earth” (*ard al-ḥaḳīqa*) and the “Pledge of the Plants,” the analysis reveals how the *barzakh* serves as a spiritual geography that integrates mineral, vegetal, and animal dimensions into the path of human perfection. By synthesizing insights from contemporary Islamic scholarship and vegetal philosophy, the paper presents the *barzakh* as a foundational, indigenous framework for an Islamic ecological spirituality—one that decenters anthropocentrism and affirms the sacred interconnectivity of all beings in the journey toward divine proximity.

Keywords: Ibn ‘Arabī, *barzakh*, *nabāṭī*, spiritual ecology, imaginal world (*‘ālam al-mithāl*), vegetal philosophy, spiritual geography, Sufism, environmental spirituality, human perfection (*kamāl*)

Introduction: Ibn ‘Arabī’s Unique Treatment of the *Barzakh*

The “*barzakh*” is one of the most fundamental and multi-faceted metaphysical concepts of Ibn ‘Arabī.¹ To understand its significance, we must first recognize its deep roots. The word *barzakh* appears twice in the Qur’an, describing boundaries in both physical and metaphysical contexts (at 55:19-20, and 25:53).² Regarding the etymology of this unusual term, most philologists remain silent as to the possibility of its being a loan-word in Arabic,³ while Lane uses it as a faith-related term. For Lane, *barzakh* in its derivative meaning connected to faith, means what is between the beginning of faith, which is “the removal of what is hurtful from the road”;⁴ or what is between doubt and certainty. Often the *barzakh* here is understood as a referring to a line of knowledge as well as faith. Islamic scholars and mystics went on to expand on its implications, linking it to dreams, visions, and discussions of the afterlife.

The 13th-century Islamic milieu of theological debate and Sufi creativity was a pivotal period for speculative mysticism (*‘irfān*), marked

by fruitful intellectual exchange between Andalusia and the East. In that creative context, Ibn ‘Arabi situated the *barzakh* within a distinctive cosmology and epistemology that blended esoteric knowledge, philosophical rigor, and poetic expression. His complex use of *barzakh*, as outlined here, reflects the intellectual and spiritual exchanges of his time, focusing on the dynamic interplay between human experience and divine reality.

In Ibn ‘Arabi’s thought, *barzakh* transcends its conventional eschatological meaning popularized by earlier Sufi authors to become a dynamic, transformative metaphysical domain central to human spiritual perception, self-realization, and ethical growth. While in earlier Islamic tradition it was primarily associated with the intermediary state of the human soul after death, Ibn ‘Arabi integrates several distinct spiritual, philosophical, and poetic dimensions to portray it as a creative locus of meaning-making, discovery and growth that continuously bridges divine and human realities.

Since Ibn ‘Arabi’s time, his expanded conception of *barzakh* has illuminated diverse studies, reflecting a wide array of personal experiences, religious piety, and novel perspectives on nature. Yet we are still awaiting a thorough discussion of its dynamic character and manifestations. Popularly known as liminality,⁵ especially in anthropological and religious discussions, relatively few scholars have paid attention to the wider importance of this concept, providing important groundwork for this study. George Archer meticulously traces the Qur’anic foundations of the *barzakh*, firmly anchoring it as an intermediary “space” linked to resurrection, ambiguity, and the posthumous journey of the soul.⁶ His extensive analysis is crucial for understanding the term’s eschatological core and its role as a barrier and a passage in the Islamic tradition. While his study establishes its ontological “location,” it does not fully engage with Ibn ‘Arabi’s expansion of the *barzakh* into a multidimensional domain of continuous spiritual experience and growth accessible to everyone within the human journey. The philosopher Salman Bashier earlier explored its ontological dimension as a liminal world of imagination that reflects both the eternal and the temporal. Bashier highlights the *barzakh* as a reflective mirror that embodies the eternal nature of

God alongside the temporally originated world,⁷ as well as exploring it as the principle of "limit" that makes relationship and existence possible, focusing on its function in Ibn 'Arabī's metaphysics. However, such a highly abstract conceptual understanding, while profound, still lacks the phenomenological, experiential dimension of how a seeker actually interacts with and grows within the *barzakh*.

Shifting the focus from ontological structure to subjectivity, Sa'diyya Shaikh fruitfully employs the *barzakh* as a metaphor for a particular ethical and epistemological posture. For her, the *barzakh* represents a "way of thinking" characterized by embracing ambiguity, holding tension, and navigating the in-betweenness of contradictory truths.⁸ This approach is invaluable for understanding the intellectual and ethical discipline required of the spiritual seeker. Similarly, Miriam Cooke examined the *barzakh* through the lens of spiritual ecstasy, highlighting its role as a site of profound, transformative experience that transcends ordinary consciousness. By examining the work of poet Huda Naamani, Cooke frames the *barzakh* as the site of an intense, ineffable spiritual experience where "two elements behave as one" during divine self-manifestation (*tajalli*). She vividly describes how this state is accessed and expressed through non-linguistic means, such as sound, color, and rhythmic repetition, arguing that the *barzakh* retains the actual spiritual experience in sound and color rather than erasing its living reality.⁹

This article builds upon those recent studies by introducing a further vital element, which is the *barzakh*'s developmental life and its inherent dynamism and profound experiential connection to the natural world. I will demonstrate here how, in Ibn 'Arabī's thought, the *barzakh* functions not as a passive boundary but as an active, growth-oriented realm, a vital spiritual ecosystem where the soul—certainly the human soul, but perhaps all living things as well—is cultivated and matured. A more direct modern theoretical support for this perspective comes from outside Islamic studies, in the growing field of "vegetal philosophy."

Recent thinkers elaborating that conception, such as Michael Arder, argue instead for decentering the human and recognizing other unique modes of being, temporality, and wisdom inherent in plant life.¹⁰ This study examines a parallel approach that Ibn 'Arabī elaborated within the

framework of Islamic spirituality, where his scattered discussions of vegetal awareness must be taken not simply as poetic devices nor metaphor, but instead as serious indicators of a “plant-like” (*nabāṭī*) dimension of human spiritual existence which is characterized by growth, sensitivity, and rootedness, reflecting a wider symbolic relationship with one’s environment. In other words, this study complements the existing structural models provided by previous scholarship by revealing the *barzakh* as the very ground of spiritual becoming. Indeed, understanding the *barzakh* as it arises in Ibn ‘Arabī’s thought and experience requires a multifaceted perspective that transcends rigid philosophical or religious categorization, but instead reflects a dynamic, comprehensive vision of reality. In this perspective, the function of the *barzakh* is not metaphorical. Rather, it is a profoundly real, and widely accessible (perhaps universal) realm with distinct eco-spiritual characteristics. As Titus Burkhart described its interpretation in pre-modern Sufi tradition, the *barzakh* is generally taken to mean a certain intermediate state in the posthumous evolution of each human being.¹¹

My methodological approach is informed by two key strands of contemporary Islamic scholarship. First, I employ a close textual hermeneutics akin to Sa’diyya Shaikh’s work, which pays careful attention to the construction of the self and spiritual anthropology in Sufi texts. Secondly, I approach Ibn ‘Arabī’s cosmology here through an ethical and critical lens, inspired by Miriam Cooke’s projects, that focuses on its potential for de-centering human dominance and articulating a much broader, relational ethical perspective. By synthesizing these approaches, this article demonstrates how Ibn ‘Arabī’s metaphysical system provides a powerful, indigenous foundation for rethinking the human place in a more-than-human world. From that point of view, the *barzakh*, as understood by Ibn ‘Arabī and his interpreters, enriches philosophical discourse by transforming conceptual rigidity into a more flexible, effective, and living approach to wisdom.

Beyond its role as a conceptual reminder of the coexistence of transcendence and immanence, the *barzakh* in Ibn ‘Arabī’s perspective, is something profoundly real. But in what way is it real, rather than

merely a metaphor? Building on the inherent naturalistic and dynamic characteristics of Ibn ‘Arabī’s exposition, our argument here about the *barzakh* proceeds along two complementary lines: its organic nature; and its wholistic inclusion of the non-human *dimensions* of being. The first approach operates according to principles of growth, cultivation, and symbiotic relationship, much like a natural ecosystem—a quality epitomized by Ibn ‘Arabī’s persistent use of vegetal metaphors (the tree, the growing plant) to describe spiritual development. The latter approach points to a realm where the spiritual realities of minerals, plants, and animals are not only present, but are essential for the soul’s own realization and perfection. Both aspects are well demonstrated in Ibn ‘Arabī’s special chapters on “*The Vast Earth*”¹² and “*The Pledge of the Plants*.”¹³

The groundwork for understanding the *barzakh* as a real, perceptible world was laid by Henry Corbin. His seminal works, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabī* and *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*,¹⁴ were groundbreaking in introducing the ‘*ālam al-mithāl* (the “imaginal world”) to Western audiences. Corbin’s detailed analysis of the *Futūḥāt* chapter on the “Vast Earth” (*arḍ al-ḥaḳīqa*) established it as a distinct ontological realm, a “celestial earth” with its own geography, accessible through the imaginative faculty (*khayāl*). However, his focus in those studies remained largely on the noetic and visionary “architecture” of this realm, its role in prophetic revelation and spiritual perception, rather than its involvement with much wider ecological and developmental processes.

By situating the *barzakh* in Ibn ‘Arabī’s larger cosmology, this paper argues that it is more than an abstract or merely doctrinal teaching. Instead, for him it is a widely accessible realm of being and experience with distinct eco-spiritual characteristics. We must also acknowledge, however, that any potential “definition” of these intermediary realms of existence is constrained by the boundaries that imagination and language establish.¹⁵ For the *barzakh* is itself unavoidably a site of exploration into the interpenetration and interconnectedness of realms of existence (both alternative “translations” of its reality), and we find that Ibn ‘Arabī’s

extensive thought provides the necessary background for envisioning this multifaceted nature in Islamic thought and practice.

The *Barzakh* and the “Intermediate Realms” of Existence

In later schools of Islamic spirituality, the *barzakh* is often understood as the “intermediate realms” associated with both divine and human imagination.¹⁶ Ibn ‘Arabī adopts this definition, identifying *barzakh* at the outset of the *Futūḥāt*¹⁷ as the realm of the “imagined body” and the first level of the lower world (*dunyā*). While other Sufis used the term to describe realms between the material and the purely spiritual, Ibn ‘Arabī develops it into a precise technical concept with unique characteristics and several different shades of meaning.¹⁸

For him, the linguistic root of *barzakh* implies an “intervening divider” (*al-fāṣila*), yet its distinctive function is fundamentally creative and connective. He applies it broadly to any liminal state that combines two distinct, “adjacent” levels of existence, conditions, or realms. It is the lukewarm state between hot and cold, or the auditory midpoint between soft and loud. This intermediary state is one of profound equilibrium. Ibn ‘Arabī compares it to a restful slumber, where the sleeper exists in a state between life and death,¹⁹ reconciling these apparent opposites. Similarly, he points to the Day of Resurrection, where divine Names with opposing qualities interact. Thus the many intermediary realms (*barāzikh*) mentioned in his work represent distinct levels of existence, each with specific characteristics, but all sharing this fundamental liminal nature.

When the *barzakh* is associated with imagination, it is a specific capacity that perceives and navigates different realms of meanings. Thus it can supersede purely intellectual approaches to meaning, which only heightens its paradoxical power²⁰ to both reveal and conceal vast ranges of human perception²¹ and spiritual possibilities. Within this framework, the *barzakh* denotes the continuous streaming of forms corresponding to each individual’s spiritual state. For this reason, this intermediary realm is called the World of Mystery (*‘ālam al-ghayb*). And it constitutes, as Henry Corbin observed, an immense “mystic geography.”²² Building on

Corbin's insight, this spiritual geography can be mapped analogously to natural geography, revealing a vast extrasensory (or "trans-sensory") realm that is both interpretable and perceptible.

When the Qur'an states (QS. 41:53)²³ that these divine signs are visible "on the horizons" and "within their souls," this geographical metaphor extends to spiritual directions. The Qur'an alludes to this through repeated references to "the east and the west" (55:17;²⁴ 73:9²⁵), including Moses's proclamation that God is "the Lord of the east and the west, and everything in between" (26:28).²⁶ The famous Light-Verse (24:35)²⁷ further situates divine illumination in a niche that is "neither of the east nor the west." Ibn 'Arabī expands these allusions into a complex spiritual cosmology. This is not merely about cardinal directions, but instead encompasses a panoramic dimension of nature itself, reflecting a crucial aspect of the human condition: our innate access to this intermediary dimension of being. Therefore, this spiritual geography enumerates all things perceived in the world in their subtle state of "immaterial matter" (*jism*), with their contours and forms, a reality made vividly apparent in visions, such as those contemplated by a dying person.

The Barzakh as Spiritual Geography

A striking illustration of Ibn 'Arabī's understanding of the *barzakh* is his early, mysterious vision of the "Reality of the Vast Earth."²⁸ This account appears amidst a long cosmological elaboration (over several extensive chapters) on the stages of creation and divine "Self-manifestation." It is recounted in the guise of an unnamed companion's story—sharing some "fantastic" elements with science fiction or Dante's *Divine Comedy*—which presents an "awakened dream" or spiritual travelogue filled with marvelous places, figures, colors, and actions. Yet these worlds remain mysteriously connected to our own, as when Ibn 'Arabī discovers that an earthquake he experienced there is linked to his daughter's simultaneous illness and passing on earth.

Ibn 'Arabī explains that this "Vast Earth" was formed from the residual fermented "Clay" of the primordial Adam (*min baqiyyat khamīra*

tīnat Ādam). This primal origin roots the entire imaginal cosmology in a foundational, natural element, connecting it directly to the essence of the human archetype. Within this special realm, the abstract becomes concrete: the inhabitants possess physical bodies of a refined and subtle consistency, while their inner qualities, such as character, ethical wisdom, and the like, are manifested in a tangible, visible manner. This “Celestial Earth,” as Corbin calls it, is symbolized by an extraordinary palm tree created from the same substance as the original Adam’s Clay; then from it the rest of these earths were created, so that this endlessly fruitful “Palm-tree” is also called “Adam’s sister.”²⁹ Thus the complete range of “imaginal encounters” described in this journey, though extraordinary, are fashioned from natural elements and are ultimately designed to contribute to the reader’s own practical spiritual “self-knowledge” or *maʿrifa*.

Significantly, this poetic and mysterious chapter does not solely mention Ibn ʿArabī’s own vision, but also aspects of this realm that other fellow Sufis like Dhūʿl Nūn al-Miṣrī have experienced as well.³⁰ As Ibn ʿArabī says, “there appeared to me in a penetrating vision that ‘Earth (of Reality),’ in this bodily configuration.”³¹ Furthermore, while talking to us as his readers, Ibn ʿArabī was also evoking or addressing a wider group, since the pronouns and other references to those who have access to this vision of the “Earth of Reality” are never very clear. By following his descriptions, we traverse a “spiritual geography” that shows what it means to be living both outside and within imagination. Here are four striking characteristics of this imaginal “Earth” he describes here:

1). **The Actualization of the Impossible:** This Earth of the *barzakh* is a realm of miracles, but its descriptions should not be dismissed as fantasy. Ibn ʿArabī insists it is as real and tangible as our world, frequently visited by advanced spiritual “knowers.” Explorers describe cities of gold and silver, fruits with unknown flavors, and oceans of precious metals whose waters do not blend. Here, the impossible becomes actual. One narrative describes a fruit that regenerates after being cut. To support this idea, here is one narrative mentioned by one of the *ʿarifūn* (most likely Ibn ʿArabī himself):

[...] This is something that the intellects here (on earth) deem to be impossible, in their view. So when Dhū'l al-Nūn al-Miṣrī witnessed this wonder, he spoke of what has been reported from him, (including) bringing the larger to the smaller, without the larger being diminished or the smaller becoming larger, or what is narrow widening, or what is wide narrowing. Thus, the immensity of an apple there—as I have just mentioned—is unchanged, and yet (our) little hand can grasp it! This holding the (entire immense apple) actually happens, although how that happens is unknown, and only God knows that, since the knowledge of (how that happens) is restricted to God alone. And a single day in our (normal earthly) time is a period of several years for them, since the times occurring on that Earth are different.³²

2). **A Stage for Conscious Theophany:** “This Earth is a vast panorama for the eyes of the ‘arifūn³³ [...] a pasture through which they roam.” Among its many worlds is one that accords with human forms, allowing the knower to witness himself in them. Divine Self-manifestations (*tajalliyyāt*) occur there with a unique characteristic: they do not overwhelm the recipient’s self-awareness. Unlike in our world, where such theophanies can take individuals out of themselves, there the knowers remain fully conscious within themselves during the experience.

One of the ‘arifūn reported something about that Earth, which I myself know from direct personal witnessing. He said: “One day I came upon in this Earth a spiritual gathering called “the gathering of Lovingmercy” (*majlis al-raḥma*). I had never seen a more wondrous gathering before. And while I was there, suddenly a divine theophany (*tajallī*) appeared to me. But it did not take me out of myself: no, it made me remain (conscious) within myself. This is one of the special characteristics of that Earth. For the divine Self-manifestations (*tajalliyyāt*) that come over the ‘arifūn in this (earthly) abode, in these earthly bodies, do take them out of their self-awareness. (This is true for) the prophets, the *awliyā*’, and everyone who experiences this (in our world).

According to Ibn ‘Arabī’s description, this particular *barzakh* constitutes the very ground for enlightened perception—the spiritual “eyes” through which divine radiance (*tajalliyyāt*) is received. Within this Earth, these opened faculties act as instruments of divine perception, actively conceiving landscapes, personalities, colors, and tastes that he meticulously details.

3). A Multiplicity of Coexisting Worlds: This “vast Earth” is one *barzakh* among many (*barāzikh*). It contains numerous distinct worlds, each with unique qualities. In Ibn ‘Arabī’s account, this special Earth tells us a substantial story through the very different and unfamiliar creations that are in it, particularly of the unusual qualities that are specific to that particular “world” within it which is “in accord with (our human) forms.” As he indicates there, many different “worlds” were created from and within this realm, including all the marvels that appear to the enlightened *‘arifūn* in this depiction.³⁴ This chapter indicates how truly vast is this immense *barzakh*, opened up by the penetrating spiritual vision needed to arrive there, revealing in its many levels (known and unknown) that this world that we inhabit is in reality only one among many other *barzakhs*.³⁵

The panorama of different images and characteristics of this “vast Earth” described in this chapter is largely recounted in the first person by someone unnamed, who is most likely Ibn ‘Arabī himself. The following passages, describing different worlds that the narrator himself visited within this immense Earth, are a small selection of the fascinating descriptions of the extraordinary spiritual “locales” that take up most of this chapter:

He said: “I entered there (i.e., in that “vast Earth”) an earth of white silver, in appearance full of trees and rivers and various fruit, all of them silver. And the bodies of her inhabitants were all silver. Likewise in all the other earths (worlds), each had trees, fruits, rivers, oceans, and all her other creatures of the same kind (of the same distinctively colored “material”). So, when I procured (their fruits) and ate them, the taste and scents and flavors I found in them were like other foods, except that the pleasure (of eating them) cannot be described or recounted.

And I entered there an earth of white camphor. In some places there was heat more intense than fire. But the human being can plunge into that and not get burned. And other places there were mild, while others were very cold. Now each earth (world) among these earths, which are places within that Vast Earth: if I were to place the (familiar earthly) heavens in just one of those worlds, it would be (in proportionate size) like a necklace in a vast desert!

Among all the earths (worlds) of that Vast Earth, for me none is more beautiful and more agreeable to my constitution than the saffron earth. I have not seen a world among the worlds of that entire All-encompassing World (whose people are) more relaxed than them, nor more friendly to someone arriving among them, greeting them warmly and hospitably[...]. And if you regard her women, you see that in comparison with the women existing in the Garden (paradise), the women of that (world) are like our women among the people of this (earthly) world in comparison with the women of paradise[...]. Her people are the most passionately loving of creatures in regard to anyone who comes among them. They have no obligatory (religious) responsibility (*taklif*), since they are automatically glorifying God and His Majesty. Were they to try to do something opposed to that, they would not be able to do so[...].”³⁶

4). **Universal Communication:** This Earth grants every visitor an understanding of all languages within it. This intense, immediate communion among all beings parallels the human soul’s innate sensitivity to the vegetal, animal, and mineral realms in our own existence. Those images, such as stones, animals, gardens, and people all communicate and understand each other. Thus, he tells us:

You do not pass a stone or a tree or a clod of earth or anything else, but that if you want to speak with it, you speak with it like one person speaking to another. They have different languages.

This Earth gives specially to everyone who enters her an understanding of the languages of everything in her.³⁷

Many of the special characteristics of this vast Earth, especially the intense level and immediacy of communication between and among all the creatures and “objects” of those worlds that Ibn ‘Arabī describes, also seem to parallel his subsequent broader account of the particular connections and sensitivities of the human soul with regard to the vegetal, animal and mineral realms of our own earthly existence.

***Barzakh* as Stages of Humanity: The Growth of the “Plant”-like Human**

The spiritual journey narrates a human soul’s development and maturation, while the vegetal *barzakh* represents the very environment and natural laws governing that development. These are two perspectives of a single reality. Although the *barzakh* is often vaguely discussed in Sufi literature as a distinct eschatological “world” for initiates, travel metaphors aptly capture the fluidity central to the religious quest.³⁸ In fact, the detailed mapping of the spiritual journey through the *barzakh*, reveals it as the fundamental domain of transformation.³⁹ However, in order to deeply realize this condition, the spiritual perception requires a “soul sensitivity” and instinctive awareness⁴⁰ manifesting itself as an invisible open door, that is, however, accessible to us through its effects and influences. So, when we translate the sensibility of spiritual perception as a journey,⁴¹ then the stories of that journey are projected onto and refracted in the hopes and nascent intuitions of others who watch, read, or listen to such accounts.⁴² This perception helps map a spiritual geography, as exemplified in Ibn ‘Arabī’s elaborate account of the Prophet’s night-journey (*isrā’*) in chapter 366 of the *Futūḥāt*.

In constructing this symbolic map of the stages of spiritual growth, he first focuses on the dimension of the *barzakh* tied to the archetypal stages of the Prophet’s ascent, as imaging the sacred finality of human acts and events.⁴³ Second, he illustrates the importance of our spiritual perception of sacred places (as exemplified in the different places connected with the

Prophet's journey). Third, he emphasizes the great importance of certain realized Friends' "return" to this world after their bodily death as a kind of transformed, positive awareness of the spiritual dynamic underlying the human physical and social world, an insight expressed through their active responsibility of teaching and guiding their people toward their ultimate destination. Finally, his detailed account about the *barzakh* as a spiritual journey highlights the necessity of spiritual preparation for this voyage, in both the invisible (inner) and visible, external dimensions.

"The human is (part of) the plant." With this, Ibn 'Arabī introduces the wisdom of the "plant dimension" (*nabāt*) of human being. Due to its intermediate position between the mineral and animal realms, the plant realm is a locus where the human becomes a fully realized *barzakh*: i.e., a domain capable of growing, accepting, and thus transforming. This domain grants self-knowledge to those who reveal the truths discovered within it. "*Al-nabāt*," in Islamic philosophy, is one of the levels of existence of "the (earthly) Kingdom" (*mulk*) that is considered as the ultimate source of the powers of growth and development. The *Ikhwān al-Safā'*, for example, wrote that plants actually come before animals in the series of existent beings.⁴⁴ Thus Ibn 'Arabī points to this plant realm as an intermediate realm comprising the designated means for the purpose of "preparation" and "growing." For example, he says:⁴⁵

In the plant, there is the secret heart of the *barzakh* that does not exist in anything else other than in itself, because it (that secret dimension) is a barrier between the human being and their self (or their "lord"). The cause of this is as indicated by the Quranic verse:⁴⁶ God caused you all to grow (*anbatakum*) from the ground like plants (*nabāt^{an}*).

The sensitivity of the human soul gives the human position in nature, in the intermediate realm including the neighboring mineral and animal domains, essential elements of what it needs to actualize the full potential of *khayāl*, of that dimension and far-reaching power of imagination. This means those dimensions of existence that constitute an important locus for spiritual learning, where each soul can develop and expand as

a *barzakh* between pure corporeality and pure spirituality. As Ibn ‘Arabī explains more extensively in the famous chapter on Ilyās (Idris) in his *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*,⁴⁷ the full realization of our humanity (i.e., the comprehensive microcosmic reality of *insān*) necessarily incorporates our mysterious awareness of the animal (as well as the vegetal and mineral) planes of existence.

Ibn ‘Arabī refers to both ways of looking at the human soul (*nafs*) as a problem to be overcome, as the practical object of spiritual exercise and meditation for those who properly situate the human reality within the cosmos. Yet no matter how we define it, the human soul is always an intermediate domain:

*The soul comes from the world of the barzakh,
so every secret becomes clear from her.*⁴⁸

Ibn ‘Arabī’s careful attention here to the spiritual importance, indeed the necessity, of experientially exploring the realm of plants (and the adjacent “pre-human” domains of animal and mineral existence) does coincide with the repeated emphatic Qurānic reminders of the worshipping and other inner dimensions of the creatures in all those natural dimensions of existence. (Even more obvious is the Qurānic use of symbols drawn from the vegetal, animal and mineral realms.) It is noteworthy that contemporary researchers have also pointedly observed the expansion of “vegetal philosophy” (mentioned above) as an independent field of study highlighting the capacities of plants, as a means of de-centering the prevalent metaphysical conceptions of human dominance, since people do obviously exist in a fundamental relationship with all non-human others.

To continue exploring the intricate yet intimate relationship between the universe and humans, Ibn ‘Arabī, like other mystics, also refers to the various Qurānic sources developing the symbolism of the individual as a tree. “The human being is a tree,”⁴⁹ he says. In addition to having a longstanding connection to divine figures and mythology,⁵⁰ trees have also been recognized in many cultures and religions as a link between different realms of creation⁵¹ throughout the course of human existence.

This certainly contributes to understanding and enriching the terminology and symbolic use of the intermediary world as a means of human development and perfection.⁵²

Now from Ibn ‘Arabī’s phenomenological hermeneutics and metaphysical perspective, the vegetative and other natural aspects of human being are an important object of exploration, an extensive source of this plant-wisdom that grants humans access to the world from a vegetal perspective, as represented in the immense phenomenology of the experience of nature among all peoples. Therefore Ibn ‘Arabī’s understanding of the spiritual role of plants (and other natural creatures) does not contradict his other metaphysical perspectives. In fact, it refocuses our attention on the interconnectedness of human nature (*nāsūt*) and divine nature (*lāhūt*), as that is enabled through the natural world (*tabī‘iyyāt*).⁵³ This has been suggested by Islamic environmentalist scholars following the spiritual path of development that “people have to reform themselves, before they can reform the world.”⁵⁴ However, realizing the full import of that vast range of phenomena and sensitivities may understandably prove to be more difficult for people today, when compared with those indigenous groups who are still dependently living side by side with nature.

We might also note that this vegetal *barzakh* presents a twofold ethical dimension. We refer here to its lived aspect with regard to the sensual, as well as the spiritually sensitive, nexus of its human relations. Vegetal life gives us a sense of what is meant by the perpetuation of creation, on both the physical and the mental planes, that takes place through daily exercise and “cultivation,” both outwardly and inwardly. The concepts of kinship and participation, along with that of responsibility, are key components within religious ethical discipline.⁵⁵ In its intrinsic aspect, the plant realm of the *barzakh* particularly suggests what makes for the virtues of spiritual humility and modesty associated with the terms *khushū‘* or *tawādu‘* and *zuhd* in Sufi ethics.

Still, the deeper spiritual reality of this state is to emphasize inward turning, the “humility of heart,” an interior state that requires the human self to recognize its total ontological dependence on God—and which, in relation to the other humans (and all other creatures as well), requires

restraining the self from feelings of superiority.⁵⁶ Thus the eventual human result of this “plant-like” ethical nature is realized spiritual knowledge. The more we grow (spiritually), the less we become. In Indonesian spiritual lore, it is understood that knowledge of the life-cycle of the rice paddy plant provides an image of this deeply rooted inner humility that has long been culturally integrated into everyday life-philosophy among indigenous people.⁵⁷

Through this turning and profound “humility,” the human being who has realized these plant-like qualities can absorb and contact this world and the worlds beyond. We find this statement bringing out Ibn ‘Arabi’s notion of the fruitful human connection with the vegetal *barzakh* developed in detail in his chapter 366.⁵⁸ Though this article is not an independent systematic discussion of the whole cosmological realm of plants, nonetheless it does elaborate on the essential human spiritual connection of our relation to this vegetal aspect of *barzakh*. Thus, from this perspective, neglecting this vegetal element in us is akin to annihilating different species of plants, in that it impoverishes a vital element of our being human and “growing in humanity” in this world. In addition, this vegetal dimension of accomplished humanity suggests not just growing to a higher spiritual level but also sustaining the human being and keeping it in a healthy state. It is part of the soul’s “convalescing” when it has been cured of its deficiencies, requiring nourishment and protection from maladies in the physical, intellectual, and spiritual spheres.

In Stephen Hirtenstein’s study on the alchemy of happiness, one of the “alchemical” (i.e., spiritually transformational) functions of our inner realization connected with plants in this intermediary realm is therefore to help cure mental and spiritual illness and to provide the proper conditions that can protect against the dominance of earthly desires.⁵⁹ Through this full assimilation of the *barzakh* of plants, the realized soul acquires a medium of perception and other qualities such that whoever attains the highest spiritual level (described here as “gold”) will never again undergo the sort of negative transformation that leads back to a lower level.⁶⁰

The following sections elaborate on two key lessons from chapter 366 of the *Futūḥāt*, followed by a memorable personal testimony by Ibn ‘Arabi

about his own realization of this transformation through the *barzakh* of animality (*hayawān*), a striking passage that concludes his chapter 22 on Ilyas (Idris) in the *Fuṣūṣ*. This key chapter there concisely sums up and highlights his teaching regarding the essential role of the *barzakh* in spiritual realization in earthly life, as it enables our assimilation of the animal, mineral and vegetal dimensions of all earthly creatures.

The "Plant-Dimension" (*nabāt*) as That Which Gives, Leads, and Rules

For Ibn ʿArabī, the human being is "a tree," and due to this inherent constitution, humans are always in disagreement and disputes until they concur on one thing, which is death:⁶¹

[God] made human beings a tree in which there is contentiousness (*tashājur*),⁶² because humans were created from contraries,⁶³ due to the human constitution being made up of different elements; and this intermediate position is very characteristic of the imagination and the *barzakh*. For if the matter were limited only to the growing (physical) body and its other (purely physical aspects), without including the soul, then (that person) would not be disputing (against God). For (the body) is created primordially (*maftūr*) to glorify God and to praise Him. So, the human body (alone, without the human soul) is like herbage among the plants.

It is the integration of the soul with the body that introduces the tension and the potential for conflict, and thus, for choice. This is why, in his chapter on plants, Ibn ʿArabī likens the human condition to an inner pledge of allegiance (*mubāyaʿa*). This allegiance acknowledges the profound effect that nature and the elemental "pillars" (*arkān*) have on all the earthly generated bodies (*muwalladāt*).⁶⁴ Therefore, "growth" in this context signifies not merely biological development, but above all a navigation of life that entails responsibility, accountability, and ultimately, leadership. This alludes to the fundamental human need for

an Imam, caliph, or guide. Ibn ‘Arabī employs a figurative language of “likeness” to show how the “human tree” corresponds to universal Reality, with the dynamics of semantic power and weakness illustrating this realm of spiritual growth. The human, as a kind of spiritual “child,” can be led and supported by the power of imagination, which acts as an internal ruler. In a positive sense, the duality within the human “tree” is the very ground from which that leadership is born. The *barzakh* thus functions as a measure, and the quality of this inner leadership judges and rules on an essential, individual, and social level. Concerning this, Ibn ‘Arabī continues here:

Barzakh is a person who divides, who is wise and just, who is the one who judges between himself and his God. So, the revealed law itself does not apply until that person himself contradicts his God and judges his God based on his own carnal self (*nafs*), on his (limited) knowledge. Because the knowledge of just persons, which is knowledge of Truth, is in the hands of God in every situation.⁶⁵

This paradoxical nature of the *barzakh* as both a separator and a bridge is epitomized in the symbolic figures of Khizr and Moses, who serve as a paradigmatic model for the master-disciple relationship throughout Islamic history.⁶⁶ Their interaction provides a vertical and horizontal model for relating different realms of knowledge, embodying the archetype of a guide who is both a “maker and protector” and a “destroyer of illusions.”⁶⁷

Crucially, the human body itself is a plant. However, it does not stand on a stem, and it is not fully a “tree” unless the spirit is present. It is this *spiritual* animation that distinguishes the human “plant” from all others. As a *barzakh*, the plant-like human body is a mirror capable of receiving and forming images of the other two earthly isthmuses: the realms of minerals and animals. Therefore, when a person pledges allegiance, the oath encompasses the entire chain of being: plants, animals, and minerals. This suggests that “plant” refers simultaneously to the body, the individual person, and the principle of leadership inherent within them.

Consequently, the causation of growth is not merely a predetermined biological process. While it is part of God's making Himself a "partner" to creation, the actual aspect of growing is also a partially self-determined factor necessary to qualify as a perfected human being. Without the human being's own preparation for "sprouting," the Divine Names would not manifest their effects within each person. The vegetal aspect of the human ultimately serves as a profound reminder, a concept supported by the Qur'an, where the growth of plants is presented as a transformative insight and a mirror to individual eschatology and resurrection (Qur'an 50:7-11) :

As for the earth, we spread it out and placed upon it firm mountains, and produced in it every type of pleasant plant, all as an insight and a reminder to every servant who turns to Allah. And we sent down blessed rain from the sky, bringing forth gardens and grains for harvest. And towering palm trees with clustered fruit, as a provision for our servants. And with this rain, we revive a lifeless land: that is similar to the emergence from the graves (at the Resurrection).

In its highest function, the allegiance to the "plant" is an allegiance to a mode of knowing. It is therefore associated with measure, rules, and, ultimately, the highest station of the spiritual "pole" (*qutb*). Spiritual knowledge and perfection spring from this allegiance. This integrated knowledge includes: the knowledge of the divine Signs in all creation; the knowledge of completion and perfection (*kamāl*), a perfection pertaining to each person's created rank; and the knowledge of statement and clarification, which includes the knowledge of uprightness and even the profound wisdom behind the gray hairs of the Prophet, as indicated in the Sura of Hud.⁶⁸

Ibn 'Arabi's Personal Experience of the *Barzakh* of "Animality"

Ibn 'Arabi's discussion makes it clear that the spiritual necessity of realizing the "*barzakh* of plants" extends to fully discovering and experiencing

the hidden realities of all creation, including the animal and mineral realms. This process is powerfully illustrated in his account of the prophet Idrīs (Ilyās) in the *Fuṣūṣ*, chapter 22⁶⁹ and in his own personal experience:

[...When the spirit of the prophet Idrīs had been “*raised up*” to God,]⁷⁰ he was sent back (to earth) as a (divine) Messenger after that.⁷¹ So God combined for him the two levels (of existence: as pure intellect, *‘aql*, and earthly animality). Thus He made him descend from the state of his (pure) intellect to that of his animal desire (*shahwa*), so that he became an absolute animal (*ḥayawān*), experiencing directly what is experienced by every animal, apart from the humans and jinn. Then he knew that he had realized fully (*taḥaqqāqa*) his own animal nature.

Now there are two indicative signs of that (purely animal state). One is this “unveiling,” so that he sees whoever (among those living) will be punished and who will be rewarded in their grave (i.e., after their death); and he sees the dead person as living, the dumb person speaking, and the sitting person walking. The second sign is that he becomes dumb, so that even if he wants to speak about what he sees (in that state), he is unable to do so. So at that point he fully realizes his animality.

We once had a student who did undergo that, but who didn’t remain in that state of dumbness, so that he didn’t fully realize his animality. But when God established me in that station, I realized and experienced my animality completely. Then I was seeing (these unveilings) and I wanted to speak of what I was witnessing, but I was unable to do so. So there was no difference between myself and the dumb person who is unable to speak.

Thus, when someone has fully realized what we have just mentioned, he is transferred to (a state) where he becomes a disembodied intellect, without any material nature. Then he

directly witnesses those things which are the (immaterial) roots of what appears in the natural forms, and he knows through direct experience the origin of this (embodied) condition in the natural forms [...].

Conclusion

Ibn ‘Arabī’s cosmology presents the *barzakh* not merely as a static intermediate realm, but as the dynamic and creative principle underpinning all of existence and spiritual development. It is the ontological bridge that connects the divine and the created, meaning and form (*ṣūra*), and the present life with the realities to come. The *barzakh* gives profound meaning to the stages of human life, while its very nature challenges the limits of human language and conception. As this study has illustrated, the journey through the *barzakh*, for Ibn ‘Arabī, is one of progressive realization (*taḥaqquq*). The human being, initially understood as a contentious “tree” in the vegetal realm, must navigate the spiritual growth inherent in their composite nature, embracing responsibility and leadership. This journey can extend into the profound, pre-mortem unveiling of states like pure “animality,” where the mystic learns to see with visionary clarity, a precursor to the soul’s final awakening. In human development, the *barzakh* manifests as a series of transitional stages, evoking the rhythmic spiritual states of contraction (*qabḍ*) and expansion (*bast*). This dynamic process, symbolized by the Quranic concept of *inshirāḥ* (expansion), reflects the soul’s responsive engagement with divine reality.

Ultimately, it is through imagination (*khayāl*) that humans gain an intimate awareness of other realms, with *ma‘rifa* (spiritual knowledge) offering a direct encounter that transcends mere conceptual understanding (*‘ilm*). This aligns with the soul’s journey toward perfection (*kamāl*), where successive *barzakhs* are not obstacles but essential opportunities for integration and growth. Ethically, navigating these liminal states fosters profound self-awareness and spiritual discovery, demanding that the soul move beyond established patterns.

As a creative force, the *barzakh* facilitates the internalization of diverse spiritual insights, unifying their deeper meanings. In rituals, arts, and mindful acts, it bridges the corporeal and the spiritual, embodying the

transformative potential of human imagination. It reveals the constant interplay between the outer world and inner spiritual life, grounding cosmic realities in human experience. Thus, for Ibn ‘Arabī, the *barzakh* signifies the soul’s perpetual journey toward transformation, wholeness, and ultimate proximity to the Divine, a journey that begins with the growth of the “plant,” passes through the unveiling of the “animal,” and culminates in the perfected human being who fully reflects the “Names” and attributes of their Creator.

Endnotes

- 1 I would like to thank Professors James Morris and John Walbridge for their comments and useful suggestions; I am also grateful to Professor Carl Pearson for his helpful comments on different versions of this article.
- 2 "He has set free the two seas, so that they meet/ between them a barrier (*barzakh*) neither of them crosses." The meaning of the "two seas" here is usually interpreted in terms of verse 25:53: "He it is Who set free the two seas: one sweet and fresh; the other salty and bitter. And He placed between them a barrier (*barzakh*) forbidding (their mixing)." Before Ibn 'Arabī, earlier Sufi commentators and others had often connected these two waters to symbols of the material and the spiritual realms of existence.
- 3 Gholamhossein Ebrahim Dinani, "Barzakh," in *Encyclopaedia Islamica*, trans. Kevin Brown (Brill, 2021).
- 4 Lane, *Lexicon*, "barzakh," https://lexicon.quranic-research.net/data/02_b/070_brzx.html. The first definition here is alluding to a famous hadith
- 5 The notion of *barzakh* as liminality can be a point of departure. Liminality is derived from a Latin word, *limens*, means 'threshold.' It developed to be translated as a house, dwelling, abode and the barrier in a racecourse. See Charlton T. Lewis, Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary*, "Limen," <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=limen&fromdoc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0059>.
- 6 George Archer, *A Place Between Two Places: The Qur'anic Barzakh* (Gorgias Press, 2017), 2.
- 7 Salman H. Bashier, *Ibn Al-'Arabi's Barzakh: The Concept of Limit and the Relationship between God and the World* (SUNY Press, 2004), 12.
- 8 Sa'diyya Shaikh, "Embracing the Barzakh: Knowledge, Being and Ethics 1," *Journal for Islamic Studies* 39, no. 1 (2021): 28–48.
- 9 Miriam Cooke, "The Barzakh of Ecstasy," *Üsküdar Üniversitesi Tasavvuf Araştırmaları Enstitüsü Dergisi* 1, no. 2 (2022): 17–28.
- 10 Michael Mardar et. al., *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (Columbia University Press, 2013).
- 11 Titus Burckhardt, "Concerning the Barzakh," in *Mirror of the Intellect*, ed. William Stoddart (SUNY Press, 1987), 193–99.
- 12 Muḥyi al-Dīn Ibn 'Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, vol. 2 of 4 volumes. Reprint of Bulaq edition (Beirut: Dar Sadr, 1968), Ch. 8 of the *Futūḥāt* on the "Reality of the Vast Earth."
- 13 *FM* 3, Ch, 135–140.
- 14 Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabī* (Princeton University Press, 1969).

- 15 James W. Morris, "Ibn 'Arabī's Rhetoric of Realisation: Keys to Reading and 'Translating' the *Meccan Illuminations*," *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society* 33 (2003), 54–98. See also Annabel Keeler, "Wisdom in Controversy: Paradox and the Paradoxical in Sayings of Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī (d. 234/848 or 261/875)," *Journal of Sufi Studies* 7, nos. 1–2 (2018): 1–26.
- 16 For the meaning of *barzakh* in the writing of Suhrawardī, one of Ibn 'Arabī's immediate philosophical and spiritual predecessors, see Malihe Karbassian, "The Meaning and Etymology of Barzakh in Illuminationist Philosophy," in *Illuminationist Texts and Textual Studies*, ed. Ali Gheissari, et al. (Brill, 2018), 86-95.
- 17 As for this definition of *barzakh* as the first level of existence, see Ibn 'Arabī, *FM 2*, 5.
- 18 See Wilson (transl.), *The Masnavi*, Vol. 2, Book II (Probsthain & Co, 1910), note 20.
- 19 *FM 2*, 46.
- 20 *FM 3*, 232. 24
- 21 Mona Siddiqui, "Imagination and the Ethics of Religious Narratives," in *Religious Imaginations: How Narratives of Faith Are Shaping Today's World*, ed. James Walter (Gingko Library, 2018), 37.
- 22 Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabī*, 218.
- 23 "We will show them Our signs in the universe and within themselves until it becomes clear to them that He is the Truth. Is it not enough that your Lord is a Witness over all things?"
- 24 "[He is] Lord of the two sunrises and Lord of the two sunsets".
- 25 "He is the Lord of the east and the west. There is no god worthy of worship except Him, so take Him alone as a Trustee."
- 26 "He is the Lord of the east and west, and everything in between, if only you had any sense."
- 27 "Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth. His light is like a niche in which there is a lamp, the lamp is in a crystal, the crystal is like a shining star, lit from the oil of a blessed olive tree, located neither to the east nor the west, whose oil would almost glow, even without being touched by fire. Light upon light! Allah guides whomever He wills to His Light. And Allah sets forth parables for humanity. For Allah has perfect knowledge of all things."
- 28 *FM 2*, Ch. 8 "on the Inner Knowing of the Reality of the 'Vast Earth' that was Created From the Remnants of Adam's Clay."
- 29 Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 135.
- 30 Notably, this reference to their conversation (about experiences not otherwise mentioned in surviving stories of this famous early Egyptian Sufi teacher) suggests something that Ibn 'Arabī might have learned in another personal encounter with

Dhu'l Nūn in the *barzakh* of the afterlife, since he often mentions in multiple works his personal discussions with a number of well-known (but long-deceased) spiritual figures in the next world. Dhū'l Nūn's dates are 796-859 CE, or almost four centuries before Ibn 'Arabī.

31 FM 4, 127.

32 FM 2, 128.7-11.

33 *Al-'ulamā' bi'llāh*: this is one of Ibn 'Arabī's favorite terms for designating the highest spiritual ranks of the "true spiritual knowers," the *'ārifūn*.

34 FM 1, 127 (ch. 8) and following.

35 See James Winston Morris, "Life Is But a Dream": Creation as Divine Cinema and the Shadow-Theater of Existence, From Plato to Ibn 'Arabī," *El Azufre Rojo: Revista de Estudios Sobre Ibn 'Arabī* 2 (n.d.): 30-48.

36 FM 1, 128 (beginning line 11) to 129.

37 FM 1, 127. 20-23.

38 Sheikh, "Embracing the Barzakh," 28.

39 Nazeer El-Azma, "Some Notes on the Impact of the Story of the Mi'raj on Sufi Literature," *The Muslim World* 63, no. 2 (1973): 93-104:94.

40 I use Herlihy's terminology of "soul instinct," which is an inner eye of the heart accessing key existential and spiritual matters. See John Herlihy, *Borderlands of the Spirit: Reflections on a Sacred Science of Mind* (World Wisdom, 2005). 74-75.

41 The most personal and detailed account of Ibn 'Arabī's own spiritual journey in its earliest form is considered to be his highly symbolic account in his youthful book *Kitāb al-Isrā' ilā al-Maqām al-Asrā'* ("The Book of the Night-Journey to the Farthest Station").

42 See the opening sections of James Winston Morris, "The Spiritual Ascension: Ibn 'Arabī and the Mi'rāj Part I," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 107, no. 4 (1987): 629-52.

43 Frederick S. Colby, "The Subtleties of the Ascension: Al-Sulamī on the Mi'rāj of the Prophet Muhammad," *Studia Islamica*, no. 94 (2002): 167-83.

44 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrine* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1964), 72. Ibn 'Arabī echoes earlier philosophers and Sufis, such as *Ikhwān al-Safā'*, regarding the cosmic hierarchy of existents and the special position of plants. In that context, "*al-nabāt*" refers to that dimension of the world (or "the Kingdom, *al-mulk*") that is considered to be the source of the potential for growth and development.

45 FM 3, 139, lines 11-14. This and the other passages below are taken from the FM, chapter 336.

- 46 The specific verse alluded to here is at 71:17; but it presupposes the larger context of verses 71:14-20, part of Noah's address to his people.
- 47 See the translation of this key passage from the end of this *Faṣṣ* that is included at the end of this section below, where Ibn 'Arabi includes his own experience of this state of pure "animality."
- 48 FM 2, 586. Ch. 267, "On inner knowing of the soul...."
- 49 FM 3, 137. ch. 366.
- 50 J.H Philpot, *The Sacred Tree, or the Tree in Religion and Myth* (NY, Dover Publications, 2004).
- 51 Noble Ross Reat, "The Tree Symbol in Islam," http://www.studiesincomparativereligion.com/public/articles/the_tree_symbol_in_islam-by_noble_ross_reat.aspx#_ftn58.
- 52 Here one might also note that one of the most popular and widely read early summaries of Ibn 'Arabi's central metaphysical teachings was entitled the "Tree of Existence" (*Shajarat al-Kawn*).
- 53 For example, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Life and Thought* (ABC International Group, Inc., 2001), 200-206.
- 54 A.M. Schwencke, *Globalized Eco-Islam A Survey of Global Islamic Environmentalism (Draft Version)* (Leiden Institute for Religious Studies (LIRS), Leiden University, 2012),11.
- 55 In Goethe's natural philosophy, the adaptability of the transplanted shoot of a plant, the fact that a broken-off part can reattach itself, and from that point of adaptation take up further stages of metamorphosis: "[A] new rhizome may form in the heart of a tree, the hollow of a root, the crook of a branch." Cited in Elaine P Miller, *The Vegetative Soul: From Philosophy of Nature to Subjectivity in the Feminine* (SUNY Press, 2002), 186.
- 56 See an overview of this terminology in Atif Khalil, "Humility in Islamic Contemplative Ethics," *Journal of Islamic Ethics* (Leiden, The Netherlands) 4, nos. 1-2 (2020): 223-52.
- 57 This lifecycle of paddy rice is known in Southeast Asian philosophy as *Ilmu Padi*, or "the "knowing of the paddy-plant." It refers to a person's maturity, self-realization, and spiritual attainments, symbolized by the growing nature and ripening of the paddy plant. In Indonesian, a proverb says "*seperti padi, semakin berisi, semakin merunduk*". Which translates to: "*be like the rice stalk: as it is laden with ripening grains, it bows down.*"
- 58 In full, that title of chapter 366 is: "Concerning inner knowing of the waystation (*manzil*) of the plants' pledging allegiance to that spiritual Pole (*Quṭb*) who is the 'Master of the Moment' in every age, and this is from the Presence of Muhammad." This chapter within the larger *Futūḥāt* Section concerning the Spiritual Waystations (*faṣl al-manāzil*) corresponds to Sura 48 (*al-Fath*), where verses 10 and 18 both refer to the famous "swearing allegiance" (*mubāya'a*) to Muhammad by his followers

at Hudaybiyya, "*underneath the Tree*," as the Qur'an describes that key event. The closing verse 48:29 refers specifically to the distinctive signs of the people of true faith, concluding with the spiritual plant imagery that runs through most of this chapter: "*That is their likeness in the Torah and their likeness in the Gospel—like the sown seed that brings forth its shoot, and strengthens it; then it becomes strong, so it rises up on its stalk, pleasing the sowers....*"

- 59 Ibn 'Arabi, *The Alchemy of Human Happiness*, trans. Stephen Hirtenstein (Anqa Publishing, 2017), 58-59, footnote 48. The text translated and annotated in that volume is of *FM*, Ch.167.
- 60 *Alchemy*, 56.
- 61 *FM* II, 295.
- 62 This sense of the *sh-j-r* Arabic root as referring to disagreement and opposing qualities is emphasized in a number of Qur'anic verses, especially referring to the forbidden Tree in Eden: "*Don't you two (Adam and Eve) approach this tree, lest you become among the wrongdoers!*" (2:35).
- 63 *FM* 3, 137.
- 64 *FM* 3, 137. Line 26
- 65 *FM* 3, 137. Line 25-28.
- 66 Hugh Talat Halman, *Where Two Seas Meet: The Qur'anic Story of al-Khidr and Moses in Sufi Commentaries as a Model of Spiritual Guidance* (Fons Vitae, 2013).
- 67 Sometimes a shaykh knows how to reconstitute a student's situation by imaginatively transforming an apparently strictly legal solution into a more personal, negotiated solution. For an example of this, see Andi Herawati and Andi Rachmawati Syarif, "Religion and Creative Imagination: Religious Representation in I.B. Singer's *In My Father's Court* and The Shadow-Theater (*Wayang*) In Indonesia," *Prajñā Vihāra* 20, no. 2 (2019): 37.
- 68 *FM* 3, 140 and following.
- 69 *FH*, 186-187. The selections quoted below here are from the very end of the *Fass* of Ilyās (Idris). At the beginning of this same chapter (pp. 181-182), Ibn 'Arabi already carefully outlines the metaphysical importance of this complete realization of *both* the purely intelligible sources of manifest existence, together with the realized awareness in *this* material world of the essential role of human "imaginings" (*awhām*, here used in the sense of *khayāl*) in order to fully perceive the significance of all those earthly forms of the divine creation.
- 70 The allusion is to verses 19:56-57, "...*We raised him [Idris] up to a High Station.*"
- 71 This later sending back to earth of Idris, who was understood first as an early prophet between Adam and Noah, was often identified with the *later* prophetic figure called Ilyās/Elias (6:85; 37:123-13). Hence Ibn 'Arabi opens this chapter 22 by saying: "Ilyās is Idris."