

French Kiss and Arabic Culture

Aḥmad ibn al-Ṭayyib al-Saraḥsī on Love

in Light of *Rasā'il Iḥwān al-ṣafā'*

Guillaume de Vaulx d'Arcy

Why do we warmly embrace our beloved and avidly kiss him on the mouth? Because the soul of the lover tries to reach the soul of the beloved through the mouth's aperture and the pores of the skin in order for them to unite despite the separation of their bodies. This fragment attributed to al-Saraḥsī and dealing with what is now called the French kiss remained mysterious to Franz Rosenthal. Its editing is followed by its interpretation in light of a renowned text also dedicated to the erotic phenomenon, namely Epistle 37 of *Rasā'il Iḥwān al-ṣafā'*. On a philosophical level, such a comparative study reveals a consistent theory on love that achieves erotic idealism in the wake of Plato's Symposium. On a historical level, this consistency between both texts adds weight to the hypothesis of al-Saraḥsī's authorship of *Rasā'il Iḥwān al-ṣafā'*.

Keywords: Love, Kiss, al-Saraḥsī, Brethren in Purity, Iḥwān al-ṣafā'

“Bend your lips on mine
So that out of my mouth
My soul may pass into yours”.
Denis Diderot¹

In a gem of erotic philosophy attributed to Aḥmad ibn al-Ṭayyib al-Saraḥsī (d. 286/899), al-Kindī's pupil, one can read a precise description of the erotic phenomenon. Here is the passage interpreting what is nowadays called the French kiss:

¹ “Penche tes lèvres sur moi/Et qu'au sortir de ma bouche/Mon âme repasse en toi”; D. Diderot, “Chanson dans le goût de la romance”, in Id., *Œuvres complètes: Supplément*, Paris, Armand Belin, 1819, p. 289.

[Seeking to combine with the beloved's soul] drives both tongues to insert into [one another's] mouth in order to enter inside him and penetrate his deeps. Through embracing and attracting him close, it intends to achieve the union with the body, to receive [the soul] by way of the pores, and to prevent from coming between the two bodies anything that might separate them, dissolve their meeting, and put an end to their union.²

By kissing, the lover aims to unify with the beloved. This precise description of the phenomenon entwined with a Platonic interpretation can also be found in a well-known epistle dedicated to carnal love. I quote Ep. 37 from *Rasā'il Iḥwān al-ṣafā'*:

When the lover and the beloved happen to embrace each other, kiss, suck one another's saliva and swallow it, this very moistness arrives in each other's stomach where it blends with the moistness that is there.³

The similarity between these quotations is striking: both deal with the same phenomenon, describe it in detail, and interpret it as an attempt to unite. Such a proximity commands a more accurate comparison. This requires the edition of the first fragment, which consists of a short text describing the loving embrace and explaining its hidden meanings. In this article, we propose to edit, translate, and comment on it in detail.

We are indebted to Franz Rosenthal for the discovery and the English translation of al-Saraḥsī's fragment, which he unfortunately published without the Arabic text.⁴ The fragment is an excerpt from the

² Istanbul, Topkapısaray, MS Ahmad III–3483, f. 240r. Unless specified all translations are mine. For a description of the manuscript, see F. Rosenthal, "From Arabic Books and Manuscripts VIII Al-Saraḥsī on Love", *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 81 (1961), pp. 222–224, esp. 223.

³ *Rasā'il Iḥwān al-ṣafā'*, ed. by B. al-Bustānī, Beirut, Dār ṣādir, 1957, Ep. 37, III, 274. Save for some exceptions, we will be referring to this edition of the *Rasā'il Iḥwān al-ṣafā'*, hereafter identifying each epistle with its progressive Arabic numeral, followed by the Roman numeral of the edited volume and by the relevant page number. Even if we consult and try to integrate translations from the Institute of the Ismaili Studies' project, we are compelled to reject its edition for reasons we detailed in G. de Vaulx d'Arcy, "The *Epistle of the Brethren in Purity* by the Institute of Ismaili Studies: When the Re-Edition of a Book Can Be its Destruction", *Mélanges de l'Institut dominicain d'études orientales* 34 (2019), pp. 253–330.

⁴ Rosenthal, "From Arabic Books and Manuscripts VIII".

Book on the Establishment of Astrology, the Components of Wisdom and the Names of the Soul,⁵ from which only survived, to our knowledge, this unique passage. Without any further element, reconstructing the world of meanings hidden behind the text was impossible. Therefore, Rosenthal did not venture any commentary whatsoever. The disappearance of almost all the writings of al-Saraḥsī might have annihilated any possibility of unveiling his philosophy of love.

The similarity with a passage of Ep. 37 from *Rasā'il Ihwān al-ṣafā'* provides a unique opportunity to attempt its interpretation: does Ep. 37 bestow meaning upon what had remained obscure for so long and offer unforeseen consistency to what seemed contradictory in al-Saraḥsī's text? Does the epistle on love from *Rasā'il Ihwān al-ṣafā'* help us in editing, re-translating, and understanding al-Saraḥsī's fragment on carnal love?

The article will first set out the *editio princeps* of the fragment, then it will present a new English translation and provide a detailed commentary of the philosophical "content".

1. Edition of *Topkapı Sarayı*, MS Ahmad III–3483, f. 240r–v

[1–240]

من كلام أبي العباس أحمد بن الطيب⁶ في العشق. ذكر في كتابه "في تثبيت أمر النجوم وأجزاء الحكمة وأسماء⁷ النفس": سئل: لِم صار⁸ العاشق إذا ظفر بمعشوقه وضع فاه على فيه وطلب أن يدخل لسانه في

⁵ Ulrich Rudolph does not list this title in the bibliographical note dedicated to al-Saraḥsī but refers to a book *On Love* (*fī l-ʿiṣq*) and to a philosophical opus dedicated to astronomy, *Fī anna arkān al-falsafa ba'dubā 'alā ba'd wa-huwa Kitāb al-istifā'*. See *Philosophie in der islamischen Welt 8.-10. Jahrhundert*, ed. by U. Rudolph, Basel, Schwabe, 2012, p. 152. The Islamic Scientific Manuscripts Initiative mentions two witnesses of al-Saraḥsī's book intitled *Al-maḍḥal ilā šinā'at al-nujūm*, one at the Institute of Manuscripts of Azerbaijan (Baku), and the other at Dār al-ʿulūm (Cairo), but this information is not correct: the first witness (MS Arabic 1130) is authored by Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Tūsī (672/1274), and the other (MS Miqāt 139) is authored by 'Abd al-'Azīz 'Uṭmān al-Qabīṣī (d. 380/967). See <https://ismi.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de/text/96492> (26 November 2025).

⁶ الطيب. This is an intermediary form of al-Ṭayyib and al-Ṭabīb that is found in some manuscripts and led Latin translators to call him "Mahometh discipulo Alquindi". See F. Rosenthal, *Ahmad b. al-Ṭayyib as-Saraḥsī: A Scholar and a Litterateur of the Ninth Century*, New Haven, American Oriental Society, 1943, p. 57.

⁷ Rosenthal, "From Arabic Books and Manuscripts VIII", p. 223, suggests: <ارسأ حر>.

⁸ MS Ahmad III–3483, f. 240v, اصار.

فيه وقتله فبُله متتابعة متصلة الزمان ويضمه إلى نفسه <؟>
قال: قلت إن العشق إفراط المحبة والمحبة علة اجتماع الأشياء وليس يكون في إفراط الاجتماع أوكده من الاتحاد الذي به يصير الإنسان واحداً. ونفس الحي إنما تُدرك⁹ إرادة [240ب] النفس من هذا الجسم الذي هو آلة للنفس في أفاعيل إذا صارت النفس الإنسانية إلى العشق الذي هو إفراط المحبة التي هي علة اجتماع الأشياء. فقصدت النفس إفراط المحبة لأوكد¹⁰ الاجتماع المطلق، وإفراط المحبة علة الإفراط الاجتماع الذي هو أوكده. وطلبت الاتحاد بالمعشوق من محبة الحي. فلم تجد سبيلاً من الظاهر إلى الباطن إلا سبيل البدن الذي ينسجم منها ما به قوائم الحياة ومادة القوة الحيوانية التي هي نفس ويدفع ضررها. فلم يكن في هذه السبل أعظم من الفم والمنخرين المؤديين للهواء إلى قصبة الرئة لأن السبل الباقية إنما هي المسام اللطاف التي في أصول الشعر. فقصدت النفس بالمعشوق نحو الفم بلحمة وتنسجم¹¹ بالمنخرين ما يخرج من نفسه القريب العهد بغريزته وقوى نفسه، لتتحد¹² المادتان وتشارك القوتان وطلبت بإدخال كل واحد من اللسانين في في الآخر لتنفيذ فيه والخلوص إلى باطنه وقصدت بضمتها إياه وجذبها له الاتحاد جسماً والاستقبال فيها من محبة المسام ولئلا يدخل بين الجسمين <ما> يفصل بينهما ويفرق اجتماعهما ويزيل اتحادهما.

لما عدت الحرف¹³ الحقيقي الذي هو الامتزاج طلبت اتحاد النفس. فتبته أهواء المعشوق ومحابة فوافقت في طلبه وواصلته إليه ليكون نفس المعشوق واصله إلى محبتها الممكنة بإرادتها. فلما وقع من نفس العاشق لإرادة لمحبة المعشوق وصلت نفس المعشوق إلى محبتها بإرادة نفس العاشق كانت النفسان كإتھما واحدة لاتحادهما بالموافقة.

ولهذه العلة قال الحكم: "صديقك آخر هو أنت"، يعني بقوله "آخر": اختلاف الجسمين، ويقول "هو أنت": اتفاق الإرادات. فكان التأثير في الأجسام جميعاً وقد وقع عن نفس واحدة. وجاع القول في هذا أن الصداقة اتحاد نفسي المتصادقين باتفاق الإرادات، والله أعلم بالصواب. تحريراً في واسط¹⁴ في حج تسع وستين وسبع مئة بخط العبد الضعيف النحيف أقل عباد الله وأصغر خلق الله الغني أحمد بن إسماعيل بن أحمد بن محمد ...† أصلح الله تعالى أحواله.

2. Translation

From the discussion of love by Abū l-'Abbās Aḥmad ibn al-Tayyib. In his book on *The Establishment of Astrology, the Components of Wisdom and the Names of the Soul*, he mentioned [the following]: He was asked: "Why does the lover upon winning his beloved's heart get to place his mouth upon that of his beloved, seek to put his tongue

⁹ يدرك.

¹⁰ The manuscript states: لاوكد, but a later instance at the end of the sentence shows the right form.

¹¹ وسلسم.

¹² ليتحد.

¹³ Rosenthal, "From Arabic Books and Manuscripts VIII", p. 223, suggests: صرف.

¹⁴ لولسط.

into his mouth and give him a continuous, long-lasting kiss and press him unto himself?”. He said. “I said that love [*al-‘iṣq*] is extreme affection [*al-maḥabba*], and that affection is the cause of the meeting [*iğtimāʿ*] of things. And nothing results more certainly from ultimate meeting than this union [*al-ittihād*] through which men become one. The soul of the living being only grasps the soul’s will thanks to this body, which is the instrument of the soul for acting, provided that the human soul is led by love, which is an extreme affection, cause of the meeting of things. Thus, the soul aspires, through extreme affection, to reach absolute union with certainty. Indeed, extreme affection is the cause of ultimate meeting, which is the most certain [way to union]. So [the human soul] looks for the union with the beloved through its living part. And the only way from the outside in is through the body from which blows what makes the subsistence of life, constitutes the matter of the animal power – also called the soul –, and rejects out whatever might harm it. Now, the most important of these passages are the mouth and the nostrils which direct the air to the windpipe, since the only remaining passages are the fine pores at the roots of the hair. Therefore, the soul seeks the beloved through kissing him on the mouth and inhaling [*tanassama*] the breath [*nafasih*] coming out of the nostrils, which had a recent contact with its natural disposition and the powers of his soul, in order for both materials to unite and the two powers to combine. Thus, [love] drives both tongues to insert into [one another’s] mouth in order to enter inside him and penetrate his deeps. Through embracing and attracting him close, it intends to achieve the union with the body, to receive [the soul] by way of the pores, and to prevent from coming between the two bodies anything that might separate them, dissolve the meeting of both, and put an end to their union. Once the soul loses the true direction, which is the blending (*al-imtizāğ*), it looks for unifying with the soul. The desires and inclinations of the beloved follow it, agree with [the lover’s] quest and join him in such a manner that the soul of the beloved obtains his affection offered by his own will. So, the soul of the lover is affected by the voluntary affection of the lover, the soul of the beloved reaches the affection voluntarily given by the lover and, at this moment, both souls become like one, due to their union by mutual consent. For this reason, the sage said: ‘Your friend is your alter ego [*sadiquka ābiru huwa anta*]’, signifying by ‘alter’ the difference of the two bodies, and by ‘ego’, the agreement of wills, for the influence extends to both bodies, as if it came from one soul. In sum, it can be said in this respect

that friendship is the union of the souls of those who seek friendship through the agreement of wills. And God knows what is best”.

Issued at Wāṣiṭ the year of the pilgrimage 769 by the pen of His humble and modest servant, the last of the servants of God and the meaningless creature of God the Provider, the poor Aḥmad ibn Ismāʿīl ibn Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad †...†. May God, the Almighty, restore him in his state.

3. Commentary

3.1. Nature of the Text

A “majlis”

The text takes the form of a philosopher’s answer to what could be the question a student asked during a lesson – like the explanation given by Ṭābit ibn Qurra (d. 288/901) to his disciple Ibn Usayyid for instance¹⁵ – or to the question sent by a friend and requiring the writing of a particular epistle, as was the practice of al-Kindī (d. before 256/870), al-Sarāḥsī’s master.¹⁶ However, the nature of the question and the brevity of the answer correspond better with the style of the *majlis*. Admittedly, the genre of the *majlis* will mostly flourish by the end of the 4th/10th century with Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī (d. 414/1023) or Badīʿ al-Zamān al-Ḥamaḍānī (d. 398/1008),¹⁷ but it has a clear origin in philosophy, and may have been taken from pseudo-Ar-

¹⁵ M. Rashed, “Ṭābit b. Qurra sur l’existence et l’infini: Les Réponses aux questions posées par Ibn Usayyide”, in *Ṭābit ibn Qurra: Science and Philosophy in Ninth-Century Baghdad*, ed. by R. Rashed, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2009, pp. 619–673.

¹⁶ For instance, al-Kindī, *Epistle to Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Ḥurāsānī Explaining the Finiteness of the Body of the World*, and *Epistle of the Unity of God*, which is addressed to Muḥammad ibn al-Gāhm al-Barmākī. See al-Kindī, *Rasāʾil al-Kindī al-Falsafīyya*, ed. by ‘A.H. Abū Rida, vol. I, Cairo, Dār al-Fikr al-‘Arabī, 1950, respectively pp. 199–207 and 185–192; see also *The Philosophical Works of al-Kindī*, trans. by P. Adamson and P. Pormann, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. 63–68 and 68–72.

¹⁷ Al-Tawḥīdī, *K. al-intinā’ wa-l-mu’anasa*, ed. by A. Amīn and A. al-Zayn, Cairo, al-Hay’a al-‘amma li-quṣūr al-ṭaqāfa, 2002; Badīʿ al-zamān al-Ḥamaḍānī, *Maqāmāt*, French trans. by R. Blachère and P. Masnou, Paris, Klincksieck, 1957. The foreword reconstitutes the literary history of the genre, but without any reference to al-Tawḥīdī.

istotelian *Problemata*.¹⁸ At the very time of al-Saraḥsī, a sample is available with a fragment of Ṭābit ibn Qurra transmitted by Abī Ya‘qūb al-Siġistānī (d. 331/971),¹⁹ in which a discussion on what is now known as the honeycomb theorem is the occasion to express his opinion on Pythagoras and to give his own interpretation in terms of mathematical providence.²⁰ Both excerpts share the same context since Ṭābit ibn Qurra was al-Saraḥsī’s colleague at al-Mu‘taḍid’s court, shared with him a Pythagorean influence, and a book was written based on al-Saraḥsī’s questions and Ṭābit ibn Qurra’s answers.²¹ It should also be noted that the reflection on the beehives which may be excerpted from Ṭābit’s work will find its echoes in the *Rasā’il Iḥwān al-ṣafā’* (Ep. 2, I, 96).

Literary Status of Carnal Love

Having written a book on fleshy love (*al-‘iṣq*),²² al-Saraḥsī is well-immersed in the topic of the fragment. Moreover, he is the narrator of a “controversy between a pederast and a fornicator” (“*munāẓara bayn al-lūṭī wa-l-zānī*”),²³ in the same tradition as al-Ġāḥiz’s book on *The Relative Merits of Maids and Boys*, and with obvious echoes to the court’s saucy entertainments. Neither is this topic alien to the *Rasā’il Iḥwān al-ṣafā’*, which contains an epistle entirely dedicated to carnal love proposing a philosophical interpretation of the controversy between the two types of love, namely the pederastic and the heterosexual (Ep. 37, III, 277–278).

¹⁸ *Pseudo-Aristotelian Problemata: Works*, vol. VII, trans. by E.S. Forster, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1927.

¹⁹ Refer to Abū Sulaymān al-Siġistānī, *Muntahab Siwān al-Hikma*, ed. by D.M. Dunlop, The Hague-Paris-New York, Mouton, 1979, pp. 124–125; see also Abū Sulaymān al-Siġistānī, *Muntakhab Siwān al-hikmah and Three Other Treaties*, ed. by ‘A.R. Badawī, Teheran, s.n., 1974, pp. 301–303.

²⁰ French translation and philosophical commentary in M. Rashed, “Thābit ibn Qurra, la *Physique* d’Aristote et le meilleur des mondes”, in *Thābit ibn Qurra*, pp. 675–714, esp. 703–704.

²¹ Mentioned by al-Qiftī, *Tārīḥ al-ḥukamā’*, ed. by J. Lippert, Leipzig, Dieterich’sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1908, p. 117.

²² *Philosophie in der islamischen Welt*, p. 152.

²³ Abū l-Ḥasan al-Kātib, *Kitāb ḡawāmi‘ al-ladda* (Istanbul, Sulaymaniye, MS Fatih 03279), ff. 64v–73r. An English translation exists, which we were unable to consult: Alī ibn Naṣr Abū al-Ḥasan al-Kātib, *Encyclopedia of Pleasure*, trans. by A. Jarkas and S.A. Khawwam, Toronto, Aleppo publishing, 1977.

Al-Sarāḥsī's fragment intersects two different treatments of the erotic experience: between the crude description of sexual intercourse told for entertainment purposes and an idealist analysis in the tradition of Plato's *Symposium*. Such a duality was theorised by al-Ġāḥiẓ:²⁴

While I mention the sweetness of the world, rejoice of its pleasures and the features of its beauty, quoting its proponents and its lords, your talking of the ascetics and the jurisconsults cuts off debates between us. As we said at the very beginning of this book, when the talk is made of jokes and banter, if you switch to something serious, it loses its original meaning and comes to nullity.²⁵

Al-Ġāḥiẓ, who greatly influenced al-Sarāḥsī, does not reject the profane way of dealing with the question, he simply refuses to amalgamate sacred and profane, to merge seriousness and banter within the same text. Such a preoccupation can also be traced in the *Rasā'il Iḥwān al-ṣafā'* about music:

In this epistle entitled "On Music" we wish to discuss that art which combines the physical and the spiritual, that is, the art of composition and the knowledge of proportion [*ma'rifat al-nisab*]. But it is not our intention in this epistle to give instruction in practical musicianship [*ta'līm al-ġinā'*] and the construction of instruments, even if such matters have to be touched upon. Rather, we are concerned with knowledge of proportion and the modalities of composition, whose command results in skill in all the arts [Ep. 5, I, 183].²⁶

Music is both the worldly art of practicing an instrument (*al-malāḥī*) for sensual enjoyment, which is studied by *'ilm al-ġinā'*, and the

²⁴ Following Rosenthal's opinion: "He was probably acquainted with the man who enjoyed the greatest reputation ever accorded to an Arabic littérateur: al-Ġāḥiẓ"; Rosenthal, *Aḥmad b. al-Ṭayyib as-Sarāḥsī*, p. 20. Rosenthal supports his claim with an extract from *Kitāb al-Aḡānī* (*ibid.*, p. 102 and commentary note 228) in which Aḥmad ibn al-Ṭayyib confirms having heard an anecdote from al-Ġāḥiẓ's own mouth.

²⁵ Al-Ġāḥiẓ, "Kitāb mufaḥarat al-ḡawārī wa-l-ḡilmān", in *Rasā'il al-Jāḥiẓ*, ed. by 'A.S. Hārūn, vol. II, Cairo, Maktabat al-Ḥanḡī, 1965, pp. 87–137.

²⁶ *On Music: An Arabic Critical Edition and English Translation of Epistle 5*, ed. and trans. by O. Wright, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010, pp. 75–76 (amended trans.).

spiritual science of harmony (*al-nisab*) studied by *‘ilm al-mūsīqā*. Al-Sarāḥsī’s book on *Entertainment and Musical Practice* (*fī l-lawḥ wa-l-malāḥī*) was probably dedicated to the first, while Ep. 5 of *Rasā’il Iḥwān al-ṣafā’* deals with the second. Our fragment on the loving embrace seems to fall within the first category because of its explicitly erotic description, however, its philosophical aim falls within the second. If the title of the book had not been given, only a comparison with other texts would have helped us decide whether the philosophical material was satirical or whether the crude description is, in effect, a pedagogical instrument to draw the attention of the layman to spiritual truths.

A Treaty of Astrological Erotology

But it is rather surprising to find it in a book dedicated to astrology.²⁷ However, the apparent dissimilarity between eroticism and astrology should not entirely unsettle the reader. In a long side note dedicated to love (*al-‘iṣq*) that will be discussed in detail below, al-Mas’ūdī (d. 346/956) reports the views of a wide range of schools. Among them, astrologers are confirmed to be among the main authorities on the topic together with poets, theologians, and philosophers.²⁸

Concerning more precisely al-Sarāḥsī, as a Kindīan thinker, he may assume the priority of a vertical causality by which the situation of the celestial bodies determines human states, including the impulses of the human heart. The application of astrological principles to love life can already be found in the *Epistle on the Description of Spiritual Beings* (*rūḥāniyyāt*), dedicated to astral intelligences and attributed to al-Kindī, although it may have been written by one of his students.²⁹ The following passage is of particular interest:

²⁷ Rosenthal, “From Arabic Books and Manuscripts VIII”, p. 223: “It is hard to say why the discussion of love should have been included in a work that presumably dealt mainly with astrology, but as long as we do not have any precise information about the contents of that work, we must accept the statement of our text”.

²⁸ Al-Mas’ūdī, *Muru’at al-dabab wa-ma’adin al-ḡawhar*, ed. by C. Piellat, vol. IV, Beirut, Lebanese University, 1973, pp. 243–244.

²⁹ On a more theoretical level, one can refer to the cosmological function that relates, in al-Kindī’s thought, love and celestial action on earth. See al-Kindī, “Risāla fī ibāna ‘an sujūd al-ḡirm al-aqṣā”, in Id., *Rasā’il al-Kindī al-Falsafīyya*, vol. I, pp. 177–189, here 184–185; al-Kindī, “The Prostration of the Outmost Body”, in *The Philosophical Works of al-Kindī*, pp. 177–199, 184–185, 174–186, here 178.

When Jupiter is in relation with Saturn, that the day and the hour are those of Saturn, that the Moon has no direction, take some already used wax and shape two images, one of the man, and the other of the boy. Then, make them embrace each other but with the boy's face turning away from the man's. Then, cover them with a silk material and fumigate them with two dirhams of *qust*, saying: "I separate so-and-so from so-and-so, and so-and-so from so-and-so, in the name of the farthest star and God the Almighty! By Saturn, by Saturn, I separate them and I settle enmity and hate between them until the day of resurrection!" You will say that seven times, then you will put both images inside a new jug and bury it in a dark house. They will split up for certain.³⁰

Yes, the text is a spell, it deals with the separation of lovers and not their union, but what we should retain from this quotation is the means of intervention in love affairs: one should not directly remedy the lovers but rather address the celestial causes of their feelings. Such astral magic applied to lovers' woes is also prescribed in Ep. 37 of *Rasā'il Ḥwān al-ṣafā'*. Among the different opinions of the ancients, the epistle mentions the consideration of love as "a disease of the soul" (Ep. 37, III, 270) called melancholia, whose forms are studied in "the books of horoscopes [*kutub aḥkām al-mawālīd*]" (Ep. 37, III, 271), that the author regrets having to "quit mentioning, for fear of lingering too long thereon". But he already specified that the malady of love is divine madness that can only be cured through prayer:

As to those who claim that [love] is divine madness they do it solely because they did not find any medicine to cure it or antidote to swallow to protect from misfortune and woes. It is only God's invocation in prayer, giving alms and offerings at the temple, through the witchcraft of priestesses and so on [Ep. 37, III, 270].

Physical medicine is a horizontal causality which is helpless in front of the outburst of passion that possesses a loving soul. The only possible therapy comes from God, who can listen to the prayers of his believers. And God's actions and believers' supplications are mediated by celestial bodies.

³⁰ "Trois épitres d'al-Kindī", ed. by L. Vecchia Vaglieri and G. Celentano, *Annali dell'Istituto Orientale di Napoli* 34 (1974), pp. 523–562, here 551.

Ep. 37 classifies the objects of love (*al-ma'sūqāt*) relatively to the nature of the soul: the vegetative soul (*al-nafs al-nabātiyya*) loves concupiscence, the sensitive soul (*al-nafs al-ḥayawāniyya*) loves conquest and power, and the rational soul (*al-nafs al-nātiqa*) loves knowledge. The domination of one of these three souls over the others depends on the astrological conditions of one's birth:

From his very birth, each man is under control. If the influence is that of the Moon, or Venus and Saturn, the desires toward food and beverages, their gathering and accumulation, will dominate his nature. If, from his very birth, he is under the control of Mars and Venus or the Moon, his desires lean toward intercourse and women [Ep. 37, III, 273].

Whereas conjunctions of planets with the moon explain natures dominated by concupiscence, the influence of the sun and Mars on his birth makes the spirited soul (*al-nafs al-ḡadabiyya*) dominate, and his desire leans toward power. This general theory is repeated on the level of relationships, for the exclusivity of the object of carnal love is explained by the unique similarity between the lovers' astral birth conditions (Ep. 37, III, 284). Hence, we do not only understand the relation between love and astrology but also the precise title of al-Sarāḥsī's book, which Rosenthal preferred to rectify by substituting "the names (*asmā*) of the soul" with "the secrets (*asrār*) of the soul", as if astrology had to mean esotericism. But the manuscript may not be mistaken, and the book may indeed have dealt with the numerous names of the soul and its kinds: vegetative appetitive (*nabātiyya ṣahwāniyya*), animal spirited (*ḥayawāniyya ḡadabiyya*), human rational (*insāniyya nātiqa*), angelic (*malakiyya*), and so on.³¹

3.2. The Topic of the Text: *Al-Maḥabba wa-l-ʿIṣq*

In the effort to understand the fragment one is immediately faced with an ambiguity that blocks its interpretation and even the translation

³¹ Note that Ibn Baḥṭiṣū' attributes a doctrine close to the *Rasā'il Iḥwān al-ṣafā*'s astrological and medical one on love to an Indian physician called Miskasār: "He said that *al-ʿiṣq* is made of airs flowing in the mind and mixing with the spirit. It is astral by essence"; Abū Šā'id 'Ubaydallāh Ibn Baḥṭiṣū', *Risāla fī l-ṭibb wa-l-aḥdāt al-nafsāniyya*, ed. by F. Klein-Franke, Beirut, Dār al-mašriq, 1986, p. 64.

of its main concepts. It defines *al-ʿiṣq* as *ifrāt al-maḥabba*, translated by Rosenthal as “excessive affection”. Indeed, *al-ifrāt* was used in the philosophical tradition of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* with its opposite *al-tafrīt* to express the two extremes, the default and the excess that surpass the reasonable limits of the right balance (*al-iʿtidāl/al-wasat*). But Rosenthal did not translate “passion is an excessive affection”, which would have been more consistent with the doctrine of moderation, and he is right: the text is not the description of the lover’s vain attempt because of his ignorance of the immaterial nature of his soul and his getting lost in desperate physical intercourse with his beloved. Quite the contrary, carnal love succeeds in uniting the lovers. Then, *al-ʿiṣq* is not an excess but the realisation of *al-maḥabba*’s end, for it leads to the ultimate state where “both souls become one”.³² Hence, how can *al-ʿiṣq* be at once an excess and a success?

Such an ambiguity similarly characterises Ep. 37 of *Rasāʾil Iḥwān al-ṣafāʾ* “on the essence of *al-ʿiṣq* and *maḥabbat al-nufūs*”. Its resolution may serve to unravel the fragment’s ambiguity. The epistle also defines *al-ʿiṣq* in comparison to *al-maḥabba*:

Among the wise men, one assumes that *al-ʿiṣq* is *ifrāt al-maḥabba* and a violent inclination [*ṣiddat al-mayl*] toward a particular species of beings and not others, toward a certain person and not others [Ep. 37, III, 271].

The definition is attributed to an ancient sage, but *Rasāʾil Iḥwān al-ṣafāʾ* claimed it as its own and rephrased it by defining *al-ʿiṣq* as “an intense desire [*ṣiddat al-ṣawq*] of union” (Ep. 37, III, 272). This intensity cannot nonetheless mean a vicious excess: “*Al-maḥabba* and *al-ʿiṣq* are virtues that appeared in all creatures, a brilliant wisdom and an extraordinary spiritual quality” (Ep. 37, III, 279). No distinction here is made between *al-maḥabba* and *al-ʿiṣq*; both being divine providence and the Creator’s protection of his creatures. Indeed, by provok-

³² The translation of *ifrāt* as “excess” by Constantine Zurayk in Miskawayh and reuse of such a definition of *al-ʿiṣq* pose the same challenge. Love is clearly more a praised extreme than a blamed excess: “The first kind of love (*maḥabba*) we have described cannot exist in great numbers because such a person is precious and he is loved excessively, for excess in love (*maḥabba*) can take place and be achieved with a single person only”; Miskawayh, *Tahdīb al-ablāq*, ed. by C. Zurayk, Beirut, The American University of Beirut, 1966, p. 155; ET: Miskawayh, *The Refinement of Character*, trans. by C. Zurayk, Beirut, The American University of Beirut, 1968, p. 140.

ing women's desire toward men, *al-ʿiṣq* leads to the reproduction of the species, and by provoking men's desire toward boys, it perpetuates knowledge (Ep. 37, III, 277). So, *al-ʿiṣq* is not an excess, but an extreme, and a providential intensity (*ṣidda*). Surely, such a sexual desire would be a vice for an angelic soul separated from the body and then condemned to suffer from its lack of flesh (Ep. 30, III, 79–80), but it is a virtue for the human soul joined to a body. Essentially used to reproduce the ancients' opinion, the term *al-ifrāt* originates in al-Kindī's lexicon, and can be found in his *Epistle on Definitions* which states that "*al-ʿiṣq* is *ifrāt al-maḥabba*".³³ Indeed, whether the idea can be found elsewhere in texts of the second part of the 3rd/9th century, the phrasing is very specific to the Kindian circle. For example, al-Ġāḥiẓ shares the principle but uses the term *al-ḥubb* instead of *al-maḥabba*, and *al-fāḍil* '*an al-miqdār* or *ma yufawwat minhā* instead of *al-ifrāt*.³⁴ In that sense, we can state that al-Kindī, al-Saraḥsī, and the *Rasāʾil Iḥwān al-ṣafā*' share a common wording of the concept and that the negative connotation of *al-ifrāt* disappears, at least, starting with al-Saraḥsī. Then, "extreme" and "ultimate" are a better translation than "excessive".

The translation of the concepts of *maḥabba* and *ʿiṣq* poses another challenge. The generation before al-Saraḥsī used the distinction to specify the presence or absence of reason in the feeling. For instance, al-Ġāḥiẓ's *Kitāb al-qiyān* distinguishes two types of carnal love.³⁵ The first, *al-ḥubb*, stands for the legitimate sexual desire toward the free spouse and the concubine. This love remains under the control of reason. The second, *al-ʿiṣq*, is the uncontrolled passion that pushes men into the arms of the singing-slave girls who are shared with others and taint men's honor (*al-murūʾa*).³⁶ In this case, *al-ʿiṣq* signifies a vice by excess, whereas *al-ḥubb* denotes a virtue by moderation. Like-

³³ Al-Kindī, "Risāla fī l-ḥudūd", in *Al-rasāʾil al-falsafiyya*, vol. I, pp. 175–176; ET: Id., "On Definitions and Descriptions of Things", in *The Philosophical Works of al-Kindī*, p. 306.

³⁴ See Al-Ġāḥiẓ, *The Epistle on Singing-Girls (Kitāb al-qiyān)*, ed. and trans. by A.F.L. Beeston, Warminster, Wilts, 1980, p. 25, § 35. Note that Ibn Baḥṭīšū' will quote this version in *Risāla fī l-ṭibb wa-l-aḥdāt al-naṣāniyya*, p. 47.

³⁵ See Al-Ġāḥiẓ, *The Epistle on Singing-Girls*, p. 28, § 42, and A. Cheikh-Moussa, "La négation d'Éros ou le *ʿiṣq* d'après deux épîtres d'al-Jāḥiẓ", *Studia Islamica* 72 (1990), pp. 71–119, esp. 73–74.

³⁶ See al-Ġāḥiẓ, "Kitāb al-nisā", in *Rasāʾil al-Jāḥiẓ*, vol. II, pp. 139 and 141, and Cheikh-Moussa, "La négation d'Éros", pp. 73–74.

wise, Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq attributes to Hippocrates a close distinction between *al-maḥabba* that “occurs between two rational beings thanks to their similitude on the level of the intellect [*taṣākulihumā fī l-‘aql*] but not between idiots who are similar in dumbness”,³⁷ and *al-‘iṣq* that “is a natural disposition that stems from the heart and provokes an accumulation of material when it is desired”.³⁸ Such an accumulation leads to an excessive and pathological imbalance of humours. In both texts, *al-‘iṣq* is characterised by a lack of reason and falls within the field of passion.

However, it is quite another story with al-Saraḥsī, who distinguishes both concepts only by a difference of degree: *al-maḥabba* which causes the meeting of souls, and *al-‘iṣq* which results in the ultimate meeting, which is the union of the two souls. The same is the case in Ep. 37: in both texts, the intensity of *al-‘iṣq* leads to a carnal relation, therefore we shall conserve Rosenthal’s translation of *maḥabba* as “affection” and *‘iṣq* as “love”.

The distinction between affection and love is not inherited from the Islamic juridical tradition as the distinction between passion and love is in al-Ġāhiz, but from the Greek philosophical heritage, since it corroborates the Greek distinction between φιλία and ἔρως. For instance, the *Rasā’il Iḥwān al-ṣafā’* talks about *maḥabbat al-riyāsa* (the will of power),³⁹ *maḥabbat al-ḥayāt / al-baqā’* (the will to live),⁴⁰ and *maḥabbat al-‘ulūm* (φιλοσοφία).⁴¹ So, *maḥabba* is the generic term also used in zoology and cosmology, and *‘iṣq* almost restricted to human relationship with sexual connotations: “[Among the noble morals] there is affection for fellowmen, and what we call love” (Ep. 37, III, 279). Yet, in al-Kindī’s writings, the general term is not *maḥabba*, but *ḥubb* – philosophy being translated *ḥubb al-ḥikma*.⁴² Once more, al-Saraḥsī’s lexicon comes even closer to the *Iḥwān al-ṣafā’* than to his

³⁷ Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq, *Ādāb al-falāsifa*, ed. by ‘A.R. Badawī, Kuwait, al-Munazzama al-‘arabiyya li-l-tarbiyya wa-l-ṭaqāfa wa-l-‘ulūm, 1975, p. 121. This view is debated in Ep. 37, III, 276: “Know brother that most of the people believe that love stirs only toward beautiful realities. But it is not like they believe”. Al-Mas‘ūdī, *Murūḡ al-dahab*, vol. IV, p. 243, will attribute such a view to Galen.

³⁸ Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq, *Ādāb al-falāsifa*, p. 121.

³⁹ Ep. 25, II, 437.

⁴⁰ Ep. 40, III, 370.

⁴¹ Ep. 1, I, 48.

⁴² Al-Kindī, “Risāla fī l-ḥudūd”, p. 172; ET: Id., “On Definitions and Descriptions of Things”, p. 304.

master. Starting from Miskawayh (d. 421/1030) who attentively read the *Rasā'il ihwān al-ṣafā*, the term *al-maḥabba* will establish itself in the tradition of *kutub al-aḥlāq* to include the Aristotelian socio-political dimension of φίλῶν.⁴³

The last important pair of concepts, *al-iḡtimā'* and *al-ittihād*, deals with the vocabulary of gathering and, once more, introduces a difference of degree. *Al-iḡtimā'* is the end of *al-maḥabba* and *al-ittihād* the end of *al-iṣq*. *Al-iḡtimā'* is the meeting of things, including the reunion of the philosophers, such as their symposiums. Rosenthal translates *iḡtimā'* as “junction”, to signify that the union is not entirely accomplished and to layer an astrological dimension to the concept. We prefer to translate it by “meeting” for its social connotation: it opens to more than the junction of two. In any case, it is the idea to put separate things together, to gather and assemble them. Concerning the term *ittihād*, which derives from the root *w-h-d*, naming the idea of unity, the translation should use a similar English root, therefore “union” is the most suitable translation.

In Ep. 37, the term *al-iḡtimā'* is endowed with additional meaning. In the other epistles of *Ihwān al-ṣafā*, it indicates the political or religious meeting (Ep. 42, III, 442), or the intellectual agreement on a particular opinion (Ep. 42, III, 431), but in the epistle on love, it is also used in lieu of *al-ḡimā'*, meaning the sexual intercourse in the expression *al-iḡtimā' wa-l-sifād* (Ep. 37, III, 277). By using *al-iḡtimā'* in place of *al-ḡimā'*, the *Rasā'il Ihwān al-ṣafā* assumes that carnal love may be the paradigm of all meetings, hence its constant use as a metaphor. For instance:

Another example is the nature of magnet and iron; in fact, between these two dry and hard stones, and between their nature, there is affection [*ulfa*] and longing [*iṣṭiyāq*]: when the iron is close to this stone at the point that it smells its odour, it goes towards it and is attached to it, and

⁴³ Miskawayh, *Tabdīb al-aḥlāq*, p. 137; ET: Id., *The Refinement of Character*, p. 125. He distinguishes between collective and individual friendship: “[*Al-ṣadāqa*] does not take place among a large group, as is the case with [*al-maḥabba*]”. See also the third discourse of Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī, *Nasirean Ethics*, trans. by G.-M. Wickens, Abingdon-New York, Routledge, 2011, pp. 195–210 and 242–252. And compare with Carmela Baffioni, who founds the political bond on the concept of *al-ulfa*. See C. Baffioni, “*Al-Madinah al-Fāḍilah* in al-Fārābī and the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā: A Comparison”, in *Studies in Arabic and Islam*. Proceedings of the 19th Union Européenne des Arabisants et Islamisants (Halle 1998), ed. by S. Leder et al., Leuven, Peeters, 2002, pp. 3–12, esp. 5.

the stone attracts it to itself, retaining it as a lover does with his beloved [Ep. 19, II, 111].⁴⁴

It can be surmised that the loving embrace is the paradigm of all unions. More broadly, we may refer to the *Rasā'il Ihwān al-ṣafā*'s concern for a pedagogy that has a starting point in the immediate experience of the common people,⁴⁵ and also remind their epistemological premise that argues that "[man] is the sum of the ideas of all beings" (Introductory Ep., I, 32). Then, all cosmic or natural attractions will be explained by referring to the immediate experience of sexual intercourse.

3.3. *An Idealist Doctrine of Carnal Love: The Heritage of Plato's Symposium*

A second ambiguity right at the beginning of the text prevents one from developing a consistent interpretation: although carnal experience will specifically be the subject of analysis, love is defined as an affection of the soul, a desire toward the soul, and a relationship between two souls. How can the text reconcile the physical manifestations of love with its spiritual principle?

Al-Sarāḥsī differs from the vitalist conception of al-Ġāḥiẓ who defines passion (*īṣq*) as an amalgam of love (*ḥubb*), sexual drive (*hawā*), and identity of nature between lovers (*muṣākala*), and identifies its origin in animal nature.⁴⁶ This conception leads to a pathological approach of passion, as soon as carnal desire becomes a need dependent on a certain being, especially if the latter is forbidden or tabooed. For instance, al-Ġāḥiẓ calls passion a disease (*dā' al-īṣq*).⁴⁷ Such an approach comes from the *ṭabī'iyyūn*, particularly from Hunayn ibn Ishāq's medical analysis of passion. In his translation of the Greek

⁴⁴ *On the Natural Sciences: An Arabic Critical Edition and English Translation of Epistles 15–21*, ed. and trans. by C. Baffioni, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 254. This example of natural love at the level of minerals can already be found in al-Kindī, "Risāla fī ibāna 'an sujūd al-ġirm al-aqṣā", p. 249; al-Kindī, "The Prostration of the Outmost Body", p. 178: "But love occurs [...] without the intermediary of sense, like the love of the nature of iron for a magnetic stone".

⁴⁵ Ep. 37, III, 271: "We would like to speak about love as most people know it".

⁴⁶ Al-Ġāḥiẓ, *The Epistle on Singing-Girls*, p. 28, § 41 and p. 29, § 44, and Cheikh-Moussa, "La négation d'Eros", p. 114.

⁴⁷ Al-Ġāḥiẓ, *The Epistle on Singing-Girls*, pp. 27–28, §§ 40–41.

Gnomologia,⁴⁸ he gives a symptomatic description of the malady of love, as well as in the part of *Adāb al-falāsifa* dedicated to the sayings attributed to Galen.⁴⁹ The distinction between *mahabba* in the sense of spiritual love, and *ʿiṣq* in the sense of carnal love restricted to corporal life seems to be a generally shared opinion among philosophers during the 9th century, especially in Pythagoras's following words as relayed by Gutas: "He said: Not the mutual love (*mu'āṣaqa*) of souls but that of bodies ought to be prevented".⁵⁰

This is not dissimilar from the position that emerged from the Arabic reading of Plato's *Symposium*, to which al-Saraḥsī is indebted despite some minor disparities. Indeed, his reflections on love must have originated from his master's *Epistle on the Symposium of Philosophers on Mysteries of Love* from which only two fragments survived, the first being the myth of Aristophanes while the second is the participation of Alcibiades that precisely deals with the link between carnal and spiritual desire. Along these lines, this second excerpt highlights the relation between the two types of desire:

Al-Kindi mentioned that a handsome young Greek aristocrat named Alcibiades said: "I loved philosophy and I used to go frequently to Sokrates. While teaching others, however, he kept looking at me, and so it occurred to me that he might want from me what people want from fresh-faced young boys. I thus contrived to be alone with him and I presented myself to him. He said to me, 'What calls you [here], Alcibiades?' 'My desire for your wisdom', I replied. He then came closer and said, 'What do you expect from the wisdom of a person the extent of whose precious wisdom is this contemptible act? My son, he who advocates virtue but commits debauchery is not a wise man [or: philosopher]. Someone else is responsible for the beauty of your face, but you are responsible for the beauty of your soul; so don't debase what you are responsible for lest you derive nothing from all your qualities!'" The young man said: "I never remember in moments of solitude this reprimand without being overcome by a sense of shame, or gaining a deeper insight into the nobility of Sokrates' soul;

⁴⁸ H.H. Biesterfeldt and D. Gutas, "The Malady of Love", *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 104 (1984), pp. 21–55.

⁴⁹ Hunayn ibn Ishāq, *Adāb al-falāsifa*, p. 121. For the Greek medical tradition on love, see P. Toohey, "Love, Lovesickness, and Melancholia", *Illinois Classical Studies* 17/2 (1992), pp. 265–286.

⁵⁰ D. Gutas, *Greek Wisdom Literature in Arabic Translation: A Study of the Graeco-Arabic Gnomologia*, New Haven, American Oriental Society, 1975, p. 80.

and had it not been for the fact that those who hear this story told will love Socrates even more, I would not have mentioned my vile behavior”.⁵¹

Although it differs from the original dialogue of Plato in form, this text follows quite faithfully the spirit of *Smp.* 217a–219e, where Alcibiades tells how he tried to seduce Socrates, and how the latter rejected his proposal to enjoy the physical beauty of the ephebe in exchange of sharing his own spiritual beauty. If Socrates' wisdom provokes Alcibiades' carnal desire, this very desire is to be condemned – particularly in al-Kindī's text – for it lacks any spiritual value.

In contrast, al-Saraḥsī's concern for carnal manifestations of love is revealed through both his role in the erotic controversy mentioned by al-Kātib⁵² and al-Kaskarī's reference to his theorisation of pederasty.⁵³ In that case, how do we conciliate his subscription to Platonic idealism and his appreciation of carnal love? The answer lies in the fragment: souls achieve union through the mediation of bodies.

Given that Ep. 37 contains the same duality, a comparison of the two perspectives is due. First, the same influence of Plato's *Symposium* can be observed regarding *Rasā'il Iḥwān al-ṣaḥā'*. Amnon Shiloah has already observed it on the formal level of the dialogue as a genre concerning the wise men's discussion on music at the end of Ep. 5 (I, 234–239).⁵⁴ The presence of such discussions in Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq's *Ādāb al-falāsifa*⁵⁵ – knowing that Ḥunayn is the second Arabic source for Plato's *Symposium* – confirms that such a writing style has its origin in Plato's dialogue, or in any material derived from it. Indeed, Ḥunayn reports several philosophers' meetings (*iḡtimā'āt al-falāsifa*) in which

⁵¹ Ibn Baḥṭišū', *Risāla fī l-ṭibb wa-l-aḥdāt al-naḥsāniyya*, p. 52; ET: D. Gutas, "Plato's *Symposium* in the Arabic Tradition", *Oriens* 31 (1988), pp. 36–60, here 38–39.

⁵² Following the testimony of three manuscripts of *Kitāb ḡawāmi' al-ladḡa* that mention Aḥmad ibn al-Ṭayyib al-Saraḥsī in a controversy between the pederast (*al-lūṭī*) and the fornicator (*al-zānī*). See Istanbul, Sulaymaniye, MS Ayasofya 3836, ff. 63r–82r, (dated 533/1139), MS Fatih 3729, ff. 64v–73r (dated 582/1186), and Dublin, MS Chester Beatty, ff. 61v–85v (dated 724/1324).

⁵³ G. de Vaulx d'Arcy, "Al-Saraḥsī versus al-Kaskarī: Plus qu'une dispute religieuse, un événement philosophique", *Bulletin d'études orientales* 66 (2018), pp. 275–321, esp. 299–300.

⁵⁴ A. Shiloah, "L'épître sur la musique des *Iḥwān al-ṣaḥā'*", *Revue des études islamiques* 32 (1964), pp. 125–162, esp. 128, note 8. For an English translation, see *On Music*, pp. 162–172.

⁵⁵ Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq, *Ādāb al-falāsifa*, pp. 51, and 56–61.

they briefly converse, each one giving his proper opinion on a particular topic.

Furthermore, al-Mas'ūdī, in the same concise style as Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq, begins his side note on love with the abstract of an Arabic symposium, an assembly of theologians at Yahyā ibn Ḥālid ibn Barmak's (d. 808) on the same topic as Plato's dialogue. Then, he moves to the opinions of other schools of Islam (*abl al-ḥadīth*, poets, *falāsifa*, astronomers, Sufis). Such a large digression indicates the great influence of Plato's *Symposium* on the representation of intellectual life.

Ep. 37 on the essence of love precisely starts with such a presentation of competing perspectives. If we accept that Kindian works are the base material of the *Rasā'il Iḥwān al-ṣafā'*,⁵⁶ we can reasonably assume that the opinions contained in Ep. 37 come from al-Kindī's *Epistle on the Symposium of Philosophers on Mysteries of Love*. The list of opinions found in Ep. 37 is as follows:

Know brother that among the wise men, 1) one spoke about love blaming it, talking about the villainy of those who are engaged in such affection and the ugliness of its causes. They pretended that it was a vice. 2) One of them said that love is a virtue of the soul, praised it and talked about the goodness of those who are engaged in it and the beauty of its causes. 3) Another one could not catch the truth and precise meaning of its secrets, causes, and reasons, so he pretended that it is a spiritual disease. 4) Another said that it is divine madness. 5) Another one said that it is a concern for empty souls. 6) A last one said that it is the conduct of idle people with no occupation or concern [Ep. 37, III, 270].

Since we ignore the real content of al-Kindī's lost epistle, it would be presumptuous to argue that it is only the opinions of the participants in Plato's *Symposium* that are reported in both al-Kindī's and *Rasā'il Iḥwān al-ṣafā'*'s epistles on love. Of course, blaming or praising love as the two first wise men do remind the reader of the beginning of the *Symposium* and Pausanias' distinction between the noble love of the heavenly Aphrodite, which deserves eulogy, and the vile love of the common Aphrodite, which deserves blame (Pl., *Smp.* 181b). The second opinion can also refer to Phaedrus' opening speech, in which he

⁵⁶ G. de Vaulx d'Arcy, "Foreword", in *Les Épîtres des Frères en Pureté (Rasā'il Iḥwān al-ṣafā'): Mathématique et philosophie*, trans. by G. de Vaulx d'Arcy, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 2019, pp. 13–63, esp. 41–45.

praises *Eros* for being the “giver of virtue in life, and of happiness after death” (Pl., *Smp.* 180b). Even if the third opinion can be traced back to the physician of the assembly Eryximachus who distinguishes between the love of the healthy and the desire of the diseased (Pl., *Smp.* 186b), it will be associated later in the text with the symptomatic trait inherited from the aforementioned Galenic literature translated by Ḥunayn ibn Isḥaq. No relation whatsoever can be made between the last three positions and the philosophers of the *Symposium*, but despite this not only does the expression “divine madness” had an impact on erotic philosophy in Islam,⁵⁷ but it was also precisely related to Plato. Indeed, in his side note on love, al-Masʿūdī attributes such a view to him: “It is said [*ḥukiya*] about Plato that he asserts the following: ‘I do not know what love [*hawā*] is, but what I know is that it is a divine madness and that it should neither be praised nor blamed’”.⁵⁸

The penultimate category mentioned in Ep. 37 may be tracked back to Pythagoras through a Greek *Gnomologia* translated in Arabic: “He was asked, ‘What is love?’ He said, ‘A foolishness (*ḡahl*) that has encountered, or found, an idle heart’”.⁵⁹ Later, Ibn Baḥṭiṣūʿ will attribute this phrase to Socrates.⁶⁰ Although *Rasāʾil Iḥwān al-ṣafāʾ* equally disapprove of these opinions, the epistles apply their doctrine consist-

⁵⁷ Such a view will be later associated by tradition to Ḡāʾfar al-Šādiq who would have said that “love is a divine madness without limit nor prohibition”: see for instance, Farīd al-Dīn al-ʿAṭṭār, *Tadkirat al-awliyyāʾ*, ed. by M.A. al-Ġādir and trans. by M. al-Šāfiʿi, Beirut, Dār maktabatī, 2016, p. 38. However, this author may have inherited the expression from the *Rasāʾil Iḥwān al-ṣafāʾ*, for we know that they were of great influence on him, and especially on his *Manṭiq al-ṭayr*. But the structure of the saying reproduces the structure of Plato’s quote.

⁵⁸ Al-Masʿūdī, *Murūḡ al-dahab*, vol. IV, p. 245. This saying is conserved in a more complete version in al-Rāḡib al-Aṣḥāhānī, *Muḥāḍarāt al-udabāʾ wa-muḥāwarāt al-šuʿarāʾ*, ed. by I. Zidān, Cairo, Maktabat al-hilāl, 1902, p. 168: “Some philosopher was asked about love, he said: ‘A divine madness! Not to be praised nor blamed’. Another said: ‘The movement of an empty soul’”. The presence of Plato’s pseudo-quotation and of the second definition may indicate that we are here in presence of the same source read by the authors of Ep. 37, namely, a quotation of al-Kindī’s epistle on the *Symposium*. The link of the medical doctrine of the malady of love with Plato concerns the *Republic*, III, 403ab. See Ibn Baḥṭiṣūʿ, *Risāla fī l-ṭibb wa-l-aḥdāt al-nafsiyya*, p. 47: “True, I cannot say that, and I know no pleasure producing more madness than [the pleasure of the sexual intercourse]”. The expression *al-junūn al-ilabī* or *al-maraḍ al-ilabī* most probably comes from Hippocrates’ book on the sacred illness translated in Arabic *Fī l-maraḍ al-ilabī*. See *ibid.*, p. 57.

⁵⁹ Quoted by Gutas, *Greek Wisdom Literature in Arabic Translation*, p. 80.

⁶⁰ Ibn Baḥṭiṣūʿ, *Risāla fī l-ṭibb wa-l-aḥdāt al-nafsiyya*, p. 48.

ing of “giving all his own due” (Ep. 33, III, 199) and find a part of truth in each one of said opinions. So, after having criticised the medical view for its materialism, they gratify it for its faithful description of the signs of love; the idea of divine madness adds the verticality of love’s causes, and the opinion of the empty soul adds a layer of understanding of the effects of this feeling (Ep. 37, III, 270–271). The science of the soul and its resurrection that guides love toward the elevation of the soul remains the dominating thesis amongst many others. It is the thesis of love as a cause of union, which we will start studying beginning from al-Saraḥsī’s fragment.

Another element that can be inherited from Plato’s *Symposium* through al-Kindī’s epistle is the relation between pederasty and education. A double shift occurs between the Platonic view and that of *Rasā’il Iḥwān al-ṣafā’*. First, the epistles flip the subject and the object of love: sexual desire is no longer felt by the student toward the master, but by the master toward the student, and this last desire is a requisite for education:

Then know that even if they benefit from the education of their fathers and mothers, children and young people need to be taught the sciences and arts by masters in order to achieve accomplishment and perfection. For this sake, mature men feel sexual desire toward boys and love for ephesbes. Such a motive propels them to educate them, teach them and help them improve, in order to reach their own ends. This can be found in the dispositions of most nations that are driven by a passionate love for acquiring knowledge [Ep. 37, III, 277].

Yes, such an asymmetric relation hereby described is very different from the situation found in al-Saraḥsī’s fragment. However, if we refer to his controversy with Isrā’īl al-Kaskarī, it appears that it is very similar to the mixing of spiritual fatherhood and pederast love, which the Nestorian bishop accuses al-Saraḥsī of.⁶¹

The second shift consists in setting the *raḡba fī nikāḥ al-ḡilmān* as a cunning of reason. Whereas women’s sexual desire for men is a cunning of nature pushing them to mate, reproduce, and ensure the continuation of the species, men’s love for boys is a cunning of reason pushing them to teach, develop their knowing soul, and ensure the

⁶¹ De Vaulx d’Arcy, “Al-Saraḥsī versus al-Kaskarī”, pp. 297–299.

transmission of knowledge. The first part of the idea could already be found in Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq who attributes to Socrates the following:

Carnal love is a power established by God, may He be praised and exalted, for the generation of the animals, which are moved by this power that drives them to desire mating in order to ensure the continuity of their form in the world, lacking any means to help perpetuate all that is submissive to generations and corruption. Nevertheless, the lover loves the nicest forms in order for the fruit to have the most accomplished form and be the nicest fruit.⁶²

Indeed, the pursuit of pleasure is a cunning of nature to optimise the reproduction of the species. However, as already established, to limit oneself to this statement would reduce love to an affection of the body, although both al-Sarāḥsī's fragment and Ep. 37 consider it an affection of the soul.

In fact, Ep. 37 conceives eroticism in the same way Ep. 5 conceives music, that is as an affection of the soul through the body. Indeed, music is "that art which combines the physical and the spiritual" (Ep. 5, I, 183).⁶³ Knowing that the distinction between matter and form in the epistles belongs to the category of relation (Ep. 35, III, 234–235), spiritual substances can be the material of art. Such manual art uses sound vibrations produced by bodies in order to transform the listeners' states of mind. The spiritual aim of such a physical practice consists in the elevation of the soul:

The tones produced by the movements of the musician remind the individual souls that are in the world of generation and corruption of the joy of the world of the celestial spheres, just as the tones produced by the movements of the celestial spheres and the heavenly bodies remind the souls that are there of the joy of the world of the spirits. This is the conclusion derived from the premises confessed by the sages, that is, their assertion that the states of secondary, caused entities imitate those of the primary entities that cause them [Ep. 5, I, 207].⁶⁴

⁶² Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq, *Ādāb al-falāsifa*, p. 64.

⁶³ *On Music*, p. 75.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 120 (amended trans.).

Musical experience brings the perception of harmony between artificial sounds and, consequently, evokes to the soul the natural harmony of the celestial world, which is a sign of the harmony between eternal forms. In the same way, the erotic experience must be perceived as a physical initiation to the soul's separate destiny:

Know that the presence of love in the innate disposition of souls, their affection for bodies, their taste for flesh and physical beauty, their craving for all sorts of desirable beings, all of that is to awaken them from the sleep of negligence and the slumber of ignorance, a training, an inclination, and an elevation from physical sensitive realities to spiritual rational ones [Ep. 37, III, 282].

Even if the will to persevere in its being (*maḥabbat al-baqāʾ*) characterises the concupiscent soul through carnal love, the spirited soul through the love of power, and the rational soul through the love of knowledge, only the latter will actually perpetuate for eternity. Therefore, the rational soul is the true place of realisation of the final end, which the body cannot reach. More broadly speaking, in the epistles the body is a propaedeutic path toward the achievement of the soul. For instance, whereas prophets can reach knowledge directly through intellectual power (*quwwat al-fikr*), common people reach it through the means of the faculties of the body, through tradition and sensuous experience (Ep. 26, III, 13).

That way, the ambiguity concerning the body in this idealist perspective is cleared. Just as the peasant in *Kalīla wa-Dimna* has to grow grass to harvest grains, caring for the spiritual destiny of our soul, men have to cultivate their bodies (Ep. 19, II, 124). Since the intellect needs the mediation of the body (Ep. 14, I, 437–438), the soul should not be considered separately from it. Therefore, the first object of concern is the union of the body and the soul. Precisely, eroticism, just like music, does not belong to the arts of the soul or the body alone, but to the arts of the union of both body and soul (*maḡmūʿubumā* – Ep. 23, II, 379). Indeed, Ep. 30 identifies seven pleasures specific to the union body-soul: besides pleasure of the five senses, there is also mating (*al-ḡimāʾ*), which is a pleasure specific to the union of the body with the concupiscent soul, and revenge that is characteristic of the union with the irascible soul (Ep. 30, III, 53 and 68–69). Hence, music starts from the pleasure in audition, and eroticism from the pleasure in mating to initiate the soul to its spiritual elevation.

3.4. *The Proposition on Symbiotic Love*

We now move on to address the specific proposition on love, considered as a cause of ultimate meeting in the Sāraḥsian fragment. A contradiction immediately appears: carnal love is indeed described as an ultimate meeting, but physical union is confirmed as impossible. So, how could union strictly speaking, that is, the “becoming one” (*yaṣīru al-insānⁿ wāḥid^{an}*), occur through a loving embrace although both bodies will never become one? First, corporal union is nothing more than a spatial contiguity, endangered by the intrusion of an alien body in between the two bodies. Second, union does not particularly concern bodies, but their spiritual power (*quwwatān*). Third and last, to say that love develops an ultimate stage of meeting implies that different stages of affection between men exist and produce other forms of meeting. Let us discuss these three points in detail.

The Union of Souls through Physical Embrace

The definition of love and the description of the loving embrace found in the fragment ultimately refer to Aristophanes’ intervention in Plato’s *Symposium*: “So ancient is the desire of one another which is implanted in us, reuniting our original nature, making one of two, and healing the state of man” (191d). The Aristophanes myth which illustrates this proposition was available in Arabic in two different versions: one by Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq (d. 260/873) which reappeared in Ibn Dāwūd’s (d. 257/910) *Kitāb al-zahrāʾ*, and the other by al-Kindī reported in Ibn Baḥtīšū’s (d. 450/1058) *Epistle on Medicine*. Here is the latter:

Certain [*qawm*] Sabian scholars believe that when humans were first created, they were connected [with each other] at the place of the navel and that Zeus commanded that they be cut apart on account of their strength and power and the deeds they were committing on earth. Thus, a male who was attached to another male now loves males, a female who was attached to another female now loves females and one who was attached to a male now loves males, and <a male> who was attached to a female now loves females. Whoever falls in love, falls in love only with the person to whom he was originally attached and of whose stuff and substance he is.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Ibn Baḥtīšū, *Risāla fī l-ṭibb wa-l-aḥdāt al-naḥsāniyya*, p. 52; ET: Gutas, “Plato’s *Symposium* in the Arabic Tradition”, p. 37.

Gutas legitimates the possibility of a Sabeian transmission of such an abstract of Pl., *Smp.* 190b–191e.⁶⁶ Quite interestingly, one may notice that the association between Sabaeans and ancient Greeks is consistent, on the one hand, with al-Kindī's book on the *Apology of Socrates* entitled *On What Happened between Socrates and the Harranians*,⁶⁷ and on the other hand with the assertion of *Rasā'il Iḥwān al-ṣafā'* that Pythagoras was Harranian (Ep. 33, III, 200). For both al-Kindī and the epistles, in a way or another, sages do not belong only to a foundational past, but have also a present and very local existence. Coming back to the Aristophanian proposition, we can notice that al-Kindī seems to have made it his own, as we can infer from the *Epistle on Definitions*: "*Al-maḥabba* is the cause for the meeting (*iḡtimā'*) of things".⁶⁸ Knowing that the same epistle asserts that "*al-iṣq ifrāt al-maḥabba*", all the beginning of the fragment can be deduced from al-Kindī's definitions.

Moving now to the second version of the Aristophanian myth, we translate Ḥunayn's text:

Ptolemy was asked about love and he said: God created every spirit round in the form of a sphere, which he then cut into [two] halves and put one half in every body. So, every body that encounters the body containing the half [of the spirit] which was cut from it is filled with love that arises between the two on account of the original relationship.⁶⁹

Two main differences with the Kindian version may be noticed: first, the adaptation of the text to the monotheist context by mentioning the creation; second, the assertion that the cut concerns the souls be-

⁶⁶ Gutas, "Plato's *Symposion* in the Arabic Tradition", pp. 41–47.

⁶⁷ *Al-Risāla fī mā ḡarā bayn Suḡrāt wa-l-Harrāniyyin* (see *Philosophie in der islamischen Welt* 8. – 10. Jahrhundert, p. 97). However, some manuscripts contain another version and evoke the guards (*ḥurrās*), instead of the Harranians. See D. De Smet, "L'héritage de Platon et de Pythagore: Sa voie diffuse en terre d'Islam", in *Entre Orient et Occident: La philosophie et la science gréco-romaines dans le monde arabe*, ed. by R. Goulet and U. Rudolph, *Vandœuvres*, Fondation Hardt, 2011, pp. 87–133, here 123.

⁶⁸ Al-Kindī, "Risāla fī l-ḥudūd", p. 168; ET: Id., "On Definitions and Descriptions of Things", p. 302 (amended trans.). Such a definition is confirmed by that of *al-iḡtimā'*: "Meeting: its cause by nature is affection" (Id., "Risāla fī l-ḥudūd", p. 170; ET: Id., "On Definitions and Descriptions of Things", p. 303).

⁶⁹ Ḥunayn ibn Iṣḥāq, *Adāb al-falāsifa*, p. 128; Gutas, "Plato's *Symposion* in the Arabic Tradition", p. 48 (amended trans.).

fore their incarnation. The consequence of the second is that love is the reunion of the souls, not the bodies: this is the reason why Nuha al-Šaʿar considered that Ep. 37 followed Hunayn's version rather than al-Kindī's, as this is precisely the case in the former's fragment. However, the difference with al-Kindī should not be overestimated,⁷⁰ for he also considers that the soul is the subject of affection: "*Al-maḥabba*. What the soul seeks; what perfects a potentiality by assembling (*iğtimāʿ*) things".⁷¹

According to al-Kindī, love (*al-maḥabba* as well as *al-ʿiṣq*) is a principle that exceeds the anthropological level. Thus, the definition of love as a cause of union is also applied to cosmology in the epistle *The Prostration of the Outmost Body*: "Love without the intermediary of sense is a natural tendency towards union with the beloved object, either through the body or through nature".⁷²

It is not the exclusion of the body from the conditions of love that one may surmise from this quotation, but rather the maintenance of the possibility of love, then union, for non-sensitive beings, hence the possibility to establish love as the cosmic principle of movement, in the tradition of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, Λ. Such a cosmological status of love is still the case at the end of Ep. 37, despite its insistence on carnal love:

The universal soul is [like the soul of the wise men alongside it]: it acts like the Creator in its administration of celestial bodies, animation of the planets, generation of beings, ever obedient to its Creator, full of adoration and burning desire. That is why the wise men said: God is the first beloved, around which evolve all animated celestial bodies, craving for him, pleased to perpetuate this way [Ep. 37, III, 285].

⁷⁰ So Gutas' opinion should be tempered. See Gutas, "Plato's *Symposium* in the Arabic Tradition", p. 48: "The differences between [Hunayn's] version of the Aristophanes myth and the preceding one by Kindī are immediately apparent. This version is 'spiritualized': it is not the *bodies* of the original humans which were created joined together (in a spherical form), but their *spirits*; it is also provided with a 'scientific' (medical) rationalization: the final sentence is added to forestall possible objections, on the grounds that all people would then love each other equally, to the doctrine of the bisected spheres. The purpose of the author of this version, therefore, seems to be to 'demythologize' the Aristophanes myth and present it as a serious doctrine with medical pretensions".

⁷¹ Al-Kindī, "Risāla fī l-ḥudūd", p. 175; ET: Id., "On Definitions and Descriptions of Things", p. 306 (amended trans.).

⁷² Al-Kindī, "Risāla fī ibāna ʿan suğūd al-ğirm al-aqṣā", p. 249; Id., "The Prostration of the Outmost Body", p. 178.

We presently return to the doctrine of symbiotic love as described in Ep. 37. After some comments on the first list of views on love, the epistle adds two other opinions:

Among the wise men, one asserts that love is a passion [*hawā*] that dominates the soul and targets a physically similar temperament [*tab‘ muṣākil*] or a form of an identical [*mumātala*] gender. Another one claims that love is a burning desire [*ṣiddat al-maḥabba*] toward union [*al-ittiḥād*] [Ep. 37, III 272].

The first opinion contains the very elements of *al-‘iṣq* according to al-Gāhiz as already established, while the second opinion is precisely the proposition on symbiotic love. The text endorses the latter, adding that “it is the most persuasive statement”, that “we have to discuss in this chapter to shed light on its truth” (Ep. 37, III, 272).⁷³ Then, the text associates each type of soul with a type of desirable object with which the soul aims to unify. Therefore, the nature of love depends on the nature of the soul. This results in an important statement:

We presently return to the explanation of the wise man’s statement: love is a burning desire toward union. We say: union is a property of realities of the soul and spiritual states, whereas union is impossible for bodies, only vicinity, mixture [*al-mumāzaḡa*] or contact, nothing more. So, union concerns spiritual realities, as we will show it in the following sections [Ep. 37, III 273].

Among the contenders for union, bodies sharing love are not the best candidates, because it is precisely through the body that particular souls are separated.⁷⁴ Carnal love is thus condemned to contiguity.

⁷³ The Beirut edition adds a remark and some verses of Ibn al-Rūmī (d. 283/895) between the definition and its confirmation, what distorts the intention of the judgement. Yes, it designates the definition and not the verses. Such an interpolation does not appear in Istanbul, Süleymaniye, MS Atif Effendi 1681, f. 352r and Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS Arabe 2303, f. 337r. They can be added to Abbas Hamdani’s study of poetic interpolations: A. Hamdani, “The Arrangement of the *Rasā’il Iḥwān al-Ṣafā*’ and the Problem of Interpolations”, in *The Iḥwān al-Ṣafā’ and Their Rasā’il: An Introduction*, ed. by N. El-Birzi, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 83–100.

⁷⁴ Or “otherness is due to matter only”, to use Miskawayh’s words in *Tahdīb al-ablāq*, p. 139; ET: Miskawayh, *The Refinement of Character*, p. 126.

However, carnal love encourages union and tends to it. Since it is unable to achieve it, it leads the soul to the love's overcoming at a spiritual level, where amalgamation is only possible. Such a breakthrough stems from the heart of carnal love, and this corporal origin is still metaphorically in check, even when the union concerns separated souls with eternal forms:⁷⁵ "Once [the soul] sees these hidden realities, it gets connected with them as a lover's connection with his beloved and unites with them as the light unites with the light" (Ep. 27, III, 3). Bodies are condemned to contiguity, but subtle substances reach absolute union. However, erotic experience is the first step in man's initiation to union. While in the Sarāḥsian fragment the overcoming of the physical dimension happens from the contiguity of bodies to the actual unity of will, in Ep. 37 it happens, for instance, from the pederast relationship of masters and pupils to the actualisation of the intellect, from the contiguity of bodies to the union of rational souls.

The Different Paths to the Union of Souls

Carnal love, as we previously established, is the path toward union but not quite where the union actually occurs. Other paths exist and the end of the Sarāḥsian fragment evokes one, that is friendship: "Therefore, the sage said: your friend is your *alter ego* [*ṣadiquka āḥaru huwa anta*], signifying by 'alter' the difference of the two bodies, and by 'ego', the agreement of wills".

The philosopher who will develop this dimension of affection is Miskawayh, who will do it by combining the Brethren in Purity's doctrine of brotherhood and the Aristotelian *philia*.⁷⁶ Specifically, he quotes the same saying (here in Constantine Zurayk's translation): "This is why a friend is defined as another person who is yourself [*ḥudda al-ṣadāq annahu āḥar huwa anta*] but is another than you in person".⁷⁷ This quotation is taken from Aristotle's *Nichomachean*

⁷⁵ Note that Miskawayh, despite his mitigation of the importance of eroticism, also refuses to consider a friendship separated from "the love which is caused by pleasure": only the composite love lasts (or "dissolves slowly"). See Miskawayh, *Tahdīb al-ablāq*, p. 136; ET: Id., *The Refinement of Character*, pp. 123–124.

⁷⁶ Miskawayh's dependence on the Brethren in Purity is proved elsewhere by his sociological treatment of religious rituals, directly taken from the epistles. Compare Miskawayh, *Tahdīb al-ablāq*, pp. 140–141; ET: Id., *The Refinement of Character*, pp. 127–128, with *Rasā'il Iḥwān al-ṣafā'*, Ep. 22, II, 328.

⁷⁷ Miskawayh, *Tahdīb al-ablāq*, p. 144; ET: Id., *The Refinement of Character*, p. 131.

Ethics (IX, 1666a).⁷⁸ In Miskawayh, the context does not link such a definition of friendship with *al-ʿiṣq* nor the loving embrace, not even with astrology. The quotation follows the definition of the highest type of affection: “The mutual affection between virtuous people [*maḥabbat al-aḥyār baʿdihim baʿd^{an}*] is not motivated by any external pleasure or any benefit, but is due to their essential similarity, namely, in aiming at what is good and seeking virtue”.⁷⁹

This definition could be a paraphrase of the *Rasāʾil Iḥwān al-ṣafāʾ*’s passage in the epistle on friendship defining the highest degree of friendship in a similar way. I quote:

The friendship of [the Brethren in Purity (*iḥwān al-ṣafāʾ*)⁸⁰] is not exterior to their essence. Indeed, any friendship happens for some reason, so the disappearance of such a reason puts an end to the very friendship, except the friendship between Brethren in Purity that is a uterine affinity [*qarābat raḥim*] that consists in living for one another, in inheriting one another, so they consider and believe that they are one soul in separate bodies [Ep. 45, IV, 48].

This text holds some echoes of Arist., *EN* IX. It shows that the epistle of the Brethren in Purity and that of Miskawayh develop two different commentaries of the Aristotelian conception of friendship. The idea dealing with the different degrees of affection will be later reflected in a saying attributed to Hermes Trismegistus: “[Hermes] said: ‘A brother’s affection does not happen for the pursuit of a particular interest, or the flight from a nuisance, but for his own good and his character’”.⁸¹

⁷⁸ “Therefore, since each of these characteristics belongs to the good man in relation to himself, and he is related to his friend as to himself (for his friend is another self), friendship too is thought to be one of these attributes, and those who have these attributes to be friends”. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. by W.D. Ross, Kitchener, Batoche Books, 1999.

⁷⁹ Miskawayh, *Tabdīb al-aḥlāq*, p. 144; ET: Id., *The Refinement of Character*, pp. 130–131 (amended trans.).

⁸⁰ Rather than “Brethren of Purity”, we find more correct to translate the concept of *iḥwān al-ṣafāʾ* as “Brethren in Purity”, modelled on the common expression “brethren in faith”. Indeed, purity is not a common property of the brethren, but the cause of their friendship.

⁸¹ Al-Šahrastānī, *Kitāb al-milal wa-l-niḥal*, ed. by A.ʿA. Manhā and ʿA.Ḥ. Fāʿūr, vol. II, Beirut, Dār al-maʿrifā, 1993, p. 354. The presence of an approximate sentence in Miskawayh’s *Tabdīb al-aḥlāq* throws doubt on such an attribution: “Friendship (*al-ṣadāqa*) is a sincere affection which causes one to take an interest in all that concerns his

The first sentence of the Brethren in Purity will be analysed independently below. What is important to notice at this stage is that the friendship of the Brethren in Purity represents the unity of souls beyond the separation of bodies. Nevertheless, this unity starts with the material community: the sharing of life and heritage that is reminiscent of the relationship between Muslim immigrants and Medina inhabitants at the beginning of Islam. As for the “uterine affinity”, it participates in a metaphor used all along the epistles, which refers to the stay of souls in bodies before the second birth, namely their separation from the mortal body, and which is similar to the stay of the foetus in the uterus before the first birth.⁸² Here, the material path towards unity is not erotic, but economic and consists of a communitarian way of life in which no one owns something that others do not.

Now, even if the definition of friendship in the fragment refers to Aristotle’s passage, it is not sure that al-Saraḥsī refers to him while speaking of “the sage”. Indeed, the conception of love he develops is not Aristotelian. Therefore, knowing that the *Rasā’il Iḥwān al-ṣafā’* share a similar concept of friendship with the fragment, do they contain any element hinting at the identity of the wise thinker who conceived such a theory on friendship? The idea is not Platonic, it does not originate in the *Symposium*. So, who is the one that al-Saraḥsī calls “the wise man” and that he follows?

In the *Rasā’il Iḥwān al-ṣafā’*, *al-ḥakīm* is the word describing the founder of the philosophical heritage, analogous to *al-nabī*, which refers to the founder of the prophetic tradition. Two persons are more directly named *al-ḥakīm*: Socrates and Pythagoras.⁸³ Interestingly enough, the clue may come from a reader of the *Rasā’il* rather than from the *Rasā’il* themselves. Abū l-Faraġ al-Ṭayyib (d. 434/1043) credits Pythagoras for a similar concept of friendship: “Friendship was glorified among the party of Pythagoras [*šī‘at Fīṭāġūrus*], and friend-

friend and to choose to do all the good he can for him”; Miskawayh, *Ṭahdīb al-aḥlāq*, p. 24; ET: Id., *The Refinement of Character*, p. 21. Notice that Miskawayh refuses the metaphoric use of kinship (*ṣilat al-raḥim*) and gives back legitimacy to the biological bond. See Id., *Ṭahdīb al-aḥlāq*, pp. 24 and 145–146; ET: Id., *The Refinement of Character*, pp. 21 and 131–132.

⁸² See for instance, among many others, Ep. 27, III, 6 and Ep. 42, III, 522.

⁸³ Concerning Socrates, “the wise among the Greeks”, see Ep. 46, IV, 73. For Pythagoras, see Ep. 5, I, 208 and 226, Ep. 31, III, 125, Ep. 32, III, 178.

ship was the model of the union with the gods”.⁸⁴ The doctrine of friendship as union is attributed to Pythagoreanism,⁸⁵ to which al-Kindī and al-Saraḥsī may be linked,⁸⁶ and which philosophy *Rasā’il Iḥwān al-ṣafā’* claim.

Some Pythagorean apophthegms concerning friendship were transmitted into Arabic by Ḥunayn ibn Iṣḥāq. Among them, is the following one:

[Pythagoras] saw two men who significantly differed one from another. He said: “What binds them?” He was said: “They have nothing in common, however, they are sincere friends [*lakinnahumā mutaṣāfiyān*]”. [Pythagoras replied:] “Therefore, one is not [*lam*] poor, and the other rich”.

Having edited the text, Gutas offered a remarkably distinctive translation:

Observing two men who hardly ever separated, he asked, “What is the relationship between them?” “There is no relationship between them”, he was told, “but they are sincere friends”. “Why [*lima*], then”, said Pythagoras, “is one of them rich and the other poor?”⁸⁷

According to Gutas, Pythagoras could not accept the existence of a friendship without similarity, consequently denying the sincerity of their friendship. The linguistic reason for his interpretation is his reading of the two letters l-m as the interrogative pronoun *lima*? But it can also be read as the negation *lam*. If one adopts this reading, the wise man does not confirm the impossibility of a friendship between opposites but effectively solves the contradiction. Then, the apothegm

⁸⁴ Ibn al-Tayyib, *Proclus’ Commentary of the Pythagorean Golden Verses*, ed. by N. Linley, New York, University of New York, 1984, p. 24.

⁸⁵ “According to Timaeus, he was the first to say, ‘friends have all things in common’ and ‘friendship is equality’; indeed, his disciples did put all their possessions into one common stock”; Diogenes Laertius, *The Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. by R.D. Hicks, vol. II, London-New York, Heinemann-Putnam’s sons, 1925, p. 325.

⁸⁶ See de Vaulx d’Arcy, “Foreword”, pp. 49–53.

⁸⁷ Gutas, *Greek Wisdom Literature in Arabic Translation*, p. 71, note 2: “He meant: if they had really been friends, they would have helped each other out”. But that is precisely what they do.

may be read as formed of three parts: first, the fact of the existence of friendship between opposites, then the astonishment of common people in front of this kind of friendship without affinity, and finally the solution given by Pythagoras: one completes the other, so no one lacks what the other possesses. Al-Saraḥsī, who proposes a spiritual friendship beyond material differences, would have no objection to such a doctrine.

Above all, this doctrine is consistent with *Rasā'il Iḥwān al-ṣafā*'s complementarianism. More precisely, the epistles propose two illustrations of the friendship between opposites: the couple formed by the blind and the cripple (Ep. 31, III, 156–159) and the other composed by the rich weak and the strong poor. Here is the second parable:

The financial assistance of the wealthy brother to the educated brother, and the scientific assistance of the educated brother to the wealthy brother for the benefit of the religion are like those two travellers who kept each other company across the desert. One of them was well-sighted and weak but had heavy provisions he was unable to carry. The other was blind and strong but had no provisions. So, the well-sighted took the blind by his hand and led him, while the blind carried the provisions of the well-sighted man on his shoulders. They shared provisions, had a safe trip, and achieved salvation. No one owed the other for his help and his salvation from annihilation, for both achieved salvation together thanks to their mutual assistance [Ep. 45, IV 55].

This parable is formulated exactly within the frame of the Pythagorean apothegm, just adding a soteriological dimension with the religious idea of *zād al-musāfirīn*, and giving a clear solution to the problem of friendship between opposites: indeed, one is rich and the other poor, but no one possesses all the required qualities for salvation, so the rich will need the strength of the poor, even if the latter is also blind.⁸⁸ Finally, we can discern the term used by Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq for friend:

⁸⁸ In the perspective of debates in theology of religions, *Rasā'il Iḥwān al-ṣafā*'s view is original and cannot be reduced to the three classical doctrines (exclusivism, pluralism, and inclusivism). Their proposition, which appears in such a parable, can be named complementarianism and claims that no one will be saved if all are not. See G. de Vaulx d'Arcy, "Nul ne sera sauvé si tous ne le sont: Le complémentarisme des *Iḥwān al-Ṣafā* – Contribution à la théologie des religions", *Mélanges de l'Institut dominicain d'études orientales* 33 (2018), pp. 136–179.

mutaṣāfiyān, those who strive to achieve sincerity, or purity (*ṣafāʾ*). Then, it can be said that *Rasāʾil Iḥwān al-ṣafāʾ* not only follow the Pythagorean doctrine at an ontological level but also the Pythagorean communitarian organisation at a political level.⁸⁹

In addition to love and sincere friendship, the epistles develop a third path to union through religious gatherings. In the fable in Ep. 22, which puts on stage the case of animals versus man on the latter's claim to domination over the beasts, in his reply to the men's representative, who boasts the superiority of their religious laws, the leader of the birds put things into perspective:

You say you have festivals, days of collective prayer, attendance at houses of worship, and we have none.⁹⁰ Know that if you were well-educated and supportive brothers during hard times, that you were like one soul in the management of your business, so festivals and meeting for prayers would not be mandated to you.

So the legislator required that people gather together after living in disregard of each other, so that their meeting [*ig̃timāʾihim*] produces friendship [*al-ṣadāqa*], for friendship is the foundation of fraternity [*al-uhūwwa*], fraternity the foundation of affection [*al-maḥabbā*], affection the foundation of the reform of things, such a reform the guaranty of the welfare of the country, and such a welfare the foundation of the perpetuation of the world and the progeny [Ep. 22, II, 328].

The first paragraph is an implicit reference to the definition of friendship between sincere brothers in Ep. 45, IV, 48. The second one proposes an accurate conceptual distinction between degrees of affection, reminiscent of the precision of the Sarāḥsian fragment. Indeed, the nightingale presents religious regulations as a substitute for the true

⁸⁹ See F. Rosenthal, "Fitāḡūras" s.v., in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ed. by P.J. Bearman *et al.*, vol. II, C–G, Leiden, Brill, 1991, p. 930: "The Iḥwān al-Ṣafāʾ may not have been entirely unaware of the organizational precedent of Pythagoreanism".

⁹⁰ We borrowed, with some changes, the translation of this first sentence from *The Case of the Animals Versus Man Before the King of the Jinn: An Arabic Critical Edition and English Translation of Epistle 22*, ed. and trans. by L.E. Goodman and R. McGregor, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 258. But then, their edition is based on manuscripts that contain a flagrant oversight by *saut du même au même* (*homocleuton* or *homoearchon*) confusing two occurrences of *wa-laysa lanā šayʾ min ḡalika*. MS BnF 2303, f. 224r, contains many differences compared to the Beirut edition, but the meaning remains almost similar.

friendship which people are unable to establish between them. Therefore, when love and desire are lacking, the legislator institutes physical proximity by law and the authoritarian will of the legislator replaces the free agreement between friends, hence friendship becomes citizenship. Miskawayh, who discusses *Rasā'il Iḥwān al-ṣafā*'s doctrine of friendship thanks to Aristotelian elements,⁹¹ endorses this very interpretation of religious rituals in terms of social bond.⁹²

The analysis of the three different paths to the unity of humankind may lead to the following proposition: knowing that love is a desire of the soul, as there are different kinds of souls so there are different kinds of love, each drawing a different path, thus carnal love happens to the concupiscent soul, which aims at mating, whereas citizenship happens to the irascible soul, which aims at governing, and friendship between sincere brothers would be specific to the rational soul, which is potentially independent of any physical determination (even time and space). Friendship does not found a family or a community, but it institutes a "spiritual city [*madīna rūḥāniyya*]" (Ep. 47, IV, 134), a timeless place gathering the angelic souls of the blessed brothers.⁹³ In this perspective, al-Sarāḥsī's text would focus on the elevation from the first form, that is, the union of the concupiscent souls in the loving embrace, to the second, namely the union of the irascible souls in citizenship.

3.5. The Status of the Body in Another Sarāḥsian Fragment

The prospect of an idealist doctrine of love that includes erotic experience presupposes a particular conception of the body. This concep-

⁹¹ This is not the place for commenting chapter 5 of Miskawayh, *Tabḍīb al-aḥlāq*, but we can reasonably state that "these people [*qawm^{un}*] [who] had in view the virtue of unification which is realised in a collectivity" refer to the Brethren in Purity. See *ibid.*, p. 133; ET: Id., *The Refinement of Character*, p. 118. Miskawayh begins his chapter on friendship with the Brethren in Purity's view, before amending it with Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Indeed, their definition of friendship between sincere brothers opened the chapter: "Everyone finds his completion in his friend"; Miskawayh, *Tabḍīb al-aḥlāq*, p. 135; ET: Id., *The Refinement of Character*, p. 123 (amended trans.).

⁹² Miskawayh, *Tabḍīb al-aḥlāq*, pp. 140–141; ET: Id., *The Refinement of Character*, pp. 127–128.

⁹³ Ep. 45, IV, 58 distinguishes between present companions and pure souls from the past, and illustrates it with Socrates' farewell to his companions: "As for me who kept you company, dear virtuous brothers [*al-iḥwān al-ṣuḍalā*], I am going to reach our blessed brothers [*al-iḥwān al-kirām*] who preceded us". Inspired by Pl., *Phd.* 63bc.

tion is clearly explained in the fragment. The body is the path to the realisation of love because it is the way through which the lover's soul reaches that of the beloved. In other words, the body is "the instrument of the soul in acting [*alat al-nafs fi af'āl*]" . Far from being arbitrary, this clarification lives up to the status of a principle. Indeed, the same conception of the body equally determines al-Sarāḥsī's view on paternity, as shown in a second fragment, that we also edit here.

Edition of MS Fatih 03222, ff. 48v–49r

In his article "Arabic Books and Manuscripts VI" dedicated to Kindian and Sarāḥsian fragments,⁹⁴ Rosenthal specifies and translates a passage of the *muḥtaṣar* of al-Siġistānī's *Siwān al-ḥikma* by 'Umar ibn Sahlān al-Sāwī from manuscript Fatih 03222 that is missing in other manuscripts. Strangely enough, although 'Abd al-Raḥmān Badawī claims to have based his edition of the book on this manuscript, he omitted the following paragraph. It is indeed quite corrupted and necessitates some radical changes to find out its meaning. Hence, our translation differs to some extent from Rosenthal's one.

[48ب] أحمد بن [49أ] الطيب السرخسي.
 قرابة الآباء إلى الأبناء بالآلات أي الأجسام، والآلات خارجة عن الذوات. فإذا، قرابة الآباء إلى الأبناء
 بما هو خارج عن الذوات.
 الناصح لغيره⁹⁵ > لتحقيق⁹⁶ بأن ينصح نفسه >ب<نصح⁹⁷ أفضل⁹⁸ من لم يظلم غيره لم يظلم نفسه، ومن عد<ا⁹⁹
 عليها بغير إنصاف¹⁰⁰ فقد ظلم نفسه. ومن ظلم نفسه فحقيق⁹⁹ بأن يظلم غيره، ومن يظلم نفسه وغيره فهو
 تام الجور، والتام الجور تام الرذيلة.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁴ F. Rosenthal, "From Arabic Books and Manuscripts VI, Istanbul Materials for al-Kindi and as-Sarāḥsī", *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 76 (1956), pp. 27–31, esp. 29 and 31.

⁹⁵ محقيق.

⁹⁶ من ينصح.

⁹⁷ ومن لم يظلم نفسه عطل.

⁹⁸ من بغير الانصاف.

⁹⁹ محقيق.

¹⁰⁰ التام الرذيلة.

Translation

Aḥmad ibn al-Ṭayyib al-Saraḥsī.

The relationship between fathers [*abāʾ*] and sons [*abnāʾ*] is through instruments,¹⁰¹ that is, bodies. And instruments are exteriors to essences. So, the relationship between fathers and sons is through what is exterior to essences.

He who advises the other is able to advise himself with even better advice. He who does not harm the other does not harm his own soul [*naḥṣahu*]. He who opposes his own soul unfairly harms it. And he who harms his own soul is able to harm the other. So, he who harms his own soul and the other is definitively unfair. And who is definitively unfair is absolutely evil.

Commentary

This note is composed of two independent quotes. We will make first a few comments concerning the second one, which is not directly relevant to our subject. It relies on a Qurʾānic topic, the harm to oneself (*ẓulm al-naḥṣ*): “And We did not wrong them, but they wronged themselves” (Q 11:101, 16:118, 29:40, 30:9). However, al-Saraḥsī does not read it under the theological question of the divine responsibility of human faults,¹⁰² but his interpretation must be understood in comparison with the Muʿtazilite ethical premise: it is obligatory for the agent to avoid any unjustified harm that he expects to befall him. Harming oneself is evil because it is a form of wrongdoing, and wrongdoing is intrinsically evil.¹⁰³ In place, the Muʿtazili theologian al-Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Ġabbār (d. 415/1025) will use the expression *al-ḍarār fi naḥṣihi*, while al-Saraḥsī uses *ẓulm al-naḥṣ* in a particular way, understanding *naḥṣ* not as the self by contrast with the others, but as the soul in distinction to the body, which is only an inessential instrument. He gives such a Qurʾānic formulation to an idea that is initially attributed to Aristotle by Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq: “The ignorant is the enemy of

¹⁰¹ Rosenthal, “From Arabic Books and Manuscripts VI”, p. 29: “Is through organs”.

¹⁰² Hence, the Qurʾānic reminiscence may better be the following: “Whoever transgresses God’s limits has truly wronged his own soul” (Q 65:1).

¹⁰³ See Al-Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Ġabbār, *Sharḥ al-fuṣūl al-ḥamsa*, ed. by ʿA.K. ʿUṭmān, Cairo, Maktabat Wahba, 1965, p. 67, commented by A. Shihadeh, “The Existence of God”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, ed. by T. Winter, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 199.

himself, so how could he be another's friend?"¹⁰⁴ Al-Saraḥsī's thinking epitomises this bond between self-respect and respect for others. The bond annihilates the distance between the self and the other and paves the way for a conception of the effective unity of the human soul. This conception will later be attributed to Hermes Trismegistus whom the *Rasā'il Iḥwān al-ṣafā'* claimed to be a prophet:

Perpetual unbreakable fraternity is twofold: on the one side, man's love for his own soul regarding its return, the purification he exercises on it by true knowledge and good deeds; on the other side, his affection for his brother in God's faith, because this man accompanies his brother physically here below, and spiritually in the hereafter.¹⁰⁵

This saying of Hermes was familiar to scholars of the 4th/10th century, and perhaps earlier than that.¹⁰⁶

We shall now return to the first part of this excerpt, which deals with paternity. The sentence shares close similarities with the fragment on the loving embrace and the doctrine of the body in the *Rasā'il Iḥwān al-ṣafā'* and represents the third testimony of al-Saraḥsī's instrumental doctrine of the body.¹⁰⁷ This fact is quite remarkable, knowing the scarcity of available texts written by al-Kindī's pupil. The origin of such instrumental conception may be traced back to Plato's *Timaeus* and is plainly expressed by Galen as follows:

[All the organs (*al-a'dā'*)] find their achievement in the soul's need. That is why the body is an instrument [*āla*] for the soul. Therefore, the organs of the bodies differ; due to the differences between the souls contained [in the bodies] themselves.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq, *Adāb al-falāsifa*, p. 82.

¹⁰⁵ Al-Šahrastānī, *Kitāb al-milāl wa-l-niḥāl*, vol. II, p. 356.

¹⁰⁶ In Al-Šahrastānī, *Le livre des religions et des sectes*, trans. by D. Gimaret, J. Jolivet and G. Monnot, vol. II, Leuven, Peeters, 1986, p. 156, note 296, Daniel Gimaret and Jean Jolivet note that such a sentence is already found in al-Siğistānī's *Muntaḥab ṣiḥwān al-ḥikma* and Miskawayh's *al-ḥikma al-ḥālida*.

¹⁰⁷ The other instances are the main fragment on the loving embrace and his controversy with Isrā'īl al-Kaskarī. See de Vaulx d'Arcy, "Al-Saraḥsī versus al-Kaskarī".

¹⁰⁸ Ḡālīnūs, *K. manāfi' al-a'dā'*, Arabic translation by Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq, in Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS Arab 2853, f. 1v.

The instrumental conception as presented in this text is highlighted by the necessity to interpret the Greek word ὄργανον which means as well a tool (*ālā*) or an organ (*ʿaḍw*). This conception had great importance at the end of the 3rd/9th century. For instance, Abū Bakr al-Rāzī also claims it,¹⁰⁹ and develops its ontological foundations (the separated nature of the soul).

The same conception surfaces at different intervals in the *Rasāʾil Ihwān al-ṣafāʾ*:

The soul is a rational substance that uses the brain, the heart, and the other senses and organs, which are instruments [*al-ālāt*] and tools [*al-adawāt*] for it and through which it manifests some of its actions [*yazhar bihā baʿḍa afʿālihā*] [Ep. 46, IV, 85-86].

[Know that] the cause of the difference between the actions of [the soul] lies on the difference of instruments and tools regarding their qualities and defaults, for each organ of the body is an instrument and a tool for a certain power of the soul [Ep. 42, III, 405].

Know brother that souls are like craftsmen, bodies like workshops, and organs like instruments, as we have shown in the epistle on the structure of the body¹¹⁰ [Ep. 29, III, 46].

Know brother that Indian wise men gave this example just to represent the soul as a cripple, because it does not act unless through the mediation of the instruments of the body [Ep. 31, III, 159].

Above all, there is an explicit instance in the epistle on love itself:

It belongs to the soul to depend on the complexion [*mizāğ*] of the body in the manifestation of its deeds and habits, because the complexion of the body, its organs and articulations are for the soul like the instruments and the tools for the wise craftsman, it acts and appears through them [Ep. 37, III, 275].

¹⁰⁹ Abū Bakr al-Rāzī, “Al-ṭibb al-rūḥānī”, in Id., *Rasāʾil falsafīyya*, ed. by P. Kraus, Beirut, Dār al-al-ʾafāq al-ḡadida, 1979, pp. 28–29.

¹¹⁰ More precisely, Ep. 23, II, 384.

Applied to eroticism, the analogy confirms that love is a spiritual matter: the body is just the tool through which the living soul perpetuates itself. Such an instrumental view is inherited from Galen, but will find with the Brethren in Purity its own development that differs from the Galenic source. Let us quote again the Arabic version of Galen's *Usefulness of parts*: "Among all the animals, the body is adapted to its soul. In the case of the horse, which is characterised by his ardour and impetuosity, he received a body possessing strong hooves".¹¹¹

The instruments suit the soul's powers. Other examples follow:

As the soul of the lion possesses strong boldness and long endurance, courage and wrath, his paws have been provided with claws and fangs, appropriately to those situations. [...] Concerning those who are characterised by cowardice, like hares, and rabbits, and others, they were not provided with what serves boldness but with tools that are adequate to these souls: lightness and strong legs as tools for fleeing, taking shelter, and running away.¹¹²

According to Galen, each soul receives an appropriate body, but *Rasā'il Iḥwān al-ṣafā'*'s interpretation of Galen is quite different. If one reads the monotheist version of the Promethean myth in Epistle 22, he can see that the distribution of the powers of the soul and instruments of the body is explained thus:

"The Creator understood", the cricket replied, "that a powerful frame and a mighty body are fit only for toil, brute labour, and bearing heavy loads. Had He linked great souls with such bodies they would not so readily be led to drudgery and menial labour. They'd be fractious and unruly and would refuse to bear a rider. But praise be to God for the bounties of His creation. Small bodies and great souls full of learning befit the artistry of the bees, silkworms, pearl oysters, and their ilk" [Ep. 22, II, 363–364].¹¹³

God does not dispense organs to particular souls but rather arranges the powers of the soul with the instruments of the body to form harmonious beings. Whereas souls in their specific forms were, in

¹¹¹ Gālīnūs, *K. manāfi' al-a'ḍā'*, f. 1v.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, ff. 1v–2r.

¹¹³ *The Case of the Animals Versus Man*, p. 298.

Galen, eternal, for the *Rasā'il Iḥwān al-ṣafā'* the universal soul passes through the different reigns aiming for its separation from the body and changing its form at every step of its ascension. So, in the epistles, not only the organs are the instruments of the particular soul, but also the bodies are the uterus of the universal soul.

Concerning the question of paternity in this second fragment, such an undermining of kinship is the counterpart of the overestimation of spiritual relationships, in the same fashion as in the quotation of Ep. 45. Indeed, in this epistle, whereas the friendship of sincere brothers involves the unity of their souls and is “not exterior to their essence”, kinship is only a relationship between bodies, then it is exterior to their essence. Another text mentions al-Saraḥsī's thinking on paternity: in his controversy with the Nestorian bishop and Aristotelian logician Isrā'īl al-Kaskarī (d. 258/872), he is accused of overestimating the spiritual fatherhood of teachers over their students.¹¹⁴

3.6. *Al-Imtizāḡ, Necessary Condition of the Loving Union*

Now, if we come back to the main fragment of al-Saraḥsī, a last concept remains unexplained. Indeed, it is said that the conversion from carnal love to spiritual love occurs when mixing (*imtizāḡ*) ceases. Therefore, this mixing is the proper result of erotic union, and its end encourages the soul to find another path towards union. But how is such a melding possible when human bodies are barely capable of contiguity?

The term *al-imtizāḡ* has a unique occurrence in the fragment, and no further explanation is given to clarify its meaning: what was mixing? Theories on mixing were violently debated among philosophers at al-Saraḥsī's time,¹¹⁵ so what kind of mixing is described here? The row was over the consequences of mixing for the nature of the ingredients involved: do they stay the same or are transformed by the mixing? The terms of such a debate were mainly inherited from Galen and his theory of *κρᾶσις*, or *μῖξις*, distinguish in Arabic two types of mixture:

¹¹⁴ See our analysis in de Vaulx d'Arcy, “Al-Saraḥsī versus al-Kaskarī”, pp. 292–300.

¹¹⁵ And apparently opposed the Banū Mūsā to al-Kindī's school, following Pauline Koetschet's interpretation of Abū Bakr al-Rāzī's testimony. See Abū Bakr al-Rāzī, *Doutes sur Galien*, ed. and trans. by P. Koetschet, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2019, section XVI, § 8, p. 146, and also P. Koetschet, “Foreword”, *ibid.*, pp. i–cxxi, here xcvi–xcviii.

al-mumāsa and *al-imtizāḡ*. *Al-mumāsa* refers to a juxtaposition of elements producing a reversible mixing at the level of the qualities, like the softness of mud (*tīn*) which is the sensation produced by a combination of the earth's (*turba*) drought and the water's humidity. Regarding *al-imtizāḡ*, it refers to a real blending, either because both mixing elements go through an alteration in the Aristotelian sense (ἡ ἀλλοίωσις), either because the mixing is the blend of each part of the two substances with one another, which makes them inseparable (the Stoic μίξις).¹¹⁶

Because al-Saraḥsī asserts that *al-imtizāḡ* leads to *al-ittiḥād*, he may really intend the plain meaning of the concept and not only a sort of *mumāsa*; an application of such a doctrine of *al-imtizāḡ* to the question of the nature of love was indeed available in the Greek medical literature in Arabic at that time. In his section on *al-ʿiṣq*, al-Masʿūdī quotes a saying that he attributes to Hippocrates:

Love [*al-hawā*] is the blending [*imtizāḡ*] of the two souls in the same way water mixes with water, which makes difficult, if not impossible, the purification of one from the other by whatever means. Knowing that the soul is even more subtle and of a gentler run than water, the sequence of the days does not dim [love] nor time can wear it out. It resists any obstacle; its run is unpredictable, and its object remains hidden. Reason stays confused about the explanation of its power and can only say that its movement and powerfulness come from the heart before spreading in all the organs.¹¹⁷

We did not succeed in tracking the quotation back, but it was obviously important for al-Saraḥsī too. The beginning of the quotation summarises the theory of the μίξις applied to love, then the text goes on, describing the propagation of love in the organism. Knowing Galen's conception of *pneuma* as a subtle substance able to interact with matter, we may understand the spreading of love in the organs in the same way the *pneuma* does. But because of the scarcity of the texts by

¹¹⁶ Koetschet, "Foreword", pp. xcii–xcviii. On the Aristotelian origin of the question of mixture, and on the debate on the Stoic view, see Jocelyn Groisard introduction to Alexandre d'Aphrodise, *Sur la mixtion et la croissance*, ed. by J. Groisard, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 2013, pp. xix–civ.

¹¹⁷ Al-Masʿūdī, *Murūḡ al-dahab*, vol. IV, p. 241.

Galen on love, we do not have any proof that that is the case, nor that it corresponds to al-Sarāḥsī's view.

Once more, do the *Rasā'il Iḥwān al-ṣafā'* give any additional information about such a singular conception of love? The term *imtizāğ* is indeed found in there where *imtizāğ al-arkān* or *imtizāğ al-ṭabā'ī*, *ba'dihā wa-ba'd* mainly designate the mixture of the four elements that all creatures are made of. In those cases it is not a real mixture, for decomposition will occur with the destruction of the body. But *al-imtizāğ* is also used concerning the composition of certain sounds to produce music (Ep. 31, III, 96), or to the gathering of particular souls to form the universal soul on the Day of Resurrection: "We said that the union [of the souls in the universal soul] is the blending of the spiritual substances, similar to the mixing of the sound of the low string with the sound of the sharp string" (Ep. 41, III, 398). In both cases, the mixed elements can no longer be pulled apart.

We have already seen with the quotation of Ep. 27, III, 3 that the *Rasā'il Iḥwān al-ṣafā'* also apply the theory of *al-imtizāğ* to love, finding a metaphor closest to the subtlety of the souls than water, namely the melding of light with light. And naturally, Ep. 37 develops such an application. The term *imtizāğ* has one instance in Ep. 37, and we find many instances of *al-mizāğ* used with the same meaning in the very context of the description of a loving embrace (Ep. 37, III, 274–275). Hence, the comparison of the fragment with the epistle becomes crucial and the text on *al-imtizāğ* applied to love in Ep. 37 will be entirely translated.

It starts by explaining the subtle nature of the spirit:

Then know that the spirit of life [*rūḥ al-ḥayāt*]¹¹⁸ is a humid vapour that splits into moistness and blood and develops in the whole body. The life of the body and the organism is generated from it. Its material originates from the inhalation [*istinšāq*] of the air during normal breathing which ventilates the innate warmth of the heart.

The *rūḥ al-ḥayāt* clearly refers to the *pneuma* in Galenic medicine, which is inhaled from the outside air and then rushes through the

¹¹⁸ We may precise here that MS Atif Effendi 1681, f. 352v, as well as MS BnF 2303, f. 337v, omit *al-ḥayāt*. However, the meaning of the expression *rūḥ al-ḥayāt* has already been established in *Rasā'il Iḥwān al-ṣafā'* (see Ep. 22, II, 313 and Ep. 25, II, 423), thus the expression may be genuine.

arteries till it reaches the various centres – the brain, the heart, and the liver – and there causes thoughts and organic movements.¹¹⁹ *Rūḥ al-ḥayā* is another way to name the vital, or animal, *pneuma*, usually named *al-rūḥ al-ḥayawānī*.¹²⁰ So, the subsequent part of the text will analyse what happens when the inhaled air already comes from a soul. Following the same succession as al-Saraḥsī's fragment, it starts at the level of the mouth:

When the lover and the beloved happen to embrace [*ta'ānaqa*] each other [*ḡami^{can}*], kiss, suck one another's saliva and swallow it, this very moistness arrives in each other's stomach where it blends [*imtazaḡat*] with the moistness that is there. Then, it reaches the liver where it melts [*ihṭalaṭat*] with the parts of the blood, before spreading through the blood vessels up to all other parts of the body, where it melts with all the parts of the organism, becoming flesh, blood, fat, vessels, nerves and the like.

The description refers here to Galen's vital *pneuma*. Then, the text describes another entrance of the body, the nostrils, and what corresponds in Galen to the flow of psychic and animal *pneumas* (respectively generated in the brain and the heart):

Likewise, when each one breathes into the face of his companion, some of his spiritual blow is expelled with the breathing and melts with the air. Therefore, if they inhale this air, some parts of the blow enter the nostrils with the inhaled air. Some arrive at the front of the brain where they pass like the light through a crystal, then each one enjoys this inspiration [*al-tanassum*].¹²¹ Other parts of this inhaled air arrive in the lungs through the windpipe, and from there reach the heart, and [propagate

¹¹⁹ See Galen, *On the Usefulness of the Parts of the Body*, trans. by M.T. May, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1968, p. 347 (book VII, § 8): "The outer air drawn in by the rough arteries receives its first elaboration in the flesh of the lungs, its second thereafter in the heart and arteries, particularly those of the retiform plexus, and a final one in the ventricles of the encephalon, where its transformation into psychic *pneuma* is complete".

¹²⁰ See P. Pormann and E. Savage-Smith, *Medical Islamic Medicine*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2007, p. 45.

¹²¹ MS Atif Effendi 1681, f. 353r, and MS BnF 2303, f. 338r contain *al-nasīm*. But the presence of *al-tanassum* in al-Saraḥsī's text confirms the use of such a form and validates the Beirut edition. Such a term was already used by al-Ġaḥīz, *The Epistle on Singing-Girls*, p. 31, § 47.

from the heart]¹²² in all the parts of the body thanks to the blood vessels' systoles. Then, they melt with the blood, the flesh, and the other components of the body. What was dissolved from this body settles down in that one, and what was dissolved from that one [settles down] in this one.

This passage of the text details what the Saraḥsian fragment meant by a breath "full of his dispositions and of the powers of his soul". Then, the text explains how *al-imtizāğ* produces new *mizāğ*:

Then, from these different complexions [*durūb min al-mizāğāt*]¹²³ together with these complexions [*al-amziğā*] happen different humours [*al-ablāt*], and from these humours different morals [*al-ablāq*]. This is all dependent on the complexions of their body.

As long as the loving embrace lasts, the contiguity of the bodies is fortified by an exchange of fluids coming from each soul and penetrating deep inside the organism of the companion, making it impossible to separate these particles from one's own, and determinant for one's behaviour as one's own complexion does. Hence, it is right to say that love produces ultimate meeting, union of souls, and blending of complexions. But all loving embrace has an end, and then the complexions' blend dims and fades out. The only way for the union to perpetuate is to pass to the level of the agreement of wills.

On a theoretical level, if *al-imtizāğ* leads to the union of the lovers, does it mean that al-Saraḥsī adopts the Stoic theory of the melding matter, then refuses categorically the atomistic view on the contiguity of the atoms? Did he adopt the anti-atomist view of his master? The problem is that it would be contradictory with Abū l-Qāsim al-Balḥī's testimony on al-Saraḥsī.¹²⁴ If al-Saraḥsī really understands the proper

¹²² "Wa-min al-qalb yadibb", following MS BnF 2303, f. 338r. MS Atif Effendi 1681, f. 353r, contains a trace of this expression with *dabba*.

¹²³ According to MS Atif Effendi 1681, f. 353r, and MS BnF 2303, f. 338r. Remove "*wa-*" *min al-mizāğāt* from the Beirut edition, that is erroneous.

¹²⁴ Abū l-Qāsim al-Balḥī, *Kitāb al-maqālāt*, ed. by Ḥ. Ḥānṣū, R. Kurdī and 'A.Ḥ. Kurdī, Istanbul-Amman, Kuramer/Dār al-fath, 2019, p. 76. Al-Balḥī mentions al-Saraḥsī's book on geometry where he discusses the use of geometrical arguments by both the atomistic doctrine and the supporters of continuity. Al-Saraḥsī did not take sides with either one but, if we paraphrase the *Rasā'il Iḥwān al-ṣafā'*, he gave to each their own due and attributed a proper domain of truth to both views.

truth of both atomism and the doctrine of continuity in geometry, he should also attribute their own domain of truth to both theories of contiguity and blending of the matter. If al-Saraḥsī is also the author of the *Rasā'il Iḥwan al-ṣafā'*, such a complementarity should be found there. Do the epistles apply their complementarianism to this topic? Indeed they do: based on the debates on matter, we can deepen our interpretation of Ep. 37, III, 273: "Union is a property of realities of the soul and spiritual states, whereas union is impossible for bodies, only vicinity, mixture, or contact [*al-muḡāwara wa-l-mumāzaḡa wa-l-mumāsa*], nothing more". On a material level, mixture (*mumāzaḡa*) is nothing more than juxtaposition (*mumāsa*), thus the distinction between material realities and spiritual realities overlaps with the distinction between atomistic contiguity and Aristotelian continuity, since material realities are barely capable of contiguity while spiritual ones achieve mixing. We can notice here that this doctrinal duality is perfectly consistent with another duality found in Ep. 2 concerning the duality of geometries, with the atomist foundation of sensitive geometry on the one hand and the foundation of intellective geometry in the continuity doctrine on the other.¹²⁵

4. Historical Remarks

The comparative study of al-Saraḥsī's fragment with the *Rasā'il Iḥwan al-ṣafā'*, specifically Ep. 37, shed light on some of the fragment's obscure statements and results in a consistent philosophical view on love. Now, how can we understand such a unity of meaning between both texts? What does their philosophical proximity imply on a historical level? Why interpreting al-Saraḥsī's fragment in light of Ep. 37 is not the same as projecting an alien meaning to the text?

First, both texts belong to a well-defined genre, the Abbasid erotology. Authors of such literature were divided by Pernilla Myrne into two factions: "Those who regard sex as a necessary component of a romantic relationship and those who maintain that sex and love are incompatible".¹²⁶ Whereas al-Ġāḥiẓ belongs to the second cate-

¹²⁵ Ep. 2, I, 79–81. To understand this duality in light of the atomistic and continuistic views on matter, see Ep. 42, III, 469–470.

¹²⁶ P. Myrne, "Pleasing the Beloved: Sex and True Love in a Medieval Arabic Erotic Compendium", in *The Beloved in Middle Eastern Literatures: The Culture of Love and*

gory,¹²⁷ both texts obviously belong to the first faction, the one that maintains that sensuality is a condition of spirituality and that the goal of carnal love is “spiritual union”,¹²⁸ a faction to which also belongs Ibn Naṣr al-Kātib (4th/10th century), the author of the *Encyclopedia of Pleasure* (*Ġawāmi‘ al-ladda*), a compendium gathering earlier material, “a deliberate attempt to synthesize knowledge from different disciplines”.¹²⁹ Its goal is both entertainment and the education of a cultivated elite,¹³⁰ showing how “love for the beloved’s own sake is strengthened by sexual union”.¹³¹ However, such a practical thesis is not grounded on precise philosophical principles. This is obvious in his use of the concept of mixing: “The mixing of his and her seminal fluid is the most efficient in assuring love [*mawadda*] and mutual affection”.¹³² In al-Kātib’s view, mixing is only the melting of the material fluids, not the union with the beloved’s soul, while he knew al-Saraḥsī’s work on love. The *Encyclopedia of Pleasure* is more a compilation of views and debates on carnal love than a treatise asserting a philosophical thesis; like the abovementioned al-Mas‘ūdī’s *Murūğ al-dahab* it belongs to this secondary literature, whereas al-Saraḥsī’s fragment and the epistle on love belong to the primary literature they refer to.

A second and more restrictive hypothesis places both texts in the same philosophical milieu, namely the Kindian school, with al-Saraḥsī as al-Kindī’s only known pupil.¹³³ As seen before, the Arabic Aristophanes myth is quite proper to the Kindian school since the only quotations of the *Symposium* can be found in Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq and Ibn Ishāq al-Kindī, with slight differences in their interpretation of

Languishing, ed. by A. Korangy, H. Al-Samman and M.C. Beard, New York, I.B. Tauris, 2018, pp. 215–236, here 218.

¹²⁷ Cheikh-Moussa, “La négation d’Éros”, pp. 73–74.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

¹²⁹ P. Myrne, “Organizing, Presenting, and Reading Sexual Knowledge: The Abbasid Context of *Jawāmi‘ al-ladhdha*”, *Journal of Abbasid Studies* 7 (2020), pp. 182–206, here 200.

¹³⁰ Myrne, “Pleasing the Beloved”, p. 221, Ead., “Organizing, Presenting, and Reading Sexual Knowledge”, p. 185.

¹³¹ Myrne, “Pleasing the Beloved”, p. 227.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 224.

¹³³ Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, ed. by R. Tağaddud, Tehran, Maṭba‘at-e dānešgāh-e Tehrān, 1971, p. 320, names a list of disciples, but none of them left any work for posterity and Abū Zayd al-Balḥī (born in 235/849) related to al-Kindī’s school may have rather been al-Saraḥsī’s student.

the myth. We could conclude that both al-Saraḥsī's fragment and Ep. 37 followed the same interpretation, closer to Ḥunayn's than to al-Kindī's.

This proximity allows us to make an even more restrictive assumption and suggest that the author of both texts is the same, meaning that al-Saraḥsī was involved in the writing of the *Rasā'il Iḥwān al-ṣafā'*, an historical assumption we already suggested.¹³⁴ It opened the possibility of a rationalist reading of the *Rasā'il Iḥwān al-ṣafā'* and an interpretation of their philosophical system grounded in mathematics.¹³⁵ Such a hypothesis also provided clues to break the code of Aḥmad ibn al-Ṭayyib's controversy with Isrā'īl al-Kaskarī by enlightening the debate's background,¹³⁶ and also led to the identification of the author of the Arabic version of Nichomachus of Gerasa's *Introduction to Arithmetic* with al-Saraḥsī.¹³⁷ Comparing al-Saraḥsī's fragment on love with the Brethren in Purity's epistle on love can be considered, in Popperian terms, as another test refuting or strengthening the hypothesis.

Of course it is impossible to reach a conclusion based on the state of the art, due to the scarcity of available testimonies on al-Saraḥsī's thinking, but the hypothesis deserves to be tested on any of his philosophical statements. Other tests are possible, like the theory of arithmetic developed in Ep. 1 and the mention of al-Saraḥsī's view on arithmetic in Abū l-Qāsim al-Balḥī's *Kitāb al-Maqālāt*.

5. Conclusions

Sexual intercourse may just be a cunning of nature to perpetuate the species, as suggested in Ep. 37, but carnal love contains something else. So, why does a lover embrace his beloved so passionately and kiss them so avidly? Following Plato's *Symposium*, al-Saraḥsī describes how love is an attempt to unite with the other but, from his point of view, it is not merely an attempt. Following Galen's theory of the *pneuma* he

¹³⁴ See our demonstration in the foreword to our translation of six epistles in de Vaulx d'Arcy, "Foreword", pp. 22–48.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 49–60.

¹³⁶ De Vaulx d'Arcy, "Al-Saraḥsī versus al-Kaskarī".

¹³⁷ G. de Vaulx d'Arcy, "Aḥmad b. al-Ṭayyib as-Saraḥsī, réviseur de l'*Introduction arithmétique* de Nicomaque de Géraise, et rédacteur des *Rasā'il Iḥwān al-ṣafā'*", *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 29/2 (2019), pp. 261–283.

demonstrates that, although bodies remain in contiguity during the embrace, one breathes the other's breath which holds particles from his spirit. Hence, during their kiss, they inhale those subtle particles which will blend with their own complexion, thus union occurs. Such an intense although short experience makes people long for a sustainable union with the other soul and will progress to the agreement of wills in sharing life and belongings, before becoming a pure spiritual union of intellects for eternity. Then, erotic experience is the starting point of the spiritual experience of union, and because personal salvation is dependent on the help of others, it is also the starting point of religious life.

The understanding of the text would have been far less extensive without the assertion that Aḥmad ibn al-Ṭayyib al-Sarāḥsī is the author of *Rasā'il Iḥwān al-ṣafā'*. Many clues on other topics already made us suspect such a hypothesis, but with this fragment we are finally in the presence of an original text signed by al-Sarāḥsī that has another instance in Ep. 37 on love. In particular, the phenomenological method consisting in describing the loving embrace before interpreting it in a Platonic-Galenic fashion is quite specific to both texts, without other previous instance. Furthermore, the application of the theory of mixture to the lover's blow penetrating the beloved's body is worded in almost the same way, as if the same author rewrote his very interpretation in a different context.

This interpretation of the fiery kiss will have a great destiny, influencing later thinkers such Avicenna, Mullā Ṣadrā, and Ibn al-ʿArabī,¹³⁸ and percolating into the Jewish gloss of the Song of Songs' verse: "O that he would kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!"¹³⁹

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¹³⁸ J.F. Toosi and S.N. Virani, "Love and the Brethren of Purity: A Comparative Study of Human Intimacy in Islamic Philosophy", *Journal of Sufi Studies* 11/2 (2022), pp. 149–180.

¹³⁹ T. Werthmann, "'Spirit to Spirit': The Imagery of the Kiss in the Zohar and its Possible Sources", *Harvard Theological Review* 114/4 (2018), pp. 586–609.