

Week 1: Nizāmī Ganjavi (d. 1203-1209)

He lived in Ganja, in Azerbaijan, which in the 11th and 12th centuries became one of the great centres of literature and science under the Seljuks. There is little known about his life, which is largely because although his major poems were sponsored/dedicated to princes and rulers in the area – poetry being on the whole a courtly pursuit – he himself never lived at court but lived a quiet, solitary life such that his sponsors had to seek him out in order to give him commissions. There is debate as to whether he should be counted as a ‘mystical’ poet, as we have no information about any affiliation with the Sufi path. His writings embody many of the themes of mystical writing and he shows familiarity with Sufi terminology and concepts, but by this time this would have been the case for any educated person. And one thing that we do know about Nizāmī is that he was a highly educated and informed man; he was not only steeped in the traditions of Arab and Persian literature, but also had knowledge of mathematics, geometry, astronomy and astrology, alchemy, medicine, Quranic exegesis, Islamic theology and law, philosophy and mystical thought, history, music and the visual arts. This natural integration of all forms of knowledge was very characteristic of the civilisation of the Seljuks and the early Ottomans, where knowledge of God, knowledge of the self and knowledge of the world were regarded as complementary aspects of a single wisdom rather than alternative or opposing worldviews. Thus in 13th century Seljuk Konya, the *madrasas* in which Rūmī and Kirmānī taught together were also astronomical observatories, etc.

Nizāmī is important because he brought to perfection the particular form of poetry called the *masnavi* or *mathnawi*. This was a new, specifically Persian poetic genre developed first by Rūdakī (d. 940) and Sanā’ī of Ghazna (d. 1131), which is basically rhyming couplets on the pattern aa, bb, cc. Its great advantage was that it allowed for longer poems than the traditional monorhyme of Arabic and early Persian poetry, and this led to the development of an epic form which was able to incorporate the beloved Persian tradition of story-telling, and also a didactic tradition – i.e. these poems were fundamentally vehicles for teaching and instruction. Nizāmī is said to have written 20,000 verses in his lifetime, many of which have not survived. He is famous for his fine language and inventive use of metaphor, as well as his wonderful descriptions of nature and the incorporation in places of Christian imagery. One of the problems we face on this course is the difficulty of translating the *mathnawi* form into English without it sounding like doggerel, and I am afraid that without exception all the translations of Nizāmī I have looked at so far fail dismally to capture the beauty of the original, largely because they commit themselves to preserving the rhyme. The best translator of Rūmī’s *Mathnawi* which we will use on the next course, Alan Williams, now professor of Persian Studies in Manchester, maintains that it is virtually impossible to do both things – i.e. preserve the sophistication of the thought/ language and the rhyming couplets – at the same time and wisely in his own translations does not attempt to do so.

Nizāmī's reputation rests upon five long poems in the *mathnawī* style, which are referred to as 'The Khamsa' or 'Panj Ganj' (the Five Treasures). These were:

1) *Makhsal al-Asrār* (The Treasure of Mysteries) (1163-4)

Twenty discourses on religious and ethical topics

2) *Khusraw and Shīrin* (1180)

A famous love story between the last Sasanid King, Khusraw II (590-628) and his mistress.

3) *Layla and Majnun* (1188-93)

The famous Arab love story of Qays and Layla, who fell in love when they were young but were not allowed to marry.

4) *Haft Paykar* (The Seven Beauties) (1197)

The story of the Sasanid King Bahram Gor and his encounters with seven princesses.

5) *Iskandarnāma* (1200-2)

Tales and exploits of Alexander the Great.

The extension of form allowed also for the development of elaborate structures within the poem, which were themselves replete with symbolic meaning. Thus *Haft Paykar* is structured around seven stories told to the king by seven princesses from seven different climes, on seven days of the week, in seven different pavilions of seven different colours. It clearly lends itself to an esoteric interpretation, as Nizāmī himself points out, being based upon the Night Journey of the Prophet Muhammad, who was taken at night (i.e. in the interior) by the Angel Gabriel from earth to the highest heaven and the presence of God Himself, traversing on the way the seven heavenly spheres. In the mystical tradition, this becomes a symbol for the journey of a person from ignorance to knowledge through seven different stages of purification and revelation until they reach the station of the 'The Perfect Human Being' (*al-insān al-kāmil*). This same structural element reflecting Sufi teaching is found in 'Attar's masterpiece 'The Conference of the Birds', where the birds travel through seven valleys in search of the Simurgh, likewise indicating a progression in wisdom and self-knowledge. Thus these poems are very different from the rather intimate verses of Rābi'a or Hallāj that we studied last time, which encapsulate a moment of revelation and union with the Divine. These epic works present us with a total cosmic vision in which everything is connected to everything else, in which everything has a meaning. One of the major themes is a belief in human perfectibility, based upon an implicit metaphysical understanding of the role of the human being in the cosmos. Thus, the perfected man, personified by the king, is understood to be the mediator between God and His creation, and his development in virtue and wisdom is presented as a necessary preparation for his assuming this cosmic function.

It is clearly impossible for us to look at a whole epic poem in the time that we have, so in this session we are just going to look at three very short extracts which I have chosen because a) they are reasonable if not good translations and b) they embody some themes which will be central to our discussions during the next five weeks. As last time, I think it is important to make clear that our aim here is not to give you a lot of information about the poetic tradition of Islam in terms of technical knowledge of metres or even imagery. Our aim is to explore what these poems bring up in ourselves, now, in the present day, and what they may awaken in us spiritually. The first two are taken from the third of the *Khamsa*, *Layla and Majnun*, which Nizāmī was commissioned to write by Sharvānshāh Akhstān I who ruled in Baku, the present capital of Azerbaijan. This is a famous love story which was deeply embedded in the early Arab tradition of *qasida*, often associated with the poet Qays who lived in the 8th century. There are many different versions of the tale, but Nizāmī's became regarded as the definitive version, at least in the Persian tradition.

It is basically a story of what we might regard as unfulfilled love. Layla and Qays fall in love when they are young after a single encounter, but they are from different Bedouin tribes and not allowed to marry. It is expected, therefore, that they will get over their youthful passion and grow up to conform to the social expectations of marrying according to family choice. But this does not happen, as Qays finds that he cannot give up the love he has for Layla, which burns itself deep into his heart, and he devotes his life to yearning for her and writing poetry in her praise. This leads him progressively to move further and further outside society, giving up all his relationships, even to his beloved parents, until he becomes 'mad' – *majnūn* – living wild amongst the animals, eating only the plants of the desert. This clearly lends itself, as the first poem indicates, to a mystical interpretation in which this love of Layla, the personification of beauty, stands for the love of God in the heart of the mystic, who is equally led to give up all worldly affairs and relationships in his/her single-minded devotion to The Beloved.

I say 'we would regard as unfulfilled love' because the Arab convention here is very different from the modern western expectation that fulfilment means union and living 'happily ever after' with the object of one's love. As we saw in the last course, the typical Arab *qasida* begins after the moment of union as the beloved departs, and the poem describes the journey of the lover as he follows her traces across the desert, stopping at her campsites to remember their moments of passion and at famous monuments to lovers of the past. There is no physical reconciliation, but rather the internalisation of the image of the beloved, of that aspect of beauty, in the heart of the lover. In the traditional Arab form, the poem would end with the re-integration of the lover into the tribe, coming home after a period of wandering. This re-integration does not happen in quite the same way in *Layla and Majnūn*, but the internalisation of the image is a major theme, as our second poem shows. In fact, so strong is

this theme that when, later in their lives when Layla has been married and widowed, the possibility of physical union re-emerges, Majnūn refuses it because his love for Layla has transcended even Layla herself, and they are re-united only in death. This is something very different from anything in our western tradition, which we need to get hold of, as it is such an important element in the mystical poetry of someone like Ibn ‘Arabī. The background to this particular verse is that Majnūn, whilst with a companion in the desert, finds a piece of paper with both their names engraved upon it, and scratches out Layla’s, and this is his explanation of why has he done this.

The last poem concerns Nizāmī’s understanding of poetry itself, and its importance to our spiritual life. He calls poetry “the shadow of the prophetic veil” – meaning that that the activity of writing and reading poetry is a way – perhaps for him, the only way – in which the truths brought down through revelation come to life in our own hearts. This relationship between the prophetic revelation of Islam and poetic expression is something that we shall come across again with Ibn ‘Arabī, and so for the moment we shall just leave this with Nizāmī’s rather beautiful take on the transformative power of the word.

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