

ISLAMIC MYSTICAL POETRY 3

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Introduction

This is the third course on Islamic mystical poetry which Jane and I have run under the auspices of OUDCE. Apart from introducing you to four more great poets from this tradition, it is an opportunity to take stock and look back at what we have covered in the first two courses. Let us start with some important general points regarding our title: Islamic Mystical Poetry.

First of all, we should remind ourselves that the Islamic world covers a huge and diverse territory of peoples and languages. In the period we have been investigating, from the 2nd/8th to 7th/13th centuries, it included not only most of the Mediterranean, from al-Andalus (Spain and Portugal) and the Maghrib (lit. the 'west', Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia) to Egypt and the Hijaz (the Arabian peninsula) to the heartlands of the Mashriq (lit. 'the east', the Levant – Iraq, Syria, Palestine), but also further east into Iran and Afghanistan and Central Asia (modern Uzbekistan, Tajikistan etc), north into Azerbaijan, Armenia and Anatolia, south across the Sahara and into east Africa. It included nomadic peoples roaming deserts and steppes, as well as highly urbane and urbanised peoples settled in towns and cities that were far larger than anything comparable in the Christian world of the time. So when we look at the literature of mystical poetry, we have to bear in mind the various geographical centres within this vast landscape as well as the poetic traditions of a particular culture and language.

The place of poetry in Islam is somewhat ambiguous: the Quran, for example, stresses that it is not poetry, as there was a widespread association of poetry with magic, the magic of words and the evocation of feelings: revelation is deemed "a recitation that is clear" (i.e. non-poetic), and yet 85% of Quran exhibits end-rhyme (something close to rhyming prose). One important point: the *sound* and *rhythm* of the Quran is crucial, and it utilises features of poetry.

Secondly, we briefly looked at what mysticism means within the Islamic context, which is sometimes called Sufism: described as "the ancient wisdom of the heart" or "the science of love" (Andrew Harvey), it "stresses unveiling, or the direct vision of the divine light, of seeing God's actual presence in the world and in the self" (William Chittick). "The major goal of Sufism", writes Eric Geoffroy, "is to return man to his original purity, to the state in which he was not yet separated from the spiritual world.... According to one of Rumi's images, he has transformed the copper from which man was made into gold. He acts as a 'spiritual hero' (*fatā*), because few people affiliated with Sufism achieve this supra-individual state. One thus distinguishes the *sūfī*, the 'realised' man, from the *mutasawwif*, the aspirant who still undergoes the tribulations of the Path and who makes an effort through spiritual discipline to reach the state of the *sūfī*."

Thirdly, we looked at the traditions of poetry in pre-Islamic Arabia and in Persia. We noted how poetry was an important social event: it was chanted and sung in public, not read privately in the study. Poetry was a major force in the pre-Islamic Arab context, more important than oratory or story-telling (which it included) – it was the literature of a nomadic people who prided themselves on bravery, manliness, fidelity to the tribe etc. They developed three main types of poem, the boast (exalting oneself or one's tribe), the insult (lampooning another tribe) and the lament (bemoaning the loss of a hero, often composed by women). The fourth, the panegyric, developed out of the patronage system, as all poets needed to make a living! A poet was thus a historian and journalist, an entertainer, a praiser and critic of public figures, a propagandist and so on...

The major verse-form was the *qaṣīda*, the ode – a highly structured poem in 3 parts, the nostalgic amatory prelude (*nasīb*), the journey or quest, and the arrival at the goal – often punctuated by a highly symbolic wine-song. It was this that formed not only the basis of a long tradition but take-offs as well.

According to the Arab critic Ibn Qutayba (d. 888), who lived in Baghdad, the capital of the 'Abbasid Empire: "I have heard a certain man of letters remark that the author of a *qaṣīda* began always by mentioning the encampment, the dung-heaps and other relics. He then wept complainingly, addressed the deserted site and begged his companion to halt, in order that he might furnish an occasion for mentioning the folk who once dwelt there but were now departed... To this he joined the amatory prelude; he complained of the violence of his sentiments and the pain of separation, as well as the extremity of his passion and yearning, so as to incline men's hearts towards him and win the attention of their eyes and ears; for love poetry is very near to the soul and readily cleaves to the heart... When he was confident that he had secured a hearing, he followed all this up by affirming his rights: in his poetry he mounted the saddle, complained of weariness and sleeplessness, of long journeying by night and through the heat of the noonday; he described the exhaustion of his riding-beats or his camel. When he was conscious that he had sufficiently affirmed to his patron the right that he had for hoping and the guarantee he felt entitled to that his desires would be gratified, and that he had convinced him of the sufferings he had endured upon the journey, he began the panegyric, inciting his patron to be generous and bestirring him to compensate him adequately; he extolled him above his peers, and belittled them in comparison with his superior worth".

From the *qaṣīda* developed other forms of poetry: the love-poetry of the *ghazal* (lit. 'love-talk, flirtation') and '*udhrī* (where the lover goes mad with the intensity of love and perishes); and in the Persian tradition, the *ruba'i* (quatrain) and the *masnavi* (epic), which has less rigid rules of rhyme. In Arabic there is also the tradition of rhyming prose (*saj'*), a sort of rap-music hybrid between poetry and prose, originally used by soothsayers.

In both Arabic and Persian, poetry developed largely as a court tradition – naturally, given that poets depended for their livelihood upon a rich patron. Therefore, when we consider mystical poetry, we can see how easily some Sufis transferred many of the images directly to the divine King and His court. The same occurs with love poetry: Ibn ‘Arabī, for example, in his *Tarjumān al-ashwāq* used the classical *qaṣīda* format to describe the plight of the mystical lover before the divine Beloved.

Fourthly, we have tried to convey the profundity and richness of this mystical poetic tradition in Islam, which is so different to the Christian mystical tradition. Our poets convey a deep experience of the Divine through an array of poetic forms, stories, imagery etc. Often these forms can be quite unfamiliar to a western reader (for example, the use of prophetic figures as models of human perfection). We have looked at:

the simple love-poems of Rābi‘a al-‘Adawiyya

the personal pronoun shifts of Hallāj

the penetrating insights of Abū Sa‘īd

the Majnun-Layla motif used by Nizami

the bird imagery used by ‘Attār

the quatrain structure employed by Kirmānī

the complex love poems of Ibn ‘Arabi, including the symbols of the *qaṣīda* (ruins, phantom apparitions, lightning-flashes etc) as mystical states and stations

We have also touched on certain thematic images that appear throughout Islamic culture, especially amongst mystics: the tavern and drinking, natural images like trees (cypress), flowers (rose, tulip), the moon and so on.

At the same time, the language of love is undoubtedly universal. These poets have a power to speak to us directly, to touch the heart and imagination, even in translation. Thus, at the same time as looking at the general background and biography of each poet, our major concern on this course is to explore and savour the impact which each poem makes on us, and to begin to enter into the insights they express.

Stephen Hirstenstein

January 2013

Plan of first session: January 16

1. brief silent meditation - guided
2. intro for new people re Jane and me
3. intro qs: (new) what brought you on IMP course? (old) what has struck you from previous courses?
4. intro to IMP 3 by SH: looking back at previous courses
5. mention also 5 weeks is short, assignment is required but not arduous – in past people have written responses to poems/authors or kept journal and/or declaimed a poem
6. BREAK
7. Ibn al-Farid by JC