

## Hafiz (Ḥāfīz) (d. ca. 792/1390)

“Every great work of poetry tends to make impossible the production of equally great works of the same kind” (T. S. Eliot)

Hafiz was both a great lyric poet, a writer of ghazals (*ghazal-sarā*), and a man of great spirituality. Hafiz was born in Shiraz some time between 710/1310 and 720/1320, and died ca. 792/1390, so his life spans the 8th/14th century. He wrote a *Dīwān* of some 500 extraordinary poems over a period of 50 years, some of which were considered by the great Jami as “downright miraculous”. He has been called “the Tongue of the Unseen” (*lisān al-ghayb*) and “the Interpreter of Secrets” (*tarjumān al-asrār*).

To be educated, in the eyes of a Persian or an Afghan, even today, is to have a copy of Hafiz’s poems on the shelf (and know many of them by heart). As Peter Avery, one of Hafiz’s modern translators (who by his own admission studied Persian in order to be able to read the poems in the original), recalls a visit to Iran: “I asked a slightly, if at all, literate youth whence he came. When he replied ‘Shiraz’, I immediately recited the famous verse “If that Shirazi Turk were to get hold of my heart...”, whereupon he proceeded to recite the rest of the poem. Literate or not, he knew his Hafiz. Imagine giving a London cab driver the first line of a Shakespeare sonnet. It is unlikely that he would reply with the rest of the poem.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, Hafiz today in Iran is a living entity, and his poems are often used for bibliomancy, taking an omen (*fāl*) from the verses where the book falls open, like the Quran or I Ching.

### Shiraz

To better appreciate his contribution, we should first situate him within his context: Shiraz in the 8th/14th century, a time when the Sufi orders (*tariqāt*) were being established, the thought of Ibn ‘Arabi commented on and interpreted by masters such as Sayyid Haydar Amuli (d. 782/1380), a time when the spiritual and literary Persian tradition was in full flow in the wake of major influences such as Ahmad Ghazali (brother of the theologian Abu Hamid Ghazali, d. 520/1126) and ‘Ayn al-Qudat Hamadhani (d. 525/1131) and the great Shirazi Sufi Ruzbihan Baqli (d. 606/1210). It was a period when many brilliant poets appeared (eg Khwaju Kirmani, d. 753/1352; Ubayd-i Zakani, d. 772/1371; Kamal Khujandi, d. 803/1400): it was possible to be not only a poet but a religious judge (*qādī*) and a Sufi shaykh. These ironic lines by Zakani, aimed at pious fanaticism, have become proverbial:

“Good news! The cat has repented,  
and become a true worshipper, an ascetic, a real Muslim”

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<sup>1</sup> From the Foreword to *Hafiz and the Religion of Love* (New York, 2010), pp. xxi.

14th-century Shiraz under Muzaffarid rule has been compared to 15th-century Florence under the Medicis. The city and the suburbs had a population of approx 200,00: it had had a large Zoroastrian community, who looked after the wineshops, though by Hafiz's time this seems to have been simply a poetic convention – the taverns were in the hands of Christians and Jews. It was well supplied with water, and got its food from the rich agricultural region of Fars. It acted as the centre of government for southern Iran. It had a special grape called *mesqali*, which was eaten fresh and made into wine, vinegar etc (hence Shirazi wine). The city was renowned as the House of Knowledge (*dār al-‘ilm*), a city of “saints and poets” as Arberry put it, and was especially famous for its colleges (*madrāsas*), its Sufi centres (*khanqahs*) and mosques. It was a primarily Sunni city, with some Shi'i adherents and shrines, which allowed it to embrace the imposition of Shi'ism as the state religion by Shah Ismail a century later. Ibn Battuta, the great Moroccan travel-writer, who visited Shiraz during Hafiz's lifetime, said the Qur'an was chanted more beautifully there than anywhere else in the Islamic world he had been to. According to Sa'di, writing in the previous century, “in Shiraz, 1,000 Sufi masters and saints or more are to be found”: among the most popular holy sites to be visited by the faithful (including the ruler's mother according to Ibn Battuta) was the tomb of the Sufi master Ibn Khafif (d. 371/982), who is credited with bringing Sufism to Shiraz. Ibn Battuta was also amazed by the sight of some two thousand women crowded onto the balconies of the Old Friday Mosque (considered by some to have been the most beautiful in the world at the time) to hear the sermons of famous preachers: “I have never seen in any land so great an assembly of women”!

The city was a centre of book illustration. It had a vast bazaar, divided into sections for each guild; taverns and brothels; gardens full of fountains, orange trees and cypresses – even the English Romantic poets used the motif of roses and nightingales echoing through Shiraz's gardens.

At the same time it was a turbulent century, with decades of bloodshed as various rulers fought for power. Hafiz's lyrics emerged from a background of Sufi gatherings, communal gatherings at the Old Mosque, daily life in the city's bazaars, uncontrolled city mobs, violent sieges of the city as well as hedonism and debauchery. Poetry was the crown jewel, and Hafiz was by far the most brilliant figure.

We have already seen how a generation earlier Shabistari in his *Gulshan-i rāz* had shown how profane imagery could convey the deepest spiritual ideas. Likewise, Hafiz usually uses the motif of Shiraz to convey the wonders of the city of Love.

“Shiraz is a treasury of ruby lips, a quarry of beauty.

Bankrupt jeweller that I am, it all makes me uneasy.

So many drunken eyes I've seen, by God, in this town,

I'm so filled with cheer that I've abandoned wine.  
The town abounds with coy coquettes in each of the six  
directions – I'm broke, or else I'd buy all six".<sup>2</sup>

This sentiment of allegory as superior to literalism, of “the gross as shadow of the subtle, that things are wise before they become foolish” in Yeats’ words, is well known amongst poets of east and west. Thus, as Francis Thompson put it in a poem entitled “The Heart”,

“...Our towns are copied fragments from our breast;  
And all man’s Babylons strive but to impart  
the grandeurs of his Babylonian heart.”<sup>3</sup>

But with Hafiz there is one supreme difference: his audience was highly educated, sophisticated and cultured. They knew Rumi, ‘Attar, ‘Iraqi, Sa‘di etc by heart. Many were poets themselves. All of them were at the very least familiar with, if not steeped in, Sufi terms, concepts and practice. According to Lewisohn, “most of the *ghazals* and *qasidas* written in the Age of Hafiz were composed within this grand intertextual tradition of classical Persian poetry, in which the ‘modern’ poets would attempt to outdo ‘classical’ poets by ‘replying to’ or ‘welcoming’ or ‘following’ their poems.”<sup>4</sup>

For example, Khwaju writes:

“If one is near the beloved, what difference if he be in heaven or hell?  
If prayer is out of need, what difference if it be in mosque or synagogue?”

Hafiz transformed this into:

“(Everyone in the end reaps what they have sown)  
Everyone, whether he be drunk or sober, seeks the beloved.  
Every place, whether it be mosque or synagogue, is the house of love.”

### **Hafiz**

So what do we know of the man himself? His name was Shams al-din Muhammad Shirazi, but he has always been known by his pen-name Hafiz. The connotations of this name are many: first of

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<sup>2</sup> Ghazal 329:5-6.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Yeats, *The Symbolism of Poetry* (1900).

<sup>4</sup> Leonard Lewisohn, ‘Hafiz in the Socio-historical, Literary and Mystical Milieu of Medieval Persia’, in *Hafiz and the Religion of Love in Classical Persian Poetry* (London, 2010), p. 12.

all, it suggests someone who preserves the Qur'an by committing it to memory – Hafiz himself was certainly well versed in the Qur'an, and would attend lessons at the mosque with his master, which started at dawn (after classes in theology).

“To rise at dawn and seek what's sound

and wholesome as Hafiz has done –

all I've done has come from the grace

and *embras de richesse* of the Qur'an”<sup>5</sup>

But Hāfiz is also a Divine Name, meaning the One who protects, guards, preserves, upholds, sustains, as well as a word that refers to human activities like being watchful, mindful, attentive, observing a covenant or oath etc. It therefore also suggests one who keeps the primordial covenant with his Lord – a theme that appears often in Hafiz's poems.

His father died when Hafiz was still a child, and he was brought up by his mother, receiving the best education available. We do not know when he started composing poetry, but he must have followed the fashionable career of writing panegyrics in praise of rulers and nobles, several of whom are mentioned in his *ghazals*. He appears to have also made a living as a professional copyist.

Hafiz evidently was well known internationally even in his lifetime: one contemporary, who was the first to compile his poems, states that “it took but a very short time for the literary empire over which his *ghazals* reigned to stretch from the outermost borders of Khurasan up into Turkistan and down into India. It took but a brief instant for the convoys of his enchanting speech to reach the outskirts of the lands of Iraq and Azerbaijan.”<sup>6</sup> After his death his poetry became rapidly recognised as a masterpiece, especially in Ottoman Turkey and Mughal India where it gave rise to commentaries, some mystical, some grammatical and sober: for example, the huge commentary written by ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Lahuri in ca. 1026/1617 (first published in 1995 in over 4,000 pages).

He was also challenging to the existing order: he describes himself as a ‘*rind*’, an almost impossible word to translate, variously rendered as ‘rogue’, ‘rake’, ‘scallywag’, ‘libertine’ or ‘free spirit’. It is a category beyond and opposed to conventional piety and asceticism and devotion: while some have understood it to mean one who advocates physical debauchery, others take it as a free-thinking, inspired libertine, or enlightened mystic (‘*ārif*’), one who may appear as anti-establishment in the way that the travelling qalandars did, or remain hidden. The closest in

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<sup>5</sup> Ghazal 312.

<sup>6</sup> Lewisohn, p. 13.

the Arab tradition is that of the *malāmatī*, ‘the person of blame’, who is the most advanced in spiritual realisation. Thus Hafiz is someone for whom being a ‘Sufi’ is nothing like enough: he often criticises them for false piety, for manifesting an ecstasy they do not really know or feel, and for failing to accept suffering and sorrow in the way of love (which for Hafiz is a sign of spiritual authenticity).

### **Hafiz’s language and imagery**

As we have mentioned, his language is colloquial, everyday Persian. This in part explains its enduring appeal, especially as the language of Hafiz is still close to modern Persian speech in a way that Shakespeare is not.

Like many poets before him, Hafiz used several metaphors of to convey profound truths.

**cup, wine and drunkenness:** being drunk is not simply about prohibition and transgression, but about the experience of ecstasy and union, an experience that is impossible to define or rationalise but an experience that is nonetheless infinitely real. “There is no pen with a tongue capable of expressing the mysteries of love”.<sup>7</sup> His poetry lies between concealment of a secret that cannot be spoken of and revealing indications of it to those prepared to hear it and understand. Yet he acknowledges that no human confidant will suffice: only the wind is his true confidant.

The cup of wine symbolises the inverted dome of heaven or the bowl of the firmament, but also alludes to the world of hidden mystery that cannot appear except in itself. “No-one knows the mysteries of the invisible world”. It is “Jamshid’s cup”, since Jamshid, a pre-Islamic king of ancient Persia, had a cup in which the secrets of the world could be seen: according to Shabistari, ‘Jamshid’s cup’ is a symbol of the one who knows himself, the perfected human being, that which resides within the heart of every human. The cup is both the mirror of heaven and the traces of mystery that are inscribed thereon. The cup of wine, therefore, initiates one into the mystery of ‘both worlds’<sup>8</sup> (now and the hereafter, earth and heaven). One must ‘drink two cups’<sup>9</sup>, i.e. the cup of action and the cup of reception, so that intoxication is redoubled in true remembrance.

The cup as mirror is an image of the human heart, the inmost consciousness. This needs to be purified by the sorrows of love – only sorrow can cleanse the heart of all regard and concern for the self. Then the wine within the cup of the heart, which is also the wine that the heart is

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<sup>7</sup> Ghazal 431:3

<sup>8</sup> Ghazal 479:2

<sup>9</sup> Ghazal 329:7

enamoured of, becomes clear and pure. Thus the human becomes in accord with the primordial Love that motivates all things, as in “I was a hidden treasure, and I loved to be known.”

“The cup is a mirror, in which, crystal-clear,  
you may gaze, o Sufi, and see therein  
the glow and sheen of the ruby wine.”<sup>10</sup>

Other imagery which Hafiz and Persian poets in general use:

**the face:** *face* signifies the reality of a thing, according to Ibn ‘Arabi, but the real Beauty of God cannot be described. So to describe the real Beloved we can only talk about His self-manifestations (*tajallī*) in the form of *tresses/curls*, which are curved because of their descending nature, like the spiral love of convolvulus (*‘ishq*), or *rosy cheeks*, which are coloured by the manifestation or by the viewer, red signifying love or the blood of lover. The *mole* signifies the dot or point of Unity, the centre of the circumference of Being. Then there are *kisses*, brief encounters where the gnostic meets his beloved face to face in the imaginal world, *union* and so on.

“... Wherever you see a veil,  
beneath that veil He hides...” (Jami)

**scent or perfume:** words are the scent of the muskdeer, which leads finally to the source of the fragrance; or they recall the scent of Joseph’s shirt, which brought his father Jacob glad tidings and cured his eyes, which had gone blind from weeping.

**Joseph** is the model of beauty, the one whose beauty so completely ravished the onlooking women that they forgot what they were doing and cut themselves with the knives they were holding.

the **Zoroastrian** or **Magian**, who is the keeper of the tavern, both literally since Muslims were not allowed to own a wineshop, and metaphorically as one whose art lies beyond the confines of conventional religion. The Magian elder is the leader of the Zoroastrians, a priest of the religion of light and darkness, of fire-worship, of monastic retreats far from cities and worldly concerns. His is a religion in which wine is not unlawful. He symbolises wisdom, ultimate knowledge, and the true source of inspiration.

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<sup>10</sup> Ghazal 7:2. The ruby comes from a coarse rock created by the transforming rays of the sun, just as the heart, through trials and tribulations, is transformed by love into something valuable: here it becomes the quality of love itself.

**A brief bibliography:**

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