

Awḥad al-dīn Kirmānī (1163-1238)

In the last two sessions we have looked at two major poets writing in the Persian language, Nizāmī and ‘Attar, who deserve a place on a course on Islamic Mystical Poetry the basis of their writing alone. In both cases, we know little of their actual spiritual lives and neither of them were Sufi shaykhs in the way we usually understand the term, i.e. a teacher with a group of disciples, although it is quite possible, and in the case of ‘Attar actually likely, that they were followers of the mystical path in the manner of the *malamiyya* or ‘people of blame’ whose way was to hide their spiritual achievements under the cloak of ordinariness. But in the last three sessions we will be looking at two men – Awḥad al-dīn Kirmānī and Muḥyī al-dīn Ibn ‘Arabī – who were primarily famous for their spiritual realisation, from which their poetry flowed as a secondary consequence. Although I think that a case could be made that Ibn ‘Arabī, who wrote in Arabic, would be considered an important poet on purely literary considerations, it seems fairly widely agreed that Kirmānī, who wrote in Persian and therefore has much more competition, would not on the whole, and he is important primarily because of the ideas he expresses and the depths of his spiritual experience, and also the insight they give into the Sufi path as it was conceived by an important section of the Sufi community in the 13th century.

He is also famous as a practitioner of the quatrain, or *rubā‘i* form, leaving behind him some 1700 verses which constitute his written heritage; unlike many other Sufi masters of his day who wrote metaphysical expositions or books of advice for their students, Kirmānī seems to have poured both his experience and his wisdom into these terse little poems, which are the shortest possible verse form in the Persian tradition. Thus in this session, having briefly considered in the last two sessions the development of the longest form in the Persian tradition, the *masnavī*, today we return to a more traditional way in which mystical insight was expressed, made famous as we saw in our last course by Abu Sa‘īd b. Abī al-Khayr (d.1049).

Biography

Awḥad al-dīn (ca.1164-1238) was from Kirmān in present-day Iran, but he left his birthplace when he was about 16 and travelled to Baghdad where he became a disciple of Shaykh Rukn al-dīn Sijāsī (n.d.) who traced his spiritual lineage through Quṭb al-dīn Abharī and Abū Najīb Suhrawardī (d. 1168) (the uncle of Abū Hafṣ al-Suhrawardī, the founder of the Suhrawardī order), who in turn traced their lineage

back to Aḥmad al-Ghazālī (d. 1126, the brother of the famous philosopher/theologian), who was famous for established the ‘path of passionate love’. Awhād al-dīn travelled widely in the central lands of Islam, living in Tabriz, now in Iran but then I think in Azerbaijan, Nizāmī’s homeland; in Anatolia where he lived in Konya and Kayseri, and also in Aleppo and Damascus which were the centres of the Ayyubid dynasty which was ruling in this region. At the end of his life, he returned to Baghdād and was honoured by the ‘Abbasid Caliph al-Mustansir who appointed him shaykh of the Marzubāniyya ribāt (tariqa), where he became a venerated teacher with a very large number of disciples, dying as a much-loved and respected man in 1238. Bernard Weischer and Lamborn Wilson, whose biography and translation I am relying upon, say that:

“[He] seems to have been the very prototype of a teaching Sufi master, with great experience of the Path and its pitfalls and potential. Many stories reveal him as a guide who warns, helps or comforts his disciples through charismatic signs ([miraculous powers such as] ...clairvoyance and bilocation, etc). Asked the number of his disciples, Awhād al-dīn replied: “They number 70,000. Of these, 3,000 are close to the Path, and every night I must read to each of them the Invocation”, which seems to imply a miraculous power of contracting space and time, and demonstrates the master’s individual care for his students.”¹

However, he was also a very controversial figure, as we shall see in a moment. Before that, we should say something about the area of southern Turkey, particularly the city of Konya, which became a great centre of spirituality and learning at this time, the 13th century. Anatolia was newly conquered territory for Islam, being even at this period largely Christian in the general population, and it developed a very distinct and creative new culture under the rulership of the Seljuks. Kirmānī was part of a circle of people who were centred in this area, and who were extremely important for the development of poetic expression from this point on. Foremost of them was Ibn ‘Arabī, who lived most of the second half of his life in Anatolia and Damascus, who was his close friend. In fact, Ibn ‘Arabī entrusted the final stages of the education of his stepson and spiritual heir, Šādr al-dīn al-Qūnawī, to Kirmānī and they travelled to Shiraz together. So Kirmani knew all those in Ibn ‘Arabī’s circle, such as the poet al-Tilimsānī. He also knew Shams-i Tabrizī, Rūmī’s teacher, who was a fellow a pupil of Sijasī, and he probably knew Rūmī himself. Also associated

¹ *Heart’s Witness*, translated by Bernard Weischer and Peter Lamborn Wilson, Imperial Academy of Iranian Philosophy, Tehran, 1978. P.2

with this circle are Fakhr al-dīn ‘Irāqī, who studied with al-Qūnawī and whose ‘Divine Flashes’ are some of the most famous mystical verses of the Persian tradition, and Ibn al-Fāriḍ, who wrote some of the greatest mystical verses in the Arabic language. Both of these we will study on the next course. So this is a very important *milieu*, which was highly influential in all sorts of ways upon the way that Islam developed in the wake of the Mongol invasions which brought about the sack of Baghdad only 20 years after Kirmānī’s death. One of the reasons for the cultural flowering in this place was that it became a melting pot of people converging from different parts of the Islamic world – people like Ibn ‘Arabī from the West in the wake of the Frankish invasions of Spain, and people like Rūmī and Kirmānī from the East fleeing from the Mongol incursions.

One of the characteristics of this circle in a spiritual sense, was that it emphasised the path of love, some people say, the path of ‘passionate love’. And in particular, it embraced the principle that the world is a mirror to the Divine – in Ibn ‘Arabī’s terminology, one would say that the world is the place where the Divine attributes of God are manifested in the same way that an image of the person is manifested in a mirror. The world is seen not as separate from God, or in opposition to Him, but on the contrary, the place where His attributes of Beauty can be witnessed. From this follows the possibility of coming to witness the Beauty of God through the contemplation of the forms in which He manifests. And the greatest of these, the most beautiful and perfect, is the human form. We have already seen this principle expressed in Nizāmī, where he has God telling Majnūn:

*“Oh lost man,
With Leila’s love I have your heart filled;
The beauty of Leila that you see
Is just another reflection of Me”.*

Here it becomes explicit that the beauty that we see in things which have form, and which causes us to fall in love with them, is essentially the Beauty of God. And the man of knowledge, the mystic who has penetrated beyond the outer form to understand the inner meaning of it, can actually witness this; i.e. he can witness that which is infinite and unbound within the confines of that which is to the common eye finite and limited. Thus we find in Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Tarjumān al-ashwāq*, a case where he saw the Divine Feminine manifested in the form of the young girl Nizam whom he met at the house of her father in Mecca.

Within the Persian tradition of Ghazālī, of which both Kirmānī and Fakhr al-dīn ‘Irāqī were inheritors, this principle was raised to the level of a formalised practice called *shahid bazi*, which involved contemplation of beautiful human faces, usually young, beardless boys, and this was often accompanied, or took place at, gatherings called *samā’* where music and dancing were used to bring the participants to a state of ecstasy. And both of these practices were quite controversial even within the Sufi community, with people taking up different positions upon their use. Thus there are passages within Ibn ‘Arabī’s work where he criticises the practice of *sama’* and points out its dangers to those on the Way. Kirmānī became well known for developing his own version of *shahid bazi*, and this attracted comment from several well-known figures of his time. I think it has to be said that whilst it is obviously a practice that could in certain circumstances be open to misunderstanding or even abuse, there seems to be absolutely no evidence that there was any sexual component to the way it was undertaken in this circle – in fact it is explicitly emphasised that it was a purely spiritual practice, just as Ibn ‘Arabī was later to emphasise, when the *Tarjumān* became a subject of discussion, the purity of Nizām’s state and his love for her.

What is interesting here is not the question of what are or are not acceptable practices, but the whole matter of contemplation and form, which is totally relevant to our understanding of the poetry. There is a famous incident recorded by later commentators between Shams-i Tabrīz and Kirmānī when Shams asked him one day: “What are you doing?” and Kirmānī replied: “I am gazing at the moon in a basin of water”. To which Shams said: “If you don’t have an abscess on the back of your neck, why don’t you simply look at the moon in its sky?”. This is often interpreted by modern commentators, including Weischler and Lamborn Wilson, to be a condemnation of Kirmānī’s practice, but it can also be interpreted in a more general way, as a discussion about a very real issue upon the spiritual path, i.e. is it actually possible to contemplate God without form? And if not, what is the relationship of the outer form which is witnessed by the eye and the inner form which can be witnessed only the heart? Those of Kirmānī’s persuasion would say that in fact as long as we are embodied ourselves, we will necessarily be limited to contemplating form, and there are passages in Ibn ‘Arabī which would support this. So we have this quatrain:

While my eye looks
with the heart’s eye

by him at all, and there has been some confusion in particular with another poet who was highly influenced by him and adopted his name, Awḥad al-dīn Awḥadī of Marāgha (d.1337).

As a form, the quatrain was probably pre-Islamic, and there is even some controversy about whether it was originally a Turkish poetic form rather than a Persian. However, we will stick with the Persian Islamic tradition today, in which it is maintained that it was invented by the Rūdakī (10th century) who is said to have based it on a phrase he heard a child shouting out which had a new fresh rhythm to his ears, so it is called *tarāna* i.e. young and fine, because a good quatrain is both musical and refreshing or spirited. It was developed into a form for mystical expression by the Khurasānī mystic Abū Sa‘īd b. Abī al-Khayr and used by many of the major poets of the Persian tradition. The form is of four lines, or two lines of two hemstitches, and it has a usual rhyme form a/a/b/a, although many of Kirmānī’s are actually monorhymes, ie a/a/a/a. There is a 13-syllable rhythm structure on the pattern of

-- u u -- u u -- u u --

although two short syllables are sometime replaced by one long one which gives the form a lot of flexibility. It also has a meaning structure; namely

Introduction (the first two lines)

Surprising new motif (third line with a different rhyme)

Return to theme (last line)

I don’t know how much one can actually see this in Kirmānī’s poems, especially as Weischler and Lamborn Wilson have chosen not to follow either the rhythm or the rhyme in their translations, but have concentrated upon the meaning. But it is something to bear in mind when reading them.

Just a final couple of quotes about the nature of this form in capturing mystical experience. This is a quote from ‘Attar, which is from Brujin, so some of you may have read it already but for those who have not, it goes as follows:

“These verses are the result of experiences; there is nothing artificial about them and they are free from any pretence. I wrote them down as they came to me and

entered my blood. If one day actual experience gets your soul in its grip and if you, for some nights, have been submerged in confusion, then you will know from which nest these tender nightingales and these sweet-talking parrots fly: “who did not taste it, will never know”.”⁵

Thus there is a kind of intrinsic ecstatic element to the form when it is bent to the purposes of the mystical tradition because it is the expression of a “moment”. Junayd called it “the discourse of lovers and madmen” and he said that the gatherings at which these short verses were recited, *samā‘ al-rubā‘iyāt*, were “suitable only for strong experienced men.”⁶ So we had better be careful in reading these this evening!

Poems for Discussion

Weischer and Lamborn Wilson arrange the poems in their selection into 13 sections, which they have conceived of as a kind of ‘path’, reflecting the passage of the Sufi from an initial state of repentance to the state of ecstatic union with the Beloved. I thought this was quite an interesting way of doing it, but that 13 stages would be too much for us. So instead I have given four groups and given each three poems to consider on a theme (see the attached sheet).

Jane Clark 28/10/2012

⁵ *Persian Sufi Poetry* by J T P Brujin, Routledge/Curzon, London 1997, p. 21

⁶ EI2 *Rubā‘ī*