

Mystical Islamic Poetry 5: Week 1

General Introduction

In this course, which covers the late 13th and 14th centuries, up until the death of Hafiz in 1390, we enter into what is often called the post-Mongol period. In this, after the major disruptions of the invasions which resulted in the sacking of Baghdad in 1258, the Islamic world settled back into a normal kind of life. In regions where the Mongols had been turned back, there arose new dynasties; in Syria and Egypt, this was the era of Mamlūk's, and in India, of the Delhi Sultanate, whilst in Turkey, this period saw the rise of the Ottomans, who would eventually go on to conquer a huge swathe of territory from Europe to the Balkans in an empire which survived into the 20th century. In the regions where the Mongols had prevailed, which was most of the territory between Egypt and India, Mongol overlords became established as rulers in various dynasties. Rather than bringing about radical change, however, they were absorbed; slowly they converted to Islam and many, if not most, existing customs continued much as before. In fact, the new Mongol rulers proved themselves to be religiously tolerant and actively supportive of cultural activities, inviting scientists, philosophers, poets and religious thinkers to their courts.

There was therefore substantial continuity in intellectual and cultural life, to the extent that this period is usually depicted as one of conservatism across the board; economic, political and cultural.¹ The major forms of cultural expression in literature and poetry, and the forms of intellectual discourse in philosophy, law and Sufism had been set by this stage, and the task was to establish and perfect them. In poetry, these forms included the *ghazal* – the short love poem – and the quatrain – the four line epigram, the *rubā'ī* – and the long poetic form *mathnawī* – a form in which the rhyme changes every two hemstichs – with a variety of rhythms. Poets of this period looked back to their illustrious forebears in choosing their forms; 'Attar, Rūmī, Sa'dī, Nizāmī, etc.

Some changes did take place, however, which concern us on this course. For one thing, the balance of power within the Empire was changing, beginning to move away from the old centres of power in Cairo and Baghdad and towards the new territories of

¹ Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*. Volume 2, Book 4, *Crisis and Renewal; the Age of Mongol Prestige*. University of Chicago Press, 1974.

Turkey, Iran and India. Thus, two of our four poets this time come from these new Islamic lands; Hacı Bayram (d.1352) from Ankara in central Turkey, and Amir Khusraw (d.1325) from Delhi, whilst Shabistari (d. 1340), whom we will study today, came from the area of Tabriz, then in Azerbaijan and now in Iran, which had a long tradition of poets, including the great Nizāmī al-Ganja, and Hafiz (d.1390), considered by many to be the greatest Persian poet of all, came from Shirāz, which had long been a centre for both mysticism and poetry, home of Sa‘dī (d. 1292) whom we studied at the end of the last course.

None of these people were writing in Arabic; Persian at this point was the dominant language both in political life (the Seljuk and early Ottoman courts spoke Persian, as did those of the Delhi sultanate) and in cultural life, with new vernacular languages beginning to emerge. Amir Khusraw, for instance, wrote in both Persian and his native Hindustāni. We studied Yunus Emre (d. 1321) two courses ago, but actually he should have been in this period. He was really first poet who wrote in vernacular Turkish rather than Persian.

Secondly, this was the period when Sufism in both a practical sense – in the sense of having a cultural presence on the street– and in an intellectual sense, really became the dominant force within Islam. This had been happening before, particularly during the time of the Mongol invasions when, as we saw when we studied Sa‘dī, the Sufi orders provided a source of stability and comfort in a world which was literally falling apart for many people. Under Mongol rulership it received a further boost. The Mongols were originally Buddhists, and they brought along with them a host of Buddhist advisors who were present in their courts. The Mongols were very even-handed and tolerant in their approach to other religions; they used Christian auxiliaries in their armies and employed Jewish administrators, etc. They had no particular attachment to Islam, and although they were eager to integrate with their Muslim subjects, they were nevertheless not particularly keen on the legal and religious side of Islam, which tended towards exclusivity. They much preferred to interact with followers of Sufism, who on the whole shared their attitudes of religious tolerance and open-mindedness. When they chose to convert, for instance, they often did so under the supervision of a Sufi master, rather than an *imām*. Thus these new regimes tended to actively encourage the propagation of Sufi ideas and values.

And the same was true of the Ottomans, who from the very beginning, with Uthmān himself, regarded themselves as coming under the spiritual influence of Ibn ‘Arabī, and his followers were given prominent positions in the administration of the new territories which they conquered. This was something rather new within the Islamic world. At the forefront of this intellectual expansion of Sufi ideas and perspective, were the writings of Ibn ‘Arabī and Rūmī, which, by the end of the 14th century, had become known and studied in every corner of the Islamic world. Thus it has been said that:

“The philosophical mysticism of Ibn ‘Arabī and poetical mysticism of Rūmī are but two different genres used by 13th century Sufism to effect a spiritual reanimation of Islam that would be the literary counterparts to the eruption of the Sufi orders all over the Islamic world. All of these literary works and the new Sufi brotherhoods together constitute a spiritual revival more analytical, much more discursive, much more openly esoteric and spiritual and philosophical or theosophical than we see in former times...”²

Shabistārī

This leads us very naturally into our poet of the week, Maḥmūd b. ‘Abd al-Kerīm b. Yaḥyā Shabistārī, whose very famous poem *Gulshan-i rāz* – The Rose garden of Mystery – is kind of poetic summary of Ibn ‘Arabī’s metaphysics. Shabistārī was a prominent religious scholar in Tabriz, and a member of a Sufi order – probably one of the branches of the Kubrawiyya. It is said that one day a letter was sent from one of the great Sufis in Khurāsān, Rukn al-dīn Amīr Ḥusaynī Harawī (d. 718/1318) to the Sufis of Tabriz, questioning them, in verse, on a number of difficult points of mystical doctrine. This was not, Lenny Lewisohn points out, an aggressive act, but was one of the ways that people introduced themselves in those days, and in those circles. The Tabrizī Sufis were all sitting together in a circle when the letter arrived, and they nominated Shabistārī to answer it, which he did, also in rhyme – although in his own account of the event, he claims that he had never uttered a line of poetry before, and did it under the influence of an ecstatic state. Later, one of the brotherhood asked him to expand on his answers, and this became the *Gulshan-i-rāz*. It consists of about 1,000 verses in *mathnawī* form, and is organised around the original questions, which

² Victor Danner, quoted in Lenny Lewisohn, *Beyond Faith and Infidelity: The Sufi Poetry and Teachings of Mahmud Shabistari*, London, 1995, p. 105

were 17, although the versions that we have in English seem to have only 15. The book was completed in a period of about month in 1317-8. One of the things that is emphasised about Shabistarī is, that he wrote always under the power of inspiration. Lenny Lewisohn says of him:

The unique element of Shabistarī's *Gulshan* is the extent of its ecstatic, selfless – yet extremely learned – inspiration, an inspiration which stems from the poet's spiritual depths rather than from his own personal genius or muse. It is given rather than made, the utterance of the race rather than of the individual poet.³

Very little is known about Shabistarī's life. He was born and died in the vicinity of Tabriz, and his tomb at Shabistar, now in Iran, has become a famous place of pilgrimage. He was buried at the feet of one of his Sufi masters, Bahā al-dīn Ya'kūb (d. 1336). His date of birth is not known exactly, but it seems to be widely accepted that he died in about 1340. At some point in his life he went travelling, as he relates that he spent many years studying "the science of Divine Unity in Egypt, Turkey and Arabia"; he might also have visited Kirmān. It was during this period, we assume, that he became a student of Ibn 'Arabī; he was particularly steeped in the study of his two major works, the *Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* and *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*.

He wrote other works – one later entitled *The Book of Felicity* (*sa'da nāma*) which is even long than *Gulshan*, also in *mathnawi* style, which is on mystical theology. In this, he expresses some concerns about the orthodoxy of Ibn 'Arabī's ideas which are completely absent from *Gulshan*; Lenny Lewisohn suggests, rather cynically I think, that this might have been because there was a change of ruler in Tabriz and the new guy was not so keen on him. There is also an earlier prose work called *Haqq al-yaqīn*. But neither of these has received the same degree of attention as *Gulshān*, which quickly became immensely popular. By the middle of the 16th century, nearly 30 major commentaries had been written on it. Those who have been on these course before will know that this practice of writing metaphysical commentaries upon mystical poems, and *vice versa*, is a particular feature of the tradition associated with Ibn 'Arabī. Here, in this classical period where, as I said above, the literary forms were well established, one sees the full flowering of this literary genre; the poem was originally inspired by Ibn 'Arabī's metaphysical vision, and then itself became the

³ Lenny Lewisohn, *Beyond Faith and Infidelity: The Sufi Poetry and Teachings of Mahmud Shabistari*, London, 199. p.16

subject of many metaphysical commentaries, and so the tradition proliferated. The most famous of these commentaries is by Shams al-dīn al-Lāhijī, written 1472, who is widely regarded as having written it from the same elevated degree from which it was originally composed. Here one has a great mystical thinker writing on the work of another great mystical thinker to produce something of great value.

Gulshān has also been translated many times into European languages; into French as early as 1821 and into German in 1825, and into English by Whinfield in 1880. We are going to be using the translation by Robert Darr which came out only in 2007.⁴ Darr has a good understanding of the meaning of the poems, and aims to bring this out; he does not attempt to put them into rhyme or keep a consistent rhythm, although he does keep the basic structure of the *mathnawī* form. He also includes some very useful and well-informed notes, so this is a book well worth buying. He gives very little background information, but for this there is a good study of Shabistarī's life and work, and of his metaphysics, by Lenny Lewisohn called "Beyond Faith and Infidelity in Islam"⁵ which I would highly recommend. This contains substantial passages of translation from Lāhijī.

Before we look for ourselves at the poetry; just to say a couple of words about the content of *Gulshan*. It is divided into 15 'inquiries' which are in the form of rhyming couplets. In answer to these, Shabistarī gives three different types of answers. There is an initial, fairly short, reply; there can be a theoretical explanation, and/or there can be an illustration, or several illustrations, which give examples of the point.

The book begins with the question:

First of all, I am perplexed by my own thoughts.

What is it that is referred to as 'reflection'?

which will look the answer to this in a moment. The other inquiries cover a wide range of topics, including (9th enquiry)

Why is it said that the human creature reaches union?

How does his spiritual journeying reach its aim?

⁴ Shabistarī, *Garden of Mystery*, trans. Robert Abdul Hayy Darr, Cambridge, 2007.

⁵ Leonard Lewisohn, *Beyond Faith and Infidelity: The Sufi Poetry and Teachings of Mahmud Shabistari*, London, 1995.

(11th enquiry):

What is the part that exceeds the whole?

What is the Way to discovering that part?

And (15th enquiry)

In this alley-way, the idol, Christian belt and Christianity

Are infidelity – or if not, say then what they are?

This last is interesting, because Shabistari's reply is not what you might expect; he says:

I have seen that Christianity's aim is real detachment.

I've seen it as a breaking of the bonds of imitation...

This opens up a very interesting discussion on what Shabistarī means by 'infidelity', which Lenny Lewisohn has rightly identified, in evoking this in the title of his study, as one of the most original of Shabistarī's ideas. There is also something very interesting about Shabistarī's relationship with Christianity, and he notes both the religious tolerance of the Mongol regimes, where all the different faiths really were respected; and also, the particular nature of Tabriz, where there were a lot of Christians at this time; the city was full of churches. The final section of the poem is actually entitled: *The Symbolism of the Idol and the Christian Youth*, where the image of the Christian youth is the Spirit itself which enlivens everything.

This idol of a Christian Youth is a manifest light,

A light that shines in the faces of these idols

He is in the service of all hearts that he enthrals.

970

Sometimes he's a minstrel, sometimes a cupbearer.

What a minstrel, who with just one lovely tune

Sets fire to the proud harvest of a hundred ascetics.

What a cup-bearer, who with just one overflowing cup

Renders senseless two hundred sages of seventy years...

Jane Clark, January 2014

