

Mystical Islamic Poetry Week 4

‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nabulusi

Poem 1: The Face of My Beloved¹

The face of my beloved revealed itself
and that is all that I seek.
Oh fire of my enemy, melt away.
What I am experiencing² is beyond your reach.

The beauty of the one who is graceful and brilliant,
the loveliness of the one who is delicate and resplendent,
Has worn my patience thin
and I would die in her.

We saw her light rising
and we became her flashing lighting (*barqihī abraq*).³
There is no Najd and no Abraq,⁴
only the jug (*abrīq*) and the cup.

The wine has been served to us
and our minds are bewildered by it.
The birds of passion (*hawā*) have taken to the air⁵
harmoniously, full of grace.

¹ *Diwān al-Haqā’iq*, Bulaq, 1889, p. 51-2. Poems 1-3 translated by Jane Clark and Ahmad Sukkar. Please note that these are provisional translations which will no doubt evolve as our understanding of al-Nabulusi’s poetic style evolves. Thanks to Rahim Hassan ad Nadia Jamil for their help and comments.

² Literally: *shurbī* = my drinking

³ There is a problem with this line. The obvious reading of the verb in the second verse is as *kunnā* (from the root *k-w-n* = to be), meaning: “We became her flashing lightning”, which has a comprehensible meaning in terms of *waḥdāt al-wujūd*. However, there is an argument against this reading in the context. This is because there is a well-established *topos* within the Islamic tradition of the rising of the dawn light being associated with a flash of lightning, which is in turn is associated with the promise of rain or, in mystical poetry, wine, which is different kind of moisture. Therefore one would expect something directly linking the *motif* of lightning with the wine of the next verses. But there is no obvious reading of the verb in this sense. Alternatives would be to read the verb as deriving from the root *k-y-n* = to submit, to humble oneself; “we submitted to her flashing lightning” (but strictly speaking, the preposition *lī* should be present); or from the root *f-k-k* = it break open or split, in which case it would mean: “her flashing lightning broke us open, or split us asunder”. To finalise the translation, it would be desirable to consult the original manuscripts to be certain that no mistake has been made in the printed version of the verb.

⁴ In these two lines, al-Nabulusi is playing on/punning the different meanings of words derived from the root *b-r-q* = to shine, flash. Again, there are alternative translations possible. Because of their juxtaposition to each other, and to the *motif* of the lighting flash, we have felt that *najd* and *abraq* are reference to places in the mythic language of classical Arabic poetry and in particular to Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Tarjumān al-ashwāq*. *Najd* is both a place, and a general name for a highland; it is a place of aspiration, of nostalgic longing, from which come the winds carrying news of the beloved. (See Ibn ‘Arabī, *Tarjumān al-ashwāq*, trans. R A Nicholson (London, 1911/78, pp. 58, 121, 122, 143, 144).) *Abraq* is a mountainside or a sand-dune, and is usually used as part of a place-name; eg the ancient city of Tell Abraq near the Persian Gulf. (See *Tarjumān*, pp. 76-77.)

⁵ *Hawā*: means both passion and air, so there is a depth of association here.

The beauty of creation (*malīḥ al-kawn*) has come to dwell with us,
and loveliness has increased its beneficence.
Joseph's life has been preserved,
bringing consolation to the eyes of Jacob.⁶

May the blessings of our Lord, the guide (*al-hādī*),
be upon the one who ennobles the valley.⁷
For him, 'Abd al-Ghanī is the camel-driver (*al-ḥādī*)
through the passion (*'ishq*) by which he is bound.⁸

⁶ A reference to the Prophet Joseph, who was characterised by beauty, to the extent that one could talk about him as the representative of the beauty of all humanity. The reference to Jacob, his father, is because in the Qur'ān he is described as going blind from weeping after Joseph disappeared.

⁷ In poetry, *wādī* = valley, is often a reference to Mecca, which lies in a valley. This line is therefore a reference to the Prophet Muhammed.

⁸ For al-Nabalusi, as for Ibn 'Arabī, there are various kinds of love. The word used here, *'ishq*, deriving from the root *'-sh-q*, with meanings of fitting together or dove-tailing, is the kind of love in which the lover and the beloved are inter-twined. Hence the meaning here would seem to indicated the strong bond between the poet and the Prophet.

Poem 2: He is One⁹

He is one, and everything is one in Him.

Love (*ḥubb*) of Laylā and longing (*ḥanīn*) for the homeland,¹⁰

Passion (*hawā*) for a glance from a beautiful eye,

and desire (*ghārim*) for that which is beneath the dome (*qubiyyi*),¹¹

For Hayfā',¹² who is like the rising moon,

and the sweet swaying form of a gazelle –

These are names which are used by others,

but the one who is named, whom they cannot grasp, is with me.

The loved one is looking out from her window (*tāqā*),

and we have no power (*tāqā*) in that deep abyss (*hūwiya*).

He banishes patience and invites desire (*shawq*)

when He seizes the heart, causing tears to fall from my eyes;

If He appears in the heart, we perish (*fanīnā*),

and if He disappears, we survive (*baqīnā*). Oh brother!

He is near, and He is far from the realm of creation,

but He is also in-between.

In our Mecca, He is our Ka'ba,

and through Him, the body is an entrance and an exit.¹³

Do not think that we are within Him, nor that He is within us;

it is ignorance to think like this.

All understanding comes from us, and all these

meanings are just a shadow cast by the sun of the Self.

⁹ *Diwān al-Haqā'iq, Bulaq*, 1889, p. 442 (vv. 17–28).

¹⁰ Note here that al-Nabulusi uses many different words for love, each of which, within his metaphysics, has a different characteristic.

¹¹ It is unclear exactly what this refers to; in general, the meaning is of something hidden from view, a hidden treasure. It could, for instance, be a way of referring to the *howdah*, within which women travelled in seclusion.

¹² Hayfā'; a common way of referring to the female beloved in Arabic poetry.

¹³ Literally, “the body is Kada' and Kudī” which are two gateways into the city of Mecca. One is high and one low, connected respectively with the Prophet's entrance to Mecca and his departure for doing pilgrimage.

Poem 3: O You the beauty of existence¹⁴

Oh You beauty of existence (*jamāl al-wujūd*), it is a consolation to witness you, whilst others sleep.

My eyes see only you, and in my heart there is no-one else.

I dissolve in you, I belong only to you; like all mortals, I am completely in your hands.
The suffering of love for you throws me into extreme confusion.

You are in my heart (*muhja*) and between my ribs, with a passion that does not perish.
Oh my beloved, I hope you will continue to come to me.

Everything is non-existent; I have a long-standing connection to this,
and there is no force that could make me separate from you...

Poem 4: I am the substance¹⁵

I am the substance, diffused without a diffusion,
I appear and disappear in all the truths.

I am the centre of all turnings, for to my way
returns all the order of all the other ways.

I am the outward, known in every status;
I am the inward, concealed amongst the creatures.

I am; the Pole is my doorkeeper. I am: the Sustainer is my servant.
I am: the individual fears entering my straits.

I am the light, the light of the eye; from me are constituted
all creatures, be they the longing or the longed for.

I am knowledge, the knowledge of the Real in every being;
none understands my words except those who are able to taste.

¹⁴ *Diwān al-Haqā'iq*, Bulaq, 1889, p. 442 (vv. 17–28).

¹⁵ *Diwān*, Beirut, Dar al-Jil, 1986, p. 343. Translator Samer Akkach, in *'Abd al-Ghanī al-Nabulusi*, OneWorld, 2007.

Poem 5: The Truth has Appeared.¹⁶

The truth has appeared through her concealments,
with an intimacy after long estrangement.

And she smiled in the face of her passionate lover,
who was enraptured with the intensity of her revealment.

Concealed, yet not concealed, revealed, yet not
revealed,
a concealment inherent in her revealment.

A veiling without veiling, and an unveiling without
unveiling,
among those preoccupied with her engagements.¹⁷

Whoever says: who is she? I say: who is she? just like
him,
a saying that makes me realize the imminence of her
announcements.¹⁸

With her the One with the veils glitters with beauty,
in transcendence, residing in her lofty palaces.

She restricts her beauties for the eyes of her passionate
lovers,
so that her spectators always long for her own spectacle.¹⁹

¹⁶ *Diwān*, Beirut, Dar al-Jil, 1986, p. 254-55. Translator Samer Akkach, in ‘The Poetics of Concealment: al-Nabulusi’s encounter with the Dome of the Rock’.

¹⁷ *Ahl umūrihā* could also be translated as “people of her affairs”, “the people who are concerned with her”. Akkach is trying to keep a rhyme with ‘revealment’ ‘concealment’.

¹⁸ Again, Akkach is trying to keep a rhyme with ‘concealment’ etc. An alternative translation would be ‘her appearance’.

¹⁹ A more obvious translation would be: “so that those who see her always long for her appearance”.

Poem 6: Be Gentle with the branches²⁰

Be gentle with the branches of the Ruba, O breeze,
because it is by passionate longing they are swaying.

Your wine has gone through them to intoxication,
so that they began bending their straight figures.

We were in an intimate gathering place,
whose air was freshened by delicious fragrances.

The water was flowing up and down,
in a pool, spreading and throwing ordered pearls.

Rods of glass bent by a hand,
made of pipes for the breeze to strike.

Underneath us was a brook of running water
Flowing like a sharp-cutting sword...

What a day it was for us there, so delightful,
in a gathering place like the gardens of paradise.

²⁰ *Burj Babel*, Damascus, Dar al-Ma‘arifa, 1988. p. 121-22. Translator Samer Akkach, in ‘The Wine of Babel: Landscape, Gender and Poetry in Early Modern Damascus’, *Lonaard Magazine*, 7/2, 2012, pp. 76-90.