

**Shaikh Galib / Şeyh Galıp 1757–1799**

Galib (Galıp) was born into a Mevlevi family with important connections to prominent Sufi artists and intellectuals: his grandfather's Mevlevi teacher (Peçevi Arifi Ahmed, d. 1724) had translated into Turkish an Arabic treatise on Mevlevi rule and custom by 'Abd al-Ghani al-Nabulusi (d. 1731); his father was a khalifa (*halife*) at the Yenikapı tekke (Sufi lodge) in Istanbul. He clearly grew up imbued with Mevlevi training, and was especially fond of Rumi's poetry. After completing his own *mesnevi* poem *Beauty and Love* in 1782 at the age of 25, Galib ran away to Konya to present himself directly to the head of the Mevlevi order, the Konya Çelebi who presided at Rumi's tomb, but was then obliged to return to Istanbul to complete his 1001-day training.

In 1791, nine years after composing *Beauty and Love*, he was appointed shaykh (*şeyh*) of the major Mevlevi centre in Istanbul, the Kulekapı Mevlevihane at Galata. He was almost the same age as Sultan Selim III, with whom he was close friends, and for whom he served, at least formally, as Mevlevi shaykh. Selim was a poet and composer as well as a political visionary who lay the groundwork for the 19th-century state reforms known as the Tanzimat. Through his *Divan* and his masterwork *Hüsn ü Aşk*, Galib has become known as the last great classical Turkish mystical poet.

He died at the age of 42, and was buried in the Galata Mevlevihane.

**Beauty and Love**

“The greatest Turkish romance”, this is how the modern Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk describes Galib's most famous work, *Hüsn ü Aşk*. According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, “these poems illustrate his preoccupation with mystical religious themes and are characterized by highly symbolic language and complex conceits and wordplay. Thus his work is often inaccessible to the average reader”...! However, we have the advantage of the wonderful modern translation by Victoria Holbrook in English, *Beauty and Love*, and her penetrating study of Ottoman poetics entitled *The Unreadable Shores of Love*.

*Hüsn ü Aşk* is in the form of a *mesnevi* (mathnawī), i.e. a narrative poem in rhyming couplets. The tale of *Beauty and Love* is framed or interspersed with prefatory sections (the first 240 lines), an expository section titled “A Digression” (which discusses poetry, its audience, the necessity of poetry and so on), and a brief epilogue. It owes a great deal to Rumi's Mathnawī, both in content and style.

First of all a word about the original title: Beauty (T. *hüsn* = Ar. *ḥusn*) is a loaded word in the original, evoking the Most Beautiful Names of God, *al-asmā' al-ḥusnā*, the Names which are the contents of the Absolute Unity and which God desired to see manifested. Love, on the other hand, (T. *aşk* = Ar. *'ishq*) is a particularly powerful kind of love, a fervent, passionate, excessive, sheer form of love, where the lover spirals around and clings tightly to the beloved, like convolvulus or ivy clinging to a tree. It is understood to be a special form of love (*muhabbet / muḥabba*), one that depicts the mystical quest in particular. These terms would have been familiar to Galib's Ottoman readers, with all the allusions to Sufi thought that they contain.

The tale itself is full of stunning imagery and has a fast-moving plot. The basic story is that amongst a tribe known as the Sons of Love (*Beni Muhabbet*), the girl Beauty and the boy Love are betrothed to each other as children. They go to the school of right conduct (*mekteb-i edeb*) to study under Professor Madness (*Molla-yi Cünüñ*), who is a sage, the perfect shaykh. Then Beauty breaks all the customs of the tribe and falls in love with Love (this is like the arc of descent, in which Beauty descends to display Herself in all Her Names, seeking Love's desire and playing the role of the lover). They go out into the Pleasure Place of Meaning, where they meet Poetry, an ancient sage who acts a go-between. Then a noble of the tribe called Dazzle (*Hayret*) forbids them to see each other; they exchange letters instead of meeting. Beauty is advised by her nurse Purity/Modesty that Love will not be happy to see her in the role that really belongs to him – so Beauty pretends not to be interested in him, whereupon because of the separation Love immediately falls head over heels in love with her and asks the tribal elders for her hand.

Love is then forced to undergo a terrifying journey with all its trials to prove himself worthy, a journey of ascent where Love seeks to return to his eternal residence. Imagining that Beauty is inaccessible and far away, Love's quest involves suffering until he loses all his self-pretension. Along the way he meets a whole host of characters, such as Rivalry who becomes his companion, a witch who puts a spell on him and crucifies him, a sword called Ah!, a horse called Sorrel Rose, as well as forms that Poetry takes such as a parrot and a pheasant and a nightingale... It is a journey that goes from the depths of a dark well to the high turrets of the Fortress of Form, until finally he reaches the Fortress or Castle of the Heart, where he realises his own and Beauty's true nature.

The poem is in many ways an extended meditation on the nature of Beauty and Love, and human aspiration and realisation. It is firmly situated within a Sufi view of the world as a theatre of Divine self-manifestation. In this it is markedly different from the European Romantic views of love and beauty: for example, Keats' poem *Ode on a Grecian Urn* (written in 1819, over 35 years after Galib's *mesnevi*) has echoes of the same sentiments about the qualities of love –

Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,

Though winning near the goal – yet, do not grieve;  
 She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,  
 For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair! (lines 17–20)

But his final lines (49-50: “Beauty is truth, truth beauty – that is all ye know on earth and all ye need to know”), much criticised over the years by others including T. S. Eliot, do not reach the same mystical vision of love and beauty in an ineffable union that lies beyond words (one of the possible fruits of Holbrook’s masterly study of Galib’s poem in *The Unreadable Shores of Love* would be a full comparison of Galib and Keats).

In addition, Galib’s Digression into the nature of poetry and what it means to be a poet are also worth exploring in this respect (see the extracts below).

### **The Indian Style**

Galib “was known as the greatest Ottoman master of the Indian style, which was famous for its complex imagery and so called because it had flourished at the Turkish Mughal courts in India. In the Indian style, relations among elements in images established in the high classical poetry of the 14th through 16th century are exponentially multiplied, creating an effect a student once called “psychedelic” (Holbrook, *Beauty and Love*, xxi).

Indian style builds on classical formal harmony, which compares objects based on shape: thus a face is likened to a moon, until “that moon” simply means a good-looking person. Or Love, as a baby in his cradle, is like a sword in a sheath. The Indian style takes this one stage further, often distorting the simple comparisons or piling one on top of another: for example, describing the jealousy of Beauty who thinks that Love doesn’t return her affections, “a watchful sword in the hand of his glance, her jealousy led to doubt’s hinterland” (422); or describing Beauty herself, “her neck was a cypress gracing a stream, it shone on the Bosphorus like a moonbeam” (448); or describing Love’s face, “the gleam of a tempered sword for a beard, black moonlight that falls in spring on Kashmir”.

**On the Existence of Poetry**

It's God the Truth who showers forth poetry  
 Humankind is the site of this bounty...

There can be no bound to God's qualities  
 The blessing of poetry cannot cease

Give this matter consideration due  
 Could our forebears have exhausted that boon?

Beyond bound, estimate, analogy  
 New poetry is uttered constantly

May you find the power to comprehend  
 Let me have my say now and you attend

Is not *perpetual creation*<sup>1</sup>, above all,  
 Of original poetry the true cause?

**On the Nature of Poethood**

To say poet is to say man of heart  
 A tolerant man and gentle of heart...

Poethood requires a burning desire  
 Attended by anxiety and trial

He'll condescend neither to lip nor cheek  
 In his garden blooms a rose not-yet-seen

He searches down each and every path well  
 His imagery's falcon captures gazelle

Once inside imagination's steep way  
 He'll not run across the demon hearsay...

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<sup>1</sup> Or "new creation", a reference to Q. 50:15: "Were We then weary with the first Creation, that they should be in confused doubt about a new Creation?" As Holbrook observes (*Shores of Love*, p. 111), "what remains perpetual is individual responsibility and access to divine inspiration".