

## The Diwan of Ibn 'Arabi

### Introduction

Ibn 'Arabi is often regarded as one of the most profound thinkers in the Islamic mystical tradition, a writer who composed complex metaphysical treatises on the Unity of Being. What is less well-known is his poetry, apart from the justly famous *Tarjumān al-ashwāq* (The Interpreter of Ardent Desires), a set of 51 poems which are modelled on the old Arabic qasida.

However, poetic sensibility is never far from any of his writing: most of his treatises contain short poems, and when we consider his magnum opus, the *Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (Meccan Illuminations), and the fact that it contains approximately 1,750 separate poems (each of the 560 chapters opens with a set of verses), then we can begin to get a sense of the extent of his poetic output. Until very recently the precise contours of this heritage have remained somewhat of a mystery, as the printed edition of his poems clearly does not contain all the poems he wrote. In fact it represents only one-third. The work of Julian Cook in compiling a database of all the known poems, both from the printed Bulaq edition and manuscripts, has shown that Ibn 'Arabi wrote a total of approximately 3,500 poems of varying length, some one-liners, some of hundreds of verses<sup>1</sup>.

Clearly a study of this enormous literary heritage will take many years, and much effort from many scholars. So far the best work has been done by Claude Addas in three articles and by Denis McAuley in his recent *Ibn 'Arabi's Mystical Poetics* (see booklist).

### What is poetry according to Ibn 'Arabi?

As we mentioned last term, Ibn 'Arabi links poetry (*shi'r*) to its etymological root of awareness or perception (*shu'ūr*), saying “its rightful role is to be comprehensive, not specific, and that is the opposite of clarity” (referring to the explanatory clarity of the revelation of the Quran). Poetry was not conceived of as something bad in itself, simply different to revelation. All depended on the one who practised it – as Ibn 'Arabi's predecessor who wrote a manual of Sufism, al-Qushayri (d. ), put it, “poetry is like the speech of a person: its beauty is like his, and its ugliness is his”.

Poetry is directly associated with order, symmetry, beauty. The world is laid out in measures and metres, as is poetry. “God Almighty made existence like a verse of poetry in its structure and order... all of the world is endowed with rhythm, fastened by rhyme, on the straight path.”

“Verse is the permanent essence, and prose the root that grows out of it. Prose appeared only in the created world, not in the presence of the Essence.”

### How did Ibn 'Arabi compose poetry?

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<sup>1</sup> Full details will appear in vol 52 of *JMIAS*, due out in December 2012.

According to his own account, the manner in which he composed poems was highly unusual:

“The reason which has led me to utter poetry is that I saw in a dream an angel who brought me a piece of white light, like a fragment of the sun’s light. ‘What is that?’ I asked. ‘It is the *Sūrat al-Shu‘arā*’ (the Poets)’ was the reply. I swallowed it, and felt a hair arising from my chest to my throat, and then into my mouth. It was an animal with a head, a tongue, eyes and lips. It grew out of my mouth until its head struck the two horizons, the East and the West. After that, it contracted and returned into my chest, so I knew that my words would reach the East and the West. Then I came back to myself and I uttered poetry without any process of reflection or thought. Since that time, this inspiration has never ceased; and it is because of this sublime contemplation that I have collected together all the poems that I can remember in this *Dīwān*. But there is much more that I have forgotten! Everything that this collection contains is thus, praise be to God, nothing other than [the fruit of] a divine projection, a holy, spiritual inspiration, and a splendid, celestial heritage.”<sup>2</sup>

This extraordinary vision precipitated an outpouring of poetic inspiration, and became the basis of his Diwan. What is important for us to note here is that poetry for him was not an ordinary composition, flowing from some association of ideas, but a direct inspiration into the heart, a contemplative act.

### Language

The way that Ibn ‘Arabi again brings together different meanings inherent in a single root (e.g. poetry/*shi‘r* = hair/*sha‘ra* = perception/*shu‘ūr*) shows a particular sense of the Arabic language, drawn directly from his way of participating in one of the specific divine gifts to the Prophet Muhammad, *jawāmi‘ al-kalim*, the synthesis of many meanings in a single word. It is this linguistic ambiguity that can be found throughout his writing, but most especially in his poetry. It is particularly apparent in the way he uses personal pronouns: as Arabic has only two genders, ‘he’ *huwa* and ‘she’ *hiya*, i.e. an active and a receptive, we often do not know in Ibn ‘Arabi’s poems who exactly is doing what to whom! This means that there may be several readings of a sentence, all equally valid. This is not simply using abstruse meanings to express the ineffability of mystical experience, but employing paradox and shifting syntax to push against the limitations of the reader’s understanding. In a certain sense, the structure of his poems as much as their content encourages us to see differently.

In addition, his poems shift rapidly from one register to another: for example, from sensual love to profound metaphysics to implied references to other poets. This is not so much the case in the

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<sup>2</sup> Ms. Paris B.N. 2348, fol.37a. See C. Addas, ‘The Ship of Stone’, *The Journey of the Heart* (JMIAS, 1996) <http://www.ibnarabisociety.org/articles/shipofstone.html>, and D. McAuley, *Ibn ‘Arabi’s Mystical Poetics* (Oxford, 2012), pp. 47–48, for alternative translations.

*Tarjumān*, where the traditional qasida framework predominates, but in the Diwan as a whole it is most noticeable.

As with ‘Attar or Rumi, a modern reader may find some of the poems somewhat didactic, although in the Persian tradition there are plenty of stories to 'lighten the burden'. But one must bear in mind that poetry was for him a way of conveying inspiration, of teaching. In addition, as we mentioned last term, medieval love poems do not describe the actual beloved - you would not be able to draw a picture of what Layla looked like. Nature poems describe not so much an empirically verified garden as an idealised garden that represents the order of the cosmos. Love poems describe not so much an individual beloved as an exemplification of the way in which all lovers and beloveds ought to behave. Panegyrics do not so much lie about the patron as present him with an image of what he ought to be like.

#### Types of poems

Arabic poems are based on a tight structure of end-rhyme and rhythm. Ibn ‘Arabi composed in many different styles. Some were Andalusian, such as his strophic poems (*Muwashshahāt*) or the 10-liners (*Mu‘ashsharāt*). Some were conventional ghazals, love-poems. Some were monorhymes, i.e. a whole word used as a rhyme rather than just a syllable. Some were one-liners (*mufrad*). We shall look at examples of these.

Stephen Hirtenstein October 2012