

Notes on *The Wine Ode*

1. "In memory"

The concept of memory, or remembrance, is very important within Islamic mysticism. In his introduction last week, Stephen gave a few brief indications of the aim of the Sufis, amongst them Eric Goeffroy's:

"The major goal of Sufism is to return man to his original purity, to the state in which he was not yet separated from the spiritual world...."

And I mentioned briefly the idea of the Night of the Covenant, which is the time when we knew ourselves in this state of non-separation, before we were born. Within Islam, unlike Christianity, there is no idea of original sin; on the contrary, the concept is that the human being is essentially pure and perfect in our essential nature. There is the idea, however, that we forget this original nature, which is what we really are even now, as we become embroiled in the relative world, and the task of the spiritual path is to turn back towards it, to remember where we came from. This means removing from ourselves the habits and inclinations which have taken us away from our awareness of the Real.

So the centrality of the idea of remembrance – *dhikr* in Arabic – arises because the aim is to return to a state that we have already tasted. One of the early Sufi writers, al-Qushayri, writing in the 10th century, says:

"Remembrance is a powerful pillar of the path to God – indeed it is the very foundation of this path, for one can only reach God by constantly remembering His Name."

There is a Qur'ānic basis for the practice, in the saying: "If you remember Me, I will remember you"¹ – meaning, that the action of remembrance is Divinely blessed. Also, that there is an undertaking from the Divine side to be present with the one who remembers. Ibn 'Arabī says: "God is the companion of the one who remembers Him".² Thus the aim of the seeker is to remember God constantly, so that God becomes his/her constant companion. In fact, in principle this is always the case for everyone, according to another Qur'ānic saying: "I am with you wherever you are", but it is a matter of becoming aware of it. Within the poems that we are reading, the knowledge of all this gives a particular dynamic to the notions of separation and union/absence and presence; the one who is absent from the Beloved but in a state of remembrance is also, in some way, in Her presence. As Ibn al-Fāriḍ says:

... if there be no (real)
distance between us, I regard that separation as union.

Within the Sufi tradition, the practice of 'remembrance' takes many forms. Since the earliest days in the 7th and 8th centuries, it was a central practice for people to gather together and chant the names of God in unison, and there is an aspect of this which was designed to bring the participants into a state of ecstasy, in which they actually experience union. It was also common that seekers/students of the path would be given the constant recitation of a name of God, or a phrase, as personal practice, which was regarded as a fundamental way of purifying the heart from things of this world which distract, or veil us, from the spiritual world. In this sense, the Christian practice of constant prayer, or the prayer of the heart, i.e. of continually repeating a phrase, would count as 'remembrance' in the Sufi tradition.

¹ Q 2:152

² Ar. *jalīs*; literally, the one who sits with you, i.e. at a social gathering or at the table.

Al-Qushayri distinguished two types of *dhikr* – the *dhikr* of the tongue and the *dhikr* of the heart, saying that:

“...the continual remembrance of the tongue eventually brings one to the remembrance of the heart. The true effect, however, lies in the remembrance of the heart” –

The heart here is not only the seat of divine love of God; it is also the organ of mystical perception – that organ by which the human being can perceive the truth, or the spiritual reality, in the same way that the eye can see physical things. Thus there is the notion that remembrance brings one to **vision** of the Divine, which is an idea developed to a high degree by Ibn ‘Arabī.

al-Qayṣarī’s commentary upon this first verse of *khamriyya* goes even further than al-Qushayrī for he says:

“Memory” has levels, namely those of the tongue, the heart, the spirit and the innermost mystery”³

He goes on to give a very essential interpretation of what memory means in the context of this verse which I am not going to give here, as it is just one specific way of understanding it. What is important, though, is that you should have some idea of the resonance of this particular word within the Sufī tradition, and know that it has many different levels of meaning.

As for the meaning of the “wine”, al-Qayṣarī says in his commentary that:

“...by means of it, the drinker loses his sense of self as all of the properties of his human nature disappear along with his natural traits regarding the designations of actions, characteristics and essence. For the ruling property of duality disappears from him as becomes one with the divine essence that was from the beginning when there was nothing with it...”⁴

- 2) This is perhaps the trickiest verse, and all the commentators give a different interpretation. What they all agree on is that the image of the crescent moon circling the glass is a reference to the cup-bearer, *the sāqī*, who is a very important figure in the wine ode tradition. He is the one by whose hand the wine is poured, and it is common for wine songs to begin with the poet calling out to him to bring the wine. Here he is depicted as bending around the glass, some people say “like an elder” – an old man – although usually we think of the wine bearer as a young man. I am going to read you Nicholson’s commentary on the verse which in my opinion is the most interesting for us; he uses al-Nabulsi’s 18th commentary as his source. He says:

“The full moon is the Perfect Human Being, ie the gnostic or saint in whom God reveals Himself completely and who is, as it were, filled with Divine love. The new moon is the Gnostic veiled by his individuality, so that he manifests only a part of the Divine light and not the whole. He causes the wine of love to circle; ie he displays and makes known to others the Names and Attributes of God. When the wine is watered ie when pure contemplation is blended with the element of religion, the seeker of God obtains spiritual direction and is like a traveller guided by the stars on his night journey.”⁵

³ Homerin *‘Umar Ibn al-Fāriḍ*, p. 55

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 55

⁵ Nicholson *Studies in Islamic Mysticism*, London 1921/94, p, 184

Al-Qaysarī, whom Homerin uses as his commentator, has a more specifically Islamic commentary, seeing the full moon as the Prophet Muhammed, or more esoterically, the Light of the Prophet Muhammed, who is the *epitome* of the perfected human being in the Sufi tradition. The crescent is then his son-in-law ‘Alī, who is venerated as being the originator of the esoteric side of the religion. Al-Qaysarī agrees that the stars are to do with guidance, but takes the water to be rational knowledge.

Either way, the idea is that the water prevents the drinker from becoming so totally intoxicated that he might deviate from correct behaviour in this world. This was a central concern within the Sufi tradition since the 10th century, when the celebrated Sufi al-Hallāj was executed for heresy following statements uttered in an ecstatic state.

4. “Time preserved nothing of it save one last breath”.

According to Arberry, this is based on the idea that wine left standing in a vat would be refined into pure spirit.

5. “The tribesmen’ are interpreted to be the mystics who are capable of illumination (Nicholson). Arberry says that the ‘drunk by morn’ is reference to the practice of communal *dhikr*.
6. The ‘vat’ is the mystic’s heart, from which the experience of ecstasy gradually fades.
13. According to Arberry, this is a tradition that if you touch the wine then it will stain your fingers like henna. The image of henna-tipped fingers we met in Ibn ‘Arabī’s poems, and has the connotation that brides stain the ends of their fingers on their wedding day. No-one comments on the second half of the verse, whose meaning I think is far from obvious.
14. The unveiling of the wine jar from a cellar, covered with cobwebs, is often used as an allegory for the unveiling of the bride on her wedding night.
20. The strainer (*fidām*) is placed over the mouth of the bottle so that the wine may run clear. There is a pun here, as the root of the word also has the meaning of a slow-witted person.
24. *Nu‘m* seems just to be a common female name. Ibn al-Fāriḍ uses it in other poems, such as his *lāmiyya*, as a name of his female beloved. It may that the meaning lies in the root of the word, *n-‘-m*, which has meanings of ease, happiness, delight, and also blessedness and grace. I could not find the exact word in the dictionary, but *na‘m* in Arabic means ‘yes’ and *na‘im Allah* is the grace of God. *Nu‘ma* is happiness.

We should note that the beloved is often male in Arabic poetry, whilst in Persian poetry the pronouns are not gender specific, so the sex of the beloved is often unspecified. This should not necessarily be taken literally to mean that the poems are addressed to a man; especially within the mystical tradition, all poems are essentially addressed to God who can appear in a male or female aspect.

26. This could be a reference to Christianity. Nicholson following Nābulṣī says:

“Moslems associate Christianity with the beverage forbidden by their own religion. When the poets describe a wine party, the scene is often laid in the neighbourhood of a Christian monastery. Ibn al-Fāriḍ says that the Christians became intoxicated without having drunk; ie their doctrine that God reveals Himself in Christ is only a glimpse of the truth which is fully realised by Moslem saints, that God reveals Himself in every atom of existence.”⁶

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 187

al-Qaysarī though goes along a different route and says that the ‘monastery folk’ are realised mystics who drank the wine of love whilst dwelling in the monastery of passionate love.

29. This is a reference to another common practice within Sufism, called *samāʿ*, i.e. listening to music to induce ecstasy.