

Mystical Islamic Poetry 3

Week 1: The Poetry of Ibn al-Fāriḍ

Ibn al-Fāriḍ is regarded as one of the greatest Arabic poets, and certainly one of the most important who wrote explicitly within the mystical tradition. He was a slightly younger contemporary of Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabī (1165-1240), being born in Cairo in 1181 and dying there in 1235, and the two men are closely associated in the later tradition. It is just about completely certain that they never met physically, although Ibn al-Fāriḍ would have been in Cairo at times when Ibn ‘Arabī was also visiting on various occasions between 1200 and 1221. But it is possible that Ibn al-Fāriḍ was influenced by Ibn ‘Arabī’s ideas during his upbringing, which would be one reason why their conception of the spiritual path was so compatible.

Ibn al-Fāriḍ seems to have led an exteriorly uneventful life, although he lived at a time of great change and turmoil within the Islamic world – it being the age of the crusades, the invasion of Spain by the Franks and the beginnings of the Mongol invasions in the East. He was born in Cairo just about ten years after the final fall of the Fātimids, when the city was returned to the rule of Salāḥ al-dīn and his brothers. He was born into a Sufi family – both his father and his grandfather, who seem to have been originally from Syria, being Sufi shaykhs – and so he was initiated into the Sufi path when he was just a boy. He was also trained in law, and became a well-known *muḥaddith* i.e. a transmitter of the traditions of the Prophet. According to Th. Emil Homerin, who is the major contemporary biographer and commentator on his life and work, he never belonged to any of the formal orders which were beginning to be established in this period, nor did he found one.

From his own account he led a quiet life of study and contemplation – like many other poets we have come across in these series, he did not attend court and undertake the kind of tasks which a poet in these times would be expected to perform, such as writing poems in praise of the ruler, and indeed, as one would expect of someone who had devoted their life to God, he seems to have shunned the patronage of rulers altogether. He spent much of his youth in solitary retreat in the hills and deserts around Cairo, and seems to have earned his living by teaching poetry at the al-Azhar mosque in central Cairo, which would explain his mastery of the classical forms of the Arabic poetic tradition. Then, when he was about 35, he met a mysterious Sufi shaykh called al-Baqqāl, the greengrocer, who told him that he would only achieve his aim of receiving the revelation of the Divine Reality by travelling to Mecca. He therefore left Cairo and spent about 15 years in the Holy City, where, from his own accounts, he did indeed achieve his spiritual aims, saying:

“...as I entered it [Mecca] enlightenment came to me wave after wave and has never left”.

And he later wrote a verse:

Oh my night companion
refresh my spirit
singing of Mecca
if you wish to cheer me.

In her was my intimacy
and the ascent of my sanctity
My station was Abraham's
And the enlightenment clear.¹

He returned to Cairo for the last four years of his life, again on the instruction of al-Baqqāl, and was buried there. His shrine can still be visited. What we know of his life comes largely from a biography, *Dibājat al-Diwān*, which was written by his grandson, 'Alī Sibṭ al-Fāriḍ, about 100 years after his death, in which he is depicted as a saintly man to whom were attributed many miraculous and compassionate acts – as was usual for a saint in those days. If you want to know more, Emil Homerin has translated this biography, and it can be found at the back of his book *'Umar Ibn al-Fāriḍ; Sufi Verse, Saintly Life* which is the recommended book for this course.²

Ibn Fāriḍ's poetic output was relatively small – or at least, the part that survives is relatively small compared to the vast heritage of people like Nizamī or Rūmī, or even Ibn 'Arabī. His *Diwān* (collected poems) was compiled by his grandson 'Alī, but there are other lines of transmission and in particular a famous manuscript now in the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin upon which early scholars such as Nicholson and Arberry based their translations. The exact number of poems varies from source to source, but according to the list compiled by Guiseppa Scottolin, who has produced an Arabic critical edition of the text,³ we are talking about around 30 poems altogether, of which there is a core corpus of about 14 fairly substantial works of between 20 and 150 verses, plus about 15 which he calls 'miscellanea'. In addition, there is one very extraordinary poem of 752 or 760 verses (depending upon the source mss) which is called *Naẓm al-Sulūk*, which is usually translated as *Poem of the Way*, or it is called the *Tā'iyya al-kubrā* because it has the end rhyme of 'ta'. This is an extended exposition upon his own spiritual journey which is considered a work of genius in terms of both technique and content.

In these sessions, though, we will focus mostly on the most famous of the shorter poems which is referred to as *The Wine Song*, the *Khamriyya*, or the *mīmiyya* because it has the end-rhyme 'mīm'. For those of you who have not attended these classes before, you should know that the standard Arabic poem is very formal and always follows set classical patterns. There are a number of rhythmic patterns which have various meanings and effects, and each line is divided into two halves, hemstitches. The rhyme is only on the second half, and is the same throughout – so for the *Khamriyya*, each of the 33/41 lines ends in the sound 'mu'. It is not, however, a mono-rhyme in which the same word ends each line, which was a form sometimes used in both the Arabic and Persian tradition. Even the same letter rhyme is difficult to maintain for too long, so few poems within the Arabic tradition are longer than about 100 verses. We saw in the last course that around this period of the 12th-13th century, within Persian poetry, new forms of verse with a more varied rhyme pattern

¹ Th. Emil Homerin *'Umar Ibn al-Fāriḍ; Sufi Verse, Saintly Life*, Paulist Press, NY, 2011. p. 306

² *Ibid*

³ Guiseppa Scattolin *The Diwan of Ibn al-Fāriḍ*, Institute Français d'Archeologie Orientale, Cairo, 2004.

began to develop – particularly the *mathnawi* form where the rhyme changes every two lines. This allowed the development of long epic poems such the works of Nizamī and ‘Attar’s *Conference of the Birds*. One of the great achievements of Ibn al-Fāriḍ in the *Poem of the Way* was to write a 760-verse poem using the same rhyme throughout, which is an indication of his mastery of the technical form of Arab verse.

In fact, such was his mastery and sophistication that the first thing that all the translators say about his verse is that it is fundamentally untranslatable because it is so packed with word-play, allusions, puns and references to other works within the Arab literary tradition which are lost upon the modern reader. A J Arberry is full of praise for Ibn al-Fāriḍ’s style, which he likens to the construction of the Alhambra because of its structural sophistication and the elaborate intertwining of decorative elements. Even he, though – and I say ‘even’ because Arberry was one of the really great experts in Arabic and Persian, one of the pioneers who first brought Islamic poetry into English translation and really understood it. Even he says that he only felt able to undertake a translation of the *Poem of the Way* because he found a near contemporary commentary upon which he could draw to discover the meaning. Emil Homerin, who has produced what is probably the best modern translation,⁴ which we will be using today, also worked with some of the major commentaries; for the *Khamriyya* he uses that of the 14th century Turkish master Da’ud al-Qayṣarī (d. 1350) and translates some excerpts from it alongside the poem.

These commentaries derive largely from the akbarian tradition,⁵ and arise because of the great love which Ibn ‘Arabī’s principal disciple, Ṣadr al-dīn al-Qunawī (1207-1273), had for the *Poem of the Way* – a love which may well have been shared by his master, although we have no definite information about this. In the years immediately after Ibn al-Fāriḍ’s death, Ṣadr al-dīn gave a famous series of classes in Cairo, Damascus and Konya in which he expounded upon the mystical meaning of the poem, and his comments were turned into a detailed commentary by his disciple Sa‘īd al-Dīn Farghānī (d.1299). This was a very widely read book – a “best-seller”⁶ – and in the generations that followed it became common practice for major figures within the akbarian tradition to produce further commentaries. Amongst the works cited by our modern translators are those by al-Farghānī himself, Abdul Razāq al-Kāshānī (d.1329), Da’ūd al-Qayṣarī and the 17th century Damascene, ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nabulusī (1641-1731). Ibn al-Fāriḍ’s shrine in Cairo also became a centre for spiritual gatherings within the akbarian tradition, and al-Nabulusī describes visiting it during a visit to Cairo in the 1700s and finding it a thriving centre for study and the practice of *zikr* – remembrance of God. One of the unfortunate outcomes of this love of the Ibn al-Fāriḍ by the followers of Ibn ‘Arabī is that his work became associated with the controversy which surrounded this tradition, and even within his grandson’s lifetime there were various kinds of condemnation by people who saw the poems as expounding the doctrine of *wahdāt al-wujūd*, or unity of being, even though, as I have said, there is no evidence of any formal contact with or direct influence from Ibn ‘Arabī in Ibn al-Fāriḍ’s own lifetime.⁷

⁴ Th. Emil Homerin *‘Umar Ibn al-Fāriḍ...*

⁵ i.e. the tradition which grew out of the teachings of Ibn ‘Arabī, who was called *al-shaykh al-akbar*.

⁶ See Jane Clark *Early Bestsellers in the akbarian Tradition*, Journal of Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabī Society, Volume 33, 2003. <http://www.ibnarisociety.org/articlelist.html>

⁷ For a good summary of the controversy surrounding this term within Islamic tradition, see Alexander Knysh *Ibn ‘Arabī and the Later Islamic Tradition*, New York, 1999.

The fact that these poems attracted the admiration of Ibn ‘Arabī’s followers, even though Ibn ‘Arabī’s own output would seem to be more than enough to keep anyone busy, gives some indication of the great depth and power of Ibn al-Fāriḍ’s expression of mystical experience. The *Wine Song* is one of his more direct and essential poems, and unusual in that he is not one of the poets like ‘Attar or Hafiz or indeed, Omar Khayyam whose quatrains were made so famous by Fitzgerald, who invoke the image of wine constantly. For those not here on previous courses, it should be mentioned that Islam has a great tradition of wine poetry, even though within the religion the drinking of wine derived from grapes – precisely the *khamr* upon which this poem is focussed – is forbidden. The symbol as in all traditions throughout the world is a reference to the intoxication and the loss of control which is experienced in love, and in union with the beloved, but in Islam there is this additional element of it being forbidden knowledge, and going beyond the boundaries of social convention. This is also a characteristic feature of Sufism itself, in which the love of God and the related desire to give up all relative identity inclines the mystic to leave behind all that is safe and familiar. It is a common *topos* in the Persian tradition for a poem to be constructed around a confrontation between a strict follower of the religion whose knowledge is merely of words and theory and therefore dry and dead; and a ‘drunken’ Sufi at the doorway of a tavern whose knowledge is drawn from the living source of the spirit and which is therefore exciting and alive. This did not mean that the poets themselves were advocating the drinking of wine. There is no doubt that in his daily life Ibn al-Fāriḍ like Ibn ‘Arabī was a devout Muslim, and in the *Khamriyya* you find an attempt to disassociate the ‘real’ wine from its earthly manifestation. Ibn al-Fāriḍ was clearly no stranger, however, to states of spiritual intoxication and practices such as *zīkr* (remembrance) and *samā’* (audition) designed to bring them about; his grandson says:

“When he participated in *samā’* (audition) and went into ecstasy as a mystical state overcame him, his face would increase in beauty and brightness, and the sweat would pour from the rest of his body until it flowed beneath his feet onto the ground.”⁸

There are many translations available of the *Khamriyya*. On our booklist we have mentioned three – by Homerin, A J Arberry⁹ R H Nicholson.¹⁰ Homerin’s translation has only 33 verses, whereas the others and Scattolin’s critical edition have 41. This is because there are eight verses between verses 24 and 25 in Homerin, which he considers to be later interpolations, and so has omitted. It does indeed seem to me that these have a rather different tone from the rest of the verses, being much more metaphysical, so we will not look at them, but stay with the direct very imagery of the poem as Homerin has rendered it.

But I want to give just one piece of background which I think we need to get to grips with the poem. And this is the tradition which is often referred to as “The Night of *Alast*” or “The Night of the Covenant”. This is a reference to a verse in the Qur’ān¹¹

⁸ Homerin, p. 303.

⁹ In A J Arberry *Mystical Poems*, Chester Beatty Monograph, Dublin 1956

¹⁰ R H Nicholson *Studies in Mysticism* (Curzon, London, 1921/1994.

¹¹ Q7:172

which describes how God the Creator, before he brought human beings into existence, gathered them all before him and asked them: “Am I not your Lord? (*A lastu birabbikum*) and they all replied “Indeed.” Thus, within the Islamic tradition, we know and are known by God before we come into physical existence, and we have made a promise or covenant with Him in our pre-existence. In the Sufi tradition, where the emphasis is upon the love between God and his creation, this ‘Night’ is synonymous with returning to a state of union with our Lord – of coming to know ourselves as we were before we were born, when we were pure spirit. And in this place – which is not in either time or space – we are in company of others who have realised this degree, who are described as ‘the drinkers until dawn’ – i.e. those who are intoxicated with the wine of union. Al- Qayṣarī says in his commentary of this wine 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...”¹²

And this, for Ibn al-Farid is the real wine, of which the earthly manifestation is merely a reflection. To strike a more human note, another reason why wine is associated with mystical love and union, according to Homerin, is that when the mystic leaves this state of union, as he must, the pain of separation from his beloved is so great that he turns to wine for consolation.

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¹² Homerin, *‘Umar Ibn al-Farīd*, p. 55