

Introduction to Nūr al-dīn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Jamī (1414-1492)

Having looked last week at the essentially oral tradition of Kabir, we come, by contrast, this week to one of the most cultivated and highly educated figures not only of the 15th century, but of the entire Islamic poetic tradition, Nūr al-dīn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Jamī (1414-1492). Born in Khorasan, he spent most of his life in Herat under the reign of the Timurids, at a time when this region was the most advanced and culturally brilliant centre of the Islamic world. Jamī was not just a poet, although poetry does seem to have received his most intense and abiding attention; he was also a brilliant scholar, a Sufi master of the Naqshbandī order, and one of the most important interpreters of the ideas of Ibn ‘Arabī, writing several important commentaries and expositions which, in the eastern regions, were as highly regarded and widely studied as the works of the Shaykh al-akbar himself.

Jamī’s output was prodigious; there are about 39,000 lines of verse extant, plus 31 prose works. In contrast with Kabir, these were well preserved in manuscripts that have come down to us in the present day – Herat being, as we saw in our first week, a great centre of book production in the 15th century. Despite this, he has been oddly neglected at certain periods and in certain places within the Islamic world – he is not as widely known and universally loved as, say, Hafiz, Sa’di or ‘Iraqī – and also by modern western scholars. Of all the poets we have studied in this series it has proved the most difficult to find good contemporary translations. So you will notice that the section from ‘Yusuf and Zulayka’ which we are going to read today is, I think for the first time on these course, full of ‘thees’ and ‘thous’, although on the whole the translation is very good and clear, being done by E G Browne who was an excellent scholar of the Persian tradition.

Jami’s life can be divided roughly into three periods; the first covering his early years, education and establishment as a scholar, up until the age of 38; the second, a period when he abandoned his scholarly pursuits and became a Sufi and a follower of the Naqshandi order in Herat; and the third, when he withdrew more and more from public life and became a virtual recluse, concentrating upon his writing and his spiritual life.

To go through it more systematically. He was born in Jam, which is about 200km due east of Herat in present day Afghanistan, and moved with his family to Herat when he was about 13 – it is thought that the move was prompted by the desire to give him a good education, as he was already showing remarkable intellectual gifts. His given name was Nūr al-dīn, meaning ‘Light of Religion’, and he took the name Jami later as his pen-name for his poetry, encapsulating his reasons in a short verse:

“ My place of birth is **Jam**, and the distillations of my pen are but a drop
from the **goblet** of the **Shaykh al-Islam**”

This is a three-way play on the word, as *jam* means goblet in Persian, with a very particular range of allusion within the genre of mystical wine poetry, and the reference to ‘Shaykh al-Islam’ is to the famous early Sufi saint Ahmed Namiqi Zhanda-Pil (Ahmed Jam) who was buried in the city.

In Herat, Jami entered into the *madrassa* system and studied the usual range of Islamic sciences; Arabic grammar and rhetoric; *kalām*, formal logic, Qur’ān, *ḥadīth* and Islamic law. He also studied poetry and Persian literature, and, unusually for a scholar of religion, music. He spoke Arabic, Persian and, it seems, Turkish. Farah Shadchehr, who has written perhaps the most comprehensive study of this life and works available in English, says that, given the huge range of disciplines they were expected to cover:

“ Most of the scholars of the era, as the old proverb says, were ‘jacks of all trades and masters of none.’ Nonetheless, Jami, according to general consent, was the master of almost all, especially the different literary genres”.¹

He excelled at debate, and it seems that he was rather an abrasive character who did not suffer fools gladly; one of his fellow scholars, Hafiz Ghiyath, compared his technique in debate to “the importunity of an angry wasp, constantly attacking his adversary with an endless series of stinging arguments.”² In about 1450, when he was in his 30s, Jami added maths and astronomy to his skill set and went to Samarkand to study at the famous observatory there, where he almost instantly made his mark by

¹ Farah Fatima Golparvaran Shadchehr, ‘Abd al-Rahmān Jami: Naqshbandi Sufi, Persian Poet. PhD thesis, The Ohio State University, 2008,

https://etd.ohiolink.edu/rws_etd/document/get/osu1217869380/inline.

² Hamid Algar *Jami*, One World, Oxford, 2013, p. 18.

publicly correcting the work of the leading astronomer of the city – and indeed, of his day – Qazi-zada Rumi.

It was whilst he was in Samarkand that he underwent a sudden religious conversion. He had become enamored of a person of great beauty in Herat – just about certainly a young male person – and whilst he was tossing and turning one night in a state of longing, he saw Sa'id al-dīn Kashghari, a Naqshbandī shaykh living in Herat, in a dream, who said to him:

“Come now, brother, go find a beloved who cannot abandon you”.³

He immediately hastened back to Herat and attached himself to Kashghari as a disciple, hardly leaving his master's side until his death four years later. Kashghari was a very different character from Jami; he was practically illiterate and an ecstatic, spending much time in a state of rapture. Jami was clearly devoted to him and was eventually, at his own request, buried next to him in Herat. He himself said of his conversion:

My goal was unattainable by knowledge alone
Hence I aspired to turn word into deed.
I joined the ranks of the Sufis of great heart,
Whose sole purpose is erudition in action.⁴

Other people, however, were not so pleased with this development; one of his teachers at the *madrassa*, M Jajarmi, is reported to have said:

“ For the first time in 500 years a person of true accomplishment appeared amongst the scholars of Khurasan, and now Mawlana Sa'd al-dīn Kashghari has waylaid him”.⁵

This gives us a taste not only of the stature of Jami as a scholar, but also of the tensions and rivalry amongst the different disciplines of knowledge within Islam –

³ Quoted in Vraje Abramian *This Heavenly Wine*, Holm Press, Arizona, 2006, p. xviii

⁴ Diwan II, 36. Translated by Hamid Algar in *Jami*, p. 24

⁵ Algar *Jami...* p. 28 The reference of '500 years' is almost certainly a reference to Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037) who worked in the same region.

philosophy, kalām, law and sufism – which Jami was to later articulate very clearly in his book *Durrat al-fākhira* (The Precious Pearl).

There is no doubt that Jami’s adoption of the mystical path was sincere and life-long, going deeper than a mere attachment to Kashghari; he is said to have encountered a great Naqshbandi saint, Khwaja Muhammad Parsa as a child, receiving a never-forgotten candy stick from him, and to have had a direct interior connection – what is called an ‘Uwaisi’ connection – to the founder of the Naqshabandī order Baha‘ al-dīn Naqshband (d. 1389) himself. He was clearly a man of real spiritual attainment. It was widely expected that he would take over Kashghari’s role as leader of the Herat Naqshbandi Order, but he refused this, preferring not to be distracted by the requirements of teaching. Instead he supported another Naqshbandi shaykh from Tashkent, Khwaja Abdullah Ahara (d. 1490), with whom he developed a close relationship and he acted as a kind of deputy to him in Herat, helping to establish the Naqshbandiyya as the predominant order in the region.

However, he did take some students himself; it was said of him that “if a sincere person should suddenly appear, Jami would secretly enlighten him about his path”.⁶ One of these pupils was the poet Mir ‘Ali-shir Nava’i, who was famous for establishing the vernacular Chaghatay Turkish as a medium for poetic expression and who was to have a significant influence upon the development of Turkic poetry throughout the Islamic world.⁷ He and Jami became close friends, and Nava’i played an important role as advisor in Jami’s poetic life; he seems, for instance, to have helped him organize his vast corpus of work at the end of his life into a coherent *Dīwān*.

Nava’i was also a powerful and rich man, a patron of the arts and artists, particularly miniature painting, and he had close connections to the Timurid court in Herat. It was during this middle period of his life, when he was in his 40s and 50s, that Jami too had considerable contact with the court, particularly with that of Sultan Abu Sa‘id (reigned 1459-1469) and Sultan Bayqara, who came to power in 1470 and reigned for 36 years, instituting a period of relative stability in a region where in-fighting between the descendants of Timur were the norm and regime-change was common. Bayqara’s reign provided the conditions for a great cultural flourishing, in which Jami played an

⁶ Hamid Algar in *Jami...*, p. 32

⁷ See S Frederick Starr *Lost Enlightenment*, Princeton University Press, 2013, pp. 500-504

important role, becoming the ‘poet laureate’ of the regime. He wrote a number of eulogies in praise of the rulers, but he was never a paid member of the court – it is made clear in the biographies that he never directly took money from the Sultan. But he did act as an advisor; in fact, cultivation of relationships with rulers was quite a feature of Sufi practice of this time, especially in the Naqshbandiyya, and it was consciously undertaken for the sake of intercession on behalf of their subjects: Jami himself wrote:

‘Closeness to virtuous and just kings, as is well-known to the intelligent and enlightened, is the best means for attaining goals pertaining both to religion and to the life of this world, for the perfection of outer and inner felicity. It renders possible aid to the unfortunate and facilitates intercession on behalf of the wretched’⁸

Thus there are extant letters from Jami to Sultan Bayqara begging him to take action in cases of injustice. We see similar instances in earlier times, with known instances of both Ibn ‘Arabī and Jalāl al-dīn Rūmī using their relationship with Seljuk and Mongol rulers to attain clemency for the poor and needy. This was in fact an important part of the pastoral role that the Sufis played within society, in accordance with their underlying understanding that it is the function of the realized human being to be ‘a mercy to the universes’; i.e. to act as a conduit for the over-riding mercy of God.

By the 1470’s, when he was in his 50s, Jami had become one of the most famous and acclaimed figures in the Islamic world, known both as a poet and as a writer. When he went on *hajj* in 1472 – his only journey outside of the region of Khorasan – he rather comically had to flee from Aleppo to Tabriz in secret to avoid the emissaries of the Ottoman emperor Mehmet II, who were arriving with lavish gifts to persuade him to relocate to the glittering new court in Istanbul. He fled because he did not want to cause offence, and later wrote *Durrat al-fākhira* as a compensatory gift. One of the platforms of this fame, which made him so desirable to the Ottomans, was that he was a great exponent, and fierce defender, of the ideas of Ibn ‘Arabi. These were a cornerstone of the Naqshabandi spiritual path – Khwaja Abdullah Ahara was considered an expert in akbarian doctrine and it is said that he and Jami had many conversations about the meaning of Ibn ‘Arabī’s work. But these ideas were also extremely

⁸ Farah Shadchehr, *‘Abd al-Rahmān Jami...*, p.42

controversial, at this time causing considerable furore amongst the intellectual communities. One of the most widely discussed issues was Ibn ‘Arabi’s assertion that the Pharaoh had died a believer in the divine unity. Sultan Bayqara even convened a conference in Herat where the leading scholars of the day were invited to debate this sticky issue, at which Jami employed all his famous debating skills on the side of the “*Wujūdi*”s (so called because of their defense of the doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, or ‘unity of being’) saying:

“Those who intend to proclaim him (Ibn ‘Arabī) an unbeliever must first be capable of determining his mode of thought; explain it to those competent in such matters and then prove to all and sundry that it contravenes the *shari’a*”⁹

He himself from his own account struggled for more than a decade to understand Ibn ‘Arabī’s work, and he attributed his final success to the help of his Naqshbandi masters and the writings of Ṣadr al-dīn al-Qūnawī (d. 1273) who had formulated his master’s ideas into a more systematic format. During his struggle with works such as *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* and *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, Jami vowed that:

“... if this gate be opened for me, I will expound the meanings intended by this group in such a way that people will easily understand them”.

To this end, he wrote several prose works; amongst them a commentary upon Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Naqsh al-Fuṣūṣ*, a commentary upon the *Fuṣūṣ* itself, commentaries upon the poetry of Faqr al-dīn ‘Irāqī and Ibn al-Fāriḍ as well upon Rūmī’s *Mathnawi*, plus his most enduringly famous work, *Lawā’ih* or “Divine Flashes’ which we will look at next week. Almost equally famous is his *Nafahāt al-uns*, an account in the tradition of Sulamī and ‘Attar of the Sufi saints from previous times to his own day. This is now one of the principal sources of biographical information about the early followers of Ibn ‘Arabī; at the time, it was controversial in itself, not so much because of its akbarian content but because of the contemporary figures whom Jami chose to omit from it. One of the features of this era, which we will not go into here, was the debate between Shi’ and Sunnī thinkers. Jami was definitely Sunni and wrote critically in certain places of Shi’ite ideas, and one should note here that within ten years of his death, the Safavids would triumph over the Timurids in the central regions which are more or less present day Iran – the Safavids being of course Shi’ite, as Iran remains to

⁹ Algar *Jami...*, p. 97

this day. Jami's perceived anti-Shi'a sentiments were a major factor in what was the virtual eclipse of his writings in Iran for several centuries after his death; whilst his adherence to the ideas of Ibn 'Arabī were a major factor in his being embraced in Ottoman lands, where they became an integral part of the spiritual landscape.

In terms of his own spiritual development, Jami seems to have been of an essentially *malamī* disposition – i.e. preferring not to take on overt spiritual roles but to live a simple life of study and seclusion, as he demonstrated when he refused to become the leader of the Naqshabandi order in Herat. He himself intimated that both the pursuits for which he is famous – poetry and scholarship – were undertaken only as 'cloaks' by which to hide his inner spiritual state. Towards the end of his life he withdrew more and more from worldly concerns, and was overtly critical of the spiritual standards of his day, despairing of both the masters and the pupils; he said in verse:

Thank God that I am neither a sheikh nor a follower,
[that I] neither seek knowledge, nor teaching and tutoring.

I am free from the bondage of the world, either impure or bright;
I shall sit in a corner of a shack, lone and solitary.¹⁰

The last 10-12 years of life, when he was in relative solitude, were the most productive in terms of writing. It was during the 1480's for instance that wrote, or at least completed, the seven epic *mathnawī*'s for which he is now most famous as a poet and compiled his *Dīwān*, as well as some of his Ibn 'Arabī commentaries. One of his most famous works is the *Bahristan*, a book of what Algar calls "entertaining and entertaining anecdotes" about various classes of men which he finished in 1487. This was dedicated to his surviving son, Ziya' al-dīn Yusuf – he had four sons but tragically lost three of them, writing a famous moving elegy to one who died in his teens.

The two or three commentators that I have read tend to dismiss Jami's own statement that his poetry and his scholarship were mere 'cloaks' by which his real state and stature were veiled from the world, as well as the many other statements that he, like

¹⁰ From *Fatihah*, See Farah Shadchehr, 'Abd ald-Rahmān Jami...', p.179.

Rūmī, made about despising the very medium of poetic expression. They do this on the basis that he was too much of a poet – writing throughout the whole of his life, from childhood to within days of his death – and too much of a scholar (the Naqshbandis, despite their emphasis upon practices such as *dhikr*, did not require of him that he gave up his intellectual interests, so these too he continued to pursue from childhood to grave) for these to be anything but essential components of his character. But I think what we can read into this statement is the emphasis that he himself gave to the spiritual side of his life over his more manifest achievements. In Jami, one comes across the reality of genius, just as one does in Ibn ‘Arabī; he is an absolute giant of a man, and it is clear that for him the highest levels of attainment in the human arts and sciences came easily, springing out of an extraordinary interior state rather than sought for their own sake. Thus one could say that he was a true follower of the Naqshbandī way, which was defined by Baha‘ al-dīn Naqshband himself as “being outwardly with men, inwardly with God”.¹¹

Poetry

Jami has often been called the “the seal of the Persian poets”, not only because he is really the last great writer in the tradition – it being the case that from the end of the 15th century, the creative edge of the poetic arts moved towards India and Turkish cultures, and there were no immediate great successors to him writing in Persian. He is also called ‘seal’ in the way that Muhammad is called ‘the seal of the prophets’ because his work sums up, encompasses, codifies and completes the entire tradition which began in the 10th/11th centuries with people like Nizāmī. We have mentioned before that there were three main forms of Persian poetry at this time (Jami’s poetry was entirely in Persian); the *ghazal* (the lyrical poem usually a love poem); the *mathnawī* (the long epic poem) and the *ruba‘i* (the short four liner). To these we should add a fourth which was not used for mystical poetry but more for praise poetry, the *qasida*. Usually, poets were known for their mastery of one form over the others, but Jami was acknowledged as being *mutafannin*, skilled, in all of them. What is more, he revived and/or mastered all the sub-forms of the genres; Shadchehr has identified eleven altogether and counted the number that he wrote as follows;

ghazal (1,804), ruba‘i (274), mathnawi (8), qasida (53), qit‘a (137), tarji‘-band(4), tarkib-band (6), murabb‘a (2), mu‘amma (29), bahr-i tavil(1), fard (1).

¹¹ See Algar, p. 88

The *Diwān* contain 16,629 lines of poetry, of which ghazals account for 13,017.

This following of traditional forms has been criticised by commentators both contemporary and posthumous, as lacking originality or depth. But it has been defended by others, who maintain that Jami's intention was to show that:

“ ... a work lives not by its form, as was commonly thought at the time, but by the profundity of its content. Jami demonstrated that not a single one of the classic forms had died out definitively, but that it was possible to revive them if the poet were capable of lending them a deep and significant meaning ...”¹²

In this era, in place of innovation in the form of poetic expression, what we find is a conscious embracing of **imitation** as a kind of art form in itself, undertaken as a homage to the great poets of the past. There were basically two forms of imitation; *nazira* and *javab*. In *nazira* – meaning ‘a parallel’ – the poem was written in the same metre and rhyme as the original, and the aim was to surpass it in excellence. Usually, the original was not revealed, and it was left to the audience, who were clearly assumed to be deeply versed in the poetic tradition, to identify it. Jami's *Diwān* is full of such imitations in *ghazal* and *qasīda* form, imitating poems by Khusrau, Sa'di, Rūmī, and above all, Hafez. The *javab* – meaning response – is a poem written in *mathnawi* form written on the same or similar subject as the *mathnawi* of a previous poet. Five of the seven poems in Jami's *Haf Awrang* are of this nature, based upon the epics of Nizāmī and his imitator, Amīr Khusrau. It is worth noting here the great influence of the great 14th century Indian poet Khusrau (d. 1325), who, as we saw last year, wrote at the court in Delhi – one of many possible demonstrations of how the geographic consciousness of the Timurids extended eastwards as well as westwards. When Jami came to organize his great *Dīwān* in the last years of his life, he chose the same structure that Khusrau had, dividing it into three sections:

Fatihah al-shabab (The Opening of Youth)

Vasilat al-'iqd (The Middle of the Necklace)

Khatimat al-hayat (The End of Life)

¹² Farah Shadchehr, 'Abd al-Rahmān Jami..., p.118

You may remember from Mystical Islamic Poetry 5¹³ that Khusrau divided his work into four separate stages, saying:

The first was like the earth because they were cold and dry in their formality. The second was like water, gentle, soft and purged of the dust of all dense worlds. The *ghazals* in the third volume were roasted and baked to perfection but delicate at the same time. The fourth volume has *ghazals* that like fire can set alight a heart that is cold and devoid of passion.¹⁴

However, unlike Khusrau, it seems that Jami's sections are not strictly chronological, with the *Fatihah* containing poems from quite late in his life.

I think we have covered all the main poetic works of Jami in our discussion so far. It remains just to say that there are good critical editions of his works in Persian, of which Algar gives a very comprehensive review, so I have taken the liberty of just referencing you to his list.¹⁵ As I have already mentioned, translations into English are surprisingly rare. There are two translations of *Lawa'ih*, which I am sure that Stephen will cover next week, but only two of his *mathnawi's* have been translated in full; *Salamān and Absāl* by Edward Fitzgerald some time ago (1889), and *Yusuf and Zulayka* which was translated twice in the 19th century, and is now available in a modern translation by David Pendlebury. However, this latter is a rendering into prose rather than poetry, so not too suited to our purposes. A more recent book by Vraje Abramian, *This Heavenly Wine*, puts a very small selection of the *ghazals* very nicely into modern English, but apart from that we seem to have only the odd poem, or section from a poem, here and there in anthologies.

Bibliography

1) Biography

Jami by Hamid Algar (One World, Oxford, 2013)

A brief but thorough and balanced view of his life and works, though not particularly focussed on his poetry. This book is available in digitised form through the Bodleian library, so you can read it on-line if you have a Bodleian ticket.

¹³ See <http://open.conted.ox.ac.uk/series/islamic-mystical-poetry-5>

¹⁴ Sunil Sharma *Amir Khusrau, the poet of Sufis and Sultans*, Oxford, 2005.

¹⁵ Algar, *Jami ...*, p. 145-6

‘Abd ald-Rahmān Jami: Naqshbandi Sufi, Persian Poet by Farah Fatima Golparvaran Shadchehr, (PhD thesis, The Ohio State University, 2008, https://etd.ohiolink.edu/rws_etd/document/get/osu1217869380/inline)
A comprehensive overview of Jami’s life and times, with detailed sections on the poetry but probably a less reliable assessment of its value than Algar’s.

Life & Poetry of Jami: The Celebrated Timurid Poet (Lambert Academic Publishing, 2012)
The book of the PhD which I have not personally seen.

Encyclopaedia Iranica (<http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/jami>)
Gives a good general introductions to his life and work, his relationship to Sufism and to the visual arts.

2) English Translations

This Heavenly Wine, translated by Vraje Abramian (Hohm Press, Arizona, 2006)
A very slender selection from the *Diwān*.

A Treatise of Sufism by Mirza Mihammed Qazvini and E H Whinfield (London, 1928)
Persian text and English translation of *Lawā’ih* (Divine Flashes)

Chinese Gleams of Sufi Light by Sachiko Murata (Albany, NY, 2000)
An English version of a Chinese translation of *Lawā’ih* plus a translation of the original Persian by William Chittick.

The Precious Pearl by Nicholas Heer (Albany, NY, 1979)
A very good translation of *Durrat al-fākhira*, a Sufi/philosophic treatise comparing the different means of obtaining knowledge; Sufism, philosophy and *kalām*.

Jami: Yusuf and Zulayka, transl. by David Pendlebury (Octagon Press, 1981)
A well-thought of, clear translation with good background notes. But it is in prose rather than being a poetical translation.