

Poem 16 – by Jane Clark

- 1) According to Michael Sells, this is a reference to small, white alabaster figurines with red streaks which were used in Syrian Christianity. They symbolise that aspect of the Deity which is “deeply silent before the entreaties and the questions of the lover.”¹

- 4) al-Khawarnaq and al-Sādir; these are places in Iraq known within the Bedouin tradition, and in particular are the mythic sites of ruined palaces, the sites of past glory and sovereignty.² Ibn ‘Arabī says that it means ‘the Divine Presence’ and I think the implication must be, given the henna-tipped reference as well, that she is royal and sovereign, and having dipped her fingers into the lower world for a bit, she is returning to her real home.

- 5) Perdition, means ‘ruin’ or ‘destruction’.

- 6) A reference to Q 25:14: “This day plead not for a single destruction; plead for many destructions.”

- 7) Dove of the *arāk* trees:

Doves/cooing of doves = the sad sign of parting in the classic *qasīda*.

Thornberry (*arāk*) = a thorny, aromatic shrub with light purplish berries, which was used by the Bedouin for toothpicks. Therefore, a symbol of purity in classical poetry, and also has associations with the mouth of the beloved.

- 11) The fortress of Hajir. Hajir was the ancient Arabic name for the ruins of the pre-Islamic Arab civilization of Mada'in Salih, ruins that served for centuries to instill in the bedouin meditation the transitory nature of all human edifice, a meditation that was then taken up in Qur'anic references to other abandoned cities in the desert.

- 13) Boon companion; the *qasīda* was originally a drinking song, so this is the friend who would stay with you through a night of carousing and celebrating.

“Lightening’ is a commonly used image for a flash of Divine inspiration. It is not possible for the human being to have knowledge of the Essence, which is beyond all comprehension by the limited mind, but it is possible that the veil should be lifted in a moment of what in the Sufi tradition is called *kashf* or uncovering, like a curtain which is pulled back just for split second so that the full glory of the light can be seen.

¹ *Stations of Desire*, p.40

² According to one of the scholars in this poetry, Stetkevych (p.67-73), mention of these places would particularly evoke the poetry of the 9th c poet Abū al-Atāhiyya.

Poem 16 – From Ibn ‘Arabī’s Commentary³

- 1) ‘The camels’ are the human faculties, the ‘howdahs’ are the actions they are charged to perform, ‘the damsels’ in the howdahs are the mystical sciences and the perfect sorts of knowledge.
- 3) This divine subtlety, being acquired and not given directly, is subject to change produced by contact with phenomena; this change he indicates by talking of ‘henna-tipped fingers’ as though they were a modification of unity by a kind of association.
- 5) “Do you invoke perdition” i.e. why do you not see the face of God in everything, in light and darkness, in simple and composite, in subtle and gross, in order that you may not feel the grief of parting?”
- 6) ‘Cry “perdition” many times’, i.e. not only in this station but in every station in which you are placed, for you must bid farewell to every one of them, and you cannot fail to be grieved, since whenever a form of the truth disappears from you, you imagine that He has left you. But He has not left you, and it is only you remaining with yourself that veils you from the vision of that which pervades the whole of creation.
- 7) In the image of the dove; “ the poet addresses holy influences of Divine pleasure which have descended upon him”.
- 10) ‘Death’ means the station in which the subtle principle of the Human Being is severed from its governance of this dark body for the sake of the Divine subtleties which are conveyed to it by the above-mentioned holy influences.” [i.e. this is the mystical death, or *fanā*’.]
- 11) Ibn ‘Arabī’s comment derives from the root meaning h-j-r, which is related to ‘obstacles, prevention’ and inaccessibility. He says” Hājir here denotes the most inaccessible veil of the Divine glory. No phenomenal being can attain to the immediate experience of it, but scents of it blow over the hearts of gnostics in virtue of a kind of amorous affection.

‘Rainclouds i.e sciences and diverse sorts of knowledge belonging to the most Holy essence.”
- 13) ‘Oh watcher of the star’ is in reference to keeping in mind that which the sciences offer in their various connections.

‘Oh wakeful spy on the lightening’; the lightening is a locus of the manifestation of the Essence. The author says addressing the one who seeks it: ‘Our quest is the same, be my companion in the night.’”
- 14) This verse may be applied to either the heedless or the unconscious”.

³ Taken from Nicholson *The Tarjumān al-ashwāq*, 1911

- 15). 'The fond maiden' = the Essential Divine subtlety which is the gnostic's object of desire.

'Through her' = although she is unattainable, yet through her manifestation to you all that you have is baptized⁴ for you, and your whole creation is displayed to you by that Essential form."

16. 'Conversing secretly with the suns, etc.' is in reference to the traditions (*ḥadīth*) that declare that God will be seen in the next world like the sun in a cloudless sky or like the moon when she is full."

⁴ Arabic: *yanṣighu* = coloured, dyed, tinted.