

Week 5; Introduction to *Tarjumān al-ashwāq*

We had a very brief introduction last week to Ibn ‘Arabī and his place within the poetic tradition of Islām. As we said, the *Diwān* as a whole, and many of the poems within it, are only just starting to be studied and translated, although it was one of the first books of Ibn ‘Arabī’s to be brought into a printed edition. The poems we will look at this week, by contrast, include some of the most famous and quoted words of his entire output, and they were one of the first works to be translated into English – by the famous Arabist R H Nicholson, who also did the first English version of Rūmī’s *Mathnawī* – in an edition which was first published in 1911 in London.¹ It has since reprinted, and is still available in that second edition, with a critical edition of the Arabic text which has not yet been superseded.

This is a series of 61 poems written as a cycle, in the style of the traditional pre-Islamic *qaṣīda* to which Ibn ‘Arabī gave an explicitly mystical stamp. They were almost certainly written in 611/1213 during his second visit to the sacred city of Mecca. But in the preface which he wrote to the first version, he explains that they embody the experience of his first visit about 13 years previously, when he had first arrived in the East, having travelled from the far west, from Andalusia, to make the pilgrimage. He spent about three years in the city during this first period, and it was a time of remarkable spiritual opening for him. He describes in particular many experiences he had whilst in the sacred precinct and circum-ambulating the Kaaba. The poems are dedicated to a young girl, Nizām, whom he met at the house of a family he very much admired, that of Abū Shujā‘ Zāhir b. Rustam and his sister Fakhr al-nisā’ bint Rustam, both of whom were eminent scholars of *hadith*. Ibn ‘Arabī saw in Nizām, whose name means harmony – and also has ranges of meaning associated with the stringing of a necklace which are related to poetry – the *epitome* of beauty, wisdom and learning, and also a particular kind of refined culture, *abad*, which, he explains, inspired him to write this set of verses.

¹ Reynold A Nicholson, *The Tarjumān al-ashwāq*, Royal Asiatic Society, London, 1911/1978.

We have here an unusual situation in the Islamic tradition, for although we have found in the poetry we have read so far many eulogies to feminine beauty, they have all been very abstract, idealised forms, whereas here we have what seem to be love poems to a real woman, using in places quite explicit erotic imagery. And this has its own meaning, for, as we saw in our discussions on Kirmānī, for Ibn ‘Arabī and his school, the beauty of the Divine is really manifested in the forms of the world, which is understood to be the *locus* of the Divine self-revelation, the self-disclosure of the One Reality. And it is manifested in quite a particular way in the image of the human being, who is made in the image of God and therefore includes and encompasses all the Divine qualities, both physical and spiritual. And like Kirmānī, Ibn ‘Arabī attracted criticism for writing poems in this style, and was prevailed upon by his companions to produce a defence of his motives. This took the form of an almost line-by-line commentary, called *K. al-Dhakhā’ir wa al-a‘lāq fī sharḥ tarjumān al-ashwāq* (which can be roughly translated as “The treasures and the precious things in the commentary on the *Tarjumān al-ashwāq*”) explaining the mystical meaning of the verses. This nearly always accompanied the poems as they were transmitted down the centuries – Nicholson includes selections from it alongside in his translation, as we shall see. In producing this commentary, Ibn ‘Arabī started a whole new literary genre within the Islamic tradition, and in the following centuries it became a feature of the tradition which grew out of his teachings, which is often called the akbarian tradition, to write commentaries upon mystical poems. In particular, there is a large and lengthy corpus of commentaries upon the poems of Ibn al-Fāriḍ and Rūmī, who are the two major poets we will be studying in the next course.

The matter of the addressee has been the subject of much discussion, especially amongst western scholar – as the American scholar Michael Sells says in the introduction to his own translations of these poems *Stations of Desire*: “In the translation of desires, there is no end to the argument over whether the beloved is human or divine”.² But it seems to me that there is no reason to doubt Ibn ‘Arabī’s own account of the matter. It is clear that these poems do record a kind of awakening to the experience of love which happened for him during this time in Mecca, which is perhaps comparable to the much more famous awakening which happened to Rūmī

² Michael Sells, *Stations of Desire*, p.37

when he encountered Shamsī Tabrīzī. This period also saw a change of attitude towards women in general, as he describes how prior to this point he had avoided their company, but during this period he also married and had his first child. But Ibn ‘Arabī at this stage was a mature man, about 40 years old, and he had already reached a state of what we might call spiritual realisation. Therefore the love and passion which was awakened in him was not at all like the yearning of an undeveloped man for a beautiful woman; it was the love of a realised mystic for his God, and for a Divine reality which was known and witnessed as appearing in every created form, both physical and imaginal. For him Nizām was an image of the Divine Wisdom Itself, and what he describes as descending upon him from her presence is Divine knowledge and tastes of hidden mysteries, and the agonies of longing and separation which he describes are the yearning of the relative being for an absolute reality which is forever beyond its grasp.

Therefore in approaching these poems we should understand that they are not about the object of love as such; they are about what we experience in the heart – the states of love which it undergoes – when it is really open to receiving the full force of beauty. By which, I mean, the Divine beauty which is so glorious, so great, so brilliant, that the human receptacle cannot contain it, or stand in its presence, and so has no choice, if it wants to have this intensity of inner contact with the Divine, but to pass away from itself, give itself up. Ibn ‘Arabī gives an alternative explanation for the inspiration of the poems at the end of the preface. He describes how one day he was circumbulating the Kaaba and at the same time reciting a love poem he had composed, thinking he was alone. Suddenly, a young woman touched him softly on the back and began to question each verse. When he came to the final verse, on bewilderment, which went:

I wish I knew if they knew
whose heart they have taken

Or my heart knew
which high-ridge track they follow.

Do you picture them safe
or do you picture them perished?

The lords of love in love

are ensnared, bewildered

she protested and said;

“Amazing! How could it be that the one pierced through the heart by love had any remainder of self left to be bewildered? Love’s character is to be all consuming. It numbs the senses, drives away intellect, astonishes thoughts, and sends off the one in love with the others who are gone. Where is bewilderment, and who is left to be bewildered?”³

This short verse became the first poem of the *Tarjumān* cycle, and the other 60 were written as a response to her objections. It is not specified by Ibn ‘Arabī at any point, as far as I know, whether she was a flesh and blood woman, or whether, like the youth who inspired the *Futūhāt*, she was perceived in the imaginal realm, or even whether, as many scholars have conjectured, she was actually Nizām herself. It does not matter; what matters is that she was a means by which the Divine reality revealed Itself to Ibn ‘Arabī in a way which made a forceful impact upon him.

In form, the poems are nearly all written in the first person, and the unifying motif of the cycle is that each poem describes an encounter with a different Beloved, in most cases female but not always, who, in true *qasīda* style, presents herself to the poet and overwhelms him with her beauty, and then departs, leaving him in a state of longing. Or perhaps one might say, given our knowledge of Ibn ‘Arabī’s underlying metaphysical vision, what arrives each time is a different form of the same Beloved, because for Ibn ‘Arabī it is a central principle that the One Reality who is the mystic’s only object of desire, cannot be tied down to any one form, but constantly appears to us in new, fresh revelations to the heart. For the one who really knows the truth and what reality is like, the art is both to receive each revelation – each manifestation of beauty – fully and completely, and at the same time to be able to let it go, knowing that it can never be possessed or tamed. In this way, the heart becomes able, and ready, to receive a further revelation, and then another, and another. Therefore, these poems have a different emphasis to that of the tale of Layla and Majnūn, which, incidentally, is constantly referred to along with the stories of other famous Bedouin

³ *Ibid*, frontispiece.

lovers. Whereas in the classical tale, Qays is faithful to one image, Layla, which burns itself into his heart, in *Tarjumān* the Beloved is the Divine Essence Itself which is beyond all images that we might try to impose upon it, but at the same time the essence of everything; therefore, the form the beloved constantly transmutes, comes and goes, leads the lover ever onward.

The title translates as *Interpreter of Desires*. *‘Ashwāq* is the plural of *shawq* which means word used for passion and desire. *Tarjumān* can, like all Arabic words, have many shades of meaning; it can mean guide, interpreter, translator, and Michael Sells has an interesting take on it which I thought I would give you a taste of:

For Ibn ‘Arabī, translation is not word-for-word mechanistic rendition from one system into another. It is a simultaneous “bringing-across” and transformation. In every moment, the heart must change to receive the new form of the constantly changing beloved. An early meaning of the English ‘translation’ and Latin *translatio* is the ritualised transport of relics from one shrine to another. The new shrine or holy place is not sanctified until the relics arrive. In Ibn ‘Arabī’s poems, when the beloved and her company pass through a station, they both inhabit it and enliven it... Similarly, in Ibn ‘Arabī’s philosophy, when a state of consciousness passes through a person, it takes over the person completely, and when it leaves, it leaves the person empty until a new state of consciousness arrives.”⁴

There are a great many themes that one could explore in this work. It is such a complex and interwoven set of verses that it is simultaneously about the real person Nizām, and an exploration of the Divine feminine; it is about Mecca as the sacred centre of the Islamic revelation and Ibn ‘Arabī’s experiences on his first pilgrimage; it is a fusing together of the pre-Islamic and Islamic landscapes; it is an account of the mystical journey; it is an exploration of the union of east and west, etc etc. There is an underlying Christian theme which would be fascinating to go into. But today we will look at just one particular aspect, which is this matter of the transmutation of the beloved, as it is an important aspect of the Islamic mystical tradition that we have not yet touched upon. And we will look at just one poem, number 16, so that we can go

⁴ *Stations of Desire*, p. 42

into it in a bit of depth. There is a great accumulative power to the whole cycle of poems, with the same *motifs* and images arising over and over again so that you really get drawn into an extraordinary imaginal landscape which has its own logic even if you don't specifically understand the symbolism. I suggested that you read Michael's exposition on Poem 18 as preparation for this class,⁵ and if you have not already done this, it would be good to do so, as it gives a good introduction to this particular form of *qasīda* which he dubs that of the 'lost beloved'. There are several other articles and translations on the same site which would be an easy way of looking a bit more broadly at the total collection.

And also, I thought it would be good to look at Ibn 'Arabī's commentary. There is a debate about the role of this when reading the poems. Nicholson and also Maurice Gloton,⁶ who has produced a full version of the poems and commentary in French, have printed the two things side by side, but Michael Sells does not do this, and in fact does not refer very much at all to the commentary, maintaining that the poems are best experienced as things in themselves, without being coloured even by the author's remarks. One the whole, on this course, we have followed Michael's approach and not given you many guidelines in approaching any of the poems, believing that they do have their own valid reality even in translation. But on the poem I have chosen the commentary does say some very interesting things which add another dimension to our understanding. So I suggest that we look first at the poem with a few notes by me so that you can get some idea of the basic meaning, and then I will give you some notes taken from the commentary, and see what difference it makes. I want to emphasise that we are not to understand that there is a 'right' interpretation of the poems which is given by Ibn 'Arabī's own exposition; his comments are often very obscure and inaccessible without long exposure to his work and so they really an additional resource to be incorporated where relevant. Actually, I think it is true to say that no-one, not even the most learned Ibn 'Arabī scholars, really understands these notes in their entirety.

⁵ See the Muhyddin Ibn 'Arabī web-site
<http://www.ibnarabisociety.org/articles/sellswaystations.html>

⁶ *L'interprète des desires*, Albin, Paris, 1996

Finally, we will read Poem 11 – just read it – and listen to it being sung by the Moroccan Sufi group, the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabī Ensemble.⁷ For those of you who don’t know the poem, we are doing this because it contains some of the most famous lines in whole mystical tradition of Islam, which are always worth mentioning. Also, the recording illustrates the fact that these verses, and many of the others we have studied on this course, are still being recited and listened to within the Islamic world, often within this kind of folk music tradition. On this same album, there are verses from Ibn al-Fāriḍ and from Shustarī, as well as the famous poem by Rābia‘ al-adawiyya “I have loved you with two loves” which we studied on the first course.

Jane Clark, 11/11/2012

⁷ Ensemble Ibn ‘Arab, *Chants Soufis Arabo-Andalous*, Long Distance Recordings.