

Mystical Islamic Poetry 4, Week 4.

Abū ‘Abd Allāh Musharrif al-dīn b. Muṣliḥ Sa‘dī, known as Shaykh Sa‘di, (1206/8 -1291/4)

- *All men and women are to each other
the limbs of a single body,
each of us drawn from life’s shimmering essence, God’s perfect pearl;
and when this life we share wounds one of us,
all share the hurt as if it were our own.
You, who will not feel another’s pain,
you forfeit the right to be called human.¹*

This poem (which you can hear sung in Persian on <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FtRZjcHdDOA>) is perhaps the best known of all Sa‘di’s verses. It comes from his *Gulistān* (The Rose Garden, Book 1, Anecdote 10), one of the two master works – the other entitled the *Bustān* or Herb Garden – for which he is lastingly famous both in Persia and beyond. He was the first Persian poet to come into European languages – the first translation into Latin was in 1651 – and he has been quoted by Voltaire, Emerson, and two American presidents; Benjamin Franklin (who used to narrate the story of Abraham which is No 5 on the attached sheet) and President Obama, who quoted these very lines in an address to Iran. They are also displayed in the Hall of Nations in the UN Building in New York.

- The lines illustrate Sa‘dī’s humanistic philosophy, which is one of his most famous attributes, and which has endeared him to western proponents of the Enlightenment. There are many other examples of such universalist sentiments in his work, which constantly defends the poor and helpless, and advocates compassion towards all people.
- Sa‘di is not known solely as a mystical poet, as Rūmī or Shushtarī are. He is what one commentator has called “the great Persian all-rounder” who wrote all sorts of different poetry; he wrote love poems and mystical poems, but he is most loved in the Persian world because of his books of what you might call practical wisdom. His *Gulistān*, in particular, is full of stories and anecdotes which make a moral point, embody some form of wisdom about the way we should behave, or lay out some ethical principle. Whereas Rūmī’s

¹ See *Selections from Saadi’s Gulistan*, translated by Richard Jeffrey Newman,. Global Scholarly Publications, New York, 2004.

poetry when considered at full length is very complex, and designed, as we said, to perplex us and challenge our perceptions in order to bring us to a higher state of knowledge, Sa‘dī is more down-to-earth; his poems are very beautiful and pleasant to listen to, and, taking the form of entertaining and fairly short but thought-provoking stories, accessible to the ordinary listener. They are very much about living life in this world in a proper manner. This does not at all mean that he is a folk poet like Shustarī or Yunus Emre; he is extremely learned and educated, and is considered to be a master – perhaps THE master in Persian – of language and literary form.

- He seems to have been a professional poet, and had a number of patrons to whom he composed panegyrics – or poems of praise. The *Bustān* was dedicated to the local ruler in Shirāz, Abū Bakr b. Sa‘d b. Zangī, and the *Gulistān* to his son, Sa‘d al-dīn Abū Bakr, from whom he took his pen-name Sa‘dī. But he was not resident in Shirāz for the whole of his life, but spent the middle 30 years travelling and living in many different places. He lived in extremely turbulent and dangerous times, when the Mongol invaders were taking over much of the territory of the Islamic Empire and the rulership of the different regions was constantly in flux. It seems that Sa‘dī was a survivor who was not averse to transferring his loyalty to whoever was in power in order to scrape a living. However, he does not seem to have been a court poet as such; even his panegyrics do not consist of unadulterated praise for his patrons but of moral advice, and he devotes much space in his work in general to laying out the correct conduct of kings and princes, which is an implicit criticism of the governance he saw around him.²
- His position as regards the mystical tradition is a matter for scholarly discussion.³ He was called Shaykh Sa‘dī, and in his native Shirāz he is venerated as a saint; if you watch the video I have mentioned above, you will see pictures of his very grand tomb. But he does not seem to have been a card-carrying member of any Sufi order or to have undertaken formal training. However, his poems are full of tales and accounts of dervishes and their way of life, and he may well have spent some time travelling with the bands of wandering Sufi groups who were threading the Islamic empire at this time. He also wrote some very beautiful poetry which would without doubt be classed as ‘mystical’ in its expression of passion for the divine Beloved. And it seems that he spent the last years of his life more or less in seclusion and contemplation.

² See Homa Kataouzian *Sa‘di, the Poet of Life, Love and Compassion*, Oxford: Oneworld Publishers, 2006.

³ See Homa Katouzian, ‘Sufism in Sa‘di and Sa‘di on Sufism’ in *The Heritage of Sufism, Vol. 2*, Edited by Leonard Lewisohn, Oneworld, Oxford, 1999.

- So one could perhaps say of Sa‘dī that he demonstrates the extent to which the principles and practice of the Sufi tradition had become common-place by this period of Islam. The Sufis had an enormous social presence, and really provided what one could call ‘the pastoral care’ of the community. One would go to a *faqīh*, or religious lawyer, to obtain a ruling on the legality of one’s actions under Islamic law, but you would go to your local Sufi shaykh or saint for advice and help with the problems of daily life – when you lost your job or your children misbehaved, or when you were sick, etc. At a time when there was enormous social upheaval, the Sufis provided a much-needed anchor and source of wisdom. This translation of the sophisticated metaphysics of people like Ibn ‘Arabī, and the intimate experience of people like Rūmī and Shushtarī, into a down-to-earth philosophy for everyday life based on compassion, tolerance and self-awareness is a very important aspect of the Sufi tradition which we may not have mentioned very much before in these courses. But this is very much what Sa‘dī provides.

Some people, because of the survivalist element in his work, have called his philosophy “Machiavellian”. But the EI says about this:

“... it is true that both Machiavelli and Sa‘dī, writing in turbulent and potentially disastrous political circumstances, strove to provide advice that would ensure their audience’s successful negotiation of an exceptionally risky and faction-ridden world. The crucial difference is that, whereas Machiavelli writes directly for a central actor in such political upheavals, Sa‘dī’s intended audience... would seem to be much more those on the sidelines of major events, hoping to survive by luck and their wits. Further, in Sa‘dī’s case, to this “Machiavellian” preoccupation with survival must be added a strong sympathy for the vulnerable and weak... and a constantly reiterated plea for tolerance, perhaps the result of the poet’s travels.”⁴

- The other thing to mention is that he was known as a great lover, and a very large part of his poetic output was love poetry; he is regarded as having brought the *ghazal* to its final perfection, in which form it has continued more or less unchanged to the present day. He wrote poems in praise of both the women and young men, as was very much the custom of his time, and he seems to have been a fervent practitioner of *shahid bāzī* i.e. contemplating the beauty of God in the face of beautiful boys. The extent to which all his love poems can be regarded as mystical poems depends on whether one believes that the

⁴ R Davis in *EIII* ‘Sa‘dī’.

object of all love poetry can be transposed to the divine Beloved. Rūmī, for instance, says in the passage we read two weeks ago:

*No matter whether love is of this world
or the next, it steals us to that world*

The other point of view is that there are cases when the beloved is just too obviously earthly to make this kind of transposition, and it seems that many of Sa‘dī’s *ghazals* are definitely concerned with human rather than divine love. Some of them are even regarded as unpublishable in scholarly editions because they are so graphic.

These love poems have not been translated on the whole, but you can listen to a very famous one in a popular rendering on http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_t9HEr_T74o, which perhaps gives you an idea of the great beauty of the original language (Poem 2 on the sheet). You should be able to hear, and indeed see because the text is given as well, that this is composed as a standard mono-rhyme. This is a poem that I think you could read both ways – bearing in mind Rābi‘a’s famous declaration to God: “Next to You, a house in paradise”.

Life and Works

- He was born in Shirāz, in about 1208-9, and died in 1291/4; so he is more or less contemporary with Rūmī, although he lived longer. The two men are said to have met. By his own accounts, he was an orphan who had a hard upbringing, but when he was about 25 he left Shirāz to take up a scholarship at the famous Nizāmiyya Madrassa in Baghdād, where he studied jurisprudence; in his own account, he studied under the great Sufi al-Suhrawardi (Abū-Hafs ‘Umar al-Suhrawardī, d. 1234) and the theologian al-Jawzī (Sibt Ibn al-Jawzī, d. 1256). But he became disillusioned with his studies, which he found dry, and left to take up a life of travelling for the next 30 years.
- The extent of his travels is rather debated. Early scholars took his own account at face value and believed that his writings were largely autobiographical. So they believed that he had travelled all over the Islamic world, and beyond it, to India and into Europe; that he had been captured by Crusaders at Acre and spent seven years as a slave digging trenches outside its fortress; that he was ransomed by a man who lived in the Yemen on the condition that he marry his daughter; that he had lived in the remote areas of the desert, mixing with bandits, renegade soldiers and dervishes, and travelling with merchants whose caravans were following the silk road, etc. But more recent scholarship has come to the

understanding that his use of the first person in the narratives of the *Bustān* and *Gulistān* is a literary device, and he probably did not do many of these things personally. His actual travels were most likely restricted to the usual central regions of Baghdād, Damascus, Cairo, Jerusalem, which were probably quite exciting enough given the political and social turmoil of the times. However, what the narratives do illustrate is the huge mental geographic area which was the province of Islam at this time; people's imaginative world encompassed a huge and culturally diverse area.

- Sa'di returned to his native city in about 1257 and it was here that he wrote the two master-works for which he is most famous. The conceit of the *Bustān* is that it was written as a gift for his fellow citizens in Shirāz to explain what he had been doing for the last 30 years. It is a poem in *mathnawī* form of about 8,000 verses, divided into 10 sections.

1. Justice, Sound Government and Good Judgement
2. Beneficence
3. Love, Intoxication and Ecstasy
4. Humility
5. Resignation
6. Contentment
7. Edification
8. Gratitude
9. Repentance
10. A Prayer

The *Gulistān* was written only a year later, in 1258, and is rather a different kind of work consisting of short pieces of prose into which verses are interposed. It is divided into eight sections:

1. Manners of rulers
2. Morals of dervishes
3. Virtues of contentment
4. Advantages of Silence
5. On Love and Youth
6. On Weakness and Old Age
7. Effects of Education
8. Rules of Conduct.

Both of these are considered to be not only highly innovative in their form – no-one had done anything like this before – but also to be superlative in their use of language and imagery. G M M Wickens, who has done a translation of the *Bustān* published by Brill, says:

Sa‘di, in the Bustān, set a new standard, which marks him off even from such great contemporaries as ‘Attar and Rumi, to say nothing of those who tried to imitate him in succeeding centuries. Not only is his poem one of the longest (at least in the category of general moralistic literature), but it is in its combination of variety, epigrammatic fluency, and restrained elegance a sustained tour de force.... No one else in Persian poetry could say so much to the point in so little compass. Furthermore, there is scarcely a single “overblown” line in the whole work. ⁵

- Rūmī is often compared to Shakespeare because of the great breadth and majesty of his work. Sa‘dī however, famous on the one hand for his sermonizing and on the other for his love poetry, has been compared the 17th century metaphysical poet, John Donne.
- Sa‘dī, as I have said, was the first Persian poet to be translated into a European language, and he was immensely influential upon western thinkers of that time, who regarded him as far more important than other writers such as Rūmī. There are several partial translations of *Bustān* and *Gulistān* done in the 19th century and early 20th, all of which are very difficult to read now because they attempt to keep the end rhyme, sacrificing clarity of meaning. In recent years, the pendulum has rather swung away from him and translators have tended to concentrate upon Rūmī or Hāfiz. The result is that it has proved very difficult to find a good modern version of the poems. However, I have eventually found versions done a man called Richard Jeffrey Newman in 2004 and 2006. These are both out of print, but this very kind man is willing to send out PDF copies of the book to anyone who wants them. The poems we are going to read tonight are all taken from his versions.⁶

⁵ Saadi, *Morals Pointed and Tales Adorned: The Bustan of Sadi*, trans. G. M. Wickens (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974) xx. Quote by Richard Newman, p. 13

⁶ *Selections from Saadi’s Bustan*, translated by Richard Jeffrey Newman, based on G M Wickens 1974 translation. Global Scholarly Publications, New York, 2006. *Selections from Saadi’s Gulistan*, translated by Richard Jeffrey Newman,. Global Scholarly Publications, New York, 2004.