

Mystical Islamic Poetry 7

‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nabulusi (1641-1731)

Our poet for this week, ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nabulusi, is very different from Sultan Buhū whose short, folksy verses we looked at last week. Al-Nabulusi is one of the towering genius’s of the late Islamic world, a polymath who was both a mystic and a scholar, to whom are attributed around 280 works, including four substantial volumes of poetry; we don’t know how many verses he wrote altogether, but the collection we will be looking at, *Dawn al-Ḥaqqā’iq*, containing his mystical poetry, is more than 500 pages long – all basically in Arabic. Living in the late 17th/18th century in Ottoman Damascus, he was also a modern man whose work paralleled in some way the intellectual developments in Europe during what is called the Enlightenment, following the revolutionary work of Descartes (1596-1650); he was an almost exact contemporary of Isaac Newton (1642-1727), Leibnitz (1646-1716) and Voltaire (1694-1798). Samer Akkach, who is perhaps the most important scholar working on al-Nabulusi in the English-speaking world at the moment, subtitles his book on his thought “Islam and the Enlightenment”,¹ seeing in al-Nabulusi an equivalent figure within the Muslim world, although, as a follower of Ibn ‘Arabī, his thought took a slightly different tack in certain important respects.² Akkach writes:

“He presented a new individualistic model of a self-made Sufi master, one that relied on texts rather than masters for spiritual attainment, and who saw no conflict between worldly pleasures and spiritual fulfilment. Through his teachings, he attempted to expand the scope of rationality in religious thinking. He articulated a philosophy of religion that supported an ecumenical and egalitarian understanding of Islam and enhanced its scope for tolerance, and introduced a philosophy of being” – i.e. based upon the *waḥdat al-wujūd* or “unity of being” – “as a viable alternative to the natural philosophy that was emerging in Europe. Through his public reading of highly controversial mystical texts he also strove to create a new

¹ Samer Akkach, *Abd al-Ghanī al-Nabulusi*, OneWorld, 2007.

² For a comparison between al-Nabulusi’s concept of the self and that of Descartes, see the podcast: Self-Knowledge and Self-Consciousness in Islamic Philosophy and Mysticism <http://www.ibnarabisociety.org.uk/podcasts/archives/0710/akkach.mp3>

social space for mysticism, one that promoted public participation rather than privacy, secrecy and elitism”.³

To these ends he wrote on a huge range of subjects; on Islamic law and Sufi practice, on metaphysics, writing some famous commentaries and expositions of Ibn ‘Arabī’s ideas. He is perhaps best known for his book on the interpretation of dreams, for his commentary upon Ibn al-Fārid’s famous *Poem of the Way*, and for initiating a new genre of literature in the form of spiritual travel writing. He also wrote tracts in support of smoking (which was forbidden at certain periods in Damascus), coffee houses, singing and dancing during Sufi ceremonies (in particular, he was supportive of the *mevlevi* order, referred to in the west as “the whirling dervishes” because of their practice of “turning”), and the controversial practice of gazing upon the faces of young boys (*shāhid bāzi*).⁴ As such, he was a highly controversial figure in an age when the forces of conservatism – within the Ottoman Empire represented by a group called the Kadizāde’s – had considerable influence and power. However, al-Nabulusi seems to have largely side-stepped their attacks and he lived to be over 90. He is buried in Damascus and his tomb, which can still be visited, or at least could be up to a few years ago before the Syrian civil war began, is just down the road from that of his beloved Ibn ‘Arabī in the Salihyya district.

There is a great deal that could be said about his fascinating man, but I am just going to give a brief outline of his life in the context of the poetry. He was born and brought up in Damascus; he came from an eminent family of religious scholars and judges who had deep roots in Damascus, although they had spent some time in Palestine, hence the surname al-Nabulusi. His father was a scholar, who gave him his early education in Qur’ān and *ḥadith*; he is said to have memorised the Qur’ān by the age of five. His mother was also from an eminent family and, as with Sultan Bahu, played an important part in his spiritual education. When he was 12 his father died, but the family was wealthy enough to support his continuing education, and he came under the tutelage of a Hanbalite scholar, ‘Abd al-Bāqī‘ Hanbalī.

³ Ibid, p. xii

⁴ For a good exposition of this practice, see Cyrus A Zargar, *Sufi Aesthetics: Beauty, Love and the Human Form in the writings of Ibn ‘Arabī and ‘Irāqī*, Columbia, 2011

The first public signs of his genius came when he was in his early twenties, when he wrote and publicly recited a poem of praise to the Prophet in the complex style of *badī‘a*. We saw something of this tradition in our last series when we studied the poems of Ai‘shah al-Ba‘ūniyya, also from Damascus. The standard form of these praise poems had become by this time very elaborate, with each line exhibiting a different technical effect or ‘verbal trick’, which played upon the sounds and meanings of words. Al-Nabulusi, who claimed that the poem was given to him by divine inspiration, exhibited an extraordinary number of these technical *tropes* – the poem was 150 lines long – and because of his young age people accused him of copying it from someone else. So they challenged him to write a commentary explaining it, and he astonished them by producing a work of equal length and sophistication, written in both prose and poetry, within three weeks.⁵

One aspect of this story is that it gives a taste of the way that poetry was composed and appreciated during this time. We saw in our last course⁶ the state at which classical Persian poetry had reached as a court tradition by the 16th century – in which the poems were riddled with references to the works of past poets which the audience was challenged to recognise, and full of puns and plays upon words. In this era, this practice had transposed into public exhibitions of poetry, where groups of the social and intellectual elite would gather and have poetry ‘competitions’ where they would challenge each to improvise verses, spontaneously respond to each other’s work, etc. In Damascus, these gathering often took place in beautiful gardens, either private or public, and it was within these situations that al-Nabalusi gained his reputation as a poet. One of his *diwān*’s, entitled *Burj Bābel wa shaduw al-Balābil*⁷ (The Wine of Babel and Singing of the Nightingales) is in fact an anthology of verses composed in such environments by him and his friends over a period of 35 years. This, being fundamentally devoted to physical pleasure, is a very different sort of poetry from that found in his collection of mystical verses *Diwān al-Ḥaqā’iq*.⁸ (The Collection of Realities). Collecting poems into different books according to their different subject

⁵ These two works together came to constitute his first published work, *Nafahāt al-azhar ‘alā nasamat al-ashar*, Beirut, ‘Alam al-Kutub.

⁶ <http://open.conted.ox.ac.uk/sites/open.conted.ox.ac.uk/files/resources/Introduction%20to%20Nūr%20a%20l.pdf>

⁷ Ed. Ahmed al-Jundī, Damascus, 1988. See Samer Akkach “The Wine of Babel: Landscape, Gender and Poetry in Early Modern Damascus”, in *Lonaard Magazine*, 7/2, 2012, pp. 76-90

⁸ Beirut, 1986.

matter is a change from usual practice. As we have seen previously, many mystical poems were actually quite ambiguous, capable of being interpreted as being devoted to either a physical or a spiritual beloved, but with al-Nabulusi, it is always clear whether a poem has a material or spiritual beloved.

Shortly after his poetic triumph, al-Nabalusi made his first journey away from Damascus and travelled to Istanbul, which was of course the capital and cultural centre of the Ottoman world. But he had no sooner arrived, than he met an ecstatic Sufi in the street who shouted at him: “There is nothing for you here. Go back towards the *qiblah*” – a reference to Damascus as the place which, for the Ottomans, was the starting point of the pilgrimage to Mecca. So he instantly returned. But along the way he had his first encounter with practical Sufism and became initiated into the Qādirī Order by a direct descendent of its founder, ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Gilānī (d. 1166). It seems, however, that he did not gain his spiritual knowledge from a living master. Rather, he believed that it was better to take ones knowledge from the writings of the great masters. For him, this meant in particular the writings of Ibn ‘Arabī (1165-1240), the great Andalusian mystic whose massive corpus of works constitutes a complete exposition of spiritual principles and perspective. Al-Nabulusi was so devoted to Ibn ‘Arabī, and so identified with his teaching, that he was widely regarded as being his reincarnation; he wrote a famous commentary upon the *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*,⁹ held public readings of his *magnum opus al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* and produced several works outlining the principles of *waḥdāt al-wujūd*¹⁰. In addition, like all Ottoman Sufis, al-Nabulusi also drew heavily upon the work of Jalāl al-dīn Rūmī.¹¹ But he also studied the works of other contemporaries from the 13th century; Ibn Sa‘bīn, whom we have met before as the master of the great North African poet al-Shushtarī, and his son-in-law, Afīf al-dīn al-Ṭilimsānī, a well-known poet himself and a disciple of Ibn ‘Arabī. In this choice of reading material, al-Nabulusi showed himself as an extremely radical thinker, Ibn Sa‘bīn and al-Ṭilimsānī being especially singled out by Ibn Taymiyya and hence the Kadizādī’s for criticism; they were considered even more heretical more Ibn ‘Arabī.

⁹ *al-Jawāhir al-nuṣūṣ*, ed. al-Kayyālī, 2 vols, Beirut, 2008.

¹⁰ The famous of these, *al-Wujūd al-ḥaqq*, is available in an Arabic translation edited by Bakri Aladdin, Damascus, 1995.

¹¹ See Ahmad Sukkar “‘Abd al-Ghani al-Nabulusi of Damascus (d. 1143/1731) and the Mawlawi Sufi Tradition” in *Rūmī Review*, Vol. 4, 2014, pp. 136-170.

About two years after he returned to Damascus, al-Nabulusī had another encounter with a Sufi master, this time a member of the Naqshbandī Order who followed the way of an Indian teacher, Tāj al-dīn. This initiated a period of retreat, which lasted seven years, which he spent in his family house near the perfume market in the old city, close to the Umayyad Mosque. Here he experienced a great many visions and ecstatic experiences which established his reputation as a mystic as well as a poet and a scholar; he was widely believed to have reached the very highest states of union. Out of these experiences came several books, including the famous book on dream interpretation, *Taʿtir al-anam fī taʿbir al-manam* (The Perfuming of Humanity through the Interpretation of Dreams),¹² and his own record of a number of conversations he had directly with God in a book called *Munājāt*¹³.

When he came out of retreat in 1687, when he still in his mid-forties, he re-entered public life consciously, in a state of what he called ‘solitude in a crowd’, i.e. in which he was outwardly in the world but inwardly with God – which is the stated aim of the Naqshbandī’s, as well of course of Sufism in general. This was a period in which he took on the role of a Sufi master, and when he initiated public readings of mystical works, as Akkach mentioned, to which all were invited, not just the elite of the city. He said in a poem:

They say: do not utter what you know

Amongst the ignorant folk, for that is shameful.

I say to them: leave the blame, for we are

under the demand of disclosure....¹⁴

Between 1689 and 1700, he undertook four journeys outside Damascus, visiting modern-day Lebanon, Palestine and Jerusalem, Egypt and Mecca, where he did the pilgrimage, and finally Tripoli. Out of these came a series of travel books – written apparently in rhyming prose – in which he described the holy places he had visited,

¹² Ed. Y. al-Shaykh M. Sidon, al-Maktaba al-ʿAsriyya.

¹³ No printed edition available as far as I know.

¹⁴ Akkach *ʿAbd al-Ghanī*... p. 125.

the tombs of the saints to whom he paid his respects and the Sufi practitioners he met along the way.¹⁵ This was a period when he felt attacked and criticised fiercely by the forces of conservatism, and also when Damascus was undergoing considerable political turmoil, such that he feared for his life. So he and his family left his family home in the city centre and moved up the hill to Salihyya, at the bottom of Mount Qassioun, and made a new home close to Ibn ‘Arabī’s tomb. He spent the last 30 years of life in the relative peace and quiet of the suburbs, and died, as I have already mentioned, at the age of about 93. He may have been condemned by the conservatives – although this happened less as he grew older – but he was also widely loved and revered by the Damascenes, who regarded him as their local saint, and treasured him for his efforts in the public sphere to condemn bribery and corruption, and to fight on their behalf against injustice and oppression. This a quote from one of his biographers:

“It is of his character that he wears splendid clothes, eats delicious food and sleeps on expensive furniture, without any of these distracting him from God. When he goes out, he rides on a couch, wearing head-gear in the manner of the distinguished *ulema*, with servants and students walking in front of him and on his right and left side. He passes no Muslim without saluting him first with a smiling and cheerful face.”¹⁶

The Poetry

Remarkably for such an extraordinary and important figure, Al- Nabalusi has not been well studied in our modern era. Even, in the Arabic world, only about 54 of his 280+ works are available in printed editions, and in the west, there are really only two books about him – the one I have already mentioned by Samer Akkach,¹⁷ and a biography by Elizabeth Sirriyeh.¹⁸ There are no complete translations into English of any of his works that I have been able to find. In the autumn of 2014, there was a big conference about him in Tübingen which brought together scholars from all over the world, so perhaps things will change.

¹⁵ For studies of these, see Elizabeth Sirriyeh “The Mystical Journeys of ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nabalusi” in *Die Welt des Islam* 25, 1985, pp. 84-96, Samer Akkach, “The Poetics of Concealment: al-Nabalusi’s Encounter with the Dome of the Rock” *Muqarnas* 22, 2005, pp. 110-27.

¹⁶ Akkach *‘Abd al-Ghani*, p. 126

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Elizabeth Sirriyeh *Sufi Visionary of Ottoman Damascus*, Routledge-Curzon, London, 2005.

As for the poetry; al-Nabalusi wrote four volumes of poetry, two which we have already mentioned; the *Burj Bābel* and the *Diwān al-Ḥaqā'iq*. There is also one entirely consisting of praise poems to the Prophet, and one which gathers together miscellaneous verses; this last does not even have a good published edition and exists only as a damaged manuscript. The *Diwān al Haqā'iq* is about 450 pages long in the Bulāq edition, published in 1889, and contains we would guess around 1000 poems. There is really nothing translated into English apart from a few lines translated by Samer and Ahmad within their other work, so the first three poems which are presented alongside this introduction have been translated by Ahmad Sukkar and myself, and are a kind of first stab, and the second three have all been translated by Samer Akkach in his various publications.

The main thing to say about the poems that we have looked at, is that they are very difficult; highly reminiscent of Ibn 'Arabī's poetry, drawing on a huge range of references both geographical, cosmological, cultural and poetic, as well as referring to the most advanced spiritual stations – moving from expressions of love to metaphysics within a line – and full of complex word play. They are also very lovely, and to get the full effect, one has really to hear them in the original Arabic. Many of them, or parts of them, are sung by the musicians in Syria, Sudan and even Europe, even today, and for a Syrian rendering of Poem 3 on our sheet, try the short video on <http://www.aramram.com/episode/1650>.

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Podcast

Samer Akkach: Self-Knowledge and Self-Consciousness in Islamic Philosophy and Mysticism

<http://www.ibnarabisociety.org.uk/podcasts/archives/0710/akkach.mp3>

Jane Clark, 2015.