

The Preface to the *Tarjumān al-ashwāq*

A provisional translation by Jane Clark, based upon the text by R A Nicholson in *The Tarjumān al-Ashwāq* (Theosophical Publishing House, London, 1911)

In the name of God the merciful and the compassionate.

Praise be to God whose actions are beautiful (*al-ḥasan al-fi'āl*), “the Beautiful (*jamīl*) who loves beauty (*al-jamāl*)”,¹ who created the world in the most perfect (*akmal*) form and adorned it (*zayyanahu*).² He chaptered out in degrees the wisdom of the unknowable when He brought it into being, alluding through it to the place of the mystery and particularising it. He set out a detailed summary of it for the ones who know [God] and explained it, and made that which is within the realm of bodies an adornment (*zayna*) for it.³ Then he caused the knowers to “pass away” (*afnā*) in the witnessing (*mushāhada*) of that adornment with ecstasy and rapture (*wajdan wa walahan*).

May God give His blessings and peace upon the one who was revealed to in the best (*aḥsan*) form, the one who was sent with the most complete (*akmal*) way and the most excellent (*aḥsan*) life, Muḥammad Ibn ‘Abd Allah, who was spoken to in the high station, the one who was favoured with total perfection (*al-kamāl al-kullī*) and the bringing down of the inspiration [of the Qur’ān], and upon his family and his friends.

When I stayed in Mecca in the year 598H, I came to know a group of excellent people, a cultivated and knowledgeable group consisting of both venerable men and women. But despite their superiority in occupying themselves with their souls and their concern to examine every moment of their lives, I did not see amongst them anyone like the learned *shaykh* who was the Imām in the place dedicated to (*maqām*)

¹ A reference to the well-known *ḥadīth*: “God is beautiful and He loves beauty”, Muslim, Īmān, 147.

² Following the vowelling in *Ayasofia* 1723.

³ Q 18:7 “That which is upon the earth we have made but as an adornment for it [the earth], in order that we may test them as to which of them are the best (*aḥsan*) in their actions.”

Abraham (SA), the resident of the land of faith [Mecca], Makīn al-dīn Abī Shajā‘ Zāhir b. Rustam, son of Abū al-Rajā al-Isfahānī (may God be merciful to him) and his sister, the old learned *shaykha* of the Hijaz, Fakhr al-Nisā’ bint Rustam. As for the shaykh; we studied the book of *ḥadīth* of Abū ‘Īsā al-Tirmidhī and many sections [of the Qur’ān] with him in the company of excellent people. He was a highly cultivated man, and being with him was like sitting in a scented garden.⁴ He (RA) was pleasant in the conduct of friendship and an elegant and stimulating companion who always delighted his guests and entertained his friends. He was a man of substance and self-sufficiency who only spoke on matters which concerned him.

As for his sister Fakhr al-Nisā’, the “glory of women”⁵ – or rather “the glory of men and learned people” – I sent [a message] to her because of the high standard of her transmission [of *ḥadīth*]. She replied: “Hope has passed away, and the appointed time approaches. The urgency of the work [still to be done] has distracted me from what you ask of me concerning transmission. It is as if death has assaulted me and I am in a deep state of repentance”. When I heard that she had said this, I wrote her a verse:

*My state and your state in the transmission of hadith are one;
There is no objective other than knowledge and applying it.*

So she permitted her brother, as her delegate, to write us a general permission to transmit all the *ḥadīth* she had taught, and he (RA) wrote that out and gave it to us. He also wrote an outline of all [the *ḥadīth*] he had learnt from her, and a general permission. I wrote for him a poem which I had composed for him, in which I said:

*I heard the Tirmidhi according to the great Shaykh (Makīn),
The imām of men in the land of faith (balad al-amīn).*

This shaykh (RA) had an unmarried⁶ daughter, a slim and elegant girl who was riveting to gaze upon. She adorned the assemblies [at her father’s house], delighting whoever was addressing the gathering and confounding her peers. She was called Nizām, and she was named ‘*Ayn al-shams wa al-bahā*’ – “the source of the sun and

⁴ In this sentence and the next, and in several other places in this introduction, Ibn ‘Arabī expresses himself in the flowering literary language of rhyming prose (*saj’*) which is extremely difficult to render into modern English. I have therefore tried to convey the meaning and substance, rather than the literal translation, of his praise of Makīn al-dīn.

⁵ This is the meaning of her name.

⁶ Ar: ‘*adhrā*’ = literally virgin. Ibn ‘Arabī uses the same term here as is used for the Virgin Mary.

the glory”. She was one of the women who are learned and who serve God, who are dervishes and ascetics – the *shaykha* of the two sanctuaries [Mecca and Medina] and the culture of the greatest sacred land [Mecca], without doubt. She was bewitching in looks, ‘Irāqī⁷ in her culture. If she talked at length, she could outstay anyone; if she spoke concisely she did it in inimitable style; and if she spoke eloquently, she was lucid. If she declaimed, Quss al- Sā‘ida⁸ would fall silent; if she showed generosity, Ma‘n Ibn Zā‘ida⁹ would withdraw, and if she showed faith, al-Samaw‘al¹⁰ would fall short and jump onto the bare back of treachery and ride it.

If it were not for the weak souls who are quick to fall into error and unhealthy states, then I would undertake to explain the beauty that God had placed within her constitution and her character. She was a rain-fed meadow;¹¹ a sun amongst the knowers¹² and a garden amongst the cultured; a sealed flask¹³ and the central pearl of a perfectly strung necklace;¹⁴ the unique one¹⁵ of her time and the most precious thing of her age. She was abundant in her generosity¹⁶ and lofty in her aspirations; the lady of her valley and the mistress of her associates. Her dwelling place was with nobility, and her residence was like the black [centre] of the eye, or the inner secret (*al-fu‘ād*) of the heart (*al-ṣadr*). Tihāma¹⁷ shone because of her, and due to her proximity, the meadows opened their calyxes, and the fragrances of the flowers of knowledge

⁷ The root ‘*a-r-q* has a meaning of ‘deep-rooted’ and can refer to an ancient family line or nobility. ‘*Irāqī* can also be a reference to Nizām’s Persian ancestry. Throughout the *Tarjumān*, she is presented as the exemplar of the refined ‘*ajamī* culture of Persia in contrast to Ibn ‘Arabī’s own Arab culture of the ‘far west’. See Michael Sells on

<http://www.ibnarabisociety.org.uk/podcasts/archives/1202/sells.mp3>

⁸ A semi-legendary figure of Arab antiquity famous for his eloquence, and also, in some traditions, for his poetry. See Pellat, Ch., EI II, Brill Online, 2012.

⁹ Another legendary figure from the late Umayyad/early ‘Abbāsīd period who was famed for his generosity. He was noted particularly for his patronage of poets. See Kennedy, H. EI II, Brill Online, 2012.

¹⁰ A reference to al-Samaw‘al b. ‘Ādiyā, a Jewish-Arabic poet who lived in the middle of the 6th century. He is most famous for his association with the poet and Kinda prince Imru‘ al-Qays, who entrusted his armour to al-Samaw‘al. Samuel kept his trust even when his son was threatened, leading to a popular saying: “more loyal than al-Samaw‘al”. See Bauer, Th. EI II, Brill Online 2013.

¹¹ Here again, in the rest of this passage, Ibn ‘Arabī expresses himself in rhyming prose.

¹² The Arabic word for ‘knowers’ – ‘*ulama*’ – can also be a reference to the heavenly bodies, who were regarded in medieval cosmology as manifestations of the divine intellect. Therefore Nizām is depicted as the centre around which all the other planets revolve.

¹³ See Q83:25: “Their thirst will be slaked with pure wine sealed”. This is an image of purity, as the wine is sealed to protect its purity and flavour.

¹⁴ Ar: *wāsiṭa ‘iqd al-manẓūm*: This is usually portrayed as a perfect pearl, and can be a symbol of the divine intellect, ‘*aql*.

¹⁵ Ar: *yatīma*, which also has the meaning of being an orphan, the only one of its kind.

¹⁶ Reading *sābiḡha* as in Ayasofia 1877, f. 2a.

¹⁷ Strictly speaking, Tihāma is Red Sea coastal plain of Arabia from the Gulf of Aqaba to the Bab el Mandeb Strait. Along with Najd and Hijāz, it is one of the places that take on a mythic quality in the pre-Islamic poetical tradition (see Stetkevych, J. *The Zephyrs of Najd* (Chicago, 1993) pp. 114, 116, 118.) But here, because of its proximity to the sacred city, the reference could simply be to Mecca.

diffused the delicate and subtle mystical [mysteries] that they contain. You could see in her the touch of an angel and the aspiration of a king

We were ever mindful in her company of the dignity of her essential nature, as well as the dignity that was implied by the company of her aunt and her father. We conferred upon her,¹⁸ in the form of our verses (*nizaminā*) in this book, the finest adornments in the language of pure Arabic verse (*nasīb*) and expressions of the appropriate love poetry (*ghazal*).¹⁹ I could not express all that my soul experienced, nor the sense of intimacy aroused by my noble-hearted love for her and my long-standing acquaintance, by the subtlety of her quality and the purity of her abode, since she was both the question and the answer, the most pure virgin (*athrā*). But we strung together (*naẓamnā*) in [these verses] some of the experiences of yearning from those treasures and precious things (*al-dhakhā'ir wa al-ālāq*), and I gave expression to a soul full of desire, and made reference to the devotion in my heart, bearing in mind our long acquaintance and giving due honour to the enlightened company. Every name I mention in the book alludes to her, and every abode I describe means her abode, whilst [at the same time] I never cease to indicate divine inspirations, spiritual revelations and elevated correspondences (*munāsabāt*)²⁰ according to our exemplary way (i.e. the way of the Sufis). For indeed, the next world is better than this one, and it is to her knowledge (RA) that I allude when I refer to it. “None can tell you [the truth] like the one who is aware” (Q 35:14).

So may God safeguard the reader of this part of the *diwān*, and the rest of it, from jumping to conclusions that are not suitable for souls which have turned away [from lower things], who have high intentions and are attached to heavenly matters. I

¹⁸ Throughout this passage there is a word play between the two meanings of the root *n-z-m* – to string a necklace and to compose poetry; thus the verb here, *qallada*, has the meaning of putting on a necklace, or investiture, i.e. putting on the decorations of office.

¹⁹ These are two forms of traditional Arabic verse. The *ghazal* is an independent love poem, originating in the 6th century in Arabic verse and subsequently becoming a popular form of expression throughout the Islamic world. *Ghazals* have been written in many different languages; Persian, Urdu, Turkish, etc. The *nasīb* is also a love poem, but strictly speaking the term refers to the only first section of the Arabic *qasīda* in which the poet describes his love for his beloved. However, the two terms are often used interchangeably when referring to the Arabic tradition. See Jacobi, R., in EI II, Brill Online 2013 and Stetkevych *Zephyrs* p. 145.

²⁰ This is a reference to the Sufi idea that there are the subtle connections between the high and low realms, such that things at one level are perceived to have an ‘affinity’ or ‘correspondence’ with things at another. Ibn ‘Arabī says in *Futūḥāt al-Makīyya*: “Know that there is no form in the lower world without a likeness (*mithl*) in the higher world... Between the two there are subtle threads (*raqā’iq*) that extend from each form to its likeness, such that they are connected, not disconnected. Ascent and descent take place along those subtle threads, so they are ascending and descending ladders. Sometimes they are called ‘affinities’ (*munāsaba*).” (*Futūḥāt* III, 260.6) See Chittick, W., *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany, NY, 1989), p.406 n.6.

believe in His glory, there is no Lord other than Him and God speaks the truth and guides to the right path.

I asked God for guidance and I have set down in these pages some love poems which I composed in Mecca, (may God enoble it and make it great) when I was visiting [the holy places] in Rajab, Sha‘bān and Ramaḍān [of 611H].²¹ I refer in them to divine knowledges, spiritual mysteries, intellectual sciences and religious instructions. I have expressed myself in the language of the *ghazal* and the *nasīb* because the souls love this form of expression, so there will be more incentive for people to incline towards them. I have pointed to the intention in the following verses:

*Whenever I mention ruins,
dwellings or places of abode, or whenever*

*In the same way, I say “her” or I say “oh you”
or, as the case may be, “does it not” or “is it not”²²*

*Or similarly, if I say “she” or if I say “he”
or “they” or “those women” or “those two”*

*Or likewise, if I say in one of our poems that a turn of fate
made me travel in the highlands or in the lowlands,*

Or if I say that the clouds wept or the flowers smiled,

*Or I call to the camel drivers who are heading for
the ban tree of al-Ḥājir, or the doves of al-Ḥimā,*

Or [I refer] to full moons in howdahs,

²¹ Nicholson’s printed text does not give the year, but it appears in other mss. See, for example, Hariocoglu 801, f. 3b.

²² Almost all the phrases used in this poem are drawn from the poems in the main text. For instance, the phrase “Is it not? (*‘a mā*)” appears three times in last line of Poem 4:

‘A mā yakfīhi annī fī qalbiḥī yushāhidunī fī kulli waqtin ‘a mā ‘a mā
Is not enough that I am in his heart/ and that he can see me at every moment. Is it not? Is it not?

I have not attempted here to trace every reference, but this example should suffice to demonstrate the principle; see also the epilogue below where Ibn ‘Arabī describes how the mystics imbue ordinary language with technical meaning in order to convey spiritual experience.

suns, or maidens like stars which have set,

*Or lightening flashes, thunder-claps, the East wind,
the breezes, the South wind, or the North wind,*

*Or the road, or the ravine, the sand-dunes,
the mountain, the hills, or the stony ground,*

*Or a true friend, or a departure, or hills,
rain-fed meadows, thickets, protected precincts,*

*Or young women with swelling breasts
ascending like suns, or white marble statues –*

*Whenever I mention all of these
or their likenesses, understand*

*By them divine secrets and the sublime lights of revelation
brought by the company of the heavens.*

*My inner heart (al-fu'ād) – and the inner hearts of those who have,
like me, the qualities of a knower – possesses*

*A holy and high attribute that testifies
to the truthfulness of what I say.*

*So turn your attention from the external aspects of these things
and seek their inner meaning, so that you may know.*

There is an incident which happened to me when I was circumambulating the house [the Kā'ba] one night. My “moment” (*waqtī*) was propitious, and a state that I had experienced before came upon me suddenly (*hazzanī*).²³ So I left the paved area because of the people and walked on the sand. Some verses presented themselves to me, so I recited them, making them audible to myself and anyone following me, had there been anyone there.

²³ Literally: jolted or shook me.

*Would that I knew whether they knew
Which heart (qalb) they possess,
And if only my inner heart (fu'ād) knew
Which mountain pass (shi'b) they travel through.
Do you see them as being safe,
Or do you see them as having perished?
Those who are consumed with passion (hawā) are perplexed
In love (hawā) and become confused.*

I felt nothing more than a single touch between my shoulders by a hand lighter than silk. I turned round and there I was with a young girl, one of the daughters of Rūm. I had not seen anyone more beautiful than her in the face or more pleasant in speech, more gracious in manner, more subtle in meaning, more delicate in her allusions or more astute in her conversation than her. She surpassed all the people of her time in grace and culture, beauty and knowledge. She said to me: “Sir, what did you say?” I recited:

*“Would that I knew whether they knew
Which heart (qalb) they possess”*

She replied: “It is amazing that you, who are the greatest gnostic of your time, should say such a thing. Is not everything that is possessed known? And is not possession only verified after there has been knowledge and the feeling of yearning informs us of its absence? The way is “a language of truth”,²⁴ so how can someone like you tolerate [saying] this. Tell me, Sir, what did you say after that?” I recited:

*“And if only my inner heart (fu'ād) knew
Which mountain pass (shi'b) they travel through.”*

She said. “Sir, the “mountain pass’ is that which is between the innermost heart (*al-shaghāf*)²⁵ and the inner heart (*al-fu'ād*), and it is that which prevents it from

²⁴ Q 19:50: We bestowed mercy upon them and granted them a language of truth.

²⁵ There is complex interplay in this short poem between the different words used within the Sufi tradition for the heart, each of which conveys a different aspect of its activity. The most common terminology was coined by Ibn ‘Arabī’s predecessor, Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Nūrī, in his classic text ‘The

knowing. So how can someone like you hope for something which it is not possible to attain? The way is “a language of truth”,²⁶ so how can someone like you tolerate [saying] this. Sir, what did you say after that?” I recited:

*“Do you see them as being safe
Or do you see them as having perished?”*

She said: “As for them, they are safe. But as for you; you need to ask yourself whether you are safe or whether you have perished. Sir, what did you say after that?” I recited:

*“Those who are consumed by passion (hawā) are perplexed
In love (hawā) and become confused.”*

She cried out, and said: “How amazing! How can the one who is madly in love (*mashghūf*) have anything left by which he could be perplexed, when the very nature of love (*hawā*) is that it is all-encompassing. It makes the senses wary, and causes the

Stations of the Heart’ (*Maqāmāt al-qulūb*). Stephen Hirtenstein summarises this as follows (see ‘The Mystic Ka‘ba’ JMIAS XX, 20XX):

“...firstly, *ṣadr* (literally, ‘chest’, which is expanded from the pain of constriction and becomes joyful, the first part of something); *qalb* (that which is turned according to the revelation); *fu‘ād* (from a root meaning ‘to hit or strike in the heart’ or ‘to be ardently excited’); and finally, *lubb* (kernel, heart or pith, the best part of something and hence in relation to the human, the deepest understanding or consciousness, free from any negative characteristics).”

The dictionary meaning of *al-shaghāf*, which comes from a root with meanings of ardent passion and love, is the pericardium i.e. the outer, protective casing of the heart, which would make it equivalent to *ṣadr*. But in my opinion it is more likely that here Ibn ‘Arabī is referring to the terminology of Rashīd al-dīn al-Maybudī in his famous “The Unveiling of the Mysteries” (*Kashf al-Asrār*, started 520/ 1126) who uses *shaghāf*, rather than *lubb* for the deepest level. He defines *al-fu‘ād*, which I have rendered as “the inner heart”, as “the pavilion of witnessing of the Real”, and *al-shaghāf*, which I have rendered as “innermost heart”, as: “...the place where one puts down the carpet of love, in accordance with His words: “Love for him has rent her innermost heart” [Q 12:30]. He describes how, when God looks into the innermost heart (*al-shaghāf*) of the mystic, it is:

“A gaze which is the tree, whilst the companionship of the Beloved is its shadow. A gaze which is wine, whilst the heart of the gnostic is its cup. When this gaze reaches the innermost heart, it removes it from water and clay. The person steps into annihilation (*fanā*’).”

(See Sachiko Murata *The Tao of Islam*, New York, 1992, pp. 296-7).

Another aspect of the heart is that the different degrees correspond to the sites of the pilgrimage in Mecca; *ṣadr* = the *haram*; *qalb* = city of Mecca; *fu‘ād* = The Great Mosque; *lubb/shaghāf* = the Ka‘ba (See W P Heinrichs in “Ṣadr”. *EI II*, pp. . . .) Thus there is a symbolic correspondence between the Ka‘ba, around which Ibn ‘Arabī is circumambulating when this poem is composed, and the state of his heart.

²⁶ Q 19:50

intellect (*'aql*) to depart; it confounds the thoughts, and causes the one who is consumed by it to become lost. So where is the perplexity (*hayra*), and who is the one who remains (*bāqin*) here to be perplexed? The way is “a language of truth”, and someone like you allowing [yourself to say] this is not suitable.”

I said to her: “Madam, what is your name?”

She said: “The consolation of the eye (*qurrat al-‘ayn*).”²⁷

I said: “For me”.

Then she said goodbye and turned away. I became acquainted with her after that and came to know her well. I saw in her [greater] subtleties of knowledge than can be conveyed in describing this commentary on these four verses.

Epilogue

The author (may God bless him and benefit us and all Muslims through him) explains: The cause of my commentary upon the *Tarjumān al-Ashwāq*, which I composed in Mecca, was the request of my blessed friend Abū Muḥammad Badr al-Ḥabashī, and of my righteous son Shams al-dīn Ismā‘īl Ibn Sawdakīn al-Nūrī, [when we were staying] in the city of Aleppo, who had heard one of the Islamic lawyers say something which he disputed; i.e. he heard him say that what I say at the beginning of the *Tarjumān* is not true – i.e. that what I intend [to convey] by the *ghazal* verses which are in it are divine knowledges, and esoteric ideas and realities. And that I had only done this as a cover-up, so that I should not be associated with the language of erotic poetry, given my standing in religion and righteousness.

Shams al-dīn Ismā‘īl mentioned this to me, and so I started the commentary in Aleppo, and the speculative theologian [mentioned above] and a group of Islamic lawyers attended a reading of part of it; the recitation was done by Kamāl al-dīn Abū

²⁷ This is an evocative phrase which can also be translated as “freshness of the eye” inasmuch as it refers, in the pre-Islamic tradition, to the power of poetry to make one weep. Thus it implies a state of catharsis and relaxation. It means literally ‘the resting of the eye’, because the object on which it settles gives delight and consolation. Ibn ‘Arabī also attributes the saying: “The consolation of my eye (*qurrat ‘aynī*) was given to me in prayer (*salat*)” to the Prophet Muḥammad in the Chapter on Muḥammad in *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* (see Ibn ‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, trans. ‘Affīfī, Beirut, nd, p, 222).

al-Qāsim Ibn Najm al-dīn, the Qādī Ibn al-‘Adīm, in our house (may God grant him success). We were short of time because of our departure, and therefore we completed it in a slightly abbreviated and imperfect form on the date mentioned. When the one who had made the remark heard [the commentary], he said to Shams al-dīn Isma‘īl: “After this, I will no longer cast aspersions on any of the people of this [Sufi] path for the way that they talk about things in ordinary language, or for their claim that they are indicating divine knowledges to which they customarily refer with these expressions.” What he thought was good, and he benefitted [from the experience]. This was the cause of commentary on the *Tarjumān*, so praise and grace to God, through Him is the power and strength to avoid both excess and lack.
