THE RUINS OF LOVE
Ibn 'Arabi's Poetics of Perplexity

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Abstrak

Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi terkenal dengan karyanya yang banyak dan meliputi hampir setiap subjek, termasuk teologi, kosmologi, hukum, filsafat dan ilmu-ilmu mistis, sekitar 350 karya. Apa yang kurang dikenal adalah kenyataan bahwa ia juga seorang penyair luar biasa dan berbakat, dengan beberapa ribu puisi. Jika ia menjelaskan secara detail fenomenologi dan penafsiran ontologis pengalaman mistik dalam karya-karya seperti *Futūhāt al-Makkiyya*, maka dalam puisinyalah ekspresi gairah cinta-Nya untuk yang tercinta terungkap dalam aspek kemanusiaan yang menyeluruh. Kondisi seseorang yang melalui keterpisahan menuju penyatuan, tauhid, yang diungkapkan melalui puisinya menjadi sangat hidup, melintasi berbagai macam kebahagiaan dan kehilangan yang disadari benar oleh sang pecinta untuk yang tercinta ini dapat ditemukan dalam segala hal, namun tidak dapat dicakupi oleh apapun, juga tidak pernah dimiliki**.**

Kata-kata Kunci: Puisi, ketakjuban, cinta, yang tercinta, *Tarjumān al-Ashwaq*, Nizam, Ka'bah

Abstract

Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi is renowned for his voluminous output of works on almost every subject, including theology, cosmology, jurisprudence, philosophy and the mystical sciences, numbering some 350 works. What is less known is the fact that he was also a prodigious and talented poet, with an output of several thousand poems. While he describes in great detail the phenomenology and ontological exegesis of his mystical experiences in works such as the *Futūhāt al-Makkiyya*, it is in his poetry where the expression of his passionate love for his beloved is revealed in its full humanity. The condition of one who has passed from separation to union, *tawhid*, is revealed through his poetry to be intensely alive,

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traversing the full range of bliss and loss that lovers know all too well, for his beloved is to be found in every thing, yet cannot be contained by any thing, hence never to be possessed.

Keywords: Poetry, perplexity, love, beloved, *Tarjumān al-Ashwāq*, Nizam, *Ka'bā*

Introduction

It is not widely known that the great Sufi Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi, known as the *Shaykh al-Akbar* or Greatest Master, was also an extraordinarily gifted poet, and like many of his Sufi brethren he too found poetry to be the vehicle of choice with which to express his love for his beloved[2]. He composed three books of poetry[3] of which perhaps the best known is the Translator of Desires (*Tarjumān al-Ashwāq*), composed in a classic Arabic meter and consisting of stunningly original poems. Towards the end of his life, it was notable that Ibn 'Arabi made the reading of the *Tarjumān* a regular part of his sessions with his students, and of all his works it is the *Tarjumān* that he chose to recite himself in person, rather than having a student recite it for him.[4]

This paper considers some of the experiential dimensions of spiritual love that are well known to Sufis in particular. Far from the often-idealized condition of spiritual realization (*taḥqīq*) misconstrued by some as tranquility or bliss, Ibn 'Arabi paints a quite different picture of intense and passionate longing, and even of despair. Union (*tawḥīd*) with one's beloved implies seeing all things as not-two, thus the lover must continuously straddle the worlds of spirit and form, oneness and diversity, and give each world its due – as illustrated so richly in the delicacy of Ibn 'Arabi's love for a young girl in whose beauty he sees reflected his Beloved.

As impossible as this dilemma may at times seem for the human soul, no love affair can be held to a rational standard of reasonableness, for the heart as a faculty of knowing and loving has a particular comprehensiveness

2 A version of this paper was presented at the Songs of the Soul Conference, International Association of Sufism, San Rafael, California, March 18, 2012. I am indebted to Prof. Michael Sells for his inspirational work on Ibn 'Arabi's poetry.

3 William Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-'Arabi and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), p.67

4 Michael Sells, *Stations of Desire* (Jerusalem: Ibis Editions, 2000), p.38

that transcends normal epistemologies – the heart is said to "turn over" and adapt to the incessant flow of the modalities of the divine Self-disclosure of God, and the result for the lover is a constant fluctuation of states, to which poetry gives true voice.

The Perplexity of Love

Falling in love is the ultimate transformational experience, exerting a power not easily explained in the sober language of prose. The poetics of love is such that it embodies a wide range of responses – physical, emotional and spiritual. We know also that beauty and love go hand in hand, for do we not love that is which is beautiful? Lovers can find themselves in turmoil and no longer in control of their sensibilities, ravished as they are by the beauty of their beloved. As Ibn 'Arabi says in a line from one of his poems:

> "*Dost thou not see that beauty robs him who hath modesty, and therefore it is called the robber of virtues?*"[5]

It is the lot of the lover to be constantly tossed and turned on an ocean of love – wherever he looks, there is the face of the beloved, both *in* the form that is witnessed and at the same time *transcendent from* the form in which the face of his beloved appears. The heart is constantly in movement between these two poles, fluctuating between form and essence, between body and spirit, between the immanent and the transcendent.

And so the lover can fall into perplexity, and it is this perplexity that is at the core of the experience of love that is captured so beautifully in poetry because the language of love permits ambiguity and contradiction. But the meaning of perplexity, or bewilderment, in Ibn 'Arabi's teaching is very different from that of confusion, and is better understood as the awestruck response of the lover to Beauty. In his poetry he describes the lived experience of embracing the One Real Being in her infinite modalities of appearance. When the mystic embraces Oneness, *tawḥīd,* he finds not a state of blissful unattachment so often imagined by the spiritual seeker as the ultimate union, but a dynamic and fluid condition of constant fluctuation and change, which is the only response possible for a heart that has been

5 Reynold A. Nicholson, *The Tarjumān al-Ashwāq* (London: Theosophical Publishing House, 1978), p.61

opened to the infinite self-disclosures of the One. This is the story of love told from the perspective of the subjective and relative existence.

Ibn 'Arabi's poetry captures this exquisite dilemma of the lover, and as with so many of the great mystics, we find that their teachings are often best illustrated by historical events in their lives, and Ibn 'Arabi's life is really quite remarkable, as anyone who has read his biography will quickly come to appreciate. What follows is an account of episodes from Ibn 'Arabi's life that resulted in an outpouring of love poetry, illustrating the rich and complex tapestry of the world that the poet-mystic inhabits. Both events take place in Mecca, and both are associated with encounters that take place within the vicinity of the *Ka'bā*.

Nizam and The *Tarjumān al-Ashwāq*

Ibn 'Arabi, having travelled eastward from his native Andalusia in Spain arrived in Mecca where he met a learned *sheikh* and *sheikha* from Isfahan, who had a beautiful daughter by the name of Nizam, and this girl was to inspire a book of poetry. So as not to give opportunity to narrow minds, which might misinterpret some of the erotic style and imagery found in his poetry, Ibn 'Arabi makes clear to eulogize Nizam's learning, literary accomplishments and spiritual gifts. What she represents for him is the image of the beloved, since as he has written elsewhere, in nothing but the image of a woman is beauty so completely manifested. Nizam is at the same time a beautiful young woman as well as an expression of the Divine Beauty. She becomes the object of his love, and an inspiration for his yearning of union with his beloved. We can perhaps see a very close parallel with Rumi's love for Shams, who similarly was an image of the divine beloved and the catalyst for Rumi's outpouring of love poetry.

Ibn 'Arabi describes a meeting or a vision that takes place at the *Ka'bā* with a young woman who is not named, but clearly is connected in a spiritual way with Nizam. This was a waking vision, one of many that he experienced in his lifetime and which he explains took place in the Imaginal Realm, the *barzakh*, that intermediary world where meanings can appear, where spirit takes form and forms take on life. Night had fallen, and in the grip of spiritual ecstasy Ibn 'Arabi had started performing the ritual circumambulation around the *Ka'bā*. As he circled, he recited some verses that he had just composed at the top of his voice, when he became aware of a presence at his side. He says:

> "All I felt was a light tap on my shoulder, made by the gentlest of hands. I turned around and saw a young woman, one of the daughters of Rum. Never have I witnessed a face that was more graceful, or speech that was more pleasant, intelligent, subtle and spiritual. She surpassed the people of her age in her discernment, her erudition, her beauty and her knowledge. She said to me: 'Oh Master, what did you just say?'"[6]

The young woman then proceeds, line by line, to critique Ibn 'Arabi's poem, and by the time she gets to the last line, where he talks of his bewilderment, she tears into him: If the nature of love is to consume everything, how can the lover even have a self left to be bewildered, she demands? How dare he be so presumptuous? From her perspective, she is speaking of the complete annihilation of the self in love, while in his poem Ibn 'Arabi is expressing the perspective of the lover in time and space, in the constant oscillation between annihilation in love and remaining in the world.[7]

Ibn 'Arabi was of course taken aback but pleasantly surprised by such insight, and after this exchange between them, he asked the woman her name. She responded: "Freshness of the eyes."[8]

Here is the poem that Ibn 'Arabi was reciting, and which the young woman critiqued: it is the first poem from his book of poetry called the *Tarjuman*:

> "*Would that I were aware whether they knew what heart they possessed!*
> *And would that my heart knew what mountain-pass they threaded!*
> *Dost thou deem them safe or dost thou deem them dead?*
> *Lovers lose their way in love and become entangled.*"[9]

Here Ibn 'Arabi is talking about the locus of vision, *manzār*, the place from where one is looking, and how one's sense of identity can fluctuate depending on whether one's vision is an elevated spiritual insight, or if one's vision is of the earthly eye of the body. When vision oscillates in this way, the lover's sense of identity can become entangled. This bewilderment or perplexity that arises in the lover should be seen as quite different from that

6 Claude Addas, *Quest For The Red Sulphur, The Life of Ibn 'Arabi* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1993), p.209
7 Sells, *Stations of Desire*, p.34
8 Addas, *Quest For The Red Sulphur,* p.209
9 Nicholson, *The Tarjumān*, p.48

of confusion. Yet there can be little doubt that the anguish of the lover's separation, and his longing for union, is a real anguish or passion. The distress felt by the lover for that which they can never truly possess is what is so clearly expressed in this poem.

In his *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, Ibn 'Arabi describes this condition of perplexity as follows:

> "The Divine guidance consists in the fact that man be brought to perplexity (*hayrah*) so that he may know that existence is entirely perplexity (meaning oscillation between two Divine aspects apparently contradictory); but, perplexity is instability and movement, and movement is life, so that there is neither inertia nor death, but pure existence, without absence."[10]

Ibn 'Arabi here addresses the condition of a fully engaged human being, embracing life in all its energy and power, and simultaneously accepting the fluid nature of the changing face of the Beloved as she manifests in every moment and in every form.

In this poem from the *Tarjumān* he expresses the impossible conundrum of the lover:

> *"My longing sought the Upland and my affliction the Lowland, so that I was between Najd and Tihama*
>
> *They are two contraries which cannot meet: hence my disunion will never be repaired.*
>
> *What am I to do? What shall I devise? Guide me O my censor, do not affright me with blame!*
>
> *Sighs have risen aloft and tears are pouring over my cheeks.*
>
> *The camels, footsore from the journey long for their homes and utter the plaintive cry of the frenzied lover.*
>
> *After they have gone, my life is naught but annihilation. Farewell to it and to patience!"*[11]

Many of these poems use the metaphors of the desert – the camels that were essential for journeying, the sites of abandoned camps where tents

10 Angela Culme-Seymour, *The Wisdom of the Prophets* (Gloucestershire: Beshara Publications, 1975), p.99

11 Nicholson, *The Tarjumān*, p.58

had been pitched, blackened stones used for cooking. The poems follow the form of the desert *nasib*, the remembrance of the lost beloved, standing next to the encampment of the beloved and calling upon his companions to grieve with him over her absence. When the journeyer happens upon these sites, he is reminded of the one he loves as her traces are still visible, and he remembers her and names her stations. He remembers the last time he saw her, and his recollection becomes *dhikr,* remembrance. He asks the stations through which the beloved passed about her, but the stations may not respond, and if they do, their words wound.[12]

In this poem of recollection the lover happens upon a station of remembrance:

> *"O moldering remains (of the encampment) at al-Uthayl, where I played with friendly maidens!*
>
> *Yesterday it was cheerful and smiling, but today it has become desolate and frowning.*
>
> *They went far away and I was unaware of them, and they knew not that my mind was watching over them,*
>
> *Following them wherever they journeyed and pitched tents, and sometimes it was managing the beasts of burden,*
>
> *Until, when they alighted in a barren wilderness and pitched tents and spread the carpets,*
>
> *It brought them back to a meadow verdant and ripe which erstwhile had been an arid desert.*
>
> *They did not halt at any place but its meadow contained forms beautiful as peacocks,*
>
> *And they did not depart from any place but its earth contained tombs of their lovers."*[13]

The lover is left with an aching feeling of ruin, their sense of self apparently fragmented in the astonishment that ensues in the embrace of the Real, the *Ḥaqq*, which by definition cannot be embraced or possessed. Yet this is the fate of the lover, to be constantly embracing the Real in all its faces, perpetually in motion between the unlimited and the limited.

12 Sells, *Stations of Desire*, p.19

13 Nicholson, *The Tarjumān*, p.84

Perplexity ensues when the mind tries to grasp this condition, which on its own cannot unify opposites. The only faculty, we are told, that is capable of unifying opposites is the heart, and it is this faculty that is associated with love and is awakened when the lover is brought close to the Beloved. Ibn 'Arabi explains that the word for heart, *qalb*, contains the meaning of variation, adaptability, and turning.[14] It possesses an innate ability to adapt to the manifestation of the Real in whatever form it appears, expanding or contracting or "turning over" as it receives and responds to the endless variation of the modalities of the divine self-manifestation. In whatever form the divine appears, the heart conforms to it and follows it.[15]

In this famous verse Ibn 'Arabi alludes to the heart's capacity to adapt to any form:

> *"O marvel! A garden amidst fires!*
> *My heart has become capable of every form: it is a pasture for gazelles and a convent for Christian monks,*
> *And a temple for idols and the pilgrim's Ka'bā and the tables of the Tora and the book of the Koran.*
> *I follow the religion of Love: whatever way Love's camels take, that is my religion and my faith."*[16]

Love Letters to the *Ka'bā*

This particular event in the life of Ibn 'Arabi resulted in a series of eight love letters addressed to the *Ka'bā*. The circumstances surrounding the composition of these poems concern Ibn 'Arabi's desire to affirm the superiority of the human above that of the stone *Ka'bā*, which after all is but at the level of the mineral, whereas the human stature is more superior to that of stone, fashioned as it is in the image of the divine. He frets that giving his attention to the *Ka'bā* will take him away from his proximity to God. Once again we see played out the drama of giving one's attention to either the world of forms or the world of spirit.

This episode richly illustrates the representational power of the imaginal plane of existence, in which a stone is able to speak and take on attributes

14 William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), p.107
15 Nikos Yiangou, *The Epistemology of Heart-Mind in the Spiritual Teachings of Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi* (Kanz Philosophia, Volume 2(1) 2012), p.123-133
16 Nicholson, *The Tarjumān*, p.67

normally associated with human qualities. The imaginal realm is not to be confused with imagination in the common understanding as fantasy or unreality, but rather as the ontological degree of being where the two oceans of being and not-being meet. Spirit and form are simultaneously united and separated in this place of vision, and for the lover whose vision of this world is secure the fluctuation of the heart with each passing disclosure in the *barzakh* is the very stuff of the love relationship. The *Ka'bā* here becomes an animated presence, no mere object, but indeed makes known to him that she is in fact the heart of the universe. Ibn 'Arabi recounts his experience as follows:

> "One day I was looking at the *Ka'bā*; it asked me to fulfill the circuits around it, and *Zamzam* asked me to drink of its water, out of a desire for friendship with the believer. I was able to hear one and the other with my ears. I was afraid of being veiled by them, given their immense stature in the eyes of God, and of being thus turned away from my state of divine proximity which is fitting for this place according to our knowledge. I addressed this poem to them in order to make them aware of this and to speak to them about the perfect believer:
>
> Oh *Ka'bā* of God, oh *Zamzam*, how strongly you demand my friendship, but no, no!
>
> If I must get involved in a friendship with you, it is through compassion and not desire towards you.
>
> The *Ka'bā* is nothing other than our essence, the essence of curtains of pious fear.
>
> The True One is not contained by sky nor earth nor any word.
>
> He appeared to the heart and said to it: Be patient! For it is the *Qiblā* established by Us.
>
> From Us to you and to your heart, towards the encounter with My house; how magnificent it is.
>
> It is a duty for Our *Ka'bā* to love you and to love Us is a duty for you. Enough!"[17]

Ibn 'Arabi says that this poem was composed while in a spiritual state of inebriation, and what followed was that God wished to warn him about

17 Denis Gril, *Love Letters to the Ka'bā; A Presentation of Ibn "Arabi's Taj al-Ras'il* (Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn "Arabi Society, Volume XVII, 1995), p.40-54

this state. He continues to relate his story, describing the fury that the *Ka'bā* directs towards him, and how she physically threatens to harm him:

> "He incited me to arise from my bed one cool night with a full moon and a slight dew. I did my ablutions and went out to accomplish the ritual circuits, profoundly disturbed. It seemed to me that just one person was carrying out the circuits. I began by kissing the Stone and then started to circumambulate. Having arrived at the Gutter, behind the enclosure *(Hijr),* I looked at the *Ka'bā*. I then saw it, as perceived by the faculty of my imagination, raise the skirts of its robe and maintain itself thus hovering above its foundations. It had the intention of turning me back when I reached the Syrian corner, to prevent me from circling around it. It threatened me, using words which my ear could hear. I felt deeply afflicted on account of this, and for His part God displayed to me such irritation and fury, that I was unable to move from where I was standing. I sheltered behind the Enclosure to fend off its blows and took hold of it as a shield. "By God," I heard it saying to me: "Keep coming on and we shall see what I will do with you! How you underestimate my value and overestimate that of the Sons of Adam, and consider that those who have knowledge are superior to me. By the almighty power of Him alone to whom it belongs, I shall not allow you to circle around me!"
>
> I came back to my senses and realized that God wished to correct me. I thanked Him for this, and the affliction which I had felt vanished. As for the *Ka'bā*, it seemed to be hovering above the ground, lifting the skirts of its robe like one who pulls up his clothes before jumping. I had the impression that it had gathered up its veils, ready to jump on me. It had taken the form of a young girl such as I had never seen and of a beauty that cannot even be imagined. On the spur of the moment I improvised some verses which I addressed to it in order to calm its irritation towards me. Gradually as I began to praise it with these words, it grew bigger and fell back onto its foundations. It displayed its satisfaction at what I was reciting to it, until it returned to its initial state. It assured me of its safeguard and entreated me to complete my circumambulations."[18]

Ibn 'Arabi describes his experience of the threat by the *Ka'bā* as terrifying, relating, "there was not a single part of my body that was not trembling." He reconciles with it and kisses the stone, and continues:

18 Gril, *Love Letters to the Ka'bā*, p.42-43

"These are the words with which I invited the *Ka'bā* to come back down:

My heart took refuge in the sanctuary when it was struck by the arrows of the enemy.

Oh, clemency of God towards his servants, God placed you among the minerals.

Oh, House of my Lord, light of my heart, freshness of my eye, intimate friend of my heart.

Oh, heart's secret of true existence, oh my inviolability, purity of my love.

Oh, *Qiblā* towards which I have turned each time I have camped, in each valley,

Of permanence, then of heaven; of extinction and of the cradle.

Oh, *Ka'bā* of God, oh my life, path to happiness and justice,

You are God's depository of the only safeguard against the terror of the final return.

The noble station shines brightly in you, in you resides the servant's happiness.

In you is the Right Hand which my mistake has covered with a black mark.

In the place where we attach ourselves to you, he who perseveres with amorous passion will know happiness on the Day we are called.

Souls have died because of their desire for it (the *Ka'bā*), through the5pains of longing and exile.

Because of its affliction for them it donned a mourning blanket.

God makes a light shine on its summit, which shines on the heart.

Only the afflicted whose eyes have suffered the Kohl of insomnia can perceive it.

It turns, seven after seven, after the fall of night to reply to the call.

It weeps endless tears, received in token by its passion, without weakening.

I heard it call out to the Stone for help: oh heart of mine!

The night quickly passed, but my amorous passion was not appeased."[19]

19 Gril, *Love Letters to the Ka'bā*, p.44-45

Ibn 'Arabi's relationship to the *Ka'bā* is a complex one. The encounter serves to remind him that while its mineral nature may situate it at the bottom of the chain of being, it is this base nature that precisely allows all the degrees of being to be supported and sustained. It represents the primal material constitution of the human being, which is the foundation of servanthood in the face of the Divine, and the natural impulse for submission. He identifies the *Ka'bā* with the heart of existence and the heart of the believer, which in the universal sense is the integral principle of the Perfect Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*) who synthesizes the plurality of the manifestations of the divine self-disclosure.

His love for the *Ka'bā* is no different from his love for God; she represents his beloved and even takes on a beautiful feminine form; she behaves as a capricious lover does, forever changing temper in the fluctuation from one state to another, leading Ibn 'Arabi to complain "How much longer will this constant changing from one state to another go on?" His refrain captures exactly the dilemma of the lover – the incessant turning of the heart as it receives the forms of the self-disclosure in the succession of moments, and the oscillation between the transcendent in which the bliss of union is experienced, and the immanence in which separation and longing are the lot of the bereaved lover.

The language of love poetry becomes the vehicle of the lover's passion, and two faces of love are revealed. On the one hand, the Human is the most perfect mirror of the Beauty and both contains it and reveals it by his/her complete and universal nature: as Ibn 'Arabi revealingly says to the *Ka'bā* about his own stature in comparison to it, "It is indeed rare to see a being like me circumambulating around you!" As for the second face of love, that of separation and yearning for union, the Human lover fulfills an even greater perfection by his/her relationship with the relativity of existences, a love affair with all the faces of the One Being – a relationship in which the heart witnesses the manifestation of the most beautiful names in all their infinite permutations.[20]

Conclusion

From this brief account of two episodes in the life of Ibn 'Arabi, we witness the full extent of his humanity. He has been plunged into love, but the object of his love is a Beloved who cannot be possessed, as she is

20 Gril, *Love Letters to the Ka'bā*, p.52-54

both immanent in everything, and transcendent from everything. And throughout his poetry we see the pattern of his perplexity as a constant and dynamic fluctuation between the witnessing of spirit and form, between union and separation, and between possession and loss.

Many of Ibn 'Arabi's contemporaries were scandalized by the erotic language of the *Tarjumān al-Ashwāq*, so he responded by writing a separate commentary stressing the allegorical nature of the poems and their connection to the larger teachings that he was trying to communicate.[21] Yet while he placates his critics with responses such as these, he also affirms that he "used the erotic style and form of expression because men's souls are enamored of it", and he does not apologize for the intense love that Nizam aroused in him, letting it be known that every name he mentions alludes to her, and every abode that he mourns over he means her abode.[22] Both Nizam and the *Ka'bā* embody the aspect of the divine feminine, objects of his passion and amorous advances – both appear to him as beautiful young women, yet impossible to possess and even dangerous to cross.

Driven by love, the lover must know union and separation, bliss and ruin, in order to know their Beloved fully.

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21 Sells, *Stations of Desire*, p.34

22 Nicholson, *The Tarjumān*, p.4