

Nizām, Ibn ‘Arabī and the Importance of Beauty as a Path to God

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“Beauty is the reflection of reality in the mirror of illusion.”¹ Ibn ‘Arabī
 “Love Beauty: it is the shadow of God on the universe.”² Gabriela Mistral

Abstract

This study offers a meditation on the role of Beauty on the Way as a path of Return to God in the work and thought of the Sufi scholar, poet and mystic, Ibn ‘Arabī, with specific reference to the *Tarjumān al-ashwāq* or *The Interpreter of Desires*, his collection of love poetry dedicated to the Lady Nizām. Ibn ‘Arabī’s intensely transformative relationship with Nizām is explored in the context of relations between Sufi men and women, and likewise of Ibn ‘Arabī’s own multifaceted relationships with women, encompassing his radical understanding of the genders and the role of women in general, in whom, according to Ibn ‘Arabī, the Divine is to be most perfectly witnessed. Commencing with an exploration of the significance of Beauty, this study explores the relationship with Nizām in its wider social and religious context, and the poems of the *Tarjumān*, to conclude with Ibn ‘Arabī’s belief in the significance of sacred poetry for the mystic as a way of “saying the unsayable.”

* * *

Praise be to God whose actions are beautiful,

‘the Beautiful (jamīl) who loves beauty (al-jamāl),’

who created the world in the most perfect form and adorned it ...

Ibn ‘Arabī, the *khutba* or introductory prayer from the First Preface to the *Tarjumān al-ashwāq*³

Beauty

I paint my eyes to enhance your beauty
 Yea, to enhance your beauty I paint my eyes.

* * *

Beauty is nought if It leads not beyond.

* * *

Help me to bear the beauty which others perceive.

Beauty which I don’t possess - yet others’ perception

Perceives it seeing their own hearts’ desire.⁴

In Italian, there is a concept that affirms the importance of beauty, both inner and outer, as a form of self-respect and respect of others—it is the concept of “la bella figura,” and it is by no means as superficial as it might at first appear. A deep philosophy underpins this valuing of beauty and the beautiful, a beauty which is both the result of inner harmony and gives rise to harmony, harmony between self and surroundings, harmony in appearance, actions, speech and thought. An aspiration to embody “la bella figura” is an aspiration for self-improvement and self-refinement, it is a display of self-respect and a manifestation of respect for and trust in the greater Harmony of the Universe of which we are all parts. As such,

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ultimately, Beauty becomes an indicator of that greater Harmony which is of God.⁵

“God (Allāh) is beautiful and loves beauty” states a well-known and accepted ḥadīth, in the face of puritanical fundamentalist attempts to excise beauty from Islam. In fact, there are those Muslims who say that Beauty is at the essence of their faith and its “highest expression,”⁶ and that Islam is surrender to the Beauty of Allāh. Allāh is said to describe Himself to humanity through His Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names,⁷ and beauty is revealed in creation to evoke love, the prime mover or cause of creation. Hence, to be the best Muslim would be to express that beauty in yourself and in your life. For the Sufi philosopher, mystic, and poet, Ibn ‘Arabī, also known as Shaykh al-Akbar or the Greatest Master, the seeker’s ability to witness the beauty of the Divine Essence becomes a sign of spiritual refinement along the Way.

In common with other Islamic thinkers, Ibn ‘Arabī divides the Divine Names or Attributes into two principal types, attributes of beauty (*jamāl*) and attributes of majesty and power (*jalāl*). Of the two, it is the attributes of beauty that Ibn ‘Arabī prioritizes most consistently. Indeed, the importance of Beauty to Ibn ‘Arabī as a way to God can scarcely be overstated. As Jane Clark points out: “Ibn ‘Arabī was one of the greatest exponents within the Islamic tradition of the idea that beauty, and the beauty of God, the One Reality, has a central place in both the cosmos and in the realization of human potential.”⁸ It was the Desire of the One to see His Beauty manifested in form that led to the Creation, Ibn ‘Arabī states. Expanding on this thought, he writes in the *Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (*The Meccan Openings* or *The Meccan Revelations*):

When God made the cosmos manifest, it was in itself His place of self-revelation, so He saw nothing within it but His own beauty (*jamāl*), and He loved the beauty. Thus, the cosmos is God’s beauty, and He is both the beautiful (*al-jamīl*) and the lover of beauty (*al-muḥibbu li-l-jamīl*). Anyone who loves the cosmos in this regard has loved it with God’s love, and has loved nothing but God’s beauty, for the beauty of a work of art is not

ascribed to itself; it is ascribed to the one who made it.⁹

At the same time, as Cyrus Zargar points out,¹⁰ Ibn ‘Arabī equally sees beauty as awesome and terrifying, calling it *jalāl al-jamāl* or the “majesty of beauty,” thus seamlessly bringing the two principal types of Divine Attributes together in a concept of beauty which possesses might and dominance.¹¹

There has been a lot written about beauty of late in the West, particularly in the context of modern Western art movements, and much of it has been disparaging. Somehow, the maxim that “beauty is in the eye of the beholder” has been twisted and co-opted into a justification of classifying the ugly, which is of necessity inharmonious, as beautiful. Indeed, the maxim itself is far more profound than is usually given credit for, as the eye as the organ of perception requires its own purification if it is to be able to perceive beauty in all of its manifestations. It is true that the harmonious and purified eye will be capable of perceiving the underlying foundational beauty in everything, but that is a level of development and refinement of the ego open to the very few.

For Ibn ‘Arabī the beauty and harmony of the things of this world were a way of coming to perceive the Beauty and Greater Harmony of their Creator.¹² For him also, this ability to pass through the veils of outward appearances to witness the purity of the essential Beauty of things or people is attained only through the purification of the self and one’s organs of perception. Thus this perception or revelation was not open to everyone. Those who are not sufficiently purified or refined are in danger from the dazzling glamour of outward appearances. However, when the veils are lifted and the real Divine Beauty underlying them is revealed, the mystic or the gnostic (the knower) may attain the state of mystical Union even through the contemplation of such outward appearances because his eye is pure.

Just as the concept of “la bella figura,” though not limited to women, is primarily embodied by them, so is Beauty perceived as primarily a feminine virtue or attribute. This has been questioned and denigrated of late, but that is largely

through a confusion of meaning, equating beauty with a superficial veneer of outward appearances and neglecting its deeper attributes of both inner and outer harmony. Women, in particular, have rebelled against confinement to what they started to see as a demeaning role, while at the same time paradoxically increasing a search for outer adornments, such as an unrealizable fashionable shape, facial features, skin, and the like. It is as though the further away human beings move from a real appreciation of beauty, the more desperately we try to chase an illusory semblance of it, a chimera. We try to find it in its most superficial trappings, while neglecting the true Harmony which should be our quest.

To be a carrier of the Beautiful is to have the power to bring others closer to both perceiving and manifesting a harmonious Universe. It is to be a carrier of the Image of the Divine Feminine. It is not a power to be taken lightly or to be used unconsciously. It is surely of this Beauty that Dostoevsky spoke when he made his famous pronouncement that “Beauty will save the world.”

One of the historical figures who have come down to us as an embodiment of that Beauty and its power is the Lady Nizām bint Makīn al-Dīn, as perceived through the eyes of the Sufi mystic, poet and scholar, Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-‘Arabī. Nizām’s beauty, both physical and spiritual, continued to both torment and inspire Ibn ‘Arabī throughout the years of his long life.

Ibn ‘Arabī and Nizām

Because as for me, I see a being
Whose beauty increases,
Brilliant and superb
At every one of our meetings.
One does not escape an ecstasy
That exists in kinship
With beauty that continues to intensify
To the point of perfect harmony.¹³
“She is the object of my Quest and my
hope, the Virgin Most Pure.”¹⁴

Nizām bint Makīn al-Dīn who inspired the poetry of Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Tarjumān al-*

ashwāq, was a young Persian Sufi woman residing at the time in Mecca. Ibn al-‘Arabī (1165-1240) had arrived in Mecca in 1202 hoping to study with the shaykha, Fakhr al-Nisā’ bint Rustam, who was the expert in traditional Islamic scholarship in Mecca. However, she turned him down as a potential student, pleading her advanced years as an excuse. This prominent shaykha and scholar was Nizām’s aunt. However, she did authorize her brother, Nizām’s father, to write a certificate of authorization for Ibn ‘Arabī to transmit all the ḥadīth she had taught. Nizām’s father, Makīn al-Dīn Abī Shaja’ Zāhir ibn Rustam al-Isfahani, was himself a shaykh of high standing and a distinguished scholar in Mecca.

Mecca was to prove a pivotal point in Ibn ‘Arabī’s intellectual and spiritual growth. Apart from the fateful meeting with Nizām and the poetry that flowed from it, it was in Mecca that Ibn ‘Arabī started on what would become his magnum opus which took him thirty years to complete—*The Meccan Openings (Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya)*.

Nizām made an indelible impression on Ibn ‘Arabī, who describes two types of interaction with her in the Preface to the *Tarjumān al-ashwāq*. One occurred when he was circumambulating the Ka’ba and, moved to ecstasy, recited one of his poems aloud, only to feel a light touch on his shoulder, and find a young woman reproving him for his words as being unworthy of a Sufi master. Here she appears as an otherworldly figure, a Byzantine princess, and a teacher and spiritual master herself. At other times she appears as a flesh and blood young Persian woman whom Ibn ‘Arabī meets in her father’s house, and who is exceptional for her beauty, her wisdom and her general charisma.

In fact, although the otherworldly young woman from the second part of the Preface is assumed by most scholars to be Nizām, it is possible to question this¹⁵ as she remains unnamed, describing herself only as *qurrat al’ayn* (the freshness of the eye).¹⁶ However, Ibn ‘Arabī does explicitly state: “Whenever I mention a name in this book I always allude to her [i.e., Nizām], and whenever I mourn over an abode I mean her abode.”¹⁷ Here I shall follow the

majority of scholars in equating this unnamed mysterious woman with Nizām, albeit in an apotheosis which reveals her essence as an embodiment of divine Wisdom or Sophia. In the meeting at the Ka’ba, she acts as a spiritual master, criticizing Ibn ‘Arabī for allowing rational doubt to intrude on his mystical insight, which is, of course, the province of Sophia, for it is sapiential wisdom which unveils direct experiential knowledge. Ibn ‘Arabī’s moment of doubt seems atypical of the master, for despite being a jurist, philosopher and theologian, he claims most often to have acquired his knowledge through “openings,” that is, theophanies or visions, which open the heart to the wisdom and gnostic knowledge being unveiled, bypassing and surpassing the mind and the intellect in their moment of revelation. The meeting with Nizām at the Ka’ba is the occasion of just such a theophany.

But who is Nizām herself in all of this? We see her through the eyes of Ibn ‘Arabī, but she has left no writings and no record, at least none that have survived. Is she primarily a literary trope, an embodiment of Sophia, an idealized portrayal of the Feminine who becomes the male poet’s guide, inspiration and light in the manner of Dante’s Beatrice, Cavalcanti’s Lady or Petrarch’s Laura?¹⁸ While Nizām does share aspects with these human exemplars of the Feminine, above all she comes across as a very real young woman of flesh and blood with whom Ibn ‘Arabī forms a deeply passionate and spiritually intense relationship.

Here she is as described by Ibn ‘Arabī in his original Preface to the *Tarjumān*. She was

riveting to gaze upon. She adorned the assemblies, delighting whoever was addressing the gathering, and confounding her peers [with her beauty and her intellect] ... She was named “*Ayn al-shams wa-l-bahā*”—the source of the sun and the glory [in other translations “the Eye of the Sun and of Beauty”]—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). She was bewitching in her looks, ‘Irāqī in her culture. If she talked at length, she could

outstay anyone; if she spoke concisely she did it in incomparable style; and if she spoke eloquently, she was lucid ...¹⁹

We see here a young woman who is clearly comfortable and visible in mixed company, and is not veiled, neither her face nor her discourse nor her thoughts. At the Ka’ba she does not hesitate to reprimand and admonish the older famous shaykh, speaking as his spiritual master or superior. She possesses understanding, learning, spirituality, and inner and outer beauty.

Ibn ‘Arabī does not hesitate to mention her physicality and the impact it produced:

If not for the paltry souls who are ever ready for scandal and predisposed to malice, I should comment here on the beauties of her body as well as her soul, which was a garden of generosity.

He speaks further of her “unwavering friendship,” “grace of mind” and “modesty of bearing,” continuing “she is the object of my Quest and my hope, the Virgin Most Pure.”²⁰

She is “a sun amongst the knowers and a garden amongst the cultured; a sealed flask and the central pearl of a perfectly strung necklace; the unique one of her time and the most precious thing of her age...”²¹

For a start, Nizām challenges many of our preconceptions about the role and standing of women in Islamic societies at the time, as does Ibn ‘Arabī himself, who was never slow to pay homage to his female spiritual teachers, nor to acknowledge his many female disciples as fully-fledged aspirants on the Sufī path. However, his relationship with Nizām, while not so unusual for him given his many associations with women, is different. It goes both further and deeper until, in the *Tarjumān al-ashwāq* or *The Interpreter of Desires*, the volume of sixty-one poems dedicated to her (the number is not definitively fixed, in some versions being given as sixty or as sixty-two), she appears as the fervently desired Beloved who also leads Ibn ‘Arabī on a mystical quest for God as the Divine Feminine. However, in contrast to Beatrice or Laura, Nizām comes across not only as an embodiment of Sophia, but very much as a sensual and spirited young woman.

In fact, Nizām exhibits a remarkable degree of both social and spiritual freedom that is suggestive of the freedom other accomplished Sufi women would have enjoyed, as it is highly improbable that Nizām's position, while perhaps unusual, would have been totally exceptional for her time. We know of Sufi women who lived independently and traveled in pursuit of knowledge, often in the company of unrelated male Sufis, and we know of female Sufi teachers who took on both male and female disciples.²² Through Nizām it is possible to see the relative freedom and independence accorded to some Sufi women, even if these women were likely to be exceptional in some way, such as intellectual learning, or spiritual attainment. Through their unconventional lives they demonstrate in a real way the Sufi maxim that it is the state of the soul that is the primary defining value of a human being.

A composite picture emerges of a young woman unveiled but modest, comfortable and confident in mixed company and in sustaining friendships with unrelated men. Nizām's physical beauty is clearly visible, yet it does not define her. She is eloquent, unmarried, and uninhibited, and not constrained by gender or age in terms of her spiritual attainment, or in her relationship with the celebrated shaykh. In her independence, her self-assuredness, and assertiveness, as well as in her spiritual stature, she is reminiscent of Mary Magdalene in the gnostic gospels, although, unlike Mary, we do not witness her being put down or questioned by powerful men. Nor do we see her leading congregations like Mary, although her eloquent speech could point to a skill in preaching and giving commentaries on sacred teachings. It appears that her sexual propriety did come in for questioning through her friendship with Ibn 'Arabī, whose own morality and sexual propriety in relation to her were likewise questioned. Unlike Mary Magdalene though, she has never been maligned as a prostitute. Still, the parallels between the two women are interesting in terms of a certain model of female spiritual attainment and such a woman's relationship to a male spiritual master.

Even so, Nizām remains a tantalizing presence. Who was she in her own mind and being? Not from the perspective of a man writing

predominantly for himself and for other men but in and for herself? We have no self-representation by Nizām, only one mediated through the subjectivity of Ibn 'Arabī. How do we fill the gaps? That is a question that has come to the forefront among feminist scholars, struggling to fill the lacunae of our recorded human history in a way that does not exclude half of humanity. Hints and omissions leave clues for a creative reconstruction, and that is what we are faced with also in the character of Nizām.²³

What was it like for Nizām to be that Mirror, to be that Muse? We may never know. Yet, this is what inspired *Circling the Centre - Conversations with Nizām*, a series of seven dialogues between Nizām and Ibn 'Arabī, a work of "creative imagination" in the fullest sense of that term. Nizām speaks in this work:

She: Speak to me of the Lover

No -

Be the Lover

The Beloved seeks -

Your words then

Shall be - Fire

Lighting Fire

Beyond words and

Beyond

Silence.

[...]

She: There is but this,

A perfume which you may distil

And make forever present to yourself

Thus present through all time.

[...]

He and *She:*

I am caught in the semblance of grace

- too many the veils between us

I am caught unravelling in time

- too clinging your fear

I am caught still searching for your embrace

- too obstinate your sense of separation

I am caught in the net of mercy...

- what is its face?²⁴

To turn to Nizām as she is perceived by Ibn ‘Arabī, her name already reveals her essence, for the meaning of Nizām is Harmony, harmonious order, artful arrangement, perfected harmony, or, also, the stringing of pearls in a necklace.²⁵ The Pythagoreans saw this harmony or perfect harmonious order as intrinsic to the cosmos, and for Ibn ‘Arabī too, the created universe was orderly and harmonious. Nizām both reflects and encapsulates that harmonious order. There is a further meaning of n/z/m, the root of the name Nizām, which is to compose poetry, *naẓm* being verse.²⁶ Ibn ‘Arabī plays with all the overlapping meanings of this root, stringing words together into the harmonious order of a necklace of verses which he then presents to Nizām.

The Beauty of Nizām

She is one of the girls with swelling breasts
who guard their honour, tender, virgin and
beautiful,

Full moons over branches: they fear no
waning.

In a garden of my body’s country is a dove
perched on a *bān* bough,

Dying of desire, melting with passion, be-
cause that which befell me hath befallen
her.²⁷

It has already been seen how Ibn ‘Arabī celebrates and affirms Nizām’s physical beauty alongside her spiritual and intellectual attainments, and the poems themselves provide further explicitly erotic examples of this. Ibn ‘Arabī does not shy away from praising and describing Nizām’s very physical and sensuous beauty in lines such as the following from poem 46 with its explicitly erotic imagery: “A sweet-lipped girl, dark-lipped, honeyed where she is kissed” or “girls with large breasts, virginally bashful, playfully passionate.”²⁸

At no time does he condemn Nizām’s beauty, or the beauty of women in general, as a source of temptation for the male or a cipher for the evils of the material world. Indeed, beauty, and specifically Nizām’s beauty, is celebrated as a gift of God and valued in the poems for its ability to awaken an all-consuming longing and desire, which become the longing of the Lover for the

Beloved who is none other than God. Nizām’s beauty is a mirror of God’s ultimate Beauty, and it is her degree of refinement that makes it possible for the Divine Attributes, such as Beauty, to be revealed through her. Both Nizām’s physical beauty and her spiritual beauty are valued as indications of the degree of spiritual ascendancy she has attained. As such, she models the degree of perfection every human being should aspire to. Ibn ‘Arabī’s naming of her as the “Virgin Most Pure” gives an extra indication of the spiritual stature he ascribed to her, as this was a phrase used to refer to Mary the Mother of Jesus (the Virgin Mary), who is highly esteemed in Islam. And it was also possibly a way for Ibn ‘Arabī to deflect criticism from Nizām by stressing her purity and her virginity.

Criticism of Ibn ‘Arabī and Nizām

Dark moon rising

Spilling ecstasy and grief

Mirrored - I am

- in you

Seeking the mirror of Love

I am bound

To seek it - here -

- in You.²⁹

Even Ibn ‘Arabī, the Greatest Master, did not escape criticism and accusations of immorality and even heresy from the puritanical Muslims of his day. The *Tarjumān al-ashwāq*, his exultant ode to Nizām, to Beauty, to Love, to the all-engulfing quest for the Beloved, and to God in a feminine form, provoked a disapproval which persists in certain Islamic circles. Indeed, the questioning of Ibn ‘Arabī’s orthodoxy has been widespread over the centuries, with some regarding him as the greatest Sufi master and Islamic scholar, and others accusing him of heresy.³⁰ As recently as 1979, members of the People’s Assembly (Egypt’s Lower House) attempted to officially ban Ibn ‘Arabī’s teachings in Egypt, effectively branding him a heretic.³¹ They failed, but, infidel or saint, the controversy around him continues into the present day in certain circles, and the *Tarjumān* plays its own role in it. Ibn ‘Arabī was suspected of

immorality and sexual impropriety in his relationship with Nizām, and the accusations were sufficiently serious to force him to write a second Preface and Commentary to the *Tarjumān*, explaining and justifying his poetry in great detail. Ibn ‘Arabī explains the reasons behind his Commentary quite clearly: apparently, it was being put around that what he had said about the poems expressing divine knowledge and “esoteric ideas and realities” was not true and merely a cover-up for the erotic poetry.³²

Despite Ibn ‘Arabī’s detailed and extensive self-defense, the controversy still simmers today. In a recent article, “Did Ibn al-‘Arabī marry Nizām?,” the author goes to great lengths to defend both Nizām’s honor and Ibn ‘Arabī by claiming that he clearly must have married her and interpreting the meeting at the Ka’ba with the mysterious “princess of the Greeks” as a marriage proposal. Only thus could her behavior and her free speech be excused, and the poetry not incur censure.³³

Interestingly, there is another revelatory episode Ibn ‘Arabī experienced at the Ka’ba, albeit with a young man,³⁴ or the “Young Man” (fatā). Ibn ‘Arabī had already encountered this “Young Man” previously in Andalusia, as a poem from the *Dīwān* states, followed by another initiatory encounter related at the beginning of the *Book of the Nocturnal Journey*. At the Ka’ba, Ibn ‘Arabī encounters him again and writes at length about the meeting, stating that the “reality of his beauty was unveiled for me and I was overwhelmed by love,” a statement that points again to the importance of Beauty in the mystic’s quest according to Ibn ‘Arabī. The “Young Man” does not speak in words, only in signs and symbols, so Ibn ‘Arabī becomes his “interpreter” (similar to a “*tarjumān*”), explaining that what he had communicated was “I am Knowledge, the Known, and the Knower, I am Sapience, the Sapiential Work, and the Sage.” Allegedly, the *Meccan Openings* came from these silent Sophianic revelations, although in this encounter, Sapientia takes on embodiment as a young man who is seen to belong to the Imaginal Realm. The encounter at the Ka’ba with Nizām holds similar overtones except that here it is a real woman playing the part of Divine Wisdom.

Ibn ‘Arabī was comfortable amongst women—his relationships with the women in his family, his female masters, and his female disciples and peers all bear witness to this. Unlike many of his contemporaries, also in the Sufi community, Ibn ‘Arabī did not see women as an impediment or a threat to the spiritual life of male seekers. Rather, he famously claimed that God is most perfectly witnessed in women.³⁵ His position, however, would not have been the most widespread, as even amongst the Sufis, many saw women as the embodiment of a dangerously disruptive sexuality for men and society at large. Sufi women were not infrequently accused of sexual misconduct, a tried and tested way of bringing down a woman’s status and discrediting her, with Mary Magdalene from a different tradition being one of the more famous examples and victims of such libel.

However, even given Ibn ‘Arabī’s relatively radical attitude towards women, the relationship with Nizām, enigmatic and intense, went further in many ways. While inspiring an absolute Love and lasting friendship on every level, Ibn ‘Arabī and Nizām also modeled a unique relationship which was not a marriage, nor a sexual liaison, but, rather, a profound friendship which was spiritually transformative, at least for him, and, most probably, for her. This is of necessity conjecture, but given the paucity of women’s voices which have come down to us, such conjectures are needed. So, what of Nizām? We cannot know for sure, but nor is there any record of a marriage. Sa’diyya Shaikh conjectures convincingly that she never married: “Nizām also independently embodies a different model: from all accounts, she remained single and was clearly a highly spiritually attained individual, as were Rābi’a and other celibate Sufi women and men.”³⁶

It is highly significant that of all his works, Ibn ‘Arabī left the recitation of only the *Tarjumān* exclusively to himself, not entrusting it to anyone from among his students. This was certainly the case towards the end of his life when he had established a school in Damascus to pass on his legacy. The *Tarjumān* was by all accounts read regularly during the school’s assemblies, and it was “the *Tarjumān* which Ibn ‘Arabī, of all his

works, chose to recite in person, rather than having one of his students recite it.”³⁷

Women, Mysticism, Immanence and Transcendence

The Mirror mirroring

The universe’s reach

God mirroring Him/Self

Her/Self

Discovering Self - in you.³⁸

The debate that plays out in the criticism of the *Tarjumān* is, at its most profound level, a debate about the transcendence and immanence of the Godhead. Patriarchal religions, or patriarchal interpretations of religion, tend to emphasize the “terrible” awe-inducing or *jalāli* qualities of the Godhead, such as unknowability, majesty, and power. God is the beyond of the beyond, utterly transcendent and unreachable. God’s Immanence, by contrast, is more often associated with the Feminine Aspect of the Godhead (examples from Hinduism and Judaism are Parashakti and the Shekhinah) and with qualities such as love, beauty, and mercy (*jamāli* qualities), whereas God’s Transcendence and *jalāli* qualities are traditionally seen as a Masculine Aspect.

The denigration of women and the feminine is usually accompanied by a mistrustful attitude towards God’s immanence mirrored in Creation, an attitude which also tends to downplay the Divine qualities of mercy and love—even though God speaks for instance in the ḥadīth on Mercy: “Verily My Mercy precedes My Wrath.”³⁹ For Ibn ‘Arabī, these qualities of love and mercy are precisely the most important ones for human beings to aspire to.

The appreciation of God’s Immanence is most often associated with faiths that honor a Feminine Divine principle, either as primary, or as coequal with the Masculine Divine principle. Tantrism and Tantric Buddhism are striking examples of a faith and worldview in which the world and its creatures, and women in particular, are honored, while God is worshipped also as Mother. Women themselves can function as

spiritual guides in these traditions and as mirrors or embodiments of the Divine attributes on earth. A relationship with a woman can serve as a spiritual initiation in itself, although many Tantrics, for instance, in Tibetan *vajrayana*, considered this quite a perilous practice and a degree of initiation only open to those (men) who had already attained an elevated stage of spiritual refinement and mastery.⁴⁰

In a like fashion, Ibn ‘Arabī states that “the male disciple should not have friendships with women until he reaches a particular state of spiritual maturity, at which point his soul becomes ‘feminine’ in its receptivity to the Divine,”⁴¹ thereby affirming the view that such teachings and insights should be limited to those who had already attained a high degree of spiritual refinement. Essentially, this would equate to a spiritual and intellectual Sufi elite. At that stage, there can be love without sexual or social impropriety, and Nizām and Ibn ‘Arabī (and probably other Sufis of both genders) would most likely have seen their relationships in these terms. Ibn ‘Arabī himself asserts that he had reached a spiritual degree not attained by any of his peers, namely the Seal of Muhammadan Sainthood.

That is not to say, however, that sexual love and union was something that Ibn ‘Arabī denigrated or even disapproved of on the spiritual path. There is what might loosely be called a Tantric slant in Ibn ‘Arabī’s appraisal of love as a pathway to the knowledge of God. For him, as in Tantra, sexual union, given the right degrees of purification, refinement, and proper understanding, could lead to spiritual epiphanies, as it imitates God’s relationship with Man. Ibn ‘Arabī states explicitly that the *qutb* or highest in the hierarchy of saints, the Axis, loves women and often engages in sexual intercourse, not for procreation but solely for pleasure.⁴² The *qutb* is also said to love beauty as it mirrors the Beauty of the Divine. Ibn ‘Arabī’s statement that God could be most profoundly and perfectly witnessed in women is a great affirmation not only of women, but of human love.⁴³

The poems of the *Tarjumān* are both a great outpouring of love and an ode to that witnessing of the core of love being the core of God. In

Woman, in this case Nizām, divine reality can be unveiled.

Ibn ‘Arabī frequently refers to a particular *ḥadīth* in his writings: “I was a Hidden Treasure and I loved to be known so I created the world that I might be known.”⁴⁴ From this it follows that the reason for the existence of creation is divine desire (a concept again similar to Tantra). Thus, God is seen to be both eternally hidden and radically other in the Divine Essence, and self-revealing through the Divine Names and Attributes (or Energies in the Christian tradition of Gregory of Palamas). Hence, God is always unveiling and always veiled, a realization attested to in every mystical tradition. This “becoming” in the sense of self-revelation, as distinct to “being,” is the traditional province of the Divine Feminine face of God and Its immanence in the world. Through Its agency it is possible to witness the Hidden Treasure self-revealing in the mirror of the world. It goes without saying that a full revelation of the Divine Essence is by definition impossible and would mean annihilation for anything created—no man, no human being, may gaze on Isis Unveiled and live, to refer to a different tradition. The Ultimate Source must always be concealed by veils, veils of darkness, veils of light. As Ibn ‘Arabī writes, if God were to remove His 70,000 veils of darkness and of light the revelation of His Face would mean our destruction, our incineration as separate entities in the pure fire of His Gaze.⁴⁵ The Source Itself is absolute Unity, so of necessity, all multiplicity would be annihilated in that Unity. No separate forms could exist. Nevertheless, all separate forms derive their Being from this Essence. For God desires to be known, and the Divine Names are traces of that desire. For Ibn ‘Arabī, the Desire of God for His creature is what causes that creature to desire God, become a “desirer” or lover of God in turn, leading eventually to *fanā* or annihilation in the Divine.

Ibn ‘Arabī struggles to say the Unsayable, clothe the paradox of existence and non-existence in language, and explain how it is that the universe as being different from God is an illusion, and yet, it is neither other than God, nor is it God. As he writes in the *Futūḥāt*, these are truths that can only be understood by the heart,

which can reconcile all opposites within itself: “The universe is neither pure Being nor pure nothingness. It is total magic: it makes you think that it is God and it is not God; it makes you think that it is creation and it is not creation, for in every respect it is neither this nor that.” (*Futūḥāt*, IV, 151)⁴⁶

This is subtly but profoundly different from pantheism which simplistically asserts that everything is God; but nor does it create a chasm between spirit and matter, the existence of the cosmos and the existence of God. The universe is both illusory and non-illusory, both and at the same time. Ibn ‘Arabī, like the Tantrics, endorses a return to God not through escaping the world but by returning to God through God, that is, through God’s Names and Attributes as manifested in the world, pouring into the world in an act of self-revelation, as expressed in the *ḥadīth*: “I was a Hidden treasure and I loved to be known.” But, equally, one can only recognize the God he or she can contain, and thus, for all of us, this has to be the “God created by beliefs.”⁴⁷

The one who is refined or purified—we might call such a one enlightened in contemporary parlance—is capable of witnessing the immanence of God to the extent of their own “refinement” or enlightenment. Ibn ‘Arabī maintains, “He whom God has illuminated sees Him in all things.”⁴⁸ In a similar vein, St Seraphim of Sarov (1754-1833), a beloved Russian saint and sage who had many visions of the Mother of God, addressed his disciple Motovilov consistently as “your Godliness,” having become capable of seeing the Divine spark in all. The Qur’ān itself states unequivocally: “Wherever you turn, there is the Face of God.” (Qur’ān 2:115) In short, while the Divine Essence is beyond any form or image, the Divine Energies (Attributes, Names) may be witnessed in the world of forms. This is a concept common to the great faiths of humanity—Gregory of Palamas speaks of the essence and energies of God, Hinduism, to give another example, of the eternally unknowable Brahman and the Parashakti who awakens and embodies the creative energies of God in an outworking of the Divine Essence. And Ibn ‘Arabī speaks of the Essence of God, *al-dhāt*, as the Void, and of God’s Names and

Attributes as God's self-revelation. In a like manner, Ibn 'Arabī's concept of the Breath of God generating words which constitute the universe—"The universe is nothing more than His words"⁴⁹—shows a deep affinity to St John's Word or Logos and Kali's Necklace of Letters. It also follows that if the universe is a divine manifestation, all of it—matter, the body included, must be "good" in the sense of Genesis where "God saw that it was good." And hence women, associated with the embodiment of birth, are also "good."

For Ibn 'Arabī, the archetypal complete human being, the original Adam or *al-Insān al-Kāmil*, is like a polished mirror of all the Divine Names, the most perfect embodiment of the desire of the Divine to be known. This archetypal human ensouls the universe, imbuing consciousness into the cosmos. And human beings, as they strive for that original completion, aspire once again to embody the fullness of the Divine Attributes in a journey of Return from multiplicity back to the One.

This original Adam is reminiscent of Jesus's concept of the "Anthropos" or the "Single One" in the Gospel of Thomas, a word signifying the perfected and completed human being, regardless of gender. It is not for nothing that of all the Prophets, Jesus was the one Ibn 'Arabī felt the closest affinity to, calling Him his first teacher and the master through whom he returned to God.⁵⁰

Ibn 'Arabī categorically states that there is no gender differentiation in the human potential for attaining the perfection and completeness of the original Adam. Men and women are seen to be equally capable of the necessary spiritual refinement to embody this state. In fact, for Ibn 'Arabī this is a crucial and distinguishing aspect of the Islamic view of human nature, namely that all are capable of perfecting, and that women have identical spiritual potential to men.⁵¹

In her book, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, Sa'diyya Shaikh speaks eloquently of the "egalitarian ethical call of Islam,"⁵² reminding the reader that Allāh as the Godhead is radically free of anthropomorphism, and hence of gender

and of duality. Ibn 'Arabī, both in his life and writings, demonstrated how very seriously he took these, for him, core concepts of Islam, stressing the equal capacity and potentiality of all human beings for knowledge and spirituality, irrespective of any outer characteristics such as gender. Nor did Ibn 'Arabī shy away from the social, religious or ritual implications of this core belief of radical egalitarianism, such as affirming that women could equally well lead mixed congregations in prayer, deliver sermons, and be Imams.⁵³ Once again, this is an affirmation of how the inner state of the human being is the primary determinant of worth for the Sufī, not gender or any other outward characteristic, while attaining the spiritual stations is a result of growth in refinement and grace.

This is not to say that Ibn 'Arabī was unambiguously "feminist" in any current sense. He was both patriarchal and radically egalitarian, and, whatever his critics might say, he was always completely affirmative of Islam's core teachings. He was, of course, historically situated in his time and wrote predominantly, if not exclusively, for an audience of other men. At times, his pronouncements seem to endorse the patriarchal and even misogynist values and attitudes prevalent in his time. And yet, by means of subtle interpretative shifts, he constantly unsays and deconstructs such attitudes, to the extent that *al-dhāt*, the very Essence of God, has primacy at the ultimate level of the Godhead, and *al-dhāt*, the Divine Essence and the highest level of contemplation, is recognized by Ibn 'Arabī as being the Feminine Face of the Divine.⁵⁴ At the human level, at times, male superiority is endorsed, at times female, at times a radical spiritual equality between the sexes is posited. Ultimately, Ibn 'Arabī values receptivity and servanthood as the keys to spiritual completion,⁵⁵ both of which tend to be exhibited, even if only out of necessity, more frequently by women than by men who can become ego-driven in their assumed superiority (unlike, as Ibn 'Arabī points out, the humility of Muhammad). Thus the inversion is completed and complete.

Female Teachers, Female Disciples

Ibn ‘Arabī’s relationship with Nizām, while unique in its depth and intensity, was not unusual or abnormal for him. As pointed out already, he enjoyed multilayered relationships with women, whether members of his family,⁵⁶ his female disciples, or his female teachers.

In the Sufism espoused by Ibn ‘Arabī, it is the state of a person’s soul that gives that person value, and that necessarily transcends any other factors. All the same his position was certainly unusual in his own time, given the widely disseminated view of “female deficiency” which most subscribed to, based on the story of Eve’s derivation from Adam’s “crooked rib.” Ibn ‘Arabī accepts this biblical story from Genesis (taken on in a modified form by Islam) but manages to subvert it: 1) by saying that the original Adam or perfect human (anthropos) was neither male nor female but combined all human possibilities, and 2) by presenting the creation of Eve story in such a way as to show that woman was God’s “choicest” creation, the “choicest part” (*naqāwa*) of the human condition.⁵⁷

Another way in which Ibn ‘Arabī deconstructs the whole notion of male superiority is through linking masculine and feminine modes of behavior not to males and females but to active and receptive modes of being which either sex may assume according to the particular circumstance.

At the same time, Ibn ‘Arabī is wont to use the term “manliness” (*rujūliyya*) or “being a real man” as an equivalent for spiritual realization in either a woman or a man. In this he was in accord not only with his contemporaries, but also with the Gnostics and philosophers of over one thousand years before him. Thus, Fāṭima of Nishapur, a ninth-century Sufi shaykha and saint, famous as a teacher also of male Sufis, was called not just the “one true woman” (by Bāyazīd Bistami) but also “a true man hidden in women’s clothing.” In a like manner, Attar includes the great Sufi female saint Rābi’a in the “ranks of men.” Attar writes further: “When a woman becomes a man in the path of God she is a man and one can no longer call her a woman.”⁵⁸ In line with this, Mary, the Mother of Jesus, is considered by Ibn ‘Arabī to have been the first “man” to enter paradise. And Fakhr al-Nisā’, Nizām’s learned aunt, whose

name literally means the “glory of women,” is apostrophized by Ibn ‘Arabī in the Preface to the *Tarjumān* as “rather ‘the glory of men and learned people.’”⁵⁹

The valorization of the term “male” or “man” as a way of acknowledging spiritual stature goes back centuries before the establishment of Islam and is grounded at least partly in Aristotle’s dualistic opposition between spirit versus matter, equated with male versus female, as well as in a Manichaean type of Gnosticism. The gnostic Gospel of Thomas concludes with the disputed logion 114, which reads, referring to Mary Magdalene:

Simon Peter said to them, “Mary should leave us, for females are not worthy of life.” Jesus said, “Look, I shall guide her to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every female who makes herself male will enter heaven’s kingdom.”⁶⁰

“Becoming male” meant transforming the perishable into the imperishable, it was a statement of liberation. This transformation, according to writers such as Clement of Alexandria, Hippolytus Zostrianos, and the author of the First Apocalypse of James, was something that all people must make, whatever their biological gender. Spiritually advanced women were thus considered to have acquired “male” status and “become males” in essence. Both Jesus and later Ibn ‘Arabī were operating in a patriarchal context, so in such a context, this use of “male” was actually a way of subverting biological gender and allowing biological women access to full humanness.

In Thomas and in these other writers, “maleness” clearly refers to a degree of spiritual mastery rarely attained by women or men. According to such a definition, there are very few real “men” in existence. However, it is also undeniable that, just as during Jesus’ time, centuries later, male disciples (and men in general) were often reluctant to accept women masters. And, of course, accusations of sexual impropriety were often leveled at Sufi women—the most common way throughout history to tarnish a woman’s reputation and discredit her intellectual, political, or spiritual achievements.

However, it is also true that relationships between Sufi men and women could be much more egalitarian than in the broader society, and this in itself would have formed a precedent and a context for Ibn ‘Arabī’s and Nizām’s relationship. There seem to have been few barriers to male/female interactions in the religious and social Sufi circles Ibn ‘Arabī mixed in, in which women were often prominent.

Ibn ‘Arabī claims that at the outset of his spiritual path, women were abhorrent to him. It was a hatred of women that he felt bad about, which was contrary to Muhammad’s teachings, so he prayed to be freed of his aversion. After eighteen years, he says, God answered his prayers and made women loveable to him, and with this conversion he also felt that he had acquired the responsibility to defend women’s rights. It is difficult, though, to take his alleged hatred at face value, given that in his youth, Ibn ‘Arabī had traveled throughout Andalusia seeking out teachers and had become the disciple of two women teachers whom he revered as exhibiting both *jamāli* and *jalāli* qualities (beauty and power). It seems more likely that it was sexuality and woman as a sexual being that had caused his “aversion.”

Undeniably, Ibn ‘Arabī was influenced in his view of women by his interactions with his female peers and later, his female disciples, but probably, first and foremost, by the female masters he studied under.⁶¹ The first of these adepts was Yasmīna Umm al-Fuqarā’, a miracle worker then in her eighties. Ibn ‘Arabī writes of her:

... I have never met one like her with respect to the control she had over her soul. In her spiritual activities and communications, she was among the greatest. She had a strong and pure heart, a noble spiritual power, and a fine discrimination ...,” also stating that he saw her “perform many wonders.”⁶²

He also spent two years serving Fāṭima of Cordoba (Fāṭima bint Ibn al-Muthannā), then in her nineties, who named herself his “spiritual mother” and the “light of his earthly mother,” while he called her “a mercy to the world.”⁶³ He emphasizes her remarkable youthfulness alongside her spiritual influence and power, writing:

I waited on her with all my soul for many years; at that time she was ninety-five years of age. The delicacy and freshness of her visage, however, made me ashamed to look at her. Most people who saw her thought she was fourteen years old.⁶⁴

Ibn ‘Arabī asserts that Fāṭima had been given “the power of the Qur’ānic chapter *Al-Fātiḥa* [The Opening] and was able to wield its power in any situation.”⁶⁵

Ibn ‘Arabī also admired women from among his peers, such as the slave girl of Qāsim, or Zaynab al-Qal’iyya, a companion to many prominent male Sufis, and described by Ibn ‘Arabī as “one of the most intelligent people of her time.”⁶⁶

Significantly, out of the fourteen named disciples Ibn ‘Arabī says he invested with the *khirqā* or Sufi cloak, thirteen were women. Like *shak-tipāt* or the transmission of the power of the lineage by an Indian guru, this initiation linked the disciple into a Sufi transmission lineage that was seen to go back to the Prophet. The bestowal of the *khirqā* produces a binding relationship between master and disciple with obligations on both sides. In the poems addressed to his female disciples and initiates (found at the beginning of his *Dīwān*) Ibn ‘Arabī gives fulsome praise to many of them (with the exception of Zumurrud, who abandoned the Path) and is clearly pleased with their spiritual progress and the results of his mentoring.⁶⁷

From these poems, and from others addressed to female beloveds,⁶⁸ we can see that the poetry written to Nizām, while exceptional in some ways, was not unique in Ibn ‘Arabī’s output in the fact of its being addressed to a woman. What stands out in all of these poems is that despite the “maleness” these women are said to assume on the Path there is no denigration or downplaying of their womanhood. On the contrary, their beauty is celebrated in young and old, just as Nizām’s beauty and sexuality are celebrated. Simultaneously though, these women are never made into objects of the male gaze on account of their physical presence. Nor is there a sense of mistrust and revulsion towards women as the embodiment of a socially dangerous sexuality that leads “pure” men astray. In fact, there is a sense of these women being valued *as women*,

in the fullness of their physical and spiritual beauty; there is never a sense of them trying to become men, and this is despite Ibn ‘Arabī’s use of the term *rijāl* (men) for female aspirants.⁶⁹

Another thing that is striking about Ibn ‘Arabī’s attitude to women—and hence also to Nizām—is his refusal to fall into the virgin/whore dichotomy. The women he knows and interacts with are not perceived as sexual temptresses, but nor are they sexless saints either. Women are neither condemned and damned to everlasting servitude for their role in the Fall, nor are they idealized as unattainable paragons in the manner of Dante’s Beatrice, Petrarch’s Laura, or Cavalcanti’s Lady. The carnal and the spiritual are not opposed but enhance each other, mirroring the way all opposites may be seen to resolve in God.

Despite his earlier “hatred,” sex is clearly not, for Ibn ‘Arabī, a challenge or an obstacle to spiritual life. The body and sexuality are intrinsic to spirituality, and the soul loves the body for giving it a house to live in. In fact, marriage is a path to spiritual realization, while sex (in the best Tantric tradition) is sacred—not carnal, not abusive but, in the total annihilation or *fanā* brought about by desire, it is itself a road to the spiritual realization of unity, again a Tantric tenet. In some ways Ibn ‘Arabī can be said to have gone further than many Tantric paths which put contingencies around the sexual act and who it is to be performed with—often a low caste woman to accentuate its socially transgressive nature. There is no valorization of marriage as such in Tantra either, although the partnership between an adept and a consort could be an enduring and equal one. The right-handed Tantric path, on the other hand, is keen to move all the transgressive rituals of the five M’s⁷⁰ (including sexuality) from the physical to the mental sphere, in effect negating the participation of the body in the spiritual quest and overturning the whole non-dualist philosophy of Tantra with its core vision of spirit interpenetrating matter and bringing it to ever-increasing levels of refinement and subtlety. So, while Ibn ‘Arabī’s affirmation of the dissolution of the self in the sexual act as a mystical transformative experience is not unique to him, in many ways he goes further and links up to the ancient traditions of

vamayana (the left-handed or literally the “women’s path”) underlying Tantra, in his valuing of women and the feminine principle, and in the high value he attaches to sexuality in marriage which is idealized as a spiritual partnership leading to the growth and refinement of both partners.

It is worth pointing out that this exalted view of sexuality was not common or usual then, nor is it common or usual today. All too often, sexuality is degraded or coerced, its true meaning obliterated or buried.

Nevertheless, Ibn ‘Arabī appears to have seen sexuality and specifically the sexual act itself as reflective of God’s creative essence. Intercourse is seen to be at “the root of all things.”⁷¹ The non-existent and the virtual potentiality comes into being through the mutual desire and embrace of the two aspects of the Godhead, which then gives birth or existence (being) to a new thing, or “child.” All of this is reminiscent of the play between Shiva and Shakti in the Indian Shaivite and Shakta traditions. To digress momentarily, just imagine if the creation of every new thing in the universe were to be seen as the result of an act of divine love ever renewed, just as every moment is ever new and ever renewed. And imagine if human beings were to understand their role in the universe as those whose consciousness ensouls it and interprets it, giving it meaning and substantial form. And if they were to understand that the level of their consciousness directly impacts upon everything in the created cosmos for they are the microcosm of the all ... Just imagine. All these are among the core insights of Ibn ‘Arabī.

According to Sachiko Murata, there is a lost book by Ibn ‘Arabī entitled “*The Book on the Sexual Act That Pervades all Atoms*.”⁷² What becomes apparent from this is that Ibn ‘Arabī’s view of sexuality extended to the creation of the physical world down to its smallest constituents. He furnishes yet another example of how mystics could indeed see into the heart of matter and the physical processes of the world, a reason why many of their insights are now being validated by science, albeit couched in a scientific, mathematical language rather than the mystic’s visionary poetic speech.

Parallels between the Gospel of Thomas and Ibn ‘Arabī

There are some interesting parallels with the Gospel of Thomas in Ibn ‘Arabī’s thought, beyond that of the “Single” one, who in Ibn ‘Arabī’s language is *al-Insān al-Kāmil*, the original Adam, essentially the human archetype or the blueprint for the human being. There is also the already mentioned logion 114 in which Mary Magdalene is said to be “made male” in her journey towards spiritual perfection. Female aspirants on the Sufī path were also praised for their “maleness.”

On another occasion, Ibn ‘Arabī writes that when one uses the body to serve God, that body itself becomes transformed and filled by God’s presence, permeated by God.⁷³ This reads as an explanation of Jesus’ somewhat enigmatic saying in the Gospel of Thomas (logion 22), which combines both this idea and the perfection of the *anthropos* or original Adam created in the Image of God:

Jesus said to them, “When you make the two into one, and when you make the inner like the outer and the outer like the inner, and the upper like the lower, and when you make male and female into a single one, so that the male will not be male nor the female be female, when you make eyes in place of an eye, a hand in place of a hand, a foot in place of a foot, an image in place of an image, then you will enter [the kingdom].”⁷⁴

This brings to mind a ḥadīth describing the relationship of God to the one He loves with the following words: “I am his hearing with which he hears, his sight with which he sees, his hand with which he seizes, his foot with which he walks.”⁷⁵ Here the transformation demanded by Jesus is complete, to the extent that, as Meister Eckhart (c.1260-c.1328) famously proclaimed:

The eye with which I see God and the eye with which God sees me is the same eye.⁷⁶

Not unlike Meister Eckhart, Ibn ‘Arabī maintains that the one who sees through God, sees God through God.⁷⁷

The Eye which sees
The eye with which I see merge

Merge

Into one seeing

Which will pass through me⁷⁸

As already stated, Ibn ‘Arabī felt particularly close to Jesus, a great Prophet in Islam, had numerous encounters with him, and considered himself to be guided by him, so these parallels are by no means farfetched. Nizām herself is said to be a “daughter of Rūm,” a word used at the time to signify Byzantine Christians. She is presented as an exemplar of Christianity in a “pure” Islamic interpretation, while the *Tarjumān* itself contains many references to Christianity.

Ibn ‘Arabī and the Divine Feminine

*I was a Hidden Treasure; I loved to be known.
Hence I created the world so that I would be known.* Ḥadīth

Like many others who are open to both the masculine and feminine aspects of God (*jalāli* and *jamāli* in Ibn ‘Arabī’s Islamic language), Ibn ‘Arabī, like Jesus, does not denigrate the body or embodiment. On the contrary, human beings are seen to be superior in status to the disembodied angels precisely because of embodiment—the marriage of spirit and body. It is this that makes the human being the most complete manifestation of the Divine. Thus, the dualistic idea of spirit and intellect being higher and superior and body and matter being lower and inferior is subverted, given that it is embodiment that gives the human being an exalted status in creation.

Ibn ‘Arabī goes even further along this path, for if the human being is the epitome of creation, woman (who is the agent of that embodiment) is the epitome or “choicest part” (*naqāwa*) of humanity.⁷⁹ In her is distilled the refinement of which humanity is capable, which, for Ibn ‘Arabī, is the measure of a person’s worth. Woman “activates the self-awareness of humanity”⁸⁰ and participates in the process of the desire of the non-existing entities in God to come into existence.⁸¹ The story of Eve’s creation from Adam’s rib becomes deconstructed and inverted in Ibn ‘Arabī’s interpretation as

proof of the additional care taken by God over the fashioning of woman, an extra refinement as compared to the fashioning of man.

The essence of God for Ibn ‘Arabī is to be found in the receptive feminine matrix (*al-dhāt*) which unites active and passive principles and gives rise to all of creation. All opposites combine in this matrix of God which is the limitless source of potential creativity. Mursid F.A. Ali ElSenossi gives the definition of *al-dhāt* in *The Language of the Future: Sufi Terminology* as: “(Dhat),” The Essence. This is Allāh in Himself without regard to His creations, His Attributes or His Names. The Essence is beyond knowledge or conceptualization. Allāh warns us of this aspect of Himself. The Essence is Absolute Blindness, the Hidden of the Hidden, the Unknown of the Unknown. This is the World of Absolute Non-manifestation.”⁸² In common with many traditions, Ibn ‘Arabī sees this Essence as Feminine, the Face of God as the Dark Mother, hidden and forever Unknown, containing all the essences of the possible in its luminous darkness.

For Ibn ‘Arabī, as for mystics in general, Reality is both either/or and both/and, and these contradictions coalesce and are resolved in God. Thus men and women are both different and the same. The majestic (*jalāli*) and beautiful (*jamāli*) attributes of God are combined within God, but just like dominance and receptivity, these attributes are interchangeable between the two genders, depending on the situation and the role played by the woman or man. This is because the original Adam or *al-Insān al-Kāmil*, combined in him or herself all the attributes and qualities as the most perfect mirror of the Divine, and since there was no distinction of gender in Adam as the human archetype, this original “completeness” is equally accessible to men and women.

For Ibn ‘Arabī the beauty and harmony of the things of this world were a way of coming to perceive the Beauty and Greater Harmony of their Creator.... this ability to pass through the veils of outward appearances to witness the purity of the essential Beauty of things or of people is attained only through the purification of the self and of one’s organs of perception.

The original Adam, *al-Insān al-Kāmil*, is the human archetype, single and complete, the “Single” One in the language of the Gospel of Thomas, and a mirror of all the Divine Attributes. However, in our gendered world, according to Ibn ‘Arabī, God is to be most perfectly witnessed in woman. Woman is the microcosmic reflection of the Divine Feminine, allowing the divine feminine matrix to manifest in its most perfect creativity.⁸³ She is both created and creator, both receptive and active. Through her all of humanity is born.⁸⁴

Furthermore, the One needed Otherness and separation to know Its Self—but the Other is nothing but Self. As Ibn ‘Arabī writes: “Since [God] breathed His spirit into man, he is yearning in reality only for himself.”⁸⁵ Thus, desire between man and woman is sanctified, for its blueprint is to be found in God. Human desire and love mirror the divine desire and love between God and humanity, just as witnessing human beauty is a way of witnessing divine beauty. The Beloved in Sufi poetry is always ambiguous for he or she is always both the human beloved and the divine beloved; beauty manifest in the human form, and the Source of Beauty Itself. The image of Nizām in the *Tarjumān* follows the same blueprint. A ḥadīth verifies that God has created Adam according to his form.⁸⁶ Human form mirrors the divine form: hence human beauty is beautiful because of its resemblance to the Divine. It could be said that the whole philosophy of Sufi love poetry is based on perceiving human beauty as being of divine origin and hence a way for the gnostic to perceive the Divine. This is clearly perceptible in the poetry of Rumi and Hafiz to take the best-known examples of those who professed the “religion of Love.”

Witnessing—whether the witnessing of beauty or of creation per se—is not only integral to the

human being's ability to approach the Divine; it is also integral to the existence of existence itself, which would have no existence without there being one to witness it. Something that is a potentiality in the Divine is granted existence and being when it is seen—if that gaze is averted it ceases to exist. Ibn 'Arabī puts this realization as follows: “the Highest Panoramas, with respect to their being panoramas, have no existence except insofar as they have one to view them.”⁸⁷ As consciousness is present and withdrawn, the seen flashes in and out of existence, an ancient mystical insight paralleled by the speculations of the new physics which posits this blinking in and out of existence of the tiniest building blocks of matter. This centrality of the witness or the perceiver is something the new physics is exploring in experiments such as the observer effect in quantum mechanics. Scientists still disagree on how to interpret this and other experiments. However, some, such as the theoretical physicist John Archibald Wheeler, tout the possibility that this is a “participatory universe” which we have participated in bringing into being. Thus, it may be possible to say that the consciousness of the observer impacts that which is observed—or even that which exists.⁸⁸ In the mystical tradition, a similar concept extends further into a spiritual dimension, affirming that the level of consciousness of the observer impacts on the nature of what is perceived. Thus the perception of the gnostic will allow him or her to receive more and in a more profound manner from what is being perceived. In this tradition, to the profane gaze, all is profane, while to the gnostic all is illuminated and divine. Or, as Ibn 'Arabī puts it, everywhere the gnostic or the mystic turns, there is the face of God.⁸⁹ In all of this, the perception and refinement of the perceiver are paramount.

The pure are hard pressed to perceive what is impure

For in their observation alchemy is found
Transforming objects of perception through
their gaze
For is it not said that these two -
The gaze and what is gazed upon -
Are One?

What is perceived cannot exist without the
organ of perception

And just as atoms can't decide if they are
waves

(we must decide for them instead)

So does the Light which looks through
guileless eyes

Cleanse and transform what its ray
touches.⁹⁰

A distinctive feature of Ibn 'Arabī's style as a writer and thinker is fluidity. Nothing is allowed to be fixed but is subject to constant change. Concepts flow in and out of each other. The Beloved is Divine and human, never completely one or the other. Ideas and statements are deconstructed and reflect off each other. Immanence exists alongside transcendence, and at the same time as it, both within the inner heart and beyond the beyond of all limits and all comprehension. We think a text affirms one thing only to see, in Ibn 'Arabī's brilliant interpretation, that it can mean something quite different or even opposite (as for example in the rib creation story of Eve). This fluidity of language and thought trying to describe the indescribable, that which is in constant motion and flux, is a hallmark of mystical experience which inevitably brings the gnostic closer to the Feminine Face of God.

You see

I am seen

You know

I am known

Source is reflected

In skyclad awareness

Your world

Unfolds

In Me.⁹¹

Nizām, Ibn 'Arabī and the Tarjumān

So, what of the *Tarjumān al-ashwāq* specifically? And Ibn 'Arabī's poetry in general? Not for nothing were the poems of the *Tarjumān* the only texts that Ibn 'Arabī allegedly

insisted on reciting himself in his sessions with his disciples and students. This, in itself, is a testimony of its personal significance to him.

In the poems of the *Tarjumān*, the Beloved (Nizām) comes across as a real personage, a dream image, a mirage always just out of reach yet constantly leading the poet onwards in his quest to reach her and to join her caravan. She is absent and present at once, more present in her absence than many in their presence. She is both cruel and merciful, challenging the poet to understand and realize her constant presence in his inner heart. She is addressed as “she,” “he” or “they” (feminine plural), yet mostly as “she.”⁹² She is Divine and human, both the human beloved and the Divine Beloved, who the poet sees in and through her face. And yet it is unequivocally Nizām who is the subject, the Beloved. Ibn ‘Arabī makes that clear in his original Preface when he writes: “Whatever name I mention in this work, it is to her that I am alluding. Whatever the house whose elegy I sing, it is her house I am thinking.”⁹³

So that there can be no mistake, Ibn ‘Arabī alludes to Nizām’s name in many different ways in the poems, for example, making use of the fact that *Nizām* (or *naẓm*) also means verse or poetry, the root *n-ẓ-m* meaning to compose poetry⁹⁴ as well as being related to structuring and organizing. Thus, the poet’s statement that she is the central pearl in a beautifully strung and ordered necklace brings to the fore her central sunlike presence in the *Tarjumān*, one that brings harmony and order, or the harmonious arrangement of poetic form, to the passionate outpouring of the poetry. She is, as Ibn ‘Arabī writes in the Preface, “*Ayn al-shams wa-l-bahā*—‘the source of the sun and the glory’”⁹⁵—in effect the Sun around which the pilgrimage of the poems revolves.

Indeed, one of the structuring principles of the *Tarjumān* is the imagery of the pilgrimage of the Hajj with its stations. Examples of this include the frequent mentions of the stoning ground where pilgrims stone the devil, or the prayers made by pilgrims at the four corners of the Ka’ba. Beyond that and on a deeper level, however, is the circling motion of the poems themselves in their journey around the

Beloved/Sun, echoing the circling of the pilgrims around the Black Stone. The journeying of the *Tarjumān* never has an arrival point; like the circle, it is endless, and each point on the circle can equally well be a point of departure or a point of temporary arrival. The journeying into the beloved is infinite as is the journey into the infiniteness of God who forever remains beyond any limits of knowing. The theme of Circling is paramount—circling the Sun, circling the central jewel of the necklace, circling the Ka’ba, which is both physical and represents, for the Sufi, the inner spiritual Heart—and the Beloved herself is the focal point of all this circling. Her magnetic force keeps the Lover in his orbit and forever guides and incites his journeying.

For Ibn ‘Arabī, “the truth speaks in circles.”⁹⁶ His thought is circular because he sees reality to be circular—a circle which has no beginning and no end.

Not long after, Rumi (1207-73) was to experience his more famous awakening in the presence of Shams i-Tabrīzi, who became Rumi’s human-divine Beloved, the human face of the Divine, and the Sun around which Rumi’s life and poetry were to ceaselessly rotate. Rumi echoed this perpetual circling in the physical dimension by setting up a pole around which he rotated in ecstatic dance and spontaneous poetic inspiration, a dance which has passed into the ritual of the Whirling Dervishes of the Mevlevi order, who seek the state of Union and of self-annihilation through their dance.

The constant motion of their circling echoes Ibn ‘Arabī’s realization that the Divine Feminine is never fixed or static. Rather, its characteristics are fluidity and change, for it itself is both in and provokes perpetual movement, as the poems of the *Tarjumān* portray. The theophanies of the poems never repeat themselves but are constantly renewed, just as nothing is ever repeated in existence, for God is unlimited.

Nizām’s journeying away from the poet is also a well-established trope of Classical Arabic poetry, specifically, the classical form known as *qaṣīda*, in which the beloved is seen to depart at the start of the poem and the lover then describes his journeying after her, trying to catch

up with her caravan, stopping at her campsites, searching for traces of her passage, led on by these traces across the desert as though following a mirage. The poems of the *Tarjumān* follow this conceit except that there is no return for the lover-poet to his point of departure, his tribe. The *qaṣīda* has a strict and elaborate rhyming and metrical structure: verses have the same length and meter throughout the poem and are divided into two hemistichs, the second of which ends in a rhyme which is the same throughout the poem. The images used come from a stock reservoir, so the virtuosity of the poet is demonstrated in handling these constraints of strict rhyme scheme, formal structure and defined themes and images, not by finding or creating new or original ones. The subject matter is also traditional: scenes from Bedouin life, caravans crossing the desert, oases with their welcome shade, camels, traces of encampments, night journeys, the moon and stars, clouds, flowers, the sun, wind, lightning, thunder. This Bedouin style of poetry was apparently quite archaic even at the time of the writing of the *Tarjumān*, and it is almost as if Ibn ‘Arabī revels in the limitations it imposes as he creates the container through which to express the quest of the Lover for the Beloved.⁹⁷

Nizām’s “absent presence” is constantly evoked in the poems of the *Tarjumān* in many different ways. A central conceit Ibn ‘Arabī plays with is the proximity between Nizām and *naẓm* (poetry). Given that poetry (*naẓm*) is itself a harmoniously ordered and beautiful language, Nizām (in all the meanings inscribed in her name) is ever-present in her own beauty in the poetry and in the beauty and harmonious arrangement of the poems themselves. She is thus integral to it on every level.

There are allusions to Nizām’s name scattered throughout the *Tarjumān*. For instance, in the last line of poem 46, Ibn ‘Arabī speaks of “the order of togetherness” (*Nizām al-shaml*), poem 29 (14) states, “She is our principle of Harmony,” while poem 55 ends with the words “perfect harmony (Nizām).” In poem 20, translated beautifully by Zargar, “My malady comes from the one with malady in her eyelids,” there are more lines which unambiguously point to the very human Nizām as the beloved:

Long has been my yearning for that young
one versed in prose
and in verse, with her own pulpit, and with
clarity of expression,
from the daughters of kings from the land
of Persia,
from the most glorious of cities: from Isfa-
han.
She is the daughter of ‘Iraq, the daughter of
my imam;
I am her contrasting opposite: a Yemeni
son.
Have you ever seen, oh my masters, or ever
heard
of two contrasting opposites undergoing
combination?
If you could only see us in Ramah offering
back and forth
winecups of love-longing without the use of
fingers,
when love-longing between us drives to
further chatter,
sweet and heart-arousing, but without the
use of tongue,
then you would see that in which reason be-
comes lost ...⁹⁸

The “young one” versed in prose and in verse, who is eloquent in preaching and expressing herself with clarity, and who hails from Isfahan in Persia and is the daughter of the imam Abu Shuja’ Zāhir Ibn Rustam al-Isfahani is unambiguously Nizām.

She: See you these fingers?
They touch yours already
Despite the chasm of space.
For space itself is not an emptiness
It trembles in this cup
It touches wine
And touches us
Caressing...⁹⁹

Speaking more generally, Nizām is clearly the sun around which all the poems—and the lover—revolve, the central jewel of a harmoniously strung poetic necklace which she herself

ornaments, and is the cause of, and which she receives as a gift and a homage. Her qualities are those Ibn ‘Arabī cherishes most dearly in a human being—refinement, beauty, grace, subtlety, culture, learning. She is the Harmony the poetry aspires to create with its own harmonious words; she is the light that lightens East and West and enlightens the lover as she speaks in poem 4 (6): “Isn’t it enough for him that I am forever in his heart? Isn’t it? Isn’t it?”¹⁰⁰—reminding the Lover that the One desired is beyond form, although the Beloved may take on a temporary form as and where and when She pleases.

In keeping with the reconciliation of all opposites, Nizām’s beauty and presence, though forever physically absent, are supremely present. They define and circumscribe the universe of the lover, being the object of his quest, the substance of the quest itself, its stations which he comes to through following in her footsteps, and the dynamic movement of the quest which is the journey into her.

In accordance with Ibn ‘Arabī’s contention that God is best witnessed in women, Nizām is the reflection in the microcosm of the Divine Feminine, to the extent that at times she merges in it, her individual self being annihilated in it. Her constant motion is like that of the Spirit in the Christian tradition which blows (“listeth”) where it will (and which, for some Christian exegeses, is the Feminine face of the Christian Trinity). Like It, Nizām is never fixed in a location or a station, but is always in dynamic motion, transforming herself and transforming her lover, undoing certainties, unsaying definitions and creeds, never still, never possessed, bringing all opposites together, as in poem 31 (11):

My night is made luminous
At the sight of her face.
My day darkens
Hidden beneath her hair.

Or poem 39 (7):

Her shining visage - sun
Her long hair - night
Sun and night reunited!¹⁰¹

The Beloved is continually changing in these poems, to the extent of shifting gender and number, and the Lover’s heart and intellect must constantly change to keep pace. She is both beyond everything and within everything, and in this, analogous to the Divine. The Lover seeks annihilation in her. Hers is the state of the ultimate release and realization, not holding on to anything, no certainty, no single form, but surrendered to all forms and to the dynamism of change, in short, the state to which all mystics aspire to —“Let go and let God.” And in these transformations of the Beloved is implicit the state described by the verse from the Qur’ān: “Wherever you turn, there is the Face of God.” (Qur’ān 2:115) No one form of the Beloved is fixed, no one form is stable, and the heart must encompass them all. This realization that the true object of desire is beyond form and within the heart is essentially the lesson of Nizām as an embodiment of the Divine Feminine, whether in her own right, or as the “daughter of Rūm” who appears in the second part of the Preface to the *Tarjumān*.

While he is circumambulating the Ka’ba, Ibn ‘Arabī relates that he was inspired to recite a poem, given here in Zargar’s translation:

If only I knew whether they were cognizant
of the heart that remains within their possession.
And my heart - if it could somehow just apprehend
the mountain-pass which they traversed.
Do you suppose they made it safely?
Or do you suppose that they have perished?
The lords of love-longing are perplexed
in love-longing and are near inescapably entangled.¹⁰²

As he was speaking these lines out loud, Ibn ‘Arabī avers he felt a touch “softer than silk” on his back. What follows is an intervention and a revelation which apparently inspires the outpouring of the *Tarjumān* poems. It could even be said that the *Tarjumān* is an exposition of the teaching given to Ibn ‘Arabī by this “daughter of Rūm” whom he encountered at the Ka’ba.

As already stated, there is some doubt around the “reality” of this meeting, as there are questions relating to the identity of the woman. Most commentators presume this encounter took place during Ibn ‘Arabī’s second visit to Mecca in 1214, some twelve years after his first visit in 1202 when he stayed for three years and first met Niẓām. However, this is only an assumption, as Ibn ‘Arabī does not specify the timing of the encounter. Nor is it clear whether this encounter formed part of the original Preface (called Preface 1 by Jane Clark)¹⁰³ or was a later insertion. Nicholson, the original translator of the *Tarjumān* into English, believed that the preface he translated was put together from two different prefaces written by Ibn ‘Arabī at different times, but their exact content has proved difficult to ascertain. As Clark writes, concluding her exhaustive study of the Preface:

The exact details of how it was written — whether it is, as Nicholson suggested, really two prefaces written at different times, or whether it is a single preface of which the first part was omitted at certain times because of its controversial nature—may never be known.¹⁰⁴

It could perhaps even be conjectured that this may have been the first meeting with Niẓām, whether real or imaginal, as Ibn ‘Arabī writes of this mysterious woman: “I knew her after that and came to know her well.”¹⁰⁵ This different chronology cannot be excluded, as it is unlikely that the seed for the composition of the poems was not planted during Ibn ‘Arabī’s first visit to Mecca. What is known is that the compromising references to Niẓām from the original Preface were omitted soon after Ibn ‘Arabī wrote his nearly line by line Commentary to the poems, and that these passages were probably not reinstated until after his death. The replacement of the very human Niẓām of the First Preface by the etherealized figure of the “daughter of Rūm” could equally well have been another attempt to protect Niẓām and himself from censure.

Ibn ‘Arabī continues relating the encounter:

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 never seen anyone more beautiful than her in the face or more pleasant in speech, more gracious in manners, more subtle in meaning, more delicate in allusions, more astute in conversation. She surpassed [all] the people of her time in grace and culture, in beauty and knowledge.¹⁰⁶

This transfigured ethereal figure, endowed with gnosis (knowledge) and beauty, who names herself simply *qurrat al-‘ayn* (“freshness of the eye”), turns out to be a stern taskmaster as she takes apart every line of Ibn ‘Arabī’s poem and reproves him for his deficient understanding of the Real and of Love, unworthy of a Sufi master on the Path. For instance, here is her commentary on the lines:

And my heart - if it could somehow just apprehend

the mountain-pass which they traversed.

“Sir, the ‘mountain-pass’ is that which is between the innermost heart and the inner heart, and it is that which prevents it from knowing. So how can someone like you hope for something which it is not possible to attain?”¹⁰⁷

Here is another of her responses:

“I am amazed to hear such a thing from you, you who are the gnostic of your time! [...] What I desire is real awareness made known by non-existence, and the Path which consists of speaking truthfully.”¹⁰⁸

And to the final lines:

The lords of love-longing are perplexed in love-longing and are near inescapably entangled.

She replies:

“How amazing! How can the one who is madly in love have anything left by which he could be perplexed, when the very nature of love is that it is all-encompassing [...] So where is the perplexity, and who is the one who remains here to be perplexed?”¹⁰⁹

In each case, the mysterious girl points him towards *al-dhāt*, the feminine essence of the

Divine, which is forever dark and unknowable, the latent power of the hidden, luminously dark Truth.

Although, as mentioned, there is some debate as to her identity, the mere fact of her presence in the preface to a series of poems directly inspired by Nizām and in which everything, as Ibn ‘Arabī affirms, speaks of her, points to Nizām as the human embodiment of this figure. That said, it is also true in some sense that this etherealized figure is equally a human woman, and a figure from the imaginal world, where tabus on touch between the sexes do not exist, unlike in traditional Islam where such contact as she made would have been forbidden. She is also, as Ralph Austin points out, an image of Knowledge¹¹⁰ and a manifestation of Holy Wisdom—Hagia Sophia. This might explain her curious denomination as a “daughter of Rūm,” as Rūm at the time was used to refer to the Eastern Roman Empire or Byzantium, the heart of the Eastern Orthodox Christian church. And the heart of Constantinople was the magnificent Greek basilica of Hagia Sophia, the Church of the Holy Wisdom. Given Ibn ‘Arabī’s allegiance to Jesus and his stated profession that the Real was too vast to be limited to any one form of belief but could be worshipped in every form, this link to the Divine Sophia through the figure of Nizām is not at all unlikely. In the poems themselves, Nizām is, by turns, Persian, Arabic, and Greek—and, like the Divine Sophia or Wisdom, beyond the constraint of any one religion or any one form, as poem 2 makes clear:

She is a bishopess, one of the daughters of Rome, unadorned: thou sees in her a radiant Goodness.

Wild is she, none can make her his friend; she has gotten in her solitary chamber a mausoleum for remembrance.

She has baffled everyone who is learned in our religion, every student of the Psalms of David, every Jewish doctor, and every Christian priest.

If with a gesture she demands the Gospel, thou wouldst deem us to be priests and patriarchs and deacons.¹¹¹

She appears equally as a beautiful sensuous woman whose presence always eludes the poet,

as multiple and as one, as feminine and as masculine, and as a face of the Divine Feminine itself, dark and hidden, wild and never possessed or contained in any one form or image. This is the Black Goddess (Black in Her unknowability and Her wisdom) with her “black tresses,” resident in the “black centre (pupil) of the eye,”¹¹² a “hidden pearl beneath her black hair” (poem 48), and when she lets down her hair, the night appears, black, dense, opaque and impenetrable (poem 30). This is Shakti, who is perpetually becoming and in Her Becoming moves Shiva into Being; this is the latent brooding vastness and void of Aditi or *al-dhāt*, the Divine Essence Itself from which all that is latent actualizes and emerges into form.

One of Ibn ‘Arabī’s central tenets was that nothing could fully express the Reality of God. The other is that this Reality is constantly changing, mutating, and calling in different ways to the human heart. Hence the famous verses from poem 11:

My heart has become the receptacle 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’ba,

And the tables of the Torah and the Book of the Qur’ān.

I follow the religion of love: whatever way Love’s camels take,

That is my religion and my faith.¹¹³

And hence our transformations into priests or rabbis or deacons, all at Her command, as in poem 2.

In the *Bezels of Wisdom*, Ibn ‘Arabī ties the form and nature of the divine revelation to the one receiving it, for if Divine Revelation can be described as colorless absolute light, the receiver is a prism which of necessity endows that light with colors. He writes: “If the believer understood the meaning of the saying ‘the color of water is the color of the receptacle,’ he would admit the validity of all beliefs and he would recognize God in every form and every object of faith.”¹¹⁴

She: Yet – there is just One Power
In all its aspects.
Just as the Nameless may be named a
hundred ways
Yet remain Nameless
Just so this Power appears in different
colours like a rainbow.
Yet what would happen if the colours of
the rainbow coalesced
And showed themselves as One?
For Light is one
Is that not so?¹¹⁵

Jonathan Black writes,

we may know the constant changing of the Absolute and the changing of the world by scanning our own hearts. If we see with our inner eye how our own heart in all its myriad states and dimensions is mutating, transforming and evolving at every fleeting moment, then we may also begin to understand the operations of the divine.¹¹⁶

Our heart is constantly changing, traversing Stations in Ibn ‘Arabī’s Sufi language, ever receptive to different divine influences and different divine Names, ever metamorphosing. This journey through the heart’s inner landscapes in pursuit of the caravan of the Beloved is the journeying the *Tarjumān* offers us a record of. A journey through the imaginal world, the *mundus imaginalis*, accessed by what Henry Corbin called the “creative imagination” or what Jung also called “lucid dreaming.”

Nor is there any contradiction for Nizām to be both real and imaginal in the world of the journey of the *Tarjumān*, itself an imaginal realm which bridges our reality and Reality itself. Her lesson at the Ka’ba is that presence and absence are one and the same in the highest form of love where the Beloved merges into the Lover’s heart, leaving no one to be perplexed, having been annihilated in Love. And Ibn ‘Arabī writes in poem 4: “Isn’t it enough for him that I am present forever in his heart? Isn’t it? Isn’t it?” Furthermore, it is she, Nizām, who is the guide, the interpreter, the “*tarjumān*” in this world, and on this journey. It is she who provokes the poet into taking this journey, spurs him into activity

through her ceaseless motion, is the initiatrix on the quest, and the guide through the landscapes of desire—a very Tantric concept. She veils and unveils as she will, revealing the face of the Real as and when She chooses in an illumination of lightning, stars, moon, and sun — all images of light or “enlightenment.”¹¹⁷

She guides the poet through a desire so pure and unadulterated that it is a great and incandescent fire that can light our own pure desire for the Real in which the physical and the spiritual meld into each other. Flesh and spirit are both needed in this call of the true self to us, for formlessness and form are both part of the mystery, and for Ibn ‘Arabī Nizām is the carrier of this form. As Ibn ‘Arabī writes: “Contemplation of God without formal support is not possible ... Since therefore, some form of support is necessary, the best and most perfect kind is the contemplation of God in women.”¹¹⁸ Rumi’s immortal lines come to mind here:

Woman is a beam of the divine light
She is not the being whom sensual desire
takes as its object.
She is Creator, it should be said.
She is not a creature.¹¹⁹

The realization of the *Tarjumān*, the realization granted to Ibn ‘Arabī by Nizām and by his love for her, is a vision of the Feminine Face of God. This journey into the Divine is endless; it is a journey of the Return. As with the Return to and into God, there is never an ultimate point of arrival—there is always further to go.

Yet the Journey is one endorsed by God Himself, for, as Allāh says and Ibn ‘Arabī is so fond of quoting: “I was a hidden treasure, and I loved to be known.”

Nizām becomes an Image of the “hidden treasure,” mirroring God’s desire to be recognized, to be seen by His creation.

She: Yes – God
The Unknown yearning to
be known
The Uncreated longing
for creation
The Treasure thirsting

for discovery
 The Merciful, Compassionate and Loving
 searching for the Lovers
 [...]

 Your eyes, your eyes,
 They must awaken.¹²⁰

The Beloved is seeking us all to be Lovers.

It is scarcely surprising that Ibn ‘Arabī should have run into trouble for his valorization of the Divine Feminine and for his refusal to separate out the sensual and the spiritual. The accusations of sexual impropriety and of harboring an erotic love for Niẓām forced him into writing the second Preface, an apologia of sorts, in which he is at pains to remove all such suspicion from himself and from Niẓām, and in which the mysterious daughter of Byzantium replaces the Persian Niẓām. As stated, the dedication to Niẓām was omitted from the second Preface, and Ibn ‘Arabī went on to provide lengthy and virtually line by line commentaries on the allegorical and metaphysical meanings of the poems for those who had little idea of gnosis or of mystical experience. There is a clear attempt to deflect criticism through spelling things out in detail. Arguably, though, these commentaries are nowhere near as powerful as the poetry itself. Poetry thrives on paradox and on saying the unsayable—and, then again, unsaying the sayable. So, the commentaries that seek to explain it often suck the lifeblood out of it, leaving husks where before were colors, juices, textures, and all the flesh and ambivalence of poetic words. For poetic language, poetry can combine and convey both the flesh and the spirit in its music, its sounds, and its message. But Ibn ‘Arabī knew that. He also knew, doubtless, that the commentaries would help these poems, so precious to him, to survive.

The Tarjumān and the Purpose of Poetry

- a language of veiling and unveiling

Ibn ‘Arabī was, first and foremost, a mystic following the path of gnosis, direct knowledge experienced in the heart, and poetry has long been the favored language of many mystics. For the great Sufī poets such as Rumi

and Hafiz, poetry is an expression of their journey into God, and Ibn ‘Arabī was of the same lineage, seeing poetry both as a way of accessing spiritual realities and of conveying something of their essence to others. He inspired Persian poets and mystics such as Jami, ‘Irāqī, and Shabistari.¹²¹ Like many other mystics, Ibn ‘Arabī resorted to poetry to give utterance to his most profound—and esoteric—realizations, precisely because of its veiled and allusive character. Ibn ‘Arabī’s voluminous writings, both in poetry and prose, attempt to convey something of what he directly experienced, and which he knew to be ultimately beyond verbal expression. Hence his skill in “unsaying,” or in deconstructing, to use modern parlance, what he writes. Yet poetry occupied a privileged position for him, as it could hint at and occasionally even unveil a glimpse of this Reality to those who were sufficiently receptive and refined, as he explicitly stated Niẓām to be in the first Preface to the *Tarjumān*:

In the verses I have composed for the present book, I never cease to allude to the divine inspirations, the spiritual visitations, the correspondences with the world of angelic intelligences, in this I conformed to my usual manner of thinking in symbols: this [...] because this young girl knew perfectly what I was alluding to.¹²²

The closing poem of the Prologue to Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Dīwān* begins with the following lines:

In our poetry, there is no padding
 nor are there any redundant words.
 Under every word that it contains
 is abundant meaning.
 Not many people know it
 and those who know it are few.
 The one who is inspired
 will understand what I say.
 Phrases of it are for one group
 and sections are for other groups ...¹²³

Niẓām is clearly of that number of the few who knew and understood.

Like many genuine poets, Ibn ‘Arabī describes the process of writing poetry as a state in which he is overtaken by inspiration, an inspiration

which appears to come from without, and which then dictates to him the words he is to set down. "All that I put down in my books is not the result of thinking or discursive reasoning. It is communicated to me through the breathing of the angel of revelation in my heart," he writes.¹²⁴ Indeed, many poets intuit that the poem provides the initial revelation which the poet will then work to explain and understand—a process which can unfold over many years.

In the lengthy Prologue to the *Dīwān al-ma'ārifa-l-ilāhiyya wal-latā'if al-rūhiyya* (*The Dīwān of divine knowledges and spiritual subtleties*), Ibn 'Arabī relates three visions which were instrumental in bringing about his own prolific poetic output. Claude Addas discusses all three and the Prologue in "The Ship of Stone,"¹²⁵ a work scarcely surpassed for its insights into the nature and purpose of true poetry as conceived by Ibn 'Arabī. The third and last vision is perhaps the most famous. In it, Ibn 'Arabī describes how he was called to "utter poetry" when he saw an angel in a dream who brought him a "piece of white light, like a fragment of the sun's light." He is told it is the "*Sūrat al-Shu'arā'* (the Sura of the Poets)" which he swallows and then feels growing within him like a hair, which then becomes an animal growing from his mouth, whose head "reached the two horizons, that of the East and that of the West." Ibn 'Arabī continues, "Then I came back to myself and I uttered poetry without any process of reflection or thought. Since that time, this inspiration has never ceased..."¹²⁶ Through this vision, Ibn 'Arabī realizes that his poetry is divinely inspired and that it will convey an esoteric and initiatory message to the "saints (*awliyā'*) of the two horizons," East and West, that is, those pure enough and sufficiently advanced to understand its deeper meaning. The

God is always unveiling and always veiled, a realization attested to in every mystical tradition. This "becoming" in the sense of self-revelation, as distinct to "being," is the traditional province of the Divine Feminine face of God and Its immanence in the world. Her constant motion is like that of the Spirit in the Christian tradition which blows ("listeth") where it will (and which, for some Christian exegetes, is the Feminine face of the Christian Trinity).

26th Sura of the Qur'ān is called "The Poets" (there are 114 Suras in all), and it is this Sura that Ibn 'Arabī swallows in his lucid dream, thus linking his poetic inspiration directly to the divine inspiration of the Qur'ān.

Poetry, according to Ibn 'Arabī, is of supreme importance for the "saints" (*awliyā'*) as a means of expression because it can veil certain truths from the eyes of the impure or the insufficiently refined, and thus protect these truths (and, one might add, the truthsayers), and, conversely, it can reveal these same truths to those with "ears to hear." As Claude Addas writes:

Fundamentally ambivalent, poetic language, more than any other form of expression, offers indispensable guarantees of inviolability;

only pure souls can successfully decipher the enigmas and symbols which make up its substance.¹²⁷

Poetry is thus quintessentially a language of veiling and unveiling, and there is a sense in which it could be seen to be associated with women, or more precisely, with the feminine modality, whereas prose, with its emphasis on clear expression, could be associated with men, or the masculine modality. Ibn 'Arabī wrote a great deal of poetry alongside his prose. It is a mark of his style that he inserts poetry into prose texts such as the *Futūḥāt*, which, according to Roger Deladrière, contains over 7000 lines of verse woven into the text, the poems standing side by side with the prose.¹²⁸ It is there to provide deeper insights for those who have "eyes to see, ears to hear."

With its musical and rhythmic structures, poetry is uniquely positioned in the eyes of Ibn 'Arabī to reflect and reveal the order and structure of the universe through its own structure and form. For him, the universe is indisputably based on a

harmonious ordering based on number, a concept traceable to the Pythagoreans. Thus, it is based on the sacred science of numbers (which includes what we know as astrology), which is then reflected in the sacred science of letters (also known as gematria, in which numerical values are assigned to letters, also employed by the Hebrews, Greeks and early Christian writers). This sacred science conceals the secrets of the universe within it to await discovery by those who know how to read it. Moreover, poetry, particularly classical Arabic poetry and the rules governing it, is seen by Ibn ‘Arabī to reflect this same order and structure. As Addas writes: “Ibn ‘Arabī sets out to prove that the rules upon which Arabic poetry is based come forth from Divine Wisdom, and that they are ubiquitous in Creation.” Furthermore, and to make his thought even clearer, “God constructed the universe ... according to the same principles as those that form the framework of ... the verses of a poem.”¹²⁹

Even human actions are recorded as “a melody in double or triple time” in the second of Ibn ‘Arabī’s visions or lucid dreams relating to his initiation into poetry.¹³⁰ The implication is that all in life is harmoniously ordered and poetry, being itself a harmonious ordering of words, is best suited to portray this. Furthermore, for its readers and hearers, poetry opens a path into the imaginal worlds, acting both as a guide itself (or *tarjumān*) into their realities and as a vessel for gnosis.

After Ibn ‘Arabī wrote his second Preface and Commentary to the *Tarjumān* prescribing metaphysical meanings to the poems, it became acceptable to take him at his word and add the *Tarjumān* into the canon of his writings on the basis that the poems are, primarily, a form of metaphysical speculation. Of course, this bypasses the whole rich ambiguity and scintillating wealth of associations of poetic expression, chosen by mystics precisely because it can say so much more and on so many more levels than prose. However, the poetry itself still remains for all those *awliyā’* capable of reading it and experiencing its deepest teachings.

Like the *Tarjumān*, the ecstatic and erotic poetry of the *Song of Songs* has occupied a

marginal position in the canon, being thought of as somewhat suspect and dangerous, with its inclusion needing to be justified. As the Talmud states, the *Song of Songs* was going to be expelled from the canon because it “renders the hands unclean.” But Rabbi Akiva (50-135 AD) disputed this, famously declaring that “the whole world is not as worthy as the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel; for all the writings are holy but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies.”¹³¹ Ever since, the *Song of Songs* has been the subject of numerous interpretations that attempt to explain away its erotic element by interpreting its sensual love poetry as God’s love for Israel or that of Christ for His Church. At the same time, the *Song of Songs* has also provoked some of the most inspired commentaries and responses, such as the words of Rabbi Akiva, or the sermons of St Bernard of Clairvaux. The Kabbalist Joseph of Hamadan saw the masculine and feminine faces of the Divine in the Lovers of the *Song of Songs*, while in our current time, the erotic sensuality of the work is being reclaimed with the Song being associated with the Seal of Solomon, the sacred six-pointed star where the downward-pointing triangle symbolizes the Divine Feminine and the upward-pointing triangle represents the Divine Masculine, uniting in perfect harmony.

Similarly, Ibn ‘Arabī set great store by the *Tarjumān* and treated it differently from his other poetry.¹³² Most importantly, the poems of the *Tarjumān* have survived, with their message of love, beauty, perplexity and astonishment, and a journey that never ceases, a circling journey which has no end—like the pilgrim’s circumambulation of the Ka’ba. The paradoxes of the poetry match the paradoxes of the Divine before which reason and rationality must flounder. Indeed, “perplexity,” the perplexity of the poet and our own perplexity, is the correct response to the unfathomable Reality of the Divine expressed in the paradoxical “I am” statements of texts such as Krishna’s “I am” revelation to Arjuna on the battlefield in the Bhagavad Gītā, the pronouncements of the female speaker in *The Thunder, Perfect Mind*, or Jesus’ statements in the “Hymn of the Dance” in the *Acts of John*. Hence, Ibn ‘Arabī’s constant unsaying and

deconstruction of what is written and said. In the end, “Wheresoever ye turn, there is the face of Allāh.” (Qur’ān 2:115)

The Divine speaks to us directly in the following lines by Ibn ‘Arabī from his *Kitāb al-Tajalliyāt* (*Book of Theophanies*), translated in the form of a poem by Henry Corbin in his magisterial opus, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabī*. It speaks to us in the manner of the monologues just alluded to. It speaks to us through a Feminine Face, with strong overtones of the words of Jesus, Ibn ‘Arabī’s beloved Prophet and “first master on the Way,”¹³³ particularly those uttered by Him in the course of the Last Supper, according to the Gospel of John:

Listen, O dearly beloved!
I am the reality of the world, the centre of
the circumference,
I am the parts and the whole.
I am the will established between Heaven
and Earth,
I have created perception in you only in order
to be
the object of my perception.
If then you perceive me, you perceive yourself.
But you cannot perceive me through yourself,
It is through my eyes that you see me and
see yourself,
Through your eyes you cannot see me.
Dearly beloved!
I have called you so often and you have not
heard me
I have shown myself to you so often and
you have not seen me.
I have made myself fragrance so often, and
you have not smelled me.
Savourous food, and you have not tasted me.
Why can you not reach me through the object
you touch
Or breathe me through sweet perfumes?
Why do you not see me? Why do you not
hear me?

Why? Why? Why?

[...]

For you I am preferable to all other good
things,

I am Beauty. I am Grace.

Love me, love me alone.

Love yourself in me, in me alone.

[...]

Others love you for their own sakes,

I love you for yourself.

And you, you flee from me.

Dearly beloved!

[...]

I am nearer to you than yourself,

Than your soul, than your breath.

[...]

Be mine, be for me as you are in me.¹³⁴

Virtually every mystic comes to know the Feminine Face of God in the end. Ibn ‘Arabī is no exception—except that he seems to have intuited it almost from the start.

The *Tarjumān* is a long, neverending quest, a journey of the Return. As with the Return to and into God, there is never an ultimate point of arrival—there is always further to go.

Epilogue

He: She was
mysteriously veiled
She was
the magnet for my eyes
She was
a woman
and
the magnet for my soul

She: I was
mysteriously called
I was
the space where his eyes learned to see
I was
a woman.

... *All paths are circular* ...
Ibn ‘Arabī¹³⁵

- ¹ Quoted in *The Burning Heart*, “Dante and Islam, Eros Sublimated, the mundus imaginalis of Dante’s Divine Comedy, and Ibn ‘Arabī’s Tarjumān al-ashwāq”; *Kone, Krusos, Kronos*. Online at: <https://konekrusoskronos.wordpress.com/2013/04/24/eros-sublimated-the-mundus-imaginalis-of-dantes-divine-comedy-and-ibn-arabis-Tarjumān-al-ashwaq/> (accessed June 2, 2020).
- ² Gabriela Mistral, online at: <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/543840-love-beauty-it-is-the-shadow-of-god-on-the> (accessed, June 2, 2020).
- ³ Trans. Jane Clark, in Jane Clark, “Mystical Perception and Beauty: Ibn ‘Arabī’s Preface to *Tarjumān al-ashwāq*,” *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabī Society* / Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabī Society; Editor Stephen Hirtenstein, Vol.55 (2014): 33-62, 42.
- ⁴ From “Your Beauty,” in: Irina Kuzminsky, *Dancing with Dark Goddesses* (Bath: Awen, 2009), 74-75.
- ⁵ I am using God as the term to address the Divine, despite the fact that for some, God has become a value-ridden and even restrictive term, restrictive in terms of gender, and in terms of adherence to a particular religion. I trust that readers will understand that God is being used in a totally inclusive way throughout.
- ⁶ For instance, see Mahmoud Mostafa in “What if Allāh is Beautiful and Loves Beauty?” who reminds his reader of the beauty of the word, the beauty of art, the beauty of music, which are all intrinsic to a rich Islamic tradition of the beautiful. Online at: <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/livingtradition/2019/07/what-if-Allah-is-beautiful-and-loves-beauty/> (accessed June 3, 2020).
- ⁷ “The Beautiful Names of Allāh” (SWT). Online at: <https://www.researchgate.net/> (accessed June 4, 2020).
- ⁸ Clark, “Mystical Perception,” 45.
- ⁹ Ibn ‘Arabī, *Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* II. 345, trans. Clark, in “Mystical Perception,” 46.
- ¹⁰ Cyrus A. Zargar, *Sufi Aesthetics: Beauty, Love and the Human Form in the writings of Ibn ‘Arabī and ‘Irāqī* (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 2011), 124.
- ¹¹ Dostoyevsky also intuited this when he wrote: “Beauty is not only a mysterious thing, it is a terrible, frightening thing.” Cited by Jonathan Black, in Jonathan Black, *The Sacred History* (London: Quercus, 2013), 133.
- ¹² This harmony can itself be seen to be the basis for the perennial appeal of the greatest of classical music, poetry, dance, or art in which the eyes and ears perceive traces of a harmony which opens our consciousness and hearts to mindful perception and a glimpse of a harmonious state of being, at harmony and peace with ourselves, with the world and with others.
- ¹³ Poem 55 (3-4), from the *Tarjumān al-ashwāq*, trans. in *Perfect Harmony: Sufi Poetry of Ibn ‘Arabī*. Calligraphy by Hassan Massoudy (Boston: Shambhala, 2002).
- ¹⁴ Ibn ‘Arabī, from the Preface to the *Tarjumān al-ashwāq*, trans. in Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabī* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 136-138.
- ¹⁵ See, for instance, Clark, “Mystical Perception and Beauty,” 57.
- ¹⁶ This is reminiscent of the ḥadīth in which Muhammad states that three things in this world were made dear to him, women, perfume, and the freshness of the eyes in prayer.
- ¹⁷ Ibn ‘Arabī, Preface to the *Tarjumān al-ashwāq*, trans. R.A. Nicholson, in R.A. Nicholson, *The Tarjumān al-ashwāq: A Collection of Mystical Odes* (London: Theosophical Publishing House, 1911, 1978). Online at: <https://www.sacred-texts.com/isl/taa/index.htm> (accessed June 3, 2020).
- ¹⁸ A culmination of this archetype was to come in Vladimir Solovyov’s three visionary encounters with the Divine Sophia herself, described in his poem *Tri svidaniya* or “Three Encounters” or “Three Rendezvous” (1898).
- ¹⁹ Jane Clark’s new provisional translation of the Preface, in Jane Clark, “The Preface to the *Tarjumān al-ashwāq*,” available on the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabī Society website: <https://www.ibnarabisociety.org>, and also at: <https://academia.edu> (accessed June 6, 2020).
- ²⁰ From the Preface to the *Tarjumān*, in Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 136-138.
- ²¹ Clark, “The Preface to the *Tarjumān al-ashwāq*.”
- ²² For an in depth discussion of this, see Sa’diyya Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn ‘Arabī, Gender and Sexuality* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 49-56.
- ²³ Such questions have inspired large amounts of my own poetry, including longer narrative poems such as *Heloise Speaks* and *In Memory of Her: The Woman Who Knew the All*.

24 Extracts from: Irina Kuzminsky, *Circling the Centre: Conversations with Nizām* (unpublished manuscript). I will use occasional quotes from this work to help fill the gaps and offer Nizām and others similar to her a voice.

25 See Michael Sells, *Stations of Desire: Love Elegies from Ibn 'Arabī and New Poems*, (Jerusalem: Ibis Editions, 2000), 32, 148.

26 See Clark, "Mystical Perception," 54.

27 Poem 49 (2-5), *Tarjumān*, trans. Nicholson, *The Tarjumān*, 136.

28 From Poem 46, *Tarjumān*, trans. Zargar, in Zargar, *Sufi Aesthetics*, 123.

29 From Irina Kuzminsky, "Mirroring," unpublished manuscript.

30 On the controversy, see Claude Addas, *The Voyage of No Return*, trans. David Streight, (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 2000) 125-7, and Chapter 1, "Should Ibn 'Arabī Be Burned?," *passim*. Also, A.E. Affifi, "Ibn 'Arabī," Chapter 20 in *A History of Muslim Philosophy* (Vol.1, Book 3), particularly the subsection "Controversy about His Orthodoxy." Online at: <https://www.al-islam.org/sw/node/39536> (accessed June 12, 2020).

31 See Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, 18.

32 See full translation in Clark, "Mystical Perception," 36; also, in Zargar, *Sufi Aesthetics*, 121: "[his disciples] had heard one of the jurists of Aleppo deny that this [collection of poems] resulted from divine secrets and that the Shaykh dissimulates so that [the poetic collection] is ascribed to propriety and religion." *Dhakhā'ir*, 4.

33 Mohamed Haj Yusef, "Did Ibn 'Arabī marry Nizām?" Online at: http://www.ibnalarabi.com/English/20_his_wife_nizam.php (accessed May 14, 2020).

34 Ibn 'Arabī, *Futūhāt*, I, pp.47-51; in Addas, *The Voyage of No Return*, 75.

35 See a commentary on this famous quote in Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, 174.

36 *Ibid.*, 194.

37 Michael Sells, *Stations of Desire*, 37, see also fn. 9, 47.

38 Kuzminsky, from "Mirroring."

39 See Sahih al-Bukhari 3022, Sahih Muslim 2751, Online at: <https://abuminaelias.com> (accessed June 15, 2020).

40 For a discussion of the important role of women in Tantric Buddhism, see Miranda Shaw, *Passionate Enlightenment: Women in Tantric Buddhism* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995).

41 Ibn 'Arabī, *Al-Futūhāt al-makkiyya*, 2:192, quoted in Sa'diyya Shaikh, "Feminism, Epistemology and Experience: Critically (En)gendering the Study of Islam." *Journal for Islamic Studies* 33:14-47, (2013): 40; and also, in Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, 126.

42 Ibn al-'Arabī, Muhyi 'l-Din. *Al-Futūhāt al-makkiyya*. 4 vols. Beirut: Dar Sadir. 2:573-574; quoted in Sayyid Ahmed Amiruddin, "Mysticism and Women According to Ibn Arabi." Online at: <https://sayyidamiruddin.com/women/> (accessed June 14, 2020).

43 See Ibn 'Arabī, *Bezels of Wisdom (Fusūs al-Hikam)*, Chapter 27 on Muhammad. One of the first translations into English was by R.W.J. Austin (with a Preface by Titus Burckhardt), *Bezels of Wisdom* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1980).

44 See, for a discussion, Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, 70.

45 Ibn 'Arabī, Commentary on poem 25, v.6 of the *Tarjumān*. Trans. Maurice Gloton, in Maurice Gloton, *L'interprète des désirs* (Albin Michel: 1996, 2012), 325. The saying of the "70,000 veils" is the ḥadīth: "God has seventy thousand veils of light and darkness; if He were to remove them, the radiant splendours of His Face would burn up whoever (or 'whatever creature') was reached by His Gaze." Quoted online at: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kashf> (accessed June 16, 2020).

46 Ibn 'Arabī, *Futūhāt*, IV, 151, quoted by Addas, *The Voyage of No Return*, 83.

47 Ibn 'Arabī, *Fusūs al-hikam (The Bezels of Wisdom)*, I, 121, quoted by Addas, *Voyage of No Return*, 98.

48 *Futūhāt* III, 247, in Addas, *Voyage of No Return*, 55.

49 *Fut.*, I, 366, in Addas, *Voyage of No Return*, 95.

50 *Fut.*, III, 341: "He [Jesus] is my first master on the Way; it is in his hands that I was converted. He watches over me at all hours, not leaving me for even a second." Quoted in Addas, *Voyage of No Return*, 25.

51 See on this subject, Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives*, 9; see also Souad Hakim, "Ibn 'Arabī's Twofold Perception of Woman: Woman as Human Being and Cosmic Principle", *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabī Society* 31 (2002): 1-9. Online at: <https://ibnarabisociety.org/woman-as-human-being-and-cosmic-principle-souad-hakim/> (accessed June 29, 2020).

52 Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, 27.

53 For a discussion of how women and men have equal capacity in society and law for Ibn 'Arabī, see Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives*, 82, 84. In

- general, for an unsurpassed exposition of the complexity of Ibn 'Arabī's views on men and women and his skill in deconstruction and 'un-saying' see Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives, passim*.
- 54 See, Ibn 'Arabī, *Bezels of Wisdom*, (trans. Austin), Chapter 27 on Muhammad, 214-226; see fn. 12 in Jane Clark, "The Image of the Beloved: Vision and Imagination in Ibn 'Arabī's Interpreter of Desires (*Tarjumān al-ashwāq*)," paper delivered at the conference "Symbol and Creative Imagination in Ibn 'Arabī," University of Murcia, Spain, 8-9 March 2013, 7. Online at: <https://www.academia.edu/37785534/> (accessed July 4, 2020).
- 55 Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives*, 74.
- 56 Ibn 'Arabī had at least two wives, Maryam and Fāṭima, one other who died, and at least one biological daughter, Zaynab, who also died young and for whom he wrote a great elegy.
- 57 See Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, 193.
- 58 See Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, 52-53.
- 59 See Clark's translation, in Clark, "The Preface to the *Tarjumān al'ashwāq*."
- 60 Logion 114, trans. Marvin Meyer, in Marvin Meyer with Harold Bloom, *The Gospel of Thomas: The Hidden Sayings of Jesus*, (New York: HarperOne, 1992), 63.
- 61 For an in-depth account of Ibn 'Arabī's relationships with these female masters and the debt he owed them, see Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives*, 100 *et al*; and Shaikh, "Feminism, Epistemology and Experience," 32-33. See also, for Ibn 'Arabī's own descriptions of these relationships, Ibn 'Arabī, *Sufis of Andalusia: The Rūḥ al-quds and Al-Durrat al-fākhira*, trans. R.W.J. Austin (Roxburgh: Beshara, 1988), 142-146.
- 62 *Sufis of Andalusia*, 142, 143; quoted in Shaikh, "Feminism, Epistemology and Experience," 32.
- 63 As Shaikh points out, this is an implicit comparison to Muhammad, described in the Qur'ān as "the Mercy to the Worlds"; Shaikh, "Feminism, Epistemology and Experience," 33, fn 44.
- 64 See this quote in https://sufi-wiki.com/Fatima_of_Cordoba (accessed June 25, 2020).
- 65 *Sufis of Andalusia*, 143-5; quoted in Shaikh, "Feminism, Epistemology and Experience," 33. The "Opening" is literally the First Chapter or opening of the Qur'ān and Fāṭima was given its power to wield in any way she wished and thus produce miracles. Ibn Arabī The preface to the *Tarjumān al'ashwāq*."
- witnessed her ability to create a three-dimensional ethereal image of the *Fāṭiḥa* which then carried out what she had prayed for.
- 66 For more on these and other women as described by Ibn 'Arabī, see Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives*, 101; Shaikh, "Feminism, Epistemology and Experience," 34.
- 67 Shaikh has translated several of these initiation poems for the first time in Shaikh, "Appendix: Selected Poems from the *Dīwān* Ibn 'Arabī." In Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, 229-32.
- 68 Such as the poems to Safiya, Zaynab, Firdaws, Mah-buland. For a comprehensive discussion of Ibn 'Arabī's *Dīwān*, see Julian Cook and Stephen Hirtenstein, "The Great *Dīwān* and its offspring: The collection and dispersion of Ibn 'Arabī's poetry", *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabī Society*, Vol.52 (2012): 33-75.
- 69 See Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, 218.
- 70 The Five M's, *madya* (wine), *mamsa* (meat), *matsya* (fish), *mudra* (cereal), and *maithuna* (sexual intercourse), are considered transgressive from the standpoint of Brahmanical Hinduism with its strict codes of vegetarianism, abstinence and caste divisions. Tantra, on the other hand, affirms that everything, even the ritually impure, can be a path to God, radically affirming Divine Immanence alongside Transcendence, and using the charge of transgression to bring the Tantric closer to a direct experience of Reality.
- 71 Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, 122.
- 72 Quoted in Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, 123. See Sachiko Murata, *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992) Chapter 6, 171-202, for translations of passages by Ibn 'Arabī on the cosmological significance of sexual intercourse.
- 73 See Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, 134. Also, Ibn 'Arabī writes: "The action, though it is God's, becomes manifest only by our hands." Cited in Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, 179.
- 74 *Gospel of Thomas*, logion 22, trans. Stephen Patterson and Marvin Meyer. Online at: <http://ww3.haverford.edu/religion/courses/122b/GThomas2translations.htm> (accessed July 27, 2020). Similarly, logion 106 reads: "When you make two into one, you will become children of Adam."
- 75 *Fath al-Bari* 11:34041, ḥadīth 6502.
- 76 Meister Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart's Sermons, Sermon IV: True Hearing* (London: Aeterna Press, 2015).

- 77 *Futūhāt* IV, 30; cited in Addas, *Voyage of No Return*, 98.
- 78 Kuzminsky, from "Mirroring."
- 79 See Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, 158, 193.
- 80 Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, 171.
- 81 *Ibid.*, 279.
- 82 Murshid F.A. Ali ElSenossi in "The Language of the Future: Sufi Terminology". Online at: <http://www.almirajsuficentre.org.au/qamus/app/single/299> (August 2, 2020).
- 83 For more on this subject, see Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives*, 178-9.
- 84 But what of woman herself? If man most perfectly witnesses God in woman how does she most perfectly witness God? Ibn 'Arabī's answer seems to be that she witnesses God in all of creation.
- 85 Cited in Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy*, 165.
- 86 See Zargar, *Sufi Aesthetics*, 133, fn 35.
- 87 Ibn 'Arabī, *Dhakhā'ir al-Aclaq*, ed. Muhammad al-Kurdī (Cairo, 1968) 9, quoted by Zargar, *Sufi Aesthetics*, 139.
- 88 For a quick overview of this area, see <http://www.bbc.com/earth/story/20170215-the-strange-link-between-the-human-mind-and-quantum-physics> (accessed July 30, 2020).
- 89 *Dhakhā'ir*, 26-27, quoted in Zargar, *Sufi Aesthetics*, 150.
- 90 Irina Kuzminsky, "The pure are ...," in *Esoteric Quarterly*, Fall (2012), 8.
- 91 Irina Kuzminsky, "You see," unpublished MS.
- 92 As Clark says, a majority of the *Tarjumān* poems, 49 out of 61, have a female Beloved. See Jane Clark, "The Image of the Beloved." In Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 138.
- 93 Clark, "Mystical Perception," 54.
- 94 *Tarjumān*, quoted by Clark, "Mystical Perception," 53.
- 95 I have taken the phrase from the book by Mano Warren, *The Truth Sings in Circles* (London: Athena Press, 2005), a study of the Black Madonna.
- 96 It is not my intention to situate the poems of the *Tarjumān* (which are *qaṣīda*) within the traditions of classical Arabic poetry. Michael Sells has done splendid work there and I would refer the reader to his *Stations of Desire*, and also to Maurice Gloton, *L'interprète des désirs*.
- 97 Zargar, *Sufi Aesthetics*, 141-2.
- 98 Kuzminsky, from *Circling the Centre*.
- 99 From Poem 4 (6) trans. Zargar, *Sufi Aesthetics*, 150, as follows:
- 100 "She said, 'Doesn't it suffice him, concerning me, that with his heart he witnesses me in every single moment? Doesn't it? Doesn't it?"
- 101 Trans. Irina Kuzminsky after the French versions by Gloton, *L'interprète des désirs*, 413, 445.
- 102 Zargar, *Sufi Aesthetics*, 138-139.
- 103 See Clark's study of the Preface(s), Clark, "Mystical Perception."
- 104 Clark, "Mystical Perception," 43-44.
- 105 Ibn Arabī, "Preface to the *Tarjumān*," in Clark, "The Image of the Beloved."
- 106 Trans. Clark, in Clark, "Mystical Perception," 56; also, Clark, "The Preface to the *Tarjumān*," 7.
- 107 Trans. Clark, in Clark, "Mystical Perception," 59; also, Clark, "The Preface to the *Tarjumān*," 7-8.
- 108 In Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 149.
- 109 Trans. Clark, in Clark, "The Preface to the *Tarjumān*," 8-9.
- 110 Ralph Austin, "The Lady Nizam - an Image of Love and Knowledge," *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabī Society*, Vol. viii (1988): 35-48. Online at: <https://ibnarabisociety.org/the-lady-nizam-ralph-austin/> (accessed August 3, 2020).
- 111 Poem 2 (6-9), trans. Nicholson, *The Tarjumān*, 60.
- 112 Preface to the *Tarjumān*, in Clark, "The Preface to the *Tarjumān*," 3.
- 113 Poem 11 (13-15), trans. Nicholson, *The Tarjumān*, 67.
- 114 Quoted online at: <https://ibnarabisociety.org/introduction-muhyiddin-ibn-arabi/> (accessed August 4, 2020). The saying Ibn 'Arabī uses is by Junayd.
- 115 Kuzminsky, from *Circling the Centre*. These intermittent quotations are a way of reinstating Nizām's missing voice to the dialogue.
- 116 Black, *The Sacred History*, 229.
- 117 Images of light are scattered throughout the poems, as examples: "radiance of the sun," 57, "She smiled, showing her side teeth," 59, "lightning" in the East and the West, 14, at night she is like the sun illuminating the dark, 39, and numerous others.
- 118 *Bezels of Wisdom*, 275, 27th Chapter, quoted in Austin, "The Lady Nizam," 5, fn 34.
- 119 Rumi, *Mathnawi*, Book I, v.2437 (ed. and trans. R.A. Nicholson; Leiden, NLD: Brill, 1925).
- 120 Kuzminsky, from *Circling the Centre*.
- 121 See Affifi, "Ibn 'Arabī" Chapter 20, 6.
- 122 Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 138.

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- ¹²³ Quoted in Cook and Hirtenstein, “The Great Dīwān,” 46.
- ¹²⁴ Quoted by Affifi, “Ibn ‘Arabī,” Chapter 20, 4; who quoted it from Sha’rani, *Yawaqit*, 24
- ¹²⁵ Claude Addas, “The Ship of Stone,” in *The Journey of the Heart*, J. Mercer (ed.) (Oxford: 1996), 5-24. Special issue of the *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabī Society* Vol.XIX (1996).
- ¹²⁶ Cook and Hirtenstein, “The Great Dīwān,” 33.
- ¹²⁷ Addas, *Voyage of No Return*, 107.
- ¹²⁸ <https://ibnarabisociety.org/poetry-poems/> (accessed August 17, 2020). Also, as Jane Clark points out, “the tendency to jump between prose and poetry/*inshā’* is a very distinctive feature of his writing in the early and middle periods.” See Clark, “Mystical Perception”, 42.
- ¹²⁹ Addas, “The Ship of Stone.”
- ¹³⁰ As quoted by Cook and Hirtenstein, “The Great Dīwān”, 39-40. This vision takes place during Ibn ‘Arabī’s marriage with the stars in heaven (astrology) and the letters of the alphabet (sacred science of letters). See also Addas, “The Ship of Stone”.
- ¹³¹ Babylonian Talmud, *Yadayim* 73a; quoted in Rabbi Robert Teixeira, “The Song of Songs Seder: A Night of Sacred Sexuality, 4/11/2014. Online at: <https://the-shalomcenter.org>.
- ¹³² For more on this, see Cook and Hirtenstein, “The Great Dīwān”, 70.
- ¹³³ *Fut.*, III, 341: cited in Addas, *Voyage of No Return*, 25.
- ¹³⁴ Corbin, *Creative Imagination*, 174-175. This is not a poem in the Arabic, but part of a chapter from the *Kitāb al-Tajalliyāt*. However, this translation by Corbin is justly famous.
- ¹³⁵ Kuzminsky, from *Circling the Centre*.