The Poetics of *Shuhūd*[1]

Ibn al-ʿArabī's 'Intuitive, Enamored Heart' and the Composition of Erotic Poetry[2]

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To consider Muḥyī al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn ʿAlī ibn al-ʿArabī (d.638/1240) as the expounder of his own poetic theory, or at least strands of a theory, opens up exciting opportunities for scholars and admirers of Sufism and Sufi poetry. Not only does Ibn al-ʿArabī have much to say about almost every facet of the sciences held important by Arabic writers in his age, he also usually manages to place each discussion within a larger visionary and ontological framework. That framework (even if reinterpreted and eventually somewhat altered) found a captive audience among thinkers and practitioners of Sufism to such an extent, that it is not difficult to label Ibn al-ʿArabī the most influential theorist in all of Sufism. To know how Ibn al-ʿArabī might read a poem, or how he might evaluate its degree of literary success, and also to know how he might place that interpretation and evaluation in his visionary framework, would shed more light on both the master's overall worldview as well as the place of poetry, more generally, in Sufism.

In a recent and remarkable monograph, Denis E. McAuley has studied Ibn al-ʿArabī's own discussions of the meaning of poetry and poetic composition.[3] What emerges is Ibn al-ʿArabī the poet, both his individual inclinations as well as the poetic

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at 'Mystical Perception and Beauty', the 30th annual UK symposium of the Muhyiddin Ibn ʿArabi Society, held in Oxford on 11–12 May 2013.

2. I must thank H. Talat Halman and my brother, Sohrab Kadivar, for their suggestions concerning this article.

3. Denis E. McAuley, *Ibn ʿArabī's Mystical Poetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

and social milieu in which his poems took shape. McAuley, however, focuses on Ibn al-ʿArabī's *Dīwān*, which contains very little in terms of love poetry, and so his discussion considers poetry that is mostly topical – whether related to Quranic chapters or descriptions of mystical knowledge and experience. Yet, in order to understand more fully Ibn al-ʿArabī's views on the meaning and even essence of poetry, a look at his statements about love and love poetry can complement McAuley's discussion. Indeed, a consideration of love poetry is necessary, for clearly love poetry was not, for Ibn al-ʿArabī and his students, one poetic form among many, nor was it composed or recited merely for its own sake as an exercise in poetic ability. Rather, it seems to have been an integral part of studying the path and acquiring gnosis for Ibn al-ʿArabī and his students. The teacher, Ibn al-ʿArabī, wrote an extensive commentary on his own collection of love lyrics, *Tarjumān al-Ashwāq* (that commentary is titled *Dhakhāʾir al-Aʿlāq*). While avoiding misunderstanding, as he mentions in his own introduction, was certainly the main motivating factor for Ibn al-ʿArabī's commentary on his love poems, his commentary as a whole shows that his worldview, along with the details of his cosmology, abide and perhaps even inhere in his love poetry, assuming the reader has a discerning and receptive heart.[4] Such a commentary, as imitated later by those in his school, shows that love poetry has the ability to keep within it the crux of Ibn al-ʿArabī's teachings, almost, it would seem, in their entirety. We know that Ibn al-ʿArabī's foremost student Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī (d.673/1273–74) placed heavy emphasis on Ibn al-ʿArabī's collection of love lyrics, *Tarjumān al-Ashwāq*, making the reading of poems from this collection a consistent part of his meetings with pupils.[5]

4. *Dhakhāʾir al-Aʿlāq, Sharḥ Tarjumān al-Ashwāq*, ed. Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Najm al-Dīn al-Kurdī (Cairo: College of Arabic, al-Azhar University, 1968), p. 4.

5. See Michael A. Sells, *Stations of Desire: Love Elegies from Ibn ʿArabi and New Poems* (Jerusalem: Ibis Editions, 2000), p. 37, in which Sells relies on a bibliographical study by Gerald Elmore, namely, 'Sadr al-Din al-Qunawi's Personal Study-List of Books by Ibn al-ʿArabi,' *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 56, no. 3 (1997): 161–81, here especially 175 and 179.

Moreover, al-Qūnawī's enthusiasm for the love poetry of Ibn al-Fāriḍ seems to have been contagious, leading to numerous commentaries on those lyrics by those over whom al-Qūnawī had either direct or indirect influence.[6] Lastly, as I have tried to show elsewhere, love poetry as an art form springs from what is arguably the most pivotal principle in Ibn al-ʿArabī's writings: love as a cosmological principle, indeed perhaps even the divine essence itself, and one that attunes the soul and the senses of designated knowers-of-God to its own ways.[7] For that reason, in this article, I will consider Ibn al-ʿArabī's poetics in the context of love poetry. More specifically, I will illustrate the ways in which Ibn al-ʿArabī's own critique of a love poem in Chapter 198 of *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* touches on his observations about the correspondence between love as truly experienced and love as truly expressed, that is, the relationship between gnosis and lyrical love poetry.

DEFINING POETRY

First, what is poetry? For Muḥyī al-Dīn and his contemporaries the question would not be one of category. Metered language, usually in set numbers of feet, stood out from other compositional forms, making it rather easy for the famous lexicographer Muḥammad ibn Mukarram ibn Manẓūr (d.711/1311–12) to describe poetry (*al-shiʿr*) as 'that utterance which is arranged, marked in its high distinction by the predominance of meter and rhyme.'[8] Even Ibn al-ʿArabī himself,

6. Cyrus Ali Zargar, *Sufi Aesthetics: Beauty, Love, and the Human Form in the Writings of Ibn ʿArabi and ʿIraqi* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2011), pp. 103–4. McAuley argues that the systematization of Sufism, during and especially after Ibn al-ʿArabī's day, led to greater reliance on both didactic poetry and lyrical poetry that could be read using Sufi terms and doctrines; this meant that Sufi love lyrics, such as those of Ibn al-Fāriḍ, became more popular. See McAuley, *Mystical Poetics*, pp. 214–15.

7. Zargar, *Sufi Aesthetics*, especially pp. 82–3.

8. Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ʿArab* (Qom: Nashr Adab al-Ḥawza, 1984), 4:410. All translations in this article are my own, unless otherwise noted.

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when discussing what makes poetry distinctly similar to God's creation, focuses on its rhythm and structure – which he seems to see as poetry's defining traits.[9] The question, then, becomes one of essence: what *really is* poetry?

In Ibn al-ʿArabī's discussions of the topic, it is clear that poetry is a venue for a summative, perceptive sort of knowledge lacking detail – as opposed to a venue for clarity, specifics, or lucid expression; that is, it is a place of *al-ijmāl*, or synoptic expression, and not *al-tafṣīl*, or expositional expression.[10] According to Ibn al-ʿArabī, this is why the Prophet Muhammad, who was sent to clarify and expound, was not made a poet, as is announced in the Quran.[11] In this regard, poetry (*al-shiʿr*) is related to the word *al-shuʿūr*, which one might translate as 'perceptiveness.' Elsewhere, Ibn al-ʿArabī clarifies that 'perceptiveness' (*al-shuʿūr*) can be explained by imagining a locked chest in which you sense movement; you know that there is an animal in the chest, and yet you cannot determine its species.[12] Similarly, if the chest is heavy, you can sense that something is weighing it down without knowing the identity of its contents. Clearly, then, poetry comes from a sort of 'knowing,' but one that is intuitive and unclear. What one sees in dreams has form and carries meaning – sometimes incredibly profound meaning. The places, people and

9. McAuley, *Mystical Poetics*, pp. 44–5.

10. *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1968), 2:274, hereafter cited as '*Fut.*'.

11. Q.36:69. It seems that, according to Ibn al-ʿArabī, the Prophet's role as a clarifier and expounder of God's religion is the *only* reason that he was not made a poet. In other words, were it not to avoid confusion, the Prophet certainly would have been made a poet, since poetry can bear spiritual meanings not borne by prose. Moreover, even if the Prophet did not compose poetry, Ibn al-ʿArabī's statements do still leave open the possibility of his receiving or perceiving as a poet. Indeed, according to his own account, Ibn al-ʿArabī himself 'received' in his heart the divine command 'which none can perceive but a poet,' but that experience was 'arranged… as prose'; in other words, experiences that befit the perceptiveness of poets can be expressed as prose. See McAuley, *Mystical Poetics*, p. 207.

12. *Fut.*3:514.

events encountered in a dream can be called if not knowledge then certainly a sort of awareness, especially since a dream is 'one-forty-sixth part of prophecy,' as is stated in a hadith that Ibn al-ʿArabī will often quote.[13] And yet the experiences of dreams require interpretation, or *al-taʿbīr*, a phrase that Ibn al-ʿArabī uses to describe the 'crossing over' from form to meaning, once meaning has been captured in form. For this reason, in Ibn al-ʿArabī's astrology, dream interpretation and poetic composition belong to the same heaven, namely, the third heaven, the heaven of the divine name 'the Form-giver' (*al-muṣawwir*), whose acts of creation testify to the capture of meaning in varieties of form. It is the heaven of the prophet Joseph, who unraveled form to get to the meaning of dreams and the heaven of 'proper fashioning' and *al-niẓām* or 'harmonious arrangement.' The word for 'harmonious arrangement' is closely related to the word *al-naẓm*, a word that describes the structures and symmetries that define, among other things, verse itself.[14] Other modes of language – specifically, prosaic composition and speech – belong to the second heaven, the heaven of knowledge.[15] Poetry, as opposed to prose, might be described as an act of creation rather than speech, an act of conjuring images rather than proceeding discursively, a verbal act beyond time, space and contradictions rather than one bound by reason. In this regard, Claude Addas has proposed that poetry – and only poetry – can carry certain ineffable realities.[16] In fact, in his own preface to his *Dīwān*

13. William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), pp. 121 and 397, n. 11.

14. William Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-ʿArabī and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), p. 81.

15. It should be mentioned that Titus Burckhardt places the prophet Joseph and Venus in the fifth heaven, and not the third, in his *Mystical Astrology According to Ibn ʿArabi*, trans. Bulent Rauf (Abingdon, UK: Beshara Press, 1977), pp. 32–3. Chittick's version is supported by the passage he translates from *Fut*.2:275.

16. Claude Addas, 'The Ship of Stone,' in *The Journey of the Heart*, ed. John Mercer (Oxford: Muhyiddin Ibn ʿArabi Society, 1996), pp. 5–24, here p. 24.

al-Maʿārif, Ibn al-ʿArabī describes poetic language, as 'the permanent principle (*al-jawhar al-thābit*), while prose is the immutable consequence (*al-farʿ al-thābit*).'[17] In other words, poetry captures an essential reality of things, an inexplicable ordering, that exists throughout the cosmos and within an individual's imagination, while prose functions in the arena of consequences and explains itself at every turn. It is not only that prose must acknowledge cause and effect, but rather that its words are all causes and effects.

McAuley, also, reviews three useful prose passages by Ibn al-ʿArabī, in which he describes either the poetic process or the nature of poetry itself. First, in Chapter 167 of *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, Ibn al-ʿArabī uses the principles of alchemy to describe the poetic process. Images come together, for the poet, in the structures of ordered speech, in the form of rhyme and meter, much like alchemy brings a balance to the elements.[18] Second, in the introduction to his *Dīwān al-Maʿārif*, we learn of Ibn al-ʿArabī's views not only concerning the relationship between prosody and the natural order, but also concerning poetry's ability to keep certain esoteric matters obscure and thus secret. We also learn that Ibn al-ʿArabī's view of poetic composition may have been influenced by a long-held association in Arabic literature and lore between poets and the jinn who were thought to inspire them. Ibn al-ʿArabī clearly describes an imaginal event in his life that renders him a poet and one that resembles the model of demonic possession: he swallows the twenty-sixth chapter of the Quran, *Sūrat al-Shuʿarāʾ* (the Chapter of the Poets), which appears to him as light and grows, after his swallowing it, as a hair 'sprouting from my chest' that has the limbs and faculties of an animal; its head reaches the horizons of East and West before retreating back into Ibn al-ʿArabī's chest, which means to him that his audience will extend to both East and West.[19] Third and last, we learn that in Chapter 398 of *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, Ibn al-ʿArabī states that preachers

17. Ibid. p. 16.
18. McAuley, *Mystical Poetics*, p. 43.
19. Ibid. pp. 47–8.

should choose the poetry they use in their sermons carefully. They should avoid those love poems in which the author had no intention whatsoever that God (and not a human being) is the beloved.[20]

MUST THE POET BE A KNOWER?

The aforementioned passage about poetry in sermons from Chapter 398 of *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* seems, to me, to have more to do with effective preaching than with the nature of poetry as a whole. The preacher that Ibn al-ʿArabī describes as chided by God in the afterlife, Manṣūr ibn ʿAmmār, is reprimanded for having a dry eye and a hard heart and yet, still, reciting love poetry; the love poetry, while unworthy for preaching, still seems less at issue than the impure combination of sermons, profane love lyrics, and an ethically unworthy preacher.[21] The message seems to be that, for successful and God-accepted preaching, sincerity must pervade everything – including the intention of the original poet. Indeed, Ibn al-ʿArabī mentions *ikhlāṣ* (sincerity of intention) as a prerequisite for pure food, comparing that to poetry, which can be pure or impure depending on the intentions of its author.[22] Where people gather to remember God, purity of intention matters. Yet one must remember that Ibn al-ʿArabī can write, as McAuley notes, as a 'literary critic, as a Sufi, and as a jurist.'[23] I would add to Ibn al-ʿArabī's various roles that he can also write 'as a knower-of-God writing to other knowers-of-God,' because the more elite 'knowers' and the more general 'Sufis' are separate categories in his writings.[24] So, preaching aside, what would Ibn al-ʿArabī – the knower-of-God (*ʿārif*) – say to other elect knowers-of-God about love poetry, written with the intention of a human beloved?

20. Ibid. pp. 52–3.
21. Ibid. p. 51.
22. Ibid. p. 52.
23. Ibid. p. 54.
24. Ibn al-ʿArabī makes this distinction, for example, in *Fut*.2:190 (Chap. 108).

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For an audience of elite knowers, those whom Ibn al-ʿArabī calls *al-ʿārifīn*, it does not matter whether the poet intended God or a human beloved in his or her love lyric – the poem will necessarily be read in the right way. He clarifies this in Chapter 178 of *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, when he says that, even though poets have 'wasted away their words on existent things while being unaware,' praising the created instead of the creator, nevertheless, 'the knowers (*al-ʿārifūn*), on the other hand, do not hear a poem, or a riddle, or a panegyric, or a love lyric, without [knowing] who is in it behind the veil of forms.'[25] They can hear a love poem, regardless of its original intent, and trace it back to its proper source; in fact, the knowers can do nothing else when they hear words of love. This is because the elite knowers-of-God have realized the oneness of love: according to Ibn al-ʿArabī's reading of the Quran 17:23 ('And your Lord has decreed that you worship none but Him'), God does not allow for anything other than Himself to be worshipped, such that anyone worshipping – even if one thinks one worships something other than God – actually only seeks divinity as imagined within that thing.[26] Similarly, in actuality, 'a person can love nothing but his creator,' because God is the true possessor of beauty in all things, and 'the cause of love is beauty.' The entire cosmos, indeed, acts out God's own act of self-admiration and self-love: 'He is manifest in every beloved for the eye of every lover, and every existent is necessarily a lover. The cosmos is all lover and beloved, and it all returns to Him, just as nothing is actually worshipped but Him.'[27] Therefore, the poet-lover who has intuition, awareness, and, especially, sincere love has the proper state of heart to produce good poetry, or at least poetry that *becomes* good when read by the knower-of-God, as can be seen in Ibn al-ʿArabī's own critiques of poetry that follow.

25. *Fut.*2:326.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.

POETRY COMPOSED BY THE INTUITIVE, SUBTLE HEART

Despite his discussion of authorial intentions, Ibn al-ʿArabī's approach to poetic commentary places less emphasis on the author and much more emphasis on the correspondence between the poem in question and the universal laws of love, universal because these laws apply to true lovers in the natural, spiritual, and divine sense; in other words, they apply to *any* sort of love experienced sincerely and expressed precisely. The able poet has the perceptiveness needed to capture ineffable meaning in the form of poetry, even if not wholly aware of the spiritual subtleties captured in that poem. Yet good poetic *interpretation* seems to be the exclusive domain of the knower, as Ibn al-ʿArabī shows in his critiques. The knower-of-God will read a poem and recognize in it the spiritual subtleties that the poem's own author might know only by intuition, and not in any detailed fashion. In that regard, twice in *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* Ibn al-ʿArabī comments on a poem by the Abbasid caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd (r.170–93/786–809). In the poem, the caliph confesses his overwhelming infatuation with three slave girls, Ghādir, Mārida, and Haylāna:[28]

> Three delightful maidens possess my bridle rein
> and have alighted in every place of my heart.
> Why, when all of creation coils in fright of me,
> do I obey them – although they constantly disobey me!
> This is nothing other than the dominion of passion
> with which they prevail more mightily than my
> dominion.[29]

Although there are three maidens, Ibn al-ʿArabī explains, the caliph describes them as possessing 'one bridle rein.' Here the poet, according to Ibn al-ʿArabī, could have attributed to the

28. Ibn al-ʿArabī does not mention the details. For such details, see Bāqir Sharīf al-Qurashī, *Ḥayāt al-Imām al-Riḍā* (Tehran: Manshūrāt Saʿīd ibn Jubayr, 1992), 2:225.

29. *Fut*.2:113.

girls multiple 'reins' (*aʿinna*), but chose to use the singular, 'rein' (*ʿinānī*).[30] In other words, even though there are three girls, and thus three beloveds, the poet describes them as unified in their rule over the lover. The language of the poem reflects a truth about love and desire: the lover feels ruled, indeed subjugated, by the force of love itself – not by the girls. It is for this reason, also, that all three girls alight *together* in the various places of the caliph's heart. As Ibn al-ʿArabī comments, the caliph 'loves exclusively one meaning actualized for him by these three girls'; one meaning, that is, love itself, not as an emotion, but rather as a cosmological principle.[31] Indeed, when one bears in mind that the first instance of love was God's love for Himself that created the entire cosmos, His 'love to be known' since He was a 'hidden treasure,' the love that conquers the caliph signifies much more than mere biology.[32] Rather, in being attuned to the condition of his heart, the caliph here has happened upon what Ibn al-ʿArabī calls a 'concealed secret,' namely, that love is one thing, and in fact, the very cause of creation and all instantiations of love.[33] For this reason, these lines of poetry, reflecting this truth about love, deserve praise, regardless of whether or not their author was aware of the significance of that which he declared.

POETRY COMPOSED BY THE UNINTUITIVE, COARSE HEART

In contrast, Ibn al-ʿArabī does not shy away from pointing out an instance of bad love poetry. Once again, the basis for his judgment is the correspondence between poetic expression and the truths of the heart, which he determines through close reading. Ibn al-ʿArabī, as usual, proves to be a very careful and sensitive reader, as he navigates his response to a friend, who has inquired concerning a certain set of lines 'whether a

30. *Fut.*2:330.
31. Ibid.
32. See Zargar, *Sufi Aesthetics*, pp. 12 and 53.
33. *Fut.*2:330 and 2:113.

knower from among the divine lovers had composed them.'[34] Ibn al-ʿArabī does indeed address this part of his friend's question (that is, whether the poet was a knower-of-God), but he is more interested in showing that, whether the poet was aware of divine mysteries or not, he was not a true lover – and hence not a good poet. In other words, while Ibn al-ʿArabī's response does acknowledge that being a 'knower' of God can affect poetic output, he places far more emphasis on the poet as a 'lover,' for it seems that a poet who is not a lover simply cannot create a properly beautiful love poem.

The analysis of this poem appears in the introductory portion of Chapter 198 of *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, a chapter concerning the 'Breath of the All-Merciful,' and the poem relates to the theme of breath in that it describes a man under the influence of nostalgia inspired by an oncoming breeze:

> I implore you by God, oh Breeze of the East Wind
> from where is this goodly-smelling breath?
> Did you envelop, within your gown at midmorning,
> the place where Zaynab dropped her necklace?
> Or did I detect your aroma at the meadow of the
> inviolate lands
> [from] when you were drawing her skirt over it?[35]
> So bring it! And receive me kindly with news of her
> because your familiarity with her today is nearer
> [than mine].[36]

Ibn al-ʿArabī agrees that the poem is 'subtle in terms of expression, and attractive' but he emphatically states that it is 'nothing in terms of meaning.' First, he points out that when the poet implores, he is inquiring, seeking knowledge about something unknown. His inquiry, 'from where is this goodly-smelling breath,' implies that he has encountered a number

34. Ibid. 2:392.

35. The Dār Ṣādir edition here has *fawqihā*, which should, of course, be *fawqihi*, as quoted correctly later in the text.

36. *Fut*.2:392.

of such 'breaths' since he has to ask.[37] The lover should be so preoccupied with his beloved that he does not see anything but her; indeed, Ibn al-ʿArabī offers, the mere possibility that an entity might share in the beloved's beauty and perfections should not even enter the lover's mind. The poem, therefore, bears witness against the poet, pointing to a lack of intimate knowledge (*maʿrifa*), if the poet claims to be an intimate knower-of-God (*ʿārif*), and even to, as Ibn al-ʿArabī puts it 'the deficiency of his love, if he is to be a lover and a truly passionate one.'[38] Here Ibn al-ʿArabī does grant that it is possible that the plurality intended, the possibility of multiple fragrant breaths, could be solved if the poet intended multiple manifestations of that beloved – namely, seeing the beloved's face everywhere.

The next line, however, cannot be resolved: 'Did you envelop, within your gown at midmorning, / the place where Zaynab dropped her necklace?' Ibn al-ʿArabī comments that this double-line is 'among the most evident proofs that he [the poet] is not a lover and that this utterance is nearer to satirizing the beloved than to praise and extolment.'[39] The problem is that the poet has actually praised not his beloved but the necklace she has dropped, because the necklace has made the place fragrant, and the place has passed that perfume onto the wind. What the poet meant to say, however, was that Zaynab's own breaths gave to the necklace, the place, and the wind its perfume. For that reason, Ibn al-ʿArabī offers his own rectified version of these lines:

> Did you envelop, within your gown at midmorning,
> the goodly fragrance of a place made redolent
> by Zaynab?
> Its breaths are from the fragrance of her breaths
> so her fragrance is, compared with its fragrance,
> more wondrous.[40]

37. Ibid.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid. 2:392–3.

Ibn al-ʿArabī's changes make the beloved, Zaynab, the undisputable source of goodliness; moreover, the new lines attribute to her a supremacy of beauty, over all other entities in the poem. Simply by specifying Zaynab as the sole source of beauty (as love itself would dictate to the true lover), this new version obscures the distinction between God and human, attributing all fragrant breaths to Zaynab's fragrant breath, hence simultaneously invoking the theme of the chapter (the life-giving breath of the All-Merciful). The poet has not failed as a poet because of *whom* he loves; he has failed because of *how* he loves. The proper lover, like the knower-of-God, sees his beloved as the source of all beauty and yet as far more beautiful, far above all other instances of beauty.

Critique of the poem continues. When the poet says to the wind, 'Or did I detect your aroma at the meadow of the inviolate lands / [from] when you were drawing her skirt over it,' once again, according to Ibn al-ʿArabī he attributes the delightful fragrance not to the beloved and her breaths, but rather to the meadow. When he says, 'So bring it! And receive me kindly with news of her / because your familiarity with her today is nearer [than mine],' the poet reveals that he speaks falsely as opposed to speaking in utter sincerity. After all, the poem offers no real evidence that the wind has recently been with the beloved. It has been at a place and at a meadow, and, during one point in time, Zaynab was there. But the wording of the poem only establishes a sort of *probability* that the wind passed by Zaynab. What we do know is that it has passed by these places, so the poet should speak honestly; he should say to the wind that 'your familiarity with *it*,' that is either place, or 'with *them*,' that is, both places, is nearer; he should not say, 'with *her*.' Moreover, Ibn al-ʿArabī points out, how do we really know that this delightful smell has anything to do with Zaynab? Perhaps the meadow is fragrant because of the presence of flowers or something else.

While Ibn al-ʿArabī's critique might seem at times facetious, or at least sarcastic, he actually makes a rather serious declaration about poetic expression. Poetry is not simply the compilation of beautiful words, fine metaphors, and rhythmic, rhyming manipulations of language. Beautiful words, when examined

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deeply, must capture a sort of sublimity of meaning to yield good poetry; expression is the form, but the form without meaning will lead to something poetically dead, dead in that it is unable to speak to hearts that are sensitive and aware, as he himself states:

> …the beauty of poetry and speech in general lies in the combination of refined expression and unusually exalted meaning, such that both the one contemplating and the one hearing are bewildered, so that each cannot tell which was more beautiful – the expression or the meaning, or if the two were equal. Thus when he looks into one of the two [into either expression or meaning], the other baffles him in its beauty, and if he looks into both of them together, they both bewilder him. Only a person with a coarse heart would find pleasure in a poem such as this [the poem on Zaynab and the fragrant breeze], for its expression is fine but its meaning is coarse. If the meaning is ugly to one with a correct view, then beauty of expression will not veil such a one from the ugliness of meaning. A metaphor I can give for this is that of one who loves pictures of the utmost beauty drawn on a decorated wall in a variety of colors, complete in terms of [formal] creation [but] without spirit. Meaning is to expression what spirit is to form; in reality, it is its beauty.[41]

Ibn al-ʿArabī continues to comment that the height of this combination, the combination of expression and meaning, can be found in the Quran. The Quran repeats stories, in order to teach, and yet the addition or subtraction of even one word would disturb the meaning; this is because, as Ibn al-ʿArabī comments, it is an instance of 'true speech.'[42] Those who find beauty in true speech have fine hearts; those who find beauty in decorated language that lacks meaning have coarse hearts. The ability to judge properly lies in the subtlety of one's heart.

One might say then that, to Ibn al-ʿArabī, good love poetry is *true* love poetry, and the standards for such truth are the experiences of a fine heart. For the lover, 'experience' is the

41. Ibid. 2:394.
42. Ibid.

experience of love. For the lover who has intimate knowledge of God, that is, the knower (*ʿārif*), it is also the experience of love, but one coupled with an awareness of the most sublime realities and the full significance of that love. In Ibn al-ʿArabī's words, his own heroes are the great lovers and beloveds of Arabic poetry, figures such as Hind, Bishr, Qays, and Layla – those who loved or were loved with all their being.[43] Love took away, in his description, 'their sense of reason and annihilated them from themselves,' because their beloveds – even when absent – were imprinted in their hearts and lived on in their imaginations, afflicting them, afflicting their lovers because they were absent in physical form and yet ever-present in the imagination.[44] Imagine, then, how much worse it must be, Ibn al-ʿArabī says, for the lover of God. After all, for those experiencing human-to-human love and only human-to-human love, the beloved is *seen* and *heard* by the lover. In the case of the lover and knower-of-God, however, the beloved (that is, God) is not just seen and heard, but rather the very *faculties* of sight and hearing.[45] Here one can see that poems written about human beloveds can be instances of what Ibn al-ʿArabī calls 'true speech,' that is, poetry that is beautiful in terms of form *and* meaning. Poems about human beloveds (Hind, Bishr, Qays, and Layla) can be true if written by a poet who has loved truly, for that poet has inadvertently loved something greater than even the poet can understand. The target might have been another human being, but the inevitable bull's-eye is always the reality of love itself, the divine self-love that permeates all things. Thus true speech, even if intended for Hind, Bishr, Qays, and Layla, resonates for the knowers in a way that it simply cannot for those unaware of the measureless reaches of love.

43. *Dhakhāʾir al-Aʿlāq*, p. 51.
44. Ibid.
45. Zargar, *Sufi Aesthetics*, pp. 136–7.

POETIC NOSTALGIA AND *SHUHŪD*

One who is familiar with classical Arabic love poetry knows that its major theme is nostalgia, a longing for a beloved physically absent yet ever-present in the mind.[46] This experience of love, this mixture of absence and omnipresence, helps us understand the most basic component of much of Sufi love poetry and arguably all of Ibn al-ʿArabī's love poetry, namely, *shuhūd*, or 'witnessing.' James Winston Morris, in *The Reflective Heart*, discusses longing for the divine face, longing for the beatific vision implied in the Quranic verse 'wheresoever you turn, there is the face of God' (Q.2:115), which is not only a central theme in *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, but also the driving theme in Ibn al-ʿArabī's poetry and poetic commentary.[47] There is an intimate and inseparable connection between God's imagined face and the beautiful human faces celebrated in Arabic and Persian Sufi poetry. The universality of love and the universality of beauty together mean that all instances of love and beauty return to God. The key element in the human love for God is witnessing God's beauty; so too, the key element in the human love for humans is gazing upon human beauty. Witnessing the divine beloved has much in common with gazing at a human beloved: both acts give the viewer great pleasure, fan the flames of the viewer's love, cause him to want union, and – when such union is impossible – bring the viewer great pain.

Love poetry finds its spiritual significance in this act of gazing, an act called 'witnessing' (*shuhūd*) in technical Sufi language. Without delving too deeply into the details of witnessing (which I have discussed elsewhere), it can be described briefly as follows. An encounter with God leaves an impression in the heart, an imprint left either by the act of witnessing or by a self-

46. Jaroslav Stetkevych's important book, *The Zephyrs of Najd: The Poetics of Nostalgia in the Classical Arabic Naṣīb* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), traces the theme of nostalgia among such poets, including Ibn al-ʿArabī himself.

47. James Winston Morris, *The Reflective Heart: Discovering Spiritual Intelligence in Ibn ʿArabi's Meccan Illuminations* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2005), pp.102–13.

disclosure 'outside of matter,' which is a self-disclosure both unfathomable and unenjoyed.[48] That imprint is called a *shāhid* or 'witness.' The person who has this imprint on the heart – this *shāhid* or visionary testimony to the Real – enjoys beholding it, because beholding it feeds and fortifies love more than anything else. In order to behold the *shāhid*, the person must resort to phenomena as known and as perceived by the senses; he or she views the *shāhid* in various places, in various forms, forms that might exist in the imagination of the soul, or in the natural world, but beholding the *shāhid*, which is called *shuhūd* or 'witnessing,' always needs some medium.[49] Here we come to a point which Ibn al-ʿArabī makes unequivocally: the human form, above all else, serves as the best *medium* for witnessing; for one human being to contemplate the beauty of God best, that human must take to the beauty of other human beings. More specifically, from a male perspective, as Ibn al-ʿArabī makes clear in his chapter on the Prophet Muhammad in *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, the witnessing of the Real in women is the greatest, most perfect, and most complete instance of witnessing.[50] Witnessing might seem pleasurable, and it can be, but there is always an element of pain; the viewer longs for something more immediate, longs for direct vision (*al-ruʾya*), but is constantly rejected. He must resort to the media of witnessing, that is, to *in*direct or mediated vision, instead. Moses, famously, longs for direct vision in his cry, 'Lord show me that I may gaze upon You' (Q.7:143); Ibn al-ʿArabī argues that it is direct vision and not witnessing that Moses seeks because saints well below the rank of Moses have achieved witnessing, so Moses must be longing for something more.[51]

Consider, then, how closely this experience of witnessing parallels the experience of falling in love with another human being: a person meets, for the first time, another beautiful person

48. *Fut.*2:567.

49. Ibid. 3:234–5.

50. Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, ed. Abū ʿAlāʾ ʿAfīfī (Cairo: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Kutub al-ʿArabiyya, 1946), p. 217.

51. *Fut.*2:567.

and, overwhelmed by her beauty, falls in love. She leaves, but an image of her remains in the heart of the lover. He carries that image everywhere and indeed sees her everywhere. While he enjoys remembering her, thinking about her always, the memory also torments him. After all, he can only remember; he cannot actually have. She is both omnipresent and absent. She is both everywhere and nowhere. His only consolation is crying out loud, and from those cries comes the mode of perceptive expression we call love poetry. For this reason, in the following poem from *Tarjumān al-Ashwāq*, Ibn al-ʿArabī describes the pains of yearning common to lovers, lovers of humans, lovers of God, and those like Ibn al-ʿArabī himself who are lovers of both, or, rather, as he himself says, the 'combination' of the two:[52]

Peace be upon Salmā and whoever settles in that private pasture,
and it is the duty of one like me, so tender-hearted, to give greetings.
And what would she lose if she were to return these salutations
to us? But one cannot pass judgment against beautiful idols.
They set off, when the tenebrousness of night let down its curtains,
and I said to her, 'Uncontrollably in love! Stranded! Enslaved by love!
Yearnings surrounding him! Ready to unleash violently
upon him are those [desires] who project arrows, no matter where he turns.'
She smiled revealing her teeth. A flash of lightning struck.
I do not know which of the two broke the sheer night darkness.
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?'[53]

52. *Fut.*2:330 and Zargar, *Sufi Aesthetics*, p. 82.

53. Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Tarjumān al-Ashwāq* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir li-l-ṭabāʿah wa-l-nashr, Dār Bayrūt li-l-ṭabāʿah wa-l-nashr, 1961), pp. 25–7.

And of course the answer is, 'No, it does not.' In fact, witnessing the beloved always and everywhere is far from a consolation for the afflicted lover. Rather, it is this witnessing and *not* having that sums up his agony. In fact, the beloved's statement is not meant to console; it is meant to mock, to trifle with the lover, and to underscore the pleasure she takes in his pains. Rather than sympathize with his cries, she smiles. Rather than offer an end to his torture, she tells him that he can enjoy it, always and everywhere. The beloved's ironic response, more than mere coyness, exhibits a sadistic indifference to his suffering. Moreover, it is not even the actual beloved saying this; it is the beloved as lodged in the lover's memory; she is *that* unattainable. As Ibn al-ʿArabī mentions, the lover in this state of suffering combines opposites, which is one of the qualities of love. The beloved loves separation. The lover loves union. But the lover is also supposed to love that which the beloved loves. So does the lover then also love separation? That would be impossible and 'contrary to the dictates of love.' Rather, the lover must love 'the beloved's love of separation, not separation itself, and also love union.'[54] This is not the state of some temporary and fleeting relationship, but, rather, the nature of love, since the lover and the beloved, no matter how much the same, and even if the beloved is lodged in the lover's own memory, must be separated by their opposing roles. Thus, when Moses cries out 'Lord show me that I may gaze upon you,' the answer comes back: 'You will not see me' (Q.7:143). And yet the witnessing described in this poem – the awareness of the beloved imprinted in the heart and seen everywhere through the imagination – does indeed give to the viewer something he would not otherwise have; as Ibn al-ʿArabī describes it in his commentary on this poem, it is a witnessing of the beloved 'in his [the lover's] own essence, through his essence, at every moment.'[55] Without such witnessing, love and esoteric knowledge lose their source of nourishment; without such witnessing, the knower would not be a knower.

54. *Fut.*2:327.
55. *Dhakhāʾir al-Aʿlāq*, p. 28.

LOVE POETRY AS LIVED PRACTICE OF THE IMAGINATION

If our goal is a true 'poetics' of Ibn al-ʿArabī, then Sufi love poetry and Sufi commentaries on such poetry should be read in their own, very real conceptual and historical context, which is why studies such as that of McAuley are so valuable. Poetry, in the case of Ibn al-ʿArabī's love lyrics, can capture the contradictions of love because it is not bound by the laws of reason; remember that poetry originates in the imagination and answers to the imagination. Poetry aims to do that which the imagination does, namely, capture meaning in forms. That which appears in the imagination is both sensory and super-sensory; it conveys meaning – or we might say spiritual realities – but does so using everything one has acquired from the senses. An abstract concept such as 'knowledge' cannot appear as knowledge. How can one 'see' something like knowledge, something that has no form? Rather, in the imagination, knowledge might appear as milk, to give an example. The importance placed on both imagination and witnessing allows Ibn al-ʿArabī to embrace the sensory, and even the sensual, in ways foreign to, or even rejected by, many among ascetics and those we call mystics. We know that Ibn al-ʿArabī himself proclaims that he came to the love of women only after struggling with it. Upon originally entering the path, Ibn al-ʿArabī detested women and union with them – according to his own account – for a period of eighteen years.[56] The insight given to him in this matter reflects his newer alignment with the spiritual perfection of Muhammad. For both the Prophet Muhammad and Ibn al-ʿArabī, it is not that they loved women, but that, through divine agency and their own inherent perfections, women were *made beloved* of them. In declaring this, Ibn al-ʿArabī refers to the hadith of the Prophet Muhammad, 'Three things have been made beloved of

56. Claude Addas, *Quest for the Red Sulphur: The Life of Ibn ʿArabī*, trans. Peter Kingsley (Cambridge, UK: The Islamic Texts Society, 1993), p. 40; *Fut*.4:84.

me from this world of yours: women, perfume, and the delight of my eye has been placed in the prescribed prayer.'[57]

Ibn al-ʿArabī's love lyrics are poetic venerations of very real human beauty, closely related to his theories on beauty (including human beauty) and any practices that might have resulted from such theories. For that reason, the intimate link between love poetry and the human form that one finds in Ibn al-ʿArabī's corpus should not be understood in vague terms. The centrality of erotic poetry and the human form in Ibn al-ʿArabī's thought should not be confused or conflated with other instances of erotic poetry in a religious-spiritual context, or other instances of erotic poetry as part of a spiritual regimen. Ibn al-ʿArabī's reading of erotic poetry is especially *un*like many metaphorical uses of erotic poetry to describe a spiritual experience distinct or distant from the bodily. In the case of Ibn al-ʿArabī, his fascination with erotic poetry blossomed in a certain context, a context in which many Persian-speaking Sufis with whom he was acquainted (such as Awḥad al-Dīn Kirmānī, d.635/1238) proclaimed their allegiance to a School of Passionate Love (*madhhab-i ʿishq*, in Persian). Erotic poetry for many adherents to the School of Passionate Love occurred in settings where actual human beloveds – often young men whose beards had not yet grown – sat before these saints; the viewers would recite poetry, weep, and witness unlimited divine beauty in the form of an actual human face. Remember that *shuhūd* is the knower-lover's primary occupation and that its best medium is the human form. While there is some evidence that Ibn al-ʿArabī opposed this practice of gazing upon human faces, I have argued that there is better evidence that Ibn al-ʿArabī sympathized with it.[58] In fact, Ibn al-ʿArabī's

57. *Fut*.3:501; for the hadith, see Aḥmad ibn Hanbal (d.241/855), *Musnad Aḥmad ibn Hanbal* (Riyadh: Bayt al-Afkār al-Duwaliyya, 1998), no. 12318/9, p. 868.

58. Claude Addas discusses this in *Quest for the Red Sulphur*, pp. 163–4. She uses Ibn al-ʿArabī's *Kitāb al-Amr* as translated by Miguel Asín Palacios in his *El islam cristianizado: Estudio del 'Sufismo' a través de las obras de Abenarabi de Murcia* (Madrid: Editorial Plutarco, 1931), pp. 300–51. My discussion in *Sufi Aesthetics* (pp. 73–6) is based on *Fut*.2:190.

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contradictory statements about gazing at young men, found in two different texts, can be explained by a difference in audiences. In one passage, intended for 'Sufis,' Ibn al-ʿArabī emphasizes the dangers of associating with beautiful young men, or, even more dangerous, gazing at them and thus trying to use them as 'witnesses' to divine beauty, which is the 'gravest of obstacles' on the path.[59] The other passage is intended for elite knowers, for as Ibn al-ʿArabī says, 'the *knower* (*al-ʿārif*) gazes.'[60] Here Ibn al-ʿArabī defends the knower's associating with young men and gazing at them, while still acknowledging that such association should be forbidden for 'novice wayfarers (*al-murīdūn*) and Sufis (*al-ṣūfiyya*).'[61] Gazing at beardless youths is an abominable act for *almost* everyone; 'almost' because such gazing is allowed for realized knowers and only realized knowers, namely, those who have completely mastered their desires. For that group, gazing has distinctive spiritual effects that Ibn al-ʿArabī describes. Here we return to the matter of intention, for even gazing upon women – Ibn al-ʿArabī tells us – can be either reprehensible or allowed in differing contexts; it is allowed in the case of courtship or medical treatment, and, for the physician, can even be an act of worship.[62]

Ibn al-ʿArabī's stance on the practice of gazing at beautiful faces is only one factor in beginning to understand the theoretical and historical context of his love poetry: regardless of where he stood on the matter of gazing, he certainly and unambiguously sympathized with the principles of the School of Passionate Love, namely the witnessing of divine beauty in human form. Ibn al-ʿArabī's famous reference to his belonging to a 'Religion of Love' (*dīn al-ḥubb*), the heroes of which are the lovers and beloveds of erotic poetry, mirrors to some degree the Persian title 'School of Passionate Love.'[63] And one cannot ignore the fact that those influenced by Ibn al-ʿArabī,

59. *El islam cristianizado*, p. 328.
60. Zargar, *Sufi Aesthetics*, p. 73.
61. Ibid. p. 74.
62. *Fut.*3:562–3.
63. *Tarjumān al-Ashwāq*, pp. 43–4.

especially the students of his foremost student, began a trend of commenting on erotic poetry, often that of the Egyptian Sufi ʿUmar ibn al-Fāriḍ (d.632/1235), and interpreting that poetry in ways that intertwined ineffable divine appearances and real human beauty. Figures such as Fakhr al-Dīn ʿIrāqī (d.688/1289) and Saʿīd al-Dīn Farghānī (d.699/1300) did not maintain a definition of erotic poetry that veered from that of their great shaykh, Ibn al-ʿArabī. They instead continued a way of thinking about beauty that claimed to go far back into the memory of Sufism and Islam itself, back beyond the great Aḥmad Ghazālī (d.520/1126), beyond even earlier advocates of using human beauty as visual or poetic media for spiritual love, back to the source texts themselves.[64] As Ibn al-ʿArabī states, the love of beauty, especially the full spiritual significance of natural beauty, including the rain that falls from above and the women with whom union reawakens human origination, had been taught by the Prophet Muhammad himself.[65]

CONCLUSION

Ibn al-ʿArabī's writings lead one to conclude that to ponder the nature of love poetry one must first ponder the nature of love itself. Love experienced between human beings, which is the greatest model of the love between God and Himself, has veracity. It should be no surprise, then, that the poet, gifted with intuition, can capture something true, reflecting the most profound cosmological realities, merely by capturing his own true experience of love for another human. Of course, the knower-of-God can capture such realities in poetry to an incomparably higher degree; the knower, after all, knows and does not merely intuit, so that even the knower's intuition derives its powers from intimate familiarity with God.

64. The history of what the author calls 'religious love for a beautiful person' in Sufism is discussed in detail by Helmut Ritter, *The Ocean of the Soul*, trans. John O'Kane (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2003), pp. 448–84.

65. The hadith on women has been mentioned above. As for rain, see Zargar, *Sufi Aesthetics*, pp. 74–5.

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Moreover, the knower, and only the knower, properly translates all instances of love, poetic and otherwise, seeing in a limited instance of love and beauty the unlimited agent of love and beauty. If poets have intuition and relay the ordeals of love through synopsis (*al-ijmāl*), the *tafṣīl* or exposition of such experiences belongs only to the knower. The word 'translate,' indeed, appears in the title Ibn al-ʿArabī gives to his collection of erotic poems, *Tarjumān al-Ashwāq*, namely, the 'translator' or 'interpreter' of desires; love subverts reason, and since poetry is the means for expressing that which is known and yet not bound by reason, poetry can speak on behalf of love. Through poetry, one can translate that which is foreign to the intellect. For human beings, after all, nothing can be known without translation. Just as love is best translated into poetry, so too divine beauty is best translated into human beauty. Here one can see a relationship between the literary vehicle of beauty and love (poetry) and the most complete manifestation of beauty and love (the human form): poetry, and by this I mean love poetry as its highest expression, comes closest in terms of art forms and modes of expression to the human form. Like the human, poetry has the ability to capture contradictories, to be material in form and immaterial in meaning. Ibn al-ʿArabī, as we have seen, describes successful poetry as the combination of beautiful and balanced form with exalted and sublime meaning. Thus, composing (and enjoying) poetry, especially love poetry, captures the very paradigm of being human, for the human has the most beautiful and balanced form (Q.95:4) and the most exalted and sublime meaning or spirit (as Ibn al-ʿArabī announces in his first chapter on Adam in *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*). The story of the creation of Adam, the story of the Prophet Muhammad's nightly ascent, and the revelation of divine speech in human tongue known as the Quran, all point to the marriage between absolute meaning and material form made necessary only by love, the love of the Real to be known.