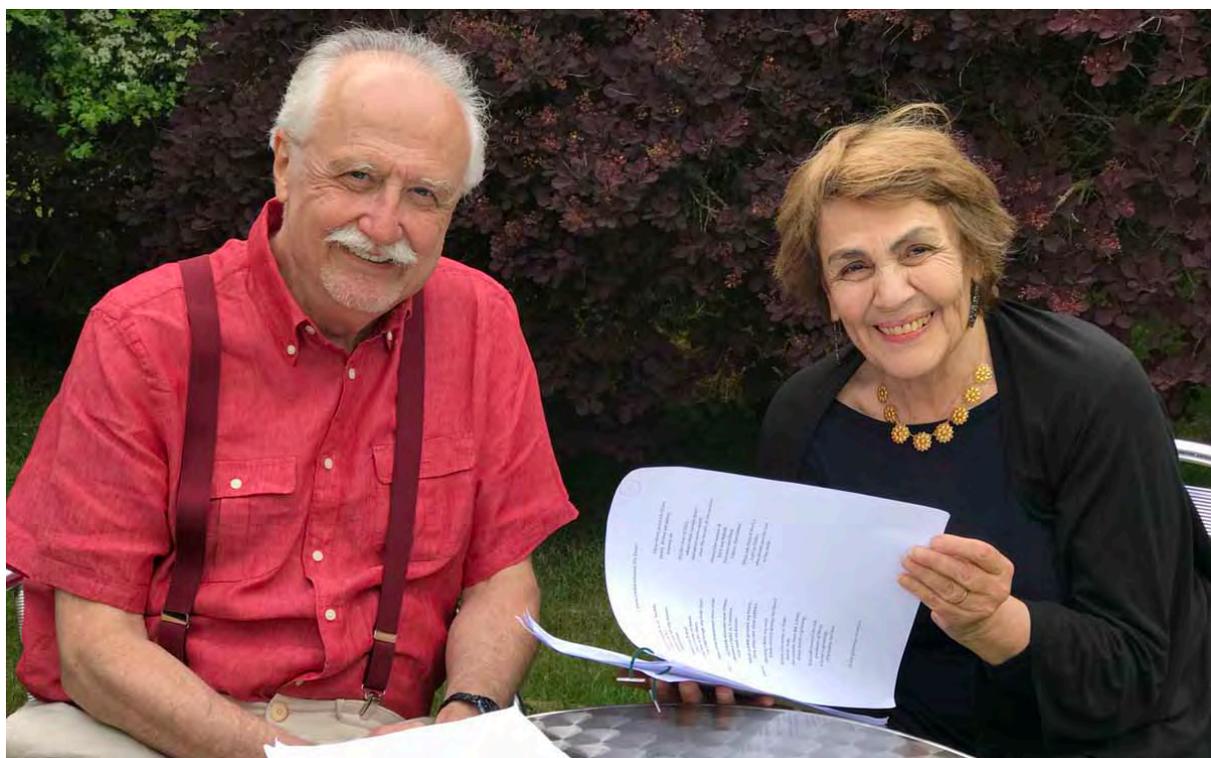
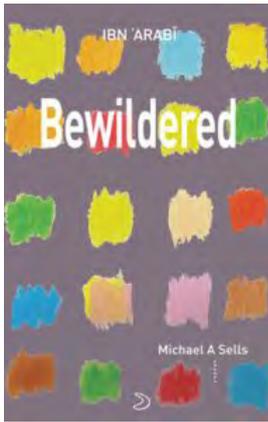


BEWILDERED BY LOVE AND LONGING

Michael Sells and Simone Fattal talk about a new translation of Ibn 'Arabi's famous cycle of love poems, 'Translation of Desires'



'Translation of Desires' (Tarjumān al-ashwāq) is one of the world's great works of mystical poetry. A cycle of 61 poems addressed to a beautiful but elusive beloved, it has been one the most widely-read works of the Andalusian mystic/philosopher, [Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi](#) (1165–1240). Even today, 800 years after its composition, its extraordinary imagery and sentiments continue to inspire artists and musicians not only within the Arab world, but also in the West, where it has become known largely through the early 20th century translation of R.A. Nicholson. This year has seen the publication of new translations of 46 poems, under the title 'Bewildered', by [Michael Sells](#), The John Henry Barrows Professor of Islamic History and Literature at the University of Chicago, who has spent a lifetime on their study. Jane Clark and Cecilia Twinch talk to him, and to artist and publisher [Simone Fattal](#) who has produced the book for The Post Apollo Press.



Cecilia: Michael, these English versions of poems from *Translation of Desires* have been a work in progress for you for many years now, since the 1980s. What is it about the book that fascinates you?

Michael: It is the poetry of loss and longing from the classic Arabic tradition of love poetry, although it also represents a very distinctive development of that form. One of the things that makes it appealing is that it is based on a very sophisticated psychology of love. It expresses all the moods of a lover, all the ways in which he or she becomes almost different people in relationship to the beloved. This makes it a master work of a poetically-sensitive treatment of love.

Cecilia: Do you feel that this is something timeless that people today can relate to even though the poetic form is unfamiliar?

Michael: Definitely. One of the reasons that I have not included a long scholarly introduction or lots of notes in the translation is so that people who like to read good literature – and even people who think that they don't really like poetry because these themes are in other forms of literature; they are in music, they are everywhere – will be able to read a poem and say: "I don't know where this place is or who this person is, but I can see the brilliance of the images, and the beauty of the sound quality." So they can be brought into this world of extreme delicacy and passion.

Jane: You say that this is a poetry of loss and longing. Can you say a bit more about this? Poem 11, for instance, which is perhaps the most famous, begins:

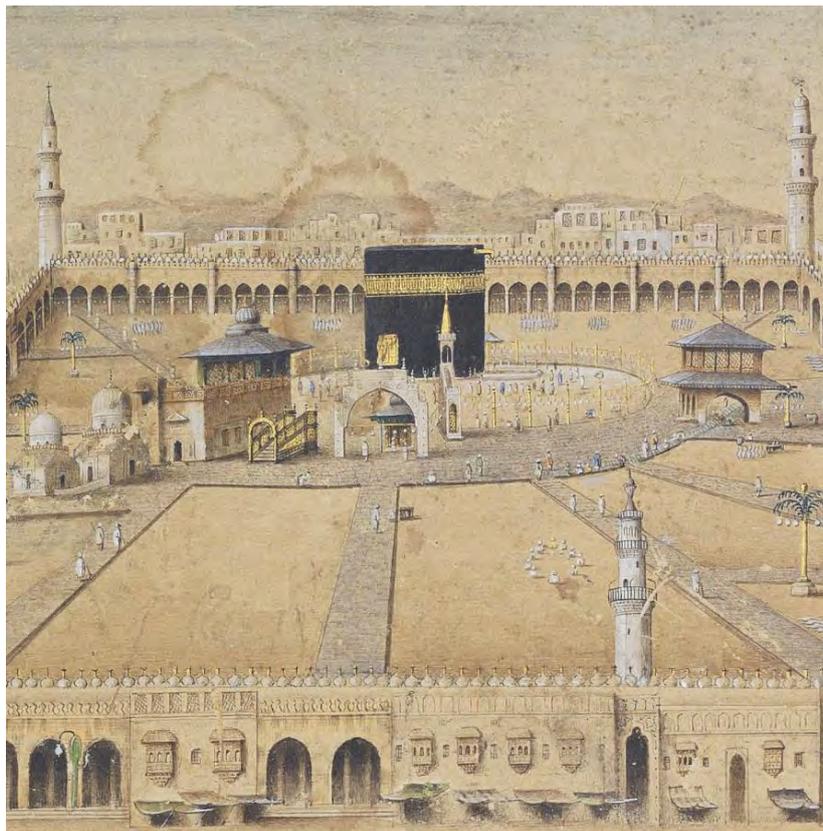
*Gentle now, doves
of the thornberry and moringa
thicket, don't add
to my heart-ache your sighs.*

*Gentle now,
lest your sad cooing
reveal the love I hide,
the sorrow I hide away (p.6)*

Michael: In the classical Arabic form, the poem starts out with the poet expressing a sense of loss for the beloved or the homeland. Then there is a quest or a trial in which the lover is tested repeatedly; there is a sense of being lost, of being rejected, and of desolation. Then there is a transformative moment when the voice takes on a more confident tone in announcing its love, leading, at the end of the poem, to the lover returning to their community with a new sense of resolution. This is a pattern

we see in every mythic tradition of the world, and it is therefore something which everyone can relate to.

The innovation which Ibn 'Arabi made was to tie this traditional form to the idea of pilgrimage, and in particular to his own experience of the pilgrimage to Mecca, known as the *hajj*. Mecca is located in the same desert regions that the ancient Arab love poets were inhabiting, so the poetry ties together the language of the *hajj* – of travelling through the desert, enduring the trials of the pilgrimage and the sense of disorientation which comes about from its rigour and its rituals – with the stations of the lost beloved from the early poetry. This was something which two or three contemporaries were also doing, some from Baghdad, some from Andalusia, some from Cairo. So this moment in the 13th century CE is a pivotal moment in the development of a certain kind of poetry.



The sacred precinct at Mecca in Ottoman times. It was probably little changed from Ibn 'Arabi's visit in 1203, when he met the woman who inspired *Tarjumān al-ashwāq*.

Jane: So this adds a dimension of spiritual journeying, of mystical longing, to the poetry?

Michael: Yes, the poems are also about love and longing for the supreme being, the ineffable: the love and longing for those sights and traces of the beloved or of God, which are represented in Islam by the temple of the Ka'ba, or the stations on the way to the sacred precinct where people stop to get water. These all become charged with many layers of symbolism, bringing together the old meanings passed down through the centuries of love poetry, and the new meanings of the longing for God.

I feel that almost everyone has had an experience, in their own world, of this feeling of longing. Going to some place, such as a forest or a desert which is wild, where there is solitude, has the same kind of transformative effect. Some people do this more adventurously than others; not everyone treks to the tops of mountains. But everyone has a yearning for some deep taste of home, which is one of the things that both the love poetry and the pilgrimage are about. When the poet laments the loss of the beloved, it is a lament for that moment when they felt “I belong here”.

So this sense of searching is common to everyone, whether it is going on *hajj* or a pilgrimage in another tradition; or people making their own private journey, seeking a sense of their own recollection of their home, their contact with their family history. It could be going to a family cemetery, for instance.



“I asked them where the travellers rested at noon”.
Print by [Rahima Kenner](#) based on Poem 6 of *Tarjumān*.

Modalities of the Feminine

Jane: One of the most striking things about *Translation of Desires* – and also a radical departure from the classical traditions – is that the poems are

dedicated to a real person, a young woman whom Ibn ‘Arabi met on his first visit to Mecca in about 1202. This is often seen as a precursor to Dante’s encounter with Beatrice, which inspired *The Divine Comedy*.

Michael: Ibn ‘Arabi tells us in his preface to the poems that he was inspired to write them by a girl called Nizam, who was the daughter of a distinguished scholar from Isfahan with whom he studied. But the poems go beyond a single individual; they are dedicated to many manifestations of the feminine. Beauty is involved in this, of course, but it never just ends there. The women he describes both in these poems and elsewhere in his writings were sages, people of great wisdom and deep insight, models of wit, expression, argument and ethical pursuit, meaning that through their own behaviour they became ethical models for everyone around them.

Jane: So would you say that Nizam is like the archetype of a wise, spiritual woman?

Michael: Actually, we don’t really know whether Ibn ‘Arabi is talking about a flesh-and-blood woman whom he met at a particular moment in Mecca and who inspired him to write many of his works; or whether he is presenting an allegory of a spiritual encounter that he had in a feminine modality.

The great French scholar, Henry Corbin, had profound insight into this matter. He saw that often in this kind of literature the answer is not necessarily one or the other. It can be both. After all, the title of this book is *Translation of Desires* – meaning, all desires. My tendency is to say that the reason that some of these poems can be read as the beloved being God, and in others the beloved could be someone he had met in real life, is that for Ibn ‘Arabi longing or desire is a cosmic force. It goes beyond all boundaries, and it is the closest taste of the infinite that people can have in their own experience.

If love is beyond boundaries, then it cannot be said to be ‘up there’ or ‘down here’, and it cannot be said to be outside of the human being – his or her mortal form – or inside. So that is why I think that poets like Ibn ‘Arabi, or the great Persian poets like ‘Attar, Hāfiz and many others, composed poems which have generated centuries of discussion as to whether they are mystical poems or just love poems. That is also why Sufi teachers throughout the Middle East even today will work by reciting the verse of a love poem and then giving a teaching, then reciting another and giving another teaching, and so on.

Cecilia: Ibn ‘Arabi wrote his own commentary on the poems, which was published – or at least selections from it – alongside them in the first translation by R.A. Nicholson. How integral do you think this is to the whole work?

Michael: The commentary came about because Ibn ‘Arabi was challenged by some people in Aleppo for allegedly writing simple love poetry which had nothing to do

with Sufism, so he wrote the commentary in order to link the poems to his wider thought – to his cosmology and his metaphysics – and in it he draws out those aspects. It is very useful if you feel that a poem could have two or three different meanings; then you can read the commentary and decide which one is best. But in my view, a poem is a poem because it is saying something that could not have been expressed in prose. If you could reduce the meaning to x, y and z, then why not write x, y and z instead? A poem is always more than any commentary, including the author's, and I think that Ibn 'Arabi acknowledges this himself. I am currently working on a bilingual, scholarly edition of these translations which will hopefully appear sometime next year. In that, I will be including large sections, not all, of the commentary, whereas in *Bewildered* I don't include any at all.

Jane: Given the importance of the feminine aspect, it seems appropriate that the book is published by the Post Apollo Press, which I believe started out largely as a feminist publishing house. Simone, can you say something about this?

Simone: Well, I actually never thought of Post Apollo in that way. But when I published my first book – which was [Etel Adnan's *Sitt Marie Rose*](#) – it was taken up by the feminist movement, although I myself never intended it to be a feminist statement; I saw the political aspect of the book. In fact, very soon afterwards I started publishing books by men as well, which horrified some of the feminists!

I actually started the Press in order to publish the English translation of *Sitt Marie Rose*, and I knew that this first one was a great book. So from the very beginning, I wanted to publish works of this quality. This was the main thing – literary quality. Ibn 'Arabi's poetry fits into this because you could not imagine anything of a higher quality; it is the most beautiful poetry you could think of. And Michael's translations are a real joy. [Click to hear a rendering of Michael's translation of Poem 24 in [ENGLISH](#) and [ARABIC](#) by Vast Earth Orchestra]



Vastearth Orchestra, who have set many of the *Tarjumān* poems to music, in performance at [Chisholme House](#) in Scotland.

The Process of Translation

Michael: Simone has been inspirational on this project throughout, not least because she has been present at many of the events where I have read the poems out to audiences. My view of art is that I don't believe in an 'artistic soul' – someone who breathes in inspiration and then conveys it to the world. I view art as an interaction, and what comes out of these translations reflects, in the end, all the experiences that I have had of sharing Ibn 'Arabi's poetry with people over the years.

I have, as you pointed out, been working on them since the 1980s, and in that time I have produced hundreds of different versions. I have talked about them in many different places – at conferences, at the university where I teach as seminars – reading them out and then asking people to express what a sentence or a phrase brings to their mind. That's the only way to know whether a translation is evoking in people from a very different culture what is right in terms of the original. One of the dangers of translation is that there are associations that people have with an English word that might not be there in the Arabic, so it is necessary to refine translations by this kind of process until they are both true to the original and readable as an English poem.

Cecilia: Earlier on you mentioned the beautiful sound quality of the Arabic: how do you get this to carry across to another language?

Michael: Poetry translation is always a matter of compensating for what cannot be imitated directly. For example, to try to reproduce the same rhyming pattern of the Arabic – and all of these poems are written in mono-rhyme, meaning that each line ends with the same sound – is not possible. You have to give up the rhyme, although I do use a lot of echoes – words which have a strong sense of acoustic connection. You also have to give up the very intricate metres which are a strong feature of Arabic poetry, because we don't use these in English poetry. We have the iambic metre which Shakespeare used, but apart from that it is not a strong feature of English, especially modern poetry.

What I see as the function of rhyme and metre is what I call 'tension and release'. There is a movement of tension in a dance, and the movement of release. The 'tension' is when the metre falls in the middle of a syntax and artificially separates words which one might expect to go together. The 'release' is when it falls naturally on the flow of words. So when translating, I try to rebuild that same sense of tension by using line breaks. I break a full Arabic line, which always consists of two parts, into either a quatrain or a couplet. Sometimes the breaks go with the flow, and sometimes against it. Hopefully by doing this I am able to get a similar dynamic to the original.

Let me give you an example in a couple of verses from Poem 51, which in Arabic would be each just one line:

*There are swords that flash
in the gleam of smiles
and pouches of musk
forbidden the senses.*

*Fight and they'll unsheathe
blades from their glances
Make peace and they'll shatter
The chains of constraint (p.41)*

In the first verse, I break at 'smiles' because the thought is incomplete, and the phrase 'the pouches of musk' links with the next line. At other times the thought is complete, and so is the sound quality, so I don't break the line. [To hear Michael read this poem, click [HERE](#)].



'Promise', a calligraphy by Hassan Massoudy based on Poem 57 of *Tarjumān*:

"In her tent, in secret/we will meet/to fulfill the promise completely".

From *Perfect Harmony* (Shambhala, 2002).

Jane: There are issues surrounding the translation of poetry in general, and this is perhaps especially the case with mystical poetry. Some people say that it is always going to be an inadequate reflection of the original, and others would say that in the best of cases, the translator manages to capture the real spirit of the poem, and so their translation can be seen almost as an extension of the original.

Michael: I feel this is a matter of understanding the process of communication. Communication is constantly an act of translation. Thought is always in process, and so is meaning. So in the whole of Ibn 'Arabi's writings, whether poetry or prose, there is never a moment when you have the sense, "Here it is, he's said it in pure form." It is always, "He is saying this in process."

I coined the phrase that, for Ibn 'Arabi, 'existence is translation'. He focuses on the fact that the ineffable can never be adequately put into words. That does not mean that people should not try to express it as best they can. In fact, that is precisely what he did in at least 150 books.

This is not just a matter of translating from foreign languages. It happens when I am talking to people in English, which is my own language; we disagree on something, and then one of us will say, "Oh, I see. You meant the word that way, whereas I heard it this way." So even here we have an act of translation.

Simone: We owe everything we know to translation. Without it, we would know nothing of ancient Egypt or ancient China, or Greece.

Michael: It's true. So if someone wants to say, I will only read pure original languages, and wants to limit their experience to the languages they themselves can read well, then to me that it is a terrible restriction.

Simone: In the case of Ibn 'Arabi, he translates from what he knows, but he also indicates. He cannot express the ineffable but he indicates what he wants to say, and we can participate in his experience. He is very much in line with what it says in the Quran, that every meaning is in the text. So if people can see ten different meanings in a line, then those ten meanings are all valid.

Michael: Another aspect of translation which I find particularly rewarding is the idea that we don't know a language, even our own. There are scholars in Cairo who read Chaucer fluently without a crib, but I can't do that. It is supposedly my language, but actually, we all just know pieces of languages. In many cases, although educated in modern standard Arabic, for many people in the Arabic-speaking world, *Translation of Desires* is difficult for them. So translations are often an intersection point for talking about their own traditions with people.

Jane: **This is all consistent with another of Ibn 'Arabi's central principles: the idea that nothing is fixed, that there is a 'new creation' at every moment.**

Michael: Yes. The process is never finished. In the same way, if you have a song, there may be a thousand versions of that song and they will all be 'right'. That's why I don't have to worry about having published one version of these poems somewhere, and now there is something different about it.

Ibn 'Arabi's way of putting it is like this: in some of his works, he talks about writing these poems and explains – this was the occasion, this was the spirit of the poem, these were the people I was in conversation with and this is the version of the poem. The poem has come about from the conversation; someone will have recited a poem, or there was a discussion about something to do with love, and Ibn 'Arabi at that moment will recite some verses, which may or may not be exactly the same as verses in another situation.



‘Wild is she, none can make her his friend...’

Painting by John Brass, based on Poem 2, Verse 7, of *Tarjuman*.

The Importance of Ibn ‘Arabi Today

Jane: Speaking more generally, why do you think that Ibn ‘Arabi is so important for our time, such that you and many others are working so hard in bringing his work into English translation?

Michael: There is so much that I could say. One thing is that there is a sense of critical openness in his thought. It is never uncritical or relativistic, and it is continually challenging the tendency of human beings to dismiss other people; to think that our culture, our society, our theology, is the ‘right one’. Ibn ‘Arabi’s work views this as an essential aspect of humanity. It constantly confronts its own natural tendencies to turn into a dogma, and so it demands of the reader that they become more humble – or maybe you could say more realistic – about what we can actually know; to understand that we can have a strong conviction and carry through with it, but we still do not have to close off the views of others, whether those be other religions, other philosophies, other cultures or whatever.

Jane: So what you are describing is what is expressed in the last few lines of Poem 11, which are probably the best known of Ibn ‘Arabi’s verses, which these days have often been set to music. [Click for versions by [Amina Alaoui](#) and [Francisco Javier Jáuregui](#)]

*... marvel,
a garden among the flames!*

*My heart can take on
any form
For gazelles a meadow,
A cloister for monks,*

*For the idols, sacred ground
Ka'ba for the circling pilgrim
The tables of the Torah
The scrolls of the Qur'an*

*I profess the religion of love
Wherever its caravan turns
along the way, that is my religion
my faith (pp.7-8)*



Singer Amina Alaoui, famous for her rendering of '[Hymn to love](#)', based on Poem 11 of *Tarjumān*.

Simone: I would like to add that not only is Ibn 'Arabi a great poet, a great thinker, but he also teaches us how to think. This is something we need very much these days, because people are more and more attached to following other people. He gives us a method to start thinking for ourselves, to open up our mind. He wrote so many books, and yet he says, "I can only give you this much today – I have not yet said what I really wanted to say." So he makes us know that there are so many things we do not yet know, and he creates the desire in us to find them.

Michael: Yes, in this matter of sharpening the brain, there is much emphasis these days on left brain/right brain; mathematical-logic world/artistic world. I feel that Ibn ‘Arabi is, at all times, teaching and inspiring us with both sides of the brain simultaneously, and so it is training both sides. This is invaluable in the present day when we really need joined-up thinking, an integrated perspective.

The other way I like to think about this, is that in his writing, no sentence or thought is allowed to stand on its own. I call it a writing of ‘double propositions’. We have laws about non-contradiction, and we have laws which put things in their place, which are all absolutely valid in the world of finite things. But if one is trying to talk about that which is beyond the world of finite things, about the infinite and the ineffable, then you cannot express it in terms of one proposition, because a proposition is necessarily about a finite thing. So if you say that the Real is beyond all finite things, that is incomplete. And if you say, He is within all things, that is also incomplete. If you say it is both, then that is closer to the truth, but you have two statements which contradict each other. But this is the way of proper contradiction; there is nothing illogical about it.

To accept proper contradiction is to accept that human beings are never just one thing. We might be united, and we might be separated at exactly the same time. We might be experiencing immense sorrow, and at the same time find joy. And the same is true of whatever unlimited reality there is. The cause of the universe is not a thing, so we cannot apply the usual laws of logic to it either in our heart or outside of it. This is the underlying principle behind those wonderful Sufi paradoxes, such as: “That which is outside of yourself is also there in your heart”, and so on. This is the kind of profound wisdom which Ibn ‘Arabi enables us to embrace.



A performance of *Religion of Love (El amor es mi fe)* by Francisco Javier Jáuregui; an excerpt can be watched [HERE](#).

Jane: So from what you are saying, we can perhaps say that Ibn ‘Arabi is *particularly* relevant to us today, as these days we are generally quite aware of paradoxical logic. For example, we have been living with the fundamental paradoxes of quantum mechanics, in which matter is understood to be simultaneously both a wave and a particle, for more than a century now.

Michael: I like to think of Ibn ‘Arabi in terms of his own paradoxes. My own view is that in one sense, people like him and Rūmi are undoubtedly great authors, but in another sense, they are able to ‘walk the walk’ in terms of allowing the self to disappear so that reality can appear in their heart, as if in a polished mirror. So in that way, seeing it not in black-and-white terms but in terms of voices, when we read Ibn ‘Arabi we hear the voices of the people he met – the society he lived in, the culture which he expressed, was particularly receptive to this kind of language.

So he was a man – meaning he was of male gender – but his writing is filled with the honouring of female teachers, of women he considered to be brilliant and sages. Therefore he is both male and female; he is both his own individual self and the whole of his culture; both one person and the many other people he came into contact with who inspired him and provided the occasion for the voice that he spoke to emerge.

Cecilia: Ibn ‘Arabi has been best known for his works such as *Bezels of Wisdom* and *The Meccan Revelations*, which are very metaphysical in their content. But you see him very much as a poet.

Michael: I believe that Ibn ‘Arabi’s poetry was central to him at every moment of his life. In fact, I see even his non-poetic writings to be deeply poetic. This is because his thought always runs very freely; it evokes images and encompasses a huge range of symbolism and allegory. To read his prose, one scholar has said, is to read a genius who is constantly engaging in a kind of free expression. There is a rationale behind it, but that never becomes completely apparent. So his writings are all very poetic.

There was a long tradition coming out of the early western writings on Islamic mysticism, to consider Rūmi as the quintessential poet and Ibn ‘Arabi as the quintessential intellectual. One of the pioneers of Islamic mysticism, Anne-Marie Schimmel, put forward this point of view repeatedly. So some people have referred to Rūmi as the ‘path of love’ and Ibn ‘Arabi as ‘the path of knowledge’ or intellect.

In my view, the poetry of Rūmi is inimitable; even those of us who don’t know Persian have only to hear it recited to know that it is something extraordinary. But Ibn ‘Arabi and the Arabic tradition are also extraordinary, and they will be revalued as time goes on. So I view Ibn ‘Arabi’s thought as quintessentially to do with two things – love and the effort to understand. These are never separated; I never consider him to be making some sort of purely intellectual argument.

Simone: In *Meccan Revelations* he starts every chapter with a poem. This indicates to me that he thinks in poetry, and then the rest of the exposition is him trying to explain what he has just said.

Michael: Even in *The Bezels of Wisdom* he often starts a chapter with a poem, and there are several poems in the middle of the chapters. My feeling is the same as Simone's: that the poetry is an inspiration for him as the writer. Poetry comes first, and then he thinks and explores those dimensions that the poems open up.



Stella by Simone Fattal, inscribed with words by Ibn 'Arabi.

Bewilderment

Cecilia: So lastly, could you say something about the title 'Bewildered'?

Michael: The first poem has four verses: and the last one is:

*The Lords of love are in love ensnared
Bewildered*

And the last poem ends like this:

*I'm in love far gone
With a girl from Ajjādī*

*Wrong, she lives within the black
shell of my liver*

*In a diffusion of musk and saffron
Beauty falls amazed. Bewildered (p.47)*

So the cycle starts with bewilderment and it ends with it. My view is that this concept of bewilderment is central for all Ibn 'Arabi's thought, and it comes up again and again in the poems. There is bewilderment because one does not understand what is going on. And there is bewilderment because this is the place where one is confronting things, which for human beings are essentially bewildering because they are at the boundary point between the finite and the infinite. That is what great love is, and that is what the religious path is.



'My heart', a calligraphy by Hassan Massoudy based on Poem 11 of *Tarjumān*.

From *Perfect Harmony* (Shambhala, 2002).

Image Sources

Banner: Michael Sells with Simone Fattal. Photograph: Richard Twinch

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