

Introduction

ʿUmar Ibn al-Fāriḍ is the most famous Arab poet within Islamic mysticism. He was a master of the Arabic poetic tradition, composing verse in a number of forms including the quatrain, the *ghazal*, the ode (*qaṣīdah*), and wine ode (*khamrīyah*). Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poetry is lyrical and complex, as he explores mystical feelings and themes relating to the quest of a devoted lover to regain union with his lost beloved. Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poems, with their intricate style and elegant beauty, have moved generations of Muslims, and for centuries, he has been admired and imitated as an Arab poet and venerated as a Muslim saint.

Life

When ʿUmar Ibn al-Fāriḍ died in 632/1235, he was an established poet and a respected teacher. Several of his students left brief biographical notices on him, and these earliest sources agree that ʿUmar was born in Cairo on the 4th of Dhū al-Qaʿdah 576/1181. He was the son of Abū al-Ḥasan ʿAlī ibn al-Murshid ibn ʿAlī, and a descendent of the Saʿd tribe of Arabia. His father ʿAlī ibn al-Murshid migrated to Cairo from Hama prior to ʿUmar's birth, probably to serve in the judiciary of the Ayyubid dynasty, which had replaced the Shīʿī Fatimids in 568/1171.¹ The Ayyubid sultan, Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn (Saladin, r. 566–89/1171–93) established several Sunni law schools in Cairo together with a *khanqāh*, a residence and chantry for as many as three hundred Sufis. In his attempts to promote Sunni Islam, Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn also appears to have favored non-Egyptian scholars to fill many legal positions, perhaps to ensure their loyalty to him, and this may have brought ʿUmar's father to Cairo.² There, ʿAlī ibn al-Murshid served as a women's advocate (*fāriḍ*) in legal proceedings, thus ʿUmar's eventual title Ibn al-Fāriḍ, "son of the women's advocate." ʿAlī ibn al-Murshid was a member of the Shāfiʿī law school and was respected for his religious knowledge.³

ʿAlī ibn al-Murshid oversaw ʿUmar’s education in the religious sciences and in Arabic language, literature, and poetry (*adab*). ʿUmar also studied the traditions of the prophet Muḥammad (*ḥadīth*) with the noted traditionalist of Damascus Abū Muḥammad al-Qāsim ibn ʿAlī Ibn al-ʿAsākir (d. 527/1203). Early sources also note that Ibn al-Fāriḍ was, like his father, a member of the Shāfiʿī law school, and that he undertook the study and practice of Islamic mysticism, or Sufism, composing poetry on the Sufi path (*ʿalā ṭarīqat al-taṣawwuf*). Unfortunately, his students do not record any information regarding Sufi masters or books that he may have consulted. Ibn al-Fāriḍ’s earliest biographers add that he went on pilgrimage to Mecca, where he lived and studied for a time, after which he returned to Cairo. There, he supported himself by teaching *ḥadīth* and poetry at the Azhar congregational mosque. ʿUmar Ibn al-Fāriḍ died on the 2nd of Jumādā I 632/1235, and was buried at the foot of Mt. Muqattam in the Qarāfah, the large cemetery north east of Cairo.⁴

The early, brief sketches of Ibn al-Fāriḍ by his students may be fleshed out by an influential later source, the *Dībājah* (“The Adorned Proem”). Composed by the poet’s grandson ʿAlī (fl. 735/1334), this work is an introduction to the *Dīwān Ibn al-Fāriḍ*, ʿAlī’s definitive collection of his grandfather’s poetry. However, the *Dībājah* must be used with caution, for the work is clearly a hagiography of a saintly life, not a factual biography of a grandfather who had probably died before ʿAlī was born. Still, ʿAlī provides important information regarding Ibn al-Fāriḍ’s family by noting that Ibn al-Fāriḍ was married and had at least two sons, Kamāl-Dīn Muḥammad (d. 689/1290) and ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, and an unnamed daughter, who was ʿAlī’s mother. ʿAlī also relates many stories about his grandfather, ordering them in such a way as to portray Ibn al-Fāriḍ’s progress along the mystic path from a religiously naive youth to a spiritually realized Sufi master and divinely inspired poet. Along the way, many miraculous events occur to his grandfather, including Ibn al-Fāriḍ’s instantaneous travel over hundreds of miles, his conversation with a lion, and his frequent trances followed by automatic recitation of scores of verses.⁵

Despite such tales, ʿAlī may have based his narrative loosely on Ibn al-Fāriḍ’s life as told to him by his uncle, Ibn al-Fāriḍ’s son, Kamāl-Dīn Muḥammad. According to the *Dībājah*, in his youth ʿUmar would sit with his father during court cases and teaching sessions. But ʿUmar would grow restless, and so leave and wander in the Muqattam Hills for spiritual retreat. There, he met an old shaykh who instructed him to seek enlightenment in Mecca. Following this advice, ʿUmar went on pilgrimage to Mecca, where he lived and studied for

about fifteen years. Ibn al-Fāriḍ then returned to Cairo as a mature religious scholar and an accomplished poet. In Cairo, Ibn al-Fāriḍ was a member of the religious and cultural elite of his day, teaching at the Azhar mosque, and discussing poetry with colleagues.⁶ This last fact is corroborated by the literary scholar al-Ṣafadī (d. 764/1363), who recounted an instance of Ibn al-Fāriḍ adjudicating a dispute between two poets who claimed to have composed the same poem.⁷

ʿAlī mentions that Ibn al-Fāriḍ composed some of his poems in Mecca, though ʿAlī suggests that his grandfather composed much more of his verse in Cairo, including his famous poem the *Naẓm al-Sulūk* (“Poem of the Sufi Way”). In several stories, ʿAlī highlights his grandfather’s reputation as an acclaimed poet and venerated figure in Cairo, where one of his poems was recited before the Ayyubid sultan al-Malik al-Kāmil (r. 615–35/1218–38). The poem so impressed the sultan that he sent a gift of money to the poet, which Ibn al-Fāriḍ refused to accept. The sultan and one of his amirs made other offers on several later occasions, but Ibn al-Fāriḍ declined them all. The clear moral of such stories was that Ibn al-Fāriḍ would not be tainted by money or power.⁸ Although we cannot verify the historical accuracy of these accounts, it is significant that Ibn al-Fāriḍ’s collected poems do not contain any panegyrics for rulers or their retainers, who often were the patrons and subjects of professional poets of the time.

On the Sufi Path

ʿAlī concludes his *Dibājah* with two different accounts of Ibn al-Fāriḍ’s final hours of mystical rapture and eventual death, and the explicit signs that his grandfather should be recorded among God’s saintly friends. In one account, the spirit of the prophet Muhammad suddenly appears to lead the prayers at Ibn al-Fāriḍ’s funeral.⁹ Although ʿAlī’s reverential account of his grandfather differs substantially from the earlier notices on the poet by Ibn al-Fāriḍ’s students, all agree that Ibn al-Fāriḍ had studied and participated in the Islamic mystical tradition. Known in Arabic as *taṣawwuf*, “following the Sufi path,” Islamic mysticism is commonly known in the West as Sufism. Islamic mysticism may be defined as the study of experiences within Islam characterized by ineffability and transience, and frequently by a positive sense of passivity, timelessness, and unity. Sufism also includes the methods to attain and refine these experiences, the theories and doctrines regarding their origin and significance, and the place of these experiences within the lives of individuals and their societies.¹⁰

Sufism shares much in common with other mystical traditions, and some similarities probably owe to the fact that Islam arose and flourished in an environment of religious diversity, which included Zoroastrianism, Gnosticism, Judaism, and Christianity. Islamic mystics clearly were influenced by Christian ascetic and mystical practices in the region, such as wearing a simple frock of wool (*ṣūf*), from which Sufism derives its name.¹¹

The forefathers of the Sufi movement were the Muslim ascetics, who feared transgressing God's commandments and the divine punishment to follow. Some of these pious Muslims undertook asceticism as penance and as a means to restrain temptation. Their practices included fasting, late-night prayer vigils, and seclusion, as well as periods of celibacy, although lifelong celibacy generally was regarded as a violation of the Qur'ān and Muhammad's prophetic tradition. Although asceticism did not appeal to most Muslims, for some, including many Sufis, ascetic practices were essential tools for self-control, purification, and repentance.¹² Fear of the Judgment Day and divine chastisement were prime motives for an ascetic life, yet, Muslim mystics also sought solace in God's love and forgiveness as mentioned in the Qur'ān:

Say [to them Muhammad]: "If you love God, then follow me, that He may love you and forgive your sins, for God is forgiving and merciful." (3:31)

God loves those who depend on Him completely. (3:159)

To God belongs the east and west; wherever you turn, there is the face of God. (2:115)

If my servants inquire of you concerning Me, lo, I am near. (2:186)

We are nearer [to the human being] than his jugular vein. (50:16)

In these and similar passages, the Qur'ān declares that God is ever-present with His creation and, in His mercy, He has sent down revelations to humanity. As such, the Qur'ān is the essential guide for all Muslims who seek to live in accordance with God's commandments. Moreover, Muslim mystics have been inspired by the Qur'ān's accounts of human and divine encounters. Stories of the prophets, including

Moses on Sinai, and his standing before the Burning Bush, Abraham's conversations with God, and Jesus' miracles, have served as patterns for a close personal relationship with God. Even more paradigmatic has been the life of the prophet Muhammad, and the Qur'an's allusions to his moments of spiritual revelation:

Blessed be He who took His servant [Muhammad] by night from the sacred mosque to the furthest mosque, whose precincts We have blessed, that We might show him Our signs . . . (17:1)

Truly this is a revelation inspired, taught to him [Muhammad] by one powerful, possessing strength, who set himself on the farthest horizon and then drew close and descended to within two bows' lengths or nearer, and he revealed to His servant what he revealed. The heart did not lie about what it saw, so will you wrangle about what he saw? He saw him descend again, near the furthest lote tree where the Garden of Sanctuary is, where there enveloped the lote tree what enveloped it. His vision did not turn away or transgress, and truly, he saw one the greatest signs of his Lord! (53:4-18)

For Muslims, these accounts form the basis of Muhammad's miraculous night journey from Mecca to Jerusalem, from where he ascended to heaven (*al-isra' wa-al-mi'raj*). According to tradition, Muhammad, accompanied by the archangel Gabriel, met with various prophets in heaven and, ultimately, with God. While the Qur'an's enigmatic passages just cited do not mention ascension at all, later Muslim tradition gives detailed descriptions of these events based on prophetic *hadith* (*al-hadith al-nabawi*). The *hadith* are accounts of Muhammad's sayings and actions and the second foundational source for Islam. They have been essential for elaborating on Muhammad's heavenly ascension and other archetypal aspects of his pious life, and when compiled together in a narrative form, they may resemble a Christian gospel. Still other *hadith* collections serve as guides for religious ritual and legal matters, and offer aphorisms and advice for following the straight path to God:

[Muhammad], the Apostle of God, God's blessings and peace be upon him, said: "Sincerity is that you worship God as if you see Him, and if you do not see Him, know that He sees you."

The Prophet, God's blessings and peace be upon him, said: "Not one of you truly believes until you love for your brother what you love for yourself."

The Messenger of God, God's blessings and peace be upon him, said: "Be in this world as if you were a stranger or wayfarer."¹³

Together with the prophetic *ḥadīth* is a smaller body of traditions known as "Divine Sayings" (*al-ḥadīth al-quḍṣī*), which are purported to be the words of God revealed to Muhammad but not found in the Qur'ān for various reasons. Among them is the famous "Tradition of Willing Devotions" full of mystical import:

The Messenger of God, God's blessings and peace be upon him, said: "God said: 'My servant draws near to Me by nothing more dear to Me than by the religious obligations that I have imposed upon him, and My servant continues to draw near to Me by willing acts of devotion such that I love him. Then, when I love him, I become the ear with which he hears, the eye with which he sees, the hand with which he grasps, and the foot with which he walks. Surely if he were to request something of Me, I would give it, and if he were to seek My protection, I would shelter him . . .'"¹⁴

By the early third/ninth century, mystically inclined religious scholars cited the Qur'ān, prophetic traditions, and divine sayings in their Qur'ānic commentaries, guidebooks, and other works, including biographies, spiritual genealogies, mystical lexicons, and epistles containing explanations and instructions regarding Sufi thought and practice. These works explore some of the psychological states (*ḥāl/ahwāl*), and ethical and cognitive stages (*maqām/maqāmāt*) on the mystic path leading toward the annihilation of selfishness (*fanā'*) and, subsequently, abiding in accord with the will and living presence of God (*baqā'*). Sincere love and humility are essential to achieving this ultimate goal, and for Sufis, this requires a physical and mental struggle against selfishness (*nafs*) in order to uncover the divine spirit (*rūḥ*) within. Therefore, one must continually check base tendencies by introspection and a strong conscience aligned with God's guidance, so that one may be at peace and pleasing to one's Lord:

So be mindful of God as much as you can, and listen, obey, and spend (on charity) for your own good, for whoever

is saved from his own selfishness will be among the prosperous. (Q. 64:16)

Throughout the Qur'an, God exhorts humanity to *dhikr*, to remember and be mindful of Him and His blessings, and Sufis developed *dhikr* into a meditative practice. *Dhikr* recollection entails the repetition of God's divine names and/or religious formulas including the witness to faith "There is no deity but God." This and other formula may be recited in silence or aloud, alone in seclusion or in unison with fellow seekers. Additionally, *dhikr* rituals developed by Sufi orders include procedures for posture, breath control, chant, song, music, movement, and dance.¹⁵ But no matter the specific form, the Sufi *dhikr* aims to purify its practitioner of selfishness so that one may experience the divine presence in obedience to God, holding true to the covenant to worship Him alone, as attested in the Qur'an:

And when your Lord drew from the loins of the children of Adam their progeny and made them bear witness against themselves: "Am I not your Lord?" They said: "Indeed, yes! We so witness!" (7:172)

Recall (*adhkurū*) the blessings upon you from your Lord and His covenant (*mīthāq*) that He confirmed with you when you said: "We hear and obey!" (5:7)

For many Sufis, this pledge was taken in pre-eternity on the Day of the Covenant (*yawm al-mīthāq*), which begins God's test of humanity and the human spirit's painful longing to return to its heavenly home. This tribulation, however, is the necessary spark for the Sufi's spiritual quest to rein in selfish tendencies so as to encounter exhilarating moments of illumination stabilized within a selfless spiritual life. Yet this enlightened life is only possible if God totally eradicates the Sufi's selfish will and graces him with the experience of mystical union. In this light, Sufis have asserted that the true meaning of God's oneness (*taḥḥīd Allāh*) is not merely monotheism, but above all God's absolute oneness. Therefore, mystical union is not the joining of two separate and distinct essences or natures but, rather, the realization of the divine unity underlying all existence. Thus, this radical monotheism may lead to monism, where only God ultimately exists.¹⁶

Over the centuries, Sufi scholars have composed detailed accounts of their thought and practice, carefully noting the Qur'anic and prophetic basis for Islamic mysticism. Additionally, their works

attempt to systematize Sufism and to situate it within the larger Islamic tradition. Muslim scholars often have invoked Sufism's attention to personal experience in order to give spiritual relevance to the letter of the law, and to enliven the God of theology. Furthermore, during the fifth–sixth/eleventh–twelfth centuries, Muslim scholars worked to harmonize the various branches of Islam into a balanced and holistic faith where each aspect held its proper place and value. Law (*sharī'ah*) was the foundation for any legitimate system, and accomplished Sufi masters have made adherence to it a requirement for spiritual development. A Muslim must master the rules and obligations regulating such important matters as the canonical prayers, fasting, and proper behavior, before entering the Sufi path (*ṭarīqah*), which necessitates additional regulations concerning mystical devotions, personal conduct, and communal life. Even then, however, the adept requires the divine grace of mystical union for a vision of creation in its relation to God (*ḥaqīqah*). Thus, belief, ritual, law, and mystical experience are all essential for those who seek the inner truth (*bāṭin*) beneath the world of exterior form (*ẓāhir*). From this perspective, all of creation when seen aright glows with God's supernal light, and here again, Sufis cite the Qur'ān as proof:

God is the light of the heavens and the earth. The semblance of His light is like a niche in which is a lamp, the lamp in a glass. The glass is like a shining star lit from a blessed tree, an olive, of neither east nor west, whose oil would seem to shine even if not touched by fire. Light upon light, God guides to His light whom He wills, and God strikes parables for humanity, for God knows everything! (24:35)

Words of Love and Longing

Appearing in Sufi writings as early as the third/ninth century was verse ascribed to Muslim mystics. Some of the earliest Sufis poems may be classified as *zuhdiyyāt*, or ascetic poetry, which is moralizing and didactic, and often tinged with a sense of impending doom:¹⁷

man lādha bi-llāhi najā bi-llāhi
wa-sarrahu marru qaḍā'i-llāhi
in lam takun naḥsī bi-kaffi-llāhi
fa-kayfa anqādu li-ḥukmi-llāhi
li-llāhi anḥāsun jarat li-llāhi
lā ḥawla lī fihā bi-ḥayri-llāhi

He who seeks refuge in God is rescued by God,
 and pleasing to him is God's bitter decree.
 If my soul is not in the hand of God,
 then how can I obey God's judgment?
 To God are the souls who rush to God;
 I have no strength among them save God!

Arabic ascetic poetry echoes images and themes found in the elegy with its melancholy mood, and this resonates with the life of many ascetics and Sufis known for their life of material poverty and sincere piety based on trust in God. Yet, among the Sufis, there was an increasing emphasis on the reciprocal love between God and His devout worshippers:¹⁸

ahibbuka hubbayni hubbu-l-hawā
wa-hubban li-annaka ahlun li-dhākā
fa-ammā-l-ladhī huwa hubbu-l-hawā
fa-shughlī bi-dhikrika ʿamman siwākā
wa-ammā-l-ladhī anta ahlun lahu
fa-kashfuka lī-l-ḥajba ḥattā arākā
fa-lā-l-ḥamda fī dhā wa-lā dāka lī
wa-lakin laka-l-ḥamdu fī dhā wa dākā

I love you with two loves:
 passion's love and a love you deserve.
 Passion's love is my constant recollection
 of you and no one else,
 While the love you deserve
 is your raising the veil for me to see you.
 But there is no praise in this or that for me,
 for in this and that the praise belongs to you!

From such a perspective, life's hardships and sorrow can be dispelled by God's compassion and mercy, which help the sincere believer to subdue selfishness in loving submission to God's will. Then, with God's blessing, the mystic may be given a brief premonition of the eternal life to come. The quest for such a mystical experience of loving union is central to Arabic Sufi poetry, and so, traditional love imagery and themes became favorite allegories for aspects of the mystic way. Like the verses above ascribed to Rābi ʿah al-ʿAdawīyah (d. 185/801), most early Sufi poems rarely exceed six or seven verses, and the surviving corpus of early Arabic Sufi poetry is quite modest. Undoubtedly, some Sufis recited poetry to highlight and reinforce

mystical doctrines and beliefs. But much of this verse probably was composed by mystics who, like many other Muslims, participated in the popular Arab pastime of versification.¹⁹

In marked contrast to this occasional mystical verse was the contemporary Abbasid court poetry, which flourished as the ruling elite heavily patronized their poets. This helps to explain the rising popularity of poems of unified theme such as those on hunting, love, and wine. Not surprisingly, Sufis soon allegorized this wine imagery, too, as emblematic of mystical love and gnosis.²⁰ Some Abbasid poets also attempted to expand the expressive limits of Arabic poetry by the use of *badīʿ*. *Badīʿ* literally means “unprecedented” or “innovative,” and the term has frequently been equated with rhetorical devices such as paronomasia (*tajnīs*), antithesis (*tibāq*), and metaphor (*istiʿārah*). However, these are the means and not the ends of good *badīʿ* poetry. To be more precise, *badīʿ* is a method of abstraction, which uses rhetorical devices to personify and articulate complex and often abstruse concepts. The early Abbasid period was marked by rational inquiry and intense legal and theological disputation, which had an impact on all of the arts and sciences. Concomitantly, creative litterateurs viewed poetry in increasingly abstract and etymological terms, and they began to manipulate the metaphors and themes of traditional Arabic poetry in attempts to communicate their own ideas and concerns and take Arabic poetry in new directions.²¹ Within this environment, the innovative poet Abū Tammām (d. 232/846) used paronomasia, alliteration, and punning for emphasis but also to establish logical and semantic links between words and concepts whose relationships might be only subliminally grasped:²²

matā yaʿtika-l-miqdāru lā taku hālīkan
wa-lākin zamānun ghāla mithlaka hālīku

When the fated time comes to you,
 you will not perish,
 but time—a destroyer like you—
 will perish!

Here, Abū Tammām personifies his patron’s appointed time of death as his foe on the battlefield in order to endow this abstraction with another, namely the finiteness of time. Thus, time and death itself must fall before some stronger entity, in this case, the immortality promised to this Muslim general for his defense of Islam.²³ The larger intent and range of *badīʿ* poetry are well illustrated by Abū Tammām’s celebrated “Ode to ʿAmmūriyah,” where he employs antitheses—Arab

caliph–Greek emperor, light–darkness, male–female—to repeat and accentuate his major theme of Islam’s triumph over infidelity. *Badī*^c poetry at its finest, then, is not the mere presence of certain rhetorical devices, but their use as a mode of thought and expression, which is at once metaphorical, abstract, and dialectic.²⁴

Badī^c dramatically enhanced the creative possibilities of Arabic verse as it freed the poet to abstract from the concrete poetic image, and this, naturally, expanded the range of symbolic mystical poetry. Among the first Sufi poets to compose *badī*^c verse was al-Ḥusayn ibn Maṣṣūr al-Ḥallāj (d. 309/922). One of the most controversial figures in the history of Islamic mysticism, al-Ḥallāj appears to have been an outspoken advocate for moral reform, which won him many followers. But this may have angered the increasingly unpopular Abbasid regime, which feared public unrest; al-Ḥallāj was arrested and, ultimately, executed on charges of fomenting rebellion. Al-Ḥallāj also aroused the suspicion of the religious establishment by his growing reputation as a holy man, and his public preaching on love and the possibility of union between the human and the divine. A number of religious leaders took exception to several statements ascribed to al-Ḥallāj, which strongly suggested unacceptable notions of divine incarnation within a human being.²⁵

*anā man ahwā wa-man ahwā anā
 nahnu rūḥāni ḥalalnā badanā
 fa-idhā aḥṣartanī aḥṣartahu
 wa-ithā aḥṣartahu aḥṣartanā*

I am he whom I love,
 and he whom I love is me;
 we are two spirits
 dwelling in one body.

So, when you see me,
 you see him,
 and when you see him,
 you see us.²⁶

Al-Ḥallāj often alludes to enigmatical mystical states and complex metaphysical ideas, and the abstract and often paradoxical nature of these subjects is reflected in his mature *badī*^c style. As in the verses just presented, al-Ḥallāj employs antithesis, paronomasia, the repetition of verbs, and the use of multiple and contrasting prepositions within a single verse to rupture the rational categories of space and time:²⁷

*al-‘ishqu fī azali-l-‘azāli min qidamin
fīhi bihi minhu yabdū fīhi ibdā’un*

- 1) Eros in the eternity of eternities
from the primordial,
in it, by it, from it
appearance appears in it.
- 2) Eros before time
is an attribute
among the attributes
of him whose victims live.
- 3) His attributes are from him,
within him, without time,
while the temporal
depends on creation.
- 4) When creation appeared
he invoked eros,
an attribute in him who appeared,
and so a gleam glimmered there.
- 5) Then the *lām* is united
to the connected *alif*,
together one meaning
in priority.
- 6) But in separation,
they are two;
when together in disunion
they are slave and master.
- 7) Just so the true ones:
the fire of desire
rages from reality
whether they be far or near.
- 8) They were submissive, powerless
when driven mad by love!
Indeed, the mighty, excited by desire,
are humbled.

The opening verses of this poem conjure a timeless pre-eternity in which divine love has pride of place among God's eternal attributes. Alluding to the Qur'ān, al-Ḥallāj declares that those martyred by this love will be revived by God and live with Him in Paradise (cf. Q. 3:169–70). For divine love is the spark and energy of temporal creation. But this creation necessitates a distinction between creator and creature, and in verse 5, al-Ḥallāj symbolizes this duality by two connected letters: the bending *lām* for creation (*khalq*), and the straight *alif*, the first letter of the Arabic alphabet, for God, the Creator (*Allāh al-khāliq*). Together, they spell *lā* or “no,” which begins the first half of the Muslim profession of faith: *lā ilāha illā Allāh*, “There is no deity save God.” Al-Ḥallāj's invocation of *lā*, which merges the two separate letters, appears to deny the absolute nature of creation's duality. Still, a state of separation continues to exist, if only temporarily, between the Lord and His worshippers. Thus, the true lovers of God burn for union with Him, as the spark of eros becomes a raging fire consuming their self-regard before the divine beloved.²⁸

Although the content and meaning of this poem may be elusive, the explicit and frequent rhetorical plays within the verses are clearly aimed at inducing a shift in perspective in order to speak of nonrational spiritual matters. But, as a result, such *badī'* mystical poetry often is quite complex, both in theme and syntax, and may verge on nonsense for the uninitiated.²⁹ This, in turn, led several medieval litterateurs to criticize the paradoxical “Sufi style” as inappropriate to good poetry. This was clearly the case when the literary scholar al-Tha'ālibī (d. 427/1035) criticized al-Mutanabbī (d. 354/965) for “imitating the expressions of the Sufis and using their tangled words and abstruse meanings” in his verse.³⁰ One of the most famous poets of the Abbasid period, al-Mutanabbī spent much of his career as a panegyrist in the Hamdanid court of Sayf al-Dawlah (r. 336–56/947–67) in Syria, and al-Mutanabbī's elegant poems became a classical standard for later poets who imitated his verse for generations.³¹ Although inclined more toward courtly than religious life, al-Mutanabbī nuanced his sophisticated poetry with formal elements associated with the Sufis, yet this hardly impressed critics, like al-Tha'ālibī, who targeted many verses for criticism:³²

wa-lakinnaka-d-dunya ilayya ḥabībatun
fa-mā 'anka lī illā ilayka dhahābu

Beloved, you are the world to me,
so leaving you is, to me, a return to you!

In this verse, al-Mutanabbī links the verbal noun *dḥahāb* (“going”) to three prepositions within a hemistich to give the word opposite meanings: “My leaving from you is my returning to you.” This paradox is pivotal to the extraordinary image of the royal beloved as encompassing the entire globe so that wherever the poet begins, he ultimately ends still within his patron’s domains. Al-Tha^cālībī also took exception to al-Mutanabbī’s use of some words that had become Sufi technical terms. The following verse contains the word *qurb*, which means “nearness” in general, but more specifically in Sufism, “spiritual proximity to God.”³³ Al-Tha^cālībī claimed that had this verse been ascribed to the famous third/ninth-century mystics al-Juanyd and al-Shiblī, “the Sufis would have argued endlessly over it:”³⁴

*nahnu man dāyaqa-z-zamānu lahu fī-
ka wa-khānathu qurbaka-l-ayyāmu*

For your sake, time crushed us;
the days made off with your nearness.

In his criticism of al-Mutanabbī, al-Tha^cālībī obviously believed that he could distinguish clearly between proper poetic diction and style, and those types of speech appropriate to other forms of discourse, but not to poetry. For him, Islamic mystical language was distinguished by the presence of a paradox and/or technical mystical terminology.³⁵ However, many litterateurs were either unable or unwilling to make such distinctions. *Badī^c* was certainly not an exclusively mystical style, nor did all Sufis composing poetry use *badī^c*. Moreover, many poets, mystical or otherwise, drew from a common pool of philosophical, mystical, and related sources to speak of their loves and raptures.³⁶ For their part, Sufis continued to read and interpret the Arabic poetic tradition in terms of their spiritual concerns, as they expanded and enhanced their mystical allegories.

Luminaries

By the beginning of the sixth/twelfth century, mysticism was an integral and valued part of the Muslim tradition. Sufism’s personal and devotional qualities were attracting an ever increasing following among all social strata, and Sufi orders (*ṭarīqah/ṭurūq*) with their own particular mystical beliefs and practices coalesced around spiritual masters. Among scholars, Sufism was regarded as one of the branches of

the Islamic religious sciences, and a number of institutions, particularly the *zāwiyah* and the *khānqāh*, supported Muslim mystical life.³⁷ As a result, mystical ideas and practices were prominent in Muslim culture as is apparent in Muslim literatures at the time. In Persian poetry, Ṣanāʿī (d.c. 525/1131) developed the didactic *mathnavī* form to spread his ascetic and mystical teachings, and he composed Persian *qaṣīdahs* as homilies.³⁸ Later, Farīd al-Dīn ʿAṭṭār (d.c. 617/1220) masterfully refined the mystical *mathnavī*, composing several compelling allegories, most notably, the *Mantiq al-Ṭayr*, or “Conference of the Birds”; ʿAṭṭār also contributed to the Persian tradition of mystical *ghazals* or love poems.³⁹ In Arabic poetry, too, we begin to see more Sufi verse around this time. In earlier centuries, an anthologist might quote a verse or two by a given Sufi, but there does not appear to have been Sufi poets, per se, although a substantial amount of poetry has been ascribed to al-Ḥallāj and, a smaller amount to the Egyptian Sufi Dhū al-Nūn (d. 246/861).⁴⁰ Nevertheless, the amount of Arabic mystical verse was still small in comparison to the poetry composed under state sponsorship. Official ministries of documents (*diwān al-inshāʿ*) were established by the Abbasids, in the courts in Spain and, later, by the Fatimids and Ayyubids in Egypt and Syria, which often set the topics appropriate for poetic compositions, such as Muslim military victories or the fine qualities of the ruler.⁴¹

A fair appraiser of this situation may be Ibn Khallikān (608–81/1211–82), a younger contemporary of Ibn al-Fāriḍ and a respected legal scholar in Damascus and Cairo. Ibn Khallikān is most famous for his biographical work *Wafayāt al-Aʿyān*, which contains more than eight hundred biographies of notable men and women living in the Arabic speaking world from the rise of Islam until the middle of the seventh/thirteenth century. Ibn Khallikān did not include entries on the prophet Muḥammad, his companions, or on caliphs about whom much had already been written, and he choose instead to compile biographies of officials, scholars, and litterateurs whose date of death was know with some certainty.⁴² Ibn Khallikān was extremely well read in Arabic poetry, citing from the works of a number of important literary scholars including Ibn Qutaybah (d. 276/889),⁴³ Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih (d. 328/940),⁴⁴ Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī (d. c. 363/972),⁴⁵ Ibn Rashīq (d. c. 463/1071),⁴⁶ Ibn Bassām (d. 542/1147),⁴⁷ and ʿImād al-Dīn al-Iṣfahānī (d. 597/1201).⁴⁸ He also gives the biographies of a number of classical poets including Dhū al-Rummah (d.c. 117/735),⁴⁹ ʿUmar Ibn Abī Rabiʿah (d. ca. 103/720),⁵⁰ Abū Nuwās (d.c. 198/813),⁵¹ Abū Tammām, al-Buḥturī (d. 284/897),⁵² and al-Mutanabbī, one of his favorites. Additionally, Ibn Khallikān offers entries on scores of

other lesser known and later poets, citing examples of their verse, which often are rhetorically complex and usually composed for learned friends and patrons. For example, the Egyptian Zāfir al-Ḥaddād (d. 529/1134) was a poet and a blacksmith, who was called one day to the residence of Amīr al-Saʿīd, the governor of Alexandria, to cut off a ring that had become too tight for the governor's fat little finger. Zāfir carefully removed the ring and then recited these verses:⁵³

*qaṣṣara ʿan awṣāfika-l-ʿālamu
wa-kathura-n-nāthiru wa-n-nāzimu
man yakuna-l-baḥru lahu rāḥatan
yaḍīqu ʿan khinṣirihi-l-khātimu*

Humanity fell short of describing your qualities
though their writers and poets be many.
He whose palm is ample as the ocean,
the signet ring must surely squeeze his pinky!

The governor then gave Zāfir the gold ring in appreciation for his praise.⁵⁴ Ibn Khallikān quotes hundreds of such verses in his *Wafayāt*, including a number by contemporary poets whom he knew. Ibn Khallikān regarded Ibn Sanā' al-Mulk (d. 608/1211),⁵⁵ Ibn ʿUnayn (d. 630/1233),⁵⁶ Ibn Maṭrūḥ (d. 649/1251),⁵⁷ and Bahā' al-Dīn Zuhayr (d. 656/1258),⁵⁸ to be excellent poets.⁵⁹ All of them had served as administrators or secretaries to the Ayyubid dynasty, whose princes they praised. Generally, these poets composed their panegyrics in the *badīʿ* style, as in the following verses by Ibn ʿUnayn on the noble sons of the sultan al-Malik al-ʿĀdil:⁶⁰

*wa-lahu-l-banūna bi-kulli arḍin minhumu
mulkun yaqūdu ilā-l-aʿādī ʿaskarā
min kulli waqḍāhi-l-jabīni tukhāluhu
badran wa-in shahada-l-waghā fa-ghaadnfarā
mutaqaddimun hattā idhā-n-naqʿu-njalā
bi-l-bayḍi ʿan sabiyi-l-ḥarīmi ta'akhkharā
qaumun zakū aṣlan wa-ṭabū muḥtadan
wa-tadaffaqū jūdan wa-rāqū munzarā
wa-taʿāfu khayluhumu-l-warūda bi-manhalin
mā lam yakun bi-dami-l-waqāʿi ʿi aḥmarā
yaʿshū ilā nāri-l-waghā shaghfan bi-hā
wa-yajillu an yaʿshū ilā nāri-l-qirā*

He has sons,
 each a prince in every land,
 leading an army
 against the foes.

Each with a bright brow
 making him seem a full moon,
 but when battle appears
 a fierce lion!

He leads the charge until the dark dust
 is dispelled by shining swords
 revealing the captive women,
 then he lags behind.

A family, pure of lineage,
 pleasant, harmonious,
 brimming with generosity,
 and a delight to see.

Their steeds loathe
 to drink from a pool
 that was not turned red
 from the blood of battles.

By night they travel with passion
 toward the fire of war,
 too exalted to seek out
 the fire of hospitality!

In addition to panegyrics, these Ayyubid poets also composed love poems, riddles and quatrains, some in simpler, more direct styles, particularly when musing on old age and death, as did Ibn Khallikān's good friend Ibn Maṭrūh:⁶¹

*aṣṣbaḥtu bi-qa^cri jufratin murtahanā
 lā amlaku min dunyāi illā-l-kafanā
 yā man wasa^cat ^cubbādahu raḥmatuhu
 min ba^cḍi ^cibādika-l-musī^tna anā*

I was deposited in the bottom of a pit,
 owning nothing of my world save a shroud.

O, One whose mercy holds His servants,
among Your wayward worshipers am I!

In addition to biographical notices to government officials and professional poets, Ibn Khallikān gives accounts of many Muslims noted for their piety and scholarship, including a number of Sufis. Ibn Khallikān was well informed on Islamic mysticism, too, having read al-Qushayrī's (d. 465/1072) popular Sufi compendium, the *Risālah*, and his commentary on the Qur'ān,⁶² along with the saints' lives recorded in the *Ḥilyat al-Awliyā'* by Abū al-Nu'aym al-Iṣfahānī (d. 430/1038).⁶³ Ibn Khallikān also had studied a number of works by Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), including his *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* and the *Mishkāt al-Anwār*,⁶⁴ and the more recent and popular Sufi guide book the *'Awārif al-Ma'ārif* by 'Umar al-Suhrawardī (d. 632/1235).⁶⁵ Ibn Khallikān gives a notice to each of these important mystical authors, as well as to a number of other earlier Sufis, including Dhū al-Nūn, Rābi'ah al-'Adawīyah, al-Junayd (d. 297/910), and al-Hallāj. Ibn Khallikān also made entries for the North African mystical theologian Ibn al-'Arīf (d. 536/1141),⁶⁶ and for Abū Najīb al-Suhrawardī (d. 563/1168)⁶⁷ and Aḥmad al-Rifā'ī (d. 578/1182),⁶⁸ both of whom founded Sufi orders that bear their respective names.

As was the case with earlier Sufi biographers, Ibn Khallikān offers a verse or two in some of his entries, such as this verse by 'Umar al-Suhrawardī:⁶⁹

in ta'ammaltukumu fa-kullī 'uyūnun
aw tadhakkartukumu fa-kullī qulūbun

When I contemplate you,
I'm all eyes,
and when I recollect you,
I'm all heart!

Significantly, however, Ibn Khallikān identifies several poets as composing verse specifically on mystical topics. One of them, al-Murṭadā Ibn al-Shahrazūrī (465–511/1073–1117), was from a respected scholarly family in Iraq, and held positions as an *ḥadīth* scholar, judge, and preacher in Mosul. Like other educated Muslims of the period, Ibn al-Shahrazūrī was at once a religious official, a mystic, and a litterateur. Reflecting these concerns, his poetry is often homiletic in tone, mystical in content, and classical in form, as in the following quatrain:⁷⁰

yā qalbu ilāma lā yufidu-n-naṣḥu
da^c mazḥaka kam janā^c alayka-l-mazḥu
mā jāriḥatun fika^c adāhā jurḥu
mā tash^curu bi-l-khummāri ḥattā taṣḥū

O heart, how long will you ignore advice?
 Stop kidding around; how often it has led to vice.
 You're all banged up, but until you're sober,
 you won't know the wine's price!

Ibn al-Shahrazūrī's mystical proclivities are discernable in several poems cited by Ibn Khallikān, which address Sufi themes in traditional poetic contexts. The following poem combines love themes with well-known Sufi technical terms (v. 1: *qalb* / "heart;" v. 5: *waṣl* / "union;" v. 7: *baqā'* / "staying," "abiding;" v. 8: *fanā'* / "passing away") to portray the purging of the lover prior to mystical annihilation in the beloved.⁷¹

bi-qalbī minhumu^c ulaqu wa-dam^cī fihumu^c alaqu

- 1) My heart is bound to them;
 my tears are blood
- 2) I burn for them;
 my insides blaze.
- 3) We huddle at their door,
 fear melting our hearts.
- 4) But they left nothing, just a spark;
 if only they cared.
- 5) There is no union, no parting,
 no sleep, no sleeplessness,
- 6) No hopelessness, no hope,
 no patience or disquiet.
- 7) They were cruel and did not spare me;
 if only they had stayed,

- 8) That I might have passed away,
while the fragrance of my love lingered,
- 9) Like a candle, delighting its companions,
while consuming itself.

Ibn al-Shahrazūrī composed a number of short mystical love poems, in addition to several on wine.⁷² However, Ibn al-Shahrazūrī's fame does not rest on these short, if elegant pieces, but rather on a long allegorical ode of forty-four verses recounting a quest for mystical illumination. Ibn Khallikān rarely cited long poems in full, but he did so in this case because the ode was hard to find, although much sought after. In fact, this ode, entitled the *al-Mawṣliyah* because Ibn al-Shahrazūrī composed it in Mosul, is one of the earliest surviving formal Arabic *qaṣīdahs* on Sufism, and, as such, it represents an important development in the history of Arabic poetry.⁷³

Such mystical odes would become quite popular late in the sixth/twelfth century, although much Sufi verse continued to be short modest love poems, like those by the Egyptian Sufi, Muḥammad Ibn al-Kīzānī (d. 560/1166).⁷⁴ In his brief biography of him, Ibn Khallikān noted that Ibn al-Kīzānī was a pious ascetic, scholar, and Qur'ān reader famous in Egypt, with his own Sufi order. Further, he had a collection of poetry, and although Ibn Khallikān had not seen the collection himself, he had heard one of the poet's verses:⁷⁵

wa-idhā lāqa bi-l-muḥibbi gharāmun
fa-kadhā-l-waṣlu bi-l-ḥabibi yalīqu

If passion is proper for a lover,
then union befits the beloved.

Although Ibn al-Kīzānī's collection of poems is now lost, nearly seventy of his poems were preserved by later biographers and anthologists.⁷⁶ Several of these sources note that Ibn al-Kīzānī was also a preacher and that his collection of poetry was widely read and admired in Egypt. Most of these poems rarely exceed ten verses, and in a number of them, Ibn al-Kīzānī assumes the role of the spiritual guide to instruct his audience on leading a righteous life:⁷⁷

qif 'alā-l-bābi ṭalīban
wa-da'ī-d-dam'a sākiban