

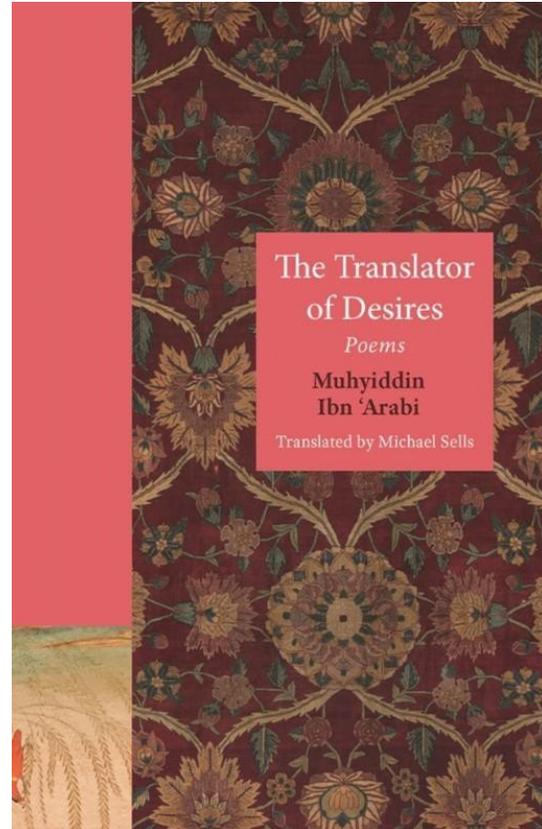
Book Review: *The Translator of Desires: Poems by Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi*. Translated by Michael Sells

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Review of *The Translator of Desires: Poems by Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi*. Translated by Michael Sells. NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021.

In William Chittick’s assessment of Ibn ‘Arabi’s cosmology, “all things shimmer between being and nonbeing. Each is an isthmus between other things, spatially and temporally,” and all images are “located in a never-never land between being and nonexistence, light and darkness, consciousness and unawareness.”¹ Professor Michael Sells’ new translation of *Tarjumān al-Ashwāq* (The Translator of Desires), a collection of sixty one poems by the Andalusian Muslim sage Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-‘Arabī (1165–1240) provides an ‘isthmus’ in two senses. In one sense, his translation forms a figurative isthmus connecting two larger literary traditions, over which one may traverse and join the Andalusian poet-lover in his bewilderment. In a second sense, as Ibn ‘Arabi’s use of the term indicates, this translation both divides and brings together. Accordingly, we are reading both a mirroring set of poems—one written by Ibn ‘Arabi and one by Michael Sells—and, concomitantly, just one original set of poems. The ‘shimmering’ between pages is deft, as his translations betray none of the strained awkwardness that might characterize a rendition of mystical unsaying.

The sheer difficulty of translating, as well as the particular difficulty of translating poetry, speaks to Sells’ abilities; for a translation, in the words of one of the twentieth century’s polyglot scholars, is “not a matching of dictionaries but a meeting of minds.”² It is a long-lamented fact among the Islamic scholarship intelligentsia that Ibn ‘Arabi’s work



has received paltry attention in proportion to its massive influence on the contours of global intellectual history. One of the main obstacles to his entry into the broader world canon is both the voluminous corpus he left behind and the daunting challenge of its translation.

While Ibn ‘Arabi’s contributions to the world’s vast ferment of ideas is important, and likely still understated, the aim of this book is to present his poetry on its own terms—that is, as poetry, rather than merely a sounding board for philosophical argumentation. The very nature of his poetry is an eloquent sermon against the facile enterprise of reducing complexity and depth to hermetically sealed dogma and commoditized truisms. The atmosphere of

the *Tarjumān* obstructs the roving of reductionist eyes. What Sells calls the “*shawq*-conditioned human existence” is on full display, consisting of “ever-repeated acts of re-enchantment as the beloved is brought back to the present and the withered world is revived. But the poems are also fevered with the knowledge that such a rebirth can only last an instant and must be constantly repeated.”³

One gets the sense that despite some thematic continuity, the poet-lover that gives voice to these poems undergoes a cycle of death and rebirth with each opening and closing line. He is a phoenix rising from the ashes each time, stirred by an insatiable longing (*shawq*), only to pass away (*fanā*) with each end rhyme devoid of union with the beloved. The thrilling urgency of the lover’s pursuit is tempered by the melancholy pauses and only slowed by tears, as in the poem “My Only Guide”:

My tears rained down,
blocking the way

Since when, they asked,
does a river run here?

The tears, I say—
as they seek

and fail to cross it—
are endless

The natural phenomena of a turbulent storm also correspond to the poet-lovers’ physiological turbulence induced by his longing for the beloved:

[. . .] As

if the thunder
and lightning flares
and clouds roiling

in the pouring rain

were hearts beating,
the flash of a smile

and a burst of tears
for those gone away

The lover, as is the case since the beginnings of Arabic poetry, is continually stirred by the *aṭlāl*, the ruins of the beloved’s abandoned campsite, as in the poem entitled “In a Bad Way”:

O ruins of Rama,
wasted now—
what splendor
you once beheld!

This same motif of *aṭlāl* resurfaces throughout the collection, again appearing in “As Cool as Life”:

Halt at the stations,
grieve at the ruins,
then ask the meadows
so desolate now

Where are those
we loved and their roans?

The presence of the beloved enlivens the landscape graced with her presence, in imagery reminiscent of miraculous desert rain and its ensuing festal bloom:

Wherever they stopped
for midday rest
blossomed into
peacock splendor

When they struck camp
they left a land
bearing the tombs
of those who loved them

The *aṭlāl* trope has lived a long life in Arabic poetry, from Imru' al-Qays down to Mahmud Darwish. It is a tradition with which Ibn 'Arabī' is intimately familiar, alluding often to names and places appearing in his predecessors' *aṭlāl* provoked vexations. In doing so, he forges himself as a link in the long chain of Arabic culture's greatest art.

His own poetic provocation—like Dante's Beatrice—according to one of his prefaces, is a young woman named Nizām, the daughter and niece of two Persian scholars in Mecca. Another preface, however, relates that while circumambulating the Ka'ba, lines of love poetry came to mind, whereupon he moved to the periphery to recite them. Soon thereafter he felt a touch “from a hand softer than undyed silk,” belonging to a mysterious young woman who begins criticizing the quality of the verses, inspiring him to compose sixty more poems during his stay in Mecca that constitute the present compilation. To whom are his poems addressed then? To God? To Nizām or to the young woman at the Ka'ba? Or are they one and the same? Once again, the object of his love and poetry is itself an ‘isthmus,’ elusive and shimmering between apparitions of beauty.

His beloved is often described in breathless lines accentuated by the most commonplace tropes of light and dark...

By night the light
of day in her shines
By day night falls
with the dark of her hair
The push and pull of contraries...
She lowered her veil
and a fearsome beauty
drew me toward her

yet held me back
The incomparableness of her beauty...
Other beauties
in her flowering vanish
Her light darkens
the light of the moon
The irresistible allure...
Pearl in a shell of jet black hair—
The mind dives after, sinking deep

The pain of love is arduous, and the shifting forms the beloved can take on become cause for confusion. In the poem entitled “No Cure,” the object of this love who has consistently been referred to in the feminine, is curiously referred to in the masculine, another instance of lines blurred, and certitude fled. Earthly logic and rationality fade from view in a world where the beloved can suddenly drift from feminine to masculine. This unmooring of reality paves the way for mystical experience. Sells notes that this poem embodies two aspects of mystical experience; that of *fanā'* (“the passing away” of the lover out of longing for the beloved) and *wajd* (ecstasy or sorrow):⁴

Without him I die
and with him's no better
With or without him
longing's the same

Bewilderment is at once the celestial wine and the dregs. The beloved takes on many forms, ever changing. Thus, “the mystic's goal is to achieve constant transformation along with the manifestations of the beloved.”⁵ This too upon reflection, is the task of any able translator. A nimbleness of tone and syntactical gravitas are demanded of any translator but is especially challenging for

Sufi writings of any sort, which even Harold Bloom had to concede, are “a bewildering labyrinth.”⁶

An invaluable aid in conveying the breathless and luminous poesies of Ibn ‘Arabī turns out to be the formatting of this printed edition of *Tarjumān al-Ashwāq*. The pages, one immediately notices, are mostly blank space. Arabic verses appear on the left page, translation on the right, both slipping into the vanishing point of the fresh book spine induced curvature. Both are on the verge of visual *fanā*, further evoking the famous negative space of Japanese and Chinese art, referred to in Japanese as *yohaku no bi*, the beauty of empty space.

Rudolf Otto, commenting on the numinous potential of such art, called this “an essential feature of their style to make the strongest impression with the fewest strokes and the scantiest means...which impress the observer with the feeling that the void itself is depicted as a subject. .. in order that the ‘wholly other’ may become actual.”⁷ Thus, that which is inevitably lost in translation between two languages having nothing in common, Arabic and English, is somewhat ameliorated by the visual presentation of this book, demonstrating, as it does, a mystical emptiness and landscape of *fanā*, the homeland and hinterland of the lover.



(*Pine Trees*, 16th century, by Hasegawa Tōhaku, Tokyo National Museum.)

¹ William Chittick, *Ibn ‘Arabi: Heir to the Prophets* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2007), 106.

² Hugh Nibley, *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment*. 2nd ed. (UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 2005), 52.

³ Ibn ‘Arabi, *The Translator of Desires: Poems by Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi*, trans. Michael Sells (NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021), xxii.

⁴ *Ibid*, 275.

⁵ *Ibid*, 276.

⁶ Harold Bloom, *Omens of Millennium: The Gnosis of Angels, Dreams, and Resurrection*. (NY: Riverhead, 1996), 195.

⁷ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (NY: Oxford, 1958), 69-70.