

***The Translator of Desires: Poems*, by Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabī, translated by Michael Sells. The Lockert Library of Poetry in Translation. Princeton University Press: Princeton and Oxford, 2021, xxxviii, 323 pp.**

*He describes Himself to us through us.*¹

It is not a simple matter, believe it or not, providing the bibliographic and publication information for the book under review here. It appears differently according to, for example, the cataloguing systems of the Library of Congress, the University of Toronto Library and the Library of McGill University. In one, the author is listed as Ibn ‘Arabī, with no mention of Michael Sells anywhere in the entry; in the second the author is Michael Sells and Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabī; in a third it is Ibn al-‘Arabī 1165–1240 and Michael Anthony Sells. In yet another, the author is Ibn ‘Arabī, with Michael Sells being listed as the translator – a fairly reasonable solution one would have thought. Such variation points to one of, if not *the*, central themes of the poems: the identity of authorship, especially in the case of a composition such as this collection of unsurpassed Arabic poetry, *Tarjumān* (sometimes *Turjumān*) *al-ashwāq*, written by Ibn ‘Arabī probably around 1215–20 in Damascus. The title may be translated as ‘The Translation of Desires’ or the ‘Translator of Desires.’ In the first instance we may also think of the desires themselves as doing the translating, as the authors. In the second it seems the only choice we have is to think of the poetry or the poems as the collective translator. The poems themselves are, of course, composed by Ibn ‘Arabī. But it is poetry, we come to appreciate, that does the work of translation and interpretation, and both Ibn ‘Arabī and Michael Sells are poets.

One of the keys to the uniqueness of this work is that reading it gives rise to the insight that here such words as ‘mystical’ and

1. Muhyiddin Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, ed. Abū al-‘Alā Affīfī, 2 vols. in 1 (Beirut, 1966), vol. 1, p.53 (*Faṣṣ ḥikmat ilāhiyya fī kalimat Ādamiyya*). Cf., e.g., Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, trans. R.W.J. Austin (New York, 1980), p.55 (in ‘The Wisdom of Divinity in the Word of Adam,’ pp.50–9).

‘spiritual’ as modifiers of the poetry emerge as pleonasm. Poetry is mysticism and mysticism is poetry. Thus are we introduced to the solution for the age-old question: was Ibn ‘Arabī speaking about love and therefore, God forbid, sex? Or, was he speaking about Reality (*al-ḥaqq*), for which the word divine is similarly redundant? Library cataloguing thus alludes to an important truth: the identity of the author and the subject matter of the book is a problem, along the lines of a Zen koan.

Such has been a theme, implicit or explicit, in Islamic religio-literary thought since the Quran: Who is speaking? Who is addressed? Who is listening? Indeed, what is ‘identity’ after all? It evokes Augustine’s apposite parable of the itchy fingers trying to scratch themselves. Composition is real. But to ‘know the dancer from the dance’, in explicit formulaic terms of mathematical precision, is a question strongly suggested and left frankly open both with regard to the Quran, here with the *Tarjumān*, and elsewhere, as with the *Mathnawi*. Such a simultaneously humbling and generative question would appear to be one of the most enduring and valuable gifts of the Islamic tradition. In some sense, the question is the answer because it generates the requisite spiritual and intellectual effort (*himma*) as response: meditation, contemplation, action. Indeed, the *lack* of what we are accustomed to refer to as definitive clarity emerges as one of the sources of inspiration for the poems. Furthermore, it seems clear that Ibn ‘Arabī wants us to think critically about the nature of the act of composition. Such is clear in the word *Tarjumān*. It is not only here as a general title for the book of poems, but the idea is also prominent in the *Fuṣūṣ* where it is clearly a word, both in its nominal form and verbal usage, which Ibn ‘Arabī employs to describe prophets and their vocations, including revelation.

Although the word *tarjumān/turjumān* has Greek origins, it has long been used in Arabic. It indicates leadership and guidance, and especially the guidance issuing from the act of translation. It is, for example, the basis for the English word dragoman (interpreter, guide). Ibn ‘Arabī wants us to understand that the prophets are guides and interpreters for the unseen realm and the transcendent divine reality, known in Arabic as *al-Ḥaqq*. Here we inflict upon the Arabic otherwise unknown capitalization to emphasize the

Absolute Otherness, construed frequently as ‘Holiness’ (*qudsiyya*), of this unique reality and its simultaneous ‘Witness’ (*ma‘iyya*). This is a unique concept (again, koan-like) which distortions such as capitalization help to elucidate. It is a wonder word, the contemplation of whose meaning helps to make Ibn ‘Arabī’s ‘points,’ if this comparatively crass word may be used here. For on reading these truly remarkable poems it seems obvious that discursive furniture such as points or ideas, or even meanings, fade into at least secondary importance. Their place is assumed by something less readily grasped, a useful word for which may be ‘feeling’. This is perhaps what Ibn ‘Arabī understands as the first vocation of the mind-heart (*al-fu‘ād*). Such feeling leads to perception and then, of course, knowledge. Here in the ‘land of knowledge’ is where points and their fellows may reside. But of ‘the country of the perceptive heart’ it is not so easy to speak. This may be another point. After all, one etymology of our much used and undoubtedly abused technical term ‘mystic’ or ‘mysticism’ is the Greek verb meaning either ‘to close the eyes’ or ‘to close the mouth,’ not because one has been sworn to secrecy by a mystic master but because one simply cannot speak of the experience – it eludes description. It is not a matter of not divulging to the unworthy, but rather of not being able to express the ineffable, as if understanding itself is something of a contamination, or violation and betrayal of the original privilege of the experience.

Whatever the etymology of the word mystic and its derivatives may be, here it is the idea that interpretation – a word which suggests its somewhat oblique synonym, translation – and guidance are clearly the business of prophets and messengers which Ibn ‘Arabī wants us to be able to recognize and educate ourselves about. Prophets translate their experience to humanity through speech and action which together form their revelation. It is the speech that we are concerned with here, not forgetting that speech is also an action. This speech entails literary figures such as metaphor and simile and is cast in a rhythmic or metric cadence. These devices are, to use the late Professor Boullata’s apt formulation, ‘literary structures of religious meaning.’ These literary and poetic features participate in and reflect the feelings attendant upon the experience/teaching of the prophet. In the case of the Quran, this is, of course, Muhammad. In the case of the

Tarjumān, the authorial presence is, of course, Ibn ‘Arabī. Really? But whether we speak of Muhammad or Ibn ‘Arabī, it is the same: each claims that the substance of the composition/revelation has its source in the above-mentioned transcendent reality, a reality which is itself somehow the author of the composition. Because the words are saturated with this divine energy, these authors – and other such *tarājima* (interpreters and guides) – also become saturated or, if you like, clothed in the garment of ‘ḥaqqian’ charisma. They are then what Ruzbihan (d.1209) called ‘in disguise’ (*iltibās*) in which, for example, the separate identities of the prophet and his or her source are not readily distinguishable. Clarity in making the distinction is the task of the reader/believer who must distinguish the divine sign from the mere ‘thing’ it inhabits and enlivens. Such a motif has been at home in Arabic mystical utterance since well before the time of Maṣūūr Ḥallāj (d.922). Ibn ‘Arabī’s poetry here is quite famously just as problematic as Ḥallāj’s ‘I am God.’ So, in addition to the question of ‘who is actually speaking?’ a derived problem emerges in the shape of the (quite imbecilic) question: ‘Is this poetry about spiritual matters or about earthly matters?’

It is not, as Sells masterfully makes clear through interpretation and translation, a matter of *either/or* but rather *both/and*. This is so even if Ibn ‘Arabī himself seems to back down, for the sake of ‘orthodoxy’, from his authentic and original perspective, as when he goes to great pains to offer (sometimes, frankly, plodding) sanitization of his poetry in the form of commentary. At the heart of this achievement, this poetry of Reality and experience, is, of course, the metaphor. Metaphor is what enables the revelation to take place. In these poems, in fact, it may be metaphor and its glories that are the main focus. Technically, metaphor is a two-part speech act which consists of something known and something either imperfectly known or completely unknown. By means of what is called artistry or ‘artistic talent’, the prophet/poet chooses just the right *vehicle*, a word to indicate the precise and otherwise unknown or spiritual *tenor* or meaning (*ma‘nā*) which he or she is felt inspired or even commanded by Reality to communicate. In the process, though, an interesting exchange takes place. For example, a mundane vehicle such as the word ‘light’ in the ineffably glorious Quranic verse at Q.24:35 that opens with ‘*God is the light*

of the heavens and the earth' not only indicates what the otherwise eternally and profoundly unknowable God is, but the holiness or numinousness of this transcendence also tinges the vehicle word 'light' so that it is no longer easy to use it without thinking of God. Metaphor and the metaphorical also lead to a very personal and intimate form of revelation because each reader/believer responds to the metaphor according to what Ibn 'Arabī might think of as her or his own particular identity ('*ayn*) and in which, paradoxically, such identity becomes as fluid as water from a spring ('*ayn*). And this is *a fortiori* the case with this collection where the object or subject or goal is a beautiful young woman. As we know from the *Fuṣūṣ* and elsewhere, the feminine occupies a place of the utmost importance in Ibn 'Arabī's world. It is divine. Readers of this journal know that this is not the first time that Ibn 'Arabī has sailed very close to the wind of divinity. One might opine that one could not in fact sail any closer than he does.

While the problem of identity may be considered something of a venerable trope in Arabic mystical discourse by the time of Ibn 'Arabī, as Sells points out, Ibn 'Arabī's eroticization of the stations of the pilgrimage and other aspects of the so-called Pillars of Islam and the Shari'ah is novel. He and Ibn al-Fāriḍ (1181–1234) are the first to do this. While there is background precedent, especially in Isma'ili literature in which the elements of the Sunna are metaphorized to stand for other values, most commonly the Imam himself (see also Twelver hadith), it seems certain that both Ibn 'Arabī and Ibn al-Fāriḍ played a major role in introducing such an explicit poetics of praxis to the Sunni world, and this is the crux of the scandal because it evokes not only the prurient but also the heretical. The pilgrimage itself becomes a metaphor for which the technical terms *majāzī* (metaphorical) and *ḥaqīqī* (real, as opposite of metaphor) generate a dynamics of perception, transformation and being that would take on a powerful and influential life of its own from this time forward. Depending on the category or type of perspective, processes may appear literary and poetic or of nature: botanical, biological, geological, mathematical and so on. There is an implicit critique of the whole notion of category.

Metaphysical poetry is a type of poetry most famously associated with John Donne (1572-1631), sometime Dean of St. Paul's

Cathedral and prolific Elizabethan/Jacobean poet. The adjective ‘metaphysical’ is frequently taken amiss as when the reader expects, because of it, poetry to do with the rather abstruse philosophical problems of being, time, chance and so on. However, what soon becomes clear upon reading Donne is that, even though he is a devout follower of Jesus, his poems are rather rarified by a concern with the above- noted topics and are, in fact, extremely earthbound. The same magic trick is seen in the work of Ibn ‘Arabī. How then do we understand ‘metaphysical’? It is in the way Donne employs and deploys familiar images, objects, elements, planets, rivers, the Sun and the Moon and so on. In short, he uses the ultra-familiar things of normal experience in an unprecedentedly imaginative – bordering on fantastic – way. The author of the poems at hand may also therefore be considered a metaphysical poet for exactly the same reasons – the poetry depends on ‘far-flung imagery’ in which the natural world plays an indispensable role. Despite some serious differences, the *Tarjumān* would have been of much interest to Donne and he would have seen much in common with its general method, subject matter and ethos. It is also true that metaphysics, in its usual meaning, is absent neither from Ibn ‘Arabī’s or Donne’s poetry. Chittick’s contention that ‘there is nothing far-fetched or ridiculous’ about Ibn ‘Arabī’s perhaps somewhat defensive commentary on the *Tarjumān* (mentioned above) remains quite true.²

A brief look at a few of the poems will help to illustrate the supreme and singular artistry of both Ibn ‘Arabī and Michael Sells as masters, in their own way, of *tarjumān*, each a *mutarjim*, interpreter and translator of considerable and unique gifts particularly with regard to the somewhat dangerous and infinitely rewarding ‘forest of love.’ It should be mentioned here that a very interesting and innovative feature of Sells’ work has been to give these poems titles and to arrange the verses in stanzaic form. As such, this highlights a chief qualification for a translator: mastery of both the original and target languages including, of course, idiom and, as here, specific native poetic typographical conventions, largely unknown in Ibn ‘Arabī’s literary milieu. The result is that Sells’ translation, by means of

² William C. Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-‘Arabī and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Albany, 1994), p. 82.

optics alone, offers to the lover of English poetry some common ground, beyond the lexical and at times frankly obscure conceits, which helps remove the foreignness of what is basically a common human act and pursuit: love and poetry. If the task and duty is to communicate feeling and artistry across time, space and cultural boundaries, titles, as Sells teaches us here, are an essential feature. If they do not exist, they must be supplied.

This is brought home in the very first poem, ‘Bewildered’, because the subject and main character of this short and powerful poem emerges as bewilderment itself, which thus acquires a certain charisma or sanctity. It is important to point this out because one could easily assume that it is the ‘lords of passion’ who are the subjects and the heroes. They emerge, rather, as the playthings of passion. Sells has, somewhat miraculously, transmuted this originally Arabic symphony or sonata of experience, feeling and meaning into an English recital of magnificent and particular expressive power. In the substantial and essential ‘Translator’s Introduction’ (TAS,³ pp. xiii– xxxiii), Sells warns the reader that the experience that awaits is not necessarily straightforward, with stages and players that are readily described and fully understood. The central conceit which permeates the entire collection of sixty-one poems is precisely confusion or bewilderment:

Poet, lover and beauty itself are in a state of constant bewilderment, which forms the subject of the first poem of the *Tarjumān*, recurs throughout it, and culminates in the final poem of the collection. (TAS, p. xxxiii)

The first poem, ‘Bewildered’ (Poem #1, TAS, pp. 2–3), introduces us to this in its last line, transliterated here in the stanza form adopted by Sells:

*ḥāra`arbābu`l-hawā
fī`l-hawā wa`rtabakū*

The lords of love are in love
ensnared, bewildered

3. The book under review.

For comparison, see Nicholson's translation:

Lovers lose their way in love and become entangled
(TAN,⁴ p. 48)

In their respective commentaries, neither Sells nor Nicholson approach the problem presented by the word translated here as 'love': *hawā*. *Hawā* is usually understood as that which cannot be controlled or that which leads to error or perdition: passion, or even vain desire, for which the idea of there actually being a lord is problematic from the outset. In Islamic thought, generally, the word for intellect, 'aql, from a word meaning that which is used to hobble a camel to keep it from running away, was settled upon because of the felicitous way in which it captured the problem: intellect is that which 'hobbles' or 'restrains' the wild beast of *hawā*. Ibn 'Arabī is being ironic here in speaking of lords of passion. He may be suggesting that we understand *al-arbāb al-hawā* as 'passions which are lords.' And, indeed, the second half of the hemistich would seem to offer resolution. Here, the same problematic word is used to make the point. It is possible then to understand this verse as saying: 'Those who would be brash enough to consider themselves lords of something as dangerous as passion will end by being conquered by it.'

The 'lords' here may in fact be best understood as intellects or wielders of intellect which, in the face of true passion, are vanquished, bound (entangled: *artabakū*) and are, in fact, lords of nothing. The minds are paralyzed. Of course, the entire stanza may be in conversation with and reflective of the much-loved, though "extra-canonical", prophetic statement: "Increase my bewilderment in Thee! /*Zidnī fīk taḥayyuran!*" quoted elsewhere by Ibn 'Arabī, where he identifies it as the true teaching of Muhammad (*زِدْنِي فِيكَ تَحْيِرًا* *Fuṣūṣ*, 1:73, *Bezels*, 79) and which is, perhaps, a gloss or expansion for the sound prophetic

4. Ibn al-'Arabī, *The Tarjumán Al-Ashwāq: A Collection of Mystical Odes*, trans. and ed. R.A. Nicholson (London, 1978 [originally published 1911]).

hadith: ‘O Lord! Increase me in [nothing but] knowledge (*‘ilm*).’ In these poems, it seems that Muhammad the prophet is never very far away. For example, the rhyme scheme of Poem #22 (pp. 93–5), entitled ‘Blacksilver’, is built upon words with the same pattern as the name Muhammad (i.e., *mufa‘al*), while the actual name never occurs in the poem. This is but one small instance of the way in which Ibn ‘Arabī petitions, throughout the entire *Tarjumān*, Islamic scriptural sources and topics, Quran, Hadith and the above-mentioned Pillars, and offers his own highly personal and hard-won poetic take on them, and much else in the process. Such becomes explicit in the following example.

In the poem entitled ‘Hadith of Love’ (Poem #14, pp. 53–5), Ibn ‘Arabī is using the technical terminology from the comparatively dry science of hadith (*‘ilm al-ḥadīth*), as Sells points out in his commentary (TAS, pp. 255–6), to communicate something very un-hadith-like to the reader. This is a perfect example of the ‘far- flung imagery’ usually associated with the above-mentioned John Donne. Two features of this poem are of immediate interest. The first is in the second ‘stanza/verse’ (p. 53), which Sells translates:

I burn for the lightning,
the flash, not for this
or for some other
piece of ground

*fa`inna gharāmī bi`l-barīq wa lamḥihi
wa laysa gharāmī bi`l-`amākini wa`t-turb*

Nicholson had already pointed out, in his paraphrase, that this verse is a succinct account of Ibn ‘Arabī’s theory of *tajallī*, or divine self-manifestation: ‘I desire the forms in which the manifestation takes place only in so far as they are a *locus* for the manifestation itself ’ (TAN, p. 75). As a matter of interest, Nicholson’s excellent translation helps us appreciate the poetic superiority of Sells’ own rendering:

My desire is for the lightning and its gleam, not for the
places and the earth. (TAN, p.75)

Again, the spiritual-cum-noetic principle of becoming tinged and transformed by the very object of desire is masterfully brought out

through Sells' translation. (Above, it was bewilderment; here, it is burning love. Later, below, it is the very device of metaphor which is assimilated by the seeker/reader.) Such illustrates another dimension of the ubiquitous oneness central to Ibn 'Arabī's thought-world. Yet, it exposes the essential and ultimately phantom difference. This shape-shifting and mutual entanglement is the business of poetry. But Ibn 'Arabī wants us to know that poetry is not mere entertainment. Rather, it functions more as a kind of authentically 'Ḥaqqian' or Akbarian sacrament of communion. The better the poetry (and its translation) the truer the response, whether bewilderment, desire or any other spiritual/emotional state. One might also summarize this verse as: 'I live for the lightning, not the property it destroys.'

The second feature of this remarkable poem is that it brings into focus the above-mentioned and imponderably influential (and variegated) Hadith culture, marshalled here as a metaphor for something quite different. Sells, in his commentary on this poem, draws our attention to the key Hadith technical term *mu'an'an* that Ibn 'Arabī uses in the first hemistich of the third stanza/verse:

The Eastwind brought us
the word – from distraction
from rapture and sorrow
from my disarray

rawat lī'ṣ-ṣabā 'anhum ḥadīth mu'an'anan
'ani'l-baththi 'an wajdī 'ani'l-ḥuzni 'an karbī

To begin with, the verb *rawat* 'brought us / the word' is a technical hadith-science term designating one of the types of reporting and simultaneously vouching for the truth of the report. A *rāwī* is an expert in preserving and transmitting hadith, a word that occurs in the same line.⁵ More interesting here, however, is the use of prepositions. Technically, a preposition, which we are inclined to silently qualify as *mere* preposition, the Arabic particle 'an, 'from,' can be tricky. In the context of Hadith science it almost always bears the enriched meaning 'on the unimpeachable authority of.' Note that this word occurs in this verse no less than five times in its 'pure' form, 'an, and once in its adverbial, somewhat hybrid, form *mu'an'an* – in which it is repeated, giving a total of seven instances. Ibn 'Arabī wants us to know and feel that the knowledge, here represented by the word 'ḥadīth', for which 'ilm (knowledge) is by convention a frequent synonym, is obtained most authentically through his own – and by analogy others' – emotional experiences now seen

5. Poetry and *ḥadīth* are deftly alluded to and perhaps equated in the verb *rawat*; the word for reciter of poetry in pre-Islamic times was *rāwī*.

as playing the role of, or seen as metaphors for, unimpeachable hadith transmitters, here identified in turn as [Shaykh] Distraction, [Shaykh] My Rapture, [Shaykh] Sorrow and [Shaykh] My Disarray (instead of, for example, important early experts in Ḥadīth such as Abū Hurayra, Ibn ‘Abbās or ‘Alī). In this context, the emotional states that are named are thus deemed most reliable of teachers and informants. It is a remarkably succinct and powerful extended metaphor which I trust will not be irreparably damaged by this comparatively prolix comment.

Poem #15, ‘Just a Flash’ (pp. 56–9; brief commentary p. 256), seems to me especially deft in composition and translation. This is especially true of the third and fifth stanzas/verses. By way of introduction, I will quote Nicholson’s perfectly accurate and quite moving rendering:

The blush of shame on his cheek is the whiteness of dawn
conversing with the redness of eve.
Who will compose my distracted thoughts? Who will
relieve my pain? Guide me to him! Who will ease
my sorrow? Who will help a passionate lover? (TAN,
p. 76)

Here we see, in addition to the new translation, how the arrangement into actual stanzas enriches the poetry:

On his cheek a tinge
of shyness, dawn
light whispering
into dusk

Who will guide me
through the thrall
and throes of this
unending love? (p. 57)

But beyond this somewhat superficial difference, we see and hear a different music altogether, accented by the change from ‘conversing with’ to ‘whispering into.’ Here, the history of a word casts light on Sells’ translation. The Arabic verb *yunāghī* (to whisper) brings to mind a near homonym *yunājī*, the root of which gives rise to the generic technical term *munājāh*, more widely known in the plural, such as in the title of the Persian classic, the *Munājāt* (intimate conversations [with God]) of Anṣārī (d.1088), or the collection of the Arabic *Munājāt* ascribed to ‘Alī, the first Imam of the Shi‘a and fourth caliph of Sunni Islam. Here, Ibn ‘Arabī presents language

as fundamentally creative, as if the love whispering of dawn creates the beauty of the reddening sky through conversation. This aspect is very difficult to find in Nicholson's translation. Sells' translation is simply much more 'musically' interesting because the remarkable concision, a feature much admired in Arabic poetry, of the original verse is mirrored in the brevity of his translation, and the sounds he employs to such stirring effect enhance the meaning of endless, and as we have already learned, potentially treacherous, love and the need for guidance.

One of the things that is put in the dock of bewilderment by Ibn 'Arabī, and it is no doubt the most important, is the identity of Nizām, a word that means 'literary composition.' Is Ibn 'Arabī in love with art, an art that is here merely personified by means of a well-used, if not slightly fatigued, poetic device? Poem #20, 'In a Bad Way' (pp. 79–87), helps us answer the question, though nothing as vulgar as perfect clarity ensues. This is especially poignant at verse 17 (p.83):

Long is my longing
for a young girl –
harmony in verse,
in prose, in oration

*ṭāla shawqī li-ṭiflatin dhāti nathrin
wa nizāmin wa minbarin wa bayāni*

This corresponds to Nicholson's verse 16 of the same poem (TAN, p. 87):

Long have I yearned for a tender maiden, endowed with
prose and verse, having a pulpit, eloquent[.]

Music itself is the subject of the last poem. Poem #61, 'Tigris Song' (TAS, pp. 242–3; TAN, pp. 46–7 and 148–9), and its expressive potential is put to full use. The experience of disappearing into beautiful frequently rhythmic music is one common to human beings. Nizām here is both music and instrument. Poetry and the creative word is the object, source and experience (music) of love. Muhammad's camel driver, Anjash, who was said to be able to put the camels to sleep through his beautiful singing is, Ibn 'Arabī tells us, no match for Nizām and the music that somehow occurs because

of her. So, there emerges again the question of authorship. Sells speaks briefly about an interpretation of the beloved Beatrice-like Nizām as a principle of composition and not only as a guide through difficult territory, whether for Dante or Ibn ‘Arabī – or anyone else. Ibn ‘Arabī disturbs, through these beautiful lyrics, a normal or default understanding of authorship, composition, revelation: one might say he puts a grain of sand under the interior oyster shell of comfortable understanding. Historically, Nizām’s father was an important learned gnostic residing in Mecca and her aunt was an equally important mystic and Hadith scholar also residing in Mecca during Ibn ‘Arabī’s sojourn there beginning in 598/1202. As well as meaning literary composition, the word *nizām* also means arrangement or order [out of chaos]. And in the present context it would appear that these poems we read from Ibn ‘Arabī, even if they are sometimes difficult, opaque and disturbing, nonetheless spring from the pre-creational chaos of his spiritual and emotional states. And this is why he himself declares that the true author of these poems is precisely the desires themselves (TAS, p. xxxii), referring to Ibn ‘Arabī’s own Introduction to another work which contains some of the poems from the *Tarjumān*, namely his *Sessions of the Righteous* (*Kitāb Muḥāḍarat al-abrār*, compiled during ‘the second and third decades of the thirteenth century,’ on which see TAS, passim, esp. pp. xiv, 296–7, 310). Here, Ibn ‘Arabī clearly declares: ‘Among the poems that the Ashwāq [– the Desires themselves –] composed (*naẓamat*) in the language of *ishtiyāq* [desire for what is near or owned] are what I said regarding Nizām . . .’. Nizām, then, is simultaneously subject, object and act of composition. Such a turn, identity of subject and object is well known in Islamic mysticism. We are very familiar with the conceit about the union of love, lover and beloved. However, here in the poems of the *Tarjumān* this powerful noetic, ontic and emotional event is recited and performed on every page. It is a record and handbook of experience. The magnificence of the translation is attested in the quality of the personal response it induces in the reader. We are grateful, quite beyond words, for Michael Sells’ precision, learning and, it must be said, *himma*, without which such a masterpiece could not exist.

Todd Lawson