

The Wine-Song (*al-Khamriyyah*) of ‘Umar Ibn al-Fārid

(Translated and annotated by Martin Lings)

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The Egyptian Sufi ‘Umar ibn al-Fārid (1181–1235 A.D.) was revered as a Saint already in his life-time, and his much visited tomb at the foot of the Muqattam range of hills is held to be one of the seven holy places of Cairo. He ranks unquestionably among the greatest of all Arab poets. Unlike his eminent Andalusian contemporary Muhyi’-d-Dīn Ibn ‘Arabī, Ibn al-Fārid wrote only poetry. His odes have been amply commented, in particular by the Damascene Sufi ‘Abd al-Ghanī an-Nābulusī (1641–1731 A.D.) But since the poet himself chose to give them to the world without any commentary, we will here reduce our notes to a minimum.

Wine is the symbol of Gnosis and Love in their Essential Oneness, the Divine Radiance whereby all things exist and the Divine Attraction whereby all existence is reabsorbed into its Principle. This Gnosis-Love is both Transcendent and Immanent; its Subject as well as its Object is God. Being Absolute, pure Wine is only accessible to man in virtue of the Divine Self in the depth of his heart.

The full moon, its cup, is the Logos, the Spirit of Muhammad (*ar-Rūh al-Muhammadī*), and by extension the Spiritual Master, the Shaykh. The crescent is a disciple of promise who is ‘growing’ towards the perfection of plenitude. The tavern is the *Zāwiyah* where the Sufi gatherings are held, and the people of the tavern, are the initiates of the *Tarīqah*, that is, the order or brotherhood.

Each generation of Sufis has lamented the spiritual decadence of the present as compared with the past. The poet complains of his times by dwelling on the absence or hiddenness of the wine.

This poem, here translated into blank verse, was translated into prose by Nicholson in his *Studies in Islamic Mysticism*, (pp. 184-188) and by Arberry in *The Mystical Poems of Ibn al-Fārid* (Chester Beatty Monographs, No. 6, pp. 81-84).

Rememb'ring the beloved, wine we drink
Which drunk had made us ere the vine's creation.
A sun it is; the full moon is its cup;
A crescent hands it round; how many stars
Shine forth from it the moment it be mixed!
But for its fragrance ne'er had I been guided
Unto its tavern; but for its resplendence
Imagining could no image make of it.
Time its mere gasp hath left; hidden it is.
Like secrets pent in the intelligence,
Yet if it be remembered¹ in the tribe,
All become drunk—no shame on them nor sin.
Up hath it fumed from out the vessel's dregs.
Nothing is left of it, only a name;
Yet if that name but enter a man's mind,
Gladness shall dwell with him and grief depart.
Had the boon revelers gazed upon its seal,²
That seal, without the wine, had made them drunk.
Sprinkle a dead man's grave with drops of it,
His spirit would return, his body quicken.
If in the shadow of the wall where spreads
Its vine they laid a man, mortally sick,
Gone were his sickness; and one paralyzed,
Brought near its tavern, would walk; the dumb would speak,
Did he its savor recollect. Its fragrance,
If wafted through the East, even in the West,
Would free, for one berheumed, his sense of smell;
And he who stained his palm, clasping its cup,

1. The reference is to the *dhikr*, the remembrance or invocation of the Name of God, the basic rite of Islamic mysticism. It is to this Name that every mention of the wine's name refers throughout the poem. The tribe is the brotherhood.

2. The Prophet is not only the cup, but also, as Seal of the Prophets, the seal upon the wine-jar.

Could never, star in hand, be lost by night.
Unveil it³ like a bride in secrecy
Before one blind from birth: his sight would dawn.
Decant it, and the deaf would hearing have.
If riders⁴ rode out for its native earth,
And one of them were bit by snake, unharmed
By poison he. If the enchanter⁵ traced
The letters of its name on madman's brow,
That script would cure him of his lunacy;
And blazoned on the standard of a host,⁶
Its name would make all men beneath it drunk.

In virtue the boon revelers it amends,
Makes perfect. Thus by it the irresolute
Is guided to the path of firm resolve.
Bountiful he, whose hand no bounty knew;
And he that never yet forbore forbearth,
Despite the goad of anger. The tribe's dunce,
Could he but kiss its filter, by that kiss
Would win the sense of all its attributes.

“Describe it, well thou knowest how it is,”
They bid me. Yea, its qualities I know:
Not water and not air nor fire nor earth,

3. Literally “unveil her”, for *khamr* (wine) is feminine. As Arberry remarks in the notes to his translation, the comparison of the unveiling of a becobwebbed wine-jar with the unveiling of a bride is frequent “in bacchic poetry”.

4. The riders are the advanced initiates, *sālikūn* (travelers), who are immune from the effects of poison which, according to Nābulusī, is the passionate attachment to worldly things.

5. Again according to Nābulusī, the enchanter is the Spiritual Master and the madman is one who takes appearances for reality.

6. Another reference to the brotherhood, this time as an army whose warriors are engaged in the Greater Holy War (*al-jihād al-akbar*), ‘the war against the soul’.

But purity for water, and for air
Subtlety, light for fire, spirit for earth—
Excellencies that guide to extol its good
All who would tell of it, and excellent
Their prose in praise of it, excellent their verse.
So he that knew not of it⁷ can rejoice
To hear it mentioned, as Nu‘m’s lover doth
To hear her name, whenever Nu‘m is named.

Before all beings, in Eternity
It is, ere yet was any shape or trace.
Through it things were, then it by them was veiled,
Wisely, from him who understandeth not.
My spirit loved it, was made one with it,
But not as bodies each in other merge.
Wine without vine: Adam my father is.
Vine without wine, vine mothereth it and me.⁸
Vessels are purer for the purity
Of truths which are their content, and those truths
Are heightened⁹ by the vessels being pure.
Things have been diff’renced, and yet all is One:
Our spirits wine are, and our bodies vine.¹⁰

7. Every human being is in love with the wine even if he be not conscious of it. The descriptions of it serve to awaken that latent love. Nu‘m, like Laylā, is one of those women’s names by which Sufis denote the Divine Essence. Love of Nu‘m and love of the wine may therefore be said to coincide.

8. At the level of my oneness with the principal wine in Eternity—wine which, being absolutely independent, is therefore in no need of grape or vine for its existence—I am a true son of Adam who, as Logos, prefigures my union by his. The vine is *Nafas ar-Rahmān* (the Breath of the All-Merciful) which is also termed *at-Tabī‘ah* (Universal Nature), the feminine or maternal source of all manifestation.

9. Reading *tasmu* as in the oldest manuscript. It is for the mystic to ensure, by the ritual means at his disposal, that his soul is filled with spiritual presences or truths. These presences have a purifying effect upon the soul which is their vessel, and this increase of purity qualifies the vessel to endure a heightening of the truths. If we read *tanmu* “have increase”, as in the other manuscripts, the meaning is not basically changed.

Before it no before is, after it
 No after is; absolute its privilege
 To be before all afters. Ere time's span
 It pressing was, and our first father's¹¹ age
 Came afterwards—parentless orphan it!
 They tell me: 'Thou hast drunk iniquity'.
 Not so, I have but drunk what not to drink
 Would be for me iniquitous indeed.
 Good for the monastery folk, that oft
 They drunken were with it, yet drank it not,
 Though fain would drink. But ecstasy from it
 Was mine ere I existed, shall be mine
 Beyond my bones' decaying. Drink it pure!
 But if thou needs must have it mixed, 'twere sin
 To shun mouth-water¹² from the Loved One's lips.

10. But, as Nābulusī remarks, the vine contains the spiritual juice which will ultimately be transmuted into wine. We may compare the lines of Ibn al-Fārid's younger contemporary, 'Alī ash-Shushtarī:

Behold My beauty, witness of Me
 In every man,
 Like the water flowing through
 The sap of branches.
 One water drink they, yet they flower
 In many hues.

11. It is not the spiritual or 'winal' nature of Adam which is referred to here but his human or 'vineal' nature, of which the Prophet said:

"I was a Prophet when Adam was yet between water and clay."

12. If you have not the spiritual strength for oneness with the Divine Essence Itself, then let the water that you mix the wine with be nothing less than "the saliva of God", that is, the Supreme Spirit, which, if it be not fully Him, is not other than Him. The mixing of the wine thus signifies the emergence of the Logos, *ar-Rūh al-Muhammadi*, and this explains the mention of stars in line four. The manifestation of the Spirit of Muhammad precipitates the existence of the Spirits of his Companions, whom he likened to stars: "My Companions are even as the stars. Whichsoever of them ye follow, ye shall be rightly guided". By extension the words "how many stars" may be taken to include those Saints who are the heirs of the Companions in subsequent generations.

Go seek it in the tavern; bid it unveil
To strains of music. They offset its worth,
For wine and care dwelt never in one place,
Even as woe with music cannot dwell.
Be drunk one hour with it, and thou shalt see
Time's whole age as thy slave, at thy command.
He hath not lived here, who hath sober lived,
And he that dieth not drunk hath missed the mark.
With tears then let him mourn himself, whose life
Hath passed, and he no share of it hath had.