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On Translation of Ottoman Poetry 1: My Mistake

Osmanlı Şiirinin Çevirisi Üzerine 1: Benim Hatam

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Abstract

This is the first in a series of articles I plan to write about translation of Ottoman poetry into English. They will serve as an introduction to reading the poetry and offer fruits of research new to scholarship. All writing is rooted in a certain metaphysics, and as with the oldest literary languages—Chinese, Sanskrit, and Greek—verse was for centuries the major site for philosophy in Turkish, Persian, and Arabic. While the reimagining of a text in a new cultural setting has often been the norm for translation of literature, I argue that to face the challenge of a text’s metaphysics is primary and requires a mode of textual analysis that is cognizant of the historical context. I explain what I call “long meaning,” and review how categories that emerged from the European Enlightenment contributed to the loss of this way of thinking. I give the example of a mistake I made in translating a work of *mesnevi* verse, and further explain my approach to translation through the example of a *gazel* lyric.

Öz

Bu makale, Osmanlı şiirinin İngilizceye çevirisi üzerine yazmayı planladığım bir dizi çalışmanın ilkidir. Bu çalışmalar, şiiri okumaya yönelik bir giriş sunmayı ve mevcut literatüre yeni katkılar sağlamayı amaçlamaktadır. Her yazı belirli bir metafiziğe dayanır ve Çin, Sanskritçe ve Yunanca gibi en eski edebî dillerde olduğu gibi, Türkçe, Farsça ve Arapçada da şiir yüzyıllar boyunca felsefenin başlıca mekânı olmuştur. Bir metnin yeni bir kültürel bağlamda yeniden tasavvur edilmesi, edebiyat çevirisinde çoğu zaman yaygın bir yaklaşım olsa da, ben bir metnin metafiziğiyle yüzleşmenin öncelikli olduğunu ve bunun tarihsel bağlamın bilincinde olan bir metin çözümleme biçimini gerektirdiğini savunuyorum. “Uzun anlam” olarak adlandırdığım kavramı açıklıyor ve Avrupa Aydınlanması’ndan doğan kategorilerin bu düşünme biçiminin kaybına nasıl katkıda bulunduğunu inceliyorum. Mesnevi nazım biçiminde yazılmış bir eseri çevirirken yaptığım bir hatayı örnek olarak sunuyor; ayrıca bir gazel örneği üzerinden çeviri yaklaşımıyı ayrıntılandırıyorum.

Keywords

Poetry,
verse,
philosophy,
metaphysics,
Ottoman,
Plato,
Enlightenment,
Oneness of Being

Anahtar Kelimeler

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With apologies to Edward Mitchell

Introduction

This is the first in a series of articles I plan to write about translation of Ottoman poetry into English. They will serve as an introduction to reading the poetry and offer fruits of research new to scholarship. I will not go into technical issues; translation technique is specific to a language, genre, era, individual author, text and the translator. I can offer no general rules, unless it be my preference that to the degree possible, the translator should seem not to be there at all.

Many would disagree. Prior to World War One, when Richard Lattimore's translations of Greek classics brought the notion of literal rendering to the fore, translation was most often viewed as the re-imagining of a text in a different context, so that the Arabian desert tale of *Layla and Majnun*, for example, was rewritten in Persian by Nizami Ganjavi in the twelfth century as an urban story. Even Shakespeare's use of Thomas North's translation of Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* when writing his play *Antony and Cleopatra* could be regarded as translation in the reimagining sense. Chapman's Homer, too, was in the "domestication" vein, as was Edward Fitzgerald's Omar Khayyam, and E.J.W. Gibb's six-volume *A History of Ottoman Poetry*, which with his continual rant defaming the Turkish people as incapable of originality,¹ periodically interrupted by breathless disagreement from his editor and flatmate Edward G. Browne, put an end to the avid European interest in Ottoman poetry that had been growing since the Renaissance, i.e. the Ottoman conquest of Istanbul.² There were no new translations for half a century.

In Republican Turkey, beginning in the 1930s, Ottoman and world literature were rendered in vocabulary and syntax designed by the Turkish Language Association to represent late antique Turkish usage, deemed authentic for the new Turkish nation state.³ As we entered the twenty-first century, commercial concerns became more powerful, and many translators now find it natural to alter a text to make it easier to sell. More recently, as China's role in the world economy has grown, a friend told me that his U.S. publisher asked him to translate a work so that his translation would be easier to retranslate into Chinese.

Preliminaries

To be as absent as possible when translating is a philosophical stance based on what one thinks a text is. Briefly, it is to recognize that a text has an existential reality regardless of how it is received, despite the fun had by all speculating on the death of the author with regard to reader reception

¹ See Victoria Rowe Holbrook, *The Unreadable Shores of Love: Turkish Modernity and Mystic Romance* (University of Texas Press, 1994), 13–31.

² "Istanbul" is a Greek word and the old name of the city. "Constantinople" was a metonymic usage, calling the whole state by its part, like saying "the White House" to mean the USA.

³ Much of this vocabulary and syntax did not settle into usage, and in the field of Greek classics there is now a fresh round of Turkish translation, notably the excellent work of Erman Gören and Ömer Aygün.

theory. I will explain and give the example of a mistake I made. But first I will move quickly through several preliminary matters without footnotes, because although each one deserves separate treatment, I cannot address translation of Ottoman poetry without taking these matters into consideration.

Ottoman poetry is rooted in a certain metaphysics. I pretend to have a question: Why is metaphysics in Turkish/Persian/Arabic called “Sufism” and not “philosophy”?

Poetry, more precisely verse, which is metered discourse rhymed or not, was the major site for the practice of philosophy in premodern Turkish/Persian/Arabic, as it was in the oldest languages—Chinese, Sanskrit, Greek—though not Latin. The Latin exception is significant because it accounts partly for the exceptional place of prose in the history of European literary languages, which are relatively new, arising in the late Middle Ages. In world history, prose is the exception; verse—and prosimetrum, verse and prose mixed—was the vehicle for almost every genre, including philosophy, medicine and other sciences, historiography, even dictionaries.

The assumption that philosophy is written in prose emerged in Europe as one of the many consequences of what we may call “the Enlightenment quarantine of religion.” As religion was pushed out of the public sphere in Europe, and eventually almost everywhere, it became quarantined in such a way that philosophy, poetry, literature, art, music, dance—the list goes on—were left outside of it. The result, a less noticed aspect of “disenchantment,” was that religion was impoverished as a set of rules and rituals. Fundamentalism has not changed that; on the contrary, it has taken the impoverishment to new extremes. Meanwhile, from Hegel to Nietzsche, philosophy agonized as empiricism became the authoritative definition of science and reality. One can cite exceptions, but that remains the general trend.

“The quarantine view” gave rise to much narrower categories for human action, which we have become so used to that we do not realize how ahistorical they are. For most of human history, the term “science” had much broader meanings, as in, for example, the science of divinity. There were a few scattered usages of the term “mysticism” prior to the Enlightenment, but it was in the late 1700s that the word became common parlance for those parts of religion that German Romantics did not want to lose, and was also applied to parts of religions not Judeo-Christian which they found attractive, as texts from the East poured into Europe by way of colonialism rather than through the more humble search that exploration of Turkish/Persian/Arabic texts had been in Europe for centuries. In French, “Islamic mysticism” became *sufizm*. Texts exhibiting traits that seemed in accord with modern, secular, conceptions of originality and imagination became “literature.” While there is still such a thing as “the literature of the field,” literature has for the past century meant fictional writing, including poetry; it is art, and art is not deemed science.

By the mid-twentieth century, “philosophy” came more and more to mean analytic philosophy, which takes in hand the logic of statements rather than the realities that may be their ultimate referents. In other words, analytic philosophy does not focus on the meaning of life. Pre-Enlightenment philosophy did focus on the meaning of life, and how to live accordingly. By the time I was a Harvard freshman in 1969, no pre-Enlightenment philosophy, not even the work of

Plato and Aristotle, was taught in the Harvard philosophy department. Under the influence of Willard Quine, philosophy began with Descartes.

In premodern Turkish/Persian/Arabic writing, as in Chinese, Sanskrit, and Greek, philosophy was communicated in verse and stories in verse, proverbial tales, allegories, or narrations of contemporary events; well-known and interpreted to present a philosophical argument. Religion was everywhere. In universities today, such things may survive as “Indian philosophy” or “Chinese philosophy.” Turkish/etc. thought is most often reduced to “Arabic philosophy,” meaning the eighth-to-tenth century reception of Greek philosophy in a then-expanding literary Arabic, which had recently made its transition from orality. These latter hyphenated categories of philosophy are often housed in departments of religion, where they often get ahistorical treatment, and such convoluted phrases as “theoretically sophisticated mysticism”⁴ have been the norm in studies of Sufism for decades. All these factors have been at play in the characterization of pre-modern Turkish, Persian, and Arabic poetry as written in the language of Sufism.

What I have just written is, of course, a series of massive generalizations. But if it is convoluted and inconsistent, that is because the system of categories brought to the study of Ottoman poetry has been illogical as well as ahistorical. Aside from the fact that the way of thinking I sum up as “the quarantine view” does not serve knowledge today, for us the problem is that if we come to translation of Ottoman verse this way, we will see very little.

In what follows, I will focus on what I call “long meaning.” Words do not mean only what we think they do. They have histories reaching back to the beginning of language, and carry these histories into the future, bearing countless resonances beyond our grasp, including the grasp of the best etymologists. I am not referring to the remarkably vague term “influence,” an eighteenth-century concept that emerged to organize anxieties characteristic of modern individuality in the context of an expanding print culture.⁵ Especially such words as “soul,” probably one of the first words human beings invented, are like echo chambers resounding with millennia of meaning. This becomes obvious when one translates texts across different eras, ancient, medieval, and modern, and across varied languages as well as clique lingos, such as the poststructuralist. For a noun to reach us without having gone through many translations must be very rare, if such a thing exists at all. Words have long meaning.

I admire translation theory, which became an internationally recognized academic field in the latter part of my lifetime, but it is the job of translation theory to address *all* translation, and most translation is workaday stuff—contracts, inventories, descriptions and instructions for practical use, written in diction that is as standard, as free of the conscious use of metaphor as possible—or

⁴ One of many examples that could be given, see the abstract of: Justin Cancelliere, “Traversing the Barzakh: The Problem of Universals in Islamic Philosophy and Theoretical Sufism” (MA thesis, University of Georgia, 2019).

⁵ See Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein, “Figures in the Corpus: Theories of Influence and Intertextuality,” in *Influence and Intertextuality in Literary History*, ed. Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein (University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 3–36.

verbal discourse, which is full of unconscious metaphor. While premodern poetry conformed to strict versification rules and supported stock tropes,⁶ the most talented and intelligent poets used metaphor in unpredictable and extremely clever ways that a scientific (quantitative) approach cannot address, ways that require from us not so much a different method as a different way of thinking.

A Narrative Example

To illustrate what I mean by a different way of thinking, I will first take the example of a mistake I made in translating a line in an Ottoman work of narrative verse considered by many to be the greatest work of Ottoman literature. It was written in 1783 by Şeyh Galip, who was born in Istanbul in 1757 and died young there in 1799. He is called *şeyh* because after he wrote this book he was appointed by the Konya Çelebi, the administrative head of the Mevlevi dervish order, as director (*şeyh*) of the Galata Mevlevi House, a position furnishing him a residence and salary that made him independent of the parental home. Narrative verse works in rhyming couplets were classified as *mesnevi*, regardless of subject. Galip's is a philosophical work told as a journey story, titled after its two heroes, Beauty and Love (*Hüsn ü Aşk*). The line I mistranslated is the first half of a couplet that comes near the end and is regarded as summing up the work (couplet 2059):

Kim Aşk Hüsn'dür, 'ayn-ı Hüsn Aşk

Aşk means "Love," and *Hüsn* means "Beauty" (shortened as *hüsn* to conform with the meter). The line defines the relationship between the two. When I began reading the work in 1982, I was a student new to Ottoman poetry and trusted in the great scholars before me. All paraphrased the line in modern Turkish to mean that Love is Beauty and Beauty is Love. The marvelous scholar Abdülbaki Gölpınarlı, who did the sole critical edition of the work, rendered it as:

*Çünkü Aşk Hüsn'dü, Hüsn de Aşk'ın ta kendisi.*⁷

"Because Love was Beauty, and Beauty, Love himself." This did not seem right to me, but I figured I was ignorant and Abdülbaki Bey must have known better. The character Love is a young man, and Beauty is a young woman. As my reader is probably thinking, the work is a kind of allegory.⁸

⁶ Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, translated by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (Beacon Press, 1967; French 1953) is a book about what was so new about modern poetry, and in the course of explaining that in the Marxist vein typical of his time, Barthes gives one of the best descriptions of what he calls "classical" poetry available.

⁷ Abdülbaki Gölpınarlı, *Şeyh Galip: Hüsn ü Aşk* (Altın Kitapları, 1968), line 2059.

⁸ I pointed out in a 1996 article, and earlier in my 1985 doctoral dissertation, that there was no term for allegory in Ottoman Turkish rhetoric, which was adapted from medieval Persian and Arabic rhetoric. The Quran states that everything in the world is a sign of God. In so far as "sign" here means allegory, allegorical works that assume this rule must be allegories of allegories, which is not the same thing as the standard sort of allegory about, say, the key and the lock, see Victoria Rowe Holbrook, "Alegorinin Ölümü, *Hüsn-ü Aşk'ın Özgünlüğü*" [The Death of Allegory, The Originality of *Beauty and Love*], *Defter* 27 (Spring 1996), 65–80; *Beauty and Love: The Ultimate Romance* (PhD dissertation, Princeton

Decades later, having worked steadily on receptions of Plato in Islamicate and European contexts, particularly of the way Plato saw beauty,⁹ I am convinced of something that in my the-emperor-has-no-clothes innocence I thought from the start, that “Kim Aşk Hüsün’dür, aynı Hüsün Aşk” does not mean that Love is Beauty and Beauty is Love. The second part repeats the first for emphasis, meaning:

For Love is Beauty, Love is the very same as Beauty.

This is what the line means according to Turkish grammar. If Galip wanted to say that Beauty was the same as Love, he would have written “aynı Aşk Hüsün” not “aynı Hüsün Aşk.” There is nothing ambiguous about this. Grammatically, “aynı Hüsün Aşk” means Aşk is the same as Hüsün; it does not mean that Hüsün is the same as Aşk. Mistranslation of the line derives not from any difficulty in its diction but from a lack of philosophical preparedness, and willingness, common in modernizing circles where Ottoman poetry was called “just Sufism” and all Sufism was assumed to be the same.

But what’s the difference? The two translations offer different theories about the structure of the cosmos. This has to do with the well-known principle of the Oneness of Being.¹⁰ There is no doubt that Galip assumed the principle;¹¹ it is obvious in all his works.¹² According to the Oneness of Being, all being is God’s being. All existents derive from God’s being. The analogy of light has very often been used. Let us imagine that there is a light shining on a wall, illuminating it. The wall is lit up, but not because the wall is luminous in itself; if the light source is turned off, the wall goes dark. We exist, but our existence does not derive from us; we exist because God is continually

University, 1985). Nineteenth-century British Romantics, Coleridge in particular, challenged European allegory and exalted symbols so effectively that little was written about allegory in the twentieth century. The scholarship by Rosemund Tuve in the 1960s, and in the late 1990s by Eugene Vance, are excellent exceptions. Peter Heath’s *Allegory and Philosophy in Avicenna* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992) was a milestone in understanding allegory in Arabic and Persian.

⁹ See, for example, Victoria Rowe Holbrook, “The Separation of Goodness and Beauty: Plato, Galip, Lacan,” in *Challenging Conventions: Love in Early Modern Ottoman Poetry*, edited by Christiane Czygan and Hatice Aynur (De Gruyter, 2025).

¹⁰ Also called “Unity of Being” or “Unity of Existence.” “Being” and “existence” are both translations of Tr. *vücud*/Ar. *wujūd*. “Being” is an old English derivation, “existence” is Latin. The choice is usually a matter of habit, but grammar also plays a role. “To be” tends to be a copula, while “to exist” is a full-fledged verb, making it easier to express certain things in certain languages. The philosopher Charles Kahn has written extensively about this, see “Why Existence Does Not Emerge as a Distinct Concept in Greek Philosophy,” in *Philosophies of Existence Ancient and Medieval*, edited by Parviz Morewedge (Fordham University Press, 1982), 7–17. Kahn argues that Avicenna was the first to treat existence as a distinct concept.

¹¹ I thank Professor Dr. Mustafa Tahrallı for pointing this out to me in 1983, before the role of Ibn Arabi in Ottoman thought began to be widely noticed.

¹² For Galip’s works and his biography, see Holbrook, *Beauty and Love: The Ultimate Romance*.

providing us with being. If God ceases to provide being, “turning off the light,” we will no longer exist.

However, although we are nothing but God’s being, we are not God. *Vahdet-i vücûd* is not pantheism, although it has often been confused with pantheism. In pantheism, as popularly understood, God consists of the same stuff as all beings, as if God were an Aristotelian substance. In the Oneness of Being, we are made of God’s being, but God is beyond being. One may say that we are (nothing but) God, but God is not us. This is the relationship between Hüsün and Aşk. Aşk is (nothing but) Hüsün, but Hüsün is not Aşk.

The way one interprets Galip’s line is the way one interprets Galip’s work. If Beauty and Love are ultimately the same, they are both qualities of God, and Galip’s work is about God’s qualities playing out in the form of a story, which would end with their union in God. But if Love is Beauty, and Beauty is beyond Love, then Beauty represents God. In fact, at the end of Galip’s work, Love and Beauty are not united in God. In the final scene, the character Poetry tells Love that he will be taken to Beauty; the rest “is not to be shown” because language and images are representations, and God cannot be represented. That is why intellect cannot “see” God. Poetry says (verses 2057–2068):

I’ve come now to tell you union awaits
See and understand the truth of this state

*Geldim yine da ‘vet-i visâle
Vakıf ola gör meâl-i hâle*

Of all these events there was but one cause
Your vision awry, therein lay the fault

*Bulmaya zuhur bu mebâhis
Bir kec-nazar olmuş idi bâis*

For Love is but Beauty, the very same
You’ve practiced the path of error you made

*Kim Aşk Hüsün’dir ‘ayn-ı Hüsn Aşk
Sen râh-ı galatta eyledin meşk*

In unity there is no make-believe
In that duty nothing that cannot be

*Birlikte bu kıylükâl yoktur
Ol farzda hiç muhâl yoktur*

Come now and behold that angelic face
See Beauty who has no peer and no price

*Var imdi gör ol melek-likâyı
Seyreyle ki Hüsn-i bî-behâyı*

That all once concealed may now be revealed
And all once revealed may now be concealed

*Tâ cümle nihân iyân ola hep
Evvelki iyân nihân ola hep*

Your friends of the path can come just so far
For only Love reaches that Padishah

*Hemrâhların bu râha erdi
Aşk ancak o pâdsâha erdi*

Nor Rivalry, Modesty, nor Madness
The Sons of Love, your tribe too must be left

*Mollâ-yı Cünûn u Gayret İsmet
Hem kaldı geri Benî Muhabbet*

And friendship with Poetry here has an end
None but Dazzle may beyond this ascend

*Hem üns-i Suhan nihâyetindir
Bundan ilerisi Hayret'indir*

And so Dazzle took that shah by the hand
The curtains of union parted at last

*Filvâki' alıp o şâhı Hayret
Açıldı sürâdikât-ı vuslat*

At this point the story comes to a close
What lies beyond this is not to be shown

*Buldu bu mahalde kıssa pâyân
Bundan ötesi değil nümâyân*

Praised be God the living who does not die
Speech has to the realm of silence arrived

*Sad şükr ola Hayy-i lâ-yemûta
Kim erdi söz âlem-i sükûta¹³*

The work reveals as its skeleton the Staircase of Love in Plato's *Symposium*, with "beauty in itself" as the ultimate object of love.¹⁴ As in Plato's Staircase, where the lover begins by loving beautiful

¹³ This is quoted from my translation of *Hüsn ü Aşk*, with couplet 2059 amended, see Şeyh Galip, *Beauty and Love (Hüsn-ü Aşk)*, edited and translated by Victoria Rowe Holbrook (Modern Language Association of America, 2005), 199–200.

¹⁴ See Holbrook, "The Separation of Goodness and Beauty."

bodies and climbs up to see *to kalon*, beauty in itself (210a–212b), the journey of Galip’s hero is one of maturation in vision until he is ready to “see” Beauty as she really is.

Furthermore, Galip has God represented by a female. This certainly seems revolutionary in the eighteenth-century Ottoman context, and it has gone unnoticed because of the way the line we have examined has been read. New research will be required to appreciate it.¹⁵

Beauty and Love makes use of the paradigm provided by Ahmed Ghazali (d. 1126). In Ghazali’s work, it is God who first takes the role of lover, on being’s “arc of descent” into the world. God creates the human being out of love, taking the role of lover, while we are in the position of the beloved. We eventually realize this and take on the role of lover, seeking beloved God on the return “arc of ascent.”¹⁶ In accord with this pattern, in the first half of Galip’s tale, Beauty is in love with Love. Then, midway through the work in a chapter titled “The Reversal of Events,” Love falls in Love with Beauty and sets out on a journey through trials to obtain the alchemy that will make him worthy of her.

Galip’s work is metaphysics—ontology and epistemology—echoing down the centuries in the long meanings of words, and one needs to think in concert with that metaphysics to translate it correctly.

Lyric

I will next give an example of translating “long meaning” in lyric. The forms of Ottoman verse are panegyric (*kaside*, “intent”), stanza (*musammat*), lyric (*gazel*), narrative (*mesnevi*), and briefer verse (*mukataat*). The lyric *gazel* is monorhyme. When I translate, I follow the form of what I translate, including meter and rhyme scheme, in so far as I can.

The *aruz* metrical system adapted by the Ottomans from Persian and Arabic is, like other ancient versification systems, quantitative. It is based on a specific calculation of “long” and “short” syllables, without regard for stress. Although there has been some experimentation with quantitative meter in English, English meters are accentual, based on stress, not quantitative. *Aruz* meters are livelier and rockier. Legend has it that they were derived from camel gaits. They are also more abstract than accentual meters, intellectual rather than visceral. *Aruz* gives a feeling of

¹⁵ It is not unprecedented. Ibn Arabi did something related. See for example Souad Hakim, “Ibn ‘Arabi’s Twofold Perception of Woman: Woman as Human Being and Cosmic Principle,” translated by Nermine Hanno, *The Muhyiddin Ibn al-‘Arabi Society Journal*, accessed 10.01.2026, <https://ibnarabisociety.org/woman-as-human-being-and-cosmic-principle-souad-hakim/>. To point this out is not to ignore the vicious misogyny in Islamic societies, similar to that of Euro-American and other societies.

¹⁶ Nasrollah Pourjavady, “Ma’na-yi Husn va ‘Ishq dar Adabiyat-i Farsi” [The Meaning of Beauty and Love in Persian Literature], *Sophia Perrenis* 2, (Spring 1976): 43–51.

suspension while the mathematical operation of the meter is worked out; a feeling of gliding rather than walking, of travel by sea rather than by land.

There is no system for calculating long and short syllables in English, and English is rhyme-poor while Turkish is rhyme-rich. Any attempt to reproduce *aruz* in English must be based on mere syllables with imperfect rhyme. But to translate Ottoman poetry with English forms that seem similar, in an English contemporary with the era of the Turkish—for example, to render a seventeenth-century Turkish lyric *gazel* with a seventeenth-century English sonnet—is to try to make an English poem out of the Turkish. I do not try to write English poetry when I translate.

A lyric *gazel* is a brief monorhyme poem on the subject of love, or occasionally, spring. The love can be love of anything—love or lust for a person, love of God, ambition for attainment of high position or other patronage, fame as a poet, or deliverance from desire. As in Plato's *Symposium*, love and desire are one. There Diotima says that all desire for good things, whether “to make money, succeed in athletics, or philosophy,” is love (*eros*; 205d). Even when desire is clearly lust for a person, pronouns in Turkish are not gendered, so the nature of the desired object can be kept ambiguous.

Below, I translate a *gazel* by a man who took the pen name Neşati. We usually know very little about the lives of Ottoman poets. He was born in the early 1600s. Like Galip, he was appointed director of a Mevlevi House, but in Edirne, a former Ottoman capital where he lived most of his life. Also like Galip, he is among a handful of the greatest Ottoman poets.

Gazels do not have titles. They were arranged in books of collected poems alphabetically according to the letters of the rhyme. Both *mesnevi* and *gazel* are poems of rhyming couplets, but in a different sense. In *mesnevi*, the first line of a couplet rhymes with its second line, while the couplets as a whole do not rhyme with one another. A a, b b, c c, etc. In contrast, *gazels* are monorhyme poems in which the ends of the second lines rhyme together. A b, c b, d b, etc. The first *gazel* couplet is an exception; in the first couplet of a *gazel* both lines have the same rhyme. In any case, we call *mesnevi* “verse rhyming couplets,” and call *gazel* “monorhyme verse.”

In the case of Neşati's *gazel*, there is also a *redif*; the same rhyme-word is repeated throughout. The *redif* is *nihanız*, “we are concealed.” The meter is a common one: - - . / . - - . / . - - . / . - - . In my discussion of the poem I will focus on the last couplet.

Gazel Lyric by Neşati, Nihanız

We are passion in the wild nightingale's low notes concealed
We are blood that is in the wine-red rosebud heart concealed

Şevkız ki dem-i bülbül-i şeydâda nihânız
Hûmuz ki dil-i gonçe-i hamrada nihânız

We pour upon our ravaged bodies the drops of our tears
We are like the soul's thread in substance of meaning concealed

*Biz cism-i nizâr üzre döküp dâne-i eşki
Çün rişte-i cân gevher-i ma'nâda nihânız*

What if we are famed throughout the world without name or sign?
We are within a complex riddle like the heart concealed

*Olsak n'ola bî-nâm ü nişân şöhre-i 'âlem
Biz dil gibi bir turfa mu 'ammâda nihânız*

It is again the breeze at dawn that knows our every state
We are always in the curls of our darling's locks concealed

*Mahrem yine her hâlimize bâd-ı sabâdır
Dâ'im şiken-i zülf-i dil-ârâda nihânız*

We are manifest in colors of meaning like the rose
And like joy in the mood of reddest wine we are concealed

*Hem gül gibi rengîni-i ma'nâ ile zâhir
Hem neş'e gibi hâlet-i sahbâda nihânız*

Now like the pen we ornament complaint of grief in love
Now like a cry we are in the complaining pen concealed

*Geh hâme gibi şekve-trâz-ı gam-ı 'aşkız
Geh nâle gibi hâme-i şekvâda nihânız*

We've so removed ourselves beyond becoming, Neşati
That in the polished mirror's radiance we are concealed

*Ettik o kadar ref'-i ta'ayyün ki Neşâtî
Âyîne-i pür-tâb-i mücellâda nihânız¹⁷*

Turkish gazel-writers most often referred to themselves as “we,” often meaning “we lovers.” Neşati says “we” are passion, we are blood, we are manifest and concealed, hidden like the soul, the heart, like feelings of joy or the silent cry to which the pen gives words. But how are “we” these things? An important clue comes in the last couplet, where he uses the phrase *ref'-i ta'ayyün*: “we have so removed ourselves beyond becoming that...”

Here *removed beyond becoming* translates *ref'-i ta'ayyün*. *Ta'ayyün* means appointment to an office, to a job. *Ref'* means to remove something upwards, to lift it away, as one does when lifting something to a high shelf. The literal meaning of the line is: “We have lifted appointment to such a degree that... we are concealed.” But if I were to translate it that way, it would not be possible to

¹⁷ Neşati Ahmed Dede, *Neşâtî Dîvânı*, ed. Mahmut Kaplan (T.C. Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı, 2019), 156–157. In couplet 6, *Geh hâme gibi şekve-trâz-ı gam-ı 'aşkız*, Kaplan preferred the reading *Geh câme gibi şekve-trâz-ı gam-ı 'aşkız*. I prefer the reading *hâme*. Complaint is traditionally associated with the *hâme* reed pen, referring to Mevlana Rumi's famous line, “Listen to this reed as it tells its tales / Complaining of separations as it wails, and Neşati, being a member of the Mevlevi dervish order, would have been aware of the association.

understand the line. Here *ta'ayün* means God's provision of worldly existence to an entity ('*ayn*) in His knowledge. If this were Plato, existence would proceed from the Beautiful/Good/One, the origin of all things. In Islamic philosophy, we all begin as entities in God's knowledge, and when God creates us, appointing us as creatures, we descend through the structural levels of being in the cosmos to the realm of manifestation, of growth and change, of becoming, in the philosophical sense of being and becoming. That is why I translated *ta'ayün* as "becoming."

Neşati is saying that he has so lifted himself out of the realm of becoming that he is as one with his origin and so can be manifest in every thing, as God is. He also says, "What if we are famed throughout the world without name or sign? / Inside a riddle novel as the heart we are concealed." He means that everyone knows about love, passion, the heart, about feelings of joy and sorrow, they are famous. But "we" are not known by our names, because we do not seek fame for ourselves. Neşati tells us about his *melamet* preference, an existential humility. "Mirror" is a trope for the heart, "polished" by acts of devotion. "We" who have lifted our appointment no longer exist, unless as the ever-new, ever-changing reflections of God's being within the mirror of a pure heart.

This usage of the term *ta'ayün* is typical of Ibn Arabi, who first came to Turkish Seljuk Rum (Anatolia) when Mevlana Rumi was a child living there. The Mevlevi order assimilated Ibn Arabi's characteristic usages, and definitively shaped Turkish Islam. One can see it in the many Ottoman commentaries on Rumi's work, commentaries full of Ibn Arabi's usages. The most widely known was written by Rüşühi Ankaravi, who was affiliated with the Mevlevi order and died in 1631, not long after Neşati was born. The British Orientalist Reynold Nicholson, known for his translations of Rumi's works, relied on Ankaravi's commentary.

But let us return to the question of "Sufism." It is often said that Ottoman poetry was written in a language of Sufism shared by both sufi and non-sufi poets, and there is no clear line separating sufi from not-sufi poetry. But all writing in any society shares the basic assumptions about reality, the metaphysics, of that society, and each writer will have their own understanding, or lack of understanding, of it. In Ottoman Turkish, and modern Turkish until the late 1980s, the word spelled in Ottoman letters *صوفی*, often pronounced "*sofu*," meant the sort of person who brags about their piety, like a know-it-all first-year medrese college student. The context is pre-modern societies in which institutions are religious, and piety is an important factor in career advancement.

Ottoman parlance employed a *rind/zahid* dichotomy, the *zahid* being a *sofu*, and the *rind* understanding piety well enough to not go around bragging about it. In Galip's words, a poet is *rind* and receives *vahy-i dil*, "inspiration of the heart," drinking from "the cup of style" (verses 802-804; I translated *rind* there as "tolerant man"). There are endless jokes at the expense of the *zahid*, and *mesnevi* narratives about *zahid* exploitation of religion for material gain. The term "Sufism" reached Turkey in the late 1980s via the U.S.A., where it arrived from Europe and Iran with Euro-Americans working in pre-Islamic Republic of Iran, where the Shah bestowed the power of state cultural politics upon the opinions of the magnificent French scholar advocate Henry

Corbin. In other words, the present Turkish meaning of “*Sufizm*” travelled from France to Iran to the U.S.A. to Turkey. It is also via the U.S.A. that Mevlana began to be called “Rumi” in Turkish.

Among the nation-state, and British espionage-era, constructions that have become prevailing academic assumptions are the theory that Arabic is a universal Muslim language, and Persianate culture is extensive in Muslim societies. If loanwords and cultural borrowing had such magical force, all the people who speak English today would understand it in the same way as British people did in the century when the word was loaned, and the exportation of American culture everywhere would make the whole world Americanate. Loanwords often do not mean what they mean in the language they are borrowed from, and the same is true of cultural artefacts, which acquire quite different uses in new contexts. An Arabic word taken into Persian will almost always have acquired different meanings, as will Arabic and Persian loanwords in Turkish, not to mention such cultural artefacts as yoga.

In the Ottoman Empire, the word for “Sufi” was dervish. No one has ever heard of a whirling Sufi. Furthermore, the modern French-Iranian sense of the word “Sufi” is closer to what it was in tenth-century Baghdad than what it was from the thirteenth through the nineteenth centuries, beginning in Turkish Seljuk Rum where dervish orders were first founded as institutions. The orders expanded with the Ottomans to become very large and powerful institutions with property and branches extending throughout an empire lasting six centuries and rivalling Rome in size. Institutions always tend toward corruption, and so did the dervish orders, of which *melamet* was critique. In short, the way “Sufism” is marketed today internationally makes it difficult to understand Ottoman poetry.

The long meaning of journey narratives called *seyr-i sülûk* includes Plato’s Staircase of Love, and the history of what I have here called the structure of being includes Plato’s “divided line.”¹⁸ If one translates Ottoman poetry with respect for long meaning, one will not make the kind of mistake I did.

¹⁸ See Victoria Rowe Holbrook, “Divided Line and Degrees of Being: Plato and Islamic Cosmology,” forthcoming in *The Reception of Plato in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, ed. Eva Anagnostou, George Arabatzis, and George Steiris (Leiden: Brill).

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