

Found in Translation

Discoveries and challenges in translating the more enigmatic stanzas of
Mahmud Shabistari's Garden of Mystery

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The Garden of Mystery (Gulshan-i Raz) holds a unique position in Persian Sufi literature. It is perhaps the most compact and concise presentation of the doctrines and practices of Sufism at the peak of their development in the early fourteenth century. The book is one of several masterpieces from that period that helped to bridge the teachings of the Persian 'School of Love' and the increasingly popular and influential writings of Ibn al-'Arabi. The Garden of Mystery's author, Mahmud Shabistari was a well-respected Sufi who lived in Tabriz, Iran, from about 1288 until 1339. These were times of great change just after the Mongol conquest of all of Asia. The Islamic establishment had fallen from power and there was suddenly a great deal of religious freedom despite ongoing political and social chaos. The Garden of Mystery was written 1317, during this brief period of creativity and free expression. Shabistari's later works, written after the Mongol conversion to Islam and a return to power of their more conservative Muslim advisers, are not on a par with this masterpiece. The Garden of Mystery has remained a primary text of Sufism throughout the Persian-speaking world. The poem, a thousand couplets in length, is complex and challenging even for Persian speakers working in the Sufi tradition. For that reason, it has historically be studied with the aid of commentaries, some of them true masterpieces of Sufism like Muhammad Lahiji's elucidation, The Keys to the Wondrous Eloquence in the Exegesis of the Gulshani Raz. I have followed his commentary closely for my own translation of the Garden of Mystery. I was very fortunate to also have had the help of a living Sufi poet from Afghanistan, Ustad Raz Mohammad Zaray, who went over the poem with me line by line. I dedicate these two lectures to him.

This evening I will present the first of two lectures in which I will explore the use in Sufi literature of the Science of Alphabetical Letters, the *'ilm al huruf*. I will examine a stanza of poetry from the Garden of Mystery in which the poet presents an important teaching on the nature of the self in several enigmatic verses based on the symbolism of certain Arabic letters. Tomorrow night's lecture will examine the role of alphabetical numerology in Sufi teaching.

Bismillahi rahmani rahim, 'In the name of Allah the Compassionate, the Merciful.' This phrase is spoken by Muslims each day before beginning anything of consequence. It is the opening sentence of all but one of the one hundred and fourteen chapters of the Qur'an. The written *bismillah* is ubiquitous in the Islamic world, appearing everywhere in stunning calligraphy often penned in forms from the natural world like those of birds and other animals. The art of calligraphy had nearly reached the peak of its aesthetic development by Shabistari's day. The Qu'ran was the very soul of Islamic culture and calligraphy had been, from the beginning, the most treasured of Islam's visual arts. By Shabistari's time, the personification of the alphabetical letters had been centuries in the

making. Any literate, educated person would have been aware, at least to some extent, that the words of scripture and even the individual letters making up those words, were the embodiment of spiritual realities. God's angel from the spiritual world had spoken the words of Revelation which were then carefully recorded and preserved in writing. Calligraphy had become a sacred art because the written word was the visible bridge to the unseen world of spirit. Master calligraphers had so refined their art that the words they penned seemed to take on a life of their own, sometimes even appearing to float and move across the page. It was their aim to embody, in calligraphy, the sublimity that was heard and felt in the recitation of the Qur'an. Each verse, in the most delicate and beautiful calligraphy imaginable, itself became a Gabriel, a graceful spiritual intermediary from the sacred world. The further personification of calligraphy into entities like faces, animals, and symbolic objects, was the next artistic step of a culture that already regarded the divine words, that is the sounds and the letters that made them, as bodies with souls of spiritual meanings. For the mystics of Islam, personified letters became active, living metaphors for spiritual realities which could be witnessed and understood through them.

Rumi, who lived a couple of generations before Shabistari, frequently used letter-play in his poetry. In one instance where Rumi is making a point about self-negation,¹ he refers to the phrase *bismillahi rahmanir rahim* when he writes:

Be like the letter *alef* that is folded into the *bism*
That *alef* has become hidden in the *bism*
It exists, yet it doesn't exist within the *bism*

Rumi is referring to the disappearance of the letter *alef* which normally begins the word *ism*, which means 'name.' He also means for the *alef* to represent *ananiyyat*, I-ness, ego. It is written with a single downward stroke that resembles the number one. In this teaching through letter-play, Rumi says that just as the tall *alef* of a 'name' must disappear in the phrase, "In the name of the Compassionate and the Merciful," so must the mystic disappear in God. Yet, both the *alef* and the mystic are said to essentially endure despite their disappearance, like Rumi's image elsewhere of the star that is no longer seen when the sun rises, even though that star is still present in the sky.

This kind of letter-play or Sufi punning was quite common in the Sufi poetry of that period. The translator is faced with the task of effectively conveying the metaphysical meanings of such stanzas without an awkward interruption in the flow of the poem. Given the paucity of this type of sophisticated metaphysical letter-play in Western literature, translation can be a challenge.

This evening I'd like to discuss a stanza employing letter-play from Shabistari's masterpiece, the Garden of Mystery. The poem consists of Shabistari's replies to fifteen questions on spirituality put to his Sufi circle by a great mystic from Herat, Afghanistan,

¹ Book VI of the Mathnawi, 2239

by the name of Sayyid Husseini. In two couplets in the third inquiry of the poem, we find an important example of Sufi teaching through letter-play. In the first couplet, Shabistari writes,

**From an imaginary line, the *ha* of *huwiyyat*
becomes two-eyed at the moment of vision.**

Shabistari is referring to the letter *ha* in Arabic but which is known in Persian as the *he-ye do chesmeh*, the ‘*h* with two eyes’ because of its oval shape split in two by a vertical line. It is this *h* that begins the word *huwiyyat* which means ‘identity’ or ‘ipseity’, often referring in metaphysics to the unseen, transcendent Absolute Reality. The couplet’s meaning is as follows: When any reference is made to the Absolute Reality which transcends all reference whatsoever, even the writing of a word used to name the Absolute Reality, *huwiyyat*, causes a conceptual duality to arise. The Absolute Reality is held to be beyond human conception and it is only when that Reality has given existence to an individual form, that we can conceive of It through that form. Muhammad Lahiji’s Keys to the Wondrous Eloquence in the Exegesis of the Garden of Mystery, generally considered the best exegesis on the poem, elucidates as follows:

“Know that *huwiyyat* is the Essence of the Real in Its aspect of being a non-individuated, non-entified Essence. In this aspect it is called *hu* and the level of *huwiyyat* means the ultimate effacement of all individual manifestations, whether of the senses, the imagination, or the intellect. In fact, one cannot even refer to the *huwiyyat* except by saying what it is not. Yet, just as the Essence of Reality is completely concealed in Its aspect of negating all relations and individuations, and is called the Unmanifest as a consequence, in Its aspect of appearing through existential relationships and relativity It is called by the name, the Manifest. Moreover, the Manifest and the Unmanifest are just one Reality [as indicated by] the Qur’anic verse, “Can there be a god with God?” Our poet speaks here of the *ha* of *huwiyyat* which refers to the individuation of Absolute Reality and he draws upon this connection to the *ha* of *huwiyyat* because *ha* [while being a letter is also] an [Arabic] pronoun [by which one can refer to something.] One cannot refer to the Essence of Reality until It is individuated as a particular individual form, whether this be a conception of what It is not, or a conception of what It is. This is due to the level of Absolute Unity in which all references are completely annihilated.”

Before we go on to discuss the possibilities for translation of this line and the equally challenging couplet that follows it, I’d like to point out that these lines of poetry are not merely, as it might seem from the commentary I just quoted, a reflection of Shabistari’s understanding of the Sufi theology of his day. As we shall see, Shabistari intends to share his experience and knowledge of a special kind of intimacy with God, and the liberation that comes through such intimacy. He wants to share with us the possibility of being transformed at our very core in a manner rarely even imagined by people. He hopes to guide his readers toward the experience of this ultimate intimacy and freedom. He knows by experience that this radical love and freedom are in the very nature of human consciousness.

The third inquiry of the poem, in which the lines using letter-play are embedded, is actually one of the most personal and practical inquiries to be found in the Garden of Mystery. We would benefit by looking at the topic of the inquiry before considering the possibilities for translating the problematic calligraphic lines. The chapter begins with the following question from Sayyid Husseini, one of the most accomplished mystics of that time:

Who am I? Explain to me who I am.

Shabistari, perhaps with just a bit of humor, answers,

Now you ask *me*, “what is ‘me’?”

Lahiji mirrors Shabistari’s reply with, “You’ve asked, ‘When I say “me,” what is this ‘me’ exactly?’”

I’m sure that all of us have wondered the same thing from time to time. Who are we really? Shabistari next launches into one of the most beautiful and valuable pieces of Persian literature about the relationship of personal identity to the Divine Identity. He writes,

**When Absolute Existence is alluded to,
People use the word “I” as a matter of expression.**

Shabistari offers a profound answer to the question “What is me?” by first saying that the individual self is in fact a reflection or a manifestation of the Divine Self and that when people use the word ‘I’ they are knowingly or unknowingly referring to a Divine Reality which is the true Self of the person saying ‘I’ or ‘me’.

Lahiji comments, “Through any relationship among the individual relationships [of the Divine Attributes] which manifest as particular individuations and become known, the Absolute thus individuated is referred to with the word ‘I’. In truth, the word ‘I’ is an expression for Absolute Existence.

Shabistari expands on the theme with the next couplet:

**When Reality has taken form through individuation
you refer to It in language with the word ‘I.’**

He guides us further toward the experience of our most fundamental relationship to the Divine Identity by referencing the famous Light Verse in the Qur’an. This opens with, “*Allah is the light of the Heavens and the Earth. The similitude of His light is of a niche and within it a lamp, the lamp within a glass. The glass is like a shining star....*”

To better understand Shabistari's next two couplets and the commentary that accompanies them, it would be useful to visualize the kind of lamp that Shabistari and Lahiji describe in the simile: It is an oil lamp sheltered in a glass, set in a mirrored niche which increases its luminosity. A latticed or perforated screen separates the lamp from the room. Light coming through the screen's openings enhance the aesthetic experience of the room.

Shabistari writes,

**You and I are contingent expressions of the Essence of Being,
like openings in the covering of the lamp of Being.**

Lahiji adds, "You and I, who are like particular individuations of the Essence of Being, can be compared to the openings or holes in the covering of the lamp whose light shines variously through them." Shabistari means that we are each a particular constriction and attenuation of the same light that shines from the divine Lamp of Being.

Let's consider for a moment what Shabistari might have wanted us to take in from his words. Our joys and sufferings, in all of their intensity and variation, arise from the manner in which each of our individualities, like the holes in the lamp, constrict the limitless energy of that Light of Being. The Light, Existence, is one light. The myriad limitations and constrictions of that light are those of our own essential selves. The plurality and variety of existence are not in that Light but in our inherent individualities.

And Shabistari claims that it does not matter which kind of experience we are having, since all of cosmic existence and experience is animated by the same Light of Being.

He writes,

**Know all light as the same, whether spirits or bodies,
sometimes shining from the mirror, sometimes the lamp.**

Lahiji comments,

"Sometimes this is the light of the bodies and sometimes of the spirits since the light is refracted and reflected according to the differences of the reflective surfaces. Know that the flow of spirit in the body is like the flow of divine Being in all of the existent things whether they be non-corporeal entities or physical bodies. In the verse of Light, the Divine Presence is the Light of the heavens of the non-corporeal entities and spirits, and the *earth* of the bodies, both imaginal and physical. The similitude of this light is that of a niche, meaning the body, within which is a lamp, which stands for the spirit. And that lamp is within a glass, meaning the heart, which is like a shining star, in that it has become bright through purification."

The next few lines in the poem are directed against the mere intellectualization of the teachings we have been considering. In Shabistari's day, it was not only the Sufis who used the first person pronoun to refer to the divine Self manifested in the forms. Philosophers, theologians and many would-be Sufis also used some of the same terminology. Shabistari chides them for presenting this teaching at an intellectual level instead of striving to experience the spiritual reality. Shabistari writes,

**Go, my friend, and understand yourself well;
but don't mistake swelling for the fullness of health.**

Lahiji adds, "The intellect with its proofs is not able to apprehend the realities of things as they are. You must get to know yourself well, meaning your 'I', as indicated in the hadith, *He who knows himself knows his Lord*. Effort is required to become like the 'possessors of true witnessing' who have seen things as they are through spiritual unveiling. The gnosis of spiritual unveiling can be compared to the hearty fullness of health whereas philosophical wisdom is like an unhealthy swelling."

In the next line, Shabistari summarizes the experiential process that allows a person to transcend the limited, egocentric experience of the self. In the Sufi Way, this is done by dissociating from the habitual experiences of the five senses through which we objectify the world and our own existence. This is a process of internally letting go of the usual mental and emotional attachments that occur to us, by turning our attention towards the Divine Presence.

Universally, we human beings are subject to those forces of the cosmos which gave rise to our mortal, bodily existence. We ordinarily spend our lives instinctively trying to preserve our limited self-experience by reacting to perceived threats to our existence and seizing opportunities to safeguard it. According to the Sufis it is largely because of the forces and laws governing physical existence that people becomes veiled from the Divine Presence. The mystic interrupts these life-long patterns of self-referential thinking and feeling by gradually dissociating from the illusion of a solid personal 'I'. The poet writes:

**Travel the path that leads beyond this universe.
Leave this world and hide your self within the Self.**

Lahiji comments:

"Make a spiritual journey outside of spatial and corporeal existence, leaving behind the world of the Names and the Attributes. You then transcend the plane of multiplicity and individuality and attain the plane of the Absolute through annihilation of the limitations of corporeal and spiritual existence. In this way you reach permanent existence in God. At that point, you will be able to see that the entire creation and all things in it are parts of yourself, that you penetrate every molecule of everything, and that there is nothing outside of 'you.' Thus you understand that there exists nothing outside of your 'I.'"

We now have enough of a background to come back to the lines using letter-play in order to consider their translation. As you recall, the verse in question says,

**From an imaginary line, the *ha* of *huwiyat*
becomes two-eyed at the moment of vision.**

The choice has to be made either to present such a literal translation along with a good deal of commentary, or as is generally my preference, to present an intelligible equivalence that retains some element of the letter-play. In either case we have to understand what the poet is trying to get at. If we are going to keep a more literal translation, we can help the reader to understand the lines above by providing the rest of Lahiji's exegesis for that line. He writes,

“In other words, that *ha* of *huwiyat* becomes two-eyed at the moment of vision, and one appears to be two, since the divine Essence in its aspect of negating all qualities is known by the name of Hidden and Unseen, and in its aspect of deploying the existential relationships is known as Apparent and Seen, and these two aspects are understood to be different from each other; the plurality of these names arises from the differences in meaning and expression. The imaginary line refers to the Qualities (the characteristics of Divinity which are reflected in the cosmos) and these are called an imaginary line or script because the resulting separation and distinction (like that in the letter) are a mere mental construct. This is because other than the Essence which is Absolute Existence, there cannot really be any other existent being, and this apparent plurality is not more than an illusion.”

I wanted to somehow retain these various meanings for the verse but to present them in English in a form that would be more immediately graspable. My translation would have to hinge on the key word ‘identity.’ I rendered it as follows:

**From an imaginary script writing the word ‘identity,’
Two i’s will appear at the moment of vision.**

As already mentioned, the word *huwiyat* is most comprehensively rendered into English by the word ‘identity.’ This word was, in fact, ideal for translating the verse because I could make my own letter-play with it. When the translated line is spoken, the two i’s that appear at the moment of vision would, of course, also sound like ‘seeing eyes’ rather than two letter i’s conveniently found in the word identity. Let us recall Shabistari’s teaching about the illusory nature of any identity other than the Absolute Reality. Duality is but an appearance resulting from Absolute Reality’s reflection in the countless mirrors of the otherwise non-existent entities of all things. Shabistari also compared this metaphysical situation to that of the one light of Absolute Being shining through the countless constrictions of the lamp of existence. And the illusion of separateness and rigid egocentric individuality, he tells us, result from a mistaken point of view about the individual self which is, in truth, but a contingent manifestation. This self composes for itself a ‘script’ of personal importance and permanent existence. Suffering results from

the rigidity of such a metaphysically impossible point of view. And since it is precisely this untenable point of view that most human beings cling to, it is not surprising that there is so much suffering. The commentator Lahiji has also stressed that there is a conceptual duality in the Absolute Reality between the opposites of Manifest/Unmanifest, Seen/Unseen, and that these conceptual opposites, though actually one Identity, appear to be two at the ‘moment of vision,’ the moment that this supreme Identity manifests in the world of form.

In the line following, Shabistari continues with the theme, again through letter-play. The next line literally reads,

**The traveler and the way don’t remain in between
When the *ha* of *hu* becomes joined to *Allah***

Lahiji comments,

“Know that the various kinds of differences will not lift away until the traveler makes the spiritual journey with the help of a true guide, and only if fully engaged with self-purification, and thus completes the journey to God. He reaches the level of ‘union’ which means transcending duality. Until then, we and you, and he will continue to manifest and there will be no escaping the bonds of psychological idolatry. In that state, the seeker will not experience true unification but will remain bound by the contraries of near and far, arrival and separation. It is the imaginary script of identity, which refers to differences in individual entities, whether manifested or unmanifested, which is the cause of the separateness of we, me, you, and he, and all multiplicity that appears; and when that *ha* joins to Allah those two eyes become one eye and the imaginary script lifts away. The word Allah stands for the Essence and the Divine Qualities, inclusive of such opposites as Manifest and Unmanifest, Unity and multiplicity, etc. When that *h* is joined to the word Allah, the road, the traveler and the travel no longer remain, and the manifestation of fictitious multiplicity vanishes. All is then unified. Real Oneness then manifests, and the one Reality that was referred to as I, you, and he become one through the theophany of the Absolute.”

**The traveler and the way don’t remain in between
When the *ha* of *hu* becomes joined to *Allah*.**

In translating the verse, I took careful note of the connection between the terms ‘script of identity,’ and ‘vision,’ or point of view, which recur throughout the poem and commentary. They form the basis for what we think of as our ‘individuality’. Once again I worked toward an intelligible equivalence for the translation of this verse. I found what I was looking for in Lahiji’s definition for the word ‘Allah’ as it concerns the very lines we are examining. Lahiji writes that Allah is comprehensive of all levels of existence, seen and unseen, transcendent and immanent. In his commentary, he offers the word

Haqiqat, meaning ‘Reality’ as a synonym for Allah. In just about all the mystical traditions, the word ‘Reality’ has been used as a technical term indicating this metaphysical comprehensiveness. ‘Reality’ was an appropriate choice for my translation because it has only one letter ‘i’, making it ideal for my own letter-play in English. Here together are the two couplets as I have translated them:

**From an imaginary script writing the word ‘identity,’
Two i’s will appear at the moment of vision.**

**Nothing is left of the seeker, nor of the path,
when these ‘i’s’ are absorbed in the I of Reality.**

There is one more line in the Third Inquiry that makes use of letter play and whose translation will add to our understanding of Shabistari’s teaching on identity. Literally, the line reads:

**Individuation is an imaginary dot on the ‘ain.
When your ‘ain is purified, ghain becomes ‘ain.**

This line uses the word ‘ain three times. The word has several meanings but the two that concern us are ‘individuality’ and the seeing ‘eye,’ precisely the same resonance we find audibly in the words ‘I’ and ‘eye.’

Lahiji writes, “Know that just as the difference between the letter ‘ain and ghain is because of a dot, the difference between the ‘contingent’ and the ‘Necessary’ is because of individuation. Separate individuality is a mental construct which has no real existence. When the mystic’s eye has become illuminated by the light of unveiling and witnessing, and the imaginary veil of contingent individual entities has cleared away from his vision, ghain which represents multiplicity and fictitious individuations, becomes ‘ain, and the two letters become one. Duality no longer remains and the curtain of illusion lifts to reveal that there is only one Reality which manifested in the forms of the countless fictitious individualities, a Reality that had clothed itself in the vestments of ‘I’ and ‘you’.”

My translation reads,

**This separate I is like a speck in your eye;
When your eye is cleared, forms reveal the Essence.**

Shabistari and Lahiji have already stressed that the illusory individuality which we know as our personal existence is, in fact, the very barrier that blinds us from the perception of True Reality. The Qur’an describes this as the heart’s eye which blinded to what it real because of attachment to external forms. The eye of the heart refers to the spiritual organ of cognition which is said to be located within the physical heart. The Sufis frequently

quote a *hadith* about this heart in which God says, “My earth and my heavens do not encompass Me, but the heart of my servant, the faithful, encompasses Me.”

Being the faithful servant mentioned in the *hadith* means turning one’s attention away from personal preoccupation which is our usual condition, towards the vast light and consciousness that sustains us and everything around us. That Light overwhelms the ego-self and allows us to witness the supreme Self that permeates and sustains all beings.

Books like the Garden of Mystery present us with a map to the most precious of treasures. They provide us with guidance, even sustenance for the spiritual journey. Translating a masterpiece like the Garden of Mystery I take to be a sacred duty. Translation can also be one of the most rewarding of activities. This is because in seeking to explain what is difficult, one constantly strives to better understand it.