

A Sufi Fable: Shah Dā‘ī I Shirazi’s “Tale of the Fish”

by

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NIZAM AL-DIN MAHMUD DA‘I SHIRAZI, known as Shāh Dā‘ī, deserves more attention as a Sufī poet than he has received so far either in the West (where neither Browne nor Arberry mentioned him) or in the East. Although his *Dīwān*¹ was published in Tehran not long ago, Dā‘ī is remembered, if at all, as a minor disciple of Shāh Nī‘matullāh Walī Kirmānī.²

Born 810/1406-7, died 870/1464-5 and buried in Shiraz, he was first initiated into Sufism by Abū Ishāq Bahrāmī (or Bahrānī), known as “The Shaykh of Four Books”, a khalīfah or representative of both Shāh Nī‘matullāh and Qāsim al-Anwār.³ When he had advanced as far on the path as Bahrāmī could take him, the Master told him, “Before the two great men (Shāh Nī‘matullāh and Anwār) pass away, you should go and meet one of them.”⁴

Soon afterwards, Dā‘ī dreamt of a *majlis*, a Sufī meeting, where an old man sat before a flowing fountain, busy sewing. Dā‘ī realized that the old man was Bāyazīd al-Bastāmī; Bāyazīd told him: “This job of sewing first belonged to Ibrahīm ibn Adham, and in his hand he had wool.⁵ Then the task passed to me, and in my hand there was thread. Now it is Shāh Nī‘matullāh’s turn, and in his hand it has become silk!”

¹ *Dīwān-i Shāh Dā‘ī* ed. Muhammad Dabir Sīāqī, introduction by ‘Alī Asghar Hikmat (Tehran, 1339), two volumes.

² The famous mystic and poet. See Jean Aubin (editor), *Materiaux pour la bibliographie de Shāh Nī‘matullāh Walī Kirmānī* (Paris, 1956); E. G. Browne, *A Literary History of Persia* (Cambridge, 1969), Vol. III, pp. 463-73; Nasrollah Pourjavady and Peter L. Wilson, “The Descendants of Shāh Nī‘matullāh Walī Kirmānī”, *Islamic Culture* (Hyderabad) Jan. 1973.

³ See Browne, *op. cit.*, III, pp. 173-86.

⁴ ‘Abd al-Razzāq Kirmānī, *Risālah*, in Aubin, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

⁵ Bāyazīd and Ibn Adham were two of the most famous Sufis of the 3rd/9th century. See ‘Attar’s *Muslim Saints and Mystics* (Episodes from the *Tadhkirat al-Auliya*) Trans. by A. J. Arberry (Chicago, 1966) pp. 100-123, 62-79.

Next day, when Dā'ī reported the dream to Bahrāmī, the Master declared, "It is decreed: you will go to Kirman, to the King of Māhān." Although it was winter, Shāh Dā'ī set out at once for Māhān (the village near Kirman where Shāh Ni'matullāh lived and is buried) with his brother and a few companions. The way was beset with many difficulties, and as many miracles and visions. When they finally reached the goal, Shāh Ni'matullāh received Dā'ī and initiated him at once. Dā'ī wrote:

I reached Māhān and my soul awoke;
Shāh Ni'matullāh has become the master of my heart.⁶

Dā'ī returned to Shiraz. When Shāh Ni'matullāh died in 834/1431, he was twenty-four years old. When Bahrāmī died in 841, he became the khalīfah of the Order in Shiraz, and it was about then that he began to compose his poetry and essays, which were later to be collected and copied by his son.⁷

Our author's *takhallus* (pen name), Dā'ī, means "he who prays"; it did not belong to him exclusively, but rather to his family, which traced its descent from Dā'ī al-Saghīr, the last 'Alewī king of Tabaristān and Gilān, who was killed in 316/928.⁸ Although Dā'ī himself was a member of several Sufī orders, including the Ahmadīyyah Qādirīs of Asia Minor, and the Safavids, there is no doubt that his first allegiance was to Shāh Ni'matullāh, whom he praised in a number of poems:

Come spread your arms to heaven O Dā'ī
if like us you are one of the beggars of God's Bounty
(Ni'mat Allah).⁹

He was a close friend of another of Shāh Ni'matullāh's disciples in Shiraz, the famous satirist, parodist and eulogist of food, Bushāq (Abū Ishāq Shīrāzī) At'ima ("The Gastronomer"),¹⁰ on whose death he composed an elegy.¹¹ Among Dā'ī's other works are a

⁶ *Dīwān-i Shāh Dā'ī*, Vol. II, p. 87.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. "LB". At the time the *Dīwān* was first collected, Dā'ī was 55 years old. (Herman Ethé, *Catalogue of Persian Manuscripts in the Library of the India Office*: Oxford, 1903; SI099.)

⁸ *Dā'irat al-ma'ārif-i Fārsī*, ed. Gh. Musāhib (Tehran 1345 a.h.s.), Vol. 1, p. 943.

⁹ *Dīwān-i Shāh Dā'ī*, Vol. II, p. 755.

¹⁰ See Browne, *op. cit.*, Vol. III, pp. 344-51.

¹¹ *Dīwān-i Shāh Dā'ī*, Vol. II, pp. 312-15. Here he gives the date of Bushāq's death as 850/1445-6, which we consider correct, rather than Browne's 814/1416 (*op. cit.*, Vol. III, p. 211) or Arberry's 828/1424—1427 (See *Classical Persian Literature*; London 1967; p. 140.)

number of risālas¹² a commentary on the *Gulshan-i Rāz* of Mahmūd Shabistārī, called *Nasā'im-i Gulshan* (“Breezes from the Rose Garden”),¹³ and a commentary on the first three books of Rūmī’s *Mathnawī*.¹⁴

From Dā‘ī’s *Dīwān*¹⁵ we have chosen to translate a selection in mathnawī metre, which we have called “The Tale of the Fish”; we confess to not having made a strictly literal translation, in the interest of introducing Dā‘ī to Western readers in a form more nearly approximating his spirit of combined profundity and good humor, than a dry word-for-word rendition could have achieved. We do think it necessary, however, to say a few words about the philosophical background of “The Tale”.

The thought of Shāh Dā‘ī, like that of his master Shāh Ni‘matullāh, was based root and branch in that of the great Andalusian Shaykh Muhyī al-Dīn Ibn ‘Arabī. In some ways it might even be called a popularization of Ibn ‘Arabī, for although Dā‘ī is perfectly capable of pure metaphysical exposition, he ties it as often as not to examples couched in lyrical or narrative verse.

Before the emergence of consciousness (*shuhud*, “witness”), God was a Hidden Treasure, Dā‘ī explains in his preface to the tale (referring to the *hadith-i qudsi*, “I was a Hidden Treasure and I desired to be known, so I created the world that I might be known”). As the philosophers have said, being or existence cannot be defined, even though it is far more clear than anything else. The mind can never reach Essence (or the Absolute) because Being is without definition or limitation of description of any sort. There is no plurality in His Essence: He is neither composite nor simple, neither substance nor accident. He is the Essence of all created beings because He Himself is stripped from the chains of creation.

Ibn ‘Arabī’s position is identical: “The Absolute in such an absoluteness... (God in Himself as He really is), is absolutely inconceivable and inapproachable”, that is, transcends every definition man can think of. Thus He is “the Mystery of mysteries,...the most indeterminate of

¹² *The Catalogue of the Persian, Turkish, Hindūstanī and Pushtū Manuscripts in the Bodleian Library* (Oxford, 1889) mentions, under 883, “eleven risālas on Sufic matters” from a manuscript dated 897/1474. *The Verzeichniss der Persischen Handschriften der Koniglchen Bibliothek zu Berlin*, (Berlin 1888) mentions, under S774, a “*Fragments des Commentaires des Nizām al-Dīn Dā‘ī*.”

¹³ Manuscript in the Central Library of Tehran University, S3286.

¹⁴ The *Hāshiya-i Dā‘ī*. Ethe (*Loc cit*), mentions an edition lithographed in Lucknow in 1282 a.h.

¹⁵ From the *Mathnawī Ganj-i Rawān* (Treasure of Soul—with a pun on “running water”) Vol. 1, pp. 42-44. Dā‘ī’s *Dīwān* contains, in the first volume, a “Sextet of Mathnawis” (*mathnawīat- Sittah*) of which the *Ganj-i Rawān* is the second. Volume II, the *Dīwān* proper, contains the ghazals, qasidahs, rubaiyat, etc., and has been divided into three sections by the editor.

indeterminates, the abysmal darkness,...something that lies at the very source of all...existents and makes them exist. It is Existence as the ultimate ground of everything”.¹⁶

And yet, Dā‘ī points out, since He is the Essence of the created world, He is not totally removed from conditionality. If He is the unconditioned, He is also the conditioned—if He is the worshipped, He is at the same time the worshipper. “At this stage, there exists between the two (God and the world) a relation of reciprocal need (*iftiqār*, lit. “poverty”). As Al-Qāshānī (a well-known commentator on Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Fusūs al-hikām*) says, ‘The world is in need of the Reality for its existence, while the Reality is in need of the world for its self-manifestation’”.¹⁷

Our definition and His Unity are one and the same, Dā‘ī asserts. His Transcendence (*tanzīh*) and His Immanence (*tashbīh*) are one and the same. Seeing Reality as Transcendence is “merely half of the (perfect) knowledge of God”, according to Ibn ‘Arabī. The pure intellect...which has freed itself completely from anything physical and material...cannot by nature see God except in His Transcendence. The other half of knowledge, however, deals with Immanence, “because God is Transcendent and Immanent at the same time”.¹⁸

Although there is but one ocean and countless waves, Dā‘ī explains, all these waves are water in the same ocean. Determinations (the waves) are simply a mental construct, and if this mentality is put aside, all the waves will again appear as water: no determination will remain. According to Ibn ‘Arabī, “the most appropriate symbol of Life (or existence) is afforded by ‘water’.... ‘The secret of Life is in the act of flowing peculiar to water’. And everything in existence has a watery element in its very constitution, because water is the most basic of all elements. Everything is alive because of the ‘water’ it contains. And this ‘Watery’ element...corresponds to the He-ness of the Absolute.

“Each single thing is in itself a unique existence (like a wave), and yet is immersed in the limitless ocean of Life.... In the first aspect, everything is unique and single, but in the second aspect everything loses its identity in the midst of the ‘Water’ that flows through all”.¹⁹

THE TALE OF THE FISH

Now once upon a time a school of fish
had met in council to discuss the tale
(familiar to all) that fish had life

¹⁶ T. Izutsu, *A Comparative Study of the Key Philosophical Concepts in Sufism and Taoism; Part I: Ibn ‘Arabī* (Tokyo, 1966), p. 19.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 141-142.

and breathed and took existence from one source:
The Water. Furthermore, that *all* which lives
from Water gains its living, finds its life
in Water. Water's fame fills all the world,
and Water fills the oyster's ear with pearl,
the eyes of heavy clouds with mercy, mouth
of dust with flowing bounty. All the earth
has pledged its soul as mortgage to this source,
this element which with one drop renews
the world—which with such light abounds, it seems
that Heaven's very eye is fixed upon it.
Man (so says the tale) appeared from but
a single drop of it, and from it sprang
the vasty ocean of all heart and soul.

The school of fish were puzzled by all this,
and thus began to argue what it meant:
one of them said, "Beware! What right have we
to sully with our words the bright-faced one,
His Majesty the Water?" Then a fish
(more optimistic) spoke and said, "But wait!
Such disappointment must be a mistake,
for what if the whole tale were true, what then?"
"There must be proof!" a third demanded, "for
without some hard facts, who knows what is true?"
A fourth burst out: "Ah! Now I see it all!
All is unveiled through intuition, for
on such a Path, mere thought has far less chance!"
"That would be fine, my friend", the fifth
fish said, "if everyone possessed, like you,
the eye of intuition; but, in truth,
they simply don't—and there's an end to that."
"The Inner State! That's the real thing, not words",
another shouted. "Only Water pure
will satisfy the thirsty ones."

"No, wait",

then spoke another delegate. "I think
that only Love can guide us now, and if
you do not have His Love, give up and call
the conference off." Thus spoke the fish, and thus

they wrangled, flinging forth opinions till
the sea grew warm with all their hot debate,
when from the circle of contention, one
of the companions stepped, and cleared his throat.
“I am the humblest and most ignorant
of fish, yet hear me, and if what I say
meets with approval, then abide by it
and put an end to strife”; thus was his speech.
“I know that in a distant quarter of
our sea, there lives an ancient fish, who more
than any here possesses wisdom, Truth,
sagacity. On all horizons of
our sea, in science there is none like he,
but listen: all his knowledge and degree
of wisdom does nor spring from written page
or dusty book, for in his school (they say)
such seas of ink are but a vagrant stream,
and knowledge such as he possesses, from
the inmost level of the heart springs forth.
In deepest trenches of our unplumbed sea
he roams, and shuns the shallows and the shores.
Come, let us to him with our questions swim,
let all the drops return unto their source.
Perhaps our puzzle will be solved by him
and thereby all our hearts gain rest at last.”
This sound advice at once infused the fish
with new enthusiasm, and as one
they clamoured their acclaim and new-found hope
that promised a solution to their quest.
So, one by one they swam, set out towards him;
anxiety suffused their hearts with blood,
their eyes with tears, their journey with dispatch.
Boundless hardship plagued their path—success
came only after infinite distress.
But finally they found the ancient one
who of all fish in that age was the Pole,
and to his august presence bowed themselves
in deep humility and courtesy
as well they might. Their spokesman rose and said,
“O Shaykh, O thou who sought and found

the secrets of the universe, now peer
into our hearts, for God's sake, hear our plea.
We have been told that Water is the source
and origin of all, the ferment of
all union and all separation; but
how strange this seems to us, how hard to grasp,
since we have never seen this Water, not
a one of us, not once in all our lives!
Towards thee we have been swimming day and night
yet from this ocean of perplexity
have found no exit. Not a trace of Him,
this fabled Water, not a single drop
before our eyes has fallen—and obsessed
by questing, tossed in raging floods of doubt
and torrents of dismay, we come to thee
as our last hope. Now could it be that thou,
for love of God and in thy grace, might feel
some pity for our plight, illuminate
the darkened minds of fish and demonstrate
this Water to us like a noble sun
in such a way that clouds might never veil
its face nor hide its brilliance from our sight.”

The ancient fish was silent. On his breast
he sank the chin of meditation, till
at last from his communion with the world
of the Unseen, he raised his countenance
and spoke. “Ah, fish! If you could bring to me
from all existence one thing, and one thing
alone that is *not* Water, then I might
reveal to you the Essence which you seek.
But mark this well, that there is naught but He!
This endless ocean which surrounds us, that
is He, and so are we. We each came forth
from Water, and unto the Water shall
return.” Upon the fishes' minds these words
worked miracles. Their hearts and eyes became
a veritable sea of lights. They cried
“So He it is who all this while hath sought
Himself; and He and I and we and thou

are but a pretext, subterfuge and trick!
Our doubts and questions rose from this one fact,
that Water's veil is Water—nothing more.
Thank God our troubling doubts are put to flight,
imagination and warped fantasies
dispelled at last and laid to rest. Now we
have learned that all our voyaging is but
an inward voyage, and in all our sea
none swim beside us. All, all, all is He!”

MORAL

The less, the more—the good, the bad—the sweet
and bitter: If we wish to pry within
the secrets of a thing, we must perforce
have recourse to its opposite, its twin.
But know that our Creation's eyes are blind
because HE has no opposite, no like,
comparison nor similitude; and in
His Essence, all such opposites are one.
How faint, how small our knowledge of this truth,
for knowledge is distinction, nor can we
distinguish aught except between two things.
The portals of Distinction have been closed
by Unity, and if you should attain
to gnosis in the One, then recognize
that though He be possessed of attributes,
His Essence is but one—“Say: He is One”!