The Extraordinary Life Story of a Scholar
Mehmed Mecdi, 1587

Translation: Helga Anetshofer

The following biography is from the translation into Turkish of Taşköprülüzade Ahmed’s (d. 1561) Shaqaq al-numaniya, a biographical encyclopedia of more than 500 scholars and sufi sheikhs who lived after the rise of the Ottomans. Taşköprülüzade held the position of the judge of Istanbul until 1554, when he resigned due to failing eyesight. Although his native language was Turkish, he dictated this work in Arabic in 1558. There were a few attempts to translate the compilation into Turkish. The entry below is from Mehmed Mecdi’s translation, which was carried out in 1587. Mecdi strove to turn the unassuming plain language of the original work to a courtly style. For example, the excessive use of various terms related to alcohol consumption in the entry below was a conscious choice of the translator, for it pertained to the topic, and was considered an art of eloquent writing. Therefore, Mecdi’s work represents an attempt to produce a new work based on the original work.

The subject of the biographical entry is the poet and scholar Melihi (d. early sixteenth c.). The honorific title ‘Mevlana’ in front of his name (also used as Molla or Monla) is customary for scholars of Islamic jurisprudence, who were collectively known as the ulema. Students in this track usually attended a medrese—a secondary through higher education institution—for over ten years studying the Arabic language, Quran exegesis, and Islamic law, among other things, to become either jurists or medrese professors, if they were lucky to find a position. Travelling to other cities to study with a particular scholar was rather common for ambitious students. Melihi travelled to Herat, the seat of the Timurid court at the time, and became classmates with Abdurrahman Jami (d. 1492), who would become one of the most prominent poets and theologians of the Persianate world. Melihi’s life story took an extraordinary turn when he gradually became alcoholic after he returned to Istanbul following his studies. It was illegal to sell alcohol to Muslims, although surely many drank. His constant intoxication seems to be the impeding problem. As it becomes clear from the text, Melihi could easily get ahold of wine until the sultan specifically ordered the tavern-keepers not to sell it to him. Apparently, he had a pleasant personality, as he was often called to the palace to be a boon companion to Sultan Mehmed II. Mustafa Ali, the author of another biographical encyclopedia, writes that the sultan felt that a feast without Melihi was like food without salt. He is not known to have held any office, so apart from the stipend mentioned in the text, it is not clear how he made his living.

Mevlana Melihi—may God have mercy on him. He hailed from the province of Anatolia. When he studied the advanced sciences with the virtuous scholars of his time he supplicated to God: My Lord! Increase me in knowledge! (Q 20:114). Consequently he was endowed with an abundance of divine grace, excelling among his peers.

Since advancing to higher ranks and progressing to higher standards is an innate part of human nature, Mevlana Melihi went to the Land of the Ajam in order to rise high on the ladder of virtues. During his studies with the scholars of that land, he became companions with Maulana Jami, who was intoxicated with the cup of pure and true [spiritual] wine. After Melihi imbibed from the cup of virtues through the grace of Jami’s companionship, he returned to his noble and bountiful home, and settled in the protected city of Constantinople in the early days after the conquest.
[1453]. He had indeed drunk an excessive amount from the cup of knowledge: if those who are used to sipping from the bowl of divine virtues take even a sip of what he drank, they would become drunk, unconscious, and bewildered. Just one drop of the wine that he swallowed would make all the people of the world intoxicated.

If one of the droplets we drank fell on the world, vines would appear
From just one berry of our grapes all things would get drunk.

As he was so intoxicated with the tipsiness of the carefree cup, he became a wine lover and drinker until the end of his life: just like the wine-jar he was never empty of wine. In all his life nothing made his heart and eyes blossom like a rose so much as as fragrant and pomegranate-colored wine. If he was not dead drunk he was not himself. The tulip of my pine-cone shaped heart would only open up with the help of rose and tulip-colored wine. The withering rosebud of his mind would only become succulent with wine, and the dew-crying rose of his heart would only be calmed by the same. […] He was not able to function properly unless the warming intoxication of the wine that bestows life and increases the spirits—which in elegant speech they call ‘the second spirit’—entered his body like a flowing spirit, or flowed into his veins like the blood of life. Without drinking a few cups of wine he would not eat even one bite. […]

The author of the Shaqaq has narrated from his father that the Arabic dictionary of Sihah by Jawhari [d. 1009] was preserved on the thread of the memory of this omniscient augur like pearls on a string. If one had difficulty with an Arabic word and explored it, Melihi would accurately recite from memory all the phrases and expressions related to this word from that dictionary.

One of the trusted pious friends told the following story: “When I was going to travel from Ajam to Rum [Greater Persia to the Ottoman Lands], I visited his excellency Abdurrahman Jami and asked: ‘I am going to Rum. Is there anything I can do for you there?’ He answered: ‘I have a companion there by the name Melihi. I am hearing that he now resides in the protected city of Constantinople. This treatise is my gift to this most virtuous man. Please, bring it to him.’ When I arrived in the protected city of Constantinople a while later I started asking around for Mevlana Melihi among the members of the group of the pious ulema, thinking he was one of them, because he was friends with Molla Jami. One of them told me: ‘Melihi is not a member of the ulema, who are steady in rectitude and prosperity. Instead, he dwells in the house of drunkenness, that is, the tavern, like a misfortune-bringing cup of wine. Go there, that’s where you will find him.’ Thereupon I searched for him, and indeed found him in a tavern. I conveyed to him the greetings of Maulana Jami and handed over his virtuous treatise. Upon my message and words, he started weeping bitterly and said: ‘The divine decree and the predetermined plan of fate has led me to sin and iniquity, while it has led Maulana Jami to rectitude and prosperity. The commandment of God is certain destiny (Q 33:38).’ […] After that learned man (Melihi) spoke of scholars who defended fatalism, and blamed predestination and fate for his own plight, he said: ‘Men of bad plight like me are not worthy of seeing such an unequaled treatise,’ and returned it to me. He remained at the spot where he was, and continued with his unlawful ways. [Later] he regretted his past deficient actions, and thought that there will be no good end for him, because, despite [his ability for] judgement, he had acted contrary to the things forbidden by divine law. So he filled the cups of his eyes with tears of remorse and let his tear drops flow and flow from his cheeks. […]

They say that (once) Sultan Mehmed Khan Gazi heard that Mevlana Melihi drank wine in the covered bazaar and sprayed his unclean sips on Muslims. As a result of this spraying incident, the
sultan became concerned and ordered the wine-sellers not to give any wine to Mevlana Melihi. He threatened them with capital punishment, and promised again and again a swift penalty. With this measure Mevlana Melihi had to refrain from the wine glass. As he no longer set foot in a tavern, he was designated a daily stipend of 25 ağaçe for his necessary expenses and lived for a few days abstemiously and virtuously. (Ar.) Perhaps God is granting me virtue. On this issue Mevlana Melihi made the following joke: “How on earth did the noble padishah believe them when they said about me: ‘He spit wine on people’ — me, who holds every glass of pure wine in high esteem, and who would not give away one drop of that precious jewel for all of his treasury!”

One day some hateful and malevolent men saw the aforementioned virtuous Melihi drunk and complained to the padishah about him: “Mevlana Melihi is again secretly abusing the crystal cup which used to be the eye he saw through and the hand that held him; he is secretly longing for the sound of wine gurgling out from a narrow-necked vessel and the clamor of the beak-spouted jug. While he had previously promised in the presence of the comely padishah he now broke his promise because of the goblet, and made the keeper of the tavern his spiritual guide and the ‘staff’ of the old men’ [that is, wine] his helping hand.”

Mevlana Melihi was a strange person,
The keeper of the tavern was his spiritual guide.
When he was not able to walk any more,
The goblet became his helping hand.

The noble padishah sent for him immediately and had his breath checked. Yet there was no smell of alcohol. He asked how this was possible, and urged and reproved him: “What is the reason for your tipsiness? Speak the truth!”

(Pe.) If you desire in the world someone with a face like the sun,

Tell the truth like the true dawn.

Mevlana Melihi told him the circumstances and said: “The cup of my promised agreements is still intact. I have not crushed it with the rock of violation. Only I, who is ill from deprivation, gave myself a enema with this vital force and water of life as a remedy for my disease. That is what made me tipsy.” Sultan Mehmed Khan Ghazi took pleasure from these words. He laughed heartily like the gurgling sound of liquor poured out from a pitcher, and pardoned him for his sin.

[Pe.] Honesty is what brings God’s satisfaction,
I have not seen anyone who was lost from the right way.

Sultan Mehmed Khan Ghazi’s—may God’s grace and approval be upon him—cup of living filled up and eventually the goblet of his life broke. Afterwards Mevlana Melihi drank even more. From then on he was preoccupied with drinking alcohol until his death. Like a bubble he always lusted for wine. Whenever he saw a cup of wine he would simply flop. He would spread out an old mat and take the place of honour wherever he spotted a goblet of wine.

[Pe.] .... Abstain from the elixier of life [that is, wine],
For drinking one drop of it brings a thousand calamities

We ask from God—whose grace is wide and majesty is high—that He—after Melihi has entirely drunk the wine of death from the hand of the cup-bearer of the hour of death—may quench his
thirst with the water of paradise (from the river of Kauthar). May God let Melihi, who was ill with sinful thirst, obtain fresh life and immeasurable freshness through the stream of His forgiveness of which He has spoken in the verse: *A spring whence those brought near to God drink (in the gardens of paradise)* (Q 83:28). Amen.

[Pe.] May God’s grace be his friend and companion,  
May Your forgiveness be the guide on his path.

*Note:* Melihi was a skillful poet who could write beautiful poetry. There was elegance in his witty poems, and sweetness in his pleasant works.