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### **Poetics and Aesthetics in the Persian Sufi Literary Tradition**

A Victorian traveler once remarked that Persia is a country where people walk on silk carpets and speak the language of poetry. In the same romantic vein, Iran has been called “the land of the rose and nightingale”, those symbols, of course, of the archetypes of the “Beloved and Lover” or “Beauty and Love” or, one might say, of “Aesthetics and poetics” ... if we interpret the symbol of the rose in Persian literature as referring to the Aesthetics and the nightingale to Poetics. As if following the passion of the nightingale for the Rose, the Persian Sufi poets [professed themselves to be lovers of beauty, and all their poems to be but songs and hymns in praise of that Transcendent Beloved, as Hafiz put it: *Not I alone it is who surrenders the beauties of rose-cheeked ladies. All around there are a thousand nightingales that intone the same hymn.* (Hafiz 1983, ghazal 190, v, 6)

The opening lines of another ghazal by Hafiz convey the Persian poet’s eternal message – the perpetual call of beauty to rapture, communicating the nightingale’s constant romance with the rose, as well as the mystical poet’s ongoing aesthetic project to view all temporal beauty as a ray of divine splendor: *Red roses have blossomed; Nightingales are*

*all drunk. Everywhere, the hue and cry of ecstasy: Oh Sufi, devotee of the Eternal Now!* (Hafiz 1983, p. 396, ghazal 20 v. 1)

In this article, rather than entering into elaborate and complicated scholarly theories about Aesthetics and Poetics, I will take Hafiz's lead and play the Saki, a Cupbearer who purveys a goblet of that wine of beauty which so intoxicated the nightingales of Persia that they never regained sobriety. It is the same wine to which Shabistari's verse refers inciting the lover of this Beauty to – *Drink down the wine whose cup is the Beloved's countenance; imbibe a brew whose beaker is her wine flushed, drunken eyes.* (Shabistari 1986 p. 101, v. 811)

Persian Sufi poetry is animated by a vision of divine beauty – that beauty which is in the words of Keats “a joy forever”. This beauty is also, in the theological vocabulary of the Koran, the “Light of the Heavens and the Earth”. The Truth underlying Appearance, the Absolute Being, the One who is “like unto none”. *All round the world my heart has gone but like unto Him found no one – There is none like Him, none like Him, none!*

The potential tale of this Beauty – who is one with Truth and Goodness – is also reflected in the art of Persian storytelling. Traditionally all stories are prefaced with this opening line drawn from the archetypal Islamic *creation myth*: “There was one and there was none.”<sup>1</sup> Although this statement bears a superficial resemblance to similar phrases in other literature (such as “Once upon a time” in English, or “Il était une fois” in French, for instance), the Persian expression conveys a profound philosophical message, as well. All Persian stories are prefaced with this phrase simply because it recognizes all stories occurring after this story. From a philosophical point of view, the phrase emphasizes the basic metaphysical premise that “the being of the One precedes the being of the Many”, that the existence of “Multiplicity”. This premise is well expressed in Maghribi's verses: *Ah, as if your face brimmed with sun is laid to plain view within both worlds every atom manifests. From the shadow downcast by the sun of your face arose all existent things. Your visage, a sun itself, cast a shadow; from that penumbra all phe-*

*nomena appeared, every atom is existent through a sun from every atom a sun is subsistent.* (Maghribi 1993, p. 19, VI: 1-4)

Just as in the Islamic metaphysical thought, one speaker of the “One Being” who precedes all other beings in Persian Sufi aesthetics one also refers to that Eternal Beauty which precedes all temporal beauty. The analogical relationship between metaphysical thinking and aesthetic thought in Persian Sufism is evoked by Jami in the prologue to his mystic-romantic poem *Yusuf and Zulaykha: The heart ravishing beautiful bride was in the bridal chamber; a lovely mistress in her blissful solitude, playing the game of love with none but herself, and drinking alone the wine of her own beauty. None knew aught of her. Even the mirror had not yet reflected her countenance. But beauty cannot stand being conceited for long. Comeliness cannot hear concealment: if you close the door, she will show her face through the window. So she pitched her tent outside the sacred precincts, showing herself within the soul and throughout creation. In every mirror her theophanic features appeared; so that everywhere her tale was told. From that effulgence a flash struck the rose and the rose cast passion into the nightingale’s heart.* (Jami n.d. p. 592)

The Persian Sufi poets did not have mere romantic entertainment in mind in the usage of erotic imagery in passages such as these. Rather, they wished to make a metaphysical point about creation, to allude to that Primordial Beauty who had unveiled herself on “Roof of Contingency” so that as a result of the theology, thousands of words came into being. A beam of this Eternal Beauty struck the Rose, and the Rose reflected that Beauty to the Nightingale, filling the distraught bird with melody, frenzy, and ecstasy. This myth of aesthetic genesis – if one may call it this way – is expressed by Hafiz’s renowned verse: *By grace of the rose the nightingale learnt the art of song; Else, within its splendor bill there could never be sung such lovely rhymes and tunes.* (Hafiz 1983, ghazal 272, v. 4) In another verse – one of the most sublime expressions of the myth of genesis in all Persian Literature – Hafiz provides a more explicitly metaphysical formulation to this doctrine: *In pre-eternity, a ray of your beauty was shown through its theophany.*

*Love appeared and set the world afire.* (Ibid, ghazal 148, v. 1) Both verses mentioned above have one basic message: to show how beauty gave birth to love and how love generated existence.

As Jami in the passage cited above pointed out, this is also the central tale of artistic creation. The artist first witnesses beauty. This vision arouses love and consequently, a longing to express the beauty witnessed – through Love – in artistic creation. The Greek myth of the creation of Venus's son Cupid chronicles this same erotic-metaphysical and aesthetic event, and in the same context Shakespeare's words (in *Romeo and Juliet*), "it's Cupid who rules us all", should be taken. The metaphysical allusions of this aesthetic-metaphysical creation-myth of beauty, which then created the "world of romance" through her splendor, are many and deserve our consideration. We have seen how beauty – symbolized by Zulaykha as the hidden god – had deserted her solitude and pitched her tent in the realm of Appearance. How should this be understood? Four or five different interpretations exist in Persian Sufi writings of the realm of appearance, which many are summarized as follows:

According to the first interpretation "the realm of appearance" is seen as alluding to the world of multiplicity and temporal phenomena, symbolized in Sufi poetry by the "tresses of the Beloved", which despite their many nesses guide the seeker to the One Beloved – to whom each and every strand of hair alludes.

The second interpretation regards appearance as a reflection of God in the mirror of non-existence. This view is illustrated by the following verse from Shabastari's *Garden of mystery*: *Non-existence is a mirror, the world its reflection, and man is like the reflected eye of the unseen person.* (Shabastari 1986, p 72, v. 139)

A third interpretation follows the platonic conception, which considers the realm of appearance to but a shadow cast by the radiance of the divine Being. A fourth and final interpretation regards appearance neither as veil nor shadow, but rather as God Himself. In the words of Rumi: *He is the rose, meadow, the garden and spring. There is none other*

*than Him in the entire world's garden.* So where Shakespeare says: "O mistress mine, where are you roaming?" The Sufis would reply that this "mistress" is, in fact, the pre-eternal Beloved, forever roaming alone, beside of existence. This same philosophy of beauty in which the moral exemplar appears as the celestial original is featured in the following lines from Shakespeare's immortal sonnet: *What's this substance, whereof are you made, that millions of strange shadows on you tend? Since every one hath, every one, one shade. And you, but one, can every shadow lend, describe Adonis and the counterfeit is poorly imitated after you: on Helen's cheek all art of beauty set, And you in Grecian times are painted new: speak of the spring and foison of the year, The one doth the shadow of your beauty show, the other as your beauty doth appear; and you in every blessed shape we know: in all external grace you have some part, But you like none. None you, for constant heart.* (Shakespeare 1985, p 123)

Perhaps the best way to illustrate the diversity yet continuity between all these various interpretations of the eternal traffic between the two realms of Unity and Multiplicity, or Beauty and Appearance is by means of a diagram. According to the Sufis, the cycle of creation is divided into two halves of a circle. The upper half represents the spiritual realm. In the upper semicircle one finds a series of ideas pointing to transcendence and the divine: God, Heaven, Light, Eternity (that is transcendence of time), Beauty, Peace and the Beloved's face. The lower half of the circle represents the realm of multiplicity or many nesses. This in turn, is indicated by a variety of symbols, images, and concepts, which reveal its inferior nature, hell, separation, time, war, and the beloved's tresses. However, before exploring other dimensions of the Sufi aesthetic-poetic vision, it will be helpful to summarize the salient points of our discussion above. First, we have seen that the central theme of Persian Sufi poetry is, in fact, the relationship between the rose and the nightingale, two poetic symbols which encode truths penetrating to all art in general. The symbol of the rose conveys allusions to concepts such as beauty, love, divine Unity, poetry, music and beloved ness, while the nightingale symbolizes multiplicity and diversity. Artis-

tic creation contains in miniature form the entire story of Creation. The rose plays the part of absolute Existence in this story and the nightingale – with its songs, infinity diverse in their tonality and pitch, hymning the praise of the beauty of this divine Existence – express possible Being. Incessantly, beauty – the rose of the beloved – brings into existence myriads of lovers (nightingales); every moment she contemplates herself through the eyes of these lovers, hearing them sing praises. Instant by instant, the One Beauty assumes shape after shape, harkening to a perpetual chant of panegyric intoned upon a thousand tongues. It is this Beloved, this Unique One Being, and this multiplicity, to which Jami's lines refer: *Through all beautiful faces you have revealed your beauty; so in the lover's eye you may contemplate yourself. Through a beloved you're decked out in a lover's garb; and then your own display unto yourself you can elicit from yourself!* In this context, the above diagram of Unity and multiplicity – with the various characteristics of each half of the circle – not only tarnishes us with a basis for a general theory of aesthetics and poetics in Islamic mysticism, but also expresses the basic principles of Islamic Theography.

### Theology and Ethics

Thus, we see, for instance, how “Satan” who belongs to the nature of “Multiplicity” and multiplicity itself are the substance of all “war” and “hell”. In the same way, “hell” is the locus of sorrow, ignorance and separation: those qualities which pertain to multiplicity. Thus ever so-called “evil” in the end may also be subsumed under the category of “multiplicity”. “Ugliness”, for instance, is also “multiplicity” and “identify”, just as “despair” and “injustice”, are also attributes of “multiplicity”. On the other hand, “Unity” (that is to say God), encompasses and absorbs the qualities of the lower circle by its own comprehensive qualities. Unity's most salient attribute and manifestation is found in “love”. Love is described by the Sufis as the remedy of all illnesses and the alchemy of existence. Love transforms poverty into richness, pauperism into abundance, war into peace, ignorance into knowledge and hell into heaven. Finally it should be pointed out that poetry, the inspiration for which hails from the higher world of love and Unity,

ration for which hails from the higher world of love and Unity, functions as a motive and cause of Unity. The therapeutic value of poetry as well as its metaphysical motivation and aesthetic significance in Sufism arise from spiritual quality.

*“Charity is a duty unto every Muslim.  
He who has not the means thereto,  
let him do a good act or abstain from  
an evil one. That is Charity.”*  
Prophet Mohammad

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<sup>1</sup> pers. *yekī būd yekī nabūd* (Anm. d. Red.)