

On Sufism and Poetry

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[Here is a draft, a sort of outline of ideas toward a basic understanding of the relationship between Sufism and poetry, with an exposition of basic ideas about what poetry is and does, and might do. - Dana]

Poetry and Sufism: A Few Generalities

It's not surprising that Sufis place so much emphasis on music and especially poetry in their teachings and their understanding of the Way to salvation or reunion with the Divine. The general Sufi sense of what reality consists in is inherently poetic; it seems not only to parallel the cosmos that a poetic imagination, in the most general terms, conceives, but really seems to embody that version of reality.

Let me make some observations about what poetry is, actually, and then we can see how it aligns and intersects with the Sufi view of the world. Much of what follows is apt to seem painfully obvious, or self-evident. But my experience is that it's always of vital importance to keep the basic underpinnings, the basic facts and understanding of your subject, clearly in view at all times when working out more complex problems; otherwise, the complexities take on lives of their own and begin to detach themselves from their sources -- which mystics say is our essential problem.*

All poetry is inherently mystical. In the first and most basic way, its primary aim is to communicate at nonrational levels. This idea is easy to grasp rationally, on the face of it, but tricky to grasp in practice or as a matter of fundamental understanding because of the way we learn to read and think of poetry in the modern age. That is, as dutiful and well-trained followers of the scientific method, we learn to analyze poetry using primarily logic and rationality and to frame verbal summaries of what a poem "means" based on these rational analyses. Analysis no doubt has a place in understanding poetry because poetry is made of language and language requires us to create categories to communicate; that is, especially in the modern (not to say, English-speaking) world, we think of language as an instrument that conveys practical, sortable, down-to-earth "meanings," which implies meanings we can grasp at pragmatic, rational levels, concrete or abstract. So since poetry is made of everyday words, our natural disposition is to try to grasp its rational, utilitarian meanings.

Lots of people who read poetry in this analytical framework get frustrated very quickly. This frustration sets in because poetry's rational, utilitarian meanings are sometimes hard to grasp and even harder to paraphrase. These meanings often do not seem self-evident and often seem obscure or veiled, and even when they are eventually grasped, they can seem trite or useless, and one wonders why in the hell there should be so much work to understand such a simple thing, a thing that could be said much more directly.

Actually, there is an answer to this objection: The poem whose rational meaning seems trite probably (if it's a truly worthwhile poem) was meant to convey a whole different range of meaning -- the kind of meaning I've called nonrational. In other words, while analysis of a poem's meaning has its place, it is unfortunately the least appropriate method of understanding poetry because poetry's major meanings are nonrational.

To say this in yet other words, the meaning you can think of is usually not the most powerful or affective (sic) meaning the poem conveys, or builds up -- let's begin to disperse the subject-object understanding of what happens when you read or hear a poem. Instead, the poem through its verbal impact spurs you to "feel" or "sense" meanings rather than "think" meanings.

It does this in two general ways: through image and metaphor, and through its sound.

If you are still with me in this overly abstract discussion, then you probably begin to see why Sufism devotes itself to poetry. There is more to say about this.

Metaphors exist to convey, or evoke, or create sensibilities that cannot be conveyed or created using direct terms. For our purposes, this means metaphors evoke "feelings" in the range of emotions, but also sensibilities, in the range of intuitions, and of moral and spiritual senses of meaning which are very difficult or impossible to express directly. For a simple example, Robert Frost's poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," a poem most Americans are familiar with, evokes through its imagery a sense of gorgeous winter beauty

and peace, inside which is a certain friction or tension. Now, the poet could have expressed this feeling in direct terms by saying: "A man was struck by the beauty and peace of the snowy woods, but he felt a certain tension because he had to continue on his way." Even this sentence contains helpful imagery, but it in a way encapsulates the rational gist of the poem. But the imagery of the poem creates in the reader the actual feelings of peace, beauty and tension; these actual feelings make up a range of experience entirely different from the experience of the rational thought that sums up the poem.

In other words, metaphors make you feel a meaning rather than think it. They circumvent the limitations of rational analysis and expression, and aim at the heart, to use an old-time metaphor. When you read a poem and have no idea what the rational meaning is, and yet you feel an emotion of some kind aroused by the images or events in the poem, then your inability to paraphrase or summarize the poem is of no account, really; you have grasped the poem by feeling the emotion. The emotion is the meaning.

In keeping with the mystical sense that there are levels or stages of reality, poems build up not only emotional responses, but also (let's say) intuitive, moral and spiritual responses. If you are sufficiently self-aware, you can distinguish in your reading or hearing of poetry different qualities of experience which are distinct from basic emotions like sadness or humor, but clearly real in your psyche. For example, in reading or hearing the story of Jesus' Passion, emotions of regret or sorrow or joy may arise, but also, deeply moral responses are also triggered in people, and if you push this, you can see that the Passion can catalyze a deep inner response of faith; it is virtually impossible to say what "faith" is, but you can certainly feel it, even though it is not an emotion like anger or happiness (although it may entail such emotions). So the experience of faith can be expressed directly in sentences like, "It's important to have faith," or "Faith is very powerful," but the feeling itself - beyond emotion -- can actually be evoked through the story and figures in the Gospels. (Similarly for the story of the Prophet and the hadith.) Words can catalyze deep inner sensibilities and experiences. This is what poetry is. This is why I say poetry

is inherently mystical: because it aims to evoke and create deep inner experiences that can (and should?) culminate in spiritual experiences. All poetry has the potential to trigger spiritual experience.

Now I said that one way poetry has its effect is through imagery and metaphor; and the other way is through its sound, or really, its music. Nowadays, because of our reliance on print (and electronic) media, it takes a little work to grasp the fact that only in the last hundred years or less have people thought of poetry as primarily a private, silent reading experience. Before our time, poetry was spoken aloud - more accurately, it was chanted or sung, in all cultures. (There is an early, early recording of Tennyson reciting his poetry, and though very scratchy, the sound of it is astonishing: He chants, declaims the poems in a chilling, almost supernatural thunder of half singing, half saying.) The "reasons" poetry was chanted or sung are manifold, all the way from the simple fact that when poetry was first composed there was no such thing as writing, up to the more complex observation that language has musical properties.

The important thing to observe here is the universal feeling that music is meaningful. More: Pure music -- like a Mozart sonata or a Mevlevi arrangement of drums and instruments without voice - is meaningful to virtually everyone despite the fact that it conveys no rational message at all. In listening to music, one feels the rhythms and hears the sounds, the tones, chords and melodies, and responds in one's own way. Language in its sonic form does the same thing as music. Words can be built up in powerful rhythm patterns; alliterations, assonances and rhyme sequences can be created that are not only pleasing to the ear, like melodies, but also powerful in ways that reach the body the same way instrumental music reaches through the body and touches the psyche. Music can be hypnotic, and so can poetry. The sound of words is very powerful because it is musical.

So the music of poetry creates nonrational meanings in the same way as instrumental or vocal music. Moreover, poetry uniquely combines music and imagery, and can shape specific meanings, or experiences. At this point it is important to recall that we are speaking almost strictly of only nonrational meanings: Poetry's primary shaping of meaning occurs at nonrational levels through

music and imagery. And then, as a bonus, poetry also can utilize the aspects of language which reach for the rational mind, as well.

Poetry's primary meanings are nonrational. This poses problems for discussions of poetry in college classrooms, because college lays almost all its emphasis on rational understanding.** But on the other hand, poetry's unique ability to reach beyond the rational and into the nonrational lends itself directly to Sufi teaching.

Sufi teaching addresses the inner human being. One aspect of the inner human being is the rational mind, and so in Sufism we find complex statements concerning metaphysics and cosmology, and we find certain philosophical explanations and analyses. But these texts are clearly less important to Sufism than is poetry. And the reason must by now be clear: Poetry

addresses -- or better, shapes the emotional, moral and spiritual faculties or elements of the inner person. The expressed aim of Sufi teaching is to help the individual align him or herself with the Divine, to "perfect" himself - which means, to purify his inner self (we can refer to terms like "nafs" -- the "animal soul" -- at this point) so it is worthy of "the beloved," or indeed simply capable of being there, so to speak.

There is a sentence in Wilhelm's translation of the I Ching which seems deeply Sufic to me; Wilhelm interprets: "All that is visible must grow beyond itself into the realm of the invisible." In Sufism and most of the mystical tradition, there is a sense that every individual is in fact perpetually in touch with the Divine, and his or her task is to find that spark or element of the Divine, which (in many forms of mystic expression) is to say, to find the true self, the self that is the Divine as opposed to the false, or worldly, or detached and apparently isolated self. In all mystical traditions, there is said to be a "way" to do this; there is a path that can be followed back to our origin, a way from the visible to the realm of the invisible.

The "way" varies in scope and detail from culture to culture, religion to religion. Some religions and mystical traditions prescribe the same purgative activities for all disciples, such as Buddhism, which in essence (apparently) trains everyone in the same methods of meditation. But in Sufism, the way is highly personal: The master assesses the needs of the individual and assigns the work appropriate to those particular needs. One might say, the Sufi master shows the individual the right trail among many possible trails. The aim is to awaken (to use a classic mystic metaphor) the individual to his or her state or level and to help him find the right methods of purgation (the second step along the mystic way) that clear away the fogs of our material existence -- the "visible" world.

Somehow, in other words, the Sufi master has to make the student aware of his inner self, the self that is an element of, or is the Divine. Poetry and music touch the inner sensibilities -- the emotional, intuitive, moral and spiritual parts of the inner self. They open the person living in the visible world to the realities of the invisible world.

Sufism places emphasis on metaphor as a key to understanding because it conveys or creates

meanings that are beyond the visible world -- which is also to say beyond the limits of logic, analysis, rationality -- and touches the emotional, intuitive, moral and spiritual worlds. Hence poetry.

Sufism places emphasis on music for the same reason: Music's meaning lives at supra-rational levels. Again - hence poetry.

Poetry is an instrument of awakening and instruction. It is a way of opening the mind to the divine reality, a way of helping people to grow out of the visible into the realm of the invisible. To broaden the point a little, this is the reason religious liturgies are chanted and often seem filled with "mystery": The liturgy, which is in fact a form of dramatic poetry, creates the emotional, moral and spiritual atmosphere for the Divine to be present; the sound and rhythm (or music) and in many cases the imagery of the liturgy open the worshipper's mind to the possibility of some sort of contact with the Divine.

Now there are a couple more basic points to be made about this. One is that the mystical traditions all focus their attention on the relation of the individual self to the Divine (in a very general sense, the "true self"). In some versions of the Way, the activities necessary for the traveler to make his way back to the spiritual origin are generalized to all wayfarers (as in the example of Buddhism). But in Sufism, there are many different kinds of training, and many different ways for many people with different spiritual needs. This aligns in a way with the inescapable fact that any given poem has multiple meanings; there are as many meanings of a poem, it has been said, as there are readers.

This is a way of saying that the individual shapes his or her own spiritual experience in the same way that he or she shapes the meaning of a poem. There is no poem acting in one way on all readers, giving one meaning and one meaning only; and this is because the act of reading -- or better, hearing -- is not a subject-object activity, one thing acting on another: Reading or hearing is a collaboration of a force of words and the listener's shaping imagination. Each person brings a different set of experiences, understandings, dispositions, interests to each poem, and hence finds different meanings than other listeners.

But as with spiritual experience, which has a single source in the Divine, each hearer of a poem meets a single source -- the poem, which if well-wrought has the capacity to create specific inner effects, open specific emotional, intuitive, moral, spiritual doors. Whatever is revealed in that opening will look different, or feel different, to different listeners, but if the poem is well-made it will be the same revelation. Sufism naturally uses poetry because the apprehension of a poem is an analogue for the apprehension of, or maybe a glimpse of the actual contact of the Divine: That glimpse or apprehension or contact is the same for all and different for all.

To recall a maxim of Western mysticism, each person creates his own heaven or hell.

The same varying apprehension of meaning is derived from music, naturally, music and poetry being similar if not essentially the same.

In Sufi poetry, there are a couple of metaphors which do not align immediately with the figures, and the categories of figures, in other mystical literature. To place this statement in a more specific context, most depictions of the Way insist in one sense or another on the moral virtues, most clearly delineated for us, maybe, by Socrates, who named temperance, courage, justice, wisdom, honesty and piety, among others. I mention temperance first because it is a virtue (to retain the Platonic term) stressed repeatedly in the Socratic dialogues and also in Christianity and Islam. But in Sufi poetry, paradoxically, intemperance seems to be represented as a virtue; intoxication and erotic longing are metaphors of certain human relationships with the Divine.

Now there is a reason for this, and it is figured - or actually, embodied -- in Sufi poetry. This whole article has been pointing at the fact that poetry and music are used to open the inner self to its own reality, and to its relation to the Divine. When I noted above that poetry and music can be "hypnotic," I meant in a general way that poetry and music can create an "altered state of consciousness" (to use a phrase current a few decades ago) and that some form of altered consciousness is needed to awaken an individual to the reality of who he or she "really" is and what that self consists in. This awakening and subsequent state of consciousness looks to the everyday world like insanity, and to the experiencer it is sometimes represented in Sufi poetry as a delicious bewilderment -- seemingly the antithesis of Platonic, Christian or Islamic temperance.

Now paradoxically, this sense is not peculiar to Sufism, but is found in other mystical literature -- the prime example being Socrates himself, perhaps, who in the Allegory of the Cave describes the mystic climbing out of the cave into enlightenment, and then upon returning is thought to be insane by the cave dwellers because he tells them the shadows on the wall are unreal and urges the dwellers to unshackle themselves. The enlightened man is seen as insane.

The theme of divine madness is treated in more detail in Plato's Phaedrus. Significantly, one of the kinds of madness Socrates questions there involves words, their power, and the use and misuse of that power. Although Socrates operated largely along very rational lines, it is significant that in the last hours of his life he began writing poetry, at least partly because he felt it was an obligation to the gods that he had not yet discharged -- but we may also note that he deliberately chose to put himself in a poetic, nonrational frame of mind just as he was to pass on. In other words, he sought the madness, the "altered state," or indeed the intoxication that poetry evokes, or creates.

Poetry can literally be intoxicating. A brief anecdote, one among many that might be told: Years ago a couple of friends and I were reading poems of Robert Frost aloud in the living room, and although we were very temperately drinking black tea (not beer or wine as we well might have been), I began to feel quite tipsy, the early sweet fuzzy stages of drunkenness that incite one to intensify the pleasure by drinking more. Only a few moments after I silently noted this strange tipsiness in myself, one of my friends said with bewilderment, "Man, these poems are making me drunk."

The Sufi metaphor of intoxication as a spiritual state is partly figurative but partly literal. Intoxication is a metaphor for madness, and madness is a metaphor for the spirit's condition, or transformation, or unfolding into reality, in the presence of the Divine. But amazingly, where

poetry and music are involved, intoxication is not only a poetic figure, but is also a literal condition of the body as well as the mind. Poetry's music and imagery affect the body and the mind -- the exterior and interior -- alike, as if they were the same thing.

This is exactly what Sufism, and indeed all the mystical traditions (or all that are not strictly gnostic, let's say), seek to reveal: that the cosmos is a unified whole, one, or One. The music of poetry and the images and metaphors of poetry intoxicate the body and mind -- together they change the state of outer and inner awareness of the hearer. Poetry affects the whole human being. It's not surprising that Sufis place so much emphasis on music and poetry in their Way to reunion with the Divine.

Footnotes

*I am making some vast generalizations here, all of which surely are not universally true. But I'll ask you to understand these generalities as observations of tendencies, some very strong, and to accept them either as self-evident, or as a matter of trust in my judgment, or as propositions to entertain and play along with.

**A pedagogical question arises (tangential to this discussion) about how to teach the nonrational elements of poetry, how to approach and discuss them in the classroom, if they're so important, without the discussion degenerating into a chaos of personal anecdote and wild, egocentric misreadings. I have no concrete answers to this question beyond advising: Always read poems aloud. I can only sum up the difficulty by recalling a scene in Star Wars in which Obi Wan Kenobi sternly tells Han Solo he wants "to avoid any Imperial entanglements," and Solo replies, "Well that's the trick, isn't it?"