

## **Rumi the Reluctant Poet**

By

**Amin Banani**

Dimly perceived and grossly debased in the contemporary New Age market place, Rumi has suffered an unbalanced public image for 800 years. While prodigious and invaluable attention has been focused on the philosophical, doctrinal and dogmatic underpinnings of his thought, very little has been said about the medium, mode and manner of expression of those thoughts. As the body of his work happens to be in Persian verse, it is necessarily perceived with the complex of critical faculties developed and articulated in the context of the long and venerable Persian poetic traditions. Even Nicholson, the scholar who has so far done more than anyone to help us gain systematic access to Rumi, repeats the bias that as a poet he falls short of the highest standards of chaste and elegant Persian poetry. This bias is partly helped by Rumi's own occasional outbursts against the purpose and practice of "professional poets."

In this paper I suggest that the unique profundity and true poetic beauty of the best of Rumi's work is the inevitable and coequal result of his mystic thought process which was reliance upon imagination rather than reason. The engine that provides the dynamism of his thought is the same that produces the volcanic outburst of passionate poetry—the magnetic power of love.

The illustrious history of Muslim mystics contains many profound thinkers, innumerable memorable poets and quite a few commentators who expressed their thoughts in verse. Without a doubt, none has attained the heights of mystic insight and experience, and the poetic expression, ascended by Rumi. This bold claim extends across

all the major tongues of the Muslim world—Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Chaghatai, and Urdu—and covers the span of time from the birth of Islam to the present. Yet the overwhelming amount of attention paid to him, whether by scholarly observers or devotees, or by those who have learned his language or are native speakers of it, has been to the system and content of his thought. Considerations of Rumi the poet are often subordinated to the discussion of his doctrinal and philosophical views. This imbalance is aggravated for a number of reasons. First, are Rumi's frequent fulminations against the concerns and the craft of poets and disclaimers of his care for his own poetry. Second, there are the myths surrounding his poetic activity. And finally, there are his frequent judgments, albeit made with an air of embarrassment regarding his "shortcomings" as a poet.

The title of this presentation ironically suggests that it is possible to focus upon one dimension of the complex but wholly integrated person that was Rumi. Nothing could be further from the truth. The source and the structure of his mystical thought and the nature and process of his poetic creativity are inseparably connected. It is, in fact, in the nexus of the two that the core of the man is to be found.

The tension between mystical and legalistic tendencies—present in all Abrahamic religious traditions—is nowhere more pronounced than in Islamic history. Mysticism as a variety of religious experience in Islam has commonly come to be known as Sufism. The figure of Mowlana Jalal al-Din Balkhi, known as Rumi (1207-1273), towers above the mystics of Islam as a Sufi master whose life and works are the validation of a unique paradox. He was at once a most ecstatically uninhibited lover of the Divine and a zealous upholder of the Law. It is not merely the profundity of his exposition of the mystic worldview that distinguishes him among a vast and brilliant constellation of Sufi masters, but the creativity of infinite imagination, the prodigious complexity of his personality and his encounter with life and society of his time—at once sublimely detached and passionately involved. A man who gave shelter to the homeless, and whose company was sought by royalty; a magnetic force in the process of Islamization of Asia Minor and yet a man who was deeply loved and, at his death, sincerely mourned by Jews, Greeks

and Armenians alike; a sober judge and expounder of the Holy Law and Doctrine who instituted nocturnal séances of music and dance among his devotees; a supreme creator and manipulator of sign and symbol in an integrated life of infinite variety and singular purpose—this is the legacy left to us by Rumi.

No part of this legacy is more relevant to our time than Rumi's frequent assertions that all religions and revelations are only the rays of a single Sun of Reality, that all prophets have only spoken—albeit in different tongues—the same principles of goodness and truth. The ultimate goal of humanity, according to Rumi, is union with God through love. Virtue, as he conceives it, is not an end but a means to that end. Thus his poetry is based on a transcendental idea of unity which he expresses from the moral, not the metaphysical, standpoint.

It is not possible to come to a judicious understanding of Rumi's place in the Persian poetic tradition, his numerous dismissals and attacks upon its canons, and yet life-long compliance with those canons when it came to the traditional forms, without a cursory review of those traditions. Few cultural traditions are as permeated with poetry as that of the Persian-speaking world. By the same token, there are not many people whose critical judgment about the nature and quality of poetry is as dulled by the sheer quantity of verse that constitutes the repository of a millennium of literary tradition. Even before the accumulation of this massive body of verse, circumstances pertaining to the cultural milieu in which the tradition was nurtured, the taste of its intended audience, the social position and function of the poet, the nature of patronage, and above all, the character of its overweening model—Arabic poetics—had much to do with defining the aesthetic principles which have guided poets writing in the Persian language and governed the judgment of their labors.

Whatever we might conjecture about the presence of lively poetic veins among the lower strata of Perso-Islamic societies—and there is ample evidence for such conjecture in the preserved snatches of topical verse and street ballads—there is no denying the fact that the chronicles of Persian poetic history and the canons of Persian

poetic taste were conceived and formulated in princely courts and ruling circles, beginning in the 9<sup>th</sup> century in Eastern Iran and spreading to other regions of the Persian speaking world. In this milieu, we recognize an earlier bardic tradition whose primary function was entertainment. The bards provided song and music for the royal *bazm*, the ceremonial banquet. They would sing lyrics of their own composition and accompany themselves on a musical instrument. The roots of this tradition can be found in pre-Islamic Iran. Typified by Rudaki, they show a preference for the *masnavi* genre for their longer idylls, the shorter *tarane* for wine and nature poems, and *ghazal* for love poetry. The common wisdom has identified the *ghazal* as the “detached head” of the Arabic *Qasida*. Only the relatively recent investigations by the brilliant Italian scholar Alessandro Bausani suggest a possible earlier pre-Islamic provenance by pointing to a Chinese lyrical form allegedly modeled after lyrics brought to China by Persian court musicians. The Chinese poems are remarkable in their formal resemblance to the *ghazal*, including the recognizable rhyme scheme.

The bardic tradition was soon merged with a class of patronized panegyrists whose function was essentially political. They spun a mantle of virtue and legitimacy for patrons who often lacked both. In their role and social position, they resemble more the tribal poets of pre-Islamic Arabia and the panegyrists of the Umayyad and Abbasid courts. Their preferred mode of expression was the *qasida*, modeled after the classical Arabic genre. By the time this class of professional court poets of the Persian language assumed their principal role as panegyrists, the aesthetic principles governing their art and the canons of taste applied to their works were firmly established in the Arabic model. Poetry was defined as metered and rhymed speech. Its practitioners viewed themselves as craftsmen, builders whose brick and mortar consisted of an established supply of rhetorical devices. The novel and ingenious employment of these devices was pursued as an end in itself. The success of a “construction” was measured in discrete and segmented parts of the whole. Affirming the act of construction, the unitary line of a poem was called a “*bait*” (literally a “house”.) The poem was received and reacted to line by line. The wholeness or the aim of the poem was secondary if considered at all. The intention of the poet was to evoke a sense of marvel and amazement in his audience

by the brilliance of those formal parts. The themes were known and prescribed and could not be counted upon to shock or fascinate. In all critical criteria applied to poetry matters of form predominated over those of content. This superficial approach is also evident in the ludicrous mode of compiling collected works (*divans*) of a poet by alphabetical order of the last letter of the poem's rhyme, which disregards and obscures all considerations of chronology, context, thematic content, and intellectual and artistic evolution of the poet. Adding to these incongruities was the imposition of an artificial scheme of Arabic metrics ('*arud*) upon Persian poetry, ignoring the characteristic vowel music of Persian with its varying lengths and rests. Yet it would not be an exaggeration to say that the best poems of the best of Persian poets are those that were created in conscious or unconscious disregard of the prevailing critical standards of their culture.

Within the given cultural context, and adhering to the poetic principles described above, much poetry of exquisite artistry was written in Arabic and Persian. The stamp of poetic tradition was configured in this milieu, and it has continued to dominate the standards of poetic taste to this day. But the princely courts did not remain the exclusive source of patronage, production, and consumption of Persian poetry. Once more from the eastern regions of the Persian world, this time from the Sufi circles, the voice of poetry was raised. It was Sana'i, a court poet of Ghazna, who made a decisive transformation in his own life and, as it turned out, a signal turn in the course of Persian poetry. He employed the molds and forms, the tools and devices developed by the bards and the panegyrists for a new and different purpose: the affirmation of a mystical worldview. If the hybrid verse of Sana'i pointed the way, it was the fired imagination of 'Attar that transmuted mystical thought into pure art and limned the sea of soul into which Rumi so boldly plunged.

Whereas Sana'i and 'Attar had chosen narrative *masnavi* as the primary vehicle of their mystic verse, Rumi began with the *ghazal* form and stayed with it, turning only later to the *masnavi*, which also occupied him to the end of his life. The *ghazal* is the quintessential form of Persian poems, and the most popular and enduring. By virtue of its ubiquity, it is at once the most noble and most debased genre encountered in Persian

poetry. It achieved its zenith of perfection in the period extending from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 14<sup>th</sup> centuries when poets of immense power as Sa'di, Rumi and Hafez, poured their creativity into it.

It is no coincidence that this prime period of the Persian *ghazal* is also the time when it was the preferred vehicle for expressing high mystical aspirations of the soul. Of the three supreme practitioners of the art, it was Rumi who fused the mystic vocabulary and the language of the *ghazal*, the predominating ethos of mysticism as well as the intricate fabric of symbolism, to such an extent that the *ghazal* as a form takes on a unitary vision of the universe. It could be argued, for example, that it was Rumi's conflating of the purest mystical spirit with the most corporeal sensuality that paved the way for Hafez's tantalizing irony and ambivalence. This inherent affinity between the *ghazal* form and the mystic vision cannot be overemphasized. What seems to be a bewildering variety of images and ideas in a *ghazal* is fused together into a unity by the Sufi poet, much in the same way that the mystic reduces the diversity and the multiplicity of the phenomenal universe into one world of divine spirit. Those who have puzzled over the incoherence of the imagery and the apparent absence of structural unity in the *ghazal* have been looking for a rational scheme of organization, and intellectual coherence, a logical progression, a dramatic continuity—in short, for reason. Reason is precisely what Rumi considers a shackle. For him the animating force of existence is love, equated with unreason. No concept has been more vigorously attacked and subjected to more withering ridicule by Rumi than reason. The greatest portion of his lyrical poetry, that is, his *ghazals*, is a rhapsodic celebration of love, which, as he emphatically tells us, is a force diametrically opposed to reason.

Here lies the nexus of Rumi the mystic and Rumi the poet, and it is at this point that we must make sense of the mythified accounts of how Rumi came to be a poet. The poetry that welled up in him was precisely that stream of irrational and enraptured, love-crazed, magical incantations described and disapproved of Plato. The list of uneven and doomed contests between reason and love that one encounters in Rumi's poetry is

endless. Love (*'eshq*) is often represented in a metonymic way by one of its attributes, such as drunkenness (*masti*), madness (*divanegi, junun*), or unconsciousness (*bikhodi*).

The link with madness is particularly potent with poetic possibilities because it makes possible a play on the concrete root of its opposite, *'aql* (wisdom, reason—also the camel's knee lock). It is the wooden shackle that ties down the camel, particularly the *shotor-e mast*, the drunken camel (that is the rutting camel), to prevent it from wandering off into the desert, just as Majnun, the love-crazed legendary lover, wandered off into the wilderness. With the figure of Majnun the semantic domains of love and madness are joined into one in Sufi symbolism and wine and drunkenness become the symbols of the unhobbled spirit, the best way to remove the shackle of reason.

This is but a glimpse of the substance of Rumi's poetry. To search it for a scheme of rational organization and discursive language is to deny the very source of its vision. The brilliance and heterogeneity of his imagery point toward a transcendence of speech itself. The character of his best *ghazals* is that of music "rising above words and letters and transcending the murmur of syllables and sounds," freed from the bonds of rational discourse but obeying a higher harmony.

تا چند غزلهارا در صورت حرف آری  
بی صورت حرف از جان بشنو غزلی دیگر

How long are you going to put the *ghazals* in the form of speech?  
Without speech, hear another *ghazal* from the soul.

Let us hear it in his own language and marvel at how much he reveals in so few words:

شمس تبریزی به روحم چنگ زد  
لاجرم در عشق گشتم ارغنون

The line is constructed on a pun and therefore defies simple translation. One might give its surface sense by simply saying:

Shams-e Tabrizi touched my soul

Inevitably, I became an organ on [the subject of] love

But “touched” misses the crux of the matter. The wordplay is on the double meaning of the compound verb *chang zadan*, made up of the noun *chang* and the verb *zadan*. The noun *chang* means paw, claw, and talon; and with the auxiliary verb *zadan*, to strike, it becomes: to claw, to dig one’s fingers into [something]. There is a definite connotation of forcefulness and violence. The preposition *be* before *ruham* (my soul), grammatically reinforces this sense of the verb. So the initial image projected is: “Shams-e Tabrizi reached into my soul,” or better, “dug his fingers into my soul.” But the mention of *arghanun*—a musical instrument—as the last word of the poem immediately brings up the second meaning of *chang* as a harp or lyre, and undoubtedly so named because of its resemblance to a digitized paw or hand, and because it is played by the plucking of stretched fingers. The auxiliary verb *zadan* is the usual one in Persian for playing any musical instrument. So the second image evoked is of “Shams-e Tabrizi played the lyre with my soul.” Once more it is the preposition *be* that carries the weight of subtlety. It is the very soul of Rumi that is the lyre, and it is the fingers of Shams that reach in and play upon it. The two images projected by the two meanings of *chang zadan* are superimposed, and precisely in a musical way, the tension created by the violence of the first meaning is released by the caressing harmony of the second. The sense of conjoining of opposites—a reflection of the essential paradox—is intensified in the second line. “Inevitably in love” (*dar ‘eshq*), used here in the abstract verbal noun form, casting its semantic net across the entire range of love: “I became an *arghanun*.” Why the choice of *arghanun*, a musical instrument seldom mentioned in connection with the Sufis? Why not the ubiquitous *nay* or *barbat* or *daf*? Because, unlike all those instruments which require the active fretting and fingering of the player in order to produce the desired tones, the *arghanun* is pre-tuned. Thus an involuntary musical order is already built into it. It serves as an apt metaphor for the spontaneity as well as the

ultimate harmony of Rumi's poetry—but it is an ordered harmony on the subject of love which is equated with madness.

Here we may look for the grounds of what Western scholars of Arabic and Persian literature have often objected to as the bewildering heterogeneity of images in a *ghazal*. For this feature in *ghazal* is in fact a closely related aspect of the non-discursive thought process. Both features are deeply rooted within the underlying mystic vision and override the discursive regimentation of thought at the larger organizational level, the level of imagery. They dispose with most of those tangible linkages between images which our discursive habit of mind requires in order to cross from one to the other; because the heavier the referential and logical freight of thought, the more solid the connecting bridges must be. The disembodied, ethereal substance of Sufi thought rarely stands in need of such stepping stones. Moreover, the objects of experience which would appear to be in fragments and disjointed would merge in the light of the mystic vision, and blend in an all-encompassing unity of being.

In hardly any other poetry is the fluid coalescence of diverse images achieved more wondrously than in the poems of Rumi. They overwhelm by a deluge of imagery, which is miraculously subdued into unity. One particular verse singularly illustrates both the unifying-subduing process of Rumi's style and the penetrating force of his vision:

چو دیگ از زر بود او را سیه روئی چه غم آرد  
که از جانش همی تابد به هر زخمی حکایتها

Being of gold, why should the pot grieve at its blackened face?

For through each gash shine forth dazzling tales of its soul.

In this verse Rumi compacts a brilliant allegory of the body-soul dichotomy. He proceeds by systematically chipping away, as it were, the blackened crust of matter where the treasure of the spirit has been trapped, until the very golden heart shines forth. He does this at several stages of successive penetration. First by giving a face to the pot

he animates it. Then he humanizes it by suggesting its grief at the disgrace of falling into the toilsome prison of dark matter—the play on the double meaning of “blackened face,” that is the darkened exterior “face” of the pot as well as disgrace and infamy. Yet even the tragic identity of the toiling, begrimed, but nobly wrought being does not end with the process of removing the multiple layers of appearances from the face of the inner reality. There remains one more crucial veil which, once unfolded, will reveal the humanized being as deified. The chipping process at this point scores “gashes” (*zakhm*) upon the darkened body, revealing the pure gold of the soul. The metaphor reverberates with allusions to the wounds of the prophets and the anguished bodies of the saints—the luminous gold which radiates through the gashes, symbolizing the efflux of their sanctified blood. Here the style passes into a still higher level of spirituality. The tales of the unveiled soul “shine forth” (*hami tabad*), that is to say, they are not conveyed verbally, but shine forth from the inner reality of being, once the black veil of matter has been rent through. This striking metaphor distills—to the extent that a single metaphor may be capable of distilling—Rumi’s idea of the function, or rather the ambition of poetry, which for him is telling the story of the soul by means which transcend the range of words. The inadequacy of words, the hopeless venture of “crippled” logic and blind intellect in the mystic quest, are all varying aspects of a pervasive theme in Rumi’s poetry, which aspires to transcend words through words. This inveterate concern is voiced right at the beginning of the Masnavi:

گرچه تفسیر زبان روشنگر است  
 لیک عشق بی زبان روشنتر است  
 چون قلم اندر نوشتن می شتافت  
 چون به عشق آمد قلم از هم شکافت

Illuminating as is the account of words  
 Yet more lucid the tongue of wordless love  
 As the pen was racing along its path  
 It split through as it came upon love

Even in these lines which stress the limitations of language in mediating the ineffable raptures of the soul, Rumi's transverbal techniques are already at work. The first line relinquishes the illumination of the "language" for an ultra lingual experience of "love," which disposes with language in its discursive sense. The first line apparently assesses the scope of the spoken "tongue." The second line, however, turns to speculate on the state of the written language when it comes to coping with the problem of conveying the unconveyable. The dramatic encounter of the "rushing" pen with "love," while allegorizing the predicament, also obliquely suggests paradoxical nonverbal means through which the tongue and the pen may achieve their ends.

The second hemistich of the second line which describes the outcome of the incident—the impact between pen and love—does not simply "tell" what happened but recreates the incident in the sound of the words. We actually hear both the impact and its ambiguous sad-happy effect upon the injured party, as the pen emerges with a split tongue. Love constitutes the barrier, the impact which has brought about the happy mishap; the sibilant "sh" followed by the plosive "q" in the word *'eshq* (love) captures and throws back at us the vividly concrete feeling of the purely imagined event. The sibilant-plosive combination of *shq* in *'eshq*, which actually forms the onomatopoeic Arabic verb *shaqqa* (to cleave, to split), is repeated in the last word of the distich, *shekaft*, the Persian verbal form of rending and splitting. Thus the two phonetically and semantically salient words in the distich—"love" and "split"—where the latter both means and sounds what it means, while the voiced part of the former embodies the actual splitting sound, sensuously recreate, rather than just tell, the story of the precipitous pen on its momentous errand. At the same time the irony involved is that it is exactly by virtue of the split tongue that the pen can go about its business ever more ably—hence the felicity of the injury. The split tongue of the reed pen runs twice as smoothly as it would have had it not suffered the fissure. Here we approach a deeper level of meaning and what may be the most significant part. This meaning grows out of the paradox that out of the bruising encounter with love—the barrier on the seeker's path—comes the vigor; and out of the split tongue, the wholeness of volubility. The parallel with the wounded pot,

whose identity is manifested in laceration, becomes clear. In fact the prevalence of paradoxes such as these constitutes a hallmark of mystic poetry.

The foregoing discussion was a mere passing glance at Rumi's attitude toward discursive language and at his manner of forging a verbal medium, out of his poetry, toward achieving a transverbal "telling." It is no coincidence that Rumi alludes particularly to this function of his poetry in the very first line of the *Masnavi*, where he evokes the sublime symbol of the reed whose melody shapes not only the opening line but epitomizes the ideal of his poetry. This view of Rumi's poetry as an immediate emanation of the aspiring and rapt soul, rather than a mediate structure of discursive scheme, is further affirmed by his unconventional manner of composing the *ghazals*. For if we are to believe the stories, he never took up pen and paper in order to write a *ghazal*. His *ghazals* were spontaneous effusions of mystical ecstasy, recorded by his disciples.

On the more practical level, controlled tension is evident in the manner in which Rumi perceives his own poetic activity in relation to the Persian poetic tradition: at once in it, but not of it. All the polite carping about lapses in technique, the occasional coarseness of language, the "unpoetic" imagery of the kitchen and the stable, the grotesqueries, the bawdy humor, and so on, come from academic mediocrities who apply traditional canons of judgment. Rumi in turn is charmingly less than polite in voicing his utter disdain for those canons and concerns:

قافیه و مفعله را گو همه سیلاب بر  
پوست بود پوست در خور مغز شعرا  
رستم از این بیت و غزل ای شه دیوان ازل  
مفتعلن مفتعلن مفتعلن کشت مرا

Literally the verse means:

Let floodwaters carry off rhyme and meter  
It's shell! It's shell! It's shell! Fit for the brain of poets.  
I'm freed of this couplet and ghazal! O king of preeternal poems  
Scanning, scanning, scanning is killing me.

Rumi's deprecation of the poet's craft is sometimes ruthlessly turned on himself, acknowledging that he is working within the tradition but rejecting it.

شعر چه باشد بر من تا که از آن لاف زدم  
هست مرا فنّ دگر غیر فنون شعرا  
شعر چو ابريست سیه من پس آن پرده چو ماه  
ابر سیه را تو مخوان ماه مئور به سماء

What's poetry to me that I should boast of it  
I have another art, different from the poet's art  
Poetry is like a black cloud, I am behind the veil like the moon  
Don't call the black cloud a shining moon in the sky

In a disarmingly candid way he speaks of the spontaneity of his verse by likening it to Egyptian bread (*nan-e mesr*, the unleavened bread consumed in haste by the Israelites in flight, it can also mean manna):

شعر من نان مصر را ماند  
شب بر او بگذرد نتانی خورد  
آن زمانش بخور که تازه بود  
پیش از آنکه براو بشیند گرد

My poetry is like the bread of Egypt  
The day after, you cannot eat it  
Eat it while it is fresh  
Before dust has settled on it

Then Rumi puts everything in perspective by calling out to Shams:

شمس تبریز بجز عشق ز من هیچ خواه  
ز آن کسی داد سخن جو که سخندان باشد

Shams-e Tabriz don't ask for anything from me save love

Seek eloquence from those who are connoisseurs of words.

By placing himself outside the circle of connoisseurs Rumi rejects the mainstream of Persian poetic tradition. That is to say, he is scornful of the intent, mode of operation and standards of judgment of professional Persian poets, but he takes up their forms and their devices and turns them into expressions of a state of rapturous love. What he rejects in the traditional definition of poetry is not its forms, but the primacy of form in the consciousness of poets and their audience. Preoccupation with the formal features of poetry did not end nor did it abate despite Rumi's assault upon it. That is the key to all the nitpicking directed at his occasional faulty rhymes and meters, and at his robust use of "inelegant" or "unpoetic" language. It is not that the beautiful vision—the kernel—of his poetry was undetected or unappreciated, it was simply not grasped as the true nature of poetry.

To help obtain if only a cursory and filtered impression of the power and beauty of Rumi's poetry I offer a quatrain and a ghazal chosen at random:

شمعیست دل مرد بر افروختنی  
چاکیست ز هجر دوست بردوختنی  
ای بی خبر از ساختن و سوختنی  
عشق آمدنی بود نه آموختنی

Sham'ist del-e mard bar afrookhtani  
Chaakist ze hejr-e doost bar dookhtani  
Ey bi khabar az saakhtan-o sookhtani  
Eshq aamadani bovad na aamookhtani

(A man's heart is a candle which can be lit  
Separation from the beloved is a tear that can be sewn  
O you who have no idea of burning and bearing  
Love is something that comes, not something that can be learned)

The candle inside your heart: Let it burn!  
That gap keeps you from the Friend: Let it turn!  
Hey! Don't you know about pain and burning?  
Love comes like that. It's not something you learn.

The simple meter and rhyme scheme of the Persian quatrain is made reverberates with a contrapuntal technique. Four strong Persian verbs, *afrookhtan* (to light), *dookhtan* (to sew), *sookhtan* (to burn) and *aamookhtan*(to learn) are turned into abstract nouns. They are related to and amplified by one another. The first two lines are declarative sentences the subject of which is “man’s heart” (*del-e mard*.) The metaphor of a candle that can be lit is intensified by adding the prefix *bar* to the verb *afrookhtan* which raises it from simple lighting to something with the connotation of sudden conflagration or combustion. The heart of man is capable of sudden enlightenment. The associative web of cultural myths flashes in the mind the image of the Prophet reaching into his breast and pulling out his luminous heart blazing as the sun. In the second line the subject is still the heart of man in its torn (*chaak*) state because of separation (*hejr*) from the beloved. But it is a tear that can be sewn. Here again by adding the prefix *bar* to the verb *dookhtan* it is made into sewing over. It is not sewing together or stitching or basting or hemming, but putting on a patch. The cure for separation (*hejr*) is union (*vasl*). The unmentioned word for a patch is *vasle*, from the same root as union. Behind this primary layer of associated images is the light of the lit candle needed to enable the sewer to put on the patch well. The third and fourth lines introduce an evocative, chiding tone addressed to one who has not learned to bear the suffering that comes with love. The idiomatic Persian expression “*sookhtan-o saakhtan*” (to burn and to bear) is inverted to relate the first and the third rhymes: to enkindle and to burn. The subtle connection between the second and fourth rhymes suggests that while sewing a patch is something that can be learned, love cannot. By adding a colloquial touch to the last line (‘*eshq amadani bovad*, love is something that comes) the poem ends on a note of common affirmation.

For a *ghazal* I wish to turn to one listed as number 2309 in the Foruzanfar edition. It combines many of the characteristics for which Rumi’s *ghazals* are admired, even if

grudgingly, by some who fail to find a coherent progression from line to line or who are bewildered by the heterogeneity of his imagery. It is told—and it must be true of many of Rumi’s *ghazals*—that they were composed in spontaneous oral recitations, indeed chanted, with their musical rhythm underscored, and then jotted down by a devoted son or disciple. Certainly the present *ghazal* demands a *viva voce* hearing because of the strong musical and other sound effects built into it. The first of these is the rhyme, which displays to the fullest the strong vowel music of the Persian language—the bold succession of two clean “a”s unblurred by any suggestion of a diphthong, one long “a” joined to an open short “a” with a resonant palatal consonant “n”.

من بیخود و تو بیخود ما را که برد خانه  
من چند تو را گفتم کم خور دو سه پیمانہ  
در شهر یکی کس را هشیار نمی بینم  
هر یک بتز از دیگر شوریده و دیوانہ  
جانا به خرابات آ تا لَدَت جان بینی  
جان را چه خوشی باشد بی صحبت جانانہ  
هر گوشه یکی مستی دستی ز بر دستی  
و آن ساقی هر هستی با ساغر شاهانہ  
تو وقف خراباتی دخت می و خرجت می  
ز آن وقف به هشیاران مسپار یکی دانہ  
ای لولی بربت زن تو مستتری یا من  
ای پیش چو تو مستی افسون من افسانہ  
از خانہ برون رفتم مستیم به پیش آمد  
در هر نظرش مضمَر صد گلشن و کاشانہ  
چون کشتی بی لنگر کز میشد و مژ مشد  
وز حسرت او مرده صد عاقل فرزانه  
گفتم ز کجائی تو تسخر زد و گفت ای جان  
نیمیم ز ترکستان نیمیم ز فرغانہ  
نیمیم ز آب و گل نیمیم ز جان و دل  
نیمیم لب دریا نیمی همه دردانہ  
گفتم که رفیقی کن با من که منم خویشت

گفتا که بنشناسم من خویش ز بیگانه  
من بی دل و دستارم در خانه خمارم  
یک سینه سخن دارم حین شرح دهم یا نه  
شمس الحق تبریزی از خلق چه پرهیزی  
اکنون که در افکندی صد فتنه فتنه

Who'll take us home, now we've drunk ourselves blind?  
How many times must I say, You've had too much wine!  
Not a sober person in this whole town do I see:  
One's worse than the other, stoned out of his mind  
Let's to the tavern, dear friend, to see the soul's delight  
When my loved one's not with me life's joyless, I find  
A souse in every corner, hands waving at the sky  
To each of them He carries a cup of the royal kind  
The tavern's your legacy, and wine is its cash flow  
For sober folk not one drop of the fruit of the vine  
O gypsy lutenist, who is drunker, you or I?  
Ah, matched with your madness, my magic cannot bind  
As I left home, a tippler weaved his way towards me  
A hundred blossomy bowers in his glances were enshrined  
He listed and lurched like an unmoored ship  
And a hundred sobersides enviously whined  
When I asked him, Where are you from? He grinned:  
Half of me is Turkistan, half to Ferghana inclined  
Half water and clay, and half heart and soul  
Half made of pearl, half like the seashore's line  
Then be my friend, I said, for I must be related to you  
Stranger and kin, he replied, are to me all one kind  
I am drunk and disheveled in the winemaster's house  
Shall I speak? My heart has so many knots to unwind  
Since you alone have caused a hundred riotous ecstasies

## Divine Sun of Tabriz, why do you hide from mankind?

It is not my intention to attempt an exhaustive analysis of this poem here. Rather, I wish to draw attention to some of the thematic, tonal and imagic features that shed light on Rumi's conception of poetry. To begin with, the obvious question is: How are we going to find our way home? Who is fit to guide us there? And ultimately: Where is home? Before that final home address is disclosed we are invited to a public house to enjoy the conviviality of friends and wine and music. There is an intriguing exchange between the poet and a musician in the tavern, which conjures up a flashback for the poet. It is a vision of his guide, who reveals to him his identity and evokes from the poet a final expression of longing, with a question, returning to the same tone of bemused perplexity. "I am out of myself and you are out of yourself, who is going to take us home? / How many times I told you go easy on the wine." And at the end: Why do you avoid the people, Divine Sun of Tabriz? / Now that you have set off a hundred riots?" The ghazal is framed in lines of mock admonishment, in an almost colloquial speech that imparts a tipsy air to the whole poem. What could be a more appropriate atmosphere for a town where not one sober person can be found? The invitation to the tavern is punctuated four times with the word *soul*; and in the four corners of the tavern are four drunks with hands raised to receive the royal cup from the primordial cup-bearer. Is this a vision of the *Molavi khaneqah* (the cloister of Rumi's disciples)? Are these the raised hands of the devotees in their whirling dance? Affirmation of wine as the chief asset of the persona of the poem, and the denying of even one drop of this asset to those who are sober, leaves no doubt that indeed being drunk is the preferred and wished for state.

The "I am you" stratagem of the poem, implied in its revolving dialogue structure, is charged with tremendous power in the sixth *beyt*, which is its hinge line. In a resounding rhetorical question the poet asks the gypsy musician, "Who is more drunk, you or I? Faced with a sot like you, my magical incantations are mere legends." The crucial word is *afsoon*. Here is Plato's definition of poetry as magic, which in this encounter falls short of the power of the wandering musician's spell. At this precise point in the poem, as if by magic—and triggered by the word *afsaaneh* (legend)—the

plane of space, the focus of vision and the frame of time are shifted. The poet remembers stepping out of his house one day and seeing a drunk approaching in whose glances are reflected a hundred rose bowers. It is a striking image of many layers. It has the effect of a deliberate multiple exposure of a superimposed set of perspectives. “Like a ship without anchor, he was listing, this way and that / And a hundred wise sages, dead with longing envy of him.” The verse is a tour de force of poetic ingenuity. The total merging of sound and sense, music and picture in motion (what Wagner dubbed *gesamtkunstwerke*) is highlighted by the phrase *kazh mishod-o mazh mishod*, “listing this way and that,” where the creaking timbers of the unmoored ship and the lapping of the wavelets against its hull are heard. But it is the juxtaposition of *langar* (anchor) and ‘*aaqel* (wise, sane, rational) in the two hemistiches of this line that conjures up the deep-seated concrete image of ‘*iqal* as shackle, the camel knee lock. Anchor is to the ship as ‘*iqal* is to the ship of the desert. The contrasting image between the buoyant, animated, dancing, anchorless ship and a hundred wise men literally dead (*mordeh*) in the water is hilariously cinematic.

“I said where are you from? He smiled and said, my dear / Half of me is from Torkestan and half from Ferghana. / Half of me water and clay and half heart and soul / Half of me the seashore and half pure pearl.” Torkestan and Ferghana, two actual and nearly adjacent geographic areas, serve here as symbolic locations. In actuality Torkestan is low steppe land and Ferghana is high mountain valley. Torkestan is arid desert and Ferghana is well-watered farmland. Torkestan is equated with water and clay, and Ferghana with heart and soul, the one with ephemeral bubbles and sand, the other with precious pearls. The contrast and combination of low and high, hot and cool, desert and meadow, arid and fertile, base and noble—such is Rumi’s view of human nature and the human predicament.

“Be my friend then, I said, I must be related to you / He said, I cannot tell apart relatives from strangers.” The positive, universal, tolerant humanism of Rumi shines through, emphasized by the rare grammatical use of the positive preposition *be* before the negative verb (*benashnasam*). The merging of the two voices of the poem is complete.

The magic of “I am you” has worked. In the penultimate line Rumi resorts to a characteristic device that is at once an artful way of concluding the poem and a profound statement on the limitation of words to carry the poem any further. “I have a breast full of things to say, shall I or not?” And finally, as if there were any doubt as to the identity of the poem’s interlocutor, the gypsy musician, the fellow drunk of the opening line, he is called by name. “Why do you hide from the people,” he is saying, “now that the world is full of your signs?” He calls out like Moses pleading to see the face of his Lord.

How far we are from the verbal gymnastics of the professional poets and their shoddy imitators! How perfect even the form can be when the poet starts with something worth saying. Not until the middle of the twentieth century, and then only in response to different circumstances, was the fixation on the formal definition of poetry challenged in Persian culture. Therein lies a vital link between Rumi and our own outlook and experience. In rejecting the primacy of form Rumi placed himself outside the mainstream of Persian poetic tradition. It is time to redefine and reappraise that tradition with Rumi at the center of it.

