

The Ecstatic Poems of Sufism*

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Abstract:

Sufism is the mystical path of Islam, also known as the Way of the Heart which implies being in love with God, without attachment to anything besides Him. Sufi mystics assert the possibility of knowing God through direct experience, not through reason, which revolves in the orbit of the material plane, unable to know the secrets of the divine world. Trying to put into words their experiences, Sufis have created ecstatic poems designed to express divine love, the proximity to the Loved and Beloved one.

Keywords: mystical, Sufism, ecstatic poems, ineffable, knowledge by love

In both sacred and profane languages, the notion of mysticism is quite confusing, referring to something hidden and unaccessible to common experience. The origin of this concept is the Greek verb *myo*, which means to “close the eyes and the mouth, plug the ears, and join a secret cult”. Based on its etymological sense, mysticism is “an action, an experience that takes place in secret, away from the eyes and ears, which for various reasons do not share things happening in secret” (Stroe, Bustle, 1998: 27).

Mysticism is an emotional and dynamic way of cognition; different from the notional, reflexive or intellectual cognition, it is a direct way of knowing an ultimate reality which can not be accessed any other way. Rational cognition involves splitting, differentiation and analysis of a certain part of the whole; reality is a Whole and at the same time the return to this very Whole through a process of intellectual synthesis. In the mystical experience this Whole is indivisible and identifies with itself in a kind of fusion accompanied by feelings of bliss, love and plenitude.

Similar to religion, mysticism's basic idea is that the fundamental nature of the universe and life consists of a spiritual essence, of an omnipresent reality that is central to all beings. In trying to describe the aspects of this spiritual essence, in addition to the experiences they go

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through, mystics are influenced by ideas and images of their own religion. Mystical steps happen in the context of tradition and historically constituted authority, which has its own values, customs, rituals, holy books, theories, dogmas and religious experiences. Often, throughout time, there were tensions between mystics and various forms of religious authority due to the tendency of the former to reinterpret sacred texts in the terms of their own experiences. Mystical experience, which is present in all religions, can not be characterized as a mere extension of religious life because it exists on another plane. The role of mysticism is to revive religion, to further religious faith, not through an intellectual assimilation of the religious dogma, but by rewriting it “in fire letters” (Bergson, 1992: 218).

E. Underhill notes that although “any religious system which fosters unearthly love is potentially a nursery for mystics”, true mystical formulae can not be limited to a particular religion, requiring knowledge of religious dogmas to which mystics refer to while describing their experiences (1995: 166). In the context of the actions characterizing various religions, mysticism takes into account the historical and religious processes but contains within itself its own foundations, giving religions another dimension: “Independent of any collective phenomena and social fact, it appears as a secret trip, perpetrated inside in search of *Deus absconditus*” (Davy, 1997: preface). Islamic mysticism (Sufism) like other mystic movements pertaining to monotheistic religions, aimed to go beyond the superficial aspects of rituals and theology, asserting the possibility of knowledge in and through the love of God.

Claiming that they have access to divine reality, whose inaccessibility is supported in traditional Islam, Sufis have been persecuted by the official religious authorities, especially by the orthodox Shiites. Relevant in this regard is that one of the most famous Muslim mystic, Al-Hallaj was accused of blasphemy by the Abbasid authorities in Baghdad and sentenced to death because he said “I am the Truth”. The essential characteristic of mystical experiences, regardless of the religious land they are cultivated on, consists, above all, in an ecstasy of the soul.

Compared with the ordinary religious man, the mystic does not defer the reunion with the supreme spirit until after the moment of death but tries to realize this union during his lifetime. Ecstasy is “a unique moment, without dimension and running time, the biggest challenge for mystics is the development of revelation rationally considered, adjusting it to the reflection mechanisms, in a review that evolves, necessarily, in time” (Gregoire, 1957: 95).

Access to mystical ecstasy requires certain spiritual preparations, the usage of means aimed at amplifying mystical states of consciousness as well as the reduction of rational consciousness to its limits. This alliance of spiritual and material methods is characteristic to Islamic mysticism. Sufism includes a ceremony called *Samā* which is centered on ecstasy inducing music and dances. *Samā* designates “The spiritual concert of Heaven. It unites song, music and dance, symbols of a celestial dance, which is a theophany, a manifestation of God in his omnipotence. Through its double ordered spin across a circumference, the Sufi symbolically enrolls in this divine order” (Chevalier, 2002: 116).

Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Mawlānā Rumi, one of the most famous mystic Persian poets, born in 1207 in Balkh, now located in Afghanistan, was the founder of the Whirling Dervishes brotherhood. Rumi, also called the prince of Sufi poets, wrote poems that transcend time and cultures through their modernity and evocative power. Following the union of the divine and human nature, Islam mystical traditions are based on Prophet Muhammad’s ecstatic night journey from Makkah to Jerusalem and his ascending along Archangel Gabriel to the seventh heaven. Once ascended to God’s throne, he received commandments and the eschatological perspectives of believers and nonbelievers were revealed onto him.

To enter into a mystical union and live annihilation in God condition- self extinguishing and merging with the divine- Sufis believe that there are three main conditions to be fulfilled: an essential grace of God, the guidance of a spiritual leader and the aspirant’s intense fervor. Going through the Sufi mystic (*tasawwuf*) path (*tariqa*), an adept will need a master whose authority is guaranteed by the fact that he, in his turn, is one link in the chain that connects him to Muhammad, to his son in law Ali or one of his companions, the early caliphs. This is the “golden chain”, or the “chain of blessing” (Marquette, 1996: 140). In Sufism, as in other types of non muslim mysticism, prayer is a means of exiting one’s self and coming closer to divinity. The most important prayer, *Dhikr*, starts by continuously repeating God’s name and continues with placing its meaning inside one’s heart.

This prayer, similar to the Prayer of the Heart practiced in Christian Orthodox hesychasm, involves a mystical type of physiology and has two stages: “with effort, which implies the hidden wish to maintain the formula and therefore results in a pain felt in the physical heart; and without effort, in which the divine presence expressed by name, expresses itself though a sort of resonance of the formula with the physical heartbeat and with the pulse of the blood which courses through the arteries and veins, without any sort of pronunciation of the

words, not even mental, but through which the words flow” (Chevalier, 2002: 165).

As the organ of contemplation and spiritual life, the heart is made up of three parts: an outer part, an inner one and a deeper part, the heart’s quintessence. *Qalb*, the inner heart, is the place where God, as described in the Koran, planted people’s faith. Based on the meaning of the term, Sufis have correlated *qalb* with notions of knowledge and mystical union through love.

Mystical love, expressed by the term *mahabba*, is based on the belief that the relationship between man and God is defined by love; that He is the loved and beloved one and that this love “is an act of grace which concerns only the chosen ones, al-awliya and that the initiative belongs only to God” (Nicoară, 2008: 39). In order to achieve a level of love that allows entry into mystical ecstasy, it is required to access the deep shell of the heart, *fu ad*. Thus, a heart open to patience is emptied of everything except God and becomes ruled by Him. “How could I get close to other but You? All are dead to me, You are my only friend” (Sana’a, 2006: 138). The mystic, feeling God’s omnipresence in his heart, annihilates himself into God.

Knowing God by and through love, as postulated by both Sufism and other non Muslim mystic religions, lies beyond what can be transmitted through language and can not be described in words with a well-defined meaning. Mystical language is, in many respects allusive, and is, most of the times, poetical. The metaphors used by mystics add aspects, qualities and values to language; they talk about a reality that does not have direct access to a descriptive language. This language can be spoken only through transcending the current meanings of our words. The ambiguities of mystical texts, especially the poetic ones, are only for the interpret. The metaphors used to translate what happens in a mystical union lead us beyond the immediate accepted meaning of words, beyond the appearance of the objects denoted, their nature, and even beyond the interpret’s way of thinking. Many researchers question its very existence, indicating that mystic silence is more revealing, deeper, and has more meaning than what it says. The mystic’s call towards the ineffable is the result of multiple and excruciating efforts to put into words that which can not be captured in any form of representation. And yet, what we know about mysticism is revealed by mystical texts, whether they take the form of treaties or of poems. Mystical inventiveness, at a language’s level, denotes the fact that though a mystical experience is subjected to the constraints of a language, it still creates its own speech.

He who has such an experience “can not be silent and hide the secret, as he is overwhelmed with thrilling, joy, a superabundance which pushes him to share with the others the mystery of this state, but not in detail, yet rather hazy. If it’s a man who lacks scientific skills, he will speak in tongues. For example, someone got as far as to say, being in such a state: *Thank me, how terrible is my greatness!* Someone else: *I am the Truth!* And another one: *There is nothing in my past except God*” (Tufail, 2005: 84).

“Mystical saying” fundamentally means “translation”. “It enables a crossing. It forms a whole by unceasing operations on foreign words. It organizes from all this mottled material a chain of gaps but also lexical camouflages and quotes” (Certeau, 1996: 127).

Mystical phrases are distinguished more by their method of construction and less by their structure. Words are subjected to a “technical manipulation” and “the language is removed from the function of imitating things. Mystical language is the effect of work on existing language” (*Ibidem*: 127). Another important aspect of language refers to the analogy between the mystic and love metaphor. The mystic is not in love with the Absolute in a passive way; he feels a strong attraction for the over-sensitive object of his search.

Therefore, the language used is most often that of passion: “I have a lover and His love I feel / deep within me / if He wants to tread on my face, he does it / his Spirit is my spirit and my spirit/ is his Spirit / if he wants something, so do I and if I / want, He wants too” (Hallaj, 2008: 141).

Singing the ecstasy of divine love, Sufis use an erotic and bacchanal symbolism; they use the profane language of love which is then translated into the sacred language of love. The painful inability to express the infinite love felt in a language too human for a superhuman experience leads to the creation of intense writings, erotic phrases, whose symbolism is difficult to decipher. But beyond words or symbols used, Sufis know that such an experience is ineffable. Sufi mystical poems, well-known for their artistic and spiritual value, are designed to communicate something almost impossible to communicate, using symbols difficult to translate. If we stop at the literary dimension of the words used, we are not granted access to their hidden meaning; our understanding stops at the surface without comprehending the code that could read this symbolic versification. “For things to become even more complicated, under the symbolic code, in poetry lurks a hidden vision of the structure of the reality of human condition and of the spiritual path to which the symbols used by the poet only refer to” (Olaru, 2013: 10).

The most common symbols, taken from pre-Islamic traditions, are wine, drunkenness, the tavern, Boyfriend or Girlfriend, veil, pearl and

perfume. Prohibited in Islam for their effects on the senses and reason, wine and drunkenness are used as symbols to describe the indescribable states of mystical ecstasy. The one drunk on wine, as well as the one drunk with divine love, has his senses, mind and behavior affected, both being “brave and foolish, they have no fear, and are not cowards. They are bold, in case of danger, and during times of distress, little do they care about their lives, but the bravery of the first one comes from the fact that his prudence was overwhelmed and annihilated by wine, while the courage of the second one comes from the domination that certainty and mystical revelation hold over him. The result, for the first one, is his undoing in this world, while in the case of the second one, there is eternal life” (*Ibidem*: 214).

Wine imagery is often found in the metaphysical poems of one of the most important representatives of medieval golden age Persian poetry, Jami: “Oh you, bringer of the wine goblets! Fill my soul from/ The pre-existing cup, that thief of the heart, that watch dog of formal religion. / Fill it with the wine which flows from the Heart and mixes with the Soul, / The wine whose bubbles inebriate the eye that watches, of the Lord Almighty [...] / A drop from this goblet shall transform your masterpiece in/ gold-may my Soul be sacrificed to this goblet of gold!” (*Ibidem*: 210). Mystical poems abound in erotic metaphors that describe the painful experience of love either because the Beloved or Loved one rejects the advances of the lover, or because the one who loves is not capable of total dedication, is selfish, jealous or unfaithful.

The physical attributes of the loved one, the kisses and the caresses described in a way that borders on blasphemy, serve to emphasize the ecstasy of love: “If I were to get drunk and head towards you, I would walk/ Boldly ahead and watch your Face, / Sometimes I drink as if from a jewelry box of Your/ Shiny ruby lips, sometimes counting the rings of your hidden curls” (*Ibidem*: 218).

The tavern, the place where the divine wine of love intoxicates the pilgrim, is the mystical heart, the soul’s nest. The Tavern of Ruin, a gathering place for Sufi symbolists is the opposite of the mosque, is the place where, under the guidance of a master “the ecstasy of intoxication is experienced, through which the practitioner departs from both the egoism of a false self and from the illusion of the world” (*Ibidem*: 12). In the words of Hafez: “Cease to pretend being saints and to humiliating those / who go to the tavern! / The sins of other people are never written / on the tally by you. / Every place is the home of love, whether it is / Singogue or mosque. / My head is left entirely to his will, lying on the / tavern door bricks” (*Ibidem*: 12).

Another symbol which was picked up by mystic poets from profane love poetry and made the transition into the world of love for God is the *scent*. For example, in Al-Hallaj's poems, the description of a mystical union is given extra sensuality when associated with the mixture of two essential oils: "Your spirit melted into my spirit / As amber melts into musk essence / And if something touches you, touches me too / and if you exist I am too, inseparable" (Hallaj, 2008: 152).

As Al-Gazal proves, the veil, is another symbol frequently found in Sufi poetry: "is understood under its connection with the thing it covers. God, according to the prophet, has seventy veils of light and darkness; if It would uncover its veil Its greatness would burn the face of the one looking at him [...]. Considering the type of the veil with which they are covered, people are divided into three groups: those who are covered in darkness, those covered in pure light and those covered by light and darkness at the same time" (Gazal, 2005: 55).

Masters in hiding and unveiling symbols, Sufi mystics have composed odes, ghazals and rubaiyats so complex that can not be reduced to their undeniable aesthetic value, their purpose being to translate into a particular language something that, essentially, remains inaccessible to both language and reason. For, as a famous Sufi mystic said: "through mind, thought and senses no creature can get to know God [...]. Reason will lead you, but only up to the door. His grace is the one who leads the way [...]. If you want to describe it with arguments, speech is a comparison, and silence is an abandonment of duty" (Sanā'ī, 2006: 44–45).

Since ineffability is a general characteristic of the mystical experience, describing this extraordinary event can only have a symbolic or allegorical value. Between the verbal expressions used and the reality lived by the mystic, the distance is quite long.

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