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Acts of Devotion in Persian Classical Texts: self and friendship in Maulana Jalal al-Din Rumi's poetry

'The text brings a subject matter into language, but that it does so is ultimately the achievement of the interpreter.'¹

This essay explores the relationships between acts of interpretation and understanding the significance of the Persian classical poets for Iranians, in terms of the endurance of their works. The essay provides some insights into what Persian poets at the core of their poetry intend to express; why Iranians read them and pay great attention to their works; and the impact of their poetry today. The essay will then make a brief reference to the philosophical shift in language in 20th-century Continental philosophy, and the emphasis on language and concepts such as hospitality, care, the 'Other' and understanding. There will be a brief reference to Sa'adi (d. 1292) and 'Attar (d. circa 1221) and in conclusion there will be my reflections on how Iranians may re-consider their conventional attention to Maulana Jalal al-Din Rumi's (d. 1273) mode of 'being' as a human-being when they read his poetry. I conclude the essay with reference to the extreme importance of the concept of the 'Other' in Persian poetry.

A Brief Hermeneutic Reflection

We interpret things in the world in order to understand; we do this in order to discover the true nature of the subject matters that are presented in the dialogues we engage in with others, or the texts that we read. Any text has a history. In order to understand the content, the reader needs to transpose himself or herself into the specific historical context in which the author of the text lived. Understanding emerges from knowing the historical event in which things take place or were created. Hence in seeking to understand a text we must pay attention to the significance of its historical horizon. As Hans-Georg Gadamer puts it 'understanding is, essentially, a historically effected event.'² Therefore, he argues, the objective of interpretation is not essentially to bridge the temporal gap that exists between us and the time that the text was written, or attempt to reconstruct the original situation of the text, but it is to focus on discovering what the text actually has to say to us.

In the creative process, writers and artists move from their lived experiences to what they intend to express. While searching to understand, we begin with the expression itself and then move towards the core of meaning of lived experience. Re-experiencing is a kind of revisiting, or comprehending parts of a whole. It is an attempt to understand how to relive a series of events that forms a whole. The philosopher, Wilhelm Dilthey, argues that 're-experiencing attains its fulfillment when an event has been processed



The Hoopoe tells the birds about the Simurgh. From a manuscript of 'Attar, *Mantiq al-Tayr*, dated 898 (1493). Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, MS. Elliott 246, fol. 25v.



Prose introduction.
From a manuscript of
Rumi, *Masnavi*, dated
1063 (1652).
Bodleian Library,
University of Oxford,
MS. Elliott 264, fol. 18v.

by the consciousness of a poet, artist, or historian and lies before us in a fixed and permanent work.³

We are dealing with fixed and permanent works when we talk about the classical Persian poets such as Rudaki, Firdausi, ‘Attar, Khayyam, Rumi, Sa‘di and Hafiz and their contributions to our understanding of their unique inner worlds. Persian poetry at its core, for me at least reading it in my native language, has expressed the supreme emotional expressions of care, friendship, the otherness of the self, being in the self and the desire to reach oneness. It achieves this with profound and beautiful expressions of separation, grief and longing through the experience of displacement. These expressions are conveyed to the reader in different ways and depend on the temperament and inclination of the poet. They stem from the poet’s roots; recognition of self as the divine; the moment; presence; silence both within the self and with others; time and space as the sites of celebration of life and beauty; and also from the recognition of the inevitability of death. All these notions and many others are delicately expressed through the importance of living within the poetic and musical space consciously created in the verse of the poets. At the core of all their writings is the will to engage in deep conversations that are rooted in the self and the other.

Regardless of beliefs, personalities and inclinations, each Iranian seems to be devoted to their poets and their texts, which for them are living testimonies of their own lives. Iranians go to the texts of their poets to read them alone, or choose pieces of their poems to sing, or accompany their music, or listen to in small and large gatherings. Persian poetry always has a great effect on Iranians, for whom it has the spiritual and intercultural power to engage them in reflection on their presence in the world.

The work of these poets has enormous cultural significance for our contemporary world. Their poetry contains extraordinary treasures to which we need to turn our close attention and commit ourselves to close study of their profound meaning. There are questions and answers in Persian classical poetry that need to be vigorously reflected upon in order to unlock the great ideas with which their authors have left us. This will greatly assist us in turn to get to know ourselves, and our responsibilities to the ‘Other’ in the world.

The creative, imaginative, psychological, social, political, spiritual, aesthetic, moral and ethical impacts of these great poets’ minds on Iranian culture are great; as is their impact on those people beyond its borders who have close cultural, linguistic and historical ties with Iran. These impacts need to be vigorously investigated in order to provide us with new ways of looking at ourselves, the world, and the time in which we live. We need to fully interpret and understand the message of co-existence and strong universal values that we have inherited from them. Hans-Georg Gadamer asserts that:

understanding must commence from our inherited prejudices (traditions)
... Understanding is to be thought of less as a subjective act than as participating
in an event of tradition, a process of transmission in which past and present are
constantly mediated.⁴

Twentieth-century Continental philosophy arrived at a point that was recognised through some of its most influential philosophers, namely Martin Heidegger, Ludwig Wittgenstein (from within analytic philosophy), Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur and others: that 'language belongs to the closest neighborhood of man's being. We encounter language everywhere'.⁵ Understanding takes place only in a dialogue that is open to questions and answers between the self and the other, and focussed on care. The purpose of an authentic dialogue is to strive towards establishing humane and mutual understanding

The poetry of care and authenticity of Omar Khayyam, 'Attar, Jami, Sa 'di, Hafiz, and Rumi are very apparent in their works. Their poems are rich and ever useful for us to interpret what they contain that can help us, their readers, to understand our existence. Through their poetry these poets invite their reader to enter into places in which profound meaning is waiting to be discovered in their inner lives. There are many things that we can learn from them. For example, the acts of friendship, hospitality, and generosity toward the stranger whose care we ought to take to our heart. Human beings in general claim that they care and, unfortunately, in many situations we know that is not the case. To care for each other as human beings requires the will to overcome old and infested, dangerous prejudices and seek to break the old and futile barriers that divide and prevent them communicating their authentic selves and their intentions to each other. To be an authentic human being, according to Sa 'di, necessitates certain characteristics:

Human beings are members of a whole,
In creation of one essence and soul.
If one member is afflicted with pain,
Other members uneasy will remain.
If you've no sympathy for human pain,
The name of human you cannot retain! ⁶

In other words, it leads us to realise that at the end it is the individual who must learn about his or her existence and responsibilities toward the other.

'Attar's Seven Valleys of Love in his *Mantiq al-Tayr* ('Conference of the Birds')

Another great example is 'Attar's masterpiece in which he introduces the magnificent bird called the hoopoe that, one day embarks on a journey to guide all the birds of the world in search of their ideal bird, the Simurgh (see p. 166). As the birds scatter around the world their journey takes them through seven valleys: the Valley of Quest, the Valley of Love, the Valley of Understanding, the Valley of Independence and Detachment, the Valley of Unity, the Valley of Astonishment and Bewilderment, the Valley of Deprivation and Death.

In the first valley they face hundreds of difficulties that they have to overcome. They experience hardship as they constantly try to free themselves of what is most valuable to them; this undertaking gradually changes their fixated state of mind. Successful for this first part of their journey, they begin to feel a profound longing and in order to overcome it they seek to dull the feeling with wine that helps them to rid themselves of their dogma, beliefs, and lack of trust in their day-to-day lives.

Waking up later in the second valley, the birds begin to give up hope for love that they find a great sacrifice. They continue their pursuit of the Simurgh.

The third valley stunned and confused the birds, particularly when they learnt that their existing knowledge had become completely futile and their understanding had become confused. In this state they discovered that there were so many different ways of going through this valley, and they did not all fly in the same manner. It was there they discovered that understanding could be achieved in many different ways. For example, some in their journey toward the Simurgh will find salvation and others will experience damnation.

Attar introduces the fourth valley as the valley of detachment. This is a new encounter with the world as this experience is detachment of the self from the desire to possess or to discover. It is at this stage that the birds begin to feel that they have become part of a universe that is detached from their physical and recognisable reality. In this new world, the planets are as minute as specks of dust and elephants are not distinguishable from ants.

It is not until they enter the fifth valley that they realise that unity and multiplicity are the same, as they have become entities in a void with no sense of eternity. More importantly, they realise that the absolute definition of God is beyond unity, multiplicity, and eternity.

Flying into the sixth valley, the birds become astonished at the beauty of the Beloved. Experiencing extreme sadness and dejection, they come to feel they know nothing and understand nothing. It is here that feeling this deep sense of their inner selves, they are not even aware of their outer beings. In this arduous journey that started with many birds, only thirty of them reach the resting place of the Simurgh. Excited to have arrived, they are told that the Simurgh is nowhere to be seen. However, they are not convinced that the Simurgh is not there. So they demand that the guardian tell them of its whereabouts, but he keeps them waiting for the Simurgh for a long time. It is in this waiting that the birds begin to understand that the truth is that they themselves are the *si-murgh* ('thirty birds').

It is in the final valley that we learn we are in the time and place of deprivation, forgetfulness, dumbness, deafness, and death. The present and future lives of the thirty successful birds become shadows chased by the vastness of the ever-shining omnipotent Sun. The *si-murgh* ('thirty birds'), lost in the sea of existence, finally wake up and succumb to the reality that the Simurgh who they have been seeking so feverishly is none but themselves.

Text and the Reader: some reflections on Maulana (Rumi)

Paul Ricoeur writes that 'the meaning of the text is open to anyone who can read'.⁷ The question of understanding Maulana (Rumi)⁸ is an extremely complex and difficult task. The only thing we need to understand is that his mode of being in the world was his own unique and existential mode that formed and shaped his experiences of time and space. The way in which Maulana made choices to become the individual that he turned into has much to teach us. We firstly need to consider what Maulana's concerns and responses were to the question of his being in the world, to the question of the 'Other', and the ways in which he related to his concerns and responses through his life and work.

We read Maulana because there are available texts of his work. *Logos* in Greek means 'speech that comes out' and not 'reason'. *Logos* means speech that reveals to us the same meaning that the speaker intends. We Persians call this *sokhan del*, or 'language/speech of the heart'. In his poetry Maulana spoke about the soul in his unique mode of expression. He accessed the meanings of his own being through the things that presented themselves in his speech, and not from the preconceptions that he was escaping from in his immediate social and cultural setting. In other words, in a poetic understanding of Husserl's transcendental phenomenological⁹ concept of things and their direct relationship to consciousness, Maulana went to the 'the things themselves' as they appeared in his consciousness.

Maulana speaks to the world in order to discover himself. He delves deeply into the things that matter to him in order to release himself from the bars of his anxious mind, burdened by his cognitive skills so manifest in his poetry. Maulana's impulse to speak is a desire to achieve his pure existential understandings of the specific mode of being that is spoken (ie. expressed) in his poetry and thoughts. Entering into this mode of speech to the world, he is aware that he will face difficulties. Nevertheless, he takes the risk and plunges into this fire, this new emotional space: his inner self desire. It is there that he commits all of his existence to that inner voice that calls him to speak out like the reed for those who will hear the depth of his being. The path of Maulana is to find the unity within himself. He is devoted to speaking what he knows and can hear this depth of his being in love:

The spirit which does not wear
The inner garment of Love
Should never have been.
Its being is just shame.
Be drunken with love,
For love is all that exists.
Where is intimacy found,
If not in the give and take of Love? ¹⁰

However, Maulana is well aware that communicating one's innermost thoughts is not greatly rewarded in society. But he insists that he has to stay the way that he is as a being

that knows that his beginnings are buried deep inside his profound understating of his own self. No wonder, regardless of our interpretations of his poetry, we keep admiring this unique human being. But as we read we realise he is not completely happy with most of us because as he says:

Listen to the reed and the tale it tells,
How it sings of separation:
Ever since they cut me from the reed bed,
My wail has caused men and women to weep.
I want a breast torn and tattered with longing,
So that I may relate the pain of love.
Whoever has been parted from his source
Wants back the time of being united.
At every gathering I play my lament.
I've become a companion of happy and sad
Each befriended me from his own ideas,
And none searched out the secrets within me,
My secret is not different from my lament,
But the senses cannot perceive it.
The body is not hidden from the soul,
Nor the soul from the body, but the sigh
Of the soul is not for everyone.¹¹

Doctor Johnson said of Maulana that 'he makes plain to the pilgrim the secrets of the Way of unity, and unveils the Mysteries of the Path of Eternal Truth'.¹² The word pilgrim is significant here; Johnson suggests that he reads Maulana as a pilgrim and through this journey he, the reader, realises what 'the Mysteries of the Path of Eternal Truth' are. Maulana's eternal path helps us to understand that this humility and love for the other are his religion. Rumi says that 'the religion of Love is like no other,' and 'gambling yourself away is beyond any religion'.¹³

We ought to enquire about how poetry invites us to think about questions relating to the understanding of selfhood, as described in the poetic texts we have inherited from these poets. There are poets whose primary concerns are to invite us into their souls, and there are other poets who allow us to enter only into their minds. I think the poetry of the great Persian classical poets, without a doubt, is from those who invite us to their souls. The essence of the Persian poets' works is their deep passion for expressing the immediacy of the subject matter that is their focus. One of the fundamental substances of Persian poetry is the demand for the purification of the mind that is not always a necessity of Western poetry.

This purity is at its best in Rumi's poetry. It is useful to note that Rumi and most of the great poets of Persia were not interested in any form of literary success and ambition. Their expression was an act of care and desire to share their devotion and concern for

life with others, with all its happy and sad moments. For Rumi, poetry was an immediate response to the music of the words as he felt them in his being. His urge to speak freely created a magnificent way of spontaneously speaking his heart to others. His love for the other, his listener, was enormous. No wonder his words were recorded and remembered by those who listened to his outpourings.

Rumi's poetry reveals his unique ability to make the concealed objects of the psyche as clear as they are at the core of his poetry. Maulana is an intoxicated being who simply knows what suffering is, how love can be totally beautiful one moment and destructive the next. He knows that love is life-enhancing. The other great attribute of Maulana is total recognition of the other as the mirror of himself. This notion is also articulated in the works of poets such as Firdausi (d. 1020), Omar Khayyam (d. 1123), Sana'i Ghaznavi (d. 1131), 'Attar (d. circa 1221), Sa'di (d. 1292), Hafiz (d. 1390), and Jami (d. 1492). We need to be aware that these masters of verse were not attempting to challenge the conventions of language or style.

As their works make clear, their intention goes far beyond that. Their profound poetic raptures are direct works of inner life that interrupt, and disturb, conventions in the reader's mind. They invite the reader to find ways to begin the process of purifying their psyche from the conditions imposed by thoughts and feelings. In Maulana, in particular, we are in the world of a human being who is constantly penetrating the deepest layers of his existence. In other words, he is telling whoever listens to, or reads him, that this is his mode of expectation of how to be a human being.

Labelled as 'mystic poets', the Persian verse-makers aim to go beyond day-to-day experiences of life; a quality especially apparent in Maulana's poetry. His writing is not an explanation of life, but something altogether more than the life we normally talk about. For example, while most poetry leads us through carefully arranged thoughts and feelings, we can say that Maulana's poetry is written from beyond our apparent understanding embedded in our day-to-day thoughts and feelings. Maulana seeks to let us know that our thoughts can be largely deceptive, and thinks that our thoughts are like bars behind the doors that we need to leave behind. To enter into Maulana's poetry is not necessarily a search for some inherent, intrinsic, innate or immanent truth and knowledge, but an elaboration of an instant presence, the instantaneous inner voice of experience that spontaneously expresses this world as perceived by the poet. It is an overpowering emotional release: knowledge that is released into words, sounds, images and dance that allows immediate unity between mind and body and the world. In this mode of expression Maulana possesses knowledge of the Whole as well as the parts. Maulana creates a unique model of a boundless, immeasurable inner world in which he employs every possible example of events and situations that occur in the external world as metaphor and allegory. He says:

I am a sculptor, a molder of form,
In every moment I shape an idol.
But then, in front of you, I melt them down.

I can rouse a hundred forms and mix them with spirit,
But when I look into your face,
I want to throw them in the fire.
Do you merely fill this drunkard's glass?
Or do you really oppose the sober?
Is it you who brings to ruin every house I build
My soul spills into yours and is blended.¹⁴

These classical Persian poets were masters of inhabiting and welcoming the most complex emotions and working their meanings through for themselves. They lived in a simultaneity of moments; they cherished them and they were not frightened of the consequences of what they uttered to the world. In other words, they lived without any destructive obstacles and prejudices. We must be absolutely attentive listeners, readers or interpreters of Rumi's poetry in order to arrive at the self through which Maulana feels he urgently needs to convey his deep inner emotions in poetry.

For example, the departure of Shams-i Tabrizi, his spiritual companion and friend, had a devastating impact on Maulana's attitude and desire: in order to express his deepest sadness and loss. The words 'love' and 'devotion' are fundamental for Maulana in order to realise this grief and loss that is the result of a profound sense of inner displacement. Shams's disappearance from his life left him totally alone, without any spiritual intimacy. So, what happened to Maulana? His inner intention is to overcome the loss. He is very familiar with this experience. Throughout his life Maulana experienced a tremendous amount of loss. The poet digs deeper and deeper into himself in order to understand the roots of his suffering. He recognises wholeheartedly that it is necessary to experience the pain and suffering of separation in order to reach his own perfection, that is the self who he and only he can know. It is no wonder that Maulana, after overcoming the loss of Shams, continues to discover 'friends' in various guises for the rest of his life. We know after Shams he met Salahudin, the goldsmith, who became his disciple and after whose death Maulana befriended Husamuddin, the significant figure who acted as a scribe in recording the *Masnavi* towards the end of Maulana's life.

Ultimately the close spirituality with the other as friend in human form in the work of Maulana is not the worship of personality. It is not *jan-nessary*, which compels the individual foolishly and slavishly sacrificing one's life for another's egotistic satisfactions, but *samimiat*,¹⁵ which may be understood to mean to deeply devote oneself in the act of authentic friendship based on generosity, kindness and care. It is pure egoless and unselfish recognition of the spiritual gifts he receives and loves to share with the other. Friendship with the other is a conscious act of humility, respect and devotion for a love that is not physical, but is freely expressed to the world in dance and the joy of the journey to unity of self with self.

It is worthwhile to note that there are two distinguishable levels of communication in the works of mystic Persian poets. The first one is ontological and the second stages

their presence as beings. That is to say, ontological in the body of knowledge they share about the different ways in which they are disentangling the issues. The issues with which they are preoccupied in their beings and the presence they demonstrate, without any inhibition, references the ways in which they feel that their beings are embedded in the world.

Iranians Love their Poets

Regardless of social position, political inclination, regional backgrounds religious beliefs, or aesthetic and poetic tastes, there is one thing that has always united Iranians when approaching the works of their poets. Iranians, without a doubt, love and have great respect and boundless admiration for their poets. Persian poetry, whether classical or modern always plays a significant role in the identity formation of Iranians in their day-to-day lives wherever they are. For it is from their poets and their poetic voices and the contents of their works that they take great strength and a sense of self, a historical and psychological understanding. Iranians tell anyone openly and without any hesitation that in times of joy and sorrows they *panha me barand*, or 'go for protection to their poets'. It is there that the poets, according to them, provide the emotional and existential insights that enable them to reflect on their own lives. Their poets greatly help them to describe their complex experiences in the world. As someone once told me in the course of an interview, 'the poets I love to read or the songs that our great classical and modern musicians sing always gives me something to help me understand what and how I feel about myself and the world in which I live'.

Iranians are drawn to the aspects of the world they have experienced themselves by reading or listening to their poets. One may say that this is universal and could take place in any culture and amongst any group of people. That may be the case, but for Persians poetry goes hand in hand with their lives. It is not a luxury that they have in their disposition, but a spirit that they have inherited from their ancient history and traditions that have been handed out to them by their ancestors regardless of how conscious they are of this fact. Let us say that an Iranian has poetic, mystical, pragmatic and hermeneutic modes of understanding of his or her self and others when reading the poetry of their poets. One of the things I have come to realise in relation to Iranian poetry is that a poet with his or her poetic language is always in conversation with the other, whether this other is fictive or real. Borrowing M. M. Batkhin's words, there is a unique 'dialogical relationship'¹⁶ that is going on in the language of these poets. The consciousness of the poet is always directed toward reaching the other.

Conversation in Poetry

Either as a friend who is there sitting opposite you, or an imagined self that is better than you, or a beloved who is not accessible to you, or someone very dear to you who is far away: all these invoke the deepest emotions and symbolism for the poet to say what he hears in his inner voice. We know a conversation involves an exchange that is embedded

in the act of giving something in return for something else between conversational partners that seek agreement or consolation, about some issues at hand. The subject matter of Persian poetry we have inherited from this rich and troublesome past is about searching to be at one with the self and the world in which one dwells, is to ultimately love the other as yourself, which in reality is the path of becoming the pure self.

The forms of conversation Iranians have are all poetic in the deepest sense and placed in the language of love and care. The poetry that they read is a search for understanding and a conversation that takes place in poetic spaces. This search for a form of understanding the self is instituted in the language of the sublime that is not their common language, but deeply appeals to the common sense of common people. It is so because the classical Persian language is by nature musical. It is no wonder that Iranians still love their classical musicians singing the works of these great poets. They are 'in' the world through being 'in' language that sings for them. The emphasis here is not the 'linguisticity' of understanding, but musicality and the poetics of understanding.

This essentiality of language is that within which anything that is intelligible can be comprehended. It is also that in which Iranians encounter themselves and others through and within language. In this respect, language is itself understood as essentially dialogue or conversation. The poetry of Maulana and other great Persian poets is uniquely conversational. That is to say, the self of the poet is directly engaged with a subject matter that deeply concerns him both within his inner and in his outer world. In Persian poetry, the language of the poet sounds mystical to the reader or listener, but if you know what you are looking for in reading them this language is directly public language. The essence of writing and the function of language always involves others, hence the poetry of these poets essentially is always directed at the world as they perceived it according to their own unique individual understanding of it. The poetry of these great poets is the song that calls for recognition of the primacy of understanding and the possibility of authentic union with the self.

Conclusion

Cultures are based on some foundational trajectories: paths, progressions or lines of development. These are passed on to us through history, tales, myths, symbols, images, monuments, rituals, beliefs, oral and written texts. To understand our being, we are existentially embedded in the world we know both subjectively and objectively. The process of understanding the meaning of things begins with the direct relationships we have with the situations in which we grow, live and encounter the other in the world. The intensity that we have experienced through the interaction with the other, and the modes of interpretation we adopt in order to lead us toward a totality of who we are in the world, is the work of that intensity. It is through intensity and vigorous interpretation that we learn how to pave the path of finding our true essence.

The poetry we are discussing here is a kind of calling to the soul, and the true meanings of things that are known in our consciousness have been embedded in our

experiences and the situations in which these experiences have occurred. 'The truth of experience always implies an orientation toward new experience'.¹⁷ Hence the reflectivity of consciousness does not lead to absolute knowledge, but rather to the truth of experience itself. Maulana lived in his unique world in which he poured out his being and left us with one of the greatest treasures of human experience in its sublime mode of expression, poetry. Now, when we read him we are obliged to look into ourselves and ask ourselves who we are in the depth of our selves. This is the core of our being in the world, and is our understanding of friendship and care for others.