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**TALES OF MYSTICAL LOVE IN THE POEMS OF THE PERSIAN
POET FARID AD-DIN ‘ATTAR**

Abstract: One of the greatest Persian Sufi poets of the late 12th–early 13th centuries, Farid ad-Din ‘Attar (died c. 617/1220 or 632/1234) is the author of many mystical mathnavi poems, such as “Asrar-nameh” (“The Book of Secrets”), “The Mantiq al-tair” (“Language of the Birds”), “Ilahi-nameh” (“The Divine Book”), and “Musibat-nameh” (“The Book of Suffering”). One of the poet’s major accomplishments are poems about mystical love, whose heroes are famous Sufi sheikhs, historical figures, heroes from the Middle and Near Eastern literary tradition, as well as lesser-known characters. ‘Attar’s stories illustrate various aspects of the mystics’ religious love for God.

Keywords: Persian Sufi literature, Islamic mysticism, mystical love, Iranian Sufism, ‘Attar.

Already in the first centuries of Islam, strict Muslim jurists prohibited sensual poetry, while less austere ones permitted it, provided that it did not relate to a specific person, but was abstract. By virtue of the latter prohibition, the image of the beloved in Arabic and Persian poetry scarcely reveals individual traits, but rather represents a general idea of perfect beauty. In Islamic mysticism feminine attributes seemed unthinkable for the concept of God, so a masculine image served as a symbol of the deity far more often than a feminine one (see Ritter H. *Das Meer der Seele. Mensch, Welt und Gott...* Leiden, 1955, p. 443). Medieval

scholiasts regarded Persian love poetry as a symbolic expression of love for God. Even the sensuality of the beloved was interpreted through religious concepts, and it came to the point that the mystics mistakenly viewed ordinary sensual love as religious. On the other hand, Sufi poets benefited from the possibility of mystical interpretation, because they could disguise their sensual experience under the veil of searches of the Sufi message (Ibid., p. 444). Heavenly and earthly love in the epic poetry of the Persian Sufi poet Farid ad-Din 'Attar (died c. 617/1220 or 632/1234) are strictly separated, but in his mystical tales he often comments on the moods and spiritual experiences of those who love God together with the experiences of earthly lovers. There was a very close connection between heavenly and earthly love in Islamic mysticism. As an example, a story in 'Attar's poem "Ilahi-nameh" ("The Divine Book") shows that one must have the strength to endure the closeness of the divine beloved:

An officer fell in love with the king's handsome son. When the prince went with his father at the head of an army against the enemy, the officer got a horse and joined the army just to be able to look at the prince. However, the prince's army was defeated, he himself was captured, and the officer in love was also captured along with the prince. Both of them were bound in chains, the officer served the prince and eventually confessed his love to him and explained why he had gone to war voluntarily with the prince's army. The officer in love strived to be with the prince and prayed to God that their imprisonment would last as long as possible. But the king made peace with his enemy, and according to their agreement, the prince had to marry the daughter of his former enemy. The wedding celebrations continued for forty days, after which the prince recalled his lover and ordered to summon him. The officer in love neared the prince and suddenly fainted. Having come to his senses, he answered the prince's question about what happened to him: "In the prison I did not fully understand who you

really were. Now, after a forty-day separation, when you appear in such splendor, I do not have the strength to bear the sight of you” (‘Attar, “Ilahi-nameh” (“The Divine Book”); H. Ritter (ed.); Istanbul; 1940; pp. 80-85 (chapter 4, tale 4)).

A lovesick mystic was not afraid of death. Instead of fear of death, he felt a passionate desire for death and joy:

The lover was laughing on his deathbed. Someone asked him: “Why are you laughing when you should be crying?” The dying man replied: “I am the lover who dwells with the Beloved. I am like the early morning, laughing because it carries the sun. I carry the sun in my chest, the day has come to me, and the night has disappeared; my Beloved has come, and only God is everywhere” (‘Attar Farid ad-Din, “Musibat-nameh” (“The Book of Suffering”); Tehran; 1338/1959; pp. 133-134 (chapter 10, tale 2)).

However, the God’s love cannot be put on the same scale with human love, since God is above human affects or the sensual happiness that a person feels near his/her beloved. We can only think of the God’s love in the same way we think of a king who brings closer to himself a slave he favors and deems worthy of this privilege because of his excellent qualities. ‘Attar tells that once a Sufi saw a beautiful princess during a caravan stop. He fell in love with her and was very embarrassed. When the princess noticed his plight, she sent for him and asked what was the cause for his embarrassment. He confessed his love to her. Then she said: “I may be beautiful, but if only you could see my sister! She is an embodiment of perfect beauty, which Sufis love. Look back, she is passing behind me now.” When the Sufi turned around, the princess ordered his head to be cut off (‘Attar Farid ad-Din, “Musibat-nameh” (“The Book of Suffering”); pp. 242-244 (chapter 26, tale 1)).

A lover cannot and does not dare to sleep:

Once a lover was sleeping on the ground. His beloved was passing by. When he saw that the lover was sleeping, he wrote a note and attached it to the

sleeping man's pillow. When the latter woke up, he found a note which read: "If you are a tradesman, get up and work to earn money; if you are an ascetic, then watch and pray. However, if you are in love, then be ashamed and do not dare to say you love me. A lover who sleeps may be in love, but only with himself. You are an idle talker who talks about love yet knows nothing about it. Sleep well! You are unworthy!" (Farid ad-Din Muhammad ibn Ibrahim Nishaburi, "The Mantiq al-tair" ("Language of the Birds"); 10th edition; Tehran; 1374/1995; pp. 196-197 (bayan-i vadi-yi ma'rifat; an explanation to the Valley of Mystic Knowledge; tale 2)).

Numerous stories from the Sufi poems by 'Attar not only provide rich material for understanding the Sufi teachings of the 12th-13th centuries, but also symbolically show artistic expression of various aspects of the mystics' religious love for God.

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