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Sufi Literature
S U F I   L I T E R A T U R E

by

Annemarie Schimmel

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In the first week of October, 1974, the Afghan Government invited some German scholars to celebrate, together with their Afghan colleagues, the 700th anniversary of Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi Balkhi's death. Rumi, because he settled in Anatolia then called the country of Rum; Balkhi, because he came from an old family of mystical theologians in Balkh in present day Afghanistan.

Our conference gave us the opportunity to visit various sacred places in Afghanistan and to see the country where the oldest trends of Sufism have developed; a country which has contributed more than any other area to the development of mystical poetry in the Persian language and also in the various regional languages, like Turkish on the one hand, Pashto and, to a certain extent, the languages of Indo-Pakistan (like Panjabi and Sindhi) on the other hand.

At the same time, our journey gave us the opportunity of discussing once more the problem: what is Sufi poetry and what is Sufism? There has always been a tendency in the West to define Sufism as a kind of libertinist religion, a religion - or a state of mind - which captures those people who do not conform with the establishment and which everybody tries to develop and to practice according to his own taste.

This idea is as far off the mark as is the definition of Sufism as the later development of Islamic mysticism from the 13th century onward, a development usually connected with the great Spanish-born philosopher, Ibn 'Arabi (d. 1240), and usually known as wahdat al-wujud, 'unity of being'. This, however, is more a theosophical speculation than true mysticism in the classical sense.

If we go back to the beginnings of Sufism, we see that this movement grew out of the teachings of the Koran, when the Islamic Empire expanded and when worldliness seemed to overshadow the eschatological prophecies of the Koran. Then, a number of pious people concentrated upon the otherworld, constantly meditating on the Koran in their daily and nightly prayers, thinking of the annihilation of the lower self, and realizing through their whole life the first and second half of the profession of faith: there is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his prophet.

This movement, which probably originated in Basra, is called tasawwuf or Sufism because the ascetics, following the example of their Christian neighbors, dressed in woolen (suf) garments. Although the origins of Sufism can be found in Iraq the movement very soon took roots in the mountains of present-day Afghanistan. Here, in Khurasan and the ancient area of Bactria, a great ascetic movement developed during the late eighth and the ninth century. The ascetics of Marw and Taligan are still mentioned as models-cases in later poetry, and we can certainly assume that some of their ascetic ideals were shaped by Buddhist influences, Palkh being one of the centers of Buddhism in the first centuries of the Christian era. Khurasan is noted for the strictness of the ascetic behavior that was prevalent in this region, and particularly for the development of tawakkul, the complete and unquestioning trust in God, which sometimes led to strange excesses of ascetic behavior.
It was a woman saint who introduced the element of love, the pure love of God, into this stern, austere asceticism. Her name, Rūbiqa al-Adawiyya from Basra, has become the symbol of absolute love. This slave-girl is also an example of the fact that a woman can reach the same spiritual heights as a man once she wholeheartedly enters the path to God. Even today a particularly pious woman is often called 'a second Rūbiqa.'

Sufism developed during the ninth century almost everywhere in the Muslim world: in Egypt where Dhū'n-Nūn sang his beautiful mystical hymns and prayers; in Iran and in Baghdad where the psychological method of introspection was developed. The movement culminated in the figure of a man who has become the symbol of the ecstatic lover in later literature, Ḥusain ibn Mansūr al-Hallāj. Ḥallāj was executed in Baghdad in 922 allegedly because he had said Anš'āl-Haqq, 'I am the Creative Truth' or, as later sources interpret it, 'I am God'. But his execution is rather to be ascribed to the fact that his teachings and his interpretation of Islam in a very personal way - his interiorization of the external duties - did not agree with the general political and social structure of the Abbasid Empire. Whatever the true reason may be, Ḥallāj, or, as he is usually called, Mansūr, became one of the central figures for all those poets who sang of their love and longing and the final experience of unity between man and God; his name was repeated, his fate alluded to in innumerable verses in all the languages of the Islamic world.

When Hallāj was in prison a young man from Shiraz visited him three times. It was Ibn Khafīf, an ascetic who was deeply impressed by Ḥallāj's teachings and who noted down a number of his poems, brought them home to Shiraz and cherished his memory. This Hallajian tradition was kept alive under the surface in the city of Shiraz up to the 12th century; then, Rūzbihān-i Baqī, probably the greatest love-mystic in Islam, put this tradition openly before the Sufis by writing his great commentary on the sayings of Ḥallāj, the Sharh-i shat hiyāt. This made him a commonly acknowledged hero of mystical love although the orthodox never fully accepted him.

At the time of Rūzbihān (d. 1209) however, other trends had become visible in Sufism. While the early Sufis concentrated exclusively on the pure love between man and God without any created object in between, later Sufis developed theories according to which the Divine Beauty could reveal itself through the veil of created forms. Thus they might be able to see God revealed in the face of a beautiful young human being, preferably a boy, whom they admired and loved and whose love was, for them, a kind of spiritual ladder leading to the Divine Beloved as in the Arabic saying, al-majāz qaṭaratul-baqīqa - 'the metaphor is the bridge toward reality'. (Hence, worldly love is called āshq majāzī, 'metaphorical love'.)

At the same time, various poetical genres had developed in Iran and the concept of the revelation of God through the medium of human beauty became one of the centers of mystical poetry. The poetry now begins to acquire that oscillating character which is so typical of the verses of the great Persian poets. When you read the ghazals of Ṣafī, and even of his earlier compatriot Sa'īdī, you will always find this kind of opalizing quality so that you never know exactly whether the addressee of the poem is the Divine Beloved or a human being; whether the wine of which the poet speaks is real or is meant as a metaphor of divine, intoxicating love; whether the taverns are the place of union with God or real drinking places, etc.
This aspect of Persian poetry caused immense confusion, especially in the minds of Western readers, when it was first translated in the 18th century. The question of whether or not to interpret the poetry of Hāfīz, Žāmī or other great Persian language poets in a mystical or profane sense has divided orientalists for more than 150 years. I personally think that the only way to understand this kind of poetry properly is to know that behind every outward meaning there is a secret meaning hidden and that the two belong together as much as the rays of the sun and the sun itself cannot be separated. The greatest mistake we can make in translating this kind of poetry is to take its symbolism at face value and to transform Hāfīz and his contemporaries and many other Persian, Turkish and Indo-Muslim poets into libertines and wild, love-intoxicated characters who had nothing to do but sing about beautiful girls or boys and about very worldly pleasures in the wine-house.

On the other hand it would also be wrong to see their poetry exclusively as an expression of mystical theories so that every black curl of the beloved, which is praised and described by the poet, is intended to mean the world of phenomena; every beautiful radiant face means nothing but the uncreated beauty of God; every glass of wine is in itself the wine of love or gnosis. Later poets, unfortunately, tended to write commentaries for their own poetry explaining each and every word in a mystical and highly philosophical sense but I think this did not make their verses better.

This is the way lyrical poetry developed, mainly in Central Iran. This style reached its first apex in the poetry of Hāfīz who is certainly the most delightful and most colorful of all Persian lyrical poets.

But for the whole development of mystical poetry and for the dissemination of mystical thought, epical poetry was probably even more important and here it is the eastern fringe of the Persian-speaking world, nowadays Afghanistan, which has played the most important role. The first poet ever to write didactic poetry with mystical content was Ḥakīm Sanā'ī who died about 1131 in his native Ghazni. After having been a panegyrist of the later Ghaznavids, he suddenly converted to Sufism. He wrote a mystical poem of about 10,000 verses, Ḥadiqat al-haqīqa (The Orchard of Truth), which E.G. Browne considered, unfortunately, to be the most boring poem ever written in the Persian language. I think that anyone who has really managed to go through the Ḥadiqa will not agree with Browne's statement. On the contrary, Sanā'ī's slightly dry and matter-of-fact style is after a while much more attractive and lovable than the highly embellished literature which we usually connect with Persian mysticism. Sanā'ī's work is a storehouse of anecdotes, fables and little proverbs. It is particularly interesting since it preserves traces of the ancient dialect of Ghazni - traces which some modern scholars have interpreted as flaws in the author's versification. On the whole, the Ḥadiqa is a most admirable work which sets the model for the greatest masterpieces of Persian epical literature.

Besides, we owe to Sanā'ī a number of other poetical works among which the Sair al-qbād ilā'lam qud (The Journey of God's Servants to the Place of Return) belongs with the most interesting philosophical books. Although his role in Persian literature is usually underrated, he is the author of one of the most intriguing qasidas in early Persian, the Tashīh at-tuyūr (The Rosary of the Birds), where he shows how every bird in the world has a special way of talking about and praising God. For instance, the dove always says kū kū (Where?, Where?) because it searches for the Beloved; the stork says lak lak meaning al-mulk lak al-izz lak (the Kingdom belongs to Thee, Glory belongs to Thee), thus constantly acknowledging God's power and telling the other birds about it. Sanā'ī enumerates all the birds
known to him and interprets their calls. This poem certainly influenced CAttār's Mantiq ut-tair (The Birds' Conversation) and its imagery and wording was also taken over by Maulānā Jalāluddin. We should not forget Sana'ī's touching 'Lament of Satan' in which the exiled angel complains of having fallen prey to God's ruses, or his poetry in honor of the Prophet. Sana'ī's interpretation of Sura 93 'By the Morning Light' is a rhetorical and mystical masterpiece and deserves special mention here because one aspect of Sufi poetry is the veneration of the Prophet of Islam. It was Ḥallāj, the martyr-mystic we mentioned earlier, who first produced a hymn in honor of the Prophet praising him as light from the Uncreated Light and as the one whose wisdom, compared to the wisdom of everybody else, is like a drop compared to the ocean, and so on. From that time onward, Arabic, Persian and related poetry abounds with praise-songs in honor of Muhammad; they could not sing enough of his miracles and they expressed the hope for his intercession at Doomsday. It is thanks to the Sufis that the figure of the Prophet became the center of mystical piety and of piety in general. Even nowadays when millions of Muslims recite the durūd sharīf (the prayer on the Prophet and his family) several times every day, it is certainly thanks to the Sufis who disseminated this piety everywhere so that it is now echoed in innumerable songs from lullabies to Mauluds (the wonderful stories about the Prophet's birth which are sung in Turkey at the anniversary of a bereavement or on the Prophet's birthday to insure Divine grace). The popular veneration of the Prophet is one aspect of Islamic mystically-tinged poetry of which the Westerner is usually not aware but which colors the whole attitude of Muslims from West Africa to Indonesia.

As I said, Sana'ī's "Litany of the Birds" certainly influenced CAttār, the second of the great Eastern Iranian mystical poets. To him we owe not only a collection of beautiful mystical lyric poetry and the Tadhkirat al-auliyā', the first comprehensive 'romantic' collection of stories about the lives of the saints, but also some of the finest and most artistic epics ever written in the Persian language. Among them the Mantiq ut-tair (The Birds Conversation) is probably the most famous and rightly so. Alluding to a Koranic expression it tells how thirty birds, under the guidance of the hoopoe, wander through the seven valleys in search of the King of Birds. It is really a Persian version of Pilgrim's Progress. Eventually they reach the valley of poverty and annihilation and enter the dwelling-place of the King of Birds, the Sīmurgh, and discover that they, being thirty birds (ṣī murgh), are themselves identical with the Sīmurgh. Thus they find the King of Birds - the Divine Reality - in themselves and inseparable from themselves. This pun on ṣī murgh and Sīmurgh is certainly the most ingenious pun in Persian and the story is one of the finest allegories for the quest of the Divine which is to be found essentially in the heart of man himself.

CAttār's Ilahīnāme tells the story of the King and his Six Sons, each of whom has a strange wish and hope; he answers their requests by telling them numerous stories about greedy, angry and powerful personalities to divert them from their worldly goals. The book is really a treasure house of Persian tales and folklore. In CAttār's greatest work, the Musībatnāme (Book of Affliction), we follow the internal way of the mystic during his forty days' seclusion. At every station he meets one of the created beings - from archangels to the wind, fire, Satan, animals and birds - until he reaches the Prophet himself. At the 39th stage, the Prophet tells the seeker to turn to the ocean of his own soul and to find God there. This whole epic is about the development of the disciple during the forty days of seclusion and at each stage the mystical guide is introduced to explain the meaning of each conversation to the disciple: for he understands that everything created is yearning for God and is on its way toward God. Everywhere in the world there is the voice of longing for God.
There is also Ṣāṭṭār's Ushtūrnāmā in which the hero is a Turkish puppeteer. He takes his puppets from the 'box of nothingness', projects them on the screen, then breaks them into pieces and puts them back into the box. The adept, searching for the secret behind the play, sees all the seven veils opening one after the other, but when he witnesses everything ending again in the darkness of unqualified Unity he commits suicide. This is one of the strangest expressions of mystical experience in Persian poetry and it has been properly analyzed, as have Ṣāṭṭār's other works, by Hellmut Ritter whose masterly book, Das Meer der Seele (The Ocean of the Soul), is the best introduction not only to Ṣāṭṭār's thought but also into the classical phase of Persian mystical poetry.

There is a legend that Jalāluddīn Balkhī-Rūmī, when he was a mere boy, came with his family to Nishapur and met the aged Ṣāṭṭār who gave him his Pandhāma and blessed him because he saw his future greatness. If this story is true it must have happened one year before Ṣāṭṭār's death, in 1219, when Jalāluddīn's family left Balkh fearing the advancing Mongols who were to destroy the city shortly afterwards.

Jalāluddīn Rūmī's life story is well-known. After wandering through the Islamic lands with his father, a noted mystical theologian from Balkh, the family eventually settled in Laranda, then in Konya, the capital of the Seljukids of Rum and a center of learning and art during the early 13th century.

Jalāluddīn succeeded his father in the chair of theology at one of the numerous madrassas of Konya in 1231. Later he was enraptured by an infinite love for the wandering dervish, Shamsuddīn of Tabris, and, thanks to this rapturing experience, he became a poet - the greatest mystical poet of Islam. After Shamsuddīn disappeared in 1248, Maulānā Jalāluddīn had another experience of mystical love - though on a different spiritual level - with the illiterate goldsmith Salāḥuddīn Zarkūb, whose daughter he married to his eldest son. After Salāḥuddīn's death he was inspired by his disciple, Ḥusāmuddīn Chalabī, to compose the Mathnawī, the great mystical epic of approximately 26,000 verses, which has become for Persian speaking mystics second only to the Koran - hast Qur'ān dar zabān-i pahlavi: 'It is the Koran in Persian tongue', as Jāmī (d. 1492) of Herat said in the 15th century.

Rumi's life and poetry belong to the most fascinating aspects of Persian and Turkish culture and he has inherited much from his predecessors in the present Afghan area. We cannot go into detail; his work is too large and there are too many possibilities of interpretation. What we would like to stress, however, is the fact that in his more than 33,000 verses of lyrics and his more than 26,000 verses of epic poetry, Rumi never loses his relation with this world which serves as a starting point for his development of his ideas and feelings. Of course this world was, for him, a metaphor, not a reality - Reality belonging only to God. In his attitude toward the world he very much resembles Sanā'I of whose work he was extremely fond - fonder than he was of the work of Ṣāṭṭār. This fondness can be illustrated by the number of verses and allusions he took over from the Wise Man of Ghazni: he has inserted whole verses from Sanā'I's Divān and Hādīga into his own work; he mentions him very often in the Mathnawī and he wrote a beautiful elegy about Sanā'I's death which is practically nothing but an elaboration of an inscription which Sanā'I himself had composed for his tombstone.

Rumi uses everything created as a symbol of a higher reality. He does not shun the imagery of the kitchen, of the world of children or of sewing and weaving to express his mystical experiences. There is not a single sphere of life which he
did not use to produce a mystical metaphor and it is probably this marvelous closeness to daily life and his knowledge of everything human which makes his poetry so great and thanks to which he never lost himself in vague or dry speculations or in fruitless philosophical thought.

We cannot deny that his lyrics are sometimes very difficult to comprehend because they do not fit into the general image of Persian poetry. They are not like a beautiful Persian garden which looks as though it were made of glass or precious stones; they are rather like a wild landscape in which the strangest and most fragrant flowers appear all of a sudden and one does not know where they came from. Then the poet leaves you in complete darkness and despair telling about his agony after his beloved has disappeared. Or he describes how love is a government official who comes to confiscate everything on earth, squeezing man until the last drop of egotism has disappeared; love can be a carpenter who builds a ladder to heaven or love is like a police inspector who chases away the thieves called Grief and Sorrow. There is no end of these personifications.

But the greatest attraction in Rumi's lyrics is certainly his stress on rhythm in his poetry. Since he initiated the Order of the Whirling Dervishes, it is only natural that his poetry should have been created out of a feeling of music and rhythm. Indeed, we know that he used to compose most of his lyrical poetry in a state of rapture, spinning around, clapping his hands and reciting whatever came into his mind in intensely glowing verses. If a modern reader cannot read him this way it will be difficult for him to really appreciate Rumi's poetical greatness.

Rumi's poetry greatly influenced later generations not only in the Ottoman Empire - where the best commentaries on the Mathnawī were produced and where the Order of the Whirling Dervishes (the Mevlevis) had its home - but also in the Eastern part of the Muslim world. Iran can boast of a considerable number of philosophically oriented commentaries on his work and his new home, so to speak, became the Indian subcontinent where his work was known only a few years after his death. It became famous in the following decades not only in the Western fringe of the subcontinent - present-day Pakistan - but also in East Bengal. We know that in the 15th century the Brahmans of Bengal loved to recite his poetry. Rumi's influence is also visible in the literature produced in the regional languages of India and Pakistan. We cannot go into the whole question of the imitation of and the commentaries on the Mathnawī here nor into the problem of the numerous verses taken from his poetry and incorporated into the Persian and later the Urdu literature of the subcontinent, however, his work was considered the most important ingredient of mystical life in the provinces of the Punjab and Sind.

There is one story in which one of the mystical leaders of Sind in the 17th century possessed only three books, the Koran, the Mathnawī and the Diwan of Hāfiẓ, which he, of course, interpreted mystically. We have no reason to doubt the veracity of this story because the whole of Sindhi and Panjabi folk poetry is permeated with allusions to Rumi. With this poetry, however, we reach another field, a field which seems to be far away from classical Persian literature but in which for centuries the poets sang about the same ideas, expressed the same feelings of longing and love.
Of course, the classical type of Persian poetry is also known in Indo-Pakistan literature. Its most typical expression in classical times is found in the works of Īraqī who, in the 13th century, lived for 25 years in Multan as a disciple of Bahā'uddīn Zakaria Multānī, the great Suhrawardi saint. If you go to Multan today, you will still find some musicians sitting in front of Bahā'uddīn's mausoleum singing the poetry of Pakhruddīn Īraqī with sweet and melancholy voices as if the verses had been written yesterday and not 700 years ago. It is the same experience one can have in Herat where the presence of the great Ābdūl-lah-i Ansārī (d. 1089) is still felt in Gāzargāh and where his tender and heartfelt short orisons, the Munājāt, are still in the air just as Jāmī's verses seem to be alive in the remnants of the Timurid mosques - as a verbal counterpart of the colorful tiles of the monuments from the time of his patron, Husain Baiqara.

Besides the strong current of Persian mystical poetry which was always important for the development of religious thought in Muslim India, we find that Sindhi and Panjabi poetry have much else in common: both come from rural, agricultural areas and in both languages the poets use a large number of images taken from daily life - especially from spinning and weaving as is natural in a cotton-growing country. Thus, the dhikr, the constant repetition of God's name deep in the heart, without spoken words, was compared by many poets to the spinning of fine yarn, and the humming sound which the constant dhikr may produce could easily be compared to the humming of a spindle. Shah Ābdūl Latīf, the greatest poet of the Sind in the 18th century, used an old folk tune called Kāpaitī, used by women for spinning songs, for his poem on the dhikr. The heart becomes more and more refined just as a thread becomes finer and finer by constant and patient spinning.

One thing that is highly surprising to the reader who knows the central Islamic tradition in mystical poetry, and particularly the Persian tradition, is the role of women in the poetry of Sind and the Panjab. From Persian or Turkish poetry we are used to the male author addressing the beloved as a male being - even though the gender is not distinguishable in Persian and Turkish, the descriptions of the beloved with down on his upper lip can be applied only to a male being. The reader once used to this usage does not find it surprising or shocking but even if he should try to translate the object as feminine - a possibility using some of the theories of Ibn Ārābī - the situation would still be very different from that in the Indian tradition. For in Sindhi, Panjabi, Kashmiri and even in early Urdu, as well as in the Ismaili ginans, the soul is represented as a loving woman. Here we have a clear influence of the Hindu tradition where the soul is always the longing and loving woman who sits and waits for her husband or her beloved or goes out to seek him under the most difficult circumstances. It is the motif of Radha longing for Krishna. It is amazing to see how the folk poets in Sind and the Panjab have used old folk tales in which the heroine always searches for her lost beloved until she dies - either on the road, in the mountains or in the floods of the Indus. It is perhaps this aspect of the folk poetry of the plains which makes it so attractive to a Western reader because, in it, he finds a symbolism which is well known to all who have enjoyed the Song of Songs in the Bible. The Sindhi and Panjabi folk poets have always used this kind of imagery and I know of few poems in the whole tradition of mystical writing in the Eastern Islamic world which can compete with the love songs of Sassui, Sohni and Marui as they have been told time and again, from the 16th century onward, by the simple and often illiterate folk poets of the Indus Valley. Even today they are as fresh as they always were.
The situation in the hill countries and in the eastern part of Afghanistan is different. There is a great difference between the popular mystical poetry of the Pathans and that of the Panjabis and Sindhis. I know of only one of the Pashto poets who expressed the same overwhelming feeling of all-embracing unity as we find it so often in later Persian and also in Sindhi and Panjabi verse. This is Mirza Khan Ansari, a descendent of Pir-i Raushan, the famous founder of the Raushaniya sect and one of the first to use Pashto in his theological-mystical works in the early 16th century. But on the whole I think it would not be wrong to say that the stern ascetic influence of the early mystics of Khurasan - and particularly the poetry of Sanai of Ghazni - may have influenced the Pashto mystics. I am thinking particularly of Rahnman Baba, certainly the most powerful writer among the earlier mystical poets of the Pathans. His hymns are of superb beauty but they are also very grave and full of awe in front of the majesty of God, full of the feeling of sinfulness on the one hand and the experience of the constant worship of everything created in the presence of the creator on the other hand. Their whole approach and their wording is quite different from the certainly more 'romantic' and overflowing love poetry of the plains which expresses longing, pain and, eventually, union in ever new images. These differences, however, have not yet been properly studied. It is to be hoped that new investigations into the mystical language of the Pashto poets in connection with the Khurasanian mystico-ascetical movement may produce some interesting results; a comparative study of Sanai and Rahnman Baba in their approach to God, creation and adoration would be certainly most welcome.

We may ask ourselves what the common determinator of all these poetical expressions may be, poetry to which we could add easily not only the incredible amount of Turkish popular mystical verse as preserved in the Bektashi tradition, but also other mystical orders. Why is this poetry so much alike in the whole area between Istanbul and Delhi and perhaps even farther East? What makes it attractive in our day and to a Western reader?

Personally, I feel that the very first figure in Islamic mysticism to impress the following generations has never lost his interest for the poets: it was Husain ibn Mansur al-Hallaj, the great lover who openly proclaimed his loving union with God, who was killed by the 'establishment' and has remained the arch-martyr of Sufism - the martyr of love. There are some Sufi orders which think that Hallaj had not reached the highest stage of union but remained at a lower level and had to be punished because he proclaimed the secret of union - a secret which must not be told to the world. The Suhrawardiyya and the Naqshbandiyya orders belong to this group. But, in general, Hallaj is considered the martyr of suffering love and the model of rebellion against what we now like to call the establishment. His name occurs almost everywhere in the poetical tradition be it in Panjabi and Pashto, in Sindhi and Urdu, in Turkish or Persian. I shall never forget the evening when I was sitting in a forlorn village in Upper Sind; the musicians sang one song after the other praising Hallaj as the great lover whose bridal bed was the gallows...

It is certainly not an accident that the last great representative of mystical poetry in Islam in the Persian-Urdu tradition, namely Sir Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938), was infatuated with the figure of Hallaj. Iqbal, who probably would have been shocked to hear himself called a mystic, was very deeply steeped in the mystical tradition and, although he had described Hallaj in his earlier poetical works as a typical representative of pantheism, (as he had been labeled for many centuries in the poetical tradition), he later came to understand him as one of the few who had interiorized the Islamic teachings and had called people to a religion
that did not consist of imitation but was the personal experience of the power of God in human life. Ḥallāj becomes in Iqbal's work the representative of the modern, loving Muslim who ushers in a new period of human consciousness. He also becomes the hero of the love of the Prophet, as he was indeed. One of the finest hymns ever written in Persian in honor of the Prophet was put by Iqbal into Ḥallāj's mouth in a touching scene in his great poem, Jāvīdnāme, published in 1932.

The figure of Ḥallāj can be found everywhere in modern Islamic poetry. In Urdu he has become the symbol of the man who suffers for his ideals and is persecuted by the establishment; he was a key figure for all those who suffered under the British and remains a model for those who suffer for their political convictions. The same is true in Turkey. Lately in the Arab countries his fate has attracted some of the most important writers - the Egyptian Ṣalāḥ Ǧabdas Sabūr, the Iraqi ǦAbdul Wahhāb al-Ǧayātī, the Lebanese Adonis and others - who have devoted highly interesting poetry to his memory.

I think that the very fact that a person such as Ḥallāj, who represents the highest ideal of mystical Islam - i.e. a completely interiorized and personal experience of the absolute power of God - and has expressed in his life and work the never-ending love and longing of man, the very fact that his name has survived as a mystical symbol throughout the centuries in all the lands of Islam and has been rediscovered in the 20th century, shows the innate power of Sufism. It also shows that Islam and the Islamic peoples may be able to find a new interpretation of their religious tradition when they go back to Ḥallāj's personality and to the tradition of those who have loved and suffered like him.