

The Complex of Divine Love and Human Love In the Sufi Poetry of Rumi (Or, How All Love Is Love For God)

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Introduction

Rumi's poetry is replete with allusions to love. Or, it can also be said that the whole of Rumi's poetry is about love.

This latter claim I make on the basis of a poem in *Divān-i Shams-i Tabrizī* (hereinafter referred to as *Divān*). In William Chittick's study on Rumi, *The Sufi Path of Love*, there is Rumi's invitation to the readers by way of an epigraph which goes:

If you have lost heart
In the Path of Love,
Flee to me without delay;
I am a fortress invincible. (endpaper)

It is not an exaggeration to say that anyone who heeds the poet's invitation is not disappointed. Rumi, without imposing on his readers, is able to instruct them on the ways of love. Through his work, he elaborates on its nature, its various permutations, and initiates his readers into the many ways of loving.

In this paper, I explain some of Rumi's visions about love, expounding on his reflections on the answer that God gives David to the question about the motive for creation: God tells David, "I was a hidden treasure and I loved to be known. Hence I created the creatures that I might be known" (Chittick, "The Spiritual Path" 6).

I also elaborate on Rumi's reflections (accomplished through his poetry) and their implications on contemporary understanding of love. This means I show how these reflections are able to complete the picture of the experience of love by pointing to the need to recognize it not as an exclusively human phenomenon but rather as indicative of something higher. Human love is a manifestation of God's love for himself; I forward and defend the thesis that all love is love for God.

I divide my presentation into three sections; section one is an exposition on the human experience of love. Rumi asserts that love cannot be approached theoretically; one has to experience it in order to understand it. In this section, I explain what the poet means by his assertions. Also, according to Chittick, although the poet asserts that love cannot be defined, "its effects and consequences can be described" ("The Spiritual Path" 6). Hence, I present some of Rumi's descriptions of love, i.e., what occurs when one is in love.

The goal is not simply to make love graspable via descriptions, rather it is to provide reader with something she can check her experience against, thus allowing her to further validate her own experience of love.

Section two is an elaboration of what for Rumi is essential in the discussion of human love, i.e., the realization of its incompleteness. Rumi dispels the notion that love is something that a person does out of his own capacity. For him, human love is a consequence of an originary act, of something primal. If one wishes to know what love truly is, then one must be able to distinguish between cause and effect, that is, one must come to the realization that human love is a consequence of the activity of God loving himself. Chittick writes, “[a]ll love is in truth love for God” (“The Spiritual Path” 10).

In section three I conclude the presentation with a brief discussion of what is accomplished by the realization initiated by Rumi’s reflections. I discuss how the awareness of God’s act of self-love, as causative of human love, allows for an insight into his motive for creation. God’s creative act springs from his desire to be known, and the attainment of the purpose of creation being dependent upon human beings’ recognition of this desire, i.e., the recognition that all created things are God’s self-manifestation. A person, having been separated from the creator by the very act of creation (initiated by the creator’s desire to be loved), should strive towards union with the creator by directing her love towards him.

Human Love

Human love is nothing but the **experience** of love. I gloss on the word experience to put emphasis on how love is made manifest in a person only through concrete encounter. Rumi writes in the *Divān*,

Someone asked, “What is Love?” I replied, “Ask
not about these meanings.
When you become like me, then you will know.
When he calls you, you will recite its tale.” (Chittick, *Sufi Path of Love* 195)

For the poet, it is futile to inquire into love’s meaning if one has not experienced its effects and consequences. Words used to describe love are empty and meaningless to someone who has not experienced it; they point to nothing in the mind of a person who has not loved. For Rumi, one must first become a lover in order to understand love. “Become like me, then you will know,” he exhorts. A lover hears herself in another person who speaks about love, and no other person can speak about love except the lover. All lovers are one, they all recite love’s tale. A lover who speaks about love to someone who has not experienced it speaks only to herself; the other becomes a spectator of a play whose story she cannot follow. Only a lover can know what love is; the uninitiated remains ignorant.

Rumi’s emphasis on experience as the prerequisite of love is not without existential import. He is most practical when he exhorts the initiate to love first before asking about it. This exhortation stems from his belief in the inability of language to fully articulate love. He writes in the *Mathnawī*, “No matter what I say to explain and elucidate/ Love, shame overcomes me when I come to Love itself” (“The Spiritual Path” 194).

To speak about love entails the risk of not being able to articulate it despite having already experienced it. The converse also holds true; to ask about love is to run the risk of not being able to make sense of what is being said despite having already experienced what is being pointed out by the words spoken. This he conveys in the *Divān* through a metaphor: “Love cannot be contained within our speaking/ or listening. Love is an ocean whose depths cannot be/ plumbed” (Chittick, *Sufi Path of Love* 195).

It is Rumi's conviction that words are insufficient to occasion the understanding of love. Rumi scholar William Chittick writes, "[l]ove...has to be experienced to be understood" ("The Spiritual Path" 195). Words may fail to articulate love, but the experience of love remains the same despite failure in articulation. It is the experience that is most important; it is what informs a person on what love is. In the *Divān*, Rumi writes, "Oh you who have listened to talk of Love,/ behold Love! What are words in the ears compared to vision/ in the eyes!" ("The Spiritual Path" 195).

To see (experience) love is to know love. No articulation can capture what lies hidden in the core of the one who has experienced love: "Whatever you have said or heard is the shell;/ The kernel of Love is a mystery that cannot be divulged" ("The Spiritual Path" 195).

But it can be asked, if love cannot be divulged, i.e., it can only be experienced, then whence comes the knowledge of having experienced love? How does an initiate of love know it is already love she is experiencing? On this point Rumi is not very instructive. Although he gives vivid descriptions of the effects and consequences of love— hence directing his readers to their own experience of love for confirmation, or instructing them in the different ways of loving further— he is vague when it comes to the question of what brings about this realization of having already experienced love.

This is a problem because given that words are insufficient to occasion the understanding of love, it may happen that a novice who inquires into love fails to make sense of the description given to her by someone who has already experienced love's effects and consequences. Or, it may also happen that the novice has no one to ask about what it means to love. On both occasions the novice is left to figure out on her own what it means to truly love. She has to decide on her own—and the question, again, is on what basis—whether a particular experience is already an instance of love. A task she may fail miserably at.

It is also an issue in another respect: it suggests the possibility of an infinite regress, i.e., an absurdity, if it happens that someone claims to have arrived at a confident validation of her experience as love via another person, and this other person claiming to have arrived at the same, again, via another person, and this other person via another *ad infinitum*. It begs the question: who was the first to arrive at the realization that her experience is an instance of love, and the looming question: how did she arrive at this realization?

On the preceding issues, it can only be said, for one, that the experience of the effects and consequences of love is sufficient to occasion the knowing of what love is; as already suggested by Rumi: become like me, and then you will know. And then there is also the possibility of a profound change in someone who has experienced the effects and consequences of love, i.e., from being a novice she changes into a lover already reciting love's tale. This latter point, I claim, can be inferred from "The Worm's Waking." Although it may not be a poem about love, I find its message instructive on the matter. In *The Essential Rumi*, Rumi writes,

This is how a human being can change:

there's a worm addicted to eating
grape leaves.

Suddenly, he wakes up,
call it grace, whatever, something
wakes him, and he's no longer
a worm.

He's the entire vineyard,
and the orchard too, the fruit, the trunks,
a growing wisdom and joy
that doesn't need
to devour. (265)

I conjecture that arriving at an understanding of love, i.e., knowing one's experience to be an instance of love, is a product of a profound transformation that occurs in the lover the moment she sips from love's flagon. It is a transformation that does not carry within itself an explanation or reason for its occurrence: a lover wakes up transformed, knowledgeable about love, no longer a novice. She is transformed by who knows what, "grace, whatever," Rumi does not identify. This latter point, I conjecture, is also what helps avoid the positing of an absurdity which is that of an infinite regress (as it eliminates the need for a series of novices and masters in love, asking and answering questions about love) by occasioning the understanding of love that does not require another. The lover is enough!

Love makes itself known as love the moment it is experienced. Hence, to experience love is to heed Rumi's call. Rumi invites readers to become like him: a lover, love's raconteur. Theorizing, discussions about love are not the best way to love. As Rumi says "Love cannot be found in erudition and science,/ books and pages. Whatever is discussed by people—that is not/ the way of lovers" (Chittick, *Sufi Path of Love* 95).

There is only one sure way to love — to experience it.

I conclude this section by presenting two of Rumi's poems which I believe are able to capture what the experience of love is like. Even though, as Chittick claims, a great deal about love can be gleaned from Rumi's words, the poet's caveat stands: "[l]ove exists to be realized, not discussed" (*Sufi Path of Love* 95). Chittick adds, "[i]f Rumi discusses it, he does so only to stir up the desire for Love in the heart of the listener" (*Sufi Path of Love* 95). He quotes from the *Divān*: "What is love? Perfect thirst. So let me explain/the Water of Life" (*Sufi Path of Love* 95).

In the first poem from the *Divān* in *The Essential Rumi*, Rumi scholar and translator Coleman Barks assigns the title "Like This." Here, Rumi writes of the intensity of the experience, an intensity comparable to nothing but only to itself. *Like this*:

If anyone asks you
how the perfect satisfaction
of all our sexual wanting
will look, lift your face
and say,
 Like this.
When someone mentions the gracefulness
of the night sky, climb up on the roof
and dance and say,
 Like this?
If anyone wants to know what "spirit" is,
or what "God's fragrance" means,
lean your head toward him or her.
Keep your face there close.
 Like this.
When someone quotes the old poetic image

about clouds gradually uncovering the moon,
slowly loosen knot by knot the strings of your robe.

Like this?

If anyone wonders how Jesus raised the dead,
don't try to explain the miracle.

Kiss me on the lips.

Like this. Like this.

When someone asks what it means
to "die for love," point
here.

If someone asks how tall I am, frown
and measure with your fingers the space
between the creases on your forehead.

This tall.

The soul sometimes leaves the body, then returns.
When someone doesn't believe that,
walk back into my house.

Like this.

When lovers moan,
they're telling our story.

Like this.

I am a sky where spirits live.
Stare into this deepening blue,
while the breeze says a secret.

Like this.

When someone asks what there is to do,
light the candle in his hand.

Like this.

How did Joseph's scent come to Jacob?

Huuuuu.

How did Jacob's sight return?

Huuuuu.

A little wind cleans the eyes.

Like this.

When Shams comes back from Tabriz,
he'll put just his head around the edge
of the door to surprise us.

Like this. (135-137)

Chittick as translator does not assign a title to the next poem which answers the question: what happens when one becomes a lover?

What would happen, youth, if you become a lover like me?

– every day madness, every night weeping.

His image not out of your eyes for one instant –

two hundred lights reaching your eyes from that face.

You would cut yourself off from your friends,

you would wash your hands of the world:

"I have detached myself from myself,

I have become entirely Yours.

"When I mix with these people, I am water with oil,

outwardly joined, inwardly separate.”
Leaving behind all selfish desires, you would become mad –
but not any madness that a physician could cure.
If for an instant the physicians tasted this heartache,
they would escape their chains and tear up their books.
Enough! Leave all this behind, seek a mine of sugar!
Become effaced in that sugar like milk in candy.
(Chittick, “The Spiritual Path” 13)

Divine Love

It is easy to miss the point of Rumi’s poetry if one does not go beyond his discussion and explore his other writings especially those about his religion, Islam.

Reading him through the lens of his spirituality reveals a theme that runs deeper through his work than the attempt to elucidate the human experience of love. This theme deals with the question about the why of love? For Rumi, to experience love is to know it, but this knowledge is not necessarily revelatory of the reason for engaging in the loving act. Thus Rumi asks why love? What is its purpose? Answering these questions led Rumi to the conclusion that: higher than the goal of engaging in the loving act is the realization that this love is incomplete unless it is directed toward the being responsible for its emergence: God.

For the poet, love is not something that a person does out of her own capacity. Human love is a consequence of an originary act, of something primal; if one wishes to complete the experience of love, then one must be able to distinguish between cause and effect, that is, one must come to the realization that human love is a consequence of the activity of God loving himself. Loving is not an activity done for its own sake. It occurs not because one is capable of loving, or because one wants to. It is something that God endows a person with so that she may, in her act of love, strive toward union with God—loving him in turn—hence completing God’s activity of loving himself.

What does it mean for God to love himself?

How is it causative of the capacity to love in man? Reflecting on a famous saying found in the *Qur’an* (which is about God’s answer to David’s question regarding the motive for the world’s creation), Rumi writes:

God says, “I was a hidden treasure and I loved to be known.” In other words, “I created the whole cosmos, and the goal in all of it was to make myself manifest, sometimes through gentleness and sometimes through severity.” God is not the kind of king for whom a single herald would be sufficient. Were all the atoms of the universe his heralds, they would fall short and be incapable of making him known. (Chittick, “The Spiritual Path” 7)

God is a hidden treasure who wants to be known: a treasure because he is perfection itself, and he wants to be known because all striving can only tend toward him. Love is God’s activity of wanting to be known; love is the recoil of the perfect being toward perfection that he already is. Hence, God’s creative act, motivated by his desire to be known. God created the cosmos and everything in it to make himself manifest, and he makes it the destiny of all creatures

to seek the treasure hidden in all of creation, including the treasure hidden in themselves. God decrees that all creatures desire him. Rumi writes in the *Mathnawī*:

God's wisdom through his destiny and decree
made us lovers of one another.
That foreordainment paired all parts of the world
and set each of them in love with its mate...
The female inclines towards the male
so that each may perfect the other's work.
God place desire within man and woman
so the world might subsist through their union.
(Chittick, "The Spiritual Path" 8)

All creatures manifest desire for another creature, but this desire is in truth a desire for no other but the Creator himself since all that is desirable is his self-manifestation. The one who desires is also a manifestation of the one who desired first; hence both lover and beloved are nothing but manifestations of God in his activity of making himself known to himself. According to Chittick, Rumi likens this recoil of God to the act of looking into a mirror. Chittick quotes from Rumi's *Dīvān*: "God said to love, 'Were it not for your beauty,/ would I concern myself with the mirror of existence?'" ("The Spiritual Path" 7)

God sees himself in his creation which mirrors his perfection, hence desirable. Creatures' desire for other creatures is in truth desire for the perfection of God. Rumi's goal is to make all lovers realize this latter point. For the poet, to complete God's act of self-manifestation, all lovers must come to know that the source of their love is God, and that their love must tend toward the creator as it is his desire to be known. It is to find the hidden treasure, to love not what hides the treasure but the treasure itself:

All the hopes, desires, loves, and affections that people have for different things – father, mother, friends, the heavens, the earth, gardens, palaces, sciences, works, food, drink – all these are desires for God, and these things are veils. When people leave this world and see the eternal King without these veils, then they will know that all these veils and coverings and that the object of their desire was in reality that One Thing. All their difficulties will be solved, all the questions and perplexities that they had in their hearts will be answered. They will see all things face to face. (Chittick, "The Spiritual Path" 10)

It is to see God face to face, to strive for the unity of the lover and the beloved, to restore to God what is rightly his, i.e., himself, which Rumi forwards as the goal of human love. It is to allow for the "recoil" which is the striving of the perfect being toward perfection that he already is. The why of love is the creator's desire to be known!

Conclusion: Union with God

What is then accomplished by the realization initiated by Rumi's reflections?

It has already been elaborated how love, on the level of created beings, enables creatures to hope, desire, love, and seek that which is worth hoping for, desiring, loving, and seeking, i.e., God. But it has to be clarified that this is a truth not known to the human lover at the outset. The lover must discover this in her finite striving to love another creature.

It is Rumi's aim that through his poetry this truth be made apparent. Through his poems, the poet exhorts his readers that in their love for another creature, they are able to see beyond the beloved and find the treasure hidden within: to recognize the self-manifestation of the creator in the creature; or, as Chittick writes, "[t]he lover must be able to distinguish gold from gold-plate" ("The Spiritual Path" 11). He quotes from Rumi's *Mathnawī*:

Love is an attribute of God in his independence –
 love for anything else derives from him.
The beauty of the others is gold-plated:
 outwardly it is light, inwardly smoke.
When the light goes and the smoke appears,
 derivative love turns cold.
The beauty return to its source;
 there remains a corpse – putrid, disgraced, ugly.
The moonlight goes back to the moon,
 the moon's reflection leaves the dark wall...
But those who have eyes love the mine of gold.
 Each day their love increases,
Since the mine has no partner in its goldness –
 Hail, O Mine of Gold! In you there is no doubt.
 ("The Spiritual Path" 11)

The truth of love is the recognition of the infinite's desire to be known. To attain this truth is to seek no other. In the *Mathnawī*, Rumi says:

Love is that flame which, when it blazes up,
 burns away all except the everlasting Beloved.
With the sword of "no god" love slays "other than God."
 Look carefully: After "no god" what remains?
There remains "but God," the rest has gone.
 Hail, O great love, burning away all others!
It is he alone who is first and last,
 all else grows up from the eye that sees double.

But what is accomplished by the attainment of this truth?

Rumi exhorts his readers to seek for the hidden treasure, to find the mine of gold: God. But what form does the search take, and for what purpose exactly? For Rumi, to look for the hidden treasure is to strive to imitate God, and to imitate God is to strive to become perfect like him. According to the poet, this is something inescapable; the possibility of perfection on the level of created beings has been decreed by the creator himself. Chittick notes that for Rumi "human beings must [strive to] imitate God because of the treasures of divine potentiality that are concealed within their selves" ("The Spiritual Path" 7).

He quotes Rumi,

God created the universe for manifestation,
 lest the treasure of wisdom stay hidden.
He said, "I was a hidden treasure." Listen!
 Lose not your substance! Make yourself manifest!
 ("The Spiritual Path" 7)

Human love is a person's striving to become perfect like the creator. By directing her love toward the creator, she strives to be united with him, becoming perfect like him; the separation brought about by God's act of creation—brought about by his desire to be known—is made to recoil upon itself by the desire of the lover to be united with God. Separation from God has, as its goal, union with him. Chittick writes,

[i]n order for creation for creation to achieve its purpose, human beings must come to know that all creatures are nothing but God's self-manifestation. They must see themselves and all things in the divine context and recognize God in and through the created world. Hence, just as love brings about separation – the creation of the cosmos – so it also brings about union, or the return of the cosmos to its proper place in God. ("The Spiritual Path" 9)

The possibility of perfection is what should motivate the creature to strive for union with God; to allow for this union is to recognize God in and through the created world, to direct the creature's love toward the creator. Chittick also notes that, for Rumi, because of the divine potentiality for perfection, God says to the prophet Muhammad in the *Qur'an*: "But for thee, I would not have created the heavenly spheres" ("The Spiritual Path" 7). Chittick elaborates:

[h]ere the prophet – who represents the perfection of the human state – is pictured as the ultimate goal of creation, since only through human beings, created in God's image, is a full and complete knowledge of God made possible on the created level. Through them alone can the Hidden Treasure be completely known. ("The Spiritual Path" 8)

Muhammad represents the perfection of God on the level of created beings; hence human beings come to know God through him. To strive for the perfection of the creator is to follow the ways of the prophet; an act that is not impossible for human beings since the prophet, who has attained perfection, is not unlike them. God's concern for human beings to imitate the ways of his prophet is a manifestation of his concern for them to become perfect like him: Muhammad's perfection is God's own perfection. Here, a definite proof is forwarded by Rumi for God's desire to be united with his creatures. He has installed, on the level of created beings, someone who represents his perfection, i.e., Muhammad, so that created beings may have someone to imitate, granting them full and complete knowledge of him, so that they may become like him. It is God's love for his own perfection (represented by Muhammad, i.e., "for thee, I would not have created the heavenly spheres") that he created all things, and it is his desire that all created things become perfect like him. Rumi writes,

Love makes the ocean a boiling pot,
 love grinds down mountains to sand.
Love splits the heavens with a hundred splittings,
 love shakes the earth with its outbursts.
Pure love was paired with Muhammad,
 for its sake God said to him, "But for thee...":
"Were it not for pure love,
 why would I create the spheres?
I raised the celestial wheel on high
 so that you might grasp love's exalted rank.
 ("The Spiritual Path" 8)

Here the reality of love is made apparent: all love is love for God, and it is love that desires nothing other than the perfection of the beloved. God has created creatures so that they may know him, and that this knowledge of the creator, once arrived at, becomes an invitation for them to become perfect like him. Creation was made possible because of love, and it is this same love which makes union with the creator possible. On this truth, Rumi writes, “When the heart was annihilated within Him, He/ remained; then it understood the object of His words: ‘I/Myself am the Seeker and the Sought’” (*Sufi Path of Love* 210).

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