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Love's Limits: In Persian Poetry and Film

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Dissertation Abstract

"Love's Limits: In Persian Poetry and Film" explores the unbounded, unruly, anarchic, border-traversing potential of love through the works of Iranian poets and filmmakers spanning a millennium. In each of the works examined in this study, love precipitates a crisis in relation to a different set of questions or problems that results in a liminal moment (or moments) of confusion, ambiguity, uncertainty, and ambivalence that tests and transcends a love whose *sense* is conceptually limited. And in each instance, love's occurrence marks, or is marked by, the dissolution of a problematic, insoluble either/or dichotomy, in relation to a particular concept or a set of concepts (e.g., knowable/unknowable, human/animal, belief/unbelief, communicable/incommunicable, and reality/fiction), and the appearance of an indeterminate, indecipherable neither/nor enigma. In turn, this study not only attempts to shed light on the recurring motif of love's boundlessness, in Persian poetry and film, but also the phenomenon of love itself, as it occurs in bound and unbounded form.

Acknowledgment

I acknowledge, from the bottom of my heart, that not only is the topic of my dissertation love but the entire work originated in love, and is itself a kind of love letter; to my mother, who taught me what love is, to my grandparents, aunts, and uncles who gave me more love than I knew what to do with, to my teachers and mentors (including, but not limited to, Harry Berger Jr., Jaleh Pirnazar, Judith Butler, Samuel Weber, Franklin Lewis, Peter Fenves, Nasrin Qader, and Regina Schwartz), who, each in their own way, taught me that the art of teaching is intimately connected with the art of caring, to my students, who taught me that the more love you give the more love you will receive, to my friends, whose love supported and sustained me, to my brother, for whom my love is singular, to my beautiful wife and children, whose love means everything to me, and finally, to the Persian poets and filmmakers whose lessons on love I have spent nearly a decade studying and imbibing.

Transliteration Scheme

The transliteration of Persian words and names into a Latin script is based on the system used by the *Journal of the International Society for Iranian Studies*. Unless noted otherwise, other transliteration systems have been fully preserved in cited references. In the interest of readability and accessibility, I have used the Anglicized version of Perso-Arabic names and terms that are well known.

For Hermik

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Introduction

This study deals with the problem of limits, or, more narrowly, conceptual limits—i.e., the boundary beyond which a given concept ceases to subsist—and how they are transcended by love, in Persian poetry and film. Focusing on the works of Persian poets and filmmakers from different historical periods, I use various approaches (e.g., historical, theoretical, comparative) to illuminate their works and to show how the problem of limits is a defining characteristic of those works. This is not to suggest that the interrogation of limits in poetic and cinematic texts is unique to the Persian culture.[1] It goes without saying that the greatest artistic achievements in any culture owe much of their greatness to traversing conceptual boundaries (in artistic form, content, or both) previously thought unimaginable. Nor does this study suggest that transgressing conceptual borders in the name of love is a uniquely Persian phenomenon. Indeed, in his classic, and controversial, etymology of love, *Love in the Western World*, Denis De Rougemont traces the roots of an anarchic, border-crossing, passionate love, which he calls "Eros," that has existed in the mythic consciousness of the Western literary tradition (standing in stark contrast to all culturally, politically, and religiously sanctioned conceptions of love) since at least the 11th century.[2] Though De Rougemont believes that the antecedents of Eros, which he traces back to Plato, are ultimately "Iranian and Orphic,"[3] his study, aside from a short chapter on "Arab Mystical Poetry," focuses on Eros' inception in the courtly love poetry of the troubadours, its

[1] I acknowledge that "culture" is a fraught term, and all the customs, beliefs, and traditions of a society that fall under this category are open to constant interpretation and revision. In this sense, this project both relies on and complicates (through the act of interpretation) the body of knowledge that determines, in advance, what is meant by "Persian culture."

[2] According to De Rougemont's controversial thesis, "*The cultivation of passionate love began in Europe as a reaction to Christianity (and in particular to its doctrine of marriage) by people whose spirit, whether naturally or by inheritance, was still pagan*." See Denis de Rougemont, *Love in the Western World*, trans. Montgomery Belgion (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), 74 (italics in the original).

[3] Ibid., 62.

role in Western mysticism, its subsequent representation in European literature, and its effects on no less grand and complex phenomena than marriage and warfare. According to De Rougemont, the ultimate object of this anarchic, recalcitrant, unappeasable passion, that transcends all duty, convention, morality, law, and hierarchy, is not a person or a thing, but rather people and things merely serve as conduits for the expression of this Eros-centered love. To the extent that Eros seeks a union that, in transcending all duality, difference, and opposition, represents "the negation of the present human being in his suffering multiplicity," its telos, or consummation, is self-negation: "The supreme soaring of desire ends in non-desire….because its demand is to embrace no less than the All. It is *infinite transcendence*, man's rise into his god. And this rise is without *return*."[4]

Although this study, like De Rougemont's, also deals with the phenomenon of a fervent, border-traversing, border-transgressing love, in various forms and guises, it nonetheless parts ways from his treatment of the topic in several important ways. Not the least of these is the fact that whereas Eros is defined as "boundless desire"—boundless because despite its erotic origins its ultimate aim, or telos, is not sexual union but what sexual union represents, i.e., the dissolution of self and ascension "to the one source of all that exists, remote from bodies and matter, remote from what divides and distinguishes, and beyond the misfortune of being a self and even in love itself a pair"—what is "boundless" in this study is love itself. As we will see, this distinction is important because despite its boundlessness Eros is nonetheless bound by "desire," specifically, erotic desire, and everything this term connotes—and this to say nothing of eros' specialized meanings in Western philosophy and psychology, including Platonic

[4] Ibid., 61-62.

philosophy and Freudian and Jungian psychology, all of which inform, both directly and indirectly, De Rougemont conception of "Eros" as a special kind of love—while "boundless love," by definition, cannot be conceptually bound. Additionally, unlike De Rougemont's sweeping, philosophical, diachronic study (in which he traces the development, transformation, and displacement of Eros in European history, literature, and culture) this study only considers the phenomenon of "boundless love" as it emerges in relation to specific themes or problems within Persian literary/artistic works that span eleven centuries. Despite this synchronic, highly contextual approach to the phenomenon of "boundless love" patterns do emerge, and these patterns suggest that there are qualitative differences between De Rougemont's Eros ("boundless desire") as a historical, cultural, philosophical, and psychological phenomenon, and the phenomenon of "boundless love" as it emerges through a close reading of Persian texts. Unlike De Rougemont's Eros, "boundless love," in this study, because it is boundless and because it transcends all duality, difference, and opposition, (1) resists conceptualization/classification and therefore cannot be unambiguously represented (2) encompasses traditional concepts of love (like filial and paternal love) that organize and order social relations and therefore cannot be unambiguously distinguished/differentiated from them and (3) if it has a telos, then its telos is, paradoxically, endless or open-ended. Ironically, these defining characteristics of "boundless love," which, however paradoxically, determine its conceptual borders, also render the qualifier "boundless" unnecessary, lest we bind "boundless love" to a state of perpetual boundlessness. Moreover, to the extent that "boundless," as a qualifier, merely highlights the boundless potential inherent in all love, it is redundant and unnecessary. In fact, none of the poets and filmmakers in this study make a distinction between love and "boundless love." And that is because what they

are trying to represent is not so much "boundless love," or a love for which they would need a new vocabulary, but rather love's *boundlessness*.[5]

In the works considered in this study, over and over again, a conceptual border is tested, transgressed, or transcended in the name of—for lack of a better word—love. I say for lack of a better word because love, in this context, is not simply a concept, but rather an enigmatic, emotive force that is not reducible to a concept. To be sure, the love we are speaking of encompasses the concepts of eros, agape, philia, storge, self-love, divine love, and more, but it is not equivalent to any one concept. If a limit is only a limit to the extent that its borders can be determined, then determining the conceptual borders of love would suggest that its borders could be transgressed, transcended, or remapped by a power greater than it. But what power is greater than love? Love can destroy every binary, every hierarchy, and every system standing in its way, burying the remains under a gravestone erected in loving memory of good reasons, solid proofs, and sound logic. Even love cannot stand in love's way, when love is at stake; deconstructing the binary of love and hate (or that which makes love recognizable as love) in the name of love, is second nature to love.[6]

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[5] The Persian word for love, derived from the Arabic, is *'eshq*, meaning "love," "passion." It can be used to signify romantic love, erotic love, divine love, platonic love, or love in general. What distinguishes *'eshq*, in Persian, from the love expressed through words/concepts like *dust dāshtan* (which has a range of meanings, from "to love" to "to like") is its intensity of feeling and passion.

[6] In the Western canon, no work better exemplifies love's power to dissolve seemingly irreconcilable conceptual binaries, differences, and oppositions than Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*:

> My only love sprung from my only hate!
> Too early seen unknown, and known too late!
> Prodigious birth of love it is to me
> That I must love a loathèd enemy. (1.5.152-155)

Of course, Juliet's speech not only foreshadows her marriage to Romeo (her enemy), but also the transformation of enmity into love at the end of the play. By the end of the play, Romeo and Juliet's love, through their sacrificial death, has the effect of forging new relations by turning hate (between their respective families) into love. And this transformation speaks to love's unlimited potential to create new relations, and new ways of relating to the world, from the ashes of those it left behind. For more on love's transformative, healing power, in *Romeo and Juliet* and

Love's ability to dissolve and remap conceptual limits (casting them in a new light) is as much a sign of love's transformative power as it is of its power to subvert existing paradigms. In this sense, love can never be disentangled from the concepts it undoes, for the conceptual borders that love tests, transgresses, or transcends (in the name of love) are also works of love. When the power of love is harnessed, contained, and delimited it expresses itself through the language of *seriousness*. Existing at the intersection of language and love, seriousness describes that phenomenon which allows us to take seriously (or give import to) those things we care about or that affect us most—and the more we care, or are affected, the more seriously we take them—but only upon the condition that we can identify (however superficially) the "things" which demand our emotional, psychic investment, i.e., our seriousness. In contrast to the limits imposed on *sense* by serious discourse, this study focuses on objects of sense whose borders dissolve or conflate with the borders of a *different* object of sense—causing both objects to lose their sense (or meaning) without losing their sense (i.e., their power to affect)—at the very moment they are to be taken hold of—to be taken seriously. Such is the effect of a love that speaks without conceptual borders or limits. Such a love is unassimilable. Such a love is immeasurable. Such a love, because it lacks conceptual borders—borders without which nothing can be "taken" (or not taken) seriously—transcends the limits of seriousness. Hence, when love is freed, or frees itself, from all conceptual limits, as it does in the works considered here, it makes itself known, or *felt*, by effacing or obfuscating the very limits it previously relied on for its *sense*. (Or, to say it another way, love has meaning within a certain framework, and loses that meaning, without

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other Shakespeare plays, see Regina Schwartz' insightful meditation on law, justice, and love in *Loving Justice, Living Shakespeare*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). All quotations for *Romeo and Juliet* are taken from The New Folger Library Shakespeare edition of *Romeo and Juliet*, eds., Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (New York: Washington Square Press, 1992).

losing the power to affect, when it breaks that framework.) In this sense, the unassimilable, irreducible power of love is most keenly felt in a state of semiotic liminality or limbo, when conceptual borders dissolve, or are dissolved by an excess of feeling and emotion that can no longer be contained by any concept, including those that frame, and by framing *contain*, our understanding of concepts like emotions. [7]

In each of the works examined in this study, love precipitates a crisis in relation to a different set of questions or problems that results in a liminal moment (or moments) of confusion, ambiguity, uncertainty, and ambivalence that tests and transcends a love whose *sense* is conceptually limited. And in each instance, love's occurrence marks, or is marked by, the

[7] Here again, I am reminded of Shakespeare's great play about love. Upon hearing the news that her husband (Romeo) is banished for killing her cousin (Tybalt), Juliet says:

> "Romeo is banishèd." To speak that word
> Is father, mother, Tybalt, Romeo, Juliet,
> All slain, all dead. "Romeo is banishèd."
> There is no end, no limit, measure, bound,
> In that word's death. No words can that woe sound. (3.2.133-137)

For Juliet, the words "Romeo is banishèd," by inflicting endless suffering, signal an end to her world as she knows it. There "is no end, no limit, measure, bound" to the death dealing power of those words, or, to be more precise, the death dealing power of the painful feelings generated by those words. In turn, the violent feelings and emotions induced by "that word," which, paradoxically, emerge from her love for Romeo, dissolve and destroy not just every living relation and relationship (i.e., relations that are themselves forged by love), but also the very concepts (of "mother," "father," "cousin," "self," and "beloved") that make those relations possible. In fact, the intensity of what Juliet feels is so great that it even severs her from the language she uses to express her feelings. Hence, the words she uses to "sound" or express her pain cannot truly sound (i.e., express or measure) her "woe"—a sorrow caused, ironically enough, by another "word's death" dealing blow— because the meanings of her words, unlike the feeling of "woe" her words ostensibly represent, are bound or limited. Although the predicament Juliet faces is dire, or serious, her impassioned, hyperbolic language nonetheless tests the limits of serious discourse by suggesting that her tortured feelings paradoxically dissolve the very relations that give her feelings meaning. In other words, Juliet's boundless emotional pain, by indiscriminately dissolving and destroying, in a world of sense, all loving relations that give her life, or any life, meaning or sense ("father, mother, Tybalt, Romeo, Juliet / All slain, all dead"), threatens to consume any discourse that relies on such relations for its sense. Additionally, Juliet's feelings of woe—by transcending the language through which her woe can be expressed or represented—also test the limits of serious discourse by ostensibly making it impossible for her to communicate the meaning of her feelings. I say ostensibly because ultimately Juliet manages to convey the seriousness of her feelings by, ironically, using words that negate the very relations that allow her to take her feelings seriously, including her relation to the language she uses to express the ineffability of her feelings. Nonetheless, Juliet's words hint at an all-consuming, boundless passion that, by dissolving and confounding every relation, including the relationship between words and their meanings, tests the limits of a love bound and measured by serious discourse.

dissolution of a problematic or insoluble either/or dichotomy (in relation to a particular concept or a set of concepts) and the appearance of an indeterminate, indecipherable neither/nor enigma. Neither this nor that, neither known nor unknown, neither just nor unjust, neither good nor bad, neither creative nor destructive, neither recognizable nor unrecognizable, neither human nor not human, neither faithful nor faithless, neither communicable nor incommunicable, neither imitable nor inimitable, neither real nor fake are all part of love's radical vocabulary—at least to the extent that love can be put into words. In light of what has been said, as much as what cannot be said, one might be tempted to define love as a power that is beyond all conceptualization but which nonetheless makes conceptualization (im)possible. But such a formulation would—by giving conceptual form to an amorphous power—be antithetical to the project at hand. For to represent love, and give it conceptual form, risks turning love into an *object* of interpretation whose *sense* is, once again, limited by *seriousness*. This is not to suggest that the studies in this volume are devoid of conceptual tools, but rather, the conceptual tools used to explain the workings of love reveal love's work by revealing the limits of their own conceptual powers. It is this inherent, unresolvable tension between the un-representable, affective phenomenon of love, on the one hand, and the medium of representation (i.e., our conceptual tools), on the other, that creates a liminal space of ambivalence, ambiguity, and undecidability where love reveals itself, or makes itself felt, through its effects. Conversely, this revelation reveals that love, as an unassimilable, irreducible power, is always already there (in potentia) and only becomes *something* remarkable/noticeable (and therefore "something" that can be taken seriously) when it is synthesized or takes on conceptual form.

The first chapter, "Framing the Unframable in Ferdowsi's *Shāhnāmeh*," deals with the

limits of knowledge in Persia's national epic, the *Shāhnāmeh*.[8] Written over a thirty-year period (977-1010 C.E.), and consisting of nearly 50,000 rhyming couplets, Ferdowsi's masterpiece is best known for its colorful characters and characterizations of Iran's historical, mythological, and folkloric past.[9] In fact, Ferdowsi's epic, which begins in Iran's mythological past and ends with the fall of the Sassanid Empire and the Arab conquest (651 C.E.), was so influential that it is often credited with preserving and transmitting the history, culture, customs, and language of the Iranian people at a time when Iran was in danger of being Arabized.[10] In light of the fact that Ferdowsi belonged to a landowning class of Iranian gentry called *dehqān*s, who saw it as their mission to preserve the "traditional civilization, customs, and culture, including the national legends" of Iran, it is not surprising that his *Shāhnāmeh* would aim for and ultimately achieve its ethnocentric ambitions.[11] What is surprising, however, is that despite the author's passionate effort to help preserve the ethno-national identity of the Iranian people—through a work of art that maintains and solidifies Iran's national, cultural, and linguistic borders and boundaries—on the margins of his text (i.e., the prologues and epilogues framing his national epic), Ferdowsi, time and again, tests, challenges, and tears down the epistemological borders that are

[8] Ferdowsi, Abu'l-Qāsem (940-1019 or 1025 C.E.) is "one of the greatest epic poets and author of the *Šāh-nāma*, the national epic of Persia." Djalal Khaleghi-Motlagh, "Ferdowsi, Abu'l-Qāsem," in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/ferdowsi-index (accessed October 3, 2017). Unfortunately, except for the few, scattered biographical details Ferdowsi gives us in his work, very little is known about him. The entry in *Encyclopædia Iranica* provides all the information that can be gleaned about the poet's life from his work. A version of this chapter was originally published under the same title: "Framing the Unframable in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*," *Iranian Studies: Journal of the International Society for Iranian Studies* 48, no. 3 (2015): 423-41.

[9] For an overview of the epic poem's expansive scope, see Franklin Lewis, "Shahnama," *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Islamic Political Thought*, edited by Gerhard Bowering (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 492–493. For an overview of the *Shahnameh's* status in the world of literature and literary criticism, see Franklin Lewis, "The *Shahnameh* of Ferdowsi as World Literature," *Iranian Studies: Journal of the International Society for Iranian Studies* 48, no. 3 (2015): 313-336.

[10] For more on the nationalistic aspect of the *Shāhnāmeh*, see Khaleghi-Motlagh's entry in *Encyclopædia Iranica*.

[11] "On the one hand, in the Šāh-nāma *dehqān* appears along with the *āzāda* (freeborn) with the meaning of 'Iranian,' and, on the other, beside *mōbad* (Zoroastrian priest), with the meaning of 'preserver and narrator of the ancient lore.'" *Encyclopædia Iranica*.

fundamental to the survival of any society or nation. (Though, as we will see, this too is born out of his love for his people and country.) It is in, and from, this conflicted space (i.e., the borders that frame his untidy, sprawling narrative) that Ferdowsi speaks candidly, and often despondently, about himself, his work, and the fate of his country, all the while expressing his doubts about those religious, ethical, and existential "truths" that ostensibly validate, and give meaning to, the politics of his creative enterprise.

Whether it be the tragic story of Iran's legendary hero (Rostam) unwittingly killing his son (Sorhāb), or the same hero battling another legendary hero (Esfandyār) to the death—in what has been described as one of the most profound psychological struggles in the entire world of epic—Ferdowsi uses the prologues and epilogues that frame his famous tales to further complicate our understanding of stories that themselves test the limits of our ethical sensibilities and intellectual understanding.[12] Hence, the frames to Ferdowsi's tales, rather than helping us understand how to interpret the epic's morally ambiguous stories, ironically represent a narrator who is in no position to offer us any help. Of course, the poet does give us clues as to why he, and consequently we, are "helpless" (*bichāreh*) when it comes to understanding the ultimate meaning of his tales, which, in its own way, can be considered helpful. What seems to hinder understanding at every turn for the poet is, paradoxically, the very language or speech (*sakhon/sokhan*) that makes understanding possible in the first place. Because language is epistemologically limited, in that the same phenomenon can be framed in illimitable ways, the poet bemoans his inability to speak seriously about any topic, and therefore to take anyone else

[12] In *Das iranische Nationalepos* (Berlin: Leipzig, 1920), Theodor Nöldeke says that the Rostam/Esfandyār struggle is "the deepest psychological struggle in the whole of the Šāh-nāma, and one of the deepest examples of its kind in the whole of world epic" (59). The translation is from Djalal Khaleghi-Motlagh's entry on Ferdowsi in *Encyclopædia Iranica*.

speaking about the same topic (e.g., philosophers and theologians) seriously.[13] Ironically, this linguistic limitation, to get to the bottom (or truth) of things, ultimately allows Ferdowsi to transcend his epistemological impasse by envisioning a language that finds its truth in the very feelings which allowed him to take his impasse seriously. Or, to put it another way, the poet's relentless pursuit of answers to questions with no definitive answer, motivated by a passion he cannot name, results in a linguistic/epistemological crisis that finds reprieve in the mysterious and mystifying language of love. Although it is unlikely that Ferdowsi knew much about Sufism and its religion of love (Sufism was, at that time, just a nascent, mystical offshoot of Islam), his gesture towards the mystical, in a manner that transcends all conceptual borders, is nonetheless strikingly reminiscent of other Sufi poets in this study.[14] What makes Ferdowsi's gesture different, however, is that the transcendent mystical experience is devoid of any religious references or overtones.[15]

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[13] And yet, Ferdowsi does not just complain about language's limitations, either. Instead, the poet, like an angry, jilted lover, demonstrates (again and again) the shortcomings of his beloved (i.e., the language of his trade) by making himself, and the reader, confront an epistemological limit in the form of an insoluble, existential question.

[14] Milad Milani, following in the footsteps of scholars like Henry Corbin and Alessandro Bausani, tries to link the mystical, esoteric aspects of Persian thought (particularly those found in Persian Sufism) to pre-Islamic Iranian religions like Zoroastrianism, Mithraism, Manichaeism, and Mazdakism. Ferdowsi plays an important role in Milani's controversial narrative because he is credited with the "revitalization and popularization of the Avestan traditions and the ancient wisdom of Iranian culture and religion." See *Sufism in the Secret History of Persia* (Durham, NC: Acumen, 2013), 32. For a more comprehensive overview of Iran's religious heritage, see Alessandro Bausani, *Religion in Iran: From Zoroaster to Baha'ullah*, trans. J.M. Marchesi, (New York: Bibliotheca Persica Press, 2000).

[15] "Mystical" is a multivalent term that critics often use to describe the esoteric aspects of Persian poetry and film. Although I use the term in this text, in its various connotations (e.g., "having a spiritual character or significance by virtue of a connection or union with God which transcends human understanding; spiritually allegorical or symbolic; mysterious, enigmatic, obscure, esoteric; of hidden meaning or nature; having an unknown or mysterious origin or influence, relating to or dealing with spiritual or transcendental matters; concerned with spiritual mystery, religious awe, etc.,"), to highlight the "mystical" dimensions of the works in question, I also try to show, through each reading, the unique way in which the "mystical" manifests itself in a given text. In this regard, the "mystical" is not so much a concept whose meaning is determined in advance as it is an experience that emerges through readings of texts whose intent is to *mystify*; that is, to create, for the reader, the mysterious, awe-inspiring, transcendental and/or spiritual effects of love's boundless potential. The definition for mystical is from *The Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "mystical," accessed November 23, 2018, http://www.oed.com/.

The second chapter, "Recognizing the Unrecognizable in Dariush Mehrjui's *Gāv*," considers the limits of "the human" through the lens of one of Iran's seminal filmmakers.[16] Widely considered a landmark in the history of Iranian cinema, Mehrjui's *Gāv*, which was initially banned in Iran, went on to win the international film critics' award at the 1971 Venice International Film Festival. Ironically, one of the reasons for the film's critical acclaim was also one of the reasons for why the film was initially banned. By tapping into universal human values, Mehrjui's film, about a poor farmer's tragic demise after the loss of his beloved cow, ostensibly conferred recognition upon a peasant population whom the Iranian government (for political reasons) did not want to acknowledge or recognize. In turn, not only did Mehrjui's influential film usher in the pre-revolutionary "new wave" cinema but it also became a forerunner to Iran's post-revolutionary humanist genre.

And yet, despite the film's humanistic undertones, Mehrjui's *Gāv* does not take the act of recognizing "the human" for granted. In fact, the film itself is preoccupied with the problem of not just recognizing "universal human values" but also those features which make the human universally recognizable. With veiled mystical undertones, Mehrjui's surrealistic film, about a man's preternatural love for his cow, attempts to deconstruct the binary that separates human from animal, or the conceptual borders that make humans recognizable as "humans," by obfuscating the distinction between human and animal. In turn, the narrative about a man's love for his cow, and his subsequent madness and dehumanization at the hands of his fellow villagers, who do not recognize who or what their erstwhile friend and neighbor has become, creates a

[16] Dariush Mehrjui is often credited with starting the Iranian New Wave movement with his cinematic adaptation of Gholam-Hosayn Sa'edi's famous short story, *Gāv*, which Sa'edi converted into a screenplay with the same title. A version of this chapter was originally published under the same title: "Recognizing the Unrecognizable in Dariush Mehrjui's *Gav*." *Cinema Journal* 54, no. 2 (2015): 49-71.

crisis in knowledge (or recognition) of "the human." What makes Mehrjui's achievement truly extraordinary is that his cinematic adaptation of this bizarre, interspecies love story interrogates what it means to be human not just on a narrative level, but on a viscerally visual one as well. By exploiting the oneiric, poetic potential of filmic language (in the form of cinematic free indirect discourse) the filmmaker forces the viewer to confront (and possibly transcend) the limits of her powers of perception by asking her to recognize the unrecognizable: a love that transcends the dichotomy of human and animal.

The third chapter, "Believing the Unbelievable in ʿAttār's Poetry," interrogates the limits of faith through a reading of Sufi "heretical" love poems by Farīd-al-Dīn ʿAttār (1145-1241 C.E.).[17] ʿAttār, whose pen name means "herbalist, druggist, perfumer," is one of the most important and influential Sufi poets in Iranian history.[18] Unfortunately, little, besides where he lived (Nishapur), is known or can be corroborated about the enigmatic poet, including whether or

[17] To call these poems heretical does not mean that they *were* heretical, but only that they delve into and explore heretical themes and topics. According to Franklin Lewis, in a note to me on 7/23/2018, "The expression of heretical ideas, or any ideas, in poetry usually framed them in a way that they were not thought of as competing truth claims with discursive theology based on logical argumentation."

[18] Besides being a poet, ʿAttār was also a theoretician of mysticism and a hagiographer. Both ʿAttār and Farīd-al-dīn were his pen names. Based on the pen name of ʿAttār, and various spurious sources, some have assumed that the poet was an apothecary by trade, but this theory cannot be corroborated. According to Kenneth S. Avery and Ali Alizadeh, the fact that ʿAttār could "spurn the art of being a professional poet, particularly that of a court eulogist or panegyric poet" suggests that he must have had an "assured livelihood." In contrast to ʿAttār, "Such writers had to depend on the whims of princes, and were forced to write poetry to order, often to flatter or cajole their patrons." See *Fifty Poems of ʿAttār*, edited and translated by Kenneth S. Avery and Ali Alizadeh (Melbourne: re.press, 2007), 3. According to Austin O'Malley, "In the works now accepted as authentic, ʿAṭṭār reveals almost nothing directly about himself or his contemporary circumstances: he mentions no birthdate, no legal affiliation, no sufi shaykh, and no contemporary political events; he provides no overview of his literary contacts, personal travels, or chronology of his poetic activities. O'Malley goes on to say, "Reliable external sources do not fill many of these biographical gaps, either." Austin O'Malley, "Poetry and Pedagogy: The Homiletic Verse of Farid al-Din 'Attâr." (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2017), 31, ProQuest (10239450). Though details about 'Attār's personal life are few, Hellmut Ritter's *The Ocean of the Soul: Man, the World, and God in the Stories of Farid Al-Din Attar* (Boston: Brill, 2013), is by far the most comprehensive study (in Western scholarship) of ʿAttār's works and the context in which they were written.

not he was "really" a Sufi.[19] Nonetheless, the major theme of ʿAttār's work is the Sufi path to divine knowledge and mystical union. Both his longer narrative poems, like the famous *Mantiq al-tayr* (*The Speech of the Birds*), as well as his lyrics, or *Dīwān*, which contain a large number of *ghazals*, including those of an antinomian, heretical nature, deal with this theme. The *ghazal*, whose links with profane love poetry from its earliest origins had never severed, was the perfect medium for Sufis trying to express their mystical yearning for self-annihilation (*fanāʾ*) and divine union with a Godhead that encompasses everything, including sacred and profane love.[20] During the 12th century, a subgenre of *ghazals* called *kufriyyāt* or *qalandariyyāt*, celebrating immoral, irreligious behaviors (like drinking, gambling, dancing and fraternizing with non-Muslims) emerged in response to religious jurist and scholars whose strict interpretation of Islam and Islamic practices often resulted in the hypocritical denunciation and persecution of those who did not share their religious views. Whether or not the antinomian attitudes and behaviors expressed in *qualandar* poetry reflected real life is a matter of debate, but their theological impact on medieval discourses of faith (*imān*) is indisputable. By embracing *kufr* (infidelity) in

[19] According to O'Malley, "In part because of the ambiguity surrounding his spiritual training, there has been a tendency to doubt whether ʿAṭṭār was an 'actual' sufi." O'Malley, "Poetry and Pedagogy," 43. But as O'Malley goes on to say, "Regardless of whether he had a formal spiritual guide, he seems to have been socially involved with other mystically minded individuals, such as Majd al-Din Khwārazmi. We should also note that important sufi figures Kalābādhī and Sarrāj do not seem to have been invested by a shaykh, and no one questions whether they were 'real' sufis" (45). Furthermore, according to contemporary accounts, "ʿAṭṭār was recognized as a local mystical authority who actively propagated a sufi worldview through sermons and dialogue" (45). Of course, regardless of whether or not ʿAttār' thought of himself as a Sufi, 'Sufi' itself is a fraught term. According to Franklin Lewis, in a note to me on 7/23/2018, Sufi "is a very general term (like, say, 'athlete') and it's not easy to say who is in this group or out. And there is a great deal of difference, even dissension, between one 'Sufi' and another." He goes on to say, "Also, among Persian speakers of ʿAttār's era, 'Sufi' was mostly a pejorative term, tending to suggest people who were posing or playing at a life of spiritual commitment." Although Lewis agrees that ʿAttār identified closely with certain "Sufi" principals and beliefs (including those discussed in chapter four), he is less certain that ʿAttār would identify himself as a Sufi.

[20] *Ghazals* are short lyric poems, usually dealing with the subject of love, with rhyming couplets in the form of, aa ba ca, etc. "The word *ḡazal* (غزل) is of Arabic origin. The basic meaning of its root is 'spinning.' At a very early stage, the figurative sense of 'having amorous talks with women, flirting' must have led to the association with erotic poetry." See J. T. P. de Bruijn, *Encyclopædia Iranica*, http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/gazal-1-history (accessed October 3, 2017).

their poetry, Sufi poets like ʿAttār express their faith in a divine love and unity that, by embracing both faith and infidelity, paradoxically transcends the dialectic of faith. At the same time, however, the aporetic scenario of trying to articulate a divine love that encompasses everything without asserting anything, or anything that could be taken on faith, forces ʿAttār to confront the very limits of what can be articulated through language and, to the extent that one must be able to articulate one's beliefs, what can be believed. The subgenre of heretical *ghazals* that best exemplify these conundrums are love poems about a beautiful Christian child (*tarsā-bachcha*). These homoerotic poems conflate the forbidden love for a Christian boy with love of the divine, thereby obfuscating the distinction between faith and faithlessness and inducing a crisis of faith for the poem's speaking persona.

In order to better understand and appreciate ʿAttār's radical reflection on the enigmatic phenomenon of belief, in its intersection with love, language, and knowledge, I compare and contrast his views with not just those of his Muslim contemporaries but also with the views of those who are temporally, geographically, and culturally far removed from the poet's world. Although a cross-cultural, cross-historical comparison of the concept of belief may seem incongruous, defamiliarizing, and transgressive—because, after all, not only does the concept mean something different for a 2nd century Pyrrhonian Skeptic like Sextus Empiricus, a 5th century Christian theologian like Augustine, and an 18th century Christian philosopher like Kant, than it does for a 12th century Muslim poet like ʿAttār, but it also poses different problems for each (*e.g.*, philosophical versus religious)—the comparison proves fruitful nonetheless because of (and not in spite of) these unassimilable differences. If, for instance, Kant finds it necessary to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith, and the ancient skeptics find it necessary to

suspend belief, and with belief knowledge, in order to lead a tranquil life, then it becomes all the more interesting to find out why ʿAttār has to suspend faith in order to make room for love, and why suspending faith in the name of love becomes a source of emotional turmoil and spiritual upheaval for the poet and his poetic personas. If Augustine and Kant make a distinction between faith and knowledge, why is it that the ancient skeptics do not make this distinction, and why does ʿAttār represent all forms of knowledge and knowing (except for divine knowledge) as being illusory? If for Augustine knowledge of God is impossible without faith, and for Kant faith is a requisite part of not just religious life but life in general, so that belief in ourselves as moral agents becomes impossible without faith, then why is it that for ʿAttār faith, and all knowledge encompassed by faith (including moral knowledge), are seen as spiritual obstacles to divine knowledge? And finally, if for Augustine one can only know what one loves, and yet, at the same time, one cannot love without knowing what it is that one loves, why is it that for ʿAttār knowledge of what one loves, and loving what one knows, only works to conceal the truth that is love? After raising these intriguing questions, the chapter attempts to provide possible "answers" through a close reading of some of ʿAttār's heretical love poems.

The fourth chapter, "Communicating the Incommunicable in Rumi's *Masnavi*," interrogates the limits of the imitable and communicable through the humorous, whimsical viewpoint of one of the world's greatest mystical poets, Jalāl al-Din Rumi (1207-1273 C.E.). Rumi was not only a poet but also a scholar, a preacher, a teacher and a Sufi philosopher who was, according to his contemporaries, revered and followed by "people from all faiths and all

nations."[21] Rumi's enduring universal fame and appeal (he is one of the most, if not the most, translated Iranian poet) is a testament to this fact. Like ʿAttār before him, "Rumi belongs to… [a] non-professional class of poets whose living" did not depend "on panegyric and flattery of the sultan or other potentates, but on the expression of religious truths."[22] Besides his collection of lyrical poems or *ghazals* (*Divān-e Shams-e Tabrizi*), dedicated to his spiritual guide and mentor Shams al-Din of Tabriz, Rumi also wrote a longer narrative poem called *Masnavi-ye maʿnavi* (*Spiritual Couplets*), "a compendium of practical instruction that seeks to communicate its message to a wider audience, one disinclined to sit through dry abstract lectures on doctrine and theology," through memorable, entertaining, and instructional stories meant to touch "the heart of his listener" and help "transform him or her into a lover of God":[23]

> The *Masnavi* is a kind of Koran commentary, but not in the conventional verse-by-verse manner; it concentrates on the spiritual message of scripture, as reflected through the discourses of theology, law and Sufism. It describes a path for the purification and sanctification of the soul that leads the soul back home to its heavenly abode. The all-consuming problem of human existence for Rumi stems from the painful experience of imperfection and unfulfillment caused by alienation from our potential, or more precisely, from our essential source. This problem is intractable to logic and reasoning and can only be solved phenomenologically and heuristically.[24]

But trying to address an inherent existential imperfection, caused by a primordial separation (which manifests itself as alienation) from the divine Being, through heuristic means is not an easy task. Nor is it an easy task to explain to someone, through language, how to go about

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[21] See Franklin D. Lewis, *Rumi: Past and Present, East and West: The Life, Teaching and Poetry of JalâL Al-Din Rumi* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000), 284. Lewis' book is a painstaking work of scholarship and the definitive guide to all things Rumi.

[22] Ibid., 328. According to Lewis, "Professional poets usually composed for a sultan or prince or for high ranking members of the military, in return for which they received state patronage—a stipend from the court and/or a direct reward for specific poems" (327). Lewis goes on to say, "About a hundred years before the birth of Rumi, Sanâ'ï (d. 1131) carved out a niche for a new kind of poetry recited in gatherings of religious scholars, preachers and canon lawyers, specifically those with an inclination to ethical and metaphysical speculation" (327-328).

[23] Ibid., 399. For more on the all-important relationship between Rumi and Shams, see the fourth chapter of Lewis' *Rumi*.

[24] Ibid., 399.

solving problems that do not have a linguistic solution or cannot be solved through reason and logic.[25] As if to illustrate these points, Rumi, in his *Masnavi*, tells the colorful tale of a Sufi who fails to achieve gnosis because he misunderstands the cause of his spiritual unfulfillment, the source of his alienation, and, if all that was not pathetic enough, the reason why he failed.

Rumi's satirical story, about a Sufi traveler who participates in a religious feast (*samāʿ*) that his peers pay for by stealing and selling his donkey, is ostensibly about the follies of imitation, or "blind imitation." In the story, the Sufi's imitation of those dervishes whom he longs to resemble not only leads to his financial ruin, but also his spiritual corruption. Instead of having a genuine mystical experience, born out of divine love, the Sufi has an inauthentic ecstatic experience born out of empty imitation. However, once we get past the more obvious meanings/morals of the story, i.e., the dangers of following false guides, getting duped on the mystical quest, and trying to find the mystical experience in outward performances of ritual acts that are associated with it, nagging questions persist. For if the Sufi's passionate imitation of other dancing, chanting, and feasting dervishes did not result in a genuine mystical experience—only an inauthentic one—the poet must nonetheless tell us (1) How can anyone tell if they've had a mystical experience when such an experience (because it transcends the world of imitation) is inimitable? and (2) What kind of action, if not an imitable one, results in an inimitable mystical experience? This conundrum, which is at the heart of Rumi's clever tale, ultimately tests the poet's own powers of communication, and, consequently, the limits of communicability itself, by requiring the poet to communicate the inimitable mystical experience of divine love, and the actions required to achieve it, in non-imitable terms. In turn, love of the divine and the

[25] Rumi himself was keenly aware of the limits of what language can do and say. In his *Divān* he often adopts the pen name *Khāmush* (Silence!) to emphasize the ineffable nature of the mystical experience.

desire for mystical communion create a crisis in communication that not only obfuscates the distinction between the communicable and the incommunicable but also the imitable and the inimitable.

By way of conclusion, the fifth chapter, "Seeing the Invisible in Abbas Kiarostami's *Close-up*,"[26] investigates, through the loving lens of one of the world's greatest auteurs, the limits of the real.[27] Before becoming a world-renowned filmmaker, Abbas Kiarostami made documentaries about children working "at the Center for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults (CIDCYA), under both Pahlavi and Islamic regimes."[28] During those informative years, Kiarostami developed a unique style of filmmaking in which he "breaks the fourth wall and self- reflexively inserts the process of filmmaking into his stories" so that "the focus of inquiry is shifted from the characters to the camera, the cinema, the director, and ultimately the spectators, who become aware of their own act of film watching."[29] Combining the techniques and styles of realism, neorealism, documentary, and cinema vérité, his greatest films "mix illusion and reality and create uncertainty and ambiguity about which is which."[30] In so doing, Kiarostami's films tackle a problem that has preoccupied philosophers and poets since time immemorial. From Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" in *The Republic*, to Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, to Shakespeare's plays where "All the world's a stage," artists and thinkers have been

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[26] In Persian, the title of the film is translated as *Nema-ye Nazdik*. But this title is rarely used by those who discuss the film, including the director himself, who uses the word "close-up" in the film and gives the film that very title, alongside *Nema-ye Nazdik*, during the opening credits.

[27] "Jean-Luc Godard has said: 'Film begins with DW Griffith and ends with Abbas Kiarostami.' According to Martin Scorsese, 'Kiarostami represents the highest level of artistry in the cinema.'" See Stuart Jeffries, "Landscapes of the Mind," The Guardian, April 16, 2008. https://www.theguardian.com/film/2005/apr/16/art. For an overview of Kiarostami's films, and the critical response to his films, see Alberto Elena's, *The Cinema of Abbas Kiarostami* (London: Saqi in association with Iran Heritage Foundation, 2005).

[28] Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*, *Volume 4*: *The Globalizing Era, 1984-2010* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 179.

[29] Ibid., 192.

[30] Ibid.

trying to determine what (if anything) is real, true, or authentic about the empirical world by comparing and contrasting it with the world of representation, fiction, and make-believe.

As the chapter will show, what inevitably motivates the desire to determine or demarcate the limits of the "real," in a world where the boundary between nature/artifice, representation/reality, and original/copy is often blurred, is an anxiety about what, if anything, should be taken seriously. And if the answer to this serious question is *ultimately* love, Kiarostami, like the other artists in this study, asks his audience how, in all seriousness, can one determine or demarcate the limits of love? Hence, what distinguishes Kiarostami's cinematic meditation on the nature of reality (at least in *Close-up*) is that the entire movement—of a fiction based on fact, based on a fiction, based on fact, and based on a fiction again—is motivated by love. Kiarostami's film, a mixture of documentary and docudrama in which all subjects play themselves, tells the tale of a man who impersonates a famous filmmaker (Mohsen Makhmalbaf) in order to gain entry into the home of an affluent family under the pretext of making a film about them. Although most commentators of the film focus on the film's seamless blurring of fact and fiction (where life and art intersect by imitating one another), and the love story at the heart of the film (*i.e.*, the protagonist's love of film, filmmaking, and the filmmaker responsible for his love), they fail to *see* that the two events are inextricably interconnected. In other words, the "real" is not tested, transgressed, and transcended as an intellectual aesthetic exercise or, conversely, in the name of some ethical enterprise, but out of a love that ultimately transcends both.

Taken together, these disparate artistic works, from disparate eras, dealing with disparate topics and themes, not only give us a better understanding of the phenomenon of love, in its

boundlessness, but they also reflect a poetic spirit rooted in a love that transcends all conceptual limits. And since these works of art also happen to be some of the most important, influential, and celebrated from the Iranian culture, they also give us (through the thread of love that links them) a window into the heart of the culture that produced them. Undoubtedly, much of the power afforded to love in Persian poetry and film is owed to a poetic heritage steeped in Sufi mysticism (regardless of whether the poet or filmmaker is/was actually a Sufi mystic) and its religion of love.[31] There is certainly evidence in these chapters to help support such a thesis. But it is beyond the scope and interest of this study to help prove this claim. Instead, this study focuses on the unique set of circumstances within each poetic or cinematic text that leads to testing, transgressing, or transcending a conceptual limit by way of love.

In trying to understand the limits being transgressed/transcended by love, the motivations guiding those efforts, and their effect on the overall meaning of the artistic work, this study relies on a variety of approaches, including, but not limited to, historical, political, religious, etymological, comparative, and theoretical analysis. Though these modes of analysis are chosen to help address the unique set of challenges that each work presents, their primary function is to create a context for understanding. But since context is unlimited, it goes without saying that there are an infinite number of ways to interpret or understand the works in this study. Considering this problem—a problem I take seriously—regarding the question of interpretation, it is perhaps not a coincidence that I have chosen to interpret works that are themselves preoccupied with the problem of interpretation—the problem, that is, of not just finding answers to questions that cannot be definitively answered, but also the problem of what it means to have

[31] For more on Iran's pre-Islamic, mystical, esoteric roots, and its possible relation to Sufism, see footnote 14. Sufi mysticism in relation to sacred and profane love is discussed in the third chapter.

the ability to answer questions that have no definitive answers.[32]

To interpret an object of art (or perhaps any "object") is not only to confront the limits of one's understanding but also the depths of one's feelings. Ironically, the works in question, by drawing our attention to the fact that understanding is always contingent upon feelings and emotions that color understanding, remind us that our understanding of them is further delimited by our feelings, including those induced in us by the work of art itself. As a critic, my response to this problem—a problem that I take seriously—is to stage a conversation with the work that, like the work itself, highlights the ambiguity, open-endedness, and indeterminacy of any critical enterprise that takes the problem of how affects effect understanding, seriously.

Conversely, although this study is interested in the problem of affects (on a critical and thematic level), and therefore shares some similarities with that enigmatic academic orientation called "affect theory," there are also compelling reasons for resisting this limiting label. First and foremost, though I have some familiarity with the thinkers and theorists on whose work "affect theory," or theories, are based—even borrowing some of their ideas in this study—I do not consider myself an "affect theorist."[33] Second, and related to the first, the term "affect theory"—if by affect theory we mean a cohesive system of ideas or principles that are used to explain or understand not only what affects are (on a technical level) and how they work (on a physiological and psychological level) but also the role they play in various arenas of cultural activity and production—is a misnomer. Instead, the term "affect theory" is a general term used

[32] In fact, my critical response to the works in this study is often the result of the works' effects on me. In other words, my own critical outlook, is, to a great extent, informed by the very texts that I seek to understand by way of critique.

[33] Current iterations of affect theory are largely based on the works of Baruch Spinoza, Henri Bergson, William James, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari. In chapter two, I use Deleuze's formulation of "free indirect discourse" in my interpretation of *Gāv*.

to describe a wide array of theoretical approaches that deploy the concept of affects, in various forms and guises, to evaluate, understand, or complicate our understanding of, the fields of psychology, politics, literature, art, film, architecture, culture, religion, etc.[34]

Nonetheless, the predicament that affect theorists face, in trying to articulate the workings of an irreducible, unpredictable, ineffable affective phenomenon that resists conceptualization, can be instructive when it comes to understanding the works in this study. For the affect theorist's dilemma is not unlike the one Iranian poets and filmmakers face when trying to

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[34] An illustration of the motley assortment of theoretical approaches that fall under the rubric of "affect theory" can be found in *The Affect Theory Reader*, edited by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010). In their introduction to the reader, Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, in a playful, poetic, affective, and affected manner, lay the groundwork for what is to come by acknowledging that affect theory has no discernable ground rules:

> There is no single, generalizable theory of affect: not yet, and (thankfully) there never will be. If anything, it is more tempting to imagine that there can only ever be infinitely multiple iterations of affect and theories of affect: theories as diverse and singularly delineated as their own highly particular encounters with bodies, affects, worlds. […] But such a state of affairs might also go some distance toward explaining why first encounters with theories of affect might feel like a momentary (sometimes more permanent) methodological and conceptual freefall. (3-4)

This inability, or, to be more precise, refusal to articulate a "generalizable theory" of affects, or even to define the term, is, ironically enough, considered by some scholars to be the distinguishing characteristic or hallmark (if indeed there is one) of the latest iterations of "affect theory." In her critique of affect theory, Ruth Ley claims that regardless of their "philosophical-intellectual" differences, many affect theorists today "share a single belief: the belief that affect is independent of signification and meaning." See Ruth Leys, "The Turn to Affect: A Critique," Critical Inquiry 37, no. 3 (2011), 443. If Leys is correct, and this is indeed "the belief" shared by today's affect theorists, then I find this belief to be problematic for the simple reason that such a premise (i.e., that affects are "independent of signification and meaning") can hardly serve as the basis for a "theory," even one as nebulous as "affect theory." And that is because without meaning and signification "affect theory" would, paradoxically, be a theory about a phenomenon that was beyond theorization. Conversely, if we need someone to tell us that "affect is independent of signification and meaning," then affects are not as independent of meaning and signification as affect theorists "theorize" they are; they need someone (or something) to communicate their independence from meaning and signification. For a literary example of a subject trying to articulate an emotion that is beyond words, see my discussion of Juliet's speech (from *Romeo and Juliet*) in footnote 7. In his discussion of the complex relationship between affects and language, in a chapter entitled, "Of the Influence of Literature on Conduct," De Rougemont formulates the problem this way:

> Passion and expression are not really separable. Passion comes to birth in that powerful impetus of the mind which also brings language into existence. So soon as passion goes beyond instinct and becomes truly itself, it tends to self-description, either in order to justify or intensify its being, or else simply in order to keep *going*. (173)

According to this formulation, a passion that cannot be named can hardly be called a "passion" (at least not yet). And yet, ironically enough, one of the main features of Eros in De Rougemont's study is its ineffability and the drama involved in trying to name an "emotion" that is, paradoxically, unnamable (see pp. 47 and 160).

represent the affective phenomenon of love. But whereas affects are the starting point for affect theorists and their respective theories, the affective phenomenon of "love" in this study (situated in a specific cultural and artistic tradition) is the endpoint or limit where meaning, language, logic, and reason (i.e., the foundations of any theory) break down and become inoperable. In this sense, love, because it is beyond all conceptualization, is the final destination of a journey without beginning or end…

Chapter One

Framing the Unframable in Ferdowsi's *Shāhnāmeh*

In his trenchant and thought provoking essay, on the cosmology of the *Shāhnāmeh*, Djalal Khaleghi-Motlagh explores the tension between two competing and, ostensibly, irreconcilable cosmological viewpoints that Ferdowsi deploys to frame his grand narrative.[1] First, there is the monotheistic, creationist viewpoint, where God creates the universe and makes humans the literal and symbolic center of the universe by giving them the intellect (*kherad*) they need to be able to, among other things, recognize God as the creator of the universe. Although this viewpoint accords with Ferdowsi's professed Shiism, it is not always easy to identify which brand of Shiism Ferdowsi's religious outlook most closely adheres to. For instance, regarding Ferdowsi's characterization of God as an unknowable entity, whose existence nonetheless must be acknowledged, Khaleghi-Motlagh suggests that Ferdowsi might have adopted this viewpoint from Shia sects like the *Ismaili*, or he may simply be expressing his own personal, religious viewpoint; a viewpoint which, according to Khāleqi-Motlaq, can also be found in the works of a few other fourth/tenth and fourth/tenth and fifth/eleventh century Persian poets and philosophers.[2]

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[1] See Djalal Khaleghi-Motlagh, "Jahān shenāsi-ye *Shāhnāmeh*," *Irānshenāsi*, 1 (1350/1971), 55-70.

[2] In the editorial notes supplementing his critical edition of the *Shāhnāmeh*, Khaleghi-Motlagh, in addition to the *Ismaili*, mentions a few other poets (e.g., Fakhr-e Gorgāni and Asadi-ye Tusi) who, like Ferdowsi, also espouse the unknowability of God. See Khalehi-Motlagh, *Notes on the Shāhnāmeh*, vol. 1, pt. 1, 4-5. For Khaleghi-Motlagh's brief discussion of philosophers (such as Al-Fārābi) who, like Ferdowsi, did not believe that the existence of God could be "proven" through Aristotelian reasoning or argumentation, see Khaleghi-Motlagh, "Jahān shenāsi," 57. For the question of religion in the Shahnameh, see also articles by Dick Davis, "Religion in the Shahnameh," and Cameron Cross "'If Death is Just, What is Injustice?': Illicit Rage in Rostam and Sohrāb and the Knight's Tale," in *Iranian Studies: Journal of the International Society for Iranian Studies* 48, no. 3 (2015): 337-348 (Davis) and 395-422 (Cross).

Meanwhile, Ferdowsi's second, more mysterious cosmological viewpoint, also used to frame the morally murky universe of the *Shāhnāmeh*, comes from a pre-Islamic doctrine, possibly Zurvanism. According to this cosmological view, "Time," because it is eternal, is the original source of all creation, including God himself—if his existence is indeed compatible with such a viewpoint—and the controller of human destiny. As Khaleghi-Motlagh points out, although there is no direct representation of a religion of Time or fate in the *Shāhnāmeh*, its presence, as a competing cosmology with its own belief system, can nonetheless be discerned throughout Ferdowsi's text. Time or fate, which in Ferdowsi's text is symbolically represented by the heavens (*sepehr*), is often thought, by both the poet and the characters in his poem, to play a decisive role in determining the outcome of events, even if the exact nature of its role is beyond human comprehension. Interestingly, although the end result of this fate-driven drama is often tragic, this does not discourage Ferdowsi from having "fun" with fate at the expense of his characters, who often meet their fate while trying to avoid it.[3]

We may never know exactly why Ferdowsi chose to draw on two different cosmological traditions to frame the folkloric, mythic and historic narratives of Iran's past, or how much he highlights, intensifies, or mitigates what he found in his sources, but the effects of his decision are fairly clear. By continuously vacillating between these two disparate cosmologies, the author, and/or his poetic persona, creates a world mired in epistemological uncertainty, moral ambiguity and religious perplexity.[4] According to Khaleghi-Motlagh, if we follow the logic of Ferdowsi's

[3] Scholars rarely discuss the *Shāhnāmeh's* "humor," which is understandable considering the epic's overall gravitas. Nonetheless, the text often toys with a character's and/or the reader's expectations, through irony and tone, in darkly funny and amusing ways. In a sense, one could say that the way the author plays with "expectations" structurally mirrors the way fate and fortune (within the stories) make human beings their personal playthings.

[4] Dick Davis, in the introduction to his prose translation of the *Shāhnāmeh: The Persian Book of Kings*, (New York: Penguin Classics, 2006), notes how the text's ambiguities and ambivalences are embodied by the author himself: "If

God-centered cosmology, then God, who made the universe, also gave humans the wisdom to know good from bad, which in turn makes them responsible for all of their actions: actions which they will presumably have to answer for on judgment day.[5] Additionally, as Khaleghi-Motlagh points out, Ferdowsi's God-centered cosmology also suggests that if someone without merit is the beneficiary of good fortune, and someone without guilt is the beneficiary of bad fortune (a common occurrence in the *Shāhnāmeh*), the cause of such injustices cannot be the stars or fate but God himself, who is the author of all things. Not only does the effort to be moral bear little or no earthly reward, in the world of the *Shāhnāmeh*, but also if moral actions have any theodictic significance in the afterlife, the poem does not reveal them to us either.[6] In turn, it can be argued that it is this absence of justice (*dād*) in the world that, from time to time, causes the plaintive poet to question the ways of God to man.

If, however, time or fate, rather than God, is posited to be the author of every good and bad that befalls humans, then the poet doesn't have to worry about justifying God's ways. But this cold consolation is gained at the expense of losing faith in God himself, either by casting doubt on his existence or minimizing his importance by undermining his omnipotence. This conundrum is best exemplified near the end of the poem, when the poet evokes his two cosmologies to lament the death of Yazdegerd, the last successor to Iran's great monarchic dynasty, in an epilogue to his story:

چنین داد خوانیم بر یزدگرد وگر کینه خوانیم ازین هفت گرد
وگر خود نداندهمی کین و داد مرا فیلسوف ایچ پاسخ نداد

Ferdowsi's final claim is one of pride in his work, an emotion that seems almost as strongly present is that of bewilderment" (xxxi).

[5] I say "presumably" because the poet often steers clear of making such bold predictions.

[6] One of the ironies of Ferdowsi's project is that his *Shāhnāmeh*, insofar as it is a record of deeds and acts, is concerned with what kind of reputation serves us after death even if those judgments do not mete out real world consequences for the actions being judged.

وگر گفت دینی همه بسته گفت بماند همی پاسخ اندر نهفت

> Should we *call* what's befallen Yazdegerd justice?
> Or should we *call* it spite doled out by the seven spheres?
> And if he/it doesn't know justice or spite,
> the philosopher hasn't given me any answer [either].
> And if any religious person spoke of this, he spoke abstrusely/cryptically.
> The answer [to his conundrum] remains concealed.[7]

The poet begins with an anacoenosis in the form of two rhetorical questions that immediately implicate the reader. The pun on Yazdegerd's name (meaning, "made by God") links the question regarding justice (or *dād*), in the first hemistich, with God's divine justice. Meanwhile, the rhetorical question in the second hemistich alludes to Ferdowsi's second cosmological frame, which is governed by fate. Ironically, the poet's efforts to resolve this dubiety, regarding which cosmology is to blame for Yazdegerd's tragedy, only seems to produce more ambivalence and doubt. In his essay, Khaleghi-Motlagh uses this brief epilogue to not only illustrate how both cosmological frames are operative in the *Shāhnāmeh* but to also suggest that when it comes to bemoaning the tragic fate of his nation, and the death of its heroes, the poet doesn't care which cosmology is at fault. In other words, Ferdowsi sees the two cosmological frames through the lens of an inconsolable, despairing fatalism that vainly rails against both viewpoints. But what Khaleghi-Motlagh misses, in his otherwise astute analysis, is the role that language plays in creating the frames that frame, and are framed by, Ferdowsi's fatalistic outlook. The poet doesn't merely ask which power (i.e., God's or the seven spheres') is to blame for this event, but what word ("justice" or "spite") should he use to try to understand this event? And the poet answers

[7] The translations are mine, based on Khaleghi-Motlagh's edition of *Shāhnāmeh*: Abu al-Qāsem Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh*, 8 vols. ed. Djalal Khaleghi-Motlagh, (New York: Bibliotheca Persica, 1987-2008) 8:473, lines 733-35 (cited hereafter as *SN* followed by the volume:page, and line numbers).

his own question by suggesting that it makes no difference which frame one uses to understand an event *not* because the end result is the same (i.e., a tragedy), but rather, in the end we cannot comprehend the result by answering the question one way or the other because both frames are a product of language, of naming (*khwāndan*) or processing a phenomenon that cannot be cleanly reduced and explained by a dichotomous either/or characterization.[8] Hence, the religious frame (*dini*) is just as helpful, and therefore helpless, as any other frame when it comes to explaining what is happening: "And if any religious person spoke of this, he spoke abstrusely / The answer [to his conundrum] remains concealed." The poet's vacillation, then, between competing cosmological viewpoints not only draws our attention to the arbitrariness of any linguistic frame that purports to tell us what things mean, but it does so in order to show that it is impossible to know (*dānad*) if the language used to frame an event is itself commensurate with the event it frames: "If he/it doesn't know justice or spite / the philosopher hasn't given me any answer [either]."[9]

This pessimism regarding language's inability to tell us something substantive about ourselves, and our world, is also poignantly expressed in the opening prologue to the *Shāhnāmeh*, which frames the entire work.[10] While most critics, Khaleghi-Motlagh included,

[8] It is important to note, that the poet is not necessarily saying theodicy doesn't exist. What he is saying, rather, is that he can't prove if it exists, or doesn't exist, because no amount of talking, or framing of events through language (by philosophers or theologians), can ever give us the correct, definitive interpretation of events.

[9] Two "western" philosophers that articulate a similar epistemological position are Plato and Nietzsche. In the *Cratylus*, Plato's Socrates deals specifically with the question or problem of language in its ability (or inability) to tell us anything substantive about the "things" it names. Meanwhile, in his famous essay, "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense," Nietzsche discusses the incommensurability between words and the phenomenon that words attempt to capture or describe.

[10] While *Shāhnāmeh* scholars have devoted (and continue to devote) considerable attention to the "orality" versus "literacy" question surrounding the text, little attention has been paid to the text's representation of language in general. Although the political and scholarly stakes are high, for those partaking in this contentious and most likely insoluble debate, Ferdowsi's own text seems less concerned with the artistic merits of how narratives get transmitted through time (whether it be by oral or written means), and more concerned with language's ability to produce

point to Ferdowsi's famous passage regarding knowledge and power (*tavānā bovad harkeh dānā bovad / ze dānesh del-e pir bornā bovad* = "He who has knowledge has power / knowledge makes an old heart young")[11] as proof of the high esteem that the poet grants to the powers of the human intellect, they often neglect to mention that some twenty lines later Ferdowsi undercuts his praise, in a section of the prologue specifically dedicated to praising the powers of the intellect:

به دانش ز دانندگان راه جوی به گیتی بپوی و بهرکس بگوی
ز هر دانشی چون سخن بشنوی ز آموختن یکزمان نغنوی
چو دیدار یابی به شاخ سخن بدانی که دانش نیاید به بن

> Seek the way to knowledge from those who know,
> search the world and talk to everyone.
> Of every branch/domain of learning you hear tell,
> of learning one moment do not repose.[12]
> When you set your eyes on (take in) a branch of speech (exposition),
> know that knowledge will not come to root.[13]

To be more accurate, the poet's final verse doesn't so much critique or undercut the powers of the intellect as much as our ability to get to the bottom of arguments, formulations and/or expositions which make the world intelligible. According to the poet, the ultimate meaning or explanation of phenomena, like the roots of a tree, remains hidden underground, beyond our ken.

If this were an isolated instance of the poet building up a thought—in this case, the thought that thoughts, and the words which make thought possible, can lead to anything beyond

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meaning and knowledge through narrative. For arguments that claim Ferdowsi relied mostly on an oral poetic tradition to produce the *Shāhnāmeh*, see Olga M. Davidson, *Poet and Hero in the Persian Book of Kings*, (Ithaca, NY: Mazda, 1994) and also her *Comparative Literature and Classical Persian Poetics*, (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, 2000), as well as Dick Davis, "The Problem of Ferdowsi's Sources," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 116, no. 1 (1996): 48-58. For a scathing critique of Davidson and Davis, see Mahmoud Omidsalar, *Poetics and Politics of Iran's National Epic, the Shahnameh*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

[11] *SN*, 1:4, line 14.

[12] In other words, do not fail to take advantage of the opportunity to learn something whenever anyone speaks about any domain of learning/science.

[13] *SN*, 1:5, lines 31-33. The word *bon*, which literally means "root," also means "basis," "foundation" and "end."

themselves—only to tear it back down to its "root" (*bon*), or rather, to a thought with no discernable "root" but a rootless word, then that would be one thing. But since this is a pattern of thought that reemerges throughout Ferdowsi's searching text, especially when the poet emerges to comment on what his text might mean, then this thought, or reflection on language, may not only help explain Ferdowsi's epistemological agnosticism but also his religious pessimism.[14] For instance, in his prologue to the Akvān Div story, Ferdowsi uses the occasion of trying to praise an un-appraisable God, to question those (i.e., wise men and philosophers) who claim to know more than they actually do:

توبرکردگارروان و خرد ستایش گزین تا چه اندر خورد
ببین ای خردمند روشن روان که چون باید را ستودن توان
همه دانش من به بیچار گیست به بیچارگان بر بباید گریست
تو خستو شو آنرا که هست و یکیست روان و خرد را جزین راه نیست
ایا فلسفه دان بسیار گوی بپویم به راهی که گفتی مپوی
سخن هرچه با هست توحید نیست به ناگفتن و گفتن او یکیست
ترا هرچه بر چشم برنگذرد نگنجد همی در دلت با خرد
تو گر سخته یی راه سنجیده گوی نیاید به بن هرگز این گفت و گو

You, upon the doer (the lord or creator) of soul and wisdom,
choose praise that is fitting.
Look you, bright minded wise man,
how is it possible to make the proper/fitting praise?
All my knowledge is helpless:
over the helpless (or wretched) one must cry.
You must acknowledge him that exists and is one.
Except for this, wisdom and soul have no other way.
Hey, philosopher of many words,
I search the way that you told me not to.
Whatever speech is not of the existence of God's unity,

[14] The importance of Ferdowsi's prologues, in helping us understand the author's understanding of his own text, cannot be overstated. In this regard, it is somewhat disappointing that Dick Davis failed to include much of this prefatory material in what is otherwise the most comprehensive English (prose) translation of the *Shāhnāmeh* to date (Davis, *Shāhnāmeh*: *The Persian Book of Kings*). In excluding the material translated in this essay, Davis' translation turns the *Shāhnāmeh* into a collection of loose fitting tales that do not do justice to how Ferdowsi wanted to frame these famous stories for his readers: frames which, as this essay shows, have the power to change our understanding of the stories themselves. Hence, I hope that Davis will correct this oversight in future editions of his translation.

> whether you say it or not, it makes no difference.
> Whatever does not pass by your eye,
> will not find its way to your heart through wisdom.
> If you say to strictly measure (weigh) things,
> all this talking will never come to root.[15]

Ferdowsi begins the passage by giving his religiously devout readers a seemingly "helpful" suggestion, namely, when you praise God "choose praise that is fitting." It is not long, however, before Ferdowsi uses this pretense, the pretense of being able to properly praise God, to get his readers to acknowledge their own helplessness when it comes to appraising their creator. Once Ferdowsi acknowledges that his "knowledge," and consequently ours, "is helpless," when it comes to appraising God (for all we can do, it seems, is to acknowledge his existence), he turns his attention to the figure of the philosopher (his imaginary addressee), who is presumably an expert on such matters. Although Ferdowsi admits that the philosopher may have been right in advising him to not seek answers in the manner he has been seeking, "Hey philosopher of many words, / I search the way that you told me not to," he also doesn't believe any answers are forthcoming when it comes to understanding God: "Whatever speech is not of the existence of God's unity, / whether you say it or not, it makes no difference" and again, "If you say to strictly measure (weigh) things, [or, if you are careful and speak measuredly], / all this talking will never come to root." Besides Ferdowsi's mild invective directed at the loquacious philosopher, there are several other direct (and indirect) critical references to language in the passage. Whether it is using the right words to praise God, or finding the right words to appraise him with, language seems to be "helpless" when it comes to doing anything more than acknowledging his existence and unity. And once again, as in the opening prologue to his work, Ferdowsi use of the word *bon*

[15] *SN*, 3:287-288, lines 1-8.

(meaning "root"), to convey language's inability to get to the root of things: "If you say to strictly measure (weigh) things, / all this talking will never come to root." In other words, all this talking will not amount to, prove, or reveal anything about God, his intentions, or our relation to him.

Ferdowsi's skeptical stance towards all things knowable becomes even more striking when compared with a surviving passage from the introduction to his prose source, the Abu Mansur *Shāhnāmeh*. The older prose rendition of the *Shāhnāmeh* is instructive here, for it shows how Ferdowsi does not always share the opinion of his sources:

> The Work on the *Shāhnāmeh* began with what was brought together by Abu Mansur Ma'marī, the minister of Abu Mansur. . . . Thus (he) says first in this book: "As long as the world has existed, people have sought knowledge [*dānesh*], held speech [*sokhon*] great, and considered it the best memorial, because in this world men become richer and greater through knowledge."[16]

In contrast to this idealized view of "knowledge" and "speech," Ferdowsi often uses his mordant wit through pithy expressions like, "What good is a long life / when the world will not open its secrets to you" (*cheh bāyad hami zendegāni derāz* / *cho giti nakhwāhad goshādant rāz*), to dismiss such naive sentiments.[17]

Not surprisingly, Ferdowsi reiterates his somber reflection on language elsewhere in the Shāhnāmeh, for example in the prologue (*āghāz-e dāstān*) to his most indelible story, the tragedy of "Rostam and Sohrāb." There, the poet also begins by calling attention to the power and problem of naming (*khwāndan*):

اگر تندبادی برآید ز کنج　　به خاک افگند نارسیده ترنج
ستمگاره خوانیمش ار دادگر　　هنرمند گوییمش ار بی هنر

[16] The translation of the prose introduction to the Abu Mansur *Shāhnāmeh* is by Vladimir Minorsky, "The Older Preface to the *Shāhnāma*," in *Iranica: Twenty Articles*, (Hertford, UK: University of Tehran, 1964), 265.
[17] *SN*, 1:52, line 190.

اگر مرگ دادست بیداد چیست ز داد این همه بانگ وفریاد چیست
ازین راز جان تو آگاه نیست بدین پرده اندر ترا راه نیست
همه تا در آز رفته فراز به کس بر نشد این در راز باز
به رفتن مگر بهتر آیدت جای چو آرام گیری به دیگر سرای

If a gust of wind comes from some corner
and throws to the dirt an unripe fruit,
tyrannous should we *call* it, or just?
Skillful *name* it, or skill-less?
If death is just, what's unjust?
What's all this clamoring and shouting then for justice?
Of this secret your soul has no knowledge,
through this veil there is no path for you.
Although all have gone as far as the door of avidity,
this secret door has not opened for anyone.
In going (i.e., dying) perhaps a better place will come to you.
When you take rest in that other world.[18]

Before discussing the prologue, or what is in the prologue, it is worth mentioning what isn't in this version of Ferdowsi's prologue to the "Rostam and Sohrāb" story. In his methodically researched edition of the *Shāhnāmeh*, Khaleghi-Motlagh excises several spurious lines that were added to the prologue by later scribes who were trying to tone down and contain the religiously subversive elements of Ferdowsi's philosophical meditation. The excised lines can be readily distinguished from Ferdowsi's original because most of them employ religious words or concepts (such as *fanā* and *imān*) that are foreign to the *Shāhnāmeh's* vocabulary.[19] But here again, the ethical and religious uncertainty, which later scribes tried to counter with their own words, is inextricably tied to language and the epistemological frames made possible by

[18] *SN*, 2:117-118, lines 1-6, italics are mine. Khaleghi-Motlagh notes that the last line quoted here is missing in some of his oldest manuscripts, but nevertheless feels the language is old and genuine. See *SN*, 2:118, footnote 2, and Khalehi-Motlagh, *Notes on the Shāhnāmeh*, 4 vols. (New York: Bibliotheca Persica, 2001-2008), vol. 1, pt. 1, 491. Jayhuni, however, does not apparently find that a persuasive argument for inclusion and leaves it out of his edition: *Shāhnāmeh-ye Ferdowsi: Tashih-e Enteqādi, Moqaddameh-ye tahlili, nokteh-hā-ye Nowyāfteh*, ed. M. Jayhuni. 5 vols. (Isfahan, 1379 / 2010), 323.

[19] For more on Khaleghi-Motlagh's rationale in excising these verses, see *Notes on the Shāhnāmeh, vol. 1, pt. 1*, 491.

language.

Ferdowsi begins his prologue by asking how he should linguistically frame the act or action of the wind when it knocks down an unripe fruit.[20] The poet asks if he should call it just (*dādgar*), or tyrannous and unjust (*setamgāreh*); if he should name it skillful (*honarmand*), or skill-less (*bi-honar*). Ostensibly, the poet seems to be raising the theodictic question once again: is the world inherently just and/or will we ever find justice in this life or the afterlife? But by relating the problem of justice to the problem of naming (*khwāndan*), or finding the right word to frame a "natural" act or action, the poet also seems to be asking whether our language can tell us, in any definitive way, the *right* way to frame or understand any action and what difference, if any, such names ultimately make? Whereas in the prologue to the Akvān Div story language was helpless when it came to comprehending God, now its arbitrariness and imprecision obfuscate both the category of justice (as in the epilogue to Yazdegerd's tragedy),[21] and the value of the life that gives such categories meaning. This radical reflection on language not only has implications for how we might *understand* the actions of a father (i.e., Rostam) who "mistakenly" or "accidentally" kills his son, because he fails to recognize him, but also how we understand the language that makes such actions recognizable to us as unjust or tragic to begin with.[22]

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[20] *SN*, 2:117-118, lines 1-3.
[21] *SN*, 8:473, lines 733-35.
[22] According to my friend and mentor, Franklin D. Lewis, the passage is not about naming or about language but about the normal human narrative impulse to describe/pronounce (*khwāndan*) what happens to Sohrāb as either deserved or undeserved. In turn, to ask if what has happened is just or unjust, and to be unable to answer is not an indictment of language, but a desperate search for theodicy and a logical attempt to find transcendent meaning in the tragedy. My response to this argument is that language is implicated in the poet's search for theodicy and transcendent meaning (and is therefore as much a source of his consternation as the questions he cannot answer by way of language) because whatever power is responsible for our existence as sentient beings (whether it be God, Time, or fate) has given us the ability to ask such questions but not the ability to answer them; at least not unequivocally.

Of course, Ferdowsi's carefully chosen words (i.e., the words he proposes to use to try to frame this event) tell us something in their very inability to tell us much of anything. The first set of words (translated as "tyrannous" and "just") carry ethical, moral and even religious connotations while the second set of words (translated here as "skillful" and "skill-less") have a range of values, from the aesthetic to the ethical. The word *honarmand* (derived from *honar*, meaning "learning," "knowledge," "ability," "skillfulness," "art," "science," "industry," "virtue," "excellence," "nobility," "purity"), can be used both as a noun (meaning a skilled, knowledgeable, capable, talented, noble or virtuous person), or as an adjective, describing a person or thing possessing such attributes.[23] In the *Shāhnāmeh*, Ferdowsi often uses the word in a laudatory manner to describe those who possess a rare talent or ability, even if he doesn't always specify what that talent or ability is. In this regard, a warrior like Rostam can be considered *honarmand*, with his talent for politics and warfare being a kind of virtue, or a quality considered desirable in a person in his position.[24] At the same time, however, his courage and ability in combat, and his sagacity in politics, do not, in and of themselves, always lead to noble and virtuous action or conduct, as exhibited by the tragic murder of his son and Esfandyār's accusation that the great warrior killed him (i.e., Esfandyār) through trickery and sorcery. Consequently, although *honarmand's* ethical connotations cannot be unambiguously separated from its aesthetic meanings neither can we assume that learning, knowledge, talent, and skill are always ethically bound, or not done for their own sake. Considering the fact that Ferdowsi gives

[23] For a range of definitions of the words *honar* and *honarmand*, as they occur in *the Shāhnāmeh*, see Khaleghi-Motlagh, *Notes on the Shāhnāmeh*, vol. 1, pt. 2, 927. According to Dehkhodā, the word is also used in the *Shāhnāmeh* to mean "brave," "strong," and "powerful." See Loghatnāmeh, s.v. "*honarmand*," Accessed September 11, 2012, http://www.loghatnaameh.org/dehkhodaworddetail-93027e2b5ea643f5ac1dcba2560b5a21-fa.html.

[24] There are numerous references in the *Shāhnāmeh* to Rostam's *honar-hā*, his various talents and skills, which presumably include his expertise in the martial arts.

us the ethical viewpoint of the fallen fruit in the first verse of the prologue, it seems unlikely that he would repeat himself in the second verse by using *honarmand* as an ethical category. In turn, what *honarmand* seems to connote in the passage is something thought out or planned through ingenuity and skill (as in a poem), which, in turn, is contrasted with *bi-honar*; something either unintended or unplanned, or something poorly planned or conceived. On one level, then, Ferdowsi's word choice calls into question God's divine providence as creator of all things (asking in essence, "is there a plan or meaning to all of this?") which recalls the ethical question, but on another level, Ferdowsi draws a marked, if not an entirely unambiguous distinction, between God as creator or artist (*honarmand*) and God as judge or moral authority (*dādgar*), presiding over his creation. Hence, what Ferdowsi might also be asking is, maybe we can't ascribe ethical value to or ethically judge the wind when it knocks down an unripe fruit from a tree, but can we, or should we, judge it aesthetically? Is there something skill-full, or perhaps poetically sensible, even sublime, about this seemingly unjust act, even if it goes against our ethical sensibilities?[25] Or is this lamentable scene the product of a poor, unskillful and/or

[25] I use the word "sensible" rather than "just," because poetic justice suggests that there is something ethically or morally right in having Sohrāb (our fallen fruit), and his father, be punished and/or suffer because of a confluence of events that, in many ways, are outside of their control. Poetically sensible simply means that from an aesthetic viewpoint, there might be something poignant and emotionally cathartic about the fall of an unripe fruit, as much as the events that the fruit symbolizes. In his portrayal of Rostam, for instance, Ferdowsi gives us a character whose courage, strength, love of honor/fame, cleverness, and never say die attitude, ironically help create the conditions for the tragedy. There is something so profoundly moving about Rostam's plight that it almost transcends any moral judgment. If Rostam didn't doggedly pursue honor and fame, or try to maintain his reputation at all cost, even to the point of withholding his identity from an opponent that he feared losing to, then he wouldn't be Rostam. In trying to live up to, and preserve, his heroic status, Rostam helps bring about a tragedy that defames and diminishes him. The poet beautifully captures this ironic scenario, where Rostam's heroic attitude, or disposition, helps bring about the tragedy, through a pun on the old Persian word *āberu,* meaning "reputation," "honor," "esteem." In describing Rostam's reaction to his son's murder, Ferdowsi plays on the literal meaning of the word *āberu* (water of the face) in order to comment on the action, "He [Rostam] poured out his blood and pulled out his hair / his head full of dirt and his face full of water (or tears)" (*Hami rikht khun u hami kand muy / sarash por az khāk o por az āb ruy SN* 2:187, line 879). What Ferdowsi's sardonic pun ("his face full of water" or "por az āb rui") suggests, is that Rostam's dogged pursuit of honor and fame (*āberu*) has helped bring about a tragedy full of tears, pain and shame. And yet, this does not mean the poet blames Rostam for the tragedy, or blames him any more than he blames the

disinterested creator whose work lacks both rhyme and reason? Consequently, is the universe and everything in it, the work of an artist, the work of a moralist, both, or perhaps neither?[26]

In the third verse of his searching prologue, the poet continues his inquiry into the nature of justice by "asking" what appears to be another set of rhetorical questions: "if death is just, what's unjust? / What's all this clamoring and shouting then for justice?" What the poet seems to be saying here, through his questions, is, if death (and in particular a premature death), which is arguably the most unjust thing we can imagine from our human perspective, can also be seen as just or right from another (equally human) perspective—because, like the fallen fruit of the first verse, it too is a natural occurrence—then every other kind of "injustice" in life is, naturally, also just or right. In turn, the passage reveals justice to be nothing more than a human-made concept whose terms are relative. This realization leads the poet to his most profound commentary on the linguistic problem yet, without, ironically, using language (at least directly) to comment. For a poet who rarely uses puns, the second hemistich of the third verse deploys a dramatic and powerful pun: a pun that is, in fact, so uncanny that it makes us pause and wonder whether it is something the poet intended or planned (i.e., *honarmand*), or something unintentional and accidental (i.e., *bi-honar*). The pun, which in its deployment ironically also raises questions about reading, or the right or just way of reading, involves the word *dād* or just. The word *dād*, which also means "a shout or cry," most likely derived its secondary meaning from its

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wind for knocking down an unripe fruit. If he did, he would include himself among those tender hearted readers who would blame Rostam for his son's death (*SN* 2:199, line 1014). In fact, Ferdowsi's staging of this tragedy, like the fallen fruit in the prologue, tests our moral and intellectual faculties by pushing them to their limits, creating a sense of wonder and awe associated with only the most sublime works of art.

[26] This undecidability, between an ethical and aesthetic outlook, that Ferdowsi's beautiful, simple, and yet profoundly provocative verse stages, anticipates by seven centuries the discourse of aesthetics, which, through the writings of Kant (*Critique of Judgment*), Schiller (*The Aesthetic Letters*), and Kierkegaard (*Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*), would turn western philosophy's understanding of ethics inside out.

association with cries or implorations for justice.[27] Here, Ferdowsi evokes *dād's* other meaning by placing it next to words that mean the same thing. Hence, if we read the word as a pun, the line reads this way, "If death is just, what's unjust? / What's all this clamoring and shouting over a shout (or a cry)?" Ferdowsi's clever pun, or play on words, frames words themselves as a kind of noise; an emotive shout or a cry (*dād*) that expresses feelings which, if not for words/concepts like justice (*dād*), would remain ineffable.

Intended or not, Ferdowsi's pun once again raises questions about the intentional in language. Not only does this pun, or "accident," in writing and reading, unexpectedly alter the way we frame or understand the passage, and the language which gives sense to the passage, but it once again emphasizes the random nature of any linguistic frame that purports to tell us what it is that we are seeing or even hearing. Ferdowsi finally responds to his own questions by suggesting that no conclusion regarding the questions that his prologue has raised can ever be reached: "Of this secret your soul has no knowledge / through this veil there is no path for you." Having already used our limited "knowledge" of God, and our inability to distinguish justice from spite, to test the powers of language and thought, Ferdowsi now seems to subsume those mysteries under the broader mystery of life and death:

همه تا در آز رفته فراز　　به کس بر نشد این در راز باز

Although all have gone as far as the door of avidity,
this secret door has not opened for anyone.[28]

According to Khaleghi-Motlagh, going as far as the "door of avidity" indicates the desire to

[27] Dehkhodā, *Loghatnāmeh*, s.v. "*dād*," accessed March 19, 2012, http://www.loghatnaameh.org/dehkhodaworddetail-0293e66113df4438a1a319b6507ca291-fa.html.
[28] *SN* 2:117, l. 5.

know or learn more than what is possible or permissible about such mysteries.[29] Meaning, when it comes to understanding the secrets of life and death we greedily try to go further than what language and thought allow but to no avail. Although the poet's riddling search for answers ultimately proves to be fruitless (or only manages to deepen the mystery regarding the mysterious nature of answers), it doesn't completely shut the door on the possibility of one day opening "this secret door," or finding answers:

به رفتن مگر بهتر آیدت جای چو آرام گیری به دیگر سرای

In going (i.e., dying) perhaps a better place will come to you.
When you take rest in that other world.[30]

And yet if answers are forthcoming they won't be revealed in this world, and the poet's concluding, consolatory note is anything but a promise of a "better place," or an afterlife that, in the end, will reveal the mysteries of life or justify the ways of God to man.[31]

One gets the feeling here that not being able to make sense out of the tragedy, and the life that encompasses it, is, at least for the poet, just as tragic as the tragedy. This sentiment is echoed again at the end of the story when the perplexed poet and his forlorn characters vainly search for answers to cope with their existential despair. The poet expresses his frustrations by reformulating the unanswerable questions that he raised in the prologue, "Why must/should one always have so much affection for this world / when we must strut off (pass away) with our

[29] See Khaleghi-Motlagh, *Notes on the Shahnameh* vol. 1, pt. 1, 392. Ironically, Ferdowsi's pessimistic conclusion is so syntactically cryptic and strange that it is hard to conclude what "this secret" (*rāz*) is referring to. Is it the secret of life and death, the meaning of (or the desire for) justice? Or is it the "veil" of language, which produces secrets without revealing why the secret we keep can be kept or known in other ways?

[30] *SN*, 2:118, line 6.

[31] As an 'Alid living in an Islamic society, one might expect the great poet, the "*hakim*" of Tus—where the epithet *hakim* "denotes a sage or philosopher and is sparingly applied to great Persian poets"—to exhibit a little more faith, or a sense of providence, throughout his text. But, as noted before, such sentiments are, more often than not, conspicuously lacking in Ferdowsi's text. The quotation above is from Firuza Abdullaeva and Charles Melville's, "*Shahnama*: the Millenium of an Epic Masterpiece," *Iranian Studies*, vol. 1, no. 43 (2010), 1.

fellow travelers?" (*cherā mehr bāyad hami bar jahān / bebāyad kherāmid bā hamrahān).*[32] What the poet is asking, in essence, is what does it all mean, if, in the end, we have to leave it all behind? Meanwhile, the characters in the poem respond to their existential crises by trying to find a cause or a reason for the tragedy. According to Sohrāb, it was that *kuzhposht* or hunchback (i.e., the bent/curved sky) that brought about his downfall. According to the narrator, it is the *charkh-e boland* (the wheel of fortune) that is at fault, and according to Key Kāvus *zamāneh* (or Time) is to blame. And, finally, the tender hearted reader might even want to pin the blame on Rostam: "A tale full of tears / leaves the tenderhearted angry with Rostam" (*yaki dāstān ast por āb-e chashm / del-e nāzok az rostam āyad beh khashm*).[33] But blaming Rostam for the tragedy is really no different than blaming the stars, Time or God.[34] Consequently, what the poet's and the characters' varied responses to the tragedy reveal, is that the theodictic problem is, once again, inextricably tied to the linguistic/epistemological one, for although one can assign blame or responsibility for Sohrāb's death and/or even try to justify the ways of God to man, by framing events a particular way (just as later scribes tried to do by giving the prologue a distinctly Islamic spin), such frames are ultimately susceptible to the very power (i.e., language) that produced them; which means, any explanation of the story, religious or otherwise, can itself, at any moment, be dismantled, or shown to be nothing more than a story, a myth, or a piece of fiction,

[32]*SN*, 2:195, line 973.
[33] *SN*, 2:199, line 1014
[34] Of course, in addition to fate, God and Rostam's sense of honor and pride, the story offers other possible causes for the tragedy, such as Sorhab's mother's tryst, and her ambition to have a baby warrior, Hozhir or Zenderazm for failing to deliver the message / the truth; and Key Kāvus for "protecting" the Iranian nation; all of which are in their own way true. And yet, none of these "causes" tell us why it is so important to find a cause for the tragedy when we, like the poet know, that such causes can never be "the cause."

not unlike those found in the *Shāhnāmeh*.[35]

By continuously pointing out language's epistemological shortcomings or limits (i.e., its inability to get at the truth, bottom, or "root" of things) Ferdowsi creates an interesting tension or conflict between himself (as poet) and, to the extent that his poems are meant to express timeless truths about the human condition, the very medium of his trade (i.e., poetry). On the one hand, language (in the form of poetry) is a creative and productive outlet for the poet's thoughts, beliefs, feelings, imagination, worries, and longings. On the other hand, however, the very words he uses to express himself can be turned into self-wounding weapons when the poet uses them to remind himself (and his audience) of language's limitations in providing unequivocal answers to nagging existential questions. And here, it is important to reiterate that Ferdowsi's epistemological morass is not simply the result of a dispassionate inquiry into the nature of God, Justice, truth etc., but a deeply personal one (or at least that is how it is framed), motivated by a desire for, and love of, justice, truth, God, etc. In this regard, his search for answers has at least as much to do with the feelings motivating his impassioned inquiries as it does with the objects of those inquiries. Hence, in conducting his inquiries (or staging them after the fact), the poet is

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[35] The narrative impulse, shared by poet, philosopher and layman alike, might explain Ferdowsi's cryptic admonition of the wise man/philosopher at the end of his prologue to the Akvān Div story from the *SN*, 3:289, lines 16-18:

نباشی بدین گفته همداستان که دهقان همی گوید از باستان
خردمند کین داستان بشنود به دانش گراید بدین نگرود
ولکین چو معنیش یاد آوری شوی رام و کوته شود داوری

Perhaps in this story you are not like minded,
that the old story teller tells from ancient days.
The wise man who hears this story
tends towards knowledge not towards this [i.e., the story].
Perhaps when you think upon its meaning
you'll become tame and judgment will be shortened (or diminished).

Just exactly how this children's fairy tale (about "good" versus "evil") is supposed to curtail judgment is not made explicit. But Ferdowsi's attempt, in the prologue, to put his stories on a par with the philosopher's teachings tells us how little he thinks of philosophy, or how highly he thinks of his stories, or, perhaps, how the philosopher's expositions are no better (or worse) than a story.

not simply searching for answers, but he is also searching his own feelings to understand why seeking answers to questions that have no definitive answers is so important to him. And what the poet finds, or is left with, at the end of his endless search for meaning, are the feelings that give his life (or any life) *meaning*. In turn, as we will see, the poet's insoluble epistemological, ethical, and theological conundrums are resolved, by being dissolved, in feelings not unlike the mysterious feelings that give rise to his impassioned seeking. Ironically, then, the epistemological skepticism and ethical/religious pessimism at the heart of Ferdowsi's despairing, fatalistic viewpoint also clear the way for him to transcend his limited viewpoint, and the language framing it, by overcoming the *feelings* responsible for his outlook. Although the prologue and epilogue framing the "Rostam and Esfandyār" story, and the story itself, do not come at the end of the epic poem, they nonetheless provide a resolution (however momentary or fleeting it may be) to the poet's search for existential meaning, by representing a love (and a language) whose meaning is not limited by an either/or understanding.[36]

The poet begins the prologue that frames the tragic tale of "Rostam and Esfandyār," in anything but tragic fashion, through an ecstatic poetic outlook that is vivid, vibrant, and rhapsodic:

کنون خورد باید می خوش گوار — که می بوی مشک آید از جویبار
هوا پرخروش و زمین پر زجوش — خنک آنک دل شاد دارد به نوش
درم دارد و نقل و جام نبید — سر گوسپندی تواند برید
مرا نیست فرّخ مر آن را که هست — ببخشای بر مردم تنگدست
همه بوستان زیر برگ گلست — همه کوه پر لاله و سنبلست

Now is the time to drink delicious wine,
when the scent of musk flows from the creek;

[36] For more on the role love plays in generating the conflicts within the story of "Rostam and Esfandyār," see footnote 45. For more on the narrator's shifting/changing moods and perspectives throughout the epic (and how his changing moods frame his enigmatic persona), see the coda at the end of the chapter.

the air bubbling, the earth boiling—
blessed he who gladdens his heart with drink,
[and who] has money and sweetmeats and a strong cup of wine
and can cut off the head of a lamb.
I have none of these—fortunate is he who has it!
Give away to those who need it.
The whole garden is hid beneath petals of flowers;
the whole mountain is full of hyacinths and tulips.[37]

Using the convention of the spring royal advent poems, present in many of the *qasidahs* of his contemporaries, Ferdowsi gives us a vernal day; a time for renewal and rebirth; a time for feasting and carnal pleasures; a time for love and amorous passions. The passage may also contain an appeal for patronage, one perhaps tinged with cynicism and bitterness, either because the poet has not been the beneficiary of such generosity, or possibly a fierce independence that would not allow him to accept such patronage, in any case. At the same time, the references to wine, drinking, merry making, and animal sacrifice at the beginning of the prologue give the scene a peculiar pagan, even bacchanalian, flavor. Although the poet claims to be too poor to afford wine and the things money can buy to go with it ("I have none of these—fortunate is he who has it / Give away to those who need it"), that does not mean he cannot suffer from wine's hallucinogenic effects, or that he cannot induce them through other means. The poet, here, is not intoxicated with wine but with words, words that (in his hallucinatory reverie) he delivers to us through a mad, chaotic, rush of images of blooming flowers, singing birds, bursting clouds and roaring lions, all jumbled together by his contorted syntax and even more convoluted narrative:

به پالیز بلبل بنالد همی گل از ناله ی او ببالد همی
شبِ تیره بلبل نخسپد همی گل از باد و باران بجنبد همی
چو از ابر بینم همی باد و نم ندانم که نرگس چرا شد دژم
بخندد همی بلبل از هر دوان چو بر گل نشیند گشاید زبان
ندانم که عاشق گل آمد گر ابر چو ازابر بینم خروشِ هزبر

[37] *SN*, 5:291, lines 1-5.

بدرّد همی باد پیراهنش　　درفشان شود آتش اندر تنش
به عشق هوا بر زمین شد گوا　　بنزدیک خورشید فرمانروا
که داند که بلبل چه گوید همی　　به زیرگل اندر چه موید همی

At the kitchen garden the nightingale is wailing;
the rose from its wailing, is blooming.
Through the dark night, the nightingale is not sleeping;
the rose, from the wind and the rain, is shaking.
Since I see wind and rain from the clouds,
I don't know why the narcissus became despondent?
The nightingale is laughing at them both.
When on the rose it sits, it loosens its tongue.
I don't understand; if the cloud came as the lover of the rose,
why from the cloud do I see the roar of a lion? [38]
The wind, tearing its clothes:[39]
the fire (i.e., lightning) in its [the cloud's] body becoming bright.
To the air's love for the earth, it [the cloud] became witness,
in the presence of the commanding sun.
Who knows what the nightingale is saying,
underneath the flower, what it is lamenting?[40]

The sudden and unexpected movement from springtime festivities to a vernal (or is it autumnal?) storm that at first seems life-giving (i.e., it makes the flowers grow), but then becomes life-threatening (i.e., rending the flowers), not only gives the passage an ominous, foreboding tone, thus foreshadowing the tragedy, but it also complicates our understanding of events that, on the surface, appear sad or tragic. For what makes the storm appear disturbing and threatening has as much to do with how it is interpreted, or misinterpreted, by the various parties (i.e., the rose, the narcissus, and the nightingale), as the physical and psychic injuries that it ostensibly inflicts. Adding to the confusion is the intimation that the "victims" of this passing storm are, in a mysterious and inexplicable way, involved in the appearance of the storm. In this, Ferdowsi's

[38] In other words, if the cloud came as the lover of the rose [as did the nightingale], then why is the cloud roaring at the rose, instead of singing to it?
[39] The pronoun here is ambiguous enough to allow us to read the storm as raping the petals of the rose, "The wind, tearing its [the rose's] clothes," or tearing up the storm cloud itself. Both readings, however, point towards the violent, destructive potential of love.
[40] *SN*, 5:292, lines 6-13.

version of the "butterfly effect," the bird's impassioned wailing (or singing) causes the flower to bloom, the flower blooming and the bird wailing coincide with (or cause) a storm, the storm ostensibly upsets or disturbs the flower, the flower's despondency causes the bird's laughter, and the cloud that created the storm is finally torn up by the storm it created. Or, to put it another way, reverie gives way to desire; unreciprocated desire gives way to longing; unfulfilled longing turns into rage, and rage into an all-consuming storm of passions that tries to destroy everything in its wake, including the passions that produced the storm. Although the relationship between cause and effect is not readily recognizable, in Ferdowsi's jumbled, anthropomorphic narrative—where everything from plants to clouds are animated by human feelings and emotions—what we can see, is that it is difficult to see or discover what causes what to happen, or why (the poet's "I don't know why" and "I don't understand").

And if the poet's (or the nightingale's) confusion about what all of this means isn't enough to confound us,[41] the poet concludes his prologue by turning this story about the mysterious life of flowers, birds, and clouds into an allegory that ostensibly sheds light on, or explains, the story that we are about to be told:

نگه کن سحرگاه تا بشنوی زِ بلبل سخن گفتن پهلوی
همی نالد از مرگ اسفندیار ندارد جز از ناله زو یادگار
چو آواز رستم شب تیره ابر بدرّد دل و گوشِ غرّان هزبر

Look around at dawn until you hear,
the Pahlavi language from the nightingale.
He is wailing for the death of Esfandyār,
from whom he has no souvenir save wailing.
Like the cry of Rostam, on a dark cloudy night,
[the wail of the nightingale] rends the heart and ear of a roaring lion.[42]

[41] Not only does the poet's muddled and muddying syntax make it difficult to tell who is doing what to whom and why, but also who is speaking, or when nightingale stops speaking and poet begins.
[42] *SN*, 5:292, lines 14-16.

But just exactly how natural phenomena, moved by mysterious emotive forces, are supposed to help us understand the conflict between Rostam and Esfandyār is itself mysterious. Specifically, the passage compares Rostam's killing of Esfandyār, and his reaction to that murder, to natural phenomena by way of a roaring cloud that storms over an unhappy flower.[43] But since the anthropomorphic interpretation of natural phenomena, which is meant to allegorically reveal the meaning of Rostam and Esfandyār's story, only raises questions about the status of its own meaning (lines 8, 10, and 13), it leaves us with a question mark.[44] In other words, the allegory suggests that any meaning assigned to the tale of Rostam and Esfandyār is questionable. In turn, this epistemological question about how we read and understand the world, including the feelings that color our understanding, puts Rostam and Esfandyār's fatal confrontation on a par with a natural phenomenon, whose meaning, like the meaning of a bursting cloud or a cooing bird, is ultimately indecipherable. Paradoxically, this indecipherability might help explain why Ferdowsi frames the tale of "Rostam and Esfandyār" as a love story, or compares their enigmatic relationship to the ineffable experience of love.[45]

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[43] The roaring lion is not only a symbol for Rostam, in the epic poem, but is also used here at the outset of the Esfandyār episode to characterize a vernal storm, which in turn symbolically represents a raging Rostam: "I don't understand, if the cloud came as the lover of the flower / why from the cloud do I see the roar of a lion?" In turn, it is possible that the "roaring lion" at the end of the second *mesraʿ* is meant to qualify Rostam as well, in which case we get: "As the cry of Rostam—a roaring lion— / rends the heart and ear on a dark cloudy night."

[44] This is not to suggest that lines 8, 10 and 13 cannot be read as statements, but to point out that they all employ the word *dānad* (from "to know") to express a general confusion about what is taking place and why.

[45] Of course, Rostam and Esfandiyār's relationship within the story is a complex and intense one, and their mutual love and admiration for each other as warriors, which is inextricably tied to their desire to outcompete each other, both on and off the battlefield, can be interpreted in many ways. But to locate the cause of their fatal encounter in the nature of their personal relationship or the socially and politically charged ethical conundrums that the two men face, or still some other motive, all of which attempt to rationalize, explain away and/or demystify their encounter, would be to miss the prologue's implicit argument, that regardless of how we choose to frame such violent conflicts, ultimately they are the result of the mysterious force of love. Whether the source of the conflict be pride (or self-love), or the love of duty, ambition, or honor, or the need for parental or societal approval (i.e., the desire to be loved), love, as a force of attraction, and therefore repulsion, is a common denominator.

The poet represents love's ineffability by challenging preconceived notions about how love works and, consequently, what love means, through a narrative that obfuscates the distinction between love (*'eshq*) and those destructive emotions and actions that seemingly negate it. While at first glance the passage seems to suggest that love, and those actions that denote love, are wholly unrelated to and different from the violent and destructive emotions exhibited by the cloud—for the flower expects its lover, the cloud, to sing not rage—the poet inevitably disabuses us of this simplistic, either/or understanding of how love works. Hence, the inimical actions of the cloud, who ostensibly comes as a "lover of the rose," merely become a testimonial to an even greater love—i.e., "the air's love for the earth." So although the rose doesn't interpret or understand the cloud's thunderous roars to be a sign of love, the poem tells us that, from a cosmic, universal perspective, they are, for the raging storm also gives life by watering the earth. And the poet is able to present this surprisingly mystical viewpoint, where positive and negative, attractive and repulsive, and creative and destructive forces comingle in the name of love, due to the mysterious nature of love itself. In other words, since love, or that power which brings transitory beings together to produce life, is itself a mystery (i.e., something beyond human comprehension and language), the poet can't exclude the possibility that the mysterious cosmic forces that, through their creation of life, make life's destruction possible are themselves a work of love.

Just as the existence of the earth, the air, the clouds, the flowers and the birds (as separate entities) creates the potential for a friendly or hostile encounter, the existence of these two, larger than life heroes—Esfandyār and Rostam— as separate entities, is what allows them to both love and ultimately, through love's destructive potential, try to kill each other. We see

this idea reiterated at the end of the tale when Rostam and Goshtāsp, who, in their own way, contribute to Esfandyār's untimely demise, take on the role of loving parental figures that help nurture and raise Esfandyār's son, Bahman. At Esfandyār's dying request Rostam becomes the boy's teacher and caretaker until Goshtāsp, thinking that his grandson might help wash away the pain of losing his son, asks Rostam to return him to court. Like the vernal storm that watered the earth, Rostam and Goshtāsp, those agents of death, now become givers of life, showering Bahman with their love; the very love that, in its negative form, created a deadly storm of passions that claimed Esfandyār's life. In renewing and reestablishing the relations that gave rise to the initial conflict the story comes full circle, ending in a metaphoric spring that recalls the ecstatic, celebratory mood of the opening prologue:

> Esfandyar's story has come to an end.
> May the king live eternally.
> May his heart be free of anguish,
> and the times be obedient to his command!
> May his heart rejoice and his crown remain exalted,
> and a rope be put around the neck of his ill wishers![46]

Unlike the straightforward, literal language of the epilogue, however, the prologue uses an anthropomorphizing, poetically abstract, allegorical language to not only frame the Rostam and Esfandyār conflict as a work of love but to also question ordinary, prosaic language's ability to decipher (or frame) the world. And yet, if allegory's inability to help us understand the Rostam and Esfandyār story in anything but poetic terms diminishes language's significance as a meaning-making device, it also makes prosaic language appear just as mystical and poetic by suggesting that everything explicated or framed by ordinary language always already has a metaphoric component to it. For if in one sense the nightingale is a symbolic surrogates for the

[46] *SN*, 5:438, lines 1669-1671.

Pahlavi poets, then in another sense, the poet himself is a surrogate for the wailing bird lamenting his lost love. Through this ancient motif, a motif as old as poetry itself, the poet's own words become a sort of wail (*nāleh*); an indecipherable moan, expressed in loving memory of a passion that he can only recall by wailing, or reciting his narrative poem. Hence, Ferdowsi's characterization of the mysterious doings of the nightingale could just as well apply to him, or us for that matter, who must at every moment use words to frame our world: "Who knows what the poet is saying, beneath those flowery words what he is expressing?"

Coda

To conclude, it is difficult to say something definitive about Ferdowsi's (or is it his narrator's?) religious and philosophical beliefs, not to mention his views on language. For there is not "one" Ferdowsi, or a univocal representation of the author that we can all point to and say, "That's who Ferdowsi was and this is what he believed." Instead, what the *Shāhnāmeh* gives us is the evolving portrait of a poet who has as many faces as moods. When he feels that the universe is conspiring against him, his nation, and its beloved heroes he can become despondent, inconsolable, and even downright nihilistic. But then, just as he is about to be consumed by despair, the poet is able to rescue himself, become skeptical of his own cynicism, and, in dramatic fashion, lift himself out of the spiritual abyss that he has helped create. This too is Ferdowsi, or at least an aspect of him. Perhaps more than anything else, or any words that can be used to describe him and his text, it is this play of moods, of emotions that run too deep to be expressed in anything but an equivocal fashion, that ultimately frame the *Shāhnāmeh* and its enigmatic author.

Chapter Two

Recognizing the Unrecognizable in Dariush Mehrjui's *Gāv*

Dariush Mehrjui's groundbreaking 1969 film *The Cow* (*Gāv*) is often recognized as paving the way not only for a "new wave" of Iranian cinema during the Pahlavi era but also for the postrevolutionary art cinema of the Islamic Republic that flourishes to this day.[1] In fact, the film's influence on Iranian cinema in terms of form, content, and overall development as a competing art form (in a country where poetry and literature had traditionally reigned supreme) is so indelible that it is hard to imagine its future was at one time in doubt.[2] According to Hamid Naficy, Iran's Ministry of Culture and Art (or the MCA) initially offered funding and permission for making the film on the basis of Mehrjui's lie that the film was going to be a "documentary" about a rural community in Iran.[3] After the film was made and reviewed by the MCA, Mehrjui was then asked to "add a caption at the film's head that would

[1] According to Hamid Dabashi, Mehrjui's *Gāv* "transform[ed] the very definition of Iranian cinema. . . . *The Cow* became the touchstone of every major cinematic event since." See Dabashi, *Close Up: Iranian Cinema, Past, Present and Future* (London: Verso, 2001), 27–28.

[2] In his beautiful, lyrical film *Once upon a Time, Cinema* (1992), which is an ode to not only the art of cinema but also that art form's emergence in Iran, Mohshen Makhmalbaf acknowledges the impact of Mehrjui's film on the development of Iranian cinema. Makhmalbaf gives the lead actor from *Gāv* (Ezatollah Entezami) a prominent role in his own film and also visually quotes from it in a manner that puts Mehrjui's film at the forefront of any discussion regarding the origins of Iran's art cinema. Makhmalbaf's film, which examines the relationship between politics and aesthetics, also alludes to the political dimensions of *Gāv*, in its ability to raise people's consciousness and challenge the political status quo.

[3] Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 2: The Industrializing Years, 1941-1978* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 346. The MCA, created in the 1960s, was a massive government agency that oversaw "the visual, performing, and literary arts throughout the country" (49). In charge of film censorship, the MCA also had a powerful and determining role in the "funding, production, distribution, [and] exhibition . . . of documentaries during the second Pahlavi period" (50). According to Naficy, filmmakers like Mehrjui risked working with the MCA because of the opportunities (e.g., funding, distribution) it afforded them: "These same government corporate structures created channels through which filmmakers—while kowtowing to the state's official line—could express themselves both artistically and politically to create subversive works" (50).

historically place the story forty years earlier, before Reza Shah's main reforms had been inaugurated."[4] Despite the postproduction changes, however, the government decided to ban the film anyway, fearing that it contradicted Iran's official image as a wealthy, modern, cultivated nation.[5] Although the film was denied an export permit, Mehrjui (through some friends) managed to smuggle a print out of the country and enter it in the 1971 Venice International Film Festival, where the film won the international film critics' award. The film's success abroad not only brought instant international recognition to Iranian cinema (which it enjoys to this day) but also ironically "opened the way for government support of the new wave, which it hoped would create a positive international profile for it at a time when it had come under criticism by an increasingly vociferous population of Iranian students abroad."[6]

In inaugurating a new wave of cinema in Iran, *Gāv* combined features that would become characteristic of many "new wave" films:

> Reality (faithfulness to the external world) and realism (faithfulness to conventions of classic realist cinema) were two intertwined features that set the new-wave films apart from the fantasy-driven and narratively chaotic commercial filmfarsi [*sic*] movies. They constituted the foundational features of this counter-cinema, which set the reality of ordinary peoples' lives, treated with empathy and respect, against the fiction of the official culture of spectacle perpetrated by the government and the commercial cinema.[7]

Looking back, it is not hard to see how *Gāv*'s realistic portrayal of village life and its tragic and complex treatment of the lives of Iran's peasant population—during a time when the Pahlavi regime was trying to foster a progressive, modern, Westernized image of Iran—

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[4] Ibid., 346.
[5] As Mehrjui tells it, the government was "heralding everywhere our nation's arrival at the gates of a new civilization, and here was a film about a village so poor that there was only one cow to nourish them all. . . . The censors could not believe this was Iran. So they banned the film." Naficy, *Social History*, 346.
[6] Ibid., 347.
[7] Ibid., 340.

paved the way for Iran's prerevolutionary, new wave cinema. Nor is it difficult to see how Mehrjui's film, which the Ayatollah Khomeini endorsed for its universal human values, was also a forerunner to Iran's postrevolutionary humanist genre.[8] According to Naficy, "The neo-realist treatment of these subjects . . . focused attention on both the reality of post-revolutionary Iranian society, which established that society's exotic difference and specificity, and on the moral and ethical dimensions of daily existence there, which tapped into universal human values."[9] And yet, despite these similarities between *Gāv* and the pre- and postrevolutionary filmic genres it inspired and influenced, Mehrjui's film also goes a long way in resisting and transcending any narrow, generic categorizations that delimit its meaning and reception.[10]

The simple yet surreal story of *Gāv* centers on Masht Hassan (Ezzatolah Entezami), a farmer who has an ardent, almost romantic relationship with his pregnant cow, a cow that also happens to be his main source of livelihood and the only source of milk for his entire village.[11] When Masht Hassan's beloved cow mysteriously dies, he goes mad, believing

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[8] According to film critic Godfrey Cheshire, Mehrjui's film was "so powerful that it not only was credited with launching Iran's modern cinema but also, a decade later, made a fan of the Ayatollah Khomeini and thus helped assure that country's cinema of having a post-Revolutionary phase." "Watching *The Cow*," Cheshire notes, "reportedly spurred Khomeini to comment approvingly on the cinema's social uses, a statement that proved valuable to progressive officials trying to revive the film industry under the Islamic Republic." Khomeini's approval of cinema was crucial because many conservative clerics viewed it to be a subversive, "Western" import. See Cheshire, "Revealing an Iran Where the Chadors Are Most Chic," *New York Times*, November 8, 1998.

[9] Hamid Naficy, "Iranian Cinema," in *Companion Encyclopedia of Middle Eastern and North African Film*, ed. Oliver Leaman (London: Routledge, 2001), 180.

[10] As Naficy notes, although "the film's treatment of village life . . . was reinforced by [a] sparse, raw, and invisible style of classic realism, resembling neorealism . . . *The Cow* was not a neorealist film . . . for Masht Hassan's possession by the cow injected a powerful surrealistic element, pushing the film toward philosophical transcendence and psychoanalytic understanding." Naficy, *Social History*, 339. In *Social History*, Naficy gives several possible interpretations of this enigmatic film (342–345). This ambiguity, regarding the film's genre, and its "meaning," might also explain how the same film could be sponsored, banned, and sponsored again, by the state.

[11] In his chapter on *Gāv*, Hamid Dabashi offers a poetic meditation that focuses on the film's surrealistic elements. But Dabashi does not so much provide a reading of the film's visual vocabulary as a reading of the film's narrative, and, even there, his reading is based less on the film's narrative than the source for that narrative (i.e.,

himself to be his cow. The perplexed villagers in Masht Hassan's village then try to help him by taking him to a nearby town with medical facilities, but he dies on the way. There is, however, much more than meets the eye to this love story that blurs the boundary between human and animal.[12] For it is the villagers' unquestioned, normative presumptions about what signifies the human (and their refusal to acknowledge the shifting, changing, and uncertain grounds on which their presumptions rest) that hampers their ability to *see* beyond their field of recognition and helps facilitate Masht Hassan's tragic demise.

Hence, any reading of *Gāv*, whether it be political, philosophical, or psychoanalytic, must necessarily come back to this question of the "human" in its social, political, and psychological manifestations because, ultimately, the film is interested not only in complicating our understanding of what that category signifies but also in exploring the ways in which that category *comes to signify*, and become intelligible, within a social field. To have a humanist cinema (*Gāv* seems to suggest), one must presume to know what the human is, and on some "human level," a human being's values and beliefs, hopes and aspirations, and fears and desires are, or must be, recognizable and communicable. And yet it is this presumption that many take for granted that *Gāv* asks us to reconsider and recognize as the very blindfold that allows human beings to commit the violence they seek to eradicate in the name of "humanity." Hence, rather than beginning with the preconceived

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Gholamhossein Saedi's surrealistic stories about the village and villagers portrayed in *Gāv*). According to Dabashi, the "psychedelic realism" of Saedi's stories, which *Gāv* is an instance of, chip away at reality to expose "the irreality of reality (as in a nightmare)." Despite his overemphasis on Saedi's texts (and Saedi's role as a collaborator with Mehrjui), Dabashi makes some salient and provocative observations about the film and its critical reception. Most notably, Dabashi questions those critics who tried (and still try) to reduce the film to a political allegory, directed at the Pahlavi regime, at the expense of the film's more enduring, universal themes. See Dabashi, *Masters and* Masterpieces *of Iranian Cinema* (Washington, DC: Mage Publishers, 2007), 124.

[12] According to Dabashi, "there is scarcely a more loving scene in the history of Iranian cinema than the one in which Masht Hassan feeds his cow." Ibid., 125.

idea of what the human is or ought to be, in order to deliver a "humanist message," *Gāv* takes seriously the task of deconstructing the very process through which the human comes to be recognized and made intelligible as the necessary precondition to any humanist endeavor. Of course, this is not to suggest that all films that fall under the broad category of the "humanist genre" take the category of "the human" for granted. Within the context of Iranian cinema, for instance, films such as Bahram Bayzai's *Bashu, the Little Stranger* (*Bashu, gharibeye koochak*, 1987), Amer Naderi's *The Runner* (*Davandeh*, 1985), and Majid Majidi's *The Color of Paradise* (*Rang-I Khoda*, 1999) not only represent "man's inhumanity to man" and critique such injustices but also offer their own poetic meditations on the question of what it means to be human.[13] Like *Gāv*, these films grapple with such questions as, how and by what criteria is the human defined, measured, and made intelligible in a given society? What are the ethical and political consequences of such delimiting factors? And how do those factors affect the community as well as individual members of that community?

For cultural critic Judith Butler, these are central questions that societies need to address and contend with (in various social, cultural, and political arenas) in order to make life viable for all members of a human community to come:

> The Hegelian tradition links desire with recognition, claiming that desire is always a desire for recognition and that it is only through the experience of recognition that any of us becomes constituted as socially viable beings. That view has its allure and its truth, but it also misses a couple of important points. The terms by which we are recognized as human are socially articulated and changeable. And sometimes the very terms that confer "humanness" on some individuals are those that deprive certain

[13] I mention these three films because they share an important stylistic component with Mehrjui's *Gāv*. All three films deploy, in one way or another, a style of looking (and even hearing) that I refer to in this article as free indirect discourse. It's hard to know whether or not these filmmakers borrowed this cinematic technique from *Gāv*, from other films, or developed it on their own, but they all use it in a way that helps the audience establish a psychic connection (through visual and sometimes auditory means) with characters that are misunderstood, marginalized, and/or disenfranchised by their community. For more on how *Bashu* deploys this cinematic technique, see note 51.

> other individuals of the possibility of achieving that status, producing a differential between the human and the less-than-human. These norms have far-reaching consequences for how we understand the model of the human entitled to rights or included in the participatory sphere of political deliberation. The human is understood differently depending on its race, the legibility of that race, its morphology[,] . . . its sex, its ethnicity. . . . Certain humans are recognized as less than human and that form of qualified recognition does not lead to a viable life.[14]

This "qualified recognition" is an important factor in determining how human beings relate to and interact with one another. Additionally, the act or action of recognition suggests that there is a prior act of knowing or cognition that always already determines the parameters under which recognition can take place. Hence, Butler problematizes our understanding of what recognition means and how it works by suggesting that the "universal" cognitive activity of recognizing others who have the same capacity operates according to terms that are "socially articulated and changeable" and are, therefore, not universally recognizable. Although *Gāv* also tackles this problem of recognizing the human in an unflinching and complex manner and style, it nonetheless offers a radically different response to this dilemma. Whereas for Butler, "differential" is the end result of a dehumanizing process, *Gāv* literally *shows* how an inherent perceptual differential or lacuna—the same perceptual differential that, ironically enough, makes both dehumanization and humanization possible—is what establishes our common "humanity." In so doing, the film posits itself as a medium with the power to help bridge this gap of intelligibility between a community and those individuals whose desire for recognition goes unrecognized by their community by way of what Pier Paolo Pasolini theorized as cinema's version of "free indirect discourse."[15] A

[14] Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 2.

[15] This is not to suggest that Mehrjui knew Pasolini's essay, in which Pasolini discusses the use of free indirect discourse in cinema, although he would surely have been familiar with avant-garde filmmakers (like Pasolini) who use

popular literary technique used by novelists since at least the time of Flaubert, free indirect discourse is "the practice of embedding a character's speech or thoughts into an otherwise third-person narrative."[16] Later in this article I discuss exactly how this deceptively simple literary device, with complex aesthetic and ethical implications, is translated into a cinematic one (by filmmakers like Pasolini and Mehrjui).

The film begins with a troubling scene in which the village kids, led by an adult, jocularly torture one of their own, the "village idiot," as other adults watch and laugh in amusement (Figure 1). This disturbing, visceral prologue, showing "innocent" children inflicting physical and psychological violence on someone whom they perceive as beneath them on the human scale, sets the tone for the remainder of the film. Through this scene, we see how the mechanisms through which an individual is "othered," abjected, and made to seem less than human in society may include a visually communicable component: the torturers give the tortured man a black face by applying a paintlike substance.[17] In a sense, then, this figurative disfiguring of the man's face stands in for how the children (led by their adult ringleader) see, view, or perceive the man as an abject other who is not their "human" equal. And yet the very activity of blackening the man's face reveals how abjection, and the

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this cinematic technique in their own films. Rather, the contention here is that Mehrjui, for whom "the practice of philosophy is cinema," deploys cinematic techniques similar to those theorized by Pasolini, to make the problem of recognizing the human visually recognizable for his cinematic audience. Naficy, *Social History*, 340.

[16] Jon Gingerich, "The Benefits of Free Indirect Discourse," *Lit Reactor*, August 23, 2012, http://litreactor.com/columns/the-benefits-of-free-indirect-discourse. For more on the development of this fascinating literary technique in the European novel, see Roy Pascal, *The Dual Voice: Free Indirect Speech and Its Functioning in the Nineteenth-Century European Novel* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1977).

[17] For more on the concept of abjection, as developed by Julia Kristeva, see *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982). Kristeva's understanding of how the concept of abjection helps define and determine the human (in opposition to animals and animalism) is especially relevant to the rituals of abjection that take place in *Gāv*: "The abject confronts us, on the one hand, with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of *animal.* Thus, by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder" (12–13).

sensibilities it inculcates, are taught, learned, and communicated from adults to children by way of social, cultural, and consequently political practices through which another is made to appear strange, unknown, and unknowable. The scene, then, stages the slippage between the activity of recognition and cognition in which what we think we perceive or cognize to be "real" or "true" is based on cultural, social representations that actively shape our ability to recognize the "reality" that those representations are mapped onto.

Consequently, the villagers' cruel, sadistic treatment of the man paradoxically makes his unintelligibility intelligible as an "unintelligibility" that authorizes their dehumanizing activities. And if we somehow think that the village idiot's unintelligibility is a direct result of his inability to make himself intelligible (since he is not able to speak), the film thwarts this hypothesis by showing how the process of abjection (or that which distinguishes the human from the less than human) is in no way static or permanent. Meaning, it is not based on some objective, universal criteria but is itself contingent on changing social, cultural, and historical contexts, which, in turn, determine the horizon of what is perceived to be human. This idea is clearly illustrated when Masht Hassan's psychosis, and his transformation into his beloved dead cow, causes the belligerent villager in charge of tormenting the village idiot to become more understanding, accepting, and humane toward the same village idiot, who now, in comparison to the culturally or socially unintelligible Masht Hassan, has become more recognizably "human."[18] In fact, the links between the village idiot, Masht Hassan, and his cow are established early on in the film, when, during the opening torture scene, a pair of

[18] We see this during the second half of the film, when the man who was tormenting the village idiot and egging the children on to do the same, stops the children from tormenting him.

cowbells are shown to be tied around the neck of the tortured man (see Figure 1).[19] This connection comes full circle at the end of the film when Masht Hassan, in a scene eerily similar to the first, is tied up and pulled through the streets against his will while amused adults and children look on and/or follow the "circus" from behind.

Figure 2.1: A villager gives the "village idiot" a black face while an audience of children and women take in the scene of torture, Dariush Mehrjui's *Gāv* (MCA, 1969).

In addition to the village idiot, and later Masht Hassan, the Boluriha—peasants from a neighboring village who, from time to time, terrorize Masht Has-san's village—also function as a site where the "less than human" is projected and displaced (Figure 2). Instead of taking on the role of abject other, however, the Boluriha (meaning "crystallines" in Persian) represent feared, deviant, cultural out siders, or others, who, in their unintelligibility, also fail to qualify as fully "human": at one point, the head of Masht Hassan's village even suggests that the Boluriha are a godless people. Hence, whatever ill befalls the village is conveniently blamed

[19] In fact, soon after this scene, when Masht Hassan returns to the village with his cow, he ties her to a tree noticeably similar to the one that the man being tortured is tied to. When the children come around to play with and feed his cow, in a teasing manner, Masht Hassan rebukes them several times to leave her alone, thus highlighting, once again, the connection between the tortured man (or the less than human) and Masht Hassan's cow (who is also less than human).

on the Boluriha. Although the film's mise-en-scène evokes the presence of an eerie, supernatural dark force—a world pregnant with an unknown evil that at first corroborates the villagers' view of the Boluriha—we eventually find out that the inhuman Boluriha are also just ordinary people who happen to be stealing from the villagers, just as the villagers themselves happen to be stealing from the Boluriha.[20] Even though this knowledge changes how we view the Boluriha, and in turn how we view the villagers' paranoiac view of the Boluriha, the film offers no easy solution to this dehumanizing drama. For it is precisely our "human" *ability* to learn to make the world intelligible, through the processes of differentiation, identification, and classification (where the "terms by which we are recognized as human are socially articulated" across race, gender, ethnicity, and so on), that leads to the marginalization of those individuals and/or groups who, in falling "outside" the purview of intelligibility or recognizability, help establish the norms of humanness that exclude them.[21]

[20] In a manner reminiscent of Ingmar Bergman's 1958 classic, *The Magician*, *Gāv* creates an eerie, mysterious mood, which, in turn, makes the Boluriha appear supernatural and nonhuman. But *Gāv*, like *The Magician*, eventually undercuts some of its own magic or mystery, so to speak, by showing the Boluriha speaking to each other like ordinary people during their raid of Masht Hassan's barn.

[21] Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 2. As alluded to earlier, Iran (under the Pahlavi regime) was going through an intense period of Westernization and modernization, a process that alienated and disenfranchised Iran's traditional and religious rural population. Hence, a film, made for public consumption, about an "invisible" class of people automatically conferred recognition upon those whom the Iranian government did not officially acknowledge or recognize. It is precisely for this reason that the film can be, and has been, read as a political allegory.

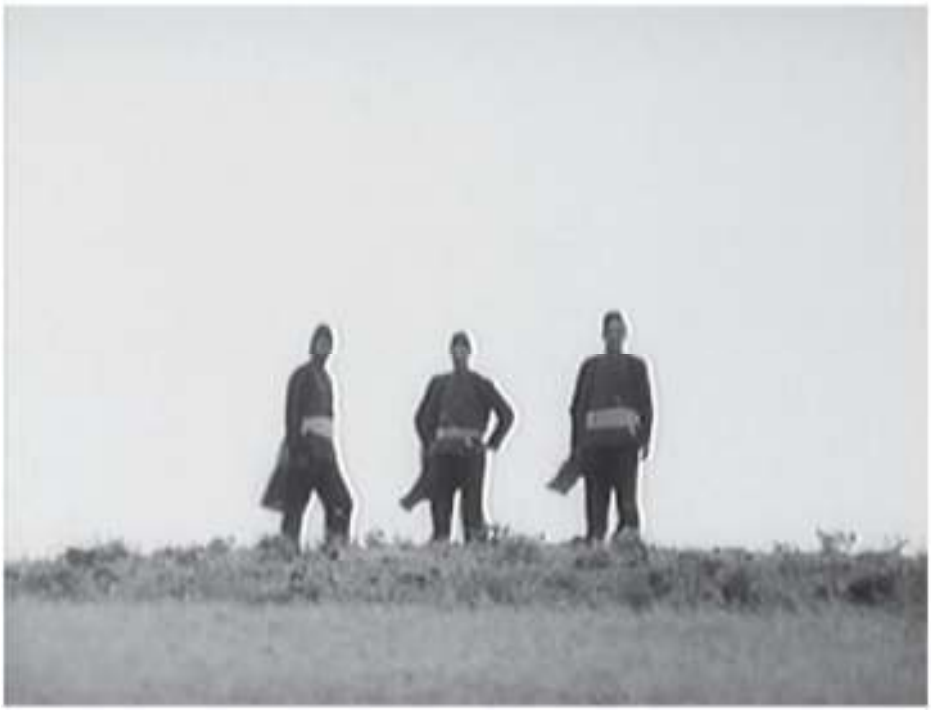

Figure 2.2: Mysterious outsiders from a neighboring village whom the villagers fear, in *Gāv* (MCA, 1969).

In her essay "Homosum," Monique Wittig makes a powerful argument about how oppositional thinking has shaped the human condition.[22] Although Wittig discusses how oppositional thinking is inculcated, as well as how it is deployed by those social or political actors (mostly men) who benefit from it, she does not consider what purpose this oppositional economy serves outside its "use value" for oppressive purposes. According to Slavoj Žižek, in his rather pessimistic Lacanian formulation, this antagonistic, oppositional disposition is not a social construction that is internalized but an internal, psychic drama that finds its expression in the external social matrix: "The negativity of the other which is preventing me from achieving my full identity with myself is just the extension of my

[22] Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind: And Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 46–58.

own auto-negativity, of my self-hindering."[23] Even if we accept Žižek's contention, however, we must also concede that the "internal" negativity and antagonism that gets displaced "externally" is always already culturally, socially, and politically mediated. This is especially true if we accept the premise that auto-negativity, and the subjectivation that conditions it, are an effect of language. In other words, the mediating effect of language that makes this speaking "I" possible also prevents *me*, the "I" that is spoken, "from achieving my full identity with myself."[24] The question, then, is, does this relative differential or structuring lack between the speaking and spoken "I" become oppositional only when the terms of this linguistic equation—which makes my existence as both subject and object possible—are interpreted negatively? Or, does *the call* to respond to this structuring lack or differential through socially and therefore discursively and ideologically mediated processes necessarily result in a negative or oppositional interpretation of the terms of "my" subjecthood? Either way, it is impossible to locate an original auto-negativity outside of a mediated discursive field whose effect makes the psychological and social parameters of "my" auto-negativity, and the desire to transcend them, possible. Under this scenario, the subject and his or her "agency" are not lost. Instead, they are put in the services of an oppositional economy where "external" oppositional differences (e.g., racial, sexual, cultural, social, political) are made possible through linguistically induced psychic divisions that constrain one to respond to one's alterity through the actions of othering or self-othering and identification or disidentification. In turn, the negativity of the opposing other is the result of "internal" psychic forces that antagonistically

[23] Slavoj Žižek, "Beyond Discourse-Analysis," in *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, ed. Ernesto Laclau (London: Verso, 1990), 251.
[24] Ibid.

position the alienated subject within a social matrix by asking the subject to repress, displace, and/ or project the very alterity whose effects make the antagonistic disposition that the subject "needs" (for *its* cultural, social, political, and psychological survival) possible. What is at stake, then, in the film as much as in the world outside of it is (1) whether a society or a collective can recognize the response (in the form of identification or disidentification) to the effects of alterity as the cause of that which denies various members of the human community social, cultural, and political recognition and (2) whether that society or collective can effectively respond to the problem of alterity without duplicating the problem, in the form of identification or disidentification? Such a solution, however, appears aporetic in light of the fact that a society or community depends on the unintelligibility of "others" to forge and maintain the integrity and intelligibility of its own privileged sites of power, knowledge, and identity within a changing social matrix. All this may seem far removed from the cares and concerns of the ordinary villagers of Mehrjui's film, but, as will be shown, it really is not.

When Masht Hassan leaves town on business, his cow mysteriously dies. After deliberating for some time, the village elders decide to keep the cow's death a secret, not only to spare their friend's feelings but also perhaps to save themselves embarrassment, since the cow died on their watch. Hence, they bury his cow and tell him that she has run away. Although the villagers' decision to keep the cow's death a secret is in keeping with the Iranian cultural custom of "staging bad news," the film tests the limits of this

convention.[25] For although the villagers recognize, or acknowledge, Masht Hassan's love for his cow, as exhibited by their desire to buffer him from news of the sad occurrence, they fail and/or are unable to recognize the extent and intensity of his love. In turn, their subterfuge backfires as Masht Hassan comes to realize that the villagers are lying to him. During a key scene, Masht Hassan sits on a rooftop contemplating the loss of his cow while looking across a flat, unforgiving, barren landscape, a landscape that represents the bleak prospects of Masht Hassan's world, as he faces it without the life-giving powers of his pregnant cow (Figure 3). It is during this crucial juncture in the narrative (where everything hangs in the balance once more) that Masht Hassan confronts his friends and peers about the lie they conveniently want him to believe. He asks the village elder to ask his friend Islam (Ali Nassirian) what he (Masht Hassan himself) has ever done to Islam to cause him to lie (*duruq*) to him in this way?

[25] It is not known when this custom originated, or what its exact function was, though one can imagine functional reasons for it. Travel in premodern times involved much delay in the transmission of news, and if one traveled from Nishapur to Baghdad and met there with a family friend, one might be rather reluctant to bluntly deliver bad news about relatives long unseen back home. So perhaps travelers' etiquette involved successive "staging of bad news," to prepare the hearer. It may also be the case that people did not want someone's last memory of them to be that they conveyed the death of their loved ones. It may also be that this social grace of lessening emotional stress on one's interlocutor is somehow related to the Iranian politeness code of *ta'arof*, which is a communicative ethic of indirection that makes desires or emotional demands implied to ease awkward situations. But whatever the reasons or the category we put it in, the "staging of bad news," like the death of relatives, was (and still is) common, or at least a recognized method in traditional Iranian culture. Hence, when someone dies, it is not uncommon for Iranians (whether sophisticated city folk or ordinary villagers) to keep near relatives of the deceased in the dark for as long as possible.

Figure 2.3: Masht Hassan sits alone, contemplating the loss of his cow while his peers try to console him with a lie, in *Gāv* (MCA, 1969).

Faced with a choice, Islam and the other men have the opportunity to admit their lie, make amends, and perhaps change the trajectory of the story. Instead of admitting it, however, and acknowledging Masht Hassan's loss to allow him to publicly mourn, they choose to save face and stick to their original story, thereby foreclosing the possibility of any reconciliation between Masht Hassan and his community through a reciprocal recognition of the tragedy. In response to this untruth Masht Hassan retaliates with his own fiction, insisting that his dead cow is alive in her shed.[26]

[26] Upon hearing the news that his beloved cow ran away, an incredulous Masht Hassan goes inside the cowshed to see for himself. When he comes out of the shed, he tells Islam, through tears, "My cow didn't run away, Islam. My cow wouldn't run away." Shortly after this scene, we learn from a female villager that Masht Hassan believes that his cow is still alive in its shed. In retrospect, then, one might read Masht Hassan's initial statement to Islam to mean "My cow didn't run away, or couldn't run away, because she is still alive in her shed." But since we are not privy to Masht Hassan's state of mind during the scene, his statement could also mean, "My cow didn't run away and wouldn't run away; so you're lying to me, Islam." This reading is corroborated when Islam and the other villagers visit Masht Hassan on his roof. Here again, the villagers try to convince him that his cow has run away, to which Masht Hassan replies by openly confronting Islam about his lie. He then follows up his accusation with a question that exposes the villagers' lie, "My cow didn't run away. If she were to run away, where would she go?" Masht Hassan's hypothetical question, regarding his cow's whereabouts ("if she were to run away"), suggests that he is not (or at least not yet) in total denial that his cow is missing, only that she went missing by running away—for where

In turn, this prompts the question as to why Masht Hassan cannot simply accept the villagers' attempts to mollify him with a story that is meant to ease the burden of his loss. Perhaps Masht Hassan's stubborn refusal, or inability, to accept the convention of "staging bad news" is in response to the villagers' aggressive attempts to thrust the convention upon him, regardless of what he may want or need. In other words, what Masht Hassan might be looking for or needing is a response that acknowledges that his love for his cow equals and/or surpasses his love for any human while what he receives is a response that puts his cow in the category of a treasured lost object, but an object nonetheless. So although the villagers' motives for keeping the truth of the cow's death from Masht Hassan is ostensibly for his own welfare, this scene calls that strategy, and the purity of the community's motives, into question. As Masht Hassan is despondent, irrational, and inconsolable, the scene raises the question not only of how much more damaging the truth would have been for him but also of what role the lie (which he interprets as a betrayal) has played in pushing him to the brink of psychosis. In turn, Masht Hassan is doubly devastated, losing both his greatest source of joy (i.e., his cow) and his connection with his community, whose refusal to acknowledge or recognize the fact that the cow might mean more to him than they are capable of knowing or wanting to know—corroborated by their persistence to maintain a lie, which, in Masht Hassan's eyes, diminishes and trivializes the magnitude of his loss—alienates him from them. The film visually foregrounds and reiterates this growing isolation and alienation, between Masht Hassan and the male members of his community, by showing him sitting upon his roof and literally turning his back on his friends while looking across

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could she possibly go? It is only after the villagers insist on their lie that he resorts, once again, to the fiction that his cow is still alive in her shed: refuting, in essence, one lie with another.

the arid landscape. Although it is not clear why the villagers continue to lie (or "stage the news") about the status of his cow when he clearly does not believe them, one wonders whether they would be acting the same way if Masht Hassan had lost his wife or another human loved one. To take the comparison further, would the villagers have covertly buried his wife (if she had died), or some other human loved one, without giving Masht Hassan the opportunity to bid farewell through a ritual burial? In such an instance, would they not acknowledge Masht Hassan's right to know the truth and to have the opportunity to mourn his loss with the support of his community?

What opaque presumptions, then, compromise the villagers' ability to recognize or acknowledge how the unquestioned differential between the human and less than human (i.e., the loss of a beloved person versus the loss of a beloved cow), as much as their concern for Masht Hassan's welfare, helps create a situation in which the two sides become alienated from each other? To raise these questions is not to suggest that the film is necessarily passing judgment on the villagers but, rather, to complicate our understanding of the social and cultural processes involved in articulating the human within a given community. After all, one can argue that Masht Hassan's treatment of his wife, under the category of "woman," abjects her (rendering her desires socially or culturally unintelligible, invisible, and/or unrecognized) in a manner that mirrors the way women seem to be treated in the village as a whole.[27] Consequently, Masht Hassan is not wholly free or innocent of the kinds of otherings taking place in his village.

[27] Masht Hassan never treats his wife in the loving manner with which he treats his cow; in fact, it is just the opposite. Not only does he talk to her in a curt, dismissive manner but also his conversations with her are almost always about the welfare of his cow. The film further highlights this disparity in treatment when Masht Hassan

By burying the cow the villagers commit the "crime" of refusing to recognize or acknowledge Masht Hassan's need to mourn the loss of his beloved, to which Masht Hassan responds by refusing to recognize their desire to protect him (even as they protect themselves) from the full effects of his loss.[28] Perhaps what the villagers fear, by acknowledging Masht Hassan's loss, is the loss of knowledge or intelligibility that the acknowledgement of such a loss would produce. In turn, the psychic chasm that eventually separates them from their fellow villager is, ironically enough, brought on by the fear of having to acknowledge or recognize such a chasm. By not being allowed to mourn or name his loss, Masht Hassan, in turn, becomes a melancholic that internalizes the lost love object (his cow) by embodying her. In *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter*, Judith Butler discusses a similar process through which the heterosexual male or female, who, because of social taboos against homosexuality must disavow his or her love for a same-sexed subject, nonetheless holds onto the lost love object by embodying him or her: "The truest lesbian melancholic is the strictly straight woman, and the truest gay male melancholic is the strictly straight man."[29] Like Butler's melancholic, Masht Hassan turns into the cow that he is not allowed to name as the lost love object of his desire.[30]

After the villagers' prayers and homegrown remedies fail to bring Masht Hassan back to his senses, Islam and two other villagers decide to escort, or rather herd, Masht Hassan

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decides to sleep with his cow instead of his wife (to protect her from a possible raid by the Boluriha) and when, upon his return from his trip, he brings his cow a beautiful ornament to wear, but his wife, nothing.

[28] For a discussion of how Masht Hassan responds to the villagers' "story," see note 26.

[29] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 235. For more on gender-related melancholia, see Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 78–97.

[30] The villagers decide to tell Masht Hassan the truth about his deceased cow only after his melancholic psychosis has set in.

(whom they have tied up like an animal) to a nearby town to get him psychiatric help. As they travel over hill and dale, encountering bad weather along the way, they see the Boluriha tracking them from afar (Figure 4). Fearful that the Boluriha want to capture Masht Hassan, the men try to hurry along, but Masht Hassan resists their frantic efforts by refusing to move. This causes Islam, who has acted as the voice of "reason" throughout the film, to go into frenzy and begin violently beating and berating Masht Hassan, even calling him an animal. Shocked and dismayed by Islam's sudden transformation, his friends stare at him in disbelief and disappointment. Ashamed of his own actions, as if some deep, dark, previously unknown part of him has revealed itself, Islam puts his head down in shame while his friends' reaction acts as a cultural mirror that reflects on what he has become.

Figure 2.4: The Boluriha, from the viewpoint of Masht Hassan's friends, as they drag him to a nearby town for help, in *Gāv* (MCA, 1969).

If Butler is right and "desire is always a desire for recognition and that it is only through the experience of recognition that any of us becomes constituted as socially viable beings," then one might say that Islam's desire to further dehumanize Masht Hassan is not being recognized by his community.[31] In that moment, when he strips another of his humanity, and through that action fortifies his own humanness (by transforming differential into opposition, into the human and less than human), Islam ironically loses his humanity in the eyes of his companions who, according to their community's standards, view Islam's act to be inhuman. And since Islam is a part of that community, he is able to recognize his act, through their reaction, as something shameful and therefore socially unacceptable. In other words, by failing to recognize Masht Hassan's humanity, Islam does violence to himself and strips himself of the very humanity that he withholds from another, making himself appear less than human to his fellow villagers and consequently to himself. Not so coincidentally, it is at this moment, when Masht Hassan has been reduced to an animal—an animal similar to the one (his cow) that he had elevated to the status of "human"—that he runs away from his caretakers and falls off a steep hill to his death (Figure 5).[32]

And yet the film complicates its own "humanist message" by refusing to make Islam the scapegoat for the villagers' actions. The film reveals the villagers' complicity in what has taken place by juxtaposing shots of the three men escorting Masht Hassan to shots of the three Boluriha following them, to the point that it becomes nearly impossible to recognize or identify which group is which (Figures 4–6). To complicate matters further, it is not exactly

[31] Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 2.
[32] One might even say that Masht Hassan has, ironically, retreated into the psychic space of an animal, his cow, as a result of his experiences with humans who fail to understand him.

clear whose viewpoint the camera is representing when it takes in or sees Masht Hassan's friends in the same way that Masht Hassan's friends view the Boluriha.[33] Regardless, the eerie juxtaposition of uncannily indistinct images of two distinct groups of men visually suggests that it is the villagers' bad faith attempts to disavow their alterity by projecting it upon the likes of the Boluriha (to forge and maintain their "common humanity" in opposition to those less-than-human others) that has turned them into the very strangers they loathe and fear.

Figure 2.5: Masht Hassan's friends, from the viewpoint of Masht Hassan's dead body at the bottom of the hill, in *Gāv* (MCA, 1969).

[33] I take up this question again at the end of the article, after a thorough discussion of cinematic free indirect discourse.

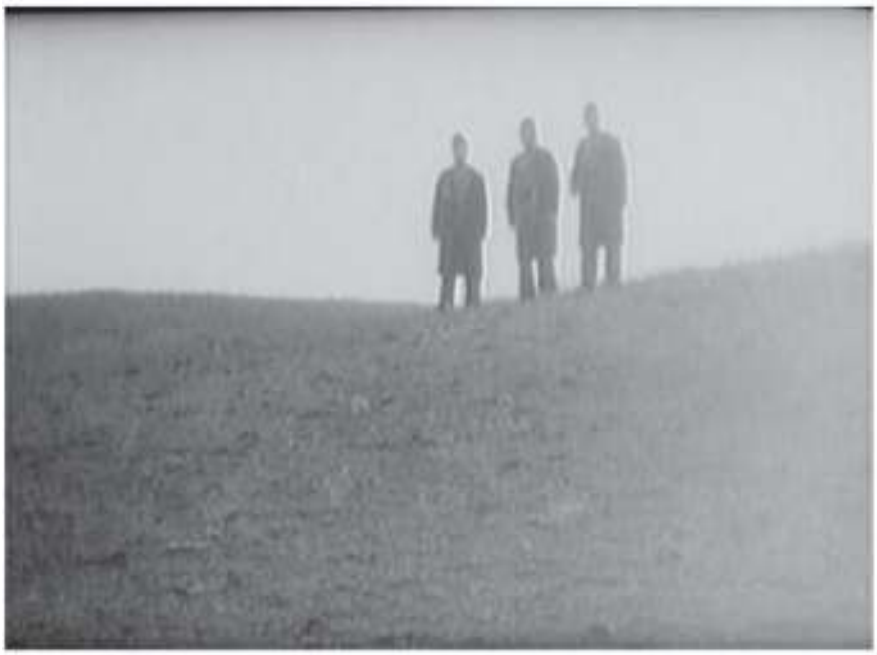

Figure 2.6: Parting shot: is it them or is it us? (*Gāv*, MCA, 1969)

But what the villagers' perceptual frame will not allow them to perceive or recognize (i.e., the alterity of their own powers of perception), the film does through the use of free indirect discourse. In fact, the visual play or movement in this scene between two sets of distinctly indistinct human figures hauntingly echoes an earlier scene of perceptual ambiguity and undecidability that, in turn, helps us understand this one. In that scene, which is also arguably the film's visual climax, the camera—through the use of free indirect discourse—invites the viewer to view Masht Hassan's dead cow from a recognizably unrecognizable human viewpoint. But to *see* how Mehrjui's camera achieves this cinematic feat and brings to view the alterity of the villagers' viewpoint by contrasting it with Masht Hassan's peculiar point of view, we must first take a detour through Pier Paolo Pasolini's labyrinthine essay "The Cinema of Poetry."[34]

[34] Pier Paolo Pasolini, "The Cinema of Poetry," in *Heretical Empiricism*, trans. Ben Lawton and Louise K. Barnet (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 167–186.

Pasolini begins his dense essay by comparing the language of film to spoken and written language. He argues that while spoken and written language can be discussed in technical, scientific, and semiotic terms, cinematographic communication lacks this science (or at least according to him "it did"). In an effort to begin thinking about images in semiotic terms, Pasolini uses what he calls "im-signs" to describe the visual sign system operative not only in cinema but also in "the world of memory and of dreams": "Every effort to reconstruct a memory is a 'sequence of im-signs,' that is, in a primordial sense, a film sequence . . . [and] every dream is a sequence of im-signs, which have all the characteristics of film sequences."[35] Pasolini's leap, from the visual language of film to that of memory and dream, is not accidental—for not only does he want his readers to begin to think about film differently; he also wants filmmakers to use the medium in a way that brings viewers into contact with a primordial state of being:

> The visual communication which is the basis of film language is, on the contrary, extremely crude, almost animal-like. As with gestures and brute reality, so dreams and the processes of our memory are almost prehuman events, or on the border of what is human. . . . [T]hey are pregrammatical and even premorphological. . . .*The linguistic instrument on which film is predicated is, therefore, of an irrational type*: and this explains the deeply oneiric quality of the cinema, and also its concreteness as, let us say, object.[36]

If we take Pasolini at his word, then film becomes (or has the potential to become) the 21 perceptual apparatus par excellence, where the human sensorium comes into naked contact with its own animality through the "irrational," prelinguistic dreamscape of cinema. This formulation raises the interesting possibility that cinema can explore the characteristics of human consciousness through a mode of experience (seeing) that taps into other modes of visual and/or cognitive experience (dreaming and remembering) that are recognized to be

[35] Ibid., 168.
[36] Ibid., 169 (italics in original).

universally similar. But similar does not mean the "same," and in fact Pasolini goes on to indicate that im-signs are expressions of pure "subjectivity" that belong to the world of poetry. Unfortunately, according to Pasolini, cinema, or what has come to be thought of as cinema, save for a few exceptions like surrealism, has shunned its poetic root in favor of a "cinematographic tradition" that has developed around the "'language of prose,' or at least that of a 'language of prose narrative,'" which, for Pasolini, is deplorable. As Pasolini notes, although "the fundamentally irrational nature of cinema cannot be eliminated . . . all its irrational, oneiric, elementary, and barbaric elements were forced below consciousness; that is, they were exploited as subconscious instruments of shock and persuasion," in the services of "escapist" entertainment.[37]

But rather than just lament the passing of poetic cinema (for even art films have succumbed to the power of narrative, deprived as they are "of expressive, impressionistic, and expressionistic highlights"), Pasolini, in what amounts to the defining move of the essay, delves into—of all places—the genre of nineteenth-century prose literature and "middle-class literature" to find the language needed to rescue cinema from itself.[38] It is important to note that Pasolini's aesthetic project is also entirely political. For him, poeticizing cinema equals politicizing it and the poetic language he borrows for this task is called free indirect discourse. Before looking at free indirect discourse in its cinematic form, let me give a linguistic example. Direct discourse is when the narrator of a story directly reports or quotes what a character said or thought, as in, "Masht Hassan said, 'Why are you lying to me?'" Indirect discourse is when a narrator describes what someone said or thought indirectly,

[37] Ibid., 172.
[38] Ibid.

without the use of quotation marks, as in, "Masht Hassan asked why they were lying to him." Meanwhile, free indirect discourse is when the voice of the narrator and the voice of the character commingle, as in, "Poor Masht Hassan, why are they lying like this?" to create various effects. The question that such a passage often prompts is, just who is speaking here? One of the more interesting and complex answers to this question is offered by Gilles Deleuze (in *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*), when, in his discussion of Pasolini's notion of free indirect discourse, he turns to Bakhtin:

> The linguist Bakhtin . . . states the problem clearly: there is not a simple combination of two fully-constituted subjects of enunciation, one of which would be reporter, the other reported. It is rather a case of an assemblage of enunciation, carrying out two inseparable acts of subjectivation simultaneously, one of which constitutes a character in the first person, but the other of which is present at his birth and brings him on to the scene. There is no mixture or average of two subjects, each belonging to a system, but a differentiation of two correlative subjects in a system which is itself heterogeneous. This view of Bakhtin's—which seems to be taken up by Pasolini—is very interesting; also very difficult.[39]

If this phenomenon is "difficult" for Deleuze to understand or explain, it will not be easy for us. Nonetheless, it is important to try because Deleuze's—or is it Bakhtin's?— grammatical characterization of this interstitial scene of discourse is not entirely consistent.[40] The novelist creates a narrator who in turn represents a character's speech or voice, through direct, indirect, or free indirect discourse. This becomes interesting grammatically and linguistically when we remember that, according to the linguist Emile Benveniste, the "third person" in discourse is the pronominal nonperson or "nonbeing" in language and represents the "object" position, or that which lacks agency, and stands in stark contrast to the subject positions occupied by the first-

[39] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (London: Athlone Press, 2001), 73.

[40] The question mark next to Bakhtin's name is to indicate that Deleuze, through his own style of writing, seems to intentionally conflate his voice with Bakhtin's so that it's not exactly clear whose point of view is being expressed.

and second-person pronouns *I* and *you*.[41] It is easy enough to understand and accept the fact that a character, who is represented by a narrator, is the "third person." But, then, what position does the narrator of a novel (let's assume the narrator is an omniscient one) occupy grammatically? Do we think of the narrator as another "third person" telling us a story, or is he or she more like a first person that implicitly writes *to* (and for) a reader who occupies the position of the second-person addressee ("you") that is being told a story about a "third person" in the novel? If we accept this scenario, then it is really only the "third person" that, in coming into being, becomes a subject while the narrator (already a subject) is merely transformed. In his discussion of this topic in relation to African American novels, Hamid Naficy says, "One of the key contributions of this style [i.e., free indirect discourse] is to force the dominant language (standard English, the language of indirect narration) to speak with a minoritarian voice (spoken black English, the language of direct speech)."[42] Naficy's astute observation is problematic in only one respect: who or what is doing the "forcing" in this formulation? And if there is nothing forcing the dominant language to "speak with a minoritarian voice," then what ethical and political conclusions can we draw from this "style" of speaking? Without force, the dominant, narrative voice, in a moment of *recognition* (recognition of the other's desire), is *affected* by the third person, who, in turn, becomes a subject and gains agency by affectively transforming the narrator's language and consciousness.

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[41] Émile Benveniste, "The Nature of Pronouns" and "Subjectivity in Language," in *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1971), 218–230.
[42] Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 102.

Despite all these clever readings of free indirect discourse, it is important to emphasize that free indirect discourse is a complex, multifaceted literary (and cinematic) technique whose outcome, effect, and meaning cannot be determined in advance; this is also what makes it so interesting. In fact, according to Pasolini, free indirect discourse is used in "good" and "bad" ways. For example, in middle-class literature, "which is lacking in class consciousness," free and indirect discourse becomes a device that allows middle-class consciousness to identify "itself with the whole of humanity."[43] From this passage we can glean that Pasolini views humanism to be more politically harmful than helpful and that free indirect discourse can become complicit in promoting this type of humanism in literature, which masks social injustices (and the intransigent opposition between classes) by creating a false sense of identification and understanding between people of different social strata. But if humanism, and the false sense of identification it fosters, is not the goal for Pasolini's cinema, then why promote a technique that works to bring together and explore the intersubjective interplay of two heterogeneous identities through what amounts to be a "false recognition"? And even if free indirect discourse could be used in subversive and counterhegemonic ways, how does one translate a literary device that works on the level of written language into a cinematic or visual one? To answer these questions, we need to understand how Pasolini sees traditional narrative cinema to be working and the kind of intervention that is needed to create a cinema that challenges the "bourgeois" spectator's aesthetic, ethical, and political sensibilities. According to Pasolini, when writers deploy the technique of free indirect discourse they have the advantage of "reproducing the various languages of the different types of social conditions" in ways that can critique class-

[43] Pasolini, "Cinema of Poetry," 176.

consciousness.[44] But the visual language of cinema is not able to make these types of differentiations on a formal level because "our eyes are the same the world over."[45] For Pasolini, this becomes not just an aesthetic problem but also a political one, because the truth is that "the 'gaze' of a peasant . . . embraces another type of reality than the gaze given to that same reality by an educated bourgeois. Not only do the two actually see different sets of things, but even a single thing in itself appears different through the two different 'gazes.'"[46] Unfortunately, Pasolini does not develop his intriguing ideas any further than this, and so it remains up the reader to try to sort out how these different gazes embrace different realities and why (in addition to the reasons already mentioned) it might be difficult for film audiences to *see* those differences (Figure 7). The "gaze" in Pasolini's text signifies more than the mere act of "seeing": it is actually the entire visual, cognitive, perceptual apparatus that Pasolini is concerned with. In cinema that cognitive apparatus becomes conflated and confused with the mere act or sensation of seeing, where audience members are encouraged to believe that because they (like the characters in the film) literally see the "same cow," in the "same film," the cow, and the film about the cow, are recognized in the same way.

[44] Ibid., 177.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid.

Figure 2.7: Taking a page out of Pasolini, Mehrjui's film obsesses over what viewers perceive, as well as what they don't perceive, when they see whatever it is they think they are seeing. Here, the viewer is invited to gaze at peasants gazing at another peasant (Masht Hassan) whom they (the peasants) can barely recognize—and all this through a window that is reminiscent of a cinematic screen, in *Gāv* (MCA, 1969).

But recognition operates according to terms that are "socially articulated and changeable" and are, therefore, not universally recognizable. For example, we may all recognize the name *Aristotle*, but the way that name becomes recognizable to each of us changes what "we" recognize in it, or what that name signifies to each of us across variables of personal history, time, and space. Leaving aside the thorny distinctions between symbolic, iconic, and indexical signs, what is cognitively deceptive about visual media like film is that, because im-signs optically represent the objects they signify, the viewer is prone to mistake the uniquely singular act of cognitive perception, or re-cognition, with the universally recognizable recognizability of visual signs, where viewers conflate the universal recognizability of what

they see (e.g., filmic images of a man, a tree, or a cow) with how their own powers or abilities of perception make what they see singularly recognizable to them each and every time they see it.

It is precisely this misrecognition of *a gaze* (our own) for *the gaze*, cinema's version of false consciousness, which mainstream cinema often promotes (and that stands in the way of Pasolini's political project) that free indirect discourse will, according to Pasolini, be used to challenge and displace. But since the filmmaker cannot use language, "that formidable natural instrument of differentiation," to correct for this optical illusion, "his activity cannot be linguistic; it must instead be stylistic."[47] Free indirect discourse in cinema must be expressed stylistically in order to displace false consciousness with class consciousness. But this is not as easy as it sounds, and the techniques filmmakers use to create such effects vary greatly.[48] Still, according to Pasolini, there is a general characteristic that they all share, and it is not dissimilar to the literary model: "The immersion of the filmmaker in the mind of his character and then the adoption on the part of the filmmaker not only of the psychology of his character but also of his language."[49] In the cinematic version of free indirect discourse, then, the filmmaker replaces the narrator in the novel—who does not necessarily represent the author's point of view, but is himself a character. But Pasolini's slight modification cannot be entirely correct, for it assumes that the camera (as an enunciative apparatus) represents the filmmaker's vision while discounting the possibility that "that vision" could itself be performative, meaning that the camera is cast in a certain role by the filmmaker as the enunciative or narrative apparatus. Also,

[47] Ibid., 179.
[48] Pasolini focuses on three filmmakers (Antonioni, Bertolucci, and Godard) who deploy this style of filmmaking to produce different effects.
[49] Ibid., 175.

since film is primarily a visual medium, the character's "language" (as indicated before) will have to be conveyed through a style of seeing that involves framing, lighting, editing, shooting angles, duration, and so on. Through this double vision (encompassing the character's and the camera's point of view) the "original oneiric, barbaric, irregular, aggressive, visionary quality of cinema" is reintroduced.[50] Free indirect discourse transforms the seemingly objective "gaze" of the camera by introducing it to a radical subjectivity (the character's), which alters the spectator's relationship to "the gaze" by showing how this subjectivity transforms, and is itself transformed by, the seemingly "objective" gaze of the camera, or the enunciative or narrative apparatus. In this way, free indirect discourse frees up the enunciative apparatus or camera to work in ways that subvert not only our false consciousness but also our *false understanding of consciousness* by showing us multiple consciousnesses coexisting, affectively, within a single cinematic frame. Of course, as noted earlier, there is no single, uniform way in which the technique of free indirect discourse is deployed and represented visually, so its meanings and effects will vary from film to film.[51] But how, one might ask, does all this change our

[50] Ibid., 169.

[51] In Michelangelo Antonioni's *Eclipse* (1962), for instance, free indirect discourse is used to express the point of view of an alienated (and bored) subjectivity. Whether that viewpoint belongs strictly to the lead character (Vittoria), or whether it is a point of view shared by the filmmaker (and his narrative apparatus), is not exactly clear, or is made intentionally ambiguous. In discussing the film, Gilberto Perez says, Antonioni's camera declines "the governing stance of superior knowledge usual in storytelling, his camera explores rather than governs, inquires rather than tells, from a point of view that feels as subjective as any character's—without consistently reflecting, however, any character's subjectivity." See Perez, *The Material Ghost: Films and Their Medium* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1998), 378. What I would add to Perez's perceptive observation is that Antonioni's camera stages this play (between character viewpoint and, for lack of a better phrase, camera viewpoint) without consistently telling us whose subjectivity (the character's or camera's) is being reflected. In contrast to this continuous play (or tug of war) between character viewpoint and camera viewpoint—which ultimately calls attention to our own subjective viewpoints—Mehrjui chooses very specific moments in his film to stage a similar perceptual ambiguity. For more on Antonioni's use of free indirect discourse, see Perez, *Material Ghost*, 377–379. Within the context of Iranian cinema, there are several interesting examples of free indirect discourse at work (see note 13). In *Bashu*, for instance, a film that deals with the theme or problem of nation-states (in this case Iran) that do not recognize and/or give political voice to racial, ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities living within their borders, the camera plays an important role in giving the viewer a minoritarian point of view. Of central importance

understanding of *Gāv*, the problem of recognition (in relation to the human and the less than human), and cinema's role in challenging the perceptual frames that make this qualified recognition possible? What follows explores that question.

During the seminal scene of the cow's burial, there is an unsettling, uncanny moment when the camera comes to an improbable visual halt on the deceased cow's face, before punctuating the moment by fading out to white. As the villagers lower the cow into an abandoned well, the film goes into slow motion, creating a dreamlike atmosphere, before the camera closes in on the cow's head, freezing on her face and memorializing the moment in portraitlike fashion (Figure 8). Not only does her upright head lean vertically against the rocks; her eye, somehow wide open, questioningly stares out at us. Surely a cow has never been so particularized, individualized, or looked so recognizably "human" in a film, which prompts the question, who is looking here? If this is Masht Hassan who is longingly looking at his dead cow, through a point-of-view shot that visually expresses his sorrowful sentiments, then this "style" of looking might make sense, but Masht Hassan is not in the scene. In his absence, then, how are we to make sense out of this improbable, phantasmagoric perceptual moment? It is as if the enunciative apparatus were suddenly possessed by or channeling Masht Hassan's

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to the film is the ability of marginalized people to communicate with those in power and with one another. To this end, the film offers the "universal" visual language of cinema as a way to overcome cultural, social, and sexual barriers in communication and, consequently, political recognition. The film achieves this feat by using free indirect discourse to embody the gaze of the little stranger, Bashu (Adnan Afravian). Things we see in the beginning of film, through the "neutral," "objective" gaze of the camera, are later revealed to be events witnessed by Bashu himself. In addition, as in *Gāv*, the film takes up the lead character's viewpoint or gaze, even when he is not present. This occurs in scenes where the ghost of Bashu's deceased mother, previously seen only through Bashu's eyes, becomes visible to the camera consciousness. In this way, the film mixes "reality" with the character's fantasies, dreams, and wishes, making it difficult to tell them apart. Like *Gāv*, the film's intention, in representing the character's viewpoint through free indirect discourse, is not to make us believe that we can identify "with the whole of humanity," since we are keenly aware of all the viewpoints that are not represented or taken up by the camera, but to show how cinema can give us access to different ways of seeing and experiencing the world. Coincidentally, *Bashu*, like *Gāv*, is also interested in interrogating the artificial division between human and animal, as it blurs the boundary between human and animal communication by emphasizing form over content.

"gaze" (in a manner uncannily similar to the way Masht Hassan will later be possessed by, or channel, the spirit of his dead cow) through a kind of inter-subjective perception, or double vision, that we have been describing as free indirect discourse. But what does it mean for the film's narrative or enunciative apparatus to look at Masht Hassan's cow in this manner, and why choose this moment, when Masht Hassan is literally absent, to stage his gaze? Why does the camera make him present (on the level of "the gaze") when his community tries so hard to "protect him" by concealing the dead cow from his gaze? Is it possible that this camera consciousness momentarily allows itself (*with us*) to recognize Masht Hassan's desires on the level of "the gaze"? Can this be the recognition that his community can't confer because they can't recognize the possibility of that impossible desire within themselves? Is it not the subject's negation of the possibility of the other's desire, or the otherness of his or her own desires, that allows the subject to maintain the privileged position of his or her cognitive frame? And so, what is true for the individual is also true for the group or community. Group identity must also be forged and preserved through negation and opposition. Like a film audience, the villagers in the film operate under a false consciousness by excluding other forms of consciousness from what they recognize to be the "normative frame," where those exclusions become the necessary terms by which group consciousness becomes recognizable to itself as the normative type. In fact, the film is replete with frames, as the camera obsessively shows shots of the villagers claustrophobically framed by rectangular, circular, and square windows, through which they look and look (see Figure 7). Additionally, the villagers are constantly shown to be standing around gazing, either directly or furtively, at whatever happens to be going on in the village. These scenes are especially disturbing when the villagers

(as in the first scene) sadistically watch the violent proceedings without intervening (see Figure 1). The question here is not, what are they seeing?, but instead, what aren't they seeing? What is being excluded from their perceptual frame and why?

As *we* now see, the knowledge that the villagers' consciousness works to exclude from their perceptual frames (namely, that Masht Hassan's cow might mean more to him than they are capable of knowing) the camera reintroduces into the cinematic frame by representing the dead cow through the dreamlike perspective of someone longing to gaze upon the face of a lost loved one, one last time. Here, the camera, in recognizing and acknowledging Masht Hassan's singular and sublime relationship with his cow, punctures the frame by seeing with him, as him, and for him all at the same time; it is "an oscillation . . . between two points of view . . . a hither-and-thither of the spirit . . . a being-with."[52] In this sense, the scene also disrupts the linear space-time continuum of the narrative.

[52] Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 5.

Figure 2.8: Masht Hassan's beloved cow, lovingly framed on her deathbed by the camera, in a moment of recognition, in *Gāv* (MCA, 1969).

The narrative is suddenly and jarringly taken in (or perceived) in slow motion through the coordinates of a different viewpoint from the one the film has been privileging thus far. Free indirect discourse transforms the seemingly objective gaze of the camera by channeling a radical subjectivity (in this case, Masht Hassan's) that alters not only "the gaze" but also the viewer's relationship to that gaze. Soon after the screen fades to white we see the cow's neck and head, lying horizontally in a dusty grave. The ordinariness of this shot highlights the uncanniness of the previous one, and as the camera cuts from the cow to the villager shoveling dirt onto her head, we recognize that this is the villager's viewpoint: the cow is no longer Masht Hassan's cow; it is just a cow, and a dead one at that. Although the scene poignantly illustrates Pasolini's point regarding the incommensurability of different gazes, it also complicates and problematizes

his theories regarding class consciousness (in relation to the gaze) by showing that even peasants living in the same village have gazes and/or consciousnesses that embrace different realities.

But what of the spectator or viewer, whose experience in the cinema Pasolini was so concerned about? How to theorize the role he or she is being asked to play in this jarring scene? What is the spectator being asked to recognize in this scene beyond what has been discussed? Are we (as viewers) implicated in this *look*, or this moment of visual or psychic intersubjectivity, in a way that is different than the intersubjectivity we (as readers) encounter in textual form? We can propose first that this oneiric look is uncanny precisely because it makes itself unfamiliar through its strange familiarity. It looks at and takes in the event of the cow's burial as any of us might when we look at, dream about, or remember the burial of a loved one. And yet that loved one is not a "human being" but a cow, some *thing* we don't recognize as the object of such a look, an unfamiliar other who calls into question the very humanness of the look: humans don't look at cows in this way, do they? Hence, we might say, we as viewers recognize the camera's look (we can *identify* with it) but not the object of that look; a simultaneous distancing and a pulling in of the spectator, a vision we both do and do not share, both familiar and wholly strange.

This uncanniness comes full circle near the end of the film, when the camera represents what is seemingly the point of view of a dead man (see Figure 5). As Masht Hassan falls to his death the camera cuts to a blurred, long-distance shot of his "friends" looking down at him from a hilltop. But since Masht Hassan is seemingly dead (or dying), as revealed in the following slow-motion shot (a shot that eerily recalls the cow's burial), then what we are left with is the possibility that the camera is, once again, embodying Masht Hassan's gaze when he is no

longer present.[53] This uncanny, intersubjective vision, which the camera shares with a dead or dying man, visually captures Masht Hassan's paranoiac view that his friends are, or have become, the Boluriha that he fears will take away his cow.[54] In fact, the shot visually recalls the first time Masht Hassan sees the three strangers, ominously looking down at him from a hilltop, as he bathes his pregnant cow in a watering hole (see Figure 2). What makes the shot of Masht Hassan's friends uncanny, then, is that it represents those who are seemingly familiar to us, and Masht Hassan, as suddenly distant, alien, and unknowable. Through the camera's intersubjective gaze, we recognize that Masht Hassan's friends are no longer recognizable to him as "friends," or perhaps even as humans. Like the Boluriha, they have become faceless strangers. As if to drive the point home, the film gives us one last, distorted look at the three men, before the film's penultimate scene concludes (see Figure 6). On the surface, this ghostly shot of the ghostly men is an iteration and a conflation of Masht Hassan's dying glimpse of his "friends" (see Figure 5), and his ominous encounter with his "enemies" (see Figure 2), with the blurred, washed-out image serving as a metaphor for Masht Hassan's inability to distinguish friend from enemy, known from unknown. But what if the blurred image is not simply a metaphor? What to conclude, then? Is this look (or way of looking) recognizable? Or is the camera's look just as uncanny as what is being looked at? If, as I have been theorizing, the camera consciousness is embodying Masht Hassan's gaze in a moment of free indirect discourse, then it is important to recall that Masht Hassan is, or was (when alive), being possessed by or channeling his dead cow. Hence, what the final, haunting shot of the scene might very well

[53] This idea, that the camera is representing, by sharing, the point of view of a dead man, is supported by the last shot of the scene (Figure 6), which embodies Masht Hassan's alienated gaze despite his obvious absence.

[54] When the villagers come to visit Masht Hassan in the cowshed, Masht Hassan, who believes himself to be his cow, screams for his owner (i.e., himself) to come rescue him from the Boluriha (i.e., the villagers), whom he believes have come to steal him away.

represent is the viewpoint of an animal: an animal looking up at those strange and mysterious creatures with the potential to both nurture and destroy. Like Pasolini, Mehrjui puts the "animal-like" quality of film language back into film, by giving us (through free indirect discourse) the phantasmagoric vision of a camera consciousness channeling a man channeling a cow. Not human but also *not* not human, since humans are animals too, what we see in *Gāv* is a vision that is both recognizable and unrecognizable—or perhaps, recognizably unrecognizable.

It is beyond the scope of this article to elaborate on the similarities and differences between intersubjectivity in cinema and literature. But what we can say for now is that the visual language of film literally allows us to look in on this moment of intersubjectivity by allowing us to see the way these consciousnesses *together see*. In seeing them see, we are implicated in that look, and in *Gāv* we are invited to identify, disidentify, or both with that gaze through the use of our own visual or perceptual apparatus. So the intersubjectivity between character consciousness and camera consciousness (this "being with") gets displaced onto the viewer as a kind of question. Where do we, each and every one of us, plant our gaze when what we recognized as "the gaze" has been shattered? Ironically, the unrecognizability of the object of desire (see Figure 8), as well as the desiring, looking subject (see Figure 6), help us recognize Masht Hassan's humanity as a differential that cannot be bridged. So whereas in Butler's formulation, "differential" was the end result of a dehumanizing process, where "the terms by which we are recognized as human are socially articulated" so that the "terms that confer 'humanness' on some individuals are those that deprive certain other individuals of the possibility of achieving that status, producing a differential between the human and the less-than-human," in *Gāv* it is the recognition of an inherent perceptual differential or lacuna that

establishes our common humanity.[55] Hence, it is this tension, or being with, between the recognizable and unrecognizable that needs to be maintained for humans to remain equally "intelligible" as such. Traveling too far in either direction, either by presuming that we can recognize the other's desiring consciousness and, in so doing, objectify it, or, conversely, by failing to recognize the other's desire to have his desires recognized to the point at which we abject him, is what must be (and yet seemingly cannot be) avoided. Neither recognizable nor unrecognizable, the other's consciousness, like the camera consciousness in *Gāv*, might be thought of as a recognizably unrecognizable *recognize-ability*, where we recognize (or acknowledge) its desire for recognition while its powers of recognition, and the desires informing those abilities, remain existentially unrecognizable. If this formulation of multiple consciousnesses existing in a single (cinematic) frame sounds uncannily like the structuring of Freud's unconscious, well, that's because that's how *you* recognize it.

[55] Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 2.

Chapter Three

Believing the Unbelievable in ʿAttār's Poetry

عشق، گو، از کفر و ایمان برتر است

Say, "love is above belief and unbelief."[1]

"Truth is an intentionless state of being, made up of ideas. . . .Truth is the death of intention."[2] If Walter Benjamin is correct, then one might ask whether or not such a statement can ever be truthful in its "intention" to declare what truth is? In other words, can the truth of this statement be demonstrated in language or must truth die in words intent on demonstrating truth to be the death of their intention? And if the truth of this statement can only be accepted on faith, and faith is made possible by an *intention* to believe (or "hold something for true"), then there is no way to believe this statement and still have it be true. And if we believe this, then faith itself becomes an obstacle to truth. It is just such an aporia that plagues the 12th century Persian Sufi poet Farīd al-Dīnʿ Attār, who must use words to attain to a truth (*haqīqat*) that cannot be held for true because such an intent compromises the truth of what he believes; i.e., that in order to arrive at or experience truth one must annihilate (*fanāʾ*) the very self who believes.

This insoluble problem or riddle is at the heart of many of ʿAttār's poems and "in particular . . . a genre of poetry called 'songs of infidelity' (*kufriyyāt* or *qalandariyyāt*), in which

[1] Farīd al-Dīnʿ Attār, Mantiq al-tayr, ed. Muhammad Ridā Shafiʿi-Kadkani (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Sukhan, 1383/2004), line 1175.
[2] Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1998), 36.

the true 'infidel' is beheld as the poet's (and by extension, the reader's) own ego."[3] The reasons why the Sufi poet adopts the role of infidel in these poems, as a precondition to achieving *fanāʾ* (annihilation) and experiencing mystical union with God, or the divine Being, whom the poet conflates with his forbidden love object, will be important in helping us understand why ʿAttār, and other likeminded mystics, saw faith as an obstacle to divine knowledge. But before describing the cultural and religious context from which ʿAttār's heretical love poems emerge, and before offering readings of poems that test the limits of faith, I want to expand the limits of this discussion by considering the viewpoints of different philosophical and theological schools, in regards to the concept of faith and belief, that in their own way also test the limits of credulity. Through this comparative approach, I seek to show (1) the limits of our understanding of an enigmatic and mysterious phenomenon that plays a fundamental role in all aspects of human life (i.e., belief) and (2) how ʿAttār, who complicates the discourse of faith through the even more mysterious discourse of love, contributes to our limited understanding of belief by revealing how understanding, and the belief that undergirds it, are ultimately limited by love.

A Philosophical and Etymological Interlude

The juxtaposition of religious belief (*imān*) with divine knowledge, or truth (*haqīqat*), where belief, as we will see, is portrayed as an obstacle to truth, is an interesting one to consider. Though the Sufis seemingly began with a religious problem, namely discerning the true nature of God (*haqq*), their theosophic questioning inevitably lead them to question the true meaning and nature of reality, or of all of God's creation, as well as the self which is the source and,

[3] Leonard Lewisohn, "Sufi Symbolism in the Persian Hermeneutic Tradition: Reconstructing the Pagoda of ʿAṭṭār's Esoteric Poetics," in *ʿAṭṭār and the Persian Sufi Tradition: The Art of Spiritual Flight*, ed. Leonard Lewisohn and Christopher Shackle (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 256.

paradoxically, obstacle to attaining such truths.[4] The metaphysical questions raised by the Sufis, which ultimately call into question the reliability of their own powers of judgment and perception, also have a long history in Western thought. Though motivated by very different sets of philosophical concerns, the ancient Greeks also found the inherent epistemological disjunction or gap between belief (i.e., a subject holding something for true) and knowledge (i.e., that which is true independent of what the subject believes) to be problematic. In fact, the Greek term for "belief" (*doxa*), which also means "opinion," serves to remind us of the ancients' low opinion of belief as a form of holding-for-true. According to Katja Maria Vogt:

> *Doxa* is the technical term for 'belief,' understood—minimally—as holding to be true. *Doxai* (the plural of *doxa*) are not in every way like beliefs in today's sense. Instead, they are truth-claims or acceptances of content that fall short of knowledge.[5]

In other words, ancient Greek philosophers did not simply consider *doxa* (or belief) as a legitimate or justified form of holding-for-true in lieu of knowledge, as later philosophers like Kant did, nor was belief inextricably linked to knowing (where knowing *p* presupposes believing *p*), as it is for contemporary epistemologists like Timothy Williamson.[6] Instead, the ancient Greeks believed that beliefs were inherently insufficient truth-claims bordering on ignorance.[7]

Vogt goes on to say, "This shortcoming—that *doxai* fall short of knowledge and at the same time are truth-claims—is the most general reason for the derogative sense of the notion."[8] In turn *doxa*, which for ancient philosophers had the "connotations of seeming-ness and

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[4] The word *haqq*, from which *haqīqat* (meaning "truth," "reality," "fact") is derived, in addition to meaning "right," "reality," and "truth," is also a name for God (i.e., "The real" or "The Truth"), but one that transcends the theologian's discourse and posits God less as a personality and more as Ground of Being.
[5] Katja Maria Vogt, *Belief and Truth: A Skeptic Reading of Plato*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 10-11.
[6] Timothy Williamson, *Knowledge and Its Limits*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), chapter 11.
[7] Vogt, *Belief and Truth*, 13.
[8] Ibid., 10.

appearance" and whose truth-claims could therefore be challenged, was often contrasted with knowledge (*episteme*), whose epistemic content was unassailable. To complicate matters further, different philosophical schools (e.g., Platonism, Pyrrhonian Skepticism, Stoicism, and Epicureanism), though in general agreement regarding the deficiency of *doxa* and the superiority of *episteme*, nonetheless had varied attitudes towards their interrelation, the conditions of their possibility, and acquisition.

There is, for instance, no definitive account of knowledge formation in the Platonic dialogues. There are dialogues that are extremely skeptical about the possibility of acquiring knowledge by way of belief, and there are dialogues that explore "the idea that, in coming to know something, knowledge that p *transforms* and *replaces* belief that p."[9] As Vogt makes clear, "Plato's dialogues are not treatises in disguise."[10] Instead, they are philosophical explorations and investigations into the nature and possibility of truth itself. And how one reads or interprets the dialogues is just as important to understanding Plato's (or is it Socrates'?) view(s) on truth, knowledge, and belief, as which dialogues one reads or relies on for one's understanding. This, in part, explains how the Stoics and skeptics (Plato's stepchildren) could come away with vastly different readings of the same dialogues, especially in relation to the question of truth, knowledge, and belief.

The Stoics, based on their readings and interpretations of the Platonic dialogues, believed the gap between knowledge and belief was bridgeable. And they bridged this epistemological gap through their theory of the "wise man" or "sage." According to this theory, only the wise man (à la Socrates) had the ability to distinguish perception from reality, or what was really true

[9] Ibid., 11.
[10] Ibid., 6. Vogt borrows the phrase from Michael Frede.

from what was merely *believed* to be true. Exactly how the wise man got to be wise, or how he discerned truth, or avoided falsehood, is not clear. Nor could the Stoics explain by what criteria we can judge the truth or validity of a theory that claims the criteria used to judge the truth of any theory lies solely within the subject who judges.[11] Meanwhile, the skeptics responded to this dilemma, of how the "same thing" can be perceived (by the same beholder or different beholders) in different ways, by "wisely" suspending judgment regarding the truth or validity of any proposition.[12] The suspension of judgment, however, also meant the suspension of belief (*doxa*), which created a new set of philosophical puzzles and conundrums for the skeptics to circumnavigate. For if the skeptic thought it wise to suspend judgment regarding all matters of belief, he nonetheless must have *believed* that there was a good reason for doing so. Hence, the most pressing philosophical problem or puzzle for the skeptics was how to explain the preposterous scenario of living a life without beliefs, without resorting to a set of beliefs to justify their choice. I will return to this problem of what, if anything, the skeptics "believed" and why they believed it, later in the discussion.

Under Christianity, the concept of belief took on a different dimension. Believing without knowing (or having definitive proof), in religious matters, was not seen as a vice but a virtue; a

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[11] It is important to note that though the Stoics (of all the philosophical schools) held the most negative view of *doxa*, and believed that "a state of mind is attainable in which one would indeed only assent as and when one should," they also knew that achieving a state of mind that could see through the illusory truth of *doxa* would not be easy. Vogt, *Belief and Truth*, 8.

[12] Most scholars agree that there were at least two schools of ancient skepticism, Academic and Pyrrhonian. Academic skeptics are often characterized as being negative dogmatists, believing that nothing can be known, while Pyrrhonists are described as consistently doubting everything and determining nothing, "not even determin[ing] that they determine nothing." Harald Thorsurd, *Ancient Scepticism* (Stocksfield U.K.: Acumen, 2009), 10. But this distinction is itself a matter of debate and interpretation, as there is little consensus among scholars as to what the ancient skeptics believed or did not believe. For more on the philosophical differences between various schools of ancient skepticism, see Thorsurd's illuminating survey, *Ancient Scepticism*. For more on scholarly disagreements about what the ancient skeptics believed, allowed themselves to believe, how they justified their beliefs (if any), and whether or not their justifications are credible, see the influential essays in *The Original Sceptics: A Controversy*, ed. Myles Burnyeat and Michael Frede (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997).

gift from God Himself that ennobled and elevated the believer (in the eyes of both "man" and God) through the strength of his conviction.

> Faith is an attitude of belief in Christ, whether in his words, his gift of healing or his works; it was codified by Paul, who uses the term over 200 times in his *Epistles*, as a means of distinguishing the Christian attitude towards the law from that of the Jews. He also initiated the extremely influential idea that faith was a gift of grace: 'For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God' (Ephesians 2:8).[13]

In turn, the profession of faith played a prominent role in Christian religious rituals and practices. Although religions like Judaism expected "faith in God" and "had a strong sense of the divine deeds that created and preserved Israel as God's 'chosen people,'" they "did not demand the profession of a creed."[14] Consequently, faith or *fides*, which had a range of meanings during the medieval period—including "trust and belief (especially in God), specific acts of giving one's assent to something or someone, the habitual state of having trust and belief, the body of beliefs held by believers, the grace of a divine light that illumines the mind about certain truths, and the gift of God by which one is able and ready to give God one's assent, love, and trust"—was elevated above reason or *ratio* (meaning "reason or a cause, a line of reasoning, and an act of discursive reasoning, but also the mind in general and the faculty or power by which one thinks and knows") for the simple reason that the faithful often had to accept truths that defied reason and rationality.[15] Despite the seeming superiority of faith over reason—or truths revealed through faith or divine grace, versus those ascertained through logic and reasoning, i.e., "the use

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[13] Howard Caygill, *A Kant Dictionary* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), 192. Caygill goes on to say, "This idea [of faith as a gift of grace] was developed by Augustine in several works, and given its place within the medieval Aristotelian revival by Aquinas. In the *Summa Contra Gentiles* he distinguishes the ascent of natural knowledge to God from the descent of knowledge of faith through grace from God, movements which he regards as complimentary" (192). For more on the biblical concept of "faith," see footnote 51.

[14] Joseph W. Koterski, *An Introduction to Medieval Philosophy: Basic Concepts* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 12.

[15] Ibid., 11.

of our intellectual powers without the light of any special divine grace"—early Christian apologists nonetheless felt the need to justify their faith through a rationalist discourse in order to (1) "distinguish it from mythic religions of antiquity," (2) "show that this religion included not just claims to truth about certain historical facts but claims of universal validity that are accessible to anyone," (3) "show that sound reasoning could disclose by means of reasoning the cogency of at least some portions of what they had been given to know by faith" and (4) to respond to internal conflicts about what to believe about the nature of Christ, God and other religious matters.[16]

Consequently, this melding of theology and philosophy, faith and reason, and the attempts by Christian Scholastics to reconcile the two, created a conflict between knowledge ascertained through faith (*fides*) and knowledge ascertained through reason (*ratio*) that shares similarities with the ancient debate regarding the relationship between *doxa* (belief) and *episteme* (knowledge). But whereas ancient philosophers were preoccupied with the possibility of knowledge itself, or trying to determine the grounds, authority, and justification for even the most basic form of knowledge, Christian Scholastics were mainly concerned with providing the grounds, authority, and justification for religious knowledge. Hence, the ancient problem of trying to bridge the gap between knowledge and belief did not disappear in the "Age of Faith," it merely took on a different form. Recontextualized, re-framed, and reformulated through the

[16] Ibid., 12-13, 13 and 14. According to Koterski, "The voices of fideists like Tertullian with his pervasive skepticism about the usefulness of philosophy to the faith ('What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?')" were rare. *An Introduction*, 10.

discourse of Christianity, the philosophical problem of belief (in its relation to knowledge and truth) turned into a theological and theophilosophical one.[17]

Augustine's pithy phrase *Credo ut intelligas* ("Believe that you may understand"), which Anselm of Canterbury famously reformulated as *credo ut intelligam* ("I believe in order to understand"), distills the medieval problem of trying to reconcile belief with knowledge (in the form of understanding) to its essence.[18] To begin with, the statement suggests that, though related, belief and knowledge are two distinct categories of holding-for-true. Nonetheless, the two categories are represented as being related or relatable, and that relationship is represented as a hierarchical one where belief, because it precedes understanding, is a precondition to knowledge. In other words, before one can begin testing or investigating the truth or validity of something one must believe something to be the case, otherwise there would be nothing to investigate.[19] And this preliminary knowledge (provided by faith) "is founded not on experience or sight but on the acceptance of the authority of credible witnesses."[20] In fact, according to Augustine, "Society would disintegrate unless there was belief based on credible witnesses. Indeed, without such faith a man could not even know who his mother was."[21]

On a theological level, what Augustine is saying is that one cannot come to understand and know God, by way of reason and rationality, without first embracing Him and committing to

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[17] According to Koterski, "For all of the spiritual writing done during the Middle Ages, there was no separate discipline called theology for much of the period. If anything, authors preferred to speak of the *philosophia Christi* ('the philosophy of Christ')" (18).

[18] See footnote 22 for Augustine's complete statement. Anselm's entire statement is as follows: "For I do not seek to understand in order to believe, but I believe in order to understand that he has failed to understand*."* See Anselm of Canterbury, trans. Jasper Hopkins and Herbert Richardson, *The Complete Philosophical and Theological Treatises of Anselm of Canterbury* (Minneapolis: Arthur J. Benning Press, 2000), 93.

[19] According to John M. Barton, "Over and over again, in his sermons, letters and writings, Augustine quotes Isaiah 7:9 (as it appears in the Septuagint): 'Unless you believe you cannot understand'." "Faith and Reason in Augustine," *Restoration Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (1966), 142.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid.

Him through faith. But once someone does, by, first and foremost acknowledging the corrupting influence of his will over his mental faculties, and then by subordinating his will to the authority of the church and the gospels, he will be rewarded for his faith because "Understanding is the reward of faith":[22]

> We are guided in a twofold way, by authority and by reason. In time, authority has the prior place; in matter, reason. . . .Thus it follows that those desiring to learn the great and hidden good it is authority which opens the door. And whoever enters by it [i.e., faith in authority] and, leaving doubt behind, follows the precepts of a truly good life, and has been made receptive to teaching by them, will at length learn how pre-eminently possessed of reason those things are which he pursued before he saw their reason, and what that reason itself is, which, now that he is made steadfast and equal to his task in the cradle of authority, he now follows and comprehends, and he learns what that intelligence is in which are all things, or rather what He is who is all things, and what beyond and above all things is their prime cause. But to this knowledge few attain in this life.[23]

Consequently, in making the claim that one must believe in order to understand, Augustine is asserting the primacy of faith in the theophilosophical debate "as to whether faith or reason provided the most illuminating interpretation of the totality of human experience."[24] But upon closer inspection, Augustine's pithy proclamation (*Credo ut intelligas*), and the rationale behind

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[22] Ibid., 143. Augustine goes on to say, "Therefore, seek not to understand that thou mayest believe, but believe that thou mayest understand." *In Joannis Evangelium*, XXIX, 6. The translation is Barton's. Augustine believed that the human will, puffed up with pride and blinded by its passions, held sway over the rational faculties, thus keeping true understanding and divine knowledge at bay. Only by accepting faith and humbling the will could reason find its way to the light of truth: "Faith thus purifies the heart, rendering it capable of receiving and enduring the great light of reason" (144). *Epistola CXX, 3.* The translation is Barton's.

[23] *De Ordine* II.IX.26 Translation taken from *An Augustine Synthesis*, ed. Erich Przywara (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2014), 54. Regarding the fallibility of reason, the primacy of authority, and how authority can serve as a corrective to reason corrupted by sin and wickedness, Augustine, in *De Moribus Ecclesiae Catholicae* I.II.3, says:

> Where, then, shall I begin? With authority, or with reasoning? In the order of nature, when we learn anything, authority precedes reasoning. For a reason may seem weak, when, after it is give, it requires authority to confirm it. But because the minds of men are obscured by familiarity with darkness, which covers them in the night of sins and evil habits, and cannot perceive in a way suitable to the clearness and purity of reason, there is most wholesome provision for bringing the dazzled eye into the light of truth under the congenial shade of authority.

See Augustine, *Of the Morals of the Catholic Church*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. Richard Stothert (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015), 8.

[24] Robert E. Cushman, "Faith and Reason in the Thought of St. Augustine," *Church History* 19, no. 4 (1950), 272.

it, which ostensibly privileges faith by suggesting that belief precedes understanding, or that understanding is always predicated on a prior belief in the authority of others (religious or otherwise), also intimates that belief is not complete until it is supported by knowledge attained through understanding. Hence, knowledge, though only a supplement to faith and though difficult to come by ("But to this knowledge few attain in this life"), by validating or confirming faith, makes faith dependent on knowledge for its "primacy." In trying to give faith a rational foundation, by claiming that religious "truths" which are initially accepted on faith have a rational basis which the seeking mind can discover and understand, Augustine intimates that the truths which faith accepts (before those truths are corroborated by reason and understanding) are wanting, or not on a par with those that have been corroborated and confirmed by reason; at least not until they become so retroactively; that is, not until faith has been *rationalized*.[25] And here, it is fair to ask if Augustine, in trying to justify faith in the eyes of reason, by, first and foremost presenting a rational argument for its primacy, has not put faith *in* reason?

In turn, Augustine's proclamation of faith's superiority over knowledge simultaneously confesses to, or betrays, an insecurity regarding its proclaimed eminence. This insecurity becomes more pronounced when we realize that Augustine's statement is not so much a proclamation but an exhortation or plea to his audience to believe what he says (i.e., that one must believe in order to understand) so that they can better believe the religious truths that he wants them to believe. In fact, there is no definitive conclusion to Augustine's account regarding the primacy of faith. For as Augustine himself acknowledges elsewhere in his writings, one must

[25] Though human beings have the power to grasp or understand many divine truths, Augustine concedes that some things are beyond comprehension. See Barton, *Faith and Reason*, 143.

understand what sentences like "Believe that you may understand" mean before accepting or believing their propositions:

> Of course, what I am now saying, I am saying to help those people believe who do not yet believe. And yet, unless they understand what I am saying, they cannot believe. So what this person [i.e., his imaginary interlocutor] says is partly true—"Let me understand, in order to believe"; and I on my side, when I say, just as the prophet says, "On the contrary, believe, in order to understand," am speaking the truth. Let's come to an agreement, then. So: understand, in order to believe; believe, in order to understand. I'll put it in a nutshell, how we can accept both without argument: Understand, in order to believe, my word; believe, in order to understand, the word of God.[26]

Here, Augustine concedes that at the most basic level (i.e., that of comprehension) knowledge of what words mean precedes faith and makes faith, or believing in the propositions put forth by language, possible. According to this formulae, belief presupposes knowledge, knowledge of what words (like "belief") and sentences (like "Believe, in order to understand.") mean, whose truth cannot be verified (at least not initially) but only believed: "Understand, in order to believe, my word; believe, in order to understand, the word of God."[27] Interestingly, upon reaching the conclusion that belief presupposes knowledge of the meanings of words and sentences whose truth cannot be initially verified but only believed, Augustine takes a leap of faith by once again claiming that the religious truths he wants his audience to believe have a rational basis that the mind can come to know and understand through words whose own truth will only be confirmed retroactively; that is, after "understanding the word of God." But to claim that reason can reveal the truth of propositions accepted on faith, through words whose own truth cannot be verified until a second level of "understanding" takes place (as Augustine seems to do), is to suggest that

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[26] Sermon 43, in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century, Pt. 3, V.2: Sermons 20-50*, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill (Brooklyn, NY: New City Press, 1990), 242-243.

[27] According to Augustinian semiotics, "I cannot know that a sign is a sign unless I know what it signifies—but then I learn nothing from the sign; my knowledge of its significate [i.e., that which is signified by the sign] is presupposed in its being a sign in the first place." See Peter King's introduction in Augustine's, *Against the Academicians and The Teacher*, ed. and trans. Peter King, (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 1995), xviii.

reason itself authorizes the truth of words it is beholden to for its sense. For reason to claim this authority for itself, i.e., the authority to verify the truth of words without which understanding and reasoning would not be possible, is to test the limits of credulity. Conversely, for reason to cast doubt on the truth of words it relies on for understanding would be to call into question the credibility of reason itself. Since reason is in no position to verify or disqualify the veracity of words on whose authority it relies on for understanding, then it stands to reason that reason is bound to accept their truth on faith and faith alone. This is the conclusion Augustine should have and would have reached, had he not been a man of faith.[28] Instead, as a man of faith, Augustine takes the additional step (or leap) of claiming that all matters of belief shall, in time, become understood, known, and confirmed to the person with faith. And Augustine is convinced of this because when that time comes, it will not be reason or understanding in the abstract which will authorize the truths held in belief but reason and understanding as they relate to "the word of God," which is to say, God Himself, the author of all things. To answer our earlier question, then, it seems as though Augustine, when it comes to the transformation of belief into understanding, has not put his faith (or at least all his faith) in the powers of human reason but in God, who will make Himself known, or understood, to the believer who accepts his word on faith.[29] In this semiotic version of Christian eschatology, the true meaning of language is

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[28] By Augustine's own account, he had to quash the doubts stirring within him, or remove the impediments to faith through reasoned arguments, before he could become a man of faith. In *Contra Academicos*, written in the form of a Platonic dialogue, Augustine took on Academic Skepticism (a philosophy that he himself had dabbled in after his disillusionment with Manichaeism) to disprove the thesis that knowledge and truth were impossible to attain. In fact, in that work, Augustine suggests that happiness itself is contingent upon the possibility of attaining truth:

> "Do you believe that we can be happy even though we haven't found the truth?"
> Then Licentius ventured: "We can if we're searching for the truth." I solicited the view of the others by nodding my head. (1.2.5.16-19)

The translation is from Peter King's, *Against the Academics*, 6.

[29] In *De Beata Vita* (4:34), Augustine equates truth with God Himself.

deferred until some future date, when, through God's grace, language is redeemed (in the word of God) and its eternal truths revealed in the heart of the faithful.[30] Hence, for all of Augustine's appeals to rationality and reason, to show or prove just how reasonable faith can be, his ultimate solution to the problem of attaining knowledge through faith seems, at least in part, to be a spiritually mystical one.

This notion of a mystical understanding of God (as opposed to a rational one) is further corroborated when we consider another important aspect of Augustinian epistemology, and that is the relationship between love and knowledge. For Augustine, love and knowledge are intimately connected so that knowledge is limited by love.[31] According to this formula, faith is the conduit of love which allows the believer to embrace God so that God's truths can be revealed to him. And yet, as the formula suggests, one needs to have at least a preliminary knowledge of what one loves before believing it. Hence, the relationship between knowledge and love, or how loving God leads to knowledge of Him when knowledge of Him (on a preliminary level) is a precondition to loving Him, is a complicated one. According to Martin Westerholm, "Augustine casts his search for an answer to the paradox that love must precede knowledge, and

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[30] For Augustine, to exorcise the demons of doubt, it was not enough to simply refute skepticism, he also had to create his own theory of knowledge formation to insure that those demons never returned. Fusing Platonism with Christianity, Augustine's theory of how knowledge is acquired, is, according to Peter King, predicated on "illumination and Christ as the Teacher within":

> The test of truth is inside. . . . What gets conveyed from one person to another are at best putative knowledge-claims that each recipient judges for himself. In items perceived by the senses, we have knowledge when the sensible object itself is present to us. In items perceived by the mind, we look upon these "immediately in the inner light of Truth" and know them. Roughly, each person grasps conceptual truths, to the extent he or she is able, without recourse to experience or external testimony. (xviii-xix)

Hence, for Augustine, truth is found within, not without, and the source of that truth is Christ who is internalized in the heart of the believer by way of love.

[31] "What is known [for Augustine] cannot be divorced from what is loved. At the very minimum, all cognition is directly dependent upon interest, nor is anything fully known to which the consent of the will has not been given. Yet there may be awareness of reality without completed cognition of that reality. The completion of cognition lies with affection. Thus full cognition is *re-cognition*. The possibility of so-called 'objectivity' in knowledge is given in the fact that there may be *cognitio* without *agnitio*, acknowledgement. This is possible with respect to God. That is to say, God may be known while not being acknowledged." Cushman, *Faith and Reason*, 273.

yet nothing unknown is loved, in terms of a framework of general notions, and the way in which he discusses this initially suggests a conceptual solution to the problem."[32] The problem, however, with "a conceptual solution to the problem," is if a conceptual framework for recognizing God is a precondition to loving Him and believing in Him, then the object of faith (and the love that animates it) is "not really . . . God at all, but rather . . . whatever notion of God we can cobble together from our store of mental contents." In light of this problem, Augustine "turns to make the question existential rather than conceptual":[33]

> The question of the knowledge of God hinges on a kind of true love that, ultimately, is a gift from God that allows us to recognize our dependence on him, accept the mediation of Christ, and live justly. God may be understood through this love because God is love, and love, like all of the divine attributes, exhibits the triune structure of the Trinity.[34]

In turn, Augustine bypasses the aporia he has created for himself by suggesting that God Himself endows the believer with the love he needs to recognize Him through his "dependence on him." And this love is sufficient in itself to induce recognition of Him because "God is love," at least to those who can recognize it. Hence, Augustine's "non-conceptual" solution to the conceptual problem is to marry a deeply personal, spiritual, and even mystical understanding of God with central Christian concepts (like salvation and the Trinity) whose acceptance is, paradoxically, the telos of the subjective, faith inducing, mystical experience. As we will see later, ʿAttār's solution to the problem of attaining divine knowledge (at least in his heretical *ghazals*) will be to divorce the mystical experience from any and all orthodoxy by making the suspension of belief, in all orthodoxy, a precondition to the mystical experience.

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[32] Westerholm goes on to say, "Our faith in Christ's virgin birth is possible because we understand 'what a virgin is, and what being born is, and what a proper name is.'"
See "Love and the Knowledge of God in Augustine's *De Trinitate*" (master's thesis, McMaster University, 2009), 120, https://macsphere.mcmaster.ca/bitstream/11375/9433/1/fulltext.pdf.
[33] Ibid., 121.
[34] Ibid.

Even though the concept of faith (as a special kind of belief emanating from God) was idealized, spiritualized, and made indispensable through Christianity (by theologians like Paul, Augustine, and Anselm), its connotations as a truth-claim that falls short of knowledge became more denotative over time. Part of this had to do with the fact that while belief and faith were associated with scriptural truths, the acceptance of arcane moral injunctions, and the acknowledgement of an invisible God, *episteme* or *scientia* (as a distinct category of knowing) was associated with knowledge of the empirical, phenomenal world. Though thinkers like Augustine considered *scientia* to be a lower form of knowledge, "about the truth of things in this world and their mundane causes," often contrasting it with *sapientia* (wisdom) or "knowledge of eternal and immutable truths in the mind of God," over time *scientia* began to play a more prominent role in theological matters.[35] In contrast to the metaphysical mysteries of religious life and teaching, the truth of the sensible world (also created by God) was self-evident. In fact, God, who had given humans dominion over the natural world had also endowed them with reason so they could, through knowledge and understanding, exercise their dominion. Besides the practical application of reason, for the purposes of survival, safety, and comfort, humans could also use their God given reason to understand the workings of the natural world, thereby gaining direct access to the mind of their creator:

> The starting point for all natural philosophy in the Middle Ages was that nature had been created by God. This made it a legitimate area of study because through nature man could learn about its creator. Medieval scholars thought that nature followed the rules that God

[35] Of course, Augustine also had his own motivations for diminishing the stature of *scientia* and elevating that of *sapientia*:

> Augustine's undeviating conviction was that fides is the gateway to understanding the way to the Kingdom which none enters except as a little child. This, according to Augustine, is the gospel wisdom, *sapientia*, which must replace the proud sufficiency of classical knowledge or *scientia*. Faith is the lowly door by which the "heart," bowing to enter, is cleansed in order that at length the whole mind may apprehend the universal abiding Truth-may see God. (Cushman, *Faith and Reason*, 272-273)

> had ordained for it. Because God was consistent and not capricious, these natural laws were constant and worth scrutinizing.[36]

For Scholastics like Thomas Aquinas, natural philosophy, in the form of natural theology, provided another avenue (besides divine revelation) through which important religious truths (such as the existence of God) could come to be known and confirmed:[37]

> Our natural knowledge begins from sense. Hence our natural knowledge can go as far as it can be led by sensible things. But our mind cannot be led by sense so far as to see the essence of God; because the sensible effects of God do not equal the power of God as their cause. Hence from the knowledge of sensible things the whole power of God cannot be known; nor therefore can His essence be seen. *But because they are His effects and depend on their cause, we can be led from them so far as to know of God "whether He exists,"* and to know of Him what must necessarily belong to Him, as the first cause of all things, exceeding all things caused by Him. [38]

Consequently, although the philosophical sciences (which included divine science) arrived at religious truths through different means, and though they could not verify or discover every religious truth, they nonetheless played an important role in providing a scientific foundation for religious faith. In fact, in his *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas asks "Whether, besides Philosophy, any Further Doctrine Is Required?"[39] Aquinas' question (rhetorical though it may be) is a far cry from Augustine's proclamation regarding the necessity and primacy of faith in both religious and non-religious matters. Despite answering in the affirmative, and arguing for the necessity of doctrine, Aquinas' question shifts the terms and tone of the argument surrounding faith. Whereas

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[36] James Hannam, *The Genesis of Science: How the Christian Middle Ages Launched the Scientific Revolution* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2011), 348-349.

[37] For Augustine, even though "natural theology" is not to be discounted it is always filtered through faith: "For Augustine, creation naturally bears the stamp of the God by whom it was made, but, as we have seen, no object contemplated apart from a love of God leads one through to him." Westerholm, *Love and the Knowledge*, 52.

[38] Italics are mine. *Summa Theologica* 1a.12.12. in Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, tr., Fathers of the English Dominican Province, (New York: Benziger Bros, 1947), accessed October 8, 2017, http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/17611/pg17611-images.html.

[39] *Summa Theologica* 1a.1.1.

for Augustine reason supplemented faith, for Aquinas faith is characterized as a "necessary" supplement to reason, without which human knowledge of divine truths would be incomplete:

> Hence it was necessary for the salvation of man that certain truths which exceed human reason should be made known to him by divine revelation. Even as regards those truths about God which human reason could have discovered, it was necessary that man should be taught by a divine revelation; because the truth about God such as reason could discover, would only be known by a few, and that after a long time, and with the admixture of many errors. Whereas man's whole salvation, which is in God, depends upon the knowledge of this truth. Therefore, in order that the salvation of men might be brought about more fitly and more surely, it was necessary that they should be taught divine truths by divine revelation. It was therefore necessary that besides philosophical science built up by reason, there should be a sacred science learned through revelation.[40]

Besides providing human beings with divine truths "which exceed human reason," the scriptures had the added benefit of making accessible, to a great many people, those truths which reason could only arrive at or discover through great labor and over a long period of time. In the final sentence of the paragraph quoted above, Aquinas plants the seed for what he will propose next, i.e., that sacred doctrine be considered a science in its own right. In light of the argument he has been making, regarding the necessity of religion as a supplement to philosophy and natural reason, Aquinas proposal seems both reasonable and frustratingly unreasonable. On the one hand, since Aquinas believes that the science of philosophy alone will not provide humankind with the truths he needs for his salvation, then the addition of faith (in the form of scriptural truths), as a supplement to the philosophical sciences, seems reasonable. On the other hand, however, Aquinas' attempt to turn faith into a science, after arguing for faith's ultimate supremacy to philosophy and natural reason, is dubious. If faith transcends the sciences, by revealing truths which are beyond reason's reach, then it hardly makes sense to categorize it as another science (speculative though it may be), unless, of course, faith has something to gain by

[40] Ibid.

it or is somehow elevated by being demoted. This inherent conflict regarding the status of faith as a supplement that surpasses in value or worth the thing it supplements (i.e., Philosophy and natural reason), is ultimately "resolved" when Aquinas tells us that faith (in the form of religious doctrine) is "nobler" than all the other sciences, and that the "Other sciences are called the handmaidens of this one."[41] In labeling the other sciences "handmaidens," Aquinas' argument comes full circle, as he makes the other sciences a supplement to the science of faith. Consequently, it seems as though Aquinas wants it both ways. He wants faith to have the credibility of the sciences, or scientific truth, while at the same time preserving faith's superiority as a medium for divine truths that cannot be attained through those "other sciences."

Despite Aquinas' attempt to give faith the stamp of scientific approval, and despite the fact that, according to him, truths acquired through faith are superior to those attained through the sciences, he nonetheless acknowledges that the truths held in faith are not on a par with those which are *known* through the sciences: "faith is a mid-way between science and opinion."[42]Aquinas goes on to say:

> As Aristotle says in the same text, some people can have science, others opinion about the same point. . . . But when it comes to the same thing under the same aspect, science cannot coexist in the one person with either opinion or faith, although for different reasons. Science cannot, because by definition science means that one judges that the object known cannot possibly be otherwise than it is; opinion by definition means that its object is thought of as able to be otherwise than it is. As to faith, because of its certitude, it also judges that what is believed excludes the opposite; but the reason for the incompatibility between the same thing's being an object of science and of belief is that what is known is seen and what is believed is not.[43]

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[41] *Summa Theologica* 1a.1.5.
[42] *Summa Theologiæ*2a2ae.1.2., in Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 31, ed. T. C. O'Brien (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). According to O'Brien, Aquinas' distinction is based on the "widely accepted definition of faith formulated by Hugh of St Victor": "Faith is a form of mental certitude about distant realities that is greater than opinion and less than science" (*De sacramentis* I.10.2). See O'Brien's footnote on p. 11.
[43] *Summa Theologiæ*2a2ae.1.5.

For Aquinas, the difference between belief and science (or knowledge) lies not in the certitude with which a proposition is held for true, but the evidence on which this certitude depends; for "things are said to be seen when they themselves cause the mind or the senses to know them."[44] Here and elsewhere, Aquinas suggests that knowing has a passive quality to it, so that in the face of irrefutable, convincing evidence the mind simply succumbs to and accepts the truth that it "sees." Meanwhile, believing is an active phenomenon that involves the will, so that a believer is someone who holds a proposition true without "seeing" the evidence (whether with the eyes or the mind's eye) that justifies and proves his faith. According to this theory, a person can, potentially, hold the same proposition to be true, either by way of science (i.e., with sufficient evidence) or by way of belief (i.e., insufficient or no evidence), but not by way of both. Aquinas gives an example to illustrate his point:

> For example, we have hope that we will one day see what we now believe about the Trinity. . . . That very vision the angels already enjoy; thus what we believe in they see. Similarly, even in this life it can happen that what is an object of vision or science for one person, can be an object of belief for another who does not have proven knowledge about it.[45]

For Aquinas, then, the old adage "seeing is believing" can never be true because seeing is incompatible with believing. Seeing (either through the eyes or the mind's eye) is synonymous with science and knowing, whereas believing occurs in the absence of scientific knowledge. Additionally, Aquinas intimates, as Plato does in some of his dialogues, that belief can become knowledge, since "what is an object of vision or science for one person, can be an object of

[44] *Summa Theologiæ*2a2ae.1.4.
[45] *Summa Theologiæ*2a2ae.1.5.

belief for another who does not have proven knowledge about it."[46] But that platonic viewpoint was, for Plato and other ancient philosophers, just that, one viewpoint or theory among other competing viewpoints and theories regarding the possibility of knowledge. For the skeptics, the possibility of knowledge was so intimately connected with the phenomenon of belief (*doxa*) that it was impossible to *know* what, if anything, was true or real. For the stoics, the possibility of belief being mistaken for knowledge was real enough that they had to invent an implausible theory about a wise man who could distinguish truth from falsehood and knowledge from belief. In contrast, for Aquinas, the possibility of knowledge's existence is no longer a philosophical question but a foregone conclusion, or a matter of fact.[47] Hence, the philosophical task is no longer to prove or disprove the possibility of knowledge but to define and determine its limits.[48] This entails distinguishing knowledge from the concept of belief by determining (1) what objects of inquiry belong to the sphere of knowledge (*scientia*) and what objects to the sphere of belief and (2) if or how an uncertain object of belief might become an object of certain knowledge. Although Aquinas was ostensibly trying to unify science and theology under one body of knowledge, by demonstrating how faith and reason work in concert to help humankind understand physical and metaphysical truths, he also helped solidify the boundary separating

[46] One problem that this scenario raises is if belief is intimately connected with the "will," and knowledge is passive, then what role, if any, does the will play when belief is transformed into knowledge?

[47] Although Aquinas' predecessor, Augustine, also argues that belief can become knowledge (and therefore posits knowledge as being real), for him, belief and knowledge are not mutually exclusive, and the boundary separating them is much more fluid. For instance, for Augustine, belief in *p* presupposes at the very least cursory or superficial understanding/knowledge of P, as well as the words and sentences which make *p* intelligible. Additionally, for Augustine, the will is inextricably linked to both knowledge and belief, which is why the will must be purified through faith before it can attain understanding.

[48] Even the goal of Cartesian skepticism, for instance, is not to cast doubt regarding the possibility of certain knowledge, but to use skepticism as a method for distinguishing truth from falsehood.

them by determining their incontrovertible differences.[49] Consequently, behind Aquinas' argument that the knowledge acquired through faith (though religiously and spiritually indispensable) is scientifically deficient, is the tacit acknowledgment that one can believe and have faith in what is untrue—hence faith is a faulty instrument as regards truth, and one needs a method other than belief to adjudicate between competing beliefs about Christ, God, etc.

The etymologies of faith and belief in the English language support the notion that their status as truth claims that fall short of knowledge became more prominent with the assent of *scientia*. According to the *OED*, the word faith (in English) derived from the Latin *fides*: "belief, trust, that which produces belief, evidence, token, pledge, engagement, trust in its objective aspect, troth; observance of trust, fidelity."[50] Faith "originally meant in Eng. (as in Old French) 'loyalty to a person to whom one is bound by promise or duty, or to one's promise or duty itself,' as in 'to keep faith, to break faith,'" but in the 14th century it took on the religious sense and was used to translate belief, "and in course of time almost superseded 'belief,' esp. in theological language, leaving 'belief' in great measure to the merely intellectual process . . . [so that] 'belief in God' no longer means as much as 'faith in God.'"[51] It was during this transitional period,

[49] According to Koterski, it is rare to find "medieval thinkers who are skeptical about faith as a source of knowledge—at least until after the translation of various texts of Greek philosophy into Latin in the thirteenth century. One then begins to find figures like Siger of Brabant and Boethius of Dacia, who read Aristotle as offering access to knowledge that was not just independent of Christianity, but to be preferred where the two were in contradiction" (11). This realization (regarding the philosophical authority of the ancients) existed in the Islamic context from the tenth century.

[50] Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed., s.v. "faith."

[51] Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed., s.v. "belief." The nuanced distinction between belief and faith (in the English language) is highlighted (and exploited) by statements such as, "I believe in God, but I do not have faith in him." Interestingly, some scholars believe that even the "traditional" Christian concept of faith, not to mention its subsequent interpretations over time, do not accurately represent the biblical concept of belief. In an essay entitled "Faith - A (Scripturally) Meaningless Word" (unpublished manuscript, last modified April 2015, http://www.lasotell.com.au/bi/Faith%20-%20A%20Scripturally%20meaningless%20word.pdf), I.R. Phillips and R.N. Phillips argue that the Christian, Latinate concept of "faith" is anachronistic and not equivalent, in meaning, to what the authors of the *New Testament* had in mind:

when faith took on a religious sense that it also came to mean "Belief as a form or act of knowledge not subject to confirmation by reason or the senses; specif., such belief in religious matter."[52]

Meanwhile belief—"from West Germanic **ga-laubon* 'to hold dear, esteem, trust," […] from **galaub-* 'dear, esteemed,' from intensive prefix *ga- + PIE root **leubh-* 'to care, desire,

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> Faith is a word that appears many times in English language Bibles. But basic research quickly shows *faith* is the wrong translation of the underlying Greek word. *Faith* is a noun with no verb form, whereas the underlying Greek word has noun and verb forms. English Bibles generally use the correct word to translate the verb, but use *faith* instead of the correct word to translate the noun. The New Testament texts were originally written in *koine* Greek, the street Greek [sic] the Greek and Roman empires, including the time of Jesus. The street Greek was well understood in Judea, Asia Minor and through to the British Isles; it was the language of commerce. In these texts, the Greek verb *pisteou*, means *to believe* and the related noun, *pistis*, means belief. Yet the Authorised Version translates *pistis* as *faith* in all but one instance (2Th 2:13). (1)

I.R. Phillips and R.N. Phillips go on to argue that choosing the word faith (derived from Latin) over the Greek *pistis*, to translate belief, has important implications for interpreting the *New Testament*. (In fact, according to these scholars, even the *New Testament* is inaccurately named/translated because that work is in reality a *New Covenant*, between the Jews and God, supplanting the *Old Covenant* or *Testament*.) In turn, they try to show how the word faith, with its grammatical limitations (as a noun without a verb form) and its semantic connotations (of trust, loyalty and duty) operates grammatically, syntactically, and semantically to color our understanding of one of the most influential works in human history:

> Almost as soon as the gospels and epistles began to circulate, new interpretations began. The earliest collection of the changes is known as the writing of the church fathers. Early translations from the Greek texts were into the Latin of the Roman Empire. There is little doubt these translators were aware of the original meanings of the Greek words, but chose Latin words in translation that allowed more flexibility for their readers to accept the new interpretations. (2)

Consequently, translators of the *New Testament*, in translating the word "belief" as "faith," transform (or change the meaning of) a belief, or a set of beliefs, that are culturally, socially, and historically specific to a group of people (i.e., the *New Testament* Jews), to a generalized and generalizing "faith" that, due to its lack of specificity, not only has greater mass appeal, or is more inclusive, but also, in emphasizing trust, loyalty, fidelity, and duty empowers the purveyors of faith, i.e., those religious organizations and institutions that are ostensibly God's representatives on earth. What interests us here, however, is not a new reading (which is really the old reading) of the *New Testament*, based on the original meaning of the word belief—fascinating and provocative as that may be—but to show how our beliefs about belief (or the meanings and connotations we attach to the word/concept) change what the phenomenon of belief means. In other words, belief by any other word or name is not belief, or just "belief." The concept of faith or belief—as we can see even in this brief survey—is socially, culturally, and historically contingent. Hence, what we believe about the concept, paradoxically, determines if not what we believe (or hold-for-true), then how we believe and our attitude towards our own beliefs.

[52]Middle English Dictionary Online, s.v. "feith," accessed Nov 14, 2017, http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=byte&byte=54869090&egdisplay=open&egs=54888399&egs=54883176&egs=54899635&egs=54886620&egs=54879185&egs=54906289.

love'" —"was the earlier word for what is now commonly called *faith*."[53] According to the earliest documented sources, from the 12th century, belief was used in a religious sense: "The trust that the believer places in God; the Christian virtue of faith."[54] And by the 14th century, belief, like faith, began to signify truth-claims that could not be verified through reason, sense, and logic. Not so coincidentally, it was during the 14th century that the word science, meaning both "The state or fact of knowing; knowledge or cognizance *of* something specified or implied" as well as "A particular branch of knowledge or study; a recognized department of learning," began to be used in the English language.[55] In John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, for instance, we see the poet argue for the necessity of "feith" as a science (i.e., a body of knowledge), while at the same time pointing out its shortcomings as science (i.e., a proven fact or piece of knowledge):

> To this science [i.e., Theology] ben privé
> The clerks of divinité,
> The whiche unto the poeple prechen
> The feith of holi cherche and techen,
> Which in som cas upon believe
> Stant more than thei conne prieve
> Be weie of argument sensible.
> Bot natheles it is credible,
> And doth a man gret meede have,
> To him that thenkth himself to save.[56]

Here Gower, like Aquinas before him, argues for the importance of "Theology" as a science, or branch of knowledge (especially as it pertains to the theme of salvation), by contrasting it with the other sciences. In turn, he contends that things learned by way of theology may be deemed

[53] The first quotation in the passage is from the Online Etymology Dictionary, s.v. "belief" accessed Nov 14, 2017, https://www.etymonline.com/word/belief and the second quotation is from the *OED*, 2nd ed., s.v. "belief."
[54] Oxford English Dictionary, 3rd ed., s.v. "belief."
[55] Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed., s.v. "science."
[56] John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, vol. 3, ed. Russell A. Peck, Latin translations by Andrew Galloway (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Western Michigan University, 2000) Book 7, lines 121-130.

"credible" even though they cannot be proven through reason and argumentation, as they may be in the other sciences. And yet, by comparing faith's credibility with those truths that can be proven through "argument[s] sensible," the poet acknowledges "feith" to be a science, and belief to be a form of holding-for-true, that, despite the conviction of the believer, ultimately fall short of knowledge.[57]

The subjective, emotional, and deeply personal nature of faith and belief as truth-claims—which are intimated by etymologies that link truth's conviction to emotionally charged or colored concepts like "trust," "loyalty," and "love"—were also ironically revealed when the fervently faithful turned a critical eye towards those who did not share their beliefs (e.g., heretics, heathens, and the faithless). [58] The many references (from the earliest sources) to false, heretical, and heathen beliefs and faiths reveal that the "truths" held in faith and belief are never secure, but always in danger of being questioned, suspected, and doubted.[59]

If faith and belief (as truth claims) were wanting (i.e., something less than science), or susceptible to error and ignorance (in the form of heresy and heathenism), in an age when one's faith in God emanated from God himself, and the faithful were ostensibly rewarded for their trust and fidelity (if not in this world, then surely the next), is it any wonder that during the Enlightenment they had to be resuscitated and rescued? Responding to the Scottish philosopher

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[57] According to the Oxford English Dictionary (3rd ed., s.v. "belief"), belief took on the connotations of an uncorroborated, un-confirmable truth-claim, or an "assent to a proposition, statement, or fact . . . in the absence of proof or conclusive evidence," in the 16th century. But as the example from John Gower's text shows, the notion of belief as a truth-claim that could not be corroborated through reasoning, logic, and proof came into circulation much earlier. See Middle English Dictionary Online, s.v. "bilēve," accessed Nov 14, 2017, https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED4599&egs=all&egdisplay=open.

[58] Whereas the subjective nature of *doxa* (as a truth-claim) was captured in its connotations of seeming, appearing, and even reputation, the subjective dimensions of belief and faith (as truth-claims) are expressed through their etymological origins in love and loyalty respectively.

[59] Middle English Dictionary Online, s.v. "bilēve."

David Hume, who was heir to the arguments pitting faith against reason, and for whom the quest for metaphysical truths could only result in a "rational skepticism" or an "irrational fideism," Emanuel Kant tried to find a "middle path between the extremes of Hume's dilemma" by showing how belief could be rational.[60] In the preface to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant takes on the challenge of trying to save faith, or justify its necessity as a form of holding-for-true (*Fürwahrhalten*), by famously stating that he will "deny knowledge" or circumscribe its limits—in regards to what we can know, or hope to know, about both physical and metaphysical matters—to give validity to the concept of faith: "Thus I had to deny **knowledge** [*Wissen*] in order to make room for **faith** [*Glaube*]."[61] Whereas most philosophers—from Plato to Descartes—had focused their attention on the shortcomings of belief, as a form of holding-for-true, and many theologians—from Augustine to Aquinas—had tried to idealize belief, as a gift from God, despite its inherent shortcomings, Kant attempts to give validity to the concept of belief by delimiting "knowledge."[62] But that is not to say Kant lacks faith in the powers of the human intellect. Far from it; for his critique valorizes and validates the mental powers and faculties he intends to critique by deploying them to give us theoretical knowledge

[60] Fredrick C. Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1987), 6.

[61] Bxxx, boldface in the original. Quotations from Kant's first *Critique* are cited by the standard A/B edition pagination. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. and trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[62] Of course, Aquinas and Augustine had also curtailed knowledge, but they did so in order to show the primacy and superiority of faith. Kant's reasons for limiting knowledge have nothing to do with the superiority of faith and everything to do with creating a philosophical system that demonstrates its superiority by defining and determining the proper limits of each phenomenon.

(*erkenntnis-theoretisch*) of the conditions of the possibility of empirical knowledge (*Erkenntnis cum Erfahrung*) and its limits.[63]

It goes without saying that the limit or scope of the word *Glaube*, which Kant leaves ambiguous in the passage, is extremely important for not only determining what matters are within the purview of knowledge and what of faith, but also the overall meaning of the passage. According to Andrew Chignell, some translators translate *Glaube* here as "faith," though they translate it as belief elsewhere in Kant's tome, because they, like the majority of critics, assume Kant is only referring to moral and religious beliefs here.[64] Unlike belief, however, the German cognate *Glaube* can mean both faith (in the religious sense) and belief (in the mundane sense), depending on how it is used. Hence, nothing precludes Kant's *Glaube* from encompassing "theoretical belief" as well, where "assent . . . is formed on the basis of theoretical, though still in an important sense subjective, grounds."[65] As we will see, the inclusion or exclusion of theoretical belief under the term *Glaube* is more important than even Chignell is willing to acknowledge, because nothing less than the validity of Kant's own theories, regarding such things as "things in themselves" and his tripartite division of propositional attitudes (i.e., knowing, opining, and believing), are at stake.[66]

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[63] According to Beiser, "The Enlightenment faith in reason was based first and foremost upon its belief in the powers of criticism." He goes on to say, "Reason was identified with the faculty of criticism, that is, the power to determine whether we have sufficient evidence for our beliefs" (6).

[64] Andrew Chignell, "Belief in Kant," *Philosophical Review,* 116, no. 3 (2007): 323-60.

[65] Ibid., 359.

[66] According to Leslie Stevenson, Kant likely borrowed and modified Aquinas' tripartite division for his trio of propositional attitudes: *Meinen, Glauben and Wissen*. See Leslie Stevenson, "Opinion, Belief or Faith, and Knowledge," *Kantian Review* 7 (2003), 97 (footnote 1). Conviction in relation to knowledge (*Wissen*) is when one's propositional attitude is both subjectively and objectively sufficient and therefore certain for everyone (A822/B850). Conviction in relation to belief (*Glauben*) is when one's propositional attitude is objectively insufficient (i.e., lacks objective grounds) but subjectively sufficient, i.e., valid for everyone "as long as he has reason" (A820/B848). (For more on subjective sufficiency, see footnote 74.) Meanwhile opinion (*Meinen*) is the subject "taking something to be true with the consciousness that it is subjectively as well as objectively insufficient" (A822/B850). Interestingly,

In Kant's philosophy *Glaube* is necessary (or becomes necessary) because human knowledge is necessarily limited. Whereas for Aquinas knowledge is limited by what we perceive and understand (i.e., the information at our disposal and our ability to understand and decipher that information), for Kant knowledge is further limited by our powers of perception and understanding, or how our cognitive faculties make the world intelligible. Hence, to use Aquinas' own example, even if we could see the Trinity with our own eyes that does not mean we would see them the same way angels see them, as Aquinas presumes we would, because humans are not angels. Kant's distinction between an object of knowledge and the powers that make an object knowable acknowledges the skeptical argument (i.e., that human perception and understanding are inherently subjective and limited), while preserving knowledge (even in this limited sense) as a legitimate and distinct category of holding-for-true:

> Kant's epistemology can be said to implement a number of security measures insofar as it protects the knowing subject from the "noumenal," that is, from everything that the subject can ever know for sure. As the later generation of German idealists would

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Kant introduces a fourth propositional attitude (which he considers to be an illegitimate form of holding-for-true) to the scholastic tripartite division of knowledge. He calls this propositional attitude persuasion (*Überredungen*). Persuasion takes place when a "subject is persuaded of a proposition when he would hold on reflection that he has sufficient objective grounds for taking a proposition to be true . . . but when, in fact, the grounds he cites are insufficient" (Chignell, 331): "Persuasion is mere semblance [*schein*], since the ground of the judgment, which lies solely in the subject, is held to be objective" (A820/B848). In other words, the subject of persuasion believes that the grounds of his/her judgment are objectively sufficient (i.e., certain for everyone) when in fact they are not, or lie "solely in the subject." As a result of this error in judgment, persuasion is not considered to be a legitimate assent, or "holding-for-true," and is therefore both subjectively and objectively insufficient. According to Kant, however, persuasion "cannot be distinguished from conviction subjectively," and an "experiment" has to be made "on the understanding of others, to see if the grounds that are valid for us have the same effect on the reason of others" (A821/B849). And yet, as Kant acknowledges, discovering this deception, or "illusion," by experimenting "on the understanding of others," may not be as easy as he makes it sound; for "we are always tempted to certain degree if the subjective cause of the illusion depends upon our nature" (A821/B849). Kant's statement assumes that there must be some objective criteria by which someone other than the subject (perhaps the philosopher himself?) can distinguish persuasion from legitimate forms of knowing or "holding-for-true (even if the subject himself cannot), while negating the possibility that, due to his "own nature," the person making the distinction is himself under the "illusion" that making such a distinction is possible to begin with. Without these presumptions and tacit disavowals, it might be impossible to distinguish persuasion from other, "legitimate" forms of holding-for-true.

> indicate, Kantian critique secures the subject's knowledge by renouncing inaccessible noumena in favor of accessible phenomena.[67]

Consequently, Kant's theory of apperception—according to which, because things exit independently from the form in which they are given and apprehended, specifically the form of space and time, only knowledge of phenomena (or how things appear to us) is possible—makes *Glaube* necessary and integral to human life.

> I cannot even **assume God, freedom and immortality** for the sake of the necessary practical use of my reason unless I simultaneously **deprive** speculative reason of its pretension to extravagant insights; because in order to attain to such insights, speculative reason would have to help itself to principles that in fact reach only to objects of possible experience, and which, if they were to be applied to what cannot be an object of experience, then they would always actually transform it into an appearance, and thus declare all **practical extension** of pure reason to be impossible. Thus I had to deny **knowledge** in order to make room for **faith**.[68]

Paraphrasing this difficult passage, where Kant gives his rationale for denying knowledge about "things-in-themselves," Paul Guyer states:

> Here Kant means that if we were to take the principles that govern our experience of nature to give us theoretical knowledge of all things as they are in themselves, there would be no room for the ideas of God, freedom, and the immortality of the soul, all ideas he takes to be vital to morality, because everything in our experience is finite, limited, and causally determined; but that if we recognize that these necessary facts about the objects of our experience, determined by the very conditions of the possibility of experience, are facts only about how things must appear to us, not how they must be in themselves independently of their relation to our knowledge of them, then there is at least room for us to believe about things as they are in themselves—above all, ourselves as we are in ourselves—what morality requires us to believe.[69]

In one sense, then, Kant's enterprise is nothing short of trying to justify *Glaube* before the powers reason by showing how reason necessitates that we be able to believe in things whose

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[67] John T. Hamilton, *Security: Politics, Humanity, and the Philology of Care* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2013), 24.
[68] Bxxx, boldface in the original.
[69] Paul Guyer, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Kant's Critique of Pure Reason,* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 8.

existence reason can neither prove nor disprove; "above all…what morality requires us to believe." In another sense, however, Kant tries to "secure" knowledge (in the form of phenomena) by relegating *Glaube* to the realm of the noumenal or the unknowable. But all this begs the question: is distinction between phenomena and noumena, or the known and unknown, which allows Kant to distinguish knowledge from belief, an article of belief or knowledge? If noumena cannot be known, then how does Kant know they exist? And if their existence cannot be proven, then what are the grounds for believing in them? This objection to Kant's theory was initially raised by Kant's contemporary, Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi:

> According to Jacobi, Kant cannot assume *empirical* objects are the causes of representations; for he expressly states that they are nothing but representations, and so they cannot be the cause of representations. But Kant also cannot hold that the *transcendental* object is the cause of representations. For he expressly teaches that we cannot have any knowledge of it; and if we cannot know it, then we a fortiori cannot know that it is the cause of our representations.[70]

According to Chignell, however, Jacobi's objection can be circumvented by showing how "theoretical reason itself can provide grounds on which to form assertoric rather than merely problematic [i.e., merely possible] assents about certain things-in-themselves":[71]

> If we agree with Kant that one of our fundamental goals as rational inquirers is to cognize appearances, and if we also agree that we cannot pursue that goal without also firmly presupposing that there is some thing-in-itself that grounds those appearances, then the conclusion is near that Grounding is an article of Theoretical Belief for us. If this is right, then it offers a new response to F. H. Jacobi's famous objection that Kant contradicts himself when he both claims that we can't know anything about things-in-themselves and yet clearly assumes that things-in-themselves both exist and ground appearances. If the latter assumption counts as Belief rather than Knowledge, the contradiction disappears.[72]

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[70] Beiser, *The Fate of Reason*, 124.
[71] Chignell, "Belief in Kant," 359.
[72] Ibid., 351.

Chignell begins his defense of Kant's theory of "things-in-themselves" with an iffy clause, i.e., "If we agree with Kant . . . ," and ends his argument the same way, "If the latter assumption counts as Belief . . . [.]" Chignell syntax puts much of the onus, for not only accepting or rejecting Kant's theory but also his own interpretation of that theory, on the reader; which tells us just how tenuous the argument is. According to Kant, even though we cannot have knowledge of "things-in-themselves" we must nonetheless presuppose the existence of "things-in-themselves" in order to be able to talk about how things appear to us, "otherwise there would follow the *absurd proposition* that there is an appearance without anything that appears."[73] And this presumption is, or can be—at least according to Chignell's reading of Kant—thought of as an article of "Belief rather than Knowledge." But even if we were to agree with Chignell's conditional statement[s], i.e., that Kant's contradiction regarding "things-in-themselves" disappears *if* we categorize his theory as an article of rational belief, that would only create another contradiction. Namely, that Kant's theory of "things-in-themselves" can only be

[73] Italics mine. Bxxvi-Bxxvii. The Pyrrhonian skeptics, who refused to deny or affirm the existence of mind-independent objects, or in Kant's terms, "things-in-themselves," deployed an appearance-based language to communicate their noncommittal attitude towards the existence of any mind-independent object. For example, in talking about an apple sitting on a table, the skeptic might say, "It appears to me that there is an apple sitting on a table." Unlike Kant, then, Pyrrhonian skeptics did not believe they had to affirm the existence of things-in-themselves to be able to talk about how things (regardless of if they exist outside the mind) appeared to them. For more on the Pyrrhonian discourse of appearances see Benson Mates, introduction to *The Skeptic Way: Sextus Empiricus's Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). In *The Will to Power*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), Friedrich Nietzsche offers his own critique of Kant's concept of things-in-themselves:

> The "thing-in-itself" is nonsensical. If I remove all relationships, all the "properties," all the "activities" of a thing, the thing does not remain over; because thingness has only been invented by us owing to the requirements of logic, thus with the aim of defining, communication (to bind together the multiplicity of relationships, properties, activities). §558, p. 302.

rationalized *if* we accept (or believe) Kant's theory of what constitutes rationale belief, not to mention a host of other propositions. [74]

To state the problem another way, if, on the one hand, Kant's theories meet his standards and criteria of knowledge (i.e., that his propositions are both objectively and subjectively sufficient) then the facticity of his theories are, paradoxically, dependent on his own theories regarding what constitutes knowledge. If, on the other hand, Kant's theories don't constitute knowledge, but are nonetheless justified because of his theory regarding belief that is subjectively sufficient (i.e., that "anyone in the subject's position could base that Belief on the same subjective grounds") then his own theories, though they fall short of knowledge, are, based

[74] According to Chignell, "*theoretical* considerations on which we can base firm rational assent that such things [as things-in-themselves] exist . . . can't count as *Knowledge* . . . since it won't be objectively sufficient and subjectively sufficient[1]" but it can count as "rational Belief" or "assent that is objectively insufficient and subjectively sufficient[2]" (359). Chignell further explicates Kant's complex and convoluted theory of subjective sufficiency by arguing for two kinds of subjective sufficiency, which he designates as sufficiency[1] and sufficiency[2]. The first kind of subjective sufficiency is based on what Chignell calls "epistemic merits," and it "involves the subject holding that he or she has sufficient objective grounds," while the second, based on non-epistemic merits, is a subjectively sufficient assent that is motivated by the subject's "needs, interests, and goals" without "indicating that the assent is true" (334). As Chignell points out, both notions of "subjective sufficiency" are operative in Kant, even if he never distinguishes them for the reader. Chignell's argument is problematic because it suggests that judgments (about the truth or validity of something), based on epistemic merits, are not informed by non-epistemic merits, or do not involve a subject's needs, interests, and goals. If this is indeed true, then does it mean we can only know (*Wissen*) things we have no interest, need, or intention in knowing? To be fair, Kant himself is not clear on the matter. In a passage from the *Jäsche Lectures* (translated here by Chignell), Kant says that knowledge is "determined [in us] through objective grounds of truth that are independent of the nature and interest of the subject" (9:70), whereas in the first *Critique* he says, "Taking something to be true is an occurrence in our understanding that may rest on objective grounds, but that also requires subjective causes in the mind of him who judges" (A820/B848). What these "subjective causes" may be (if they are indeed unrelated to a subject's interests, needs, or goals), or how they relate to a subject who "involuntarily" judges or determines that his "assent is based on sufficient objective grounds" (328), is difficult to say. Chignell tries to smooth over these difficulties by saying, "the sort of justification we're interested in is a state rather than an activity [so that] a subject's belief that *p* can *be justified*, even if the subject doesn't *do* anything to determine that it is" (328). And here—since presumably we are talking about a subject who involuntarily (?) establishes "objective grounds" for a knowable, as opposed to a believable, proposition—we might note how difficult it is (semantically at least) for Chignell to keep "belief" out of the equation when belief is not even supposed to factor into the equation. Chignell then goes on to say, "One way to accommodate this point is to use a principle that appeals to the reflective assent that the subject is *in a position to make* about his objective grounds *if* he were to reflect on them" (328).

on his theory of rational belief, justified.[75] In turn, one could argue that in making room for belief of a certain kind, or justifying its necessity, by, first and foremost, distinguishing noumena from phenomena, Kant, ironically, not to mention paradoxically, makes room for or justifies the necessity of his own theories.

According to Howard Caygill, Kant creates this conundrum for himself by not following "his own self-limiting ordinance . . . , since he assumes that there *must* be a correlate which can be thought, even if not known."[76] Caygill goes on to say, "On critical principles he [i.e., Kant] can properly say no more than that the thing in itself [i.e., noumena] *may* be a correlate of sensibility."[77] Caygill's critique of Kant may be correct on critical principles but not on practical grounds. For if Kant were to say "there *may* be things-in-themselves," then he could not very well proclaim to deny knowledge of things-in-themselves; at least not without testing the limits of credulity. Conversely, acknowledging the aporia at the heart of his critique—by saying he "*may* have to deny knowledge (of things-in-themselves), or he may not," depending on if such things really exist—would be equally preposterous. And if Kant were to rid "his philosophy of the thing-in-itself—as he must, if he is to remain within his own limits upon knowledge—then we are left with nothing more than the existence of our own fleeting sensations."[78] Hence, instead of acknowledging the flaws in his theory Kant circumvents them by insisting that we must accept the existence of "things-in-themselves" because not to do so, would, according to him, be "absurd." Consequently, since Kant's theoretical knowledge (*erkenntnis-theoretisch*) of the limits of empirical knowledge (*Erkenntnis cum Erfahrung*) is derived from a distinction

[75] Ibid., 337.
[76] Caygill, *A Kant Dictionary*, 393.
[77] Ibid.
[78] 5 The Fate of Reason

which itself is not based on "knowledge," then all the conclusions that follow from this premise must be accepted, or rejected, on faith and faith alone. In turn, it might be said that in denying empirical knowledge of the transcendental object (or delimiting it), presumably in order to make room for faith, Kant was really denying faith (or delimiting it) in order to make room for philosophical knowledge; i.e., knowledge of "knowledge" and its limits. Another reader of Kant's who comes to this conclusion is Nietzsche:

> How is the fact of knowledge possible? Is knowledge a fact at all? What is knowledge? If we do not know what knowledge is, we cannot possibly answer the question whether there is knowledge.—Very well! But if I do not already "know" whether there is knowledge, whether there can be knowledge, I cannot reasonably put the question "what is knowledge?" Kant *believes* in the fact of knowledge: what he wants is a piece of naiveté: knowledge of knowledge![79]

Nietzsche attacks Kant's notion of knowledge by questioning the possibility of knowledge itself. In so doing, he once again draws our attention to the old problem of trying to distinguish knowledge from belief. Nietzsche coyly answers his own question by italicizing the verb "believe," in a sentence that established the primacy of belief over knowledge: "Kant *believes* in the fact of knowledge." In other words, we only know things, including the existence of things-in-themselves, by *believing* to know them, which means all truth claims are destined to fall short of knowledge or facticity.[80]

The etymology of faith (*imān*) in Arabic is somewhat different from its western counterparts. According to Fazlur Rahman, "The First Form meaning of the Arabic root *a-m-n* is 'to be at peace with oneself' or 'to feel no tribulation within oneself,'" and the verb form (*āman*)

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[79] Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, §530, pp.286-287. Italics are Nietzsche's.

[80] Of course, the claim that "we can only know things by believing to know them" sounds a lot like a piece of knowledge, which is probably why the Pyrrhonian skeptics (unlike their dogmatic counterparts) avoided making such claims.

"appears to mean 'to follow someone' or 'to give oneself over to someone'" which, with the addition of the preposition *bi* (in), comes to mean "to have faith or trust in."[81] Putting these meanings together, Rahman makes the following assessment about *imān*:

> I said that in the First Form a-m-n means to "to be at peace," "to be without tribulation," "to be safe." Now in the Fourth Form this basic meaning is carried over to the idea of "belief" or "faith" in God, which insures one's peace and safety. This is also implied in belief in the truth of (all) the Books of God, His Prophets, and in the Judgment. This means that a person who does not accept God or does not have faith in Him and in other matters that flow from this (the truth of the Books, etc.), cannot be secure, at peace, integral, etc. . . . *Īmān* is an act of the heart, a decisive giving oneself up to God and His Message and gaining peace and security and fortification against tribulation.[82]

The etymological link between faith (*imān*) on the one hand, and safety, peace, and security on the other, opens up new vistas of understanding and offers a different perspective on the phenomenon of belief. Like *doxa*, faith, and belief, the etymology of *imān* also carries subjective and affective connotations—for what gives one person a sense of peace, safety, and security is not the same as what gives another the same *feeling.* But unlike those other iterations of the concept, the etymology of *imān* suggests a different function or purpose for both religious faith, and, to the extent one's beliefs are held with religious conviction, faith in general. Rather than simply allowing individuals to hold on to or express subjective truths that they are (for one reason or another) emotionally and psychologically invested in, *imān* can also protect individuals from existential tribulations, worries, and cares by way of "truths" that anchor their existence.[83]

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[81] Fazlur Rahman, "Some Key Ethical Concepts of the Qur'ān," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 11, no. 2 (1983), 170-171.
[82] Ibid., 171.
[83] Of course, the concept of faith, founded on trust and loyalty, also entails safety and security; for one presumably trusts or is loyal to that which is safe, stable, and secure. But the etymology of *imān* suggests that safety and security are the primary aim/goal of faith. In other words, one does not simply have faith in that which seems to be safe and secure, but one has faith in order to attain psychological and emotional security, safety, and protection.

Ironically enough, the ancient skeptics believed that beliefs (*doxai*)—because their truth claims could not be substantiated—were the source of internal conflict, disagreement, uncertainty, anxiety, tribulation, and worry: "The goal of Pyrrhonism is ἀταραξία [*ataraxia* or peace of mind], and the original cause of Skeptical investigations is 'the anomaly in things' and the disquiet which such anomaly arouses."[84] The skeptic starts out believing that he will attain *ataraxia* "if only he can discover the rights and wrongs of the matter and give his assent to the truth."[85] Along the way, however, the skeptic *discovers* that there are no satisfactory criteria for determining the truth or knowing if things are really as they appear to be. As a result of this stalemate, between competing and conflicting opinions (or appearances) of equal strength, the skeptic is compelled to suspend all judgment and belief (*doxa*), and this, to his surprise, results in the *ataraxia* he was seeking all along: "And when the sceptic does suspend judgment, *ataraxia* follows—the tranquility he sought comes to him, as if by chance, once he stops actively trying to

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[84] Jonathan Barnes, "The Beliefs of a Pyrrhonist" in *The Original Sceptics*, 89. In his *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, Sextus Empiricus discusses the skeptic's "goal" and explains how/why beliefs can be an obstacle to that goal:

> As regards belief, the Skeptic's goal is *ataraxia* [peace of mind], and that as regards things that are unavoidable it is having moderate *pathē* [feeling]. . . . For the person who believes that something is by nature good or bad is constantly upset [by everything that happens]; when he does not possess the things that seem to be good, he thinks he is being tormented by things that are by nature bad, and he chases after the things he supposes to be good; then, when he gets these, he still falls into still more torments because of irrational and immoderate exultation, and, fearing any change, he does absolutely everything in order not to lose the things that seem to him good. But for the person who takes no position as to what is by nature good or bad neither avoids nor pursues intensely. (PH 1.25-8)

The translation of Sextus is from Benson Mates, *The Skeptic Way*, 7-8. The skeptic takes no intellectual position as to what is really true only because taking such a position, i.e., believing that one's beliefs are inherently good or right or true when there are no grounds for such conviction, is potentially damaging to one's emotional and psychological well-being. The skeptics understood that beliefs were not just assents of the mind but involved *pathē* (feeling) or had an affective component. In turn, because individuals are emotionally and psychologically invested in their beliefs, they must constantly grapple with the psychic and emotional consequences of those beliefs when they are tested, challenged, or undermined by contravening facts or experiences.

[85] Myles Burnyeat, "Can the Sceptic Live His Scepticism?" in *The Original Sceptics*, 29.

get it . . . ."[86] One critic who is skeptical of this serendipitous conclusion for the seeking skeptic is Myles Burnyeat:

> If tranquility is to be achieved, at some stage the sceptic's questing thoughts must come to a state of rest or equilibrium. There need to be no finality to this achievement, the sceptic may hold himself ready to be persuaded that there are after all answers to be had. He is not a negative dogmatist furnished with a priori objections that rule out the possibility of answers as a matter of general principle once and for all (cf. *PH* I 1-3). But *ataraxia* is hardly to be attained if he is not in some sense satisfied—so far—that no answers are forthcoming, that contrary claims are indeed equal. And my question is: How can Sextus then deny that this is something he believes?[87]

In other words, the skeptic must *believe* that "no answers are forthcoming" and that "contrary claims are equal" before he can achieve the *ataraxia* or peace of mind that accompanies such knowledge. Otherwise, he would be right back where he started; i.e., still believing and holding out hope that answers to questions that gave rise to his initial consternation and tribulation might be found. But if, as Burnyeat claims, the only way for the skeptic to achieve *ataraxia* is to *believe* (on some level) that no "truth" will be found and that contrary claims are, and will always be, equal, then the skeptic disproves his own thesis by accepting a "truth," or a set of truths, that give him the peace of mind he didn't *believe* he could achieve by accepting truth claims (*doxa*) that fall short of knowledge. In one sense, then, belief (in the suspension of judgment) offers the skeptic psychic protection, safety, and security from those beliefs which are the source of his tribulations and worries. In another sense, however, the skeptic's beliefs ironically expose him to a new set of worries and concerns. And that's because the skeptic, who is ostensibly no dogmatist (even a negative one), must nonetheless dogmatically defend his "beliefs"—including the belief that his beliefs are not beliefs—in order to protect himself from

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[86] Ibid.
[87] Ibid., 56.

the charge of dogmatism and to enjoy, however paradoxically, the benefits of a life free of dogma.

The notion that beliefs (or at least beliefs of a certain kind) can provide psychological and emotional security, safety, and tranquility adds a new layer to John T. Hamilton's intriguing and insightful study dealing with the philology of care. In *Security: Politics, Humanity, and the Philology of Care*, Hamilton considers the various permutations of care (e.g., physical, psychological, sociological, political), through the dialectic of *securitas*—where the desire to be free from care brings on the care it seeks to be rid of—in order to understand its impact, as a phenomenon, on human life:

> Both self-directed and altruistic care are always linked to inevitable evanescence, because one cares only for that which will one day pass away. If an object could never be lost, it would never call for concern. If a being were imperishable—if one's own self were perfectly indestructible—there would be no occasion for anxiety, nothing to cause worry. The will to secure bespeaks a desire to fix or set in place that which is shifting and shifty, constantly in motion, and, like the real future, threatening constant change. The longing for security—the concern to be without concern—is driven by the wish to render the future motionless, to wrest it from its own futurity and set it firmly in the present, where it could be safely assessed.[88]

In light of Hamilton's observations, we might wonder about the relationship between the phenomenon of care (with its "will to secure") and the phenomenon of belief, which gives human beings the ability to secure "truths" that expand, if not determine, the sphere of care. From religious, philosophical, scientific, and political truths (including those "held to be self-evident") to ordinary truths that, by telling us how to be in the world, inform our daily actions and interactions, truths (in the form of beliefs) are not only a source of security but also the source of insecurity that threatens it. For beliefs, including those that cast doubt on all beliefs,

[88] Hamilton, *Security*, 27.

need to be nurtured, cared for, and vigilantly defended from attack, both from without and within, in order to shield the subject, from worry or care, with the security of *knowing*—most of all himself. In fact, if self-knowledge is a precondition for the existence of caring selves or subjects, then beliefs are one of the primary ways in which such knowledge is secured. One might go so far as to say that beliefs make care possible by giving the human animal the ability to secure learned truths that establish his identity as a caring subject. In other words, beliefs don't just offer security or peace of mind to the existential subject, but, to the extent that a subject, at any given moment, is no more than the sum of his/her beliefs, they *secure* his very existence.

Within the Islamic context, if belief in God, His Books, His Prophets, and in the Judgment are the bulwark of safety, security, and peace, for the Muslim subject—indeed, the word *Islām* itself, meaning to "submit," "to surrender," suggests that submission to the truth of revelations and God is an essential element of what gives safety and security—then questioning, undermining or rejecting God, His words, His tenets, and His laws (including choosing the "wrong" *doxa* among various Islamic schools of thought) is tantamount to courting danger, exposing one's soul to peril, and inviting the kind of uncertainty, tribulation, suffering, fear and sorrow that accompany a life unmoored from faith.[89] In disavowing their faith, to attain to a higher truth, this is precisely the kind of danger that ʿAttār and other Sufi mystics expose themselves to. In poetry, these psychic dangers, trials, and tribulations (in the form of alienation, loss of self, bewilderment, and confusion) are often represented as a rite of passage for those brave enough to shun orthodoxy, commit heresy, and risk damnation to acquire divine

[89] M. Arkoun, s.v. "Islām" in *Encyclopedia of the Qur'ān*, vol. 2, ed. Jane Dammen (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 565.

knowledge. In life, the psychological and emotional dangers of abandoning orthodoxy were further compounded by the threat of persecution, excommunication, and violence.[90]

Belief and Unbelief in ʿAttār's Heretical Love Poems

Faith in classical Islam is based, according to the saying of the Prophet, on a tripartite division: "Faith is a knowledge in the heart, a voicing with the tongue, and an activity with the limbs."[91] Verbal confession (*qawl*), works *(ʿamal*) and intention (*niyya*) are all expressions of, and ways to express, one's faith (*imān*).[92] Of the three ways in which faith manifested itself, the "interior dimension" (i.e., intention or "knowledge of the heart") was considered to be the most important by both Sufis and scholastic theologians. Equally important to both camps was the question of how one arrived at faith, or adopted their faith. One way of adopting a set of beliefs was by "blind imitation or *taqlid,*" another was by way of science (*imān ʿan ʿilm*), i.e., an "enlightened faith which proves its object."[93] Both the scholastic theologians and the Sufis "disapproved of belief by blind imitation (*taqlid*)."[94] And though the scholastic theologians emphasized rationality as a means of attaining spiritual knowledge, the relationship between faith and knowledge in Islam was a complicated one that was further complicated by the opinions of different Islamic schools, scholars, and theologians. In general, faith and knowledge, though different, are nonetheless intimately related:

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[90] Though there is not much evidence (internally or externally) that ʿAttār was subjected to threats from orthodox Islam that is not the case for other Sufis. For more on the political and religious motivations behind the persecution of prominent Sufis, see Carl W. Ernst, *Words of Ecstasy in Sufism*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), 97-115.

[91] Leonard Lewisohn, *Beyond Faith and Infidelity: The Sufi Poetry and Teaching of Mahmud Shabistari* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1995), 269.

[92] Ibid.

[93] Louis Gardet, s.v. "Īmān," in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, vol. 2, ed. E van Donzel, B. Lewis, Ch. Pellat, et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1965), 1173. In the Islamic religion, in addition to ʿ*ilm* (علم), which is a disciplinary, scientific knowledge, there is also ʿ*irfān* (عرفان), which is non-disciplinary, gnostic spiritual knowledge.

[94] Lewisohn, *Beyond*, 269. The charge against common believers was that their faith (*imān)* was based on *taqlid* (تقليد) and therefore neither on knowledge (ʿ*ilm*) nor spiritual knowing (ʿ*irfān*).

> There are two points to be noted about faith. One is that it is not simply equivalent to intellectual or rational knowledge, but that it is not without such knowledge either. It is a "knot" (*'aqd*)," as Muslim theologians state, which "ties" the mind or "pegs" it to something sure and unshakably certain, but it has a sure basis in knowledge as well.[95]

Hence, according to Toshihiko Izutsu, "Only when you 'bind your heart' to that information, which you already know is true, does it become *îmân*."[96] But the connection between *imān* (faith) and knowledge, even among those who put a premium on rationality, was not always a given. For instance, the Murji'ite (followers of the Murji'ah school of divinity), for whom the concept of *imān* is intimately connected with formal knowledge, reason, and learning, were "divided into two opposing camps in regard to the question of whether a true *imān* is possible or not without being based on reasoning (*nazar*)."[97]

Meanwhile, the Sufis, or those whose spiritual, inward path toward a mystical union (*tawhīd*) with God—culminating in *fanā'* or the symbolic annihilation of self—naturally made them skeptical of any faith that placed conditions and constraints on their beliefs, posited a higher type of faith.[98] This faith was not based on empty imitation, scientific proofs, or the

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[95] Rahman, "Some Key Ethical Concepts of the Qur'ān," 171.

[96] Izutsu's articulation of the relationship between knowledge and faith in Islam, where the heart transforms understanding into conviction, suggest that love plays an essential role in the phenomenon of faith. See *The Concept of Belief in Islamic Theology*, (1965; repr., New York: Books for Libraries, 1980), 137. Additionally, according to Izutsu, if *imān* (faith) was generally equated with knowledge, then *kufr* (infidelity) "would have to be equated with 'ignorance,'" though in reality "*Kufr* means 'giving the lie' *takdhib* or 'covering up (the truth)'" (135). The notion of *Kufr* as ignorance or falsehood is important to keep in mind because when Sufi poets like 'Attār dissolve the binary of faith and faithlessness (in love) they also invariably dissolve the binary between knowledge and ignorance and truth and falsehood.

[97] Ibid., 105. For more on the relationship between knowledge and faith in classical Islam, see chapter 6 ("Belief and Knowledge") in Izutsu's *The Concept of Belief in Islamic Theology*.

[98] According to Ahmet T. Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), "the word *ṣūfī* [from *ṣūf* meaning wool] was first coined as early the second/eighth century to refer to some renunciants and priests who wore wool as opposed to other renunciants and the majority of Muslims who wore linen or cotton" (6). Wearing wool, which was seen as a form of "self-deprivation" "self-marginalization" and "political protest," eventually came to be associated with some "interiorising renunciant mystics" who directed "their energies increasingly to the cultivation of the inner life" where this "inward turn manifested itself especially in new discourses on spiritual states, stages of spiritual development, closeness to God, and love." (2). Karamustafa goes on to say, "For these 'interiorising' renunciants, the major renunciatory preoccupation of eschewing this world (*dunyā*,

verification of a religious object based on argumentation and reasoning, which might come under attack by opponents. Instead, it was based on personal experience and enlightenment realized through "the heart's vision or illumination (*kashf wa shuhūd*?)":[99]

> Intimate knowledge of God is located in the heart. The heart, created by God as the locus of the human encounter with Himself . . . .
>
> Once the heart is taken over with God's light, the stage of 'unification'. . . sets in and the Sufi arrives at God himself.[100]

This journey towards God was imagined as a path with various stopping places (*manāzil*), stations (*maqāmāt*) and states (*hālāt*) that the traveler had to pass through; turning away from the concerns of this world (*dunyā*) and the lower self (*nasf*) towards "the inner locus of God's presence (*qalb*)."[101] Some Sufis "described the highest stage of intimacy with God as the dissolution of all self-consciousness" while others "viewed the ultimate goal as a 'reconstituted' self, a human identity recomposed in the image of God after being thoroughly deconstructed during the Sufi journey."[102] Regardless of how a union with God was formed, the self (or ego) first had to be evacuated before God could enter and transmute the believer. Many mystical poems, of various genre, stage this drama of losing one's self (*fanāʾ*) in order to gain the beloved by becoming one with Him. In so doing, they invite the reader along on a metaphorical journey,

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literally, 'the lower, nearer realm') in order to cultivate the other world (*ākhira*, the 'ultimate realm') was transformed into a search for the other world within the inner self" where the "concern with attaining knowledge of the inner self was evidently accompanied by a parallel effort to discern the inner meaning of the Qur'ān and the Sunna" through an introspective method of interpretation described as "*instinbāt* (inference)" (2).

[99] Lewisohn, *Beyond*, 269.

[100] Karamustafa, *Sufism*, 15. Here, Karamustafa paraphrases the ideas of one of the "most prominent Sufis of his time," Abu' l-Husayn al-Nūrī.

[101] Ibid., 18.

[102] Ibid., 19. Despite disagreement, among Sufis, over how to characterize the union with God, most "agreed . . . that the ultimate Sufi experience was to be viewed as the passing away or re-absorption of the created human being into the only true/real (*haqq*) being of God, and, most emphatically, not as a divinization of the human" (20). According to Franklin Lewis, in a note to me on 7/23/2018, "Some mystical teachers in the Islamic tradition [who] were much influenced by the Manichaean or neo-Platonic ideas might see the process more as removing/purging the material/transitory//non-divine dross from the divine spark/essence already placed within us."

where the poetic persona subverts and effaces socially constructed hierarchies, oppositions, and differences through paradoxical propositions that turn the ego inside out and strip it of its alienating armor or identity. Once his identity—or that which allows the self to be a self by creating a psychic boundary between self and other—is stripped away, the Sufi mystic is prepared for "his" union, or rather reunion, with God:[103]

> Even the seemingly most irreconcilable opposition between Separation and Union, the very paradigm of opposition, is to be dissolved in the quest for Love, in the symbolic depiction of a theologically unfathomable union between one (Being) and the 'Great Other' (God).[104]

The following *ghazal* from ʿAttār is an example of the poet's use of language to break down social, cultural, and religious borders and hierarchies that differentiate, and in differentiating separate, self from other, lover from beloved, and creature from creator:

زان پیش که بودها نبودست — بود تو ز ما جدا نبودست
چون بود تو بود بود ما بود — کی بود که بود ما نبودست
گر بود تو بود بود ما نی — موقوف تو بد چرا نبودست
ما بر در تو چو خاک بودیم — نه آب و نه گل هوا نبودست
در صدر محبّت نشانیدم — زان پیش که حرف لا نبودست
دریای تو جوش سر بر آورد — پر شد همه جا و جا نبودست
عطّار ضعیف را دل ریش — جز درد تو به دوا نبودست

Before beings came into being,
your being from mine was not separate.
Since you existed I/we existed,
when was it that I/we did not exist?[105]
If you existed and I did not exist,
and my existence was contingent on yours, why wouldn't I not exist?
I was like the dirt upon your door,

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[103] "Human life presented itself to them [the early Sufis] as a journey towards the ever-elusive goal of achieving true 'God-consciousness', as an ongoing attempt to draw near God. In Sufi perspective, human beings, viewed as God-servants, had experienced such proximity to their Lord before the beginning of time . . . and they were promised an even more intimate closeness to Him at the end of time in paradise. While on earth, however, they had to strive to preserve and renew the memory of their primordial proximity to their creator." Karamustafa, *Sufism*, 19.

[104] Farīd al-Dīn ʿAṭṭār, *Fifty Poems of 'Aṭṭār*, trans. Kenneth S. Avery and Ali Alizadeh (Melbourne: re.press, 2007), 52.

[105] The personal pronoun *mā*, literally meaning "we," but traditionally used in Persian poetry to refer to the singular poetic persona/speaker, will be discussed later in the chapter.

no water nor earth nor air existed.
You sat me before the first rank of your love,
before the word *lā* [meaning "no"] existed.
Your ocean began to surge/boil,
it filled every place and place did not exist.
Weak ʿAttār's heart is wounded,
other than your pain, no remedy exists.[106]

According to Kenneth Avery and Ali Alizadeh, the *ghazal*, whose "pan-en-theistic view is in tension with the traditional doctrine of creation," takes on a familiar philosophical/mystical conundrum the Persian Sufis were widely occupied with.[107] Namely, if all beings, before the existence of the universe, partook in divine Being or that which existed before the universe existed (i.e., the primordial matter and energy out of which the universe was created), then that means individuated, finite beings, paradoxically, have also existed (in one form or another) since eternity. If that is the case, then there could never have been a time when individuated, finite beings (in some way, shape or form) did not exist or partake in divine Being. But for beings to *partake* in divine Being they must, paradoxically, be individuated and finite beings. Without separation and individuation, in time, beings would never become aware of there having been a time when all beings were one Being. In this regard, the poem is likely alluding to the famous Hadith Qudsi where God, a "hidden treasure," creates humankind in order to be known, recognized, and loved:

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[106] The translation is mine. The Persian original, transcribed from *Fifty Poems* (*ghazal* 12, p. 86), is from Farīd al-Dīn ʿAṭṭār, *Dīwāni ʿAṭṭār*, ed. Taqī Tafazzulī, (Tehran: Bungāh-i Tarjumah u Nashr-i Kitāb, 1967) *ghazal* 58.

[107] ʿAṭṭār, *Fifty Poems*, 181. According to Ritter, the doctrine of pantheism had been in currency since the "5th century AH" and "came to exert a broad dominance over Sufism up unto the modern era." Ritter goes on to explain the influential doctrine in the following way:

> The whole of creation is a self-manifestation of God who, as the only real Being, stands concealed behind all things and provides them with their Being. In things the attributes of God take on concrete form and in this way become accessible to perception.

See Ritter's, *The Ocean of the Soul: Man, the World, and God in the Stories of Farīd al-Dīn ʿAṭṭār*, trans. John O'Kane (Boston: Brill, 2013), 492.

كنت كنزاً مخفياً فأحببت أن أعرف فخلقت الخلق لكي أعرف

> I was a hidden treasure and desired to be known,
> so I created the creation in order to be known.[108]

At the same time, however, this separation from the divine source is, at least for the poet, a source a great pain and anguish. The narrator acknowledges this painful truth when, at the end of the poem, he confesses that the "pain" caused by this primeval separation is, paradoxically, the only "remedy" for his suffering heart; for the pain of separation is not only a reminder/remainder of a past connection but also the hope of future reconciliation with the divine Being. Furthermore, by addressing God or the Supreme Being as his beloved (or using the conventions of love poetry to express his longings for mystical union), the poet suggests that secular, human love is one way in which individuated beings, by becoming one with the beloved, symbolically efface themselves and partake in Being.[109]

Inevitably, the Sufi ethos of effacing oneself, as precondition to mystical union, brought them into conflict with those whose religious identity was tied to a strict interpretation and practice of Islam. These *kalām* (scholastic theology) teachers and jurists, from as early as the 8th century, through the "application of *takfīr* (condemnation of one's co-religionists for heresy)" persecuted and anathematized anyone who did not agree with their religious beliefs or practices:[110]

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[108] I am grateful to Franklin Lewis for translating this Hadith for me. "Knowledge" here is cognition (عرف) not *scientia* (علم) .

[109] This reading is consistent with the way in which Persian mystical poets understood pantheism. According to this view, "God created the world (mankind) so that, like a divine Narcissus, He might admire His own beauty in it, as in a mirror, and engage in love-play with Himself." Ritter, *The Ocean*, 492.

[110] Lewisohn, *Beyond*, 273. According to Carl Ernst:

> The result of this trend was that certain theologians began to anathematize all Muslims who did not belong to their school. Such a step effectively restricted salvation to professional theologians adhering to the one

> Of course, to the mystics, for whom faith and piety was, as dictated by the Prophet, "in the breast," the catechisms and anathema of the jurists were signs that the malady of hypocrisy had infected the entire Muslim body-politic. Turning upon themselves, many Sufis rejected the literal faith of the *faqīhs* [jurists], and transforming curses to compliments, laid the epithet of 'Infidel' like a laurel upon their brows. Sufis, paradoxically, vied with each other in aspiration to the heights of 'praiseworthy infidelity', and to combat conceit, knowing the ego (*nafs*) to be "the worst of all enemies," in Hujwīrī's words, anathematized their pride.[111]

Embracing infidelity, then, became a way for Sufis to express their faith in *tawhīd*, or divine unity, by, paradoxically, effacing the duality, difference, and opposition between faith and infidelity; i.e., that which makes the concept of faith possible:[112]

> From the realization that God's action pervades all diverse "forms" of movement and rest—and hence, sustains all infidelity and faith—it was a short step for the Sufi to dare to qualify himself with God's own universal comprehensiveness of both *kufr* [infidelity] and *īmān* [faith]. That is to say, to bravely envision the possibility of a transcendental faith in God which *included kufr* as well.[113]

In turn, what began as a reaction to, and a protest against, injunctions and injustices ensuing from a narrow understanding of faith became an "integral aspect of Sufi doctrinal teaching concerned with the *ethics of the spirit*, and thus effectively removed [heresy] from the realm of doctrinal squabbles."[114] In the Persian context, the process of turning faithlessness into an expression of

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> correct doctrine. The unbridled use of theological anathemas threatened to go out of control and create a vicious factionalism based on purely theoretical grounds. (*Words of Ecstasy*, 57)

According to Franklin Lewis, in a note to me on 7/23/2018, "Unless there was also a potential circumstance involved that put the particular exponent of non-orthodox beliefs at risk for persecution, it hardly ever happened that people were executed for heretical beliefs." He goes on to say, "Theologically, the Islamic tradition becomes very early on practically and politically concerned with the question of which *doxa* are correct and moved to exclude certain groups from the 'People of Consensus and the Sunna' on the basis of their *Khārijī* or *Alid* beliefs, and the question of belief was narrowed according to various schools' stated *doxa* or articles of faith *('aquīda)*, by which it was evaluated whether or not you had *imān*, or not."

[111] Lewisohn, *Beyond*, 274.

[112] To believe something (or hold something for true), about any phenomenon, including the phenomenon of faith, is made by possible by disbelieving or negating the possibility of another interpretation of the same phenomenon. Conversely, to disbelieve something or to be faithless (as any faithful atheist will acknowledge) entails belief in the negation of that which one disbelieves. This helps explain why, as we will see later, ʿAttār's poems dealing with the topic of faith and infidelity often stop short of asserting anything, or anything that can be believed or disbelieved.

[113] Lewisohn, *Beyond*, 280.

[114] Ibid., 274.

faith received its most powerful articulation in Mansūr al-Hallāj's (d. 309/922) doctrine of "heretical faith" or *kufr-ī haqīqī* (literally, "real infidelity"). In a famous letter, "that appears to have been a dominant inspiration to the development of the genre of *kufr*-prose and poetry in Persian for some seven centuries following his death," Hallāj says:[115]

> In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate, who manifests Himself (*tajalla*) through everything to whomsoever He wishes. Peace be unto you, my son. May God veil you from the exterior of the religious law, and may He reveal to you the reality of infidelity (*haqīqat al-kufr*). For the exterior of the religious law is hidden in idolatry, while the reality of infidelity is a manifest gnosis (*ma'rifah jaliyah*). Thus, praise belongs to the God who manifests Himself on the head of a pin to whom He wishes, and who conceals Himself in the heavens and the earths from whom He wishes, so that one testifies that He is not, and another testifies that there is none other than He. But the witness in negation of Him is not rejected, and the witness in affirmation of Him is not praised. And the purpose of this letter is that I charge you not to be deceived by God, and not to despair of Him; not to covet His love, and not to be satisfied with not being His lover; not to utter affirmation of Him, and not incline towards negation of Him. And beware of affirming the divine unity! Peace.[116]

Hallāj's letter is remarkable as much for what it instructs the pious reader to profess and believe, as what it instruct him not to profess and believe, which is to say anything that compromises his ability to profess and believe anything else that he can potentially profess and believe. And here, it is important to recall the intimate connection between faith and knowledge that Augustine acknowledged: "Understand, in order to believe, my word." In order for the believer to profess his faith, or the unbeliever to profess his faithlessness (i.e., his negative belief), he must nonetheless *know* what it is he believes or, in the case of the unbeliever, what he does not believe, otherwise there is nothing to believe or disbelieve. In turn, Hallāj's letter questions professing (or avowing to) even this most basic kind of knowledge—i.e., the knowledge of what

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[115] Ibid., (footnote 944), 312.
[116] The translation is by Carl Ernst, *Words of Ecstasy*, 64-65. According to Ernst, Hallāj is "the real formulator of the mystical *topos* of faith and infidelity" (61).

one is accepting or rejecting on faith, or that which is a precondition to believing or disbelieving anything—because the affirmation of such knowledge not only creates the possibility of its negation but it also delimits the object of faith (i.e., God). Consequently, though the letter begins by affirming the "reality of infidelity" (or negating the false opposition between faith and infidelity), and rejecting the "exterior of religious law," or exoteric religiosity, which positively distinguishes faith from infidelity, thereby negating "divine unity," it ends by warning the reader, "beware of affirming the divine unity!" Hence, as we will see, Hallāj's contribution to future generations of Sufi philosophers and poets is not so much in what he espouses and believes, but in pointing out the limits of what can be espoused and believed. In turn, Hallāj's doctrine of "heretical faith," which gradually chipped away at the foundations of orthodox faith, not only influenced important Sufi jurists and philosophers like Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) and 'Ayn al-Qudāt Hamadāhnī (d. 526/1131), but it also had a profound impact on the most poignant and powerful medium of mystical expression: Sufi poetry.[117]

In the Persian context, the motif of real infidelity (*kufr-ī haqīqī*), and infidelity (*kufriyyāt*) in general, was explored by Sufi poets through the deployment of metaphors and symbols taken from non-Muslim religions:[118]

> The 'lyrics celebrating infidelity', or kufriyya, feature non-Islamic, and sometimes deliberately anti-Islamic imagery and symbols drawn from the theological and doctrinal lexicons of Christianity, Buddhism and Zoroastrianism which are used to glorify the transcendence of esoteric spiritual realization and the Sufi Path.[119]

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[117] According to Lewisohn, although Ghazālī was very critical of fanatical Muslims, especially those who used doctrinal differences to condemn and persecute other Muslims, that did not necessarily make him tolerant of other religions. In fact, he considered anyone who refuted the words of the Prophet an infidel (276). In contrast to Ghazālī, Ayn al-Qudāt Hamadāhnī's "views were expressive of that pleasant extremity of tolerance for which Persian Sufism has ever been a byword" (276). For more on Ghazālī's and 'Ayn al-Qudāt Hamadāhnī's respective religious views, see *Beyond*, 275-277.

[118] Lewisohn, *Beyond*, 278.

[119] Lewisohn, "Sufi Symbolism in the Persian Hermeneutic Tradition," 267.

Though Sufism, with its belief in divine unity, advocated, for the most part, tolerance and acceptance of other religions, we are nonetheless warned by some scholars not to interpret the promiscuity between religions in Sufi poetry as being anything more than symbolic.[120] According to J.T.P. de Bruijn:

> One should therefore take care not to read a reflection of reality in these poetic images. Poets such as Sanā'ī and Farīd al-Dīn ʿAttār, who used them very frequently in their poetry, were certainly not antinomian mystics, but pious Muslims who put much emphasis on the obedience to God's will.[121]

Meanwhile, A. Bausani says that heretical symbols and imagery are "simply symbols of something contrasted with official Islam and, in lyrics, a symbol of a mystical reality deeper than any exoteric religion."[122] Hellmut Ritter, whose literary tome on ʿAttār, *The Ocean of the Soul*, is a standard in the field, only concurs with this view up to a point. Ritter argues that though ʿAttār's, and other poets', *qalandar* songs (*qalandariyyāt*)—"named after the wandering dervish known as *qalandar*"—celebrating gambling, drinking, carousing, erotic love and an "indifference toward positive religions and their rites," might only be fantasies of acting impiously, they nonetheless represent a way of life that actually existed.[123] This is an important point because scholars who argue for a purely symbolic reading of heresy inevitably contain or neutralize the religious subversiveness of the poems. In emphasizing a purely symbolic, esoteric

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[120] The liberal Sufi attitude towards other religions, was also influenced by the Mongol invasion of Persia (1219-1221), which lasted for over a hundred years. According to Michael M. Mazzaoui, "The Mongol period . . . was marked with tremendous religious controversies; but at the same time it was a period of co-existence of various Muslim religious views. This co-existence amounted almost to a freedom of religious beliefs and reciprocal toleration." See *The Origins of the Ṣafawids; Šī'ism, Ṣūfism, and the Ğulāt,* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1972), 38.

[121] J.T.P. de Bruijn, *Persian Sufi Poetry: An Introduction to the Mystical Use of Classical Poems* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 1997), 75.

[122] A. Bausani, "Muhammad or Darius? The Elements and Basis of Iranian Culture," in *Islam and Culture Change in the Middle Ages*, ed. S. Vyronis Jr., (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1975), 53.

[123] Ritter, *The Ocean of the Soul*, 503-504.

reading of heresy, over and against a potentially literal one, these critics not only "inadvertently" Islamicize the poems, by fictionalizing their blasphemous or non-Islamic dimension, but they also, ironically, risk compromising the mystical, spiritual, and esoteric meanings that the subversive heresy of the poems unlock.

Lewisohn takes the process of containment (in terms of the poems' heretical meaning) one step further by arguing that "any understanding of the poetics of a Sufi poet, and particularly that of ʿAṭṭār, the greatest Persian Sufi poet of the 12th century, demands comprehension of the principles of Sufi mystical doctrine and theology."[124] Lewisohn advocates reading ʿAttār's heretical poems through the lens of symbolist commentators writing *after* the poet's death. Once again, these readings emphasize the symbolic dimension of infidelity, showing how the poems use infidelity (*kufr*) to critique and subvert orthodox Islamic faith while advocating for a faith based on "Muslim divine unity (*tawhid*)."[125] The problems with this approach are many, including (1) the assumption that we know what ʿAttār expected of his readers or that he had a stable disciple group for whom he was writing and (2) the presumption that Sufi poetry can only be explicated and understood by recourse to a symbolist discourse grounded in "principles of Sufi mystical doctrine and theology."[126] But exchanging one set of words/concepts for another (i.e., the non-symbolic with the symbolic, only to translate the symbolic back into the non-

[124] Lewisohn, "Sufi Symbolism in the Persian Hermeneutic Tradition," 257.
[125] Ibid., 260.
[126] As Kenneth Avery and Ali Alizadeh rhetorically ask, in their scathing critique of the symbolist tradition, "if every word is symbolic of a highly refined theosophical system better expressed in philosophical prose" then "why write poetry at all"? See *Fifty Poems*, 45-46. This is not to suggest that ʿAttār's texts require no knowledge of Sufi themes and symbols, for surely they did. But to limit the meaning of his works to rigorous readings based on the codification of Sufi symbols and terminology that took place after his death is not only anachronistic but it also goes against the spirit of the poems themselves (or at least those in this study), whose intent, as we will see, is to give the reader an experience that is beyond words, regardless of what such words symbolize.

symbolic) in order to articulate the principles of one's doctrines does not circumvent the problem of avowal, or what Sufis like Hallāj say *you can't say* about the "mystical doctrine and theology": "I charge you not to be deceived by God… not to utter affirmation of Him, and not incline towards negation of Him. And beware of affirming the divine unity!" Hallāj's stated message or "charge," if he has one, is, as mentioned before, to neither affirm nor negate any "principle" or "doctrine"; including the doctrine of "divine unity." And his words of caution, when it comes to espousing one's beliefs, make sense when considering that (1) what drove the Sufis to Sufism was, in part, the uncompromisingly dogmatic and doctrinal treatment of faith by Islamic jurists and theologians (2) the recourse to discourse (symbolic or otherwise) to express religious truths assumes knowledge of what letters and words signify, thus limiting the meaning of God and opening the door for disagreement and conflict and (3) the Sufi subject, whose aim it is to achieve divine unity (*tawhid*), the be all end all of the Sufi's mystical journey, cannot avow to an experience, i.e., divine unity, that is predicated, by way of *fanāʾ*, on the extinction of the self that avows. As we have seen, one way the Sufi mystic tries to circumvent the aporia of avowal is by outwardly embracing infidelity. The Sufi's heretical disposition (whether in life or poetry) is ostensibly a tacit sign of his faith in divine unity, which incorporates both faith (avowal) and faithlessness (disavowal). And yet, his faithlessness cannot be interpreted as a *sign* (tacit or otherwise) that unambiguously affirms divine unity; for if it were then the mystical concept of divine unity would have to include its own negation, since any avowal of divine unity is predicated on the possibility of its disavowal (or negation). This, in turn, would turn divine unity into another human-made doctrine or religion—that one could accept or reject—thereby negating its universal truth.

Consequently, Hallāj's letter, if taken to heart, creates a series of linguistic obstacles for the Sufi poet keen on espousing his faith in divine unity. First, if there is an avowal, the avowal must be expressed without being expressed, through the disappearance of the subject in *fanāʾ*, where his disappearance as a subject of discourse avows, or testifies to, the divine unity he could not otherwise, as a grammatical subject, avow to. And yet, the subject cannot fully dissolve and disappear, for if he did we would have the preposterous scenario of a speech act without a speaker, testifying to the annihilation of the speaking subject (in divine unity) who, because he is no longer a subject, cannot speak. Second, if divine unity encompasses everything, then it should, at least theoretically, encompass immanence (in the form of the speaking subject) and transcendence (the dissolution of the speaking subject in divine unity) simultaneously. In fact, if the poems aim to perform (and not just represent) a mystical experience, by way of mystical union, then they should encompass all possible meanings and readings. And yet, even an all-encompassing notion of divine unity, which includes self (immanence) and selflessness (transcendence), does not solve the problem or riddle of avowal, or how to (1) avow to that (i.e., divine unity) which always already encompasses avowal and (2) to do it in a way that does not, as in the case of ordinary human beliefs, create the possibility of its disavowal.[127]

[127] The Sufi dilemma, regarding the concept of divine unity as a category that must, for the purposes of avowal, include itself and yet at the same time cannot include itself, seems to be a medieval version of Russell's Paradox:

> The comprehensive class we are considering, which is to embrace everything, must embrace itself as one of its members. In other words, if there is such a thing as "everything," then, "everything" is something, and is a member of the class "everything." But normally a class is not a member of itself. Mankind, for example, is not a man. Form now the assemblage of all classes which are not members of themselves. This is a class: is it a member of itself or not? If it is, it is one of those classes that are not members of themselves, i.e., it is not a member of itself. If it is not, it is not one of those classes that are not members of themselves, i.e. it is a member of itself. Thus of the two hypotheses – that it is, and that it is not, a member of itself – each implies its contradictory. This is a contradiction. (§136)

Bertrand Russell, *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy* (London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1919).

These linguistic hurdles explain why Lewishon, in regards to one of ʿAttār's heretical poems, says that the "actual regeneration experienced is ineffable" and that such mysteries "are always expressed through apophatic discourse."[128] Lewishon's distinction between an ineffable mystical experience and the *expression* of the same ineffable experience through apophatic discourse, is based on Michael A. Sells' important work on mystical languages.[129] Although Lewishon ostensibly agrees with Sells' distinction, he nonetheless insists on a symbolist reading of the "ineffable" in ʿAttār—where "an image or metaphor is assigned its supra-sensual reference," thus restricting "its allusive power … to serve in a variety of poetic contexts."—all the while ignoring the poem's apophatic dimensions.[130] According to Sells, the problem of ineffability in mystical writing begins with the dilemma of trying to name the transcendent, which in the context of this discussion is the Sufi avowal, or affirmation, of divine unity: "Any statement of ineffability, 'X is beyond names,' generates the aporia that the subject of the statement must be named (as X) in order for us to affirm that it is beyond names."[131] Consequently, there are three responses to this aporia: the first is "silence," the second is "to distinguish between ways in which the transcendent is beyond names and ways in which it is not," and the third is to accept the "dilemma as a genuine *aporia*, that is, as unresolvable; but this acceptance, instead of leading to silence, leads to a new mode of discourse":[132]

> *Apophasis* is the common Greek designation for this language. Apophasis can mean "negation," but its etymology suggests a meaning that more precisely characterizes the discourse in question: *apophasis* (un-saying or speaking-away). The term apophasis is commonly paired with *kataphasis* (affirmation, saying, speaking-with). Every act of unsaying demands or presupposes a previous saying. Apophasis can reach a point of

[128] Lewisohn, "Sufi Symbolism in the Persian Hermeneutic Tradition," 296.
[129] Michael Anthony Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).
[130] Avery and Alizadeh, *Fifty Poems*, 45.
[131] Sells, *Mystical Languages*, 2.
[132] Ibid.

> intensity such that no single proposition concerning the transcendent can stand on its own. Any saying (even a negative saying) demands a correcting proposition, an unsaying. But the correcting proposition which unsays the previous proposition is in itself a "saying" that must be "unsaid" in turn. It is in the tension between the two propositions that the discourse becomes meaningful. That tension is momentary. It must be continually re-earned by ever new linguistic acts of unsaying.[133]

Another key feature of this discourse, which the monotheistic writers in Sells' study all share, is the "radical dialectic" of transcendence and immanence, "in which the utterly transcendent is revealed as the utterly immanent" so that "the hierarchical levels of being that are posited are unsaid from within."[134] The aim of such mystical discourse is mystical union, or the "moment in which the boundaries between divine and human, self and other, melt away."[135] And yet, as Sells warns, the experience conveyed through apophatic discourse is no ordinary experience. In fact, it can't be an "experience" at all, at least not in the ordinary sense of the word. An experience presupposes "a grammatical object of experience," "mediation," and "constructedness," while mystical discourse tries to convey an experience "that claims to speak from the point where subject and object, self and other, are one."[136] According to Sells, then, the mystical experience is not conveyed or represented through language but rather, the mystical experience, or what he calls the "meaning event," occurs within the workings of language, by producing referential openness:

> Mystery is neither a set of abstruse doctrines to be taken on faith nor a secret prize for the initiated. Mystery is a referential openness onto the depths of a particular tradition, and into conversation with other traditions. The referential openness is fleeting. . . . As soon as one thinks one has it, one has lost it. It is glimpsed only in the interstices of the text, in the tension between the saying and the unsaying. Yet as elusive as it is, it is in principle accessible to all.[137]

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[133] Ibid., 2-3.
[134] Ibid., 6-7.
[135] Ibid., 7.
[136] Ibid., 10, 9.
[137] Ibid., 8.

Sells' view of how mystical language works, or is supposed to work, and whom it is supposed to work on, is very different from Lewisohn's uncompromising view, where the true meaning of Sufi mystical writing is only accessible to initiates with arcane, esoteric knowledge of Sufi symbolism. Instead of referencing static esoteric symbols of a religious doctrine, apophatic discourse "moves toward the transreferential."[138] Though apophatic discourse "cannot dispense with reference" it nonetheless, "through the constant turning back upon its own referential delimitations, seeks momentary liberation from such delimitations."[139] Sells goes on to say, "Rather than pointing at an object, apophatic language attempts to evoke in the reader an event that is—in its movement beyond structures of self and other, subject and object—structurally analogous to the event of mystical union."[140]

A closer look at ʿAttār's *ghazal* dealing with the theme of primordial union of all beings in divine Being, the eventual separation or individuation of beings from divine Being, and a being's desire or longing to reunite with divine Being, illustrates just how apophatic discourse "works." In that poem, "'ʿAttār uses word plays and 'word-knots' involving the use of the verbal form *būd* 'was; being'" and its noun, "being" or "existence," to create a contradictory set of meanings that point to a truth beyond language and words.[141] This play or pun on *bud* (as both subject and predicate) connecting a thing to its activity, by obfuscating the distinction between a thing and its activity, mirrors (on a grammatical level) the way in which the poet connects the existence and activity of all beings to a single divine Being before time; or at least before a

[138] Ibid.
[139] Ibid.
[140] Ibid., 10.
[141] Translator's notes in *Fifty Poems*, 181.

grammar of separation, difference, negation, and change could demarcate or measure *being* in time:

> You sat me before the first rank of your love,
> before the word *lā* [meaning "no"] existed.
> Your ocean began to surge/boil,
> it filled every place and place did not exist.

In the first verse, the poet not only conjures a time when all beings partook in divine Being, that is before separation, as the arch negation, existed, but he also connects our current, decoupled or individuated state to a language of difference, separation, and negation (i.e., before *lā* existed). In the verse that follows, the poet evokes God's sea of divinity in order to give the reader a glimpse of what an un-individuated, pre-grammatic–existence might have been like, before the droplets forming the sea became, through creation, individuated. But the syntax of second hemistich complicates what we are asked to imagine/visualize in the first by having God, who encompasses everything, fill itself, or fill that which it already is. To point out these "impossibilities" is not to deny the obvious, i.e., that the poet, in trying to describe or convey a mystical truth, is necessarily limited by human language, understanding, and reason, but rather, to show how the poet points to a mystical truth by testing the limits of human language, understanding, and reason. In this case, the verse suggests a "subject" (i.e., divine Being) that is simultaneously subject, object, and predicate, or the thing doing the acting, the thing being acted upon, and the action itself, and, if all this was not enough to confound our limited faculties, also the "place" where it (i.e., divine Being) manifests itself (as subject, object and predicate). But such a conclusion defies human comprehension, which is why the verse concludes in apophatic fashion, and the "place" occupied by divine Being vanishes under the strain of syntax unable to *hold*

(everything) together: "Your ocean began to surge/boil, / it filled every place and place did not exist."

ʿAttār's poems are full of such apophatic moments, even if the apophatic is not directly stated, or rather, unstated. More often than not, the apophatic in ʿAttār is expressed through unresolvable paradoxes and aporias that defy logic and reason. One such paradox involves the nature of being in its relation to divine Being, where being is predicated on a being's existence in time—cleverly demonstrated through the pun on *bud*—while at the same time, the existence of beings is predicated on a divine Being that predates time: "Before beings came into being, / your being from mine was not separate." Here, the language used to articulate a logical proof demonstrating the primordial union between finite beings and divine Being is negated (or undone) by the very logic it relies on for its sense. According to the argument, before beings came into existence (i.e., before time) the poet's being (which is predicated on time) existed in divine Being. Or, to put it in more preposterous terms, at a time when there was no time, a finite being that could not exist, because its existence is predicated on time, nonetheless existed, in potentia, in divine Being outside of time.

Another apophatic moment occurs when the poet tries to reinforce the primordial bond between beings and divine Being by exploiting a literary convention. In Persian lyric poetry, the poetic persona often uses the personal pronoun we (*mā*) to refer to himself. Unlike the royal "we," the majestic plural pronoun in English, "we" in Persian poetry is a sign of humility and deference. But within the context of a poem espousing the mystical union of all beings, the use of "we" also operates on a more literal level to, paradoxically, create a metaphoric meaning. For instance, a literal translation or reading of the second verse ("Since you existed *we* existed, /

when was it that *we* did not exist?") not only reinforces the interconnectedness of all beings to divine Being, but it also subverts the hierarchy between beings and divine Being by obfuscating the very distinction (between self and divine other) that the sentence, and the poem as a whole, rely on for their sense. For if beings (by their very existence) are always already a part of divine Being, then what beings desire, paradoxically, is nothing short of partaking in their own divinity. Finally, to perplex us even further, the poet, in using the traditional language of love poetry to address the divine Being, complicates the very categories of sacred and profane that distinguish his spiritual, mystical longing from a carnal, physical one.

Although the *ghazal* is not directly about faith, it nonetheless leaves the reader wondering just what to believe about the nature and origin of beings, the divine Being, the universe, and time. Just as importantly, the poem creates this sense of mystical bewilderment through its inability to articulate a "belief" that does not, in some way, shape or form, compromise its own sense. One question that immediately comes to mind, in relation to the apophatic in ʿAttār's mystical poetry, is whether the poem (and those like it) stage an apophatic discourse (as Sells claims), or whether they reveal the apophatic nature of all discourse by exploiting language's apophatic (or self-negating) potential? It is a subtle distinction to be sure, but one worth considering because if the answer is the latter then that means the poet is not simply using apophatic discourse to suspend all linguistically (which is to say culturally) constructed notions of God or the divine—in order to induce a mystical experience by way of referential openness—but he is also testing the limits of what can be imagined, thought,

articulated, and consequently believed (through language) by exploiting language's unlimited potential to undo and unsay whatever it says or does.[142]

ʿAttār's preoccupation with faith, in its relation to language, love, divine knowledge, and faithlessness come together in direct and unabashed fashion in the subgenre of *ghazals* called *tarsā-bacha* or Christian child.[143] These heretical *ghazals* or love poems represent and respond to the love encounter between "a Muslim male, usually the speaking persona of the poem, for a Christian boy" who is "sexually androgynous, or ambiguous, doubtless marked by the absence of those hallmarks of testosterone, facial and body hair, leaving his skin smooth and soft."[144] According to Hellmut Ritter, hairless, beardless boys, in Sufi iconography, are a symbol of the divine: "If a specific form peculiar to God was envisaged by the early Sūfīs—an intolerable thought for orthodox Muslims—then it would be that of 'a beardless youth'."[145] Although ʿAttār

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[142] This is not to suggest that one cannot make sense out of the poem, but only that if we try to imagine what the poem is actually saying (or asking us to imagine) we are confronted by the limits of our imagination, or what language will allow us to imagine without losing its sense.

[143] According to Franklin Lewis, "The word *tarsā* (plural *tarsāyān*), deriving from the Persian verb *tarsīdan*, etymologically means one who fears or dreads, or by extension one who is pious (cf. Arabic *rāhib*, as well as *taqvā*), but as a confessional term it regularly refers to Christians." See Franklin Lewis, "Sexual Occidentation: The Politics of Conversion, Christian-love and Boy-love in ʿAttār," *Journal of Iranian Studies* 42, no. 5 (Dec 2009), 713.
Lewis goes on to say:

> Far from suggesting the precarious social situation of a fearful minority religious community, it is rather an emic term in Middle Persian (MP), with Christians themselves, as well as Zoroastrians and later Muslims, denoting "Christian" by *tarsāg/tarsāgān*, quite likely related to the Arabic adoption of *rāhib*, one who fears, for Christian monks. Pines had argued that Middle Persian *tarsāg* might derive from the phrase in the Acts of the Apostles, e.g., 10:2 and other places…"those who fear God" = gentiles who believed in the God of the Jews without converting, and were targeted by Paul's preaching. Despite its widespread sociolinguistic acceptance in the MP period, one cannot help wondering if *tarsā* did not acquire a somewhat negative connotation in the Islamic period, as marker of an out-group that was sometimes described as *kāfir* (pagan) despite their status as people of the Book. (713-714)

[144] Ibid., 694, 717.

[145] Ritter, *The Ocean*, 459. For orthodox Muslims, all visual representations of God are strictly forbidden:

> Islamic orthodoxy will absolutely not accept attributing a particular form to God….To orthodox Islam the idea that God could have a visible form is an abomination. It only adopted this defensive position against the conception of a God in visible form after conflicts with groups favorable to anthropomorphic thinking. (453)

Despite this fact, there were also exceptions to the orthodox viewpoint; exceptions which ultimately allowed the Sufis to symbolize God (or give God human form) in their love poetry. According to Ritter, not only was "a kind of

did not invent the genre of *tarsā-bacha* or Christian-child poems, he was nonetheless interested in them, writing some fifteen *ghazals* altogether dealing with this topic and the themes it encompasses.[146] However, according to Franklin Lewis, unlike some other poets who wrote in this genre ʿAttār tends to "marginalize or exclude the more graphic language . . . and its more overtly earthly eroticism," in favor of using the "desire for human beauty" as "a metaphor and a symbolic cipher for the soul's yearning for the divine" in order to explore the relation between faith and unbelief.[147] I want to extend Lewis' argument by suggesting that these "love poems," which confuse, collapse, and overturn the distinctions between sacred and profane, tavern and temple, Christian and Muslim, knowledge and ignorance, desire and despair, speech and silence, and, ultimately, faith and faithlessness, stage a crisis of faith by complicating our understanding of the categories that bring the crisis to a head. But in order for the poems accomplish this feat, the profane love of a Christian child cannot simply represent the sacred love of the divine (as Lewis suggests). Conversely, the poems cannot be read as offering two distinct and incompatible readings (i.e., one sacred and the other profane) as Ritter suggests: "And so ʿAṭṭār counts on a twofold readership, one which understands these poems mystically, and one which conceives of

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anthropomorphic conception of God…quite usual in circles of the pious" (454) but also, from a mystical, pantheistic point of view, "God has no specific form": "He manifests Himself in the whole of creation, displays His beauty in every beautiful creature, even in flowers and gardens" (457).

[146] According to Franklin Lewis, "These fifteen *tarsā-bacha ghazals* constitute a relatively small percentage of the total number of *ghazals* in the Dīvān, and yet the topos seems to be given special, even unprecedented emphasis, in ʿAttār" (717). Regarding the origins of the genre, Lewis says:

> Pederastic courtship and the idealization of the ephebe goes back, of course, to classical Athens, and through the institution of the symposium, as well as literary representation and artistic depiction on vase paintings, the social institution of pederasty would not have been unfamiliar in the Hellenized Middle East from the Seleucid and Parthian periods through late antiquity. Whether the amorous idealization of the Christian boy in Arabic and Persian poetry owes its origins in part to the influence of the Hellenistic cult of the ephebe, there is already a long history behind the semiotic fascination, not to say fetishizing, of certain of the garments and symbols of Christianity by the time ʿAttār comes to the topos in the latter half of the twelfth century. In Arabic, the topos of the lovely Christian boy emerges in the Abbasid era, famously in Abu Nuwās (d. c. 198/813 or 200/815), where it already verges on the burlesque and bawdy, though a poet as skilled and interesting as Abu Nuwās is up to something serious with his ludic lewdery. (703)

[147] Ibid., 708-709.

them in a worldly way."[148] Instead, the two loves, sacred and profane, must be inextricably linked together so that the profane love for a Christian youth, which the poems entwine with the sacred love of the divine, is the catalyst for a crisis that tests and transcends faith's limits by obfuscating the distinction between faith and faithlessness.[149] Only in this way, i.e., by making avowal or disavowal impossible, can the poems gesture towards a religion of love, or faith in a divine Being that lovingly encompasses everything (including faith and faithlessness), without avowing it.

The aporias facing the Muslim persona of the poems are many. He is carnally attracted to a Christian boy who, though not of the "true faith," holds out the possibility for spiritual transcendence if only he (the lover) is willing to commit blasphemy and suffer eternal damnation by being intimate with him.[150] In turn, the lover can only attain his object of desire and become intimate with the beloved if he is brave enough to figuratively annihilate himself (*fanāʾ*) in the process: a self-martyrdom of sorts. And if that isn't enough, the man who is being asked to do all this, as a precondition to attaining union with his beloved, is put in the paradoxical situation of having to prove his masculinity (in the form of courage or fearlessness) by submitting and succumbing to the demands of an effeminate and ostensibly weaker boy. Though the *tarsā-bachcha* is, within this genre of *ghazals*, invariably a boy, his androgyny also makes possible a

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[148] Ritter, 519.

[149] To reiterate an earlier point, suggesting that love of the Christian child merely symbolizes love of the divine (as some scholars do) risks compromising the mystical, spiritual, and esoteric meanings that the subversive heresy of the poems unlock.

[150] According to Franklin Lewis, in a note to me on 7/23/2018, "The Christianness of the boy as love object is not as theologically/legally blasphemous as the idea of sodomy. As long as the Muslim male maintains his religion he is allowed, encouraged even, to take a Christian wife or concubine (but not sexually use a boy slave, though it was a commonplace occurrence)." Hence, love for the Christian boy threatens to undermine his faith while the act of sodomy threatens to put him in legal jeopardy. In this regard, the Christian boy's precondition that the Muslim man give up his religion before being sexually intimate with him is doubly damning!

kind of gender conflation, and as Lewis notes, "Lexically *tarsâ-bachcha* does not pin down the gender of the Christian child with any precision."[151] The androgyny of the boy-beloved and the self-feminization that is required of the man, in order to prove his masculinity, together provide the poet with merely one more opportunity to wreak havoc on a category (this time gender norms and hierarchies) that make knowing, and consequently believing, possible. Of course, with loss of knowledge and belief comes the loss of security, safety, and peace of mind that comes with knowing and believing.

[151] Lewis, "Sexual Occidentation," 717. In fact, ʿAttār's most famous rendition of heretical love (between a Muslim and a Christian) is between a Muslim man and a Christian girl (*dukhtarī tarsā*). That story is presented in ʿAttār's epic poem, *Mantiq al-tayr* (*The Speech of the Birds*), and is the longest, most famous tale in the entire epic. (For more on the influence of this captivating love story, see Christopher Shackle, "Representations of ʿAṭṭār in the West and in the East: Translations of *Manṭiq al-ṭayr* and the Tale of Shaykh Ṣanʿān" in *ʿAṭṭār and the Persian Sufi Tradition*, pp. 165-193.) The story is about a pious Shaykh "whose honoured existence at Mecca surrounded by his numerous followers is disrupted by a dream in which he sees himself as an idolater in Rum until, in pursuit of the dream, he is driven to Rum where he falls hopelessly in love with a beautiful Christian girl to the dismay of his disciples" (Shackle, "Representations of ʿAṭṭār," 166). The Shaykh then gives up his religious faith to attain the girl of his dreams, even taking up drinking and becoming a swineherd to please her. Eventually, through the supplication and prayers of his followers, the Prophet intercedes and releases the Shaykh from his bondage of love. The Shaykh then resumes his faith and returns to Mecca with his disciples. Shortly after he returns, in an ironic twist, the Christian girl has a dream of her own in which she is told to give up her faith and pursue her love (i.e., the Shaykh) to Mecca. The Shaykh hears a voice from within that reveals to him her plans and so he goes to find her. Upon finding her, she expresses guilt and remorse for her previous treatment of him and asks to be converted to Islam so that she can find the path to God. However, shortly after their reunion and her conversion, in a yet another ironic twist, her heart, having tasted of faith, now longs to join God, causing her to expire. The story is of particular interest because it raises the question of what happens to a love that transcends the limits imposed by faith when love is situated in fictional characters who, unlike the generic poetic personas of ʿAttār's heretical love poems, must suffer through and contend with various cultural, social, and psychological impediments. The lovers in the narrative poem must not only adopt the faith of their beloved but also live with the consequences of their heretical choice. In contrast, the focus of ʿAttār's heretical love poems is not so much on the real-life consequences of choosing a beloved who is of another faith, or asking the reader to seriously consider the real-life consequences of such a choice. Instead, ʿAttār's *ghazals*, by fusing the desire for the beloved with the desire for God, try to induce a mystical, almost psychedelic experience that transcends all conceptual borders and the objects of belief made possible by such borders. It is worth noting that ʿAttār's story of star-crossed love, which is the longest in the entire poem, is framed by a larger allegorical narrative about a group of birds in search of a bird-king (the legendary Sīmorgh). The frame story, which on an allegorical level represents humankind's existential search for meaning, truth, and God, ends with a clever pun, when the thirty birds (*sī morgh*), or the thirty who have survived the arduous journey, come to the realization that "the Sīmorg̃ is none other than their own selves." In this way, "ʿAṭṭār […] consummates the epic with an affirmation of his cherished belief that man will find the sought supreme being, within himself." See B. Reinert, "AṬṬĀR, FARĪD-AL-DĪN," in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/attar-farid-al-din-poet (accessed on October 3, 2017).

Hence, the moods that best characterize these "love poems" (besides infatuation and intense longing) are uncertainty, ambivalence, disorientation, alienation, and loss. And these moods are the result of a libidinally and spiritually charged amorous state where the conflation (and confusion) of these two antithetical affective categories (i.e., sacred and profane love), and their respective love objects (i.e., God and an androgynous Christian boy), induce feelings that equivocate our understanding of all other categories or signs.[152] But if love is the ultimate source of this epistemic confusion then wine is its lubricant. Drinking and drunkenness feature prominently in these poems where the Christian boy often appears as a beautiful, seductive wine-bearer (*saqi*) in a Christian monastery or Magian temple that doubles as a tavern (*kharābāt*).[153] Though "the widespread imagery of wine and drinking employed in ʿAttār's poetry is ultimately derived from the long secular tradition of bacchanalian verse in Arabic and Persian literature" the subsequent "association of wine drinking with Christian and Zoroastrian religions is an important one in the imagery of the Persian *ghazal* generally, and with ʿAṭṭār in particular."[154] In fact, access to wine is one of the features that is seductive about Christianness as a symbol of mystical experience. Not only were the altered states of consciousness experienced in drunkenness associated with mystical gnosis but also the association of "such drinking [forbidden to Muslims]

[152] According to Franklin Lewis, in a note to me on 8/23/2018, "Categorizing these poems as love poems is not simple and straightforward. They are a form of panegyric but to a symbolic rather than specific other (apparently)." He goes on to say, "It would be easier to speak of them as love poems if they were addressed to a beloved, but I take the reader's perspective to be as a third person, apart from the elder Muslim man and the young Christian boy. As such they are didactic poems, too, arguing a point."

[153] The Persian word *kharābāt*, meaning "ruin," also signifies a tavern. These "taverns," usually located outside of town, and run by monks or magians, were places where "high society" would congregate to drink. According to Hamid Dabashi, "the word originally meant a 'house or tavern of ill repute' but was eventually appropriated by the mystics to mean a place that they frequent by way of suspending all hypocritical pretense to piety." He goes on to say, "Among its possible etymological roots, we may consider the word *kharabat* to be a combination of two exactly opposite words: *kharab* and *abad*, or 'ruinous' and 'prosperous,' respectively [and] the idea is that there are places that you can frequent that will dismantle your beliefs, and yet, in doing so, will also restore your faith." Italics are mine. See Hamid Dabashi, *Being a Muslim in the World* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 20-21

[154] Avery and Alizadeh, *Fifty Poems*, 22, 23.

with apostasy provided further literary possibilities" to poets like ʿAttār. Hence, wine drinking, as a symbol of Christianity, dissoluteness, impiety, illicit desire, lust, love, and divine intoxication is one of the major motifs in these poems. But ʿAttār takes the theme of drinking and drunkenness one step further by representing it in the very syntax of his poem, so that the dizzying, hallucinatory effects of the verse (where the status of the "referent" is always in question) reproduce the protagonist's state of drunkenness for the reader. In this sense, we can never exclude the possibility that what we are asked to believe (or disbelieve) is an effect of the wine or, conversely, that the wine has given the protagonist access to an otherwise inaccessible mystical truth. In one such poem, an old Muslim man, smitten by a "heart-stealing" Christian youth who offers him wine, asks the youth for directions to the path that, depending on one's interpretation, leads to achieving mystical union with God, sexual union with the beloved (i.e., the androgynous boy), or both:

ترسا بچه را به پیش خود خواند پس گفت نشان ره چه دانی

He called the Christian child before him
and asked, "What do you know of the sign to the road?" [155]

To which the boy coyly replies:

گفتا که نشان راه جاییست کانجا نه تویی و نه نشانی

He said "The sign to the road [to union] is at a place
where there is no you and no sign."

Reading the passage in an esoteric mystical way, the youth paradoxically suggests that the sign to the road that leads to God can only be located or identified through the absence of any identifiable markers or signs. In other words, God can't be found in a language of signs but only

[155] Farīd al-Dīn ʿAttār, *Divān-i ʿAttār*, ed. Taqi Tafazzuli (Tehran: 'Elmi o farhangi, 11th printing 2005), *ghazal* 831. All translations are mine unless noted otherwise.

in a state (i.e., mystical union) that signals an end to all worldly signs. The "logic" of the beloved's maddening words, which associate mortality and immanence with a world of signs, and immortality and transcendence with a sign-less, selfless state (*fanāʾ*), causes the lover to literally "give up the ghost":

چون پیر سخن شنید جان داد　　عطار سخن بگو که جانی

When the elder heard these words, he gave up the ghost.
ʿAttār, say something, for you are life.

But the comical episode of a beautiful, alluring Christian boy offering a lusty old Muslim man "spiritual advice" with his wine also contains a profane, erotic reading of the same interaction. According to this reading, the overwrought lover faints, passes out, or figuratively "gives up the ghost" not in response to the beloved's paradoxical condition for joining God in mystical union but in response to the beloved's flirtatious invitation, or cold rejection, of a sexual union. What the Christian boy could be telling the Muslim man, through his cryptic reply, is either (1) "you have no chance with me you old fart, so beat it" or (2) "In order get to your desired destination (i.e., union with me) you must be willing to sacrifice all that you are and know": "The sign to the road [to union] is at a place / where there is no you and no sign."

The old man's response to the boy's sacred and/or profane reply, to his sacred and/or profane question, is to literally and/or figuratively "give up the ghost," which could either mean (1) he comically passes out or dies in response to being rudely rejected and rebuffed or (2) he cannot meet the beloved's paradoxical precondition for mystical and/or sexual union and therefore gives up the chase (by dying or passing out) or (3) he ironically fulfills the beloved's paradoxical precondition for mystical and/or sexual union by literally expiring or figuratively effacing himself in drunken oblivion. According to this latter reading (where the lover ironically

fulfills the beloved's conditions for mystical and/or sexual union by fainting) abeyance and absence of self-consciousness in drunkenness become metaphors not only for the experience of *fanāʾ* in mystical union but also the loss of self/ego that the boy demands of the Muslim man as a precondition to sexual union, as well as the sexual union itself, where the self, however temporarily, sheds those markers of identity and difference that distinguishes it from other selves.[156]

Taken together, both readings (sacred and profane) posit love as that truth which transcends ego, self, and the world of signs (signs which the self depends on for understanding its place in the world), through a *union* that, paradoxically, dissolves all *signs of attachment*. Though both readings (i.e., sacred and profane) lead to the dissolution of all categories, or signs, the poem does not commit to either reading but suspends the reader between two possible readings in order to obfuscate the distinction between the very categories (sacred and profane) that make each reading possible. In so doing, the poem allows the transcendent to be revealed in the immanent and the immanent to lead to the transcendent.[157] And yet, there is nothing ordinary about the immanent in which the transcendent is revealed; for the Muslim man can only achieve a transcendent, mystical state through a heretical act. In other words, he must risk his soul, by way of damnation, through an act (i.e., sodomy with a Christian boy) that violates sexual/religious taboos and laws, in order to reach an ecstatic, spiritual state. (In this sense, the soul the man gives up upon hearing the youth's reply also represents the soul he risks losing by participating in religiously forbidden relations and acts that, paradoxically, hold out the promise

[156] According to this reading, instead of "dying" in orgasm (*la petite mort*) the old man "dies" by hearing words that allude to an orgasmic state of oblivion.

[157] Recalling Sells, mystical language stages the "radical dialectic" of transcendence and immanence, "in which the utterly transcendent is revealed as the utterly immanent" so that "the hierarchical levels of being that are posited are unsaid from within." (6-7, *Mystical Languages*)

of apotheosizing his soul.) Hence, the *tarsā-bacha* asks the believer to show faith by giving up his faith, through a heretical love union that, by dissolving all categories of knowledge, knowing, and believing, leads to divine knowledge.

In another *ghazal*, a Muslim man is offered a cup of wine by the young Christian beloved and told to drink it in his (the beloved's) memory:

ترسا بچهٔ شکر لبم دوش — صد حلقهٔ زلف در بنا گوش
صد پیر قوی بحلقه می داشت — زان حلقهٔ زلف حلقه در گوش
آمد بر من شراب در دست — گفتا که بیادمن کن این نوش
در پرده اگر حریف مایی — چون می نوشی خموش و مخروش
زیرا که دلی نگشت گویا — تا مرد زبان نکرد خاموش
دل چون بشنود این سخن زود — ناخورده شراب گشت مدهوش
چون بستدم آن شراب و خوردم — در سینهٔ من فتاد صد جوش
دادم همه نام و ننگ برباد — کردم همه نیك و بد فراموش
از دست بشد مرا دل و جان — وز پای در آمدم تن و توش
یك قطره از آن شراب مشکل — آورد دو عالمم در آغوش
یك ذرّه سواد فقر در تافت — شد هر دو جهان از آن سیه پوش
جانم زسر دو کون بر خاست — در شیوهٔ فقر شد وفا کوش
هر کو بخرد بجان و دل فقر — بر جان و دلش دو کون بفروش
ور دین تو نیست دین عطّار — کفر آیدت این حدیث منیوش

The other night, a Christian child, with sugar lips
and hundreds of circles of hair falling behind the ears,
A hundred wise men, firmly in a circle,
from those circles of hair, as slaves, he had.
He came to me drink in hand,
and said: "In memory of me, drink this.
If in secrets you are my equal,
when you drink it silence and no more clamor.
Because the heart does not speak
until man silences his tongue."
As soon as the heart heard this,
without drinking, it became drunk.
When I took the drink and drank it,
in my chest began a hundred eruptions.
I gave all notions of name and shame to the wind,
and forgot all [knowledge of] bad and good.
From my grasp slipped heart and soul,
and from my feet fell body and strength.
One drop of that difficult drink,

brought the two worlds into embrace.
One drop of wine/learning made poverty shine out,
both worlds became dark from that event.
My soul rose beyond/above both worlds
and in poverty it strived to be faithful.
Whoever buys, with heart and soul, poverty,
You can sell both worlds upon his heart and soul.
If your religion is not ʿAttār's [i.e., the poet's] religion,
then this talk will appear *kufr* to you, so don't imbibe/listen to these words![158]

The evocation of the Eucharist, as an act of faith in remembrance of Christ's ultimate sacrifice, makes the boy's blasphemous gesture of offering wine to the Muslim man to be drunk in "his memory," anything but straightforward. (And here we should recall "that Christ is also represented as a beardless youth in early Christian art.")[159] The *tarsā-bacha*, this radical, unassimilable, liminal other, shakes the foundations of faith and knowledge by showing the believer, who, in his desire for the beloved is quickly losing all strength and belief, that sacrifice of previously held truths or beliefs, is, paradoxically, the precondition to a union that testifies to the new "faith." One must submit to the commands of an androgynous boy to feel like a man, one must become a slave to free oneself from slavery, one must be willing to commit heresy (i.e., drink wine from a Christian's cup) in order to find faith, one must silence his tongue in order to hear the silent speech of his heart, and one must sin in order to purify the soul. Thus, the sacrifice of self, identity, and ego, as a prerequisite for mystical and/or sexual union, that the Christian boy cryptically alluded to in the previous poem ("The sign to the road [to union] is at a place / where there is no you and no sign") is made explicit in this *ghazal*.

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[158] ʿAttār, *Dīvān*, *ghazal* 446. I have chosen to leave the word *kufr* untranslated in order to preserve its range of meanings, which, in the context of poems dealing with faith and infidelity, include, "unbelief, infidelity, godlessness, blasphemy, and profanity." According to Jane I. Smith, in the Qur'ān *kufr* "has two basic meanings": "the absence of faith, often rendered as disbelief, or ingratitude for God's signs (*āyāt*)." See Jane I. Smith, s.v. "kufr," in *Encyclopedia of the Qur'ān*, vol. 2, ed. Jane Dammen (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 165.
[159] Ritter, 461.

Upon hearing all this, the Muslim man, who has come to the *kharābāt* to drink, without drinking, becomes drunk (with love). He then consummates the relationship (or union) with the Christian child by drinking the wine, in a ritual act with profane and sacred implications. On one level, imbibing the wine represents the culmination of a seduction scene where a Muslim man acquiesces to the amatory overtures of a Christian boy—a boy who inverts the power dynamics of his social inferiority as a Christian and a young man through the seductive power of his beauty and wine—thus sealing his fate as a heretic and guaranteeing the damnation of his soul. On another level, drinking the wine represents a Eucharistic transubstantiation ritual where a Muslim man (acquiescing to the religious overtures of a Christian boy) commits heresy, and risks damnation, by drinking wine/blood that symbolizes Christ's ultimate sacrifice. Lastly, and paradoxically, the heretical and sacrilegious acts of erotic union and divine communion that imbibing the wine symbolically represents result in the Muslim man's parodic "salvation" when he sacrifices who or what he was in order to be reborn, not as a Christian, but as the embodiment of a mystical love union that dissolves all duality, opposition, and difference (i.e., "both worlds") that stand in the way of consummating such a union:

> One drop of that difficult drink,
> brought the two worlds into embrace.
> One drop of wine/learning made poverty shine out,
> both worlds became dark from that event.

The man's spiritual education begins and ends by drinking a wine whose dregs (*savād*) result in a knowledge or learning (*savād*) that, paradoxically, dissolves all knowledge and learning.[160] We might assume, based on what was said before—"Because the heart does not speak until man silences his tongue" and "As soon as the heart heard this, without drinking, it became drunk"—

[160] *Savād* is a homophone, meaning "wine dregs" or "learning," and is used here as a pun.

that the knowledge which the Muslim man attains is a knowledge of the heart—the symbolic seat of love. Hence, the consummation of this love-union (symbolized by the consumption of wine) brings together (in embrace) and then dissolves (in darkness) the worlds and categories of sacred and profane, Christian and Muslim, self and other, eminent and transcendent, and, to the extent that the self relates to itself through conceptual categories that rely on opposition and difference, the self and itself: "I gave all notions of name and shame to the wind, / and forgot all [knowledge of] bad and good." "Name," on a literal level, is exactly that, the first marker of identity, or that which allows the self to not only know and relate to itself but also other things and beings with names. By pairing name (*nām*) with a word (*nang*) the can mean "reputation / honor" or "dishonor and shame," the poet shows how the societal manifestation of name (in the form of status, reputation, honor) and shame (in the form of dishonor and infamy) shape identity by asking the subject—based on culturally and religiously sanctioned beliefs and norms—to accept as good (*nik*) or reject as bad (*bad*) those activities, ideas, or thoughts, whose acceptance or rejection define him. In giving all "notions of name and shame to the wind," and in forgetting all knowledge of "good and bad," the Muslim man sacrifices the very thing that makes him a Muslim man, i.e., his identity. Upon making the sacrifice, he is reborn as a being whose identity is, paradoxically, determined by a lack of all identifiable markers, including name. In turn, the heretical love-union between a Muslim man and a Christian boy results in a "subject" whose identity is based on the absence of all identifiable markers, who finds spiritual fulfillment in emptiness, and whose faith (*wafā*) is based on poverty (*faqr*), or the lack of all attachments: "One drop of wine/learning made poverty shine out, / both worlds became dark from that event." In embracing ("buying") poverty, then, the speaking "subject" abandons ("sells") all worldly and

otherworldly attachments (in the form of "both worlds") including those markers of identity that make him identifiable as a subject. Hence, "poverty," in the context of a poem about faith and faithlessness, does not simply represent a life of asceticism based on one's beliefs, but rather, poverty is itself a metaphor for one's beliefs. In other words, what the speaking persona strives to be faithful in (above and beyond everything else) is metaphysical poverty, or the lack of owning, having, or holding any beliefs, including any belief based on asceticism or poverty. To be faithful to poverty, then, is, paradoxically, to *hold-for-true* the lack of all attachments as the only truth.[161]

In terms of *imān*, to be faithful to poverty is to be secure in securing nothing, or having nothing (i.e., no beliefs) to secure or find security in, except, of course, one's faith in poverty (or the lack of all attachments). This paradoxical, apophatic notion of a faith based on "poverty" has epistemic consequences as well as affective ones. For not only does ʿAttār's apophatic and aporetic discourse create referential openness (by obfuscating the distinction between faith and faithlessness), but it does so in order to create affectual openness: i.e., to free feelings and emotions from their attachment to an object (real or abstract) of affection. If Sells is correct and

[161] According to an alternative reading of the poem, which suggestion I owe to a friend, "Poverty," in this context, simply means a lack of social standing, wealth, and prestige. Love for a Christian makes the Muslim man lose fair reputation. Hence, the poem is not arguing that he (i.e., the Muslim subject) should have no beliefs, but that he should not base his beliefs on what society rewards because that is not "true belief," but "imitation." While such a reading of ʿAttār's "heretical" poem is certainly possible, it also risks reducing the poem to a didactic exercise. If what the poet is truly concerned with in this poem (and those like it) is the problem of imitation in religious matters, and how such imitation prevents spiritual growth or enlightenment, then it does not make much sense for him to ask his readers to follow in his (or his persona's) footsteps by adopting his "religion," as he ostensibly seems to do at the end of his poem. Nor does it make sense for him to express his *beliefs* about what is or is not "true belief" through a genre of poetry that subverts orthodoxy, and tests the very limits of faith, by obfuscating the distinction between faith and faithlessness. Hence the poems, in my view, are not advocating for a certain kind of belief (e.g., one that is not based on "imitation") but are instead putting belief to the test to see if they can take the reader beyond the dichotomy of belief and unbelief. In this regard, more than conveying a "message" (which the poet could easily do without resorting to ambiguity, double entendre, irony, and symbolism) these poems, as kinds of thought experiments, are meant to give the reader an experience (possibly even a mystical one) by deconstructing *doxa* or anything that resembles or can be taken as *doxa*, including what is "true belief" and what "imitation."

the apophatic, "through the constant turning back upon its own referential delimitations, seeks momentary liberation from such delimitations," then ʿAttār's mystical love poems seek affectual liberation from any belief, which is to say all beliefs, that impose referential, conceptual limitations on the emotion of love by determining its limits.[162] Love, then, in this context, is that emotion which has the power to transcend the limits imposed on affects by faith and its attachments, including any limited conception of love. Consequently, "poverty" signals love's freedom once all emotional/psychic attachments to objects of faith have been severed by a heretical love that is antithetical to not just a particular manifestation of faith but, to the extent that any faith is *secured* by an object of cathexis, to all faiths. [163] The poet concludes his song of "infidelity" with a final salvo directed at anyone who confuses the poet's understanding of faith (which is based on impoverishment and lack) with a traditional understanding of faith: "If your religion is not ʿAttār's [i.e., the poet's] religion, / then this talk will appear *kufr* to you, so don't imbibe/listen to these words!"[164] What the poet is saying, in essence, is if you avow to any faith or religion (*dīn*) other than the poet's, which is based on "poverty" (or a state of metaphysical/spiritual detachment), then you are, by delimiting love, being unfaithful (*kufr*) to

[162] Sells, *Mystical Languages*, 8.

[163] In discussing the connection between Eros (i.e., boundless "passion" or "desire") and mysticism, Denis De Rougemont, *Love in the Western World*, trans. Montgomery Belgion (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), suggests that the lover's/mystic's psychological state is not defined by fullness and plentitude, as one might expect, but by *lack* and *destitution*:

> Passion is by no means the fuller life which it seems to be in the dreams of adolescence, but is on the contrary a kind of naked and denuding intensity; verily, a bitter destitution, the *impoverishment* of a mind being emptied of all diversity, an obsession of the imagination by a single image. In the face of the assertion of its power, the world dissolves, 'the others' cease to be present; and there are no longer either neighbours or duties, or binding ties, or earth or sky; one is alone with all that one loves. (145-146)

The psychological state De Rougemont describes here is not unlike the one ʿAttār's ecstatic lover/mystic finds himself in, except that in ʿAttār's poem what the lover is left with (once the world dissolves and melts away) is not the object of affection (or "all that one loves") but a love that *realizes* itself by, paradoxically, transcending the need for any object.

[164] The poet's reference to drinking in the final verse also recalls the Christian boy's exhortation to drink in the beginning of the poem. Hence, the passage can also mean, "if your religion is not the poet's then don't drink, i.e., don't do what the boy says in the beginning of the poem."

the very power (i.e., love) which animates all faith, and which the poet's words celebrate, so this poem is not for you. Paradoxically, and apophatically, since the poet's faith is based on poverty, or the lack of any metaphysical/spiritual attachments, there is no way to avow or disavow his faith, which makes listening to his words (or accepting them on faith) a moot point.

In another *ghazal* from this genre, ʿAttār demonstrates how the love union or coupling, between a Christian boy and a Muslim man, which decouples words from their meanings frees that affective power (i.e., love) which binds words to their meanings:

جهانی جان چو پروانه از آنست که آن ترسا بچه شمع جهانست
بترسای در افتادم که پیوست مرا زّنار زلفش بر میانست
در آمد دوش آن ترسا بچه مست مرا گفتا که دین من عیانست
درین دین گر بقا خواهی فنا شو که گر سودی کنی آنجا زیانست
بدو گفتم نشانی ده از این راه مرا گفت که این ره بی نشانست
ز پیدایی هویدا در هویداست ز پنهانی نهان اندر نهانست
فنا اندر فنایست و عجب این که اندر وی بقای جاودانست
چو پیدا و نهان دانستی این راه یقین میدان که نه این و نه آنست
بدین ما درآ گر مرد کفری که عاشق غیراین دین کفردانست
یقین می دان که کفر عاشقی را بنابر کافریّ جاودانست
اگر داری سراین پای درنه بترك جان بگوچه جای جانست
و گرنه با سلامت رو که باتو سخن گفتن ز دلق طیلسانست
برو عطّار و تن زن زانکه این شرح نه کارتست کار رهبرانست

A whole world has a soul like a moth
because of this Christian child who is the world's candle.
I've turned into a Christian since I wear,
around my waist, a Christian's girdle made from his hair.
Last night that child came to me drunk
and told me "my religion is evident."
In this religion if you want life annihilate yourself;
for if you profit [here] there you will lose.
I told him to give me directions to this path
and he told me that this path is directionless.
In terms of its manifestness, it is manifest in manifestness.
In terms of its hiddenness, it is hidden in hiddenness.
It is annihilation in annihilation, yet how strange
that there is eternal life in it.
Once you know this path is hidden and manifest,
be certain that it is neither this nor that.

Come to me if you are a man of *kufr*;
for the lover considers other faiths as *kufr*.
Be certain that the *kufr* of love
is therefore an eternal *kufr*.
If you have desire for this, step forward
[and] bid farewell to life; what place/room is there for life here?
And if not, go in peace because with you
one can only talk of a scholar's garment and mantle.[165]
Oh ʿAttār, be quiet, for this poem
is not your business, but a guide's.[166]

The poem begins with a traditional amatory trope: the lover's soul (in fact, the "whole world's" soul) is compared to a moth and the beloved (i.e., Christian boy) to an alluring, irresistible flame that the moth can't enter without destroying itself. In the case of the Muslim man, annihilation takes the form of symbolic emasculation, religious conversion, and the inevitable damnation of his "soul," where the man, by submitting to the demands of a young Christian boy, gives up his faith and adopts a heretical one. And the man hopes to be rewarded for his heroic heretical act, by attaining the object of his desire and the cause of his symbolic and literal self-destruction: the *tarsā-bacha*. The love-child, who is either drunk with wine, love, or both, tells the man that it is "evident" what his [i.e., the man's] religion is; by which he seems to mean that the man's true religion— because he is willing to sacrifice his own faith and risk eternal damnation for the sake of his beloved—is neither Islam nor Christianity but love. Building on the theme of annihilation, the boy suggests the man's self-sacrifice (in the name of love) is not in vain because in that religion (i.e., the religion of love) annihilation is not the end result of a heretical act but, paradoxically, the precondition to eternal life. In turn, the boy lays out the terms of love's mysterious religion— "In this religion if you want life annihilate yourself; / for if you profit

[165] The scholar's garments symbolize outward signs of knowledge of faith.
[166] ʿAttār, *Dīvān*, *ghazal* 90.

[here] there you will lose"—in a language that is appropriately apophatic and aporetic. In order to live in love's religion, one must annihilate oneself, in order to profit here (i.e., in the religion love), one must be prepared to lose there (i.e., in traditional religion). In response to the beloved's beguiling invitation, to convert to the religion of love, the man asks for directions to the path leading to sexual and/or mystical consummation of love's religion. The beloved's response to the man ("he told me that this path is directionless") builds on his previous aporetic reply through a set of directionless directions that further ensnare the man's addled heart. The path to the beloved's heart and the spiritual and sexual fulfillment it promises are, paradoxically, manifest and hidden, eternally non-existent, and existent in non-existence, not this nor that, both life giving and death dealing, and, most important of all, only accessible to those who are unfaithful towards all faiths except, paradoxically, the "infidelity of love." In turn, the spatially, temporally, referentially and spiritually disorienting and dizzying discourse of the boy, which doubles as the discourse of love, suggests that uncertainty is the only "certain" path to achieving the love-union the man is after. Love produces this uncertainty by "annihilating," in a world of sense or feeling, the very categories that give sense to the world. Hence, the inability to attach any referential meaning to the words the boy uses to describe the phenomenon of love induces the effects of the very phenomenon his words mean to represent. In so doing, his words suspend all meaning and draw our attention to that affective power which only becomes sensible (or gains meaning) by attaching itself to an object of *sense*. In this sense, the language of love paradoxically expresses its *sense* by not being bound by sense, or relying on words or concepts for its sense.

If to believe something is to hold that "thing" for true, then the truth of love cannot be held in words but only in the power which makes such holding and having (im)possible. Faith itself, as the poet demonstrates, is not that power, it is just a name for that power; a name and a concept whose power derives from being held for true by another power that, because it can dissolve the distinction between faith and faithlessness ("for the lover considers other faiths as *kufr*"), transcends faith.[167] (Recall that the English word "belief," from West Germanic *ga-laubo*n "to hold dear, esteem, trust," literally has its roots in love: *leubh-* 'to care, desire, love.')[168] That is why the poet, through the *tarsā-bacha*, paradoxically characterizes the defining feature of love's faith as an eternal *kufr*—"Be certain that the *kufr* of love / is therefore an eternal *kufr*"—for the religion of love must not only be blasphemous/unfaithful towards other religions but also towards itself, lest it becomes a faith (like all other faiths) whose limits are determined by the binary of faith and faithlessness. In this regard, the religion of love (which asks the believer to put his faith in faithlessness) is a self-negating, apophatic phenomenon, so that what we are left with, once faith loses its sense in love's maddening self-negating discourse, is the truth of our feelings, the same feelings that make concepts like faith sensible in the first place.

The Muslim man's encounter with the *tarsā-bacha* eventually concludes with the boy inviting the man, or rather challenging him, to live in eternal *kufr*: "If you have desire for this, step forward / [and] bid farewell to life; what place/room is there for life here?" In essence, the boy asks the man if he is "man enough" to forgo the safety and security that faith provides (to him and his soul), in order to experience the truth of love's *kufr*. And if he does not want to forgo

[167] To say it another way, belief cannot be a precondition for saying what belief is or means, since any definition of belief must itself be believed before "belief" can become a precondition for believing it.
[168] Also recall that for Augustine, faith itself is ultimately a conduit of love.

the safety and security provided by faith, in exchange for an uncertain future in the truth of love's eternal *kufr*, then the boy tells him to keep on walking because his spiritual capacity or understanding is scholastic and/or confined to the outward signs/shows of faith: "And if not, go in peace because with you / one can only talk of a scholar's garment and mantle." Whereas in the previous poem mystical and/or sexual union was ostensibly consummated and enjoyed (as symbolized by drinking the wine offered by the Christian boy) in this poem the possibility of such a union remains in question. Thus not only is the reader suspended between the poem's sacred and/or profane meaning but he is also kept in suspense by Muslim man's lack of response to the boy's sacred and/or profane invitation.

Coda

By obfuscating the distinction between sacred and profane love, ʿAttār's heretical "love poems" (regardless of if the love is rebuffed, consummated, or unrequited) do not simply represent the liberation of the soul from the burdens of belief: they enact it. They invite the reader on a spiritual journey up a ladder of words whose meanings crumble beneath his feet, thus suspending him between what is said and unsaid—in symbolic flight. But this respite in spiritual flight, or free fall, is fleeting. To highlight its ephemerality, ʿAttār ends his poems by resoundingly bringing the reader back down to earth. This metaphoric crash landing, through which the poet undercuts his own message of spiritual transcendence, is expressed by invoking the most elemental marker of identity or ego, the poet's own (pen) name. Hence, the very name/identity that was supposed to be effaced, sacrificed, and annihilated, in the name of love, ironically asserts itself in the most unabashedly, self-aggrandizing fashion:

When the elder heard these words, he gave up the ghost.
ʿAttār, say something, for you are life.

If your religion is not ʿAttār's [i.e., the poet's] religion,
then this talk will appear *kufr* to you, so don't imbibe/listen to these words

Oh ʿAttār, be quiet, for this poem
is not your business, but a guide's.

ʿAttār, what do you know and what story do you tell
If you don't remain here at all [i.e., if you are effaced], you'll turn into a denizen of there [i.e., the beyond].[169]

In each concluding couplet, the poetic persona, stepping outside of his sexually charged spiritual quest, responds to the mystifying, existentially untenable situation he finds himself in, by calling on, or naming, the poet (i.e., himself) responsible for his preposterous predicament.[170] Though ʿAttār's self-naming gesture (*takhallos*) is a common feature of the *ghazal*, each poet uses the convention somewhat differently based on his poetic persona, style, or the theme *du jour*. In *Rumi: Past and Present, East and West*, Franklin Lewis gives the following general summary of the convention:

> The genre conventions of the Persian ghazal call for the poet to adopt a poetic persona and to invoke that persona by name, usually toward the end of each poem, in the *takhallos*….As such, the poetic persona, though associated of course with a recognizable style and the particular characteristic themes of a given poet, presented the audience with a kind of stage image or character, and not necessarily the private life of the individual poet….With this *nom de plume* (*takhallos*) the poet would, in effect, sign his poems, a

[169] This *ghazal* (869) has not been discussed, but I am including its ending because it is another example of ʿAttār undercutting his mystical message. The translation is Lewis' (except for what is inside the brackets), and it is based on ʿAttār's *Dīvān*. See "Sexual Occidentation," 722.

[170] Even the speaking persona's seemingly boastful assertion, "If your religion is not ʿAttār's [i.e., the poet's] religion, / then this talk will appear *kufr* to you, so don't imbibe/listen to these words," as mentioned before, has an ironic meaning. Since according to the poem the poetic persona's religion is "poverty," or metaphysical lack, then that means either (1) ʿAttār has no religion for anyone to adopt (thus making his words empty or not worth listening to) or (2) because his religion is "poverty," or metaphysical lack, it asserts nothing and therefore blasphemes against nothing. In turn, the couplet undercuts the mystical meaning of the poem by humorously demonstrating the complete and utter infeasibility of ʿAttār's "religion" as a spiritual practice.

> signature he would weave into the text, usually as an apostrophe to his persona, by way of consoling himself, summing up his situation, or urging action on his audience.[171]

Regarding ʿAttār's use of his pen name in mystical love poems in general, Leili Anvar-Chenderoff says:

> But it should be noted that the classical use of the pen name induces a change in pronoun: in the last line, ʿAṭṭār is no longer 'I' but 'he' (sometimes 'you'), and this imposes a change of perspective: we no longer look from the inside but the outside, that is, we return to form or at least to the consciousness that the poem is a form, an assertion of being, although it tries to expound the reality of non-being.[172]

Although Anvar-Chenderoff is correct on all counts, regarding the poet's self-objectification through the use of his pen name, her account remains incomplete, for by referring to himself in the third-person the poet does more than just assert his, or his poem's, "being," he also claims ownership of his poem through a rhetorical act that, despite its conventionality, expresses ambition, self-promotion, and the desire for immortality and fame that attends his self-regarding gesture.

To be clear, though the poet might not have a choice when it comes to using the convention of *takhallos* in his poems he does have a choice over *how* he uses it and *how* his use of the convention, as much as the convention itself, will come to affect the meanings of themes he chooses to explore in his poetry. In turn, the ironic juxtaposition of this poetic convention with the mystical theme of ʿAttār's *ghazals* creates an interesting tension that the poet can exploit to create new layers of meaning. For instance, in relation to the theme of *fanāʾ* the poet's objectification of himself through his *nom de plume* ironically recall the same egocentric concepts that are an anathema to those, like the poetic persona of his *tarsā-bacha* poems, who

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[171] Lewis, *Rumi: Past and Present*, 329.
[172] Leili Anvar-Chenderoff, "'Without Us, From Us We're Safe': Self and Selflessness in the *Dīwān* of 'Aṭṭār," *'Aṭṭār and the Persian Sufi Tradition,* 245.

desire a love union that dissolves the categories of name and fame. Consequently, it is difficult to reconcile this effect of ʿAttār's use of his pen name with the idealized and idealizing one proposed by Anvar-Chenderoff:

> When every sign, every form, every expression of the self has been dissolved, it does not mean that all identity is lost: it means that the real identity has been found at last. And this true identity is symbolized by the *laqab* ('nickname') which is always meaningful.[173]

Anvar-Chenderoff's reading of ʿAttār's pen name, in relation to the theme of self and selflessness, or extinguishing oneself, in mystical love, tries to put a positive spin on the problem of avowal, or avowing to a faith (in mystical love) when the "self" has been extinguished. According to her, what ʿAttār's name, or "nickname," symbolically avows to is his newfound identity in mystical love. But the problem of avowal, or avowing to anything that can be taken on faith—at least in ʿAttār's heretical love poems—precludes the poet from asserting any identity, much less one that avows to everything that his heretical love was supposed to annihilate.[174] Consequently, despite his desire for symbolic self-annihilation, through a forbidden love-union, the poetic persona in the *tarsā-bacha* poems, through this poetic convention, ends up right back where he started, i.e., grounded in himself. Rather than downplay this conflict (between the desire for self-annihilation and transcendence and the poet's assertion of ego and self through the convention of *takhallos*), ʿAttār conspicuously highlights it in order to comment on the religious, mystical, and erotic themes of his poems. In this regard, the poetic persona's sarcastic and often self-deprecating tone (which memorializes the poet's poetic achievements, by evoking his pen name, even as it questions the viability of his erotically charged mystical quest), coming at the

[173] Ibid., 246.

[174] To be fair, Leili Anvar-Chenderoff is not concerned (at least directly) with the problem of heresy, or faith and faithlessness, in ʿAttār's *ghazals*. Nonetheless, the problem of avowing to a love that annihilates the very self that avows is a problem that many of ʿAttār's *ghazals* (regardless of genre) share.

end of these heretical love poems, undermines any serious attempt to reconcile the poet's "self-affirming" gesture with the self-effacing mystical outlook that his poems otherwise espouse. In fact, the punctuating passages appear to be a kind of witty, ironic commentary meant to undercut the seriousness of the poem's mystical meaning, or prevent the reader from taking the mystical message too seriously. In each of the final couplets quoted earlier, the poet's name is evoked in the context of an utterance that humorously points out the existential improbability, impracticality, or absurdity of enacting the poem's mystical meaning. In so doing, these utterances not only represent the poetic persona's *sober* acknowledgment of his untenable situation, after his alcohol-induced, sexually charged spiritual quest, but they also, through the evocation of the poet's name, acknowledge an existential limit. ʿAttār was not the only Sufi poet to use his pen name to demarcate an existential limit in his *ghazals*. Rumi, who had an affinity for ʿAttār's poetry, used his pen name, *Khāmush* (Silence!), in a similar fashion:

> In the poems in which it appears, *Khâmush* usually calls for an end to the complaint of existential or ontological pain experienced in the absence of the object of love. This word effectively remonstrates with the poetic persona, pointing out the paradox of being unable to express in words the *mysterium tremendum* experienced in the presence of this numinous beloved. The poem then ends in an address to a personified silence, an embodiment of the *via negativa*; the signature also acts as a command to the reader or the mystic desirous of revealing the mysteries of mystical love: Silence! It is not through words but experience that the truth is known.[175]

But whereas Rumi uses his pen name (*Khāmush*) to acknowledge mystical truth's ultimate ineffability, ʿAttār uses the same self-naming, remonstrating gesture (in the *tarsā-bacha* poems) to humorously call into question mystical truth's viability as an ethical practice, a dating strategy, or a way of life—essentially warning his readers, "Don't try this at home!" Hence, despite the poetic persona's desire for self-effacement and self-annihilation, in the name of a love (*ʿeshq*)

[175] Lewis, *Rumi: Past and Present*, 329.

and a truth (*haqīqat*) that transcends all religious and secular categories, the poet's final self-affirming self-defeating-gesture, as much as his self-defeating self-affirming-gesture, is one of capitulation. After all, one cannot remain in a mystical state of intentionless truth (or an intoxicated state of orgasmic oblivion for that matter) forever. Nor can one do without concepts like faith and belief, despite what one chooses to believe.[176] The best the poet can do, through the magic of his song, is to momentarily suspend belief so that he, and we along with him, can experience the truth of our unfettered feelings in disbelief.

[176] The ancient skeptics who, without the religious/mystical component of Sufi theology, tried to live a life without beliefs have sometimes been treated by other philosophers like philosophical laughing stocks. The skeptics have been derided, not so much for their skepticism, or what they refused to believe, but for what they believed despite their skepticism. In a famous passage regarding the ancient skeptics, Hume, who was himself a skeptic, points out the limits of skepticism by pointing out the follies of his predecessors:

> But a Pyrrhonian cannot expect, that his philosophy will have any constant influence on the mind: or if it had, that its influence would be beneficial to society. On the contrary, he must acknowledge, if he will acknowledge anything, that all human life must perish, were his principles universally and steadily to prevail. All discourse, all action would immediately cease; and men remain in a total lethargy, till the necessities of nature, unsatisfied, put an end to their miserable existence. It is true; so fatal an event is very little to be dreaded. Nature is always too strong for principle. And though a Pyrrhonian may throw himself or others into a momentary amazement and confusion by his profound reasonings; the first and most trivial event in life will put to flight all his doubts and scruples, and leave him the same, in every point of action and speculation, with the philosophers of every other sect, or with those who never concerned themselves in any philosophical researches. When he awakes from his dream, he will be the first to join in the laugh against himself, and to confess, that all his objections are mere amusement, and can have no other tendency than to show the whimsical condition of mankind, who must act and reason and believe; though they are not able, by their most diligent enquiry, to satisfy themselves concerning the foundation of these operations, or to remove the objections, which may be raised against them. (12.2.128)

David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* in *Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1902), 160.

Chapter Four

Communicating the Incommunicable in Rumi's *Masnavi*

Prelude

In the history of Sufi lore, no religious practice or ritual is as famous, or as controversial, as *samāʿ*. *Samāʿ*, which literally signifies "hearing" and therefore, by extension, also means listening "presents a specific sense in Ṣūfism, where it generally denotes the hearing of music, the concert, and in its particular sense, the Ṣūfī tradition of spiritual concert, in a more or less ritualised form."[1] In turn, *samāʿ* is a devotional practice which, through the use of music and poetry, focuses the listener's attention on God in order to "induce intense emotional transports [*tawādjjud*], states of grace (*aḥwāl*), of trance or of ecstasy [*waj̲d*, *wuj̲ūd*] and even revelations."[2] During the state of emotional transport or contemplative ecstasy, the listener is moved to stamp his feet, shake his arms, or dance. An important mystery or paradox at the heart of *samāʿ*, which this essay will grapple with, is whether it is *samāʿ* and dance that induce religious ecstasy, or religious ecstasy that induces the dance?

Regarding the origins of *samāʿ*, there seems to be no scholarly consensus. According to Kenneth Avery, "The practice of *samāʿ* is clearly an extension of the more basic practice of *dhikr* ('remembrance [of God]' or ritual chant and praise)":[3]

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[1] *Encyclopedia of Islam*, s.v. "*samāʿ*," vol. 8, ed. C. E. Bosworth, E van Donzel, et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 1018. I have changed some of the transliterations, and therefore placed them in brackets, because *Encyclopedia of Islam's* transliteration scheme is somewhat unconventional.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Kenneth S. Avery, *Psychology of Early Sufi Samāʿ: Listening and Altered States* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2004), 4.

> The Qur'ān itself prescribes the constant remembrance and praise of God, and all these ritual activities have as their source the recitation of the Qur'ān. Such practices could lead to the heightening of spiritual awareness culminating in various types of ecstasy, alterations of the psyche, and spontaneous physical reactions.[4]

But according to other scholars, "*Samāʿ* does not seem to appear until the mid-3rd/9th century among the Ṣūfīs of Baghdād, but while the association of music with ecstatic rites or practices is attested prior to Islam in the Religions of the Book (Molé), no solution has been found to the question of continuity between the latter and the Ṣūfi practice of *samāʿ*, in spite of numerous similarities."[5]

Regardless of its origins, the *samāʿ*, as religious ritual, spiritual celebration, and a mode of mystical communion, eventually came to be associated with one of the world's greatest mystical poets, Jalāl al-Din Rumi, and his followers, the Mevlevi, more commonly known as the "whirling dervishes."[6] According to Franklin Lewis, the practice of *samāʿ* was so important to Rumi that it transformed him "from a preacher and thinker inclined to mysticism and asceticism into a full-fledged Sufi."[7] The activity of *samāʿ* "liberated Rumi from the austere ways of self-renunciation and gave him a joyous vehicle for expressing his mystical rapture":[8]

> Indeed, Rumi became quite enamored with the ritual of turning and singing verse. *Samāʿ* became Rumi's food of divine love, and he played it on and on. It brought on tranquility and made his imagination flow in thousands of lines of verse.[9]

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[4] Ibid.
[5] *Encyclopedia of Islam*.
[6] Franklin Lewis, in *Rumi: Past and Present, East and West: The Life, Teaching and Poetry of JalâL Al-Din Rumi* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000), offers the following helpful description of the origin of the Mevlevi order:

> Following what was by then a well-established custom, the disciples and descendants of Rumi formed a confraternity, or Sufi order, committed to following worship practices, the spiritual discipline and the teachings traced back to Jalâl al-Din Rumi. This brotherhood (which has also included female disciples), named after "My Master," Mowlavi, is called the Mevlevi order….In more common parlance, however, the adherents of the Mevlevi order are known as the whirling dervishes or dancing dervishes, after the distinctive practice of meditative turning. (423)

[7] Lewis, *Rumi*, 312.
[8] ibid.
[9] Ibid., 311-312.

According to Leonard Lewisohn, there was almost a symbiotic relationship between the poet, his poetry, and the ecstasy inducing ritual responsible for his melodious verses, so that ecstatic revelation (in *samāʿ*) turned to poetic inspiration, in turn, resulted in further revelations:

> Apart from overt textual evidence demonstrating the musicality of Rumi's poetry (countless *ghazals* composed to drum-beat rhythms written in staccato meters, allegro in tempo, with lilting end-rhymes featuring choral refrains for use as versicles for Sufi *dhikr*) and the fact that his lyrics possess greater diversity of musical rhythms and melodies than found in any other Persian poet, codicological evidence also demonstrates that the practical use of his *Dīvān* by Mevlevi dervishes from its inception was a hymnbook for *samāʿ*, which is why his lyric poetry may be considered to be inseparable from its use in the Sufi concert...[10]

There is no definitive account of how or when Rumi discovered *samāʿ*, but according to one biographical source, the person who introduced Rumi to *samāʿ* was his spiritual guide and mentor, Shams al-Din of Tabriz, who gave him this advice:

> Enter into *samāʿ*, for you will find increase of that which you seek in it. *Samāʿ* was forbidden to the people because they are preoccupied with base passions. When they perform *samāʿ*, their reprehensible and hateful characteristics increase and they are moved by pride and pleasure. Of course *samāʿ* is forbidden to such people. On the other hand, those people who quest for and love truth, their characteristics intensify in *samāʿ* and none but God enter their field of vision at such times. So, *samāʿ* is permissible to such people.[11]

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[10] Leonard Lewisohn, "Principles of the Philosophy of Ecstasy in Rūmī's Poetry," in *The Philosophy of Ecstasy: Rumi and the Sufi Tradition*, ed. Leonard Lewisohn (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2014), 63. According to Lewisohn, "Rūmī's lyric and epic poetry, and the philosophy of ecstasy that sustained them, were inconceivable without *samāʿ*." Lewisohn's arguments, in this regard, are informed by Jean During's, *Musique et exstase: L'audition mystique dans la tradition soufie* (Paris: Éditions Albin Michel, 1988), 193-194.

[11] Lewis, *Rumi*, 311. The anecdote regarding Shams' instructions to Rumi (and the quote attributed to him) is taken from *Resâle-ye Sepahsâlâr*, translated here by Lewis. Written a half-century after Rumi's death, Sepahsâlâr's work is "the second-oldest biographical source (after Sultan Valad's *Ebtedâ nâme*) that we possess for Rumi, his family and his successors" (243). Like Sultan Valad before him, Sepahsâlâr "wrote as a member of Rumi's inner circle and an eye-witness to many of the anecdotes he describes" (243). The connection between Shams' arrival in Konya, Rumi's transformation, and his love of *samāʿ* is also interesting to consider. According to Lewis, after Shams' arrival, Rumi "became more ecstatic in his worship, expressing his love for God not only in a careful attitude of self-renunciation and control, but also through the joy of poetry, music and meditative dance" (274).

Although "manuals of Sufism had thoroughly covered the subject of *samāʿ* by the time of Rumi, giving it a theoretical justification," the practice of *samāʿ* was not, as Shams' instruction suggests, without religious controversy.[12] The reason for this, as Lewis notes, is that according to the manuals of Sufism "music can provoke a person's base passions or it can send him into transports of spiritual bliss."[13] In turn, although "listening to music was not…in itself wrong or evil" it could become "sinful if the listener responded improperly."[14] Consequently, *samāʿ* "became for some a form of delectation or a sensual pleasure, all the more so" when the rite "included dancing and was concluded with a meal."[15] Additionally, "the proletariat indulged in profane *samāʿ*s, in other words concerts with a religious pretext, not to mention rites of trance inherited from paganism and superficially Islamised."[16] The inherent religious/spiritual dangers associated with *samāʿ* are clearly expressed in Shams' instructions to Rumi, as is the idea that the *samāʿ* is ultimately "a revealing instrument," supplying "that which is brought to it by the hearer."[17] Hence, to give a preliminary answer to our earlier question, it seems as though it is the Sufi mystic's ecstatic state, based on his meditative *hearing* of music, song, and lyrics, that induces the dance, and not dancing and movement, inspired by music and song, which induce the

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[12] Ibid., 309. Paraphrasing Aflāki (one of Rumi's biographers), Franklin Lewis describes how Rumi himself got entangled in the controversy surrounding the practice of *samāʿ*:

> Some folks in Konya attempted to get the *qâzi* of the city, Serâj al-Din Ormavi, to condemn the practice of *samāʿ*. He refused and opponents next resorted to sending Rumi excerpts from works of Islamic law about the impropriety of dance and music. Rumi, explaining that he had no care for the world and would willingly give up his position, gave convincing counterarguments, with the result that the *qâzi* and all the other ulama in town, including the learned and the *mofti*-professors, expressed their submissiveness to Rumi and ceased to harass him about *sam*âʿ. (312-313)

[13] Ibid., 310.
[14] Ibid., 310.
[15] *Encyclopedia of Islam*.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid.

mystical state. Though, as we will see, because the emotional transport induced by *samāʿ* is a purely subjective phenomenon, this problem cannot be unambiguously resolved.

First Refrain

There are references to *samāʿ* scattered throughout Rumi's poems, but nowhere is *samāʿ*, and its spiritual promises and dangers, treated more thoroughly, or more humorously, than in a colorful tale in his *Masnavi*.[18] In the story, a group of poor, starving, unscrupulous Sufis, passing time at a monastery (for Sufis), steal and sell a Sufi traveler's ass to pay for a feast and *samāʿ* session. The unsuspecting traveler, unaware that his ass has been stolen and sold, gladly accepts an invitation from the duplicitous Sufis to join them in *samāʿ*, wherein, carried away with passion, he sings with the other Sufis, "the ass is gone, the ass is gone," oblivious of the meaning of this lyric:

چون سماع آمد زاوّل تا کران　　مُطرب آغازید یك ضربِ گران
خر برفت و خر برفت آغاز کرد　　زین حرارت جمله را انباز کرد
زین حراره پای کوبان تا سحر　　کف زنان خر رفت و خر رفت ای پسر
از رهِ تقلید آن صوفی همین　　خر برفت آغاز کرد اندر حنین

When the samāʿ came from beginning to end,
the minstrel began with a heavy beat.
"The ass is gone, and the ass is gone," he sang.
He made the whole company partake in this passion.
From this passion they stomped their feet till dawn,
clapping their hands, "the ass is gone, the ass is gone, O son!"
By way of imitation that Sufi
passionately sang this same, "The ass is gone."[19]

(M2:535-538)[20]

[18] According to Lewisohn, there are 151 references to *samāʿ* in Rumi's works. See *The Philosophy of Ecstasy*, p. 62.
[19] All translations are mine, and they are based on *The Mathnawí of Jalálud'dín Rúmí : Edited from the oldest manuscripts available, with critical notes, translation, & commentary* by Reynold Alleyne Nicholson, 3 vols. (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2004).
[20] M2 signifies *Masnavi*, book 2, and is followed by line numbers based on Nicholson's edition.

The next day, when the traveler finds out that he has been duped, he is indignant, and blames the poor servant whom he had charged with the care of his donkey for the mishap. Eventually, he asks the servant why he failed to tell him that his ass had been stolen, and the servant replies by telling him that, based on his joyous singing in *samāʿ*, he thought the Sufi already knew of the occurrence and was at peace with it:

چون نیایی و نگویی ای غریب　　پیش آمد این چنین ظلمی مهیب
گفت و الله آمدم من بارها　　تا ترا واقف کنم زین کارها
تو همی گفتی که خر رفت ای پسر　　از همه گویندگان با ذَوْق تر
باز می گشتم که او خود واقف است　　زین قضا راضی است مردِ عارف است
گفت آنرا جمله می گفتند خَوش　　مر مرا هم ذوق آمد گفتنش
مر مرا تقلیدشان بر باد داد　　که دو صد لعنت بر آن تقلید باد

"Why didn't you come and say, 'Hey stranger,
a terrible injustice has occurred'?"
"By God," he said, "I came several times
to inform you of these events.
But you were always saying, 'O son, the donkey is gone'
with more enthusiasm than the rest.
I went back thinking 'he himself is aware,
he is satisfied with the judgment: he is an *ʿārif*."[21]
The Sufi replied, "The company was saying it so joyfully
I became joyous in saying it.
Imitation of them has ruined me:
two hundred curses on that vain imitation."

(M2:558-563)

In realizing his complicity, in bringing about his own misfortune, the Sufi blames "imitation" (*taqlid*), or "blind imitation," for misunderstanding the "true meaning" of the song he joined the others in singing.[22] And the reason he failed to understand the "true meaning" of the

[21] According to Nicholson, *ʿārif* (sometimes translated as a "wise or sagacious person") only means "gnostic" in Rumi's *Masnavi*, and such "knower[s] of God [are] quite indifferent to worldly loss" (vol. 2, p.275). Consequently, the servant thought the Sufi was an *ʿārif* because he knew his donkey had been stolen and sold (as evidenced by his singing) and was at peace with it.

[22] *Taqlid* is an Arabic word that, for the most part, shares the same meanings and connotations as its Persian derivative, including "imitation, copying; blind unquestioning adoption (of concepts or ideas); uncritical faith."

song he sang is because he failed to understand the true meaning and purpose of *samāʿ*; whose intent, as mentioned before, is to induce an emotionally heightened state, by way of aural stimulation, that can lead to spiritual awakening: "The physical and psychological impact of chanting and recitation, especially with the accompaniment of music, was powerfully effective, far beyond the semantic force of the words heard."[23] The *samāʿ*, then, is the "liturgical and ritual use of music" and poems where the communication of semantic meaning takes a backseat to the expression and inducement of spiritual feelings through linguistic and musical form. Not to be lost, is the fact that the addressee with whom the Sufi subject longs to connect with and express his devotion to, through the medium of music, song, and chant, is none other than God:

> These unusual states were sought after because they were seen as signposts or way stations on the path of the mystic's goal of divine unitary experience. Due to their sometimes ecstatic and blissful nature, these states were also interpreted as manifestations of divine love and mercy.[24]

Ironically, God's response to the mystic's plea, for spiritual awakening by way of divine communion, can only be found in the ecstatic feelings and passions induced by the very chants or songs that express the longing for such a communion. Consequently, if the intent of *samāʿ* is to induce an altered, ecstatic psychic state, through ritualistic recitation, chant or song, so that the Sufi can experience God, Rumi's story satirizes the entire event by disrupting the scene of divine communion through a series of miscommunications.

See Hans Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, edited by J. Milton Cowan (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1966), s.v. تقليد. In Arabic, taqlid, in addition to these meanings, also means the adoption of a legal decision based on Islamic law and connotes "tradition; convention, custom, usage." It is not difficult to see how these meanings intersect and interconnect. Following tradition, custom, or a law (blindly or not) involves imitation or copying. Conversely, those who follow or adhere to a tradition, custom, or a law can be said to be imitating or copying a set of social prescriptions. Though it is tempting to simply translate *taqlid*, in the context of a story about the follies of imitation, as "blind imitation" (as Nicholson and other translators do) that would be doing an injustice to the way Rumi plays on *taqlid's* ambiguity to deconstruct the concept in ways that allow the reader to transcend any simplistic understanding of it.

[23] Avery, *Psychology of Early Sufi Samāʿ*, 4.

[24] Ibid., 3.

The traveler misunderstands the meaning of the song he sings, the servant who comes to tell the traveler about his stolen ass misunderstands or misinterprets the traveler's ecstatic singing, and the traveler (now in hindsight) realizes that he misinterpreted or misunderstood the meaning of the song he sang because he misinterpreted or misunderstood his own motivations for partaking in *samāʿ* in the first place. If *samāʿ* is all about hearing and responding to a song's spiritual meaning—at the expense of its literal meaning—in order to be spiritually uplifted or elevated, in Rumi's story the Sufi's inability to hear or understand the literal meaning of the song he sings sends him into an inauthentic ecstatic state that reveals him to be a jackass.[25] According to R.A. Nicholson, "In the ears of a Ṣúfí '*khar bi-raft*' ["the ass is gone"] would sound as a song of triumph announcing the liberation of the spirit from the body and the flesh, which are very frequently typified by the ass (*khar*)."[26] Nicholson's reading adds another layer (or two) of irony to the story, for by hearing the symbolic meaning of the lyrics (i.e., that he is free from his bodily desires, and is therefore no longer a beast), the Sufi remains deaf to its literal meaning, which in turn reduces him to an uncomprehending beast or "ass." Additionally, not only does the Sufi fail to reach the mystical state (where one is free from carnal desires) but, as we find out later, his participation in *samāʿ* is motivated by the same earthly desires that the song ostensibly proclaims his freedom from. In turn, instead of the ritual experience bringing him closer to God (through spiritual awakening, knowledge, and understanding) the Sufi's failure to hear or understand not only the literal meaning of the song, but also how the song's symbolic meaning does not apply to his own spiritually vacuous impassioned state, has the opposite effect, so that the very ceremony

[25] In Persian the word *khar*, besides meaning ass or donkey, is also used to describe a foolish or stupid person, just as in English. Hence, by obliviously singing a song about the sale of his ass, with those who cheated him out of his ass, the man reveals himself to be a jackass.
[26] Nicholson, *The Mathnawí of Jalálud'dín Rúmí*, vol.2, p. 275.

he thinks spiritually elevates him, becomes, in retrospect, the cause of his downfall and a sign of his spiritual bankruptcy. In this way, the worshipper's communion with God is compromised by what he fails to hear or understand in the very communication (*samāʿ*) that is meant to facilitate his communion.

On the surface, then, the moral of the story seems to be the simple proscription (by Sufi mystics and scholastic theologians alike) against adopting a faith or a set of beliefs by "imitation" or "blind imitation," because the ritualistic imitation of a prescribed set of actions (even esoteric Sufi ones) won't, on their own, lead to true spiritual understanding or enlightenment:

> Another important movement of Rūmī's symphony concerns his polemic against the vice of blind imitation (*taqlīd*) as contrasted to his praise of the virtue of self-realization, known in Sufi terminology as 'direct experiential verification' (*tahqīq*).[27]

According to Lewisohn, "Rumi makes the most direct statement in all his oeuvre about the scourge of blind imitation versus the benefit of spiritual realization" in the current story:[28]

> The traveler surrender[s] himself to the spiritual ambience, happily chanting "the ass has gone" alongside the dervishes, blindly imitating their conviviality, joining in their jubilation little understanding the coda that the duplicitous dervishes had concealed in their chant: that "the ass has gone" was a secret threnody for his own forsaken mount![29]

And indeed, as stated before, this is ostensibly the lesson or moral that the Sufi in the story draws from his plight; except that he seems less concerned with how "blind imitation" made him lose sight of God than he is with how it caused him to lose his ass:

تو نیآیی و نگوی مر مرا که خرت را می برند ای بی نوا
تا خر از هرکه بود من واخَرَم ورنه توزیعی کنند ایشان زَرَم
صد تدارك بود چون حاضر بُدند این زمان هر یك باقلیمی شدند

[27] Lewisohn, "Principles of the Philosophy of Ecstasy," 16.
[28] Ibid., 17.
[29] Ibid.

You did not come and tell me,
they are taking away your donkey, poor man!
So that I could buy back the donkey from whomever had it,
or if not, then maybe they could divide my money.
There were a hundred possible remedies when they were still present;
By now each one is in a separate region.

(M2:554-556)

Though perhaps in his addled state of mind, the two (i.e., God and his donkey) go hand in hand: "Imitation of them has ruined me: / two hundred curses on that vain imitation."

Nonetheless, it is important to point out that though the Sufi's focus seems to be on how *taqlid* caused him to lose his ass, the poet is equally, if not more, concerned with how *taqlid* kept the Sufi from achieving mystical awakening, and how his plight can be avoided:

لیك آن صوفی زمستی دُور بود لاجرم در حرص او شب کُور بود

But that Sufi was far from [divine] intoxication;
Undoubtedly he was night-blind in greed.

(M2:583)

If the poet's reassuring tone, coming at the very end of his story, betrays, in its certainty, a hint of doubt, or uncertainty, about the nature of the Sufi's ecstatic experience, or why he was "far from" divine intoxication, it is for good reason. Because if the Sufi was undoubtedly not intoxicated with God, then the poet must undoubtedly know, and be able to tell us (1) how and why being "night-blind in greed" prevented him from divine intoxication, and (2) how being intoxicated with God is, in no uncertain terms, different from the Sufi's inauthentic ecstatic experience when the experience of God, or the inimitable, cannot be communicated in imitable terms. In turn, as will be shown, this humorous story about communication that does not bring awareness of its meaning will ultimately test the poet's own powers of communication and, as a consequence, the limits of communicability itself.

Second Refrain

The Sufi joins his cohort in feasting and song, a song that celebrates a feast made possible by the sale of his ass, because he delights in *imitating* a ritual celebration that ostensibly brings him closer to God. In so doing, he confuses or mistakes his desire for friendship and feasting, and the pleasures they bring, during *samāʿ*, with his desire and love for spiritual awakening and mystical union:

عکس ذوق آن جماعت می زدی وین دلم ز آن عکس ذوقی می شدی

The delight of that company was casting a reflection,
and my heart from that reflection was becoming delighted.

(M2:565)

Consequently, in misunderstanding his own feelings and motivations for participating in *samāʿ* the Sufi not only misunderstands the meaning of the song he sings but also the *samāʿ* itself, thereby short-circuiting his own spiritual journey.

In turn, the story humorously shows how imitation (*taqlid*), the desire for imitation, and those affects associated with the desire for imitation, can lead to misfortune by delimiting communication and understanding. This reading and the story as a whole illustrate the idea contained in Shams' instructions to Rumi, that the *samāʿ* is ultimately "a revealing instrument," supplying "that which is brought to it by the hearer."[30] But Rumi does not stop here, with this rather ordinary scene of miscommunication and misunderstanding. He pushes his commentary further by using this comical episode of misplaced mysticism to test the very limits of communication and understanding. In this reading, or rereading, of the story, the mystical event that did not happen and/or was not experienced becomes the focus of the poet's commentary.

[30] *Encyclopedia of Islam*.

Understanding the mystical event or experience, in terms of what it is and what one needs to do to achieve it, becomes important for the poet, and consequently his readers, because simply laughing at the poor Sufi for thinking he had reached an ecstatic mystical state, when he really had not, will not help Sufi aspirants avoid his mistakes or achieve what he failed to achieve. And this brings up an important point, the Sufi only comes to realize that his mystical experience was hollow, a shallow *show* of spiritual devotion, after the fact; that is, after realizing the heavy price he has paid for his "spiritual awakening." Hence, the Sufi fails the spiritual test (or reveals he has failed the spiritual test) not simply because he allows himself to be taken advantage of but because of how he responds to the knowledge that he was taken advantage of. Presumably, the Sufi's response to the situation is one of many potential responses. If his spiritual feelings had been genuine, or his ecstatic state truly mystical, then losing his ass, or finding out that his comrades used him, might not have invalidated his entire experience. In fact, if the poet is right, and "this world becomes carrion" in the eyes (*jahān dar chashm-e u mordār shod*) of those who enjoy mystic vision, then losing an ass is surely no big deal—a small price to pay for spiritual awakening or divine communion.[31] The fact that the Sufi does not *feel* this way tells us that he did not reach the spiritual plane he intended to reach, thought he had reached, or pretended to have reached. In other words, the Sufi's response to the incident, or how he *hears* the news about his ass, once again *reveals*, just in case there was any doubt, that he not only is not an *ʿārif*, but is, in fact, a spiritual ignoramus, or ass.

Of course, this still does not tell us what the Sufi needed to do, or could have done differently if not to save his ass then at least save himself from looking like one. Nor does it tell

[31] M2:582

Sufi aspirants what the correct attitude or orientation for achieving mystical enlightenment ought to be. In other words, if the Sufi failed to achieve mystical awakening because his hearing did not allow him to hear what he needed to hear, then the poet should not only be able to tell us *what* he needed to hear but also *how* one needs to hear in order to be mystically awakened. Hence, the Sufi's failure can only be fully understood in relation to what he failed to understand, and consequently achieve. The poet begins to help us understand how and why imitation (*taqlid*) kept the Sufi from achieving mystical awakening, by, ironically, complicating our understanding of the role *taqlid* plays in achieving mystical awakening. In response to the Sufi's claims that "imitation (*taqlid*) of them has brought me to ruin: / two hundred curses on that imitation" and "The delight of that company was casting a reflection, / and my heart from that reflection was becoming delighted," the poet says:

عکس چندان باید از یارانِ خَوش　　که شوی از بحر بی عکس آب کَش
عکس کاوّل زد تو آن تقلید دان　　چون پَیاپَی شد شود تحقیق آن
تا نشد تحقیق از یا ران مبُر　　از صدف مگُسل نگشت آن قطره دُر

> Such reflection from cheerful friends is necessary,
> until you become, without reflection, a drawer of water from the sea.
> Know that the first reflection cast is imitation.
> When it follows in succession it becomes realization.
> Do not part from friends until it is realized.[32]
> From the shell do not break off; the droplet hasn't finished becoming [a pearl].

(M2:566-568)

In contrast to the Sufi's impassioned denunciation of imitation (*taqlid*), and the desires motivating imitation, as the cause of his downfall, the poet does not categorically reject imitation, but views the problem through a wider, philosophical lens. In Platonic fashion, the

[32] Two senses of *tahqiq* may be implied here. The first being, "actualization" (i.e., "When it follows succession it becomes actualization"), and the second being "research or looking into the truth of a thing" (i.e., "Do not part from friends until it [i.e., the world of imitation/sociality] is researched").

poet envisages a world of imitable, mirror like reflections (*aks*) that have the same relationship to truth or reality, in the form of God, as an inverted image does to its original.[33] The poet first indicates the illusoriness of this world through a clever wordplay (*yār* being a Sufi moniker for God)[34] that contrasts the world of the divine, or "the Friend," with the societal world of friends (*yārān*), who cast imitable (*taqlid*) reflections (*aks*) and shadows that the Sufi subject eventually outgrows or transcends: "Such reflection from cheerful friends is necessary, / until you become, without reflection, a drawer of water from the sea." In other words, once a Sufi reaches the mystical state, the love of friends, friendship, and society (or the imitable) turns into or becomes love of God or "the Friend," imagined here as a boundless sea, which the love of "friends" is (or was) merely a reflection of.[35] In the next verse, the poet develops this idea further through a clever wordplay: "Know that the first reflection cast is imitation (*taqlid*). / When it follows in succession it becomes realization (*tahqiq*)." The root of the Arabic word *tahqiq* (meaning realization, actualization, verification) is *haqq*, which, as mentioned in the previous chapter, in addition to meaning "right," "reality," and "truth," also means "The real" or "The Truth," as in God. In fact, the poet uses the word *haqq* to refer to God elsewhere in the story. But in this verse

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[33] Whereas in Plato's allegory of the cave truth and reality are symbolized by the sun, for Rumi truth and reality are synonymous with God. For Plato's allegory, see book VII, 514a-520a, in *The Republic*, translated by Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1968).

[34] Although *dust* (دوست), meaning "friend," is perhaps the more common moniker for God in Sufi poetry, *yār* (meaning "friend," "companion," and even "beloved") is not uncommon. In a famous *ghazal* in which Attar compares God to a beautiful beloved/companion (*yār*), he says:

یافتن یارچیست؟ گم شدن تو تا نشوی گم ز خویش یار نیابی

What is it to find the friend? Losing yourself.
You'll not find "the Friend" until you lose your "self."

Farīd al-Dīn ʿAttār, *Divān*, ed. M. Darvish (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Jāvidān 1359/1980), 592.

[35] Of course, Rumi might also be alluding to *yār's* other special meaning in Sufi lexicon, where *yār* signifies a "spiritual master" or "saint" while *yārān* refers to his group of disciples. Thus, what is missing here is precisely the guidance of a *yār* who could tell this traveler when the appropriate point on this journey of approaching God it is to perform *samāʿ*. According to this reading, in order to properly perform *samāʿ* one needs a guide on the Sufi path, and if you do things before you are ready for them and/or surround yourself with the wrong guides or "friends" (as the Sufi traveler ostensibly does) you impede the rest of your journey on the path. But as the story will demonstrate, this is easier said than done. (For more on the relative strengths and weaknesses of this reading, see footnote 38.)

he juxtaposes *haqq*, hidden inside the word *tahqiq*, with *taqlid*—both words occupy the same metrical position in each hemistich of the verse—to suggest that the imitable world of reflections and shadows only becomes something real or true in God, or the experience of God; which also means, compared to God, or the experience of God, everything is an illusory image, reflection, or copy. But the juxtaposition of *taqlid* and *tahqiq*, and the wordplay involving God, where the echo of *haqq* and *yār* (as references to God) can be heard in words like *taqlid* and *yārān*, also conveys another message. It suggests that God, the inimitable, always already exists in the imitable, and that He can be discovered or experienced by those who, like the perceptive reader, have the ear to hear and/or perceive Him. Through this subtle wordplay, Rumi plays on the theme of listening/hearing/audition in *samāʿ* to turn his narrative poem (or the experience of reading it) into a kind of *samāʿ* that, even without the presence of music, dance, and whirling dervishes, has the potential to not only reveal and intensify the character of his readers/auditors but also help transform them through the act of hearing/listening:[36]

يك حكايت گويمت بشْنو بهوش تا بدانی كه طَمع شد بندِ گوش

I will tell you a story: listen to it attentively,
that you may know that covetousness is a plug in the ear.

(M2:578)

And again:

صد حكايت بشْنود مدهوشِ حرص در نيآيد نكتهٔ در گوشِ حرص

The man dumbfounded by greed may hear a hundred stories,
Not a single point is heard by the ear of greed.

(M2:584)

[36] As was discussed earlier, Rumi's lyric poems, based on stylistic and historical evidence, are inseparable from their use in *samāʿ*. Hence, it is not a leap to imagine his narrative poems incorporating some dimension or element of *samāʿ*, especially in relation to the all-important theme of audition.

We will return to this idea of Rumi's narrative poem as a kind of *samāʿ*, with the potential to transform the perceptive and spiritually receptive reader, later in our reading. But for now, what is important to keep in mind is that if the poem, like the *samāʿ*, is a kind of tuning fork, then each reader, depending on his nature, sensibility, and consequently "hearing," will be affected differently and have a different experience or understanding of the "same" poem. In fact, Rumi's text, with its jazzy, improvisatory style invites the reader to read/hear/interpret his words in the same creative, spontaneous manner; offering up metaphors, allusions, wordplay, puns, ironies and paradoxes that can be read/heard/interpreted in various ways. Such an approach turns the poem into more than a didactic exercise, because the poem's ultimate meaning, and therefore effect, is not just determined by its form and content, but also by how each reader/hearer responds to the poem's form and content. This is not to suggest that Rumi himself does not play the role of hermeneutical guide, on his reader's journey through a labyrinthine text, but rather that the poet's own explications, like the rest of his text, require the reader's attentive engagement and careful interpretation.

Third Refrain

With this in mind, let us return to the passage under consideration and listen for the subtle ways in which the poet continues to confound our senses and complicate our understanding of this seemingly straightforward narrative about the follies of "blind imitation." In making the claim that God is the ultimate reality or truth, the poet, in effect, not only deconstructs the binary between "blind imitation" and "imitation" (to the extent that both blind imitation and imitation fall short of "the Truth" or "realization"), but also imitation and non-imitation (to the extent that everything but God is derivative). And this makes sense because imitation, the desire for

imitation, and the love of imitation (there is a pleasure principle associated with imitation), are inescapable, defining features of human life. In fact, according to Aristotle, even poetry owes its existence to the human proclivity for, and love of, imitation:

> It is clear that the general origin of poetry was due to two causes, each of them part of human nature. Imitation is natural to man from childhood, one of his advantages over the lower animals being this, that he is the most imitative creature in the world, and learns at first by imitation. And it is natural for all to delight in works of imitation. The truth of this second point is shown by experience: though the objects themselves may be painful to see, we delight to view the most realistic representations of them in art….The explanation is to be found in the further fact: to be learning something is the greatest of pleasures not only to the philosopher but also to the rest of mankind...[37]

Through imitation, one not only learns how to learn but also what to desire, and how to go about fulfilling those desires; including religious desires. In turn, imitation is an integral part of religious and spiritual life. Far from interfering with a human being's spiritual quest, imitation (*taqlid*) seems to play an important, vital, and necessary role for those hoping to transcend their imitative state through rituals like *samāʿ*.[38]

To the extent that the Sufi in the story does not understand this truth, or only sees

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[37] Aristotle's *Poetics*, 4, 1448b4-15, trans. Ingram Bywater, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, edited by Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941).

[38] In his commentary on the story, Nicholson says, "The imitation of a true saint by his disciples is not only praiseworthy, but (as a rule) necessary in the early stages of the mystical life." See, *The Mathnawí of Jalálud'dín Rúmí*, vol.2, p. 275. Nicholson goes on to say, "The 'reflexions' which the novice receives from the illuminated spiritual guide gradually instill pure knowledge of God into his heart, so that at last "the rain-drop becomes a pearl" (276). Nicholson comments show the important role imitation played in teaching and fostering Sufi religious beliefs. Taken too far, however, his commentary might lead some to conclude that Rumi's story is simply about surrounding oneself with, following, and/or imitating good friends (like a Sufi gnostic), while avoiding bad ones (like those Sufi miscreants who stole the donkey to pay for a *samāʿ* session). Although the Sufi traveler could certainly do better in his choice of "friends" that is not the main reason the poet gives for his demise. The starving Sufis at the monastery mirror the Sufi traveler (or what is in his heart) as much as he mirrors them (or what is in their hearts). They covet his ass as much as he covets the feast and *samāʿ* session that they pay for, by, ironically, selling his ass. What this suggests is that one can only find a spiritual guide or friend who casts the proper reflection by knowing what qualities or traits to look for in a friend. And one can only know what traits/qualities to look for by having a preliminary knowledge of those traits/qualities in their own heart. Hence, as the poet will make clear, though the "reflections" cast by others is spiritually important what is even more important is the reflection cast by one's own heart, which determines one's response to the reflections cast by others.

imitation in a negative light, i.e., as "blind imitation," or thinks *taqlid* can be avoided, he not only remains blind to imitation's power over him but also its transformative potential. Consequently, the poet exhorts his readers to not forgo the world of imitation and sociality until the process of imitation results, paradoxically, in its own transcendence: "Do not part from friends until it is realized. / From the shell do not break off; the droplet hasn't finished becoming [a pearl]."

And yet, when it comes to offering details regarding when, how or by what mechanism imitation leads to or results in the realization of an inimitable mystical state, the poet remains evasive. He does not even tell us, at least not unequivocally, if mystical awakening and/or its effects, are permanent or temporary; something that can be repeated or a singular event or happening; something that must be actively sought or something that happens passively, when the time comes. In this last regard, the poet seems to suggest that both have a part to play:

تا نشد تحقیق از یاران مبُر　　از صدف مگُسل نگشت آن قطره دُر
صاف خواهی چشم و عقل و سمع　　را بر دران تو پرده های طمَع را

> Do not part from friends until it is realized.
> From the shell do not break off; the droplet hasn't finished becoming [a pearl].
> If you want eye, mind, and hearing to be pure,
> tear apart the curtains of covetousness.
>
> (M2:568-569)

On the one hand, the poet suggests that one ought to allow the process of imitation to play out until the transformative event, without the subject's doing, takes place: "Do not part from friends until it is realized." And here again, through wordplay, the poet tacitly reminds us that one separates from his "friends" only when one realizes "the Friend," i.e., the *haqq* (God) in the *tahqiq* (realization). The subject's passive role, in making the mystical event happen, is further highlighted in the second hemistich of the verse. Here the poet intimates that those who, in their

quest for realization (i.e., God), try to abandon the imitable world of sociality are more likely to hurt, than help, their chances of experiencing the inimitable transformative moment: "From the shell do not break off; the droplet hasn't finished becoming [a pearl]." On the other hand, the emphasis on action and activity in the next verse ("If you want eye, mind, and hearing to be pure, / tear apart the curtains of covetousness") suggests that one must actively seek mystical enlightenment by battling and overcoming one's baser instincts or desires. Here, the passage pits one kind of wishing or desiring (*khāstan*) against another (*tamaʿ*), translated as covetousness, that must be overcome.

In the next verse, the poet offers an important clue to solving the riddle to achieving mystical enlightenment by connecting the activity of *taqlid* with *tamaʿ*:

ز آنکٔ آن تقلیدِ صوفی از طَمَع عقلِ او بر بست از نور و لُمَع
طمعِ لُوت و طمعِ آن ذوق و سماع مانعِ آمد عقلِ او را زاطّلاع

> Because of the Sufi's *taqlid* from *tamaʿ*,
> his intellect was closed off from light and shine.
> Covetousness for food, covetousness for delight, and the *samāʿ*,
> blocked his understanding from knowledge.
>
> (M2:570-571)

The verse beginning with, "Because of the Sufi's *taqlid* from *tamaʿ*," suggests that the Sufi failed in his quest for mystical enlightenment, because he was unable to overcome a certain kind of imitation; namely, an imitation motivated by *tamaʿ*. *Tamaʿ*, which appears nine times in the poet's explication of the story (lines 569-579), is variously translated by Nicholson and others as, "selfish desire," "greed," and "desire." Interestingly, however, these translations leave out what is perhaps—in the context of a story about the follies of imitation—the most important

connotation of *tamaʿ*: "covetousness."[39] Unlike greed (inordinate or insatiate desire) or selfish desire (a desire that has little or no regard for the wishes or wants of others), or desire in general, covetousness not only signifies an intense desire (for material and immaterial objects) but also a desire for what others possess, and, consequently, what they desire. In other words, covetousness is an imitative desire: it wants what others want, and it seeks to gratify itself through the same imitable ends. Additionally, the object of *tamaʿ* presents itself to the beholder as an object worth coveting, so that a person comes into possession of what the object represents by possessing that which represents it. But since what the object represents is simply a reflection of the desires projected onto it, then what the subject ultimately covets is that which emanates from his own heart. In this sense, the object of *tamaʿ* is a kind of copy or imitation (*taqlid*) of what is in the beholder's heart. Both these senses of *tamaʿ* are captured in the Sufi's description of his own seduction: "The *delight* of that company was casting a reflection, / and my heart from that reflection was becoming *delighted*." As the Sufi himself admits, it was his desire to partake in the delight others were enjoying, and not an insatiable desire for more (i.e., greed), or selfishness, that ultimately caused him to imitate those who *reflected* what he now coveted. The poet emphasizes the covetous nature of the Sufi's desire by using the same word, *zowq* (meaning joy or delight), to describe what the Sufi saw his companions reflecting (i.e., delight), and the desire kindled in his heart as a result of that reflection (i.e., the desire for delight). But this uncanny mirroring of desires also conveys the sense that the delight (*zowq*) being reflected is something that the Sufi projects onto those who reflect it, so that the other Sufis only reflect/imitate what is already in his heart: the desire for delight. From this viewpoint, the

[39] The primary meaning of the verb form of *tamaʿ*, in both Persian and Arabic, is "to covet."

viewpoint of *tamaʿ*, or covetousness, the ritual of *samāʿ*, rather than being an open-ended process, becomes an end in itself; a self-contained system that satisfies every desire it inculcates through imitation (*taqlid*): "Covetousness for food, covetousness for delight, and the *samāʿ*, / blocked his understanding from knowledge." And, to the extent that the Sufi understands (or rather misunderstands) the experience of mystical awakening to be something imitable (i.e., something that can be duplicated or repeated), the ritual of *samāʿ* can even "satisfy" his desire for mystical awakening:

لُوت خوردند و سماع آغاز کرد　　خانقه تا سقف شد پُر دود و گرد
دودِ مطبخ گَرْدِ آن پا کوفتن　　ز اشتیاق و وَجْد جان آشوفتن
گاه دست افشان قدم می کوفتند　　گه به سجده صُفّه را می روفتند

They ate food and began the *samāʿ*.
The monastery became filled with smoke and dust up to the celling.
The smoke from the kitchen, the dust from beating feet,
the tumult of soul from longing and ecstasy.
Now, waving hands, they beat their feet;
now, in prostration, they would sweep the estrade.

(M2:529-531)

But the desire for mystical awakening or divine communion is not a desire for the imitable but the inimitable, and therefore cannot be fulfilled through imitation; for imitation, as the poet points out, is merely the starting point. The story is steeped in irony because the imitable, and the desires satisfied through the imitable, take the form of a religious ritual (the *samāʿ*) whose ultimate aim is an inimitable mystical experience that is made possible by overcoming that (i.e., *tamaʿ*) which finds fulfillment in imitation: "If you wish eye, understanding and hearing to be pure, / tear the curtains of *tamaʿ* to pieces." And yet, this does not mean doing away with imitation, or the desire for imitation; for how could one engage in ritual practices (like the *samāʿ*) that ostensibly lead to mystical awakening without imitation? Instead, what is needed is a

shift in perspective, attitude, or perhaps something more fundamental, like a change of heart. For those who wish to experience an inimitable mystical state must, paradoxically, imitate out of a desire, and a *love* for, the inimitable, rather than the imitable. If *taqlid*, as suggested before, is the outward manifestation of an otherwise invisible truth or reality (*haqq*), then "blind imitation," for Rumi, amounts to not seeing/sensing this hidden truth. Through the eyes of covetousness, all imitation becomes blind imitation because one can only covet what one sees or perceives (i.e., the imitable), and is therefore *blind* to the inimitable Truth (*haqq*) that animates the phenomenal world. In imitating out of *tamaʿ*, the Sufi imitates out of a desire for the imitable, and therefore engages in ritual actions that have no hope of transcending themselves and achieving spiritual awakening through divine communion. Rumi compares the affliction of *tamaʿ* to a mirror that covets (or desires to possess) the reflections/images cast in its glass:

گر طَمَع در آینه بر خاستی　　در نفاق آن آینه چون ماستی

If *tamaʿ* were to arise in a mirror,
in hypocrisy that mirror would be like us.

(M2:572)

Unpacking the tortuous passage, Nicholson notes that a normal mirror, unlike the mirror possessed by *tamaʿ*, "does not covet and retain the images presented to it" but merely reflects what it sees.[40]

Fourth Refrain

Nonetheless, it is not clear how one can exclude or negate the possibility that imitating out of a desire for an inimitable mystical experience is not itself (despite one's best intentions) a form of *tamaʿ*? In other words, how does one preclude the possibility that such actions are (1)

[40] Nicholson, *The Mathnawí of Jalálud'dín Rúmí*, vol.2, p. 276.

driven by a form of covetousness, or a desire to have/possess what others desire (even if what they desire is an inimitable mystical experience) and (2) that they fulfill themselves through imitation; for how can one tell the difference between a genuine mystical experience and an inauthentic one if they themselves don't know what a mystical experience is like? After all, if the Sufi had not learned that the sale of his beast funded his unholy feast, or had been told a fib that pacified him (e.g., that his donkey ran away), he, and consequently we, might have remained under the mistaken impression that he experienced real nirvana, instead of an affected or self-induced one. As mentioned before, it is only after the fact, after the Sufi *hears* the news about his donkey, that he realizes, and we confirm, that his mystical experience was inauthentic or fake. And that is because the Sufi's interpretation or understanding of events is based on his feelings about the event; and based on the new information he hears/receives his feelings about the event change. He now, in hindsight, feels duped, cheated, and taken advantage of. Consequently, if the Sufi's feelings about the mystical experience only change once he learns about the circumstances surrounding the event, then it is not enough to know why he failed, or what he could have done differently to reach the mystical state; we also need to know what the mystical state is like if we want to rely on something more than a feeling to determine if he (or anyone else for that matter) actually experienced the elusive event, or that he was not duped, or duping himself, into thinking that he had. And yet, any discussion about a mystical experience (whether it be the Sufi's or someone else's) is invariably a discussion about the subjective world of feelings. Therefore, not only are objective criteria for determining the veracity of mystical phenomenon difficult, if not impossible, to come by, but also, and for that very reason, any objective criteria used to determine the authenticity of a mystical event will be highly suspect. Despite these

epistemological difficulties, however, the poet presses on and tries to give his readers, if not a complete picture, then at least a snapshot of the mystical state that eluded the Sufi. But then again, what choice does he have? Lest we think him an ass for satirizing someone who thought he had, or pretended to have, a mystical experience when he himself does not know, or cannot tell us, what an actual mystical experience is like.

Whereas earlier, the poet had used abstract metaphors (e.g., a raindrop turning into a pearl), that are themselves in need of interpretation, to describe the mystical event or state, he now gives his readers a glimpse of the mystical state through a series of negations. In responding to his own observation, that those affected with *tamaʿ* are blinded (or have their senses blocked) by their desires, the poet states:

هر که را باشد طمع اَلْکَن شود　　با طمع کَی چشم و دل روشن شود
پیشِ چشمِ او خیالِ جاه و زر　　همچنان باشد که موی اندر بصر
جز مگر مستی که از حق پُر بود　　گر چه بدْهی گنجها او حُر بود

Whoever is covetous becomes a stutterer:
with covetousness how will eye and heart become enlightened?
Before his eye, the vision of rank and riches
is like a hair in the field of vision.
Except, of course, the drunkard that is filled with God:
although you give him treasures, he is free.

(M2:579-581)

What the poet is saying here, in effect, is that only those who are intoxicated with God are able to possess treasures without feeling any sort of attachment for them. And that is because in comparison to the affective phenomenon of divine communion, or being filled or intoxicated with God's love, earthly "treasures" are viewed to be worthless or deficient. Ironically then, the poet's comparison only reveals how God's love surpasses, or is incomparable to, all imitable earthly treasures; which explains why being filled and fulfilled with God frees one from the

desire for such treasures. In the verse that follows, the poet continues to compare the incomparability of divine intoxication to intoxication induced by wealth, power, and other earthly delights, by describing the mystical state through another negation:

هر که از دیدار برخوردار شد　　این جهان در چشمِ او مُردار شد

Whoever comes to enjoy this vision,
this world becomes a carcass in his eye.

(M2:582)

Instead of describing the mystical vision, the poet describes the effects of the vision, which only intensifies the mystery surrounding it. For if seeing the world turn "carrion" before one's eyes is the only sign of an ecstatic, exalted spiritual state, then this morbid "metaphor" does little to help us understand the joyous occasion of spiritual awakening and divine intoxication. All we know is that the mystical state won't be like anything we know, because once someone experiences it this world, and the desires of this world, melt away. Taken together, the poet's "descriptions" of the mystical state only encapsulate and recapitulate the idea that *tamaʿ*, as imitable worldly desire, can't compare to the inimitable experience of the divine. In a sense, then, the poet offers his readers a clue about the mystical state by way of its incomparability. Consequently, if someone can compare the imitable, or worldly, to the inimitable or otherworldly—as the Sufi does when he decides that his ecstatic feelings during *samāʿ* don't make up for the loss of his ass, or feeling like an ass for being cheated out of his ass—then chances are they did not have a mystical experience; because the inimitable (i.e., God) can't be compared with, or measured against, the imitable things of this world (e.g., an ass or feeling like an ass). The incomparability of the mystical state also means that the desire for a mystical experience must be different from what everyone else wants or desires, even if they desire the "same" mystical experience. And that is

because anyone desiring an inimitable experience desires that which cannot be compared to anything else, including another (or another's) inimitable experience. Consequently, if one *sees* their desires being "reflected," and therefore duplicated, in another—as the Sufi does when he sees what he wants being enjoyed by others—then chances are they are not after an inimitable experience, even if they think they are. Additionally, if one truly desired the inimitable (i.e., God) and not the imitable, then seeing their desire, or love of the divine, *reflected* in an imitable object, would not cause them to desire the object, but, like the echo of *haqq* in the *taqlid*, and *yār* in *yārān*, the divine love shining through it. This is perhaps another reason why those intoxicated and/or filled with God are not affected by earthly treasures/delights, and why the world turns carrion before their eyes, for all they *see*, through their newfound vision, is, paradoxically, the *invisible* spirit that animates all of God's creations.

In addition to drawing our attention to its incomparability, another way the poet highlights the inimitability of the mystical experience is through the syntax he uses to describe the event. In answer to the question of why mystical awakening or divine communion can never be found, or fulfilled, through imitation alone, the poet suggests that imitation, out of a desire for the inimitable, merely sets the stage for communion between an imitable creature and an inimitable creator, but it does not guarantee the experience. *Tamaʿ*, as the poet tells us, is just "a plug in the ear" (*band-e gush*)" Removing that plug brings about a state of spiritual and perceptual purity that allows God's "light" and "radiance" to enter and be received: "If you wish eye, understanding and hearing to be pure, / tear the curtains of *tamaʿ* to pieces." The poet alludes to the passive dimension of divine communion both in his discussion of imitation—*becoming* realization (lines 566-568)—and in his description of the elusive mystical state:

"When anyone comes to enjoy vision, / this world becomes carrion in his eyes." Only when the mystical vision is experienced, or "enjoyed," and not before, does the world "become carrion" in one's eyes. Which is to say, one's activity of defeating or overcoming *tamaʿ* does not, in and of itself, induce or guarantee a vision that turns the world, and the pleasures of the world, into "carrion," but only creates the conditions of its possibility. Here again, the passive position of the subject, whose only activity, according to the intransitive syntax of the verse, is to enjoy a transformative mystic vision, and then, as a result, see the world become carrion before his eyes, suggests an experience or a happening that is, to some degree, beyond one's control.

Consequently, only those who have had the mystical experience can speak to it, and perhaps not even they; for as the poet's earlier metaphor of a raindrop turning into a pearl suggests, the transformative nature of the mystical experience is so radical that the subject bears no resemblance to his earlier self. According to the metaphor, the union or communion between an imitable being and inimitable creator results in something new, something that did not exist before. Hence, there is no guarantee that the person at the end of the inimitable experience will be the person who experienced it. But even if the subject could recollect the inimitable experience, or muster a description, how could he communicate it without putting it in imitable terms? To the extent that language is based on the iterability and imitability of signs, signs that stand for universally recognizable concepts, any description of the mystical event is bound to be incomparable to the inimitable event itself. It is also worth recalling that imitation, the desire for imitation, and, most importantly, the desire for the imitable in imitation (in the form of *tamaʿ*) is what got the hapless Sufi in the story into trouble. Not only did fulfilling his desires through imitation prevent the Sufi from experiencing an inimitable mystical experience but also his

profound misunderstanding of imitation's role and function in the spiritual journey is likely to prevent him, and those like him, from ever achieving mystical enlightenment. Consequently, even if the poet could somehow describe the inimitable mystical experience in prosaic terms, he would only be fueling the hunger for the imitable—the circular chain of sign, signifier, and signified, endlessly feeding the desire to know, to learn, to possess, and to pass on what one knows and owns by way of imitation—which is to say, the covetable. To the extent that possession implies knowledge of what is possessed, one can only covet (or desire to possess) what one knows. But the mystical event cannot be "known" until it is experienced or realized; and, to the extent that knowledge must be imitable in order to be considered knowledge, not even then, for the mystical event is inimitable.[41]

Fifth Refrain

Rumi's story is ultimately about a man's confusion and misunderstanding regarding his own feelings, desires, and motivations for participating in a ritual whose telos (God willing) is a mystical experience (between creator and creature) born out of love. And the story ends with the poet trying to articulate the ineffable, mystical love experience that the Sufi never achieved, in terms that test the limits of logic, reason, and understanding. Poetry is the perfect medium/language for expressing the ineffable experience of love (including the love between "man" and God) because poetry, like love, emerges out of a world of feelings that exceed the bounds of logic and reason: feelings too complicated to understand, much less communicate.

[41] Of course, Rumi's refusal or inability to describe the mystical state in anything but negative terms (i.e., by telling us what it is *not*), is very much in keeping with his persona from the *ghazals*, where the poet responds to the *mysterium tremendum* by professing silence (*Khāmush*):

> The poem then ends in an address to a personified silence, an embodiment of the *via negativa*; the signature also acts as a command to the reader or the mystic desirous of revealing the mysteries of mystical love: Silence! It is not through words but experience that the truth is known. (Lewis, *Rumi: Past and Present*, 329.)

Nonetheless, poetry tries to put into words that which cannot be put into words. Hence, poetry emerges out of the tension between what one wants to say and what one is, for better or worse, unable to say, or say without metaphor, symbol, irony, hyperbole, personification and other figures of speech that exceed the bounds of ordinary discourse. Ironically, the poet's inability to describe the mystical experience, and the path to achieving it, in anything but figurative terms tells us something in its inability to tell us much of anything. It suggests, in an indirect way, that the inability to describe or communicate the mystical experience (except, of course, in poetic terms) is not only an inherent feature of the inimitable experience, but also the only one that, paradoxically, *signals* its existence. Conversely, this also means anything that can't be articulated and explained by imitable, prosaic language has an element of the mystical in it. To the extent that poetry can transform the prosaic into the poetic, the ordinary into the extraordinary, and imitable into the inimitable, it has the power to mystify. Poetry, then, is the perfect language for not just trying to communicate the incommunicable but also transforming the communicable into the incommunicable—the mystical.[42]

Sixth Refrain

But if the mystical can be represented as being communicable in its incommunicability, and the inimitable, or mystical, can be found in the imitable, then the poet blurs the distinction between each of these respective categories, concepts, or signs by pointing to a truth that encompasses all signs, regardless of what they signify. And the poet gestures towards this mystical truth through a story about *how* we hear or understand the meaning of any sign,

[42] The mystifying function of poetry is in ironic tension with the imitative one ascribed to it by Aristotle. For here the poet uses the art of imitation to, ironically, communicate, represent, or convey an inimitable, incommunicable experience.

including those that induce mystical awakening. Long after the story about the Sufi traveler has passed, Rumi obliquely returns to the symbolism of the ass to, once again, make the reader reconsider the meaning of the story she heard by asking her to reconsider the meaning of the song that the Sufi heard:

معنیٔ تو صورتست و عاریت　　برمُناسب شادی و بر قافیت
معنی آن باشد که بسْتاند ترا　　بی‌نیاز از نقش گرداند ترا
معنی آن نبْود که کُور و کَر کند　　مردرا بر نقش عاشق تر کند
کُوررا قسمت خیال غم فزاست　　بهرهٔ چشم این خیالات فَناست
حرفِ قرآن را ضریران مَعْدِن اند　　خر نبینند و بپالان بر زنند
چون تو بینایی پی ِ خر رَوْ که جَست　　چند پالان دوزی ای پالان پرست
خر چو هست آید یقین پالان ترا　　کم نگردد نان چو باشد جان ترا
پشتِ خر دکّان و مال مَکْسَبست　　دُرّ قَلْبت مایهٔ صد قالَبست
خر برهنه بر نشین ای بو أَلْفُضول　　خر برهنه نه که راکب شد رسول

Sense for you is borrowed form:
you rejoice in what conforms and rhymes.
Sense is that which seizes you
and makes you free of form.
Sense is not that which makes one blind and deaf,
and makes man more in love with form.
The portion of the blind is sorrow-inducing supposition;
the portion of the [spiritual] eye is imaginings of *fanāʾ*.
The words of the Quran are a mine for the blind:
they do not see the ass and go for the pack-saddle.
Since you see the path, go for the ass that jumped [away]:
how long are you going to sew the saddle, you saddle worshipper?
As long as the ass is there, the saddle will certainly be yours:
you will not lack bread when you have the spirit.
On the back of the ass is shop, wealth and gain;
your heart's pearl is the stock of a hundred bodies.
Sit upon the ass bare-backed, you idle talker:
did not the prophet ride the ass bare-backed?

(M2:719-727)

The poet begins re-contextualizing and redefining the meaning of the ass, and therefore the story about the ass, by, ironically, complicating our sense or understanding of the word "meaning" itself: *maʿni*. And the poet complicates our understanding of what *maʿni* means by, ironically,

playing off of *maʿni's* various meanings (i.e., "sense, meaning, signification, import, that which is intended, the point of something, essence, spirit, and reality"). According to him, one kind of *maʿni* is tied to form, appearances, or that which, because it conforms to the eye and/or the mind's eye, has sense or meaning: "Sense for you is borrowed form: / you rejoice in what conforms and rhymes." In contrast to this *maʿni*, the poet envisions another kind of *maʿni* whose sense, i.e., meaning, essence, spirit, because it is formless, is not tied to objects of sense. Though this *maʿni* is not dependent on form for its sense, it nonetheless makes itself felt or known through the very senses one relies on to make sense out of objects of sense or form: "Sense is that which seizes you / and makes you free of form." In sensing this reality (*maʿni*) one is, paradoxically, freed from the reality imposed on the senses by *maʿni* as form or appearance. Those who mistake *maʿni's* form, in the form of rhyme schemes, the literal meaning of Quranic verses, and saddle-packs, i.e., the imitable objects of sense, for *maʿni* itself, are blind to the spirit or essence (*maʿni*) that animates all form because their senses are, paradoxically, dulled or blinded by their own senses: "Sense is not that which makes one blind and deaf, / and makes man more in love with form." What the poet is implying here—and what he makes more explicit in the verses below—is that *maʿni*, as form or appearance, is not meant to be an end itself, but merely a vehicle for *maʿni*, as formless spirit or essence, to be experienced through the senses as a love whose sense transcends the sense of the sensual love object:

آنچه معشوقست صورت نیست آن　　خواه عشق این جهان خواه آن جهان

That which is loved is not its form,
whether it be love for [things of] this world or the other world.

(M2:703)

آنچه محسوس است اگر معشوقه است　　عاشقستی هرکه اورا حسّ هست

If the beloved is that which is perceived by the senses,
then whoever has senses would be in love [with it].

(M2:706)

In turn, the ego's blind attachment to, and love of, objects of sense (i.e., those things which reify the ego through their outward appearance, form, or *maʿni*), and the troubles that such attachments bring, is a constant source of consternation and pain for the human soul: "The portion of the blind is sorrow-inducing supposition." Whereas the ego that severs itself from such attachments by way of *fanāʾ* ("the portion of the [spiritual] eye is imaginings of *fanāʾ*") only sees, senses, and loves the animating spirit or soul that such attachments both rely on, and conceal, through their sense, or *maʿni*. Hence, it is not the imitable objects of sense that ultimately give sense (*maʿni*) to the world, but rather, the animating spirit that the imitable objects of the world rely on for their sense is itself the sense, or *maʿni*, of the world. And this animating spirit (*jān*), which is the very essence of reality, or *maʿni*, and both the cause and the effect of the mystical experience, is now, ironically, represented by the poet as an ass: "As long as the *ass* is there, the saddle will certainly be yours: / you will not lack bread when you have the *spirit*."[43] (Not to be lost in all of this is the notion that the source of this animating spirit (*jān*), which has "the stock of a hundred bodies," whose telos is a formless love-object, and which the

[43]*Jān* is an old Indo-European word that signifies "life," "soul," and the "vital spirit." In Persian it is often contrasted with the Arabic *nafs*, which, in addition to signifying "soul," "spirit," and "life," also means "the individual," "the self," "identity," "desire," and "appetite." In turn, *nafs* is often used to represent the "carnal soul," whereas *jān*, because it is not associated with the ego, the self, or bodily desires, is used to signify the animating spirit, soul, or life force in its purest form. *Jān* is commonly used in colloquial Persian (just as it is in Armenian) as a term of endearment and affection. The expression *jānam*, meaning "my soul," "my love," or "my dear," is used in a variety of contexts that, depending on the nature of the relationship between interlocutors, can express various degrees of affection or fondness, ranging from the intensely intimate to the socially polite. To me, this colloquial use of *jān* illustrates that *jān*, unlike *nafs* (which is an egoistic, self-centered, and self-serving life force), is a life force or spirit that opens out into the world and connects with other living souls in such a way that makes the welfare and well-being of each life, soul, or spirit contingent on the other's. In this sense, *jān* is the medium through which love is expressed. According Kenneth Avery and Ali Alizadeh, *jān*, in Persian mystical poetry, is the "intersection or convergence between the human and the Divine." See *Fifty Poems of ʿAṭṭār*, 35.

mystical experience, by way of *fanāʾ*, is the ultimate manifestation of, is none other than love; symbolized here as the heart that engenders the pearl or soul.)

Whereas in the previous story, the ass was associated with the "carnal spirit" (*nafs*), or that which stood in the way of mystical union, so that what the Sufi heard, in the refrain which ironically commemorated the sale of his ass, was the liberation of the spirit from the flesh and earthly desires ("the ass is gone, and the ass is gone"), here the ass symbolizes the animating spirit (*jān*), or that which is at the heart of mystical union, that the loss of the ass in those lyrics ostensibly symbolized. In hindsight, then, and unbeknownst to the ecstatic singers themselves, what the refrain about the ass was really about, or at least also about, was their own moral and spiritual bankruptcy, i.e., their lack of *jān*. The fact that the Sufis were tone deaf to this symbolic meaning of the song ironically puts them in the same shoes as their unsuspecting victim, who failed to hear the literal meaning of their song. That is why after *samāʿ*, the Sufi, like his cohort, has no ass (i.e., spiritual knowledge) to carry him through life's journey, and is, instead, symbolically saddled with the baggage that comes with the carnal soul:

چون خالی شد و صوفی ماند　　گَرْد از رخت آن مسافر می فشاند
رخت از حجره برون آورد او　　تا بخر بر بندد آن همراه جوُ
تا رسد در همرهان او می شتافت　　رفت در آخرُ خر خودرا نیافت

> When it [the monastery] became deserted, and the Sufi remained,
> that traveler started to shake the dust from his baggage.
> He brought out the baggage from his room,
> in order to tie it to the ass and seek traveling companions.
> He was hurrying in order to reach his fellow-travelers;
> he went into the stable but did not find the ass.
>
> (M2:540-542)

Coda

The polyphony of meanings we hear in Rumi's poem suggest that what the ass "means" might be less important than the activity of assigning meaning to the ass, and what this activity, in turn, might mean for our understanding of the poem as a whole. To drive this point home, soon after redefining and recasting the ass as a symbol of the animating spirit (*jān*) at the heart of gnosis and mystical awakening, Rumi turns the tables on his readers/auditors yet again by transforming the ass back into a symbol of *nafs* (the carnal soul):

شد خرِ نفْسِ تو بر میخیش بند چند بگُریزد زکار و بار چند

The ass that is your carnal soul is loose; tie it to a nail.
How long will it run away from work and burden, how long?

(M2:729)

This shift in the ass's symbolic *maʿni* or meaning (from *nafs* to *jān* and back to *nafs* again), which like the carnal soul itself is difficult to pin down, is done with such deftness and sleight of hand that it has even confounded Rumi scholars. According to Nicholson, although "most commentators...identify 'the ass' in these verses [i.e., M2:726-728] with the carnal soul (*nafs*)" Rumi is "still keeping up the metaphor of the preceding verses, in which the ass represents the spiritual essence and the saddle the bodily attributes."[44] By testing and confounding his reader's senses, through a symbol that previously appeared in a song and a story about *samāʿ*, Rumi once again draws parallels between the experience of reading his poem (or song) and *samāʿ*. Instead of saddling the ass with a fixed sense, the poet dramatizes the performative, interactive dimension of his poem by asking his reader to choose between possible meanings of the "same sign" even as he continues to assign new meanings to that sign. By actively involving his readers

[44] Nicholson, *The Mathnawí of Jalálud'dín Rúmí*, vol.2, p. 282.

in the creative process of meaning formation the poet does not just sing about the animating spirit (*jān*) at the heart of what he calls "*maʿni,*" but conjures that very spirit through the evolving *maʿni* or sense of his song. In other words, if the song about the ass can mean either the spirit has fled, or the carnal spirit has fled, or both, then perhaps the meaning of what is heard or sensed is secondary to the act of hearing/sensing itself. In this, Rumi's version of the insoluble riddle, "If a tree falls in the forest…", the poet seems to suggest that signs may mean what they mean despite what anyone takes them to mean, but signs can only mean what they "mean" when someone makes sense out of them. Hence, what the poet demonstrates (through a poem that tests, challenges, and relies on the reader's senses for its own sense) is that the inimitable is none other than the animating spirit that gives the "imitable" signs of this world their *sense*. And yet, this does not mean we can forgo or do without the imitable. For without the "imitable" sign, the poet would have nothing to sing about, the senses nothing to sense (or make sense out of), and the animating spirit (*jān*) nothing through which to communicate its inimitable potential. In this sense, the mystical experience of the divine in *samāʿ* is akin to sense sensing its essence through a medium (song/music/poetry) whose sense, like the love that animates it, is limitless…

Chapter Five

Seeing the Invisible in Abbas Kiarostami's *Close-up*

It is only fitting to conclude this study on the theme of limits (and love's limitless transgressions) in Persian poetry and film, with a work of art that not only tests its own limits as a work of "art" but also the limits of any discourse that delimits it as an art work. Mixing the genre of documentary with docudrama Abbas Kiarostami's *Close-up* (1990) tells the tale of a poor, divorced, out of work, and out of luck cinephile named Hossain Sabzian who is arrested and brought to trial for impersonating his cinematic idol, the famous Iranian director, Mohsen Makhmalbaf. Based on the film's reconstruction of events, what starts out as an innocent bit of play-acting during a chance encounter on a bus—Sabzian, pretending to be Makhmalbaf, autographs a copy of Makhmalbaf's screenplay for an elderly, middle-class woman named Mahrokh Ahankhah—becomes something more serious, even illegal, when Sabzian promises to cast Mrs. Ahankhah's star-struck family in "his" next film. Eventually, the family members recognizes Sabzian for the impostor that he is and have him arrested and taken to court for trying to deceive and defraud them: we learn that Sabzian had borrowed money from the family (the equivalent of $20) to pay his cab fare and buy a present for his son.

It is at this point in the actual, real-life narrative that Kiarostami, through an article written in *Sorush* magazine, learns of these events and decides to make a film about them. Kiarostami then proceeds to convince (or bamboozle, depending on whom you believe) all those involved in the story, including the reporter who broke the story, the trial judge, and Makhmalbaf

himself, to partake in his film.[1] Through a series of interviews, reenactments (including Sabzian's initial encounter with Mrs. Ahankhah, as well as his eventual arrest), the actual trial footage, and an improbable ending that seems both manufactured and "real," Kiarostami merges documentary and drama in such a way as to render the distinction between life and art, reality and fiction, and truth and deception meaningless. In so doing, Kiarostami's *Close-up* takes its rightful place among such classics as Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, and Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* that in their own way also interrogate the nature of reality. Unlike those works, however, the blending of fantasy and reality in *Close-up* is not only based on "real life" events, but also, and for that reason, *Close-up* is able to further obfuscate the distinction between fiction and reality by intervening in and manipulating the very "reality" it ostensibly interrogates:[2]

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[1] According to Godfrey Cheshire's interviews with Makhmalbaf and Kiarostami, there are conflicting accounts regarding the original inspiration for the film:

> When I interviewed them separately in Iran in 1997, the two filmmakers gave me different accounts of *Close-up*'s origin. Makhmalbaf said he'd brought the magazine to the office and that he'd had the idea of making the film himself, but that Kiarostami said he shouldn't direct it, because he was a character in the story. For his part, Kiarostami recalled that the magazine was already in the office and that he started talking about his idea for making a film about the case only because Makhmalbaf made him nervous. In any event, the two men then borrowed a car and visited the Ahankhahs. The directors and the family stayed up late drinking tea and talking. To paraphrase Makhmalbaf's conclusion, by evening's end, Kiarostami had bam-boozled everyone into participating in the film, with himself as director.

There is more than a hint of irony in Cheshire's account, for as he notes, "bamboozlement" is also a central theme in *Close-up*. From Sabzian bamboozling the family into thinking he is a famous filmmaker, to Kiarostami bamboozling everyone to perform in his film, and finally, to the bamboozlement practiced by cinema itself, with its power "to bewitch" all those involved, including the film's audience, no one escapes being bamboozled. For more on the theme of bamboozlement in *Close-up*, see Godfrey Cheshire's "*Close-up:* Prison and Escape," https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/1492-close-up-prison-and-escape (accessed July 3, 2018).

[2] According to Hamid Naficy, in *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 4*: *The Globalizing Era, 1984-2010* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), Kiarostami borrows and adapts this technique of using "recording to provoke reality" from cinema vérité:

> *Close--Up* is neither documentary nor fictional; it is a hybrid of both, made in cinema vérité style. The judge asks Kiarostami, "Are you ready?" before opening court: in cinema vérité, the real court proceedings cannot begin without filming, while in direct cinema, the camera is to have no bearing on the profilmic world. In one, reality cannot take place before filming begins, in the other, filming cannot begin until reality occurs. (202)

> One could begin with either fact or fantasy. It would not make any difference….Makhmalbaf is a filmmaker, a real man who creates fictional worlds. Sabzian fictitiously enters the real world of Makhmalbaf by pretending to be him. Or we can say that Sabzian physically enters the fictitious world of Makhmalbaf. He becomes so successful in his fantasy that he convinces a perfectly respectable family to cooperate with him, thinking that he is Makhmalbaf. Sabzian's fiction finally unravels and he is taken to a real court where he receives a real jail term. But this all happens before Kiarostami enters the scene. Kiarostami now subjects everything to a double erasure by asking the real people involved in the event to "reenact" for him what happened. But by doubly negating the real, Kiarostami's erasure confirms a reality: Sabzian now actually does act and direct for Kiarostami, the family does feature in a movie, and Kiarostami ends up making a film.[3]

Although much of the critical literature on *Close-up*, like Dabashi's, is preoccupied with the blurring of fact and fiction, being and seeming, and truth and falsehood, very few critics, if any, offer a compelling explanation as to why Kiarostami, by blurring fiction and reality in the film, mirrors the actions of his protagonist who does the same thing in his own life outside the film. In other words, why does the filmmaker, in telling the story of a man who loses himself in the fictions he concocts for himself and others, tell the story in such a way so as to conflate and confuse fact and fiction for his audience? According to Dabashi, Kiarostami's ultimate intent in blurring the distinction between fact and fantasy is to cleanse our vision so that we may see the world anew:

> The translucent nature of fact-as-fantasy thus becomes the diaphanous lens through which Kiarostami begins to show us ways of looking we never knew existed….By thus aesthetically subverting the metaphysics of "the real," Kiarostami has opened the way to a radical dismantling of the structural violence of 'meaning,' upon which is predicated such metaphysical surrogates as "history," "tradition," "identity," and "piety." A pellucid reading of reality-as-fantasy begins to replace the opaque metaphysics of objectivity at the roots of all violent claims to truth. The fictive transparency of the real that thus

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The purpose of provoking reality, according to Naficy, is not to simply acknowledge the role the camera plays in producing meaning but to also "get at deeper meanings" that would otherwise remain hidden beneath the veneer of "reality."

[3] Dabashi, Close Up: Iranian Cinema, 67.

> emerges begins to eat into the legitimacy of any and every absolutist claim to truth, reality, veracity, having-been-there, having-seen-it.[4]

Despite his otherwise insightful analysis, what Dabashi fails to explain is how Kiarostami's deconstruction of meaning, history, tradition, identity, and the "metaphysics of objectivity" relates to the story of *Close-up* or the plight of its protagonist. Questioning and challenging the "metaphysics of objectivity" is certainly not what Sabzian has in mind when he decides to mix fantasy with reality in his own life. Perhaps an argument can be made that Kiarostami's dismantling of "the real" is somehow meant to exonerate Sabzian from his "crimes": i.e., to show how we are all (including the director himself) *guilty* of indulging in the stories we tell ourselves. But Dabashi does not make such an argument, either. Nor does he tell us what this new way of looking that we "never knew existed" entails, or what we are supposed to see (besides, that is, the fictiveness of reality) through Kiarostami's lens once "the real" has been dismantled and the grime of ideology wiped away. These questions become more pressing when we consider the fact that the filmmaker is not simply a storyteller but also plays the character of storyteller in the story he tells, which, in turn, conspicuously draws our attention to his motives as a storyteller and his particular mode of storytelling. Kiarostami constantly hints at the possibility that even the documented scenes are rehearsed, choreographed, and scripted so that he and his camera, far from being neutral observers, are in fact active participants in the drama they depict (Figure 1).[5]

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[4] Ibid.

[5] As Hamid Naficy notes, "Kiarostami appears as himself in the film, although not so much visually (only glimpses of him are shown from the back), but as the voice of the investigative filmmaker just outside the frame who is researching the magazine story on the incident, visiting locations, interviewing players, and re-creating and directing scenes." He goes on to say, "This investigative structure inscribes Kiarostami as both author and actor, who simultaneously records the film and invents it as he goes along, mixing documentary footage with fictional accounts." See Naficy's "*Close-Up*: Questioning Reality, Realism, and Neorealism" in *Film Analysis: A Norton Reader*, 2nd ed., edited by Jeffrey Geiger and R. L. Rutsky. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005), 799.

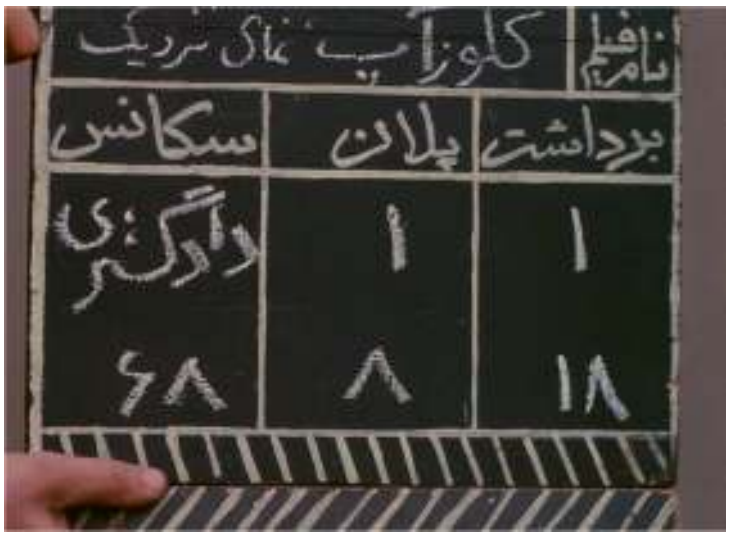

Figure 5.1: Clapperboard used before the "real life" courtroom scene, with the caption "administration of justice" under the scene heading, in *Close-up* (Kanoon, 1990).

Though we now know, through the hindsight of scholarly research, that almost every aspect of the film was highly orchestrated, manufactured, or manipulated, including, but not limited to, Kiarostami's visit of Sabzian in prison, Sabzian's monologues in the courtroom, the courtroom scenes themselves, the very outcome of the trial, and the failed sound equipment during Sabzian's emotional encounter with Makhmalbaf, the film creates enough ambiguity to cast doubt on any conclusion the viewer might be tempted to draw about the veracity of what is depicted.[6] As Alberto Elena notes, "The absence of exact references to times and dates means

[6] According to Godfrey Cheshire:

> If Sabzian is deceptive, *Close-up*, it turns out, is even more so. Very few scenes in the film that appear to be documentary actually are. The trial scenes, in fact, are elaborate fakes (and the use of 16mm thus is one of the film's stylistic tricks). Kiarostami himself orchestrated what happened in the courtroom, including the family's forgiveness (they actually wanted Sabzian to be locked up). Kiarostami also scripted much of Sabzian's testimony, although, as he carefully pointed out to me, it was all taken from things actually said by Sabzian, whose speech really is clogged with literary references, mystical aphorisms and cinephilic jargon. In fact, Kiarostami conducted much of that testimony; seated beside Sabzian, he asks most of the questions we hear coming from off-camera during the trial.

that the audience must continually reorder the scenes that they are shown on the screen, change their perspectives and question their perceptions, in an uncomfortable but productive state of uncertainty."[7] In this regard, straying outside the film (as critics, scholars, and cinephiles are inclined to do) to draw definitive conclusions about the facticity of what is presented on screen seems to go against the grain of the film. Conversely, however, because the film is ostensibly based on true events (as the opening credits roll a printing press prints out the magazine story that provided the inspiration for the film) it invariably invites, and even encourages, comparisons between the film's depiction of events and the "reality" the film is based on (Figure 2).

Figure 5.2: As the opening credits roll, a printer rolls out copies of a "true story" about a fraud, in *Close-up* (Kanoon, 1990).

Based on his interviews about the film, each one adding another layer or wrinkle to the mythology surrounding it, one gets the feeling that Kiarostami was not only aware of this

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See Cheshire's, "Godfrey Cheshire on *Close-up*," in Film, *Slant*, March 29, 2010, http://www.slantmagazine.com/house/article/godfrey-cheshire-on-closeup-abbas-kiarostami-1990. Reprinted from the December 29th, 1999 issue of *New York Press*.

[7] Elena, *The Cinema of Abbas Kiarostami*, 88. For more on the theme of "uncertainty" in Kiarostami's films, see Laura Mulvey's, "Kiarostami's Uncertainty Principle," *Sight and Sound*, June 1998, pp. 24-27.

tension, between stoking and frustrating the viewer's desire to know the "real story," but purposefully intensified it through his revisionist accounts of what took place.[8]

The Prologue

The theme of performance, performativity, and play permeate every aspect of Kiarostami's film, including the manner in which the story is told. This idea is most powerfully expressed at the very beginning of the film, where, as Gilberto Perez astutely observes, Kiarostami takes an intentionally circuitous path to introducing the story in order to not only "tell us the story but to [also] make us aware of our path to the story":[9]

> This is going to be a big story, the reporter feels sure, and as we ride with him in its pursuit we assume he is going to be the character taking us into it, the film's figure of the storyteller. When the taxicab arrives at the family's home we expect we will go inside with the reporter. But the film frustrates our expectations: we remain outside with the cab driver and the two policemen, and even after the two policemen are called inside to make the arrest we still remain outside, with the driver we took for the secondary figure, subordinate to the reporter we thought would be giving us entry into the story.

In this way, Kiarostami draws the viewer's attention to not just the constructedness of his own narrative but also any narrative, including the one the viewer creates in her mind, putting into question "the means our art employs for representing the world."[10] As if to demonstrate this idea, after the policemen are called into Ahankhah's home to arrest Sabzian, Kiarostami stages a scene that requires viewers to use all their powers of imagination to connect what they see, or think they are seeing, to the larger narrative (Figure 3):

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[8] Kiarostami is not the only one who gives various, even conflicting, accounts of what took place before, during, and after the shooting of the film. In a documentary called "*Close-up*" *Long Shot* (1996), made by Mamhoud Chokrollahi and Moslem Mansouri, about the controversial protagonist of *Close-up*, Sabzian gives his own revisionist account of what took place.

[9] Gilberto Perez, *The Material Ghost: Films and Their Medium* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1998), 264.

[10] Ibid.

> The waiting driver turns the car around in the dead-end street where the family lives. He gets out of the car and (a former flier) he looks up at an airplane leaving its white trail in the blue sky. From a pile of leaves on the street he picks out some flowers, and in so doing he sets loose an aerosol can he now kicks gently and watches roll down the sloping street and across to the other side, where it comes to rest at the curb.

Figure 5.3: The cab driver contemplates kicking the aerosol can, in *Close-up* (Kanoon, 1990).

The question of what, if anything, these seemingly insignificant, random events have to do with the story we are watching is left up to the viewer to decide. According to Perez, "that rolling aerosol can may be taken as a witty epitome of the naturalistic approach":[11]

[11] Perez, *Material Ghost*, 263.

> It may be seen to represent the detail of everyday life on which naturalism dwells: we thought we were in pursuit of a big story and we find ourselves watching the course of an insignificant can down a suburban street. And the course of that can may also be seen to represent the iron rule of cause and effect in narratives of the naturalistic school: we watch, and keep watching until eventually it comes to rest, the inexorable effect of a cause, the perhaps trivial but nonetheless ineluctable consequence of the driver's actions of picking out the flowers and kicking the can he set loose.[12]

But the meaning of the aerosol can, and the scene as a whole, turns out to be more mysterious and mercurial than Perez, initially at least, makes it out to be:

> Often cited as one of the most striking [scenes] in Kiarostami's work….standard journalistic narrative is displaced by techniques that might best be called poetic. The unseen arrest and the random flower bouquet set up rhymes that will be closed in the film's final sections. The rolling aerosol can...meanwhile, gives us a multivalent symbol as opaque as it is whimsical. At every turn, Kiarostami engages us with questions concerning not only the events we witness but also the film containing them.[13]

After the driver returns to his car with the flowers, the reporter, the policemen and Sabzian emerge from the house and enter the taxicab. But the reporter has forgotten to bring the tape recorder that he needs for his interview! Instead of riding back to the police station with the others, as we might expect, Kiarostami, defying narrative convention, has the reporter stay behind and go door to door in search of an elusive tape recorder:

> Cause and effect: we watch the reporter going down the street in quest of a tape recorder as we watched the aerosol can rolling down the street in the same direction. But the reporter doesn't come to rest, he starts moving faster once he gets his tape recorder, and as he scampers off after his story he kicks the aerosol can, not gently as the driver kicked it but spiritedly, so that it starts rolling much faster than before. This time we don't stay with the can on its rolling course but cut to a printing press (the sound of the can rhyming with the sound of the press) putting out the paper with the reporter's story, not a connection of cause and effect between can and press but a metaphor: the unremarkable detail of everyday life given the kick, the spin of publication. Or the resonance of art: in Kiarostami's hands the aerosol can becomes remarkably expressive not so much within the story as in what it tells about the telling of the story, as a representation of the means

[12] Ibid., 263-264.
[13] Cheshire, "*Close-up:* Prison and Escape."

of representation.[14]

In offering several possible readings of the kicked can, including its meaning as a metaphor for the storytelling process itself, or "the means of representation," Perez suggests that the meaning of the rolling can might be less important than its role as a meaning making device, i.e., the "be-cause" that we, as viewers, must answer in order to not only make sense out of the scene but also the life that the scene ostensibly represents. In fact, Kiarostami, whose films often invite the viewer to fill in narrative gaps that he intentionally left behind, admits as much in his interviews about the scene.

In one interview, Kiarostami claims that he is constantly in search of scenes in which there is "nothing happening" because this nothingness is an important part of his storytelling process. As an example, he cites the incident of the kicked can in *Close-up*.[15] In another interview, Kiarostami describes the scene involving the kicked can as a form of play (*bāzi*), and then explains how play and the love of play, which one learns in childhood, inform his filmmaking to this day.[16] He then amusedly recalls all the elaborate interpretations viewers ascribed to this impromptu, spontaneous scene of play. (Some even thought the "can" represented the cab driver, a former pilot whose life had been rendered empty and useless because he had been "canned.") Although Kiarostami concedes that everything a director puts in a film will be given some kind of meaning, and that the audience's role, at least in part, is to help produce such meaning—so that the audience, in this sense, was not wrong in trying to ascribe meaning to the kicked can—he nonetheless maintains that in this particular scene he and his film

[14] Ibid., 264-265.
[15] Elena, *The Cinema of Abbas Kiarostami*, 88-89.
[16] Abbas Kiarostami. "Interview." Disc 2. Close-up, special ed. DVD. Criterion Collection, 2010.

crew were simply "playing." Of course, it is possible that Kiarostami is merely toying with his audience's perceptions by asking them to reconsider what they thought they saw (or were seeing) when the cab driver (or the actor playing the cab driver) kicked the aerosol can. Nonetheless, by claiming that the scene represents nothing more than play, Kiarostami, paradoxically, attributes a new meaning to the scene: its meaning as *play*. Kiarostami's characterization of the enigmatic scene in which the cab driver and/or the actor playing the driver playfully kicks the aerosol can and then watches it roll downhill, as "play," is noteworthy for several reasons. One reason is that the Persian verb forms of the noun *bāzi* (meaning "a game, a play, sport, a jest, a joke"), like the English "play," can mean (1) to engage in an activity for recreation, pleasure, and fun, instead of a practical or serious purpose (2) to play a part, as in a theatrical performance or film and 3) to play a joke on, trick, or deceive someone.[17] In this sense, the actor playing the cab driver is not simply "playing," as Kiarostami contends, but also—within the context of a dramatic representation—playing the part of someone who is playing and—within the conventions of cinematic "docudrama" and "documentary"— perpetuating the fiction that his play is, if not real,

[17] The concept of play as a defining human activity is explored in Johan Huizinga's fascinating, though muddled, anthropological study in Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955). Huizinga's thesis is that, "The great archetypal activities of human society [including language, religion, law, war, philosophy and art] are all permeated with play from the start" (4). Huizinga, defines play as a "well-defined quality of action which is different from 'ordinary' life" (4), and, in a characteristically anthropological fashion, goes on to list its many distinguishing features: including disinterestedness (i.e. its standing outside of "the immediate satisfaction of wants and appetites" (9)), the specificity of locale, the limitedness of time, and its creation of order through rules. Not surprisingly, these defining features of play allow Huizinga to show how play permeates those "archetypal activities of human society" that share the same characteristics. In a way, Kiarostami's *Close-up* also tries to show how play permeates all human activities—at least the possibility of play cannot be excluded from those activities. Unlike Huizinga, however, Kiarostami does not connect play to other human activities through features like "the specificity of locale, the limitedness of time, and its creation of order through rules" etc. And that's because for Kiarostami play is not something that is different from, or outside of, "ordinary life" as it is for Huizinga, but, as will be shown, something that, through the love that animates it, is synonymous with life itself.

then based on reality. This is important because the entire premise of *Close-up* is based on a man (Sabzian) who engages in a form of play or playacting that is ultimately deemed to be a crime by society. A less obvious but equally important reason why the concept of play is central to understanding the scene, and the film as a whole, is that *Close-up* is full of references to an earlier Kiarostami film, called *The Traveler* (1974), that is also about the relationship between play, in its various manifestations, and life. In that neorealist inspired film, an impoverished, soccer-obsessed twelve-year-old boy named Qassem, who, much to the consternation of his mother, prefers playing soccer in an alley with his friends over doing his schoolwork, decides to travel by himself to Tehran (which is some 150 miles away from his home) in order to see an important soccer match. But before he can attend the match Qassem must first raise money for the bus fare and the game ticket. Ultimately, Qassem's love of playing and watching soccer causes him to engage in other forms of "play" (e.g., pretending to be ill so he can be late to school and pretending to take photographs of children and adults, with a broken camera, in order to raise money for his travels) that violate various ethical and moral codes. These games of deception that Qassem must play in order to achieve his goal of attending a game that he loves, and his moral/ethical transgressions in the name of that love, are what connect him to the protagonist in *Close-up*, whose passion for cinema causes him to impersonate his favorite filmmaker and, in the process, violate the law. In *Close-up* the connection between the fictional Qassem and the real Sabzian is made explicit when, during the middle of his trial, an animated Sabzian claims that that he is just like Qassem in *The Traveler*. Besides this and Kiarostami's use of a musical score from *The Traveler*, in the penultimate scene of *Close-up*, there is at least one other important allusion to that film. The driver kicking the can down the alley, and the reporter

mimicking the driver's action shortly thereafter (Figure 4), recall Qassem and his friends playing soccer in an alley in *The Traveler* (Figure 5).

Figure 5.4: The reporter playing "kick the can," in *Close-up* (Kanoon, 1990).

Figure 5.5: Boys playing soccer, in *The Traveler* (Kanoon, 1974).

In a way, these two men in *Close-up*, who playfully kick a can, can be seen as grown up versions of the boys from *The Traveler*, who, despite having aged (or *traveled* through time) still love to play. And like the child actors in *The Traveler*, who, before Kiarostami's camera, candidly display their passion for playing, play-acting, and making the audience believe that their play is genuine or real, the actors in *Close-up* simultaneously play at kicking the can, play the role of someone playing at kicking the can, and play on the audience's desire to believe they are kicking the can.

Before moving on to consider, through the lens of play, this most enigmatic of scenes in Kiarostami's oeuvre, I want to illuminate Kiarostami's use of the concept of play (as performance, pastime, and artifice) by juxtaposing it with a poet's whose works are synonymous

with it. Shakespeare's famous iteration of the theatrical metaphor, which has become so ingrained in our cultural imagination that it has taken on the status of truth, also captures these various senses of play:

> All the world's a stage,
> And all the men and women merely players.
> They have their exits and their entrances,
> And one man in his time plays many parts,
> His acts being seven ages. At first, the infant,
> Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms.
> Then the whining schoolboy, with his satchel
> And shining morning face, creeping like snail
> Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,
> Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad
> Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then a soldier,
> Full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard,
> Jealous in honor, sudden and quick in quarrel,
> Seeking the bubble reputation
> Even in the cannon's mouth. And then the justice,
> In fair round belly with good capon lined,
> With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,
> Full of wise saws and modern instances;
> And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts
> Into the lean and slippered pantaloon
> With spectacles on nose and pouch on side,
> His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide
> For his shrunk shank, and his big manly voice,
> Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
> And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
> That ends this strange eventful history,
> Is second childishness and mere oblivion,
> Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything. (2.7.146-173)[18]

The speech, put in the mouth of the melancholy Jaques, which characterizes all of human life, from birth to death, as a play not only suggests that human beings play various culturally inscribed roles throughout their lives but also, and for that very reason, no role is intrinsically

[18] All Shakespeare quotations in this chapter are taken from *Shakespeare's Plays, Sonnets and Poems*, Folger Digital Texts, Barbara Mowat, Paul Werstine, Michael Poston, Rebecca Niles, eds., (Washington: Folger Shakespeare Library, n.d.), accessed July 18, 2018. www.folgerdigitaltexts.org.

more important or serious than any other role: they are, for better or worse, just parts that we *play*. Ultimately, Jaques' theatrical metaphor, which has a leveling effect (not only between the roles themselves but also between those who play them, since we are all, regardless of our station in life, destined to play various roles, including some of the same roles), and a liberating effect (since the roles we play are mere diversions, like fictions on a stage), is deeply pessimistic and despairing. As Jaques' speech progresses, and surely by the end of his "eventful history," it becomes clear that his theatrical metaphor is meant to satirize life and those who, because they take its contents (e.g., schooling, courtship, honor, reputation, justice, etc.,) seriously, are duped by it. In this regard, the speaker's sardonic use of the theatrical metaphor only reveals his own despairing, disenchanted viewpoint, a viewpoint that, ironically enough, can only result by being previously enchanted by the very things one no longer finds enchanting. Shakespeare's plays are full of characters who use the metaphor of play and playacting to express a despairing, disenchanted worldview. Macbeth's fatalistic speech, after the untimely death of his wife, is one of the most famous examples of this use of the metaphor:

> She should have died hereafter.
> There would have been a time for such a word.
> To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
> Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
> To the last syllable of recorded time,
> And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
> The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
> Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
> And then is heard no more. It is a tale
> Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
> Signifying nothing. (5.5.20-31)

Once again, not only is life, in Macbeth's speech, represented as a play, a story, a piece of bad fiction but also, and for that reason, those who take it seriously (or give it import) are considered

to be fools and idiots. What is ironic about Macbeth's speech is that the victims of life's fictions are ultimately *played* for a fool by their own powers of imagination or make-believe. Through the stories they invent, these risible figures, including Macbeth himself, invest life with a meaning it doesn't have. In this regard, Macbeth's speech echoes the deposed Richard II's, who, while awaiting his fate in prison, sardonically despairs the fact that his role as king is no more or less satisfying than any other role because, in the end, they all amount to the same nothing:

> Thus play I in one person many people,
> And none contented. Sometimes am I king.
> Then treasons make me wish myself a beggar,
> And so I am: then crushing penury
> Persuades me I was better when a king.
> Then am I king'd again, and by and by
> Think that I am unking'd by Bolingbroke,
> And straight am nothing. But whate'er I be,
> Nor I nor any man that but man is
> With nothing shall be pleased till he be eased
> With being nothing. (5.5.31-41)

As these passages show, far from being something joyous, fun, and liberating the concepts of playacting and play in Shakespeare are often used pejoratively to point out the fictive, frivolous, deceptive, and ultimately absurd nature of human existence. And yet, a closer inspection of the passages reveals that it is not so much a worldview informed by theatricality and play that renders life meaningless, absurd, and without any transcendent value or substance but rather a nihilistic view of time. It is the passage of time, absent of any discourse of redemption and salvation, that, through death and decay, renders all human experiences empty and trivial. Jaques' "mere oblivion," Macbeth's "dusty death," and Richard's "nothing," do not just scornfully describe the fate of every living being, but they also, through the lens of time, reduce human life to the same nothing that it is destined to become. Ironically, by rendering all human

experiences and relations meaningless the passage of time makes the experience of time the only truly "meaningful" event. In turn, human existence as an ethical phenomenon gives way to human existence as an aesthetic phenomenon, where human life, now seen as a kind of theater, diversion, or jest, is *played out* until it comes to an unceremonious end. In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare's most trenchant exploration of the theme of play, it is the death of Hamlet's father and his mother's incestuous marriage to his father's murderer, Claudius, that motivates his angry, vitriolic assault, through puns, jokes, conspicuous asides, half-truths, rumors and playacting, on all *serious* discourse.[19] In this sense, Hamlet's deconstruction of his interlocutors' reality through various forms of play is a response to his existential crisis. Taking our observations one step

[19] And here we might recall the ghost's command that Hamlet take what he says seriously:

GHOST.
Pity me not, but lend thy *serious* hearing
To what I shall unfold.
HAMLET. Speak. I am bound to hear.
GHOST.
So art thou to revenge, when thou shalt hear. (1.5.9-12)

The word "serious" is used sparingly by Shakespeare, and in *Hamlet* it only appears once, setting into motion not only the tragedy but also establishing one of the major questions of the play, i.e., what in life (or at least in Hamlet's life) is worth taking seriously? Unlike Hamlet, his father's ghost has no doubts about what is to be taken seriously: filial duty, love, respect, honor, and consequently, revenge. The implications of the ghost's words are clear: If Hamlet loves and respects his father he will take what the ghost tells him seriously and avenge his father's murder—which is what loving sons are expected to do in the world of the play. Ironically, however, this is precisely what Hamlet cannot do: to take the ghost's mandate for revenge seriously. Instead, Hamlet plays. Literally and figuratively. He plays mad, he plays with words, he plays with ideas, he puts on a play, and finally, he plays with swords. In fact, the word "play" appears more frequently in *Hamlet* (some 53 times) than any other Shakespeare play. And all these different senses of play call into question the distinction between play (or that which is considered to be non-serious) and seriousness. Hence, Hamlet's inability to take the ghost's request seriously is the mysterious engine that drives the play and much of the criticism about the play. The fact that Hamlet works so hard to dismantle the binary between serious and non-serious discourse, both through his words (puns) and actions (play), making it impossible for his audience to know what to take seriously, seems to be related, albeit in an ironic way, to the ghost's command. One possible explanation for why Hamlet takes the task of dismantling the binary between play and seriousness so seriously, or more seriously than the task of getting revenge, is that his father's death and his mother's marriage to his uncle, the newly minted king, have created an existential crisis that casts doubt on all the things he held dear, believed in, or took seriously, including the institution of kingship, marriage, and family—as much as the love that sustains them all. In turn, Hamlet responds to this dilemma (i.e., the dilemma of not knowing what to invest his feelings in or to take seriously) by cynically attacking and questioning the value and/or seriousness of all human made constructs. But Hamlet's assault on all serious discourse also means that he can no more believe in, or take seriously, the act of revenge, as a form of retribution and justice, than he can the cultural values and institutions that revenge is a product of. After all, revenge will not bring back his father, redeem his mother, or restore the world (or worldview) that he has lost.

further, we could say that Hamlet's existential crisis is ultimately brought on by the love that his mother betrayed, Macbeth's by the love that he bore his wife, Richard's by the love that he never received, and Jaques' by the love he no longer feels. This lack of feeling, passion, and desire, for the things of this world (the objects of our affections), caused by irreparable loss, disillusionment, and despair, has the same leveling effect, in the lives of Shakespeare's characters, as the intensification of feelings and passions does, in relation to objects of *sense*, in the works in this study. Whereas in this study an excess of love and passion renders any distinction between objects of sense senseless, in the examples from the aforementioned plays love's self-imposed exile, its withdrawal from a "stale," "flat," and "unprofitable" world, results in senselessness of another kind.[20] Feelings and passions that were once the wellspring of pleasure, joy, and love now cynically turn on themselves. And passion's self-negation, exhibited by the subject's inability, or refusal, to commit to anyone or anything, including his own feelings, emotions, and motivations[21] turns the passage of time into empty time and the subject himself into "Time's fool."[22]

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[20] "How (weary,) stale, flat and unprofitable / Seem to me all the uses of this world!" *Hamlet*, 1.2.137-138. Soon after the murder of Duncan, in an artificial show of grief, Macbeth characterizes the effect of his "grief" as a loss of seriousness:

> MACBETH.
> Had I but died an hour before this chance,
> I had lived a blessed time; for from this instant
> There's nothing *serious* in mortality.
> All is but toys. (2.3.107-110)

Macbeth's words ironically foreshadow what he will eventually come to feel (i.e., that "there's nothing serious in mortality") after Lady Macbeth's death.

[21] Hamlet even has a difficult time taking his own feelings and motivations seriously. In Act 2, Scene 2 (lines 576-616), after chastising himself for not being able generate as much passion/motivation for his cause as an actor pretending to get roused over a fictional one, he proceeds to chastise himself for getting carried away, like a "whore" (i.e., someone who pretends for a living), by the very emotions/feelings he has stoked by chastising himself.

[22] Sonnet 116, line 9, "Love's not Time's fool…." Whereas in Sonnet 116 the poetic persona suggests, albeit ironically, that the constancy of love makes love *fool*proof against the ravages of time, in *Hamlet* it is love's mutability, in relation to time ("But two months dead—nay, not so much, not two." 1.2.142) that turns us into time's fools.

But these are all discussions for another day. Our purpose in introducing these examples from Shakespeare's plays is to show (1) that the blurring of fiction and reality and play and seriousness in great works of art does not occur in a vacuum but is, instead, a response to some other care or concern and (2) that Kiarostami's exploration of these themes (though it shares similarities with those found in Shakespeare and other writers) is not only motivated by different concerns, or matters of the heart, but also produces radically different result. In fact, one of these results, as we will see, is to turn the metaphor of the world as a stage on its head by, paradoxically, highlighting its own fictiveness. For as Kiarostami recognizes, even if the Don Quixotesque Sabzian does not, when taken too far, such fictions, far from revealing some fundamental truth about the nature of reality, become a reality in and of themselves.

Returning to *Close-up*, let us now consider the scene with the kicked can through the lens of play, as Kiarostami suggests. Though Kiarostami, in his interview, ostensibly uses *bāzi* to signify pastime or diversion the other senses of play are implicated as well because the film represents an actor (Houshang Shamai) that not only *plays* someone (regardless of if that someone is himself or a fictional cab driver) who takes pleasure in play (i.e., kicking a can and watching it roll downhill) but also plays at convincing the audience of his play. As Perez insightfully observes, the first time the can is kicked the camera tracks the can through the point of view of the driver (Figure 8). But when Kiarostami's camera returns to the can a second time, and shows us the reporter, with tape recorder in hand, kick it in excitement, the driver is no longer in the scene. We now observe the can playfully roll down the street through the

filmmaker's point of view, or what we described in chapter two as the "camera consciousness." In this way, the camera's look playfully mirrors the cab driver's gaze even in his absence. But the mirroring effect between character consciousness and camera consciousness does not end, or rather begin, here. For just before the can is kicked a second time, Kiarostami's camera tracks the reporter going door to door, down the same street the can was kicked, in search of his tape recorder. The mirroring effect between man and can is so uncanny that it is as if the playful event from the previous scene is now being played out by a different cast of characters: the pudgy reporter, waddling down the street in a circuitous manner, at the behest of the director, mirrors the rolling can that was sent down the same curving path by the cab driver.[23] And the driver's playful gaze, which followed the can, is now mirrored by Kiarostami's camera which follows the reporter going down the same path. If Perez is correct, and Kiarostami's intent is to have us think about "the iron clad rule of cause and effect in narratives of the naturalistic school"— "we watch, and keep watching until eventually it [the can] comes to rest, the inexorable effect of a cause, the perhaps trivial but nonetheless ineluctable consequence of the driver's actions of picking out the flowers and kicking the can he set loose"—then we might also ask what *causes* Kiarostami to mirror the gesture and look of a character (the cab driver) who is, according to Perez, asked to act as he does by the director (the symbolic driver of the scene), in order to draw our attention the iron clad rule of cause and effect? According to Perez, Kiarostami's camera mirrors the cab driver's gesture and look ("we watch the reporter going down the street in quest of a tape recorder as we watched the aerosol can rolling down the street in the same direction") be*cause* he wants to draw our attention to the storytelling process: i.e., the kick of the can

[23] As the reporter goes door to door, searching for a tape recorder, instead of traveling down a straight path he goes out of his way to conspicuously mirror the can's (earlier) curving trajectory.

represents the spin we give reality or the mode of representation itself. But this is not what motivated the driver, or the reporter for that matter, to playfully kick the can. What Perez fails to account for, in his otherwise insightful analysis, is the identification between character consciousness, camera consciousness and, considering the metacinematic nature of the film, actor consciousness. If Kiarostami is mirroring the driver's, and actor's, gesture and look, then their motivations, and not just their activities, ought to, at least on some level, mirror each other as well. The driver has no interest in drawing our attention to the storytelling process, or the connection between cause and effect, but is simply playing, while the actor is playing as if playing. And Kiarostami mirrors the driver's playful gesture and look (as much as the actor who plays the driver) through his own form of play. From this viewpoint, the viewpoint of play, Kiarostami is not just trying to draw our attention to the storytelling process but also playfully diverting us from the main story in order to establish an existential connection between himself and the activity he is engaged in as a filmmaker and those of his characters and actors. If what Kiarostami (as both director and a character playing himself) and his actors (as both actors and characters playing themselves) are engaged in are all forms of play (i.e., play as pastime, make-believe, playacting, and artifice) so that play is the common denominator in both life and art, fiction and reality, then the question becomes: What is Kiarostami trying to *show* us by ontologically reducing everything to play? Unlike Shakespeare's characters, who use the metaphor of play to reveal the fictiveness of all our actions and motivations, Kiarostami, by deploying the same metaphor, visually creates not a level playing field but a field that reduces everything to the level of play in order to draw our attention to the animating force behind all our actions and motivations. In turn, Kiarostami's camera, rather than focusing on that which is

fictitious, inauthentic, deceptive, and trivial about play, reveals, and visually revels in, that which is real, authentic, true, and significant about play.

As he concludes his commentary on the film, Perez offers one possible (ironic) connection between the driver's motivation and the director's:

> If the aerosol can represents truth, the truth naturalism seeks in the details of life, the flowers represent beauty. As the can may be taken as a metaphor for the means of naturalistic art, so the flowers may be taken as a metaphor for what art can do, what the experience of art can do for us, what art can make happen. If in the quest of beauty the cab driver set truth loose to roll on its course, in quest of truth Kiarostami sets beauty free to soar in our minds.[24]

According to Perez' allegorical reading, the pursuit of beauty is what causes the driver to set truth loose, and Kiarostami's pursuit of truth, in the film, is what causes beauty to be set free. What Perez fails to observe, however, in his otherwise perceptive analysis, is that it is not simply the "quest" for beauty, and the "quest" for truth, that set truth and beauty loose, but the *love* of beauty and the *love* of truth (not to mention, the *love* of play) that motivate the entire movement. The animating force, or the cause behind "the cause," in all instances, is love. Even in the case of the reporter who races down the street in search of his tape recorder, it is his love of reporting and the rewards of his profession that carry him in the same downward trajectory as the kicked can. As if to dispel any doubts about the source of this movement, Kiarostami has the reporter, mirroring the driver who held the colorful flowers (a gesture that is mirrored by the protagonist at the end of the film), hold a red tape recorder (the sign of his profession/passion) when he kicks the can the driver kicked (Figure 4).[25]

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[24] Perez, *Material Ghost*, 272.

[25] Shades of the color red feature prominently in Kiarostami's otherwise chromatically muted film. An important instance occurs near the end of the film when Sabzian, shortly after meeting his idol, Makhmalbaf, purchases a bouquet of red flowers to take with him to the Ahankhahs. This scene, and the symbolism of the red flowers, will be

Through this playful mirroring effect, Kiarostami recasts the flowers held by the driver as a symbol of love, the same love that is not only responsible for the driver's and reporter's playful gestures but also his own. In this sense, what the scene reveals is not just the truth that naturalism, or naturalistic art, "seeks in the details of life," as Perez contends, but also the truth that love is the animating force in life and art, work and play. And if the reporter kicking the can is indeed a metaphor for the spin we give reality, or how we represent it, as Perez suggests, then it is also a metaphor for how the work (or play?) involved in representing reality is motivated by the same animating force that is responsible for the kick. In turn, the very action of representing reality—a reality which is not only predicated on the distinction between fiction and reality but also taking the distinction seriously is neither a work of fiction nor of reality but of a love that, by dissolving the distinction between fiction and reality, transcends both. But if love, as the ultimate truth, is both the cause and the effect of what we see—where all of our conceptual tools, including the opposition between reality and fiction, nature and artifice, truth and falsehood, are the product of a love that animates every thought, every act, every breath—then what Kiarostami shows us, paradoxically, cannot be seen. Or, to put it another way, what Kiarostami's camera *shows us* is a love that, because it animates everything and therefore cannot be distinguished

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discussed later. Needless to say, the flowers, like the flowers that appear in the prologue, symbolize, even more overtly than before, the love that animates the narrative of *Close-up*. The other instance where the color red makes a conspicuous appearance is near the beginning of the film's prologue. In that scene, the cab driver stops the car so that the reporter, who has lost his way, can ask an old man, carrying something in his hand that, for the moment, is concealed from our view, directions to the Ahankhah's home. It is only after the reporter addresses the man, and the man turns around to answer him, that we see what he is holding: two big, black turkeys with bright red heads (Figure 7). The turkeys, which are indistinguishable from one another, become associated with the protagonist when the man asks the reporter if he wants to purchase a turkey and the reporter jokingly responds: "No. No. We are going after a turkey of our own." The uncanny connection between Sabzian and a turkey that is being sold to be killed and eaten (a symbolic sacrifice of sorts) becomes even more uncanny when we recall that, like the twin turkeys, Sabzian is Makhmalbaf's doppelganger. In this sense, the turkeys, with their flaming red heads—a red that recalls both the blood of sacrifice and passions that can only be quenched through sacrifice—remind us that the sacrifices art exacts (in this case the life of a lowly cinephile) are as *real* as any sacrifice.

from anything, is invisible to the naked eye. If in Shakespeare the aesthetic reduction of all human activities into "play" was the result of a nihilistic view of time, then for Kiarostami, love, as the invisible, animating force behind all forms of play transforms time into a time of love.

The Epilogue

If the narrative of *Close-up* begins with a dramatization of reality in the pursuit of truth, it concludes with reality being dramatized in the name of the love that spawned the narrative. As Sabizan exits the jail he is met by the man he is guilty of impersonating, his cinematic idol, Makhmalbaf:

> Taken aback, the lowly fan bends down to kiss his [idol's] hand in the traditional gesture of humility and great respect. However, Makhmalbaf, in the equally traditional gesture of magnanimity, prevents him from doing so and, instead, embraces him, whereupon Sabzian breaks into what appears to be heartfelt tears. These expressions of humility and emotion demonstrate Sabzian's sincerity.[26]

In shooting the scene, Kiarostami uses a distant camera (hidden in a van) tracking the men from afar in order to give the proceedings an air of authenticity, as if we are looking in, or eavesdropping, on a scene not meant for us. Kiarostami further emphasizes the documentary, unrehearsed quality of the scene by employing a microphone that intermittently stops working—leaving it up to the audience to imagine what the two men are saying—while conspicuously allowing the audience to hear, or rather overhear, him and his frustrated film-crew complain about the "failed mic." (In a later interview, Kiarostami confesses that the faulty microphone was a ruse that he retroactively employed because the bathetic banter between Sabzian and Makhmalbaf was altogether inappropriate for the sublimity of the scene.)[27] After Sabzian crumbles in his idol's arms, in what appears to be a genuine display of emotion, the two men

[26] Naficy, "*Close-Up*: Questioning Reality," 854.
[27] Kiarostami, "Interview" (Criterion Collection), 2010.

board Makhmalbaf's motorcycle and "proceed to purchase a bouquet of red flowers to take to the Ahankhah family as a gesture of reconciliation."[28] Interestingly, Sabzian initially chooses a yellow bouquet of flowers, but Makhmalbaf, ever the director, commands him to take the red ones (Figure 6). Not only do these flowers recall the flowers held by the cab driver in the prologue to the film but their color, a symbol of passion, desire, and love, also recalls the red tape recorder held by the reporter (Figure 4) as well as two red headed turkeys from an earlier scene, that were pressed against each other like lovebirds—not unlike the director and his idol on the motorbike—in an old man's arms (Figure 7).[29] But perhaps most striking of all is the uncanny color scheme (green and reddish rose) that metaphorically connects the flowers held by Sabzian, as he and Makhmalbaf travel through the streets of Tehran (Figure 9), to the aerosol can kicked by the cab driver as it travels down a street in the same city (Figure 8). The flowers, made of organic matter, are a product of nature, the can, made out of metal, is a product of human ingenuity and art, and yet, through this uncanny metaphor, both objects—as much as the animating force behind their movement—become works of love. Through these playful chromatic/visual symbols and rhymes, serving as a bookends to the film, Kiarostami tells, or rather shows, his viewers that the narrative they have been watching (regardless of its facticity) is, and has always been, a love story. According to Hamid Naficy, "The ensuing scene that shows Makhmalbaf driving his motorcycle with Sabzian seated behind him with the flowers, while holding onto his idol, is reminiscent of stereotypical love scenes in which lost lovers are reunited."[30]

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[28] Naficy, "*Close-Up*: Questioning Reality," 854.
[29] For more on the two red-headed turkeys, see footnote 25.
[30] Naficy, "*Close-Up*: Questioning Reality," 854.

Figure 5.6: Lover and beloved united at last, in *Close-up* (Kanoon, 1990).

Figure 5.7: Another uncanny double, in *Close-up* (Kanoon, 1990).

Figure 5.8: The uncanny colors of the traveling can, in *Close-up* (Kanoon, 1990).

Figure 5.9: The specter of the kicked can, in a bouquet of flowers held by the traveling cinephile, in *Close-up* (Kanoon, 1990).

To further highlight the timeless, transcendent dimension of this love union the faulty connection on Makhmalbaf's mic, and the broken dialogue between the two men, give way to a haunting, wistful melody from *The Traveler*. As Naficy notes, what is important here, in this "classic trope [of] Persian mystic poetry and philosophy," is not the content of Sabzian and

Makhmalbaf's conversation, but that lover and beloved, fan and star, disciple and master are finally united. Additionally, by using the musical theme from *The Traveler*, Kiarostami once again invites comparison between the two films and their respective protagonists. It is as if the love and passion that fueled Qassem's mini odyssey to see a soccer match in Tehran, now *travels*, by way of music, from that film to this one, animating the movement that carries our two travelers through the streets of the same city. But whereas in that film the boy's passion remained unfulfilled, Qassem sleeps through the soccer match he had worked so hard to attend, here, through the magic of art, Kiarostami, by uniting the cinephile with his cinematic idol, fulfills, at least momentarily, Sabzian's dream: "At this point Kiarostami has already abandoned the simple filming of an event and his more or less faithful reconstruction of it using the real protagonists—now like a real god, he creates reality and makes Sabzian's dream come true."[31]

Even more, through his use of music from *The Traveler* Kiarostami "explicitly highlights and makes his own the connection that Sabzian made during the trial between the film and his own life."[32] In so doing, the director once again identifies himself with the subject of his film, as if he were channeling him in the telling of *his* story. But in taking on his subject's point of view, by ironically alluding to his own film, the filmmaker also symbolically partakes in the lovely union he has helped bring about. In turn, these various loves (Sabzian's for his cinematic idol, Kiarostami's for his cinematic subject, and the one the audience shares with them for the art of cinema), which are both the cause and the effect of the narrative being told, are now communicated through a musical score that frees the viewer to *travel* into the recesses of his own heart. This is not music that tells us what to feel but music that allows us to partake in feelings,

[31] Elena, *The Cinema of Abbas Kiarostami*, 89.
[32] Elena, *The Cinema of Abbas Kiarostami*, 90.

feelings not unlike those responsible for the union we are witnessing, that we share with others of our kind. Hence, in a film in which reality and fiction cannot be unambiguously distinguished, this most contrived and artificial of moments—where extradiegetic music, taken from a work of fiction no less, ostensibly replaces the "reality" of a broken mic and broken dialogue—turns out to be, ironically enough, the most palpable and moving in the entire film. According to Godfrey Cheshire, "After straining against the annoyance caused by the in-and-out sound, *the viewer inevitably experiences an emotional surge* when the beautiful theme of *The Traveler* suddenly overwhelms the mechanical dissonance."[33] In this way, the "reality" of what we are watching takes a backseat to the reality of our sentiments. For it is this reality, the reality of what we feel, that makes our experiences, regardless of their facticity, meaningful. From this perspective, the perspective of feelings that must be felt in order to be understood, the faulty mic through which we hear lover and beloved discourse, and the shattered, distorted windshield through which we watch Sabzian, flowers in hand, enjoined to his beloved on a motorcycle, are metaphors for a love that is beyond visual and discursive representation.[34] In this regard, the music we hear is not simply a supplement to the narrative unfolding before us, but is, instead, a conduit for our feelings, allowing us to experience a truth (the truth of our feelings) which our minds cannot grasp without distorting it; without, that is, reducing it to mere representation.

When Sabzian and Makhmalbaf arrive at the Ahankhah house, and Sabzian, still holding the flowers, humbly bends down to kiss Mr. Ahankhah's hand, the flowers do indeed become (as Naficy suggests) a symbol of reconciliation and forgiveness. But if the flowers are a symbol of

[33] Cheshire, "Cheshire on *Close-up*."
[34] Although I have not included images that show our two travelers obscured by a shattered windshield and other objects, much of the scene is filmed through and around visual impediments.

reconciliation—as much as the love that makes such reconciliation possible—the reconciliation taking place is not simply between Sabzian and Ahankhahs but also between fiction and reality. If it was Sabzian's deception (or fiction) that caused the Ahankhahs to bring charges against Sabzian, it is through Kiarostami's art (or fiction) that Sabzian and the Ahankhahs, as well as Sabzian and the director in whose name Sabzian's fictions were perpetrated, are reconciled. At least that is one possible way to understand how love, which animates both fiction and reality in the film, resolves the conflict between the two. But another, more radical way to understand the film's ending, and the film as a whole, is that Kiarostami turns what started out as a "fiction" (i.e., Sabzian, as Makhmalbaf, promising to make a film about the Ahankhahs) into a "reality" (i.e., a film about Sabzian and the Ahankhas, that also includes Makhmalbaf) through a *work of love* that rejects both labels.

The Trial

What takes place between the prologue and epilogue of *Close-up*, besides some "candid" interviews and the reenactment of "factual events," is a trial scene that serves as the gravitational center of the film. Much of the critical discussion about the aesthetics of the scene deal with Kiarostami's use of two distinct cameras in the courtroom—one that films in a wide-angle and, according to Kiarostami, "belongs to the court" and one that films in close-up and "is for us and has no business with the court."[35] And yet, despite all the critical discussion regarding the two

[35] Kiarostami further instructs Sabzian, "This camera [i.e., the close-up camera] is here so you can explain things that people might find hard to understand and accept." According the Naficy (in *Close-Up: Questioning Reality*), Kiarostami uses two cameras in the courtroom in order to visually represent a cultural "psychological orientation" according to which "manifest reality" (represented by the long shot) is distrusted and "inner reality" (represented by the close-up) is highly valued (852). Additionally, according to Naficy, "by setting up the close-up shot as belonging to 'us,' Kiarostami conflates the position of the film's subject with those of the director and spectators, creating a powerful suturing mechanism that makes the audience complicit in both Sabzian's fraud and Kiarostami's sly film" (853).

cameras, the distinct images and effects produced by each, and the symbolism behind it all there is virtually no mention of the stoic figure, whose facial features are almost as discernable as Sabzian's, sitting behind Sabzian for a majority of the close-up scenes. Presumably, with all the freedom the judge gives him to turn his courtroom into a veritable movie set, Kiarostami could have chosen anyone (or no one) to occupy the frame behind Sabzian. As it is, Sabzian's close-up looks more like a double portrait than a single one. Considering the centrality of the trial scene(s), Kiarostami's directorial control over the courtroom, and the extended close-ups of Sabzian, which title the film, one must assume that the identity of the sitter sitting behind Sabzian, as much as the purpose of him being seated there, is of some importance. As it turns out, the person who gets as much face time as Sabzian, during his courtroom close-up, is none other than court officer or bailiff (Figure 10). As a representative of the rule of law, the bailiff symbolizes the ethical, moral, and legal problems that our protagonist (as a result of his playacting) faces as he pleads his case before the cameras in the courtroom. In this sense, the bailiff, whose ominous presence in the eponymous shot of the film is a reminder of the ethical other to whom Sabzian is ultimately bound and answerable to, is a surrogate for the "real." But the bailiff only represents one half of the "reality" Sabzian's is bound to. The other half of Sabzian's psychological and existential bondage is, ironically, represented by his would-be saviors, i.e., the director before whom he pleads his case and the imagined film audience he tries to win over with his impassioned performance. In essence, there are two trials going on in the same courtroom; one trial before the trial judge and the victims in the case and another trial before the film director and the film's audience; one trial in which the accused must try to

exonerate himself according to legal/ethical standards and another trial in which he must prove himself according to aesthetic standards (i.e., show the film's intrinsic worth/value as a work of art outside of any ethical/moral considerations). And yet, one also gets the impression here that there is a third trial taking place, one in which both ethics and aesthetics, the lenses through which Sabzian's actions are to be examined, explained, and judged are themselves on trial before an even higher court.[36]

Figure 5.10: Sabzian, caught between two worlds, in *Close-up* (Kanoon, 1990).

If Sabzian's guilt hinges on ethical transgressions that resulted from his excessive love of

[36] The following discussion on the relationship between love, ethics, and aesthetics in *Close-up* was inspired by Regina Schwartz' beautiful meditation on love, justice, and the law in *Loving Justice, Living Shakespeare*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

fiction-making and make-believe (i.e., aesthetics), then Kiarostami disabuses us of this simple *narrative* by blurring the boundary between Sabzian's ethical and aesthetic motivations. To begin with, part of what makes Sabzian's story aesthetically appealing is that it is ethically compelling. Hence, the more Sabzian embellishes his story and elicits the audience's sympathy (ethics) the more likely they are to like the film he stars in (aesthetics). At the same time, what makes Sabzian's story ethically compelling is that he loses himself in a world of fantasy by impersonating a famous film director. Just as importantly, Sabzian's predicament is itself the result of various aesthetic and ethical entanglements. For instance, part of the reason why Sabzian loses his family (i.e., his wife and two children) is because of his obsession with cinema (aesthetics), and yet, his attempt to escape through a world of make-believe is partly the result of his inability, as an alienated, impoverished, social outcast, to cope with the reality of day-to-day life in the Islamic Republic (ethics). In pleading his case before Kiarostami's sympathetic camera, Sabzian confesses that he indulged in a world of make-believe and playacting (aesthetics) because it ennobled him, while at the same time suggesting that his lowly, abject living conditions (ethics), motivated, at least in part, his escape through fantasy:

> It was difficult playing the role of the director but it gave me self-confidence and respect….They did whatever I wanted. For instance, if I told them to move a cupboard from a certain place and they would do it….Before, no one would have obeyed me like that because I'm just a poor man. But because I pretended to be this famous person they did whatever I said. And they would believe me. But whenever I'd leave the house, even on that night when I took the money, I'd realize that I'm the same old Sabzian desperate for a little pocket money so that I could get home to that godforsaken place and that once there I wouldn't even have the money to buy my kid a treat. So I'd realize I'm still the same poor guy, alone and back in my social class. So then when I'd go to sleep and I'd wake up the next day, I wanted to go back and play that role for them even though it was really hard for me. I still wanted to go back because of my passion for cinema and also because they respected me and supported me morally. So I really got into the role. It encouraged me to play the part better, to the point where I felt like I was a director. I was

really that person. I was not acting anymore.

In essence, what Sabzian is saying here is that *love*, in the arena of aesthetics (i.e., his love of filmmaking and film) and ethics (i.e., his desire to be accepted, recognized by society), not only motivated him to impersonate his cinematic idol but also that these same loves, i.e., the pleasure he took in directing the family (aesthetics) and the love, adoration, and respect he received from the same family (ethics), helped transform his fantasy into reality. So much so, in fact, that he was, paradoxically, no longer acting. Not to be outdone, Kiarostami himself, whether he be motivated by the love of storytelling and filmmaking (i.e., aesthetics), or the love of mercy and justice (i.e., ethics), mirrors his protagonist's actions by compassionately turning Sabzian's dreams (or fictions) into "reality." And he does this by not only making a film involving the Ahankhahs (just as Sabzian had promised them he would) but also by casting Sabzian in a sympathetic light, so that by the end of the film, Sabzian, through Kiarostami's loving lens, is ethically and aesthetically exonerated. And yet, at the same time, there is nothing straightforward about Sabzian's redemption, for in order for Sabzian to be redeemed (both ethically and aesthetically), Kiarostami must first, paradoxically, reveal the limits of both viewpoints. Mirroring his protagonist even in this regard, thus making his identification with him complete, every one of Kiarostami's aesthetic choices (in the film) has an ethical consequence, and every ethical choice is, in turn, aesthetically informed. As a result, Sabzian, and the director who mirrors his transgressions, cannot be fully exonerated and redeemed (for their "crime" of blending fiction and reality) in either the court of ethics or aesthetics (since we can hardly tell

where one begins and the other ends) but only in the court of love that rules over both.[37]

In discussing the viewer's relationship to Sabzian's ethical, moral, and legal predicament, Ed Gonzalez observes, "*Close-Up*'s genius, though, is not that it suggests that there's no legal and/or moral justification for Sabzian's actions, but that Sabzian's defense is impossible to fathom unless the spectator can share the man's passion for art as cultural and intellectual emancipator."[38] If the boundary between ethics and aesthetics in *Close-up* were not continuously blurred, and their facticity not called into question, Gonzalez' conclusion, that Sabzian's defense is "impossible to fathom unless the spectator can share the man's passion for art," would be correct. As things stand, however, Kiarostami, by blurring fact and fantasy, nature and art, makes it *impossible* for the audience not to share in Sabzian's passion. For in a world in which it is *impossible* to distinguish fact from fiction the only reality anyone can rely on is the reality of their passions. In this sense, Sabzian's passion is our passion, his love our love:

> According to him [i.e., Sabzian], his impersonation was not based on *fraud*, but was driven by his *sincere love* of for Makhmalbaf's films, which powerfully depict the terrible social conditions of downtrodden Iranians, including himself. As a result, he elaborates: "I loved Makhmalbaf and wanted to be in his place."[39]

During the trial, after Sabzian explains why he thinks his ability to convey his internal experiences externally would make him a good actor, Kiarostami playfully asks him, "Don't you think you are playing/acting before the camera right now? Tell us, what are you doing right now?" On its surface, Kiarostami's question, which ironically suggests that Sabzian is using the same playacting skills that got him into legal trouble to get himself out of legal trouble, once

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[37] In this regard, what Kiarostami's close-up of Sabzian in the courtroom symbolizes is a man caught between two worlds (i.e., the ethical and aesthetic) even as the filmmaker points to a love that animates, and in animating transcends, both worlds.

[38] Ed Gonzalez, "Close-Up," in Film, Slant, February 3, 2002, https://www.slantmagazine.com/film/review/close-up.

[39] Naficy, "*Close-Up:* Questioning Reality," 852. Italics mine.

again brings into focus the themes of fiction versus reality, nature versus art, and truth versus deception that the film has been grappling with from the start. And yet, the question, coming at a point in the narrative where fiction and reality have been so thoroughly conflated and confused that we can no longer tell them apart, can hardly be taken seriously—even if Sabzian tries to seriously answer it. Not only does Sabzian's own criteria for being an actor (i.e., the ability to communicate one's internal thoughts and feelings externally) suggest that everyone, including Sabzian himself, must, to some degree, be acting, but also, and for similar definitional reasons, we can no more tell whether someone is "acting" or "not acting" than we can confirm the facticity of the concepts that make such propositions meaningful. Instead, Kiarostami's use of the word *bāzi* and Sabzian's response to the question—"I am expressing my suffering. Playing? No. I am not playing. I am speaking from what is inside me (i.e., the heart)"—ironically recall the deconstruction of *bāzi*, as something trivial, untruthful, and unreal, during the film's prologue. In that scene, in which Kiarostami and his actors play at playing, what the filmmaker *shows* us are the invisible feelings and emotions (not unlike those referred to by Sabzian) that, in animating play, turn play, regardless of its facticity, into something real, truthful, and meaningful. In turn, rather than answering the question, Sabzian's answer, within the context of a film in which the only reality is the reality of one's feelings, raises the following question: How is it possible *to act*, regardless of whether or not one is "acting," without the heart's consent?

Coda

Searching for a truth that can only be found in the heart, the authors in this study, from Ferdowsi to ʿAttār to Rumi to Mehrjui and, finally, to Kiarostami, ultimately arrive at the border of a love that is borderless. Kiarostami's *Close-up* contributes to this theme of a limitless love by visually

representing love's borderlessness through a work whose conceptual frames (e.g., fact, fiction, ethics, aesthetics) are undone by a love that is, paradoxically, beyond representation. In this regard, Kiarostami's project shares an affinity with Ferdowsi's, who cannot answer his existential questions through any discursive frame because such frames are themselves the product of a love that cannot be framed by any discourse. But Ferdowsi is not the only poet in this study whose influence can be felt in Kiarostami's *Close-up*. Like ʿAttār's heretical love poems, Kiarostami's *Close-up*, a love story in its own right, tests the limits of our beliefs by showing us that what we see, or believe we see, is ultimately contingent upon what we feel. Similar to the Muslim persona in ʿAttār's poems, who flirts with adopting the subversive, mind-bending, reality-altering religion of his beloved (i.e., the religion of love), Kiarostami, defying social mores, passionately emulates his duplicitous subject by melding fact and fiction for the viewer, thus creating a sense of uncertainty, liminality, and limbo. And just as in ʿAttār's love poems the only truth that matters, in this zone of indecipherability, is the truth of one's feelings. Kiarostami's cinematic meditation on the nature of reality also shares something with Rumi's *Masnavi*. Like the ass in Rumi's tale of mystical awakening, whose meaning keeps changing throughout the poem, the object of representation in *Close-up*, and its status as fact or fiction, is shown to be less important than the animating spirit, or love, that makes the object meaningful. Finally, Kiarostami's *Close-up* owes a more direct debt of gratitude to the visual poetics of filmmakers like Dariush Mehrjui, who translated the Persian mystical poetic tradition into a visual medium in new and revolutionary ways.[40]

[40] We can *see*, for instance, how the intersubjectivity—born out love—between man, cow, and the camera consciousness in *Gāv* paves the way for a similar aesthetic fusion, in *Close-up*, between the filmmaker and his alienated, misunderstood cinematic subject.