

Āb-e Ātash-zāy (Fire Breeding Liquid):

The Nature and Functions of Wine in Classical Persian Poetry

AHMAD KARIMI-HAKKAK

Wine-drinking at the royal court is one of the few pre-Islamic customs that survived the Islamicization of Iran's culture beginning in the second half of the 7th century CE and lasting full force through the 9th century.¹ The preponderance of these royal ceremonies is best recorded in the histories of the early courts in the northeastern region of Khorasan, including the present-day Iranian provinces of Khorasan as well as much of eastern Afghanistan and Persian-speaking central Asia, where classical Persian poetry also found its earliest grounding.² Encouraged by local warlords who, with or without the consent of the Abbasid Caliphs in Baghdad, sought to assert their authority over this region, early court poets writing in Persian in the 10th and 11th centuries used poetry as a signifier of the continuation of ancient Iranian customs, and thus a way of anchoring the new dynasties in pre-Islamic courtly rituals. Like some other ancient customs of ancient Iran, wine-drinking then constituted a way of seeking legitimacy for Samanid and Ghaznavid rulers. For the purposes of this paper, these ceremonies are viewed as a way of establishing the social settings where poets displayed their artistry and added to the joviality of the assembly, not just as providing glimpses into the life of the Iranian nobility but, more importantly, as a way of praising the virtues of allegiance to the sovereign ruler and of camaraderie and good fellowship. Indeed, connections between drinking and other pleasures of social life at the court and among the nobility gradually became a hallmark of early

¹ See Arthur Christensen, *L'Iran sous les Sassanides*, 2nd ed., Copenhagen, 1944, pp. 478–79. Accounts of ceremonial official wine-drinking in pre-Islamic Persia make it clear that the custom has been present in the culture before the advent of Islam. See Ehsan Yarshater, “The Theme of Wine-Drinking and the Concept of the Beloved in Early Persian Poetry,” *Studia Islamica*, No. 13 (1960), 43–53.

² See, for example, Abolfazl Bayhaqi, *Tārikh-e Bayhaqi*, ed. Moḥammad Jaʿfar Yāhaqqi (2 Volumes), Tehran: Sokhan, 2009, Vol. 1, pp. 157, 245–46, 273, 488, 500; Anonymous, *Tārikh-e Sistan*, ed. Moḥammad-Taqi Bahār, Tehran, 1935, p. 315 ff.

wine poetry in Persian, known as *khamriyyāt*,³ a type of poetry, often expressed through public, official and ceremonial compositions marking official or calendric occasions through genres of *qasida*⁴ and *qet'eh* held sway at least through the 11th century, before morphing into the *sāqināmehs*⁵ that slowly but steadily changed the meaning and function of wine and drinking altogether.

In this essay, however, I will not address complicated issues of categorization or periodization in classical Persian poetry. Instead, I will continue to apply the theoretically-driven argument that I have presented more fully elsewhere to the thematic exploration of wine and drinking. Briefly, as an aesthetic system, Persian poetry easily lends itself to a stage-by-stage study of systemic growth in complexity when viewed along a diachronic dimension.⁶ This is in large measure due to the fact that the aesthetic system underlying Persian poetry is one in which the growth of the aesthetic complexity is often textually traceable from stage to stage, from one discursive underpinning – be it social, moral, religious or otherwise – to another. In that sense, we can say that, as an aesthetic system, Persian poetry has no fixed nature, but a guiding story, better yet a genuine history. Stated differently, the dialectic of its movement through time from generation to generation, from one center of production to another, and through ever-changing guiding principles of a philosophical or religious nature, can be demonstrated through attempts at acts of textual production that concretely reveal – and at times foreground – the system's tensions and conflicts, its continual novelty, and

³ See Eḡterām Reżā'i, *Sāqināmeḡ dar She'r-e Fārsi*, Tehran, Amir-Kabir, 2009. In this book the author argues that the Persian *Khamriyyāt* (Drinking Poems), historically related to the Arabic poetic genre of the same name, is the precursor of the more famous and more aesthetically sophisticated Persian genre of *Sāqināmeḡ* (Book of the Cup-Bearer). At any rate, the Persian *Sāqināmeḡs*, important as they are, appear at a later stage of the evolution of Persian poetry and are, as such, excluded from our discussion in this essay.

⁴ On the *Qasida* as a seminal genre in Persian poetry and its historical development, see Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak, "Preservation and Presentation: Continuity and Creativity in the Contemporary Persian *Qasida*." In *Qasida Poetry in Islamic Asia and Africa: Classical Traditions and Modern Meanings*. [Volume One]. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996, pp. 253–280; and id., "Four Modern Persian *Qasidas*." In *Qasida Poetry in Islamic Asia and Africa: Eulogy's Bounty, Meaning's Abundance, An Anthology*. [Volume Two]. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996, pp. 192–215.

⁵ See Reżā'i, *ibid*.

⁶ See Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak, *Recasting Persian Poetry: Scenarios of Poetic Modernity in Iran*, Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1995.

each practitioner's individual contribution to change in the entire system. In each stage the opposing views within it, or expressed through it, are synthesized, reconciled or at least juxtaposed in observable and traceable ways.

Consequently, in content and theme as well as in its imagery and expressive system, from its very beginning Persian poetry reflects, at least in its basic thrust, a constantly shifting set of sociopolitical environments as it moves through many of the stages characteristic in the evolution of poetic traditions anchored in natural languages. Initially, it reflects a courtly milieu in fairly simple, straightforward epic and romantic narratives, ultimately with a social, ideological or moral, yet worldly, purpose. The numerous long tales related to ancient Iran, chief among them those like the ones recorded in the tenth-century *Shāhnāme* (Book of Kings), a monumental heroic poem based on Iranian myths and legends and versified by Abolqāsem Ferdowsi (935–1010), exemplify this mode, as do the many romances of ancient and medieval lovers put to verse by Gorgāni, Neẓāmi and others through the 11th century. At the same time, shorter compositions of a philosophical or lyrical nature like the ode-like qasida and the sonnet-like ghazal, as well as fragments, quatrains, and other verse forms, become vehicles through which more personal and private moments were recorded or celebrated. In such compositions, numerous Persian poets develop an ideal of beauty and a theory of love, as well as ideas about social life that, thanks to the fact that the Persian language does not have gender designations, can be and have been read as intended for or addressed to one's beloved (male or female), one's king or patron, and, at a later period, through the 12th century, an idea of God, as we will see later.

Thematically, though, such prominent early poets as Rudaki and Manu-chehri are perhaps the best representatives of the early composers of Persian poems featuring wine and drinking. In their compositions, these poets record recipe-like descriptions of vineyards, wine-making and the assembly of courtiers where the final product is served, complete with an elaboration of the culture and customs of proper wine-drinking at the royal court. Rudaki's poem opens with an image of the ripened grape as the mother who has to be sacrificed to begin the elaborate process of wine making:

Mādar-e may rā bekard bāyad qorbān
Bacheh-ye u rā gereft o kard beh zendān
Bacheh-ye u rā az u gereft nadāni

Tā-sh nakubi v-az u nakeshi jān⁷

(You must sacrifice the mother of wine
Take her child from her and put her in prison
But you can't take the child from the mother
Unless you first smash the mother and press life out of her)⁸

Here the image of the ripened grape as the pregnant "mother of wine" (*mādar-e may*) leads to detailed description of how the vine farmer (*dehqān*) sheds her blood and imprisons her daughter in pitch dark vats to make the wine which months later may become worthy of the royal assembly.

The poem I wish to discuss more extensively, a *qet'eh* by Manuchehri of Dāmghān composed a generation later at the court of the Ghaznavids who succeeded the Samanids, also exhibits the tendency to initiate the reader into the world of wine and the culture of wine-making and drinking at court. Known to modern scholars as *Dāru-ye Khvāb* (Cure for Sleep), the poem consists of eleven couplets (*bayts*) and reveals many of the basic elements characteristic of early Persian poetry composed in or around the courts of Samanid and Ghaznavid kings:

Āmad shab o az khvāb marā ranj o 'azāb ast
ay dust biār ānchēh marā dāru-ye khvāb ast

Cheh mordeh vo cheh khoftēh keh bidār nabāshi
ān rā cheh dalil āri o in rā cheh javāb ast

Man jahd konam bi ajal-e khish namiram
dar mordan-e bihudeh cheh mozd o cheh šavāb ast

Man khvāb ze dideh beh may-e nāb robāyam
āri 'adu-ye khvāb-e javānān may-e nāb ast

Sakhtam 'ajab āyad keh chegūneh bāradash khvāb
ān rā keh beh kākh andar yek shisheh sharāb ast

V-in niz 'ajabtar keh khorad bādeh nah bar chang
bi naghme-ye changash beh may-e nāb shetāb ast

⁷ Abu Ja'far Rudaki Samarqandi, *Ahvāl va Ash'ār-e Rudaki Samarqandi*, ed. Sa'id Nafisi (3 Volumes), Tehran, 1319, Vol. 2, p. 199. For a translation and discussion of this poem, see Kamran Talattof, "Sparkling and Ravishing: Wine in Rudaki's Poetry" (a paper presented at *The Rise of the Persian Renaissance Conference*, Oxford, UK, July 13–15, 2008).

⁸ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of Persian poems into English are mine and are meant for purposes of discussion and analysis, not for any aesthetic effect.

Asbi keh safirash nazani mi nakhorad āb
ni mard kam az asb o nah may kamtar az āb ast

Dar majles-e aḥrār seh chiz ast o fozun nah
v-in har seh sharab ast o robab ast o kabab ast

Nah noql bovad mā rā ni daftar o ni nard
v-in harseh bedin majles-e mā dar nah šavāb ast

daftar beh dabestān bovad o noql beh bāzār
v-in nard beh jā'i keh kharābāt-e kharāb ast

Mā mard-e sharābim o kabābim o robābim
khushā keh sharāb ast o kabāb ast o robāb ast.⁹

(Night has come and I am loathe to go to sleep.
bring on, my friend, that which repels sleep.

If not awake, what difference whether you're dead or asleep,
what's the excuse for that, how would you answer to this?

I try not to die before my appointed time
what good, what virtue is there in dying in vain.

I keep sleep away from my eyes only with the best wine
for young men, pure wine is indeed an antidote to sleep.

I even wonder how the man can sleep
who has a bottle of wine left in his dwelling.

I wonder even more when I see one who drinks without music
who rushes to take the goblet without the melody of the lyre.

Horses do not drink water if you do not whistle along
Is a man lower than a horse, wine less than water?

Three things ought to be there when free men make an assembly
and those three are wine, the lyre and kabab!

For us, no sweetmeat, no notebooks, no backgammon
these three are not seemly in our assembly.

Notebooks you see in schools, sweetmeat in the market-place
and backgammon is meet for the rabble's ruins.

But we are men of the wine, the kabab and the lyre

⁹ Manuchehri Dāmghānī, *Dīvān*, Ed. Moḥammad Dabir Siyāqi, 3rd. ed., Tehran: Enteshārāt-e Zavvār, p. 6. Jerome W. Clinton, *The Divan of Manuchehri Damghani: A Critical Study*, Minneapolis, 1972, p. 66–67.

how seemly then that there is wine, kabab and the lyre.)¹⁰

In his study of the Manuchehri's poetry, Jerome W. Clinton identifies a cumulative movement in the way that the poet advances his argument in favor of the stark, yet rich, ceremony where wine is served and enjoyed. "The first five lines," he states, "expand upon the distasteful mordancy of sleep and the virtue of wine as a cure for it," while the rest of the poem foregrounds, expands and extends the theme to an entirely worldly life-style, especially befitting young noblemen:

That we are to take wine here as meaning good fellowship as well is indicated by the subtle *carpe diem* of "What answer to the former [death]?" and by the mention of "young men." This theme is brought to the fore in *bayt* six with the introduction of the lute (his word for the Persian *chang* or *robāb*, which I have translated as lyre), and *bayt* eight moves us into the midst of a wine party, whose conviviality is happily underscored by the alliterative linking of "wine" (*sharāb*), *kabāb*, and *rebāb*. The next two lines serve to add to the pleasure-loving character of the group by separating them from the bazaar and the school. And the final *bayt* with its percussive double repetition of *sharāb*, *kabāb*, and *rebāb* provides as emphatic and decisive a conclusion to this poem as does the final couplet of a sonnet.¹¹

What I would like to add to this argument is twofold. First, the notion of *aḥrār*, which I see as close to that of "men of free spirit," constitutes a large component of Manuchehri's worldview in general and his intention here. This is exemplified in the poem by the circle of noblemen gathered in the drinking assembly. This status is not so much a matter of aristocracy as running in blood; rather it denotes a class of men free not just from the dictates of labor and toil, but also from the din of society, as enumerated observably in other sites where individuals come face to face with material life – the school, the marketplace, or what the poem refers to as *kharābāt-e kharāb*. Together, these exemplify a life of low class revelry, possibly tied to gambling and the presence of women. We begin, as such, to get a glimpse of a social structure in which people like poets and their patrons distinguish themselves not just from the hubbub of the marketplace and the school, but from the vagaries of fortune and gatherings of what we can call the rabble.

The second point worth mentioning relates to how young the world seems to be in the assembly of which the poem's speaker is a member. The

¹⁰ For my translation here, while using Clinton's fine translation, I have made a few modifications to bring the English text closer to the Persian original.

¹¹ Clinton, *The Divan of Manuchehri Damghani*, p.67

solidity of the poetic terms that connect the text to its social context and a specific life style within it are nothing short of astounding – and yet refreshing – when compared to that which surrounds the poetry of Rumi or Hafez. The social trappings the poem makes us aware of place wine meaningfully within a way of life that leaves no room for ambivalence, ambiguity, or hesitancy about what wine is and means or how the gathered assembly consumes it and to what end. The world seems as robust as the young men assembled here feel themselves to be, life as precious as the moments of joy it can offer; the rest consists only of matters over which humans have no control and should therefore not worry about. Death is a reality, of course, but one as distant from the mind of the carefree group gathered here as the word *ajal* (appointed time), mentioned in the poem. These are indeed matters over which later generations of Persian poets – men as diverse as Sanā'i, Rumi and Hafez – agonize. Here, however, while concepts like *ajal* are duly acknowledged, they simply do not play a significant part in the dynamics of ideal life. When the appointed time arrives death will of course claim the human body, but that is all the more reason to seize the moments of merry-making and cherish such blessings of life as wine, music, good food and the congenial company of kindred spirits. In the centuries to follow, while the twin motifs of *ubi sunt* and *carpe diem* continue to be a part of the Persian poetic discourse they begin to be marginalized considerably, gradually replaced by trepidations – philosophical, mystical or apocalyptic – that often haunt and men like Rumi and Hafez.

A second sign of the pragmatism that, religious prohibitions notwithstanding, can be seen here as part of Iran's ruling culture and needs somehow to be acknowledged and accommodated within reason, can be found in the Persian literature of advice. Among the various rules of conduct that Qābus ebn-e Voshmgir, the late 11th century Ṭabari prince and ruler as well as a man of high literary accomplishments, issues to his son, we see both his recognition that drinking violates the rules of Islam and his acknowledgment that it is an activity that princes do engage in. Acknowledging the subtle irony inherent in such an attitude, here is how Edward Browne, early twentieth century historian of Persian literature, articulates Qābus's princely admonishment and fatherly advice:

His advice as to drinking wine is tinged with a delicate irony. He admits that to drink wine at all is contrary to religion, "but I know," he continues, "that you will not refrain from it for any words of mine, or hearken to what I say." Therefore he confines himself to recommending his son not to drink in the morning, or at least not often, for thereby he will be tempted to omit his prayers, and will fill his head with fresh fumes of wine ere those of

the previous evening's debauch be dissipated. He also counsels him to get drunk in his own house, so as to avoid scandal; not to drink on the eve of Friday, out of respect for the day, so that men, seeing this, may forgive his drinking on other evenings; and not to behave, when drunk, in a riotous and offensive manner. "To drink wine," says he, "is a sin, and if you must sin, let it at least be pleasantly and gracefully. So let the wine which you drink be of the best, and likewise the music to which you listen."¹²

Within a century or so, as the power of the local and regional kings begins to give way to that of the guiding sheikhs and Sufi masters, an ever more deeply felt sense of life as a spiritual and mystical quest gradually takes the center stage in Persian literature. The node between the beloved, the patron, and the deity facilitates one of the most noteworthy processes of transformation in any aesthetic tradition. The poet – or his persona – intoxicated by the wine of the beloved's beauty, now strives to transcend all carnal temptations and move – or be moved – to contemplation of divine munificence. As the locus of the blessed event, the tavern is placed higher than the mosque, the house of God at Ka'ba, or even the foot of the divine throne, for it alone allows a vision of the almighty. Wine, the ruby liquid that induces the trance, once openly sought and celebrated, now ought to be assiduously shunned, at least such pretence becomes a trope, as the letter of the Islamic Shari'a seems to dictate. Fermentation, perhaps the most antique metaphor for transformation, begins to serve as the central image for man's desire to ascent to godhood.¹³ All this, and a plethora of similar paradoxes, become possible, if only the poem is allowed to release its meaning not on the apparent plane but at the level of so many esoteric interpretations.

Only a generation or so after Qābus and barely a century after Manu-chehri, Sanā'i of Ghazneh, the first of the great Sufi poets, inaugurates a shift in the universe of poetic discourse that can be termed "the grand internalization" of the aesthetic apparatus in the Persian language. The shift is nearly all-encompassing, so much so that it stands on its head a struggle as worldly and objective as that between the epic hero and his enemies – the divs, demons and dragons that await him at every turn of his material exploits, turning it instead into a constant grappling with such internal forces

¹² Browne, E. G., *A Literary History of Persia*, Volume II. From Firdawsi to Sa'di, pp. 283–284. Browne's version here consists of an abridgement of the original Persian text. For the original Persian version, cf. Qābus ibn Voshmgir, *Qābusnāmeḥ*, Ed. Sa'id Nafisi, Tehran, Marvi, 1983, p. 47–49.

¹³ On the meaning of wine and the tavern, see Coleman Barks, *The Essential Rumi*, San Francisco, HarperSanFrancisco, 1995, p. 1.

such as the *nafs*. As I have argued elsewhere, for example, it changes the character of a bird as fabulously corporeal as the Simorgh of *The Shāhnāme* into the invisible ethereal presence we see in ‘Attār’s *Conference of the Birds*, and an object as revealing as Jamshid’s cup.¹⁴

Given the nature of the argument here, this last point bears further elaboration, though. In this process, the object known as Jām-e Jam (Jam’s cup), a sort of crystal ball into which legendary King Jamshid, or as we have it in the *Shāhnāme* the enlightened monarch Kay-Khosrow, is supposed to have peered to see the workings of the world, undergoes a drastic change, as the early mystical discourse ascribes to it the capabilities earned by the illuminated Sufi. When utterly polished by constant remembrance and repeated utterance of the name of God, it is polished to the extent that it becomes an object at which the adept Sufi stares long and hard to see the whole of human history and destiny. The equivocation through which this transformation is initiated is instructive in its utter simplicity and iron-clad certainty. Here’s Sanā’i’s articulation of the node:

Qeṣṣeh-ye jām-e jam basi shenavi
v-andar ān bish o kam basi shenavi

Beh yaqin dān keh jām-e jam del-e to-st
Mostaqar-re sorur o gham del-e to-st

Chun tamannā koni jahān didan
Jomleh ashyā dar ān tavān didan¹⁵

(You will hear many tales about Jamshid’s cup
And in each telling something added or left out.

Know this for certain: Jamshid’s cup is your heart
The seat of joy or sorrow is your heart.

When you desire to view the world
You can see all things inside it.)

The kind of equivocation we have here, “know this for certain: Jamshid’s cup is your heart,” is a hallmark of the makers and propagators of the Sufi discourse in Persian poetry. What facilitates the node produced by it is a

¹⁴ On this change in the figure of Simorgh, see my online article in *Iran Nameh* the following address: <http://fis-iran.org/en/programs/noruzlectures/simorgh-hakkak>

¹⁵ Sanā’i Ghaznavi, Abolmajd, *Maṣnavihā-ye Ḥakim Sanā’i*, Ed. Modarres Rażavi, Tehran: Enteshārāt-e Dāneshgāh-e Tehrān, p. 347.

two-stage process that works first through a readjustment of the hermeneutic apparatus assumed to be already in operation in the mind of the reader, that which depicts the cup as an actual object in the material world. The initial acknowledgment of the diversity of the tales about the object prepares the mind for a plunge from that which the tellers of the tales may add to or omit from their version of the story, the *bish o kam* (more or less) of the second hemistich, to a non-material realm where the true meaning of the cup, now divorced from those varying narratives, can be tied to a sense that is independent of all external narration. In light of that initial divestiture and the subsequent reinvestment of the word with a novel sense, the emphatic iteration, *beh yaqin dān* (know for certain) begins to make its impact as a true statement based on a plane of understanding separate from, and superior to, all the stories that one may have heard about the cup as a material object.

Historically concurrent with the gradual ascendancy of Sufi monasteries and the emergence of Sufi poets throughout the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, a second process gets underway, one marked primarily by a dematerialization of the poetic machinery in the Persian aesthetic culture. Mystically inclined philosophers, theosophists, and poets redirect the character and mission of many archetypal and primordial mythical and historical figures of the pre-Islamic Persian past to their purposes, making narratives, anecdotes, even images qualitatively different from that which marked them in the epic and romantic traditions. It is through Attar, most illustratively, that the figure of Simorgh changes into the non-existent, yet ever so passionately sought-after, bird living on top of the mythic Mount Qāf. Let us recall that in the *Shāhnāme* Simorgh – the word connotes initially a bird the size of thirty birds put together – is a real supernatural creature. She nurses and raises the hero Zāl and leaves her feather with him to set on fire if he needs help. When he needs her to help in the birth of his son Rostam she reappears to play surgeon and midwife, and performs the first known c-section operation on Rudābeh and when Esfandiyār's mortal wounds have left Rostam moribund, she appears again at Zāl's behest, the wind from her feather moving the dust into an all-encompassing cloud. Everything in this articulation privileges the mythical bird's corporeality as a manifestation of her matronly nature. In 'Attār's mystical narrative, *Manteq at-Tayr* (The Conference of the Birds), written two centuries later, this mother of all birds turns into an ethereal concoction of the human imagination that the other birds long for and seek, only eventually to be faced – at least the thirty most steadfast ones

who survive the ordeals of the avian quest – with a mirror-like surface that reflects their own likeness.¹⁶

The transformation, achieved in a coup de force that plays on another aspect of the same connotation of the word *si-morgh*, is the most striking among myriad textual maneuvers that the poet, a master of many meaningful puns in the Sufi discourse, harnesses in the service of his own story. Instead of using the number thirty (*si* in Persian) in the way it has been used by Ferdowsi to denote a very big bird, ‘Attār uses it to correspond with the number of the birds, very few indeed when compared with the thousands of birds that set out on the journey, who have survived the rigors of the journey to the top of Mount Qāf. Their quest then comes to correspond with the path which every novice Sufi must tread on in order to deserve to be called a *Ṣufi-ye Ṣāfi* (a pure mystic). Attar thus redirects the connotation of the word *si* toward the attainment of a condition of spiritual purity and enlightenment that few are capable of obtaining through the rigors of the Sufi path and practice. This internalization in turn makes it possible for him and many other Persian Sufi poets to conceive and describe the battle for the purification of one’s soul as by far greater than that which may have wounded Rostam in his old-age encounter with the young invulnerable prince Esfandiyār.

Articulated in the fullness of their significance, such internalizing strategies, most based on word plays that Persian Sufi poets are known to delight in, are too many and too varied to allude to here. One must be mentioned here, though, because it bears on my argument here that the shift in the semantic realm of the archetypal *Jām-e Jam* or Jamshid’s cup. The internalization in Sanā’i’s poem above has to do not with an equivocation but with the outcome of the act of seeing. Someone looking into Jamshid’s cup may be expected to see a picture of the external world or of some event – past, present or future – that may be actually happening in the world. That at least is the use that personages of epic and romantic tales have made of Jamshid’s cup. What Sanā’i’s wording suggests has to do not with the act or object of seeing but the effect that the process of seeing produces in the person looking into it. With impressive deftness, the poet buttresses that meaning when he speaks of the heart as the seat of joy and sorrow. Indeed the word *mo-staqar* Persian of Arabic origin meaning “seat,” connotes the resting spot, the point at which human emotions like joy and sorrow appear to settle as a

¹⁶ See Farid ud-Din ‘Attār, *The Conference of the Birds*, Translated with an Introduction by Afkham Darbandi and Dick Davis, New York, Penguin Books, 1984, pp. 214–220.

result of that which one has seen or contemplated. While the prince or hero peering into the cup may “see” flames of war or the likeness of a beautiful princess, the Sufi wayfarer looking into his heart may see that which causes him to “feel” joy or sorrow.

This subtle distinction becomes most consequential in the later generations of Sufi poets like ‘Aṭṭār and Rumi, as well as those who adopt the language of Sufi poetry even though they may not be Sufis in practice, particularly in a master of poetic diction like Hafez. Let’s look first at a ghazal by ‘Aṭṭār, a major poet as much important in the annals of Persian poetry for his dynamic and dramatic articulation of transforming mystical experiences as for the stunningly novel vignettes he presents them in:

Negāri mast o laya ‘qel cho māhi
dar-āmad az dar-e masjed pegāhi

Siah zolf o siah chashm o siah del
siahgar bud o pushideh siāhi

Ze har mu’i keh andar zolf-e u bud
Foru mirikht kofri o gonāhi

Dar-āmad pish-e pir-e mā beh zānu
Bedu goft ay asir-e āb o jāhi

Fesordi hamcho yakh az zohd kardan
Besuz ākher cho ātash gāhgāhi

Chu pir-e mā bedid u rā bar āvard
Ze jān-e ātashin chun ātash āhi

Ze rah oftād o ruy āvard dar kofr
Nah ru’i mād dar din o nah rāhi

Beh tāriki-ye zolf u foru raft
Beh dast āvard az āb-e khezr chāhi

Degar hargez neshān-e u nadidam
Keh shod dar bineshāni pādesihāhi

Agar ‘Aṭṭār ham bā u berafti
Nayarzidish ‘ālam barg-e kāhi¹⁷

(A moonlike beauty, drunk, devoid of all sense
entered the mosque one early dawn,

¹⁷ ‘Aṭṭār, Farid ud-Din, *Divān-e ‘Aṭṭār-e Nayshaburi*, Ed. Sa‘id Nafisi, Tehran, 1939, p. 345.

black-haired, black-eyed, black in the heart
she was of black deeds, clad all in black.

Blasphemy and all manner of sin oozed
from every strand of her tresses,

She came in, kneeled before our Pir,
and spoke thus: You captive to name and rank

you are frozen in your asceticism.
Burn a bit now and then, like fire!

As our Pir saw her, he heaved a sigh
from the depth of his soul, a burning sigh,

and strayed from the path, facing the way of infidelity,
Neither did he face religion again, nor treaded the path.

He sank deep instead into the darkness of her tresses,
found there a well filled with the water of immortality.

After that day I never saw a sign of him,
for in the land of the signless he attained a royal rank.

And if 'Aṭṭār too had accompanied him,
he would not value the world as much as a blade of straw.)

Here we have a figure that comes very close to an embodiment of utter drunkenness, a sort of Lady Intoxication. The woman is drunk and devoid of reason, black for head to the depth of her heart, oozing sin and irreligion. She appears before the assembly's venerable pir, chides him for his vainglory and pride, itself a deadly sin, and invites him to warm up, even move to the opposite end of what to him was *zohd* (asceticism), as she accuses him of being frigid, frozen in his ascetic practice and a captive to honor and ambition (*āb o jāh*). In asking him to burn like fire, she is, in effect, asking whether the pir might be capable of experiencing the opposite of his present state. She is careful, however, to make this only a proposition within the realm of the possible, as she tempers the challenge she issues with the words "from time to time" (*gāhgāhi*). The words alluding to various shapes that human soul can take – ice, water, fire – come in a carefully graded move away from literality and into the metaphorical realm. Whereas initially she calls the pir captive to *āb o jāh* (meaning *āberu* or honor), she does see him as capable of changing his lot, as she does in the end. The pir is said to have become frozen from his commitment to his religion and, therefore, literally resembling ice (*hamcho yakh*), needs to turn into its elemental opposite. Fire, however, is not only temporary, *gāhgāhi*, but also clearly a tentative meta-

phorical coming in the form of a command or invitation, which the pir may accept or reject. Where things become more serious is when the speaker reports the pir's reaction to the temptress's invitation: he heaves a burning sigh from the depth of his fiery soul (*ze jān-e ātashin*). Notice that the sigh is not the result of the words the lady speaks, but of the pir's vision – i.e., when he sighed when he “saw” the woman (*cho pir-e mā bedid u rā*), he heaved a sigh like fire from the depth of his fiery soul. It is not that the pir heard the woman out and considered her words; rather, he is already burning since the moment he set his eyes on her; he is now simply exuding that fire from the depth of his soul. When the same speaker, now identified with the poet through his pen name ‘Aṭṭār, tells us that he too would have gone with the pir, if only he had reached the stage where the entire world would have appeared to him as utterly worthless, we are thrown back to our understanding of irreligion and sin (*kofr* and *gonāh*) in ‘Aṭṭār's discourse – it is indeed the depth of spirituality freed from appearance and observance.

We know that in western cultures, a sin is classified as deadly, not merely because it is a serious mortal offense, but because it is or can become the *prima causa* of other sins – i.e., can lead to other sinful acts. Whether we go all the way back to the early Christian monastic tradition of classifying sins, which was popularized in the Muslim world through the crusades, or to Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologia*, which was articulated almost a century after ‘Aṭṭār's time and can be seen as the culmination of the process of classifying sins, we come across this motivational distinction, that a deadly sin becomes a motive for the sinner to commit other sins, thereby becoming the cause of other sins, whether deadly or not. That intoxication causes evil acts is well-known in the Islamic world as well and this is clear from one of the more familiar metaphors for wine, *umm al-khabā'es*, mother of all evils or vices. Now in the traditional catalogue of sins intoxication or drunkenness itself is not listed as one of the seven; rather, it is usually included in the fifth sin, gluttony.

The development of Sufi sects, monasteries and seminaries from Sanā'i to Rumi included the systematization, sophistication and hierarchization of almost all the principles and practices, which can be detected to varying degrees in ‘Aṭṭār and Rumi's treatment of the theme of wine and drinking. While in ‘Aṭṭār we are still in the realm of ambiguities and double meanings that must be taken into account in ascribing meanings to such personages as well as principles and practices underlying them, in a narrative like Rumi's account of a famous story in Sheikh Bāyazid of Basṭām's fabled life, what guides and governs the act of interpretation is the solidity of the central per-

sonage's credentials and the certitude with which the narrator frames and guides the narrative. Here we have someone who is authorized to act as he wishes because he is privileged to be the historical figure he is reported to be. In other words, it is the name of Bāyazid that leads the reader ultimately to understand metaphorically what belies the narrative on the literal plain:

Bā moridān ān faqir-e Moḥtasham
 Bāyazid āmad keh: nak, yazdān manam
 goft mastāneh 'ayān ān zūfonun
 lā elah ellā anāhā fa'bodun
 chun gozasht ān ḥāl goftandash ṣabāḥ
 to chonin gofti o in nabvad ṣalāḥ
 goft in bār ar konam man mashghaleh
 kārdhā bar man zanid ān dam haleh
 ḥaq monazzah az tan o man bā tanam
 chun chonin guyam bebāyad koshtanam¹⁸

(That eminent Sheikh and man of poverty Bāyazid
 once told his followers: look, I am God!
 And in the manner of an intoxicated man he added
 there is no God but me, so worship ye me!
 As the state he was in waned they told him at dawn
 that's how you spoke, and it was not appropriate!
 He said: If I ever utter such words again
 stick knives inside my flesh with no hesitation,
 God has no body and I am contained in one,
 if I ever speak thus I deserve to be killed.)

Harkening the words of the grand Sheikh, the disciples arm themselves with knives, doubtless hoping the occasion for their use will never arise. Yet, once again, having gotten drunk again (*mast gasht u bāz*), love takes over his soul, putting reason to flight (*'eshq āmad 'aql-e u āvāreh shod*) and, as Rumi has it, "as the happy bird of intoxication (*homā-ye bi-khodi*) soars in him", he utters words of apparent blasphemy again. As the bewildered disciples begin to stab their pir in different parts of his body, however, they see that wounds appearing at the same spot in their own bodies, leaving Bāyazid totally unharmed. Rumi ends the parable by repeating that, in a man like Bāyazid, the state of *bi-khodi* is the safest and most secure from harm, a fact that separates him from the rest of humanity.

¹⁸ Jalal ud-Din Balkhi, *Maṣnavi-ye Ma'navi*, Ed. R. A. Nicholson, in Four Volumes, Tehran, Amir Kabir, Volume 2 (Book Four), 1984, pp. 401–402.

A brief comparison between ‘Aṭṭār’s ghazal and Rumi’s verse story might help elucidate the distance that Sufism as a vision of the world and the afterlife has come in the span of half a century that separates the two poets’ visions, and do so through the relationship between the kind of drinking that still retains the possibility of a literal interpretation and one that has shed literal meaning completely and become purely metaphorical. In other words, as readers, we might still interpret the drunkenness we see in ‘Aṭṭār’s poem as an invitation to a drinking assembly, whatever our impression might be of poetic expressions of mystical states of consciousness. Recalling the *ghazal*’s closing lines where the poet identifies with the poem’s speaker by skillfully weaving in his pen-name into the texture of the poem, we are not only left wondering what happened to the *pir*, but more importantly see an indeterminate final thought about the poet himself expressed through a conditional sentence: “And if ‘Aṭṭār too had accompanied him / he would not value the world as much as a blade of straw.” By contrast, the state of intoxication we see in Rumi’s story of Bāyazid and his disciples leaves no room for such an interpretation. Whereas ‘Aṭṭār’s poem ends at a point where we as readers are not certain what happens to the *pir* or to the poem’s speaker, Rumi’s articulation of intoxication, now increasingly articulated as a state of standing apart from one’s former self (*bi-khodi*), draws us toward an entirely separate reality, one with no connection to the regular state of being among real flesh-and-blood human beings. It is there, on that elevated moral plain, that the poet imparts his message and that, as disciples of Sufism as a system of ideas, we begin to absorb the lesson the narrative means to impart: there are indeed human beings whose conditions have been elevated to that of Godhood; As a sign of that, their bodies, in fact their whole being, is subject to conditions incomprehensible to the rest of us, mere mortals with bodies of blood and flesh.

Let me move to my last textual evidence, a primary sign of all the complications that wine or the mere craving of it renders the human flesh heir to: Whether we contemplate stories like that of Bāyazid and his followers as parables of Godlike men as existentially different from and superior to not just the laity but those who have given their lives over to emulating them, we see articulations of a series of very exclusive deeply personal experiences with practically no application to the world of real human beings. In the case of this particular story, one can even see how the story is ultimately entirely asocial, devoid of a moral purpose that might relate to the aspirations of a novice Sufi or general human strivings for perfection. As we move another century along the path of history, we encounter an articulation in Hafez, the

apex of Persian lyric poetry, where the language of the mystical quest is used to make a point that is at once special and collective and ultimately running counter to the desires of mystical poets like Rumi. It is as if Hafez were trying to restore to the lofty Sufism of Rumi a dimension that he may have found missing from it, one that would make it relevant to the world of real flesh-and-blood human beings, creatures with a mix of ambitions and frailties. In the poem I have selected for illustrating this point, an account of such human shortcomings comes to us first through the concept of repentance, only to communicate the ultimate impression that, like so much else in human life, drinking is a social act, one worthy of sharing with a few kindred spirits in the congenial assembly not too different from that of Rudaki and Manuchehri, with whom our exploration in this paper began. Here's the *ghazal* in its entirety:

Beh 'āzm-e towbeh saḥar goftam estekhāreh konam
bahār-e towbeh-shekan miresad cheh chāreh konam

Sokhan dorost beguyam nemitavānam did
keh mey khorand ḥarifan o man nezāreh konam.

Beh dōwr-e lāleh demāgh-e marā 'elāj konid
gar az miāneh-ye bazm-e tarab kenāreh konam

Ze ru-ye dust marā chun gol-e morād shekoft
ḥavāleh-ye sar-e doşman beh sang-e khāreh konam

Beh takht-e gol beneshānam boti cho solṭāni
ze sonbol o samanash sāz-e ṭowq o yāreh konam

Gedā-ye maykadeh-am lik vaqt-e masti bin
keh nāz bar falak o ḥokm bar setāreh konam

Cho ghoncheh bā lab khandān beh yād-e majles-e shāh
piyāleh giram o az showq jāmeḥ pāreh konam

Marā keh az zar-e tamghā-st sāz o barg-e mo'āsh
cherā mazemmat-e rend-e sharāb-khvāreh konam

Ze bādeh khordan-e penhān malul shod Ḥāfez
beh bāng-se barbaṭ o ney rāzash āshkareh konam.¹⁹

(Intent on repentance, I thought I would consult the holy Qur'an –
spring the vow-breaker is arriving, though; what shall I do there?)

¹⁹ Shams ud-Din Moḥammad Ḥāfez, *Divān-e Ḥāfez*, Ed. Parviz Nāṭel Khānlari, (in two volumes), Second Printing, Tehran, 1983, Vol. 1, p. 342.

Truth be told, I cannot bear to see friends assembled
in convivial wine-drinking, and I am there only to watch.

In the season of the tulip take me in for a cure,
if I should stay away from gatherings of joy.

The friend's face has opened up the rose of my desire;
so now, I will leave the foe's head to the hardest of granite.

I will seat my beloved upon a throne of roses, like a Sultan
and adorn her neck, hands and feet in garlands of hyacinth, jasmine.

Myself I am a beggar at the tavern door, yet watch as I drink,
how I shun the highest spheres, issue commands to stars.

Budlike, as I recall my sovereign's jovial assembly I open up,
raise my cup with a smile, and joyfully tear asunder my garment.

I owe all my wherewithal but to the gold of levied tax
Why then should I chide the intoxicated wayfarer at all?

Hafez is sour but for having to drink his wine in hiding
Let us then sing his secret aloud with the melody of harp and flute.)

As the poem opens, the speaker, "intent on repentance," contemplates the coming of spring, the season of tulips and roses, wine and good companionship, and perhaps even a beloved to enthrone royally. He would of course repent of drinking if only the advent of spring "the vow-breaker" did not present him with such strong temptations. In the next breath, however, he owns up to a second shortcoming, that of being ignored by friends gathered "in convivial wine-drinking," in an assembly which, we soon learn, has been organized by the king (*shāh*). Consoling as it may be, the thought of enthroning his beloved in private and the recollection of the royal drinking assembly in private will just not do, especially for someone who still remembers the privilege of having once been invited to one such by his sovereign. Of all those who have once been in the king's favor, he now realizes that he should not look down on one who has been reduced to a drunken beggar left to the tavern or an intoxicated rend or outlaw. The contemplation of his own lot gives rise to a new realization: he is not just missing getting drunk in the privacy of his own domicile; rather, he is missing that which he once had the privilege of experiencing and which only a king can provide: drinking openly and without fear to the tune of the harp and the flute in the assembly of the king and the nobles invited to his palace for the purpose. It is as if he too is asking for an assembly not too different from that which his predecessor by three centuries Manuchehri celebrated in his poem.

Following the theme of wine-drinking over the eleven-hundred-year life of Persian poetry in the larger Iranian culture and examining the nature and functions which Persian poets have assigned to the substance at the heart of it leaves us with the distinct impression that the rich and dynamic system of signification and communication underlying this aesthetic tradition has been used imaginatively and creatively over the centuries in response to diverse demands arising from ever-changing intellectual and emotional circumstances. From the simple metaphor of “daughter of grape” to the supreme symbol expressed in the phrase “mother of all evil,” from the catalyst of social interactions to the facilitator of profound spiritual transformations, wine has served as the lynch-pin of a system of poetic thought and expression that begins with contemplations of a worldly life of joy and camaraderie away from the din of society and culminates in the powerful yet silent transformer of souls, capable of refreshing the mind and curing the cares that human flesh is heir to and of preparing the bird of the soul to soar through unimaginable heights toward an ultimately unknowable deity. It has appeared as that which repels sleep and that which empowers humans to seek what lies forever beyond the reach of reason and intellect. It is at once eagerly sought passionately and it is to be avoided at all cost, a dangerous yet deeply tempting substance that can sooth or burn the soul. Through the ages, both in life and in literature, the mind-altering substance has lived up to its reputation to earn the appellation “fire-breeding liquid”.

