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# The Crisis of Identity in Rumi's "Tale of the Reed"<sup>1</sup>

## Firoozeh Papan-Matin

Hear the voice of the Bard!  
Who Present, Past, & Future, sees;  
Whose ears have heard  
The Holy Word  
That walk'd among the ancient trees

William Blake<sup>2</sup>

Jalal al-Din Rumi was born in Balkh in 1207 and died in Konya in 1273. A celebrated mystic and poet, he scarcely needs an introduction.<sup>3</sup> His exceptional achievements in mysticism and poetry, along with his intriguing relationship with Shams al-Din of Tabriz (d.1247), have kept him in the foreground of literary and mystical discussions all over the world.<sup>4</sup> Rumi's intimate relationship with Shams—a mysterious dervish whom he met in Konya in 1244—had a formative influence on his life and his poetry.<sup>5</sup> Rumi considered Shams to be the perfect image of the beloved and the supreme companion he had been seeking in his spiritual life. After the disappearance of Shams from his life, Rumi maintained intense relationships with two other companions, Salah al-Din Faridun Zarkub (d. 1258) and Husam al-Din Chelebi (d. 1284-85); Rumi assigned both of these men, respectively, to instruct his disciples. These friendships are important in understanding Rumi's work.<sup>6</sup> Rumi saw in these men a spiritual mirror for his own complex mystical experiences. This article will evaluate an instance of such complexities in a reading of "The Tale of the Reed" (*Nay Namih*).<sup>7</sup>

"The Tale of the Reed"—the well known opening thirty-five lines of the great Persian mystic *magnum opus*, the *Masnavi*—is the account of the separation of the lover, personified as the reed, from the Fatherland, the reed-bed, where it had belonged in the presence of God, the beloved. It has been argued that this prelude to the *Masnavi* captures the major themes that appear in the ensuing several thousand rhyming couplets. Considering the significance of *Nay Namih*, the central role of the reed in this poem becomes an important subject of inquiry. In other words, what the reed stands for in Rumi's life as well as in the life of the poem is an essential question in understanding both the *Nay Namih* and the *Masnavi*. This article will address this question within the context of separation and union between the lover and the beloved and will demonstrate how the exchanges between the lover and the beloved correspond to Rumi's transcendence in his relationship with Shams. Rumi chose a poetic medium for communicating a conscious recollection of a mystical state that he seems to have experienced with Shams. The metaphor of the reed and its relationship to the poetic narrator correspond to this relationship.

In *Nay Namih*, the cry of the reed permeates the poem with its song of ecstasy even as it recalls a fateful reality: an anxiety-inducing separateness that has marked the destiny of the reed. Alongside the voice of the reed, there is a poetic narrator who stands in curious affinity with the reed. As will be discussed below, the relationship between the voice of the reed and that of the poetic narrator accentuate the complexities involved in discussing the question posed earlier: the identity of the reed and its function in the life of the poem. Badi al-Zaman Furuzanfar, the renowned critic of Persian literature, considers the voice of the reed to be Rumi's Self, purged of his self. He states that in this poem, Rumi is filled with the sound of love or the beloved, be it Shams or Husam al-Din, both of whom Rumi considered to have been united with the divine.<sup>8</sup> Reynold A. Nicholson, like Furuzanfar, argues against the interpretation that takes the *nay* to be "the Most Exalted Pen," the prophet Muhammad, as Logos.<sup>9</sup> According to Nicholson, the personified reed is the soul of the deified perfect man, the disciple, Husam al-Din, who is one with the divine.<sup>10</sup> He further explains, the voice of the reed could be perceived as the soul of the poet himself who is filled with divine inspiration, singing the songs of the "deified" Perfect Men.<sup>11</sup>

While it is evident that the reed is profoundly symbolic in itself, this article concerns itself with the symbolism of the relationship between the poetic narrator and the reed. The dynamics between Rumi and his immediate muse and audience—Shams, Salah al-Din or Husam al-Din—add new complexities to understanding the *Nay Namih*. The traditional readings of *Nay Namih* have left in the margin the dynamics of the relationship between the voice of the reed and that of the poetic narrator who initiates the tale, summoning all to hearken to the reed:

Listen to the reed how it tells a tale, complaining of separations—  
Saying, "Ever since I was parted from the reed-bed, my lament hath  
caused man and woman to moan."<sup>12</sup>

As early as the second line in the poem, the voice of the reed is heard resonating through the voice of the poetic narrator. The former so dominates the scene of the poem that the poetic narrator has been left in the shadow as a mere tribune reverberating the truth. In the following, I shall demonstrate how the dramatic play of this choir of voices communicates the poet's fluctuation in and out of himself between two personified voices that relate to different realities: the world of the lover and that of the beloved. The exchanges between these two voices refer to Rumi's exalted mystical experiences with his companions.

The loss of one's self in the other, or one's voice in the voice of the other, as appears to be the case in the *Nay Namih*, is but a transient state. This subject is conveyed through the narrative structure of the poem. As mentioned above, in the *Nay Namih*, the ecstatic cry of the reed woven into the poem's structure is the most audible sound in the poem. It reduces the role of the poetic narrator to that of reporter. The latter subordinates himself to the dominant sound of the reed and admits the distinction between the realities that are depicted in the poem: Fatherland, where the reed has come from, juxtaposed against the state of exile, whence the narrator speaks. This literary device highlights the force and intensity of the experience that has overtaken the reed, whose state is a

metaphor for the states experienced by wayfarers on the mystical path. The rapturous trance that suddenly and unexpectedly conquers the heart of the mystic, absorbing him in the exalted presence of the beloved, so deifies the mystic that he experiences himself to be God, his own utterance (*shathiyat*) to be the voice of God. The mystic who undergoes this experience, however, does not in all cases bring back a conscious memory of this ecstasy. This anthropocentric affinity with God is condemned by some Muslim mystics who, once convinced of their own self-expression as God, considered this less ascetic path to the divine to be blasphemy.<sup>13</sup> In *Nay Namih*, Rumi's "deified manner of speaking" is remembered and articulated in the voice of a narrator whose consciousness incorporates the distinctions between this voice, personified as the reed, and himself as the narrator. To better understand the dynamics between these two personas, we must consider Rumi's relationship with Shams.

In his introductory chapter to *Maqalat-i Shams*, editor Muhammad Ali Muvahhid observes a break in Rumi's literary career: the period before Shams's departure from Konya, and the one after his death. Attributing Rumi's lyrical poems (*Ghazalliyat*) to the former and the *Masnavi* to the latter period, Muvahhid highlights the autobiographical aspect of these works.<sup>14</sup> He argues that these volumes of poetry reflect Rumi's experience of his beloved, Shams, as "an-other" who in the *Ghazalliyat* phase is sought outside of the lover and in the *Masnavi* period is born as a reality within Rumi's own self.<sup>15</sup> According to Annemarie Schimmel, Rumi's *Ghazalliyat* manifests the poet's association between words and the beloved.<sup>16</sup> The lyrical poetry in this collection, Schimmel argues, expresses the lover's wish to enjoy the nearness of the beloved through the "magic of words."

In the *Masnavi* phase, however, the beloved, Shams, is incarnated in the body of the lover, Rumi, after the violent death of the former—a plot involving Rumi's son Ala al-Din.<sup>17</sup> This second separateness, unlike the first one, fills Rumi with the desire for *sama*.<sup>18</sup> In *sama* the lover and the beloved approach each other with the anticipation of a unity fraught with impending separation. In a similar manner, the sound of the reed in *Nay Namih* foretells the separation that follows the union. Shams defines *sama* as the process by which the face of God becomes more apparent. He further explains that men who have gone past themselves leave other worlds in *sama*.<sup>19</sup> And Jan Rypka suggests that the mystic's whirling dance in *sama* depicts the "vain and desperate search for this mysteriously lost friend."<sup>20</sup> Accordingly, after Shams disappears from Rumi's life, he turns to *sama* and is inspired to write the *Masnavi*. Rumi's unavailing search to find Shams in the world around himself comes to a close when he learns to perceive and internalize as his own the soul and knowledge of Shams.<sup>21</sup> In other words, the inspiring fire that was Shams ceases to be outside of Rumi; accordingly, he comes to see himself both as the lover and the beloved.<sup>22</sup> In this regard, Muvahhid observes that the *Masnavi* is to be seen not as the "teachings" of Shams but rather as a combination of his thoughts and Rumi's own personal mystical experiences. Muvahhid's remarks recall the classical arguments that appear in all major analytical works on Rumi. The present reference to Muvahhid is, however, significant because his introduction to the text of the *Maqalat* precedes some statements by Shams on language, poetry, consciousness, and the

relationship of the lover and the beloved. At one point, Shams distinguishes himself from Rumi, saying:

Mulana has intoxication in love, but not consciousness in love. But I am intoxicated in love as well as conscious in love. I do not undergo that forgetfulness in intoxication. How dare the world veil me or be veiled from me?<sup>23</sup>

The forgetfulness referred to is that loss of self in the love of God, which induces intoxication. According to Evelyn Underhill, when the mystic says that he was not conscious of anything, he means that his consciousness was so changed that it was impossible for him to recognize and describe the joining with the divine in human speech.<sup>24</sup> In other words, the mystic associates language with a subjectivity that belongs in the realm of divisions and multiplicities. This dichotomized consciousness is contrasted with the ecstatic consciousness wherein the mystic becomes so merged with the beloved that he ceases to see himself other than as the godhead. And the “I,” to whom the enraptured mystic alludes, is God who is the only self worthy of selfhood. In the case of conscious inebriation, the wayfarer can describe this state in language. Shams’s claim of conscious inebriation conveys the permanent recollection of the deified consciousness in the corporeal state of being. Underhill refers to Plotinus’s *Sixth Ennead*<sup>25</sup> to indicate the connection between ecstasy and thought: “Since in this conjunction with Deity there were not two things, but the perceiver was one with the thing perceived, if a man could preserve the memory of what he was when he mingled with the Divine, he would have within himself an image of God.”<sup>26</sup> Thus, conscious inebriation is a state of mind beyond ecstasy wherein dualities are removed. During the ecstatic trance the lover, so used to the sight of the created world, is able to behold God with His own eyes.<sup>27</sup> In Shams, the ecstatic instant of his deification has turned into his permanent reality; his immersion in the consciousness of the beloved is so much a part of his identity that he is able to articulate it. Shams seems to imply that his self is so transformed that his consciousness on a “human” scale need not be abandoned in the interest of the divine consciousness: he sees himself to be the beloved.<sup>28</sup> Shams was that beloved who identified himself with God in having the attributes of wrath and of mercy, or separation and union.<sup>29</sup>

In this connection, Rypka emphasizes the affinities between Shams and Rumi’s ideas as expressed in the *Maqalat* and the writings of Rumi.<sup>30</sup> However, Shams’s remark in the *Maqalat*, that in contrast to Rumi his experience of ecstasy does not result in forgetfulness, could be perceived as his acknowledged point of distinction between them. This distinction was overcome after Shams had disappeared from the life of Rumi and the latter learned to appropriate the beloved as an aspect of his own personality. Following the precept that Rumi and Shams are eventually merged in the person of Rumi—*Masnavi* being taken as the poetic expression of this spiritual marriage—Shams, whom we directly meet in the *Maqalat*, could be viewed as the more desirable aspect of Rumi’s mystical personality. Thus, *Nay Namih* could be read as an assertion of the presence of Shams in the person of Rumi. However, this presence does not occupy all the space of his heart: Rumi, the lover, continues living in the shadow of Shams, the beloved. As discussed in the following, the deliberate shifts in the narrative voice of *Nay Namih*, along with the narrator’s pensive recollections of the reed’s cries of pain and ecstasy, highlight the far

and near aspects of a nostalgic affinity between the lover and the beloved. In *Nay Namih*, the biographical expressions of the relationship between the lover and the beloved provide the framework within which the reed's cry of yearning finds a structured presentation. *Nay Namih* comes to a close with the narrator's personal remark that the tales in *Masnavi* reflect his and his friends' state:<sup>31</sup>

O my friends, hearken to this tale: in truth it is the very marrow of our inward state. (l. 35)

This conclusion is admitted after an esoteric initiation into the poem, whereby a bosom torn with the passion of longing is summoned forth as the desired audience capable of apprehending the tale of separation and union. This concluding line could lead the reader to take the *Nay Namih* as a premeditated introduction to the *Masnavi*. Zarrinkub and Furuzanfar, relying on Aflaki's account of the biography of the master,<sup>32</sup> state that Rumi had written the first eighteen lines of *Nay Namih* in his own handwriting before he shared them with Husam al-Din, and the idea of composing the *Masnavi* occurred only later on.<sup>33</sup> This may be a valid approach to interpreting the poem, for there is an evident break in the poem after the eighteenth line, when the poem sways from its predominantly personal and ecstatic theme to a didactic one. Nicholson observes this division in his translation of the poem into English by leaving a gap between line eighteen and the rest of the poem.<sup>34</sup>

The concluding line of *Nay Namih* (line 35) invokes a select audience to listen to the ensuing tale. The eighteenth line, by contrast, asserts the narrator's skeptical view of language by remarking that the state of the "ripe" is beyond communication except among those who have matured in the fire of love:

None that is raw understands the state of the ripe: therefore my words must be brief. Farewell! (l. 18)  
O my friends, hearken to this tale: in truth it is the very marrow of our inward state. (l. 35)

The contrast between these two conclusions highlights the difference between the silent language of rapture and the articulated signs borrowed from the world of dualistic reference; language being among such signs. The allegorical tales of the *Masnavi*, accordingly, can be read as a medium for portraying Rumi's grand metaphor for separation and union: the eradication of all divisions and multiplicities through the cleansing fire of ecstasy. The aforementioned conclusions (lines 18 and 35) signify two kinds of discourse: one alluding to the state of the reed, and the other to that of the poetic narrator. The former evokes the realm of silence while the latter is an article of faith in the power of poetic imagination.

Shams refrained from writing. He even revered the person of the prophet above the Qur'an.<sup>35</sup> Shams explains his attitude towards writing when he states his preference for keeping the concepts alive and ever-changing in his imagination, rather than binding them in the stifling form of words. Notwithstanding his expressed skepticism towards writing, Shams shows a powerful concern for communication when his addressee is exclusively his lover. At one point in the *Maqalat*, Shams declares: "I tell secrets, I do not utter words. . . . I can say my secret to one in whom I do not see himself but see in him

me myself.”<sup>36</sup> Rumi, likewise, adheres to the inspired language of poetry in order to testify that an incommunicable ecstatic state, beyond time and space, simply is. In *Nay Namih*, the poetic narrator—his voice alternating between himself and the reed—seems in need of an audience to perceive his message and aid him in better expressing it, to ease his pain by hearing his message entirely without intruding upon it:

In every company I uttered my wailful notes, I consorted with the unhappy  
and with them that rejoice.  
Every one became my friend from his own opinion; none sought out my  
secrets from within me. (ll. 5-6)

Martin Buber relates “an-other,” most silent speech with the mystic’s urge for communication. He says this quiet language wants not to describe existence, but only to communicate it, only to say that it is.<sup>37</sup> In referring to this silent language, the poetic language turns into a metalanguage that conceives itself to be a sign of inarticulation. Language, in this capacity, turns against itself, commits suicide, in order to be reincarnated in silence. Accordingly, the most exalted image in *Nay Namih* proves to be the poetic vision of the fire whose silent burst of heat, creation, and annihilation keeps the poem forever bright with burning:

This noise of the reed is fire, it is not wind: whoso hath not this fire, may  
he be naught!  
'Tis the fire of Love that is in the reed, 'tis the fervour of Love that is in  
the wine.  
The reed is the comrade of every one who has been parted from a friend:  
its strains pierced our hearts. (ll. 9-11)

It is in light of this background that the voice of the reed is juxtaposed against that of the poetic narrator who illuminates the silent burst of fire. While being aware of the distinctions between the inebriated and the sober states of mind, Rumi’s narrator communicates a state beyond language, the memory of which is the silent fervor of the reed and the allegorical tales of the *Masnavi*.<sup>38</sup> In the *Nay Namih*, contemplation of silence is this speaking voice: it is silence that the poem asserts as its triumph in conveying the cry of the reed. In contrast to the written words, this silence becomes audible only in between the lines—as the breath of the *nay*, the fire that sets the poem ablaze, is made visible in the act of negating all else.<sup>39</sup>

Rumi’s conscious inebriation has enabled him to recollect the knowledge he obtained during his rapture (a state beyond words). As discussed earlier, in *Nay Namih*, this silent state is expressed through juxtaposing the dramatic voices that relate different realities. The opening lines of the poem, while establishing the themes of the *Masnavi*, convey a poetic ambiguity in identifying the narrative voice and the voice of the reed.<sup>40</sup> The poem begins by referring to the reed as a third person being quoted by the poetic narrator:

Listen to the reed how it tells a tale, complaining of separations—  
Saying, “Ever since I was parted from the reed-bed, my lament hath  
caused man and woman to moan.

I want a bosom torn by severance, that I may unfold (to such a one) the pain of love-desire. (ll. 1-3)

In this manner, the reed is introduced to an audience that is assumed to incorporate a broad range from those who understand the tale of the reed to those who do not. This lifelike spectrum of listeners is being addressed directly. Thus, different casts of characters are created in the first two lines of the poem among whom two distinct voices, modulating between rapture and reflection, are audible: the poetic narrator, in resonating the cry of the reed, in transforming its passionate ache for an ecstatic union, is approaching the voice of the reed in an attempt to be identified with it. The narrative voice is, simultaneously, pensive and declarative; it could at times be heard as a soliloquy. While conveying a didactic message, this voice is overwhelmed with awe and sorrow. The choice of the imperative verb *bishnu* (listen) in initiating the poem can be interpreted as a vocative cry directed to an audience other than the narrator, and/or an exclamation of awe uttered by the narrator in his interior monologue. In this latter case, the person of the narrator could be seen as his own exclusive audience, indifferent to anyone else, one whose solitude is filled with the recollections of an awe-inspiring memory. This voice, so vibrant with different shades of joy and sorrow, is juxtaposed against the enraptured voice of the reed, transliterated by the poetic narrator.

The narrative voice, in transforming the sound of the reed, conveys the impression that he has had an intimate and personal affinity with the *nay*'s outburst of longing. This point is made in the poem's second line, which begins with the word *kaz* (ever since):

Saying, "Ever since I was parted from the reed-bed, my lament hath caused man and woman to moan. (l. 2)

The compound conjunctive *kaz* is the transition from first-person to a direct quotation of an otherwise third-person narrator, the reed. Moreover, *kaz* establishes a causative sense of time that has marked the beginning of this separation and shall be prolonged until the instant when there may be an end to this exile: a bursting free from the chains of a temporal prison of "being." According to Nicholson, this line refers to the descent of the soul from the sphere of pure being and absolute unity, to which it belongs and would fain return. This "fall" from the realm of unity into the transient world of duality is one that has driven the *nay* into sorrow and despair. The *nay* is now in a state wherein his *nafir* (sharp cry) has caused men and women to wail.

The next line simultaneously identifies the adept audience and the theme of the reed's story:

I want a bosom torn by severance, that I may unfold (to such a one) the pain of love-desire. (l. 3)

Separation and the pain of longing, "the pain of love-desire," the intent of the reed's tale, so overwhelm the confines of the poem that the reed, the poem, and the poet could all be taken as means employed to allow the expression of a higher meaning: the reed, a hollow instrument filled and emptied with breath blown into it; the poem a sanctuary lit with the lamenting voice of the poet set ablaze; the body of the poet, like the reed, a vehicle, the host of a current that induces the poet to cry out the effects of a

mysterious love. It is in trying to communicate the force and the intensity of “the pain of love-desire” that the reed and its wail, the poet and his poem, and the body and the soul strive to overcome the dualities that hinder the ambitions of their desire.

The intentional ambiguity in identifying the first-person voice as the reed and/or the poetic narrator highlights the affinities between the two. The poetic narrator is not merely an observer recalling the voice of an-other: he and the reed have both partaken in this fierce ecstasy. Furthermore, this ambiguity could correspond to the narrator’s search for his apt reader. The poet appears to need someone who would pursue him upon this violently tainted path; the route of a journey turned sanguine with the stains of separation:

The reed tells of the Way full of blood and recounts stories of the passion  
of Majnún. (l. 13)

Upon this road the poet and his audience may be able to discover the similarities and the distinctions between the poet and the reed. The violence involved in this separation is echoed in the unheard sound of the blade that had once, for a hidden reason, cut the reed from the reed-bed, a sound that I believe is reproduced in the repeated sound of “sh” in the third line of the poem:

I want a bosom torn by severance, that I may unfold (to such a one) the  
pain of love-desire.

*Sinih khaham sharhi sharhi az faraq / ta biguyam sharh-i dard-i ishtiyaaq*  
(l. 3)

*Sharhi* (butchered, violently torn), the second *sharh-i* (tale, description of), and *ishtiyaaq* (yearning, passionately longing for) refer to the violent passion that permeates the poem. In this manner, the memory of the world of unity is brought into the foreground in light of a harsh separation. After all, the reed’s tale and/or complaint is inspired by separation.<sup>41</sup> In *Nay Namih*, the reed’s primary recollection of the world of unity is acutely focused on the instance when it was painfully detached from the reed-bed, a point communicated further in line three, quoted above, where *faraq* (separation) parallels *ishtiyaaq* (yearning) as they bring the two hemistiches to an end with the same glottal end-rhyme. The conditions of separation and ecstasy create a tenor that embraces both the temporal and the eternal instances of being: the reed/narrator cries out the moment when its embryonic self was cut off from the womb of unity, from the reed-bed. What follows from that moment on is a fall into subjectivity. Accordingly, the poem comes to declare:

Only to the senseless is this sense confided: the tongue hath no customer  
save the ear.

In our woe the days (of life) have become untimely: our days travel hand  
in hand with burning griefs.

If our days are gone, let them go!—’tis no matter. Do Thou remain, for  
none is holy as Thou art! (ll. 14-16)

The passage of time is a motion that belongs to the fallen world. In *Nay Namih*, the motion of the fire of love is brought into our time as the current that fills the hollow reed with new meanings; the reed’s rapturous burst of longing is the testament to this current. The coming together of the “time” of the lover and that of the beloved is thus the instance

of conscious inebriation. It is the juncture when the wayfarer reflects on the experience, remembers it, and tries to capture it in language. Beyond words, the experience and its remembrance stand for the coming together of indivisibility—beyond subjectivity, thought, and articulation—and division and multiplicity. This state has inspired Rumi to fashion *Nay Namih* in such a complex manner and by means of the alternations between the voices in the poem. Rumi extends his recollections of the ecstatic instance to his reader, saying:

This noise of the reed is fire, it is not wind: whoso hath not this fire, may  
he be naught!

'Tis the fire of Love that is in the reed, 'tis the fervour of Love that is in  
the wine. (ll. 10-11)

The voice that depicts these pictures belongs to the poetic narrator who assumes an omniscient point of view. He beholds the reed inflamed by love; he beholds how suddenly the brazen world of the reed is turned into gold. The reed's transmutation into the fire of love is an alchemic process laden with magic; this inspiring event has seized the poetic narrator with awe. The narrator is familiar with and recognizes the ingredients involved in this magical event; he identifies the sound of the reed to be fire and not wind, and its substance to be love's fervor. The poetic narrator thus perceives himself to be the adept witness to an occurrence that unceasingly captivates him with ever varying novelty.

From his omniscient stance, the narrator elaborates on the attributes of the *nay*, identifying it as the peerless enthusiast on the path of love:

Who ever saw a poison and antidote like the reed? Who ever saw a  
sympathiser and a longing lover like the reed?

*Hamchu nay zahri aw taryaqi ki did, hamchu nay damsaz aw mushtaqi ki  
did* (l. 12)

The poet's choice of the word *damsaz* is significant in this context. Nicholson has translated it as "sympathiser"; however, the range of potential meanings is lost in translation. *Damsaz* could also be read as a compound adjective made of *dam* and *saz*. *Dam* means breath, instant, lip, edge, blood, and a pipe used in goldsmithing that is blown in to fan the fire, and *saz* means a musical instrument or a derivative of the infinitive *sakhtan* (to make or produce). The fire that has filled the reed is the creative force that produces breath and blood. In this wonderful act of alchemy,<sup>42</sup> the cleansing force of desire, symbolized by fire, is forever blazing.<sup>43</sup> In *Nay Namih*, the transformed reed could be perceived as the mystical lover whom, Schimmel explains, appeared over and again as sulfur or dry kindling, ready to catch fire, and more frequently as a reed-bed that has been burnt up.<sup>44</sup> In this manner, the reed goes past itself while the narrator remains steady in his stance, carefully observing the metamorphosis of the reed. It is at this juncture of intimacy and individuation that the narrator refers to himself and the reed as "we" and he admits that the only "confidant" to this consciousness/sense is the one who is sense-less (*bihush*):

Only to the senseless is this sense confided: the tongue hath no customer  
save the ear. (l. 14)

The narrator comes to perceive himself as a vigilant participant in love and in ecstasy.

In this manner, in *Nay Namih*, rapture is being simultaneously apprehended from within the center of ecstasy as well as from without. Conscious inebriation is posed as the instance when the deified self and the “other” overlap in mutual conception. There, face to face, the consciousness of the deified self is incorporated and remembered by the enraptured man. Rumi had composed most of his verses in a state of rapture and trance; it is this state of joining with the divine that he communicates in the *Nay Namih*.<sup>45</sup> Having known and partaken in the divine, the whole concept of I-hood, of space and time, is suspended. Identity is thus discovered on the fateful crossroad of eternity and temporality, where the finite and the infinite grasp and greet each other. It is in this manner that *Nay Namih* is posed as a palpable evidence in the temporal world of dualities that incorporates this unique juncture of being and non-being or the worlds of the Fatherland and of exile. *Nay Namih* is that point of no return, that point of transmutation, where the *nay* defines itself as a nostalgic longing.<sup>46</sup>

As discussed earlier, the process of identification in the *Nay Namih* is analogous with the relationship between Rumi and Shams. In being separated from the beloved, Rumi seeks out and regenerates his own identity by means of poetic creation. Creativity, in this context, is associated with Rumi’s conscious inebriation whereby eternity is grasped in the present instance of the poem: the ecstatic infinitude emanates through the finite body of the words as the deified self finds its dwelling in a body fallen into subjectivity. The poetic narrator in the *Nay Namih* alternates between the ecstatic *nay* and the spectator. The tension between these two positions provides the drama, the metaphor of separation and union. The yearning inspired by separation is like fire that burns through the poem in the reed’s cry of longing for the beloved; this passion fills the lover’s emptied self with an illuminating consciousness. Rumi, the inebriated man/poet/mystic, has remembered and versified this experience in the body of the *nay* and the poetic narrator after he has come to internalize and to claim his beloved Shams as an aspect of his own identity.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This article is written in memory of Riza ‘Ali Khazini. May he be with the blessed.

<sup>2</sup> William Blake, “Introduction” to *Songs of Experience*, in David Perkins, ed., *English Romantic Writers* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1967), 57, ll. 1-5.

<sup>3</sup> Jalal al-Din Rumi was born in Balkh in Kharazmid Persia in 1207. His father, Bha al-Din Vallad, for political reasons left Balkh with his family when Jalal al-Din was twelve years old. The family settled in Konya where in 1244 Rumi met Shams al-Din of Tabriz. Their coming together had a formative influence on Rumi’s life and works.

<sup>4</sup> Franklin D. Lewis, *Rumi: Past and Present, East and West: The Life, Teaching and Poetry of Jalal al-Din Rumi* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000), 1-5.

<sup>5</sup> The exact date and circumstances of the death of Shams are an important subject of controversy in Rumi scholarship. Lewis provides a concise background on this topic, *ibid.* 185-93.

<sup>6</sup> Reynold Nicholson, *Rumi: Poet and Mystic* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1950), 20-22.

<sup>7</sup> Before turning to our discussion, I would like to call the reader's attention to the translation of *Nay Namih* in Reynold A. Nicholson, *The Mathnawi of Jalalu'ddin Rumi*, vol. 2. (London: Luzac & Co. Ltd., 1926), 5-6. Henceforth, all references to *Nay Namih* cite this source as Nicholson, *Mathnavi*.

In the Name of God the Merciful, the Compassionate.

1 / Listen to the reed how it tells a tale, complaining of separations—

2 / Saying, "Ever since I was parted from the reed-bed, my lament hath caused man and woman to moan.

3 / I want a bosom torn by severance, that I may unfold (to such a one) the pain of love-desire.

4 / Every one who is left far from his source wishes back the time when he was nited with it.

5 / In every company I uttered my wailful notes, I consorted with the unhappy and with them that rejoice.

6 / Every one became my friend from his own opinion; none sought out my secrets from within me.

7 / My secret is not far from my plaint, but ear and eye lack the light (whereby it should be apprehended).

8 / Body is not veiled from soul, nor soul from body, yet none is permitted to see the soul."

9 / This noise of the reed is fire, it is not wind: whoso hath not this fire, may he be naught!

10 / 'Tis the fire of Love that is in the reed, 'tis the fervour of Love that is in the wine.

11 / The reed is the comrade of every one who has been parted from a friend: its strains pierced our hearts.

12 / Who ever saw a poison and antidote like the reed? Who ever saw a sympathiser and a longing lover like the reed?

13 / The reed tells of the Way full of blood and recounts stories of the passion of Majnún.

14 / Only to the senseless is this sense confided: the tongue hath no customer save the ear.

15 / In our woe the days (of life) have become untimely: our days travel hand in hand with burning griefs.

16 / If our days are gone, let them go!—'tis no matter. Do Thou remain, for none is holy as Thou art!

17 / Whoever is not a fish becomes sated with His water; whoever is without daily bread finds the day long.

18 / None that is raw understands the state of the ripe: therefore my words must be brief. Farewell!

19 / O son, burst thy chains and be free! How long wilt thou be a bondsman to silver and gold?

20 / If thou pour the sea into a pitcher, how much will it hold? One day's store.  
 21 / The pitcher, the eye of the covetous, never becomes full: the oyster-shell is not filled with pearls until it is contented.  
 22 / He (alone) whose garment is rent by a (mighty) love is purged of covetousness and all defect.  
 23 / Hail, O Love that bringest us good gain—thou that art the physician of all our ills,  
 24 / The remedy of our pride and vainglory, our Plato and our Galen!  
 25 / Through Love the earthly body soared to the skies: the mountain began to dance and became nimble.  
 26 / Love inspired Mount Sinai, O lover, (so that) Sinai (was made) drunken *and Moses fell in a swoon*.  
 27 / Were I joined to the lip of one in accord with me, I too, like the reed, would tell all that may be told;  
 28 / (But) whoever is parted from one who speaks his language becomes dumb, though he have a hundred songs.  
 29 / When the rose is gone and the garden faded, thou wilt hear no more the nightingale's story.  
 30 / The Beloved is all and the lover (but) a veil; the Beloved is living and the lover a dead thing.  
 31 / When Love hath no care for him, he is left as a bird without wings. Alas for him then!  
 32 / How should I have consciousness (of aught) before or behind when the light of my Beloved is not before me and behind?  
 33 / Love wills that this Word should be shown forth: if the mirror does not reflect, how is that?  
 34 / Dost thou know why the mirror (of thy soul) reflects nothing? Because the rust is not cleared from its face.  
 35 / O my friends, hearken to this tale: in truth it is the very marrow of our inward state.

<sup>8</sup> Badi al-Zaman Furuzanfar, *Sharh-i Masnavi* (Tehran: Zavvar, 1989), 2-3.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>10</sup> Nicholson, *Rumi: Poet and Mystic*, 20-21. Nicholson explains: "He (Rumi) calls the *Mathnawi* 'the book of Husam' and likens himself to a flute on the lips of Husam al-Din, pouring forth 'the wailful music that he made.'" For a discussion of how Rumi saw Salah al-din and Husam al-Din as reflections of Shams, see Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 315. According to Schimmel, Rumi was drawn to Salah al-din and Husam al-Din because they manifested qualities that were found in Shams: "In many cases he addresses Husamuddin in terms that show that he too was considered a 'light of the sun,' another manifestation of the Sun of Tabriz"; compare with Zarrinkub, *Sirr-i Nay*, vol. 1 (Tehran: Intisharat Ilmi, 1986), 25.

<sup>11</sup> Nicholson, *Rumi: Poet and Mystic*, 18-21.

<sup>12</sup> See note 7 above. Compare with note 44 below.

<sup>13</sup> Ernst Arbman, *Ecstasy or Religious Trance*, vol. 2 (Stockholm: Bokforlaget, 1968), 482. Here, Junayd is referred to as one of the Muslim mystics who was awestruck by his own ecstatic identification with God and tried to justify this “sacreligious” act.

<sup>14</sup> Shams al-Din Muhammad Tabrizi, *Maqalat-i Shams*, ed. Muhammad Ali Muvahhid (Tehran: Intisharat-i ilmi-i danishgah-i sanati-i Tehran, 1978).

<sup>15</sup> Annemarie Schimmel, *As Through a Veil: Mystical Poetry in Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 89. According to Schimmel, after Shams was internalized by Rumi, Mulana adopted Shams’s name as his own *nom de plume* and praised him in terms that horrified the inhabitants of Konya: he called him *aql-i kull* and went so far as to wonder if he is God. He called Shams the radiance (*farr*) of Mustafa’s light and the intimate companion of Mustafa in the secrets of love.

<sup>16</sup> Annemarie Schimmel, *The Triumphal Sun: A Study of the Works of Jalaloddin Rumi* (London: East-West Publications, 1980), 53. She argues that in expressing longing, for instance, Rumi’s poetry reflects a movement analogous to his inner feelings; this movement may not abide by the rules of prosody. Such motions and emotions frequently overwhelm the confines of meter and rhyming techniques and adhere to syllabic stress.

<sup>17</sup> Schimmel, *As Through a Veil*, 86.

<sup>18</sup> Shams, *Maqalat*, 22. Compare with Schimmel, *As Through a Veil*, 85. Schimmel, unlike Muvahhid, argues that Rumi’s involvement in *sama* was equally intense in both periods of separation.

<sup>19</sup> Shams, *Maqalat*, 73.

<sup>20</sup> Jan Rypka, “Poets and Prose Writers of the Late Saljuq and Mongol Periods,” in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 5, ed. J. A. Boyle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 592. Rypka explains: “This whirling dance is the center-piece for all the rites of the Maulavi dervishes and was instituted by Maulavi himself. His longing and his anxiety made him a truly great poet; he identified himself with the vanished *mashuq*, and in so doing found him again spiritually. His poems are not sung by himself, they are sung by his teacher reembodyed in him.”

<sup>21</sup> Schimmel, *As Through a Veil*, 25. The author explains that for Rumi all the prophets are manifestations of the same soul; therefore, what he perceived and internalized as his own was the soul and knowledge of Shams.

<sup>22</sup> Shams, *Maqalat*, 28-29.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 80. The translation is mine.

<sup>24</sup> Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism* (New York: Meridian Books, 1974), 370.

<sup>25</sup> *Plotinus on the Beautiful: Being the Sixth Treatise of the First Ennead*, tr. Stephen MacKenna (Stratford: Shakespeare Head Press, 1914).

<sup>26</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 370.

<sup>27</sup> Martin Buber, *Ecstatic Confessions* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 35.

<sup>28</sup> Schimmel, *As Through a Veil*, 85. According to Schimmel, Shams had claimed the station of the beloved, a claim never made by any mystic before him. And in Rumi he found the perfect lover: one who could be consumed by the spiritual fire of their love.

<sup>29</sup> Shams, *Maqalat*, 74.

<sup>30</sup> Rypka, “Poets and Prose Writers,” 591.

<sup>31</sup> Abd al-Hussain Zarrinkub, *Justuju dar Tasavuf-i Iran* (Tehran: Amir Kabir, 1991), 276-7. Zarrinkub extends his interpretation of the reed to the allegorical tales of the *Masnavi*. He reads the first story of the *Masnavi*, “The King and the Handmaiden,” as an allegory for the relationship between Rumi and Shams and argues that in their relationship, Rumi learns to abandon the sciences and, with the help of the invisible doctor, Shams, turns to the world of abstract forms.

<sup>32</sup> Shams al-Din Ahmad al-Aflaki (d. 1360) is the author of *Manaqib al-Arifin* (Merits of the Gnostics). His work is based on oral and written records of the life of Rumi. For a detailed study of Aflaki and his work, see Lewis, *Rumi: Past and Present*, 249-64.

<sup>33</sup> Furuzanfar, *Sharh-i Masnavi*, 25. Compare with Zarrinkub, *Sirr-i Nay*, vol. 1, 34-35.

<sup>34</sup> See note 3 above.

<sup>35</sup> Shams, *Maqalat*, 12.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>37</sup> Buber, *Ecstatic Confessions*, 8.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 5. Buber defines silence and rapture, or the silence of rapture, as a unified state of emancipation wherein “one is removed from the commotion, removed into the most silent speechless heavenly kingdom—removed even from language.” Silence, he explains, takes the place of language as a sign that communicates this mute, solitary experience of unity. Upon his return to the world of multiplicity, the wayfarer ventures to recall and permanently possess that ecstatic trance by describing it in words. However, the consciousness wherein he has retained this experience differs from memory as he knows it in the act of creativity. Silence is compromised—but only for the moment—by language and the act of expression when the subjective mind of the mystic steps outside of the ecstatic experience in order to observe and articulate that experience. But just as the traveler knows that the map is not the territory, the poet knows the limitations of his craft. And one of the finest limitations is that the territory is undamaged by even the crudest of maps.

<sup>39</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 366-7. Underhill defines the mystics’ greatest creations as translations to us of something they have partaken of in the instant of ecstatic union with the “great life of the All.”

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 318-27. These dramatic voices refer to different aspects of the mystic’s ecstatic experience. Quiet and rapture, according to Underhill, are among such states that are expressed in the form of paradox. An outcome of these experiences is the mystic’s self-surrender to love. This can be perceived as an active renewal of the self and not merely a self-abandonment. Referring to St. Catherine’s *Divine Dialogue*, Underhill further explains the mystic’s subjective account of the ecstatic union.

<sup>41</sup> Whether the reed's tale is a complaint or merely a tale remains a point of dispute both in the analysis and in the translation and editing of the poem.

<sup>42</sup> See Schimmel, *As Through a Veil*, 106, for a discussion of purification through fire and allusions to the alchemic vocabulary in ancient rites and mystical literature.

<sup>43</sup> The fire of love fills the reed at the same time as its fervour brings the wine to maturity:

'Tis the fire of Love that is in the reed, 'tis the fervour of Love that is in the wine.  
(l. 10)

The transmutation that is alluded to here is discussed by mystics as a process or creativity. Hujviri, for instance, sees intoxication with the wine of love to be caused by observing God in creation. Hujviri describes mystical ecstasy in its highest and purest spiritual form as a state of "sobriety." He further explains that there are two kinds of intoxication: with the wine of love (caused by observing God in the creation) and with the cup of love (contemplating the essence of God). Arberman, *Ecstasy or Religious Trance*, 490.

<sup>44</sup> Schimmel, *Triumphal Sun*, 106.

<sup>45</sup> Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 316.

<sup>46</sup> Schimmel, *Triumphal Sun*, 239-42. According to Schimmel, in Rumi's cosmology, *adam* (non-being) entails both being and non-being: it is both *fana* and *baqa*. Schimmel argues that *adam* goes even deeper than *fana*; it is the abyss of Divine Life.