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RÜMİ'S VIEW OF THE IMAM HUSAYN

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The martyrdom of the Imam Ḥusayn can hardly be called a major theme of Rūmî's works; in over 50,000 couplets he refers to it less than twenty times. Nevertheless, these few lines are sufficient to suggest how the events of Karbalā' were viewed not only by Rūmî, this great representative of the Ṣūfī tradition, but also by his listeners, who constituted a pious cross-section of Islamic society.

The first thing one notes is that it was sufficient for Rūmî to mention one of three words to conjure up the image of Ḥusayn's martyrdom for his listeners: Ḥusayn, Karbalā', 'Āshūrā' Yazīd and Shimr had a similar evocative power. There was no need for Rūmî to describe the tragedy to a Muslim public, since everyone was already familiar with it; even among Sunnīs, it must have been part of the Islamic lore that was commonly called upon—especially in the context of popular preaching—to drive home points about good and evil, martyrdom, injustice, and similar themes. There is, of course, nothing surprising in this: scholars have often remarked on the indelible imprint left in the Muslim awareness by the Imam Ḥusayn's martyrdom. What should perhaps be noted is that the name Ḥusayn, along with the other words mentioned above, functioned to call up a whole set of images, just as, for example, it is sufficient for Rūmî to mention the name Abraham for his listeners to think of Nimrod and the fire that turned into a rosegarden; numerous other examples could also be cited.
One might ask about the sources of Rumi’s information concerning Husayn, but this would be like asking where he learned about Islam. Nevertheless, one can say that among Sufi poets that were known to have been read by Rumi, Sanai’i (d. 525/1131) employs the terms Husayn and Karbalâ as poetic images in much the same manner that Rumi does, while ‘Attar (d. 618/1221) apparently does not refer to him except in the context of panegyrics on the Prophet and the first few caliphs (e.g., in his Mosâbat-nâma).

Sanai’i invokes the name of the Imam Husayn either to stress the necessity of suffering and tribulation in the practice of one’s religion, or to point out that the saints—the men of God—are those who have experienced the death of their individual selves. In one instance he compares Husayn, Yazid, and Shimr to contrary forces working within the souls of men, and here, as in the first two instances, parallels are found in Rumi’s poetry.

For Rumi, love for God is the heart and soul of Islam. Certainly the ‘forms’ (‘arâqî) of our acts and religious practices are important, but they are given values by the ‘meanings’ (ma’âlî) which animate them. Thus, for example, when asked if anything is more important for Islamic practice than the ritual prayer (salât), Rumi replies that the animating spirit (jâmî) of the prayer is better, just as faith (imân) is more excellent. Faith must be continuous, whereas the prayer is performed at five different times during the day. The prayer can be omitted for a valid excuse, but faith can never be omitted. Faith without prayer has certain benefits, whereas prayer without faith is hypocritical and useless. Finally, faith is the same in all religions, while the form of prayer in each is different.

Were Rumi to be asked this question in more general terms, i.e., ‘Is anything more important than the religion of Islam itself?’ I think he would answer that love for God is so, since all these outward forms of ritual and devotion, all the teachings and practices that make up Islam, exist for the sake of that love. This is not to suggest that the ‘forms’ are without importance—far from it; the ‘meaning’—love—cannot exist without its outward supports. But one must not fall into the error of thinking that the doctrines, practices, and outward forms are their own raison d’être, for ‘prayer without faith is useless’. As Rumi remarks:

If the exposition of meanings were sufficient, the creation of the world would be vain and useless.

Religion is your Husayn, while desires and hopes are pigs and dogs—yet you kill the first through thirst and feed these two. How can you keep on cursing the wicked Yazid and Shimr? You are a Shimr and a Yazid for your own Husayn!

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If love for God were only thought and meaning, the form of fasting and prayer would not exist.

The gifts that lovers exchange are naught in relation to love except forms,

1. So that the gifts may give witness to the love hidden within.

The forms of religion, then, are the necessary concomitants of the meaning of religion, which, for Rūmī, is love:

My religion is to live through love—life through this spirit and body is my shame.7

The distinguishing feature of Rūmī's 'Religion of Love' is that it negates the reality of 'everything other than God' (agḥyār) with the sword of the shahāda: 'There is no god but God.'

The joy and heartache of the lovers is He, the wages and salary for their service He.

Were they to be contemplated other than the Beloved, how would that be Love? That would be idle infatuation.

Love is that flame which, when it blazes up, burns away everything except the Beloved.

It drives home the sword of 'no god' in order to slay other than God.

Consider carefully: after 'no god,' what remains?

There remains 'but God'; the rest has gone.

Bravo, oh great, idol-burning Love!6

The chief 'idol' or 'other' that must be negated on the Path of Love is the seeker's own self: 'The mother of all idols is your own ego.'9

You are God's lover, and God is such that when He comes, not a single hair of you will remain.

Before His glance a hundred like you are annihilated.

Is it that you are in love with your own negation, sir?

7 Mathnawi, VI, 4059.
8 Idem, V, 586–590.
9 Idem, I, 772.
abandonment of personal wishes and sensual desires. This is the Greater Holy War (jihi'd-i akbar).\(^{13}\)

If Husayn is a model worthy to be emulated, it is not because he was killed by villains—this goes without saying. What is truly noteworthy about his life was his victory in the Greater Holy War; only by virtue of his spiritual greatness do the events that led to his physical martyrdom have meaning. The emulation of him that is encumbent upon his followers is then engagement in the Greater Holy War.

Why do you sit there with your own thoughts?

If you are a man, go to the Beloved!

Do not say, 'Perhaps He does not want me.'

What business has a thirsty man with such words?

Does the moth think about the flames?

For Love's spirit, thinking is a disgrace.

When the warrior hears the sound of the drum,
at once he is worth ten thousand men!

You have heard the drum, so draw your sword without delay!

Your spirit is the sheath of the all-conquering Dhu'l-Faqâr!

You are Husayn at Karbala', think not of water!

The only 'water' you will see today is a sword of the first water!\(^{14}\)

But in order to attain the Kingdom of Love a man must first suffer the pain of separation from his Beloved. For the more he understands the nature of his goal, the more he will understand the depth of his own inadequacy.

Whoever is more awake has greater pain,
whoever is more aware has a yellower face.\(^{15}\)

Nevertheless, the pain that the lover suffers always attracts him toward the object of his love.

Every heartache and suffering that enters your body and heart pulls you by the ear to the Promised Abode.\(^{16}\)

\(^{13}\) *Fiki mafâghi*, p. 130; Discourses, pp. 140–41.

\(^{14}\) *Kulliyât*, vs. 3656–62.

\(^{15}\) *Mathnawi*, I, 629.

\(^{16}\) *Kulliyât*, vs. 35487.
because here he is looking at the good news of joy and union which are announced by the Imam's spiritual victory and which are the meaning beyond the form of his outward suffering:

The spirit of a sultan has escaped from a prison.
Why should we tear our clothes and bite our fingers?

Since he was the king of religion,
his breaking of the bonds was a time of joy,
For he sped toward the pavilions of good fortune
and threw off his fetters and chains.22

In conclusion, let me quote two more of Rūmī's ghazals, which can serve to summarize the Imam Ḥusayn's significance as pictured in Rūmī's works:

Where are you, martyrs of God,
you who have sought affliction
on the plain of Karbalā'?

A stranger, a poet,
arrived at Aleppo on the day of 'Ashūrā'
and heard all that lamentation....
He went along asking questions in his search:
'What is this sorrow?'
'For whom are you mourning?....'
Someone said to him,
'Hey, are you mad? Are you not a Shi'ite?
Are you an enemy of the Family?
'Don't you know that it is the day of 'Ashūrā',
a day of mourning
for a soul who was greater than a generation?....'
The poet replied,
'True, but where are the days of Yazid?
When did this tragedy occur!
How long the news has taken to reach you here!
The eyes of the blind have seen that loss!
The ears of the deaf have heard that story!
Have you been asleep until now
that you have just begun to tear your clothes in mourning?
Then mourn for yourselves, oh sleepers,
for this heavy sleep of yours is a terrible death!
The spirit of a sultan....'

22 Mathnawi, VI, 797-99.

Rūmī and the Imam Ḥusayn

Where are you, light-spirited lovers,
you who fly better
than the birds in the sky?

Where are you, kings of the heavens,
you who have found the door
that leads outside the circling spheres?

Where are you,
you who have been delivered from spirit and place?
Indeed, does anyone ask of the intellect, 'Where are you?'

Where are you,
you who have broken the door of the prison
and given freedom to the debtors?

Where are you,
you who have opened the door to the treasury,
you who possess the wealth of poverty?

For some time now all of you have been swimming
in that Ocean of which this world is but the foam.
The forms of the universe are but the Ocean's foam—
if you, oh listener, are a man of purity,
pass beyond these bubbles!

These words are but the picture of my heart's bubbling—
if you are one of us,
leave aside the picture and go to the heart.
Rise from the east,
O Sun of Tabrīz,
for you are the root
of the root
of the root of every radiance.23

In the fire of its yearning, my heart keeps up its cries,
hoping that a welcoming call will come to it
from the direction of union.

My heart is Ḥusayn and separation Yazid—
my heart has been martyred two hundred times
in the desert of torment and affliction (karb-o-balā').

23 Kulliyāt, ghazal no. 2707.
Outwardly made a martyr, in the unseen world it has gained life—
in the eyes of the enemy it is a prisoner,
in the Void, a king.

Dwelling in the paradise of union with the Friend,  
it has been delivered from the depths of hunger's prison 
and freed from the cheap and the dear.

Were the root of its tree not well nourished in the Unseen,  
why are the blossoms of its union open for all to see?

Silence! Speak from the direction of your awareness.  
For the Universal Intellect is asking you,  
"Will you not understand?" (2: 44, etc.).

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ELEGY (MARTHIYA) ON ĤUSAYN:  
ARABIC AND PERSIAN

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I propose to give here an account neither of the development, nor 
of the themes, of the elegy on Ĥusayn—in Arabic or Persian—nor 
of the outstanding poets of elegy—the literature in both these 
languages is too vast for that, and spread out over too great a 
period. Rather, I would like to give some idea of the place of these 
marāthī in literary and religious tradition, while giving in 
translation some examples of elegy on Ĥusayn which should serve 
for those unfamiliar with these languages to form an idea of the 
beauty and effectiveness of this type of poetry.

I should warn English-speakers that my translations, in one 
essential respect, do not bear much resemblance to the originals. 
The Arabic and Persian poetical traditions, at least until very 
recently (only a few decades ago), required adherence to strict 
rhyme patterns—often monorhyme—and strict quantitative metre. 
These things are not only nearly impossible to reproduce in our 
English language, but also undesirable. It is necessary to imagine 
that the examples I give had in their original a very regular rhythm, 
a rhythm which could also be important for ritual purposes, for 
instance, in religious processions. If the conceits used are sometimes 
also a little difficult for us to understand immediately, the ideas 
expressed, and the effect, are, I think, universal.

The tradition of elegiac poetry known in Arabic as marthiya had 
its roots, as regards themes as well as form, in pre-Islamic times.

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24 *Idem,* ghazal no. 230.