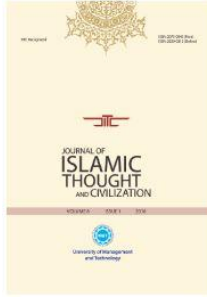


Volume 8, Issue 1



# Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization (JITC)

Volume 8, Issue 1, Spring 2018

ISSN: 2075-0943, eISSN: 2520-0313

Journal DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32350/jitc>

Issue DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32350/jitc.81>

Homepage: <https://www.umat.edu.pk/jitc/home.aspx>

Journal QR Code:



Article:

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Author(s):

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Online

Spring 2018

Published:

Article DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.32350/jitc.81.03>

Article QR  
Code:



Iftikhar Shafi

To cite this  
article:

Shafi, Iftikhar. "Romancing the Sufi: Persian Sufi poetry  
under the Western Gaze." *Journal of Islamic  
Thought and Civilization* 8, no. 1 (2018): 40–59.

[Crossref](https://doi.org/10.32350/jitc.81.03)

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A publication of the  
Department of Islamic Thought and Civilization  
School of Social Science and Humanities  
University of Management and Technology  
Lahore

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## Romancing the Sufi: Persian Sufi Poetry under the Western Gaze

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### Abstract

The paper presents an argument against the problematic comparison of the Sufi poetry with Romanticism that is found among some of the most noted comparatists. It emphasizes the need to put both discourses within their corresponding traditional provenances for comparative purposes. The paper is divided into three sections. The first section traces some major milestones in the history of Western reception of the Persian Sufi poetry while questioning the hypothetical subsuming of the Sufi literary tradition, along with the Romantic, under the Platonic and the Neo-Platonic discourses. The second section deals with the religious provenance of Romanticism and its relationship with the Islamic tradition. The study maintains that it is the Islamic tradition that provides the theoretical framework for the Sufi literary practice. Finally, based upon the theoretical discussion in the first two sections, the last section of the paper elaborates the underlying divergences between some apparently similar notions in *Tasawwuf* and Romanticism through closer reading of selected passages from Rumi, Keats, and Wordsworth.

**Keywords:** Persian Sufi poetry, romanticism, Western gaze, Islamic Tradition, Rumi, Keats

### Romancing the Sufi

The term “gaze” in the title of my essay refers to a certain mode of seeing, to a “theory,” if we take the term theory in its original sense of “seeing.” Since its initial theorization in the mid-seventies in the context of film studies, it has been adopted in various critical contexts ranging from Lacanian psychoanalysis to postcolonial theory, while retaining its original sense of a view that tends to project the observed object in significant ways. In the context of the Western appropriation of the Persian Sufi poetry, as this study argues, it could seemingly take the form of romancing, that is, of a certain *courting* of the Sufi literary creativity in terms of Romanticism. One may perhaps even say that it was basically through the mediation of the Romantics, or at least through the scholarship during the rise of the Romantic theory in the eighteenth century, that the West came to be acquainted with the Persian Sufi poetry for the first time. Franklin D. Lewis tells us that the “Early European translations of Persian literature made Rūmī’s contemporary, S‘adī (d. 1292), whose humanist ethos was seen to share in the spirit of Enlightenment, a figure of admiration for thinkers like Voltaire and Emerson. But the first Persian poet truly to find a home in European imagination was Hafez (d. 1390),

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feliculously presented to the English public by Sir William Jones (1746-94).<sup>1</sup> He also mentions Annemarie Schimmel's work *Friedrich Rückert: Lebensbild and Einführung in sein Werk* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1987) in which Schimmel traces the influence particularly of Rūmī on German Romanticism. As far as the American Transcendentalism is concerned, Lewis points out that the "Persian lyric poetry was transported on the wings of German Romanticism directly to the New World, where it materialized its transcendental form in the 1840s."<sup>2</sup>

Beginning in the eighteenth century, the history of the Western gaze at the Sufi poetry through the lens of Romanticism runs through the nineteenth century down to the recent times. Ian Almond, for instance, associates Nietzsche's (1844 – 1900) appreciation of Islam and its corresponding aesthetics, especially in case of Hafiz, with Nietzsche's growing appreciation of Romanticism:

Just as Islam is a Semitic religion — but nevertheless an *affirmative* one, so Hafiz is presented to us not just as a Romantic, but as an affirmative example of Romanticism. Nietzsche's own definition of Romanticism as the 'consequence of dissatisfaction with reality' is, in part, a response to Schopenhauerian pessimism. The Romantic is someone whose gaze is constantly averted, usually backwards, away 'from himself and his world.' Nevertheless, as late as 1886 we find Nietzsche discerning two ambiguous elements within Romanticism: a desire for destruction and change, and a parallel desire for eternity and being. To this second category belong Rubens, Goethe and Hafiz, for whom art stems 'from gratitude and love.' The vein in which Nietzsche speaks of Hafiz here is the same in which he speaks of the 'rare and exquisite treasures of Moorish life'; Hafiz is associated with this-worldly joy, a deification of the mundane, the transformation of the here-and-now, without succumbing to the Romantic weakness for deferral and postponement. In other words, Hafiz forms the 'acceptable' face of Romanticism, just as Islam forms the acceptable face of Semiticism.<sup>3</sup>

Even before Nietzsche, another major philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) is seen to have admired Islam and its literary tradition manifested through the Persian Sufi poets via Romanticism. "Present in the bud in Hegel's thought" as Gerret Stuenbrink in his study of Hegel's interpretation of Islam points out "the Romantic enthusiasm for mysticism, including Islamic Sufism, as the internationale of all religion and philosophy, is a returning phenomenon in modern European history."<sup>4</sup> Gerret believes that Hegel's "admiration for Islam is caused by influence of Romantic thinkers like Herder, by the translation work done by the Romantics in Germany and by Goethe's appropriation of Islamic poetry in his West-Eastern *Diwan* Hegel refers to."<sup>5</sup> Gerret

<sup>1</sup>Franklin D. Lewis, *Rūmī, Past and Present, East and West, The Life, Teachings and Poetry of Jalal al-Din Rūmī* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000), 529.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 569-70.

<sup>3</sup>Ian Almond, *The New Orientalists, Postmodern Representations of Islam from Foucault to Baudrillard* (NY: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 20-21.

<sup>4</sup>Gerret Stuenbrink, "A Religion after Christianity? Hegel's Interpretation of Islam between Judaism and Christianity," in *Hegel's Philosophy of the Historical Religions*, ed. Bart Labuschagne, Timo Sloomweg (Brill: 2012), 240.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 225.

considers Hegel's "dynamic interpretation of Rūmī" as a manifestation of the "Romantic strand in Hegel's thought." Along with Hegel, Gerret also considers Goethe's "transition from classicism to Romanticism in his *Diwan*, in his admiration for non-Western and non-classicistic literature."<sup>6</sup>

The twentieth century Western scholarship shows similar trends of appropriating the Sufi discourse in general and particularly the Persian Sufi poetry in Romantic terms. Using the term "creative imagination" to explore mystical experience in the Sufism of Ibn Arabī, Henry Corbin (1903-1978) readily clarified that he was not "dealing with imagination in the usual sense of the word: neither with fantasy, profane or otherwise, nor with the organ which produces imaginings identified with the unreal; nor...with what we look upon as the organ of esthetic creation."<sup>7</sup> But when he explains the Imagination as "an absolutely basic function, correlated with a universe peculiar to it, a universe endowed with a perfectly 'objective' existence and perceived precisely through the Imagination"<sup>8</sup> one is reminded of Coleridge's epistemological context in the *Biographia Literaria* within which he couches his notion of imagination. Corbin uses the phenomenological view of man's experience "of his relationship to the world without reducing the objective data of this experience to data of sense perception or limiting the field of true and meaningful knowledge to the mere operations of the rational understanding."<sup>9</sup> It is basically through such a view that "the Imagination (or love, or sympathy, or any other sentiment) *induces knowledge*, and knowledge of an 'object' which is proper to it, no longer smacks of paradox."<sup>10</sup> Despite the fact that Corbin does not mention Romanticism directly in his discussion of the Imagination he associates with Sufism, it may not be farfetched to argue for the Romantic echoes that reverberate in Corbin's phenomenological descriptions. Modern studies of Romanticism also see the notion of imagination that formulates the Romantic view of art not simply as an organ which produces imaginings but as "a special mode of knowing" that joins "subject and object in an act analogous to God's creative act."<sup>11</sup> Such modern views of Romanticism, as that of Jack Jacobs, legitimize the possibility of a "dialogue between phenomenology and Romantic poetry" and argue for "a Romantic reduction of consciousness, which shares some significant traits with Husserl's phenomenological reduction."<sup>12</sup> Although

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 239.

<sup>7</sup>Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn Arabi*, trans. Ralph Manheim (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), 3.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Hazard Adams, (ed.), *Critical Theory since Plato* (NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971, 1992), 468.

<sup>12</sup>Jack Jacobs, "Phenomenology and Revolutionary Romanticism," in *Analecta Husserliana, The Yearbook of Phenomenological Research*, vol. LXXV, *The Visible and the Invisible in the Interplay between Philosophy, Literature and Reality*, Anna-Teresa Tymienieka (ed.), (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 117.

Corbin considers it “advisable to free the intentions of the Imagination from the parenthesis in which a purely phenomenological interpretation encloses them” in order to relate it to the spiritualist world view, it is still this phenomenological/Romantic imagination that becomes the starting point for his discussions of Sufism.

Following Corbin, in more recent years there have been others who have more unreservedly connected Romanticism to the Sufi literary tradition in general, and perhaps for his relatively recent rise in popularity in the West, with Rūmī in particular. Leonard Lewisohn, for instance, treats the Romantics and the Sufis together in a highly problematic manner. Contradicting the existing historical evidence, first of all Lewisohn binds together Romanticism and Sufism through the Platonic and the Neoplatonic tradition, calling both, the Romantic and the Sufi, “Platonic poetics”:

The fraternity of Poetic Genius between the Sufis and Romantics is not only animated by the metaphysics of the Imagination, as Henry Corbin’s researches have shown, but grounded in the mutually shared Platonism and Neoplatonism nurturing both poetic traditions, not to mention many similar metaphysical worldviews, cosmogonies, theoteric, and ethical doctrines that Christianity and Islam hold in common and which transcend their exoteric theological divergences...<sup>13</sup>

Such naïve “transcendence” from the “exoteric theological divergences” between what Lewisohn would call the “Christian” Romanticism and the Muslim Persian Sufism, made possible by the nurturing of both traditions by Platonism and Neoplatonism, appears with an acknowledgement of the fact that, there is far less known about the literary history of the Platonic tradition in medieval Islam than there is about it in Christianity...not one single Persian Sufi poet has ever directly quoted from a Platonic dialogue to my knowledge...“It remains difficult to say just how much of Plato, whether in integral translation or in epitomes,” F. E. Peters underlines, “the medieval Muslim actually possessed. No Arabic version of a Platonic dialogue has ever been preserved.” This stands in direct contrast to the situation found among the late eighteenth - and the early nineteenth century English Romantics, nearly all of whom were immersed in the actual study of Plato’s dialogues and studied him in the original Greek.<sup>14</sup>

But the fact that there is no direct scholarly and historical evidence to suggest the influence of Platonism and Neoplatonism on the Sufi poets (in fact there is considerable evidence to suggest the contrary through Rumi’s and many other Sufis’ revulsion to philosophy) is abruptly repressed by another “fact”:

Yet the fact remains that despite the difference in the reception-history of Plato and in the Christian West and Muslim Persia (which no one should overlook when attempting a comparative understanding of these civilizations), *Plato’s thought and Neoplatonism are the most important*

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<sup>13</sup>Leonard Lewisohn, “English Romantics and Persian Sufi Poets, A well-Spring of Inspiration for American Transcendentalists,” in *Sufism and American Literary Masters*, ed. Mehdi Aminrazavi (NY: State University of New York Press, 2014), 15.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 15-16.

*part of the mutual philosophical heritage shared by these Christian Romantic and Muslim Persian Sufi Poets and mystics.*"<sup>15</sup>

Despite acknowledging the importance of historical divergences regarding the relationship between Romanticism and Sufism and the Platonic and Neoplatonic traditions, Lewisohn ignores taking any account of such a history in the Sufi case (he does talk about the romantic relationship of the Romantics with Plato in detail) and by force brings about the Platonic and Neoplatonic intervention into Sufism.

Such critical contradictions are also observable in Lewisohn's use of the theoretical framework for his comparative study of Romanticism and Sufism. First, he rejects Northrop Frye's archetypal approach to "make any valid comparisons between Western Romantics and the Sufis" since he thinks that this approach involves the "study of literary symbols as part of a whole" and hence may open up the possibility of exposing significant divergences and differences beneath the apparent similarities among the two poetic traditions. But he suddenly seems to realize (almost as an afterthought) that on occasions even the archetypal strategy may work (the present study does not deny but only seeks to qualify and condition such a possibility, hence calling Romanticism "potentially Muslim" in its aspirations).<sup>16</sup>

In any case, despite offering some help the archetypal approach does not look to be good enough probably because it may be a potential threat to Lewisohn's own critical predilections. Having given a "hypo-critical" send-off to the archetypal approach (he keeps saluting the Platonic and the Neoplatonic provenances of both Romanticism and Sufism throughout the discussion), he takes a fancy rather to Frye's anagogic criticism whereby one can "transcend all civilization-specific and ethnocentric interpretations of literature and discern the 'universal symbols' underlying the exoteric literary archetypes."<sup>17</sup> The universe of anagoge, as Lewisohn quotes Frye, is not be "contained within any actual civilization or set of moral values,"<sup>18</sup> and then he goes on to observe that "on the anagogic level the theological, religious and cultural distinctions that otherwise separate the Persian Sufi from the English Romantic poets evaporate."<sup>19</sup>

But where will the vapours go? One can always ask. Isn't it possible that the vapours pour down from the sky as rain, a metaphor that Rūmī uses to distinguish and discriminate between traditions, as spring-time and autumnal? This discussion the study intends to take up shortly, in a way to test its legitimacy against Frye's own idea that "If any literary work is 'emotionally depressing' there is something wrong with either the

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 17.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 17-18.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 19.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 20.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 22.



writing or the reader's response."<sup>20</sup> If the anagogic approach sees literature (in the words of Frye quoted by Lewisohn) as "existing in own universe, no longer a commentary on life or reality, but containing life and reality in a system of verbal relationships," then this is precisely the strategy the present study seeks to employ in its comparison between the Romantic and the Sufi literary traditions, namely a close verbal analysis of the texts to trace parallel structures of meanings, to explore the anagogic compatibility of the symbols, and to seek the religious provenances of the two discourses, since Frye declares (as quoted by Lewisohn himself) at this (anagogic) phase for the poet "only religion or something as infinite in its range as religion, can form an external goal."<sup>21</sup>

Lewisohn through his self-contradictory comparative strategy seems to "intervene" in a tradition of hypo-criticism that ironically goes back to Romanticism itself through Frye. Unluckily for Lewisohn, Frye himself does not seem to consider Romanticism as admissible to either the archetypal or the anagogic approaches, rather he thinks that traditions such as Romanticism can better be accounted for by the more social, cultural, psychological and biographical approaches, all the approaches that against Frye's own critical tendency tend to submit *mythos* to *logos*:

Social and cultural history...will always be a part of the context of criticism...The same is true for relation of psychology to criticism. The first and the most striking unit of poetry larger than the individual poem is the total work of the man who wrote the poem. Biography will always be a part of criticism, and the biographer will naturally be interested in his subject's poetry as a personal document, recording his private dreams, associations, ambitions, and expressed and repressed desires. Studies of such matters form an essential part of criticism. I am not of course speaking of the silly ones, which simply project the author's own erotica, in a rationalized clinical disguise, on his victim, but only of the serious studies which are technically competent both in psychology and in criticism, which are aware how much guesswork is involved and how tentative all the conclusions must be.

Such an approach is easiest, and most rewarding, with what we have called thematic writers of the low mimetic—that is, chiefly, the Romantic poets, where the poet's own psychological processes are often part of the theme.<sup>22</sup>

But a curious contradiction appears when Frye, towards his later years, is reported to have admitted that his own criticism is "entirely Romantic" because he has learned everything he knows from Blake. Frye's own effort at making a coherent body of criticism out of a tradition of contradictions, namely Romanticism, can be seen in the remark he made in response to Paul de Man's *Rhetoric of Romanticism*: "most Romantic-centered critics have one figure that they use as a Virgilian guide through its

<sup>20</sup>Northrop Frye, "Anatomy of Criticism," in *Critical Theory since Plato*, ed. Hazard Adams, 1057.

<sup>21</sup>Lewisohn, "English Romantics and Persian Sufi Poets," 22.

<sup>22</sup>Frye, "Anatomy of Criticism," in *Critical Theory since Plato*, 1065.

*contradictory* mazes, and for de Man that figure is Rousseau” (my Italics).<sup>23</sup> As Richard Stingle points out, for Frye, the Virgilian guide who takes him through his whole critical journey of “coherence in contradiction” (to use Jacque Derrida’s phrase) is Blake. Towards the end of his musings on anagogic criticism, Frye gives a passionate call to guarantee the autonomy of criticism and religion for the sake of their purity, but ironically, as Stingle tells us, Frye confesses that he learned how to read Bible from Blake. It looks as if for Frye, not only “the study of literature” as Frye claims “belongs to the ‘humanities’” that “can take only the human view of the superhuman”<sup>24</sup> but also the study of the Bible, which he is ready to learn from a poet. The autonomy that Frye seems ready to grant to both culture and religion is seemingly granted to culture alone — the destiny of religion in the West, as the present study implies:

Just as no argument in favor of a religious or political doctrine is of any value unless it is an intellectually honest argument, and so guarantees the autonomy of logic, so no religious or political myth is either valuable or valid unless it assumes the autonomy of culture, which may be provisionally defined as the total body of the imaginative hypothesis in a society and its tradition. To defend the autonomy of culture in this sense seems to me the social task of the “intellectual” in the modern world: if so, to defend its subordination to a total synthesis of any kind, religious or political, would be the authentic form of the *trahison des clercs*... Religions, in spite of their enlarged perspective, cannot as social institutions *contain* an art of unlimited hypothesis.<sup>25</sup>

The Romantics approach religion through poetry, so it seems, does Frye. It is a tradition, whose chief locus for us in this study is Romanticism, of an unflinching and self-conscious intellectual hubris — a tradition of “intervention,” as reflected in passages such as the above — an inevitable and unavoidable confusion of and ambivalence towards both *mythos* and *logos* that binds the likes of Frye and his followers with their opponents, namely the self-destructive (deconstructionist) confessionists like de Man and Derrida. Essentially Romantic in spirit (Harold Bloom tells us that Romanticism has been *the* tradition of the West in the last two hundred years), all these discourses in the words of Derrida “are trapped in the kind of a circle... we have no language—no syntax and no lexicon—which is foreign to this history...”<sup>26</sup> The problem is compounded by the critical effort of Lewisohn and other such scholars to re-appropriate any language, syntax or lexicon such as that of *Tasawwuf* that may claim to be “foreign” to this history within the folds of Romanticism. Frye’s own romantically ironic bonds with the deconstructionists may be reflected through his “dull, flagging, notes” (like those of Wordsworth’s harp) towards the end of his career as both share each other’s failure: “I am often described as

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<sup>23</sup>Quotation taken here from Richard Stingle, “Northrop Frye,” in *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*, eds., Michael Gordon and Martin Kreiswirth (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1994), 317.

<sup>24</sup>Frye, “Anatomy of Criticism,” in *Critical Theory since Plato*, 1072.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 1072.

<sup>26</sup>Jacque Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge, 1967). Third Indian reprint, 2007, 354.



someone who is now in the past and whose reputation has collapsed. But I don't think I am any further down skid row than the deconstructionists."<sup>27</sup>

Frye's contradictorily coherent observations lead him to the ultimate resolution that critics like Lewisohn pounce upon, namely the poet's independence "from the acceptance of any specific religion."<sup>28</sup> Others follow the line and the "contradictorily coherent" tradition continues. Naji B. Oueijan, in a presentation at the German Society for English Romanticism at the University of Erfurt, has gone to the extent of saying that "one could coin Sufism as an early form of Eastern Romanticism; or, even better, one may consider Romanticism as a moderate form of Sufism."<sup>29</sup> Algis Uždavinys thinks that "According to Romantic philosophers (who nonetheless affirmed a universal humanity), the primary source of all intellectual development should be traced back to the ancient Indian or Indo-Iranian monistic milieu, imagined as the starting-point of an exalted metaphysical tradition which perfectly resonated with their own fundamental assumptions and was directed against the materialistic philosophy of the Enlightenment. At least partially, they followed the paradigm established by Schlegel, namely that "the highest Romanticism" must be sought in the Orient which validates the ideas of a single monistic God and some universal esoteric essence of all great mythological and religious traditions, i.e., confirms a sort of the perennial philosophy which rests on the transcendental wholeness and spiritual essence of the natural world."<sup>30</sup> Paul Davies suggests that, "Like Rūmī's work, the poetry of the Romantics lives on the deeply held axiom that love lies at—at the deepest level *is*—the root of existence itself."<sup>31</sup> Mustapha Bala Ruma takes up a comparative study of English Romanticism and Sufism as literary movements "with the intention of bringing their similarities into a sharp focus. Despite acknowledging the "obvious" difference between the two movements, Ruma insists that "there are areas in which the two are so much alike as to warrant this kind of study."<sup>32</sup> In a comparison between Rūmī and Romanticism, Fazel Asadi Amjed takes up what he calls "two archetypal images" of the reed and the Aeolian harp, "the wind instruments that aptly manifest the common epistemological concerns of mysticism, Christian and Muslim, and the European Romanticism."<sup>33</sup> "For the Sufis and Romantics" Amjed

<sup>27</sup>Stingle, "Northrop Frye," in *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*, 321.

<sup>28</sup>Frye, "Anatomy of Criticism," in *Critical Theory since Plato*, 1070.

<sup>29</sup>Naji B. Oueijan, "Sufism, Christian Mysticism, and Romanticism," *Palma*, Vol. 7. Issue no. I, (2001): 18.

<sup>30</sup>Algis Uždavinys, "Sufism in the Light of Orientalism," *Acta Orientalia Vilnensia*, 6 no. 2, (2005):115.

<sup>31</sup>Paul Davies, *Romanticism and the Esoteric Tradition, Studies in Imagination* (Steiner Books, 1998), 152.

<sup>32</sup>Mustapha Bala Ruma, *A Study of English Romanticism and Sufism as Literary Movements* (Lambert Academic Publishing, 2012).

<sup>33</sup>Fazel Asadi Amjed, "The Reed and the Aeolian Harp: Coleridge's 'The Aeolian Harp,' Rūmī's 'The Song of the Reed' and Jubran's *Al-Mawakib* and Imaginal Perception," *Mutaliat-e-Irfani, Bahar-o-Tabistan*, vol. 5 (1986): 14.

contends, “despite some fundamental differences, truth...is not transcendent but is present within a system of changing signs or relations and is perceived in a frame of mind or logic that accepts and unites the opposites in contradistinction to that which is based on the principle of non-contradiction.”<sup>34</sup>

“And as always,” to recall a memorable statement from Derrida, “coherence in contradiction expresses the force of a desire.”<sup>35</sup> A noteworthy aspect of such comparative works, despite their acknowledging some fundamental differences between the Sufi tradition and Romanticism, is their focus upon the similarities, epistemological, social, political, aesthetic, tropological, aspirational, archetypal, anagogical etc. between the two movements and the differences remain somewhat repressed beneath the surface of the comparative grounds. This is done, one may expect, with a basically noble desire of bringing the West and the East closer to each other, by presenting both *Tasawwuf* and Romanticism as movements of a non-denominational spirituality, and perhaps with a desire to separate especially the Sufi image from the often denigrating images of Islam proliferating the modern media, in order to find common grounds for making bridges (as Ananda Coomaraswamy expected Rūmī and Meister Eckhart to become “two piers of the bridge of understanding that will finally span Western and Eastern civilization”).<sup>36</sup> With all respect to these honourable intentions, bridges must be built on firm and not only on common grounds, or to put it the other way, infirmities never make sustainable and veritable common grounds. In finding common grounds differences have to be equally taken into consideration, at times these differences may be more significant than the similarities. One may agree with Yannis Toussulis in being wary of the oversimplification of “the universalist elements that can be found in the classical traditions of Sufism. In the process a narcissistic form of Romanticism pervades many popular renderings of poets like Rūmī...Sufi gnosis is far more sophisticated than that, and it provides a detailed approach to sacred psychology that requires more rigour.”<sup>37</sup> Rūmī himself wants us to be wary of appearances:

Do not measure the actions of holy men by (the analogy of) yourself, though *shér* (lion) and *shír* (milk) are similar in writing.  
On this account the whole world is gone astray: scarcely any one is cognizant of God’s *Abdál* (Substitutes).<sup>38</sup>  
They set up (a claim of) equality with the prophets; they supposed the saints to be like themselves.

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

<sup>35</sup>Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 352.

<sup>36</sup>Ananda Coomaraswamy, “Understanding and Reunion: An Oriental Perspective,” in *The Asian Legacy and American Life*, ed. Arthur Christy (NY: Greenwood, 1968; originally published 1942), 229, quoted here from Lewis, *Rūmī*, 510.

<sup>37</sup>Yannis Toussulis, Ph. D., *Sufism and the Way of Blame, Hidden Sources of a Sacred Psychology* (Wheaton: Quest Books, 2011), 17.

<sup>38</sup>As Nicholson explains, the *Abdál* are the saints next in rank to the *Qutb*, who is the head of the spiritual hierarchy.

“Behold,” they said, “we are men, they are men; both we and they are in bondage to sleep and food.

In (their) blindness they did not perceive that there is an infinite difference between (them).

Both species of *zanbūr* ate and drank from the (same) place, but from that one (the hornet) came a sting, and from this other (the bee) honey.

Both species of deer ate grass and drank water: from this one came dung, and from that one pure musk.

Both reeds drank from the same water-source, (but) this one is empty and that one (full of) sugar.

Consider hundreds of thousands of such likenesses and observe that the distance between the two is (as great as) a seventy years’ journey.<sup>39</sup>

## 2. Sufi Theology and the Romantic Onto-Theology

On the face of it, Romanticism does indeed offer parallels with the Sufi literary tradition that has been drawing so many critics into the comparative fold and one reason for this comparative possibility is Romanticism’s close concern with religion. The Romantics themselves and those who came in its wake on either its supporting or the opposing sides acknowledged some kind of relationship between Romanticism and religion. In the words of Sheila A. Spector, “Although not always acknowledged, virtually all aspects of the debates that characterize the Romantic period were suffused with a religious component.”<sup>40</sup> In defining the characteristics of the Romantic poetry Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829) observed that “only a divinatory criticism would dare try to characterize its ideal.”<sup>41</sup> The question is: to what religious tradition does Romanticism belong, the Christian, the Jew, or the Greek, or to a Western admixture of the three often referred to as the onto-theological tradition? What relationship does Romanticism have with the Islamic tradition?

With all the necessary qualifications that follow, Romanticism that we want to talk about here, was Christian in birth, potentially Muslim in its aspirations,<sup>42</sup> and Jewish

<sup>39</sup>Jalal al-Din Rūmī, *The Mathnawi of Jalalu’ddin Rūmī*, ed. and trans. R. A. Nicholson (London: Messrs Lusac and Co., 1925 – 1940). First Pakistani edition, (Karachi: Darul Ishaat, 2003), I/263-271. Henceforth referred to as *M* in the parenthetical references. All the subsequent references to this work will be made within the text in parenthesis, indicating the volume and the line numbers respectively.

<sup>40</sup>Sheila A. Spector, (ed.), *Romanticism/Judaica: A Convergence of Cultures* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2011), 4.

<sup>41</sup>Friedrich Schlegel, “Athenaeum Fragments” (116) in *Critical Theory since Plato*, ed. Hazard Adams, 432.

<sup>42</sup>It is about Umayya Ibn Abi Salt, the pre-Islamic Arab poet, that the Prophet (SAW) is reported to have said that he had “well-nigh embraced Islam” (*kāda Umayyā bin abī al-Salt an yuslim*) [*Sahih al-Bukhari, The Early Years of Islam*, trans. and explained by Muhammad Asad (Lahore: Arafat Publications, 1938, third reprint, Gibraltar: Dar al-Andalus Limited, 1993), 152]; *Al-Shamail Muhammadiyah Lil-Tirmizi*, no. 235) and that “his poetry believed but his heart rejected (faith)” (*amana sh’iruhū wa kafara qalbhū*) (*Akhbar Makkah lil-Fakihi*, no. 1898). There seem to be some interesting similarities and also differences between the case of Umayya and that of the Romantics. Umayya is generally thought to be a *hanīf*, a member of a small group of monotheists on the Arabian Peninsula who followed the monotheism of Abraham, and as modern scholarship argues, may have been influenced in his poetry by the Jews (see Tilman Seidensticker, “The Authenticity of the Poems ascribed to Umayya Ibn Abī al-Salt,” in *Tradition*

in its failures (the Greek component, I believe, can be accounted for by that remarkably rhetorical sequel to Derrida's "Violence and Metaphysics").<sup>43</sup> The Romantics inherited Christianity and the Christianity they inherited was already much too suspect about its own sufficiency for the fulfillment of either any spiritual or literary ideals. It may be argued that the Romantic resort to the Greek mythology for the fulfillment of its aesthetic needs may be due to the aesthetic insufficiency into which traditional Christianity had drawn itself by aligning with Greek philosophy. This ambivalence can be traced much earlier than the eighteenth or nineteenth century Romantics, for instance, in critics like Philip Sidney whose "religious" defense of poetry in the sixteenth century that anticipates much of the later Romantic criticism, seems to be much too under awe of the Greeks than Christianity.<sup>44</sup> This ambivalence is "handed over, delivered" to the Romantics and is "betrayed" (recall Bloom's tradition) through such comments as Schlegel's in "On Incomprehensibility": "What gods will rescue us from all these ironies? The only solution is to find an irony that might be able to swallow up all these big and little ironies and leave no trace of them all."<sup>45</sup> As Alistair E. McGrath points out,

Romanticism was ambivalent towards traditional Christianity. While recognizing the significance of religious feeling, and acknowledging the importance of the quest for a transcendental dimension of life, some Romantic writers—such as Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822)—saw this quest as having no necessary connection with the Christian faith. This naturally leads us to consider what is widely described as the "Victorian crisis of faith," which is often cited as setting the context for many themes in modern theology.<sup>46</sup>

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*and Modernity in Arabic Language and Literature*, ed. J. R. Smart (NY: Routledge, 1996, 2013), 87-101. The Romantics, on the other hand, are Christians with a compromised monotheism as compared to the *hanīfs* and also, as argued here, influenced by the Jews, betraying a complex onto-theological amalgam of a tradition heavily influenced by the Greek philosophy. The difference makes Romanticism more open to the detection of a "dis-belief" lurking at the heart of an apparently "spiritual" and "religious" language in its poetry. Hence Rūmī's epigraph for the exploration of a possible compatibility between *Tasawwuf* and Romanticism: "Sharing the hearts is better than sharing the tongue."

<sup>43</sup>"Are we Jews? Are we Greeks? We live in the difference between the Jew and the Greek, which is perhaps the unity of what is called history...Are we Greeks? Are we Jews? But who, we? Are we...*first* Jews or *first* Greeks?... 'Jewgreek is greekjew. Extremes meet'?" Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: Routledge, 1978, Third Indian Reprint, 2007), 191-192. Lest the passage sound to reflect only a concern with Jewish relation with the Greek tradition, one should note that the epigraph of Derrida's essay was taken from Mathew Arnold: "Hebraism and Hellenism,— between these two points of influence moves our world..."

<sup>44</sup>Having already used the biblical arguments in his defense Sidney feels his burden as "great" once "Plato's name is laid upon (him)." See *An Apology for Poetry*, in *Critical Theory Since Plato*, ed., Hazard Adams, 156.

<sup>45</sup>Schlegel, "On Incomprehensibility," in *Critical Theory since Plato*, ed. Hazard Adams, 434.

<sup>46</sup>Alistair E. McGrath, *The Christian Theology, An Introduction* (Chichester: Blackwell, 1993, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. 2011), 71.

It is indeed in Shelley that one finds perhaps the acutest expression of a deep distrust of the authenticity of the Christian tradition:

It cannot be precisely ascertained in what degree Jesus Christ accommodated his doctrines to the opinions of his auditors; or in what degree he really said all that he is related to have said. He has left no written record of himself, and we are compelled to judge from the imperfect and obscure information which his biographers (persons certainly of very undisciplined and indiscriminating minds) have transmitted to posterity. These writers (our only guides) impute sentiments to Jesus Christ which flatly contradict each other...But it is not difficult to distinguish the inventions by which these historians have filled up the interstices of tradition, or corrupted the simplicity of truth from the real character of their rude amazement.<sup>47</sup>

Romanticism's relationship with Islam and its literary tradition especially in the form of Sufi poetry has now been a matter of much scholarly debate and a critical look at this relationship is important for a comparatist in order to make the task of finding similarities or differences between the Romantics and the Sufis significant. In the wake of Edward Said's *Orientalism* that reads the relationship between Romanticism and Islam basically in terms of misrepresentation and misappropriation on part of the Romantics, there have been studies in more recent times that seek to characterize this relationship as ambivalent and ambiguous. One can point out here though that Romanticism's ambivalence towards Christianity is still different from its ambivalence towards Islam in terms of acceptance and rejection. Christianity, no matter how suspect its tradition could be for the Romantics, was still their "own" religion. On the contrary, Islam, despite the authenticity of its tradition, would still remain the "other." The question then becomes less a matter of the nature of representation than the end to which the representation has been made. Mohammed Sharafuddin points out that "...the Romantics had an ambiguous attitude to Islam: on the one hand, it offered a convenient symbol of the tyranny they all sought to overcome; but on the other, it offered an alternative to the compromised or corrupted political and social systems of Europe."<sup>48</sup> Unlike Said, Sharafuddin, while studying Landor, Southey, Moore and Byron for their rather sympathetic portrayal of Islam focuses upon an "orientalism which, because it proved receptive to the radical energies liberated by the French Revolution, offered an effective vantage point from which to condemn the reactionary forces at home and the prevailing spirit of intolerance reflected in relation with a culture such as that of Islam."<sup>49</sup> Sharafuddin wants us to keep in mind that "the Romantic Movement emerged as resistance to massive despotism, and that its writers were reacting against political and cultural centralization. It was possible

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<sup>47</sup>Percy Bysshe Shelley, *On Christianity in Shelley Memorials from Authentic Sources*, ed. Lady Shelley (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, n. d.), 290-91.

<sup>48</sup>Mohammed Sharafuddin, *Islam and Romantic Orientalism: Literary Encounters with the Orient* (London: I. B. Taurus, 1994), XXI.

<sup>49</sup>Sharafuddin, *Islam and Romantic Orientalism*, IX.



for a genuine interest in other countries and cultures to develop.”<sup>50</sup> James Hodkinson sees a similar ambivalence towards Islam among the German Romantics:

Romantic theoretical writing might seem to promise a more flexible image of Islam, given its apparent distaste for the static, dogmatic categories of thought, though in practice both (the later) Friedrich Schlegel and, perhaps disappointingly, the theologian Schleiermacher ultimately stereotype and subordinate Islam to their own vision of Christendom-cum-Christianity. It is rather in the realm of literary practice that Romanticism becomes more progressive, through poetic experimentation with concepts such as “identity” and intersubjective communication” and so the prose fiction of Novalis...begins to open out a dialogue between Muslim and Christian subjects. Yet even then...the later Romanticism of E. T. A. Hoffmann...in his story *Das Sanctus* (presents) a less dialectical narrative of Muslim-Christian conflict, in which Christian Europeans triumph on various levels: Romanticism offers a typically ambivalent vision of the encounter.<sup>51</sup> (Last parenthetical insertion mine)

Whether Romanticism’s relationship with the Islamic tradition is subversive (as argued by Said) or it is in some cases sympathetic (as depicted by Sharafuddin and Hodkinson), one point that comes out commonly from both types of studies is that Romanticism never “owned” the Islamic tradition. The thesis of books like that of Sharafuddin, Hodkinson, or Ian Almond’s *The New Orientalists* (though this book focuses on the representation of Islam in the postmodern rather than the Romantic thinkers) seems to be that even if in some cases we find a sympathetic portrayal of Islam among these thinkers and writers and even though some Romantic thinkers and writers, if not all, had a “genuine interest” in Islam, such sympathy and genuineness of interest was basically motivated less by a search for and a subsequent adoption of an authentic tradition than by finding an angle to criticize their own. This is probably why Coleridge’s desire “to make a pilgrimage to the deserts of Arabia to find the man who could make... (him) understand how the one can be many”<sup>52</sup> remained only a desire perhaps never really meant to be fulfilled, like Rousseau’s desire that for Paul de Man makes for the true Romantic consciousness: “If all my dreams had turned into reality, I would still remain unsatisfied: I would have kept on dreaming, imagining, desiring. In myself, I found an unexplainable void that nothing could have fulfilled; a longing of the heart towards another kind of fulfillment of which I could not conceive but of which I nevertheless felt the attraction.”<sup>53</sup>

Disillusioned with the Greco-Christian tradition and consciously resistant to the fulfillment of its desire through the Islamic tradition, Romanticism unconsciously fell into a characteristically Jewish mode. If one is allowed to consider the agony that is often

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<sup>50</sup>Ibid., XVII.

<sup>51</sup>James R. Hodkinson, Jeff Morrison, *Encounters with Islam in German Literature and Culture* (NY: Camden House, 2009), 10.

<sup>52</sup>Quoted in Hodkinson and Morrison, *Encounters with Islam in German Literature and Culture*, 21.

<sup>53</sup>Jean Jacques Rousseau, Letter to Malesherbes, Pléiade ed. I, 1140. Quotation and its discussion taken here from Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1983), 18.



associated with the idea of Romanticism as precisely this deliberate and conscious avoidance of any absolute fulfillment, of an attachment to failure accompanied by the desire for success, of a deliberate hesitation to enter the “promised land,” then it becomes quite plausible to align it, albeit unconsciously, with the Jewish tradition.<sup>54</sup> As Sheila A. Spector argues,

Characterized by interest in a number of new themes — including the imagination, the irrational, the particular, the remote, egotism, orientalism, primitivism, medievalism, and the sublime, to name a few— (Romanticism) was not simply an aggregate of novel ideas, but, rather, a response to the dislocation of the old certitudes and an attempt to derive a new ethos. Though seldom acknowledged, the Jews had an integral role in this process.<sup>55</sup>

Harold Bloom is another contemporary Jewish critic who sees Romanticism primarily as a Jewish mode of existence. Romanticism to Bloom is “*the tradition of the last two centuries*” in the West and through its psychological links with the Jewish tradition “differs vitally from earlier forms of tradition.”<sup>56</sup> This difference Bloom characterizes in terms of Romanticism’s *psychology of belatedness*, that is, its conscious awareness, just like the Jewish tradition of Kabbalah, of being late, of being *left behind*, being separated from the caravan of tradition that has earlier gone by and hence the agony of creating a tradition on its own. It would not be for Bloom that the writers prior to the Romantics were not *late*, (everyone is *bound* to be as such, as Bloom would have it) but they were not as *conscious* of their belatedness as the Romantics were, and hence were entertaining a false hope of being part of a “tradition”; recalling the words of Hartman, were deceived “by the lure of false ultimates.” Romanticism to Bloom “more than any other tradition, is appalled by its own continuities, and vainly but perpetually fantasizes some end to repetitions.”<sup>57</sup> The Jewish sensibility in Romanticism would be reflected through the recognition but not the neutralization of this sense of belatedness, just like in Rousseau’s comment earlier quoted — but instead of trying to get rid of this anxiety provoked through the sense of belatedness, the Romantics would try to use it for the purpose of creating something out of it, in the words of Bloom “to make...belatedness a strength rather than an affliction,” to come to terms with the fact that this anxiety, this *agon*, this *angustia*, is the destiny, the Jewish and the Romantic alike, the destiny of “living in doubts, uncertainties and mysteries without any irritable reaching after fact or reason” — the famous Keatsian Negative Capability— patience in the face of a purgatorial nothingness—and for nothing.

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<sup>54</sup>To be taken in a strictly analogical sense, the Qur’ān mentions that the Jews showed their reluctance and refusal to enter the Promised Land by saying to Moses that the people there were of “exceeding strength.” The resulting punishment of this rebellion was “wandering through the land” (V: 24-29).

<sup>55</sup>Sheila A. Spector, (ed.), *Romanticism / Judaica: A Convergence of Cultures*, 1.

<sup>56</sup>Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1975), 35.

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*, 36.

### 3. Sufi *Sabr* (Patience) and the Romantic Negative Capability

The Western gaze on *Tasawwuf* via Romanticism, while often overlooking the traditional contexts of the two discourses, tends to ignore the simulacrum Romanticism presents of the inspirational and spiritual ideals of *Tasawwuf*. One quick example of the Romantic relationship with *Tasawwuf* as that of inversion may be Keats's purgatorial Negative Capability bearing an apparent kinship with the Sufi emphasis on *sabr* (patience) and self-negation (Martin Lings thought that Keats was a "born mystic"). Keats thought that this capability of overcoming *angst* and anxiety precisely by letting go any *irritable* attempt at overcoming it, by waiting for truth to come to you itself rather than trying too hard at it (he accused his friend Dilke of being guilty of such impatience), by remaining within *angst* and anxiety with patience, without an alibi, is a must for "a Man of Achievement, especially in literature."<sup>58</sup> In an apparently similar vein, Rūmī also asks us to "have patience," for "patience brings the object of desire, not haste" (*M*, I / 4003). Coleridge for Keats was not negatively capable because Coleridge would be "incapable of remaining content with half-knowledge."<sup>59</sup> This also looks quite similar to what Khizr says to Moses in the Qur'ān: "How canst thou have patience about things about which thy understanding is not complete?"<sup>60</sup> Rūmī also wants the seeker to remain patient with the spiritual master (the *Pīr*) on the Sufi path:

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<sup>58</sup>John Keats, Letter to George and Tom Keats, December 1817, in *Letters of John Keats*, ed. Robert Gittings (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), reprinted 1979, 43.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid.

<sup>60</sup>Kahf 18:68, Abdullah Yousuf Ali notes that "this episode in the story of Moses is meant to illustrate four points. (1) Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians. Even so that wisdom did not comprehend everything, even as the whole stock of knowledge of the present day, in the sciences and the arts, and in literature, (if it could be supposed to be gathered in one individual), does not include all knowledge. Divine knowledge, as far as man is concerned, is unlimited. Even after Moses received his divine mission of Apostleship, his knowledge was not so perfect that it could not receive further additions. (2) Constant effort is necessary to keep our knowledge square with the march of time, and such effort Moses is shown to be making. (3) The mysterious man he meets...to whom Tradition assigns the name of *Khidhr* (literally, Green), is the type of that knowledge which is ever green, fresh, and flourishing, ever in contact with life as it is actually lived, and not merely crystallized in books or second-hand sayings. The second kind of knowledge has its uses, but only is a stepping stone to the first kind of knowledge, which is true knowledge and which is from God direct... (4) There are paradoxes in life: apparent loss may be real gain; apparent cruelty may be real mercy; returning good for evil may really be justice and not generosity...God's wisdom transcends all human calculations. *The Glorious Qur'ān*, note 2404, 747.

Shabbir Ahmed Uthmani interprets this episode as "instruction and admonition" of Moses from God. Uthmani notes from the *Hadīth* that once "Moses was imparting most valuable and effective instructions to his people. A person asked: "O Moses, do you find any one more knowledgeable than you in this world?" Moses said, "no." the answer was actually right as Moses is among the "Apostles of inflexible purpose". It's obvious that who could have more knowledge of the mysteries of the Divine law than Moses in his times. But God did not like his wordings, although the purpose was right. Nevertheless, the generality of the manner of the reply would show as though he thought himself as the most knowledgeable among people in this world in all respects. The Will of God was this that he conferred the reply to His all-encompassing knowledge, for example, would say that there are many accepted and honoured servants of

When the *Pīr* has accepted thee, take heed, surrender thyself (to him): go, like Moses, under the authority of Khizr.

Bear patiently whatever is done by a Khizr who is without hypocrisy, in order that Khizr may not say, "Begone, *this is our parting*."

Though he stave in the boat, do not speak a word, though he kill a child, do not tear thy hair. God has declared that his (the *Pīr*'s) hand is as His own, since He gave out (the words) *the Hand of God is above their hands*. (M, I / 2969-2972)

But unlike the "upside down, Hellward," onto-theological, Judeo-Romantic patience that is Negative Capability, Rūmī's Sufi *sabr* is not object-less, not just an irritation-less reaching after "fact or reason," but "ascends to heaven"<sup>61</sup> "like the bridge *Sirāt*,<sup>62</sup> (with Paradise) on the other side..."<sup>63</sup> and is "sweetened" by the relief that "comes into the heart from faith."<sup>64</sup> The Sufi *sabr* is directed towards God Who "hath joined *sabr* (patience) with *haqq* (the real and permanent)."<sup>65</sup> This understanding of *sabr* in the Sufi tradition can be traced back to the Qur'ān, where the Prophet (SAW) has been enjoined to "patiently persevere, as did (all) apostles of inflexible purpose; and be no haste about the (Unbelievers)."<sup>66</sup> Such patience comes from God: "And do thou be patient, for thy patience is but from God."<sup>67</sup> As the Romantic in being patient circumambulates his own self, the Sufi's *sabr* revolves not around him but is directed towards God. The Qur'ān gives "glad tidings to those who patiently persevere, — who say, when afflicted with calamity: "To God we belong, and to Him is our return."<sup>68</sup>

From a perspective of developing a Rūmīan critique of Romanticism, we may also find Rūmī telling us that "Anyone who feels lonely and whose soul is full of anguish must have associated with an impostor / If he had shown patience and loyal friendship (to God), he would not have suffered this infliction through being separated from Him."<sup>69</sup> The Romantic imposture of the Sufi *sabr* can again be witnessed in Wordsworth's description in "Animal Tranquility and Decay" of the patient old man that might almost seem to present a popular picture of Rūmī himself:

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Allah, and only He knows all of them. Then came the Revelation there is a servant of Ours where the two rivers meet who knows more than you."

<sup>61</sup>M, I/1601.

<sup>62</sup>According to the Muslim belief, a bridge narrower than a hair, sharper than a sword, that all would have to cross on the Judgment Day in order to go to Paradise.

<sup>63</sup>M, II/3145-47.

<sup>64</sup>M, II/599.

<sup>65</sup>M, III/1853.

<sup>66</sup>al-Ahqāf 46:35.

<sup>67</sup>An-Nahl 16:127.

<sup>68</sup>M, 155-156.

<sup>69</sup>M, VI/1413-14.

THE little hedgerow birds,  
 That peck along the roads, regard him not.  
 He travels on, and in his face, his step,  
 His gait, is one expression: every limb,  
 His look and bending figure, all bespeak  
 A man who does not move with pain, but moves  
 With thought. — He is insensibly subdued  
 To settled quiet: he is one by whom  
 All effort seems forgotten; one to whom  
 Long patience hath such mild composure given,  
 That patience now doth seem a thing of which  
 He hath no need. He is by nature led  
 To peace so perfect that the young behold  
 With envy, what the Old Man hardly feels.

Is this the patience that for Rūmī is “the key to relief (from pain)”? Or is this “peace so perfect” a pretense that hides from the view quite a different disposition, which is in Rumi’s words inwardly “lonely and whose soul is full of anguish”? Willard Spiegelman tells us that Wordsworth here did hide something from us: the final stanza in the earlier version of the poem in which Wordsworth actually asks the whereabouts of the old man and that Wordsworth later prudently decided to remove:

—I asked him wither he was bound, and what  
 The object of his journey; he replied  
 “Sir! I am going many a miles to take  
 A last leave of my son, a mariner,  
 Who from a sea-fight has been brought to Falmouth,  
 And there is dying in an hospital.

The melodramatic details of the old man’s account (“many a mile,” “a last leave”), the contrast between the Romantic anguish beneath an apparent poise and patience rendered most powerful through a chilling and “insensibly subdued” expression of a heart-rending experience, reveal the old man as a true predecessor of Coleridge’s *Mariner* and the *Wedding Guest*: in appearance a Sufi figure of a wise, serene, thoughtful nature, but in reality a self-pitying, anguished, stunned and forlorn Romantic. Spiegelman thinks that “Wordsworth’s tinkering with the original ending shows the problem that attends his presenting the old man. If the old man speaks, Wordsworth risks plunging the poem into bathos or matter-of-fact triviality after the relative stateliness and grandeur of his description. Yet the man’s speech is humanizing, grand at a distance, he is not really different from us in motive and behavior.”<sup>70</sup> No wonder Wordsworth calls the “perfect” peace reflecting from this seemingly angelic paragon of patience as “Animal Tranquility and Decay.”

Such “animal tranquility” as patience can be witnessed again in Keats’ spiritual pretensions in his famous “The Vale of Soul-Making” letter, serving as a gloss to

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<sup>70</sup>Willard Spiegelman, *Wordsworth’s Heroes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 95.

Wordsworth's "de-description," the truth under-erasure, of the Romantic saint. Like Wordsworth's "insensibly subdued" personified patience, Keats' spiritual homily is also motivated by a "temper indolent and supremely careless":

My passions are all asleep [*for* sleep] from my having slumbered till nearly eleven and weakened the animal fiber all over me to a delightful sensation about three degrees on this side of faintness—if I had teeth of pearl and the breath of lillies I should call it languor—but as I am I must call it Laziness—In this state of effeminacy the fibers of the brain are relaxed in common with the rest of the body, and to such a happy degree that pleasure has no show of enticement and pain no unbearable frown. Neither Poetry, nor Ambition, nor Love have any alertness of countenance as they pass by me...<sup>71</sup>

This "animal tranquility" in which "the fibers of the brain are relaxed in common with the rest of the body" has interesting parallels with the Sufi spiritual tranquility through patience. The Romantic animal tranquility leads to a state of indifference to pleasure and pain, apparently similar to the state of Rūmī's harper who "became without weeping or laughter, like the soul."<sup>72</sup> However, as Rūmī predicted, we can witness a "seventy years' journey" between such likeness. While the harper's spiritual absorption (*istighrāq*) drowns him "in the beauty of the Lord of majesty... Drowned, not in such wise that there should be for him any deliverance, or that anyone should know him except the (Divine) ocean" setting thus "his skirt free from talk and speech" Keats' animal, listless "drowsy numbness" that further "sinks him" "Lethe-wards" (as in "Ode to a Nightingale") sets him off to a long series of "dim and unhallowed" shapings, to use Coleridge's words for his own thoughts in "The Eolian Harp" of an "unregenerate mind" on the issue of "soul-making." Keats' indifferent state towards pleasure or pain elicits a lot of his onto-theological attention (with the theological part suffering from a deep distrust on Keats' part) towards both (both Socrates and Jesus appearing as the twin titans of "complete disinterestedness") as much as the Wordsworthian saints' melodramatic revelation of his apparently spiritual indifference. Keats' "Lethe-wards" plunge into the so-called "vale of soul-making" is actually a bodily jump into the life of this world that he calls the "world of circumstances" made into a hell by the vicissitudes of pleasure and pain. Keats' concern does not seem to be any Heaven-ward ascension from this Hell, but rather how to be happy within it:

...that Man is originally 'a poor forked creature' subject to the same mischances as the beasts of the forest, destined to hardships and disquietude of some kind or other. If he improves by degrees his bodily accommodations and comforts—at each stage, at each accent there are waiting for him a

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<sup>71</sup>Keats, Letter to George and Georgiana Keats, April 19, in *Letters of John Keats*, 228.

<sup>72</sup>*M*, I/2209 Set in the times of the Caliph Umar (RA), the story is that of an artist, a harper, who is shown to be broken-hearted at the decline of his art with his own declining years, and realizes that he has wasted his years in playing the harp only for the worldly gains of appreciation and sustenance. Repenting, and having lost all the hope in the world, he goes into a graveyard, deciding to play that day only for God, becoming that way "God's guest," and there, playing the harp and weeping, goes to sleep. Umar, on the other hand, is instructed by a Divine voice in his dream to find and deliver the old harper, materially and spiritually.

fresh set of annoyances—he is mortal and there is still a heaven with its Stars abov[e] his head. The most interesting question that can come before us is, How far by the persevering endeavours of a seldom appearing Socrates Mankind may be made happy.<sup>73</sup>

The Romantic anguish, towards which basically the Romantic “patience” is directed, is all directed towards the purgatorial space and time that we call this world and its life. In this “constricted space” *mākana dayyiq*, a term the Qur’ān uses for Hell,<sup>74</sup> patience is meaningless as it does not help one to get out of this Hell. The Qur’ān tells the inhabitants of Hell: “Burn ye therein: the same is it to you whether ye bear it with patience, or not.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup>Keats, Letter to George and Georgiana Keats, April 19, in *Letters of John Keats*, 249.

<sup>74</sup>Furqān 25:13.

<sup>75</sup>At-Tūr 52:16.



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