

T.C.

IBN HALDUN UNIVERSITY
THE ALLIANCE OF CIVILIZATIONS INSTITUTE
DEPARTMENT OF CIVILIZATION STUDIES

MA THESIS

“SITTING ONTO THE SOUL” -
INNER EXPERIENCES OF MODERN IRANIANS WITH SUFI
POETRY

MARIAN BREHMER

JUNE 2018

ONAY SAYFASI

Bu tez tarafımızca okunmuş olup kapsam ve nitelik açısından, Medeniyet Araştırmaları alanında Yüksek Lisans Derecesini alabilmek için yeterli olduğuna karar verilmiştir.

Tez Jürisi Üyeleri:

	KANAATI	İMZA
(Unvanı Adı ve Soyadı)		
Dr. Öğr. Üyesi Önder KÜÇÜKURAL	_____	_____
(Tez Danışmanı)		
Dr. Öğr. Üyesi Nagihan HALİLOĞLU	_____	_____
Prof. Dr. Omid SAFI	_____	_____

Bu tezin İbn Haldun Üniversitesi Medeniyetler İttifakı Enstitüsü tarafından konulan tüm standartlara uygun şekilde yazıldığı teyit edilmiştir.

Tarih

Mühür/İmza

AKADEMİK DÜRÜSTLÜK BEYANI

Bu çalışmada yer alan tüm bilgilerin akademik kurallara ve etik ilkelere uygun olarak toplanıp sunulduğunu, söz konusu kurallar ve ilkelerin zorunlu kıldığı çerçevede, çalışmada özgün olmayan tüm bilgi ve belgelere, alıntılama standartlarına uygun olarak referans verilmiş olduğunu beyan ederim.

Adı Soyadı: İmza:

ABSTRACT

“SITTING ONTO THE SOUL” - INNER EXPERIENCES OF MODERN IRANIANS WITH SUFI POETRY

Brehmer, Marian

MA in Civilization Studies

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Önder Küçükural

June 2018, 112 Pages

This thesis aims at exploring the inner experiences of Iranians when reading or listening to Persian-language Sufi Poetry in modern Iran. Iranians have access to a large body of spiritual poetry that was composed on the fertile grounds of Sufism. Based on interviews and participant observation conducted during three months of field work, the study presents poetry as being experience itself rather than just a linguistic medium to transport fixed messages. Apart from investigating different kinds of poetic experiences, this thesis explores the various ways in which Sufi poetry creates experience in the reader and the listener, in both individual and collective settings.

Being the first anthropological study on the experiential dimension of reading Sufi poetry in contemporary Iran, my thesis contributes to our understanding of Persian poetry, but also to our perspective on the medium of poetry as a whole. It also shows how a culture, even in the fast-paced 21st century, has managed to preserve its literary-spiritual heritage to an extent that it continues to provide meaning and direction to those who intentionally turn to it for guidance.

Keywords: Iran, Persian poetry, Sufism, spirituality, poetic experience

ÖZ

“RUHA OTURMAK” - MODERN İRANLILARIN TASSAVUF ŞİİRİYLE YAŞADIKLARI İÇSEL TECRÜBELER

Brehmer, Marian

Medeniyet Araştırmaları Yüksek Lisans Programı

Tez/Proje Danışmanı: Dr. Önder Küçükural

Haziran 2018, 112 sayfa

Bu tezin amacı modern İranlıların Farsça dilinde yazılmış tasavvuf şiirlerini okuma ve dinleme sürecinde yaşadıkları içsel tecrübeleri araştırmaktır. İranlıların, tasavvufi kültürün imkan tanıdığı verimli alanda yeşeren büyük çaplı bir mistik şiir geleneğine erişimleri vardır. Üç ay yürütülen saha çalışmasında yapılan görüşmelere ve katılımcı gözlemlerine dayanan bu çalışma, şiiri belli başlı mesajları ileten dilbilimsel bir araçtan ziyade şiirin kendisini başlı başına bir tecrübe olarak sunmuştur. Şiirsel tecrübenin farklı türlerini incelemenin de yanı sıra bu çalışma hem bireysel hem de kolektif çerçevelerde tasavvuf şiirinin okuyucuda ve dinleyicide yarattığı tecrübenin farklı yollarını araştırmıştır.

Çağdaş İran’da tasavvufi şiir okumalarının deneysel boyutu üzerine yapılan ilk antropolojik çalışma niteliğindeki bu tez, hem Farsça şiir konusundaki anlayışımıza hem de bir araç olarak şiire bakış açımıza katkıda bulunmuştur. Aynı zamanda 21. yüzyıl gibi hızlı bir çağda bile bir kültürün nasıl edebi-mistik mirasını koruduğunu ve bu mirasa rehberlik niyetiyle dönmek isteyenlere anlam ve yön sağlamaya devam ettiğini göstermiştir.

Anahtar kelimeler: İran, İran şiir, tasavvuf, mistisizm, şiirsel tecrübe

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

For me, this thesis is more than just the product of an academic research. The research leading to this piece of writing was an exploration of some of the paths humans walk to discover their innermost truth. This research has taught me the practice of letting mind and heart work hand in hand, as complementary and in service of something greater. Conducting a research that was in line with my heart and my personal desire for meaning in life has been a very fulfilling experience.

I deeply thank the land of Iran and the countless people who have made this learning experience possible for me. Approaching Iran through the focus of an academic enquiry gave me the necessary energy and direction to deepen my understanding of Iranian culture in general and Sufi poetry in particular. I hold heartfelt gratitude for all the individuals who have opened their homes and hearts to me. I am indebted to them for willingly letting me into the world of their experiences and emotions, for giving me a glimpse of the things that add meaning to their lives, for sharing with me what is dear to them - their favorite poetry, their most profound experiences and their dearest stories. Without their generosity and openness this research would never have been possible.

I thank Dr. Iraj Shahbazi, who through his excellent ways of teaching has opened my door to the world of Persian Sufi poetry during my literature classes at Dekhoda Institute in Tehran in the winter of 2013/14. I thank my dear friends Hossein and Sara who so generously hosted me during my field work in Tehran and provided valuable suggestions for this research. I would also like to thank my academic mentor Dr. Önder Küçükural from the Alliance of Civilizations Institute who supported this project from the beginning with his practical advise and expertise in the field of sociology.

I thank my parents for kindling in me the love for other cultures and nourishing in me a profound sense of unity in diversity. Deep gratitude goes to my beloved wife who not only tolerated my physical absence during the period of field work, but also supported me throughout the writing process with so much love and care. Finally, I humbly and reverently bow to the source of all poetry and dedicate this writing to that divine source that is moving and working in us.

TABLE OF CONTENT

ABSTRACT.....	iv
ÖZ.....	v
ACKNOWLEDGMENT.....	vi
TABLE OF CONTENT.....	vii
LIST OF TABLES AND PHOTOS.....	viii
INTRODUCTION.....	1
Epigraph.....	1
The Experience.....	2
Motivation and Standpoint.....	2
The Subject Matter and Core Arguments.....	5
Research Questions and Theoretical Framework.....	7
Research and Methodology.....	10
Terminology.....	13
Contextualization.....	15
The Meaning of “Sufism”.....	16
The Place of Experience in Sufism.....	17
Poetry and Sufism.....	18
Persian Sufi Poetry.....	21
Structure of the Thesis.....	23
CHAPTER 1: READING POETRY IN IRAN.....	24
1.1. Inside a People of Poetry - Preliminary Observations.....	25
1.2. <i>Shā‘erānegi</i> or the “Poetic-ness” of Iranians.....	28
1.3. Poetry and Iranian Identity.....	32
1.4. The Origins of Iranian “Poetic-ness”.....	36
1.5. Persian Poetry Beyond Iranian Identity.....	38
CHAPTER 2: INTO THE EXPERIENCE.....	41
2.1. Flying with the Butterflies - an Experience Account.....	41
2.2. Different Ways of Reading and Experiencing Poetry.....	43

2.3. Listening to Poetry - the Auditory Experience.....	49
2.4. Relating to the Poet.....	56
2.5. Uncovering Meaning in Sufi Poetry.....	62
2.6. 'Sitting onto the Heart' - Experiencing Beauty in Sufi Poetry.....	70
CHAPTER 3: EXPERIENCES OF SYNCHRONICITY WITH POETRY	74
3.1. Divination with Sufi Poetry.....	75
3.2. Synchronicity as an Experience.....	78
3.3. Collective Synchronicity and Interconnectedness in Circle Experience	80
CHAPTER 4: POETRY AND <i>SAMĀ'</i> AS COLLECTIVE EXPERIENCE	88
4.1. <i>Samā'</i> and Ecstasy at a Poetry Ceremony in Tehran.....	89
CONCLUSION.....	100
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	106
ADDITIONS	
INSTRUCTIONS FOR READING	111
CURICULUM VITAE.....	112

LIST OF TABLES AND PHOTOS

Table 2.1: The process of experience transmission in Sufi poetry.....	45
Photo 1.1: Kindergarten children drawing in front of the tomb of Hafez in Shiraz.	32
Photo 2.1: Dr. Shahbazi at Dekhoda Institute Tehran with his first copy of the <i>Masnavi-ye Ma'navi</i>	49
Photo 2.2: Reza Khatibzadeh in his study room filled with books of Sufi poetry near Neyshabur in the province of Khorasan, East Iran.....	64
Photo 3.1: Poetry Circle A in Tehran in January 2017.....	85

INTRODUCTION

Epigraph

Some Hindus had brought an elephant for exhibition and placed it in a dark house. Crowds of people were going into that dark place to see the beast. Finding that ocular inspection was impossible, each visitor felt it with his palm in the darkness.

The palm of one fell on the trunk.

'This creature is like a water-spout,' he said.

The hand of another lighted on the elephant's ear. To him the beast was evidently like a fan.

Another rubbed against its leg.

'I found the elephant's shape is like a pillar,' he said.

Another laid his hand on its back.

'Certainly this elephant was like a throne,' he said.

The sensual eye is just like the palm of the hand. The palm has not the means of covering the whole of the beast.

The eye of the Sea is one thing and the foam another. Let the foam go, and gaze with the eye of the Sea. Day and night foam-flecks are flung from the sea: oh amazing! You behold the foam but not the Sea. We are like boats dashing together; our eyes are darkened, yet we are in clear water.

- Rumi in *Masnavi III*, adapted by A.J. Arberry¹

¹ A.J. Arberry, *Tales from the Masnavi* (accessed online 30/04/18).

The Experience

I feel an emerging inner stillness that envelops my mind. The silence causes a sensation of expansion in my chest and makes my breath slow down. My senses sharpen and I suddenly feel completely awake and vigilant. There is a sensation of natural joy and excitement in my body which doesn't call for expression. I have lost my sense of time and space, or maybe time and space have lost their grip on me, as everything simply becomes part of a harmonious whole, a flow of energy and meaning. The habitual voice of analysis and judgement in my mind has turned silent. The endless stream of thoughts has calmed.

The feeling has something very familiar to it. I have felt it before, yet in this moment it is totally fresh and unique. It is immediate and existential, as if an unheard voice was speaking to me from within the experience: "What you feel right now is your natural state. It is why you are in this world."

I am sitting on a chair in my Persian Literature Class in Tehran. A handful of foreign students are learning to read and understand the verses of classical Persian poetry. I have just finished reading a short section from Rumi's Masnavi which our teacher Dr. Iraj Shahbazi is interpreting and explaining to us.

Motivation and Standpoint

What I have described above is a recurrent personal experience that would take place during literature classes I took at Dehkhoda Institute, Tehran through a period of three months in the years 2013/14. These experiences were triggered by certain poems that touched me in their beauty of meaning. In the long run, those experiences produced a lasting effect on me and opened my senses to the world of Persian

poetry², especially the poems commonly referred to as “Sufi poetry”. These experiences gave me a hint of the potential spiritual power of Persian poetry beyond its obvious value as a part of the cultural heritage of Iran.

In this thesis I will explore the inner experiences of Iranians while reading or listening to Persian Sufi poetry — their experiences with poetry, in poetry and through poetry. I asked myself: If I as a foreigner had such experiences with Sufi poetry, what then do Iranians feel and experience when reading it?

While there is a wealth of studies on Persian poetry and Sufism from academic fields such as literature studies, history, religious sciences or Sufi studies, very little work has been done to investigate Persian poetry through anthropological research. Oxford anthropologist Zuzanna Olszewska writes in the preface of her doctoral research on the poetry of Afghan refugees in Iran: “Perhaps because it is more difficult to translate, less tailored to international audiences, and more embedded within a long and highly self-referential tradition than the richly visual Iranian cinema (...), or because it is perceived as less obviously subversive and current than blogs or less “modern” than prose genres such as the novel, contemporary Persian poetry has been given little to no attention outside of Iran and Afghanistan”.³

While researching in Iran I would often find myself saying to my interviewees that learning Farsi was one of the best decisions I had taken in my life, as it enabled me to discover an almost magical world of beauty and depth. Farsi for me, I realized, had become a vehicle that transported me into a realm of profound aesthetic and spiritual experience. Apparently, this experience had an intensity that

² There is a long-standing and often politically driven debate on the usage of the terms “Persian” and “Iranian”. The word “Persia” is derived from “Pars”, the historical name for the home region of the Persian people, located in the geographical center of modern Iran. In today’s Iran “Persia” has a historic and somewhat emotional connotation, evoking for many Iranians the memories of ancient kings and dynasties as embedded in the common historical consciousness. The word “Persian” (or “Parsi”) alongside with the Arabicized “Farsi” is commonly used to denote the national language of Iran. “Iran” is derived from the Middle Persian “Erān” and officially became the name for the modern Iranian state in 1935. I will use “Iran” and “Iranian” when referring to the country and its broader culture, “Persian” or “Farsi” when referring to the national language of Iran and “Persian” in the context of language and literature.

³ Zuzanna Olszewska, *The Pearl of Dari: Poetry and Personhood among Young Afghans in Iran* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), p. 9.

my own mother tongue and cultural experience as a German did not give me (with the notable exception of listening to Bach). It struck me that this realm of experience seemed just as accessible to me as a foreigner who had studied Farsi up to the literary level as it was to a poetry-loving Iranian.

My first encounter with the Persian language was in 2010 while backpacking through Iran for a month. Back then I experienced an intuitive affinity to the sound of Farsi and to Iranian music. Traveling across the country I didn't feel like I was a stranger in a foreign land. In parts it was my upbringing that accounted for this sense of familiarity. Having been taken on annual journeys to India since I was four by my parents, a strong Eastern presence had been part of my childhood ever since I can remember. The impressions of hospitality and cultural beauty from this initial travel to Iran remained with me as cherished memories. Ultimately, they fuelled my decision to study Farsi in the frame of a Bachelor's degree in Iranian Studies.

I deem it important to reveal my (hi)story, particularly in a research project that aims to explore the realm of inner experience. Had I not undergone an experience with Persian poetry myself, it would have been impossible for me to approach the inner experiences of Iranians with poetry. In fact, I would have never even conceived of such a topic.

Rather than seeing my love for Iranian culture as a bias or obstacle to a supposed "scholarly objectivity", I view my closeness and adaptability to Iranian culture as a strength that helped me in conducting my qualitative research. On the other hand, my European background provided me with a practical "working distance" towards Iranian culture. My relatively young relationship with Iranian culture is not as emotionally charged with memories and personal stories as it might be for an Iranian. Although set in an academic framework my thesis is ultimately the product of my personal relationship with Iran. In the words of Jordan Paper who aptly questions the notion of scholarly objectivity in his study on "mystic experience",

Scholarly objectivity is often understood to require distance from the studied topic. But does this make any sense? Why would an analysis of the mystic experience by someone who admittedly not only does not understand it but is doubtful about its actuality be more reliable than an analysis by someone who does know the experience? We do not expect scholars of the visual arts

to be blind or of music to be deaf; indeed, we assume that a scholar of art enjoys the subject.⁴

The Subject Matter and Core Arguments

This thesis aims at approaching the inner experiences of Iranians with Sufi poetry (*she'r-e 'erfāni*)⁵ and showing that the process of reading or listening to poetry is itself an experience, rather than being just a medium of spiritual instruction.

In *Reading Mystical Lyric: The Case of Jalāl al-Dīn Rumi* Persian literature specialist Fatemeh Keshavarz focused on the experiential dimension of Rumi's poetry. With her study Keshavarz put the spotlight on Rumi as a poet, rather than Rumi being only a mystic who wrote poetry "out of necessity" because he had no better language at his disposal. Keshavarz identifies three common narratives around Rumi's poetry, which are valid for other works of Sufi poetry as well: Firstly poetry, especially from the medieval period, is commonly treated as a form of "ornamented version of referential language".⁶ But in fact, Sufi poetry is much more than that: It is a complex linguistic force that generates meaning in the here and now and touches the reader on different experiential levels. Poems from the past are often regarded as antique pieces of literature, a perspective that bereaves this poetry of its timelessness, immediacy and experiential power.

Secondly, Sufi poetry tends to be read as the expression of the poet's personal experience. However, if we reduce a poem to an account of a particular mystical experience, our view becomes very limited. The poem then will be understood as merely subjective and confined to a particular time and place. This view of Sufi poetry becomes an obstacle to our understanding of how this poetry actually works

⁴ Jordan Paper, *The Mystical Experience: A Descriptive and Comparative Analysis* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), p 9.

⁵ *She'r-e 'erfāni* a particular genre in Persian poetry that is mystical and spiritual in nature. Persian literature comprises a variety of other genres such as court poetry, epic poetry or modern poetry (*sh'er-e now*). Whenever I refer to poetry in this thesis I generally mean Sufi poetry.

⁶ Fatemeh Keshavarz, *Reading Mystical Lyric: The Case of Jalāl al-Dīn Rumi* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), p. 9.

on the reader and how poetic experience is transferred through the verses beyond the personal dimension pertaining to a specific poet.

Thirdly, Sufi poetry is often regarded as a tool which was employed by Sufis to convey doctrinal teachings. To mystics, it is argued, poetry is a means to an end, a perspective which does not give much credit to the poetry itself. In consequence, analysis of Sufi poetry has often been conducted on the lines of certain themes and teachings, matching recurring metaphors with ideas from Sufi thought. This approach, as Keshavarz argues, does not do justice to the dynamism of Rumi's poetry and the ways in which he, and other Sufi poets, intentionally composed poetry to incite spiritual experiences in their readers. It is due time, her work suggests, to put the attention on the poetry itself and on the elements of which poetry is composed.

My research topic was stimulated by this view of poetry and my study will serve to underpin the aforementioned observations. While Keshavarz focuses on the linguistic side of Rumi's poetry, I will investigate poetic experience through the accounts of Iranian readers of Sufi poetry which I have gathered during field work.

In this thesis, I will look at Sufi poetry as being experience, not as being a means of creating some sort of subsequent mystical realization or detached experience. Through examples from a wide array of interviews I will show how experience lies within the poem and is not merely an end-product of the reading. Experience emerges from an interplay of language and meaning and from the personal rapport the reader establishes with the poem and the poet. Understanding poetry as experience, we will see that Sufi poets do not aim at transmitting some fixed meanings, but rather invite their readers to a dynamic process of meaning-making that involves different human faculties. I will establish that experience with Sufi poetry is an existential experience that occurs to the extent to which someone has collected experience in his life. I will also show how the ripples of poetic experience persevere in people's lives and how poetry comes to shape the broader way in which life is experienced.

This study will thus expand our conventional understanding of poetry. By investigating into the width and breadth of Iranian interaction with poetry, I will broaden our view of poetry from being an aesthetic art form to poetry as a multi-

dimensional experience. By letting my interviewees speak I will give an overview of the potentialities that lie concealed in the verses of Persian Sufi poetry. Finally, I will conclude that poetry in Iran, for the conscious recipient, becomes a source of meaning that provides answers to the essential questions of human experience and builds a bridge between his inside and outside worlds. More than being a literary text that is approached from the outside, the poem becomes an integral part of daily life and turns into a lived experience that reaches beyond the momentary experience.

Research Questions and Theoretical Framework

An important question that I asked myself at the onset of this study is: Is it possible to study experience? It is not possible for the researcher to understand poetic experience as it is, because it can be only known through experience itself. But the experiences can be approached by asking precise exploratory questions, listening attentively to the interviewees and to what emerges in those conversations. The findings presented in this thesis are based on the accounts of the experiencers which are verbal renditions of what they have experienced. These “translations” of experience are formed by the way in which the interviewee understands and frames his experience.⁷ Finally, by means of analysis and interpretation, I can discover patterns and parallels in the various accounts and assemble them to a coherent whole. Hence, we are dealing with three different stages: the experience itself, the conversation about the experience and my subsequent reflection on that conversation based on the core argument of poetry as being the experience.

The questions I asked in my research pertain to different levels of enquiry, all of which are interconnected. On the initial level, I try to explore the experience itself: What triggers the experience? What kind of feelings and sensations are prevalent in it? How does the experiencer relate to the poet? Then I look at the nature of the poem that has triggered the experience and at the interaction between poem and reader: How do the verses stimulate experience? What role do factors such as language,

⁷ For the sake of readability only the masculine form will be used from now on. However, it is important to stress that my interviewees were men and women alike and the occurrence of a poetic experience does not in any way depend on gender.

rhythm, imagery and meaning play in the experience? In which ways are mind and heart engaged in this experience?

In order to understand the grounds on which experience takes place, another field of enquiry is the personal relationship of the interviewee with poetry: What role has poetry played in his childhood? How has poetry shaped his life so far? How often and in which situations does he read Sufi poetry? I also pose questions regarding the interpretation of poetic experience and its further implications for the experiencer: What is the framework employed by the interviewee to interpret these experiences? How does poetry serve the personal spiritual needs of the experiencer? How does experience with Sufi poetry affect his individual perspective on life and reality? On the level of society I will look at the wider consequences of the poetic experience: What place does the poetic experience occupy in the spiritual life of modern Iranians? To what extent, in Iran, does poetry answer the human quest for meaning?

Inner experience and the realm of feelings and impressions it occurs in cannot be contained by a particular descriptive theory. My dealing with theory during the research has been “emergent”; meaning that rather than subscribing to a fixed set of theories or methodologies, I have attempted to keep myself open for whatever would emerge from my interviews and observations. This enabled me to hold space for the manifold “faces of experience” to reveal themselves, rather than limiting their possibilities from the onset. This, however, does not mean that theory is absent in this approach, because “we cannot see social reality without theory, just as we cannot see the physical world without our eyes. Everyone carries and uses social theory, cognitive maps of the world we inhabit (...)”.⁸

Rather than placing my observations and findings into a ready-made container of theory, I let the narrative of this thesis develop from the puzzle pieces of collected material as I laid them out before me and tried to assemble them to a coherent whole. Structure here is emergent, just like the research itself was also emergent and led me to places I did not know I would go.

⁸ Michael Burawoy, *The Extended Case Method: Four Countries, Four Decades, Four Great Transformations and One Theoretical Tradition* (Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009), p. xiii.

I will explore poetic experience through direct quotes from the experience accounts and reflections in the interviews, which I will then relate to elements from the Sufi tradition and tie to an investigation of the various mechanisms of poetry, including its linguistic, aesthetic, spiritual and psychological ways of creating experience. Fatemeh Keshavarz's study *Reading Mystical Lyric: The Case of Jalāl al-Dīn Rumi* has proven very instructive for this study. Her theory of Sufi poetry as experience has informed my field research and subsequent analysis. My perspective on Persian Sufi poetry has been shaped by works of scholars of Persian Sufi literature such as William Chittick, Carl W. Ernst, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Omid Safi as well as Dr. Shafi'i Kadkani and Dr. Iraj Shahbazi in Iran. My analysis of the mechanisms behind poetic experience takes inspiration from Wolfgang Iser's response theory which holds that meaning is not fixed in the text but lies in the reader. Chapter 3 will explore poetic experience through divination with the help of C.G. Jung's theory of synchronicity.

Finally, I suggest to read this thesis in line with Rumi's above-quoted story of the elephant in the dark room: Inner experience with Sufi poetry is our elephant and the scholar resembles the people who discover different parts of the elephant, finding out something about its nature without ever being able to fully understand understand the elephant *as it is*. Given the subject matter of this thesis, it becomes clear that it deals with different types of knowledge, not merely intellectual knowledge, but also intuitive and emotional knowledge which Islamic mystics sometimes call the "knowledge of the heart".

James Taylor even speaks of "poetic knowledge" as a distinct category of knowing as opposed to scientific knowledge - this thesis may be understood as an attempt to bring together those modes of knowing that Taylor holds to be "radically different":

Poetic experience indicates an encounter with reality that is non-analytical, something that is perceived as beautiful, awful (awe-full), spontaneous, mysterious. (...) Poetic knowledge is a spontaneous act of the external and internal senses with the intellect, integrated and whole, rather than an act associated with the powers of analytic reasoning (...). It is, we might say,

knowledge from the inside out, radically different from a knowledge about things. In other words, it is the opposite of scientific knowledge.⁹

Research and Methodology

This thesis is my reflection on ten weeks of field work I conducted in Iran in early 2017.¹⁰ It included a mix of interviews and participant observation. In the field, I did not consider myself an outside observer studying a foreign culture, but as part of a dynamic exchange of which knowledge is the “end product”. The material I have collected emerged from this interplay of different factors and elements that joined together at a certain time and in a certain place.

In many cases, my access to interviewees and places during the research was rather straightforward. Often the fact that I was speaking fluent Farsi and showed an honest interest in Persian literature was a door-opener and granted me a warm welcome wherever I introduced my research. Any conversation would typically begin with me answering questions about the story behind my interest in Iran and how I managed to learn to speak Farsi so well, even to the extent that I was sometimes asked if my parents were Iranian.

By displaying an authentic enthusiasm about Persian poetry I moved beyond the role of the outside academician into a shared field of questions about human life and spirituality. This generally secured me a high level of trust by my interviewees. It helped to break down the hierarchy of interviewer and interviewee and, in a way, made both of us participate in a greater quest. The connection I established with my participants led in them to a sense of “he is one of us” rather than “he wants to study me”.

As I conducted the interviews in Farsi I often felt there was very little of a cultural divide between me and my participants during our conversations. My previous readings in Persian poetry, as well as secondary literature, had given me sufficient acquaintance with the Farsi literary world. This included the kind of

⁹ James Taylor, *Poetic Knowledge: The Recovery of Education* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1997), p. 5-6.

¹⁰ My field work stay took place between January 16 and March 29, 2017.

terminology which I needed to conduct the interviews and understand the subtleties in the interviewees' responses. The more my interviewees would realize my expertise and identify me as a sort of "insider", rather than a foreign "outsider", the more they would be ready to touch on deeper levels of their inner experiences and let me partake in their emotions and reflections.

I tried to reach out to people who have a strong inclination towards poetry and read poetry out of an existential spiritual quest. I soon developed a "nose" for potentially interesting interviewees. Often my interviewees would point me to one of their friends saying: "X really has a deep understanding of poetry" or "Y entirely lives with poems", suggesting me to have an interview with him or her, which I would then pursue. At the end I had conducted interviews with twenty-five interviewees ranging from age 26 to 59.

While some of the conversations were with professors and teachers of Persian literature, the greater part of them are with Iranians whose main field of research or profession does not include literature. All my subjects ascribe an important place to spirituality and philosophy in their lives, which naturally raises their receptivity for inner experiences with Sufi poetry. Naturally, the findings of my interviews do not allow for quantitative conclusions, but rather they help illuminate a particular, however important, aspect of Iranian society and culture.

Although I developed a set of questions at the beginning of my research, new aspects would always emerge during the interviews. In every conversation I noticed a unique unseen and dynamic structure emerge which would guide the interview by itself. This often made my prepared catalogue of questions redundant. The unique ways in which each of my interviewees experienced Sufi poetry in their lives and the personal rapport I built with them shaped the course of the interview and often inspired me to ask unexpected questions. In some of the interviews participants told me that this was the first time they were reflecting on their experiences. Then the conversation was not only a personal "reliving" of the poetic experience, but also prompted fresh reflections and became a way for the subjects to digest their experiences.

Moreover, the interview turned into another experience of its own right, with feelings similar to the original experience resurfacing while the interviewees were talking. For me as a researcher every interview was a different experience based on the relationship between me and the interviewee. It was also a practice in listening: sometimes I noticed that my lack of full attention would prevent an interview from deepening, whereas in other cases I could developed a strong receptivity for what was shared with me.

In some interviews I covered a lot of ground, oscillating between topics such as Iranian history and poetic identity, Rumi's ecstatic language, the philosophy of reading and private memories attached to specific poems. Some of the participants replied to my questions entirely on a personal level, focusing on their emotions, physical sensations and individual connections to poetry. Others replied on an abstract or philosophical level, analyzing the psychological processes involved in reading poetry and the factors that enable experience with poetry. In most cases, the content of my interviews would turn out to be a mixture of personal and abstract conversation. However, these two levels are often difficult to separate from one another. After all, seemingly abstract statements can also reveal something of how a person experiences poetry personally.

In some of the interviews I made my interviewees listen to a recording of a specific poem and ask them questions about it. Another method I used on two occasions is a participative circle group conversation in which everyone's personal relationship with poetry became interwoven with the emergent group dynamic. I will describe this method in detail in chapter 3.

I also took part in two sessions of a regular poetry gathering in Tehran as a participant observer. On those occasions I informed the host about my research. During the observations which I will present in chapter 4 I paid attention to the general procedure and to people's behavioral patterns, especially their ways of relating to poetry. My aspiration was not to conduct a thorough ethnography of this community, which would have needed more time, but rather I place these observations into the thesis narrative as a different angle on poetic experience.

I conducted most of the interviews in Tehran, followed by a number of interviews in Mashhad and Neyshabur in Eastern Iran, and others in Shiraz and Esfahan in Central Iran and Kermanshah in the West. The choice of places I made was not in order to attempt a comparison between different regions of the country, but I was just following the advice and contacts I kept receiving throughout my research.

The process of transcribing, translating and evaluating interview material frequently yielded new connections and realizations. As I was listening to the recorded conversations I would often experience sudden inspirations, not produced by a train of thoughts but as a “direct way of knowing” which, strikingly, resembles the way in which meaning is discovered in the reading of poetry. I thus found similarities between the subject matter of my research and the process of researching and writing about it.

It has been a challenge to come up with a coherent way of organizing the large amounts of interview material into separate chapters, as topics often overlap and seemingly different subjects are in so many ways interrelated. The order in which I will present my findings is thus only one among myriad ways of connecting all the threads and layers of this research.

Terming the Experience with Poetry

In this thesis “experience” (Farsi *tajrobe*) will refer to all kinds of inner manifestations resulting from the relationship between the individual and the poem. Inner experience can include virtually anything that is triggered in the person when reading or listening to a poem. One of the challenges in my research has been finding an adequate name for this kind of experience which does not limit the possibilities from the onset, but still provides a tangible working definition. The semantic differences between English and Persian further added to this challenge.

We often come across the term “mystical experience” in the context of Sufism. However tempting the term might be there is no clear agreement about what actually qualifies as a mystical experience and what does not, which is why the

expression is shrouded in ambiguity. In the 20th century, Harvard philosopher and psychologist William James offered four categories of mystical experiences: ineffability, noetic quality, transiency and passivity.¹¹ However, the term “mystical experience” has more recently been criticized as a constructed category that emerged out of the Protestant Christian tradition and is of very limited use in the study of a non-Christian context.¹²

The closest Persian equivalent to “mystical experience” is *tajrobe-ye ‘erfāni*, which stems from the word *‘erfān* (gnosis, mysticism). In modern Farsi, *‘erfān* is used to broadly term what we know as “Sufism”.¹³ However, *‘erfān*, more precisely *‘erfān-e eslāmī* (Islamic mysticism), brings with it an entire host of connotations that are closely associated with the history and teachings of Sufism. I was cautioned in an interview with Dr. Shahbazi that in the classical Sufi understanding *tajrobe-ye ‘erfāni* denotes exclusive spiritual experiences that occur only to highly advanced aspirants on the spiritual paths of Islam.¹⁴

Consequently, I ruled out “mystical” and *‘erfāni* for describing the kind of experiences I was looking to explore. Another option in Farsi is to speak of *tajrobe-ye ma‘navi*, which can be translated as “spiritual experience”. The adjective *ma‘navi* is actually derived from *ma‘nā* (meaning), which carries a more neutral semantic field. Thus the term *ma‘navi* allows us to subordinate a wider array of experiences and emotions under its umbrella. Furthermore, calling an experience with poetry *tajrobe-ye ma‘navi* would point at the fact that poetic experience is, most fundamentally, an experience with meaning.

¹¹ Quoted in: Omid Safi, “Bargaining with Baraka: Persian Sufism, ‘Mysticism,’ and Pre-modern Politics”, *The Muslim World*, Vol. 90 (2000), p. 260.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 261.

¹³ The Encyclopaedia Iranica defines *‘erfān* as follows: “In its generic use, the term *‘erfān* as describing Islamic “theosophy,” is a broad and somewhat amorphous concept adopted by 20th century scholarship for intellectual developments that combine Sufi thought and Twelver Shi‘ite philosophy. (...) The modern use of the term (1) emphasizes the mystico-philosophical side of Sufism and Shi‘ism, in contra-distinction to the organized practice of Sufism (*taṣawwuf*) and to the rational speculation and legalistic reasoning of Shi‘ite theology (*kalām*) and law (*feqh*)” See Gerhard Böwering, “‘Erfān” in: *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (accessed online 30/04/2018).

¹⁴ Interview with Dr. Iraj Shahbazi, male, professor of literature, Tehran, 08/02/17.

I also frequently used the expression *tajrobe-ye daruni* (inner experience) in my interviews. “Inner experience”, being a term of wide possibilities, has provided me with a definitional freedom that seemed practical for this research. “Inner experience” with poetry can accommodate bodily sensations, just as it may also denote emotions, as well as sudden thoughts, realizations and reflections. My approach being to investigate whatever Sufi poetry may trigger inside, I have opted for the term “inner experience” in the title of this thesis.

In this study, I will mostly speak of “inner experience” and sometimes “spiritual experience”. Another term I frequently use to denote experience in poetry is “poetic experience”, which comes close to the Farsi expression *tajrobe-ye shāer‘āne*¹⁵. While the experience at the core of these terms is the same, the terminology basically suggests three characteristics: it happens on the inside, it is spiritual and related to meaning (*ma‘navi*) and it is poetic, because it occurs in the reading of or listening to poetry.

Inner experience is, of course, possible with any kind of poetry. Every poem produces an effect on the reader. In fact, some of my interviewees have also referred to contemporary Persian poetry. However, Sufi poetry has a special place because it is concerned with the deepest questions of human beings. It is read in a spiritual framework and has a special capacity to trigger inner experience. For a better understanding of the word “Sufi poetry” it is necessary to understand the context in which Iranian spiritual poetry was composed and is read and appreciated up to this day.

Contextualization

It is impossible to understand Iranian Sufi poetry separate from its religious and spiritual roots, as has been attempted recently with the poetry of Rumi.¹⁶ In this study I will therefore make repeated reference to the framework of Sufism when describing

¹⁵ The concept of *shā‘erānegī* will be explained in detail in chapter 1.

¹⁶ Franklin Lewis, *Past and Present, East and West: The Life, Teaching and Poetry of Jalāl al-Din Rumi* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2011), p. 2.

poetic experiences. As we will see throughout the thesis, my participants have often borrowed expressions and concepts from the Sufi tradition to explain their experiences. Some of these expressions have found their way into the modern Farsi vernacular. Others belong to a specialist terminology which some interviewees employed to explain their experiences.

In this overview of the spiritual context in which Persian Sufi poetry emerged I will focus on the Sufi view of experience on the spiritual path, on the place of poetry in the Sufi tradition and the importance of the Persian Sufi poetic heritage.

The Meaning of “Sufism”

It is important to realize that the word “Sufism” is primarily a Western concept which evolved out of the colonialist interest for the East at the end of the eighteenth century. It uses the kind of “ism”-classification that groups social or philosophical phenomena on the basis of their main qualities - a method that has its roots in comparative zoology. In this way, the word “Sufism” attempts to unite a wide array of diverse religious and cultural practices that appeared in the Islamicate World.¹⁷ As Carl W. Ernst observes, “Sufism is not a thing one can point to; it is instead a symbol that occurs in our society, which is used by different groups for different purposes”.¹⁸ For Orientalists “Sufism” denotes a set of religious beliefs and practices, but in Muslim mysticism the term *Sufi* has a distinct ethical and spiritual usage.

Although some scholars of Sufism still take those established categories for granted, there has been considerable advancement in trying to understand Sufis in their own terms and grasping Sufism from within the available sources.

While the term “Sufi” has been traced to the Arabic word *suf*, meaning “wool” for the wooden garments worn by early Arab mystics, *tasawwuf* (literally

¹⁷ The term “Islamicate” was used by Marshall Hodgson to make a distinction between “Islamic” as pertaining directly to the Qur’anic revelation and the foundations of Islamic faith, and “Islamicate” for the wider cultural context that emerged in Muslim societies. If we look closely, as Carl W. Ernst points out it, even the term “Islam” itself was not common until its introduction into European languages. Historical sources usually speak of *imān* for the faith proclaimed by Prophet Muhammad. Even the very concept of religion as a category is based on a distinct European understanding of Christianity. The interest in non-Christian religions first emerged out of colonialism. (See: Carl W. Ernst, *The Shambala Guide to Sufism*, p. 1).

¹⁸ Carl W. Ernst, *The Shambala Guide to Sufism* (Boston: Shambala, 2000), p. xvi.

“the process of becoming a Sufi”) denotes a spiritual orientation within Islam - or as some Sufis would put it, a way of life in which the personal spiritual development is placed at the center. Sufism evolved within the cultural matrix of Islam and builds on the foundation of Qur‘anic revelation. In Farsi what we generally refer to as “Sufism” is commonly called ‘*erfān-e eslāmi* or just ‘*erfān* (gnosis, literally “knowledge”).

In modern Iran the concept of ‘*erfān* is a well-established category on which many articles are penned and books are produced. The word ‘*erfān* is not only used for Islamic spirituality, but for all kinds of movements pertaining to spirituality. In fact, during my research I noticed that the term ‘*erfān* is very flexible depending on who employs it: It can be laden with philosophical, spiritual or intellectual weight, but at other times it is also used nonchalantly for New Age-style spiritual practices or a certain orientation in life.

The Place of Experience in Sufism

Sufis or ‘*orafā* (Farsi “gnostics”, “possessors of knowledge”) strive to discover the inner dimensions of Islam. They pay special attention to the experiential realm of religion. For Sufis throughout the ages, living Islam meant that central Islamic principles like *towhid* (declaring that God is one) should not remain mental ideas, but could actually be cultivated and experienced.¹⁹ For a practicing Sufi *towhid* is a unitive experience, a state of being rather than a theological concept.

Based on their experiences and visions on the mystical path Sufis have distilled the teachings of Sufism into doctrinal systems. The terminology of Sufism that is expounded in classical works is therefore “lived knowledge”, an attempt to capture experiences with language. Many of the teachers of the Sufi orders (*turuq*) wrote their treatises to function as an aid for adepts on the spiritual path.

In the Sufi tradition, experience is closely associated with knowledge. Experience is a way of “tasting” the truth, as the word *dhawq* (taste) suggests. *Dhawq* is generally used in Sufism to denote spiritual experience. For Sufis, “tasting” through direct experience is the primary way of attaining certain knowledge

¹⁹ Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975), p. 17.

about something, just like tasting a delicious dish leads to a fuller knowledge of that dish than merely writing about it. In fact, Al-Ghazali defines Sufism itself as *dhawq*, or direct experience.²⁰

Sufis have taught that there are three levels of certainty (*yaqin*): the knowledge of certainty (*'ilm al-yaqin*), the eye of certainty (*'ayn al-yaqin*) and the truth of certainty (*haq al-yaqin*). While the first level pertains to the intellectual knowledge of a thing, the second level means seeing that thing with your own eyes. On the third level, there is a direct experience of the thing. It is on this stage of “truth of certainty” through direct experience that no shred of doubt remains and the highest state of certainty can be reached.

States of experience that occur along the spiritual path are known as *ahwāl* (“states”, Arabic plural of *hāl*). A “state” in the Sufi understanding is a transient spiritual condition that can suddenly descend onto a person and leave him again with the same suddenness. *Ahwāl* can be ecstatic or joyful states, but they may also include other sensations such as awe or sorrow.²¹

Poetry and Sufism

While the Qur‘an warns the believers to stay away from worldly kinds of poetry as it was commonly practiced by Arab tribes before Islam, the Prophet appreciated poetry. Moreover, the poetic language of the Qur‘an itself has significantly shaped the sense of beauty for Muslims.²² Islamic theologians like 11th century philosopher Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali have acknowledged poetry because it “acts the part of the fire steel which lights the kindling of one’s heart. Its flames blaze up and longing is aroused (...) causing states not usually encountered“²³.

²⁰ Peter S. Groff, *Islamic Philosophy A-Z* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 47.

²¹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Garden of Truth: The Vision and Promise of Sufism, Islam’s Mystical Tradition* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), p. 124-25.

²² Carl W. Ernst, *The Shambala Guide to Sufism* (Boston: Shambala, 2000), p. 151.

²³ Quoted in: Kenneth S. Avery, *A Psychology of Early Sufi samā‘: Listening and Altered States* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), p. 82.

The term “Sufi poetry” refers to poetry that was composed by poets generally associated with Sufism or poetry that is read in the framework of Sufism. It is probably not exaggerated to say that the greatest production of spiritual poetry in human history flourished on the fertile soils of Sufism. Shafii Kadkani fittingly calls ‘*erfān*’ “an aesthetic view of theology”²⁴ in which poetry has an important place.

In Sufi poetry we find frequent reminders that no words can ever suffice to express spiritual experiences and describe the divine mysteries. This can lead Sufi poets such as Rumi to complain about the shortcomings of poetry. The underlying paradox of Sufi poetry is therefore that it “it employs words to bemoan the inadequacy of words”.²⁵ To Sufis, language is insufficient to convey experience. Nevertheless many Sufis chose poetry to convey their experiences, because poetry, being aesthetic and ambivalent language, is the kind of language that comes closest to their experiences. Moreover, “the ambiguity inherent in poetry corresponds to the ambiguous nature of indescribable experiences”.²⁶ Poetry’s emphasis on the inner meaning that lies in its symbols reflects the importance of the inner truth (*haqiqat*) in Sufism.

For many Sufis, composing poetry also met the necessity of remaining discrete about one’s experiences. Instead of revealing directly what they had lived, Sufis would code their experiences in metaphors in order to prevent fundamentalist reaction or physical persecution. In many Sufi circles secrecy about one’s realizations was considered one of the prime rules. Sufi poets were masters of this verbal game of concealing and revealing, crafting elaborate worlds of imagery. This is how Rumi expresses his struggle of putting the experience of love into words:

*Whatever I say in exposition and explanation of Love,
when I come to Love I am ashamed of that.*

Although the commentary of the tongue makes clear,

²⁴ Mohammad Shafii Kadkani, *Zabān-e she‘r dar nasr-e Sufiān: Darāmadi be sabkshenāsi-ye negāh-e ‘erfāni* (Tehran: Sokhan, 1392/2013), p. 19.

²⁵ Fatemeh Keshavarz, *Reading Mystical Lyric. The Case of Jalāl al-Dīn Rumi* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), p. 30.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

yet silent love is clearer.

*While the pen was making haste in writing,
it split upon itself as soon as it came to Love.*

*In expounding Love, the intellect lay down like an ass in the mire:
it was Love that uttered the explanation of love and being in love.*

*The proof of the sun is the sun:
if you require the proof, do not avert your face from him!²⁷*

However, Sufi poetry is not just an inspired utterance that occurs incidentally out of a lack of words. It is also an artistic language that was used as a tool to communicate experience on the Sufi path. Sufi poetry is as a “highly complex and deliberately composed literature with more or less elaborate rules of rhymes and meter, and complicated codes of symbolic interpretation”.²⁸

Poets like Hafez, who is considered today a “Sufi poet” (*shā‘er-e erfānī*), were masters of their craft. What distinguishes Hafez’ poetry is that his verses can be read on many levels that echo the multiple levels of reality.²⁹ But what makes Hafez a Sufi and his poetry Sufi poetry? How can we know that a poet was a Sufi? It is not possible for us to judge the “Sufi-ness” of any poet. Hafez, for instance, did not write explicitly on Sufism, unlike other poets from the same genre who, alongside their poems, penned treatises and classical Sufi manuals. Moreover, there are poets who wrote poetry in the Sufi vocabulary without being practicing Sufis. It is therefore more accurate, as Carl W. Ernst points out, to use the term “Sufi poetry” for poetry that is commonly recited and appreciated by Sufis and read in the interpretive framework of Sufism. In the case of Hafez, “the extent of his reception, indeed, makes him a major Sufi poet”³⁰.

²⁷ Masnavi I, 112-116 (Translation by Kabir Helminski, accessed online 30/04/2018).

²⁸ Carl W. Ernst, *The Shambala Guide to Sufism* (Boston: Shambala, 2000), p. 149.

²⁹ The most famous example for this ambiguity is the ubiquitous wine symbol. In a way, the inherent ambiguity of Sufi poetry also reflects the ambiguous nature of experience. It is thus “not a coincidence that mystics have turned to poetry more than any other medium to give expression, through its matching reluctance to be articulated, to their inner explorations.” (see Keshavarz, p. 9)

³⁰ Carl W. Ernst, *The Shambala Guide to Sufism* (Boston: Shambala, 2000), p. 166.

On the other hand, there is undoubtedly an element of “overflowing” in Sufi poetry, particularly in the poetry of Rumi whose verses are said to have originated from states of ecstasy. Rumi has thus lived in a constant state of spiritual experience from which his poetry naturally poured forth. His poetry thus springs from *hāl* (spiritual state) rather than *qāl* (speech). From this point of view poetry is not “planned”, it is not so much the product of an intellectual process as it is an experience revealing itself spontaneously in the moment. At the same time, we must be aware that Rumi was also a poet with technical skills and methods, as it has been shown that Rumi often edited and updated versions of his poetry. I would argue that with poets like Rumi poetic creation was an interplay of *jushesh* (overflowing) and *kushesh* (trying, effort).

The process of poetic creation happens through “an inexplicable intermingling with the Divine to the point that the poetic and the Divine become one and the same. As readers, we never discover (nor are we supposed to) where God’s creative process stops and Rumi takes over”.³¹

The more skilled or “ensouled” a poet, the more he could turn his poetry into a powerful vehicle for communicating experience to the reader. With their poetry Sufis created new spiritual worlds through the usage of fresh language.³² However, it also needs to be stressed that Sufi poetry (*she’r-e erfāni*) is more than an autobiographical account of inner experience, “the real subject of poetry is the experience that the poem creates in the reader”.³³ It is this experience-generating function of Sufi poetry that we will concern ourselves with.

Persian Sufi Poetry

Modern Iranians have access to a vast body of mystic literature that was composed in their mother tongue Farsi. The *Masnavi-ye Ma’navi* of Rumi alone is a work of more than 25 000 *beyts* (couplets or lines of poetry), while Rumi’s *Divān-e Shams* contains

³¹ Fatemeh Keshavarz, *Reading Mystical Lyric. The Case of Jalāl al-Dīn Rumi* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), p. 30.

³² Mohammad Shafi’i Kadkani, *Zabān-e she’r dar nasr-e Sufiān: Darāmadi be sabkshenāsi-ye negāh-e ‘erfāni* (Tehran: Sokhan, 1392/2013), p. 244.

³³ Carl W. Ernst, *The Shambala Guide to Sufism* (Boston: Shambala, 2000), p. 161.

about 35 000. The works of Rumi's literary predecessors Sanai and Attar, as well as Saadi, Hafez, Nezami and Jami can be added to this list, to name only a few.

When seen in the context of the rise of Islamicate civilization, Persian poetry is the product of the highly fruitful encounter between the pre-Islamic heritage of Persia and the cultural impetus of Islam. The emergence of a distinct Persian poetry had a substantial influence on other lands, shaping the Turkish and Indian cultural worlds to the West and to the East.

It needs to be stressed that the flowering of Persian Sufi poetry took place on the breeding ground of Islamic spirituality. The *Masnawi* of Rumi, for instance, contains such a wealth of Qur'anic allusions that the popular claim that Rumi had nothing to do with Islam, arising from the postmodern tendency to denounce everything religious, can be clearly refuted.³⁴ One of my interviewees reflected that "all these poets we are talking about have come from the heart of Islamic wisdom (...) these people have grasped the essence of Islam, not the fringes, not the sectarianism".³⁵

As we will see in the first chapter, Sufi poetry continues to occupy an important place in Iranian culture. Verses of popular poets have entered the modern Persian vernacular in the form of idioms and proverbs. There has also been a gradual appropriation of Persian Sufi poetry in the West during the last two centuries. One of the most famous examples for an Orientalist rendition of Persian poetry into English is Edward Fitzgerald's translation of the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* in 1859 which, interpreted as a proclamation of live-affirming hedonism, became a huge success in the Victorian era.

Sticking closely to the original Persian, literal translations of Hafez and Rumi by scholars such as Nicholson and Arberry made Persian Sufi poetry accessible to a Western academic readership. More recently, these academic literal renderings of Sufi poetry have been rewritten by mainly modern American poets such as Robert Bly or Coleman Barks who transformed them into a suitable modern English poetical

³⁴ Franklin Lewis, *Past and Present, East and West: The Life, Teaching and Poetry of Jalâl al-Din Rumi* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2011), p. xix.

³⁵ Interview with Parastoo, 26, female, entrepreneur, Tehran, 10/02/17.

form. These re-interpretations of Persian poetry have become a major success in the West with Rumi turning into a best-selling poet in the United States.

Structure of the Thesis

Chapter 1 presents the cultural framework in which Iranians relate to Sufi poetry and shows the particularities of Iranian interaction with poetry. Based on my own observations and on interview material, this chapter also provides an insight into the Iranian psyche as it is reflected in the reading of poetry. It serves to prepare the grounds for chapter 2 in which I will explore the different types and characteristics of experience with Sufi poetry as well as the various elements that stand in an interplay, namely the relationship to the poet, the uncovering of meaning and the experience of beauty. This chapter is also concerned with the ways and mechanisms in which Sufi poetry works on the reader and on the listener.

Chapter 3 focuses on a specific type of poetic experience, the experience of synchronicity through divination with Sufi poetry and in self-organized collective reading circles as part of my research. I will further expand on the idea of Sufi poetry as a collective experience in chapter 4 which is based on participant observation in a weekly gathering of poetry, music and dance. The relationship of Sufi poetry with music and movement is at the center of this last chapter.

CHAPTER 1: READING POETRY IN IRAN

After the show of an Iranian film we had sat down with some foreign friends for conversation. One of them asked: “What was that small boy on the crossroads selling? Was it drugs or...?” — I replied: “He was selling fāl.” — He asked: “What is fāl?” — “Poetry. The poems of our great poet Hafez.” — With excitement he said: “This means you come from a country where they sell poetry in the streets and ordinary people spend their money to buy poems?!” Then he went to the other tables and told this to everyone. This is called perspective, some see the darkness and some see the beauty.

— Twitter post of Oscar-awarded Iranian director Asghar Farhadi in January 2017³⁶

When Iranians read and experience Sufi poetry they connect to a centuries-old cultural and psychological field of experience. In other words, inner experience of Iranians with Sufi poetry does not take place inside a vacuum, but it has to be understood in the framework of the broader culture and “poetic history” of the Iranian people.

In this chapter, I will present the context in which the Iranian experience with poetry takes place. Based on my observations on the ways modern Iranians interact with poetry, this chapter will describe the Iranian relationship with poetry as a way of being rather than a way of relating to some form of culture outside of oneself. As we will see, this “living” inside the poetry, which I translate as the “poetic-ness” of Iranians, is an inseparable part of Iranian identity and identity-formation. It gives Iranians a sense of belonging while also addressing their fundamental spiritual needs. Subsequently, I will delve into the question of where the Iranian relationship with poetry originated from, quoting some of the explanatory models my interviewees have used in order to explain the origins of their own “poetic-ness”. Despite the uniqueness in the Iranian way of reading poetry, I will also emphasize the universality of Persian Sufi Poetry.

³⁶ Blog *Hamaḡzā* (accessed online 30/04/2018).

Inside a People of Poetry - Preliminary Observations

It is Friday, the holiday of the Iranian week. I have joined my friend Hossein to visit his parents. We arrive at a modern apartment building on the Northern edge of Tehran where the city meets the mountains. Close-by there is a well-known weekend destination known among *Tehranis* as the “roof of Tehran”. The air in this upper middle class neighborhood is clean and quiet, worlds apart from the hustle and bustle of downtown Tehran. Zohre and her husband Mojtaba are sitting in a spacious living room warmed by a gas heater that is designed to look like a fireplace. There is a kitchen on one side, a seating area to entertain guests and a traditional Iranian *sofre* for floor dining on the opposite end. In the corner stands a long study table filled with reading material.

The room has the sophisticated air of an intellectual Iranian household. Paintings of different styles adorn the walls. Hossein’s father Mojtaba, a retired photographer who crafts *setārs* (traditional Persian lutes) as his hobby, has a tight-grown mustache and wears reading glasses on the tip of his nose. He proudly shows me his collection of hand-carved reed pens that he uses for his daily calligraphy practice. In his life he must have calligraphed thousands of poetry verses, slowly pushing the reed pen down the paper with just the right amount of ink at the end.

One of the walls of the living room is entirely covered by bookshelves containing the most valued treasures of Persian literature: renowned dictionaries of the Farsi language, thick books explaining two millennia of Persian literary history, anthologies of classical and modern poetry and long-stretching multi-volume commentaries on Jalaluddin Rumi’s *Masnavi* by different Iranian literary masters. Mojtaba’s wife Zohre is a retired literature professor who taught at Azad University in Tehran. She has lived with Persian poetry ever since she can remember. From the days of her early childhood, her father and grandfather would read from Ferdowsi’s *Shāhnāme* and from the poetry of Hafez to her while her maternal grandmother used to sing verses from the *Masnavi* into her ear. Her father would also encourage her to read the poetry books he kept in his private library. She says: “Due to of my

early exposure [to poetry], I could memorize any poem after having read it two or three times”.³⁷

With her literature studies at university Zohre consciously committed herself to the preservation of Iranian culture and identity, which is a cause she holds dear even after her retirement. One of my friends from Iran would later tell me a striking characterization for people like Zohre: “They are living as if their lives are poems.”

The more I came across such people in Iran, the more I began to understand what he had meant. A little while into my conversation with Zohre I started reading a long poem of 92 *beyt*³⁸ from the display of my laptop. She simply started reciting along with me from her memory. Whenever my pronunciation went wrong or I would miss the intonation she corrected me. With the same confidence she could recite any Rumi poem that showed up in our conversation. When I asked Zohre about this astonishing skill she confirmed to me that she knew hundreds of Rumi poems by heart. For Iranians like Zohre, the memorization of poetry in childhood turned into a resource she could tap into throughout her life. Poetry comes to shape and enrich her experience of life on a daily basis.

Even a foreign tourist without any prior knowledge of the Persian language would eventually notice the outstanding role poetry plays in the daily life of Iranians. He would spot children selling little envelopes of *fāl-e Hāfez* - selected poems of Hafez - in the streets, on Tehran’s metro trains or in restaurants. Sooner or later, he would find himself in a conversation with locals about Iran’s culture, in which poetry would surely feature. Most probably, his travel itinerary would include a visit to one of the tombs of the most-revered poets. He might make it to the *Hāfeziyyeh* in Shiraz or follow the *Lonely Planet’s* to “take in Omar Khayyam’s magical poetry in his memorial gardens at Neyshabur”.³⁹

³⁷ Online interview with Zohre, female, 65, professor of literature (retired), 24/01/18.

³⁸ A *beyt* is a verse composed of two *mezra’* (lines) that are connected. In Persian poetry, a *beyt* typically has an independent unity of meaning in itself, which means it can be extracted from the original poem and recited alone. The poem referred to is the *tarji’-band* of 18th century poet Hatf Esfahani consisting of 92 *beyt* or 184 *mezra’*.

³⁹ Andrew Burke and Virginia Maxwell and Iain Shearer, *Iran* (Lonely Planet, 2012), p. 239.

Upon return from my first trip to Iran in 2010 I was full of enthusiasm to share my experience, so I would tell friends and family in Germany how important poetry was in Iran: “In Shiraz I saw Iranian youth sitting next to the marble tomb of Hafez reading from books of his poetry for hours. Just imagine this in Germany! That’s as if crowds of German youth would flock to Weimar and read poetry at Goethe’s grave.” This comparison seemed very effective in challenging the popular narratives around Iran as a somewhat backward country caught in middle age fundamentalism or a country that is, at best, too dangerous to be visited.

Growing up in Germany, I experienced almost no exposure to poetry except for the occasional lessons in poem analysis that were part of our German curriculum at secondary school. Poetry was treated as a literary remnant of the past with little connection to the present. Poets like Goethe and Schiller were historic figures, their voices did not seem alive to me and, most importantly, no-one made them come alive for me. There was no bridge between this dusty literary world and my own reality of life. To me, poetry was a language of the past, something confined to the embellished pages of friendship books we used to pass around in primary school.

I was surprised when I encountered people in Iran whose sense of identity seemed to be shaped to a considerable degree by their poetic heritage. The cultural self-confidence with which Iranians would recite poetry and venerate their poets impressed me. When I lived in Tehran in 2013/14 to study Farsi I came to witness different ways in which poetry features in the daily life of Iranians. I remember taxi conversations in which a driver would suddenly begin to recite poetry to me. I used to see artful murals of famous poetry verses and pass by streets, squares or metro stations that were named after famous poets. In conversations I noticed how Iranians could casually link a thought or a question to a specific verse that they would recite from memory.

The cultural landscape of Tehran reflects the place of poetry in Iranian life. Works of the most-read Persian poets are on front display in many bookstores on Tehran’s central Enqelab Street. A number of these stores specialize in poetry and works of literary analysis. As one of the booksellers told me, the *Masnavi* commentary written by contemporary Rumi scholar Karim Zamani consisting of

seven heavy volumes had been a bestseller in the last years. It is remarkable to think that a commentary work on poetry from the 14th century taking up almost one meter of your bookshelf could have such popular appeal in Iran, when elsewhere it would very likely be confined to a highly specialist readership.

During my research I visited Tehran's *Kānun-e zabān-e Fārsī* (Center for the Persian Language) which hosts a series of literary evening programs entitled *Shab-hāye Bokhārā* (Nights of Bukhara), named after Iran's most respected literary journal, the *Bokhārā* magazine. That night a new anthology of Akhavan Sales' work, contemporary poetry, was going to be presented with speeches by some renowned professors and literary figures. I arrived about twenty minutes before the program was scheduled to begin. To my surprise the organizers had already closed all the doors of the auditorium because it was filled up to the last seat. The back room, which was equipped with additional chairs and a screen for live transmission from the auditorium, was teeming with people scrambling to find a place to sit. In the end dozens of visitors had to stand at the back for more than two hours because there were no more seats left. I was struck by how an event like this could draw so many people, literally in their hundreds.

***Shā'erānegi* or the "Poetic-ness" of Iranians**

How can we explain the special relationship of Iranians with poetry? There is a technical term in Farsi which describes a way of being with poetry called *shā'erānegi*. In a Farsi-Farsi online dictionary this word is explained as the "state and quality of the manner of poets" or "a fine and fluid state like the state poets experience while composing poetry".⁴⁰ Rendered into English, *shā'erānegi* could be translated as "poetic-ness". Contemporary Iranian philosopher Dariush Shayegan employs this term in his book *Panj eqlim-e hozur*⁴¹ ("The Five Climates of Presence") which is an investigation into the Iranian connection with poetry:

⁴⁰ Vājehyāb, *Shā'erānegi* (accessed online 30/04/2018).

⁴¹ Translated literally, the title would be "The five climates of Presence". By the five "climates", Shāyegān means five different modes of being which Iranian people possess.

This quality, which I have called ‘poetic-ness’, gives an inexhaustible identity to the world view of Iranians, while it also strengthens their self-confidence. (...) [It is] as if time has not done any damage to the lasting relationship Iranians have with their great [poets] (...). The fact that the last of these notable poets has lived seven hundred years ago has not created the tiniest breach in how we look [towards them].⁴²

As I understood through my research, many Iranians do not regard poetry as a cultural artifact. Poetry is a living reality in their lives. Viewing poetry merely as cultural heritage, like an object displayed in a museum, is a modern approach that has little to do with the ways poetry in Iran has been perceived throughout the centuries. Even the term “culture” as a distinct category defining a certain set of things produced by humans in the past or present, is a modern import into the Persian language. The Persian word *farhang*, which is now used as an equivalent to the English term “culture” only evolved in Iran in the 19th century. Before, the word that came closest to “culture” would have been *honar*, now understood to mean “art”.⁴³ Because their lives are so intertwined with poems, poetry to Iranians is not a “culture” that lies outside of them.

Up to today the question of what actually constitutes Iranian culture is a highly contested topic and would be answered very differently depending on who is answering.⁴⁴ However, the strongest consensus one could probably find among Iranians is that poetry is an essential part of their national identity.

In *Panj eqlim-e hozur*, Shayegan identifies five poets that stand out in the influence they have had on Iranian culture. He characterizes each of these poets - Ferdowsi, Khayyam, Rumi, Saadi and Hafez - with a particular “poetic climate” or mood for which he stands. Shayegan argues that for Iranians these poets do not belong to the past, but they possess an almost eternal or primordial presence in their

⁴² Dariush Shayegan, *Panj eqlim-e hozur: Bahsi darbāre-ye shā‘erānegi-ye Irāniān* (Tehran: Farhang-e mo‘āser, 1393/2014), p. 2-3.

⁴³ Nasrin Rahimieh, *Iranian Culture: Representation and Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 5.

⁴⁴ One of the main fault lines comes with the question of how to trace the origins of “Iranian culture”. Whereas some emphasize the role of Shia Islamic heritage, others tend to view the arrival of Islam in Iran as a catastrophe and consequently essentialize pre-Islamic Persian culture as “the real Iranian culture”.

lives. Taken together, these five poets make up a fivefold multi-layered system in which each of them represents a specific archetype-like aspect of “the Iranian soul” (*ruh-e irāni*) reaching well beyond the perception of poets as historical personalities. Between the soul of an Iranian and these five poets, he writes, exists

a mysterious relationship and connection. For example, that person can become absorbed into the epic and heroic moods of chivalry orders in Ferdowsi, attain the ecstasy of *samā*‘ with Mowlana⁴⁵, save himself with the wise counsel of Saadi, behold the *jām-e jam* on Hafez’ [spiritual] journey in a hundred different ways and ponder the dizzying dance of the world’s atoms from Khayyam’s disenchanting perspective.⁴⁶

An Iranian can shift between these varying moods and modes, all of which are part of his soul. The chronological succession of these poets - meaning how they are historically related to each other - is not as relevant here as the fact that all these poets are linked to a kind of timeless consciousness which Shayegan calls the “perennial memory” of Iranians. Because of this way of looking at their poets Iranians “always see things in images (...) and think through poetry. In my opinion, in no other culture have thought and poetry coexisted in such a mind-boggling way”.⁴⁷ Dr. Taqi Tabatabayi, a professor of philosophy I interviewed at the University of Tehran, confirmed this by telling me that poetry has been the primary medium to convey philosophical points and intellectual wisdom in Iran.⁴⁸

The “transpersonal” view of seeing poets has been also expressed in the context of Western literature, as we see in the writings of the 20th century Scottish literary scholar J.W. Mackail who defines poetry as

⁴⁵ “Mowlana” or “Mowlavi” is the name Iranians commonly use for Jalaluddin Rumi. This Arabic title means “our Master”, which actually was his father’s title before him. The name “Rumi” was given to the poet of Jalaluddin-e Balkhi because he lived in Anatolia, which had been the eastern Roman empire for centuries and had just recently been conquered by Muslims (See Lewis, p. 9-10). In this thesis, the title “Mowlana” will appear whenever I quote from interviews which I translated from the Persian language. However, in other parts I will use the name “Rumi”, as he is more widely known in the West.

⁴⁶ Dariush Shayegan, *Panj eqlim-e hozur: Bahsi darbāre-ye shā‘erānegi-ye Iraniān* (Tehran: Farhang-e mo‘āser, 1393/2014), p. 15.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 17.

⁴⁸ Interview with Dr. Taqi Tabatabayi, 40, male, professor of philosophy at Tehran University, Tehran, 14/02/2017.

essentially a continuous substance or energy, poetry is historically a connected movement, a series of successive integral manifestations. Each poet, from Homer to our own day, has been to some extent and at some point, the voice of the movement and energy of poetry; in him poetry has for the moment become visible, audible, incarnate, and his extant poems are the record left of that partial and transitory incarnation (...).⁴⁹

In the case of Iran, poetry is fully imbedded into the Persian world view, in a similar way that mythology and tales have shaped the imagination of indigenous societies. Tabatabayi calls the Iranian relationship with poetry a “feeling of kinship” (*khishāvandi*):

This feeling [of kinship] with poetry exists in Iran because it is an expression of the rationality (*aqlāniyat*) which Iranians are living, and [in poetry] it is being expressed in an ideal manner (...) it tells us: If you really want to be Iranian, approach yourself to the way of living (*zisti*) that exists in these poems. They give direction and orientation to us. First of all, we cannot say where this [connection with poetry] has originated from. We are *in* this. We are *in* the culture. (...) We live *inside* the poetry. It's not that the poetry is “mine”. This means that by reading poetry and by living with poetry, an Iranian finds himself. He reaches to an understanding of his essence (*chisti*), an understanding of how he should live. Here lies his relation with his tradition and his roots. The relationship with his roots becomes apparent in the poetry.⁵⁰

From among all kinds of Persian poetry the relationship with Sufi poetry is a particularly existential one, because it serves to provide answers to the deepest questions of life. The genre of Sufi poetry has therefore left a substantial imprint on the Iranian soul - or as Shirin, an interviewee from Shiraz, asserted: “Sufi poetry opens another world in front of your eyes. It speaks to you of things that are more important [than ordinary reality].”⁵¹

The relationship between Iranian culture and poetic experience runs in two ways: The Iranian culture of reading poetry shapes inner experience with poetry, but poetic experience has also shaped Iranian culture and identity as a whole. Moreover, if Iranians live inside the poetry, as Dr. Tabatabayi sees it, then there can be no strict

⁴⁹ Quoted in: Ogden and Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning: A Study of the Influence of Language upon Thought and of The Science of Symbolism* (Oxon: Routledge, 2001), p. 158.

⁵⁰ Interview with Dr. Taqi Tababayi, 40, male, professor of philosophy at Tehran University, Tehran, 14/02/2017.

⁵¹ Interview with Shirin, 37, female, accountant, Shiraz, 20/02/2017.

delineation between the poet, the poem and the reader. As we will see in the next chapter all three of them are inseparable parts of the same inner experience.

Poetry and Iranian Identity

It's my third visit to the mausoleum of Hafez in Shiraz. Set among tangerine trees in a green garden with long basins of water that reflect the eight-pillared structure, this elegant place has always seemed emblematic to me of Iran's poetry culture. Even more so at night, when the tomb is lit in yellowish light, the *Hafeziyyeh* seems to embody the beauty of Hafez' poetry.



Photo 1.1: Kindergarten children drawing in front of the tomb of Hafez in Shiraz.

As I sit next to the marble grave suddenly a large group of kindergarten children escorted by a their female teachers trample up the stairs to the mausoleum. Chattering joyfully and holding each others hands, they form a circle around Hafez' tomb, their little fingers clutching the protective glass case around the marble stone. The teachers are spinning around, trying to keep the kids together and constantly reminding them to keep quiet. After a while one of the women raises her voice in the typical tone of an educator: "Here lies Mr. Hafez. Do you know who Mr. Hafez was?" - A hand shoots up into the air. "Mr. Hafez was a great poet." - "*Āfarin!* Mr. Hafez was a great poet of our country. Now all of you repeat!" - About twenty children in chorus: "Mr. Hafez was a great poet of our country!" A few minutes later the whole group sits down in the backyard of the mausoleum for a picnic. After the picnic, the kids are instructed to draw the mausoleum. Pens and paper are handed out and the children take to their task with devoted attention.

An integral part of family and state education, the poetic consciousness of Iranians is formed at a young age. Given these early imprints poetry becomes a major factor in the shaping of Iranian identity, or as Manoukian observes, "poetry is the form in which Iranians experience themselves as subjects endowed with the power to act and live in the world".⁵²

Knowledge of poetry is an important asset for any Iranian to mark his belonging to Persian culture. Being able to recite poetry from memory, a process that Rahimieh calls "an internalization of cultural identity", therefore becomes an integral part of one's self-image. In *Iranian Culture: Representation and Identity*, the Iranian-American anthropologist describes how difficult it was for her aging mother to accept the loss of poetic memory that came with dementia, because her "mother's relationship to language, poetry and fiction was a key component of her public persona and her pride".⁵³

⁵² Setrag Manoukian, *City of Knowledge in Twentieth Century Iran: Shiraz, history and poetry* (New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 218.

⁵³ Nasrin Rahimieh, *Iranian Culture: Representation and Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 122.

There are areas in Iran which have historically been known as possessing strong links with Sufi poetry. Shiraz, being the resting place of Hafez and Saadi, is usually the first city associated with Persian poetry. Naturally, *Shirazis* continue to cherish their connection with poetry. Another region is Khorasan in the Northeast of Iran, a cradle of Sufi sainthood and literature, one of its cultural centers being the city of Neyshabur. Today much of Iran's literary activity is concentrated in Tehran.

The reading of poetry also continues to constitute an important aspect of Iranian social life. Poetry connects people to one another and strengthens social bonding. This becomes visible in cultural rituals such as *moshā'ere*, a game in which friends or family members gather in a poetry competition "where one player recites a line of poetry, and a second player must then recite from memory another poem in which the first letter of its first word is the same as the last letter of the last word of the line recited by the previous player. Whoever fails to come up with a fitting line is eliminated".⁵⁴

How did poetry become so intertwined with identity? In *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, Stuart Hall offers two different perspectives on identity. Firstly, he explains that "our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as 'one people', with stable, unchanging, and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our cultural history".⁵⁵ In the case of Iran, poetry has long been part of the historic narrative. The second perspective views cultural identity as "a matter of 'becoming' as well as 'being' (...) Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation".⁵⁶

Among the lines of this second perspective we can argue that cultural identity in Iran, especially among the younger generation, is indeed fluid and now increasingly includes elements of a global culture in flux, among other elements that

⁵⁴ Abbas Milani, *Eminent Persians: The Man and Women Who Made Modern Iran, 1941-1979. Volume One*. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2008), p. 652.

⁵⁵ Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" in Rutherford, *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), p. 234.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 236.

are more “typically Iranian”. During my research I have come across different approaches to identity with regards to poetry. Some considered their love for poetry as an integral part of their “Iranian-ness”, whereas others told me that being Iranian did not play an important role in their relationship with poetry.⁵⁷

However strong the poetic-ness of an Iranian may be linked to his sense of “Iranian-ness”; the fact that an Iranian grows up with Farsi as a mother tongue grants him a privileged access to Sufi poetry. The Persian language has been shaped by poetry and, along the way, has absorbed many proverbs and expressions originating from poems. Farsi is therefore clearly linked to the poetic Iranian identity, because “although many behaviors can mark identity, language is the only one that actually carries extensive cultural content. (...) Core spiritual concepts framed in the heritage language of the group can be difficult or impossible to express with equal clarity or depth of meaning in another tongue”.⁵⁸

Once, after trying to understand a rather difficult Rumi poem together, I told one of my interviewees that she was lucky to have grown up with Farsi as a mother tongue. Native Farsi speakers, I claimed, were really sitting on a treasure with all this Sufi literature available. She was surprised: “Now that I am looking at it with your eyes, it gives me a different perspective. I did not think of it like this before.”⁵⁹ Sometimes the questions I asked about poetry and identity led to deep reflections on the existential connection with one’s mother tongue and poetry, like in this passage from my interview with Sara:

I was born in this land and I was always wondering why I am Iranian. I never really had a great connection with poetry and literature. (...) But deep inside my mind I knew that there must be a reason why I was born here. Now I can understand why. Everyone has certain possibilities and instruments (*vasile*) that lie in his culture. If my language was different [from Farsi] I would have

⁵⁷ Notwithstanding the outstanding importance of Persian-language poetry for Iranian identity formation, we must be careful not to collapse Persian language and Iranianness. There is a wide body of Persian-language Sufi poetry outside the Iranian context, in both Central Asia and South Asia as well as in the Ottoman Empire. Persian Sufism and its poetry have flourished widely outside the borders of today’s Iran, so if I speak of “Iranian identity” or the “Iranian soul” it is only because this study concerns itself exclusively with Iranians and their relationship with Persian Sufi poetry.

⁵⁸ Nancy C. Dorian, “Linguistic and Ethnographic Fieldwork” in *Handbook of Language and Ethnic Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 31.

⁵⁹ Interview with Shabnam, 29, female, biologist, Tehran, 23/01/2017.

to try really hard to read this. (...) The fact that we have a few centuries distance [from this poetry] also creates challenges, of course. But if you live here and Farsi is your [native] language, this [poetry] is a very suitable instrument for you. It is the proper choice, because this is what has been given to me.⁶⁰

One of my interviewees expressed the respect and pride Iranians often feel towards their language in one sentence: “Until this language exists, Iranian thought will also continue”.⁶¹ This passage from Robert Fishman’s introduction to the *Handbook of Language and Ethnic Identity* about the psychological importance of language occurs to me as particularly relevant for the Persian language:

The language that a person speaks often takes on extralinguistic characteristics that go far beyond the need to communicate. For members of many ethnic groups with their own language, the language itself comes to be symbolic of the group's vitality and place in the world. For instance, we use the term “mother tongue” to signify the first language learned and/or the language of the home. (...) In other words, language, like a mother, provides the nurturance and stability so necessary for healthy development and fulfillment. Language gives meaning to an ethnic group because it connects the present with the past through its oral traditions, literary forms, music, history, and customs.⁶²

The Origins of Iranian “Poetic-ness”

One question that showed up during my initial probe into the Iranian experience with poetry was: Where did the “poetic-ness” of Iranians originate? I was cautioned that this exploration might turn out to be futile, because the Iranian connection with poetry “is so interwoven with our existence. (...) You cannot ask ‘Why?’ (...) you can only ask ‘What?’ and ‘How?’”.⁶³ That said, it is not my aim to provide definite answers to this question. However, I sometimes asked my interviewees where *they* thought the roots of Iranian “poetic-ness” lay. I hoped that these “stories of origins”

⁶⁰ Interview with Sara, 36, female, photographer, Tehran, 21/01/2017.

⁶¹ Interview with Hamed, 36, male, journalist, Tehran, 12/02/17.

⁶² Joshua A. Fishman, “Introduction” in *Handbook of Language and Ethnic Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 12.

⁶³ Interview with Dr. Taqi Tababayi.

would help me see how the participants in this study felt rooted in their “poetic selves”.

An obvious vantage point is to look into the history of Persian literature. The role of Persian literature in the broader unfolding of Islamic culture was shaped in the 11th century with the composition of Ferdowsi’s famous work of epic poetry, the *Shānāmeḥ*. The *Shānāmeḥ* is generally credited with giving birth to a new cultural consciousness around the Persian language. As Hodgson writes, “the rise of Persian (...) served to carry a new overall cultural orientation within Islamdom”.⁶⁴ We can see that poetry was the foundation and identity card of Persian culture as early as one thousand years ago. Starting with Ferdowsi, poetry became a way for Iranians to mark their place in the world and set themselves off from, for instance, Arab culture. This distinct sense of Persian-ness that was formed through poetry has survived to the day.

A more “essentialist” distinction which I heard from several of my interviewees is that Iranians were people of feeling (*hes*) as opposed to Western people for whom the mind (*‘aql*) was more dominant. Elmira, a literature student from Mashhad, said that “Eastern people are more in love, their being is more intuitive (*shohudi*) and their feelings are incited more quickly than their mind is. When this character trait is stronger [in a people], then poetry has an important place there.”⁶⁵ Another interviewee simply put it like this: “Iranians are very emotional (*hesi*). The soil of Iran is like this. All Iranians are very emotional, even if they don’t read poems.”⁶⁶

Whereas some have interpreted this common thought pattern among Iranians as an almost naively simplistic categorization or a kind of “Orientalism in reverse”⁶⁷, I would still argue that the Iranian relationship with poetry certainly does reflect a

⁶⁴ Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam II: Conscience and History in a World Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. 293.

⁶⁵ Interview with Elmira, 36, female, lecturer of Persian Literature at Ferdowsi University, Mashhad, 09/03/2017.

⁶⁶ Interview with Leyla, 35, female, teacher, Tehran, 27/01/17.

⁶⁷ Zuzanna Olszewska, *The Pearl of Dari: Poetry and Personhood among Young Afghans in Iran* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), p. 48.

distinctly emotional and spiritual way of relating to poems which is more “Eastern” in the sense that it has been practically lost in Western culture.⁶⁸

Other interviewees highlighted the geographical position of Iran. Hamed pointed at the fact that, if you drew a line between the extreme West of Europe and Japan in the East, Iran was in “the center of the world”. For this reason it had been exposed to different modes of thought: Intuition (*shohud, kashf*) and mysticism (*‘erfān*) came from the East and rational thought arrived to Iran from the West. But other than for example in India “where people would go and seek out solitude by retreating in the Himalayas, this was not the case in Iran. In Iran, someone with that tendency would sit in a corner and read poetry”.⁶⁹ Hooman explained the place of poetry in Iranian culture with the constantly changing governments and oppressive regimes in 2500 years of Iranian history that led to a collective experience of pain, which, together with the emergence of Sufism, had contributed to the formation of an “emotional archetype” in Iranian existence (*vojud*).⁷⁰ Poetry, he argued, was the principal medium through which this archetype expressed itself.

The answers I gathered also echo the wide-spread perception of Iranians that they live at the crossroads between the East and the West, which is now deeply embedded in the Iranian psyche. This gives them the ability to operate in different modes of being, such as rational and emotional, logical and intuitive. Many of my interviewees saw their “poetic-ness” as part of the more “Eastern” parts of their identities.

Persian Poetry Beyond Iranian Identity

Although there is undoubtedly a uniqueness in the Iranian way of relating to poems it does not mean experience with Persian poetry is confined to Iranians. Many of the people I talked to expressed an understanding that the beauty of Persian Sufi poetry is universal, which means it lies beyond any kind of cultural or national identity.

⁶⁸ It does not mean that it never existed. In Christianity, for instance, spiritual poetry reached a height with St. John of the Cross (see Laude, *Singing the Way*, p. 150).

⁶⁹ Interview with Hamed.

⁷⁰ Interview with Hooman, 36, male, journalist, Tehran, 25/01/17.

After all, if that was not the case how could I have been so profoundly touched by these poems?

Reversely, just by virtue of being born in Iran it does not mean that one has to be drawn to poetry. Rather, the orientation and meaning one “reads” into life will be also reflected in one’s reading of poetry. Parastoo (aged 26) told me that many of her same-age friends did not read Sufi poetry from a spiritual perspective, but thought that these poems do not “have any particular intended purpose (*manzur*), they are nothing special. It’s just how they used to talk 700 or 800 years ago”.⁷¹ In fact, the common lament about the “decay of culture” levied at the younger generations that seem to be forgetting their roots is far from unheard of in Iran, just like in other countries.

Hossein, a *setār* teacher, reflected about the different factors which play together in one’s individual connection to the “jewels” of culture. Persian Sufi poetry, he said, is

something universal; because you have come from a different place and your connection with it is so deep. There is no doubt that being Iranian helps in this [connection]. But being Iranian is just one part of it. You grew up in a family which guided you into this direction [of spirituality] (...). You have traveled with your father and your mother. This is, I think, more important than your being German. (...) That ‘jewel’ (*jowhar*) guides you from some place and takes each of us into another direction. Sometimes we cross each other, but still our paths are different. (...) Each land gives some gifts to us. It is not that I am *thinking* of being Iranian [when reading poems]. These are gifts which every land gives to its people and every family gives to its children. There are not few Iranians who are really ignorant (*bi-khabar*) [of these gifts].⁷²

While the reading of poetry has been a constant in Persian culture people’s reading behavior changes according to the prevalent *zeitgeist*. In the last decades, the Iranian taste of poetry has undergone steady transformation. For example, until about fifty years ago a large majority of lyrics in classical Persian music stemmed from the poetry of Saadi. In the years prior to the revolution of 1978/79 Ferdowsi’s poetry received plenty of attention due to the Persianist tendencies (*Irāngerāyi*) prevalent in

⁷¹ Interview with Parastoo.

⁷² Interview with Hossein, 37, male, musician, Tehran, 28/03/2017.

Iranian society at that time.⁷³ At present, Jalaluddin Rumi enjoys great popularity in Iranian society. For this Dr. Shahbazi identified a number of reasons that give us a picture of how reading behavior in the context of Sufi poetry is shaped today. In his explanation we can see how the state's monopolization of religion has increased modern Iranians' interest in Rumi:

- 1) The governmental religion (*din-e hokumati*) which is politicized and focuses on religious laws does not serve the needs of many people, but caters to the needs of the political system. By reading Rumi, people have access to an alternative perspective on religion that answers their fundamental soul questions (*porsesh-hāye ruhi*). The promotion of only one type of religiosity provokes people to turn to the opposite.
- 2) In modern times psychology has made significant advances. Rumi's thought contains insights that are in line with the findings of modern psychology and can even expand your perspective on psychology.
- 3) Rumi's poetry is calming and especially effective in giving joy and hope to its readers, this is why it appeals to the modern human being that is increasingly caught up in lots of information, consumerism and haste.
- 4) There has been a recent trend among popular Iranian singers of classical Persian music to interpret Rumi's poetry.
- 5) In the West, Rumi has received plenty of attention in recent years, turning him into a bestselling poet. There is a certain tendency among modern Iranians to take the West as a benchmark for all that is good and then imitate Western behavior. As a consequence of this, if Westerners like Rumi, his poetry must be good.⁷⁴

Surely the popularity of Rumi in translation, particularly in the United States, shows us that Persian Sufi poetry has a deeply universal appeal. Although the following three chapters will guide us into the intricacies of the inner experiences of Iranians we shall bear in mind that poetic experience is an essentially human experience without limitation to any specific culture or language.

⁷³ Interview with Dr. Iraj Shahbazi. It is safe to say that these trends apply mainly to the urban Iranian populations which were then a small minority within the whole population of the country. In the countryside, local folk poetry plays an important role that is not taken into account here.

⁷⁴ Interview with Dr. Iraj Shahbazi.

CHAPTER 2: INTO THE EXPERIENCE

This chapter explores different aspects of inner experience with Sufi poetry as it is read and listened to by Iranians in various contexts. I will begin by exploring reading patterns among the participants in this study, followed by quoting some of the experiences that were related to me. Another part focuses on the auditive dimension of Sufi poetry based on a listening experience I incorporated into some of my interviews. The material from my research will provide insight into the depth and breadth of poetic experience with Persian Sufi poetry. Subsequently, we will focus on three aspects that I have identified as lying at the center of poetic experience: The relationship which the reader or listener establishes with the poet as a friend, guide or inner voice; the uncovering of meaning through symbols on the basis of life experience and spiritual experience; and the experience of beauty.

Flying with the Butterflies - an Experience Account

*We're all really three butterflies
In the world of love, we are a legend
The first came near the candle and said
'I have found the meaning of love'
The second fluttered its wing near the flame and said,
'I've been burned by the fire of love'
The third threw himself into the fire
Yes, yes, this is the meaning of love...*

— Fariduddin Attar⁷⁵

When I was reading Attar's poem of the three butterflies [for the first time], suddenly it was as if my heart stopped beating. I couldn't breathe anymore (...). I felt a strange energy. For one hour I was crying heavily and screaming. There was nothing I could do to calm myself. (...) It was as if Attar had entered me. The being of Attar had become one with my being.

⁷⁵ Translation from Sulayman Ibn Qiddees Blog (accessed online 30/04/2018).

(...) When I got out of this state of trance, I did not remember what had happened. But it was the effect of the poem. (...) It was as if, in that moment, I had become that butterfly and was consumed. (...) Now [that I am remembering this], my body is shivering and I feel the vibration of my cells has changed. (...) Without any doubt, these poets are spiritual masters. Their books are not poetry books, these are books of guidance for the human being. They help you arrive where you need to arrive.⁷⁶

What Azar experienced when reading Attar's famous butterfly poem was so memorable that, even years later, she was able to tell me every detail of her experience. It included a physical reaction, a perception of some sort of energy, a sense of intimate connection with the poet - even to the point of identification - and encountering a trance-like state. The experience had a lasting effect on the way Azar looked at life and reality. In the interview she interpreted this experience in a spiritual framework and told me that even the retelling of the experience produced an effect on her body.

Azar's "butterfly experience" happened inside the poem as if she herself was moving with each of these butterflies, drawing nearer to the flame. She turned into a butterfly circling the candle and, at the end, "burnt" herself in an experience of "strange energy" entering her body. Clearly here Attar's poem was itself the experience and Azar was joining the poet on his metaphoric and mystical exploration of love.

Although Azar's experience of Attar's poem was certainly unique it contains elements that appeared in other interviews as well, themes that we will explore in the course of this chapter. I will attempt to find a structure for all those experiences that were recounted to me, bearing in mind that whatever words I will use can ultimately only circle experience, but never reach it completely; the actual nature of the experience is only known to the experiencer himself.

⁷⁶ Interview with Azar Azari, 54, female, teacher, Mashhad, 04/03/2017.

Different Ways of Reading and Experiencing Poetry

The participants in this study do not read Sufi poems just as a habit or for the sake of entertainment, but they approach them in existential ways. I call this kind of attitude towards reading “intentional reading”. The intentional reading of poetry is practiced within the context of a spiritual life orientation and is part of a quest for meaningful existence which my interviewees deem central to their lives. Reading with intention, be it through a sense of purpose, an inner yearning for guidance or as an everyday contemplative practice, creates a readiness for inner experience. It “mobilizes” the energy for the poem to produce an effect on the reader.

Besides intention, the intensity and frequency of reading also play into the poetic experience. Some of my interviewees read poetry spontaneously whenever they feel like, while others address a particular poet when they carry a specific question in mind by means of divination (*fāl*). Yet others are “systematic” spiritual seekers in poetry who reserve several hours each day to the study of spiritual poetry. The last group are the ones whose main focus of life or even profession includes poetry.

About half the people I spoke to recalled that reading poetry was a common activity in their childhood. In those cases the relationship to poetry would typically be transmitted through a key person from the family such as the father or the grandmother. These parents or family elders were the ones who had poetic experiences and passed on the passion for poetry to their offspring. Others grew up in families where Sufi poetry was not read, but later life circumstances led them to reading poetry. Here is a typical story of how a relationship with poetry might evolve over the years:

In my childhood, my father always used to read poems to me. But at that time I just wanted to escape. I didn’t like it, I didn’t understand what it was. However, my ear was always familiar to it. Sometimes he was telling us stories by Saadi, in a way that is pleasant for a child. Even at high school and as an undergraduate, my connection with these books was not very strong. I was in a different world. But then, when I went to university, I started to enjoy reading. The poems I first read were by Hafez. Hafez often speaks of terrestrial love and of ‘the beloved’, which actually means God, the existence of a sacred beloved. In words, he was speaking of terrestrial

love and that's how I [first] understood it. But then in the last years I realized that these are just metaphors. You understand different things at different times.⁷⁷

As we see in this interview snippet Shabnam experienced Sufi poetry in her childhood, unconsciously soaking in the poetry that was read at home, but it took until university for her to have the first “conscious experience” with Sufi poetry. As the desire for meaning and direction in life grows stronger poems come to be read as a guide, and not merely because it is a quick remedy for everyday stress and worry.

Many of my interviewees experience Sufi poetry as a vehicle that takes them out of the ordinary world into deeper realms of existence, or in other words, it helps to bring them in touch with their souls. Here are some verbalizations of how Sufi poetry might be experienced: A poem resembles “home, because there is no constancy (*qarār*) in the material world. A poem is warm (...), it gives you refuge where the mind cannot”.⁷⁸ A poem can awaken a feeling of “being cut off from the world (*kandan az donyā*)”⁷⁹ or it can “remind me that there are things we forget, which need repetition. Like a sportsman trains his body, you also need to train your psychology”⁸⁰.

The sense of Sufi poetry being of sacred or “mystical” nature pervaded many of the interviews, serving as a reminder that interviewer and interviewee are conversing about something that is in fact not graspable by words. When I asked Gholamreza, a young Sufi-inclined Iranian Kurd and aspiring poet, what he feels when he reads a beautiful poem, he replied with astonishment: “Can you describe love? If this feeling could be expressed, it wouldn't be a feeling. If love can fit into the frame of words then it is not love, but it is language (*kalām*).”⁸¹

Poetry is itself a language that brings verbal expression to its limits. In its effort to translate experience into words, poetry is a conscious exploration of the

⁷⁷ Interview with Shabnam.

⁷⁸ Interview with Morteza, 36, male, anthropologist, Tehran, 12/02/2017.

⁷⁹ Interview with Amir Ali, 34, male, director, Tehran, 14/02/2017.

⁸⁰ Interview with Niloofar, 37, female, accountant, Shiraz, 20/02/2017.

⁸¹ Interview with Gholamreza, 32, male, musician, Kermanshah, 29/01/2017.

realm where words meet the wordless. Although frequently lamenting the limits of verse and rhyme in his poems, Rumi still turned to poetry because “he needed a discourse equally at home with the confusion and pain of uprooting as with the joy of love, both of which had played a part in his growth. The poetic experience, which was part constitutive, part expressive of this reality, had to encompass both”.⁸² Poetry can express and trigger the full range of human experiences, a process in which the poet and the reader meet.

The poem forms the bridge between the reader’s and the poet’s inner experience. In the process of experience transmission, something of the spiritual state of the poet is passed on to the listener or reader. In the case of my research the process of verbalizing experience starts with the composition of the poem and ends with the interview:

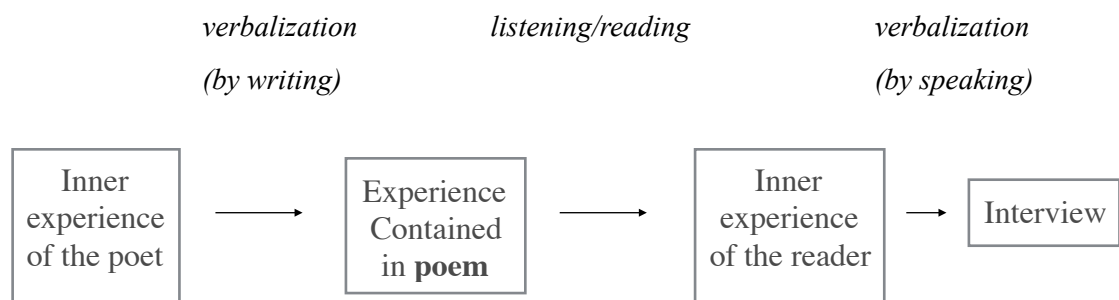


Table 2.1: The process of experience transmission in Sufi poetry.

In order to not only *talk* about the realm of experience, but also *invite* that realm into our conversations, I sometimes requested from my interviewees to “create” an experience by reciting a poem, either from memory or from one of the poetry books that would lie before us. In my interview with Parastoo I asked her to read one of her favorite poems from the *Divān-e Shams* aloud. As she was reading verse by verse, she completely immersed herself into the poem, focusing on intonation and the speed of her voice. After the last line she let out a deep breath and

⁸² Fatemeh Keshavarz, *Reading Mystical Lyric. The Case of Jalāl al-Dīn Rumi* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), p. 7.

fell into a moment of silence. I could see in her body language that she had entered a state of deep relaxation. I too could feel the calming effect of listening to the poem.

After a while I asked her if that feeling of tranquility would always occur. Parastoo, who frequently reads Rumi poems to audiences of people, told me that it all depended on her state of mind. At times, her mind would “interfere” during the reading, out of anxiety for making mistakes or the desire to impress others. This, in turn, impacted her connection with the poem and made it hard for her to connect to the meaning in deeper ways. The setting of the reading and the state of mind the reader has in that moment are two factors that impact poetic experience.

When Hooman recited verses from his favorite Rumi *ghazal* to me in an upscale Tehran café he described his feeling like this: “Now my whole body got goosebumps. (...) It’s because what I am reciting in this poem is about what I love. It is that loving (...) towards the teacher, God or earthly beloved (*ma’shuq-e zamini*).”⁸³

On another occasion I sat with Shabnam in the living room of her flat in the West of Tehran. I grabbed the *Divān-e Shams* from her bookshelf and opened it randomly, challenging myself to read the poem that first caught my eye. As I was trying, she politely corrected my pronunciation and sometimes we halted to ponder on the meaning of a *beyt*. When we closed the *Divān*, Shabnam told me that there were times when she was not in the mood of reading poetry. “But then, when I open it [the *Divān-e Shams*], it turns into an exercise. I read four poems and I might not be able to understand them. Then, suddenly, the fifth one just completely brings me to *that level (ān sath)*.”

What is it that underlies Parastoo’s and Hooman’s experiences with Sufi poetry and what did Shabnam mean by “that level”? S. H. Nasr argues that Persian Sufi poetry transports a “celestial atmosphere” to the reader:

Persian Sufi literature contains what one could call the depiction of paradise, that is, it creates a kind of celestial atmosphere for the soul to breathe in. When Persian Sufi poetry is read, its didactic elements become to some extent eclipsed by the presence of an atmosphere of celestial quality. This atmosphere has been of utmost importance not only for Persian culture and the nourishment of the Persian soul, but has also had profound

⁸³ Interview with Hooman.

effect on those outside of Persia proper. The reputed effect of this literature, especially the poetry more than the prose - and we could call its therapeutic effect - has to do with this kind of atmosphere into which the soul enters through the recitation of this poetry.⁸⁴

It is to experience this atmosphere that my interviewees turn to poetry. My aforementioned experience of Rumi's poetry during a literature class with Dr. Shahbazi was about passing into that kind of atmosphere. When I related my experience to Dr. Shahbazi he said this was not the first time a foreign student told him of such an occurrence. Although Dr. Shahbazi is expressly careful for his classes to be of academic nature, to confer theoretical knowledge about Persian poetry, he shared with me that he would frequently notice the inner state of his students change during class. He instantly understands when this transformation takes place, "from their looks, from their kind of energy (...). This feeling exists along with the [theoretical] information and is transferred completely".⁸⁵

The experiences of foreign students show that inner experience of this atmosphere is possible even without much previous exposure to Sufi poetry. However, the more a person practices intentional reading of Sufi poetry, the more his relationship with the poems is likely to deepen and with it the experiences. One could say that the amount of past experiences one has had with Sufi poetry shapes the experiences and also transforms their quality. This means not so much that poetic experience can be "trained" at will, but rather that one's "container" to receive meaning through poetry grows bigger, as we shall explore further on.

Dr. Shahbazi's reading experiences are exemplary for such a deepening through frequent reading paired with a strong intention. During the last 13 years he has been reading the *Masnavi* of Rumi for more than ten hours a day. According to his own calculation he has read over the *Masnavi* about fifty times from the first to the last page. Still, he told me, that each time he opens the book, he feels as if he is reading it for the first time. While reading he senses that he is completely detached from time and space. He experiences a strong heat in his body, combined with a

⁸⁴ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Persian Sufi Literature" in *The Legacy of Medieval Persian Sufism (1150-1500)* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1999), p. 5.

⁸⁵ Interview with Dr. Iraj Shahbazi.

physical lightness that resembles “the body of a newborn baby that has been in the world for one month”. With shining eyes, Dr. Shahbazi told me of an experience he had during the *nowruz* holidays two years ago. For six days he retreated into a room and read Rumi’s *Divān-e Shams* from four in the morning until ten at night. During this intensive encounter with Rumi’s poetry he went through a swirl of emotions and experiences. Here is an excerpt from his account which contains elements from Rumi’s thought:

I can’t tell you what these six days were about. Those were days I could die for. The *Divān-e Shams* is *that* great. (...) When you read the book [*Divān-e Shams*] it invites you: ‘Come towards me’. But, in my view, only few have the courage to move towards Him [God]. (...) Total self-sacrifice (*pākbāzi*) is one of the keys in Mowlana’s thought. From the beginning you have to be ready to give up everything. (...) I had the feeling of being invited to fully devote myself. But I didn’t have the courage to go to the end. (...) Mowlana gives you the feeling of enjoying life and death at the same time. Someone who really understands Mowlana enjoys all moments of life and is in every moment ready to leave life behind. This is a great paradox. (...) When there is a direct and unmediated contact (*ertebāt-e bi-vāsete*) with the text, none of these explanations remains. (...) When you enter the *Divān-e Shams* you feel that you have ceased to exist. The book is carrying you with itself and you don’t know where. There is a sense of lightness, of deep joy, sometimes heavy crying and the feeling that your skin can’t contain you anymore. It wants to tear apart. All of these are experienced [at the same time].⁸⁶

While reading Rumi’s *ghazals* Dr. Shahbazi feels that he is entering the experiential realm from which Rumi was writing his poetry, which includes deep sentiments such as complete devotion and great joy of life. The poetry does not “confer” these feelings, but their experience is actually *in* the poem - to the point that the experience of Rumi and the reader become one. The process of reading *is* the experience of concepts such as the devotion and joy of which Rumi frequently talks in his verses. Undoubtedly here “the poems themselves are the mystical experience and the meaning, not a container holding them”⁸⁷, as Fatemeh Keshavarz has argued.

It also became clear to me that Dr. Shahbazi’s experience with the *Divān-e Shams* originated in a very particular relationship with Rumi which he built up

⁸⁶ Interview with Dr. Iraj Shahbazi.

⁸⁷ Fatemeh Keshavarz, *Reading Mystical Lyric. The Case of Jalāl al-Dīn Rumi* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), p. 19.

during that six day-long journey of reading and, to a larger extent, during all his years of reading Rumi's poetry. As I was listening to Shahbazi's account I could myself feel some of the energy charge of what he had experienced being transferred onto me through his words.



Photo 2.1: Dr. Iraj Shahbazi at Dekhoda Institute Tehran with his first copy of the Masnavi-ye Ma'navi.

Listening to Poetry - the Auditory Experience

*Listen to the reed how it tells a tale,
complaining of separations—
Saying, “Ever since I was parted from the reed-bed,
my lament has 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.
Every one who is left far from his source
wishes back the time when he was united with it.*

— Masnavi I, 1-4⁸⁸

Rumi initiates his *Masnavi* with the word “Listen” (*beshnaw*), reminding his audience to listen deeply to what he has to say. Our experience of a poem fundamentally depends on our capacity to listen, no matter if we read a poem or actually *listen* to it being recited. “Deep listening” enables us to penetrate into deeper layers of a poem, while also staying attentive to the experience that occurs in our bodies, minds and souls. The understanding of listening here is extended: It is not a passive function reserved to the ear, but it is an active state of being “in which we are fully present with what is happening in the moment without trying to control it or judge it. (...) For listening to be effective, we require a contemplative mind: open, fresh, alert, attentive, calm, and receptive”.⁸⁹

The process of listening deeply to poetry is an experience of continuous uncovering within the poem. In fact, the poem itself can be said to have emerged from an act of deep listening: Before writing, the Sufi poet has listened in himself to what of his experience “wants” to be revealed and transformed into language.

Listening to a poetry recitation augments the auditory dimension of a poem and can produce effects different from reading. In the state of listening, as opposed to reading a poem, a person may become more receptive for the “atmosphere” of the poem because his mind is no longer concerned with aspects such as correct pronunciation. The skill of the reciter, his fluency and intonation, as well as his inner state during the reading can significantly impact the auditory experience. A reciter who reads to an audience of people also has to be sensitive to people’s reactions and

⁸⁸ Translation by Reynold A. Nicholson, *The Mathnawī of Mawlāna Jalāladdīn Rūmī* (Konya: Tablet Publication, 2007), p. 10.

⁸⁹ Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, *Deep Listening* (accessed online 30/04/2018).

be conscious of the states his reading induces in them.⁹⁰ In a way the reciter is reading and listening at the same time (to his own voice), so in his experience there is a confluence of reading experience and auditory experience.

The effect of listening to poetry is also treated in the *Kitāb al-Luma'* of Abu Nasr Al-Sarraj (d. 988), believed to be the earliest guide to Sufism. Al-Sarraj tells the story of an assembly of scholars who had gathered to discuss theology. Among them was a mystic named Nuri. After having remained silent for a while, Nuri suddenly bursts out into reciting four verses of love poetry which are a lamenting expression of the pain of separation. Upon hearing the poem, all the scholars rise to their feet and immediately fall into a state of ecstasy. The author uses this example of group entrancement to demonstrate the limitedness of the intellect in the face of love.⁹¹ In the Sufi tradition, poetry recitation was also known to have therapeutic effects. In one account, a patient was cured from all his ailments by listening to a beautifully recited verse that was connected to his physical condition.⁹²

For most of history listening has been the primary way of connecting with Sufi poetry. Dana Wilde points out that in modern times “because of our reliance on print (and electronic) media, it takes a little work to grasp the fact that only in the last hundred years or less have people thought of poetry as primarily a private, silent reading experience. Before our time, poetry was spoken aloud - more accurately, it was chanted or sung, in all cultures”.⁹³ Still today, albums that feature poetry recitations of famous reciters continue to hit Iranian bestseller lists.

During my research I invited six of my participants to a listening experience⁹⁴ of a Rumi poem read by Abdolkarim Soroush. In order to create the setting for their inner experiences, I asked them to close their eyes, listen attentively to the recitation for three times and take note of the sensations and thoughts arising in them.

⁹⁰ Kenneth S. Avery, *A Psychology of Early Sufi samā': Listening and Altered States* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), p. 186.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 206.

⁹² Ibid., p. 96.

⁹³ Dana Wilde, *On Sufism and Poetry* (accessed online 30/04/2018).

⁹⁴ The participants are Azadeh, Dariush, Elmira, Hossein, Niloofar, Shirin.

Afterwards I asked which verses or words from the poem had resonated with them while listening. The *ghazal* I picked is one of the best-known poems from the *Divān-e Shams*.⁹⁵ It has been interpreted as a conversation between love and the mind:

*I serve that orb in heaven,
say no word but Orb!
speak to me of nothing
but sweetness and light
Not of bother, but of treasure
and if you cannot find the words
don't bother.*

*Yesterday a craze came over me
Love saw, came up to me:
Here I am,
don't shout
don't rip your shirt,
hush, shh!*

*I spoke:
Love, I'm scared of that other thing
There is no other thing, say
nothing!
I will whisper secrets in your ear
you just nod in asseveration
speak in semaphore*

A nova, a celestial love

*burst bright above the heartpath
so exquisite the quest of heart,
it cannot be expressed*

*I asked:
Heart, what orb is this?
heart intimidated:
beyond fathom
be quiet, forget!*

*Is this the face of man or angel?
Beyond men and angels
hush!*

*What is it?! Tell me, I'm in a whirl
Whirl on, keep quiet!
You sit within this room
whose walls reflect
mere forms and suppositions
Get up, go out, move on,
keep quiet!*

*I said:
Heart, befather me,
for doesn't this match God's
description?*

⁹⁵ Translation from Franklin Lewis, *Past and Present, East and West: The Life, Teaching and Poetry of Jalāl al-Din Rumi* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2011), p. 370-71. About his translation Lewis remarks: "I have used 'orb' (...) to render what is literally "moon" (*māh*, *qamar*). This is the shining visage of the beloved, beside which all other thoughts and images pale. Unfortunately, the English 'moon face' does not have a very happy connotation."

*Yes, my son, it does,
but do not tell.*

but do not tell.

I have systemized my observations and the participants' experiences in four categories (number and names of participants in brackets):

1) Physical behavior observed:

- closed eyes (6)
- light smile on the face (1)
- gentle movement of head (1)

2) Feeling/sensation described by participant:

- quickened heartbeat (2)
- feeling a surge of energy entering the breast ("as if seeing someone I love") (1)
- breath changes (1)
- experience of calmness (1)
- feeling "like something inside yourself wants to jump out, like the cage of the breast is narrow (*qafas-e sine tang ast*)" (1)

3) Impression that...

- "words are very alive" (Elmira)
- all emotions expressed in the poem "have a form, color, smell, taste" (Elmira)
- "Rumi is speaking from my heart" (Elmira)
- the *ghazal* is about severance from the world, "cutting the ties of attachments" (Azadeh)
- this poem is sacred, "not everyone deserves to hear the secrets" (Dariush)
- this is "one of the *ghazals* with which I can get high and forget time and place" (Niloofar)

4) Associations with verses/words that resonated:

- *beyt 3* - restlessness of the lover, longing for the lover to arrive - “it gives me a sense of hope, feeling ‘I have come’” (Elmira)
- *beyt 3* - expresses “fear of the unknown. I have experienced this feeling, but this *beyt* makes me feel better. (...) ‘hich magu’ is calming me. When you want to let go of everything, there is fear of cutting the ties of attachments.” (Niloofar)
- *beyt 5* - reminds me of “sweetness of awareness that I have experienced several times, especially during dreams, when my mind is still” (Elmira)
- *beyt 9* - “describes someone who seems normal on the outside, but has unrest inside.
I observe lots of unrest among the people around me, everyone is trying to make himself seen” (Hossein)
- *beyt 10* - “leaving the ‘house of *naqsh* and *khial*’ has been my real wish since I was 3 years old” (Elmira)
- *beyt 11* (Shirin)
- repetition of “hich magu” - “there is really nothing left to say, silence is very important” (Dariush)

This evaluation shows the various ways in which a poem can be experienced by different listeners. For example, while a poem might incite feelings of great excitement in one person, it can give a sense of profound calmness to someone else. Rumi’s *ghazal* has an atmosphere of stormy upset (voiced by the restless mind) which is balanced with the certainty and reassurance coming from the voice of love. In the poetic experience these two emotions are not opposites, but they can form two stages in the same process of experience. Which aspect the listener relates to in that moment determines his experience. In fact, while listening to the *ghazal* many simultaneous processes take place in the listener and all these inner responses are hard separate from each other. His experience occurs through the dynamic movement of the verses that carry him forward, each verse being a whole world in itself. That is why, as Keshavarz cautions, we should not - as it is often done with Sufi poetry - study “various elements of this poetry in isolation as if they were in a fixed posture, ignoring the changing mood and attitude of their constituent parts

from verse to verse.”⁹⁶ Parastoo described this flow of changing experiences in Rumi’s *ghazals*. There

is never a steady rhythm, a straight line. (...) It’s like in each moment something in your existence is re-ordered (*jā be jā mishavad*). You go up, you come down [with the poem], there is pain, there is joy. They always come together, you always see the opposites in each other. (...) It is life [itself].⁹⁷

At the same time there often is a conscious or unconscious “remembering” that takes place and leads the listener to associate certain verses with his ideas or past experiences, such as “the fear of the unknown” (Niloofer) or the unrest that one witnesses in one’s environment on a daily basis (Hosseini). As the findings in 4) show, different verses may resonate with different listeners, based on associations that surface in the moment. The conversation between mind and heart - or mind and love in the case of this poem - is an experience many people can relate to. While listening to the poem a memory of such an experience might be evoked. The poem can also trigger memories of particular situations in life which was the case with Azadeh who once attended a funeral ceremony where this poem was recited. Listening to it immediately brought back her memory of that ceremony.

This particular *ghazal* makes the listener “observe” the love-mind conversation, just like a spectator would watch a dialogue in a theatre scene. This observing is a revelatory experience because it leads to insights into the ways mind and love operate within the listener, it mirrors to him the mechanisms within his own psyche. In this way, one can gain the impression that Rumi is indeed “speaking from my heart” (Elmira). Rumi’s poetry becomes “alive” (Elmira) when the recipient can connect elements from his or her own life experience to the verses. The poem is “sacred” (Dariush) because it directly relates to our innermost realities. As we listen to the poem, every verse is a fresh experience and we feel as if Rumi is *actually* speaking to us. The relationship that is established between listener or reader and the poet plays an important part in the inner experience with Sufi poetry.

⁹⁶ Fatemeh Keshavarz, *Reading Mystical Lyric. The Case of Jalāl al-Dīn Rumi* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), p. 8.

⁹⁷ Interview with Parastoo.

Relating to the Poet

I am not the physical presence you observe but the pleasure and the happiness you sense inside as you hear my name and my words. If you feel such a pleasure, treasure the moment and express gratitude, for that is me.

- Rumi as quoted by Aflaki in *Manāqib al-‘ārefin*, 1:185⁹⁸

I have lived with Mowlana. I have visited his house. I have joined him in his solitude with Shams. I don't feel he is a poet who belongs to many years ago. For me he is one of the alive ones (*kasāni ke zende ast*). (...) His words are a kind of revelation (*vahi*). His words have a soul, they are alive. That's why when you read these words, you don't read them from the mind, but with your heart. Your mind might not understand, but your heart does. (...) Each one reads [Mowlana] from his own understanding (*har kasi az zann-e khodash mikhānad*). There are so many different theories about Mowlana.⁹⁹

When Elmira talked about her personal relationship with Rumi her face was radiant with joy and excitement, almost as if she was speaking to me of a secret beloved. It struck me how a young woman could speak in this way about a poet who had lived almost 800 years ago. For her, Rumi was not only her living mystic teacher, but also her *mahram*, to use the Persian and Arabic term for “trusted confidant”.

In one's inner experience with a Sufi poem often one feels a connection with the poet who composed those lines. This relationship might be embedded in the reading, but it can also be perceived as a direct personal relationship. There is an immediacy to this connection that bridges time and space, bringing a poetic voice that was embodied in the past right into the present moment. In this experience the poet does not so much represent a voice taken from history, but he might be felt - in the words of Rumi - as “the pleasure and the happiness inside”. Going back to Shayegan's model of “poetic climates”, the poet comes to symbolize a sort of archetypal quality in the reader. For Parastoo, for instance, Rumi represents joy, so

⁹⁸ Quoted in: Fatemeh Keshavarz, *Reading Mystical Lyric. The Case of Jalāl al-Dīn Rumi* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), p. 7.

⁹⁹ Interview with Elmira.

by reading his poetry she connects not only with Rumi but also with the joyful part inside herself:

All of us are after joy in our lives. But the interesting thing about Mowlana is that he doesn't look for it. He knows 'I am myself the essence of joy'. No-one and nothing can give or take this from me. (...) We are always in search of this joy and child-like innocence. Being joyful without any reason. That's the thing that we really, really need in this world. (...) finding the joy inside of ourselves instead of looking for it outside. Mowlana can be such a role model (*'olgu*) for me.¹⁰⁰

During the interviews I observed multiple ways of relating to the poet behind the words of a poem. Some interviewees related a sense of intimacy or of feeling equal to the poet, just like in a pleasant conversation between two friends. While there is an existing sense of "kinship" with poets in the Iranian cultural consciousness, each person has his own history with poets. Some people might have read Rumi, Hafez or Saadi for many years of their lives, so they are like old acquaintances to them. Adding to this existing cultural bond and history with a poet, there is a unique relationship that builds up in the moment of reading. Morteza reflected on his connection to Saadi in relationship to his own life experience like this:

When I look at this great man of his time who has lived many years before me and [realize] that my feelings correspond (*motābeq ast*) to one of his poems, it is like a stamp of validation (*mohr-e tayidi*) to my feelings, [telling me] 'you are on the right path'. It connects me to that man, beyond time and place. I feel that I am going the right way. I sense that I am at eye level (*ruberu*) with that man. There is no 'higher' and 'lower' anymore. We can completely speak together, we are on one level. Saadi then for me is like a friend with whom I can speak for hours. This removal of hierarchy is really enjoyable. He turns into a friend in the present.¹⁰¹

In this example of Dr. Tabatabayi, Saadi - who is often seen as the poet of morality (*akhlāq*) in Iran - is experienced as a friend with a direct voice giving practical life counsel, however not with a lecturing tone:

He is a friend who is next to me (*baghal-e dastam*) and speaks to me. (...) He is a very kind and equal (*barābar*) friend. Whenever I speak to him,

¹⁰⁰ Interview with Parastoo.

¹⁰¹ Interview with Morteza.

instead of saying ‘follow me’, he reminds me of myself. He continuously tells me: ‘Think. Be yourself.’ Through his words, he creates a counterpart for me, not an ideal that I need to follow. He gives me a mirror in which I see myself (...). We are like two people who are walking with each other.¹⁰²

Another sentiment I came across is a profound sense of awe towards the poet’s greatness. Being humbled by a poet’s insight or his depth of expression can be an experience of going beyond the limits of one’s own identity. Speaking in Sufi terminology this “humbling” enables us to transcend - even if only for a moment - the confinements of our *nafs*, the ordinary ego-consciousness. In the face of the divine wisdom that finds expression in the poet the reader becomes “nothing” (*hich*), which is an important experience on the path of Islamic mysticism (*seyr-o soluk*). In that place the poet can be experienced in a “transcendent” or in an “immanent” way, meaning as a great sage whose elevated spiritual stage lies beyond one’s own reality or as *dost*, the close spiritual friend. In this account Shabnam relates an experience of discovering her own inner voice in the poetry of Rumi while being humbled by his spiritual magnitude:

When he [Mowlana] speaks to me, I feel that it is actually me [who is speaking]. I don’t want to say that I am Mowlana, no, in my grasp (*dark*) [of Mowlana] I am maybe just a tiny particle (*zarre*) of his greatness (*bozorgi*), of this ocean. When I open this [book], it’s like I am connecting to the experience which he had, to the great soul and great understanding, to the perspective that he had on the material world (*jahān-e hasti*), on life and on everything, on the whole (*kol*).¹⁰³

Shabnam hints at a mystical sense of identification with the poet (*hamzātpendāri*) that occurs during the reading. She feels that the messages she “receives” from Rumi are actually already inherent in herself. While reading the verses she feels like she is speaking to herself. This relationship with the poet emerges from the inside of the reader and can be compared to the Sufi understanding that there exists actually just one “essence” (*asl*) that is continuously speaking to itself, be it through a poetic voice or even in ordinary human conversation.¹⁰⁴ Seen in

¹⁰² Interview with Dr. Taqi Tabatabayi.

¹⁰³ Interview with Shabnam.

¹⁰⁴ Conversation (*sohbet*) with Sufi teacher Ali Osman Çoban in Istanbul.

a spiritual light, the relationship between the reader and the poet reflects the relationship between one's personality and one's higher Self. The higher Self manifests in the messages and meanings that the reader discovers in the Sufi poem, as if "it is something from inside of me that is speaking this. This [poet] is someone of my kind (*az jens-e man*), and even of my own language".¹⁰⁵

Nourishing that kind of relationship with poetry in the spirit of '*erfān* has consequences in the way Iranians look towards Sufi poets. Sufi poets come to be seen as the wake-up callers who remind us to connect to our innermost truth, a truth that is not separate from the truth the poets conveyed. Thus any of the Persian Sufi poets can be, as Laude formulates it, "considered as an intuitive and meditative soul who enjoys a rare ability to contemplate reality in a more profound and subtle way than do most fellow human beings."¹⁰⁶ In the spiritual world of my interviewees, poets are seen as the keepers of the treasure of timeless wisdom. Sufi poetry is their key to access this treasure trove. However, as we will explore in the next part, this experience might be lost to someone who has not spiritually readied himself sufficiently. In the view of Heidegger who was fascinated with poetry "the holy sends its greeting, by way of the gods, to the poet, who, hearing, tells the people. But the poet's word, which carefully guards mystery, is fragile; further, the people are not always ready to respond to it."¹⁰⁷

According to Heidegger, a poet is someone who receives messages from the gods, and in the receiving itself there is also an act of giving: "The writing of poetry is the fundamental naming of the gods. But the poetic word only acquires its power of naming, when the gods themselves bring us to language."¹⁰⁸ Hossein had a similar understanding when he reflected on how Sufi poets pass the wisdom they have received on to humanity, even for centuries to come:

¹⁰⁵ Interview with Hossein.

¹⁰⁶ Patrick Laude, *Singing the Way. Insights in Poetry and Spiritual Transformation* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2005), p. 1.

¹⁰⁷ Robert Mugerauer, *Heidegger and Homecoming: The Leitmotif in the Later Writings* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), p. 133.

¹⁰⁸ Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 97.

I think that they are the most certain people on earth. Otherwise, who in the world would you want to trust? (...) I need someone to guide me. Who has guided humankind until now? Among those guides, who has lived on? What is left in history? For me, it is *this* [Sufi poetry] that has remained (...).¹⁰⁹

Poets can also be experienced as a kind of religious intermediary. When God seemed unreachable, one of my interviewees used to see Hafez as her personal mediator with the divine. To her, Hafez was like “a God who was inside of me”. He was always available through the *Divān* which she kept in her pocket at all times.¹¹⁰ When read in the framework of a traditional ‘*erfān*’ education poets such as Hafez can also perform the function of formal Sufi guidance (*ershād*). In many of the Iranian Sufi orders (*tariqat*) poems are used for teaching, to convey gnostic truths or to foster spiritual conversation (*sohbat*). As Dana Wilde writes, “the Sufi master has to make the student aware of his inner self, the self that is an element of, or is the Divine. Poetry and music touch the inner sensibilities -- the emotional, intuitive, moral and spiritual parts of the inner self. They open the person living in the visible world to the realities of the invisible world.”¹¹¹ Baba Majid, a modern Sufi master from Esfahan, told me that he often reads or sings poems of Hafez to his students. Hafez, to him was a “master, doctor and poet” in one.

According to Persian literature specialist Shafī‘i Kadkani, each poet has something different to offer to the human being: “As each poet has had his own specific life and experiences, the pictures in his imagination are also particular and the kind of metaphors he uses make up his particular character.”¹¹² While Hafez is arguably the most-loved poet among Iranians from all walks of life, many Iranians have been drawn to Rumi’s poetry in recent times. Which poet an individual feels most attracted to depends on his personality and character. According to Dr. Shahbazi every human is on a quest to find his *hamjens* (connatural), a kind of “spiritual

¹⁰⁹ Interview with Hossein.

¹¹⁰ Interview with Azar.

¹¹¹ Dana Wilde, *On Sufism and Poetry* (accessed online 30/04/2018).

¹¹² Mohammad Shafī‘i Kadkani, *Sovar-e khiāl dar sh‘er-e Fārsi: Tahqiq-e enteḡādi dar tatavor-e imāzhhā-ye sh‘er-e pārsi va seyr-e nazariye-ye balāghat dar Eslām va Irān* (Tehran: Āgah, 1350/1971), p. 21.

counterpart” they resonate with. An individual may relate more to one poet than others “because that poet is closer to the understanding which I have of myself”.¹¹³

The majority of participants in this study seem to have found their poetic *hamjens* in Rumi. Rumi is not only emblematic of the very genre of Sufi poetry, but he is also particularly successful in triggering strong spiritual experience, because “Rumi doesn’t compose poetry, he overflows (*mijushad*) with poetry”.¹¹⁴ Rumi, as Dariush told me employing the vocabulary of Sufism, “has torn apart the veils of secrets (*pardehā-ye asrār*)”.¹¹⁵ Rumi is also the enraptured mystic *per se* who is said to have uttered poetry while whirling in a state of trance.¹¹⁶

Similarly to Heidegger’s view of poets as messengers who communicate to us from the gods the Sufi poet is like a channel through which wisdom can flow. According to Kadkani “the poetic experience is not a product of the will of the poet, but it takes place on the level of the soul and, while being unaware of it, becomes reflected in his intellect; while also being based on the events that occurred in his life”.¹¹⁷ Just as the experience of every reader is unique, the experience of the poet while writing or uttering his poem was also unique. The experience Rumi had while writing (or uttering) the *ghazal* which I chose for the listening experiment is thus unrepeatable. At the same time it is never static: In each poetic experience there is a constant flow of experiential states (*hālāt*). Rumi’s experience transforms from moment to moment, from verse to verse, just like the reader’s experience is in constant flux. Consequently, there can be endless configurations between the reader’s and the poet’s experience. At the place where the state of the poet meets the state of the reader a very unique and unrepeatable reading experience takes place.¹¹⁸

¹¹³ Interview with Dr. Taqi Tabatabayi.

¹¹⁴ Interview with Hooman.

¹¹⁵ Interview with Dariush, 36, male, worker, Tehran, 14/02/17.

¹¹⁶ However, we should not overlook the fact that Rumi has time and again edited his poetry.

¹¹⁷ Mohammad Shafi’i Kadkani, *Sovar-e khiāl dar sh’er-e Fārsi: Tahqiq-e enteqādi dar tatavor-e imāzhhā-ye sh’er-e pārsi va seyr-e nazariye-ye balāghat dar Eslām va Irān* (Tehran: Āgah, 1350/1971), p. 21.

¹¹⁸ Mohammad Shafi’i Kadkani, *Zabān-e she’r dar nasr-e Sufiān: Darāmadi be sabkshenāsi-ye negāh-e ‘erfāni* (Tehran: Sokhan, 1392/2013), p. 34.

In this unique experience the borders between reader and poet finally begin to blur, even to the point of disappearing. More than anything it is the discovery of meaning that gives momentum to such experience. The process of uncovering meaning at the intersection of life experience and poetic experience is a crucial event that deserves some thorough investigation.

Uncovering Meaning in Sufi Poetry

What's interesting is that each time you listen [to a *ghazal*] it gives a different feeling to you, even when listening to it three times in a row. Each time one *beyt* attracts your attention more (...). It is not the poem or the words that have changed. It is my perspective (*negāh*), which has changed. The place from which I look at the poem, the place I am in that moment [has changed].¹¹⁹

A poem, even a single verse, not only means different things to different people; when read at different times it can also convey different meanings to the same person. After reading his favorite Rumi *ghazal* to me Dariush marvelled at the fact that “each time when I read a *ghazal*, it manifests (*tajali mikonad*) in a different way in my mind. (...) Each time something else becomes visible. Which secret is sleeping in this greatness?”¹²⁰ It was this “secret” that I was trying to unlock on a Tuesday morning in February when I went to Tehran University's Faculty of Literature to attend Shafi'i Kadkani's class. Professor Kadkani is Iran's most respected authority on Sufi poetry, as well as a contemporary poet who is nothing short of a living legend in the Persian literary scene.

Taking part in Kadkani's class was itself a memorable experience. Before entering the overcrowded classroom I had prepared a question on the origins of spiritual experience with poetry. The moment 77-year-old Kadkani sat down on the chair in front of his class the chitchat among the students immediately died away. In the following two hours Kadkani answered questions from his students, sometimes taking as long as twenty minutes to respond. At the end of class I finally prevailed against dozens of inquisitive students raising their hands and posed my question to

¹¹⁹ Interview with Parastoo.

¹²⁰ Interview with Dariush.

him. Kadkani leaned forward to make sure he heard me well. Then he answered in the voice tone of a distinguished intellectual, but the gentle smile on his face which made his eyes narrow simply gave him the looks of a humble old man. In his response Kadkani explained poetry's countless possibilities of meaning-making by referring to the '*Ayn-ol Ghozāt-e Hamedāni*, one of the primary treatises of Persian Sufi thought:

Let's say you read the *Divān-e Shams* and I read the *Divān-e Shams*, or someone else reads and we both listen. (...) Physically, the responses and reactions towards the audio waves which originate from the recitation (*gharā'at*) of the *Divān-e Shams* are the same. But the emotional states and spiritual experiences (*tajārob-e rouhāni*) which I have and the ones which you have are infinitely different. (...) Because I have my own particular spiritual background (*zamineha-ye rouhāni*), and you have your own particular spiritual background. (...) [It says in the] '*Ayn-ol Ghozāt* that every phenomenon of art is a mirror. Each one sees in that mirror himself. By itself the mirror does not have a special meaning. The mirror does not have a face of itself, but everyone sees his face in the mirror. (...) The theory of the '*Ayn-ol Ghozāt-e Hamedāni* constitutes in fact the meaning of art.¹²¹

Every poem holds a mirror to the reader in which he can see all kinds of meanings (*mafāhim*). Basically those meanings are not "out there in the poem", but they are already inherent in the reader. What the reader finds when reading a poem depends on what is alive (*zنده*) and present in him during that moment. Ultimately the process of discovering, or better *uncovering* meaning, occurs on the basis of the reader's life experience and spiritual experience. In his essay *On Sufism and Poetry*, Dana Wilde reflects on the correlation between spiritual experience and the meaning of a poem, arguing that

the individual shapes his or her own spiritual experience in the same way that he or she shapes the meaning of a poem. There is no poem acting in one way on all readers, giving one meaning and one meaning only; and this is because the act of reading -- or better, hearing -- is not a subject-object activity, one thing acting on another: Reading or hearing is a collaboration of a force of words and the listener's shaping imagination. Each person brings a different set of experiences, understandings, dispositions, interests to each poem, and hence finds different meanings than other listeners.¹²²

¹²¹ Class with Shafi'i Kadkani, University of Tehran, 14/02/2017.

¹²² Dana Wilde, *On Sufism and Poetry* (accessed online 30/04/2018).



Photo 2.2: Reza Khatibzadeh in his study room filled with books of Sufi poetry near Neyshabur in the region of Khorasan, East Iran.

In classical Sufi terminology one can say that the level on which a reader can understand or “find meaning” in a poem depends on the degree to which he is “cooked” (*pokhte*), meaning how much he has experienced and ripened on the spiritual path. There is virtually no end to cooking, therefore no interpretation or commentary on poetry can claim to be final. The intentional reader tries to get nearer to the poet’s level of understanding, because - as the poetry scholar and author Reza Khatibzadeh told me - “to the extent the commentator is distant from Rumi, his commentary (*tafsir*) will be also flawed (*nāghes*). (...) I can understand his verses only to the extent that I have approached Rumi.”¹²³ Khatibzadeh, who has dedicated much of his adult life to the reading of Sufi poetry as part of the spiritual training he received on the Sufi path, hinted at Rumi’s lines at the beginning of the *Masnavi*: *Dar-nayābad hāl-e pokhte hich khām* —‘None that is raw understands the state of the ripe’.¹²⁴

¹²³ Interview with Reza Khatibzadeh, 59, male, scholar, Neyshabur, 10/03/17.

¹²⁴ Translation by Kabir Helminski, *Masnavi I* (accessed online 30/04/2018).

Of course this does not mean that Sufi poetry is something hierarchical and cannot produce spontaneous experience for someone who is not “initiated” or experienced enough. However, the framework in which the poetic experience is going to be interpreted will then look different. One of my interviewees, with reference to the Qur’an, explained that the aim of creation was not to bestow everyone with the same level of understanding. That is why Sufi poets needed to compose their verses on different levels of meaning so they could speak to different people in different ways.¹²⁵

Life experience and spiritual experience are intertwined and grow in time: “In the poem, you see who you are. (...) The more your spirituality is strong and the more you have experienced, the deeper you can relate to the poem (*ertebāt-e zharf-e bishtari*).”¹²⁶ This means that understanding of a poem does not root so much in an intellectual preparedness or in some form of mental learning, but it deepens to the extent to which a person can link verses to his *lived* experience. Sara explained this process to me when reflecting on an experience she had with a Rumi poem:

It is not that you read a poem and understand it because you have studied before. It depends on an inner readiness. Maybe, if I had read this poem in a different moment, I would have just passed it by. (...) You need to be in a certain life situation and you need to have made certain experiences so that you can understand this. This is not to say that ‘now I have understood Mowlana’s message’. It [the understanding] is to the extent that I have had life experiences, (...) to the extent that my [capacity of] listening has grown (*parvaresh kard*). (...) How much readiness do you have for these words so they can reach your heart? (...) The connection you establish [with the poem] in that moment is the result of all your life, of the questions in your life, of your way of living. Your life has brought you there, so that you could attain such receptivity and (...) receive from it [the poem].¹²⁷

For the poem to inspire understanding in Sara that inspiration had to be already inherent in her as a seed, be irrigated with the water of life experience so that it could finally sprout with the help of the poem. The poem here plays the role of “midwifing” new meaning, understanding and realization in oneself. Uncovering

¹²⁵ Interview with Elmira.

¹²⁶ Interview with Reza Khatibzadeh.

¹²⁷ Interview with Sara.

meaning in the poem is thus a perpetual process that will always yield fresh results. As Sufi poetry concerns itself with the perennial questions of life it will never lose its relevance to answer the human quest for meaning: “Like all good poetry, Rumi’s lyrics will be deciphered in numerous readings by generations to come and yet will remain cryptic. His readers will continue to hear his voice echoing from century to century (...)”.¹²⁸

As the “image” one sees in the poetic mirror always changes, poetry also reflects one’s personal life journey over time. Hossein gave the example of how a poem he might have found merely “entertaining” or “nice” during his youth seems to contain a deeper message when read at a later point. Sometimes it is not until you make a certain life experience that the poem really comes to life. In this way a single poem can provide perpetual guidance on one’s life path: “As you walk on this path, the poem also gets closer to you. You understand the words better and its presence becomes more palpable (*porrang*) in your life.”¹²⁹ Poetry also endows us with the vocabulary and meaning to understand our inner world, “it gives shape to those empty spaces within us that we have no words for until we find them in a poem”.¹³⁰

This gradual “opening” of meaning lies at the center of Wolfgang Iser’s reader response theory which “holds that meaning does not reside in the text, but in the mind of the reader”.¹³¹ Drawing on Iser’s theory, Antonio Spadaro asserts that “the meaning of the text is a dynamic event. Reading is not an act. It is a process, something happening in time, the meanings being activated piecemeal. (...) The reader is therefore akin to a traveller. He or she travels through the ‘poetic’ text from his itinerant point of view, uniting all he sees in his memory, mixing memories from his own life, as well as images and recollections from the reading of earlier pages of the text. (...) At no time, however, is he able to see the entire picture of his

¹²⁸ Fatemeh Keshavarz, *Reading Mystical Lyric. The Case of Jalāl al-Dīn Rumi* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), p. 99.

¹²⁹ Interview with Hossein.

¹³⁰ Jill Bialosky, *Poetry Will Save Your Life* (New York: Atria Books, 2017), p. 200.

¹³¹ “Reader Response Theory”. *Oxford Reference* (accessed online 30/04/2018).

journey”.¹³² Ultimately, the meaning *is* the process, it is not some kind of fixed end-product that needs to be obtained.

When we discover that a poem addresses our life, especially in troubled times, this can give birth to a life-affirming force which can entirely transform the way we look at our condition. I heard such a story from Sara¹³³: A few years ago she found herself in a depressive life situation. When feeling she had reached a deadlock, a simple poem of Rumi profoundly changed her perspective on what she was going through. The poem became an anchor for her to hold on to. It infused fresh meaning into her life. By using the image of the grape’s transformation into wine, Rumi reveals that all the difficult travails in life are sent for the sake of our own maturing:

*Only then does the grape of my body become wine
When I am squeezed under the grape press.
I shall die under the squeezer like the grape
So my secrets may be revealed and turn into Joy.
Although the grape is crying tears of blood
That ‘I am weary of all this tyranny and misery’
The grape presser puts cotton into his ear
As ‘I am not squeezing because of ignorance’.*¹³⁴

The simple and highly effective symbols of grape, grape squeezer and wine worked together to create Sara’s experience with this Sufi poem. By making things vivid, metaphors help us grasp meaning playfully. The symbology in a poem transfers meaning in a non-rational way, which is why “the meaning you can think of is usually not the most powerful or affective (sic) meaning the poem conveys — (...) metaphors evoke ‘feelings’ in the range of emotions, but also sensibilities, in the range of intuitions, and of moral and spiritual senses of meaning which are very

¹³² Antonio Spadaro SJ, “Non tantum lecturi sed facturi: Reading Poetry as Spiritual Transformation” in *Poetry and the Religious Imagination: The Power of the Word* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), p. 183.

¹³³ Sara shared this story in the Poetry Circle on 26/01/2017 (see Chapter 3).

¹³⁴ My translation of *Divān-e Shams* 1678.

difficult or impossible to express directly (...) In other words, metaphors make you feel a meaning rather than think it.”¹³⁵ The American poet Jill Bialosky puts it like this: “A poem enters the reader or listener, inhabits her, so that its meaning is, in a sense, superfluous to the experience of encountering it”.¹³⁶

Symbols and metaphors have always been important means for humans to approach the inexplicable divine mystery, because through symbols “a transcendent reality is mirrored. There are so many metaphors reflecting and implying something, which, though thus variously expressed, is ineffable, though thus rendered multiform, remains inscrutable. Symbols hold the mind to truth but are not themselves the truth, hence it is delusory to borrow them. Each civilization, every age, must bring forth its own”.¹³⁷

In Iranian civilization Sufi poetry has doubtlessly been the most prolific generator of symbols. Poets such as Rumi are masters in using everyday images to generate “meaning-full” experience in people. Rumi’s poetry is a “bridge to the universe” in that it builds a personal and unprecedented relationship with the universe around us, the grapes, the fish, the sea, the planets.¹³⁸ In the words of Shafi’i Kadkani,

the unique perspective of the poet (...) towards the relationship of nature and the human being transports us into another world, a world that possesses freshness; and although its elements are habitual and available to all, the kind of combination, the way the poet connects the human being to nature, is fresh and caused by his imagination.”

The spiritual experience with Sufi poems is thus an experience of meaning-making through symbols. The essential relationship between spirituality and meaning is reflected in the Persian word *ma’navi* (spiritual) that derives from *ma’nā* (meaning). As Hossein Nasr writes, Persian Sufi poetry is “able to carry us to the far shore of existence precisely because it issues from that shore, precisely because its

¹³⁵ Dana Wilde, *On Sufism and Poetry* (accessed online 30/04/2018).

¹³⁶ Jill Bialosky, *Poetry Will Save Your Life* (New York: Atria Books, 2017), p. XV.

¹³⁷ Heinrich Zimmer, *Philosophies of India*, Edited by Joseph Campbell (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1953), p. 1.

¹³⁸ Fatemeh Keshavarz, *Reading Mystical Lyric. The Case of Jalāl al-Dīn Rumi* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), p. 96.

language is never what it appears to be in its literal and external aspect. One penetrates into the language to be carried by it to the inner meaning, from the *surat* [form] to the *ma' nā'*".¹³⁹

In downtown Tehran I interviewed Vahid and Leyla, a married couple who share an affinity for reading Sufi poetry. In the interview it came out that they had different approaches towards poetry. Vahid, who regularly attends a poetry gathering I will present in chapter 4, described that poetry affected him when it had a rhythmic form (*surat*) and when certain words or phrases were repeated in it, no matter what the meaning of the poem was. Leyla, on the other hand, told me that the meaning (*mafhum*) of a poem produced an effect on her. She said she would often read a poem multiple times, pondering on different words to deepen her understanding, which led to a prolonged state of inner experience in her. Accordingly, Vahid had a strong affinity for the rhythmic and ecstatic poems of the *Divān-e Shams*, while Leyla preferred to study the more instructive *Masnavi*. She called these two approaches "drunkenness" (*masti*) and "soberness" (*hoshiyāri*).¹⁴⁰

Vahid and Leyla both had their own experiences with meaning; Vahid through the feeling that was evoked by poetic rhythm in his body and Leyla through an intellectual engagement with meaning using the mind as a "door" to meaning. A poem can work in all those ways:

A poem's meaning alters by the associations, insights, and experience we bring to it. We may respond to the poem for meaning, or because we fall under the spell of its musicality and end rhymes, or because we are drawn to the poem's sense of irony and wit, or its visual imagery. A poem can do many things at once. (...) it can challenge the reader intellectually, spiritually and emotionally. It can validate our experiences or cause us to question our beliefs.¹⁴¹

Eventually experience with poetic meaning brings together the faculties of mind and heart. Dr. Tabatabayi sees the emergence of an "illuminated mind" at the center of poetic experience, an intellect that is able to harmonize the opposites of life

¹³⁹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Persian Sufi Literature." In *The Legacy of Medieval Persian Sufism (1150-1500)*, (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1999), p. 8.

¹⁴⁰ Interview with Vahid, 35, male, graphic designer and Leyla, 35, female, teacher, Tehran, 27/01/17.

¹⁴¹ Jill Bialosky, *Poetry Will Save Your Life* (New York: Atria Books, 2017), p. 5

and grasp the deeper meanings of poetry. In Hossein's experience "first your brain (*zahn*) becomes active in discovering the meaning of the words so that you can connect to it. When your mind understands, then the meaning follows (...) and the poem can 'sit onto the heart'".¹⁴²

'Sitting onto the Heart' - Experiencing Beauty in Sufi Poetry

In Farsi one way to express that something - particularly a work of art - has moved you is to say "it has sat onto my heart" (*be delam neshast*). The adjective *del-neshin* (literally "heart-sitting") is a common word for something that is beautiful and moving. I noticed that the participants in my study often used this idiom to express that a poem had affected or touched them in a profound way. Such ways of expression reveal, on the level of colloquial Farsi, an immediate connection between poetry and the human heart. In combination with "to sit (onto)" this expression seems to suggest that a poem can deeply penetrate one's inner core and firmly "take a seat" there.

The engagement with meaning, as we have seen, lies at the the core of inner experience with poetry. Sufi poetry also works on humans by producing a sense of deep beauty. It is, as one of my interviewees remarked, "the most beautiful and refined kind of expression of human beings, in all cultures".¹⁴³ Poets beautify and perfect the use of language. They transform referential language, the primary medium of human communication, into linguistic gold. We feel that "poetry is the place where language falls in love"¹⁴⁴, because it has the potential to stir the most profound human emotions. In Sufism beauty is an essential virtue as reflected in the famous *hadith* "God is beautiful and He loves beauty".

On the spiritual path, as Hossein Nasr describes, "beauty is able to attract the soul and to enable it to break this hardness which prevents it from reaching the heart. This is precisely the function of beauty in Persian Sufi poetry: it is there to

¹⁴² Interview with Hossein.

¹⁴³ Interview with Reza Khatibzadeh.

¹⁴⁴ Interview with Elmira.

complement and aid in the process of reaching, through spiritual discipline and practice, the heart, which is the center of our being”.¹⁴⁵

How then, does the inner experience of beauty by means of poetry come about? Through its content, symbology, melody and rhythm poetry can trigger profound aesthetic experiences that answer the intrinsic longing for beauty in us. As we read the verses of a Sufi poem, we experience beauty in different ways. A great work of art, be it Rumi or Beethoven, is able to take a human beyond the noise of his mind, to ignite him and bestow on him an experience of “exiting himself” as Saadi suggests in one of his poems (*az khod bedar shodam*).¹⁴⁶

Just as it depends on who is reading, the ability of poetry to stir aesthetic experience also depends on the skillfulness of the poet in his craft, for example how sophisticated he is in the use of symbols or how harmoniously he can use poetic rhythm or employ silence. Shafii Kadkani calls these two sides - the skill of the poet and the receptivity of the reader - the positive and negative poles in the transmission (*resānegi*) of poetry (however, he argues that in authentic Sufi poetry it is mainly the negative pole that determines the quality of poetic experience).¹⁴⁷

Being a “skilled” writer of poetry, in a Sufi sense, means that the poet must have reached a certain level of spiritual attainment and mastery of his craft so that his poem could reflect wisdom and beauty. “Words that come from the heart reach the heart”, my participants would often tell me to characterize a poem that had reached their heart. Reza Khatibzadeh made a distinction here between “genuine” Sufi poets (*shā'er-e āref*) and those who just wrote in the Sufi style.¹⁴⁸

What are the mechanisms of Sufi poetry which play together to create aesthetic experience with beauty? In his article “On Sufism and Poetry”, Dana Wilde argues that Sufi poetry operates twofold: through image and metaphor, and through

¹⁴⁵ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “Persian Sufi Literature.” In *The Legacy of Medieval Persian Sufism (1150-1500)*, (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1999), p. 9.

¹⁴⁶ Interview with Dr. Taqi Tabatabayi.

¹⁴⁷ Mohammad Shafi'i Kadkani, *Zabān-e she'r dar nasr-e Sufiān: Darāmedi be sabkshenāsi-ye negāh-e 'erfāni* (Tehran: Sokhan, 1392/2013), p. 35.

¹⁴⁸ Interview with Reza Khatibzadeh.

sound.¹⁴⁹ This seems to correspond with the fact that some interviewees explained the efficacy of Sufi poetry by pointing at metaphor and sound in the Persian language. Speaking of his mother tongue Farshid made a noteworthy statement: “Saadi has not composed poetry in Farsi. *We* are speaking the language of Saadi”.¹⁵⁰

Farsi has an inherent linguistic flexibility that makes it very suitable for word plays and multi-layered meanings. It is rich in metaphor, which shows in how frequent Iranians use images and proverbs in daily speech. The poetry of Hafez is the best example for this linguistic flexibility because one of his *beyts* can often be read on multiple levels of meaning, giving his poetry a mysterious (*rāzgune*) touch. Added to this, the beauty of writing Persian poetry has been heightened through the rich Iranian traditions of calligraphy (*khoshnevisi*). Calligraphy is in itself a pathway of poetic experience through the act of slow and attentive writing.

Moreover, there is a unique musicality in Farsi that is instantly recognizable. All in all, there are close to 300 different rhythmic patterns (*arus*) in the Persian language.¹⁵¹ What Wilde writes about the musical dimension of poetry is therefore especially true for Persian poetry:

Language in its sonic form does the same thing as music. Words can be built up in powerful rhythm patterns; alliterations, assonances and rhyme sequences can be created that are not only pleasing to the ear, like melodies, but also powerful in ways that reach the body the same way instrumental music reaches through the body and touches the psyche. Music can be hypnotic, and so can poetry. The sound of words is very powerful because it is musical.¹⁵²

Speaking from the standpoint of *erfān*, Reza Khatibzadeh identified three factors that make a poem “cooked”, meaning that it is a work of aesthetic potency: beauty (*zibāyi*), order (*nazm*) and secret (*rāz*). Khatibzadeh argues that if poetry possessed all these three characteristics, which he sees in the works of great Sufi poets like Rumi, Hafez or Attar, it will continue to attract people even many centuries

¹⁴⁹ Dana Wilde, *On Sufism and Poetry* (accessed online 30/04/2018).

¹⁵⁰ Interview with Farshid, 55, male, meditation teacher, Mashhad, 05/03/17.

¹⁵¹ Interview with Hamed.

¹⁵² Dana Wilde, *On Sufism and Poetry* (accessed online 30/04/2018).

later. In Dr. Shahbazi's words, "when we read these poems we sense that all our existence is being cleansed and purified".¹⁵³

The virtues of beauty, order and secret can be found in constant interplay in nature. This explains why one of my interviewees defined the effect of poetry by referring to nature:

A poem (...) is more connected to nature [than ordinary language]. Why is nature so attractive to us? Because it has a rhythm, a song, a note. All of nature is played on a note (...) That's why, when we are in nature, we feel good. It is the same with poetry. (...) Because of its note and its sound it is like the flow of a river. It is moving with you.¹⁵⁴

As we have explored in this chapter, inner experience with Sufi poetry is multi-dimensional and touches manifold layers of human existence. It is unique and unrepeatable for every reader or listener, but there are also commonalities and connecting points between the experiences which have been identified. It became clear from our exploration that the experiential power emerges from within the poetry and poetry is not a mere container for the "delivery" of some fixed intended meaning. Poetry has an autonomous role in the spiritual experience (*tajrobe-ye ma'navi*), which in its core, is an experience with meaning (*ma'nā*) with the help of beauty. Ultimately poetic experience reaches far beyond what words can describe, so as this thesis proceeds we will continue to journey around the inexplicable.

¹⁵³ Interview with Dr. Iraj Shahbazi.

¹⁵⁴ Interview with Elmira.

CHAPTER 3: EXPERIENCES OF SYNCHRONICITY WITH POETRY

Many of us who have used [the I Ching] seriously over a number of years have been struck by its enigma. Although I have been familiar with it since my cradle days as an analytical psychologist I still feel equally disturbed and impressed by its efficacy. I am disturbed because it seems so utterly improbable that a book, several thousand years old and grown in such different cultural soil, should still prove so meaningful to us. If it is a genuine oracle, as I personally from my experiences have to accept, it cuts right across our Western scientific causalistic world-picture. It reveals an interdependence of subject and object, it stands against the accepted Western dogma of the division between the two, dictated by a limited ego-consciousness, and it reveals a profound correspondence between within and without. All this makes me wish that the riddle of the I Ching should be taken more seriously by us and systematically researched.¹⁵⁵

— Excerpt from *C. G. Jung in a Changing Civilisation* by Gerhard Adler

*Oh Hāfez of Shiraz
You are the revealer of all Secrets
We are desiring a fāl
Reveal to us the Secret*

— Traditional invocation before casting a *fāl*

This chapter will explore the practice of divination with Persian Sufi poetry among Iranians (*fāl*), and how it contributes to the sense of poetry as being experience. Considering the mechanisms behind *fāl*, I will connect the topic of divination with Sufi poetry to the concept of “synchronicity”. Afterwards I will present my observations during two self-organized poetry circles in which I used the group communication technique of council. It will be explored how intentional reading of poetry in a circle nurtures a sense of interconnectedness. We will thus expand our view of poetry from constituting an individual experience to being a collective experience.

¹⁵⁵ Quoted in Roderick Main, *Revelations of Chance: Synchronicity as Spiritual Experience* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), p. 141.

Divination with Sufi Poetry

Once in a while Sara turns to Rumi's *Divān-e Shams* to ask for a message. In her personal practice this "divination" is usually preceded by a meditation or some sort of self-designed ritual. When the following experience occurred she was in a specific life situation where she had been invited by a university to deliver a lecture on photography. This invitation reached her despite the fact that she had already left academia behind. Not feeling quite at home in the academic environment, she was not sure whether she should take the invitation or not. Although she did not ask specifically for this question to be solved she found that the poem which showed up was directly addressing the dilemma she was in. The message she took from Rumi's poem was to dedicate the talents and potential she had been given in service of something greater than herself and to share her knowledge, rather than holding it back. After reading the poem she was clear she needed to deliver the talk. In our interview, Sara expressed the experience of receiving this message and the mechanisms behind it:

I made the intention (*niyat*) that now 'I am very receptive (*pazirā*) and a [good] listener' and I put myself into a place of deep learning (*vaziyat-e yādgiri-ye 'amiq*) and that I listen to what you will tell me (...) So I opened the book and a page came up. The poem was so much in line (*ertebāt dāsht*) with my situation. (...) In that moment you really feel that your words are being heard and you are being responded to. Whatever you give, this world of existence (*jahān-e hasti*) returns it to you, like a mirror. When you put yourself into such a state of receptivity, and are ready to listen, it really speaks to you. (...) Divination (*fāl*) is in our culture and we always say that you should make an intention before taking a *fāl* and connect to yourself. Until I didn't have this experience, I didn't exactly know what it means to make an intention. Now I have understood that making an intention is really just to prepare yourself so that you are able to listen. (...) This is what taking a *fāl* means. It is not a prediction (*pishguyi*) that is meant to give you all the answers. It is you who is getting in touch with the universe (*kā'enāt*). There is a human being who has lived centuries before you and who has made these experiences and is still ready to play the role of being your guide and is present (*hozur darad*). It is enough for you to be ready to receive it from him.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁶ Interview with Sara.

Divination with poetry (*fāl*) is a common practice in the daily life of Iranians. Books of poetry, first and foremost the *Divān* of Hafez, are consulted on special occasions such as Nowruz - to see what the next year will bring - or to gain insight into a specific situation or a problem. With a question in mind one opens a book of poetry at random. The first verse one sets eye on is believed to contain the answer to the question, while the rest of the poem may serve as further exposition. Envelopes containing scraps of paper with verses from Hafez' poetry (*fāl-e Hāfez*) are sold on the streets and metros of Tehran and at popular tourist spots - a sort of “*fāl* to go” that one can pick up in a traffic jam or on the way back home from work.

As per definition of the Encyclopaedia Iranica divination is “the art or technique of gaining knowledge of future events or distant states by means of observing and interpreting signs.”¹⁵⁷ However in Iran, bibliomancy - divination by means of books - is more than a method to just “predict” the future. If used in an intentional way, divination with poetry (*fāl gereftan*, literally “taking a *fāl*”) can become an active way of seeking spiritual guidance. This process can become a life-changing experience that is usually more profound than the slightly pubertal *Does (s)he really love me?*-type of divination one can observe among teenagers, e.g. at the *Hāfeziyye* in Shiraz.

Before taking a *fāl* one is supposed to recite a prayer or make an intention. In the above-cited interview passage, Sara reflected on “intention” (*niyat*) as an active preparation in order to be able to “listen” attentively to the poem. Another Iranian friend asserted that “through the intention you get closer to yourself. When there is no big distance between the outside and inside anymore, there is no more distance between the poem and you. (...) Divination can take any form, it is a way of establishing a connection to your soul. You create presence”.¹⁵⁸

While for many Iranians the practice of intention might have turned into a ritualistic automatism, Sara understands it is a voluntary state of receptivity that requires concentration and awareness. Out of that space of receptivity comes the

¹⁵⁷ Mahmoud Omidsalar, “Divination” in: *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (accessed online 30/04/2018).

¹⁵⁸ Skype conversation with Kamyar.

experience “that your words are being heard and you are being responded to” through the poem. This experience for her was deeply fulfilling:

You know, you cannot explain that kind of feeling. It just brings tears to your eyes. No words remain. You feel how much you’re being supported, how much you’re being heard and you become certain that this is right. And how much you are exposed to grace (*mored-e lof*). You also become sure of the authenticity inside of yourself. An answer is given to you, so that you take from it a power of the heart. It’s almost like you are becoming certain of your heart. (...) It creates a kind of [physical] pressure so that you really feel you need to express it. I expressed it through my tears.¹⁵⁹

Shabnam, who said she was practicing *fāl* with Rumi’s poetry every day, told me “when I take a *fāl* I concentrate and wish that he [Rumi] talks to me. I tell him: ‘That soul which you possessed and whatever you experienced in this body of Mowlana was so amazing (*ānghadr khaffan*) that you can now understand my situation when I call upon your soul’”.¹⁶⁰

Referring to religious scholar Jonathan Z. Smith, Carl Ernst explains in his *Shambala Guide to Sufism* that “a text used for divination is the most elemental form of scripture; it becomes an authoritative structure that can be transferred and applied to any situation.”¹⁶¹ In Iran, trained clerics are also entitled to perform bibliomancy with the Qur’an, a practice that is known as *estekhāre*.

In the case of Hafez, the ambiguity in his verses makes them easily applicable to different kinds of situations and effective in creating very different kinds of inner experience. Among Iranians Hafez is also known as “*lesān al-gheib* (“Tongue of the Hidden”) for his power to convey arcane knowledge from the mystic realm”.¹⁶² This view of Hafez as someone who can communicate exclusive truth to the reader from a different level of reality was echoed by Hamed who sees Hafez as “the example of someone who could become empty of himself. That’s why they take *fāl* with Hafez.

¹⁵⁹ Interview with Sara.

¹⁶⁰ Interview with Shabnam.

¹⁶¹ Carl W. Ernst, *The Shambala Guide to Sufism* (Boston: Shambala, 2000), p. 170.

¹⁶² Zuzanna Olszewska, *The Pearl of Dari: Poetry and Personhood among Young Afghans in Iran* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), p. 149.

Iranians see it [his poetry] as a divine text (*matn-e elāhi*)”.¹⁶³ While connecting the topic of *fāl* to findings from the previous chapter we shall subsequently introduce the notion of synchronicity as experience and deepen our view of Sufi poetry.

Synchronicity as an Experience

The experience with *fāl* encompasses all of the elements we have already explored: The conscious reading of poetry with an intention or question in mind leads to a sense of direct interaction with the poet. Meaning is transferred on the basis of one’s life experience and can be matched to one’s specific life situation. Often this is paired with a strong experience of beauty.

But what stands out in the event of taking a *fāl* is that there exists a heightened sense of participation in something unexplainable, often to the point of being uncanny, which is usually interpreted as deeply meaningful. In many cases the poem one opens from the book seems to coincide with one’s own question, problem or situation - one’s psychological disposition at that moment. There is a sense that “this poem has been written only for me”¹⁶⁴, which gives a feeling of empowerment to the recipient.

This kind of “coincidence” was termed by C.G. Jung as “synchronicity”. Synchronicity is the unlikely event of two or more parallel events that appear meaningfully related, but the occurrence of which cannot be explained by means of normal causality. Jung has also defined synchronicity as a “meaningful coincidence” or an “acausal parallelism”.¹⁶⁵

In his book *Revelations of Chance: Synchronicity of Spiritual Experience*, Roderick Main distinguishes between two kinds of synchronicities, spontaneous synchronicities and oracular synchronicities.¹⁶⁶ Spontaneous synchronicities are meaningful connections between events in daily life whereas oracular synchronicities

¹⁶³ Interview with Hamed.

¹⁶⁴ Interview with Gholamreza.

¹⁶⁵ Roderick Main, *Revelations of Chance: Synchronicity as Spiritual Experience* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), p. 14.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 143

are connections brought about by using a divination technique such as *fāl-e Hāfez*. The main difference between these two kinds of synchronicities lies in the conscious attitude of the experiencer during divination. In oracular synchronicity, there is an element of participation. The reader sort of “generates” synchronicity through the intentional act of reading, whereas with a spontaneous synchronicity there can be no formal preparation of any kind.¹⁶⁷ That is why such synchronicity always comes unexpected. However, there might be a third kind which is holding a question and then looking for “signs” in the world as an answer.

Jung explored the experience of synchronicity through bibliomancy on the basis of the *I Ching*, an ancient Chinese divination text which he used as a practical psychological tool. The above-quoted Gerhard Adler, one of Jung’s students who at first was very skeptical about the *I Ching*, experienced a moment of synchronicity after consulting the book. His question was if he should marry a girl he was in love with who had, however, a neurotic personality. The line that showed up when Adler opened the book read “one should not marry such a maiden”. After this experience of synchronicity with the *I Ching* Adler’s attitude towards the book radically changed and he later reflected that this first experience was necessary to shake his rationalistic skepticism.¹⁶⁸

Sufi poems that are used for divination can work in a similarly “disarming” way by producing wonder and amazement in the reader. This experience resembles many a religious experiences like moments of epiphany in which there is a sudden insight that seems to originate not from the familiar place of the causal mind, but from a divine realm.¹⁶⁹ It includes an immediate sense of being in communication with a higher reality.

Synchronicity with Sufi poetry can also be experienced over an extended period of time: During the second poetry circle, which will be subsequently described, someone told me that in certain weeks it may happen that he opens a book

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 173.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 149.

¹⁶⁹ See definition of “epiphany” as “a sudden, intuitive perception of or insight into the reality or essential meaning of something” at Dictionary.com (accessed online 30/04/2018).

of poetry for taking *fāl* and one poem just keeps on “coming back”. It is as if something in that poem is really trying to make itself understood to you. While in Iran I have also experienced this almost “uncanny” way of a poem trying to get my attention.

The usage of the *I Ching* as a divination tool involves a fixed procedure through the casting of hexagrams, traditional Chinese figures of lines and dots, which makes it different from works of Persian Sufi poetry like the *Divān-e Hāfez*. Nevertheless there are some similarities to the *Divān*: With both texts, there are three steps involved: The reader makes an inquiry, receives a response and then interprets the response.¹⁷⁰ With the *Divān*, there is a ritual of intention that “sets the space” for a synchronistic experience to occur. What Main observed about the language of the *I Ching* can be also held true for the *Divān* and other works of Sufi poetry: “Language that is so richly symbolic and so highly versatile and polysemantic lends itself to being molded to the expressive requirements of particular oracular occasions.”¹⁷¹

In any case, the practice of *fāl* is a strong example for the experiential nature of poetry because it catapults the reader into an unintermediate experience with a poem in which time and space seem to disappear entirely. Casting a *fāl* is not a mental event, so meaning is not analyzed, but it is felt instinctively and instantaneously. Divination and its response through the poem involve a high sense of immediacy that leads to direct realization, a kind of “existential understanding” (*dark-e vojudi*).

Collective Synchronicity and Interconnectedness in Circle Experience

Part of my research was spent in two poetry reading circles I organized in Tehran among the contacts I gained during my research in the city. The method I used for these circles is called “council”, a group communication technique that has been

¹⁷⁰ Roderick Main, *Revelations of Chance: Synchronicity as Spiritual Experience* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), p. 147.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

adapted from the native American tradition, but has existed in modified ways throughout different cultures, including parts of the Islamic civilization.¹⁷² I shall briefly introduce some of the key elements of council practice to illustrate how it can serve my research.

In council, there is no hierarchy between the participants. When sitting in council, the participants are invited by the facilitator - in this case myself - to follow four intentions: to speak from the heart, to listen from the heart, to be spontaneous and to be of lean expression. “Speaking from the heart” invites a way of speaking that is personal, ideally based on stories from one’s own life. The practice here is to speak from the heart, which means expressing what is felt and experienced rather than using arguments, philosophical reflection, analysis or generalizations. “Listening from the heart” is the intention to listen deeply, with a clear mind and with full attention to the one who speaks. For this practice, it is required to suspend the automatic flow of thoughts and judgements in one’s head. “Being spontaneous” means to speak whatever “comes alive” in the moment, meaning not planning one’s sentences in the head beforehand. “Being of lean expression” or “speaking the essence” is the art of keeping one’s sharing brief and not losing oneself in long monologues.¹⁷³

These four points are called “intentions” deliberately, because they need to be practiced over time. Any participant can open the council with a “dedication”, which can be the statement of an intention or the offering of prayer, poem or song, sometimes accompanied with the lighting of a candle in the centre. The usage of a “talking piece”, which can be any object that is handy like a stone or a *tasbih* (prayer beads), facilitates the flow of the council conversation: The one who holds the talking piece is empowered to speak.¹⁷⁴ Talking pieces are placed into the centre which becomes the focal point of the circle. Rather than speaking directly to each

¹⁷² Jack Zimmerman and Virginia Coyle, *The Way of Council* (Bramble Books, 2009), p. 5. In the Sufi tradition, the term *sohbat/sohbet* denotes a form of spiritual conversation in which deep listening is practiced. The Turkish term *sohbet halkası* is used for conversations in circles of dervishes.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 28-9.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

other, as one would in a discussion or normal dialogue, the circle members are invited to speak to the centre.

One of the reasons I employed council during my research is that it breaks the duality of interviewer and interviewee. Although it is me who has invited others to join the circle, the council process enables me to step back from my role as a researcher and become an equal part of the circle as a participant observer. This diminution of hierarchy creates an atmosphere that is potentially more relaxed than a formal interview. It also allowed me to relax into the group field of shared experience as a participant observer. Rather than asking any questions, I let the “answers” emerge at their own pace and time, which is one of the fundamental principles underlying council. A recording device in the middle helped me in capturing the content of the conversation so that my mind was not busy with trying to keep what others had said.

Another strong point of council is that it creates a safe space for people to share in. Every participant just speaks about himself. There is no commenting or judging of what other people have shared whatsoever. In this way participants are more ready to share something of their inside world which they would not reveal in ordinary conversation. Council therefore overcomes the split between *zāher* (inside) and *bāten* (outside) that is a strong feature of Persian culture. As Olszewska writes in her study on Afghan migrant poetry in Iran,

The *zāher*, the outer self or public facade that one wears, is a form of calculated, restricted expression and politeness in situations of uncertainty, between status unequals, or simply when confronting the so-called corrupting everyday reality of the outside world. The *bāten*, one’s inner or true self, is the seat of one’s deepest emotions and is typically concealed except in situations of free, unguarded expression, such as in the secluded realm of the family sphere or between status equals and intimate friends.¹⁷⁵

With its ability to encourage letting go of automated social responses, council encourages us to drop the habitual masks we are wearing and touch on the layers of *bāten* instead. It facilitates authentic expression and creates an interactive field of “heightened perception” in which “the illusion of being separate from others in the

¹⁷⁵ Zuzanna Olszewska, *The Pearl of Dari: Poetry and Personhood among Young Afghans in Iran* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), p. 188.

circle dissipates and the wholeness of the circle becomes a palpable reality”.¹⁷⁶ In that sense council can be said to be directly in line with the spirit that is alive in Sufi poetry in that it speaks of, and points the reader towards, unity (*towhid*).

As I observed during the two councils I organized, the individual sharing of reflections, which is based on the poetry we read, is more likely to go deeper than during the interviews. This is also because questions have a limited ability to explore experience, but an emergent conversational process that is in itself an experience is likely to “reveal” more fruitful content. The direct experience of reading and reflecting on poetry, which also marked my interviews, is now further enhanced by the group synergy that emerges in the council’s “interactive field”. This “synergy is the experience of interaction between elements or people that, when combined, produces a total effect greater than the sum of the individual parts.”¹⁷⁷ The synergy is able to bridge all the inevitable differences that exist in a circle, such as differences of age, gender, experience, character etc.

Within the interactive field of both councils we experienced “collective synchronicities”. I will briefly outline what occurred in these two circles and derive from them observations of how poetry can be experienced in an interactive group. As there is no standardized process for such circles the councils were slightly different in their procedure:

In *Circle A*¹⁷⁸ I invited everyone to introduce themselves as well as their personal connections and histories with poetry. After naming the four council intentions I invited each participant to share a poem that had played an important role in his or her life and tell the story behind that poem to the circle. This “prompt” brought up stories of suffering, of the day-to-day struggles of life and how experiences with certain poems had helped them overcome difficult situations. Poems of Rumi and

¹⁷⁶ Jack Zimmerman and Virginia Coyle, *The Way of Council* (Bramble Books, 2009), p. 104.

¹⁷⁷ Christin Baldwin and Ann Linnea, *The Circle Way: A Leader in Every Chair* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2010), p. 7.

¹⁷⁸ On 26/01/2017; 8 participants; age 20-40: Dariush, Hossein, Jalal, Morteza, Reza, Sara, Tahere and myself; duration: 3 hours.

Hafez were read out most of the time, but in the course of the circle verses of Attar, Khayyam and Houshang Ebtehaj also showed up.

As soon as the group's interactive field was built there were some palpable experiences of interconnection and synchronicity among the participants. This interactive field emerged through the connections between individual sharings, but also through what lies beyond what is expressed verbally. The deepening of the breath, relaxed face expressions and body postures, and spontaneously occurring minutes of silence between the verbal sharings were all elements of this emerging field.

There was a copy of the *Divān-e Shams* lying in the middle which Jalal had picked up at the beginning of a circle. He randomly opened a poem from the book and silently read it for himself. Some time into the circle it was Morteza's turn to share his story with a poem he felt connected to. It turned out that from among hundreds of Rumi poems Morteza had chosen precisely that same poem which Jalal had just picked for himself. He remarked that "I have lots of memories with poems, but there is one poem that I always like to read".

Another such "moment of connection" occurred a bit later. When Sara shared her personal connection to the poem of the grape that needed to turn into wine, Jalal was deeply touched to the point of feeling an inner urge to cry. He instinctively related his current life situation to the poem of Rumi and, by extension, to the life experience that Sara had when reading that poem. This is how Jalal interpreted his experience of synchronicity during the circle:

That I, when opening a poetry book, start reading a poem and Morteza exactly starts reading the same poem is - in my opinion - certainly not coincidental (*etefāqi*). While Sara was reading this poem... How much this poem was helping with the conditions (*sharāyet*) I am struggling with at the moment. I felt like crying. I became very peaceful by hearing this poem. In my view, this is all part of the miracles of poetry.



Photo 3.1: Poetry Circle A in Tehran in January 2017

In *Circle B*¹⁷⁹, participants already knew each other, so there were no formal introductions. There was a round of “check-ins” in which everyone shared how he or she feels at present and what is currently going on in their lives. After some silence Mohammad took a *fāl* from the *Divān-e Shams* which was then read out twice to the whole group. Subsequently, each one was invited to share reflections on the poem’s *beyt* which had touched them most.

The experience of this circle was that the meaning of the poem revealed itself to us part by part through the different sharings, each sharing opening up a different facet to the group. By means of the collective group intelligence we thus wove the tapestry of the meaning which the poem “wanted to convey to us”. For, as Sara asserted, the poem did in fact “speak to our collective (*jam*’) in that moment”.¹⁸⁰

The reading of poetry in these two circles brought about a twofold experience of synchronicity: In the first place there is an “individual synchronicity” between the

¹⁷⁹ On 16/02/17; 7 participants; age 25-35: Hossein, Mohammad, Parastoo, Sara, Shabnam, Towhid and myself; duration: 2 hours.

¹⁸⁰ Sharing of Sara in Circle B, 16/02/17.

uncovered meanings from the poems and our own life experiences and psychological states. At the same time there is a “collective synchronicity” which emerges through the sharings of different group members.

In the circle, there is a profound experience of interconnectedness that comes through the co-experiencing, the “suffering with” - the compassion - when someone else is speaking. After the second poetry circle I noted down some thoughts that arose in me during the council as a participant observer:

The magic of circle lies in the feeling that you partake in something greater, of which you and everyone else in the circle are a part. You experience that what the other says also exists in your mind and heart. It is just expressed from another point of the whole. However, it is all coming from the same space. In that moment it is not necessary for yourself to speak anymore, proving that you also have something to say, because the border between you and the other has started to blur or even disappear.¹⁸¹

The sense of interconnectedness is reinforced by the common universal themes we can identify between the sharings of both circles, two of which were suffering and the yearning for light. As the meanings of the poems reveal themselves to and *through* the group, they make us feel interconnected: Poems may speak to us in different ways, but they also reveal to us the shared narratives and experiences of human beings. They cut through the illusion of separation and strengthen our sense of interconnectedness. This experience is very similar to William N. Isaacs’ exposition of the process of metalogue in which the group eventually becomes the meaning:

In this experience, the world is too full to talk about; too full to use language to analyze it. Yet words can also be evocative — narratives that convey richness of meaning. Though we may have few words for such experiences, dialogue raises the possibility of speech that clothes meaning, instead of words merely pointing towards it. I call this kind of experience metalogue, meaning “moving or flowing with.” Metalogue reveals a conscious, intimate and subtle relationship between the structure and content of an exchange and its meaning. The medium and the message are linked: information from the process conveys as much meaning as the content of the words exchanged. The group does not “have” meaning, it is its meaning. Loosening rigid

¹⁸¹ From my notes taken after Circle B, 16/02/17.

patterns of thought frees energy that now permits new levels of intelligence and creativity in the container.¹⁸²

The two circle experiences that I described show how poetry works as experience not only on an individual, but also on a collective level. On a larger scale, this bonding quality of poetry can also lead to a wider sense of human interconnectedness in Iranian society. In the subsequent chapter, we shall explore a different type of group interaction with poetry that involves music and dance, both of which play an important role in the Iranian interaction with Sufi poetry.

¹⁸² William N. Isaacs, “Dialogue: The Power of Collective Thinking” (accessed online on 30/04/18).

CHAPTER 4: POETRY AND *SAMĀ'* AS COLLECTIVE EXPERIENCE

*You know what is samā' ? To hear the call of 'yes' to God,
to be cut free from selfhood, to reunite with Him.*

*You know what is samā' ? To go beyond existence,
in dying absolutely to savour everlastingness.¹⁸³*

— Jalaluddin Rumi

In *samā'* we can't understand what it is that is moving. We can just name it 'soul' or 'energy'. (...) When this happens, there is a feeling of half-drunkenness and half-soberness (*nim-e masti, nim-e hoshyāri*). Your senses are becoming weaker. If someone takes my hand I wouldn't feel it very much. (...) It is like the soul is spreading the drunkenness and this wine inside of you. (...) The poems of the *Divān-e Shams* have certain words which are repeated, such as *nur* or *shams*. (...) Why does *zehr* have an effect? Because something is being repeated. When something becomes rhythmic, that rhythm throws you into the space where you want to enter *samā'*.¹⁸⁴

— Interview with Vahid, participant of the *Niyayesh* gatherings

In this chapter, I will present the observations I made during two gatherings of poetry, dance and music in Tehran against the background of the classical Sufi terminology of *samā'* and ecstasy. Along with a short ethnographic overview of the structures and mechanisms in these gatherings, we will look at how poetry is experienced in a regular collective ceremonial context. The understanding of Sufi poetry in interplay with music and physical movements, which is essential to the Iranian experience of Sufism, will further expand our perspective on the experiential

¹⁸³ Translation of the ghazal *Dānī samā' ċe bovad* by Alan Williams, In *From Daena to Dīn. Religion, Kultur und Sprache in der Iranischen Welt* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2009), p. 495.

¹⁸⁴ Interview with Vahid.

nature of poetry while shedding light on a modern way of interaction with Sufi poetry in Iran.

***Samā`* and Ecstasy at a Poetry Ceremony in Tehran**

Every Wednesday night around nine o'clock in an upscale neighborhood of Northern Tehran, a flow of guests arrives at the doorstep of a sizeable white villa. After ringing the bell at the front gate and introducing himself, each visitor walks on a path that crosses the garden up to an unassuming entrance door. Pairs of shoes have already piled up at the basement. A flight of stairs leads up to a brightly-lit spacious studio apartment. All over the place small groups of people are conversing, welcoming one another, exchanging news and home-made food which is placed into a modern American-style kitchen. Many of the visitors wear white linen clothes and collarless shirts with lines of Persian calligraphy printed on them. I was told by one participant that the reason for wearing white was that it symbolizes purity¹⁸⁵, yet another explanation I encountered is that white is the colour traditionally used by dervishes when performing the whirling dance (*samā`*).¹⁸⁶ Many of the men have beards and some of them long hair. Women generally don't wear a headscarf.

The studio's decoration is eclectic in a typical new-age fashion: There is a statue of the Buddha standing in an illuminated wall niche, next to a poster with some writing in Hebrew and various decorative items from the Sufi tradition. In the middle of the room there is a white prayer rug with ten books of poetry, including the works of Rumi, Hafez, Attar, Khayyam and Shah Nematollah Vali. The floor is lined with seating cushions waiting to be occupied by the guests.

Roughly forty people, about half of them women and half of them men, have come to this week's *Niyayesh* gathering, a get-together of poetry, music and spiritual dance (*samā`*). For eleven years Babak has opened his home to these ceremonies of "worship" and "prayer", as the word *niyāyesh* translates. Babak, a dentist, was inspired to host such gatherings after a visit to the mausoleum of Rumi in Konya. In

¹⁸⁵ Interview with Vahid.

¹⁸⁶ Conversation with host Babak before ceremony on 25/01/17.

Turkish Sufi ceremonies he first experienced *samā*¹⁸⁷, the ritualistic practice of reading poetry, music and sacred movement in Sufism.

As Babak told me in a conversation before the ceremony, poetry reading lies at the center of these Wednesday night gatherings. However, it was not a place to display one's literary talent: Most of all it was the participants' intentions that mattered, not how much they had already read poetry. The participants of *Niyayesh*, he recalled, had changed throughout the years, but there was a core of participants that showed up on a regular basis and held the group together. "There are people who are very rich and some who are very poor. The only thing that makes them gather (...) is to be in prayer, remember God and spread love (*'eshqvarzi*)."¹⁸⁷ Rather than following a fixed procedure the group would let the ceremony "emerge by itself. We have always tried not to create any form or system here. Nevertheless some forms do appear."¹⁸⁸

The social context of *Niyayesh* fits into what has been termed "Sufi chic"¹⁸⁹, a trend that is described by Nahid Siamdoust in her study of the contemporary Iranian music scene entitled *Soundtrack of the Revolution*: "At the turn of the millennium, a sort of Iranian New Age lifestyle had become a perceptible trend among mostly middle-class Tehranis. This lifestyle often involved engaging with the Sufi poetry of Rumi and Hafez, sometimes in private gatherings; pursuing self-improvement (*khod-sāzi*) activities, such as therapy and yoga; and adopting a more natural look by wearing Iranian fabrics and designs and taking a more liberal attitude toward hair growth."¹⁹⁰

During my research in Tehran I attended two of those gatherings.¹⁹¹ Audio recordings of the ceremonies later helped me analyze the procedure of *Niyayesh*. In my description of the gatherings I will present some of the observations I made with

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Shahram Khosravi, *Young and Defiant in Tehran* (Pennsylvania: University of Philadelphia Press, 2008), p. 164.

¹⁹⁰ Nahid Siamdoust, *Soundtrack of the Revolution. The Politics of Music in Iran* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017), p. 112.

¹⁹¹ Gatherings on 18/01/2017 and 25/01/2017.

a focus on the ways poetry is read. I will then contextualize my observations against the background of the Sufi theories on ecstasy and *samā*’.

I realized that the structure of these two gatherings was more or less the same and there exists a loose order that repeats itself every week. I shall render what happened at *Niyayesh* in a chronological order:

At 9:30 pm lights are switched off and a set of candles is lit in the middle of the circle. Babak welcomes the participants who sit all across the studio and asks for a few moments of silence “so that we may enter into presence” (*be hozur biāyim*). After a few minutes the first poem is read, followed by someone improvising notes on the *divān* and the *tanbur*, both Kurdish-Iranian string instruments. In the first half an hour of the ceremony, individuals recite poems they have prepared at home. Most of them read the poetry from the screens of their mobile phones, whereas a few elderly women have brought printed copies of poems which they read with the help of a flashlight.

The order of the recitations is spontaneous and there is always a moment of silence between two readings. The person who reads typically sways his head back and forth in a gesture of rapture, sometimes rising a hand in emphasis of a certain verse or word. The listeners react with exclamations such as *bah, bah, Yā Allah* or *La illaha illallah*. Some in the group take audibly deep breaths. When the name *Shams-e Tabrizi* appears in a verse, a few people react by exclaiming *hu*, which is the “pronoun of Divine Presence, also understood by Sufis to be the indwelling presence of God”.¹⁹² It can be said that about eighty per cent of the recited poetry stems from the *Divān-e Shams*.

In this part of the gathering poetry and music merge into an improvised performance: Sometimes the poetry reciter stops after one *beyt*, lets the musician play a few notes and then continues with the following *beyt*. Approximately forty minutes into the gathering the instruments pick up speed and rhythm. Someone plays the *daf*, a frame drum that is generally used in Iranian Sufi ceremonies. Suddenly several people start singing a well-known Rumi poem to a melody that seems to be

¹⁹² Kabir Helminski, *The Knowing Heart: A Sufi Path of Transformation* (Boston: Shambala, 1999), p. 272.

known to the majority of the group. A young woman wearing a black dress and prayer beads around her neck gets up and steps into the middle of the circle. She bows into four directions and then starts whirling, getting faster and faster, the hem of her dress flying through the air. Meanwhile, some voices of the group grow louder while others exclaim *Allah* in line with the rhythm of the *daf* beats.

About one hour into the gathering, participants in the inner circle get up on their feet and start to chant the *zehr* *Yā Allah, Hu Allah* and *La illaha illah hu*. Three *dafs* are now playing, the heat figuratively and physically increasing in the room. A smell of sweat penetrates the air. The pinnacle of the gathering is reached when everyone joins into the speaking choir of the Hafez poem *Bā man sanamā*, a *ghazal* that has been turned into music by many Iranian artists. Groups of people are now holding their hands and rocking their heads and torsos back and forth in the manner of *zehr* circles as they are practiced in some traditional Sufi orders. Movements get faster and the energy is building up significantly. Now some of the physical rocking seems uncontrolled and out of rhythm, some individuals shake in spontaneous ways. There are loud cries and exclamations such as *hey* or *hu*. One group starts reciting different names of Allah such as *Yā Sobhān, Yā Karim, Yā Hakim*.

About one hour and 45 minutes into the gathering, the men stop beating the *daf*. The string instruments start playing improvised meditative tunes again. The woman who was whirling before now sings the slow *kirtan* “Narayana Om” (from the Indian spiritual tradition) with a soft voice, followed by a few more poems being read across the room.

The ceremony ends after about two hours with Babak speaking a prayer to which the group responds with *elāhi amen*. After the prayer, people continue to sit for a few moments, some with closed eyes and in silence, whereas others begin to talk or prepare the buffet in the kitchen. Two women are crying. People hug each other, pick up food on paper plates and engage in smalltalk again.

I would first like to mention a few key observations that I made during my participation. To start with, there are some defined roles in the group which include a host, a musician playing a string instrument, three *daf* players and about ten poetry

reciters in each gathering. Some participants are known in the community to be gifted poetry reciters, but practically anyone can recite. The poem can be either a prepared poem or one that comes spontaneously to mind or even one that is picked by *fāl*. Babak describes the process of choosing a poem like this: “I try to be careful that until the *hāl* (spiritual state) of the poem has come [to me], I should not read the *qāl* (words) of the poem. So I prefer to stay more in silence until a poem really leaps from my heart (*az delam mitapad*). When I recite I become completely one with the poem. I never prepare a poem beforehand.”¹⁹³

The attitude and feeling with which someone reads a poem can affect the whole group, as Vahid shared with me:

The one who reads the poem should be in a good state. All of us understand if someone is reciting a poem from the brain or has just learnt it by heart. (...) in the last session there was a woman who was reading a poem and many people exclaimed ‘Hu’. The reason is that she was reading from her heart. Why do suddenly all exclaim ‘Hu’ together? (...) The reason is that, when something comes from the heart it also has to sit onto the heart (*lājeran bar del mineshinad*). All of us understand that there is an energy or a love present and all exclaim ‘Hu’ or ‘Allah’ together. It is not something that has been agreed upon beforehand.¹⁹⁴

Something I observed is how the group navigates between two modes of being which I call “daily mode” and “ceremonial mode”. The ceremony is preceded and succeeded by smalltalk, jokes and the practice of typical Iranian *ahvālporsi*, literally “asking for each other’s states”. Turning off the lights, lighting the candles and saying a prayer opens up a sort of “ritual time” that is separate from the “ordinary time” of daily social interaction. I noticed that the transition from ceremonial mode into daily mode at the end of the gathering is very swift. In the second gathering it happened to be someone’s birthday and immediately after the closing prayer someone struck up a birthday song carrying a huge birthday cake in her hand.

The sense of community at *Niyayesh* is strong and participants seek both social and spiritual nurturing. In a country where there are no public spaces that offer

¹⁹³ Interview with Babak.

¹⁹⁴ Interview with Vahid.

similar kinds of collective experience, the freedom of expression and relaxed atmosphere of these gatherings undoubtedly is one of the main factors that draw people. The afore-mentioned eclectic, new-age, fashionable appearance of these meetings further adds up to this impression. Gathering around mysticism and poetry on a weekly basis also leads to a form of group bonding. A participant who had been attending *Niyayesh* for the past three years told me that he had been a heavy metal fan in his youth: “That’s why I could easily relate with *Niyayesh* when I first came. *Zekr* is like head banging and *hu* is like [shouting] ‘hooo’ in a metal concert.”¹⁹⁵ In fact, at the culmination of the gathering, the coherence in movement and singing between the members of the group seemed to dissipate and it actually felt more like individuals taking part in a sort of freestyle dancing party. The speaking choirs at the peak of the gathering reminded me somewhat of the group songs that are “chanted” in football stadiums. Hossein who had attended *Niyayesh* once, would later tell me: “We don’t have discos, so people come to such gatherings. If there were discos, they would go to disco to let off steam.”¹⁹⁶

Another characteristic of the *Niyayesh* gatherings is their eclecticism: Classical Persian poetry is being recited, but the musical instruments and the standing *zeker* are borrowed from Kurdish-Iranian Sufism. At the same time elements from other spiritual traditions - such as the *kirtan* sung at the end - are welcomed into the ceremonial space.

Now, the Sufi poems that are read in the ceremony have various functions: The first half an hour, during which poetry is at the centre, is like a warm-up phase to gradually build up group energy. In accompaniment with the string instruments, poetry plays the role of relaxing the group into a meditative mode, it marks the transition from daily mode into ceremonial mode. The interaction between poetry and music here is spontaneous. In fact, poetry already has in itself an inherent music, which is also why the genre of Persian classical music has been essentially formed on the basis of poetry.¹⁹⁷ In addition, those “entry poems” invite the group to

¹⁹⁵ Conversation with *Niyayesh* participant Mehdi, 25/01/17.

¹⁹⁶ Interview with Hossein.

¹⁹⁷ Interview with Ostad Mohammad Reza Shajarian, vocalist of classical Persian music, Konya, 26/09/2015.

emotional and physical movements, creating a field of individual and collective experience. Particular poems that are known by most participants and return in every gathering act as “connectors”, they play the role of common denominators of the group.

Generally those connecting poems are rhythmic and ecstasy-inducing *ghazals* from the *Divān-e Shams*, which many in the group love for its high musicality. On another occasion Parastoo told me that “when I hear the *Divān-e Shams* I feel that I want to move, to whirl. And if don’t do it and sit calmly and observe, there is really something moving in myself”.¹⁹⁸ Rhythm can bestow a sense of harmony on a human being similar to the ease a baby feels when being rocked in the cradle.¹⁹⁹ But rhythm is not the only element that makes poetry musical: “Rhyme, rhythm, syntax and repetition achieve memorability. A poem’s music and rhythm can become embedded in our consciousness like a haunting jazz tune or a schoolyard chant.”²⁰⁰

Referring to Rumi’s famous dance-like poem *Morde bodam zende shodam* (“I was dead, I became alive”), Vahid referred to poetry as “a song (...) which has keywords that naturally carry me into ecstasy. The words are creating this space in you, [like] ‘*doulat-e ‘eshq*’, ‘*pāyande shodam*’. (...) Words like ‘*eshq*’ or *zende shodam* (...) are very powerful in the Persian language for the one who is travelling on the path (*soluk mikonad*).”²⁰¹ When certain “keywords” are repeated by the poet and then recited skilfully by the reader, the poem itself turns into a form of *zeker*.

Vahid used the Sufi term *wajd* or the Farsi expression *be wajd āvārdan* to explain his states of experience to me. The term *wajd* is held to be the Arabic equivalent of “ecstasy” or “rapture”.²⁰² The word derives from the root *wajada* which

¹⁹⁸ Interview with Parastoo.

¹⁹⁹ Fatemeh Keshavarz, *Reading Mystical Lyric. The Case of Jalāl al-Dīn Rumi* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), p. 111.

²⁰⁰ Jill Bialosky, *Poetry Will Save Your Life* (New York: Atria Books, 2017), p. 10.

²⁰¹ Interview with Vahid.

²⁰² However, Michael Sells cautions against translating the Arabic *wajd* with “ecstasy”, as “there is a difference in metaphor between the [Greco-]Latin term *ek stasis* (‘standing outside oneself’ or ‘rapture’ (from *raptus*), (...)) and the Arabic term *wajd*. *Wajd* combines the meaning of ‘intense feeling’ with ‘finding’ (...). In addition to intense experience and finding, the lexical field of *wajd* also includes ‘existence’ (*wujūd*) (...).” (Quoted in Lewisohn, “Principles of the Philosophy of Ecstasy in Rūmī’s Poetry,” p. 39).

- depending on the context - can mean “to find”, “obtain”, “experience”, “suffer”, “to be in ecstasy” or “to be existent”.²⁰³

While Rumi’s *Divān* poems produce an ecstatic effect on Vahid, this poetry can be said to be itself the product of ecstasy. Rumi is believed to have uttered his poems while whirling in a state of ecstasy during nightlong sessions of *samā’*. *Samā’* (Arabic ‘listening’) is the practice of listening to poetry, music and of spiritual dance as a pathway to ecstasy. While the permissibility of these practices in Islam has been a subject of many a debate, *samā’* is among the early expressions of Sufi spirituality. For Rumi the practice of *samā’* was more than a spiritual discipline, it was “the veritable conservatory of his poetic inspiration and the praxis underlying his poetics”²⁰⁴. While the practice of *samā’* certainly inspired Rumi’s poetry, his poetry in turn is read to inspire others to perform *samā’*.²⁰⁵

As I observed in the *Niyayesh* gatherings Rumi is read for his ecstasy-inducing verses more than any other poet. Babak explained the focus on Rumi during *Niyayesh* because “the love of Molana is a rapturous love, full of ecstasy and movement and waves, like a sea (*daryāvar*)”²⁰⁶. According to Chittick, the poems of the *Divān-e Shams* “represent particular spiritual states or experiences, such as union with God or separation after union, described in appropriate images and symbols. (...) The overall ‘feeling’ of the *Dīwān* is one of spiritual intoxication of love.”²⁰⁷ In *Niyayesh*, people seek to relive those states and incite each other in this experience. During the ceremony Rumi’s poetry may awaken the impulse to whirl or move the body in whatever form one likes. Babak described to me how during the ceremony he would sometimes be overcome with a longing to perform *samā’*: “It is like an inner necessity, (...) I can’t sit any longer. The poem wants this (*mitalabad*); but (...)

²⁰³ Leonard Lewisohn, “Principles of the Philosophy of Ecstasy in Rūmī’s Poetry” in *The Philosophy of Ecstasy: Rumi and the Sufi Tradition*, Edited by Leonard Lewisohn (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2014), p. 38-9.

²⁰⁴ Ibid, p. 53.

²⁰⁵ The traditional *samā’* is a strictly ritualized procedure that developed in the Mevlevi Order which was founded by Rumi’s son Sultan Valad. The practice of *samā’* set the *Mevlevi*s apart from other dervish orders.

²⁰⁶ Interview with Babak.

²⁰⁷ William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), p. 6.

before this kind of ecstasy has enveloped you, you should not do *samā*‘, because then it turns into mere dance. In reality, the *samā*‘ needs to carry you, rather than you getting up so that a state (*hāl*) is created in the brain”.²⁰⁸

Dana Wilde describes intoxication as a function of Sufi poetry in *On Sufism and Poetry*:

When I noted above that poetry and music can be “hypnotic,” I meant in a general way that poetry and music can create an “altered state of consciousness” (...) Poetry can literally be intoxicating (...) The Sufi metaphor of intoxication as a spiritual state is partly figurative but partly literal. Intoxication is a metaphor for madness, and madness is a metaphor for the spirit's condition, or transformation, or unfolding into reality, in the presence of the Divine. But amazingly, where poetry and music are involved, intoxication is not only a poetic figure, but is also a literal condition of the body as well as the mind. Poetry's music and imagery affect the body and the mind -- the exterior and interior -- alike, as if they were the same thing. (...) The music of poetry and the images and metaphors of poetry intoxicate the body and mind -- together they change the state of outer and inner awareness of the hearer. Poetry affects the whole human being. It's not surprising that Sufis place so much emphasis on music and poetry in their Way to reunion with the Divine.²⁰⁹

Music is as much a part of *samā*‘ as dance and poetry are. A large number of verses in Rumi’s poetry do not only sound like music, but they also contain allusions to music, either to the various musical instruments of his time or to the modes and moods of the musical repertoire.²¹⁰ This does not only testify to Rumi’s knowledge of music, but also to how much he valued music on the spiritual path, especially in combination with poetry. Kadkani asserted that “the Persian language in the lyrical poetry of Rūmī attained a degree so rich in respect to musicality that no other language can compete with it (...). We must consider him more than any other poet in the world as one who was aware of the importance of the need to preserve musicality in poetic meter and end-rhyme”.²¹¹

²⁰⁸ Interview with Babak.

²⁰⁹ Dana Wilde, *On Sufism and Poetry* (accessed online 30/04/2018).

²¹⁰ Annemarie Schimmel, *The Triumphal Sun: A Study of the Works of Jalāloddin Rumi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), p. 215.

²¹¹ Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 63.

Music is already inherent in poetry and therefore the two are inextricably linked to each other. In an interview with the author, the famous Persian vocalist and composer Mohammad Reza Shajarian stressed that “poetry and music are like two wings of the same culture. (...) Our poetry is dependent on music (...), it needs the music that lies in it”²¹². Rarely, as with Persian classical music and poetry, “have two art forms been so complementary and intimately merged”, as the French ethnomusicologist Jean During observes, and Persian music with its poetic lyrics and mystic character is a powerful aid to meditation and inner transformation.²¹³

While most recitals of Persian poetry include background music of some kind, the actual marriage between poetry and music happens when poetry is sung and further accentuated by rhythmic instruments. Music can amplify the effect of Sufi poetry and increase its emotional charge: “When our poetry is mixed with classical music something particular is created and its effect is multiplied a thousand times. Sometimes I feel the meaning of the poem is changed when the singer sings the poem”.²¹⁴ Maestros of classical Persian music such as Shajarian have perfected this style. In fact, for a few of my interviewees their relationship with Sufi poetry first grew out of listening to classical music. Because his father was listening to Shajarian’s cassettes when he was a child, Jalal initially became acquainted with Sufi poetry through Shajarian’s voice.²¹⁵

Others hinted at the power of repetition, both in listening to recited poetry and to poetry turned music. Hossein deepened his connection with poetry by repeatedly listening to certain verses sung by musical masters to train his musical ear: “In the repetition, I was able to make personal discoveries. (...) With repetition, I was understanding the meaning [of the poems] in myself”.²¹⁶ Along with music another practice of repetition for Hossein is calligraphy, the repeated writing of words from

²¹² Interview with Ostad Mohammad Reza Shajarian.

²¹³ Jean During, “Poetry and Music: Unity of the Persian Arts” in *The Art of Persian Music* (Washington: Mage Publishers, 1991), p. 174.

²¹⁴ Interview with Elmira.

²¹⁵ Sharing of Jalal in Circle A on 26/01/17.

²¹⁶ Sharing of Hossein in Circle A on 26/01/17.

poetry in a *mashk*: “Calligraphy and music both have the role of transporting the meaning [of poetry]. They do this more powerful than commentary (*tafsir*)”.²¹⁷

In a meeting like *Niyayesh* there are different levels of experience with poetry that intermingle: The reader who recites the poem has a personal experience with the poem and at the same time contributes to a wider field of group experience which is composed of other elements such as music, movement, the dynamism of the group etc. The reader’s experience and the group experience merge into a field of collective experience of which poetry is constituent.

The Sufi poetry’s performative and auditive effects, as experienced by the group, are spontaneous, and meaning is felt both emotionally and physically. Shared meaning emerges through stirring words or phrases from the poems that can become group chants or elements of *zehr*, but the meaning is not deciphered mentally, it does not turn into conscious thought, because the ceremony moves forward. Those repetitive “key words” are like triggers that guide the group into intensifying states of ecstasy. There is also a sense among the participants that the poet himself is present in the gathering - especially Rumi and Shams-e Tabrizi, guiding the group on a collective journey of spiritual experience as the *sheykh* would in a more traditional Sufi ceremony.

In this constellation of music, movement and poetry, the recited poems take on a new life: Their evocative power is increased and mystical emotions from the catalogue of Sufi imagery such as separation, burning, longing, union are experienced in a collective way.²¹⁸ In such kind of a performative context poetry fully engages all the senses, it moves the body and takes the breath. A powerful experiential field of energy is created by means of Sufi poetry.

²¹⁷ Interview with Hossein.

²¹⁸ Iranians, by way of their culture, are familiar with this kind of experience: In Shia Islam collective mourning and group emotion plays an important role of the religious practice.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis I have explored the inner experiences Iranians have when reading Sufi poetry based on the argument that poetry is more than just a literary medium to contain and transport meaning, it *is* experience. Grounding itself in the awareness of the limitations of scientific research, this study has attempted to approach the topic of poetic experience as closely as possible through interviews and participant observation. Along the way we have been conscious of the fact that poetic experience can only be known by experiencing, which is why any description, interpretation or analysis is bound to be incomplete. Seen from this angle the author has faced the same dilemma as any Sufi poet who tried to put his experiences into words and verses. Like Sufi poetry, this thesis is thus basically an exploration of the realm where words meet the wordless.

This study has used the words “inner experience” and “spiritual experience” in the context of poetry reading, while the latter term in Farsi (*tajrobe-ye ma‘navi*) has been shown to stem from the noun *ma‘nā* (meaning), suggesting the centrality of meaning in inner experience with poetry. In order to contextualize the Iranian reading of Sufi poetry I have argued in the introduction that Sufi poetry needs to be viewed in the framework and reading tradition of Islamic mysticism which gives special importance to the realm of inner experience. Moreover, traditional *‘erfān* often provided my interviewees with a descriptive framework to talk about their experiences. I have therefore included frequent allusions to concepts from the Sufi tradition throughout the four chapters.

The first chapter served to show the cultural, social and historical framework of Iranian poetry reading. We have explored how poetry reading in Iran is tightly connected to deep levels of the Iranian social identity. This existential view of poetry creates a fertile ground for deep and meaningful interaction with Sufi poems to take place. This disposition, which we have called the “poetic-ness” of Iranians manifests in various ways, one of them being the intentional reading of Sufi poetry. It also has consequences in the way Iranians view their poets who come to represent certain qualities and archetypes of the “Iranian Soul”, rather than being perceived as mere

historical personalities. This “soul-full” relationship towards Sufi poetry shapes the poetic experience, which Dr. Taqi Tabatabayi described as a way of “living inside the poetry”. Living in poetry implies that the borders between the poet, the poem and the reader start to blur or even disappear and merge into a single experience - because one lives inside and *from within* the poetry, it becomes too hard to look at it from the outside and talk about it.

The butterfly experience of Azar at the onset of the second chapter is an example of this kind of merging with poetry - in Azar’s account we discovered how she felt she was becoming one with Attar’s being. Reflecting on the different ways of reading poetry, I have identified “intentional reading” as my interviewees’ primary approach towards Sufi poetry. Reading poetry as part of a larger spiritual quest in life, they seek guidance and wish to get closer to their own soul, to their “real self”, in the verses. Through the example of the inner experiences which foreign students have with Sufi poetry in the classes of Dr. Iraj Shahbazi we understood that meaningful experience with Sufi poems is possible without much former exposure to such poetry, including also non-Iranians; however, frequent intentional reading of Sufi poetry is likely to widen one’s personal container to “receive” from the poems.

My subsequent exploration of the auditive dimension of poetry brought our attention to the significance of “deep listening”, which means intending to understand the poem with a conscious and attentive attitude of receptivity. Through the listening experiences that I created for a number of participants I showed how the same poem can trigger different impressions and associations and how in the process of listening, experience is a constant flow that moves from moment to moment and verse to verse. Here the relationship with the poet behind the verses can be felt as an intimate friendship of equals or with a profound sense of reverence towards the wisdom of the poet. Often the poet is experienced as the voice speaking from inside the experiencer, rather than a separate personality outside oneself. While one’s personality determines one’s individual leaning towards a specific poet, all Sufi poets are read with the understanding that they are keepers of spiritual wisdom who have left behind a heritage of poems for us to access this wisdom. Inner experience with poetic wisdom occurs through an encounter of the unique state of the poet, as

reflected in the poem, with the state of the recipient in the moment of reading or listening. In consequence, there exist endless possibilities of experiential configuration between the reader and the poet. In this chain of experience, spiritual experience is passed on from the poet through the poem to the reader.

Meaning plays an essential role in this process: The reader uncovers meaning on the basis of his own life experience and spiritual experience. Poetry acts as a mirror, because we can find in it ourselves and see where we stand in life. Our own maturing on the spiritual path can profoundly change the way in which we read a poem over time, which is why Sufi poetry always yields fresh experiences, like some of the stories from my interviews have so richly illustrated. The meaning in Sufi poetry is already inherent in the reader and becomes activated through the poem when the moment for it is ripe. Ultimately the meaning is the process itself, it is not a static end-product of the reading. Moreover, in Sufi poetry symbols and images have the function of transferring meaning in a trans-rational way, enabling us to feel meaning rather than mentally decipher it. Since this process involves both the mind and the heart, it leads to a harmonization of the different human faculties of perception.

Sufi poetry is able to touch the reader through its beauty. In Sufi poems beauty, being a primary virtue in Sufism, is created through a linguistic wealth of metaphor and sound, both of which are strengths of the Persian language. The skill of a Sufi poet lies in his ability to create powerful aesthetic experience which moves us and makes us feel that, as Dr. Shahbazi puts it, “all our existence is being cleansed and purified”.

In the third chapter I showed how *fāl*, divination with Sufi poetry, can lead to powerful spiritual experiences of synchronicity along with using the ritual of intention-making to increase one’s state of receptivity towards the poem’s messages. In divination there is a heightened sense of participation in the divine mystery that is interpreted as profoundly meaningful. I demonstrated the experiential workings of divination with participant observation in two self-designed poetry circles in which we experienced a form of collective synchronicity. In this process of collective interaction with poetry meaning “revealed itself” to the group on the basis of

individual sharings that were held within a collective field. As a participant observer I experienced the bonding quality of poetry and stories around poetry in an intentional circle setting, which led us to a deep sense of interconnectedness.

The fourth chapter added to our findings the dimension of *samā'*, poetry reading in combination with music and physical movement. In the context of a weekly gathering in Tehran I observed how poetry can function as experience in a regular ceremonial setting. Through the group dynamic and its merging with the music, poetry becomes a tool for the participants to experience ecstatic states, especially the rhythmic and musical poetry of Jalaluddin Rumi. Repetition of verses and key words from the poems like in a *zehr* induces ecstasy, while music helps to further bring out the inherent music of the poetry. Poetry read in such a performative context leads to a collective experience that involves all the senses.

Given the limited scope and time frame of this research, further fields of observation of the collective reading of Sufi poetry, such as teahouses in rural areas or traditional dervish convents, remain to be explored. Expanding this enquiry to other segments and areas of Iranian society could constitute the basis for further academic research.

As we have seen in this study, inner experience with Sufi poetry can manifest in many different ways. We have expanded our view of poetry to being a multi-dimensional experience and seen the possibilities that lie in such type of spiritual literature. Originating from a space of deep connection with all that is, Sufi poetry aids people to enter and live more from this space of connection.

When poetic experience becomes integrated in oneself and translated into one's daily actions, Sufi poetry comes to shape individual reality on a day-to-day basis, functioning as a moral and spiritual compass and as an inexhaustible source of hope and meaning in life. In other words: With Sufi poetry "life becomes sweeter and it is more in a flow".²¹⁹ On a practical level, one interviewee told me that with reading Sufi poetry his tolerance for difficulties in life had substantially risen, while another one expressed to me that poems gave him the courage to do new things in

²¹⁹ Interview with Dariush.

life. Hossein, who grew up in a poetry-loving family, knows that more than anything else “Sufi poetry invites you to deepen”.²²⁰

The more one deepens in Sufi poetry, the more one seems to experience life through the lens of the poems, interpreting events along the lines of the poetic meaning that has been discovered and uncovered. Poems build bridges between our inside and outside worlds, prompting us to draw fresh connections between ourselves and nature around us. When “walking through life with poetry”, different moments may rekindle certain poems one has read or random verses may suddenly pop up in one’s mind. Sufi poetry can thus become the “background music” in all one’s actions and deeply transform one’s experience of life. In this way poetic experience is extended from the moment of reading or listening over time.

For Dr. Shahbazi years of deep interaction with the *Masnavi* have added both depth and direction to his life, paired with a continuous feeling of “being in love” that, as he says, pervades all of his daily actions: “The things I am doing have not changed, but they are taking place with more depth and deeper meaning (...) It gives a deep inner satisfaction, a highly sublime cosmology, a sweet inner peace and a beautiful thrill and passion to man’s life”.²²¹

Living through Sufi poetry means that poems become implicitly embedded in one’s life experience. Certainly in Iran, Sufi poetry is the most available source of meaning and spiritual guidance for those who have put their intention to orient their lives into that direction. As Shabnam concluded poetry “gives me great hope, knowing that I am on the path is enough for me. I might be behind, but I see that this is the right direction. The path is what is important for me and I can see that I am on it”.²²²

When poetry is not only read but actually *practiced*, someone’s life gradually turns into a poem. There have been people I met during my research who seemed like “walking poems” to me, touching the lives of others through their depth, wisdom or joyful way of being. Because Sufi poems tell us to be better human beings and live

²²⁰ Interview with Hossein.

²²¹ Interview with Dr. Iraj Shahbazi.

²²² Interview with Shabnam.

from the most meaningful places in our lives, they will continue to guide Iranians and non-Iranians alike for generations to come. Or, as Reza Khatibzadeh concluded during our interview in his mountain house near Neyshabur: “We have to learn to manifest God in all of our actions”.²²³

²²³ Interview with Reza Khatibzadeh.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Arberry, A.J. *Tales from the Masnavi*. Accessed 30/04/2018. http://khamush.com/tales_from_masnavi.htm.
- Avery, Kenneth S. *A Psychology of Early Sufi samā‘: Listening and Altered States*. New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004.
- Baldwin, Christin and Linnea, Ann. *The Circle Way: A Leader in Every Chair*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2010.
- Bialosky, Jill. *Poetry Will Save Your Life*, New York: Atria Books, 2017.
- Böwering, Gerhard. “‘Erfān.” In: *Encyclopaedia Iranica*. Accessed 30/04/2018.
<http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/erfan-1>
- Burawoy, Michael. *The Extended Case Method: Four Countries, Four Decades, Four Great Transformations and One Theoretical Tradition*. Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009.
- Burke, Andrew and Maxwell, Virginia and Shearer, Iain. *Iran*. Lonely Planet, 2012.
- Chittick, William C. *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983.
- Dorian, Nancy C. “Linguistic and Ethnographic Fieldwork.” In *Handbook of Language and Ethnic Identity*. Edited by Joshua A. Fishman. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- During, Jean. “Poetry and Music: Unity of the Persian Arts.” In During, Jean and Miarbdolbaghi, Zia and Safvat, Dariush. *The Art of Persian Music*. Washington: Mage Publishers, 1991.
- Ernst, Carl W. Sufism. *The Shambala Guide to Sufism*. Boston: Shambala, 2000.
- Fishman, Joshua A. “Introduction.” In *Handbook of Language and Ethnic Identity*. Edited by Joshua A. Fishman. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Groff, Peter S. *Islamic Philosophy A-Z*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007.

Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." In Rutherford, *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990.

Helminski, Kabir. *The Knowing Heart: A Sufi Path of Transformation*. Boston: Shambala, 1999.

Hodgson, Marshall G. S. *The Venture of Islam II: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974.

Isaacs, William N. "Dialogue: The Power of Collective Thinking". In *The Systems Thinker*. Accessed 30/04/18. <http://thesystemsthinker.com/dialogue-the-power-of-collective-thinking/>

Kadkani, Mohammad Shafi'i. *Zabān-e she'r dar nasr-e Sufiān: Darāmedi be sabkshenāsi-ye negāh-e 'erfāni* [*The Language of Poetry in the Prose of Sufis. An Introduction to the Stylistics of the Sufi Perspective*]. Tehran: Sokhan, 1392/2013.

————— *Sovar-e khiāl dar sh'er-e Fārsi: Tahqiq-e enteḡādi dar tatavor-e imāzhhā-ye sh'er-e pārsi va seyr-e nazariye-ye balāghat dar Eslām va Irān* [*Forms of Imagination in Persian Poetry: A Critical Study of the Course of Imagery of Persian Poetry and the Theory of Rhetorics in Islam and Iran*]. Tehran: Āgah, 1350/1971.

Keshavarz, Fatemeh. *Reading Mystical Lyric: The Case of Jalāl al-Dīn Rumi*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998.

Khosravi, Shahram. *Young and Defiant in Tehran*. Pennsylvania: University of Philadelphia Press, 2008.

Laude, Patrick. *Singing the Way. Insights in Poetry and Spiritual Transformation*. Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2005.

Lewis, Franklin. *Past and Present, East and West: The Life, Teaching and Poetry of Jalāl al-Din Rumi*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2011.

Lewisohn, Leonard. "Principles of the Philosophy of Ecstasy in Rūmī's Poetry." In *The Philosophy of Ecstasy: Rumi and the Sufi Tradition*. Edited by Leonard Lewisohn. Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2014.

Ogden, C.K. and Richards, I. A. *The Meaning of Meaning: A Study of the Influence of Language upon Thought and of The Science of Symbolism*. Oxon: Routledge, 2001.

Main, Roderick. *Revelations of Chance: Synchronicity as Spiritual Experience*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007.

Manoukian, Setrag. *City of Knowledge in Twentieth Century Iran: Shiraz, history and poetry*. New York: Routledge, 2012.

Milani, Abbas. *Eminent Persians: The Man and Women Who Made Modern Iran, 1941-1979. Volume One*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2008.

Mugerauer, Robert. *Heidegger and Homecoming: The Leitmotif in the Later Writings*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008.

Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. "Persian Sufi Literature." In *The Legacy of Medieval Persian Sufism (1150-1500)*. Edited by Leonard Lewisohn. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1999.

————— *The Garden of Truth: The Vision and Promise of Sufism, Islam's Mystical Tradition*. New York: HarperCollins, 2007.

Nicholson, Reynold A. *The Mathnawî of Mawlâna Jalâladdîn Rûmî*. Konya: Tablet Publication, 2007.

Olszewska, Zuzanna. *The Pearl of Dari: Poetry and Personhood among Young Afghans in Iran*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015.

Omidsalar, Mahmoud. "Divination." In *Encyclopaedia Iranica*. Accessed 30/04/2018.

<http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/divination>

Paper, Jordan. *The Mystical Experience: A Descriptive and Comparative Analysis*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004.

Rahimieh, Nasrin. *Iranian Culture: Representation and Identity*. New York: Routledge, 2016.

Safi, Omid. "Bargaining with Baraka: Persian Sufism, 'Mysticism,' and Pre-modern Politics." *The Muslim World*, Vol. 90 (2000): 259-288

Schimmel, Annemarie. *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975.

————— *The Triumphal Sun: A Study of the Works of Jalâloddin Rumi*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993.

Shayegan, Dariush. *Panj eqlim-e hozur: Bahsi darbāre-ye shā'erānegi-ye Iraniān* [*The Five Climates of Presence: A Discussion of the Poeticness of Iranians*]. Tehran: Farhang-e mo'āser, 1393/2014.

Siamdoust, Nahid. *Soundtrack of the Revolution. The Politics of Music in Iran*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017.

Spadaro SJ, Antonio. "Non tantum lecturi sed facturi: Reading Poetry as Spiritual Transformation." In *Poetry and the Religious Imagination: The Power of the Word*. Edited by Francesca Bugliani Knox and David Lonsdale. Farnham: Ashgate, 2015.

Taylor, James S. *Poetic Knowledge: The Recovery of Education*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1997.

Wilde, Dana. *On Sufism and Poetry*. Accessed 30/04/2018.
<http://www.unc.edu/depts/sufilit/Wilde.htm>

Williams, Alan. "Anniversary and Ecstasy: Rumi's samā'/sema as expressive and commemorative rite". In *From Daena to Dîn. Religion, Kultur und Sprache in der Iranischen Welt*. Edited by Christine Allison, Anke Joisten-Pruschke and Antje Wendtland. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2009.

Zimmer, Heinrich. *Philosophies of India*. Edited by Joseph Campbell. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1953.

Zimmerman, Jack and Coyle, Virginia. *The Way of Council*. Bramble Books, 2009.

"Center for Contemplative Mind in Society". *Deep Listening*. Accessed 30/04/2018.

<http://contemplativemind.org/practices/tree/deep-listening>

"Dictionary.com". *Epiphany*. Accessed 30/04/2018.

<http://dictionary.com/browse/epiphany>

"Hamafzā". Accessed 30/04/2018.

<http://vaaseh.ir/%D8%B2%DB%8C%D8%B1-%D9%85%D9%86%D9%88-%D8%B3%D9%88%D9%85/>

"Oxford Reference". *Reader Response Theory*. Accessed 30/04/2018.

<http://oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100406762>

“Sulayman Ibn Qiddees”. *'Attar – The Three Butterflies*. Accessed 30/04/2018.

<http://blogs.harvard.edu/sulaymanibnqiddees/2012/11/07/attar-the-three-butterflies/>

“Vājehyāb”, *Shā'erānegi*. Accessed 30/04/2018.

<http://vajehyab.com/?q=شاعرانگی>

INSTRUCTIONS FOR READING

I have conducted all the interviews in this research in the Persian language (Farsi). In my translations of the interviews I have tried to stick to the literal meaning as closely as possible. In some places I have taken a few aesthetic liberties to make a term or a phrase better fit into the context of the English language. In the quotations I have included the Farsi original of certain expressions in (*italics*) for reference to the original terminology used by my interviewees. I use [brackets] to insert missing words or add short comments into the interview quotations.

In the text *italics* are used for indigenous terms in Farsi, and to a lesser extent Arabic, especially expressions stemming from the Sufi terminology.

This thesis uses a modified version of the International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies' (IJMES) transliteration system for Persian. Consonants are consistent with this system, but for the sake of readability diacritics are not used to distinguish letters that have the same pronunciation in Persian. The only vowel for which I use a diacritic is the long *ā* (similar to a in "all") as contrasted with *a*, the short vowel (similar to a in "at").

Diacritics are not used for the names of people or places, except for the letter ^ˆ (ayn) that cannot be rendered in the Latin alphabet.

In order to protect the privacy of my interviewees they will be mentioned only by their first names. Exceptions lie with the "experts" I interviewed, meaning renowned specialists or professors of Persian literature.

CURRICULUM VITAE

Personal Information:

Name-Surname: Marian Brehmer

E-mail: marianbrehmer@gmail.com

Education

2011-2014 Iranian Studies Bachelor Program, Freie
Universität Berlin, Germany

2010 – 2012 Civilization Studies Master Program, Ibn Haldun
University, Turkey

Languages: German, English, French, Persian, Turkish