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The Stages of Love in
Early Persian Sufism, from
Rabi'a to Ruzbihan

01 Kasım 2013

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Everyone acknowledges that love is hard to classify, but that has not kept people from trying to do so. Especially in a tradition like Persian Sufism, in which love is the subject of innumerable tributes, it has been impossible to resist the attempt to describe the character of love. The panorama of early Sufism in Persia offers many testimonies to love and its many moods and degrees. Mystical classifications of the stages of love differed from secular, legal, and philosophical analyses of love in that the Sufis consistently placed love in the context of their mystical psychology of "states" and "stations", with an emphasis on love as the transcendence of the self.¹ Moreover, love in its various forms was of such importance that it generally was recognized

¹ For secular, mystical, and legal classifications of love, see the tables in Joseph Norment Bell, *Love Theory in Later Hanbalite Islam* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1978), pp. 157–60. Surveys of the literature are found in Hellmut Ritter, "Philologika VII: Arabische und persische Schriften über die profane und die mystische Liebe," *Der Islam* 21 (1933); Hellmut Ritter, *Das Meer der Seele: Mensch, Welt und Gott in den Geschichten des Fariduddin 'Attar* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1978), esp. pp. 504–74; Lois Anita Giffen, *The Theory of Profane Love Among the Arabs: The Development of the Genre* (New York: New York University Press, 1971); and 'Abd al-Rahman ibn Muhammad al-Ansari al-ma'ruf bi-ibn al-Dabbagh, *Kitab mashariq anwar al-qulub wa mafith asrar al-ghuyub*, ed. H. Ritter (Beirut: Dar Sadir, Dar Bayrut, 1379/1959), Introduction, pp. ii–vi (in Arabic).

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as "the highest goal of the stations and the loftiest summit of the stages", in Abu Hamid al-Ghazali's phrase.² The classifications of the stages of love according to the early Sufis differed in detail, but the fundamental emphasis throughout was on love as the most important form of the human-divine relationship. We can trace the historical development of the classifications of love in Persian Sufism in an almost direct line from its origins through Rabi'a of Basra to the summa of love by the sixth/twelfth-century Sufi of Shiraz, Ruzbihan Baqli. Throughout this development, we can see the gradual elaboration of many refinements, and even the intrusion of vocabulary from the secular philosophical tradition, but the fundamental emphasis is on love aspiring to union with God.

The problem of the classification of love's stages is inseparable from the larger theme of the states (*ahwal*) and stations (*maqamat*) in Sufism. Ultimately, the impulse to categorize goes back to the Qur'an, with its differentiation of souls in the eschaton, and the term *maqam* is fairly frequent in the Qur'an.³ In Sufism, many commentators have noticed that this type of classification goes back at least to Dhu al-Nun the Egyptian (d. 246/861), who is credited with lists of 19 or eight stages, while in Iran, Yahya ibn Mu'adh (d. 258/872) spoke of seven or four.⁴ Paul Nwyia has traced the Sufi concern with the structure of mystical experience to the sixth imam of the Shi'a, Ja'far al-Sadiq (d. 148/765), whose Qur'an commentary formed the basis for the Sufi exegesis of Dhu al-Nun. Ja'far al-Sadiq compiled three lists of stages, which analysed the spiritual itinerary toward the vision of the

² Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *Ihya' ulum al-din* (16 parts in 4 vols., Cairo: Dar al-Shu'ab, n.d.), p. 2570. Cf. Zayn al-Din Hamid Muhammad Ghazali Tusi, *Kitab-i kimiya-yi sa'adat*, ed. Ahmad Aram (2nd ed., Tehran: Kitabkhana-i wa Chapkhana-i Markazi, 1333/1955; reprint ed., Istanbul: Waqf al-Ikhlās, 1408/1366/1988), p. 850, where he calls love (*mahabbat*) "the greatest of the stages."

³ The term *maqam* occurs 14 times in the Qur'an. It hardly seems necessary to suppose with Massignon that this concept is a "philosophical intrusion" of Stoic origin; cf. Louis Massignon, *La Passion de Husayn Ibn Mansur Hallaj, martyr mystique de l'Islam exécuté Baghdad le 26 mars 922* (new ed., 4 vols., Paris: Gallimard, 1975), I, 390, n. 3.

⁴ Massignon, *Passion*, I, 390, nn. 3–4; idem, *Essai sur les origines du lexique technique de la mystique musulmane*, Études Musulmanes, 2 (new ed., Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1968), p. 41; Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1975; New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2009), p. 100.