

What Thirst is For

BY M. ALI LAKHANI

It is good knowing that glasses are to drink from.
The bad thing is not knowing what thirst is for.
Antonio Machado

Whoever is desireless, sees the essence of life.
Whoever desires, sees its manifestations.
These two are the same.
Tao Te Ching

Man is compounded of both dust and spirit, and, like all creatures, he is covenanted concurrently to both time and eternity. This simultaneity, this admixture, inheres within the very fabric of creation and existence, of revelation itself. To exist is to be and, at the same time, not to be. Growth is a form of evanescence, dying a form of being born. Existence is now and, in a certain sense, forever. Form conceals essence, being resides within becoming, stasis abides in the heart of movement, reality is both present and fleeting, both beyond and within. And in this *complexio oppositorum* lies the paradox and ambiguity of spiritual expression: divine utterances, ourselves included, contain ineffable meanings. Words proclaim Silence.

It is this same ambiguity that clouds the nature of desire—a cloud of ambiguity which only the rays of the Intellect, the supernal Sun, can disperse. This is the ambiguity of Maya, the ambiguity of the Cosmic Veil. And at the heart of this ambiguity lies a choice given to all of mankind: to seek the fulfilment of one's desires in the beatific vision of the Sun's heavenly Light or to seek it in the tumult of the shadows.

From a metaphysical standpoint, privation and proximity, transcendence and immanence, the mystery of the Absolute and the radiance of the Infinite, are each embedded within the very structure of Reality. It is our "ontological distance from God" that constitutes our privation, and the possibility of our "ontological re-integration" within God that constitutes our proximity. "Things are in God and God is in things with a kind of discontinuous continuity" (Schuon), and Reality is therefore translucent with the radiance of God. Creation is understood in traditional thought to be a Veil through which—and in which—God is metaphysically transparent. Insofar as creation is separate from God, man is ontologically distant from the source of his existence and from the object of his salvation, which remains ever transcendent, mysterious, beyond reach. Yet, insofar as creation is a theophany, radiating the immanence of God, man—made in the image of God—has within him both the means and end of the fulfilment of his desires.

But what appears as translucent to the Inner Eye of the Heart is perceived as opaque by the Outer Eye of the mind or the senses. Therein lies the ambiguity of the Icon and the Veil, an ambiguity inherent in the process of the concretization of the Absolute, and its reversal. It is the Inner Eye that discovers the

Beauty beneath the Veil. And it is “sacred desire” (or “spiritual thirst”) that impels this discovery.

From the traditional perspective, since “all that exists tends towards perfection” and since “God is the Supreme Perfection”, desires are satisfied only by the serenity of the Divine Presence. God is the sole and final refuge of lustful man. This is why Niffari exclaims: “I take refuge in the unity of Thy Quality against every quality”. In the Islamic context, God is said to be both *Zahir* (“Manifest” or “Outward”) and *Batin* (“Hidden” or “Inward”). He is revealed to the extent that man perceives Him through his Inner Eye, the Eye of the Heart—the Eye of the Intellect. For traditional man, there is no Truth without Presence, and there is no Presence until God is perceived in the “eternal now”, both beyond and within. The world seen in a grain of sand, and a heaven in a wild flower.

One of the key attributes of modernity is the profanation of desire. “He who knows God is disinterested in the gifts of God, and he who is negligent of God is insatiable for the gifts of God” (Shaykh Ahmad al-‘Alawi). Modern man has an insatiable thirst for the gifts of God, but is blind to His Presence. Instead he perceives only the objects of his lusts, breeding through them a world of concupiscence, exploitation, commodification and wanton consumption—a world in which desire is reduced to the need for the instant gratification of individual wants and cravings, and the indulging of personal appetites. In such a world, the notion of the perfectability of desire as love, or the conformity of the soul to the Beauty of the Spirit, is all but forgotten—replaced by modernist explanations of desire in terms of behavioural instincts, or the pleasure/pain principle, or libido, or the evolutionist's creed of the “survival of the fittest”. These theories are reinforced and systematized through the tyranny of the modern media and its various seductions that fuel the monster of consumption, creating wants and desires that mankind never before even dreamed of. Lost in such a world is the respect for traditional values, for the nobility of the person, the sanctity of relationships, the wonder of life, and the appreciation that “everything that lives is holy”. In a world of such wantonness, desires degenerate, pander to the unsalutary, and eventually erode the very foundation of society. In *Cymbeline*, Shakespeare observes:

The cloyed will, —
That satiate yet unsatisfied desire, that tub
Both fill'd and running, — ravening first the lamb,
Longs after for the garbage.

What, then, can fulfil this “satiated yet unsatisfied desire”? It is true that some traditional teachings have anathematized desire, but in so doing, they are in reality no more than condemning the desecration of desire—not desire itself. So, for example, when Bayazid exclaims “I desire not to desire” or the Buddha—who teaches that craven desire is the cause of all suffering—advocates “blowing out the flame of desire”, the “desire for desirelessness” to which they aspire is itself a legitimate and necessary form of desire—a prolongation in the will of an

apophatic discernment of the intelligence—and is another example of the *complexio oppositorum* referred to earlier. It is not until the final act of “letting go”—the initiatic “death” of the “psycho-physical res” which constitutes the crystallised being of man—that desire itself finally ceases, requited ultimately by Divine Presence (*visio beatifica*) or Mystical Union (*unio mystica*). But, till then, de-centered man is enjoined, by force of his privative conditions, to desire. For thirst and privation are the conditions of existence. Man cannot overcome his privative conditions. To exist in a contingent and imperfect world is to partake of those very qualities. Man will thirst, hunger, bleed and eventually die. But something in man can transcend and survive the contingency and imperfections of his earthly existence. There is a connection between our worldly—sensual—desires (*eros*) and their intended end (*telos*). Worldly desires exist in order to be sublimated. The desire of man is prefigured in the desire of God. This is one of the many meanings of the famous *hadith qudsi*: “I was a hidden treasure; I desired to be known, so I created the world.” Creation then is a projection of God’s desire into the world. In other words, God desires our existence precisely so that we may desire our return to Him, our Origin and Final Sanctuary.

Though man’s lot cannot be overcome, it can yet be transcended by reconnecting our desires to their sacred Origin, a connection that is made through the golden thread of *Amanah*, the “Sacred Trust” of mankind. This is the true purpose of desire, whose fulfilment is both knowledge (“To know what is, and to know it in such a fashion as to be oneself, truly and effectively, what one knows” —Guénon) and vision (“Everything is perishing but His Face”, Qur’an: 28.88). Herein lies the meaning of the Qur’anic Covenant of Alast (Qur’an: 7.172) in which each departing soul, before being sent out into the world, affirms its sacred Origin — a witnessing that is subsequently reaffirmed by every practising Muslim in the *Shahadah* or “profession of faith”: *La ilaha illa llah* (“There is no god but God”) and in the divine invocation or *dhikr*.

True knowledge (or Truth), because it permeates our very being, is none other than Love (that is to say, moral intelligence—or Virtue) and Vision (that is to say Presence—or Beauty). The True, the Good, and the Beautiful. *Sat, Chit, and Ananda*. It is through the cultivation of these qualities that desire, by grace and effort, is finally sublimated to its ultimate goal, the *Pax Profunda*, the “peace of God, which passeth all understanding”.

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