

Sema as *Zikr*: The Language of the Whirling Dance

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Abstract

This paper explores the parallels found in the dance of the whirling dervishes and Rumi's poetry. The dance, or *sema*, is a remembrance of God, *zikr*, which Rumi beautifully describes in his poetry. It is an honoring and mirroring of the revolutions, cycles, circles, centers, and turnings of life. This poetry in motion, done in the silence of the dervish, brings us to the *sema*, as a pronounced capacity to presence, because it is both poetry and thing. As poetry, it affords us to undergo an experience with language and the silence that bring us nearer to our center. There is much that is said in the *sema* even if nothing is spoken. What is said is heard in the silence cultivated by *sema*. The dance of the whirling dervishes is *zikr*, a remembrance of God..

Keywords: *Rumi, semazen, silence, zikr, god*

Introduction

A secret turning in us makes the universe turn.
Head unaware of feet, and feet head.
Neither cares.
They keep turning. ~ Rumi

The spinning movements of the whirling dervishes of the Sufi Muslim tradition is said to be a remembrance of God, or *zikr*.¹ Remembrance of God happens with repetitive, lyrical, and meditative physical movements that enable the dervish to lose himself and ultimately connect with the divine. The Mevlevi Order of the Whirling Dervishes was founded by 13th century poet and Sufi mystic Mevlana Jalal Al-Din Muhammad Rumi (1207-1273). Lore has it that Rumi passed by a goldsmith's shop and was overcome by the rhythm of the constantly pounding hammer. The rhythmic pounding plunged Rumi into an ecstasy. He started spinning, and even invited the goldsmith to spin along with him. This dance, or *sema*, was the inspiration of Rumi and has become an iconic practice of Turkish history and culture. The *sema* is meant to connect the person to the infinite. The resulting ecstasy is achieved when the *semazen*, or dancer, falls into a state of meditative

¹ Metin And, "The Mevlana Ceremony," *The Drama Review* 21, no. 3 (1977), 84.

consciousness, because of the rhythmical movements that suspend thought and will. This dance is a form of remembrance of God. According to Rumi, "The *sema* is the soul's adornment that helps it to discover love, to feel the shudder of the encounter, to take off the veils and to be in the presence of God."²

This paper jumps off from a fascination with the whirling dervishes and an appreciation for Rumi's poetry. It actually came as a surprise to me that Rumi is credited for establishing the Mevlevi Order of Whirling Dervishes. Better known as Mevlana in the East, Rumi is now touted as a bestselling poet in the US. Rumi's poetry compels us to see the world richly and deeply, with all its nuances and overt manifestations, from the mundane to the metaphysical. The language he has woven cuts to the core and opens a doorway of possibilities for us. Reading Rumi moves us to have an experience with language. As a poet, Rumi has an intimacy with language that brings us face-to-face with what is, either still concealed or already revealed.

In turn, the whirling dervishes make us experience a different reality. The *sema*, done in the silence of their being, is a meditative action that supposedly opens a pathway from the mortal to the divine. Digesting Rumi's poetry and investigating the practice of the whirling dervishes, I am

² And, "The Mevlana Ceremony," 84.

struck that an experience with language actually happens on two levels: on Rumi's poetry itself and on the practice of the whirling dervishes which the poetry obliquely refers to. This paper focuses on the latter part and contends that the movement of the whirling dervishes, as poetry in motion, is also an experience with language.

The Mevlevi Practice of Whirling, Spinning, Turning

The ritual of the whirling dervishes integrates poetry, music, and dancing, as these are believed to be tools in one's spiritual goal to find union with God, inasmuch as they provide an emotional link to the divine. Before the *semazen* or whirling dervish is fit to perform the ceremony, he must have first undergone one thousand and one days of reclusive training.³ The grueling regimen for whirling mainly consists of two toes enclosing a nail between them and turning around this pivot.

Whirling is grounded on the reality that everything in nature revolves: from the sub-atomic particles that compose matter, up to the planets and heavenly bodies in the cosmos. The human person lives through these revolutions, be these revolutions of particles, or revolutions in her life. The life of the human person is essentially cyclical in that she comes from the earth and will eventually return to it: "For you were

³ United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Education. "The Mevlevi Sema Ceremony." *Proclaimed Masterpieces* 2005.

made from dust and to dust you shall return (Genesis 3:19).” Whirling is a recognition and honoring of all these. Furthermore, it is a physical expression of the words from the Quran: “To God belong the East and the West, and wherever you turn is the face of God. He is the All-Embracing, the All-Knowing (Surah Baqara 2:115).” The *semazen* thus shares and participates in the revolutions of all reality. He consciously and meditatively does his own revolution, turning, whirling, and spinning. Even the attire of the *semazen* is symbolic, serving as a reminder of his mortality. Moreover, the rectangular headpiece that he wears represents his tombstone, the cloak his coffin, and the white shirt his shroud.⁴

Walk to the well.

Turn as the earth and the moon turn,
circling what they love.

Whatever circles comes from the center.⁵

Even if the turning is a dance of yielding to the divine, it is executed with a centered discipline borne of rigorous training and otherworldly sensitivity. When the *semazen*

⁴ And, 93.

⁵ Maulana Jalal al-Din Rumi, *The Essential Rumi*, trans. Coleman Barks (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2004), 279. Lines by Rumi are quoted from translation by Coleman Barks. [Henceforth, I cite the title of the book, abbreviated TER, instead of the original author to accommodate the work of both Rumi and Barks.]

spins, his right arm is extended upwards with the palm facing the heavens while his left arm is downwards with the palm facing the earth. It is believed that the dervish receives blessings from heaven through his upturned hand, and sends these to earth with the other downward facing hand. This dance is a prayer that serves as a link between the transcendent and the earthly. Rumi expresses, "There are many roads which lead to God. I have chosen the one of dance and music."⁶ In turning, the dervish⁷ becomes an arena where the human and divine can converge. Moreover, it serves as an emotional expression of that which cannot be contained. It is said that Rumi started turning in his utter grief at the inexplicable loss of his soul friend, Shamz.⁸

Dance, when you're broken open.
Dance, if you've torn the bandage off.
Dance in the middle of the fighting.
Dance in your blood.
Dance, when you're perfectly free.⁹

Rumi contends that real men dance, most significantly, when they leave behind the weaknesses and flaws of the self.

⁶ Eva de Vitray-Meyerovitch, *Rumi and Sufism* (Sausalito: Post-Apollo Press, 1987), 43.

⁷ Dervish literally means "doorway." TER, 277.

⁸ Shamz of Tabriz is Rumi's dearest friend with whom he connected on a cosmic soul level. He vanished one night and is speculated to have been killed by followers of Rumi who were jealous of their singular relationship.

⁹ TER, 281.

He enjoins, “Dance where you can break yourself to pieces and totally abandon your worldly passions.”¹⁰

The whirling dervish is a being that seeks union with the divine. The *semazen* recognizes and understands that there is transcendence, from which his very existence is dependent, or at least, finds reference. It is in his rigorous training that he tries to put things under his control, and tries to know more about the divinity through meditation and repetitive physical movements. The Mevlevi practice presupposes that the divinity may reveal itself when the former is prepared. Such preparation, however, may only go so far, because the desired experience is ultimately something that happens to the *semazen*, not something that he makes happen.

Though the ritual of the whirling dervishes is essentially movement, it speaks of something greater than the movement itself. It speaks of the human desire to reach out for something beyond his actuality. At the same time, this movement speaks of the very present human actuality. The underlying reality of the movement is communicated to us in its meditative and repetitive nature. There is communication, a linking of beings, that occurs. There is language.

¹⁰ And, 86.

What the *sema* says to us links us to the divine, albeit in a veiled manner. The *sema* says something even if nothing is spoken. The *sema* says something of significance through the rhythmic and spinning movements. What is said, however, may only be understood when we do away with calculative thinking. It is through meditative thinking that what the *sema* is truly saying is heard and understood. It is through meditative thinking that what is said is linked to God.

The dance of the whirling *dervishes* brings us to an experience with language. There is so much that is said but nothing is actually spoken. We are brought to an encounter with something transcendent, yet nothing is uttered. There is language in *sema*, and it shows itself to us when we do not have the words for the experience.

The repetitive and meditative movements of the *sema* are meant to arrive at a silencing within. It is in this silencing that *zikr*, remembrance of God, happens. It is meditative thinking that silences the cacophony within and without and makes us see the poetic in the world.

Silence as Ground for Poetic Experience

Silence is the language of god, all else is poor translation. ~ Rumi

What Rumi aims at through the verse above is to prod us into finding our silence, that we may be linked to something grander than us. It is silence that moves us to poetic thinking. It is silence that sets the ground for an experience

with language. It is this silence that the *sema* cultivates; a silence pregnant with meaning and presence.

The significance of silence is further elucidated in the Filipino word, *paghilom*. In the Visayan regions of the Philippines, *paghilom* is usually uttered as a directive which translates to, “Be quiet.” A mother may reprimand her bickering young children with, “*Paghilom mo!*” to shut them up. *Paghilom* is also the word for healing in the Tagalog regions of the Philippines. “*Paghilom ng sugat* (healing of the wound)”; “*Matagal ang kanyang paghilom* (her healing took time).” This recognition and appreciation of the word, *paghilom*, is an experience with language. It is something that strikes us, then moves us to ponder its significance, and perhaps, even changes something within us. Thus, the word *paghilom*, which embodies silence and healing, points to an essential truth of our existence. *Paghilom*, which we can utter without thought, unconceals a truth that remains hidden in the noise. The truth that there is healing in silence, or that silence heals, is found in that single Filipino word: *paghilom*.

The inner silence that the *sema* cultivates is that which is found in *paghilom*. The *semazen* seeks after the silence and healing that come with the convergence within himself of the heavenly and the earthly. Moreover, the *semazen* seeks the silence and healing that come with the falling away of familiar thinking. It is in this silence and healing that the transcendent becomes more manifest. As Rumi says, “Every

spoken word is a covering for the inner self.”¹¹ What is thus made full and present in silence, when all noise recedes, is essential being. “The speechless full moon comes out now.”¹²

Sema as Poetry

The elements of the *sema* bring about not only a thinking experience, but also a poetic experience: a poetic experience that renders a different richness to the everyday and the familiar. The thinking experience that also ensues is in no way subordinate to poetic thinking.

The *sema*, as poetry in motion, magnifies the poetic experience into that which encompasses the whole human being. There is poetry in the dance of the dervishes. The recognition and appreciation that there is poetry in the *sema* arises because of an intimacy with language that transcends convention. This intimacy with language allows for the expression of words apart from what is written and uttered. The *semazen* goes on a way where he understands and experiences that his dance is his own poetic language. The *semazen* offers up concrete actions to reach this transcendence. The repetitive movements that the *semazen* makes have become something much more than physical motions: they have become the temple of his being. The

¹¹ TER, 30.

¹² Ibid., 22.

constant, meditative movements—intensely poetic language that they are—bring the *semazen* to what is.

Sema and Being

Such poetry in motion of the *sema* is a veritable gift of outpouring. The *semazen* pours himself out in the rigorous training that makes him fit and worthy to do the poetic dance. His feet are planted on the ground as he whirls in honor of the revolutions of earthly and cosmic reality. His arms reach out to the sky to receive from the divine, and gesture towards the earth to bestow on mortals what he receives. It seems that the *sema* has a pronounced capacity to presence because it is both poetry and thing. As poetry, it affords us to undergo an experience with language that silences our familiar thinking and brings us nearer to our center. This sacred whirling dance becomes something else and something more. As Rumi expresses, “I have no name for what circles so perfectly.”¹³

Rumi articulates, “A secret turning in us makes the universe turn.”¹⁴ This saying by Rumi highlights the significance of the practice of the whirling dervishes that appropriates the reality of the world, as unconcealed by their own intimate and sacred actions. However, Rumi’s saying also points to the reality that there is something that is always a little out of

¹³ TER, 278.

¹⁴ Ibid.

reach, despite an outpouring of self because what is, nature, will always love to hide. Even if “whatever circles comes from the center,”¹⁵ this center remains distant and concealed. At the same time, it is also tantalizingly near and unconcealed. Thus, the *semazen* continues to whirl and turn as his means of reaching out to bridge the distance. His whirling and turning are already an art that says so much. Yet, what is in nature is the much greater art that eludes his artful reaching out. *Ars est celare artem*. It is art to hide art. It seems that reality will always be the greater artist as it still hides itself even as it shows itself. Both the artist and the art decide whether to manifest itself or not, no matter how much we try participate in it, approximate it, imitate it, or bridge our distance to it.

Whirling Dervishes and the Word

Rumi’s poetry compels us to see the world richly and deeply, with all its nuances and overt manifestations. The language that he has woven cuts to the core. As a poet, Rumi is one who is most intimate with language. The word is not only that which names or allows us to identify something. It is essentially the source of being, and it is the poet who truly experiences such reality which she, in turn, extends to us with her beautifully crafted words. The poet’s

¹⁵ TER, 279.

experience is not only cognitive knowledge and facility with words, but an immersive encounter that makes her fully understand and appreciate the primordial relation of word and thing.

Much as it has been asserted that *where word breaks off no thing may be*, an “is” arises where the word breaks up. It is no longer just the sounded word that brings us to what is, but also the soundless word. The soundless word seems like a paradox; but the breaking up of the word is the sounding word going back to the silence from which it came. The *sema* is sounded word in its coming into being, in its training and execution. More than soundlessness, it is from the stillness stemming from the richness of primordial silence that language truly says something. Rumi is cognizant of such a truth when five hundred of his odes end with *khamush*, the Farsi word for silence. Furthermore, he expresses:

This is how it always is
When I finish a poem.
A great silence overcomes me,
And I wonder why I ever thought
To use language.¹⁶

¹⁶ TER, 20.

The poem first draws us in for an authentic experience with language. When such an encounter touches and affects us, we are moved to a silence where words then become superfluous. It is silence that sets the ground for meditative thinking. In silence, we are able to revel in the poetry of life. In silence, we are able to listen and respond to what is.

There is a way between voice and presence
Where information flows.
In disciplined silence it opens.
With wandering talk it closes.¹⁷

In silence, the dance of the whirling dervish becomes poetry that compels us to sit up and take notice. Without the noise and distraction of familiar thinking, the *sema* becomes beautiful and meaningful, going beyond its physical execution. No longer is the world something that we can exploit and abandon, because we already see it as transcendently extraordinary. This is what the practice of the whirling dervishes shows to us; it is up to us to be receptive to its nuances. Rumi exhorts, “Be like melting snow. Wash yourself of yourself.”¹⁸ We do not get wrapped up in the smallness of our selves but stand out in the open, free of conceptual baggage and ready for revelations to bestow.

¹⁷ TER, 32.

¹⁸ Ibid., 13.

Conclusion

The dance of the whirling dervishes is *zikr*, remembrance of God. Barks contends if there is an essential Rumi, it would be the remembering that everything is God. It is thus that Rumi's poetry, his establishment of the Mevlevi Order of Whirling Dervishes, the very dance of the dervishes, all move us towards *zikr*.

I stand up, and this one of me
turns into a hundred of me.
They say I circle around you.
Nonsense. I circle around me.¹⁹

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¹⁹ TER, 280.

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