Chapter 3

Shams’ Rebellious Paradigm: Listening and Thinking Rumi

Prelude

Shams al-Din Mohammad ibn Ali ibn Malikdād Tabrizi, known as Shams Tabrizi, was a pioneer master who changed Rumi’s perception of spirituality and his experience of the supreme state. The essence of the Shams-Rumi experience is as relevant today as it was in the thirteenth century. Their universal, non-sectarian, and timeless message has been overshadowed due to the existing Sufi and religious narrative(s). Understanding Shams and his message can become an analytical conduit for understanding Rumi on a larger scale. Rumi, in distancing himself from his theological tasks and duties, as well as from his old juridical and unquestioning Sufi practices, radically changed the course of his life and raised serious questions about the scholastic Sufism of the time.1 The path Shams showed Rumi seemed to lie outside of old-fashioned Sufism and even outside of the conventional Islam of his community—but their rebellion was impeded and thrown off course by the Islamic politics of Ottomanism and Sufism of the thirteenth century. There is only one surviving thirteenth-century document in Persian to provide evidence about the unruly approach of Shams when he met Rumi. The manuscript of the Maqālāt presents the discourses that Shams shared with Rumi, Rumi’s son Sultan Valad, Salāh al-Din, and perhaps with the young Husām al-Din. It was behind closed doors in Konya between 1244 and 1247 that the Discourses (Maqālāt) of Shams were recorded. However, we do not know if Shams was aware of the talks being recorded, or whether he encouraged it.2 To understand this inner world of Shams, one must

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delve into the existing versions of his *Maqālāt* as a means to make sense out of the rebellious spiritual agendas that ultimately affected Rumi so much. The discussions in this chapter are almost exclusively based on this essential primary source.

The *Maqālāt* is full of tantalizing, even shocking, spiritual ideas. Shrewdly and precisely cutting through the thick layers of spiritual and mystical jargon of the time, Shams presented his core practice and philosophy to Rumi. But Shams was unsure of whether Rumi would appreciate it and do something with it, or he would have to resume his path alone. To Shams’ profound pleasure, Rumi embarked on the same path, the uniqueness of his approach influencing and forming Rumi’s methods. Thus, Shams was the inspiration for Rumi not only to step out of his old practices as a theologian and scholastic Sufi, but also to construct a new worldview, reflected in his poetry. Let us survey Shams’ eccentric personality and explore some of his views, ones that led to the deconstruction of Rumi’s previous understandings under Islam and Sufism.

Shams did not demonstrate a commitment to any philosophical, spiritual, or religious conventions. He was not interested in pedantic spiritual and moral undertakings; he was more interested in training the mind and the higher faculties and taming the ego. Shams was not only a Sufi wandering around, boasting about searching for God. That was too ostentatious for him, and he did not miss an opportunity to insult what he considered the superficiality of such characters. He set an even higher goal in both the external and internal realms.

Shams lived a nomadic existence, spiritually as well as physically, traveling from town to town to sit at the feet of great masters, learning the essences of what they had to offer. Given his genuine passion for spiritual knowledge, he kept his options completely open, ready to settle down if any master should demonstrate an intellectual honesty that lived up to their philosophy. But Shams did not like any of the masters he visited, and felt he was giving them more credit than they deserved. Nor did he find a qualified disciple he could engage with and transmit his knowledge to. He simply wandered, practicing a freedom from attachment to homeland and family. His confidence transmits a tendency to put a foggy past behind him while indicating no depressive angst about the future. Living in the moment seemed to constitute the core of his life. He was not concerned about the worldly conventions that other people were attached to. As a celibate he was free. He had the nickname of *parandeh*, Shams the bird, who was in constant flight from one place to another. His freedom can be