

The Romantic Selflessness: Sufism in Romanticism

Naji B. Oueijan
Notre Dame University

“I live not in myself, but I become/Portion of that around me,”
Lord Byron *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, III, ll.680–81.¹

I start this study with the above quotation because the self in Romantic literature, perhaps most especially in Lord Byron, is so prominent, so asserted, that to speak of selflessness at all seems strained. Indeed, Romantic literature is packed with examples of the self versus the other, especially the orthodox other. Without denying the thrust of these, this work suggests that selflessness is an essential feature of Romantic literature and that definitions of Romanticism which deny or ignore the concept of selflessness risk misguiding the reading of some of the best Romantic works, which sometimes are being falsely accused of egotistical bombast. Of more academic concern, if selflessness is and can be shown a valid and necessary concept to the understanding of Romanticism, then its kinship with Sufism will be secured.

Just as the Romantics were preoccupied with uncovering the mysteries of the self, they were equally eager to fuse with the other (the other being anything but the self) in a Sufian manner. This mystic fusion is induced by kenosis, the emptying of the self of that which binds it to its physical frame and the filling of the self with that which is the object of the self's

contemplation. This process is induced in order to unravel what Keats calls, "the burden of the mystery" in the self and the other. Their search for that which lies outside the domain of the self, in the other, is a means to inducing the self's quest for selflessness and a reaction against orthodoxy, which engulfs the self with materialistic realities. Blake's concept of "Selfhood," Wordsworth's "spots of time," Coleridge's monistic self-reconciliation, Byron's self-alienation, Shelley's "visitations of the divinity," and Keats's "negative capability" embody certain portions of mysticism, rather Sufism, which generate an immediate concern in the other as a medium to redeem the self. In this respect, the Sufi ecstatic experiences expedite the Romantic craving for "infusing the thoughts and passions of man into every thing which is the object of his contemplation," and the Romantic concern in the Sufi experience reverberates the self's sensibility of the other.

George Poulet introduces his article, "Timelessness and Romanticism," by saying: "Romanticism is first of all a rediscovery of the mysteries of the world, a more vivid sentiment of the wonders of nature, a more acute consciousness of the enigmas of the self. Now there is nothing so mysterious, so enigmatic, so wonderful as Time."² I fully agree with Poulet's definition and sequencing, except that I would prefer—for the purpose of my thesis—to add "Space" to "Time" and to replace both with "Self", which itself determines "Time" and "Space". Without the existence of the Self in an ephemeral physical form, there is no "Time" or "Space", both of which, for the Romantics, imprison the Self—Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality," is the best example. And although Man's ephemeral physical existence could not be measured except by units of Time and Space, his spiritual existence—in a constant search for timeless and spaceless Truth and Beauty—could not. Poulet himself makes it clear that the untying of the enigmas of the Self is done by liberating the Self from the limitations of Time. He writes: "As we are living in duration, it is not permitted to us to have anything but glimpses, disconnected reminiscences, of this immense treasure stored in a remote place in our soul."³ Such glimpses of self-awareness represent images of eternity, of the Universal and the Eternal, of God. For Shelley, "A Poet participates in the eternal, the infinite, and the one; as far as relates to his conceptions, time and place and number are not."⁴ These illuminating

Romantic instances are Timeless and Spaceless; i.e. Selfless. And what is Sufism other than a process of achieving Selflessness leading to the “participation in the eternal, the infinite, and the one.”

The curious Romantic and Sufi craving after fusing with the eternal and infinite starts by eliminating all physical distractions hindering selflessness. This is provoked by the self's spontaneous contemplation of an object and involves the self's fusion of all disagreeables that hinder the object's wholeness. For the Romantics this object could be an element of Nature, determined by specific time and space, such as the ocean, the wind, a bird, a flower, etc. at sunset, sunrise, etc. The object, by its own wholeness, attracts the contemplative self of the beholder; when this attraction reaches an ecstatic peak, it induces the illuminating fusion of the self with the wholeness of the object, thus producing a wholeness of the self and the other, the other being none but a representation of the wholeness of God. The Sufi poet, Jami, says:

Therefore He created the verdant fields of Time and
Space and the life-giving garden of the World,
That every branch and leaf and fruit might show forth
His various perfections⁵

Schelling describes self-illuminating moments as “the sudden brightening and illumination of consciousness”; Goethe considers them as “the flash of now...the center”; Wordsworth asserts that they are “attendant gleams” or “the spots of time”; Coleridge regards them as the visionary moments, Byron conceives them as “The bodiless thought? The Spirit of each spot” (*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, III, l. 705); Shelley observes them as “visitations of divinity” or “evanescent visitations”; and Keats sees them in moments of “Beauty and Truth”. These moments, in a platonic and Coleridgean sense, are timeless moments in which “The infinite Power of the universe transcends the mechanical, the physical, the sensuous; man is in mystical harmony with the universe, and through this harmony he in security derives a knowledge of the universe which is its truth.”⁵ This attempt by the Romantics, says Herbert Schueller, is intended “to transcend the mundane and the human, even though the human mind is the agency by which this transcendence must be achieved; the difficulty is

that the only agency which the human mind has for transcending itself is itself."⁶

This process is Sufian, except that the Sufi initiates it willfully, while the Romantic does so spontaneously. The Sufi initiates this process through mental meditation, contemplation, or through physical exertion—the whirling dance of the Sufi dervish; however, in the case of the Romantics it is in most cases accidental. In *Endymion*, Keats writes:

Feel we these things?—that moment we step
 Into a sort of oneness, and our state
 Is like floating spirit's.
 (*Endymion*, ll. 795–97)

The Sufian “kenosis” involves self-mortification, thaumaturgical and animistic exercises and various methods of auto-hypnosis, contemplation, and self-annihilation to reach the stage of illumination.⁷ Of course, for the Romantics this process was not so severe and willful as it was for the Sufists, which is the reason why for the Romantics these illuminating or floating moments were less frequent and briefer, on the temporal scale, than those of the Sufists; yet, both the Romantics and the Sufists sought these ecstatic moments eagerly and passionately; and when they did, they sought not the *metaphysical knowledge* of existence but the *living experience* of real existence, of the Infinite.

Amongst the Romantics, Byron's process seems more willful and thus more Sufian than that of other Romantic poets because it involves self-annihilation through love—pure spiritual love—which itself induces the separation of the personal physical self from the pure self; i.e., it fulfills an escape of the self from material and spatial limits and from self-centeredness to achieve unification with the Eternal Essence. The Romantic realizes that self-completion involves some degree of self-immersion approaching self-negation, rather ego-negation. The destruction of the ego becomes a necessary step prior to immersion in the other self. As love of the other develops, the ego wastes away producing a selfless self. Only then is floatation of the self possible. In his *The Bride of Abydos*, Byron implies that Zuleika and Selim's passionate pure love breaks the chains of physical reciprocity and embodies the highest form of

spiritual love. Their detachment from sensuality and sexuality is a detachment from the physical desires of their selves. Their love is more Sufian than Romantic in the sense that it embraces the pure, spiritual adoration of the other as one of the means to reunite with the Almighty. Bernard Blackstone is the only scholar to have suggested that Byron's Eastern heroines represent the "allegorical mistresses or youths of Sufi poetry, symbolizing noesis, mystical realization."⁸ Whoever has no passionate love, says Jami, has no heart; and whoever has no pain in his heart is like still water. So to set oneself free and enjoy an everlasting happiness, one must carry the pains of pure love in his heart.⁹ In *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Byron describes Rousseau as a "self-torturing" poet:

His love was passion's essence—as a tree
On fire by lightning; with ethereal flame
Kindled he was, and blasted; . . . [Whose love]
...
But of ideal beauty, which became
In him existence, and o'erflowing teens,
Along his burning page, distempered though it seems.
(III, ll. 734–43)

Much like the Sufi self, the Romantic self's existence is determined by its knowledge; just as, conversely what it knows depends upon its existence. Thus knowledge is existence, and existence is knowledge; and although self's existence depends upon its perception of elements of the outer world, self-knowledge depends upon its unification with those elements. The Sufi and the Romantic believe that knowledge of the self is incomplete without knowledge of the outer world and that this process is unattainable unless a union between the beholder and the beheld takes place. At the moment when the Self is conscious of the knowledge of an element of the outer world it contains the idea of that element and the two are united as one reality; but for the self to contain the idea of that element it must empty itself from itself; it must itself become selfless. All existence, then, has a *single* comprehensive design, a "Universal Truth". Wordsworth makes it clear that to have knowledge man has to unite with the outer universe in a "holy marriage":

For the discerning intellect of Man,
 When wedded to this goodly universe
 In love and holy passion, shall find these
 A simple produce of the common day.

(*The Excursion*, "Prospectus," ll. 52–55)

This holy marriage, to Shelley, is divinely controlled; it unites all things in a "harmonious Soul":

Man, one harmonious soul of many a soul,
 Whose nature is its own divine control,
 Where all things flow to all, as rivers to the sea.

(*Prometheus Unbound*, IV, ll. 400–402)

Also for Blake, knowledge of the universe is possible when man and all natural elements mystically unite; he writes:

All Human Forms identified even Tree Metal Earth & Stone. All
 Human Forms identified, living going forth..."

(*Jerusalem*, 99. ll. 1–2).¹⁰

Praising Blake, Coleridge called him, "a *Mystic*"; i.e., "a man who was receptive to esoteric doctrines, as Coleridge himself had been and continued to be."¹¹

Discussing Sufism, Seyyed Hossein Nasr notes that the Sufi believed that existence gives a substance reality and distinguishes it from other substances; "but existence itself plunges in Being. In turn this Being is and possesses at the same time the attributes of Light and Knowledge. Likewise all things are united by their existence as they all unite in this Being; however, each is distinguished by its own particularities."¹²

"Oneness" or "Wholeness" is possible when these particularities are diffused in the self of the contemplative mind; only then, is illumination possible. Along the same lines Keats writes: "There may be intelligences or sparks of the divinity in millions—. . . [I]ntelligences are atoms of perception—they know and they see and they are pure, in short they are God."¹³ These intelligences see through the eye of the mind and the soul.

They perceive Truth through the process of identity, which is achieved only through gnosis; only then does knowledge become Truth.

The Eastern thinker and scientist, Ibn Sina, claims that there is a Necessary Being which cannot be two, and that it is all Truth, "then by virtue of His Essential Reality, in respect of which He is Truth, He is United and One, and no other shares with Him in that Unity; however the all-Truth attains existence, it is through Himself"; thus, "His whole cosmology depends upon the correspondence between the microcosm, man, and the macrocosm, the Universe, so that the constitution of the one corresponds to the constitution of the other."¹⁴ The Universe, then, is a great man, that man is a little Universe. The Sufi believes that he studies nature not to analyze it but to come to know himself through the analogy existing between the microcosm and the macrocosm. Thus by exploring his inner self and the immediate realities of the natural world man comes to know God. The Sufi sets himself the task of synthesizing these various natural realities into a unified vision of things. It is the task of the human mind, considered here as a reflection of the Universal Intellect, to analyze the contents of its experiences before attempting a synthesis. Jami writes:

Being, with all its latent qualities,
Doth permeate all mundane entities,
Which, they can receive them, show them forth
In the degrees of their capacities.¹⁵

Coleridge expresses the same views in his *Biographia Literaria* when he writes about the function of the imagination and classifies it into Primary Imagination, which analyses elements of nature, and Secondary Imagination, which synthesizes them.

Man's perception of Nature, then, depends upon his perception of God or the Necessary Being, who himself is all elements of the universe in One. One cannot speak of Nature as separate from this One. "The oneness of Being, which has often been misconstrued as pantheism, implies the essential unity of all things with each other and with their Divine Cause"; besides, it "is through the realization of this doctrine that the Sufi [and the Romantic] is able to see in nature a determination of a higher state of

being and a domain which not only veils but also reveals the divine essences.”¹⁶

In the Sufi perspective, Nature is a vast panorama of representations which must be comprehended and interiorized before it can be transcended. The Sufi Syllogism goes like this: God is Truth; Nature represents God; therefore, Nature represents Truth. But “The nature of the truth is such that it is beautiful.”¹⁷ Nature then reflects the Divine Beauty. Keats’s Beauty is Truth and Truth is Beauty, and both are God. To Keats, a revelation of Beauty and Truth is accessible when a fusion, sensual or sexual, takes place between man and his fellow human beings, and between man and the sensuous objects of nature; the main ingredient for this fusion is love:

But there are
Richer entanglements, entanglements far
More self-destroying, leading by degrees,
To the chief intensity: the crown of these
Is made of love and friendship, and sits high
Upon the forehead of humanity.

...

till in the end,
Melting into its [love’s] radiance, we blend,
Mingle, and so become a part of it.

(*Endymion*, ll. 797–811)

For the Sufi, much as for the Romantic, Nature is a source of spiritual nourishment and a retreat from materialistic life. And the spiritual travail itself, which enables the Sufi and the Romantic to gain a vision into the inner meaning of nature, is focused on eliminating all physical, materialistic obstacles. Also to the Sufi, Truth represents the supreme mercy of God, which embraces all things, even non-being which is its opposite. This Being unifies all inside himself inasmuch as it is the origin of all universal existence. The Sufi poet Rumi writes:

Being’s the essence of the Lord of all;
All things exist in Him and He is all;
This is the meaning of the Gnostic phrase;
‘All things are comprehended in the all.’¹⁸

When Coleridge's ancient Mariner blesses the snakes, he again becomes a part of this all; he is redeemed by the mercy of the Supreme Being. In his *Religious Musings* Coleridge claims that

'Tis the sublime of man,
Our moontide Magesty, to know ourselves
Parts and proportions of one wondrous whole!
... 'tis God.

(xxxviii. 127-31).¹⁹

Thus like the Sufi, the Romantic asserts that man's highest state of self awareness is the experience of his familial participation in the One. Also, for the Romantic the otherness of God, the universe, nature and man yields an estrangement with the self and constitutes their unpardonable sin. For Coleridge as well as for the Sufi poet, self-sufficiency is evil, and self-annihilation is virtue. In other words, selflessness is virtue, and it is possible when

The whole one Self! Self, that no alien knows!...
Self, spreading still! Oblivious of its own,
Yet all of all possessing!

(*Religious Musings*, ll.154-56)

Thus the movement away from a sensuous reality to a vision of Truth is a movement from an illusionary reality to real reality. "When the illusion of the separation between the soul and the Divine Self is removed, we realize that there is but one Principle dominant in every mode of manifestation, and that the reality we had according to secularism as a competing principle with religion, has been no more than the reality of fantasies of a soul not yet awakened from the dream of negligence and forgetfulness."²⁰

Wordsworth's dream of the Arab Bedouin in Book V of *The Prelude*, Coleridge's poetic dreams, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," and "Kubla Khan", Byron's *Manfred*, Shelley's Sufi poet's dream in *Alastor; or, The Spirit of Solitude*, and Keats's *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream* are the best manifestations of such a process of the mind, which sets itself on a pilgrimage towards identity-awareness and Ultimate Truth. The contemplative traveler toward perfection and gnosis finds forms in nature

which represent his inner state as his inner state represents the truthful forms of nature. Nature, then, becomes a vast book of Divine Wisdom. Byron's poetic pilgrimages, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and *Don Juan*, are aimed at reading deep into this vast book and at redeeming man's self-centeredness. For Byron *Time*, which preoccupied the Romantics with its mystery and immense temporal experience, stops in the world of poetry, a world where every illuminating moment brings man closer to the original experience, and every new experience draws man closer to his true identity. "Like the later French romantic writers Chateaubriand and Lamartine, Flaubert and de Nerval, Byron's journey to the East was partly a private pilgrimage into the exotic recesses of his own mind" to discover the mysteries of his immediate state of being.²¹ The stages of the Romantic circuitous Journey, explained well by Abrams,²² represents the Sufi pilgrimage, which itself follow the course of separateness, renunciation, torment, patience, repentance, abstinence, trust in God, and satisfaction or self-illumination. For both, the Sufists and the Romantics, the mode for the self's expression of selflessness is "To make the external internal, the internal external, to make nature thought, and thought nature, . . .—this is the mystery of genius in the Fine Arts."²³

To conclude this study I must refer to an piquant and legitimate definition made by Nasr of the term "Orient":

The word 'orient' brings to mind the whole Ishrâqi or Illuminationist... We know that in European languages 'orient' contains the double meaning of East as well as turning to the correct direction. In reality, this East is not as much to a geographic direction as the 'Orient of Light' which is the spiritual world transcending the world of material forms. It is also the abode of that spiritual light which illuminates us and through which we receive true knowledge... It means also a penetration within ourselves and a reintegration. Applied to Islamic philosophy, this manner of thinking means then a representation into its spiritual and inner contents and an absorption of its essential truths.²⁴

Sufism and Romanticism seem to feign selflessness and to aggrandize the self, seeking self-illumination through filling this self with the other as a necessary requirement for salvation. Sufism and Romanticism seem to embody a spiritual philosophy expressed in literature. Both reacted

against orthodoxy of thought; and both developed a new process for the perception of the outer and inner world. These suggestions stimulate several questions that still await answers: Is there a relation between the Sufi call for the brotherhood of men and that of the Romantics? Did the Sufi movement, which arose out of the ranks of the common people and appealed to the people, prompt the Romantic movement, which started breaking away from the orthodox control? Was Sufism to Eastern Literature what Romanticism was to Western Literature? Indeed, the Romantic works were remarkable for the overwhelming presence of Sufi features, and there is no doubt that the development of Oriental scholarship, in England during the eighteenth century, with Orientalists like Simon Ockley, George Sale, Edward Gibbon, and Sir William Jones, who translated some of the most significant Eastern religious and literary works, contributed much to the integration of the Sufi ideals into Romanticism. I strongly believe that this integration warrants further consideration and investigation.

Notes

- ¹ All quotations of the poetry and prose of the Romantics are taken from David Perkins, Ed. *English Romantic Writers* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1967), unless otherwise stated.
- ² George Poulet, "Timelessness and Romanticism," *Prism[s]: Essays in Romanticism*, 2 (1994): pp. 25.
- ³ Poulet, p. 37.
- ⁴ From "Defence of Poetry" in Perkins, p. 1073.
- ⁵ Herbert M Schueller, "Romanticism Reconsidered," in *Prism[s]: Essays in Romanticism*, 1 (1993): p. 72.
- ⁶ Schueller, p. 72.
- ⁷ Gibb, p. 156.
- ⁸ Bernard Blackstone, "Byron and Islam: the Triple Eros," *Journal of European Studies*, 4 (1974), p. 350.
- ⁹ Muhammed Ghounaimy Hilal, *Leila and the Mejnoun in the Arabic and Persian Literature*. (Beirut: Dar Al-Awda, 1980), pp. 260-61. It is worth mentioning here that Byron confessed his admiration of Jami, whose poetry he had read in Sir William Jones's translations; see, Naji B. Oueijan, *The Progress of an Image: The East in English Literature* (New York: Peter Lang Publishers, 1996), p. 94.
- ¹⁰ See *Jerusalem in The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*. Ed. David V. Erdman, Commentary by Harold Bloom (Los Angeles: University of California, 1982): pp. 238-59.
- ¹¹ M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1973), p. 165.

- ¹² Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Studies: Essays on Law and Society, the Sciences, and Philosophy and Sufism* (Beirut: Librairie Du Liban, 1967), pp.135–37 .
- ¹³ From a letter “To George and Georgiana Keats,” February 14–May 3, 1891; in Perkins, p. 1225.
- ¹⁴ Quoted in Nasr, p. 46.
- ¹⁵ Quoted in Nasr, p. 144.
- ¹⁶ Nasr, p. 59.
- ¹⁷ Nasr, p. 109.
- ¹⁸ Nasr, p. 143.
- ¹⁹ See the poem in *The Complete Poetical Works*, Ed. E. H. Coleridge, 2vols (Oxford, 1912).
- ²⁰ Nasr, p. 24.
- ²¹ Stephen Coote, *Byron: The Making of a Myth* (London: The Bodley Head, 1988), p. 43.
- ²² See Abrams, pp. 197–323.
- ²³ Abrams, p. 169.
- ²⁴ Nasr, p. 108.