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Title: Contemplation and Nature in the Perspective of Sufism

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Abstract: In this article, the author examines the idea of contemplation as a state of being in its own right. He discusses esoteric understandings, particularly in the Sufi cosmology, of Reality and Being, in order to get to the heart of the act of contemplation. In this regard, the author highlights nature as a sanctuary for Man that must be revered and not destroyed.

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I

*Creation's book I studied from my youth,
And every page examined but in sooth
I never found therein aught save the 'Truth',
And Attributes that appertain to 'Truth'.
What mean Dimension, Body, Species,
In Mineral, Plant, Animal degree?
The 'Truth' is single, but His modes beget
All these imaginary entities.¹*

(‘Abd al-Rahman Jami)

Contemplatives of all ages from the prophets who are the prototypes of spirituality to the forest seers of the Upanishads and the early desert fathers, the medieval saints, and such contemporary sages as Sri Ramana Maharashi have turned to nature as a source of spiritual nourishment and retreat for the contemplative life. If in this essay the relation between contemplation and nature is limited to the Islamic tradition it is because of the limitations of the knowledge of the author rather than the lack of universality of the subject-matter, for, as the Sufis say, “Truth like the Sun shines wherever no obstacle is put before it.”

Contemplation, from the Muslim point of view, is not a passive response, nor an emotional or even mental activity. It involves, strictly speaking, the faculty of intellection symbolised by the ‘eye of the heart’ which ‘sees’ the spiritual world in a direct manner much like the physical eye which possesses the same power in the sensible world and in opposition to the faculty of reason which functions discursively and ‘knows’ indirectly. In the hierarchy of human faculties the Senses occupy the lowest realm, the faculties of the soul the main one of which is reason the intermediate realm, and ‘the eyes of the heart’ or the intellect - as used in its original sense - the highest level.

Contemplation, then, is dependent upon the functioning of the faculty of intellection just as physical vision is dependent upon the possession of healthy eyes. The contemplative ‘sees’ the Truth and knows it through the process of identity. At the end when he has reached the state of ‘union’, through the effective realisation of the Truth or through gnosis (*ma‘rifah*) his knowledge becomes perfect, and because knowing is essentially being, his being also partakes of the ‘perfume’ of the divine knowledge thus acquired. The imperfections of his finitude have disappeared like a drop of water in the infinite ocean of Being.

¹ ‘Abd al-Rahman Jami, *‘Lawa’ih* translated by Whinfield & Kazvini, London 1928, p.21.

II

“Not-being is the mirror of Being, that is, of Absolute Being. In it is reflected the glory of the Creative Truth. When not-being is placed opposite Being, in an instant the reflection appears in it. Not-being is a mirror and the world the reflection and man like the reflection of an eye - the eye of the Hidden One. Although the place which is the centre of the heart is small, it is yet found to be a fitting dwelling place for the Lord of the two worlds.”² (Mahmud Shabistari).

Of the many worlds of Reality only the highest which is the world of the Divine Essence - *al-alam al-dhat* - is absolutely Real. The other worlds are its multiple reflections in the mirror of Non-being. This is the only image that can convey to a certain extent this effable aspect of the Truth, for the transition from Unity to multiplicity is an ultimate mystery which no human language or thought can hope to express. From a negative point of view each lower world can be said to be the shadow of the one above it, each Shadow being paler and farther away from the Absolute Reality as one descends from the world of the Essence through the intermediate realms to the world of earthly existence which is the lowest in this hierarchy. The world may thus be considered as the shadow of God.

If negatively this world is a shadow, positively it is a reflection and symbol of the worlds above it. In essence it is nothing other than God - for there cannot be two completely independent orders of Reality. This essential identity, however, does not imply any form of pantheism despite what a cursory glance may imply to certain people. It may be said of the Sufi that ‘he does not for one moment imagine that God is in the world; but he knows that the world is mysteriously plunged in God’³. The universe is united and one with its Divine Principle not substantially but in essence. And because it is thus united every particle in the universe reflects the Divine Beauty.

‘Under the veil of each particle is concealed the soul-refreshing beauty of the face of the Beloved. To that one whose spirit lives in contemplation of the Vision of God, the whole world is the book of God Most High’.⁴ (Shabistari)

*Being’s the essence of the Lord of all,
All things exist in Him and He in all;
This is the meaning of the Gnostic phrase,
‘All things are comprehended in the all’*⁵

(Jami)

If from a certain point of view each world is a shadow of the one above it and a symbol of a higher realm of Reality, from another aspect the universe or macrocosm itself is a symbol of the microcosm or man. From the divine metacosm the two realms of microcosm and macrocosm are created in such a manner that they preserve an analogy with each other. As the Sufis say, ‘The universe is a great man, and man is a little universe’. The Reality which lies in the centre of the heart of man also lies behind the veil of the appearances of nature. Consequently, every event, every particularity in nature corresponds to an element within

² Margaret Smith, *Readings from the Mystics of Islam*, London 1950, p.112.

³ Frithjof Schuon, ‘Aperçus sur La Tradition des Indiens de l’Amérique du Nord’ *Etudes Traditionnelles*, 1940, p.164.

A saying stated originally with respect to the North American Indians but which applies equally well to Sufism.

⁴ Margaret Smith, *op.cit.*, p.112

⁵ Jami, *op.cit.*, p.39.

man, but since the soul of a fallen man is like a dark forest his eyes cannot see the analogies within himself.

*Being, with all its latent qualities,
Doth permeate all mundane entities,
Which, when they can receive them, show them forth
In the degrees of their capacities*⁶

(Jami)

Besides being 'a little universe' man is also the central link in a great chain of being which extends from the lowest creature of the mineral kingdom to the archangels. Man alone, because of the free-will accorded to him, can ascend to a realm even beyond that of the angels, to the Divine Presence itself or descend below the level of the beasts of the field.

*I died as mineral and became a plant,
I died as plant and rose to animal,
I died as animal and I was Man.
Why should I fear? When was I less by dying?
Yet once more I shall die as Man, to soar
With angels blest; but even from angelhood
I must pass on; all except God doth perish.
When I have sacrificed my angel-soul,
I shall become what no mind e'er conceived.
Oh, let me not exist! for Non-existence
Proclaims in organ tones: 'To Him we shall return'*⁷

(Rumi)

Placed in a hierarchy below the order of angels and the domain of subtle forms in the world of generation and corruption which is the lowest of all levels of cosmic existence, man occupies a central position with respect to other creatures in the terrestrial environment. He is to other creatures as the centre of the circle is to the points on the circumference. Only man, by virtue of his central position, can acquire gnosis and sanctity, and is thereby given power over other creatures on earth. He is for them a channel of Divine Grace, a source of light in an otherwise dark room. But, also, only man can dominate nature and even destroy it. If this channel of grace is narrowed or diminished in any way a corresponding darkness occurs in nature. And when man himself turns away from the higher realities to concentrate all his efforts within this world of shadows, then the light that was destined for nature is cut off, and the inner darkness of man's soul is projected into nature. The modern growth of the cancer of urbanisation is an historical example of this principle.

'Although each of the various kinds of existent things is a mirror, man is a mirror revealing the whole universe; although each individual being in the existent world is a goblet, the knowing man is the goblet that reveals the stages (of being), the 'great electuary' (*ma'jun-i akbar*), the goblet that reveals the world ...'⁸ ('Aziz ibn Muhammad Nasfi)

'Man is the link between, God and Nature. Every man is a copy of God in His perfection; none is without the power to become a perfect man: It is the Holy Spirit which witnesses to

⁶ Ibid, p.40.

⁷ R.A. Nicholson, *Rumi, Poet and Mystic*, London, 1950, p.103.

⁸ 'Spirit and Nature' *Erano*s, New York, 1954, Vol. I, p.189.

man's innate perfection, the spirit is man's real nature and within him is the secret shrine of the Divine Spirit. As God has descended into man, so man must ascend to God, and in the Perfect Man - the True Saint - the Absolute Being which has descended from its absoluteness returns again unto itself.'⁹ (Abd al-Karim al-Jili)

III

The symbols which are found everywhere in nature, like rain, thunder, the rose, or the sun correspond to the immediate appearance of things, an appearance that is known to man through the senses and not through a conceptual scheme dependent upon ratiocination. Symbols, just because they do belong to the sensible realm, symbolise the highest realm which is that of intellection. The Hermetic saying, 'That which is lowest symbolises that which is highest' expresses a basic law of the science of the symbolic interpretation of nature.

The contemplative, by contemplating the phenomena of nature, is carried beyond the intermediate realm of reason to the realm of pure forms or 'Platonic ideas' (*al-'alam al-jabrut*). He studies nature not to analyse it according to some conceptual scheme but to come to knowing himself through the analogy existing between the microcosm and the macrocosm. And by knowing himself man comes to know God, for as Prophet Muhammad said, 'He who knows himself, knows his Lord.'¹⁰ Many of the ancient cosmological sciences were constructed precisely for this purpose and were therefore based on the analogy which exists between various realms of Being. That is why in medieval times such contemplative groups as the Brethren of Purity in Islam and Taoists in China - and not primarily the rationalists - cultivated the sciences of nature.

It is natural then to see that sages and gnostics have again and again made use of immediate experience to express the highest realities. It is due to this law of inverse analogy also that poetry has remained throughout the ages the language of seers and prophets expressing in symbols and images what the language of prose cannot easily convey. Prose has always been more suitable for the expression of ideas belonging to the intermediate realm of reason, while poetry or other forms of expression which lend themselves easily to symbolism, such as music and geometry, have always been the suitable vehicles for the contemplative precisely because the most outward symbolises the most inward.

*Kings lick the earth whereof the fair are made,
For God hath mingled in the dusty earth
A draught of Beauty from His choicest cup,
'Tis that, fond lover - not these lips of clay –
Thou art kissing with a hundred ecstasies,
Think, then, what must it be undefiled.¹¹*

(Rumi)

As an example of traditional cosmological sciences one may cite alchemy which is also based on the analogy between the microcosm and macrocosm. The forms of nature are ever changing in their cycles of generation and corruption. From the *materia prima* which is the ground and 'stuff' of all forms, the Divine Artist builds ever-new forms. But among these

⁹ Smith, op.cit, p.119.

¹⁰ Ibn 'Arabi (*al-Futuhat al-makkiyya* II 308.22; C.312) also (*al-Futuhat al-makkiyya* III 404.28; C.344)

¹¹ Nicholson, op.cit. p.45

forms certain have nobility and beauty which reflect in a more direct manner the Beauty of the Artisan. Among stones the diamond is transparent to light and has a 'divine nature' in comparison with common stones which are opaque. And among metals gold has a nobility like that of the sun, a nobility which is reflected in the fact that it is resistant to corrosion and destruction unlike the base metals which corrode easily.

The soul of most men is like base metal ever tempted by the desires of the world and corrupted easily under every evil influence. In the hands of the Spiritual Master who functions as the vicegerent of the Divine Artist the base soul of the disciple is melted to its *materia prima* from which a noble soul is formed, a soul which like gold shines with the spiritual virtues and is incorruptible when placed under the influence of the corrosive forces of evil. The traveller upon the path in his journey toward perfection and ultimate gnosis finds forms in nature at each step which symbolise his inner state as his inner state reflects the noble forms of nature.

The contemplative also finds nature as a sanctuary which relative to the transient works of man represents the 'eternity' of God's handiwork. He becomes the channel of grace for nature, and nature becomes in turn for him a vast book of Divine Wisdom, an image of the Divine Word which in Christianity is Christ and in Islam the Holy Qur'an. The rest of human society also shares in this exchange because the contemplative who has reached the goal of gnosis also becomes the means by which grace is dispensed to the society in which he lives. As al-Ghazali has said, 'The saints are the salt of society and what keeps it together.'

Man by dissecting nature and destroying her with ferocity to satisfy his never satiated passions ultimately dissects and destroys himself. What seems to him as the 'conquest of nature' becomes ultimately the conquest of his own higher nature by the inhuman elements within him. But he whose soul is thirsty for the Truth and who has been endowed by God with the power of contemplation seeks not to conquer nature but to come to know it intimately and to benefit from it spiritually. Such a person can find no better plea than the prayer of Jami who sang:

*'O God. save us from the distraction of wanton pastimes and show us things in their reality. Take from our inner vision the veil of indifference and show us each thing as it really is. Do not let us see Not-being in the form of Being and do not place the veil of Not-being over the beauty of Being. Make this material world into a mirror for the manifestation of Thy loveliness, do not allow material things to be a means of concealment of Thy Presence and a means of keeping us far from Thee. Make these imaginary pictures to become the causes of knowledge and vision to us, let them not be a means of ignorance and blindness. Our loss of Thee and separation from Thee, all come from ourselves, but save us from ourselves and grant us knowledge of Thyself.'*¹²

¹² Smith, op.cit. p.121