

KHAMUSH – James Wood

Introductory Note

The thirteenth-century Sufi mystic, Islamic scholar and theologian, Jalāl ad-Din Muhammad Rūmī is widely recognised as the greatest poet writing in the Persian language. He lived from 1207 to 1273, and most of his works are written in what is known as modern Persian, although he also wrote in Arabic, Turkish and Greek.

In 1244 he met the Sufi mystic, Shams-e Tabrizi, who had allegedly travelled throughout the Middle East praying for someone who could ‘endure his company’. A voice asked him what he would give in return for such a friendship – he replied that he would give his head. In 1248, only a few years after their meeting, and apparently in return for the rich mystical friendship they enjoyed, Shams was indeed murdered, with the possible connivance of Rumi’s own son, Ala ud-Din. Rumi’s love and admiration for Shams, as well as his bereavement following Shams’ murder resulted in an outpouring of over a thousand lyric poems in what became known as the *Diva-e Shams-e Tabrizi*. The poems in *Khamush* all come from this collection.

The poems all expound different aspects of Sufi mysticism and spirituality using allegorical imagery; and what is so extraordinary about them is the strength, potency and ravishing beauty of the imagery and language coupled with their ability to expound true Sufic spirituality, and to propose paths towards spiritual enlightenment.

One of Rumi’s most characteristic fingerprints is his constant reference to the concept of *Khamush*, which appears in some form in the final verse of every poem. The word, *Khamush*, means literally ‘to close’ or ‘to turn off’ (for example to turn off a light) – it also means to close one’s mouth, to stop speaking and to remain silent. No matter how wild, noisy or exciting the events depicted in each poem, Rumi always returns us to the quiet, reflective state of *Khamush* in the final strophe – this is in order to allow ‘the giver of speech to speak’, or to ‘open our hearts and enjoy the connection with God’.

In the first poem, *Khizid āsheghān...(Lovers, make ready...)*, Rumi invites us, as good Sufi (the lovers), to leave the garden of this world and to aspire to that other garden – once there, we realise that our desire to reach this other garden has arisen from an egoistic state, and so we must pass by both these beautiful gardens and proceed on to ‘the gardener’ - to God. In the third verse he

describes the journey using the image of a torrent of water flowing down to the sea; once there, the lovers float on the water, cheering¹. When, in the fourth verse, their passion leads them to their wedding they come face to face with God – his face appears red as saffron – they blush in shyness, turning their own cheeks to the same colour. In the fifth verse Rumi alludes to the Sufi experience of joy of connection with God – he uses the image of quivering leaves on the branches to describe the lovers' fear of falling from this ecstatic state. Their hearts pound from worry, and so they go to the 'safe-house' (*dāralamān*) of the presence of God. In the final '*Khamush* verse' Rumi instructs us to keep silent and allow the giver of speech to speak – whatever he says, we must do likewise.

In this first movement I have taken Rumi's idea almost literally, by setting the first five verses using only instruments and wordless voices. Only the text of the final '*Khamush* verse' is actually heard, as if the singers are inviting us to receive the message of the poem through the music alone.

The second poem, *Biya buse be chandast* (*Come precious kiss*) contains the most overtly sensuous imagery, constantly returning to the idea of the kiss (*buse*) as a metaphor for the Sufi concept of connection with God and spiritual enlightenment. But it is also a powerfully moralistic poem, instructing us Sufi that this 'kiss' does not come for free – it has to be wanted, needed and earned. In the second verse Rumi even says that if this kiss is only deserved by 'the dust', we should be ready to die for it. In the third verse Rumi compares the kiss to the pearl in a sea-shell - we must break open the shell within us in order to reach it. In the fourth verse the kiss is compared to a flower (perhaps an opium poppy) - this flower is so potent that 'even the wine' is excited by it, and the 'tongues of the world' must be 'thrust out like a lily's stamen' to reach it. In the fifth verse Rumi warns against arrogance or feelings of self-importance – if we feel like a king, or like a sun or a moon (both metaphors for God), we cannot expect that kiss. In the sixth verse he addresses God directly – he asks the moon to come out because he is prepared and ready to receive that kiss. So finally he invites us to stay silent and open the 'pin-hole' of our hearts - only in this way can we receive the enjoyment of the connection with God.

In the third poem, *Ey āsheghān, āmad gahe!* (*Hey lovers, the time has come!*) God's blessing is invoked on a wedding-feast – the wedding is full of happiness, wine, music and dancing. Traditionally 'trailing skirts' are worn, and dances and processions are performed where all cling on to each other to form a chain. Musicians are instructed to play on and never to tire – bells must be shaken continuously - the sweet howling of the neys² from the fields is invited to last throughout the night – frets on the other instruments should be retuned as

necessary to allow the music to continue. But finally we must fall silent, close the curtains and drink our wine in silence. We must cover up and allow ourselves to be tamed through the knowledge of God – for it is God who has blessed this feast.

James Wood (September 2016)