

On Sufi Madness, Rumi, and Peter Daverington's *The Dervish Series*

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Why do the dervishes, these breakaway monks of Islam, whirl? And who was this Rumi, so-called 'Roman,' Islamic Afghan-born poet and theologian who set his followers on the orbit of perpetual spinning for centuries to come?

Imagine the Whirling Dervishes of Konya. Better still, let Peter Daverington's sequential images of the ecstatic dancers envelope you. Either at the centre of these ghostly white figures, or circumventing the edges of their space, and listening to the haunting chant of the reed flute; what do you imagine is the cause of these devotees' ethereal rotation? Has it something to do with religion? Is it what spiritualists call 'passion'? Are you not yourself spinning around the gallery to survey them, following the path of the artist's frame-by-frame representation of the faceless spectres?

'Passion' seems initially appropriate to describe the activities in *The Dervish Series*. These dervishes are, after all, devout Muslims; and passion has often been understood as a religious term, e.g. the medieval Passion Plays depicting the violent death of the Christ. Do the Sufi dervishes, like Christian martyrs, aspire to attain a passage to Heaven through repudiating their bodies; their dizzying, perhaps nauseating, whirling; and, as Daverington suggests, their disintegration?

Religious passions, however, have never been either transcendental or, come to that, sincerely mystical. Such fervours – from those of the Zealots and Crusaders to post-modern Islamism, Hindu Nationalism and Revisionist Zionism – have been political and tribal, and almost always aggressive. It is therefore not passion – or at least a passion of the religious kind – that animates and spins our notedly peaceful, harmonious and humble dervishes, but something far less quantifiable and exploitable.

Consider this description of madness by the historian-philosopher Michel Foucault. Does it not describe what we see in Daverington's paintings?

...suspension of passion, breach of causality, dissolution of the elements...
Madness ends by being a movement of the nerves and muscles so violent that nothing in the course of the images, ideas, or wills seems to correspond to it: this is the case of mania when it is suddenly intensified into convulsions, or when it degenerates into continuous frenzy.¹

Terms like 'dissolution' and 'continuous frenzy' do more justice to the Whirling Dervishes than those of a religious lexicon. Even concepts like ritual and ceremony seem secondary to what, to use Foucault's terms, can best be described as an anarchic 'movement of the nerves and muscles' that suspends conventional religious passions. After all, Sufi spirituality, the belief system of the Whirling Dervishes, has often been seen as a heresy by Islamic fundamentalists, from the early Caliphs – who in 922 CE hanged one of the first Sufi Masters Al Hallaj – to the Taliban of Afghanistan. Even in the progressive and secular modern Turkey, the Mevlevi Order of Whirling Dervishes was banned until the 1950's.

So if Sufism is a form of deviance/madness, and if these dervishes are madmen and madwomen, then what can be said of the founder of their tradition, Jalal al-Din Mohammad Mowlavi (Mevlevi in Turkish), the poet and mystic also known as Rumi, who lived from 1207 to 1273 CE, who was born in today's Afghanistan, wrote and spoke in Farsi, and died in today's Turkey? Was he also mad or, perhaps, the maddest of them all? Who was this person whose followers continue to replicate his spinning and dancing more than 700 years after his death? Was he a wise patriarch/prophet like Zoroaster and Confucius, or an eccentric charismatic, occult leader?

Since Rumi's best-known cannon of poetry, his *Mathnawies*, is also known as the 'Farsi Koran' and chanted by his Sufi followers at their ceremonies, he can be seen as some kind of religious messenger. But is it not an insane prophet who begins his scripture, his grand testament, by not citing a creator or god but by evoking the mournful tune of the reed flute, the *Ney*, the very sound that reverberates through the space of *The Dervish Series*? These are the opening lines of Rumi's masterpiece (my translation):

Listen to the *Ney* as it narrates
And complains of countless divisions
They've severed me from the reeds
So humanity shall feel my song's pain
Separation has sliced my chest
So I tell the tale of pain and passion
Whoever is cut off from their origin
Shall for all eternity seek out a union
Whoever has heard the sound of my cry
Has known sadness and exhilarationⁱⁱ

No 'sane' ideological framework – religious, social or even philosophical – can so brazenly conflate the absolute opposites (sadness and exhilaration, division and union) without running the risk of seeming irrational. But this irrationality is precisely the quality that marks Sufi mysticism as a unique, refreshing and positive movement, particularly for our times. In a world oppressed by the 'rationalism' of brutal economic disparities, imperialist wars, religious fundamentalisms and environmental catastrophes, only madness may provide any degree of emancipation. Peter Daverington's exceptional *The Dervish Series* evokes such a freedom.

ⁱ Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (translated by Richard Howard), Vintage, New York, 1988, pp. 91-92.

ⁱⁱ Mowlana Jal al-Din Mohammad known as Mowlavi, *The Enthusiastic Lyrics of Shams-i-Tabrizi* (selected by Fereidoon Kar), Forooghy Books, Tehran, 1989, p.14.