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WILLIAM BLAKE AND AN EARLY PERSIAN POEM
"DROWSING NARCISSUS"

(FARRUKHI D. 1037 — 38) : A NOTE ON THEME

By

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It would be far-fetched to imagine that Blake drew on an eleventh-century poem by the Persian poet, Farrukhi, for his three poems from *Songs of Experience* : "The Garden of Love", "Ah, Sunflower" and "The Sick Rose". There is, however, an unmistakable affinity between the two poets with regard to the choice of theme. The sickness resulting from the absence of love is illustrated by nature pining away with desire. There is constant withdrawal and lack of communication in Farrukhi's poem. But the need is still there despite the fear, inadvertent perhaps.

Just when the narcissus starts to stir and shake the drops of water from off its petals, the lotus begins to draw its "watery veil around it, and falls to dreaming. Here again is an echo of Tennyson's "The Lotos Eaters" in the drowsiness of the flower's movement which implies negativity. The rose's retreat compels the Judas tree into motion when its branches thicken with leaves and push aside its already flowering bluish rose. The rose is hiding from the horror of the experience the tree has to live with. Judas is said to have hanged himself on such a tree. It stands for betrayal and lack of love. Perhaps more fortunate than the barren fig tree of the Gospel in that it produces flowers, it still has to submit to the curse of a twisted course of nature and see its leaves appear too late. Farrukhi's withdrawing rose is no rose which the wind "wooes from out the bud" ("The Lotos Eaters"), but rather one which escapes from the onrush of an autumn breeze that blows out the tulips' lit up candle glory. Blake's rose too, is sick because it is cold and unloved. We do not see the real rose in Farrukhi's poem, and the

first flower that hits the eye is the rose of the Judas tree. He sees it as blue, strange, but it is the apple which blushes with the shame of rejection. Its flush sets off the paleness of the yellow quince, again like Blake's sunflower, sick with unsatisfied desire. The entire garden, in the Persian poem, reacts in response to the barrenness of emotion in the hearts of its inhabitants. Blake's youth in "Ah, Sunflower" pines away with longing, and the pale virgin is "shrouded" in the snow of her chastity.

What both poets are saying is not at all new. What is original lies only in the new way in which each of them expresses himself. Blake's garden or Farrukhi's, both speak of lack of warmth. If the latter poet finds that the Persian autumn breeze only extinguishes the tulips' blaze and leaves him in the dark, Blake too, comes up against garden gates that are sinister, shut. Emotion in both cases, is expressed with the utmost lyrical simplicity. Farrukhi leaves a great deal unsaid. Even in translation the poem does not lose any of its beauty.

The drowsing narcissus
Tired of sleep — just then
The lotus drew its watery veil
And fell to dreaming.

The rose retreated
In its bud — just then
... (1)

Simple phrases like "just then" acting here as a kind of internal refrain, or questions like "Why not?" add to the conversational quality of the poem. The poet provides no answers, merely a sense of acceptance and resignation through lack of understanding.

1. I came across this poem when in Iran in 1979, but unfortunately do not possess a copy or details of the anthology including it. It is also interesting to compare Farrukhi's poem with Robert Frost's "The Rose Family" where he says that "...the theory now goes/That the apple's a rose./And the pear is, and so's/The plum..."

I feel that this very brief study is extremely inadequate, but it has opened my eyes to fresh possibilities in comparative literature. It has also instigated a desire in me to learn more about the subject of Persian literature. The question remains : How many more comparisons can be drawn between Blake and Farrukhi, and possibly other Persian poets ? It is one I would like to be able to answer some day.

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APPENDIX

THE GARDEN OF LOVE

I went to the garden of love,
And saw what I never had seen :
A chapel was built in the midst,
Where I used to play on the green.

And the gates of this chapel were shut,
And *Thou shalt not* writ over the door;
So I turned to the garden of love,
That so many sweet flowers bore,
And tomb-stones where flowers should be —
And priests in black gowns were walking their rounds,
And binding with briars my joys and desires.

(N. B. See also "I saw a chapel all of gold" (*Poems from the Notebook*, c. 1791—2) for a reference to the same theme.

AH, SUNFLOWER

Ah, Sunflower, weary of time,
Who countest the steps of the sun,
Seeking after that sweet golden clime
Where the traveller's journey is done;
Where the youth pined away with desire
And the pale virgin shrowded in snow
Arise from their graves and aspire
Where my sunflower wishes to go.

THE SICK ROSE

O rose, thou art sick;
The invisible worm
That flies in the night,
In the howling storm,

Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy;
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.

APPENDIX

The drowsing narcissus
tired of sleep — just then
the lotus drew its watery veil
and fell to dreaming

The rose retreated
in its bud -- just then
the Judas tree thrust aside
its blue rose

Filled with lighted candles
of tulips the garden
swelled in pride --
and the autumn breeze

blows out the candles,
why not ? if the flames
cannot stand to face
the wind ?

The apple blushes
the quince goes yellow
with the sickness of desire
and thus the garden teaches us

the story of love.

(Farrukhi -- 11th century)