IV

ENCOUNTERS WITH TURKISH POETRY
On Rosestrikes and Coffee Grinds
by Seyhan Erözçelik

In Seyhan Erözçelik’s Coffee Grinds, life is presented as unstable, as a continuum of experiences, part of “a long journey” within the arc of ascent and descent.¹ In the very first of the twenty-four readings of the fortune, the central themes of Coffee Grinds are suggested. There are people, “stretching toward the sky,” “all together they are on a long journey, mixing with the smoke, and becoming an object.” Here is the unification of subjective and objective experience, “one single object unified by smoke.” Out of the multiplicity of phenomena there arises a single object. There are three roads all “opening towards the same place, the sky, emptiness. Pure, blessed, emptiness.” Here is the destruction of the ego, the union with it. In the poem, God is never mentioned. It refers to the emptiness, a tabula rasa. But the arc of ascent and descent, this consummation, is simultaneous, there is no division between the micro- and macrocosm, indeed, “the sky turns human.”

¹ The Sufi concept of the arc of descent and ascent is the movement from the multiplicity of phenomena to the unity with divine essence and the reverse. This movement is not sequential but continuous, two aspects of this divine essence.
Fortune twenty tells of a “ferocious beast” (echo of the first canto in Dante?) who “drowns in a brook” and is “reborn in the cup” and continues to say, “to put it another way, it’s jumped a threshold. / To another world.” This is the “yearning” for a parallel space, for non-being, that “other world” where there is no interference from the ego. The woman is “amazed at everything or ready to be amazed, childlike / Not childlike, a child, a baby.” Regression to the origin. But, “distress, to continue the analogy, / is fed by the placenta, finding sustenance, gaining its existence from it.” Melancholy begins at birth. The original state of unity is broken. There is instead a multiplicity of phenomena and this is what causes suffering: “But now, with the rupture of the distress, the distress has increased.” “The fortune has dried”; there is a potential source of despair since, “the movements of time sometimes are much slower than the forward movement of our hopes.” This forward, linear perception of time is also a cause of suffering. One fails to experience the simultaneity of past, present and future during the arc of ascent/descent. It is a sobering experience rather than the dizzy, disoriented feeling of ecstasy that is at the heart of Sufism.

Then, in fortune fifteen, there is an image of affectionate display; she — at least it seems that the person receiving the reading is a woman — caresses a man’s head as it lies on her lap. But this causes a greater distress. It’s even worse than she could have imagined, and this is because, in another fortune, “you’re caught between two worlds,” the worlds of the spiritual and the material, “reborn,” “between sky and earth.” Yet the poet writes, “seen from another angle.” And this is how the fortune operates. It is a kind of seeing, of interpreting the world, subjectively. Fate is a fusion of being and looking at that being. Interestingly, in fortune twenty-two, the fortuneteller sees the woman being followed by saints and then corrects himself, “Nooo, fools!” In Tarot, the number associated with the Fool is zero, the number of unlimited potential, and the card is an indicator of the purity and open-hearted energy of the child. But zero also suggests unity before division, the pure, blessed, “emptiness” that is
the implicit goal of Sufi practice. He concludes, “the signs have disappeared now. Beautiful.” We are outside language itself for a moment — even the fortune is stalled. There is a brief interlude where perhaps that “blessed emptiness” is felt. But as life is unstable, anxiety does not end, but continues, albeit in another form, takes on the form of another beast. A wonderful aspect of the fortunes is how they speak of the “animal spirits that populate the universe … the dome of the sky.”

In fortune twenty-three, the fortuneteller reveals the only way in which this can end: “the ending of anxieties depends on an arrival at the sky.” Therefore, the twenty-third fortune echoes the first fortune, where, “the mountain is flying to the sky … leaving its main mass of land behind.” Indeed, Coffee Grinds is about a kind of vertical movement, the thrust is upward, through the destruction of the ego, and the absorption of multiplicity into unity, the zero that indicates the presence of the Fool. But these anxieties have their “roots on earth” and because of this, “they must cut off all ties with earth.” The final piece, written in English, suggests a kind of erotic relation between the fortuneteller and the woman.

The fortuneteller speaks about the validity of a fortune. He speaks of the importance of not writing down the fortune because then it becomes invalid, it “is to be read and interpreted only” (it is “a spirit echo of the world”) yet the “written word, sign is what matters.” It is what matters, but at the same time it is a prison from which he cannot escape, hence, while the poet is inspired by the woman, the mother, (one reveals oneself by looking at others, using the universe as a mirror), he cannot escape from despair. And this despair is associated with the act of writing and reading itself. Therefore, the poet says, “Ikra / My desperation, Milady. With all my heart, Seyhan Erözçelik.” The poet, like the fortuneteller, is at once the teller of the truth and a liar. Therefore, while the written word matters there is also a sense that was is hidden is just as important as what is revealed.

Rosestrikes is an altogether different kind of book than Coffee Grinds, but what makes them work together as a whole is how their similarities as well as their differences are woven together.
so seamlessly. The fortunes in *Coffee Grinds* are indeed “moody” and changeable, and yet the overwhelming thrust of the poems is vertical, toward unification of the disparate elements of consciousness and the destruction of the ego in the arc of ascent/descent. On the other hand, *Rosestrikes* are a series of poems concerned with fragmentation, loss, despair and pain. The rose generally stands for the soul in Sufism. In alchemy, it is the red tincture that suggests a successful transformation. It is also solar and male, as opposed to the white rose that is female. In these poems, its function is also linguistic, and, in this way, the rose is almost divested of its traditional meanings and takes on a different character dependent on the word it is attached to. At one point the poet writes, “roses are multiplying / multiplying,” which suggests dispersion rather than unification, the central theme in these poems.

The very first poem, “Rosethroat” contains images of pain and loss. The narrator screams until his throat is hoarse, the suggestion being that he has failed to unify with the female, the pain he feels “has no relief,” a “thorn” pricks his heel. The scene is bloody and the “heartflesh dry like a rose.” And furthermore, “loves are burning. / Town is burning” and “A love is burning, / no water.” These images of war and holocaust and a desire that is not relieved contribute to the overwhelming sense that these poems will be about destruction, separation, an inability to destroy the ego and unify in love. In fact, these poems are in one sense about how the ego causes suffering.

The material fails to transform into the spiritual and thus the union is a failure; in “Cherryrose” the lover kisses so fervently that his lips become “cherryrose” like the beloved’s, but the poet writes “your lips, / still taste like lips.” And then the ironic, “Thanks!” Love has failed to transform the lover because they have not arisen to the spiritual state and remain bound by transitory images. In “Moonrose” he writes, “Here, / get hold of me. The poet speaks of the desperation of the lover, the desire to be reborn, “taken,” in both of its senses. There is the sickness of birth, of being, in a fallen world. And then there is the call to
the “invisible groom,” a desire to be ravaged: “Rape me. / With
my invisible groom. // In your crime / bed.” There is something
criminal about this union. It is a “rape” in a “crime bed.” This is
the subversive element in Sufi sexuality. Spiritual union is con-
ceived of as a transgressive and violent experience.

In “Rosebelief” the poet is heartsick and there is a rejection
of belief in a higher spiritual plane but also a rejection of the
premise of Coffee Grinds: “If you do not kiss what good / are
roses? // Let them fade, / I’m no believer. // You can’t read a for-
tune / from its roses.” There is a sense of loss throughout these
poems, for example, when the poet writes, “Passing myself / I
pass out // The moon rises. / The rose has left with you” and that
the heart is exiled. There are two aspects of the self at war with
one another. The self fails to achieve a state of union with the
other. Even the image of a bird in flight is described as a “fly-
ing prison.” In “Constellationrose” the poet is exiled from the
sky, rooted to the earth, and unable to “fly,” to destroy the ego,
and become unified in love. He writes, “Under / I’m silent.” This
silence also implies wonder.

Even the “spiritual world” rejects and mocks the lover: “An-
gels laughed at me … it seems the devil / made a pass … The
fire having fooled me, / hitting on me, / is fueling me.” This is
the fallen world, the exile from paradise. As you write, “While
desire is eternal and unobstructed, love is only possible from
a state of fallen grace—a consciousness of loss.” And And so
we are spurred on by desire that arises from a sense of lack, of
something missing, or amiss in the world and in ourselves: “The
adoration lanced long ago / is still bleeding.”

But in “Spin o sa” there are lines that suggest the dizziness
that is a prelude to ecstasy in Sufism: “the rose is spinning, / at
the pit / c h / of the vertigo.” There is in this line the word “pit”
as if the rose is spinning at the edge of it. But there is also the
word “pitch,” which implies a sudden turn and also can suggest
the black color that in alchemy refers to the initial chaos from
which all the elements arose. Here is the whirling blackness of
the initial chaos over which the “rose is spinning,” over which
the poet is spinning. In a single image the ecstatic dizziness
of the spinning rose (poet) is fused with the whirling primal chaos. You write, “through the prism of multiplicity, disintegration and chaos to have a glimpse of the divine (Islamic or pagan) unity” is the essence of the Sufi experience. Earlier in the poem, a marten is on the “skyscraper / of the soul cleaning / its windows.” And at the end of the poem we read, “the clock stopping / now;” this is the moment where linear time is destroyed and past, present, and future are simultaneous This “stopping” also implies death. Both meanings exist simultaneously. These are all moments, like in Coffee Grinds, where the poems seem to present an alternative experience that counters the overwhelming sense of loss and despair. But these experiences of union and dispersion do not necessarily occur independently and sometimes the experiences are simultaneous. For example, in “Revolverrose” the poet writes “i collapse / in your arms.” The lines suggest union, the lover is exhausted. The title contains the word, “revolver” which suggests perhaps a kind of violence or death involved. Here perhaps is the death of the ego. Or perhaps this exhaustion can be a result of the dizzy ecstatic vertigo that a lover in Sufism experiences when he is rising to a higher spiritual plane.

And yet, “the elements dispersing too far … too far … far / rose is the mirage … the mirage / in the dust.” Here is an ultimate realization that the rose itself, which in one sense stands for reality in these poems, is an illusion, a mirage. “The storm / has elapsed,” the veil is lifted and reality itself proves to be an illusion. And in “The Death of Gestures” comes acceptance: “Occasionally, we say this / to ourselves: / this is life, this is it, / we did this, / thus. / Where’re we now,” and “nothing can be the same as before.” This is the hard-won realization that pain has taught the poet. This life, here, even this body that I call my own, is temporary, and with this comes the realization of mortality: “Besides, / i see the skull in my face / in the mirror.” But despite death, “people need each other. / Why love together otherwise?”
Which leads naturally to a memory of childhood, the “tabula rasa” that Erözçelik refers to in his drawing. There is a realization that death is “a childhood disease.” And there is the trauma that he speaks of, that involves crushing the frost with the heel of his foot: “Because the inside of frost is hollow, the sound it makes being crushed is interesting.” So, the first pain is associated with a sound, a piece of music. And in the poem the poet asks, “Is that, in essence, Achilles’s scream?” Achilles screamed three times when he learned of the death of Patroclus, thus causing the Trojans to re-route their troops so he could retrieve the body. He ignores Thetis’s warning that if he avenges Patroclus’s death, he himself will die. So that primal “sound” has associated with it a fierce overwhelming love in the face of profound loss and the awareness that even what one loves is destined to fade away, or die. Furthermore, the poet writes, “Fragments of frost broke the weave / in the heart, cut it / loose … only the cut endures.” There is a break in the continuum, a rift in the eternal, and we are time-bound, painfully aware of our own mortality in this fallen world. And this, despite our almost hysterical desire to love: “I want to put my hook into your heart so that you can’t unhook me.” In Rosestrikes, this signals the change from innocence to experience, which is a kind of death. And from this first death desire is born.

Works Cited
