

A medieval-style illustration depicting the Virgin Mary holding a lily, with a man kneeling before her in a church setting. The Virgin Mary is shown in a long, flowing white robe with a blue mantle, holding a white lily. She has a halo and is looking down at the man. The man is kneeling, wearing a dark tunic with a red and black diamond pattern, and looking up at her. In the background, several men in white robes are watching. The scene is set in a church with stone walls and a large window.

JAN M. ZIOLKOWSKI

READING THE JUGGLER OF NOTRE DAME

Medieval Miracles and Modern Remakings



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11. The Persian Tale of “The Old Harper”

The fragment quoted by Augustine in his early fifth-century *City of God* reports an episode that its author Seneca packages as a reality: an entertainer, despite having withdrawn from public practice of his profession, still puts on daily performances in homage to a god. The writer, who died in the capital of the Roman empire in 65 CE, treats the incident as having transpired in the city in his day. No other evidence survives to confirm or deny his description of what allegedly went on. “Our Lady’s Tumbler,” though poetry, lays similar claim to relating a real-life occurrence. Once again, we have no independent substantiation of the supposed event. Furthermore, nothing at all suggests that the medieval French poet had heard, let alone read, the anecdote that purported to have happened more than a millennium earlier.

Whether the two instances took place or not, they both depict performers whose “the show must go on” ethos is familiar even today. The distinguishing feature in both cases however is the faith of the protagonists that their true audience is not earthly but divine: in the end they feel certain that their most meaningful patrons are not people but God and celestial associates.

This chapter makes available a cluster of narratives preserved in Persian, composed from the late twelfth century on. All but the most recent, which is from the mid twentieth century, are imbued to various degrees with the kind of personal mystical meditation that is commonly associated with Sufism. This specifically Islamic brand of mysticism is hard to define. It means very different things at different times and has a complex history from the early medieval period to this day. The term can refer to distinct communities whose members share similar mystical beliefs that are accompanied by their own hierarchies and supporting literature. More comprehensively and in broadest terms, Sufism can be described as a mystical perspective on all of culture that has affected the discourse of literature and other modes of artistic expression throughout the Islamic world. This mystical reading, with its engrained defiance of, or impatience with, legalistic categorizations, enables Sufis to act as facilitators between different doctrines, inducing connections that break, or at least blur, sectarian divisions and internecine polemics. All these characteristics are particularly evident in Persian literature and its mystical classics. The remarkable Sufi poets cited here, ‘Aṭṭār and Rumi, were both Sunnis but their verses deal with human predicaments applicable to all faiths and sects.

So it would be misleading to belabor the terms Sufi, Sunni, and Shia, when the narratives in question hold paramount interest not for any specific religious doctrine but rather for the general circumstance of the miraculous element that they feature. The miracle depends on the involvement of a saintly figure, in these cases a great Sufi master, whose mediation brings an unexpected reward to the faithful old performer.

The Persian narrative telling of an aged professional entertainer who addresses God as a last resort and only then finds deliverance from adversity has been transmitted in at least a half dozen iterations, written between the late twelfth century and today. The most familiar version is by the thirteenth-century Sufi mystic poet, Rumi. The story is contained in his long mystical poem that has come to be known as *Mathnavi*. This designation denotes the prosodic form that has been used for almost all extended verse narratives in Persian. The composition has also been called *Mathnavi-ye Ma'navi* or "Spiritual Couplets."

The resemblances between these tales and the ultimately medieval European complex associated with Anatole France's *Le Jongleur de Notre Dame* have seized the [attention of Persianists](#) sporadically for nearly a half century, but such specialists have not received much acknowledgment for their finds from those scholars in the West who specialize in philology, folklore studies, or any other division of learning, for that matter. The Persian-language material cries out for thoughtful analysis from many directions, and this dossier should greatly facilitate such examination.

Though some of the versions exist in English, others have never been put into any other language, and almost all of them would be hard for outsiders to track down. The older forms have received modern critical editions only recently, and little to no scholarship exists in Western research languages. All translations and annotation in this dossier are the work of Mohsen Ashtiany.

A. Moḥammad ebn Monawwar, *The Mysteries of Unification*

The author of this extract from a long hagiography, commonly known for short as [Ebn Monawwar](#), was a descendant of [Abu Sa'id](#), a celebrated Sufi from Khorasan. Sometime between 1179 and 1192, Ebn Monawwar wrote his hagiographical text describing the life and deeds of his famous ancestor. Its full title may be rendered in English as [The Mysteries of Unification in the Spiritual Stations of Sheikh Abu Sa'id](#).

Among the numerous incidents recounted in the book, one tells of a lute-player who becomes destitute in his declining years. After performing in honor of God until he collapses from exhaustion, the entertainer is richly rewarded. The anecdote is ascribed to Ḥasan-e Mo'adab. Major domo to Abu Sa'id, he is mentioned frequently in this hagiography but seldom elsewhere. According to the narration attributed to him, the event took place in Nishapur, in Khorasan. In the Middle Ages, the city was a flourishing center of cultural activities. In this period, the province of Khorasan covered a large area that stretched well beyond its present borders in Iran.

Ḥasan-e Mo'adab recounted the following story:

"One day in Nishapur I was standing in the presence of Abu Sa'id, our Sheikh, may God sanctify his precious soul. The public session had come to an end, and the audience gone. I was deep in thoughts: I had amassed large debts, and there were callers demanding settlement. I couldn't see a way out. What I needed was for our Sheikh to say something on this matter and he was not saying anything.

The Sheikh beckoned to me to turn round. I looked and saw an old woman entering the door of the *khānaqāh*. I went to her, and she gave me a heavy purse and said, 'Here are a hundred gold dinars, go to the Sheikh and ask him to pray for our case.' I came back, delighted, thinking that I could meet my debts there and then. I took the purse to the Sheikh and put it down.

The Sheikh said, 'Don't put it down there. Pick it up and go to the graveyard at *Ḥayra*. You'll find there a dilapidated mausoleum with half-fallen walls. Go inside. There is an old man there, asleep. Give him our greetings and this gold. Tell him, "When you're done with this, come to us; we'll give you another. We're here till you come back."'

Ḥasan went on with his story. "I left and followed the Sheikh's directions and went inside. I saw an old man, very frail, asleep with a lute tucked under his head. I woke him up, passed on the Sheikh's greetings, and gave him the gold. He bawled, demanding to be taken to the Sheikh.

I asked him about himself. 'I am as you see me, a lute-player by profession,' he said. 'I was much sought after by the public in my youth and a fixed feature in every get-together in town. A great many students came to me. I am old now and no one asks for me. We are in want of our daily bread, and I have no other skills. My wife and children told me, "We cannot have you here anymore. Leave now, and entrust us to God's care," and they threw me out of the door.

'I didn't know where to turn. I came to this graveyard and wept in agony and confided in the Almighty in my supplication, "I have no profession and my youth and strumming powers are gone. I have been shunned by all, and my wife and children have also thrown me out. It is now I and You, and You and I. Tonight I shall be your lute-player so that you will feed me." I kept playing some airs and weeping till the break of dawn. By the time the early prayers were called, I was exhausted. I collapsed and fell asleep till you came.'"

Ḥasan went on, "Together we went back to the Sheikh. He was still sitting there. The old man prostrated himself and embraced his hands and feet and repented. The Sheikh said to him, 'Good-hearted soul! You said your piece when you were left abandoned and in dire need. Keep on speaking to Him and spend this.' Then he turned to me and said, 'Ḥasan! In dealing with God no one has ever been a loser. That sum had been earmarked for him. Yours too will turn up.'"

Ḥasan narrated, "The next day after the Sheikh had finished with the session, someone came and gave me two hundred dinars, instructing me to take them to him. The Sheikh decreed that I should use them to meet my debts. I did and freed myself from all my debts."

B. Farid al-Din 'Aṭṭār

Farid al-Din 'Aṭṭār was a renowned Persian poet as well as the author of a greatly admired hagiography of eminent mystics. He flourished in the final quarter of the twelfth and first two decades of the thirteenth century. Scant details of his life have

been ascertained, beyond the fact that he was supposedly a pharmacist in Nishapur. Two versions of "The Old Harper" appear in his works, in prose and verse.

1. *Saints' Lives*

Ebn Monawwar's account of Abu Sa'id, though the most voluminous and famous biography of him, was by no means the only one. Other descendants and disciples also recorded their versions. 'Aṭṭār must have been acquainted with a hagiographic account regarding Abu Sa'id that was distinct from Ebn Monawwar's, because he drew on it for the long section on Sheikh Abu Sa'id Abul'-Khayr in his book entitled *Saints' Lives*, about the notable sayings and miraculous deeds of various prominent Sufis. Probably one of his later works and composed in the early thirteenth century, this is his only extant prose. In its earliest form it comprises an introduction and [seventy-two biographies](#).

It is narrated by the (Sheikh's) attendant:

I had many debts and no resources. Someone brought a hundred dinars. The Sheikh said, "Go to such and such mosque. There is an old man there, give them to him." I went there and gave them to him. He was an old man with a lute tucked under his head. He wept as he got up and came with me to see the Sheikh and said to me, "They turned me out of the house and did not give me any food and no one took me to [samā'](#) and I was hungry. I went to a mosque and said, 'Oh Lord! I know nothing except playing the lute. I lack sustenance and they have thrown me into the street and my students have turned away from me and no one wants me. I will entertain you with my music tonight so that you feed me.' I kept playing and crying till morning and fell asleep after the dawn call for prayers till you came and gave me the gold."

So he came and sought repentance from the hands of the Sheikh. The Sheikh said, "Good-hearted soul! Driven by dearth and despair you said your piece and it did not go unheeded. Keep on speaking to Him and spend this silver!" The Sheikh then turned to the attendant and said, "In dealing with God, no one has ever been a loser."

2. *The Book of Afflictions*

'Aṭṭār also turns to the story of the old harper in verse, in his *Moṣibat-nāme* or *The Book of Afflictions*, a mystical allegory narrating a quest of the soul for unity. In this version the author twice mentions (lines 27 and 58–59) the importance of payment to the performer.

There was an old man, helpless and bewildered,
 striving hard, but caught in the Wheel of Fortune,
 crushed by penury, penned in by old age.
 He grieved in distress and wailed like a harp.
 5 He played the lute for his keep,
 but found no buyers for his play,
 and no charitable handouts of bread.
 He was hungry, had no food and lacked sleep,

- left stripped of all, with no provisions.
 10 Finding all doors barred,
 he picked up his lute and took to the road.
 A ramshackle mosque was on the way.
 He went in and played for a while.
 Facing Mecca, he began to pluck at the strings,
 15 with a song to accompany.
 After playing his lute for a while, he said,
 "Oh Lord, no skills have I,
 but what I do have, I have brought along for you,
 I have brought sweet melodies to your presence.
 20 I am helpless, old, feeble, and all alone.
 Bereft of bread, I've had enough!
 I am not sought for my music,
 I am not fed as an act of charity.
 Now I have given you what I have.
 25 You are munificent, so bring me what you have;
 I have nothing in the world,
 so don't listen to my session for free.
 Straighten my affairs once and for all,
 and save me from this life of sorrow."
 30 Having poured out his heart,
 he fell into a blissful sleep in that same mosque.
 The Sufi companions of that master of the path, Abu Sa'id,
 had all been famished for a while,
 all eyes were fixed on the road,
 35 waiting for relief, wanting to fortify body and soul.
 At last, a messenger arrived,
 bringing the Sheikh a hundred gold dinars.
 He kissed the threshold and said,
 "This is for your companions,
 40 to cover the cost of today's spread."
 The companions were truly thrilled,
 their cheeks flushed with the joy of expectation.
 The Sheikh gave the gold to his attendant and said,
 "In such and such a mosque there is an old man asleep,
 45 with a lute tucked under his head, a fine old man.
 Give him this gold, for this gold is his."
 The attendant took the old man's gold,
 leaving his own people hungry.
 When the old man saw all that gold,
 50 he threw himself on the ground, weeping,
 "Oh Lord! You are so magnanimous in bartering!
 So bountiful to a creature of dust like me.
 From now on, till death puts me to sleep for good,
 I will play my lute only for you.
 55 You truly appreciate the worth of masters.

No one is as discerning as you and yet,
 since you yourself bask in praise,
 how should I praise you, save by returning to you,
 once I've spent all the gold."

C. Rumi, "The Old Harper"

The Persian poet and Sufi mystic who is often known simply as Rumi in the West is conventionally called Mowlānā or Mowlavi in Persian literature and in Iran. More formally, he is designated by the fuller name Mowlānā Jalāl al-Din Rumi. Sometimes the adjective Balkhi is added, to acknowledge his birthplace of Balkh. His extensive mystical narrative poem *Mathnawi*, which counts among the major works of Sufism, comprises six books, with around 25,000 verses.

In the first book of *Mathnawi*, Rumi unfolds the story of the old harper, called "Pir-e changi" by the poet. Rather than relating the tale consecutively in a single sequence, he presents it in [five separate sections](#) that he intersperses among other stories and general observations. He uses such interlacement as a structural technique throughout the poem. In this translation the unrelated material that intervenes between the five is omitted. The last segment opens with a characteristic authorial interjection.

The line numbering assigned here is for the convenience of those who wish to navigate the English more precisely than by page alone. It does not attempt to follow the internal numeration of the Persian edition. Titles and subtitles have been excluded from the count.

The story of the old harper who, in the time of 'Umar, may God be pleased with him, played the harp for God in the graveyard, on a day when he was utterly destitute.

1

In the reign of the [Caliph 'Umar](#), as you may have heard,
 lived a harper, enjoying great pomp and opulence.
 Hearing his song, nightingales swooned, fainting in delight.
 On joyous occasions he raised the mirth a hundredfold;
 5 he enriched gatherings and feasts by his presence,
 and he could raise the dead when he took up his harp
 like [Esrāfil](#)'s touch, whose artful strains
 bring life to the dead, reviving the lifeless corpse.

2

He was a minstrel, who filled the world with joyous songs,
 and with such airs that could kindle wondrous thoughts.
 On hearing him, the soul would take wing like a bird
 while his voice enchanted one's innermost spirit.

- Time went by, he turned old and frail,
 10 the falcon in him now a flycatcher perforce,
 his back bent, curved like a barrel,
 his eyebrows shading his eyes like a crupper strap.
 His rousing fine voice now turned
 hideous, trifling to hear.
 15 His airs, once the envy of [Venus](#),
 echoed now the bray of an aged ass.
 For all beauty is doomed to die:
 roofs crumble at last and fall on earth, flat.
 All save the voices of holy men from deep inside,
 20 leading the way to the trumpet blast on the Day of Resurrection.

3

- Weaker and idle, with advancing years,
 even a loaf of bread was beyond his grasp.
 "You've given me a long life and respite, oh Lord,
 showered me with favors, and I, a worthless soul,
 25 seventy years I have lived a life of sin,
 not for a day did you take my bread away.
 Today, I've had no takings. I'm your guest;
 I'll play the harp for you. I'm yours."
 He picked up the harp and set out, seeking God,
 30 sighing all the way to the graveyard at [Yathrib](#).
 "I'll ask God to meet my strumming dues,
 for His compassion reaches far, even to counterfeits."
 He played his harp for a long while,
 then lay down on a grave, his harp his pillow.
 35 Sleep seized him; his soul like a bird,
 freed from the cage, upwards flew,
 away from the body and all the sorrows of the world,
 leaving the harper and the harp.

4

40 Just then God brought sleep to 'Umar's eyes,
 so that he could not keep awake.
 Baffled, he thought to himself, "This is strange.
 It must come from the Unseen,
 and to some purpose."
 He lay down and fell asleep;
 45 he dreamed of a call from heaven.

5

Return and listen to the minstrel's plight,
 for he's exasperated by all this anxious waiting.
 "Oh, 'Umar, go and tend to our servant's needs.
 He is a special servant, in our highest esteem.
 50 Take seven hundred dinars from the public purse,
 and proceed to the graveyard.
 Take the dinars to him, tell him he is our choice."
 "Accept this modest sum now as the harper's dues.
 Spend it all. When done, come here again."
 55 Hearing the awesome command, 'Umar leapt up,
 and to render service, set out to the graveyard.
 Clutching the purse, in his quest,
 he kept running round and round the graves,
 but he found none except the old man.
 60 "This can't be him," and so he ran once more.
 He was exhausted and saw no one else.
 "The Almighty had decreed that he had a servant,
 pure, worthy, and favored.
 How can an old harper be the chosen one? But then,
 65 how wondrous are the Mysteries of the Divine!"
 Once more he scoured the graveyard,
 like a lion hunting on the plain.
 Now convinced it had to be the old man,
 "In darkness beat many a radiant heart," he mused.
 70 Quietly he sat by the old man, but suddenly had to sneeze.
 The old man leapt up, and seeing 'Umar, was taken aback.
 In fear and trembling he set out to go.
 "Oh God!" he said to himself, "Have mercy on me!"
 "The **Moh̄taseb** has come after the Old Harper."
 75 'Umar glanced at the old man,
 looking shamefaced and pale.
 "Don't be scared," he said,
 "Don't bolt away from me!

I have brought you many good tidings from God.
 80 He praised you to such a degree,
 that he made 'Umar long to see you.
 Come and sit beside me, don't go away,
 so that I can relate in your ear the secrets of your good fortune.
 God sends you his greetings and asks after you,
 85 after all the endless sorrows and suffering borne by you.
 Look! Here are scraps of gold for your strings.
 Spend them all and come back here again."
 The old man, tossed by emotions, heard this,
 tore his clothes, and bit his hands.
 90 "Oh Almighty without equal!" he kept crying,
 as he melted in the sweat of his shame.
 Sobbing violently and suffering beyond measure,
 he threw down the harp and broke it into bits.
 "You've been the veil hiding me from God;
 95 a highwayman, waylaying me on the royal way,
 you've sucked my blood for seventy years,
 covered me with shame facing his pure presence.
 Oh God, so compassionate, so steadfast,
 take pity on a life spent in sinning!
 100 God grants us life but its daily worth
 is known to none save him alone.
 I squandered mine, moment to moment,
 blowing it all in treble and bass.
 So absorbed in the [musical mode of Iraq](#),
 105 I forgot all the bitter memories of separation.
 The twenty-four melodies absorbed my hours,
 while the caravan departed, and the day was lost.
 Oh God! I rail against my own reprobate self!
 I seek justice from none but you;
 110 none can offer me redress save
 He who is closer to me than I.
 My selfhood derives from him, in dribs and drabs.
 Less of that, and I will only see him.
 When gold is counted in your presence,
 115 your eyes will be fixed on the count, not on yourself.

How 'Umar, may God be pleased with him, turned the harper's gaze from the station of weeping, which is existence, to the station of absorption, which is non-existence.

"Your lamentations," 'Umar said, "are yet another sign of your sobriety.
 The path of those who are wholeheartedly absorbed goes in another direction,

- for sobriety is yet another transgression:
 sobriety is remembrance of the past.
- 120 Past and the future shroud you from God.
 Set fire to both, past and future.
 How much more do you wish to suffer from the two?
 With their twists and turns and so many knots,
 they are no better than a misshapen reed.
- 125 So long as there are knots, *the reed is not fit for secrets*,
 nor as a companion to lips and songs.
 What you say belies your ignorance of God's true knowledge.
 Your contrition worse than what you repent,
 you repent of your past deeds, but tell me,
- 130 when will you repent of this latest repentance?
 For a while you prayed at the altar of your music;
 now outpourings of tears have taken its place.
 With *Fāruq* as his mirror of mysteries,
 the soul of the Harper rose from within,
- 135 as with the soul itself, tears and smiles departed.
 His soul departed, another soul was reborn,
 a sense of wonder entered him at the time,
 taking him beyond the earth and the sky.
 A quest beyond a quest,
- 140 I cannot convey it; if you can, say so!
 Such words and states are beyond words and states.
 He drowned in the contemplation of his splendor and beauty—
 not drowning, but detachment from all,
 hidden from all, save the ocean.
- 145 When the tale of the Harper reached this stage,
 The old man and his story drew a veil upon themselves,
 Leaving all talk behind.
 They remain half told, and they linger on in our mouth.

D. Khvāju-ye Kermāni, *The Garden of Lights*

Khvāju-ye Kermāni, a Persian poet and mystic, was born on December 24, 1290. His birthplace was Kermān, in south-central Iran. After traveling in Arabia, Egypt, Syria, and Iraq, he settled eventually in Shiraz, in the southwestern part of his homeland. He died there, perhaps in 1349. His *The Garden of Lights*, a poem of 2,037 couplets completed in 1342, comprehends twenty discourses that discuss the requirements of the mystical path and the ethics of kingship.

*The Story of the Old Lute-Player,
Playing in the Wilderness and Receiving Favor*

There was once a minstrel, a musician,
 who played his lute to earn his keep.
 His soft whisperings took the tavern by storm.
 As he sipped from a vintner's flagon, a blessed spring,
 5 the bird-ewer was his soul mate.
 Venus danced in circles to his tunes.
 He lived on his airs,
 his youthful days spent on his songs.
 Then, with his lifespan at its last stage,
 10 from riches he went down to rags.
 His purse void as the hollow sound box of his lute;
 his eyes, once sparkling like the garden of paradise, now bereft of its
 resident beauties;
 his gullet, narrow as the long neck of his lute.
 The airs he once knew washed away from his mind,
 15 hope abandoned, and teeth dislodged in despair.
 The days of his youth had entered their evening.
 All the melodies gone cold in his aged heart,
 the appeal of his songs ebbed away.
 He was well past playing his tunes,
 20 and singing in different tongues.
 Early one morning he made his way to a run-down inn,
 and tuned his lute to the whispers of his heart.
 His cries of woe rose to the firmament,
 as he prayed to Heaven in softer tones,
 25 grieving for his heart, laden with pain.
 "You who know our hidden thoughts,
 my heartfelt songs all came from you.
 The fleeting airs secured fame, inspired by you.
 I've grown old, my back bent double like an arched harp,
 30 my heart doleful as the lovers' dirge.
 With a vengeance, the avenging spheres
 twist and turn my ear, as if tuning a lute.
 I cry and no one comes,
 How long should I wail? Attend to my cries!
 35 In a tumultuous world filled with anguish,
 only to you can I offer my song.
 Sixty years I've spent, serving your subjects,
 composing songs in contraries.
 How long should I go on, accommodating all?
 40 Today it is for you that I play my song,
 I play, with no caprice, nor a whim.
 My lute has given me no succor.

- Don't abandon me! Lift me up with a helping hand.
I seek your charity.
- 45 Show me compassion; I've come in need.
Your bounty is limitless, and I am destitute,
don't turn me away empty-handed."
He kept playing, shedding gemlike tears from his eyes,
tears of blood, rubies set in gold.
- 50 His palpable supplication took wing like a bird,
and at once a messenger arrived from the Unseen.
He drew out a sack of gold from his belt,
gave him his compliments, and placed it in front of him.
- *
- I am that old songster now,
55 I made a home in this desolate corner,
a place for revelry in this day of mystery,
where in a hundred tunes I address him,
he who is free of all wants:
"See how tears flow from my eyes like the [Oxus](#),
60 tears of blood rushing forth.
I have played in praise of your Oneness,
I have written chants dedicated to divine love.
Fortune's Wheel, baleful, bent on malice,
snatched away my heartfelt songs by its ruse.
- 65 My laments have become pitiful and my body frail.
The happy days of youth have gone; I have aged.
Birds screech when they hear me cry.
My unhappy heart sheds gloom on those about,
the color has drained from my cheeks,
70 wine has played havoc with my heart.
Like the tender silken strings of a lute,
my body has fallen victim to the perfidy of the firmaments,
thrashed about by their savage strumming.
My pristine soul awaits your service,
75 like a busker at the corner of your street.
Observe my impoverished state,
like the empty palm of an indigent Sufi.
Observe the way I stoop slanted,
[like an alif in a Kufic script](#).
- 80 Since your bounty has no limits,
graciously replenish my needs.
On the road of my yearning for you, I made many songs.
Respond to this bandit of the road, lost on his way.
Don't drop me like a bowstring,
85 don't make me fall silent time and again.
Only you can straighten my affairs,
only you can make my market flourish.

- From your garden comes Khvāju's flowering inspiration,
 like a red tulip, scorched and branded by your mark.
 90 Pour water on him from the fountain of your munificent bounty;
 forgive him all his sins.

E. Moḥammad Amin, *The Sea of Chronicles*

Precious little is certain about the author of this extensive historiographic work. His name was Moḥammad Amin, the son of Mirzā Moḥammad Zamān, and he was a native of Bukhara, in present-day Uzbekistan. In keeping with all the other uncertainties surrounding the writer, his year of birth is not sure: the best guess is that he was born at the end of the 1630s. He likely received a good education before assuming a high office in the service of the khan.

Moḥammad Amin tells us that he conceived the idea of writing *The Sea of Chronicles* when he turned sixty. This revelation suggests strongly that he composed the work late in the seventeenth century. In fact, a colophon in one manuscript puts the completion on March 5, 1699. The author lived on at least a few years afterward.

The title of the text signals its grand sweep. *The Sea of Chronicles*, or of *Histories*, comprises ten chapters. Following a pattern common in Persian historiography, the work offers in its opening chapters a potted universal history, beginning with the creation of the world, before proceeding in the final ones to more detailed local history. The whole is apparently based on thirty-seven earlier historical writings in Arabic and Persian. Given the direct quotation at the end of Moḥammad Amin's account of "Pir-e Changi" from the *Mathnavi*, Rumi must have been one of his main sources.

An Account of Past Musicians and Minstrels

Regarding that wayfarer on the path of sundry arts of music, privy to the mysteries of the Divine, the recipient of his favors, and a conveyor of eternal subtleties, the Excellent Pir-e Changi, may God have mercy upon him:

It is narrated that during the reign of *Anushirvān the Just*, he enjoyed such prestige and wealth that whenever he rode in a procession, two hundred Turkish and Indian slaves, clad in satin robes and wearing pearl earrings, escorted him. But when Anushirvan departed from this world, in a brief space of time and in the ensuing debacle all his wealth and chattel vanished or went to waste.

When the Caliphate was conferred on that guide on the path of righteousness, that ruler of the realm where religious law reigns supreme, whose presence embellishes the altar and the pulpit, the Commander of the Faithful, 'Umar b. Khattāb, may God be pleased with him, Pir-e Changi became apprehensive, and fearing the Caliph, went to the graveyard at Yathrib and took up his harp.

"Oh Lord," he said, "I used to play the harp regularly for your subjects. Now your creatures no longer pay heed to my music. I have therefore come here today to play for you so that you will pay for my performance."

He plucked at his harp, bewailing his broken heart, and weeping as he played. At last he tucked the harp under his head and fell asleep.

The Commander of the Faithful, 'Umar, may God be pleased with him, was asleep when a heavenly voice announced to him, "We have a friend in the graveyard at Yathrib. Take seven hundred dinars from the public coffers and give them to him and tell him it is the reward for his performance."

The Commander of the Faithful, 'Umar, may God be pleased with him, woke up from his sleep and took seven hundred dinars from the public purse and went to the Medina cemetery. No matter how hard he searched, he saw no one except the Old Harper, Pir-e Changi. On seven occasions, according to one version, and seventy according to another, he found himself arriving at the spot where the old man was sleeping.

"This old man is a miscreant," he mused to himself, "and not fit to be God's friend." In the end, since no one else appeared on the scene, he pondered awhile and thought to himself, "Perhaps it may be him after all."

He finally sat down by his feet. Suddenly he had to sneeze, and the old man opened his eyes. He saw his Excellency 'Umar. "My God!" he exclaimed, "I asked you to pay for my music and you've sent me 'Umar instead!" and he tried to beat a hasty retreat.

"Don't be afraid, old man!" his Excellency 'Umar responded. "The Almighty has called you a friend of his and has sent me to you to pay for your performance." And he left that seven hundred dinars with the old man, proffered his apologies, and added, "When you have spent it all come here again. The Almighty God has showered so much praise on your character that he has made me besotted by you." And he asked him to tell him how he had spent his seventy years on earth.

A citation from [Mowlānā Jalāl al-Din Rumi](#), may his grave be hallowed! In his [Mathnavi](#) he says:

In the reign of 'Umar, as you may have heard,
lived a harper, enjoying great pomp and opulence.
Hearing his song, nightingales would swoon, fainting in delight.
On joyous occasions he raised the mirth a hundredfold.
He was a minstrel who filled the world with joyous songs,
and with such airs that could kindle wondrous thoughts.
On hearing him, the soul, birdlike, would take wing
while his voice enchanted one's innermost spirit.

[Rumi] noted down what had occurred and turned it into verse.

F. Jalāl Āl-Aḥmad, "The Setār"

The twentieth-century Iranian intellectual Jalāl Āl-Aḥmad was born in 1923 in Tehran and died in 1969. His father was a Shi'ite cleric. Āl-Aḥmad made a strong mark as a social critic who pointed out the shortcomings of barren technology and consumerism. Equally important for our purposes, he also produced much fiction.

"The Setār" was first published in 1948. In it Āl-Aḥmad demonstrates his familiarity with the stories of "[The Old Harper](#)." Many elements have a familiar ring. For a start, we have a musician with a musical instrument (called setār and tār) and with pent-up

emotions who takes refuge in a mosque. But then the differences press forward, not to be ignored. The leading man is not old but young, not pious and devout but racked by doubts, not rooted in faith but angst-ridden in a bleak world where God is absent, not communitarian but individualistic. He has the air of an existentialist, transplanted from the pages of Camus or Sartre, Iranianized but by way of a rapidly changing Muslim land that was in friction with the encroaching sterilities of Western culture. We are far from both medieval Khorasan and Clairvaux.

He was holding a new *setār* with no cover. He was walking along in an open-collar shirt, oblivious to all. He came down the steps of the main mosque and struggled to make his way through the throng of sidewalk vendors and their crowd of customers, all milling around, sniffing for God knows what.

He was keeping the *setār* close to his chest and guarding its strings with his other hand in case they got caught up in a bystander's coat button or a porter's backpack and snapped apart.

At last, he had got what he had wished for. No longer did he have to hire a *setār* from someone else to play in gatherings and pay through the nose for its use and put up with patronizing condescension.

His disheveled hair reached down over his forehead, and it covered his right eye. He had a yellowish complexion and sunken cheeks but now he could hardly keep his excitement to himself and began running.

In gatherings and when in the right mood, he would sing and play the *tār* and the joy and happiness that he felt within would find its way to those around. But now he found himself in a crowd milling around for no good reason. So what could he do but rush to his destination? He was in a rush because he was happy thinking about a *setār* which was now very much his own.

He thought that from now on when he was in high spirits he could be as spontaneous and forceful as he wished, wielding the pick on the strings with no fear of breaking the strings and having the owner of the *tār* darken his day. This was a great relief to him and he thought that from now on he could give rapturous performances, irresistible even to himself, that would make him cry. He didn't know why he would cry, but from the bottom of his heart he wished to play well enough to make himself weep. He was convinced that only when the sound of his own *tār* brought tears to his eyes, would he have played well. Up to now he had never been able to play the way he had really wanted. His playing had all been for the sake of others, for people who were searching for their own fleeting and lost moments of happiness in the sound of his *tār* and deep within his doleful singing.

In all those nights at festive parties where he had sung and played, nights of revelry that appeared as canned jollity and were irksome to him, the sound of his strings had never been able to make him weep.

He hadn't been able to play the *tār* in a way that would have made him cry. Either the occasions were not suitable and the people who paid him and invited him didn't wish to be the recipient of his tears, or he himself, afraid of breaking the strings, had used the pick far more gently and slowly up and down the scale. He was certain of this too. He was certain of the fact that up to this time he had played and sung far more gingerly and placidly than he should have done.

He wanted to avoid dullness in his performance, to throw away caution. Now that he had been able to buy an instrument with these miserly sums that he had earned, he had fulfilled his goal. Now it was his, now he could easily play whatever he wanted. Now he could play the *tār* in such a way that would bring tears to his eyes.

He had been playing and singing for three years now. That's why he had left school. He always used to sit at the far end of the classroom and hum to himself. Others didn't care or notice but their math master was very strict. He disliked his humming to himself so much that he would get angry and leave the classroom in a fury. He had given formal promises on four or five occasions that he would stop humming but had found this impossible. It was only during the final year that no one could hear him humming at the end of the classroom. He was so tired and had spent so many nights awake that he would either stay in bed till noon or sleep in the classroom. But this episode too did not last long, and he soon left the school for good.

During the first year he had exhausted himself. He had played the *setār*, sang every night, and slept everyday till noon. Later he managed to bring some order into his life and would not accept invitations for more than two or three nights a week. He was gradually making a name for himself, no longer needing to rely on this or that music band. He was now known to people and they would come to the door of their shabby home and fix a date with his mother and knew for sure that he would turn up and they would spend a pleasant evening.

In spite of this, it was grueling work and his mother could see that he appeared more and more drained and haggard as the days went by.

He didn't pay any attention to this himself. He only thought of owning a *tār* and playing the way he wanted with his very own instrument. It was only recently that, from the tips he had received from playing in an upmarket wedding, he had managed to set some money aside and buy a brand new *tār*. And now that he owned a *tār*, he didn't know what else to wish for. It stood to reason that one could have more wishes, but he hadn't yet thought about this. For the moment his sole concern was to get somewhere as quickly as possible and take a good look at his *tār* and peer into its parts. Even in those nights of canned jollity and facile revelry, once he had the *setār* in his hand and singing to its tunes, he would lose all sense of here and now and feel such inner peace that he never wanted to put the instrument down—inconceivable of course, since this was someone else's home, the party belonged to others, and he was there only to entertain others.

In these states of oblivion he had not yet succeeded in experiencing real warmth and excitement. He had not managed to bring heat into his heart.

In the long nights of winter when he was returning home from these parties, dead tired, finding his way in the darkness to his home, he felt the need for internal warmth in such a palpable way that he thought that without it perhaps he would not be able to make it home. On several occasions he had been so panic-stricken that he had spent the entire evening in bars in search of this irretrievable object.

He was very frail. At a first glance he looked like an opium addict. But the tumult within, and the warmth that he felt inside in the past hour, ever since he had become the owner of the *tār*, had made his cheeks flush, and his forehead felt hot.

Busy with his thoughts, he had reached the main gates of the big mosque and was stepping forward on the smooth stone slab of the threshold when a lad selling perfumes who was sitting on the platform by the mosque door keeping an eye on his goods and twiddling his prayer beads waiting for customers, jumped down and grabbed him by the wrist.

"Bloody infidel! Coming into the mosque with your goddamn tool! Into God's own house!"

His train of thought was broken. The heat, which he had just felt, vanished. At first, he was confused but gradually realized what the boy was saying. No one else had yet noticed. He tried to extricate his wrist and carry on his way, but the perfume-seller was not letting go. He was clutching his wrist and kept on cursing and creating havoc.

"You godless rascal! Aren't you ashamed of God? How about some shame now ... a bit of modesty ..."

He tried once more to free his wrist and go on his way, but the boy wasn't going to be so easily satisfied and seemed to be making up for his lack of customers by wreaking vengeance on him.

Gradually one or two people began to take notice and gathered round them but no one was yet aware of what was going on and intervening. He had now been delayed for far too long.

It was evident that something would happen soon but the cold that had caught hold of his heart had again departed. He felt heat surging through his heart and into his brain. He saw red and lost control and with his other hand gave the boy a strong slap under his ear. The boy started panting and the cursing and swearing stopped. For a second, he felt dizzy in his head. He forgot about clutching the wrist and was rubbing his face with both hands. But suddenly he came to himself and jumped up. He was about to enter the mosque with his *tār* when the boy grabbed hold of the hem of his jacket and clutched his wrist again.

A brawl had begun. Several people tried to join in. The boy was still shouting and swearing and cursing the godless and fuming about the insult inflicted on God's own threshold and asking Muslims to come to his aid.

No one knew how it happened. He himself didn't notice it. Only that the *setār* with its wooden bowl hit the ground and broke with a short but resounding sound and its broken three strings twisted around each other and fell off at a corner. He stood by, dumbfounded, and gazed at the crowd. The perfume boy felt comforted, convinced that he had done his religious duties to the utmost. He expressed his heartfelt thanks and went back behind his stand and with his prayer beads at hand, intoned the many names of God.

Like the strings of his *tār*, all his thoughts were entangled and were rolled together. The cold had returned to his heart and was gradually seeping to his brain. Frozen, he huddled at a corner. His cup of hope had shattered into three parts like the bowl of his newly found *tār*. And its shards were slashing into his heart.

