

Teach your eyes the mathematics of  
poverty and then listen.

-Timothy Roe



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## Layla and Majnun: On Space



Rainer Maria Rilke has a quote on love that could equally be applied to life, learning, or simply being. He once told a young poet, “We need, in love, to practice only this: letting each other go. For holding on comes easily; we do not need to learn it. Let everything happen to you, both beauty and terror, for no feeling is final. Believe me, just trust me, you will learn that life is always in the right.”

In Persia, a deeply religious culture, we have the story of Layla and Majnun. It was written by Nizami Ganjavi, who was a Sufi. Sufi, the mystical branch of Islam, hold a soteriological view not common in the West. The principle of Fana, in Sufism, is the "annihilation" (of the ego). The concept is hard for an occidental mind to understand because it means to “negate understanding.” In oriental thought understanding is something that must be left behind in pursuit of love (see; Conference of the Birds by Farid ud Din Attar). In the story of Layla and Majnun we are asked to contemplate the mysterious language of love.

Layla (Persian: لیلا, Arabic: ليلى, Hebrew: לילה) is a feminine given name in the Semitic (Arabic, Hebrew) and Persian languages. In Hebrew the name Leila or Laila (לילה) can mean "night", or "cloaked in night". Majnun (Persian: مجنون) is a masculine given name in Semitic (Arabic, Hebrew) and Persian languages. The name has come to mean synonymously many words describing Majnun in the story of Layla and Majnun: “crazy, mad, possessed, one who lives without or has lost, reason, or has become annihilated.” Majnun is one who is learning the language of love.

The algorithmic truths found in Layla and Majnun are, in essence, a teaching on the hardships of learning what it means to believe one’s pre-destiny. Often the story of Layla and Majnun has been called the Romeo and Juliet of the Middle East, a tragedy, but I would like to put a question-mark where comparative liturgists have placed a period. A closer look at Middle Eastern epistemology will unveil the story isn't a tragedy, it is an allegory about spacial relationship and communication.

Majnun dances, “I live for you. This is the madness bestowed upon me. What a true blessing I have found in you. The last scent of love.” The story of Layla and Majnun bids us ask ourselves what it is that brings us to a state of oneness, where multiplicity becomes the willing of one thing, for these are the pure in heart, the selflessness found in Majnun’s love for Layla and Layla’s devotion to Majnun. They, as a couple, are the meaning of faithful.

# Algebra, Jonah, and the Whale



Algebra- (from Arabic: الجبر, transliterated "al-jibr"), literally means to set a broken bone, or the return to a belief in predestination, and is an Arabic variant form of the name Gabriel, referring to the archangel. It is one of the broader disciplines in mathematics, together with number theory, geometry, and analysis. In its most general form, algebra is the study of mathematical symbols and the rules for manipulating these symbols; it is the unifying thread of almost all of mathematics.

So, the story. Jonah has a desire to learn physics and is told he should go learn from the Ninevites about their goddess and their culture. He instead gets afraid, and delusional, so he makes up a story that they are an evil people and that it would be unsafe for him to go there, so he flunks his first physics test. Enter: Algebra. So, he goes to the bowels of the ship, takes a nap, and the seas become turbulent. The mariners break out their tarot cards and divine that Jonah is the cause. Reluctantly, they throw him overboard, where he is swallowed by a GPS whale that vomits him at Nineveh. Flunking the second part of his physics exam, he begins to tell the Ninevites that Allah is going to destroy them. He sits outside of the city and waits for Allah's wrath to fall upon them. Allah does nothing to

the Ninevites, but gives Jonah part three of his exam. He asks Jonah if his anger is justified, and of course Jonah says, "Yes, it makes me so angry I should die! You should have destroyed them so I didn't look like a fool!" Allah finishes the exam by asking Jonah a question, "Should I really destroy a whole people, their culture, and their animals?"

Jonah flunked his physics exam, because he hadn't learned algebra, even though the Dark attempted to teach him "as above, so below, as within, so without." Jonah was too busy sleeping to study for his exam; first in the ship, then in the belly of the whale, then under a worm-eaten tree. What can we divine from this tale of scientific jest? Line upon line, precept upon precept, non-zero sum... that maybe, we shouldn't try to study physics if we haven't first learned algebra.