Wine and drunkenness are two of the most common metaphors in Persian mystical love poetry, and it would be appropriate to start my paper with a few lines of a poem by Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, a poet who has become somewhat popular in Western countries, particularly in America, in the last two decades.

So drunk am I, so drunk am I today
That I have leapt out of my loop today
In spirit, I went out with the Heaven of Love,
Though in body, I am still in this world today.
I took Reason by the ear, and said,
“Get out of here; I am free of you today!
Reason, wash your hands of me,
For I am one with the mad lover today.”
The cup of wine has carried me to such a state,
That I have smashed unnumbered vats of wine today.
I know not where I am today,
But this surely is a blessed place to be today.

In these lines, Rūmī speaks of two ideas, or two main states of mind, which he has experienced, one being drunkenness and the other love. He starts by saying how drunk he is and what a unique experience of intoxication he is going through, an intensity of intoxication that he does not recall ever having had before. Then he equates his inebriation with love. Although physically he is in this world, within his soul he has been able to transcend the material world and arrive in the heavenly domain of love. Whether we designate this state by drunkenness or by love, it has one main characteristic, and that is breaking the rules that are set by reason, the ordinary rationality that governs our worldly life and behavior.

But what kind of state is this drunkenness and what does the poet mean by it? Why does he equate it with love, or with the state of being in love? Rūmī, as we know, was a full-fledged mystic and in his lyric poems (ghazals), just as in his epic ones, known as the Mathnāvī, he uses the idea of love in a mystical sense. What is this mystical love that Rūmī, as well as all the other Persian mystical poets and writers, have in mind, something they have often characterized as drunkenness? By this term, Rūmī obviously does not mean the intoxication induced by wine or other alcoholic beverages. He is clearly using the word drunkenness metaphorically, just as all other mystical poets in Persian (as well as in Ottoman Turkish and Urdu) have traditionally done. Since using drunkenness metaphorically for love depends on the meaning of love for the mystics, we must first examine the nature of this love.

At the outset, it seems clear to us what the word love means and even how the mystics, in different religions, use it or what they mean by it. Yet it is also clear to us, and the Sufis almost unanimously agree, that the nature of love cannot be described by words or sentences and its meaning is beyond our comprehension. But they also say that there are certain things we can say about the mystical idea of love without taking the risk of going after the impossible.

The obvious thing we can say is that love, whether used in a mystical sense or non-mystical, designates a relationship, and as such it happens between two sides, an object and a subject, called the lover and the beloved. In ordinary usage, this word is used to refer to the relationship

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2 The idea that the nature of love is beyond our comprehension is discussed in various ways by Ahmad Ghazzālī in his book on love, Sawānih, Inspirations from the world of Pure Spirits. Translated by Nasrollah Pourjavady, London, 1986. One of these ways is the following poem on page 21 which may well belong to the author himself: “Love is covered and no one has ever seen it revealed. / How long will these lovers boast in vain?”