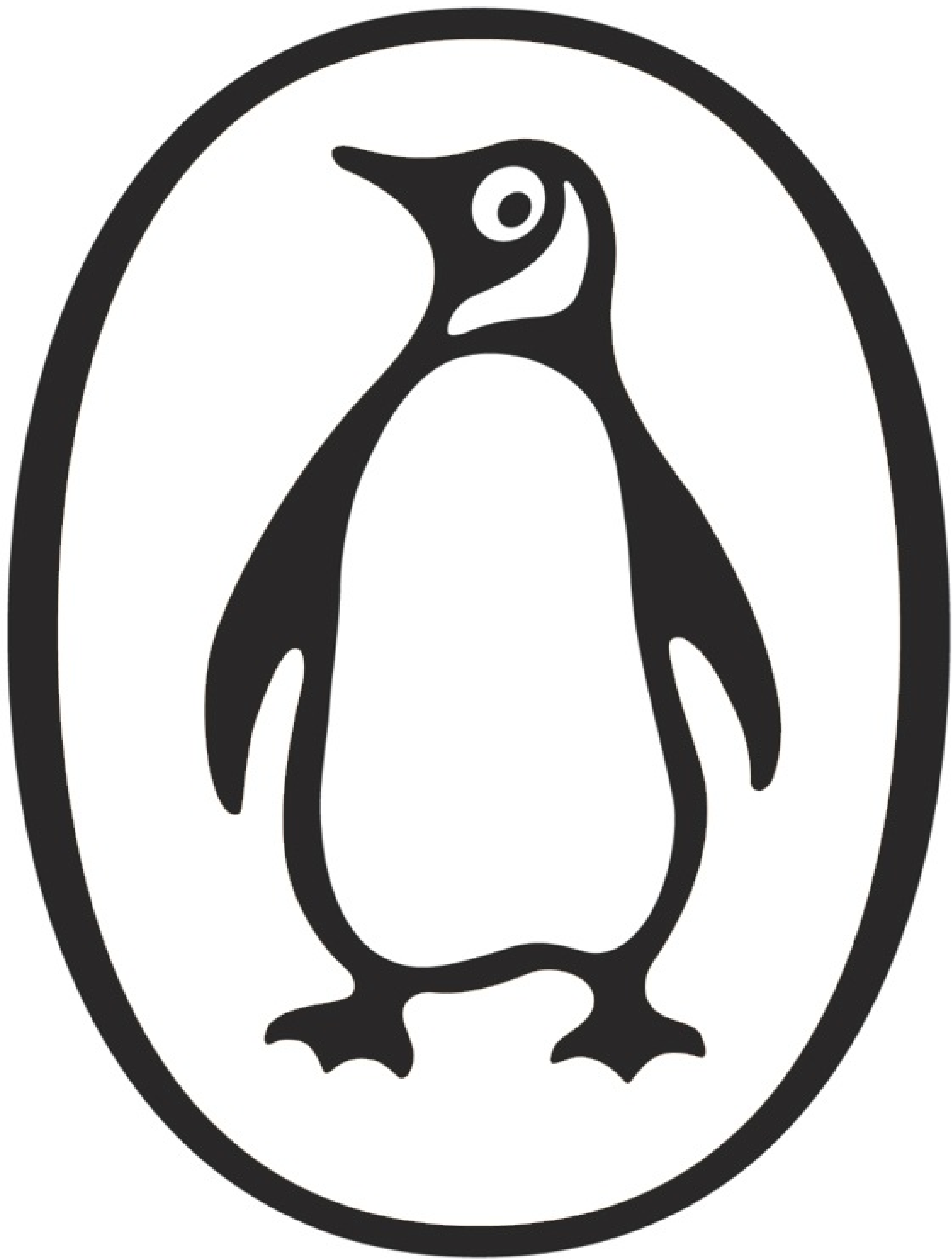

PENGUIN CLASSICS

SPIRITUAL VERSES

MOWLĀNĀ JALĀLODDIN BALKHI, known to the West as RUMI, was an Iranian poet of a status in Muslim civilization comparable to the greatest poets of European culture. For over 700 year he has been famed throughout the Muslim world as one of the greatest spiritual teachers of all time, and is affectionately known as Mowlānā (Turkish Mevlana) 'Our Master', or Mowlavi 'Learned Divine'. He was born in 1207 in a small town near Balkh, in the north-eas of present-day Iran, but his family fled the advancing Mongol hordes of Genghis Khan, who by 1220 had devastated Balkh and Samarqand, the cities of Rumi's childhood. Around 1216 his family took him more than 2,000 miles westwards, settling eventually in Anatolia, a province that was still known as 'Rum' (Rome/Byzantium), as it had only recently been conquered by the Muslim Seljuqs. Rumi's name therefore spans cultures and continents.

Rumi's father, Bahāoddin Valad, established himself as a religious scholar in Konya, the Seljuq capital of Rum. Apart from his years spent studying in Aleppo and Damascus, Rumi remained in Konya for most of the rest of his life. Like his father, he was educated in all the religious sciences and became a scholar of a spiritual, Sufi, leaning. In his late thirties he began a profound transformation as a result of meeting a spiritual master called Shamsoddin of Tabriz, who arrived in Konya in 1244. This powerful and highly enigmatic teacher stimulated a spiritual and poetic development in Rumi until his death in 1273, though Shamsoddin himself disappeared mysteriously some twenty-five years earlier, around 1248. Near the time of their first meeting, Rumi began the composition of a body of sublime lyric poems, totalling 35,000 lines. In his later years he turned to the composition of the six volumes of his mystical masterpiece, the *Masnavi-ye Ma'navi* 'Spiritual Verses', a poem of epi proportions that is also one of the most personal and intimate works of spiritual teaching. Rumi is also loved as a saintly teacher. Following his teachings, his disciples formed the 'Mevlevi' Sufi order, best known in the West for its practice of the *sema*; the ritual practice o 'audition' to music and accompanying whirling dance of the Mevlevi dervishes. It is in the poetry of the *Masnavi*, however, that we find the living teaching and insight of a prodigious and unrivalled spiritual understanding.

ALAN WILLIAMS was born in 1953 in Windsor, Berkshire, England. He was educated at Dulwich College, London and The Queen's College, Oxford, where he studied Classics, then Persian and Arabic, followed by a doctorate in Old and Middle Iranian Studies and Zoroastrianism at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, where he has also taught. He was Lecturer in Religious Studies at the University of Sussex and is now Senior Lecturer i Comparative Religion at the University of Manchester, specializing in Iranian studies. His research has resulted in several books and articles on Iranian studies, the history of religions comparative literature and translation studies.

RUMI

Spiritual Verses

The First Book of the *Masnavi-ye Ma'navi*

Translated with an Introduction and Notes by
ALAN WILLIAMS

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Acknowledgements

Though Rumi's *Masnavi* is vast in scale, it is one of the most personal poems ever written. It is a revolution against imprisonment in personality and against estrangement from our true selves. I first encountered the *Masnavi* more than thirty-five years ago, in Reynold Alleyne Nicholson's (London, 1923–40) translation. It was an experience of entrancement but also perplexity. What poetry lay in the Persian, behind Nicholson's highly literal, prose, version? ended up switching from an undergraduate degree in Classics to the study of Persian and Arabic language and literature. Now I could read the *Masnavi* in Persian, I saw just how muc of the original is lost in prose translation. It was only later, in the experience of trying to teach students how the poetry of Rumi *works*, that I began to wish to do my own metrical English translations of the *Masnavi*. Initially I was asked by my editor to translate the entire work: I pointed out that that would be a long time in preparation. I resisted the idea of anthologizing: this has been done before, and, more importantly, what is lost in such story-based anthologies is the coherence of the didactic structure. So I translated the first book as faithfully as possible, and at the same time into a poetic form, namely iambic-pentameter couplets of blank verse. I have tried to keep faith both with the Persian language and with the poetic integrity of the couplet form. This first book of the *Masnavi* is the key to understanding the whole work.

Nobody who translates the *Masnavi* can step out of the long shadow cast by Nicholson's monumental work of scholarship. However, readers often find his translation difficult to understand because of its archaic language and difficult phrasing; moreover his literalness in explaining the letter of the text in prose loses the poetic coherence and power that drive the *Masnavi* forward and hold the reader's attention. Though a great deal has been written about Rumi over the last hundred years, and about his ideas in the greater context of 'Sufism', to date there has been little written in European languages about the actual *poetry* of the *Masnavi.* Scholars have laboured to translate this and other Sufi classics, but very little analytical work has been done on the literary and linguistic form of the texts. Such is the reverence many readers have for Rumi that in some cases what are intended as serious academic studies are in fact more celebrations than elucidations. This is not a new phenomenon, as for many centuries a devotional culture has surrounded the figure of Rumi: he has been seen, especially outside Iran, as a saintly sheikh at the centre of the Mevlevi tradition rather than as a poet whose works could be thought about. There are signs that this is about to change.

Rumi is both a poet and a mystic, but he is a teacher first, trying to communicate what he knows to his audience. Like all good teachers, he trusts that ultimately, when the means to g any further fail him and his voice falls silent, his students will have learnt to understand on their own. In reading the text with my students, and in reading my translations out to listeners, I began to engage with the structures of Rumi's method of communication and his poetic voice in a way that went beyond merely studying the original text privately. I was

particularly fortunate to benefit from working with a master of the Persian *nay* (flute) and voice, Ostad Hosayn Omoumi, in a recitation of the *Masnavi* and musical performance in London in 2002 – an experience that made me realize that any translation must be worth reading aloud! I am deeply indebted to him, and also to the many students with whom I hav read the *Masnavi* at the University of Manchester over the years. I also thank the many students and friends, too numerous to mention by name, who have commented on my draft translations. I am particularly grateful to Narguess Farzad for checking the working transcription and translation. I thank my Manchester colleagues Todd Klutz, Jacqueline Suthren Hirst and Alex Samely for their perceptive reading and discussion of my work; I am indebted to the poets Mimi Khalvati and John McAuliffe, who probably do not know how much they helped and inspired me with their interest. Lastly I thank my editors, Marcella Edwards and Andrea Belloli, for thehr enthusiasm, expertise and patience. My children Charles, Beatrice and Mary have been with me all through this work, and it is to them and their generation of new readers of Rumi that I dedicate this book.

Chronology

c. 1152 Birth of Rumi's father, Bahāoddin Valad

c. 1200 Bahāoddin teaching in Vakhsh

c. 1207 30 *September* Birth of Rumi in Vakhsh, second son of Mo'mene Khātun and Bahāoddin Valad

c. 1208 Bahāoddin in dispute with Qazi of Vakhsh

c. 1212 Valad family living in Samarqand; Khwārezmshāh lays siege to the city

c. 1216 Valad family leave Khorasan for Baghdad and Mecca (March)

c. 1217 Brief stays in Damascus and Malatya (summer)

c. 1218 Valad family in Aqshahr near Erzincan for four years

c. 1219 Mongols destroy Samarqand

1221 Mongols take Balkh

c. 1222 Valad family in Larende (Karaman) for seven years. Death of Rumi's mother (between 1222 and 1229)

1224 Marriage of Rumi to Gowhar Khātun

1225 Birth of Rumi's son Alāoddin

1226 Birth of Rumi's son Soltān Valad

c. 1229 Family settles permanently in Konya

1231 Death of Rumi's father

c. 1232 Arrival of Borhānoddin Mohaqqeq in Konya. Having been a student in Aleppo and Damascus (*c* 1233–7), Rumi returns to Konya an accomplished scholar. He remai under the spiritual discipline of Borhānoddin

1241 Death of Borhānoddin

1242 Death of Rumi's wife, Gowhar Khātun

1244 29 *November* Arrival of Shamsoddin of Tabriz in Konya. Rumi takes up *samā* and composes *ghazals* (lyric poems)

1246 Shams leaves Konya for Syria (March)

1247 Shams is persuaded to return to Konya (April)

1247 Shams marries Kimiyā

1247-8 Shams disappears from Konya forever. Rumi makes at least two abortive trips t Syria or Damascus in search of him. Rumi chooses Salāhoddin Zarkub as his successor a conspiracy to remove Salāhoddin is foiled

1258 Death of Salāhoddin. Abbasid caliphate falls to the Mongols

c. 1262 Death of Rumi's eldest son. Composition of Book I of the *Masnavi* begins

c. 1264 Composition of Book II begins; composition of Books III—VI until shortly befor

Introduction

THE AUTHOR: MOWLĀNĀ JALĀLODDIN BALKHI/MEVLANA CELALEDDIN RUMI

Just as history is written by the victors, so poets' names are given by those who claim them. To the Western world he is Rumi 'Westerner', though this name merely describes where he lived during his adult life: in Rum, the formerly 'Roman' Byzantine province of Anatolia in Asia Minor, now part of Turkey. Turks also know him by this name, but they prefix it with the religious honorific Mevlana 'Our Lord' and the personal name Celaleddin. Iranians call him Mowlānā Jalāloddin or Mowlavi, but they always refer to him as Balkhi, taking into account that he spoke and wrote in Persian and referred to himself as coming from Balkh, a province in what Iranians regard as ethnically part of greater Iran, though it is now on the national borders of Tajikistan and Afghanistan.

The American scholar Franklin Lewis has published a comprehensive study of Rumi[1] whic gives a full narrative reconstruction of his biography to the limit of current scholarly knowledge and attempts to sort out fact from myth and legend. Lewis discusses Sufi hagiography and the mythical Rumi of the past and present. His energetic research in all the available original sources has allowed him to paint a vivid picture of Rumi, real and imagined, then and now. The chronology on pages x-xi sets out the principal events of Rumi' life.

Jalāloddin Rumi was born on 30 September 1207 the second son of Mo'mene Khātun, wife of Bahāoddin Valad, a learned religious scholar and preacher in his late fifties. Rumi was bor in a small town, Vakhsh,[2] in Tajikistan, 150 miles east of Balkh and 300 miles west of the borders of China. Bahāoddin Valad moved his family north-west to the ancient city of Samarqand when Jalāloddin was a very young child (between 1210 and 1212); the family remained there for four or five years. Samarqand would be completely destroyed by Genghi Khan in 1219; whether out of prescience or because of local political instability, Bahāoddin stayed there only a short time before moving his family westwards, around 1216, on a journey of more than 2,000 miles. They travelled through Nayshapur to Baghdad and Mecca then on to Damascus and Aleppo in Syria. The family finally settled in the capital of Rum, Konya, around 1229, where Rumi's father, by now in his late seventies, gained a position in *madrase* (college), having won the favour of the Seljuk sultan Alāoddin Kay Qobād. In 1224, at the age of seventeen, Rumi married Gowhar Khātun, also seventeen and from Samarqand. They had two sons, Alāoddin (b. 1225) and Soltān Valad (b. 1226). At his father's death in 1231, Rumi took over his post at the *madrase*, although he himself was only a young man of twenty-four who had not yet completed his studies. One of his father's most senior and devoted pupils, Borhānoddin Mohaqqeq, soon arrived at the *madrase* and became Rumi's scholarly and spiritual mentor. Borhānoddin despatched Rumi to Syria to complete his

education, first in Aleppo, then in Damascus, leaving his young wife and two sons behind in Konya for five years (1233-7), during which time he studied the traditional curriculum of all the religious sciences, including law and jurisprudence. Rumi is thought to have heard lectures by the great mystical philosopher and visionary Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi and his pupil Sadroddin Qonavi in Damascus. Rumi’s spiritual education began in earnest, however, when he returned to Konya in 1237 and Borhānoddin engaged him in rigorous ascetic practices. Borhānoddin died in 1241, as did Rumi’s wife, Gowhar Khātun, in the following year. Soon after, he married a young widow, Kerrā Khātun, with whom he had at least two children.

The most intense period of Rumi’s life began in 1244, when he met Shamsoddin of Tabriz, the great teacher who was to ‘cook and burn’ Rumi’s soul. Shamsoddin was both an impassioned mystical adept and a deeply learned scholar of the Shāfe’i school of law. He wa in his sixties when he arrived in Konya and remains the most enigmatic and powerful figure in Rumi’s biography. Rumi spent a great deal of time with Shamsoddin in the four years before the latter mysteriously disappeared in 1247/8: Shamsoddin’s influence helped to transform Rumi from a locally esteemed spiritual scholar and writer of fine lyric verses into poet and teacher of world stature. The hagiographical and devotional tradition down to the present day has feasted on speculation as to what happened between the two companions, and only recently, with the publication of Shamsoddin’s *Maqālāt* in Persian and English, have scholars become able to consider properly the relationship and teaching shared by the two men.[3] Rumi was, it seems, willing to abandon his reputation for the sake of the spiritual companionship he shared with Shamsoddin. Shamsoddin apparently recognized early on that Rumi was destined to exceed his own spiritual attainment and arrive at the goal of the Sufi life by becoming a Perfect Man (*ensān-e kāmel*). In Sufi understanding, a Perfect Man is one in whom all selfishness has died and who lives in complete union with God, embodying divine attributes in his perfected human nature. Shamsoddin disappeared from Konya twice, briefly in 1246 and, two years later, forever.[4]

Rumi’s life after Shamsoddin was spent in spiritual enterprise, writing and teaching, and working closely with two companions, first Salāhoddin, then Hosāmoddin, to whom, successively, the practical running of the *madrase* was given over. Rumi’s relationship with both men was intense and reciprocally respectful. Hosāmoddin is said to have suggested to Rumi that he compose the *Masnavi*, and it is addressed to him throughout as he wrote down most, if not all, of it from Rumi’s dictation. This process is thought to have been begun in 1261/2. After the first book was completed, there was an interval of nearly a year, occasioned, it seems, by the sudden death of Hosāmoddin’s wife. There is much speculation as to exactly when Rumi composed each of the remaining five books, but it is generally agreed that he completed the work before his death on 17 December 1273.[5]

In addition to the six books of the *Masnavi* and the compendious *Divān* of thousands of lyri poems, Rumi left behind him three works in Persian prose. The work traditionally known as the *Fihe Mā Fih* ‘In It What Is in It’ is a collection of semi-formal talks which were transcribe by others rather than penned by Rumi himself as a literary text.[6] The *Majāles-e Sab’e* ‘Seven Sermons’ survive as examples of Rumi’s preaching style, but to date no complete English translation has been published.[7] Finally there is the *Maktubāt* ‘Letters’, written in a more sophisticated literary style: these also have not been published in translation.[8]

The *Masnavi-ye Ma'navi*, the 'Spiritual Couplets' or 'Inner Verses', is possibly the longest single-authored 'mystical' poem ever written. In the most recent Iranian edition of the text[9] contains 25,683 couplets. But the 'couplet' (Persian *bayt*, *masnavi*) is in fact double the lengt of most European lines, so the poem is equivalent to one of well over 50,000 lines: almost a many as Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* together, twice as many as Dante's *Divina commedia* and five times as many as Milton's *Paradise Lost*. There had been *Masnavis* before Rumi's— most famously Faridoddin Attār's *Manteqottayr* 'The Conference of the Birds' and *Elāhināme* 'The Divine Book', and Sanā'i's *Hadiqe al-Haqiqe* 'The Walled Garden of Truth' – but none of these is considered to rise to quite the sublime heights of Rumi's *Masnavi*.

The *Masnavi* is a spiritual masterpiece of the Persian Sufi tradition. It teaches progress to the ultimate goal of the Sufi path – that is, union with God. God is known primarily through love and is therefore approached as the divine beloved. Rumi's principal theme, and in fact his method of working on the transformation of the human heart, is announced in the very first couplet of the work, which commands the listener to hear the story of separations. Separation is the human predicament: love is both the cause of, and the solution to, this predicament. Human love forms attachment to the object of love, which inevitably results i the experience of separation from it. Then, if this transitory love is lost, occasioned by a failing heart or a failing of health, can love be given and felt anymore? The cure is divine love, which is not to be found in other transitory things, not even in the image of a transcendent beloved – for to do so would be to return to things which can be lost and forgotten. Right from the beginning, in the first story of the king and the slave-girl, Rumi leads the reader into the complexities of human love and separation, and discloses the actio of divine love when it is earnestly sought and asked for. As the *Masnavi* progresses, the couplets each convey a *nokte*, or 'point of intelligence', that penetrates and lightens the sens of separation felt by the soul, which is dominated by the *nafs*, the egoistical and illusory condition of 'self-regard'. The goal of Sufi teaching is to die to self-regard and live in consciousness of the divine.

The *Masnavi* is also a work of great poetic art. The two categories, spiritual teaching and poetry, are *not* different but one and the same. As one Iranian critic has put it, discussing Rumi's lyrics,'… the poems themselves are the mystical experience and the meaning, not a container holding them.'[10] Rumi's skill as a spiritual teacher is visible in the poetic structure of the *Masnavi*. He layers his writing. He begins a story and then quickly moves into telling another story within that story, and another one within that. Often he creates a speech withi a speech, and another one within that. Layering is a feature of the deeper structure of his composition. The *Masnavi* is a didactic poem bound together by the poet's own voice, which is itself composed of many voices moving between the high and low registers of its range, just as the *nay*, with which Rumi begins the work, ranges through its several octaves.

The *Masnavi* has no framing plot. Its many stories are all *a plot*, i.e. a strategy, the device and the means to hook imagination. It takes the multifariousness of life as its raw material: all states of existence, from rocks and plants to insects and animals, and all of humankind, from villains and harlots to men of state, kings, saints, angels and prophets. Characters are

drawn from all occupations and situations. The tone ranges from popular stories from the bazaar to fables and timeless moral tales, as well as quotations from the stories of the prophet Mohammed and from Quranic revelation itself. Rumi's art is, however, subversive: he subverts expectation and understanding of experience in order to challenge ordinary idea of the way things happen, and even the worldly notion of causality itself. Folk and popular culture, politics and manners, tell us about how things work in the world: Rumi takes the strands of life and weaves them together, not in order to make common sense but to make a *new* sense based on an understanding of things as they truly are in their inner or spiritual reality. As the folklorist Margaret M. A. Mills has put it, '… his poetry presents a holistic flow, a possibility of reading all experience in an enriched mystical way.'[11] The stories Rumi tells are not for entertainment, nor even for moral improvement. He hints that he does not fully believe in the real substantiality of his own characters: they are fictive – but fictions with a purpose.

Why, then, tell stories? Rumi gives us the answer in *Masnavi* I. 2636:

If spiritual explanation were enough,
creation of the world were all in vain.

Margaret Mills explains this dense couplet:

> Rumi… offers a wealth of commentary, explanation, and interpretation, so much so that a story can seem overwhelmed in sheer volume of words by its interpretations, yet the narrative examples are nonetheless necessary to the process of mystical enlightenment, just as experience of the fragmented, separated created world is necessary in approaching Union.[12]

She adds, with a touch of Rumi's own turn of phrase: 'The poet narrates for the same purpos as the Deity creates.'

In a conventional story, the narrative sequence followed is:

problem/theme → complication → resolution.

For Rumi this sequence is illusory, arising from a self-centred view of the world that constructs definite images and fixed stereotypes, just as the *nafs* conceives itself as fixed and permanent in a fixed world. Rumi uses many realistic characters in his stories, but he does not treat them as fixed realities. Personas are masks which are worn, taken off and thrown away. Imagery and symbols are not fixed either. The sea means one thing now, then something altogether different. Image, representation – everything is mutable. The only image that has a constancy is the sun, though Rumi reminds us that he speaks of what is *beyond* the merely physical sun. There is a spiritual purpose in his use of imagery that is possible only in the heightened reality of poetic discourse. As the *Masnavi* progresses, Rumi builds into his audience's imagination a sense of freedom from control by the imagery, paradoxically by flooding their minds with imagery. He insists on the realization of the reality that lies beyond appearances: through his poetry, he discovers the nature of meaning

To whom is the poetry of the *Masnavi* addressed? One of its most striking features is its

psychological immediacy: the whole poem is addressed to the second-person ‘you’ of the human reader, and to the ‘You’ of the divine presence – though often the two are implicitly linked. Rumi addresses ‘you’ from the first line, when he commands ‘Listen.’ The stories that run through the work are told in the third person (i.e. never in the first person) about characters from folklore, scripture and myth, but then Rumi’s gaze returns to ‘you’, addresse affectionately as ‘my son’, ‘father’, ‘dear reader’, ‘lad’ etc., as, for example, in the gently chastening line from the beginning of the poem (l. 19):

Be free, my son, and break your chains asunder!
How long will you be slave to gold and silver?

As the *Masnavi* progresses, Rumi explores the nature of his audience’s identity, as it is his purpose to transform them from being obsessively fascinated by appearances into those who know God. Rumi’s voice, directed intensely at ‘you/You’,[13] is intended to change his audienc as they respond to his many voices in this epic journey of enchantment and disenchantment.

THE QUESTION OF DESIGN AND THE VOICES OF THE AUTHOR

Each of the six books of the *Masnavi* is believed to be focused on one of six themes of progressive development along the Sufi path. Sufism, as the gnostic, mystical interpretation of Islam, teaches that the spiritual path involves embarking on a course of discipline by whic one purifies the *ruh* (immortal spirit) of pollution by worldly desires. The purpose of this is t realize union of the spirit with God through surrendering, effacement and, ultimately, dissolution of the concupiscent *nafs*. Indeed this problem of the *nafs* seems to be the main theme addressed in the first book.

The six books are also thought to fall into three groups of two, and each pair is concerned with a major theme.[14] According to this schema:

> Books 1 and 2: are principally concerned with the *nafs*, the lower, carnal self, and its self-deception and evil tendencies. The one who follows the Sufi path can resist such evil, but the *nafs* is identical with the devil, i.e. the constant tempter of our true nature.
>
> Books 3 and 4: have as their principal themes Reason and Knowledge. Reason and Knowledge are personified by the figure of the Biblical and Quranic prophet Moses, and are opposed by illusory Imagination, which is personified by Pharaoh. The angelic aspect of our nature replaces the diabolical.
>
> Books 5 and 6: are united by the idea that man must first deny his own existence in order to affirm that of God. Passing away from selfhood, in Arabic and Persian *fanā*, is linked to the heart, the spirit and light.[15]

This schema conforms generally to the overall structure of the Sufi path. There is, however,

dynamic as well as a thematic structure to the poem. Rumi switches his 'point of view'[16] in order to draw the reader under the influence of his imaginative enchantment. This takes the form of a change of voice and shifting of the mode of speaking in a manner that is sometime sudden, at other times so subtle that it goes almost unnoticed.

There is a sevenfold framework of the *Masnavi*'s principal 'voices':

1. *authorial*
2. *story-telling*
3. *analogical*
4. *of speech and dialogue of characters*
5. *of moral reflection*
6. *of spiritual discourse*
7. *of hiatus*

1. *The Authorial Voice*

Rumi begins the *Masnavi* with its most famous passage, known as the *nayname*, or 'Song of the Reed' (ll. 1–35)[17] in his authorial voice. This passage resonates with the authority of the *pir* or sheikh, the Sufi teacher: it is majestic, grandfatherly and gently chastising. All Persian poets use this voice occasionally, especially as an aside to the reader in the middle of telling story. For Rumi, however, the authorial voice is pivotal and frequently used. The person addressed is *You, God*, and *you, all of humankind*. Passages written from this point of view ar intensely serious, often wistful and even melancholic and minatory. This is the voice that introduces and ends stories and books, as here when Rumi is just about to begin the first story of the first book (ll. 34–5):

> *Do you know why your mirror tells of nothing?*
> *The rust has not been taken from its surface.'*
> *Reflect upon this story, my dear friends;*
> *its meaning is the essence of our state.*

In the very next line the voice suddenly changes to the story-telling voice.[18]

2. The Story-telling Voice

The most obvious indicators of the change of voice or point of view to that of story-telling are (1) change of verb tense from present to past, and (2) introduction of third-person characters in a narrative. The story-telling voice is usually lively and witty, colourful and dramatic. The main story is often interrupted by either a sub-story or various of the other voices described below. Some stories therefore take many hundreds of lines to finish becaus of Rumi's constant self-interruption. For example, the story of the Bedouin and his wife, which is begun at l. 2255, is not completed until some 700 lines later, having been interrupted by numerous apparent deviations and three separate sub-stories. The story-tellin voice is also constantly interrupted by a very characteristic device that is so much a standar

feature of Rumi's compositional style that it can be seen as a voice in its own right, namely the analogical voice.

3. The Analogical Voice

The analogical voice appears to interrupt the narration of a story: in fact it is a pivotal stage in the poet's development and elucidation of a story. Usually the analogy addresses a point made in the previous line. It instills wit and clarity through an example or examples in a series of 'one-liners' (e.g. the succession of nine analogies in eleven couplets, ll. 2797–807). The following lines, taken from the beginning of the first story, illustrate how Rumi explains the meaning of l. 40 by turning to two analogies, then returning to the story in l. 43.

> *Now when he'd bought her and he had enjoyed her,*
> *by heaven's fate the slave-girl turned to sickness.*
> *A man possessed an ass but had no saddle;*
> *he got a saddle – wolves had got the ass!*
> *Another had a pitcher but no water;*
> *he found the water, but he broke the pitcher!*
> *The king called in the doctors all around,*
> *'The lives of both of us are in your hands.*

The switch to analogy may best be recognized by the change of context from that specified i the story to one of a generalized, proverbial context. The tense may remain the same in the switch, as in the above example, or it may change from past to present, as in the mid-couple switch, from story to analogy, in l. 107:

> *Her pain was not from black or yellow bile:*
> *the scent of wood is sent up in its smoke.*

From the analogical voice the poet will either return to story-telling or, just as often, move t the fourth or fifth type of voice.

Rumi's use of analogy is fundamental not only to his compositional style but also to his spiritual teaching. According to Sufi teaching, the world is a multitude of reflections of the attributes, or divine names, of God. Phenomena are not real in themselves, only in so far as they constitute finite examples, or likenesses, of their infinite creator. Therefore it is part of Rumi's teaching to coax his readers out of the misapprehension that the world is made up of multitude of separate selves apart from God and into the knowledge that all reality subsists only in relation to God. The Persian/Arabic word for 'example' and 'likeness' (*mesl*, pl. *amsā* is also the word for 'proverbial saying', of which Rumi's analogies are (often freshly minted) coinages. The lively shifting out of conventional narrative into sometimes oblique and challenging analogies therefore has a didactic purpose: constantly to reawaken the reader to the awareness that while meaning may be expressed in story form, and through analogical imagery, these stories and analogies are ultimately interchangeable and disposable, as meaning transcends language.

4. The Voice of Speech and Dialogue of Characters

Rumi often tells his stories through speeches and dialogues by and between his characters. It might be thought that these are just part of normal story-telling. In the *Masnavi*, however, they have a voice of their own: a poetic device that makes it impossible for the reader to see when the speech of a character begins and ends, and when the poet moves out of story-tellin into other voices. Medieval Persian used no punctuation to indicate speech, and there are no other 'stage directions' to make it clear who is speaking. Having put the reader's imaginatior into the harness of a story, the voice of speech and dialogue enables the poet to wear and discard multiple personas and, by literary sleight of hand, to leave readers feeling that they are still *in* the story when in fact Rumi has moved into a directly moralistic or spiritually didactic voice.

5. The Moral Reflection

Rumi's voice of moral reflection is in some respects similar to his original authorial voice an is identifiable by its prescriptive and proscriptive statements, and by frequent use of the imperative mood. The sentiments are often inspired by quotations from the Quran and from hadith stories of events in the life of the prophet Mohammed. There is a logical, thematic connection between the sequence of verses in this voice: it is 'linear' and 'horizontal' in that is addressed to the human 'you', the reader, in second-person relation to the poet.

6. The Spiritual Discourse

The spiritual discourse of the *Masnavi* is, like the analogical voice, one in which Rumi excels. It almost always follows on from a moral reflection, as a sudden development from it. However, it is addressed not to humankind but to God on a 'vertical' trajectory of flight fror this limited world to absorption in the ecstatic state beyond. This voice is characterized by fast-flowing imaginative associations, as if each couplet is no sooner pronounced than it is expendable and replaced. Indeed each couplet has the quality of an impassioned cry or plea rather than a statement, as if the poet is drowning or soaring to express the passion he feels for the divine Beloved. A good example of how Rumi leads the reader from the simplicity of a story and the sobriety of moral reflection to experience the passion of ecstatic flight with him is the famous story of the merchant and the parrot.[19]

7. Hiatus

The 'voice' of hiatus signals the limit of spiritual discourse and the return to silence.[20] Hiatus questions the wisdom of continuing to speak, having reached the very brink of incoherence because of the unattainability, or inexpressability, of what the poet is trying to evoke. Sometimes Rumi says that he cannot say more because of the reader's incapacity to understand, as in l. 18 of the very opening of the poem:

> *The raw can't grasp the state of one who's cooked,*

so this discussion must be brief – farewell!

Accordingly, the *Masnavi* should have ended here, 25,000 couplets early, but this is a rhetorical device. Sometimes Rumi wishes for silence to reign, as being more expressive of 'inner' truths than sensual words (a sentiment that is articulated most eloquently in Book I b the wicked vizier in ll. 569–81). Sometimes Rumi says that he does not *wish* to say more (because beyond this, things should remain hidden), as in ll. 142–3 at the conclusion of the passage quoted below; sometimes he is *forbidden* by higher powers to say more. As Fatemeh Keshavarz explains, at times in the lyric poems divine possessiveness 'forbids the poetic discourse from publishing the secrets of love'; she refers to instances when Rumi is told, or even physically forced, to desist from uttering more.[21] Sometimes he desists of his own free will as his own mind has become distracted or tired (as at the end of Book I). However, afte the hiatus, there is usually a return to story-telling. In the passage quoted below, we see the shadow of silence approaching in two pairs of couplets – ll. 112–13 and 130–31 – until it finally reigns at ll. 142–3.

Rumi's writing style is dynamic and polyphonic. As the *Masnavi* unfolds, there is an increase in the speed and subtlety with which the different voices change and overlap, and passages are formed in combinations of several voices. Once the modern reader has become familiar with the seven principal ones, he or she will be able to keep up with the faster-flowing, mor complex voicings of the poem as it develops. In order to illustrate the whole schema in action, and the process of complication by the combining of voices, I shall quote one of the most dynamic passages from Book I (ll. 102–43) and annotate each couplet with reference t voices 1–7, or to a combination of voices using the symbol /. The two speakers in the dialogue are identified as 4a and 4b:

The King Takes the Physician to the Sick Girl to See Her Condition

He told the tale of illness and the patient, 2
then seated him beside the sickly girl.
He saw her pallor, checked her pulse and urine, 2
and listened to her symptoms and her functions.
He said, 'None of the drugs they have prescribed 4
will build her up – they have destroyed her health.

105 *They did not understand her inner state:* 4
I seek God's refuge from what they contrive.'
He saw the pain and opened up the secret 2
but did not tell the king and kept it hidden.
Her pain was not from black or yellow bile: 2
the scent of wood is sent up in its smoke. 3
He saw in her distress her broken heart: 2
her body healthy but her heart in chains.

The sign of being in love's an aching heart; 5

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there is no suffering like the suffering heart.

110 *The lover's suffering's like no other suffering:* 6
love is the astrolabe of God's own mysteries.
No matter whether love is of this world 6
or of the next, it steals us to that world.
Whatever words I say to explain this love, 6/7
when I arrive at Love, I am ashamed.
Though language gives a clear account of love, 6
yet love beyond all language is the clearer.
The pen had gone at breakneck speed in writing, 6/3
but when it came to love it split in two.

115 *The explaining mind lies like an ass in mud,* 6
for love alone explains love and the lover.
The sun alone is proof of all things solar: 6
if you need proof, do not avert your face.
Although the shadow gives a hint of it, 6
the sun bestows the light of life at all times.
The shadow brings you sleep like bedtime stories, 6/3
and when the sun comes up, 'the moon is cloven.'
There's nothing like this sun in all the world, 6
the spiritual Sun's eternal – never setting.

120 *Although the outward sun may be unique,* 6
still you can contemplate another like it.
And yet the sun from which the aether comes 6
has no external or internal likeness.
How can imagining contain His essence, 6
and likeness of Him come into conception?
When news came of the face of Shamsoddin 6/1
the sun in highest heaven hung its head.
It's necessary, since his name is with us, 6/1
to give some hint of his munificence.

125 *Upon this breath my soul has scorched my skirt* 6/1
and caught the perfume of the shirt of Joseph,
Saying, 'After all our years of comradeship, 6/4a
explain one of the states of ecstasy,
So that the mind and sight and spirit grow 6/4a
a hundredfold, and heaven and earth may laugh.'
'Do not impose on me, for I am dead: 6/4b
my senses dulled, I cannot take things in.

For all that's said by one not yet awake, 6/4b/5

in modesty or boasting, is illicit.

130 What can I say – no vein of mine is sober – 6/4b/7
to explain that Friend who is beyond a friend?
But now, leave off until some other time 6/4b/7
talk of this parting and this bleeding heart.'
He said, 'Give me to eat, for I am hungry, 6/4a
and quick! Time is indeed a cutting sword.
The Sufi is the son of Time, my friend; 6/4a
tomorrow's no condition of the Way.
You, are you not indeed yourself a Sufi? 6/4a
Nothing will come from such procrastination.'

135 I told him, 'Better to conceal God's mysteries 6/4b
and pay attention to what's in the tale!
It is to be preferred that lovers' secrets 6/4b
are spoken of in tales of other folk.'
He said, 'Tell it unveiled, the naked truth! 6/4a
The declaration's better than the secret.
Hold back the veil and speak the naked truth! 6/4a
I don't lie down with clothes on with my lover.' 6/4a/3
I said, 'If He were naked in your sight 6/4b
you'd not survive, nor would your breast nor waist.

140 Ask for your wish, but ask with moderation: 6/4b
a blade of straw cannot support a mountain. 6/4b/3
The Sun, by which this world's illuminated, 6/4b/3
will burn the lot if it comes any closer!
Don't seek out trials and griefs and shedding blood! 6/4b/7
From now on, no more talk of Shams of Tabriz!'
There is no end to this. Begin again, 7/1
and go recite the ending of this tale.

In this passage, all seven voices are used successively and in combination, in a drama that unfolds and becomes so intense that it must be silenced. When T. S. Eliot distinguished between 'dramatic blank verse and blank verse employed for epical, philosophical, meditative and idyllic purposes', he was making a point about how 'the dependence of verse upon speech is much more direct in dramatic poetry than in any other.'[22] In this sense, Rumi *Masnavi* is written in dramatic verse and resembles a Shakespeare play since, as Eliot puts it, 'in dramatic verse the poet is speaking in one character after another… It remains the language not of one person, but of a world of persons.'[23] The *Masnavi* is dramatic, conversational, written in the spoken registers of the day and multivocal/polyphonic, so it sounds like a company of actors or musicians performing on a stage. It represents a culminating stage in Rumi's development as a poet.

Shamsoddin taught Rumi that intellectual knowledge and aesthetic subtlety are not the goals of the Sufi path. The task of the Sufi teacher is to give instruction in how to be free from psychological imprisonment in the self-regarding, carnal self. Rumi takes his readers to the edges of their imaginations, and thence to silence. Metaphor and imagery in the stories, analogies, speeches and discourses are the means of transport from this world in a flight of spiritual ecstasy to the world of *ma'na* – 'inner meaning' or 'spirit' – and back again. Most importantly, Rumi encourages his readers that the *nafs* is to be recognized for what it is, and abandoned.

THE MUSIC AND METRE OF THE MASNAVI

It is thought that Rumi was a great musician and a master of tonality, melody, rhythm and rhyme: the *Masnavi* has a unique musicality, not least because of the metre, or rhythm of the couplet. The constant metre is 'the apocopated six-fold running metre' in which each verse (*bayt* lit. 'house') is a couplet (*masnavi*) of two eleven-syllable half-lines, or hemistiches (*mesrāʿ* lit. 'leaf of a folding door'), each of which breaks up into three rhythmic units ('feet' in classical Western prosody). Hence each couplet has the following pattern of long and short syllables (where the symbol U denotes a short and – denotes a long syllable, reading from left to right):

– U – – / – U – – / – U –   – U – – / – U – – / – U –

In Western musical notation, the rhythm of the basic unit of the *Masnavi*, namely – U – –, is *crotchet, quaver, crotchet, crotchet*, which is an off-beat, syncopated pattern, one quaver short of a regular, walking rhythm, i.e. 4/4. In Persian music, the *masnavi* metre is felt to have a seductive lilt to it when slow, and to be enrapturing when fast, inspiring bodily movement such as dance. The ethnomusicologist Regula Burckhardt Qureshi, writing about the *masnavi* metre in Sufi music, says that this rhythm is considered a hard metre, the most mystical one for *qawwali* (religious singing), in South Asian Islamic culture.[24] It seems not to pause, tending to move the listener out of the rhythms of ordinary consciousness: it is believed to induce ecstasy in performer and listener alike, similar to the complex rhythms set up in performances of the Sufi rite of *zekr-e allāh* (collective remembrance of God).

RHYME AND RHYTHM IN THE TRANSLATION

In this translation I have tried to translate the couplets into pairs of blank (unrhymed) iambic pentameters, i.e. a metre of five feet of light and heavy stress U –:

U – / U – / U – / U – / U – / (U)   U – / U – / U – / U – / U – / (U)

The half-line may have an eleventh (light) syllable, i.e. the couplet can have twenty, twenty-one, or twenty-two syllables. As this metre is most familiar to the English ear from Shakespeare's tragedies, I found it to be the best equivalent of the *ramal* (running) metre of

the Persian *Masnavi*. As an accentualstress metre, it lacks the syncopation of the quantitative syllabic Persian metre, but it has the advantages of being approximately the same syllabic length as the Persian and of being the proven metre of English dramatic verse.

John Milton thought rhyme to be ‘the Invention of a barbarous Age, to set off wretched matter and lame Meeter’ and thus freed his *Paradise Lost* from what he called ‘the troubleson and modern bondage of Riming’.[25] In the past, many translators of Persian poetry have been tempted to have a go at rhyming their translations because classical Persian poetry always uses rhyme. However, rhyme – namely the use of parallel sound patterns between lines, or parts of lines, of poetry – varies greatly in its nature and function from language to language In the English heroic couplet[26] rhyme usually occurs only in the last one or two syllables. Th rhyme scheme of the *Masnavi* is commonly perceived by Western translators to consist primarily in the end-rhyme of each *mesrā*‘ of the couplet, in the scheme *a a, b b, c c*… In fact Rumi’s use of rhyme is a great deal more complex than this. He frequently uses rhyme between the two hemistiches at the beginning, middle and end. Rumi rhymes anything from one to all eleven syllables of each *mesrā*‘, or he rhymes groups of two, three, four and more syllables. In Persian this kind of rhyming is a much more flexible and powerful poetic device than the end-rhyme of the English heroic couplet. Rumi uses simple and complex sequences t intensify the power of what he is saying; some of his more definitive and sonorous utterance are given the treatment of ‘total rhyme’, i.e. where there is a parallelism of form and meaning through use of sound patterns. One example (l. 603) can illustrate this (and also ho the translator has to resort to devices other than rhyme in order to convey the intensity of the point – here by chiasmus):

mā chu nāyim o navā dar mā ze tust
mā chu kuhim o sadā dar mā ze tust

We’re like the reed-flute and our sound is from You;
our echoes are from You – we are like mountains.

This was reason enough *not* to rhyme the English translation, but there are two equally important considerations for the translator: first, translating with end-rhymes invariably requires a sacrifice of meaning where the Persian sense must be distorted into a rhyming English word, and hence all too often mistranslated; second, for a modern audience, English end-rhyming generally infantilizes (the nursery rhyme) or ridicules (as in eighteenth-century satirical rhyming) except in the hands of an accomplished poet. These effects are quite the opposite of what Rumi’s use of rhyme achieves.

NOTES

1. Franklin D. Lewis, *Rumi Past and Present East and West: The Life, Teachings and Poetry Jalal al-Din Rumi* (Oxford: One-world, 2000).
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 47ff.
3. The text is edited by Mohammed ‘Ali Movahhed (*Maqālāt-e Shams-e-Tabrizi* (Tehran:

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