

JALALUDDIN RUMI, THE SON OF THE SUN
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In the course of my life, I fell in love with two main figures in Islamic culture, namely Al-Ghazzali and Rumi. My journey from Al-Ghazzali to Rumi has its own story, its own logic, which I'm going to tell. But, first, I have to say a few words about Rumi himself, his place in history and his life, and then I will plunge into the main teachings of this great figure of Islamic mysticism and of mysticism as a whole.

I should perhaps add as a footnote here that Iranians do not know Rumi by this name. Rumi is a title that was given to him by Westerners. We Iranians know him as Jalaluddin, which is his original title. His name was Muhammad, of course, but his title is Jalaluddin, which means the splendour, or the glory, of faith. He is known as Rumi in the West because, at the age of 12, he migrated to and settled in what we know as Turkey today. At the time, "Turkey" constituted a part of the Eastern Roman Empire. So, he became known as "Rumi", meaning "from Rome" or "Roman". Generally, when we speak about him in Persian, we use the word "mowlana", which means "our master", "our leader". Although this is a title that can be used for anyone, it has taken on a very specific usage for Iranians and refers specifically to Rumi and no one but Rumi.

Mowlana was born in a city known as Balkh. But Balkh no longer exists; it ceased to exist many centuries ago. In its place now stands a city called Mazar-e Sharif, which is in modern-day Afghanistan.

Now in order to put him in context, it may be useful to give a very brief account of Islamic history, the backdrop to Rumi's life and work, and to explain why he became such a prominent figure in Islamic mysticism and why his work is so important and significant. When the Prophet Muhammad died, in 632 A.D., he left behind a vast heritage. This heritage needed protection. We can, therefore, call the period immediately after the Prophet's demise the age or the era of fighters, because Islam needed fighters to defend and safeguard it. This was the first, the earliest stage of the history of Islam. At that time, fighters were

Lecture held at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin on June 8, 2005.

particularly praised, admired and needed, because there were enemies everywhere and they were on the offensive. After this period, we had the age of the jurist in Islamic history, the age of the legalist if you like.

Since, after the Prophet's demise, Arabs, Muslims conquered virtually the whole area that we now know as the Middle East and then of course they extended their empire even beyond the Middle East. So this empire needed law. This is why, roughly after a century, we had the era of legalism, or the age of law. The great jurists of Islam, and the four historic Islamic schools of jurisprudence, all appeared during this period, roughly from the 8th to the 10th century A.D. I don't want to introduce unfamiliar terms and names; therefore I skip a lot here. Suffice it to say that the following "hadith" attributed to the Prophet embodies the spirit of the age very clearly, namely: "the ink of the pen of scholars is superior to the blood of martyrs".

And then, after this period of legalism, we had the age of elegance, because by then you had a very well-settled, established empire, with its own fighters, its own jurists and so on. What it needed at this point was science, philosophy, mysticism, etc. So from the 10th century on, in what historians describe as the Golden Age of Islamic history, we have our great philosophers and scholars. You are familiar with the name of Ibn Sina (or Avicenna as he is known in the West), with Al-Ghazzali, with Abubakr Razi, Biruni, Al-Farabi, etc. All of these eminent figures actually appeared in this period. Now, Rumi belongs to the 13th century. He is one of the great luminaries of this Golden Age of Islamic history. He belongs to the ranks of the great mystics in Islamic history and arguably the history of mysticism in general.

Mysticism actually had its own roots. It was a kind of response or reaction to the omnipotence of God. It was the same for the Europeans. According to some historians, modernity was in part a kind of reaction or response to the idea of God's omnipotence: humanism and secularism were all ways for man to assert himself in the face of God or perhaps against God. Nominalism was something that went alongside the omnipotence of God.

In Islamic history, the debate over the omnipotence of God began very early, roughly in the 8th and 9th centuries. There were two different schools of Islamic theology, as you know, the Asharite and the Mutazilite, and they actually argued over the idea of whether God was bound by causality or not; whether God was bound by morality or not; or whether he was over and above all such things and could even sometimes undermine causality, could sometimes undermine morality, and so on. It was a very big debate, a very productive one, and sometimes, of course, very destructive. So it attracted everybody, I mean faithful

Muslims and philosophers. It generated theology, it generated philosophy, and it created disputes and conflicts between philosophers and traditionalists, on the one hand, and theologians and mystics, on the other.

The response of Muslims to this issue, the important issue of the omnipotence of God, was twofold. On the one hand, we had theologians who tried to solve the problem on rational grounds. And, here, as I said, we had the divide between the theological schools, mainly, the Asharites and Mutazilites. But then there was another response to this important idea of the omnipotence of God and that was the practical response. The practical response effectively led to what we now call mysticism or Sufism, which is Islamic mysticism.

Now, in the face of the omnipotence of God, you will have two different responses. I call them the mysticism of fear and the mysticism of love. What will you do before a God who has control over everything, who is all-powerful, who is not even restricted by morality, because morality cannot limit Him in what He does and in what He wishes and wills. Even causality cannot amount to anything before Him. He can undermine and challenge even causality; even laws of nature – there are no boundaries for Him. So what is the individual going to do before such a God? What stance can he actually take? One of the positions that you might take is something that is, of course, unthinkable to a faithful person, and that is disbelief. I mean, you might abandon this idea of God and you might stop worshipping an omnipotent God, who might never have any mercy on you and might never pay any attention to you. But that was unthinkable at the time. We were still not in modern times, when it became possible to entertain such an idea of leaving or abandoning God. So, two other responses emerged that were conceivable within the framework of faith, namely the mysticism of fear and the mysticism of love. And, of course, we witnessed these two responses consecutively. One was perhaps the logical continuation of the other.

First to emerge was the mysticism of fear. I think that this was even more in keeping with Islamic teachings, because if you read the Quran, you will find much more fear there than love. In fact, the response of a believer to God is more likely to be fear than love. I'm not saying that love is altogether absent, but it is pale, it is of a lesser order of magnitude than the fear, which is of a much, much higher order. So, we had the mysticism of fear. Al-Ghazzali is the most prominent representative of the mysticism of fear. He has a four-volume book, "The Revivification of Religious Sciences", very influential in the history of Islamic culture, is imbued with the fear of God. He wrote this book about Islamic mysticism, and only one chapter is devoted to the issue of love and the rest is about fear. I have read the whole book, not just once, but several times. It's so appealing, so fascinating. But

when you read the book and when you finish it and close it, you cannot help but feel that the whole world is pressing tight against you and that someone is looking at you so fiercely that you have to – your only possible response is just to shiver and to be afraid. This is really what he tries to convey and he is very successful at conveying it. This is the mysticism of fear. It is mysticism because it bases itself mainly on an experience. It is an experience of fear. It gives you a meaning in life. You know what you have to do. You know where you stand in the universe as a whole. God, according to this mysticism, manifests Himself as a very fierce entity to you and totally fills you with fear and awe before Him. This was the first response to the omnipotence of God. Then we needed two centuries to pass in order to arrive at Jalaluddin Rumi, who would produce and establish another kind of mysticism, which we call the mysticism of love.

Rumi's book, *Masnavi*, can quite confidently be called a book of love, because he quite confidently and quite consciously made the contrast between fear and love. And he based his school of mysticism on the idea of love.

Now, who is Jalaluddin Rumi? He was born in 1207 in Balkh, as I said. A city that was possibly located somewhere around the border between modern-day Afghanistan and Tajikistan. It was somehow like Königsberg, Kant's birthplace, which is now in Russia. But you call Kant a German. So, Rumi was somehow like this. We call him an Iranian, and there is a dispute, a meaningless dispute actually, over him. Iranians call him an Iranian, Turks call him a Turk, Afghans think that he was an Afghan, and Tajiks think of him as a Tajik. And I think that he was all of these things because he was over and above all such things. And he was such a big fish, which you cannot confine in such small pools. Read some of his poems in Persian, in the original language, and you will get some idea of the rhyme, of the meter and of the beauty of what he produces: "What shall I do? Because I don't know whether I am a Muslim or a Jew or a Zoroastrian or a Christian? My place is placeless, my trace is traceless ..." and so on and so forth. It is a real pity to confine such a figure, who gives such a description of his position, to Iran or Afghanistan or Turkey. I was in Turkey some years ago, giving a talk at Rumi's tomb. I saw Turkish scholars there who were, unfortunately, trying to persuade the audience that Rumi was a Turk. This runs counter to all the teachings of Rumi, who, as I said, didn't think in terms of such categories at all. Nevertheless this much must be said at least: His language is Persian. Most of what he produced is in Persian. He has very few poems in Turkish, very few in Arabic. And he even has some in Greek. But, by training, he was bilingual, Arabic and Persian. This was

actually the custom of the age. He knew both of them very well and, if you read his poetry, you will find that he was fluent in both languages.

When Rumi was 12, the invasion of Genghis Khan and the Mongols was imminent. In fact, a year later they invaded Iran and the whole region. So his family decided to migrate. At the time, many people, many Iranian scholars fled Iran to other countries, to safer lands. So he travelled first to Mecca and then to Konya, which lies in modern-day Turkey. At the time, Konya was a Muslim city. It was not under the Byzantine Empire. But, as you know, Turkey as a whole was still not an Islamic country and Sultan Mehmet, who would topple the Byzantine Empire two centuries later, had not yet been born. So Rumi settled in Konya with his family. He became a very bright scholar in the field of religious studies and, in particular, he was a very good orator and also a good mufti, I mean a jurist. Till the age of 38, he was not a poet and, as far as we know, he hadn't written any poems. He was a good scholar and worshipper, "sitting on his prayer mat solemnly" as he would describe himself later, had his own madrassa and his own students. But, at the age of 38, a very exceptional event took place in his life. It changed his whole personality and made him the Rumi that we know nowadays. This was his encounter with a very mysterious figure called Shams. "Shams" means "the sun", hence the title of my talk; this Shamsuddin Muhammad was the person who transformed Rumi from a mystic of fear into a mystic of love.

We do not know much about Shams. In fact, we know him through Rumi. If he had not met Rumi and if he hadn't had such an influence on him, he would have never been known to anyone, because he was a wandering dervish, going from one place to another. And his encounter, his meeting with Rumi was such a mysterious one that very many myths and stories have evolved and been spun around this mysterious meeting, because the change in Rumi was so radical, so abrupt and so sudden that it took everybody by surprise. Still, we don't know what happened to Jalaluddin. He was, after all, a scholar, a very learned man. He was not a person who could easily be captured; easily fall under someone's spell. So, we do not know what happened to him, but he changed dramatically. For two months, the two men actually lived together and then Shams left Konya, and Rumi became an altogether different man. In fact, from then on, he abandoned his teaching and his school. And, from then on, we actually find the newly born Rumi as a poet, as a mystic of love. And this is the Rumi that we know today. After this, he lived for 30 more years and produced the captivating poetry, which is his main heritage, and I am going to talk about here.

I had the good fortune, and I am grateful to God for this, of preparing a definitive edition of his book, the *Masnavi*, in six volumes, which is perhaps the handbook of mysticism. If you want to know Islamic mysticism, there are two books to learn. One is in Arabic and the other, in Persian. In Persian, you have to read the *Masnavi*. In Arabic, there is a gentleman called Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi, who lived roughly at the same time as Rumi. He was born in Spain and then migrated to Syria; his seminal book is called *Meccan Revelations*. It is the foundation of, let us say, theoretical mysticism in Islam. Incidentally, Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi's book is not about the mysticism of love. That's why I called Rumi the pioneer and the prophet of the mysticism of love.

Now, what is the *Masnavi*? *Masnavi* is not a proper name; it is a form of poetry. It consists of couplets. And Rumi's *Masnavi* has more than 25,000 verses, 25,000 couplets. But that's not all, because Rumi has another book, which is called *Divan* or *Divan-e Shams*, a collection of his odes and sonnets. This contains some 35,000 verses. So altogether, he is the author of about 60,000 poems in Persian. As I said, a very small part of it is in Arabic, in Turkish and in Greek. But these are really negligible. The bulk of it is in Persian, in a very good Persian, and occasionally in an Afghan dialect. When people wrote down his poems, he was very keen to insert some diacritical marks as a guide to pronunciation. And the pronunciation is not exactly Iranian; it is somehow Afghan. Anyone who knows the difference knows what I mean by this. It's a dialect of Persian. Rumi did not write any poems himself, in the literal sense of writing, that is. He just produced them. There were people at the sessions where he first recited them and they noted them down. And as far as we know, he never edited what he read out, because he was like a flood, just flowing on. He never went back, he never edited what he said. So, all we have is just directly the words as he spoke them, what poured out of him. He would start the evening like this: He would sit down with his friends, maybe 10 or 12 of them. And then, without any preparation, without having any plan beforehand, he would just start reciting new poetry. And his audience would just note it down. There are points in his poetry when he says, "Now it is dawn." From let us say 8 or 9 p.m., the words would just pour out of him until the dawn. And his friends transcribed what they heard. This was not all that there was. Sometimes, when he was pacing and walking in the marketplace, in the street, in the mosque, wherever, something came to him; it was just an inspiration. And then he would begin dancing and singing things. And the people around him knew that it was so precious that they had to write it down. And that was how the poems were created.

All of Rumi's poems were actually fresh experiences to him. He was not a man to sit in a room and close the door and take a pen, think, then write and then cross something out and then edit and so on and so forth, finally producing a finished book of poetry. That was not his way. The whole book, the warm, raw experience of the words coming to his lips through his mind – he is like a man swimming when he plunges into the depths of the sea. You never know from where he might next emerge. So you cannot follow him, because the steps are not, strictly speaking, logical. He moves with free associations; that is the formula, which is the guide. Free association: something comes to his mind and he says it, either because of the free association of concepts or because of the association of the events that are occurring at the session. Somebody comes in, somebody says "salaam", somebody goes out, and so on. And this would trigger another experience and then another experience, etc. Therefore, following him is sometimes difficult, especially for beginners, because he moves from one experience into another and then into another, and so on. Sometimes, it even becomes repetitious, because he is never aware of what he has said before. Sometimes he repeats himself. Still, these repetitions are very precious. Because he has so much within him, is so rich. And despite all of this, it is interesting what title he gives himself: "Silence". He uses this word. He doesn't use the word "Jalaluddin". He doesn't use the word "Muhammad", no: "Silence". Because he says that he has so much to say that what he has already said is like silence. So, if he were to say all that he has within him, he would fill the whole world. This is how the *Masnawi* was produced and created. It unfolds in front of us. It is not conventional by any means.

Saying: ever since I was parted from the reed-bed, my lament hath caused man and woman to moan.

Now listen to this reed-flute's deep lament
About the heartache being apart has meant:
'Since from the reed-bed they uprooted me
My song's expressed each human's agony,
A breast which separation's split in two
Is what I seek, to share this pain with you:
When kept from their true origin, all yearn
For union on the day they can return.
Amongst the crowd, alone I mourn my fate,
With good and bad I've learnt to integrate,

That we were friends each one was satisfied
 But none sought out my secrets from inside;
 My deepest secret's in this song I wail
 But eyes and ears can't penetrate the veil:
 Body and soul are joined to form one whole
 But no one is allowed to see the soul.¹
 It's fire not just hot air the reed-flute's cry,
 If you don't have this fire then you should die!
 Love's fire is what makes every reed-flute pine,
 Love's fervour thus lends potency to wine;
 The reed consoles those forced to be apart,
 Its notes will lift the veil upon your heart,
 Where's antidote or poison like its song,
 Or confidant, or one who's pined so long?
 This reed relates a tortuous path ahead,
 Recalls the love with which Majnun's heart bled:
 The few who hear the truths the reed has sung
 Have lost their wits so they can speak this tongue.
 The day is wasted if it's spent in grief,
 Consumed by burning aches without relief –
 Good times have long passed, but we couldn't care
 When you're with us, our friend beyond compare!
 While ordinary men on drops can thrive
 A fish needs oceans daily to survive:
 The way the ripe must feel the raw can't tell,
 My speech must be concise, and so farewell!¹

This is a very beautiful beginning to the work. It is not conventional, in the sense that it doesn't start with the name of God or the name of the Prophet and the like as usual. I mean, when you look at books like this by mystics, by philosophers, by theologians, they usually start by naming God and praising Him, and then, of course, going on to the

¹ "Exordium: the Song of the Reed." In *Rumi: The Masnavi*, Book one, translated by Jawid Mojaddedi, 4–5. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004 (Oxford World Classics).

Prophet and so on, and then describing what they want to do and so on, in a logical way. This is not how Rumi proceeds. He says, "Listen to this reed flute!" And, of course, you are all listening to this reed flute, which is being played in the background here. This is a very important symbol as Rumi uses it, and I would like to dwell a little bit on this. This part of the masterpiece has even been called *Nay Nameh*, meaning "The Book of the Flute", because it talks about the reed flute. You know, in Persian, we call the flute a "nay". "Nay" is the word for the reed flute, the traditional instrument. And Rumi was fond of it. At all his sessions, two instruments were always present: this flute and then the Rabab, another instrument that he liked.

Now, the "nay" or reed flute is of course a very telling symbol. I do not recall anyone using it before Rumi to convey this mystical message, which I am going to explain to you. As I said, "nay" in Persian means "reed flute". But it also had another meaning. The other meaning was negation. "Nay" corresponds exactly to "no" in English, in the Latin languages. Now, Rumi actually plays on the word: on the one hand, everybody is like a reed in the hands and on the lips of God, as if we are mere instruments. He has to play us, play with us, and blow into us. You know, this business of the blowing is something very familiar in Abrahamic religions. You have in Christianity the blowing into Mary in order for Jesus to be conceived. In Islam, too, God's breath is the soul and the spirit that we have. Now, Rumi has taken this symbolism of the reed, likening us to those pieces of reed, with God blowing into us. But then He blows in order to produce some very beautiful sounds. But this reed, "nay" that is, is also a symbol of negation. People are nothing before and beside God. Or perhaps they reach perfection when they self-annihilate, when they negate themselves. So everybody is, at one and the same time, an instrument and an embodiment of negation. And this negation has something to do with love, as we shall see.

That was the opening piece of the *Masnavi* – and, incidentally, reports have it that Rumi may have had this bit written down before his students proposed to him that he should produce a book that could become a handbook for mystics; so he had produced this earlier and then, of course, after this, he started producing the other parts of the *Masnavi*. Now, what is his style? His style, as I said, is this: He sits down without any plan in mind and he just recites words and goes on and on. And his style is the style of storytelling. The book has about 250 stories, long and short, all full of wisdom, and sometimes very colloquial in language and in style. One funny point is that Rumi did not abstain from using rude words. For a man of his calibre, this seems very strange. And it is even stranger that nobody removed these words from his book. There are about 150 verses in the *Masnavi* that contain

words of this kind. And, interestingly, Nicholson, the British translator of the whole of the *Masnavi*, actually did not translate these verses into English, but rather into Latin. It was Nicholson's Victorian morality perhaps. But the rude words have been there in Persian and people have produced them and reproduced them and read them all the time. Great religious scholars have written commentaries on the book without ever suggesting that these words should be removed. This is a unique phenomenon in the whole history of Persian literature; I would say in the whole history of Islamic literature. And it is only Rumi's great, powerful, influential personality, which casts its shadow over all these things, that allows people to ignore it, to forgive it perhaps; otherwise, this could not happen at all.

By the way, since I mentioned this business of translation, let me add in brackets that Germans were pioneers in translating Rumi into the Latin languages. It was not English scholars, the Americans, or the French, no, it was the Germans. The first person was an Austrian diplomat, Hammer-Purgstall, who translated parts of Rumi. And then, of course, Friedrich Rückert translated Rumi. Among the German philosophers, the one who knew Rumi through this translation and mentioned him and used his material was Hegel, who, when he talks about the unity of existence and the relationship between the absolute one and the particulars, being dissatisfied with Hindu philosophy, he says: for this, we have to go back to the Mohammedans, to use his terminology, and to "the excellent Rumi". But, of course, later on, you have many other writers, even Meinecke, as a poet, and of course the last one, Annemarie Schimmel. I have to mention her here, first of all because she was my personal friend. I met her first in Bonn and then in Harvard. Secondly, because she has done a very great service to Persian literature; she has written so many books on Islamic Sufism and especially on Islamic-Iranian mysticism. She was fond of Rumi, knew Rumi very, very well. If my testimony is worth anything, I would like to testify here that her writings on Rumi are excellent, analytical and full of new insights.

And then moving on from Germans, there were the Americans: first Emerson got some ideas and spread them in America, and of course nowadays there is the gentleman called Coleman Barks. He has popularised Rumi. Rumi is a bestseller now in America, as you know, and his book *Essential Rumi* is a very good book, because he has Americanised Rumi, so to speak. Rumi in Nicholson's translation is so dull, so unexciting. To be fair, it's very faithful to the original. I have even seen some Iranian scholars of Rumi who sometimes look it up for guidance on some of the verses in order to see what is the opinion expressed there, what is Nicholson's translation. So careful, so precise, and so faithful to the original, but unfortunately it doesn't convey the splendour, the beauty of the poem. The

Coleman Barks one is very appealing in this respect, because he is a poet himself and he knows how to render it, how to put it in English.

So, now, what are Rumi's teachings? There are two main teachings in Rumi. First of all, there is love. He is the prophet of love. Love as a universal concept, love of God, love of beauty. And he bases himself on the idea of love, especially on his discovery – I call it a discovery – that the omnipotent God is a loveable being. According to the mysticism of fear, as I mentioned, God is not to be loved, cannot be loved, because He is so omnipotent, so frightening, so fierce, that you cannot love Him. You have only to fear Him. The discovery of the mysticism of love was that God is so beautiful that you can love Him. He is a bigger self. This is how Rumi explains it. He says that God is WE ourselves, but is a bigger self. Therefore, in negating yourself into Him, into a bigger self, you re-attain yourself, re-find yourself through Him. Yes, this is the idea of love according to Rumi. In order to be a good lover, you have to be able to negate yourself into a bigger self. So the idea of negation and love, as I said, go hand in hand. But in order to be a lover, you have to be modest. No arrogant person can become a lover. This is another teaching of Rumi. Therefore, there are two teachings here: love and modesty.

This is a very beautiful story: A lover knocked on the door of the beloved, and the beloved asked from inside the house, "Who is there?" He said, "I." The beloved told him, "Go away, there is no place for you here." So he went, and he burned in separation and came back and knocked again. "Who are you?" This time, he replied, "You are at the door. There is no I anymore." Then the beloved said, "Okay. Now you can come in." The whole thing is a very beautiful story that shows you the unity, the unification of the lover and the beloved. And of course he goes on to explain the consequences and the implications of this unity between the lover and the beloved.

A man knocked on his lover's door one day,
'Who is it?' he heard his beloved say.
He said, 'It's me.' She answered, 'Leave at once!
There isn't room for such raw arrogance.'
Raw meat's cooked just by separation's flame –
What else can cure hypocrisy's deep shame?
He wandered off in pain as his heart burnt,
In exile from the one for whom he yearned,
Matured before then going back once more

And walking to and fro outside her door.
 He tapped the door, now suffering nerves inside,
 Not to let slip a wrong word how he tried!
 His sweetheart then responded, asking who
 Was at the door – he said, ‘None, love, but you.’
 ‘Now you are I, please enter in this place
 Because for two I’s here there isn’t space.’
 A needle can’t accommodate split thread,
 To enter thread must have a single head.
 To fit a needle thread is suitable,
 For camels, needle eyes are much too small!
 A camel’s being must be cut to size
 With scissors of religious exercise –
 For that to work God’s hand is necessary –
 His ‘Be!’ solves each impossibility.
 With His hand everything is possible –
 Fear of Him tames each stubborn animal;
 He doesn’t heal just lepers and the blind
 But he can raise the dead too you will find,
 And non-existents, more dead than the dead,
 Towards existence by His will are led.
 Recite, ‘He works on something new each day’
 And never think He idles time away.²

Now, let us look at a poem about arrogance: the story of an encounter between a grammarian and a boatman. Again a very, very beautiful story. The grammarian is the symbol of an arrogant person. The grammarian can be anybody, can be a chemist, a philosopher, a physicist, whoever: somebody who knows a lot and is proud that he knows a lot, who is very arrogant about his learning. Now, the grammarian was on the boat and he very proudly and arrogantly asked the boatman, “Do you know grammar?” (Or, do you know chemistry?) The boatman replied, “No, I know nothing of that.” He said, “Okay, half of your life is wasted.” And the boatman said nothing and kept silent. And suddenly, there

² “The Lion, the Wolf, and the Fox.” In *Rumi: The Masnavi*, *ibid.*, 174–175.

was turbulence and a typhoon and so on. Now it was the turn of the boatman to ask the grammarian: “Do you know swimming?” The grammarian said, “No.” The boatman replied, “Now, the whole of your life is going to be destroyed.” Rumi plays on the words here of course – because “grammar” in Arabic is “nahw”, and “annihilation” is “mahw”, and he says, rather than learning “nahw”, you have to learn “mahw”. Instead of learning a lot, you have to unlearn what you have learned and try to learn modesty. A lover is a modest person. An arrogant egoist person can never love either God or his neighbour; no. Modesty is the first precondition of the ability to love.

By the way, this reminds me of a book by Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving*. There he mentions Rumi and he shows that he is familiar with Rumi’s teachings. Fromm says that loving is an art, is something that you have to learn. And he borrows from Rumi the idea that one of the main preconditions of love, of being able to love somebody, is modesty. This is not something for the arrogant, for people who are proud of themselves, of their beauty, of their ability, of their learning, and so on.

Once a grammarian stepped into a boat
And turned towards the oarsman just to gloat:
‘Have you learned any grammar?’ He said, ‘No.’
‘Then half your life’s been wasted just to row!’
Although this made the oarsman burn with pain
From answering back he opted to refrain.
Wind steered the boat towards a whirlpool there
The oarsman shouted to him, once aware,
‘Have you learned how to swim and keep afloat?’
‘I’ve never learned, skilled captain of my boat.’
‘Grammarian, your whole life has been in vain:
We’re sinking fast – what good now is your brain!’
Not grammar but effacement’s needed here –
If self-effaced dive in and have no fear!
While corpses can float on a stormy sea,
How can the living find security?
When you have died to human qualities
You’ll be borne by the sea of mysteries.
He who called others ‘donkey’ pays the price –

He's now left skidding like an ass on ice!
Even if you're the scholar of the age,
Observe the passing of this world, deep sage!
We've silenced the grammarian in narration
To teach the grammar of annihilation,
The law of law and grammar that's most pure
You'll find through being less, of this be sure.³

Now, let me come to another story. This is a translation by Nicholson. This is not a poetical, lyrical translation, rather a dull one as I mentioned, and it also contains some of those Latin rude bits! Roughly, the story is this: there was a woman who had an illicit lover and she wanted to have an affair with him, to sleep with him. So she played a trick. Her husband was sitting there. The woman climbed a tree and from the top of the tree, she attacked her husband, saying, "Who is that man laying over you, man? You homosexual, you bastard!" The rude words that were not translated. And the man kept explaining, "There is nobody with me here, I am alone." But she was insistent that "somebody is sleeping with you, man, over there." Now, the man understood and said, "Okay, this is because of the tree. Since you are sitting on the tree, maybe the perspective, the place you are in, tells you that here I am sleeping with someone else." Now the woman came down and the man climbed the tree. Now the woman embraced her lover. And the man was shouting at her: "Who is that man sleeping with you?" "No, no, no, this is because of the tree, it is not that!" Now, the tree is the tree of egoism, it is the tree of selfishness. If you climb that tree, the facts will not appear to you as they are. You have to come down from the tree. This is the lesson of the story. It's so wonderful.

That woman desired to embrace her paramour in the presence of her foolish husband.

Therefore the woman said to her husband, 'O fortunate one, I will climb the tree to gather fruit.'

As soon as she had climbed the tree, the woman burst into tears when from the top she looked in the direction of her husband.

Marito dixit, 'O cinaede improbe, quis est ille paedicator qui super te incumbit?'

³ "The Poor Bedouin and his Wife." In *Rumi: The Masnavi*, *ibid.*, 188.

Tu sub eo velut femina quietus es: O homo tu vero catamitus evasisti.'

'Nay,' said the husband: 'one would think thy head is turned (thou hast lost thy wits); at any rate, there is nobody here on the plain except me.'

Uxor rem repetivit. 'Eho,' inquit, 'iste pileatus quis est super tergo tuo incumbens?' 'Hark, wife,' he replied, 'come down from the tree, for thy head is turned and thou hast become very dotish.'

When she came down, her husband went up: (then) the woman drew her paramour into her arms.

Maritus dixit, 'O scortum, iste quis est qui velut simia super te venit?'

'Nay,' said the wife, 'there is no one here but me. Hark, thy head is turned: don't talk nonsense.'

He repeated the charge against his wife. 'This,' said the wife, 'is from the pear-tree. From the top of the pear-tree I was seeing just as falsely as you, O cuckold.

Hark, come down, that you may see there is nothing: all this illusion is caused by a pear-tree.'

Jesting is teaching: listen to it in earnest, do not thou be in pawn to (taken up with) its appearance of jest.

To jesters every earnest matter is a jest; to the wise (all) jests are earnest.

Lazy folk seek the pear-tree, hut 'tis a good (long) way to *that* pear-tree.

Descend from the pear-tree on which at present thou hast become giddy-eyed and giddy-faced.

This (pear-tree) is the primal egoism and self-existence wherein the eye is awry and squinting.

When thou comest down from this pear-tree, thy thoughts and eyes and words will no more be awry.

Thou wilt see that this (pear-tree) has become a tree of fortune, its boughs (reaching) to the Seventh Heaven.

When thou comest down and partest from it, God in His mercy will cause it to be transformed.

On account of this humility shown by thee in coming down, God will bestow on thine eye true vision.

If true vision were easy and facile, how should Mustafá (Mohammed) have desired it from the Lord?⁴

I will now come to one of the *ghazals* from the *Divan*, the one that is supposedly the last ode, the last *ghazal*, that Rumi composed. And this was just hours before his death. “Go lay your head on your pillow. Let me be alone.” He is addressing his son here, at the end. And of course one can see again the shadow of the omnipotent God here, “the monarch of the handsome is under no duty to be true”, the monarch of the handsome is God. He has no duty to be true. He has no duty to have mercy upon anybody. Again, at the time of his death, as if he was facing the same God, again the idea of omnipotence is coming to him. But nevertheless, the whole sonnet very beautifully shows Rumi’s experience, the courageous encounter with death, because one of the main characteristics of Rumi was that he was a lover of death throughout his life. And he always thought that death is a gate to a better life.

Go lay your head on your pillow, let me be alone
leave me laid waste to wander the night, afflicted
Me and the waves of grief, alone, dusk to dawn
Come be kind, if you will; go and be cruel, if you want.
Leave me, run, fast, or you’ll fall likewise in affliction
Choose the more wholesome path and leave harm’s way
Me and the puddle of my eyes, huddled in sorrow’s corner
turning mill after mill after mill with my tears

Impudent, brazen, he murders me, stony his heart
none dare demand money to atone my blood
The monarch of handsome faces is under no duty to be true
Sallow-faced lover, be patient, be true
It is a pain cured only by dying
I cannot tell you how to treat this pain

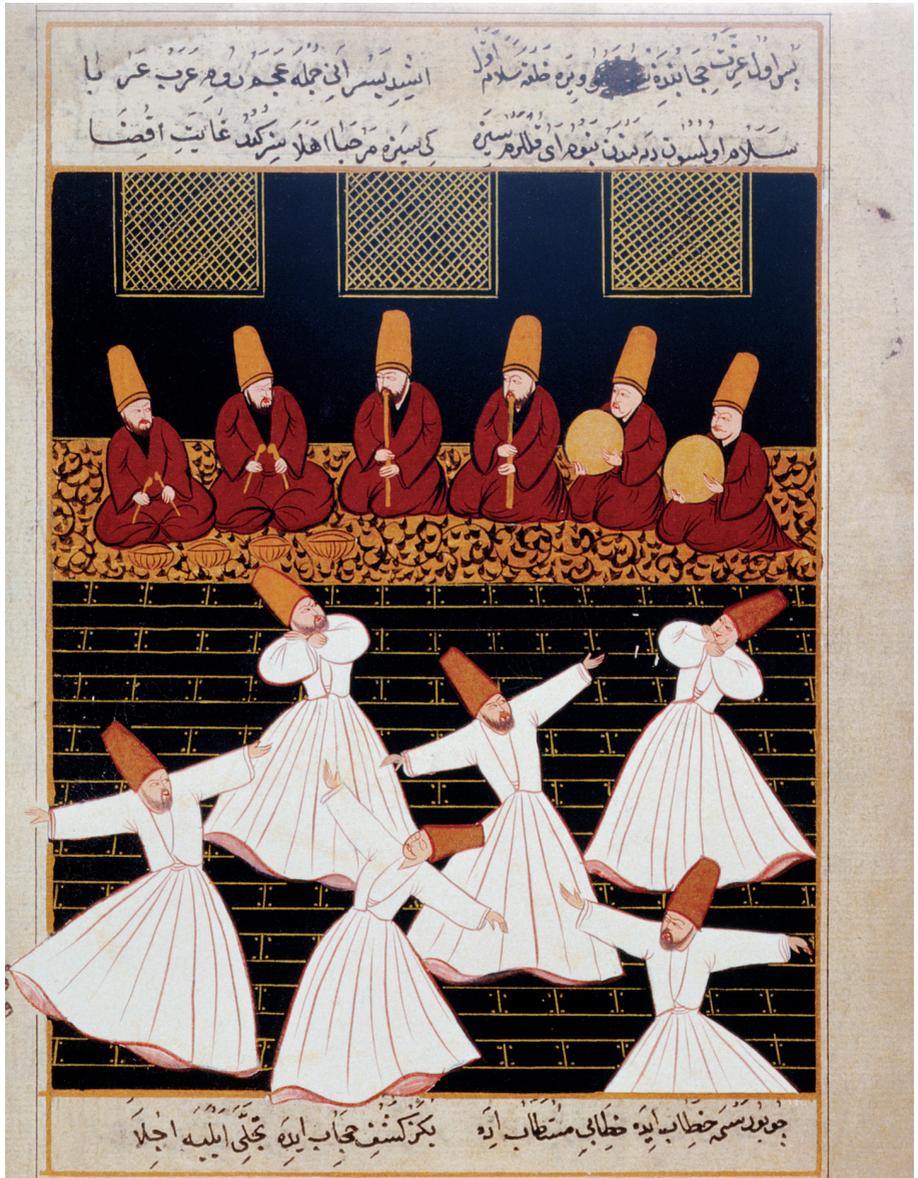
⁴ “The Pear-Tree of Illusion.” In *The Mathnawi of Jalaluddin Rumi*, trans. by Reynold A. Nicholson, vol. iv. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1930, 467–468.

Last night I dreamt I saw an old man in the street of love
he beckoned me with his hand, 'Come this way, to me'

If a dragon blocks the path, love works like an emerald
The glittering of the emerald will repulse the dragon.⁵

At last I would like to present a picture of the dances that the followers of Rumi perform every year at his tomb. The dancers perform a very beautiful dance, look at their hands. They are actually getting something from the heavens and then giving it to the people who are in need of it on the earth. I hope that this will be the happy ending of what I was going to tell you, getting something from Rumi's heavens and pouring on you earth-bound folk.

⁵ Franklin D. Lewis. *Rumi: Past and Present, East and West*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2000, 348.



Whirling dervishes, from a 16th-century miniature painting.
 Topkapi Sarayi Library, Istanbul. © Corbis Corporation.