

The Operation of Divine Love

An Interview with Alan Williams by David Hornsby, January 2020

What would you say is the profound and universal message of the *Masnavi*?

I've been thinking about this for a very long time. The main message cannot easily be put into intellectual terms, and that is the problem, and why Rumi addresses the reader through poetry: poetry immediately addresses a different level of the mind from the literal, intellectual mind. The message is intended for the inner being or higher mind. And, to hear this message, one has to be very patient and attentive. The message is about the realisation of union with our true reality – but that is a conditional promise of a result, if you like, because we have to give up everything in order to know union, and very few of us are able or prepared to do that.

Rumi went to great pains to explain what he meant in the best possible way, through *ordinary* language, through stories and fables, but also by direct *conversation* with his readers, guiding them along the way. This is really what I talk about in my Introduction to the first book, that he has a way of leading the reader into a receptive state so that it is easier to understand what he has to say: to contemplate subtle realities that are much subtler than what we are normally used to reading in ordinary literature, even in other Persian, Sufi poetry.

One of the people commenting on your books, Ahmad Karimi Hakkak, has said that they are “intensely relevant not just to our time, but to all humanity through the millennia”. Yet you're saying that it's actually quite a difficult message?

Well, you asked about the *ultimate* message. The ultimate message *is* a difficult message, and it may *also* be a universal message: how to find liberation or unification. But of course, there are all sorts of other messages that are certainly relevant and important for today.

The core message is the one that I'd like to explore a bit more. What is this union that you're talking about?

The union that he is talking about, that I try to translate, is the realisation of *haqq*. There's no better word for it than *haqq*, but we can translate it as 'Truth' or 'God'. That is the biggest one to crack,

and there's no easy way of simplifying it in intellectual terms. But this is what he does, and this is why it's difficult to *begin* with this question, because it really needs a lot of mental preparation. It is possible to talk about it, and Rumi himself sometimes seems to fall into ecstatic states while speaking: he is sharing his insight and opening himself to the reader and practising meaning. And this is why the book is known as the *Masnavi-ye Ma'navi*, the 'Masnavi of Spirit' or 'Masnavi of Meaning'. He does it right in front of us on the page and embodies it in his words, so that the reader can begin to participate in and share in the world of Being, which is where he wants to take us. I hope that is a profound enough message for you; he wants *to take us to*, not merely *define in words*, that world of ultimate meaning, which is way beyond any mental conception. Even to talk about it as 'Being' is to degrade it.

We are talking about and translating something we do not fully understand, because we are not sitting here speaking from the realised mind. So translating such things is something one has to do with humility. And we must learn to read it with humility. I think ultimately his example has a subtle effect on the reader. It has a kind of osmotic effect on the reader. I referred to it once in a talk at Chisholme as what J.G. Bennett and Gurdjieff called a 'legominism', because I do think that the act of reading such a text as the *Masnavi* has a cathartic and uplifting effect on the reader. It does this because it is working at a subtle level. I believe that some other poetry has a similar wonderful effect (Milton's *Paradise Lost*, for example), but it is clearly true of the *Masnavi*.

Can you say something about Rumi, when and where he lived, his life? Who were the spiritual influences on him and his family?

Yes. He was born in 1207 in an area east of modern Iran, in greater Khorāsān (which means 'the Land of the Sun'), the geographical area of ancient Bactria around Balkh in a region which is now shared by Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. It is actually not located in the territory of modern Iran, but all these countries, including Iran and Turkey, now claim him as their one of their national poets. As is well known, his family had to migrate from there when he was still a child, travelling 2000 miles westward and settling eventually in Konya.

Why did they have to migrate?

This is actually disputed by scholars, but it is suggested that Rumi's father, Bahaoddin Valad, may have been in dispute with his employers there and wished to leave. But the most likely underlying reason is the mass Mongol invasion that was on the horizon and which destroyed Samarkand a few

years after they left. This is the invasion that came right into Asia Minor (modern Turkey), and in fact, many folk from Khorasan had gone before them, having migrated and settled there in Anatolia, driven by fear of annihilation. When Rumi began the *Masnavi* in the early 1260s the Abbasid caliphate had just been overthrown by the Mongol armies of Hulāgu Khān who sacked Baghdad in 1258. Rumi probably did not know if his civilisation would survive, as we do not these days.

These were very traumatic times for him and his family, and I think the signs are there in the *Masnavi* of a person who has been traumatised. There is the theme of deep spiritual nostalgia in the *Masnavi*, which may have arisen from his own experience of being uprooted with his family from his homeland and transported to a completely new environment in which he was a stranger. He was a young man when he grew up in Konya, not a child anymore, but his whole life is a catalogue of losses: loss of his homeland, loss of his mother and a succession of teachers, loss of his first wife Gowhar Khātun, not to mention the sudden disappearance of Shamsoddin. All this was transformed and transmuted by Rumi in the *Masnavi* into a spiritual nostalgia that was cathartic and led him to the spiritual understanding for which he is famous.

What traditions influenced him in the environment in which he grew up? Was it the Zoroastrian tradition, the Islamic tradition, the Christian tradition? Konya seems to have been in a certain way at the heart of all of these.

This is true, Konya is one of the ancient centres of civilisation, and was in his day too. Certainly we have two sets of influences. The influence of his background in Khorasan: he was profoundly influenced by the Sufi traditions of Khorasan; this is different from those of the Middle East, different from that of the traditions in which he was educated and studied in Anatolia and Mesopotamia. These two traditions come together in Rumi, and it is not surprising that you can find both – namely, the quietest tradition associated with Junayd and the more ecstatic tradition associated with Abu Yazid of Bistām.

One influence people forget is that of his own father and his early teachers. (We tend to jump forward to the influence, profound influence, of Shamsoddin and his later teachers.) But his own father and his first teachers as a young man when he was learning the Quran, and later studying the sciences of Islam, rooted him in his faith and in the spirituality of his father's tradition of piety and homiletics. And then, of course, we have this later development into a Sufi of the more ecstatic kind with Shamsoddin. I have tried in my Introduction to say something more about the nature of Shamsoddin's influence on Rumi – both called one another *Mowlāna* 'Master, Lord' out of respect.

I shan't say anything about the influence of Zoroastrianism here but I am aware of it as I read the language of his poetry. The Persian language he spoke is immensely ancient and rich in pre-Islamic nuances. To take one instance alone: for Rumi fire is not just the Muslim fire of punishment, but it is also the fire of love.

Turning to the *Masnavi*, this huge work that you have been so engaged with. What is it? How long is it? It's been translated before, most notably by Reynold A. Nicholson and that is a work which is still very widely read and admired. What has driven you to do this massive work to produce a new version?

This is a very long work of thousands of couplets. It has grown slightly over the centuries, as copyists and editors added to it. But there has been some wonderful scholarship done, by Nicholson and more recently by Iranian scholars, such as Mohammad Estelami and most recently Mohammad Ali Movahhed, to find the earliest manuscripts. In these there are some 25,500 couplets that are attributable directly to Rumi.

He began this work about ten years before he died, in the early 1260s. He died in 1273. He had already written thousands of *ghazals*, *robā'is* ('quatrains') and other short poems that make up the *Kulliyāt*, 'collected poems' popularly known as the *Divān of Shams of Tabriz*. But the *Masnavi* is quite a different sort of work. Its name *Masnavi* in modern Persian, or in Arabic transcription *Mathnawi*, means simply 'couplet' or 'double verse' from the Arabic numeral *ithna*, 'two'. So it is named after a poetic *form*, it's not a thematic name: this was the genre of Sufi didactic, instructional works, as opposed to their panegyric paeans, *ghazals*, *rubāyāt*, and similar short lyrical verses. But, as I've said, Rumi's *masnavi* became known as the *Masnavi-ye Ma'navi*, '*Masnavi* of Meaning' and was distinguished from all other *masnavis*, of which it is the most massive, the paragon and most important example. The most famous one before Rumi's was the *Manteqottayr*, 'The Conference of the Birds', of Attar. A *masnavi* poem was long but also highly memorable and repeatable because of its narrative story element (such as in Attar's journey of the 30 birds to find the Simorgh): also, the metre is eminently sustainable over very long passages. Rumi's *Masnavi* of 25,500 couplets is equivalent to 51,000 lines of English poetry – around five times the length of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and four times Dante's *Commedia Divina*. Rumi regarded the whole thing as a work that had a life of its own, as revealed to him by God. This wasn't a way of promoting himself to prophetic status; rather he saw himself as a medium for its transmission. He passed away very soon after he got to the end of the sixth book.

Yes, it was translated by Nicholson in the 1920s and 30s, and nobody can replace that: I'm certainly not trying to replace Nicholson. Nicholson did a scholarly job of editing all the oldest texts/manuscripts he could manage to get his hands on. And interestingly, he was into the third book before he found the oldest manuscript, that is the Konya 'G' manuscript from which I have worked – the one on display in the Mevlana Musesi in Konya. He revised his translations after seeing that manuscript, knowing it to be the oldest. Nicholson was the first westerner to edit and translate all six books, but as a Cambridge scholar in the 1920s he regarded editing and commenting – scholarly commentary – as rather more important than doing a 'crib-sheet' for students of Persian. But he published a translation and it's a very good one, excellent because it's so literal, but it's not really for modern public consumption because it just flies way over everyone's head. Unless you're really dedicated to ploughing through it, it makes tough reading and it's difficult to get the juice out of it.

Nicholson's translation was done into a deliberately archaic style of English in imitation of the King James Version of the Bible (which was itself archaic even in its own day). Anyone who tries to read the *Masnavi* in Nicholson's English alone would not be aware of the richness of the original Persian poetry. I had to learn Persian to discover this for myself when I was a student in Oxford nearly 50 years ago. In translating it now I have tried to do a double job, which is to be as literal as possible, but also to anchor it onto a comparable metre in English, which is the iambic pentameter of blank verse. The *ramal* metre, the mystical metre of Rumi's *Masnavi*, means 'running', but it is quite complex to the English ear. It is a driving, syncopated rhythm. I can demonstrate what it sounds like in Persian on a recording. The metrical pattern is summarised in the Arabic phrase *fā'ilātun fā'ilun*, that is 11 syllables, 22 in the full couplet, i.e. (reading from left to right) where '–' is a long syllable and 'U' is short:

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

It is quite different from the metre pentameter I've used in my translation, which visually looks more pedestrian:

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

But in fact in English, because of the great wealth of literature there is from Shakespeare onwards, to Milton and Wordsworth, blank verse has been developed and enriched by centuries of use. And the English ear is totally accustomed to it, so it's an ideal form for translation, especially for dramatic narrative and dialogue – pentameter is second nature to me, as English speech is naturally iambic.

So what I'm trying to do in my translation is to liberate the poetry from a prosaic prison, something similar in a way to what Coleman Barks has said he was trying to do with the old translations in front of him. Now I've gone back to the Persian verse, and am trying to be as faithful as I can to the text. It's very difficult to find the right words in the right order, because Persian poetry is so much more concise – lacking definite and indefinite articles, pronouns and all the auxiliary verbs of English – just to name a few. This is why it is taking me so darned long to do.

How long has it taken?

So far I've been working on it for decades. I published the first book in 2006 and I started three years before that. I'm now well over halfway through, but it will take me another few years to finish all six books. I'm quite prepared to do that because something happened to me halfway through my academic career, which I will mention in a minute.

People in this field sometimes say, 'Well, these kinds of things really cannot be translated and therefore you're interpreting them'. Some people say, 'I'm rendering it into English', and you've taken the approach of having both the Persian text and the English text side by side.

Yes, I asked an Iranian academic, Professor Mohammad Estelami, if I could incorporate his edition of the G Manuscript into my books, and he was delighted. It's not actually side by side, as we couldn't achieve that logistically. What happens is that these books begin at both ends and the English starts at the English beginning and the Persian at the other. They work towards one another and the texts are symmetrical rather than parallel, meeting in the middle, with notes and appendices in between. I had tried to find a solution to the problem for months until I came up this. I couldn't do it the way I'd hoped, with the Persian on the right and the English on the left, because the scripts and texts work in opposite directions; also, a Persian poem is laid out in a completely different way from an English one, running across the page – the two hemistichs of each couplet run in parallel, from right to left: we couldn't typeset the English translation in that way, with the couplets running across the page – it wouldn't look right. We managed to get a maximum of English 34 lines on a page = 17 couplets. So there were logistical problems, but the solution was to keep the texts separate and bind in a simple ribbon for the reader.

To have the text there with the translation, is, you might say, a risky thing to do, for Iranian and western academics/mother-tongue speakers to have the original there in front of them, and

Williams's efforts to boot. So it's a risk. But I'm taking that risk for the sake of transparent translation, and not hiding anything. Translation *is* interpretation: the very word is a Latin form of the Greek 'metaphor'. But then, according to the very philosophy of Rumi and the Sufis, everything is in a sense translation, a version of a version, and of course philosophically, even we are versions, as, *ayān al-thābita* 'manifestations', in form. So I'm taking this very literally – that, yes, one is always only approximating the original form of the poem – but I'm hoping that by looking more at the spiritual form of the text, by looking at both the micro-structure and macro-structure of the poem, one gets more than just the mere words. In short, translating the words is always an act of interpretation, but then when you look at what he is actually doing *dynamically*, you can identify that 'something else', a bigger voice is being heard. And that is the mind of Rumi. I'm trying to translate not just words, but what I hear as the mind of Rumi as he is working through the text.

You've been for many years Professor of Iranian Studies and Comparative Religion at the University of Manchester. Can you say something about your background and how you came to be equipped to listen to Rumi's voice in this way? How did you first come to engage with Rumi and what kind of preparation do you think has been necessary for you to undertake this task and to be able to do it?

I didn't come from an academic background at all: my parents were working people – Welsh and Scots, in fact, so no English blood in me – and as a Celt I have something of a poetic and musical bent. I also spent a lot of my youth in church. My father was quite devout, and so I know the music and texts of the Christian tradition well, having spent years in church choirs, and my childhood and adolescence listening to liturgy and sermons. I got a scholarship to a big public school in London, where my whole world was transformed overnight. I didn't board, but it was a six-day week in a very academic, totally male environment, very old school as you might say – in fact it was still pretty Victorian. Corporal punishment was beginning to be phased out; the teaching was excellent and I was learning Latin from 11 and Greek from 13. I was thinking of doing a degree in English literature, but I ended up doing Classics.

I lost my Christian faith along the way (religious instruction there beat religion out of me), but oddly, in the 1960s, Dulwich College had a quite strong bohemian culture. Maybe to get away from school, I became interested in meditation and lots of things like that from a pretty early age, like 15 or 16. I remember reading Ouspensky and Gurdjieff on a Christian retreat that I was taken on by the church – I was devouring *Tertium Organum* on the quiet. I fell in with Pir Vilayat Khan, went to meditation retreats, met Reshad Feild, went to Sion Chapel, and ended up at Swyre Farm, because it

opened the same year I went up to Oxford. I read Classics at The Queen's College and I lasted about six months doing that because I was bored, already having read the texts at school. So I told my tutor I wanted to study Persian and Arabic. This was actually a time-honoured route for orientalist; Nicholson was a classical scholar before he studied Persian and Arabic.

I had been studying Ibn al-ʿArabi and reading translations of Mowlana in my first year at Oxford, while still doing Classics, with Stuart and Rahima Kenner at the Oxford Beshara Centre. I'd attended the first Beshara Ibn al-ʿArabi course in Radnorshire, and had been practising *zikr* and had my first experience of states of being (*hāl*). At the same time I had no doubt about my studies, I had no idea of what I wanted to do with them.. I remember someone you know asking me to translate the *Neynāme* – the beginning of the *Masnavi* – when I was in my first year of Persian and I gave it to him. I've lost it. You've lost it. I wouldn't like to see it. But I had a terrific time learning Persian and Arabic. I was in a new world, totally different from what I had grown up with, but I had the preparation of languages under my belt already as I had also learnt German and French.

On the whole I was taught rather poorly at Oxford, I hate to say it, because in those days you didn't get taught so much as you learnt. Almost in spite of your lecturers. Robin (R.C.) Zaehner, for example gave a dry-as-dust series of lectures on the early Sufis of Baghdad and Khorasan. I was rebelling against the world-weary Orientalist attitudes I came across, which were so different from the much more enlightened approach of scholars like Nicholson, who was by that time already my virtual mentor – his books were on my shelves (in fact his were almost the only books on Sufism in Blackwells in those days). They were my *vade mecum*. I was fortunate to be taught by one or two very inspiring scholars: one, the wonderful Mohammad Reza Shafi'i Kadkani who has since become one of Iran's most celebrated contemporary poets (some of whose poems I've translated with Pari Azarm Motamedi, and met 40 years on); another was the late Patricia Crone, who delivered her radical revisionist study of the origins of Islam, which, with Michael Cook, she soon after published as the notorious *Hagarism The Making of the Islamic World*.

Then in 1975 I went to Iran, which was smoldering in the last embers of the Shah's regime. That had a powerful effect because I visited Zoroastrian sites, much encouraged by my lifelong friend, Khojeste Mistree, who was also a fellow student at Oxford at that time. Remarkably, when I came back from Iran, I attended the Ratanbai Katrak lectures, which in Michaelmas 1975 were given by the doyenne of Zoroastrian studies, Professor Mary Boyce, who happened to be talking about those exact villages near Yazd I had just visited, which she had visited 10 years previously (published by OUP in 1977 as *A Persian stronghold of Zoroastrianism*). After her final lecture I mustered up the

courage to ask her to take me on to do a PhD at SOAS, London in the following September, and happily she agreed. Professor R.C. Zaehner had just passed away, and there was only the young postgraduate, the late Julian Baldick, teaching about Sufism (he of the subsequent *Mystical Islam*, IB Tauris, 1989). So, alas I gave up on Oxford (for which one is never forgiven) – and, for the time being on Persian and Arabic and the idea of a doctorate on Sufism – and for several years I studied Pahlavi, Avestan and other pre-Islamic Iranian languages, and Zoroastrian religion and literature at SOAS in London. I also studied the social anthropology of religion at Kings College London.

In that period, I also went along to Kabbalah classes with Warren Kenton and Glynn Davies, and got myself thrown out of a Gurdjieff movements class for ‘not taking it seriously’. I was also drawn to the forest tradition of Buddhism, to Samathā-Vipassanā and Zen meditation, and to Joanna, who is the mother of our three children. She and I married in 1979, and fortunately I got a job teaching Religious Studies at the University of Sussex (as there were no jobs in Iranian Studies at the time). I finished and published the doctorate and continued working in pre-Islamic Iranian Studies for two more decades, having moved up to the University of Manchester in 1985, after Mrs Thatcher’s Education Minister closed Religious Studies at Sussex and at several other universities too.

It wasn’t until 2000 that I was invited to do a paperback of the *Masnavi* for Penguin Classics. They wanted me to do an anthology, and I said no – I want to translate the whole fish not fillet it. But they already had Coleman Barks, and didn’t want any more than one book. After that one was published in 2006 I went back to writing about what I knew best, Zoroastrianism, and I carried on publishing on that subject, but I was always looking for a publisher to publish the whole of the *Masnavi* and it took me several years to find one, when Iradj Bagherzade of IB Tauris kindly agreed to take the whole project on. That was around the time I was invited up to Chisholme to give the first of several talks on one of the long Beshara courses. I walked into the Mead Hall there, looked up and saw old friends from Swyre Farm and Sherborne House, looking like their parents after 30 years. Sadly, Bulent had passed in the intervening years, so I never got to meet him again so long after he had given me the Sufi name ‘Alim.

Bulent Rauf very much liked the story of the Turkish poet, Yunus Emre, who went to see Rumi and asked him about his teaching, and Rumi gave him a long explanation as to what his work was about. Listening carefully, Yunus Emre said, ‘If I understand you rightly, basically what you are saying is “I wrapped myself in flesh and blood and appeared as Yunus”.’ That seems to encapsulate, or to be the starting point rather, of the *Masnavi* that he put his finger

on in these few words. The *Masnavi* is full of many extended and often apparently quite rambling stories.

Yes, that is what it *looks* like. The German scholar Hellmut Ritter once wrote:

Rumi's peculiar looseness in the association of ideas, which almost resembles a flight of thought. The relationship between the tale and the accompanying moral is also very curious. The point in view is sometimes neither allegory nor moralizing fable, but that the tales should simply arouse interest in the reader for what is to come, though the degree of coherence is but slight. One expects to gather the moral from the essential point of the story. But this is by no means always the case.

Now I think that is a harsh and a wrong reading of the *Masnavi* and it is so because we are *misled* by what appears to be the predominant feature of the text, namely story. But I've done some analysis of the text of the second book and found that the 65 stories and anecdotes occupy only 1,650 of the total 3,836 verses (44%), and the other 2,146 verses (56%) are taken up by nearly 100 different discourses, reflections and commentaries. Many people will begin reading the *Masnavi* mostly for the pleasure of the stories, but they will find that there is much more going on besides. Publishers (e.g. Penguin) might prefer an anthology, and that is why A.J. Arberry did his 1961 and 1963 books (*More Tales from the Mathnawi* (in prose translation) – hence it is fixed in the popular mind that the *Masnavi* is all about the 'tales'. I'm hoping that my work might help correct that impression.

I've described the experience of reading the *Masnavi* as 'open heart surgery', qualified with the subtitle 'The Operation of Divine Love in the *Masnavi*', and this is now published. I got my come-uppance for this just a few weeks ago, when I received a formal invitation from the Dean of the University of Jordan asking me to referee an internal promotion to a Chair in their Cardiology Department! They assumed that having written on 'open heart surgery' that I must be a cardiologist. In my paper I described story narrative as the anaesthetic by which the divine surgeon puts the intellect to sleep: in this state of reverie or relaxation the *Masnavi* acts as a heart-lung machine to keep the reader alive. The diseased heart is then replaced by a new heart purified of selfhood, and the story is thus the means by which this is taking place. (I never got an acknowledgement from Jordan when I explained that my kind of cardiology was metaphorical.)

I developed this idea in my Introduction to Book 1, talking about the poetic structure of the *Masnavi*, about how it is a process of transformation, at a macro level, and why the reader comes out of it feeling different than when he or she began: it has an osmotic effect. Rumi layers his writing – beginning a story, and then moving into telling another story within that story, and another one within that. What is happening here has the effect of disorienting the reader, creating a sense of dislocation from the self, and from the mind, so the intellect is befuddled. This nesting, or layering, is one feature of the structure of his composition, and within it he introduces many voices, moving between the high and low registers of Rumi’s range – just like the flute or *ney*: by blowing harder when the *neyzen* (*ney*-player), brings the notes up an octave. This is what Rumi does, as he changes the octave and escalates the tone, switching the reader/listener into another mode.

This is a perfect analogy with the famous story in the *Masnavi* of the blind men and the elephant...

Funny you should say that, though it’s not quite what I meant. But if you asked me what my favourite story is, I might say that it is that one. It’s a remarkable story because it’s very old and widespread across folklore internationally. But in all the versions I’ve ever found of it, it’s called ‘the story of the blind men and the elephant’, as you call it. Rumi’s story is called ‘The disagreement about the nature and shape of the elephant’, and it is about an elephant in a darkened room – no one is blind, they cannot see because the room is dark. I wrote an article about blindness and the *Masnavi* because – in the metaphor of light, which is powerful in Sufism in general – the blind usually get a bad deal and are treated as disabled. And I was inspired by a blind theologian I was fortunate enough to meet shortly before he died, John Hull who had written a great book I strongly recommend, *Touching the Rock: An Experience of Blindness* (SPCK 2013).

Can we turn now to the famous opening couplets of the *Masnavi*, which have been referred to as “the most captivating ever written, even in comparison to Shakespeare, and fill the heart of the reader with sadness”. Yet people seem to love being filled with this sadness, because these words are famous and have resonated across countries and peoples all over the world. Today the Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk is famed for his *uzun*, his nostalgia. What’s going on here? And how did you find working with this voice of Rumi which has such huge strength and sadness and possibility in it? Can you comment on the opening lines?

One reflects on what is the most beautiful music; or, what music do I find most beautiful in the Western canon? For me, almost always, there is a degree of melancholy in it. Of course, thoroughly

joyful music is uplifting, Beethoven's 'Ode to Joy' in his Ninth Symphony is uplifting and powerful. But there is a different kind of beauty in melancholy music. In Bach, Vivaldi, Mozart, or in so many composers, including Beethoven, we find the melancholic intrinsically touching. Melancholy music makes us sad yet we are uplifted (at least I am – in my youth a friend once dubbed me 'Alancholy Melon').

Such melancholy is characteristic of so much of Persian poetry and music. It *sounds* melancholic, but of course what it's doing is pulling the heart, pulling the heart upwards – to reach beyond sensuality to something truly tender. An example on a grand scale is the opening few minutes of Bach's *St John Passion* which, with its discordances in the woodwind is tremendously evocative of the Passion Bach is about to unfold musically. Rumi's *Neynāme*, 'The Song of the Reed' has that character, because it is an intimate tugging at our heart strings; it is Rumi's invitation to come into the *Masnavi* – and there are so many passages like this in it. I do find that particular passage very moving, but it doesn't overshadow everything else. I cannot compare it to Shakespeare: Rumi was not a professional poet like Shakespeare, though he was indeed a consummate one – he was essentially a spiritual teacher who found in the long form of the *Masnavi* a perfect platform for his teaching.

The *Neynāme* is not a story, it is what I've called the voice of the Sheikh, that initial voice of the beginning of the *Masnavi*: he has just given us his Preface to the first book. In each of the books there is a Preface in Persian or Arabic prose, and they are delivered from a sublime place, as he is letting the revelation come into him. (Instead of a thematic title for each book, I've chosen some idea or phrase from his Prefaces.) After he has finished the first Preface, he is still in a very uplifted state, and I call that the voice of the Sheikh. It is just 35 verses, and leads straight into the long first story. But that story lasts only a few lines before it is interrupted and transformed into something else. What catalyzes that shift is that he introduces an analogy (Ar. *mathal*, P. *masal*, 'example'): these are a kind of electric pulse, almost like an injection of intellect into his story, which challenge the reader, by introducing an anecdote or analogy to illustrate or exemplify what he's just said.

Professor James Morris mentions on the edition of your book that Rumi's work is "the mirror of our innermost state" and it seems that his work is much more challenging, or that you are delivering a much more challenging version, than is implied by his super-popularity these days as a poet, particularly in the United States?

That is right. What Coleman Barks did was to ‘normalise’ or to de-islamicise the *Masnavi* and the *ghazals*, to take the Islam out of it. And I can see why he wanted to do that.

By Islam, do you mean the religion or the spiritual tradition?

No, he’s not really trying to take the spirituality out, although it has changed because in taking the Islamic aspect out of it he has turned it into a more psychological than spiritual wisdom.

It’s a bit like mindfulness and Buddhism?

Exactly so. The *Masnavi* has been compared to the Quran. It is said to be ‘the Quran in the heroic Persian language’ (*masnavi-ye ma’navi qor’ān be zabān-e pahlavi*), a saying attributed to the 15th-century Persian poet Jami, probably apocryphally. No poet with any sense of shame would compare himself or any other poet to the Quran. It’s *verboten*, so it is ‘attributed’ to Jami.

It’s an extraordinary thing to do, considering the Quran is constantly assuring us that it’s not poetry.

That is right. This is an interesting point because Rumi’s *Masnavi* is *full* of the Quran, and yet it is all in poetry – in fact he even *translates* verses of the Quran, and also examples of *ḥadith*, into the *ramal* metre so that they fit. If you remember a couple of years ago, I gave the Beshara Lecture in London in which I explained how Quranic it is. It’s not a very popular thing to say at the moment, as there is an unfortunate ambivalence, even antipathy, towards Islam in Europe and North America among non-Muslims. I don’t make a big thing of it, but I would see it as similar to pretending that Chaucer, Dante, Shakespeare or Milton were not writing from within a Christian milieu. There is no doubt that the *Masnavi* is constantly echoing the Quran and *hadith*. Some ‘Rumiphiles’ deny this, and on air, I have had ‘discussions’ on national radio with people who refuse to accept either the Islamic or Sufi nature of the *Masnavi* and view it as purely universal. They are entitled to that view, but I am to mine too.

Even universality can be conditioned or qualified by a level of understanding. Rumi is often thought of as being in a Christic saintly tradition in himself, developing the universality of that tradition in an Islamic context. Have you found this to be so?

Certainly Jesus is, after Mohammed and Moses, the most mentioned of all the prophets in the *Masnavi*, and he is spoken of with great feeling, as is Mary his mother also. And you could say that there is a very strong Christian theme in the *Masnavi* that God is Love, that Love is God. But Rumi is very anti-trinitarian and rejects the doctrine of incarnation. I also talked about that two years ago. But this is part of his appeal to the West, I would say, that he talks about the embodiment or presence, or possibility of presence, of the divine in the human heart. This is a very powerful teaching – that the human heart is capable of such depth, of such transcendent strength. He doesn't use the word *insan al-kāmil* in the *Masnavi*, but does talk about the 'man of God', and alludes to what Christian mystical theologians call *theōsis* – 'becoming God', 'divinification'. He doesn't go as far as some mystics, such as Meister Eckhart or Ibn al-'Arabi, to talk about the absolute Godhead and elevate the concept of Perfect Man to a virtual doctrine, although this is debatable. What I would say on this subject is that for Rumi there is a universal presence in form, and that without form there would literally be nothing, and no point. There is also the idea that all is meaning, or spirit; but without form there would be no manifestation, and without this there is no purpose in creation.

And also in the Yunus Emre saying of 'wrapping oneself in flesh and blood'?

Yes indeed.

How has your own relationship with Rumi changed over the many years of doing this very intimate work?

Well, you know, it's played havoc with my social life, because I've had to become a hermit and a bit of a monomaniac. If you don't use it every day you lose it. There has to be focus and discipline in doing it. And I've not found that easy, and very solitary at times. I've had great fortune in the last few years of having a lot of research sponsorship from the British Academy and then from the Leverhulme Foundation, and my colleagues are understandably a little envious of that, having that kind of time – six years of research leave is almost unheard of. Bizarrely, it was almost a kind of semi-retirement, or even an experience of *unemployment*, working from home. I missed the collegiality of the University and teaching students, but not the committee meetings.

Did you feel that you had Rumi's company with you?

There was that, of course, as Mowlana's hand seems always to be extended to the reader. I was fortunate, however, that just over a year ago I met an American Sufi who was visiting Konya for the Şeb-i Arus last year, namely Ibrahim Gamard. I met him in the Manuscript Museum in Konya, and though we only spent one day together, we have been in touch constantly ever since, and I have visited him twice at his home in Marin County in California. He is not only a Mevlevi sheikh, but also a fount of knowledge of all things to do with Mowlana, and the *Masnavi* in particular. Your readers might like to look at his wonderful websites 'Dar al-Masnavi' (<http://www.dar-al-masnavi.org/> and 'Masnavi' (<http://www.masnavi.net/>). His career was not in university academe, but rather as a Doctor of Psychology for the State of California. He knows Persian and Arabic very well, and is the author of articles and two scholarly books – one the Quatrains of Rumi, and a new book, with Hülya Küçük, *Rūmī's Son and Father of the Mawlawi: Sultān Walad and his Understanding of Sufism*.

With such companions, loneliness is banished. One can make a distinction between being alone and being lonely. For me a lot of it was a matter of endurance, because much of the *Masnavi* is very long and drawn out by modern standards. Rumi did not, it seems, have an editor who would take one aside and say, 'Come on, Mowlana, get to the point!'. On the positive side, this teaches great patience and respect, as one experiences the full flow of his associative mind at work. You can see his mind laid out before you, and sometimes he goes off into passages we might call digression for pages and pages. My job is to translate every verse as faithfully as I can.

You said earlier that it is an inspired book. Perhaps there is a purpose in those apparent goings off which we cannot get?

There is indeed, and it's important. I've tried to explain that there is a stable structure to it, that there is a cyclicity, a cycle of seven different voices that start at the highest level of spirituality and come down to earth with the story, and then re-ascends through analogy, dialogue, moral discourse or homily, ecstatic discourse, and back through hiatus to a point of silence. This is the general pattern. I've even drawn a diagram of that in the Introduction to my first book, showing the cycle of voices. The smallest element of the single *masnavi* couplet is powerful and interesting in this respect: its two-part structure means that it can answer itself, so each verse is in dialogue with itself.

There is also an enormous amount of wordplay going on in the text, which is a challenge to the translator. Unless one is very careful, one can miss all sorts of wordplays that come in the Persian –

often fiendishly difficult to render into English. My rule of thumb is that wherever there is an opportunity to make a play on words in English, I do so, whether or not Rumi is at it at that moment: one has to grab one's opportunities. That can be a lot of fun. Translators do it for themselves, and the reward of translation is the pleasure of creating something beautiful. I never found that in any other academic work I did in pre-Islamic Iranian studies. My academic career changed (for the better) when beauty came into the equation, exactly at the half way point twenty years ago.

Yes, indeed. And this is only the first two books and you've got four more to go!

Pretty daunting, isn't it! But I have decided that at the moment there's nothing else I'd rather do within Persian/Iranian studies and academe in general, so that's okay by me. I have translated the third book and many passages from 4, 5 and 6 as well, and I plan to try to publish one book a year from now on. There are some wonderful passages I just couldn't wait to get to. There is one famous passage from Book 4 that is so beautiful I couldn't resist spending days translating it properly, and I've used it several times, ironically only at funerals. The first time, back in 2005 when my father died, I could see no better way of dealing with my own grieving than to read this passage at his funeral, which is about the idea that death is a waking up from the sleep of life. Then a dear friend, Patricia Buckle died, sadly prematurely. She had been trained to turn as a Mevlevi, so I thought it appropriate to read this passage out for her. It was a Buddhist funeral, organised by a *dhamma* friend, Ajahn Candasiri, and the Buddhists fully appreciated the idea that death is an awakening and not an oblivion.

There are many wonderful passages like this, but they may be missed by those who are just looking for stories. When I was teaching this subject to students I provided a kind of navigational chart for them, so they could spot where they were situated on the ocean and not get lost: it's possible to identify whether you're in a story, analogy, speech, moral discourse, or an ecstasy from linguistic features of the text. In a story or analogy, everything is in the past tense. In a discourse, they are in the present and future. In a moral homily, there is constant reference to imperatives and texts of admonition and challenges. In ecstatic discourse there is a constant present, of accelerated and evanescent exclamation. Even when there is a sense of being becalmed in a vast passage, there is the feeling of the deep oceanic swell of the *Masnavi*.

Rumi the poet is himself moving in the *Masnavi*: Books 2 and 3 are much darker than the first, there is more madness and bewilderment, and the development of soliloquy. Rumi no longer has to

pull the reader out of the story into the text of a discourse; he just continues by making the story go into a dramatic dialogue, where a soliloquy doubles as his own voice, the voice of Mowlana. It makes it a dickens of a job to translate, and even more perplexing to punctuate.

If people are to get the best out of reading this work, what kind of preparation would you say they need? What sort of frame of mind should they approach it in?

First of all, it has to be taken seriously. And that is why I kind of have a problem with what I could call 'Rumi Lite'. What I've tried to do by putting the Persian text into the publication, is to graphically show that this is not something of the 20/21st century, not something American or English, or modern at all. It is in some ways foreign and alien to this world of ours. I've indicated this to the reader semiotically, using colour illustrations from the oldest manuscripts and miniature paintings on the dust jackets from 500 years ago, so that they can *see* that this is a text from another era and another world.

Also the challenge, because I have included everything, is that I've not made it easy for readers. If I say it's a terrific read, I mean that in another sense as well – it's a heck of a long read, and some people are going to fall asleep. Perhaps the volumes should come with their own bookstand as well as a ribbon, because these heavy books are going to be dropped if the reader drops off. Rumi occasionally chides his own audience for falling asleep while he is talking, and knows his words lead to other states of consciousness, one of which is sleep. It is a challenging read and the only preparation I can offer is my own Introduction, where I've tried to prepare the reader for the rollercoaster that it is.

Rumi is a very kindly man and calls on you the reader, as 'son', 'brother', 'uncle', even 'father'; in Persian these words can be said euphemistically, and are not always endearments, as they sometimes chide the reader as 'lazybones, wake up!'. But there is also a strong connection, in that it is always addressed to *you*: you, David, and You, God. Sometimes he segues directly from one 'you' into to the other You. The passage I will read out to you on tape will probably be the story of the parrot. This ecstatic passage, in which he goes through all seven voices in a matter of a few lines, starts with the parrot talking to her owner, the merchant, who is going to relate her story to the parrots in the forests of India – and the reader is suddenly witness to her addressing God Himself. There's just no doubt about that, because it then turns into a kind of *zikr* towards the end so you can see that he comes to a point of passing out. So in answer to your question, it is a tough read, and the only way readers can prepare themselves is to dive in and be drowned in it.

Is there more Rumi scholarship in the United States than in England where you have been ploughing a pretty lonely field? Are more people working on this academically in America?

In America, there are a few scholars of the older generation – like James Morris, William C. Chittick, Carl Ernst and others. Franklin Lewis at Chicago is a bit younger than me and is the main Rumi authority in the US academe. There are a number of others working on various aspects of Rumi, the Mevlevi tradition and Persian Sufism in general; and more still working on Sufis in Arabic texts and tradition. In the UK there are very few of us working on classical Persian: I am Chair of Research at the British Institute of Persian Studies in London, where in total, in all periods and disciplines we are still a rather small group of a few score academics. Across Europe there are a number of scholars working on Rumi studies in France, Germany, and elsewhere; and because of the emigration of Iranians and Afghans etc. to Europe and America there are now a good number of mother-tongue Persian scholars, especially in the younger generation, many of whom have had very good university educations in Iran and the West.

Many people in the West are interested in the Mevlevi dervishes and the spiritual tradition of Rumi. Do you think your work will help open it up a bit more for them?

I would hope so. I have been to Konya three times in my life – when I was a young man, in 1973 for the 700th anniversary of Rumi's death, then again in 2007 for the 800th birthday; then, as I said, I went last year. All I can say is that Konya and the Mevlevi tradition have changed enormously in that time. Some might say that that tradition is in decline. But last year in Konya I met the 22nd generation grand-daughter of Mowlana, Esin Chelebi, and I shall send her and the Mevlana Musesi copies of my books, and will willingly go and talk and do all I can to support them. Additionally, I'm hoping my publisher will send the books to journals like the London and New York Review of Books, and other literary heavyweights, because I want the mainstream to review these as well, so it doesn't just get out to a 'New Age' periphery of publications.

It was the aim of the Mevlana Rumi Review to redress the lack of attention in world literature to the works of Arabic and Persian thinkers, because people focus on Dante and Shakespeare and Milton. Is this work adding enormously to world literature?

I would hope so. I hope that that will happen. As for myself, I shall go and talk to anyone who wants to listen to me on this subject: I am even hoping to go back to Iran one day, and perhaps to Afghanistan, and to Rumi's earthly native land.