

GLOBAL RUMI

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As I write this I have beside me on the desk *Rumi: The Card and Book Pack: Meditation, Inspiration & Self Discovery* created by Eryk Hanut and Michelle Wetherbee. According to the blurb on the back of its box: ‘The words of the thirteenth-century Sufi poet and mystic Rumi guide us like a wise friend. This 54-card pack and book, with new translations, bring Rumi’s advice and spiritual sustenance to our daily lives’. One can either draw a card to find a subject for the day’s meditation, or, by following simple directions, one can actually ask these oracular cards questions. ‘Let their message comfort you in times of sorrow, relieve the stress of daily life, and point the way forward.’¹ Hoping for some guidance on how to write what will follow, I draw a card.

Dawn;
Its breezes swim with musk;
Wake up!
Breathe in this fragrance!

Though the Rumi Tarot Pack might have provided additional help, it is at present out of print. However, typing in ‘Rumi’ on Amazon reveals the cur-

rent availability of seven competing Rumi calendars for 2018, a Rumi arm-chair, Rumi sportswear for women, Rumi shower curtains, guides to Rumi-style yoga and countless Rumi cafes, restaurants and books. Among the books are Roszeen Afsar's *Vibrant Soul*, a colouring book inspired by Rumi, also a Sufi Comics presentation of 'an enriching collection of Rumi's poems in graphic form', while Nevin Halici's *Sufi Cuisine* (London, 2005) is devoted to the numerous references to food in Rumi's verses and to recipes of the Mevlevi dervishes.

In recent decades the wisdom of Jalal al-Din Rumi has also received a great deal in the way of celebrity endorsement. For example, a DVD entitled *Rumi: Poet of the Heart* is narrated by Debra Winger and it also features Coleman Barks, Robert Bly, Deepak Chopra and others. Similarly, in the CD *A Gift of Love: Music Inspired by Love Poems of Rumi* the poems are voiced by 'Deepak Chopra and friends.' Those 'friends' include Coleman Barks, Madonna, Goldie Hawn, Demi Moore, Debra Winger and Martin Sheen. Beyoncé and Jay Z have named their twin boys Sir Carter and Rumi. In order to promote a line of fragrances produced in association with Etat Libre d'Orange, the film star Tilda Swinton recited 'Like This', a poem taken from Coleman Barks's *The Essential Rumi*. Franz Beckenbauer, the legendary Bayern Munich footballer, has cited Rumi in support of his own belief in reincarnation. Philip Glass's multimedia 3-D chamber opera *Monsters of Grace*, which premiered in 1988, drew its lyrics from Coleman Barks's versions of Rumi's verses. In 2016 there were reports of a Hollywood plan to make a Rumi biopic in which Leonardo di Caprio was to play the Sufi master, with Robert Downey Jr possibly playing Shams al-Din of Tabriz. As Peter Wilson wrote some years back, 'We may not have to wait too long for the more repellent aspects of the New Age spiritual Disneyland to claim another victim, and books of Sufi crystal healing, Sufi geomancy, talks with Sufi dolphins and Sex Secrets of the Sufi Masters may be going to press as I write.'²

It is all very curious and we shall have more to say about Coleman Barks, Robert Bly and Deepak Chopra in what follows. In America, at least, it has become smart to be Sufi and the marriage of mysticism and merchandising has gathered its own seemingly unstoppable momentum. The Sufi Jalal al-Din Rumi (1207–73), who was born in Vakhsh in what is now Tajikistan, but who settled and taught in Persian in Konya in Turkey, has belatedly found a fresh audience in the United States and Western Europe among the children of the New Age.

The New Age, which evolved out of the counter-culture of the 1960s, was something which came together in the 1970s. Not all that much was new

about the New Age, as it fed eclectically yet selectively on ancient wisdom. Characteristically the gurus and disciples in the New Age aimed at self-improvement through meditation and certain kinds of exercise. They embraced a religiosity which owed little or nothing to mainstream Christianity and often practised some form of 'esotourism' as they might move from Zen to yoga to Sufism, and then on to Vedanta, finding it easy to combine doctrines and practices from several oriental religions (and the wise gurus almost invariably came from the East). Marginal knowledge and techniques tended to be highly valued. The advocacy of holistic approaches to personal and global problems was part of the rhetoric of the New Age and remains one of its legacies. The popularity of New Age approaches ran in parallel with the rise of World Music and a related enthusiasm for various forms of ritual dance. Love was seen as the solution not just to personal problems but also to those of the world. Like the Marxists, proponents of the New Age protested against capitalist materialism, though they proposed very different solutions.³

New Age Sufi meditations could be easily fitted in with yogic exercises. In many Western Sufi groups Sufism has been detached from Islam and is presented as a pilgrimage of the self. As Reshad Feild wrote in *The Last Barrier*, an account of his pilgrimage to discover the Sufi truth, 'The New Age does not mean the formation of any new religion. Far from it. There will be no need, anymore, for any form of religion. All that will have to go.'⁴

Though the New Age is now mostly seen as a phase of Western culture that has passed and the phrase is rarely attached to current beliefs and practices, nevertheless those beliefs and practices that became so popular in the 1970s still flourish today. It is only that there is less expectation of a cohesive 'New Age' that will bring altered sensibilities and change on a global scale. Instead, the various meditations and therapies are now usually presented in a more individual context. Within that context, it has been possible to portray Rumi as a figure who preached a religion of love that transcended conventional spirituality, a proto-humanist, a healer who anticipated Freud, and a gay icon. According to Demi Moore, 'Rumi awakens us to the dance of life, so that we can celebrate the mysteries of existence'.⁵ Though this kind of thing is all very pleasant, some may call to mind such inspirational observations of Madeleine Basset as 'The stars are God's daisy chain' and 'Today I danced on the lawn before breakfast and then I went round the garden saying good morning to the flowers' (in the Jeeves and Wooster novels of P.G. Wodehouse).

Zen, Vedanta and Taoism were popular in the 1970s, but the enthusiasm for Rumi only really got properly under way in the late 1980s. Prior to that,

Rumi's doctrines and poetry were hardly known outside academic circles and small, often secretive esoteric groups. There were almost no books on Sufism aimed at the general reader. The most notable exception was *The Sufis* by Idries Shah (1924–96). This general survey presented Sufism as a form of timeless wisdom that was not attached to any particular religion. Indeed, Sufism, which was 4,000 years old, predated Islam. Sufism, according to Shah, was a way of learning how to learn and in order to do so one had to free oneself from mechanical thinking. (Perhaps this notion was borrowed from Gurdjieff.) A chapter of *The Sufis* was devoted to 'Our Master Jalaluddin Rumi'.⁶ This relied heavily on the writings of the Cambridge academics Nicholson and Arberry. According to Shah, Rumi instituted the whirling dance. (In fact, it was his son Sultan Valad who did this.) Also: 'The body-mind movements of the Whirling Dervishes, coupled with the reed-pipe music to which they were performed, is the product of a special method designed to bring the Seeker into affinity with the mystical current, in order to be transformed by it.'⁷ It is hard to know what this means. The chapter on Rumi also gives an account of his alleged meeting with the other great Sufi, Ibn 'Arabi, in Baghdad and, though this almost certainly never happened, it has been given widespread circulation in subsequent popular writings on Rumi. According to Shah, Rumi's writings were the source for some of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. But Rumi was only one of numerous Sufi masters described in Shah's book and one must look elsewhere for the chief inspiration behind the contemporary Rumi cult.

1984 was the year that the Rumi cult began to take off in the USA. This was the year when the poet and academic Coleman Barks published his first collection of Rumi poems *Open Secret*.⁸ It had been another American poet, Robert Bly, who first introduced Barks to the poetry of Rumi, via the scholarly but somewhat archaic translations of E. H. Whinfield, R. A. Nicholson and A. J. Arberry. Bly showed Barks the academic translations of Rumi and told him 'These poems need to be released from their cages'. Besides being a prolific poet Bly (b.1926) is an accomplished translator from Norwegian, Swedish, Spanish and German, as well as the poetry of the sixteenth-century, Sufi-influenced, Hindu poet Kabir. Though Bly knew no Persian, he also produced free-verse adaptations of Rumi's verses, drawing on academic translations to do so.⁹

Coleman Barks (b.1937) took his older friend's advice and followed his example. He has not learnt Persian and his prolific 'translations' are lively adaptations often of the translations by Whinfield, Nicholson and Arberry, though he also sometimes makes use of translations supplied to him by a Persian speaker, John A. Moyné, an emeritus professor of linguistics at New

York University. 'Translating' from a language one does not actually know has an eminent precedent in Ezra Pound's versions of Chinese poetry, published as *Cathay* in 1915, in which Pound, chiefly relying on notes and translations of Chinese poetry previously made in Japan by the specialist historian of oriental art, Ernest Fenollosa, modernised the source material and made it accessible.

The teachings of Rumi were congenial to Barks. His early reading of Evelyn Underhill and Rudolf Otto had got him interested in mysticism. In 1977 he had had a vision of a Sufi master in a dream. A year later in Philadelphia he met the master of that dream, the Tamil Sufi guru Bawa Muhaiyaddeen (d.1986), and became his disciple.¹⁰ Through Barks's numerous 'translations' and public readings he has succeeded in making Rumi one of America's best-selling poets. His versions read well. But they tend to avoid such specifically religious terms as 'prayer', 'hour', 'circumcision feast' and 'infidelity'. His presentation of Rumi effectively removes him from the medieval and Islamic context, so that he emerges from the turbulent thirteenth century to teach calmness and well-being to his twenty-first century following.¹¹ Equally important, Barks has succeeded in liberating Rumi's teaching from the cage of Victorian versification. As Barks has confessed with, perhaps, mock modesty, 'What I do is a homemade, amateurish, loose, many-stranded thing, without much attention to historical context, nor much literal faithfulness to the original'.¹² The appeal of this approach is an important factor behind the popularity of Rumi today. Across the centuries a strange partnership has been established between the two poets—one that perhaps has a parallel with the earlier case of Edward Fitzgerald and Umar Khayyam. As Jorge Luis Borges wrote of the latter: 'All collaboration is mysterious. That of the Englishman and the Persian was even more so, for the two were quite different, and perhaps in life might not have been friends; death and vicissitudes and time led one to know the other and make them into a single poet.'¹³

Nevertheless, there may be a less obvious reason for the startling success of Barks's version of Rumi and that is the apparent similarity of Rumi's poetry to that of one of America's best-known and most popular poets, Walt Whitman (1819–92). Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (first edition, 1855) is suffused with pantheism and idealism. His was an erotic celebration of a kind of cosmic consciousness. In Whitman's poem 'A Persian Lesson' (composed in 1891 and added to the last edition of *Leaves of Grass*) the students learn from the Persian sage that 'Allah is all, all, all—is immanent in every life and object', and the poem ends with the following lines:

It is the central urge in every atom,
 (Often unconscious, often evil, downfallen)
 To return to its divine source and origin however distant,
 Latent the same in subject and in object without exceptions.¹⁴

One is irresistibly reminded of the opening lines of the *Masnawi* in which the reed yearns to return to the reed bed.

Indeed it seems likely that Whitman was familiar with some of Rumi's poetry, if at several removes. Although Whitman came too late to be classed as a poet of the Transcendental School, Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–82), the poet and essayist, can be so classified and he was Whitman's friend and philosophical guide. Transcendentalism was a literary and philosophic movement that flourished in early nineteenth-century New England. Its optimistic, idealistic and mystically inclined adherents rejected formal religion and instead drew eclectically upon the writings of the Neo-Platonists, Buddhists, Swedenborg, St. Thomas à Kempis and the Sufis. They preached the unity of all things and the immanence of God in the world. Man's duty was to fulfil his divine potential. Emerson's studies of Persian poetry relied mostly upon the very poor German translations of Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall (1774–1856) and in 1858 Emerson published an influential essay 'Persian Poetry' in *Atlantic Monthly*.¹⁵ Whitman may also have read W.R. Alger's *The Poetry of the East* (1856). As such, Rumi can be read as an oriental precursor of Whitman. There is a sense in which Emerson and Whitman had prepared the way for Bly and Barks who in turn introduced Rumi to Madonna and Demi Moore.

Finally, with respect to Barks's versions of Rumi, it should be remarked that his reworking of Rumi's relatively restricted imagery and vocabulary offers Barks's readers an escape from the modern world and its attendant problems—no office life, no computer glitches, no shopping malls, no pollution, no boredom, no grinding poverty, no lovelessness, no sickness unto death. In its place, a sunlit universe has been conjured up which pulsates with energy and whose flora, fauna, taverns, mosques, and market places deliver mysterious and exhilarating messages that hint at ecstasy.

The Rumi of the Scholars

Turning now to the scholarly translations by Englishmen that Bly, Barks and those who came after them relied upon, the first of these was by E. H. Whinfield who had been in the Bengal Civil Service and who turned

himself into a private scholar active in the 1880s and 1890s. His selection from Rumi *Masnavi-i Ma'navi* was well-chosen and well-translated. His introduction compared the *Masnavi* to the *Divine Comedy* and *Paradise Lost* and stressed the Christian features in Rumi's mysticism and also pointed to the number of borrowings from the Gospel in the *Masnavi*.¹⁶ (The compatibility of Rumi's teachings with so much of Christian doctrine also struck Nicholson and Arberry who came after him.) It was, it is worth noting, a general feature of the nineteenth century that amateurs who had taken up languages outside the universities played a greater part in development of Persian and Arabic studies in Britain than did the university-based professors.

However, by the twentieth century academics came close to monopolising the study of Persian and Arabic. As a student in Cambridge, Reynold Alleyne Nicholson (1868–1945) was introduced to Rumi by the great Persianist and Thomas Adams Professor of Arabic, Edward Granville Browne. Nicholson was to spend the rest of his life in Cambridge and most of it in the study of Rumi. At first he judged Rumi's writings to be obscure and rambling and only slowly changed his mind. *Selected Poems from the Dîwâni Shamsi, Tabriz* (1898) stressed the Neoplatonic content. He met Iqbal, the Muslim scholar from India while the latter was studying in Cambridge and thereafter corresponded with him. Later in 1920 Nicholson published a translation from the Persian of Iqbal's *The Secret of the Self (Asrâri Khudi): A Philosophical Poem*. (For more on Iqbal, see below.) Late in life Nicholson returned to his first enthusiasm and set about the mammoth task of editing, translating and commenting on the 25,000 couplets of the *Masnavi* which were published in eight volumes over the years 1925–40. According to his friend and disciple, Arberry, Nicholson slowly went blind as he toiled over the manuscripts. The dirty bits, and there are quite a few in Rumi, he translated into Latin. By common consent Nicholson's translation is so archaic as to be almost unreadable. *Rumi: Poet and Mystic* was posthumously published in 1950.¹⁷

Nicholson, a pious Christian, nevertheless identified strongly with Rumi's spiritual teaching and he would sometimes weep as he lectured on the *Masnavi*. His favourite student and eventual successor as Thomas Adams Professor, Arthur John Arberry (1905–69), had become an atheist in his youth, only to be converted back to Christianity by his reading of the Muslim mystics.

He published ninety books, of which twenty were translations or interpretations of Rumi, including *Discourses of Rumi* (London, 1961), *Tales from the Masnavi* (London, 1961), *More Tales from the Masnavi* (London, 1963) and *The Rubaiyat of Jalal al-Din Rumi: Select Translations into English Verse*

(London, 1969).¹⁸ Arberry, writing in the 1950s and 60s, was under the impression that the great age of Sufism was over and that it had reached a dead end, but this does not seem to be the case and it was rather readings of Sufism filtered through a Victorian Christian and poetic sensibility that had come to a dead end with Arberry himself as one of its last representatives.

Like Nicholson, Arberry was also attracted by the writings of Iqbal, which were so strongly influenced by Rumi, and he translated Iqbal's *The Secrets of Selflessness* and the *Javid-Nama* (London, 1966). The Indian poet and thinker Sir Muhammad Iqbal (1873–1938) wrote in Urdu, Persian and English. Rumi featured prominently in his writings and was praised for his stress on striving and spiritual evolution. In Iqbal's mind Rumi was opposed to cold reason and dry philosophy, both of which were primarily the creation of Western civilisation. But though Iqbal was highly critical of Western civilisation and suspicious about the agendas of the Orientalists, he corresponded regularly with Nicholson and greatly admired the famous French Orientalist Louis Massignon.¹⁹ At first Iqbal classified Rumi as a pantheist, but later, in the words of Annemarie Schimmel, he came to see him 'as the advocate of spiritual development, of love between man and a personal God, and of an infinite quest for God.'²⁰ In particular, he cited the well-known lines from Rumi which outline the evolution of plants from inorganic matter, and animals from plants and men from animals, with its conclusion 'Of his first souls he has no remembrance/ And he will be again changed from his present soul.'²¹

Iqbal ranked the *Masnavi* as the holiest text, second only to the Qur'an. His last major work published in Persian in 1932, the *Javid-Nama* was modelled on the *Masnavi* and described his pilgrimage through the heavenly spheres under the guidance of Rumi. As with Dante and Virgil in *The Divine Comedy*, Iqbal and Rumi on their journey through the spheres met a remarkable assortment of people, including Jamal al-Din Afghani, the Buddha, al-Hallaj, Tolstoy, Zoroaster, the Mahdi, Kitchener and Nietzsche. Iqbal's Rumi-saturated writings not only exercised a strong influence on Nicholson and Arberry, but also on two other translators of Rumi, Annemarie Schimmel and Eva de Vitray-Meyerovitch.

Her teacher in Berlin University, Hans Heinrich Schaeder, guided the young scholar Annemarie Schimmel (1922–2003) to Rumi's *Divan of Shams Tabrizi*. Schimmel was prodigiously industrious and linguistically gifted and was comfortable in Persian, Arabic, Turkish, Urdu and Sindhi, as well as most of the useful European languages. Although she remained a Lutheran throughout her life, her Christianity had a distinctly Sufic feel and her studies

of Rumi and other mystics have a strong devotional flavour. Her translations of Rumi into German which included both the poems and the 'Discourses' were much influenced by Friedrich Rückert's nineteenth-century Romantic adaptations. Her books about Rumi, which include *The Triumphal Sun: A Study of the Works of Jalaluddin Rumi* (London, 1978) and *I Am Wind, You Are Fire: The Life and Work of Rumi* (Boston, MA, 1992) manage to be scholarly and yet quite uncritical. She also produced the major study of Iqbal, *Gabriel's Wing*.²²

Eva de Vitray-Meyerovitch (1909–99) was an academic who researched and taught at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique in Paris. A convert to Islam and a Sufi (though not a Mevlevi), she worked closely with Louis Massignon, the famous Orientalist and expert on the tenth-century Sufi martyr al-Hallaj. De Vitray-Meyerovitch was led to Rumi by reading Iqbal's *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, in which Rumi was frequently quoted. She then learnt Persian so that she could translate both Iqbal and Rumi. Her doctoral thesis was entitled *Thèmes mystiques dans l'oeuvre de Djâlal-Ud-Din Rûmî* (1968). Believing in the ultimate unity of Islam, Christianity and Judaism, she stressed his universalism and message of love.²³ Her later book *Rûmî et le Soufisme* (1977) is packed with enthusiastic misinformation. It described him as the discoverer of the heliocentric system and of the ninth planet, along with being an early practitioner of psychotherapy. According to her, Rumi was born in Balkh; Shams al-Din al-Tabrizi was murdered by Rumi's son; Konya is a city of the saints; and Sufism is 'not a doctrine, but a way'.²⁴ In 1990 she published a complete translation of the *Masnavi* into French. It was her dying request that her body be buried in Konya and in 2008 her body was re-interred there.

Although the various translations and pseudo-translations of Rumi have been the most important factor behind the rise of his modern cult there were, of course, other enablers, fellow travellers and forerunners of the phenomenon. There is only space to pause on a few of these here.

Andrew Harvey was one such enabler. Born in 1952 and educated at Sherborne and Oxford, after gaining a first-class degree, he was awarded a fellowship at All Souls College. He then gave this up in 1977 to become a kind of latter-day incarnation of Matthew Arnold's 'Scholar-Gipsy', who, wearying of Oxford, 'One summer morn forsook/ His friends, and went to learn the Gipsy lore,/ and roamed the world with that wild brotherhood...'. Harvey travelled endlessly to find gurus of various religions in various regions and sit at their feet. From 1978 on he spent several years with Mother Meera,

supposedly the embodiment of the Divine Mother on earth, first in India and then in Germany. From 1984 onwards he spent time with French Sufis in Paris, spending ten years studying the writings of Rumi under the guidance of de Vitray-Meyerovitch. Not knowing Persian, he relied on her translations of Rumi, supplemented by other versions.²⁵

In 1993 Harvey met and fell in love with Eryk Hanut (who would go on to produce *Rumi: The Card and Book Pack*). But Mother Meera still remained his 'divine master' and, when she allegedly told him that her divine force had transformed him into a heterosexual and that he must leave Eryk, he rebelled.

In *The Direct Path* (London, 2000) he wrote that this 'shattered my faith in the traditional "master" system and in the New Age' and that book is consequently a guide to achieving enlightenment without recourse to submitting oneself to a living guru. In *The Direct Path* the relationship between Rumi and Shams is presented as a sexual one. When Shams disappeared, the stricken Rumi danced himself back to health and Harvey provides a do-it-yourself guide to performing the Mevlevi dance without recourse to a Sheikh.²⁶

Harvey is a prolific author and Rumi has featured prominently in most of his books, including *The Essential Gay Mystics* (1997). His film *In the Fire of Grace: Dancing Rumi's Journey of the Soul* (2011) is devoted to Sufi dance. Banafsheh Sayyad performs a free-wheeling and somewhat erotic dance while Harvey takes on the voice of Rumi and instructs us on the five steps on the path to union with the Beloved.²⁷

George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff (c.1872–1949), in exile from Tsarist Russia, established himself in France where he taught a distinctive form of esotericism in which dance featured prominently, and which he claimed originated with the mysterious Sufi Sarmoun brotherhood in Central Asia. Though Gurdjieff did not acknowledge any explicit debt to the Mevlevi, his former disciple P. D. Ouspensky, among much else, wrote of his encounters with the whirling dervishes of Pera, first in 1908 and then again twelve years later when he was in flight from the revolution in Russia.²⁸ He claimed that their whirling represented the planets of the solar system and he concluded his description of their dance with the enigmatic observation that 'in order to understand it fully one must first know *why they do it*'. Ouspensky's investigations into dervish orders in Constantinople and Scutari were followed up by J. G. Bennett, a leading follower of Gurdjieff, who specifically interested himself in the Mevlevi in Istanbul and later went on pilgrimage to Konya.²⁹ Bennett, who presided over one of the Ouspenskyite successor groups with a centre at Coombe Springs in Surrey, seems to have been looking for a form of Sufism

that transcended Islam, and eventually thought he had found the Master he was looking for when he encountered Idries Shah. In 1966 he turned over Coombe Springs to Shah, who promptly sold it.³⁰

Another Ouspenskyite successor group, the Study Society, had been established in 1951 in the Barons Court area of London under the leadership of Dr Francis Roles, a London physician. The Society (on which see more below) followed Advaita Vedanta meditations (Advaita Vedanta teaches the essential unity of everything, it following that people are potentially one with God—they only have to know it), but combined Advaita Vedanta with the Mevlevi whirling dance. In 1963 a Mevlevi sheikh, hostile to the touristic performances in Konya but impressed by the serious spirituality of the Study Society, came to London and instructed Roles and forty of his group in the *sema* (turning dance). As such the Mevlevi dance, detached from its original Muslim setting, acquired a different context: ‘The purpose of turning is to access inner stillness and opening of the heart which leads to inner stillness.’³¹

The motivational speaker Deepak Chopra (b. 1946) has already been mentioned. He studied medicine in India before moving to the USA, and is today a leading advocate of alternative medicine. He claims that it is possible to achieve perfect health and acquire immunity from disease, pain and even death.³² The back cover of *The Love Poems of Rumi*, edited by Chopra and Fereydoun Kia (London, 1993), states that ‘Deepak Chopra’s vision brings wholeness to American culture and makes us more awake to the possibilities in each moment’. According to Chopra’s introduction, his ‘translation’ does not actually reflect Rumi’s words, but rather seeks to capture what he judges to be his moods.³³

Novelists have also had a role in popularising the life and love of Rumi. Paulo Coelho is a best-selling Brazilian novelist and poet (b. 1947), and Rumi’s sayings often feed into his inspirationally improving fictions. His most popular novel *O Alquimista* (*The Alchemist*) is based on a story narrated in the *Masnavi*—of a dream about a fabulous treasure, the quest for that treasure and the ultimate discovery that the true treasure is hidden within oneself.³⁴ Moreover, Rumi is much cited on Coelho’s regular blog.³⁵

Elif Shafak (b. 1971) is a best-selling Turkish novelist. Her novel, *The Forty Rules of Love*, was published in English in 2010. In it, Ella, a reader for a literary agency, reads a manuscript of a novel entitled *Sweet Blasphemy*. This tells the story of how the arrival of Shams al-Din of Tabriz, ‘the wild card’, in (a somewhat modernised and Americanised) Konya disrupted the serenely scholarly life of Rumi and led him into a passionate quest for beatitude.

Eventually the jealous younger son of Rumi arranges the assassination of Shams al-Din. As the narrative progresses the eponymous forty rules are spelled out and Rumi finds his voice as a spiritual poet. Ella is so powerfully taken by this novel that she writes to its unknown Rumi-obsessed author, then meets him and finally decides to abandon her husband, two children and a comfortable existence, in favour of adventure, passion and heartbreak. According to the Penguin reading guide which accompanied the novel, the ways followed by Rumi and Ella cannot offer lasting happiness: 'What they can offer is a taste of mystical union, divine love, the deep harmony that arises when the false self—constructed to meet society's demand for respectability—is shed and the true self emerges'. The novel within a novel presents Sufism mostly as a way of living and seeing that is at odds with orthodox Islam. The forty rules are spelt out in italics. (Among the sources cited are Coleman Barks, Idries Shah, Kabir and Camille Helminski, Annemarie Schimmel, Nicholson and Franklin Lewis.)³⁶ Another novel, *The Way of Love* by Nigel Watts, similarly focusing on the passion and pain of Rumi's association with Shams al-Din of Tabriz, was published in 1998.³⁷

Some novels about spiritual journeys and self-discovery have been presented as non-fiction. In 1966, *The Teachers of Gurdjieff* was published by Rafael Lefort (almost certainly a pseudonym for Idries Shah). It detailed the quest of an earnest but ignorant seeker for those mysterious teachers. The quest begins in Konya and one teacher after another sends the hapless seeker on to yet another instructor with only a few words of wisdom, and so he journeys on to Baghdad, Damascus, Cairo, Istanbul, Tabriz and eventually as far as Afghanistan. He learns that Rumi is a master who transcended religion and who taught self-development. One of the final encounters takes place back in Konya with a certain sheikh of the Mevlevi order, Shah Naz, but he leads him not to the whirling dance, but to a rather strange demonstration of the 'stop exercise' as is practised by Gurdjieff groups. Finally the seeker is told that there is no point looking for those who taught Gurdjieff since all that is outmoded. Rather he will find what he needs to pursue his self-development in London.³⁸ (Perhaps this will turn out to be with Idries Shah.)

Though *The Last Barrier: A Sufi Journey* (London, 1976) similarly purported to be an autobiographical memoir and its dustjacket claimed that 'it carries the true stamp of authenticity', it too has many of the qualities of a novel. Its author, Reshad Feild (1934–2016) was educated at Eton and served in the Royal Navy. Subsequently he became interested in alternative medicine and this led him down an esoteric path. His story (which is prefaced by a

quotation from the *Masnavi*) begins with a chance encounter with an antique dealer who, though he is called Hamid in the story, is modelled on the real-life Sufi, Ali Bulent Rauf, who in the 1960s had an antique shop in London's Flask Walk (if I remember correctly).³⁹ The encounter in 1969 sends Feild on a spiritual and literal journey as he, like Lefort, is sent from master to master in one exotic locale after another, inevitably including Konya.

In accordance with New Age style of teaching (and in the words on the dustjacket), 'The teacher's methods are extraordinary, and remind us of Castaneda's Don Juan, cajoling, praising, prodding, scolding, laughing, praying—forcing Reshad to shed the deadening preconceptions of his past, to break the shackles of the rationalising mind, and to perceive the reality lying beneath the surface'. As such, there are many riddles and much laughter, with the ingenuous Feild having much to learn before he can find his real self. (We may be grateful that they do not teach like this in British universities.) It is true that there may be a literary debt to Carlos Castaneda's *The Teachings of Don Juan*, which had been published in 1968.

In actuality, Feild was no mystical ingénue when he encountered Bulent Rauf, since he had already studied Sufism in America with the Chishti Sufi Pir Vilayat Khan and received an initiation from him in 1962, years before he met Rauf. When Feild went out to Konya in 1971 he took a group of his own disciples with him—there they met with Rauf and Suleiman Dede, a former sheikh of the Mevlevi, and witnessed a *sema* (ritual whirling dance). In Los Angeles in 1976, despite not having converted to Islam, Feild was made a sheikh of the Mevlevi order by Suleiman Dede. Thereafter he presided over the Mevlevi Foundation and its whirling rituals in which non-Muslims and women participated. For Feild, as for so many Western enthusiasts, Sufism was something that transcended Islam.⁴⁰

While on the subject of novels, it seems that Rumi also has a ghostly presence in science fiction. Philip K. Dick was familiar with some of his writings and cited him.⁴¹ Moreover, it has been suggested that in Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965), the 'Litany Against Fear' of the Bene Gesserit is based on a similar theme in Rumi.⁴² In the film *The Last Jedi* (2017), the incident in which Yoda burns the sacred Jedi texts in front of Luke Skywalker may have been modelled on a similar confrontation between Shams al-Din al-Tabrizi and Rumi in which the latter's books were burnt.⁴³ (New Age authors and the writers who have followed them are oddly keen on the message that there is no need for books.)

Rumi and Dance

Dance has been an important element in the rise of the modern Rumi cult. The earliest Western observers of the Mevlevi rituals were fascinated by the whirling dance. (In the West, many know nothing about dervishes except that they all whirl.) The fascination exercised on the general public by the dance was hardly less important than Barks's verses in focusing attention on Rumi. The whirling dance has been appropriated in the West not only by Feild's Mevlevi Foundation and followers of the Ouspenskyite tradition, but by several other groups. Whirling is often presented as a form of therapy in the United States. For example, Shahram Shiva advertises online an easy-to-follow four-step system: 'By following this proven method students without any prior training can begin whirling immediately'.⁴⁴

Samuel L. Lewis (1896–1971), also known as Murshid Sam, or Sufi Sam, was Jewish in origin. He studied with the Theosophists, who hold that all religions are in their essence one, before moving on to Zen. In the late 1960s he too was instructed in the Mevlevi dance by the Chishti Sufi, Pir Vilayat Khan. Subsequently he received initiations from teachers of other traditions. The Dances of Universal Peace, which he established and which combine the Mevlevi whirling with other dance traditions, have an amiable happy-clappy feel.⁴⁵

Kabir Helminski, like Sufi Sam, studied various esoteric disciplines before seeking initiation as a Mevlevi dervish at the hands of Sulaiman Dede in Konya in 1980. Subsequently he was made a Mevlevi sheikh in America by Celaledin Çelebi. Together with his wife Camille, Kabir is co-director of the Threshold Society, and they preside over whirling sessions in which non-Muslims and women are welcome to participate. They have toured North America with performances of the whirling dance. Kabir has also published a number of books including *Living Presence: A Sufi Way to Mindfulness and the Essential Self* (New York, 1992) and *Holistic Islam: Sufism, Transformation, and the Needs of Our Time* (2017). Like Barks, he has produced free verse versions of Rumi based on the translations of Arberry and Nicholson.⁴⁶

When one considers the background of Western gurus and seekers on paths to spiritual self-improvement one is struck by the prominence of the wealthy and the highly educated in those circles. To take just the British case, J. G. Bennett, Reshad Feild and Andrew Harvey are among the many to have been educated at public schools. It is also striking how many Harley Street physicians were and perhaps still are in the various Ouspenskyite groups.

Certainly, it helps to be articulate, to have leisure, to be widely read, to have the money to travel. It may also be the case that it is easier to renounce material values if one has some actual wealth to renounce—'twas ever thus. In *Reason and Society in the Middle Ages*, the historian Alexander Murray, drawing on those medieval saints given entries in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, established that of seventy-one saints in the sample, 87 per cent were of upper-class birth.⁴⁷

Though the globalisation of Rumi is largely synonymous with the Americanisation of Rumi, this is not entirely the case. Rumi's teachings, naturally, have a considerable following in Muslim countries. In Turkey, after Kemal Atatürk banned the dervish orders and closed the *tekkes* in 1925, some Mevlevi groups went into exile in Syria and Cyprus, while others continued to meet clandestinely in Istanbul, though it seems that by the late 1960s the last of these groups had ceased to operate. However in 1956, in response to demands from tourists, performances of the whirling dance were authorised in Konya, though the dance was obstinately presented as folkloric and not religious and its performances had to take place in secular buildings. In 1960 there was a crackdown on the participation of actual Mevlevi in the dances and local youths replaced them. In 1967 there was a further crackdown on the employment of Sufi musicians from Istanbul. Politicians and tourist officials used the events to make speeches that had nothing to do with Sufi spirituality. From the 1970s onwards, spiritual tourists begin to arrive in Konya in large numbers. As the Mevlevi musician Kudsi Erguner has observed, some of these 'tourists', perhaps Ouspenskyites or disciples of a Californian dance cult, knew more about the correct Mevlevi ritual than did the dancers.⁴⁸ There are now competing Mevlevi groups in Turkey, many of which are strictly Islamic, though others welcome the participation of non-Muslims and women. Despite the presence of Rumi's tomb and the claims of various Western Sufis, twentieth-century Konya was not a particularly mystical place. It was, rather, a centre of Islamic fundamentalism, and in the 1980s and '90s the headquarters of the Islamist Welfare Party.

Though Turks do not read much Rumi as the translations are apparently so poor, Rumi has been adopted by various politicians as Turkey's national poet. Current President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, like many of his supporters in the AKP (Justice and Development Party) has a Naqshbandi Sufi background. In a speech delivered in Konya on the 741st anniversary of Rumi's death he praised Rumi's philosophy of tolerance and fraternity, claiming it has proven to be the basis of the Turkish nation.⁴⁹

Fethullah Gülen (b. 1941), Erdoğan's former political ally, now in exile in the United States, was allegedly the chief conspirator behind the attempted military coup against the AKP government in July 2016, and consequently Erdoğan has sought his extradition from the United States. Gülen has enjoyed widespread support among middle- and upper-class Turks and especially among Turkish expatriate groups. He preaches a holistic view of man and claims to offer a modernised version of spirituality. His followers are supposed to devote themselves to *hizmet*, altruistic service of the community. According to Gülen, 'Arab Islam is based on fear of Allah, Turkish Islam is an understanding based on love of Allah'. Rumi is thus the epitome of a distinctively Turkish Islam. He is also presented as a model of tolerance and dialogue with Christians and Jews. In *Towards a Global Civilization of Love and Tolerance*, Rumi is cited fifteen times. However, Gülen does not belong to any Sufi *tariqa* and, though he often cites Rumi in support of his views, he is equally likely to draw on Shakespeare and Balzac. He is Honorary Chairman of the Rumi Forum for Interfaith Dialogue and Intercultural Understanding in Washington, DC. There are similar institutions in Pakistan as well as Amsterdam and London, and the liturgy of the whirling dance is sometimes performed at these centres.⁵⁰

Although Rumi was a Sunni Muslim and Iran is overwhelmingly Shi'i, there is naturally an Iranian cult around perhaps the greatest poet ever to write in Persian. Abdolkarim Soroush (b. 1945), the Iranian writer, reformer, theologian and Rumi scholar, presents Rumi as an oppositional figure. Soroush was involved in the early years of the Iranian Cultural Revolution and the purge of country's universities, but he subsequently became a leading critic of the regime and consequently his lectures in Tehran University were barracked by fundamentalist zealots. In recent decades he has been lecturing in Western universities, particularly in the United States. In those lectures he has often attacked Islamic legalism and instead cited Rumi as a proponent of religious pluralism. Despite his enthusiasm for Rumi, he is hostile to institutionalised Sufism and he has warned against confusing mystical poetry with philosophy.⁵¹

The writings of Muhammad Iqbal have made Rumi a familiar figure in the Indian subcontinent and doubtless the similarity of Rumi's teachings to those of Kabir Helminski will have attracted many Hindus. There are at least seven million Bahais scattered around the world. Bahá'u'lláh, the Iranian founder of the Bahai faith, often quoted Rumi with approval.⁵² It was through reading works by Bahá'u'lláh and other Bahais that the American academic Franklin D. Lewis first became interested in Rumi.⁵³

Lewis's *Rumi, Past and Present, East and West: The Life, Teachings and Poetry of Jalal al-Din Rumi* (Oxford and Boston, 2000) is easily the best and most comprehensive guide to the life, works and legacy of Rumi. His book ditches the romantic folklore about Rumi and provides an excellent account of what he was like before globalisation distorted his teachings. All sorts of errors are corrected in *Rumi, Past and Present*. Lewis reveals that Rumi was not born in Balkh. He emphasises Rumi's Sunni, Hanafi mindset. Properly read, the *Masnavi* should not be mined for consoling thoughts for the day, since it is a well-constructed commentary on the Qur'an (and it is read by Muslims from the Balkans to South-East Asia not as a self-help manual but as a commentary on the Muslim revelation). Quite a few modern readings elide the anguish and the yearning, as well as the anger and occasional obscenity. There are anti-Semitic and misogynistic passages in the *Masnavi* that should offend a modern sensibility. The thirteenth-century biography of Rumi by Aflaki is not an entirely reliable source. It is most unlikely that Shams al-Din was murdered and equally unlikely that the relationship between Rumi and Shams al-Din was sexual. In the words of Bruce Wannell's review of Lewis's book, 'His thirty-year-old relationship with the sexagenarian Shams was not a foretaste of Californian gay romance, but must be seen in the context of the Islamic medieval structures of learning.'⁵⁴

According to Lewis, Rumi's *Masnavi*

seeks to communicate its message to a wider audience, one disinclined to sit through dry abstract lectures on doctrine and theology, in an area which was not fully developed in Islam. Rumi brings to bear a not inconsiderable erudition in his lectures, but wears it lightly, illustrating his points with entertaining, instructive and memorable tales, drawing together disparate themes and sources in rhizomic fashion, keeping the listener rooted to the theme without the listener even realising where the argument is leading until it arrives. His teachings are carefully tailored to his audience.⁵⁵

Conclusion

Though various factors have been adduced above for the current enthusiasm for the life and teachings of this thirteenth-century Persian mystic, his current acclaim is more than anything else based on his own charisma and that of Coleman Barks. Their energy is attractive, as is their lyricism and complementary charismas. Rumi was an eloquent spiritual master who had no difficulty in finding audiences for his preaching and his friendship with Shams was a passionate one. As for Barks: 'By some external standards I've led a scandalous

life: lots of lovers, lots of wine drinking, lots of unconsciousness. God knows I've loved sex.'⁵⁶ His poetry readings are uninhibited and very popular. The charismas of the two poets do complement rather than match one another, for, where Rumi was verbose, pedagogic and obedient to the Persian laws of prosody, Barks is clipped, cryptic and free-wheeling.

Stripped of its Persian and Islamic context, Rumi's teaching has been selectively improved by protagonists of the New Age and those who have come after them, but there may be a lot to be said for this unscholarly, selective and romanticised version of the medieval mystic. A modernised Rumi, filtered through the modern sensibility and phrasing of Barks and others, has brought comfort and hope to millions.

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