

The Contemporary Relevance of Rūmī's Language of the Soul



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Introduction

Despite the passage of over 700 years since his death, *Mawlānā*—“Our master”—Rūmī's teachings, remain relevant in many diverse—psychological, emotional, social, religious, literary, and metaphysical—contexts. Rūmī is a master of psychology, a verifier of revelation, a most profound guide to the depths of human nature, an insightful commentator on societal dynamics, a supreme literary genius, and of course, a consummate metaphysician and scientist of ultimate reality.

Both in the wider Western world and in the non-Persian-speaking Islamic world, Rūmī is not known as he rightly deserves. While lip-service has been given to him over the past three decades in the West as a universal voice of peace and love, this—albeit largely superficial—fame and popularity is itself all the more important because he is an authentic voice from within the Islamic spiritual tradition at a time when Islam is widely denigrated from outside. In today's Western Islamophobic society, many within the Muslim community suffer with a sense of malaise, discouragement, and humiliation, knowing what is essentially a religion of peace and truth has come to be viewed as a source of violence, oppression of women, and general intellectual backwardness. Given this disappointing social situation, Rūmī is a voice that needs to be heard, studied, and appreciated in depth.

The fable of the Lion and the Hare, which is found early in the first book of his *Mathnawī*, provides an excellent illustration of the contemporary relevance of Rūmī's thought to some of the social and political problems that plague the modern world.¹ The following meditations on the contemporary relevance of Rūmī's language of the soul are largely framed and informed by this tale (which in his narration is about 500

¹ For a good overview and study of this tale, see Christine van Ruymbeke, “The *Kalīlah wa Dimna* and Rūmī: ‘That was the Husk and This is the Kernel,’” *Mawlana Rumi Review*, IV (2013), pp. 85-105, as well as Nicholson's comments in his commentary on Book I, vv. 899-900. – ED.

couplets long²), which he had adopted from the Arabic cycle of animal legends known as *Kalīlah wa Dimnah*, which in turn was based on an ancient Indian classic.

The Wise Hare and the Dimwit Lion

As the fable goes, a mighty lion was attacking and preying on the animals of a certain valley. His harassment had afflicted the entire animal population with considerable anxiety. Suffering the risk of general extermination, the beasts call a meeting with the lion to propose a contract with him in order to alleviate the threat of their ongoing slaughter. It was agreed that one of the beasts will be regularly offered as a meal allowance for the lion as part of the deal. In this way, the autocratic lion will be unable to make the beasts his passive prey, while the majority of the animals will at least be saved from the worry of who is to be devoured next. The lion at first opposes the arrangement, offering eloquent arguments in defense of the virtue of individual effort and personal responsibility over the animals' advocacy of necessitarianism and fatalism:

Freewill is the endeavor to give thanks for His beneficence: your fatalistic trust is the denial of that beneficence. Thanksgiving for the power of acting freely increases your power; fatalism takes the Divine gift out of your hand.³

The beasts, however, prove themselves to be equally powerful theologians and oppose the lion by advocating the quietist perspective of resignation to God's will and Providence. In the following verses they preach the doctrine of reliance on God alone:

There is no work better than trust in God: What, indeed, is dearer to God than resignation? Often do they not flee from affliction only to fall into affliction? Often do they not recoil from the snake only to meet with the dragon? Man devised, and his devising

² *The Mathnawī of Jalālu'ddīn Rūmī*, ed. and trans. R.A. Nicholson (London: E.J.W. Gibb Memorial Trust, 1924-40; Gibb Memorial Series N.S.), Bk. I, vv. 900-1372.

³ *Mathnawī*, ed. Nicholson, I:938-39. Most of the translations below are based upon Nicholson's literal translation, slightly modified for readability.

became a trap: that which he thought to be life was actually the drainer of his blood.⁴

Rūmī places in the mouth of the lion a number of eloquent arguments in defense of freewill, individual responsibility, and making personal exertions (*kasb*), while the animals, to convince the lion that he should accept their terms and cease aggressively exerting himself, preach the virtue of pure trust in God (*tawakkul*). By advocating different Islamic theological positions, both the lion and beasts try to convince each other of the superiority and probity of their individual piety and so ridicule the vanity and inanity of the doctrines of their opposite numbers. However, as Nicholson wryly comments, “though the Lion can preach admirable doctrine when it suits his position, he plays the villain’s part all through the story.”⁵

In the end the lion agrees with the deal offered him by the animals and begins to get his provender freely provided him without hunting the beasts and scavenging through the jungle. One day a clever hare decides that he doesn’t want to play his allotted part in becoming the daily noonday sacrifice to the lion’s insatiable appetite. He devises a scheme to undo him. To disorient and trick the lion, the hare intentionally shows up late at noon, where he finds his foe, just as he hoped, furiously tearing up the ground for having been stood up for lunch. In his guile the hare produces an alibi to justify his delay. He relates how he was delayed along the way by another lion who confronted and threatened him, who seized the other plump buck-rabbit who had been traveling with him as his companion as a pledge, demanding that he return immediately with news of his foe, or else he would make his companion his prey. “So the tie of our covenant has now been severed by that other lion,” the hare declares. “It was that other lion who barred my way to you. You might as well give up all hope now in having your daily stipend provided as before. I speak the truth and truth is bitter.”⁶

Thrown off guard and incensed by the perceived impertinence of this intruder who dared to disrupt his meals and challenge his power, the lion immediately demands to know the whereabouts of the lair of his rival king of the jungle. The hare readily offers to lead him to his rival’s lair, which, as it happens, was at the bottom of a well. Upon arriving there, the lion beholds his adversary reflected in the water, with another plump hare at

⁴ *Mathnawī*, ed. Nicholson, I:916-19.

⁵ See *Mathnawī*, Nicholson’s commentary on Book I:901, p. 76.

⁶ *Mathnawī*, ed. Nicholson, I:1178-79.

his side. Enraged, he springs into the well to attack his challenger, a mere reflection of himself, but, of course, is drowned in the well itself.

The World-Well and Universal Reason

Let us now revisit an earlier episode in the fable. Having assessed the situation with his keen mind, the hare had, as mentioned above, determined there was a ruse that he could use to beguile the lion and so prevent becoming his next meal. So he deliberately showed up late for his own noonday date with death and the lion, in an attempt to rouse the lion's wrath and thus trick and distract him. At this juncture, Rūmī introduces an extended metaphysical reflection, which I cite below in full:

Whole worlds are manifested by Divine Intelligence (*'aql*), which is like an ocean. The forms of our existence are like cups or bowls floating upon the face of this sweet water. They are buoyed for a while, and eventually they fill with water and sink back to the depths from which they came. The Divine Intelligence remains hidden, while the phenomenal world is visible as waves and ocean spray. Whichever form the Ocean takes as a means to manifest itself, the Ocean then takes that means away, casting off that form.

So the heart is made to forget the Giver of conscience, and the arrow forget the Archer. In such a state he is like that rider who thinks he has lost his horse while the steed is obstinately speeding him down the road. That noble man thinks his horse is lost, yet his horse is pulling him fast as wind down the road. Crying out and looking everywhere, the mindless rider gads about from place to place, asking: "Who's stolen my horse? Who is he?" Yet what's this steed, good man, between your thighs?

. . . Spirit is so obvious and immediate that it is lost, like one whose stomach is full of water but whose lips are parched and parted open like a jar. How can you see the colors of red, green, and russet, unless there be the three lights⁷ visible before

⁷ Anqaravī, the great commentator on the *Mathnawī*, declares that "the manifestation of the existence of colors in the doctrine of Abī 'Alī Sīnā (Avicenna), as well as according to some other thinkers, is by mediation of the light of Being. There are three kinds of light that cause colors to be manifest, and without two of these, no color would be visible. The first is the light of the eye, second the light of sun and moon, and third, if it is night, the light of a lamp." See *Sharḥ-i kabīr-i Anqaravī bar Mathnawī-yi Mavlavī*, trans. into Persian

you. But since your mind has been immersed in those colors, the colors have become a veil and we do not recognize the Light. But when at night those colors are concealed, we realize our seeing of them depends upon light. One cannot perceive colors without an external light, and it is the same with the perception of imaginal colors internally.

This outward light is from the sun and stars, while the inward light is a reflection of Divine Radiance. The eye's light is derived from the light of the heart, and the light of the heart is from the Divine Light, which is pure and separate from the light of intellect and sense.

There was no light at night and so you saw no color, so that by what's opposed to light—darkness—color appeared. First one sees light, then color, and so it is that by its opposite (darkness) you can apprehend color instantaneously. . . .

Forms are bodied forth from the reality of Spirit as a lion springs from a thicket, or as an articulate voice and speech arises from thought. Voice and speech come from Thought, but you don't know where lies the Sea of Thought. But when you see the waves of speech are beautiful, you know the Sea from which they come is noble. . . .

The form was born from the Word and died again; the wave fell back into the Sea. Form appeared from formlessness and then fled back to it, for: "Indeed, unto Him we are returning."⁸

Rūmī's purpose in making this lengthy metaphysical excursus is to underline the importance of self-reflection. He explains that although in appearance "brute force" rules the world, in reality it is "right thought"—the hare symbolizing Divine Intelligence for the poet, and his artful stratagem being an emanation of Universal Mind (*'aql*)—that governs all events and determines the final outcome of phenomena. Just as the quality of any action depends on the underlying thought animating it, all human perceptions are but by-products of the colors and shapes perceived by the light of imagination, which in turn derive from the light of Divine Intelligence. The lion's carnal, material reason, enslaved to forms and infatuated by colorful phenomena, lacks divine illumination; hence his susceptibility to the ruse of the hare, symbol of the human intelligence guided by Universal Reason. Like the rider who cannot see the horse of his own mind

by 'Iṣmat Satārzāda (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Zarrīn, 1374 A.Hsh./1995), vol. II, p. 482. – ED.

⁸ *Mathnawī*, ed. Nicholson, I:1109-29, 1136-38, 1140; an allusion to Qur'ān, II:151.

while it is carrying him galloping away under him, the lion is kept in the dark, enraged by the colorful reflection of himself in the well of his own mind; he cannot perceive which Archer has fired the arrow of his wrathful phantasy, his heart being unaware of his secret conscience. Discernment between true and false perceptions, between illusion and reality, remain the exclusive province of the enlightened intelligence of the wise hare, Universal Reason.⁹

Another important teaching we may glean from the fable is that the hare—Universal Reason—represents the power of divine Mercy which alone can restore harmony in the jungle. The exercise of intelligence inspired by this divine Reason within man is a mercy which partakes of the ineluctable Law of Compensation, a teaching Rūmī elaborates in a later passage of the fable as follows:

The Lion leapt into the pit he had dug for himself, for his oppression had come back to haunt him. The iniquity of those who do evil is their own deep dark well, just as the wise have said. The more oppressively one behaves, the more terrifyingly deep one's well. Such is divine Justice; "requite ill for ill,"¹⁰ as the dictate commands. O you who would dig a pit of crime, you are laying down a snare for yourself alone! If you must spin a web of sin about yourself like a silkworm, at least take care it not envelop you completely!

Never think the weak are without a defender: remember the words of the Qur'ān: "When God's succor and triumph come . . ."¹¹ If the wretched of the earth beg for help, their cries shall reach the Heavenly Hosts. . . .

The lion saw himself in the well, and in his rage he could not distinguish himself at that moment from the enemy. He regarded his own reflection as his enemy, and so he took up arms against himself.

O many an evil that you see in others is your own nature projected upon them, O you to whom this may concern! In them has been reflected your own very being: your hypocrisy, oppression, and drunken brawling. That miscreant is you yourself, and you are striking those blows at yourself: you are cursing yourself at

⁹ See *Mathnawī*, Nicholson's commentary on Book I:1109-20.

¹⁰ Alluding to: "The guerdon of an ill-deed is an ill the like thereof. But whoever pardons and amends, his wage is the affair of God" (Qur'ān, XLII:40).

¹¹ Qur'ān, CX:1.

that moment. You cannot see that evil clearly in yourself, or else you would oppose yourself with all your soul. O simpleton, this attack you make is upon yourself, just like that lion who assaulted himself. When you reach the core of your own being, then you will know that that vileness was from yourself. At the bottom of the well the lion realized that what seemed to be the “other” was really his own image.¹²

The jungle depicted in this passage is the jungle of our own hearts. It is inevitable that the outer world of human society in general will reflect the ignorance and iniquity within the hearts of its people. As Rūmī repeats over and over in this passage, our perception of evil in others is more often than not simply a refusal to acknowledge the presence of those similar or identical reprehensible qualities within ourselves. On the political level, the Lion and Hare fable thus forms a perfect allegory for the everyday news of the world: the lion's irrational rage at his enemies we witness today continuously played out, decade after decade, in totalitarian ideologies, in the hegemony of globalist empires, in military invasions waging “just wars,” in misguided religious crusades, and in fundamentalist persecutions of opposing sectarian minorities, etc.

However, what is less understood, and certainly almost never taken into account by media analysts, political pundits, or social historians, is that no one ever escapes the Law of Compensation, that every oppressor ultimately pays in degree or kind for his oppression. Thus, on the spiritual level, Rūmī's teaching informs us that there exists an Inspirer of Conscience, an All-Merciful Teacher and Guide, which is the ever-present Divine Intelligence and Universal Reason, which, when necessary, can inspire an insignificant hare with a rescue plan, a solution, a way to the Truth.

In sum, according to Rūmī's insight into this ancient fable, our true well-being is always dependent on our relationship with Divine Intelligence. Human welfare rests as much on metaphysical as on physical foundations. As much as we may be overwhelmed and bewildered by the vicissitudes and circumstances of the jungle of the passions, distracted by the colorful variety of the realm of the world's multiplicity, there is a deeper spiritual reality from which we can derive security (*amanah*) and certainty (*yaqīn*). Thus, the wise hare, relates Rūmī, when warmly congratulated by the rest of the beasts of the chase, rather than being made giddy and proud by their celebration and commendation of the success of

¹² *Mathnawī*, ed. Nicholson, I:1308-13, 1315, 1317-25.

his ruse which had killed their oppressor, modestly shunned their praise, preferring to acknowledge that higher grace which sustained his abilities:

From God come privileges, from God come changes of fortune.

God sends his succor at regular intervals to skeptics and seers alike.

Be mindful! Do not exult in a kingdom of transience. You who are in bondage to vicissitude, do not act as though you are free!

A realm beyond vicissitude is waiting for you, and the drums are beating beyond the planets.

Beyond vicissitude are the eternal sovereigns: their spirits are circling with the Cupbearer perpetually.

If you will renounce these worldly intoxications for a day or two, you will taste the Wine of Paradise.¹³

Having outlined some of the spiritual teachings in Rūmī's Lion and Hare fable, what material pertinence, it may be asked, does it actually have for today's society? How can the words and ideas of a thirteenth-century Persian Sufi mystic help us meet the challenges of the global dilemmas that we face today? How can Rūmī's poetic wisdom help us address complex issues such as the environmental crisis that forces us to look at the consequences of our own greed and consumption? Or the arms crisis that threatens annihilation through nuclear holocaust, or by perpetual war through dependence on the manufacturing companies that sustain the military-industrial complex? Or the financial crisis that allows billions of people to starve in poverty while concentrating wealth in the hands of a tiny minority? Or the crisis of surveillance and technological control which currently looms, which will allow governments to propagandize entire populations, monitor communications, and stifle the dissent and activities of any citizens who threaten the status quo? Might it be wiser to focus fully on solving the complex technological issues underlying the unprecedented problems of the present day rather than scan medieval Islamic poetic texts for direction and guidance about what are, it would appear, practically speaking, purely modern afflictions?

Far from it. Rūmī remains as relevant today as he was in the mid-thirteenth century. The problems of the present are both informed and illumined by the solutions proposed by bygone sages; the answers we must formulate to these problems demand as much spiritual vision and

¹³ Ibid., I:1367-72.

imagination as they do practical, empirical analysis. Just as great works of art of all civilizations are timelessly relevant to modern aesthetic concerns, so the insights of ancient mystical psychology remain relevant to the social psychology underlying today's complex problems. Rūmī's insights can help us in formulating a fresh approach and response to these current troubles, and his message to us, although conveyed by means of poetic fable and allegory, I believe can be summed up in three symbols: a mirror, a compass or astrolabe, and a touchstone, each of which conveys its own wisdom.

The Mirror

One kind of mirror is a sacred text, preserved and valued for centuries, that gives us a perspective on our own times and situation. While no text can entirely escape the cultural and historical conditions within which it was created, the *Mathnawī* speaks to us from a relatively timeless dimension. It is a mirror because it helps us to see ourselves from an eternal perspective. Focused entirely on the present we lack the perspective and the capacity for reflection. Rūmī's timeless perspective, which derives from the quality of inspiration that created the *Mathnawī*, helps us to realize the nature of the times we live in, and allows us to see ourselves. In one passage of the *Mathnawī*, Rūmī describes how the entire world is a narrow cell within which each person only sees what is shown him. It is as if we are looking at the sun through blue sunglasses which makes the horizon appear blue, or gazing through a red lens which colors all things with red, but the Complete Human Being, *al-Insān al-kāmil*, is like a mirror "in which all colors are reflected; in him everyone sees his own good and evil qualities."¹⁴ Thus, the Prophet Muḥammad, states Rūmī, referred to himself as a mirror: "I am a hand-polished mirror. Hindu and Turk gaze upon me and see what exists within themselves."¹⁵ The saints are also mirrors in which we see ourselves reflected:

If you spit at the saint, you spit at your own face, just as when you strike a mirror, it is your own reflection you hit. If you see an ugly face there, that is your own countenance therein; and if you see Jesus and Mary: it is but you. But he is neither this nor that,

¹⁴ *Mathnawī*, Nicholson's commentary on Book I:2370.

¹⁵ *Mathnawī*, ed. Nicholson, I:2370.

but simple and pure, and has only placed your own face before you to see.¹⁶

There is also a parallel teaching about the mirror symbol in a later account of the same Lion and Hare fable (found in Book VI of the *Mathnawī*), where Rūmī analyses the mental attitude of the lion's rage as follows:

The blind follower of authority was subjugated by the hare: He was boiling with fury from his own fancy. So when you, enthralled by all six directions, wreck vengeance on your enemy, you are in error concerning all six. That enmity in your enemy is reflected from God, for it is derived from the divine attributes of Wrath manifested there. And that sin in him is akin to your own sin: you must wash that evil disposition out of your own nature. Your evil nature showed itself to you in him because he was like the surface of a mirror for you.¹⁷

The lion's mental attitude—which modern psychology refers to as the phenomenon of “projection”—underlies most of the military conflicts of modern man; the lion's blind jealousy and rage instructs us that our external “enemy,” the “other,” is in fact nothing but a mirror which displays our own internal vice and shortcomings.¹⁸ The lion's wrath, according to Rūmī's analysis, was merely a projection and reflection of the evil nature within himself. It is clear that the fable speaks directly to any military strategist, advising us that our enemies are, more often than not, nothing more than a projection upon others of our own shortcomings and flaws.

The Compass or Astrolabe

Just like the mirror of the saints, the compass that Rūmī offers us also orients us toward the Real. Without a metaphysical compass to orient us we become lost in a labyrinth of speculation, subjective values, and mere opinion. Those who have the capacity to appreciate this metaphysical

¹⁶ Ibid., IV:2141-43.

¹⁷ Ibid., VI:3148-53.

¹⁸ Cf. C.G. Jung's essay: “Introduction: Individual and Mass Psychology,” in his *Essays on Contemporary Events*, trans. E. Walsh *et al.* (London: Kegan Paul, 1946), pp. ix-xviii. – Ed.

compass—and clearly there will always be with us those who live in denial of such spiritual realities—will be guided by it as they contend with the challenges of the present. The more that such enlightened individuals turn to profound sources of traditional wisdom, the more this world can be protected from the dehumanizing forces which threaten social justice and human dignity.

All of Rūmī's stories, poems, prayers, and metaphors are unified by a metaphysics centered upon the Divine attributes of Beauty, Generosity, Mercy, and Love. All of existence flows from and returns to that Divine Reality. This is his orientation (*qibla*), his true north. In the following verses from the *Mathnawī*, which occur just before the passage from Book VI cited above, Rūmī speaks of man himself as being an astrolabe (using the Arabic word *uṣṭurlāb*, from which the English "astrolabe" is derived) by which the spiritual astronomer can decipher the divine mysteries:

Man is an astrolabe of the highest mysteries: his character is to be a place of epiphany for the Signs of God. Whatever appears within man is a divine reflection, just like the moon shining on a river's running water. The lines of the Spider ('*ankabūt*) etched across the astrolabe (the uppermost tablet that is criss-crossed by lines and figures representing the Zodiac) are there to confirm the presence of Eternal Qualities, so the Spider may expound in detail the firmament of the Invisible Realm and Sun of the Spirit. However, without an astronomer to read them, this Spider and astrolabe of spiritual direction have fallen into the hands of common folk. God vouchsafed this spiritual astrology to the prophets, since to see the invisible realm requires supernatural vision. Generations have fallen into the Well of the World, where they saw their own image reflected therein. Recognize that whatever is revealed to you in this Well comes from outside, else you're like that lion who plunged down and drowned therein.¹⁹

Only those who know how to use this human astrolabe, that is, the prophets, perceive these hidden, divine mysteries within man. Those who cannot use the astrolabe to perceive these divine mysteries are like the lion who plunged down into the pit of illusion, the world-well-mirror, where they saw only the reflection of their own face, the image of their own flaws and faults shimmering therein.

¹⁹ Ibid., VI:3138-45.

But for the mystics who are attuned to love (*‘ishq*), “which is an astrolabe of divine mysteries,”²⁰ who have spiritual insight, that human astrolabe can be used to apprehend the divine Attributes, just like the spider on the astrolabe reflects the internal divine nature in man. By utilizing their spiritual insight and orienting themselves by means of this internal compass, they can perceive the realm of the Spirit. Rūmī describes human intelligence, if used correctly, as being just such an astrolabe, through which “you can apprehend how close the Sun of Being is to you. That nearness is indescribable and directionless, beyond left and right, and before and behind.”²¹

The Touchstone

Within each person exists a spiritual intelligence by which he or she discerns truth from falsehood. “The genuine from the counterfeit gold cannot be assayed well without a touchstone to distinguish their weight. In whosoever’s soul God sets a touchstone can immediately distinguish what’s certain from what’s dubious.”²² If one can’t locate this touchstone of true humanity, capable of distinguishing between the genuine article and the counterfeit within oneself, then it is better to follow someone else who already possesses this inner criterion, Rūmī advises:

A beam was cast on the counterfeit coin by pure gold. Without a touchstone don’t try, by mere fancy, to assay the difference. If you have a touchstone, go ahead, choose; otherwise, go and pledge yourself to someone intelligent enough to distinguish between the two. Either you must have a touchstone within your own soul, or if you don’t know the way, find someone who does.²³

Complementing this interior touchstone within the soul, the Qur’ān and the mystical states of the prophets also constitute an exterior touchstone; by constant study and meditation upon these, the difference between sterling and counterfeit coinage may be assayed, and spiritual truth from error discerned:

²⁰ Ibid., I:110.

²¹ Ibid., IV:3685-86.

²² Ibid., I:299-300.

²³ Ibid., II:745-47.

Intelligence and sensual self-gratification are contraries, O champion. Don't regard anyone wrapped up in sensual gratification as intelligent. What's enslaved to sensuality is called "fantasy" ; fantasy is the counterfeit coin of the sterling coin of intelligence. Without a touchstone the difference between fantasy and intelligence can't be assayed, so quickly put both of these to the touchstone. That touchstone is the Qur'ān and the mystical states of the prophets, for the touchstone calls the counterfeit coin to "Come! Then when you place yourself on me, you'll see how foreign you are to my spiritual heights and depths."²⁴

Many in the contemporary world see human nature as something malleable, arbitrarily shaped by education, the media, and being subject to various social influences, too often under the control of those with the power and money. However, innate within each person, says Rūmī, there lies a touchstone which is immune to all such external influences. That touchstone allows one to perceive the uses of adversity in order to grasp how blessings often come disguised as calamities. The touchstone bestows a knowledge of the Divine within the heart of reality itself:

Everyone can distinguish mercy from wrath, whether he is wise or ignorant or corrupt, but a mercy hidden in wrath, or wrath hidden in the heart of mercy can only be recognized by one whose nature is divine, whose heart contains the spiritual touchstone.²⁵

The human heart is the instrument of theophany, the locus in which the divine experiences itself as other. In the following verses, Rūmī relates how the Devil (*Iblīs*) asked the Caliph Mu'āwiya how he could tell the difference between false illusion and truth.

Iblis asked, "Can you tell a lie from the truth,
O you who are filled with illusion?"
Mu'āwiya answered, "The Prophet has given a clue,
a touchstone to know the base coin from the true.
He has said: 'That which is false troubles the heart,
but Truth brings joyous tranquility.'"²⁶

²⁴ Ibid., IV:2301-05.

²⁵ Ibid., III:1506-08.

²⁶ Ibid., II:2732-34.

Thus within every sound and pure heart, but especially in the heart of the Complete Human Being (*al-Insān al-kāmil*), exists a touchstone that discerns between good and ill and distinguishes error and deceit from truth and sincerity.

Conclusion

From the foregoing I hope I have shown how the wisdom within an ancient Indian animal fable first translated into Arabic in the tenth century, then versified by a thirteenth-century Persian poet, has relevance to modern concerns in the twentieth-first century. As we have seen, the wise hare exemplifies the Divine Intelligence operating within the world and man, offering guidance and disclosing the truth within this world of illusion—the well of human passion and rage. An insignificant, powerless creature inspired by Divine Intelligence leads the lion toward a fate which his jealousy and pride had made inevitable. The following lines from this fable concerning knowledge, penned by Rūmī in a passage of the *Mathnawī* subtitled “In Illustration of the Wisdom of the Hare and in Exposition of the Excellence and Advantage of Knowledge,” which today are still memorized by children in grammar schools in Afghanistan and Iran, constitute some of the most famous verses in all of Islamic literature about the benefits of learning and knowledge.

Knowledge is the seal of the kingdom of Solomon. The whole world is form. Knowledge is the Spirit. . . . The human being has many secret enemies. The cautious person is the wise one. At every instant there are secret creatures, both good and ill, every moment knocking on the heart. If you go to wash in the river and a thorn pricks you beneath the surface, although hidden, you still feel its barb. The sharp barbs of inspiration and temptation come from thousands of beings, not just one. Wait for your bodily senses to be transmuted, so you can see them and the problem solved for you. Then you will know whose words you have rejected and whose you have followed.²⁷

The three symbols of mirror, astrolabe, and touchstone are of course internal, psychological realities serving to orient us towards that higher consciousness which is called by names such as Universal Reason or heart. Rūmī's *Mathnawī* is itself a mirror reflecting reality and a touchstone of

²⁷ Ibid., I:1030, 1034–40.

truth, which offers insights from an “eternal” spiritual perspective and addresses and illuminates the transient but real concerns of the present. His symbol of the mirror of phenomena—the lion’s plunging down into the mirror of the world-well—also affords us timeless observations concerning the psychology of the projection of human anger. Likewise, his exposition of the spiritual astrology of the internal astrolabe within man that reflects divine Qualities presents us with a spiritual compass by which we can distinguish what should be the true metaphysical direction of our terrestrial journey. Similarly, the touchstone he presents us with allows us to cut through the deceptions of today’s materialistic environment and reconnect with the eternal aspects of our humanity, and reconnect with the eternal aspects of our humanity, which is, after all, the function of all great world literature.²⁸

Much of what passes for knowledge today, especially in our mass media, is like writing on the water:

When the pen is of wind and the scroll is of water,
 Whatever you write vanishes quickly.
 It is written on water:
 If you expect constancy from it
 You’ll wind up biting your own hands.
 The wind in human beings is vanity and desire;
 Only when you have abandoned vanity
 Will His message come to us.
 The messages of the Maker are sweet;
 They abide from head to foot, from first to last.
 The speeches and nations of the politicians pass away;
 The speeches and community of the Prophets abide. . . .
 The royal images stamped on coins will vanish.
 But the name of Ahmad is permanently inscribed,
 And this is the name of all the Prophets.
 The hundredth includes the ninety-nine.²⁹

In every age, humanity as a whole faces the possibility of waking up to its spiritual nature. The crisis of our times is forcing us to recognize the destructiveness of our collective egoism and to acknowledge our innate nature, our *fiṭra*, which exists beyond the prison of the five senses and all

²⁸ His *Mathnawī* is literally a touchstone as well, being one of three books in Persian used for the purposes of divination (the other two being the *Dīvāns* of Ḥāfiẓ and Sa’dī). — Ed.

²⁹ *Mathnawī*, ed. Nicholson, I:1099-1103, 1105-1106.

the compulsions and fears these produce. What remains for us to do is to distill this relatively timeless knowledge into a language and a way of life more in harmony with the requirements of Reality—*al-Ḥaqq*. The beauty and spiritual depth of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī offers a creative and explicit language of the Soul that can inform a desperate humanity in its contemporary defining moment.