

**MYSTICAL POETRY IN ISLAM:
THE CASE OF MAULANA JALALADDIN RUMI**

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Blessed time! when we are sitting,
I and thou,
With two forms and only one soul,
I and thou.
Fragrance, song of birds, they quicken
cv'rything,
When we come into the garden,
I and thou.
All the stars of heaven hurry
to see us,
And we show them our own moon,
I and thou.
I and thou without words, without
I and thou—
In delight we are united,
I and thou.
Sugar chew the heaven's parrots
in that place
Where we're sitting, laughing sweetly,
I and thou.
Strange that I and thou together in this nook
Are apart yet thousand miles, see—
I and thou.
One form in this dust, the other
in that land,
Sweet eternal Paradise there. . . .
I and thou.¹ (*Divan* 2214)

This *ghazal*, a poem with one rhyme, here extended by additional rhyme words (I and thou) is one of the most tender descriptions of the

R&L 20.1 (Spring 1988)

state of loving ecstasy found in the enormous work of Maulana Jalaladin Rumi, the outstanding mystical poet in the Persian tongue, and probably one of the greatest mystical poets in the world. Rumi describes in traditional images the state of complete spiritual union between lover and beloved: no separation exists anymore, and everything created—gardens, birds, stars—participates in amazement in this scene. The silent word of the united lovers is so sweet that the heavenly parrots (attired in green, the color of Paradise) indulge in their favorite occupation, that is, to chew sugar, and the stars of heaven look bewildered at the beauty of the beloved, radiant as the full moon. And yet, this is a purely spiritual experience—the bodies of the lovers are thousands of miles apart, “in Iraq and Khorassan” (eastern Iran), as the text should be translated literally. The bodies may still be on the dusty earth but the spirits have reached eternal, paradisiacal bliss.

Behind this simple poem lies a development in Islamic culture of nearly seven centuries and, more than that, a unique experience of mystical love which transformed Rumi into a poet. How did this happen?

One of the most fascinating aspects of Islamic literatures is the enormous amount of religious, and in particular mystical, poetry in the various languages of the Islamic world. Surprisingly, this type of poetry has never been taken into consideration by the literary critics of the Islamic Middle Ages. The development of truly religious verse in the Islamic world took considerable time, as poetry and poets were condemned in the end of Sura 26 of the Koran. There, poets were called people “who say what they do not do,” and are considered to be “roaming in every valley.” This verdict, to be sure, was directed against traditional Arabic poetry, which was highly developed as to vocabulary, grammar, and rhetoric at the time that Islam appeared, and which expressed in a rather uninhibited style the joys of free love and the pleasure of drinking, self-praise and satire. These topics remained an integral part of poetry even later, and pious theologians were therefore often adverse to poetry. The Prophet himself regarded the most accomplished poet of pre-Islamic days, Imru’l-qais, “as the leader of people on the way to Hell.”

During the Prophet’s lifetime, several poets wrote encomia for him, among them Hassan ibn Thabit, who was attached to the young Muslim community in Medina. He described the Prophet and his achievements and denigrated his enemies in traditional style, and his verse cannot really be called “religious” poetry. One reason for the late appearance of religious verse is that the Koran, regarded as the primordial Divine

Word revealed in clear Arabic language, was so overwhelming that one simply did not dare to express religious feelings in poetical words. But the Koran's vocabulary, symbols, and stories permeated Muslim thought, and when the first ascetic trends emerged in Iraq and Khorassan during the early eighth century, the constant recitation and meditation of the sacred text led to what Père Nwyia has so aptly called "a koranization of the memory." The words and phrases of the Arabic Koran resound in the mystical poetry of all Islamic languages to our own day. The Koran must be recited only in its original Arabic, and many a verse that sounds simple and plain to an untutored Western reader is fraught with meaning as it contains a word or two from the Koran which, in turn, spark off a whole series of related concepts. The structure of Arabic, with its three-lettered roots out of which almost infinite verbal and nominal derivations can be formed, enables the Arab as well as all those who have grown up in a traditional Muslim environment to understand not only the word mentioned in a sentence or verse but to evoke also a plethora of cognate meanings. To us these meanings may look far-fetched, but as they are derived from one root they can be interconnected by the exegete. The Arabic script, which was used in most countries where Islam spread, does not express the short vowels, and every consonant has a numerical value as well. These features add to the intricacies of religious texts which can be interpreted on ever so many levels.

The Arabic language was highly refined already during the time of the Prophet Muhammed (570?-632 A.D.), but despite an enormous output of poetry, its greatest achievement seems to be the terse, beautiful prose style which was used by educated people—a style that delights every reader by its density and its crystalline lucidity. This quality is visible in the sayings of the Sufis, the mystics, during the first centuries of Islam. These sayings condense the experience of Divine Love and Unity and try to guide the disciple into a non-logical understanding of the highest mysteries, which must not be revealed to the uninitiated. The short poems written during the classical time—between 800 and 1100 A.D.—are usually not of great literary value, although they nicely reflect the central topics of Sufism: longing and love. Some passages in the poetry of the martyr-mystic al-Hallaj (executed in 922 in Baghdad) reach a higher poetical level; yet, even in his case, his prayers and prose pieces are more moving. Only once, around 1200, is truly great Arabic mystical verse to be found: in the poems of 'Umar ibn al-Farid of Cairo, who used the classical vocabulary of love poetry to express his love of God, and whose *khamriyya*—the poem about the

"wine of love" — has influenced generations of mystics. His long description of the mystical path, the *Ta'yya* with its 756 verses, was commented upon century after century.

The true home of Islamic mystical poetry is the Persian and Persianate world, stretching from Turkey to Bengal and central Asia. Persian developed as a literary medium in the tenth century A.D. and its poetry was regulated according to the rules of Arabic rhetorics, prosody, and rhyme. Monorhyme prevails, but whereas in Arabic the rhyme consists of one letter, at most two, in Persian and the languages under its influence the rhyme consists of a word or even a full phrase after the actual rhyming letter, whether the poem is a *ghazal* (a short love poem) or a *qasida* (a long poem mainly devoted to praise or, more rarely, to satire). The Persians also developed the poem in rhyming couplets, *mathnavi*, which could be extended to thousands of lines, and they loved to express tender feelings and pithy thoughts in the *ruba'i*, the quatrain of the form *aaxa* (known in Europe thanks to Fitzgerald's version of Omar Khayyam's *Rubaiyat*). Such quatrains were often sung during the Sufi meetings in the so-called *sama'* (literally "hearing"), when love poetry was recited with musical accompaniment and many of the listeners experienced an ecstatic state, or at least a spiritual uplifting. Comparatively early, the *mathnavi*, first used for heroic themes, was applied to mystical teaching. Sana'i of Ghazna (now Afghanistan) set the example with his *Hadiqat al-haqiqah*, "The Orchard of Truth," written in the early twelfth century. He tells anecdotes and little stories to draw a lesson from them, and this type of didactic poetry remained in use for centuries to come. It was refined by Faridaddin 'Attar (died 1220) whose mystical *mathnavis* are masterpieces of narrative art, delicately molded, with beautiful, often sad stories. They offer poetical descriptions of the mystical path and the mystic's experiences: in the *Mantiq at-tair*, 'Attar tells the wandering of the thirty soul-birds through the seven valleys of mystical experiences until they reach the *Si-murgh*, the Divine Bird, with whom they, being *si-murgh*, "thirty birds," are identical. In the *Musibatnama*, the dialogues of the seeker with all creatures during the forty days of his seclusion are described in vivid images: everything in the world longs for God, and the perfected Sufi finds Him, in the end, in "the ocean of his own heart." In the *Ushtur-nama*, again, God is symbolized as the great playmaster who makes appear and disappear the puppets on the screen of the shadow theater, a theme used by numerous mystical poets (including Ibn al-Farid), especially in later Turkish and Indo-Muslim literature.

'Attar paved the way for Jalaladdin Rumi, the greatest of all mystical

poets in the Islamic world, a poet whose *Mathnavi* has been called by the fifteenth-century mystical writer Jami, "the Koran in the Persian tongue." Jalaladdin was born in Balkh, northern Afghanistan, into the family of a leading mystical theologian, probably in 1207. The family left Balkh, apparently for political reasons, to settle briefly in Aleppo, then in Anatolia, *Rum*—hence Jalaladdin's surname *Rumi*. The country was thriving under the benevolent rule of Alaettin Kaykobad, the Seljukid ruler of Konya. The family moved to the capital after a lengthy stay in Laranda-Karaman, and Jalaladdin became his father's successor as professor of theology in 1231. He was initiated into mystical theory and practice by a disciple of his father, and in the fall of 1244, he experienced an overwhelming mystical love through a wandering dervish, Shamsaddin, "the Sun of Religion," of Tabriz. They were inseparable, but after some time, Shamsaddin left Konya, threatened by the growing aversion of Maulana ("our lord") Rumi's family and disciples. It was during this first separation that Rumi became a poet. He himself did not know how this happened, and thus he wonders time and again:

In my hand there was always the Koran—
Now I seized the lute out of love!
In my mouth there were always words of laud—
Now it is poetry and quatrains, and songs. . . . (*Divan* 2351)

After some time Shams was found in Damascus, and Maulana's young son, Sultan Valad, was sent to bring him home; much later, he described in his *Valadnama* how his father and Shamsaddin fell at each other's feet, "and nobody knew who was the lover and who the beloved." Again a short period of close relationship began. Then, on December 5, 1248, Shamsaddin was called out of Maulana's house never to return—in all probability killed by members of Rumi's entourage. Maulana knew what had happened, yet he refused to believe that "the sun had died." He continued to search for his friend, even traveling to Syria. But finally he discovered the beloved "in his own heart, radiant as the moon." And his poetry—now written under his friend's name—poured out as though it were magical incantation because:

The primordial Moon is his face, verse and *ghazal* are his scent—
Scent is the portion of him who is not intimate with the view.

Jalaladdin slowly calmed down. His friend, the illiterate goldsmith Salahaddin Zarkub, whom he had known for a long time, was, after the consuming fire of "the Sun," Shams, like a soothing moon for him. The circle of the Maulana's disciples—men and women from all strata

of society—grew constantly, and his favorite disciple, Husamaddin Chelebi, was able to persuade his master to compose a mystical *mathnavi* for the benefit of his students, lest they rely exclusively on the works of Sana'i and 'Attar. Maulana complied, and it is said that he immediately improvised the first eighteen couplets of the *Mathnavi-yi ma'navi*, "The Spiritual Couplets." It is the so-called "Song of the Reed":

Harken to the reed how it complains
and how it tells the pangs of separation. . . . (*Mathnavi* I.1)

The reed is the human soul, separated from the primordial reedbed, the Divine Presence, and its music makes people aware of the secret of longing for home. The dictation of the *Mathnavi* was interrupted after less than two years, in 1258, and was resumed in 1262, at a time when Husamaddin had matured and was chosen as Rumi's future successor. It continued until shortly before Maulana's death on December 17, 1273, when the bird of his soul returned from the cage of the body to the eternal rose garden. An enormous crowd attended his funeral—Muslims, Christians, and Jews—for he was loved and admired by all communities. A long *sama'* with music and whirling dance followed the funeral prayers, for

When you come to visit my grave,
my roofed tomb will appear to you dancing. . . .
Do not come to my tomb without tambourine, brother!
For a grieved person does not belong to God's banquet! (*Divan* 683)

A high, turquoise-green dome was constructed over his tomb. It was converted into a museum after Ataturk closed the dervish lodges and banned the mystical brotherhoods in 1925. But the spirit of Rumi, his poetry, and the mystical dance which was institutionalized by Sultan Valad, are still very much alive.

Maulana Jalaladdin's life is a paradigm of mystical experience. Completely burning himself in the Divine Love as experienced through Shamsaddin, he attained spiritual peace and equilibrium in his relation with Salahaddin; and, to complete the semicircle, then turned to his disciple Husamaddin in whom he saw a ray of the Divine Sun and to whom he entrusted the secrets of mystical life in innumerable stories, fables, and anecdotes. A key passage of the *Mathnavi*, and of mystical poetry in general, is found at the beginning of the first part when Husamaddin—called "the soul"—asks Rumi to tell him more about Shamsaddin and insists, despite the master's refusal, until Maulana says:

It is better that the secret of the beloved ones
be told in the stories of others. (*Mathnavi* I.136)

He warns him that the sun, which illuminates the whole world, will burn everything if it comes too close. Likewise, the Divine Truth can be expressed only in symbols—like colorless light which becomes visible when broken by glass pieces or raindrops.

Rumi's work is inexhaustible. His relation with Shams resulted in a constant output of lyrical poetry, of *ghazals* in which he sings of his love and longing and suffering in wonderful images. These images are often taken from everyday life, so that his verse offers a veritable picture of the customs and events in a medieval Anatolian town. It seems to me that it is exactly this rootedness in daily human experience which makes his verse so fresh—"fresh like Egyptian bread," as he says once (although he claims that such bread does not keep fresh long). Even during the time he dictated the *Mathnavi* he continued to write *ghazals*. To be sure, these later lyrical poems often lack the high soaring spirit of the earlier verse and sometimes are mainly didactic. The complete number of couplets in the collection of lyrical verse amounts to some 36,000, to which a good number of *ruba'iyat* has to be added. About one third to one quarter of the *ghazals* bear the pen name of Shamsaddin, for instead of mentioning his own name in the last line of a *ghazal*—customary with Persian poets—Rumi inserted his beloved's name to point to their complete unity. Many other *ghazals* end with the word *khamush*, "Quiet!" or another admonition to stop talking (for the true secret can never be revealed). Others have no proper ending at all. There are some poems with the pen name of *Salahaddin* and a very few with that of *Husamaddin Chelebi*. To this remarkable number of lyrical verses one has to add the approximately 26,000 verses of the *Mathnavi*. Also there are Maulana's talks (collected as *Fihi ma fihi*), and some 170 letters, written to different people in Konya, mainly notables whom he often asked to help his protégés. The letters show him as a man concerned with the welfare of the poor and needy: despite his deep mystical experiences, he never lost touch with the people of this world who needed his support.

The *Mathnavi* has been read and re-read, commented upon and translated into different Oriental and Western languages. Every educated person in Ottoman Turkey and in Muslim India knew it, and Hindus also were enchanted by its contents: as early as the late fifteenth century a writer in faraway Bengal complained that even "the holy Brahmin reads the *Mathnavi*." Most of its numerous interpreters have understood it in the light of the mystical theosophy of Ibn 'Arabi (died 1240), whose influence shaped almost all mystical teaching in the Islamic world after 1300, and whose main interpreter, Sadraddin

Qonawi, was a neighbor and friend of Maulana Rumi in Konya. Yet it is impossible to interpret the outpourings of the free, soaring spirit in terms of a highly complicated mystical philosophy, and Maulana himself was very much against a philosophical approach to Sufism and to life in general. In fact, he very rarely used even the technical vocabulary of Sufism as developed during the first centuries of Islam, and was blamed for that by some highbrow intellectuals of Konya. But for him, poetry, especially his own poetry, was connected with inspiration. In a moment of despair he remarked that in his native country, Balkh, poetry was the lowliest and most despicable profession one could think of, and that he would never have dreamt of writing a verse — but:

Into me breathes
that one Turk who comes and says to me: "Hey, who are you?" (*Divan* 1949)

He felt like an instrument moved by the breath of the mystical beloved, a flute to sing of love and separation, a harp resting on the friend's breast, touched by his fingers, and at times like a drum beaten by him. Musical imagery permeates his work, and much of his verse was composed during the musical sessions which his friends arranged for him, while he was dancing, spinning around his axis, reciting line after line. Although his lyrics are written according to the rules of quantitative classical prosody, many of them can be scanned according to stress, and Maulana himself sometimes sighs that "this *mufta'ilun mufta'ilun* has killed me," because the catchwords for metrical forms seemed to divert him from the inner meaning. One is indeed tempted to clap one's hands while reading many of his poems. Strong rhythm is one of their characteristics as is the use of powerful, and at times unusual, words and rhymes. Maulana did not hesitate to use dialect forms, and the common parlance of Konya during his time — Greek and Turkish — appears also in some of his *ghazals*, at least in the rhyme. His Arabic was flawless, and he inserts Arabic phrases from the Koran, the Prophetic traditions, and Sufi history into his Persian poetry without difficulty, and also composed a considerable number of Arabic poems. These, however, are always written in meters commonly used in Persian, not in the long, heavy, classical Arabic meters, and their imagery betrays that the author's mother-tongue is Persian.

In some of Maulana's *ghazals* one can feel how the inspiration sets in: a powerful first line immediately catches the listener's attention, and the inspiration continues through a long sequence of verses, like waves, with ever new, stunning images, until the apex is reached; then

the inspiration seems to stop while the rhyme word forces him to continue with lines less attractive than the main part. Contrary to the classical ideal, most of Rumi's *ghazals* display a unity of thought—even though he may sometimes be carried away by illogical verbal associations—whereas in the normal *ghazal*, each verse is supposed to be a closed unit, so that a poem resembles a string of unique pearls, strung by a fastidious jeweller. Rumi is not a jeweller or a poet who filters his ideas and feelings through layers and layers of intellectual activities until one perfect line is achieved; for him, feeling is first, and his poetry is nothing but the result of inspiration through unending love. His early *ghazals* are the most intoxicated ones, the sound of the beloved's name carrying him as it were from verse to verse:

Not alone I keep on singing
 Shamsaddin and Shamsaddin,
 But the nightingale in gardens
 sings, the partridge in the hills.
 Day of splendor. Shamsaddin, and
 turning heaven! Shamsaddin!
 Mine of jewels: Shamsaddin, and
 Shamsaddin is day and night. . . . (*Divan* 1081)

At times he may use amazing paradoxes, or even describe some of his visions: carried away by the "falcon Love," he sees the Divine Ocean billowing, out of which everything emerges to return into the fathomless sea at the call of the abyss. Trees become candles, candles become humans; flowers and stones talk about the power of the Sun of Love manifested through Shamsaddin. Those who know Anatolia can appreciate Rumi's allusions to the ice and snow which bar the freezing soul from its way home until spring, when the Sun enters Aries and the snow melts; the caravan of souls moves on, and the trees begin to dance, moved by the breeze of Love, and donning the green garments of Paradise which tailor Spring has prepared for them because they have been patient during the hard days of winter; the spring thunder resembles Israfil's trumpet which calls the dead out of their graves to appear at the resurrection and be granted a new life. Rumi's imagery is limitless—be it taken from food or from children's games, be he inspired by the pleasant but dangerous gypsies who perform their rope dance in the streets, or by the miserable donkey, the stench of garlic, or the proud camel which, though of crooked shape, carries its patient rider to the Kaaba. Bees and bats, lions and cats, roses and violets, ravens and hawks—they all appear in his poetry to represent this or that aspect of the soul, or of human life.

A typical example of his style is the description of love upsetting everything:

Prison became Paradise through the clamor of Love,
 Mr. Justice "Intellect" drunken on the judge's bench!
 They came to Professor Reason to ask:
 "Why has this terrible riot happened in Islam?"
 Mufti "First Intellect" answered with legal opinion:
 "This is the moment or resurrection — where is [the difference] between licit and illicit?" (*Divan* 202)

The description of the Preacher "Love" then slowly tapers off into less interesting images. The *Mathnavi* offers a similar wealth of symbols, allegories, and longer stories. Initial stories more often than not lead to new stories; and carried away by verbal associations, Maulana spins out of a simple folktale, even a dirty joke, ascending spirals of mystical thought which lead the reader through every aspect of religious experience. The *Mathnavi* is a veritable encyclopedia not only of mystical teaching but of folklore, literary history, and proverbs, a book which constantly surprises the reader — as does the *Divan-i Shams*, the lyrical poetry.

Yet behind all these variegated expressions and colorful stories there is a hidden unity. It is the strong conviction of every Muslim that there is "no deity save Allah," that He alone is the one who acts, the only one to whom to turn. Everything in the world is His army, working under His orders. What look like secondary causes are, in reality, only the means by which He carries out His work. That does not mean, though, that man is completely coerced. He has a certain degree of free will, as Rumi exemplifies in the story of the thief who was caught stealing apples from a tree. The thief claims that he did it because God had written his acts beforehand, but the man is given a solid beating with "the stick of God" until he admits that sins are never ordered by God. Maulana repeats time and again that every act brings its own fruits, and when one plants colocynths, one cannot expect sugar cane to grow. Everyone, he says, has to wear the garment made of the material that he himself has spun and woven, and recompense and punishment are meted according to man's actions and intentions. Yet there is a limit to one's responsibilities as well as to one's possibilities: the ox is beaten because he refuses to carry the yoke, not because he does not sprout wings. Although Maulana likes to quote the Prophet's sayings, "People are asleep, and when they die they awake," he admonishes his readers not to assume that dreams are of no consequence: they will see the true interpretation of their dreams in the morning

light of eternity, in the other world. And who can describe the world of eternity, the spiritual realms? We know as little of it as the foetus in the dark womb can imagine the beauty of this world, its flowers and colors.

Rumi's work is the expression of a love experience that is more intense than a normal human being can imagine. No other poet, East or West, has invented so many metaphors for Love in all its aspects: Love is a tax collector who does not leave anything to man, and Love is a consoling mother; Love is alchemy that transforms the copper of human nature into pure gold after purifying it in the heat of the crucible; Love is a dragon that swallows man completely; it appears as a policeman who "hits intellect over the head," or as a creeper that completely covers the tree of human existence; it is a ragman who wants to buy all the old, shabby parts of human life (Rumi makes Love call, in Turkish, "Who has got old shoes?"), and it is the government official enacting confiscation of all goods; it is a carpenter who builds a ladder to the roof of heaven; it is that which poisons the lover's tears so that sleep dies when approaching his eyes. And yet, this poison is sweeter than honey, this illness more wholesome than health. In short, Love can appear under every imaginable form, and all the heroes of traditional stories, the prophets mentioned in the Koran, and the various aspects of nature only serve to prove the strength of this Love which makes the lover forget everything besides the Beloved. One of the most beautiful passages in the *Mathnavi* alludes to this attitude of the true lover: the lengthy description of Zulaikha, Potiphar's wife, who is in love with the beautiful Joseph. She thinks only of him, and hides his name in everything she says — whether it be, "The sun is shining," or "The bread is tasty," or "Clean the rugs," or "I have a headache." When she says something positive, it means, "He was kind to me," and when she complains, it is because he lacks interest in her.

This story appears at the very end of the *Mathnavi*, and must have been composed only a few months, perhaps weeks, before Maulana's death. It takes up the remark, in the beginning of the *Mathnavi*, that the secrets of the beloved ones can be expressed only in the stories of others. Maulana's love of Shamsaddin, through whom he attained perfect love of God and His prophet, is hidden under all the hundreds of metaphors, the thousands of symbols and allusions, the various stories in his more than 60,000 verses. What he wants to express is not, as most of his earlier interpreters thought, a theoretical concept of "Unity of Being," but rather the dynamic force of true love which changes one's whole life, and concentrates one upon only one thing, the presence

of the Beloved. This love cannot be learned, as the Sufis have always known; rather, it is a gift of grace, a Divine Gift — and the same applies to his poetry, the fruit of his love. Rumi also knows that every word the lover utters in his relation with God is divinely inspired, for

Not only the thirsty seek the water—
the water seeks the thirsty as well. (*Mathnavi* I.1741)

One of the first chapters of the *Mathnavi* ever translated into a Western language, a Latin booklet in 1821 by the German Protestant theologian F.A.D. Tholuck, is the story of the man who gave up prayer owing to the Satanic insinuations that no answer seemed to come from the Lord. God reveals to the man that in his every cry, "O God!" there are a hundred Divine Addresses, "Here I am at thy service." Prayer is a gift of grace; otherwise, "How could a rose grow from an ash pit?" The Swedish archbishop Nathan Söderblom, the first to recognize the importance of Rumi's story on prayer, has rightly compared it to Pascal's experience of God's revelation: "You would not have sought Me if you had not already found Me." Rumi expresses — in this story as in many comparable sayings — a truth which was well known to the Muslims, and especially to the Sufis, from the very beginning: everything is a Divine Gift, and man has to acknowledge this gift by constant gratitude.

Rumi's poetry is still as fresh as it was seven centuries ago. Its repercussions are strong not only in the Islamic world, particularly in the areas under Persian influence, but also in the West, where the first translations of his verse were produced by German orientalists in the early nineteenth century. Rückert's version of Maulana's *ghazals*, published in 1820, although freely adapted, reflects the poet's spirit better than most of the later, more literal translations; they are also remarkable in that they reproduce the form of the *ghazal* with its monorhyme faithfully in German so that the *ghazal* has become a completely germanized literary form. Still, Rumi's poetry is available to most Westerners only through more or less faithful translations, most of which cannot convey the slightest idea of the original's breathtaking beauty and dazzling rhetorical art.

But another aspect of Maulana's work is more easily understood by the nonspecialist: the ritual of the *sama'*, the whirling mystical dance accompanied by the haunting sound of lute and drums, and introduced by the *na't-i sharif*, the praise poem for the Prophet Muhammad, which leads into the very heart of Rumi's religious feeling. The mystical dance, spontaneous in early Sufism, and not strictly regulated by Rumi, who gave himself to whirling for long hours without fatigue, was organized

into a proper ritual by his son, Sultan Valad, who gathered the disciples of his father into a real brotherhood, the Mevlevi. The brotherhood was centered in Konya but expanded as far as the borders of the Ottoman Empire. It inspired much of classical Turkish music, miniature painting, and calligraphy. The novice, who wanted to become a Mevlevi dervish, had to undergo a training of 1001 days, during which he did menial work in the kitchen but was also instructed in the recitation and the interpretation of the *Mathnavi* as well as in the whirling dance until he was able to spin around his axis for hours.

It is the *sama'*, the whirling dance, through which Maulana's ideal of dying and rising in Love is expressed most beautifully. The dervishes appear in their black gowns, with high felt caps on their heads, walk slowly toward the master and kiss his hand. After a threefold repetition of this movement, they throw off their gowns to emerge in white dancing garments: the material world is discarded, and the heavenly dance in the white spiritual robe follows; annihilated in love, they experience eternal life in their turning around the center of life, the spiritual sun. Maulana saw everything as a *sama'*: it is the "ladder to heaven," and everything created is engaged in the circling that is caused by Love's attraction. From the angels to the demons, dance is common, and even the act of creation is seen, in Maulana's poetry, as a dance. When the creatures heard the primordial Divine Address, "Am I not your Lord?" (*Sura* 7.171), it sounded to them like music. Intoxicated by this sound, they came into existence in a loving dance. Do not the dust particles revolve around the Sun, and, at the touch of the morning breeze do not the branches begin to move as though they were dancing? Wherever the dancer puts his foot, the water of life wells up, and when the name of Shamsaddin is mentioned, even the dead appear from their graves, dancing in their shrouds—for everything revolves around the Sun of Love by which life is made possible and which attracts everything into its own orbit.

This seems to be the shortest formula in which to condense Maulana's mystical poetry: He is the witness of the Sun of Love, without which everything is lifeless. In his own tradition and environment, he experienced what Dante soon after saw in his crowning vision: *L'amor che muove il sol e l'altre stelle*.

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NOTE

1. All translations of Rumi's poetry in this essay are by Annemarie Schimmel.

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