

Mystical Islamic Poetry 4: Sessions 1 and 2

Rūmī and the *Mathnawī*

We did a session on Rūmī's *Diwān Shamsī Tabrizī* at the end of the last course, and at that point we had quite a detailed look at his life, and the famous story about his meeting with his first soul mate, Shamsī Tabrizī. I don't want to repeat this all again, and for those of you who were not here for that session, perhaps you could access it under Mystical Islamic Poetry 3 on <http://open.conted.ox.ac.uk/series>.

For many people, Rūmī (1207-1273) is the greatest mystical poet of Islam; he is regarded as the greatest exponent of love, which is after all a universal phenomenon which everyone can relate to. He is loved and recited, and sung, everywhere in the Islamic world, and is also now loved by many in the western world who have come to know his work through the translations of people like Coleman Barks and Andrew Harvey. These tend to take short passages from his work and make them into little gems of poems, and there is no doubt that these are very beautiful. Rūmī is a master of the metaphor, who seems able to always find just the right image, or the right set of images, to express some deep truth in an easy and accessible manner. To this extent, he translates very well. But his actual works, when you look at them in the original, are much more complex. And they are very long. About 60,000 verses are attributed to him; approx 35,000 of these are in the *Diwān*, and the other 25,000+ are in the *Mathnawī*, which is divided into six volumes. We have mentioned before that the traditional form of poetry within the Arab and Persian world was the mono-rhyme, i.e. the same rhyme, and sometimes even the same word, would appear at the end of each line. This put a natural limit upon the length of works; thus, when Ibn al-Fāriḍ managed to produce a poem with the rhyme *ta* of about 760 lines (his famous *Poem of the Way*) this was considered an extraordinary feat of skill – as indeed it was. But the *Mathnawī* form adopted a style in which the rhyme changes every two lines, and this unleashed the form so that it could take on epic lengths. In particular, it allowed the poems to become vehicles for story telling. Thus one of the first and most famous poems written in the *mathawī* form is 'Attar's *Conference of the Birds* – 'Attar being an older contemporary of Rūmī; it said that that met in Nishapur when Rūmī was just a boy and 'Attar was an old man. We have also looked, in Mystical Poetry 2, at the poems of Nizāmī who is famous for his *Khamṣa* or *Panj Ganj* (the Five Treasures), which was a set of five epic poems amounting to more than 20,000 lines.

This form of poetry was overtly didactic – i.e. the poems were designed to carry teaching and to instruct as well as to entertain or inspire. Rūmī's *Mathnawi* is a very complex piece of work; it consists of a series of stories, but Rūmī – like 'Attar – constantly digresses into teachings, or reflections, or ecstatic flights, so the narrative jumps around all over the place. It was deliberately demanding to read, in order to put the reader through a series of hoops which would hopefully bring him or her to a state of receiving the real meaning in their hearts. Alan Williams has identified that there is a progression through the six volumes as follows:

Vols 1 & 2 are principally concerned with the lower self, the *nafs*, and its struggle against evil.

Vols 3 & 4 are concerned with reason and knowledge, as personified in the prophetic figure of Moses in his struggle against the Pharaoh.

Vols 5 & 6 are concerned with the passing away (*fanā'*) of the mystic from his own *nafs* in union with reality, which is linked to the heart, spirit and light.

One of the important features of the poem is that the rhythm is consistent throughout the poem, so it has a kind of hypnotic effect when it is being recited. From what we know, it was composed by Rūmī reciting it, rather writing it down. He would compose whenever his state dictated it – falling into ecstatic states in the public baths or wherever – and his last close companion, Ḥuṣām al-dīn Ḥelebi, would write the verses down and then read them back later to him for correction. Ḥuṣām al-dīn was the last of the successors to Shamsī Tabrīzī whom Rūmī took as his spiritual soul mate, and he seems to have been the inspiration for the work, suggesting to Rūmī that he write an epic poem in the style of 'Attar. This all happened quite late in Rūmī's life, so it is his mature work, and it was completed just before he died in 1273.

In terms of our knowledge of the book, we have a complete translation into English which was published in eight volumes between 1923 and 1940 by the great orientalist R A Nicholson, Cambridge Professor of Oriental Studies, who was responsible for bringing so many works of the Islamic mystics into English. This seems rather dated now in its language, but it is still the standard work that one would turn to if you are really serious about getting to grips with Rūmī. What we are going to use on this course is a new translation by Alan Williams (*Rūmī, Spiritual Verses*, Penguin Classics, London, 2006) who is Professor of Religious Studies at Manchester University and has been a great lover of Rūmī all his life. We only have Volume 1 in this translation so far – he is currently working on the rest of them – but this will be more than enough for our purposes.

In the booklist below, I give you a reference to a web-site where you can hear a lecture given by Alan entitled “Open-heart Surgery” in which he recites some of the lines that we are going to study today – in particular, the first exposition on love, from line 109-130 (pp. 16-18 in *Spiritual Verses*) and then the first few lines from the very beginning, the famous “Song of the Reed”. You will be able to hear the very distinctive rhythm, which is as follows:

— u – –/ – u – –/ – u – (long, short, long long/etc) = 11 syllables

These are the first three couplets in transcription:

BESH-na-WEEN NAY CHOON shi-KAA-YAT MEE-ko-NAD

AZ jo-DAA-EEY-HAA hi-KAA-YAT MEE-ko-NAD

KAZ na-YES-TAAN TAA ma-RAA BOB-REE-da-AND

DAR na-FEE-RAM MAR-do ZAN NAA-LEE-da-AND

SEE-na KHWAA-HAM SHAR-ha SHAR-HA AZ fi-RAAQ

TAA be-GOO-YAM SHAR-he DAR-DE ISH-ti-YAAQ

Listen to this reed as it is grieving;

It tells the story of our separations.

Since I was severed from the bed of reeds

in my cry men and women have lamented.

I need the breast that’s torn to shreds by parting

to give expression to the pain of heartache.¹

Book List

- For material from previous courses, including the talk on Rūmī, see

<http://open.conted.ox.ac.uk>

- For a detailed background on Rūmī, his life and his works:

Franklin Lewis *Rūmī, Past Present and Future*, Oneworld, Oxford, 2000

- For a good translation of Book 1 of the *Mathnawī*

Rumi, *Spiritual Verses*, translated by Alan Williams, Penguin Classics, London, 2006

¹ *Rūmī: Spiritual Verses*, trans. Alan Williams, London, 2006.

- For a spoken version of Alan Williams' translation,

Alan Williams and Anton Lester, *Spiritual Verses*, Naxos Audio Books, 2007.

- For a good talk on the *Mathnawī* by Alan Williams

Open Heart Surgery, <http://www.beshara.org/principles/sound-recordings.html>

- For some further "listenings" in Persian and English

Fatemeh Keshavarz *Recitation of Rumi*,
<http://www.ibnarabisociety.org.uk/podcasts/archives/1111/rumi-poetry.mp3>

General Reading for the course

- Ed, MahmoodJ Jamal, *Islamic Mystical Poetry: Sufi Verse from the Mystics to Rumi*, Penguin Books, London, 2009
- *J T P Bruijn*, Persian Sufi Poetry, Routledge, London, 1997
- Annemarie Schimmel, *As Through a Veil*, Oneworld, Oxford, 2001.