This week our subject is Jalāl al-dīn Rūmī (1207-1273), who is one of the great figures of Islamic mystical poetry, and indeed one of the great figures of the world. Last week we looked at Yunus Emre who is the most popular poet in Turkey even to this day. Rūmī is probably the most famous poet within the Islamic world as a whole, loved and quoted everywhere. What is more, he has also been the most popular poet in America for more than a decade now, and so there are probably very few people in the world today who have not heard his name. This cannot be said of anyone else we will study on this course.

One reason for this enormous popularity in the west is the existence of some very accessible translations by people such as Coleman Barks and Andrew Harvey who have taken short sections from his poems – most often from the quatrains or the Mathnawī – and put them into modern language, and I think we would all agree that these are often very beautiful renderings which encapsulate profound meanings. Another reason is that Rūmī is associated in a very particular way with the path of love, which is after all a universal human emotion. Thus William Chittick, one of our best contemporary scholars, has written two important introductions to the metaphysics of the two towering figures of Islamic mysticism, one entitled The Sufi Path of Love¹ devoted to Rūmī, and one entitled The Sufi Path of Knowledge² devoted to Ibn ʿArabī. This is not a distinction that necessarily holds in every respect, as we shall see, but it does encapsulate some sort of public perception of the roles of these two very important spiritual teachers. But the main reason that Rūmī is so widely known is simply that his poetry is very very good, and capable of touching the heart of anyone who has sensitivity to spiritual matters.

Alongside the popularity of the poems, there is a well-known story about the way that they came to be written which I am sure that many of you are familiar with, which is largely based on hagiographical literature or very old sources. But on this course, we are not going to look at these populist traditions, but consider Rūmī as a poet within the context of the historical development that we have been working within so far, based upon modern scholarship and more rigorous translations. This does not contradict the more popular view, as the basic outline of the story is beyond question; it is more a matter of filling in the detail and rethinking some aspects of the myth in the light of new information.

Rūmī was a man of learning who taught in a madrassa – or university – and who had a solid grounding in Islamic law and sciences. He was also a mystic who spent many years in retreat and undertaking hard ascetic practices until he attained realisation. He was the originator of the Mevlevī Sufī order – sometimes called “The Whirling Dervishes” because of their particular ritual of “turning”³ – which in the centuries after this death grew to be one of the most wide-spread orders within the Ottoman Empire and is still existent today. Rūmī’s tomb in Konya, in central Turkey, is visited by hundreds of thousands of people every year, especially during

¹ Chittick Sufi Path of Love, State University of New York Press (SUNY), NY, 1984
² Chittick Sufi Path of Knowledge, State University of New York Press (SUNY), NY, 1989
³ For a taste of what this is like in modern-day ceremonies, see some clips on youtube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UjSig4DxU_M which has a short commentary by Khabir Helminski, who has published a number of translations of the poems; http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=INm76HwBHvM
the celebrations which take place there in mid-December each year to mark what is called his ‘Nuptial Night’ i.e. the night when he returned to his Beloved, i.e. his death date.

• In addition, he was a highly skilled and prolific poet who produced more than 60,000 verses of excellent poetry, plus a couple of prose works. This poetry – written in Persian – is contained within two major collections; the Diwān – or collected poems – which contains more than 3000 separate poems adding up to about 35,000 verses. The majority of these (3229) are ghazals – love poems – but there is also a substantial section of 1,983 quatrains – ruba‘āt – and some 44 tarjī-bands, a form of poetry in which there is a linking refrain. Then there is the Mathnawī which amounts to about 25,000 verses, which is a continuous poem with a rhyme pattern which changes every second line. Thus Rūmī seems to have had facility in every major poetic form of his age.

• Not only is the poetry prolific; unlike some of the other poets we have covered where there is very little biographical material available, there is a great deal known about Rūmī’s life and spiritual development, and because of the great interest in him in the western world, quite a bit has been brought into English over the last 20-30 years. Therefore, for this session I have been drowning in information, and I am going to keep the introductory part of this session quite brief and I will refer you to the sources if you want to pursue the life in more detail yourself.

• Enough to say that there are three early accounts of his life; one by his son, Sultan Valad who was his successor (although not immediately after his death) and the person who really established the Mevlevi order; a biography by Faridun b. Ahmad Sephsālār, who published about 50 years after Rūmī’s death, and another by Shams al-din Ahmad al-Aflākī which appeared about 1354, i.e. about 70 years after the death. The first two were members of Rūmī’s inner circle and wrote from eye-witness experience, whereas Aflākī is of a slightly later generation. It is the only one available in translation, and it is a highly readable and informative book – but I warn you that it is notorious as also being a very biased account, written in the early days of the Mevlevi order and very much aiming to build up Rūmī’s stature in relation to his contemporaries.

• In addition to the biographies, there are works by and accounts of many of the central figures in the Rūmī story, such as his father Bahā-al-din, his second teacher, Borhan al-din, and his third teacher, the remarkable Shamsi Tabriz, etc. All of these sources are brought together in a very excellent and exhaustive book by Franklin Lewis entitled Rūmī: Past and Present, East and West, which tells you everything that you would want to know not only about Rūmī but also his close associates and the history of the Mevlevi Order as well as including original translations of many poems. This is the recommended reading if you want to gain further knowledge of Rūmī. I have not myself gone into all the ins and outs of the various contradictions between the sources, but in the brief account which follows I am basically following Lewis.

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5 Chittick, Me and Rumi, Fons Vitae, Louisville, 2004
Rūmī was born in the region of Balkh, in modern day Afghanistan, in 1207. His father, Bahā al-dīn Valad, was a learned man, a teacher of the Islamic sciences, and also a Sufi, but not, according to Franklin Lewis, associated with any of the formal orders which were becoming established in this era. Nor was he, as Aflākī would have it, of royal descent, or of such stature as a teacher that kings and rulers rolled out the red carpet form him wherever he went. He was, though, clearly a man of great spiritual quality and devotion, who attracted a following.

When Rūmī was six years old his family left Balkh, travelling first to Samarkand, and then a few years later, when he was ten, further west into Anatolia, now in Southern Turkey. This was the era of the Mongol incursions into Islamic territory, when many people were migrating west, but it seems that the immediate reason for the Valad family’s migration was more to do with a dispute with the local ruler. In Anatolia, they settled first in Kamara, about 60 miles outside Konya, and then, when Rūmī was about 22, his father obtained a post at a madrassa in Konya itself and the family settled there permanently. Rūmī married early – when he was just 17 – and had two children by the time he was 19. The import of this was that his son, Sultan Valad, was already a grown man when the seminal events of his father’s life occurred, and so was able to give a reliable account of them.

Anatolia was a lively environment in which to grow up. It was newly conquered territory for the Muslims, with a population which was still largely Christian or Zoroastrian, and was ruled over by an enlightened Seljūk dynasty, the Seljūk’s of Rūm, whose capital was in Malatya and then Konya. The area was attracting immigrants from all over the Islamic world as people fled from the far eastern territories in the face of the Mongol advance, and people such as Ibn ʿArabī fled from the western territories as the Franks conquered Spain. The region was thus a melting pot for a huge variety of influences and exchange of ideas, leading to new kinds of thought in all sorts of spheres; in social policy, in the arts, in science (astronomy, medicine) and in religion and spirituality. When the Islamic world eventually began to recover from the devastation wrought by the Mongols, from about 1300 onwards, it was the new forms of religion and culture developed in this region, and in Konya in particular, which became the driving force of its re-birth, with the ideas of Ibn ʿArabī and the poetry of Rūmī as the twin pillars of the emergent spirituality.

Some of the other poets we have studied on these courses have been very learned – ʿAttar, Nizāmī, Ibn al-Fārīd – but we have not known very much about the education that they received. With Rūmī, we know a great deal. He was taught by his father until he was about 24, being groomed to take over his university post teaching the religious sciences and hadīth (the traditions of the Prophet). Then, after death of Bahā al-dīn in 1231, his education continued under the guidance of his god-father, a student of his father’s, Borhan al-dīn, who sent him to the centre of the Islamic world, to Damascus and Aleppo, for further study. This seemed to have consisted of undertaking ascetic exercises and retreats as well as continuing instruction by teachers of the religious sciences. Only at this stage does it seem that he started to be initiated into the mystical sciences. This is a very different kind of life from that of our poet last week, Yunus Emre, who was said to be unlettered, meaning that he was not university educated.

When Rūmī 34 was years old, in 1241, he returned to Konya ready to take up his teaching post at the madrassa, at which point he was also regarded as an
enlightened shaykh. He seems to have been a popular teacher and began to build up a following. But after just a few years, in 1244, he underwent a great transformation when he met a man called Shams-e Trabriz who was newly arrived in Konya. Shams, as his name suggests, was from Tabriz, now in Iran, and was a colourful character. His encounter with Rūmī instantly resulted in an extraordinary and intense relationship, and they went into a period of seclusion together. Through this, Rūmī was initiated into a completely different world, which one might call the world of love.

- Rūmī became completely devoted to Shams, whom he saw as a manifestation of the Divine light – the pure Divine light, his name means ‘sun’ in Arabic – and his divine soulmate. He began to attend samāʿ – the Sufi ceremony where singing and dancing is used to bring one to a state of ecstasy – and to compose poetry. It has been widely believed that he did not start composing verses until the loss of Shams about three years later, thus that that they sprang initially from his state of grief. But Franklin’s perusal of the early sources leads him to believe that they started with the arrival of Shams in 1244, although the vast majority were indeed written after 1247, when it said that the poetry poured out from him like a torrent.

- These verses eventually ended up in the Diwān – the Mathnawi not being started until about twenty years later – which is called Diwān Shams-Tabriz not only because Rūmī devoted many of his poems to Shams, but because in some cases he signed them as being written by Shams. This is an indication of the depth of the relationship he experienced with his new teacher – a relationship in which he not only saw in Shams the reflection of the Divine Beauty, but in which he regarded them as sharing a single identity: in Poem 2789 from Diwân he says:

  An old man stomping before his dais like a drunk—
  But a sea of knowledge, a philosopher and sage
  holding onto the hem of knowledge with his teeth
  but the smith’s tongues of love
  having left him not a single tooth…
  There I am, transfixed by this sage’s light,
  the old man completely absorbed in his beloved
  He like a mirror’s face, pure reflection
  I two headed like a comb
  I grew old in that subtle old man’s bounteous glory
  I like a moth, he having in me a moth…

The ‘old man’ is because Shams was older then Rūmī by about 20 years, making him about 60 at the time of their encounter.

- Rūmī’s relationship with Shams caused great jealousy amongst his students, especially as it seems that Rūmī neglected his teaching duties whilst he underwent this transformation. So after about a year, Shams was forced go leave Konya because he feared for his life. This sent Rūmī into a state of intense grief, and, far from returning to the madrassa, he went even further into seclusion. He also stopped writing poetry. Shams, who had returned to Syria, was therefore sent for, it seems by the agency of Sultan Valad, and he returned to Konya amidst great rejoicing.

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7 Ibid, p. 169-170
• However, two years later, in 1247, he disappeared again. It is widely believed in the Turkish tradition that he was murdered by Rūmī’s jealous students, and specifically by his eldest son, ‘Alā al-dīn, and when one visits Konya, there is a maqām or tomb in the place where is reputed to be buried. However, Lewis’s research does not support this interpretation of events; instead, he believes that Shams died of natural causes either in Tabriz or on the road to Tabriz; there is no definite place of location but several places where he is remembered.

• This second separation sent Rūmī once again into a state of intense grief, and he made two journeys to Syria in an attempt to find Shams. However, it seems that at some point he received news of his death, and eventually came to terms with it, internalising the voice of his teacher and returning to his duties. He also found a new beloved to whom he became devoted, having the belief that there is, of necessity, always a physical embodiment of the perfect teacher, around whom everything revolves, on earth. For a period he took a man called Salah al-dīn Zarkub as his companion and teacher, and there are several poems in the Dīwān devoted to him. Then, when he died in 1258, he took Hosam al-dīn Çelebi Akhi Tork, who was already acting as his secretary, as his teacher and his successor.

• It was at the suggestion of Hosam al-dīn that he composed the Mathnawī, which was begun in 1262, about 11 years before his death. It seems that he would recite the verses and Hosam al-dīn would write them down and sing them back to him, later revising the written text. We don’t have any similar information about the way that the poems in the Dīwān were composed, although we do know that they were collected and written down within about twenty-five years of his death. I think we would largely assume that they too were captured by disciples from his utterances rather than written down by Rūmī himself.

• This period saw an extraordinary gathering of great spiritual figures in Konya, which was a brief time of peace. Konya was never sacked by the Mongols but the Seljuk dynasty fell in 1243 and was replaced by a Mongo protectorate. The new Mongol ruler Parvāna, Mu’in al-dīn Sulaymān, was sympathetic to Sufism, and it is said that he visited Rūmī every day. It was not only Rūmī who was teaching in the town; the followers of Ibn ‘Arabī were also based there, his designated heir, Şādr al-dīn al-Qūnawī having returned to his home town in about 1249 after a period of exile. Many important figures were associated with Qūnawī – for example, Fakhr al-dīn ‘Irāqī whose poetry we studied two weeks ago: another important poet Aflākī al-dīn al-Tilimsānī: Sa‘īd al-Farghānī, the author of the very famous commentary upon Ibn al-Fāriḍ’s Poem of the Way – and al-Qūnawī’s house was a centre of culture and wide-ranging conversation as well as teaching.

• al-Qunawī and Rūmī were living in close proximity to each other, and were constantly interacting; Rūmī is described as frequently visiting al-Qunawī, probably to attend ḥadīth classes (whether or not Rūmī was influenced by Ibn ‘Arabī’s teachings as such is a hotly debated subject which is not our concern here) and Aflākī paints a vivid picture of a society in which these men, along with other men of God and all their followers, met at funerals or banquets put on by the Parvānā. Rūmī in these accounts is depicted as a poor, ascetic mystic who would be sent into ecstasy by a word, by a thought, by a sound, leaving the gathering to do his turning and, presumably, to utter verses.

• He died in 1273, and is buried in Konya, where he is venerated to this day. The Mevlevi order was established in the years after his death, his son, Sultan Valad being an important figure in this, and today there is a rather grand tomb to house
the body of his father. This, as we have already said, is visited by hundreds of thousands of people every year.

Class Study

• Our study today will concentrate on The Diwan, and we will go on to look at the Mathnawi in the first sessions of Islamic Mystical Poetry 4 in the autumn. The Diwan is a vast collection of verses, and unlike the Mathnawi which has been translated into English in several versions, it is still largely untranslated. There is an excellent complete critical edition of the original Persian, based on early manuscripts, produced by Badiʿ al-Zaman Foruzānfar in ten volumes. This is organised, as is usual within the Islamic world, in order of end-rhyme, although it seems that the very earliest versions were organised according to meter – these being the two main formal elements of ghazals and quatrains. Lewis points out that many of the poems have a quite definite historical of origin, being written in response to some event such as the death of Shams, but the chronological order is now completely lost to us. We should bear in mind though that these poems’ were written over a period of about 30 years.

• The Diwan was tackled by some of the early great Orientalists, R A Nicholson and A J Arberry, Nicholson producing a selection of verses which were published alongside the original Persian, and Arberry producing versions of 400 poems in two collection called Mystical Poems of Rūmī 1 and 2. In more recent times, Franklin Lewis has translated 50 poems in Rumi, of which about 48 are from Diwan, and in addition there are perhaps another fifty scattered throughout the book. He has also published these and more translations in Rumi: Swallowing the Sun. These are the main sources I have looked at; Lewis, with his usual thoroughness, has devoted a whole chapter of his book to other translations if you want to get a complete picture.

• First of all we will look at perhaps the most famous poems in Diwan in two different translations. This is partly to give you a feeling for the way that our perception of these poems has changed over the last sixty year, and also because if you don’t have access to the original, looking at different translations of a poem can give insight into some of the depths of meaning that it contains.

• Then we will look at five poems on our main course theme of wine and spiritual intoxication, with the aim of seeing what they add to the knowledge that we have already established in the last five weeks.

Jane Clark 16/2/2013

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