

The "ascension of the word": Rhetoric and reader engagement in Rūmī's Mathnawī

Author: James Winston Morris

Persistent link: <http://hdl.handle.net/2345/2214>

This work is posted on [eScholarship@BC](#),
Boston College University Libraries.

2011

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 3.0 Unported License.

THE “ASCENSION OF THE WORD”:
RHETORIC AND READER ENGAGEMENT IN RŪMĪ’S *MATHNAWĪ*

The title of this essay¹ is taken from a remarkably evocative expression, *mi’rāj al-kalīma*, that Prof. Su‘ad al-Hakim once applied to describe Ibn ‘Arabī’s creative reworking of so many resources of classical Qur’ānic Arabic in his lifelong effort to awaken and to communicate all the phenomenological subtleties of our deepest spiritual experience. That richly allusive Arabic phrase directly conveys both the transformative “ascension” of the artistic word from its mundane origins to the highest dimensions of meaning; and correspondingly, the spiralling ascension of each active reader’s soul and intellect through that inspired poetic speech. Like Ibn ‘Arabī’s inimitable Arabic writing, and at virtually the same point in history, Rūmī’s incomparable Persian poetry brought to life an equally rich and effective transmutation of its Qur’ānic inspiration into the already well-established genre of the epic *mathnawī*.² In his immense *Spiritual Mathnawī*, in particular, Rūmī’s ongoing fascination with the creative “Word”³ is specially highlighted by four memorable invocations of that key term already in his opening Song of the Reed (lines 1-35).

The purpose of this introductory study, focusing on those celebrated opening verses of Rūmī’s epic, is strictly pedagogical: to help Western students initially encountering his work (and therefore relying solely on translations) to become familiar with the characteristic set of rhetorical forms that the poet carefully adapted—often with clear Qur’ānic inspiration—throughout his *Spiritual Mathnawī*. Here at its very beginning, as throughout the remainder of

¹ A shorter version of this essay was originally presented at the International Rūmī Symposium sponsored by the Rūmī Institute (NEU, Cyprus) at the Mevlevi museum and shrine in Konya, during Rūmī’s annual *‘urs* celebration in December 2007, as part of the international UNESCO commemoration of the 700th anniversary of the poet’s birth.

² See the further discussion of some of those distinctive rhetorical features of the Qur’an that are creatively adapted in the *Masnawi* in the separate Appendix at the end of this essay.

³ Note the recurrence of the Persian *sukhan* (echoing the constantly repeated Qur’ānic references to the divine *kalīma*, *kitāb*, *qawl*, etc.) and *zabān*, in verses 14, 18, 28 and 33 below, together with the corresponding centrality of active human spiritual “listening” (echoing the Arabic *samā’*) opening and closing this poem, at verses 1 and 35 (and 29).

this immense poem, all those artistic features come together to serve first of all as an effective mirror of each reader’s particular states of soul, spirit and mind. At the same time, though, these striking rhetorical elements work together as a mysteriously *active* “spiritual mirror”—or polyphonic musical composition—that progressively brings about and reflects deepening levels of each reader’s participation and expanding insight.

At the very least, helping students of Rūmī’s *Mathnawī* in translation to become aware of the foundational, unifying role of these rhetorical features should overcome one widespread popular misconception that this poem is somehow simply another didactic compendium of traditional Sufī, ethical and theological teachings.⁴ In fact, one has only to compare Rūmī’s *Mathnawī*, from the very start, with its earlier Sufī prototypes by ‘Attār and Sanā’ī, to realize just how misleading that common interpretive approach to the *Mathnawī* is.

The recurrent problems that one encounters in attempting to teach and communicate the meanings of the *Mathnawī*—just as with the Qur’ān—are rooted in this poem’s constant interplay between initially unfamiliar metaphysical assumptions⁵ and subtle poetic and dramatic structures intended to elicit each reader’s illuminating experience of the realities and perspectives in question. With either text, translators and interpreters quickly discover that attempts at systematic explanation (both theological and philosophical) of that underlying web of metaphysical symbolism and corresponding practical prescriptions quickly lead to elaborate commentaries that can only too easily submerge the original text. On the other hand, translation alone, without a constant reminder of that original underlying framework of active individual

⁴ Readers limited to English sources can discover something (albeit in fragmented form) of later Islamic commentary traditions by following Nicholson’s extensive commentary volumes accompanying his translation and edition of the *Mathnawī*.

⁵ This problem is quite similar to the challenges encountered in trying to convey to modern audiences the now-unfamiliar philosophical and theological conceptions embedded by Rūmī’s near-contemporary Dante (d. 1321) throughout the Purgatory and Paradise sections of the *Divine Comedy*. In the case of the *Mathnawī* itself, this ongoing difficulty helps to explain the widespread and long-lasting use of ideas associated with Ibn ‘Arabī to interpret the *Mathnawī*, beginning soon after Mevlana’s passing: that is precisely because the Akbari philosophical, theological and practical spiritual tradition is likewise so profoundly rooted in close attention to the distinctive language of both the Qur’ān and hadith.

realization,⁶ necessarily keeps readers at a relatively superficial distance from what can then tend to appear as a disparate, fragmentary, even apparently random string of stories, parables, exhortations to virtuous action, wisdom sayings, didactic monologues, vivid eschatological reminders, and ecstatic utterances. As we have explained more fully in several related hermeneutical studies,⁷ these initial difficulties of appreciation quickly begin to disappear once students are sufficiently able to appreciate the close analogy between these characteristic Islamic literary structures and the roles of different instruments, voices, timbres, keys, themes and orchestration in musical composition; or with the corresponding functions of dramatic parts (including the chorus), characters, and stage directions in Western theatrical traditions. Such pertinent artistic parallels do highlight the degree of active individual participation and sustained study, practice and contemplation required to appreciate fully the *Mathnawī* (or its sacred exemplar), even after readers have assimilated the initial scaffolding provided by carefully accurate translation and an adequate commentary.

By carefully interweaving a number of key unifying rhetorical and structural procedures throughout his opening “Song of the Reed,” Rūmī highlights and introduces for his readers a number of pivotal literary features and interpretive considerations—already somewhat familiar, of course, to his original literate audience—which are indispensable for the active reading and study of all six Books of the *Mathnawī*. The remaining sections of this study are designed to familiarize beginning students with Rūmī’s elaborate interweaving of those literary devices and hermeneutical considerations by carefully “scanning” through these celebrated opening lines—while constantly referring to the literal, annotated English version provided at the end of this essay—from four successive perspectives. We begin with the basic structural indications

⁶ See Section IV below for a fuller discussion of this key unifying dimension of intellectual and spiritual “realization” (*tahqīq*)

⁷ See *Transfiguring Love: Perspective Shifts and Contextualization of Experience in Hāfiz’s Ghazals*, pp. 227-350 in *Hafiz and the Religion of Love In Classical Persian Poetry*, ed. L. Lewisohn, (London, I.B.Tauris, 2010); *Encountering the Qur’ān: Contexts and Approaches*, pp. 55-96 in *Voices of Islamic Tradition, vol. I: Voices of Tradition*, ed. V. J. Cornell, (Westport, CT, Praeger, 2007); and *From Allusion to Insight and Right Action: Political Dimensions of Ibn ‘Arabi’s Hermeneutics of Spiritual Realisation*, pp. 41-83 in *Symbolisme et Hermeneutique dans la pensée de Ibn ‘Arabi* (Actes du Colloque), ed. Bakri Aladdin, (Damascus, Institut Français du Proche-Orient, 2007).

provided by Rūmī’s ambiguous use of different speaking voices, audiences, tonalities and resulting perspectives. Next we move through the unfolding inner drama and practical spiritual challenges that the succession of those contrasting perspectives poses for each reader. Then a third level of consideration—integrating reading, reflection, and potentially illuminated understanding—is posed by the contrasting chiasmic juxtaposition of each of the poem’s eight paired and contrasting sections. The fourth and final element in this richly layered drama of experience and interpretation—and in each reader’s own process of realization—is provided by Rūmī’s introduction of the key thematic and existential touchstones that he goes on to develop throughout the following six Books.

I. SHIFTING VOICES AND EMERGING STRUCTURE IN THE “SONG OF THE REED”:

To begin with, the grammatical “voices” and corresponding “audiences” of each of the opening speakers here (highlighted in boldface type in the appended literal translation) provide an initial indication of the basic constitutive sections of the Song of the Reed. Thus these sudden perspective shifts in speaker, tone, and audience closely correspond to the explicit Persian prose division headings that Rūmī has carefully provided to mark out the constituent sections of the twelve story-cycles dividing each Book throughout the rest of the *Mathnawī*.⁸

Line 1: Unusually, in comparison with the rest of this Song, the opening speaker here is unknown and vaguely indeterminate (much like the similarly indeterminate Speaker of so much of the Qur’ān), while the emphatically singular imperative makes it very clear that this poignant demand is addressed to each *individual* reader and listener. Equally uncertain is the tone with which this command is actually spoken and the nature of the open-ended “recounting” involved, which are open to many different interpretive possibilities—as students can readily confirm simply by acting out this line. More importantly, the key opening verb here—pointedly repeated in the final verse 35—recalls both the central human practices of prayer and the (often musical) liturgical collective remembrance of God (*samā’*, literally “listening”). While on a metaphysical

⁸ See the seminal study by Simon Weightman and S. G. Safavi, *Rūmī’s Mystical Design: Reading the Mathnawī, Book One* (Albany, SUNY Press, 2009).

plane, it evokes the primordial instance of each soul’s “listening” and heart-response to God’s Call.⁹

Against that well-known metaphysical backdrop—familiar to anyone in Rūmī’s original audience, and carrying over repeatedly throughout the entire *Mathnawī*¹⁰—it is important to keep in mind here the primacy of the poetic image (and implicit experiences) of the living “reed,” as well as the related musical associations with the reed-flute (*nayy*, in both cases). For this initial evocation of the green, well-watered bed of reeds soothingly caressed by the spirit-wind (a quintessential image of the paradisiac “Gardens” of the Qur’ān) suggests by contrast the traumatic rending (by an unnamed, but apparently external force), death, fragile drying, and multiple piercings that are needed to create the reed-flute, as well as providing the unforgettable occasion for the reed’s opening complaint. The other foundational Qur’ānic allusion underlying the image of the reed-flute here is the mystery of the reed’s true Player or Musician—the latter role again being a familiar poetic symbol of the Divine’s relationship to creation and to humanity in particular, building on the Qur’ān’s elaborate metaphysical symbolism of divine Speech and Writing. Finally, this opening imagery of the apparently empty reed of course echoes the multiple Qur’ānic accounts of the two-fold creation of Adam, the archetypal human being: first, as a visibly empty, fragile mortal tube of “stinking mud” or “clay” (15:26, etc.); but also as the theomorphic being whose spiritual potential and animating essence—and corresponding earthly task and responsibility—flows from the transformative inbreathing of the divine Life-Breath and Spirit (*rūh/ jān*).

⁹ Recounted in the well-known Qur’anic account at 7:172 of the primordial covenant and inner “witnessing” of all the human spirits (before their earthly manifestation) to the presence of their divine Lord and Sustainer, where God brings forth the spirits of all the descendants of Adam and had them witness of the themselves, (saying) “Am I not your Lord/Sustainer?” (*alastu bi rabbikum*). And they said: “Yes indeed! We have testified.” This famous allusion to the original unity, divine awareness, and pre-existence of the human spirits was a standard metaphysical concept already elaborately developed by earlier Persian poets in a wide range of erotic love-imagery (“last night,” etc.) familiar to Rūmī’s readers.

¹⁰ Here we should also mention the implicit, complementary spiritual and metaphysical emphasis involved in Rūmī’s common pen-name (or concluding exhortation), in many of his lyrical ghazals, as *khamūsh*: “Be quiet!” or “Shut up!”—that is, so that we can actually begin to listen and appreciate the Concert of the infinite divine Signs within and around us.

Lines 2-7: The following six lines include *eleven* pointedly repeated uses of the first-person singular (*I, me*, and five times the possessive *my*), vividly highlighting the lonely, obsessively self-pitying and blinding egoism of the isolated reed that initially remains unaware of its deeper purpose and divine connections. As is only befitting for this self-centered litany of traumatic separations, these verses are essentially a soliloquy, with no apparent or worthy audience—since the reed here bitterly thinks that even its would-be “friends” (verse 6) only spuriously imagine that they know its innermost secrets. In the concluding line of this soliloquy, though, Rūmī introduces his readers to one of his own most common rhetorical secrets, which he follows throughout the rest of this opening Song and indeed the entire *Mathnawī*: that is, his use of the final line of each section, discourse or story as a kind of revealing enjambment or prefiguration of the central theme of the following section—here, in his first allusion to the illuminating divine “Light” of Love.

Lines 8-15: In the following lines—an intense, almost angry retort to this reed-flute’s initially plaintive and self-pitying complaint—a very knowing, but still distanced and objective narrative voice reminds Rūmī’s readers/listeners of the true reality and purpose of the reed and all its sufferings, and of the shared “Path” (lines 6, 8) and healing companionship and guidance that only emerges through the proper appreciation of its song. Whether one imagines this objective, sometimes almost didactic narrator to also be in some way the personal voice of Rūmī himself, this specific narrative voice of wisdom returns at key points throughout the rest of the *Mathnawī*. (Indeed the most proverbial and best known individual wisdom-verses of this epic are usually expressed by this memorable summational voice.) But this first reflective and wise narrative voice is also strikingly different from the even more emotionally present and personal voice (i.e., one openly engaged with either Husamuddin or Shams himself), often prayerful or ecstatically rhapsodic, that suddenly intervenes here at line 16. And again, that same unmistakably ecstatic and irrepressible personal voice, often alluding to or recalling the ongoing presence of the true Shams/divine “Sun,” frequently reappears in the central hinge-sections of each larger story-cycle or discourse throughout the rest of the *Mathnawī*.

As for the narrator’s relation to the audience of this section, its central and concluding verses (lines 11 and 15)—in keeping with Rūmī’s basic themes at this point of divine Love and God’s transforming, guiding Friendship (*walāya*)—suddenly and mysteriously shift to speaking

of “*us*”, although that nascent inter-connection is here still specifically based on our all too palpable human sharing in those common painful “veils” and “grieving” (the tell-tale causes and signs of separation and suffering) which were the defining characteristics of the lonely, isolated reed in the preceding section.

*Lines 16-18:*¹¹ If the two preceding sections witness an almost hidden inner movement from the poem’s audience as a singular (and inherently separate) “you” to a nascent “we” sharing at least a common human experience of suffering (“veils”) and nostalgic grieving (verse 18), line 16 suddenly introduces yet another, even more personal and challenging Voice. Curiously, the first half of this climactic verse seems to be responding—curtly and abruptly in yet another singular imperative, like the monitory voice of a spiritual master—in salutary practical response to the renewed, self-pitying complaint shared by these newly assembled fellow travelers on this as yet undefined Path. Yet the second half of this same heartfelt verse—with its resonant Buberian “*Thou*”—takes on a sharply different tone and audience, addressing an intensely fervent prayer to a “You” that can only be divine. This “You” may be God’s momentarily more personalized human mirror and theophany in the person of Shams (or even the formal addressee of the *Mathnawī*, Husamuddin); or each reader’s own personal divine-human Friend and Guide (*yār, dūst, walī*). This memorable and powerfully autobiographical voice will quickly become familiar to each reader who progresses on through the *Mathnawī*.

Yet the remaining two lines of this central section just as suddenly move back from the full intensity of this unforgettable Encounter to a moving personal reflection on the peculiarly rending loneliness and difficulties of communication that still await us whenever we fall away from that transforming unitive Relationship—a kind of paradoxically inverted version of the more familiar sorts of painful separation and isolation with which this poem began. But this now calmly knowing reflection—as we can see and feel in the implicitly imperative, yet still longing and hopeful “Good-bye!” (*wa-s-salām*) at the end of end of the central verse 18—is definitely intended to challenge each reader at a far deeper and more decisive level than the opening

¹¹ Or lines 16-17, with line 18 then standing separately as the midpoint and chiasmic hinge of the entire opening Song, marking the singular moment of each reader’s necessary and decisive choosing (see Section II below).

“Listen!” Since each of us has some embedded memory of those unforgettable “I-Thou” moments of Reunion (if only in the primordial, forgotten “reed-garden”) and some premonition of the soul’s ultimate Destination (*rūzigār*, at line 4), Rūmī lovingly reminds each reader at this climactic point that we must take those rare, unforgettable ecstatic moments of *non*-separation as promises and prefigurations, rather than as the occasions for further disappointment and alienating complaint.

Lines 19-22: The import of these equally central lines, which in many ways inaugurate an entirely new poem, is pointedly underlined by the opening half-line’s allusive resonance (“O son”) with a distinctively intimate, affectionate Qur’ānic phrase that is repeatedly used there only to evoke the transforming relationship of trust, guidance and support between a divine messenger or prophet and his son or potential disciple.¹² The *singular* “you” and “son” addressed here—four times in the first two lines—take the form of an intentional and unmistakable challenge whose demanding practical preconditions, through the necessary purification of the lower, ego-self, are boldly enunciated in the following two verses.

Lines 23-26: At first, it appears that in these verses the same deeply personal voice of Rūmī (from the two short preceding sections) has simply returned to the intensely prayerful, worshipful mode of lines 16-18, only addressing God this time as “Love”, as the divine Physician-Sage (*Hakīm*, a key divine Name) who can cure both soul (Plato) and body (Galen)—an unmistakable allusion to the central transformational mystery of the following longer story of the King and his maidservant. But what has in fact profoundly changed in this section is that this voice is no longer speaking in the singular, but now as or on behalf of a transformed, newly appearing “*We*” (three times in lines 23-24) that is apparently constituted by the communion of all devoted lovers—as this voice then goes on to make explicit in the revealingly intimate aside at line 26 (its slyly complicit “O lover”). In other words, this section suddenly presumes that the wavering, tentative “you” addressed in the preceding sections has now effectively joined in this Path of love and communion: thereby overcoming, as the archetypal divine theophanies of

¹² *Yā bunayya*, “O my dear little son”: 11:42 (spoken by Noah); 12:5 (Jacob); 31:13-17 (Luqman); 37:102 (Abraham). The dramatically differing reactions of those addressed in each of these scriptural passages are also instructive concerning the fundamental spiritual choice that Rūmī is offering or suggesting here.

Muhammad and Moses make clear (lines 25-26), all the initially daunting, apparently even impossible metaphysical oppositions initially raised in verses 7-8.

Lines 27-34: These renowned concluding verses together constitute an almost unbearably poignant, openly autobiographical evocation of Rūmī’s transforming encounter with Shams of Tabriz. Paradoxically, they are also a first-person testimony, like the parallel opening “complaint” of the reed (verses 2-7), though here in a markedly different, metaphysically reversed key and tonality. The “I” that is speaking so tenderly and longingly—but also knowingly—to its Beloved here (“I” and “my” seven times in lines 27 and 32) is one of the deepest gratitude and acknowledgement of Grace, not of complaint and loss. And the poet’s ecstatic thanks here are punctuated and heightened not by any regrets, but by his compassionate sharing and concern for each of his fellow human companions (the intimately singular “you” of verses 29 and 34). As line 31 makes clear, this actively shared and effective human gift of Compassion (that divinely creative Lovingmercy, *rahma*, which is a uniquely all-encompassing divine Name in the Qur’ān)¹³ becomes manifest as the actualized Aim of the first reed’s apparent separations and the deepest answer to its serial complaints, as the true and mysteriously present formative “reed-bed” and promised Garden. Carefully echoing and amplifying the foundational divine saying of the Hidden Treasure¹⁴ so familiar to all readers of Rūmī’s own time and circle, this richly allusive concluding section responds to each of the reed’s initial complaints through its unfolding evocation of our shared human state—precisely in and through its familiar

¹³ As in the well-known verse 17:110: *Call upon God or call upon the All-Compassionate (al-Rahmān). Whichever you call upon, His are the Most-Beautiful Names.*

¹⁴ In this highly influential divine saying, God says: “I was a Hidden Treasure, and I loved to be known. So I created the creatures/human beings so that I might be known.” Throughout the *Mathnawī*, Rūmī continues to move back and forth between these two equally indispensable facets of the key Arabic term *al-khalq* here, as both that which is known (all the creatures), and that which alone fully knows and mirrors that creation (the theomorphic, fully realized human, *insān*).

alternation and inner conjunction of loneliness and communion, isolation and reunion—as the sign, fruit, and ongoing seedbed for the Beloved’s breath-song.¹⁵

Line 35: While the opening *plural* imperative of this final verse explicitly echoes the singular “listen!” of the poem’s first line, everything that has transpired in the intervening verses is reflected in this profound grammatical shift from the soliloquy of the isolated ego to the transformed “We” and loving communion of all the poet’s “beloved friends.”¹⁶ The same spiritual alchemy is likewise reflected in this poem’s gradual transition from the prosaic, egoistically distorted, initially painful “recounting” (*hikāya*: mimesis) of each life’s sorrows to the transforming symphony of the divinely inspired “revelatory story.”¹⁷ The same reed, but a very different Player.

II. FROM SOLITUDE TO COMMUNION: DRAMA AND READER ENGAGEMENT

The carefully orchestrated chiasmic structures of each of the constitutive story-cycles in the *Mathnawī*—like their parallels and probable models in many Suras of the Qur’ān—mean that the successive internal sections of each story-cycle were intended to be read, experienced and studied in two very different ways.¹⁸ To begin with, reading a story or longer passage “straight through,” as we normally expect to do, naturally awakens our life-like sense of intrinsic drama. That immediate sense of participation includes our desiring, willing, and emotionally judging sympathies (or antipathies) towards the different characters and events discovered in the story, together with our reactions to all the various authorial commentators or “voice-overs”—at times

¹⁵ In content and majesty of tone alike, these concluding verses are palpably echoed in the famous final lines of *Faust II*—not surprisingly, given Goethe’s fascination with these earlier Persian poetic classics.

¹⁶ *Dūstān*, which is also the core of the common Persian compound verbal expressions for “to love” (*dūst-dāshtan*: literally “to have as friend”). Together, these two Persian expressions carefully mirror the mystic unity of the Love/Lover/Beloved (Arabic *Ishq/‘Āshiq/ Ma‘shūq*) celebrated in the concluding lines 27-34.

¹⁷ *Dāstān*, echoing the specific Qur’ānic term (*qisas*) for spiritually significant, symbolic or archetypal stories, especially in the description (at 12:3) of Joseph and his brothers as “the most-beautiful-and-best of stories.”

¹⁸ See the ground-breaking study by S. Weightman and S. G. Safavi cited at n. 7 above.

ecstatic, philosophical, moralizing, and so on—who are frequently interjected at key points throughout most story-cycles of the *Mathnawī*.

On the other hand, recognizing and then working with the parallelisms or nested correspondences between internal sections that are established by Rūmī’s organizing chiasmic structure (illustrated in section III below) necessarily involves a more probingly critical and analytical process of comparison and reflection.¹⁹ In fact, the alternation of these two rather different modes of engagement with the text (whether of the Qur’ān or *Mathnawī*) closely mirrors the familiar processes of everyday spiritual life, in which we are constantly engaged in what we perceive as “just experience.” Yet that relatively unreflective practical engagement in life’s immediate challenges proceeds simultaneously with the intricate inner processes (involving retrieval of related memories, analysis, projection, imagination, relevant levels of intuition and perception, judgment, inspiration, and so on) by which we gradually distill the deeper meanings underlying the ongoing flow of outer happenings and inner experience. In the cultural context of Rūmī’s original readership, of course, these multiple dimensions of reflective spiritual engagement and interrogation were already particularly encouraged through the supportive contemplative framework of the many required and supererogatory daily prayers, fasting, vigil, and the more focused “remembrance” (*dhikr*) disciplines of the Sufi Path (*ṭarīq*).

To begin with the reader’s linear, dramatic relationship to the different consecutive voices and perspectives of the Song of the Reed, it is apparent that this initial encounter with Rūmī’s poem already confronts each reader with at least seven or eight different perspectives on the meaning and proper direction of life and our awareness of the full dimensions of divine

¹⁹ Initially, this second-order element of reflective understanding and derived wisdom might naturally seem more superficial or external than the linear dramatic sequence of outer events and storytelling. But as the course of life’s stories eventually becomes more repetitive and familiar—as is normal in the course of a lifetime’s “human comedy”—then the inner fruits of observation and reflection become relatively more weighty and significant. In the course of this lifelong process of spiritual reflection on the divine Signs of creation (what the Qur’ān calls *tafakkur*)—and this inner quest for discovering the inspired “original source/meaning of events” (*ta’wīl al-ahādīth*, the particular divine grace bestowed on Joseph, at 12:6) is constantly encouraged and illustrated throughout the Qur’ān—the search for ultimate causality and deeper meaning gradually supersedes youth’s practical preoccupation with proximate conditions, choices, and immediate consequences.

Love—and of our corresponding choices at each of these critical turns.²⁰ As with Plato’s richly comparable *Symposium*, it is possible to read through these challenges simply as a desired or ideal progression. In that case the result is an overall successive movement corresponding—just as in the archetypal Qur’anic account of Joseph and his brothers—to key stages in the human soul’s spiritual ascension (verses 1-18) and then its subsequent compassionate “return” (lines 19-35) to help awaken and enlighten other human seekers and communities.²¹

But Rūmī was acutely aware of the pitfalls and delusions inherent in the popularization and resulting premature, purely literary encounter with such idealized spiritual schemas, which were particularly widespread in his ambient poetic culture.²² Hence reading the Song of the Reed at even a few different occasions in life will quickly make it obvious that his concluding observation (l. 35) that this story “is itself the inner reality of our *current* state”²³ means that we will normally find our own self and existential situation differently illuminated and reflected each time we return to the *Mathnawī*. Who or what we currently understand to be the “Reed” (or Love, Light, Friend, Breath, or any of the other key elements of this play) will often appear quite differently after each visitation.

Line 1: To begin with the familiar state of indeterminate observation and relatively external, only superficially participatory or compassionate “listening” evoked in the opening verse, no further commentary is really needed. For it is clear that the mutual “recounting of

²⁰ It is noteworthy that the following tale of the King and his maidservant apparently includes a similar spectrum of symbolic “case-studies” of very different forms, expressions or dimensions of Love.

²¹ See the discussion of these almost identical narrative structures and two-fold organizing “movements” in Chapter 7 above (*Dramatizing the Sura of Joseph: An Introduction to the Islamic Humanities*).

²² Especially suggestive of Rūmī’s suspicions in this regard is his powerful juxtaposition, at the very center of the entire *Mathnawī* (end of Book III, overlapping with the start of Book IV), of a long, highly idealized allegory of perfect spiritual love, which is suddenly followed by an ironic and painfully realistic love story focusing on the essential purifying elements of suffering, humiliation, devotion, guidance, patience, and dauntingly difficult spiritual discipline.

²³ It appears that this remark applies equally to the preceding Song of the Reed and—even more obviously—to the following richly elaborate tale of the King and his maidservant.

complaints” and bittersweet revisiting of memorably painful separations (of oneself or of others) is indeed one of the most familiar human pastimes.

Lines 2-7: Suddenly the monotony of this familiar everyday pseudo-listening is broken by the plaintive complaint of this first anonymous reed-flute. If we as readers are not put off by the self-pitying tone and the metaphysical abstraction of its mournful song, and if we are unable to deflect or ignore its implicit demands—for such polished deflection is often our first possible choice and response, one that we conveniently apply, almost habitually, in our daily encounters with the familiar or more intrusive expressions of this particular voice of suffering—then we are forced to interact with Rūmī’s complaining reed in two other demanding and far-reaching ways. First, we are obliged to identify inwardly and personally with the poignant complaints of this voice of suffering: this response requires empathically identifying the corresponding painful, incomplete dimensions of our own inner life and experience with others. The second, possible response to this part of the reed’s song is that our reflection and work of sympathetic identification may extend back into the past, engaging those suffering fellow-reeds we had previously encountered so that we find our focus shifting toward the unsuspected depths of other people’s expressions of similar tales of suffering, loss, longing, and disappointment.

In other words, Rūmī here—in addition to offering a painfully revealing autobiographical evocation of his own secretly desperate inner state before his transformative meeting with Shams—is confronting each reader with a moving depiction of that all-encompassing human-divine interaction so beautifully depicted in a well-known divine saying (the “Hadith of the Questioning”) already familiar to his initial audience.²⁴ While those encountering that celebrated

²⁴ God says on the Day of the Rising: “O son of Adam, I was sick and you didn’t visit Me.”

He said: “O my Lord, how could I visit You, and You are Lord of the worlds!?”

God said: “Didn’t you know that My servant so-and-so was sick, yet you didn’t visit him? Or didn’t you know that if you had visited him you would have found Me with him?”

[Then God says:] “O son of Adam, did I not ask you for food, but you refused to feed Me?”

He said: “O my Lord, how could I feed You, and You are Lord of the Worlds!?”

God said: “Now didn’t you know that my servant so-and-so asked you for food, but you didn’t feed him? And didn’t you know that if you had fed him you would have found that with Me?”²⁴

hadith initially tend to identify with the unanswered sufferings of the multitude of unhappily neglected sick, hungry and thirsty souls, even a little further reflection reveals that we always find ourselves simultaneously living in *both* those quintessential human positions: i.e., both suffering at some level in all those ways, and either responding to or else neglecting that same suffering in others. And the next, deeper stage of reflection—which Rūmī summarizes here in the several alternative, intentionally complementary readings of line 3²⁵—reveals that we are only capable of even perceiving, and then properly responding to, that very real suffering to the degree that we ourselves have previously passed through those same figurative but all too palpable “Fires”. Just where—and how—God comes into that cosmic picture of suffering and compassion is what Rūmī’s entire *Mathnawī* (and the remaining lines 8-35 here) are all about.

Perhaps the most important lesson dramatized in verses 2-7 is the immense gulf separating our merely conceptual, formal “knowing” of these basic spiritual laws from the demanding practical steps (both appropriate actions and heightened sensitivities) that are needed to translate those abstract principles into reality. The basic symbolic metaphysical framework assumed in these opening lines was quite familiar to Rūmī’s original readers. But the very

[Then God says:] “O son of Adam, I asked you for a drink, but you didn’t give Me anything to drink.”

He said: “O my Lord, how could I give You a drink, and You are Lord of the Worlds!?”

God said: “My servant so-and-so asked you for a drink, but you didn’t give him any. But if you had given him a drink you would have found that with Me.”

²⁵ To begin with, the multi-faceted language here—which has given rise to many commentaries and interpretations, partly reflected in Nicholson’s translation—is an unambiguous allusion to one of the best-known short Suras of the Quran (94:1-8), which begins “*Have we not opened up (unburdened) for you your chest (= heart), and lifted off from you your burden, which was pressing down on your back...?*” But Rūmī’s more ambiguous language here suggests, beyond the intrinsic pain of this “open-heart surgery,” several simultaneous facets of this dilemma of suffering and longing for release: (a) the reed’s hope for its own consolation and release (alluding to the celebrated hadith image of the divine “Breath of the All-Merciful”, *nafas al-Rahmān*, whose grace came to the Prophet at the most difficult and hopeless moment of his mission); (b) the reed’s need for an empathic, deeply understanding and compassionate listener (like all the “Friends” subsequently evoked in this song) who has fully experienced the same loneliness and suffering; and (c) and finally *God’s* own loving “need” for such compassionate and receptive human hearts. This characteristic interplay of suffering, longing and Grace—often openly connected to Rūmī’s own transforming discovery and loss of Shams—is one of the most familiar themes in his celebrated quatrains and ghazals.

cultural omnipresence of such spiritual principles—the importance of the soul’s deepest longing as our inner compass and source of animating energy; the profound need to know the divine “Friends” (*awliyā’ Allāh*) in all their personal manifestations and influences; the transformative “secrets” of the divine Breath/Spirit and Grace—only serves to intensify our awareness of our apparent helplessness with regard to properly applying them.

Lines 8-15: Dramatically speaking, in terms of the ongoing existential drama (and frustrating practical impasse) introduced in the preceding section, the new narrative voice introduced here—which initially sounds much like a learned, but not very practically helpful guide—seems at first only to intensify and highlight the ongoing helplessness and neediness of this “normal,” complaining reed. The ostensible practical lessons so readily proffered in this section—developing true inner humility (“becoming nothing”); and madly surrendering, like Majnūn, to the transforming passion of overwhelming divine Love—were familiar stereotypes of every Sufī handbook and spiritual poem of Rūmī’s day. But those suggestions are also radical, drastically life-changing steps that seem inherently to defy any voluntary enactment, since they depend on a rare inner burning “Fire”²⁶ of passionate divine Love. Even more problematically, the symptoms and descriptions of that mysterious Love first described here (“poison and cure-all,” “a Path full of blood/suffering,” “crazy,” intoxicating, and so on) are not unambiguously enticing, especially since this divine elixir seems in any case to be dependent (as the allusions to Moses at Sinai and to Muhammad’s heavenly ascension pointedly suggest) on rare and extreme gifts of divine grace reserved only for specially favored prophets and saints.

Against this still unresolved practical backdrop, Rūmī’s narrator here only vaguely alludes, implicitly and in passing, to an as yet undefined “Path” of inner purification and potentially salvific fellowship—partners, intimate friends, revelatory tales and legends, shared prayer and grieving are all quickly mentioned at this point—that might yet offer some life-saving way out of this apparently helpless dilemma. The one new practical choice suggested here, however fragile and uncertain that might at first appear, is the foundational virtue of “spiritual

²⁶ The Persian expression used here is equivalent to the Qur’ānic *al-nār* (“The Fire”), which is the most common scriptural description (in both Qur’ān and hadith) for the soul’s experience of estrangement from God’s Love and Compassion.

perseverance” (*sabr*), which is the indispensable accompaniment of each of these demanding outward aspects of the Path that are tentatively introduced here.

Lines 16-18: From a dramatic perspective, the intensely personal, ecstatically longing words and voice of this new speaker cannot help but evoke Rūmī’s own equally impassioned lyric evocations of his transforming encounter with Shams of Tabriz—and at least equally important, of his eventual deeper discovery of the Living divine “Sun” behind and through the earthly Shams, following his companion’s mysterious disappearance. For this is a personal voice that would already be recognizable to most of his initial readers through its unforgettable expression in much of his immense *Dīvān* of lyrical ghazals and quatrains. And readers of the *Mathnawī* itself will quickly discover that this same impassioned personal, apparently autobiographical lyric voice reappears throughout this epic at any number of key junctures. But where does this climactic new section and unforgettably rhapsodic voice actually leave the engaged reader? What new choice or alternative does it open up—especially for those jaded or sceptically inquisitive readers who may well ask how often most human souls are visited by the grace and rare destiny of meeting *their* own Shams? And how, such readers must surely ask, can we actually become that enlightened, immortal “fish”²⁷ effortlessly swimming through the often terrifying divine Seas? Or how can we voluntarily become the properly mature, receptive and suitably “cooked” mature soul—a painfully explicit image that recalls instead the preceding (and understandably worrying!) images of Love’s destructively purifying “Fire”?

The remainder of the poem begins to articulate Rūmī’s own personal response to these key practical challenges. But verse 18, at the literal midpoint of this opening poem, only repeats and highlights that central choice: either one can stay engaged on this still practically unknown, only intermittently visible Path, seeking (whether out of desperation or fascination) the necessary guidance and companionship to do so. Or else, having so sharply portrayed the attendant risks

²⁷ The richly complex imagery in lines 17-18 is all connected to the influential symbolic account, at the center of the Sura of the Cave (18:60-82), of Moses’ long search for and eventual discovery—or sudden recognition—of the Water of Life (at “the meeting place of the two Seas” of body and Spirit), when his dried fish is suddenly revived (the central theme of the entire Sura) and joyfully returns to its original Home. See also the related imagery of the oyster and Pearl, at line 21 (n. 39 below).

and challenges of that choice, Rūmī calmly and directly invites his less courageous or still unprepared readers to simply walk away. Indeed his final “and Peace be with you!” under these circumstances, seems more of a regretfully knowing blessing (or even a promise of eventual discovery), than a critical or angrily dismissive gesture.

Lines 19-22: In terms of practices and formal teaching, the next short section appears to introduce, above all, the variegated practical processes of inner purification and non-attachment which constitute one of the main recurring subjects of the entire *Mathnawī* (as well as essential foundations of the institutions later elaborated in the Mevlevi Sufī path). And if the reader does choose to remain with Rūmī and his guidance, then this practical work is indeed the necessary next step.

On the more dramatic, personal level, however, this short central section is marked by two other key developments and implicit choices. First, in suddenly and unexpectedly referring to his still-engaged reader as “my son” (see n. 12 above), Rūmī boldly suggests the practically critical possibility that—much like an outward spiritual guide or master—he (or his transforming “Word,” at verses 18 and 33) may be able to help more directly in liberating the reader from his or her debilitating attachments and veils. This initiatic role of the inspired “Word” of grace also recalls the transforming power of music, already evoked in the underlying reed-flute imagery of this entire poem.

The second dramatic dynamic of this deceptively brief section is to propose Rūmī’s equivalent of a kind of Pascalian wager, a spiritual gambit which is apparently intended to help more timorous readers to overcome any anxieties and outright fears evoked by the poet’s earlier emphasis (at lines 8-15) on the risks and sufferings entailed by the surrender to Love. Adopting a more positive and seductive tone, the poet highlights here the infinite disproportionality of the soul’s gamble on Love, whose rewards and consequences—if they are granted—so palpably outweigh all the other momentary satisfactions and uneasy comforts of the unenlightened life. On an equally positive note, this master-like voice more openly alludes (l. 22) to the crucial motivating role of Love in underpinning all the daunting efforts (and offsetting the apparent risks and sacrifices) that are inherent in the demanding lifelong disciplines of purification. Both of these positive observations apparently lead Rūmī—momentarily neglecting his disciple-readers

(or leaving them to ponder these varied and weighty benefits)—back to the rhapsodic “ode to Love” that constitutes verses 23-26.

Lines 23-26: If each of these constitutive sections of the Song of the Reed seems to articulate a particular unifying spiritual virtue, then this short section is visibly devoted to the central Qur’ānic virtues of thankfulness and praise (*hamd, shukr*). This effusive celebration of divine Love is not simply a moving autobiographical expression of Rumi’s own transforming encounter with Shams—though the passionate invocation of similar memories does frequently interrupt every Book of the *Masnawi*. What is even more important for each reader here is the poet’s grammatically telling inclusion²⁸ of *every* lover, whose ecstatic discovery of and by Love unforgettably reveals this archetypal overcoming of the earlier apparent separation (lines 7-8) of soul and body, heaven and earth. As Rumi then reminds us, the Source and full implications of this transforming gift of Love are memorably prefigured in the archetypal theophanic illuminations of Muhammad and Moses (verses 25-26).²⁹ And against that backdrop, the unexplained, challengingly intimate personal address of the final line here (“O lover”) openly suggests that at least some readers’ earlier hesitations have now been definitively set aside.

Lines 27-34: In a centuries-long poetic tradition particularly devoted to elegantly compressing the greatest number and depth of potential meanings into the briefest possible aesthetic form, the succinct interweaving of musical and erotic imagery in the opening half-line of this section would surely place it among the prize contenders. For each of this verse’s alternate understandings suggests a different dramatic perspective and possible conclusion to this song. Since the “intimate Friend” (*damsāz*: literally “Breath-maker” or “Breath-player”) so

²⁸ In the space of only two lines (23-24), Rumi emphatically (albeit mysteriously) speaks three times of “*our*” curing and healing.

²⁹ For a more adequate explanation of these complex allusions, from both Qur’ān and hadith, to the Mi’raj (archetypal spiritual ascension and return) of the prophet Muhammad and to the Qur’ānic account of the theophanies of Moses, see our detailed study of *The Spiritual Ascension: Ibn ‘Arabī and the Mi’rāj*, in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 107 (1987), pp. 629-652, and vol. 108 (1988), pp. 63-77. (Soon to be available in our forthcoming volume *Ibn ‘Arabī and His Interpreters: Contexts and Foundations*.) The significance of Rūmī’s allusions here is summed up in the Qur’ānic insistence (at 17:1) that the Prophet’s entire journey was “... *so that We might cause him to see*, among Our Signs.”

directly evokes the universally animating, life-giving divine Spirit, Who plays out through His fragile human reed the universal drama of Love and creation, Rūmī's image here suggests that we (or rather "We"?) are individually *both* a player and (even more certainly) the specially adapted instrument—and audience—of the divine Concert. Both of those "vertical", metaphysical possibilities seem almost inseparable by this point. Yet both of these possibilities are further concretized and emotionally heightened by their resonance and reflection at the intensely present "horizontal" level of the human *kiss*, with all its endless possible meanings and expressions of love—and through the paradigmatic inseparability of any imagined "subject" and "object" within that archetypal symbol of Love.

In the second half-line (of verse 27), that musical-erotic dimension of the "reed" is further extended to an even more inclusive Qur'ānic symbol of God's supreme cosmic and artistic creativity: the divine (reed-) "Pen" of the universal Intelligence that writes out all the Books of created existence.³⁰ The ironically punning connection here between that divine instrument of all creation and the poet's own authorial hand no doubt also alludes to Rūmī's conviction concerning the particular inspired character of this poem, which he had already so boldly emphasized in the famous opening lines of his prose prologue to this first Book of the *Mathnawī*.³¹

The rest of this celebrated concluding section dramatically alternates between further classic expressions of this unitive realization of Love, subsuming all individuals and apparent "egos" in the One divine Breath, and a poignant series of potentially still-painful reminders (at verses 28, 29, 31 and 34) of the isolated, passing, discordantly singular "I" of the reed's earlier soliloquy. But what has changed at this end-point—even for readers still personally caught up in the ruminations of that longing solitude—is Rūmī's careful metaphysical contextualization of

³⁰ Because the pen (*qalam*), in Islamic civilization, was always made from carefully cut and trimmed reeds, Rūmī's reference here to "*my reed*" directly recalls not only the reed flute and cosmic Qur'ānic imagery of the divine Speech and Breath/Spirit, but also the close parallelism between his own inspired poetic creation in this *Spiritual Mathnawī*, and the source of earlier divine revelations.

³¹ Western readers will be reminded of the parallel role of Prospero's "books" and "magic" in Shakespeare's *Tempest*.

that repeated human experience of suffering, loss and apparent separation within the larger divine framework of Life, Love, Grace, Light and the Word³² which unveils that suffering's deeper meaning. For by this point, the apparently irredeemable isolation, nostalgic longing and object-less love that filled and fed the first reed's mourning now turn out to mirror at every stage the very Heart of creation, in this poem's memorable concluding evocation of the influential Divine Saying: "*I was a hidden Treasure, and I loved to be known; so I created creation/human beings in order that I might be known.*"³³

Verse 35: As already suggested, this final verse apparently reverses (or more accurately completes and fulfills) each of the elements of this poem's opening invocation. For "*this story*"—which is both the reed's song just completed, and the more elaborate narrative retelling of that opening story which follows—is a mirror that necessarily includes and illuminates all conceivable stories and attitudes, in language that clearly evokes its Qur'anic inspiration (12:3) in Joseph's "best-and-most-beautiful of tales." *Wherever we happen to turn* and find ourselves, this last verse suggests, *there too is the Face of God* (2:115).

Thus Rumi's tentative, yet boldly inclusive claim in this final opening verse already foreshadows his notoriously problematic ending to the entire *Masnavi*. There (Book VI, verses 4876-4916) he concludes by highlighting the paradoxical comprehensiveness of that mysteriously enlightened "laziness," of our inner surrender to peace (*taslīm*) and faithful perseverance in that surrender (*sabr*, which is also the last word and culminating lesson of Book I)—a spiritual station transcending and incorporating all of life's dramas of love and the soul's quest for knowledge—which paradoxically carries away the ultimate divine Prize at the very end of this vast epic of the soul.

III. CHIASMUS AND REFLECTION: RECONSIDERING THE SOUL'S UNFOLDING DRAMA:

³² Lines 30-33 form a successive litany, an almost ritual reminder (*dhikr*) of each of those transforming divine Names.

³³ See also the note to the translation below (lines 33-34) briefly explaining the Qur'anic and hadith references to the "rust" and "polishing" of hearts, as well as the fuller treatment of this theme in chapter 2 of *The Reflective Heart: Discovering Spiritual Intelligence in Ibn 'Arabī's 'Meccan Illuminations'* (Louisville, Fons Vitae, 2005).

As we already noted (section I above), a preliminary examination based primarily on the shifting voices and perspectives in the Song of the Reed suggests a succession of eight distinct sections (or nine, if we separate out the central hinge-verse 18), with the central subjects of each of the first four sections closely paralleling the final four, only in inverse order (i.e., sections 1 and 8; 2 and 7; 3 and 6; 4 and 5). This linking chiasmic structure, which turns out to be followed (although in increasingly more complex forms) throughout—and apparently also across—each of the six Books of the *Mathnawī*,³⁴ creates a remarkably intertwined aesthetic and intellectual structure in which each section in the first half typically raises a problem or issue that is then resolved, transformed or answered in some way by its later, corresponding “parallel” section. The careful adherence to this organizing procedure already throughout the Song of the Reed, albeit in such a simplified and relatively visible form, suggests that this opening poem was meant to provide Rūmī’s readers with something like a master-key to the chiasmic structures developed in the twelve, quite visibly coherent and constitutive story-cycles of Book I and each succeeding Book.

Although we began our earlier discovery of this deeper organizing structure (in section I) by exploring the revealing grammatical and formal features of Rūmī’s opening poem, the usefulness and reliability of those indications is richly confirmed when we consider the primary subjects and progressive development of the four corresponding pairs of sections here.

Sections 1 and 8 (verses 1 and 35): As already discussed above, both of these framing lines start with the imperative “Listen!” But everything we find in the concluding line 35 involves a dramatic perspective shift from the mournful loneliness, unexamined subjective “recounting” and complaining focus on painful separations expressed in the first verse and

³⁴ The recent pioneering study of these organizing structures of Rūmī’s *Mathnawī* (n. 8 above) promises a further detailed volume devoted to Book II, while one of its authors (Dr. S. G. Safavi) has since published a series of short articles in the journal *Transcendent Philosophy* (www.iranianstudies.org) demonstrating Rūmī’s careful development of the same chiasmic procedure (of 12 “discourses” divided among three successive “blocks” of four) throughout each of the remaining Books of the *Mathnawī*. However, one should hasten to add that the visibly growing complexity of those structures in each successive Book of the *Mathnawī* also illustrates Rūmī’s visible resistance to any sort of arbitrary, unnaturally rigid uniformities—a feature again mirroring the unpredictable architectonic structures of each Sura of the Qur’ān.

throughout the following section. Instead the tone, the addressees, and the speaker's relation to them in the final line 35 (which basically summarizes the preceding eight-line section) all boldly highlight a dramatic reversal of each constitutive element of the opening verse: here those addressed are now our fellow "friends" (*dūstān*), sharing intimately in a common, spiritually meaningful archetypal "tale" (*dāstān*) which reveals to us the deeply-purposeful "inner reality" of "our" (at once each reader's, and all of humanity's) actual spiritual state.

Sections 2 and 7: The shared theme here is that of the ego, but speaking in the sharply contrasting voices of two totally different "I's". The first speech (tellingly, all "complaint") of the reed is a desperately lonely one: isolated, bereft, pained and separated from both its divine Source and its outwardly sympathetic (but inwardly indifferent) fellow human beings, singing only the mournful lament of nostalgia and unrequited longing. In a word, it represents the alienated condition of the dead, uprooted, fragile, traumatically pierced stick somehow imagining itself to be the Musician's transforming breath and touch. By the end of the poem, the "individual" speaker is revealed instead as the underlying communion-kiss of the loving divine "Breath"³⁵—here at once Life, Love, Grace, Light, Word, and Heart—expressed and perceived in the shared music-creation of each of Its human instruments, even those whose heart-mirrors may be momentarily clouded by the obscuring fog of distraction, loss, attachment or solitude.³⁶

Sections 3 and 6: These corresponding transitional sections present the manifestations and perception of divine Love from two very different, but progressive and complementary perspectives. The first section (lines 8-15) already acknowledges the transforming centrality of Love, but still almost entirely from the narrow, self-limited perspective of the solitary and

³⁵ As explained in the translation notes, Rūmī assumes his readers will be aware of the underlying identity of the Spirit (Arabic *Rūh*) as literally both "wind" and the life-giving divine "Breath; and of the closely related Qur'ānic term for "soul" (*nafs*) as both the individual soul-breath and the ever-renewed divine "Love-Breathing" (*nafas al-Rahmān*) that re-creates all manifestation at every instant.

³⁶ See n. 81 below on the "rust"—and necessary "polishing"—of the mirror of the human heart (lines 33-34).

mournful reed.³⁷ Hence it focuses on the tumultuous passion and familiar poetic litany of the symbolic sufferings and inner troubles associated with love: blood (uncontrollable emotion and suffering), craziness (the literal Arabic root meaning of *Majnūn*'s name), grieving, darkness, poison, boiling, and wine's intoxicating ferment. The only positive side emerging here at first is the liberating force of Love perceived as a persistent motivator (in the face of loss and death) and accidentally effective destroyer which conveniently breaks through "our veils" and illusions of separation.³⁸ Only in the middle of this third section (at lines 11-12) do we encounter the first acknowledgement of the actually central, catalytic role of the divine "Friend," Guide and Guardian (*yār/walī*): first as the otherwise unspecified "universal antidote" (*tiryāq*: also ironically the word for opium!) for life's persistent pains; then as the indispensable consolation of the longing lover; and finally as the reed's true soul-mate, the "breath-giving/breath-playing" (*dam-sāz*) Musician behind the reed's song.

In section 6, of course, Rūmī's eloquent praise and celebration of Love restores "our" properly balanced human perspective and intrinsically dependent relations to the full divine reality of Love, as that can only be perceived by fellow lovers (l. 26). The archetypal theophanic experiences of Moses and Muhammad allusively evoke and briefly summarize the heights of Love's transforming influences, aims, and universally healing, spiritually curative effects—which continue to be elaborated in the longer concluding section. Ultimately the divine reality discussed here is that first so problematically, and distantly encountered in section 3. But the poet's (and reader's) perspective in relation to the effective

³⁷ The reed's lonely opening complaint here is functionally equivalent to the already widely familiar Sufi poetic image of the perpetually alienated and romantically longing "nightingale"—hopelessly singing the beauties of its unattainable divine Rose—that openly emerges only at line 29.

³⁸ Here and throughout Rūmī's *Mathnawī*, it is essential for Western readers to keep in mind that the recurrent symbolism of "veiling" refers to what can be safely "seen through" in all the endlessly unfolding theophanies of the divine Beauty and other Names, not to any simple blocking of our spiritual vision. The classical scriptural source for this guiding theophanic insight is the well-known "hadith of the Veils":

"God has seventy thousand [or in some versions, 70/700] veils of light and darkness: if He were to remove them, the radiant splendors of His Face would burn up whoever was reached by His Gaze."

reality and presence of that all-encompassing creative and redemptive Love has shifted completely here, as though from night to day.

Sections 4 and 5: The inner connection between these two shorter central sections is essentially practical, and in this case quite visible and understandable. As section 4 reminds us, our unforgettable moments of theophanic encounter with the divine Friend, whatever their outward forms and occasions, inevitably give rise afterwards to a sense of tormenting attachment, painful loss, and unsatisfied longing—demoralizing states of the fragile ego-reed that could readily drag us back to all the familiar short-sighted egoistic distractions and other dead-ends that were more elaborately evoked in the opening sections. And Rūmī’s cryptic challenge to each reader at this midpoint of this poem (l. 18) suggests that for many, that frustrating return to the lonely reed-world and its mournful musical solace may often seem inevitable. But section 5 suddenly opens up the alternative, necessarily *practical* prospect of undertaking the lengthy purifying work and gradual detachment of the faithful and devoted lover³⁹—while highlighting the necessary catalytic role of grace (God’s directly experienced Loving) in making possible that challenging soul-work of transformation.

In each of these four nested pairs of linked sections, it is important to keep in mind that the actual individual spiritual process implied and demanded by these comparisons is a living reality quite different from the mere intellectual or symbolic articulation of the visible differences between these two parallel states or conditions—even if that reflection and understanding may constitute an essential first step in this process. Instead, what is really revealed by this contrasting parallelism, in each case, is a kind of specifically existential “mystery”: that is, the deeper challenge of understanding and then realizing within ourselves this dramatic shift in perspective. The eventual results of each of these pairs of contrasting spiritual states may be unmistakably visible, but the actual deeper workings and inner

³⁹ Here, at line 22, it is particularly important to be aware of all the interrelated symbolic references to the process of spiritual growth and perfection included in the Qur’ānic image (already familiar from the gnostic “Hymn of the Pearl”) of the “Pearl” of the fully realized human soul. The oyster-shell of the body, immersed in the “bitter” salt-water of material-temporal existence, was understood to open up at special rare moments to a single pure heavenly “rain-drop” of the Spirit and Grace, which then required ages of incubation and perseverance (*sabr*) to arrive at its ultimate perfection.

development underlying those transformations force us to focus more directly on our own cognate personal experiences and moments of unexpected illumination and insight—and on the sustained and quietly determined inner work underlying them—which eventually help give rise to such dramatic and initially unsuspected inner changes.

IV. FROM GRAMMAR TO METAPHYSICS: REALIZING THE *MATHNAWĪ*'S UNIFYING THEMES

The entire movement of the Song of the Reed could be very simply summed up—and indeed is, in the pairing of its first and last lines—as the mysteriously unfolding development of the Spirit from an apparently solitary, alienated and embittered ego; through a series of transforming encounters with Love (the “Thou”/you of all the divine/human Friends and Beloveds); to its destined realization as the “W/we” of the Spirit that lives and acts within the fuller awareness of that One creative Love. Each of this poem’s four pairs of chiasmically linked sections together dramatizes and highlights one key dimension or manifestation of that ongoing, revelatory transformation: the simultaneously cosmic and internalized individual unfolding of that divine hidden Treasure which “loves to be known.”

But here one basic caution is also in order. Rūmī, throughout the *Mathnawī*, rigorously and quite self-consciously avoids the familiar kind of systematic, didactic allegorization which is so obvious in his well-known Persian poetic predecessors, such as ‘Attār and Sanā’ī.⁴⁰ The recurrent danger which he systematically works to avoid at every turn in this epic is that such familiar ways of writing ultimately lead their readers to remain at the primarily intellectual level of simply “recognizing” and aesthetically appreciating the refined artistic representation of teachings and truths with which they were already quite familiar, in Rūmī’s own religious and cultural context, from a host of earlier Islamic religious sciences, practical disciplines, spiritual traditions, and popular wisdom-literatures. Readers have only to turn to a carefully close reading of the final story-cycle of Book I (the saga of Ali’s forgiveness of his opponent in battle, his

⁴⁰ Those who have read through even a single Book of the *Mathnawī* quickly discover that Rūmī is constantly playing with our natural human tendency to expect some comforting allegorical regularity and constancy in his use of particular images and symbols—so that the “hero” (real or self-proclaimed) of one story often becomes the dupe or villain of another. (This literary process closely mirrors filmmakers’ familiar use today of often ironic and humorous, but meaningful allusions to familiar scenes from earlier classics.)

enemy's sudden illumination, and the mysterious "passion" of Ali's servant and eventual assassin) to see how Rūmī, within every section of that cycle, is constantly moving back and forth, often within every few lines, through the different alternating perspectives and stages of the overall movement so systematically orchestrated in the Song of the Reed.⁴¹

The guiding purpose of all these challenging metaphysical and poetic complexities, however, is quite clear. What happens in each of those stories and reflections is that a homiletic popular story or teaching which Rūmī's reader naturally expects to express, in poetic guise, a familiar and externally considered didactic point,⁴² is instead subtly "reversed" or turned upside-down. The result is that each unsuspecting new reader suddenly finds, at some point in that process, that the whole purpose of that section was instead to catch and draw out for more conscious reflection certain practically crucial, but previously unconscious aspects of the reader's own soul and deepest patterns of conceiving God, the world, and our own destined place in that ongoing drama. In other words, every story and passage in the *Mathnawī* eventually turns out to be an exquisitely shifting mirror designed to "catch the conscience of the King." In the religious and philosophical sciences of Rūmī's day, this distinctive way of teaching and learning was described as *tahqīq*:⁴³ a term which means simultaneously "realizing" (spiritually and intellectually) what is in fact true; while likewise "actualizing" in ongoing reality (both in spirit and in deed) that truth which was previously simply believed or formally accepted, or which had remained even more profoundly unconscious. The enduring appeal and lasting fascination of this

⁴¹ This particularly fluid and indeterminate rhetorical aspect of the *Mathnawī* offers remarkable similarities with the often untranslatable Arabic poems of Ibn 'Arabī (in his *Futūhāt* and elsewhere), where each line must often be read from two or three different—but ultimately complementary and indispensable—metaphysical perspectives.

⁴² Something of the ecumenical range of earlier literary, philosophical and religious sources for Rūmī's tales and imagery in the *Mathnawī*—most of them somewhat familiar to his contemporaries, or at least to those learned readers culturally at home (like himself) in both Arabic and Persian—can be gathered from Nicholson's extensive abstracts (in his commentaries) of earlier Islamic commentators, Furuzanfar's *Qisas al-Mathnawī*, and especially the slowly expanding body of available translations in Western languages from his classical Persian poetic predecessors.

⁴³ A key expression that we have elsewhere translated as "spiritual intelligence": see the extensive study of this distinctive spiritual and literary practice in our work cited at n. 33 above.

Spiritual Mathnawī, across so many centuries and despite all the inevitable further losses in translation, has everything to do with Rūmī’s extraordinary creative mastery of this rhetoric of realization.

However, there is one more critical feature of Rūmī’s distinctive artistic language that ultimately can only be approximated or externally described, since its actual workings have to be experienced repeatedly in order to become clear: that is the mysterious transforming element of spiritual intuition or inspiration. Just as with so many celebrated verses and chapters of the Qur’ān, Rūmī’s rapid and unexplained shifting of metaphysical and contextual perspectives secretly draws the actively engaged reader into a kind of bewildering impasse. Indeed the very complexity of those existentially compelling considerations and their potential implications—throughout Book I, for example, Rūmī’s ongoing theological insistence on both divine determination and individual free will and responsibility; or the intertwined mysteries of bodily death, mortality, evil and suffering that connect each story-cycle—eventually leads his readers into a state of deep inner bewilderment (*hayra*) that cannot be resolved simply by intellectual means.⁴⁴ It is precisely at that crucial point that this disorienting inner puzzlement is memorably answered by an illumination, an unexpected inner change of state or new consideration that opens up, in a profoundly convincing way, an enduringly changed perspective or resolution which is both existential and intelligible.

In what may be a helpful analogy, this characteristic experience of discovery when studying the *Mathnawī* over time closely mirrors the common experience of that particularly memorable aspect of prayer which many Sufī writers, before and after Rūmī, have vividly described as *ilqā’*: as the sudden divine “throwing” or emergence into our momentarily receptive consciousness—just as in an indubitably spiritual dream or vision—of a particularly apt illuminating verse of the Qur’ān (or a similarly transformative insight or intuition) which is the immediate response to our current state and need.

⁴⁴ The centrality (and relative rarity) of this spiritual station of *hayra* is discussed in detail in all of the recent studies of Ibn ‘Arabī’s historically influential thought, but its most accessible literary representation can perhaps be found in the available translations of ‘Attar’s renowned account of the “Seven Valleys of Love” in his *Conference of the Birds (Mantiq at-Tayr)*—a book which (along with ‘Attar’s *Ilāhī-Nāmeḥ*) exercised a profound influence on Rūmī’s *Mathnawī*.

It is against that wider backdrop that we can appreciate one final preparatory role of the Song of the Reed: this prelude is Rūmī’s carefully open-ended first introduction to many of the practically central leitmotifs and perspectives of the entire *Mathnawī*. What is important here is that each of these basic considerations and their symbolic exemplifications introduced here does not simply provide significant unifying literary and theological themes, but rather that Rūmī here is providing his readers with a much smaller set of guiding “touchstones” that we can use to gauge our actual personal relation to his teachings at any point in this epic. The great advantage of these guiding existential considerations is that this inherently subjective element is directly accessible and normally requires no further explanation or commentary. Each reader (and no one else!) can and must provide this key catalytic element for each story’s interpretive process.

- The first of these constant touchstones, introduced already in the poem’s opening line, is the familiar spectrum of relative separation and reunion or proximity with the divine Beloved, which is of course mirrored in the grammatical structures and shifting voice-perspectives and alternative responses outlined above (section I). Rūmī’s Song of the Reed opens with the apparent opposition of these experiential poles, in which the reality and presence of the all-encompassing divine Love and Compassion is at first known and perceived only through the reed’s desolate egoistic sense of loss, conflict, longing, and separation. But Rūmī quickly moves on to the dynamic revelation of all the mediating, motivating, and transforming influences of that Love: the divine “You”, all the divine “Friends” and guides,⁴⁵ their Water (of Life), and the personal Path that eventually emerges through those lifelong encounters and alternating subjective states of apparent separation and proximity. And even a small amount of reflection on our cycling between these two polar conditions—above all as constantly encountered in everyday life, not just while reading this epic—quickly reveals the immense spectrum and variation of each soul’s movements and conscious states along that Path, as well as the ongoing mystery and challenge of just why we happen to find ourselves in each of those momentary positions, and where we are now headed.

⁴⁵ See the related notes to the translation below on *walāya* (divine “Friendship”, Guidance, Protection, Mediation) and the saintly *awliyā’*.

- A second dynamic and far-reaching touchstone introduced here, which quickly becomes the dramatic heart of the following story-cycle of the love-struck King and his mysteriously ailing maidservant, is the soul's gradual discovery and appreciation of the divine Cure, Healer, and Friend, in all their infinitely varied manifestations. This discovery only becomes possible through the humanly embodied spirit's ineluctable suffering—and especially through the purifying “fires” of loss, estrangement, longing, tears, and inner perseverance which are inherent in that mortal condition. It is no accident that this opening Song's central line (l. 18) unambiguously highlights this secret of the initially innocent, “raw” human soul's necessary purifying, maturing and “cooking” by all the painful fires so unforgettably described throughout the Qur'ān and related hadith⁴⁶—until through “illuminating perseverance” (*sabr*, the concluding word of Book I) and the life-giving waters of grace, that fire (*nār*) is transmuted into Light (*nūr*).
- The third, equally universal touchstone arising here—again already present in the opening line—is the intimate divine/human need for communication and creative expression, for shared, inter-active “speech” (or Music) and for the equally indispensable receptive dimension of empathic, contemplative “listening.” This particular semantic web, so central to all of Rūmī's poetry (not just the *Mathnawī*), stretches from the cacophonies of everyday human interaction to the central focus of the Qur'ān itself on all the inherently creative dimensions and manifestations of the divine “Words” (a term notably including all the messengers and their Books), the harmonious angelic Concert of all creation, and the key cosmological symbols of the divine Pen, Inkwell and Tablet, as well as the individual eschatological “books” of each soul's life and destiny. Understandably, this symbolic matrix—and its central vivifying dynamic of divine Love and human need—is in reality inseparable from the following theme of divine/human companionship, grace and guidance (*walāya*).

⁴⁶ For a coherent and more detailed account of the complex traditional eschatological/spiritual symbolism (and its scriptural sources) developed throughout the *Mathnawī*, see chapter 5 of our study cited at n. 33 above.

- One of the most intimate and essential dimensions of each soul’s path is of course the touchstone of the divine protecting and guiding “Friend” (*al-Walī*)—of all the unfolding discoveries and instruments of Grace, the indispensable catalysts in the longing soul’s transmutation from raw and lonely ego to the culminating, fully cooked “We” of the Spirit. The centrality of this multifaceted reality in Rūmī’s spiritual vision and teaching is reflected in the profusion of intertwined synonyms introduced already here in these few opening lines: *yār, walī, dūst, hamrāh, hamzabān, damsāz*—as well as in the constant flow of allusion (and the sudden surprising interjection of open addresses) to the central figures of Shams-i Tabriz (or Husamuddin) in Rūmī’s own personal love-story. Fortunately, the full dimensions of this transformative autobiographical dimension of the *Mathnawī* can now be much more directly grasped through the recent availability of two English translations of the transcribed teaching-sessions of Shams, with their revealing and colorful amplifications in Aflaki’s later voluminous and influential hagiography.⁴⁷

- Finally, perhaps the most intimate and multi-faceted touchstone of all is the complex of allusions—almost all of them ultimately Qur’ānic in origin and wider semantic context—which Rūmī introduces to convey the ever-present polarities and possibilities of the Heart. Here this spiritual locus of all perception and awareness, as throughout the Qur’ān, is at once “our” heart and the Heart of all Being, both the divine Names and their human reflections. These central symbolic families include, in just these opening lines: Love, the soul’s innermost secret or mystery (*sirr*), Light, Spirit, Sea, mirror, Pearl, “inside”—as well as all their intrinsic corollaries (“outside,” rust, body, corpse, veils, senses, alienation, reflection, senses, wind). All the inescapable polarities which, taken together, make this singularly fragile and broken reed the fully theomorphic instrument of that Heart’s endlessly unfolding Song.

⁴⁷ See *Rūmī’s Sun*, tr. C. Helminski and R. Algan (Morning Light Press, 2008), and *Me and Rūmī: The Autobiography of Shams-i Tabrīz*, tr. W. Chittick (Fons Vitae, 2004). Both versions are explicitly incomplete, given the extraordinary challenges posed by the surviving Persian text of Shams’s *Maqālāt*. Aflaki’s invaluable later hagiographic compilation of stories surrounding Rūmī, Shams and other key figures in the nascent Mevlevi movement is now also available in a full English translation by John O’Kane, *The Feats of the Knowers of God: Manāqib al-‘Arifīn* (Leiden, Brill, 2002).

Literal Version of the “Song of the Reed” (verses 1-35)⁴⁸

[Section 1: line 1 (Narrator to *singular* reader)]

Listen (sing.) to the reed/flute,⁴⁹ as it recounts a story,

complaining of separations:

[Section 2: lines 2-7 (Reed/flute’s soliloquy)]

[2] “Ever since they tore **me** from the reed-garden,

men and women have been weeping at **my** cry.

[3] **I** want a chest torn open,⁵⁰ torn open by separation,⁵¹

so that [for such a listener?]⁵² **I** can give expression to the pain of longing!

⁴⁸ This intentionally literal version (also adhering closely to the original phrasing and word order) is adapted from both Nicholson and the recent verse translation of Book I by Alan Williams, *Rūmī: Spiritual Verses* (London, Penguin Classics, 2006). For the analytical purposes developed in section I above, we have highlighted certain key grammatical markers and also added in square brackets our tentative identifications of the main sections and the possible speakers and audiences in the different sections.

⁴⁹ Throughout this opening poem, it is important keep in mind both meanings of the Persian *nayy* here: as both the fragile, dead flute (or even the reed-pen, at line 27) and the living reed from which it is made. These two senses correspond to the twofold Qur’anic account of the origination of humanity, as both the celestial, eternal spirit (at 7:172; see n. 9 above) later breathed into Adam, and the mortal bodily (and similarly tube-like) human form, created of “stinking clay.”

⁵⁰ See n. 25 above for the Qur’anic resonances (98:1-8) of this image and its multiple contrasting, but inter-related senses here. While we have kept the literal “chest” (*sīneh*, Qur’anic *sadr*) in English here, in the Qur’ān this term refers to the outermost dimension or covering of the “Heart” (*qalb*), which is the locus of all the levels and forms of human perception and cognition (i.e., not at all restricted to emotion and feeling).

⁵¹ Here *firāq* is the Arabic synonym of *jidā’ī* in opening line, usually referring more specifically in poetry to one’s separation from the longed-for Beloved.

⁵² See note 25 above for a more detailed explanation of the complex possible meanings of the Persian here.

- [4] Each person who remains far from his/her own Source/root
is seeking after the destined-Day of their Reunion.⁵³
- [5] I was weeping in every gathering:
I joined with those who were sad and with those who were happy.
- [6] Each person, from their own supposition, (imagined) he became **my** Friend⁵⁴ —
(yet) none sought **my** secrets from within **me**.
- [7] **My** secret⁵⁵ is not far from **my** weeping—
but the (bodily) eye and ear do not have *that* Light!”⁵⁶
- [Section 3: lines 8-15 ([same?] narrator to everyone)]
- [8] Body is not veiled from soul,⁵⁷ nor soul from body—
yet no one is permitted to see the soul.⁵⁸

⁵³ Although we have not interrupted the quotation of the reed’s complaint here, this entire line 5, without any first-person marker, seems to shift into a very different, proverbial voice of wisdom, as though Rūmī is already interjecting a wiser, deeper context for the reed’s initial feelings of loss and longing. Such mysterious and unexpected interjections or sudden “jumps” to a higher metaphysical perspective are in fact common throughout *Mathnawī*—as they are in the Qur’ān.

⁵⁴ *Yār* here is the first of a large number of Persian expressions in this opening poem (all familiar from earlier Persian mystical poets) corresponding to facets of the central Arabic notion of *al-Walī*: both the divine Name and Attribute designating God’s “closeness” and protecting, guiding “proximity” to all creation, and more specifically all those divine “Friends” and Mediators (*awliyā’ Allāh*, in the Qur’ānic expression) who are the instruments and mediators of God’s protection, guidance and eventual salvation, both in this world and in higher realms.

⁵⁵ *Sirr* is a key Qur’ānic expression referring to one of the innermost dimensions of the human Heart; “mystery” or “essence” may come closer to conveying that aspect of spiritual psychology.

⁵⁶ Rūmī (or the reed) here uses specifically (among many more mundane Persian expressions for light) the highly charged Qur’ānic expression and divine Name (24:35 ff.) *Nūr*—a term originally referring to moonlight, and hence to all the theophanies of the divine Sun “reflected” in the planes of creation. Thus its symbolic role and nature here is very close to the parallel imagery of the divine “Spirit” or “Breath” (*rūh*) in the Qur’ānic symbolism of God’s creative Speech and Music that runs throughout this opening poem.

[9] *Fire* is this cry of the reed; it isn't (mere) wind:

whoever lacks *this* fire, may he become nothing!⁵⁹

[10] *Fire* is Love that has fallen into the reed,

Love's boiling-ferment, fallen into the wine.

[11] The reed is the partner of whoever is torn away from Friend-ship/a Friend:⁶⁰

its notes/His veils have torn *our* veils apart.⁶¹

[12] Who has seen a poison and a cure-all like the reed?

Who has seen an intimate-friend (*damsāz*) and a longing-lover like the reed?

[13] The reed tells the legend of a Path full of blood/suffering:

it tells the tales of crazy (Majnun's) Love.⁶²

⁵⁷ *Jān* is also “Life” and (through its equivalence to the Arabic *nafs/nafas*) the soul or “life-breath” quickening and illuminating the human body.

⁵⁸ Rūmī's expression here directly echoes the well-known verse (6:103): “The vision (of the eyes) does not perceive/encompass Him, but He encompasses that vision”—reminding his readers of the repeated Qur'ānic contrast between human beings' vast potential power of spiritual insight (*basīra*) and the sharply limited scope of the physical eyes' visual range (*basar*: originally the “visual ray” thought to emanate from the eye in the process of ocular vision.)

⁵⁹ There is a serious pun here between the everyday sense of this idiom (“may he just disappear”) and Rūmī's repeated emphasis—here in the *Mathnawī* and throughout his poetry, following 'Attar and many earlier Sufi writers—on the state of ego-less “nothingness” (*nīstī* and *hīch*) as the very highest human spiritual condition of absolute surrender and pure servanthood (*'ubūdiyya*).

⁶⁰ *Yārī*: see n. 54 (line 6) above. This term (equivalent of the abstract Arabic *walāya*) is both the inner state of the saints or “Friends of God” and the wider reality of all the effective expressions of God's divine Assistance, Grace, Help, Protection and Caring.

⁶¹ The Persian *pardeh* here refers both to musical “melodies” or frets on an instrument, and to “veils”. As explained at n. 38 above, the latter reading alludes to widely cited hadith of God's 70,000 Veils, which contrasts the translucently revealing “veils” of divine Creation with the obscurities of our human supposition.

[14] The only intimate/worthy of *this* understanding is the “senseless” one:⁶³

there is no buyer for the tongue but the ear.

[15] In **our**⁶⁴ grieving, the days are out of place [= resemble nights]:

the days travel the Path together with burning (sorrows).

[Section 4: lines 16-18 (Rūmī to God/Shams/?)⁶⁵]

[16] If days have gone, say “**Go!**”⁶⁶—it doesn't matter:

You stay! O **You**, whose Purity none can match!⁶⁷

[17] Everyone but a fish becomes satiated with His Water;

whoever is without H/his daily bread,⁶⁸ their day becomes long.

[18: exact center of poem] No one who is raw can understand the state of the cooked:

so (this) word must be short—and farewell in Peace (*salām*)!

⁶² Both terms for a spiritually significant story used here (*hadīth* and *qisas*, directly echoing the Sura of Joseph, 12:3) have strong religious and Qur’ānic overtones. Majnūn is both “crazy” and the archetype of the purely devoted lover in the popular love-story of Layla and Majnun.

⁶³ Here (and further at l. 26 below), Rūmī is following a long-established Sufi understanding of the Qur’ānic account of Moses’ swooning at Mt. Sinai (“... I fell down stunned”, 7:143) as an allusion to the lofty spiritual state of *fanā’*, the “dissolving of the ego” within its divine Source.

⁶⁴ If one reads this line in light of Rūmī’s passionate evocation of his grief and loss in so many of his shorter lyrical works, then it is hard not to read this “our” as a possibly autobiographical reference. In any event, how one understands this “our” inevitably colors one’s sense of the identity of the speaker responding in the following line 16.

⁶⁵ There are several ways of imagining the speaker(s) and who is being addressed in these central lines, though all of them include the reader, as the implicit “witness” of this dialogue.

⁶⁶ The Persian imperative here is singular and intensely personal.

⁶⁷ This final half-line seems to echo the emphasis on the divine uniqueness in the familiar Sura *Iklās* (112:4).

⁶⁸ The Qur’ānic term *rizq* suggested here refers in fact to all the forms of divine support and sustenance.

[Section 5: lines 19-22 (Rūmī to *single* reader)]

[19] Break **your** chains and be free, o **son!**

How long will **you** be enslaved to gold and to silver?

[20] If **you** should pour the Sea into a pitcher,

What part of that will it hold? One day's worth!

[21] The pitcher of the greedy ones' eye can't be filled;

as long as the oyster-shell is not content, it can't be filled with pearl.⁶⁹

[22] Whoever's clothes have been torn apart by a Love/Loving,

they will be pure of greed and every fault.⁷⁰

[Section 6: lines 23-26 (Rūmī (for “*us*”) to Love)]

[23] Rejoice, O Love, our happy passion/trade,⁷¹

O Physician for *all* **our** many illnesses!

[24] O Cure for **our** egoism and pretension,

O You who are **our** Plato and **our** Galen!⁷²

⁶⁹ See the full explanation of the complex symbolism presupposed here, at n. 39 above.

⁷⁰ Here the imagery of clothing and nakedness reflects the familiar contrast of spiritual humility and true servanthood (“nothingness”/ *nīstī* at n. 59 above), as opposed to the ego’s normal attachment to all its inner and outer accoutrements of apparent “being” (*hastī*). The imagery of the passionate lover here no doubt also alludes to the Qur’ānic account of Joseph and Zulaykha (at 12:25-27), and to the eventual sartorial consequences of that encounter.

⁷¹ The Persian here expresses a mix of intentionally contrasted meanings: *sowdā*’ as melancholy and passion (a normally painful state of mind); and *sowdā* (without the final hamza) as a trade or transaction, alluding to the many Qur’ānic references to our short-sighted “selling” of our soul for illusory ends.

⁷² In Rūmī’s culture, these figures represent the two classical philosopher-healers (*hakīm*, as in the following story, refers to both philosophers and physicians), of spirit/soul and of body, respectively.

[25] Because of Love, the earthly body soared to heaven;

the Mount (Sinai) started to dance and became nimble.⁷³

[26] When Love came to Sinai's soul, **o lover**,

Sinai became drunk and “*Moses fell down thunderstruck*”.

[Section 7: lines 23-34 (Rūmī intimately to *single* reader)]

[27] If **I** were pressed to **my** intimate-friend's⁷⁴ lips,

then like **my** reed⁷⁵ **I'd** tell what must be told.

[28] Whoever is separated from the one who shares his tongue⁷⁶

is speechless, though he have a hundred songs (to sing).

[29] And when the Rose is gone, the Garden faded: after that

you [*sing.*] will no longer *listen* to the adventures of the nightingale.

[30] All is the Beloved, the lover (but) a veil;

The Living One⁷⁷ is the Beloved, the lover a corpse:

[31] When Love is not caring/concerned for (the lover),

s/he is like a bird without wings—alas for him/her!

⁷³ See n. 29 above for a fuller explanation of the Qur'ānic and hadith allusions in these two lines to the spiritual journey of Muhammad (as well as the ascensions of Jesus and Ilyās/Idrīs), together with the Qur'ānic account of Moses at Sinai.

⁷⁴ The literal sense of this key expression (first introduced at l. 12) is both “breath-maker” and “breath-player”, with each of those aspects applying both to the player of the reed and to the divine Source of the soul's Spirit-breath.

⁷⁵ See n. 30 above on the reed as the usual source of the pen (*qalam*) in Rūmī's day, suggesting “my reed” as a punning reference to the poet's own creative literary activity.

⁷⁶ While we have kept the most literal, linguistic sense of this term, it refers of course to all the manifold forms of deeper empathy and sympathetic understanding.

⁷⁷ The Persian here suggests one of the most central divine Names, *al-Hayy* (the Living, Source of Life), but also all those souls discovering their inner relation with that Life.

[32] **Me**, how can **I** understand (things) all around,
 when/if **my** Friend's Light⁷⁸ is not all around?

[33] Love *wants* this Word to become manifest:
 how can the mirror be without reflection?⁷⁹

[34] Do **you** [sing.] know why **your** mirror has no reflection?
 Because the rust has not been separated from its face.⁸⁰

[Section 8: line 35 (Narrator to dear friends)]

[35] **Listen** (pl.) to this story, o beloved-friends!
 it *is* itself the inner reality of **our** current state.

⁷⁸ See n. 56 (line 7) above.

⁷⁹ The last word here is literally someone “winking back (seductively)” (*ghammāz*), a far more lively and mysteriously moving image than a mere abstract “reflection”. These celebrated lines express an even more compressed version of the influential “Hidden Treasure” divine saying translated and discussed at note 14 above.

⁸⁰ This verse refers to the ongoing care and great effort required to polish pre-modern copper and brass mirrors. More specifically, this mirror-imagery in verses 33-34 involves a complex allusion to a number of Qur’ānic descriptions of the Heart (most notably 83:14, “... and what they were acquiring has rusted on their Hearts”) and to the well-known hadith: “hearts rust like iron, and their polishing is through the Remembrance of God and the recitation of the Qur’ān.” See the fuller explanation of the many related Qur’ānic verses on the Heart in chapter 2 (“Listening: Contemplation and the Purified Heart”) of our *The Reflective Heart: Discovering Spiritual Intelligence in Ibn ‘Arabī’s ‘Meccan Illuminations’* (Louisville, Fons Vitae, 2005)

Appendix: QUR'ANIC RHETORICAL AND STRUCTURAL FEATURES ADAPTED IN THE *MASNAVI*:

More detailed illustrations of each of the following characteristic rhetorical and structural features of the Qur'an—and of Rumi's *Masnavi*—can be found in Chapter 7, our discussion and experimental “literal” translation of the Sura of Joseph, the highly symbolic narrative divinely denoted (Qur'an 12:3) as “the most-beautiful-and-best of tales” (*ahsan al-qisas*). By carefully interweaving each of these significant rhetorical and structural procedures throughout his opening “Song of the Reed,” Rumi immediately highlights and introduces for his readers central literary features and interpretive considerations—already familiar, of course, to his original literate audiences—which are indispensable for the active reading and study of all six Books of the *Masnavi*. Since the functioning of these basic rhetorical elements in the *Masnavi* is illustrated in greater detail in Sections I-IV of the preceding essay (and are best appreciated, in any case, as they appear in their original Qur'anic contexts), their descriptions here have been kept as brief as possible.

- One of the most striking and mysterious features of the Qur'an is the constant interplay of shifting, multiple “voices” apparently emerging from or representing very different (and often mysteriously uncertain) planes of being or origins. These very different divine voices—which interact in complex ways with what are often equally indeterminate or puzzling times, states, audiences, intentions, tones and other elements of each verse's combined situational perspective—include (just as we find from the very start in the *Masnavi*) unidentified “narrators”, “I”, “You,” a particularly problematic and recurrent “We,” various actors within stories, the soliloquizing thoughts of certain speakers, and so on. Perhaps most importantly for the present consideration of the *Masnavi*, the Qur'an constantly leaves it to each reader or reciter to properly “fill in” and dramatize each of these mysterious voices and their applicable situations and intended audiences. This constant creative and meditative challenge gradually unfolds in alternative ways that necessarily mirror and reveal—especially as the sacred text is daily performed (in ritual prayer) and contemplated throughout all of life's illuminating circumstances and dramatic embodiments—our successive interpretations and realizations of the manifold intentions and immediate relevance of each verse.

- A second, equally striking rhetorical feature of the Qur'an—deeply rooted in particularities of classical Arabic language that are hard even to conceive (and even more challenging to communicate) in Indo-European languages—is its constant ambiguities and uncertainties of *time* and of the relevant contexts and reference-points tied to those temporal options. Rather than the familiar, linear, earthly progression of past, present and future so deeply embedded in English (and other Indo-European tongues), the Qur'an constantly moves back and forth “vertically”, between clearly divine perspectives (and corresponding Voices) that are metaphysically situated somehow “above” or beyond the normal linear succession of earthly time-events; other perspectives that are apparently (or often quite problematically) apparently situated within the flux of transpiring psychic or external times; and many others somewhere in-between. Within the Qur'an, the cadenced rhythms and sudden perspective-shifts between these alternating vertical metaphysical perspectives are perhaps the most familiar, recurrent manifestation of the perception of *all* things as uniquely revelatory “Signs,” “theophanies” (*tajalliyāt*) and divine “Presences,” ever-renewed manifestations of the One Real revealed in and through the created many.⁸¹ Given the very different linguistic facilities⁸² and challenges of Persian, Rumi's re-creation of that characteristic trans-temporal spiritual vision requires extraordinary poetic means, most visibly in the recurrent sudden appearance—at first apparently arbitrary and puzzling—of paradoxical perspective-shifts (unexpected jumps and swings of voice, audience, tone and situation) that still strike even the most naive readers of the *Masnavi*, even when those mysterious shifts have been partially “ironed out” by translators.

⁸¹ *We shall continue to show them* (“cause them to see”) *Our Signs on the horizons and in their own souls until/so that it becomes clear* (“shines forth”) *to them that Hū is the truly Real (al-Haqq)...* (41:53).

⁸² For example, the relative indeterminacy of Persian grammar, together with other special allowances peculiar to the rules of prosody, allow a variety of far-reaching ambiguities of reference that are very helpful in suggesting alternative metaphysical and theological perspectives within a single line or phrase. Most importantly, the absence of gender markings (both for verbs and for nouns and adjectives), makes the central ambiguity of theophanic reference (as pointing simultaneously to the Divine Love/Beloved and to readers' own immediately present beloveds) far easier to convey and sustain in this poetic tradition.

This recurrent rhetorical feature of sudden perspective-shifts—each of which requires the reader (whether of the Qur’an or the *Masnavi*) to suddenly stop short and reconsider what is actually happening at that point of apparent confusion, or indeed simply to figure out where and how the *speaker, audience, subject, and situational key or tone* have actually shifted—may seem a good deal less mysterious when we consider the many familiar parallels to the extraordinarily rapid “cuts” of time, location, and both inner and outer perspective shifts that are now found so abundantly in contemporary film and related video and musical media. Despite the complexity and rapidity of the visual or musical clues normally signaling those perspective shifts—changes which were once literally unimaginable for earlier audiences who would often experience difficulty recognizing even simple flashbacks (or flash-forwards, or subjectively imagined or remembered or re-played scenes by different “actors”) outside a single simple temporal narrative flow⁸³—today even young children familiar with these media experience little difficulty following such complex visual and aural clues, and thus can quickly begin to appreciate their aesthetic and intellectual significance and artistic possibilities as mirrors of our manifold human fields of perception and imagination.

- A third fundamental rhetorical feature of the Qur’an, which goes to the very heart of its meaning and uniquely transforming impact on readers throughout the centuries, is its complex, intentional ambiguities of pronoun reference, regarding both the speaking and acting subjects (i.e., the mysterious multiple divine “Voices” already mentioned) and even more so the intended “objects” and audiences of that divine Address. The existential and metaphysical crux of this key element—just as much in the *Masnavi* as in the Qur’an itself—is the intensely problematic identity of the singular “you,” of the ultimate or original intended audience of this revealed/inspired speech.⁸⁴ In the Qur’an,

⁸³ Here we have only to recall the often uncomprehending initial reactions a century ago to the comparable narrative and poetic innovations of Proust, Joyce, Pound, Eliot, Virginia Woolf and many others .

⁸⁴ English or American translation of these classical Islamic texts, since the passage of the thou-forms from current everyday usage, presents constant difficulties in conveying the constant and absolutely fundamental contrast between plural (usually external and relatively non-

of course, that singular “you” being addressed is often clearly or initially Muhammad (or some other prophet or divine messenger). But at the same time—and always in trenchant contrast to the external, unenlightened plural “you-all” of the human collective—this pointedly singular “you” in many situations is also somehow the soul of each purified, fully realized “person of real faith” (*mu'min*), insofar as this shared pronominal reference reflects our real or potential identity or sharing in the deeper logos, “Word,” or spiritual reality of the prophetic figures in question.⁸⁵ In other contexts—including the entire dramatized progression of the opening “Song of the Reed” here in the *Masnavi*—a similarly critical ambiguity engages the intended pronominal referents of “Us” and “We” (with or without capitalization, which is of course absent in the Persian). This open-ended collective reality could refer potentially to all (realized and illuminated) people, readers, and effective participants in the divine Spirit. But often, as so clearly and fundamentally in the concluding verses (34-35) of the Song of the Reed, it clearly points as well to the awareness of each (or every?) human being as potentially or actually the theophanic spiritual mirror of the divine “We” encompassing all the divine Names.

In the *Masnavi*, this central spiritual and existential ambiguity of the Qur'an is further intensified and complicated by Rumi's intentionally problematic literary presentation throughout the poem (detailed in his opening Prologue) of his companion Husamuddin as the initial, formal literary “addressee” of the *Masnavi*—in some way representing every ideal, properly receptive reader, or at least what his suitably gifted

problematic) and heightened singular “you,” especially as that contrast is most often embedded in Arabic or Persian *verb* forms (indeed normally left completely untranslated for imperative verbs), as well as in separate pronouns.

⁸⁵ This central Logos-connection of the primary “addressee” of the Qur'an (as divine and eternal Speech) is of course amplified in later prophetologies integrating as well the hadith of the *mi'rāj* and other related hadith. By Rumi's time, those interpretive perspectives were widely reflected both in popular devotional life (the multitude of devotional songs, poems, and popular hadith identifying Muhammad as the creative “Light” or divine “Intelligence”), and in complex philosophic and theological discussions of the Logos underlying all prophecy as the “Muhammadan Reality” (*Haqīqa Muhammadiyya*). See also J. Renard, *All the King's Falcons: Rumi on Prophets and Revelation*, SUNY Press, 1994.

and persistent readers could potentially become.⁸⁶ But at the same time, throughout the *Masnavi*, this already deeply problematic recipient “you” often suddenly shifts sharply “upward” to reflect the deeper, more poignantly intimate spiritual presence of Shams (at once the divine “Sun” and the deathless spiritual reality of Rumi’s friend), as the real, ever-present and watchfully caring divine Friend. Finally, the evocative, open-ended richness of this singular “you”/“You” in the *Masnavi*—as indeed in all the classics of Persian spiritual poetry—is further heightened by the absence in Persian of grammatical gender markers, which opens up even more pointedly and explicitly the full human range of earthly addressees and actual “beloveds” manifesting the One divine Beloved (e.g., in the famous verse 30).

- Always depending on how one momentarily understands and “reads” these first three basic compositional elements, their combination immediately generates that characteristically mirroring, *interactive* dramatic interplay of constantly ambiguous and shifting relational perspectives which is so central in each reader or listener’s encounter with both the Qur’an and the *Masnavi*.

Two fundamental implications of this fourth distinctive rhetorical feature are particularly significant. The first essential point is that each of these “internal” dramatic relationships—i.e., the different meanings and understandings that so often arise, depending on one’s momentary understanding of the subject/speaker, object/addressee, and their possible metaphysical/temporal relationships—necessarily presupposes as well the additional active imaginal construction of their intended *contexts* (a kind of “hidden drama” that must be actively, creatively and interactively supplied and exemplified by each reader) and their appropriate emotional “*tones*” (for example: ironic, reproachful, ambivalent, diffident, regretful, seductive, wise, ecstatic, accepting, and so on),

⁸⁶ In many ways, the persona of this very ambiguous, idealized “recipient” of the poem (whose role is repeatedly highlighted and recalled in the prose prologues to each of the *Masnavi*’s six Books)—who also appears as the concretely present, active party to almost conversational exchanges in many other passages—corresponds to a kind of addressee-persona equivalent of the traditional Persian authorial “pen-name” (*takhallus*). In English literature, one finds richly analogous parallels, for example, in the mysterious addressees of familiar sonnets of Shakespeare.

ultimately drawn from the vast spectrum of human emotions and attitudes that could potentially fill in the existential contexts and situations in question.

Truly accomplished Qur'an reciters, of course, are able to directly communicate many of these essential realities and interpretive perspectives aurally, even (or perhaps especially) to listeners without any deep knowledge of the verbal meanings of the Arabic text. But the simple effort to act out seriously a few lines of the *Masnavi*, especially in the company of a few other reader-actors, will immediately reveal (just as with Shakespeare, for example) both how much active participation Rumi expects of his serious companions, and how many different ways his poetry can and must be understood. Furthermore—and many facets of Rumi's poetic language (including the points outlined immediately below) absolutely demand this of his readers—this inner participation necessarily requires the active engagement of the full scope of our intellectual, imaginative and spiritual capacities and relevant experience. In short, reading the *Masnavi* slowly, carefully and contemplatively requires something much like the attentive reader's "internal" staging and dramatization of Shakespeare, or the internally imagined performance of a complex classical orchestral score.

The second, even more essential point here is the way that this central rhetorical feature of the *Masnavi* (and the Qur'an) necessarily leads to the gradual heightened realization by each reader of the unavoidable "reflexivity" of this ongoing hermeneutical process: not just in regard to Rumi's poem, but as absolutely integral to our participation in and shifting perception of life itself. In other words, to the degree that we as readers actively respond to the all the peculiar puzzles and demands posed by Rumi's extraordinarily challenging poetic language, we gradually come to recognize both the full multiplicity and range of our own internal "parts" and spiritual dimensions—corresponding to all the alternative voices, audiences and attitudes which our imagination is able to supply—and to our own inalienable responsibility for whatever we eventually discover in this remarkable dramatic mirror. Happily, this exquisitely constructed reflexivity also means that each renewed reading of the *Masnavi* normally opens up entirely new insights and perspectives, carefully reflecting the evolving contours and situations of our own personal "spiritual epic" and path—as Rumi so

trenchantly observes here in his closing transition (line 35) to the key opening story of the *Masnavi*.

- A fifth distinctive feature of Qur’anic rhetoric richly mirrored throughout the *Masnavi* is the apparent “scattering” (*tabdīd*) of essential elements of a complexly coherent teaching—for example, regarding eschatology, angelology, prophecy, the divine Friends, and any number of foundational spiritual practices and virtues—throughout a vast number of locations and exemplary situations, so as to require of each reader an ongoing intensive effort of gradual spiritual, practical and intellectual realization which eventually brings into play all our unique existential pre-requisites for an adequately comprehensive understanding. This indispensable active participatory role of each reader, necessarily drawing on all relevant dimensions of our thought, spirit and memory, would at all times be blocked or short-circuited by a premature, narrowly conceptual perspective on the personal spiritual experiences and realities in question.

The resulting challenges, in both the *Masnavi* and the Qur’an, of apparent thematic “repetition”—and corresponding superficial critical impressions of randomness, of arbitrary or disordered organization, or even of a purely rhetorical restatement of the same familiar ideas and symbols—are necessarily only heightened by the process of translation, especially those translations whose understandable guiding aim is to provide a fluid, “easy” reading experience. As already explained in Section IV above, the Song of the Reed does not simply introduce many of the central themes that recur throughout the rest of the *Masnavi*, so that those vital spiritual issues can be recognized in all their poetic and dramatic guises. More importantly, it also provides each reader with a series of much deeper “existential touchstones” or essential spiritual reminders for recognizing and gauging our actual degree of engagement with and responsiveness to the teachings and lessons which are introduced at each stage of Rumi’s epic, as those issues are awakened and mirrored in all the relevant domains and levels of our own being.

- One of the key unifying structural and compositional features of the longer Suras of the Qur’an—particularly evident in the organization of the Sura of Joseph (Chapter 7 above)—is the recurrent use of *chiasmus* or *inverted parallelism*. With regard to the *Masnavi*, the central systematic role of complex chiastic compositional techniques—

whose practical pedagogical and mnemonic dimensions, before the advent of printing, have been highlighted in very different scriptural and poetic contexts⁸⁷—has only recently been revealed and painstakingly outlined in their overarching architectonic significance and complexity, for every compositional level of Rumi’s work, in the groundbreaking research of Simon Weightman and S. G. Safavi. As we have seen in sections I-III above, careful attention to the emergence of the different shifting voices and perspectives in the opening Song of the Reed directly leads to the discerning reader—especially those literate readers of Rumi’s day who were so deeply familiar with the extensive Qur’anic precedents—to distinguish the underlying nested chiasmic structure and thematic correspondence of parallel sections, which Rumi then goes on to develop far more elaborately throughout the rest of the *Masnavi*.

- Finally, yet another characteristic rhetorical feature of the entire *Masnavi* that is carefully introduced by repeated examples in this opening Song of the Reed is the poetic “condensation” of richly complex teachings of the Qur’an, hadith and earlier Islamic spiritual tradition—both metaphysical and practical—in a single richly allusive word, phrase or symbolic image. This distinctive expressive element of the *Masnavi* (and indeed of virtually all later Islamicate spiritual poetry) provides something like a semantic Persian equivalent for the richly symphonic complexity of multiple complementary meanings inhering in that unique family of triliteral Arabic consonantal roots which so powerfully and inimitably weave together the Qur’an at every level (while rendering it quite literally un-translatable into other languages). Unfortunately, although for perfectly understandable practical reasons, virtually all translators of the *Masnavi* have been reluctant to encumber each line of their translation with the multi-paragraph footnote explanations that would often be required to elucidate the complexly allusive dimensions of these key “condensed” words and symbols.

⁸⁷ See the introduction to *Rumi’s Mystical Design: Reading the Mathnawi*, Book One, by Simon Weightman and S. G. Safavi (SUNY Press, 2009), which highlights the pioneering Biblical studies by Mary Douglas, as well as precedents in the Persian poetic works of Nizami which were certainly familiar to Rumi.

In our accompanying literal translation of these opening lines, in order to convey something of what would be required by a literal, study version of the *Masnavi*, we have provided highly abridged footnote indications of some of those key condensed expressions—keeping in mind that these allusions were for the most part readily accessible, without any further commentary at all, to most of Rumi’s original literate readers. For just as with the immense Latin (and underlying Greek) learning and complex theological and philosophical precedents presupposed by Dante’s spiritual epic, Rumi’s original literate readers were necessarily profoundly bilingual (or more accurately, fully bicultural) in the manifold learned Arabic traditions that are alluded to in virtually every line of the *Masnavi*, as indeed was already the case in earlier classics of Persian spiritual poetry.