
“He Has Come, Visible and Hidden”

Jalal al-Din Rumi’s Poetic Presence and Past

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Jalal al-Din Rumi (Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī) is best known as a mystic poet and promulgator of the Sufi tradition of Islam. During his lifetime, Jalal al-Din Rumi was a teacher in Islamic religious sciences, a prolific author, and the figurehead of a religious community that would come to be known as the Mevlevi Sufi order. His followers called him “Khodavandgar” (an honorific meaning “Lord”) or “Hazrat-e Mawlana” (meaning the “Majesty of Our Master,” often shortened to “Mawlana,” in Turkish rendered as “Mevlana”) (Safi 1999, 55–58). As with his appellations, the legacy and import of Rumi and his poetry have been understood in a variety of forms.

Jalal al-Din Rumi’s renown places him amongst the pantheon of great Persian-language poets of the classical Islamicate literary tradition that includes Hafez (see Hafez of Shiraz, Constantinople, and *Weltliteratur*), Sa’di, ‘Attar, Nezami (see Nizami’s Resonances in Persianate Literary Cultures and Beyond), and Ferdowsi (see The *Shahnameh* of Ferdowsi). While all of these poets produced large bodies of literature, Rumi’s writing differs somewhat in the circumstances of its production. His poetry was composed in front of, and for the sake of, a community of *murids* (*murīds*), or pupils, who relied on Rumi for his mystical teachings related to the articulation of Islam through the lens of love of the divine. At times, he delivered his ghazal (see The *Shahnameh* of Ferdowsi) poetry in fits of ecstatic rapture. His poetry vacillates between inspired and seemingly extemporaneous tones to the didactic and measured style of a master teacher. His poems and other teachings guided many Sufi adherents, and found favor amongst popular and courtly Persian, Turkish, and Urdu-speaking audiences for centuries following his passing. As a result of popular translations in the

A Companion to World Literature. Edited by Ken Seigneurie.

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DOI: 10.1002/9781118635193.ctw10068

twentieth century, Rumi and his writing achieved new fame amongst English-speaking audiences, to the point that Rumi eventually came to be recognized as the best-selling poet in the United States (Lewis 2000, 1–9).

While often referred to as “Rumi” in modern translations of his work, this appellation refers to the area where he settled as young man. Anatolia, long under Byzantine influence due to its proximity to Constantinople, was known in the thirteenth century as “Rum,” hence one who was born there would be called “Rumi.” Since “Rumi” was actually born in Balkh (in modern-day Afghanistan) in 1207, he has also been referred to as Mawlana Jalal al-Din Balkhi. The title “Jalal al-Din,” or “Splendor of the Religion,” was added by his father to his given birth name, Mohammad (Lewis 2000, 9–10). Due to the diversity of his background, from his Central Asian birthplace, the Persian language in which he wrote, and the area of Anatolia in which he settled, Rumi has been claimed as a figurehead in the traditions of a variety of contemporary nation-states, including Afghanistan, Iran, and Turkey. His shrine, built after his death by his followers, is located in the city of Konya, Turkey. Though it remains a site for religious pilgrimage, the shrine is now officially known as the Mevlana Museum, due to the Turkish government’s “closing” of Sufi shrines under Kemal Ataturk in the early twentieth century. The order of Sufis founded in his memory, the Mevlevi order, cannot officially operate in Turkey, where it was once a predominant Sufi order. However, the “whirling dervish” dance associated with this tradition continues to be publicly performed in Turkey to large crowds of pilgrims and tourists alike, and images of Rumi feature in many a marketing magazine in the country.

Rumi’s status as a religious figurehead, secular icon, and popular poet all form the basis for the modern understanding of Rumi. In his famous “Song of the Reed,” the poet writes, “Each befriended me for his own reasons, yet none searched out the secrets I contain” (trans. Helminski 2000b, 145–146). In many ways, the modern understanding of Rumi can be traced to people’s own reasons for liking his work. Whether it be his compact, aphoristic wisdom, his humorous anecdotes and insightful parables, or his poetry’s integration within spiritual experiences like ecstatic dance, Rumi’s writings have been popularized in varied forms and contexts far outside those in which he himself wrote. As such, he serves as a prime example of what happens to the legacy of a medieval poet and saint within contemporary literary and cultural spheres.

One of the hallmarks of many contemporary translations of Rumi’s writing is their tendency to de-historicize the author. In order to be a poet for our time, or all time, Rumi’s own life fades from memory. This is partially due to a gap in the surviving historical information about Rumi: the main details that survive about Rumi’s biography are incomplete, and come from either his own writings or the writings of his son, Sultan Valad, as well as two hagiographers, Aflaki and Sepahsalar. These accounts often incorporate elements of the fantastic, such as Rumi flying through the streets of Konya. They focus on the religious experiences and teachings of Rumi. These religious aspects, especially when they are couched in the language of Islam, often do not survive into contemporary depictions of the poet.

However, there survive some details of Rumi’s life that are generally accepted and are crucial to understanding his legacy. The son of Baha al-Din Mohammad Valad (Bahā’-al-Dīn Moḥammad Valad), a Muslim scholar, and his wife Mumina Khatun (Mu’mina Khātūn), Rumi was born in the Balkh region of Central Asia. A conflict with the local powers caused

the family to move westward across Iran during Rumi’s youth (Lewis 2000, 41–128). According to the hagiographer’s accounts, Rumi’s father cursed the ruling authorities upon their exit – an event that led to their downfall at the hands of the Mongols.

The family eventually settled in the city of Konya, then the capital of the Seljuk Sultanate of Rum, around 1228, at the invitation of the Seljuk sultan, ‘Ala al-Din Kayqubad. Baha al-Din died four years later in 1232. Rumi, now married to Gowhar Khatun, began to study with his father’s friend, Burhan al-Din Muhaqqiq, who instructed Rumi in the esoteric teachings of Islamic mysticism, including the poetry of Sana’i, an early progenitor of Sufi-themed *masnavi* (*masnavī*) verse in Persian. During his time as Burhan al-Din’s pupil, Rumi traveled to Aleppo and Damascus to advance in his educational training. When Burhan al-Din passed away in 1240, Rumi was in Konya working as a teacher of religious sciences, having been trained in the Hanafi school of Islamic law that was predominant in Seljuk-ruled lands.

His poetic efflorescence and the growth of his fame as a Sufi sheikh comes after his encounter with a traveling weaver named Shams al-Din Tabrizi. According to one of the legends associated with their first meeting, Rumi was on horseback when he encountered Shams along the road. Shams called out to Rumi, and asked, “Who was greater, Abu Yazid Bistami or the Prophet Muhammad?” Rumi responded that the Prophet was greater than the Sufi saint. When Shams disagreed by means of a mystical proof, Rumi went into a state, dismounted his horse, and prostrated before Shams. From that point on, Rumi and Shams spent much of their time in private contemplation and discussion – as well as doing a circular dancing ritual, called the *sama*’ (*samā’*), that came to be known as the dance of the “Whirling Dervishes.”

These ecstatic and frenetic meetings provoked the jealousy of Rumi’s students, ostensibly because Rumi had stopped teaching. Some even saw Shams as a corrupting influence on their teacher. Eventually, Shams left Rumi’s side, which apparently rendered Rumi quite despondent. He composed poetry in Shams’ absence, lamenting the loss of his friend. Shams eventually returned from his sojourn, only to – according to one uncorroborated account – be murdered by conspirators amongst Rumi’s followers (Lewis 2000, 134–200). Despite this tragedy, their relationship had awakened the poetic fire in Rumi. Following Shams’ death, Rumi constantly, and often rapturously, expounded on the themes of mystical love, divine knowledge, and other aspects of the Sufi path. He also took subsequent disciples as his “beloved” and engaged in mystical discourse with them.

By all indications, Rumi must have been writing poetry prior to meeting Shams: his mastery of technical forms demonstrates a practiced hand. Rumi’s earliest writings would have been produced in his early adulthood, but were probably not well known at that time. During the mid-thirteenth century, Persian and Arabic poetry were very much part of the fabric of social and intellectual life, so we can presume that Rumi was well versed in these traditions prior to his gaining a reputation as a poet in his own right. The Seljuk capital of Konya was apparently a rather competitive religious environment, leading some to speculate that Rumi’s later poetic output was an attempt to gain recognition as the greatest *shaykh*, or spiritual teacher, within that milieu (Ay 2013, 1–24).

The primary works for which he is known include his collected odes (the *Divan-e Shams-e Tabrizi*), a six-volume epic poem (the *Masnavi-ye Ma’navi*), a collection of prose

teachings (the *Fibi ma Fib*), and seven of his sermons (the *Majales-e sab'e*). Additionally, Rumi's collected letters have been published, though these were not well known to scholars up until recently. In his lifetime, Rumi primarily composed his poetry in the Persian language, which was the predominant cultural and bureaucratic language of the Seljuk Empire. Rumi also often employed Arabic-language quotations, often from the Qur'an or Muhammad's sayings (*ḥadīth*) either directly or in translation in his work. He purportedly used oral and spontaneous modes of composition, even delivering lines of verse while he was spinning rapturously around a pole or while in the midst of *sama'*.

Given the quantity of poems attributed to Rumi, it would appear that poetry was never far from his lips – despite his apparent ambivalence about the form, and his supposed late start in composing poetry. After Rumi delivered the poems, his followers would orally repeat them and commit them to memory, or transcribe them to be edited by Rumi later. Due to the volume of the poetry that was preserved, it can safely be assumed his followers understood its importance. They also deployed it as a means of confirming the brilliance of their master within the competitive religious environs of thirteenth-century Anatolia. The poems were later translated into Urdu, Ottoman, Arabic, and other languages. His work inspired commentaries and imitations in a variety of Sufi and poetic circles across three continents in the centuries after his death.

Despite its popularity elsewhere for centuries, it took until the Victorian era for English-language scholars to encounter Rumi's writing. As a result, the image that contemporary audiences have is largely a product of the tastes and styles of that time, when Sufis were portrayed as exotic, free-spirited types not bound by the “formal strictures” of Islam. In large part, the poet Rumi known to readers now would have been unrecognizable to the disciples who viewed him as Mawlana, an Islamic mystical master who wrote canonical poetic works about the Sufi path of love.

The *Divan-e Shams-e Tabrizi* contains the collected corpus of Rumi's shorter, lyric poetry in the *ghazal*, *qasida*, *tarji' band*, and *robā'ī* styles. This *Divan* is alternately known as the *Divan-e Kabir* (the “Grand Collection”), the *Kolliyāt-e Shams-e Tabrizi* (the “Complete Shams-e Tabrizi”), and the *Ghazaliyat-e Shams-e Tabrizi* (the “Shams-e Tabrizi Ghazals”). While the numbers and lengths of poems can vary amongst manuscripts, it is estimated that there are over 3200 lyric poems authored by Rumi, amounting to 35 000+ lines of verse.

Rumi's *Divan*, or collection of the poems, is atypically titled not after Rumi but after Shams al-Din Tabrizi, due to Shams' role in inspiring Rumi as well as his presence as a character within the poetry (Keshavarz 1998, 39–40). Rumi's *takbhallos*, a poetic signature that often appears in the end lines of *ghazals*, also flouted convention by, on occasion, using Shams' name instead of his own. (In other instances, Rumi “signed” his verses with the phrase *khamush* (*kbāmush*), or silence.) The usage of Shams' name may also express the “oneness” that Rumi experienced with Shams, a state that apparently persisted even after Shams' passing. Though his *takbhallos* does not appear in every poem, Shams' presence can often be found through the language and imagery of a given poem, such as by playing off the meaning of “shams” by referring to its denotation of “sun,” as in these lines from the end of one of the *ghazals*:

Behold heaven's triumph and Orion's bewilderment!
How the world, high and low, is troubled
By love, which is purified from high and low!
When the sun goes up, where stayeth night?
When the joy of bounty came, where lagged affliction?
I am silent. Speak thou, O soul of soul of soul,
From desire of whose face every atom grew articulate.
(From Rumi 2002, 7)

Rumi evokes both the sun as well as silence within these lines. The poem ultimately calls on the divine to speak. Clearly, even when absent physically, Shams was never far from Rumi's mind when he composed poetry, even as a means of making metaphors for the divine.

Yet Shams is just one of Rumi's recurrent motifs. A broad range of themes and imagery recur and interplay within his mystic poetry. Some tropes appear more frequently than others: a certain form of "radical" love, *'ishq*, can be found throughout, usually within the paradigm of the lover seeking the beloved. While at times the beloved appears at first to be Shams, in the Sufi tradition to which Rumi belonged, the ultimate beloved is generally understood to be God. Another frequent misconception comes from the poetry's repeated discussion of wine. In the ghazals, the author would often achieve "intoxicated" states:

I have fallen, with my heart shattered –
where else but on your path? And I
broke your bowl, drunk, my idol, so drunk,
don't let me be harmed, take my hand.
(From Helminski 2000a, 20)

The drunkenness, along with the invocation of the "idol," are fairly obvious metaphors and not an indication that Rumi was, in fact, drunk on wine or worshipping idols while he was reciting poetry. This "drunkenness" relates to the Sufi motif of the effacement of self, often placed within the context of death. A Sufi might even achieve the state of *fanā'*, or "annihilation," as a means to the ultimate goal of experiencing union with the divine. Rumi's poetry can articulate the Sufi adage to "die before you die" through the experience of *fanā'*. Intimacy, self-effacement, passion, and movement are hallmarks of Rumi's ghazal poetry. In the following example, the poet incorporates a number of these themes in calling out to his beloved:

I am a painter, a maker of pictures: every moment I form an image
And when all the images are before you, I melt them.
I rouse a hundred pictures; I mix them with the spirit.
When I see your picture, I throw them in the fire.
Are you the wine-merchant's cup-bearer or the enemy of caution
Or the one who ruins every house I build?
The soul has been poured over you, mixed with you –
Because the soul possesses your perfume, I shall caress the soul.

The blood which drops from me upon your earth is saying
 I am one colour with your love, I am the companion of your passion.
 In the house of water and mud, without you, this heart is rubble.
 Enter the house, O beloved, or I shall leave it.

(From the *Kulliyat-i Divan-i Shams-i Tabrizi*, poem 1462, trans.

Rehder, in Chelkowski 1975, 276)

Rumi's poetry frequently deploys paradox, apophasis, and a diverse range of imagery. The intended effect of these poems can be understood as an attempt to destabilize the listeners, to shake them out of their own state, allowing them to advance on the Sufi path (cf. Keshavarz 1998).

In addition to the ghazals, Rumi also composed a number of quatrains that are often included in the *Divan*. These four-line poems are called *rubayyat* (*rubā'īyyāt*). Translations of the *rubayyat* of another Persian poet, Omar Khayyam (see Edward FitzGerald's Translation of *The Rubā'iyāt of Omar Khayyām*), became something of a sensation in Victorian England at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While Rumi's quatrains never enjoyed that type of popularity, a recent translation by Ibrahim Gammard and A.G. Rawan Farhadi has revived some interest in this poetic form. The fixity of the quatrain form does not afford the same level of play as the ghazals: the latter could continue for as many lines as the poet chose to maintain the rhyme. Instead, quatrains distill Rumi's themes into more direct, impactful lines, such as in the following:

I cried out and he said, "I want your silence."
 I became silent and he said, "I want your cries."
 I boiled up and he said, "No, be still."
 I became still and he said, "I want your agitation."
 (*Quatrains*, no. 316: F-233, translated by Gammard
 and Farhadi, Rumi 2008, 100)

The beloved keeps the lover guessing; all the lover can do is continue to try to please. Given their pithiness, the quatrains are often quite quotable. However, their brevity has also provoked some doubt as to whether Rumi actually wrote all of the quatrains attributed to him: the style is rather simple to accomplish. The existence of variant manuscripts and poetic collections is not unusual in the history of Persian poetry.

The above examples paint Rumi as a short-form poet, one whose style fits easily into the prevailing poetic modes of contemporary literature. Many contemporary translations of Rumi offer the same portrayal. Yet, at least historically, Rumi was most renowned for his mastery of the long-form poetic genre of epic couplets called *masnavi*. According to tradition, he undertook, later in life, to write the *Masnavi-e Ma'navi*. The title of this work translates to the "Spiritual Couplets," or "the *masnavi* of hidden meaning." It is commonly referred to as, simply, "The *Masnavi*": though many other works in the *masnavi* genre were produced before and after, Rumi's *Masnavi* came to supersede these in importance. Alongside the *Divan* of the poet Hafiz, this epic work stands among the most canonical poetic writings of the Persian, Sufi, and Islamic traditions.

A six-volume work composed over the course of roughly 15 years, the *Masnavi* contains over 26 000 lines of verse. Rumi began it in his fifties, roughly concurrent with

the Mongols’ capture of Baghdad in 1258. According to the legends associated with it, Rumi composed it at the urging of his disciples, who wanted their teacher to have his own epic to go along with those of ‘Attar and Sana’i. When Rumi’s closest confidant, Husam al-Din, first approached him about it, Rumi purportedly pulled out a piece of parchment containing the first 18 lines of the epic.

These opening lines are now known as the “Song of the Reed,” and are among the most recognizable verses in all of Persian literature. Told from the perspective of a reed flute, these lines tell the story of the reed’s pain at being separated from the reed bed. Just as the reed cries from being “cut,” so too does the lover lament becoming separated from the beloved:

Listen to the reed and the tale it tells,
how it sings of separation:
Ever since they cut me from the reed bed,
my wail has caused men and women to weep.
I want a heart that is torn open with longing
so that I might share the pain of this love.
Whoever has been parted from his source
longs to return to that state of union.
At every gathering I play my lament. I’m a friend to both happy
and sad.
Each befriended me for his own reasons,
yet none searched out the secrets I contain.

(trans. Helminski 2000b, 145–146)

The voice of the poet echoes within the reed: while many are drawn to the poet for their own reasons, he still has secrets to reveal. The reed’s song segues into the stories that follow: unlike most previous works in the *masnavi* genre, there exists no other explicit, overarching “frame” structure to Rumi’s *Masnavi*. It unfolds as a variety of narratives interspersed with homilies and comments. The book’s influences include stories and expositions derived from the Qur’an and the hadith of Muhammad, as well as Persian, Arabic, Hindi, and Turkic-origin folktales.

Rather than telling one complete story after another, the narratives in the *Masnavi* are frequently left incomplete, with another tale beginning before the previous one is finished. Later in the text, narratives and tropes reemerge to impart another moral or message. There exists some disagreement amongst scholars as to whether the text has a hidden or overarching plan, such as a ring structure, or whether its composition was more extemporaneous stylization, as in Rumi’s ghazal poetry (cf. Mojaddedi 2014, 105–131). The epic’s abrupt ending in book 6 also admits some disagreement. It is unclear from the text whether this was an intentional stopping point on Rumi’s part or whether his poetic skills had reached their natural limit. However, what is clear is that this epic was Rumi’s final major poetic work.

Rumi’s *Masnavi* spread out from Anatolia into regions stretching from the Balkans to Iran and into India. The courts of the Ottomans, Safavids, and Moghuls collected manuscripts of Rumi’s writing, and his poetry was frequently performed for courtly

audiences. It was also recited amongst various Sufi orders and the general populace. A widely known quote, attributed to the poet Jami, calls the *Masnawi* “the Persian Qur’an,” owing as much to its religious content as its continuing influence and fame amongst Persian-speaking Muslims. It has been translated into over 22 languages, and has an extensive commentary history in Urdu, Arabic, Turkish, and Persian dating back to the fourteenth century.

R.A. Nicholson produced the first critical edition of the *Masnawi* in English in 1933. His literal, unrhymed verse rendering has remained a touchstone for English translations ever since. More recently, Jawid Mojaddedi has been translating each volume into rhyming iambic pentameter, in an attempt to create a more enjoyable experience for the reader – echoing what he argues was Rumi’s reasoning for using verse in the first place. Selections from the book appear alongside Rumi’s other poetry in some English translations, usually in the form of short quotations and parables. Occasionally, the translator sacrifices the larger narrative context to focus on a particularly poignant selection. Such are the perils in translating Rumi’s epic writing: the length of the text makes a complete translation project daunting, yet smaller selections lose the depth and integrity of the original. For audiences used to consuming poetry in smaller bites, these selections provide a taste of Rumi’s style, but should not be mistaken for the complete course.

Since Rumi’s own audience first heard the *Masnawi* in parceled form, perhaps these modern abstractions are not total misrepresentations. There are some crucial differences, however. Rumi’s audience first utilized the poetry in the context of a spiritual community engaged in learning about the path of Sufism. While there are “universal” aspects to Rumi’s teaching that carry over through the centuries, he also shows a particular concern with his and his disciples’ wellbeing, as evident in his surviving sermons, lectures, and discussions. These paint a portrait of a person highly engaged in the spiritual development of his own community of thirteenth-century Konya – an aspect of Rumi’s life that has often been lost in translation.

One such surviving collection is the *Fibi ma Fib* (“In it what is in it”). The collection contains prose renderings of discourses between Rumi and his disciples in their *kbanaqab*, or Sufi compound, in Konya. While not nearly as well known as his poetry, these discussions offer straightforward statements on the meaning of Rumi’s teachings. The disciples would ask the “master” to explain esoteric aspects of Sufism (cf. Safi 1999, 70). Rumi responded at times by means of a parable:

A greengrocer who once loved a lady sent a message with the lady’s maid, saying, “I am thus, and I am so. I am in love; I burn; I have no peace; I am tormented. Yesterday I was so; last night such befell me.” And thus he went on at great length. When the maid came to her mistress she said, “The greengrocer sends his regards and says that he wants to do thus and so with you.”

“So bluntly?” asked the lady.

“Well,” replied the maid, “he made a long story, but that was the gist of it.”

It’s the gist that counts; the rest just gives you a headache.

Such “meta-commentary” on the use and/or futility of words appears often in Rumi’s works. However, despite the ambivalent attitude shown above toward wordy explanations, in the *Fibi ma fib* Rumi expounds on a variety of topics, including debates about

philosophy, mysticism, theology, and power relations with external authorities. As such, this text provides a window into the intellectual and social dynamics of Rumi’s community within the dynamic milieu of medieval Konya. The discourses demonstrate that Rumi was an active teacher amongst a community of followers, as well as an interlocutor with the political authorities of his era. They provide much-needed balance to portrayals of Rumi as a free-spirited poet solely concerned with ecstatic dance and radical love.

Rumi also was a capable Islamic preacher, as shown in the *Majales-e Sab‘e*, which contains seven of his sermons. The sermons were delivered in a mixture of Arabic and Persian, and include snippets of poetry as well as the expected quotes from the Qur’an and hadith. Further evidence of Rumi’s religious and political authority can be found in his letters, or *Maktubat*. Only a scant few selections have been translated, as they supposedly lack literary value: the letters largely consist of honorifics and requests for favors. While an analysis of these more banal aspects of Rumi’s life might seem akin to examining Einstein’s work at the post office, these texts show that Rumi did not entirely vacate his responsibilities to his community when he became an ecstatic love poet. His mastery of a multiplicity of roles contributed to his reputation, and later, memorialization, amongst his followers and the shifting power players in Anatolia.

Rumi and his followers were apparently quite successful in their attempts at maintaining a working relationship with the authorities. His popularity was also reportedly non-sectarian: Muslims, Christians, and Jews all are said to have attended his funeral in 1273. After Rumi’s death, his son, Sultan Valad, and his main disciple, Husam al-Din, formalized the community that he had inculcated. The Mevlevis, as they would come to be known, united around the core teachings and rituals that had drawn people into Rumi’s circle. The fourteenth-century world traveler, Ibn Battuta (see Ibn Battuta), famously reported seeing Mevlevi rituals in Konya. His accounts spread Mevlevi practices to the broader cosmopolitan world under Muslim influence. Eventually, the Mevlevis became tied in with the power structure of the Ottoman Empire, expanding their influence greatly – though this association also confined the Mevlevi order’s spread to Ottoman lands.

Rumi’s literary reception was not bound by these limits. Medieval texts circulated beyond the boundaries of the communities in which they were produced; Rumi’s writing stands as one of the most famous examples of this. His teachings were heavily influential in the Chisti and Naqshbandi Sufi orders, popular in Iran and the Indian subcontinent. His influence can be found in later Persian-language poets, including Jami (d. 1492), and amongst other Shi’i mystics within the Safavid Empire. Within India, the Mughal Emperor Akbar held Rumi’s *Masnawi* in high regard. Thousands of manuscripts of Rumi’s writings can still be found in libraries from Delhi to Tehran to Istanbul. The extent of the commentary and manuscript traditions of Rumi’s *Masnawi* is such that it could be considered second only to the Qur’an in importance and influence in these regions during the medieval and early modern periods.

By comparison, European and non-Muslim audiences were rather late to formally encounter Rumi’s writings, even though his near contemporaries like Ibn al-‘Arabi (see Ibn al-‘Arabi, the Greatest Master), Averroes, al-Ghazali, and Avicenna were highly influential for European theologians and philosophers during the medieval period. Even Chaucer (see *The Global Pilgrimage of Geoffrey Chaucer’s The Canterbury Tales*)

“borrowed” narratives from the oeuvre of Farid ad-Din ‘Attar, Rumi’s poetic forbearer. During the nineteenth century, concurrent with the spread of the British Empire, the poetry of the Persians was “discovered” by English scholars. Sir William Jones, for example, brought Rumi’s poetry to the wider attention of the Royal Asiatic Society and Victorian society at large (Lewis 2000, 499–527).

Rumi’s writings were also previously translated by German-language scholars, including Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (see Goethe’s *World Literature Paradigm*). Their interest in Rumi’s writings dovetailed with a broader interest amongst German- and English-language poets and scholars for “world literature” that could reanimate their own writings by borrowing the (perceived) idealistic, romantic, exotic, pantheistic, and/or hedonistic themes found in cultures further afield. While this “Orientalizing” tendency came to be critiqued, notably by Edward Said, these movements were successful in bringing the literary aspects of Rumi to new audiences. The spiritual orders and Islamic teachings that were key to Rumi’s life and reception were overlooked, ignored, or otherwise dismissed by most European, non-Muslim audiences – a trend that has only recently begun to be remedied in popular translations and scholarship alike.

Sufi poetry and ideology influenced nineteenth-century thought in the United States through the efforts of transcendentalists, theosophists, and occultists. Concurrently, scholarly translations of Rumi’s works emerged. Sir James William Redhouse published a translation of book 1 of Rumi’s *Masnavi* in 1881, and Edward Henry Whinfield produced a popular abridged translation in 1887. The aforementioned R.A. Nicholson (and his student A.J. Arberry) also popularized Rumi’s writing for English-language readers, though translations by Edward FitzGerald of Omar Khayyam, a twelfth-century Persian polymath, initially achieved wider fame.

Sufism reemerged in the 1960s and 1970s within popular culture through authors like Idries Shah, and in new religious movements, including “New Age” movements. “Sufism,” as then constructed, answered the desire for countercultural and spiritually inclined (rather than doctrinally oriented) teachings. In the United States, Sufism has not always been affiliated with Islam and is sometimes understood as a separate or distinct tradition.

Interest in Sufism spread into literary circles. In the 1980s, the poets Robert Bly and Coleman Barks produced translations of Rumi’s poetry that came to be literary sensations. Barks, in particular, popularized Rumi’s writings through titles like *The Essential Rumi*. Eventually, these and other translations of the medieval author led to Rumi being hailed as the “best-selling poet in America” at the end of the twentieth century. Barks’s translations are often short selections or abstractions, and can include the helpful addition of titles and spacing to the source materials. In poems like “Special Plates,” he utilizes an American vernacular while capturing the mysticity of the original:

Look at this cup that can hold the ocean.
 Look at those who see the face.
 Look through Shams’ eyes
 into the Water that is
 entirely jewels.

(Barks 1995, 7)

Barks’s translations do not always aim for technical or literal accuracy between Persian and English. Other notable English-language translators and scholars of Rumi include Annemarie Schimmel, Kabir Helminski, Camille Helminski, Andrew Harvey, William Chittick, Ibrahim Gammad, Omid Safi, Jawid Mojaddedi, and Franklin Lewis. Some translations aim for balance between fidelity and readability, or between literality and “inner reality,” to borrow some Sufi terminology. Yet there are inherent epistemic and linguistic difficulties in transporting medieval, mystical Islamic poetry into contemporary idioms and forms. The emphasis, found in some translations, on the universal and mystical indicates a preference for themes that stand the test of time – as opposed to the religious, sectarian, and context-specific aspects to which modern readers have less access, or even less interest, in examining. Rumi’s writing stands at the crossroads, to this day, of debates over Orientalist adaptation, New Age usage, cultural cooptation, authenticity, and aesthetics in relation to the translation of premodern world literature.

To some extent, these debates are immaterial to the real and material phenomenon that Rumi and his poetry have become – even and especially in his absence. To borrow an idiom, the ocean has overflowed the cup. While “Rumi-mania” has had its ebbs and flows, Rumi’s writing now exists in a cornucopia of media: greeting and tarot cards, daily calendars, religious commentaries, operatic and dance productions, and country music albums. A cinematic portrayal of Rumi may yet emerge, bringing with it attendant dilemmas of representing race, ethnicity, and religion in the contemporary world. The question of to whom Rumi and his legacy belongs remains sticky: his life and legacy has featured in contemporary nationalistic debates among Turkey, Iran, and Afghanistan, with the latter objecting to the former two’s attempt to designate Rumi as “shared cultural heritage” by UNESCO. Rumi, who in his lifetime produced poetry on par in quality and quantity with any poet past or present, continues to provoke passionate reactions. Not that these would have given much pause to the poet, who once wrote, “... when all the images are before you, I melt them” (from the *Kulliyat-i Divan-i Shams-i Tabrizi*, poem 1462, trans. Rehder, in Chelkowski 1975, 276).

SEE ALSO: From Epic to Lyric; The Cuneiform World; Introduction to World Literature 601 to 1450; The Qur’an (Koran); Love and Reason in the Ghazal; Ibn al-Arabi, the Greatest Master; The Secular Wisdom of *Kalila and Dimna*; The *Shabnameh* of Ferdowsi; *Orientalia*; Goethe’s World Literature Paradigm

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