

Book Review

Alan Williams. *The Masnavi of Rūmī, Book One: A New English Translation with Persian Text and Explanatory Notes* (London; New York; Oxford; New Delhi; Sydney: I. B. Tauris, 2020). ISBN 9781788314458.

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In an especially lyrical passage of Rūmī's *Maṣnavī*, the reader is addressed directly with intimate urgency: "Come to your senses for a while, O brother," Rūmī writes, for "each moment you are full of spring and autumn" (p. I.126). It is this inward churn of changes within each human being, not to mention the "hundred thousand opposites" that constitute the chaotic world around them, that Rūmī's masterwork dramatizes so capably for therapeutic purposes. Rūmī's aim could hardly be more ambitious: he believes that, in a very real way, the *Maṣnavī* can help people attain freedom from suffering. As Alan Williams notes in the introduction to his wonderful new translation, "Rūmī builds into his audience's imagination a sense of freedom from control by imagery...paradoxically, by flooding the mind with imagery, not allowing the mind to fixate on and invest in one particular image" (p. I.xxviii). In other words, the remedy for pain is a carefully curated literary exposure to the very source of that pain.

The *Maṣnavī* is both a text and a phenomenon. Streaking comet-like across the centuries with a long and luminous history, it has been read, studied, appreciated, translated, and even revered as the "Qurʾān in Persian" throughout vast stretches of Afro-Eurasia and beyond. When Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 1273) finished composing his six-volume verse masterpiece, the *Maṣnavī-ye maʿnavī* (*Spiritual Couplets*, or simply the *Maṣnavī* in English) not long before his death, it rapidly became a landmark work across the closely interwoven domains of Persian literature, Sufi devotion, and Islamic thought. Translating it for a modern audience, then, is a task that is both pressing and challenging. Williams places his translation in

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dialogue with predecessors who sought to bring Rūmī to the notice of English-language scholars and readers. Foremost among them is Reynold A. Nicholson, whose twentieth-century translation of the *Maṣnavī* and accompanying commentary remains a standard academic reference work. Nicholson's translation is peppered with *thou arts* and *wouldsts* and other markers of Victorian sensibility, and while his parenthetical clarifications are helpful for specialists, it does not make for an especially satisfying reading experience now. Happily for us, Williams recasts Rūmī's words in an easy modern English idiom—and this alone is a mighty service.

Three steep formal problems confront any translator of Rūmī's *Maṣnavī*: meter, rhyme, and voice. A great merit of Williams' translation is the thoroughness and transparency with which he discusses his approaches to these problems in his introduction. Rūmī's work is a long narrative poem consisting of rhyming couplets (indeed, at nearly 26,000 couplets, it is a *very* long narrative poem), where each couplet adheres to a fixed metrical pattern, the "running" *ramal* meter. This meter's specific rhythm doesn't have an exact English equivalent, and Williams transposes Rūmī's rhymed and metered Persian into an unrhymed English iambic pentameter—Shakespeare's favorite form—which, as Williams proposes, best conveys the feel and flow of the Persian.

As for rhyme, translators diverge in how to meet this challenge. For instance, Jawid Mojaddedi's English translation preserves each couplet's internal rhyme, and in his version Rūmī's injunction to the reader quoted above sounds like this: "Collect your thoughts now, stop meandering / Each breath, within, your fall's replaced by spring!"¹ In contrast, Williams does not force end-words to rhyme with each other, although now and again he does "let the couplet blossom into natural rhymes" (p. I.xlviii). As he explains, it did not seem worth sacrificing precision of meaning for the mere achievement of formal conformity. He also notes that modern English readers generally do not enjoy encountering rhyme at the end of every line of a long poem; furthermore, they tend to associate rhyming poetry with children's verse, lewd limericks, and outmoded jingles from times long past (p. I.xlix). (That being said, there may be English readers who prefer to read long narratives in rhyme, and surely it is a good thing to have multiple thoughtful scholarly translations of Rūmī available in English today.) Williams reminds us that Rūmī's remarkable sense of rhythm and musicality is not confined to his use of meter and end-rhyme. The *Maṣnavī* ripples with countless eddies of intricate parallel figuration, internal echoes, and various swirls of similar sounds—all of which together create an incredibly rich and varied verbal texture. Williams' English version aims to approximate these effects wherever possible.

Perhaps the most vexing (and maybe also the most interesting) formal problem is the issue of voice, and Williams dedicates a substantial section of his introduction ("Structure and Design") to this issue. He argues that what distinguishes the *Maṣnavī* from earlier Persian didactic narratives is Rūmī's technique of constant shifts in voice. Williams identifies seven distinct modes of address that constitute what he calls Rūmī's polyphonic style. Just like in the Qur'ān, sudden pivots in voice and address startle readers and listeners, who become caught up in the poem's constant unpredictable movement across registers. An especially

1. Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, *The Masnavi*, trans. Jawid Mojaddedi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 118.

compelling argument advanced by Williams here is that the *Masnavī* should be considered a *dramatic* work (pp. I.xxxiv–xxxv). The polyphony of Rūmī’s narrative reveals an entire cast of characters, and the *Masnavī* thus becomes a small world of its own, populated by distinct voices that variously affirm, complicate, and expand each other’s ideas. According to the sevenfold scheme that Williams unfolds in helpfully thorough detail, these voices are: authorial, story-telling, analogical, speaking (as in a dialogue of characters), moral reflection, spiritual discourse, and hiatus. The last voice, hiatus, names and unifies the many moments scattered throughout the *Masnavī* when Rūmī pauses to consider the limits of discourse and contemplates the superiority of silence.

The *Masnavī*’s many voices constantly intersect with and interrupt each other, and Rūmī’s ultimate aim, Williams suggests, is to pull his audience into a perpetual current of change. Extended exposure to shifting voices, fleeting forms, and the never-stable play of imagination allows readers to recognize and reflect on the similar flux of appearances that surrounds them in their daily lives—and with that realization, transformation begins. Especially important here is Williams’ claim that Rūmī’s technique of narrative polyphony in fact constitutes a form of argumentation: Rūmī’s aim, like that of countless scholars, Sufis, theologians, and philosophers, is to lead his audience towards truth—but instead of writing formal treatises that present his ideas in an objective and logical way, Rūmī turns to narrative and imagination. The more destabilization a reader experiences in their encounter with the *Masnavī*, the more primed they become for the lifelong project of extracting themselves from the flood of false imagery. In the end, Rūmī hopes he can guide people towards the truth that lies beyond appearances.

The natural style of Williams’ English makes it possible for veteran and novice readers of Rūmī alike to appreciate the *Masnavī*’s polyphony. Some voices are helpfully bracketed by quotation marks, and the judicious use that Williams makes of punctuation (which is entirely absent from the original, as is typical of premodern Persian texts) helps us see how ideas sometimes spill over from one couplet to the next. In classical Persian narrative poems, each couplet is a grammatically complete unit, so the addition of a seemingly innocuous semicolon or comma at the end of an English couplet marks a carefully reasoned choice on the translator’s part. In an attempt to preserve the couplet-based units of the Persian original, Williams capitalizes the first word of each couplet’s first hemistich and indents each second hemistich. But when a thought clearly carries over from one couplet to the next and invites more complicated English sentence structures spanning multiple couplets, to encounter capitalizations where an English reader would not expect them in the middle of a sentence at times hinders the flow of reading. Overall though, Williams renders Rūmī into accessible, elegant English, offering a translation that is teachable and enjoyable for specialists and nonspecialists alike.

So far, Williams has translated two of the *Masnavī*’s original six volumes, with the remaining four already underway. He has taken the liberty of giving each volume a subtitle to indicate “the general themes of the progress along the spiritual journey of the path of love and knowledge to union with the divine” (p. I:x). *Book One* is subtitled “The Opening of the Path,” and *Book Two* is called “The End of the Self.” The introduction to *Book One* is more extensive, but both English volumes supply the same paratextual apparatus: a short

preface, a chronology of Rūmī's life and times, bibliographies for further reading, a note on translation, and an introductory essay that situates Rūmī's work in the context of Sufism, Persian literature, and Islamic thought and culture.

At the end of each volume are notes that elucidate certain passages, supply references, and helpfully direct the reader to other parts of the *Maṣnavī* and to other commentaries. The notes are followed by an index and an appendix with a very useful outline of all the stories. A particular virtue of this edition is the inclusion of the complete Persian original (critically edited by Moḥammad Este'lāmī), which begins near the rightmost end of the book and proceeds from right to left.² The decision to make a bilingual edition that does not follow a facing-page format is discussed by Williams in the preface to the first volume; citing logistical difficulties, Williams opts to preserve the unbroken flow of both the English and the Persian separately. It is perhaps rather poetic to have the two languages meet in the middle, but it does make for a slightly disjointed reading experience for anyone who wants to follow the Persian and English simultaneously. This choice is perhaps also premised on the optimistic view that physical books will continue to have currency amongst twenty-first-century readers. As objects, these books are very handsome. They are substantial hardbacks with appealing dust-jackets; several color plates vividly bring the *Maṣnavī*'s manuscript history to life, and a crimson ribbon aids readers as they flip back and forth between the English, the Persian, and the notes. If the publisher were to supply an electronic version with tooltips that could facilitate such jumps for readers who need or prefer a non-physical format, this would be very welcome and useful for a wide range of readers.

Every act of translation is a forced sequence of hard choices resulting inevitably in loss, but Alan Williams' translation of the *Maṣnavī* brings so much back in. Rūmī enjoins his audience to "listen to the surface of the tale, / but mind you prise the kernel from the shell" (p. II.17). This new translation, with its rich apparatus of notes and critical frames, allows readers to do just that.

2. Rūmī, *Maṣnavī*, ed. Moḥammad Este'lāmī, 7 vols., 2nd ed. (Tehran: Zavvār, 1990).