

The Masnavi

(excerpts)

by Maulana Jalalu-'d-din Muhammad Rumi

Translated by E.H. Whinfield (1898)

Sufism

Sufism is a mystical form of Islam. The primary focus of the Sufi revolves around looking inward to purify the heart and develop a powerful love of God. The Sufi thereby seeks to experience a personal union with God in this life. Rumi (1207-1273) is one of the best known Sufi poets in the west. He was a 13th century Persian scholar. For more, see: www.sacred-texts.com/isl/masnavi/index.htm.



Rumi's tomb (Mevlana museum)

Book I Prologue

HEARKEN to the reed-flute, how it complains,
Lamenting its banishment from its home:
"Ever since they tore me from my osier bed,
My plaintive notes have moved men and women to tears.
I burst my breast, striving to give vent to sighs,
And to express the pangs of my yearning for my home.
He who abides far away from his home
Is ever longing for the day he shall return.
My wailing is heard in every throng,
In concert with them that rejoice and them that weep.
Each interprets my notes in harmony with his own feelings,
But not one fathoms the secrets of my heart.
My secrets are not alien from my plaintive notes,
Yet they are not manifest to the sensual eye and ear.
Body is not veiled from soul, neither soul from body,
Yet no man hath ever seen a soul."
This plaint of the flute is fire, not mere air.
Let him who lacks this fire be accounted dead!
'Tis the fire of love that inspires the flute,
'Tis the ferment of love that possesses the wine.
The flute is the confidant of all unhappy lovers;
Yea, its strains lay bare my inmost secrets.
Who hath seen a poison and an antidote like the flute?
Who hath seen a sympathetic consoler like the flute?

The flute tells the tale of love's bloodstained path,
It recounts the story of Majnun's love toils.
None is privy to these feelings save one distracted,
As ear inclines to the whispers of the tongue.
Through grief my days are as labor and sorrow,
My days move on, hand in hand with anguish.
Yet,, though my days vanish thus, 'tis no matter,
Do thou abide, O Incomparable Pure One!
But all who are not fishes are soon tired of water;
And they who lack daily bread find the day very long;
So the "Raw" comprehend not the state of the "Ripe;"
Therefore it behoves me to shorten my discourse.
Arise, O son! burst thy bonds and be free!
How long wilt thou be captive to silver and gold?
Though thou pour the ocean into thy pitcher,
It can hold no more than one day's store.
The pitcher of the desire of the covetous never fills,
The oyster-shell fills not with pearls till it is content;
Only he whose garment is rent by the violence of love
Is wholly pure from covetousness and sin.
Hail to thee, then, O LOVE, sweet madness!
Thou who healest all our infirmities!
Who art the physician of our pride and self-conceit!
Who art our Plato and our Galen!
Love exalts our earthly bodies to heaven,
And makes the very hills to dance with joy!
O Iover, 'twas love that gave life to Mount Sinai,
When "it quaked, and Moses fell down in a swoon."
Did my Beloved only touch me with his lips,
I too, like the flute, would burst out in melody.
But he who is parted from them that speak his tongue,
Though he possess a hundred voices, is perforce dumb.
When the rose has faded and the garden is withered,
The song of the nightingale is no longer to be heard.
The BELOVED is all in all, the lover only veils Him;
The BELOVED is all that lives, the lover a dead thing.
When the lover feels no longer LOVE's quickening,
He becomes like a bird who has lost its wings. Alas!
How can I retain my senses about me,
When the BELOVED shows not the light of His countenance?
LOVE desires that this secret should be revealed,
For if a mirror reflects not, of what use is it?
Knowest thou why thy mirror reflects not?
Because the rust has not been scoured from its face.

If it were purified from all rust and defilement,
It would reflect the shining of the SUN Of GOD.
O friends, ye have now heard this tale,
Which sets forth the very essence of my case.

Story I

The Prince and the Handmaid

A prince, while engaged on a hunting excursion, espied a fair maiden, and by promises of gold induced her to accompany him. After a time she fell sick, and the prince had her tended by divers physicians. As, however, they all omitted to say, "God willing, we will cure her," their treatment was of no avail. So the prince offered prayer, and in answer thereto a physician was sent from heaven. He at once condemned his predecessors' view of the case, and by a very skilful diagnosis, discovered that the real cause of the maiden's illness was her love for a certain goldsmith of Samarcand. In accordance with the physician's advice, the prince sent to Samarcand and fetched the goldsmith, and married him to the lovesick maiden, and for six months the pair lived together in the utmost harmony and happiness. At the end of that period the physician, by divine command, gave the goldsmith a poisonous draught, which caused his strength and beauty to decay, and he then lost favour with the maiden, and she was reunited to the king. This Divine command was precisely similar to God's command to Abraham to slay his son Ishmael, and to the act of the angel in slaying the servant of Moses, and is therefore beyond human criticism.

Description of Love.

A true lover is proved such by his pain of heart;

No sickness is there like sickness of heart.

The lover's ailment is different from all ailments;

Love is the astrolabe of God's mysteries.

A lover may hanker after this love or that love,

But at the last he is drawn to the KING of love.

However much we describe and explain love,

When we fall in love we are ashamed of our words.

Explanation by the tongue makes most things clear,

But love unexplained is clearer.

When pen hastened to write,

On reaching the subject of love it split in twain.

When the discourse touched on the matter of love,

Pen was broken and paper torn.

In explaining it Reason sticks fast, as an ass in mire;

Naught but Love itself can explain love and lovers!

None but the sun can display the sun,

If you would see it displayed, turn not away from it.

Shadows, indeed, may indicate the sun's presence,

But only the sun displays the light of life.

Shadows induce slumber, like evening talks,

But when the sun arises the "moon is split asunder."

In the world there is naught so wondrous as the sun,

But the Sun of the soul sets not and has no yesterday.
 Though the material sun is unique and single,
 We can conceive similar suns like to it.
 But the Sun of the soul, beyond this firmament,
 No like thereof is seen in concrete or abstract.
 Where is there room in conception for His essence,
 So that similitudes of HIM should be conceivable?
 Shamsu-'d-Din of Tabriz importunes Jalalu-'d-Din
 to compose the Masnavi.
 The sun (Shams) of Tabriz is a perfect light,
 A sun, yea, one of the beams of God!
 When the praise was heard of the "Sun of Tabriz,"
 The sun of the fourth heaven bowed its head.
 Now that I have mentioned his name, it is but right
 To set forth some indications of his beneficence.
 That precious Soul caught my skirt,
 Smelling the perfume of the garment of Yusuf;
 And said, "For the sake of our ancient friendship,
 Tell forth a hint of those sweet states of ecstasy,
 That earth and heaven may be rejoiced,
 And also Reason and Spirit, a hundredfold."
 I said, "O thou who art far from 'The Friend,'
 Like a sick man who has strayed from his physician,
 Importune me not, for I am beside myself;
 My understanding is gone, I cannot sing praises.
 Whatsoever one says, whose reason is thus astray,
 Let him not boast; his efforts are useless.
 Whatever he says is not to the point,
 And is clearly inapt and wide of the mark.
 What can I say when not a nerve of mine is sensible?
 Can I explain 'The Friend' to one to whom He is no Friend?
 Verily my singing His praise were dispraise,
 For 'twould prove me existent, and existence is error.
 Can I describe my separation and my bleeding heart?
 Nay, put off this matter till another season."
 He said, "Feed me, for I am an hungered,
 And at once, for 'the time is a sharp sword.'
 O comrade, the Sufi is 'the son of time present.'
 It is not the rule of his canon to say, 'To-morrow.'
 Can it be that thou art not a true Sufi?
 Ready money is lost by giving credit."
 I said, "'Tis best to veil the secrets of 'The Friend.'
 So give good heed to the morals of these stories.
 That is better than that the secrets of 'The Friend'
 Should be noised abroad in the talk of strangers."
 He said, "Without veil or covering or deception,

Speak out, and vex me not, O man of many words!
Strip off the veil and speak out, for do not I
Enter under the same coverlet as the Beloved?"
I said, "If the Beloved were exposed to outward view,
Neither wouldst thou endure, nor embrace, nor form.
Press thy suit, yet with moderation;
A blade of grass cannot, pierce a mountain.
If the sun that illumines the world
Were to draw nigher, the world would be consumed.
Close thy mouth and shut the eyes of this matter,
That, the world's life be not made a bleeding heart.
No longer seek this peril, this bloodshed;
Hereafter impose silence on the 'Sun of Tabriz.'"
He said, "Thy words are endless. Now tell forth
All thy story from its beginning."

Story V

The Lion and the Beasts

In the book of Kalila and Damna a story is told of a lion who held all the beasts of the neighborhood in subjection, and was in the habit of making constant raids upon them, to take and kill such of them as he required for his daily food. At last the beasts took counsel together, and agreed to deliver up one of their company every day, to satisfy the lion's hunger, if he, on his part, would cease to annoy them by his continual forays. The lion was at first unwilling to trust to their promise, remarking that he always preferred to rely on his own exertions; but the beasts succeeded in persuading him that he would do well to trust Providence and their word. To illustrate the thesis that human exertions are vain, they related a story of a man who got Solomon to transport him to Hindustan to escape the angel of death, but was smitten by the angel the moment he got there. Having carried their point, the beasts continued for some time to perform their engagement. One day it came to the turn of the hare to be delivered up as a victim to the lion; but he requested the others to let him practice a stratagem. They scoffed at him, asking how such silly beast as he could pretend to outwit the lion. The hare assured them that wisdom was of God, and God might choose weak things to confound the strong. At last they consented to let him try his luck. He took his way slowly to the lion, and found him sorely enraged. In excuse for his tardy arrival he represented that he and another hare had set out together to appear before the lion, but a strange lion had seized the second hare, and carried it off in spite of his remonstrances. On hearing this, the lion was exceeding wroth, and commanded the hare to show him the foe who had trespassed on his preserves. Pretending to be afraid, the hare got the lion to take him upon his back, and directed him to a well. On looking down the well, the lion saw in the water the reflection of himself and of the hare on his back; and thinking that he saw his foe with the stolen hare, he plunged in to attack him, and was drowned, while the hare sprang off his back and escaped. This folly on the part, of the lion was predestined to punish him for denying God's ruling providence. So Adam, though he knew the names of all things, in accordance with God's predestination, neglected to obey a single prohibition, and his disobedience cost him dearly. Trust in God, as opposed to human exertions.

The beasts said, "O enlightened sage,
Lay aside caution; it cannot help thee against destiny;
To worry with precaution is toil and moil;
Go, trust in Providence, trust is the better part.
War not with the divine decree, O hot-headed one,
Lest that decree enter into conflict with thee.
Man should be as dead before the commands of God
Lest a blow befall him from the Lord of all creatures."
He said, "True; but though trust be our mainstay,
Yet the Prophet teaches us to have regard to means.
The Prophet cried with a loud voice,
'Trust in God, yet tie the camel's leg.'
Hear the adage, 'The worker is the friend of God;'
Through trust in Providence neglect not to use means.
Go, O Quietists, practice trust with self-exertion,
Exert yourself to attain your objects, bit by bit.
In order to succeed, strive and exert yourselves;
If ye strive not for your objects, ye are fools."
They said, "What is gained from the poor by exertions
Is a fraudulent morsel that will bring ill luck.
Again, know that self-exertion springs from weakness;
Relying on other means is a blot upon perfect trust.
Self-exertion is not more noble than trust in God.
What is more lovely than committing oneself to God?
Many there are who flee from one danger to a worse;
Many flee from a snake and meet a dragon.
Man plans a stratagem, and thereby snares himself;
What he takes for life turns out, to be destruction.
He shuts the door after his foe is in the house.
After this sort were the schemes of Pharaoh.
That jealous king slew a myriad babes,
While Moses, whom he sought, was in his house.
Our eyes are subject to many infirmities;
Go! annihilate your sight in God's sight.
For our foresight His foresight is a fair exchange;
In His sight is all that ye can desire.
So long as a babe cannot grasp or run,
It takes its father's back for its carriage.
But when it becomes independent and uses its hands,
It falls into grievous troubles and disgrace.
The souls of our first parents, even before their hands,
Flew away from fidelity after vain pleasure.
Being made captives by the command, 'Get down hence,'
They became bond-slaves of enmity, lust, and vanity.
We are the family of the Lord and His sucking babes.
The Prophet said, 'The people are God's family;'

He who sends forth the rain from heaven,
Can He not also provide us our daily bread?"
The lion said, "True; yet the Lord of creatures
Sets a ladder before our feet.
Step by step must we mount up to the roof!
The notion of fatalism is groundless in this place.
Ye have feet why then pretend ye are lame?
Ye have hands why then conceal your claws?
When a master places a spade in the hand of a slave,
The slave knows his meaning without being told.
Like this spade, our hands are our Master's hints to us;
Yea, if ye consider, they are His directions to us.
When ye have taken to heart His hints,
Ye will shape your life in reliance on their direction;
Wherefore these hints disclose His intent,
Take the burden from you, and appoint your work.
He that bears it makes it bearable by you,
He that is able makes it within your ability.
Accept His command, and you will be able to execute it;
Seek union with Him, and you will find yourselves united.
Exertion is giving thanks for God's blessings;
Think ye that your fatalism gives such thanks?
Giving thanks for blessings increases blessings,
But fatalism snatches those blessings from your hands.
Your fatalism is to sleep on the road; sleep not
Till ye behold the gates of the King's palace.
Ah! sleep not, O unreflecting fatalists,
Till ye have reached that fruit-laden Tree of Life
Whose branches are ever shaken by the wind,
And whose fruit is showered on the sleepers' heads.
Fatalism means sleeping amidst highwaymen.
Can a cock who crows too soon expect peace?
If ye cavil at and accept not God's hints,
Though ye count yourselves men, see, ye are women.
The quantum of reason ye possessed is lost,
And the head whose reason has fled is a tail.
Inasmuch as the unthankful are despicable,
They are at last cast into the fiery pit.
If ye really have trust in God, exert yourselves,
And strive, in constant reliance on the Almighty."
Wisdom is granted often times to the weak.
He said, "O friends, God has given me inspiration.
Often times strong counsel is suggested to the weak.
The wit taught by God to the bee
Is withheld from the lion and the wild ass.
It fills its cells with liquid sweets,

For God opens the door of this knowledge to it.
The skill taught by God to the silkworm
Is a learning beyond the reach of the elephant.
The earthly Adam was taught of God names,
So that his glory reached the seventh heaven.
He laid low the name and fame of the angels,
Yet blind indeed are they whom God dooms to doubt!
The devotee of seven hundred thousand years (Satan)
Was made a muzzle for that yearling calf (Adam),
Lest he should suck milk of the knowledge of faith,
And soar on high even to the towers of heaven.
The knowledge of men of external sense is a muzzle
To stop them sucking milk of that sublime knowledge.
But God drops into the heart a single pearl-drop
Which is not bestowed on oceans or skies!"
"How long regard ye mere form, O form-worshippers?
Your souls, void of substance, rest still in forms.
If the form of man were all that made man,
Ahmad and Abu Jahl would be upon a par.
A painting on a wall resembles a man,
But see what it is lacking in that empty form.
'Tis life that is lacking to that mere semblance of man.
Go! seek for that pearl it never will find.
The heads of earth's lions were bowed down
When God gave might to the Seven Sleepers' dog.
What mattered its despised form
When its soul was drowned in the sea of light?"
Human wisdom, the manifestation of divine.
On his way to the lion the hare lingered,
Devising a stratagem with himself.
He proceeded on his way after delaying long,
In order to have a secret or two for the lion.
What worlds the principle of Reason embraces!
How broad is this ocean of Reason!
Yea, the Reason of man is a boundless ocean.
O son, that ocean requires, as it were, a diver.
On this fair ocean our human forms
Float about, like bowls on the surface of water;
Yea like cups on the surface, till they are filled;
And when filled, these cups sink into the water.
The ocean of Reason is not seen ; reasoning men are seen;
But our forms (minds) are only as waves or spray thereof.
Whatever form that ocean uses as its instrument,
Therewith it casts its spray far and wide.
Till the heart sees the Giver of the secret,
Till it spies that Bowman shooting from afar,

It fancies its own steed lost, while in bewilderment
It is urging that steed hither and thither;
It fancies its own steed lost, when all the while
That swift steed is bearing it on like the wind.
In deep distress that blunder head
Runs from door to door, searching and inquiring,
"Who and where is he that hath stolen my steed?"
They say, "What is this thou ridest on, O master?"
He says, "True, 'tis a steed; but where is mine?"
They say, "Look to thyself, O rider; thy steed is there."
The real Soul is lost to view, and seems far off;
Thou art like a pitcher with full belly but dry lip;
How canst thou ever see red, green, and scarlet
Unless thou seest the light first of all?
When thy sight is dazzled by colors,
These colors veil the light from thee.
But when night veils those colors from thee,
Thou seest that colors are seen only through light.
As there is no seeing outward colors without light,
So it is with the mental colors within.
Outward colors arise from the light of sun and stars,
And inward colors from the Light on high.
The light that lights the eye is also the heart's Light;
The eye's light proceeds from the Light of the heart.
But the light that lights the heart is the Light of God,
Which is distinct from the light of reason and sense.
At night there is no light, and colors are not seen;
Hence we know what light is by its opposite, darkness.
At night no colors are visible, for light is lacking.
How can color be the attribute of dark blackness?
Looking on light is the same as looking on colors;
Opposite shows up opposite, as a Frank a Negro.
The opposite of light shows what is light,
Hence colors too are known by their opposite.
God created pain and grief for this purpose,
To wit, to manifest happiness by its opposites.
Hidden things are manifested by their opposites;
But, as God has no opposite. He remains hidden.
God's light has no opposite in the range of creation
Whereby it may be manifested to view.
Perforce "Our eyes see not Him, though He sees us."
Behold this in the case of Moses and Mount Sinai.
Discern form from substance, as lion from desert,
Or as sound and speech from the thought they convey.
The sound and speech arise from the thought;
Thou knowest not where is the Ocean of thought;

Yet when thou seest fair waves of speech,
Thou knowest there is a glorious Ocean beneath them.
When waves of thought arise from the Ocean of Wisdom,
They assume the forms of sound and speech.
These forms of speech are born and die again,
These waves cast themselves back into the Ocean.
Form is born of That which is without form,
And goes again, for, "Verily to Him do we return."
Wherefore to thee every moment come death and "return."
Mustafa saith, "The world endureth only a moment."
So, thought is an arrow shot by God into the air.
How can it stay in the air? It returns to God.
Every moment the world and we are renewed,
Yet we are ignorant of this renewing forever and aye.
Life, like a stream of water, is renewed and renewed,
Though it wears the appearance of continuity in form.
That seeming continuity arises from its swift renewal,
As when a single spark of fire is whirled round swiftly.
If a single spark be whirled round swiftly,
It seems to the eye a continuous line of fire.
This apparent extension, owing to the quick motion,
Demonstrates the rapidity with which it is moved.
If ye seek the deepest student of this mystery,
Lo! 'tis Husamu-'d-Din, the most exalted of creatures!