‘Ishq and the Literary: Exploring Rūmī’s *Mathnawī* as a Sufi Text

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Thesis Abstract:

Although there has been a bourgeoning corpus of studies on Rūmī in terms of his mystical ideas, there has been till present, very little attention paid to the literary aspects of his works – especially the Mathnawī as his narrative magnum opus. This thesis explores Rūmī’s Mathnawī to understand how it functions in the broader context of Sufism and literary production. Its approach is twofold: first, it provides a close literary reading of select passages from the Mathnawī through generic, rhetorical and narrative constructs; and second, delineates its broader theological/epistemological contexts. Therefore, through its emphasis on literary form, this thesis identifies how the Mathnawī’s literary structures both relate to, and are informed by Rūmī’s Sufi thought – specifically his ontology of ‘ishq (passionate love). Thus, adopting a literary approach to Rūmī’s works, the present study explores questions relating to the literary form of Rūmī’s Mathnawī such as: genre, function, the Mathnawī’s intertextuality with the Qur’ān, the complexities surrounding the Sufi notion of authorship, meaning and hermeneutics, as well as Rūmī’s specific notion of the “ideal reader” as a potential wayfarer on the Sufi path of ‘ishq. Finally, this thesis employs close-analysis to a specific tale from the Mathnawī (The King and the Handmaiden) in order to explore how Rūmī attempts to transform his readers through specific narrative structures. This thesis concludes that by the very act of producing the Mathnawī, Rūmī was effectively participating in the textualisation of his Sufi path of ‘ishq. In this sense, the present thesis addresses the kinds of strategies employed in Sufī writing to convey mystical ethos and content, to shape religious subjectivity in distinctive ways, or even to influence the cosmos through specialised acts of reading and writing such as the act of consuming and producing literature. The present study does not simply contribute to the niche field of Rūmī studies, but also draws attention to how consideration of its topics may change the way we think about Sufism and literary studies more broadly. As well as contributing to the broader field of world literature, a study of this kind is not only valuable in its contribution to a deeper understanding of Sufism within the field of Islamic studies, but also because analysing Rūmī’s particular works through an explicitly literary scheme may help in developing more nuanced and relevant descriptions of mystical or sacred literatures.
Declaration

This is to certify that:

(i) The thesis comprises only my original work toward the PhD except where indicated in the Preface;

(ii) Due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used;

(iii) The thesis is less than 100,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices.

Sirin Yasar
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I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Dr Muhammad Kamal, and my co-supervisor, Dr Christina Mayer, for their continuous support throughout my PhD study. Their patience, dedication and insight made my journey one that I can only describe in positive terms. The genuine interest they showed for my research created an atmosphere in which I was able to pursue my studies not as tasks to be fulfilled, but as a sincere pursuit of my passions. I would also like to thank my honours supervisor, Redha Ameur, for having first sparked my interest in exploring how studies in Sufism can contribute to the field of literary criticism. My sincere gratitude also extends to two invaluable educators, Fülya, whose last name I no longer know and Jann Keegan – the former because she was first to introduce me to Rūmī, Sufism and the literary, and the latter because she truly made me believe “the world is your oyster”.

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All citations from the *Mathnawī* are indicated in the footnotes by the Book number in Roman numerals followed by the line number, separated by a colon. Citations from the Qur’ān are indicated by the number of the sūrah (chapter), followed by number of the ‘āya (verse), separated by a colon. In transliterating Persian and Arabic words, the following system has been followed:

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Where Western publications of Arabic or Persian works are cited, the authors’ names and the titles are transliterated as in the publications used.

As the terms “Sufi” and “Sufism” are treated in modern English dictionaries as English words of Arabic origin\(^1\), the above transliteration rules were not applied to them.

Definition of Key Terms

**Baqā’ (Subsistence):** Arabic term for one of many important concepts developed to describe subtle aspects of mystical experience, typically paired with its polar opposite *fanā’* (annihilation). *Baqā’* also refers to the paradoxical experience of surviving or abiding within an encounter with the Divine, a meeting that, according to some theorists, means the destruction of the “self” or individual personality and at the very least means the cessation of self-awareness.

**Dīwān (A collection of poetry):** Often including two or more genres, such as the love lyric or ghazal, the lengthier ode or qaṣīdah, and the brief quatrain or rubā’ī form.

**Fanā’ (Annihilation):** The verb *faniya* means, among other things, “to pass away”, “to perish”, “to cease to exist”, whereas *fanā’* refers to a fundamental aspect of spiritual experience and has been used by the Sufis in the sense of passing-away with one’s own will to have union with God.

**Ḥāl (State):** Along with various stations, there are also what are known as temporary states, or *aḥwāl*, that the Sufi can experience. Therefore, in contrast to *maqām* (station), which is earned by personal toil, *aḥwāl* (states) are, in contrast, taken to be divine gifts or blessings.

**‘Ishq (Love):** A non-Qur’anic term, *‘ishq* denotes excessive or passionate love but also connotes *maḥabbah* (moderate love), and is sometimes considered a species of that genus. The term has sometimes been considered problematic especially in regards to its connotations of transgression.

**Maʻshūq (Beloved):** One of many ways of naming the object of the mystical quest. Sufi poets frequently leave draped in tantalizing ambiguity whether the beloved is human or divine but, in general, even a human *maḥbūb* (love interest, beloved) is at the very least a reflection of the Divine.

**Maqām (Station):** The ‘way stations’ or *maqāmāt* are understood as being the stages of the mystical travellers; a continuous path or journey that has distinct stages. Progress from station to station requires both the wayfarer’s personal effort and God’s continual assistance without which the goal cannot be achieved.
**Mathnawī / Masnavī / Mesevî (Couplets):** Is an important poetic structure used extensively in Sufi didactic works. Many of the greatest Sufi poets employed the *mathnawī* genre of “doubled” rhyming lines, with each verse composed of hemstitches that rhyme with each other.

**Mawlānā / Mevlânâ (Our Master):** Once used as a common noun, the term Mawlānā / Mevlânâ has come to be used almost exclusively in reference to Rūmī – especially in Turkey. It is more commonly used in the broader Muslim world as an honorary title.

**Mawlawiyya / Mevlevî (The Sufi Order/Followers of Rūmî):** The Sufi order founded in Konya (during the Ottoman period after Rūmî’s death) by his followers. They are also commonly known as the *Whirling Dervishes* due to their famous practice of spiritual whirling as a form of *dhikr* (remembrance [of God]).

**Nafs (Ego):** The sum of natural human tendencies whose centrifugal effects continually threaten to distance the individual from the true centre, God. One’s “lower self” or “ego soul” (*nafs*, also rendered as soul), is described in the *Qur’ān* as functioning in various ways: inciting to evil (12: 53); blaming or admonishing, serving as a kind of conscience (75: 2); and bringing about a peaceful condition resulting from its purification (89: 27).

**Sālik (Disciple):** Follower of the *shaykh*, student of a Sufi teacher; aspirant or seeker along the mystical path. Sufi texts use the Arabic terms *ṭālib*, a “student seeker,” but the most important technical term, *murīd*, refers to an “aspirant seeker” understood to be a member of an order in the initial phases of training (i.e. a “novice”).

**Sharḥ / Şerh (Commentary):** An important genre of Sufi literature, mostly in prose, in which disciples and later students produce elaborations (*sharḥ*) of seminal works of earlier Sufis. Commentary ranges from brief glosses on selected sayings or aphorisms to extensive treatises on complete works.

**Shawq (Desire):** A concept originally associated with longing to see the face of God and later incorporated by Sufi theorists as a way station on the spiritual path. Sufi authors have accorded “desire” varying roles in their systematic analyses of spirituality, depending on their views of its relationship to love and the degree to which they considered active longing for God an appropriate goal.
Sufism: Commonly understood as being the mystical dimension of Islam; Sufism can best be understood through its point of emphasis: a distinctive preoccupation with the internal happenings of the human subject – its qualities, weaknesses and its intrinsic desire to love and be loved.

Ṭarīqah (Way / Path / Sufi Order): is generally used as a term for a school or order of Sufism, or especially for the mystical teaching and spiritual practices of such an order with the aim of seeking ḥaqīqah (ultimate truth). Sufi orders usually have a murshid (guide), who is the spiritual leader of the murīdīn (lit. the desirous), students who desire the knowledge of God. Over time, ṭarīqah has also come to refer to the institutionalised forms of Sufi orders that are usually named after a key figure.

Uns (Intimacy): An aspect of spiritual experience related to ecstasy and mystical union. An aspect of spiritual experience sometimes listed among the states and frequently in relation especially to desire, proximity, recollection, and love.

Waḥdat al-wujūd (The Unity of existence / being): ontological reality (wujūd), a status ultimately belonging only to God, a concept of particular importance in theoretical and theosophical Sufism. If God alone is “the really real,” all things beside God have no claims to independent existence. Mystical theologies vary as to precisely how they define the concept in relation to the human being who seeks union with the divine, a debate prominently exemplified in the wujūdī controversy.
Chapter One:

Introduction

*Every one became my friend from his own opinion; none sought out my secrets from within me*¹

In the lines above, Rûmî’s woeful complaint seems to suggest that being misunderstood was a plight he had endured even during his own lifetime. His words take on an even deeper significance in the post-modern world where we have basically reached the conclusion that anything can mean anything you want it to mean. One way in which this phenomenon is manifested can be observed through the plethora of references and decorated quotes attributed to Rûmî that now saturate social media and the online platform. On the one hand, this signals Rûmî’s sustained relevance and popularity throughout the ages; however, for those more familiar with Rûmî’s teachings, what one often observes are the reduction of his profoundly dense couplets into hollow little platitudes. This observation is not a self-important attempt to withdraw the appreciation of Rûmî from the masses – this would not only be contrary to the spirit of his teachings but also a betrayal of Rûmî’s own legacy as someone who was loved and revered by all sections and members of society. However, at the same time, it can be said that the same popularity that has made Rûmî a household name has also led to a lot of confusion about his ideas and teachings. Many readers, especially Western, can face a number of obstacles reading and understanding Rûmî’s works. Pushing aside the drawbacks of translations in general, there remain the constant references to Islamic teachings with which the reader may not be familiar: Rûmî’s universe is shaped by the Qur’ân, the Prophet, and the Muslim “saints”, just as Dante’s is shaped by Christ, the Bible, and the Church. Furthermore, as the esteemed scholar on Sufism, William Chittick, has pointed out, it is not uncommon to meet people in the West who are familiar with certain Sufi teachings and practices but who are ignorant of – or would deny – anything more than an accidental relationship between Sufism and Islam. One of the primary reasons for much of this confusion is the general ambiguity that still surrounds the relationship between Sufism

and Islam. This is due in large part to the fact that the field itself is still very much enmeshed in various and complex processes of self-definition. This tension is not simply an external academic debate about influence and origins, but can also represent a deeply internal struggle within these same traditions: a fear of the erosion of meaning and the loss of sincerity that could potentially destroy entire systems of faith when they are reduced to emptied and hollow shells of their former selves. One means through which various individuals have attempted to protect or reinstate the spirit of their faith traditions has been through the medium of great literature – those works which could become a mirror to hold to one’s self or to the world around. In the Islamic tradition, those figures identified as Sufis have often be appreciated for their various methods of seeking to gain re-union with the Divine, as well as the production of a rich heritage of literature describing this experience.

As a key representative of this tradition, today, one can find a growing and sustained interest in Rūmī, who, despite espousing a specific faith tradition, many recognise as having an inherent universality to his wisdom appealing to people from all ages, regardless of creed or culture. Perhaps this is because so much of what Rūmī writes about seems to deal with the paradoxically most recognisable and simultaneously most elusive of all subjects – the self: its purpose, sufferings, weaknesses, desires and yearnings.

Today, there are many popular renditions of Rūmī’s works as well as ever emerging poetic translations of his works, but if one considers a world in which the production of a text meant that it had to be copied by hand, it may indicate the time and dedication it would have taken to produce a text as lengthy and versatile as the Mathnawī. That there are tens of thousands of manuscript copies (second only to the Qur’ān) leads us to realise, in a very real and tangible sense, that after the Qur’ān, almost no other text and author has had such an impact on the religious imagination of Muslims as the Mathnawī. As a common noun, mathnawī refers to a genre as well as a literary form signifying a work extended prose-poetry often utilising the

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2 For example, an oft-cited reference in any attempt to define Sufism is Abu al-Hasan Fushanja’s woeful formulation sometime in the 11th century proclaiming that ‘Sufism today is a name without a reality, whereas it was once a reality without a name.’ Quoted by ‘Ali b. ‘Uthmān al-Jullābī Al-Hujwīrī in the Kashf al-Mahjūb, translated by R. A. Nicholson, Adam, New Delhi, 2006, p. 32.

3 As Michael Frishkopf has pointed out, ‘[w]hile Sufism does not provide the only forum for Islamic poetry, it is in Sufism that religious poetry is most developed and most utilized in religious practice.’ Michael Frishkopf, ‘Authorship in Sufi Poetry’, Alif Journal of Comparative Poetics, no. 23, Literature and the Sacred, 2003, p. 80.

4 The enduringness of Rūmī’s work on a global scale is also apparent if one considers that he was recently voted the most read poet in the U.S. whereas 2007 marked the eight hundredth anniversary of Rūmī’s birth, leading UNESCO to issue a Commemorative Medal in his honor. UNESCO, ‘Mawlana Jalal-ud-Din Balkhi-Rumi (1207-1273)’, UNESCO [website], para. 2, <http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=39343&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html> accessed 12 June 2013.
form of didactic narrative. The longer title for Rūmī’s *Mathnawī*, the “*Mathnawī-i Ma‘nawī*” has sometimes been translated as “spiritual couplets” or “rhyming couplets of great spiritual import”. Here one may pause to consider its title, for this can be a significant initial step in understanding the kind of work it is. Interestingly, in Persian, the *Mathnawī*’s chosen language, *ma‘nawī*/*ma‘nawiyya* corresponds in meaning to spirituality rather than *rūḥāniyya*, (derived from the term *rūḥ*) which is the term more commonly used in Arabic for spirit/soul. Therefore, in the Persian, the term “meaning” is etymologically interrelated with the notion of “spirituality”. This subtilety in the title is suggestive because not only is the work titled after its literary form, but also implies a kind of interrelatedness between the search for meaning and divine purpose. Considering that the *Mathnawī* is now almost always used as an exclusive epithet for Rūmī’s *magnum opus* is also telling of the significance of its stylistic composition in relation to its status as a Sufi text.

Rūmī often makes references to the strenuous process of composing the *Mathnawī*, “burning the midnight oil” so to speak, as he addresses his scribe, Ḫusām al-Dīn, who was working with him sometimes till the early hours of dawn over a period of time expanding no shorter than twelve years. The end result that was the *Mathnawī* is a work in six volumes consisting of more than 25,000 verses (of rhyming couplets).\(^5\) The *Mathnawī* has been remarked as being ‘like nothing to be found in Western spirituality; in scope, scale, and conception it also far transcends its own antecedents, and these were considerable enough.’\(^6\) Firstly, it has no framing plot. Its many stories can be viewed as collectively forming a loosely related interconnected plot, which in itself becomes a strategy and means to hook the imagination. As *Mathnawī* translator Alan Williams has described it, “It takes the multifariousness of life as its raw material: all states of existence, from rocks and plants to insects and animals, and all of humankind, from villains and harlots to men of state, kings, saints, angels and prophets.”\(^7\) Characters are drawn from all occupations and situations. The tone ranges from popular stories from the bazaar to fables and timeless moral tales, as well as quotations from the stories of the Prophet to Qur’ānic revelation itself. It is arguable that one reason why the

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\(^5\) Each book consists of about 4,000 verses and contains its own prose introduction and prologue, and since there are no epilogues, it is desirable to read the preceding volumes to fully benefit from the wisdom presented by Rūmī. Although it has sometimes been said that the final book of the Mathnawī is incomplete or that there was a book, most Rūmī scholars have detracted such claims (e.g. Şefik Can, *Fundamentals of Rumi’s Thought: A Mevlevi Sufi Perspective*, Tughra, New Jersey, 2005, p. 36).


works of Sufi figures such as Rūmī have evoked such interest among various cultures – in both academic circles and the broader public – is due to the noticeable preference of Sufi authors’ for the literary medium in expressing their mystical doctrines. This researcher upholds the premise that one of the essential reasons why Rūmī continues to remain especially significant is through his singular ability to harmoniously blend the theological, mystical as well as the literary traditions to which he belonged. As such, through its emphasis on literary form, the present study primarily seeks to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between form and content in Sufi literature through the specific example of Rūmī’s Mathnawī. This being the case, any thorough study of Rūmī’s works (especially the Mathnawī) will necessarily require the simultaneous study of Islam, Sufism and literature.

1.1 Literature Review: The Significance of the Mathnawī’s Literary Form

This review will begin by contextualising the gaps in existing methodologies to approaching Rūmī’s works and has attempted to justify the value of adopting a literary approach to Rūmī’s Mathnawī that is also cognisant of its Sufi content. The latter part of this review will focus on innovative research that can be distinctively identified as having a literary orientation in their approach to Rūmī’s works (specifically the Mathnawī). Although numerous studies on Rūmī have been produced in other languages, this review will concentrate on those produced in the English language (or translated into English), which the present study also intends to contribute to. At present, what tends to exist is a rather broad, suggestive definition of both mysticism and mystical literature, which also translates into a similarly general and somewhat loose understanding of what may be identified as “Sufi literature”. Another problem with identifying “Sufi literature” with “mystical literature” is

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8 However, it is also important to point out that the literature that has been written by Sufis, or about Sufis, represents only a tiny fraction of the phenomenon of Sufism, since the great majority of Muslims who devoted themselves to God, including most of those who were known in their own time or revered by later generations as great Sufis, did not have the vocation of writing.

9 Though not in any way conclusive, my references to literature and the literary throughout this thesis have been summarised by Terry Eagleton thus: ‘When people at the moment call a piece of writing literary, they generally have one of five things in mind, or some combination of them. They mean by ‘literary’ a work which is fictional, or which yields significant insight into human experience as opposed to reporting empirical truths, or which uses language in a peculiarly heightened, figurative or self-conscious way, or which is not practical in the sense that shopping lists are, or which is highly valued as a piece of writing.’ Terry Eagleton, The Event of Literature, Yale University Press, London, 2012, p. 25.

10 Interestingly, many of these essays have been produced in the last few years in the lead-up to the completion of the present thesis and in this sense, also reflect the growing relevance and interest among Rūmī scholars for studying the literary form of Rūmī’s works.
that in modern English, the word “mysticism” sometimes carries negative connotations, not least that of irrationality, whereas ṭasawwuf, the Islamic term for Sufism (sometimes described as Islamic or Muslim mysticism) does not necessarily carry the negative connotations or eclecticism inherent in its counterpart in Christianity. Furthermore, opting to define the Mathnawi in terms of Sufism also suggests an appropriate cultural specificity as well as calling for a clearer definition. The argument of this researcher is that our understandings about works of cultural and religious significance need to be modified and expanded by an examination of specific individuals and texts as well as the traditions to which they belonged. Although there is now an established corpus of studies on Rūmī as a Sufi as well as the specific nature of his mystical ideas, there has been, till present, very little attention paid to the literary form of his literary works – especially his magnum opus, the Mathnawi. Scholars have identified this monumental work as ‘a most important book in the study of Sufism’ in which ‘countless metaphysical concepts are woven into the fabric of the text in order to elucidate important Sufi teachings.’ Similarly, Mathnawi scholar and translator, Alan Williams, identifies it as ‘possibly the longest single-authored “mystical” poem ever written.’ However, for the most part, Rūmī’s thought has generally been explored either through a historical or a philosophical framework, and until fairly recently, the Mathnawi’s literary significance has received little to no attention in the English-speaking world.

The scarcity of Rūmī scholarship in English naturally led early scholars to adopt a historical or a philosophical approach for exploring Rūmī’s life and works. Having noticed this trend, Banani suggests that, for the most part, academic discussions on Rūmī are often ‘subordinated to the discussion of his doctrinal and philosophical views’ and as such, ‘the overwhelming amount of the attention paid to him has been to the system and content of his thought.’ Keshavarz has expressed a similar sentiment pointing out that although Rūmī’s literary biographers have not been able to ignore the force of his poetry, ‘they have told the reader far more about his religious training, his interaction with other Sufis, his mystical doctrine, and his mysterious encounter with his master Shams than about his poetic

15 ibid.
artistry.’\textsuperscript{16} Similarly, Williams, rightly points out that despite Rūmī’s popularity, the \textit{Mathnawī} has been somewhat left in the shadows and ‘there have been few, if any, studies of the structure of its literary composition and poetics, that is, of how it works as a poem.’\textsuperscript{17} However, there has also been, at times, an outright aversion to the literary merit of Rūmī’s work. For example, William Chittick, a leading scholar of Rūmī, has proclaimed that ‘Rumi had no respect for poetry as such. If poetry has any value, it is found in the meaning and message it conveys.’\textsuperscript{18} Observing such claims, Fatemeh Keshavarz argues that subscribers to such views often argue that Rūmī engaged in writing poetry because he was left with no other expressive outlets, that he was not dedicated to literature nor did his work possess “true” literary merit.\textsuperscript{19} However, even though valuable Rūmī scholars such as Chittick have argued that it is the content of Rūmī’s work that deserves our attention, the nature of his work reveals his own anxieties in terms of methodology. For example, Chittick’s lengthy work, \textit{The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi}, is a sort of extended contents page which quotes overwhelming extracts from the \textit{Mathnawī} according to what Chittick has deemed to be overriding themes. Chittick sums up his plight explaining that it would have been possible to systematise and arrange Rūmī’s ideas much more thoroughly - however, this would have defeated his ‘goal of allowing Rūmī to present his teachings in his own words’.\textsuperscript{20} Chittick attempts to justify his methodology but ends up capturing the essential problem facing all Rūmī scholars:

In fact, we can say about Rumi what we can say about numerous other figures in the history of Islamic thought: he takes the principle of the “profession of God’s Unity” (tawhid) as given and explains all that this principle implies for us as human beings in terms of our ideas, our activities, and our existence. But this simple statement cannot begin to tell us why Rumi has attracted so much attention from his own lifetime down to the present day. That must be sought not so much in what he is saying but in \textit{how he says it}. As soon as one separates Rumi’s message from his own \textit{mode of expressing it}, it becomes somehow dry and uninspiring. This is a major drawback of books about Rumi, by dissecting his poetry and thought; they lose sight of his heart and soul. To appreciate

\textsuperscript{17} Alan Williams, ‘Narrative Structure and Polyphonic Discourse in the \textit{Mathnawi}, \textit{Mawlana Rumi Review}, vol. 4, 2013, p. 51.
\textsuperscript{19} Keshavarz, op. cit., p. 14.
\textsuperscript{20} Chittick, op. cit., p. 13.
Rumi in all his dimensions, one must read Rumi himself, not the scholarly commentators.21

I do not believe Chittick is arguing for the futility of Rūmī scholarship – the difficulty certainly has not prevented him or others from producing work. Rather, what he points out is the difficulty in terms of methodology facing Rūmī scholars. Whether Chittick’s methodology overcomes this tension is questionable, but his basic argument seems to be inadvertently admitting the inevitable failure of attempting to explain Rūmī whilst ignoring the literary nature of his work. Furthermore, it can be argued that viewing mystical texts as both aesthetic and cultural/religious artefacts forces a reader to question the text’s literary form (e.g., discursive, narrative, or poetic) as well as its performative dimension as it constructs, describes, or enacts the cosmos through exegetical and other techniques.

Although focusing on Rūmī’s Diwān, Fatemeh Keshavarz’s pioneering study, Reading Mystical Lyric, is one of the first extensive critical examinations of Rūmī’s vast, dynamic body of literature.22 Through close readings of the Diwān, Rūmī’s collection of more than 35,000 lyric verses, Keshavarz explores the nature of Rūmī’s literary success. Rather than simply catalogue the images and concepts used by Rūmī, Keshavarz employs a new critical approach that she describes as ‘observing the poems in action’.23 Her approach demonstrates how the poet’s use of paradox, manipulation of silence, innovation in rhythm, and experimentation with imagery result in a literary enactment of love rather than a mere portrayal of it. Furthermore, in a section titled Rumi’s Experience: Poetic or Mystical? The Second Misconception Keshavarz argues that for Rūmī, his interaction, and perception, of the Divine and his act of composing poetry are one and the same process.24 Along the same lines, Farooq Hamid contends that it is futile, even fatal, to separate the two factors in reading the Mathnawī.25 As with Rūmī’s ghazal poetry Hamid argues there is no either/or solution in the Mathnawī where the arena of the “mystical” and the “poetic” is enlarged to include the “prophetic” and all are equally implicated in the production of the Mathnawī. Such

21 Chittick, op. cit., pp. 27-8. My italics. Nancy Hardin expresses the same idea in relation to Sufi stories as a whole: ‘That the stories have a unique ability to survive relates in part to the fact that they are at home in Europe, in Africa, in America, as well as in the Middle East; they are not dependent on any given cultural framework. They survive as a result of their form’. Nancy Shields Hardin, ‘The Sufi Teaching story and Doris Lessing’, Twentieth Century Literature, vol. 23, no. 3, 1977, p. 315.
22 Keshavarz, loc. cit.
23 ibid.
24 Keshavarz, op. cit., p. 19.
considerations are also worth exploring in relation to the especially ecstatic passages throughout the *Mathnawī* and how they can be understood within the notion of literary experience.

An essay by Christine Van Ruymbeke explores the way in which Rûmî ‘manipulates one of his sources[, a] cycle of fables’.\(^{26}\) Even though the scope is limited to one example in the *Mathnawī*, Ruymbeke claims that her focus on the transformation process wrought to one of the fables by Rûmî is an ‘attempt to deconstruct the poet’s literary technique, a hitherto rather marginalised aspect in Rûmî studies.’\(^{27}\) As an expert on the *Kalīla wa-Dimna*, Ruymbeke feels that Rûmî’s reappropriation of its source text is inferior in contrast to the original though she does concede that Rûmî is primarily interested in conveying his Sufi message. On this same theme, an essay by Muhammad Este‘lami, briefly examines how Rûmî had modified several tales throughout the *Mathnawī* from their original sources so as to serve his own purposes, as well as examining Rûmî’s use of specific terms throughout the *Mathnawī*.\(^{28}\)

Although such observations can veer into questions of personal taste, it also opens up interesting considerations in relation to the uses and ‘misuses’ of source materials by Sufis like Rûmî, and how this plays into the notion of intertextuality.

Another innovative study is *Rûmî and the Hermeneutics of Eroticism* by Mahdi Tourage, which, for the first time, attempts to provide a systematic exposition of the *Mathnawī*’s sexual imagery and its significance for Rûmî’s esoteric intentions.\(^{29}\) Thus, examining the bawdy passages in the *Mathnawī* by using relevant features of modern theories of gender and semiotics (particularly those of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan) as strategic conceptual tools, Tourage examines the link between the dynamics of eroticism and esotericism that are operative in the *Mathnawī*. Although Tourage singles out the bawdy tales in the *Mathnawī* as affecting a splintering of conscience within its readers, it could be argued that although the bawdy passages may enhance this effect, this technique is certainly not limited to these passages in the *Mathnawī* and is therefore worth further considering how Rûmî attempts to affect his readers through other narrative techniques.

A study by Maryam Musharraf and Leonard Lewisohn compares the links between Rûmî’s *Mathnawī* and the work of the early Sufi Qur‘ān commentator, Sahl ibn ‘Abdullāh al-Tustarī.


\(^{27}\) ibid., p. 85.


Highlighting the Mathnawī’s exegetical role in relation to the Qur’ān, Musharraf and Lewisohn argue that it has been unfortunate that most scholars who have studied the Mathnawī’s interpretation of the Qur’ān have paid more attention to Rūmī’s use of traditional commentaries and disregarded the influence of mystical exegesis of the Qur’ān on his poem. As such, the study is one of the first to systematically evaluate the impact of early esoteric Qur’ānic exegeses upon the Mathnawī to serve as a preamble to further, more elaborate, investigations of Rūmī’s poetic use and adaptation of mystical interpretations of the Qur’ān. Thus, through its comparative examinations of several passages in Rūmī’s Mathnawī with Tustari’s Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-azīm (Exegesis of the Tremendous Qur’ān), Musharraf and Lewisohn reveal how Rūmī’s interpretations of several Qur’ānic verses is in accord with similar Sufi mystical interpretations of the holy text.

A valuable study by Bilal Kuşpinar analyses the Simāṭ Al-Mūqīnīn by the renowned Ottoman Mathnawī commentator, Ismail Anqarawī (d. 1631). The commentary serves to explain and clarify difficult expressions and phrases in the Mathnawī’s Arabic dibājah (prefaces). Kuşpinar argues that the most striking feature of Anqarawī’s commentary ‘is that it posits the existence of certain astonishing similarities between the Mathnawī and the Qur’ān and even puts the two almost on a par on several grounds.’ This is a significant finding that is worth further exploring, especially in terms of how Rūmī himself perceived the Mathnawī. Kuşpinar’s study also hints at the notion of readership in the Mathnawī arguing that it, ‘in a way similar to the Qur’ān, exercises varying degrees of impact on its readers and hearers, depending on their condition, aptitude, capacity and receptivity.’ This is a significant point in terms of delineating a broader understanding of Rūmī’s reader-response theory and warrants further exploration.

In a comparative study of various ecstatic poets, D. J. Moores highlights the appeal of Rūmī’s ‘aesthetics of ecstasy’ – especially through his use of allegorical narrative strategy and symbols characteristic to the Sufi tradition. Moores argues that the notion of vairag (nonattachment) coined by the Indian Sufi, Hazrat Inayat Khan who founded the ecumenical International Sufi Movement, ‘serves as a foundational idea in Sufism and appears

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32 ibid., p. 66.
33 ibid., p. 67.
Moores argues that although Rūmī never articulates this notion or any corresponding Persian concept in the Mathnawī, he strongly and repeatedly implies it throughout the narrative to the degree that he identifies it as his ‘unspoken but central concern’ and that it is also the principal idea linking all of the digressive stories in his great epic. Although Moores' emphasis on vairag may provide some clarity within a broad comparative approach to studying different poets from different traditions, it is also worth identifying this underlying principle in Rūmī’s work in terms of his specific Sufi ideas (such as his notion of fanā’ and baqā’) and how such notions tie in with his overall notion of the human self as he attempts to guide his audience throughout the Mathnawī.

There have also been an increasing number of essays in the past few years that have focused the Mathnawī's literary form – specifically Rūmī’s unconventional narrative structure. For example, in a book chapter titled, Persian Sufi Literature: Its Spiritual and Cultural Significance, Seyyed Hossein Nasr argues that in much of Sufi works, “[t]he form is there not only for itself but in order to express the inner meaning.” An essay by James Roy King examining Rūmī’s narrative technique using a story from the Mathnawī also suggests that although Rūmī did not supply all the clues, ‘the literary form in which he worked seems to have pointed the way’ and how ‘the “meaning” of the Mathnawī cannot be separated from the narrative and the peculiar form into which it is cast’. As such, King argues that Rūmī was fully aware of his function as a poet and storyteller and to this purpose, the unusual narrative method he chose was uniquely suited. Along the same line of argument is a book chapter by Amin Banani, Rūmī the Poet, in which he also points out Rūmī’s poetic identity and argues that ‘[t]he source and the structure of his mystical thought and the nature and process of his poetic creativity are inseparably connected.’

Similarly, an article by Farooq Hamid demonstrates that ‘the form of the narrative in the Masnavī is a necessary outcome, indeed, an instrument of Rūmī’s didactic purpose with the

35 ibid., p. 79.
36 ibid.
40 ibid., p. 276.
41 Amin Banani, Richard Hovannisian, & Georges Sabagh, loc. cit.
use of a homiletic method.'

In the same vein, in his introduction to the translation of Book One of the *Mathnawī*, Rūmī scholar Jawid Mojaddedi, remarking on the *Mathnawī*’s wayward narrative, suggests that the frequency of breaks in the flow of narratives reveals that, although Rūmī has earned a reputation as an excellent storyteller, ‘his primary concern was to convey his teachings as effectively as possible to his Sufi disciples.’ Therefore, in a more recent essay, Mojaddedi critiques Safavi and Weightman’s fairly recent study on Book One of the *Mathnawī* which argues for the concept of narrative design within the *Mathnawī* through its chiastic structure (ring composition). Mojaddedi rightly forewarns that although such readings of the *Mathnawī* are arguably valuable in the broader context of Rūmī scholarship, they also ‘run the risk of veiling the actual preoccupations of the *Masnavī*, and feels that Rūmī is more interested in communicating his immediate messages rather than the meticulous or methodological let alone mathematical deciphering of a complex code hidden within the *Mathnawī*. In fact, Mojaddedi argues that there is, at minimum, a rationale for the *Mathnawī*’s unstructured narrative composition describing ‘the alteration between narrative and non-narrative verses in his poem has been maintained deliberately like the ebb and flow of an ocean.’

Remarking on the wayward narrative of the *Mathnawī*, Nicholson remarks:

The loose and rambling structure of the poem leads to other perplexities. When our author gives no sign whether he is speaking in his own person or by the voice of one of his innumerable puppets — celestial, infernal, human, or animal — who talk just like himself; when he mingles his comments with their discourse and glides imperceptibly from the narrative into the exposition; when he leaves us in doubt as to whom he is

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44 Providing a synoptic reading of book one of the *Mathnawī*, Safavi and Weightman essentially argue that: ‘what is being read is connected through a network of correspondences with other parts of the work within an overarching unseen organization of significances, is to extend the present moment, to enhance consciousness and to open a dimension of transcendence, which is itself training to live spiritually in this world.’ Seyed Ghahreman Safavi & Simon Weightman, op. cit., p. 10.
45 According to Mojaddedi, these are concerns such as: ‘the key importance of the living representative of God for overcoming selfhood so as to complete the path, and the divinely-inspired communications that the mystic aspires to perceive in preference to intellectual knowledge.’ Jawid Mojaddedi, ‘The Ebb and Flow of “The Ocean inside a Jug”: The Structure of Book One of Rūmī’s *Masnavī*, *Journal of Sufi Studies*, vol. 3, 2014, p. 124.
46 ibid., p. 127.
addressing or what he is describing — the translator is driven to conjecture, and on occasion must leap in the dark.\(^{47}\)

Having noticed this peculiar tendency in Rūmī’s narrative method, several other researchers have observed the presence of “polyphonic discourse” in the *Mathnawi*.\(^{48}\) Polyphony, or the shifting of narrative voice can also be thought of in terms of its intended affect on the reader – another significant factor now gaining more fore in Rūmī studies as well as both Sufi and literary studies more broadly. For example, James W. Morris argues that the *Mathnawi’s* ‘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.’\(^{49}\) Whereas Ahmet Karamustafa has concentrated on Rūmī’s use of polyphony through its similarity to the Qur’ān’s use of *iltifāt* in *balāgha* (Arabic rhetoric), which refers to the rhetorical stylistic device of the transition of the person of the verbal subject and other grammatical elements.\(^{50}\) Karamustafa explores how the technique works to transition from the impersonal narrator to the personal commentator, preacher and petitioner, which he argues makes it highly interactive, like the Qur’ān.\(^{51}\)

Rūmī translator and scholar Alan Williams, who frequently writes on the multivalent nature of the *Mathnawi’s* narrative voices, points out that the *Mathnawi’s* linguistic changes also include types of vocabulary (even change of language between Persian and Arabic), a shift of tense of the verb, verbal modulation, (for example, from primarily indicative to imperative, subjunctive and imperative), and change from monologue to dialogue and other shifts.\(^{52}\) Williams, has identified what he believes to be seven distinct narrative voices and argues that the myriad of narrative voices can be viewed as “instruments of discourse” which together


\(^{48}\) The phrase is first used by Fatemeh Keshavarz in *Reading Mystical Lyric: The Case of Jalal Al-Din Rumi*, University of South Carolina Press, 2004.


\(^{52}\) Williams points out the variations of *iltifāt* that occur most frequently in the *Mathnawi* are change between first person, second and third person narrative, change from singular to plural and, change in the tense of verbs. Alan Williams, op. cit., p. 63.
form ‘a polyphonic narrative of poetic intensification that tends towards mystical ecstasy.’

Williams’ essay is also particularly significant because it, for the first time, attempts to address ‘the question not of why Rumi’s Mathnawi moves readers, but how.’ Thus, through his exploration of several passages throughout the Mathnawi, Williams concludes that the Mathnawi has a dynamic rather than a thematic structure ‘which, though based on the telling of stories, has a different purpose from narration, namely moments of illumination in ekstasis, in a hiatus shared between the poet and the reader.’ This shifting of the subject has been identified as Rūmī’s peculiar “meditative-narrative” style, where his interpretation and commentary take precedence over the narration that is interwoven with it. In her analysis of the Mathnawi’s narrative structure, Margaret Mills concludes that even more striking than the relative number of interpretation versus those of narrative, is the location of those interpretive passages, with their shifting voices, in the midst of a narrative string rather than at its end. She argues that this placement of commentary tends to explode the narrative and violate conventional expectations for sequencing (problem– complication–resolution–interpretation) in didactic storytelling.

Therefore, although the authorial ‘voice’ in the Mathnawi is dynamic and has numerous shades and pitches, it is perhaps best examined as a group: As such, this thesis argues that the plurality of voices we come across in the Mathnawi should be viewed not as different subjectivities but rather, as unique manifestations of the authorial voice. Although the author and the narrator have often been identified as separate entities that cannot be equated with one another, I am intentionally equating the authorial interjections with Rūmī the narrator, author and figure. For this, I may be charged with (in Mikhail Bakhtin’s words), ‘naïve biographism’. However, as Monika Fludernick has pointed out, ancient texts (such as the Mathnawi) adamantly persist in undermining the author/narrator distinction since the ‘the narrator insists on being one and the same person as the author.’

Therefore, what I prefer to call Rūmī’s authorial interjections are those sections of the Mathnawi that I deem to be

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53 ibid., p. 50.
54 ibid.
55 ibid., p. 53.
57 ibid., pp. 141-2.
distinct when contrasted with the speech and dialogue of the characters.\textsuperscript{60} I believe it is particularly in these moments that the realities of Rûmî the individual, the author, and the narrator simultaneously merge within a complex, atemporal narrative flux. In this sense, Rûmî’s narrative interjections are a feature of the Mathnawī that are particularly worthy of further exploration in terms of identifying how the dynamic narrative structure of the Mathnawī couples with its authors frequent interpolations; thus, mirroring the vicissitudes of progression upon the Sufi path.

There have also been some very interesting implications emerging in works by various scholars in terms of how the Mathnawī interacts with its readers. For example, Safavi and Weightman argue that Rûmî’s purpose in writing the Mathnawi was ‘to make it possible for its readers and hearers to transform, to change inwardly in the direction of reality, a task that he had conducted in person for many years as a spiritual director on the Sufi path’.\textsuperscript{61} Similarly, examining Rûmî’s narrative strategy through a tale from Book Six of the Mathnawī, Hamid suggests that the underlying purpose of this tale is to convince his readers about what they should do in order to advance on the Sufi path. In the same vein, exploring the significance of the Mathnawī’s prefaces, Carl W. Ernst hints at the function and purpose of the Mathnawī as a Sufi work, proposing that Rûmî uses the prefaces to the Mathnawī ‘to set up his primary goal as a teacher of Sufism: that is, he wants to clarify the way in which language functions as a way of bringing about the understanding of a reality much larger than any concept.’\textsuperscript{62} Thus, Ernst suggests that the Mathnawī’s prefaces serve to position the Mathnawī as a type of ‘overwhelming and limitless revelation with an ideal audience, who nevertheless must be given hints and guidance, since the full disclosure would destroy him (or the reader).’\textsuperscript{63}

Williams also offers a unique perspective on the Mathnawī’s effects on the reader, maintaining that the Mathnawī was itself aimed at inducing in the reader, through contemplating the text, reparation of the heart by means of what he calls “open heart surgery”.\textsuperscript{64} He suggests that through this metaphor, ‘I am venturing to suggest that, for the original, adept Sufi reader, the Mathnawī was a procedure as deliberate as the surgeon’s

\textsuperscript{60} Admittedly, this distinction can become almost indistinguishable throughout certain points in the Mathnawī.
\textsuperscript{61} Seyed Ghahreman Safavi & Simon Weightman, op. cit., p. 3.
\textsuperscript{63} ibid., p. 25.
operation on the heart.\(^6\) Thus, illustrating his thesis by numerous quotations from various books of the *Mathnawī*, Williams finally asks a profound question:

To put it succinctly, the question is: what is the reparation that is intended by Rūmī and what is it that he intends to be experienced by readers? This might be an evanescent, indeed impossible, question in consideration of an author in modern literary studies, but in the context of a deeply spiritualized and avowedly mystical writer, this question is always close to the surface of our examination of Rūmī.

The question, as well as Williams’ observation is significant because it also reflects the growing emphasis on reader-response theory and criticism that has gained increasing significance in the field of literary scholarship. Although research of a more experiment-based nature may offer exciting new insights in future, the present at thesis seeks to offer, through its qualitative analysis of Rūmī’s *Mathnawī*, some clues into not only how Rūmī attempts to engage with his readers, but also what this means in the broader context of his Sufi worldview. These observations become especially profound when considered in relation to how the *Mathnawī* functions to simulate the Sufi path and is an important point that will be taken up within this thesis. In summary, it can be said that the widespread attempt to read Sufi texts primarily for conceptual content—as models of mystical thought or philosophy—has inevitably served to obscure the work they do at an aesthetic level in shaping the religious ethos and forms of subjectivity.

### 1.2 Research Questions and Objectives

As outlined in the literature review, till recently, the focus in Rūmī studies has been on understanding specific aspects of his thought with much less attention on how these views are shaped and in turn, shape the form of the texts that have sought to convey them. What do we know about the specific intentions of the author of a text? What readership did the author have in mind? Can we identify a particular literary genre, or combination of genres, in the text? What are the communicative limitations and strengths of the literary form the author has chosen? In other words, what kind of information have scholars gleaned from these sources, and through what academic disciplines have scholars most often filtered the ancient sources?

Despite the explosion of interest in Sufism in recent decades, scholars have only recently begun to explore in any depth how mystical texts function as literature. Similarly, although

\(^6\) ibid., p. 112.
there has been a bourgeoning corpus of studies on Rūmī in terms of his mystical ideas, there has been till present, very little attention paid to the literary aspects of his works – especially the *Mathnawī* as his narrative *magnum opus*.\(^{66}\) This being the case, the present thesis seeks to explore Rūmī’s *Mathnawī* in an attempt to better understand its function in the broader context of the links between Sufism and literary production. If addressing why this thesis specifically focuses on the *Mathnawī* and not one of Rūmī’s other works, then one reason that can be provided is the obvious issue of scope: one is naturally limited by the sheer enormity of Rūmī’s poetic works; whether in relation to its volume or content. The second reason is more to do with what might be considered as the *Mathnawī*’s specific literary form in terms of its unique genre, style and function. The *Mathnawī* is also well suited to the literary study of Sufi literature because of its unique narrative composition, which invites literary analysis.\(^{67}\) The focus on the *Mathnawī* therefore, is not an inadvertent claim that Rūmī’s other works cannot be appreciated for literary merit but, rather, an explicit desire to explore how the *Mathnawī*’s literary form functions in terms of literary efficacy. Furthermore, what the present study seeks to offer is not an analysis of the *Mathnawī* in relation to the rather contentious tradition of literary criticism (though this will naturally occur to some degree) but also, an attempt to understand the *Mathnawī* on it’s own terms – as a literary example of a Sufi text. To be more specific, this thesis focuses on three primary areas of inquiry:

- Rūmī’s Sufism, with its emphasis on the notion of ‘*ishq* and how this is mediated by
- The *Mathnawī*’s literary form including considerations such as: genre, hermeneutics, author, the reader and function in order to better understand
- The dynamics between *form* and *content* within the broader notion of the Sufi text.

Although all three topics could be stand-alone areas of research, this thesis adopts an interdisciplinary approach to the study of Rūmī that seeks to demonstrate how his works persistently overlap in points of theological, philosophical as well as literary inquiry. Therefore, this thesis also raises an important set of interrelated question about what the Qur’ān is for Rūmī, who his intended audience is and what his authorial intentions were

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\(^{67}\) Like the *Divān-e Kabīr* (also known as the *Divān-e Šams-e Tabrīzī*; Rūmī’s collection of lyric poems that contains more than 40,000 verses), the *Mathnawī* is certainly poetic in nature: the entire prose-poem is composed in rhyming couplets; however, it is specifically Rūmī’s use of narrative (including narrative voice) that I find to be the most distinguishing aspect of the *Mathnawī* and it is particularly this aspect I shall focus on throughout this thesis.
in relation to the *Mathnawī*. Furthermore, through close textual analysis of a specific tale from the *Mathnawī*, this thesis also seeks to offer some clues into how Rûmî attempts to engage with his readers, specifically through his use of polyphony throughout the *Mathnawī* (hence called Rûmî’s authorial interjections), and what this means in the broader context of his Sufi worldview. Through its unique approach, this thesis argues that a sufficiently profound understanding of Rûmî’s work is not possible in isolation from consideration of its literary form. Therefore, this thesis should not simply be taken as a literary reading of a Sufi mystical text, but also an exploration into questions of mystical and literary efficacy. In other words, what kinds of strategies are employed in Sufi mystical writing to convey mystical content and ethos, to shape religious subjectivity in distinctive ways, or even to influence the cosmos through specialised acts of writing and reading (that is, producing and consuming literature)? Finally, how might consideration of these topics change the way we think about Sufism and literary studies more broadly?

1.3 Significance of Research

While the academic study of Sufism has a relatively long and productive history in both western and Islamic academic discourses, in recent years the mainstay philological, philosophical and literary approaches to the subject have begun to give way to a much wider array of approaches drawn from across the humanities and social sciences. As such, this thesis does not simply contribute to the niche field of Rûmî studies, but also offers new insights into the bourgeoning field of Sufi Literature as well as exploring how particular figures identified as Sufis understood and practised Islam. A study of this kind is valuable not only because it contributes to a deeper understanding of Sufism within the field of Islamic studies, but also because analysing Rûmî’s particular works through a explicitly literary scheme may help in developing more nuanced and relevant explorations into what may be identified as mystical or sacred literatures, as well as contributing to the broader field of world literature.

1.4 Methodology

When we approach a text like the *Mathnawī*, what we are essentially dealing with is prose-poetry. Therefore, analysing the literary aspects of the *Mathnawī* will mean combining close textual analysis with more general observations about the Islamic, and specifically the Sufi, ideological framework that underlies it. This necessarily requires a qualitative approach,
which will mean applying close textual analysis to the *Mathnawī* as the primary text for this study. However, as a work that inherently refuses any kind of systematisation, it is also important to point out that although useful to a certain point, an analytical or terminology-focused approach to the *Mathnawī* will be limiting. In other words, although identifying patterns in the *Mathnawī* may provide some interesting insights in a literary sense, a broad appreciation of Rûmî’s *Mathnawī* in the context of Sufi literature will necessarily require the researcher to think conceptually, not literally. As such, the approach of this thesis is twofold: first, to provide a close literary reading of select passages from the *Mathnawī* through generic, rhetorical and narrative constructs; and second, to delineate its broader theological and epistemological contexts. This will mean providing an exploration of how Rûmî’s views tie into broader literary themes such as genre, text, meaning, hermeneutics, authorship and the reader, as well as how these themes are understood in relation to Rûmî’s own mystical and theological tradition. In other words, this thesis simultaneously analyses Rûmî’s doctrine of Sufism in relation to his doctrine of literature in order to better understand how they both inform and are in turn, informed by one another. Furthermore, although this thesis will provide comparisons when deemed to be insightful or relevant, this thesis is not, on the whole, a comparative work of Rûmî’s *Mathnawī* that attempts to understand his idea of literature through modern conceptual frameworks that do not reflect his own Sufi vision.

It is also necessary to make some explanation in regards to the issue of working with translations of primary texts. There are now several modern academic translations of the *Mathnawī* that attempt to balance the desire to accurately translate Rûmî whilst maintaining his poetic beauty. In 2004, Jawid Mojaddedi’s rhymed translation (in iambic pentameters) of Book I of the *Mathnawī* was published followed by Book II in 2007. In 2006, Alan Williams translated book II of the *Mathnawī* in iambic pentameters and in 2011, Victoria Holbrook offered a unique translation of Book I directly from the Persian in imperfect rhyme. However, the oldest English translation of the entire *Mathnawī* was compiled by Professor Reynold Nicholson (1868-1945) who dedicated more than three decades of his life to a critical edition of an English translation and commentary that he published in eight volumes. 

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68 Jawid Mojaddedi, loc. cit.
69 Alan Williams, loc. cit.
70 Holbrook translates in imperfect rhyme (vowels and consonants, each line with eleven syllables, replicating the number of syllables in the Persian original) is embedded in a late Ottoman commentary on Book I that she has translated from Turkish – as such, it is the first extensive commentary in English since Nicholson’s commentaries were completed in 1940. Victoria Holbrook, *Listen: Commentary on the Spiritual Couplets of Mevîana Rumi by Kenan Rifai*, Fons Vitae, Kentucky, 2011.
volumes. Although I admire and greatly appreciate the work of modern translators, I firmly believe that Nicholson’s work, granted its natural shortcomings, maintains its status as the English translation par excellence. It is for this reason that the English translation of the Mathnawī that has been consulted for this thesis is the scholarly version by Reynold A. Nicholson, which has had a mostly positive reception among Rūmī scholars, and is still considered to be one of the most academically scrupulous. Most criticisms directed at Nicholson are minor and technical in nature such as his tendency to awkwardly interrupt the flow of the lines with explanations within parentheses. In this regard, he stated clearly his motives:

The present translation, in which the numeration of the verses corresponds with that of the text of my edition, is intended primarily as an aid to students of Persian; it is therefore as exact and faithful as I can make it, but it does not attempt to convey the inner as distinguished from the outer meaning: that is to say, it gives the literal sense of the words translated without explaining either their metaphorical or their mystical sense.

As in can be seen, Nicholson made a strict distinction between translation and interpretation and since accuracy had a strong claim on him as a scholar, a prose translation was naturally his choice for the Mathnawi, which also allowed him to preserve Rūmī’s modulation of style from colloquial to high. Working with the oldest manuscripts, Nicholson intended to produce an other version of the text in which interpolations were reduced to a minimum. The result, according to renowned scholar of Persian literature and Rūmī, Baṭāl al-Zaman Foruzanfar, was the most complete and reliable copy of the Mathnawī one could obtain. Although the Victorian style and vocabulary is sometimes remarked as having become archaic, this tends to be a somewhat redundant argument considering the nature of scholarly work. A more interesting critique is against Nicholson’s habit of rendering into Latin what he deemed to be ‘improper’ verses. Although this can often frustrate the reader without a Latin background, these passages are available in other translations. Therefore, Nicholson’s translation may be regarded as remaining most fitting for scholarly research be it through his intellectual honesty,

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71 There are now dozens of different editions of the Mathnawī in Persian, Turkish, Italian, French and English.
72 I will endeavour to gain a deeper understanding of key passages by crosschecking them with the original Persian and various Ottoman translations of the Mathnawī.
74 Mahdi Tourage examines the nature of these passages in great length remarking that the censored verses reveal more about Nicholson’s sensibilities than they do about Rumi’s ostensible crudeness. Tourage, op. cit., p. 7.
academic scrupulousness, or his perseverance as an author that has dedicated most of his life to transmitting this work. However, this research will also attempt to consolidate it’s analysis by working in close reference with original as well as several secondary texts collectively known as the Şerh-i Mesnevi, (The Mathnawi Commentaries), which were produced during various stages of the Ottoman and Turkish period. When deemed necessary, for example to expand upon the specific meaning of a term, translations of certain lines will be clarified further with its accompanying Persian.

Even though the predominant focus of this study will be Rûmî’s Mathnawi, it will also, when relevant, make references to Rûmî’s other major didactic work, the Fîhi Mâ Fîhi (The Discourses). Literally meaning “In it what is in it”, or “It is what it is”, the Fîhi Mâ Fîhi is a prose work consisting of 72 short discourses and will be the second primary text referenced throughout this thesis. It was compiled from the notes of his various disciples, so Rûmî did not author the work directly. Although not much is known about the publication time and the writer of the book, according to Foruzanfar (1900-1970), the editor of its most reliable copy, it is likely that it was written by Sultan Walad (Rûmî’s eldest son), and based on manuscripts and notes taken by himself or others from the lectures of his father. Many scholars believe the title is a reference to the Mathnawi (what is in the Mathnawi is in the Fîhi Mâ Fîhi) and therefore, is also considered to be an introduction to the Mathnawi especially since many Sufi concepts are described in simple terms.

1.5 Organisation of the Thesis

This thesis consists of two parts, which, together with the introduction and the conclusion, form ten chapters. The first part, which is comprised of four chapters, draws extensively from Rûmî’s works in an attempt to thoroughly explore the theoretical as well as the practical aspects of Rûmî’s Sufism. Although various scholars have done this in some depth, this thesis is contributing to this field by offering a thorough exploration of what its author believes to be the most salient aspects of Rûmî’s particular kind of Sufism in an effort to highlight the primary doctrinal principles that underlie what may be identified as his ideas.

75 The Iranian scholar, Badi‘ al-Zaman Foruzanfar (in some sources Badi’uzzaman/Badiozzaman Forouzanfar) (1900-1970), is considered to have been one of the greatest Rûmî scholars of the 20th century. In addition to his work on Rûmî’s Divān, Foruzanfar wrote his Ph.D. dissertation on Rûmî’s life (Risala dar ahval va zendegani-ye mowlana jalalu’d-din Muhammad), which was later published in 1936 (revised, 1954). He edited Rûmî’s Fîhi Mâ Fîhi (Discourses) as well as Rumi’s father’s spiritual notebook, Ma‘arif: majmu’ i mawa’iz wa sokhanan-e sultanu’l ‘ulama baha’ud din muhammad b. husayn khatibi balkhi mashur-e baha’i walad. He also wrote three volumes of commentary on the Mathnawi (Sharhh-e Masnavi-ye Sharif, 1967-69). Further material about Foruzanfar’s life can be found Lewis, op. cit., pp. 554-557.
about the literary. The second part of this thesis, also comprised of four chapters, will focus specifically on the literary dimensions of Rūmī’s Mathnawī, whilst seeking to understand how these views are shaped by his Sufi metaphysics. The first part of this thesis consists of a series of preliminary chapters that serve to provide the relevant intellectual framework that underlies much of the literary themes that will be later discussed in the second part of this thesis. In summary, the thesis is organised as follows:

**Chapter One: Introduction**

This chapter explains the research problem, outlines the aims of the research, the main research questions and the significance of the research, as well as providing a brief literary review of relevant research that has been produced in relation to Rūmī’s specific contributions in terms of the intersecting fields of Sufism and literature. The introduction also provides an explanation of the methodology that will be adopted throughout this thesis as well as specifying its scope and limitations.

**Part I: Rūmī’s Sufi Path of ‘Ishq (Chapters 2-5)**

This part consists of a series of necessary preliminary chapters in the hope to provide the relevant intellectual framework that underlies much of the literary themes that will be later discussed in Part II of this thesis (The Mathnawī as a Sufi Text). The present section is also an attempt to contextualise Rūmī’s Sufism in order to better appreciate how these ideas are manifested throughout a text (the Mathnawī) that was initially composed to not only inform, but to potentially transform those who sought to be initiated into the Sufi path. Therefore, the first section of this thesis (Part I), will offer a series of chapters that aim to provide a better understanding of Rūmī’s Sufism including its various gradations.

**Chapter Two: The Primacy of ‘Ishq in Rūmī’s Sufism**

In this chapter I have explored Rūmī’s specific kind of Sufism in relation to the broader tradition of love-based Sufism. Thus, this chapter begins by tracing the significance of the specific intellectual and spiritual tradition from which Rūmī comes, as well as highlighting the primacy of ‘ishq in his thought. Drawing from specific passages of Rūmī’s works, this chapter also provides a broad exploration of the notion of love and loverhood in the Islamic tradition. Finally, this chapter will examine specific aspects of Rūmī’s Sufi ontology of ‘ishq such as his views on wahdat al-wujūd (the Unity of Existence) and how this relates to more specific Sufi notions such as fanā’ (annihilation) and baqā’ (subsistence).
Chapter Three: The Metaphysical Self and Its Journey to the Beloved

This chapter focuses on Rūmī’s understanding of what he deems to be the various subtle spiritual realities underlying the Sufi notion of “self” including rūh, qalb, ‘aql and nafs. Furthermore, this chapter also considers how these various entities differ according to Rūmī as well as why Rūmī often depicts the self as a negative entity throughout the Mathnawī. Finally, this chapter will consider why Rūmī believes human beings struggle with the reality of the individual self in their quest to reach God.

Chapter Four: ‘Ishq, Knowledge and Experience

This chapter begins by considering why Rūmī deems true knowledge to be an experiential path, as well as its relation to ‘ishq. Next, it explores the limitations of the intellect in Rūmī’s Sufi thought and, finally, it considers one of the most distinguishing aspects of Rūmī’s Sufi vision of knowledge, the mystical intuitive knowledge that is bestowed on the Sufi elect.

Chapter Five: The Need for the Guide on the Path of ‘Ishq

This chapter begins by exploring Rūmī’s concept of walāyah (sainthood) in the context of spiritual authority and the polemic surrounding the Sufi mystic’s ability to receive “divine communication”. This chapter will also explore the role of the Sufi guide in regard to his role in assisting the spiritual aspirant’s spiritual transformation including significant factors such as companionship and obedience. Finally, this chapter will end with an exploration of Rūmī’s words of warning against falling victim to “false” guides who will potentially lead one astray from their spiritual goals.

Part II: The Mathnawī as a Sufi Text (Chapters 6-9)

The second part of this thesis, focuses on the concept of literature in the thought of a Sufi such as Rūmī. This means carefully analysing not only the literary structures inherent within his work (specifically the Mathnawī), but also identifying how the Mathnawī’s literary elements relate and are informed by Rūmī’s Sufi thought. Therefore, the second part of this thesis is dedicated to laying out the groundwork for a literary approach to Rūmī’s works by exploring questions relating to the literary form of Rūmī’s Mathnawī such as genre, function, its intertextuality with the Qur’ān, the complexities surrounding the Sufi notion of authorship, meaning and hermeneutics, as well as Rūmī’s specific notion of the “ideal reader” as a potential wayfarer on the Sufi path. Finally, this section will employ close-analysis to a
specific tale from the *Mathnawī* (The King and the Handmaiden) in order to examine the specific function of the *Mathnawī* – specifically in its use of narrative – in seeking to transform those wishing to travel the Sufi path of 'ishq.

**Chapter Six: Exploring the *Mathnawī* through Genre**

This chapter begins with an exploration of the *Mathnawī* as a unique example within the genre of Persian Sufi literature. Next, this chapter considers the *Mathnawī*’s significance within the genre of Qur’ānic literature, that is, literature that is inspired by, or cites, the Qur’ān as its source as well as how it can also be positioned in relation to the genre of *tafsīr* (Qur’ān commentary). Finally, this chapter considers Rūmī’s view of the *Mathnawī* as sacred literature that has been divinely inspired by God, and how this notion can be understood within the broader notion of scripture.

**Chapter Seven: The *Mathnawī* and Rūmī’s Hermeneutics of ‘Ishq**

This chapter begins by exploring the Sufi origins of Rūmī’s hermeneutics and proceeds by examining what Rūmī considers to be the hermeneutic authority of the Sufi elect. Next, this chapter considers Rūmī’s understanding of meaning in the *Mathnawī*, particularly through his distinction between Form (*ṣūrah*) and Meaning (*ma’nā*) and finally, it will explore Rūmī’s notion of the reader in relation to the *Mathnawī*.

**Chapter Eight: Rūmī’s Sufi Path of Narrative**

The focus of this chapter is on Rūmī’s unique narratory role throughout the *Mathnawī* as the “author-guide” who attempts to reconfigure both the reader’s self-perception as well as their reading and interpretive practices. Thus, this chapter will begin by providing an exploration of Rūmī’s understanding of the literary notion of “the author”, and how this vision of authorship is informed by his Sufi views. Next, taking the tale of *The King and The Handmaiden* as the basis for a broader discussion, this section will employ close textual analysis to explore Rūmī’s use of narrative (specifically allegorical), to communicate and awaken the reader to his/her own complex spiritual psychology.

**Chapter Nine: The Function of the *Mathnawī* as a Sufi Text of ‘Ishq**

The purpose of this chapter is to explore some of the *Mathnawī*’s multifaceted functions as well as pointing out the instrumentality that is intrinsic to the Sufi literary tradition as a whole. Therefore, beginning with Rūmī’s general theory of literature, this chapter continues by
exploring more specific functions of the *Mathnawī* such as its role as a guide for spiritual aspirants traveling the Sufi path, a means of assisting individuals to interiorise the Qur’ān, a concealer and revealer of esoteric secrets, the literary representation of Rūmī’s mystical experiences, as well as a being a channel through which they could pour through.

**Chapter Ten: Summary and Conclusions**

This is a concluding chapter that briefly summarises the key findings of this thesis as well as analysing the significance of the relationship between Rūmī’s Sufism and his notion of the literary as expressed throughout the *Mathnawī*. This chapter will also make concluding remarks on the interdisciplinary significance of Rūmī’s works, as well as interesting prospects for future research.

**1.6 Scope and Limitations**

Reading the *Mathnawī* can be difficult for those unfamiliar with Rūmī’s tradition because it is comparable to reading Milton without ever having read the Bible. Furthermore, regardless of their language of transmission, Sufi texts, like other mystical texts, characteristically resist translation – this is, in essence, what makes them mystical – the meanings they convey are embedded not in words but experiences, and Rūmī is no exception. On top of this, there is the added barrier of working in translation, especially when dealing with a work as versatile as the *Mathnawī*, which often transitions from Persian to Arabic. However, despite such limitations, the immense body of scholarship, translation and commentary produced on Rūmī’s works in numerous languages, including the *Mathnawī*, allows a serious researcher to sufficiently overcome potentially debilitating language barriers. Furthermore, since this thesis is primarily interested in the thematic concepts that underlie broader questions of literary inquiry, nuances in language and translation can be overlooked to a reasonable degree.
PART I: Rūmī’s Sufi Path of ‘Ishq

The Law is knowledge, the Path action, the Truth attainment unto God.¹

In a concise yet profound passage in the Mathnawī, it is remarked that: ‘(Some one asked), “What is Sūfism?” He (the Shaykh) said, “To feel joy in the heart at the coming of sorrow.”’² Although seemingly odd, the saying encapsulates the belief that there is no purposeless pain, only painful purpose. In this sense, the passage also epitomises the Sufi approach to viewing all things as originating from God, and to this degree, even the sufferings inherent to the human condition become a means through which they could potentially Divine. Therefore, it is often the case that the descriptive approach to defining Sufism often contrasts sharply with the use of the term in Sufi texts themselves. For example, William Chittick has pointed out, ‘there is something in the Sufi tradition that abhors domestication and definition.’³ If we are to turn to the primary texts, for example al-Qushayrī’s epistle on Sufism, which is often considered to be one of the most authoritative, we find an archival approach to defining Sufism that consistently focuses on the means to ethical and spiritual perfection.⁴ Often, Sufis stress inwardness over outwardness, contemplation over action, spiritual development over legalism, and cultivation of the soul over social interaction. On a theological level, Sufis speak of God’s mercy, gentleness, and beauty far more than they discuss His wrath, severity, and majesty. In its most institutionalised forms, the Sufi path is known as the ṭarīqah, or it’s plural ṭuruq which fittingly utilises the metaphor of the “pathway” and should therefore be understood in connection with the term sharī’ah, which also has the meaning of “path”, or more specifically, a “well-trodden path” or “path to the waterhole.”⁵ These ideas are similarly evoked within the metaphor of the

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¹ Rūmī, Mathnawī, V: Arabic preface.
² Rūmī, Mathnawī, III: 3261.
⁴ As Ernst has pointed out, the term Sufi is already problematic in Islamic Civilisation and there is no real agreement in Islamic texts either: the definitions range from suf (wool, garment of ascetic denial) safa (purity), safwa (the elite) and Ahl al-suffa, “the people of the bench”. It is also worth considering the linguistic properties of the Arabic term tasawwuf “becoming a Sufi”, which is a verbal noun from the particular grammatical structure (fifth form verb) used in Arabic for assimilating or taking on an ethnic identity. Carl W. Ernst, The Shambhala Guide to Sufism, Shambhala Publications, Colorado, 1997, p. 21.
pathway suggested within the term ṭarīqah; a further path, taken by the mystic, which continues from the “well-trodden path” or exoteric dimensions of the shariʿah towards the esoteric aspects of the religion that underscore Reality.6

Another way of understanding Sufism might be through its point of emphasis; what renders it unique from the other approaches to Islamic religious life. Essentially, intellectually orientated approaches to Islamic faith frequently affirm the necessity of ‘ilm, which can be translated as “knowledge”, “science”, or “learning”, and insist that the primary means of gaining knowledge is through the ‘aql: an Arabic term used in Islamic theology and philosophy for the “intellect” – the rational faculty of the soul or mind. Through such approaches, a spirituality tied in with the expansion of religious knowledge has been the primary focus of the legalistic and philosophical traditions within Islam, and this is precisely the point of divergence between what has, over time, come to be known as the “Sufi path”. Through its various gradations, Sufism is essentially a path on which the first and possibly even the last point of reference is always the self. In fact, the Turkish Sufi poet, Yunus Emre aptly summarises this idea from a line in one of his poems when he exclaims, ‘İlim ilim bilmektir ilim kendin bilmektir / Sen kendini bilmezsen ya nice okumaktır’ (Knowledge is to understand, to know yourself / If you do not know yourself what is the use of learning?).7 This inevitably leads one to recognise a distinctive preoccupation among Sufis with the internal happenings of the human subject: its qualities, weaknesses and its intrinsic desire to love and be loved.

6 As the comprehensive study by Franklin Lewis has revealed, Sufi communities and orders flourished in the reign of the Seljuk Empire in which Rūmī lived and was also something Rūmī’s own father had engaged in. Franklin Lewis, Rumi, Past and Present, East and West: The Life, Teachings and Poetry of Jalāl al-Din Rumi, OneWorld Publications, London, 2000. Furthermore, the institutionalisation of the Mevlevi order was something that only occurred after Rūmī’s death, and it is perhaps in this sense that Safavi &Weightman argue Rūmī was a ‘Sufi in the general sense not the institutional sense.’ Seyed Ghahreman Safavi & Simon Weightman, Rūmī’s Mystical Design: Reading the Mathnawī, Book One, State University of New York Press, New York, 2009, p. 11.

7 Yunus Emre (1240-1231) was one of the first and most influential Turkish poets and Sufi philosophers. Whereas Rūmī’s life is fairly well documented, little is known about the latter. It is clear, however, that the two men came from very different backgrounds: Rūmī received a formal education and taught in the madrasa in Konya, whereas Yunus was a shepherd who lived a very humble existence. As a contemporary of Rūmī, it is believed the two had met at one point and a folkloric tale relates that on this encounter, Yunus was asked what he thought of the Mathnawī. He replied: ‘It’s a little long. I would have written it differently. When Rūmī asked, ‘Oh, how so?’ Yunus replies that he would have simply written: ‘I came from eternity, clothed myself with skin and bones and called myself “Yunus”.’ John Baldock, The Essence of Sufism, Arcturus Publishing, London, 2005, p. 95.
It should also be stated that the literary concerns of this thesis are its author’s attempt to better understand how literature is understood and utilised by specific Sufi authors. Needless to say, it would be difficult to claim to have understood much of the Mathnawi without any understanding of its Islamic and Sufi underpinnings. Thus, focusing on the main factors that have been identified as important themes in Rumi’s thought, the following section of this thesis examines the central ideas that underlie Rumi’s Sufi path of ‘ishq including: his specific kind of Sufism which argues for the primacy of ‘ishq, his understanding and depiction of the human self and its weaknesses, his view of the intellect and the experiential nature of knowledge and finally, why Rumi insists on the need for a spiritual guide on the Sufi path of ‘ishq.
Chapter Two:
The Primacy of ‘Ishq in Rūmī’s Sufism

Love is the root of all obedience; all else is mere adornment.⁸

Considering the scarcity of academic discussion on what ‘ishq is in the context of Sufism and specifically, in the works of Rūmī, it is important to delve further into this topic considering that it is arguably the very nexus of Rūmī’s Sufism as well as his understanding of Islam.⁹ In fact, Safavi and Weightman have gone so far as to suggest that ‘Love is the crux of the Mathnawi, as it is of the spiritual path, and the Mathnawi, in every sense, hinges on love.’¹⁰ Therefore, if we were defining the fundamental approach that characterises Sufis like Rūmī, we would need to consider them in relation to the madhhab-i ‘ishq (School of love) that characterises much of their thought, works and life. As such, this chapter will begin by tracing the significance of the specific intellectual and spiritual tradition from which Rūmī comes, as well as highlighting the primacy of ‘ishq in his thought. Next, this chapter will provide a broad exploration of the notion of love and loverhood in Rūmī’s specific Sufi tradition. Finally, this chapter will examine specific aspects of Rūmī’s Sufi ontology of ‘ishq such as his views on reunion with the Beloved and how this relates to more specific Sufi notions such as fanā’ (annihilation) and baqā’ (subsistence).

2.1 Rūmī and the Madhhab-i ‘ishq

If we were defining the essence, or fundamental approach that characterises Sufis like Rūmī, we would need to consider them in relation to the madhhab-i ‘ishq (School of love) that characterises much of their thought, works and life. As such, from about the thirteenth century onward, few themes played as important a role in Sufi teachings as

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⁹ For example, William Chittick contends that love and the call to it is Rumi’s ‘core message’ and claims that ‘[i]t can easily be shown that Love (‘ishq) is the central theme of all Rumi’s works.’ William C. Chittick, ‘The Sword of Love and the Fire of Love’, Mawlana Rumi Review, vol. 3, 2012, p. 10. Similarly, Şefik Can contends there is ‘no doubt’ that Rūmī ‘emphasizes the concept of love over all else.’ Şefik Can, Fundamentals of Rumi’s Thought: A Mevlevi Sufi Perspective, Tughra, New Jersey, 2005, p. 149. Whereas Annemarie Schimmel takes her argument a level beyond claiming that love is not only the focus but also the source of Rūmī’s poetic work. Annemarie Schimmel, The Triumphant Sun: A Study of the Works of Jalaloddin Rūmī, State University of New York Press, New York, 1993, p. 43.
¹⁰ Safavi & Weightman, op. cit., p. 9.
love, in fact, it would be no exaggeration to claim that the tradition to which Rūmī belonged, considered the foundation of the created world to be Love and in this sense, attaining reunion to the Beloved is both the goal and purpose of existence. Love is a rather broad and perhaps culturally distant term from the specific terminology used by Sufis like Rūmī; therefore, considering the implications of the term ‘ishq is an interesting concept to begin attempting to understand the nature of Rūmī’s love-based Sufism. The term ‘ishq might be understood as an ardent, passionate or a burning type of love that is intrinsically tied in with an insatiable sense of yearning. The term is not Qur’ānic and Rūmī himself was likely aware of the tendency prevalent among the fuqaha (Islamic jurists) to differentiate ‘ishq from terms such as mahabbah (spiritual love) because they deemed it to be a term with negative connotations signifying excess, sickness and defect.\(^{11}\) Al-Qushayrī (d. 1072), who wrote the renowned epistle on Sufism, is a good representative of those who use both terms, while preferring mahabbah. He explains:

Loving desire (‘ishq) means to transgress the limit (mujawazat al-hadd), and God – praise be to Him – cannot be described as a transgressor of the limit, so loving desire cannot be attributed to Him. Were the loves of the entire created world brought together in one and the same person, he would still be unable to love God – praise be to Him – as He deserves. Therefore one cannot say that someone has transgressed the limit in his love of God. So, God Himself is not described as possessing loving desire (ya’shaq), nor should the servant describe Him as such. Thus, loving passion is [totally] negated: neither the servant nor God – praise be to Him – uses it to describe the other.\(^{12}\)

In this respect, the term ‘ishq implies ‘an intense passion, expressive of a strong tension that is often absent from the term mahabbat.’\(^{13}\) However, regardless of etymological tensions, it can be said that discussions of love in early Sufism flowered into a full metaphysics of love by the 12\(^{th}\) century. This approach to Islamic spirituality is usually traced to Rābi’ā al-ʻAdawiyya al-Qaysiyya (714/717/718 —


\(^{12}\) ibid., pp. 328-9.

801), who is usually identified as the first figure in early Sufism that shifted the focus in spiritual practice from being embedded in fear of God to the love of God. Rūmī’s predecessor, Farīd al-Dīn ‘Attār, a later Sufi figure and poet, used earlier sources in his compilation narrate much of her early life. One of the most renowned anecdotes related about her explains how one day, she was seen running through the streets of Basra carrying a pot of fire in one hand and a bucket of water in the other. When asked what she was doing, she said, “I want to put out the fires of Hell, and burn down the rewards of Paradise. They block the way to Allah. I do not want to worship from fear of punishment or for the promise of reward, but simply for the love of Allah.” The anecdote epitomises her approach to faith as well as why Rābi’a is considered to be one of the first to have set forth the doctrine of Divine love. In this sense, it can be said that madhhab-i ‘ishq Sufis recognise and emphasise that before anything else, the relationship between God and the human being is based on the human desire and seeking of love that is engaged not in a top-down but a reciprocal, loving relationship first and foremost.

Therefore, the sense in which Rūmī uses the word ‘ishq in the Mathnawī may be considered as being part of the Khurāsānī Sufī tradition of “love mysticism” that can be traced at least as far back as Bāyazīd Bistāmī (d. 260/874) and is continued by figures such as Abū’l-Ḥasan Kharaqānī (d. 425/1034) and Abū Saʿīd ibn Abī’l-Khayr (d. 440/1049), through Ahmad Ghazālī (d. 520/1126) and to Rūmī’s own immediate predecessors Abū’l-Majd Majdūd Sanā’ī (d. 525/1130-1) and Farīd al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār (d.c. 618/1221). It is from this period of literary activity that Rūmī inherited an active tradition of mystical and nonmystical didactic discourse and interpretation. The underlying premise distinguishing these Sufis from other Sufis as well as other groups throughout Islamic history was their insistence that only love could deliver humanity

17 For example, a detailed article by Joseph E. B. Lumbard examines the precise manner in which the teachings on love from the early Sufi tradition (spanning the 2nd to 5th Islamic centuries) influenced later developments. He argues that early Sufi theories on love ‘emphasize a human love for God which is absolute, not a love which is the Absolute Itself—and this is the crux of the matter.’ Joseph E. B. Lumbard, ‘From Ḥubb to Ishq: The Development of Love in Early Sufism’, Oxford Journal of Islamic Studies, vol. 18, no. 3, 2007, p. 348.
to the Divine. By the early 12th century, love came to be discussed as the Divine Essence beyond all duality, which coincides with the beginning of what some scholars have called the *madhhab-i 'ishq* (The Path/School/Creed of Love). However, as Lumbard has suggested, this ‘school’ was not a direct succession of Sufi initiates that was marked by a definitive spiritual genealogy like the Sufi orders but rather, ‘a trend within Sufi thought in which all aspects of creation and spiritual aspiration are presented in an imaginal language fired by love.’

It is therefore unsurprising that the next century produced a figure like Rūmī whose works were both nourished by, and reflected this theological centrality. In his description of the distinct path of loverhood, Rūmī proclaims that ‘[t]he religion of Love is apart from all religions: for lovers, the (only) religion and creed is—God.’

The specific term Rūmī uses in this line are respectively, *millat-i ‘ishq, dīn, millat* and *madhhab*. The first term, *millat-i ‘ishq* (nation/community of love) can be viewed as the loosely affiliated spiritual community who have love at their core in their search for the Divine. The second term, *dīn*, has multiple language usages and has several implications even within the Islamic context.

The Islamic scholar, Fazlur Rahman suggested that *dīn* is best considered as ‘the way-to-be-followed’. In this interpretation, *dīn* is the exact correlate of *sharī’ah* ‘whereas *Shari’a* is the ordaining of the Way and its proper subject is God, *Dīn* is the following of that Way, and its subject is man.’ Thus, ‘if we abstract from the Divine and the human points of reference, *Shari’a* and *Dīn* would be identical as far as the ‘Way’ and its content are concerned.’ This is significant in how the passage may then be understood especially when considered in

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18 ibid., p. 346.
19 As Annabel Keeler has pointed out, this distinctly “Persian Sufism” that flourished by the 12th century had culminated in ‘Ahmad Ghazâlî’s (d. 520/1126) renowned treatise in Persian, the *Sawāneh*, in which the entire mystical journey is described as a journey of love; the poet Sanâ’î was composing *ghazals* about mystical love; and Maybûdî was able to write a commentary on the Qur’an which included references to Laylî and Majnûn, and to Sultan Mahmûd’s love for Ayâz, and which defined the Qur’an itself as ‘an epistle whose title is eternal love (*mihr-i qadim*), and whose content is the story of love and lovers’’. Annabel Keeler, *Sufi Hermeneutics: The Qur’ān Commentary of Rashîd Al-Dîn Maybûdî*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006, p. 110.
20 Rūmî, *Mathnawî*, II: 1770. Sometimes, such lines have become misleading and understood as proof of Rūmî’s heterodoxy but, as Kabir Helminski has also explained, Rūmî ‘did not wish to start a new religion but to reveal the essence of all religion, which is submission to God in love.’ Kabir Helminski, *The Knowing Heart: A Sufi Path of Transformation*, Shambhala Publications, Boston & London, 2000, p. 56.
21 Some scholars of the Qur’ān have translated *dīn* in places as “faith”, “sovereignty”, as well as “submission”, whereas in its opening *sūrah, al-Fātihah* (The Opening), it is used to signify “judgement”.
23 ibid.
24 ibid.
relation to the Sufi idea that certain individuals are given access to the esoteric
dimension of the *Sharīʿah* and for this reason, what may seem in contradiction or
conflict to the exoteric *Sharīʿah* may not necessarily hold true for all individuals due
to their access to the inner knowledge/reality of certain acts. As such, it is important
that such as passages are not oversimplified as espousing some kind of obscure deism
or a kind of Perennialist philosophy – Rūmī’s Sufism is complex, and very much
rooted in the Islamic tradition and upholds many of its essential truth claims; however,
what such passages do unquestionably serve in highlighting are the singularity of
those whose spiritual orientation (in Rūmī’s case Islamic), are guided by an
unquenchable and constant yearning for the Creator-Beloved that is also reflected in
one’s overall approach to all of life and all of creation.

Similarly, the term, *madhhab*, is commonly used to refer to the various Islamic
theological and legal schools; however, Rūmī’s use of the term in this passage as
well as more broadly often refers to its broad sense as a particular “school”, “sect”,
“creed”, or “religion”. Rūmī seems to be suggesting that the nation or, community of
lovers is separate, distinct and categorically different from the external or exoteric
form of religion (specifically the Islamic faith), because for the lovers (*ashīqān*) their
*madḥhab* (creed) and their *millāt* (community) is God alone. It should be clarified at
this point, that such declarations are not necessarily an attempt by Sufis (likes Rūmī)
to abrogate the established theological and legal schools, or an attempt to dismiss
their relevance so much as making a statement about the singularity of the *madḥhab-i
‘ishq*. For example, Rūmī proclaims in one passage: “[m]y bonds are more grievous
than thy advice: thy doctor (who taught thee) was not acquainted with love. / In that
quarter where love was increasing (my) pain, Bū Ḥanīfa and Shāfiʿi gave no
instruction.” The references to Abū Ḥanīfah (699 – 767 CE) and Shāfiʿi (767 — 820

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25 The precedent for this notion is set forth in the 18th *ṣūrah* of the Qurʿān (*Ṣūrat al-Kahf*/The Cave) in the exchange between the Prophet Moses and Kḥḍr, where the latter performs a series of actions that Moses perceives as being in conflict with the exoteric demands of the *Sharīʿah* but are later revealed as having been performed on the direct command of God due to the esoteric knowledge that was revealed to Kḥḍr.

26 Such as the Ḥanafī, Shāfiʿi, Mālikī and Ḥanbalī madhḥāhib named eponymously with the various founders of Sunni schools of jurisprudence.

27 In fact, many Sufis including Rūmī were themselves important members of juristic schools. For example, Rūmī was known to be a Sunni Muslim from the Ḥanafī school; however, it is important to point out that the intellectual and religious communities at the time were highly influenced by Sufi ideas including Rūmī’s own father. Lewis, op. cit. p. 90.

CE), two of the four great legal jurists comprising the Sunni school of Islamic jurisprudence, are referenced symbolically not to undermine their scholarship or person, but rather to emphasise that the cure for the pangs of love does not lie within the scope of legalistic Islam, nor can the spiritual realm, which love occupies, be penetrated or understood by those who have not experienced it. In this sense, Rūmī’s statements about the singularity of the madhhab-i ʿishq often serve as an indication of the preference for the esoteric, personal and internal dimensions of Islam over its exoteric, public and external aspects. Therefore, rather than identifying the path with a distinguished theologian or jurist, many Sufis including Rūmī, identified the path with love, and even more directly, with God. Rūmī’s affiliation with the madhhab-i ʿishq, therefore, can be understood as a personal commitment to a distinct pathway within the broader tradition of Islam that emphasises the reciprocal, loving relationship between the Creator and creation, comprised of a loosely affiliated spiritual community joined in their insatiable love and yearning for their Beloved.

2.2 The Human Being as Lover

There is a consensus that love is the principle concern in Rūmī’s works, but any understanding of what love is or what it means to Rūmī necessarily requires that one is familiar with the spiritual and theological framework that was not only the source of Rūmī’s works, but also the path which guided his life. In Islam, human beings are perceived as being the end result of the creational process, and there are two specific theological events that mark the origin of love: the Covenant and the Trust. This is the Qur’ānic tale of the primordial covenant that was extracted from the souls of mankind after the Trust (al-amānah) to be God’s vicegerent on Earth was established. These distinct, yet intimately connected cosmic events need to be considered closely in relation to Rūmī’s notion of ʿishq. As Şefik Can explains, ‘[b]efore the physical existence of man, our souls were united, they were contained in God’s knowledge. In this level all the souls were united and the same.’ As such, there is an understanding in Islam that human beings existed in a state of spiritual matter or soul, prior to being placed within a physical body. Thus, Islam like other monotheistic religions, and particularly through its Sufi interpretations, aspires to lead the individual to recognise

29 Qurʾān, 7: 172.
30 Can, loc. cit.
their primordial spirit-state prior to being immersed in material form. In this sense, the Qur’ān’s reference to the “Trust” is understood to be the cosmological event that underlies the human being’s ontological, as well as spiritual quest.\footnote{The 12th century Sufi thinker, Rashīd al-Dīn Maybudī, who was a contemporary of Imam Ghazālī, narrates in the Kashf al-āsrār wa ʿuddat al-ābrār (The Unveiling of the Mysteries and the Provision of the Pious) that the Trust was in reality, a seal of love: “O poor man! A seal was put on you, from the top of your head to your feet. That was the seal [muhr] of love [mihr]. A seal was put on the place of love. O Riḍwān, paradise is yours! O Mālik, hell is yours! O cherubim, the Throne is yours! O burnt heart upon which is the seal of love, you are Mine, and I am yours.” Rashīd al-Dīn Maybudī, Kashf al-Āsrār – Unveiling of the Mysteries, Great Commentaries on the Holy Qur’ān, Abridged Version translated by William C. Chittick, Fons Vitae, Kentucky, 2014, pp. 611-2.} It is this free choosing of God that the Qur’ān identifies as the “Trust”: that which God offered to the heavens, the earth, and the mountains, but all refused.\footnote{Qur’ān, 33: 72. In this sense, the element of choice (limited as it may be) is implicated in the transaction of the Trust, which also substantiates the human being’s choice to love God for His own sake.} Thus, the human being is depicted as a creature that was both bold and brazen, since the Trust was a heavy burden from which all other forms fled. The Trust also signified the human being’s recognition of their primordial purpose of creation: to love God and by loving Him, becoming the vestibule for manifesting God’s love for Himself. To this degree, in the Islamic standpoint, love can be viewed as the essence that both precedes and underlies the human being’s existence.\footnote{This idea is encapsulated in the renowned (albeit arguably inauthentic) ḥadīth qudrī that speaks of God as a “Hidden Treasure” and is a favourite especially among Sufis: ‘I was a treasure that was not known, so I loved to be known. Hence I created the creatures and I made Myself known to them, and thus they came to know Me.’}

As such, Rūmī complains that human beings continually sell themselves short oblivious to their own worth: ‘[y]ou say, “Look at all the work I do accomplish, even if I do not perform that task.” You weren’t created for those other tasks!’\footnote{ibid.} Rūmī argues that since the human being is at the center of a powerful creation, they have a responsibility to honour the divine within them by drawing it to the forefront of their existence, since not acknowledging this capacity means it can go to waste. Therefore, in much of his work, Rūmī bemoans the plight of those who have forgotten their primordial spiritual quest. For example, in the Fīhī mā fīhī, Rūmī critiques those who ‘fawn and grovel and sacrifice all their wealth, seeking somehow to win the one they want with every effort’\footnote{Rūmī, Fīhī mā fīhī, p. 27.} yet, are unwilling to forgo even the slightest of inconveniences out of love for God. Rūmī is not so much disparaging the passion and
determination with which people pursue worldly love as he is insisting that the same intensity, if not more, is also required on the path that leads to loving God – the ultimate Beloved. Thus, in describing the attributes of one who is in love, Rūmī explains that ‘[l]overs have heartaches no cure can mend, neither sleeping, traveling, nor eating—only the sight of the beloved.’ Therefore, Rūmī insists that one cannot be nonchalant in their desire for God, but rather ‘must be moved with passion and yearning’ and so he advises individuals to ‘[a]cquire this appetite’, so they will not just see the creation, ‘but will find the Beloved everywhere’.

### 2.3 ‘Ishq in Rūmī’s Thought

It has become an accepted spiritual idea that each part of the universe in some way reflects the whole. Contemporary spirituality has borrowed this holographic model from contemporary science; however, this notion has always existed within Sufiism and is expressed, for instance, in the idea that the human being is not merely a drop that can merge with the Ocean, but a drop that contains the entire Ocean. Thus, Rūmī has quite profoundly stated: ‘Thou art the sea of knowledge hidden in a dewdrop; thou art the universe hidden in a body three ells long.’ The image is a reversal from the usual phrasing of this imagery in which people are reminded of their insignificance. When Rūmī claims human beings are all like drops that contain the entire ocean within them, he is insisting that, in terms of their spiritual potential, human beings have everything they need contained within them. He carries this imagery further proclaiming that: ‘Whom indeed should fortune like this befall? A Sea has become the suitor for a drop.’ Here, Rūmī alludes to the human being’s purpose in creation as God’s chosen beloved. Therefore, in light of his Sufi tradition, Rūmī insists that the Reality we are seeking is also seeking us: ‘[i]f they that are thirsty seek water from the world, (yet) water too seeks in the world them that are thirsty. / Inasmuch as He is (thy) lover, do thou be silent: as He is pulling thine ear, be

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36 ibid., p. 403.
37 ibid., p. 129.
38 ibid., p. 130.
39 Rūmī, Mathnawī, V: 3579.
40 ibid., IV: 2621.
thou (all) ear.’ In this sense, Rūmī implies that the love the human has for God is ‘a special favour’ which necessarily implies God’s love for them.

Rūmī also considers love to be the animating force that sustains the entire universe: ‘Know that the wheeling heavens are turned by waves of Love: were it not for Love, the world would be frozen (inanimate).’ In fact, he argues that the very food we eat only becomes nourishment out of love for us: ‘[h]ow would an inorganic thing disappear (by change) into a plant? How would vegetative things sacrifice themselves to become (endowed with) spirit? Even the mundane processes of ecological consumption are depicted as springing from the love-desire that underscores all types of innocuous needs:

If there had not been Love, how should there have been existence? How should bread have attached itself to you and become (assimilated to) you? / The bread became you: through what? Through (your) love and appetite; otherwise, how should the bread have had any access to the (vital) spirit? / Love makes the dead bread into spirit: it makes the spirit that was perishable everlasting.

Rūmī suggests that all that corporeally perishes in the material realm ascends in the spiritual realm out of love. Interestingly, Rūmī also attempts to explain the reality of love through the notion of economic consumption as understood through the principle of supply and demand: ‘corn is at the price of gold one year, another year it is at the price of dust. The form of the corn is the same—therefore its value comes from love.’ In this sense, Rūmī describes love as the primal force from which everything else emerges: ‘[a]ll forms spring from love, as branches spring forth from their root.’

On this point, Nasr points out that in modern thought (often dominated by a quantitative science), the significance of form, as that which contains the reality of an object, has been nearly lost. The understanding of “form” for Rūmī it is essential to

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41 ibid., I: 1740-2.
42 Rūmī elaborates on the special rank of lovers in the *Fihi mā fihi*: ‘The Prophet says that Abu Bakr was superior to the other Companions, not due to his prayer and fasting, but because that special favor—the love of God—was with him. On the resurrection day, a person’s prayers will be placed in the balance along with their fasting and generosity, but once love is brought forth it cannot be contained by any balance. Therefore, love is the root.’ Rūmī, *Fihi mā fihi*, p. 387.
43 ibid., V: 2012-4.
45 ibid.
47 ibid.
grasp fully the significance of the meaning of form as used in the traditional context (as *forma*, *morphē*, *nāma*, *ṣūrah*, etc.).\textsuperscript{48} As such, Nasr explains that,

From the point of view of hylomorphism, form is the reality of an object on the material level of existence. But it is also, as the reflection of an archetypal reality, the gate, which opens inwardly and “upwardly” unto the formless Essence. From another point of view, one can say that each object possesses a form and a content, which this form “contains” and conveys.\textsuperscript{49}

In the *Fihi mā fihi*, Rūmī remarks that someone claimed ‘[l]ove too cannot be expressed or experienced without form. Hence it is the branch of form.’\textsuperscript{50} The statement implies that love is also a contingent reality, whereas Rūmī responds by explaining this is not the case: ‘[w]hy cannot Love be a form without form? On the contrary, Love is the sculptor of form. A hundred thousand forms are raised up on Love’s pottery wheel. Although a painter cannot exist without paintings, still painting is the branch and the painter is the root. As the finger moves, so moves the ring.’\textsuperscript{51} To this degree, Rūmī argues God cannot be considered a “form” because He is not contingent on anything whereas all are contingent upon Him and in the same way, as an attribute of God, love and *'ishq* are also form-giving. To this degree, Rūmī considers love to be an attribute of God and only accidental or derivative in relation to human beings:

Love is an attribute of God, but fear is an attribute of the servant (of God) who is afflicted by lust and gluttony. / Since you have read in the Qur'ān (the words) “they love Him ” joined in a certain place with (the words) “He loves them,” / Know, then, that love (mahabbat), and excessive love (‘ishq) too, is an attribute of God: fear is not an attribute of God, O honoured sir. / What relation exists between the attributes of God and those of a handful of earth? What relation exists between the attributes of him who is originated in time and those of the Holy (Eternal) One? / If I should continue to describe Love, a hundred Resurrections would pass, and it (my description would still be) incomplete; /

\textsuperscript{49} ibid.,
\textsuperscript{50} Rūmī, *Fihi mā fihi*, p. 251.
\textsuperscript{51} ibid.
For there is a limit to the date of the Resurrection, but what limit can there be where the Divine attributes are (concerned)?

In the preface to the second book of the *Mathnawī*, Rūmī proclaims that God is the only true Lover: ‘it has been said to be in reality the attribute of God and unreal in relation to (man who is) His slave. He (God) loveth them (*yuhibbuhum*) is the entire sum. Which (of them) is (really the subject of the word *yuhibbīnahu*) they love Him?’

Rūmī’s allusion to the Qur’ānic verse describing ‘people He loves and who love Him’; is a favorite among Sufis. Along with frequently being cited as a basis for the existence of a loving relationship between God and human beings, when the maxim is considered within the context of *tawhīd*, the usual conclusion drawn by much of Islamic theology is that since there is no God but God, there is also no true lover or beloved but God. Therefore, in keeping with Islamic thought in general, Rūmī maintains that love is a divine attribute and that it can only be considered a human attribute metaphorically, or by derivation.

But what exactly is meant by ‘metaphorical’ or ‘allegorical’ love? In his commentary on the *Mathnawī*, Ankarawī states that ‘[t]he attribution of love (*muhabbet*) to the slave is but metaphorical, a mere figure of speech (*majaz*), because in reality affection (*muhabbet*) belongs to God (*Hakk*) alone… Therefore, the love (*muhabbet*) that the slave has for God is merely of a metaphorical and nominal nature (*itibari*).

Therefore, whereas ‘*ishq majazi* is related to the material world and bodily love, real love or, ‘*ishq haqīqī*, is understood as the love which is felt towards God alone. In other words, metaphorical love is transient and therefore, fleeting, whereas real love – as an attribute of God – is eternal and infinite. Rūmī also suggests that the difference

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53 ibid., II: Arabic preface.
54 Qur’ān, 5: 54.
55 The idea has also been expressed by other Sufi thinkers, for example, in his chapter on love, Ghazālī remarks that ‘[w]hen someone loves only himself, his acts, and his compositions, his love does not transgress his essence and the concomitants of his essence, since they are connected to his essence. Thus, God loves only Himself’ *Iḥyāʾ*, 4: 474. Similarly, Samʿānī (d. 1140) proclaims that ‘when God said, “He loves them,” He was declaring that He loves human beings because they manifest His own beauty and in effect, He loves Himself, because everything is a manifestation of His own beauty.’ Quoted in William C Chittick, *Divine Love: Islamic Literature and the Path to God*, Yale University Press, Connecticut, 2013, p. 121. Earlier, *Ibn-Sinā* (980-1037) had made a similar point in his metaphysics claiming that God ‘…is the lover of His own Essence. Since His Essence is an origin, It is the origin of all order and all good. Hence, the order of the good comes to be an object of His love accidentally.’ *Iḥāyiyyāt*, 292.
57 Can, 2005, p. 149.
between the two kinds of love depends on the human being’s perception: some know that only God truly exists; thus, direct their love only toward the true Beloved, while others believe in ‘the independent existence of various objects of desire and so turn their love toward them.’\(^{58}\) Therefore, Rūmī suggests that the desire for “forms” (contingent existents), essentially reflects the human being’s innate desire for a more deeply rooted need for God:

All things in this world—wealth, a mate, and clothing—are desired for something other than themselves… In this way, all things are desired for some other thing, each desire leading to the next, all ending in the desire for God. He is desired for His own sake, not for anything else. Being beyond all, greater than all, nobler and subtler than all, can God be desired for something less? “So, He is the goal.” Within God is the completion of all things, beyond Him there is no transcending.\(^{59}\)

Therefore Rūmī argues that love for all else is only instrumental but are hardly ever recognised as thus. As such, Rūmī proclaims that, in reality, everyone is seeking a manifestation of God’s love, whether they are aware of it or not. Hence, Rūmī posits that it is the human being’s failure to recognise the source of desire itself that is the actual issue: ‘[a]ll the hopes, desires, loves, and affections that people have for different things father, mother, friends, the heavens, the earth, gardens, palaces, sciences, works, food, drink – all these are desires for God, and these things are veils.’\(^{60}\) Therefore, as long as the veils of instrumental desires blind human beings, they will not be able to see the Reality that lies beyond them. However, when the individual recognises and seeks the Source of desire, Rūmī suggests that all multiplicity disappears and a unitive state of conscience is reached where the individual begins to not just theoretically acknowledge, but to actually perceive existential multiplicity through the kaleidoscope of Unity. In this sense, some of Rūmī’s most ecstatic lines within the Mathnawī are those in which he declares that the love of God is also the truest expression of tawḥīd:

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\(^{58}\) William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rūmī*, State University of New York Press, New York, 1983, pp. 337-8. However, although Rūmī vouches for the supremacy of divine love (‘ishq haqiqi), he also points out that “metaphorical” or derivative love can also lead one to “True love”: ‘Whether love be from this (earthly) side or from that (heavenly) side, in the end it leads us yonder.’ Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, I: 111. Therefore, Rūmī also suggests that the wide array of material forms can also potentially lead one back to their source of origin.

\(^{59}\) Rūmī, *Fihi mā fihi*, p. 181.

\(^{60}\) Ibid., p. 35.
Love is that flame which, when it blazes up, consumes everything else but the Beloved. / He (the lover) drives home the sword of Not in order to kill all other than God: thereupon consider what remains after Not. / There remains except God: all the rest is gone. Hail, O mighty Love, destroyer of polytheism! / Verily, He is the First and the Last: do not regard polytheism as arising from aught except the eye that sees double.'

This notion also highlights the position of the one who unities within them consciousness of God’s utter unity in multiplicity (tawḥīd); thus, actualises and realises what in faith, is only implicit. If there is no God but God, then there is also no Lover but God. In this sense, many have regarded Rūmī to be a proponent of the doctrine of Wahdat al-wujūd (the “Oneness of Being” or “Unity of Existence”). Unsurprisingly, the term carries a good deal of baggage because of the long debate over its use. Although the expression is known to have historical ties with the school of Ibn ‘Arabī, it is sometimes employed to refer to the views of other Sufis, including figures who lived long before him. Since Rūmī never employs the term Wahdat al-Wujūd, it is difficult to claim any specific meanings that give to the term itself a technical significance. However, in a general sense, the terms suggests that ‘There is only one Being, (wujūd), even though we are justified in speaking of many “existent things” (mawjūdāt) in order to address ourselves to the plurality that we perceive in the phenomenal world.’ Or, as Nicholson has explained, ‘[a]ll phenomena are individualised modes of Real Being; when stripped of this individualisation (ta‘ayyun), which produces the appearance of plurality, they “become one” with each

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61 Rūmī, Mathnawī, V: 559.
63 The controversy is mainly around what the term implies at the theological level: For opponents of the doctrine such as, Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328), the renowned Hanbali scholar, Wahdat al-Wujūd is practically synonymous with incarnationism and unificationism, that is, the thesis that God and the world, or God and man, are identical. Similarly, numerous Western scholars have interpreted Wahdat al-Wujūd as being synonymous with the concept of pantheism in occidental philosophy, although such interpretations are now less favourable in Rūmī circles of scholarship.
64 There is a tendency among commentators on Rūmī to interpret his works with the presumption that he was a follower of Ibn ‘Arabī and look at him through the lens of their particular understanding of Ibn ‘Arabī’s teachings. I believe, in line with Chittick’s argument, that the commonly held view of Ibn ‘Arabī’s “influence” on Rūmī is ‘highly speculative and lacks evidence both on the formal as well as a deeper, spiritual level.’ William C. Chittick, ‘Rūmī and wahdat al-wujūd in Poetry and mysticism in Islam’, in ed. Amin Banani, Richard Hovannisian & Georges Sabagh, The Heritage of Rūmī, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994, p. 75.
65 ibid.
other and Real Being." Chittick has also explained that since God is both the ‘ābid (worshipper) and the ma‘būd (object of worship), “‘otherness” or “individuality” is nothing but an illusion arising from the interplay of two aspects under which Reality may be viewed. The key is to grasp that divine unity and existential multiplicity are not exclusive of one another but that they are in fact the two “faces” of the same Reality. However, Rūmī explains that the disappearance of duality in the human conscience is not possible ‘until a person has surrendered their image of a separate existence’.

2.4 ‘Ishq and the Mystical Annihilation of Self

What is the means of ascension to Heaven? This not-being. Not-being is the creed and religion of the lovers (of God).

Another significant aspect of Rūmī’s notion of ‘ishq is the eradication of the individual ego. Although the image of self varies widely according to the various cosmologies in which it finds reference, mystics appear to converge on the notion that inculcating “selflessness” allows one to approach divine unity. This is probably why, in his pivotal work on Sufism, Nicholson has claimed that ‘[t]he whole of Sufism rests on the belief that when the individual self is lost, the Universal Self is found, or, in religious language, that ecstasy affords the only means by which the soul can directly communicate and become united with God.’ This leads us to the concept of fanā’ (annihilation): one of the most elusive of all Sufi terms and one that is perhaps most significant in our attempt to understand Rūmī’s notion of ‘ishq. The simple dictionary definitions of this complex term from a single dictionary range from ‘passing away, cessation of being; perdition, ruin, destruction, annihilation; evanescence, vanishing, termination, extinction; exhaustion’ to ‘non being, nonexistence, nonentity; extinction of individual consciousness, recedence of the ego, obliteration of the self.’ It is especially the latter definition becomes most relevant in the thought of Sufis like Rūmī where fanā’ has commonly been used in the sense of

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67 ibid.
69 Rūmī, Mathnawi, VI: 223.
passing away with one’s own will to have reunion with God.\textsuperscript{72} Thus, Rūmī remarks: “There is no God, but God”—that is what the common folk say. The elect believe “There is no Self, but Self.”\textsuperscript{73} At this point, one may reasonably ask, whether the Sufi concept of self-annihilation is a purely negative reality? Western scholars seem to have focused on the term \textit{fanā’} because it is reminiscent of terms like \textit{nirvana} and \textit{moksha} in Buddhism. But in Sufi texts, \textit{fanā’} is always contrasted with \textit{baqā’}, commonly translated as subsistence or more specifically, subsistence in the attributes of God. The authority for both terms is the Qur’ān, for example, it is said: ‘Everyone on earth perishes; all that remains is the Face of your Lord, full of majesty, bestowing honour.’\textsuperscript{74} Hence, the verse can be read to mean that everything in the human being that dwells in the domain of distance from God will be annihilated and overcome by the attributes of nearness to God or, as Chittick has phrased, ‘[i]nasmuch as human beings are Not He, they are annihilated, but inasmuch as they are He, they subsist.’\textsuperscript{75} Thus, having annihilated one’s human attributes in God, the lover then subsists in his Beloved. In fact, Rūmī proclaims this is the very existential purpose of the lovers of God: ‘[h]e said, ‘I moulded thee for the sake of \textit{fanā’} (self-naughting).’ It replied, ‘I accordingly took refuge in \textit{fanā’}.’\textsuperscript{76} Whatever the name, the expected outcome is unanimous – a realisation of one’s deeper nature and a resultant self-transformation.

However, one must distinguish between language that is ontological and that which is phenomenological, just as one must distinguish between the person and the empirical ego. In \textit{fanā’}, it is this latter entity that must be lost to give way to a deeper awareness at the depths of one’s being.\textsuperscript{77} Therefore, one way in which \textit{fanā’} and \textit{baqā’} may be

\textsuperscript{72} The Sufi notion of \textit{fanā’} differs from Buddhist notions of passing away from existence through Nirvana as it essentially signifies the forgetting or loss of self, such that only contemplation of the Divine remains. It is as close to the Divine as humans can get since, in Islam, it is generally upheld that humans cannot be absorbed into Allah (as, in Buddhism, they can be absorbed into Nirvana or the Buddha-nature).

\textsuperscript{73} Rūmī, \textit{Fihi mā fihi}, p. 211.

\textsuperscript{74} Qur’ān 55: 26-7.


\textsuperscript{76} Rūmī, \textit{Mathnawī}, V: 676.

\textsuperscript{77} Toshiko Izutsu articulates \textit{fanā’} as ‘the total nullification of the ego consciousness, when there remains only the absolute \textit{Unity of Reality} in its purity as an Absolute awareness prior to its bifurcation into subject object.’ Toshiko Izutsu, ‘The Basic Structure of Metaphysical Thinking in Islam’, in Mehdī Moughagheh & Hermann Landolt ed., \textit{Collected Papers on Islamic Philosophy and Mysticism}, Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University, Quebec, 1971, p. 39. Whereas Chittick argues that self-abasement is necessary for annihilation or \textit{fanā’} because ‘[a]s long as man continues to live under the illusion of the real existence of his own ego, his own selfishness, he is far from God’ and ‘[o]nly through negation of himself can he attain to union with Him.’ Chittick, \textit{The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual
understood is through its ethical dimensions: extinction of all passions and desires, which includes the renunciation of selfishness, aspirations, and bodily appetites. As such, Al-Qushayrī explains that by “annihilation” the Sufis refer to the disappearance of blameworthy qualities, whereas by “subsistence” they refer to the persistence of praiseworthy qualities.\(^78\) Similarly, in the *Mathnawī*, Rūmī provides a “[d]escription of the selfless ones who have become safe from their own vices and virtues; for they are naughted in the everlastingness of God.”\(^79\) This suggests that the experience of annihilation and subsistence in God is intimately tied in with the world of behaviour and action.

Another sense in which *fanā’* and *baqā’* can be understood is the psycho-spiritual realisation of reunion with God. Al-Qushayrī has stated that “[w]hen one observes the workings of divine power in the vicissitudes of divine decrees, it is said that one has been annihilated from seeing events as emanating from creatures. And when one is annihilated from perceiving events as products of secondary causes, one subsists in the attributes of the Real.”\(^80\) That is, one begins to see God as the sole cause of all created things whereas the transition from *fanā’* to *baqā’* is the cognitive process through which the individual perceives this unity in existence.\(^81\) Therefore, in understanding Rūmī’s Sufi concept of *baqā’*, it can be said that in the state of reunion, only positive reality (God), remains. Chittick also reminds us that annihilation is a relative term: it always means annihilation from some specific mode of lower consciousness and simultaneous subsistence through a specific mode of higher consciousness.\(^82\) In this sense, he suggests that one kind of awareness is given up to be replaced by a higher kind, so that the experience of *fanā’* is validated through the experience of *baqā’* that accompanies it. Rūmī is careful, however, to point out that in passing away to self, the individual does not become equal to God:

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\(^78\) Al-Qushayrī, op. cit., p. 89.


\(^80\) Al-Qushayrī, loc. cit.

\(^81\) In this sense, Chittick attempts to clarify the notion of “union” by equating it to “subsistence” in God, which he describes as ‘the other side of annihilation’. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi*, loc. cit., p. 396

\(^82\) ibid., p. 61.
Homogeneity is not in respect of form and essence: water becomes
homogeneous with earth in the plant... Since my genus is not the genus of my
King, my ego has passed away (faná) for the sake of His ego. / Inasmuch as my
ego passed away, He remained alone: I roll at the feet of His horse, like dust. /
The (individual) soul (self) became dust, and the (only) signs of it are the mark
of His feet on its dust.\(^{83}\)

Rūmī frequently depicts this paradoxical tension existing between the individual
notion of self and the Self of God throughout the Mathnawī. For example, illustrating
this predicament in his characteristically enigmatic way, Rūmī narrates the tale of a
lover who knocks the door of his beloved only to be refused because when asked who
it is, he answers, “It is I”. Along the same lines, Rūmī explains that:

In God’s presence two I’s cannot exist. You cannot know your self and God’s
Self; either die before God, or God will die before you so that duality will not
remain. But as for God’s dying, that is both impossible and inconceivable, for
God is the Living, the Immortal. So gracious is He that if it were at all possible
He would die for your sake. Since that is not possible, then you must die so that
God can reveal Itself to you, and duality can vanish.\(^{84}\)

Rūmī implies that it is the lover’s sense of a separate and distinct identity that is the
obstacle to reaching reunion with God. When the lover attains to fanā’, he visits his
lover again, but this time, when asked who it is, he answers, “It is you”. In this way,
Rūmī illustrates the secret of loverhood:

In the quarter where our Beloved is, where are “we” and “I”? / O Thou whose
soul is free from “we” and “I,” O Thou who art the subtle essence of the spirit in
man and woman, / When man and woman become one, Thou art that One; when
the units are wiped out, lo, Thou art that (Unity). / Thou didst contrive this “I”
and “we” in order that Thou mightst play the game of worship with Thyself, / That all “I’s” and “thou’s” should become one soul and at last should be
submerged in the Beloved.\(^{85}\)

Rūmī implies that only God truly exists and love is the only means through which this
Unitive state can be re-cognised within the human self. However, until an individual
has personally reached this state of realisation, Rūmī warns that it is not befitting to

\(^{83}\) Rūmī, Mathnawī, II: 1171-5.
\(^{84}\) Rūmī, Fīhi mā fīhi, pp. 44-5.
\(^{85}\) Rūmī, Mathnawī, I: 1784-8.
speak through the language of unity because others still view through the level of duality. In contrast, for one that has attained unity, Rūmī explains that even if such an individual claim to love themselves, they in reality love only God: ‘Whether the pure ruby loves itself or whether it loves the sun (God as Beloved), / There is really no difference in these two loves: both sides aspects are naught but the radiance of the sunrise (God’s attributes).’

To illustrate this notion, Rūmī provides the example of Pharaoh, who is not only one of the greatest villains in Islamic lore but also, according to Rūmī, an embodiment of the plague of ego-existence and contrasts him with Mansūr-e Hallāj (858–922) the beloved love-martyr of all Sufis:

A Pharaoh said “I am God” and was laid low; a Mansúr (Halláj) said “I am God” and was saved. / The former “I” is followed by God’s curse and the latter “I” by God’s mercy, O loving man; / For that one (Pharaoh) was a black stone, this one (Halláj) a cornelian; that one was an enemy to the Light, and this one passionately enamoured (of it).

In this passage, Rūmī is obviously alluding to Hallāj’s famous invocation, Ana ‘l-Haqq (“I am the Truth”), which many viewed as a claim to divinity. Rūmī, in line with the Sufi tradition, interprets it instead, as an instance of mystical annihilation of the ego through fanā: ‘[t]his “I,” O presumptuous meddler, was “He” (God) in the inmost consciousness, through oneness with the Light, not through (belief in) the doctrine of incarnation.

In this sense, Rūmī implies that since having attained to reunion with God, Hallāj’s sense of self had become encompassed within the Self of God (a experiential realisation as opposed to a theoretic one), and to this degree, his ostensible praise of self was in fact, praise of God. As such, Rūmī’s notion of ‘ishq is intimately connected with his notion of the eradication of the individualised human

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86 Rūmī, Mathnawī, III: 2027-30.
87 ibid., V: 2035-7.
88 ibid., V: 2038.
89 Rūmī’s sensitivity on the matter of Hallāj’s tragedy is made most explicit in the Fīhī Ma Fīhī in which he provides an extensive exposition on the spiritual nuances underlying his famous exclamation: “Take the famous utterance, “I am God.” Some people think this is a great pretension, but “I am God” is in fact a great humility. Those who say, instead, “I am a servant of God” believe that two exist, themselves and God. But those who say, “I am God” have become nothing and have cast themselves to the winds. They say, “I am God” meaning, “I am not, God is all. There is no existence but God. I have lost all separation. I am nothing.” In this the humility is greater. This is what ordinary people don’t understand. When they render service in honour of God’s glory, their servanthood is still present. Even though it is for the sake of God, they still see themselves and their own actions as well as God—they are not drowned in the water. That person is drowned when no movement, nor any action belongs to them, all their movements spring from the movement of the water.” Rūmī, Fīhī mā fīhī, p. 414.
ego to reach a greater God-consciousness through which one perceives everything, including their own existence, through the Reality of God.

2.5 Conclusion

Rūmī’s Sufism is neither a separate religion nor a sect of Islam, the Sufi path (tarīqah) is rather a mode of religious observance and a method of self-training and purification, the goal of which is to orient the believer to a religiously-informed spirituality of experience. If we are to summarise Rūmī’s love-tradition, it can be said that according to Rūmī, the “nation of lovers” – referring to the spiritual community who prioritise the experience of ʿishq in their quest for God – are unique in their faith from all others because for them, the community and the path is God alone. In this sense, those Sufis belonging to the madhhab-i ʿishq (the path of passionate love), add another dimension to the tarīqah (path), through their emphasis on ʿishq. Essentially, Rūmī’s Sufi path aims to reawaken the spiritual aspirant to their primordial purpose of creation: to love God and by loving Him, becoming the vestibule for manifesting God’s love for Himself. Thus, Rūmī considers love to be the animating force that sustains the entire universe – an attribute of God that is only accidental or derivative in relation to human beings.

However, Rūmī also contends that this unitive state cannot be experienced until the individual forgoes the belief in a separate existence of self. Thus, the state of fanā’ (self-extinction) of the Sufis is the culmination of the spiritual journey, when they realise the truth of the philosophical or logical proposition of the Oneness of Being (Wahdat al-wujūd) through actual personal experience. This experiential dimension of realisation is tantamount to the madhhab-i ʿishq tradition of Rūmī’s Sufism. In this sense, Rūmī’s Sufism is better understood as something that emerged from a tradition of figures enamoured by love, journeying on a path that was often non-systematic, gradual, experiential and therefore, deeply personal. Thus, in Rūmī’s view, the role of religious life as well as religiosity as a whole, is to help us to understand love: how to feel it, how to practice it and most of all, how to receive it. However, he suggests that as long as you’re attached to an impermanent thing, the attachment by its nature is not permanent. Thus, for Rūmī, ‘ishq is both an emotion, a stage, a state and the path
itself, it is the object and the objective, the instrument and the aim and above all of this, it is the attribute of God himself. As such, the path of love, in Rūmī’s understanding, is the one that is most apt in bringing the individual to the greatest proximity with God because, unlike other paths which will end at the individual’s capacity, the path of love is that in which all the limited human faculties are transformed so that the lover is able to love the Beloved through the Beloved.
Chapter Three:
The Metaphysical Self and its Journey to the Beloved

It is difficult to overestimate the significance of the notion of “self” in Rūmī’s work, for his entire notion of ‘ishq rests on the self of the human subject as it approaches the Self of the divine Beloved. Thus, this chapter will begin by focusing on Rūmī’s understanding of what he deems to be the various subtle spiritual realities underlying the Sufi notion of “self” including: the rūḥ, qalb, ‘aql and the nafṣ and how these are depicted throughout the Mathnawī. Furthermore, this chapter will consider how these various entities differ according to Rūmī as well as why Rūmī often depicts the self as a negative entity. Finally, this chapter will consider why Rūmī believes human beings struggle with the reality of the individual self in worldly existence, and why this misrecognition can become an obstacle on the path of ‘ishq.

3.1 The Self in Sufism

In the Fīḥī mā fīhi Rūmī narrates a short tale about a king who entrusts his son with learned scholars. In time they train him in various scientific disciplines until he one day, masters them all. When he eventually returns to meet his father, the king tests him by concealing a ring within his fist and asking his son what he holds. The prince gives a remarkably precise physical description of the ring’s properties but when the king asks him to name what it is, he responds that it “must be a sieve.” The king, devastated cries out, ‘[y]ou know all the minute details, which would baffle the minds of anyone. How is it that out of all your powerful learning and knowledge, the small point has escaped you that a sieve will not fit in a fist?’

Through the tale’s humourous exaggeration, Rūmī explains that like the son of the king:

… the great scholars of the age split hairs on details of all matters. They know perfectly and completely those sciences that do not concern Soul. But as for what is truly of importance and touches us more closely than anything else, namely our own Self, this your great scholars do not know. They make

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1 Rūmī, Fīḥī mā fīhi, p. 32.
statements about everything, saying, “This is true and that is not true. This is right and that is wrong.” Yet, they do not know their own Self, whether it is true or false, pure or impure.²

This is probably the crux of much of Rūmī’s thought, in the tradition of the saying of the Prophet’s companion, Ali, who proclaimed ‘He who knows himself knows his Lord’.³ Rūmī like countless other Sufis, believes that knowledge of God is intimately tied in with knowledge of the self – its attributes, qualities and weaknesses. Therefore, when considering a term like “self” in Rūmī’s Sufi tradition, what we are often referring to is something quite specific but simultaneously, complex, multifaceted and elusive. In this sense, the English term “self” is too broad for what we are dealing with when we examine the works of Rūmī for, when he refers to the “self”, Rūmī is almost always referring to specific psycho-spiritual aspects of the individual that reflects the Sufi notion of the human being within the broader Islamic tradition. The term Rūmī often uses for self is nafs, which is an Arabic word (cognate of the Hebrew word nefesh) occurring in the Qur’ān and simultaneously means self, psyche or soul.⁴ Nafs is not a univocal term in the Islamic tradition; it has undergone differing analyses and descriptions throughout the Muslim tradition. Therefore, when the word nafs in Arabic is used to refer to “self” in English, it should be understood to refer to everything that we are, including both our physical body and our awareness of self and others.

Rūmī’s notion of self is multifaceted and always understood in relation to other pseudo-psychological entities that are complex dimensions of the “self” as a whole.⁵ As such, the structure of the human individuality within Sufi psychology can be understood through several subtle entities such as: the rūḥ (spirit/soul), the qalb (heart), the ‘aql (reason/intellect) and the nafs (carnal self), which are all inevitably part of the “self” and yet, have vastly differing roles. Often, Rūmī will allow one term

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² Rūmī, Fihi mā fihī, p. 32.
⁵ The Islamic model of self can be compared, for example, to other models such as Plato’s tripartite conception of the soul in which reason (‘aql) is placed at the top of the hierarchy and appetite (nafs) is placed at the bottom with a mediatory spirit (rūḥ) that vacillates between the two.
to plane into another term so that the same reality is observed from a different aspect or function. Commenting on this notion, Al-Qushayrī explains:

The entity that hears, sees, smells, or tastes constitutes a whole, which is a human being. Likewise, the heart and the spirit are the repositories of praiseworthy characteristics, whereas the soul is the repository of blameworthy ones. At the same time, the soul is part of the whole, and the heart is part of the same whole. Therefore the name and property go back to this same whole. When Rūmī refers to the self it is always within the Islamic framework, and he is almost always referring to a specific aspect of the self. Although Rūmī’s notion of self is comparable to other models, the Islamic model is also vastly different as it ultimately rests on a theological narrative that governs the nature of the human self within a larger cosmic scheme.

3.2 God’s Investiture: The Rūḥ as Beloved

In the Islamic tradition, it is understood that human beings were honoured by what was blown into them – the rūḥ (soul/spirit). The Qurʾān hints at the elusive nature of the soul in an address to the Prophet in which he is told, ‘[Prophet], they ask you about the Spirit. Say, ‘The Spirit is part of my Lord’s domain. You have only been given a little knowledge.’ Rūmī points out that one of the unique qualities of the rūḥ is that it is ungendered: ‘the Spirit has no association (nothing in common) with man and woman. / It is higher than feminine and masculine’. Rather, the rūḥ, as God’s investiture, has the potential to be lifted to higher modes of existence: ‘[t]his is not that spirit which is increased by (eating) bread, or which is sometimes like this and sometimes like that. / It is a doer of (what is) sweet, and (it is) sweet, and the essence of sweetness.’ In this sense, Rūmī distinguishes between the rūḥ (soul), and the jan (spirit) or, life-source: ‘Soul is one thing and spirit is another. Don’t you see during sleep how Soul travels abroad? Spirit remains in the body, keeping it alive, but Soul wanders and is transformed.’ According to Rūmī, the human soul is to be understood as something unique and categorically different from the spirit that exists

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7 Qurʾān 17: 85
8 Rūmī, Mathnawī, I: 1975-6.
9 ibid., I: 1977-8
10 Rūmī, Fiḥi mā fiḥi, p. 106.
in all living creatures. Even animals have spirits (understood as a life-source), but only humans have a soul that carries the Trust \((\text{amānah})\). Therefore Rūmī continues:

When Mohammed said, “He who knows his own self knows his Lord,” he was speaking of knowing Soul. If we say that he was speaking of this soul or that soul, that is something very different. On the other hand, if we explain it as meaning Soul, Itself, the listener may still think we mean one soul, since they do not yet know Soul, Itself.\(^{11}\)

Rūmī highlights the idea that God breathed his own Soul into the clay of Adam and it is in this sense that the \(\text{rūḥ}\) is understood as being an honored creation. For this reason, in the Qur‘ān’s account of the creation of the human being, it is understood that God did not command the angels to prostrate to Adam until after the \(\text{rūḥ}\) was placed in his body. The \(\text{rūḥ}\) therefore, seeks to return to God because it comes from God and deep within it, contains the memory of the covenant it made with Him and yet, the \(\text{rūḥ}\)’s materialisation in bodily form is also a significant obstacle inherent within the human being’s divine destiny because, ‘only a few human beings try to reestablish their previous high rank, or are even aware of it.’\(^{12}\) Thus, Rūmī often speaks about the \(\text{rūḥ}\) as a positive entity that represents the divine within the human self. A question that naturally arises is if the human being is intrinsically God’s Beloved, why do human beings struggle spiritually?

\[3.3 \text{ Ego-Existence: The Enmity of the Carnal Self}\]

There are three kinds of creatures. First there are angels, who are pure spiritual conscience. Worship, service and the remembrance of God are their nature and their food. They eat and live upon that essence. Like fish in the water, their mattress and pillow are the water. Angels are pure and free of lust, so what favor do they gain by

\[^{11}\] ibid., p. 106. Can gives a clue as to what Sufis may mean here: ‘we have an earthly I, that is our \(\text{nafṣ}\) as well as a heavenly I that is our soul with its divine origins. Sufis are in a sense trying to uncover the divine source under the human cover of the self.’ Şefik Can, \textit{Fundamentals of Rumi’s Thought: A Mevlevi Sufi Perspective}, Tughra, New Jersey, 2005, p. 6

\[^{12}\] The quote is from Schimmel who continues: ‘Most of Rūmī’s interpreters have derived these ideas about the high rank of man from currents as systematized in Ibn’ Arabi’s philosophy and theosophy: the return of man to his origin, the growth and development of the Perfect Man as goal of creation. But it would suffice to trace these ideas back to the Koran, where sentences about man’s two fold role God’s vicegerent on earth, and the ignorant, lost creature and sinner are found side by side, encompassing almost all the possibilities of human behaviour.’ Annemarie Schimmel, \textit{The Triumphant Sun: A Study of the Works of Jalāloddin Rūmī}, New York: State University of New York Press, 1993, p. 206.
not yielding to such desires? Since they are free of these things, they have no struggle against them. If they obey God’s will it is not counted as obedience, for this is their nature, and they cannot be otherwise. Second are the beasts who are pure sensuality, having no spiritual conscience to restrain them. They too are under no burden of obligation. Lastly, there remains the poor human being, who is a compound of spiritual conscience and sensuality. We are half angel, half beast. Half snake, half fish. The fish draws us toward water, the snake toward the earth. We are forever in battle. If our spiritual conscience overcomes our sensuality, we are higher than the angels. If our sensuality overcomes our spiritual conscience, we are lower than the beasts.\textsuperscript{13}

The above passage summarises Rûmî’s basic understanding of the human being including how they differ from other forms of creation. The passage also helps to answer why, if the soul is the investiture of God and seeks to return to Him, human beings struggle with this reality. In the Qur’ān, there are three primary states of consciousness that the \textit{nafs} denotes.\textsuperscript{14} The lowest of these, the \textit{nafs al-ammārah} is mentioned in the Qur’ān in the words of Zulaykhā when she relates her seduction of the prophet Joseph: ‘I do not pretend to be blameless, for man’s very soul incites him to evil unless my Lord shows mercy: He is most forgiving, most merciful.’\textsuperscript{15} In reference to this reality, there is a well-known tradition of the Prophet that Rûmî also references in the \textit{Mathnawī}: ‘Your worst enemy is between your two sides.’\textsuperscript{16} Similarly, at one point in the \textit{Mathnawī}, in a somewhat exasperated authorial interjection, Rûmî cries: ‘I am done to death by the cunning and fraud of men, I am bitten by the sting of human snake and scorpion; But worse than all men in fraud and

\textsuperscript{13} Rûmî, \textit{Fihi mā fihī}, pp. 139-40.

\textsuperscript{14} Apart from the three principle stages of the \textit{nafs} identified in the Qur’ān (\textit{ammārah} 12:53, \textit{lawwāmah} 75:2, \textit{muṭmaʾinna} 89:27) Sufis have extrapolated to include various other gradations of the \textit{nafs} usually listing them in an ascending order of seven: \textit{nafs al-ammārah} (The inciting self), \textit{nafs al-lawwāmah} (The self-blaming self), \textit{nafs al-muṭmaʾinna} (The inspired self), \textit{nafs al-maṭmaʾinna} (The self at peace), \textit{nafs ar-raḍīyyah} (The pleased self), \textit{nafs al-mardīyyah} (The pleasing self), \textit{nafs as-sāfiyyah} (The pure self). Konuk suggests that since the pure \textit{nafs} (\textit{aṣṣāfiyyah}) is effaced in the ranks of the \textit{rūḥ} (soul), it is not considered in the ranks of the \textit{nafs}. A. Avni Konuk, \textit{Mesnevi-i Şerif Şerhi 1}, Gelenek Yayncilik, Istanbul, 2004, p. 150.

\textsuperscript{15} Qur’ān 12: 53. Though she is only mentioned as the “wife of ‘Azeez” in the Qur’ān, Zulaykhā is the name given to the Biblical Potiphar’s wife in the Jewish and Islamic tradition of the prophet Joseph. The tale has been retold countless times, the most famous version being the Persian by Jami (1414-1492) in his, \textit{Haft Awrang} (Seven Thrones). One more unconventional Sufi interpretation of the tale is that Zulaykhâ’s lust for the Prophet Joseph is symbolic of the soul’s longing for God.

spite is the man of the flesh (nafs) lying in wait within me. Therefore, although the Islamic tradition holds the nafs as a subtle, multilayered entity, the understanding of nafs that Sufis have been predominantly concerned with is the nafs al-ʾammārah (the self that incites to evil). As ordinarily understood, the nafs al-ʾammārah is the source of limitation, passion, gravity and the source of all that makes the human being selfish and self-centered. Therefore, when Rūmī refers to the nafs, it is often assigned ‘a negative polarity as an earth-bound appetitive entity that requires continuous monitoring and control, only possible by controlling the various sensory appetites of the corporeal body.' For the human being then, living in this world is a constant battle within the self and naturally, the weakest participant is one who is unaware of their enemy’s existence. If oblivious to this reality, then they are also ignorant to the battle that occurs contrary to their awareness. For this reason, Rūmī depicts the nafs as being the most powerful and most formidable of all enemies – the undetected enemy that lies within us all. Despite essentially being a part of the self, the nafs is inevitably victorious when it alone yields control over the human subject. Rūmī posits that this state usually becomes transfixed because the nafs al-ʾammārah blinds individuals to their own deficiencies: ‘[t]he reason why he (any one) is not flying towards the Lord of glory is that he supposes himself to be perfect.’ Thus, convinced of their own perfection, the individual is satisfied with chasing lowly aspirations to the degree that this becomes instinctive – a type of second nature or habitus.

Another significant point that needs to be clarified when talking about the nafs, especially Rūmī’s depiction of it throughout the Mathnawī, is that the nafs al-ʾammārah is not static – it has a multitude of dispositions and all of these reign within

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17 Rūmī, Mathnawī, I: 905.
18 In various Sufi works, someone existing at the primitive state of the nafs usually has a combination of various characteristics that must be overcome such as takabbur (pride), ḥirṣ (greed), hasad (envy), shahwah (lust), ghibah (backbiting), bukhāl (stinginess), harshness (ghilţā). For example: William C. Chittick, The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-ʿArabi’s Metaphysics of Imagination, State University of New York Press, New York, 1989, p. 307.
19 In Western psychology, it was Carl Gustav Jung who came closest to describing the base Self in a manner similar to the Sufis. Jung called it “the shadow.” By shadow, he said, ‘I mean the ‘negative’ side of the personality, the sum of all those unpleasant qualities we like to hide, together with the insufficiently developed functions and the content of the personal unconscious.” Carl G. Jung, Two Essays on Analytical Psychology, Routledge, London, 2014, p. 66.
21 Rūmī, Mathnawī, I: 3212-3
the subject at different points in their lives depending on different circumstances. Thus, Rūmī utilises a diverse combination of images when referring to the nafs al-ʿammārah: at various times it is a cunning wolf, a squalling pig, a braying donkey, a camel astray, a devious hare, a whimpering dog, a deceitful serpent or a fierce dragon. Thus, in description of this reality, Rūmī proclaims that:

The being of Man is a jungle: be on your guard against this being, if you are of that (Divine) Breath. / In our being there are thousands of wolves and hogs; (there is) goodly and ungodly and fair and foul. / To the disposition that is preponderant belongs the decision (as to what you are): when the gold is more than the copper, it (the mixture) is gold. / The manner of acting that preponderates in your nature—in that same form you must needs rise (from the dead).22

In this sense, the nafs al-ʿammārah can be imagined as an endless shape-shifter that is fuelled by insatiable want. What is important to recognise is that this inner-jungle is used to illustrate not only that the nafs al-ʿammārah is deceitful and that it calls to evil, but also that it deceives in a variety of different ways depending on the circumstances of individual existence. As such, the manipulativeness of the ego need not take a grossly carnal or emotionally negative form; it may exhibit itself as a need for attention or praise, or quite a subtle insistence on having its own way, and ‘can even take the form of doing spiritual practices from a self-serving motive, or it can permeate our whole being as the inability to step outside of our own egocentric viewpoint.’23 To this degree, the nafs al-ʿammārah is understood as being the lowest state of existence as well as being the coarsest stage of the soul.

Rūmī also suggests that the desires of the carnal self prevents human beings from seeking any kind of higher spiritual purpose: ‘[h]ow should the vulgar, in their love for bedfellow and dishes (of food), have any care for love of God’s work?’24 In such a state, the individual lives impulsively aiming only to satiate one desire to the next: ‘lust has overcome their spiritual conscience so entirely that they have taken on the status of animals.’25 Sufis believe that most people live at this stage of consciousness

24 Rūmī, Mathnawī, VI: 1662.
25 Rūmī, Fīhi mā fihī, p. 140.
and as long as they persist in this state of ego-existence, they are not considered to be conducive to receiving spiritual benefits. For this reason, Rūmī often warns: ‘[t]ake heed! Do not wish your currish (fleshy) soul alive, for it is the enemy of your spirit since long ago.’ As such, the rūḥ (when imagined as the spiritual investiture of God) is that which has come from the spiritual abode and desires to return to it, but the nafs, which is drawn to the worldly abode, draws it back down. Therefore, Rūmī argues that the world and all of its delights cater to the animal within us, which strengthens our animal nature while the spiritual self is covered in the dross of the ego:

Beyond this world is another world for us. This world and its delights cater to the animal within us. These pleasures all fill our animal nature, while our real self slowly dies. They say, “The human being is a rational animal,” yet we consist of two things. Lusts and desires feed our animality in this material world. But as for our true essence, its food is knowledge, wisdom, and the sight of God. The animality within us flees away from God, while our spiritual self flees away from this world.

In this way, Rūmī illustrates the two opposing forces within the individual that underlie the inner dynamics of the human self. In this dynamic the nafs al-ʾammārah functions as a dark entity that feeds off negative emotions and base actions – one that strengthens the more it is fed. Therefore, throughout the Mathnawī, the nafs al-ʾammārah is also associated with endless consumption and for this reason; the world is often identified as being one of its primary desires. In this sense, the incessant seeking for the pleasures of the appetite has usually led the nafs al-ʾammārah to being identified as ‘an accomplice of the “world” because in its multiple and changing aspect she passively espouses the cosmic condition of form’. However, Rūmī does not consider bodily or worldly desires as being inherently evil in and of themselves.

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26 Rūmī, Mathnawī, II: 474.
27 Rūmī, Fīhi mā fihī, pp. 105-6.
28 Rūmī often depicts this tyrannical form of the nafs al-ʾammārah as a fire-breathing dragon: ‘The idol of your self is the mother of (all) idols, because that (material) idol is (only) a snake, while this (spiritual) idol is a dragon.’ Rūmī, Mathnawī, I: 1772.
29 This idea is illustrated in a hadith of the Prophet in which it is narrated that ‘If the son of Adam were given a valley full of gold, he would love to have a second one; and if he were given the second one, he would love to have a third, for nothing fills the belly of Adam’s son except dust.’ Muhammad ibn Ismā’il Bukhārī, Volume 8 of Saḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī: The Translation of the Meanings of Saḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī, Arabic-English, Muhammad ibn Ismā’il Bukhārī, translated by Muhammad Muhsin Khan, Kazi Publications, Chicago, 1979, 76: 446, p. 537.
For example, in the *Mathnawī*, Rūmī references the Prophet’s hadith that ‘There is no monkery in Islam’ and continues to provide an explanation of its meaning:

“Do not tear out thy feathers, but detach thy heart from (desire for) them, because (the existence of) the enemy is the necessary condition for (waging) this Holy War. / When there is no enemy, the Holy War is inconceivable; (if) thou hast no lust, there can be no obedience (to the Divine command). / There can be no self-restraint when thou hast no desire; when there is no adversary, what need for thy strength? / Hark, do not castrate thyself, do not become a monk; for chastity is in pawn to (depends on the existence of) lust. / Without (the existence of) sensuality ’tis impossible to forbid sensuality: heroism cannot be displayed against the dead.  

In this sense, Rūmī implies that that the *nafs* is intrinsic to the human being’s spiritual quest and what renders us innately human. Furthermore, he suggests the lawful pleasures of the earthly life are not considered to be detrimental to the individual’s spiritual aspirations as long as they are not enslaved to them. Sufis have recognised that since it is an essential part of the self, the *nafs* is not something that can be destroyed, nor is this even considered healthy for the individual because a “healthy” *nafs* that is kept in check may be utilised to drive the human being into action, whereas a dysfunctional *nafs* can lead to nihilistic or negative emotions such as depression, apathy, ennui or even self harm. Therefore, the prominent goal in Rūmī’s Sufism is the transforming of the *nafs* to higher modes of existence. To this degree, the struggle between the *nafs* and the *rūḥ* is the challenge that both confronts and constitutes the human being’s destiny.

### 3.4 The Limitations of the ‘*Aql*

Another prominent element of the self in Rūmī’s thought is the ‘*aql*’; a term that is also used in Islamic theology and philosophy for the intellect – the rational faculty of the soul or mind. Furthermore, Rūmī insists that there are many different levels of the intelligence among human beings:

> Know well that intelligences differ thus in degree from the earth to the sky. /
>
> There is an intelligence like the orb of the sun; there is an intelligence inferior to

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32 Helminski, op. cit., p. 64.
(the planet) Venus and the meteor. / There is an intelligence like a tipsy (flickering) lamp; there is an intelligence like a star of fire, / Because, when the cloud is removed from it, it produces intellects that behold the Light of God.  

In this sense, Rūmī’s hierarchical view of the intellect also reflects the differing spiritual ranks in his Sufi thought. Although Rūmī does not have an intrinsically negative view of the intellect, he is careful to highlight its vulnerabilities whilst distinguishing its degrees. For example, Rūmī identifies the ‘aql with angels (who have also been given intellect) and to this degree, he claims both ‘[th]e Angel as well as the Intelligence is a finder of God: each of the twain is a helper and worshipper of Adam.’ However, Iblīs, (or, Shayṭān, as he later came to be known) was also a creature that was given intellect and yet, it was not able to save him from perdition. Thus, intelligence alone, as a faculty, is not viewed as being a guarantor for salvation, nor is its value contingent upon time for, as Rūmī insists: ‘O son, the old is the old in understanding: it is not whiteness of the hair in the beard and on the head. / How should he be older than Iblīs? / When he lacks understanding, he is good-for-naught.’ In fact, the idea of a pure, unbridled intellect is considered to be a dangerous notion and as Schimmel has pointed out, Iblīs could be regarded as the principle of ‘one-eyed’ intellect that also plagues the human species. Rūmī has also identified Iblīs as the first creature to employ analogue reasoning when he used an illicit method of qiyās (comparison/deductive analogy) in claiming his own superiority before Adam by reason of the form of his creation. 

Eventually, Rūmī’s satanology culminates in the lines: ‘(Cunning) intelligence (ziragi) is from Iblīs, and love from Adam’; a line that leads Schimmel to make the profound remark that ‘intelligence without love is the satanic illness of the world, an illness which brings

33 Rūmī, Mathnawī, IV: 459-64.
34 ibid., III: 3196-7.
35 ibid., IV: 2163-4.
36 She also interprets the transgression of Iblīs as an example of blinding intelligence that cannot penetrate the form of external phenomena: ‘The eye of intelligence cannot recognize true beauty hidden behind outward form, as the Divine Breath was hidden behind the form of Adam.’ But even more interestingly, Schimmel interprets Iblīs’s intellectual blindness as being derived from “lovelessness” – an inability to love inherent to his nature. Annemarie Schimmel, The Triumphant Sun: A Study of the Works of Jalaloddin Rumi Persian Studies Series, State University of New York Press, New York, 1993, p. 207.
37 ‘We created you, We gave you shape, and then We said to the angels, ‘Bow down before Adam,’ and they did. But not Iblīs: he was not one of those who bowed down. 12 God said, ‘What prevented you from bowing down as I commanded you?’ and he said, ‘I am better than him: You created me from fire and him from clay.’ Qur’ān 7: 11-2; also: Qur’ān, 17: 61-2.
about not only man’s fall but also the destruction of everything beautiful.’

Therefore, since the ‘aql is perceived to be but one aspect of the human self in Sufi spiritual-psychology, it is not without its potential dangers.

Rūmī rhetorically asks, if: ‘[t]he intellect is luminous and a seeker of good: how (then) does the dark fleshly soul prevail over it?’ Rūmī answers his own question explaining that ‘(It prevails) because it is at home, (while) your intellect is a stranger: the dog at his own door is (like) a terrible lion.’ Rūmī’s reference to the “home” represents the human being in their entirety, the human subtlety houses different pervasive aspects of the self. In this sense, the ‘aql is not inherently evil, but since it is but one aspect of the self among others, it is susceptible to becoming overcome by the desires of the ego – the nafs al ammarah. Therefore, a crux point in Rūmī’s view of the ‘aql is that the partial intellect of the human being cannot be a lover of God when it is subjugated by the nafs. In reference to the individual who lives solely for worldly gains, Rūmī remarks that ‘[h]e loves God for the sake of gain: his soul is not in love with (God’s) excellence and beauty… How should he that is in love with his own imagination and conception be one of them that love the Lord of bounties?’ As such, Rūmī frequently points out the dangers of an intellect that subordinates to the whims of the ego: ‘Because when one intellect is joined with another intellect, it prevents evil action and evil speech; / (But) when the fleshly soul is associated with another fleshly soul, the partial (individual) intellect becomes idle and useless.’ Thus, Rūmī cautions that the ‘aql is susceptible to becoming an instrument of the nafs for, ‘God’s seal upon the eye and ear of the intelligence makes him (the intelligent man) an animal, (even) if he is a Plato.’ In this sense, Rūmī is explicit about the relationship between the ‘aql and the nafs and very harshly criticises those who are oblivious to the trappings of their ego:

Forsaking Jesus, you have fostered the ass: of necessity, like the ass, you are outside of the curtain. / Knowledge and gnosis are the fortune of Jesus; they are not the fortune of the ass, O you asinine one! / You listen to the moaning of the

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38 Schimmel also points out that this tension can be related to the numerous references to Majnun in Rumi’s works because, ‘it behoves Majnun, the man demented by love, to see the unique beauty of Leyla behind a form which looks completely uninspiring to loveless, intelligent, hence inhuman, people.’ Schimmel, op. cit., pp. 207-8.
40 ibid., I, 20.
41 ibid., IV: 1923.
ass, and pity comes over you; then you know not (that) the ass commands you to be asinine. / Have pity on Jesus and have no pity on the ass: do not make the (carnal) nature lord over your intellect... This base intellect has become of the same temperament as the ass: its (only) thought is how it shall get hold of fodder." \(^\text{42}\)

Rūmī’s reference to animality is a fitting allusion to the individual who is overcome by their \textit{nafs al-`ammārah} for which the donkey becomes an oft-used metaphor throughout the \textit{Mathnawī}. As mentioned earlier, Rūmī often utilises images of various animals to depict those whose intellect has become subservient to fulfilling the desires of the carnal self. Unlike Jesus, who is referenced metaphorically in this passage as a symbol of the human being’s potential to receive divine knowledge, Rūmī berates those who continually succumb to the base desires of their \textit{nafs}. Thus, Rūmī suggests that in such a state, instead of becoming instrumental to seeking knowledge of the Truth, the \textit{`aql} is adopted as a source of cunning, machination and evil. Nor do the manipulations of one’s ego need be restricted to the realm of material acquisition – the ego can also manifest itself as a type of despotic egoism in the act of knowledge seeking and spirituality. As such, Rūmī is especially critical of the scholars of the religious sciences who are completely oblivious to Sufism as a branch of knowledge (\textit{tasawwuf}) and especially, as a method of self-purification. For example, at one point in the \textit{Mathnawī}, comparing intellectualising scholars to those preoccupied with loosening knots, Rūmī rebukes those with intellectual pursuits who have no awareness of the inner spiritual quest:

\begin{quote}
Suppose the knot is loosed, O adept (thinker): 'tis (like) a tight knot on an empty purse. / Thou hast grown old in (the occupation of) loosing knots: suppose a few more knots are loosed (by thee, what then?). / The knot that is (fastened) tight on our throat is that thou shouldst know whether thou art vile or fortunate. / Solve this problem, if thou art a man: spend thy breath (life) on this, if thou hast the breath (spirit) of Adam (within thee). / Suppose thou knowest the definitions of (all) substances and accidents, (how shall it profit thee?): know the (true) definition of thyself, for this is indispensable. / When thou knowest the definition of thyself, flee from this definition, that thou mayst attain to Him who hath no definition, O sifter of dust. / (Thy) life has gone (to waste)
\end{quote}

\(^{42}\) \textit{ibid.}, I: 1850.
in (the consideration of logical) predicate and subject: (thy) life, devoid of (spiritual) insight, has gone in (study of) what has been received by hearsay. / Every proof (that is) without (a spiritual) result and effect is vain: consider the (final) result of thyself!\textsuperscript{43}

According to Rūmī, knowledge (even of the religious sciences), has no intrinsic value if you are ignorant to the state of your own self. Therefore, even if you are knowledgeable in a multitude of exoteric sciences, if you have no clue about whether or not you are a decent human being, all your scholarly intellectualising and accomplishments will be of no avail on the spiritual path.

### 3.5 The Qalb: The Vestibule of God’s Love

(But) into the blood-drop (core) of the heart there fell a jewel which He (God) gave not to the seas and skies.\textsuperscript{44}

Is the soul the only inner faculty that is able to recognise the presence of the Beloved? Let us consider the self from another prominent term that appears throughout Rūmī’s thought – the qalb (heart), (Persian: dīl). This is not understood as the biological organ that pumps blood around the body, but rather as another metaphysical entity that is a specific component of the human “self”. Through one sense, Rūmī depicts the qalb is the locus of consciousness and intentionality: ‘all the five senses are passing (in movement) according to the will and command of the heart, like the spout.’\textsuperscript{45} In this sense, the heart is that inner arena in which all impressions and experiences are impacted, recorded and held. However, it is also suggested that over time, negative experiences and character traits can leave dark imprints on the heart, what Rūmī frequently describes as “rust”. As such, Rūmī often compares the heart to a mirror: if pure, it is able to directly receive and reflect the divine light of God, where ‘[t]hat purity of the mirror is the attribute of the heart (which) receives the infinite form.’\textsuperscript{46} Rūmī also alludes to a tradition of the Prophet very fondly circulated among Sufis in which God is believed to have said, ‘Neither My heavens contain Me nor My

\textsuperscript{43} ibid., IV: 560-8.
\textsuperscript{44} ibid., I: 1017.
\textsuperscript{45} ibid., I: 3566.
\textsuperscript{46} ibid., I: 3485. He adds a little later that Sufis ‘have polished their breasts (hearts) in commemoration (of God) and meditation, that the heart’s mirror may receive the virgin (original) image.’ I: 3154.
earth. But the heart of My Believing Servant contains Me.\footnote{Quoted in: Chittick, The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-‘Arabi’s Metaphysics of Imagination, op. cit., p. 396, n. 20.} In reference to this tradition, Rūmī proclaims: ‘[a]lthough that form is not contained in Heaven, nor in the empyrean nor the earth nor the sea nor the Fish, / Because (all) those are bounded and numbered—(yet is it contained in the heart): know that the mirror of the heart hath no bound.’\footnote{Rūmī, Mathnawī, I: 3487-8.} Thus, the tradition has been commonly interpreted to suggest that the \textit{qalb} is the exclusive vestibule of God’s love; a reality that Rūmī considers to shatter the intellect: ‘[h]ere the understanding becomes silent or (else) it leads into error, because the heart is with Him (God), or indeed the heart is He.’\footnote{ibid., I: 3485-9.} In other words, Rūmī suggests that the intellect is in a stupor wondering “\textit{zanki dīl ba ost ya khud ost dīl}” (Is the heart He or is He the heart?) The paradox serves to highlight the heart’s special status as God’s investiture and locus of His manifestation since, as Rūmī suggests, it contains ‘the light of love’.\footnote{ibid., I: 3865.} Therefore, Rūmī explains that even if the \textit{rūḥ} is in a state of heedlessness, the heart continues to be exclusively devoted to its creator:

... the heart is always attached to its beloved, and has no need to traverse the stages, no need to fear highwaymen, no need of the mule’s packsaddle. It is the wretched body that is tied to these things. I said to my heart, “How is it you are barred from the service Of He whose name you bless?” My heart replied, “You misread the signs. I am constantly in His service, You are the one astray.”\footnote{Rūmī, \textit{Fīhi mā fīhi}, pp. 303-4.}

The idea is that the heart has intuitive knowledge and it’s innermost core, (sometimes referred to as the heart’s secret); therefore, just as Islam places Mecca as the geographical center of the celestial and the terrestrial realms, the human heart is the spiritual axis through which reunion with the Beloved can be attained. Furthermore, Rūmī also suggests that the heart is the locus of divine communication with God\footnote{This idea is also reflected in the Qur’ān, for example, addressing the prophet: ‘Truly, this Qur’ān has been sent down by the Lord of the Worlds: / the Trustworthy Spirit brought it down / to your heart [Prophet], so that you could bring warning’. Qur’ān, 26:192-4.} as well as access to esoteric knowledge: ‘And behold within thy heart (all) the sciences of the prophets, without book and without preceptor and master.’\footnote{Rūmī, Mathnawī, I: 3461.}
human being’s quintessential role as God’s lover and beloved, as well as being the locus of His manifestation. However, Rūmī explains that the reason ‘these hearts have not bled, ’tis not because of (their) hardness, ’tis (because of) heedlessness and preoccupation and ill-fatedness.’\textsuperscript{54}

### 3.6 The Heedless Lover of the World

In essence, the human being is identified as the only creature capable of loving God for God’s sake alone. However, the fact that the verse of the offering of the “Trust” concludes that human beings are ‘unjust and ignorant’ is usually taken to suggest that human beings frequently fail to live up to their freely chosen responsibilities.\textsuperscript{55} The term used by the Qur’ān to signify this state is *Ghaflah* (heedlessness) as its near synonym. *Ghaflah* can also be understood as the opposite of *ḏikr* (remembrance); thus, can also be viewed as a lapse from true awareness into illusion. Rūmī touches on this plight that is inherent to humankind in the *Mathnawī*, explaining that:

\[\ldots \text{we are aware of (things) other than God, (but) unaware (heedless) of God and of so many warners (prophets). / As a necessary consequence, they (the elements) all shrank from (accepting) it (the trust offered to them): (the edge of) their impulse to partake of life was blunted. / They said, “We all are averse to this life, (namely), that one should be living in relation to created beings and dead in relation to God.” / When he (any one) remains away from created beings, he is orphaned (single): for intimacy with God, the heart must be free (from relations with aught besides).}\textsuperscript{56}

In this sense, it is implied that the primary reason why the rest of creation rejected to carry the Trust is due to this fear of heedlessness. This is assumed to be a dangerous plight, so much so, that the Sufis have remarked that: ‘Forgetfulness is worse than death, because neglectfulness cuts one off from God, while death cuts one off from creatures.’\textsuperscript{57} Since the Qur’ān identifies the individual’s inability to recall their covenant with God as primarily being due to a state of *ghaflah*, the spirit’s materialisation in bodily existence also represents the greatest obstacle facing the

\textsuperscript{54} ibid., I: 3821. 
\textsuperscript{55} Qur’ān, 33:72. 
\textsuperscript{56} Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, II: 2371-4. 
\textsuperscript{57} Al-Qushayrī, op. cit., p. 37.
human being’s quest as lover – the inability to recognise the beloved.\(^{*}58\) Within the Islamic context, then, the state of ghaffah can be understood as the great tragedy of forgetting or being indifferent to the Beloved and in consequence, one’s divine origins and their primordial purpose to be lovers of God.\(^{*}59\) The common Islamic perspective as to why this state of heedlessness persists is due to the illusory nature of the world and, as we have explored, the individual’s perpetual desire for its innumerable delights.\(^{*}60\) In facing such a challenge then, the individual’s most serious obstacle is their deception by the appearance of things. The Qur’an depicts this state as a self-sustained illusion perpetuated by the unceasing pursuit of distractions:

Bear in mind that the present life is just a game, a diversion, an attraction, a cause of boasting among you, of rivalry in wealth and children. It is like plants that spring up after the rain: their growth at first delights the sowers, but then you see them wither away, turn yellow, and become stubble. There is terrible punishment in the next life as well as forgiveness and approval from God; the life of this world is only an illusory pleasure.\(^{*}61\)

This idea is also echoed by Rūmī, who compares the enjoyment of the world’s delights to eating in one’s sleep: ‘[t]he delights of this world are the same as people who eat while asleep. They chase after worldly needs just as if they were looking for something in a dream. Even if they find it, once they are awake what good will it do them if they have eaten while asleep?’\(^{*}62\) Therefore, just as one has heightened awareness when they awaken from a dream, it is believed that “waking” from the dream of worldly life (a reality Sufis believe can be achieved prior to their bodily demise), is a state of heightened experience and certitude that is preferable to dream-like existence in a corporeal body. Therefore, like those who are continually disappointed in sleep only to fall victim to the same illusions again, Rūmī argues that people can be persistently disappointed in their worldly affairs and continuously have their desires come to no end, but a God appointed ‘oblivion’ leads them to forget all their past mishaps and failures so they can continue to strive in their plans once

\(^{58}\) Rūmī claims that some Sufi’s can recall the memory of the covenant through a type of pre-cognition that existed prior to the spirit’s descent into material existence.

\(^{59}\) It can also be understood as the sin of purposeful misguiding, misleading or the deceiving of another, usually through falsity or by failure of full disclosure, through concealment, which keeps another in ignorance and heedlessness. Further explanations of ghaffah in the Islamic context, can be found in Cyril Glassé, *The New Encyclopedia of Islam*, Tien Wah Press, Singapore, 2002, p. 154.

\(^{60}\) Qur’ān, 3: 14.

\(^{61}\) Qur’ān, 57: 20.

\(^{62}\) Rūmī, *Fiḥi mā fihī*, p. 33.
more. He explains that this is necessary for the perpetuation of human existence in the world:

Yearning for God, contemplation of the next world, intoxication, and ecstasy—these are the builders of that inner realm. If these true desires revealed themselves to all people, there would be a worldwide exodus. None would remain. Yet God wants both worlds to exist, so it has appointed two sheriffs—one heedlessness, the other heedfulness—so that both houses can thrive.

In this sense, the issue is not so much about whether or not the delights are enjoyable, but more about their quality and permanence. As such, the human being is allowed to experience and derive enjoyment from the wide range of sensory experiences available to them in the world, what Rūmī asks people to be heedful of is failing to perceive that these delights are impermanent, and unfulfilling in and of themselves. Rūmī expresses the idea somewhat more poetically when he remarks that ‘[t]his world is but foam full of floating jetsam.’ This leitmotif in Rūmī’s work depicts the world as the insignificant foam on the surface of the vast spiritual ocean which the individual must penetrate in order to gather the innumerable spiritual gems below; however, he adds that ‘through the turning of the waves, and the rhythmic surging of the sea in constant motion, this foam takes on a certain beauty. But this beauty is a borrowed thing coming from elsewhere. It is a false coin that sparkles to the eye.’

Although Rūmī acknowledges that the world with its many charms does have a certain beauty that can certainly be appreciated, this appreciation only becomes meaningful spiritually if it leads one to its Source.

3.7 Conclusion

As explored in some depth, when considering a term like “self” in Rūmī’s Sufi tradition, what we are often referring to is something quite specific but simultaneously, complex, multifaceted and elusive. In this sense, when Rūmī refers to the self, he is often referring to specific aspects of the self that are informed by the Islamic and especially Sufi notions of the human being. When Rūmī refers to the self

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63 ibid., p. 290
64 ibid., p. 196
65 ibid., p. 17.
66 At other times, Rūmī depicts the world in much less charming images, for example, Rūmī employs an allegorical tale in which the world is compared to a ‘stinking ninety year old hag’ that bewitches the individual with her painted charms. Rūmī, Mathnawi, IV: 3149.
it is always within the Islamic framework, and he is almost always referring to a specific aspect of the self. The Islamic model of self is intrinsically tied in to a theological narrative that governs the nature of the human subtlety within a larger cosmic scheme. In its purified and refined state, the self represents for Rūmī the human being’s quintessential role as God’s lover and beloved, as well as being the locus of His manifestation. Thus, Rūmī suggests that the spirit’s materialisation in bodily existence also represents the greatest obstacle facing the human being’s quest as lover – the inability to recognise the beloved. As such, for travellers on the Sufi path, the nafs is not something that can be destroyed since, essentially it is an aspect of the self, but rather, something that needs to be reigned in, and ideally transformed to a higher form of existence.

Therefore, although the Islamic tradition holds the nafs as a subtle, multilayered entity, the understanding of nafs that Sufis like Rūmī have been predominantly concerned with is the nafs al-ʾammārah (the self that incites to evil). Rūmī suggests that the nafs can be considered analogous to the ego in its unrefined state, prevents human beings from seeking any kind of higher spiritual purpose. For this reason, Rūmī often depicts the nafs as being the most powerful and most formidable of all enemies – the undetected enemy that lies within us all. Therefore, Rūmī points out that even if the individual is knowledgeable in a multitude of exoteric sciences, if they have no clue about their own inner state, all their sciences, intellectualising and accomplishments will be of no avail on the spiritual path. As such, Rūmī warns that the external forms of religious faith can become superficial and hollow if not downright dangerous when the individual remains oblivious to the internal dimensions of their own selves. In this sense, Rūmī proclaims that just as the religious path has both an internal as well as an external dimension, the sufi path is essentially the route through which the individual is able to travel to the depths of their own soul.
Chapter Four:

‘Ishq, Knowledge and Experience

(Yet) the intellectual quest, though it be (fine as) pearls and coral, is other than the spiritual quest. / The spiritual quest is on another plane: the spiritual wine has another consistency.¹

The most philosophical aspects of the Mathnawī often deal with Rūmī’s view of knowledge, and the intellect. Since Rūmī was not a theoretician he does not offer any kind of closed system of doctrine. However, a quintessential premise in his Sufi thought is that in the realm of ‘ishq, the intellect has no ground to stand upon. As such, this chapter will begin by considering why Rūmī deems true knowledge to be an experiential path, as well as its relation to ‘ishq. Next, it shall explore the limitations of the intellect in Rūmī’s Sufi thought. Finally, it will consider one of the most distinguishing aspects of Rūmī’s Sufi vision of knowledge: the mystical intuitive knowledge that is bestowed on the Sufi elect.

4.1 The Limitations of the ‘Aql in the Realm of ‘Ishq

If in the world thou art the most learned scholar of the time, behold the passing away of this world and this time.²

As explored in the previous chapter, the ‘aql or, intellect, is perceived as being a specific aspect of the human self and one which ideally, leads one to recognise their creator. Rūmī believes that in most human beings, no matter what sort of great minds they may have or how “intellectual” they may be, the intellect is veiled by the dross of the ego. However, in Rūmī’s Sufi worldview, the source of human knowledge is much broader than the limitations of individual reason and the consciousness of the individual ego. For this reason, Rūmī frequently differentiates between two different types of intelligence, what Rūmī calls the particular or, “partial intellect” (‘aql-i juzī) which is often negatively contrasted with the “universal intellect” (‘aql-i kullī).³

¹ Rūmī, Mathnawī, I: 1501-2.
² ibid., I: 2845.
³ Other Sufi thinkers have also identified the latter as, “The Great Spirit”, “The First Intellect” and “The Reality of Muhammad” signifying a particular archetypal reality. Nor is it a new, or exclusively Islamic concept, for as Chittick has pointed out, from the perspective of the philosophical tradition, ‘the
Furthermore, whenever Rūmī contrasts the ‘aql with ‘ishq, it is always identified as a source of limitation.4 Rūmī frequently confirms this observation throughout his works at one point exclaiming: ‘He (alone) whose garment is rent by a (mighty) love is purged of covetousness and all defect. / Hail, O Love that bringest us good gain— thou that art the physician of all our ills, / The remedy of our pride and vainglory, our Plato and our Galen!5 Therefore, as a Sufi representative of the madhab-i ‘ishq, Rūmī’s main point of divergence from peripatetic scholars such as al-Kindī (801-873), al-Fārābī (870-950) and Ibn ‘Arabī (1165-1240), is that the intellect unaided by divine unveiling (kashf) is not sufficient for the human being to attain ultimate Truth: ‘(Only) the esoteric knowledge will bear (thee) to the Presence (of God). / Why, then, should you teach a man the knowledge of which it behoves him to purify his breast?’6 As such, Rūmī is unforgivingly critical of those who pride themselves in having knowledge of the religious sciences without giving any credence or acknowledgement to the value and legitimacy of the knowledge attained through the mystical sciences:

When knowledge strikes on the heart (is acquired through mystical experience), it becomes a helper (yārī); / when knowledge strikes on the body (is acquired through the senses), it becomes a burden (bārī). / God hath said, “(Like an ass) laden with his books”: burdensome is the knowledge that is not from Himself. / But when you carry this burden well, the burden will be removed and you will be given (spiritual) joy. / Beware! Do not carry this burden of knowledge for the sake of selfish desire (but mortify yourself), so that you may ride on the smooth-paced steed of knowledge, / So that you may mount the smooth-paced steed of knowledge, (and that) afterwards the burden may fall from your shoulder.7


4 For example, Khalifa Abdul Hakim has observed how the contrast between love and reason (ishq wa ‘aql) can also be viewed as the philosophical differences between Plato and Rūmī’s perceptions of love. He argues that primarily, the difference between them can be understood through the relation of Rationalism and Irrationalism in their respective outlooks on life. Rūmī, in contrast to Plato, is deemed to be an ‘Irrationalist’ in the sense that he reverses the position between Reason and Love and that unlike Plato, Rūmī ‘does not believe in the knowability of the ground of Being through Theoretical Reason.’ Khalifa Abdul Hakim, The metaphysics of Rumi: a critical and historical sketch, Institute of Islamic Culture, Lahore, 1959, p. 48.

5 Rūmī, Mathnawī, I: 22-4.
6 ibid., III: 1125-6.
7 ibid., I: 3447-52.
Through the allusion to the Qur’ānic verse reprimanding the Jewish scholars of the past, Rūmī makes a statement about the same pitfall that Islamic scholars are susceptible to, when their pursuit of knowledge becomes nothing more than a hollow means of self-aggrandisement. In fact, at one point, Rūmī makes the rather bold proclamation that egoism is intrinsic to orthodox forms of scholarship: ‘Conventional knowledge is (only) for sale (self-advertisement): when it finds a purchaser, it glows with delight. / The purchaser of real knowledge is God: its market is always splendid. / He (the owner of real knowledge) has closed his lips (and is) enrapured in (his) trading: the purchasers are without end, for God hath purchased.’ As such, Rūmī distinguishes between worldly and spiritual knowledge: ‘every science learned in this world through study and experiment is the science of bodies’ whereas ‘the science acquired by crossing the portal of death is the science of Soul’. In this sense, the partial intellect also signifies that which requires nourishment from external sources acquired through learning and study. In contrast, the Universal Intellect is that which is self-sufficient and is the source of the religious sciences and has no need for any sort of outside aid. Rūmī explicates this idea further in his Fīhī mā Fīh, by highlighting the supposed illiteracy of the Prophet explaining that he was not called “unlettered” because he was incapable of writing or reading, but rather because with him, writing and wisdom were innate, not taught:

He who inscribes characters on the face of the moon, is such a man not able to write? And what is there in all the world that he does not know, seeing that all people learn from him? What can the partial intellect know that the Universal Intellect does not possess? The fact that we compose books and create buildings is nothing new. We have seen this done before, and we merely add to what we have already seen. But those who bring into this world something new of their own account, they are the Universal Intellect. We are capable of learning and need to be taught. The Universal Intellect is the teacher, and is not in need.

Rūmī ends the passage with the conclusion that revelation is at the root and origin of all trades and all branches of human knowledge and therefore, the total sum of human knowledge is based upon the knowledge of the prophets who directly received it from

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8 ‘Those who have been charged to obey the Torah, but do not do so, are like asses carrying books…’ Qur’ān, 62: 5.
9 Rūmī, Mathnawī, II: 3265-7.
10 Rūmī, Fīhī mā fīhī, p. 414.
11 ibid., p. 257
the Universal Intellect of God. In this sense, it can be said that the noetic quality of a mystical experience refers to the notion of revelation, which provides a guiding and regulatory framework within which the human being’s partial intellect is able to convey them to the plane of the ‘aql-i kullī (Universal Intellect). The partial intellect then, cannot function properly or to its full capacity without the assistance of revelation. Therefore, Rūmī explains that although each individual has been given partial intellect to various degrees, in essence, each part seeks the whole from which it has come; however, Rūmī proclaims that only ‘The prophets and saints have united the partial intellect and Universal Intellect so the two have become one.’ Therefore, although Rūmī views the Universal Intellect as being essentially one reality, he does not believe that it reveals itself to everyone to the same degree.

However, it is also important to point out that Rūmī is not antagonistic towards what he deems to be the partial intellect but rather adamant in pointing out its limitations: ‘The sciences of the followers of (external) sense became a muzzle, so that he (the believer in sense-perception) might not receive milk from that sublime knowledge. / (But) into the blood-drop (core) of the heart there fell a jewel which He (God) gave not to the seas and skies.’ In this sense, the idolisation of esoteric knowledge is considered, by Rūmī, as barring access to higher forms of esoteric knowledge that are connected with the divine Source. As such, Rūmī is especially critical of scholastic rationalists, for example, in the Fīhi mā fīhi, remarking on those who came to attend his study circles, Rūmī explains that people who are interested in their scholarly studies believe that if they faithfully attend the meetings (of Sufis) they will forget and lose all they have learned. In answer to this, he explains that on the contrary, ‘when they come here their sciences acquire soul. For all sciences, when they acquire soul, are like an empty body that springs to life. The heart of knowledge originates beyond this world of letters and language. It comes to us from that world where speech is without sound or sign.’ Rūmī believes that ideally, the ‘aql is that which

12 Rūmī further explains this idea in the Mathnawī: ‘This astronomy and medicine is (knowledge given by) Divine inspiration to the prophets: where is the way for intellect and sense (to advance) towards that which is without (spatial) direction? / The particular (individual) intellect is not the intellect (capable) of production: it is only The receiver of science and is in need (of teaching).’ IV: 1294-5.
13 Rūmī, Fīhi mā Fīhi, p. 258.
15 Rūmī, Fīhi mā fīhi, p. 279.
connects man to the truth, not the evolving truths of science but the truth that flows from God and provides the key to all knowledge and all truth.

4.2 ‘Ishq and the Experiential Nature of Knowledge

In the Mathnawī, Rūmī proclaims that ‘For lovers, the (only) lecturer is the beauty of the Beloved, their (only) book and lecture and lesson is His face.’ The line attests to Rūmī’s Sufi understanding of knowledge which proclaims that one cannot truly know something unless they have experienced it, become transformed by it and absorbed it within their own essence. For example, Rūmī proclaims: ‘What is (the meaning of) to learn the knowledge of God’s unity? To consume yourself in the presence of the One.’ In this sense, for Rūmī, knowledge is not theoretical but intrinsically experiential. As such, the Sufi corpus of texts reveal that this knowledge is not something to be found in books but, rather, is that which is already present in the heart although ‘hidden deep beneath the dross of ignorance, forgetfulness, outwardly oriented activity, and rational articulation’, or as Rūmī himself proclaims: ‘The Súfí's book is not (composed of) ink and letters: it is naught but a heart white as snow. / The scholar’s provision is (consists of) pen-marks (written letters and words). What is the Súfí's provision? Footmarks. / He (the Súfí) stalks the game, like a hunter: he sees the musk-deer’s track and follows the footprints. Here, Rūmī emphasises the practical dimensions of the Sufi path whereas the image of the dear-hunt becomes a metaphor for the Sufi traversing the ṭarīqah, experiencing its various gradations. In this sense, it can be said that the experiential dimension of Sufism involves ‘a process of inner verification, or spiritual empiricism, that leads through particular experiences and states.’ At another point in the Mathnawī, Rūmī also makes an incredibly profound statement about the experiential nature of love: ‘Some one asked, “What is love?” I answered, “Thou wilt know when thou becomest (lost in) me.” Only a lover recognises love. This line can also be translated as, “you will know when you becomes we” or, “you will know when you become like me”. The implication is that you cannot truly “know” ‘ishq through theoretical, or rational explanations since it is

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16 Rūmī, Mathnawī, III: 3857.
17 ibid., I: 3009.
19 Rūmī, Mathnawī, II: 159-61.
essentially lived experience.\textsuperscript{21} This being the case, Rūmī frequently suggests that the intellect, (when understood as the partial intelligence of the human being) must be abandoned on the path of love: ‘This company washed their hearts (clean) of (the exoteric) kinds of knowledge, because this knowledge does not know this Way. / (In order to tread this Way) one needs a knowledge whereof the root is Yonder, inasmuch as every branch is a guide to its root.’\textsuperscript{22} Thus, according to Rūmī, ‘\textit{ishq} is the soul attribute that can lead one to proximity with their creator. For Rūmī then, ‘\textit{ishq} necessarily entails experience and this cannot occur with the mindless following of another or the dry theorising of one’s intellect. This principle is signified in the notion of \textit{taqlīd}, which literally means, “to follow” or “imitate” and is commonly contrasted with \textit{tahqīq}, which can be understood as “verification” or “realisation” – a concept which also becomes thematic in Rūmī’s work in its representation of blind imitation without the direct experience of Truth.\textsuperscript{23} Underscored in this notion is the idea that the majority of people (scholars or otherwise) approach the Divine through the path of their ancestors, not one that they have realised for themselves. This critique is not a new one, but also a reiteration of the Qur’ānic criticism of blind conformity in matters of belief: ‘When they are told, ‘Follow what God has sent down,’ they say: ‘We shall follow what we saw our forefathers following.’ What! Even if Satan is calling them to the suffering of the Blazing Flame?’\textsuperscript{24} Adding another dimension to the matter, Sufis also interpret this passage to signify the dichotomy between recognising the truth through personal experience/realisation and accepting it through established tradition or through rational or theoretical means.

Rūmī also differentiates between those who seek knowledge (here signifying the knowledge of Reality) as a means to an end, and those who seek it as an end in itself: ‘Oh, there is many a learned man that hath no profit of (his) knowledge: that person is

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item[\textsuperscript{22}] Rūmī, \textit{Mathnawī}, III: 1123-4.
\item[\textsuperscript{23}] It is also used as a legal term in Islam to signify the following of a specific scholar of the religious sciences. On this point, Chittick has suggested that Rūmī’s critique is even significant in a legal sense: ‘seven hundred years ago, Rumi had already perceived that \textit{taqlīd} was leading the Islamic community into decadence and disaster. It also might seem that by criticizing \textit{taqlīd}, he is recommending the revival of \textit{ijtihād}, that is, the exercise of independent judgment in matters of the Shariah.’ William C. Chittick, ‘Rumi’s Path of Realization’, \textit{Iqbal Review} [online journal], vol. 42, no. 4, October 2001, para. 1, \url{<http://www.allamaiqbal.com/publications/journals/review/oct01/index.html>}, accessed 23 June 2015.
\item[\textsuperscript{24}] Qur’ān, 31: 21.
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one who commits knowledge to memory, not one who loves (it). / From him the hearer (but not the learned man himself) perceives the scent (of knowledge), though the hearer be of the common sort'. In this sense, Rûmî rebukes what he deems to be a state of unreflective acceptance and often critiques the fuqahā’ (Islamic Jurists) and the falāsifah (the philosophers) who are unfamiliar with the experiential path of the Sufis:

If your knowledge of fire has been turned to certainty by words (alone), seek to be cooked (by the fire itself), and do not abide in the certainty (of knowledge derived from others). / There is no intuitive (actual) certainty until you burn; (if) you desire this certainty, sit down in the fire. / When the ear is penetrating, it becomes an eye; otherwise, the word (of God) becomes entangled in the ear (and does not reach the heart).

Through the analogy of fire, Rûmî alludes to the varying degrees of certitude in Sufi thought, a notion that also has a Qur’ānic basis. The first of these is classified as ‘Ilm al-yaqīn (the knowledge of Certainty): such that Certainty is the first degree of spiritual life and the last of speculative experience. The second is ‘Ayn al-yaqīn (the eye of Certainty), that is, Certainty as a consequence of contemplation and vision. At this level, the object of Certainty is present in front of the spiritual aspirant and is not only a speculative concept. The last, and highest form of certitude is known as Haqq al-yaqīn (the total reality of Certainty): that is, Certainty as supreme truth gained through immersing experience and it is this level of certainty that best encompasses Rûmî’s understanding of the experiential nature of knowledge as well as ‘ishq. Rûmî also explicates this concept in the Fīhi mā fīhi whilst alluding to the famous invocation of Ḥallāj:

Knowing about the science of “I am God” is the science of bodies, but to become “I am God” is the science of Soul.’ To see the light of the lamp and the fire is the science of bodies, to burn in that fire and lamp’s flame is the science of Soul. Everything experienced is the science of Soul, everything based upon knowledge is the science of bodies.

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26 ibid., II: 2860-2.
27 The Qur’ān makes these three distinctions of the strength of belief in: 102: 5; 102: 7; and 69: 51.
29 Rûmî, Fīhi mā fīhi, p. 414.
In this sense, Rūmī frequently distinguishes between knowledge that is only known in theory (science of the body) and knowledge that is known through lived experience (science of the Soul) and frequently stresses the superiority of the latter as being quintessential to Sufism and the path of 'ishq. For example, referring to the concept of wahdhah (unity), Rūmī remarks, ‘[t]hat (of which I speak) is not the (sort of) oneness that reason apprehends: the apprehension of this (oneness) depends on a man’s dying (to self)’. Sufis the likes of Rūmī were not out to eradicate theoretical knowledge, (especially considering their own contributions to the broad corpus of theoretical works) but rather, wished to emphasise that ultimately, it is personal experience (or the experience of 'ishq) that will lead one to the Divine. In this vein, 'ishq has a superior position in Rūmī’s thought as the most efficient means of carrying the individual to unity and to this degree, reason is perceived as only being able to take one so far in the quest for reunion with the Beloved.

4.3 Maʿrifah: the Intuitive Knowledge of Lovers

Although theologians suggest that reason has to submit to the givens of revelation, according to Rūmī’s Sufi view, along with prophets, certain individuals (the Sufi elect) are able to exceed the limitations of the partial intellect. Nowadays, the idea of intuition or intuitive knowledge is one that is often relegated to the realm of pseudo-science, but even by the most rational minds, it is often asserted that by its very definition, intuition cannot be judged by logical reasoning. The intuitive quality

30 Mathnawī, VI: 2683.
31 As it shall become more apparent in the subsequent chapter, Rūmī enjoins those embarking upon the spiritual path to concede authority to those endowed with the privilege of access to mystical knowledge.
32 Rūmī explains that the subtlety of revelation (or divine inspiration depending on whether the individual is a Prophet or Saint) is not apprehended by the intellect alone and provides the example of Moses and Khadr: ‘The spirit of prophecy also has actions conformable (to reason), (but) the intellect does not apprehend (them), for that (spirit) is exalted (above intellectual apprehension). / Sometimes he (the man of intellect) regards (the actions of one endowed with the spirit) as madness, sometimes he is bewildered, since it (all) depends on his becoming that (other one); / As (for example) the intellect of Moses was troubled by seeing the reasonable actions of Khadir. / His actions seemed unreasonable to Moses, since he (Moses) had not his (Khadir’s) state (of Divine inspiration). Rūmī, Mathnawī, II: 3260-3.
33 In An Introduction to Metaphysics, Henri Bergson introduces two ways in which an object can be known: absolutely and relatively. Pertaining to each mode of knowledge is a method through which it can be gained. The latter’s method is what Bergson calls analysis, while the method of intuition belongs to the former. Henri Bergson, The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics, Dover Publications, New York, 2007, pp. 159-62.
of knowing is intrinsic to the Sufi tradition within the Islamic faith. Drawing from the Prophet’s tradition ‘He who knows himself knows his Lord’, Sufis have developed an understanding of knowledge that is intimately connected with knowledge of the self. In this sense, what necessarily follows self-knowledge is the aspirant’s quest for purification through conscious action. For example, al-Qushayri explains in his epistle on Sufism:

… when he (the arif) becomes a stranger to all other creatures, completely innocent of any faults of his [lower] soul, and free from any recourse to or concern for other [than God], he enters into an uninterrupted intimate conversation with God Most High and accepts nothing except what is true. After that, he begins to speak on behalf of God – praise be to Him – Who imparts to him (ta’rif) the mysteries of the dispensations of His foreordained decrees. It is then that he is called a ‘gnostic’ and his state is called ‘gnosis’. In brief, the more estranged he is from his own self, the more he knows his Lord. Sufi masters have discoursed profusely about gnosis, each speaking from his own experience and things he has discovered in his own mystical moment.

As such, one of the greatest fruits of this quest is access to higher modes of knowing that is supra sensory; that which is beyond the corporeal and the visible realms or rationally acquired forms of knowledge, transmitted directly from the divine. Therefore, one of the primary aspects that distinguish the Sufi approach to knowledge is its emphasis on access to spiritual or esoteric form of knowledge that are not gained via the intellect but are rather projected directly onto the purified self of the subject: ‘the Súfís: (they are) without (independent of) study and books and erudition, / But they have burnished their breasts (and made them) pure from greed and cupidity and avarice and hatreds. / That purity of the mirror is, beyond doubt, the heart which

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34 In his observation of intuition in the broad context of “mysticism” Rufus Jones has pointed out that in its largest sense, mysticism is a way of life, art, and worship based upon an intuitive knowledge of mystery – the “mystery” of the nature of the universe, or God, or “Reality”. He adds that this knowledge is gained, without exception, by a direct experience of the supernatural which eludes the rational faculty – is, in fact, opposed to it – and which, although “sensed”, is supersensory. Rufus M. Jones, *Some Exponents of Mystical Religion*, Literary Licensing, LLC, Montana, 2013, p. 15.


receives images innumerable.' This concept has also sometimes been identified as “the science of bestowal” and was considered to come to those who achieved ma’rifah, which can be literally understood as both “knowledge” and “recognition” and the person with such knowledge is called ‘ārif, or “recogniser.” These terms have typically been translated into English as “gnosis” or “gnostics,” and although such translations are seemingly appropriate, Chittick has pointed out that one problem arising from such translations is that ‘gnosis calls to mind esotericism, mysticism, and Christian heresy, whereas the Arabic word is associated with many of the greatest minds of the Islamic tradition.” Furthermore, he highlights that as a word, it is inconspicuous in its general usage: when contrasted with ‘ilm, which is the standard word for knowledge and learning in Arabic, ma’rifah can be better understood to mean “re-cognize,” that is, to come once again to see what one already knows. Here, the principle of self-knowledge becomes especially relevant because ma’rifah understood as re-cognition points to the internal origins of this knowledge. Rūmī suggests that the members of the Sufi community validate the authoritativeness of this intuitive mystical knowledge through their collective experiences: ‘Hundreds of thousands of Pīrs are agreed upon (the truth of) these reports and these veracious narratives. / Amongst these sources (authorities) there is no dispute, such as there is in (the case of) knowledge based on opinions.” Not only does Rūmī accord a higher status of verifiability for knowledge gained through experience, but also suggests that it is recognised, validated and shared within a spiritual community of lovers.

Another interesting point to consider is Rūmī’s understanding of intuitive knowledge or “inspiration” within the broader context of revelation in Islam. On this point, we are inevitably led to an ongoing polemic in Rūmī studies and Sufi studies about the nature and authoritativeness of divine “inspiration”.

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37 Rūmī, Mathnawī, I: 3483-5.
40 ibid.
41 Whether this intuition is sourced from within the self or supplied from an external Self is precisely the cyclical paradox that underlies the whole of Rūmī’s thought and works.
42 Rūmī, Mathnawī, VI: 4134-5.
43 An example are the exchanges between Jawid Mojaddedi and Lloyd Ridgeon in the Mawlana Rumi Review (2013-2014) in relation to the former’s work, Beyond Dogma: Rumi’s Teachings on Friendship with God and Early Sufi Theories.
translator, Jawid Mojaddedi contends that in the Sufi understandings of “Friendship with God”, the relationship involves ‘communication arriving from God to His Friends, who receive direct instructions on how to act as part of their mystical knowledge, as well as the ability to carry out the miraculous.’

However, it is also extreme to claim that Rūmī’s belief in the continuation of divine communication (call it what you may) denies or undermines his belief in the principle of khātam annabīyīn (Seal of the Prophets). It is perhaps more effective to understand the topic through the issue of semantics – Rūmī desires that people go beyond forms and labels. To this degree, Rūmī believes there is no essential difference between wāḥy and ‘ilhām in terms of their source:

It is stated that after Mohammed and the Prophets revelation will not be sent down upon anyone else, but this is not true. This is why Mohammed said, “The believer sees with the Light of God.” When someone sees with God’s Light, they see all things, the first and last, the visible and invisible, for how can anything be hidden from God’s Light? If anything is hidden, then that is not God’s Light. Therefore this is revelation, whether they call it revelation or not.

However, he also suggests that Sufis will often guise this belief through their choice in wording because they do not wish to give rise to polemics with the literal-minded:

‘The inspiration of God is not (like) astrology or geomancy or dreams—and God best knoweth what is right. / The Sufis in explaining (their doctrine) call it (the Divine inspiration) the inspiration of the heart, in order to disguise (its real nature) from the vulgar.’

In this sense, Rūmī proclaims that ‘[n]earness (to God) in respect of (His) creating and sustaining (us) is common to all, (but only) these noble ones possess the nearness (consisting) of the inspiration of Love.’ Thus, Rūmī’s notion of wāḥy-i ḵishq (the inspiration/revelation of love) suggests that Rūmī’s “epistemology of revelation” is intimately tied in with his Sufi ontology of ḵishq where ascension on the Sufi Path

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45 For example, Rūmī remarks in relation to the Prophet, ‘He has become the Seal (of the prophets) for this reason that there never was any one like him in munificence nor ever shall be.’ *Mathnawī*, VI: 171.
47 Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, IV: 1853. Rūmī also proclaims that ‘subtleties and sacred words, when they fall into the hand of darkness and brute intellect, they are changed as well.’ Rūmī, *Fihi mā fihi*, p. 246.
necessarily accords one communication with the Divine.\textsuperscript{48} Therefore, regardless of whether it is called ‘\textit{ilhām}’ (inspiration) or \textit{wahy} (revelation) it is obvious that Rūmī, in line with much of the Sufi tradition, believes that divine communication continues after the Prophet and is received by those who have traversed the Sufi path and undergone its gradations.\textsuperscript{49} Rūmī’s clarifies this concept in another passage thus:

\begin{quote}
Make thyself pure from the attributes of self, that thou mayst behold thine own pure untarnished essence, / And behold within thy heart (all) the sciences of the prophets, without book and without preceptor and master. / The Prophet said, “Amongst my people are some who are one with me in nature and aspiration: / Their spirits behold me by the same light by which I am beholding them.” / Without the two Sahīhs and Traditions and Traditionists; nay, (they behold him) in the place where they drink the Water of Life.\textsuperscript{50}
\end{quote}

The reference to ‘the two Sahīhs’, \textit{Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī} and \textit{Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim},\textsuperscript{51} are employed as symbols to highlight the deficiency of conventional knowledge (including the science of hadith) in the face of mystical knowledge. Thus, Rūmī suggests that as long as the individual is subjugated by the carnal desires of their \textit{nafs}, they will not be receptive to receiving mystical knowledge: ‘The bane of this gate is sensuality and lust; else, draught on draught (of spiritual knowledge) is (to be found) outside the gates of the wise.’

\textsuperscript{48} In his analysis of prophets and revelation in the thought of Rūmī, John Renard provides a concise summary of Rūmī’s understanding of these notions through his use of various terms: ‘Jalal ad-Din’s language of revelation seems to warrant the following conclusions: \textit{wahy} and \textit{ilham} carry a connotation rather of content or consequence than of the divine action itself. \textit{Kashf} serves as a bridge between the two above terms and \textit{tajalli}, in that \textit{kashf} occurs in contexts suggestive of both the action of the revealer and that, which is revealed. \textit{Tajalli}, on the other hand, connotes God’s doing, the event of theophany rather than the content of the revelation, \textit{Wahy} is given mostly to prophets, though it can be related to others on rare occasions. \textit{Kashf} is applicable to prophets and nonprophets alike without significant distinction, whereas \textit{ilham} seems to pertain only to nonprophets. Virtually any seeker of God may experience the divine \textit{tajalli}. In terms of content, \textit{wahy} and \textit{ilham} may impart every sort of beneficial knowledge, whether of the strictly mysterious or not as with trades or other practical affairs, secrets of the universe, etc. \textit{Kashf} is the uncovering of the mysterious as a mystery, that is, of that which should not, and will never be, the common property of all human beings. \textit{Tajalli} imparts an overwhelming sense of the brilliance and power of the Deity without necessarily conveying any further information.’ John Renard, \textit{All the King’s Falcons: Rumi on Prophets and Revelation}, State University of New York Press, New York, 1994, pp. 30-1.

\textsuperscript{49} For example, Ghazālī is a Sufi who distinguishes \textit{wahy} and \textit{ilhām} in the following way: ‘The recipient knows the medium, i.e. the angel by whom he received the information. This is “Wahi,”’ the inspiration of prophets, the inspiration of the Quran. The recipient receives information from an unknown source and in an unknown way. This is the inspiration of saints and mystics. It is called “Ilham.” The difference between “Wahi” and “Ilham” is that in the former an angel is the medium of communication, and in the latter he is not. It comes direct to the mind of the prophet.’ Quoted in: \textit{Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics: Hymms-Liberty Volume 7} of \textit{Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics}, James Hastings, John Alexander Selbie & Louis Herbert Gray ed., Scribner, New York, 1961, p. 354.

\textsuperscript{50} Rūmī, \textit{Mathnawī}, I: 3460-4. Another example is I: 2846-7.

\textsuperscript{51} Two of the six major \textit{ahādith} collections in Sunni Islam and also considered to be the most authentic.
here.\textsuperscript{52} To this degree, the Sufi path functions as the means through which the individual polishes the dross from the self and in turn, gains access to higher forms of esoteric knowledge.\textsuperscript{53} As such, Rūmī often complains about the tediousness of dry intellectualising and insists that ‘[f]rom this (scholastic) study and this intellect comes naught but vertigo; therefore leave this study and adopt (in its stead) expectation.’\textsuperscript{54} The nature of this ‘expectation’ is clarified in the next line: ‘Do not seek (spiritual) eminence from disputation: for him who is expectant (of Divine inspiration) listening is better than speaking.’\textsuperscript{55} Thus, Rūmī suggests that when the individual has effaced their ego and purified their self through the Sufi path, they gain access to mystical knowledge since their partial intellect becomes united with the Universal intellect. Rūmī provides a practical example of this reality in the \textit{Fihi mā fihi}, a certain disciple, Ḥusām al-Dīn Arzanjanī, who was a great debater before entering the service and society of dervishes: ‘Wherever he went, he engaged vigorously in argument and controversy’ and was well spoken.\textsuperscript{56} However, Rūmī explains that once he took up the company of dervishes, ‘his heart turned completely against debate’.\textsuperscript{57} Rūmī adds: ‘“Whoever desires to sit next to God, let them sit with lovers of God.” These intellectual sciences are a game and a waste of life, compared to the spiritual experiences of the dervishes.’\textsuperscript{58} Rūmī suggests that the love of God as well as the company of lovers distills the heart from the desire for self-aggrandising intellectual pursuits. Furthermore, Rūmī suggests that once one has attained to their goal (of reunion with the beloved) the very path and the processes involved become unnecessary if not offensive to the Beloved: ‘The sum (of the matter is this): when a man has attained to union, the go between becomes worthless to him. / Since you have reached the object of your search, O elegant one, the search for knowledge has now become evil.’\textsuperscript{59} Except, he adds, if it is to assist others on the path: ‘After (having

\textsuperscript{52} Rūmī, \textit{Mathnawī}, I: 10.

\textsuperscript{53} At another point in the \textit{Mathnawī}, Rūmī personifies knowledge claiming that it only associates with those who are worthy of it: ‘Though you may learn Wisdom by rote, it becomes quit of you when you are unworthy (to receive it); / And though you write it and note it (down), and though you brag (about it) and expound it, / It withdraws its face from you, O disputatious one: it snaps its bonds and (takes) flight from you. / (But) if you read not and it sees your ardour (of love), Knowledge will be a bird docile (and obedient) to your hand.’ Rūmī, \textit{Mathnawī}, II: 318-22.

\textsuperscript{54} ibid., IV: 33145.

\textsuperscript{55} ibid., IV: 4436.

\textsuperscript{56} Rūmī, \textit{Fihi mā fihi}, p. 261.

\textsuperscript{57} ibid.

\textsuperscript{58} ibid.

\textsuperscript{59} Rūmī, \textit{Mathnawī}, III: 1400-1. Rūmī also suggests that it becomes unlawful and disliked by God when those who have experienced Union return to the triviality of their former intellectual pursuits:
attained to) felicity, the way (that leads) to felicity is worthless except for the sake of helping and teaching others. For Rūmī then, mystical knowledge is one of the greatest returns of gaining intimacy with the divine Beloved.

4.4 Conclusion

As it has been explored in some detail, Rūmī often deals with the problematic relationship between love ('ishq) and the intellect ('aql). Rūmī often argues that egotistic intellectualising takes the individual away from the love of God. Rūmī, in recognition of the various elements that underlie religious life, can be seen to frequently criticise the followers of a rote-learnt spirituality (taqlīd), as well as the methodology of those who engage in a superficially intellectual religiosity – especially when contrasted with his own Sufi path of ‘ishq. This is especially so because once subjugated by the ego, he argues that the intellect is only put to task to acquire the offerings of the world. Rūmī argues that the intellect, when understood as the partial intelligence of the human being, must be abandoned on the path of love because according to Rūmī, ‘ishq is the soul attribute that can lead one to proximity with the creator. For Rūmī then, conventional knowledge like the individual ‘aql, is partial and deficient. The Sufi way, however, potentially offers a true taste of reality. Thus, it can be said that what differentiates the overall Sufi approach and in this sense, Rūmī’s specific approach to Islamic faith, is his stress on the need for ma‘rifah (mystical knowledge) as the direct, unmediated knowledge of both self and God that is directly projected upon the purified heart. As such, Rūmī maintains that the realisation of ‘ishq (reunion with the Beloved), is the highest form of knowledge because it is not simply knowledge that is known but knowledge that is experienced.

‘Any one whose prayer-niche is turned to the (mystical) revelation, do thou regard his going (back) to (the traditional) faith as shameful... The King is jealous of any one who, after having seen the face, prefers the (mere) scent.’ Rūmī, Mathnawī, I: 1765-70.

ibid., III: 1403.
Chapter Five:

The Need for the Guide on the Path of ‘Ishq

The devotee of darkness sees the light immediately as soon as he becomes subject to (the authority of) the Pir. / What is required is self-surrender, not long toil: ’tis useless to rush about in error. / Henceforth I will not seek the way to the Ether (the highest celestial sphere): I will seek the Pir, I will seek the Pir, the Pir, the Pir!¹

If it were necessary to identify one requirement above all others that Rūmī considered vital for spiritual development, it would unquestionably be his insistence on the need for every spiritual aspirant to have a well-seasoned Guide on the Sufi path – whether or not this would be within the context of an institutional Sufi order.² As such, this chapter begins by exploring the role of the Sufi guide according to Rūmī – specifically in regard to their role in assisting the spiritual aspirant’s spiritual transformation including significant factors such as companionship and obedience, as well as considering Rūmī’s words of warning against falling victim to “false” guides who will potentially lead one astray from the journey of ‘ishq. This chapter will also explore Rūmī’s concept of walāyah (sainthood) in the context of spiritual authority, as well as Rūmī’s belief in the ability of the Sufi elect to receive “divine communication” as a result of their spiritual ascent through the Sufi Path.

5.1 The Function of the Pir (Sufi Guide) in Rūmī’s Sufi Path of ‘Ishq

The common folk of the city do not know the deceit of the fleshly soul and of the body: it (the fleshly soul) is not subdued save by (Divine) inspiration in the heart. / Every one that is its congener becomes its friend, except, to be sure, the David who is your

¹ Mathnawī, VI: 4122-4.
² Rūmī’s own experiences with Shams-i Tabrīzī can certainly be viewed in this context as having been anything but conventional and depicted as an ideal that could only be aspired to following the institutionalisation of many Sufi orders including the Mevlevī order.
Shaykh; / For he has been transmuted, and whomsoever God hath seated in the abode of the heart, he (that person) is no more the body's congener.  

One distinguishing feature of maghab-i ishq Sufis has been their transcending of the conventional master-disciple hierarchy. Rūmī’s Sufi path essentially exists on the basis of the mentor-student relationship, and typically this relationship is supported and enhanced within a spiritual family of lovers. In this way, the salīk (spiritual wayfarer) or murīd (committed one) is in need of a murshid (guide/teacher), shaykh (leader), or, pīr (elder) which are all titles for the Sufi master on the path of ‘ishq. Within this context, the rapport between and disciple mirrors a myriad of other types of relationships including: father-son, master-slave, guide-traveller, physician-patient, teacher-student, and beloved-lover. In the Fihi mā fihi, Rūmī mentions a category of people who are ‘still struggling’ in their spiritual quest: ‘These last are the people who feel within themselves an agony and anguish, a sorrow and a longing. They are not satisfied with their lives. These are the believers.’  

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Thus, Rūmī implores his readers to choose a pīr ‘for without a Pīr this journey is exceeding full of woe and affright and danger’ and forewarns: ‘Do not, then, travel alone on a Way that you have not seen at all, do not turn your head away from the Guide.’ In this sense, the pīr should be understood as someone who has already traversed the path, including its various gradations and spiritual stations. Thus, according to Rūmī, the Sufi guide serves as the seasoned escort who is able to lead other travellers upon the spiritual path. Rūmī also proclaims that: ‘The shadow of God is that servant of God who is dead to this world and living through God.’ The pīr, therefore, is also the epitomic lover: having undergone the experience of fanā’ and baqā’ they have become reunited with the Beloved.

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3 Rūmī, Mathnawī, III: 2560-2.
4 Rūmī, Fihi mā fihi, p. 140.
5 ‘and by the self-reproaching soul!’ Qur’ān, 75: 2.
6 Rūmī, Mathnawī, I: 2943.
7 ibid., I: 2945.
8 ibid., I: 423.
There are various references to the pīr in the Mathnawī: at one point, Rūmī proclaims, ‘O Splendour of the Truth, Husámu’ddin, take one or two sheets of paper and add (them to the poem) in description of the Pir.’ Thus, Rūmī provides an outline ‘[c]oncerning the qualities of the Pir (Spiritual Guide) and (the duty of) obedience to him.’ Rūmī argues that spiritual aspirants should consider the pīr ‘as the essence of the Way’ and that this title of pīr (elder) should not be understood in terms of age but rather, in terms of familiarity and experience upon the spiritual path. Rūmī also depicts the spiritual guide through the maternal image of the loving mother who suckles and weans the aspirant so who weans the child out of mercy so it may feed off spiritual nourishments. Another image Rūmī employs to refer to the pīr is the spiritual physician who seeks to cure the spiritual maladies of the qalb (heart) and the “illness” of ego-existence. For example, in an extensive passage in the Mathnawī, Rūmī juxtaposes the two vocations of the ‘natural’ physicians who cure the ailments of the body and the ‘spiritual physicians’; the disciples of God who represent the unique vocation of the Sufis: ‘Those natural physicians are different, for they look into the heart without intermediary, for through clairvoyance we are in a high belvedere… Hark, come hither for the incurable disease! We, one by one, are a medicine for the (spiritually) sick.” Here, the concept of “clairvoyance” (firāsat) can also be understood as the power of discernment, which was a widespread form of “reading” the body (the science of physiognomy) in medieval Islamic societies. In this way, there is an implication that

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9 Rūmī, Mathnawī, I: 2934.
10 ibid., I: 2933
11 ibid., III: 1789. At another point in the Mathnawī, Rūmī explains that when the pīr is described as an old man with white hair, the meaning is metaphorical and that “black hair” implies the presence of ‘self-existence’ (hasat) and he does not grow old till no separate sense of self remains (indicating the transition from fanā‘ to baqā‘).
12 ibid., V: 295. Building upon this maternal imagery, the pīr’s discourse is also depicted as the milk of knowledge and wisdom: ‘We have become accustomed to thy sweet discourse, we have drunk of the milk of thy wisdom.’ Rūmī, Mathnawī, I: 560. This imagery can be seen as alluding to the Sufi notion of ḥītām, which signifies the period of time in which the murūd “suckles” spiritual sustenance form the murshid as well as the process through which they are gradually weaned from it so they are able to gain spiritual nourishment through their own volition. Ethem Cebecioğlu, Tasavvuf terimleri ve deyimleri sözlüğü, Rehber, Istanbul, 1997, p. 85.
13 However, Rūmī also suggests that the pīr approaches the spiritual aspirant according to his need: ‘When you come to the druggist, they have sugar in abundance. But they see how much money you brought, and give accordingly. By “money” is meant sincerity and faith.’ Rūmī, Fihi mā fihi, p. 54.
14 Rūmī, Mathnawī, III: 2700-9. Also: ‘Go, entrust (the cure of) this wound to a surgeon. / Flies gather on every wound, so that no one sees the foulness of his wound. / Those flies are your (evil) thoughts and your (love of) possessions: your wound is the darkness of your (spiritual) states’ I: 3223-5.
the Sufi guide is able to divine the moral qualities of individuals on the basis of their physical properties. For example, Rūmī mentions how the ‘divine physicians’ are able to ‘detect diseases, religious and spiritual, in the countenance of friend or stranger and in the tones of his speech and the colour of his eyes, and even without all these (indications), by the way of the heart; for “verily, they are spies on the hearts (of men)…” In this way, the Sufi guide is understood as being a spiritual physician that is able to administer the specific antidote according to the various spiritual ills that plague different individuals.

As explored in chapter three, the primary reason why Rūmī believes that the individual is in need of a guide on the Sufi path of ‘ishq is due to the overbearing nature of the lowly self (nafs al-ʾammārah). The nafs constantly seeks to pull the individual down to a base, animalistic level of existence. Thus, throughout the Mathnawī, Rūmī beckons spiritual aspirants to recognise that the journey is too perilous to be traversed alone due to the enmity of one’s nafs and recommends: ‘Go thou, take refuge in the shadow of the Sage, that thou mayst escape from the Enemy that opposes (thee) in secret’. Thus, Rūmī is implying that although individuals may regard themselves as being unscathed by the plagues of bad character, in reality ‘it is (a case of) clear water (on the surface) and dung under the stream.’ As such, Rūmī implies that one will not be able to perceive the essence of their own nature unless they have a purified individual (the Sufi guide) who is able to show them their true self: ‘Though opinion run with its own feet for (many) years, it will not pass beyond the cleft of its own nostrils. / Say, are you seeing aught except your nose? Say, how will you see if you turn up your nose (in self-conceit)?’ The basic principle in the transformative process is the understanding that the Ultimate Self ‘cannot be approached by the efforts of the self alone, and no amount of human knowledge of the psyche can increase the awareness or the consciousness of the self which will finally

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16 Rūmī, Mathnawī, IV: 1793. Thus, Bashir points out ‘visual inspection’ serves as being a major tool in the hands of masters to decipher the spiritual states of their disciples and indicate the correct path they need to follow – a notion that becomes especially significant in the first tale of the Mathnawī and that will be explored in more depth in Chapter Eight: Rūmī’s Sufi Path of Narrative. Bashir, op. cit., p. 46.

17 Rūmī, Mathnawī, I: 2967.

18 ibid., I: 3217.

19 ibid., I: 3771-2.
lead to the Ultimate Self.' Therefore, as those who have effaced their own ego-
nature, another function of the ābūr is to serve as a mirror for the spiritual aspirant so
they may peer into the depth of their own soul. In this sense, a common image
throughout Rūmī’s work is the image of the guide as mirror: ‘(the Sūfis) are a mirror
for the soul.’ In this way, ‘the outer master is only the mirror of the “inner master”,
of the Self toward which the lower self must evolve.’ Thus, the ābūr also serves to
personalise and more importantly, humanise the religious experience: ‘If someone
should see a hundred thousand miracles and divine blessings, still, without an inner
connection to that saint or prophet who was the source of those miracles, all these
phenomena would come to nothing.’

Another equally important reason why Rūmī believes a spiritual guide is necessary on
the Sufi path is because the guide become the locus of ‘ishq, so that by loving the
guide, the individual is able to journey to loving God. Thus, Rūmī suggests that if one
wishes to become a lover, they should keep the company of lovers: ‘“Let him who
desires to sit with God sit with the Sūfis”.’ Rūmī argues that the Sufi guide can serve
as the one who instigates a burning passion for the Beloved. For Sufis, companionship
is linked intimately to conversation (ṣuḥba), and conversely, they espouse the belief
that conversation engenders companionship. Thus, Rūmī insists in the Mathnawī:
‘… companionship with (holy) men makes you one of the (holy) men. / Though you
be rock or marble, you will become a jewel when you reach the man of heart (the
saint)… Oh, give your heart food from (conversation with) one who is in accord with
it; go, seek (spiritual) advancement from one who is advanced.’ The transformative
power of association is made more explicit in the Fihi mā fīhi, in which Rūmī claims
that the restlessness of lovers to be united with their Beloved is so overwhelming that
it is contagious: ‘…even if a hypocite sits in the company of believers, under their

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20 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, The Need for a Sacred Science, State University of New York Press, New
21 Rūmī also utilises this imagery elsewhere when he remarks that ‘[t]he soul’s mirror is naught but the
face of the friend, the face of that friend who is of yonder country (the spiritual land).’ Rūmī,
Mathnawī, II: 96.
22 Eric Geoffroy, Introduction to Sufism: The Inner Path of Islam, translated by Roger Gaetani, World
23 Rūmī, Fihi mā fīhi, p. 12.
24 In classical Arabic sources, ṣuḥba has the more nuanced meaning of companionship, including
shades of fellowship and discipleship and is derived from the same root as the word sahābah
331.
influence that hypocrite can become a believer in an instant. In this way, Rūmī suggests that even associating with people genuinely overcome with passion can influence one even if they are hypocritical in their claims to love. Thus, since the spiritual guide becomes the worldly manifestation of the Beloved onto which His attributes are projected, Rūmī implies that through loving the guide, the seeker can potentially attain to loving God.

However, Rūmī also explains that none of this will be possible if the spiritual aspirant does not show sincere obedience to the Sufi guide. Thus, Rūmī insists that whenever the pīr asks something from the spiritual aspirant: ‘[t]hey must surrender in such a fashion that no matter what the saint does, they accept it without the argument of their own mind.’ He explains that this is because ‘often, with their own mind, they cannot understand the saint’s actions’. Rūmī provides a Qur’anic basis for this principle in the example of Khiḍr:

Bear patiently whatever is done by a Khizr who is without hypocrisy, in order that Khizr may not say, “Begone, this is (our) parting.” / Though he stave in the boat, do not speak a word; though he kill a child, do not tear thy hair. / God has declared that his (the Pír's) hand is as His own, since He gave out (the words) the Hand of God is above their hands. / The Hand of God causes him (the child) to die and (then) brings him to life. What of life? He makes him a spirit everlasting. / If any one, by rare exception, traversed this Way alone (without a Pír), he arrived (at his goal) through the help (and favour) of the hearts of the Pírs.

Special knowledge is, without a doubt, Khiḍr’s decisive attribute. Since he represents esoteric, mystical knowledge, Khiḍr is of great importance in the history of Sufism, for which he functions as ‘the epitome of the spiritual guide.’ Rūmī’s allusion to Khiḍr is a reference to an intriguing narrative in the Qur’ān in which it is revealed to

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26 Rūmī, Fihi mā fihi, p. 403.
27 This process is the Sufi spiritual discipline known as Fanā’ fi ʿsh-shaykh where the personality of the murid is absorbed into the personality of the Shaykh. Ideally, this eventually leads to annihilation in the Prophet and ultimately, annihilation in God. Annemarie Schimmel, Mystical Dimensions of Islam, The University of North Carolina Press, North Carolina, 1975, p. 237.
28 Rūmī, Fihi mā fihi, p. 102.
29 ibid.
30 Rūmī, Mathnawī, I: 2970-4.
Moses to seek one who the Qur’ān describes as ‘… one of Our servants– a man to whom We had granted Our mercy and whom We had given knowledge of Our own.’ When they meet, Moses requests to accompany him on his journey, but Khiḍr shows reluctance since he has reservations about whether Moses will have patience with him. As they proceed, Khiḍr performs three actions that Moses deems morally untenable: He scuttles a ship, murders a boy, and rebuilds a wall for people of questionable character. At each juncture, Moses criticises Khiḍr’s actions, until Khiḍr has had enough: he explains himself but then Moses is left on his own, which in Sufi tradition, becomes symbolic of losing the spiritual guide due to a lack of patience. It is often highlighted amongst Sufis that God caused Moses to be in need of Khiḍr, even though he was not a prophet so as to teach that: ‘Above every knower there is a greater knower.’ Since Khiḍr himself is considered a walī among Sufis, Rūmī’s references to him almost always serve to make a connection with the awliyāʾ as well as the relationship expected between the disciple and the spiritual guide: ‘When the Pir has accepted thee, take heed, surrender thyself (to him): go, like Moses, under the authority of Khizr.’ Thus, through the example of Khiḍr, it is understood that God sanctifies whatever the awliyāʾ does because they act not through their own volition, but through the direct intervention of God, and for this reason, Rūmī argues that the spiritual aspirant must similarly heed to the demands of the Sufi guide.

However, weary of the corruptions inherent to human nature, Rūmī also frequently warns against the perils of becoming a victim to false guides or Sufis who mimic the true spiritual guides. For example, one section of the Mathnawī is dedicated to explaining ‘[h]ow disciples (novices in Sūfism) are beguiled in their need by false impostors and imagine them to be Shaykhs and venerable personages and (saints) united (with God), and do not know the difference between fact (naqd) and fiction (naql) and between what is tied on (artificially) and what has grown up (naturally).’ Recognising that there are many principles in Sufism that are very easily manipulated into certain cultic control mechanisms, Rūmī warns that the danger with many Sufi “guides” is that they are intimately familiar with the work of the awliyāʾ and use their terminology and practices to lure the naïve and gullible to serve their own aims:

32 Qur’ān, 18: 65.
31 Qur’ān, 12: 76.
34 Rūmī, Mathnawī, I: 2969.
35 Rūmī, Mathnawī, I: 2263.
Many learned the language of (true) dervishes and gave lustre therewith to the pulpit and assembly-place. / Either nothing was bestowed upon them except those (formal) expressions, or at last (the Divine) mercy came and revealed the (right) way.56 Therefore, Rūmī claims that on rare occasions, if the disciple is genuinely sincere on their quest for the Beloved, they are sometimes able to reach their spiritual goals despite the manipulations and falsehood of the fraudulent guide.

5.2 The Lovers of God: Walāyah in the thought of Rūmī

Within the technical terminology of the Sufis, the reunion with the Beloved that Rūmī’s poetry is preoccupied with rests on the notion of walāyah which is usually translated into English as either “Sainthood” or “Friendship with God,” while the wali (pl. awliyā’), who has acquired such sanctity by experiencing God’s presence continually, is “the Saint” or “lover of God.”37 The Arabic root, besides meaning “friend” also possesses the meaning of dominion or power, one of the root meanings of wali is “closeness”, along with “activity appropriate for closeness” whereby designating both the state and the stages to it.38 Nor is walāyah a novel idea, but has its origin in the sacred text itself.39 However, in the specific context of Sufism, the term has come to signify sanctity as well as initiatic power and is understood as being the closest relationship an individual can have with the Divine.40 In this sense, the term usually refers to a category of people between the prophets and the ordinary faithful. Although through consensus, many figures have been revered within the Muslim community as having enjoyed the love and protection of God, exactly how this walāyah is to be attained in practice, remains a controversial subject among Muslims. Therefore, the meaning of walāyah – understood as spiritual governance or

56 Rūmī, Mathnawī, V: 1443-4.
37 Mojaddedi’s preferred term is “friends of God” and is very much aligned with his overall view of wilāyah in Sufism and specifically, the works of Rūmī. Jawid Mojaddedi, Beyond Dogma: Rumi’s Teachings on Friendship with God and Early Sufi Theories, Oxford University Press, Inc., New York, 2012, p. 3.
38 As Chittick has also pointed out, although wali is often translated as “saint” in English, this can be somewhat problematic because of its strong Christian connotations. In Christianity, it is usually the church that designates saints whereas in the Islamic context, various figures have been considered awliyā’ by various sections of the Muslim community and there is still considerable discussion about their identity. William C. Chittick, Divine Love: Islamic Literature and the Path to God, Yale University Press, Connecticut, 2013, p. xxvi.
guardianship – is not simply about spirituality and practice but relates, at its core, to more polemical discussions about spiritual legitimacy as well as religious authority.

When it comes to the identity of the awliyā’, Rūmī remarks on the hidden type of wali, in an extensive passage in the Fīhi ma Fīhī: in which he explains that there are the elect among the awliyā’ who have achieved reunion with the Beloved through the path of ‘ishq and these select individuals are called the ‘Veiled Ones of God’ and those “saints” who are lower on the spiritual hierarchy ‘are ever pleading humbly, “Oh Lord God, show us one of Thy Veiled Ones.”41 Rūmī insists that the reason why most people fail to recognise the awliyā’ is due to the nature of their own lowly nafs – specifically their envy, which prevents them from accepting the spiritual magnitude of those who seemingly appear no different from them. Rūmī explains that this is also essentially why people refused prophets:

Fools venerate the mosque and endeavour to destroy them that have the heart (in which God dwells). / That (mosque) is phenomenal, this (heart) is real, O asses! The (true) mosque is naught but the hearts of the (spiritual) captains. / The mosque that is the inward (consciousness) of the saints is the place of worship for all: God is there. / Until the heart of the man of God was grieved, never did God put any generation to shame. / They were going to make war on the prophets: they saw the body (of the prophet), they supposed he was a man. / In thee are the moral natures of those peoples of yore: how art not thou afraid lest thou be the same (as they)? / Forasmuch as all those marks are in thee, and thou art (one) of them, how wilt thou be saved?42

Rūmī suggests that in the case of Muslims, ‘the grandeur of the Prophet has become established, none feels envy (of him), since he is accepted (by all the Faithful).’43 However, Rūmī reveals that in every epoch following the departure of the Prophet, ‘a saint arises (to act as his vicegerent)’ and this trial of the people (their ability to recognise and heed to the call of divinely ordained figures) will continue till the day of resurrection.44 Thus, Rūmī explains the existence of the “Qutb” (the spiritual axis or pole): ‘the gnostic united with God45 who not only continues the prophetic role of

41 Rūmī, Fīhi mā fīhī, p. 160.
42 Rūmī, Mathnawī, II: 3109-15.
43 ibid., II: 814.
44 ibid., II: 815.
45 ibid., V: 2328.
spiritual guidance, but also acts as the means through which God trials the people. Rūmī compares the Qutb to the “heart” of humanity: ‘These partial (individual) hearts are as the body in relation to the heart of the man of heart (the perfect saint), which is the original source’\(^ {46}\) and adds that the ‘theatre of God is the heart’ of the Qutb: ‘Therefore he is the heart of the world, because by means of this heart the body attains to (its proper) art (function).’\(^ {47}\) Rūmī also compares the Qutb to a lion, explaining that he “hunts” for the spiritual prey and that ‘the ecstasies (spiritual experiences) of the people are (only) his leavings.’\(^ {48}\) Meaning that he serves as the intermediary through which God disperses his spiritual gifts to all others. In this sense, Rūmī implies that ‘Sufi masters are the representative of the esoteric function of the Prophet of Islam and by the same token the theophany of Divine Mercy which lends itself to those willing to turn to it.’\(^ {49}\) Unsurprisingly, Rūmī was aware that his views on the Qutb would be received with controversy by the more exoteric-minded of the scholars and therefore, weary of censure, he adds that although ‘This argument wants much illustration and exposition, but I fear lest the opinion of the vulgar should stumble (and fall into error), / (And) lest my goodness should be turned (by them) to badness’.\(^ {50}\) His statement seems to imply that he fears those who are literal-minded, or the scholars of the exoteric who are not privy to mystical realities, may impute the Qutb with divinity whereby falling into blasphemy.\(^ {51}\)

Furthermore, according to Rūmī, the awliyā’ are considered to be pure instruments carrying out the will of their Beloved. This idea is supported in a Prophetic tradition – a favourite among Sufis – in which God proclaims that his servant draws closer to him through supererogatory acts till He loves the servant after which, ‘I am his hearing with which he hears, his seeing with which he sees, his hand with which he strikes and his foot with which he walks.’\(^ {52}\) Rūmī suggests that when the heart is ‘purged of sensuality’, it becomes the ‘throne’ of the Beloved who is able to control it

\(^{46}\) ibid., II: 2939.
\(^{47}\) ibid., II: 836.
\(^{48}\) ibid., V: 2342.
\(^{50}\) Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, II: 840-1.
\(^{51}\) Thus, excusing himself from liability, Rūmī adds ‘even this that I have spoken was (from) naught but selflessness.’ ibid., 841
‘without intermediary, since the heart has attained to this relation (with Him).’\textsuperscript{53} Thus, in referring to the \textit{awliyā}, Rûmî proclaims: ‘In the hands of Reality, they are shields—but the shield doesn’t move under its own power. Thus the saints say, “I am the Truth,” meaning, “I am nothing at all, I move by the Hand of God.” Look upon such shields as God. Do not take up violence against God.’\textsuperscript{54} As such, \textit{walāya} implies that the individual has purified themselves of all otherness and reached the state of \textit{fanā}’ (annihilation) in God; thus, Rûmî describes them as the “shadow of God” who is ‘dead to this world and living through God’; that he is ‘without a burden and is like a bow in the hand (a mere instrument) in receiving (the command of) God.’\textsuperscript{55} In this state, Rûmî implies the experience of unity with God enables the \textit{walī} to become a pure receptacle and instrument of God. In this way, Rûmî views the \textit{awliyā}’ and specifically the \textit{Qutb} as the spiritual \textit{khalīfah} who acts as an intermediary through which God draws others to Himself. In this respect, Rûmî frequently insists on the hierarchal structure within the notion of \textit{wilāyah} that has sometimes been invisible from any kind of institutionalised manifestations or Sufi “orders”:

He is as the Light (of Mohammed), and (Universal) Reason is his Gabriel; the saint that is lesser than he is his lamp (and receives illumination from him). / That (saint) who is lesser than this lamp is our lamp-niche: the Light has gradations in degree, Because the Light of God has seven hundred veils: regard the veils of the Light as so many tiers. / Behind each veil a certain class (of saints) has its place of abode: these veils of theirs are (in ascending order), rank by rank, up to the Imám.’\textsuperscript{56}

This image of the Prophet as light is also anticipated in the Qur’ān, where he is called “a light-giving lamp”.\textsuperscript{57} Thus, according to Rûmî, the \textit{Qutb} – the spiritual pivot who

\textsuperscript{53} Rûmî, \textit{Mathnawī}, I: 3666.

\textsuperscript{54} There is an allusion here to the notorious invocation of \textit{Mansûr-e Hallâj}, which led to his persecution as well as the opening line of the aforementioned hadîth in which God begins by declaring: ‘Whosoever shows enmity to someone devoted to Me, I shall be at war with him.’

\textsuperscript{55} Rûmî, \textit{Mathnawī}, III: 1789.

\textsuperscript{56} This doctrine may seem at first, to bare some resemblance to the Shia doctrine of the Imamate, which is also comparison made by Seyed Ghahehrman Safavi in \textit{Rûmî’s Spiritual Shi’ism}, London Academy of Iranian Studies Press, London, 2008. However, at a doctrinal level, Rûmî makes sure to clarify that he differs from the Shia concept of divinely ordained hereditary leadership: ‘That saint, then, is the living Imam who arises (in every age), whether he be a descendant of ‘Umar or of ‘Ali. / He is the Mahdi (the God-guided one) and the Hâdi (the Guide).’ \textit{Mathnawī}, II: 817-8.

\textsuperscript{57} Qur’ān, 33: 46.
sustains the spiritual universe with the aid of a hierarchy of saints – is also the heir of the prophet, as well as the living archetype of the Prophetic ideal.\footnote{Elsewhere, Rūmī compares the “light” of the Prophet to the primordial light: ‘When a lamp has derived (its) light from a candle, every one that sees it (the lamp) certainly sees the candle. / If transmission (of the light) occurs in this way till a hundred lamps (are lighted), the seeing of the last (lamp) becomes a meeting with the original (light). / Either take with (all) thy soul from the hindmost light—there is no difference—or from the candelabrum. / Either behold the light (of God) from the lamp of the last (saints), or behold His light from the candle of those who have gone before.’ Rūmī, \textit{Mathnawī}, I: 1947-50. This notion highlights the principle of “The Reality of Muḥammad" (ḥaqīqa Muḥammad) in Rūmī’s thought, which is not only a significant principle in Sufism, but also one of the most important concepts, especially in the philosophy of Ibn ‘Arabī in which it is intimately tied in with his concept of the Perfect Human Being (\textit{insān al-kāmil}); thus, ‘combining both a cosmic and a revelatory function that is inherited by the prophets and, eventually, the Sufi saints.’ Carl W. Ernst, ‘Muḥammad as the pole of existence’ in Jonathan E. Brockopp ed., \textit{The Cambridge Companion to Muḥammad}, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2010, p. 128.}

5.3 Conclusion

In the tradition of Islam and especially through the Sufi approach, the human self or, \textit{nafs}, is described according to its stage of spiritual development where, in light of the Qur’ān, a whole science of the soul has been developed based on the progressive perfection and transformation of the self of the human being towards the Self of God through the mystical reunion (through \textit{fanā’} and \textit{baqā’}). The pinnacle of this process is represented in the \textit{awliyā’}. Thus, Rūmī’s notion of \textit{walāya} can be understood as signifying as initiatic power as well as the closest relationship an individual can have with the Divine. In this sense, Rūmī implies that the \textit{awliyā’} (the “\textit{qutb}” being the highest figure in this spiritual hierarchy), are representative of the esoteric function of the Prophet. Furthermore, for Rūmī, \textit{walāya} necessarily implies that the individual has purified themselves of all otherness and reached the state of \textit{fanā’} (annihilation) and continue to subsist in God. To this degree, according to Rūmī, the \textit{awliyā’} are considered to be pure instruments that are carrying out the will of God. As such, according to Rūmī, the Sufi guide – call them what you may – is essentially one who is experienced on the path – so much so – that they have become one with the path.

Therefore, according to Sufi teachings, the path of ‘\textit{ishq} can only be undertaken and traversed under the guidance of a spiritual master: someone who has already traversed the stages of the path to God and who has; moreover, been chosen to lead others on the way. In this respect, the Sufi guide ultimately serves to offer spiritual reconfiguration to those consumed by the notion of having a separate self. Therefore,
Rūmī contends that the *awliyāʾ* are waiting to bring individuals (under the influence of their *nafs*) to their own station. For this reason, Rūmī explains that it is only ‘the Pir full of wisdom, well-acquainted with the Way’,⁵⁹ that is able to offer the spiritual guidance necessary for the individual to reach higher forms of consciousness or existence through *ishq*. Thus, Rūmī proclaims that in the case of the practitioners of Sufism, one can only hope to attain a purified self (*nafs*) that maintains the highest of moral principles under the guidance of an experienced spiritual guide.

⁵⁹ Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, I: 3220
PART II:

The Mathnawī as a Sufi Text

Rūmī begins the Mathnawī by clarifying its subject matter, proclaiming that it is the usūl usūl usūl ad-Dīn (the roots of the roots of the roots of the Islamic Religion).\(^1\) This thrice repetition of usūl (root/foundation), has been commonly identified as referring to the three dimensions of Islamic faith: the first being the sharīʿah, the second being the tarīqah and the third being ḥaqīqah.\(^2\) The implication is that you cannot recognise the tarīqah without the sharīʿah, but nor can you reach ḥaqīqah without the tarīqah and in the thought of Rūmī, all three roots are inspired by ‘ishq and the perpetual longing for the Beloved. In other words, Rūmī is suggesting that Reality can only be attained through the Sufi path (specifically his own sufi path of ‘ishq), which is the internal dimensions of the Islamic faith; however, this path lies within and is made apparent through its external form – the various prohibitions and ritual acts that together comprise the Sharīʿah. In this sense, Rūmī suggests that the Mathnawī is a text which unifies all aspects of the deen (religion), so the individual is able to experience tawhīd for themselves: ‘There is a different (kind of) commerce for every store: the Mathnawi is the store for (spiritual) poverty, O son…Our Mathnawi is the store of Unity: whatever you see besides the Oneness (of God), (know that) it is an idol.’\(^3\) Therefore, if we were to attempt to identify the essence of Sufi literature for Rūmī, it would be quite natural to suggest that like the essence of everything else, the literary essence is an extension of God’s essence. However, even if one upholds an anti-essentialist view of literature – that is to say, the belief that what is deemed to be “literary” has no essential properties or shared commonalities – this does not invalidate the potential for literary efficacy – whether the source is regarded as human or divine.

The Qur’ān naturally holds the place of the archetypal text within the Rūmī’s Sufi literary tradition. To this degree, it is viewed as the primordial text encompassing all other texts and meanings – especially when considered through its pre-language form

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\(^1\) Rūmī, Mathnawī, I: Arabic preface.


\(^3\) Rūmī, Mathnawī, VI: 125-8.
The first part of this thesis focused on the various beliefs underlying Rûmî’s Sufi path of ‘ishq – especially the primacy of love in his Sufism, the metaphysical scheme underlying his concept of the human self, his experiential idea of knowledge, as well as his belief in the need for a spiritual guide. The second part of this thesis will focus on the concept of literature in the thought of a maghab-i ʾishq Sufi such as Rûmî. This will mean carefully analysing not only the literary structures inherent within his work (specifically the Mathnawī), but also identifying how the Mathnawī’s literary elements relate and are informed by Rûmî’s Sufi thought. As such, the second part of this thesis is dedicated to laying out the groundwork for a literary approach to Rûmî’s works by exploring questions relating to the distinguishing aspects underlying Rûmî’s Mathnawī as an example of a Sufi text. Since Rûmî did not present his views on any of the above categories in a systematic fashion, the following chapters offer a

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4 The lawh al-mahfūz is mentioned in the Qurʾān, 85: 21-2, ‘Nay, this is a Glorious Qurʾān, / (Inscribed) in a Tablet Preserved!’ It has been interpreted as a book of fate as well as being identified with Qurʾānic revelation. Elsewhere in the Qurʾān, the lawḥ al-mahfūz is also referred to as the “Mother of the Book” Qurʾān, 43: 3-4.
6 ibid.,
7 Rûmî, Mathnawī, I: 529.
8 Braginsky, loc. cit.
synthesis of material from Rūmī’s works that help us understand his thoughts on the broader questions prompted by literary inquiry such as genre, the author, text and the reader.
Chapter Six:

Exploring the Mathnawī through Genre

I have exerted myself to give length to the Poem in Rhymed Couplets, which comprises strange tales and rare sayings and excellent discourses and precious indications, and the path of the ascetics and the garden of the devotees brief in expression but manifold in meaning— at the request of my master and stay and support.

One way in which literary form can be imagined is through the concept of genre as a category of literary composition. In his comprehensive introduction to genre theory, John Frow describes Genres as ‘the frames that establish appropriate ways of reading or viewing or listening to texts… made up of material and formal features, a particular thematic structure, a situation of address which mobilises a set of rhetorical purposes, and a more general structure of implication.’ Although there has been little exploration of the Mathnawī in terms of genre, I feel this is an important consideration because as Frow has pointed out, ‘Genre analysis is not about classification but about interpretation and use’, which is to say that ‘Assigning a text to a particular genre is a step in deciding how to interpret it.’ Therefore, the aim of this chapter is to explore some of the genres through which the Mathnawī can be understood in an attempt to better understand how Rūmī viewed it, as well as how he intended it to be read. Thus, this chapter begins with an exploration of the Mathnawī as a unique example within the genre of Persian Sufi literature. Next, this chapter considers the Mathnawī’s significance within the genre of Qur’ānic literature that is, literature that is inspired by, or cites the Qur’ān as its source as well as how it can also be positioned in relation to the genre of tafsīr (Qur’ānic commentary). Finally, this chapter considers Rūmī’s view of the Mathnawī as sacred literature – that which has been divinely inspired by God.

9 Rūmī, Mathnawī, I: Arabic preface.
10 John Frow, Genre, Routledge, Oxon, 2015, p. 31.
11 ibid., p. 133.
6.1 The *Mathnawī* as Persian Sufi Literature

On his thorough work on Persian poetry, de Bruijn explains how this grand corpus, which is vast and filled with a variety of metric patterns and thematic traits, usually favours an intense engagement with metaphor and symbolism. On this point, Braginsky has observed the function of analogy and parallelism as well as the tendency of symbols linking the microcosmic human with the macrocosmic in Sufi literature – for example the image of the mole on the beloved which symbolised the Divine Essence in its transcendental aspect, whereas the Face corresponds to the Essence in its immanent aspect – including the image of the Beloved’s mole.\(^{12}\) This is one example of the symbolism that pervades the *Mathnawī*, where, in a particularly enigmatic passage hinting at the doctrine of *wahdat al-wujūd*, Rūmī proclaims that ‘[t]he beauty of His state cannot be set forth: what are both the worlds (temporal and spiritual)? The reflexion of His mole.’\(^{13}\) De Bruijn suggests that initially, this type of symbolic poetry was almost entirely a matter of the medieval Persian courts and therefore, essentially a secular tradition; however, in the advent of Persian Sufism, many forms of court poetry was adapted to suit their own ends, so much so, that ‘distinguishing the two became vague.’\(^{14}\) Rouhi also explains that this is because many Persian poems straddle at once with the universes of profane and divine love thus, allowing interpretations of a worldly and religious type at the same time so that the ‘capacity for double application, which leads to a vital ambiguity, is one of the hallmarks of Classical Persian poetry.’\(^{15}\) For example, reinterpreting the imagery of the *khamriyyat* (wine poems), which extolled the virtues of wine and praised the pleasures of drinking, when viewed as a system of symbols, is often describing the states and stages of mystical love. As such, the fusion between the secular and the mystical in Persian ghazals has become such an essential characteristic that, in most instances, it is extremely difficult to make a proper distinction between the two.\(^{16}\) On this point, Rūmī constantly reminds his readers that they need to perceive beyond the symbols in the *Mathnawī* if they wish to understand and appreciate its contents. For

\(^{12}\) ibid.

\(^{13}\) *Mathnawī*, II: 191.


\(^{16}\) de Bruijn, op. cit., p. 55.
example, in the *Mathnawī*, somewhat vexed, Rūmī exclaims, ‘God, God! When the gnostic speaks of “wine,” how in the gnostic’s eyes should the (materially) nonexistent be a (material) thing? / Since your understanding is (only of) the Devil’s wine, how should you have any conception of the wine of the Merciful (God)?’

On this point, de Bruijn points out that ‘[t]he decision whether a given poem should be called a Sufi ghazal or a profane love song very often does not depend so much on the poem itself, but on what we know about its writer, that is, the answer to the question: does the life of the poet provide us with clues of a mystical affiliation, or is the poet only known as a court poet? In this sense, another problem is encountered when one attempts to relegate Rūmī to the ubiquitous genre of “Mystical Literature” for, as Nelson has pointed out, ‘a loose definition of mysticism can accommodate any poetry celebrating intuitive knowledge’ – which, including Rūmī, nearly all poetry does. However, the same discourse that blurs the distinction between spiritual and worldly love is also an illustration of the problem with simply labeling the *Mathnawī* as “Persian Literature” (which it is undeniably an exquisite example of), since there are numerous examples of literatures that are written in Persian but cannot really be considered to be “Sufi” literature. Therefore, despite its commonalities with other types of “mystical literature”, the *Mathnawī*’s significance cannot be fully appreciated unless it is recognised for its qualities as a Sufi work within the Persian literary tradition.

The region of Khorasan, which until this century encompassed Eastern Iran, Transoxiana and much of present-day Afghanistan, came to be known ‘as the land whose product is saints’ because of the number of mystics and sages who had been born there. During the second half of the 11th and the first half of the 12th centuries, probably the most significant development to take place in the Sufism of Khorasan was the evolution and coming to the force of the mystical doctrines of love which was accompanied by the emergence of Persian as a language for mystical discourse. Therefore, by the time of Rūmī’s appearance on the stage, Sufism had achieved a “dominating position” in Persian literature whereas the *Mathnawī* became

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representative of the apex of didactical tradition in Persian literature.\textsuperscript{20} In attempting to answer why this development took place, Nasr argues that it was in fact, Islamic spirituality that ‘caused the poetic dimension of the Persian soul to flower as never before’\textsuperscript{21} and for this reason, he argues that this literature ‘represents at once what is most universal in Persian culture and what is most universal in Islam.’\textsuperscript{22} Therefore, remarking on the notion of Sufi literature, Nasr points out that ‘Persian Sufi literature occupies a unique position not only in the history of Persia but in the whole of Islamic civilization.’\textsuperscript{23} In this vein, Nasr argues that the understanding of Persian Sufi literature ‘necessarily demands a comprehension of the effect that the inner meaning of the Koran and the spirituality of the Prophet had upon the soul of the Persians.’\textsuperscript{24} In terms of its overall content, Nasr points out that much of Persian Sufi Literature (or Sufi Literature more broadly) is associated with the Spiritual Path and all that is involved therein. He suggests this is why most of Sufi literature, even its poetry, seems to deal with ethics, ‘not so much with what to do and what not to do, but with an ethics which is internalized, that is to say, concerned with the transformation of man’s entire being – for without becoming a new being one cannot see things in a new way.’\textsuperscript{25} p. 3 Nasr also suggests that another important category of the content of Sufi literature is doctrine, that is to say, Metaphysics, Cosmology, Eschatology, Psychology and Philosophy as these terms are understood in their traditional context and adds, ‘One could say that this literature contains, albeit not necessarily in a systematic way, the complete doctrine concerning the nature of reality.’\textsuperscript{26} However, Nasr suggests that what is particularly interesting in the context of Sufi Literature is that ‘this body of literature represents perhaps our most important source for the


\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., p. 2.


\textsuperscript{24} ibid., p. 2.

\textsuperscript{25} ibid. p. 3.

\textsuperscript{26} ibid. p. 4
understanding of the inner meaning of the sacred history of mankind as seen through the eyes of Islam.\(^{27}\)

If expanding upon Rūmī’s literary tradition further, it is necessary to point out that the greatest Sufi poets who created the influential poems all lived during a period roughly corresponding to the European Middle Ages.\(^{28}\) In his exploration of Persian Sufi poetry, de Bruijn points out that until the twentieth century, when it was significantly modernised under Western influence, Persian poetry was a highly formalised artistic tradition. To write a poem meant, in the first place, to apply certain unchangeable rules covering prosody, imagery and the use of rhetorical devices.\(^{29}\) The distinction between lyrical and epic forms, familiar to the Western reader of poetry, is also often applied to Persian literature, where the meanings given to this pair of terms is more or less that of “shorter” and “longer” kinds of poetry. To the former belongs the various types of poems such as the ghazal which include works such as Rūmī’s Diwān-i Kabīr whereas in the latter category, there is only form to be considered: the one which Persians have coined the mathnawī genre using, as in the case of the rubā‘ī, an Arabic term for a form of poetry which is highly characteristic of their own tradition. Considering that the Mathnawī (extensive poem of rhyming couplets), is titled after the form of its composition, it is also worth considering the broader mathnawī genre from which it emerged and which is now almost always used as an exclusive epithet for Rūmî’s magnum opus. De Bruijn explains that the distinctive prosodical feature of mathnawī poems is the internal rhyme of all distichs, which changes with each following line. The form, therefore, is comparable to an English poem in rhyming couplets – the last one repeating the rhyme of the first.\(^{30}\) However, the “couplet” (Persian bayt) is in fact double the length of most European lines, so the poem is equivalent to one of well over 50,000 lines: almost as many as Homer’s Iliad and Odyssey together, twice as many as Dante’s Divina Commedia and five times as many as Milton’s Paradise Lost.\(^{31}\) Furthermore, as de Bruijn also points out, the

\(^{27}\) ibid., p. 5 However, Nasr is also careful to point out that it is important, ‘not to confuse this incredible theophanic beauty, which is Persian Sufi poetry, with Sufism itself, which is really quite something else. The two are closely related, but the latter does not necessitate the existence of the former.’ This point is especially significant considering many of the most renowned Sufi figures had little to no works attributed to their name. Nasr, op. cit., p. 6.

\(^{28}\) ibid., p. 2.

\(^{29}\) de Bruijn, op. cit., p. 96.

\(^{30}\) ibid., p. 3.

fundamental trait of Persian narrative and didactical poetry had a great influence on the development of specifically mystical poetry in the mathnawī poems. In his exploration of “Genres” in Persian literature, Utas explains that outside of the realm of texts that were composed – orally or in writing – in elaborate style, according to the rules of rhetoric and, when applicable, metrics, lay not only the field of popular verses and songs but also that of narrative prose, which was generally passed on orally.32 Due to this narrative background, many of the great works written by mystical poets are also ‘masterpieces of narrative art’ as well as generally being more accessible to modern readers than the lyrical forms of mystical poetry.33 For example, the use of the device of a frame story; a device that came to Persia from India in the late Sasanian period with the translation of collections of fables such as the Kalila wa Dimna, occupies the most prominent place and is also cited as a source by Rūmī throughout his Mathnawī.34 Commenting on this work in her seminal study of mystical poetry, Annemarie Schimmel claims how these fables, ascribed to Bidpal, were translated into Arabic in the late 8th century, and formed one of the most important sources of inspiration for Muslim scholars, poets and mystics who used the fables of animals’ behaviour to elucidate their theories.35 In this sense, the use of the narrative genre that is prevalent throughout Persian Sufi literature is also one of the most salient features of Rūmī’s Mathnawī.

It is also worth considering the Mathnawī in reference to the literary greats who inspired Rūmī within the Sufi tradition. Two figures maintain undeniable significance: Hakim Abul-Majd Majdūd ibn Ādam Sanāʿī Ghaznavi (1080-1131/41), known simply as Sanāʿī, and Abū Ḥamīd bin Abū Bakr Ibrāhīm (1145-1220) better known by his pen-names Farīd ud-Dīn and ʿAṭṭār. Sanai’s poetry is considered to have had a tremendous influence upon Persian literature. He is considered the first poet to use the qasidah (ode), ghazal (lyric), as well as the mathnawī form (rhymed couplet) to express the philosophical, mystical and ethical ideas of Sufism. His masterwork and

31 de Bruijn, op. cit., p. 86.
34 ibid., p. 85.
the first Persian mystical epic of Sufism, *Hādīqat al-ḥaqīqat* (*The Walled Garden of Truth*), expresses the poet’s ideas on God, love, philosophy and reason and is described by Schimmel as ‘a storehouse of Ṣufi lore’ that ‘contains numerous anecdotes known from earlier prose sources.’  

ʿAttār is the other key figure in terms of the literary tradition from which Rūmī emerged. Regardless of its veracity, the link between the two figures is captured in an ancient anecdote that reports Rūmī and his father had visited the aged poet ʿAttār in Nishapur when, about 1215, they journeyed from their native town of Balkh. On that occasion, it is believed ʿAttār had presented the young Rūmī with a copy of his *Aṣrār-nāmā*.  

As, de Bruijn has remarked, regardless of whether or not the tale is factual or the product of pious fantasy, ‘there is certainly an element of truth in the story as it confirms the indubitable fact of ʿAttār’s impact on Jalāl ad-Dīn’s own contribution to the tradition of the didactical *masnavī*.’  

Following in Sanāʿī’s example, ʿAttār’s mystical epics dealt with the development of the human soul on its pilgrimage toward God until the seeker discovers his/her identity with the Divine. For example, his most well-known work, *Mantiq-ut-Ṭayr* (*The Conference of the Birds*) is a long poem of approximately 4500 lines which charts the tale about all the birds of the world gathering to decide who is to be their king. The hoopoe, the wisest of them all, suggests that they should find the legendary Simorgh, a mythical Persian bird roughly equivalent to the western phoenix. The tale is identified as being allegorical in nature since each bird represents a human fault that prevents one from attaining enlightenment. The birds must cross seven valleys in order to find the Simorgh: *Talab* (Yearning), ʿ*Ishq* (Love), *Maʿrifah* (Mystical Knowledge/Gnosis), *Istighnah* (Detachment), *Tawheed* (Unity of God), *Hayrat* (Bewilderment) and, finally, *Fuqur* and *Fanāʾ* (Selflessness and Oblivion in God). These also represent the stations that a Sufī or any individual must pass through to realise the true nature of God. When the group of thirty birds finally reaches the dwelling place of the Simorgh, all they find is a lake in which they see their own reflection. At this point, is the revelation of ʿAttār’s ingenious pun on the words *Simorgh* (the mysterious bird in Iranian mythology often referenced symbolically in Sufi literature) and *si-morgh*, literally meaning “thirty birds” in Persian. As the birds realise this truth, the tale concludes with them reaching the station of *Baqā*.

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36 ibid., pp. 52-3.
37 Quoted in: de Bruijn, op. cit., p. 108.
38 ibid.,
(Subsistence), which sits atop the Qaf Mountain. Therefore, as well as being a precursor to the literary tradition that Rūmī would eventually come to lead, 'Aṭṭār also shared the Sufi tradition to which Rūmī belonged. In terms of their overall influence, Schimmel argues that although Sanā‘ī was the greater revered, both were Rūmī’s ‘spiritual masters’ although she does consider Rūmī to be ‘in a class by himself.’

This is probably not only due to the content of his works, but also his prowess for cleverly appropriating familiar symbols and styles in vigorously new ways. This is especially noticeable in the Mathnawi’s stylistic composition, but more on this later.

It is also worth reflecting briefly on Rūmī’s preference for didactic narrative in conveying his mystical truths. Rūmī uses several terms to refer to narrative such as dāstān (story), qissa (fable), ḥikāyat (tale) and afsāna (legend). Utas suggests that many of these forms of literature were held in low regard in Persian literary culture ‘unless they were adapted and integrated into literary works of high standing.’ As such, Muslim litterateurs had a deep appreciation of narrative (ḥikāyat) as a literary form, where the employment of narrative as a pedagogical device became an important aspect of the work of Sufi authors. Similarly, Moosa has pointed out that narratives have been the preferred medium for numerous mystics because they bridge the gap between fiction and life since ‘[n]arrative understanding not only anchors our living experience but also locates us within multiple symbolic systems.’ Nor does the fictional nature of the work particularly matter to Rūmī, at one point he remarks ‘Here is a tale, (be it) true or false, to illustrate (these) truths.’

It is also interesting to consider the stylistic properties of the Mathnawi’s tales. Sometimes narrative works are differentiated according to what might be identified as “character-driven” works (what might also be called the psychological novel) the actions and reactions of its character, as well as their intellectual, emotional and metaphysical journey become the locus of significance. Then there is what might be

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40 Schimmel, op. cit., p. 36.
41 Utas, loc. cit.
44 Rūmī, Mathnawi, II: 1046.
called a “plot driven” work, which are usually identifiable through the sequence of events that propels the narrative forward, characters are usually secondary in these works. In contrast, there is also what might be considered “world-driven” works; in which there are usually elaborate settings in which the ideas, themes and ontological framework (world), of the work becomes the basis of understanding its meanings and symbols.\(^{45}\) Obviously, not all works can be delineated and placed into such neat categories and there is much scope for cross-fertilisation in relation to genre. However, when we try to consider the *Mathnawī* in relation to some of these more conventional and recognisable models, we encounter great difficulty. As one of the longest poems in existence, Rūmī’s *Mathnawī* seems to have no overarching narrative structure. For example, in contrast to Sanā‘ī and ‘Aṭṭār, Rūmī does not provide any overarching narrative frame for the *Mathnawī*. Rūmī’s seemingly meandering tales are taken up and cast aside and in this sense, the *Mathnawī* can be described as having a dynamic rather than a thematic structure in which you have to surrender your desire for linearity. In fact, the identity of the speaker and addressee(s) often shifts implicitly, without obvious boundary, so that what begins as a soliloquy or address by a character becomes a more encompassing meditation or address by the poet-persona. Mills points out how Rūmī’s ‘meditative-interpretive utterances, melding with or interrupting the voices of his characters, at frequent intervals overwhelm the narrative threads he does establish.’\(^{46}\) She furthers that this manner of interweaving narration and interpretation is also in strong contrast to the *Kalīla wa Dimna* ‘where the narrative clearly provides the matrix for interpretation, and not the other way around’.\(^{47}\) Furthermore, there is very limited character development within the *Mathnawī*’s various tales – often, we know almost nothing about the character’s personality, flaws or even their physical appearance, except if it is important to the narrative-plot. The characters range from people, animals to ‘moaning pillars’.\(^{48}\) On the other hand, the lack of a complex character backstory makes it easier for readers to project themselves into the narrative since Rūmī does not allow his readers to passively divulge the narrative but rather, forces them to participate in the world of

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\(^{47}\) ibid., p. 141.

\(^{48}\) For example: Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, I: 2112.
the Mathnawī, through which, he offers his readers a glimpse into their own complex spiritual-psychology.

Furthermore, in his examination of genre, Frow explains how genres define a set of expectations that guide our engagement with a text which are structured as cues which frame a text in particular ways, and which may take a particular material form.⁴⁹ In this sense, the Mathnawī, might be considered what be called an “intention-driven” work where, various literary materials are utilised to promulgate authorial-action. This point is also significant in terms of Rūmī’s specific input within the genre of Persian Sufi Literature especially if we consider the “textual cues” he provides for his readers and are most recognisable in his frequent authorial interjections that are dispersed throughout the Mathnawī.⁵⁰ Also telling are Rūmī’s prefaces accompanying each book of the Mathnawī. For example, in the preface to the first volume, Rūmī claims that ‘in the view of the possessors of (mystical) stations and (Divine) graces, it (the Mathnawī) is best as a station and most excellent as a (spiritual) resting-place.’⁵¹

To this degree, Rūmī’s authorial interjections, not only serve to identify it within the broader mathnawī genre of Persian Sufi literature, but also provide the textual cues that guide the reader’s reception of the wide variety of literary material he draws from. Rūmī’s own justification for this aspect of his work (the use of multiple sources) is highlighted in the Fīhi mā Fīhi when someone accuses his mentor, Burhān al-Dīn, for too frequently quoting from Sanā‘ī, to which Rūmī retorts: ‘What you say is true: the sun is excellent, yet it gives light. Is that a fault? Using Sanā‘ī’s words cast light on his discourse. The sun casts light on things, and through that light it is possible to see. The purpose of light is to see.’⁵² As such, Rūmī’s attitude to literary materials is precisely that: material. With a somewhat postmodern edge, Rūmī’s Mathnawī is a demonstration of how various literary sources could be copied, cut, sewn, manipulated, distorted and synthesised in a variety of forms to be put on display in ways they had never previously been, or even contrary to how their original authors

⁴⁹ Frow, op. cit., p. 133.
⁵⁰ This aspect of the Mathnawī will be further explored in Chapter Nine: Rūmī’s Sufi Path of Narrative.
⁵¹ Rūmī, Mathnawī, I: Arabic preface.
had intended. Alan Williams, remarking on this revolutionary quality of Rūmī’s work remarks, ‘he subverts expectation and understanding of experience in order to challenge ordinary ideas of the way things happen, and even the worldly notion of causality itself.’ However, Rūmī’s Mathnawī also differs from the “playfulness” identified as being the characteristic trait of postmodern literature, which leads us to another distinguishing aspect of considering the Mathnawī through genre: its author’s commitment to the Qur’ān as its source text.

6.2 The Mathnawī as Qur’ānic Literature

When the 15th century Sufi poet Jāmī, referred to Rūmī’s Mathnawī as ‘the Qur’ān in the Persian tongue’ his remark became a testament to the reality that many others have now recognised as the thematic and stylistic similarity that the Mathnawī shares with the Qur’ān. For example, like its archetypal source text, the Mathnawī displays an abundance of unusual and constantly shifting rhythms as well as sudden transmutations and displacements in its subject matter. Therefore, one way to explain the Mathnawī as an example of Qur’ānic literature is its author’s declaration that it draws its inspiration from the Qur’ān as a source text. This is not at all peculiar for as Frow has exclaimed, ‘Texts may also refer to other genres, either as something external to them, or by embedding them within their own overarching generic structure.’ Furthermore, the Mathnawī is saturated with Qur’ānic verses; for example, Güleç has identified thousands of lines, many of which are direct translations of the Qur’ān and hadīth in to Persian. Similarly, Mathnawī scholar, Bādī’ al-Zaman Foruzanfar claims there are 528 ayāt (verses) from the Qur’ān that Rūmī both explains and interprets citing them either directly or indirectly throughout

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53 The imagery of “sewing” to describe literary activity is inspired by Rūmī himself who remarks in the Mathnawī: ‘We have stitched in (inserted) the (story of the) grammarian, that we might teach you the grammar (nahw) of self-effacement (mahw). Rūmī, Mathnawī, I: 2846.


57 Frow, op. cit., p. 124.

58 Ismail Güleç, Türk Edebiyatında Mesnevi Tercüme Ve Şerhleri, Pan, Istanbul, 2008, p. 3.
the Mathnawi. This abundance of Qur’anic quotations, interpretations, and allusions in Rūmī’s work has led Annemarie Schimmel to remark that his imagination and memory is ‘Koranized’ and that he ‘live[s] and breathe[s] in the words of the revelation.’ Similarly, Ismail Ankarawī, a prominent Ottoman commentator on the Mathnawi explains in the preface to his commentary: ‘Praise be to God who made the Mathnawi a place of meeting for the two seas (mecma’u’l-bahreyn) of Qur’anic commentary and prophetic hadith. In this sense, one interesting way in which the Mathnawi may be viewed is through the genre of Sufi tafsīr (Qur’anic exegesis), albeit as a very unique example.

Qur’anic exegesis (tafsīr) is probably the most voluminous genre that has evolved directly as a result of the Qur’ān. However, some scholars still maintain that despite all this work on Qur’ānic commentary, the field of tafsīr studies is still in a “provisional state.” In his preface to the first book, Rūmī calls the Mathnawi ‘the expounder of the Qur’ān. However, it is specifically the sub-genre of Sufi commentaries on the Qur’ān that warrants a brief exploration if we are to better understand the Mathnawi as a kind of Qur’ānic exegesis. In approaching Sufi interpretations of the Qur’ān it is appropriate to see tafsīr as a process as well as a genre; the Arabic word tafsīr is used in both senses but one of the most intrinsic aspects of Sufi commentaries is its preference for esoteric interpretations of the Qur’ān. On this point, in her exploration of Sufi Commentaries, Sands points out that the terms tafsīr and ta’wīl have a complicated history in Islam: whereas in the first few centuries of Islam, they were used interchangeably to refer to any commentary on the Qur’ān, over time, tafsīr began to exclusively refer to those works that relied heavily on the transmitted interpretative traditions from the first few generations of Muslims, while ta’wīl became a term used to describe other types of interpretations.

63 Rūmî, Mathnawî, I: Arabic preface.
Therefore, in the context of commentary, from the end of the 8th century onwards, *ta’wil* was commonly regarded as the esoteric or mystical interpretation of the Qur’ān, while the conventional exegesis of the Qur’ān was called *tafsīr*.

Sands also points out that Sufi's themselves often reserved the term “*tafsīr*” for the types of commentaries following conventional formats however: used different terms like “allusion” (*ishāra*) and “interpretation” (*ta’wil*), or more rarely, “understanding” (*fahm*), or “striking similitudes” (*darb al-mithāl*) for their commentaries. As such, Sufi texts have often been described as “allegorical” and “symbolic,” but these are terms that do not adequately convey their varied forms of discourse. Therefore, as part of their interpretation of Qur’ānic verses, Sufis display literary characteristics that are not often found in the work of *tafsīr*. Creating their own metaphors, wordplay, narratives, and poetry as an integral part of their exegesis, this use of language and style, as much as specific Sufi doctrines and beliefs, accords Sufi commentary its distinctive character. Although Rūmī does not make any direct references to his notion of *tafsīr*, we encounter a very revealing reference in the *Fiḥi mā fihi* to a certain *shaykh* Nassāj of Bukhara, who “was an honored, spiritual Man.”

Rūmī continues:

> Learned and great people came to visit him and knelt at his feet. The Sheik was unlettered, but they loved to hear him expounding on the Koran and Traditions of the Prophet. He would say, “I do not know Arabic. Translate a verse from the Koran so I can tell you its meaning.” They would translate the verse. Then he would begin to explain and reveal the truth in it. He would say, “The Prophet was in such and such a situation when he uttered this verse. The circumstances took place like this…” And he would describe in detail the spiritual level of that situation, the ways leading up to it, and how the Prophet gained that state.

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65 The Qur’ān first mentions an inner meaning (*ta’wil*) in Sūrah 18: 65-82 in the story of Moses and Khîdr. When Moses questions the strange acts performed by Khîdr, he gives him the “inner explanation” (*ta’wil*) of his actions. Therefore, in the context of Sufi hermeneutics, the practice of *ta’wil* encourages the idea of a text with an infinite number of inner/esoteric meanings (*bāṭin*)—rather than interpreting the text, the *ta’wil* releases it, leading the reader onto a whole new level of higher meanings. This aspect of the *Mathnawī* will be explored in more depth in Chapter Eight: Rūmī’s Sufi Hermeneutics.

66 Sands, op. cit., p. 67.


Conventionally, the method of verse-by-verse interpretation (\textit{asbāb al-nuzūl}) is a Qur'ānic science that requires knowledge of the Arabic language as well as thorough historical knowledge to determine the specific context in which each \textit{ayāt} was revealed and is a significant aspect of Qur'ānic hermeneutics. However, in the example of shaykh Nassāj, who is clearly an example of a Sufi, Rūmī explicates the Sufi idea of \textit{tafsīr}: according to Rūmī, ‘The Qur’ān is (a description of) the states of the prophets’\footnote{Rūmī, \textit{Mathnawī}, I: 1538.} and in this sense, corresponding to each outward occasion for revelation is the \textit{aḥwāl} (states) and \textit{maqāmāt} (stations) of the Prophet in each specific moment of his inner spiritual journey to God. It is also telling that the Sheik is “unlettered”. As explored in Chapter Four, for Rūmī, the knowledge of God is intimately connected with knowledge of the self – a kind of knowledge that is also uniquely tied in with the mystical journey of the Prophet who is viewed as the archetype of the human ideal. As such, the shaykh’s lack of knowledge of the conventional sciences (such as \textit{asbāb al-nuzūl}) does not prevent him from gaining knowledge of the inner dimensions of the revelation. According to Rūmī, the pre-requisite for becoming an ‘expounder’ of the Qur’ān at the esoteric, or inner level, is to have successfully traversed the Sufi path: the effacement of the ego and reunion with the Beloved.

Sufi commentaries on the Qur’ān also differ from conventional examples of \textit{tafsīr} in regards to their style. For example, Frishkopf argues that poetry is Sufism’s most important expressive medium: ‘Qur’ān and Hadith constitute the textual core of the Sufi’s spiritual life, as they do for other Muslims. But unlike the Divinely fixed Qur’ān, and traditionally fixed hadith, religious poetry is fluid, freer to express (and arouse) personal mystical feeling.’\footnote{Frishkopf, loc. cit.} Therefore, in the works of these authors, the hints and possibilities for meaning disclosed by the style of Qur’ānic narration and characterisation are developed imaginatively. It is in this sense that Sands describes works such as Rūmī’s \textit{Mathnawī} and Ibn ‘Arabī’s \textit{Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam} as ‘examples of Sufi works that present a large amount of Sufi interpretations of the Qur’ān, but are not generally considered to be part of the commentary genre’ because they do not follow the conventional verse by verse format of \textit{tafsīr}.\footnote{Sands, op. cit., p. 67.} For example, Rūmī will sometimes reference verses of the Qur’ān amidst a tale in case the reader wishes to

\footnote{Frishkopf, loc. cit.}
gain further understanding on a particular subject matter and at other times he will appropriate a specific Qur’anic verse to corroborate a specific idea within a tale.⁷² However, although Rūmī makes heavy use of the Qur’ān in his poetry, a feature that Mojaddedi claims is sometimes omitted in translations of his work, his manner of incorporating Qur’anic verses into his poetry is notable in that he does not use them as proof-texts rather, he intertwines Qur’anic verses with his poetry.⁷³ Therefore, Rūmī’s choice to frame his ideas not simply as abstract theory, but through conversation and story-telling means that he may be joined to a long tradition of Muslim authors who interpret the Qur’ān through the process of ‘creative retelling’.⁷⁴ As such, Rūmī’s Mathnawī can be included in the more niche collection of Sufi works that are characterised by their literary approach to Qur’ānic exegesis and are in this sense, unique specimens in the wider corpus of Qur’ānic literature.

Furthermore, the Mathnawī is addressed specifically to those lovers seeking to traverse the mystical path of Sufism. Therefore, the most distinguishing aspect of the Mathnawī from other forms of Qur’ānic tafsīr is that it was specifically composed for those wishing to traverse the Sufi path of ‘ishq.⁷⁵ Therefore, unconventional as it may be, works such as Rūmī’s Mathnawī can be viewed as unique examples of Sufi literature that consciously serve to “unveil” the Qur’ān’s deeper, hidden meanings – particularly through the prism of Sufi thought.⁷⁶ Therefore, if the specific purpose of conventional commentaries is to clarify the exoteric as well as legalistic aspects of the Qur’ān – in terms of explicating the sharī‘ah, then Sufi texts such as Rūmī’s Mathnawī can be viewed as expounders of the esoteric and mystical elements of the Qur’ān in its relation to the ṭarīqah. However, although Rūmī’s works weave the Qur’ān effortlessly into the body of the text and contain significant amounts of

⁷² For example: ‘If you desire information about this second outbreak, read the chapter of the Qur’ān (beginning): By Heaven which hath the (zodiacal) signs.’ Rūmī, Mathnawī, I: 74.
⁷⁵ This point will be further explored in Chapter Nine: The Function of the Mathnawī as a Sufi Text of Ishq.
⁷⁶ Bilal Kuşpinar posits ‘the exploration of divine mysteries as an integral part of Sufism is the very focus and central subject of the Mathnawī’. Bilal Kuşpinar, Simā’il Anqarawī’s Arabic Commentary on the Introduction to the Mathnawī, Mawlana Rumi Review, vol. 3, 2012, p. 56.
material in which he interprets verses from the Qur’ān, Rūmī assigned a role for his *Mathnawī* that was beyond the genre of commentary and closer to the realm of the “sacred”.

6.3 The *Mathnawī* as Sacred Literature

It is important to point out that Rūmī did not view his *Mathnawī* as simply being a commentary on the Qur’ān but rather, as a continuation of it to the degree that its source was nothing other than divine inspiration. For example, in the preface to the fifth book of the *Mathnawī*, Rūmī remarks, ‘to Him be the praise and the glory for the composition of the Divine, Lordly Book of the *Mathnawī* and furthers this implication when he claims in the preface to the third volume that the *Mathnawī*’s ‘power flows from the power of God, not from the veins which throb because of (bodily) heat.’ In fact, according to Aflākī, the famous 13th century hagiographer, Rūmī was infuriated when the contrary was suggested about the *Mathnawī*’s intimate connection with the Qur’ān:

It is recounted that one day Hazrat-i Sultan Walad said, “Among the companions, one made a complaint to my revered father, saying, ‘The learned (religious) scholars argued with me, saying, “Why do they say that the Masnavi is the Qur’an?”’ I (this humble) servant said, ‘It is the commentary of the Qur’an.’ Immediately, my father became silent for a moment. (Then) he said, ‘O dog! Why is it not (the Qur’an)? O donkey! Why is it not (the Qur’an)? O (you who have a) sister (who is a) whore! Why is it not (the Qur’an)? Certainly, there is nothing contained in the vessels of the words of the prophets and the saints besides the lights of Divine Secrets. And the words of God have come forth from their pure hearts and flowed upon the streams of their tongues.”

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77 In this sense, Ernst argues that ‘allusions to the Qur’ānic miracle, placed alongside praise of the *Mathnawī*, are once again designed to underline the way in which the *Mathnawī* itself functions as a sacred book.’ Carl W. Ernst, ‘A Little Indicates Much Structure and Meaning in the Prefaces to Rūmī’s *Mathnawī* Books I-III’, *Mawlana Rumi Review*, vol. 5, 2014, p. 22. Whereas Mojaddedi has remarked: ‘What seems to be clear is that Rūmī is not suggesting that his *Mathnawī* is somehow based on the Qur’ān, but rather that it is the same in origin.’ Mojaddedi, op. cit. p. 369.


79 ibid., III: 3.

Whether or not the incident actually occurred, it does seem to provide an indication of the high status Rūmī accorded the Mathnawī. One may at this point, make a remark about what seems to be a vying tension between the authority of the Mathnawī and its source text – especially in relation to the Qur’ān’s claims to inimitability. It can certainly be said that such a tension exists, but seems to be entirely a matter of perception, for Rūmī, there is really no difficulty in identifying the Mathnawī with the Qur’ān if it is viewed as an extension and elaboration upon its innumerable meanings. Therefore, although it is highly unreasonable to argue that Rūmī is suggesting that the Mathnawī is the literal words of God, his view of the Mathnawī does seem to suggest that it is a text with divinely-inspired meanings expressed through the words of the human subject (Rūmī). As we explored earlier, this is a level of communication Rūmī believed to be possible for the awliyāʾ – the lovers effaced in God.

Rūmī also indicates the sacred quality of the Mathnawī when he proclaims it has been ‘(written) by the hands of noble righteous scribes’.\(^{81}\) Ankarawī suggests that in this passage, apart from Ḥusām al-Dīn, who is the human scribe of the Mathnawī’s literal words, this reference also alludes to the angels who are the scribes of the Mathnawī’s ma’nā (meanings) as contained in the lawḥ al-mahfsūẓ (Guarded/Preserved Tablet).\(^{82}\) In relation to this concept, it is worth mentioning that the early Sufi mystic, Sahl b. ‘Abd Allāh al-Tustarī has described the Preserved Tablet as ‘the heart of the Mystic believer’,\(^{83}\) which is an interpretation that is fitting with Rūmī’s own views: ‘Ask the meaning of the Qur’ān from the Qur’ān alone, and from that one who has set fire to (and extinguished) his idle fancy, / And has become a sacrifice to the Qur’ān and is (laid) low (in self-abasement), so that the Qur’ān has become the essence of his spirit. / The oil that has wholly devoted itself to the rose—smell either the oil or the rose as you please.’\(^{84}\) In this sense, Rūmī explicitly links hermeneutic authority (in relation to access to the Qur’ān’s multiple levels of the meaning) to the Sufi elect.\(^{85}\) Picking up on Rūmī’s metaphor of the rose and the rose-oil, Ali Nihat Tarlan explains:

> They call the Mathnawī the “Mağz-ı Kur’ân”, meaning “the inner dimension and essence of the Qur’ān”. If one is permitted such a comparison, then the

\(^{81}\) Reference to Qur’ān, 80: 15-16.


\(^{84}\) Rūmī, Mathnawī, VI: 3128-3130.

\(^{85}\) This notion will be further explored in the subsequent chapter.
Qur’ān is a rose garden whereas the Mathnawī is rose oil. In the oil, the form, elegance, extraordinary symmetry or harmony of the rose is not present. However, the derivatives rūḥ (soul/essence) of the rose is present. The first is the work of God whereas the second is the work of the human being. The rose is form with essence. The rose-oil is pure essence. Eyes that are able to view the miracle of the entire rose garden from a few drops of the rose-oil may draw towards it (the Mathnawī).  

In accordance with Rūmī’s view that parts reflect the whole, it can be said that he identified the Mathnawī with the Qur’ān in so far as it served as a by-product of the Qur’ān’s meanings. To this degree, Rūmī’s view of the Mathnawī can be described as a divinely inspired albeit, humanly composed work of guidance specifically aimed at those wishing to traverse the Sufi path of ‘ishq. Furthermore, Rūmī is very annoyed by those who critique the Mathnawī on account of its literary form. For example, at one point in the Mathnawī, Rūmī vehemently rebukes those who critique the Mathnawī on account of its style:

Suddenly a great booby popped his head out of an ass-stable, like a railing woman, / (Saying) that this discourse, namely, the Mathnawi, is low; (that) it is the story of the Prophet and (consists of) imitation; / (That) there is no mention of (theosophical) investigation and the sublime mysteries towards which the saints make their steeds gallop; / (That) from the stations of asceticism to the passing away (from self-existence), step by step up to union with God, / (It contains not) the explanation and definition of every station and stage, so that by means of the wings thereof a man of heart (a mystic) should soar.  

The accusation seems to be stemming from the ambiguity of the Mathnawī’s genre since it does not fit into the conventional or more recognisable forms of systematic or theoretical Sufi texts; the likes of al-Qushayarī’s epistle on Sufism, or even Rūmī’s own Fiḥi mā fihi, which take a more methodical approach to listing and explaining the intricacies of the Sufi path. What is especially interesting is Rūmī’s response: ‘When

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86 Quoted in: Amil Çelebioğlu, Mevlânâ, Mesnevi-i Şerif, Ashley ve Sadeleştirilmişyle Manzûm Nahîfî Tercümesi, VI, Istanbul, 1967-1972, pp. 5-8. My translation. This image of the Mathnawī as essence or spirit is also held by Rūmī himself who proclaims: ‘When (the Mathnawi) becomes single (and distinct) from (its) words and sounds, it passes (beyond) all that and becomes the Ocean; / The reciter of (its) words, the hearer of (its) words, and (its) words – in the end, all three become spirit.’ 86 Rûmî, Mathnawî, VI: 67-72.

87 ibid., III: 4332-6.
the Book of God (the Qur’an) came (down), the unbelievers railed likewise at it too, Saying, “It is (mere) legends and paltry tales; there is no profound inquiry and lofty speculation; / The little children understand it; ’tis naught but things approved and disapproved.” In addressing God’s response to the critics of the Qur’an, Rūmī indirectly ties the two texts not only in terms of content, but also stylistically. Rūmī also suggests that God’s promise of divine protection of the Qur’an also extends to the Mathnawī since it shares in its meanings. For example, in the preface to the thirst book, Rūmī proclaims ‘None shall touch it except the purified. Falsehood doth not approach it either from before or behind, since God observes it and watches over it’. The last lines being a reference to the Qur’anic verse in which God ensures he will be its protector. Similarly, in the preface to book three, he declares that despite those who wish to ‘extinguish the Lights of God with their mouths—but God will bring His Light to completion, even if the unbelievers are loth’ and ends the passage by quoting the ayāt in which god promises that he will be the divine protector of the Qur’an.

At one level, Rūmī’s response as well as the denigrating remarks of his critics reflects the issues in relation genre and how the broader community perceives a particular text of cultural/spiritual significance. In this sense, the generic complexity of religious texts – especially in terms of generic ambiguity – can often lead to censure or criticism. At one level, Rūmī is annoyed that the Mathnawī was not being taken seriously for its literary form – especially when he believes that the higher spiritual ma’nā (meaning) that the work conveys are intimately linked with that said form as well as its source text (Qur’an). However, on more than one occasion, Rūmī also shows signs of ambivalence towards his role as a “poet”. For example, he apologetically defends his poetic activity by explaining he dreads boring his friends

88 ibid., III: 4327-8.
89 ibid., I: Arabic preface.
90 ibid., III: Arabic preface.
91 ‘We have, without doubt, sent down the Message; and We will assuredly guard it (from corruption).’ Qur’an, 15:9.
92 This idea will be explored further in the subsequent chapter in relation to Rūmī’s broader understanding of form and meaning in relation to his Sufi hermeneutics.
93 Remarkning on this point in his address to the audience during the commemoration of Rūmī’s 700th anniversary organised in Iran by its National UNESCO Commission in 1957, professor Badi‘ al-Zaman Foruzanfar remarked that although he had been assigned to talk about Rūmī’s position as a poet, ‘Ironically, this is the very stature that Rūmī himself somewhat avoided and shunned.’ Badi‘ al-Zaman Foruzanfar, ‘Some Remarks on Rumi’s Poetry’, translated by Rasoul Sorkhabi, Mawlana Rumi Review, Vol. 3, 2012, pp. 174-5.
and so he speaks for their enjoyment, ‘Otherwise, what do I care about poetry? By God, I care nothing for poetry. There is nothing worse in my eyes. To me, it is like the cook who plunges his hand into tripe, cleaning it out for the sake of a guest’s appetite.’ From this exclamation it seems poetic activity is an unpleasurable, yet necessary activity for Rūmī employed for the sake of effectively conveying spiritual meanings. He also feels that flowery words can detract one from the messages that they seek to convey: ‘When words are elaborately decorated, their purpose is forgotten.’ However, Rūmī’s reticence is better viewed as being emotionally reactive as opposed to doctrinal. For example, Mojaddedi points out that the main theme of the sixteenth discourse in the Fihi mā fihi in which Rūmī makes this statement concerns the relationship between form and content, and includes Rūmī’s response to the charge that his works lack substance. Therefore, what Rūmī’s reticence does reveal more than anything else is the ongoing tension between form and content and particularly how the literary form of certain works have often been used as a means of delegitimisation by those who favour more conventional forms of expression.

One reason for this cynicism directed towards the literary form of sacred works is to do with a historical culture of distrust associated with poets within the Islamic tradition. For example, in the Fihi mā fihi, Rūmī remarks, ‘God has willed this. He gathered to me all those sciences, and assembled here all those pains, so I would become occupied with this work. What can I do? In my own country, and amongst my own people, there is nothing more shameful than poetry.’ Commenting upon this trend within the Sufi community, Frishkopf, in an article on Sufi authorship, suggests that Sufis may avoid using the word sha’ir (poet) even for prolific producers of such

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94 Rūmī, Fihi mā fihi, p. 89. Ibid.,
95 ibid., p. 154.
96 The source of this distrust stems from Qur’ānic verses such as 36: 69-70; 26: 224; 37: 36; 52:30; 69: 41. Furthermore, the 26th Sūrah, Ash-Sha’ará (The Poets), which is named after the rejection of a category of poets and to the distinction between prophecy, on the one hand, and poetry and sorcery, on the other. The Qur’ān also suggests that the title of “mad poet” was used to delegitimise the Prophetic message: ‘“What! shall we give up our gods for the sake of a Poet possessed?” Qur’ān, 21: 5. Rūmī seems to be implying that like the Qur’ān, the Mathnawī’s poetic qualities do not detract its spiritual contents.
97 ibid., p. 133. Schimmel uses this passage to argue in favour of Rūmī’s contempt for poetry, Schimmel, op. cit. p. 34, whereas de Bruijn argues that the term Rūmī uses, sha’iri, has little to do with the act of poetic expression and instead, refers to the profession of composing poetry to find a patron or resorting to various means to please one. J.T.P. de Bruijn, Of Piety and Poetry: The Interaction of Religion and Literature in the Life and Works of Hakim Sana’i of Ghazna, E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1983, pp. 155-60.
poetry, since the label implies poetry as creative vocation, whose artifice and aestheticism Sufism rejects. Although Rūmī displayed his share of this ambivalence, it is difficult to deny his investment in the literary and poetic renderings of Islamic content. Though he wishes to distance himself from the negative connotations associated with poetry and literature, he also recognises that these are precisely the qualities that he believes invest his work with its “sacred” quality. Having observed this quality, Husayn Ilahi-Ghomshei hints at the prophetic dimension of mystical poetry and argues that ‘the message of Rūmī’s poetry is “prothetic” if we understand the term to refer to the prophetic faculty in the general rather than the particular sense.’ By this he seems to be suggesting that the Mathnawī’s form and composition share some similarities with the composition of scripture more generally, for example, attribution to a divine source (albeit in the case of Rūmī divine meanings conveyed through human speech), orally transmitted and codified into textual form by a scribe/s. As Renard has also explained, for the Sufis, ‘poetic imagination is in fact, if not in theory, the principal means by which the mystical poets transport the reader (or the listener) to an understanding of prophetic revelation.’ Therefore, in this revelatory or “prophetic” mode, the Mathnawī is understood not as bringing new revelation but rather as serving a “revelatory” function in relation to the existing revelation (the Qur’ān) – specifically in relation to revealing its esoteric meanings as well as illuminating the Sufi path of ‘ishq.

6.4 Conclusion

In terms of its composition, the Mathnawī is especially unique for ‘complex aesthetic texts, in particular, are rarely contained by the limits of a single genre.’ As such, Genre can function as an interpretive tool for elucidating a work’s meaning and purpose, and can also function as an analytic tool for unstitching a work at its seams.

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98 Frishkopf, op. cit. p. 92.
99 On this point, J.C. Bürgel notes ‘the major role that Sufism played in allowing the arts to flourish in the Islamic world and suggests that this is because Sufi theories made acts of creativity “licit magic,” while more orthodox Islam criticized and sometimes condemned poetry, representational art and music, seeing in their power an attempt to rival the creativity and power of God.’ J. C. Bürgel, The Feather of Simurgh: The “Licit Magic” of the Arts in Medieval Islam, New York University Press, New York, 1988.
102 Frow, op. cit., p. 125.
By the time Rūmī had come to the scene, Sufism had become the dominant position in Persian literature and unsurprisingly, the *Mathnawī* became representative of the apex of didactical tradition of Persian literature. In this sense, the *Mathnawī*’s significance cannot be fully appreciated unless it is recognised for its qualities as a Sufi work within the Persian literary tradition. This obviously does not mean that one cannot view the *Mathnawī* as purely an example of Persian poetry or literature, but such a view would certainly ignore how Rūmī himself viewed it as well as how his works have been historically received.

Furthermore, Rūmī’s literary genius is recognisable not only through his literary tradition, or the content of his works, but also his prowess for cleverly appropriating familiar symbols and styles in vigorously new ways. This is especially noticeable in the *Mathnawī*’s stylistic composition. This trait also reflects Rūmī’s attitude to literature as a whole – that which could be appropriated to suit one’s own ends. This chapter has also considered the *Mathnawī* is as an example of Qur’ānic literature. This is especially due to its author’s declaration that it draws its inspiration directly from the Qur’ān as its source text. However, whereas the Qur’ān is addressed to the whole of humanity, the *Mathnawī* is addressed specifically to those who are traversing the mystical path of Sufism. Furthermore, Rūmī assigned a sacred status for his work viewing it as a text with divine meanings expressed through the words of the human (Rūmī) subject – a level of communication Rūmī believed possible for the *awliyāʾ* – the lovers of God. In this respect, Rūmī’s view of the *Mathnawī* can be described as a divinely inspired albeit, humanly composed work of guidance intended specifically for those wishing to traverse the Sufi path of Ḣishq. Therefore, an exploration of the *Mathnawī*’s participation in multiple genres as well as its deliberate blurring of genres helps us to understand the structuring and shaping of meaning and value (at the level of the text), in order to realise its purposes.
Chapter Seven:

The \textit{Mathnawī} and Rūmī’s Hermeneutics of ‘\textit{Ishq}’

Rūmī did not present his views on literature in any kind of systematic fashion: his work on the whole refuses any kind of systematisation. The following chapter offers a synthesis of Rūmī’s views on literature in the broader context of questions prompted by hermeneutical inquiry. Thus, the following chapter seeks to appreciate Rūmī’s understanding of text, reader, meaning and authorship, through an approach that is cognisant of the spiritual framework that underlies it. Essentially, Rūmī’s hermeneutics is a hermeneutics of the Qur’ān (as the archetypal text), but can be equally applied to the \textit{Mathnawī}, which he viewed, in its essence, as being a part of the former. As such, this chapter begins by exploring the Sufi origins of Rūmī’s hermeneutics and proceeds to explore what Rūmī considers to be the hermeneutic authority of the Sufi elect. Next, this chapter will explore Rūmī’s understanding of meaning in the \textit{Mathnawī}, particularly through his distinction between Form (ṣūrah) and Essence (ma’nā) and finally, this chapter will explore Rūmī’s concept of readership in relation to the \textit{Mathnawī}.

7.1 The Hermeneutics of ‘\textit{Ishq}’

\textit{If the Mathnawī were as the sky in magnitude, not half the portion of this (mystery) would find room in it}\textsuperscript{1}

Sufi interpretation begins with several basic premises: that the Qur’ān contains many levels of meaning, that man has the potential to uncover these meanings, and that the task of interpretation is endless.\textsuperscript{2} The basis for such claims began very early in Islamic history. For example, the idea that there are exoteric (ẓāhir) and inner (bāṭin) senses of the Qur’ān was well developed by early Sufis, although it also has its basis in the Qur’ān.\textsuperscript{3} The most notable in hermeneutical discussions is tied to a \textit{hadīth} attributed

\textsuperscript{1} Rūmī, \textit{Mathnawī}, I: 2098.
\textsuperscript{3} In verses such as Qur’ān: 6: 120, 6: 151, 7: 33, 31: 20, and 57: 3.
to the companion, ‘Abd Allāh Ibn Mas‘ūd (d. 652), in which it is proclaimed that the Prophet said: ‘The Qur’ān was sent down in seven aḥruf. Each ĥarf has a back (zāhr) and belly (batn). Each ĥarf has a border (ḥadd) and each border has a lookout point (muṭṭala’).’ Rūmī provides his own commentary on this hadīth in the Mathnawī:

Know that the words of the Qur’ān have an exterior (sense), and under the exterior (sense) an interior (sense), exceedingly overpowering; / And beneath that inward (sense) a third interior (sense), wherein all intellects become lost. / The fourth interior (sense) of the Qur’ān none hath perceived at all, except God the peerless and incomparable. / In the Qur’ān do not thou, O son, regard (only) the exterior: the Devil regards Adam as naught but clay. / The exterior (sense) of the Qur’ān is like a man’s person, for his features are visible, while his spirit is hidden. / A man’s paternal and maternal uncles (may see him) for a hundred years, and of his (inward) state not see (so much as) the tip of a hair.

In this way, Rūmī insinuates the existence of hierarchal levels of meaning where the first three levels mark the exoteric or apparent in varying degrees but above these are the esoteric meanings. The access to this deeper level of meaning; however, is limited to the elect since Sufis believe it cannot be perceived with the ‘aql (intellect) alone whereas the last, deepest level of meaning is believed to be exclusive to God alone. In this way, Rūmī’s reference to recognising one’s uncles at the end of the passage is to signify that although one can be very intimate with the Qur’ān for many years, you may still remain completely oblivious to the existence of its deeper meanings.

Another striking features of the Sufi approach to language is what has, (especially in recent scholarship) been identified as a shared understanding between Sufis and post-modern trends that argue for the plurality of meaning. For example, in his comparative examination of the infinity of meaning found in Sufi and deconstructive hermeneutics, Ian Almond claims that the openness that the deconstructive reader

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4 Al-Ṭabarī includes this hadīth among several other ahādīth about the seven aḥruf, devoting several pages to the controversy over the meaning of the word “ĥarf (pl. aḥruf)” and concluding that the seven aḥruf refer to both dialects (alsun) of the Arabs and aspects (awjuh) of the revelation. Quoted in: Sands, op. cit., p. 8.

5 Rūmī, Mathnawī, III: 4244-9.

shows toward the text turns it ‘into a meaning machine that can constantly produce new meanings [which] is no different in effect from the openness of the Sufi exegete toward the “Tremendous Qur’an.”’ Sufis find support for this idea in verses such as: ‘And if whatever trees upon the earth were pens and the sea was ink, replenished thereafter by seven more seas, the words of Allah would not be exhausted.’ Using similar imagery, Rūmī accords this same plentitude in meaning to the Mathnawī, proclaiming that ‘(Even) if (all) the forest should become pens and (all) the ocean ink, (yet) there is no hope of bringing the Mathnawī to an end.’ Rūmī also frequently draws elaborate distinctions between multiple levels of meaning and reference, acknowledging that ‘meaning in poetry has no sureness of direction: it is like the sling, it is not under control’ and that the ‘participation of a word (in several meanings) is always obstructive (to the understanding).’ Such lines effectively captures the approach of most Sufis: ‘a simple disbelief in any exclusive, conclusive secret to the text – a belief in the text not as a single communication to be reiterated endlessly but, rather, as a vehicle that constantly delivers new meanings according to the situation and moment of the reader’ or, in Sufi terminology, their maqām (spiritual station).

However, Rūmī also warns against deconstructive nihilism: ‘He that says, “All are true”—’tis folly (on his part); and he that says, “All are false”—he is damned.’ Therefore, despite the seemingly rigid differentiation between different levels of meaning, Rūmī’s hermeneutics allows for the plurality of meaning but one that is infinitely full – not empty – because, unlike deconstructive hermeneutics, the plurality of meaning in Rūmī’s Sufi hermeneutics is plentiful because it has God at its center. Indeed the “truth” of esoteric secrets is on the side of absolute plenitude, which brings

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7 Sufism and Deconstruction: A Comparative Study of Derrida and Ibn ‘Arabi, p. 100. Here, Almond is referring to Jacques Derrida’s notion of the deconstructive reader.
8 Qur’an, 31:27. Similarly, Rūmī exclaims: I once explained to a Koran-teacher: The Koran says, “If the sea were ink for the Words of my Lord, the sea would be spent before the Words of my Lord are spent.” Now, with fifty drams of ink one can copy the whole of this Koran. Therefore, the Koran is only a symbol of God’s knowledge and all the knowledge belonging to God. Rūmī, Fīhī mâ Fīhī, pp. 145-6.
9 Rūmī, Mathnawī, VI: 2248.
10 Rūmī, Mathnawī, I: 1528.
11 Rūmī, Mathnawī, VI: 649. Also: ‘Thou art making a profound inquiry, thou art confining a meaning in a word. / Thou hast imprisoned the free (unconditioned) meaning, thou hast bound the wind in a word.’ I: 1517.
13 Rūmī, Mathnawī, II: 2942.
about literally endless possibilities of meaning-production. On this point, Tourage has observed whereas the ‘lack of a definite referent in the process of signification is perhaps indicative of a postmodernist alienation of the signifiers—even from their own provisional meaning—in the Mathnawi the lack is infused by a sense of bewilderment, awe and wonder at the absolute abundance of Divine presence.\textsuperscript{14} In this sense, the symbolic language that is characteristic to Sufi poetry serves to one ever upward to the Beloved. As such, the perplexity the believer experiences at this multiplication of possibilities underscores the Sufi notion of the infinite nature, essence or “mind” of God in which it is imagined that the human being’s experience of Him irrevocably exceeds any kind of interpretation of Him: ‘The jealousy (of God) is this, that He is other than all things, that He is beyond explanation and the noise of words.’\textsuperscript{15}

However, this impossibility is linked not so much to God’s inexpressibility as it is considered to attest to His irreducibility.\textsuperscript{16} In this view, both the infinite mind of God on the one hand, and the infinite range of contemporary contexts on the other, result in the same thing: an unending multiplication of meaning.\textsuperscript{17} This notion also plays into Rumi’s ontology of ‘ishq since the irreducibility of love (as an attribute of god) is directly tied in with the irreducibility of the beloved: ‘…Verbal expression is confined; the meaning (to be expressed) is very full. / The expression always fails to reach the meaning; hence the Prophet said, “(Whoso knows God), his tongue falters.”\textsuperscript{18} To this degree, Rumi’s acknowledgment of the plurality of meaning is an inherent dimension of his Sufi hermeneutics as well as his experience and expression of ‘ishq. To this degree, Rumi’s hermeneutics can also be classified as a hermeneutics!

\textsuperscript{14} Tourage, loc. cit., p. 4.
\textsuperscript{15} Rumi, Mathnawi, I: 1713.
\textsuperscript{16} Having recognised this trend in Sufi thought, Ian Almond proclaims, ‘there has been no de constructive ‘freeing’ of the text from some ill-perceived domain of the theological—on the contrary, the textual elasticity of the medieval exegete was every bit as versatile and allowed just as many different interpretations as the most radical deconstructive study.’ Almond, op. cit. p. 99.
\textsuperscript{17} Interestingly, Hamid argues that this principle (a single Divine reality manifesting itself in myriad forms in the realm of the outer world of phenomena) also makes it necessary that the literary form of the Mathnavi (specifically the use of narrative) also be multitudinous. As such, he suggests that if Rumi’s contention, that the forms of “reality” are infinite, is valid then the mimetic possibilities of this “reality” are infinite too. Thus, Hamid reaches the conclusion that the form of the Masnavi narrative corresponds with the infinite mimetic probabilities, thereby obviating the need for the idea of the “organic unity” of a literary text.’ My italics. Farooq Hamid, ‘Storytelling Techniques in the “Ma’navi- yi Ma’navi” of Mowlana Jalal Al-Din Rumi: Wayward Narrative or Logical Progression?’ Iranian Studies, vol. 32, no. 1, 1999, pp. 27-49.
\textsuperscript{18} Rumi, Mathnawi, II: 3012-3.
without end, where the plurality of meaning assumed by deconstructive and Sufi hermeneutics is understood, in the case of the latter, as the infinite nature of love and meaning (or the meaning of love) resulting from the "infinite mind of God". Therefore, especially when it comes to the subject of ‘ishq, for Rūmī, it is a continuous journey from essence to deeper essence where meaning is irreducibly boundless.\(^{19}\) These latent principles also underlie Rūmī’s understanding and approach to the Mathnawī, in which his understanding of access to its meanings (specifically those of an esoteric hidden nature) are shaped by his hermeneutic of ‘ishq.

### 7.2 Meaning in the Mathnawī

If one is to consider the Mathnawī’s extended title, the “Mathnawī Ma’nawi” it will be noticed that in the Persian, the word ‘spirituality’ corresponds to *ma’nawiyya* rather than *rūḥāniyya*, which is derived from the term ‘spirit’ (*rūḥ*) more commonly used in Arabic.\(^{20}\) In Persian, the two terms (meaning/spirituality) are interrelated, so much so that the notion of ‘meaning’ can be said to be ‘spirituality’. Thus, in Rūmī’s understanding, it can be said that meaning is inherently tied in with spirituality and it is in this context the Mathnawī can be viewed as a storehouse of spiritual meanings. However, meaning is neither stagnant nor fixed according to Rūmī. As such, the belief in hierarchical levels of meaning not only constitutes an important aspect of Rūmī’s Sufi thought, but also his approach to the Mathnawī. In this sense, Rūmī’s frequent references for the need to penetrate the “husk” of the tale or a particular line in order to gain access to the “kernel” of meaning that lies within illustrates one of the most common and fundamental principles in Sufism: that is, the dichotomy between the *ẓāhir* (exoteric) and *bāṭin* (esoteric) dimensions of reality or, as expressed throughout the Mathnawī, the difference between *ṣūrah* (form) and *ma’nā* (meaning) which underscores Rūmī’s hermeneutics as well as his views on language and meaning. This construct is employed by Rūmī to represent various dichotomies such

\(^{19}\) Or, as William Chittick has expressed it, “the veils will never be lifted,” therefore direct expression of secrets in language is not possible. Instead, mystical language is characterized by allusions, symbolizations and paradoxes that hint at the secrets without actually revealing them. Since the veils will never be lifted, the process of symbolic representation of secrets will not find closure.’ William C. Chittick, “The Paradox of the Veil in Sufism,” in Rending the Veil: Concealment and Secrecy in the History of Religions, ed. Elliot R. Wolfson, New York: Seven Bridges Press, 1999, p. 81

as inner and outer, internal and external, as well as the literal and figurative dimensions of meaning. In order to understand the meaning of traditional art (or, sacred literature) in its relation to knowledge, Nasr argues that it is essential to grasp fully the significance of the meaning of form as used in the traditional context (as *forma, morphē, nāma, sūrah*, etc.).

In this respect, Nasr explains that,

... one can say that each object possesses a form and a content, which this form “contains” and conveys. As far as sacred art is concerned, this content is always the sacred or a sacred presence placed in particular forms by revelation which sanctifies certain symbols, forms, and images to enable them to become “containers” of this sacred presence and transforms them into vehicles for the journey across the stream of becoming.

As such, referring to the human form, Rūmī insists that ‘[i]f you keep your eye fixed on its contents, you are a (spiritual) king; but if you regard its vessel, you are misguided.’ Then, extending this principle to his hermeneutics Rūmī adds, ‘[k]now that words resemble this body and that their inward meaning resembles the soul.’

This being the case, Rūmī declares that those who are not cognisant of this reality will also remain oblivious to the multilayered meanings within the *Mathnawī*: ‘Therefore the man of appearance is misled by the form of the expressions used in the Mathnawi, while they guide the man of reality (to the Truth).’ For example, amidst a tale, Rūmī abruptly interjects and reprimands the reader: ‘This, O obstinate man, is the story of the lake in which there were three great fishes. / You will have read it in Kalīla, but that is (only) the husk of the story, while this is the spiritual kernel. This is one example of several instances in which Rūmī claims a higher level of significance for his *Mathnawī* whilst insinuating the existence of hierarchal levels of meaning that can be penetrated to various degrees by different readers.

Rūmī often expresses his weariness of those who become transfixed on the *sūrah* at the cost of the *ma’nā*. For example, in his critique of rigid literalism, Rūmī mentions, the incident of how the Prophet Yahyā (John the Baptist), in his mother’s womb,
bowed in worship to the Messiah (Jesus),\(^{27}\) thus, Rûmî berates “foolish” individuals who will object to this tale on the grounds of historical inaccuracy – that the two women would have had no opportunity to meet prior to birth. Thus, in a preemptive attack, Rûmî vehemently scolds those who are unable to get past the šūrah of the tale:

Let him (the objector) know that to one who receives ideas (from God) all that is absent in the world is present. / To Mary, the mother of Yahyá would appear present, though she was far from her (bodily) sight. / One may see a friend (even) with eyes shut, when one has made the skin (the bodily envelope) a lattice (to let in spiritual ideas). / And if she saw her neither from without nor from within, take the (essential) meaning of the story, O imbecile! / Not like him who had heard (some) fables, and like shit stuck to the (literal) shape of them…

Interestingly, Rûmî’s first objection is on spiritual grounds: the lover of God receives elect vision and knowledge of things through maʿrifah, which is not accessible to those who are purely guided by their intellects. On the other hand, Rûmî’s second ground for objection is a critique of literalist interpretations in general and can also extend to serve as a critique of the rigidity and fanaticism that emerges from textual literalism – particularly in relation to scriptural hermeneutics. Rûmî’s understanding of reality, which equally reflects his hermeneutic views, is cleverly depicted through the Mathnawī’s notable tale of the elephant in the dark room. The elephant, (symbolising Truth/Reality), is approached by numerous people who grab its various appendages and describe it according to their limited perceptive capabilities whilst all remaining oblivious to how the elephant appears as a whole.\(^{28}\)

Thus, in a characteristically self-authorising vein, Rûmî suggests that it is the Sufi elect who switches on the light in the dark room as one who perceives and understands not through their limited senses, but through God’s own illuminating “light” – a quality that Rûmî extends to the Mathnawī. In this way, Rûmî suggests that ‘ordinary people’ especially the uninitiated, are unable to understand the nuanced meanings that underlie the exoteric dimensions of his Sufi expressions. In this sense, Frishkopf suggests that the Sufi listener or reader differs from the literalist, ‘who

\(^{27}\) ibid., Mathnawī, II: 3601.

\(^{28}\) ibid., III: 1258-9.
claims a single clear meaning for sacred texts, rejecting all others as *kufr* (unbelief)."²⁹ In this way, Frishkopf remarks that ‘the literalist is a semantic egalitarian: one meaning for all’ whereas the Sufi, by contrast is a ‘semantic elitist, and a relativist: subjective meaning depends upon one’s spiritual state (*ḥāl*) and station (*maqām*) as well as one’s particular position within the spiritual-social network’.³⁰

However, one cannot reduce Rūmī’s concept of *ṣūrah* and *ma’nā* to a simplistic dichotomy of opposites, because Rūmī also explains that the two are complimentary to one another: ‘the form is both near to the meaning and far from it. / In regard to indication, they the meaning and the form are like the sap and the tree; but when you turn to the quiddity, they are very far removed from each other.’³¹ Rūmī’s concept of *māhiyyat* (quiddity) can be understood as the essence or essential meaning and demonstrates Rūmī’s view that all things including language and meaning, contain essences (derived from God’s essence) and although words can give an indication of the essential meaning, they are like “husks” that contain the spiritual “kernel” within. In this essentialist view of meaning and language, form is not an obstacle in and of itself, but only becomes so if the individual fails to see beyond it: ‘How is the first (stage) of every fruit anything but the form? / After that (comes) the delicious taste which is its real meaning.’³² Rūmī expands on the need for form of meanings further in the *Fihi mā fihi*, explaining that:

> If you plant only the kernel of an apricot stone, nothing will grow. If you plant it with its husk, then it becomes a tree. From this we know that form also has a function… Until intention and form are wedded, there are no children born. When you say that words are the branch, this is only a relative term. Until the branch exists how can the term “root” gain its meaning? So the meaning of root came out of this branch. If the branch had not existed, it could never have had a name.³³

In this passage, Rūmī makes reference to the external “form” of prayer and how it is necessary to actualise the spirit of prayer; this is to suggest that the “essence” of prayer is not contained in the physical act of standing and prostrating but rather within

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³⁰ ibid.
³² ibid., III: 527-8.
the internal state experienced by the worshipper. Similarly, in the context of his hermeneutics, the analogy illustrates that although we should seek beyond the external or apparent meaning of something, we also need to appreciate that the esoteric meaning potentially becomes realised through its exoteric meaning. In this sense, the ṣūrah (exoteric meaning) is significant because it is the medium through which the ma’nā (esoteric meaning) becomes identified and potentially understood.

Thus, Rūmī insists that the meaning (ma’nā) of a specific line, or even an entire tale within the Mathnawī cannot be understood without reference to its literal meaning (ṣūrah). In fact, at one point in the Fīhi mā Fīhi, again utilising the imagery of horticulture, Rūmī remarks that ‘If you plant a seed with no husk, it cannot grow, but if you bury it in the earth with its shell, then it germinates and becomes a great tree. So, form is a great and necessary principle, and without it our task fails and our purpose is not attained.’ Especially in relation to the Mathnawī, Rūmī insists that the literal sense (ṣūrah) of the tales are necessary vessels for conveying the spiritual ma’nā, as well as being the medium through which meaning can flourish and potentially be actualised by the reader. Therefore, as Braginsky has suggested, the Sufi reader (or listener) ‘in the capacity of a man of ma’anā – had to penetrate, by means of a feat of meditation, the outward, figurative nature of the symbols and enter through it (as if through a gate) into those worlds, thus retracing the route of the poet.’

Furthermore, it can be said that according to Rūmī, the divine source of the Mathnawī’s meanings renders it an endless storehouse of spiritual significations. On this point, Tourage, remarking on the irreducibility of meaning inherent to the nature of esoteric secrets, remarks that ‘the “truth” of esoteric secrets is on the side of absolute plenitude, which brings about literally endless possibilities of meaning-production… in the Mathnawī the lack is infused by a sense of bewilderment, awe and wonder at the absolute abundance of Divine presence.’ Thus, as Tourage has also pointed out, the goal of mystical language is not to reveal the secrets in a

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34 Or in the case of prayer, through the external act.
35 Rūmī, Fīhi mā Fīhi, p. 35.
climactic instance, but is rather like a veil that reveals and conceals and conceals even as it reveals.³⁸ In this sense, it can be said that the Mathnawī serves to reveal esoteric truths – a process which Tourage and articulates in reference to Rūmī’s imagery of veils and unveiling:

In Rūmī’s view, the literal aspect of the text is the door, the lock and the key to the inner meaning. That is to say, the external forms are simultaneously veils and means of rending the veils: Hence, poetical language is a veil, but it is by means of this veil that the veil of the hidden content can be rent. This rending of the veils could take place ad-infinitum, as Rūmī states elsewhere: “Every instant a hundred veils are rent.”³⁹

Thus, Tourage implies that the denouncement of a superficial interpretation of a line or tale in the Mathnawī is not the denouncement of its literal sense.⁴⁰ Therefore, meaning is both fluid and multilayered and Rūmī implies that the transition of ma’nā to šūrah inherently creates multiplicity: when ma’nā is sought, it will necessarily overthrow the šūrah so that it becomes a new “form” that is closer to the essence and this process can continue ad infinitum.⁴¹ From this, one can understand that meaning does not hold a simple inner/outer dichotomy for Rūmī: it is a complex, ambiguous medium where the apparent can become the secret and vice versa and for this reason, Rūmī insists that ma’nā (meaning) cannot be understood without reference to its šūrah (form). As such, Sufis such as Rūmī continually seeks and encourages others to seek the esoteric meaning of things all whilst insisting that this cannot be actualised without reference to the exoteric. In this sense, Rūmī implies that the esoteric meanings of the Mathnawī are necessarily tied in with its literary form.

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³⁹ Tourage, op. cit. p. 81. Similarly, Zamir’s analysis of Ibn ‘Arabi’s hermeneutics may also be applied to Rūmī who believes the Mathnawī, like the Qur’ān, is understood to contain hidden meanings, but these hidden spiritual meanings are not intended to be ‘behind the literal words’ but rather, ‘precisely in them’. Syed Rizwan Zamir, “‘Tafsīr al-Qur’ān bi’l Qur’ān”: The Hermeneutics of Imitation and “Adab” in Ibn ‘Arabi’s Interpretation of the Qur’ān Author’, Islamic Studies, vol. 50, no. 1, 2011, pp. 5-23.

⁴⁰ Tourage, loc. cit.

⁴¹ Or as described by Safavi & Weightman, ‘The effect of the symbol, when well founded, is to lead one ever upward because it is open-ended.’ Seyed Ghahreman Safavi & Simon Weightman, Rumi’s Mystical Design: Reading the Mathnawī, Book One, State University of New York Press, New York, 2009, p. 5.
7.3 The Hermeneutic Authority of Lovers

Naturally, the plurality of meaning inherent to Rūmī’s understanding of the text may lead one to ask whether this would lead to a crisis of authority within the interpretive community? The Sufis’ insistence upon the multivalent nature of the Qur’ānic text is related to their understanding of its ambiguity. The Qur’ān acknowledges this reality in a verse outlining the clear and ambiguous verses (*muhkamāt wa mutashābihāt*). Unsurprisingly, Sufis have commonly interpreted the verse to mean that no one knows the meaning of these *ayāt* except God ‘*and those firmly rooted in knowledge*’.\(^{42}\) Therefore, according to Sufis, the knowledge of these individuals ‘is not like the knowledge of religious scholars, but neither does it contradict it.’\(^{43}\) As such, a shared assumption in Sufi approaches to hermeneutics is that interpretative abilities (especially of the esoteric kind), are gifted to certain individuals (Sufis) who are able to obtain knowledge by means other than the study of the transmitted interpretive tradition and rational thought. One of the first Sufi commentators, Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 896), interprets the *ḥadīth* of Ibn Mas‘ūd to signify a distinction of knowledge where the exoteric and the esoteric respectively correspond to the public (*‘āmm*) and the private (*khāṣṣ*). As Sands points out, although Al-Tustarī does not specify who exactly possesses this public and private knowledge, throughout his *tafsīr*, he uses the terms “elect” (*khuṣṣūs*) and common people (*‘umūm*) without saying what he means by this distinction. He also posits that the knowledge of the elect comes from their detachment from ordinary passion – a detachment that opens up the possibility of being granted profound knowledge (directly from God) of the many levels of meaning in the Qur’ān.\(^ {44}\) This is obviously reflected in Rūmī’s own Sufi thought since he considers purification of the self through the *ṭarīqah* as being the means through which the spiritual aspirant can gain access to higher knowledge

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\(^{42}\) The whole verse follows ‘it is He who has sent this Scripture down to you [Prophet]. Some of its verses are definite in meaning–these are the cornerstone c of the Scripture–and others are ambiguous. The perverse at heart eagerly pursue the ambiguities in their attempt to make trouble and to pin down a specific meaning of their own: only God knows the true meaning. Those firmly grounded in knowledge say, ‘We believe in it: it is all from our Lord’–only those with real perception will take heed’– The Sufi interpretation differs in its preference to join the clause ‘only God knows the true meaning’ with ‘and those firmly rooted in knowledge’. Qur’ān 3: 7.

\(^{43}\) Sands, op. cit., p. 25.

\(^ {44}\) He explains: ‘It has been related from ‘Alī that they are those whom knowledge protects from the intrusion of passion (*hawā*) and arguments presented without [knowledge of] hidden things (*al-ghayāb*), because God has guided them and given them power over his hidden secrets in the treasuries of the different kinds of knowledge (*‘ulūm*).’ Quoted in: Sands, op. cit., pp. 25-6.
(maʿrifah). Over time, many Sufis such as Rūmī have come to identify certain distinctions between realised Sufis and those who are uninitiated:

The perfect speaker is like one who distributes trays of viands, and whose table is filled with every sort of food, / So that no guest remains without provisions, (but) each one gets his (proper) nourishment separately: / (Such a speaker is) like the Qurʾān which is sevenfold in meaning, and in which there is food for the elect and for the vulgar.\(^\text{45}\)

The walī, who is also “the perfect speaker”, becomes a personification of the Qurʾān to the degree that they internalise and manifest its innumerable meanings. Thus, referring to the awliyāʾ, Rūmī proclaims that ‘[to] the friend, when he is seated beside his Friend, a hundred thousand tablets of mystery are made known.’\(^\text{46}\) In this sense Rūmī shows a characteristically Sufi preference for the need of a spiritual bond between the true Sufi guide and the spiritual aspirant which then becomes the hermeneutic experience of the Qurʾān in which ‘[t]he brow of the Friend is a Guarded Tablet: to him (his friend) it reveals plainly the secret of the two worlds.’\(^\text{47}\) Thus, in comparing the walī to the lawḥ al mahfūz Rūmī suggests that the corporeal form of the walī is like the form of the Qurʾān in serving as a vestibule for attaining spiritual meanings.

Therefore, in the context of spiritual discourse, Rūmī not only proclaims the existence of esoteric meanings beyond the literal and the apparent, but also insists that access to such meaning depends upon one’s commitment to the awliyāʾ. For example, in one passage in the Mathnawī, Rūmī relates a ḥadīth: “Give heed, my friends! Do not cover your bodies from the cold of spring, / For it does to your spirits the same thing that spring does to the trees; / But flee from the cold of autumn, for it does what autumn did to the garden and the vines.”\(^\text{48}\) Before providing what he deems to be the “correct interpretation”, Rūmī rebukes the interpretation of transmitters of this ḥadīth who have become transfixed on the šūrah (literal and apparent) meaning: ‘The traditionists have referred this (saying) to the outward (sense), and have been content with that same (outward) form. / That class (of people) were ignorant of the spirit:

\(^{45}\) Mathnawī, III: 1895-7.
\(^{46}\) Mathnawī, VI: 2641.
\(^{47}\) ibid., VI: 2642.
\(^{48}\) Rūmī, Mathnawī, I: 2046-8.
they saw the mountain, they did not see the mine in the mountain.’ Rūmī implies that scholars of the exoteric are not privy to the ma’nā, the bāţin or, esoteric meaning. As such, Rūmī provides what he deems to be the meaning in ‘the sight of God’, explaining that autumn refers to the nafs and its desires, whereas spring refers to reason (‘aql) and the spirit (jan) and therefore, advises his readers to ‘seek one whose reason is perfect’. In this way, Rūmī suggests that although endowed with a partial intellect, which may be sufficient in attending to one’s worldly affairs, this limited intelligence becomes insufficient in grasping spiritual subtleties. Thus, addressing the reader, he recommends they search instead for one who has conjoined their partial intellect with the Universal Intellect. What is perhaps most intriguing in this passage is Rūmī’s overall interpretation of the ḥadīth:

Therefore, according to the (right) interpretation, it (the meaning) is this, that the holy breaths are like spring and the life of leaf and vine. / The sayings of the saints, whether soft or rough, do not thou cover thy body (against them), for they are the support of thy religion. / Whether he (the saint) speak hot or cold, receive (his words) with joy: thereby thou wilt escape from the hot and cold (of Nature) and from Hell-fire.

In this way, Rūmī interprets the seasons as the ‘holy breaths’ (speech) of the awliyā’, that bring spiritual life to the aspirants on the Sufi path and therefore insists that one must yield to the council and demands of the wali ‘whether soft or rough’ for, as explored in previous chapters, the Sufi master’s requirements from the spiritual aspirant may not always be pleasing to the desires of their nafs. Therefore, in claiming to provide the “right interpretation” of the hadīth, Rūmī simultaneously designates hermeneutic authority to the awliyā’ who he deems to be ‘the support of thy religion’. This coincides with Rūmī belief that the wali who subsists in God has been transformed in such a way that all of their senses ‘become an apostle to the senses (of others), and lead all senses into that Paradise’. The hermeneutic authority of the awliyā’ also allows them to provide the deeper meanings of the Qur’ān:

Ask the meaning of the Qur’ān from the Qur’ān alone, and from that one who has set fire to (and extinguished) his idle fancy, / And has become a sacrifice to

49 ibid., I: 2049-50.
50 ibid., I: 2054-6.
51 These kinds of interpretations might be viewed as typical of eisegesis but from the Sufi perspective, they would be perceived as nothing short of direct knowledge reached through gnosis.
52 Rūmī, Mathnawī, II: 3245.
the Qur’ān and is (laid) low (in self-abasement), so that the Qur’ān has become
the essence of his spirit. / The oil that has wholly devoted itself to the rose—
smell either the oil or the rose as you please.53

Rūmī’s description of a “living Qur’ān” is commonly held as a reference to the
Prophet who is viewed as the perfect living model and interpretation of the message.
This notion was derived from a ḥadīth in which a man who had never met the Prophet
asked his wife, Aisha, what his character was like, to which she replied: ‘Have you
not read the Qur’ān? Verily, the character of the Messenger of Allah was the
Qur’ān.’ 54 In light of this tradition, Rūmī suggests that the awliyā’ – the
representatives of the Prophet in his absence – having effaced themselves in God, and
subsisting through Him, become the inheritors and living exemplars of the Qur’ān.
Thus, Rūmī implies the wali is not simply a reciter of the Qur’ān but rather is the
Qur’ān – its living exemplar in human form who has access to its deeper esoteric
meanings.

In this sense, Rūmī insists that the hermeneutic activity of the awliyā’ is authorative
because it is based not in the self but rather, in the divine. A further implication is that
the Mathnawī, like the Qur’ān, may also be considered as what Neusner has called a
“living text”: texts which become ‘models of behaviour – of ethics, piety, learning,
compassion, and discipline’ where ‘ [p]eople who practice those religions turn to
these “living texts” to learn what to do and what their religion teaches.’ 55 Through this
understanding, Rūmī also implies that sacred texts are not simply words on a series of
pages, but rather the medium through which one mind is able to craft an effect upon
other minds. Furthermore, Rūmī suggests that although there is an inherent plurality
in meaning, these multiplicities become unified in the individual who is unified with
God:

For this proper meaning admits of (different) interpretations, and this guesswork
is the source of (vain) imaginings; / (But in the case of) that truth which is
immediate and intuitive, there is no room for any interpretation. / When (all)

53 ibid., V: 3128-30.
54 Sunan Abū Dāwūd, 1342.
senses have become subject to thy sense, the heavenly spheres cannot avoid (obedience to) thee.\footnote{Rūmī, Mathnawi, II: 3247-9.}

As such, as explored in previous chapters, when it comes to hermeneutic authority in relation to spiritual Truths, Rūmī insists that the awliyā’ receive divine communication directly from God and this being the case, he maintains that their hermeneutic activity is not based on opinion or conjecture but rather, direct experience of God’s revelation. Therefore, if there is a difference of opinion or interpretation, Rūmī proclaims that it is the self-effaced awliyā’ who have interpretive authority: ‘When a dispute takes place as to the ownership of the husk, the husk belongs to him who possesses the kernel.’ \footnote{ibid., II: 3250.} In this way, Rūmī suggests that through their elevation within the Sufi path, the proximity of the awliyā’ to God accords them access to an unbound world of meanings providing them with a hermeneutic authority that also extends to their words and works. However, Rūmī also suggests that the wali’s provision of spiritual meanings directly corresponds with the spiritual aspirations of the seeker. On this point, Mathnawi commentator, Tahir Olgun, explains that ‘the craft of Sufism is essentially about hāl (spiritual states) not about words.’ \footnote{Tahir Olgun, Mesnevi Volume 1, Part 5 of Mesnevi: Terceme ve şerheden: Tâhir-ul-Mevlevî, Jalâl al-Dîn Rūmî (Maulana), Selâm Yayinlari, Istanbul, 1966, p. 73.} In this way, he claims that one can only hope to understand the Sufis or their subtle spiritual meanings by committing to the service of a spiritual guide of high spiritual rank. How does all of this directly relate to Rūmī in relation to the production of the Mathnawi?

As thoroughly explored in the previous chapter, Rūmī adamantly defended the Mathnawi’s divine source; therefore, though he may have conceded that it involved his input in terms of poetic activity, as a Sufi, he believed that the Mathnawi ultimately came into existence through the direct ‘ilhām (inspiration) of God.\footnote{Although Rūmî prefers to call it wāhy since he views the labels to ultimately be a question of semantics and particulars and sees no essential difference between the two concepts in terms of their shared (Divine) source.} This notion, as explored in Chapter Four: Knowledge and Experience, in regards to the Mathnawi’s status as a divinely inspired work is also upheld in the “revelatory epistemology” inherent to Rūmī’s Sufism in which the self-annihilated Sufi is accorded enigmatic forms of communication from the divine. As Frishkopf has also
pointed out, in the Sufi tradition, ‘poetic productions serve as a miraculous sign of sainthood (karama)’ and to this degree, the Mathnawī would have been evidence in itself to Rūmī’s disciples in regards to his status as a genuine walī of God. When considered thus, the Mathnawī’s reception by the Sufi community (especially the Mevlevī) for whom it was an all-important initiating text, can also be understood as the institutionalisation of hermeneutic authority. This notion can also be considered through the advent of the profession of the Mathnawīkān – the title denoting reading, translating and commenting on the meanings of the Mathnawī’s various passages as well as occasionally chanting it in a ritualistic setting accompanied with samā’ (ritualistic whirling). For the most part, this (the status of being a Mathnawīkān) was an exclusive position determined by one’s spiritual rank within the ṭariqah.

As such, Ḣusām al-Dīn has been regarded as the original expert of the Mathnawī as well as the first Mathnawīkān, a tradition passed onto Rūmī’s Son, Sultan Walad, that continued throughout the Ottoman Empire till the present day where the Mathnawī was taught in various tekke (Sufi lodges) as well as mosques. In this sense, in line with the reception of most other “sacred” texts, the Mathnawī rests on a tradition of guided reading in which the reader was often an auditory member of a broader community of spiritual seekers. However, the Mathnawī like many of Rūmī’s other works has left the exclusivity of its initial readership and spiritual community which makes it open to any kind and manner of reading open to modern readers; however, Rūmī’s perception of the Mathnawī reveals an interesting notion of readership that provides insight into they type of reader as well as the type of reading he argues is required in approaching the Mathnawī in order to render it most beneficial.

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60 Frishkopf, op. cit., p. 92.

61 This sentiment is also expressed by Arberry, who observes: ‘There are thousands who believe that Rūmī’s presence (Baraka) still exists today, and still teaches. If this is true, it is certainly largely due to the remarkable vitality that can be found in his writings and poetry, and a relevancy they contain that reaches to our inner core.’ Discourses of Rūmī (Fihi mā fihi), translated by Arthur James Arberry, RoutledgeCurzon, Oxford, 2004, p. viii.

62 However, it was not a position exclusive to the Mevlevī ṭariqah and historically, several Naqshbandī sheiks where known to have held the position of Mathnawīkān.

63 Şefik Can, who was the last of the lineage of the Mathnawīkān from Ḣusām al-Dīn to the present time, handed over the spiritual responsibility to H. Nur Artıran one of the few female Mathnawīkān. Nur, H. Artıran, ‘Mathnawi Sohbets From The Ottomans To Present Day’, SemazenAKADEMIK, Semazen.net [website], http://akademik.semazen.net/author_article_print.php?id=1115, accessed 29 April 2015.
7.4 The Reader According to Rūmī

In modern reader-response criticism, one can encounter several terms that refer to similar hypothetical readers including the educated reader, the ideal reader, and the optimal reader. Analogously, Wolfgang Iser uses the term implied reader, by which he means the reader that the text seems to be addressing, whose characteristics we can deduce by studying the style in which the text is written and the apparent “attitude” of the narrative toward the reader.\(^{64}\) The point here is that critics who use hypothetical readers are trying to show us what particular texts require of readers or how particular texts work to position readers in order to guide their interpretations.\(^ {65}\) If we are to begin by asking who Rūmī’s readers were, it is worth pointing out that it was intended specifically as a manual for spiritual aspirants treading the Sufi path. Furthermore, unlike a work like say, Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* (The Seals of Wisdom), Rūmī and Ibn ‘Arabī directed their works at two completely different audiences. Ibn ‘Arabī and his disciples wrote for the ‘ulamā (scholars) – those with thorough training not only in the Qur’ān, hadith and jurisprudence, but also in *kalām* (Islamic scholastic theology) and philosophy. Rūmī also wrote for a more specific audience, though not necessarily for the intelligentsia, his work appeals to anyone with a heart to pursue love.

We have the clearest impression of Rūmī’s intended audience in the *Mathnawī*’s Arabic prefaces. For example, Rūmī provides some indication of his intended readers in the preface to the first book praying that the *Mathnawī* will remain: ‘a fastness for the godly, spiritual, heavenly, super-celestial, illuminated ones who possess insight, the silent ones who behold, the absent ones who are present, the kings beneath threadbare garments, the nobles of the nations, the owners of excellences, the luminaries who display the evidences.’\(^ {66}\) In his observation of such passages, Ernst remarks that ‘[t]he claims made in the preface for the religious authority of the *Mathnawī* are thus matched by a description of its efficacy with the briefest of hints,


\(^{65}\) Whether or not readers accept that guidance or are even aware of it is another matter.

combined with a dedication of the text to the ideal listener, an advanced Sufi. This idea seems supported by Rūmī’s reference to an important group known as the liberated folk (al-aḥrār), who he believes can truly benefit from the Mathnawī. Konuk explains that this specific group refers to those who have attained spiritual freedom from the clutches of their ego by liberating themselves from the restraints of the world and the fetters of their carnal souls through mystical training and struggle against their egos, in other words, those who have advanced on the Sufī path. These individuals may be considered to be Rūmī’s “ideal readers” who are able to reap the spiritual benefits of the Mathnawī. Rūmī adds that this prayer of his (that the Mathnawī be far-reaching and ever-lasting) will not be rejected because his prayer for the desired readership of the Mathnawī ‘includes (in its benefits) all classes of the creation’ regardless of how much they have advanced on the Sufī path. His prayer seems to have been answered to some degree, for even in its own time, the Mathnawī was read widely – unlike the Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam, which was read only by the “elite”, the Mathnawī was read not only by those on the spiritual path, but also by the general public including Sufis from other orders.

However, Rūmī’s anticipation of the Mathnawī’s broad audience-base also leads him to frequently express his fear that some of his readers will misunderstand the nuanced spiritual meanings that it contains: ‘I would have explained this (matter) with (eager) contention, but I fear lest some (weak) mind may stumble.’ As such, in relation to the contents of the Mathnawī, Rūmī posits that ‘every reader understands according to the measure of his intelligence.’ This sometimes becomes frustrating for Rūmī, and having anticipated the broad readership of his work, at one point he bemoans: ‘What I am saying is according to the measure of your understanding: I die in grief for (the absence of) a sound understanding.’ In this sense, in her study of the Mathnawī, Mills has pointed out, ‘Circumspection is all the more necessary in a writing of spiritual power, which will reach much of its audience without the supervising

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69 Rūmī, Mathnawī, I: Arabic preface.
71 Rūmī, Mathnawī, I: 690.
72 Rūmī, Mathnawī, III: Arabic preface.
73 Rūmī, Mathnawī, III: 2098.
presence of its author and so must speak in such a way as to reach, but not be inappropriately accessible to, individuals of varied levels of understanding.'

Thus, Rūmī argues that, in the tradition of the Prophet, he speaks according to the measure and capacity of a variety of different readers since some will lack the capacity to understand the esoteric meanings of his speech: ‘There is no means (possibility) of communicating more than this to the people: in the river there is no room for the Sea. / I speak low according to the measure of (their) understandings: ’tis no fault, this is the practice of the Prophet.’

In this way, like the Qur’ān, the multiple meanings contained within the Mathnawī are revealed according to one’s spiritual rank (maqām). Therefore, unlike the Sufi elect, who ‘understand much from even one hint’ Rūmī suggests that beginners will only be able to draw out very specific and literal meanings, therefore, he asks rhetorically ‘What inner knowledge and ecstasy can they possess? Words are spoken according to the capacity of the listeners. If beginners do not know how to draw wisdom out, how can it come forth?’

In this sense, one can point to Braginsky’s examination of Sufi literature in which meaning refers to ‘hierarchically arranged knowledge obtainable through a type of reading which allowed the reader to penetrate to the innermost core of the text, to be eventually rewarded with a perception of the ultimate reality, the Absolute.’ In this way, Rūmī suggests a hierarchal nature of readership that naturally corresponds to one’s familiarity with the Sufi path as well as their rank within the spiritual hierarchy.

Rūmī’s hermeneutics also implies that the quantity and the quality of spiritual discourse depend upon the receptivity, “need” or, state (hāl) of its receiving audience. For example, in referring to his discourse in the Fīhi mā fīhi, Rūmī explains, ‘I am a cobbler: the leather is plentiful, but I cut and stitch according to the size of the foot. I am your mirror, I am your measure; As much as your stature is, So much my treasure.’


Rūmī, Mathnawī, I: 3810-1. Similarly, Rūmī points out how the Prophet would sometimes speak cryptically, ‘in a covert parable, in order that the adversary might not know foot from head.’ Rūmī, Mathnawī, I: 1053.

Rūmī, Fīhi mā fīhi, p. 204.


ibid., Fīhi mā fīhi, p. 195.
discourse is impingent upon the spiritual state (ḥāl) of those who are receiving it. Ḥusām al-Dīn, who is both Rūmī’s scribe and his immediate audience, also becomes his implied reader at various points throughout the Mathnawī as well symbolising the murīd on the Sufi Path. Ḥusām al-Dīn role as scribe and muse is significant because Rūmī implies that his reader-response to the Mathnawī has a direct influence on the nature and quality of the mystical meanings that are reaching Rūmī through inspiration. For example, at one point, referring to Ḥusām al-Dīn, Rūmī explains ‘How the explanation of the (inner) meaning of the tale was stopped because of the hearer’s desire to hear the superficial form of it.’ Thus Rūmī asks: ‘When will He who is envied by Light allow me to tell that which is obligatory and ought to be told?’ Rūmī is annoyed that Ḥusām al-Dīn is preoccupied with the literal form of the tale: ‘Hear what has interfered (hindered my exposition) at the present time: methinks the hearer’s mind has wandered elsewhere.’ Since Ḥusām al-Dīn wishes to know what happens in terms of the tales plot, Rūmī explains he is obliged to satiate his curiosity before he can continue: ‘Therefore it behoves me to go back from this discourse to that story in order to describe what happened (to him).’ However, on this note Rūmī also addresses the general reader and asks that they ‘listen to the outward form of the tale, but take heed to separate the grain from the chaff.’ Thus, Rūmī frequently advises the reader about the need to not get caught in the exterior details of his tales, but rather to use them as indicators for deeper esoteric meanings.

Rūmī also suggests that Ḥusām al-Dīn serves not only the role of scribe, but also the spiritual muse who inspires the Mathnawī’s maʾnā (meanings). The last tale of book one is the renowned tale of Ali who refrained from killing his enemy on the battlefield after he spat in his face because he feared this act had introduced a level of ego–awareness (through his wounded pride) and therefore feared that he was no longer acting as a pure instrument of the Beloved (in a state of fanā").

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80 ibid., II: 193.
81 ibid., 194.
82 ibid., 195.
83 ibid., 198.
84 ibid., 202.
85 In the tale Ali proclaims: ‘Half (of my fighting) came to be for God’s sake, and half (for) idle passion: in God’s affair partnership’ is not allowable.’ Mathnawī, I: 3977.
tale, utilising the imagery of consumption to refer to the act of reading/hearing, Rūmī rather abruptly exclaims:

Oh, alas, two mouthfuls were eaten, and thereby the ferment of thought was frozen up… When the bread was spirit, it was beneficial; since it became form, it produces little good… The words are coming (forth) very earth-soiled; the water has become turbid: stop up the mouth of the well, / That God may again make it pure and sweet, that He who made it turbid may likewise make it pure. / Patience brings the object of desire, not Haste. Have patience—and God knoweth best what is right.  

Konuk points out that there have been various opinions on who these two morsel refer to in this passage, one example is that it refers to ‘the audience of the Mathnawī who have not been able to inspire the spiritual meanings and realities projected onto Rūmī’s heart.’ This is particularly interesting considering that around this time, Ḥusām al-Dīn’s wife had been overcome by an illness that led to our eventual death; therefore, being familiar with Ḥusām al-Dīn’s ḥāl, Rūmī feels that it is no longer beneficial for them to continue the Mathnawī at this point, and as a result, its continuation was postponed for a period of roughly two years in respect of Ḥusām al-Dīn’s grieving process. As Rūmī clarifies in the beginning of book two:

This Mathnawī has been delayed for a while: an interval was needed in order that the blood might turn to milk. / Blood does not become sweet milk until thy fortune gives birth to a new babe. Hearken well (to my words). / When the Light of God, Husámu’ddín, drew the reins (of his spirit) back from the zenith of Heaven—(For) after he had gone in the ascension to (spiritual) realities, without his (life-giving) springtide the buds (of mystic knowledge) were unburst (in my heart)— / When (I say) he returned from the Sea towards the shore, the lyre of the poesy of the Mathnawī became attuned (again). / The Mathnawi , which was the burnisher (purifier) of spirits —his return was the day of (my) seeking (an auspicious) commencement (for it).

In this sense, it can be said that the conclusion of book one is not thematic, but rather directly as a result of Ḥusām al-Dīn’s spiritual state (mental presence); since he is no longer entirely present due to his preoccupation with his worldly commitments Rūmī

86 Rūmī, Mathnawī, I: 3990-4003.
87 Konuk, op. cit., p. 561.
88 Konuk, op. cit., p. 561.
89 Rūmī, Mathnawī, II: 1-5.
is compelled to halt the composition of the \textit{Mathnawī}. This notion is particularly interesting in terms of the \textit{Mathnawī} as a Sufi text. On the one hand, as a general theory of reader-response, it suggests that the reader who is not wholly absorbed in the \textit{Mathnawī}, the one whose mind is co-mixed with worldly preoccupations, will not be able to benefit from its transformational possibilities. On the other hand, it implies that the \textit{Mathnawī} was directly influenced by the shifting spiritual contours of its human composers and to this degree, was shaped by its surrounding realities as much it was reality shaping.

Therefore, another assumption upon which Rūmī’s Sufi hermeneutics rests concerns the nature of the self seeking understanding of the meanings within sacred texts. In this way, Rūmī implies that often, what you are finding in the text as well as what you are objecting to, is really what you have taken with you. Rūmī suggests that in addition to the multiplicity of meaning that complicates the interpretive process, there is also the problem of multiplicity at the level of the subject: ‘Thy intelligence is distributed over a hundred important affairs, over thousands of desires and great matters and small.’\textsuperscript{90} The implication being, that interpretations based on interior experiences are ever changing, because the self is in constant flux as it moves through different whims, desires, preoccupations, fears and motivations. Thus, Rūmī suggests that the myriad of distinct yearnings and conflicting urges of the human being interfere in their ability to interpret scripture because their minds are clouded by the perpetual callings of their ego-\textit{nafs}. In this way, Rūmī implies that not everyone fits his profile of the \textit{Mathnawī}’s “ideal reader”. For example, in the preface to the sixth book, Rūmī compares the \textit{Mathnawī} to a lamp that ‘cannot be perceived by the animal sense, because the state of animality is the lowest of the low’.\textsuperscript{91} Thus, Rūmī suggests that another major obstacle facing those who read mystical texts – specifically the Qur’ān and by extension, the \textit{Mathnawī} is a tendency to interpret them through their ego-\textit{nafs}: ‘The bane of this gate is sensuality and lust; else, draught on draught (of spiritual knowledge) is (to be found) here.’\textsuperscript{92} In this way, he implies that those who are at the lowest levels of conscious existence (existing through their \textit{nafs al-ʿammārah}), remain captive to the demands of their base desires and will therefore not

\textsuperscript{90} ibid., \textit{Mathnawī}, IV: 3288.
\textsuperscript{91} ibid., VI: Arabic preface.
\textsuperscript{92} ibid., II: 10.
able to interpret the *Mathnawī* in a way that will render it fruitful to them. For example, in explaining the meaning of a *hadīth* of the prophet in which he proclaims that he spends the night with his Lord who gives him food and drink, Rūmī clarifies that the meaning is metaphorical and the references to food and drink refers to spiritual sustenance. At this point, he commands the reader to ‘Accept this (saying) without any (perverse) interpretation... Because interpretation (alteration of the meaning) is a rejection of the gift, since he (the interpreter) regards that real (original) meaning as faulty.’ Here he implies that a purely literalist interpretation of the *hadīth* would be a perversion of its spiritual meanings and the reason, why the tendency to interpret in this way is prevalent among some, he explains, is due to ‘the weakness of men’s understandings’.

The derision of egotistical interpretations also forms the basis of Rūmī’s Qur’ānic hermeneutics. For example, he is very harsh in rebuking those who interpret the Qur’ān to serve themselves: ‘Thou hast interpreted (and altered the meaning of) the virgin (uncorrupted) Word: interpret (alter) thyself, not the (Divine) Book. / Thou interprettest the Qur’ān according to thy desire: by thee the sublime meaning is degraded and perverted.’ Here, it is worth considering the lexical meaning of *ta’wil*, which is to bring something back to its origin, and thus ‘refers to the effort to ascertain the full meaning of a Qur’ānic word, phrase, or story, such that one can arrive at the original intention of its divine author.’ In this sense, Rūmī’s appropriation of *ta’wil* often accords it negative connotations and suggests a type of perverse interpretation that distorts meanings instead of revealing it. Rūmī compares this type of egotistical interpretation in a scornful little parable titled ‘The baseness of the foul interpretation given by the fly’, in which the egotistical interpreter is compared to a fly on a blade of straw drifting on a pool of urine:

“I have called (them) sea and ship,” said he; “I have been pondering over that (interpretation) for a long while. / Look! here is this sea and this ship, and I am the pilot and skilled (in navigation) and judicious.” / He was propelling the raft on the “sea”: that (small) quantity appeared to him illimitable. / That urine was

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93 ibid., I: 3741-2.
94 ibid., II: 1921.
95 ibid., I: 1080-1.
boundless in relation to him: where was the vision that should see it truly? / His world extends (just) as far as his sight reaches; his eye is so big, his “sea” is big in the same proportion.97

The ‘false interpreter of the Qur’ān’98 is slighted for being limited to his/her own perceptions and partial intelligence (aql-i juzi). Rūmī implies that correct interpretation requires a correct understanding (introspection) or, muḥāsaba of the self.99 In this context, Rūmī’s exhortation to “interpret yourself” can be understood as a call to assess the origin and core of the self in the hope of understanding one’s spiritual purpose, as well as the multitude of desires and limitations that crowd the subjective conscience. This naturally constitutes a much more advanced type of self-examination in which the Sufi attempts to ‘break free from the chains of what is characterised ‘multiplicity’ and achieve a more unitive state.’100 In a hermeneutic sense, Rūmī’s reader-response theory of the spiritual aspirant forces one to question how ones mis/interpretations (especially in the context of scripture) are serving their ego; thus, requires them to interpret their interpretations and question why they have understood things in a particular way.101 As such, Rūmī declares that ‘If you wish eye and understanding and hearing to be pure, tear in pieces the curtains of selfish desire’102 In this sense, Rūmī implies that the individual’s spiritual transformation is not possible if the text is simply viewed as a mirror that reflects the egotistical desires and whims of the individual reader: ‘Dost thou know why the mirror (of thy soul) reflects nothing? It is because the rust is not cleared from its face.’103 On this point one can consider Ziesler’s description of reader-response criticism: ‘To put it crudely, there is the question whether the text, any text, is a window or a mirror. Does it [the

97 Rūmī, Mathnawī, I: 1082-6.
98 ibid., I: 1088.
99 The Arabic word muḥāsaba which comes from a root embracing such concepts as ‘settling an account’, ‘calling (someone) to account’, getting even (with someone)’ and ‘holding someone responsible’. It has thus been variously rendered as ‘accounting’, ‘bookkeeping’, and, in theology and Sufism, ‘examination of conscience’ and implies the examination of conscience or self. Ian Richard Netton, Ṣūfī Ritual: The Parallel Universe, Curzon Press, Surrey, 2000, p. 43.
100 ibid., p. 45.
101 Reader-response criticism is not a conceptually unified critical position, but a term that has come to be associated, with the work of critics who use the words reader, the reading process, and response to mark out an area for investigation. In this sense, it can be said that reader-response criticism stresses the activity of the reader, who is often considered to be the creator of the text’s meaning. Jane P. Tompkins, Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore & London, 1980, p. ix. It is worth pointing out; however, that much of modern literary theory including reader-response criticism celebrates the “lack” of meaning.
102 Rūmī, Mathnawī, II: 569.
103 ibid., I: 443.
text] in some way facilitate our own illumination [as in the reader-response approach] or does it give us access to another world [as in the author-oriented approach]?" Rūmī’s response would be that in the case of sacred texts, or his Mathnawī in particular can become both a mirror to one’s self and ideally, a window to higher esoteric truths. However, whether it becomes either depends entirely on the reader, their intention, and how much they have effaced their ego-nafs: ‘Sell your asinine (corporeal) ear and buy another ear, for the asinine ear will not apprehend this discourse.’ Thus, it is not so much subjective as it is self-serving interpretations that Rūmī discredits. Therefore, the Mathnawī must become the means through which the individual is able to polish the mirror of their own conscience so it is able to reflect moral virtues and divine guidance.

Rūmī’s frustration with the accusations made towards the Mathnawī for not being systematic or theoretical enough also reflects his sensibilities as an author. Rather, in remaining true to the spirit of the madhab-i ‘ishq, Rūmī’s preference for the poetic and literary mode naturally demands an appreciation of the aesthetic. In this way, Rūmī implies that the expression of what is beautiful must necessarily also be beautiful. For example, in the Fīhī mā fīhi, Rūmī explains ‘it would never occur to a lover to say, “My beloved and I are co-partners in the work and filth that results from two people sharing a certain space with bodies that decay.” How could anyone apply such a cold description to their beloved?’ Such an efferent mode of expression would not only be contrary to the nature of ‘ishq, but insulting to the Beloved. Therefore, Rūmī remarks that such individuals/readers ‘only recognize the general attributes, not seeing our particular beauty’ and therefore ‘it is not proper arguing with you, for our words are commingled with beauty and it is wrong to reveal beauty to those who do not love beauty.’ In this way, Rūmī explains that Sufism ‘is the science of potential, it is not the science of argumentation.’ Thus, a more indirect claim made by Rūmī

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106 This point also helps us to understand what led someone like Nasr to remark that ‘The most profound explanation of the significance of Islamic art is to be found in a work such as the Mathnawī of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī and not in books of either jurisprudence or kalām which, although very important, concern man’s actions and religious beliefs rather than the principles of an interiorizing art which leads man back to the One.’ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*. State University of New York Press, New York, 1989, p. 230.
108 ibid., p. 276.
In regards to the *Mathnawī* as a text is that it is especially suited to those who have an aesthetic, if not literary appreciation and are, on the whole, seekers of beauty.

Unsurprisingly, Rūmī’s proposed remedy for the curse of ego interpretation is that the individual ‘must unite the (scattered) parts by means of love’\(^{109}\), meaning that ‘*ishq* is the remedy for unifying the self (in its scattered desires) to become the unified Self that subsists through the Beloved – the sublime goals of *fanā’* and *baqā’*. In this way, Rūmī’s hermeneutics is naturally intertwined with his Sufi worldview and follows in the tradition of “He who knows himself knows God.” If the individual does not know their own self, including its desires and weaknesses, they are more likely to project their “self” and interpret the text from the narrow confines of the ego. Thus, recognising that the reader is able to pervert meaning by reading their base desires into it, Rūmī seeks to transform the reader by first transforming their *nafs*.

In this way, Rūmī’s theory of reader-response suggests that the text is as active as the reader in creating meaning. For example, in another riveting image in the *Mathnawī*, Rūmī expresses his scriptural hermeneutics through the imagery of consumption\(^{110}\):

> ‘Amongst the Companions (of the Prophet) there was scarcely any one that knew the Qur’ān by heart, though their souls had a great desire (to commit it to memory)\(^{111}\) and yet, anyone who knew even a portion of the Qur’ān, ‘was called a great person and pointed out’.\(^{112}\) The reason, Rūmī explains, is because they ‘devoured the Koran.’ The implication is that the reason why these companions were revered was because they had not just rote learnt the verses, but actually internalised their meanings. Reading is imagined through the act of eating where understanding means that meaning is digested and absorbed into one’s very being.\(^{113}\) Rūmī explains this idea more directly in the *Fiḥī Ma Ṣīḥī*: ‘To devour a loaf of bread, or two loafs, is certainly a great accomplishment. But people who put bread in their mouths without chewing it


\(^{111}\) Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, III: 1386. The declaration is important especially in the context of the *sahabā* (companions) and considered among Muslims to be not only the most pious, but also the most intimately acquainted with the Qur’ān.

\(^{112}\) Rūmī, *Fiḥī Ma Ṣīḥī*, p. 146.

\(^{113}\) ibid.
and spit it out again can devour thousands of tons in that way.¹¹⁴ In this sense, Rūmī implies that in relation to spiritual discourse, one cannot claim to have understood in any true sense unless that understanding is accompanied with action. As such, what is simply memorised is no great feat if the meaning and significance of those verses are not understood and more importantly, acted upon. This also reflects Rūmī’s Sufi view of the primacy of taḥqīq over taqlīd. In this way, the companions can be likened to Rūmī’s “ideal readers” for whom the act of reading was not just a superficial memorisation of words on a page but rather, the transformation of one’s very being. Rūmī’s Sufi hermeneutics are not simply mental operations that are performed on an aesthetic object; the insights gained through the process of interpretation make demands on the lives of the interpreter and the community:

The interpretation that makes you ardent and hopeful and active and reverent is the true one; / And if it make you slack (in service), know the real truth to be this, that it is an alteration (of the right sense of the saying), not an interpretation. / This (saying) has come (down) in order to make (men) ardent (in serving God), that He may take the hands of those who have lost hope (and deliver them).¹¹⁵

In this way, Rūmī’s Qur’ānic hermeneutics is far removed from a dry scholastic approach that is more concerned with the form of scripture than the demands it makes from its readers. If revelation is understood as council, then it has only been correctly interpreted if it has led to some kind of positive effect, action and movement within the individual. Thus, according to Rūmī, the demand made by the Qur’ān is by extension, also made by the Mathnawī: ‘(Mawlânâ) said, “Whoever listens to the (spiritual) meanings of the Masnavi and doesn’t perform actions in (the spirit of) it is (acting like those who said), ‘We hear and we do not obey’ (They) are not (acting like those who said), ‘We hear and we do obey’.”¹¹⁶ Therefore, another salient aspect of Rūmī’s theory of readership is the idea that their hermeneutic activity is directly influenced by the intention with which one approaches the text. In the Mathnawī, Rūmī gives the example of the Qur’ān’s warning that what one takes from it will be directly influenced by the intention with which one approaches it: ‘He (God) hath said in the

¹¹⁴ ibid.
¹¹⁵ Rūmī, Mathnawī, V: 3125-7.
Qur’ān, “This Qur’ān with all its heart leads some aright and others astray.” In this sense, Rūmī implies that depending on one’s intention, one will either be guided or misguided by the Mathnawī: ‘The study of it will increase the sorrow of them that are estranged (from God) and the joy and thankfulness of them that are blest.’ Rūmī suggests that like the Qur’ān, the Mathnawī directly responds to its readers’ present state. Therefore, in following the Qur’ān’s principle, Rūmī argues that the aspirant cannot comprehend spiritual meanings if they are not open to the concept of guidance: ‘Mere words cannot convey this spiritual understanding. Words only reveal what the heart has an ear to hear.’ The implication is that unless the individual is open to spiritual guidance, they will not be able to receive its transformative effects. In this way, Rūmī places the power of granting access to meaning within the text, but at the same time, clarifies the nature of the effort that the reader needs to exert in the pursuit of finding meaning. As such, Rūmī suggests that the Mathnawī only bares its meanings as well as its transformative potential if it is approached with the intention of seeking guidance; therefore, what the reader gets out of the Mathnawī depends entirely upon the state of their own selves:

I hope, too, that you will hear these words within your hearts, for that would be profitable. But if a thousand thieves come from outside, they cannot open the door without some fellow-thief inside who can unlock that door. Speak a thousand words from the outside, still, so long as there is none to answer from within, the door never opens…The root of the matter is the receptiveness within Soul.

If returning to the initial question about the intended readers of the Mathnawī, it can be said that it is specifically addressed for those who seek to be transformed by it. Rūmī implies that there must first exist a conscious desire on the part of the individual – then, Rūmī suggests that the outcome or, fruitfulness of its effects depends on

117 Mathnawī, V: 653-6.
118 Rūmī, Mathnawī, IV: Arabic preface.
119 For example, in particularly evocative imagery, Rūmī depicts the Qur’ān as coquettish bride who reveals her beauties (here implying meanings) only to one who courts her gently and endearingly: ‘The Koran is like a bride who does not show her face to you even when you draw aside the veil. The fact that you have examined her, and yet have not attained happiness or mystical unveiling, is a sign that your act of trying to remove her veil has itself repulsed her, so that she appears to you as ugly.’ Rūmī, Fihi mā fihi, p. 417.
120 For example: ‘It is all the same to them whether you warn them or not: they will not believe. / You can warn only those who will follow the Qur’ān and hold the Merciful One in awe, though they cannot see Him: give such people the glad news of forgiveness and a noble reward.’ Qur’ān, 36: 10-11.
121 Rūmī, Fihi mā fihi, pp. 105-6.
122 Ibid., p. 105.
divine decree: ‘If God wills, It makes these few words profitable so they will grow within your hear’, but if God does not will it, ‘if even a hundred thousand words are spoken, they will not lodge in the heart but will pass by and be forgotten’. The act of reading is only the initiation of intention, but Rūmī’s desires that the reader approaches the Mathnawī seeking guidance from the text so the individual self can progressively evolve to reach higher modes of being and conscience. For Rūmī, interpretation is predominantly a question of character – the way someone interprets as well as the resulting interpretation largely depends on the type of person they are. This profoundly ethical aspect of interpretation is a distinguishing feature of Sufi, and mystical hermeneutics more generally.

7.5 Conclusion:

Rūmī’s approach to the Mathnawī as well as the Qur’ān is shaped by his Sufi hermeneutics, which includes his broader views on language and meaning. Through such an understanding, access to higher spiritual meanings is always shaped by one’s commitment to the Sufi path. Rūmī firmly believed that only those who had effaced themselves in God were endowed with the gift of understanding the deeper, esoteric meanings of revelation. To this degree, Rūmī explicitly consigns interpretive authority (especially of the esoteric) to the Sufi community. In this sense, Rūmī propounds the distinctly Sufi view that self-effacement is a necessary step for attaining correct interpretation that penetrates beyond the mere letter and name of the Qur’ān. Therefore, Rūmī maintains that one can draw closer to the “essences” behind the plurality of meaning through divine assistance, as well as one’s commitment to the Sufi path – a perceptive state that Rūmī believes cannot be reached through the rationalising intellect but rather, through the ‘ishq-induced insight of the Sufi.

Therefore, in consideration of the Mathnawī’s broad readership, Rūmī claims to speak according to the measure and capacity of a variety of different readers since some will lack the capacity to understand the esoteric meanings of his speech. In this way, Rūmī suggests a hierarchal nature of readership that naturally corresponds to one’s familiarity with the Sufi path. Rūmī often highlights the authority of the Sufi saint, the “master of the esoteric” who does not perceive through the intellect since, in Rūmī’s view, true spiritual knowledge is only acquired through the experiential path of ‘ishq.

123 ibid., 104.
Also significant is Rūmī’s notion of readership in which he highlights the importance of the nature of the self seeking meaning. Thus, Rūmī suggests that another major obstacle facing those who read mystical texts – specifically the Qur’ān and by extension, the Mathnawī, is a tendency to interpret them through their ego-nafs. In a hermeneutic sense, Rūmī’s reader-response theory of the spiritual aspirant forces one to question how ones mis/interpretations are serving their ego; thus, requires them to interpret their interpretations and question why they have understood things in a particular way. Therefore, another salient aspect of Rūmī’s theory of readership is the idea that hermeneutic activity is directly influenced by the intention with which one approaches the text. Therefore, Rūmī suggests that, like the Qur’ān, being able to understand the Mathnawī requires one to approach it with the genuine intention of seeking guidance. Thus, recognising that the reader is able to pervert meaning by reading their base desires into it, Rūmī seeks to transform the reader by first transforming their nafs. Furthermore, Rūmī implies that in relation to spiritual discourse, one cannot claim to have understood in any true sense, unless that understanding is accompanied with action, which epitomises the profoundly ethical dimension of Rūmī’s hermeneutics as well as how he perceived the Mathnawī and what he hoped those who approached it would take from it.
Chapter Eight:
Rūmī’s Sufi Path of Narrative

‘Then he engaged with his friends in (mystical) meditation: the presence of the Friend (the murshid) is (like) a book in front (of the murid). / The Sūfī’s book is not (composed of) ink of letters (letters written with ink): it is naught but a heart white as snow.’

Mathnawī scholar and translator, Alan Williams, has stated, ‘Rūmī’s stature as a spiritual teacher is visible in the poetry of the Mathnawī, and a study of that poetry is a study of his spiritual meaning.’ I believe the subtlety of this statement is important, because it suggests that the Mathnawī’s form (didactic narrative) is one Rūmī believed was most useful in simulating the practical elements of the ṭarīqah (Rūmī’s sufi path of ‘ishq). As such, the focus of this chapter is on how Rūmī seeks to maintain the role of spiritual guide within a literary medium, in order to transform the readers’ understanding of themselves. Thus, this chapter will begin by providing an exploration of Rūmī’s understanding of the literary notion of “the author”, and how this vision of authorship is informed by his Sufi views. Next, taking the tale of The King and The Handmaiden as the basis for a broader discussion, this section will employ close textual analysis in an attempt to explore Rūmī’s use of narrative (specifically allegorical), to communicate and awaken the reader to his/her own complex spiritual landscape. Finally, this chapter will analyse Rūmī’s unique narratory role throughout the Mathnawī as the “author-guide” who attempts to reconfigure both the reader’s self-perception as well as their reading and interpretive practices.

8.1 Rūmī and Authorship

Speech is a ship and meaning is the sea.
Enter quickly, so that I may pilot the ship!

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1 Rūmī, Mathnawī, II: 158-9.
3 Rūmī, Diwān-i Kābir, 15985.
As explored in the previous chapter, the fluidity of meaning is often an inherent feature in Sufi hermeneutics as well as having become almost incontestable in post-modern literary theory; however, as Rūmī has elegantly suggested in the above lines, what is perhaps most at stake is who, if anyone, guides us in the meaning-making process? In her succinct summary of the historical progression of critical theory, Lois Tyson points out that in the early decades of the twentieth century, students of literature were taught that the author was of primary concern in reading a literary work: where as the task of the literary critic was to examine the author’s life in order to discover what the author meant to communicate—his or her message, theme, or moral—the authorial intention. The focus of literary theorists has considerably changed over the years to the point that, now, among many contemporary critical theorists at least, the author is no longer considered a meaningful object of analysis. Consequently, the question of the author, along with that of the extratextual referent in general (history, society, the world) was sidelined or bracketed as the preliminary step toward evolving a formal, internal and rhetorical approach to the text. However, a question that remains pertinent is if the author is non-existent and his intention irrelevant, so that all we find in a text is what we read into it, where does that leave us regarding a text’s power to transform the individual?

As previously stated, the Mathnawī is intrinsically a manual for travellers on the path of ʿishq. It begins with a statement of this intention, meaning Rūmī begins the Mathnawī by clarifying what kind of text it is, the type of readers it aims at, as well as what he hopes his readers will gain from it. Therefore, although consisting of various allegories, fables, and anecdotes, Rūmī initially composed the Mathnawī so that it would serve as a spiritually nurturing device or, to state it more simply, Rūmī composed the Mathnawī with the specific intention of transforming his readers. It is likely in this sense that Rūmī described the Mathnawī as ‘a light to our friends and a treasure for our (spiritual) descendants’, implying that he believed it to be a text

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4 She also points out that today, the focus is, instead, on the reader; on the ideological, rhetorical, or aesthetic structure of the text; or on the culture in which the text was produced, usually without reference to the author. Lois Tyson, Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide, Routledge, New York, 2006, p. 2.

5 To classify a text as literary through this view is to take a decision not to refer it to its originator or to treat it as a communication from them. Thus, Roland Barthes’ eponymous essay declaring the “death of the author” became a poststructuralist catchphrase that signified a way to rid the text of the authoritative clutches of the author. Roland Barthes, A Barthes Reader, Hill and Wang, New York, 1982.

6 Rūmī, Mathnawī, IV: Arabic preface.
which would continue to function in its intended purpose for generations of spiritual seekers.

Therefore, Rūmī believes that the Mathnawī is not only the means of understanding the essence or, “spirit” of the Qur’ān but also, in the context of the Sufi path, a textual manifestation of the tarīqah to the degree that it serves to assist the reader-sālik in their quest for spiritual transformation. I should here pause to state that I am aware of the rather charged claims I am making about the nature of authorship and intention – the very existence of which is outright rejected by some. For example, the intentional fallacy was coined by New Critics to refer to what they believed to be the mistaken belief that the author’s intention is the same as the text’s meaning.\(^7\) It can certainly be said that that an author’s announcements – both prospective and retrospective – of his/her intentions or plan of his/her work are irrelevant, for the simple reason that the author may fail in his/her intent.\(^8\) But can we generalise from this statement of irrelevance to the conclusion that everything about the author is irrelevant? That the Mathnawī was composed and, since its composition, has been used for the edification of spiritual aspirants on the Sufi path is an important reality that must be taken into account when analysing its literary properties.

Such a position does not assume that the Mathnawī cannot fail in its author’s intended purpose – even Rūmī believed that like the Qur’ān, what a reader would get out of the Mathnawī directly corresponds to the intention with which they approach it. Nor does it presume that the Mathnawī cannot be read simply for its own sake, contrary to what its author demands from its readers. However, this position does assume that an honest attempt to understand the intersection between Sufism and literature would need to acknowledge the author’s stated purpose in composing a text as well as addressing the ideological framework that underlies it. I argue here, that Rūmī and by extension, the Mathnawī, must be understood on its own terms. Therefore, when talking about authorship in Sufism, what we are often really talking about is what it means to be a Sufi author. Although there are many elements that Sufi theories of

\(^7\) Introduced by W.K. Wimsatt, Jr., and Monroe C. Beardsley in *The Verbal Icon* (1954), the approach was a reaction to the popular belief that to know what the author intended—what he had in mind at the time of writing—was to know the correct interpretation of the work.

\(^8\) Of course, this does not mean that the stated intention is to be believed or used as the basis for interpretation, only that it like everything else in the text, draws a response and should therefore also be taken into account.
literature may share with some of its more contemporary counterparts, it is important to recognise that Rūmī’s views on meaning, authorship and the text ultimately rest on the view of the Beloved as the archetypal author and the Qur’an as the foundational text.⁹ In this sense, Rūmī recognised God to be the primary author of all phenomena, and the Qur’an as being the physical manifestation of the authorship of his Beloved.

Rūmī also viewed the Mathnawī to have a divine source – not entirely the production of his own ego-self. At first glance, this idea obviously complicates the notion of an entirely individualised Author-creator. Who is the author of the Mathnawī? The answer to this predicament may lie in an innovative essay by Michael Frishkopf, exploring Authorship in Sufi Poetry.¹⁰ In the footsteps of Foucault (“What is an Author?”) Frishkopf continues problematising the contours of authorship (the “author-function”) and freeing “authorship” from necessary attachment to a singular concept of individualised creative genius. Spurred by such problematisation, Frishkopf argues that ‘ethnographic investigation of Sufi poetic practice can proceed to supply a radically contrastive sociological concept of generalised author.’¹¹ He argues that the concept of what he calls the “interauthor” is precisely the social and emic counterpart to the symbolic and etic intertext.¹² In the “intertext” the insider (Sufi), sees a network of spiritual-social relations, transcending the individual author, as a distributed source of textual production; whereas the outsider (critic) views a network of symbolic-textual relations, transcending the individual text.¹³ Frishkopf insists that in practice, its authors (despite Barthes) remain widely regarded as the creative geniuses from which literary culture must spring. Therefore, he argues that ‘the attribute of poet (sha’ir) is secondary to attributes indicating spiritual status, which always locate the poetic producer within the Sufi spiritual-social network, rather than as independent creator-author.’¹⁴ The composition of the Mathnawī is viewed as a combination of the human and the divine where spiritual meanings are

⁹ In an innovative essay, Authorship in Sufi Poetry, Michael Frishkopf points out that the view of the “author-god” is a uniquely postmodern concept that fails to take into account medieval views on authorship and meaning. Michael Frishkopf, ‘Authorship in Sufi Poetry’, Alif Journal of Comparative Poetics, no. 23, 2003, pp. 78-9.
¹⁰ ibid.
¹¹ ibid., p. 78.
¹³ ibid.
¹⁴ ibid., p. 101.
directly projected onto the *qalb* (heart) of the author-mystic who then renders it into poetic speech. In this sense, it can be said that Rūmī viewed himself as a divinely-inspired author and by extension, the *Mathnawī* as a divinely inspired text that would serve as a means of guiding individuals who wished to embark the Sufi path of ‘ishq.\(^\text{15}\)

This being the case, Rūmī viewed his role in the literary work not simply as an author, but as a continuous literary presence manifested through the narrative guide: ‘After us (when we pass away) the *Mathnawī* takes on Shaykhdom, guides the seekers of Truth, leads them to high levels and to the attainment of their ultimate goal.’\(^\text{16}\) As such, Rūmī implies that the Sufi Guide’s role in the *tarīqah* (Sufi path) is actualised in the literary medium through the text (*Mathnawī*) and the assistance of its author-guide:

Hazrat-i Mawlânâ said one day, “Our mausoleum will be rebuilt seven times. The last time, a Turk will appear (who is) wealthy and will construct the tomb (alternating) with one brick of gold and one brick of virgin silver. And around our tomb there will be a very large city, and our tomb will stay in the center of the city. And in that time our Masnavi will act (the part of) a sufi teacher [shaykh].”\(^\text{17}\)

Rūmī presumes that not only is an author’s intention relevant and accessible, but ultimately, that the text is the interface through which the intention continues to function even beyond the author’s absence. For example, at one point in the *Mathnawī*, Rūmī rhetorically questions why he has opted to convey his mystical truths through the literary medium: ‘Why have I steeped myself in the discourse, so that from story-telling I have become a story? / I become naught and (unsubstantial as) a fable in making moan (to God), in order that I may gain influence over (the hearts of) them that prostrate themselves in prayer.’\(^\text{18}\) The word used by Rūmī in this line, *takallub*, is Arabic for transformation or alteration.\(^\text{19}\) In this sense, another way

\(^{15}\) Considering Rūmī’s notion of *fanā’* and *baqā’* (annihilation and subsistence in God) experienced by the Sufi elect, as well as what he believed to be the divinely ordained status of the *Mathnawī*, the distinction between the human author and God as Author is sometimes blurred in the *Mathnawī*.


\(^{19}\) Joseph Catafago, *An English And Arabic Dictionary In Two Parts, Arabic And English, And English And Arabic*, Bernard Quaritch, London, 1858, p. 69.
in which the line may be read is that Rûmî chooses to narrate the tales of the *Mathnawî* so that he is able to change or transform into the believers (those who prostrate to God). Although this seems confusing at first, when considered in the literary sense, it essentially implies Rûmî’s continued existence through the *Mathnawî* in the minds of those who read it. Therefore, in answering his own question, Rûmî suggests that he has opted for the textual medium of the *Mathnawî* so that through his work, the generations of spiritual aspirants succeeding him are able to continue gaining *maʿrifah* (mystical knowledge) despite the cessation of his physical existence. Konuk implies that this affords Rûmî a type of subsistence (*baqāʾ*) via the medium of the text. Rûmî’s presence continues to resonate through the readers of the *Mathnawi* – his persona (as manifested in text) is recreated in the mind of its readers. In this context, Rûmî’s view of the author may be compared to Bakhtin’s ‘author-creator’ whose ‘dialogical character’ serves to sustain mutual interaction between the world presented in the work and the world outside the work. Bakhtin’s ‘author creator’ can be understood as a moment of the very work of literature that appears throughout the whole work but is not a construct of the reader or of the interpreter, but rather as some kind of creative energy that is imminently manifested in the work itself.

Through the mentioned approach, it can be argued that interpretation belongs neither wholly to the author or the reader, and that a text is ultimately able to serve as a vehicle of conversation (between author and reader) to the degree where the author’s physical absence (whether partial or absolute) becomes irrelevant since their textual motivations become *transintentional*. What this essentially implies is that the author’s intention can endure contextual shifts, so that regardless of reader, time, or place, the text still has the potential to transform its readers. Thus, as expressed in the thought of reader-response critic Wolfgang Iser, although the reader projects meaning onto the text, our acts of reading (through which we create this meaning) is ultimately

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20. This understanding is also reflected in the Turkish translations of this line.
22. This is a transactional approach to reader-response. Also hints at the atemporality of sacred texts as well as narrative as a whole.
constituted within, and prestructured by the text. In other words, Iser suggests that it is the text itself that guides the reader through the processes involved in the act of interpreting, or projecting meaning onto a text. Having observed the multivalent nature of the *Mathnawī*’s narrative voices, Safavi and Weightman observe how Mawlana often addresses the reader directly as a prospective spiritual traveler: sometimes he thunders, sometimes harangues, sometimes beguiles, sometimes entertains, sometimes inspires with flights of soaring mystical vision, and sometimes he is deliberately insulting, even vulgar. It can be a bewildering work, but if readers are prepared to work on the *Mathnawi*, they may be assured that the *Mathnawi* will work on them, whether or not they can read it in the original Persian.

The point here is that texts like the *Mathnawī* have particular demands from their readers and that such texts work in particular ways to position readers to guide their interpretations. Drawing on the psychology of reading through interpretive mechanisms, particularly through the notion of intentional thinking, Mártá Horváth argues “textual cues” are strong stimuli for attempting to recover the author’s intention regarding the text. He adds that in narrative texts, the positioning of authorial intention ‘can be made through directing the reader’s perspective taking process, and making them take the suggested perspective.’ To be precise, authors utilise certain linguistic conventions into motion to perform a variety of acts: promising, questioning, lamenting, narrating stories, asserting, etc. These textual cues then become the means through which the author’s intention (here signifying intended effect) is transferred to the literary medium, so that the text becomes a means and medium of authorial action. It is here in which lies the text’s transformational potential. Horváth suggests that ‘[p]robably the strongest such stimulus is a self-reflexive passage in which the narrator comments on his own narrating process or which formulates a kind of a poetic program that is to be realised by the novel in question.’

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25 Whether or not readers accept this guidance or are even aware of it is another matter.
27 ibid.
plurality of narrative voices that appear in parallel with the main text of the poem to reflect the different spiritual nuances of its author-narrator.\textsuperscript{28}

The reference to narrative as a “path” is an apt description of the processes involved in reading what might be called \textit{instrumental literature}. As we have explored, Sufism is primarily concerned with the purification of the \textit{nafs} specifically, the \textit{nafs al-\-'ammāra}. In the context of the \textit{Mathnawī}, this goal of edification is transferred to the literary realm, where the reader-\textit{sālik} is made to traverse \textit{the path of narrative}. This phrase was inspired by Rūmī himself and appears in the first tale of the \textit{Mathnawī}, \textit{The King and the Handmaiden}, which shall be explored in depth shortly. The phrase appears roughly in the middle of the story when a divinely sent physician attempts to determine the condition of an ailing handmaiden: ‘\textit{Zan kenikek ber ṭarīq-i dāstān, Bāz mīpūrsīd hāl-i dōstān}’ which Nicholson translates as ‘He inquired of the girl concerning her friends, by way of narrative’.\textsuperscript{29} The reference to the phrase \textit{ṭarīq-i dāstān, as the path of narrative} is not so much for accuracy as it is for subtlety.\textsuperscript{30} The notion reflects the instrumentality of literature (in this case narrative) as well as the cognitive processes that occur through acts such as reading, orating and relating. It also highlights that Rūmī has chosen to convey the \textit{nakd-i ḡāl} (direct experience of a spiritual state) through the literary medium of narrative. In chapter six, we looked at the unique genres through which the \textit{Mathnawī} can be identified as a Sufi text, at this point, it is also worth considering how Rūmī’s utilisation of the \textit{Mathnawī’s} literary form through the \textit{ṭarīq-i dāstān} (Sufi path of narrative), can also be considered a complex generic construct in which the sheer diversity of the \textit{Mathnawī’s} content frequently blurs the boundaries between various generic forms (e.g. romance, comedy, tragi-comedy, the abject erotic, fantasy, folklore, fable, metanarrative,  


\textsuperscript{29}Rūmī, \textit{Mathnawī}, I: 158.

\textsuperscript{30}The \textit{dāstān}, which is Persian for story, is one of several terms used throughout the \textit{Mathnawī} along with several others: \textit{qīṣṣah, afsāna, hikāyya}, which are all subtle variations on the concept of narrative and can imply both fictional and nonfictional narrative.
mythology and sacred tradition) in an attempt to simulate the disciple’s journey through the Sufi path of ‘ishq.\(^{31}\)

The specific tale being examined is, *The King and the Handmaiden*, is the first tale of the *Mathnawī*, following its Arabic preface and the elusive *Neyname* (*The Song of the Reed*). Although the entirety of the *Mathnawī* is an extensive prose-poem with no overriding narrative structure, its opening tale is an example of a relatively structured narrative plot, albeit containing Rûmî’s characteristic digressions which are intrinsic to Rûmî’s Sufi aims: since most readers expect chronology / linearity but creative and profound works will characteristically disrupts our expectations and this disorientation creates the conditions favourable to mental reconfiguration. The focus on this specific story for close analysis is primarily because Rûmî claims it is ‘very marrow of our inward state.’\(^{32}\) The tale being analysed is a tiny fragment from an extensive corpus consisting of six volumes. The present tale will suffice, however, to sample the literary properties of the *Mathnawī* for in Rûmî’s own words, ‘We have confined ourselves to this little (that has been mentioned), for the little is an index to the much, and a mouthful (of water) is an index to the (quality of the) pool,’\(^{33}\) In this way, the following analysis of the tale attempts to explore the new insights that occur as narrative is utilised to illustrate the inner landscape of anyone willing to embark the path of ‘ishq. In this sense, it can be said that each section of the tale serves to explicate a particular aspect of the *ṭarīqah*. Let us now turn to explore how Rûmî attempts to awaken his readers to the spiritual dynamics of the self, as well as informing them about the intricacies and processes of the Sufi path of ‘ishq.

8.2 The Path of Narrative: *The King and the Handmaiden*

To provide a succinct albeit, somewhat crude summary of the tale’s entirety, Rûmî narrates the tale of a certain king who had become completely enthralled by a handmaiden he perchance saw whilst hunting. The king purchases the handmaiden but much to his dismay, she falls ill as soon as he has possessed her – as he begins to

\(^{31}\) How specific tales within the *Mathnawī* participate in, or subvert various literary genres is an exciting avenue for future research.

\(^{32}\) *Mathnawī*, I: 35. It is not the only tale that Rûmî claims to be thus, but since it is the first tale in the *Mathnawī*, it is a good example.

\(^{33}\) ibid.
watch her wither by each passing day, the king becomes frantic and pledges all his treasures to anyone who can cure her. The arrogant physicians of his court claim to be the wonders of their age, but all of their remedies prove to no avail. In a state of utter hopelessness, the king runs to the mosque and cries in supplication, only to have a dream-vision in which he is told that he will soon be visited by a true physician sent by God. Surely enough, the divine physician appears the next day and is left alone to examine the sickly maiden. With much ease, the divine physician soon discovers that the handmaiden is suffering from lovesickness, yearning for a certain goldsmith she was parted with. On the divine physicians bequest, the king weds the handmaiden to the goldsmith only to administer an elixir that gradually murders him. As the goldsmith gradually becomes weaker and unsightly, the handmaiden is repulsed and desires him no more. The speech of the characters ends with the vituperations of the goldsmith who has realised too late that like a peacock hunted for its plumes, he has become a victim of his own beauty. 34 Interestingly, Rūmī commences the tale forewarning his readers, “O my friends, hearken to this tale: in truth it is the very marrow of our inward state.” 35 The tale is also very significant when considering the Mathnawī as a whole, because Rūmī proclaims that this particular tale serves in reality (ḥaqīqah) as the nakd-i hāl (immediate experience of our state) and is in this sense, Rūmī’s critique of the human condition. 36 The notion of the tale being a critique is especially fitting when one considers that nakd is etymologically tied to the use of precious metals as currency, as well as the process of scrutinising acts of counterfeiting. 37 Thus, Rūmī begins his tale by highlighting that it is allegorical and that there is more to its ma‘nā than what may initially appear in its ṣūrah.

While the commentators disagree over certain points of detail, the general structure of the allegory is agreed upon: the king is commonly identified as representing the ruh

34 The fact that the goldsmith compares itself to a ‘peacock hunted for its plumes’ is an interesting symbol that becomes a full-fledged critique in Book V of the Mathnawī when Rūmī explains that ‘accomplishments and intellectual abilities and worldly wealth are enemies to (spiritual) life, like the peacock’s feathers.’ Rūmī, Mathnawī, V: 647.
35 ibid., I: 35.
36 Elsewhere in the Mathnawī, Nicholson translates nakd-i hāl as “ready money” for example, in another allegorical tale outlining the spiritual-psychology of the sālik, The Arab of the Desert and his Wife Rūmī proclaims ‘This is not a story, mark you! God forbid! This is the ready money (presentation, here and now) of my state and yours. Consider (it) well.’ Rūmī, Mathnawī, I: 2900.
37 The notion of human beings being like gold coins that will be tested throughout life, and revealed as either pure or counterfeit is a reoccurring metaphor throughout the Mathnawī, for example, I: 3148-9. Nakd and nakt are also used throughout the Mathnawī to signify the difference between fact and fiction: I: 2263, 3:2276, 3:2566, and at one point, it is also used to signify “true love”: III: 1417.
(spirit) whereas the handmaiden represents the ‘aql-i juzī (the partial intellect). The goldsmith represents the nafs al-‘ammāra – the self that is egotistic, carnal and perpetually incites one to fulfill his/her base desires and with which, according to Rūmī, most of humankind are infatuated. The king’s courtly physicians represent the scholars of the exoteric, whereas the divine physician who is later sent to treat the handmaiden has been identified as the wali of God, the pīr (Sufi guide) as well as the murshīd al-kāmil (the Perfect Guide).38 In this sense, the allegorical tale is used to awaken the reader to what Rūmī believes to be the essential problem facing all who are embarking on the path of loverhood: being trapped in a powerful state (ḥāl) of infatuation with the ego (nafs) to the degree that it prevents the attainment of higher states of consciousness and progression on the spiritual path because the ego is intrinsically drawn to its unceasing desires and whims.

The tale commences at the juncture when the rūḥ has fallen prey to the nafs and has become undermined in the spiritual battle. The personification of the rūḥ as a king ‘to whom belonged the power temporal (dunya) and also the power spiritual (dīn),’39 alludes to the Qur’ānic account of the amānah (Trust) and the state of ghaflah (heedlessness) the individual falls into when they no longer remember the covenant made with God before the soul’s immersion in the material realm.40 Ironically, the “hunt” on which the king embarks becomes the means through which he himself becomes enslaved: ‘Forasmuch as the bird, his soul, was fluttering in its cage, he gave money and bought the handmaiden.’41 The image of the spirit as a caged bird is a powerful metaphor for the human being’s immersion in materiality and it is perhaps no coincidence that it is through worldly means that the king is able to ‘buy’ and satiate his desires.42 That the rūḥ is seduced by the ‘aql-i juzī which implies that the

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38 Some other possible variations on what the figures represent are described in various commentaries on the Mathnawī; however, I maintain that Rūmī would have anticipated and appreciated the polysemic possibilities of his Mathnawī and minor variations in the core symbols were unlikely to grossly detract the reader-sālik from recognising the central messages of the allegory.
39 Mathnawī, I: 36. (My parenthesis)
40 Kenan Rifai claims that the tale represents the individual in a state of ghaflah (heedlessness). Holbrook, Victoria., Listen: Commentary on the Spiritual Couplets of Mevlana Rumi by Kenan Rifai, Fons Vitae, Kentucky, 2011, p. 46.
41 Mathnawī, I: 39.
42 Interestingly, Nicholson translates the king as having been ‘enthralled’ by the handmaid, which might suggest she has simply captured his imagination but the Persian, gulam is more powerful because it denotes slavery and complete subservience. It is also worth pointing out that the image of hunters luring birds and the encaged bird is a leitmotif within the Mathnawī that is later expanded to an
partial intellect has been given authoritative agency, which also suggests that it has been given access to exoteric or, worldly knowledge and the resulting worldly gains that this affords. When the handmaiden becomes ill, we have a glimpse into the degree of the king’s (soul’s) obsession since in his desperation he exclaims, “The life of us both is in your hands. / My life is of no account, (but) she is the life of my life.”

At this point, it is clear that the ‘aqli-i juzī is living for the nafs instead of the rūḥ which is the investiture of God.

In the next part of the tale, Rūmī critiques the shortcomings and fraudulence of other means and methods in bringing about spiritual transformation: ‘The king gathered the physicians together from left and right and said to them, “The life of us both is in your hands.”’ As explored in Part I of this thesis, Rūmī essentially believes that the ‘aql (individual intellect) can only bring one so far in the spiritual quest. In this sense, the courtly physicians embody the scholars of the exoteric sciences; the peripatetic scholars that believe the intellect, unaided by divine unveiling (kashf), is sufficient for the individual to attain to haqīqah (knowledge of Reality). The courtly physicians respond to the king’s plea claiming: “We will hazard our lives and summon all our intelligence and put it into the common stock. / Each one of us is the Messiah of a world (of people): in our hands is a medicine for every pain.” Every medicine the courtly physicians administer results in the opposite of its intended effect. Rūmī seems to be suggesting that although there is great reverence for the scholars of the exoteric sciences (and their works), and despite the claims or attributions of greatness, when it comes to the specific ‘ilm (science) of spiritual purification (tazkiyah al-nafs), the scholars are inept (often have no clue about the state of their own selves) and instead of curing the individual, will only serve to make them more spiritually ill.

The reference to the cure being in the ‘hands’ (palm) of the physicians is also an allegorical tale (representing the soul and body) in The story of the merchant to whom the parrot gave a message for the parrots of India. Rūmī Mathnawī, I: 1547.

43 ibid., I: 40-5.
44 Rūmī, Mathnawī, I: 43.
45 Konuk points out they can also represent the fraudulent pīr (guides) on the spiritual path. Konuk, op. cit., p. 53.
46 Mathnawī, I: 46-7. The claims of the physicians to be a masīḥ (Messiah) are an interesting allusion to the prophet Jesus who the title exclusively refers to.
47 Rūmī believes the partial intellect is susceptible to the manipulations of the ego.
48 There also seems to be a critique of the sycophantic leanings of the courtly physicians, which is suggested by the king’s offering of treasure as a reward. In this way, Rūmī rather bitingly suggests that spiritual treatments are not in the hands of those struggling for the worldly.
interesting image that is ironic (when addressed to the courtly physicians) since it proleptically foreshadows the true “hands” or, divine intellect (‘aql-i kulli) that is actually capable of curing the handmaiden.\(^{49}\) The king who finally perceives this reality turns to the one who is the source of all intellect: ‘How it became manifest that the physicians were unable to cure the handmaiden, and how the king turned his face towards God and dreamed of a holy man.’\(^{50}\)

In this sense, the next section of the tale serves to highlight the declaration of intention made on behalf of the spiritual aspirant as he turns from the material to the spiritual realm in seeking divine assistance: ‘When the king saw the powerlessness of those physicians, he ran bare-footed to the mosque. / He entered the mosque and advanced to the mihrab (to pray): the prayer-carpet was bathed in the king’s tears.’\(^{51}\)

The king’s humbled state of subjection, which initiates his journey to divine mercy, is captured in a profound image: his running ‘barefoot to the mosque’. Tahir Olgun has hinted in his *Mathnawī* commentary that bare feet are an epitomic image of helplessness and also an allusion to the prophet Moses who was asked to remove his shoes in the presence of God – an act that is also a sign of humility and awe.\(^{52}\) Thus, Rūmī reveals that the preliminary step in the nafs’ purification (tazkiyah) is for the ṭūḥ or the sālik, to beg for divine assistance: ‘On coming to himself out of the flood of ecstasy (fanā’) he opened his lips in goodly praise and laud… / When from the depths of his soul he raised a cry (of supplication), the sea of Bounty began to surge.’\(^{53}\) The suggestion being that it is not the ‘aql (reason) but ‘ishq (passionate love) and the resulting mystical experience, which can reveal divine mysteries. As such, after having ascertained the incapacity of the partial intellect and those who glorify it, Rūmī reveals that ‘the sea of Bounty’ will not surge till the individual has recognised their spiritual plight. The king’s experience of *fanā*’ leads to his divinely inspired dream vision where he is foretold of the divine physician’s arrival, and is of great significance in the process of transformation for, as Rūmī reiterates elsewhere in

\(^{49}\) Rūmī expresses this sentiment more explicitly in other sections of the *Mathnawī*: ‘God has declared that his (the Pir’s) hand is as His own, since He gave out (the words) the Hand of God is above their hands.’ Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, I: 2972.

\(^{50}\) ibid., I: 54.

\(^{51}\) ibid., I: 56-7.

\(^{52}\) Similarly, Ghazâlî compares Moses’ removal of his shoes to a spiritual state in which one distances oneself from concern for this world or the next. Quoted in: Kristin Zahra Sands, *Sufi Commentaries on the Qur’ān in Classical Islam*, Routledge, New York, 2006, p. 38.

\(^{53}\) ibid., I: 58-9.
the *Mathnawī*, ‘(the fleshly soul) is not subdued save by (Divine) inspiration in the heart.’\(^{54}\) Through the tale, Rūmī reiterates his Sufi beliefs: when the ego is effaced in God through the experience of *fanā’,* it is able to receive *ma rifāḥ* (mystical intuitive knowledge), where spiritual truth is reached not through rational acquisition but ecstatic experience.

In a seeming digression from the main narrative, Rūmī proceeds to provide a homily on the importance of *ādāb* (the Islamic concept of etiquette) in reforming the nafs.\(^{55}\) ‘Beseeching the Lord, who is our Helper, to help us to observe self-control in all circumstances, and explaining the harmful and pernicious consequences of indiscipline.’\(^{56}\) As a word, *ādāb* has been translated as discipline or self-control by Nicholson, but is a concept that has many implications in the Sufi/Islamic context and does not translate as easily into its approximations of ‘‘civility’’ and ‘‘etiquette’’ as is often thought to be the case. Muslim ethicists describe *ādāb* firstly as a disposition toward knowledge and can be understood primarily, as ‘the attitude and disposition that enables one to experience the effects of knowledge and be transformed by its animation in the self.’\(^{57}\) Rūmī explains *ādāb* (or its lack thereof), by alluding to the Qur’ānic parable of Moses and suggests how one should receive God’s gifts with reverence and gratitude or everyone suffers.\(^{58}\) Rūmī’s inclusion of the homily becomes clearer as the tale progresses: it pre-emptively instructs the reader about the etiquette required towards the *pīr* because *ādāb* is necessarily ‘both an attitude and a relationship.’\(^{59}\) In this sense, the deviation from the main narrative serves as a vital pedagogic device for explicating the importance of *ādāb*, but in relation to the tale as a whole, it makes an important statement about the etiquette and reverence that is expected from the *sālik* who may inadvertently cause the cessation of divine mercy through arrogance or impertinence.

\(^{54}\) *ibid.*, II, 2561.
\(^{55}\) In many parts of the *Mathnawī*, Rūmī utilises several frame narratives to explicate subtleties pertaining to a specific point or doctrine, before returning to the core narrative.
\(^{58}\) Qur’ān, 7: 160.
As the tale continues, the king (and through him, the reader-sālik), encounter the divine physician, who is also representative of the Sufi pīr: ‘The meeting of the king with the saint whose coming had been shown to him in a dream.’  

When the king first encounters the divine physician, he remarks: ‘Thou wert my Beloved (in reality), not she’. The king’s receiving of the pīr ‘like love, into his heart and soul’ implies that the wali of God is the personification of ‘ishq in the material realm; therefore, the simile of the divine physician being ‘like love’ implies that the pīr can serve as the intermediary or ‘ladder’ to True love that is able to lead the individual back to the divine Source. In this way, it is suggested the sālik willingly and enthusiastically pledges allegiance to the pīr: ‘O thou who art to me (as) Mustafa (Mohammed), while I am like unto ‘Umar—I will gird my loins to do thee service.’ The reference to ‘Umar and the Prophet suggests that the sālik has made bay’a (an oath of allegiance) to the pīr who is also the wali of God. The inspired pīr then, is the mediator for the transformation of self since, ‘The intellect, in chase (of spiritual truth), prevails over your currish fleshly soul (only) at the time when the Shaykh is its helper.’ In this way, Rūmī suggests that the sālik cannot hope to traverse through the ṭarīqah without the assistance of a pīr.

Thus, Rūmī depicts the process of tazkiyah al-nafs (purification of the self), through which the pīr assists the sālik in their internal spiritual transformation: ‘How the king led the physician to the bedside of the sick girl, that he might see her condition.’ Upon examining her, the divine physician begins by pointing out the deficiency in the remedies of the courtly physicians, recognising that they have ‘wrought destruction’ through their misdiagnosis for, unlike the divine physician who looks at the bātin (interior) of worldly forms, the courtly physicians could not penetrate beyond the zāhir (exoteric) and ‘were ignorant of the inward state’ (ḥāl-i derūn), signifying the sālik’s spiritual states as well as the state of the qalb (heart). Elsewhere in the Mathnawī, Rūmī explains that intellects have innumerable ranks and not all are suited...
to traverse the path that leads one to attaining reunion with the Beloved. Since the scholars of the exoteric were unaware of the intellect, its ranks, states and gradations, they were unable to offer any cure. However, as the divine physician examines the handmaiden, it is revealed that ‘He saw the pain, and the secret became open to him, but he concealed it and did not tell the king.’\(^\text{68}\) The specific word used in this line is \textit{kashf} (unveiling), which as a Sufi concept signifies the knowledge that is inspired directly into the heart. In this way, the \textit{pīr} is depicted as being the \textit{wali} to whom the interiority and subjectivity of others are disclosed. As Rūmī articulates more explicitly elsewhere in the \textit{Mathnawī}:

The chosen servants of (God) the Knower of things unseen are, in the spiritual world, the spies on hearts. / He (such a one) enters within the heart like a fancy: the mystery of the (real) state is unveiled to him… He who has become acquainted with the secrets of Hū (God), what to him is the secret (inmost consciousness) of created beings?\(^\text{69}\)

Again, Rūmī is inadvertently establishing the principle of the superiority of mystical experience as opposed to knowledge acquired through logical or deductive reasoning. Therefore, at the allegorical level, the divine physician’s examination of the handmaiden is really the \textit{pīr}’s examination of the \textit{sālik}’s \textit{maqām} (spiritual station), as well as the rank or degree of their individual intellect. Thus, at the surface level of the narrative, the physician recognises that the handmaiden is lovesick and at the corresponding allegorical level, the \textit{pīr} discovers that the \textit{sālik}’s partial intellect has become subjugated by their \textit{nafs}. Having reached the topic of ‘\textit{ishq}, Rūmī attempts to provide an explication; however finds that his intellect stumbles and the resulting outflow of emotion captures one of the \textit{Mathnawī}’s greatest paradoxes: the attempt to describe ‘\textit{ishq} through the medium of language all whilst asserting love’s indefinability:

\begin{quote}
The lover’s ailment is separate from all other ailments: love is the astrolabe of the mysteries of God. / Whether love be from this (earthly) side or from that (heavenly) side, in the end it leads us yonder. / Whatever I say in exposition and explanation of Love, when I come to Love (itself) I am ashamed of that (explanation). / Although the commentary of the tongue makes (all) clear, yet tongueless love is clearer. / Whilst the pen was making haste in writing, it split
\end{quote}

\(^{68}\text{ibid., I: 106.}\)
\(^{69}\text{ibid., II: 1477-81.}\)
upon itself as soon as it came to Love. / In expounding it (Love), the intellect
lay down (helplessly) like an ass in the mire: it was Love (alone) that uttered the
explanation of love and loverhood.\footnote{ibid., I: 110-15.}

The astrolabe was an ancient astronomical device used to calculate the time and the
position of the Sun and stars in the sky as well as the height and depth of objects.
Rūmī suggests that just as the astrolabe reveals the hidden depths of the material
world, ‘ishq becomes the mystical experience which allows one to gain access to the
mysteries of the spiritual realm. Furthermore, since God is believed to be the source
of all love, Rūmī claims that all kinds of love can serve as a rahbar (guide). In the
context of the tale, it is the handmaiden’s love for the goldsmith (or the intellect’s
fixation with the ego) that becomes the pretext and the means for the individual to
ascend upon the spiritual hierarchy of love – as long as one is not blinded by the
ṣūrah (form), it can serve to lead one to the ma’nā (meaning). The Mathnawī is
riddled with such passages that bemoan the difficulties of articulating ‘ishq.
Commenting on this trope in Rūmī’s work, Schimmel remarks that ‘although Rumi
has often tried to solve this riddle of the relation between words and meaning, of
experience and expression, he always returns to the feeling that words are merely dust
on the mirror of “experience” dust brought forth from the movement of the broom
“tongue”.’\footnote{Annemarie Schimmel, The Triumphal Sun: A Study of the Works of Jalaloddin Rūmī, State
University of New York Press, New York, 1993, p. 44.} One reason, as we have explored, is due to the nature of love itself: to
\textit{speak} of love is not love because love is an experiential state that words cannot do
justice to.

However, another complication rises from the nature of the medium of language
itself. For example, Rūmī explains that any attempt to express metaphysical concepts
through the medium of language is to ‘wash away blood with blood’.\footnote{Mathnawī, III: 4727.} As such,
Rūmī’s cries of frustration not only epitomise the inherent limitations of language, but
also serve to capture the predicament facing all lovers on the quest to articulate an
experience that cannot be bound to any specific description. After his enigmatic and
paradoxical discussion on the inexpressibility of ‘ishq, Rūmī compares love to the sun
(\textit{shams}) and is at this point, is reminded of his beloved friend and guide, Shams-i
Tabrīzī: ‘Since his name has come (to my lips), it behoves me to set forth some hint
of his bounty.'\(^{73}\) In describing Rūmī’s relationship with Shams, Nicholson explains, ‘To him, as afterwards to Husām Ad-Dīn, the poet stood in a mystical relation that might be described in terms of Alexandrian theology as union with a personal Logos.’\(^{74}\) This moment in the tale is therefore, particularly exemplary of Rūmī’s experience of a ḥāl in the medium of literature (a spontaneous outburst of authorial ecstasy). As Frishkopf has explained, ‘in a state of ecstasy (ḥāl) inspired by contact with Prophet or saint, in which Divine lights become manifest, a shaykh spontaneously utters poetry, which is copied down by anonymous disciples; subsequently shaykh or disciples may “polish” such poetry to greater technical perfection.’\(^{75}\) In this sense, this section of the tale offers a clear insight into the unique oratory nature of the Mathnawī’s composition: recited by Rūmī and transcribed by Ḥusām al-Dīn and to this degree, introduces the literary presence of its scribe.

Thus, the tale takes an unexpected turn as Rūmī engages in a dialogical exchange with Husam Ad-Dīn, who is eager to hear about the secrets of Rūmī’s relationship with Shams. The transition in mood begins when Rūmī proclaims, ‘At this moment my Soul has plucked my skirt: he has caught the perfume of Joseph’s vest.’\(^{76}\) Here, several commentators on the Mathnawī unanimously contend that Rūmī is addressing Husām Ad-Dīn as his jān (soul/spirit),\(^{77}\) whereas the reference to Joseph’s shirt is obviously a Qur’ānic allusion.\(^ {78}\) Gölpınarlı suggests that Joseph is a reference to Shams, whereas the scent of the shirt is a reference to ‘his blessed spiritual path and his inner states (aḥwāl).’\(^{79}\) Just as Jacob became aware of Joseph through a whiff of his scent, Husām Ad-Dīn has sensed Shams’ superior spiritual state at the mention of his name, and begs Rūmī to remain upon this topic a little more. It is as though one can almost picture Husām Ad-Dīn eagerly tugging at Rūmī’s skirts after having heard the name of Shams and thus, exhorts Rūmī: ‘(He said): “For the sake of our years of

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\(^{73}\) Mathnawī, I: 124.


\(^{75}\) Frishkopf, op. cit., p. 82.


\(^{78}\) Qur’ān, 12: 93-6. The scent of the prophet Joseph’s shirt was perceived by his father Jacob before it even reached him, informing him that Joseph was still alive and restoring sight to his eyes after he had gone blind through weeping over the disappearance of his beloved son.

\(^{79}\) Konuk, op. cit., p. 129.
companionship, recount one of those sweet ecstasies, / That earth and heaven may laugh (with joy), that intellect and spirit and eye may increase a hundredfold.'

Here, what Nicholson has translated as ‘ecstasies’ (اَحْوَال) is an explicit reference to the spiritual states experienced upon the Sufi path; therefore in the literary medium, the Mathnawī becomes the locus of mystical experience as well as the intersection between the mystical and the literary. For example, in response to Husām Ad-Dīn’s pleading’s, Rūmī suddenly shifts from Persian to Arabic for the next two couplets and sternly cries out: La tukallafni َfanāyi fi’l َfanā’, kallat afhami fala uhksi thana. Nicholson translates this line as: ‘(I said): “Do not lay tasks on me, for I have passed away from myself (fanā); my apprehensions are blunted and I know not how to praise.’ Interestingly, Nicholson points out that the words ‘I know not how to praise’ quoted in this couplet are quoted from the tradition of the Prophet’s mi’rāj (ascension), in which it is believed that he spoke with God directly: ‘when God said to the Prophet on the night of his Ascension (mi’rāj), “Praise Me” (i’tihi َalayya), the Prophet answered: lā uhṣī ِthanāَan ‘alayka, i.e. “I cannot reckon up Thy bounties and the infinite praise and thanksgiving due to Thee from Me.”’

Rūmī’s allusion is also suggestive considering the Sufi interpretations of the tradition tend to view it as an epitomic image of the ‘aql’s limits since the archangel, Gabriel, professed he could not follow the Prophet any further after a certain point. Thus, excusing himself due to his own ḥāl (state), Rūmī implies that he is unable to deliver what Ḥusām al-Dīn demands from him, because he is no longer in his senses, and as a result of this state of self-effacement (fanā’), brought on through the mention of Shams, Rūmī insists that anything he mentions will be inorganic and feigned: ‘Everything that is said by one who has not returned to consciousness, if he constrains himself or boastfully exaggerates, is unseemly.’ Rūmī’s reference to the ‘one who has not returned to consciousness’ (mufīq), is another Sufi technical term that refers to the one who has returned from the sukhr (intoxication) of ecstasy to the saḥw (sobriety)

80 Rūmī, Mathnawī, I: 126-7.
81 ibid., I: 128.
82 Nicholson, op. cit., p. 21. Rūmī also seems to be implying a connection between the Marshid al-Kāmil and the experience of communication with the Beloved.
83 Christiane J. Gruber & Frederick Stephen Colby, The Prophet’s Ascension: Cross-cultural Encounters with the Islamic Mi’rāj Tales, Indiana University Press, Indiana, 2010.
84 Rūmī, Mathnawī, I: 129.
of a normal or supernormal state of consciousness. The spontaneous transition in language seems to support the idea that there has been a moment of transformation within the narrating subject (Rūmī). Here, it is specifically Rūmī’s love and longing for Shams that has ignited his spontaneous outburst; however, his remark also captures the emotional dimension of Sufi literature in which poetry is said to occur not through craft, but through experience. On this pervasive aspect of Sufi poetry, Zuhur remarks:

... the poet is not merely the scribe of common experience and tradition. The poet writes in order to express veritable personal mystical experience, casting molten inner feeling-grief, joy, love, pain or desire – in linguistic forms. The greatest Sufi poetry, that which expresses the experience of the advanced mystic, is the spontaneous linguistic expression of hal, a transient, non cognitive state in which one is plunged into an awareness of divine realities, or is overcome with emotion resulting from such awareness. To be in hal implies the absence of the intellect, often together with the presence of strong emotions of love or longing.

This feature also highlights the seeming paradox of sobriety and “drunkenness” among Sufis: how does one continue poetic activity (even if to communicate inability) when overcome by incapacitating states of ecstasy? On this point, Chittick explains that although ‘sobriety represents the highest stage of the Sufi path, this does not imply that the sober are no longer drunk.’ Rather, he suggests that ‘the true Sufi, having realized fully the pattern and model established by the Prophet, is inwardly drunk with God and outwardly sober with the world.’ In this way, when Rūmī speaks of his inebriation, he is often referring to the state of his internal world, although there may be little to no signs in his external actions. Hence, Rūmī is able to respond to Ḥūsām al-Dīn: ‘How should I—not a vein of mine is sensible—describe

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85 The nature of these two states is further expanded upon in al-Qushayri’s epistle: ‘Sobriety is returning to self-consciousness after absence [in God]. Drunkenness is absence [from one’s self] through a strong experience [of God]...drunkenness is experienced only by those wont to experience ecstatic states. When the attributes of [God’s] beauty are revealed to someone, he experiences the state of drunkenness: his spirit rejoices and his heart becomes intoxicated… Know that one’s sobriety corresponds to one’s drunkenness. He who experiences true drunkenness, enjoys true sobriety. Al-Qushayri, ‘Abd al-Karīm ibn Hawāzin, Al-Qushayri’s Epistle on Sufism (Al-Risāla al-qushayriyya fi ‘ilm al-tasawwuf), translated by Alexander D. Knysh, Garnet Publishing, Berkshire, 2007, pp. 93-4.


that Friend who hath no peer?" Rūmī not only hints at his ecstatic ḥāl but also suggests that his state disallows him from performing any kind of artifice. Rūmī pleads to Ḥusām al-Dīn: ‘The description of this severance and this heart’s blood do thou at present leave over till another time.’ Therefore, Rūmī reveals that there is also a deeply personal dimension to his restraint: the persistent nature of the pain and grief brought on by separation – this is especially poignant considering that Shams had probably died fifteen years before these lines were being recited. However, Ḥusām persistent and continues in his pleadings: ‘He said: “Feed me, for I am hungry, and make haste, for Time is a cutting sword.”’ As such, Ḥusām al-Dīn reveals that he is hungry for ma’rifah and wishes to be fed swiftly with the descriptions of Shams’ abwāl (spiritual states), because ‘time is a cutting sword’, meaning there is no guarantee of “another time”. Thus, further justifying his need for immediate knowledge, Ḥusām al-Dīn: ‘The Sūfī is the son of the (present) time, O comrade: it is not the rule of the Way to say “To-morrow.”’ Meaning, the Sufi is Ibn-ul-Waqt (the son of the moment) meaning that they remain subject to and dependent on the dominant state, mood, or emotion of the “moment.” Here, Husam Ad-Dīn is alluding to subtle Sufi terminology. The concept of the mystical moment (waqt), is explained by al-Qushayrī thus:

The Sufis say: “The Sufi is the son of his moment.” They mean that he engages in the worship that is most appropriate for his current situation and performs what is required of him at this moment in time… It is also said that the sword is gentle to the touch, yet its edge cuts. He who treats it gently survives, whereas he who resists it will be destroyed. The same is true of the moment. Whosoever surrenders to its command survives, and whosoever resists it is thrown down and falls on his face… If someone is assisted by the moment, then this moment becomes [his] moment, but if one is at odds with the moment, then this moment becomes [his] affliction.

On this point, Konuk explains in his commentary on the Mathnawī that the Sufi either

88 Rūmī, Mathnawī, I: 130.
89 On this point, Nicholson claims that the Sufi should be entirely unaware of any ecstatic utterances (ṣafāhiyyāt) that may flow from his lips because ‘Personal initiative, self-activity, and pretension are incompatible with true inspiration.’ Nicholson, op. cit., p. 21.
90 Rūmī, Mathnawī, I: 131.
91 ibid.
92 ibid., I: 133.
94 Al-Qushayrī, op. cit., p. 76.
becomes an owner of a maqām (station) or a ḥāl (state). The Sufi who has reached a maqām speaks in accordance with the intelligence, spiritual condition and aḥwāl (states) of his subject, and is in this way, superior to the Sufi who only experiences aḥwāl and is not concerned with the intelligences or spiritual state of those being addressed. In this way, Konuk states that they call the owner of a station Abu-ul-Waqt (Father of Time) and the owner of a state Ibn-ul-Waqt (Son of Time). Therefore, when Ḣusām al-Dīn rhetorically asks Rūmī, ‘Art not thou indeed a Sūfī, then?’ Konuk explains that he is addressing him from his own condition of Ibn-ul-Waqt, and at this point in the Mathnawī’s composition, Ḣusām al-Dīn was a Sufi who experienced states (aḥwāl) and a son of time (Ibn-ul-Waqt), whereas Rūmī was a Sufi who had reached a station (maqām) and therefore, taking into consideration the situation of his listener, he prefers to postpone the explanation of the spiritual condition and reality of Shams till another time when Ḣusām al-Dīn has made further spiritual progress.

Another significant reason why Rūmī desists from revealing the mysteries of Shams’ aḥwāl is because he believes such seccrecies are better told indirectly: ‘I said to him: “It is better that the secret of the Friend should be disguised: do thou hearken (to it as implied) in the contents of the tale. / It is better that the lovers’ secret should be told in the talk of others.”’ The reference to “secret” refers to the inner meaning or the bāṭin of the tale, whereby Rūmī suggests that the secrets of the awliyāʾ (the beloveds of God) are transmitted through the Mathnawī’s literary form and only to those who are privy. This is likely because Rūmī believes the intellect and comprehensions

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95 The term Ibn-ul-Waqt also implies that the seeker of Truth is prevailed upon by the conditions of the time while the term Ab-ul-Waqt signifies that the seeker dominates the existing circumstances. Ahmad Ali Khawaja, Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanvi: His Views on Religious and Moral Philosophy, and Tasawwuf; Pakistan Hijra Council, Lahore, 1989, p. 119.
96 Rūmī further expands upon this concept in the Mathnawī, explaining that some Sufi’s are enticed by the ecstasy of the state so much so, that it is not union they seek but the experience of the state and he explains that the Sufi who has move beyond this is superior: ‘He that is dependent on the “state” is (still) a human being: at one moment he is (made) greater by the “state,” at another moment he is in decrease. / In similitude the Sūfī is “the son of the time,” but the pure one (Ṣūfī) is unconcerned with “time” and “state.” / “States” are dependent on his decision and judgement; (they are) vivified by his Messiah-like breath.’ Mathnawī, III: 1425-7.
97 Konuk, op. cit., p. 131.
98 Rūmī, Mathnawī, I: 134.
99 Konuk, op. cit., p. 131.
100 Rūmī, Mathnawī, I: 135-6.
101 Elsewhere, Rūmī is more explicit as to why he speaks his mystical truths indirectly: ‘The exposition of this saying demands a commentary, but I am afraid of senile (feeble) minds. / Senile and shortsighted minds bring a hundred evil fancies into their thoughts. / Not everyone is able to hear rightly:
vary in degree. Furthermore, Rūmī’s words hint at the autobiographical elements within the Mathnawi. For example, in the preface to his Ibtidā-Nāmah, Sultan Walad quotes this verse as evidence that what Rūmī relates concerning the saints of old is really a description of the mystical experiences of himself and his intimate friends, such as Shams. 102 Therefore, having sensed Shams’ spiritual station, Ḥusām al-Dīn is ever more persistent and this time, cries out in vexation: “Tell it forth openly and nakedly and without unfaithfulness: do not put me off, O trifler! / Lift the veil and speak nakedly, for I do not wear a shirt when I sleep with the Adored One.” 103 Asking Rūmī to “undress” the Truth from the garments of narrative, he adopts erotic imagery Ḥusām al-Dīn argues that he does not “lie” (implying sexual intercourse) with clothing between him and his beloved, which is to signify that the tale is a barrier to attaining mystical reunion with the Beloved; that he wishes for the “naked” truth – like layers of clothing, he wishes Rūmī to remove the “layers” of the story that are enveloping the mystery of mystical reunion. 104

However, Rūmī warns him of the consequences of his request: ‘I said: “If He should become naked in (thy) vision, neither wilt thou remain nor thy bosom nor thy waist.”’ 105 Nicholson contends that this line is a reference to what will come about if ‘the mystery of Absolute Unity (sirr-i tawḥīd) be revealed.’ 106 Similarly, Konuk posits that Rūmī suggests Shams was aware of the secret of Unity, and if the nature of this secret were revealed without the veil of tales and parables, Ḥusām al-Dīn would experience fanā’ and lose sobriety. 107 Therefore, ending the discussion, Rūmī argues: ‘If the Sun, by whom this world is illumined, should approach a little (nearer), all will be burned.’ 108 Again, punning on Shams’ name, Rūmī explains that although the sun is beneficial in measure, it would destroy the world if it were any closer; likewise, if the sun of Reality were to step out and manifests Itself from behind the veil, nothing

the fig is not a morsel for every little bird, / Especially a bird that is dead, putrid; a blind, eyeless (fellow) filled with vain fancy.’ Rūmī, Mathnawi, I: 2761-4.
103 Rūmī, Mathnawi, I: 137-8.
104 It is not clear whether Rūmī is directly quoting Husam Ad Din’s words or providing a poetic rendition of his meanings, but it is more likely the latter. Nor is it particularly relevant whether or not the exchange between Rūmī and Ḥusām al-Dīn actually took place, because its very presence in the tale attests to rhetorical purpose that it is significant in of itself.
105 Rūmī, Mathnawi, I: 139.
106 Nicholson, op. cit., p. 22.
107 Konuk, 2009, p. 133.
108 Rūmī, Mathnawi, I: 141.
would remain in being except Its own Being. Thus, Rūmī implies that those privy to the secret of Unity (not simply in theory, but experientially) will lose their sense of self (a separate existence). This shattering of the perception of multiplicity will resultanty lead to the collapse of a stable, ego-subject, meaning that the 'aql (intellect) which is the bond between your ruh (soul) and the jism (corporeal body) will be severed.

In this way, Rūmī suggests that not everyone can endure the realisation of wahdat al-wujūd: ‘Ask thy wish, but ask with measure: a blade of straw will not support the mountain.’\(^{109}\) Thus, Rūmī ceases further speaking on the matter exclaiming: ‘Do not seek trouble and turmoil and bloodshed: say no more concerning the Sun of Tabriz!’\(^{110}\) On this point, Zuhur suggests that ‘the emotional force of the Sufi poet’s ḥāl (creative condition), is mysteriously imbued within his words as a nonobjective quality, capable of tremendous effective power for the Sufi possessed of spiritual insight and sensitivity (shafafiya).’\(^{111}\) However, she also points out that for the uninitiated, cryptic and emotional language expressing mystical experience (especially shathiyat), ‘sounds at best unintelligible, at worst heretical.’\(^{112}\) Hence, Rūmī implies that explicit revelations of the secret of unity (wahdat) are likely to cause discord between the scholars of the exoteric and the people of mystical experiences (Sufis), and for this reason, Rūmī in accordance with the Sufi tradition, is mindful of the potentially dangerous nature of Sufi doctrine and prefers to guise his mysteries in the discreet veils of narrative. In this sense, Rūmī’s preference for ‘subtle recondite allusions’\(^{113}\) through the literary medium of the Mathnawī becomes a means of hiding the subtleties and more controversial beliefs of Sufi thinkers. A means of simultaneously hiding and revealing religious truths so those with knowledge can gain

\(^{109}\) ibid., I: 140. This line is also an allusion to Qur’an, 55: 8.

\(^{110}\) ibid., I: 142.

\(^{111}\) Zuhur, op. cit., p. 261.

\(^{112}\) ibid., Carl Ernst also explains that the shath (p. shathiyat), a reference to ecstatic expressions of divine union, were traditionally associated with great outrage among the Islamic cultures of their day, and many of their authors were subjected to religious persecution by Islamic courts. One of the most famous being the exclamation: “I am the Truth” (Ana ‘l-Ḥaq) by Mansūr-e Hallâj (c. 858–922). However, he argues that such persecutions were mostly political affairs, resulting from “personal vendetta, subversion of the state and party factionalism” instead of religious intolerance. Ernst also points out how the shath later figured as topos of Persian Sufi poetry and this can also be applied to the works of Rūmî’s in which Hallâj and Bayazid Bastami (804-874 or 877/8) often appear as epitomes of the ecstatic Sufi completely enamored by ‘ishq. Carl W. Ernst, Words of Ecstasy in Sufism, State University of New York Press, New York, 1985, pp. 1-3, 101, 109, 115, 117.

\(^{113}\) Rūmî, Mathnawī, VI: 7.
enlightenment whilst literalists will remain not any wit wiser.

After ending his discussion with Ḥusām al-Dīn, Rūmī returns to the story: ‘How that saint demanded of the king to be alone for the purpose of discovering her malady.’

As mentioned earlier, this is also the point in the tale in which the divine physician examines the handmaiden “by way of narrative”. I believe it is no overstretch to suggest that this line also reflects the instrumentality of the Mathnawī’s literary composition, and to this degree, the pīr’s initiating of the sālik’s recovery “by way of narrative” can also be said to reflect Rūmī’s own attempt to transform the reader-sālik via the Mathnawī. In this context, Rūmī’s preference for the allegorical form of the narrative attests to his resolution for individuals to not only understand, but to also understand how they understand. On this note, remarking on the psychological processes that occur as we divulge narrative, Maureen Quilligan, having written extensively on the properties of allegory, explains that ‘allegory works horizontally, rather than vertically, so that meaning accretes serially, interconnecting and crisscrossing the verbal surface long before one can accurately speak of moving to another level “beyond” the literal.’

She further explains that a higher “level” is not above the literal one in a vertically organised fictional space, but is located in the self-consciousness of the reader, who gradually becomes aware, as they read, of the way they create the meaning of the text. She claims that out of this awareness, comes a consciousness not only of how one is reading, but also of our human response to the narrative, and finally our relation to the only “other” which allegory aims to lead us to – a sense of the sacred.

Therefore, that Rūmī chose to initiate the reader-sālik into the spiritual quest through a rather quaint “love story” seems well suited to his underlying criticism about misplaced love. Considering that the king (the ruler) has become subjugated to his subject (the handmaiden) through his choice of characters, Rūmī is also suggesting a reversal of the natural order, whereas at the allegorical level, it suggests that the nafs has taken control of the entire ‘government’ of the body, a situation which is catastrophic for the human being’s spiritual quest, for as Moosa explains:

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114 ibid., I: 143.
116 ibid.
Just as the sovereignty of an earthly monarch requires the optimum functioning of all organs of government to secure justice and order, similarly, all the bodily organs must be disciplined—must curb the lusts and passions emanating from the lower self—so that the monarch of the body, namely, the spirit, may reign supreme and turn the person into a true vicegerent (khalīfa) of God on earth.\(^{117}\)

In this sense, the characters serve as the embodiments of subtle psycho-spiritual dimensions of the self; therefore, although Rūmī uses many realistic characters in the Mathnawī, it is worth pointing out that his characters are hardly “developed” in a novelistic sense. We know very little about them, their physical descriptions, or their personalities. One could explain this away with recourse to the nature of allegory or the short story, but a likely more important reason why this is so is because Rūmī’s emphasis is never on the characters, but rather on the reading self.

The various characters employed throughout the Mathnawī (human or other) have no fixed reality and are frequently utilised as symbols that give some notion of form to more abstract realities. As such, Rūmī does not allow his readers to become overly attached to any one character – and this is especially important in the tale of The King and the Handmaiden because three of its characters represent vying aspects of one’s own self and if carried out to its ontological core, all are just as illusory as the human self – they have no substantial existence.\(^{118}\) What’s more, from Rūmī’s Sufi perspective this false sense of self is created from the desires and compulsions of our own separateness and since it strongly believes in its own existence as separate from the rest of life, it ‘recruits the intellect to help defend this illusion at the expense of the whole of the mind.’\(^{119}\) In this sense, the psycho-spiritual implications of the tale as the nakt-i hāl, is a narrative account of the various stages of consciousness the nafs must traverse on the path of love. It is fitting, therefore, that the tale of the king’s amorous passion for the handmaiden begins at the lowest level of consciousness: the nafs al-‘ammāra and the very process of interpreting the allegory becomes representative of moving through higher forms of consciousness.


\(^{118}\) Nor is imagery fixed – something can mean one thing than another at later point. All are mutable. to the handmaiden he is a physician, but to the king he is a pîr, the king is a subject to God.

Thus, at the allegorical level, Rūmī continues to explicate the process of *tazkiyah* (purification of the self). In this sense, the divine physician’s request to empty the “house” can be interpreted as emptying the *sālik*’s heart from its worldly desires and attachments whereas the physician’s questioning of the handmaiden about her hometown and friends is an attempt to establish which intellectual faculties the *sālik*’s had become most renowned.\textsuperscript{120}

Rūmī also provides the analogy of a thorn in one’s foot to illustrate the difficulty of detecting let alone removing bad habits in one’s character: ‘A thorn in the foot is so hard to find: how (then) is it with a thorn in the heart? Answer (that)! / If every base fellow had seen the thorn in the heart, when would sorrows gain the upper hand over any one?’\textsuperscript{121} For example, though in appearance one may be exceedingly modest or humble, internally they may be motivated by arrogance and pride because they seek the praise of the people.\textsuperscript{122} In this way, Rūmī highlights the *pīr*’s spiritual prowess in curing spiritual maladies, which is contrasted with the ineptness of others: ‘Somebody sticks a thorn under a donkey’s tail: the donkey does not know how to get rid of it: he starts jumping. / He jumps, and the thorn strikes more firmly (pierces deeper): it needs an intelligent person to extract a thorn.’\textsuperscript{123} The donkey can be taken to refer to the people of *gaflah* who are unable to recognise the subtle attributes of the *nafs al-ʿammāra* and the secret workings of their subconscious desires and motivations. Listening to the variations in her pulse, the divine physician is quick to discover that the source of the handmaiden’s woe is her pining for a certain goldsmith (*zerger*) in her hometown. At the allegorical level, the divine physician’s examination of the handmaiden obviously signifies the *pīr*’s spiritual assessment of the aspirant through the esoteric science of *fīrāsat*:

How, then, should the divine physicians in the world not diagnose (disease) in you without word of mouth? / From your pulse and your eyes and your complexion alike they immediately discern a hundred (spiritual) maladies in

\begin{footnotesize}
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  \item \textsuperscript{120} Konuk, op. cit., p. 54.
  \item \textsuperscript{121} Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, I: 151-2.
  \item \textsuperscript{122} In Islam, this is known as the sin of *riya‘*, and refers to ostentatious displays of piety, or the sycophantic and hypocritical show of religiosity and is significant since as Baldick has mentioned, many Muslim mystics (including Rūmī) were usually in society and perpetually observed unlike the monk or hermit. Julian Baldick, *Mystical Islam: An Introduction to Sufism*, I.B.Tauris, London, 2012, p. 34.
  \item \textsuperscript{123} Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, I: 154-5.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
you. / In sooth, ’tis (only) these newly-taught physicians that have need of these (external) signs. / The perfect (the divine physicians) will hear your name from afar and quickly penetrate into the deepest ground of your being and existence; / Nay, they will have seen you (many) years before your birth —you together with all the circumstances (connected with you).\textsuperscript{124}

As it is revealed, the handmaiden’s illness is not simply physical but rather, psychosomatic and it is ultimately this reality that the fraudulent physicians were inept at recognising: something as primal as lovesickness at one level, and as concealed and unsuspected as spiritual illness at the coinciding allegorical level. The divine physician decides not to tell the king the secret of her illness which seems odd at the level of the story, but altogether appropriate at the allegorical level considering that the king, the handmaiden and the goldsmith all represent different spiritual aspects of the same individual — the aspirant in the intermediary spiritual state (nafs al-luwwāmah).

Therefore, although embodied by different characters, all three represent a unified albeit, flawed self. As explored thoroughly, in Rūmī’s understanding, the rūḥ (soul) is above any kind of gender association and is essentially good: ‘It is a doer of (what is) sweet, and (it is) sweet, and the essence of sweetness.’\textsuperscript{125} Whereas the ‘aql-i juzī (partial intellect), denies the soul’s love for God and in this state, cannot be a lover of the rūḥ (soul):

Partial (discursive) reason is a denier of Love, though it may give out that it is a confidant. / It is clever and knowing, but it is not naught (devoid of self-existence): until the angel has become naught, he is an Ahrima (Devil). / It (partial reason) is our friend in word and deed, (but) when you come to the case of inward feeling (ecstasy), it is naught (of no account). / It is naught because it did not (pass away) from existence and become nonexistent: since it did not become naught willingly, (it must become naught nevertheless, for) there is many a one (who became naught, i.e. died) unwillingly.’\textsuperscript{126}

In this sense, Rūmī suggests that the pīr’s job is to help the sālik achieve the ḥadīth “die before you die” in transforming the self from the lowly attributes of the nafs and

\textsuperscript{124} ibid., IV: 1797-1802.
\textsuperscript{125} ibid., I: 1978.
\textsuperscript{126} ibid., I: 1982-5.
reaching the lofty stations of the *rūḥ*.\textsuperscript{127} This is because the ‘*aql* is not acquainted with the mysteries of ‘*ishq* and as the story demonstrates, susceptible to the manipulations of the *nafs*; however, the ‘*aql* (represented by the handmaiden) also becomes the passageway through which the *pīr* is able to peer into the *sālik*’s heart allowing him to: ‘enter into his heart by way of the intellect, and behold his real state and not be confined to tradition.’\textsuperscript{128} Therefore, at the psycho-spiritual level, the tale suggests that the *pīr* is able to monitor the spiritual aspirants inner psycho-spiritual attributes. Thus, the Sufi guide, as the spiritual physician, is required to diagnose and remedy the subtle negative attributes of the *nafs al-‘ammāra* whereas the practices of Sufism are the medicines, and the *pīr* is the divinely guided physician who prescribes each remedy specific to the traveller.

Finally, the tale offers some concept of a resolution both in terms of the plot but, more importantly, in terms of what is expected from the traveller on the Sufi path in their quest from spiritual transformation. As such, when the divine physician finally discovers that the handmaiden’s “illness” is her pining for a certain goldsmith, he requests the king to lure him to the castle with promise of wealth and riches and unities (weds) him with the handmaiden so that: ‘During the space of six months they were satisfying their desire, till the girl was wholly restored to health.’\textsuperscript{129} It is interesting that the king asks his messengers to ‘*[s]ummon the goldsmith from that far country; beguile him with gold and robes of honour.*’\textsuperscript{130} Konuk points out in his commentary that this nuance reveals the nature of those under the influence of the *nafs al-‘ammāra* who are not interested in the transformation offered through the Sufi path but are only lured by its external appearance of self-affirmation through the prestige or spiritual grandeur they see to be offered through the path and to this degree there motivating force, ironically is not the pursuit of self-negation but rather self-affirmation, but are oblivious to the reality that awaits them in terms of the aims of the Sufi path.

The fact that Rūmī is in fact talking about a metaphysical death is further supported in

\textsuperscript{127} ibid., I: 1985.
\textsuperscript{128} ibid., II: 1477.
\textsuperscript{129} Konuk suggests that the six months represent the *nafs*’ progression through the six levels of the *nafs* where the last – the *nafs safinia* – is considered not part of the *nafs* but a facet of the *rūḥ*. Konuk, op. cit., p. 65.
\textsuperscript{130} Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, I: 184.
the next lines when he explains that ‘proudly and delicately they conducted him to the king of kings, that he might burn (like a moth) on that candle of Tiráz.’ Sham wa parwana (candle and moth) serves as a symbol in much Sufi poetry for the mystical annihilation of self in God through the experience of fanā‘. It is at this point the pîr undertakes an action that is somewhat shocking at the narrative level (the murder of the goldsmith): ‘Thereafter he prepared for him a potion, so that when he drank it he began to dwindle away before her.’ At the allegorical level, the implication is that when the nafs dissipates (the nafs al-‘ammāra ascends to higher forms), through the mediation of the pîr, the ‘aqīl-i juzî (partial intellect) merges with the ‘aqīl-i kullî (universal intellect) and recognises the rūḥ as the divine investiture of God. The sharbat (sherbet) also highlights Rūmī’s notion of appearance and reality since at the surface layer of the tale (ṣūrah) the seemingly sweet refreshment is poison but at the corresponding allegorical level (the tale’s ma’nā), the sharbat is a symbol for true monotheism (waḥdat al-wujud) since it causes the nafs (ego-existence) to gradually dissipate, meaning that the ego loses its sense of “I-hood” and separateness.

At the tale’s denouement, the handmaiden ‘was purged of love and pain’. At the same time, Rūmī offers a critique at the tales ṣūrah: ‘Since he became ugly and ill-favoured and sallow-cheeked, little by little he became cold (irksome and unpleasing) in her heart. / Those loves which are for the sake of a colour (outward beauty) are not love: in the end they are a disgrace.’ In this way, Rūmī admonishes those whose “love” goes little beyond the physical form and in this way, highlights the perils of loving conditional forms:

The lovers of the Whole are not those who love the part: he that longed for the part failed to attain unto the Whole. / When a part falls in love with a part, the object of its love soon goes (returns) to its own whole. / He (the lover of the particular) became the laughing-stock of another’s slave: he became (like a man who was) drowning and clung to some one weak (and powerless to help him). / He (the loved slave) possesses no authority, that he should care for him: shall he

131 ibid., I: 196.
132 ibid., I: 202.
133 ibid., I: 216.
134 ibid., I: 205-6.
do his own master’s business or his (the lover’s)?

The hierarchy of love in Rūmī’s Sufi ontology can paradoxically be viewed as both ‘a ladder for ascent to the Divine Empyrean’ as well as a description of the increasing limitation and imprisonment of the soul as one descends to the lower levels of the hierarchy. Thus, Rūmī declares: ‘Choose the love of that Living One who is everlasting, who gives thee to drink of the wine that increases life. / Choose the love of Him from whose love all the prophets gained power and glory.’ ‘Do not say, “We have no admission to that King.”’ Dealings with the generous are not difficult.’ In this sense, it is interesting to re-consider Rūmī’s asseveration at the tale’s beginning, that the story is the “marrow of our inward state”. At the allegorical level, the characters manifest spiritual realities that vie with one another for a state of supremacy. Thus, the tale can be understood as both a general tale about the common state of humanity, and a specific tale for the Ṣālik (mystical aspirant) who wishes to understand and advance through the mystical path of Sufism.

8.3 Rūmī as Author-Guide

A fundamental reason as to why the author serves the purpose of a guide in the Mathnawī is due to Rūmī’s belief in hierarchal levels of meaning as well as his insistence on encoding esoteric secrets in allegories, symbols and double-speech. Therefore, in parallel with the main text of the poem, the impressive allegorical narration is invariably accompanied by methodological instructions concerning the method of the correct reading of the text. These narrative interpolations by Rūmī within the Mathnawī are separate and identifiable and distinctive from the story and it is in these parts that Rūmī most clearly addresses (and attempts to transform) the reader. Thus, in the next section of this analysis, I will be focusing on an extended section of Rūmī’s narrative presence. Although there are numerous authorial interjections throughout the tale, the most striking is Rūmī’s final “commentary” at the tales denouement since what he is saying is so obviously extra-narratory: ‘Setting forth how the slaying and poisoning of the goldsmith was (prompted) by Divine

135 ibid., I: 2801-4.
137 Rūmī, Mathnawī, I: 219-221. Konuk points out that the Mesnevihan would recite the last line at the commencement of their Mathnawī classes.
suggestion, not by sensual desire and wicked meditation.\footnote{ibid., I: 221.} Thus, premeditating that the allegorical nature of the tale may not have been immediately apparent to many of his readers, Rūmī attempts to clear any misconceptions the reader may have had. First, he addresses the likely prospect that the physician’s poisoning of the goldsmith may have disturbed many of his readers: ‘The slaying of this man by the hand of the physician was not (done) on account of hope or fear. / He did not slay him to humour the king, (he did not slay him) until the Divine command and inspiration came.’\footnote{ibid., I: 222-3.} Rūmī, in line with his Sufi view of the awliyāʾ, insinuates that the wālī of God acts through ‘ilhām (Divine inspiration) and in this sense, his acts are not his own (since having been effaced in God through fanāʾ) but are rather, the acts of God manifested through the human subject.\footnote{There is also an allusion here to the Qur’ānic verse in which God proclaims: ‘It was not you who killed them but God, and when you [Prophet] threw [sand at them] it was not your throw [that defeated them] but God’s, to do the believers a favour: God is all seeing and all knowing’. Qur’ān, 8: 17.} Rūmī also reprimands the narrowness of the reader’s ego-driven interpretation when he adds for comparison:

As for the boy whose throat was cut by Khadir, the vulgar do not comprehend the mystery thereof. / He that receives from God inspiration and answer (to his prayer), whatsoever he may command is the essence of right. / If one who bestows (spiritual) life should slay, it is allowable: he is the (Divine) vicegerent, and his hand is the hand of God.\footnote{Rūmī, Mathnavī, I: 224-6.} As explored earlier, within the Sufi tradition, Khiḍr is known to represents esoteric, mystical knowledge and is viewed as the epitomic spiritual guide. Rūmī’s references to Khiḍr almost always serve to make a connection with the awliyāʾ as well as the relationship expected between the disciple and the spiritual guide. Thus, through the example of Khiḍr, it is understood that God sanctifies whatever the pīr does because he acts not through his own volition but through the direct intervention of God and for this reason, the spiritual aspirant must heed to the demands of the pīr. Therefore, just as the Qur’ānic narrative suggests that Khiḍr had sleighed a boy, the king’s acquiescence in the murder of the goldsmith suggests higher esoteric (bāṭin) understanding on the one hand, and also serves as an exemplar of the submission required by the sālik (spiritual aspirant): ‘Like Ismā’il (Ishmael), lay your head before him; gladly and laughingly give up your soul before his dagger’\footnote{ibid., I: 227.} the sālik is
expected to annihilate his own agency in the agency of the pīr who will help him to achieve both a spiritual and an ontological “death” through the dissipation of their ego-existence. The allusion to the Qur’ānic parable also functions as an indirect lesson in humility for the reader: God caused Moses to be in need of Khiḍr, so as to teach that: ‘… Above everyone who has knowledge there is the One who is all knowing’. Thus, having pointed out the deficiencies in the presumed reader’s interpretation, Rūmī proceeds, with a somewhat postmodern streak, to reorder their conscience:

The king did not commit that bloodshed because of lust: cease from thinking evil and disputing. / You thought that he committed a foul crime, (but) in (the state of) purity how should the sublimation leave (any) alloy (behind)?

The abrupt, accusative tone in which Rūmī directly questions his readers in the second person leads to a splintering in the conscience. Even if the reader had not considered the motivations behind the king’s act, they may suddenly find themselves questioning their personal reaction to the narrative. Brian McHale, observing the implications of this psychological maneuver (switching in tense) has on the reader suggests that the ontological disjunction created in the reader’s conscience opens an uncanny gap between story and discourse or between the reader’s real world and the text’s fictional world that, ‘invites the reader to project himself or herself into [that] gap.’ Even if the reader had not thought the king was motivated by lust, they will likely bridle inside by the prospect of being misrepresented. As such, Rūmī is able to ‘include the implied reader in [his] referential field,’ whereby placing ‘permanently on the actual reader the onus of defining himself in relation to the text and its enunciator’. Commenting on this feature, Tourage has observed that the authorial interjections also serve as a type of safeguard against literal interpretations of the tale, where Rūmī

... subverts the reader’s “reading” of the text and in effect interprets the reader’s interpretation. The reader hence is disconnected from a literal reading of the tale as the activity of interpretation is problematised. No longer able to lose himself in it, the reader’s position is exposed to disruption… Instead of a narcissistic

143 Qur’ān, 12: 76.
144 Rūmī, Mathnawī, I: 230-2.
analysis and interpretation of the tale, the reader is himself analyzed and interpreted by the author of the tale. If the spiritual master demands submission to his draconian authority as a guide, Rūmī demands no less as an author; thus, the reader’s internalisation of the narrative is further encouraged when the allusion to Moses and Khīdr is suddenly addressed to the reader: ‘The imagination of Moses, notwithstanding his (spiritual) illumination and excellence, was screened from (the comprehension of) that (act of Khadir). Do not thou fly without wings!’ If we recall the Qur’anic account of Moses and Khīdr, it is at the point when Moses questions Khīdr’s acts for a third time that he responds: ‘He said, ‘This is where you and I part company. I will tell you the meaning of the things you could not bear with patiently’.

In this verse, the term used for meaning/interpretation is ta’wil and in the specific scenario, also signifies the bāṭin (esoteric) or inner knowledge that is only acquired through ‘ilhām (divine inspiration). Rūmī uses the allusion to emphasise the obliviousness of the spiritually blind to the ma’nā that lies beyond the šārah as well as reiterating the interpretive authority of the Sufi guide that is inspired by God. At the textual level, the references to Khīdr can be said to also serve in suggesting the etiquette Rūmī expects from the readers of the Mathnawī. For example, in book two of the Mathnawī, addressing the reader, Rūmī reprimands excessive garrulousness in the presence of the pīr:

The speech of Moses was in measure, but even so it exceeded the words of his good friend. / That excess resulted in (his) opposing Khadir; and he (Khadir) said, ‘Go, thou art one that talks too much: this is a (cause of) separation (between us).’ / O (thou who resembllest) Moses, thou art garrulous. Go far off, or else be dumb with me and blind! / And if thou goest not, but remainest sitting

147 Tourage singles-out the bawdy tales in the Mathnawī as affecting this splintering of conscience; however, I would argue that although the bawdy passages may enhance this effect, this technique is certainly not limited to them. As noted earlier, Rūmī’s authorial interjections are a stylistic feature in his work and present especially in those passages that ostensibly challenge expected norms and social conventions. Mahdi Tourage, Rumi and the Hermeneutics of Eroticism, Brill, Boston, 2007, p. 76.

148 Rūmī, Mathnawī, I: 237.

149 Qur’an, 18: 78.

150 Buehler, commenting on the psychological implication of the pīr’s authority explains that ‘the master has to be perceived as an infallible guide for the disciple, since both the ego and the discursive mind constantly attempt to convince the reader that they know better than the master.’ Arthur F. Buehler, Sufi Heirs of the Prophet: The Indian Naqshbandiya and the Rise of the Mediating Sufi Shaykh, University of South Carolina Press, South Carolina, 1998, p. 139.
Rūmī’s sudden transitions to a direct, second person address to the reader reveals that the subjects in question are neither Moses nor Khidr, but rather, Rūmī and the reader. Thus, it is specifically the inner-speech (interpretive practices) of the reader that is shunned as “garrulousness” in the presence of the author-guide. Rūmī desires those approaching the text (Mathnawī) to be “dumb” and “blind”: emptied of their interpretations, pre-conceived notions, biases, opinions, and conjectures – to be emptied of self. In this sense, it can be said that as author-guide, what Rūmī seeks from the reader-sālik is patience towards the literary enigmas that may not immediately be made manifest to them. Likewise, the apprehension of deeper meanings will naturally require great patience with the author-guide, but it also requires the individual to recognise the limitations of their own knowledge – a realisation that Rūmī hopes will lead the reader to turn to him, the author, for guidance in understanding his narrative as well as submission to his ‘apparently draconian authority in view of higher meanings.’

In this way, the Qur’ānic narrative of Khidr and Moses is appropriated by Rūmī to further the significance of the relationship expected between the seeker and the guide:

As (for example) the intellect of Moses was troubled by seeing the reasonable actions of Khadir. / His actions seemed unreasonable to Moses, since he (Moses) had not his (Khadir’s) state (of Divine inspiration). / Inasmuch as the intellect of Moses becomes tied up (perplexed and helpless) in (the matter of) the mysterious (inspiration), who (what) is the intellect of a (mere) mouse, O excellent (reader)?

Since Moses was unaware of Khidr’s divine inspiration, his intellect could not fathom the meaning behind his actions. At the narrative level, this becomes a lesson in humility to the reader who is made aware of their own shortcomings and presumptiveness in attempting to interpret the Mathnawī through brute intellect that is sullied by the desires of their nafs. As such, Rūmī’s harsh vituperation to, ‘cease from

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151 Rūmī, Mathnawī, II: 3515-7.
153 Rūmī, Mathnawī, II: 3262-4.
thinking evil and disputing\textsuperscript{154} can also be taken as an attack on his prospective critics – rather, it is Rūmī himself who will provide the “correct” interpretation of his text: ‘That (deed of the king) is a red rose (worthy of praise); do not call it blood (murder). He is intoxicated with Reason; do not call him a madman.’\textsuperscript{155} Rūmī subtly implies the tales symbolic significance: the sleighing of the goldsmith becomes representative of the ego’s dissipation, whereas the state of “intoxication” is because the ‘aql-\textit{i} juzī (partial intellect) has joined the ‘aql-\textit{i} kullī (Universal Intellect) of God. Thus, Rūmī leaves his readers with an admonition demanding them to acknowledge the limitations of their understanding: ‘You are judging (his actions) from (the analogy of) yourself, but you have fallen far, far (away from the truth). Consider well!’\textsuperscript{156} In this sense, Rūmī suggests that the act of reading the Mathnawī as well as the associated interpretive endeavour is complicated by the presence of the ego-\textit{nafs}, which poses to be a constant stumbling block:

How should one that is subject, like a straw, to (the wind of) sensuality know the oppressor from the oppressed? / He that cuts off the head of his wicked self—he (alone) finds the way to (discriminating) the oppressor from the oppressed. / Otherwise, that oppressor, which is the fleshly soul within (us), (being moved) by frenzy, is the adversary of the oppressed.\textsuperscript{157}

Consequently, Rūmī leads his readers to recognise that subjective interpretation, since under the sway of the \textit{nafs}, has an inherent risk of bias and without a skilled author-guide, one risks missing the spiritual truths Rūmī wishes to convey. Therefore, the reader who genuinely aspires to escape the grasp of their ego must first acknowledge their limitations, and then yield to the authority of the author-guide as he seeks to lift them to higher modes of existence. Therefore, the allegorical narrative is particularly well suited for Rūmī’s intention to guide the \textit{nafs} of the reader-\textit{sālik} where, the very process of interpreting the narrative potentially becomes the means through which the reader gains inner-transformation.

In foresight, Rūmī’s prowess as an allegorist becomes apparent in his simultaneous exploration of the consuming power of human love – exemplified by the king’s

\textsuperscript{154} ibid., I: 230.
\textsuperscript{155} ibid., I: 238.
\textsuperscript{156} ibid., I: 246.
\textsuperscript{157} ibid., III: 2434-6.
infatuation with the handmaiden and quintessentially, the trapping love for one’s ego suggested by the rūḥ’s enthrallment with the nafs. The Mathnawī begins at the station (maqām) of the Salik – a spiritual station of spiritual infancy; it is for those who are not yet ripe. Rūmī suggests that in the initial state of the spiritual aspirant: the rūḥ is subject to the whims of the nafs. Therefore, if we consider the overall dynamics of the allegory and its implications for the reader, it can be said that the tale of The King and the Handmaiden, in flouting the readers’ expectations, serves to navigate the reader’s nafs through their own spiritual interiority in hopes of bringing about a sort of spiritual ontogenesis. Furthermore, the rather long digression with Husam Ad-Dīn is significant to the tale as a whole not only for its mystical innuendos, but also because it offers a glimpse into the deeply personal, if not autobiographical elements of the Mathnawī. Rūmī also indirectly answers the question as to why he has chosen to convey his mystical insights through way of narrative: it is better to convey the secrets of the beloveds of god (awliyāʾ) by means of the Mathnawī (the tales and parables contained within), because Rūmī fears they will become targets of the animosities of the envious – a painful reality he knew only too well in the lead up to the final disappearance of his beloved Shams.

8.4 Conclusion

As we have explored, Sufism is primarily concerned with purification of the nafs specifically, the nafs al-‘ammāra, whereas the primary purposes of the enlightened Sufi who has attained to reunion with the Beloved (through the progression from fanāʾ and baqāʾ), serves to guide others who are traversing the spiritual path of ‘ishq. In the context of the Mathnawī, this goal of edification is transferred to the literary realm, where the reader-sālik is made to traverse the path of narrative. As such, in the context of the Mathnawī, the text becomes the ṭarīqah (Sufi path) and the author takes on the role of pīr (Sufi guide), whereas the ideal reader is the sālik (spiritual aspirant). Although Rūmī does not give specific systematic descriptions of the ṭarīqah, he does provide, “by way of narrative”, a literary representation of the path on which the reader-sālik is able to embark through their very act of reading. Thus, Rūmī, as author-guide, conducts the reader through the complexities of his own work (the Mathnawī) but also in a sense, through the complexities of their own spiritual, inner faculties. In this sense, it can be argued that the intricate structure of these narratives
provide the most suitable narrative model to convey the complexity of mystical experience where the ṭarīq-i dāstān (path of narrative), becomes the textual and literary means through which the reader can embark upon the Sufi path of 'ishq.
Chapter Nine:
The Function of the *Mathnawī* as a Sufi Text of ‘Ishq

*Explain, in order that the tale may be the means of curing (our malady); explain, that it may be a salve for our souls.*

In the *Fihi mā fihi* Rūmī proclaims that the intention behind a specific literary production is of paramount importance ‘...the root of the matter was the purpose desired; the poem itself was merely the branch of that purpose. If it had not been for that purpose, the poet would never have composed that poem.’ In this way, Rūmī suggests that poetic works are intrinsically tied with their intended function. The purpose of this chapter is to explore some of the *Mathnawī*’s multifaceted functions as well as pointing out the instrumentality that is intrinsic to the Sufi literary tradition as a whole. Therefore, beginning with Rūmī’s general theory of literature, this chapter will then continue to explore more specific functions of the *Mathnawī* such as its role as a guide for spiritual aspirants traversing the Sufi path of ‘ishq, a means of assisting individuals to interiorise the Qur’ān, a concealer and revealer of esoteric secrets, the literary representation of Rūmī’s mystical experiences, as well as a being a channel through which they could pour through.

9.1 Art for the Soul’s Sake

At one point in the *Mathnawī*, referring to the spiritual content of his work, Rūmī remarks ‘It is spiritual reality, not (mere) fa’ūlun fā‘ilāt (amphibrachs and cretics).’ And in this way suggests that he does not wish his words to be reduced to their literary or aesthetic appeal alone. This notion of literature having a purpose or serving specific functions has become, for the most part, a somewhat foreign idea in modern literary criticism. For example, in his examination of current literary trends, Terry Eagleton points out that one of the most vital functions of the work of art since Romanticism ‘has been to exemplify that which is gloriously, almost uniquely free of

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a function, and thus, by virtue of what it shows rather than what it says, act as an implicit rebuke to a civilisation in thrall to utility, exchange value and calculative reason.\(^3\) From this viewpoint, the function of art is to have no function at all. In contrast, in his exploration of *Art and the Sacred*, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, argues that “sacred art” is functional in the most profound sense of the term since it is always made for a particular use.\(^4\) He also explains that “sacred art” based on the idea of ‘art for man’s sake’, where ‘the axial being on this plane of reality, means ultimately art for God’s sake, for to make something for man as a theomorphic being is to make it for God.’\(^5\) In this vein, in the preface to the sixth book of the *Mathnawī*, Rūmī asks that it “give light to the Six Directions”,\(^6\) implying that its mystical teachings reach every corner of the globe “in order that any one who has not performed the circumambulation may (now) perform it (round the Mathnawi).”\(^7\) In this sense, Rūmī implies that the *Mathnawī* is like the *Ka‘bah* of the lovers of God, since ‘Love hath naught to do with the five (senses) and the six (directions): its goal is only (to experience) the attraction exerted by the Beloved.’\(^8\)

The *Mathnawī* then, serves as the work through which lovers may be drawn to their Beloved. Furthermore, Rūmī adds that although ‘in the sceptic’s ear the secret is no secret (at all)’,\(^9\) he insists that he will continue to deliver his message nonetheless, since ‘(the command) to call (the people to God) comes down from the Maker: what has he (the prophet or saint) to do with (their) acceptance or non-acceptance?’\(^10\) Therefore, Rūmī identifies the *Mathnawī* with the prophetic goal implying that he has been assigned to deliver a message to the benefit of anyone who is willing to take his

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\(^2\) Nasr defines “sacred art” thus: ‘All sacred art is traditional art but not all traditional art is sacred art. Sacred art lies at the heart of traditional art and is concerned directly with the revelation and those theophanies, which constitute the core of the tradition. Sacred art involves the ritual and cultic practices and practical and operative aspects of the paths of spiritual realization within the bosom of the tradition in question.’ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, State University of New York Press, New York, 1989, p. 275.

\(^3\) ibid.


\(^5\) ibid.

\(^6\) ibid., VI: 5.

\(^7\) ibid., VI: 8.

\(^8\) ibid., VI: 9. Konuk has pointed out there is an allusion to Qur’an 5: 67, ‘Messenger, proclaim everything that has been sent down to you from your Lord– if you do not, then you will not have communicated His message– and God will protect you from people. God does not guide those who defy Him.’ As well as 5: 99 ‘The Messenger’s duty is only to deliver the message: God knows what you reveal and what you conceal.’ A. Avni Konuk, *Mesnevi-i Şerif Şerhi 1*, Gelenek Yayıncılık, Istanbul, 2004, p. 17.
advice to heart. As such, Rūmī declares that ‘(The Divine) Destiny hath allotted to every one a certain service, suitable to his essential nature, (to be performed) in (the way of) probation.’ In this sense, Rūmī implies that the production of the Mathnawī, the poetic rendition of Qur’anic truth, is his own divinely ordained talent. So what exactly are we referring to when we mention the function of the Mathnawī in the context of Sufi literature? Rūmī argues that although the Mathnawī can be put to any purpose that its readers desire, its purpose and function, like the Qur’ân, is essentially, to serve as guidance for the human being:

“I did not create the Jinn and mankind (save that they might serve Me).” Recite this (text). The (final) object of the world is naught but Divine worship. / Though the (final) object of a book is the science (which it contains), (yet) if you make it a pillow (to rest on), it will become (serve as) that too; / But this (function of being a) pillow was not its (final) object: it (the final object) was learning and knowledge and right guidance and profit.12

Despite the recent popularity of Rūmī’s works in the Western world, as well as the growing number of its various English renditions, it is in such passages that we are glaringly reminded that works like the Mathnawī were not, for a long time, circulated within the global capitalist system of secular literary production and consumption.13 Rūmī forewarns his readers that the Mathnawī is not a text that can be passively divulged because like the Qur’ân, it is a text that makes specific demands from its readers.

In a passage that is particularly worth quoting in some length, Rūmī vents his frustration at readers who approach the Mathnawī with frivolity; barring it from serving its function:

Or dost thou suppose that when thou readest the words of the Mathnawī thou hearest them gratis (without giving aught in return)? / Or that the discourse of wisdom and the hidden mystery comes easily into thy ear and mouth?’: ‘It comes in, but, like fables, it shows (only) the husk, not the kernel of the berries, / (As) a sweetheart who has drawn a veil over her head and face and has hidden

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11 ibid., VI: 15.
13 Frishkopf claims this aspect of modern literature functions ‘to produce a strongly individualized and autonomous author-function (the genius “Author-god”), which in not only unrepresentative but also counterintuitive to the Sufi tradition. Michael Frishkopf, ‘Authorship in Sufi Poetry’, *Alif Journal of Comparative Poetics*, no. 23, 2003, p. 101.
her face from thine eye. / By reason of contumacy the Sháhnáma or Kalíla seems to thee just like the Qur’án. / The difference between truth and falsehood is (visible) at the moment when the collyrium of (Divine) favour opens the eye; / Otherwise, dung and musk are both the same to one whose nose is obstructed (by disease), since (in him) there is no sense of smell. / His aim is to divert himself from ennui (by reading such books), and neglect the Word of the Almighty, / That by means of that (entertaining) discourse he may quench the fire of distress and anxiety and provide a cure (for his malady). / For the purpose of quenching this amount of fire, pure water and urine are alike in skill (are equally serviceable). / Both this urine and (this) water will quench the fire of distress, just as (it is quenched) during sleep. / But if thou become (really) acquainted with this pure water, which is the Word of God and spiritual, / All distress will vanish from the soul, and the heart will find its way to the Rose-garden.  

In this passage, Rūmī makes a critical distinction between what might be considered “profane” and sacred literature. In this sense, Rūmī’s harsh critique is aimed at what he deems to be those who approach texts purely as a source of “entertainment” and he is not so much offended by the idea of seeking amusement or diversion through the medium of literature as he is by the Mathnawī being used for such purposes. Rūmī, in line with the Sufi standpoint in relation to literature, is inclined towards the social role of literature and the concept of “art for art’s sake”, is in no agreement with his literary theory. As such, Rūmī suggests that the Mathnawī, like the Qur’ān, is a text that makes certain demands upon its readers, requiring various kinds of work from its readers and to this degree, its function and purpose can only manifest through the

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14 Rūmī, Mathnawī, IV: 3459-71. This sentiment is also mirrored by Rūmī’s friend and spiritual master, Shams-i-Tabrīzī who proclaims: ‘The point of a story is for it to set you to the work, not its outward sense – as if you were going to repel boredom with the story’s form. No, you repel ignorance.’ Shams-i Tabrīzī, Me & Rumi: The Autobiography of Shams-i Tabrizi, translated by William C. Chittick. Independent Publishing Group, Chicago, 2004, p. 239.

15 “Art for art’s sake” is the usual English rendering of the French slogan from the early 19th century, “l’art pour l’art”, and expresses the philosophy that the intrinsic value of art, and the only “true” art, is divorced from any didactic, moral, or utilitarian function. Gene argues that as an ideology, it is a ‘specifically Western notion, generated on European soil by European writers’ and culturally diffused to various parts of the Occident. Interestingly, Gene also points out that the notion has no immediate roots in the Near east or Asia ‘where the arts remain closely bound up with religion or with other, larger, indigenous spiritual traditions and practices.’ In sum, she argues the notion of “Aestheticism” is a theory with no major vital resonances or academic standing outside Western (and Westernised) societies. Gene H. Bell-Villada, Art for Art’s Sake & Literary Life: How Politics and Markets Helped Shape the Ideology & Culture of Aestheticism 1790-1990, University of Nebraska Press, Nebraska, 1998, p. 3
resulting actions of its readers. Thus, connecting the Mathnawī’s function with the divine purpose of the human being, Rūmī makes an important implication about the instrumentality and utilitarianism of Sufi literature. In this light, it needs to be stated that the purpose of almost all Sufi works is intrinsically tied with their potential to transform their readers.\textsuperscript{16} Why the preference for the literary medium of narrative? The answer seems to lie in a particularly illuminating passage in the Mathnawī in which Rūmī professes: ‘Although the inner meaning of the tale is this bait and trap, listen now to the outward form of the tale in its entirety. / If the spiritual explanation were sufficient, the creation of the world would have been vain and idle.’\textsuperscript{17} Commenting on this meaningfully dense couplet, Mills profoundly remarks that ‘[t]he poet narrates for the same purpose as the Deity creates.’\textsuperscript{18} In other words, the Mathnawī’s literary form, including its narrative examples ‘are necessary to the process of mystical enlightenment, just as experience of the fragmented, separated created world is necessary in approaching Union.’\textsuperscript{19}

9.2 The Mathnawī as a Manual for Travellers on the Sufi Path of ‘Ishq

Come, speak (O my soul)! for the Logos is digging a channel to the end that some water may reach a generation after us. / Although (in) every generation there is one who brings the word (of God), yet the sayings of them that have gone before are helpful.\textsuperscript{20}

Even before Rūmī, Sufi masters often composed pedagogical poetry (often in the form of direct exhortation) for the spiritual edification of their disciples, implying the collaboration of the latter. Before the composition of the Mathnawī, it is said that many of Rūmī’s disciples studied the works of Sanā’ī and ‘Aṭṭār with great devotion; yet, apparently found it difficult to understand these works. Therefore, Rūmī’s

\textsuperscript{16} As de Bruijn has pointed out, ‘the link between cosmology on the one hand and the moral education of human beings on the other hand, established within the perspective of eternal salvation’ was common to the entire tradition of didacticism by Sufi poets.’ J.T.P. de Bruijn, Persian Sufi Poetry: An Introduction to the Mystical Use of Classical Persian Poems, Curzon Press, Surrey, 1997, pp. 84-5.

\textsuperscript{17} Rūmī, Mathnawī, I: 2623-4.


\textsuperscript{19} ibid.,

\textsuperscript{20} Rūmī, Mathnawī, III: 2537-9.
intimate of that moment, Husam ad Dīn, asked him to compose a similar work of his own – one along the lines of Sanā’ī’s mathnawī poem and in the metre of the Manṭiq-ut-Ṭayr (The Conference of the Birds). In reply to this, it is believed Rūmī drew a sheet of paper from his turban and handed it to Husām al-Dīn on which the first eighteen lines of the famous opening poem, the Neyname (the Song of the Reed), were already written in the requested metre. On this point, Mojaddedi considers the fact that the Fiḍī mā fiḥ contains only a modest amount of material in total, although representing at least a few years of Rūmī’s teaching activity, accords with the traditional view that he withdrew into a more reclusive lifestyle after the disappearance of Shams-i Tabrīzī, and ‘produced the Mathnawī for the benefit of his disciples in preference to more hands-on training.’

In this sense, Mojaddedi argues that the very idea of producing the Mathnawī to fulfill the purpose of guiding disciples is an indication that, although Rūmī devoted much time to producing this learning resource, ‘he preferred to take a less hands-on approach to actually guiding his disciples, since the wealth of poetry that he made available to his students could have made him feel comfortable about spending a relatively small amount of time teaching them in person.’ Although this is debatable, it seems clear Rūmī believed in the transformative capabilities of his Mathnawī in terms of conveying the nuances of the ṭarīqah – in fact, Rūmī himself described it as ‘a compensation to followers of the theory and practice (of Sūfism)’. Rūmī also describes it as that which brings ‘the sick man to his physician and guiding the lover to his beloved’ as well as ‘the burnisher (purifier) of spirits’. Thus, as well as serving to purify the individual of their lowly habits and lift them to higher modes of consciousness through the evolution of their nafs, as well as being the textual means to reaching the Beloved through its transformative capabilities.

However, Rūmī also warns extensively that the Sufi path is not one that is easily traversed, nor is it suited for all: ‘Oh, the life of lovers consists in death: thou wilt not

23 ibid.,
24 Rūmī, Mathnawī, IV: Arabic preface.
25 ibid., II: 6.
win the (Beloved’s) heart except in losing thine own.\textsuperscript{26} In this sense, the Sufi path and by extension, the Mathnawī, is specifically intended for those individuals who wish to pursue the Sufi path of ‘\textit{ishq} in attaining reunion with the Beloved.\textsuperscript{27} The Mathnawī can also be understood in the broader context of Sufi literature, as that which would ideally serve as a means to spiritual transformation. In this respect, the Mathnawī also becomes a medium for the dissemination of the mystical sciences within Islam where ‘poetry became in a way the main bridge which provided for those qualified among the general public access to Sufi teachings themselves.’\textsuperscript{28} As such, the Mathnawī, more than anything else, can best be described as a manual and guide for those embarking the Sufi path – and to this degree, it is also a textual manifestation of the \textit{ṭariqah} or more specifically, Rûmî’s Sufi path of ‘\textit{ishq}.\textsuperscript{29} However, Rûmî’s textualisation of the \textit{ṭariqah} does not follow any kind of substantial framework, nor does it proceed through specific or systematic progressions as would be found in other Sufi manuals but rather, like the spiritual aspirant who approaches it, reflects the vicissitudes of life and the unavoidable ascents and declines as one progresses through the path.\textsuperscript{30}

The efficacious role and function of the Mathnawī is also made clear in the numerous \textit{dibājah} (prefaces) written in Arabic, that precede all six books of the Mathnawī. Having noticed their significance of the prefaces in terms of positioning the Mathnawī’s overall function, Ernst has remarked that Rûmî is ‘a very deliberate

\textsuperscript{26} ibid., I: 1751.
\textsuperscript{27} For example, Safavi & Weightman argue that it is ‘the aspiring traveller on the spiritual path, the \textit{salik}, to whom the Mathnawī is largely addressed.’ Seyyed Ghahreman Safavi, Simon Weightman, \textit{Rumi’s Mystical Design: Reading the Mathnawī, Book One}, State University of New York Press, New York, 2009, pp. 4-5. Whereas Ernst claims that ‘[t]he universe of Sufis may be presumed to be the principal audience for the Mathnawī.’ Carl W. Ernst, ‘A Little Indicates Much Structure and Meaning in the Prefaces to Rûmî’s \textit{Mathnawī}, Books I-III’, \textit{Mawlana Rumi Review}, vol. 5, 2014, p. 16.
\textsuperscript{29} Rûmî also connects the Mathnawī to the realisation of \textit{tawhîd}: ‘When it (the Mathnawī) is made single (and denuded) of words and sounds and breaths, it leaves all that (behind) and becomes the (spiritual) Ocean. / The speaker of the word and the hearer of the word and the words (themselves)—all three become spirit in the end.’ Rûmî, \textit{Mathnawī}, VI: 71-2.
\textsuperscript{30} Mojaddedi considers the lack of linearity in the Mathnawī to be a technique through which he is able to keep readers’ engaged although he does point out that the progression of narratives in book one of the Mathnawī has some resemblance with the map of the path in the Chess of the Mystics board game where the “fall through pride” that threatens spiritual aspirants is represented thematically through the progression of the Mathnawī’s narrative content. Jawid Mojaddedi, ‘The Ebb and Flow of “The Ocean inside a Jug”: The Structure of Book One of Rûmî’s \textit{Masnavî}, Journal of Sufi Studies, vol. 3, 2014, p. 130.
author whose introductory gestures are extremely important for understanding the purpose of his symbolic declarations.\textsuperscript{31} For example, it is explicitly stated by Rūmī at the outset of his preface to the first book in which he quotes verbatim, a brief passage from the famous “Light Verse” of the Qur’ān.\textsuperscript{32}

This is the Book of the Mathnawi, which is the roots of the roots of the roots of the (Mohammedan) Religion in respect of (its) unveiling the mysteries of attainment (to the Truth) and of certainty; and which is the greatest science of God and the clearest (religious) way of God and the most manifest evidence of God. The likeness of the light thereof is as a niche in which is a candle shining with a radiance brighter than the dawn… It is the cure for (sick) breasts, and the purge of sorrows, and the expounder of the Qur’ān, and the (source of) abundance of (Divine) gifts, and the (means of) cleansing (sordid) dispositions\textsuperscript{33}

On this point, Braginsky explains that the idea of an analogy between poetry and the macrocosm (as well as the microcosm) was usually most fully reflected in the introductory parts of Sufi mathnawī poems, which comprised, in a way, a “justification” for the writing of the mathnawī in question on the one hand, and ‘a component thanks to which the relevant poetic work had its place in the orderly, integral system of the Universe assigned to it on the other.’\textsuperscript{34} The Qur’ān’s reference to the light of God is equated with the Mathnawī. Thus, through this passage, Rūmī connects the divine potentialities and meanings of the Qur’ān with his own work. It is also worth noting the implications of kashf (unveiling) in this passage – a prominent Sufi concept rooted in mystical ideals concerning knowledge of the heart rather than knowledge that is acquired through the intellect.\textsuperscript{35}

The Mathnawī is also described as that which serves its readers to recognise that which is beyond the material realm and to understand hidden meanings that cannot be acquired by reason alone, but rather through baṣīrah (spiritual insight/foresight) – the activation of inner or, spiritual vision. In the Mathnawī, Rūmī depicts this need to


\textsuperscript{32} ‘The likeness of His Light is as a niche in which is a lamp.’ Qur’ān, 24: 35.

\textsuperscript{33} Rūmī, Mathnawī, 1: Arabic preface.


seek “mystical” forms of knowledge through the example of the prophet David, who proclaims that “[t]he window of my soul is opened, and from the purity (of the Unseen World) the Book of God comes (to me) without intermediary.”  

At this point, Rūmī interjects, remarking that “[t]he house that is without a window is Hell: to make a window, O servant (of God), is the foundation of the (true) Religion. / Do not ply the axe on every thicket: oh, come and ply the axe in excavating a window.” Thus, comparing the human being without mystical awareness to a house without windows, Rūmī suggests that the human being that is shut off to the spiritual realm is comparable to the experience of “hell” on earth and that to this degree, Religion’s true purpose is to grant access to this realm. In this way, Rūmī indirectly suggests that as “the roots of the roots of the roots of faith”, another function of the Mathnawī is for it to serve as a means of increasing the spiritual wayfarer’s receptivity to mystical knowledge.

9.3 Interiorisation of the Qur’ān

 Needless to say, Rūmī did not perceive the Qur’ān as a work of art, which means first of all, that it does not operate on the principle of artistic transposition, but proclaims and explains Reality and the Truth: ‘For what purpose is the tale of Ad and Thamud? That you may know that the prophets have disdain.’ Furthermore, Rūmī believed that ‘The Qur’ān is (a description of) the states of the prophets,’ and therefore ‘if you read and do not accept (take to heart) the Qur’ān, suppose you have seen the prophets and saints (what will that avail you?)’ As such, Rūmī proclaims that when reading its stories about prophets, those who believe in the Qur’ān and take its message to heart, will feel distress at their corporeal existence. Hermeneutically speaking, then, knowledge of scripture is contingent upon knowledge of the self. In this sense, Çıtlak remarks that the Mathnawī becomes the ‘hermeneutic experience of

36 Rūmī, Mathnawī, III: 2402.
37 ibid., III: 2402-5.
38 ibid., I: 3307.
39 ibid., I: 1538.
40 ibid., I: 1539.
41 ‘But if you are accepting (the Qur’ān), when you read the stories (of the prophets), the bird, your soul, will be distressed in its cage. / The bird that is a prisoner in a cage, (if it) is not seeking to escape, ’tis from ignorance. / The spirits which have escaped from their cages are the prophets, (those) worthy guides. / From without comes their voice, (telling) of religion, (and crying), “This, this is the way of escape for thee. / By this we escaped from this narrow cage: there is no means of escape from this cage but this way.” ibid., I: 1540-4.
the Qur’ān’ as it teaches its readers about the essence of the human being, and leads them to determine the relative position of the *nafs* in the context of life.\(^{42}\) Therefore, in the context of the *Mathnawī*, ascertaining the identity and nature of the knowing subject becomes a particularly important quest.

Rūmī frequently appropriates Qur’ānic narratives and figures to bring to light the complex dynamics of the microcosmic self in relation to macrocosmic Reality. One such example is the frequent dichotomisation of Pharaoh and Moses, as counteracting forces within one’s own self.\(^{43}\) In the Qur’ānic narrative, Pharaoh represents the highest form of arrogance and is also the personification of the unforgivable sin of *širk* (idolatry/polytheism); however, in the Sufī tradition, Pharaoh has also become emblematic of the perils of ego-existence. Unlike many other tales in the *Mathnawī*, where the significance lies in the development of the tale’s plot, the extensive tale of Pharaoh and Moses (especially in book three of the *Mathnawī*), provides extensive monologues for the character of Pharaoh, explaining his motivations and his vacillations as he encounters God’s revelation through Moses. However, Rūmī explicitly states that his readers should not be distracted by the ṣūrah (form) of tale for, when one turns to its meaning and significance, Rūmī claims that the tale serves to provide a depiction of the negative qualities of the self (at the level of the *nafs al-ʾammārah*):

> The mention of Moses has become a chain (obstruction) to the thoughts (of my readers), (for they think) that these are stories (of that) which happened long ago. / The mention of Moses serves for a mask, but the Light of Moses is thy actual concern, O good man. / Moses and Pharaoh are in thy being: thou must seek these two adversaries in thyself.\(^{44}\)

It is through this nuanced character development that Rūmī tries to convince the readers, ‘[t]hat which was in Pharaoh, the same is in thee, but thy dragon is confined in the pit. / Alas, all this (concerning Pharaoh) is what passes in thee: thou wouldst fain fasten it on Pharaoh.’\(^{45}\) Shifting the subject of Pharaoh to the subject of the

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\(^{43}\) In another fascinating example, Rūmī appropriates the immaculate conception of Jesus to depict the spiritual ontogenesis of the individual struggling on the spiritual path: ‘Through that touch on its bosom the (individual) soul became pregnant, like Mary, with a heart-beguiling Messiah,’ Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, II: 1184.

\(^{44}\) ibid., III: 1251-3.

\(^{45}\) ibid., III: 971-2.
reader, Rūmī promotes the interiorisation of the Qur’ānic figure so that one may consider the presence of similar flaws in one’s own self. In this way, Rūmī explains that Qur’ānic tales are often regarded as simply being “tales” that have no relevance to the self: ‘If they say it of thee, there arises in thee a feeling of estrangement; and (if they tell it) of another, it seems to thee a fable.’ As such, Rūmī is suggesting that individuals often fail to benefit from Qur’ānic tales because they either fail to make an inner connection with the figures mentioned, or to see any kind of relevance or application in their own lives, and this psychological distancing hinders the tales from becoming anything more than a temporary source of entertainment. In this way, Rūmī’s appropriation of Qur’ānic narratives often serves to promote the readers’ interiorisation of them.

At other points, the Mathnawī also serves to explain specific verses of the Qur’ān through narrative. For example, there is a short tale about how an eagle seized the boot of the Prophet and carried it off into the air, but when it turned the boot upside down, a serpent fell out. What follows the tale is a short explanation about ‘[t]he right way of taking a lesson from this story and knowing with certainty that “verily, together with hardship there is ease.”’ Thus, alluding to Qur’ān 94: 5, Rūmī explains ‘[t]hat tale is a lesson to thee, O my soul, to the end that thou mayst acquiesce in the decree of God; / So that thou wilt be quick to understand and wilt have good thoughts (of God) when thou seest a calamity (befall thee) of a sudden.’ In this sense, through its various tales, Rūmī suggests that the Mathnawī also serves as a source of comfort for the various sufferings that are innate to the human condition. As such, Rūmī suggests that if Qur’ānic narratives are to have any kind of transformative effect, they must be internalised and viewed not only as being relevant, but also essentially offering a glimpse into one’s own self as it traverses through the various vicissitudes of life.

9.4 Concealing and Revealing Mystical Secrets

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46 ibid., III: 973.
47 ibid., III: 3238-54.
48 ibid., III: 3254-6.
49 ibid., III: 3255-6. The line can be taken as addressed to the self of the reader, Ḥusām al-Dīn or even Rūmī’s own self. In this sense, it captures the deeply personal elements to the Mathnawī in serving as a source of comfort and reminder to Rūmī throughout his various misfortunes – the most pertinent being the loss of his beloved Shams al-Dīn.
'Tis wrong to praise thee to the prisoners (of sensuality): I will tell (thy praise) in the assembly of the spiritual. / 'Tis fraud to discourse of thee to the worldly: I will keep it hidden like the secret of love.'

Another interesting but more unassuming purpose of the Mathnawī, according to Rūmī, is praise and thanksgiving for its muse and scribe, Ḥusām al-Dīn, who was appointed Rūmī’s spiritual successor after his passing away. As such, Ḥusām al-Dīn’s role in the Mathnawī’s composition cannot be underestimated, so much so, that Rūmī referred to the Mathnawī as the Husanname: ‘Through the attraction (influence) of a Sage like thee, a Book of Husám has come into circulation in the world.’

Furthermore, Rūmī describes Ḥusām al-Dīn as being not simply his scribe, but also his inspiration and muse: ‘Although thy slender body hath no strength, yet without the sun (of thy spirit) we have no light.’

Furthermore, Rūmī extensively praises Ḥusām al-Dīn in the Arabic dibājah (prefaces) to the Mathnawī; frequently referring to him as Ziā al-haqq (The Light of Truth) Rūmī proclaims that:

… in (composing) this Mathnawī thou, O Ziyá’u ’l-Haqq (Radiance of God) Husámu’ddin, art my object. / The whole Mathnawī in its branches and roots is thine: thou hast accepted (it)... In (all) its expressions my object is (to reveal) thy mystery; in composing it my object is (to hear) thy voice. / To me thy voice is the voice of God: Heaven forfend that (I should say) the lover is separate from the Beloved. / There is a union beyond description or analogy between the Lord of Man and the spirit of Man.

Along with alluding to Rūmī’s belief in reunion with the Beloved through the mystical path of ‘ishq, the passage also serves to hint at Ḥusām al-Dīn’s elevated spiritual station. As Rūmī’s scribe, Ḥusām al-Dīn would transpose Rūmī’s speech into writing whilst they sat, walked, made sema (whirled), in fact Rūmī would even recite its verses in the hamam (Turkish bath) and Ḥusām al-Dīn in turn, would recite all that he had written back to Rūmī, who would make the necessary revisions. At one point, he claims that his praise of others was in reality, praise of Ḥusām al-Dīn: ‘How

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50 ibid., V: 6-7.
51 ibid., VI: 2.
52 ibid., I: 2935.
53 ibid., IV: 754-60. Also: ‘O Ziyá’u ’l-Haqq (Radiance of God), Husámu’ddin, thou art he through whose light the Mathnawī hath surpassed the moon (in splendour). / O thou in whom hopes are placed, thy lofty aspiration is drawing this (poem) God knows whither. / Thou hast bound the neck of this Mathnawī: thou art drawing it in the direction known to thee. / The Mathnawī is running on, the drawer is unseen—unseen by the ignorant one who hath no insight. / Inasmuch as thou hast been the origin of the Mathnawī, if it become increased (in size), (’tis) thou (who) hast caused it to increase. / Since thou wishest it so, God wishes it so: God grants the desire of the devout.’ Rūmī, Mathnawī, IV: 1-9.
oft have I praised the people of the past! Of necessity, thou wert (the object of) my quest in (praising) them... God hath set down these tales and parables for the purpose of concealing (the true nature of) the praise from the unworthy. The reason he opts for secrecy, Rūmī explains, is because he fears the potential harms of the envious: ‘I would declare a hundredth part of thy grace, were it not for the vainglory of the evil eye; / But from the evil venomous eye I have suffered spirit-crushing strokes. / (Therefore) I will not give an eloquent description of thy state except allusively, by telling of the state of others.’ Here, it seems Rūmī alludes to his previous sufferings wrought by the hands of those envious of his relationship with Shams. In this sense, the numerous passages can be said to reflect the spiritual intimacy shared by maghab-i ‘ishq Sufis especially in their surpassing of the conventional dynamics of a sheikh-disciple relationship. In this way, the Mathnawi also functions to elusively praise the various mystics of the Sufi path.

In another sense, the Mathnawi also functions to simultaneously reveal and conceal mystical enigmas. For example, Rūmī is especially elusive whenever he speaks on the elliptic topic of ‘ishq: ‘I have told it summarily, I have not explained it (at length), otherwise both (thy) perceptions and (my) tongue would be consumed. / In order that this subject may not come to every ear, I am telling (only) one out of a hundred esoteric mysteries.’ Explicating this elusive dimension to the works of many Sufis, al-Qushayrī remarks:

The people of this community use these terms among themselves with the goal of unveiling their meaning to one another, achieving concision and concealing them from those who disagree with their method, so that the meaning of their words would be hidden from outsiders. They have done so to protect their mysteries from being spread among those to whom they do not belong. For their realities cannot be assembled by self-exertion or acquired by any deliberate action. They are nothing but [subtle] meanings that God deposits directly into the hearts of [His] folk, [after He has] prepared their innermost selves for [the

55 Rūmī, Mathnawi, III: 2112-4.
56 Rūmī, Mathnawi, VI: 190-1.
57 Rūmī is more explicit about the autobiographical elements of the Mathnawi as well as his preference for indirect allusions when he addresses Hosâm: ‘I said to him: “It is better that the secret of the Friend should be disguised: do thou hearken (to it as implied) in the contents of the tale. / It is better that the lovers’ secret should be told in the talk of others.”’ Rūmī, Mathnawi, I: 135-6, p. 11.
58 Rūmī, Mathnawi, I: 1758-9.
The reason Rūmī explains, why he opts for his ‘subtle recondite allusions’ is because on the one hand, he does not have divine permission to be more explicit, but he also explains that it is because he fears the ‘vulgar’ understandings of those who may misinterpret his words and fall into error. For example, speaking about the controversial doctrine of wahdat al-wujūd (Unity of Being/Existence), Rūmī ends his discourse explaining:

I would have explained this (matter) with (eager) contention, but I fear lest some (weak) mind may stumble. / The points (involved in it) are sharp as a sword of steel; if you have not the shield (of capacity to understand), turn back and flee! / Do not come without shield against this adamant (keen blade), for the sword is not ashamed of cutting. / For this cause I have put the sword in sheath, that none who misreads may read contrariwise (in a sense contrary to the true meaning of my words)."  

On this point, Konuk suggests that since ‘Rūmī hid the intricacies of the secret of unity (wahdat) between the layers of his tales, the public were not aware of their internal realities, and so the Mathnawī escaped the beatings that were inflicted upon the Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam. In this sense, the Mathnawī also functions to both reveal and conceal Rūmī’s esoteric doctrines and to this degree, the Mathnawī also becomes the medium and channel through which access to spiritual knowledge; thus leading Rūmī to proclaim: ‘If you are thirsting for the spiritual Ocean, make a breach in the island of the Mathnawī.’

9.5 Literary Representation of Mystical Experience

In his examination of Sufi literature, Frishkopf points out that Sufis evaluate poetry (whether written or performed) as a means of dhikr (remembrance of God): according to the degree to which it is ‘perceived to sincerely encode a true mystical experience, and hence according to its power to re-awaken similar feelings in the listener.’ This

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59 Al-Qushayrī, op. cit., p. 75.
60 Rūmī, Mathnawī, VI: 8.
61 ibid., I: 690-3. Rūmī often uses the metaphor of the sheathed and unsheathed sword for his discourses in the Mathnawī, for example: Rūmī, Mathnawī, V: 3955.
62 Konuk, op. cit., p. 23.
63 Rūmī, Mathnawī, VI: 67.
64 Frishkopf, op. cit., p. 98. My italics.
feature is arguably one of the most intriguing functions of the *Mathnawī* in the broader context of Sufi literature. For example, in the preface to the first book of the *Mathnawī*, Rūmī proclaims that ‘in the view of the possessors of (mystical) stations and (Divine) graces, it (the Mathnawi) is best as a station and most excellent as a (spiritual) resting-place.’

The term used in this passage, *maqām* is understood as a stage or station and has Qur'anic basis. Among other things, *maqām* etymologically signifies a position, station or rank. However, it also has more specific implications as a Sufi technical term, for example, in his renowned epistle on Sufism, al-Qushayrī lists the ‘way stations’ or *maqāmat* as ‘the stages of the mystical travellers.’ In this way, Rūmī’s references to the *maqāmat* often refer to a spiritual stage that periodically marks the long path followed by Sufis leading to reunion with the Beloved. In this sense, it can also be said that the *Mathnawī’s* function is inevitably shaped by the *maqām* (station) of its readers. The concept is significant because it highlights the experiential dimension of the *Mathnawī* for those who are familiar with the Sufi path, which also includes the experience of various *ahwāl* (spiritual states) by the spiritually adept.

Another Sufi technical term, *hāl* (p. *ahwāl*), derived from the Arabic root *hw'l*, connoting inconstancy, transition and change, can be understood as transient spiritual experiences by the spiritual aspirant. Al-Qushayrī explains these temporary spiritual states as ‘something that descends upon the hearts [of the mystics] regardless of their intentions, their [attempts to] attract it, or their [desire to] earn it.’ Therefore, in the context of literature produced by Sufis, the experience of various *ahwāl* is significant in relation to the *Mathnawī* as well as Sufi poetry more broadly. Frishkopf suggests

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66 ‘(Those ranged in ranks say): Not one of us but has a place appointed’ Qur’ān, 37: 164.
68 Al-Qushayrī, op. cit., p. 110.
69 Although the number and order of the *maqāmat* are not uniform among all Sufis, the fundamental three are known as *Makhāfah* (Fear), *Mababba* (Love) and *Ma‘rifah* (Mystical Knowledge). Nor should the *maqāmat* be viewed as concrete milestones depicting progress on the Sufi path, but rather, gradational reflections of inner spiritual development. Michael A. Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism: Sufi, Qur'an, Mi'raj, Poetic and Theological Writings*, Paulist Press, New York, 1996, pp. 196-211; Frithjof, Schuon, *Sufism: Love & Wisdom*, World Wisdom, Inc., Indiana, 2006, p. 271.
71 Al-Qushayrī also explains these can be states of joy, grief, expansion, contraction, passionate longing, vexation, awe or need. In this sense unlike the *maqāmat*, which refer to permanent stations earned through the efforts of the spiritual aspirant, the *ahwāl* refer to transitory states that are often experienced spontaneously. Al-Qushayrī, loc. cit., p. 78.
that ‘this active participle is not typically adopted as a primary status, but rather as a
description of a persistent condition, in which poetry appears, uncontrollably, out of
hal, not craft.’ Similarly, commenting on this pervasive aspect of Sufi poetry, Zuhur
explains that the Sufi “poet” is not merely the scribe of common experience and
tradition:

Many Sufis say that Sufi poets are not shu’ara’ (“poets”) at all, because true
Sufi poetry arises from ilham (“inspiration”), as a verbal translation of hal, not
out of studied craft (sim’a), which requires intellect. The Sufi poet is not so
called by profession. The professional poet must rely upon craft in order to
write-promptly, upon request-about subjects of little personal concern. But the
Sufi poet is a mystic first; his poetry cannot exist apart from his feeling and
inspiration. Indeed, sim’a is denigrated in Sufism; the great Sufi poets
composed naturally, without artifice, even without ego or intellect. Craft is a
construction of the ‘aql, which is viewed as a veil upon truth, while true
expression emerges from the ruh, whose origin is Allah.

Therefore, in the context of the Mathnawī, a ḥāl can be seen as a literary
representation of the transient moment of authorial ecstasy and is also a fitting
description of Rūmī’s poetic activity throughout the Mathnawī who, at one point
remarks: ‘intoxication of the body is opening my mouth without volition on my part, /
Just as in sneezing and yawning this mouth becomes open without your willing it.’ Rūmī suggests that he does not always have full control over his poetic activity – that
it is a direct result of his experience of ‘ishq.

At another point in the Mathnawī, addressing Ḫusām al-Dīn, Rūmī asks him to ‘write
thy (spiritual) experiences with gold-water for the sake of every one of goodly
substance whose heart is (deep) as the sea.’ In other words, Rūmī asks Ḫusām al-
Dīn to pen his ahwāl (spiritual states) by writing down the words of the Mathnawī.
Thus, Rūmī implies that the contents of the Mathnawī’s narratives can mirror the
most intense form of initiatory experience. For example, amidst the tale of Pharaoh
and Moses, Rūmī proclaims it is no tale at all, but rather a glimpse into the ahwāl of

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72 Frishkopf, op. cit., p. 91.
73 Here, Zuhur is specifically referring to the ancient tradition of court poetry and bardship.
74 Zuhur, op. cit., p. 261.
75 Rūmī, Mathnawī, IV: 3298.
76 ibid., IV: 3429.
the spiritual aspirants: ‘This (story of Moses and Pharaoh) is not a story in the eyes of the man of experience: it is a description of an actual (spiritual) state, and it is (equivalent to) the presence of the Friend of the Cave.’\footnote{ibid., III: 1149.} The \textit{ahwāl}, like all experience is ultimately subjective and intangible yet, although the contents of the \textit{Mathnawī} are not the experience itself, Rūmī insists that the tale serves as a ‘description of an actual (spiritual) state’ for the one who is familiar with the \textit{ahwāl}. Through the textual medium of the \textit{Mathnawī}, experience is rendered into structured thought, which is then rendered into speech, which is transposed into a text, which can potentially be decoded back into experience.

In this sense, the psychological process of recognition that can be felt by the “experienced” reader can result in a sense of Déjà vu in which the experience is potentially re-triggered. Furthermore, alluding to the Qur’ānic basis of his work, Rūmī also responds to those critical of the \textit{Mathnawī} on account of its style and content. For example, Rūmī refers to the Qur’ān’s chastisement of those who denied its merit on the grounds of it not offering anything “new”:\footnote{ibid., III: 1150-1.} ‘That (phrase) “stories of the ancients,” which the disobedient (infidels) applied to the words of the Qur’ān, was a mark of (their) hypocrisy. / The man transcending space, in whom is the Light of God— whence (what concern of his) is the past, the future, or the present?’ Rūmī implies that like the Qur’ān, a limited temporal framework does not bind the \textit{Mathnawī} rather, when internalised, the tales function to reflect the present state of its readers. As such, Rūmī proclaims that the entirety of the \textit{Mathnawī} functions as a description of the \textit{ahwāl} (spiritual states) and for the person of experience, the tale is able to potentially serve as the instigator of mystical experience.

At other points in the \textit{Mathnawī}, the tales also become an archive of Rūmī’s own mystical experiences. Although it can be said that the entirety of the \textit{Mathnawī} is written through \textit{ḥāl}, it is also the case that some \textit{ahwāl} are noticeably more ecstatic than others – especially when the subject matter refers to ‘\textit{ishq}, reunion and the Beloved. Zuhur eloquently explains this latent principle in Sufi poetry thus: ‘The greatest Sufi poetry, that which expresses the experience of the advanced mystic, is the spontaneous linguistic expression of \textit{ḥal}, a transient, non cognitive state in which
one is plunged into an awareness of divine realities, or is overcome with emotion resulting from such awareness.\textsuperscript{79} As such, to be in a \textit{ḥāl} (spiritual state) often implies the absence of the intellect coupled with the presence of powerful emotions such as, ‘\textit{ishq}, the pain of separation and perpetual longing for the Beloved. For example, at one point in the \textit{Mathnawī}, amidst the tale of \textit{Mahmūd and Ayāz}, Rūmī suddenly shifts from the narrative voice of the character to reflect his own bewildered state as he begins reciting his love for the Prophet, and is overcome by the realisation that his own reality is contained within the \textit{haqīqah al Muḥammad} (Reality of Muḥammad). Consumed by this realisation, Rūmī feels his own relative existence has become ‘insubstantial as a tale’.\textsuperscript{80} Thus, expanding upon this realisation further, Rūmī is led to exclaim:

\begin{quote}
Verily thou art reciting, O model (for all), not I: I am Mount Sinai, thou art Moses, and this (discourse) is the echo. / How should the helpless mountain know what the words are? The mountain is empty of that (meaning) which Moses knows. / . The mountain knows (only) according to its own measure: the body hath (only) a little of the grace of the spirit.\textsuperscript{81}
\end{quote}

Alluding to the Qur’ān, Rūmī compares the Reality of Muḥammad (imagined through the notion of the \textit{Insān al-Kāmil}) to the prophet Moses, who had direct communion with God on Mount Sinai. Comparing the composition of the \textit{Mathnawī} to this phenomenon, Rūmī’s claims that his own ‘discourse’ (the \textit{Mathnawī}) as the ‘echo’ resulting from this exchange: ‘Verily thou art reciting, O model (for all), not I: I am Mount Sinai, thou art Moses, and this (discourse) is the echo.’\textsuperscript{82} At the height of ecstasy, Rūmī realises that there is a lack of authorial volition on his part and that his discourse is an “echo” of the ‘secret indications’ that he receives from the realm of meaning. Therefore, it can be said that what is most intriguing in the context of literary activity is not only Rūmī’s recognition, but also his representation of his \textit{aḥwāl} (mystical experiences) throughout the \textit{Mathnawī}. On this point, it is worth quoting Gölpınarlı’s poignant description of Rūmī’s unique literary presence as well as the textual traces of his mystical experiences throughout the \textit{Mathnawī}:

\textsuperscript{79} Zuhur, op. cit., p. 260.
\textsuperscript{80} Rūmī, \textit{Mathnawī}, V: 1897.
\textsuperscript{81} ibid., V: 1898-9.
\textsuperscript{82} Rūmī, \textit{Mathnawī}, V: 1898. The lines are a reference to Qur’ān 19: 51-2: ‘Mention too, in the Qur’ān, the story of Moses. He was specially chosen, a messenger and a prophet: / We called to him from the right-hand side of the mountain and brought him close to Us in secret communion’.
In reality He (Rûmî), always comes momentarily, in every tale, takes over the words and dives into the subjects that the Sufi’s call “Maârif-i Ilâhiyye” (the science of knowing God), so that the couplets, one by one, emerge in the state of a flame, a tear. He does not, like Attâr, briefly explain the tale and come to a conclusion; part by part, the tale is divided and between these parts there are spiritual states, valleys, mountains and cols that are difficult to traverse. These passages are made visible through the blood-marks of the heart and overcome through the wings of divine love. This is unique only to Mevlânâ (Rûmî). 83

In this sense, one of the more powerful insights articulated by Sufis is that the reality of love is not the same thing as the words chosen to express that reality. Therefore, another function – one that is more personal – is the idea that literature is often utilised by Sufi figures as a medium for the output of spiritual emotion.

Rûmî also suggests that the full meanings of the words of love are only open to those who have had direct experience of it. In the Fihi mâ fihi, Rûmî explains this point in more detail:

Someone asked: “Then what is the use of expressions and words?” Rûmî answered: Words set you searching. They are not the objects of your quest. If that were the case, there would be no need for all this spiritual struggle and self-sacrifice. Words are like glimpsing something far away. You follow in its trail to see it better, but this doesn’t mean the trail is what you are seeking. Speech is inwardly the same—it excites you to seek the meaning, even though the words are never the reality. 84

Therefore, whatever its limitations, language (especially through poetic expression) is a basic human tool, and mystics like Rûmî have always attempted to use it to transcend its own condition. The very act of articulation – which manifests itself in the production of sacred literature (such as the Mathnawî) – can also be understood as an expression of the lover’s impulse: it does not contain the experience but it helps the flow and emptying of unbridled emotion so that the very act of literary production becomes a testament to the irreducible experience of ‘ishq. 85 In this sense, it can be

83 Gölpınarlı, op. cit., p. 320.
84 Rûmî, Fihi mâ fihi, pp. 349-50.
85 As Keshavarz has explored in her work on Rûmî’s Diwan, this body of work is better recognised as an example of the boundless and paradoxical nature of love and can be viewed as the extemporaneous,
said that in relation to the Mathnawī, the act of producing and consuming literature is intrinsically tied to Rūmī’s Sufism, through which the seeker’s access to the meanings conveyed in Sufi works can only be attained through their commitment to the Sufi path. Rūmī’s expression of this plight becomes a trope in his works about the difficulties of articulating ‘ishq:

Would that Being had a tongue; that it might remove the veils from existent beings! / O breath of (phenomenal) existence, whatsoever words thou mayest utter, know that thereby thou hast bound another veil upon it (the mystery). / That utterance and (that) state (of existence) are the bane of (spiritual) perception: to wash away blood with blood is absurd, absurd. / Since I am familiar with His frenzied ones, day and night I am breathing forth (the secrets of Love) in the cage (of phenomenal existence).  

Whatever its advantages, Rūmī suggests that language is limited to normal human capacities, and cannot follow the mystic into his more advanced experience; it must remain with those first feeble expressions, which appeal to the senses and the understanding, in order to stimulate the reader to begin his own spiritual pilgrimage.

As such, Rūmī’s cries of frustration not only epitomise the inherent limitations of language but also serve to capture the predicament facing all lovers on the quest to articulate an experience that cannot be bound to any specific description. However, given the voluminous body of Rūmī’s works, the notion of inexpressibility is also paradoxical. On this point, Eagleton points out that the very act of writing is already to engage in a shareable kind of sense making so that ‘[t]here is an implicit dimension of generality to even the most apparently private of experiences, which is part of what makes literature possible’. On this point, Zuhur argues that, in the context of mystical literature, despite the essential interiority and ineffability of mystical experience, the meanings and forms of Sufi poetry are universal within Sufism: feeling is shared through common training, common experience and the continuity of tradition via the shaykh-disciple relationship. Thus, overcome with the need to

verbal outburst of mystical experience and in this sense, is better understood as the ‘poetic experience’ of ‘ishq.

86 Rūmī, Mathnawī, III, 4725-8.
88 Eagleton, op. cit., p. 85.
89 Zuhur, op. cit., p. 260.
communicate his message, the very act of articulation, which manifests itself in the production of sacred literature, (such as the *Mathnawī*) can also be understood as an expression of the lover’s impulse – it does not contain the experience but it helps the flow and emptying of unbridled emotion. In such instances, Rūmī explains, ‘This (*Mathnawī*) is only the wailful music that he has uttered; (as for) that which is (kept) hidden (within him), (have) mercy, O Lord!’  

### 9.6 Conclusion

An appreciation of function naturally gives rise to an exploration of the authors’ levels of interpretation. This chapter has attempted to gain insight into the instrumentality of Sufi literature through the specific example of Rūmī’s *Mathnawī*. Therefore, if considered as “sacred art” within the broader category of Sufi Literature, then the *Mathnawī* can certainly be considered functional in the most profound sense of the term since it was made for a specific use. Rūmī identifies the *Mathnawī* with the prophetic goal implying that he has been assigned to deliver a message to the benefit of anyone who is willing to take his advice to heart but more specifically, as the work through which lovers may be drawn to their Beloved. To this degree, the *Mathnawī* can also be considered to function as the manual through which various Sufi disciples could embark upon the ṭariqah.

However, Rūmī often forewarns his readers that the *Mathnawī* is not a text that can be passively divulged because like the Qur’ān, it is a text that makes specific demands from its readers. Thus, Rūmī frequently appropriates Qur’ānic narratives and figures to bring to light the complex dynamics of the microcosmic self in relation to macrocosmic Reality, in the hopes of promoting the readers’ interiorisation of them. The *Mathnawī* also functions to elusively praise the various mystics of the Sufi path as well as simultaneously revealing esoteric secrets to those who are privy whilst concealing them from the unitiated. Thus, the *Mathnawī* functions to both reveal and conceal Rūmī’s esoteric doctrines and to this degree, the *Mathnawī* also becomes the medium and channel through which access to spiritual knowledge is granted.

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Furthermore, Rūmī also implies that the contents of the Mathnawī’s narratives can mirror the most intense form of initiatory experience. Thus, another function – one that is more personal – is the idea that literature is often utilised by Sufī figures as a medium for the output of spiritual emotion. To this degree, apart from its conscious and didactic purposes, the ecstatic passages throughout the Mathnawī also serve as a means for the mystic-poet to vent emotional overflow when overcome by the consuming experience of ‘ishq. Thus, connecting the Mathnawī’s function with the divine purpose of the human being, Rūmī makes an important implication about the instrumentality and utilitarianism of Sufī literature. It goes without saying therefore, that Rūmī had full confidence in the transformative and pedagogical capabilities of the Mathnawī. In this sense, it can be said that the Mathnawī primarily functions as the textualisation of Rūmī’s Sufī path of ‘ishq.
Chapter Ten: Summary and Conclusions

The first part of this thesis (Rūmī’s Sufi Path of ‘Ishq), explored the fundamental Sufi principles that underlie the Mathnawī as a Sufi text in an attempt to better understand not only how it is shaped by these views, but also how it attempts to instill them within its readers. We began by exploring the primacy of ‘ishq in Rūmī’s Sufi vision. It can be concluded that Rūmī’s Sufism is neither a separate religion nor a sect of Islam, the Sufi path (tarīqah) is rather a mode of religious observance and a method of self-training and purification, the goal of which is to orient the believer to a religiously-informed spirituality of experience and, for Rūmī particularly, experience of the Beloved. This experiential dimension of realisation is tantamount to the madhab-i ‘ishq tradition that envelops Rūmī’s Sufism. In this sense, Rūmī’s Sufism is better understood as something that emerged from a tradition of figures enamored by love, journeying on a path that was often non-systematic, gradual, experiential and therefore, deeply personal. If we are to summarise Rūmī’s love-tradition, it can be said that according to Rūmī, the “nation of lovers” – referring to the spiritual community who prioritise the experience of ‘ishq in their quest for God – are unique in their faith from all others because for them, the community and the path is God alone.

Rūmī’s notion of the human self can be described as a composite of multiple vying psycho-spiritual entities and is intrinsically tied in to the Islamic theological narrative that governs the nature of the human subtlety within a larger cosmic scheme. This is a significant observation because it underlies Rūmī’s notion of the reader, as well as key to understanding why anyone would need spiritual edification – an ideal that Rūmī believes continues through the literary medium of the Mathnawī. In one sense, Rūmī’s notion of the nafs can be taken to signify the myriad of false temporary identities that keep us from experiencing our true, spiritual essence. As explored in some depth, when considering a term like “self” in Rūmī’s Sufi tradition, what we are often referring to is something quite specific but simultaneously, complex, multifaceted and elusive. Therefore, when Rūmī refers to the self, he is often referring to specific aspects of the self that are informed by the Islamic and especially Sufi notions of the human being. As such, when Rūmī refers to the self it is always within
the Islamic framework, and he is almost always referring to a specific aspect of the self – the *nafs al-ʾammārah* (the self that incites to evil). Rūmī suggests that the *nafs*, in its unrefined state, prevents human beings from seeking any kind of higher spiritual purpose. Therefore, Rūmī points out that even if the individual is knowledgeable in a multitude of exoteric sciences, if they have no clue about their own inner state, all their sciences, intellectualising and accomplishments will be of no avail on the spiritual path. As such, Rūmī warns that the external forms of religious faith can become superficial and hollow if not downright dangerous when the individual remains oblivious to the internal dimensions of their own selves. Therefore, Rūmī proclaims that just as the religious path has both an internal as well as an external dimension, the Sufi Path is essentially the route through which the individual is able to travel to the depths of their own soul. Thus, in its purified and refined state, the self represents for Rūmī, the human being’s quintessential role as God’s lover and beloved, as well as being the locus of His manifestation. Rūmī also suggests that the spirit’s materialisation in bodily existence also represents the greatest obstacle facing the human being’s quest as lover – the inability to recognise the beloved.

For travellers on the Sufi path, the *nafs* is not something that can be destroyed since, it is essentially an aspect of the self, therefore, the *nafs* is ultimately the part of the self that needs to be reigned in and ideally allow for a higher form of existence.

Also significant is Rūmī’s notion of knowledge, the intellect and the inherently experiential dimension to knowledge in the Sufi view. For Rūmī, between love and the intellect, the former undeniably subsumes the position of superiority. Rūmī, in recognition of the various elements that underlie religious life, can be seen to frequently criticise the followers of a rote-learnt spirituality (*taqlīd*), as well as the methodology of those who engage in a superficially intellectual religiosity – especially when contrasted with his own Sufi path of ‘*ishq*. This is especially so because once subjugated by the ego, he argues that the intellect is only put to task to acquire the offerings of the world. Rūmī also argues that the intellect, when understood as the partial intelligence of the human being, must be abandoned on the path of love because according to Rūmī, ‘*ishq* is the soul attribute that can lead one to proximity with the creator. For Rūmī then, conventional knowledge like the individual ‘*aql*, is partial and deficient. The Sufi way, however, potentially offers a true taste of reality. Thus, it can be said that what differentiates the overall Sufi
approach and in this sense, Rūmī’s specific approach to Islamic faith, is his stress on the need for mystical knowledge (*ma’rifah*) as the direct knowledge of the self and God that flows freely into the purified heart. As such, Rūmī maintains that the realisation of *‘ishq* (reunion with the Beloved), is the highest form of knowledge because it is not simply knowledge that is known but knowledge that is experienced.

Also worth noting is Rūmī’s continual insistence on a need for a guide on the Sufi path, which becomes a significant factor in his positioning of the author/reader dynamic in the *Mathnawī*. According to Rūmī the Sufi guide is essentially one who is experienced on the path – so much so – that they have become one with the path. Therefore, according to Sufi teachings, the path of spiritual realisation can only be undertaken and traversed under the guidance of a spiritual master: someone who has already traversed the stages of the path to God and who has; moreover, been chosen to lead others on the way. The *pīr* ultimately serves to offer spiritual reconfiguration to those consumed by the notion of having a separate self. This being the case, Rūmī contends that the *awliyāʾ* are waiting to bring individuals (under the influence of their *nafs*) to their own station. For this reason, Rūmī explains that it is only ‘the Pīr full of wisdom, well-acquainted with the Way,’¹ that is able to offer the spiritual guidance necessary for the individual to reach higher forms of consciousness. Thus, Rūmī proclaims that in the case of the practitioners of Sufism, one can only hope to attain a purified self (*nafs*) that maintains the highest of moral principles under the guidance of an experienced spiritual guide. To this degree, the Sufi path functions as the means through which the individual polishes the dross from the self and in turn, gains access to higher forms of esoteric knowledge.

The second part of this thesis (The *Mathnawī* as a Sufi Text) explored the significance of the *Mathnawī*’s literary form in relation to Rūmī’s ontology of *‘ishq*. As such, this section was primarily dedicated to the concept of literature in the thought of a *maddhab-i ‘ishq* Sufi such as Rūmī. This meant carefully analysing not only the literary structures inherent within his work (specifically the *Mathnawī*), but also identifying *how* the *Mathnawī*’s literary elements relate and are informed by Rūmī’s Sufi thought. In the sixth chapter, we explored the *Mathnawī* through the various genres in which it participates in attempt to gain a better understanding of not only

how it has been critically received, but also how Rūmī himself understood it. An exploration of the Mathnawi’s genre, especially in terms of the genre Rūmī himself assigned to it, helps us to understand the structuring and shaping of meaning and value (at the level of the text) in order to realise its purposes. By the time Rūmī had come to the scene, Sufism had become the dominant position in Persian literature and unsurprisingly, the Mathnawī became representative of the apex of didactical tradition of Persian literature. In this sense, the Mathnawī’s significance cannot be fully appreciated unless it is recognised for its qualities as a Sufi work within the Persian tradition. However, Rūmī’s literary genius is recognisable not only through his literary tradition, or the content of his works, but also his prowess for cleverly appropriating familiar symbols and styles in vigorously new ways. This is especially noticeable in the Mathnawī’s stylistic composition. This trait not only attests to Rūmī’s artistry in the transformation of his mystical vision into poetic text, but also reflects Rūmī’s attitude to literature as a whole – that which could be appropriated to suit one’s own ends.

This thesis has also considered the Mathnawī’s strong ties and intertextuality with the Qur’ān as its inspirational source text. Especially significant in this context is Rūmī’s declaration that the Mathnawī draws its inspiration from the Qur’ān. Furthermore, Rūmī assigned a sacred status for his work viewing it as a text with divine meanings expressed through the words of the human subject (Rūmī) – a level of communication Rūmī believed possible for the awliyā’. In Rūmī’s view, ascension on the hierarchal levels of the Sufi Path would accord one (himself included) unadulterated spiritual meanings that are directly projected upon the purified heart. Rūmī’s view of the Mathnawī, therefore, can be described as a divinely inspired albeit, humanly composed work of guidance for those wishing to traverse the Sufi path of ‘ishq. From this, it can also be gathered that within the Sufi tradition, the composition of a text is a significant aspect of its author’s position within the spiritual hierarchy since, religious figures, in this case Sufi sheikhs, often pass through social, institutional and literary processes to achieve their sanctified status.

Another significant factor underlying Rūmī’s understanding of the Mathnawī, as well as textual meaning more broadly, is his distinction between šūrah (form) and ma’nā (meaning). For Rūmī, interpretation is predominantly a question of character – the
way someone interprets as well as the resulting interpretation largely depends on the type of person they are. This profoundly ethical aspect of interpretation is a distinguishing feature of Sufi, and mystical hermeneutics more generally. Thus, Rūmī suggests that spiritual meaning cannot be considered internalised until it has becomes a part of one’s acts. For this reason, the Sufi understanding of knowledge cannot be separated from spiritual practice. In this sense, Rūmī’s scriptural hermeneutics can be united with his ontology of ‘ishq, which necessarily requires the spiritual aspirant to traverse the various stages of the Sufi path of ‘ishq.

According to Rūmī, therefore, the pre-requisite for becoming an ‘expounder’ of the Qur’ān at the esoteric, or inner level, is to have successfully traversed the Sufi path: the effacement of the ego and reunion with the Beloved. Consequently, in line with his tradition, Rūmī explicitly links hermeneutic authority (in relation to the meanings of the Qur’ān) to the Sufi elect. To this degree, Rūmī’s hermeneutics can also be viewed as self-authorising since it places the texts authority within the broader spiritual community of those engaged in the practice of Sufism – a factor that also insinuates the ways in which discourse about experience authorises and legitimises certain individuals and groups. Rūmī’s Sufi hermeneutics, then, ultimately touches on questions in relation to who can read religious texts and who can determine what they mean? It also touches on the question of authority and who is permitted to engage in the production of knowledge-regulating discursive practices – also a central concern in Islamic exegesis more broadly. According to Rūmī, the Sufi who has effaced their self entirely in the Self of God speaks on His authority. In this respect, one of the most polemical aspects of Rūmī’s works, especially within the Muslim community, would be his implicit suggestion that a true lover of God has access to (albeit to a limited degree), divine communication with God.

Another key point in Rūmī’s hermeneutics, as well as a defining aspect of the Mathnawī as a Sufi text is Rūmī’s notion of the ideal reader. Furthermore, in accord with his Sufi world view, Rūmī implies that readers will approach texts (especially those of a mystical nature like the Mathnawī) in accordance with their spiritual station (maqām). Furthermore, Ḥusâm al-Dīn can be seen not only as the prototype for Rūmī’s ideal reader (as his scribe and muse), but also someone who has a direct impact on the Mathnawī’s trajectory through his dialogical exchanges with Rūmī. In
terms of a general notion of readership, Rûmî essentially suggests that if we approach the text filled with ourselves, then we will not derive any spiritual benefit from it. In this way, Rûmî’s hermeneutics is naturally intertwined with his Sufi worldview and follows in the tradition of “He who knows himself knows God.” If the individual does not know their own self, including its desires and weaknesses, they are more likely to project their “self” and interpret the text from the narrow confines of their ego. Therefore, according to Rûmî, what the reader gets out of the Mathnawî entirely depends on the type of person they are. Someone who reads through their nafs cannot read ‘aright’; cannot be the ‘ideal reader’. Thus, Rûmî appeals to the various levels of the reader’s nafs in an attempt to transform it since transforming the way we read necessarily means transforming the way we are. Thus, recognising that the reader is able to pervert meaning by reading their base desires into it, Rûmî seeks to transform the reader by first transforming their nafs. In this way, Rûmî’s theory of reader-response suggests that the text is as active as the reader in creating meaning. In this sense, Sufis such as Rûmî continually seek and encourage others to seek the esoteric meaning of things all whilst insisting that this cannot be actualised without reference to the exoteric. As such, Rûmî also implies that the esoteric meanings of the Mathnawî are necessarily tied in with its literary form.

Performing textual analysis to a specific tale in the Mathnawî revealed one of the ways in which Rûmî attempts to utilise its literary form – the use of allegorical narrative coupled with his frequent narrative interjections. These aspects of the Mathnawî served to reveal how the text becomes the interface for the tarîqah at the textual level as Rûmî attempts to awaken his readers to realities they would have normally reached face to face with the guidance of a Sufi master. Rûmî’s frequent authorial interjections draw attention to his aim for interactive engagement from the reader through the frequent alteration of narrative voices, as well as his insistence on maintaining a meta-narrative presence throughout the Mathnawî. In this sense, the Mathnawî might be considered what might be called an “intention-driven” work where various literary materials are utilised to promulgate authorial-action. Another salient aspect of the Mathnawî is its use of narrative verse with an expressly didactic theme. The “textual cues” Rûmî provides for his readers and are most recognisable in his frequent authorial interjections that are dispersed throughout the Mathnawî. Thus, Rûmî’s frequent use of authorial interjections as “textual cues” embedded within the
text can be viewed as a means of seek directing the readers’ very act of reading. This feature coupled with the lack of a complex character backstory makes it easier for readers to project themselves into the narrative since Rūmī does not allow his readers to passively read the narrative but rather, forces them to participate in the world of the *Mathnawī*, through which, he offers his readers a glimpse into their own complex spiritual inner landscape.

Also key to Rūmī’s narrative technique are his frequent authorial interjections in which his style of free association frequently interrupts the narrative and imposes itself on the reader. This style is experiential, not doctrinal. The *Mathnawī* does not set forth spiritual experiences and truths with the logical precision of a systematic treatise indicating, step by step, how the Sufi way leads from the stage of asceticism to that of nearness to God. It is a work of inspiration, a spontaneous outflow couched in the language of emotion and imagination. It may be said that spontaneity and inspiration have their own logic. At times, Rūmī is a skilled storyteller, a rational pedagogue and a Sufi moralist but often, he is an ecstatic mystic enamored by love. The tale then, is a reflection of Rūmī’s Sufi path of ‘*ishq* as it charts the *sālik’s* psycho-spiritual progress from ego-existence to the effacement of their *nafs* through *fanā*’ and subsistence (*baqā*) in God with the assistance of the *pīr* (Sufi guide). However, Rūmī’s textualisation of the *ṭarīqah* does not follow any kind of substantial, specific or systematic progression as would be found in other Sufi manuals but rather, – like the spiritual aspirant, reflects the vicissitudes of life and the unavoidable ascents and declines as one progresses through the path.

The *Mathnawī* can also be considered functional in the most profound sense of the term since it was made for a specific use. Connecting the *Mathnawī*’s function with the divine purpose of the human being, Rūmī makes an important implication about the instrumentality and utilitarianism of Sufi literature. It goes without saying therefore, that Rūmī had full confidence in the transformative and pedagogical capabilities of the *Mathnawī*. However, although Rūmī claims the *Mathnawī* takes on the role of the Sufi guide for those wishing to traverse the spiritual path – he also suggests that this is only available to those who actually want to be guided by it, otherwise he feels it serves just as well as something to rest on, or a pretty little edition to expand one’s book shelf. Rūmī also identifies the *Mathnawī* with the
prophetic goal implying that he has been assigned to deliver a message to the benefit of anyone who is willing to take his advice to heart but more specifically, as the work through which lovers may be drawn to their Beloved. Through its consistent and particular emphasis on the individual and the internal dynamics of the human self, the Mathnawī can be seen as being addressed specifically to those who seek to travel the mystical path of Sufism. It is perhaps in this sense that Rūmī has described the Mathnawī as ‘the renewer of the covenant of friendship (with God).’ To this degree, the Mathnawī can also be considered as functioning as the textual means through which Sufi disciples could embark upon the ḥarīqah – the Sufi path of ‘ishq – via the literary medium of narrative.

The Mathnawī also functions to elusively praise the various mystics of the Sufi path, as well as simultaneously revealing esoteric secrets to those who are privy to them, whilst concealing them from the uninitiated. In this way, the Mathnawī functions to both reveal and conceal Rūmī’s esoteric doctrines and to this degree, the Mathnawī also becomes the medium and channel through which access to spiritual knowledge is potentially granted. However, Rūmī often forewarns his readers that the Mathnawī is not a text that should be read passively because like the Qur’ān, it is a text that makes specific demands from its readers. As such, Rūmī frequently appropriates Qur’ānic narratives and figures to bring to light the complex dynamics of the microcosmic self in relation to macrocosmic Reality, in the hopes of promoting the readers’ interiorisation of Qur’ānic content. Furthermore, Rūmī also implies that the contents of the Mathnawī’s narratives can mirror the most intense form of initiatory experience. In this sense, another function of the Mathnawī – one that is more personal – is that literature is often utilised by Sufi figures as a medium for the output of spiritual emotion. To this degree, apart from its conscious and didactic purposes, the ecstatic passages throughout the Mathnawī also serve as a means for the mystic-poet to vent emotional overflow when overcome by the consuming experience of ‘ishq. Thus, the Mathnawī functions to both communicate and initiate the reader within Rūmī’s Sufi path of ‘ishq; thus, seeking to lead certain types of readers to not only read, but by their very act of reading, to potentially travel his path of ‘ishq as it is manifested through the textual medium of the Mathnawī.

2 Rūmī, Mathnawī, Arabic preface to Book IV.
The research objectives of this thesis were primarily interested in understanding the significance of the Mathnawī’s literary form in an attempt to gain a deeper understanding of the relation between form and content in Sufi literature – why the content has one specific form, and not another. This necessarily meant an exploration of Rūmī’s Sufism, with its emphasis on the notion of ‘ishq and how this is mediated by the Mathnawī’s literary form (including considerations such as genre, hermeneutics, author, the reader and function), in order to better understand the dynamics between form and content within the broader notion of the Sufi text. In hindsight, it would be presumptive to claim Rūmī had purely literary concerns in relation to the Mathnawī. Although his works certainly affront a keen insight into such themes, like all true Sufis, Rūmī’s primary concern was always his Beloved and all else was measured in its instrumental value to this primary objective. However, what this thesis has hoped to reveal is that the Mathnawī’s literary form is intrinsic to Rūmī’s prowess in infusing the ethical with the aesthetic as well as being a testament to the irreducible literary dimension of his Sufi philosophy and metaphysics. Therefore, far from splitting the aesthetic (“literary”) elements of textuality from its corresponding religious or mystical-experiential dimensions, a close reading of the Mathnawī reveals the ways in which Rūmī’s Sufi vision underwrites – and is really inseparable from – those cultural and religious projects that define the Mathnawī’s reception within the Sufi mystical tradition. It reveals, in other words, how a careful literary reading contributes to a better grasp of the conceptual and experiential phenomenology of Sufism.

The Mathnawī as a Sufi text is similar in its content to most other forms of Sufi literature: it primarily concerns itself with the Spiritual Path and deals with such issues as how to follow this Path, the conditions of the Path, the significance of the spiritual master, and the role of the disciple. It also deals with what the Sufis usually call the mystical states and spiritual stations of the path (the ḥāwāl and maqāmāt), and also the methods for their attainment. With its emphasis on ‘ishq, which is also the crux of Rūmī’s Sufism, the didactic functions of the narratives are of primary importance to the diverse prose-poem that is the Mathnawī. This is not to say that the poetic elements are arbitrary or insignificant, but rather that they are secondary to the “guidance” Rūmī hopes to impart; therefore, the Mathnawi’s poetic quality is not
intended as an end in itself but rather, as that which is instrumental in embellishing the guidance into a ṣūrah (form) to which its audience will be most receptive to. This is significant to understanding Rūmī’s overall theory of literature since it is always mediated by his Sufi belief that the ma‘nā (meaning) reflects itself in the ṣūrah (external form). Therefore, through its preference for conveying its content through a literary form – specifically through the enigmatic and fluid form of narrative, Rūmī’s is able to maintain a kind of authorial presence that makes his work transintentional regardless of time and context.

The Mathnawī’s literary form becomes the preferred means through which spiritual meanings of a higher order are communicated as well as being the medium through which a transformative reconfiguration of the readers’ spiritual world becomes possible. In other words, through its chosen literary form (its various introspective tales), it gives shape to the subtle immaterial meanings (ma‘nā) that it seeks to convey to the reader so they are potentially able to access that which is, by its nature, experiential and not theoretical. In this respect, as a Sufi text, the Mathnawī functions as the means through which meaning is not only understood, but also potentially experienced so that literary experience becomes indistinguishable from spiritual experience. Through its literary form, the Mathnawī ideally functions as the means through which knowledge becomes not simply that which is theoretical or known (‘ilm al-yaqīn) but knowledge in the truest sense as that which is individually experienced (ḥaqq al-yaqīn) via the complex cognitive (and Rūmī would add, spiritual) processes involved in the act of reading a dynamic and multifaceted work like the Mathnawī. Therefore, when considered as a Sufi text, it can be said that the Mathnawī’s literary form is one that is most conducive for an interactive engagement with its audience – a feature that mirrors the master-disciple relationship that is central to Rūmī’s Sufi path of ‘īshq.

It should also be reiterated that the purpose of almost all Sufi works is intrinsically tied with their potential to transform their readers. It can also be said that in relation to the Mathnawī, the act of producing and consuming literature is intrinsically tied to Rūmī’s Sufism, through which the seeker’s access to the meanings conveyed in such works can only be attained through their commitment to the Sufi path. In this respect, one of the most interesting prospects in terms of future research is the profoundly
ethical aspect of Rūmī’s interpretive principles, which is also a distinguishing feature of Sufi, and mystical hermeneutics more generally. Rūmī suggests that spiritual meaning cannot be considered internalised until it has becomes a part of one’s acts. In this context, Rūmī’s derision of self-serving and literalist interpretations of scripture and sacred narrations takes an interesting stance on the need for a ethical dimension to the act of interpretation: one that can only be attained through adherence to a community of spiritual seekers who are focused on the means to ethical and moral purification. If not a general theory of hermeneutics, this is certainly valuable for outlining Rūmī’s criteria or framework for a Qur’ānic hermeneutics that is open to a plurality of meanings, which is inextricable from the notion of ethical practice. In this sense, Rūmī’s hermeneutics of scripture seems to forewarn the kinds of scriptural-literalism that is removed from any kind of collective scholarly or spiritual consensus and is seen to be plaguing various parts of the Muslim world today. Therefore, further research into Rūmī’s hermeneutics may also be enriching not only for the literary field, but also within the discipline of Islamic studies more broadly – specifically in bringing more attention to the role of Sufi hermeneutics in Qur’ānic exegesis. The breadth of a text like Rūmī’s Mathnawī calls for better collaboration among scholars of religion, Islamic Studies, and literature as well as other fields such as history, anthropology, or hermeneutics.

Another underlying premise that have been made throughout this thesis is that in the text of the Mathnawī is the presence of the teacher. Attention to this presence is crucially important for the reader to understand this long and profound text that was produced over 750 years ago in Persian. Reading it today in English requires just as much attentive application as Rūmī’s disciples would have had to dedicate to it – whether they were listening to Rūmī in person, or studying it in private in a Mevlevi seminary. Traditionally, in Mevlevi practice, the Mathnawī was an advanced course of study, for more intermediate and mature students of the Sufi path. Therefore, in line with the reception of most other “sacred” texts, the Mathnawī rests on a tradition of guided reading in which the reader was often an auditory member of a broader community of spiritual seekers. Now, in the contemporary, globalised context, such reading has become subordinated to more individualised and compartmentalised forms of reading. Although this is not purely a negative occurrence, it does awaken one to the reality that the act of consuming literature can and has meant different
things by different individuals in different contexts.

How can an appreciation of Sufi notions of text expand the scope of the literary? While Sufi texts such as Rūmi’s *Mathnawī* may certainly be read as literature, their literariness is always defined, at least in part, by the kinds of “work” they ask their readers to do. Viewing such texts as both aesthetic and cultural/religious artifacts forces a reader to question the text’s literary form (e.g., discursive, narrative, or poetic) as well as its performative dimension as it describes, constructs, or enacts the cosmos through exegetical and other techniques. It means to provide a new insight into the paradigms that shape our ways of reading, from the methods of classification in histories of literature to the analyses in academic studies. Such considerations also shed light on the notion of reading religious literature which also brings new perspectives to the religion/literature interface, where exploring the religious life of literary texts means admitting that the scope is not exclusively literary, or historical but can also be fundamental to understanding the very notion of that which is considered sacred.

This does not mean, however, that literature can or should be reduced to secondary categories derived from anthropology, history, or comparative religion. On the contrary, it is argued that while attention to the multiple forms of efficacy that are sought in the writing and reading of Sufi texts cannot be ignored, such efficacy is also conditioned by distinctive literary properties (such as narrative or genre) that make Sufi literature broadly comparable to the literature investigated by scholars in other fields. In this respect, religion and literature do not obey an oppositional or binary system of exclusion but are part of a dynamic and enriching process where both terms inform the human quest in its multidimensional forms and expressions. The content is of primary importance in Rūmi’s poetics, but it is unimaginable for it to be separated from the literary form of the text. In this sense, exploring the nexus between text and context in Rūmi’s work has also revealed that considering what is being said in terms of *how* it is being said forces one to recognise the significance of form in the moral outlook of a text – that is, the morality of form in literary content. Thus, viewing texts in this way reveals how the form of a text and its content can merge to make something greater than either separately. From this point, it can be concluded that a careful literary reading that explores the form of texts (whether Sufi or other) also
contributes to a better grasp of the conceptual and experiential phenomenology of both individual thinkers, as well as entire schools of thought.
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