Mostafa Vaziri

Rumi and Shams' Silent Rebellion

Parallels with Vedanta, Buddhism, and Shaivism

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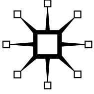

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This book is enthusiastically dedicated to the iconoclastic pioneers of mind and heart.

Rumi's Iconoclastic Universalism

At his core, Rumi was a Universalist thinker and a cosmopolitan. His philosophy embraced equanimity in human affairs and inspired coexistence despite diverse religions and cultures throughout world history. He took an inclusive approach to bring Zoroastrians, Hindus, Jews, Christians, pagans, and idol-worshippers with the Muslims; the Arabs with the Persians; the Turks with the Indians; and the Romans with the Ethiopians, all humanity under the same banner of equality. Everyone, even the sectarian, religious, and non-universalist thinkers, were included in his Universalism. But Rumi refused to entertain the limited definition of Universalism, especially when a community claimed the monopoly of the truth while ostracizing those who did not belong to their particular assembly or believe in their particular god. To Rumi, everyone carries a burning flame of Love in his or her heart, and it is an urgent necessity that this fact becomes deeply recognized. He deftly rebelled against bigoted and condescending intolerance and paved the way for enlightenment, as well as prompting a spiritual and intellectual evolution.

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Author's Note

The core of this book offers not just an analysis of Rumi's poetry and Shams' discourses, but also aims to create a fresher narrative of Rumi with a new historiographical and philosophical approach.

In this approach, we disentangle Rumi from his traditionally accepted role as founder of the Mevlevi order, because the anachronistic nature of this claim makes it a highly suspect conclusion. Since the order was created decades after Rumi's death, and the Islamic-Sufi-Ottoman background of the order does not reflect much of the textual study of the original Shams and Rumi narrative, alternative conclusions can thus be drawn from the poetry and discourses of the two men, and the exploration of those alternatives is the goal of this book.

After historically disentangling Rumi on one hand, we should include him more fully in the field of philosophy on the other, rather than viewing him from the limited perspective of being "just" a poet and mystic. It is true that he was a poet and a mystic, but of a different genre—a mystic who poetically formulated and articulated his affirmative experiences, seeking the truth of existence, as well as expressing his skepticism about the theory of creation, anticlericalism, and his profound ideas about human society.

Thus one could say that the proposition of this book is to remove the rigidity and the politics of Islamic Sufism that has blocked other, broader perspectives on Rumi and his work. Based on the primary sources that survive, we will reimagine the time when Rumi and Shams developed a highly evolved consciousness that was not lost, but has only been clouded over the centuries because of historical and religious constraints.

This book results from years of fascination with Rumi's message. As children growing up in Iran, my friends and I memorized Rumi's words in school. Years later, a continuing personal interest in Rumi's philosophical and spiritual approach led me first to translate and publish some of Rumi's poems in 1998, and to follow that work with another coffee-table book offering an introduction to Shams and

Rumi in 2008. I was influenced by the usual depiction of Rumi found in secondary sources: Rumi as Sufi poet, and Islamic mystic, transformed by his master Shams.

But that picture of Rumi turned out to be incomplete. The initial jolt came after I made several trips to India over the years and delved into a study of Buddhism. This led me as a social scientist to pursue research on the interconnection of the Iranian world with Buddhism, resulting in the book *Buddhism in Iran: An Anthropological Approach to Traces and Influences* (2012).

During these Indian trips I also studied *advaita* Vedanta and Kashmir Shaivism, both non-dualist schools. Meanwhile, in rereading almost all of Rumi's poems and of course Shams' discourses (*Maqālāt*), I began to suspect that my approach and understanding of Rumi had been both limited and somewhat sentimentalized and flawed. I was now seeing Rumi through different philosophical and anthropological lenses. Not only did I become aware of the anachronistic post-construction of Rumi's world by the Mevlevi hagiographers, followed by later authors, but also I discovered numerous surprising parallels between Rumi's writings and other spiritual schools of thought.

Thus I began the intellectual challenge of elucidating Rumi's broader, timeless, often non-religious universal message and connecting it with the sphere of the sages of Asia who had been pouring out a similar message in different eras and different cultures. It was also necessary not only to put Rumi's poetry into the context of the historical reality of his own time but also to open the way for a new alternative view of Rumi as an intercultural philosopher. It seemed a monumental task to go back and reread, select and translate the thousands of poems in Rumi's *Divan* and *Masnavi* as well as his utterances in *Fīhi mā fīh*. In addition, deciphering Shams' ideas in the multiple versions of his *Maqālāt* was a massive undertaking, as I sought the link between Shams' radical message and that of Rumi. Reading the poems of Rumi's son, Sultan Valad, also became important in constructing the circumstances of the years after Shams' interactions with Rumi.

Rereading all these writings through a wider transcultural lens led to fascinating breakthroughs of interpretation and the development of a new paradigm for understanding Rumi's message. As time passed, my central intention became to present Rumi's message based solely on the original content of his own poetry, not based on secondary sources. This book is intended for students, researchers, and admirers of Rumi, especially those who, like myself, desire an alternative to the traditional Sufi or Mevlevi depiction of Rumi and his message.

It also aims to present Rumi in relation to other philosophies, sages, and schools of thought cross-culturally, instead of studying each in an isolated manner, and particularly to explore the linkage of ideas and philosophies between the Indian and Iranian worlds. I hope others will pick up where I have left off and that this realm will be much more fully investigated, because it is my feeling that we are just beginning to uncover the interlinked wisdom in our world.

Mostafa Vaziri
Innsbruck, Dharamsala and White Salmon
November 2014

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Acknowledgments

Rumi is a cultural and literary gem whose ancestral roots, choice of language, cultural psychology, and intellectual style can be traced back to Balkh, Afghanistan. This book has come to epitomize my sincere love and admiration for both the Afghan people and Afghanistan as a cultural bedrock of many past achievements. Having lived and served there as a volunteer medical doctor for a number of years, my partner Allison and I have great respect and passion for that currently war-torn country. Allison, meanwhile, made an incredible contribution to this book by reading all the chapters to assure the flow of the text and restoring my confidence whenever I had doubts about continuing this project.

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Chapters 6A and 6B would not have been viable had they not been read, improved upon, and endorsed by the prominent Sanskritist and the world's foremost scholar of Kashmir Shaivism and Tantra,

Dr. Mark S. G. Dyczkowski. I have also had the pleasure of attending his seminars on this subject in Varanasi. For our many discussions on Vedanta, Buddhism, and Shaivism in Varanasi and Dharamsala, and his feedback on these chapters in the present book, I have the pleasure of thanking my dear friend Mr. Giteshwar Raj (known as "the old Indian Raj"), who is fluent in various Indian philosophical schools and languages, including Sanskrit and the language and Buddhist-Tantrism of Tibet. On that note, I would also like to thank Dr. Bettina Bäumer, who in her seminars in India was the first to teach me about Kashmir Shaivism.

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Last but not least, I would like to thank the Philosophy Department at the Universität Innsbruck for hosting me all these years and providing me with intellectual support.

Still, despite the enormous support from all these wonderful people and sources, I am solely responsible for the content of this book.

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A Note about the Sources

Rumi's *Divan* and *Masnavi* and Their Numbering

The number following "D" stands for the *ghazal* as numbered by the editor, without the line number(s). The symbol "D: r." followed by a number stands for the *rubā'ī* as numbered in the *Divan*. Of the two numbers following "M," the first is the roman numeral for one of the six books of *Masnavi*; the second is the page number, without the line number(s).

Abbreviations and Titles of the Primary Sources

D: *Divan: Kulliāt Shams-e Tabrizi*, by Rumi
M: *Masnavi* (or *Mathnawi* in Arabic transliteration), by Rumi
Maqālāt: *Maqālāt Shams-e Tabrizi* (Discourses of Shams)
Fīhi mā fīh by Rumi
Ebtidā Nāmeh by Sultan Valad

The abbreviation "D" in the text and footnotes stands for *Divan: Kulliāt Shams-e Tabrizi*. "M" stands for *Masnavi* or *Mathnawi* in Arabic transliteration, both books by Rumi edited by B. Forouzānfar (see bibliography for details).

Chapter 1

The Need for a New Narrative of Rumi

Around thirty years ago, Marilyn Waldman presented arguments to explain why flexible oral teachings of religions, such as Islam, have often taken on a fixed nature and inflexible narrative over time. She explained that theological formation was at the root of this evolution, particularly the techniques of storage and utilization of once-upon-a-time oral information based on social-cognitive differences as well as changes in segments of human society.[1] As oral narratives came to be written down, perspectives on religions and religious topics became more and more rigid because of the concrete nature of the written word. Thus, the tumultuous and dynamic past was reduced to the confinement of written words—an impulse that deflected attention from non-religious past events while at the same time creating a crisis of religious historicism by rejecting non-contextualized interpretations. This seems to be what has happened to the narrative of Rumi's life and teachings.

In light of the great number of books written about Rumi's Sufism and his approach to Islam over the years, these books have paradoxically made it quite difficult to think or look in different directions to acquire an alternative understanding of him. The non-religious interpretation of Rumi's writings has been displaced and clouded by many religiously minded authors simply through fixation on the dogma of religion instead of his poetry. There are two such categories of writings about Rumi: the first is the work of the early Ottoman hagiographers, such as Fereydoun Sepahsalar and Shams al-Din (Ahmed) Aflaki, who themselves were involved with the newly formed Mevlana Sufi sect; the second category is the assessment of the Orientalists,

such as E. G. Browne, R. A. Nicholson, A. J. Arberry, A. Schimmel, and other similar authors, who have framed Rumi as an Islamic mystic. Rumi's uniquely complex experiences have been arbitrarily given an Islamic, designation, a rather definite designation for indefinable truths, as if Rumi's reality was exclusively an Islamic one. The result is a one-sided theme that has been propagated over time, and has found its way to all the secondary and tertiary sources.

Nevertheless, a new narrative of Rumi is demanded by the secular-minded emergent generation that feels the urge to go back to the original poetry and give Rumi's "static texts" (borrowing Waldman's term), themselves stemming from the "dynamic utterances" of Shams, a new life. In other words, the oral teachings and mental experiences of Rumi were locked into written words that now need to be released into a dynamic interpretation. That said, Rumi's writings may not have a single meaning and purpose; readers can interpret and relativize the meaning for themselves, but without implicating Rumi in a fixed structure of interpretation. In other words, a one-dimensional religious or Sufi interpretation of Rumi would be sheer injustice in assessing the monumental works of this multifaceted sage. Furthermore, the oral transmissions from Shams to Rumi were produced spontaneously, without having followed a written text, and thus one should also avoid freezing these ephemeral teachings into fixed theories.[2]

The framework applied in this book is meant to provide an additional or alternative narrative for studying Rumi; the intention is not to reject the existing and dominant narrative but to broaden it. A secular and humanist study of Rumi, particularly exploring the philosophical aspects of his message, is the primary theme, even though "secular" and "philosophical" are not part of the classical conceptualization of Rumi. This book also aims to introduce a paradigm shift, but in fact it must be admitted that the original paradigm shift was already introduced by Shams and then transmitted to the young Rumi. This shift has only been blurred and eschewed in the course of history.

The other important aspect of this study is to view Rumi's writings from the perspective of non-dualism, which requires an introduction before we examine other key topics.

1. The Philosophy of Non-Dualism and How Rumi Fits In

Non-dualism,[3] through which this book presents a new philosophical understanding of Rumi's ideas, derives from certain Indian

philosophical and spiritual schools of thought. This new narrative at the same time presents a secular and humanistic approach to Rumi's poetical construction. Rumi took an intellectual, intuitive, and philosophical approach to describing how all phenomena, despite their plural façade, share a singular root. Rumi depended neither on hidden religious knowledge nor on his ecstatic, esoteric trance state. He soberly took on a non-rejectionist position by not denying the reality of the world and its affairs, or even moved further away from taking a moralist position, considering that sin would debase the opportunity of final knowledge and enlightenment. The multifaceted world, in Rumi's ultimate perspective, emerged and repeatedly refreshes itself from a single, undivided source of energy. By this non-absolutist position, he also implied that the world is in a continuous state of re-creation and modification. His highest goal was to transmit that the multiplicity and duality of the physical world is linked to its non-plural and non-dual source—all that can be lived and conceptualized in an enlightened consciousness. He did this without resorting to a religious or moral position. Rumi's formulation of the ultimate and unchanging state of existence as genderless, without opposite forces or binary states, was a well-contemplated philosophy that took the shape of poetry in his worldview—a source for his social universalism as well.

> Here there is no room for two; what is the meaning of I and you—
> consider these two as one, so long as you are in our assembly. (D: 2964)

The concept of non-dualism is applicable to many realms, from social to spiritual and philosophical. Its application in the philosophical and spiritual framework refers to the highest reality, a reality that is not subject to division, nor does it have any opposites. In the real and visible world, all dual pairs are branches of their one and non-dual source. Dualism, in contrast, holds that the world is made out of two opposite forces; that human beings are composed of body and spirit, mind and matter; that there is a Creator separate from the created, the believer (in God) and the unbeliever, and good distinct from evil. Some religious thinkers agree only on God's oneness but maintain the dualisms of believer and non-believer, good and evil, and so on. Dualism underlies many myths, religions, spiritual-philosophical schools, and even Cartesian science and structuralist sociology. Dualism and dualistic thinking has provided an impression that things stem from two or more sources.

From the poststructuralist point of view, which in nature challenges and rectifies the structuralist approach, the term "non-dual" may

imply negating the existence of dual phenomena and pairs of opposites. Poststructuralists argue labeling phenomena and cultural symbols leads to fixed dichotomous structures, and that even a label like "non-dualism" can lead to rigid definitions, which can be misleading. Certainly the complexity and relativism of the world of phenomena and human perceptions of them have led social scientists to reject a single hypothesis about the hierarchical structures. Similarly, the phenomenologist philosophers argue that the reality of life is just as it happens, but only in the perception of the person who experiences it. The liberation from a structured plurality to a pure contemplative oneness that is "non-plural" or "non-dual" is not a negative event. *Non-dualism*, furthermore, has been used by several Indian schools of thought to mean undivided "oneism" (not monism). "Monism" is not used in this book as a substitute for non-dualism because monism has been used in the last three centuries to describe the European formulation of mystico-philosophical concepts rather than Eastern ones, despite the similarity and overlapping of the two traditions. The label of "non-dualism" should be understood here as an alternative for describing the oneness of reality, without the term's negative poststructuralist implication.

Non-dualism, from the Indian philosophical point of view, however, rejects the notion that the world, its source, and the consciousness that perceives them are separate entities: in a nutshell, the objects, the perceiver, and all other mental perception are one and the same entity (as is clear from the Sanskrit term for non-dual, *advaita*). *Advaita* in this case actually means "non-dual," but not necessarily "one" per se, though they in fact share the same intended meaning of a timeless and undivided entity. Understanding the ultimate reality is a transcendence from the world of dualities and pluralities—it is the understanding of unique principle, but through the channel of dualities and pluralities. It is the colorless water that goes in the ground that causes the blossoming of different-colored flowers.[4] Colorless water and multiple-colored flowers are connected at a higher level and originate from a non-multiple source. Raindrops and ocean seem to represent two things, but actually follow a similar non-dual pattern. Questions about God and creation, about the source of human existence, about good and evil, the believer and the unbeliever, heaven and hell, seem to stem from a dualistic cultural perspective. Non-dualism rejects the dualistic or plural façade of things and perceives it as a case of mistaken identity. In other words, this school perceives that all things have a common denominator even if their appearance does not reveal it. This common denominator is unborn, undying, immutable; without

time-reference (timeless); the only true existence; the force of life, not the mortal forms that duel in the realm of linear time and space. This non-dual source is a building block and foundation for transitory and fleeting existence. To grasp and understand this non-dual source is a goal to which Rumi dedicated his work (*Love* is one of the designations that Rumi uses to refer to this immortal and non-dual source of existence). Non-dualism is a philosophical school whose spiritual tenets advocate a non-rejectionist and inclusive attitude, especially towards qualities that seem to be negative, such as disbelief, darkness, evil, pain, and the body, all of which belong, non-dualists believe, to a greater world with a singular source—and qualities that dualistic thinkers either reject or rank as inferior.

The term *non-dualism* thus refers to the consciousness of the ultimate reality elevated beyond transitory appearances of multiplicity, and such multiples and dual pairs ultimately manifest their existence in the pure and non-dual consciousness. The label "non-dualism" is often applied to various philosophical systems, such as *advaita* Vedanta, in which the ultimate reality is called Brahman, or Kashmir Shaivism, in which the ultimate reality is called Śiva. These non-dualist philosophical approaches see the body and the consciousness of the Universe as being one and the same, the foundation of the highest existence with no separation. In this experience the human illusion and his mundane and fleeting relationship with the physical objects is addressed and thus uprooted. This highest existence is hidden from the sight and is unchanging and permanent, but more importantly it is undivided, like the ocean being one with the rivers and raindrops, as Rumi points out (discussed in detail in chapter 5A).

The non-dualistic approach to philosophy and spirituality has often arisen in reaction to dualistic traditions,[5] including most major religions, which tend to be dualistic in nature and belief. For example, among Indian dualistic philosophical systems, the non-theistic Samkhya school of thought (to which the eleventh-century scholar Bīrunī dedicated part of his research on Indian religions) teaches that the world is made out of matter (*prakriti*) and consciousness (*puruṣa*) grouped together. The separation and liberation of consciousness from matter, bound together through desire, is the ultimate goal, a fully dualistic objective. Similarly, Zurvanism and Manichaeism are highly dualistic traditions that propose that the world is composed of two dueling, opposite powers of light and darkness, good and evil. Such dualist thinkers believe the nature of the world was originally designed by God to be light and good, while darkness and evil were interjected and became the flaws brought upon the world by Satan. Dualism and metaphysical debates

about separation are also themes of powerful theistic religions such as Vedic Brahmanism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In each of these religions, the god or gods are considered separate and distinct from human beings and the world. The ideas of good and evil, believer and unbeliever, as well as the separation of the worshipper and the worshipped, are inherent characteristics of these theistic religions. Non-conformist, non-dualist thinkers have attempted to address the limitations and flaws of such dualistic thinking, and this is the profound task undertaken by Rumi in the Islamic world.

The rise of non-dualistic thinking, despite its various origins, is an intellectual as much as a philosophical and spiritual endeavor, challenging the dualistic position of established religions. As we shall demonstrate, Rumi's rejection of dualism is a central theme of his writings. Attributing "non-dualism" to Rumi's philosophical outlook may be a new approach in Islamic studies and in the study of Rumi, but in this book we will bring to light the many ways that Rumi rejected all sorts of dualistic beliefs. His steady refrain, "There is no such thing as two; my being and yours is one, even though it seems two to us" (D: 2242, 2591), demonstrates his intention to introduce the idea of non-dualism to the Islamic world, to Persian literature, and to the philosophically inclined.

In the context of Islamic philosophy and mysticism, the term *non-dualism* may overlap with, but does not have the same relevance as, *wahdat ul-wujud* (unity of existence). *Wahdat ul-wujud* is an Islamic Sufi metaphysics, though a subject of controversy between the hard-core scholastics and liberal Sufis, alluding to God as the only true existence—everything else resembles Him (*tashbīh*), while He resembles Himself (*tanzīh*). In other words, in a paradoxical way it considers God and existence to be one principle. The unity, purity, and absoluteness of God (or rather *tanzīh*) is accepted by Muslims, but other things being similar to God, or even the mystical union of the Sufi practitioner with God, not only is not widely accepted among the jurists of Islam but, from a conservative Islamic perspective, is considered a *bid'a*, a rather ruinous "innovation," and thus heretical. The discourse of *wahdat ul-wujud*, despite the two philosophical detours of *tashbīh* and *tanzīh*, tries to identify the root of everything as God. The philosophical idea that all existing things are explainable in one single reality has been identified as *pantheism* (popularized after Spinoza, d. 1677), and even *monism* (introduced by Christian von Wolff, d. 1754), in the European tradition—two European terms that have been inappropriately applied by a number of Orientalists to Islamic and Indian mystical-philosophical schools.

Perhaps the past disinclination to uncover Rumi's message of non-dualism has been due to his work being inappropriately associated with purely scholastic Sufism and with Ibn 'Arabi's *wahdat ul-wujud*. Over the years, many have believed that Rumi came under the influence of such conceptual thinking in Sufism. If we accept such a premise, then the consequential meeting and exchanges with Shams, along with Rumi's comprehensive writings and his introduction of music, dance, and visualization, are all reduced to an unoriginal enterprise. But in fact, Shams himself met Ibn 'Arabi in Damascus before arriving in Konya and was not impressed by his mode of thinking. We can see from the *Maqālāt* that Shams found Ibn 'Arabi to be a hypocrite who repeatedly contradicted himself (see chapter 3), and thus it is highly unlikely that Rumi would have embraced Ibn 'Arabi's philosophy, even though he may have maintained contact with Sadr al-Din Qunyawi (d. 1274), the adopted son of Ibn 'Arabi and a proponent of *wahdat ul-wujud*. Rumi's search for the ultimate reality should lead us to understand that rather than blindly following Ibn 'Arabi's brand of Sufism, Rumi was focused on challenging the social and spiritual dualism of his time, including the Islamic division of people between believer and unbeliever, between the worshipper and the worshipped.

Rumi rejected the two-ness of things, but at the same time (unlike *advaita* Vedanta) he never perceived the world as an illusion or to be an illusory reflection of consciousness. To Rumi, the objects of this world and consciousness are two manifestations of the same reality. The religious dualisms of good and evil, God and Satan, believer and unbeliever, God and human consciousness as distinct and separate principles, were deftly and rigorously rejected by Rumi. In his comprehensive writings, he brought them under one singular principle that he called *Love*, the highest consciousness, without denying the reality of physical existence and social realities. Rumi's Love is the only principle that has no opposite. All other pairs of opposites are the extension of the same single source, implying that all phenomena originate from a single source of Love but exist with multiple names and identities. In other words, the principle of Love is not physical matter, but rather mental knowledge that lies within our empirical mind and yet is well-hidden from our everyday experience of the world—thus, Love, in a Rumian sense, is the highest internal perspective to understand all physical phenomena.

The non-dualism that Rumi articulated shares much with the non-dualism of certain Indian traditions, as will be discussed in chapters 6A and 6B. Rumi could be considered a prolific and pioneering philosopher (after the appearance of scattered utterances of Hallāj,

Bāyazīd, and those who later followed suit, such as Hafiz in the fourteenth century) in establishing the tradition of non-dualism in an Islamic context, although thus far his philosophy, because of the over-sentimentalization of his Sufism and "divine love" theme, has remained unrecognized in intellectual and philosophical circles.

2. How Would Rumi Fit in as a Philosopher?

Rumi the Poet and the Sage

For better or worse, Rumi has consistently been identified as a poet. Although this seems an honorable and qualified label, being confined to the role of poet has kept him from being considered a broader thinker and even a "philosopher" because the two roles have always been mutually exclusive in the Persian world—even though the great philosophers such as Avicenna (d. 1037), Khayyam (d. 1131), and Mullā Sadrā (d. 1640) also composed poetry in addition to philosophical prose. But many great philosophers and founders of other ancient schools have expressed their ideas in metaphorical short-versed poems and have been considered philosophers first and foremost, consideration of the content of their writings taking precedence over the form. For example, the composition of *Tao Te Ching* by Lao Tzu is poetical. The sayings of the Buddha in *Dhamapada* are also in the form of short stanzas. Multiple *Upanishads* are composed with symbolism. Even the *Koran*, in its original Arabic, is written in rhymed poetic form. But no one thinks of Lao Tzu, the Buddha, the Upanishadic yogis, and Mohammad primarily as poets. Poetry has been the means of transmitting wisdom in many ancient cultures, and in these cases it can be recognized as the work of a broader philosophy rather than simply literature. Perhaps no poetry in Persian can be better classified as the basis of a philosophical system than the works of Rumi, Hafiz, and the *rubāʿīs* of Khayyam, because of their vigorous attention to the flux of time and the joy of human existence, not to mention their skeptical formulations about the role of mysterious celestial forces in the creation and operation of the world. Poetry, however, became a literary license to innocuously challenge various established issues of culture and metaphysics.

Many may disagree with the idea that Rumi was a "philosopher" (let alone the founder of a new non-Sufi, non-sectarian philosophical-spiritual school) at all because of the style of his poetry, which has traditionally been viewed as a continuation of the trend in lyrical poetry begun by his Persian-language predecessors such as Sanā'ī and 'Attar. The failure to categorize Rumi as a philosopher, and the progeny of