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Dancing and Poetry: A Study of the Whirling Dervish Dance Through Rumi's Poetry

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Abstract

This exploration investigates the influence of Rumi's book of poetry, *Mathnawi*, upon the Sufi practice of the Whirling Dervish dances. It argues that Rumi's *Mathnawi* underlies the choreography of the Whirling Dervish dances. Each step of the dance expresses, manifests or embodies themes found in Rumi's poetry: separation from Unity, ascension, annihilation, and a return to Unity. The thesis introduces this argument, and then discusses historical, theological, and linguistic themes related to Rumi, Sufism, and the Whirling Dervish dances. Following this, the thesis provides a framework that begins with the Neoplatonic theory of emanation grounding Rumi's poetic thought, followed by the influence of Rumi's poetic thought upon the Whirling Dervish dances. The thesis then uses this framework to explore each step of the Whirling Dervish dance individually as it relates to poems within *Mathnawi*, examining the relationship between poetry and choreography. Four poems have been selected, correlating with the four steps of the dance. The poems are analytically dissected and evaluated. In conclusion, this thesis demonstrates how *Mathnawi* choreographically serves as a guide and structure for the Whirling Dervish practice, in addition to broadly demonstrating the influence of Rumi's poetic thought upon future generations of religious Sufi practice.

Dedication

I am thankful to my faculty mentors, Dr. Simon Wood and Dr. Stephen Lahey, for motivating me throughout my journey of *Dancing to Poetry*. This investigation has only been made possible through the knowledge, guidance, and assistance they have continuously offered me throughout my research process. I also express a special feeling of gratitude to my academic advisor, Dr. Kathleen Lacey, who believed in my ability to enter the Honors Program and complete a thesis despite the obstacles and challenges laying in my path.

My final dedication goes to my parents, Raqibul Huq and Nik Nariza Hassan, who have believed in me from the very beginning, and who have been my greatest support not only throughout my undergraduate experience, but my entire life. Every moment of hardwork and devotion spent on this thesis is dedicated to the both of you.

Dancing and Poetry:

A Study of the Whirling Dervish Dance Through Rumi's Poetry

Over a millennium ago, the growing city of Mecca discovered the religion of Islam when Angel Jibril (Gabriel) appeared to Prophet Muhammad in Jabal-al-Nour. "*Iqra*," he commanded the shivering, frightened prophet; "Read, in the name of your lord." Years later, Islam now persists as the second largest religion and the fastest growing major religion. The recitation and understanding of the Islamic holy book, the Qur'an, serves as a crucial component to practicing Islam. The text serves not only as a guide for Muslims, but is also prominently known for its enchanting and poetic-like language. The beauty of the Qur'anic language and the significance of its messages has inspired the creation of literary works over the centuries following its revelation and has impacted the consciousness of people of all religions. Jalal al-Din Mohammad Rumi, among the most renowned of Persian poets, wrote poem after poem inspired and drawn from his beliefs as a Sufi Muslim, or one who observes mystical Islam. Often revolving around themes of love, joy, and divine unity, Rumi's poetry evokes the emotions and touches the consciousness of readers with diverse backgrounds. His influence extends so far as to inspire an entirely separate religious practice in Sufism known as the Whirling Dervishes, or Darwīsh, "poor," in Persian (Etymology). Rumi's philosophical thought and influence over Whirling Dervish religious practices remains extensive and has contributed to the formation and conduct of what the Dervishes are most famously known for: their dances, or *sama*, a term that will be further explained below. The basis of Dervish practice finds itself upon all existent collections of Rumi's thoughts; and because Rumi spent a significant portion of his life writing poetry, understanding this form of literature reveals interpretations of the Whirling Dervish dance. In recognition of the comprehensive relationship between Rumi's poetry, the inspiration, and the

Whirling Dervish dance, this investigation seeks to further explore the components building these connections through examination of Rumi's poetry as a poetic choreography guiding the ritualistic steps of the Whirling Dervish dance. As will be later detailed, the four steps encompassing the dance can each be traced back to specific poems in Rumi's literature, all of which encompass a significant concept regarding the process of connecting oneself to God. In this manner, the entirety of this investigation will be structured around the composition of the religious dance, in which each component of the dance derives from Rumi's religious and philosophical thought as exemplified through his poetry.

Rumi claimed the identity of being a Sufi Muslim, an observer of both mysticism and Islam. In Islamic theology, there exists two dominant interpretations of Islam: Sunnism and Shi'ism. These two interpretations derive from the same historical origin but diverge in their conceptual beliefs of religious and political authority, a divide which took nearly 200 years following the death of Prophet Muhammad to develop and establish within Islamic theology. Sufism, or Islamic mysticism, embodies less of a holisitic interpretation of Islam and rather offers a way of understanding and approaching God; S.J. Trimingham defines Sufism in *The Sufi Orders in Islam* as "embracing those tendencies in Islam which aim at direct communion between God and man" (Saeed). As opposed to the numerous heated debates between Sunnis and Shi'ites regarding political and religious authority, Sufism emphasizes a focus on a person's spiritual freedom and the heightening of his or her spiritual senses to communicate with God, reacting directly against "the rationalization of Islam in law and theology" (Saeed). In this sense, Rumi's self-identification as a Sufi-Muslim places him within less of a religious-political sphere of Islam and within more of a spiritual-mystical scope. His mystical Islamic beliefs often served as the driving force to his poetic explorations and the creation of his poems, ones which were

eventually collected into the book *Mathnawi*, translating from Persian to mean "the Spiritual

Couplets." These poems significantly encompass mystical Islamic thought and consequently

serve as a poetic guide to the practice of this religious branch. Given the dependence of the

Whirling Dervish dance upon Rumi's poetry, examining the symbolic gestures and movements

of the dance also illuminates the themes and reasoning within the poetry itself.

  Understanding the roots of *sama* proves vital in identifying the connection between

Rumi's poetry and the spiritual meaning residing within the movements of the dance. The Arabic

pronunciation of *sama* in the Arabic language is pronounced *samā'*, the term ending with the

pronunciation of a long 'a' vowel (ا) and the Arabic letter *'ayn* (ع). Literally, *samā'* translates to

"listen." The Persian translation of *sama* differs slightly through specificity, taking on the

meaning "audition," or more specifically, "musical audition." In Sufi tradition, *sama* implies

listening with the "ear of the heart," an attitude which encompasses "listening to music and/or

the singing of mystical poetry with the intent of increasing awareness and understanding of the

divine object described" (Lewisohn). The term includes both the physical movements and the

spiritual attachments, and it is understanding the theory behind the *sama*, how the movements in

the *sama* correlate to a spiritual connection, that creates a pathway to understanding the

connection between *sama* to Sufi thought and to Rumi's poetry. Any witness to the performance

of a *sama*, when instructed, can see that the dance consists of four turns, in which the term "turn"

represents the continuous spinning of the Whirling Dervishes for a designated time. Each turn

lasts between eight to eighteen minutes and represents a step in the ritual of creating an earthly,

divine connection with God. The four steps, as represented through each turn, are explicable

through the following: the first turning represents "the going-forth of creation from the Unity";

the second turning is "man's ascension to God by means of mystic exercise"; the third turning

represents "annihilation in God"; and the fourth turning "is the eternal order restored, when God Himself turns too" (Fremantle, 332). Essential to exploring each step and its specific relation to Rumi's poetry, which will occur later in this paper, is establishing how the *sama* came into existence. The origination of the *sama* crucially unfolds an understanding of its process, purpose, and derivation within Rumi's poetic and philosophical thought. Identifying these fundamental concepts within the *sama* and Rumi's poetic philosophy allows for an exploration of the thematic ideas Rumi addresses in his poetry, the portrayal of these same ideas through the *sama*, and the parallels between the movements of the *sama* to specific poems from Rumi's *Mathnawi*.

The groundwork of Sufi philosophy arises through Neoplatonism, a philosophical system based in Platonic, the works of Plotinus, an Alexandrian philosopher born in early 200 AD who was versed in Platonic and Aristotelian teachings (Gregory, vii). Comparative philosopher Kamuran Godelek explains how the interactions between Sufism and Neoplatonism emerges from "Islamic philosophers interpret[ing] Aristotle from an Islamic point of view….they also were introduced into the Anatolian culture…[which] prepared the way for liberal interpretations of Islamic principles in Sufi philosophy" (Godelek, 60). Plotinus' teaching style during his years was unusually unassertive and open-ended as compared to other popular schools of thought surrounding him. He centralized his theory of emanation around three figures that he identified through Plato's teachings: Soul, Intellect, and the One (Gerson, 307). Each figure, excluding the One, needs and derives from the other, and are addressed in proper form to indicate that they are the first, the original, precedent to any soul, intellect, or one; in other words, all beings in the world, any soul or any intellect, exists simply as a part of a whole. Soul, Intellect, and the One cannot find quantitative or qualitative assignment as a part of this whole: "...the world eternally derives from Soul, which derives from Intellect, which derives from the One" (Gerson, 307).

Thus, the world appears as a final product of the union of Intellect and World Soul, in which union itself arises from the One, which exists before any being.

Plotinus' theory of emanation thus begins to determine specific steps, or stages, where each stage derives from a single cause or entity and which later finds attribution to the structuring of Rumi's poetic thought. Prior to emanation, the One is independent and the source of all beings which come in existence. A defining characteristic of the One is being ineffable, as thoughts and words cannot describe it and the mind cannot begin to grasp it. All beings prove to be incapable of formulating the Unity of the One because of the intellectual reliance on a multiplicity of words and ideas. As explained in *The Essential Plotinus*, translated by Elmer O'Brien, "When we wish to speak with precision, we should not say that The One is this or that, but revolving, as it were, around it, try not to express our own experience of it…." (78). Thoughts and ideas revolve around the One, seeking in every case to describe it from a given vantage point. This attempt at grasping the ungraspable One is evidence of the being of Intellect, which comes as an image of the One. The "secondary activity" to the One then can be seen as Intellect, which is an image created through the process of thinking: in the attempt to think about The One comes the self-thought that constitutes Intellect (Gerson, 312). Soul follows suit after Intellect, in which it constitutes as an expression or image in Intellect. The world that follows Soul, the existence of every physical being and worldly thought, may then be described as "Soul's tendency to express and project itself [which] means that it seeks to fill the negativity of matter with form" (Gerson, 313). Matter, then, constitutes the activity following Soul, creating a sequence of derivatives originating from the One and concluding with matter.

Upon establishing these central figures to Plotinus' theory of emanation, the One emerges as the first existent, making Intellect and Soul not the first, but rather an image of the One. One

must note that neither Intellect nor Soul constitutes a form, because every form consists of a multiple or a synthesized combination; this definition consequently makes form a figure of derivation because it consists of parts preceding the multiple (O'Brien, 75). An understanding of form begins through contemplating how forms of any subject, object, or idea in this world, as they exist within these matters, are iterations of the ideal forms that have been generated by Soul as it differentiates and distinguishes the kinds of Being dictated by Intellect. Thus, with each procession from the One, multiplicity increases: Intellect imagines multiple beings and Soul distinguishes the ways in which the beings differ from one another. This consequently causes the patterns of differentiation to function as causes working on material being and gives rise to a multiplicity of living things in the world. Individual souls, then, may be classified as forms originating from Soul, and this results in a desire of the individual soul for unification with its origination: Soul as an image of Intellect, and Intellect as an image of the One. Plotinus writes in "The Descent of the Soul" that "no soul, not even our own, enters into the body completely. Soul always remains united by its higher part to the intelligible realm. But if the part that is in the realm of sense dominates...it keeps us unaware of what the high part of the soul contemplates….Indeed we are aware of what the soul contemplated only if the content descends to the level of sensation" (O'Brien, 69-70). This consequently explains the existence of contemplation as well as the drive for human beings to contemplate: individual souls partially exist within matter, such as people, and seek reunification with its other parts, which reside with Soul. If the part of the soul existing in this physical world, described by Plotinus as "the realm of sense" remains enraptured by the tangible matter and thought, then it forgoes contemplation of its additional part with Soul in favor of the physical world.

It is this precise favoring towards the physical world that Sufis seek to detach themselves from, and that prompts Dervishes to practice *sama* as a form of detachment and unification to the One. As Plotinus writes, "the One comes to us neither by knowing nor by the pure thought that discovers the other intelligible things, but by a presence transcending knowledge" (O'Brien, 78). Achieving unification with the One cannot occur through thought or intellect, but rather through a means that exceeds the extent of intellectual capabilities. The *sama*, then, serves to Dervishes as a means of attaining this "presence" that exceeds knowledge, transcending matter (the Dervish) to Soul, Soul to Intellect, then Intellect to the One. The final inquiry may thus be produced: how exactly *sama* serves as a practice to which Dervishes may surpass the limits of matter and connect with Soul as the image of Intellect, Intellect as the image of the One, and finally the One itself. Each of the four steps of the *sama* parallel these four emanations discussed and explained in Plotinus' doctrine, beginning with the first turn as representative of creations, or matter, being separate from Unity, or the One, and ending with the final turn, restoration of the eternal order, when one reunites with the One itself. Although little scholarship reveals whether Rumi himself was aware of Plotinus and his teachings, Rumi's philosophical thought of Sufism certainly parallels the emanations to which Plotinus theorized. In some manner, Rumi's thought appears informed by Plotinus' model, thus exemplifying how his poetry finds grounding in the model's reality. Consequently, this investigation utilizes Plotinus' doctrine of emanation to establish the relation between the focus of Rumi's philosophical thought and poetry to each turn of the *sama*, allowing for the poetry to serve as a choreography for the *sama* itself. Understanding the four emanations guides an understanding of *Mathnawi*, and *Mathnawi* influences Dervish religious practices by elucidating upon the purposes and experiences Dervishes seek to attain through their rituals. Within these investigations, a deeper understanding

of *Mathnawi*'s universality and diverse impacts then develops and finds application to a wider audience, both Muslim and non-Muslim, scholarly and non-scholarly alike.

Investigating the interconnections between Rumi's philosophy, as described through *Mathnawi*, and the Whirling Dervish practice begins with an exploration of the first step of the *sama*. This first step represents a continuation of the creations separate from the Unity, in which the Unity finds itself to be synonymous with The One from Plotinus' emanations. In Sufism, followers are constantly in a state of seeking unity with God, yet this does not mean that they are separated or distanced from God. Sufis experience God through many worldly experiences and connections, especially through nature. They believe that the entire universe essentially mirrors God, and thus they are never truly separated from God but rather can attain a closer relationship with Him by looking within oneself (Ali Andrabi). Many of Rumi's *Mathnawi* correlates to the four steps of the *sama*, and for the purpose of this paper only one poem will be selected for each step. The choreography underlying every step in the *sama* finds itself in each selected poem, beginning with the first turn of the dance. *The Diver's Clothes Lying Empty* from the chapter "Feeling Separation: Don't Come Near Me" in *The Essential Rumi* reads:

> You are sitting here with us, but you are also out walking
> in a field at dawn. You are yourself
> the animal we hunt when you come with us on the hunt.
> You are in your body like a plant is solid in the ground,
> yet you are wind. You are the diver's clothes
> lying empty on the beach. You are the fish.

The first line of the poem establishes three identities, "you," "us," and the speaker. Yet, continuing through the rest of the first stanza, the insignificance of determining the exact identities of "you," "us," or the speaker becomes discernible. Unlike a traditional poem, the "you" and "us" subjects of this poem are not as significant as realizing the individuality that is

signified by these pronouns: "you" connotes an individual entity and "us" connotes a collection of individuals. The first two lines of the stanza establish the individual's presence as both belonging and not belonging to the group, a paradox that will continue to carry through the rest of the poem. The speaker describes how the subject of the poem is both sitting with the collection of people and also "walking in a field at dawn," creating a connecting image between the subject and the group while simultaneously evoking the solitary image of the subject walking alone through a field.

Enjambment between the second and third lines enables the speaker to convey two meanings of the following sentence: "You are yourself / the animal we hunt when you come with us on the hunt." The speaker establishes the identity of the subject in the first part of the sentence, expressing the wholeness of the subject being the subject itself. And yet, the second part of the sentence appears to divide this wholeness by claiming the subject to be the hunter while also being hunted. Notably, the subject possesses control in this situation, as delineated when the subject is stated to "come with us on the hunt." In being both the hunter and the hunted, the speaker utilizes the same paradox that was introduced in the first line: the subject joins the collection of individuals in search of the animal while also being that same animal itself. The metaphor introduced within these lines is that the subject *is* the animal, and thus a conclusion arises that the subject is looking, "hunting," for himself. One may interpret this search as the subject simply exploring and investigating his own identity. Yet, a significant Sufi belief is that a person is constantly seeking unity with God while also being connected to God. Through this belief, it may be inferred that the subject is not necessarily searching for his identity through the "hunt", but rather searching for unity with God while also becoming aware that he has already been united with God: the experiences are one in the same, and cannot exist without the other.

The fourth and fifth lines of the poem profess the containment of the subject within his own body the way a plant is rooted into the ground, and yet the subject is also said to be the wind. The phrase "you are in your body" connotes two different beings, the subject and the subject's body, as if they are not the same entities. Instead, the subject's inherent nature, soul or spirit, exists separately from his body, as if the body serves simply as a container to which the subject's true nature resides. Once again, the repeating extended paradox appears in the comparison between the subject's nature being solidly rooted within the body as a plant is grounded in the dirt. Yet, the subject's nature is also metaphorically described to be limitless and flowing like the wind. These metaphors exemplify the worldly experiences Sufis utilize to connect with God, primarily through an understanding and connection with natural sentients, like plants and the wind, that have been created by God and thus emanate a source of His power and a way to anchor with His presence. The final lines metaphorically compare the subject to "diver's clothes lying empty on the beach" and to being "the fish." This signifies a bodily abandonment as the subject's true nature sheds his container of being within his physical body, the diver's clothes, and transforms into a form of nature itself, the fish, where the subject is free to roam and explore without the constraints of its human vessel.

The conclusion of the poem indicates a philosophical understanding of what the subject seeks, a connection with God, as the subject rids itself of the "diver's clothes" and takes the more liberating form of a fish. And yet, despite this understanding of what is being searched for, the speaker clearly demonstrates how the search has only just begun and, by the conclusion of the poem, is still in continuation. This exemplification within the poem signifies and elucidates the preliminary purpose of the first turning within the *sama*, in which the initial turn represents a continuation of the creation, mankind, separate from the Unity. While turning, the Dervishes

impressionate the movement of spinning underwater and beginning to swim, a swirling motion that may be visualized through the calming images of one walking through a field, becoming the wind, or inhabiting the form of a fish. In this manner, *The Diver's Clothes Lying Empty* serves as a literary embodiment to understanding the first turning in a *sama*, its purpose, and the experiences the Dervishes seek to encounter.

The second turning in the *sama*, lasting around eight minutes, represents the initiation of a man's ascension to God by means of mystic exercise (Fremantle, 332). Mystical and ritualistic exercise proves foundational to Sufi practice, as this serves the means by which Sufi followers attain their divine connection with God. The primary form of practice in Sufism, one which distinguishes them from Muslims who are not mystically oriented, is their emphasis on *dhikr*, or the remembrance of God. Practicing *dhikr* in Islam is achieved through the frequent mentioning and commemorating of God, often through repetitive recitation of His many names. In her journal on Sufi spiritual forms, Nicole Abraham explains how achieving the experience of ecstasy, or union with God, exists as the ultimate goal of Sufis and how "a greater emphasis was placed on the mechanical recitation of the *dhikr*" after this goal was formed and "union became equated with the ecstatic state (*wajd*)" (199). As *sama* is a form of *dhikr* for the Whirling Dervishes, this exemplifies how the ritual is used to cultivate a connection between the turners and God. During the second turning, the Dervishes aim to ascend to God as a marking point of the beginning of their divine connection with God: this coincides with the second emanations of Plotinus' doctrine, in which "having thus freed itself of all externals, the soul must turn total inward" (O'Brien, 82). The path leading to this connection is not a straight path, but rather a circular path in which the follower "has safely arrived at the place where he will begin his ascent towards the Sacred Presence" (Hakim). The achievement of ascension comes by looking inward,

practicing contemplation over action, spiritual development over law, and the cultivation of the soul over social action (Abraham, 198).

The process of ascension may be described simply, but the mental effort requires intense practice, dedication, and awareness. Understanding this achievement simply by witnessing the second turning of the Whirling Dervishes may be near impossible. However, understanding Rumi's poetry as it influences their experiences provides useful insight into the ritual and devotion needed to ascend. Rumi exemplifies these practices in his poem *Zikr* (a different variation in the spelling of *dhikr*), as translated in the chapter "The Pickaxe: Getting to the Treasure Beneath the Foundation" in Bark's *The Essential Rumi*. Although the poem spans nine stanzas long, only six of the stanzas are necessary to include in this investigation in order to gain an understanding of the experiences Dervishes undergo during the second turning:

> A naked man jumps in the river, hornets swarming
> above him. The water is the *zikr*, remembering,
> *There is no reality but God. There is only God.*
>
> The hornets are his sexual remembering, this woman,
> that woman. Or if a woman, this man, that.
> The head comes up. They sting.
>
> Breathe water. Become river head to foot.
> Hornets leave you alone then. Even if you're far
> from the river, they pay no attention.
>
> ….
>
> Light is the image of your teacher. Your enemies
> love the dark. A spider weaves a web over a light,
> out of himself, or herself, makes a veil.
>
> Don't try to control a wild horse by grabbing its leg.
> Take hold the neck. Use a bridle. Be sensible.

Then ride! There is a need for self-denial.

Don't be contemptuous of old obediences. They help.

The poem begins with the description of a naked man jumping into a river in order to avoid the hornets that are swarming him. The water metaphorically refers to *dhikr*, and a line of *dhikr* that one repeats while practicing it is offered: "There is no reality but God. There is only God." This first stanza may be straightforwardly interpreted. The man represents any person, man or woman, and his nakedness symbolizes his vulnerability to human flaws such as being selfish, materialistic, and egoistic; likewise, it also symbolizes his vulnerabilities to human fortes. The strengths and weaknesses themselves are symbolized through the hornets surrounding the man. That these human qualities are kept separate from the human himself demonstrates the Sufi belief regarding how characteristics of a person can be shed and forgotten, leaving the person vulnerable yet true to his inherent nature as a servant of God. The water serves as the physical embodiment of *dhikr*, a sanctuary for the human to retreat into when being overwhelmed by his own flaws and fortes.

The second stanza elucidates further details of the hornets, specifying how they are the wants and desires of men and women: "his sexual remembering, this woman / that woman." When the man in the river comes up to take a breath of air, the hornets immediately sting him, offering him no moment of relief. It may be deduced that the man in the river remains with two options: to remain underwater without air, or to lift his head out of the water for air and to be stung. The third stanza, however, offers a third option: for the man to breathe water and, essentially, become water. Rather than submit to the human characteristic of fear or to the human necessity for air, the speaker beckons the man in the river to transform himself altogether. If he suffers from lack of air while underwater, then to end the suffering he must become water itself.

In doing so, the hornets are said to leave him alone and "even if you're far / from the river, they pay no attention." Becoming water in the river offers the man a freedom that his human body cannot give him: liberty from the desires and materials that tether him to the physical world and the ability to develop himself spiritually by turning completely inward into himself. Thus, water in this poem symbolizes having ascended, whereas the process of learning to breathe water is the mystical exercise to which one begins to ascend. Complete immersion of oneself into water, *dhikr*, eventually allows a person to formulate the deep spiritual connection with God despite remaining physically present in the material world.

The following stanza, also the second to last stanza of the poem, associates light with being "the image of your teacher" and darkness with what "your enemies love," clearly indicating the righteous, enlightening qualities light is often associated with and the hidden, adverse qualities of darkness. Then, the speaker states that a spider makes a veil by weaving a web from out of himself and covering the light. Sufis believe that there exists a veil covering each person's face and preventing him or her from witnessing the divine light that exists when in proximity of God. This veil, explained by Dr. Souad al-Hakim, "prevents him from seeing [that] the divine communal proximity is placed over his 'inner eye,' that is to say, that the veil is tied to human nature" (Hakim). Thus, the spider weaving a web in this poem may be easy to categorize as an enemy or a challenge, but in actuality the spider represents a human being himself. Just as the spider makes a veil by weaving its own web and covering the light, men and women create veils that cover the light by yielding to their own desires and daily, worldly concerns. The veil is created by men and women's own natural human tendencies, but this does not mean that the veil cannot be lifted. Remembrance of God, *dhikr*, is the mystical practice that may lift the veil, and thus allows one to achieve ascension.

The following stanza utilizes the metaphor of controlling a wild horse to further exemplify how dedicated mystical practice leads to ascension. The speaker advises not to try controlling a wild horse by grabbing its leg, but rather to hold onto its neck. In fact, the speaker advises to be sensible by using a saddle or other tools that may be helpful in controlling the wild horse. In this metaphor, the meaning of the wild horse functions similarly to the hornets in the first couple of stanzas: it represents worldly desires, feelings, and emotions that hold one back from uncovering his true nature, which is void of worldly attachments. Entering mystical exercises unprepared or with the simple hopes of immediately being ascended after little thought or dedication to the practice correlates to attempting to control a wild horse by wildly grabbing its leg. Instead, one must use his sensibility to first understand and learn how mystical exercise opens up the path to ascension, just as a person may have an easier time controlling a wild horse by holding onto its neck and using a saddle.

The final sentence of this stanza states that "there is a need for self-denial." Through self-denial, one gains the ability to control his or her own feelings and emotions rather than being at the mercy of them; thus, self-denial within mystical exercise is essential to the process of ascension. The poem ends with one sentence, separated as its own stanza: "Don't be contemptuous of old obediences. They help." This is a simply stated piece of guidance, a manner in which Rumi commonly ends a significant portion of his poems. By reminding subjects to not be insolent towards previous attachments, the speaker advises that although means of ascension includes shedding oneself of worldly attachments and emotions, this does not mean that a person should resent them. Instead, embracing and understanding where these obediences derive from will help a person achieve ascension, as this grants them the ability to come to peace with their past and thus continue to lift the veil over their faces, revealing the divine light.

Upon achieving ascension in God, a turner may now proceed into the third turning of the *sama*, in which he is annihilated into God. In Plotinus' doctrine, this step parallels the transition that occurs between Intellect as an image of The One: a turner must move beyond thought and towards a contemplation so intense that he becomes incognizant of the contemplation itself. Everything must be forgotten, "the subjective first and, finally, the objective. It must not even know that it is itself that is applying itself to contemplating of The One" (O'Brien, 83). In Sufism, and specific to Rumi's works, self-annihilation is a form of true liberation in which a person "exceed[s] all physical, spiritual, social, historical and cultural constraints" (Wilcox, 95). *Fana'*, The Arabic term for annihilation in God, succeeds ascension to God by continuing the release of a person's worldly attachments in favor of contemplating the oneness of God. Once a turner forgoes his physical body and connection to this life, his self may be seen to have passed away, and the passing of this self is thus seen as the "essential prerequisite to the *baqa'* [survival] of the selfless divine quantities placed in man by God" (Wilcox, 95). A deeper way of understanding *fana'* is the suggestion that creations of God, like men and women, possess no true reality of their own but rather are in a "continuous state of passing away into the eternal reality of God" (Wilcox, 96). Rumi believed in nothingness, this absence of state in which every creation was once molded from by God; this once again parallels the Plotinic emanation of Intellect originating as an image of The One. As explained by Saeed Zarrabi-Zadeh, the existence of creations emerges from opposing states, so that these oppositions both exist and do not exist through cancellation of each other. The state of nothingness emerges as a consequence of these oppositions, and this state serves as the "primary prerequisite of creaturely existence, and all things appear and come out from it towards existence and being" (Zarrabi-Zadeh, 34). Thus, in order for a person to return to this direct connection with God, he must return to the

original state of nothingness, *fana'*, in which his self may pass on and thus find annihilation in God.

Entering a state of *fana'* finds itself within sporadic descriptions throughout Rumi's poems. Sometimes, Rumi simply states a line or two about the beauty of non-existence while other times, he expresses these thoughts through longer poems. The poem *Buoyancy* renders Rumis' feelings about nothingness and a *lack of*. Although the poem reads fourteen stanzas long, only seven of those stanzas are presented below for this investigation. These seven stanzas are from the precise middle portion of the poem, passing over the introductory and final stanzas:

….

I had to clap and sing.
I used to be respectable and chaste and stable,
but who can stand in this strong wind
and remember those things?

A mountain keeps an echo deep inside itself.
That's how I hold your voice.

I am scrap wood thrown in your fire,
and quickly reduced to smoke.

I saw you and became empty.
This emptiness, more beautiful than existence,
it obliterates existence, and yet when it comes,
existence thrives and creates more existence!

The sky is blue. The world is a blind man
squatting on the road.

But whoever sees your emptiness
sees beyond blue and beyond the blind man.

….

> To praise is to praise
> how one surrenders
> to the emptiness.
> ….

The first stanza presented begins with the speaker explaining prior characteristics of himself: he used to clap and sing, and he used to be respectable, chaste, and stable. These last three descriptions may be related to desirable qualities. Any person would generally *want* to be respectable, chaste, and lead a stable life. However, these qualities may also be attributed to those belonging to this world, as they only truly matter within this current life. Despite the desirability of these characteristics, the speaker describes how they are not so powerful that they can withstand a "strong wind" that blows over. With this one strong wind, the speaker rhetorically questions how one can remember "those things," as reference to the desirable qualities. This stanza then establishes the riddance of desirable human qualities, ones which are truly only desirable in the physical world but which may easily be forgotten through interactions with a more powerful force.

In the second stanza, which consists only of two lines, the speaker metaphorically refers to his own body as a mountain holding an echo within itself. The second line of the stanza, "That's how I hold your voice," may be seen as the speaker keeping within himself "your voice," in which the voice may be assumed to be that of a higher power, presumably God or The One. In remarking how an echo is kept deep within the mountain, and metaphorically relating himself to the mountain, the speaker proclaims the existence of God's voice to be deep within himself: the significant feature of these lines is the word "deep," which implies that the existence of the powerful voice within the speaker, more powerful perhaps than his own existence, remains deep enough within him that only an action like intense contemplation may enable that voice to rise to

the surface. The next two lines, consisting of the third stanza, contains a similar essence to the first two stanzas in that it recognizes the existence of a powerful force that is addressed as the second-person subject "you." Once again utilizing a metaphoric relationship, the speaker claims to be a scrap wood that is thrown into "your" fire, consequently burning quickly and transforming into formless smoke. The use of the natural subject of fire parallels that of the strong winds in the first stanza, in which the speaker has become overwhelmed by the power of the natural force, which may be representative of God. This overpowering leaves the speaker formless, burnt to nothing but smoke, and entirely subdued by the fire. It is in this stanza that the concept of annihilation begins to serve as choreograph to the third turn of the *sama*, as the speaker essentially states that he, a piece of scrap wood, becomes entirely consumed by the fire.

The stanza that follows portrays the annihilation of the speaker even more explicitly as he fully addresses the absence of existence. In one simple sentence, the speaker reveals the immediate cause-and-effect relationship when he sees "you," the higher power: he "became empty." This process of becoming empty, hollow, or being a container of no substance, may be understood as the speaker wholly rendering himself to the higher power, a notion that is further substantiated through the following sentence: "This emptiness, more beautiful than existence, / it obliterates existence, and yet when it comes, / existence thrives and creates more existence!" There exists a binary relationship between emptiness and existence, one in which the empty form dominates and "obliterates" that of existence. The speaker describes this emptiness as more beautiful, powerful, and begetting than existence, so much so that through the presence of emptiness, existence continues to develop. This contradictory yet supplementary relationship between emptiness and existence that Rumi creates within this stanza exemplifies the assertion made by Saeed Zarrabi-Zadeh, as explained previously, in which the existence of creations

emerges from their opposing states, or what they are *not*, and that it is these oppositions which ultimately nullify each other. The speaker's recognition of the power that emptiness possesses over existence, and the two forces' concurrent development and nullification, demonstrates the speaker's entrance into the state of *fana'*, where his own self begins to pass away.

The fifth and sixth stanzas continue to emphasize the significance of emptiness as the speaker addresses the blue sky and metaphorically refers to the world as a blind man. The imagery of a blind man squatting on the road evokes emotions of humility, vulnerability, and oftentimes second-hand embarrassment on the part of those who see the blind man. In this scenario, however, it is the world, and thus everyone and everything in it, that is referred to as being the blind man. In creating this reference, Rumi implies that the blind man lacks perception of the blue sky above, regardless of whether or not he remains cognizant of its existence, while simultaneously chastening the domineering qualities of "the world." He continues this metaphor in the stanza that follows through addressing the higher entity "you" and its associated emptiness. Those who recognize the emptiness, the speaker states, will see "beyond blue and beyond the blind man." Here, the speaker does not intend for seeing "beyond" blue or the blind man as the ability to see more, but rather the ability to see past the experiences and emotions one undergoes when witnessing the blue sky or a blind man squatting on the side of a road. When applying the metaphor of the blind man as being the world, the speaker essentially states that recognition of God's emptiness allows for procession beyond what one thinks he or she knows; just as a blind man cannot witness the blue sky, the world cannot witness or begin to imagine what it is blind to before first conceding, and then welcoming, this blindness. Conceding to emptiness, then, signifies the process to which one begins to withdraw from the attachments and

constraints tying him to this world, returning to a state of nothingness, and annihilating himself

in God.

The seventh stanza offers a definition of the action of praising, a significant practice

when one performs *dhikr*: specifically, when a Muslim repetitively recites *subhanAllah, wa-*

alhamdudIllah, wa-la Ilah ha illa-Allah (Glory be to Allah and all praise be to Allah, there is

none worthy of worship except Allah). Praising, the speaker states, means "to praise / how one

surrenders / to the emptiness." The action is clearly associated with the running theme of

emptiness, in which praise does not simply refer to the expression of approval or admiration, but

rather is connected to the approval and admiration of surrendering to emptiness.

Acknowledgement of God, the speaker then claims, associates itself not only through

appraisement, but the appraisement of one's surrender to God's emptiness. This seventh stanza

consequently finalizes this advancing process of achieving annihilation, in which a person begins

first by forgetting those human qualities which are commonly desirable, becoming empty

through recognition of God, and achieving a level of contemplation that praises the surrendering

to this emptiness. In this manner, the one who practices annihilating oneself succeeds in

achieving the original state of nothingness, *fana'*, and is one step closer to passing on from his

worldly self and ascending in the levels of emanation to reuniting with God, The One.

After the completion of the third turning, the ritual enters into its final turning, in which

the eternal order is restored, matter reunites with The One, and "God Himself turns too"

(Fremantle, 332). Discussion of the fourth and final turn provides its own set of challenges, as

the experience is thought to be so intense and inward that a precise description of what exactly

the turners experience is nearly impossible to offer. As expressed in Plotinus' doctrine, The One

is "always present and we are present to it when we no longer contain differences. The One does

not aspire to us, to move around us; we aspire to it, to move around it" (O'Brien, 83). Moving around The One, God, consequently approaches the nearest explanation that one could offer regarding the fourth turn of the *sama*. A description, however, may be provided through the poetic choreography of an untitled poem written by Rumi:

> I am filled with you.
> Skin, blood, bone, brain, and soul.
> There's no room for lack of trust, or trust.
> Nothing in this existence but that existence.

This short poem encompasses the emotions and experience of being united, being one, with God. It exemplifies the final emanation of Plotinus' doctrine, in which unification with the One was not achieved through thought or intellect, but rather through a means that exceeded the extent of intellectual capabilities, transcending knowledge.

In the poem, the speaker does not specifically identify God, but rather simply speaks directly to Him by addressing him through second-person pronouns. He claims to be filled by The One, then elucidates this claim by listing out his bodily components that have been filled: his skin, blood, bone, brain, and soul. Every portion of himself is now occupied by not himself, but something bigger. The consistent binaries that appeared and continue to appear from the third turn once again emerges as the speaker states that there exists no room for lack of trust, nor does there exist room for trust. As explained in Plotinus' final emanation, everything is forgotten and every opposition cancels the other out, and this can be witnessed through the cancellation of the speaker's trust and lack of trust. The final line of the poem, then, follows suit in a similar paradoxical manner: "Nothing in this existence but that existence." What initially appears to be a contradictory statement becomes intelligible when one understands "that existence" to be the existence of God; then, the line reads that nothing exists but God, which parallels the first line as

an exemplification of the speaker being filled with the presence of The One to the extent of

nonexistence, with the exception of the existence of that which he is being filled with.

The four poems selected and analyzed for this investigation are not comprehensive

regarding the application of Rumi's poetry in exploring the Whirling Dervish *sama*; they do not

fully cover the extent to which Rumi's poetry choreographs the Sufi practice of *sama*. These

poems do, however, serve as a representation of the large collection of poems in the *Mathnawi*,

many of which find categorical placement within the context of the four turns of the *sama*,

serving as a guide to the spiritual experiences a practicing Dervish seeks to attain and undergo.

On the broader level of spiritual understanding, the four turns of the *sama* correspond to

Plotinus' theory of four emanations. The grounding of the *sama* in the reality of Plotinus' theory

demonstrates the transcending characteristics of the religious endeavors, regardless of time or

place, to reunite with some higher entity. Significantly, the determination of stages within the

theory of emanation provides the structuring to which Rumi's poetic thought establishes itself.

While similarities between Rumi's philosophical thought and Plotinus' theological works are

acknowledged, the works consulted for the writing of this thesis do not state that Rumi was

familiar with Plotinus' works. Yet, the existing relationship between Rumi's mystic thought and

Plotinus' comprehensive doctrine demonstrates the reality of how mystical thoughts serve to be

an important theological and spiritual means for traditions and practical beliefs, both belonging

to that of Sufi Muslims and other religious practices. Ultimately, the transcension of matter,

through the four stages of emanation, to the One defines the motivations behind the process of

the *sama*. While the experiences one undergoes through the *sama* requires intense practice and

cannot simply be encountered through movement alone, Rumi's poetry demonstrates a literary

embodiment of the experiences one has the ability to encounter. Even through a non-religious

perspective, Rumi's poetry evokes a sense of spirituality and wholeness among its readers, allowing the *Mathnawi* to persist as a text long after its first compilation. Its rhythmic language and universal themes prove both undeniable and irresistible to many of those who choose to truly investigate the text. Further areas of exploration may, in fact, seek to expand upon this language and universality by connecting it to a broader context, beyond the practice of *sama*. Questions of Qur'anic influence and inclusion within Rumi's poetry may arise and provoke additional inquiry. Or, one may question and conduct an investigation of the parallels between Rumi's mystical thought, as demonstrated within his poetry, and varying other branches of religions that similarly abide by Plotinus' doctrine. Another potential exploration surrounds the reverse process of the *sama* (as explicated throughout this thesis), the experiences one undergoes when returning from ecstasy, and if Rumi's poetry also discusses these meanings and purposes of return.

A number of additional areas of investigation may be pursued, as the scope of Rumi's poetry, the influences it has drawn throughout history as well as that which it has been influenced by, stretches far beyond what simply this exploration considers. Even so, the Whirling Dervish *sama* serves to be enlightening discourse on the influences which mystical thought continues to invoke upon religious practices, long past the first dictation of any poem or the first iteration of any theory. The beauty, belief, and history of the *sama* continues to influence the experience of many followers and may be witnessed by any of those spectators who demonstrate interest. No matter who reads Rumi's poetry, for what purpose, or with what intentions, the poems' themes of love, joy, and divine unity are attainable spiritual and philosophical experiences to any person who chooses to open his mind and heart to them. While the *sama* is a dedicated practice which many Dervishes religiously execute before truly experiencing unity with the One, the movement of dancing itself, religious or not, serves as a certain emotional and

spiritual purge for both religious and nonreligious participants. Despite the common conception of relating dancing to musical notes, instruments, or voices, Rumi's poetry demonstrates that some music embodies a different form of movement, one related to text. Dancing, regardless to what sound or by which participant, ultimately serves as a form of one's own acceptance and release: as said perfectly but nobody other than Rumi himself, sometimes in life a person must just dance, for "this dance is the joy of existence."

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