penultimate, etc., looping back, so to say, in the series a, b, c, d, e . . . . . e, d, c, b, a. Safavi's analysis is based on a comparison and calibration of the headings that begin each 'section', and the mentioning of certain names or themes. He takes this as evidence that the *Masnavi* was composed in a structure of organised symmetry based upon parallelism and chiasmus, and that the work's meaning is buried esoterically in such an enfolded structure. However, the theory of ring composition applied to the *Masnavi* is perhaps a little forced. The 'sections' of the text were formed after the composition by a later hand, and indeed are often problematic in that they interrupt the flow of the narratives and/or discourses (as frequently observed in my Notes). Safavi and Weightman assert that there is organised symmetry, but they do not explain what the purpose of such an esoteric structure was, and thus it is unhelpful as a theory. What, for example was being hidden in the enclosed structures of ring composition? It is indeed a fearful symmetry if it is just symmetrical to be symmetrical.

While many agree that the poem has elements of genius in it, Rumi's *Masnavi* has often been characterised as in fact *lacking* structure. For example, the German scholar Helmut Ritter commented on Rumi's

> peculiar looseness in the association of ideas, which almost resembles a flight of thought. The relationship between the tale and the accompanying moral is also very curious. The point in view is sometimes neither allegory nor moralising fable, but that the tales should simply arouse the interest of the listener for what is to come, though the degree of coherence is but slight. One expects to gather the moral from the essential point of the story, but this is by no means always the case.[38]

However, it is possible to look at the text in another way, by searching not for a coherent sequence of narrative and didactic themes, nor for a neat macro-structure by the application of numerology, but rather by a close reading of the text, by focusing on the *dynamic* structure of its eloquence and rhetorical power, at the micro-level of verse, story and discourse. The following explanation hinges on the idea that Rumi constantly switches his 'point of view'[39] in order to draw the reader under the influence of his imaginative enchantment, and it is in this state of enchantment that his alchemy (which is a metaphorical language

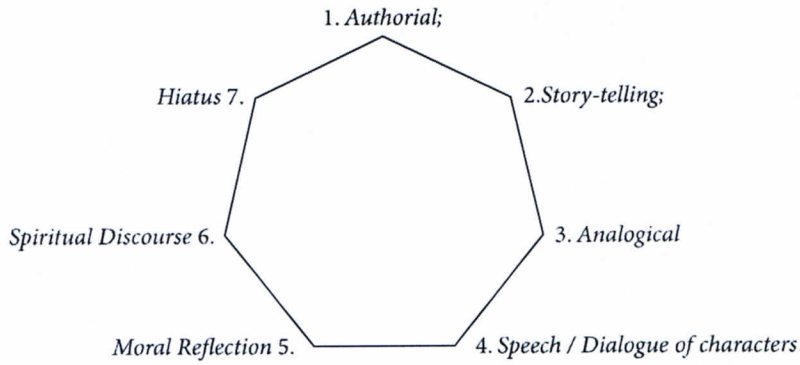
from the Introduction to Alan Williams's The Masnavi of Rumi Book I © Alan Williams 2020

he frequently uses) is effected. He is a poet in constant motion, moving through many directions at once. This way of looking at his *Masnavi* affords an insight into how he achieved something different from what came before him in the *masnavis* of Sanā'i and Attār. Rumi's advance in literary technique lies in his greatly increasing the fluidity of story-telling and didacticism by frequent changing of voices or registers in the text that stimulates a transformation of the reader's imagination. The process takes place in non-technical language (that, not in philosophy, logic or metaphysics) but in a quite natural, ordinary way, so that its goes largely unnoticed by the reader swept up in the flow of the text: it is the basis of what I have referred to as a sevenfold framework of the *Masnavi*'s principal 'voices', registers or modes of address.[40] Rumi's writing style is dynamic and polyphonic. As the *Masnavi* unfolds, there is an increase in the speed and subtlety with which the different voices change and overlap, and passages are developed in combinations of several voices. It enables Rumi to be an elusive poet, moving faster than the mind's eye can perceive, yet there is something deeply familiar about how he moves through the text. The reason for this familiarity is that it uses musical and rhetorical forms of intensification that are found in all oral and written texts, including the Quran.

When T.S. Eliot distinguished between 'dramatic blank verse and blank verse employed for epical, philosophical, meditative and idyllic purposes', he was making a point about how 'the dependence of verse upon speech is much more direct in dramatic poetry than in any other'.[41] In this sense, Rumi's *Masnavi* is written in *dramatic verse* and somewhat resembles a Shakespeare play since, as Eliot puts it, 'in dramatic verse the poet is speaking in one character after another . . . It remains the language not of one person, but of a world of persons.'[42] The *Masnavi* is dramatic, conversational, often spoken in what must be the everyday language of his time. Even though it has the given artifice of a metrical, poetic literary creation, it takes the form of a multi-vocal drama, and therefore has an important element of polyphony rather than monotony, so that it resembles a company of actors or musicians performing on a stage. Rumi uses not just a great variety of characters in his stories, but also a range of different voices and instruments in the actual speaking of the *Masnavi*. This amounts to a development that is relatively new to the literary

form of mystical *masnavi*, intended to intensify the didactic narrative. Built upon the principles of rhetoric and musical improvisation, a major element of his writing is derived from a stylistic feature of the Quran. He uses different types of vocabulary, ranging from the technical language of philosophical discourse to the lyrical exploration of the cycle of nature. Rumi uses the changes of language between Persian and Arabic to great effect, and within both he makes shifts of tense of the verb, and ranges between all the verbal moods, including, characteristically, the imperative! Often the poetic features of his style are related to this Quranic influence of his immersion in the language of the Quran since childhood, especially in his shifting from narrative to soliloquy, dialogue, reflection and ecstasy. This process of shifting personal and temporal relationships between the characters of the text and the reader is a distinctive feature of Arabic literary and Quranic style. In Arabic literary analysis it is termed *iltifāt*, which means literally 'turning one's face towards', and refers to the rhetorical, stylistic device of 'transition' of person of the verbal subject and other grammatical elements. It is not surprising that such a feature of grammatical and stylistic transition has gone unnoticed in the *Masnavi,* for, as M.A.S. Abdel Haleem has explained in his exhaustive discussion of instances of *iltifāt* in the *Quran*,[43] many modern Quranic scholars have overlooked it in the *Quran*. This, I would argue, is therefore not a style original to Rumi, but one that comes out of his own scriptural heritage as a Muslim, and which is present embryonically in the mystical *masnavis* of his predecessors Sanā'i and Attār, but which Rumi brought to the a high level of realisation.

Whilst the grammatical shifts may be of theoretical interest to linguists, the shifts of point of view which they actually entail in the *Masnavi* are of actual practical interest to the anyone interested in Rumi's virtuosic literary skill and mystical poetics. Rumi's use of *iltifāt* in the *Masnavi* as a method of changing of the register or 'voice' of his poetry is not only a distinctive but has also been a much imitated style. This switching of voices can be described in the musical analogy of polyphony or modulation – a plurality of voices, or transition through different modes of discourse. These 'voices' are here presented as following a cyclical sequence, which resembles that of a musical octave. Diagrammatically, proceeding clockwise, we have a cycle thus:



6.1 The Authorial Voice

By definition all authors use their authorial voice all of the time, but I mean to denote that authoritative register in which Rumi begins, mediates and often ends main sections of the *Masnavi,* addressing the reader or listener directly. This is not the same as the formal voice of the Arabic and Persian Prefaces that precede each volume, where the register is elevated almost to the level of a transcendent voice. The most famous passage of the authorial voice in the *Masnavi* is the so-called *Neynāme* or 'Song of the Reed' (vv. 1–35); another example later in this book is vv.1888–1922, and a third example is a passage of the authorial voice in dialogue with itself, which I have referred to in the commentarial Notes as the *Shamsnāme*, (vv. 109–143). Rumi returns to this manner of speaking throughout the *Masnavi*, sometimes briefly as an aside to the reader in the middle of telling a story, as other Persian poets do occasionally, but none perhaps use it in such a sustained and intense manner as Rumi.

Such an authorial voice is quite different from the introductory panegyric passages we find in most Persian *masnavis* and epic poems: as mentioned in the commentary to the phrase *Praise be to God alone* ... in the Preface, the *Masnavi* lacks such a section of praise of God and laudation of the Prophet. In Rumi's authorial voice there is always an implied second person addressed in the present tense, alternating between 'You' (*tu*), that is, God, and 'you' (*tu*), that is, all who will ever read or hear his words. Passages written from this point of view are serious, yearning, melancholic and admonitory, as they introduce and

close stories. There is also always a turning point. as Rumi moves from this austere role as sheikh of the *Masnavi* to that of the storyteller, as in v. 35–6 when his language moves from the didactic present into the fabulous past:

35 Reflect upon this story, my dear friends;
its meaning is the essence of our state.
In former times there was a king who was
the ruler of this world and of the next . . .

Similarly, at the end of this story we see a movement in the opposite direction, back into the present authorial voice. In vv. 223—247 he is directly addressing the reader to justify the king's poisoning of the goldsmith and the 'curing' of the slave-girl's pain, in order to correct 'your' potentially wrong understanding:

You thought he'd acted in impurity –
can cleansing leave a stain in purity? (v. 232)

and later,

You fashion your opinions from yourself;
you've fallen very far, take utmost care! (v.247)

Without missing a beat, Rumi moves immediately to another story:

There was a greengrocer – he had a parrot,
a sweetly singing bird of verdant voice . . .

6.2 The Story-telling Voice

When changing the voice or point of view to that of story-telling, not only does the verb tense switch from present to past, but there is also the bringing on stage of characters, who may be human, or just as likely animals, birds, insects, plants, and even inanimate entities (pillars, chickpeas, the breeze, the sea). We are most familiar with this voice, as we have listened to it from childhood, with its lulling, comforting effect, even as it is announced 'Once upon a time . . .' 'A long, long time ago . . .' (Persian *yeki bud, yeki nabud*) – taking us into the realm the historian of religion Mircea Eliade once dubbed

illud tempus, that mythical time of yore, where, at least according to Eliade, 'sacred space' is located. The story-telling voice is usually lively and witty, for its purpose is to enchant and entertain. The main story is often interrupted by either a sub-story or by one of the other voices below. So, some stories take many hundreds of verses to complete because of Rumi's constant self-interruption. For example, the story of the Bedouin and his wife, begun at v. 2255, is not completed until some 700 verses later, having been interrupted by numerous deviations and three separate sub-stories. The story-telling voice is also constantly punctuated by a feature that is so much a standard of Rumi's compositional style that it can be seen as a voice in its own right, namely the *analogical.*

6.3 The Analogical Voice

The *analogical* voice appears to interrupt the narration of a story: in fact it is a pivotal stage in the poet's development and elucidation of his text. Usually the analogy addresses a point made in the previous verse, introducing wit and clarity through an example, or examples in a series of 'one-liners'.[44] One of the first appearances of this analogical register comes after just five verses of the first story: it illustrates the meaning of v. 40 by turning to two discrete analogies, then returning to the story in v. 43. I quote all four verses to show the shifts at work:

[main story] Now when he'd bought her and he had enjoyed her,
by heaven's fate the slave-girl turned to sickness.
[analogy] A man possessed an ass but had no saddle;
he got a saddle—wolves had got the ass!
Another had a pitcher but no water;
he found the water, but he broke the pitcher!
[main story] The king called in the doctors all around,
'The lives of both of us are in your hands. (v.40–43)

The reader may notice the switch to analogy in the modulation from the main narrative to a more general, proverbial tone. Here the tense remains the same in the switch; elsewhere it may change from past to present, as in the following example of a mid-verse transition from story to analogy a little later on in the

first story. Here a divine physician diagnoses the cause of the slave-girl's falling to sickness, and the text says:

[main story] Her pain was not from black or yellow bile:
[analogy] the scent of wood is sent out in its smoke. (v.107)

There is a moral point here, but it is merely hinted at in lightly painted imagery. After such an analogy, the poet may return to the story or, just as often, move to the fourth or fifth type of voice, which we shall come to shortly. A third possibility is that the analogy can turn into a whole sub-story interrupting the main story. Many of the minor stories in the *Masnavi* are just such sub-stories which, like analogies, have suggested themselves to Rumi in the act of composition. The following brief and amusing example is virtually a sub-story, from the third story of the first book, 'The Jewish King Who Killed Christians', and it is at first sight confusing. Rumi begins by describing the hateful character of the Jewish king (v. 325–38), but after only four verses, he apparently wanders off . . .:

[main story] There was a cruel king among the Jews,
a Christian-cleansing enemy of Jesus.
It was the time of Jesus and his era,
for he was Moses' soul and Moses his.
[comment] The cross-eyed king divided up those two
divine companions on the path of God.
[analogy #1] A master told his cross-eyed servant, 'Come,
go down and get that bottle from the outhouse.'
The cross-eyed man said, 'Which of those two bottles
shall I bring you?—Explain to me in full.'
The master said, 'There aren't two bottles; go,
leave off your squinting, don't be seeing double!'
He said, 'O master don't be so sarcastic!'
The master said, 'Try breaking one of them!'
[narrative & sub-comment] When he broke one, both disappeared from view:
a man goes cross-eyed from such lust and anger.
There was one bottle: two appeared to him:
he broke one and there was no other bottle.

[comment] Desire and anger make men go cross-eyed,
for they distort the spirit from uprightness.
When craving comes, then virtue is concealed;
a hundred veils divide the heart and sight.

[analogy #2 & comment] A judge allows corruption in his heart
– how can he tell the victim from oppressor?

[main story resumed] The King was so cross-eyed from Jewish hatred
that we cry out, 'O mercy, Lord have mercy!'
He killed a hundred thousand innocents,
saying, 'I'm the bastion of Moses' faith.'

I quote this at length because it reveals the nested nature of the analogical story within the main one, and shows how the reader must be attentive to tell the one from the other in order to grasp Rumi's point.

Rumi's use of analogy is fundamental to his compositional style and more importantly to his spiritual teaching. For him, the world is a multitude of reflections of the attributes, or divine names, of God: it is the world of similarity (*'ālam-e mesāl*), and phenomena are real not in themselves but only in so far as they constitute likenesses, of their infinite creator. The Persian/Arabic word for 'example' and 'likeness' (*masal*, pl. *amsāl*) is also the word for 'fable and proverbial saying', of which Rumi's analogies are (often freshly-minted) coinages. Therefore it is part of Rumi's teaching to coax readers out of the misapprehension that the world is made up of a multitude of separate selves apart from God, into the knowledge that all reality subsists only in relation to God. In this sense, the constant shifting out of conventional narrative into often oblique and challenging analogies has a didactic purpose: to affirm that while meaning may be expressed in story form, these are ultimately interchangeable and disposable, as meaning transcends language.

6.4 The Voice of Speech and Dialogue of Characters

Rumi often tells his stories through speeches and dialogues by and between his characters. It might be thought that these are just part of normal *story-telling*. In the *Masnavi*, however, they have a voice of their own: a poetic device that makes it impossible for the reader to see when the speech of a character begins

and ends, and when the poet moves out of story-telling into other voices. Medieval Persian used no punctuation to indicate quotation, and there are only verbal directions to make it clear who is speaking, often subtle or absent in the pared down language of poetry. Having put the reader's imagination into the harness of a story, the voice of *speech and dialogue* enables the poet to put on and discard multiple personas and, by a literary sleight of hand, to leave readers feeling that they are still *in* the story when in fact Rumi has moved into another mode of speaking. He often tells his stories through speeches and dialogues by and between his characters. It might be thought that these features are just part of the normal *story-telling* voice, but in Rumi's hands they are a distinctive voice of their own, as *speech* has a triple potential: it creates vivid drama and realism in the story; second, it allows the poet to give full range to his imagination in an endless supply of new voices. Third, and perhaps most interestingly, speech and dialogue are a literary device that makes it difficult for the reader to see when the speech of a character begins and ends, and when the poet moves out of storytelling into other voices. Rumi layers speeches within speeches many times over – a classic instance being at the beginning of the story of 'The Merchant and the Parrot' (v. 1557 ff., quoted in §6.6). The story begins with a merchant playfully asking his parrot what she would like him to bring back for her from India. The Persian parrot (1. 1559b) replies, in a long, speech, instructing her merchant owner what he should say in a speech to the Indian parrots, which will include a speech by the Persian parrot, which she duly recites to him to relay to them. Thus we have three sets of nested speeches. In the course of this third speech, Rumi moves imperceptibly out of the 'parrot-speech' into the voice of his own brief moral reflection. In just a few more verses the voice seems to change again into a that of spiritual discourse, as he meditates for ten couplets on the exquisite oppression of the divine beloved (1. 1575–84). Here, as so often in the *Masnavi*, the effect on the audience is of a dizzying disorientation, so that the reader loses the sense of who is speaking, and occasionally even who is listening.

6.5 The Voice of Moral Reflection or Homily

Rumi's voice of moral reflection is similar to his authorial voice, but it is addressed to the 'you' of the human audience rather than alternating between

the human and divine. It is identifiable by advisory and proscriptive statements, and by frequent use of the imperative mood. Often his words are inspired by considerations of religious morality and tradition, or by quotation from the Quran and from *Hadith* literature. The point of view is that of looking backwards and surveying tradition for illumination of present values, and therefore both the past and present tense are used here. Above all there is a logical, thematic connection between the sequence of verses in this voice, which may be likened to the linear or horizontal trajectory of story-telling. It is 'horizontal' in that, just as elements of story-lines take off into dizzying analogies in a new trajectory, so moral reflection seems to lead up to the vertical trajectory of the spiritual discourse that often follows.

6.6 The Voice of Spiritual Discourse

The spiritual discourse of the *Masnavi* is like the analogical voice in which Rumi also excels. It almost always follows on from a moral reflection, as a sudden development. However, the poetic conceit is that it is not primarily addressed to humankind but rather to God on a 'vertical' trajectory of flight from this limited world to absorption in an ecstatic state beyond. It is characterized by fast-flowing, imaginative associations, as if each couplet is no sooner pronounced than it is expendable and replaced, like water over a waterfall. Each couplet has the quality of an impassioned cry or plea rather than a statement, as if the poet is drowning or soaring to express passion felt for the divine beloved (there is frequently a temptation to use exclamation marks in translation).

An example is needed of how Rumi leads the reader from the simplicity of a story, and from the sobriety of a moral reflection, to witness the passion of ecstatic flight with him. The passage selected is the tale of the Merchant who goes to India, with a message from his own caged parrot to the wild parrots in the Indian jungle.[45] It is useful to have an extended quotation that cycles through the multiple transitions, to convey the patterns and fluidity of this voice of spiritual discourse.

From v. 1557 the story quickly leads into a speech by the merchant's parrot, imprisoned as she is in a cage (v. 1559b). At the point we take up the story the

parrot takes over the discourse and puts speech within speech (v. 1562–4) as she dictates to the merchant what he should say to the parrots of India, where the parrot begins to question the justice of her plight:

The parrot said, 'When you see parrots there,
explain to them my plight and say to them,
"A certain parrot's desperate to see you,
who by the fate of heaven is in my prison.
She sends you greetings and demands some justice,
and asks for help and means of guidance from you.
She said, 'Is it correct that I should languish,
give up the ghost and die here all alone?
And is this right, that I'm in painful chains
while you can flit about from bush to tree?
Is loyalty of friends to be like this
– I in this jail, and you in beds of roses?
O sirs, will you remember this poor bird,
and in the meadow drink a draft to me!

At this point it would appear that the pretence of the speaker being a mere parrot is forgotten, and Rumi begins to speak with his own voice moral for a few verses (1. 1569–74):

Friends' memory of their friend is most auspicious,
more so when one is Layli, one Majnun.
O partners of your own beloved fair ones!
I drink from cups filled with my own dear blood.
Drink just one cup of wine in memory of me
if you do not see fit to give me justice.
Or when you've drunk, pour on the dust a drink
in memory of me grovelling in the dust.
Where then, I wonder, is that bond and oath?
Where are the vows of those with lips like sugar?

It seems that when he says in the final verse: 'when You behave oppressively . . .' a switch occurs, from the horizontal to the vertical trajectory, as the next four

couplets of the following passage abandon the narrative and are addressed in the second person singular of the divine You, and not to a flock of parrots in an Indian jungle. Each verse then builds in intensity, until there is another transition (*iltifāt*):

A servant is dismissed for bad behaviour:
when *You* behave oppressively, what's different?
The harm You do in anger and in strife
is sweeter than an ecstasy of harp strings.
Your cruelty is better than a victory,
Your scolding's more desired than life itself.
This is Your fire – what does Your light look like?
This is the funeral – what's Your wedding like?
As for the sweetness which Your violence holds,
and for Your subtlety, none plumb Your depths.

An instance of transition now occurs, as the object of attention is transformed from 'You' (*tu*) into He (*u*) for just two verses, and the 'I' and 'me' of the first person are reintroduced:

I weep and then I fear He will believe me,
and then from kindness moderate His violence.
His violence and His gentleness I love so
– how wonderful, I love these two extremes!

The focus of attention now turns, almost imperceptibly, to the self of the speaker, who refers to himself as 'I' and then 'he' through the analogy of the thorn-eating nightingale who becomes a dragon (l. 1581–83):

If I forsake this thorn-bush for the garden,
I'll sing for sadness like the nightingale.
How wonderful, this nightingale who lifts
his beak to eat the thorns within the rosebeds!
What kind of nightingale is this? A dragon!
In love all bitter things are sweet to him.

Now that identity has been blurred by successive transitions, the reader sees that the whole tenor of the passage has been leading to the implosion of the

self in the pain of self-surrender, so that the final verse (1584) is virtually an invocation and remembrance (*zekr*) of the divine presence, or even an outburst of ecstatic paradox (*shaṭḥ*):

He's lover of the whole: He is the whole.
He's Lover of Himself: He seeks His Love.'"'

Rumi now gathers himself together, and the next passage begins in a reflective mood at v. 1585a:

Such is the story of the soul – the parrot . . .

This is the voice of hiatus. But Rumi cannot curb his ecstasy for the moment, and it takes him a few more verses to come to a halt, until he slams on the brakes in v. 1594:

Leave off explaining this, avert your face!
Don't breathe another word, '*And God knows best*'

and he returns to the voice of the story-teller in the following verse:

Let us retrace our steps from here, my friends,
back to the bird, the merchant and to Hind.

Since v. 1565, the text has cycled through many voices, including narrative and soliloquy (1565–8, 1570–3), analogy and moral reflection (1569, 1574), spiritual discourse (1575–84, 1587–93), a connecting authorial voice (1585–6) and hiatus (1594–5).

6.7 Hiatus

The 'voice' of hiatus signals the limit of spiritual discourse and the return to silence.[46] In the hiatus Rumi questions the wisdom of continuing to speak, having reached the brink of incoherence because of the inexpressibility of what he is trying to evoke. Sometimes he says he cannot say more because of the reader's incapacity to understand, as in v. 18 of the very opening of the poem:

The raw can't grasp the state of one who's cooked,
then words must be cut short – and so farewell!

Sometimes Rumi wishes for silence to reign, as being more expressive of 'inner' truths than sensual words[47]. Sometimes he says he does not *wish* to say more because, beyond this, things should remain hidden, when he commands in vv. 142–3:

> Don't seek out trials and griefs and shedding blood!
> From now on, no more talk of Shams of Tabriz!
> There is no end to this. Begin again,
> and go recite the ending of this tale.

Sometimes he says that he is expressly *forbidden* by higher powers to say more. As Fatemeh Keshavarz explains, at times, in the lyric poems, divine possessiveness 'forbids the poetic discourse from publishing the secrets of love'; she refers to instances when Rumi is told, or even physically forced, to desist from uttering more.[48] In the *Masnavi* we find such a statement in v. 3835:

> I stop, for if my speech much more imparts
> the hardest stones will bleed, not only hearts.
> It's not from hardness if the hearts don't bleed,
> it's carelessness, distraction and ill-fortune.

6.8 A Cumulative Polyphony

The above schema of different 'voices' is offered just to give some idea of the dynamic, polyphonic poetics in the *Maṣnavi*. As the *Masnavi* progresses, the speed with which the different voices change and overlap increases and grows more subtle; passages are formed in more complex combinations of plural voices, with the transition from story to ecstasy taking place easily in just a few lines or within the speech of one character. The idea of so-called 'voices' and 'registers' here is just an explanatory tool to introduce the idea that Rumi writes in a modulated and musically advanced way, across the many octaves of his great instrument.

Rumi taught that intellectual knowledge and aesthetic subtlety are not the goals of the path. The task of the teacher is to give instruction in how to be free from psychological imprisonment in the self-regarding, carnal self. Rumi takes his readers to the edges of their imaginations, and thence to silence. Metaphor