Reading Rumi:

The Collapse of the Real, the Imaginal, and the Literary in Jalal al-Din Rumi’s *Masnavî i-Ma’navî*

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Abstract

Maulana Jalaluddin Balkhi (1207-1273), known by most Western readers by the name Rumi, was a mystical poet who wrote two major works, the *Masnavi i-Ma’navi* (“Rhyming Couplets of Profound Spiritual Meaning”; also called the *Mathnawi*) and the *Diwan-i Shams-i Tabrizi*. He also wrote (or dictated) three smaller works the *Fihi ma fihi* (“In it is what is in it”), *Majalis-i sab’ah* (“Seven Sessions”), and a short collection of 145 personal letters that he wrote to princes and noblemen, the *Makatib*.¹ The most famous of these works and the most extensively studied by modern scholars is the *Masnavi*. In general, scholars agree that the *Masnavi* lacks any overarching structure, and thus they focus on reading for specific themes, ideas, and images, instead complete stories or the work as a whole. A recent book, *Rumi’s Mystical Design: Reading the Mathnawi, Book One* (2009) by Seyed Ghahreman Safavi and Simon Weightman, identifies an organizational structure that orders every level of text. This thesis proposes to read the *Masnavi* in a new way using Safavi and Weightman’s theory of organization by parallelism and chiasmus. I identify several modalities through which the *Masnavi* enacts the Sufi Path and, through this, invites readers to transform themselves through a relationship with the text. I compare the openings of each of the *Masnavi*’s six books, charting a progression on the Sufi Path and varying levels of union between the lover and the Beloved through narrative development, metaphor(s), and performative literary elements. I then apply my method reading the *Masnavi* to two Persian miniature paintings, “Dancing Dervishes” and “A Prince Enthroned” in order to understand how artists re-create and re-imagine the Rumi and the *Masnavi* by visualizing its journey, teaching, and imagery.

Chapter 1: Framing the *Masnavi*

Most readers of the *Masnavi* approach the text as the random manifestation of poetic and spiritual genius. The text appears structurally to be almost entirely random, like a winding train of thought that readers must follow without knowing where they are going. Rumi often begins one story, only to apparently become distracted by another idea, theme, or story, which leads him to another thought, and so on, until he eventually returns to the original story. Though individual lines and passages are recognized for both their aesthetic and intellectual value, the work as a whole is usually dismissed as incoherent and disorganized. Because of this, most readings of the *Masnavi* focus on smaller sections or on drawing together discrete lines and passages that are connected thematically.

The lack of an easily identifiable organizational structure appears to support the claim that the text was produced almost haphazardly, as the unedited manifestation of divine or poetic inspiration, which is exactly what stories about the creation of the *Masnavi* claimed happened. Rumi’s early biographers say that he undertook the writing of *Masnavi* at the request of one of his disciples, Husamuddin Chelebi, who had been studying the major didactic works of Sana’i and ‘Attar, when he realized that he had no such work from his own master. It is said that Rumi responded by reciting or by pulling a slip of paper from his turban on which he had written the first eighteen lines of the *Masnavi* which came to be known as the “Tale of the Reed.” From this point on, Rumi would recite his poetry and Husamuddin would write it down and recite it back to him. The writing of the *Masnavi* was begun in 1260 or 1261 and continued until Rumi’s death in 1273. Because the sixth volume ends in the middle of a story, Rumi probably died before finishing it (although at least some scholars have suggested that this sudden ending was
intentional). While the *Diwan* was devoted to Shams, Rumi’s own spiritual master, the *Masnavi* was inspired by Husamuddin. Rumi called it, *Husami Namah*, the Book of Husam.\(^3\)

The *Masnavi* presents itself as an educational text. *Masnavi* (also transliterated *mathnawi*) means simply “rhyming couplets,” and is a Persian poetic form that has been used since the tenth century. It is a preferred form for longer, didactic works because the rhyme is internal to and changes every verse, making it simpler and easier for the poet to use.\(^4\) Thus, the text’s genre alone tells the reader to expect the text to be educational. Furthermore, the voice that the narrator frequently adopts is that of a teacher speaking to his students, a group that comes to include the reader. If the *Masnavi* does appear to be structured by anything, it is a desire to educate and guide its readers. Franklin D. Lewis suggests that the organization, tone, and teaching of the *Masnavi* were dictated in large part by Rumi’s audience. He writes:

> Rumi brings to bear a not inconsiderable erudition in his lectures, but wears it lightly, illustrating his points with entertaining, instructive and memorable tales, drawing together disparate themes and sources in rhizomic fashion, keeping the listener rooted to the theme without the listener even realizing where the argument is leading until it arrives. His teaching are carefully tailored to his audience, and would not have been formed this way had his audience been strictly scholars or theosophists ...\(^5\)

Like a teacher who enters in the classroom with a lesson in mind, but who lets him- or herself be guided by the response of the class, the *Masnavi* works to engage readers in order to eventually lead them to the conclusions of its lessons. The text seems more alive and more urgent because of the way the stories seem to unfold for the benefit of the reader, who becomes a listener in the presence of a spiritual master. The rambling journey of reading the *Masnavi*, the way, “the verses lead one into the other, and the most heterogeneous thoughts are woven together by word

\(^3\) Iqbal, *The Life and Work of Jalal al-Din Rumi*, 175.  
associations and loose threads of stories,” appears to be the clear result of the teacher’s creative process.⁶

Rumi scholars approach and discuss the poet and his work in a variety of ways and with a variety of theoretical frameworks, though the major scholarly works tend to construct arguments about Rumi’s imagery, theology, and teachings through disjointed readings of his texts. This is perhaps only natural considering the understanding that his work is unstructured and disorganized. Annemarie Schimmel, the author of many books on Rumi and Sufism (notably, for my work, The Triumphal Sun: A Study of the Works of Jalaloddin Rumi (1993), Rumi’s World: The Life and Work of the Great Sufi Poet (2001), and Mystical Dimensions of Islam (1975)), is a paradigmatic example of the way many scholars write about Rumi, the Masnavi, and his thought and poetry more generally. Schimmel sprinkles lines taken from all of his works throughout her text, guided only by the theme or subject of her chapter. She makes little effort to situate those lines in their context, such as the book or larger discourses where they can be found, because she does not believe that the Masnavi possesses any real structure. To understand what the Masnavi is trying to say, she picks themes and theological out of it and Rumi’s other works and strings them together to make an argument. Similarly, in The Life and Work of Jalal-ud-Din Rumi, Afzal Iqbal makes no attempt to summarize the text, but chooses passages almost at random and comments on them as a way to explore and understand Rumi’s theological ideas.⁷ William C. Chittick’s The Sufi Path of Love collects translations from all of Rumi’s work and places them next to each other with only short analyses of a specific theme or image as context. Rumi: Past and Present, East and West: The Life, Teaching and Poetry of Jalal al-Din Rumi by Franklin D. Lewis presents the Masnavi under the chapter title, “The Teachings,” and attempts to “sketch”

⁶ Schimmel, The Triumphal Sun, 35.
⁷ He writes, “Even the best of summaries would do serious damage to the work. We could only attempt an outline, often using the words and employing the idiom of the author.” Iqbal, The Life and Work of Jalal al-Din Rumi, 175.
some of the main themes in much the same way as Schimmel and Chittick.\(^8\) Out of this scholarship has emerged a variety of popular translations and adaptions of Rumi’s poetry that typically present his poetry as short poems of no more than a few lines, devoid of any larger framework.\(^9\)

Some scholars approach Rumi’s work differently. For example, Mahdi Tourage’s book, \textit{Rumi and the Hermeneutics of Eroticism} investigates entire stories from the \textit{Masnavi}. Although Fatemeh Keshavarz, in \textit{Reading Mystical Lyric: The Case of Jalal al-Din Rumi}, does not deal with the \textit{Masnavi} itself, but rather the \textit{Divan-e Shams-e Tabrizi}, she does advocate for a reading of the entire corpus of \textit{ghazals} as a unified whole.\(^10\) Margaret A. Mills, in an article title, “Folk Tradition in the \textit{Masnavi} and the \textit{Masnavi} in folk tradition,” investigates the text’s “intended status as orally received” and does some interesting work on the shifting subjectivities of speaker and audience that emerge throughout it, but even she does not find an “overarching frame narrative” that might bind the text together.\(^11\) Out of all of this scholarship, of which I have described just a few examples, a pervasive trend emerges to read Rumi’s poetry in pieces (and occasionally through entire discourses, but never the text as a whole) as a way of organizing and clarifying his teachings, theology, and imagery. Only one book presents a counter argument to this method of reading.

And it does seem strange, despite this apparent scholarly consensus about how to read and understand Rumi and his work, that the poet would have chosen to completely disregard the larger organizational structures of the \textit{Masnavi}. Considering his gifts as a poet, about which there

\(^8\) Lewis, \textit{Rumi: Past and Present, East and West}, 394.
\(^9\) Examples of this include, but are not limited to: \textit{Rumi: The Book of Love: Poems of Ecstasy and Longing} by Coleman Barks, \textit{Rumi’s Little Book of Life: The Garden of the Soul, the Heart, and the Spirit} by Maryam Mafi, \textit{Rumi: Swallowing the Sun} by Franklin Dean Lewis, and \textit{Rumi Daylight: A Daybook of Spiritual Guidance} by Camille Adams and Kabir E. Helminski.
\(^11\) Mills, “Folk Tradition in the \textit{Masnavi} and the \textit{Masnavi} in Folk Tradition,” 138, 140-141.
is no question, he should have been able and ought to have chosen to write the text in the most effective way possible.

I am proposing a new way of reading the Masnavi that is synoptic, structural, and comparative, instead of purely thematic, aesthetic, or theoretical. This reading emerges out of a conversation with the book Rumi’s Mystical Design: Reading the Mathnawi, Book One (2009) by Seyed Ghahreman Safavi and Simon Weightman, which was the first to identify the Masnavi’s general structure of the text. Safavi and Weightman also read the text synoptically, and were able to identify a highly ordered but hidden structure based on both parallelism and chiasmus that organizes all the levels of the text (“verse, paragraph composed of thematically united verses, section, grouping of sections that they call discourse, book”). According to their analysis, the books are chronologically ordered I-VI, but the organization is actually “ring-compositional,” (A, B, C, C*, B*, A*), such that Book I is mirrored by Book VI, Book II by Book V, and Book III by Book IV. They suggest that an “ideal reader” would bear in mind the multiple layers and relationship of the text, attempting to embrace the whole of the work, however impossible or bewildering this type of thought would be. They write,

There has therefore to be an acceptance of one’s own smallness, that one’s present moment is contained within larger present moments, and that even to contemplate this induces that most important mystical state, bewilderment. The Mathnawi in this way is not just about the nature of reality, it is a concrete demonstration of it, and a practical way of training spiritual travelers for its attainment.

In the estimation of these authors, the reader is transformed through the act of contemplating the text.

My reading of the Masnavi builds off of the work of Safavi and Weightman, but I propose to read it, not just by comparing different levels of the text to each other to uncover how

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13 Safavi and Weightman, Rumi’s Mystical Design, 8-9.
15 A more complete discussion of their work may be found in the appendix.
the text has structured itself or to elucidate new meanings through juxtaposition, but as
enactment or performance of the mystical Path.\textsuperscript{16} I do this through a comparison of the prefaces
and proems (untitled, introductory poems) that begin each book of the \textit{Masnavi}. I find that the
\textit{Masnavi} enacts the mystical Path through multiple modalities, in particular the frame narrative of
the prefaces and proems and literary techniques such as unstable subjects, gaps and silences, and
apophatic discourse. I add to these layers a metaphor or image employed in these opening
passages that highlights the experience of that book’s stage on the Path, although I make no
claim that the metaphors I highlight are necessarily the most important for that book—they
emerge as a way to clarify my argument about the ways that book is using these modalities to
invite the reader to engage actively with the it and, by extension, the Path.

I have identified these performative moments through the way they invite the reader into
an active, creative participation with the meaning making of the text. The \textit{Masnavi} overcomes
the limits of language and mediation of literature through a performance of its most important
themes, in particular, mystical experiences, the Sufi path, and love. As the \textit{Masnavi} depicts and
enacts a journey of mystical initiation, readers are invited to understand themselves as partaking
in that journey.

I focus on these passages because they discuss directly the evolving roles of Rumi,
Hussamuddin, and the reader, describe the expected orientation of the reader, and highlight the
station of the Path represented and described by that particular Book. I trace the evolution of the

\textsuperscript{16} Sufi mystics generally identify these three interrelated aspects of religious life: \textit{shari`a}, \textit{tariqa}, and \textit{haqiqa}. These
words can be translated in a number of ways and possess multivalent significances. \textit{Shari`a}, usually understood as
Islamic religious law and its moral codes, can also be understood as “the main road” of religious praxis, the words of
the Prophet. Strict observance of \textit{shari`a} is the first duty of the initiate who wishes to enter the mystical path. \textit{Tariqa}
is the path of the mystics, (metaphorically) much more narrow than the main road of \textit{shari`a}, and are the outward
actions of the initiate, modeled on those of the Prophet. From the theory and laws of \textit{shar`ia} comes the outward
performance of religion, \textit{tariqa}. It also encompasses the various stations and stages of the mystical journey. Finally,
the \textit{haqiqa}, the mystic’s goal, can be understood as the Truth, the interior state that accompanies the final state or
station of the \textit{tariqa}. It is also sometimes called \textit{ma`rifa}, or gnosis. (Schimmel, \textit{Mystical Dimensions of Islam}, 98-99).
relationship between Rumi and Hussamuddin, especially in terms of how it relates to the creative process, and how it informs the way readers understand and perform their own relationships to the text. The autobiographical stories being told about the writing process, the statements and demands being addressed to Hussamuddin, and the experiences Rumi describes are collapsed into the present moment through the way the reader identifies with and performs the mystical journey or drama of initiation. Though there are many lessons and stories imparted by Rumi to his audience throughout the books, the introductory remarks of each orient readers towards specific stages and stations of the Path, as well as specific relationships with the text itself. Rumi, Hussamuddin, and readers adopt many roles, sometimes simultaneously and sometimes sequentially. They become alternately teachers, students, orators, writers, and readers and listeners, though each has a specific orientation that they tend to adopt. Readers are expected to orient themselves towards the text primarily as students would in the presence of a teacher. Rumi is a spiritual guide who presence is immediate and real, and at the same time mediated by the text. He will take readers on a mystical journey of uncovering truths and attaining higher spiritual stations. Hussammudin is the ideal student, the muse and the Beloved, and the model for the reader.

In my last chapter, I examine two Persian paintings that illustrate mystical themes and practices, including the Path, experiences of union with the Divine, the ritual of sama’, religious devotion through music, poetry, and dance (often translated “musical audition”), and the relationship of the teacher and the student. These paintings fill some of the performative gaps in the text by visualizing and concretizing some of the ambiguities of the text itself, mapping and structuring the mystical journey. When read through the framework of the Masnavi, they become another modality of imagining and engaging with the Path.
I present two charts in the following pages that summarize my analysis of the *Masnavi*. In short, I discovered that while initiates in the *Masnavi* advance to higher spiritual station fairly linearly (“Ascension on the Spiritual Path”), their experiences of union with the (Divine) Beloved climax between Books III and Book IV. Figure 1 represents the initiate’s trajectory of spiritual growth versus their spiritual experiences of union or separation. The parallel structure predicted by Safavi and Weightman emerges in the similar spiritual states of Books I and VI, II and V, and III and IV. Figure 2 describes those states in greater detail (“Stage of the Path”), and also includes the metaphor and literary performance that I believe to be especially important for that book.

The scope of my project was necessarily limited, and the stages, metaphors, and performances I will identify should not be taken as representing an exhaustive list. Indeed, it is easy to imagine that that every level and section of the *Masnavi* possesses some variation of these (or other) elements that works to transcend the limitations of the medium of literature and invite readers into the text. My purpose is not to explain all of the text’s potentialities, but to propose a method of reading the *Masnavi* that differs from the work of most other Rumi scholars, who, as I have said, generally read the text through short selections and focus on decontextualized lines and stories, and even from Safavi and Weightman, who focus on explaining how the contemplation of the meta-structures of the text can induce various states in the reader, but fail to recognize the active performance on the side of the text itself.
Figure 1:

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Union of lover and Beloved

Book III ---- Book IV
Book II ------ Book V
Book I --------- Book VI

Ascension on the Spiritual Path

1. The Books mirror each other across the center line: Book I to Book VI, Book II to Book V, and Book III to Book IV.
2. Book IV represents the highest state of union with the Beloved, but the highest station of the Path is achieved in Book VI.
3. It is possible to imagine this pattern repeating itself if the reader returned to Book I after finishing Book VI.
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Chapter 2: Enacting the Mystical Path

Book I: Meeting the Teacher

Initiates who wish to enter the Path (murid: “he who has made up his will”) must find a guide who is able to lead them towards their goal, the Truth. Indeed, it was a generally accepted idea that a good teacher was necessary for any real spiritual progress. Absolute trust and real affection characterized the relationship between students and their teacher, and disciples placed absolute authority in their masters, who in return closely monitored every step of their progress and prescribed specific practices in response to the spiritual status of their students.\(^\text{17}\) In general, most Sufi initiates would join a community centered around one spiritual master.

Just like the murid, some readers are looking for a text that can guide them on a mystical journey. They need a text in which they can place their trust and in whose authority they can believe. The essential relationship between the reader and the Masnavi is that of an initiate and a master, and the opening of Book I models the almost spatial approach of a student to a potential teacher. In Book I, the text proclaims itself an authoritative guide that can affect real change in its readers, not just provide them with theoretical information about the Path. It attempts to establish its authority as a guide and to develop trust and love between it and the reader.

In the preface, readers hear from other mystics, the teacher himself, and a special student. First, as if they are traveling and asking religious authorities, especially experienced mystics, where to look for a guide, they hear what other people have to say.

\[\text{[A]}\text{nd in the view of the possessors of (mystical) stations and (Divine) graces, it (the Mathnawi) is best as a station and most excellent as a (spiritual) resting-place.}\]^\text{18}\]

Other people who possess religious knowledge agree that the Masnavi is a reliable spiritual guide, and if readers are unsure if they should trust the Masnavi, they need only ask someone

\(^{17}\) Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 100-106.
who they know has attained higher spiritual stations, and that person should reassure them. Next, readers, as if arriving in the presence of the teacher, hear him speak for the first time. He introduces himself and his work.

Saith the feeble slave who hath need of the mercy of God most High, Muhammad son of Muhammad son of al-Husayn of (the city of) Balkh: ‘I have exerted myself to give length to the Poem in Rhymed Couplets [i.e. Masnavi i-ma’navi] …’19

In many cases, readers are familiar with Rumi’s reputation as both a sufi saint and religious leader, and so the text itself derives some of its authority from the invocation of his name. But before readers can ask any questions or learn more about him or the Masnavi, the text defers to the teacher’s close companion and favorite student, Hussamuddin. Readers learn that the task of writing the Masnavi was undertaken for his sake.

… at the request of my master and stay and support, (who holds) the place of the spirit in my body, and (who is) the treasure of my to-day and my to-morrow, namely, the Shaykh...the Sword (Husám) of the Truth and Religion, Hasan son of Muhammad son of al-Hasan ...20

And it is as if the reader is invited to trust initially, not the authority of Rumi himself, but this student who has put so much faith in the text and its author.

Continuing the trajectory begun in the Preface, in the proem of Book I, the reader has now arrived in the imagined space of a sama’, where they sit in the presence of many other students, listening to the music of the reed flute and receiving a first lesson from the teacher.

Listen to the reed how it tells a tale, complaining of separations
Saying, “Ever since I was parted from the reed-bed, my lament hath caused man and woman to moan.
I want a bosom torn by severance, that I may unfold (to such a one) the pain of love-desire.
…Every one became my friend from his own opinion; none sought out my secrets from within me.
(M I 1-3, 5).21

19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid, 5.
The students are divided into two groups: the vast majority who do not listen to the reed for its own sake and the few who can understand the pain of longing for the distant Beloved and who may be invited to become real disciples of the master. The first lesson offered here is about reading—not just listening to the reed, but actively interpreting and uncovering its real secrets. Is the reader able to understand, not just the sound but what is left is unsaid? Both teacher and student (the Masnavi and the reader) are testing each other to see if they can establish the relationship of trust, love, and understanding that is the foundation of the Path. While different Sufi masters may have searched for different qualities in their disciples, the reed (and, by extension the Masnavi and Rumi) is looking for an orientation in the student-reader of love and longing. The shared experience of love-desire for the Beloved unites the teacher and his students, however superficially at this point in time, and demonstrates that the student is already oriented in the right direction.

The Path begins in Book I, and the journey will continue through the next five books. For the sake of love, Rumi has begun the work of writing the Masnavi. If its secrets are not yet clear, that is because readers are only at the beginning of the journey, and there are many experiences they still have not had.

Love wills that this Word should be shown forth: if the mirror does not reflect, how is that? Dost thou know why the mirror (of thy soul) reflects nothing? Because the rust is not cleared from its face. (M I 33-34).

Readers are given the responsibility to ascend with the text and to transforms themselves with it. Otherwise they will only be able to engage with the surface of the text. It is only when they transform themselves through love that they will understand the Truth.

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22 This way of identifying people according to their natural spiritual capabilities is itself a profoundly Qur’anic and reflects the belief that for different people different sorts of religious experience and practice are appropriate.
Book II: Relative Separation: Understanding Union

Love, beyond occupying a central place in Sufi thought generally, is after all a dominant theme in all of Rumi’s work. Rumi understands it as the primary motivating force in the world that originates with God and works to draw everything back into a perfect union with Him. It is the most “real” experience that anyone can have. Lovers learn to efface themselves so that all that is left of them is a “reflection” of their Beloved, who occupies the totality of their mind. And when a human being has become a perfect mirror for the Divine Beloved, they have effectively become the Real. When lovers lose themselves in the Beloved, nothing of them remains but their name, “everything else is filled with the beloved.”

In Rumi’s view, love dominates all stages of the Sufi path, and is itself manifest in two forms: union (wisal) with and separation (firaq, hijran) from the Beloved. These two stations are relative: something might seem like union only in comparison to an earlier station of separation, while that same level of union might seem like separation compared to a higher station. Any station of union is temporary and will be followed at least relative separation, until the mystic reaches the “very highest stages of sanctity.” Between Books I and II, Hussamuddin, the student who the reader met in the preface of Book I, ascended to a higher spiritual state of union with the Divine. The relative separation that has followed Hussamuddin’s ascent brings him back to Rumi, whose guidance and companionship he needs more deeply than ever.

My reading of Book II of the Masnavi emerges out of the realization of the significance of the gap in the narrative between Books I and II. Book I introduced the reader to the text and the student to the teacher. The first lessons were taught and the student began the Path’s ascent with the master’s guidance. The text ended only when the words of the lesson no longer felt pure.

24 Schimmel, Mystical Dimensions of Islam, 289.
25 As when Hallaj said, “I am the Real.”
26 Schimmel, The Triumphant Sun, 351-352.
27 Chittick, Sufi Path of Love, 232.
(“The words are coming (forth) very earth soiled ...”\textsuperscript{28}) because time was needed for them to manifest themselves (“Patience bring the object of desire, not haste.”\textsuperscript{29}). Though readers might expect that Book II would describe the process by which the teaching became realized, it opens after that time historically and narratively has occurred. The student Hussamuddin traveled away from Rumi, perhaps spatially, but certainly spiritually, to an encounter with the Divine. Though Hussamuddin returns to Rumi at the beginning of Book II, the text is still paradoxically characterized by separation: the seeker has not found or cannot hold onto the Truth, and the student and teacher have not yet fallen in love with each other.

This gap serves as an entry point for readers. They are invited to participate in the text by reading between the lines and imaginatively filling the gap, even experiencing Hussamuddin’s journey and encounter with the Divine for themselves. The proem of Book II intentionally collapses the differences between a gap in the historical time that it took to write the text and the break in the narrative, which, if it had been described, would have necessitated writing about mystical experiences of union, and neither the text nor the reader is ready for that. At first, it appears that the focus of the opening is the recommencement of teaching because it is centered on the teacher’s experience of waiting for the student to return and the way that Rumi needs Hussamuddin’s presence in order to write.

When the Light of God, Husamud, drew the rains (of his spirit) back from the zenith of Heaven—(For) after he had gone in the ascension to (spiritual) realities, without his (life-giving) springtide the buds (of mystic knowledge) were unburst (in my heart)—When (I say) he returned from the Sea towards the shore, the lyre of the poesy of the Mathnawi became attuned (again). The Mathnawi, which was the burnisher (purifier) of spirits—his return was the day of (my) seeking (an auspicious) commencement (for it). The date of beginning this gainful (spiritual) traffic was in the year six hundred and sixty-two. (M II 3-7).\textsuperscript{30}

\textsuperscript{29}M I 4003, Ibid.  
The text employs the imagery of springtime to express the rebirth of life and new union that the narrator experienced at the return of his muse. But underneath this flowering of poetry and the narrator’s joy is the experience of the student, Hussamuddin, who has just returned from the “Sea,” which serves as a symbol for both a purification and a return to the Divine.\textsuperscript{31} Even as Rumi rejoices at the return of his student, Hussamuddin must be feeling the acuteness of separation from the Divine.

Perhaps this is why so much of the Book II’s proem discusses companionship. Hussamuddin is lonely. And so, the \textit{Masnavi} says, just remember that individuals, especially students, become like their companions. If the companion is another “Intellect,” i.e. someone who can perceive the true forms of reality, then the individual will learn to perceive the world in the same way, and will naturally avoid “evil action and evil speech” because they will be drawn to the right Path. On the other hand, if their companion is someone who is guided by the animal soul and base desires, they will become even more veiled from their Intellect and the heart, and thus will become even farther from the Truth.

\begin{quote}
When because of loneliness you fall into despair, you become (bright as) a sun (if you go) under the shadow (protection) of the friend.
Go, seek at once the friend of God: when you have done so, God is your friend. (M II 22-23).\textsuperscript{32}
\end{quote}

How should the initiate know how to identify the right type of companion? In moments when the reader feels isolated or loses faith in their journey, the presence of a good companion will fill them with joy. Hussamuddin began as a student but can become a sun (a favorite image of

\textsuperscript{31} “The idea that Divine Grace, or even the Divine Essence itself, reveals itself in the image of water is therefore one of Rumi’s main topics ...Created water reminds the poet of the water of life...The main object of this water is to clean the dirty... Water is always the symbol of the Divine – but not everyone can understand its secret ... there are people who are not even aware of the existence of sweet water... Man’s movement towards God is, as in other mystical works, often compared to the journey of the torrent, or the river, towards the ocean...” Schimmel, \textit{The Triumphal Sun}, 78.

Rumi’s to describe the Divine) through companionship with Rumi. The reader can mirror this journey through companionship with the *Masnavi*.

A little later, the *Masnavi* describes the closeness of two companions.

Since the true believer is a mirror for the true believer, his face is safe from defilement.
The friend is a mirror for the soul in sorrow: breathe not on the face of the mirror, O my soul!
Lest it cover its face on account of thy breath, thou must swallow (suppress) thy breath at every moment. (M II 30-32).  

The image or metaphor of the mirror appears many time in the *Masnavi*. The heart, when purified through the Path, can reflect the Divine, and, through the act of reflection, be so filled with the Divine that it becomes the Divine. But this passage, though it can be related to the relationship of the mystic to the Divine, is only speaking about the relationship between mystics, between friends, or between students and their teacher. All of these pairs become one through companionship and the effacement of the self, or, in other words, through a collapse of the distinction of individuality. Breath disturbs the purity of the mirror and so in every moment the initiate must work to maintain the equilibrium between them and their companion.

The final stage of the Path is the experience of the Truth. It will not be characterized by knowledge or even by gnosis, but by love and annihilation of the self in the Beloved.

Someone asked, “What is love?” I answered, “Thou wilt know when thou becomest (lost in) me.” Love is uncalculated affection. For that reason it has been said to be in reality the attribute of God and unreal in relation to (man who is) His slave. He (God) loveth them (yuhibbuhum) is the entire sum. Which (of them) is (really the subject of the word yuhibbunahu) they love him?  

Though no clear distinctions were drawn before between Rumi, Hussamuddin, the seeker, and the reader, this passage actively collapses the difference between the voices of the narrator (Rumi) and the Beloved, but it still only implies the eventual collapse of identity that will occur between the student and the teacher, and the lover and the Beloved. Why was Book II delayed?

33 Ibid.  
34 Ibid, 221.
Because the Path takes time and the Truth cannot be revealed all at once. For now, take refuge with a good companion.

Book III: Metaphorical Love

In Book III, the student begins to teach. The performative element I would like to highlight in Book III is the elision between the roles of teacher and student, and author and reader that reflects a heightening union between lover and Beloved, and movement towards the highest state of union that will be achieved in the *Masnavi*. This performance is effected less through a significant silence or overlap between books or in the narrative, but through the way that the text invokes the student and the reader as teacher and author, and encourages them to engage in the creation of the text itself. Though spiritual truths and experiences, especially the experience of love, can never be adequately expressed through language, they are the source of infinite discourse. The fact that the student can now begin to speak about them is a sign that they have had these types of experiences. From the meeting of Book I and the invitation to become a companion in Book II, in Book III student and teacher have truly fall in love with each other. They mirror each other almost exactly, and, though the emphasis remains on intellectual understanding, it is clear that everything in Book III is a preparation for the experience of true Divine Love that comes in the next book.

Book III’s preface explains that everyone understands according to the capabilities of their intellect, but though seekers might fear that they will not be able to reach or understand their goal, they should not keep themselves from the journey. And, as the seeker learns, they should begin to teach.

But it behoves one who hath knowledge and is seeking (God) that he should learn whatever he does not know, and teach (others) what he knows already, and deal gently with those of weak intelligence, and neither be made conceited by the stupidity of the stupid nor harshly rebuke him that is dull of understanding. Such were ye aforetime, but God hath been gracious unto you.\(^{35}\)

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As in other passages, this preface differentiates between the capabilities of different people. The initiate will tailor his words to each class of people, according to their abilities: the initiate should share their knowledge with other seeks and not criticize those who are not capable of understanding. Beyond this, this section also reminds reader that the Path truly changes those who journey on it, just as engaging with the *Masnavi* changes the reader.

Lessons have changed since the initiate first met Rumi in Book I. At the beginning of Book III, Rumi turns to Hussamuddin and asks him to write the next book.

> O Light of the Truth, Husamu’d din, bring (into verse and writing) this Third Book, for “three times” has become a sunna.
> Open the treasury of mysteries; in respect of the Third Book leave excuses alone.
> Thy power flows from the power of God, not from the veins which throb because of (bodily) heat.

(M III 1-3).  

The attainment to higher spiritual knowledge is demonstrated through Hussamuddin’s ability to bring the light of God into the world. Previously, the reader may have identified with the figure of Hussamuddin, who served as a symbol of the perfect student and reader, because they both looked to Rumi as a teacher and guide. Instructions directed to Hussamuddin are also directed to the reader. Because he is now asked to write, the reader is also invited into the creation of the text. Above all, this is an invitation that urges readers to reflect and attempt to speak about their experiences. Whereas before the student’s presence was all that was required for the *Masnavi* to be written, now the student must act. They can no longer just receive, but must look for and “open the treasury of mysteries” for themselves. In a way, Rumi is his reminding his students that they are ready. They can trust themselves and the knowledge that their experiences come from God, so long as they remain humble. Beyond this, the gradual collapse between the roles of teacher and student, and author and reader hints at the complete dissolution of identities in Book IV.

36 Ibid, 5.
It is the throat, the organ that grants the ability to speak and the ability to consume various kinds of food, either spiritual or temporal, that symbolizes the stage that Hussamuddin and the readers have reached. Hussamuddin has the ability, because of his relationship with Rumi and his new role as teacher, to give people understanding of some understanding of the Truth.

Oh, alas, the area of the people’s understandings is exceeding narrow: the people have no throat [i.e. capacity for the apprehension of spiritual truths]. O Light of the Truth [Husamuddin], through the keenness of thy perception thy sweetmeat bestows a throat (even) on (one dull as) stone. (M III 13-14).

Again, the text highlights the different classes of people based on their ability to seek for and understand the truth. It draws the reader, through Hussamuddin, more closely into the text through the concept of speaking and consuming, the intermediate organ of knowing and experiencing. Depending on the food that the initiate consumes next, they will ascend to the spiritual or fall to the temporal. Through love for the teacher, students can attain to love with God, or they can become fixated on their beloved’s form, and cease to advance on the Path. In this way, Book III is a moment of possibility and of opportunity.

Book IV: Divine Love

The meta-structure of the Masnavi links Books I and VI, II and VI, and III and IV. The text builds, not only towards Book VI, but towards the center or midpoint of the work, and so it could be expected that Book IV would be the climax or culmination of the text. Because the Masnavi is also an active performance of the Sufi Path, and the highest experience is that of union between lover and Beloved, manifestation of union should be found in Book IV, and, indeed, I will suggest that this Book actively performs union through (1) the collapse of space between Books III and IV, (2) the freedom with which the text describes the Beloved, primarily through the metaphor of the sun, and (3) the collapse of distinctions between complementary

37 Ibid.
pairs, such as Rumi and Hussamuddin, the teacher and the student, and the author and the reader. Furthermore, I believe the union found in Book IV emerges primarily out of the annihilation of ego and personal identity (fana’). Thus, collapses between Books and characters serves to further demonstrate the experience of union with the Beloved.

Only Books III and IV are linked by a story in addition to the frame narrative of Rumi and Hussamuddin, and it is notable that the story describes the meeting of a lover and their Beloved after a long separation. It reassures initiates that they will eventually reach their goal (The discourse it titled, in part, “the seeker is a finder.”)

(Even) if you may not believe (it), all know this, (that) one day you will reap what you are sowing. (M III 4785).38

Book III cuts off before the lover finds his Beloved, but the text urges the reader to go immediately to the next book.

If you wish (to read) the rest of this tale, seek (it), O my brother, in the Fourth Book. (M III 4810).39

This transition is easily juxtaposed with the gap between Books I and II, where time was needed for spiritual growth and silence surrounded the mystical experience. Here, the reader is urged to go immediately from one book to the next. Thus, the connection between Books III and IV performs the end of separation, and the story that connects the two texts tells the reader that this is exactly what is happening.

If thou wilt complete this story, which is the current coin of (directly applicable to) our present state, ‘tis fitting.
Leave the unworthy folk for the sake of the worthy: bring the tale to the end and conduct it to the issue.
If this story was not finished there (in the Third Book), ‘tis (now) the Fourth Volume: set it out in order. (M IV 37-39).40

38 Ibid, 267.
39 Ibid, 268.
40 Ibid, 274.
The finding of the Beloved, which is the content of the story that bridges the gap between Books III and IV, is the exact description of the state of the seeker who is following the Path of the *Masnavi*. And, in a fashion characteristic of Book IV, it is impossible to say if the seeker is Hussamuddin, Rumi, the reader, or the text itself.

The preface of Book IV collapses the distinction between the guide, the Path, and the Truth through the way that it describes itself. Unlike the prefaces of many of the other Books, this preface does not describe a theory of religion or religious practice. Instead, Book IV uses this preface to describe itself as text that is simultaneously a journey and the desired abode, the guide and the destination. It is experiential and transformative, not just didactic. Thus, even as it brings the seeker to their goal, the seeker should see that the text is itself,

like what the sincere (in devotion to God crave and love, and like what the travelers (on the way to God) seek and wish for ... Its bosom hold a cargo of fineries such as are not carried on the bosoms of young ladies, to be a compensation to followers of the theory and practice (of Sufism) ...  

The text sees (almost) no difference between itself and the Divine because, in moments of union, those distinctions no longer matter.

Both Book IV and Hussamuddin are described as the sun—the name given to both the Divine and Shams. The metaphor of the sun highlight the Divine’s majesty and glory, as well as its life-giving power and destructive force. In Rumi’s work, the sun is also always a reference to Shams, whether he is named or not, because his “light” altered Rumi’s life so completely. Rumi often describes himself as a slave and messenger of the sun. Book IV is, “like a sun that shone forth radiantly amidst clouds dispersed,” and Hussamuddin is also called upon to shed light, “like the sun.” Whereas other Books of the *Masnavi* constantly mention the problem of discussing spiritual truths and experience through language, there is no reference to that

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41 Ibid, 271.
42 I discuss the relationship between Rumi and Shams more fully in my section on Book VI.
difficulty in this book. The radiance of the sun, as it shines through the text and the student, is so bright that it is impossible to think about anything else.

While in other Books, the actors in the text have fairly fixed roles, here those roles refuse to be easily classified. Rumi is the author and he still speaks in the first person, but Hussamuddin, who occupies an ambivalent position as muse, writer, and reader, possesses all the agency and he appears to have become much wiser and knowledgeable than his teacher. On a literary level, the text obscures the expected roles of author, muse, and reader. The expected dynamic of student and teacher is also rendered less clear as Hussamuddin more clearly adopts the role of guide.

O Ziya’u l’Haqq (Radiance of God), Husamuddin, thou art he through whose light the Mathnawi hath surpassed the moon (in splendour). (M IV 1).44

Beyond this, Hussamuddin has become the perfect mirror that reflects both Rumi and the Light of God. The text tells reader explicitly that there is no distinction between Hussamuddin and the Divine. They, too, exist in perfect unity.

Since thou wishest it so, God wishes it so: God grants the desire of the devout. In the past thou hast been (as) “he belongs to God,” so that (now) “God belongs (to him)” hath come in recompense. (M IV 6-7).45

And finally,

Shed light upon the Fourth Book, for the sun rose from the Fourth Heaven. Come, give light, like the sun, from the Fourth (Book), so that it may shine upon (all) countries, and inhabited lands. (M IV 30-31).46

The moment of union occurs simultaneously with the moment of writing, unlike the state achieved between Books I and II. The collapse of subjectivities and of divisions between the seeker and the Truth (whether this pair is imaged as Rumi/ Hussamuddin,

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45 Ibid.
46 Ibid, 274.
author/muse, student/teacher, text/reader, or lover/Beloved) is absolutely complete in this moment of the text’s creation.

Book V: Relative Separation: Describing the Beloved

Although most of those mystics who have “beheld the Images in which the Beloved reveals Himself” are unable to describe their experiences in words, those few who can do so become poets. Rumi himself constantly reflects on the problem of expressing the experience of love because it can never be adequately captured through words. “The intellect attempting to convey it is like an ass in the morass, and the pen that is to describe it breaks into pieces...” In Book V, language is both unnecessary, because union has been experienced, and demanded, because it is the only way to know the Beloved in moments of separation.

The *Masnavi* moves in multiple directions: through the Books chronologically as a temporal progression and towards the center as a spiritual ascent. Although the culmination of the Path occurs in Book IV in the achievement of the highest state of union, the journey does not end there. Because all moments of union are followed by (at least relative) separation, in Book V subjectivities are rediscovered and borders are reconstructed. After the height of Book IV, the *Masnavi* seems to shrink itself back to the primary role of guide, and, notably, a guide that seems

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47 Schimmel, *Rumi’s World*, 173
to sense its role will soon no longer be necessary. Despite the joyful description of the Divine Beloved in Book IV and the way its presence was manifested through the mirror of the text and Hussamuddin, Book V says that love cannot be described, only known through direct experience. The closest the text can get to expressing love and the Beloved is through a discussion of how impossible it is to reach the Truth through language alone. As in Book II, the reference to the text’s lack performs the need for mystical experience to transcend language.

The image of the sun, carried over from Book IV and juxtaposed with a candle emerges as the best way to describe what Rumi is finding impossible to describe: the past experience of union and the present desire for a return to that state. The *Masnavi* is no longer a sun. It is merely a candle. At one point in time, it was like a candle in front of the sun—in the moment of *fana’* (annihilation) “its light, though still materially existent, [was] no longer visible and [had] no power of its own; it [was] existent and non-existent at the same time.”

49 Schimmel, *The Triumphant Sun*, 66-67


Book V is not the Truth. It is much more like the Law in that it becomes unnecessary in the presence of the Truth. For the time being however, the Truth is not present, and so the text remains necessary.

The preface of Book V repeats the now familiar discourse on the differences between the Law, the Path, and Truth, but with an added emphasis on the idea that when the Truth has been attained, and the seeker totally transformed and annihilated in the Beloved, the first two levels are no longer necessary.
Rumi employs two examples, one of the alchemical transformation of copper to gold, the other of medicine, which both highlight the differences between theoretical knowledge, practice, and the experience that renders both theory and practice unnecessary. The goal is the transformation that frees the initiate from needing to follow either the Law or the Path. This discussion becomes self-referential insofar as the text is again merely a guide for the initiate on the Path. The goal is the end of the journey, direct knowledge of the Truth, not to stay with the guide forever.

Hussamuddin, at the beginning of Book V, is no longer the student or the author, but the teacher (the inverse of Book II) who demands that his student, Rumi, speak. He is more fully a reflection of the Beloved than he ever was before. Book V begins:

The (spiritual) King, Husamuddin, who is the light of the stars, demands the beginning of the Fifth Book. (M V 1).  

This one sentence inverts the entire dynamic of the relationship between Rumi and Hussamuddin that readers have come to expect. Hussamuddin is pulling the Masnavi and Rumi along, guiding and encouraging them, but no longer at Rumi’s request. Rumi comes to him and begins to speak the Masnavi at his request and in his honor.

O Ziyá’u l’-Haqq (Radiance of God), noble Husamuddin, master to the masters of purity,  
If the people were not veiled (from the Truth) and gross, and if their throats (capacities) were not narrow and feeble.  
In (my) praise of thee I should have done justice to the reality and expressed myself in language other than this. (M V 2-4).

Rumi laments that most of his audience forces him to speak in ordinary language because their abilities and intellects are limited. They still need the Law and the Path. Rumi could have chosen to write in another way entirely, but his audience and his purpose as teacher has led him to a different sort of language and a different type of message. In a choice of language that supports

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51 Ibid.  
52 Ibid, 4.  
53 Ibid.
the link between Book II and Book V, Rumi repeats the metaphor of “throats” as the organ of spiritual understanding and capacities. Rumi has to write in a way that most readers can digest.

Praise consists in describing (excellent qualities) and in rending the veil (of ignorance): the Sun is independent of exposition and description. (M V 8).

Rumi cannot describe the Beloved Sun because it defies language. This gap in the Masnavi is necessitated, not only by the audience, but by the nature of the apprehension of the Truth. It can only happen in moments of union, and this is a moment of separation.

And yet, Rumi admits that, despite everything he has just said, he cannot stop himself from speaking and attempting to fill that gap in his own way. Just because he cannot capture the whole of the sun in language does not mean Rumi can stop moving in that direction. The Path cannot be abandoned even though it seems futile.

Thy dignity hath transcended intellectual apprehension: in describing thee the intellect has become an idle fool.
(Yet), although this intellect is too weak to declare (what thou art), one must weakly make a movement (attempt) in that (direction).
Know that when the whole of a thing is unattainable the whole of it is not (therefore to be) relinquished.
If you cannot drink (all) the flood-rain of the clouds, (yet) how can you give up water-drinking? (M V 15-19).

Rumi is ultimately fixed in his role as poet, teacher, and lover, even as Hussamuddin has transformed. He cannot give up writing the Masnavi and his readers cannot give up reading it. A description, however incomplete, of Hussamuddin or the Beloved, will allow Rumi to transmit to his readers the outward form of mystical experience.

(My) spoken words are (only) a husk in relation to thee, but they are a good kernel for other understandings.
I will tell thy description in order that they (my hearers) may take their way (towards thee) ere they grieve at the loss of that (opportunity). (M V 21-22).

54 Ibid.
55 Ibid, 5.
The text goes on to explain that Light of God draws the soul to Him, in the same way that the *Masnavi* itself draws readers towards the Path that will take them to the Truth. Stories awaken the hearts of initiates and inspire them to begin the Path.

**Book VI: The Loss of the Beloved/ Teacher**

It was the arrival of Shams i-Tabriz in late October 1244, when Rumi was thirty-seven, that altered the course of Rumi’s life forever and transformed him into one of the world’s most famous mystical love poets. During their first meeting, Shams asked Rumi to explain the relative stations of the Prophet Muhammad, who merely called himself God’s servant, and the following phrase uttered by Bistami: “Glory to be me! There is none in my cloak but God!” Rumi evidently immediately fell into a swoon or state (*hal*) as a result of the sudden “influx of knowledge and awareness from the spiritual world.” Rumi devoted himself totally to Shams, ignoring his duties as a teacher, and began to practice *sama*. After two years, Shams disappeared, probably because of the jealousy of Rumi’s pupils. He returned some time later, after Rumi sent his son to find him and convince him to come back, but disappeared again after only a few months, and this time he never came back.²⁶

Rumi’s love and devotion for this strange wandering ascetic is hard to understand or explain. This relationship could be understood within the wider cultural context of the medieval Muslim world in which Rumi lived, which was “ambisexual,” meaning that men were expected to marry, but also to love boys and/ or have “intense friendships” with other men. Because Rumi never wrote anything to the contrary, we can assume that their relationship was chaste. Seyyid Hossein Nasr would say, “Shams was like the sun, and Rumi was like the sea; as the Sun passed quickly overhead, its gravitational force drew great waves of love from the sea, which cast up

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pearls upon the shore.” Shams was the beloved, Rumi the lover. Shams was Rumi’s muse. But more than that, “Shams and Rumi were friends.” This passionate friendship allowed Rumi to mature spiritually, but it was Shams’ absence and Rumi’s longing for his friend that transformed him. After Shams second and final disappearance, Rumi was devastated, and several years passed before he gave up hope of seeing his friend again. During this period of his life, Rumi became one of the greatest poets of the Persian language.

In Book I, the student meets the teacher. In my analysis of Book I, I demonstrated how the text maps this journey spatially, as if the student was traveling and looking for a teacher. The opening of Book I moves from a space outside the text to close physical proximity with the teacher in the space of sama’. There is a parallel, although inverted journey in Book VI. The relationship between teacher and student comes to an end because they become separated, not just in terms of subjectivity but spatially. The image of the city and other language that suggests the need to transcend outward forms hints at the imminent end of the student-teacher relationship, which has become unnecessary. But the ending of the relationship is not discussed in the opening of Book VI, but performed by the way the text ends in the middle of a discourse. Some scholars attribute this abrupt ending to Rumi’s premature death (this notwithstanding stories in which Rumi discusses his own death) – but it can in fact be read as an extremely important performance that replicates Shams’ own disappearances and works to shock the reader into the sense of longing (that love-desire described in Book I) for the Beloved that is crucial for the final stages of the Path. The love between human beings is the metaphorical bridge that brings the seeker to the threshold of the Truth, but even this love must be left behind so that the initiate can devote themselves entirely for the search for the Divine Beloved. For this reason, the

57 Wilson, Rending the Veil, xviii-xx.
58 Chittick, Me & Rumi, xiii.
teacher must leave suddenly, just as the text ends abruptly. Furthermore, this inconclusive ending invites the reader to return to Book I and to begin the Path anew. The severing of the relationship between teacher and student could be read as modeled off of Rumi’s own experiences of losing Shams. At a certain point, the teacher has given all their advice, and the student must continue the journey alone. After all, Hussamuddin himself has already become a master in his own right.

Images of space and descriptions of movement dominate the preface and the proem of Book VI. Although the preface first explains that the text is a guide on the spiritual Path through the image of the lamp (reprising earlier images of the sun, light, and candles), it quickly shifts to a spatial metaphor.

The Sixth Volume of the Books of Rhymed Couplets (Mathnawi) and Spiritual Evidences, which are a Lamp in the darkness of imagination and perplexity and phantasies and doubt and suspicion. And this Lamp cannot be perceived by the animal sense… He hath made manifest the limited measure of their action and the (confined) measure (orbit) and sphere of work to which its action reaches in the sky; or as the ruler of the city whose authority is effective within that city, but beyond that city’s dependencies he does not rule.59

The Masnavi pierces the temporal world of the animal sense, but it cannot be fully perceived as long as the reader is confined to the “city” of the animal senses. Even the power of the text is limited to a certain sphere, outside of which it is not able to pass.

Movement emerges in the beginning of the proem, at the same time that separation has reemerged between Rumi and Hussamuddin. The roles of teacher and student have been inverted: Rumi is now the student, Hussamuddin the master, though Hussamuddin still serves as Rumi’s muse. Rumi approaches Hussamuddin with his final book.

O Life of the heart, Husamuddin, desire for (the composition of) a Sixth Part has long been boiling (within me).
Through the attraction (influence) of a Sage like thee, a Book of Husam has come into circulation in the world.
(Now), O spiritual one, I bring to thee as an offering the Sixth Part to complete the Mathnawi. (M VI 1-3).60

60 Ibid, 258.
In Books III and IV, Rumi and Hussamuddin were united through their love, mystical experiences, and their roles as authors. Here, their individual subjectivities have reemerged. This implies a state of disunion, even as Hussamuddin reaches his highest station on the Path yet.

A few lines later, Rumi advises his readers to turn to the *Masnavi* if they seek the Truth. He tells them to read it, not as normal text, but as something that reaches to the spiritual realities and, in a way, only exists on those planes. The outward forms of the *Masnavi*, the physical format of the book, its language and sounds—none of these things are necessary to the *Masnavi* being what it is. It is the gaps that are the most important and the most resonant that, when found and investigated, open the text up and let the spiritual Ocean come rushing out. When the text falls silent, it reveals the Truth. Again, the act of searching (or, in this case, filling the silences and gaps in the text) is what creates moments when the Divine can be apprehended.

If you are thirsting for the spiritual Ocean, make a breach in the island of the *Mathnawi*. Make such a great breach that at every moment you will see the Mathnawi to be only spiritual. When the wind sweeps away the straw from the (surface of) the river-water, the water displays its uncolouredness. Behold the fresh branches of coral, behold the fruits grown from the water of the spirit! When it (the Mathnawi) is made single (and denuded) of words and sounds and breaths, it leaves all that (behind) and becomes the (spiritual) Ocean. The speaker of the word and the hearer of the word and the words (themselves)—all three become spirit in the end. (M VI 67-72).  

In this last book, Rumi articulates the idea that the author, the reader, and the text are all ultimately one because their fundamental nature is the same. When seekers feels themselves separated from their Beloved, they need merely return to the text itself, which will remind them again and again of the unity of all things. Life is characterized by cyclical moments of unity and separation, and the *Masnavi* itself takes readers on this journey every time they read the text.

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61 Ibid. 261.
Chapter 3: Visualizing Rumi and the Path

In my analysis of the *Masnavi* I demonstrated some of the ways that it enacts the mystical Path and various mystical ideas. These enactments were performed in a way that invited the reader to journey with the characters and the text, and to experience for themselves the stages and stations of mystical ascension. The text also invites readers, especially in Books III and IV, to join the author in creating the text. Some readers engage with the text, not just through the reading or reciting it, but by representing their readings through images. In order to investigate how some readers responded to the text, in this chapter of my thesis I look at two paintings from two different codices, “Dancing Dervishes” and “A Prince Enthroned,” in which Michael Barry, an expert on Islamic art and Persian manuscripts in particular, has identified depictions of Rumi amidst other sufis, poets, and mystical themes. I build on Barry’s identification of these figures and his general analysis of the paintings. While these paintings can obviously be studied as individual art objects, because they are both illustrations of mystical texts and because they have elements that can be read as iconographic depictions of Rumi, I am able to put them in conversation with and read them through the *Masnavi* and the Sufi Path, just as some viewers might.

Persian paintings, sometimes called miniatures because of their size, and the books in which they were placed, were objects of great value and were produced for and circulated between the upper classes of the Timurid and Safavid empires of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the appendix, I offer a brief discussion that highlights the process of book production, how books were valued in Persian society, and explain how, despite some methodological problems, I believe it is fair to say that these works of art share a common visual language that can be decoded and read. Both “Dancing Dervishes” and “A Prince Enthroned”
were produced during a period of highly sophisticated bookmaking. At this time, Persian painters commonly depicted complex mystical themes and thought of multiple poets at the same time, regardless of the specific text they were illustrating. Bookmakers, calligraphers, and artists who copy and illustrate the text quite literally re-create and re-imagine Rumi and the *Masnavi*, visualizing its journey, teaching, and imagery. Although at first it seems that these paintings imagine Rumi in one emotional state and that they fix his relationship to the other people in the paintings, I have found that they offer a fluid interpretation of the Sufi path and mystical experiences.

“Dancing Dervishes” and “A Prince Enthroned” were created during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries during the “classical” period of Persian painting production. “Dancing Dervishes” is dated to about 1480 and was produced in the city of Herat, in modern day Afghanistan. The style, composition, and color palette are all typically associated with the “Bihzadian style of Herat,” but because paintings like this were typically collaborative creations, and so it is difficult to know what work the master painter Kamal al-din Bihzad did himself. “A Prince Enthroned,” dated to approximately 1530, was also created in a workshop in Herat, and can probably be attributed to the painter Mirza ‘Ali, who painted similar illustrations in a copy of the *Khamseh* of Nizami towards the end of the 1530s. These two paintings are connected through more than the time and place of their creation or even their depictions of *sama*. Both have chosen to insert a man in mourning to scenes of music, dance, spiritual ecstasy, and princely pastimes.

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62 Ekhtiar, *Masterpieces from the Department of Islamic Art*, 190; Barry, “Rumi and the Sufi Tradition.”
63 Ekhtiar, *Masterpieces from the Department of Islamic Art*, 190-191.
64 Thompson and Canby, *Hunt for Paradise*, 20.
65 For my complete discussion of Persian paintings and description of these paintings in particular, please refer to the appendix.
In both paintings, a strange figure draws attention to itself: a man who covers his face or wipes away his tears. These figures seem to have been taken out of a typical scene of mourning, in which people rend their clothes or cover their ears or face with their hands, and transposed him to settings of spiritual ecstasy, dance, and princely pastimes. For example, “Mourning over the Catafalque of Muhammad-Sultan Ibn Jahangir, Timur’s Grandson and Heir-Apparent”\(^66\) and “The Son Who Mourned His Father”\(^67\) there are two men who mirror the figures in “Dancing Dervishes” and “A Prince Enthroned.” In the first, a young man covers his face with a white piece of cloth as he kneels before his father’s tomb, very similar to the figure in “Dancing Dervishes.” In the second, another man covers his face with scarf. His arched eyebrows and closed eyes are visible, just like the other figure in “A Prince Enthroned.”\(^68\) These physical expressions of sadness are surprising because most Persian paintings only hint at emotion, indicating it through the length of sleeves, a finger placed to the lips in contemplation, or through complex glances.\(^69\) Almost all of the men in both “Dancing Dervishes” and “A Prince Enthroned” seem to have strangely similar faces, the typical three quarters profile, seemingly only differentiated by beards, mustaches, and headgear. All the men are looking at each other or at some object, except for these two strange, mourning figures.

A viewer familiar with the typical forms and figures of Persian painting would immediately recognize the strangeness of these crying men in these scene of princely pastimes and Sufi sama’. In the process of analyzing the painting, looking for details, unpacking the paintings the way that they demanded to be, I imagine that these two figures would draw the

\(^{66}\) From a dispersed manuscript of the Zafarnama by Sharaf al-Din Yazdi, ca. 1434-36, Shiraz. The Bruschettini Collection, Genoa.

\(^{67}\) From a manuscript of the Mantiq al-Tayr [Language of the Birds] by Farid al-Din Attar, 1487, Herat. Metropolitan Museum of Art.

\(^{68}\) Sims, Peerless Paintings, 141-145.

\(^{69}\) Eleanor Sims, when describing the typical images associated with Persian painting, mentions, “a single-page painting of fashionably dressed and sensuously engaged lovers, limbs entwined but faces showing curiously detached expressions” Sims, Peerless Paintings, 1.
attention and puzzle the viewer who would then have to work to create the meaning that they
could be signifying. Barry explains his identification of both of these figures as Rumi through
Book I’s first line, “Listen to the reed how it tells a tale, complaining of separations” [M I I].
After all, Barry says, “Rumi is the poet who weeps with emotion over the state of our souls...”
and when he is depicted during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, he is depicted in tears. It
seems as though Rumi is defined, above all, by his longing for the Beloved. When studied in
isolation, he appears fixed in the state of love-desire and to be separated from his Beloved. The
paintings could be saying that this painful longing is what compelled to write the *Masnavi* and
that this sadness inspires the entire text.

Even though Rumi is identifiable in both these paintings because he is crying, and thus it
might be tempting to say that the paintings fix him in the state of separation and emotions of
longing, that description would ignore the subtle ways that the paintings relate him to other
people and to the Sufi Path. After all, Rumi is not depicted alone, but in close proximity to
students, poets, and other mystics. These paintings do highlight the ways in which the orientation
of love and longing, much as I identified it in Book I, draws the viewer or initiate to him. But
Rumi is just as strongly identifiable through his roles as poet, teacher, guide, and founder of a
Sufi community.

I am going to suggest that we can read “Dancing Dervishes” from left to right, beginning
with the figure of Rumi. Because Rumi’s feet are covered by the musicians, it is not clear at first
that Rumi is actually standing in the river. Rumi employs the image of water in Book II as a
symbol for the return to the Divine or for the Divine itself. Reading the painting through this
interpretation, it is clear that by placing Rumi in the water itself, the painting has identified Rumi
as the mystic who through his poetry, his emotion, and his music is able to bring people to God,

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70 Barry, “Rumi and the Sufi Tradition.”
to renew their spirits. Barry has identified the men in blue above the river as two poets, Hafez of Shiraz and a minister (probably Mir Ali Shir Nava’i), and the young man in orange is clearly some sort of disciple or initiate, who looks up to the earlier poets, perhaps as he begins to write his own book or to study theirs (whatever the text is that he holds in his hands). I believe the man in pink is probably another poet, one who wrote between the time of Rumi and Hafez, and that the man in green is probably another contemporary poet or scholar of the painters. If this is the case, the painting depicts an intellectual and literary lineage, with Rumi at its roots that extends to the present moment. His power originates with the Divine and he shares it with the world.

Next, the painting closely associates Rumi with the musicians who perform his lyrics, a relationship emphasized through physical proximity. Rumi stands close to a group of musicians, two of whom play the reed described in the opening of the *Masnavi*. Below the musicians, and moving to the left of the painting, are men swooning because of the power and emotionality of the dance. In the center is the group of four dancing men, thoroughly entranced in the *sama’*, around whom the spiritual ecstasy, ritual, music, and poetry turn. In this way, the performance of the *Masnavi* becomes almost as important as the text itself. Though the words come from Rumi, it is especially through the mediation of musical performance that the participants of the *sama’* are able to achieve spiritual abandon. Above the river are poets, below are musicians and dancers. Rumi and his poetry straddle the line of literature and performance, text and lived experience. And yet, just as in the *Masnavi*, Rumi is imagine in a unified way: he is still, above all, the teacher who guides people towards the Truth in the manner that is appropriate for them.

The division of the painting, “A Prince Enthroned,” caused by the page break highlights two themes: on the left, some of the mains ideas of the *Masnavi*, including Rumi’s fraught relationship with the physical world and his sadness, and on the right, the music and performance

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associated with the *Masnavi*. This painting does not associate Rumi as strongly with practice and experience as “Dancing Dervishes” because the musicians and dancers are depicted on the opposite page, away from him. In this painting, Rumi is not in a paradisiacal garden, but in a world where he watches the chess game and, though he sits between the “Tree of Life” (which in Persian paintings typically signifies the presence of a spiritual master), he is framed by withered, dying trees, which can be interpreted as the world’s unhealthy spirituality.

I read “A Prince Enthroned” primarily as a depiction of the different stations and stages of the Sufi Path. There are several smaller scenes within this painting that seem to demand to be attended to separately. Though these scenes could be read in any order, I will hierarchize them as ascending stations on the Sufi Path. First, the chess players and young men below the river are those people who have not yet joined the Path. They are concerned with games and earthly delights, and ignore the spiritual world which they could find if they but crossed the river. Next, Rumi sits next to a young man, the initiate who hold his book in hands and learns from the poet. To the right, the two men who look in different directions are torn between staying with their master, Rumi, and journeying onto the next station. The king sitting inside the palace represents the Divine Beloved. The men at the threshold hover between this world and the presence of this King, two are represented in that highest state of union, and one man returns to a state of relative separation as he leaves the palace. The men below the palace dance the *sama*’ in a circle, as if highlighting the cyclical experience of union and separation that characterizes the Path until the Truth has been fully attained.

I have demonstrated how both “Dancing Dervishes” and “A Prince Enthroned” can be read through the mystical Path and themes as I described them in the *Masnavi*. The modality of reading that I suggested was necessary to journey on the Path with Rumi through the *Masnavi*

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72 Barry suggests that this is a game between God and the devil. Barry, “Rumi and the Sufi Tradition.”
demands a great deal of time and openness to transformation. It is almost impossible for readers to hold the whole of the text in their mind at one time. These images, even as they suggest a multiplicity of relationships and spiritual experiences, manage to express the most important emotional orientation of Rumi and his work, the pain of love-desire that draws students and readers to them, and to hint at the underlying structure of cyclical spiritual journeying that motivates the text as a whole. They map journeys through time, either Sufi history or the spiritual Path, onto the limited space of the painted page.

**Conclusion**

I began this thesis with an analysis of how most scholars read the *Masnavi*, especially the assumptions they make about its structure and how it was intended be read and experienced. Inspired by the work of Safavi and Weightman, I proposed a new method of reading of the text that was synoptic and comparative. My analysis highlights the way that the *Masnavi* makes demands of readers and encourages them to read and experience the text in a certain way. This text does not just please, because of the beauty of its language and imagery, or instruct, because of the important theological issues that it discusses. It also has the potential to move and transform its readers through its silences, gaps, and collapses and its enactment of the journey, or, in other words, the way that it invites readers into active participation. The paintings I analyzed made tangible the request that the reader become co-creator with the author and depict the polyphonic relationships and experiences of the Path. They demonstrate how Rumi and his writing can be performed in other art forms without reducing or stabilizing meanings that were meant to be ambiguous and malleable. At a moment when scholars of Islamic and religion more generally are beginning to seriously confront the question, “How should a text be read?” I

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73 Karin Littau describes literature as not just something that pleases or instructs, but as something that can also move readers. Littau, *Theories of Reading*, 84.
believe that my thesis offers a compelling argument for a textual analysis of not just what a text says, but how it says those things, and how that enactment or performance of ideas can be translated into other mediums. This specifically rescues the *Masnavi* from accusations of structurelessness by demonstrating the high level of sophistication and intentionality that motive every level of the text. More generally, it allows me to claim that scholars should be reading texts for how they blur or collapse the distinctions between the real, the literary, and the imaginal in order to draw readers into a more active participation through the act of reading.

If I am making a value judgment about modalities of reading by suggesting that the *Masnavi* and other texts are open to, encourage, and occasionally demand sustained, transformative, and performative readings, this emerges from the *Masnavi*’s own repeated claims about different levels of understanding and spiritual capabilities. We need only return to Book I, to the moment when the reed divides its listeners into two groups—those who do not know how to listen and those who are able to understand—in order to see that, yes, the *Masnavi* wants its readers to undertake a journey.
Appendix

1. Summary of Rumi’s Mystical Design by Safavi and Weightman

The argument presented by Safavi and Weightman in *Rumi’s Mystical Design* opens the text up for readings that do more than analyze Rumi’s language and theology.

In their book, *Rumi’s Mystical Design*, Safavi and Weightman agree that the text presents itself as structurally random and that it seems that nothing can be gained from the analysis of the whole. But they write, Rumi, “had almost complete poetic control, so, if this is how it appears to Iranian and Western scholars alike, that is exactly how Mawlana [Rumi] intended it to appear; its appearance and self-presentation are precisely what he sought to produce, they are part of his design.” They find it surprising that the text would only be organized by the process of inspiration or creativity, especially since, “the work itself constantly emphasizes that creation is highly intelligent and, could the reader but see it, wonderfully ordered,” and it would be strange for it to claim this without the presence of an internal logic and organization.74

Safavi and Weightman advance the argument that the *Masnavi* can be read on three levels, each of which offers its own rewards and demands a certain type of work on the part of the reader. They describe different methods of reading based on the level of analysis, the “ideal” reader as Rumi might have imagined one, and the possible effects of engaging in this type of reading. First, they introduce the idea that the entire *Masnavi* is structured around an “overarching organization by ring composition” that represents the “unseen spiritual world.” The books are chronologically ordered I-VI, but the organization is actually “ring-compositional,” (A, B, C, C*, B*, A*), such that Book I is mirrored by Book VI, Book II by Book V, and Book III by Book IV. This organization does not occur just at the meta-level, but can be extended down to the discourses (such that, for example, the first discourse of Book I is in parallel with the last of Book VI) and to individual sections within a discourse. Part of the work of the reader is uncovering the connections (or disparities) between parallel sections of the text, whether at the macro- or micro-levels.75 Once they have established the organizational structure that governs the Masnavi, they can move on to the next part of their argument about different types of reading.

First, there is the poetic level, which must be read sequentially, and is marked by its immediacy, “directly pointed at the aspiring Sufi traveler and reader.” Safavi and Weightman remark that, “It would have to be a very dull reader indeed who was not captivated, edified, and inspired to change by such a text as this.” Rumi is encountered as the “master poet,” but the text does not necessarily cause any lasting changes in the reader.76 This is the level most frequently noticed and commented on by commentators and scholars alike. In Safavi and Weightman’s estimation, this level reflects this temporal world.77

There is also the meta-structural level (the overarching organization by ring composition), as described by Safavi and Weightman. The constraints of this organizational method guided the writing of the *Masnavi* and can aid readers in the interpretation of specific

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75 Ibid, 8-9.
76 Ibid, 7-8.
77 Ibid, 230.
discourses and the work as a whole through comparison. This level reflects the next world and the presence of the Divine guiding creation.  

The intermediate level, what they call, “the spiritual Sufi path,” demands repeated readings and further reflection on the discourses, symbolism, structures, and meanings of the *Masnavi*. Rumi is met as both the “master architect” and the Sufi master, who is sharing his own experiences with his students. The authors explain that, while most texts might serve to edify the reader or add to a reader’s store of “secondhand” knowledge, this level of reading which is focused on “contemplation and reflection” results in, “what might be called realization.” Because the reader works to make their own meaning out of the text, and, in a sense, the text is only fully “realized” through the work of the reader, the *Masnavi*, “becomes transformative and part of their reality … with a reader’s sincere effort and searching, it can become a real and permanent part of their path to Reality.” This level, in between the poetic and meta-structural, represents, “the symbolic hidden level of the Sufi Path.” Thus the act of reading the text itself becomes a performance of the ideas and themes that Rumi discusses on the most basic, poetic level. As readers reach “down” to individual verses and look “up” to parallel verses, discourses, and books, in impossible attempts to embrace the whole of the text in one moment of reading, they realize that, “even to contemplate this induces that most important mystical state, bewilderment.” Safavi and Weightman conclude, “The *Mathnawi* in this way is not just about the nature of reality, it is a concrete demonstration of it, and a practical way of training spiritual travelers for its attainment.”

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78 Ibid.
79 Ibid, 8.
80 Ibid, 230-231.
2. Description and Context of “Dancing Dervishes” and “A Prince Enthroned”

“Dancing Dervishes” is an illuminated painted page from the Divan of Hafez, currently conserved at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City (Accession number 17.81.4). The painting itself is small, measuring only H. 6 5/16 by W. 4 1/4 inches, though it is mounted on a larger page. The painting depicts a Persian sama’ in a blue grey field dotted with red, blue, and white flowers, several flowering trees, and a bright blue sky. A river flows through the center of the painting. The painting can be approximately divided into three horizontal planes and the twenty three men represented, each of whom are engaged with the dance directly or through observation, into several groups. The highest plane is composed of six men, standing above the river, four of whom calmly regard the scene below them. The figure farthest to the right uses his sleeve to cover his face. To the left of the four central figures stands a young, beardless man who holds a book in his hands. In the middle plane, below the river, are four dancers who move in a circle, another observer, and three musicians. One of the dancers is barefoot and his turban and scarf lie on the ground near his feet. To the right of the dancers, two musicians play reed flutes and a third, the tambourine. The observer to the left is dressed in somewhat less fine, brown clothes. The bottom plane depicts nine men, overcome by the passion of the dance, some swooning, many missing their turbans. They are leaning on each other for support. One man lifts another’s turban, as if to help him cool off. Despite the numerous figures, the painting maintains a sense of cohesion through its balanced organization and muted color palette.

“A Prince Enthroned” is a rare two page illustrated frontispiece from a manuscript of the Masnavi, Book V, today located in the Freer Sackler Gallery in Washington, D.C. (Accession number S1986.35). It is also quite small, measuring H. 6 7/16 by W 4 1/8 inches. The painting is divided in the middle by the book’s binding, but because the border does not separate the pages from each other, it is clear that only one scene (albeit a scene with several components) has been depicted. On the right, two men approach who a king sits within a palace. One man, who is exiting the palace, sees three men. One of them is pointing inside, another, with his finger raised to lips, seems to be lost in thought. Below the palace, nine men dance the sama’ in a circle. Two play the tambourine and one the flute. On the left side of the painting, there are eight men, standing or sitting outside. As in “Dancing Dervishes”, a river divides the middle and lower halves of the painting. There are several trees, one flowering, another with yellow and green leaves, and two that are leafless and withered on top of a hill. Two men play chess. Another hands a ewer of wine to a fourth. Two more men look at each other, pointing in different directions. To the far left, a young man sits beneath the flowering tree. Next to him, between the two trees sits a man who wipes away his tears with his scarf as he watches the chess game. The colors of “A Prince Enthroned” are bright, characterized in particular by rich blues, greens, golds, and oranges, as well as some pastel. Unlike “Dancing Dervishes,” which created a sense of cohesion through its composition and color palette, “A Prince Enthroned” appears to contain many discrete moments, each of which is composed of groups who seem to mostly unaware of each other. Every element demands that attention be paid to it separately.

81 Codices of the Masnavi are rarely illustrated.
“Dancing Dervishes” and “A Prince Enthroned” are just two examples of the works of art produced during the Timurid and Safavid periods in major production centers, such as Shiraz, Herat, Tabriz, and occasionally even Baghdad. This period of Persian painting production is often called “classical” for two different reasons. During the Timurid period, book ateliers brought together artisans from different cities to create “a more or less codified visual vocabulary” that was applied to many different types of objects, including pottery, textiles, and metal- and woodwork. According to some scholars, this “formalization and institutionalization” of forms and meanings signals a classical period to which later artists can refer. Other scholars claim that the blossoming and increased production of books, coupled with visual and aesthetic mastery, as determined through subjective evaluations often based on literary sources, make this period classical.82

Expensive books and large libraries symbolized the power and wealth of ruling families, much like expensive clothing and jewelry. Therefore, book ateliers and artisans (called kitabkhane)83 traveled with the court when it moved, and books were often given as gifts to courtiers or ambassadors. Though perhaps not all rulers and nobility were interested in books, many were obviously passionate about them. Some rulers were even accomplished painters or calligraphers themselves.

Creating a complete manuscript, or even a single painting, required the labor of many different people, working both independently and collaboratively. The process of making the basic materials of a codex (“paper, leather, pigments, inks, binding agents, starches”) and the tools of the trade (“pens, brushes, styluses, knives, stamps, polishing stones”), as well as preparing the materials and tools for use (“from cutting the reed to thickening ink”) was rigorous and time intensive, the knowledge often passed directly from master to pupil—all this to say nothing of the actual painting and writing of the manuscript.84 The following passage describes the commissioning of a single anthology and highlights the various individual professionals—“penmen, binders, gilders, and painters”—who worked on it:

His Highness Baysunghur Mirza had Master Sidi Ahmad the painter [naqqash = ‘colorist’], Khwajeh ‘Ali the portraitist [literally, musawwir = ‘drawer of figures’], and Master Qiwamuddin the bookbinder [mujallid] brought from Tabriz ... The copying of it was given into the charge of Mawlana Fariduddin Ja’far. ... Mir Khalil was put in charge of (abstract) decoration [tayzin] and depiction of (figurative) scenes [taswir].85

In this short passage, five individual artisans are mentioned, each of whom has a specific task, clearly demonstrating the fact that the image of a single artist working on painting or transcribing an entire manuscript alone does not accurately reflect the complex and cooperative process that it took to create a single book. Furthermore, painters did not decide what scenes they would be painting or how much space they would have on any given page. Instead, after getting the patron’s approval, the head calligrapher would determine the where and what type of illustrations would appear in a book.86 A high level of technical mastery and experience, as well as a great deal of collaboration, were necessary elements of the process of book production.

82 Gruber, “Questioning the Classical in Persian Painting.”
83 Graber, Mostly Miniatures, 53.
85 Barry, Figurative Art in Medieval Islam, 119.
86 Porter, Painters, Paintings, and Books, 112
Because of the importance of calligraphy, an art sometimes valued more highly than figural representation, the ability to copy forms and reference earlier models were important skills. There are some extant sketches that were clearly copied and used as models in workshops. This reliance on tradition and repetition of forms links images together and could imply some sort of encyclopedia of forms, though their creators and viewers may not have had access to a wide range of other examples or personal experience with many books and paintings. Gruber explains the role of taqlid in literary and artistic traditions: “The term does not merely describe blind imitation and submission; rather it denotes a positive orientation, reception, and continuation of the past.”87 Tradition was highly valued. Painters would actively engage with earlier pictures and forms in order to increase their prestige, prove the authenticity of their works, and invent new artistic boundaries, all while enhancing “the status of pictorial materials as ultimate sources of truth.”88 Painters need to negotiate their relationship with tradition and with other artistic forms, especially calligraphy and literature.

When approaching questions about Persian paintings and manuscripts, certain methodological problems emerge because of their private nature and materiality. The paintings are almost always hidden inside of books and thus can only be easily viewed by one person at a time. Not only does this pose difficulties for contemporary individuals interested in learning about these works of art, it also means that when they were first created, they were not seen by a wide range of people. They were, above all, art destined for a small elite. It is hard for modern scholars and readers to imagine the limited repertoire of images that artists and viewers could draw on, namely “a world,” says Grabar, “where, especially, only a few fragments of the artistic production that existed could serve as models or as inspiration.”89 At the same time, the collective nature of book production and the tradition of taqlid borrowed from calligraphy and religious-legal practice implies that imagery was based on a common enough model that a typical viewer would have been able to identify the archetypal figures and forms. A viewer would have known how to “read” a painting, especially as it was presented within a book. The format of a book, the relationship between calligraphy, painting, and literature, and texts that discussed painting supports the claim Persian paintings can be “read” in a way that is similar to how a text might be read and interpreted.

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87 Gruber, “Questioning the Classical in Persian Painting,” 23.
89 Grabar, Mostly Miniatures, 127-128.
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