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Bahá'u'lláh's *Mathnavíy-i Mubárak*: introduction and provisional verse translation

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Abstract
Bahá'u'lláh composed several formal poems in rhyme and meter. One of these poems, the Mathnavíy-i Mubárak*, concerns Bahá'u'lláh's disclosure of his station to the Babis and to humanity. Bahá'u'lláh's* Mathnaví *alludes to the world-famous* Mathnaví *of Jalal al-Din Rumi, whose followers founded the spiritual confraternity known as the "Whirling Dervishes" (Mevleviye or Mawlaviyyah Order), which was quite active in Istanbul and Edirne during the time of Bahá'u'lláh's exile. This paper suggests the theological and rhetorical significance of Bahá'u'lláh's use of the discourse of Sufism, specifically Sunni Persian poetry; discusses the importance of Rumi among 19th century Iranians, in particular the Bábís and the Baha'is; outlines the date and circumstances of composition of Bahá'u'lláh's* Mathnaví*; proposes some of the factors to consider in establishing critical editions of the poems of Bahá'u'lláh; and finally theorizes about some of the aesthetic factors to consider in translating the poetry of Bahá'u'lláh. The article accompanies the first provisional translation of the poem to English, an experimental translation in blank verse.*

Bahá'u'lláh and the poetic tradition

The rhetorical conventions of expository literature in Persian and Arabic call for authors to quote lines of verse, usually from a famous poet, as a means to close an argument with a flourish, point a moral, or adduce a respected authority for the view expressed. Following this tradition, particularly in his early works, Bahá'u'lláh[1] quotes from many poets, including Sanâ'i, 'Attâr,

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1 The Bahá'í community uses an official transliteration system which Shoghi Effendi, in his capacity of Guardian of the Bahá'í community, adopted in the 1920s to standardise spellings of the many Persian and Arabic terms and names being rendered into English. This transliteration system was, at that time, the academic standard, but now has fallen rather out of fashion. The Library of Congress system remains close to the Bahá'í system, though the *Encyclopedia of Islam* differs in several respects from this, as does the *Encyclopædia Iranica* and most of the major Iranian studies or middle east studies journals. The most recent transliteration norms for Persian words would more likely render Bahâ'i and Bahâ Allâh, but insofar as the purpose of accent marks in modern English is primarily to help readers pronounce words with which they are unfamiliar, it does not seem necessary to use

Hâfez, and especially Rumi.

Beyond the quotation of verse of earlier poets, however, Bahá'u'lláh himself composed several poems employing Sufi terminology in verse. For modern readers accustomed to free verse, the words "poem" or "poetry" or "poetic" may connote no more than a certain kind of imagery or style of language, with little or no restriction as to form. Indeed, much of Bahá'u'lláh's writing is popularly described as "poetic" or "flowery" language, drawing on tropes and images from the natural world metaphorically. In this discussion, however, the word "poetry" or "poem" has a more precise meaning. In 19th century Persian literature, free verse, as such, had not yet been invented; there was a kind of rhymed but unmetered prose, known by the technical term of *nasr-e mosajja'*, a literary device relying upon parallel cadenced phrasing and homophony, much used in the early suras of the Koran, and in most of Bahá'u'lláh's prayers and tablets. However, such cadenced rhyming prose was not considered poetry proper. Poetry (*she'r*) had a more restricted sense, denoting rhymed speech (*moqafâ*) composed in lines (*bayt* / *abyât*) following one of the established quantitative meters (*bahr* / *bohur*) and arranged according to a particular form. The major poetic forms include the couplet (*masnavi*, or in the Bahá'í system of transliteration, *Mathnavî*), the lyric (*ghazal*), the ode (*qasida*), the fragment (*qet'e*), and the quatrain (*robâ'i*).

Probably the first thing Bahá'u'lláh wrote subsequent to his revelation experience in the Siyáh Chál was just such a poem. This poem in ghazal form, "Sprinklings from the Divine Cloud," *Rashh-i 'amá*, adopts a refrain which had been earlier utilized by the Persian poet Sâ'eb (1607-1677), who practised his art at the Moghul court of Shah Jahân and the Safavid court of Shah 'Abbâs II. Bahá'u'lláh composed another poem in the mountains of Sulaymaniyyih in Iraqi Kurdistan (some time between 1854 and 1856), "The Dove Ode" (*Qasídiy-i 'izz-i varqá'iyyih*), this one in Arabic (though with a Persian title) and expressly modelled on the famous "Magnificent Ode rhyming in the letter T" (*tâ'iyyat al-kubrâ*) by Ibn al-Fârid (1181-1235). Provisional translations of both of these poems of Bahá'u'lláh have been

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accent marks for words like these, which, I would argue, have become domesticated in English and should be rendered as Bahaullah and Bahai.

In this article, however, the names of works by Bahá'u'lláh and the Báb, as well as the personal names of individuals known from Bahá'í history books are given according to the official transliteration system, for the ease of readers looking for further references in Bahá'í secondary literature (with the exception that I do not underline digraphs or underdot letters, hence you will find here: sh for sh, th for th, t for , etc., and I do not give the dash after the –i of the ezâfe [*Kitáb-i Iqán* for *Kitáb-i-Iqán*]). Other Persian names, however, such as the names of Persian poets (Rumi, 'Attâr, Hâfez, Sâ'eb), are Romanized according to modern Persianist conventions. Please note that the Bahá'í spellings for Karbilá and Mihdí differ from the technically agreed upon vocalisations of Karbalá and Mahdí, but I have elected to follow the Bahá'í system here for the benefit of readers familiar with these works in Bahá'í sources.

published by Stephen Lambden and Juan Cole, respectively.[2]

A provisional translation of another Persian poem from the Baghdad period, *Halih, halih yá bishárát*, has appeared in two separate versions, the first by Stephen Lambden and other more metrical version, by Sen McGlinn.[3] There are several other poems of Bahá'u'lláh, most of which date to the Baghdad period, such as two Persian odes, "The Cup Bearer of the Unseen Realm of Eternity" (*Sáqí az ghayb-i baqá*), and "Come Back and Serve the Chalice" (*Báz á va bidih jámî*).[4] Shoghi Effendi did not translate any of Bahá'u'lláh's versified poems, and to my knowledge, with the exception of the three unofficial translations mentioned above, Bahá'u'lláh's poems have not yet been Englished.

The date of Bahá'u'lláh's *Mathnavíy-i Mubárak*

Bahá'u'lláh's poem entitled *Mathnavíy-i Mubárak*[5] is apparently the longest work he composed in verse, and perhaps also one of the last, though the dating of many of his books, tablets, poems and his voluminous correspondence remains rather tentative.[6] Eshrâq-Khâvari describes Bahá'u'lláh's *Mathnaví* among the tablets revealed during the four months spent in Istanbul (Constantinople), that is between 16 August and 12 December 1863, pointing out that Bahá'u'lláh closes the poem with a section lamenting his exile from Iraq and his house in Baghdad.[7] The late Adib

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2 Stephen Lambden's translation of *Rashh-i 'amá* appeared in *Bahá'í Studies Bulletin* 3:2 (1984); Juan Cole's translation of the "Dove Ode" appears on the internet at the Baha'i library site: http://bahai-library.org/provisionals/ode.dove.html

3 Originally published in *Bahá'í Studies Bulletin* 2:3 (December 1983): 105-112; Lambden's version subsequently circulated on the internet with the comments of a few readers, and is now available in a revised version at http://bahai-library.org/provisionals/hallelujah.html, along with a more literary version by Sen McGlinn.

4 These, along with a number of Bahá'u'lláh's other poems, are found in 'Abd al-Hamid Eshrâq-Khâvari's Mâ'ede-ye Âsmâni, vol. 4 (Mo'assese-ye matbu'ât-e Amri, 129 B.E./ 1972-3) 176-211.

5 We might render this title as "The Blessed Couplets," though the word "blessed" (*mubárak*) is also used as part of a title of Bahá'u'lláh, The Blessed Beauty (*Jamál-i mubárak*), so that Persian Bahá'ís would perceive this as a double meaning: the Blessed Couplets, and/or the Couplets of the Blessed One. Either way, the title certainly alludes to the famous poem of Rumi, called the *Masnavi-ye ma'navi*, usually translated as "the Spiritual Couplets."

6 An excellent effort is underway at the website http://h-net2.msu.edu/~bahai/bahatext.htm, which should help not only to date the works of Bahá'u'lláh more precisely, but also to identify variants in the existing manuscripts.

7 'Abd al-Hamid Eshrâq-Khâvari, *Ganj-e shâyegân* ([Tehran]: Mo'assese-ye matbu'ât-e Amri, 124 B.E. / 1967-68) 71-2. The spiritual significance of Baghdad and Bahá'u'lláh's house there can be deduced from the fact that the the *Kitáb-i Aqdas* (K32 and K133; Q&A 25, 29, 32; n54, n154) ordains an obligatory pilgrimage to either Bahá'u'lláh's house in Baghdad, or to the house of the Báb in Shiraz, the places where the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh were respectively living when they revealed their stations as Manifestations of God. In the

Taherzadeh likewise placed this poem in the Istanbul period.[8] More recently, however, Vahid Rafati has shown that the text of Bahá'u'lláh's *Mathnaví* could not have been entirely composed in Istanbul.[9]

The poem would appear to have been completed in Istanbul, though some lines may have been revised in Edirne (Adrianople).[10] Various pericopes, or thematic sections, are clearly discernible in the poem, though this fact in itself would not constitute decisive evidence that the poem was composed in sections. This we may rather adduce from the words of Bahá'u'lláh himself, speaking through the voice of Áqá Muhammad-'Alí in the *Kitáb-i Badí'*, a book composed in Edirne in 1866 or 1867 (1283 A.H.),[11] and addressed to Mírzá Mihdíy-i Qádí,[12] in refutation of the arguments of the Azali Bábís. The *Kitáb-i Badí'*, in a passage explaining how God exists beyond the plane of time and does not necessarily work to the schedule of human expectations, quotes several verses from the *Mathnavíy-i Mubárak* (lines 147-152 of the poem), describing them as a few individual lines (*chand fardí*) that had been revealed in Iraq by the most wondrous, inimitable tongue.[13] It would therefore

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two tablets called *Súriy-i Hajj*, Bahá'u'lláh prescribed certain rituals for the pilgrimage to each of these houses. See Adib Taherzadeh, *Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh* 1:212 and especially 2:240, which indicates that the provisions of the *Súriy-i Hajj* "were later affirmed in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* and will be implemented in the future..." However, Bahá'u'lláh later abrogated some of these pilgrimage rites (specifically, the shaving of the head) in the *Kitáb-i Aqdas*, as per the Questions and Answers section (see *Aqdas*, Q&A 10; n54).

8 Adib Taherzadeh, *The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh: Adrianople, 1863-68* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1977) 2:29. The late Mr. Taherzadeh was the first person to sketch in English the history of Bahá'u'lláh's books and tablets. His mammoth work on the subject provides more specific detail on his unpublished writings than is found in Hasan Balyuzi's *Bahá'u'lláh: King of Glory*, though the latter work gives more systematic biographical information. A large number of articles on various tablets and books of Bahá'u'lláh were commissioned and completed for the *Bahá'í Encyclopedia* project, but as this work has not yet been published, the vast amount of new and supplemental information it would add to our knowledge of Bahá'u'lláh's writings still remains inaccessible.

9 Vahid Rafati, in his postscript to the facsimile edition of Mishkín Qalam's calligraphic *Mathnaví Mubárak* ([Langenhain Germany: Bahá'í Verlag?], 1992) 1-2.

10 The latter conjecture about the revision of lines is based upon the fact that there are minor differences in certain lines of Bahá'u'lláh's *Mathnaví* as they appear in the published text of the poem, and as they are quoted in his *Kitáb-i Badí'*. I believe these differences (which are noted in the endnotes to the provisional translation of the poem which accompanies this article) are more likely due to revision, though it cannot yet be ruled out that they stem from scribal errors made during the decades that manuscripts of the *Mathnaví* and the *Kitáb-i Badí'* were copied out by hand, before they had been published by a printing press.

11 Fâzel-e Mâzandarâni, *Asrâr al-âsâr* 2:32-34.

12 He was appointed as the Shiite religious judge of Istanbul by the Persian Ambassador, Hâji Mirzâ Husayn Khân.

13 As I do not have access to the edition in the hand of Zayn al-Muqarribín printed in Tehran, quotations from the *Kitáb-i Badí'* (99-100) are taken from a manuscript copied in *shekaste* hand, 15 lines to the page, which was acquired by Hand of the Cause Abul-Qasim Faizi in the fall of 1940.

appear that at least these five lines, if not more of Bahá'u'lláh's *Mathnaví*, date to Bahá'u'lláh's time in Iraq, and therefore prior to his arrival in Istanbul. The theme and diction of these lines seem to evoke the schematic stages of the gnostic quest, and one might conclude on this basis that the lines date to the period during Bahá'u'lláh's stay in Sulaymaniyyih, or to the general time frame in which the *Seven Valleys* (*Haft Vádí*) or the *Four Valleys* (*Chahár Vádí*), both works which likewise draw upon the Sufi tradition, were written (sometime between 1854 and 1863).

However, as extensive passages from the *Mathnaví* of Bahá'u'lláh allude to Bahá'u'lláh as the fulfilment of the promise of the Báb, we may conclude that they were written, or at least publically shared, only after Bahá'u'lláh's declaration on 21 April 1863 to his companions in the private garden of one of the notables of Baghdad, Najíb Páshá, later designated by the Bahá'ís as the Garden of Ridván. Twelve days after this declaration, at noon on the 3rd of May, 1863 (14 Dhí al-qa'dih 1279 A.H.), Bahá'u'lláh set out for Istanbul in response to the summons of the Ottoman government. Despite the difficult circumstances of the journey, Bahá'u'lláh continued to write; he revealed the "Tablet of the Howdah" *(Súriy-i Hawdaj)* in Samsun, on the Black Sea,[14] some 600 kilometres east of Istanbul, before finally arriving in the Ottoman capital on 16 August 1863 (1 Rabí' I 1280 A.H.).

Bahá'u'lláh remained in Istanbul for four months before proceeding to Edirne, again at the command of the Ottoman state. While in Istanbul, Bahá'-u'lláh composed the tablet for the Ottoman Sultan 'Abd al-'Aziz and his ministers (*Lawh-i 'Abd al-'Azíz va vukalá*), which though no longer extant,[15] most probably announced Bahá'u'lláh's presence in the city and his divine mission to the highest officials of the Ottoman state. In the Arabic "Tablet of the Bell" (*Lawh-i Náqús*), also known as "Glory be to Thee, O He", revealed on 5 Jamádí I 1280 A.H., the 20th anniversary of the declaration of the Báb according to the Islamic lunar calendar (corresponding to 18 October 1863), Bahá'u'lláh announces his claim.[16] The *Mathnaví* was also completed in Istanbul, for the *Kitáb-i Badí'* indicates that the concluding lines of the poem (specifically, lines 312-317), were composed after Bahá'u'lláh's arrival in "the Great City" (*Madíniy-i kabírih*), an epithet used in Bahá'í texts for Istanbul (Constantinople).[17]

We may therefore tentatively conclude that parts of the poem, perhaps the

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14 Eshrâq-Khâvari, *Ganj-e shâyegân* 67.

15 It is possible, given the Ottoman government's extensive penchant for record keeping, that a copy of this tablet has been preserved somewhere in the vast Ottoman archives.

16 Denis MacEoin translated the text in his *Rituals in Babism and Baha'ism* (London: British Academic Press/I.B. Tauris, 1994) 169-172; it is also available on the internet at: http://www-personal.umich.edu/~jrcole/bahai/naqus/naqus.htm

17 *Kitáb-i Badí'*, page 263 of a manuscript in *shekaste* script acquired by Abul-Qasim Faizi in the fall of 1940 (303 in the manuscript copied out by Zaynu'l-Muqarribín).

first half, date from the Baghdad period. No known Bahá'í sources mention anything about Bahá'u'lláh continuing the poem during the journey en route to Istanbul, but the *Kitáb-i Badí*' does testify that the poem was completed in Istanbul, in the autumn of 1863. There is also substantial internal evidence suggesting that much of the poem must have been composed sometime after the proclamation in the garden of Ridván in April of 1863 (to which the poem seems frequently to allude), but before Bahá'u'lláh had made his claim publicly known beyond his immediate companions and family. Bahá'u'lláh eventually announced his claim to the wider Bábí public in the *Súriy-i Asháb*, "Tablet to the Companions," revealed early on in Edirne, probably sometime in 1864.[18] Since many lines in the *Mathnavíy-i Mubárak* describe Bahá'u'lláh, or God's truth, as being still wrapt in veils, they must have been written before the *Súriy-i Asháb*.

It therefore seems that Bahá'u'lláh's *Mathnaví* consists of at least two parts, composed at different times in different locations over a period of at least several months, perhaps even a few years. The earliest stratum of the *Mathnaví* may date to as early as the mid 1850s in Sulaymaniyyih, or the period in Baghdad. A large portion of the poem must, however, date to the period in Istanbul, where it assumed its final shape by the late autumn of 1863. Because the various sections of the poems were all composed in the same form (*mathnaví*)[19] and meter (*ramal-e mosaddas-e mahzuf*),[20] it was possible to combine them into one larger poem, much as one might link several independent stanzas of heroic English couplets into a larger poem, so long as they were all in the same meter.

Rhetorical orientation of Bahá'u'lláh's *Mathnaví*

Many lines in Bahá'u'lláh's *Mathnaví* call to mind passages from the Persian *Hidden Words*, employing the same imagery or vocabulary. Noticeably absent from the *Hidden Words*, the *Seven Valleys*, and the *Four Valleys* are any mention of Husayn, 'Alí, the Mihdí (now usually spelled as Mahdi or Mahdî), or the Imami traditions of Shiism. Even more remarkably, these works never refer explicitly to the Báb or the Bábí tradition, though a Bábí reader would

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18 A translation of this by Juan Cole is available on line at http://www.h-net.msu.edu/~bahai/trans/vol3/ashab.htm and also at http://bahai-library.org/provisionals/ashab.html

19 A poem of an indefinite number of lines (stichs), all composed in a specific meter, where the first and second hemistich (*mesrâ'*) of each line rhyme, but the rhyme differs in each successive stich (conforming to the pattern aa bb cc dd ee, etc.)

20 Catalectic hexameter Ramal, consisting of six feet of four syllables each, alternating in the pattern long-short-long-long, divided in two hemistichs, with caesura in the middle after the first rhyme word. In the Mahzuf, or catalectic version of Ramal, the last foot in each hemistich (i.e., the third and sixth feet of the hexameter line) is truncated to long-short-long, as follows:

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1 2 3 A 4 5 6 A

almost certainly have recognised allusions to the Báb and his works.[21]

The Bábí community in Baghdad, over which Bahá'u'lláh increasingly presided from about 1856, by virtue of his character, if not in name, had many momentous and unresolved theological problems to work through. These included: When would appear the figure to whom the Báb referred as "Him Whom God shall make Manifest"; who should lead the Bábí community until that time; what might the Shiite prophecies about the reign of justice which the Mahdi was supposed to usher in mean, since the Bábí uprisings in Zanjan, Nayriz and Mazandaran had been defeated and the Bábí community decimated? One might expect that in such circumstances, Bahá'u'lláh would have devoted close attention to exegesis of the works of the Báb or explanation of the meaning of prophecy.

Nevertheless, the noticeable absence of overt reference to either the Shiite or the Bábí tradition, and the emphasis on non-sectarian ethical and mystical themes in works like the *Hidden Words*, *Seven Valleys* and *Four Valleys*, all makes perfect sense for the wider audience Bahá'u'lláh must have been addressing in Ottoman Iraq. The shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala were, of course, major centres of Shiite theology and the populace there, both native Arabs and Iranian visitors, would have been predominantly Shiite. However, Baghdad and northern Iraq, especially Kurdish Sulaymaniyyih, as with most of the Ottoman empire, were predominantly Sunni.

It is true that the Bábí community in Iraq, though composed mostly of Iranian exiles, also had a number of Arab supporters, including those who had been taught by Qurrat al-'Ayn Táhirih and a few early Shaykhi converts to the Báb. But the Iranian Babi refugees were now living with a small cadre of their Arab co-religionists in a land where Sunnism was the religion of the ruling class. Most of the Arab Sufis, religious scholars and government officials with whom Bahá'u'lláh and the Bábís in Iraq had contact would have been Sunni, and to them, the eschatological claims of the Bábís would probably not have been appealing. Furthermore, Iranian travellers and Iranian government officials had given the Bábís a negative image as revolutionaries.[22] Foregrounding the pan-Islamic (i.e., non-Shiite) and spiritual components (i.e., personal, not political, transformation) of Bábí teachings and of Bahá'u'lláh's own beliefs, that is to say the ethical and mystical teachings, would have been an effective way to counter this image.

Bahá'u'lláh did, of course, address Shiite millennial expectations, or

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21 For example, the English translation of the *Seven Valleys* makes an allusion to the *Bayán* in the Exordium explicit, though this word would likely have been read by non-Bábís as an allusion to the Koran (verses 75:19 or 96:5), with the meaning "explanation", and not as the title of either of the two works of the Báb by that name. The same is true of the reference to "all things" (*kullu shay'*), which had a special esoteric significance for Bábís, but was also a term well-known to Sufis and the Sunni ulama without any necessarily sectarian connotations.

22 *Má'ede-ye âsmâni*, ed. 'Abd al-Hamid Eshrâq-Khâvari (Mo'assese-ye Melli-ye matbu'ât-e Amri, 129 B.E. / 1972) 4:33.

matters of Bábí history and doctrine, when directly questioned about them. For example, Hájí Mírzá Sayyid Muhammad, the maternal uncle of the Báb, posed several questions about how the drama of the Báb and the Iranian government's ruthless repression of his religion could possibly fulfil the prophecies relating to the Mahdi, and Bahá'u'lláh responded with the *Kitáb-i Iqán*. Even here, however, Bahá'u'lláh's reply does not deal primarily with the minutiae of Shiite prophecy, nor does it delve into the Báb's writings or the history of his followers in great detail.[23]

Instead, Bahá'u'lláh replies with general principles about the nature of interpretation of prophecy and the observation that all prophets have been opposed by the religious and political authorities of their day. The focus in the *Iqán* on the New Testament prophecies about the return of Christ make it easier for a Shiite audience to accept the principles of interpretation Bahá'u'lláh proposes, because Shiites were not invested in the maintenance of the Christian clergy or any particular dogmas about Christian prophecy, and could therefore reflect on them with an open mind. Perhaps even more importantly, with this explanation Bahá'u'lláh leads Bábí theology out of its micro-Shiite milieu and brings it into conversation with the millennial traditions of a non-Islamic religious tradition.

The *Hidden Words* (*Kalimát-i maknúnih*), originally circulated among the Bábís under the title *Sahífiy-i Fátimiyyih*, or "Fátimih's Scroll," provides evidence for the continuing importance of millennial concerns and the fulfilment of prophecy for the Bábís. "Fátimih's Scroll," or the "Hidden Book of Fátimih," is an apocryphal Shiite text, supposedly revealed by the angel Gabriel to Fâtima to console her when her father, the Prophet Muhammad, died in 632. Fâtima's scroll was supposed to be in possession of the Qá'im or Mahdi, along with the sword of 'Alí and the Prophet's cloak. That this book of hitherto "hidden words" was in the possession of Bahá'u'lláh, or revealed by him, would constitute a fulfilment of the Shiite prophecy and establish Bahá'u'lláh's authority as successor of the Báb.

The fact that this book eventually became known as the *Hidden Words*, and that the prologue introduces the contents as the inner essence of what all the previous prophets had revealed, heightens the appeal of the work for a Sunni audience. Indeed, the concern with ethics and piety reflected in the *Hidden Words*, a text of 1858 (1274 A.H.), draws the Bábís away from political/eschatological concerns to interior spiritual and mystical concerns, and also creates a bridge to the non-sectarian tradition of Islamic ethics and piety among the Sunni ulama. Furthermore, the concentration on interior spiritual themes would have helped assure the Iranian officials spying on the Bábí community that the Bábís were not focused on the millennial hope of toppling the Iranian government and establishing the promised Qá'im or his

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23 It does, however, address specific theological concerns such as the meaning of *qiyámat* (resurrection), *liqá Alláh* (the meeting with God), or *ra j'at* (return), but tends to explain them in metaphorical and non-technical or non-esoteric terms.

successors on the throne.

That the themes and style of Bahá'u'lláh's writings in Iraq reflect the concerns of Sunni Islam and of non-sectarian Sufism, and not the particular millennial expectations of the Shaykhis or Bábís, should not come as a surprise. Bahá'u'lláh reflects the theological concerns and assumptions of his intended audience in many tablets; outstanding examples would include the Perso-philism and Zoroastrian cosmology in the tablet for Mánikchí Sáhib (Manakji Limji Hatari) and in the Tablet of Seven Questions (*Lawh-i haft pursish*) for Ustád Ján-Mard, or the appeal to the Islamic philosophical and cosmological tradition reflected in the Tablet of Wisdom (*Lawh-i hikmat*).

Likewise, the mystical concerns reflected in many of Bahá'u'lláh's works from the Baghdad period, such as the *Seven Valleys*, written in reply to Shaykh Muhiyyu'd-Dín, the Qádí (magistrate or religious judge) of Khániqayn, or the *Four Valleys*, addressed to Shaykh 'Abdu'r-Rahmán of Kirkúk, make perfect rhetorical sense in transcending the particular concerns of the Bábís and relating to a Sunni audience, and beyond that to a kind of non-denominational and gnostic religious orientation that transcended the particularities of doctrine and creed. Although there were many Shiite Sufi authors, classical Persian Sufism was a preeminently Sunni phenomenon (the majority of the populace in Iran followed the Hanafî or Shâfi'î rites of Sunni Islam until the 16th century, when Shiism became the state religion of the Safavids).

The Kurds of Sulaymaniyyih with whom Bahá'u'lláh was in contact during this period were primarily Sunnis with a strong inclination to Sufism, specifically the Naqshbandî-Khâlidî and Qâdirî Orders.[24] Some of them were quite opposed to Shiism, influenced by men such as Mawlânâ Khâlid Ziyâ al-Dîn Baghdâdî (1193-1242/1779-1827), founder of the Khâlidî branch of Sufis, who was from Qarâdâg, five miles from Sulaymaniyyih. He went to Delhi, India, where he was initiated by a Naqshbandi Shaykh in about 1810, and on the way, he stopped in Iran in 1809 to argue with Shiite scholars, including Shaykh Ismá'íl Káshí, a mujtahid in Tehran. Khálid was designated as the head of the Naqshbandis in western Asia, and returned to Iraq, but on the way back, he stopped in a number of cities (Yazd, Shiraz, Isfahan, Hamadan, Sanandaj) to debate against Shiites. In 1813, he turned a run-down structure in Baghdad into a Sufi lodge and began to recruit Naqshbandi disciples there; the governor Mahmúd Páshá later had another lodge built for Khálid in Sulaymaniyyih. He moved in 1823 to Damascus, where he died in 1827, but not before the Khálidí order spread to the Balkans and throughout the Ottoman territory, where it promoted the Ottoman state, opposition to imperialism and adherence to religious law. Several important Ottoman officials affiliated with the Khálidí order.[25]

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24 See Juan Cole's "Bahá'u'lláh and the Naqshbandi Sufis in Iraq, 1854-1856," in *From Iran East and West*, ed. Juan Cole and Moojan Momen (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1984) 1-28.

25 See the articles "Bahâ al-Din Naqshband" and "Baghdadi, Mawlânâ Khâlid Ziâ al-Din" in

Bahá'u'lláh would employ the idiom of these staunchly Sunni Kurds in Baghdad and Sulaymaniyyih during his stay there. As 'Abdul-Bahá explains, Bahá'u'lláh would attract the Kurds to him by speaking in the terminology of the gnostics and the Sufis, for discourse must proceed according to the inclination of the audience and the requisites of the time, with elegance of expression and temperate words.[26]

Bahá'u'lláh, Sufism, Sufi poetry, and Rumi

Despite embracing some of the themes and writings of classical Persian Sufis like 'Attâr and Rumi, Bahá'u'lláh was not in agreement with the entirety of the large and rather loose body of teachings and doctrines held by members of various Sufi orders. Bahá'u'lláh mentions some theological differences with Sufism in the *Seven Valleys*, where he categorises the mystical schools of thought known as "unity of being" and "unity of appearances" (*vahdat al-vujûd* and *vahdat al-shuhûd*), which had become prevalent doctrine among most Sufis, as limited understandings of the nature of spiritual reality.[27]

More important, however, was Bahá'u'lláh's opposition to the popular phenomenon of Sufism. Popular Sufism allowed men to grow their hair long, ignore social constraints and religious law (many "Sufis" were addicted to narcotics, as Browne's account of his travels in Persia show), and to beg for food. Mírzá Abú al-Fadl attacks the effete nature of such popular "Sufism" in his *Kitábu'l-Farâ'id*,[28] and the laws of Bahá'u'lláh's *Kitáb-i Aqdas* (c.1873) would later prohibit men from these practices: growing their hair long, begging, monasticism, practicing feats of asceticism, etc.[29]

Encyclopedia Iranica.

26 'Abdu'l-Bahá, as recalled by Mírzá Mahmúd-i Zarqání, *Badâye' al-âsâr* (Bombay, 1914; reprinted Hofheim-Langenhain: Bahá'í-Verlag, 1982) 1:175.

27 Mention is made of these doctrines in the 7th of the *Seven Valleys* (True Poverty and Absolute Nothingness, p. 39 in the Gail/Khan translation). Naim Nabil Akbar and Nader Saiedi have studied the Bahá'í scripture's interpretation of the Sufi quest in an article originally called "Ab'âd-e soluk" [The Dimensions of the Quest], most of which has been incorporated into Nader Saiedi's *'Aql, din va jâme'e dar andishe-ye Bahâ'i* [Reason, religion and society in Bahai thought] (Dundas, Ontario: Persian Institute for Bahá'í Studies, 1988).

28 Taherzadeh, *Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh* 2:27-8.

29 Taherzadeh, *Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh* 2:24-5, reports that Bahá'u'lláh encouraged his companions to adopt the guise of Bektâshi dervishes on their way to Istanbul as a measure of protecting them from recognition as "heretical" Bábís. However, the disguise of Sufis seems to have been used mostly by Mírzá Yahyá, who tied a black cord around his head and carried the begging bowl of a dervish in order to dissociate himself from the Persians in the entourage, who would have been openly identified as Bábís. Mírzá Yahyá travelled with an Arab companion and initially maintained contact only with the Arab and Turkish members of the party, according to a tablet from 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the memoirs of Áqá Muhammad Ridá-yi Qannád, as reported in Hasan Balyuzi, *Bahá'u'lláh: King of Glory* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1980) 183-4. Finally, outside of Diyárbakr, Mírzá Yahyá abandoned this disguise (ibid 190), once it had become clear that the party of Bábí/Bahá'í travellers were not in

danger from government authorities. Though there was at least one actual dervish among the 72 members of Bahá'u'lláh's party, Bahá'u'lláh and most of his companions travelled openly. Námiq Páshá, the Governor of Baghdad, had provided a ten-man mounted military escort and a letter of introduction for Bahá'u'lláh, instructing the officials along the way to treat the party well. At most of the towns along the way (with the exceptions of a region near Mosul controlled by Yazidi Kurds, and Diyárbakr, where the Governor was uncooperative), Bahá'u'lláh was met with respect by the local dignitaries. See Balyuzi 175ff, and Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 156-7.

Why then, did the *Mathnavíy-i Mubárak* assume the particular form it did? Why poetry, rather than prose? Since Bahá'u'lláh had earlier revealed his mystical ideas in a long poem in Arabic (The Dove Ode, or *Qasídiy-i varqá'-iyyih*), why choose to write this in Persian?[30] Why did Bahá'u'lláh give it this particular title? Why choose this particular meter (*ramal*) and rhyme scheme (rhyming couplets, or *mathnavî*)?

The Báb had revealed very little of his teachings in the form of poetry. One poem in the *rajaz* form is ascribed to the Imam Husayn, and the Báb did compose a verse-like commentary on this poem, though it does not strictly observe the rules of prosody.[31] In a letter written from Bushehr, the Bab includes two lines of Arabic verse, which he may either have composed or quoted. The Bab also quotes a quatrain from the poet Vahshi-ye Bâfqi (d. 1583) in another letter.[32]

Bahá'u'lláh liberally quotes from Sufi poets like Sanâ'i, 'Attâr and Rumi, as well as other poets thought to be Sufis, such as Hâfez and Sa'di. All of these poets were Sunnis, a fact which would later cause some discomfort when the Safavid dynasty made Shiism the state religion of Iran in the 16th century. Some zealous Iranian Shiites felt uncomfortable reading Sunni poets and some of the Shiite ulama harboured hostility toward Sufis. The fact that Islam's greatest mystical poet, Rumi (1207-1273), around whose memory a Sufi order formed, had denounced the Shiite practice of ritual mourning for Husayn in his *Mathnavî*[33] led some Iranian Shiites to condemn Rumi and call for copies of his books to be burned.

But Rúmí's *Mathnaví* (pronounced *Mass-na-vee*, and usually now written as *Masnavi*) was almost certainly the most widely read poem from the Balkans to Bengal.[34] Jâmi had reportedly said of it:

> The mystic *Mathnaví* of our Rumi:
> Koran incarnate in the Persian tongue!
> How can I describe him and his majesty?

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30 We may safely exclude the possibility of writing in Turkish, even though Bahá'u'lláh lived the latter half of his life in an area where Turkish was the offical language of government. Bahá'u'lláh probably did not know literary Turkish well enough to compose a poem in that language, and, besides, few of the Bábis to whom Bahá'u'lláh is directly addressing his early writings would have known Turkish, but were primarily versed in Persian and/or Arabic.

31 Ruhollah Mehrâbkhâni, *Maqâm-e she'r dar adyân* (Tehran: Bahá'í Youth Committee, 1331/1952) 23ff, 33-35.

32 *Ibid.*, 35-6.

33 *Masnavi-ye Ma'navi*, Book 6, lines 777-805 in Reynold Nicholson's critical edition.

34 For the details of Rumi's popularity, see my *Rumi: Past and Present, East and West* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000).

Not prophet, but revealer of a Book.

The enduring quality of his poetry, the magnanimity and insight of his beliefs, eventually redeemed Rumi in the eyes of most Shiites, and Rumi's *Mathnaví* enjoyed wide popularity in Iran in the latter half of the nineteenth century, and as books began to be printed in Persian, Rumi's *Mathnaví* was among the more frequently published. Mirzâ Mohammad Bâqer Khwânsâri (1811-1895), a Shiite scholar contemporary with Bahá'u'lláh, describes Rumi's *Mathnaví* as a book "esteemed by scholars and the common folk, whether Shiite or not."[35]

This assertion is amply attested by the fact that the six books of Rumi's *Mathnaví* were repeatedly printed or lithographed in the mid-nineteenth century, beginning in Egypt (Bûlâq, 1835), then in Tabriz (1847), and repeatedly in Bombay (beginning in 1851). While Bahá'u'lláh was in exile in Iraq, an edition of Rumi's *Mathnaví* appeared in Tehran (1856), and shortly after Bahá'u'lláh arrived in Edirne, yet another edition was lithographed in Lucknow (1865). Before the end of the century, Rumi's *Mathnaví* was reprinted over twenty more times. Rumi's *Mathnaví* was even popular among non-Muslim Iranians; Mullá Hizqíl Námdár, a Jewish convert to Islam in Mashhad, even possessed a Judeo-Persian version of it (Persian written out in Hebrew characters).[36]

Other Mathnavís

For Islamic scholars with mystical bent, especially among Sunnis and more ecumenically minded Shiites, writing a commentary on Rumi's *Mathnaví* was quite common practice. Iran's greatest Islamic philosopher of the 19th century, Mullá Hádí Sabzivárí (1798-1873), offered an analysis of Rumi's *Mathnaví* in a work he wrote in 1858 for a Qajar prince, Soltân Murâd.[37] Bahá'u'lláh himself, in the *Lawh-i Salmán*, quotes the following verse from Rumi's *Mathnaví*[38] and comments on it:

Once the colourless became enmeshed in colours
A Moses came into conflict with a Moses

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35 *Rawzat al-jannât* (Beirut: Dâr al-Islâmiyya, 1991) 8:63.

36 Nâmdâr was the father of Áqá 'Azízu'lláh, who became a Bahá'í in 1874, and later met with Leo Tolstoy to proclaim the Bahá'í Faith; see Hasan Balyuzi, *Eminent Bahá'ís In the Time of Bahá'u'lláh* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1985) 178.

37 Selections from this work are offered in *Sharh-e Masnavi*, ed. Mostafâ Borujerdi (Tehran: Vezârat-e Farhang va Ershâd-e Eslâmi, 1374/1995).

38 Nicholson edition, Book 1, line 2467.

In Baghdad, Bahá'u'lláh even copied out a poem of Rumi's for Ustád Ismá'íl, and instructed him to turn his face toward the Báb and chant these lines melodiously.[39]

Beyond this, many poets wrote poems in imitation of parts of Rumi's *Mathnaví*. One poem in the form and meter of Rumi's *Mathnaví* by Sohbat-e Lâri (d. 1835) was apparently understood among the Bábís as an allusion to or prediction of the advent of the Báb.[40] Táhirih took a particular interest in Sohbat's works and sometimes quoted from them. There is even a *mathnaví* written in praise of Bahá'u'lláh attributed to Táhirih.[41] Whether this poem is indeed hers or not, it is clear that the *mathnaví* was a form appreciated by many of the Bábís and, later on, by Iranian Bahá'ís. Hájí Mírzá Haydar-'Alí, for example, is said to have lived in seclusion for four months, during which time he took four books with him: The Koran, the *Mathnaví* of Rumi, the *Bayán* of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh's *Iqán*.[42] Nabíl-i Zarandí, author of the *Dawn-Breakers*, after completing his pilgrimage to the House of the Báb in Shiraz as per Bahá'u'lláh's instructions in the *Súriy-i Hajj*, composed a *mathnaví* describing the experience.[43] Nabíl also composed another *mathnaví* describing the history of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh.[44] Both of Nabíl's *mathnavís* seem to derive their inspiration from Bahá'u'lláh's own *Mathnavíy-i Mubárak*, but Rumi could not have been far from his mind, either; when describing Bahá'u'lláh's ascension, Nabíl twice quotes from Rumi's *Mathnaví*, including this line:[45]

> When the rose has gone and the garden's passed
> You'll hear no more tell of the nightingale

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39 This according to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's own testimony in *Memorials of the Faithful*, tr. Marzieh Gail (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1971) 30.

40 Mehrâbkhâni, *Maqâm-e she'r* 93-104.

41 *Ibid.*, 106-110.

42 Taherzadeh, *Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh* 2:70.

43 Eshrâq-Khâvari, *Ganj-e shâyegân* 83-5. Nabíl's *masnavi* is called the "Couplets of Reunion and Separation," and this title may have something to do with the section in Bahá'u'lláh's *Mathnaví* (see lines 270ff), which addresses the question of reunion (divine immanence) and separation (divine transcendence).

44 *Masnavi-ye Nabil-e Zarandi dar târikh-e amr-e Bahâ'i va so'ud-e Hazrat-e Bahâ Allâh* (Cairo: Mohyi al-Din Sabri-ye Kordi, 1924), and recently reprinted in Germany (Langenhain: Lajne-ye Melli-ye Nashr-e Âsâr-e Amri be Lesân-e Fârsi va 'Arabi, 152 B.E./1995).

45 *Masnavi-ye Nabil-e Zarandi* 70 and 76. The theme of this line seems to echo in Bahá'u'lláh's *Hidden Words*, Persian #15. The poem of Rumi translated here is from his *Mathnaví*, 1:29. The other lines quoted by Nabíl are 3:4718 and 3:4716, all according to Nicholson's edition.

Summoned by the Ottoman authorities to Istanbul, where he arrived in August 1863, Bahá'u'lláh perhaps observed for the first time the rituals of the "dancing dervishes," or Mevlevis, a Sufi order dedicated to the memory, poetry and turning meditation of Rumi. Further exiled to Edirne, a city of about 100,000 people at the time, during the last week of December 1863, Bahá'u'lláh resided in the northeast part of the city, in the Murádiyyih quarter near the Mevlevi lodge. He moved to another house shortly thereafter, where he remained for about ten months, announcing his claim with increasing openness in tablets such as the "The Tablet of the Traveller" (*Lawh-i Sayyáh*) and the "Tablet of the Point" (*Lawh-i Nuqtih*).[46] Still within proximity of the Mevlevi lodge, at least one member of the Bahá'í entourage was in contact with the nearby Mevlevis.

Hájí Mírzá Haydar-'Alí describes in his memoirs[47] how a public encounter between Bahá'u'lláh and Mírzá Yahyá was arranged at the Sultan Selim mosque in Edirne in September of 1867. Bahá'u'lláh entered the mosque on a Friday and his presence caused the preacher to stop speaking in the midst of his sermon. Mírzá Yahyá failed to show up and Bahá'u'lláh eventually set out for home.[48] Along the way, Bahá'u'lláh heard the Mevlevi dervishes dancing, repeating their *zekr*:[49] *huwa Allâh, yâ Allâh* (He is God, O God!). Bahá'u'lláh indicated an intention to "visit" Rumi (Mowlânâ), and headed towards the Mevlevi lodge[50] with the governor, the mayor and various town notables respectfully following along, as if part of Bahá'u'lláh's retinue. Bahá'u'lláh entered the Mevlevis' lodge, followed by these dignitaries. Although well into the *samâ'* or meditative dancing, the Mevlevi dervishes stopped their turning and their music, and the hall fell silent. Only after Bahá'u'lláh had seated himself and his companions, and motioned to the dervishes, did they continue their turning ritual. Hájí Mírzá Haydar-'Alí describes this event as if an eye-witness, though he does not explicitly indicate that he was present. Haydar-'Alí does state that Bahá'u'lláh himself

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46 See Balyuzi, *King of Glory* 219-20.

47 *The Delight of Hearts*, trans. A.Q. Faizi (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1980) 22-24.

48 Shoghi Effendi dates this incident with Mírzá Yahyá to September 1867 (Jamádíyu'l-avval 1284), and the details given by the Guardian in *God Passes By* 168-9 (perhaps based upon Nabíl's unpublished history of Bahá'u'lláh), differ slightly from the account given by Mírzá Haydar-'Alí. The Guardian does not mention Bahá'u'lláh's visit to the Mevlevi lodge at all.

49 Or *dhikr*, literally, "remembrance," a mantra-like chant used by Sufis in their devotions. Bahá'u'lláh instructs Bahá'ís to chant the *zekr* "Alláh-u-Abhá" 95 times daily.

50 These lodges, called *khâneqâh* in Persian and usually *tekke* in Turkish, were hospices and centres for Sufis, much like a monastery, where adepts and masters of a particular order would live. Most of the major cities of the Ottoman empire had a Mevlevi lodge, as well as the lodges of some other Sufi orders, such as the Refâ'is, the Bektâshis, the Jelvetis, etc.

described the incident to him on the following day as a kind of miracle.[51]

As part of their turning ceremony, or "whirling," the Mevlevis almost certainly recited from parts of Rumi's *Mathnaví*, which they still do today, and seem to have been doing since the 14th century.[52] When Marion Jack made a pilgrimage to Edirne in 1933 to see Bahá'u'lláh's house, she painted a picture of this Mevlevi lodge.

But it was in Istanbul in the autumn of 1863 that Bahá'u'lláh completed his *Mathnaví* partly in response to the Mevlevis' devotion for Rumi's great *Mathnavíy-i ma'navi*, the "Spiritual Couplets." Although Rumi's *Mathnaví* was read wherever Persian was spoken, the Mevlevi order operated mostly in Anatolia, the Levant, and the Balkans. Although Rumi had lived in Konya, Mevlevi activity in the 19th century entered on Istanbul, where literally dozens of commentaries on Rumi's *Mathnaví* had been written in Turkish. In the closing lines of the *Mathnavíy-i Mubárak*, Bahá'u'lláh indirectly alludes to the fame of Rumi's *Mathnaví*, which begins with the reed pipe. Because translations of this part of Rumi's poem are widely available, I will not give it at length here,[53] but quote the opening lines in Sir William Jones' 1794 translation:

> Hear, how yon reed in sadly pleasing tales
> Departed bliss and present woe bewails!
> "With me, from native banks untimely torn,
> Love-warbling youths and soft-ey'd virgins mourn
> O! Let the heart, by fatal absence rent,
> Feel what I sing, and bleed when I lament"[54]

Indeed, the title chosen by Bahá'u'lláh, *Mathnavíy-i Mubárak* (the "blessed couplets") evokes the title of Rumi's work. Rumi derived the name of his *Mathnavíy-i ma'navi* (the "spiritual couplets") from the verse form it employs – rhyming couplets with the rhyme scheme following the pattern aabbccdd, etc. Poets generally employed the *mathnaví* form for narrative verse; Ferdowsi used it in the epic *Shâh nâme*, whereas Fakhr-e Gorgâni and Nezâmi used it in the romances *Vîs and Râmin* and *Layli and Majnun*, respectively. Beginning with Sanâ'i, poets adapted this form to ethical-didactic and mystical themes, and Rumi modelled his narrative couplets on

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51 Haydar-'Alí, *Delight of Hearts* 23-4.

52 See Chapter 10 of my *Rumi: Past and Present, East and West*.

53 Chapters 13 and 14 of my *Rumi: Past and Present* give a history of translations of Rumi's *Masnavi*; a recent attempt to render the "Song of the Reed Pipe" to English can be found in Chapter 8 of that work.

54 *Asiatick Researches* of 1794, in *Collected Works of William Jones* 4:230-31.

the genre of such works as exemplified in Sanâ'i and 'Attâr. The adjective *ma'navi* means relating to the inner meaning, or for concision's sake, "spiritual." Hence in English one sometimes encounters the translation "Spiritual Couplets" for Rumi's *Mathnavíy-i ma'navi*. Though many works prior to Rumi's *Mathnaví* and a great many more after Rumi employed this verse form, Rumi's work is usually known as the *Mathnaví*, par excellence. Already within a few generations after its composition, according to the testimony of Qâzi Najm al-Din-e Tashti, as reported by Aflâki, the book was commonly referred to simply as the *Mathnaví*: "When they say the name *Mathnaví*, reason naturally assumes the *Mathnaví* of Mowlânâ [Rumi] is meant."[55]

In addition to the title and the trope of the reed pipe which opens Rumi's *Mathnaví* and closes Bahá'u'lláh's, Bahá'u'lláh's poem shares the same meter as Rumi's poem. Both poems also allude frequently to the Biblical prophets and to Muhammad, and to Sufi interpretations of Islam. However, the *Mathnaví* of Rumi includes many rather lengthy tales in its 25,000 lines to illustrate the mystical points it makes. These include philosophical, humorous and even bawdy stories. Bahá'u'lláh's poem, which is far shorter, at 318 lines, does not digress into stories, as Rumi's work does.

By the mid-nineteenth century, Rumi's fame had even spread to Europe, where Hegel and other European philosophers and poets drew inspiration from him.[56] William Jones had described the *Mathnaví* as perhaps one of the most extraordinary books known to man and said of Rumi (Mowlavi):

> I know of no writer, to whom the Maulavi can justly be compared, except Chaucer or Shakespeare.[57]

Factors bearing upon the provisional translation of the *Mathnaví*

History of the text of the Mathnavíy-i Mubárak

Compared to the textual history of the *Divân* of Hâfez, for which multiple variant readings and multiple orderings of the lines of almost every poem are attested, the textual history of Bahá'u'lláh's *Mathnaví* is quite straightforward. However, because the printing press did not come into general use in Iran until the 20th century, all copies of the texts of Bahá'u'lláh were written out

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55 Shams al-Din Aflâki, *Manâqeb al-'ârefin*, ed. Tahsin Yazici, 2 vols. (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basimevi, 1959) 597.

56 See *Rumi: Past and Present*, Chapter 10, for the activities of the Mevlevis in Istanbul; for the history of Rumi's reception in the West, see chapters 12-14.

57 *The Letters of Sir William Jones*, ed. Garland Cannon (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970) 632, 735.

by hand until about the 1890s, when Bahá'í texts began to be lithographed in India. The transmission of books in a chirographic culture, where every single copy of a given text must be copied out by hand (hence "manuscript," a hand-writ book), usually by a scribe who did this work professionally, typically results in a variety of changes over time.[58]

Bahá'u'lláh's texts circulated in manuscript for a relatively short time, a period of only two or three decades, before they were lithographed or printed. He wrote out most of these letters and books in his own hand, of course, or verified his secretary's copy with his seal. But most Bahá'ís in Iran did not have access to these original holographs (manuscripts copied out by the hand of the author) of Bahá'u'lláh; instead, they wrote out their copies from copies that were made from Bahá'u'lláh's copy, and so on. Although these scribes took great care in copying out the works of Bahá'u'lláh, which they regarded as divine revelation, errors or lapses did sometimes occur. Certain scribes, such as Zaynu'l-Muqarribín, were known for the greater accuracy of their manuscripts[59] (a function of their level of learning in Persian and Arabic, as well as their care and precision in copying, and the legibility of their handscript); this indicates that there may have been at least some inferior manuscripts in circulation among the Bahá'ís, no doubt copied by individuals with insufficient knowledge to understand all the words (Arabic being a foreign language for most Iranians, a certain degree of learning was necessary to correctly read and therefore copy the books and letters of Bahá'u'lláh).

Thus, some relatively minor variants are reflected in the wording of a few passages of various manuscripts of Bahá'u'lláh's works. This is also true for the *Mathnavíy-i Mubárak*: a few lines are preserved in slightly different readings in various manuscripts. As we have seen above, the poem was apparently composed over a period of time, and the poem may have been shared with family members and close companions at various points before it was completed in final form. The *Kitáb-i Badí'*, completed several years later in Edirne, quotes several lines from Bahá'u'lláh's *Mathnaví*, and at this time Bahá'u'lláh may have chosen to revise these lines slightly from the earlier version written down in Istanbul or Baghdad. In one letter, 'Abdu'l-Bahá quotes four lines from the "Mathnaví of the Abhá Beauty," but gives variants that are not to be found in any of the editions mentioned above.[60] Therefore,

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58 This is not to say that the printing process does not also introduce changes into a work over time (by changing spellings, by editing, abridging, etc.). However, the large number of examples of a given text that the printing process creates makes for more stable texts in print culture.

59 See, for example, the comments of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in *Memorials of the Faithful* 153, about his "faultless care" in copying the tablets.

60 *Montakhabât-e makâtib*, 3:227. We may either assume that 'Abdu'l-Bahá quoted these from memory, inexactly, or that he had heard Bahá'u'lláh recite the poem in this manner, at variance with the written version, or that he had access to yet a different manuscript of the

the attested variants may indeed stem, not necessarily from scribal error, but from Bahá'u'lláh's own revisions. We can hypothesize that an earlier version of the poem, dating to before Bahá'u'lláh's departure from Baghdad, circulated among the Bahá'ís in Iraq, in both written and oral form. A later, and slightly amended recension of the poem may have circulated among the Bahá'í's in Istanbul, where Bahá'u'lláh completed and perhaps revised the poem.

Literary scholars attempt to resolve any textual variants reflected in the manuscript tradition by collecting as many manuscripts as possible and comparing the readings of the most authoritative manuscripts. Generally speaking, a manuscript written by the author is considered the most authoritative; next in rank comes the oldest manuscripts, and after that, the most carefully copied manuscripts. By collating the various manuscripts, an editor can reach conclusions about which readings are oldest or most likely, and on this basis, a critical text is established, with the variants noted in the footnotes.

Insofar as I am aware, no effort has as yet been undertaken to establish a critical text of Bahá'u'lláh's *Mathnaví* on the basis of the existing manuscripts. At least two important manuscripts of the poem, both copied out by noted Bahá'ís, and probably both copied within twenty years of the poem's composition, exist: one manuscript by Zaynu'l-Muqarribín, copied on 8 Ramadán 1299 (24 July 1882), and one by Mishkín Qalam, which is undated.

However, the Persian text of the poem has been published at least five times, as follows:[61]

◦ 1914 (1332 A.H.), printed in Cairo by Faraj Allâh Zakiy al-Kordi in an

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poem.

Three of the lines quoted in this letter have minor variants (*haqiqat* for *elâhi*; *ma'âni* for *elâhi*; *yowm* for *ruz*). One of the lines, however, exhibits a significant difference from the reading attested in the published manuscripts: lines 148 and 149 of the published text of the poem are condensed into one line and given a different ending, an ending which eliminates one particular textual difficulty. *Âsâr-e qalam-e a'la*, volume three, has:

vay to az khamr-e 'enâyat gashte mast
hich yâd-at âyad az ruz-e alast
goft yâd âyad marâ ân sowt o goft
ku be-day bud o nabâshad shegoft

(See the text of the translation below.) 'Abdu'l-Bahá's letter, on the other hand, renders the following:

hich yâd-at âyad az ruz-e alast
goft âri chunke andar vay bod-ast

Do you recall the day of "am I not"?
He said, "Yes, for it was on that day"

61 The information on the 1932 and 1953 editions of the text comes from Vahid Rafati's afterword to the facsimile reproduction of Mishkín Qalam's manuscript of the text, *Mathnavíy-i Mubárak* (n.p., 1992) 2-3.

edition which included the text of the *Seven Valleys* and the *Hidden Words*.

◦ 1932 (89 B.E.), jellygraphed in Iran, a version in the hand of Jináb-i Musammá-parast, including poems of Táhirih and Na'ím, and an apologetic treatise by the latter.

◦ 1953 (110 B.E.), printed in Delhi in a volume of 54pp.

◦ 1964 (121 B.E.), in *Âsâr-e qalam-e a'lâ*, volume 3 (Tehran: Bahá'í Publishing Trust; reprinted in New Delhi by the Bahá'í Publishing Trust).

◦ 1992 (149 B.E.) a facsimile reproduction of Mishkín Qalam's calligraphic copy of the poem, published with an afterword by Vahid Rafati.

For the purposes of this translation, I have compared the 1914, 1964 and 1992 editions mentioned above, as well as the text of the *Kitáb-i Badí'*, in which Bahá'u'lláh quotes twelve lines of his own *Mathnaví*. In the endnotes to the poem, I have indicated most of the variant readings found in these three published editions of the poem. However, before we can claim to have a critical edition of the Persian text, a rigorous comparison of the surviving manuscript exemplars, and not just the printed texts, should be undertaken, noting and evaluating all variants (minor though they may be) in the number and order of lines and readings of certain words. Obviously, no translation could be considered completely accurate unless and until a critical edition of the original language text it renders has been established.

Interpretation and the translation process

Religious communities naturally read their respective scriptures for their timeless meaning, searching for the transcendent significance they have for the reader and her society at its particular point in history. Since the text of scripture, as Bahá'u'lláh affirms by quoting a tradition from the Imams, intends "one and seventy meanings," each of which can be explained,[62] and thus validated, in the realm of divine transcendence, the historical and cultural circumstances that shape each reader's perspective may reveal some aspect of the true meaning of a particular passage of scripture. Thus, though the significance that a particular tablet of Bahá'u'lláh had for an Iranian exile in Ottoman Istanbul in the 1860s may differ from the significance it has for a Chinese reader in the 21st century, both understandings may intersect on some plane and contribute to the transcendent meaning.

Jews, Christians and Muslims continue to find new understandings of the Bible and the Koran in the light of theological developments, social and cultural transformation, and philological and historical scholarship. Each new reading, if valid, does not necessarily invalidate prior understandings, but

62 Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i Iqán*, tr. Shoghi Effendi, 255.

deepens or tempers them, adding a new aspect to the multi-faceted aspects of the truth enshrined in that text. A rather extensive philosophy of the meaning of historical and religious texts has been developed over the last 150 years or so; the discussion of such matters is beyond the scope of this article, but readers interested in such matters can turn to the works on hermeneutics (e.g., Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*) and to the works of theologians influenced by "Process Theology" (as outlined by Alfred North Whitehead).

Bahá'ís have been particularly successful at abstracting the transcendent ethical and social message of their scripture, and the process of understanding the immediate historical context of the writings of Bahá'u'lláh is underway: Fâzel-e Mâzandarâni, Eshrâq-Khâvari, Taherzadeh, and more recently, Amanat and Cole have all made major contributions to the dating of the books and tablets of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, and the historical circumstances to which they respond. Since the situating of texts in their particular historical context can help us gain a deeper appreciation of the author's immediate intentions and the audience's immediate understandings, the Bahá'í community ought to be open to the ongoing unfoldment of the meaning of revelation through the study of Bahá'u'lláh's texts in their micro-historical environment.

In making this provisional translation, I have tried to uncover historical information that would help to explain some of the allusions in the poem. I have also tried to recover, wherever I could, the Koranic, Sufi and Babi referents. This information is given in the above introduction and in the endnotes to the poem, in hopes that this will help re-create one horizon of the poem, though much work of this nature remains to be done for this text. This project will not be important to all or perhaps most of the Bahá'ís interested in reading or reciting Bahá'u'lláh's poetry. My hope has been, however, to provide background information to enhance a reader's appreciation of the poem without dictating how the poem should be interpreted or understood. This seems to me the most appropriate approach to take for future translation of the corpus of Bahá'u'lláh's poetry, in the absence of an authoritative interpreter of Bahá'í scripture. The meaning for me will be slightly different than the meaning another reader, with a different life experience, different knowledge base and different theological outlook, will derive.

Toward a provisional translation of Bahá'u'lláh's *Mathnaví*

No provisional translation of Bahá'u'lláh's *Mathnavíy-i Mubárak* has as yet been published in English, and I am unaware that any of the lines of the poem are given an official translation anywhere in the corpus of Shoghi Effendi's published writings. I am aware of only one previous translation, a literary version in Castillian Spanish by Juan A. Guzmán, based upon a direct literal translation from the Persian by Kurosh Owrang and Miguel Cintas, published as *El Poema del bendito (Masnaví Mubarak) de Bahá'u'lláh* (Huelva, Spain:

Diputación Provincial de Huelva, 1997).[63]

The following provisional translation is offered in accordance with the permission given in a letter of the Universal House of Justice dated 30 June 1999, indicating that translations of Bahá'í scripture made by individuals may be published in circulars and journals "without review other than by the editors of such publications," as long as they are "clearly identified as 'provisional translations.'" This new arrangement, it is hoped, will lead to "the availability of a greater amount of translated material and avoid the present delays in approving fully authorized translations."

The version offered here is by no means, therefore, meant as a definitive translation of Bahá'u'lláh's poem; it is merely an illustration of one possible approach to rendering this and other poems of Bahá'u'lláh into English. That the translation stands in need of revision I will be the first to admit. Aside from improvements which can undoubtedly be made to the wording of the English, there are several points in the text which remain unclear or uncertain to me (most of these have been indicated in the endnotes). While I have suggested specific circumstances for some of the allusions in the poem, many others remain to be elucidated. Furthermore, one may reasonably disagree on the degree to which implicit historical allusions should be signalled in a translation; perhaps a hermeneutic of the timeless applicability of the images and ethics of the poem is to be preferred, particularly within a community reading the text as scripture.

Despite the tentativeness of the reading, I am nevertheless emboldened to offer this effort here in public because of the following factors:

1) It is perhaps better to give English-speaking Bahá'ís some idea, however inadequate and provisional, of the contents and style of the poem for devotional purposes, than for them to have no access at all to the poem.

2) Making a provisional translation available in this journal to a wider audience seems to me the best way to highlight problems and solicit improvements from translators with technical expertise, those with further insights into the allusions and references in the poem, and readers of literary taste.[64] For this reason, I have numbered the verses, to aid readers wishing to

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63 This small volume of poetry (52pp) appeared in the series Colección de Poesía Juan Ramón Jimenez (ISBN: 84-8163-103-5). The version by Juan A. Guzmán seems quite accurate, and includes a glossary of technical terms. Guzmán's prologue (dated 1995) also provides a concise historical introduction to Bahá'u'lláh's writings. Without mentioning his source(s), Guzmán twice asserts that Bahá'u'lláh composed the *Mathnaví* in a single night in 1863 during his stay in Constantinople/Istanbul (7, 9).

64 Indeed, substantive corrections have been made even to official translations, such as the *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre), subsequent to its first publication in 1978 (see the supplement, which included an index and 6 pages of errata).

compare the lines of the poem with the original Persian.

3) Though he translated a number of prayers with poetic imagery and sonorous phrasings, Shoghi Effendi did not translate any formal poetry of Bahá'u'lláh. The Bahá'í community will therefore need to experiment to find satisfying ways to render these poems into English, whether it be artistic prose, free verse, blank verse or rhyming verse. This translation is then not only provisional but also experimental, in that prior translations have not attempted to render Bahá'í scripture into traditional English verse forms.

Approaches to the translation of poetry

Bahá'u'lláh's *Mathnaví* is in rhyme and verse. Anyone wishing to translate a poem in rhyme and meter must decide whether to translate word-for-word, giving a very literal meaning, to paraphrase in prose, to dispense with rhyme and meter and make a free verse translation, or to try to recreate the verse features of the original.

In Persian literature, poetry prior to the mid-20th century invariably observed rhyme. There are different rhyme schemes, but there are no poems which dispense with rhyme altogether. Due to the structure of its verb system, along with other morphological features of both its native lexicon and the large influx of lexical borrowings from Arabic, Persian is a rhyme-rich language. Although it is of course possible to produce rhyming translations into English,[65] the English reservoir of rhyme is far smaller, and this may often result in either a relatively free rendering, less precision in the rendering of specific terms, and/or a translation that seems artificially archaic. English is an analytic, not an inflected language, and English word order has become increasingly fixed. Modern English verse is less supple than it once was; poets three hundred years ago did not feel as constrained by the natural word order of English and would blithely place objects before verbs, or verbs before subjects. Such prepositioning is now largely out of favour amongst those who still write and read traditional verse meters. Too much finessing of normal syntax in order to get the proper rhyme at the end of a line will likely leave modern readers of English bemused and disoriented.[66]

However, for anyone who believes that form is an essential component of meaning, or for anyone wishing to experience a verse poem in translation as a measured rhythmical concatenation of syllables, a simple prose paraphrase

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65 One may turn to the works of Dick Davis for a modern example; see his *The Legend of Seyâvash* and his earlier *The Conference of the Birds*, by Ferdowsi and 'Attâr, respectively, both published by Penguin.

66 Most modern poets writing in rhyme do not feel the freedom to prepose verbs before subjects or objects before subjects, and other licenses which poets did not feel the least bit of discomfort in employing from the 16th through the 19th century.

will not do. Particularly in the case of Bahá'u'lláh's *Mathnaví*, which was designed for recitation, and the cadenced phrases of which unquestionably contribute to the effect of the poem on the listener, I felt it desirable and more authentic to translate to some form of English verse.

Blank verse, which observes a regular meter while dispensing with rhyme, seemed the best solution. Invented by Surrey in the 16th century, and employed by Milton for his Biblical epic, *Paradise Lost*, this form has been used by Shakespeare and others as a dignified vehicle for dramatic and epic poetry. Blank verse does not force the translator to stray as far from the original as a rhyming translation might, but it does impinge upon the translator's diction by limiting the number of syllables she may use per line, and by imposing an alternating pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables. These constraints obviously affect the translation's precision and its ability to explain technical or theological terms. However, these constraints also help to shape the translation and create an aural experience similar to that of a person experiencing the poem in its original verse form.

But blank verse is by no means the only alternative. Other English verse forms available to a translator might include Skeltonics, the cadenced phrasings that John Skelton developed in the 16th century. These would give the advantage of breaking up metrical lines into parallel phrases that do not need to count syllables. A phrase-by-phrase translation, rather than a line-by-line one, would perhaps afford the translator the room to be more precise in formulating English equivalents of the Persian. However, most ears find Skeltonics awkward and jerky after a short while.

Poulter's meter (an alexandrine twelve-syllable line followed by a fourteen-syllable line) would also allow more precision in finding English equivalents for the *Mathnaví*, because it would give the English twenty-six syllables for every twenty-two syllables of Persian, as opposed to the twenty syllables of English for every twenty-two of Persian that iambic pentameter gives us to work with. Poulter's meter is rather old fashioned, however, and does not seem as successful in conveying a sense of rhythm.

The accentual prosody of Old English has been successfully mimicked in modern English, but seems far more appropriate to traditional epic and martial works than to religious verse. On the other hand, non-regular free-verse cadences, such as Walt Whitman uses, would perhaps work quite well.

I have chosen blank verse, in iambic pentameter, though this may not meet every reader's taste. As with all metrical poetry, variation is important; an entire poem of exactingly regular iambic pentameter would make for a lilting, lulling, if not stupefying, litany of syllables. In the translation below, the reader will find the iamb frequently abandoned for an anapest or dactyl or spondee, sometimes to fit the meaning in the line, occasionally for dramatic effect. Sometimes you will need to read words with syncopated syllables (the noun "confines," for example, may be accented unnaturally on its second syllable to fit the iamb), or with elided syllables ("mysteries" for example,

will usually be read in this poem as two syllables: "mys-tries"). Such are the poetic licenses of which one speaks for verse, though I have generally avoided graphically marking elisions (e.g., Th' Ethereal); versifiers in the 18th and 19th century would have done this as second nature, but it looks rather unfashionable today.

This *Mathnaví*, while theologically preparing the way for the wider proclamation of Bahá'u'lláh's station, I have treated as more of a devotional text, intended for recitation like a prayer, than as an informational or doctrinal tablet about belief. It does, of course, elaborate certain ideas about progressive revelation, which Bahá'u'lláh had earlier put forth in the *Iqán*, and it also employs Sufi terminology. But it will probably have more use as a work to be recited in Bahá'í gatherings for its inspirational qualities, rather than as a text to be studied like the *Iqán* or the *Tablet of Wisdom*. For this reason, it seems important to translate the poem as a poem.

What follows is, then, an effort to create a poetic effect through verse using a recognisably Bahá'í vocabulary that nevertheless shares somewhat more in common with the late-twentieth century literary idioms of American English. For example, I do not use the archaic "thee" and "thou," nor do I use the early modern English verbal inflections (doest, doth, etc.).

These days translators of poetry will often drop some lines, or alter the meaning slightly by introducing images or situations more native in the culture of the target language, in the belief that this creates a more successful poem in translation. They may well be correct, but I do not agree with this premise and have not left out lines. I have tried to convey the imagery and import of each line without greatly altering or nativising it.

I have been greatly assisted in understanding the poem by the comments of many individuals who read drafts of the translation, especially Dr. Khazeh Fananapazir, whose immense knowledge and unfailing kindness have been instrumental to me in understanding the intended referent of too many lines to note each one individually. I am grateful to Dr. Fananapazir for suggesting several improvements to the translation. Likewise, Dominic Brookshaw at Oxford University has painstakingly compared a draft of this translation to the original Persian and provided copious comments and commentary which have helped make the English more precise.[67] My sincere hope is that others reading this provisional translation will further improve it by forwarding their comments and corrections.

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67 I would also like to thank the following individuals for their suggestions on various points, which came via the Tarjuman discussion list, where the first draft of the poem was offered: Iskandar Hai (who graciously supplied me with a copy of the 1914/1332 text); Nosratollah Zamani (who helped me collate and evaluate the readings of the various texts); Ahang Rabbani (who made valuable suggestions about the reading of *lajlâj* and pointed out the letter from Mirza Haydar 'Alí to 'Abdu'l-Bahá in which lines of the poem are quoted); Sen McGlinn, Juan Cole, Peter Terry, Susan Maneck, Todd Lawson, Stephen Phelps, Iraj Ayman, and Manuchehr Salmanpour.