

Translating Rumi through the Prism of Ideology

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Introduction

All became my companion out of their own conjecture
None searched for my secrets from within me^{1,2}

Distich 6 of *Neynāme* neatly summarizes one of the main problems of hermeneutics: that of interpreting the author's intentions. This article will show how this is also a central issue in translation, which is a textual process of interpreting the linguistic discourse, eliciting its meaning, and recreating the discourse in a different linguistic system. More often than not, readers, interpreters, commentators, and translators in particular tend to look for and find what they want in the text, rather than letting the text speak for itself. A work's reception is of long-standing interest to literary critics. Critical theories on reception range from

¹Rumi, *Masnavi-e Ma'navi* (Tehran: Enteshārāt-e daneshgāh-e Tehrān, 1966), I:6.

²All translations are mine.

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epistemological approaches from the scholastic exegesis of sacred texts to the school of Constance's *Erwartungshorizont* (horizon of expectations), Jakobson's linguistic theory of communication, Roland Barthes's *la mort de l'auteur* (death of the author), and the hermeneutic theories of Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer. However, the application of a pertinent set of reception theories to translation is relatively recent. What is of particular interest here is the application of relevant concepts to the reception by the West of Rumi's mystic discourse through abundant translations and retranslations of his works, mainly in English but also in French and German, throughout the past two centuries.

This article will examine the hermeneutic complexities of Rumi's mystic discourse, on the one hand, and identify the ideological and political considerations that have affected the transcultural reception of his work through translation, on the other. To this end, I will adopt a hermeneutic approach relying on a linguistic theory of reception, applied to the theoretical framework of translation and transcultural communication studies. The corpus consists of selected translations into English and French from the nineteenth century onwards of the poetic work of Mowlana Jalaleddin Balkhi (Rumi). I will first discuss the epistemological complexities of Sufism and Rumi's unique discourse to demonstrate what is at stake in the interpretation of his texts. Subsequently, I will examine the question of reception through translation to show the modalities of ideological and political interference in the process of translation, using Karl Bühler's model of verbal communication, Antoine Berman's ethic theory of translation, the polysystems theory, and Lefevere's concept of translation as rewriting. Finally, I will give concrete examples to demonstrate the distorting impact of prevailing ideological and political discourses within both the source and the target culture on the reception of Rumi's work through translation.

1. Hermeneutic Difficulties in the Reception of Rumi's Work

The reception of Rumi's work and thought in any target culture is hindered by a series of hermeneutic complexities that are associated with the nature of his discourse. These difficulties can be explained by the

epistemological specificities of mysticism within the Islamic and Iranian worlds, as well as the particular nature of Rumi's discourse within the sphere of mysticism. Rumi's complex rhetoric further complicates the translator's task.

1.1 Metaphysical Principles of Mysticism

Sufism, *tasavvof* in Arabic and Persian, is the mystical doctrine developed within the Islamic world. As Henry Corbin, the prominent French philosopher specializing in Islamic and Iranian philosophies, explains, "Sufism as a testimony to the existence of a mystic religion within Islam, is of inestimable importance."³

However, complexities appear from the beginning with the use of the term *tasavvof* to describe the mystic metaphysics, which Corbin calls "Sufi theosophy" (divine philosophy). He attributes the problem to the connotations of the term *tasavvof* in a more modern Iranian context, in which it refers to the social historicity of a religious movement rather than to a philosophical system. Ever since the Safavid era, the term *erfan* ([quest for] the mystic knowledge [of God]) seems to refer more pertinently to a metaphysical system of thought rather than the pragmatic reality of *tariqat* (Path/Sufi wayfaring) incarnated by organized Sufi orders with a systematic hierarchy and rituals.⁴ Moreover, terms such as *Sufi* or *derwish* contain a relatively negative connotation in modern Persia by being associated with asceticism, a marginal lifestyle, and esoteric, even secret, communities, whereas *aref* (mystic) conjures up the image of a seeker of mystic truth through spiritual purification. Corbin explains, furthermore, that mystic metaphysics in Islam is not restricted to Sufi theosophy but also manifested in the oriental theosophy of Sohrawardi (*Eshraq*) as well as Shia metaphysics.⁵

³Henry Corbin, "La philosophie islamique, des origines à la mort d'Averroès," in *Histoire de la philosophie*, vol. I (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1969), 1048–1197. Quote on p. 1158. Corbin's contribution to the *Histoire de la philosophie* collection has two parts, both of which appeared later in a separate volume under the title *Histoire de la philosophie islamique* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1986).

⁴Nonetheless, to conform to the common practice in Western languages, I use *Sufism*, *erfan*, and *mysticism* interchangeably here.

⁵Corbin, "La philosophie islamique," vol. 1, 1098.

Beyond the terminological difficulties, the distinction between Sufi practice (*tariqat*) and mystic theosophy is of utmost importance in the study of the metaphysics of Rumi's discourse.⁶ This differentiation is all the more crucial in that many mystic poets like Hafez or Rumi show reticence towards *tariqat*; its top-down, master-disciple, hierarchical order; and its sheikh-dominated social organization. While not strictly antagonistic to it, Rumi's approach, involving self-abandonment and purification in an individual quest and union with the Truth, is not perfectly in tune with the somewhat sectarian character of *tariqat-e sufiyye* (Sufi orders), often embedded in secrecy and occupied with social and political influence.

Among other dissociations, mystic theosophy stands in a dual dialectical opposition to prevalent theological tenets of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and Islamic scholastic philosophy (*kalam*). First, from an epistemological standpoint, mystic metaphysics, as Corbin explains,⁷ is based on an axiomatic distinction between the *zahir*, exoteric component, and the *batin*, esoteric aspect, of phenomena, the sacred text in particular. For Islamic mystics, the hidden esoteric meaning of the Holy Scripture has primacy over its apparent, immediately accessible aspect. From this belief stems the theoretical exclusion of mysticism from the mainstream literalist interpretation of the Koran and *Sunna* (prophetic tradition), regardless of mystics' adherence to Sharia law. While *shari'at*⁸ is the domain of literalist Islamic theology embodied in the elicitation of God's law from the letter of the sacred text, theosophy thrives in a spiritual quest for the esoteric spirit of the word (*haqiqat*).⁹ A number of scholars, like Edward Browne and Nicholson,¹⁰ have seen in this central dichotomy of letter

⁶The term *discourse* is used here both in its linguistic meaning (the use of language to create utterances with semiotic and semantic aspects) and in the sense of an intellectual and ideological discourse.

⁷Henry Corbin, "La philosophie islamique depuis la mort d'Averroës jusqu'à nos jours," in *Histoire de la philosophie*, vol. III (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1974), 1067–77.

⁸In the more global sense of formal legalist religion rather than the more current meaning of Islamic law (Sharia).

⁹Corbin, "La philosophie islamique," vol. I, 1050.

¹⁰Edward Granville Browne, *A Literary History of Persia*, 4 vols. 1908. (Cambridge: IbeX Pub, 1997), 422; Reynold Alleyne Nicholson, *Selected Poems from the Divani Shamsi Tabriz*, 1898. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

and spirit the influence of pre-Islamic philosophies such as Neoplatonism with reference to the Hellenic axiomatic notion of the duality of the word. Not surprisingly, the concept of the duality of the Sacred Word—itsself a linguistic sign above all—as the underlying paradigm applied to the translations of the Hebrew Bible was met with heavy criticism by the French Talmudist Henri Meschonnic.¹¹

Moreover, there is an essentially ontological approach to the nature and acquisition of knowledge, especially to the achievement of the knowledge of the ultimate Truth, the divine Truth. Between *kalam* (and a fortiori *fiqh*) and spiritual theosophy, “there is all the distance that separates the certainty of theoretical knowledge (*ilm ol-yaqin*) from the certitude of personally realized and lived knowledge (*haqq ol-yaqin*).”¹² The fundamental difference resides in both the nature and the modalities of acquiring knowledge. The theoretical knowledge gained by an active thinking subject from a passive object is opposed to the ontological knowledge where the object of knowledge becomes its subject; the known is revealed to and experienced by the knower. This knowledge is not acquired but experienced—*erfahren* in German and *éprouvé* in French. In Corbin’s view,¹³ when the object of knowledge surpasses the intellectual capacity of its subject,¹⁴ the knowledge is realized only through the “revelation” of the Truth to the knower. This is the concept of *theophany*, the manifestation of truth to the heart of the mystic, a phenomenon Corbin finds common to Islamic theosophy and Christian speculative theology.¹⁵ In speculative theology, too, God

¹¹According to this specialist of Biblical poetics, the duality of the sign, and the separation of form and content, are rooted in a Greco-Roman philosophical tradition, in contrast to the central role of the discursive form (rhythm and prosody) in Semitic languages. Meschonnic thus dismisses most translations of the Old Testament as evidence of the “Hellenization” of the Hebraic discourse. Henri Meschonnic, *Pour la poétique II. Epistémologie de l’écriture. Poétique de la traduction* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1973).

¹²The difference between the “certainty of the existence of fire” and “being fire by oneself.” Cf. Corbin, “La philosophie islamique,” vol. III, 1071.

¹³Corbin, “La philosophie islamique,” vol. III, 1097–98.

¹⁴Cf. Rumi, *Masnavi*, I:20: “If you pour an ocean into a jar, how much can it take? The ratio of a day!”

¹⁵With notable examples in Master Eckhart and Rhine mystics or Theresa of Avila.



appears to the mystic as if in a mirror (*speculum*). As a result of the experience of this manifested truth, the known and the knower become one. The mystic becomes the Truth. Human becomes God.¹⁶

1.2 Mystic Thought and Islamic Orthodoxy

It is therefore not difficult to imagine the clash between mystic thought and Islamic orthodoxy in its legal theory (*fiqh*) elicited from the immediate sense of *Kitab* (the Koran) and *Sunna*, or in its dialectic discourse of ‘*Elma al-kalam* (Islamic scholastics), destined to dispel doubters and detractors. Mystic theosophy’s esoteric approach to Truth and its reliance on a spiritual path of union with God give it the uneasy status of a heterodoxy—if not heresy—in the face of the legalist core of Islam. However, in an inclusive mindset, efforts have been made on occasions, by both mystics and benevolent adherents to Islamic orthodoxy, to reconcile theoretical and practical differences, bridging the ideological gaps in the form of a *modus vivendi*. This has given birth to a more law-abiding and conformist view of Sufism which some scholars like Lili Anvar call the “sobriety Sufism,” as opposed to the fiery version of mysticism, “intoxication Sufism,” characterized by the antinomic and provocative language of mystics like Rumi in his *Divan*. Discrete and compliant mystics¹⁷ have been more or less tolerated throughout the centuries in the Islamic world in the name of freedom of faith and religious symbiosis. However, the tragic fate of thinkers such as Sohrawardi or Hallaj, executed by religious authorities for heresy, remains to remind us of the delicate balance between two opposing approaches to the relationship between human and God.

Once established later on, sober Sufism was to be legitimized out of expediency, not only as a set of ascetic spiritual practices imitating the Prophet’s lifestyle, but also as a metaphysical system in its own right. This was realized by attributing its theoretical grounds to the Koran and

¹⁶Hence Hallaj’s statement “I am the Truth.”

¹⁷Those who focused on practical aspects of Sufism such as asceticism and piety, keeping a low profile, as opposed to those who brazenly put the fundamentals of religious dogma into question, not necessarily in their behavior, but in their intellectual discourse.

divine traditions (*hadis-e qodsi*).¹⁸ Many Sunni thinkers, such as Ghazzali, who was both a Sufi and a prominent *Ash'ari* theologian,¹⁹ led a Sufi way of life while remaining at the forefront of Sharia.²⁰ But the theoretical polemic about the inclusion of *erfan* within Islamic ideology remains even to date. There is no doubt that Sufism both as a practice and a theosophical system has been shaped within the Islamic world and as such is profoundly affected by its theological discourse and references. Yet empirical observations of texts, themes, and practices in mystic works suggest more decisive external influences: systematic and pragmatic similarities between Sufism, on the one hand, and Neoplatonism, Mazdeism, Christian Gnosis, and Indian philosophy, on the other, point to its exogenous sources. Certain orientalist, such as Edward Palmer, go as far as attributing the origins of mystic thought to “the development of the Primaeval Religion of” Indo-Iranians.²¹ Many scholars, like Nicholson himself, defend the thesis of Neoplatonism as the source of Sufism.²² Others, like Anne-Marie Schimmel,²³ point

¹⁸This quote from the Koran (50:16) has, for instance, been construed as evidence for the concept of unity between the creator and created: “And We have already created man and know what his soul whispers to him, and We are closer to him than [his] jugular vein.”

¹⁹The case of Ghazzali is all the more interesting because as a mystic he is a rigorist reviver of the *Ash'ari* school of *Kalam*. With his *Ihy'aye 'Olum-e-ddin*, he attempts to reconcile Sufi theosophy with Sunni theology.

²⁰Here it is worth mentioning a traditional classification of Islamic mysticism dividing it into “sober Sufism” and “intoxicated Sufism,” based on the degree of the compatibility of its external manifestations with the formal doctrines of Sharia. While many mystics like Ghazzali represent a compliant version of Sufism, they being theologians, preachers, and Sufis at once, many others, like Rumi, are known for their words of ecstasy, belonging to the well-known genre called *shathiyyat* (antinomian words pronounced by Sufis) in mystic literature. The incongruity of such profane, even heretic, words of ecstasy gradually became normalized throughout the centuries, as they were explained and institutionalized by Ruzbahan Baqli's famous twelfth-century treatise on the nature of *shath*. Cf. Ruzbahan Baqli-e Shirazi, *Sharh-e Shathiyyat. Commentaire sur les paradoxes des soufis*, ed. Henry Corbin (Paris and Tehran: Département d'Iranologie de l'Institut franco-iranien, 1966). The dichotomy of sober/inebriated Sufi is especially commonplace among modern Western scholars. Cf. Leili Anvar, “La poésie amoureuse, une anti-philosophie,” interview by Adèle Van Reeth, *Les chemins de la philosophie*, in *Philosophies d'Iran 2/4*, Radio France Culture, 12 December 2017. For a study focusing exclusively on the place of *shathiyyat*, see Carl Ernst, *Words of Ecstasy in Sufism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985).

²¹Edward Henry Palmer, *Oriental Mysticism: A Treatise on Sufistic and Unitarian Theosophy of the Persians* (London: F. Cass, 1969), ix–xii.

²²Reynold Alleyne Nicholson, *The Mystics of Islam* (London: Routledge, 1963).

²³Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Car-

out Christian elements in the mystic beliefs. Edward Browne's more balanced and synthetic view favors the independence of Sufism, regarding it as a universal human quest for Truth regardless of religion, race, or geographical specificities.²⁴ More recently, Dariush Shaygan showed in his thesis, *Les relations de l'hindouisme et du soufisme*,²⁵ on the works of the Moghul prince Dara Shokuh, the profound influence exercised by Vedic philosophies upon Sufi thought. Mostafa Vaziri's monograph entitled *Rumi and Shams' Silent Rebellion: Parallels with Vedanta, Buddhism and Shaivism* focuses more specifically on the echo of such key Vedic concepts as brahman, atman, samsara, and maya in the evolution of Rumi's thought in contact with Shams of Tabriz.²⁶ The bottom line is that regardless of the nature and origin of mystic theosophy and of Rumi's thought, it cannot be considered as representative of the core message of Islam.

While Sufi orders (*tariqat-e sufiyye*) later became an inseparable part of the religious scene of the Islamic world, as mentioned before, they correspond more to a pragmatic reality of Sufism, featuring a social structure and collective rituals rather than a philosophical system of thought. This fact should be borne in mind than when faced with Rumi's paradoxical figure manifested in two opposing poles or profiles: that of an intrepid, nonconformist mystic, passionate lover, and dancing bard versus that of an Islamic theologian, headmaster of an Islamic school, notable preacher of Konya, and above all a prominent Sufi sheikh with numerous disciples. The latter is the image of him traditionalists seek to present, however puzzling this conception may look in the face of Rumi's controversial lifestyle and fiery words, not to mention his striking relationship with Shams.

As for Rumi's own viewpoint on mystic theosophy and its relation to

olina Press, 2011), 3–22.

²⁴Browne, *Literary History*, 418–20.

²⁵Dariush Shaygan, *Les relations de l'hindouisme et du soufisme : d'après le Majma' al-Bahrayn de Dara Shokuh* (Paris: Éditions de la différence, 1979).

²⁶Mostafa Vaziri, *Rumi and Shams' Silent Rebellion: Parallels with Vedanta, Buddhism and Shaivism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

religious dogma, perhaps nowhere is it more explicitly expressed than in his prose preface of Book V of *Masnavi*. He makes a clear distinction between three related doctrinal components: *shari'at*, the orthodox religion, *tariqat*, the Sufi path, and *haqiqat*, the spiritual Truth. He subtly implies that the two former, *shari'at* and *tariqat*, are supposed to be means to reach the Truth, but that only *haqiqat*, the Truth, and nothing else, is the goal: "If the truth manifested itself, religions would become nought."²⁷ Rumi continues with a metaphor: "[It is] as if copper becomes gold [by the chemistry of religion or Sufi Path] as opposed to when something is gold to begin with."²⁸ He thus clearly identifies his goal as spiritual truth, separating it from both religious law and *tariqat*, albeit without dismissing them altogether.

1.3 Discursive Difficulties of Rumi's Poetry

The complicated status of mysticism and the subsequent need for discretion, as well as the esoteric nature of mystic teachings, made the use of a hermetic coded language necessary to communicate the message. Therefore, a halo of purposeful ambiguity may be found around all modes of mystic expression.²⁹ This is one of the main reasons poetry has been the language of preference for many Persian mystics since the twelfth century.

Mystic poetry, as a linguistic semiotic subsystem, is a language in its own right. Poetry is essentially the language of trope, figurative sense, metaphor, allegory. It is the domain of double meaning and the *non-dit*

²⁷Rumi, *Masnavi*, V:818.

²⁸Rumi, *Masnavi*, V:818.

²⁹There are two schools of thought concerning the ambiguity of mystic language. On one hand, scholars like Arberry and Schimmel regard the poetic language of mysticism from a literary standpoint, describing it as an "imposed allegory," a certain obligatory disguise for an essentially erotic discourse created by the author's consciousness trapped in the midst of tensions between sensual and metaphysical love. That is what Corbin calls the creating force of a *conscience malheureuse*. On the other hand, scholars like Lewisohn and Seyyed Hosein Nasr approach the question from a metaphysical standpoint, rejecting the existence of any contradiction in the audaciously profane language of mystics, regarding it as pure symbolism, necessary to express archetypal meaning (*ma'na*). See Leonard Lewisohn, *Beyond Faith and Infidelity: The Sufi Poetry and Teachings of Mahmud Shabistari* (Richmond, UK: Curzon Press, 1995), 174–75.

(unspoken) par excellence, the best means of expression for the ineffable mystic sense. Even the name of God hardly appears in most mystic poems. God is not referred to by his names; he is known by his attributes. The artistic poetic language is also an efficient means of propagating ideas, rarely subjected to censorship by religious and political authorities the way philosophical treatises might be. It is in this logic that Rumi, despite his alleged aversion to poetry, composed some 124,000 verses in two monumental poetic works.³⁰ Rumi's verses, particularly his ghazals, are more than a linguistic utterance. Endowed with extraordinary musicality, his verses display the features of a hybrid semiotic system. This constitutes the first hurdle for translation, not only in terms of transferring contextually referenced, culturally specific tropes, but also on account of the multilayer semiotization of the discourse by a transcendental sign system which surpasses at once the limits of language and of music.³¹

The translator of Rumi's work faces many other hurdles. The work has linguistic complexities—namely, those caused by Persian grammar and lexicon: ambiguities caused by the absence of grammatical gender, lexical and syntactic archaisms, lack of punctuation, polysemy and connotative semantic lexical components, the hybrid nature of the lexicon, and so on. Beyond the linguistic obstacles of translation lie discursive issues: the purposeful ambiguity of Rumi's idiolect, which is an unstable linguistic discourse built primarily in polysemy. Who can judge beyond a reasonable doubt what Rumi means by terms like *friend*, *companion*, *love*, *lover*, *idol*, *beauty*, *wine*, *intoxication*?³² Are these references to

³⁰The idea of Rumi's aversion to poetry, attested by his own comments, is strongly contested by Keshavarz, who explains those comments mostly in the light of Rumi's view about the inadequacy of language. Fatemeh Keshavarz, *Reading Mystical Lyric: The Case of Jalal al-Din Rumi* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2014), 13–30.

³¹Rumi's ghazals, like many other Persian poets', serving as the primary rhythmic basis of *Sama'* dance and the Iranian *avazi* form of music, feature a unique system of signification that is not only linguistic but musical as well. See Amir Artaban Sedaghat, "Rumi's Verse at the Crossroads of Language and Music," *Mawlana Rumi Review* 9 (2018): 91–128.

³²These bacchanalian terms belong to a mystical poetic genre called *khamriyye*, which constitutes the canon of Persian (and Arab) Sufi poetry, characterized by a highly secular, anti-clerical, and antinomian terminology used for a spiritual purpose. See Leonard Lewisohn, "The Principles of the Philosophy of Ecstasy," in *The Philosophy of Ecstasy: Rumi and the Sufi Tradition*

divine love, or to his love for Shams or a female lover? Furthermore, at a macrostructural level, there is no apparently coherent argumentation in the poetic language of Rumi's ghazals, nor even in his didactic work, *Masnawi*, whose versified tales may appear incongruous to a Cartesian mindset on account of their non-linear narrative structure, numerous digressions, multiple narrative voices, and constant change of diegetic paradigms. Rumi's narration has a logic of its own, that of several ancient texts including the Old Testament, according to a recent study.³³ *Masnawi* has a circular model of arrangement called *ring composition*. As if this were not enough, Rumi did not hesitate to shock the reader with obscene language, salacious scenes, and indecent situations.

In short, Rumi's translator is faced with a monumental task, one that can be compared to the translation of the Old Testament from Hebrew to Koine Greek (the Septuagint).

2. Modalities of Deformation

Rumi's text is indeed a puzzle even in its source language. Even in works with no discursive complexity, recreating medieval Persian utterances in most European languages would present a challenge. But Rumi's discourse is not a stable one with a fixed semantic message. It is coded, esoteric, deliberately ambiguous. It needs deciphering, commentary, exegesis for many source-language readers. However, exegesis raises a sensitive question in a translation: while objective metalinguistic and explicative notes are an indispensable translation tool, any attempt by the translator to interpret the text for the reader constitutes a fatal error from an ethical perspective.

2.1 Berman's Theory of Translation Ethics

Antoine Berman, the renowned French translation studies scholar, postulates a widely acclaimed theory of ethics in translation, inspired by German idealists like Schleiermacher. Schleiermacher argued:

(Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2014), 35–80.

³³Seyed Ghahreman Safavi and Simon Weightman, *Rumi's Mystical Design: Reading the Mathnawi, Book One* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009).

“Either the translator leaves the author, as much as possible, and moves the reader towards him; or he leaves the reader in peace, as much as possible, and moves the author towards him” [...] Schleiermacher allowed the translator to choose between a domesticating method, an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target-language cultural values, bringing the author back home, and a foreignizing method, an ethnodeviant pressure on those values to register the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text, sending the reader abroad.³⁴

Schleiermacher’s clear choice was the foreignizing translation, which Berman takes to be the only ethical form of translation. Berman calls attention to the underlying processes of distorting text in his theory of deformation, which differentiates unethical ethnocentric translations from foreignizing ones. He recognizes a set of twelve deforming tendencies. They stem from the translator’s mostly unconscious proclivities that seriously damage the discursive framework of the source text with a view to conforming to the stylistic and aesthetic norms of the target language. Berman’s deforming tendencies are as follows:

- Rationalization
- Clarification
- Expansion
- Ennoblement or popularization
- Qualitative impoverishment
- Quantitative impoverishment
- The destruction of rhythms
- The destruction of underlying networks of signification
- The destruction of linguistic patternings
- The destruction of vernacular network[s] or their exoticization
- The destruction of expressions and idioms
- The effacement of the superimposition of languages³⁵

While these unconscious deformations occur mostly within the

³⁴Quoted by Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator’s Invisibility* (London: Routledge, 1995), 20.

³⁵Antoine Berman, *La traduction et la lettre ou l’auberge du lointain* (Paris: Seuil, 1999), 52–68.

translated text, more insidious deforming forces are in action outside the text, in what Gérard Genette calls the *paratext*.³⁶ Following from Berman's rationalization and clarification tendencies, the concept of second-degree deformation can be usefully applied here. Second-degree deformation consists of the translator's tendency to direct the possible interpretations of the source text by providing extra information on the margin of the text, in such guises as comments, footnotes, forewords, textual reframing, and choice of titles. The paratextual information can lead to distortion of the text's reception insofar as it affects the potentiality of interpretations—that is, by actualizing only a certain number of “potential” interpretations that could exist of the text in favor of the translator's view. This actualization of potential leads to the fixation of an otherwise fluid, unstable discourse. The more fluid the discourse, the more devastating the damage. The nature and modalities of the second-degree deformation can best be explained in light of Karl Bühler's communication model.

2.2 Karl Bühler's Communication Model and Second-Degree Deformation

In Bühler's model, revisited by Prandi,³⁷ the verbal communication process has three dimensions: The first is the formation of the utterance by the addresser using linguistic signs (words), regulated by the code of a system (language), creating a linguistic discourse with reference to an extralinguistic context. The extralinguistic context of reference is the second side of the triangle. The third is the reception of the linguistic message by the addressee, who deciphers it using the linguistic indications of the discourse and the extralinguistic indications of the context of reference. The linguistic communication therefore relies on three elements: symbol, the linguistic sign; index, the extralinguistic contextual datum; and system, the linguistic code. Thus, to the symbolic character (semiotic feature) of the utterance is opposed the indexical character (semantic feature) of the message. While the semiotic structure of the utterance has an arbitrary but predictable value, since it is imposed by

³⁶Paratext is divided into peritext (footnotes, preface, etc.) and epitext (interview, external commentaries, etc). Gérard Genette, *Seuils* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1987).

³⁷Michele Prandi, *Grammaire philosophique des tropes* (Paris: Minuit, 1992), 135–71.

the linguistic code, “the index” receives in each instance a “contingent positional value.”³⁸

In the case of *demonstratio ad oculos*, whereby the addresser and addressee are speaking face-to-face of objects in their sight,³⁹ Bühler imagines the indication field as “the field consisting of objects and forces that endow the index with its positional value.”⁴⁰ The internal indexical forces of language consist of textual deictic and cataphoric/anaphoric expressions.⁴¹ The external denotational elements of this field are the contextual data. In all other forms of communication, including a text, a second field can be imagined: “The *interpretation field*, on the basis of which the value of the message of the utterance is defined, can be considered as a force field of **second degree**. Although specific in its structure, it is a functional development of the **primary indication field**.”⁴² The two fields connect the two other sides of the communication triangle to the context of reference, once at the formation and once at the reception of the message. First, the indication field relates the formation of the discourse to the referential context, and second, the interpretation field lies where the discourse is received and understood in relation to the referential context. In an ideal scenario, the indication and interpretation fields are identical, as in *demonstratio ad oculos* or communication *in presentia*. However, in communication *in absentia*, with written texts for instance, the distance separating the two fields can complicate the communication. The larger this contextual distance is, the harder it is to understand the message. Of utmost importance here is the interpretation field of culturally distant texts, a field enriched in order to accommodate “all kinds of knowledge, information, presuppositions, expectations and shared projects by the partners of the act of parole, upon which the interpreter tries to go back to the intended message.”⁴³

³⁸Prandi, *Grammaire philosophique*, 146.

³⁹E.g., Jack says to Jill: “That picture is beautiful.”

⁴⁰Prandi, *Grammaire philosophique*, 146.

⁴¹Textual deixis is the function that relates the term to the immediately knowable fact in the extralinguistic context (me, here, now, that, etc.), whereas anaphor calls back to the textual referent enunciated beforehand (cataphor). Prandi, *Grammaire philosophique*, 148.

⁴²Prandi, *Grammaire philosophique*, 148.

⁴³Prandi, *Grammaire philosophique*, 149.

Translation involves a dual process of communication, once between the author and the translator, then between the translator and the reader. Interpretation being the first stage of the process, the translator interprets the hermetic text of Rumi, for example, before reformulating it into a discourse in the target linguistic system. Furthermore, any external force entering the indication field of the target text, absent in the indication field of the source text, must be considered as “noise” insofar as it increases the distance between the source text’s indication field and the target text’s reader’s interpretation field in the second stage of communication. Influenced by the translator’s subjectivity and ideological orientation, the indication field of the translated text and consequently the reader’s interpretation field are already contaminated. While this residual noise seems inevitable, extra data, exegetic information, and translator’s commentaries within specific ideological paradigms further hamper the process of communication between the author and the target-language reader. The contextual distance is already important because the linguistic and cultural differences have given way to irrelevant presuppositions and expectations. While the first type of contamination of the interpretation field—unconscious because it is the result of the translator’s subjectivity—is uncontrollable, the second, conscious type of interference must be avoided by all means. However, quite often, the translator’s exegetic commentaries find their way into the secondary interpretation field of reception, in such guises as footnotes, prefaces, and chosen titles.⁴⁴ It is interference in this secondary field that I call *second-degree deformation*.

⁴⁴Here it is important to differentiate between meta-translation and explicative notes, on the one hand, and exegetic notes, on the other. These two types are of a fundamentally different nature. (Cf. Pascale Sardin, “De la note du traducteur comme commentaire : entre texte, paratexte et prétexte,” *Palimpsestes* 20 (2007): 121–36.) Unlike the latter, the former are destined to inform the reader of the linguistic and discursive obstacles faced by the translator as well as to provide factual data—for instance, about historical circumstances of the textual genesis. Explicative and meta notes are praised by Berman as part of the foreignizing process of “education towards the foreign,” with the aim of “bringing the reader to the author.” See Jean Louis Cordonnier, *Traduction et culture* (Paris: Didier, 1995), 179. The difference between explicative and exegetic notes resides also in the dichotomy between explanation (presentation of objective facts) and interpretation (subjective appropriation of text) as two hermeneutic attitudes theorized by Dilthey. Wilhelm Dilthey, *Le monde de l’esprit*, trans. M. Remy (Paris: Aubier, 1992).

2.3 Translation Norms and Ideological Interference

The text is the privileged space of Berman's deforming tendencies, whereas paratext is the epicenter of second-degree deformation. Berman's tendencies are mostly unconscious, attributed to the translator's subjectivity, whereas the underlying motives of second-degree deformation can be found mainly in conscious ideological choices. The ideology could be the translator's own or the one dominant in source or target culture paradigms imposed by translation norms.

Inspired by Russian formalists and Roman Jakobson's structuralist theory of linguistic communication, Evan-Zohar and Toury theorized these norms in their polysystem theory.⁴⁵ In their descriptive approach, literary works and, by extension, translations are studied as parts of the society's literary system, itself in interrelation with other systemic functions: cultural, social, historical, and political. The reception of translated works can be studied by focusing on the relations between all these systems within an overarching polysystem. Translation, like any other literary production, can have a primary or secondary position in the repertoire of the polysystem. This positionality and the polysystem's institutions determine translation norms, which constitute the key factors having a direct impact on the translation's nature, quality, and adequacy.

Based on the same model but in a more critical approach, André Lefevere draws a clearer picture of the translation norms in action.⁴⁶ According to Lefevere, norms are imposed, with the aim of using translation as part of a rewriting process (of the literary and ideological canons), by two decisive actors: professionals and patronage. Professionals, comprising critics, reviewers, academics, and translators, are at the origin of the dominant poetics and impose the poetological norms. The patronage, consisting of individuals, groups, and institutions, controls the ideology, the economics, and the status of the translation process. They impose the ideological norms of rewriting. Lefevere asserts, "On every level of the

⁴⁵Itmar Evan-Zohar and Gideon Toury, ed., *Translation Theory and Intercultural Relations* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1981).

⁴⁶André Lefevere, *Translation, Rewriting, and the Manipulation of the Literary Frame* (London: Routledge, 1992).

translation process, it can be shown that, if linguistic considerations enter into conflict with considerations of an ideological and/or poetological nature, the latter tend to win out.”⁴⁷

These norms and considerations may act directly upon the text, the paratext, or both. As some of the following examples suggest, these norms have been in action with full force in the reception of Rumi’s work in the English- and French-speaking worlds.

3. Deforming Tendencies in Translating Rumi

Whether deforming tendencies are imposed by the polysystem’s—source or target—poetological/ideological norms or originated deliberately on the translator’s initiative, they are visible virtually everywhere in the reception of Rumi’s discourse, occurring in both the text and the paratext.

3.1 Ideological Interference in Linguistic Choice

The interference of the dominant poetological norms in target polysystems is apparent in the first example: it is manifested by the linguistic choices made by various (French, British, and American) translators since the nineteenth century. Most translators have acted under the influence of a historically prevalent ideological view within the source polysystem (the Persian world) or an orientalist paradigm in their target polysystem. According to this view, Rumi, being a Sufi theologian, must be alluding to only one “Beloved”: a masculine almighty God, despite the sensual imagery deployed in these verses of Masnavi.

	می‌نخسیم یا صنم با پیرهن نه تو مانی نه کنارت نه میان	پرده بردار و برهنه گو که من گفتم ار عریان شود او در عیان
Parde bardar o berehne gu ke man Goftam ar oryan shavad u dar ayan	minakhosbam ba sanam ba pirhan na to mani na kenarat na miyan	
[S/he says:...] “Tear off the veil, speak to me barely As I don’t sleep with an <i>idol</i> , with clothes on.” I say: if she strips her clothes in front of you Neither wilt thou remain, nor your waist, nor embrace!		

⁴⁷Lefevre, *Translation*, 39.

<p>E1) Redhouse: p. 8–11⁴⁸ The veil tear off, dissimulation lost: “When unadorned, beauty’s adorned the most.” Should my sweet love unveil’d her charms display, Thy smirks and smiles would all be borne away.</p>	<p>E2) Whinfield: p. 7–12⁴⁹ “Strip off the veil and speak out, for do not I Enter under the same coverlet as the Beloved?” I said, “If the Beloved were exposed to outward view, Neither wouldst thou endure, nor embrace, nor form.”</p>
<p>E3) Nicholson: p. 9–11⁵⁰ “Lift the veil and speak nakedly, for I do not wear a shirt when I sleep with the Adored One.” I said: “If He should become naked in (thy) vision, neither wilt thou remain nor thy bosom nor thy waist.”</p>	<p>E4) Mojaddedi: p. 10–13⁵¹ “Be frank and lift the veil, you ditherer. I wear no nightshirt when in bed with her!” I said, “If the beloved strips for you, You’ll be effaced, your waist and body too!”</p>
<p>E5) Williams: p. 16–19⁵² “Hold back the veil and speak the naked truth! I don’t lie down with clothes on with my lover.” I said, “If He were naked in your sight, you’d not survive, nor would your breast nor waist.”</p>	<p>F) Vitray-Meyerovitch: p. 59–61⁵³ “Lève le voile et parle nûment, car je ne porte pas de chemise quand je dors avec mon Adoré.” Je dis : “S’il t’apparaissait sans voiles, tu ne resterais pas, ni aucune partie de toi-même.”</p>

With the exception of Redhouse and Mojaddedi—the former an early Victorian translator insensitive to this ideological discourse and the latter a Persian speaker aware of the subtleties of Rumi’s discourse—all

⁴⁸James W. Redhouse, *The Mesnevi (Usually Known as the Mesneviyi Sherif, or Holy Mesnevi) of Mevlana (Our Lord) Jelalu-d-Din, Muhammed, er-Rumi* (London: Trübner, 1881).

⁴⁹Edward Henry Whinfield, *Masnavi i ma’navi: The Spiritual Couplets of Maulana Jalalu-’d-Din Muhammed i Rumi* (London: Trubner, 1887).

⁵⁰Reynold Alleyne Nicholson, *The Mathnawi of Jalalu’ddin Rumi*, 8 vols. 1926. (Cambridge: The Trustees of the E.J.W. Gibb Memorial, 1990).

⁵¹Jawid Mojaddedi, *The Masnavi, Book One* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁵²Alan Williams, *Rumi, Spiritual Verses: The First Book of the Masnavi-ye Ma’navi* (London and New York: Penguin Classics, 2006).

⁵³Eva de Vitray-Meyerovitch and Djamchid Mortazavi, *Mathnawi : la quiete de l’absolu* (Monaco: Editions du Rocher, 1990).

other translators make linguistic choices that have devastating effects on Rumi's fluid and equivocal discourse. They transform an erotic image, expressed fairly explicitly, into a univocal, sterilized, vaguely spiritual discourse by making two small grammatical and typographical choices: the adoption of masculine pronouns for the Persian genderless *sanam* (the idol) and the capitalization of the letter B in *beloved*. The word *sanam* is a periphrasis (*kenaye*) for an attractive person (especially female) with a beautiful face spurring adoration. The choice of the masculine gender to refer to this "beauty" in the English and French texts and the capitalization of its first letter, implying its divine nature, clearly turn "idol" into a metaphor for God. This is all the more detrimental, both to the semiotic structure of the utterance and the semantic network of the message, because the explicitly powerful imagery of "making love with your clothes on" is completely transformed into a prosaic allegory alluding to the banal concept of sincerity towards the Creator.

Linguistic choices reveal translators' ideological orientation, whether they are made deliberately or reflect an unconscious predisposition towards a dominant orientalist ideology. In either case, these apparently insignificant choices present several of Berman's deforming tendencies: Rationalization occurs, since translators replace an explicitly sensual image with a rational prosaic statement deemed more appropriate for the great mystic teacher. By purging its sexual connotations, they also ennoble the text. Clarification also occurs since the human or divine nature of Rumi's beloved is by no means revealed in the source text. The outcome of these three deforming forces is the destruction of underlying networks of signification. Examples of this phenomenon abound in translations of Persian mystic poetry.

3.2 Translation Misunderstood: Suspicions of Anti-Semitism

The second example, of a different nature, concerns an incident in the reception of Arberry's selective prose translation of *Masnavi*. Published in postwar UK, dominated by a climate of hypersensitivity towards anti-Semitism, Arberry's translation was faced with very negative reactions from certain critics and readers, who accused him and Rumi of

anti-Semitism in reference to one of the book's tales: *The Jewish King and the Christians*.⁵⁴

It is the story of a fictive king in Judea who, in order to kill the maximum number of Christians, creates discord among them by infiltrating his vizier into their circle of religious leaders. Despite its suggestive narrative, which may be construed as aimed at diabolizing the Jewish king, placed in the right context and read more thoroughly, the tale has an allegorical nature that seems obvious to any impartial reader. The main theme here is not interreligious feuds between believers of a particular religion—Jews or Christians—nor is it the dominance, by way of dividing and conquering, of a ruling class composed of a specific ethnic group. It is in fact the very social and sectarian nature of some Sufi orders (*tariqats*), whereby followers rely excessively on the guidance of supposedly illuminated sheikhs instead of searching for the Truth within themselves. If this tale offers criticism, it is criticism of the sociopolitical structure of Sufi brotherhoods, of sectarianism, not of any specific religious group. The antihero here, despite appearances, is not the Jewish king but the gullible disciples and their masters.

As this example shows, a message is easily misinterpreted when the interpretation field is contaminated by irrelevant contextual and circumstantial data. The resulting failure of reception was particularly exacerbated by the dominating ideological norms imposed by the target polysystem's patronage.

3.3 Turkish Peripeteia of Translating Rumi

Rumi is a central pillar of Turkish culture and one of Turkey's well-known icons. The Mevlevi Sufi Order, with its emblematic ritual dance of *Sama*, was founded by Rumi's descendants and remains one of the most important Sufi orders not only in Anatolia but all over the world. After the order was briefly marginalized by Kamalism in the early twentieth century, the order's revival gave it international renown, so it became one of Turkey's main cultural tourist attractions. Some

⁵⁴Arthur Arberry, *Tales from the Masnavi* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1961), 31–40.

prominent Turkish scholars have contributed tremendously to the diffusion of Rumi's thought and work, namely Gölpinarlı, whose Turkish edition of *Divan* is a reference alongside Foruzanfar's.⁵⁵

Nonetheless, cases of insidious second-degree deformation are not rare in translations done by Turks, rooted, among other factors, in the instrumentalization of Rumi's figure to project a liberal picture of his adopted homeland. An example of rewriting by the patronage is the active role Turkish institutions have played in funding Rumi translations into English, exemplified by Nevit Ergin's monumental project of translating the entirety of the ghazals. Having insufficient knowledge of Persian, Ergin used Gölpinarlı's Turkish version of the ghazals as a base, raising the usual ethical and technical problems associated with indirect translation. Ergin's ideological agenda is furthermore manifested in a range of paratextual devices such as his choice of texts, titles, and forewords. In the introduction to his collaborative anthology with the extravagant title of *The Forbidden Rumi: The Suppressed Poems of Rumi on Love, Heresy, and Intoxication*, Ergin brashly claims to have published translations of Rumi's censored poems. This claim is utterly false given that the poems in question had all previously appeared in Foruzanfar's edition of *Divan*. Below is an extract from this introduction:

Rumi let go of the precepts of formal religion, insisting instead that only a complete personal dissolving into the larger energies of God can provide the satisfaction that the heart so desperately seeks. It is a testament to how well-loved Rumi was in his adopted community of Konya, Turkey, that he encountered no reprisals for pronouncements that would certainly have gotten him into very hot water indeed had they been uttered instead in present day Iran or in Afghanistan under the Taliban.⁵⁶

With this anachronistic distortion of history, Ergin perpetuates the myth

⁵⁵Rumi, *Divan-i Kebir: [Yazan] Mevlana Celaleddin, Hazirhyān*, trans. Abdülbaki Gölpinarlı (Istanbul: Remzi Kitabevi, 1957–60); Rumi, *Kolliat-e Shams-e Tabrizi*, trans. Badi'ozzaman Foruzanfar (Tehran: Entesharat-e daneshgah-e Tehran, 1957–66).

⁵⁶Nevit Oguz Ergin, *The Forbidden Rumi: The Suppressed Poems of Rumi on Love, Heresy, and Intoxication* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2006), 3–4.

of the legendary tolerance in the Sultanate of Rum, evidently undistinguished from present-day Turkey. By the same token, Persian culture is castigated as intolerant through a caricatural alignment of the Taliban and Iranian state.

This phenomenon, which I call a *liberalizing tendency*—commonplace in more modern translations of Rumi, consisting of stripping Rumi of his Persian and Islamic character—could already be found in some Turkish translators as early as 1950 with Halet Tchelebi’s French translations of quatrains. The echoes of this tendency can be heard in several recent popularizing versions (free translations) of Rumi published in the United States by poets who have no knowledge of Persian or mystic literature. In his preface, for instance, Tchelebi takes a radical position in favor of Rumi’s *Divan*, deemed superior to *Masnavi* in view of its “non-Islamic pantheistic and agnostic” nature.⁵⁷ He underlines the heterodoxy of Rumi’s discourse within the Islamic world to present him more as a free-thinker than an Islamic mystic, more attractive to the laical ideological mindset of both source (Turkish) and target (French) polysystems.

Finally, it is worthwhile mentioning a brazen act of rewriting denounced by the eminent Rumi scholar Franklin Lewis in his quasi encyclopedia of Rumi.⁵⁸ Lewis deplores a Turkish tourist guide written by a certain Önder, entitled *Mevlana Jelaleddin Rumi*, in circulation in Konya:

This book published by the Turkish Ministry of Culture, displays an extremely exuberant ignorance, or an ethnocentric agenda. In the introduction, Önder refers to Rumi as “the great Turkish mystic” and “a great Turkish intellectual.” [...] In any case, we can forgive the linguistic chauvinism of poets and authors who believe their language to be the best since Babel, but Önder must surely know that Rumi wrote and spoke Persian. Therefore, we can only surmise that his cultural jingoism represents a conscious effort to rob Rumi of his Persian and Iranian heritage, and claim him for Turkish literature, ethnicity and nationalism.⁵⁹

⁵⁷Assaf Hâlet Tchelebi, *Rouba' yat* (Paris: Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1984), 11–17.

⁵⁸Franklin Lewis, *Rumi Past and Present, East and West: The Life, Teachings, and Poetry of Jalal al-Din Rumi* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2007).

⁵⁹Lewis, *Rumi Past and Present*, 548–49.

3.4 Rumi, the Quintessence of Islam

A quintessential form of second-degree deformation is seen in a number of English and French translations carried out mostly by Rumi scholars—often themselves members of a *tariqat*—with a clear ideological stance in favor of the Islamic nature of Rumi’s thought. While this Islamizing view can be supported by the Islamic character of several elements in Rumi’s work and thought, theoretical problems arise when a restrictive interpretation of his text is indirectly imposed on the target-language reader. This ideological manipulation, which I call the *Islamizing tendency*, as opposed to the aforementioned liberalizing tendency, consists of presenting Rumi’s philosophy as a pure fruit of Islamic dogma, his work as entirely inspired by the Koran and the prophetic tradition (*Sunna*), and his mystic system in perfect tune with Islamic core teachings. A discussion about how mysticism or Rumi’s thought has been influenced by the Koran and to what extent it corresponds to the main theological doctrines of Islam surpasses the scope of this article. The Islamic world, just as any other religious area,⁶⁰ is multiple and pluralistic: there is no single uniform Islamic doctrine. However, taking Rumi’s mysticism as the archetype of Islamic thought or the true message of Islam appears extremely simplistic and reductionist if one takes into account its fundamental differences, in theory and practice, from the doctrinal principles of *fiqh* and *kalam*. By emphasizing the Islamic character of Rumi’s texts, primarily *Masnawi*, and not giving the reader insight into epistemological differences, not to say frictions, between mystic theosophy and the mainstream literalist doctrines of Islam, Islamizing scholars create an orientalist state of nebulosity whereby the reader’s understanding of the text is at the very least distorted.

The principal field of ideological interference in these translations is the peritext, mostly in the translators’ choice of title, exegetic notes, and prefaces. The interference also occurs at a macrostructural level in that

⁶⁰I use the term *area* with reference to and instead of the term *aire civilisationnelle* (area of civilization) insofar as speaking of an “Islamic civilization” would sound almost as epistemologically problematic as believing in the existence of a “Christian civilization.” Such an overgeneralizing characterization of cultural and geographic entities based on religious criteria seems reductionist to say the least.

many of these translators, supposedly Rumi specialists, have published separate commentaries, speeches, and interviews (epitext) about Sufi thought, poetry, and authors, in which they explicitly demonstrate their ideological view. Some more recent cases of this Islamizing tendency can be understood as a reaction to the prevailing climate of Islamophobia and the xenophobic sentiments emerging of late in Western countries. Certain orientalist, many of whom are Sufi followers themselves, have reacted to this in good faith and with the noble intention of repairing the damaged image of Islam in their target polysystems by presenting an agreeable picture of this religion, stressing the universal character of the thought of figures like Rumi, at the expense of translator's impartiality. Some of these scholars are in fact responding to the simplistic view of Rumi portrayed by some modern American re-translations, mostly written by poets who do not even read Persian, let alone have a deep understanding of Sufism's complex system of thought. Overly emphasizing Rumi's liberal use of sensual images, some of these versions create a caricatural and romanticized image of the mystic, often with commercial aims, sometimes even distorting the text by omitting and adding content. This liberalizing tendency represents the opposite end of a simplistic orientalism spectrum.

An example of the Islamizing tendency in the English-speaking world can be found in the work of William Chittick, whose *The Sufi Path of Love* presents a heavily commentated selection of Rumi's verses. This follows the model of commentaries (*sharh*) existing in the source language, written by religious professionals and patronage with the aim of rewriting the Sufi canon. Chittick's case is all the more interesting since all his translated poems are systematically organized according to their religious content, and almost every verse is explained by the translator/commentator to showcase a point elicited from the doctrine of Sunni Islam, imitating the structure of an exegesis of the Koran. Chittick asserts: "In spite of the often-bewildering complexity of the picture Rumi paints, all of his expositions and explanations are [...] reducible to a single sentence or phrase. [...] the overriding reality of Rumi's existence and

of Islam itself: ‘There is no god but God.’”⁶¹ Chittick then cites Rumi: “How many words the world contains! But all have one meaning. When you smash the jugs, the water is one.”⁶²

What is striking in such practices as Chittick’s is the judicious selection of quotations to make an ideological point. By isolating utterances from the context, scholars like Chittick pick what suits their argument. While this dialectic approach is commonplace in Islamic theological and proselytizing debates whereby Islamic scholars electively make references to the Koran in order to support an argument, it seems inappropriate for Rumi’s poetry, given its deliberately fluid and unstable discursive nature. Ironically, such quotations often turn out to be unconvincing and are even contradicted when repositioned in the original context.⁶³ This approach is methodologically flawed since such references are mostly anecdotal and evidence to the contrary is easily available elsewhere within the same text, given that mystic poetic discourse is essentially devoid of a fixed dialectical structure. However, Chittick can see only elements of Islamic doctrine in Rumi’s ecstatic, lyrical, and bacchanalian language: “The Western reader faces a number of obstacles to reading and understanding Rumi’s works. Leaving aside the well-known drawbacks of translations in general, there remain the constant references to Islamic teachings with which the reader may not be familiar. Rumi’s universe is

⁶¹William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), 7. One response to such arguments is to ask why Rumi didn’t express directly such a banal affirmation of the Islamic dogma and what would be the need for such discursive “complexity.”

⁶²Rumi, *Divan-e Shams*, ghazal 3020, line 8. First, Chittick’s translation of *loghat* is erroneous since here it means “language” or “ideological discourse” (*logos*) rather than the more trivial modern Persian sense of “word.” Second, this reductionist interpretation of Rumi’s verse seems an oversimplification when placed in the context of the ghazal in question, which expresses the notion of “unity of the essence” in defiance of the “plurality of forms” reflected by antagonistic ideological and religious discourses. The tone of the ghazal is in fact very critical of what Rumi considers useless ideological polemics and religious quarrels. The ghazal presents no affirmation of the validity or superiority of any ideology or religion, contrary to Chittick’s interpretation.

⁶³This is best exemplified by the Islamizing scholars’ reference to Rumi’s prose preface of Book V of *Masnavi*, in which he speaks of the trichotomy of *shari’at*, *tariqat*, and *haqiqat*. These scholars construe the opening sentences as Rumi’s commitment to religion and the Sufi path, hence a proof of his adherence to the legalistic aspect of Islam whereas, as mentioned, a thorough reading of the full text provides a much subtler picture.

shaped by the Koran, the Prophet, and the Moslem saints, just as Dante's is shaped by Christ, the Bible, and the church."⁶⁴

It is then the translator's duty to show Western readers what, unsurprisingly, they cannot see in Rumi's secular antinomian discourse. Therefore, Chittick disapproves of translations with no exegetic orientation. As far as he is concerned, the reader must read the text through the prism of the Koran, *Sunna*, and "Moslem saints"—whoever he thinks they are—and it is obviously the translator/commentator's task to illuminate the reader in this regard.

Of lesser academic importance, Ibrahim Gamard, the creator of dar-almasnavi.org and a fervent Muslim, is another adept of this exegetic tradition in Rumi's translations. He criticizes, quite justly of course, Rumi's popularizing American translations for their excessively free style, absolute inauthenticity, simplistic views, and distorting effects on the text. He is, again, rightly in favor of literal translations, following Nicholson's model. But this posture does not make Gamard's translations free of second-degree deforming tendencies; his translation of Rumi's quatrains is heavily annotated.⁶⁵ He does not shy away from clearly affirming his main goal in the preface of one of his translations: "And as a Muslim (since 1984), I was also interested in explaining Rumi's frequent Islamic references (to beliefs, verses from the Qur'an, sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, and so on) that permeate his vast outpouring of poetry. I wanted to convey Rumi's love and veneration for the profound wisdom contained in the verses of the Holy Qur'an and the sayings of the Prophet."⁶⁶

Interestingly, Gamard comments on some verses⁶⁷ in which Rumi clearly demonstrates a secular eclectic worldview and a universal doctrine

⁶⁴Chittick, *Sufi Path*, 9.

⁶⁵Ibrahim Gamard, *Rumi and Islam: Selections from His Stories, Poems, and Discourses* (Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Illuminations, 2004).

⁶⁶Gamard, *Rumi and Islam*, xi.

⁶⁷For instance,

Love's **religion** is other than all religions.

For lovers, **religion and faith** is God. (*Masnavi*, II:1770)

prioritizing a direct personal relationship with God over formal religious orthodoxies, not quite in tune with Islamic teachings. Gamard either refutes the authenticity of such texts or proposes a more traditionalist interpretation for them. In light of Rumi's references to the Koran or the Prophet's tradition elsewhere in his work, Gamard opposes the idea of the universality of Rumi's thought, in a theologian's style, by rejecting any direct interpretation of Rumi's secular antinomian texts as "false impressions."⁶⁸

This approach is represented by Eva de Vitray-Meyerovitch, Rumi's most prolific French translator. The interesting fact about her otherwise monumental work is that she must have had limited knowledge of Persian, not enough to translate independently without help from Persian speakers. Moreover, her French version of *Masnavi* is suspiciously identical to Nicholson's English translation, disqualifying her as a Rumi specialist. Rather than citing Vitray-Meyerovitch's heavily ideological texts, I think it is worth considering a more serious French scholar, Leili Anvar, whose erudite analytical anthologies, suggestively entitled *Rumi la religion de l'amour* and *Trésors dévoilés : anthologie de l'islam spirituel*, still display some residual Islamizing proclivities. Anvar expresses her views subtly in her interviews and in the prefaces of her books. In this extract of one preface, she alludes to a central tradition in Sufism, that of the "hidden treasure," *trésor caché*, amply developed in the twelfth-century mystic Ruzbahan Baqli Shirazi's work on the mystic theosophy of love.⁶⁹ "I was a hidden treasure; I wanted to be known. That's why I created the creatures, so that they know me.' It is with these terms that one of the religious traditions of Islam has God speak. All of the created universe is therefore a Book of God, in which everyone reads the splendor of divine attributes. The Koran itself and all sacred and spiritual texts are but mirrors reflecting this grandiose Book of divine realities."⁷⁰

Attributing the spiritual tradition of the hidden treasure to the kernel of Islam turns a profoundly complex extra-religious notion into a

⁶⁸Gamard, *Rumi and Islam*, xi.

⁶⁹Cf. Corbin, "La philosophie islamique," vol. III, 1098–1100.

⁷⁰Leili Anvar, *Trésors dévoilés : anthologie de l'islam spirituel* (Paris: Seuil, 2009), 7.

“religious tradition” and bears the hallmark of the translator’s ideological position. By adding elements such as “Islamic tradition,” “the Koran itself,” and “all sacred texts” to the translation’s indication field, Anvar gives a fixed meaning to the otherwise fluid message of mystics like Rumi. She imposes an ideologically formatted reading of mystic poetry and manipulates the potential interpretations of the text to establish it in the center of Islamic doctrine, put on par with “all” other religious doctrines. But Anvar is certainly aware that according to the fundamental tenet of Islam, Mohammad is God’s last messenger (*khatam-ol-anbiae val-morsalin*) and his Book finalizes the word of God, overriding all former sacred texts, “altered” throughout history so that they do not show the legitimacy of Islam as the last religion to which all humans should surrender.⁷¹ By putting “all spiritual and sacred texts” at the same level as the Koran, Anvar is deliberately ignoring a cardinal theological component of Islam.

3.5 Epistemological and Ethical Problems

Islamizing and liberalizing ideologies pose a twofold problem, epistemological and ethical. They are problematic from an epistemological standpoint since they fail to take note of the entirety of mystic theosophy. Liberalizers focus excessively on Rumi’s lyricism and romanticism, mostly present in *Divan*,⁷² ignoring the theosophical character of Rumi’s discourse. Islamizers focus excessively on Rumi’s undeniably heavy references to the Koran and tradition, mostly in his didactic *Masnavi*.⁷³ However, the distorting character of the Islamizing position is less evident.

Islamic influences in Rumi’s work cannot be denied. His work was composed within an Islamic world. Like any other thinker, Rumi lived

⁷¹See the etymological sense of the lexeme *Islam*: *s-l-m* (peace, pacify) in the first verbal derivative form, the transitive-making infinitive of *If'al*: to surrender to God’s will.

⁷²In general, *Divan* constitutes the largest part of Rumi’s work, but it is also, ironically, the least studied by both Iranian and Western scholars.

⁷³Is *Masnavi* not, according to a verse attributed to Jami and quoted by Sheikh Bahayi, “the Koran in the Pahlavi language” after all? Hosein Moti’, *Daneshname-ye Adabiyat-e Iran* (Qom: Buketab, 2018), 117.

and thought in the discursive paradigm of his world, and his work is in a dialectical relation with this same epistemological framework. In that respect, Rumi benefited from and based his work on the material available in his sphere. Yet Rumi's Islamic references do not make him the Muslim theologian that many would make him out to be, despite his earlier career as a preacher and headmaster of a madrassa. First, a large portion of Rumi's references are to textual material common to all Semitic monotheistic religions. Rumi's mastery of non- and pre-Islamic sources, namely the Old and New Testaments, is uncontested.⁷⁴ Interestingly, on certain occasions of discrepancy between various narratives, Rumi seems to favor the Biblical version over the Islamic tradition.⁷⁵ Second, referring to a text, especially a sacred one, or even being influenced by it, is no proof for one's adherence to its ensuing theological discourse. Anvar claims that even the structure of his works, like most mystic works in Islam, emulates that of the Koran.⁷⁶ However, structural resemblances exist between the Koran and other ancient and sacred texts, too. This does not necessarily make the Koran their pure continuation or derivative.

By referring to Koranic or prophetic texts, mystic authors' intent may have been to reinterpret them in a completely new light. Rumi's references to sacred texts were made with a view to eliciting a transcendental sense, often fundamentally different from the face value (*surat-e zaheeri*) of these narratives, not with the aim of reaffirming common religious interpretations. On multiple occasions, Rumi's work, both implicitly and explicitly, evokes notions of pantheism, gnosis, deism, and even ir-religion,⁷⁷ not to mention the antinomian character of mystic poetry's

⁷⁴Rumi lived in Rum (Anatolia), a multicultural, multi-confessional, and multilingual society at the border of the Islamic and Christian worlds. He even composed poetry in Greek.

⁷⁵See the use of *Isaac* instead of *Ismail* in this verse:

I am intoxicated and perplex for you, I am all on your orders.

I am your Isaac sacrificed for you, as this is the Eid of Sacrifice. (*Divan*, ghazal 1792, line 6)

⁷⁶In reference to the ring composition, for instance, and other macrostructural elements in Attar's *Manteq-otteir* or Rumi's *Masnavi*. Leili Anvar, "La poésie mystique," interview by Abdennour Bidar, *Cultures d'Islam*, Radio France Culture, 24 April 2015.

⁷⁷See this explicit affirmation:

[I am] in the religion of the irreligious; I alienate my peers,

With a sign of hand when [I am] with them; [Go] slowly as I am drunk! (*Divan*, ghazal 1446, line 10)

bacchanalian themes and sensual terminology. However, the distance between Rumi's discourse and the common religious dogma may not be immediately comprehensible to many Western scholars, who approach Rumi's text from an outsider's angle. Many of the subtle but seminal thematic and formal (semiotic) nuances in mystic discourse, essentially heterodox in Islamic religious dogma, do not necessarily look as extraordinary and non-conformist to a Christian commentator as they do in the context of the Islamic world: these include unorthodox references to sensuality, intoxication, perplexity, and existential (physical and spiritual) union with God.⁷⁸

The Islamizing and liberalizing tendencies also pose an ethical problem regarding the principle of the translation's neutrality and the translator's commitment to ideological impartiality. Translation is a dual act of communication, with two sets of indication and interpretation fields. Any subjective view added by the translator to the paratext in the form of exegesis impacts the indication field of the translated text, further distorting the reader's interpretation field, which is already affected by inevitable peripheral noise and their own presuppositions. However good-willed and innocent the added data may be, it still causes disruption in the reception process, a disruption that is even more noxious when it contains an ideological component. If Berman's deforming tendencies represent the malefic forces of ethnocentrism in action, the second-degree deformation pertains to the unethical impact of politics and ideologies upon translation. Rumi's discourse is conceived to be open to interpretation. It must remain so after it is recreated in a different linguistic system.

Conclusion

As Rumi foresaw, "everyone has found in *ney's* laments their own pre-established ideas; none looked for her/his secrets within her/him."⁷⁹ Rumi's discourse indeed has secrets and a semantic content wrapped in a multilayered semiotic system that employs music, trope, allegory,

⁷⁸Anvar explains this paradox by opposing the notion of sober Sufism (more in line with traditionalist religious views) to that of inebriated Sufism (reflected in Rumi's encounter with Shams and the onset of his poetic outpouring). Leili Anvar, "Rumi avec Leili Anvar," interview by Frédéric Lenoir, *Les racines du ciel*, Radio France Culture, 19 July 2011.

⁷⁹Rumi, *Masnavi-e Ma'navi*, I:6.

mystic idiolect, provocative language, and more, to speak of the unspeakable. The result is, undoubtedly, an evasive, liquid discourse waiting to be recomunicated through translation as is, not through an ideological prism. It is almost impossible for translators to efface their subjectivity from the reception process, but they can at least limit damage to the original text by being aware of the potential consequences of their linguistic choices, their exegetic notes, and their paratextual activities. In fact, it is the “task of the translator,” to borrow the title of Walter Benjamin’s famous essay,⁸⁰ to remain neutral to the text, wary of political and ideological forces at play in both the source and the target polysystems.

The most anodyne piece of information inadvertently added to the interpretation field of the reader can influence the understanding of the author’s intent and modify the reach of the message. Therefore, deliberate interventions made by professionals and patronage with the aim of rewriting poetological or ideological canons are, a fortiori, destructive to the semantic content of the discourse. I presented only a few examples of interference of this kind in the reception of Rumi, an author whose conflictual intellectual position is still highly topical both in the West and in the East. I also observed how Rumi’s message of unity, ironically, still divides today, perhaps because his discourse is a consciously fluid one. But the most important issue is that “specialists” cannot resist the temptation of interpreting an elusive message and reducing its potentiality to compartmentalized ideological postures. Whether the ideological influence is Islamizing or popularizing, many translators, intentionally or inadvertently, have fallen in a reductionist orientalist trap in their approach to an infinitesimally complex philosophy. Hence, these translators have betrayed both the author and the reader. They have failed to bring the reader to the author, leaving the reader respectfully alone with the author’s complexity of Otherness. Instead, by simplistically reducing the author to the pigeonholed categories of a religious or liberalistic doctrine, they have imposed their own interpretation of the text on the reader, making decisions in the reader’s place as what to understand from the text.

⁸⁰Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume I*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael Jennings (Boston: Belknap Press, 2004).