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Kenan Rifai, *Listen: Commentary on the Spiritual Couplets of Mevlana Rumi*. Translated by Victoria Holbrook. Louisville, Kentucky: Fons Vitae 2011. Preface by Carl Ernst. 536 pp.
Reviewed by Ibrahim Gamard

Kenan Rifai's *Listen: Commentary on the Spiritual Couplets of Mevlana Rumi* is the first extensive commentary on Rumi's *Mathnawi* published in English since Nicholson completed his two-volume commentary more than seventy years ago. The first word of the title, 'Listen', is taken from the first word of the first verse of the *Mathnawi*: 'Listen to this reed-flute . . .'. The book is a translation from Turkish of a commentary on Book I of the *Mathnawi* by a Shaykh of the Rifa'i Sufi Order, Kenan Rifai (1867–1950), written in the late Ottoman Turkish style.

The *Mathnawi* had been studied for centuries in the lodges of the Mevlevi order of Sufism. However, due to the great level of respect and appreciation enjoyed by the *Mathnawi* in the late Ottoman Empire, institutes called 'Mathnawi Houses' (*Dar al-Mathnawi*) were established independently of the Mevlevi lodges, where the *Mathnawi* was taught to the public in a more concise and easily understood manner. The *Mathnawi* teachers in these institutes were often Shaykhs from other orders of Sufism, such as the Qadiri, Rifa'i and Naqshbandi orders. Kenan Rifai was a Shaykh in a Rifa'i lodge in Istanbul until 1925, when all Sufi orders were made illegal in the new Turkish Republic and the lodges were closed. He continued to teach the *Mathnawi* to his students for many years thereafter. Reading Rifai's book is therefore like attending lectures on the *Mathnawi* in Istanbul a hundred years ago and hearing it explained according to how its profound Islamic mystical wisdom was understood by Sufis in the late Ottoman era.

The translator, Professor Victoria Holbrook, is an American specialist in Turkish literature who has also mastered Arabic and Persian. She wisely did not translate the *Mathnawi* from the Turkish translation in the commentary (which would have resulted in a problematic double translation), but translated Book I directly from Persian, following Nicholson's Persian edition, translation, and commentary. She translated all verses using mostly imperfect rhyme with vowels or consonants, in regard to which she wrote: 'In my opinion non-versified translation of such works lacks verisimilitude.' More than that, she added a remarkable feature by replicating the number of syllables (eleven) in Mawlana Rumi's *Mathnawi* in English. In other words, each half-couplet of the four thousand Persian couplets consists of eleven syllables, as does each half-couplet in Holbrook's English translation. Here is an example of her method of rhyme and syllabification, in which Mawlana explains why so few people have access to intuitive knowledge from the 'mirror of the heart':

Do you know why your mirror's not indiscreet?
There's so much rust that you cannot see its cheek.

Since the commentary is a translation of densely packed spiritual wisdom from another language, it requires a studious and persistent approach. However, the book does not need to be read from cover to cover; the reader can also use it, for example, to see what the commentary can explain about the spiritual meanings of particular stories. One can also read the embedded translation of the *Mathnawi* independently of the commentary, if one wishes to study that way. In this sense, the Holbrook translation is a refreshing alternative to Nicholson's 1926 translation of Book I, as are the other recent translations by Mojaddedi and by Williams.

Here is an excerpt from one of Mawlana's best stories in the *Mathnawi* about the competition between Chinese artists (*Chiniyan*) and (Byzantine Roman) Greek artists (*Rumiyan*). The former made a painting on the walls of the room assigned to them. The latter simply polished the walls of their room until they shone like brilliant mirrors. The rooms were adjacent but separated by a thick curtain; when it was removed, the king was awed by the beauty of the Chinese painting, yet found it to be far more beautiful when reflected in the mirror-like walls polished by the Greek artists.

The Greeks are those Sufis without need, O son
Of books, art, and study by repetition
But they have polished their breasts and made them pure
Of lust and greed and stinginess and rancor
That mirror-clarity is, without a doubt
The heart which receives images beyond count . . .
No reflected image shines on forever
Except in the heart, with and without number
Forever, each new image that falls therein
Is displayed without any imperfection
Heart-polishers have escaped color and scent
They behold beauty without fail each instant
They've set aside knowledge's formality
They've raised the flag of *the eye of certainty*
Thought is gone and they've found luminosity
They've found the core and source of intimacy.

The following are the most relevant parts from Nicholson's brief commentary on these verses:

(3485) The heart is a mirror capable of reflecting the essences of all things and the Divine reality (*haqíqatu 'l-Haqq*) in all things . . . (3490) *i.e.* all the Divine attributes are manifested in the heart, both under the aspect of plurality in oneness (*wáhidíyyah*) and in that of absolute unity (*ahadíyyah*) . . . (3493) *‘Ayn al-yaqín* (*Qur.* CII 7), used by the Súfís as a technical term denoting the second of a triad of ascending states of spiritual experience: *‘ilmu 'l-yaqín, ‘aynu 'l-yaqín, haqqu 'l-yaqín.*

Isma‘il Rusukhi Anqarawi (d. 1041/1631), the great Mevlevi commentator on the *Mathnawi* explained the same verses as follows:

(The Sufis) have polished their hearts – which are purified of greed, lust, avarice, and hatred – from the rust of ‘others besides’ (God); they have purified and burnished (their hearts) with the remembrance of God (*dhikr Allah*) . . . (‘Except in the heart’): That is, not until the heart is qualified by both oneness and multiplicity and obtains the rank of oneness of Unity (*jam^c al-jam^c*) so that it is the heart of the Perfected Man (*insan al-kamil*), who is the manifestation of the Essence and the multiplicity of Attributes (of God) . . . That is, the Sufis (who are) the people of purity, are freed from the level of scent and colour; step by step, by means of the majestic grandeur of Truth (*haqiqat*), they witness the manifested splendour of (divine) Beauty . . . They have renounced the (outward) form and husk of knowledge. And they have gone (high) above the customary speaker in regard to (understanding) the great importance and value of the knowledge of the vision of Certainty, so that they reached the rank of the truth of Certainty and gained witnessing and contemplation (of God) . . . Conceptual thinking has vanished and been put aside from the hearts of these Sufis (who are) the people of purity; in its place they have found illumination (*rushana’iy*). They have arrived (*wasil shudand*) at the ocean of (intimate) friendship (*ashna’iy*) (with God) and attained the reward of the rank of annihilation (*fana*) and honour (in the divine Presence).

For the sake of comparison, here is Holbrook’s translation of Kenan Rifai’s commentary on these same verses:

Here the works of the painters of Rome are the Sufis who have no interest in lessons to be repeated, in books, or in showing off their art. That room is the heart of the Sufi which is pure of all dust and rust like the most brilliant of mirrors. It is in such mirrors, that is, in the hearts of such advanced Sufis, that the divine self-disclosure occurs. If you ask what it is they clean away to bring their hearts into such a state, it is rage, arrogance, selfhood and hypocrisy, lust and passion . . . It is only the heart’s mirror divested of all worldly filth which can be a mirror, a reflector, of that self-disclosure of essence and attributes without limit. For the mirror of the heart, like the beauty reflected in it, has no limit . . . Only the heart is eternal with Him. The hearts of God’s arrived are mirrors of both unity and plurality. The only mirror to reflect all these images is the mirror of the heart. That is why, from pre-eternity to post-eternity, every image reflected in the heart appears there divested of all veils. Those who polish their hearts with the love of God see a different kind of beauty shining there each instant; each instant they are witness to another of God’s infinite beauties. For them the

colors and scent whose beauty we embrace do not exist; they have risen beyond color and scent. For they are the ones who know God. They have abandoned the images in the mind of worldly sciences and raised the flag of the eye of certainty, and as a result they have reached the level of the reality of certainty and see the divine beauty. That is why the gracious Koran says: 'You will see it with the eye of certainty.' For there are degrees to the level of certainty: the knowledge of certainty is to reach God by way of knowledge, to learn of God through knowledge. The eye of certainty is the transformation of this knowledge into vision. At this level the heart succeeds in seeing God. But there is a superior degree, its result, which is the reality of certainty: to become annihilated in God . . . Those who attain the degree of the eye of certainty are freed of thought and reach the light. It is they [sic] reach the sea of familiarity . . . (pp. 451-52)

Nicholson's commentary on these verses, although brief, is wonderfully lucid and concise, and covers several themes. It is, however, difficult for many to access because he wrote it for graduate students and scholars of Persian literature, who could easily read the particular *Mathnawi* verse numbers originally written in Arabic script (here: 3485, 3490, 3493), and also understand the words written in the Arabic script (*ʿayn al-yaqin*), and find the words in the Arabic text of the *Qur'an* and in translation, 'vision of certainty'. Nicholson listed 'a triad of ascending states' in Arabic transliteration but without translation or complete citation from the *Qur'an*: 'knowledge of Certainty' (102:5), 'eye, or vision of Certainty' (102:7), and 'truth, or reality of Certainty' (56:95, 59:51).

Anqaravi's commentary, which Nicholson followed closely and declared to be the best of the commentaries on *Mathnawi* that he used, is accessible only to those who can read it in Ottoman Turkish or in its Persian translation. Anqaravi referred to the following Tradition (*hadith*) of the Prophet: 'Truly for everything there is a polishing, and the polishing for the heart is the recollection of God (*dhikr Allah*).' This may have been an interpretation of a verse in the *Qur'an*: 'That which they have earned is rust upon their hearts' (83:14). He did not need to explain in full what must have been commonly known to his readers. However, this Tradition is very significant and may well have inspired Mawlana Rumi to develop his story about the Chinese and Greek artists. Anqaravi explained one verse, 'No reflected image shines on forever / Except in the heart, with and without number', by mentioning the 'Perfect Man', a prominent term in the mystical philosophy of Ibn al-ʿArabi. In the late Ottoman Empire, commentators interpreted the *Mathnawi* via this sublime teaching, as did Rifai and Nicholson. However, today's scholars have pointed out the lack of evidence that Ibn al-ʿArabi's mysticism had any influence on Mawlana Rumi's teaching. Instead, the similarities are best understood as a shared body of Sufi wisdom in many regions. After explaining the 'vision of Certainty' (the only rank regarding 'Certainty' mentioned in the corresponding verse of *Mathnawi*), Anqaravi showed his greatness as a *Mathnawi* commentator in his explanation of the last selected verse: how the Sufis, who polished the mirror of their hearts, arrived at the Ocean of nearness to God.

vThe commentary on these verses by Kenan Rifai (who was strongly influenced by Anqaravi) offers, on the whole, the most complete, clear, and helpful explanations. In one case, there is a lack of correspondence in the book between Holbrook's translation of one of the aforementioned verses, 'Forever, each new image that falls therein/Is displayed without any imperfection,' and Rifai's paraphrase, 'every image reflected in the heart appears there divested of all veils'. This is because Holbrook does not seem to have checked Nicholson's appendices of correction that bring his translation and his edition of the Persian text into conformity with the oldest manuscript of the *Mathnawi*. Nicholson originally translated verse 3491: 'Unto everlasting every new image that falls on it (the heart) is appearing therein without any imperfection'; later, he corrected it to, 'without any veil'. Holbrook did, however, incorporate Nicholson's corrections of his translation when he mentioned these in his commentary.

Another benefit of Rifai's commentary is that he explains quotations from the *Qur'an* in verses of the *Mathnawi*, and Holbrook almost always provides citations of chapter and verse numbers in footnotes, sometimes with full translations of the verses. The following is an example:

So whatever you desire to mate with, go
Die in it, take on its quality and form
If it's light, to receive light prepare yourself
If it's distance, be far and absorbed in self
If from this ruined prison you seek escape
Bow and draw near to the Friend, don't turn away.

And so whatever you wish to possess [sic], wish to resemble, wish to be, run for it and seek it out. If you wish to be one of the chosen community, find that community and give up your being in that community's being. If you wish for light, prepare yourself for light to set itself upon you! If you wish to reach God, seek the ways to become the Truth with the Truth! If no, if your intention is to be distant from God, be selfish! Work only at the command of yourself. Keep away from God and from humanity! And finally, if you are among those who hear the invitation from God in chapter ninety-six of the gracious Koran, 'Bow down in worship and come near to your Lord!' and you struggle to be free of the prison of the body, let the only voice to which you run be the voice of the invitation of God the great.
(pp. 464-66)

Holbrook's translation of the *Mathnawi* uses the verse numbers in Rifai's book, which has forty-five more verses than Nicholson's edition. She explains in her 'Translator's Note' how she added some verses listed as variants in Nicholson's Persian text and also added some others found only in Rifai's Turkish edition, in order to align the translation with the commentary. In one case, however, she did not add a verse (p. 490) that Nicholson instructed should be added: 'Then that devoted friend, who had been newly converted to Islam, in his enthusiasm and delight said to 'Alí, . . .'. Rifai made the following comment about this verse: 'When least expected, the

enemy champion had seen the light of Islam, seen the Friend in the mirror of Hazret Ali's spirit, and was now experiencing the profound joy of Islam.'

There are numerous typographical errors throughout the book, but fortunately, in almost all cases the correct wording can easily be determined. However, in one case the error marred the translation:

Have you seen a sign without a signified?
If there is no road, there will be no ghouls' cry
Have you seen a name without a thing it names?
Have you plucked a rose which is spelled 'ghoul' [sic] by name?
You've pronounced the name, seek what it signifies
Know the moon's not in the stream but up on high
If beyond name and letter you wish to go
Purify yourself of self, quick at one stroke
Lose color like iron and be colorless
In abstention be a mirror without rust
Make yourself pure of the attributes of self
So that you may see the pure essence of your self
And in your heart the sciences of prophets
Without teachers, without tutors, without books. (pp. 443-44)

For comparison's sake, here is Nicholson's translation of the first two verses:

Hast thou ever seen a subject that shows without (the existence of) an object that is shown: unless there is the road, there can never be the ghouls (which entices travellers to stray from the road). Hast thou ever seen a name without the reality (denoted by the name)? Or hast thou plucked a rose (*gul*) from the (letters) *gaf* and *lam* of (the word) *gul*?
Although Holbrook's translation features a Glossary and she states that other key Sufi terms can be better understood by using her index, several terms will remain strange for many readers. The first is 'God the Truth', which Holbrook explains is her translation of two words for 'God' (*Hakk* and *Cenab-ı Hakk*). Then there is 'the arrived' (or 'arrived persons'), which is not in the Glossary. Via the index, one finds: 'the spiritually arrived' (p. 2); 'it is "the arrived humans" in whom God the Truth has disclosed Himself' (p. 25); '. . . the Perfect Human, the arrived individual who shows the ways for spirit to reach God' (p. 37); 'The arrived are people who are detached from the concerns of soul common to worldly people, and they are purified of all worldly filth' (p. 38).

Another term is 'the soul', a translation of *nafs* (Turkish, *nefis*). This is a correct literal translation. However, without explanation or modifiers, readers will find it disconcerting to see

the word used in such a negative context, as is often the case in Sufi texts. Nicholson's commentary does sometimes translate *nafs* as 'soul', but more often as 'animal soul', 'carnal soul', 'appetitive soul', 'the carnal self', 'selfish self', or 'lower self'. The following is an example of how Holbrook uses the term in verses from the *Mathnawi*: 'The mother of idols is your idol soul . . . If you would, O son, know the form of the soul/ Read the story of Hell with its seven doors' (p. 97). Here, Nicholson translated, 'The idol of your self is the mother of (all) idols' (I: 772). An example from Rifai's commentary is: 'spirit is the opposite of soul, and the spiritual the opposite of the soul-inclined' (p. 317). Holbrook does have a glossary entry regarding this term that is intriguing but not very helpful: 'The soul [*nefis*] is what arises when the spirit enters the body' (p. 528). The term *nefis* is listed in the index, by which one informative case can be found in the commentary: 'The various desires, ambitions and worldly wants of the soul' (p. 67).

Holbrook stated that, although Kenan Rifai died in 1950, his commentary was not published until 1973 and there is no extant manuscript. During the intervening years, some of his students worked to prepare the work to be published. Therefore, it is not known if the original manuscript was, or was not, ordered in the usual way: the translation of a verse, then a paraphrase and/or commentary, followed by a translation of the next verse. The book is organized according to the section headings in the *Mathnawi*, so there may be a page or a page and a half of *Mathnawi* verses, followed by two or three pages of commentary. This arrangement has its benefits, but it can be a tedious experience to read a section of verses followed by a long section of commentary. This is because the commentary is mostly a paraphrase of the verses, so the content is repetitive if the book is read in this manner. It is a more rewarding experience to read a small number (between several and half a dozen) of couplets from the *Mathnawi*, then find and read the corresponding commentary, then read some more couplets, and so on. This method of study (and the *Mathnawi* must be studied) may give one the satisfaction of understanding the couplets well enough before moving on further.

Despite some defects, which are minor, this book is the most significant contribution to understanding the *Mathnawi* to be published in the English language in over seventy years. Carefully translated into clear and very readable English, it is filled with profound spiritual wisdom on every page. It is highly recommended for students and lovers of Rumi's *Mathnawi*, which is the greatest poem of religious mysticism ever written.