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**BETWEEN NATION AND DEVOTION: THE TRANSLATION AND  
COMMENTARIES OF THE *MASNAVI* IN EARLY REPUBLICAN TURKEY**

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Central European University Private University, in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements of the Master of Arts degree in Comparative History

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how Rumi's *Masnavi* was reinterpreted between 1937 and 1951, when the newly established Turkish Republic implemented anti-Sufi reforms and pursued fluctuating modernizing, secular, and nationalist cultural policies. It focuses on two contrasting forms of remembrance: the 1942 state-sponsored translation by Veled Çelebi İzbudak and Abdülbâki Gölpınarlı, produced under the influence of Turkish humanism promoted by Hasan Âli Yücel, the minister of culture and education, and the commentaries of Avni Konuk and Tahir Olgun, who were among the last representatives of the *Mesnevihân* tradition. Through textual, discursive, and historical analysis, the thesis investigates the dynamics that shaped two distinct presentations of the *Masnavi* in early Republican Turkey. It contrasts the state-sponsored translation, framed by nationalist and humanist ideology that reframes the *Masnavi* as a cultural asset of the nation-state, with the commentaries of Avni Konuk and Tahir Olgun, which continue the classical Sufi commentary tradition and perceive the text as a living Sufi text within the Mevlevi framework. By situating these works within broader debates on secularism, religion, and nationalism, the study explores how Mevlevi-affiliated figures negotiated their positions in a secular environment often hostile to Sufism. The study demonstrates how varied interpretations of the *Masnavi* redefined its place within early Republican Turkey's cultural memory. Ultimately, the *Masnavi* emerges not as a fixed, singular text but as a dynamic and plural site of memory, reflecting the complex entanglement of religion, literature, and modernity in early Republican Turkey.

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This thesis is the result of my 2-year master's education at the Central European University in Vienna. During this time, far from home, family, and friends, I faced some challenges. However, I find it unnecessary and selfish to mention these challenges when a destructive genocide has been taking place in Gaza, which makes many of us question the humanity in the world. In this process, the world has witnessed our miserable passiveness in the face of wickedness, which left many actions at the symbolic level. Still, I believe that even these symbolic actions are valuable, as they testify to our efforts to seek the good and peace throughout history. With this object in my mind, I would like to dedicate this thesis to the people of Gaza humbly.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>COPYRIGHT NOTICE .....</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>AUTHOR'S DECLARATION .....</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>ABSTRACT.....</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENT.....</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS .....</b>	<b>vii</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
Literature Review.....	4
Historical Background.....	9
Methodology, Framework, and Sources .....	14
Structure .....	17
<b>CHAPTER I</b>	
<b>Reforming the Tradition: The Translation of the <i>Masnavi</i> (1942).....</b>	<b>18</b>
Rumi's <i>Masnavi</i> .....	18
The <i>Masnavi</i> as a “quasi-sacred” text .....	21
The <i>Masnavi</i> in the eyes of Sufis .....	22
Hasan Âli Yücel, the Translation Bureau, and “Turkish Humanism” .....	24
Translator of the <i>Masnavi</i> : Veled Çelebi İzbudak .....	30
Editor or “Actual Translator” of the <i>Masnavi</i> : Abdülbâki Gölpınarlı.....	33
The 1942 translation of the <i>Masnavi</i> .....	36
<b>CHAPTER II</b>	
<b>Following the Tradition: The <i>Masnavi</i> Commentaries Against the Current.....</b>	<b>41</b>
Tradition of the <i>Masnavi</i> commentaries ( <i>Şerh-i Mesnevî</i> ).....	42
Avni Konuk.....	46
The question of publication: the Ibn Arabi debate .....	48
The commentary of Avni Konuk .....	51
Tahir Olgun .....	53
Tahir Olgun's criticism of the translation of the <i>Masnavi</i> (1942).....	57
Tahir Olgun's commentary .....	60
<b>CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>64</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY .....</b>	<b>70</b>
<b>APPENDIX.....</b>	<b>76</b>

## INTRODUCTION

In 1942, several state officials and prominent figures of Konya gathered at the Konya People's House (*Konya Halkevi*) to commemorate one of the city's most respected figures: Mawlana Jalaladdin Rumi (b. 1207, Vashkhs - d. 1273, Konya).<sup>2</sup> This event took place seventeen years after the prohibition of Sufi orders by the young Turkish Republic. The Mevlevi Order was no exception. Hasan Âli Yücel (1897-1961), the Minister of Education and Culture, was raised in a family with ties to the Mevlevi order. He sent a letter to the commemoration:

In the context of our cultural history, getting to know and understand Rumi is among the foremost duties. For this reason, it is of great importance that he is seen and presented not through the *sacred dimension* of his personality, but as a complete *human* being. Foreigners, approaching his work with a humanist understanding, have achieved a success we have not yet been able to attain: they have written and published it in their own languages, and with a level of perfection we have yet to reach -and they have done so precisely through this very understanding.<sup>3</sup>

During the same year, the Ministry of Education began publishing translations of the entire six volumes of the *Masnavi*, Rumi's seminal work from its original language, Persian, into Turkish. The *Masnavi* had been read not only among the Mevlevi order and Sufi groups but also in Islamic literature, as a canonical text and for educational purposes to teach Persian. As a result of these features, several commentaries on the *Masnavi*, most of which include the translations of each couplet, were written not only for philological reasons but also to reveal its spiritual context and meaning. However, the Ministry of Education and Culture decided to prepare a new translation, not a commentary.

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<sup>2</sup> For people's House, see M. Asim Karaömerlioğlu, "The people's houses and the cult of the peasant in Turkey," in *Middle Eastern Studies*, 34/4 (1998): 67-91.

<sup>3</sup> Hasan Âli Yücel, "Mevlâna Hakkında" in *Konya Halkevi Kültür Dergisi Mevlana Özel Sayısı* (1942): 8-9, quoted by Burcu Sağlam, "A Discussion on the Myth of Mevlânâ in Modern Turkey," *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 38/4 (2017): 421.



The 1942 translation's preface notes that Veled Çelebi İzbudak (1869-1953), the last officially appointed shaykh of the Konya Mevlevi lodge and later a member of parliament, prepared the original translation, while Abdülbâki Gölpınarlı (1900-1982), a prominent scholar of Turkish literature and history and a Rumi devotee, compared it with various commentaries and added explanations at the end of every volume. However, in his 1951 book, Abdülbâki Gölpınarlı included a paragraph that was later removed by himself, explaining how he personally translated the text, which caused uncertainty and raised questions about the internal dynamics between the Mevlevi-affiliated figures of the time.

At first glance, these developments might seem confusing due to the ban on Sufi orders, rituals, and the closure of Sufi lodges in 1925. However, the commemoration for Rumi at the People's House highlighted the alignment between certain members of the Mevlevi community and the bureaucracy, as well as the broader relationship between religion and the secular regime. This was accompanied by the framing of Rumi as a "Turkish humanist," a state of mind and cultural policy that emerged in response to a sense of belatedness compared to the West. The term contains "Turk" and "Humanism" because "To turn inward and be reborn... This is the romantic ideal where the humanist Renaissance idea and nationalism converge. The counterpart to man's return to his 'essence' is the return to the 'primordial-essential' source of national formation, according to this view."<sup>4</sup> Conversely, some "traditionalist" Mevlevi were dissatisfied with the state's anti-Sufi policies and continued to see Rumi as a Sufi shaykh and spiritual guide. Two of these, Ahmed Avni Konuk, a Mevlevi and composer (1868-1938), and Tahir Olgun, a Mevlevi and poet (1877-1951), gained recognition for their commentaries on the *Masnavi*, completed in 1937 and 1951, respectively.

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<sup>4</sup> Tanıl Bora, *Hasan Âli Yücel* (İstanbul: İletişim, 2021), 298.

I argue that the two approaches to the *Masnavi* - humanist and traditionalist - emerged between 1935 and 1951 as responses to nation-state formation, Westernizing and modernizing policies, and anti-Sufi reforms, shaped by the differing engagements of Mevlevi-affiliated figures with these debates. The 1942 state-sponsored translation, carried out by Mevlevi-affiliated individuals, represents a reframing of the *Masnavi* to be presented in line with nationalist and humanist ideologies, making it a cultural asset of the nation-state. By contrast, the two commentaries by Ahmed Avni Konuk and Tahir Olgun represented a continuation of the classical Sufi commentary tradition, which perceived the *Masnavi* as alive within the Mevlevi cultural framework in the post-1925 anti-Sufi climate.

This thesis aims to understand the dynamics behind the emergence of these two different imaginations of the *Masnavi*, considering the officials who favored a prohibition on Sufism and the construction of the *Masnavi* as a cultural national asset. It discusses that the re-establishment of the *Masnavi*'s legacy through the state's pragmatic ideologies would help us understand the intersection of religion and nationalism in a secular environment that is hostile to religion. To this end, this thesis contrasts the contexts and debates in and around two *Masnavi* commentaries with the translation published and supported by the relevant ministry, as the state-supported translation differs from the commentaries written by two other Mevlevis. It therefore questions what these texts, their publication phenomenon, and their authors' political and ideological stance would reveal regarding the web of relations between Turkey's secularism and religion, particularly Sufism.

Thus, this thesis lies at the intersection of two fields that are typically considered independently: the history of Sufi orders in modern Turkey and the history of the *Masnavi*. Understanding these topics in relation to each other offers insight that has rarely been investigated in previous research. The post-1925 period witnessed the state-funded *Masnavi* translation on the one hand and civilian-initiated commentaries on the other. The difference

marking them was anchored in their presentation, style, word choices, and, of course, their translators' ideological stances. In doing so, this study examines how the translations and commentaries of the *Masnavi* reflect moments of rupture or continuity, resistance or negotiation between Sufis and the state, and the differing methods of preserving and transmitting the legacy of *Masnavi* and Rumi.

### Literature Review

Since this thesis touches on multiple fields, the literature review must also address various studies from different disciplines. The *Masnavi* translation and commentaries that are the subject of this thesis are, by their very nature, worthy of being the subject of both Sufism history and literature. However, the studies generally conducted are literary studies, and the 1942 *Masnavi* translation and other commentaries have been evaluated more within the context of all the *Masnavi* commentaries. For this reason, these studies are descriptive works focusing on the nature and characteristics of the texts rather than their historical context. It is interesting to note that comments made in the Turkish literature on the quality of the *Masnavi* commentaries have been influenced by the positioning of the figures associated with the Mevlevi order discussed in this thesis. For example, in the book of Turkish commentaries on the *Masnavi* prepared at Selçuk University in Konya, Abdalbaki Gölpınarlı's commentary is considered unsuccessful, while the others are praised.<sup>5</sup> This division in the literature alone makes the question of "what makes the text appreciated?" a meaningful one.

Among researchers on the commentaries of the *Masnavi*, İsmail Güleç is the only one who discusses Abdülbâki Gölpınarlı's commentary, published in 1973 and not included in this thesis due to the scope of the study, together with the commentaries of Avni Konuk and Tahir Olgun. According to his conclusion, if a person is "educated but has no knowledge of Sufism,"

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<sup>5</sup> Ziya Aşar, Mehmet Özdemir, and Abdullah Uçar, eds., *Mesnevî'nin Türkçe Şerhleri* (Konya: Selçuk Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2023).

they should read Gölpınarlı's commentary. If a person is a Mevlevi, they should read the commentary of Tahir Olgun. One should read Avni Konuk if one is "well-versed in Sufi philosophy and has embraced Ibn Arabi's understanding of *tawhid* (the oneness of God)."<sup>6</sup> This thesis goes beyond these distinctions and attempts to understand how these writers perceived the *Masnavi* in the sociopolitical milieu.

When it comes to the history of Sufism during the Republican era, there is a developing literature on the field. Sufism researchers in Turkey claim that the responses of Sufi orders and communities varied depending on different conditions. Mustafa Kara details the diverse ways individuals connected to Sufism responded to this radical shift, including outright opposition, quiet adaptation, and attempts to reconcile their beliefs with the new secular order.<sup>7</sup> When it comes to the Mevlevi order, their responses to the prohibition varied as well within the order. Rüya Kılıç argued that Mevlevi displayed a range of attitudes towards the Republican regime, from opposition to modernization and reforms in the late Ottoman period to diverse stances, including accommodation and even support for the new order in the Republic, as exemplified by Veled Çelebi İzbudak.<sup>8</sup> This thesis attempts to contextualize these diverse stances of Mevlevi-affiliated people in the Republic of Turkey around the *Masnavi* within the cultural and political climate of the time.

Zarcone, in his studies on the Naqshbandis, who were relatively more distant from the state compared to other Sufi orders, claims that the Sufi orders in Turkey continued their activities even after 1925 and that the state was aware of this. In order to appear legitimate in the eyes of the state, many Sufi orders established various associations and foundations to

<sup>6</sup> İsmail Güleç, "Üç Asırda Ne Değişti? 17. ve 20. Asırlarda Yapılan Mesnevi Şerhlerini Karşılaştırma Denemesi," in *Eski Türk Edebiyatı Çalışmaları II: Eski Türk Edebiyatına Modern Yaklaşımlar I. 24 Nisan 2006 Bildiriler*, ed. Hatice Aynur et al. (İstanbul: Turkuaz Yayınları, 2007), 95-96.

<sup>7</sup> Mustafa Kara, *Metinlerle Günümüz Tasavvuf Hareketleri* (İstanbul: Dergâh, 2003), 602.

<sup>8</sup> Rüya Kılıç, "Osmanlı'dan Cumhuriyet'e Sufi Geleneğin Taşıyıcıları: Mevleviler Örneği," *Kebikeç* (21), (2006): 29.

maintain their existence.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Brett Wilson stated that a sizable percentage of Sufi shaykhs were able to preserve their high social standing within the new nation-state and dedicated their time and efforts to serving it. Even those who might have internally disapproved of the secular nature of early republican Turkey established themselves in the Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*) and developed new Sufi-based communities of devotion.<sup>10</sup> Veled Çelebi İzbudak, Tahir Olgun, and Avni Konuk, who will be discussed in this study, are examples of this continuity, since all of them were employed in state office jobs, although İzbudak held much higher positions than the other two.

Yusuf Selman İnanç argues that Khalidi-Naqshbandi Sufi communities in Republican Turkey, despite severe state suppression, did not merely survive but evolved into modern Islamic movements. Accordingly, there were ambivalent state policies that led us to question the accuracy of using orthodoxy vs. heterodoxy or tradition vs. modernity.<sup>11</sup> As this thesis puts the 1942 translation of the *Masnawi* on one side and the other two commentaries on the other side, it is necessary to be aware of the risky nature of having such divisions. The reading of these texts cannot be reduced to such divisions.

When it comes to the literature on the reinterpretation of Rumi for the sake of state ideologies in Modern Turkey, two researchers successfully examined the issue of the different ways of commemorating or remembering Rumi. Mark Soileau argues that Rumi, Yunus Emre, and Hacı Bektaş Veli, who were all Sufi mystics from the 13<sup>th</sup> century, were reconstructed as “Turkish Humanists”, aligning with the secular and modernist ideologies of the newly established nation-state to create a common memory for the nation. This transformation is

<sup>9</sup> Thierry Zarcone, “Nakşibendiler ve Türkiye Cumhuriyeti: Zulümden, Yeniden Dini Siyasi ve Toplumsal Mevkiye Ulaşma (1925-1991)” in *Türkiye Günlüğü* 23 (1993): 99-107.

<sup>10</sup> M. Brett Wilson, “Sufi Leaders in the early Turkish Republic: Persecution, Privilege, and Profession (1925-1950),” unpublished typescript (2025).

<sup>11</sup> Yusuf Selman İnanç, *From Survival to Revival: Transformation of a Khalidi Community in Turkey (1925-1970)*, (Master’s thesis, Central European University, 2023), 13-14.

incarnated through the state-sponsored commemoration events and the ideological reinterpretation of their historicity, seeing them as the representatives of love, tolerance, and peace.<sup>12</sup> Burcu Sağlam claims that three prominent discourses, humanist, nationalist, and traditionalist, existed in the interpretation of Rumi when the state started to engage with Rumi's legacy. While the latter was supported by certain contemporary Mevlevi figures, the first two were embraced by the state or intellectuals aligned with it.<sup>13</sup> In her sociological research, she dealt with the issue of visibility and legitimacy of Mevlevi *semâ* ceremonies, which include the "whirling," revealing the facts of folklorization, commercialization, and re-spiritualization within the framework of Turkish modernization.<sup>14</sup> This thesis acknowledges the phenomenon of Rumi's reconstruction, as revealed by these researchers, and focuses on the reconstruction of the *Masnavi*, which is difficult to discuss without considering Rumi's rebranding.

The study by Brett Wilson on the novel *Nur Baba* by Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu (1922) sheds light on the contribution of cultural production to perceptions of Sufism in the modern context. The novel presents a Sufi lodge as a center of corruption, immorality, and decadence, resonating with reformist denouncements of the Sufi orders. But it also causes a sense of romantic mysticism and nostalgia, resonating with ambivalent views on Sufism in late Ottoman and early Republican periods. In this term, he argues that "the novel employs a combination of moralistic critique and romantic nostalgia that is central to modernist-nationalist treatments of Sufism that instrumentalize Sufi culture for nation-building purposes."<sup>15</sup> This study offers an approach to understanding how the instrumentalization of the

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<sup>12</sup> Mark Soileau, *Humanist Mystics: Nationalism and the Commemoration of Saints in Turkey* (University of Utah Press, 2018), 44-47; 83; 145.

<sup>13</sup> Burcu Sağlam, "A Discussion on the Myth of Mevlânâ in Modern Turkey," *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 38/4 (2017): 412.

<sup>14</sup> Burcu Sağlam, *How Does Prohibition Stop Working? The Visibility and Legitimacy of Mevlevî Ceremonies in Modern Turkey* (Master's thesis, İstanbul Şehir University, 2017), iv.

<sup>15</sup> M. Brett Wilson, "The Twilight of Ottoman Sufism: Antiquity, Immorality, and Nation in Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu's *Nur Baba*," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 49, no. 2 (2017): 233.

*Masnavi* contributed to the nation-state's cultural assets, shaped by the tension between different views on the *Masnavi*.

Given that this thesis examines the translations of the *Masnavi*, it is important to contextualize these works within the broader history of translation in modern Turkey. Susan Bassnet states that innovative concepts and writing styles can be introduced through translation, allowing authors working in the emerging language to explore and blend their own traditions with those imported from other countries. The lengthy and deliberate cultural policy and translation initiatives in Turkey aimed to modernize and transform both the state and the Turkish language. The significant period of translation activity functioned as a process of acculturation, through which translation became closely linked to the creation of a specifically Turkish identity.<sup>16</sup> A key figure in orchestrating this policy was Hasan Âli Yücel, Minister of Education (1938-1946), who institutionalized this ideological translation movement by founding the Translation Bureau. Under his leadership, the Bureau translated hundreds of works from Western humanist and classical canons, including Eastern literature, with the aim of cultivating a Turkish literary and intellectual sphere that aligned with the principles of secularism, modernity, and enlightenment.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, the researchers primarily concentrated on translations from the Western canon, as the Eastern classics constituted only about 3 percent of the total translations published between 1940 and 1946.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Susan Bassnett, "Introduction," in *Translation and Westernisation in Turkey*, by Özlem Berk (İstanbul: Ege Yayınları, 2004), xii cited from Nüzhet Berrin Aksoy, "The Relation Between Translation and Ideology as an Instrument for the Establishment of a National Literature," *Meta: Journal des Traducteurs* 55, no. 3 (2010): 440.

<sup>17</sup> Şehnaz Tahir Gürçağlar, "A cultural agent against the forces of culture: Hasan-Âli Yücel" in *Agents of Translation*, ed., John Milton and Paul Fadio Bandia (Amsterdam: Benjamins Translation Library, 2009), 185.

<sup>18</sup> Şehnaz Tahir Gürçağlar, *The Politics and Poetics of Translation in Turkey, 1923-1960* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), 92. 15 out of 468 books.

## Historical Background

Mawlana Jalaladdin Rumi (d. 1273) was a thirteenth-century Islamic scholar, poet, mystic, and namesake of the Mevlevi order. He was born in Vashkhs as the son of Baha al-Din Walad (d. 1231), a prominent Islamic scholar and preacher of his time. Baha al-Din's family and his entourage left Balkh for Anatolia, eventually settling in Konya, the capital of the Seljuk Empire. A few years after Baha al-Din's death, Rumi met another spiritual figure, Shams Tabrizi (d. 1248 [?]), in Konya, who would change the course of his life. It was Shams who initiated Rumi into an ecstatic and esoteric type of Sufism.<sup>19</sup> After Shams left Konya, Rumi felt depressed and expressed his inner sorrow in his poetry.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, he gained numerous followers in and out of Konya, which eventually resulted in the emergence of a new Sufi order (*tariqa*) under the mystical leadership of his son, Sultan Walad (d. 1312).

The order adopted an urban identity, initially in contact with the representatives of the Seljuk state and neighboring chiefdoms, and later the Ottoman Empire. They solidified their presence by integrating themselves into the high culture and elite. In parallel to this phenomenon, the order evolved into a system of spiritual advancement through complex institutional and ritual systems. By the seventeenth century, the Mevlevi order had achieved a great degree of political influence and status, which persisted into the 19th century.<sup>21</sup> Their considerable existence in different art branches (e.g., literature, music, and calligraphy) went hand in hand with their ties with the elite class.<sup>22</sup> For example, a poet and composer who ruled the Ottomans from 1789 until 1807, Sultan Selim III was a sympathizer of Rumi. During his rule, numerous foundations for the teaching and interpretation of the *Masnavi* were built, and

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<sup>19</sup> Franklin D. Lewis, *Rumi - Past and Present, East and West: The Life, Teachings, and Poetry of Jalal Al-Din Rumi* (Glasgow: Oneworld, 2000), 6.

<sup>20</sup> Lewis, *Rumi*, 197

<sup>21</sup> Lewis, *Rumi*, 425-426.

<sup>22</sup> Barihüda Tanrıkorur, "Mevleviye" *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (İstanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı Yayınları, 2004), 469.



Mevlevi assembly places and lodges were constructed or renovated. Selim III even produced an *ayin* (ritual/ceremonial music) containing passages from Rumi's works.<sup>23</sup>

In the nineteenth century, the Ottoman State implemented a set of reforms to strengthen state hegemony and establish order. Two of these reforms directly addressed the Sufi orders. The first one was placing tekke foundations under a new Ministry of Religious Endowments (*Nezâret-i Evkâf-ı Hümâyûn*) to centralize the management of Sufi orders and control shaykh (the leader of an order) appointments.<sup>24</sup> Second, the Council of Shaykhs (*Meclis-i Meşâyih*) was established in 1866 as part of the modernizing reforms, known as *Tanzimat* reforms. Its purpose was to centralize the Sufi organizations by connecting individual lodges to central lodges, which were then under the office of the Grand Mufti (*Şeyhülislâm*).<sup>25</sup> Under the governance of the Committee of Union and Progress, prominent Mevlevi figures also stood close to the center, especially with the role of Veled Çelebi, one of the last sheiks of the Mevlevi order, a nationalist pen studying the history of the Turkish language, and future MP in the Turkish Republic. After the deposition of Abdülhalim Çelebi, the government appointed Veled Çelebi as the new leader of the Mevlevis. In order to show the order's support for the Ottoman state during World War I and to bolster the soldiers, a volunteer regiment (*Mücâhidîn-i Mevleviyye* - Mevlevi Warriors) gathered with the initiative of Veled Çelebi.<sup>26</sup>

During the 19th and 20th centuries, some Muslim thinkers like Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida, who reflected on the obstacles to modernization, pointed to Sufism, arguing that it was not in accordance with the sharia and that the structure of the orders posed a barrier to

<sup>23</sup> Talât Sait Halman, "Mevlana and the Illusions of Nationalism," *Mawlana Rumi Review* 6, Special Issue on Rumi and the Mevlevi Sufi Tradition (2015): 142.

<sup>24</sup> This was actually made to dismantle the Janissary Corps which was strongly tied to Bektashi Order.

<sup>25</sup> Mark Soileau, "Sufism in Republican Turkey," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion in Turkey*, ed. Caroline Tee, Fabio Vicini, and Philip Dorroll (online ed., Oxford Academic, 23 January 2024), published 22 February 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780197624883.013.5>, 2.

<sup>26</sup> Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1966; 3rd ed., 2002), 403, quoted in Halman, "Mevlana and the Illusions of Nationalism," 144.

progress. Seeking a direct return to the sources, these reformers regarded Sufism as an impediment. While other Muslim modernist thinkers began to question the place of Sufism in modern society, some demanded the complete abolition of the orders, and others aimed at reforming certain practices in order to render them compatible with mainstream Islam.<sup>27</sup>

In the tumultuous political atmosphere following the First World War, Mustafa Kemal [Atatürk] launched the Salvation War and consequently established the republican regime in 1923. One year later, the abolition of the Caliphate marked a decisive break between the new republic and the broader Islamic world. As a result, together with other Westernizing reforms, it created disturbance across the country, leading to an array of revolts. Among them was that of Şeyh Said, the biggest and most well-organized rebellion that spread across the eastern provinces of the country. These uprisings represented a major turning point in terms of the regime's attitude towards religion in the early years of the republic. After the military managed to suppress the revolt with difficulty, statesmen started to discuss the elimination of Sufi orders and Sufi lodges (*tekke*). Eventually, in November 1925, the following law was enacted:

All *tekkes* and *zaviyes* (Sufi lodges), whether established through religious endowments (*waqf*), as private property under the authority of their shaykhs, or by other means, are hereby entirely closed down [...] In general, the use of titles and ranks associated with Sufi orders [...] as well as fortune-teller, sorcerer, incantationist, and those who claim to reveal the unseen or fulfill desires through magical or spiritual practices, is prohibited. It is also forbidden to perform services or wear garments related to these titles and positions. All shrines (*türbes*) associated with former dynasties, any Sufi order, or any source of material gain are to be closed, and the institution of shrine/tomb guardianship (*türbedarlık*) is hereby abolished within the Republic of Turkey.<sup>28</sup>

In the following period, while some Sufis were persecuted, others began to take up various positions within the state, such as imams, teachers, or civil servants.<sup>29</sup> Even after the relatively

<sup>27</sup> M. Brett Wilson, "The Twilight of Ottoman Sufism: Antiquity, Immorality, and Nation in Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu's *Nur Baba*," 235.

<sup>28</sup> Law No. 677 of 30 November 1925 (Law on the Closure of Dervish Lodges and Shrines and the Prohibition of Certain Titles), *Resmî Gazete*, 13 December 1925, no. 243.

<sup>29</sup> M. Brett Wilson, "Sufi Leaders in the early Turkish Republic: Persecution, Privilege, and Profession (1925-1950)," unpublished typescript (2025).

tolerant policies of the Democratic Party (1950-60), a climate of fear still lingered, albeit to a lesser extent, within Sufi communities.

The early Republic's ideological modernization was primarily seen as a rejection of the Ottoman past, particularly its strongly Islamic slant. In order to create a contemporary, Western-oriented nation-state and lessen the role of religion in public life, the new leadership embraced a secularist worldview. In connection with this, the legacy of Rumi was also reinterpreted by the new regime. The new republic portrayed saints like Rumi, Hacı Bektaş-ı Velî, and Yunus Emre as humanist figures who had been stripped of their mystical and miraculous stories, which would no longer satisfy the educated. This representation was made possible by a variety of commemorative events, such as state-sponsored festivals, publications, and the media.<sup>30</sup> Although the official initiation of commemorating Rumi in a Turkish, philosophical, and humanist manner by the government was marked by the 1942 commemoration mentioned above, the shrine of Rumi and the surrounding complex were already converted into a museum in 1926.

It is noteworthy that the translation of the *Masnavi* took place in 1942, before any concessions were made from earlier anti-Sufi policies. Indeed, the Seventh Congress of the Republican People's Party (CHP) in 1947 followed reports gathered by deputies who had visited their constituencies in 1946 and heard numerous complaints from the people. A considerable part of these grievances concerned religious matters: people lamented the shortage of imams and complained about the neglected state of mosques. The Democrat Party, founded in 1946, also instrumentalized these complaints to put the CHP in a difficult position. As a result, during the Seventh Congress, debates on secularism were particularly lengthy, and religious education was discussed in terms of meeting the "spiritual needs" of the Turkish

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<sup>30</sup> Soileau, *Humanist Mystics*, 86.

nation and its youth. The Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*) was also a subject of debate, with particular focus on the training of imams and preachers.<sup>31</sup> In this context, the 1942 state-sponsored translation of Rumi's *Masnavi* is notable because it occurred before the shift to multi-party politics and before religious concessions were even considered. Even when secularism was at its most extreme, the government attempted to incorporate Rumi and the *Masnavi* into the national cultural canon.

Scholarly research on Sufism and Sufis began during the Young Turk period, influenced notably by nationalist sentiments. These national sentiments are evident in the state's intention to claim ownership over Rumi's legacy. Rumi's designation as a "Turkish figure" reflects these nationalist inclinations.<sup>32</sup> The ambiguity surrounding his ethnic origins, combined with the fact that nearly all his works were composed in Persian, adds complexity to this narrative. The Young Turks, represented by key figures such as thinker Ziya Gökalp (1876-1924) and scholar Fuad Köprülü (1890-1966), laid the groundwork for this reinterpretation. Köprülü's influential work, *Türk Edebiyatında İlk Mutasavvıflar* (The First Mystics in Turkish Literature), published in 1919, was driven by a nationalistic aim to highlight the significance of Turkish literature and culture, including folk Sufi poetry in "pure Turkish."<sup>33</sup> Within the foundation of the new nation-state, Rumi was increasingly reinterpreted as an "important Turkish figure," with his teachings on love and tolerance aligning with the ideals of humanist scholars. This historical development marked a pivotal moment in focusing on the national character of Turkish Sufi literature and mystics. Building upon the scholarly tradition, figures such as Abdülbâki Gölpınarlı, Nafiz Uzluk (1902-1974), a physician, a well-known Mevlevi scholar, and member of Mevlevi circles, and Veled Çelebi continued to write about Rumi's

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<sup>31</sup> Gökçen Beyinli, *İslam ve Sair Halk: Laik Türkiye'de Hurafeler, Kadınlar, Türbeler* (İstanbul: Kitabevi, 2021), 79, 117.

<sup>32</sup> Soileau, *Humanist Mystics*, 55.

<sup>33</sup> Soileau, *Humanist Mystics*, 56.

legacy during the Republican era. Ultimately, while the state promoted nationalist and humanist discourses about Rumi, some Mevlevi adopted a more traditional stance, emphasizing that in addition to being a universally recognized Turkish figure, Rumi's Sufi identity should not be overlooked.<sup>34</sup>

### Methodology, Framework, and Sources

To understand the transformation of the *Masnavi*'s presentation in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the key lies in how different Mevlevi-affiliated individuals reimagined this text while engaging with their milieu. In order to frame this transformation within a broader discussion of memory and continuity, it is helpful to turn to Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire*. Pierre Nora says that "there are sites, *lieux de mémoire*, in which a residual sense of continuity remains. *Lieux de mémoire* exist because there are no longer any *milieux de mémoire*, settings in which memory is a real part of everyday experience."<sup>35</sup> In this sense, the state-sponsored translation and commentaries appear as examples of *lieux de mémoire*, as the Sufi orders, rituals, and dervish lodges—the sites where the *Masnavi* had functioned as a religious text—were officially banned in 1925. Nora characterizes *lieux de mémoire* as "the rituals of a ritual-less society [...] fleeting incursions of the sacred into a disenchanted world [...]."<sup>36</sup> Nora also emphasizes that "memory" should be understood with the "sacred context" as the range of ways that cultural communities envision themselves in various kinds of representation. These concepts shed light on how the *Masnavi*, once a living practice within Mevlevi lodges, was reconfigured in early republican Turkey as both a state project and a site of remembrance for

<sup>34</sup> Sağlam, "A Discussion on the Myth of Mevlânâ in Modern Turkey," 424.

<sup>35</sup> Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," in *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past, Vol. 1: Conflicts and Divisions*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 1.

<sup>36</sup> Full passage "[...] vestiges of parochial loyalties in a society that is busily effacing all parochialisms; de facto differentiations in a society that levels on principle; signs of reexistence and group affiliation in a society that tends to recognize only individuals, assumed to be equal if not identical." Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," 7.

different Mevlevi-affiliated intellectuals. In this respect, the presentation of the state-sponsored translation, partially stripped of its religious dimension, was an attempt to reshape how the *Masnavi* is situated within cultural memory. Thus, Rumi is reimagined as a Turkish humanist mystic, and the *Masnavi* as part of the humanist canon. The commentaries, while following the *Masnavi* commentary tradition, nevertheless reflect another mode of remembrance, shaped by the commentators' interactions with the socio-cultural and political transformations.

The close reading of the first eighteen couplets of the *Masnavi* in these three different texts, prefaces of the publications, journal articles, memories, and political speeches, will be my primary interpretative method during the thesis. By doing so, I analyze the narrativity of these sources to understand how Rumi's *Masnavi* was established in collective memory. I also read the letters sent among the figures mentioned in this thesis, which exists in the Hasan Âli Yücel collection of Bilken University and the *Mevlevi Mektupları*, prepared by Yakup Şafak and Yusuf Öz, to better understand their agency in the foundation of Rumi and the *Masnavi*. This also reveals the conflict and disagreements between the Mevlevi-affiliated people, which is worth reading in light of the political and ideological context of the time.

This thesis does not claim the features of a literature analysis. However, I am still looking at the first 18 couplets, and analyzing them, since the first eighteen couplets are considered as cherished among the order because they were directly uttered by Rumi himself. I pay attention to the use of language in these translations, the author's word choices, as the Turkish Republic had already been witnessing some radical language reforms aiming to purge Persian and Arabic words to get far away from Ottoman Turkish and use "pure" Turkish.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> When the cultural and political climate of the period is considered as a whole, the concurrent circulation of Turkish humanism and "pure" Turkish language should be seen as complementary to one another. In fact, in the early twentieth century, acknowledging the complementary features of language and nation, many new nation-states, such as Iran, Israel, and Turkey, implemented language reforms. The founders of the new Turkey initiated the "Alphabet Reform," replacing Arabic letters with Latin letters, citing the suitability of the latter in expressing the vowels of Turkish. Then, they established the Turkish Language Association to implement the language reforms. They continued to purge many Arabic and Persian words that were abundant, mostly in

I am also considering the relationship between the authors and the audience to trace the possible propagandistic intentions in the text. This helps to grasp how the text was shaped by its relationship with surrounding historical, political, and social conditions. That is also why this thesis puts the authors of texts forward, in addition to comprehending their agencies in the presentation of Rumi by the state. In fact, this thesis argues that these Mevlevi-affiliated people actively played a role in the establishment of different forms of the *Masnavi*, including the policies of the time that affected the *Masnavi*, to keep the *Masnavi* out of the anti-Sufi discourse and policies' target. Unfortunately, examining the differences of the whole *Masnavi* texts exceeds the scope of this thesis. This can be an option for the large-scale research on the *Masnavi* translations and commentaries in modern Turkey in the future.

Even though there is one more interesting translation of the *Masnavi*, Feyzullah Sacit Ülkü's verse translation, which only covers the first volume and criticizes the state-sponsored translation, this thesis focuses on the state-sponsored translation of Veled Çelebi İzbudak and Abdülbâki Gölpınarlı and the commentaries of Avni Konuk and Tahir Olgun. The reason is that these four figures are more prominent in the history of the Mevlevi culture in Modern Turkey, and the texts they produced attracted greater attention at the time. Additionally, Sacit Ülkü's translation was criticized by Gölpınarlı and Tahir Olgun. Including Sacit Ülkü's translation would deepen our comprehension of the phenomenon of *Masnavi* translations and commentaries in this period. However, considering the thesis's scope and focus on the Mevlevi-affiliated figures agency, I do not include Feyzullah Sacit Ülkü's translation.<sup>38</sup> Even today, the commentaries of Avni Konuk and Tahir Olgun and the translation of the Ministry of

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written language but also in oral language, to achieve what they considered to be pure Turkish. For a good discussion about the reform see Geoffrey Lewis, *The Turkish Language Reform: A Catastrophic Success* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>38</sup> Mevlana, *Mesnevî: Manzum Tercüme*, translated by Feyzullah Sacit Ülkü (İstanbul: Türkiye Yayınevi, 1945).

Education are more in circulation. Moreover, these figures depict a division between different Mevlevi cultures and different *Masnavi* interpretations.

## Structure

This thesis comparatively examines two distinct examples of how the *Masnavi* is conceived and presented in modern Turkey. The first chapter focuses on the translation of the *Masnavi* published by the Ministry of Education and Culture in 1942. Although this translation acknowledges the *Masnavi*'s Sufi-religious affiliation, it mostly emphasizes the *Masnavi* as a cultural asset of the new nation-state, included in the "Turkish humanist" canon. To demonstrate this, I first examine how Sufis perceived Rumi's *Masnavi* throughout history as a "quasi-sacred" text. I then focus on the agency of Hasan Âli Yücel, the minister of Education and Culture, who pioneered the "Turkish humanism" project. Then I highlight the agency of individuals affiliated with the Mevlevi order who were involved in the translation project, such as Veled Çelebi İzbudak and Abdülbâki Gölpınarlı. Ultimately, the state-sponsored translation of the *Masnavi* demonstrates how specific carriers of Mevlevi culture presented the *Masnavi* in a manner acceptable to the nation-state, within the dominant anti-Sufi and anti-religious discourse of the time.

The second chapter examines another form of imagining the *Masnavi* in modern Turkey. This way of imagining the *Masnavi*, dependent on its "quasi-sacred" nature, is rooted in the tradition of the *Masnavi* commentaries and the institution of *Mesnevihân*. Therefore, the section begins by referring to the tradition of the *Masnavi* commentary. It then discusses Avni Konuk, a commentator of the *Masnavi*, the story of its non-publication, and his commentary on the *Masnavi*. Subsequently, I examine Tahir Olgun, his criticisms of the state-sponsored translation, and his commentary on the *Masnavi*. Thus, I argue that these two figures reimagined the *Masnavi* in their own milieu by maintaining the traditional reading practices of the text.



## CHAPTER I

### Reforming the Tradition: The Translation of the *Masnavi* (1942)

In this chapter, I argue that the state-sponsored translation of the *Masnavi* (1942) exemplifies how the new regime repositioned Rumi and his work as part of its cultural asset-making project. It was incorporated into the project of “Turkish Humanism,” which was shaped by modernist, secularist, and Westernizing goals. This chapter highlights how Rumi’s *Masnavi*, historically understood as a “quasi-religious” text within Sufi culture, was reframed as a part of the Turkish humanist canon under the cultural politics of the nation-state. Contrary to its traditional role in the Mevlevi order, the *Masnavi* was appropriated into a nationalist and humanist canon. The 1942 translation, carried out with the involvement of Mevlevi-affiliated state officials, offers a concrete example of this transformation. I demonstrate that the translation project of the *Masnavi* illustrates how the modernist and nationalist state’s need for cultural asset-making and the aspiration of specific agents affiliated with Mevlevi culture come together to present a new, reframed interpretation of the *Masnavi*.

The chapter begins with a brief overview of the literary and religious background of the *Masnavi* and its trajectory until the Republican period. I then underline its quasi-sacred status within the Mevlevi order and its central role in Sufi practice. Finally, I examine how, under the influence of Turkish humanism, the *Masnavi* was reconfigured as a contribution to the nation-state canon. Special attention is given to the personal agency of Hasan Âli Yücel, Veled Çelebi İzbudak, and Abdülbâki Gölpınarlı, whose involvement in the translation process shaped this recontextualization.

#### Rumi’s *Masnavi*

Masnavi is the name of a poetic form that consists of rhyming couplets, which belongs mainly to the classical literatures of Turkish, Persian, and Urdu. Poets choose this form because

it enables them to narrate long stories (related to themes like love, heroism, or so) without being restricted to a single rhyme throughout the entire work. Sa'di, a prominent Persian classical literature poet, wrote *Gulistan* and *Bustan*, for instance, in masnavi form. Rumi started to produce a narrative poem upon the request of his follower Husam al-Din Chalabi, saying that he needed to present a book based on the stories that Rumi told his followers.<sup>39</sup> After the finalization of the first volume, Rumi did not name his masterpiece, which eventually caused the whole book to be called the *Masnavi*.

This poem of approximately 25,700 couplets consists of allegorical, didactic stories. Rumi dictated the *Masnavi* to Husam al-Din Chalabi, and the first volume was completed in four years. They continued with the other five volumes until the death of Rumi in 1273. In the following centuries, it was considered a masterpiece by many, making the Persian poet Jami (d. 1492) call the Masnavi the “Qur'an in Persian tongue.”<sup>40</sup> The *Masnavi* engages in extensive intertextuality with the Qur'an, with over 15 percent of its 26,000 verses quoting or alluding to the Qur'an.<sup>41</sup> According to Matthew B. Lynch, this intertextuality serves as a means for the *Masnavi* to establish its own spiritual and scriptural authority. It affirms the Quranic message while also displaying what Lynch terms “supersessionist tendencies.”<sup>42</sup> Franklin Lewis, a well-known scholar on Rumi, argues that “Rumi clearly intends the *Masnavi* as an elaborate though somewhat disguised commentary on the Koran and the theological discourse which Muslim thinkers and gnostics developed on that scriptural basis.”<sup>43</sup>, which illustrates the intertextual nature of the *Masnavi* and, by extension, the commentaries on it.

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<sup>39</sup> Lewis, *Rumi*, 219.

<sup>40</sup> Annemarie Schimmel, *Rumi*, trans. Paul Bergne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), xi.

<sup>41</sup> Matthew B. Lynch, *A Persian Qur'an?: The Masnavi-e Ma'navi as Scripture* (PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2018), 5.

<sup>42</sup> Lynch, *A Persian Qur'an?*, 27.

<sup>43</sup> Lewis, *Rumi*, 396.

The *Masnavi* has gained undeniable fame, evidenced by its translation into numerous languages across the region, and it has profoundly influenced Islamic literatures across a vast geographical span, from the Balkans to Bengal.<sup>44</sup> Shahab Ahmad offers a reconceptualization of Islam by taking the historical existence and reality of diverse and contradictory norms in Islamic society and culture that had “coherent contradiction” into account.<sup>45</sup> He also argues that Rumi had been very central during the emergence of the literary canon of the Balkans to Bengal complex.<sup>46</sup> The canon shaped around the discourses and teachings of the figures like Rumi (and Ibn Arabi, a Sunni scholar who lived between 1165-1240, whom I will mention more in the second chapter) was also part of *paideia* in Islamic culture, which gave rise to hermeneutics of Islam. This hermeneutics of Islam was grounded in the “revelation” phenomenon.<sup>47</sup> Shahab Ahmed states:

We have seen, rather, that Islamic philosophy subordinates the Qur’ān to the supremacy of reason—which is to say not merely that the text of the Qur’ān is read rationally; rather, the concept of the Qur’ān as the text of divine revelation is constructed and read subject to the demands of a total Truth-matrix elaborated by reason in which reason/philosophy is the higher truth and the text of revelation the lower.<sup>48</sup>

According to Ahmed, “[...] claim to a Real-Truth (*haqiqah*) that lay above and beyond the truth of the Revealed law (sharia) [...]” existed in the Sufi-philosophical amalgam.<sup>49</sup> The path of love (*madhhab-i ‘ishq*), in the discourse of Rumi and many other Sufis, “[...] functions as an elevating experience for the realization, apprehension, and experience of the values and higher Truth.”<sup>50</sup> However, it is hard to trace a systematic and structured expression of a doctrine or philosophy in Rumi’s *Masnavi*. Franklin Lewis claims that Rumi consciously embraced a

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<sup>44</sup> Schimmel, *Rumi*, xi.

<sup>45</sup> Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 5-6.

<sup>46</sup> Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 80.

<sup>47</sup> Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 80.

<sup>48</sup> Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 97.

<sup>49</sup> Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 31.

<sup>50</sup> Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 42.

discursive method by benefiting from anecdotes and verses, which all made the rhetorical and heuristic effect possible. Even though some find the heuristic method as “unorganized madness”, Rumi chose this to reach a wider audience.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, Norman O. Brown argues that the Qur’an does not adopt a historical narrative; instead, it shows signs of a fragmented, archetypal, and dream-like narrative which leads the reader to the inner meaning (*batin*) rather than the outer meaning (*zahir*).<sup>52</sup> Thus, the existential sampling of the Qur’an by Rumi deeply shaped both the form and content of the *Masnavi*. This complex and difficult text sparked a long tradition of commentary and interpretation.

### **The *Masnavi* as a “quasi-sacred” text**

In addition to its literary worth, the *Masnavi* was frequently given a status that was quasi-sacred. Even during Rumi’s own time, “there is evidence that the text was used in ritual settings alongside the Qur’an as part of his emerging order’s praxis.”<sup>53</sup> Many of its commentators, particularly those who were Mevlevi, believed that the text was filled with divine wisdom and was as significant as the Qur’an and Hadith, rather than just being a collection of moral tales.<sup>54</sup> According to Şem’î, who finished the first comprehensive commentary on it in Turkish in the late sixteenth century, “There is no book as delightful as the Exalted Qur’an, the Noble Hadith, and the Noble *Masnavi*.”<sup>55</sup> Similarly, Ismail Rusuhi, who composed a seven-volume commentary in 1628, asserted that the *Masnavi* was similar to the Qur’an in terms of spiritual depth and that it revealed the mysteries of creation. These interpretations, which were based on the authors’ own personal devotion, also represented

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<sup>51</sup> Lewis, *Rumi*, 395

<sup>52</sup> Norman O. Brown, “The Apocalypse of Islam,” *Social Text*, no. 5 (Winter 1982-83): 162.

<sup>53</sup> Lynch, *A Persian Qur’an?*, 43

<sup>54</sup> Murat Umut Inan, “Ottomans Reading Persian Classics: Readers and Reading in the Ottoman Empire, 1500-1700,” in *The Edinburgh History of Reading: Early Readers*, ed. Mary Hammond (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 163.

<sup>55</sup> Abdülkadir Dağlar, *Şem’î Şem’ullah: Şerh-i Masnavi, I. Cilt (İnceleme-Tenkitli Metin-Sözlük)* (PhD diss., Erciyes University, 2009): 86, 136 quoted by Inan, “Ottomans Reading Persian Classics: Readers and Reading in the Ottoman Empire, 1500-1700,” 163.

Ottoman sentiments more broadly.<sup>56</sup> The renowned Ottoman traveller Evliya Çelebi frequently described the *Masnavi* as “the essence of the Qur’an” in his descriptions of religious life across the empire, which lends credence to this viewpoint.<sup>57</sup> For instance, in the part Evliya Çelebi writes about the Mevlevi lodge in Szeged, he says “[...] companions who perform the five daily prayers come to this lodge [...] and read the *Masnavi*, the essence of the Qur’an. For all the people of this city, young and old alike, are of a dervish disposition (*abdâl-meşreb*) and are men who know Persian.”<sup>58</sup>

### The *Masnavi* in the eyes of Sufis

The *Masnavi* holds such a central place among the Mevlevi that a professional title *Mesnevihân*, meaning “reader/interpreter of the *Masnavi*,” emerged as part of its institutional legacy.<sup>59</sup> Husameddin Çelebi was a scribe and pupil of Rumi who wrote down the *Masnavi* as it was dictated, making him the first *Mesnevihân*, or official reciter and interpreter of the text. He later trained the earliest interpreters of the *Masnavi*, thereby establishing a tradition that would continue through generations.<sup>60</sup> İsmail Ankaravî’s commentary, which became the accepted standard, had to be followed for *Mesnevihân* to be awarded certificates of authority (*icazetnames*) during the Ottoman era. Beginning in the late 18th century, the practice had expanded beyond Mevlevi lodges into mosques, where public sermons were delivered based on the *Masnavi*. At the same time, the number of the *Mesnevihân* who were not Mevlevi (among them the Naqshibandiyya order stands out) started to increase, which enabled the work

<sup>56</sup> Ahmet Tanyıldız, *İsmail Rusuhi-yi Ankaravî: Şerh-i Masnavî, Mecmuatü'l-Letayif ve Matmuratü'l-Maarif, I. Cilt (İnceleme-Metin-Sözlük)*, PhD thesis (Kayseri: Erciyes University, 2010): 78, 81, quoted by Murat Umut Inan, “Ottomans Reading Persian Classics: Readers and Reading in the Ottoman Empire, 1500-1700,” 163.

<sup>57</sup> Inan, “Ottomans Reading Persian Classics: Readers and Reading in the Ottoman Empire, 1500-1700,” 164.

<sup>58</sup> Evliya Çelebi, *Günümüz Türkçesiyle Evliya Çelebi Seyahatnamesi* (6<sup>th</sup> book - 1<sup>st</sup> volume) edited by Seyit Ali Kahraman (İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2010), 254.

<sup>59</sup> Semih Ceyhan, “Mesnevî (Mevlânâ)” in *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (İstanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı Yayınları, 2004), 332.

<sup>60</sup> Bilal Kemikli, “Mesnevi ve Türk İrfanı: Mesnevihanlık Geleneği,” *Uludağ Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 16/II (2007): 7

to be read and internalized by broader segments of society.<sup>61</sup> A *Mesnevihân* gave lectures on the *Masnavi* in the mosques to the people, which even continued in the Republican time until the early 50's, with an interruption before due to anti-Sufi policies. In the compilation of Cemalettin Server Revnakoğlu's (1909-1968) notes, which reflect the socio-cultural climate and the Sufi networks of the period, numerous people are mentioned who gave these lectures or attended these lectures.<sup>62</sup> Avni Konuk and Tahir Olgun, who will be discussed in the second chapter, were some of the last representatives of *Mesnevihâns* who gave these lectures in big mosques like Fatih or Süleymaniye Mosque and enjoyed the formal acceptance of the *Mesnevihân* title.

In connection with this tradition, another tradition, commentary on the *Masnavi* came alive. According to researchers, the main reason for the commentaries written on the literary works of names such as Hafiz, Sadi, and Rumi in the Ottoman Empire was the teaching of Persian.<sup>63</sup> So the *Masnavi* long functioned as a foundational text for Persian language instruction. For example, a very canonical dictionary of the *Masnavi* in Ottoman literature, Şâhidî's *Tuhfe* was used for learning Persian in Ottoman madrasas.<sup>64</sup> However, this explanation is insufficient to explain the emergence of commentaries on the *Masnavi* and the continuation of the writing of new commentaries for centuries.

On the other hand, when factors such as the fact that the *Masnavi* is not only a literary work but also a Sufi text; that it is read not only in the circle of a particular sect but also among

<sup>61</sup> Ceyhan, "Mesnevî (Mevlânâ)", 332.

<sup>62</sup> Cemaleddin Server Revnakoğlu, "İstanbul'un Mesnevihânları" in *Revnakoğlu'nun İstanbul'u: İstanbul'un İç Tarihi, Fatih*, vol. 2, ed. Mustafa Koç (İstanbul: Fatih Municipality Cultural Publications, 2021), 620-632.

<sup>63</sup> Ömer Said Güler, "Klasik Türk Edebiyatında Şarihlerin Mesleki Dağılımları ve Şerhlerin İlmî Hüviyetine Dair Bazı Tespitler," in *Dost Bağının Meyveleri: Nurettin Albayrak Hattatı Kitapı*, ed., Abdullah Esen et al. (İstanbul: Türk Edebiyatı Vakfı Yayınları, 2022), 493-494.

Hülya Canpolat, *Sa'dî'nin Gülistân Önsözüne Yapılan Türkçe Şerhlerin Karşılaştırılmalı İncelenmesi*, PhD thesis, (İzmir: Ege University, 2006), 113.

Inan, "Ottomans Reading Persian Classics: Readers and Reading in the Ottoman Empire, 1500-1700," 165.

<sup>64</sup> Murat Umut Inan, "Imperial Ambitions, Mystical Aspirations: Persian Learning in the Ottoman World," in *The Persianate World: The Frontiers of a Eurasian Lingua Franca*, ed. Nile Green (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019), 83.

different Sufi groups; and that many commentaries explain the wisdom of the couplets and stories in line with Ibn Arabi's Sufi views are taken into account, it is necessary to place the commentaries on the *Masnavi* in a special position between the general literary commentaries and the scholarly-religious commentaries in the Ottoman period. This distinction is important because it will provide an explanatory ground in the following chapters in terms of making sense of the *Masnavi* commentaries in the Republican period. At this point, Murat Umut İnan's assessment of the *Masnavi* as a "quasi-religious text" is noteworthy.<sup>65</sup> It is also important in this context that Inan, who works on the practice of reading Persian in the Ottoman Empire, identifies the category of 'sufi-readers' in his categorisation of the Ottoman readership of classical Persian works.

### **Hasan Âli Yücel, the Translation Bureau, and "Turkish Humanism"**

The *Masnavi* managed to preserve its significance as a quasi-sacred Sufi text. In the Republican era, the *Masnavi* gained another feature: it became one of Turkey's national assets. The new regime, in its quest to establish a secular nationalist-oriented identity applicable to the entire Turkish society, rediscovered Rumi and the *Masnavi* for inclusion in the Turkish national pantheon. In light of these national identity construction attempts, the *Masnavi* had to be translated into Turkish. Yet, this translation had to be in tandem with the modernized Turkish language, as well as answer to the search for national identity building.

Upon examining the *Masnavi* translation published by the Ministry of Education, it is highly necessary to focus on the agency of Hasan Âli Yücel (d. 1961), the Minister of Education between 1938 and 1946, and the policies he implemented. Additionally, it should not be forgotten that, while Hasan Âli Yücel played a pivotal role in commissioning the 1942

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<sup>65</sup> I think for this thesis it is more on point to adopt the name "quasi-sacred" instead of "quasi-religious" since the people mentioned in this thesis had no doubt of the text's religiousness. Moreover, all were perceiving the text as a somewhat sacred one due to their affiliations with the Mevlevi order or their admiration for Rumi.

translation project, he was not acting independently. Intellectual trends spearheaded by Fuad Köprülü and broader attempts at cultural claims for other Sufi figures, such as Yunus Emre and Hacı Bektaş Veli, contributed to an ideological context for the rebranding of Rumi. The reason I specifically focus on his agency is not only because he pioneered the rethinking of Rumi's legacy as a national figure and a cultural asset of the new nation-state, but also because he patronized the Mevlevi authors during the publication process.

Hasan Âli Yücel was born to Mevlevi parents in 1897, in a neighborhood around the Yenikapı Mevlevi Lodge in Istanbul. As a result of his family's close ties to this lodge, he received formal schooling as well as early discipline there. He had strong memories of the place and carried remnants of the tekke that had a profound impact on his life. Hasan Âli was exposed to Mevlevi cultural values, especially through Rumi's writings. The instruction he received there helped him learn Persian and refine his skills in poetry and music writing.<sup>66</sup>

He is known as one of the masterminds of the Westernizing cultural reformations that took place under the concept of "Turkish humanism" in the early republican period. During his term in office, the First National Education Council (1939), the first vocational and technical education institutions (1941), and the University Reform, making universities into legal entities (1946) came into existence. Because of his affiliation with these cultural reforms, it may seem surprising that he was a religiously inclined person and a Mevlevi devotee. Mustafa Kara states that Hasan Âli Yücel, due to his close ties with Mevlevi culture, won the sympathy of certain dervishes. Moreover, despite Law No. 677 remaining in effect, he took an interest in the restoration and maintenance of certain shrines.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Ahmet Güner Sayar, "Yücel, Hasan Âli," *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (İstanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı Yayınları, 2013), 45.

<sup>67</sup> Kara, *Metinlerle Günümüz Tasavvuf Hareketleri*, 179, 219.



According to Tanıl Bora, Hasan Âli Yücel, a symbol of the cultural policies of the early Republican era, is romantically hailed in Kemalist discourse as the height of the “Turkish Enlightenment.” However, nationalist-conservatives critically view him as the embodiment of Westernizing and humanist alienation. He was adorned with a halo of enlightened thought, scientism, secularism, and rationalism due to his symbolic status; on the other hand, he was not expected to be religiously devoted.<sup>68</sup>

During the late 1930s 1940s, the new republic embraced a discourse centered around the term “humanism”, with Hasan Âli Yücel’s leadership and involvement. According to Güneş Serezli, “During the İnönü Era (1938-1950), the nationalism and Westernization of Atatürk’s reforms turned into an uncompromising secularism, and consequently humanist culture and ‘humanism’ became the quasi-formal ideology of the state.”<sup>69</sup> This developed in three pillars: “[...] Greek and Latin lessons in high school curriculum, establishment of the *Translation Office*, and opening of the Village Institutes [...]”<sup>70</sup> Hasan Âli Yücel, based on his vision of nationalization through Westernization, sees Turkey as a place where East and West meet. This “process in which all civilizational elements that have passed through this land are assimilated and internalized by being melted into our national identity. This, he believes, is made possible by the fact that the ‘Turk is civilized by nature’”<sup>71</sup> In a speech he gave during his tenure, Hasan Âli said that “We are on the path to establishing a form of Humanism that is broader than that of the Westerners, one that embraces every product of human intellect, wherever it may be found”, which is interpreted by Tanıl Bora as claiming that all elements of civilization and even humanity itself had Turkish roots, saw itself as more Western than the West, because it was more inclusive and universal, while the West was still limited by

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<sup>68</sup> Bora, *Hasan Âli Yücel*, 33.

<sup>69</sup> Güneş Altınbaş Serezli, “Turkish Humanism Project in the Early Republican Period” (Master’s thesis, Middle East Technical University, 2006), iv.

<sup>70</sup> Serezli, “Turkish Humanism Project in the Early Republican Period,” iv. (Italic is mine).

<sup>71</sup> Bora, *Hasan Âli Yücel*, 115.

Christianity and its own local culture. In all these debates, the translation of the classics into Turkish occupied a prominent place. In the foreword of the classic publications made by the state, Hasan Âli writes that in order to reach Humanism, it is necessary to internalize or digest the foreign classics in our language and “to strengthen Turkish erudition.”<sup>72</sup>

In terms of understanding the transformations in the *Masnavi*, the establishment of the Translation Bureau, a key outcome of the First Turkish Publications Congress (1939), warrants emphasis.<sup>73</sup> There, Hasan Âli Yücel stated the rationale behind this need:

Republican Turkey, which wants to become a distinguished member of Western culture and thought, is obliged to translate the old and new works of thought of the modern world into its own language and strengthen its identity with their sensitivity and thought. This obligation necessitates an extensive translation initiative. How will we do that? What do we have to translate and in which order? Through which way must we succeed in this? Do we not feel sorrow for the wasted efforts and money due to the nonexistence of a definite programme today, despite all the good intentions?<sup>74</sup>

The aim of the Translation Bureau was basically to decide on which one of the “world literature” classics would be translated into Turkish. The researchers, focused on Turkish humanism, viewed the phenomenon of translating the world literature classics into Turkish during these years “[...] as a means of creating a humanist movement in Turkey, which was expected to facilitate and accelerate westernization in culture.”<sup>75</sup> In the congress, the decision was taken to translate the East and West classics into Turkish. However, “Only 23 out of the titles translated between 1940-1946 were eastern classics (five per cent) and these mainly consisted of Arabic and Persian works.”<sup>76</sup> Together with that, it is noteworthy that the

<sup>72</sup> Bora, *Hasan Âli Yücel*, 142, 293.

<sup>73</sup> Özlem Berk, *Translation and Westernization in Turkey (from the 1840s to the 1980s)* (PhD diss., University of Warwick, 1999), 144.

<sup>74</sup> Berk, *Translation and Westernization in Turkey (from the 1840s to the 1980s)*, 148.

<sup>75</sup> Şehnaz Tahir Gürçağlar, *The Politics and Poetics of Translation in Turkey, 1923-1960*, 20-22.

<sup>76</sup> Gürçağlar, *The Politics and Poetics of Translation in Turkey, 1923-1960*, 71.

translation of *Masnavi* from Persian to Turkish prepared by Veled Çelebi İzbudak and Abdülbâki Gölpınarlı in 1942 was the first work chosen among the “Eastern classics”.<sup>77</sup>

Ahmed Güner Sayar, who wrote the book *Hasan Âli Yücel’in Tasavvufî Dünyası ve Mevleviliği* (Hasan Âli Yücel’s Sufi World and Mevlevi Affiliation), claims that it is hard to call him a Mevlevi dervish since he did not undergo the specific spiritual seclusion (*çile çıkarmak*) which is necessary to be a Mevlevi dervish and instead calls him a “devotee of Rumi” (*Mevlana muhibbi*).<sup>78</sup> Hasan Âli Yücel himself proposes a new form of following Rumi via the concept *Mevlânâcılık* (Rumism) in his article titled “Mevlevilik mi Mevlânâcılık mı?” (“Is it Mevlevi Order or Mevlana-ism?”) published in 1955. Referring to the commemoration events held for Rumi, he emphasizes that what is being honored is not the founding of the Mevlevi order, but Rumi himself and continues: “Mevlevi order is a past, but Rumism (devotion to Rumi) is a state of being, even a vision for the future; for within it lie such forward-looking and unifying ideas that humanity is still far from fully grasping them.”<sup>79</sup> Given this, it is possible to argue that Hasan Âli Yücel who tells he had never seen the spirit of the *Masnavi*, which unites people as brothers “in any political document produced by the human intellect” had a distinct understanding from the orthodox Mevlevi in presenting and venerating Rumi and the *Masnavi*.<sup>80</sup> During his tenure, Hasan Âli Yücel sought to revive a culture associated with the Mevlevi order, like an attempt to open Galata Mevlevi Lodge as the museum named the Şeyh Galip Museum (d. 1799), a figure known primarily for his poetry but deeply connected to the Mevlevi order.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>77</sup> Gürçağlar, *The Politics and Poetics of Translation in Turkey, 1923-1960*, 165.

<sup>78</sup> Ahmed Güner Sayar, *Hasan Âli Yücel’in Tasavvufî Dünyası ve Mevleviliği* (İstanbul: Ötüken, 2002), 105-107, annotated by Bora, *Hasan Âli Yücel*, 46.

<sup>79</sup> Bora, *Hasan Âli Yücel*, 46.

<sup>80</sup> Hasan Âli Yücel, *Hürriyet Gene Hürriyet - Volume II*, (Ankara: İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 1966), 575 quoted by Tanıl Bora, *Hasan Âli Yücel*, 46.

<sup>81</sup> Cemalettin Server Revnakoğlu, *Revnakoğlu’nun İstanbul’u: İstanbul’un İç Tarihi, Fatih*, vol 1., 132.

This lodge became the museum with the name of Divan Literature Museum in 1975 and then with the name of the Museum of Galata Mevlevi Lodge in 2011.

When the decision was made to translate the *Masnavi* into Turkish and publish it by the ministry, Veled Çelebi İzbudak began translating the text and regularly informed Hasan Âli Yücel about the progress.<sup>82</sup> Veled Çelebi's and Abdülbâki Gölpınarlı's correspondence with Hasan Âli Yücel underlines that the formation of the *Masnavi*, the image of Rumi, and the broader humanist canon was shaped by multiple agents who actively contributed to it. Indeed, in his correspondence with Hasan Âli Yücel, Abdülbâki Gölpınarlı discusses which other Eastern works were worthy of being translated and included in the publication list.<sup>83</sup> In this context, Şehnaz Tahir Gürçağlar also emphasizes that viewing translation activity as a homogeneous process "leav[es] no room for the initiative and creativity of the individual translator or groups of translators or publishers."<sup>84</sup>

In one of his letters, Veled Çelebi warmly greets the minister and states that he is preparing the ongoing translation of the *Masnavi*. In an undated letter, he expresses his gratitude for the upcoming publication of the *Masnavi*, and imagines the *Masnavi* as a monumental work within the new Republic with the following words: "This work shall stand as a monument of wisdom commemorating the era of our President [İsmet İnönü, d. 1973], a great and noble figure whose inner and outer selves are in harmony, in a stature far beyond comparison with other books, and in a manner befitting his exalted presence." In the same letter, he emphasizes that the person to revise the text should be "a person endowed with spiritual state (*hâl*) and spiritual ecstasy (*vecd*)," which shows his concerns about the potential editor.<sup>85</sup>

<sup>82</sup> Veled Çelebi İzbudak, *letter to Hasan Âli Yücel* in Bilkent University Hasan Âli Collection, accessed 21.04.2025 <https://repository.bilkent.edu.tr/items/25edaf91-008b-470d-8b82-ef3da9415cab>

<sup>83</sup> Abdülbâki Gölpınarlı, *letter sent to Hasan Âli Yücel* 19 June 1942 in Bilkent University Hasan Âli Collection, accessed 21.04.2025 <https://repository.bilkent.edu.tr/items/845afd7e-d0f6-42eb-9be8-c48aa1840847>

<sup>84</sup> Gürçağlar, *The Politics and Poetics of Translation in Turkey, 1923-1960*, 24.

<sup>85</sup> Veled Çelebi İzbudak, *letter to Hasan Âli Yücel* in Bilkent University Hasan Âli Collection, accessed 21.04.2025 <https://repository.bilkent.edu.tr/items/25edaf91-008b-470d-8b82-ef3da9415cab>

Abdülbâki Gölpınarlı praises Veled Çelebi İzbudak in the preface of the translation of the *Masnavi* (1942), mentioning his devotion to “Turkish and Turkish nationalism (*Türklüğü ve Türkçülüğü samimi bir inanç haline getirmiş bulunan*)” because of his translation.<sup>86</sup> In another letter, it becomes clear that when Hasan Âli Yücel encountered Veled Çelebi in daily life, he asked him how the *Masnavi* translation was progressing.<sup>87</sup> Moreover, in 1939, Veled Çelebi complained that he was not given the recognition he deserved within the Turkish Language Association and asked for help from the Minister.<sup>88</sup> Similarly, Abdülbâki Gölpınarlı, in a very polite tone, expressed complaints about his teaching position and requested that his situation be improved.<sup>89</sup> Other correspondence also shows that he remained in continuous communication with the Minister throughout the publication process of the *Masnavi*.<sup>90</sup>

### **Translator of the *Masnavi*: Veled Çelebi İzbudak**

Veled Çelebi, a descendant of Rumi, was born in Konya, at the center of the Mevlevi lodge, in 1869. He is known as one of the early supports of Turkology and for his contributions to Turkish language studies. Veled Çelebi took Persian and Arabic lessons from an early age, which was his passion. Based on his memories, his mother, after his education for many years, was worried that he could feel poor when his friends were around him, which made finding a job necessary. Upon his mother’s request, he started working as a civil servant in Konya.<sup>91</sup> People and his relatives in the Mevlevi lodge started to complain about his not wearing the

<sup>86</sup> Abdülbâki Gölpınarlı, “Önsöz” in Mevlâna, *Mesnevî I*, translated by Veled Çelebi İzbudak and edited by Abdülbâki Gölpınarlı (Ankara: Maarif Vekaleti Yayınları, 1942), N.

<sup>87</sup> Veled Çelebi İzbudak, *letter to Hasan Âli Yücel*, 12 January 1939 in Bilkent University Hasan Âli Collection, accessed 21.04.2025 <https://repository.bilkent.edu.tr/items/f910a66f-b4b1-494b-bfef-29abed03dc52>

<sup>88</sup> Veled Çelebi İzbudak, *letter to Hasan Âli Yücel*, 12 January 1939 in Bilkent University Hasan Âli Collection, accessed 21.04.2025 <https://repository.bilkent.edu.tr/items/f910a66f-b4b1-494b-bfef-29abed03dc52>

<sup>89</sup> Abdülbâki Gölpınarlı, *letter sent to Hasan Âli Yücel* in Bilkent University Hasan Âli Collection, accessed 21.04.2025 <https://repository.bilkent.edu.tr/items/24d7bf90-c29d-4144-8391-96d00ad78c4c>

<sup>90</sup> Abdülbâki Gölpınarlı, *letter sent to Hasan Âli Yücel* 19 June 1942 in Bilkent University Hasan Âli Collection, accessed 21.04.2025 <https://repository.bilkent.edu.tr/items/845afd7e-d0f6-42eb-9be8-c48aa1840847>

<sup>91</sup> Barış Metin, “Veled Çelebi’nin Türk Milliyetçiliğinin Doğuş ve Gelişme Sürecindeki Yeri ve Türk Diline Dair Çalışmaları.” *Karadeniz araştırmaları*, no. 32 (2012): 100.

Mevlevi clothes because of his office job, however, he defended himself, claiming that these Mevlevi garments were originally nothing more than the customary attire of the old people and clothes cannot be the sign of not being a Mevlevi.<sup>92</sup>

When he went to Istanbul at the age of 22, he met the intellectuals of the period through the networks of the Mevlevi lodges in Istanbul. He also met his close friend Necip Âsım [Yazıksız] (1861-1935), who is called one of the first Turkish nationalists, during this period. Veled Çelebi had an interest in Turkish that especially increased after he came to Istanbul and criticized the Mevlevi of the period for their lack of interest in Turkish.<sup>93</sup> He also became involved in the politics of the Young Turks during the Second Constitutional Era (1908-1922). This connection played a key role in his appointment as the head of the Mevlevi order in 1910.<sup>94</sup> After the foundation of the Republic in 1923, he was appointed as the head of the Konya Mevlevi Lodge in 1925, but this duty ended with the closure of the dervish lodges in November 1925. He served as a member of parliament between 1923 and 1943. Until the end of his life, he worked at the Turkish Language Association and carried out studies on the Turkish language.

Veled Çelebi considered his state involvement for the sake of his religion: “I hoped to be useful to my religion and nation by advancing in the state service.”<sup>95</sup> While he was carrying

<sup>92</sup> Veled Çelebi İzbudak, *Tekke'den Meclis'e Sıradışı Bir Çelebi'nin Hatıraları*, haz. Yakup Şafak ve Yusuf Öz (İstanbul: Timaş Yayınları, 2014), 41-42

<sup>93</sup> Metin, “Veled Çelebi'nin Türk Milliyetçiliğinin Doğuş ve Gelişme Sürecindeki Yeri ve Türk Diline Dair Çalışmaları,” 101.

<sup>94</sup> According to Rüya Kılıç, the rivalry between Abdülhalim Çelebi and Veled Çelebi over the leadership of the Konya lodge illustrates how political connections shaped these appointments. Abdülhalim Çelebi, who had become *postnişin* (head of the lodge) in 1907, was dismissed in 1910 under the pressure of the CUP, and Veled Çelebi was appointed in his place. In his memoirs, Veled Çelebi explained the dismissal as the result of Abdülhalim's improper behavior against the Sultan and emphasized his own legitimacy by citing both the will of the Konya Mevlevi and the support of Sultan Reşad, while also underlining the respect he received from CUP leaders. Abdülhalim Çelebi, on the other hand, in a draft letter, argued that Veled Çelebi owed his position to his CUP connections. Although it is unclear whether this letter was ever sent, the fact that Abdülhalim Çelebi was reappointed in 1919, after the fall of the CUP government, demonstrates how closely these appointments were tied to political power shifts. Rüya Kılıç, “Osmanlı'dan Cumhuriyet'e Sufi Geleneğin Taşıyıcıları: Mevleviler Örneği,” 34.

<sup>95</sup> İzbudak, *Tekke'den Meclis'e Sıradışı Bir Çelebi'nin Hatıraları*, 59.

on his Mevlevi leadership, he was also engaging with Turkish nationalism. After telling his contributions to the Turkish lexicon, he says, “I was one of the first founders of the cause of Turkism; I am proud of this.”<sup>96</sup> His participation in the early years of Turkish nationalism ultimately led him to be involved in shaping Rumi as a “Turkish humanist” during the early republic. The reason was that he was loyal to the Republican values, which tightly embraced a discourse against the Sufi orders (and religion) to create a more modernist and Western Turkey. Even though in 1924, a year before the closure of the Sufi lodges and orders, he publicly defended the lodges in a treatise after newspapers attacked the Mevlevis, he never objected to the closure of Sufi lodges.<sup>97</sup> He wrote a poem in which he said, “When the men of spirituality among us disappeared and the fools ascended to the highest heaven of guidance, our *tekkes* (Sufi lodges) were closed. Let us not cry in vain, [it is] deserved [that this should be so]; they were empty; [therefore] they were closed.”<sup>98</sup>

Veled Çelebi, ultimately, enjoyed the official positions under the state, despite his being one of the last sheikhs, and thanks to his nationalist past and especially his support for Republican values and reforms. For example, Nafiz Uzluk, who in his news article titled “Veled Çelebi İzbudak and Hat” quoted Veled Çelebi’s memoir with Atatürk, in which Atatürk once told him to take his Mevlevi hat off. The next day, Atatürk came to his house to be sure that he did not offend Çelebi. After that, Veled Çelebi wrote a poem calling the other religious people not to judge him because of his hat and rationalizing the new Western hats.<sup>99</sup>

<sup>96</sup> İzbudak, *Tekke’den Meclis’e Sıradışı Bir Çelebi’nin Hatıraları*, 153.

<sup>97</sup> Rüya Kılıç, “Osmanlı’dan Cumhuriyet’e Sufi Geleneğin Taşıyıcıları: Mevlevîler Örneği,” 38.

<sup>98</sup> İzbudak, *Tekke’den Meclis’e Sıradışı Bir Çelebi’nin Hatıraları*, 147.

<sup>99</sup> Feridun Nafiz Uzluk, “Veled Çelebi İzbudak ve Şapka” in *Feridun Nafiz Uzluk: toplu makaleler: Mevlâna, Mevlevîlik ve Türk dili*, edited by Ahmet Acıduman, Berna Arda and Ayten Altıntaş (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 2016), 466-70.

### Editor or “Actual Translator” of the *Masnavi*: Abdülbâki Gölpınarlı

In 1942, the first volume of the *Masnavi* was published in Turkish by the Ministry of Education.<sup>100</sup> The translation task was assigned to Veled Çelebi by Hasan Âli Yücel, while the revision was given to Abdülbâki Gölpınarlı, a scholar with expertise on the Mevlevi order and Turkish Sufism<sup>101</sup>. However, his involvement in the *Masnavi* translation process of the ministry might make the authorship of the translation questionable. This is because Abdülbâki Gölpınarlı’s claim over the translation of *Masnavi* in the book *Mevlana Celaleddin* (1951). Before the discussion, it would be helpful to review his profile.

Abdülbâki Gölpınarlı (1900-1982) was born in Istanbul and was involved in Sufism from a young age. With the encouragement of his father, Gölpınarlı learned Persian well, and upon his father’s death, he left his education and worked as a bookseller and teacher. Later, after completing his education and graduating from university in Turkish Literature, he continued his studies. He earned a PhD under Fuad Köprülü, a scholar, and contributed to the foundation of Turkish studies in Turkey. He was a highly respected scholar, renowned for his studies on Islamic-Turkish Sufi history and literature, more specifically the Mevlevi order. Throughout his life, he tried different orders and ideologies. Once he said, “First, I became a Bektashi, I knocked on other doors; I even received authorization and caliphates. I even became a heathen for a while. But I am glad I did all this, otherwise, I would not have become what I am today.”<sup>102</sup> Once, his close friend Cemalettin Server Revnakoğlu said that “Gölpınarlı was certainly knowledgeable; he worked hard. He produced quite a few works, but his soul was

<sup>100</sup> In one of the publication catalogs of the time, it is described as the “Translation by Veled Çelebi İzbudak with the commentaries (*şerhiyle*) of Abdülbâki Gölpınarlı”. The word “*şerh*” here was not used as the “commentary” but “explanation”. \_\_\_\_ *Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı Yayınları Kataloğu* (İstanbul: Milli Eğitim Basımevi, 1948), 42.

<sup>101</sup> Abdülbâki Gölpınarlı, “Önsöz” in *Mesnevî*, N.

<sup>102</sup> Ömer Faruk Akün, “Abdülbâki Gölpınarlı,” *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (İstanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı Yayınları, 1996), 146-149.



errant and afflicted; he had turned Rumi into an *idol*.”<sup>103</sup> Franklin Lewis describes him as “a witty man with a good sense of humor, he had a fabulous memory, even recalling the catalogue numbers of manuscripts he had consulted long ago” and acknowledges his contributions saying “Gölpınarlı furthermore contributed to our knowledge of Rumi in several works of original scholarship.”<sup>104</sup> According to him, Gölpınarlı “obviously had a deep understanding of Rumi and his works, which he displays in his six-volume *Masnavi* commentary [...]”.<sup>105</sup>

In the preface of one of his significant works, *The Mevlevi Order After Mevlana* (*Mevlana’dan Sonra Mevlevilik*), which was published in 1953, he stated his relationship with the Mevlevi order and his approach:

Fate shaped us in this crucible. From the moment of our birth, we began breathing this atmosphere. Our eyes opened to Mevlevi faces, our ears to the melodies of rituals (*ayin*) and hymns (*naat*). We believed and made others believe. We saw and internalized. We heard and became ecstatic. We wept and caused others to weep. *Eventually, time cleared the mist from our eyes and thrust us into the realm of thought. We gained the opportunity to analyze our faith through reason and to critique our emotions through reality.*<sup>106</sup>

Abdülbâki Gölpınarlı approached the *Masnavi* with a more critical perspective, as evident in his comments in the “explanation” section at the end of the *Masnavi* (1942). His comments are very informative, rather than interpretative, which is the case in the Ottoman commentary tradition.

In 1951, nine years after the publication of the *Masnavi* (1942), in his book, Gölpınarlı blames İzbudak for having taken the manuscript without returning it, which belonged to the Konya Mevlevi Lodge, and taking notes on the valuable manuscript: “I don’t know what happened [to the manuscript]. Was this valuable copy ever returned to its place, or is it still with the Gentlemen who, having taken it from his grandfather’s endowment, and occupying

<sup>103</sup> Cemaleddin Server Revnakoğlu, *Revnakoğlu’nun İstanbul’u: İstanbul’un İç Tarihi, Fatih*, 143. (Emphasis is mine)

<sup>104</sup> Lewis, *Rumi*, 552.

<sup>105</sup> Lewis, *Rumi*, 552.

<sup>106</sup> Abdülbâki Gölpınarlı, *Mevlânâ’dan Sonra Mevlevilik* (İstanbul: İnkılap, 1983), 2-3. (Emphasis is mine)

the trusteeship without right, hold on to it?”<sup>107</sup> Moreover, he claims that the translation belonged to him, not İzbudak. Just at the end of the section titled the *Masnavi* in the book, he said,

Here, the time has come to say the following: The *Masnavi* translation is mine, made by me. There is not a single point belonging to Veled Çelebi İzbudak in this translation. Veled Çelebi had translated the *Masnavi*, the Ministry bought it, and finally it was given to me to see. I saw that it was a disastrous translation, bad Turkish, a strange expression.<sup>108</sup>

He then shows the differences by giving examples from the Ministry of Education version and the Veled Çelebi translation he received: “Since there is no punctuation in the master’s [Veled Çelebi] writings, let those who read them think about where to put a comma or a full stop, or which word to capitalise!”<sup>109</sup> He goes on to say that he was surprised to see the ‘disastrous translation’, that he first tried to correct it, but after realising that this was not possible, he started translating it from scratch:

Finally, I told Hasan Âli Yücel, and *out of my love for Mevlânâ*, I translated the *Masnavi* from beginning to end. On the printed *Masnavi*, Veled İzbudak’s name was written as the translator, and it was only recorded that I had ‘compared the translation with various commentaries’, and I voluntarily made this renunciation. I heard it said here and there that I had spoiled his translation when the Master should have thanked me for covering his own faults. Nowadays, I have learned that the Ministry of Education attempted a second edition. That is why I am writing these lines.<sup>110</sup>

Finally, he says that the director of the sanatorium where he was hospitalised due to his illness, the administrative staff and the patients witnessed this translation, but there was no need for witnesses, he had the manuscripts in his hands and asks Veled Çelebi “Now I am waiting for a manliness from the master, will he be able to say that ‘this translation is not my translation?’ I am waiting with curiosity.”<sup>111</sup> Notably, finding the language of the translation of Veled Çelebi’s “complex” was obviously not independent of the Turkish language reform.

<sup>107</sup> Abdülbâki Gölpınarlı, *Mevlânâ Celâleddin: Hayatı, Felsefesi, Eserleri, Eserlerinden Seçmeler* (İstanbul: İnkılâp Kitabevi, 1951), 252.

<sup>108</sup> Gölpınarlı, *Mevlânâ Celâleddin*, 253.

<sup>109</sup> Gölpınarlı, *Mevlânâ Celâleddin*, 253-254.

<sup>110</sup> Gölpınarlı, *Mevlânâ Celâleddin*, 254.

<sup>111</sup> Gölpınarlı, *Mevlânâ Celâleddin*, 254.

The *Masnavi*, ultimately, was also an object of that kind of nationalist concerns. This was not a process that the state simply imposed on these authors. Instead, it was a process in which the ideals or policies of the state aligned with the ideological stances of these authors.

Furthermore, Şucaeddin Onuk, who made a clean copy of Veled Çelebi's translation, donated the manuscripts of Veled Çelebi's translation to the Mevlana Museum and wrote in the preface, "Although this translation was later printed by the Ministry of Education (*Maarif Vekâleti*), numerous changes were made, and the original version was not preserved as it was. Therefore, in the hope that those who wish to see the *original translation* by Veled Çelebi may benefit from it, I am donating it to the Library of the Mevlana Museum."<sup>112</sup> Onuk's remark indicates his dissatisfaction with the alterations introduced during the publication process and his concern that the original version was not properly "preserved", perhaps due to Gölpınarlı's editorial interventions or the state's editorial requirements. According to Ahmed Güner Sayar, who openly expresses his admiration for Gölpınarlı, the translation in question is attributed to Gölpınarlı. Based on what he learned from Gölpınarlı himself, the latter originally completed the translation but later acknowledged it out of respect. Notably, in subsequent editions of the book where he criticized Veled Çelebi, Gölpınarlı removed those statements. Sayar also notes that Gölpınarlı consistently remembered Veled Çelebi with respect and admiration.<sup>113</sup>

### **The 1942 translation of the *Masnavi***

This manuscript of Veled Çelebi was transcribed in a master's thesis written in 2024.<sup>114</sup> When the two texts are compared, whether or not Gölpınarlı translated from the beginning, the

<sup>112</sup> Şucaeddin Konuk's handwriting in the manuscript, quoted by, Yakup Şafak, "Veled Çelebi İzbudak'ın Mevlana Düşüncesine Katkısı," in *Şehir ve Âlimleri Sempozyumu Kitabı, 11-12 Kasım 2016*, ed. Ramazan Altıntaş et al. (Konya: Necmettin Erbakan Üniversitesi Kültür Yayınları, 2017), 336

<sup>113</sup> Ahmed Güner Sayar, "Mesnevi'nin Türkçe İlk Tam ve Mensur Tercümesine Dair Bir Not," *Dergâh*, no. 155 (January 2003): 16-18.

<sup>114</sup> Süveyda Genç, *İzbudak'ın Mesnevî Tercümesi - Metin ve Türkiye Türkçesine Aktarımı (I. Cilt)* (Master's thesis, Selçuk University, Institute of Mevlana Studies, Konya, 2024).

resulting text is quite different from Veled Çelebi's manuscript. While Veled Çelebi's manuscript makes extensive use of words inherited from Ottoman Turkish, the 1942 Ministry of National Education edition uses fewer, due to the context of the Turkish language reform. However, the difference is evident not only in the use of words but also in the syntax. Although it is difficult to recognize this in the poem, it is possible to see it in Rumi's prose statement of purpose (*sebeb-i telif*). Veled Çelebi's manuscript appears to be the text of a late Ottoman scholar. Therefore, such a text could not be considered part of the canon of Turkish humanism that the Ministry of National Education was attempting to establish.

This 1942 publication opens with a foreword by İsmet İnönü, then the President of the Republic. İnönü emphasizes that translating the masterpieces that have shaped the artistic and intellectual life of nations, "since the Ancient Greeks," into Turkish is "to prepare the most valuable means for those who wish to serve and take part in the culture of the Turkish nation." He further argues that the "great service of the Translation Collection (*Tercüme Külliyyatı*) to our culture" would be to cultivate generations raised "amid abundant means" in literature, art, and thought.<sup>115</sup> The preface by Gölpınarlı to the 1942 state-sponsored translation, allegedly translated by Veled Çelebi and edited by Gölpınarlı, demonstrates how the perception of the *Masnavi* was adjusted according to the nation-state's humanist canon-building process. While acknowledging that the *Masnavi* deals with "various religious beliefs for Sufis, the principles of Sufism, especially the philosophy of 'of existence'", he also emphasizes that the *Masnavi* is an important "product of thought," which includes "the principles of *kalām*, Greek philosophy, and the Islamic form of this philosophy, the philosophy of the *hukamā*," These statements, which are part of Rumi's presentation as a "Turkish humanist," are perfected by the expression that Rumi was particularly embraced by the Turks: "But we can proudly say that it is the

<sup>115</sup> İsmet İnönü, Foreword to Mevlâna, *Mesnevi I*, trans. Veled İzbudak, ed. Abdülbâki Gölpınarlı (Ankara: Maarif Vekaleti Yayınları, 1942), n.p.

Turkish community that truly embraced the *Masnavi*.” One should also note that Tahir Olgun does not mention the *Masnavi* as a poem, and Avni Konuk directly rejects that Rumi was a poet and that the *Masnavi* is a poem. However, Gölpınarlı defines Rumi as a “great Islamic poet” in his preface and says “[...] the *Masnavi* is a *cultural* alternative from beginning to end. And among the *works of the world*, this book has a distinguished place; among mystical works and Sufi poems, it has no equal.”<sup>116</sup>

A close look at the translation reveals that the prose translation of the *Masnavi* was shaped under the influence of the tendency causing from the Turkish language reform of the period. Therefore, this translation stands as less Ottoman Turkish compared to the translations found in the commentaries of Tahir Olgun and Avni Konuk. Although Avni Konuk and Tahir Olgun focused on the “commentary” of the *Masnavi* and underlined the limitations of the translation, much like the debates surrounding the exegesis of the Qur’an, they provided the Turkish versions of the verses before beginning their commentary. As I will show in the second chapter, their translations are more in the form of commentary.

On the other hand, the 1942 translation’s main goal was the translation itself. However, at the end of each volume, under the heading “Explanation,” there are Gölpınarlı’s explanations for some verses. This is noteworthy when considered alongside the views of Avni Konuk and Tahir Olgun, who believed that the *Masnavi* cannot be understood without commentary. Gölpınarlı also could not escape from this view at some point, and found the explanations were necessary for some verses: “We explained the necessary points by including an ‘Explanation’ at the end of each volume.”<sup>117</sup> For example, both Konuk and Olgun’s commentaries, as well as Gölpınarlı’s explanation at the end of his 1942 translation, indicate that the first 18 verses are of particular importance to the Mevlevi order because they were written directly by Rumi.

<sup>116</sup> Abdülbâki Gölpınarlı, “Önsöz” in Mevlâna, *Mesnevi I*, V-Z, H(Emphasis is mine).

<sup>117</sup> Abdülbâki Gölpınarlı, “Önsöz” in *Mesnevi I*, S.

However, unlike the other two, Gölpınarlı adds: “It is also noteworthy that the number nine was sacred among the old Turks, and eighteen is twice that number.”<sup>118</sup> Unsurprisingly, Avni Konuk and Tahir Olgun do not mention this point when explaining the importance of the first 18 verses.

In his 1945 article, Nafiz Uzluk remarks that “Veled Çelebi’s numbering [couplets] follows Nicholson’s manuscript; I had it added deliberately.” More strikingly, he writes that Gölpınarlı, “despite all his good intentions, distorted the translation by trying to adapt it to current fashion,” and that “the richness of the Turkish language was reduced to a heart-wrenching state.”<sup>119</sup> The use of the passive voice suggests that Uzluk saw this outcome not merely as Gölpınarlı’s doing but as the result of broader linguistic trends shaped by state language policies. The stylistic contrast between this 1942 edition and Gölpınarlı’s later 1973 *Masnavi* commentary further supports the idea that his agency in the earlier text was not independent from the state’s expectations.

In conclusion, the 1942 translation of the *Masnavi* should be read in the wider context of post-1925 anti-Sufi politics and the ideological enterprise of Turkish humanism. Together with this, it was not a clear top-down implication. The translation was reframed with the roles of individuals like Hasan Âli Yücel, Veled Çelebi İzbudak, and Abdülbâki Gölpınarlı, who carried their personal Mevlevi roots, scholarly aspirations, and political considerations. In rewriting the *Masnavi* as a work of nationalist and humanist literature, they reduced or eliminated its religious, quasi-sacred form in accordance with the prevailing political climate of the time. The *Masnavi*, therefore, transformed into a recently invented cultural asset during this time, a monument preserved through the very figures who, working under anti-Sufi

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<sup>118</sup> Abdülbâki Gölpınarlı, “Açıklamalar,” in *Mesnevi I*, 401.

<sup>119</sup> Nafiz Uzluk, “Mesnevî Tercümesi” in *Feridun Nafiz Uzluk: toplu makaleler: Gazete Yazıları*, edited by Ahmet Acıduman, Berna Arda and Ayten Altıntaş (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 2016), 343.

policies, made it acceptable as part of the nation-state's cultural heritage. When we turn to Nora, the modern age remembers the past not through living traditions but through history, which is archived, represented, and organized. *Lieux de mémoire*, therefore, emerge as a response to the crisis of identity in modern societies, as efforts to create a new symbolic unity after the rupture with the past. In this sense, the 1942 state-sponsored translation of the *Masnavi* functioned as what Nora calls a "ritual of a ritual-less society." Following the closure of the Sufi lodges, the *Masnavi* was reframed with the Turkish humanist approach, transforming Rumi's work into both a cultural monument and a national symbol. Materially (as a book), symbolically (as cultural heritage), and functionally (as a tool of nation-building), the state-sponsored translation of the *Masnavi* became one of modern Turkey's *lieux de mémoire*.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> "*Lieux de mémoire* are complex things. At once natural and artificial, simple and ambiguous, concrete and abstract, they are *lieux* places, —sites, causes— in three senses: material, symbolic, *and* functional. An archive is a purely material site that becomes a *lieu de mémoire* only if imagination invests it with a symbolic aura." Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," xxiv, 1, 14.

## CHAPTER II

### Following the Tradition: The *Masnavi* Commentaries Against the Current

This chapter examines an alternative development in the reception of Rumi's *Masnavi* during the republican period. The Ottoman practice of commentary typically intertwined translation with interpretation, both translating the Persian lines into Turkish and explaining their spiritual interpretations. Avni Konuk and Tahir Olgun inherited the practice, but their works inevitably carried the marks of the intellectual and political atmosphere of their time. Konuk's commentary, which he started in 1929 and finished in 1937, merged Ibn Arabi's metaphysics and engaged with the discussions of his time, such as showing evidence from the *Masnavi* for the recent scientific developments. Olgun, in his commentary on the *Masnavi* and letters, emphasized Rumi's Sufi identity over his presentation as a philosopher, and his critiques of the 1942 translation reveal his hesitations concerning language reform and the anti-Sufi climate.

By situating Konuk and Olgun within this broader context, I argue that their commentary exemplifies a continuity with the Ottoman commentary tradition, influenced by their milieu. Unlike their contemporaries who participated in the humanist re-interpretation of Rumi, they did not engage directly with or participate in that enterprise. Instead, they maintained treating the *Masnavi* as a rich Sufi book, adapting selectively in response to the movements of their time while remaining rooted in the framework of the tradition's interpretative.

The chapter opens with a summary of the long-standing Ottoman tradition of the *Masnavi* commentaries, which served as both translations and explanations. I then look at the early Republican period to show how Mevlevi-affiliated people kept this tradition alive even though Sufi lodges were being closed. Avni Konuk and Tahir Olgun are given special attention. The chapter also gives examples from the first 18 couplets in these commentaries. Konuk and



Olgun's commentaries, shaped within the culture of the Mevlevi order and the commentary tradition, can be read as opposed to the humanist interpretation of the *Masnavi*. Their works collectively demonstrate a continuity through commentary that kept the *Masnavi* as a vital Sufi text while engaging with the complexities of the nation-state's socio-cultural milieu.

### **Tradition of the *Masnavi* commentaries (*Şerh-i Mesnevî*)**

Commentaries on the *Masnavi* have traditionally served several intersecting functions. At a descriptive level, commentators read between the lines to explicate Rumi's poem, guiding readers through a text repeatedly characterized as disjointed and digressive.<sup>121</sup> These commentaries tend to place the *Masnavi* in larger theological contexts, especially in the form of Ibn Arabi's theosophy, locating Rumi's poem in preexisting traditions of metaphysics. Commentaries also pushed the availability of the *Masnavi* past the linguistic border. For instance, Ankaravî included a Turkish rendering in parallel with the Persian text, and Changi Yusof Dede published an Arabic commentary for a Syrian audience.<sup>122</sup> Commentaries thereby not only brokered meaning but also facilitated the reception of the text in a wide range of cultural and linguistic contexts. Later researchers began using them as excellent study tools; Reynold A. Nicholson "remarked that this work proved more helpful to him than any other in preparing his English commentary."<sup>123</sup> Apart from their philological contribution, as Franklin Lewis points out, commentaries also brokered the mystical depth of Rumi, resistant to direct rendering, and made it possible for scholars such as Muhammad Iqbal and Abdol Karim Soroush to use the *Masnavi* as material towards reshaping Islamic thought in a contemporary setting.<sup>124</sup>

<sup>121</sup> Franklin Lewis says "Rumi does not present a philosophical system per se, and the poetic and discursive nature of his oeuvre makes it difficult to abstract a systematic theology." Franklin Lewis, *Rumi*, 394. In the first chapter, Rumi's discursive method in relation with Qur'an was discussed.

<sup>122</sup> Lewis, *Rumi*, 478-479.

<sup>123</sup> Lewis, *Rumi*, 478.

<sup>124</sup> Lewis, *Rumi*, 483-484; 494-495

Ceylan argues that commentary (*şerh*) can be considered a kind of translation. This viewpoint is based on the historical practice of Turkish literary commentaries on the Persian *Masnavi* frequently starting with a translation of the original text, either word-for-word (*ad verbum*) or sentence-for-sentence (*ad sensum*), to make it understandable to a Turkish-speaking audience. Beyond a mere linguistic transfer, the main goal of these commentaries was to explain the internal mystical meanings and cultural nuances embedded in the *Masnavi*. This strategy aligns with the *ad sensum* translation approach, which prioritizes conveying meaning over literal translation. Additionally, by serving as a bridge between the author's ideas and the readers' comprehension across linguistic and temporal barriers, commentaries were essential to the internalization of the *Masnavi* and its ideas within the culture. Particularly during the Ottoman era, the long tradition of the *Masnavi* commentaries served as an efficient means of interlingual translation, rendering the Persian text comprehensible and impactful in the Turkish-speaking world. Therefore, it is reasonable to consider the *Masnavi* commentaries to be an important type of translational activity given their role in delivering meaning, providing context, and promoting cultural reception.<sup>125</sup>

Although the number of Turkish commentaries (*şerhs*) on the *Masnavi* exceeds forty, only six of them are complete commentaries on the entire work. These are: *Şerh-i Mesnevî* by Şem'î Şem'ullâh (d. 1602-3), *Şerh-i Mesnevî* by İsmail Rûsûhî of Ankaravî (d. 1631-32), *Hulâsatü'ş-Şurûh* by Muhammed Murâd Mollâ (d. 1848), *Mesnevî-yi Şerîf Şerhi* by Ahmed Avni Konuk, *Şerh-i Mesnevî* by Tahir Olgun, and *Mesnevi Tercümesi ve Şerhi* by Abdalbâkî Gölpınarlı.<sup>126</sup>

<sup>125</sup> Can Ceylan, *Internalization of the First Eighteen Couplets of Rumi's Mesnevî through Commentaries and Translations in Turkish Literature and Culture* (Master's thesis, Boğaziçi University, 2009), 5, 22, 25, 66.

<sup>126</sup> Mehmet Özdemir, "Mesnevî'nin Türkçe Şerhleri," *Turkish Studies: International Periodical for the Languages, Literature and History of Turkish or Turkic* 11, no. 20 (Fall 2016): 465. Even though Tahir Olgun could not complete his commentary before he dies, his student and another *Mesnevihân* Şefik Can completed the commentary based on Tahir Olgun's own and lesson notes.

Among these commentaries, the one by Ankaravî stands out, as it was the first to be printed, and R.A. Nicholson, the first to translate the entire *Masnavi* into English, benefited significantly from Ankaravî's work. In the tradition of *Masnavi* interpretation, Ankaravî's commentary thus becomes a crucial axis. It is so influential that, although nearly three centuries separate them, Avni Konuk's work is frequently regarded as a continuation or even an expansion of Ankaravî's interpretation.<sup>127</sup> This close resemblance suggests a continuity in the framework, understanding, and exposition of the *Masnavi*'s mystical teachings within the Mevlevi tradition. Certainly, there are considerable differences in interpretation; nevertheless, commentators influenced by Sufi doctrines -whether affiliated with the Mevlevi order or not- tend to follow similar patterns. This is evident in both Ankaravî's and Avni Konuk's commentaries, which were written under the strong influence of Ibn Arabi, particularly his *Fusus al-Hikam*.<sup>128</sup> This shows that Avni Konuk was deeply connected with the tradition in receiving the *Masnavi*. However, he was receiving the tradition, or reimagining the past within the context of his time. This is not only evident in his preface to the *Masnavi* but also in his findings of evidence for the scientific developments in his time from the *Masnavi*. In the end, he was a traditionalist Mevlevi in terms of his approach to the *Masnavi*.

This Ibn Arabi influence is not incidental. From the fourteenth century onwards, many *Masnavi* commentators interpreted Rumi's work through the lens of Ibn Arabi's metaphysics, particularly his doctrine of *wahdat al-wujūd* (the unity of being).<sup>129</sup> Many Sufis also said that *Fusus al-Hikam* is a prose version of the *Masnavi*, while the *Masnavi* is the verse version of

<sup>127</sup> Ceylan, *Internalization of the First Eighteen Couplets of Rumi's Mesnevî through Commentaries and Translations in Turkish Literature and Culture*, 78.

<sup>128</sup> Metin Güngör, *Ahmed Avni Konuk ve Mesnevî-i Şerîf Şerhindeki Tasavvuf Düşüncesi* (MA thesis, Uludağ Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, 2010), 26.

<sup>129</sup> William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Doctrine of Rumi*, illustrated ed. (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, Inc., 2005), 13.

it.<sup>130</sup> Avni Konuk's commentary exemplifies this approach: not only did he rely on Ibn Arabi's ideas to interpret the *Masnavi*, but he also translated and commented on *Fusus al-Hikam*.<sup>131</sup>

Franklin Lewis argues that Rumi and Ibn Arabi have some things in common, like the ideas of unity of being (*wahdat al-wujud*) and the world of imagination. However, these are more a reflection of the Sufi mindset of the time than a direct influence, and Rumi does not reference Ibn Arabi in his writings nor employ his terminology. According to Lewis, Nicholson posits that Rumi appropriated certain ideas from Ibn Arabi; however, this assertion is an overstatement, asserting that any influence, if it existed, was merely external and philosophical. Therefore, Lewis asserts that the prevalent Ibn Arabi interpretation in the *Masnavi* commentaries is likely a hermeneutic selection by subsequent commentators, and there is no substantiation that Rumi adhered to Ibn Arabi's systematic Sufism in his own writings.<sup>132</sup> Gölpınarlı also criticized Ankaravî for interpreting the *Masnavi* in a way that was parallel to the ideas of Ibn Arabi.<sup>133</sup> In a similar fashion, Ahmet Ateş argues that Ankaravî was criticized for explaining the *Masnavi* entirely according to Ibn Arabi's unity of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*) theory, which was a divergence from the former practices.<sup>134</sup> The interpretation of the *Masnavi* in accordance with Ibn Arabi continued into the Republican period, as evident in Avni Konuk's commentary, which led to its non-publication by the state.

<sup>130</sup> Ekrem Demirli, "İbnü'l-Arabî ve Mevlana Arasındaki Bazı Ortak Kavramlar," *İstanbul Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 16 (2008): 232.

<sup>131</sup> Güngör, *Ahmed Avni Konuk ve Mesnevî-i Şerif Şerhindeki Tasavvuf Düşüncesi*, 26.

<sup>132</sup> Lewis, *Rumi*, 285-286.

<sup>133</sup> İsmail Güleç, "Mevlânâ'nın Mesnevî'sinin Tamamına Yapılan Türkçe Şerhler," *İlmî Araştırmalar: Dil ve Edebiyat İncelemeleri* 22 (2006): 138.

<sup>134</sup> Ahmet Ateş, "Mesnevî'nin on sekiz beytinin manası" 60. Doğum Yılı Münasebeti ile Fuad Köprülü Armağanı, (Ankara: DTCF, 1953), 40-42, quoted by İsmail Güleç, "Mevlânâ'nın Mesnevî'sinin Tamamına Yapılan Türkçe Şerhler," 138.

## Avni Konuk

Ahmed Avni Konuk was born in 1868 in Istanbul. When he was 10, he lost both of his parents. He continued to an Ottoman secondary school for orphans (*Dar'uş-şafaka*). After his graduation, he started to work as a post office clerk in 1890. He did not receive an Islamic seminary education under a madrasa, but in the mosque. There, he met Mehmed Es'ad Dede (1843-1911), a Mevlevi shaykh and *Mesnevihân*, and became his disciple.<sup>135</sup> Mehmed Es'ad Dede was so important for Avni Konuk that he asked for Mehmed Es'ad Dede's permission to be in seclusion from the world (*khalwa*), distancing himself from office jobs, as he was concerned that bureaucracy could be an obstacle to this. However, Es'ad Dede responded to him, saying there are many people who retreat but cannot find the divine purpose, so instead advised him to study Ibn Arabi, which also shaped the frame of his *Masnavi* commentary as he frequently interpreted the couplets within the epistemology of Ibn Arabi.<sup>136</sup>

Avni Konuk is also known as a Sufi musician since he composed many pieces, including two Mevlevi ritual songs.<sup>137</sup> He continued to work in the post office after the foundation of the Turkish Republic, which was an example of the phenomenon that many Sufi figures continued “[...] maintaining a high-social status in the new nation-state and invested their energies in working for the newly formed nation-state.”<sup>138</sup> Unlike Veled Çelebi İzbudak, he was not directly involved in the making of the new nation-state, such as being a member of the parliament or Turkish Language Association, which are high-level state services. Instead, he was a Mevlevi dissatisfied with the state's anti-Sufi discourse and reforms. Nevertheless, he

<sup>135</sup> Savaş Barkçin, *Ahmed Avni Konuk: Görünmeyen Umman* (İstanbul: Klasik, 2011), 198-99.

<sup>136</sup> Barkçin, *Ahmed Avni Konuk*, 198.

<sup>137</sup> Reşat Öngören, “Ahmet Avni Konuk,” *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (İstanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı Yayınları, 2002), 180.

<sup>138</sup> M. Brett Wilson, “Sufi Leaders in the early Turkish Republic: Persecution, Privilege, and Profession (1925-1950),” unpublished typescript (2025).

was not excluded from the state's benevolences; the Istanbul Conservatory published his works on classical music, and he became a legal counsel in the post office in 1930.<sup>139</sup>

Researchers who have written about Avni Konuk tend to perceive him as a passive Sufi in response to the anti-Sufi discourse. For instance, Savaş Barkçin says, “despite all the hardships of that period and the attacks directed at religion and Sufism, Konuk managed to write his commentary on the *Masnavi* and other works.” He also believes that by translating and offering commentary on important Sufi texts, Konuk continued his quest for the Truth.<sup>140</sup> Allegedly, Konuk challenged materialists and Orientalist-influenced individuals who held skewed or insufficient conceptions of the core ideas of Islam and Sufism in his writings. Additionally, Barkçin thinks that “he defeated with solid evidence those who said that the unity of being (*wahdat al-wujud*) was the same as pantheism.”<sup>141</sup> The depiction of Avni Konuk as a representative of the “silent Sufis” is worth mentioning, as Veled Çelebi İzbudak, for instance, followed a different path, serving as a deputy and a member of the Turkish Language Association.

After 13 years of work, Avni Konuk published his translation and commentary on Ibn Arabi's *Fusus al-Hikam* in 1928. His engagement with the monumental work of Ibn Arabi had an impact on his *Masnavi* commentary. Avni Konuk started to write his *Masnavi* commentary in 1929 and completed it in 1937. He utilized the Ottoman Turkish and Persian commentaries as well as commentaries written by Indian Islamic scholars, which were not as much used by the Turkish commentators. This use of the five different Indian commentaries was novel in the

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<sup>139</sup> Öngören, “Ahmet Avni Konuk,” 181.

<sup>140</sup> Barkçin, *Ahmed Avni Konuk*, 201.

<sup>141</sup> Barkçin, *Ahmed Avni Konuk*, 200.

Turkish commentary tradition.<sup>142</sup> Barkçin claims that this was primarily due to Es'ad Dede's close relations with the Indian Islamic scholars.<sup>143</sup>

### The question of publication: the Ibn Arabi debate

Mustafa Tahralı, who prepared the first publication (in 2004) of Avni Konuk's *Masnavi* commentary, describes a discussion between Avni Konuk and Nafiz Uzluk in the introduction of Konuk's commentary. According to Tahralı, Avni Konuk, in his letter sent to Nafiz Uzluk, replied to the thoughts that Rumi and Ibn Arabi should not be considered together:

I had the impression that you perceive Hazrat Hudavendigar (Rumi), Hazrat Shaykh al-Akbar (Ibn Arabi), Fariduddin Attar, Hakim Sanai, Sayyid Burhan al-Din, Sultan al-Ulama, and Sultan Walad as distinct from one another, though I am not sure if I misunderstood you. In truth, none of these noble figures is separate from one another in terms of divine knowledge (*maarif-i ilâhiye*) and sacred wisdom (*hikemiyyet-i rabbâniye*). For the source of all their gnosis is the True Reality (*el-Hakk*) itself. Not one of them was a mere philosopher; they were all divine sages (*hâkim-i ilâhî*). Therefore, their spiritual knowledge is neither of the East nor of the West.<sup>144</sup>

Then, Tahralı continues with writing about a newspaper article written by Nafiz Uzluk, where Uzluk said that a commission he was involved in was gathered to discuss whether to publish this commentary or not. For Uzluk, there were two main reasons not to publish this commentary: first, the commentary did not rely on the most authentic manuscript; second, the text was interpreted through the lens of Ibn Arabi's philosophy, which was considered an incorrect method.<sup>145</sup> Abdülbâki Gölpınarlı writes the following lines in his book:

Ahmed Avni Konuk is the last commentator of the *Masnavi*. Having also translated *Fîhi mâ fih*, Konuk produced a commentary superior to those of other interpreters; however, since he did not consult the main primary sources, and because he sought to apply Rumi's words to modern scientific discoveries, his commentary *cannot be regarded as a scholarly work*.

<sup>142</sup> Safi Arpağuş, "Ahmed Avni Konuk'un *Mesnevî-i Şerîf Şerhi*'nde Hint Şârihleri", Uluslararası Mevlânâ Sempozyumu Bildirileri (2010): 212, quoted by, Esma Öztürk, *Osmanlı'dan Cumhuriyet'e Geçişte Tasavvufî İrfânî Gelenek: Ahmed Avni Konuk Örneği* (PhD diss., Ankara University, 2015), 97.

<sup>143</sup> Barkçin, *Avni Konuk*, 234

<sup>144</sup> Mustafa Tahralı, "Takdim," in Mevlânâ Celâleddîn Rûmî, *Mesnevî-i Şerîf Şerhi I*, translated and commented by Ahmed Avni Konuk, edited by Selçuk Eraydın and Mustafa Tahralı (İstanbul: Kitabevi, 2009), 14. (Emphasis is mine).

<sup>145</sup> Mustafa Tahralı, "Takdim," 19.

A copy of this commentary, which remains unpublished and *does not need to be published*, was sent to the Konya Museum Library in accordance with his will.<sup>146</sup>

Gölpınarlı's critical stance towards Ibn Arabi seems to be part of a broader ideological discomfort. Necip Fazıl Duru says that:

When it comes to Ibn Arabi, Gölpınarlı is not objective. He finds Ibn Arabi's view that Pharaoh died a believer to be incompatible with religion and points out ideas and expressions that he considers irreconcilable with Islamic belief. Because of his objections to the incorporation of Ibn Arabi's philosophy in the *Masnavi* commentaries and his suggestion that Rumi should be seen as opposed to Ibn Arabi, Gölpınarlı himself has faced criticism. Those who disagree with his view argue that Rumi expressed the same spiritual truths as Ibn Arabi, albeit in a different style and language.<sup>147</sup>

According to Mustafa Tahralı, these criticisms contributed to the delay in publishing Avni Konuk's commentary.<sup>148</sup> It should also be emphasized that Gölpınarlı was a Shiite person for a time, and the presence of Sunni doctrine strongly in Ibn Arabi's thought might have contributed to his distaste for Ibn Arabi.

Nafiz Uzluk's above-mentioned article was, in fact, written to express the need for a "Rumi Institute" to conduct research about Rumi. In this article, published in *Zafer* newspaper in 1955, Nafiz Uzluk mentions the budget that Iran made for the publication of Rumi's works. After this, he asks, "What do we do? [...] It is our duty, even our right, to engage with the subject of Rumi, to explain and introduce his works [...] through translation and commentaries. However, we encounter instances where booksellers or those lacking scholarly competence in this field presume authority and write and disseminate information that does not align with knowledge and truth." Just after these sentences, he states that although there was a recent idea

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<sup>146</sup> Abdülbâki Gölpınarlı, *Mevlânâ'dan Sonra Mevlevîlik*, (İstanbul: İnkılap, 1953), 145. (Emphasis is mine).

<sup>147</sup> Necip Fazıl Duru, "Mevlevîyye Köprüsü: Bende-i Bendegân-ı Mevlâna Abdülbâki Gölpınarlı" in *Abdülbâki Gölpınarlı*, edited by İsmail Hakkı Aksoyak, (Ankara: Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı, 2013), 44.

<sup>148</sup> Mustafa Tahralı, "Takdim," 20.



to publish Konuk's commentary within a commission to publish Avni Konuk's commentary, there were two main problems.<sup>149</sup>

Among the reasons presented by Nafiz Uzluk, it seems plausible that the primary cause behind the decision not to publish Avni Konuk's commentary was its strong reliance on the philosophy of Ibn Arabi, which increases the religious connotations of the *Masnavi*. At this point, one should note that both the state's secular and Westernizing cultural policies under the label of "Turkish Humanism," and the agency of Hasan Âli Yücel, Abdülbâki Gölpınarlı, and, to a lesser extent, Veled Çelebi, whose translation was adapted to the needs of "new Turkish", played an important role in the presentation and reception of the *Masnavi*. By doing so, they followed a different path from those like Avni Konuk and Tahir Olgun, who presented Rumi not as a philosopher but as a mystical Sufi, and held a relatively traditional stance in contrast to the state's anti-Sufi reforms initiated in 1925.

This does not mean Veled Çelebi and Gölpınarlı did not perceive Rumi as a mystical Sufi; they certainly did so. They merely attached to Rumi, a philosopher identity, and - knowingly or not - helped reshape the image of Rumi in accordance with the ideals of Turkish Humanism. When we consider the translation of the *Masnavi* (1942), it becomes possible to more clearly trace the transformations in the *Masnavi* commentary tradition under the influence of the period's sociopolitical context. Throughout the period when the state imposed deep religious and cultural reforms, the reconstruction of religiosity within a secular framework appears. In this context, Rumi becomes less of a Sufi mystic and more of a philosopher, and more "humanist." Likewise, the *Masnavi* is no longer seen by some as a primarily religious Sufi text, but rather as a key component of the humanist canon.

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<sup>149</sup> Feridun Nâfiz Uzluk, "Mevlana Enstitüsü" in *Toplu Makaleler III. Cilt: Gazete Yazıları*, eds., Ahmet Acıduman, Berna Arda and Ayten Altıntaş (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları, 2017), 460-462.

Still, it would be reductive to treat these actors as strictly opposed camps. Despite his critique of Konuk's Ibn Arabi-inspired metaphysics, Nafiz Uzluk himself recognized the value of Konuk's effort. In his 1945 newspaper column, he concludes by writing: "Let us remember with respect the diligent commentator of our time, Ahmet Avni. That 35-volume commentary is kept at the presence of Rumi in Konya."<sup>150</sup> This gesture, coming from a figure otherwise involved in halting the publication of Konuk's work, illustrates that these agents, though diverging in methodology or ideological alignments, remained part of a shared Mevlevi heritage.

### **The commentary of Avni Konuk**

Avni Konuk, in his commentary, follows a traditional methodical approach, first giving the Persian couplets, then translating them, explaining the vocabulary, and finally providing a thorough exegesis of the verse or verses.<sup>151</sup> His language reflects the characteristics of late Ottoman Turkish. Franklin Lewis, too, labels the commentary of Avni Konuk (and Tahir Olgun's as well) as "traditional" and "conventional", emphasizing that this tradition continued after World War II.<sup>152</sup> Yet, "traditional" and "conventional" commentaries were not granted an audience by the state authorities since, I argue, they did not resonate with the secularizing and westernizing cultural reforms of the state, which appeared as "Turkish humanism."

A close reading of the introduction and the commentary on the first eighteen verses reveals that Avni Konuk's interpretation adopts a distinctly more religious tone than that of the 1942 state-sponsored translation. For Konuk, unlike the 1942 state-sponsored translation's definition, the *Masnavi* is not a work of poetry. He argues that what makes something poetry is intentional composition in verse form, and in this case, "It has flowed from the Truth [*al-*

<sup>150</sup> Uzluk, "Mesnevi Tercümesi," in *Feridun Nafiz Uzluk: Toplu Makaleler: Gazete Yazıları*, 335.

<sup>151</sup> Bekir Çınar, "Ahmed Avni Konuk'un Mesnevî-i Şerîf Şerhi'nin İlk 18 Beytindeki Şerh Usûlü" in *Turkish Studies* 4(6) (2009): 44.

<sup>152</sup> Lewis, *Rumi*, 480.

*Haqq*] into the tongue of Rumi in a metrical form. Therefore, those who approach the *Masnavi* merely from the perspective of language and poetry, and worse, those who, failing to recognize their limits, dare to criticize and object, remain deprived of its lofty spiritual meanings.”<sup>153</sup> He goes on to provide examples from the *Masnavi* to support this position. Also, another point of contention for Avni Konuk is the criticism directed at the *Masnavi* due to its inclusion of sexually explicit stories. He counters these critiques by stating: “These are masterfully constructed traps meant to draw the common folk toward the One Reality and toward inner meanings.”<sup>154</sup>

Konuk further claims that the only difference between the Qur’an and the *Masnavi* lies in their languages, Arabic and Persian, respectively, and that both express the same truth. In this context, he cites ten traditional reasons previously offered in support of this argument.<sup>155</sup> It is also evident that Konuk was impressed by the works of the orientalist Reynold A. Nicholson, whose studies on Rumi he praises. He says, “It is admirable for an orientalist unfamiliar with Eastern religion, Sufism, and the path of spiritual journeying to dedicate such effort.”<sup>156</sup> However, for him, due to this unfamiliarity, Nicholson makes specific errors, which he identifies and responds to. A final issue of significance for Konuk is the frequent mentioning of the unity of being as pantheism. “Because Orientalists interpret the *wahdat al-wujud* as a philosophy of pantheism,” he writes, “they also consider statements about *wahdat al-wujud* in the *Masnavi* in this same light, and regard Rumi as a great philosopher belonging to this school of thought.”<sup>157</sup>

<sup>153</sup> Ahmed Avni Konuk, “Mukaddime” in *Mesnevî-i Şerîf Şerhi I*, 29.

<sup>154</sup> Konuk, “Mukaddime”, 32.

<sup>155</sup> Konuk, “Mukaddime”, 35.

<sup>156</sup> Konuk, *Mesnevî-i Şerîf Şerhi*, 49.

<sup>157</sup> Konuk, *Mesnevî-i Şerîf Şerhi*, 50.

In the translation of the first 18 couplets, what is striking is that Konuk takes less initiative in the translation. That is, if the words in the source language, Persian, exist in the target language, Turkish, the author seems to prefer to use the same words. For example, in the first couplet,<sup>158</sup> Avni Konuk renders Persian *hekayat mi-konad* (is telling a story) as Turkish *hikâyet ediyor* (is telling a story), preserving the loanword *hikâyet* (tale). By contrast, the 1942 translation uses the native Turkish verb *anlatıyor* (“is telling”). Or, in the 14th couplet<sup>159</sup>, the Persian word *bihush* (senseless) appears in the same utterance in Avni Konuk’s translation of the couplet as *bîhûş*, whereas in the 1942 translation it is rendered into Turkish as *akılsız* (“mindless”). In this, undoubtedly, the fact that Avni Konuk’s translation reflects Ottoman Turkish, where Persian words are used more, plays a role. Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that the commentaries are read by Mevlevi and general Sufi readers who are already accustomed to hearing the recitation of the *Masnavi*.

### Tahir Olgun

Another commentator on the *Masnavi* in the Republican period, Mehmed Tahir Olgun, also known as Tahirü’l-Mevlevî (1877-1951), was one of the last representatives of a long tradition of commentaries on the *Masnavi* and was always part of the cultural environment that developed around Es’ad Dede, just like Avni Konuk. His life shows both a reflection of the state-religion relations that transformed in the process of modernization and the stance of a Sufi against this transformation. In this respect, Tahir Olgun was discontent with the new regime’s secularization policies.

His connection to the Mevlevi order was partly through his family. His father, Hacı Mustafa Saffet Bey, was a Mevlevi dervish. In his youth, Tahir Olgun attended the neighborhood school, thanks to his grandmother’s encouragement. He expresses that the

<sup>158</sup> The full couplet in English: Listen to the reed how it tells a tale, complaining of separations.

<sup>159</sup> Only to the senseless is this sense confided: the tongue hath no customer save the ear.

significant step in his spiritual journey was his attraction to Rumi and the Mevlevi order, which grew from his study of the *Masnavi*.<sup>160</sup> He regularly attended the lessons of Mehmed Es'ad Dede on the *Masnavi* at Fâtih mosque during Ramadan. In these meetings, he was showing his translations of Hafez's *Divân* to Es'ad Dede.<sup>161</sup> When he was 16 years old, he obtained a permission (*icâzetnâme*) from Mehmed Es'ad Dede to be *Mesnevîhân*.<sup>162</sup> Revnakoğlu said these lines for Tahir Olgun:

We used to hear, in the mosques of Islam, after the late Mehmed Es'ad Dede Efendi, the masterly expositions of *Masnavi* recitation which bore extraordinary characteristics and possessed a classical form unique to himself and to his kind, only in Tâhirü'l-Mevlevî. In the blessed mouth of this most perfect heir and exemplar, there was a distinction which even his predecessors had not attained, this is precisely the aspect that will carry our longing and deprivation into eternity.<sup>163</sup>

His formal initiation (*intisâb*) into the Mevlevi order happened in 1894. He was taken to the Yenikapı Mevlevi Lodge by Mehmed Es'ad Dede. Es'ad Dede stated that while he had permission to perform *zikr* and *sema*, Olgun would receive spiritual grace (*feyz*) from Shaykh Celâleddîn Efendi, not from him.<sup>164</sup> Shortly after his initiation into the Mevlevi order, he undertook the pilgrimage by ship via Egypt. During this journey, he visited various lodges and tombs. Under the guidance of Es'ad Dede, he benefited from conversations with several prominent figures in Cairo, Medina, and Mecca. When he was back, he went into spiritual seclusion (*çile*) at the Yenikapı Mevlevi Lodge, which customarily lasts 1001 days, ending in 1898. Later, around 30 years after his affiliation, he received another authorization (*icâzetnâme*) from Abdülhalim Çelebi, conveyed through Ahmed Remzi Efendi, the Shaykh of

<sup>160</sup> Şentürk, *Tâhir'ül-Mevlevi: Hayatı ve Eserleri* (İstanbul: Nehir, 1991), 11.

<sup>161</sup> Şentürk, *Tâhir'ül-Mevlevi*, 9.

<sup>162</sup> Alim Kahraman, "Tâhirülmevlevî" *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (İstanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı Yayınları, 2010), 407-40

<sup>163</sup> Revnakoğlu, *Revnakoğlu'nun İstanbul'u: İstanbul'un İç Tarihi, Fatih*, vol.1, 72.

<sup>164</sup> Şentürk, *Tâhir'ül-Mevlevi*, 12.

the Üsküdar Mevlevi Lodge. This authorization permitted him to wear the *destar* (turban) specifically for *Mesnevi*hâns.<sup>165</sup>

Besides his roles within the Mevlevi order, Tahir Olgun had a diverse career. He decided to earn his living independently rather than staying permanently in a lodge cell. About 5-6 months after finishing his seclusion (*çile*), with the approval of his Shaykh Mehmed Celâleddîn Efendi, he opened a second-hand bookstore named “*Tâhir Dede Kütüphanesi*” in Bayezid, Istanbul, using books he had collected and brought from the Hajj and Cairo. His goal with publishing was to bring forgotten works by Mevlevi elders back into circulation. He taught the history of Islamic civilization at the *Dârülhilâfe* madrasas. After the madrasas were closed by the 1925 law, he was appointed as a Turkish and rhetoric teacher at the Istanbul Imam-Hatip School (Islamic vocational school).<sup>166</sup>

He became the *Mesnevi*hân at Fâtih mosque in 1925, although he had been teaching the *Masnavi* there since 1923.<sup>167</sup> The reason was that he immediately wanted to obtain a special permission to be able to wear his turban after the ban on it by the Hat Revolution in 1925, causing unrest among the religious people of Turkey.<sup>168</sup> By the law dated 2 September 1341 (1925) and numbered 2415, all civil servants were ordered to wear a Western style headgear, and a decree issued in the meantime exempted civil servants such as imams and preachers. Even though Tahir Olgun obtained the permission, he was arrested and sent to Ankara to be judged by the Independence Tribunals (*İstiklâl Mahkemeleri*), which were to suppress the opposition of the Republic and its reforms.<sup>169</sup> One of the accusations was his membership in *Teâlî-i İslâm Cemiyeti*, an Islamic community originally devoted to religious instruction. Olgun

<sup>165</sup> Şentürk, *Tâhir’ül-Mevlevi*, 12, 13, 34.

<sup>166</sup> Şentürk, *Tâhir’ül-Mevlevi* 15, 61, 82.

<sup>167</sup> Şentürk, *Tâhir’ül-Mevlevi* 36-37.

<sup>168</sup> Şentürk, *Tâhir’ül-Mevlevi*, 39.

<sup>169</sup> Şentürk, *Tâhir’ül-Mevlevi*, 41.

had cut off his ties with the organization prior to its politicization, but the inclusion of his name on the original membership lists was used against him as evidence.<sup>170</sup> He was also accused of having distributed a few copies of İskilipli Âtîf Hoca's pamphlet named "Imitation of Franks and the Hat" (*Frenk Mukallidliği ve Şapka*), a condemnation of Westernization and the hat. Tahir claimed they were circulated in his bookstore prior to the book being banned and without any political agenda.<sup>171</sup> He was sent together with other religious leaders to Ankara on 25 December 1925 to stand trial before the Independence Tribunal. During his trial on 26 January 1926, he defended himself on the grounds that he was against the use of religion for political purposes and had not committed any subversive action. Despite the fact that the prosecutor requested his internal exile according to Article 23 of the Criminal Code, he was released.<sup>172</sup>

One of his earliest published works was *Mir'at-i Hazret-i Mevlânâ* (The Mirror of His Excellency Mevlânâ), released in July 1899. Later, his public lectures on Rumi's *Masnavi*, delivered at the Fâtih Mosque in Istanbul, were compiled and published as *Mesnevi Dersleri* (The *Masnavi* Lessons) beginning in 1949.<sup>173</sup> In addition to these, he authored a wide range of works across genres, including his memoir *Matbuat Âlemindeki Hayatım* (My Life in the World of Publishing), the historical treatise *Asr-ı Saadette Müslümanlığın Medeniyete Hizmetleri* (Islam's Contributions to Civilization in the Age of Bliss, referring to the Prophet Muhammad's time), and a rhetorical manual titled *Hitabet Dersleri* (Lectures on Oratory) and commentaries on key works of classical Ottoman poetry.<sup>174</sup> Despite being dismissed from his position at the Imam Hatip school (Islamic vocational school), he continued teaching at *Dârüşşafaka*, albeit for some time without official authorization.<sup>175</sup> He began giving the

<sup>170</sup> Şentürk, *Tâhir'ül-Mevlevi*, 32, 43.

<sup>171</sup> Şentürk, *Tâhir'ül-Mevlevi*, 44.

<sup>172</sup> Şentürk, *Tâhir'ül-Mevlevi*, 44.

<sup>173</sup> Şentürk, *Tâhir'ül-Mevlevi*, 92.

<sup>174</sup> Such as Bâkî's *Kaside* and *Mersiye* (odes and elegies), Taşlıcalı Yahya's *Mersiye*, Nedîm's *Kaside*, and Sünbülzâde Vehbî's *Tannâne Kasîdesi* (The Melodic Ode).

<sup>175</sup> Şentürk, *Tâhir'ül-Mevlevi*, 44.

*Masnavi* lectures in 1948, with permission from the state, in the Süleymaniye Mosque. He also held regular *sohbet* (discussions) at his home, guiding students and visitors. He passed away in June 1951 after suffering from prostate issues.<sup>176</sup> According to Revnakoğlu, Tahir Olgun feared dying before completing the commentary he was writing on the third volume of the *Masnavi*: “His greatest fear and concern was to depart this world without finishing the third volume of the *Masnavi*. He would always say, ‘I constantly pray, my God, grant me a little more life so that I may complete this!’ But it was not destined. He feared it greatly, and it came upon him.”<sup>177</sup>

### **Tahir Olgun’s criticism of the translation of the *Masnavi* (1942)**

Olgun’s letters to Nafiz Uzluk show not only his critical attitude towards Veled Çelebi’s translation but also his own apprehension of the *Masnavi*. According to a letter sent to Nafiz Uzluk, Uzluk asked Tahir Olgun to criticize Feyzullah Sacit Ülkü’s 1945 translation of the *Masnavi*, which only comprehended the first volume and was published three years after the Ministry of Education’s publication, criticizing the 1942 translation. Based on Olgun’s response, Uzluk, to encourage him, had reminded Olgun of the criticism he had written in 1922 to the critics of Abdullah Cevdet (1869-1932) on Islam, who was one of the founders of CUP.

Yes, such a text was once written and appreciated by discerning readers of the time. Even Abdullah Cevdet told this humble writer that it was both persuasive and eloquent. But in those days, there were people who could read and understand such writings. *But now...*<sup>178</sup>

Then he shows his busy schedule as an excuse. “Except these”, he says, and quotes from the *Masnavi*: “When the crows pitch their tents on Bahman (January) / the nightingales hide themselves and are mute.” It is evident that he identifies himself with the nightingale, but what

<sup>176</sup> Şentürk, *Tâhir’ül-Mevlevî*, 56.

<sup>177</sup> Revnakoğlu, *Revnakoğlu’nun İstanbul’u: İstanbul’un İç Tarihi, Fatih*, vol.1, 70.

<sup>178</sup> Tahir Olgun, a letter sent to Nâfiz Uzluk in 30.04.1946, in *Mevlevî Mektupları: Feridun Nâfiz Uzluk’a Gönderilen Mektuplar*, eds., Yakup Şafak ve Yusuf Öz (İstanbul: Tekin Yayınevi, 2013), 151. (Emphasis is mine).



could he mean here by the crow? In his own *Masnavi* commentary, Olgun provides the following commentary for the couplet and its subsequent: “Just as it is the season of roses that inspires the nightingale to sing, and the rising sun that awakens the sleeper, it is the presence of receptive souls -those endowed with inner capacity (*erbâb-ı istidad*)- that prompts the nightingales of truth to speak. In their absence, with no one capable of understanding what is spoken, such people of wisdom fall silent and feign sleep.”<sup>179</sup> Considering Tahir Olgun’s reaction to the cultural reforms of the Republican period, it is possible to speculate that through the allegory of the crow, he is criticizing something -perhaps the founding cadres themselves, or those who viewed Rumi as a Turkish humanist- who, in most cases, were the same group of people.

Another striking point in Tahir Olgun’s letters to Nafiz Uzluk concerns the question of authority and authorship in translating the *Masnavi* (1942). He states sarcastically that it was the duty of Veled Çelebi to defend the *Masnavi*: “When someone like Veled Çelebi, a direct descendant of Rumi and the last to occupy his spiritual seat, exists, it should be his duty alone to respond to criticism of the *Masnavi* translation, especially when his own work is under attack and errors are being attributed to him.”<sup>180</sup> In another letter dated 17.08.1946, Tahir Olgun continues to complain about Veled Çelebi to Nafiz Uzluk. At the time, someone named Muhammed Şahin, most likely a pseudonym, wrote a book called *Mesnevi’nin Tenkidi* (The Critique of the *Masnavi*), criticizing the *Masnavi*.<sup>181</sup> According to the letter, Nafiz Uzluk had asked Tahir Olgun to write a critique of this book, which he wrote eventually.<sup>182</sup> He states that

<sup>179</sup> Tâhir-ul-Mevlevî, in Mevlânâ Celâlüddin-i Rûmî, *Mesnevi*, translated and commented by Tahir-ul-Mevlevî (İstanbul: Selâm Yayınları, 1963), 151.

<sup>180</sup> Tahir Olgun, a letter sent to Nâfiz Uzluk in 30.04.1946, in *Mevlevî Mektupları*, 152.

<sup>181</sup> Muhammed Şahin, *Mesnevi’nin Tenkidi* (İstanbul: Güven Basımevi, 1946).

<sup>182</sup> Tahir Olgun firstly wrote *Mesnevi’nin Eski ve Yeni Mu’terizleri* [*The Old and New Critics of the Masnavi*] (İstanbul: Tecelli Matbaası, 1946). Then Muhammed Şahin responded with a new book *Mesnevi’nin Tenkidini Beğenmeyene Cevap* [*A Response to Those Who Disapprove of the Criticism of the Masnavi*] (İstanbul: Güven Basımevi, 1947). Finally, Tahir Olgun wrote *Mesnevi’nin Yeni Mu’terizine İkinci Cevap* [*A Second Response to the New Critic of the Masnavi*] (İstanbul: Rıza Koşkun Matbaası, 1947).

he wants to see the book first, then he might write. However, he also blames Veled Çelebi, who was “wealthy, well-established, and even a deputy,” for not speaking out against the critics while he himself was struggling to make a living. He emphasizes that it is disrespectful for “poor and humble dervishes” like himself to be responsible for upholding the spirit of the Mevlevi order, particularly since a well-known and esteemed individual who had previously held the “post of Rumi” is still alive and able to react.<sup>183</sup>

In their correspondence with Nâfiz Uzluk, Tahir Olgun asserts that translating the *Masnavi* is no more feasible than translating the Qur’an -an assertion that aligns with broader debates on the translatability of sacred or sacred-like texts in the early Republican period.<sup>184</sup> He writes:

I do not believe that the Qur’an or the marrow of the Qur’an the (*Masnavi*) can be translated into Turkish using *fabricated words* merely for the sake of *the modern language*. Just as the Qur’an requires interpretation rather than translation, so too does the *Masnavi* require not only a prose or poetic translation but also extensive commentary (*şerh*) and explanation (*izah*). One who has not comprehended the meanings and truths it contains will understand nothing from mere translation.<sup>185</sup>

Here, Tahir Olgun emphasizes that without deep interpretive labor and familiarity with Sufi hermeneutics, any attempt to translate the *Masnavi* risks diverging from the text’s spiritual and metaphysical essence. Moreover, his criticism of “fabricated words” points to his discomfort with the Turkish Language Reform and its potential consequences for rendering classical Islamic texts into a radically modernized Turkish idiom.

His concern about the form and content of the 1942 *Masnavi* translation becomes more vivid in a personal anecdote he shares in the same letter. A former student of his visits him:

<sup>183</sup> Tahir Olgun, a letter sent to Nâfiz Uzluk in 17.08.1946, in *Mevlevî Mektupları*, 157.

<sup>184</sup> In order to read this discussion in detail, see M. Brett Wilson, *Translating the Qur’an in an Age of Nationalism: Print Culture and Modern Islam in Turkey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2014).

<sup>185</sup> Tahir Olgun, a letter sent to Nâfiz Uzluk in 30.04.1946, in *Mevlevî Mektupları*, 152.

Also in the same letter, he says “Since the fashion of Turkism, not Turkishness, came into being, almost everyone was eager to find a Turkish origin word and use it whether it was appropriate or not”.

Tahir Olgun, a letter sent to Nâfiz Uzluk in 30.04.1946, in *Mevlevî Mektupları*, 154.

“When I was in school, you had made us love Rumi and his *Masnavi* so much. When the translation came out, I bought and read it, but I was utterly disillusioned.” Olgun empathizes with the young officer, admitting that he, too, had examined the translation and found it indistinguishable in style and presentation from a Gospel translation, which is why he did not purchase it.<sup>186</sup> In a different letter, he again recalls this memoir, but this time he also says his response to his former student, “Son, it’s not the *Masnavi*’s fault, it’s the one who made her that way!”<sup>187</sup> What surprised him even more was learning that the original version belonged to Veled Çelebi, but that it had been “corrected” (or rather, “tampered with,” as Tahir Olgun implies) by Abdülbâki Gölpınarlı. He expresses his astonishment: “There can be no doubt that Veled Çelebi would understand his grandfather’s work better than Abdülbâki Bey. So how could he consent to having his painstaking translation altered by another hand?” This rhetorical question encapsulates his dismay. He emphasizes that, despite his flaws, he would never permit anyone to interfere with his work, even if it meant turning down a financial gain.<sup>188</sup>

### **Tahir Olgun’s commentary**

In the preface to Tahir Olgun’s *Masnavi* commentary, one of the leading scholars of the time, Ali Nihad Tarlan, addresses the youth of Konya, stating that Olgun had composed the text in a manner accessible to younger generations, and expresses his gratitude for this contribution. This is followed by another foreword by conservative thinker Nurettin Topçu.<sup>189</sup> In his own introductory remarks, Tahir Olgun’s religious tone is immediately evident. He emphasizes that virtue is encouraged through hadiths and Qur’anic verses and presents Rumi’s composition of the *Masnavi* as part of this broader moral and spiritual tradition. Unlike Avni

<sup>186</sup> Tahir Olgun, a letter sent to Nâfiz Uzluk in 30.04.1946, in *Mevlevî Mektupları*, 152.

<sup>187</sup> Tahir Olgun, a letter sent to Nâfiz Uzluk in 23.01.1946, in *Mevlevî Mektupları*, 145.

<sup>188</sup> Tahir Olgun, a letter sent to Nâfiz Uzluk in 30.04.1946, in *Mevlevî Mektupları*, 152.

<sup>189</sup> Ali Nihad Tarlan, “Tebrik ve Teşekkür” in *Şerh-i Mesnevî* by Tahir’ül-Mevlevî, (İstanbul: Şamil Yayınevi, 1963), 3-4.

Konuk, however, he does not describe the *Masnavi* as being transmitted directly from the Divine (*al-Haqq*) to Rumi. Still, similar to Konuk, Olgun underlines the importance of meaning over literal expression in the *Masnavi*, and defends the inclusion of sexually explicit stories, arguing they should not be condemned when viewed in this interpretive light.<sup>190</sup> Before concluding his introduction and beginning the commentary, Olgun offers the following remark:

I must also point out that some ignorant and half-highbrow people keep referring to ‘Rumi’s philosophy.’ What they fail to understand is that Rumi was not a philosopher, but a Sufi. The *Masnavi* speaks not of philosophy but of the truths of Sufism. The foundation of philosophy is reason, whereas that of Sufism is transmission. Since minds differ, philosophy contains everything from dogmatic certainty to skeptical doubt. In Sufism, although minor differences may arise due to individual capacities, all Sufi masters are united on essential matters.<sup>191</sup>

Similar to Avni Konuk, Tahir Olgun tends to preserve Persian vocabulary. However, what stands out in his renderings is a distinctly explanatory manner, which aligns with his view that the *Masnavi* requires commentary rather than mere translation. For instance, in the 11th couplet<sup>192</sup> he writes: “*Onun makam perdeleri, bizim nûrânî ve zulmânî perdelerimizi —yani, vuslata mâni olan perdelerimizi— yırtmıştır.*” [Its strains have torn our luminous and dark veils — that is, our veils that hinder ultimate union.]<sup>193</sup> The parenthetical gloss here shows the commentary tendency already in his translation of the couplets. Moreover, the adjectives “*nûrânî*” (luminous) and “*zulmânî*” (dark/tenebrous) do not exist in the source text. This shows that Olgun adds interpretive qualifiers that steer the reader toward a specific understanding, which makes his translation carry the features of free translation. This pattern can be seen in other couplets and becomes even clearer when he introduces words absent from the source text. In the 4th couplet<sup>194</sup>, Olgun adds the word “*vatan*” (homeland), showing his Sufi-mystical

<sup>190</sup> Tahir-ul-Mevlevî, *Mesnevi*, 21

<sup>191</sup> Tahir-ul-Mevlevî, *Mesnevi*, 22.

<sup>192</sup> The full couplet in English: The reed is the comrade of every one who has been parted from a friend: its strains pierced our hearts.

<sup>193</sup> In the original Persian text, it literally says “Its [the reed’s] veils tore our veils”, even though Nicholson translated the second *perde* as “heart”. The Persian word *perde* both means strain in music and veil/curtain.

<sup>194</sup> Everyone who is far from his source longs for the time when he was united with it.

interpretation. Likewise, in the 7th couplet<sup>195</sup>, he adds “*kudret*” (power/ability), again not in the original. Taken together, compared with the 1942 translation and with Konuk’s version, Olgun’s translation is more explanatory.

In conclusion, this chapter illustrates another remembrance of the *Masnavi* within the post-1925 anti-Sufi climate. Ahmed Avni Konuk’s commentary, composed between 1929 and 1937, viewed the *Masnavi* through Ibn Arabi’s concept of the unity of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*), which was the main tendency in the tradition of *Masnavi* commentary since Ankaravî. Konuk aimed to address accusations of pantheism while also drawing parallels to modern science. However, the committee, including Nafiz Uzluk, decided not to publish this commentary, citing concerns about its sources and its focus on Ibn Arabi’s ideas. Tahir Olgun portrayed Rumi more as a Sufi than a philosopher. He criticized the 1942 translation as being similar to a Gospel translation, implying that the concerns caused by language reform weakened the spiritual depth of the *Masnavi*, and explained his approach, claiming that *Masnavi*, like the Qur’an, requires commentary, not just translation. His letters to Nafiz Uzluk demonstrate not only that he was unhappy with the state-sponsored translation of the *Masnavi* but also with Veled Çelebi İzbudak’s stance. Both commentators, with roots in the Es‘ad Dede lineage and authority in *Mesneviḥânlık*, sought ways to keep the *Masnavi*’s ‘quasi-sacred’ authority in their commentaries, in an environment where Sufi lodges and institutions like *Mesneviḥânlık* no longer existed after 1925. However, it is worth noting that with the easing of the state’s position on religion following the CHP’s 7th Congress in 1947, Tahir Olgun began giving his lessons on the *Masnavi* in the Süleymaniye Mosque that same year. Therefore, I believe that their remembrance of the *Masnavi* signals a complex position between Pierre Nora’s *milieux de mémoire* and *lieux de mémoire*. They preserve the ethos of a milieu with their pre-1925 engagement with the *Masnavi* while also transforming it into a *lieu* by

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<sup>195</sup> My secret is not far from my complaint, but ear and eye lack the light by which it might be apprehended.

responding to the scientific developments or insisting on Rumi's Sufi identity over his presentation as a philosopher. What is certain, there was no single path for the *Masnavi* in the Republic.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis argues that between 1935 and 1951, as responses to nation-state formation, Westernizing and modernizing policies, and anti-Sufi reforms, two interpretations of the *Masnavi* emerged, shaped by the differing engagements of Mevlevi-affiliated figures with these debates. On the one side, there is a translation that emerged under the heavy influence of the “Turkish humanist” project, promoted by Hasan Âli Yücel, the Minister of Culture and Education at the time, and subsequently under his patronage, which was included in the canon of humanist classics. The task of translating the *Masnavi* was assigned to Veled Çelebi İzbudak, the last shaykh of the Konya Mevlevi Lodge, who also said, “I was one of the first founders of the cause of Turkism; I am proud of this.”<sup>196</sup> The task of editing was given to Abdülbâki Gölpınarlı, who was known for his modern-oriented research on Rumi and Yunus Emre and, involved in different political or societal camps. Gölpınarlı claimed the translation in 1951 in his book but removed this part from later publications and remained silent about it, in respect to Veled Çelebi’s memory.

The resulting text represents a distinct recollection of the *Masnavi*, departing from the traditional method of remembering the *Masnavi* in conjunction with its commentaries written by Sufi scholars and the institution of *Mesnevihânlık*. From Nora’s perspective, this type of recollection of the *Masnavi* shows the formation of a *lieu de mémoire* influenced by the socio-political conditions of the period. Additionally, it is worth noting that these individuals, who had been spiritually engaged with the *Masnavi*, were involved in the translation project, which was going to be in the formal education curriculum of Turkish schools. Therefore, it is essential to keep in mind that these individuals’ intentions and the state’s aspiration to produce a Turkish-humanist canon may represent different agendas. After all, the *Masnavi*, a quasi-sacred

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<sup>196</sup> İzbudak, *Tekke’den Meclis’e Sıradışı Bir Çelebi’nin Hatıraları*, 153.

religious text, could be appropriated by an anti-Sufi state, with the undeniable role of these agents.

The key point to emphasize is that this text is a prose translation. The more the text was layered with commentaries, including Sufi philosophy, such as the theological interpretations of Ibn Arabi, the more sacred the text remains. Considering that they were aware of Avni Konuk's commentary prior to the translation project and its subsequent non-publication by the state, it is possible to argue that stripping the text of the commentary also reduces its religiosity to some extent. Notably, Abdülbâki Gölpınarlı included “explanations” (*açıklamalar*) for some couplets at the end of every section. However, the style of these explanations was different from the traditional commentaries, which shows their hesitancy to leave some of the couplets unexplained. Additionally, the translation was disliked by some other Mevlevi-affiliated figures, which led to further debates. Tahir Olgun, a writer of a traditional commentary, called this resulting text “as if a gospel”. The reason for this kind of dislike might seem to be an issue concerning the style at first glance. However, there were also varied ideological or religious agendas inherent in their dislike.

The commentaries of Avni Konuk and Tahir Olgun, on the other hand, represent the classical or traditional remembrance of the *Masnavi*, which was developed under the significant influence of Sufi doctrines and the institution of *Mesnevihânlık*. Avni Konuk's commentary is significant because it sparked debates around Ibn Arabi and, for this reason, was not published. Indeed, Abdülbâki Gölpınarlı stated in 1953 in his book that “there is no need for it to be published.”<sup>197</sup> Tahir Olgun's commentary emerged when his lecture notes, given as a *Mesnevihân* at the Süleymaniye Mosque, began to be published in instalments in 1949, and

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<sup>197</sup> Gölpınarlı, *Mevlânâ'dan Sonra Mevlevîlik*, 145.



was later published in three volumes in 1949-50. His commentary is also a continuation of the classical commentary tradition.

These two students of *Mesnevi*han Mehmed Es'ad Dede were able to accept the new order to a certain extent, though not as much as Veled Çelebi İzbudak did, and were even subject to criticism at times. Avni Konuk engaged in debates about Ibn Arabi while he was alive, but he was an officer in the post office. Some researchers view the “silence” of such Sufi figures as part of a reaction and say that they did not openly rebel against the customs they saw in the Sufi tradition.<sup>198</sup> Tahir Olgun's case represents a clearer opposition to the reforms. After all, he was someone who, after the hat revolution, looked at himself in the mirror wearing a new hat and did not like what he saw, and was judged for opposing the hat revolution.<sup>199</sup> Thus, it is necessary to consider the role of these individuals' own orientation in their perception and recollection of the *Masnavi*, and sometimes in their dislike of other *Masnavi* texts. What is also important is that all these different *Masnavi* texts emerged in the presence of the state's anti-Sufi and anti-religious discourse, with the contribution of people who deeply admired Rumi and his *Masnavi*.<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> Barkçin, *Avni Konuk*, 201.

Öztürk, *Osmanlı'dan Cumhuriyet'e Geçişte Tasavvufi İrfânî Gelenek: Ahmed Avni Konuk Örneği*, 50.

<sup>199</sup> Şentürk, *Tâhir'ül-Mevlevî*, 41.

<sup>200</sup> Among some academics in Turkey, these differing approaches to the *Masnavi* continue to rebound. A careful reading of Selçuk University's publication *Mesnevî'nin Türkçe Şerhleri* (2023), a compilation book of articles written by various authors, each of whom introduces a commentary, reveals that there is a consistent tone of respect towards Avni Konuk and Tahir Olgun, and a critical detachment towards Abdülbâki Gölpınarlı. According to them, Gölpınarlı's rejection of the *wahdat al-wujud* framework, they argue, detached the *Masnavi* from its Sufi epistemology, turning what was meant to be an exegetical work into a scholarly introduction. In contrast, Avni Konuk and Tahir Olgun are often celebrated for writing “with love,” intertwining Rumi's teachings with Ibn Arabi's metaphysics. For instance, Bekir Çınar, in his article on Avni Konuk, openly expresses admiration for the commentator and, after citing Gölpınarlı's criticisms of Avni Konuk's commentary, concludes that “it is not possible to agree with such critiques,” without further elaboration. Likewise, Avşar and Zeybek argue that Gölpınarlı's dismissal of Konuk's commentary as a failed work shaped by Ibn Arabi's ideas is too limited to encompass the breadth of Konuk's commentary knowledge. They instead describe Gölpınarlı's own *Masnavi* commentary, which is not so different from the 1942 translation, as “colorless and lacking in spiritual insight,” contrasting it with Konuk's mastery, which, they contend, successfully united scholarship and mystical knowledge in the classical exegetical tradition.

Ziya Avşar and Betül Zeybek, “Türkçe Mesnevî Şerhlerine Umumî Bir Bakış,” 11–45; Bekir Çınar, “Ahmed Avni Konuk'un Mesnevî-i Şerif Şerhi,” 571–587; Volkan Yalab, “Abdülbaki Gölpınarlı ve Mesnevî Tercemesi ve

The 1942 translation of the *Masnavi*, along with translations of other Eastern and Western classics, was a contribution to the creation of a Turkish humanist canon. The assertion that Rumi was ethnically Turkish, along with the reconstruction of Rumi as a cultural entity in the nation-state, reshaped the presentation of the *Masnavi* to the Turkish audience and public opinion. According to Nafiz Uzluk, this state-sponsored translation reached its fifth edition by 1966, with 10,000 copies printed for each edition.<sup>201</sup> The presentation of *Masnavi* in this humanist way can be interpreted as a successful project, just as it was with Rumi. Today, when some people in Turkey are asked about Rumi, it is not surprising to hear that he is regarded as a humanist Turkish mystic. The *Masnavi*, as Rumi's masterpiece, is similarly perceived more as a work of literature, with fables from the *Masnavi* selected as reading examples in some formal school textbooks. However, in today's high school literature textbooks, Rumi is discussed under the section of Turkish-Islamic or Sufi literature. The perception or memory of the *Masnavi* thus changes and is reproduced in different ways depending on the conditions of various periods.

This thesis has various implications. Nora says that “by studying the logic of the historical construction and development of such symbols, we hope to arrive at a more adequate understanding. We shall see what no longer works and on what basis renewal is possible.”<sup>202</sup> The *Masnavi* itself appears, therefore, as a site to trace the development of memory and modernity in Turkey. As Franklin Lewis points out, within the Ottoman Mevlevi tradition, Rumi's teachings were transmitted not as a systematic philosophical corpus but through lived experience, from shaykh to disciple.<sup>203</sup> With the closure of the Sufi lodges, this transmission

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Şerhi,” 588–600; all in *Mesnevi'nin Türkçe Şerhleri*, edited by Ziya Aşar, Mehmet Özdemir, and Abdullah Uçar (Konya: Selçuk Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2023).

<sup>201</sup> Feridun Nafiz Uzluk, “M. Bahaeddin Veled Çelebi İzbudak,” in *Toplu Makaleler: Mevlâna, Mevlevilik ve Türk Dili*, edited by Ahmet Aciduman, Berna Arda, and Ayten Altıntaş (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 2017), 474.

<sup>202</sup> Nora, “Conflicts and Divisions,” in *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past, Vol. 1*, 23.

<sup>203</sup> Lewis, *Rumi*, 536.

gave way to new ways of textual and ideological reinterpretation. The commentaries and the translation covered by this thesis, therefore, are not only responses to political and cultural reforms but also attest to a broader change in the way cultural memory is reimagined and remediated over time.

A work such as the *Masnavi*, which is historically quasi-sacred, can change context depending on the reactions of figures belonging to different communities/orders to modernity, Westernization, and ultimately the state's anti-Sufi, anti-religious policies. Therefore, a religious text can be interpreted in various ways depending on the circumstances of such social, political, and cultural contexts. This thesis attempts to contribute to the field by suggesting that there is not only a single, static quasi-sacred text, the *Masnavi*, but also various interpretations of the *Masnavi*, which leads us to consider the plurality of the *Masnavi* texts throughout history. In this way, it is more accurate to approach this kind of text, which holds religious, literary, and historical significance for various individuals and communities. At the same time, this thesis also claims to contribute to the field by demonstrating the diverse responses of Mevlevi-affiliated individuals to the developments in the early Turkish republican period, through their engagements with the *Masnavi*. Again, the engagements of Mevlevi-affiliated individuals with the state and with secularism, religion, modernity, and Westernization were varied rather than uniform. Being aware of this enables us to move beyond the reductionist accounts of the history of Sufi orders in Turkey, which tends to read all in a dichotomy between modernity and religion.

Of course, a more comprehensive study could be produced by conducting a detailed comparison of these commentaries, which number more than ten volumes, and which require a historical understanding of Sufi epistemology or the philosophy of Ibn Arabi. However, beyond the need for a much more comprehensive study, the focus of this thesis is largely on understanding the impact of the modernizing policies of the new nation-state on the *Masnavi*.

From another perspective, if a detailed network map is drawn up of the various profiles of Mevlevi figures of the period, who were active in different fields both within and outside the state, ranging from positions in the state bureaucracy to university and literature, this could add a new dimension to the view of this issue. For example, determining whether there was any conflict between the different Mevlevi Lodges to which these Mevlevi figures belonged, or whether the distinct cultures of these Mevlevi Lodges had any effect on their understanding of the *Masnavi*, could further develop this study. However, it would require another study that exceeds the scope of this thesis.

The *Masnavi* thus emerges not as a single text but as a moving target of collective memory, alternately secularized and sacralized under shifting regimes of cultural authority. What this study intends to emphasize is that the *Masnavi* is not a fixed text, but a kind of *lieu de mémoire* that continually adapts to different historical conditions. These two types of remembrances of the text, religious commentaries and secular translations, demonstrate how cultural memory, religion, and modernity remain complex in the history of Turkey's intellectual life.

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# APPENDIX

Verse No.	Name of the Work					Original in Persian
	The <i>Masnawi</i> by Veled Çelebi İzbudak and Abdülbâki Gölpınarlı	Transliteration of the Manuscript of Veled Çelebi İzbudak's Translation	<i>Mesnevî-i Şerîf Şerhi</i> by Avni Konuk	<i>Şerh-i Mesnevî</i> by Tahir Olgun	<i>The Mathnawi of Jalaluddin Rumi</i> by Reynold A. Nicholson	
1	Dinle, bu ney nasıl şikâyet ediyor, ayrılıkları nasıl anlatıyor:	Dinle bu ney nasıl şikâyet ediyor. Ayrılıklardan hikâye eyliyor.	Bu neyi dinle, nasıl şikâyet ediyor? Ayrılıklardan hikâyet ediyor.	Şu ney'in nasıl şikâyet etmekte olduğunu dinle. Onun nevâsı ayrılık hikâyesidir.	Listen to the reed how it tells a tale, complaining of separations —	بشنو این نی چون حکایت می‌کند از جدایی‌ها شکایت می‌کند
2	Beni kamışlıktan kestiklerinden beri feryadımdan erkek, kadın.. herkes ağlayıp inledi.	Şöyle ki beni kamışlıktan kestiklerinden beri feryadımdan erkek kadın inlediler	Ney der ki, beni kamışlıktan kestikleri zamandan beri, nâlemnden erkekler ve kadınlar inlemişlerdir.	Beni kamışlıktan kestiklerindenberi feryâdımdan erkek ve kadın müteessir olmakda ve inlemektedir.	Saying, “Ever since I was parted from the reed-bed, my lament hath caused man and woman to moan.	کز نیستان تا مرا بیریده‌اند در نفیرم مرد و زن نالیده‌اند
3	Ayrılıktan parça parça olmuş, kalb isterim ki, iştiyak derdini açayım.	Ayrılıktan parça parça olmuş sîne isterim ki iştiyak derdinin	Ayrılıktan pâre pâre sîne isterim, tâ ki iştiyâk derdinin şerhini söyleyeyim.	İштиyak derdini şerhede bilmem için, ayrılık acıları ile şerha olmuş bir kalb isterim.	I want a bosom torn by severance, that I may unfold (to such a one)	سینه خواهم شرحه شرحه از فراق

		şerhini ona söyleyeyim.			the pain of love-desire.	تا بگویم شرح درد اشتیاق
4	Aslından uzak düşen kişi, yine vuslat zamanını arar.	Asıl vatanından uzak düşen herhangi kimse vatanında bulunduğu zamanları yine arar.	Her bir kimse ki, o kendi aslından uzak kaldı, tekrar kendi vâslının zamânını ister.	Aslından, vatanından uzaklaşmış olan kimse, orada geçirmiş olduğu zamanı tekrar arar.	Every one who is left far from his source wishes back the time when he was united with it.	هر کسی کاو دور ماند از اصل خویش باز جوید روزگار وصل خویش
5	Ben her cemiyette ağladım, inledim. Fena hallilerle de eş oldum, iyi hallilerle de.	Ben her türlü cemiyette nâleler eyledim. Fena hallilerle de hoş hallilerle de birleştim.	Ben her bir cem'iyette nâle edici oldum. Kötü halliler ile, iyi hallilerin eşi oldum.	Ben her cemiyette, her meclisde inledim, durdum. Bedhâl (kötü huylu) olanlarla da, hoşhâl (iyi huylu) olanlarla da düşüp kalkdım.	In every company I uttered my wailful notes, I consorted with the unhappy and with them that rejoice.	من به هر جمعیتی نالان شدم جفت بد حالان و خوش حالان شدم
6	Herkes kendi zannınca benim dostum oldu ama kimse içimdeki sırları araştırmadı.	Herkes kendi zannınca benim dostum geçinir. Ama benim içimdeki esrarımı araştırmaz.	Her bir kimse, kendi zannı cihetinden benim yârim oldu. Benim bâtınımın esrârını istemedi.	Herkes kendi anlayışına göre benim yârim oldu. İçimdeki esrârı araştırmadı.	Every one became my friend from his own opinion; none sought out my secrets from within me.	هر کسی از ظن خود شد یار من از درون من نجست اسرار من

7	Benim esrarım feryadımdan uzak değildir, ancak (her) gözde, kulakta o nur yok.	Benim esrarım feryadımdan uzak değildir. [O feryadın içindedir.] Ancak [her] gözde kulakta o nur yoktur.	Benim sırrım nâlemnden uzak değildir; fakat gözün ve kulağın o nûru yoktur.	Benim sırrım, feryâdımdan uzak değildir. Lâkin her gözde onu görecektür, her kulakda onu işitecek kudret yokdur.	My secret is not far from my plaint, but ear and eye lack the light (whereby it should be apprehended).	سر من از ناله‌ی من دور نیست لیک چشم و گوش را آن نور نیست
8	Ten candan, can da tenden gizli kapaklı değildir, lâkin canı görmek için kimseye izin yok.	Ten candan can tenden gizli kapalı değildir. Lakin canı görmek için kimseye izin yoktur.	Ten candan, can da tenden örtülmüş değildir; fakat bir kimseye, canı görmeye izin yoktur.	Beden ruhdan, ruh bedenden gizli değildir. Lâkin herkesin, ruhu görmesine ruhsat yoktur.	Body is not veiled from soul, nor soul from body, yet none is permitted to see the soul.	تن ز جان و جان ز تن مستور نیست لیک کس را دید جان دستور نیست
9	Bu neyin sesi ateştir, hava değil; kimde bu ateş yoksa yok olsun!	Bu (ney)'in sesi ateştir. Hava değildir. Kimde bu ateş yok ise yok olsun.	Bu nâyın sesi ateştir ve hevâ değildir. Her kimde bu ateş yok ise, yok olsun.	Şu ney'in sesi âteştir; havâ değildir. Her kimde bu âteş yoksa, o kimse yok olsun.	This noise of the reed is fire, it is not wind : whoso hath not this fire, may he be naught!	آتش است این بانگ نای و نیست باد هر که این آتش ندارد نیست باد
10	Aşk ateşidir ki neyin içine düşmüştür, aşk coşkunluğudur ki	(Ney)'in içine düşen aşk ateşidir. (Mey)'in içine	Aşkın ateşidir ki "ney"e düştü. Aşkın kaynağıdır ki, meye düştü.	Neydeki âteş ile meydeki kabarış, hep aşk eseridir.	'Tis the fire of Love that is in the reed, 'tis the	آتش عشق است کاندلر نی فتاد

	şarabın içine düşmüştür.	düşen aşkın coşmasıdır.			fervour of Love that is in the wine.	جوشش عشق است کاندر میفتاد
11	Ney, dosttan ayrılan kişinin arkadaşı, haldaşdır. Onun perdeleri, perdelerimizi yırttı.	Ney dosttan ayrılanların arkadaşdır. Onun perdeleri bizim perdelerimizi yırttı.	Ney, bir yârenden munkatı' olan her bir kimsenin musâhibidir. Onun perdeleri bizim perdelerimizi yırttı.	Ney, yârenden ayrılmış olanın arkadaşıdır. Onun makam perdeleri, bizim nûrânî ve zulmânî perdelerimizi —yânî, vuslata mâni olan perdelerimizi— yırtmıştır.	The reed is the comrade of every one who has been parted from a friend: its strains pierced our hearts.	نی حریف هر که از یاری برید پرده‌هایش پرده‌های ما درید
12	Ney gibi hem bir zehir, hem bir tiryak, ney gibi hem bir hemdem, hem bir müştak kim gördü?	Ney gibi hem zehir hem tiryak kim gördü ney gibi hem hemdem hem müştak kim gördü.	Ney gibi bir zehir ve bir tiryâk kim gördü? Ney gibi bir dost ve bir müştâk kim gördü?	Ney gibi hem zehir, hem panzehir; hem demsâzi hem müştâk bir şeyi kim görmüştür?	Who ever saw a poison and antidote like the reed? Who ever saw a sympathiser and a longing lover like the reed?	همچو نی زهری و تریاقی که دید همچو نی دمساز و مشتاقی که دید
13	Ney, kanla dolu olan yoldan bahsetmekte, Mecnun aşkının	Ney kanlı yolun vakalarını söyledi. Mecnun aşkının kıssalarını söyler.	Ney, kan dolu olan yolu söylüyor; Mecnûn'un aşkının kıssalarını söylüyor.	Ney, kanlı bir yoldan bahseder, Mecnûnâne aşkları hikâye eyler.	The reed tells of the Way full of blood and recounts stories of	نی حدیث راه پر خون می‌کند

	kıssalarını söylemektedir.				the passion of Majnún.	قصه‌های عشق مجنون می‌کند
14	Bu aklın mahremi akılsızdan başkası değildir, dile de kulaktan başka müşteri yoktur.	Bu aklın mahremi akılsızlardan başkası değildir. Dilin müşterisi de kulaktan başkası değildir.	Bu aklın mahremi bî-hûşun gayri değildir; zîrâ kulaktan başka dile müşteri yoktur.	Dile kulakdan başka müşteri olmadığı gibi, mâneviyyâtı idrâk etmeye de bîhûş olandan başka mahrem yoktur.	Only to the senseless is this sense confided : the tongue hath no customer save the ear.	محرم این هوش جز بی‌هوش نیست مر زبان را مشتری جز گوش نیست
15	Bizim gamımızdan günler, vakitsiz bir hale geldi; günler yanlışlarla yoldaş oldu.	Gam zamanımızda günlerimiz vakitsiz geçti. Günler dahi iniltileyle yoldaş Oldu.	Günler gamımızın içinde akşam oldu; günler yanmalar ile yoldaş oldu.	Gamlı geçen günlerimiz uzadı ve sona ermesi gecikdi. O günler, mahrûmiyetden ve ayrılıktan hâsıl olan ateşlerle arkadaş oldu —yânî, ateşlerle, yanmalarla geçti—.	In our woe the days (of life) have become untimely: our days travel hand in hand with burning griefs.	در غم ما روزها بی‌گاه شد روزها با سوزها همراه شد
16	Günler geçtiyse geçip gitsin; korkumuz yok. Ey temizlikte nazir olmıyan, hemen sen kal!	Günler geçtiyse bırak geçsin pervâ değildir. Ey paklıkta naziri olmayan heman sen kal.	Eğer günler gitti ise, de ki: Git korku yoktur; sen kal ey o kimse ki, senin gibi pâk yoktur.	Günler geçip gittiyse varsını geçsin. Ey pâk ve mubârek olan insân-ı kâmil; hemen sen var ol!..	If our days are gone, let them go — 'tis no matter. Do Thou remain, for none is holy as Thou art!	روزها گر رفت گو رو پاک نیست تو بمان ای آن که چون تو پاک نیست

17	Balıktan başka her şey suya kandı, rızkı olmıyana da günler uzadı.	Balıktan başka her şey suya kanar. Rızkı olmayana da günler uzar	Her kim balığın gayridir, o sudan tok oldu; ve o kimse ki rızksızdır, onun günü geç oldu.	Balıktan başkası onun suyuna kandı. Nasibsiz olanın da rızkı gecikdi.	Whoever is not a fish becomes sated with His water; whoever is without daily bread finds the day long.	هر که جز ماهی ز آبش سیر شد هر که بی‌روزی است روزش دیر شد
18	Ham, pişkinin halinden anlamaz, öyle ise söz kısa kesilmelidir vesselâm.	Ham pişkinin halinden anlamaz. Öyleyse sözü kısa kesmelidir vesselam.	Pişmişin hâlini, çiğ olan hiç anlıyamaz. Binâenaleyh söz kısa gerektir vesselâm.	Ham ervâh olanlar, pişkin ve yetişkin zevâtın hâlinden anlamazlar. O halde sözü kısa kesmek gerekdir vesselâm.	None that is raw understands the state of the ripe: therefore my words must be brief. Farewell!	در نیابد حال پخته هیچ خام پس سخن کوتاه باید و السلام