Notes on Persian Love Poems

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Arthur Guy tells us that Háfiz, Persia's great fourteenth century poet known as the "Tongue of the Invisible World," found his way into Latin in 1680: Meninsky got out the translation in that year. A hundred more years went by and European versions appeared, mostly fragmentary. A number were, Guy says, "beautiful but unfaithful" — but at least that of von Hammer in 1812 attracted the attention of Goethe, who wrote:

If you call the words a “bride,”

And for the “groom” say soul,

You have a wedding known to those,

Who this Háfiz extol.

“Great is the divergence,” continues Guy, “between the purest mysticism with its symbols, predicated on a transcendental solution to the problem of existence, which some find there — and the cynical epicureanism strongly tainted with pessimism, which others do not hesitate to take literally in his verses. Is Háfiz

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the poet of sensual love — of woman, wine, nature, unbelief? Or rather of Divine Love, of the joys of contemplation, of self-surrender, and a purified faith?”

Showing the wit with which Hafíz manipulates his symbols, Guy then repeats the often-described confrontation between Tamerlane the earth-shaker and Háfiz the poet. The reason for the interview, which, if it happened at all, took place in 1387 when Tamerlane first entered Shiraz, was the poet's having written these lines:

If but that lovely Shiráz maid

Would take my heart in her fair hand,

For that black mole of hers I'd trade

Bukhárá town and Samarqand.

The king summoned the poet and roared at him: “What! With my sword I have conquered most of the inhabited world. With the plundered spoils of a thousand realms I have adorned my two capitals of Samarqand and Bukhara. And was all this so that a miserable insect like you should offer my cities up for a single mole on the cheek of a girl?”

"Sire," answered Háfiz, “it is this very prodigality that has reduced me to my present straits.”

“A lower degree cannot comprehend a higher although all are in the same of creation . . . Degree is the barrier . . .” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says. The animal is at our side but his degree of existence keeps him out of our world. A child's degree keeps him from understanding what constitutes an adult mind: you need make no effort to hide the nature of adulthood from him, his degree of consciousness automatically keeps this a well-guarded secret. No need, for example, to hide private documents from an infant. In the same way many things all about us are secret simply because of our own limitations. The afterlife is one of them. The love of God as passionately felt by the mystics is another. The secret itself is visible everywhere, to every eye: “Every eye” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá once said, speaking of the promise that every eye should see the returned Christ: “But not the blind.”

Since degree is the barrier, those who have progressed farther than others in God's love are hard put to it to initiate the rest. This seems to be what the mystics, the súfís, the lovers of God, mean by their eternal symbols and cryptic pronouncements. They try, this way and that, to communicate (while yet hiding) what they see mirrored in their hearts, and feel running in their veins. They write, even monotonously, about “the secret.” They hopelessly try to embody their knowledge in the vocabulary of human love, since none other will serve: “Often the same ode,” R. A. Nicholson says, “will entrance the sinner and evoke sublime raptures in the saint.”

Typical of countless other verses, this fragment from the great Jalál-i-Dín Rúmí explains itself:

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Our desert has no end, our heart no bed.

World within world is with Form's image sealed;

Which of the images to us is wed?

If on the path you see a severed head,

Rolling along its way to our wide field,

Ask it, Oh ask it what we never said,

And let it tell the secret we concealed.

Rúmí's own love for God pours out in his verses to Shams-i-Tabríz, "weird figure, wrapped in coarse black felt, who flits across the stage for a moment and disappears . . ." This man was a Persian, so often on the wing that they nicknamed him Parandih, the Flier. Shams, who is likened by Nicholson to Socrates, felt he was the chosen mouthpiece of the Lord — for the mystic's love makes him identify with the Divine, and his insights make him seem arrogant. He used to call his learned disciples "oxen and asses." His theme was ecstacy and rapture, and he spread everywhere "the enchanted circle of his power."

Nicholson goes on to quote von Kremer: "The real basis of their [the sufis'] poetry is a loftily inculcated ethical system, which recognizes in purity of heart, charity, self-renunciation, and bridling of the passions, the necessary conditions of eternal happiness ... a pantheistic theory of the emanation of all things from God, and their ultimate reunion with Him . . . and frequently the thought. .. that all religions and revelations are only the rays of a single eternal sun; that all Prophets have only delivered and proclaimed in different tongues the same principles of eternal goodness and eternal truth which flow from the divine Soul of the world."

One night when Rúmí and Shams were seated together, there was a knocking at the door and a voice calling. Shams rose and said, "I am called to my death." He left Rúmí, and walked out to the darkness, where seven murders fell on him with their knives.

It was in memory of him that Rúmí founded the order of dancing dervishes who spin and spin down the centuries, copying the motions of the planets and listening to music sung by the stars — all because of that long dead love.

Browne explains that to the súfis the doctrine of Divine Oneness (tawhid) means not only, as Islám has it, that "There is no god but God" — but that "there is nothing but God." God "is Pure Being, and 'what is other than God' . . . only exists in so far as His Being is infused into it, or mirrored in it. He is also Pure Good ... and Absolute Beauty: whence He is often called by the mystics in their pseudo-erotic poems, 'the Real Beloved.' " Beauty desires to be known, Browne continues, and a thing can be known only by its opposite. Thus Evil "is a necessary consequence of this manifestation [of Eternal Beauty] so that the Mystery of Evil is really identical with the Mystery of Creation, and inseparable there-form. But Evil is merely the Not-Good, or . . . the Non-Existent."

About here in a commentary of this type the usual procedure is to mention John of the Cross, but for a change we shall remind the reader of Catherine of

Siena or any number of others resembling those saints them. George Herbert, in

England's seventeenth century, was still another mystic to whom God was a lover, seeking and being sought; he writes:

My God, what is a heart,

That Thou shouldst it so eye, and wooe,

Powring upon it all Thy art,

As if that Thou hadst nothing els to do?

Or this:

How sweetly doth My Master sound!

My Master!

As amber-greese leaves a rich scent

Unto the taster:

So do these words a sweet content,

An orient all fragrancie, My Master.

Or again:

When first Thy sweet and gracious eye

Vouchsafd ev'n in the midst of youth and night

To look upon me, who before did lie

Weltring in sinne;

I felt a sugred strange delight,

Passing all cordials made by any art,

Bedew, embalme, and overrunne my heart,

And take it in.

Manifestations of God are not as the mystics — for Manifestations in the Bahá'í context are "something not ourselves" and differ from us in kind, the mystics only in degree — but Their writings do take on a mystical cast, and whatever Divine love is, They are "the supreme embodiment of all that is lovable." The Báb exchanged this love with Bahá'u'lláh, Whom He never met. Nabíl, Their chronicler, says: "Such love no eye has ever beheld, nor has mortal heart conceived such mutual devotion. If the branches of every tree were turned into pens, and all the seas into ink, and earth and heaven rolled into one parchment, the immensity of that love would still remain unexplored, and the depths of that devotion unfathomed."

This kind of ecstasy and single-minded love has determined many a believer's life and death. "Many a chilled heart, O my God," writes Bahá'u'lláh, "hath been set ablaze with the fire of Thy Cause ..." Among the Persians, one who caught on fire was a young thug, the refuse of the streets. He was

standing in a

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crowd, watching some believers being pushed and mocked and tortured along to their graves. What he saw in their faces we do not know; only that he broke from the crowd, ran to the executioner and shouted, “Take me with them — I am a Bábí too!” Another was the son of a high-ranking officer. He embraced the new Faith, saying that to him the world was carrion. He is the one who, to drums and trumpets, walked through a screaming mob with lighted candles burning in his wounds. Passing there he chanted from Persian odes. When they I heard him sing, the executioners laughed. One of them said, "Why not dance?" And so as he died he danced, raising his arms, snapping his fingers, moving his red body to a song that Rúmí had written for Shams-i-Tabríz:

In one hand the winecup, in one the Loved One's tress,

So would I dance across the market place!

It was such martyrdom that years afterward ‘Abdu’l-Bahá described, almost re-enacted it for Juliet Thompson (who wrote about it in her diary) and other Bahá’ís on a veranda in Montclair. As He spoke He was transfigured for an instant; and lifting His arms, “With that godlike head erect, snapping His fingers high in the air, beating out a drum-like rhythm with His foot,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá danced a wonderful brief dance and “triumphantly” sang the martyr’s song. Then He sank back into His chair. “Tears welled in my eyes,” Juliet says, “blurring everything. When they cleared I saw a still stranger look on His face. His eyes were unmistakably fixed on the Invisible. They were filled with delight and as brilliant as jewels ... This was what the Cause meant... This was what it meant to ‘live near Him’! ... So low that it sounded like an echo He hummed the Martyr's Song. ‘See,’ He exclaimed, ‘the effect that the death of a martyr has in the world. It has changed my condition.’ ”

There was another among thousands changed by this love. He was born in Káshán, Persia, about 1879. His family moved to the capital — Tihrán — and his father became Mayor of that city. The boy received a good schooling which included French and English. Because of some inward prompting he used to trot after his English teacher on the street, asking him words and carefully writing them down. When the boy was fourteen, however, his father died. This was a disaster in the Persia of that day; a widowed mother, an older brother and various other relatives, some influential, could not compensate the loss. More studies, and working as a tutor in his uncle’s home, and becoming aware of the condition his country was in, increased his restlessness. His father had prophesied that one day the boy would become a Bahá’í; at this time, however, seeing what the Islamic hierarchy had done to Muslim Persia, he believed religion was only for the ignorant mass. When some of his sophisticated young friends began attending secret meetings, held late at night in rooms giving onto the back alleys of Tihrán, the young man came along to expose the Bahá’í teachers, to show how wrong they were and win his friends

back to more mundane pursuits. As the

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months passed, he found himself listening. Some were travelers, with current news of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, far away in the prison city of ‘Akká on the Mediterranean Sea. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá's own Father, still a prisoner and exile, had very recently died, left a world which had scorned and rejected Him. But He had made a compact with His followers that they should turn to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as the Center of His Covenant with them. Here was the Master, with strength and love and a world vision of hope. Here now was a Cause to live and die for; a point toward which a youth could direct his heart.

The young man, who had gone on a journey by then and was in the town of Senna, wrote a poem in which he offered his life to the great Son of Bahá’u’lláh and begged permission to be there with Him in the prison city. The lines of this ode show his familiarity with Persian mystic poetry and also his ecstatic love. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá understood. He did not turn the youth away. His answer, the original of which, illuminated by a Persian artist, now hangs on a wall in New Hampshire, said to praise not ‘Abdu’l-Bahá but Bahá'u'lláh, the Manifestation of God. This is the text:

He is the All-Glorious of the All-Glorious!

0 thou who art drunk with the wine of the Covenant!

Thy verses were full of savor; they were running waters, a fount of learning, and most sweetly eloquent. Reading them cheered and refreshed us. From the consuming blaze of that yearning heart a flame was kindled in ours and our whole being responded and caught fire.

Light up Love's fire,

Throw on the pyre

All things that be.

Then with one step (it is not far)

Enter the place where the lovers are.

The way to praise this servant is to adore the Holy Threshold, to worship humbly at the doorstep of the one Lord. This is perpetual grace; this is heavenly bestowal; this is achieving the uttermost goal; this is “the Sadrah tree that marks the boundary” (i.e., the Manifestation of God). Speak thou of this almighty Height, this wondrous Station, open thy lips in praise of Him. Pluck thy strings on the theme of servitude of Him, and with the song of this bondage awaken thou a world.

.. These are the cleansing waters; this is the flaming up of splendor; this is the laudable grace; this is the paradise of all delights; this is bounty pressed down and running over; this is ‘Adbu’l-Bahá’s most burning wish — the supreme desire of this embodiment of indigence, of nothingness . . .

Al-Bahá be upon thee.

He signed it with His initials, Ayn-Ayn, and affixed His seal, that reads: “O my companion, the prison.” An older person was present, when the youth's Tablet was read. “It is too great a Tablet for him,” this person com-

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mented. “There must be some mistake.” Yet the name was on it, in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá's own unerring hand. And although the young man was unaware of it then, he would in after years indeed help mightily to awaken a faraway world to the message of Bahá’u’lláh. (He would be known in that world as Ali-Kuli Khan. His other name, Nabíli'd-Dawlih, was a title given him, for services to his country, by the Sháh. But his pen name was Ishti‘ál - Aflame.)

Many a time, before he finally did get to ‘Akká, he must — being literary-minded — have remembered these lines from Háfiz:

There'll be no end to longing till I find my heart's desire

Either I'll win my own Heart's Life or lose my life entire.

But this I know, though I be dead, my body will burn on:

Open my grave when I am gone

And see my shroud on fire.

Such thoughts must have moved him when he set out, one snowy afternoon, left his home with no good-byes and walked away through the city gates. Part of his journey was on foot to the Caspian, by ship to Baku, then steerage from some Caucasian port to Constantinople, and finally at long last, to the prison of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. It is a long time ago now, and he and Those he sought have left this earth, but the letters and verses are still here; the love is still alive.

Ode from Senna

by Ali-Kuli Khan

Poem written to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá by Ali-Kuli Khan (Ishti’ál Ibn-i-Kalántar) in Senna, capital of Persian Kurdistan, during the month of Safar, 1317 A.H. Translated by Marzieh Gail.*

Students of mystic Persian love poetry will recognize the classical style and terminology, noting the Joseph story from the Qur an, the lover's madness and ill-repute, the lover's disregard of reason, the Zoroastrians' secret drinking place (wine was forbidden to Muslims), the symbolic wine, the Majnun story, the Beloved's tangled hair, the Beloved's likeness to a cypress tree, the author's pen-name in the closing lines. The Sun of Truth stanza refers to the author's recognition of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá's station, then recently conferred by Bahá'u'lláh. M.G.

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ODE FROM SENNA

Now that I am tied and tangled in Thy floating hair,

Am become Thy half-crazed lover, with peace of mind at war,

Life in hand I stray and wander, looking for Thee everywhere.

Thou art Egypt's beauteous Joseph, I the wife of Potiphar;

Like that grayhair who bought Joseph, I would suffer for Thy face.

When the pangs of longing for Thee struck the knocker on my door,

From within me faith and reason fled their home.

Then in the wineshop of Thy love I drank my own heart's core.

All for Thee, O spirit's guide, I emptied out this room —

Now behold me mocked and mad and half seas over for Thy face.

In the Magians' secret tavern, O sweet the brimming glass,

O sweet it is to seize Thy snaring hair.

O sweet for me to weep out my blood as along love's way I pass,

Sweet to receive this cup from Thee with no outsiders there,

And my eyes athirst since time began, drinking in Thy face.

Except for Thee, for neither world have I a care,

From any words save Thine, from all desire free,

A distracted lover I — of men's lives I've no share,

I, but the dust beneath Thy feet, O swaying cypress tree,

For me there is no place of flowers except Thy face.

O good is this tossing and turning on the sickbed of love,

Sickness that never will heal, but by love's crying.

Though reason warn me as to the perils of love,

Against the anguish of love I am not one to be sighing —

I, bound from time's dawning to the hyacinth hair that frames Thy face.

When like Majnum I fled to the desert of the mad,

I set the sand on fire with my burning sighs.

I put men out of my heart but Thee, and was glad,

And my cupped hands brimmed with tears from weeping eyes,

And I thought, let all men know that I love Thy wondrous face.

The day I filled my glass with Thy love's wine,

This tavern-corner gloried over Heaven's dome.

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Yes, the envy of Heaven would be this ruined heart of mine

Should Thy bright brow shed its rays into my lowly room —

Therefore my soul's eye never leaves Thy matchless face.

As the Sun of Truth rose out of this earthly world of His,

He opened up before Thee His secret treasure-store.

The effulgence of Thy beauty flashed from that world into this,

And from nothingness, the Divine Decree stood humbly at Thy door,

And said: “Obedient to Thy wish and will, I bow before Thy face.”

O people of Bahá, the Covenant hath come, be glad!

He is the balm for every aching heart,

And now is the earth in His Father's splendor clad.

When He unto my soul a welcome did impart,

It answered: “Save me! for I drown in the ocean of Thy face.”

Save me, great Mystery of God, I faint and fall.

Save me, without Thee I only burn and sigh.

Save me, I am as nothing in the eyes of all,

Save me, in every city: “He is mad!” they cry,

Of this lost, distracted wanderer in the desert of Thy face.

O Thou, O Thou from whose sunbright brow the moon hath drawn her rays,

The thought of whom illumines many a weary lover's soul,

But to behold Thy face I have no dream in all my days.

Then fulfill my hopes, in grace, grant me leave to reach my goal,

A desert wanderer I, and yearning for the garden of Thy face.

Without Thee, only a prison to me is Heaven and its flowers,

Without Thee, only a place of thorns, the blissful bowers.

O Thou whose brow so moonlight fair is the envy of spring hours,

In his love for Thee,

He is torn free,

Is Isti‘ál, from all that be,

And again and again,

Cries this refrain:

I am lost in the glory of Thy face.

Ishti‘ál Ibn-i-Kalántar [Ali-Kuli Khan]

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