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The Dear One of Nasaf: 'Azīz Nasafī's "Epistle on Love"

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Abstract

'Azīz Nasafī, the prominent 13th century Muslim mystic of Iran and Central Asia, was one of the first exponents of Islamic esoteric thought to draw the attention of western scholarship. Here, an introduction and translation of his impressive Persian "Epistle on Love" are presented. This epistle forms an important part of the author's Book of the Perfect Man (*Kitāb Insān al-Kāmil*).

Keywords

Azīz Nasafī, Stages of Worldly Love, Clue to the Divine Love

*Were there no heart, where would love make its home?
And were there no love, of what use the heart?*

'Azīz Nasafī, the prominent 13th century Muslim mystic of Central Asia and Iran, was one of the first exponents of Islamic theosophy and esoteric thought to attract attention in the West. Already in 1665, a Latin translation (via Turkish) of portions of his *Maqṣad-i Aqṣā* appeared. The work later came to the attention of the renowned German theologian F. A. G. Tholuck, who quoted it in his 1821 work *Sufismus sive Theosophia Persarum Pantheistica*. This was soon followed by E. H. Palmer's paraphrase of the *Maqṣad* (see Palmer 1867). It is, therefore, rather surprising that full translations of some of his works into French and English were published only in 1984 and 2002 respectively (cf. al-Nasafī 1984; Ridgeon 2002). The renewed interest in this Muslim thinker has resulted in a flurry of editions and studies of his writings, capably noted in the bibliographies of both Orsini-Sadjeđ (1997) and Landolt (Enc. Ir.). Nasafī has been praised for the simplicity and beauty of his writing style.

The couplet quoted above is from Nasafī's *Risāla fī'l-'Ishq*, "Epistle on Love", which is translated below in full, based on the edition of Marijan

Molé (Ridgeon 1962). This epistle, written, as the author himself informs us, in Shiraz, traces the lover's progress through four stages: Inclination (*mayl*), Desire (*irādat*), Affection (*maḥabbat*), and Love (*'ishq*). Having discussed these preliminaries, for fear of reproach, Nasafī refrains from discussing true love (*'ishq-i ḥaqīqī*), i.e., the love of the divine, and, instead, chooses to write on worldly love (*'ishq-i majāzī*), in the hope that his ruminations on the latter may provide a clue about the former.

Nasafī describes three stages of worldly love. In the first, the lover constantly waits upon the beloved, but is yet unable to bear a vision of her. The second sees the lover's heart becoming empty of all else save the beauty of the beloved. He now identifies himself with her and is no longer affected by the physical presence of his beloved. The third stage is arrived at when the beauty of the beloved overcomes the totality of the lover's heart, effacing all else, including the lover himself.

The *Risāla fī'l-'Ishq* is the seventh epistle in Nasafī's *Kitāb Insān al-Kāmil*, "The Book of the Perfect Man", which is perhaps more correctly titled *Kitāb Manāzil al-Sā'irīn* (Landolt, Enc. Ir.). Like all of Nasafī's extant works, it is in Persian. The translation adopts the convention of referring to the lover in the masculine and the beloved in the feminine. This is simply to avoid the possibility of confusion arising from the repetition of single-gendered pronouns for both subject and object, which hinders readability in English. Persian pronouns, of course, do not reflect gender. The paragraph numbering follows that provided by the editor of the Persian text.

EPISTLE ON LOVE

In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

All praise is due to God, the Lord of the worlds and the afterlife of the pious. May blessings and peace be upon the prophets and saints, the best of His creation, and on their descendants and their excellent and purified companions.

1) Now to begin: The weakest of the weak and servant of the poor, 'Azīz b. Muḥammad al-Nasafī says: A group of dervishes (may God increase their number) made a request of this helpless one saying, "You must compose a treatise on love (*'ishq*), explaining what affection (*maḥabbat*) and love (*'ishq*) are and how many stages¹ there are of love. I consented to their request and entreated God, the Most High, for help and assistance in order that He may protect me from errors and mistakes, "And verily, He is all powerful and only He can give real an-

¹ *Martaba* (pl. *marātib*) is translated variously as "stage" or "category", depending on the context.

swers”.

Chapter 1

ON INCLINATION (*mayl*),

DESIRE (*irādat*), AFFECTION (*maḥabbat*) AND LOVE (*‘ishq*)

2) Know (may God exalt you in both worlds) that there are four categories of Rememberers (of God): some are at the stage of inclination, some at the stage of desire, some at the stage of affection and some at the stage of love. All Sufis who attain the ascent (*‘urūj*), fall into the fourth category. As long as the Rememberer doesn't reach the fourth stage, it is not possible for his soul to attain the ascent. I will record each of these four stages with an explanation so that the Remembering Pilgrims may know at which stage each of them is.

3) The first stage is that, in which the Rememberer is physically in the place of solitude (*khalwat khāna*) and remembers (the Name of God) with his tongue, but his heart is buying and selling in the bazaar. The effect of this remembrance is less, though it may not be completely without benefit.

4) The second stage is that, in which the Rememberer remembers (the Name of God), but his heart becomes absent (and is distracted) from it. It is only with difficulty that he renders his heart present. Most Rememberers are at this stage, in which they render their hearts present with difficulty.

5) The third stage is that, in which the remembrance predominates the heart and takes it over entirely. The Rememberer is unable not to utter the remembrance. If he wishes to busy himself for a while with some external affairs that may be pressing, it is only with difficulty that he is able to do so. Just as in the second stage he renders his heart present with difficulty, in the third stage (it is only with difficulty that) he busies his heart with external affairs. This is the station of proximity. Only a few of the Rememberers reach this station. One who has had a beloved, at some time will understand these words, because the lover is constantly remembering his beloved, and he cannot be without the remembrance of her. Every day he wishes to praise her to others, or have others praise her before him. If he wishes to busy himself with other speech or work, it is only with difficulty that he is able to do so.

6) The fourth stage is that, in which the One Remembered (*madhkūr*) predominates the heart. Just as in the third stage the remembrance predominated the heart, in the fourth stage, the One Remembered becomes predominant in the heart. There is a great difference between the Name of the Beloved predominating the heart and the Beloved be-

coming predominant in the heart.

7) Oh Dervish! A time comes, in which the lover becomes so immersed in the Beloved that he even forgets the Name of the Beloved. Indeed, he forgets everything except for the Beloved.

8) As these preliminaries have been made known—now, know that the first stage is the station of inclination, the second stage is the station of desire, the third stage is the station of affection and the fourth stage is the station of love.

9) Oh Dervish! The first petition of all that become desirous of someone's companionship is called 'inclination'. When inclination increases and becomes extreme, that extreme inclination is called 'desire'. When desire increases and becomes extreme, that extreme desire is called 'affection'. When affection increases and becomes extreme, that extreme affection is called 'love'. Thus, love turns out to be extreme affection, affection turns out to be extreme desire and so on...

10) Oh Dervish! If this dear traveller (love) comes as your guest,² cherish her! Cherishing this traveller is such that you must render the abode of your heart empty for her (to dwell in), because love doesn't tolerate sharing. And if you do not render it empty, she herself will render it empty.

*Rubā'ī*³

*Love came and became like the blood in my veins and under my skin
So that it made me empty and filled me with the Friend
The Friend took over every particle of my existence
Naught but a name is left of me, all else is She*

11) Oh Dervish! Love is the pilgrims' *burāq*⁴ and the wayfarers' mount. All that the intellect may have amassed in fifty years, love burns in a moment, rendering the lover pure and clean. The pilgrim cannot progress as far on his journey with a hundred forty-day retreats (*chilla*) as a lover can in a twinkling of the eye, because the intellectual is in this world, whereas the lover is in the next world. The sight of the intellectual on the journey cannot even reach the foot of the lover.

12) Oh Dervish! I cannot write about true love (*'ishq-i ḥaqīqī*) in such a way as it deserves to be written about, for people will come to know of it and take it to be impiety (*kufī*). Rather, I shall write something about

² Read *mehān* as *mehmān*.

³ In the *hazaj akhrab* meter.

⁴ A reference to the mount on which the Prophet Muhammad is said to have flown to the seven heavens during his celestial ascent (*mi'rāj*).

worldly love (*'ishq-i majāzī*) so that the intellectuals may get some clue about (true love).

Chapter 2

ON THE STAGES OF WORLDLY LOVE

13) Know that worldly love has three stages. The first is such that the lover is in remembrance of his beloved every day. He becomes a constant presence in her lane and makes her house the direction for his prayers (*qibla*). Every day he circumambulates the beloved's house and gazes at her door and walls so that, perchance, he may catch a glimpse of her beauty from afar, and so that her vision may comfort his wounded heart and become an ointment for his heart's wounds.

14) But in the meanwhile (the lover discovers) that he can't bear the vision of the beloved because were he to see her, his limbs would begin to tremble, he wouldn't be able to utter a word, and one would fear that he would collapse and become unconscious.

15) Oh Dervish!⁵ Love is a fire which is ignited in the lover. The location of this fire is the heart. This fire reaches the heart by way of the eyes and makes the heart its home.

*Bayt*⁶

*Were there no heart, where would love make its home?
And were there no love, of what use the heart?*

The sparks of this love reach every limb and gradually burn the inside of the lover, rendering him pure and clean until his heart becomes so subtle and delicate that it cannot bear the vision of the beloved because of the extremity of its subtle and delicate nature. Thus, it is feared that with the manifestation of the beloved, it would be annihilated. Moses (upon whom be blessings and peace) was at this station, for when he requested the vision, the Exalted Truth said, "*lan tarānī*," "You cannot see Me".⁷ He did not say, "I will not show Myself to you!"

16) Oh Dervish! It is at this station that the lover prefers separation to union and finds more comfort and repose from separation. Every day, within himself he talks and listens to the beloved. Sometimes the beloved soothes him by her grace, and at those times the lover is in expansion (*baṣṭ*).⁸ Sometimes she is wrathful with him, and at those times

⁵ *Darīsh* in the edition should read *darwīsh*.

⁶ In the *hazaj akhrab* meter.

⁷ Qur'ān, VII: 143. Note Nasafī's understanding of the Qur'ānic passage, which, translated more literally, may read "You will not see me."

⁸ *Baṣṭ* is a technical term indicating a joyful state on the mystic path.

the lover is in contraction (*qabḍ*).⁹ And those who may be present, see this expansion and contraction of the lover but do not know what the reason for them is.

17) Finally, it so happens that the beauty of the beloved finds that the heart of the lover is empty of all else except itself. It occupies the totality of the lover's heart, such that no access remains for anything else. At that time, the lover doesn't even see himself and sees himself to be the beloved. Whether the lover eats, sleeps, comes or goes, he thinks that it is the beloved who is eating, sleeping, coming or going. When the lover finds freedom from the pain of estrangement and the sorrow of separation no longer remains, he gets used to the beauty of the beloved and becomes emboldened. His fear leaves him. That is to say that previously the fear had been that the lover would be annihilated by the manifestation of the beloved. But now that fear is lifted. It becomes such that if he were to see the beloved outside, he would not even turn his head, would remain indifferent and would not be affected, because the one who is within him and has made her home within his heart, is closer than the one who is outside. As the one who is closer dominates the entire heart and has rendered the heart immersed in herself, and as he is familiar and relaxed with that heart, he is not affected nor is he changed by the one outside, who is more remote. He does not even turn toward her. If someone questions whether it is correct that, at this station, he is not influenced by the one outside, wondering why he doesn't turn to the one outside, it is because the one outside and the one inside are the same.

18) Know that some say that the lover is burned by the fire of love and is thus rendered extremely subtle and spiritual. The beauty of the beloved who has made her home in the heart and who has taken over the totality of the heart is also extremely subtle and spiritual. In relation to that which is inside, that which is outside is dense and physical. The spiritual inclines to the spiritual and the physical inclines to the physical.

19) Oh Dervish! It is the opinion of this weak one that when the beauty of the beloved overcomes the totality of the lover's heart in such a way that no access remains for anything else, the lover no longer sees himself. He is entirely the beloved. Thus, he changes when there are more than two people and pays attention when there are two people. It is at this station that seeking ceases and separation and union no longer

⁹ *Qabḍ*, contraction, is the antithesis of *baṣṭ* and indicates a state of sorrow and melancholy.

remain. Fear, hope, contraction and expansion are put to flight.

20) Oh Dervish! One cannot become purified without becoming a lover, and no one reaches a state of purity without becoming purified. Whoever becomes a lover and divulges his love remains soiled and doesn't become purified, because that spark which reaches the heart by way of the eyes is expelled by way of the tongue. Such a half-burned heart remains in the middle of the path, after which that heart is useless—useless in worldly matters, in matters of the hereafter and in matters of the Lord.

21) Oh Dervish! I have composed these three epistles—the Epistle on the Path, the Epistle on Solitary Retreat and the Epistle on Love—in the city of Shiraz at the tomb of the Shaykh of shaykhs, Abū 'Abd Allāh Khafīf (may God sanctify his dear spirit), and all praise is due to God, the Lord of the Worlds.

Seventh Epistle, Completed

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