Na'im: A Baha'i Poet

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Ná'ím:

A Bahá'í Poet

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"In the year 1881," writes Ná'ím, "I declared myself a Bahá'í. In Sidih (or in Furushán, his native town) the word Bábí (as Bahá'ís were generally called) became widely current, and people began to show contempt. Gradually it became impossible for us to come out of our house since people began to say obscene and shameless things; and in those days this affair was the talk of the mosques and of social gatherings. People were excited and wanted to fight and kill. We lived through a year of disgrace and humiliation and bore troubles uncountable and incalculable until the Sayyids (Síní and Nayyir, two merchants descended from Muhammad and both Bahá'ís) returned from their trip.

"Taqí Abul went to their house to visit them. Bahr al-Ulúm, (a mujtahid and therefore an important religious lawyer,) asked him in the mosque 'Why do you go to the house of the Sayyids and become the occasion for the incitement of trouble. Taqí answered severely, 'Zill us-Sultán, (prince-governor of Isfahan) has given them a letter saying that no one should bother them. I too would like a cause for complaint (so that I could ask for such a letter.)' Bahr al-Ulúm excitedly ran up the minaret of the mosque and cried, 'Religion is dying, religion is dying, oh Muslims!' People gathered, and having surrounded Taqí, they beat him excessively and wanted to kill him. Hájj Amin Khán 'Yávar', by throwing water over him, kept him from being killed.

A letter was sent by the Ulamá (or religious leaders) of Furushán to Shaykh Muhammad Báqir, the 'Wolf' (so called for his violent persecution of the Bahá'ís). The latter, having spoken with Rukn ul-Mulk, the representative of the central government, sent two attendants towards Sidih to bring Taqí to the (nearby) city (of Isfahan). News was received that an attendant was coming. Before he arrived they sent to have me brought to the house of Bahr al-Ulúm since Taqí was there and tied up. They said 'Taqí says you led him astray.' I

said, 'He spoke under duress and constraint.'

I were in the midst of this discussion when attendants came in. They were told, 'this man Ná'ím and some others must come to the city with Taqí.' An attendant got up and with great severity tied my shoulder and, raising up Taqí, took us with a crowd of spectators to my house which was very far away. From there they went to the houses of Nayyir, Síná and Sayyid Muhammad, took them too, and brought them tied up to my house.

Someone came from the mayor saying 'Prepare a gift for the attendants and start now for the city.' Bahr al-Ulúm, (probably to prevent such a quick depar-

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ture) immediately sent someone to my house to move us. Men with clubs and sticks walked ahead of us saying 'Move! Move!' and the five of us were bound by the shoulders so closely to one another that we had to step forward simultaneously like a single person. That day there was a Friday market. There was always a crowd but that day especially spectators had gathered from all the villages in the surrounding region. They took us in this surprising condition barefoot and bareheaded, and the streets and roofs were so thronged with spectators that one could not see where the crowd started or ended.

"First, they walked us around the circumference of the village. Then, in the public square at the crossroads, which was a vast space, they took us to the upper storey of a building and tied us to (the upper part of) the columns of the wooden platform which was next to the square. The attendants took up sticks and for two hours beat us as much as they saw fit. After that, at the beginning of sunset these half-dead people, (the other Bahá'ís and I,) were taken to Taqí's house; and throughout the night till morning the attendants continually beat us. So for the fourteen hours of the night, each prisoner could rest only while the other four were being beaten. At the first sign of morning, they led us through the snow, again barefoot. At the gate of the mosque they tied us to poles and beat us on the soles of our feet. Then they took us to my house, shot five chickens they found there, and while they roasted them, they used their sticks on me, though they left the others alone, since there was no hope of getting money from them. Anyhow, in the afternoon notification came from Rukn ul-Mulk, the Governor, 'to bring the criminals to the city.'1

Thus at the age of twenty-five Ná'ím was driven from his village, to which he would never return. He had been born there in the spring of 1856 and, as he i was the only son of his family, his father wanted him to have a good education. He had made progress in Persian and began Arabic, but when he married at the age of fifteen in a famine year he could no longer afford to continue his studies. At first he worked in agriculture, and later a cousin, who was a respected merchant in the nearby city of Isfahan, made Ná'ím his representative in Sidih.

From his early youth Ná'ím composed long poems in all metres; but his greatest pleasure was in composing the short and often amatory poems of the

kind called in Persian 'ghazal'. He wrote:

The ghazal is the most pleasant of the poetic arts,

For in the ghazal, the writer's nature is turned to the Beloved.

As he was deeply religious, most of his early poems honored the Prophet and his descendants, the family of 'Alí. By chance in the same period in the village of Furushán there were two brothers, both poets, with the pen-names Síná and

Abridged from the introduction to the edition of Ná'ím's collected poems, Ahsam ut-Taqvím yá Gulzár-i Ná'ím, ed. and with an introduction by Múhsin Ná'ími and 'Abdul-Husayn Ná'ími, Bahá'í Publishing Trust of India, New Delhi, 1961. My description of Ná'ím's life comes entirely from this very helpful introduction. The title of the collection seems to have been chosen by Ná'ím himself (f. Poem No. 4) and is taken from the Qur'an XCV:4 "Surely We have created man in the most perfect symmetry (ahsani taqvfmin)" and refers to man's nobility and the symmetry of his history.

Nayyir; Ná'ím was soon friends with them. The association of these three poets was an opportunity for them to compare and enjoy each other's works.

Nayyir and Síná were merchants and travelled often. On October 26, 1880, when Síná returned from a trip to Tabríz, a city in the North-West of Iran, he told about his meeting with Mirzá Ináyat 'Alí-Abádí, a man of pleasant manners and entertaining conversation. Síná described the scene for Ná'ím: "As soon as we were seated in one of the rooms of the caravanseray of Tabríz, Mirzá Ináyat entered the building on horseback and dismounted in front of our room. After greeting us and hearing our answer, he came into the room, sat down, and directed his conversation to us: 'Behold, oh descendants of the Prophet! See, I bring to you the good news of the rising of two Great Luminaries in the heaven of the human world, the first of whom shone forth in the year 1844 with the name of "the Qa'im" (the Promised One "Who-shall-arise"), and the second of whom nine years later illumined and made bright the horizons with the name of "the Return of Husayn."' Then, he discussed basic reasons and proofs, and made the charger of eloquence and rhetoric gallop into the arena with the utmost ability and courage. Then he said, 'Listen attentively and willingly while I read to you from the tablets, verses and prayers of the Blessed Beauty, the "Return of Husayn"'. He immediately reached under his arm and brought out a tablet known as the Tablet of the Bell and in a remarkable, fresh, and at the same time awesome voice he began to read; and it is true that all sense, intelligence and awareness left everyone because of that heavenly reverberation and divine melody. After the conclusion of that august book, he recited to us the noble verse from the Quran 'Oh my people, follow Those sent by God.' He kissed that blessed discourse, the Tablet of the Bells, touched it to his forehead as a mark of respect and then gave it to us as a present. Then he mounted and rode off to his destination." 2 When Inayát left the room, a lively discussion started among those who had

heard him and one of the travellers, Sayyid Mirzá, immediately left for 'Akka in Palestine to visit Bahá'u'lláh and determine the truth.

Ná'ím was moved by Síná's description and with great caution began to seek out the Bahá'ís. He and his fellow poets soon felt that they had no choice; they accepted Bahá'u'lláh. Ná'ím gives a shorter account of the consequent persecution in another passage: "In those days when this transient one and four others Were tied, or better joined in a row, and of course with more than five or six thousand onlookers around us throwing stones and shouting obscenity and curses and pouring refuse from the roofs on our heads, we passed through the crowd talking and smiling. My friend said, 'God has tied our hands and has brought us in the midst of this crowd as a proof for all people;' and after a few more steps he said, 'We have become believers united like one person'; again, he said, 'This dominion and glory have been prepared especially for us'; again: 'God has commanded this hurling of water and oil, this cursing and this annoyance only for those he loves:

Ná'ím; ibid; pp. 25-26.

The hunter's nature must be firmly founded

For when facing the lion he will experience a flood.'"3

For a while they remained in prison in Isfahan; then they were set free and the governor told them to leave the city immediately. They had nothing. Not only had all Ná'ím's property been taken, but Bahr ul-Ulúm had declared his marriage invalid; and though his wife had a daughter and two sons by him, she was immediately married to someone else. Yet their loss seemed nothing to what they had gained. Ná'ím later wrote:

Our dealings are with God,

We have committed our labors to God.

Body and life, which were an offering to perishability,

We have sacrificed in the path of the Beloved.

"Power and respect, which were only illusory

We have spent for the condemnation of the wretched.

Money and property which meant envy and pain

We have made an endowment for the oppressive plunderer.

The mud and brick of this passing home.

We have paid for a dwelling in eternity.

We have uprooted our heart from family and household,

We have abandoned kindred and relations;

In the end, we like others must put all a side;

So from the start we have labored on our final task.

In this market, with willing dispositions

We have had joyous transactions with God:

There is no commerce better than this;

This is a commerce in which there is no loss.4

With great difficulty they came to Tihrán. Once, on the way, in extreme hardship they borrowed a single qeran, a small coin, from a dervish. Later, after a long search they found him, returned it, and invited him to the Bahá'í Faith; he accepted.

Ná'ím lived in a garden which in those days was a gathering place for the Bahá'ís of Tihran. He copied Bahá'í books and taught the children of the Bahá'ís; but the Bahá'ís themselves were so poor that he received only a very

Ná'ím, ibid; pp. 39-40.

Ná'ím, ibid; poem no. 122. The editor cites in footnotes Qur'ánic verses which are recalled in the poem: line 1, XL 47 (44) "To God I commit my case." Line 2, IX 112 (111) "God has bought from the believers their selves and their possessions against the gift of Paradise." Line 4, IX 20 "They who have believed, and fled their homes, and striven with their substance and with their persons on the path of God shall be of the highest rank with God: and these are they who shall be happy!" Line 6, IX 24 "Say: If your fathers, and your sons, and your brethren, and your wives, and your kindred, and the wealth which ye have gained, and the merchandise which ye fear may be unsold, and dwellings wherein ye delight, be dearer to you than God and his Apostle and efforts on his Path, then wait until God shall Himself enter on his work: and God guideth not the impious." Line 7, XVI 98 (96) "All that is with you passeth away, but that which is with God abideth. With a reward meet for their best deeds will we surely recompense those who have patiently endured." Line 8, XLI 10 (11) "Then He applied himself to the Heaven which was but smoke: and to it and to the Earth He said, "Come ye, whether in obedience or against your will?" and they both said, "We come obedient." Line 9 XXXV 26 (29) "Verily they who recite the Book of God, and observe prayer, and give alms in public and in private from what we have bestowed upon them, may hope for a merchandise that shall not perish."

small salary as a schoolmaster. Slowly he was able to find jobs teaching Persian and to live more comfortably; and he continued to devote a great portion of his time to Bahá'í work.

Persians have traditionally felt that anything expressed in verse, even the contents of a cook book or medical textbook, was more pleasant to read than

prose; so Ná'ím who had a genuine poetic talent wrote almost all his poetry to explain the Bahá'í Faith. He tried, as he says in one of his poems, to make his soul a tablet and his mind a pen, his eye an inkwell and men his ink. Poetry was in any I case so close to the spirit of the Bábís and early Bahá'ís that they often sang verses while under the most frightening torture. The Bábí, Hájjí Sulayman Khán, whose body had been pierced with wounds into which lighted candles had I been inserted, was mockingly ordered by his executioners to dance. He immediately recited a verse from the great Persian mystic, Jalál ad-Din Rúmí:

In one hand the wine-cup, in the other, the tress of the Beloved:

Such a dance in the midst of the market-place is my desire?

Persian poetry was an ideal instrument for expressing religious ideas. Many centuries before Na'ím Persian poets had developed a system of images which could be used interchangeably for human or divine love, physical or spiritual intoxication, and so on. Therefore, the poet could move easily between the worlds and antiworlds of different realities, seizing a marginal aspect of one image to suggest another image or even to suggest a purely philosophical idea.

Thus the "whirling" of the poet's head from love might suggest a whirling polo ball; the shape of the polo ball might suggest that the Beloved's eyebrow, which was shaped like a polo stick, was causing his head to whirl. All this might in turn suggest some observation on the cruel effect of any love on the lover. Yet despite the delicate alternation between these different worlds an overall congruity of images, and an overall meaning would be preserved throughout the poem.

One of Ná'ím's best poems in the traditional style illustrates this alternation:

Again spring has come, and flowers have come,

The tulip and jasmine and lily and hyacinth.

The king of spring has leaned back upon his throne,

The nightingale like a court preacher sings congratulations.

The cloud has sprinkled water and the wind has swept the world,

Lightning has struck with its sword and thunder pounded its drum.

In the meadow the army of blossoms and flowers

Has formed the battle line of cavalry and infantry;

Then to every side he sent breezes and fragrances

As prophets and messengers,

To say to every dead branch "Arise",

To call every sleeping bird to "Speak".

They travel the roads toward their goals

So that mineral existence may hasten toward the plant,

cf. Nabil, The Dawn-Breakers, Bahá'í Publishing Committee, New York: 1935, pp. 620-1.

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So that all parts of the world of being may be present

In the Presence of his Holiness the Flower

That they may see the word of their Merciful Lord

'How it gives life to bones when they are decayed.'6

The Bahariyyih, another poem on spring, is probably Ná'ím's most successful long poem. It is a "musammat" or "threaded" poem, so called because the final lines of all stanzas rime with each other, and so tie the poem together. This form of poem was used very effectively by early classical Persian poets and had been revived in the 19th century. Ná'ím in fact looks directly to a magnificent poem of the 11th century poet, Manúchihri, for his model. The following three stanzas give some idea of the character of Ná'ím's poem. Many parts of the poem, like the second stanza quoted below, are famous riddles, well known to Persians who have no idea that they were composed by a Bahá'í poet.7

The infant spring has taken on the glory of youth;

Once again the suckling blossom's lips have been weaned of milk,

Once again the trees have become bearing and fruitful.

Time has revealed whatever secrets it had kept;

As if today God's secret had been revealed.

Once again nature, the ruby cutter, has cut its gems,

Once again it has strung cut rubies next to each other in rows,

Once again, strung in rows, they have been knotted with silver,

Once again, knotted with silver, they have been hidden in a box,

That which has been hidden in a box has been named the "pomegranate."

When the sun of your beauty lit up the world,

It taught each person some way of being a hover:

One was like the chameleon, its eyes fixed on the light of the sun,

Another was made into a candle, burning from head to foot,

Still another flew moth-like seeking to burn.

Ná'ím's poetry takes its subjects from an enormous variety of sources. In

some poems he reasons out an argument line after line, while in others he quotes prophecies from the Bible, the Qur'án and the Avesta. He also deals with specific events as in the following poem about 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to America in 1912: 8

The kingdom of Iran sends its congratulations to America

For its good fortune, Saying:

"May the footsteps of the Center of the Covenant

Be welcome in your country."

The sun of the East has come up in the West,

But the East has not therefore become dark,

This last half line is a quotation from the Qur'án XXXVI 78. The poem is no. 185 in Ná'ím, op. cit.

Ná'ím, ibid., p. 163. The poem is forty-one stanzas long. The metre is very close to the metre of Manúchihrí's musammat, the "Sabuhíyyih", Poem No. 63 in A. de Biberstein Kozimirski's Menoutchehri: Poeète persan du onzième siècle, Klincksieck, Paris, 1886. The images of the poem, however, follow closely Manúchihí's "Fall Poem", No. 58 of that collection. I am grateful to Mr. M. Mohandessi for this reference and for many other valuable suggestions about this essay.

Ná'ím, ibid; poem no. 190.

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For the Sign of the true oneness of God,

Who has no substitute or like or companion,

Has made one land of East and West,

Has made one people of the Daylam and the Tajik,

And has given hearts such a close tie,

That they will never find separation.

If by way of land and water they are far,

Still by way of heart and soul they are near.

He has said—and the words of the King are abroad and spreading

Among his subjects and in his kingdom,—

"This is the time for the promised love of mankind;

The time for the unity of men has come."

In contrast, most nineteenth century Persian poets seem to have been in desperate rivalry to find the least desirable subjects for poetry. Qá'ání

for example, who was technically probably the most skillful poet of the century, wrote several lines of hyperbole in praise of the Queen Mother's feet. Ná'ím, however, was one of the first Persian poets to admit that the modern world existed, and to mention such hitherto unmentionable things as steamships and the telegraph. In one poem he writes: 9

Cities have become close to each other;

Why have hearts remained far apart?

Fire has driven ships upon the water [its opposite];

Why does one man avoid another [who is his like]?

All [material] things have accepted the [divine] decree;

When it came to man, he rebelled.

Ná'ím died in 1916 during the First World War. His last poems express a horror of war and are as impressive and relevant now as when they were first written: 10

All these regiments, cannons, and planes,

These bullets, swords, and grenades,

These javelins, rifles, and cartridges,

Mausers, pistols, and broadswords,

All these bombs and all these blimps,

All these forts and endless ramparts,

All this surging of troops with daggers drawn,

All this frenzied activity of battle-ready armies

So that we may make each other

Abased, miserable, prisoners and vagrants.

Half of us spill the blood of the other half

For the desires of three or four bloodthirsty men.

Therefore we are forced to seek a solution

For the sake of wretched mankind.

For sixty years this Revelation has said,

"Oh company of oppressors,

A peace-seeking parliament of man is needed;

Above the kings of the world, a king is needed!"

Ná'ím, ibid; poem no. 248.

Ná'ím, ibid; poem no. 193.

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