



The *Mathnaví* of Rúḥu'lláh Varqá, the martyr: A few notes on its historical context and poetical content.

Abstract. A tentative translation of the *Mathnaví* by Rúḥu'lláh Varqá, the martyr, is presented [above]. It is accompanied by a concise commentary on the content of his poem. After a few words on the *mathnaví* in Persian literature, the most important images presented in the poem are briefly explained: the motif of the cup-bearer and the cup, springtime motifs, and love motifs. The poem is a hymn of love to the Blessed Beauty. However, in the final 10 verses after verse 31, the poet turns to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and it closes his eulogy with a quotation of a verse from one of the Master's poems [Ay *Khudáyi-Pur-Aṭáy-i-Dhu'l-Manán*], a rhetorical device called *Taḍmín*.

While describing the lives and martyrdom of Mírzá 'Alí-Muhammad Varqá and of his son Rúḥu'lláh, Adib Taherzadeh wrote: "Truly, Rúḥu'lláh was no ordinary child. He was an inspired being and acted as a spiritual giant. At a young age, he wrote beautiful poetry which clearly demonstrates how deep was his love for Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, how vast his knowledge of the Faith and how profound his understanding of the real purpose of life" (*Revelation* 4:60). These qualities emerge from the verses of the *mathnaví* composed by this young hero, whose first English translation is being presented in this paper.

The *mathnaví* in Persian literature

Browne defines the *mathnaví* as a "narrative poem in doublets" (*Literary History* 1:18) and describes it as "the most ancient essentially Persian verse form . . . [after the quatrain or *rubá'í*] where the rhyme changes in each couplet" (ibid. 473). *Mathnavís* have been written in Persian, Arabic, Turkish, Kurdish and Urdu cultures. Johannes Thomas Pieter de Bruijn, Professor Emeritus of Persian at the University of Leiden, explains that "the Persians call it *mathnawī* because each line requires two rhyming letters . . . Etymologically, it is often explained as a *nisba* adjective to the Arabic word *mathnā*, 'two by two'." The most important features of the *mathnaví* may be summarized as follows:

Length: de Bruijn explains that “In principle, there were no limits to the length of a *mathnawī*... [except for Firdawsī’s *Sháh-Námih*¹ and Rúmi’s *Mathnawíy-ma’nawī*], most of the better-known poems fall within a range of 2,000 to 9,000 *bayts*, but the form was also used for texts of a much lesser extent. Fragments of no more than a few lines with the rhyme scheme of the *mathnawī* can be found as inserted lines in prose works.”

Rhyme: In this poetic composition, “each hemistich rhymes with its companion and each verse has a new rhyme” (Bausani, “Letteratura neopersiana” 356), and thus its classic rhyme scheme is *aa bb cc*, etc. “Other poems were occasionally inserted into a *mathnawī*text, either with or without the use of their specific rhyme scheme . . . Prose and poetry were in some cases used alternatively” (de Bruijn).

Metre: It is “written in a restricted number of metres. These metres always have eleven or, more rarely, ten syllables” (de Bruijn).

Narrative syntax: “The narrative syntax of almost all the Persian *maṣnavīs* remains essentially paratactic, like that of the language” (“Letteratura neopersiana” 365).

Contents: It “is used in extensive narratives and long stories which cannot easily be treated of in poems with one specific rhyming letter” (de Bruijn). Its genres “are not restricted to the heroic, the romantic and the didactic, the three usually associated with this verse form. Panegyrics and satire, topical events, love and wine, and many other subjects could also be dealt with in a *mathnawī* . . . During the later Middle Ages, new subjects were added to the repertoire of the narrative *mathnawī*... At the same time, mystical poems continuing the examples set by Sanā’ī, ‘Aṭṭār and Djalāl al-Dín Rūmī proliferated” (de Bruijn).

According to Bausani, the *mathnaví* had lost its expressive power in the last centuries. He wrote (ibid. 439):

. . . the *maṣnavī* also has arrived on the threshold of the contemporary age offering, together with several naive religious poems in “popular” style – usually despised . . . – mystic-symbolic poems, wholly inadequate to our modern world as well as theoretical and didactic meditations which the

¹Abu’l-Qasim Firdawsī Tusi (c. 940–1020), the greatest Persian epic poet.

modern world only conceives if they are written in prose. This event makes us understand that the *masnavī* is condemned to a radical decline in contemporary Iran, perhaps more than the other forms of traditional poetry.

However, the *mathnavī* we are presenting seems to contradict Bausani's judgment since it is rich in inspiration and uses with great mastery "the motifs, images and metaphors" of the ancient and glorious Persian poems.

Moreover, the *mathnavī* seems to have been especially appreciated by the early Bábís and Bahá'ís. Franklin Lewis, an expert in Persian Language and Literature, especially Rúmi, remarks in this regard:

There is . . . a *mathnavī* written in praise of Bahá'u'lláh attributed to Táhirih. Whether this poem is indeed hers or not, it is clear that the *mathnavī* was a form appreciated by many of the Bábís and, later on, by Iranian Bahá'ís . . . Nabíl-i-Zarandí, author of the *Dawn-Breakers*, after completing his pilgrimage to the House of the Báb in Shiraz as per Bahá'u'lláh's instructions in the *Súriy-i Hajj*, composed a *mathnavī* describing the experience. Nabíl also composed another *mathnavī* describing the history of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. Both of Nabíl's *mathnavís* seem to derive their inspiration from Bahá'u'lláh's own *Mathnavíy-i Mubárák* ("Bahá'u'lláh's *Mathnavíy-i-Mubárák*" 113)

The language of Rúḥu'lláh Varqá's *mathnavī*

Although *mathnavís* are not considered lyrical works, still the four major themes of Persian lyrical poetry, as described by Bausani, that is, "wine, love, springtime and mystics" ("Letteratura neopersiana" 176), occupy a central position in this poem by Rúḥu'lláh Varqá. Associated with springtime motifs are many nature tropes. Theological and scriptural motifs are also widely used in this poem. Last but not least, there are also didactic themes.

The cup-bearer

Immediately in verse 1, we find the figure of the cup-bearer and the cup. The cup-bearer also is mentioned in verses 19 and 21. This poem has the form *Sáqí-namih*, often translated as "The Book of the Cup-Bearer", whose central personage is a mysterious *sáqí*, who, according to many Iranists, is "an initiator

to the mysteries of wine and love” (Saccone, “Prefazione” 216n1). A famous example is the *Sāqī-namih* by Ḥāfiz, translated as *The Book of the Cup-bearer*. William L. Hanaway, Emeritus Professor of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies (Persian) at the University of Pennsylvania, remarks:

sāqī “cup-bearer, the person charged with pouring wine... Physical beauty was important in the choice of individuals to be wine servers. Bayhaqī [famous Persian historian of the 5th/11th century] describes festive occasions when the *sāqīs*, whom he calls *māhrūyān* “moon-faced”, would appear splendidly attired and attract the amorous glances of courtiers. These characteristics of the *sāqī*, sc. being a Turk, military training, exceptional beauty, and closeness to the ruler, help explain the image of the *sāqī* as it developed in poetry after the 5th/11th century.” (“*Sāqī*: In Persian Usage”)

This familiar personage of Persian mystic poetry originates in the Koran and the traditions. Carlo Saccone, an expert in and a translator of Persian poetry into Italian, comprising the whole *Dīvān* by Khājih Shamsu’-d-Dīn Muḥammad Ḥāfiz-i-Shīrāzī (ca.1318–1390), writes that “the wine which he, incessantly invoked and implored, pours into the cup of the lover\poet clearly reveals its sacred *imprinting*, i.e., it is a transposition of the ‘mysterious’ wine which the youthful cup-bearers of Muslim paradise offer to the blessed spirits” (“Sensi e soprasensi” 44).

Bausani explains that the Sufis relate the cup-bearer to ‘the ancient mystic legend wherefore at the beginning of the Divine Love, the cup-bearer (*sāqī*), as God-the Beloved, poured the wine for God-the Lover during forty successive dawns and thus he created the world’ (‘Letteratura neopersiana’ 162; see *Religion in Iran* 277). Sufis also relate the motifs of the cup-bearer, wine and drunkenness to the *rūz-i-alast*, the metahistorical morning when human souls entered into the eternal Covenant with their Creator, which is the basis of their life on earth and of the development of human civilization (see PHW, no.19). According to the German Orientalist Annemarie Schimmel (1922–2003), the Sufis

saw this moment in poetical imagery as a spiritual banquet in which the wine of Love was distributed to humanity so that everyone received the

share which he or she will have in this life. Here, the imagery of wine is used not for the final goal of the mystic's unification with God and his being filled with Him, but rather as the starting point of the flow of Divine grace at the beginning of time. (*Deciphering* 109)

Finally, according to Saccone ("Sensi e soprasensi" 49, 50), the cup-bearer sometimes symbolizes the Beloved as

an initiator, i.e., he who . . . initiates the poet . . . into the mysteries of wine and love for him [God]. [And the poet's] initiation . . . is essentially a summon to folly, to disarm one's intellect and its analytic processes, because the lover will attain unto the reunion with his friend . . . only in the condition of 'sacred folly,' fostered by his drunkenness.

Bahá'u'lláh mentions the *Sáqí* in at least three of His poems, *Sáqí az Ghayb-i-Baqá*, *Sáqí bi-dih ábí* and *Sáqí bi-dih án jám* (see *Ishráq Khávarí, Má'idíy-i-Asmání* 4:176-211).

The cup

The image of the cup is associated with the image of the cup-bearer. Many writers have commented upon the symbolic meanings of the words denoting a "cup" at length. Saná'í and 'Attár see it as a symbol of the human heart, and Gnostic thinkers as the Knowing Soul (*nafs-i-dáná*), that is, a human soul which, having been purified, has become crystal-clear. Ḥáfīẓ says that the cup is the "intimate illuminating soul of the Friend." "Cup" in Persian is also called *paymáníh*, a word resembling *paymán*, which means covenant. Therefore, the two concepts are often used together in a play on words (see Bausani, *Religion in Iran* 262). In the Muslim world, Covenant especially means the Covenant between God and man. If man submits to the laws of God, God, in His turn, will purify his soul and enable him to grow spiritually. Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, an Italian Catholic Biblicist, theologian, archaeologist and Hebraist, explains the meaning of the symbol of the cup in the Hebrew world:

Although the cup is a liturgical element (especially in Easter Judaic and Eucharistic rites), it becomes a relevant symbol to denote the destiny of a person because of the idea that a cup contains a certain amount of liquid. We thus have the cup of salvation (Psalms 116:13) and especially that of the divine judgment, the cup of fury (Isaiah 51:17-22), which also is a sign of death . . . (500 *curiosità* 47)

As has been said, Rúḥu'lláh mentions the Cup-bearer in three verses:

Fill up the wine cup, O Cup-bearer, to the brim;
By Thy liquor, set the Sinai of the heart on fire. (1)

O Cup-bearer! Kindly proffer the cup of Thy gifts,
That I may be cleansed from crimes and faults. (19)

Hail, O Cup-bearer at the eternal banquet,
Graciously pour a wine drop on this dust,

That these patterns may be brightened by Thy bounty,
That we may be sacrificed for the One Beloved. (20-1)

Who else is this Cup-bearer, this heavenly Person, if not Bahá'u'lláh Himself, the Beloved *par excellence*? And what else is His wine, if not His soul-entrancing Word? Bahá'u'lláh kindles the fire of love in the poet's heart. Since this poet responds to His offer, He cleanses his heart "from crimes and faults." He prepares it to the highest proof of love: offering his life on the path of service.

Springtime motifs

In our poem, the Anacreontic themes, strictly connected with mystical themes, turn into springtime motifs. Thus, the young poet speaks of "the rose garden of the spirit (*gulshan-i-ján*)," of "the scent of the Loved One (*búy-i-Dúst*)," of a "breeze (*násím*)," and of "soul-stirring scented breathes (*mu'aṭṭar nafḥih-háy-i-jánfazá*)."

In the Bahá'í Writings, springtime has been chiefly associated with the days of the Declaration of Bahá'u'lláh in Baghdad from 22 April to 3 May 1863:

The Divine Springtime is come, O Most Exalted Pen, for the Festival of the All-Merciful is fast approaching. Bestir thyself, and magnify, before the entire creation, the name of God, and celebrate His praise, in such wise that all created things may be regenerated and made new. Speak, and hold not thy peace. The day star of blissfulness shineth above the horizon of Our name, the Blissful, inasmuch as the kingdom of the name of God hath been adorned with the ornament of the name of thy Lord, the Creator of the heavens. Arise before the nations of the earth, and arm thyself with the power of this Most Great Name, and be not of those who tarry. (GWB27, sec. XIV, para.1, Lawḥ-i-Riḍván)

Bahá'u'lláh also writes about springtime in other Tablets:

Seize the time, therefore, ere the glory of the divine springtime hath spent itself, and the Bird of Eternity ceased to warble its melody, that thy inner hearing may not be deprived of hearkening unto its call (KI24, para.23)

It behoveth you to refresh and revive your souls through the gracious favours which in this Divine, this soul-stirring Springtime are being showered upon you. (TB86, Lawḥ-i-Dunyá)

Evidence of His bonds with springtime is also present in a prayer He wrote while He was confined in the citadel of 'Akká:

Glory to Thee, O my God! The first stirrings of the spring of Thy grace have appeared and clothed Thine earth with verdure. The clouds of the heaven of Thy bounty have rained their rain on this City within whose walls is imprisoned Him Whose desire is the salvation of Thy creatures. Through it the soil of this City hath been decked forth, and its trees clothed with foliage, and its inhabitants gladdened. (PM199, sec.117, para.1)

The image of springtime as the beginning of a new Dispensation is a typical feature of the Writings and talks by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Who, while dealing with progressive revelation, described the advent of the new Manifestation of God as a new springtime:

Soon the whole world, as in springtime, will change its garb. The turning and falling of the autumn leaves is past; the bleakness of the winter time is over. The new year hath appeared and the spiritual springtime is at hand. The black earth is becoming a verdant garden; the deserts and mountains are teeming with red flowers; from the borders of the wilderness the tall grasses are standing like advance guards before the cypress and jessamine trees; while the birds are singing among the rose branches like the angels in the highest heavens, announcing the glad-tidings of the approach of that spiritual spring, and the sweet music of their voices is causing the real essence of all things to move and quiver. (TB2:318-9)

Echoes of these words must have come to the ears of Rúhu’lláh, who implicitly relates these springtime motifs with the “Day of the Covenant (*Yawm-i-Mithaq*).”

From the rose garden of the spirit, I’ll inhale the scent of the Loved One;
From the abode of the Beloved, I’ll come back like a breeze,

With soul-stirring scented breaths,
With blessed and cheerful glad tidings.

I proclaim to my travelling companions: Hasten,
O my friends! The Day of the Covenant hath come!

Love motifs

The whole poem is a hymn of love, not only for Bahá’u’lláh but also for ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. The first part of the poem conveys the deep love of the poet for the “Loved One (*Dúst*),” the “Beloved (*Dúst*),” and the “Adored One (*Dúst*)”: he summons his readers to “assist and help” His Cause, to teach His Faith, that it “may shine above all the regions of the earth.” If they want to be worthy of such

an honour, they should “move away from fancies and doubts,” “the thorns of their hearts” should become “roses;” they should be assured that “The Lord of Creation will come to . . . [their] rescue.” Most of all, they should be “on fire in the desert of exclusion” and “burn in the flames of separation” to be ready to offer their lives on His path.

The end of the poem

From verse 31, the poet turns to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. The special love that Rúḥu’lláh had for ‘Abdu’l-Bahá reflected the same love that flourished in his father after an episode described by Adib Taherzadeh as follows:

Once Bahá’u’lláh spoke to Varqá [Rúḥu’lláh’s father] about the station of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and extolled His virtues and heavenly qualities. He said that in this world of being there was a phenomenon which He had referred to in some Tablets as the ‘Most Great Elixir’. Any person who possessed this power would be able to exert enormous influence in the world through his work and could do anything he desired . . . And now, look at the Master. Observe with what patience and compassion He dealt with all types of people. He possessed this power, therefore immeasurable was the extent of the influence He would exert upon the world of humanity.

When Varqá heard this, he was so filled with joy and excitement that he fell prostrate at Bahá’u’lláh’s at and begged Him to make it possible for him and one of his sons to lay down their lives in the path of the Master. Bahá’u’lláh favoured him with His acceptance. When he returned to Persia, Varqá wrote to Bahá’u’lláh and renewed his plea for martyrdom, a plea to which He again favourably responded. And . . . this happened; he was martyred during the Ministry of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. (*Revelation* 4:56-7)

Rúḥu’lláh describes ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in His glory, erect “as an *Alif*,” and in His utter submission to the Will of God, ‘submissive as a *bih*.’ This use of the Arabic alphabet is not uncommon in the verses of the mystic Persian poets. For example, Shamsu’d-Dín Ḥáfiz (ca.1318–1390) writes:

On my heart's tablet is naught save the (straight) alif... of the Friend's stature:

What may I do? Me, recollection of other letter the teacher (the murshid) gave not. (*Dīvān* 703, no. 416, v.8)

The verses addressed to 'Abdu'l-Bahá are 10. And they end with a *taḍmín*,² a quotation of a verse by 'Abdu'l-Bahá Himself:

Look not at my merits or worth,

Look at Thy grace, O bountiful Lord. (*Majmú'ih* 13:411-2, verse 7; provisional translation by the authors)

The whole poem may be inadequately rendered in English as follows:

He is God.

O God of all graces and Lord of all bounties,
Who knowest my heart, my secrets, and my soul!

Every morning Thou art the Companion of my soul.
Thou knowest my anguish and my distress.

Fastened to Thy remembrance, this heart
Only Thy angst as a companion longs for.

Perish the heart which does not burn for Thee!
Be blinded the eye that does not cry for Thee!

O Almighty, in this darksome night,
in my heart Thy remembrance is a glowing lamp.

² *Taḍmín*: "inserting the verses of another in one's own poem" (Steingass 306), that is quoting a "very famous verse of another poet" (Bausani, "Letteratura neopersiana," p. 178).

Upon my heart breathe the breath of life, by Thy bounty,
That non-existence, by Thy grace, into eternity may turn.

Look not at my merits or worth,
Look at Thy grace, O bountiful Lord.

Upon these broken-winged birds,
By Thy benevolence, new wings bestow.³

At the end of our perusal of this *Mathnaví*, we can but express our astonishment and awe in front of this twelve-year-old boy, who demonstrated through his verses and much more his behaviour, that not only he had preserved his heart as a mirror “upon which no dust has fallen,” as that of a child, but that he also had acquired most of “the divine perfections latent in the heart of man” (PUP72, para.2, 73, para.4).

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³ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Majmú‘ih* 13:208; see also *Adhkáru’l-Muqarrabín* 2:135.

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