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The Story of Layla and Majnun

Of Nizami Ganjavi

(In Persian with English Translation)

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مقدمه:

جمال‌الدین ابومحمّد الیاس بن یوسف بن زکی بن مؤیّد، ملقب به نظامی در سال ۵۳۵ هجری قمری به دنیا آمد. او بین سال‌های ۶۰۷ تا ۶۱۲ فوت کرده است. او شاعر و داستان‌سرای ایرانی است که در قرن ششم هجری (۱۲ میلای) زندگی می‌کرده است. آرامگاه نظامی گنجوی در شهر گنجه در جمهوری آذربایجان است.

نظامی از دانش‌های رایج[۱] زمان خود مانند علوم ادبی، نجوم[۲]، علوم اسلامی و زبان عرب آگاهی بسیاری داشته است. اولین شخصی که تلاش زیادی برای ارائه مجموعه‌ای کامل از آثار نظامی کرد، وحید دستگردی بود که نتیجه[۳] کارش بین ۱۳۱۳ تا ۱۳۱۷ خورشیدی منتشر شد. بعد از او چاپ‌های دیگری نیز انتشار[۴] یافت که از جمله آنها مجموعه دکتر بهروز ثروتیان است. این اثر در فهرست میراث جهانی مستند یونسکو از سوی ایران ثبت[۵] شده است.

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[۱] رایج: current

[۲] نجوم: Astronomy

[۳] نتیجه: result

[۴] انتشار دادن: to spread

[۵] ثبت کردن: to register

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از زندگانی نظامی اطلاعات دقیق در دست نیست. او در شهر گنجه زندگی می‌کرده است و در همین شهر نیز فوت شده است. او در زمان کودکی پدر خود را از دست داد و از ابتدا توسط دایی مادرش بزرگ شد و تحت حمایت او تحصیل کرد. مادر او از اشراف کُرد بوده است.

نظامی نام خودش و نزدیکانش را شعرهایش آورده است. نام خودش الیاس و نام پدرش یوسف بن زکی بن مؤید بوده است:

در خط نظامی ار نهی گام
بینی عدد هزار و یک نام

والیاس که الف بری ز لامش
هم با نود و نه است نامش

ز اینگونه هزار و یک حصارم
با صد کم یک سلیح دارم

گر شد پدرم به سنت جد
یوسف، پسر زکی مؤید

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اثر معروف و شاهکار[۶] بی‌مانند نظامی، خمسه یا پنج گنج است. شاعر سی سال از زندگی خود را برای تدوین[۷] آنها گذاشته است. خمسه یا پنج گنج نظامی شامل پنج مثنوی است. در دوران حکومت[۸] جمهوری اسلامی و سیاست‌های آن، آثار نظامی به ویژه منظومه خسرو و شیرین بارها سانسور[۹] و برخی از بیت‌های شعر آن در چاپ‌های مختلف حذف[۱۰] شده‌اند.

لیلی و مجنون: اگرچه نام لیلی و مجنون پیش از نظامی گنجوی نیز در اشعار و ادبیات فارسی دیده می‌شد، ولی نظامی برای نخستین بار، نظامی آن را به شکل مجموعه‌ای کامل به زبان فارسی در ۴۷۰۰ بیت نوشت. نظامی این کتاب را به درخواست[۱۱] پادشاه شروان نوشته است. منظومه[۱۲] لیلی و مجنون نظامی به زبان‌های گوناگونی مانند آلمانی، فرانسوی، انگلیسی، روسی و ارمنی ترجمه شده است.

لیلی و مجنون، دختر و پسری هستند که در مکتبخانه به یکدیگر علاقه‌مند می‌شوند. خانواده مجنون به خاستگاری لیلی می روند اما جواب رد می‌شنوند. به همین علت میان قبیله لیلی و مجنون جنگ رخ می دهد. خانواده لیلی او را مجبور می کنند که با یک مرد پولدار ازدواج کند.

---

[۶] شاهکار: masterpiece

[۷] تدوین: codification

[۸] حکومت: government

[۹] سانسور: censorship

[۱۰] حذف کردن: to eliminate

[۱۱] درخواست: request

[۱۲] منظومه: poem

POSTSCRIPT

Among the legendary love stories of the Islamic Orient that of Layla and Majnun is probably the best known. The two lovers live up to this day in poems, songs and epics of many tribes and nations from the Caucasus to the interior of Africa, from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean.

Are these legends based on truth? Has this Bedouin youth Qays from the North-Arabic tribe of Amir, named Majnun (Madman), ever lived and suffered for his Layla? We can not be certain, but there are good reasons to believe that he did, probably in the second half of the seventh century a.d., somewhere in the western half of the Arabic peninsula, about 500 years before a.d. 1188 (584 H), the year in which the Persian poet Nizami wrote his poem. Nizami was the first to make use of all the traditional ersions, widely dispersed and greatly varied in detail, which he shaped into one great narrative poem.

Thus the theme of Layla and Majnun acquired a new importance far beyond the arrow frame of local Arabic lyrics. Many later poets have imitated Nizami's work, even if they could not equal and certainly not surpass it ; Persians, Turks, Indians, to name only the most important ones. The Persian scholar Hekmat has listed not less than forty Persian and thirteen Turkish versions and the Nizami editor Dastgerdi states that he has actually found more than xoo: 'If one would search all existing libraries', he says, 'one would probably find more than iooo.' Even modem love stories are often influenced by Nizami.

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The reason for this far-reaching influence is to be found in the fact that Nizami far surpasses all his predecessors and imitators. This is today generally accepted. The Egyptian scholar M. Gh. Hilal in his book on The Development of the Majnun— Layla Theme in the Literatures of the Orient (Cairo, 1954) concludes that it was Nizami who transformed the local legend into a work of art of general and timeless value; the Persian A. A. Hekmat, who in 1941 published a prose version in Teheran, compares the work with Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet and Jan Rypka in his History of Iranian Literature — the latest and most important work in the field — says: 'The result. . . shows the hand of a genius.' The Russian orientalist, I. J. Kratshkovskij , the first to collect the early Arabian sources, points out that owing to Nizami's work Majnun has become a leading figure in many other literatures.

The scarcity of translations into European languages is partly due to the lack of a reliable Persian text which was for the first time constituted from about thirty manuscripts by Wahid Dastgerdi in his edition of Nizami's Collected Works (Teheran, 1936). The text is accompanied by an indispensable commentary. Since then 'Layla and Majnun' has been translated into Turkish (by A. N. Tarlan, Istanbul, 1943) and into Russian (by P. Antokolskij, Moscow, 1957)- Earlier part-translations, for instance the English version by J. Atkinson (London, 1836), published 100 years before Dastgerdi's Persian edition, must now be considered as out of date. Even the uotations given in E. G. Browne's standard work A Literary History of Persia, vol. II, 6th edition (Cambridge, 1956) in A. J. Arberry's Classical Persian Literature (London, 1958) and in H. Masse's Anthologie Persane (Paris, 19^0), are taken from parts which Dastgerdi has shown to be worthless additions by later editors.

Nizami had not chosen his subject himself, he had been commissioned by a Transcaucasian chieftain, Shervanshah, and confesses in one of the prefaces that at first he was by no means enthusiastic about the idea. This is hardly surprising to anybody who knows the ascetic aridity of the early Arabic sources which he was supposed to follow.

But Nizami, while preserving the main facts, made many important additions : the scene in the garden, Nawfal's attack against Layla's tribe, her refusal to consummate her marriage, Majnun' s rule over the animals, the visit of his mother and his uncle, the mother's death, the story of the youth from Baghdad, the death of Layla's husband, as well as the fables and meditations, are either not to be found at all in the Arabic sources or only in rudimentary form. It must, of course, not be overlooked that these early sources were not concerned to produce a work of art. Their object was to collect the verses allegedly written by Majnun, adding textual and factual commentaries, and to publish them together with notes about the author, his name, his origin and his life. Nizami was the first to make the Bedouin poet the centre of a poetical rendering of his story; the factual details provided by the earlier editors are for him only the basis for his own work. The only worthwhile com-parison would be one between the Arabic poems preserved under Majnun's name and those Persian verses which Nizami and the more important of his successors (Maktabi, Djami, Hatefi) have put into Majnun's mouth, even though the Arabic poems have to stand on their own while the Persian ones are supported by the context of the whole epos.

It is interesting to observe how Nizami preserves the Bedouin atmosphere, the omads' tents in the desert and the tribal customs of the inhabitants, while at the same time transposing the story into the far more civilized, Iranian world. The aridity and arshness of the surroundings are framed, as it were, by beautiful descriptions of the starred sky and the rising sun, or the deepest secrets of the human soul, in a language unbelievably rich with most precious images. In the Arabic sources the background is nearly empty.

Nizami frees the story from the limitations of a merely accidental event by lifting it to an altogether higher spiritual level and enriches it by his love of colours, scents and sounds, by embellishing it playfully with jewels, flowers and fruits. In one of the prefaces he says that because of the magic power of his diction he was called 'The mirror of the Invisible' and kept 'the treasures of two worlds in my sleeve' — those of the visible and the invisible ones.

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Majnun's father becomes 'a Sultan of the Arabs' and is at the same time Tike Korah the Wealthy', Layla walks in a rose-garden under cypress trees where nightingales sing in the bushes; Majnun talks to the planets in the symbolic language of a twelfth-century Persian sage, the en- counters of small Arabic raiding parties become gigantic battles of Royal Persian armies and most of the Bedouin talk like the heroes, courtiers and savants of the refined Iranian civilization.

Far more important than the dramatic events of the story is the inner meaning of the ork whose stage is Majnun's soul. 'What we mistake for a padlock to keep us out we may tomorrow find to be the key that lets us in' and 'every leaf in the book of fate has two pages; one is written by man, the other by Fate.' Whatever this poet touches becomes transparent and reveals its hidden meaning.

To his Arabic biographers Majnun is suffering from an illness, a broken man, who has lost his way, to be reproached, pitied or derided. Nizami understands the three elements of the traditional Majnun, his love, his insanity and his poetical genius, as three aspects of one, indivisible unity. Only when he is driven out of the paradise of his early love does Majnun become both insane and a poet. Insanity and poetical enius are two expressions of the same state of mind, of a soul estranged in the world of men. And the same people who reproach, pity and deride Majnun because of his insanity, memorize and admire his poetry. Has the tragic ambiguity of the artist's position in the world, the paradox of unbounded desire in a limited body, ever been described more aptly?

On the other hand it would be wrong to consider Majnun's and Layla's fate as 'tragic' in the western sense of the word. That there could be no fulfilment of their love on earth is a foregone conclusion for Nizami's mysticism. His Layla states clearly, that in the religion of love close intimacy is perilous. This conception is similar to the spirit which in Europe movedthe Troubadours — though only for a short time, while in Persia this age-old tradition has left its mark on all classic literature and even today is not dead but lives on like a spark under the ashes.

If, therefore, our lovers' sufferings are not 'tragic', they must also not be interpreted from a point of view of conventional morals. The Persian mystical poets have never been puritans! The lovers' grief breaks through the limitations of human nature, enabling them to become free of their 'Self' which is tied to the transitory world. Death is the gate to the 'real' world, to the home which our wandering soul desires and the poet reveals this truth in brilliant, ever-changing metaphors : the light-giving candle sheds bitter tears; the oyster suffers because of its pearl; the ruby longs to be freed from the rock in which it is hidden; the fading rose becomes a drop of precious rosewater; Majnun eats 'the eater in him- self', overcoming hunger, egoism and possessiveness, and crushing the 'bazaar' of sensual lust — to become the King of Love in Majesty. Not that everybody could reach this exalted state simply by falling in love: 'Inconstant love', says Nizami, 'remains but a toy of the senses and perishes like Youth.'

Layla, loving and beloved, is next to Nizami's Shirin one of the most touching and delicate figures in Persian literature. No doubt she is meant to be a monument of the poet's beloved wife Afaq ('Horizons') who died early. Her character is perhaps best described in Layla's last words to her mother, one of the most moving episodes in our epos.

This English version of Nizami's work is, of course, not a literal translation, although it comes often very near to it. Apart from the different prefaces and the poet's postscript which have been left out, it is based on those 3600 verses (out of more than 4000) which in the opinion of the Persian editor Dastgerdi can be accepted as genuine. His text (2nd edition, Teheran, 1333/ 19S4) is the only authoritative one.

In some cases I had to take liberties. It is not always possible to follow exactly in a prose version Nizami's very concise poetic language. It must also be remembered that the author wrote for a very small circle of highly educated readers at the courts and in the towns of Iran in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Today even well-read Persian readers find difficulties in understanding the work without using an extensive commentary such as the one provided by Dastgerdi.

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Some descriptions had to be shortened, as, for instance, that of the starlit sky under which Majnun prays, since this requires a specialized astrological and astronomical knowledge. Sometimes the complicated sense of a single verse had to be rendered in several sentences.

I began working on my prose version in Persia in 1958. 1 am well aware of the fact that in spite of all my efforts it remains inferior to the original. At least I can say it is based on a careful study of every word of Nizami's poem.

R. Gelpke.

editor's NOTE : This is an abridged version of the original Postscript published in the German edition, Manesse Bibliothek der Weltliteratur, Manesse Verlag, Zurich 1 963

End of the free sample

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