

THE POET'S KNOWLEDGE OF GOD: THE WORK OF PARVIN ETESAMI IN THE CONTEXT OF THE IRANIAN SPIRITUAL TRADITION¹

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Abstract. The subject of this article is the mystical poetry of Parvin Etesami (1907–1941). In it, we analyse the religious foundations of the poet's work of the first half of the twentieth century (a turning point in Persian culture), which continue the Persian tradition of searching for God on the paths laid by her predecessors and express her knowledge of God in old poetic forms (*monazere*, *qasida*) with a new poetic language. The study of the poetic ontology of Parvin Etesami, that is, of her reflections on God, is based not only on a collection of 60 poems published in Russian (*Journey of a Tear*, 1984), but primarily on precise translations of Etesami's poems, published for the first time in the article, which could not be included in the Soviet edition and which were carried out by two of the authors of this article. The article analyses the poet's ideas about God as the creator of man, about God's predestination (the establishment of man's mission on earth as a reflection of divine beauty), and about the Grace of God as the essence of human destiny. In the monologues of the dervishes, ideal personalities in the verses of Parvin, the value of the fruits carried by the mystical consciousness of one who has achieved contemplation of true reality is affirmed. It opposes the ideas of ordinary consciousness, for which the style of behaviour of the mystic is like madness. The love for God and God's love are shown in Etesami's poetry as the centre of the heart, so that externally manifested religiosity (the Kaaba as a shrine is the architecturally revealed

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centre of the world) and the inner comprehension of God (the Kaaba of the heart) are affirmed by Parvin in their complementary wholeness. In this way, it is shown that in the verses of Parvin, fidelity to the thousand-year-old spiritual tradition and individual creativity appear as an organic unity.

Keywords: Parvin Etesami, Persian classics, individualism and tradition, mysticism, Sufism, ontology, knowledge of God

Many Iranian poets of the twentieth century eschewed the rules of traditional verse, driven by the desire to speak to the reader in their own unique voice. Yet they remained faithful to the path of searching for God and for themselves that had been paved by the poets of the distant and not-so-distant past. They, starting with the founder of “new poetry” in Iran, Nima Yooshij (1895–1960), can be considered neo-Sufis, albeit to varying degrees. One poet who was present at the birth of this entirely new stage of Persian poetry and who was among the first to talk about God in her own poetic language while keeping herself firmly grounded in the Muslim tradition and its continuing development was Parvin Etesami.

Parvin Etesami created her poems during an era of profound change in Persian poetry, when discussions raged about the possibility of moving away from the normative system of versification that had existed for centuries. Adherents of classical verse condemned the attempts of young writers – those who stood at the origins of the so-called “new poetry” (*She'r-e Nimaa'i*) in Iran – to do something different. Parvin, due to her upbringing, the literary environment, and her creative temperament, did not get involved in these literary battles. Yet her poetry, for all its classicism, contains the seeds of an entirely new, purely individual approach to creativity: she creates new names for things that had never been seen before in this form, presents her own point of view when transmitting mystical ideas (often through direct instructions), and successfully fuses genres (with a nod to the European poetry of the Enlightenment and Iranian figurative and character material).

Our discussion of the Eternal Truth, of God, and how these ideas are presented in Parvin Etesami's poems, focuses on her poetic ontology.² For this, we will use translations of several of her works carried out by Marina Reysner and Marzieh Yahyapour, an Iranian philologist and specialist in Russian studies who has achieved fame for her translations of poems by Russian, which represent the first time these works have appeared in Russian.³ The professional qualifications of the translators attests to the ac-

² See the article “Anthropological Concept in the Mystical Poetry of Parvin Etesami” about Etesami's poetic anthropology (Koshemchuk, Reysner, Yakhyapour 2021).

³ The poem “God's Love” was translated by Yahyapour and edited by Reysner; “The Grace of God” was translated jointly by Yahyapour and Reysner; and “Kaaba of the Heart” and “Free Spirit” were translated by Reysner.

curacy with which the poet's thoughts and images are conveyed here. Such annotated texts are the most reliable for readers and researchers, because translating mystical poetry from Farsi into any other language always requires philological explanations that can partly complement the poetic vocabulary of the Iranian author and shed light on the hidden connotations that are inevitably lost in translation.

The first and thus far only collection of Parvin Etesami's work in Russian was published in the late Soviet period (Etesami 1984) and introduced the Russian reader to one of the most important names in the poetry of Iran. However, the quality of the translations was, unfortunately, sub-par. It is also marked by the fact that the poems were selected based on ideology, being mostly made up of poems on social issues (which is a particularly significant topic for Etesami) that contain the poet's own moralizing. Obviously, her poems about God were not included in the collection, and this gap needs to be filled, because the poet's moral teachings, her anthropological inquiries, are based on the spiritual tradition that is the source material for all Persian poetry.

Let us cite here one of Etesami's poems, which grew out of the religious science of the spirit – the only such work to be included in the 1984 collection – entitled, somewhat misleadingly, “The Shape of Truth,” and in an abbreviated form (the translation consists of 38 verses, compared to the original 48). The poem is written in the *mon-azere* genre,⁴ and the disputing parties in it, the “heroines” of this parable, are two roses that are traditional in Persian lyric poetry, which by Etesami's will were given a voice. These are white and tea roses, and the white rose only appears in the opening couplet of the first stanza, with the remainder of the text given over to the tea rose.

The Beauty of God

The white rose hid her beauty from the tea rose [with the words]: “I have snow-white clothes and am free from sin.” The tea rose replied: “I too have never sinned, so why must I stay on the lawn, even if for a short while? Time does not allow me to stain my pure heart with pride.”

These lines immediately reveal the unity and opposition of the two positions. The two roses are united by their sinlessness – freedom from sin, which is symbolized (as in European poetry) by the whiteness of the flower. But the white rose, in a proud display of righteousness, separates herself from the others (expressed in the word “hid”), toots her own horn, and the tea rose, speaking of her own sinlessness, contrasts pride with humility, an acceptance of the laws of the world that govern both its fate and the fate of all God's creations. Pride, she points out, is useless in the pure heart of a rose: the time of flowering is short, and time itself is opposed to pride, provides no opportunity

⁴ *Monazere* is an ancient genre that existed in Iran since pre-Islamic times and was continued in the Persian poetry of the eleventh century in the works of Asadi Tusi. It is a polemical dialogue between two characters (objects, animals, plants, etc.), somewhat close to the fable genre. Parvin Etesami is responsible for reviving this genre, giving it a new voice.

for it; time denies pride as a violation of the purity of the heart, which blooms for only a fleeting moment. Pride is not becoming of a being whose lifespan is so short – this is one of the leitmotifs of the tea rose's monologue. This is how the first lines of the monazere appear in the poetic translation by G. Chistyakova published in the 1984 collection (Etesami 1984):

*Proud, majestic and white as snow,
In the garden blossomed a beautiful rose:
"My colour shows that wholly without sin am I"
To which the yellow rose replied:
"Both yellow roses, and red ones, too
Live only as long as spring approves.
For the thread that holds together our fragile time,
Is what helps keeps the purity of heart alive."*

While this translation preserves the similarity of the main idea, it removes the main axis of opposition – pride, standoffishness, and modesty, humility, following one's calling. The situation of the dialogue is simplified in the Russian poetic translation: as we have already noted, both roses in the original are free from sin, the point of the polemic is the attitude towards the purity of the heart. Pride can be a reason for self-affirmation, or it can be a basis for modesty upon the realization that it has no place in the face of the onslaught of time and in subordination to fate. And the sobering question posed by the tea rose is also removed: If we are so pure, then why is our life so fleeting? The following lines of the poem read:

*Fate will take us, who did not come [here] on our own, from the garden,
We cannot come and go as we please.
If we look at ourselves with the eye of self-love,
Then how can we say that we truly see!?
If a rose bloomed yesterday and withered in the morn,
It is a wonder that you and I have not.
Tea roses and white roses here abound,
Don't act as if we're the only ones around.
Thousands of bushes and leaves are our shelter,
Yet the brazen eye of the world will find us and pluck us from here.
Our lush colours are not long on display...
For tomorrow we will wither and wilt away.
By the will of fate, all that grows will disintegrate,
The heavens will lessen what we have made great.
So beautifully bright is the wine in the cup of life, and yet
We will not have the chance to sip its last drops.*

And here is Chistyakova's version:

*To this garden we were brought by another's will,
And going back is not our choice still.
From birth we are given heart and eyes,
So that everything to the very end we can recognize.
You and I are not in this garden alone,
Just look at all the roses blooming around!
Among the leaves any of us may be discovered,
By the eye of the Gardener of this world who so loves us.
You rejoice, for today we bloom magnificently,
But just think – tomorrow we will no longer be.
Beautiful is the wine in the cup of life,
But, alas, we cannot drink from it twice.*

Several points are of note here in terms of comparing the two translations. Let us start with the obvious: Parvin's condensed and metaphorical style, the intensity of meanings and the occasionally unexpected semantic transitions that can be explored in an extensive commentary are not always conveyed in the simplified and flowing amphibrach with a truncated last foot, which ends up sounding like a simplified and complete aphorism in a pair of Russian male rhymes. There are also a number of semantic inaccuracies, as well as a certain arbitrariness in the selection of lines for translation. The tea rose continues her train of thought by adding that pride blinds, preventing one from seeing the meaning of existence: *If we look at ourselves with the eye of self-love / Then how can we say that we truly see!?* This is omitted entirely in the poetic translation. So too are lines that carry a deep and complex idea about fate: *By the will of fate, all that grows will disintegrate / The heavens will lessen what we have made great.* This thought alone could be developed into a treatise on the differences between East and West. Does earthly flowering, earthly creativity have any meaning? Does it bring something new and enduring to the world? According to the European tradition (in all its different manifestations), the answer to this is an unequivocal "yes." It is the justification of the world: man is a creator who continues the creativity of the divine creature, and, more than this, man creates himself. In Etesami's poems, the theme of fate is imbued with a real sense of tragedy – with a humble and almost stoic acceptance of its instructions: fate is cruel, because it will reduce everything we have done (created) to its original state; it will erase it, destroy it, and there is no use complaining, for this is a bitter pill of wisdom that we must swallow, it is destined, preordained. Etesami returns to this theme at the end of the poem.

Further, one of Etesami's thoughts is conveyed incorrectly in the Soviet version. In Chistyakova's translation – *Among the leaves any of us may be discovered / By the eye of the Gardener of this world who so loves us* – the reader might assume that there is some hidden reference here to God (the "Gardener of this world who so loves us"),

but even in this case the meaning of the phrase remains vague and not connected with the lines that follow about the fleetingness of flowering. The more precise translation is clear: “... *the brazen eye of the world will find us and pluck us from here*” – no matter how pure and beautiful we are in our flowering, no matter how well we hide among the bushes and leaves, the world will find us at our very best, and will pluck us off and destroy us. Etesami then turns her thoughts to the main theme, the topic suggested in the title of the poem – the beauty of God (which is not mentioned in Chistyakova’s translation at all):

*It's better to take the colours of the sunrise with us on our travels,
For who knows if we'll still be here on the morrow.
The vast garden is a place where we can admire the beauty of God,
And you and I are here too to be admired.
What difference does it make if you are one colour and I another?
All of God's creatures are one.
It is wonderful that we serve Him with a single heart,
And enough that we recognize His dominion with a single voice.
Don't look at the colour of our petals as they appear on the outside,
We are eloquent exponents of thousands of meanings.
If in life, despite our weakness, we gain strength and power,
We owe this to the love of Almighty God.
It is to prostrate on this threshold that we have heads,
And to follow this path – legs.
We are all but specks of dust [in the rays] of this eternal sun.
We are but drops in this endless sea.
On the page decorated with the First Word,⁵
What difference does it make if we appear beautiful or ugly?
Like other buds that have blossomed, we too will leave,
Reveal yourself now, so that we can embellish the fresh grass.
In this two-day existence, we gain the wisdom
That while time may oppress us, why continue to persevere.
The cold does not scare us, nor does the heat of fate's furnace,
We are prepared to suffer and endure.
Falling into the trap of passions and befriending avarice,
Is as shameful for even a moment as it is for centuries.*

These thoughts were omitted completely in the poetic translation. God is replaced with “creator,” “god” with a lowercase letter, according to the norms of the time, or “truth”:

⁵ This is a reference to the word of Allah, according to which the world was created. Muslims believe that Allah inscribed the word “Be!” with his divine kalam, and thus the world came into existence.

*... for tomorrow the creator will stop the clock.
But finding the form of truth is torture.
Sometimes near, sometimes far.
Reaching for it, you will burn your hand on the flame,
For fate, insidious, cannot save.
You and I are slaves of the same lord!
But I doubt that everything on earth for him is of equal import.
He longs for our actions to produce what he wants,
We are hostages of an almighty god.*

After returning to the notion of the transience of a flower's bloom and the acceptance of the fact that new roses appear after the old ones have withered, the translator states in the last lines, passing it off as the poet's conclusion, that we need to enjoy life and serve nature and people:

*... we are majestically beautiful today!
So let us live this day to the full,
Our beauty serving nature and people.*

Etesami's parable is a lesson in humility, in the courageous acceptance of God's will – in the garden existence, in its beautiful yet fleeting flowering, in which man is given the opportunity to comprehend the beauty of God and the beauty of the word, as well as to create his own beauty, albeit one that is transient and destroyed by fate. Like the rose, man is created weak and limited, his days are short, he is a speck of dust in the light, a drop in the ocean – Etesami uses the images of religious and poetic tradition to indicate the insignificance of man.⁶ But the purpose of everything created and transitory, having gained strength through the love of God, is to see the beauty of His world, to bask in the colours of the sunrise, to take this beauty of the world that God created, and, moreover: to be a reflection of the Divine Beauty, to serve it, and to carry it within oneself. The tea rose implores the white rose not to shun others out of some imaginary superiority, and to make the fresh meadow yet more beautiful in its two-day existence. And in the short time it is given, to endure this transience, to suffer and withstand it, and not to fall into the shameful trap of passions such as pridefulness. As we can see, there is nothing in these lines about enjoying life; rather, it is about comprehending the Beauty of God and realizing that we are preordained to reflect this beauty in the earthly world, where everything is transitory. The tea rose teaches us to see in every phenomenon of this world, including ourselves – ephemeral earthly flowers – a multi-

⁶ Although it was precisely the images of a speck of dust disappearing in the rays of the sun and drop of water absorbed by the sea that in mystical Sufi poetry denoted the connection of the individual's soul with the World Soul, with Truth, with God.

tude of meanings. And understanding these meanings is the path to knowing oneself and God. These and a number of other nuances of thought are evident in Etesami's lines, yet they are completely lost on the reader who has only read Chistyakova's poetic translation, which is euphonious and simple and does not contain the originality and intellectual richness of Etesami's language.

In the flow of the aphoristically expressed thoughts in the poem "The Beauty of God," Etesami, among other things, urges us to not be afraid of cruel fate. She wrote about this in her edifying poems, addressing similar thoughts to her generalized interlocutor – condemning him for various sins and vices, and offering her wisdom as a path to the Truth. In these moral teachings, she speaks of fate as cruel and insidious, emphasizing that fate always turns its evil face to those who live their lives ignorant of knowledge, and thus ignorant of God: "You are stupid, and you are powerless in the face of fate" (from the poem "Airs and Graces" in the collection *Journey of a Tear*). On the other hand, as a different pole in the understanding of fate, Etesami expresses the idea of God's mercy, which removes the tragedy of existence for those who strive to know Him. As a poet, she does not, of course, offer a detailed and consistent concept of Divine predestination. These problems are considered not as part of the sphere of morality, but rather in that of Revelation: they "can only be explained with the help of the 'discovery' (*kasif*) of inner, mystical, intuition" (Ghazali 1980: 275) – that is, only in the knowledge of God.

Let us start to unpack the theme of "poetic knowledge of God" in Etesami's work by looking at her poem "The Grace of God." This is one of her most significant poems, studied in detail by Iranian researchers (their works have not been translated into other languages and are available to us in fragments only). For example, the famous Iranian philologist S. M. Borkhani points to this poem as the best example of Etesami's loyalty to the monotheistic doctrine of Islam (Borkhani 2014: 23). In "The Grace of God," the poet illustrates the idea of fate as the will of God through the stories of two babies saved by God. The first part is made up of two stanzas, a dialogue between the mother of the prophet Moses (Musa) and God. In the conversation, God, in response to the mother's pleas, explains in how He is the one who cares for the baby, the pilgrim who in a basket in the waters of the Nile.⁷ Thus, the future prophet was left to his own fate – that is, to the care of God and God alone; it is to God's mercy that the baby owes his life.

The Grace of God

*When Musa's mother lowered her baby
Into the [waters] of the Nile at the behest of the Most Glorious Lord,
She looked, grief-stricken, from the banks and said:*

⁷ The poem is based on the well-known episode in the prophet Musa's biography, mentioned twice in the Holy Scriptures of Islam (Quran 20: 38–40/41; 28: 6/7).

*“Oh, my little innocent child!
 If you are left to the mercy of the Lord,
 How are you to escape on this boat without a captain?
 If the All-Pure Lord forgets you,
 The waters will instantly carry your remains away.”
 And then a voice came from above: “What absurd doubts!
 Our traveller is already home.
 Remove that veil of doubt,
 And you will see what you have brought – benefit or harm.
 We have picked up what you let go,
 You saw the hand of God, but did not recognize it.
 You are guided by maternal love alone,
 And Our path is justice and care for [all] slaves.
 God never loses, and you, don’t lose your composure,
 What We took from you we will return, we will certainly return.
 The smooth surface of the river is better for him than a cradle, the [Nile] flood is
 his nurse, and the wave his mother.
 Rivers do not flood on their own,
 They do as We command.
 At Our command a storm rages at sea,
 The tides and waves move on our instructions.
 Do not suggest that God has the ability to forget,
 Do not place the weight of unbelief on your shoulders.
 You would do better to go back and entrust him to Us.
 Can you love him more than We can?!
 You are just a pattern [on the walls of] our palace.
 Earth, wind and water are helpless before Us.
 The drop that flows from the stream
 Sooner or later flows back.
 Oh, how much that was lost We have brought back!
 Oh, how many hungry mouths We have fed!
 Every pauper is a guest of ours,
 He knows Us, even if he does know that he knows Us.
 We summon [to ourselves], but are rejected,
 We atone for Our sins if We do wrong.
 Our needle sews everything that is sewn,
 The candle that burned out, has burned from Our flame.*

In Etesami’s poem, God gives his slave a detailed answer, telling her how she should perceive fate, even in situations that appear hopeless: you should not succumb to unbelief; know that God’s love is greater than human love, incomprehensible to man. And it is precisely here, when the mother commits an act that appears to be crazy

and desperate, that her worries about the child end, for the traveller is already home. In the Quran, it says: "And We inspired the mother of Musa: 'Suckle him, but when you fear for him, then cast him into the river and fear not, nor grieve. Verily! We shall bring him back to you, and shall make him one of (Our) Messengers.'" (Quran 28: 6/7). The child is left to God, and the mother needs only to believe, without a shadow of a doubt that the Lord will take better care of his slave than she can. Thus the theme of the fate of those who are led by God, and above all those who are destitute in this world, is resolved. The second part of the poem, in continuation of this theme, is God's monologue about His power over the world: everything is done according to His will, all the elements of the world obey Him. He uses the example of the fate of another child, who, by the grace of God, survived a shipwreck at sea. Note that Moses' mother referred to the basket in which the baby was lowered into the Nile a ship without a captain; in the second part of his speech, God says that He is the only true captain.

*A ship hit by a deadly wave
Once fell into the abyss.
The hurricane sent it on a path of destruction,
A dark fate befell the sailors.
Neither the anchor nor the wheel could help,
There was no strength left in the sailors' hands.
There are few heroes among the captains,
[Being] the captain of a ship is an opportunity for the Almighty only.
All the rope's knots came undone,
The waves rushed from all directions.
The water washed everything, both property and people away,
Only one small child survived.
The poor child took off like a dove,
Clasping [the waves of] the sea like his mother's hem.
The wave first twisted him into a scroll,
The hurricane wanted to attack him.
I said to the sea: "Put an end to the storm,
Leave that which was built out of passion be.
The needy are all equal,
The drowning boy cannot be left to drown."
I said to the rock: "Do not cause him any pain!"
I said to the drop of water: "Do not attack him!"
I ordered the wind to lift the baby
Out of the water and lower him to the shore.
I said to the stones: "Form a soft [bed] for him."
I said to the snow: "Become warm water for him."
I said to the morning: "Grace his face with a smile."
I said to the ray of light: "Revive his heart."*

*I said to the tulip: "Grow next to him."
 I said to the dew: "Wash his face."
 I said to the thorn: "Do not stick in his feet."
 I said to the snake: "Don't touch the young child."
 I said to suffering: "His tolerance is lacking."
 I said to the tears: "Don't be angry, he's [just] a child."
 I said to the wolf: "Do not torture his tender body."
 I said to the thief: "Do not take his necklace."
 I told fate: "Give him power over the world."
 I told reason: "Give him the power of understanding."
 I turned darkness into understanding,
 Protected him from all of fears.*

Thus, it was through the efforts and beneficence of God, in harmony with all the elements of the world that the baby was saved. Further, in the third part of the monologue, God angrily denounces those ungrateful people who submit to evil and do wicked things as soon as they are out of danger:

*Having found protection, they become restless,
 I loved them, but they turned into my enemies.
 They did deeds, but deeds that were base and vile,
 They made mirrors, but mirrors made of brick.
 As soon as they got out of the hole,
 They started to dig holes in the paths of others.
 They asked for light, but got smoke,
 They erected castles, but on sand [lit. "on a river"].
 They made up stories, but the stories made no sense.
 They hired thieves as guards.
 They filled their cups to the brim with vice,
 They twisted the thread with the spindle of stubbornness.
 They learned lessons, but lessons in shame.
 They rode horses, but without a bridle.
 Demons were made guards and guarantors
 In the place that belongs to the Great, the Immortal.
 Bowed in prayer before stone and clay,
 In those sanctuaries where the Immaculate Lord is revered.
 They became guides in the desert of error,
 They took supplies for the road from sinful deeds.
 In the furnace of vanity
 The flame of evil deeds flared up.*

Finally, the last couplets make it clear who the child was, saved by God, but given over to demons and idolatry.

*We saved the unfortunate drowning boy,
As soon as he escaped death, he became the prey of passions.
The ray of epiphany turned into smoke,
And that sinless orphan became Nimrod.
By my mercy, I glorified him,
He rose in power, only to become more bloodthirsty than a wolf.
He started a feud with a such being as I,
He sought help from eagles and vultures.
A powerful fire created by the miracle of lightning,
Entire houses burn down from a single spark.
He wanted, boasting of his power,
To overthrow the towers and fortress walls of the Lord.*

The poem ends with a description of the God-saved Nimrod, the King of Babylon, the first man who ordered others to serve him as a deity, the embodiment of cruelty, pride and resistance to God. And in his monologue addressed to Musa's mother, the story about the baby He saved serves as proof that her son will also be saved. This is how the efforts of the merciful, omniscient and just God to preserve life and exalt both the future malefactor and the future prophet are confirmed. And fate here is nothing more than the mercy of God, arranging everything in the best way possible, giving his slave the opportunity to do with his life as he pleases. By having God speak in her poem, Etesami relies directly on the authority of the Holy Scriptures, in which Allah speaks to people through his messenger Muhammad, as he spoke before through other messengers, including Musa.

In Etesami's value system, in her poetic anthropology, the highest achievement of someone who serves God is to attain the consciousness of a dervish (Koshemchuk, Reysner, Yahyapour 2021), the result of a long spiritual journey of labours and prayers. "... [T]he spirit of the Dervish is higher than the power of Jam," Etesami wrote, valuing the man who knew God above the greatest of the earthly kings, Jamshid,⁸ the perfect ruler who owned a cup that allowed him to observe the entire world. The religious focus of this type of consciousness is love for God and thirst for divine love.

Now let us look at a poem that is specifically about this topic, namely, "The Love of God." Two voices can be heard in it – the first belongs to a person of ordinary consciousness, reason and common sense, and in response to reasonable and simple

⁸ In the Zoroastrian tradition, Jam Jamshid was a mythological king, civilizer and cultural hero, the guardian of the material world, and saviour of earthly creations from the Flood. At the same time, he is the first sinner to be punished for his pridefulness. The duality of Jam is preserved in classical poetry – in panegyric, he personifies absolute power, while in didactic power, he represents the transient nature of earthly glory and wealth (Reysner 2020, 348–367).

arguments that humiliate and expose the dervish to mundane unreason, we hear the truly reasonable voice of a sage who has accomplished the main task of life – to reach a higher level of consciousness. Etesami has this voice explain itself in detail and benevolently (much like the voice of God in the previous poem) and urges the one asking the question to follow the same path. These words demonstrate an understanding of consciousness, an awareness that it is incomprehensible, associable, to an ordinary man. But he simply loves God and lives his life guided by nothing else, nothing human, but God. And for those around him, for the rational consciousness, the consequences arising from this seem revolting, because he does not accept the values of this world, and even if they do reach him, he casts them away immediately, like all worldly temptations. The only things that matter to the dervish are the perfection of the soul and the contemplation of the mystical pure light. Love for God is the most important thing in his soul. This is precisely what the poem is about, as the title itself reveals. In this dialogue, a “reasonable man” speaks to a dervish, who seems insane to him, criticizing him not only for his lack of reason, but also for the fact that he has lost, as the reasonable man sees it, his human form. The pathos of his indignation is angry and cruel, a fact which serves only to sharpen the contrast between true wisdom and earthly rationality. The dervish’s accuser advises him to seek out a doctor to cure his madness. The dervish’s response is about “God’s love” and “love for God.”

The Love of God

The reasonable man admonished the madman:

“Is it worth all this trouble?

The hoodlums here fling stones at you,

They chase you everywhere.

Boys tear the shirt on your back,

Passers-by steal your shoes and hat.

You speak nonsense when you open your mouth,

You make people angry when you remain silent.

Whether you laugh or cry bitter tears,

Everyone to the last mocks you.

At night, we sent you bread,

But you didn’t eat it, instead you ate dirt – what a miracle!

We gave you water, but you knocked the cup over,

You drank from a stream, from a pond, like a beast.

You lay your head to rest in the middle of the road,

We brought you a bed, but you threw it away.

You have abandoned your human form and now resemble a demon.

Once a man, you are in temperament the same as an evil spirit.

Yesterday, some lads poured dirt on your head,

But it was enough to lift your gaze towards them for them to run away.

*The baker threw [a handful of] ash into your eyes,
You endured this cruelty and did not even get angry.
A drunkard burned your hand with fire,
You endured the pain, yet did not shake the fire from your palm.
You are the only one who is drunk without wine,
Who on Earth but you could grow accustomed to such misfortune and humiliation?
The drunkard's hangover soon passes,
But your inebriation has no end.
There are many doctors here – both at the bazaar and on the streets,
Tell one of them about your affliction.”
The madman replied: “I have multiplied my madness a thousand times over,
So that I may see the Creator in all his splendour.
I have turned my gaze from darkness to light.
I became a candle and threw the wood away.
You, oh stranger, call me mad,
But I am smarter than the smartest among you,
If every sane person was as mad as I,
Then there would be more intelligent and wise people in the world.
The mystics who claimed this
Lost themselves, but found the Lord.
I see the limit of [God's] perfection,
But you see nothing but fantasy and illusion.
I contemplate the gardens of paradise,
Yet you see nothing but clay and bricks.
Because I was created from clay, not fire,
So, let them pour clay on my head – it is close to my [nature].
I have discovered innumerable treasures,
Witnessed specks of dust turn into the sun.
The love of the Lord has lit a fire in me,
So, what is it to me that they burned my hand?!
Separated from Him, I sprinkle ashes on my head,
So, tell the one who throws ashes at me to do just that!
You call devotion [to God] madness.
So, how do you propose to find a cure for this disease, how?
You said I should seek a doctor,
But there are no such doctors in the world.
How could I find such a healer?
For there is only one healer I know, and that is God.”*

One theme that crops up time and again in Sufi poetry is rationality and madness. For the world, madness is the highest rationality before God. Etesami talks of the incompatibility of two positions – “people of external knowledge,” who are only able to see the what is evident to the eye, and “people of internal knowledge,” who, thanks to the love of God, understand the innermost secrets of Existence. Reasonable people are not able to understand the Madman, who is guided by a heart that knows love for God, dissolving his personal “I” into God. Rationality does not comprehend the love of God and considers it a disease that needs to be cured. Wisdom responds thus: the only healer is God. So, what does one who loves God care about worldly troubles?

The rational mind cannot understand this indifference to the attacks of the world; the sage, meanwhile, sees the symbolic confirmation of his position in the vicissitudes of life. Things that are intolerable for an ordinary person are desirable for him. Etesami includes three such situations in her poem. Children throw dirt (clay) on him. But as far as the sage is concerned, this is close to his nature, for he is created from clay; because he is a man, not created from fire like an evil spirit, and what is an insult to others is for him a reminder of the fact that he was created by God. They threw ashes in his eyes. For him, this is not humiliating, but a reminder that he sprinkles ashes on his head in separation from God; this is what the ashes tell him. They burned his hand on the fire, but, for him, the burn is a reminder of the flame of his love for God. Incidentally, note that Etesami refers in this poem to the symbolic image of wine and intoxication, an allegory that is of great significance in Persian mystical poetry, and extremely rare in Etesami’s works: “... drunk without wine,” “... your inebriation has no end.” What is more, it is uttered by a man of ordinary consciousness, and thus does not receive the highest religious assessment from the poet. Etesami does not develop this image, simply using it to explain what a “madman” looks like in the eyes of a “reasonable” person.

What did the mystic ultimately discover on his path that would set him apart from ordinary and rational human existence? Having lost his earthly mind and seen his madness grow, he has been expelled from worldly relationships. In return, he receives the gift of contemplation of God, His perfection, the Garden of Paradise, and the entire universe. He truly is smarter than the smartest of men. Such is the pathos of this poem about the love for God as the highest form of human rationality, and about God’s love for man, which ignites this flame of love in a person (“The love of the Lord has lit a fire in me”). And Etesami characterizes this pathos as a spiritual person. It is precisely this pathos that is clearly felt in her moralizing poem, which carries one of the most important themes of Muslim mystical spirituality – the cult of knowledge. Knowledge here means, first and foremost, knowledge of the Path: the man who moves along the path towards truth is a right-minded man, a man who, according to the hadiths of the Prophet, is pious, that is, he has come to believe in God. And the truly intelligent man whose inner vision is open to all possibilities is the one who will see God at the end of

the path. Note that there are two possible translations of the title of the poem: “God’s Love” and “Love for God,” both of which are acceptable in terms of Farsi grammar, and both fit the meaning of the poem.

Etesami offers a glimpse of the innermost core of her soul in the poem “Kaaba of the Heart.” The title alone portends a significant message from the poet about her religious world. Two parts of equal volume (in terms of the number of verses given over to each of the opposing positions) are accorded to arguing “heroes” – the unconditional shrines of Muslim culture: the Kaaba as the architecturally revealed centre of the world, and the heart as the centre of the individual.

Kaaba of the Heart

*When the pilgrims [donned] their sacral clothing on the day of the Feast of Sacrifice,
The Kaaba said to itself:*

“I am the mirror [that reflects] the light of the Magnificent [Lord],

I am the bride in the tented roof of the feast that has gathered.

I was raised by the hand of the Friend of Allah,⁹

The Lord has recognized me as revered and eminent.

Nowhere on this vast earth

Is there a place like me, blessed and pure.

[Nowhere] is there an enlightenment feast like mine,

[Nowhere] is there a haven safer than my kingdom.

We bestow sincerity on the many who are embarrassed,

We make the many who are doomed to sacrifice the chosen ones.

The foundation of the land of the righteous was built by us,

The foundation of the palace of love [for God] is us.

We are the lamp for all these moths,

The home for the Lord of the world.

Here is the sanctuary where the stars and moons are worshipped,

Here is where the truth for books and notepads resides.

Here many kings have found their crown,

Here many proud folks have bowed their heads.

How many gemstones adorned my roof!

How many treasures have been thrown at my feet!

In our form, we are Qibla¹⁰ for the noble ones,

In our meaning, an intercessor for the fallen.

⁹ That is, Ibrahim and Abraham in the Old Testament, who, according to legend, built the first temple of God on earth here.

¹⁰ Qibla is the side towards which Muslims turn their face during prayer, in the direction of Mecca. Initially, the direction of prayer was towards Jerusalem, but as Islam took hold in Arabia and the Kaaba complex of shrines appeared on the site of the old temple, worshippers began to turn their heads towards Mecca.

*The book of love contains but a single page,
 Bearing not a dot except the name of God.
 Blessed are the efforts of the one who built this palace,
 Blessed are the thoughts of the one who completed this work.
 On this threshold, every stone, every grain of sand and straw,
 Eternally offer prayer to the Lord.
 "I am the Truth!"¹¹ the doors and roof here exclaim,
 The bodies and elements magnify [the Lord].
 Here the celestial beings sing hymns of praise,
 Their voices, full of import, know not a verbal form.
 The perfection of heights is on our threshold,
 The wing of the Faithful spirit a carpet on our path.
 Here it is forbidden to draw one's sword,
 Here no one raises a hand against another.
 No traps, no hunters will you find in these parts,
 The game is tranquil and the birds free.
 Good is the master who mixed this water and clay,
 Good is the architect who drew up a beautiful plan.
 Good is the tailor who sewed the robe weaved of gold for me,
 Good is the merchant who sold this silk.
 This is how I achieved such fame,
 My superiority stretches up to the heights of heaven.*

In this monologue, all the characteristics of the Kaaba are accepted by Etesami and confirmed as truth, close to her, for she accepts the rite and law of her faith, like many mystics, to the fullest, filling them with her own heartfelt experience. The antiquity of it all (Kaaba is the oldest house of God), the adornments of the Kaaba, the significance of the Hajj for the soul of the believer – all these are crucial elements. But there are more important elements still. To be sure, the internal path of the believer is useless if he does not fulfil the external requirements of the religion, and the pilgrimage to Mecca is a necessary enrichment of the soul. But the mystics knew that "the true seat of the divine spirit was not the Kaaba made of stone but the Kaaba of the faithful worshiper's heart" (Schimmel 2012: 115). And therefore, the rite, that is, the Kaaba of the first part of the poem, as the established and final Truth, the only receptacle of God, and the affirmation of this religious position as exalted "to the heights of heaven" brings forth in Etesami the necessary second part of the poem, which reflects the most important feature of the Sufi spirituality: Sufis "emphasize the emotional and moral side of religion"

¹¹ These are the words of the famous Baghdad mystic Mansour Hallaj, who was accused of self-deification and executed for his preaching. The legend of Hallaj is included in the famous historical collection "Anthology of Saints" by Farid ud-Din (twelfth century). According to this legend, after his execution, every part of his dismembered body repeated the words "I am the Truth."

(Ghazali 1980: 269), demanding sincerity in the observance of rites and that religious life be placed in the centre of the human heart. The second monologue in the poem is spoken by the heart, the true centre of the world, created by the Creator himself, and this soliloquy brings forth the second side of the poet's religious position, remarkable as it is for the reader:

*Her heart mocked her quietly [and said], "Oh, my friend!
In the eyes of the righteous, self-praise is unrighteous.
You speak of this lump of clay in such a way
That your words are devoid of the Kaaba of the heart.
You have nothing but water and clay,
[You have] not the blessed Kaaba, which is akin to the heart.
You were built by Ibrahim, [son of] Azar,¹²
I by the hand of the Great Judge.
You have paint, drawings and stones,
My colours, meanwhile, come from the light of my soul.
While you have gemstones and treasures,
I was given a room in the [human] chest.
Your threshold is kissed on holidays only,
Whereas my gates are always open.
You were built by slaves,
But I am the creation of the architect of Being.
You are brought crowns from China and Kashmir,
But I am discussed on the page of every notebook.
Silks are covered with patterns for you,
Bloom flows through all my vessels.
You are the dark flesh, and I emanate light,
You are of the earth, I of pure soul.
You may be noble and pure,
But I have wisdom and judgement too.
Here [read: "in me" – author's note] there is nothing but the face of a Friend,
And if there is something else, it is but a reflection of this face.
You may be loved by the moon and stars,
But my friends are love, sorrow and sighs.
You are showered with jewellery,
But I was placed next to the Mind and Soul.
In this secluded haven of passion, they are my acquaintances,
On this ship lost at sea, they are the captains.*

¹² According to legend, Abraham's father Azar made idols, which Abraham then sold. Etesami spells the name Azar differently to the Arabic version here. If we take her word, it means "fire."

*Externally, we rule the kingdom of the body,
 In essence, we are a house intended for God.
 There is a mystery here the mystery of Love,
 Everything but this pattern is an illusion [lit. "a metaphor"]¹³
 In this abyss, they bring us sacrifices,
 Our spears are stained with blood.
 You haven't seen the blood of those whose hearts have been destroyed,
 You haven't seen the sea, only its shores.
 Does one whose Kaaba of the heart remains pure
 Fear getting dirty?
 What mihrab¹⁴ could be purer than the heart
 What lamp brighter than the soul?
 Good is the one who sews clothes from the silk of the soul,
 Good is the bird that builds its nest on the branch.
 Good is the one who is guided by sincerity and need,
 Who prays in the sanctuary of his heart."
 Someone, Parvin, has gained superiority over the greats,
 And the heart, which has become like the Kaaba, is free from all corruption.*

This part of the poem, in the midst of it sharp antitheses, is full of motifs that are characteristic of mystical poetry: the condemnation of all that is ostentatious, including feigned virtue and piety; the sharp contrast between the external and the internal; and the veneration of the heart as the true abode of God. A Kaaba made from clay is the material embodiment of the true Kaaba, which is located in the spiritual world and around which, as legend has it, angels circumambulate (tawaf). The closest thing to its spiritual essence is the human heart, in which Love lives as the principle of the universe. Unlike the material Kaaba, the loving, suffering heart, next to the mind and soul, has direct contact with divine reality. For it is the heart that is the true mirror of God: "That God resides in the loving heart is expressed by another favorite tradition: 'Heaven and earth contain Me not, but the heart of my faithful servant contains Me'" (Schimmel 2012: 196). "In the innermost part of the heart," the mystics said, "the divine revelation is experienced."

The earthly, material Kaaba boasts of its magnificence and decoration, a fact that Etesami does not deny in her poem, but an incomparably higher beauty and value lies in the inner space of the human soul. As one researcher of Islamic spirituality puts it, "It is amazing that people strive to cross rivers and deserts to reach the Kaaba, seeking traces of the prophets Abraham and Muhammad there, yet do nothing to cross the desert of their own self and its passions to find the traces of their master in their

¹³ The word *majaz* ("metaphor," "allegory") in Sufi terminology means "illusion" or "illusoriness." It carries the idea of the illusory nature of the phenomenologically created world in relation to the world of divine reality, which is true Being.

¹⁴ A special niche in every mosque that points to Mecca.

hearts” (Tor 203: 140). Etesami privileges the journey into the depths of her heart over the external journey. The supremacy of the individual’s physical needs is the enduring axis of Etesami’s moral teachings. Here, she is the heir of the classic poets – both the Sufi poets and the Isma’ili Nasir Khusraw (eleventh century) (who has an entire qasida about the spiritual meaning of pilgrimage) – who believed that the only way God can tell man apart from His other creations is through man’s concern for the soul and its refinement on the path of knowledge. God has given man reason, the gift of speech, and the ability to distinguish between good and evil. Demons and angels do not choose between good and evil; they are attached to their spheres of Existence, and only humans have the right to choose. Herein lies his role as the crowning achievement of creation, simultaneously a right and a duty, for he was created as an instrument of the self-knowledge of God. Here we see the deep consonance of the great monotheistic religions, the unity of the human path to God of different cultures that is obvious to mystics. The similarity of the mystical teachings of Islam and Christianity in the sphere of religious praxis has also been noted by European researchers of the Persian tradition (see, in particular: (Andre 2003). We are, of course, not talking here about the differences that primarily affect the attitude of Islam towards Christ. Nevertheless, given this fundamental difference, reading Etesami’s poetry awakens a feeling of amazement in the Russian reader – a kinship and closeness of religious and moral values.

When we talk about European literature, we are usually speaking within a specific cultural context. The researcher does not always weigh whether there is a religious principle in artistic creations, and if there is, which one precisely. In Persian literature, these two principles – poetry and mysticism – are initially and completely inseparable, for Islamic mysticism was expressed by the Persians in poetic form, and the poet could thus not help but be a mystic. This unique feature of Persian literature dominates Etesami’s work.

The task of man in the mystical tradition of Iran is to master the Science of Behaviour and the Science of Revelation – two developed stages in the path to knowledge of God. In poems addressed to the “you” of the reader, or to the “you” of the generalized hero, as the bearer of earthly passions, Etesami offers her own poetic science of behaviour, her own understanding of both what one should and should not do. The antihero – the recipient in her moralizing poems – embodies what the Prophet called the three “destroyer” sins: avarice, submission to passions, and pridefulness. Her preaching of knowledge refers to the knowledge of evil and how to move away from vices, for if we do not know the roots of evil, which reside in the world of evil spirits, we will find ourselves in the grip of destruction. Let us note once again that Etesami’s unique spiritual, gnostic and mystical enlightenment also points to social issues, which are afforded great importance in her works (although we have not considered them in this article). Deeply rooted in Etesami’s poetry is the science of knowledge of God, something that cannot be described in the words of books. It is understood and conveyed by the poet as the spiritual ideal of the dervish. Etesami places the main things she has learned about God into the mouth of the dervish.

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