

VOICES OF INTIMACY

Appreciating the Variant Collections of Abdullah
Ansari's *Intimate Sayings*, The *Munajat*

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In Memory of My Dear Friend Leonard Lewisohn
On the Fourth Year of His Passing

VOICES OF INTIMACY: Appreciating the Variant Collections of Abdullah Ansari's *Intimate Sayings*, The *Munajat*

Abdullah Abu-Ismail Ansari was born in 1006 C.E. within the Old Citadel of Herat in what is now northwestern Afghanistan. His father, Abu-Mansur, a descendent of the Arab colonizers of Central Asia, was a simple merchant and a follower of the Sufi Way. Their renowned ancestor, Abu-Ayub Ansari, was among the first 'helpers,' (*ansar* in Arabic) to offer refuge in Medina to the Prophet Muhammad.

Abdullah was a remarkably bright child. By the age of six, he was already reading and reciting the Qur'an. He soon began studying the various collections of the *ahadith*, the many volumes of the Prophet Muhammad's statements and injunctions as recorded by his associates. When Abdullah was only nine years old, his father, Abu-Mansur, left the family to rejoin his old Sufi community in Balkh. Abdullah's upbringing and education continued under the tutelage of some of Herat's finest teachers of religion and spirituality. The boy's extraordinary literary aptitude and prodigious memory soon became evident to all around him. The great 15th century poet, 'Abd ar-Rahman Jami of Herat who was also a Sufi, recorded some of Ansari's childhood memories in his monumental biography of the major Sufis, the *Nafahat al-Uns*:

"I was just a lad when I entered the Academy of Literature. I recited poetry with such ease that this became a source of envy to the other students...I extemporaneously composed poems in Arabic. When the other lads would challenge me to produce verses on a variety of topics, I would recite more than what they asked for." (Nafahat al-Uns, pg. 337)

In addition to his literary genius, Abdullah Ansari was blessed with a sensitivity to the sublime beauty of the natural world. Ansari's impressions of nature were later to inform many of his 'intimate sayings', the *Munajat*. Ansari offers us a sense of nature's impact on him in one of his recollections:

“The Shaykh ul-Islam [Ansari] said: ‘For every person there is an idol, meaning a sweetheart, and springtime is my idol since I love the spring. When the air had warmed and the flowers come into bloom, I felt a need to gaze upon the flowers until my eyes were sated. I used to go to Gazargah. In a small garden there I [once] saw a tulip the size of a saucer, so powerfully beautiful that it seemed impossible to me that anything could be greater [in beauty] than that tulip.’” (Nafahat al-Uns, pg. 353)

By Ansari’s time, Herat was a major city in the vast province of Khorasan. Sufism had become so well-established in the region that most religious authorities regarded it as an integral part of Islam. Ansari also held this view, even though he belonged to the conservative Hanbali School. It is worth noting that today’s Wahhabi sect of Saudi Arabia, also Hanbali, is generally hostile to Sufi doctrine and practice. About his own perspective, Ansari explained: “My teachers of *hadith* and jurisprudence were many, but my elder guide in this matter of Sufism and True Reality, was Shaykh Abul Hassan Kharraqani, may God be pleased with him. If I had not met Kharraqani I would not have known and understood True Reality.” (Nafahat al-Uns, pg. 340)

As a literalist Hanbali, Ansari spent much of his life opposing the views of the Ash’ari sect as it gained influence throughout Khorasan. With the expansion of the Seljuk empire which was rapidly becoming the dominant power in the Islamic world, the Ash’ari doctrine gradually prevailed as the state religion. Ansari regarded their views as dangerously innovative, deviating from the apparent message of the Qur’an. Because of his authority and renown, Ansari’s fierce opposition to Ash’ari doctrine resulted in his imprisonment on several occasions. He was even banished from Herat at times because of the unrest caused by his outspoken opposition.

The *Munajat*, (Arabic for ‘intimate sayings’) is the title shared by variant collections of Abdullah Ansari’s heartfelt communications to God. Ansari composed these often aphoristic sayings to embellish his commentaries on the Qur’an and to enhance his other works on religion and spirituality. The *Munajat* are Ansari’s verbal representations of unspoken invocation—pearls cast from the ocean of an enlightened heart onto the shore of God’s seekers. He was the tutor of intimacy

who spent most of his life guiding sincere seekers towards the ineffable vastness of the divine embrace.

Ansari's use of versified sayings to enhance his prose text introduced a style that was to have a substantial impact on Persian literature. We can observe Ansari's stylistic influence centuries later in Sa'adi's masterpieces, the *Gulistan* and the *Bostan*. It is thought that after his death, a number of Ansari's disciples culled through their notes for the Shaykh's intimate sayings and assembled these in the first manuscripts of the *Munajat*. These collections of Ansari's intimate sayings soon became very popular. They provided all classes of Muslims with a sensitive, emotionally compelling model for how to intimately communicate with God. Most of Ansari's sayings were composed in *saj'*, a style of free verse of irregular rhyme, which made his compositions easier to memorize.

In the centuries after his death, it became increasingly difficult to authenticate Ansari's authorship in the growing number of variant collections of the *Munajat*. One problem is that Ansari himself appears to have recited variant readings of his own sayings to suit his topic at hand. Over time, a good many of Ansari's compositions were altered by enthusiastic editors, and similar sayings by other authors and imitators were occasionally included in the collections. Popular modern editions of the *Munajat* are thus a blend of Ansari's intimate sayings and more or less compatible compositions by unknown authors and editors. A thousand years later, despite these uncertainties, the *Munajat* remains one of the most cherished of Sufi manuals.

The most authentic source for Ansari's intimate sayings were the transcriptions of his lectures on the meaning of the Qur'an, and his compositions on spirituality. A great number of these sayings were preserved in the pages of the *Kashf ul-Asrar* (The Unveiling of Secrets), a comprehensive commentary on the Qur'an written a couple of decades after Ansari's death. This work was composed by Rashid ud-Din Maybudi, a second-generation devotee of Ansari's teachings who worked from transcriptions of the Shaykh's teachings. The *Kashf ul-Asrar* was, according to Maybudi, his own expansion of Ansari's abridged commentary on the Qur'an.

In the following example from the *Kashf ul-Asrar*, Ansari introduces an intimate saying to enhance his commentary on verse 5:35 of the Qur'an: '**Seek the means (*wasilat*) of finding your way to Him**'. A dominant theme in the earliest collections of the *Munajat* is that God can only be known through Himself, and is therefore the only means to an awareness of his divine Presence. In dozens of intimate sayings, Ansari advocates the *via negativa*, the introspective practice of emptying one's mind of all that is conceptual in order to experience God's eternal Presence.

O God!

If another found You through inquiry,

I found You by fleeing from me.

If another found You through invocation,

I found You through self-forgetting.

If another found You by seeking,

It's from You I found the seeking!

O God!

You are Yourself the *means* to Yourself,

You were the First and are also the Last.

To say any more would be meaningless.

(*Kashf*, Dual Volume, Book I, page 248)

On the same topic concerning the futility of relying on one's own efforts to approach God, Ansari presents us with another of his sayings, following a brief commentary on verse (4:32) which reads: '**Do not covet that which God has graciously bestowed on some of you over others**'.

Shaykh Ansari says:

They will not find God by seeking! Yet the seeker will find and until he finds, he cannot seek, and whatever he finds by his own seeking is worthless. For the sincere devotee, finding True Reality comes prior to seeking. But seeking Him is a first step. The mystic-knower found seeking from finding, not finding from seeking— like a commanded servant whose obedience is from sincerity, not his sincerity from obedience; or like the cause found in the inherent meaning, not the meaning derived from the cause.

O Lord!

Because finding You precedes the seeking and the seeker,
anyone seeking You will be overwhelmed by disquiet.
The seeker seeks, yet the Sought is gained prior to seeking!
Behold! Yours is truly a strange affair! Even stranger
is to directly perceive the Found when no seeking is aroused!
God appeared while Grandeur's veil was still in place!

(*Kashf*, Dual Volume, Book I, pg. 192)

The two following sayings evoke the purification of the ritual ablution performed by Muslims prior to saying their prayers. Ansari's sayings frequently reference water as the symbol of spirit.

O God!

With thousands of waters You washed me
so that I could know your intimate love!
There remains one last washing:
O God! Do wash me of myself
so that I lift away and You remain!

(*Kashf*, Dual Volume, Book II, pg. 210, bottom)

O God!

The true lover's tongue is silent
yet his state is fully speaking
Should the soul be sublimated by love,
perhaps the Beloved will take its place.
The drowned one doesn't see the water
in which he drowns and is carried away.
No lamp stays lit with the rising sun
when the world's lamp is the sun itself.

(*Kashf* Dual Volume, Book II, pg. 624)

Most of the intimate sayings open with the invocation of God's name: "O God!," "O Lord!," etc.. The overall didactic purpose of Ansari's sayings stands out most clearly in those compositions where the invocation of God's name is preceded by versified mystical and religious doctrine. In such cases it becomes quite apparent that the Shaykh's intimate sayings were intended as spiritual guidance for a human audience. Like most Sufi teachers, Ansari employed words to indicate a spiritual reality transcending description. The intimate sayings prepare seekers for the ineffable experience of intimacy with God. Here are two examples:

O Loosener of the tongues speaking intimate sayings!
O Diffuser of intimacy in the retreats of your invokers!
You permeate the breathing of the knowers of secrets!
We have no companion but your name's remembrance!
We have no provision but your enduring recollection!
We have no guide other than You leading us to You!
O God!
Look after the need of the one who only needs You!

(*Kashf*, Dual Volume, Book I, pg. 574)

Alas for the First Day!
If there were Grace on that Day,
obedience would lead to reward
and sin result in forgiveness.
If there were no Grace on that Day,
obedience would lead to contrition
and sin result in wretchedness.
Sugar arrived sweet, not of itself,
the wild gourd is bitter, not of itself.
Work doesn't cause laziness in one person
or the will to do it in another person.
Work is for whomever in eternity it was suited.
O God,
If it were your veiled secret that no Grace existed,
then our story would end in sorrow and contrition.

(*Kashf*, Dual Volume, Book I, pg. 276)

In addition to the *Kashf ul-Asrar* another reliable source for Ansari's authentic intimate sayings is the *Tabaqat as-Sufiyya*, (The Generations of the Sufis), a biography of prominent Sufis. This was, in fact, Ansari's expansion on 'Abd ar- Rahman Sulami's existing book by the same name which had become a standard reference on the lives of the early Sufis. The *Tabaqat as-Sufiyya* was apparently composed during a series of lectures transcribed by Ansari's students. Here are some selections, which like so many from the *Kashf ul-Asrar*, emphasize the uniqueness and exclusivity of God's existence and knowledge. According to this view, the created, mortal aspect of any human being has only a relative and God-dependent existence and knowledge. Through spiritual practice, the mystic seeks to transcend this created aspect in order to share in the awareness of God's Self-knowing.

O God!

Who except You praises You?

None but You venerates You.

Who can know You except You?

There is not a person able to;

Thus, whoever seeks you by himself

remains with what suits himself.

Yours are those who seek You through You,

speaking to You with You through You about You;

The beholder is dumb, you could say, aware;

The seer drowns in the Seen, seeking is routed.

(*Tabaqat*, Habibi's edition, pg.55)

O God!

Over whom are your rights,

since there is only You?

Single are Your rights and

the reality of your making.

(*Tabaqat*, Habibi edition, pg. 76)

O God!

What is this that You've done to your friends?
Anyone looking for them found You,
and unless seeing You, did not recognize them.

(*Tabaqat*, Habibi Edition, pg. 250)

We can compare this last saying from the *Tabaqat* with its modification as recorded in the *Maqulat* sometime around the 15th century:

O God!

What virtue is this that You've put with your friends,
that anyone who recognized them found You,
and anyone who found You recognized them?

A much later version of this saying appears in Kaviani's 1924 edition of the *Munajat* titled the *Ilahi Namah wa Munajat Namah*. This Persian edition of Ansari's intimate sayings has become quite popular because it is now freely available online.

O God!

What is the pure virtue that You have sent with your Friends,
and for what noble strivings did You bring them into the world?
Whoever found You did not recognize them,
and whoever recognized them found You.

(Kaviani, pg. 9, bottom)

Kaviani's, and other popular editions of the *Munajat*, are fairly recent collections of Ansari's most basic sayings and aphorisms. Some of the sayings have been altered from their originals and some are imitations. Ansari's own more profound and metaphysical sayings have been abbreviated and simplified. The voice of selfless intimacy has become somewhat muted by a bolder voice of familiarity. We can observe these differences by comparing a few intimate sayings on the primacy of God's mercy and kindness over his judgment and wrath. Below are three

original sayings taken from the *Kashf ul-Asrar*, followed by four from Kavianî's 1924 edition, *The Ilahi Namah wa Munajat Namah*:

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O God!
However much we are sinners,
You're our Forgiver.
To the extent we're evil-doers,
You're our Concealer.
Incomparable Lord, without partner!
Yours is the treasure of Grace.
It seems fitting that You
would excuse our transgressions.

(*Kashf*, Dual Volume, Book I, pg. 550)

O God!
You've described us as feeble;
From the weak is there not but sin?
And You've described us as ignorant;
From the ignorant is there not but error?
And You are the Lord, the Most Gracious!
What other than giving suits the Gracious?
O Lord of mine! You are the Most Kind;
What but sincerity from the Most Kind?

(*Kashf*, Dual Volume, Book II, pg. 383)

O God!
I've come with both hands empty;
I've burned in hope of better days;
What if upon this ailing heart of mine
You were to apply the soothing balm?

(*Kashf*, Dual Volume, Book II, pg. 112)

Here are a similar sayings from Kaviani's *Ilahi Namah wa Munajat Namah*. Some of them were likely composed by Ansari's imitators.

O God!
You created free of charge;
You provisioned free of charge;
So do forgive free of charge:
You are no merchant, You are God!

(Kaviani, pg. 9)

O God!
I am a sinful servant, where is your pleasure?
I am dark-hearted, where is your radiant light?
If You'd grant us heaven in trade for obedience,
that is commerce! Where is your kindness and charity?

(Kaviani, pg. 9)

O God!
I am weary of that worship that leads me to vanity,
and devoted to that sinning which leads to apology.

(Kaviani, pg. 15)

O God!
Don't hold me to account for my sins
and I will hold You to your mercy;
Your grace manifests brighter than the sun,
and I with my sins am but an unworthy mote.

(Kaviani, pg. 18)

Kaviani's and other recent editions of the *Munajat* are more or less true to Ansari's original compositions. They often include entries from questionable collections of Ansari's intimate sayings, such as the short work known as the

Maqulat (Sayings). This work has, however, been accepted by many authorities because it includes material from the *Tabaqat as-Sufiyya* and the *Kashf ul-Asrar*. Here are a couple of selections from the *Maqulat* which have survived almost intact in Kaviani's edition:

When I gaze at You, I am a crowned king;
Seeing myself, I am dust, and even less.

(*Maqulat*, pg. 152)

My life has been carried away by the wind;
I've done injustice to my body's purpose.
You spoke but I disobeyed your command;
I've foundered by not taking the medicine.

(*Maqulat* pg. 154)

Another collection (with variant manuscripts) of Ansari's intimate sayings is a work titled, the *Ilahi Namah* (Words Invoking God) which was assembled around the 15th century. There are thematic and linguistic similarities between the *Ilahi Namah* and modern editions of the *Munajat*. Below are several examples comparing Shahid 'Ali's well-known manuscript of the *Risalah-ye Ilahi Namah* (dated 1499) to Kaviani's 1924 edition of the *Munajat*.

There was a time when I was searching for Him
and I was finding myself;
Now I search for myself and I find Him.
(*Risalah-ye Ilahi Namah*)

What is noteworthy in Kaviani's version below is that a thoughtful editor has enhanced the sense of intimacy in Ansari's saying by replacing the pronoun 'Him' (in the previous saying) with 'You'.

O God!
There was a time when I was searching for You
and I was finding myself;
Now I search for myself and You are found.

(Kaviani, pg. 13)

Preserved in several modern editions of the *Munajat* is the prologue to Shahid 'Ali's *Risalah-ye Ilahi Namah*:

O Giver of Grace, our Bestower of blessing!
O Most Wise, our Concealer of transgression!
Eternal One beyond creaturely perception!
O Unique, peerless in Essence and Qualities!
O Creator, our True Guide on the path!
O Powerful One, worthy of Lordship!
Bestow your purity on our souls,
and give our hearts the desire for You,
and grant your radiance to our eyes,
and give to us that which is best
and do not abandon us to uncertainty!

On the second page of Kaviani's edition, we find the above paragraph with only minor changes.

The following saying from the *Risalah-ye Ilahi Namah* remains nearly identical in the *Maqalat* and Kaviani's edition:

O God!
Don't wreck the foundation of our being witness to Oneness!
And don't make our garden of hope to be without water;
And do not with our transgressions blacken our faces!
O God!
Do not scatter the dust of shame over our foreheads,
and do not seize us with calamity!

To sum up, the popular editions of Abdullah Ansari's *Munajat* (Intimate Sayings) were assembled over many centuries from diverse sources. Ansari's original sayings were poetical elucidations randomly embedded in his large prose works on spirituality, such as the *Tabaqat as-Sufiyya* and the *Kashf ul-Asrar*. Modern editions of the *Munajat* were streamlined and altered to suit a more general audience. The later collections feature shorter sayings that are metaphysically less sophisticated than Ansari's earliest authenticated words. The later editions present us with polished and engaging sayings delivered in a more boldly conversational voice. Ansari's originals are more cautious, often mysterious and at times nearly incomprehensible to anyone unfamiliar with mystical self-surrender. Despite some loss of sophistication in the popular editions, such as Kaviani's *Ilahi Namah wa Munajat Namah*, these later works have preserved much of Ansari's essential teachings. They have diffused his spiritual message across the entire Persian-speaking world and beyond, through translation. Ansari's intimate sayings have provided, for countless Muslims raised to primarily fear God, a voice with which to lovingly speak to God. Many have turned to and embraced the path of Sufism thanks to the simple sincerity of these popular editions of the *Munajat*. It should be noted, however, that a good number of the compositions found in these editions are thought to be imitations of the Shaykh's sayings inserted by unknown authors. Yet, even these imitations are often beautifully written, and none of them can be said to fundamentally distort Ansari's teachings.

Thanks to the remarkable scholarship of Serge de Beaurecueil and Dr. Ravan Farhadi, each of whom spent decades of their lives on the study and publication of Abdullah Ansari's essential works, we can now access the Shaykh's authentic *Munajat* in French and, to some extent, in English. Those familiar with earlier English, and other, translations of the more popular Persian editions of the *Munajat* may now also enjoy Ansari's intimate sayings in their earliest forms.

Text Source

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Suggested Readings

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