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Introduction

This is the first part of Martyr Mutahhari's book *Sayri dar Nahj al-balaghah*, and consists of the introduction and the first section of the book. The introduction, which the author, presumably wrote before giving the book to the publishers is dated Muharram 3, 1995 (January 15, 1975).

Perhaps it may have happened to you, and if not, you may still visualize it: someone lives on your street or in your neighbourhood for years; you see him at least once every day and habitually nod to him and pass by. Years pass in this manner, until, one day, accidentally, you get an opportunity to sit down with him and to become familiar with his ideas, views and feelings, his likes and dislikes. You are amazed at what you have come to know about him. You never imagined or guessed that he might be as you found him, and never thought that he was what you later discovered him to be.

After that, whenever you see him, his face, somehow, appears to be different. Not only this, your entire attitude towards him is altered. His personality assumes a new meaning, a new depth and respect in your heart, as if he were some person other than the one you thought you knew for years. You feel as if you have discovered a new world.

My experience was similar in regard to the *Nahj al-balaghah*. From my childhood years I was familiar with the name of this book, and I could distinguish it from other books on the shelves in my father's library.

Years later, during my studies, first at the theological school of Mashhad, and later at Qum, when I was finishing the last stages of the preliminary education in theology called "*sutuh*", during all those days the name of the *Nahj al-balaghah* was heard more often than that of any other book after the Qur'an. Some of its sermons on piety I had heard so many times that I almost remembered them by heart.

Nevertheless, I must admit, like all of my colleagues at the theology school (*Hawzah 'ilmiyyah*), I was quite ignorant of the world of the *Nahj al-balaghah*. We had met as strangers and passed by each other

in the manner of strangers. This continued until the summer of 1325 (1946) when in order to escape the heat of Qum, I went to Isfahan. A trifling accident brought me into contact with a person who took my hand and led me somewhat into the world of the *Nahj al-balaghah*.

When this happened, I realized that I knew little about this book until that time. Later I wished that I would also find someone who would introduce me into the world of the Qur'an. Since then, the countenance of the *Nahj al-balaghah* was transformed in my eyes. I became fond of it, and gradually my fondness grew into love.

It was now a different book from the one I had known until that moment. I felt as if I had discovered an entirely new world. Shaykh Muhammad 'Abduh, the former mufti of Egypt, who edited and published the *Nahj al-balaghah* with a brief commentary, and for the first time introduced this book to the Egyptians, says that he had no knowledge of this book until he undertook its study far from home in a distant land.

He was struck with wonder and felt as if he had discovered a precious treasure trove. Thereupon, he immediately decided to publish it and introduce it to the Arab public. The unfamiliarity of a Sunni scholar with the *Nahj al-balaghah* is not surprising; what is amazing is that the *Nahj al-balaghah* should be a stranger and alien in its own homeland and among the Shi'ah of 'Ali ('a) and that too in the Shi'i theological schools in the same way as 'Ali himself has remained isolated and a stranger.

Evidently, if the content and ideas of a book or the feelings and emotions of a person do not harmonize with the mentality of a people, that book or person practically remains isolated as a stranger in an alien world, even though the name of such a person or book may be mentioned with great respect and admiration.

We, the theology students, must confess our estrangement from the *Nahj al-balaghah*. We have built a mental world of our own which is alien to the world of the *Nahj al-balaghah*. As I write this preface, I cannot abstain from recalling with sorrow the memory of that great man who introduced me for the first time into the world of the *Nahj al-balaghah*, and whose acquaintance I treasure as one of the most precious experiences of my life, which I would not exchange for anything.

No day or night passes without my remembering him or mentioning him with feelings of gratitude. I dare say that he was a divine scholar (*'alim-e rabbani*) in the true sense of the word, though I dare not claim that I was "a learner of the path of deliverance" (*muta'allim 'ala sabil al-najat*). [1](#)

I remember that in my meetings with him, I was always reminded of the following verse of Sa'di:

*The devout, the ascetic, and the Subi,
All are toddlers on the path;
If there is any mature man,
It is none other than the 'alim-e rabbani.*

He was a *faqih* (jurisprudent)², a philosopher, a man of letters and a physician, all at once. He was well versed in *fiqh* (jurisprudence), philosophy, the Arabic and Persian literature and the traditional medicine, and was considered a specialist of the first order in some of these fields. He was a masterly teacher of Bu 'Ali's *al-Qanun*, the treatise of Ibn Sina in medicine, which does not find a teacher these days, and many scholars of the theology school attended his lessons.

However, it was not possible for him to confine himself to one field and his spirit revolted against any kind of restrictions. Of his lectures the most that interested him were those on the *Nahj al-balaghah*, which threw him into ecstasies. It seemed as if the *Nahj al-balaghah* had opened its wings and he, having mounted on its wings, was taken on a journey through strange worlds which were beyond our reach.

It was evident that he lived by the *Nahj al-balaghah*; he lived with it and breathed with it. His spirit was united with that book; his pulse throbbed and his heart beat in harmony with the *Nahj al-balaghah*. Its sentences were always on his lips and their meanings had been engraved upon his heart.

When he quoted its passages, tears would flow from his eyes and soak his white beard. During lessons, his encounter with and involvement in the *Nahj al-balaghah* would make him totally oblivious of his surroundings. It was a very educative as well as an attractive spectacle. Listening to the language of the heart from someone whose great heart is full of love and wisdom has altogether a different affect and attraction. He was a living example of the saints of the bygone days. The words of 'Ali fully applies to him:

Had it not been that the Providence had decreed the years of their life the passionate earning for Divine reward and fear of chastisement would not have permitted their souls to remain in their bodies even for a moment. Their realization of the greatness of the creator has made everything besides Him insignificant in their eyes. ³

This refined man of letters, the speculative philosopher, the great *faqih*, the adept man of medicine and the excellent master of theology was the late Hajj Mirza 'Ali Aqa al-Shirazi al-'Isfahani, sanctified by God, a man of truth and wisdom, who had attained deliverance from the finite self and selfhood and had merged with the Infinite Truth.

In spite of his high scholarly status and eminent social standing, his sense of commitment to society and his burning love for al-Imam al-Husayn ('a) had impelled him to deliver sermons from the *minbar*.

His sermons, since they came from the heart, had a deep effect on the hearts. Whenever he visited Qum, the scholars of the first rank would persuade him to deliver sermons from the *minbar*.⁴ His sermons were charged with a passionate purity and sincerity that made them profoundly effective. They were not just words to be heard, but a spiritual state to be experienced.

However, he abstained from leading prayers. One year, during the holy month of Ramadan, after much

persuasion, he accepted to lead prayers at the *Madraseh-ye Sadr* for that month. In spite of the fact that he did not come regularly and refused to stick to any regular schedule, unprecedented crowds of people would come to attend the prayers led by him. I heard that strength declined in the jama'at in the neighbourhood mosques and he, too, did not continue.

As far as I know, the people of Isfahan generally knew him in person and liked him. He was also loved at the theology school of Qum. The '*ulama*' of Qum would go forth eagerly to see him at the news of his arrival in the city.

Like all other restrictions, he also refused to be bound by the conditions set for having murids and followers. May Allah shower His infinite mercy upon him and raise him with His *awliya*' on the Day of Resurrection.

With all his merits, it is not my claim that he was familiar with all the worlds that the *Nahj al-balaghah* embraces and had set his foot in all the domains encompassed by it. He had explored only a portion of its realms and that part of the *Nahj al-balaghah* had been incarnated in his person.

The universe of the *Nahj al-balaghah* includes numerous worlds: the world of *zuhd* (abstinence, piety) and *taqwa* (God-fearing), the world of '*ibadah*' (worship, devotion) and '*irfan*' (mystic knowledge), the world of *hikmah* (wisdom) and philosophy, the world of moral preaching and guidance, the world of eschatology (*malahim*) and mysteries (*mughayyabat*), the world of politics and social responsibilities, the world of heroism and bravery ...; too many worlds to be conquered by any individual. Hajj Mirza 'Ali Aqa al-Shirazi had explored only a part of this great ocean and knew it well.

Nahj al-balaghah and the Present-Day Islamic Society

The alienation from the *Nahj al-balaghah* was not confined to me or others like me, but pervaded through the Islamic society. Those who understood this book, their knowledge did not go beyond the translation of its words and explanatory notes on its sentences.

The spirit and the content of the book were hidden from the eyes of all. Only lately, it may be said, the Islamic world has begun to explore the *Nahj al-balaghah*, or in other words, the *Nahj al-balaghah* has started its conquest of the Muslim world.

What is surprising is that a part of the contents of the *Nahj al-balaghah*, both in Shi'ite Iran and Arab countries, was first discovered either by atheists or non-Muslim theists, who revealed the greatness of the book to the Muslims. Of course, the purpose of most or all of them was to utilize the *Nahj al-balaghah* of 'Ali ('a) for justifying and confirming their own social views; but the outcome was exactly opposite of what they desired.

Because, for the first time the Muslims realized that the views expressed grandiloquently by others had nothing new to offer and that they cannot surpass what is said in the *Nahj al-balaghah* of 'Ali ('a), or

translated into action through the character (*sirah*) of 'Ali and his disciples like Salman al-Farsi, Abu Dharr, and 'Ammar.

The result of it was that instead of supporting the pretentious views of those who wished to exploit the *Nahj al-balaghah*, 'Ali and his book defeated their purpose. Nevertheless, it must be accepted that before this occurred, most of us had little knowledge of the *Nahj al-balaghah* and it hardly went beyond appreciation of few sermons about virtues of piety and abstinence.

Nobody had yet recognized the significance of the valuable epistle of Mawla 'Ali to Malik al-'Ashtar al-Nakh'i; nobody had paid attention to it.

As mentioned in the first and second chapters of this book, the *Nahj al-balaghah* is a collection of sermons, precepts, prayers, epistles and aphorisms of 'Ali ('a) compiled by al-Sayyid al-Sharif al-Radi about one thousand years ago.

However, neither the recorded words of Mawla 'Ali are confined to those collected by al-Sayyid al-Radi, nor was he the only man to compile the sayings of Amir al-Muminin. Al-Masudi, who lived a hundred years before al-Sayyid al-Radi, in the second volume of his work *Muruj al-dhahab*, writes: "At present there are over 480 sermons of 'Ali in the hands of the people," whereas the total number of sermons included by al-Sayyid al-Radi in his collection is 239 only.

There are, at present, two kinds of work that must be accomplished with respect to the *Nahj al-balaghah*, so that 'Ali's thought and his views on various important issues expressed in the *Nahj al-balaghah*, which are still relevant and are direly needed by the present-day Islamic society, may be brought to light.

The second kind of work required in relation to the *Nahj al-balaghah* is research on the sources (*asnad*) and the documents related to its contents. Fortunately, we hear that Muslim scholars in various parts of the Islamic world are devoting themselves to both of these important tasks.

This book is a collection of a series of articles that originally appeared in the journal *Maktab e Islam* during 1351-52 (1972-73), now presented to the learned readers in the form of the present book. Formerly, I had delivered five lectures on this topic at the *Husayniyyah Irshad*.⁵ Later, I took up with the idea of writing a series of articles to deal with the subject in greater detail.

From the outset, when I chose to call it "*Sayri dar Nahj al-balaghah*" ('A journey into the *Nahj al-balaghah*'), I was aware that my attempt does not deserve to be called more than a journey, or a short trip. This work, by no means, can deserve to be called a research study. I neither had the time and opportunity for a research study, nor did I consider myself fit for this task.

Moreover, a profound and comprehensive research study of the contents of the *Nahj al-balaghah*, exploration of the thought of 'Ali, and, besides it, research about documentation of its contents, is the job

of a group and not of a single individual. But as it is said, that which cannot be attained in entirety is not to be abandoned in entirety⁶.

And since humble attempts open the way for great tasks, I started on my trip. Unfortunately, even this journey was not completed. The project that I had prepared for, and which the reader shall find mentioned in the third chapter, remained unaccomplished on account of many preoccupations. I do not know whether I will ever get the opportunity to continue my journey through the *Nahj al-balaghah*. But it is my great desire to be able to do so.

A Literary Marvel

The *Nahj al-balaghah* is a magnificent collection of the inimitable sermons, invocations (*du'a*), wills or advices, epistles and aphorisms of Amir al-mu'minin, Imam 'Ali ibn Abi Talib ('a), compiled by al-Sayyid al Sharif al-Radi (may God be pleased with him) about one thousand years ago. Time and years have not only failed to diminish the impressive freshness of this work, but have added constantly to its value as new concepts and ideas have emerged.

'Ali ('a) was undoubtedly a man of eloquence and delivered a large number of speeches that became famous. Likewise, numerous sayings containing philosophic wisdom were heard from him. He wrote many letters, especially during the days of his caliphate, which his admirers recorded and preserved with remarkable interest and zeal.

Al-Mas'udi (d. 346/955–6), who lived almost a hundred years before al-Sayyid al-Radi (d. 406/1115), in the second volume of his *Muruj al-dhahab*, under the heading "*Fi dhikr luma' min kalamihī, wa akhbarihī, wa zuhdih*", says:

That which has been preserved by people of 'Ali's sermons, delivered on various occasions, exceeds 480 in number. 'Ali ('a) used to deliver his sermons extempore without any previous preparation. The people recorded ⁷ his words and practically derived benefit from them.⁸

The testimony of an informed researcher and scholar like al-Mas'udi bears out the large number of 'Ali's speeches that were extant during his time. Only 239 of these have been handed down to us in the *Nahj al-balaghah*, whereas their number, as mentioned by al-Mas'udi, was more than 480.

Moreover, al-Mas'udi informs us about the extraordinary dedication and ardour of various groups of people in recording and preserving 'Ali's words.

Al-Sayyid al-Radi and the Nahj al-balaghah

Al-Sayyid al-Sharif al-Radi, or al-Sayyid al-Radi, as he is commonly called, was an ardent admirer of 'Ali's speeches. He was a scholar, a poet and a man of cultivated taste. Al-Tha'alibi, his contemporary, says of him:

He is the most remarkable man among his contemporary and the noblest amongst the sayyids of Iraq. Family and descent aside, he is fully adorned and endowed with literary excellence. He is the most remarkable poet among the descendants of Abu Talib, though there are many distinguished poets among them. To say that of all the Quraysh no poet could ever surpass him would not be an exaggeration.⁹

It was on account of al-Sayyid al-Radi's earnest love of literature in general, and admiration for 'Ali's discourses in particular, that his interest was mainly literary in compiling 'Ali's words. Consequently, he gave greater attention to those passages which were more prominent from the literary point of view.

This was the reason why he named his anthology "*Nahj al-balaghah*", ¹⁰ which means the "path of eloquence" giving little importance to mentioning his sources, a point rarely ignored by compilers of *hadith* (traditions). Only at times does he casually mention the name of a certain book from which a particular sermon or epistle has been taken. In a book of history or *hadith*, it is of primary importance that the sources be precisely specified; otherwise, little credence can be given to it.

The value of a literary masterpiece, however, lies in its intrinsic beauty, subtlety, elegance and depth. Meanwhile, it is not possible to assert that al-Sayyid al-Radi was entirely oblivious of the historical value and other dimensions of this sacred work, or that his attention was exclusively absorbed by its literary qualities.

Fortunately, after al-Sayyid al-Radi, others took up the task of collecting the *asnad* of the *Nahj al-balaghah*. Perhaps the most comprehensive book in this regard is the *Nahj al-sa'adah fi mustadrak Nahj al-balaghah* by Muhammad Baqir al-Mahmudi, a distinguished Shi'ah scholar of Iraq. In this valuable book, all of 'Ali's extant speeches, sermons, decrees, epistles, prayers, and sayings have been collected. It includes the *Nahj al-balaghah* and other discourses which were not incorporated by al-Sayyid al-Radi or were not available to him.

Apparently, except for some of the aphorisms, the original sources of all the contents of the *Nahj al-balaghah* have been determined. ¹¹

It should be mentioned that al-Sayyid al-Radi was not the only man to compile a collection of 'Ali's utterances; others, too, have compiled various books with different titles in this field. The most famous of them is *Ghurur al-hikam wa durar al-kalim* by al-Amudi, on which Muhaqqiq Jamal al-Din al-Khunsari has written a commentary in Persian and which has been recently printed by the University of Tehran through the efforts of the eminent scholar Mir Jalal al-Din al-Muhaddith al-'Urumawi.

'Ali al Jundi, the dean of the faculty of sciences at the Cairo University, in the introduction to the book 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, *shi'ruhu wa hikamuh* cites a number of these collections some of which have not yet appeared in print and exist as manuscripts. These are:

1. *Dustur ma'alim al-hikam* by al-Quda'i, the author of the *al-Khutat*;

2. *Nathr al-la 'ali'*; this book has been translated and published by a Russian Orientalist in one bulky volume.

3. *Hikam sayyidina 'Ali*. A manuscript of this book exists in the Egyptian library, Dar al-Kutub al-Misriyyah.

Two Distinctive Characteristics

From the earliest times, two distinct merits have been recognized as characterizing 'Ali's discourses: firstly, literary elegance (*fasahah*) and eloquence (*balaghah*); secondly, their characteristic multi-dimensional nature. Any of these two qualities is sufficient for estimating 'Ali's words as valuable, but the combination of these two qualities (i.e. matchless eloquence, literary elegance, and their multi-dimensional nature—in that they deal with diverse and occasionally incompatible spheres of life) has made it almost miraculous.

For this reason, 'Ali's speech occupies a position in between the speech of the human being and the Word of God. Indeed, it has been said of it that 'it is above the speech of creatures and below the Word of the Creator.' [12](#)

Literary Beauty and Elegance

This aspect of the *Nahj al-balaghah* requires no introduction for a reader of cultivated literary taste capable of appreciating the elegance and charm of language. Basically, beauty is a thing to be perceived and experienced and not to be described or defined. The *Nahj al-balaghah*, even after nearly fourteen centuries, has retained the same attractiveness, freshness, charm, and beauty for the present-day audience that it possessed for the people of earlier days. Here we do not intend to give an elaborate proof of this claim.

Nevertheless, as a part of our discourse, we shall briefly describe the marvellous power of 'Ali's words in moving hearts and infusing them with the feeling of wonder. We shall start with 'Ali's own times and follow the effect of his discourses through the changes and variations in tastes, outlooks, and modes of thought during different successive ages up to the present day.

The companions of 'Ali ('a), particularly those who had a taste for language and literary grace, greatly admired him as an orator. 'Abd Allah ibn al-'Abbas is one of them, who himself, as al Jahiz points out in his *al-Bayan wa al-tabyin*, [13](#) was a powerful orator. He did not conceal his passion for listening to 'Ali speak or the enjoyment he derived from it.

Once, when 'Ali was delivering his famous sermon called *al-Shiqshiqiyyah*, [14](#) Ibn al-'Abbas was also present. While 'Ali ('a) was speaking, an ordinary man of Kufah handed him a paper containing some questions, thus causing 'Ali to discontinue his speech. 'Ali, after reading the letter, did not continue his

speech in spite of Ibn al-'Abbas 'urging him to continue.

Ibn al-'Abbas later expressed the deep regret he felt on that occasion, saying, "Never in life was I ever so sorry for interruption of a speech as I was for the interruption of this sermon." [15](#)

Referring to a certain letter that 'Ali had written to Ibn al-'Abbas, he used to say: "Except the speech of the Holy Prophet, I did not derive so much benefit from any utterance as from this one." [16](#)

Mu'awiyah ibn Abi Sufyan, 'Ali's most contumacious enemy, also acknowledges his extraordinary eloquence. When Muhqin ibn Abi Muhqin forsook 'Ali and joined Mu'awiyah, in order to please Mu'awiyah, whose heart surged with ill-will and bitterness towards 'Ali, he told him, "I have left the dumbest of men and come to you."

The flagrancy of this kind of flattery was so obvious that Mu'awiyah himself reproached him, saying: "Woe to you! You call 'Ali the dumbest of men? The Quraysh knew nothing about eloquence before him. It was he who taught them the art of eloquence."

Influence of 'Ali's Oratory

Those who heard 'Ali speaking from the *minbar* were very much affected by his words. His sermons made hearts tremble and drew tears from the eyes. Even today, who can hear or read 'Ali's sermons without a tremor passing through his heart? Al-Sayyid al-Radi, after narrating 'Ali's famous sermon *al-Gharra'*, [17](#) says:

As 'Ali delivered his sermon, tears flowed from the eyes of the listeners and hearts quivered with emotion.

Hamam ibn Shurayh, one of 'Ali's companions, was a man with a heart full of God's love and a soul burning with spiritual fire. At one time, he requested 'Ali to describe the qualities of pious and God-fearing men. 'Ali, on the one hand, did not want to turn down his request, and on the other, he was afraid that Hamam might not be able to bear what 'Ali would say. Therefore, he eludes this request giving only a perfunctory description of piety and the pious.

Hamam is not only unsatisfied with this, but also his eagerness is heightened and he beseeches 'Ali to speak with greater elaboration. 'Ali commences his famous sermon and begins to describe the characteristics of the truly pious. He enumerates about one hundred and five [18](#) qualities of such human beings and goes on to describe more.

But as 'Ali's words flow in fiery sequence, Hamam is carried to the very extreme of ecstasy. His heart throbs terribly and his spirit is driven to the furthest limits of emotion. It advances in eagerness like a restless bird trying to break out of its cage. Suddenly, there is a terrible cry and the audience turn around to find that it came from no other man than Hamam himself. Approaching, they find that his soul has

left its earthly mould to embrace everlasting life.

When this happened, 'Ali's remark, which carries both eulogy and regret, was: "I feared this would happen. Strange, yet this is how effective admonition affects sensitive hearts."¹⁹ This is an example of the kind of influence 'Ali's sermons had over the minds and hearts of his contemporaries.

The Opinions of Ancient and Modern Scholars

After the Holy Prophet (S), 'Ali ('a) alone has the distinction of being one whose speeches and sayings were recorded and preserved by the people with particular care.

Ibn Abi al-Hadid quotes 'Abd al-Hamid al-Katib, the great master of Arabic prose ²⁰ who lived during the early part of the second century of the Hijrah, as saying, "I learnt by heart seventy sermons of 'Ali, and from that time onwards my mind always overflowed [with inspiration]."

'Ali al Jundi also relates that when 'Abd al-Hamid was asked about what had helped him most in attaining literary excellence, he replied, "Memorizing of the discourses of the 'bald one'."²¹

In the Islamic period of history the name of 'Abd al-Rahman ibn Nubatah is proverbial for oratory among Arabs. He acknowledges that his intellectual and artistic attainments are indebted to 'Ali. Ibn Abi al-Hadid quotes him as saying:

I committed to memory about a hundred discourses of 'Ali; since then this has served me as an inexhaustible treasure [of inspiration].

Al Jahiz was a celebrated literary genius of the early third century of the Hijrah, and his book *Al-Bayan wa al-tabyin* is regarded as one of the four main classics of Arabic literature²².

Often, in his book, he expresses his great wonder and immense admiration for 'Ali's discourses. From his remarks it is evident that a large number of 'Ali's sermons were commonly known to the people of his day. In the first volume of his *Al-Bayan wa al-tabyin*,²³ after mentioning that some people praise precision in talk or rather prefer silence and disapprove profusion in speech, al-Jahiz writes:

The profuseness of speech that has been regarded with disapproval is futile talk not that which is fruitful and illuminating. Otherwise, 'Ali ibn Abi Talib and 'Abd Allah ibn al-'Abbas were men of prolific speech.

In the same volume of his work, he quotes this famous sentence of 'Ali ('a): ²⁴

The worth of a man lies in what he has mastered. ²⁵

Al Jahiz then devotes half a page to expressing his admiration for this sentence, and writes further:

If our book did not contain anything but this sentence, it would suffice it. The best speech is one little of

which makes you dispense with much of it and in which the meanings are not concealed within words but are made manifest.

Then he remarks:

It appears as if Allah the Almighty has enveloped it with His glory, and covered it with the light of wisdom proportionate to the piety and *taqwa* of its speaker.

Al Jahiz, in the same work, where he discusses the oratory of Sasa'ah ibn Suhan al-'Abdi²⁶, says that:

No greater proof of his excellence as an orator is required than the fact that 'Ali occasionally came to him and asked him to deliver a speech.

Al-Sayyid al-Radi's following remarks in appreciation and praise of the speech of Imam 'Ali ('a) are famous:

Amir al-Mu'minin 'Ali ('a) was the reservoir and fountainhead of eloquence which derived its principles from his speeches and revealed its secrets through him. Every orator of mark tried to imitate him and every preacher learned from him the art of eloquence. Nevertheless, they lagged far behind him while he excelled them all. His speech (alone) bears the imprint of Divine Wisdom and the fragrance of the Prophet's eloquence.

Ibn Abi al-Hadid is a Mu'tazilite scholar of the 7th/13th century. He was a masterly writer and an adept poet, and, as we know, was an adorer of 'Ali's discourses. Accordingly, he expresses his profound admiration for 'Ali recurringly throughout his book. In the introduction to his famous commentary on the *Nahj al-balaghah*, he writes:

Rightly has 'Ali's discourse been regarded as being only inferior to that of the Creator and superior to that of all creatures.

All people have learnt the arts of oration and writing from him. It suffices to say that the people have not recorded even one-tenth of one-twentieth from any other Companion of the Prophet (S) of what they recorded and preserved of 'Ali's discourses, although there were many eloquent persons among them. Again, it is sufficient that such a man as al Jahiz is all praise for 'Ali in his book *al-Bayan wa al-tabayin*.

Ibn Abi al-Hadid, in the fourth volume of his commentary, commenting on Imam 'Ali's letter to 'Abd Allah ibn al-'Abbas (written after the fall of Egypt to Mu'awiyah's forces and the martyrdom of Muhammad ibn Abi Bakr, in which 'Ali ('a) breaks the news of this disaster to 'Abd Allah, who was at Basrah) writes: ²⁷

Look how eloquence has given its reins into the hands of this man and is docile to his every signal. Observe the wonderful order of the words coming one after the other to bow in his presence, or gushing like a spring that flows effortlessly out of the ground. Subhan Allah! An Arab youth grows up in a town like Mecca, has never met any sage or philosopher, yet his discourses have surpassed those of Plato

and Aristotle in eloquence and profundity.

He has no intercourse with men of wisdom, but has surpassed Socrates. He has not grown up among warriors and heroes but amongst traders and merchants for the people of Mecca were not a warrior nation but traders, yet he emerges as the greatest warrior of supreme courage to have walked upon the earth. Khalil ibn Ahmad was asked: Of 'Ali, Bistam, and 'Anbasah, who was the more courageous?

Replied he, “Bistam and 'Anbasah should be compared with other men; 'Ali was something superior to human beings.” He came from the Quraysh, who were not the foremost in eloquence, for, the most eloquent among Arabs were Banu Jurhum, though they were not famous for wisdom or wit, yet 'Ali surpassed even Sahban ibn Wa'il and Qays ibn Sa'dah in eloquence.

Modern Perspectives

During the fourteen centuries that have passed since 'Ali's times, the world has seen innumerable changes in language, culture and taste, and one may be led to think that 'Ali's discourses, which although might have invoked the adoration of the ancients, may not suit the modern taste. But one would be surprised to learn that such is not the case.

From the point of view of literary form and content, 'Ali's discourses have the rare quality of transcending the limits imposed by time and place. That 'Ali's discourses are universal in their appeal to men of all times we shall discuss later. Here, after quoting the views of the classical writers, we shall quote the relevant views expressed by our contemporaries.

The late Shaykh Muhammad 'Abduh, formerly Mufti of Egypt, is a man who came to know the *Nahj al-balaghah* by accident. This preliminary acquaintance grew into a passionate love for the sacred book and led him to write a commentary on it. It also prompted him to endeavour to make it popular amongst the Arab youth. In the preface to his commentary, he says:

Among all those who speak the Arabic language, there is not a single man who does not believe that 'Ali's discourses, after the Qur'an and the discourses of the Prophet (S) are the noblest, the most eloquent, the most profound and the most comprehensive.

'Ali al-Jundi, the dean of the faculty of sciences at the Cairo University, in his book *'Ali ibn Abi Talib, shi'ruhu wa hikamuh*, writing about 'Ali's prose, says:

A certain musical rhythm which moves the innermost depths of the soul is characteristic of these discourses. The phrases are so rhymed that it can be called 'prose-poetry'.

He then quotes Qudamah ibn Ja'far as saying:

Some have shown mastery in short sayings and others in long discourses, but 'Ali has surpassed all

others in both of these, even as he has surpassed them in other merits.

Taha Husayn, the contemporary Egyptian writer of renown, in his book *'Ali wa banuh* ('Ali and His Sons), recounts the story of a man during the Battle of al-Jamal. The man is in doubt as to which of the two sides is in the right. He says to himself, "How is it possible that such personalities as Talhah and al-Zubayr should be at fault?" He informs 'Ali ('a) about his dilemma and asks him whether it is possible that such great personalities and men of established repute should be in error. 'Ali answers him:

You are seriously mistaken and reversed the measure! Truth and falsehood are not measured by the worth of persons. Firstly find out what is truth and which is falsehood, then you will see who stands by truth and who with falsehood.

What 'Ali means to say is that you have reversed the measure. Truth and falsity are not measured by the nobility or baseness of persons. Instead of regarding truth and falsehood as the measure of nobility and meanness, you prejudge persons by your own pre-conceived notions of nobility and meanness. Reverse your approach.

First of all find out the truth itself, then you will be able to recognize who are truthful. Find out what is falsehood, and then you will identify those who are wrong. It is not significant which person stands by truth and which sides with falsehood.

After quoting 'Ali's above-mentioned reply, Taha Husayn says:

After the Revelation and the Word of God, I have never seen a more glorious and admirably expressed view than this reply of 'Ali.

Shakib Arsalan, nicknamed "*amir al-bayan*" (the master of speech), is another celebrated contemporary writer. Once in a gathering held in his honour, in Egypt, one of the speakers mounted the rostrum and in the course of his address remarked: "There are two individuals in the history of Islam who can truly be named amir al-bayan: one of them is 'Ali ibn Abi Talib and the other is Shakib."

At which Shakib Arsalan (1871–1946), irritated, left his seat and walked to the rostrum. Deploing the comparison his friend had made between 'Ali and himself, he said: "What comparison is there between 'Ali and me! I am not worth even the strap of 'Ali's sandals!" [28](#)

Michael Na'imah, a contemporary Lebanese Christian writer, in the introduction to the book *al-Imam 'Ali* by George Jurdaq, also a Lebanese Christian, writes:

'Ali was not only a champion on the battlefield but was also a hero in all other fields: in sincerity of heart, in purity of conscience, in the spellbinding magic of speech, in true humanitarianism, in the fineness and warmth of faith, in the height of tranquility, in readiness to help the oppressed and the wronged, and in total submission to truth wherever it may lie and whichever form it assumes. He was a hero in all these fields.

I do not intend to quote more from those who paid tributes to 'Ali, for the above–quoted remarks are sufficient to prove my point. One who praises 'Ali extols his own merit, for:

He who admires the Sun's brilliance extols himself:

My two eyes are bright and my vision is not clouded

I conclude my discourse with 'Ali's own statement about himself. One day, one of his companions attempted to deliver a speech. He couldn't as he found himself tongue–tied. 'Ali told him:

You should know that the tongue is a part of man and under the command of his mind. If the mind lacks stimulation and refuses to budge, his tongue will not assist him. However, if the mind is ready his speech will not give him respite. Indeed we (the *Ahl al-Bayt*) are the lords of (the domain of) speech. In us are sunk its roots and over us are hung its branches. [29](#)

Al Jahiz, in the *al-Bayan wa al-tabyin*, relates from 'Abd Allah ibn al-Hasan ibn 'Ali that 'Ali ('a) once said:

We (the *Ahl al-Bayt*) are superior to others in five qualities: eloquence, good looks, forgiveness, courage, and popularity with women. [30](#)

Now we shall take up another characteristic of 'Ali's discourses, which is in fact the main theme of this book; that is, their multi–dimensionality.

The Nahj al-balaghah Among Literary Classics

Most nations possess certain literary works which are regarded as 'masterpieces' or 'classics'. Here we shall limit our discussion to the classics of Arabic and Persian literature whose merits are more or less perceptible for us, leaving the other classics of the ancient world, Greece and Rome and so on, and the masterpieces of the modern age from Italy, England, France and other countries, to be discussed and evaluated by those who are familiar with them and qualified to discuss them.

Of course, an accurate judgement about the classics of Arabic and Persian is possible only for scholars who have specialized in the classical literature; but it is an accepted fact that every one of these masterpieces is great only in a particular aspect, not in every aspect.

To be more precise, every one of the authors of these classics displayed his mastery only in a single, special field to which their ingenuity was confined, and occasionally if they have left their special field to tread other grounds they failed miserably.

In Persian there are numerous masterpieces in mystical *ghazal*, general *ghazal*, *qasidah*, epic, spiritual and mystical allegorical verse, etc; but as we know, none of the Persian poets of world renown has succeeded in creating masterpieces in all these literary forms.

Hafiz is famous for mystical *ghazal*, Sa'di for anecdotes and general *ghazal*, Firdawsi for epic, Rumi for his allegorical and spiritual poetry, Khayyam for his philosophic pessimism and Nizami for something else. For this reason it is not possible to compare them with one another or prefer one over the other.

All that can be said is that each one of them is foremost in his own field. If occasionally any of these poetic geniuses has left his special field to try another literary form, a visible decline in quality is readily perceptible. The same is true of Arab poets of the Islamic and pre-Islamic periods. There is an anecdote in the *Nahj al-balaghah* that once 'Ali ('a) was asked the question, "who is the foremost among Arab poets?" 'Ali replied:

To be sure all poets did not tread a single path so that you may tell the leader from the follower; but if one were forced to choose one of them, I would say that the foremost among them was al-Malik al-Dillil (the nickname of Umru' al-Qays). [31](#)

In his commentary, Ibn Abi al-Hadid cites with asnad (authentic sources) an anecdote under the above-mentioned comment. Here is what he writes:

During the holy month of Ramadan, it was 'Ali's custom to invite people to dinner. The guests were offered meat, but 'Ali himself abstained from the food which was prepared for the guests. After the dinner, 'Ali would address them and impart moral instruction. One night, as they sat for dinner, a discussion commenced about the poets of the past.

After the dinner, 'Ali in the course of his discourse said: "The faith is the criterion of your deeds; *taqwa* is your shield and protector; good manners are your adornment; and forbearance is the fortress of your honour." Then turning to Abu al-'Aswad al-Du'ali, who was present and moments ago had taken part in the discussion about poets, said, "Let us see, who in your opinion is the most meritorious of poets?"

Abu al-'Aswad recited a verse of Abu Dawud al-'Ayadi adding the remark that in his opinion Abu Dawud was the greatest among poets. "You are mistaken; such is not the case," 'Ali told him. Whereupon the guests, seeing 'Ali taking an interest in their discussion, pressed him to express his opinion as to whom he considered the best among poets.

'Ali said to them: "It is not right to give a judgement in this matter, for, to be certain, the pursuits of the poets are not confined to a single field so that we may point out the forerunner amongst them.

Yet, if one were forced to choose one of them, then it may be said that the best of them is one who composes not according to the period inclinations or out of fear and inhibition [but he who gives free rein to his imagination and poetic inspiration] . Asked as to whom this description would fit, 'Ali replied, "Al-Malik al-Dillil, Umru' al-Qays."

It is said that when inquired as to who was the most eminent poet of the *Jahiliyyah* (the pre-Islamic period), Yunus ibn Habib al Dabbi (d. 798 A.D.), the famous grammarian, answered:

The greatest of poets is Umru' al-Qays when he mounts his steed, [i.e. when he composes epic poetry motivated by the feelings of courage and bravery, and the passions roused on the battlefield]; al-Nabighah al Dhubyani when he flees in fear [i.e. when he expresses himself on the psychological effects of danger and fear]; Zuhayr ibn Abi Sulma when he takes delight [in something]; and al-'A'sha, when he is in a gay and joyful mood.”

Yunus meant to say that every one of these poets had a special talent in his own field in which his works are considered to be master pieces. Each of them was foremost in his own speciality beyond which his talent and genius did not extend.

Imam 'Ali's Versatility

One of the outstanding characteristics of Imam 'Ali's sayings which have come down to us in the form of the *Nahj al-balaghah* is that they are not confined to any particular field alone; 'Ali ('a), in his own words, has not trodden a single path only, but has covered varied and various grounds, which occasionally are quite antithetical.

The *Nahj al-balaghah* is a masterpiece, but not of the kind which excels in one field such as the epic, the *ghazal*, sermon, eulogy, satire or love poetry; rather it covers multifarious fields, as shall be elaborated.

In fact, works which are masterpieces in a particular field exist, nevertheless their number is not great and they are countable on fingers. The number of works which cover numerous subjects but are not masterpieces is quite large.

But the characteristic that a work be simultaneously a masterpiece without restricting itself to any one particular subject is an exclusive merit of the *Nahj al-balaghah*. Excepting the Qur'an, which is altogether a different subject to be dealt with independently, what masterpiece is comparable to the *Nahj al-balaghah* in versatility?

Speech is the spirit's envoy and the words of a man relate to the sphere in which his spirit dwells. Naturally, a speech which pertains to multiple spheres is characteristic of a spirit which is too creative to be confined to a single sphere.

Since the spirit of 'Ali is—not limited to a particular domain but encompasses various spheres and he is in the terminology of the Islamic mystics, *al-'insan al-kamil* (a perfect man), *al-kawn al jami'* (a complete microcosm) and *jami' kullal-hadarat*, [32](#) the possessor of all higher virtues, so his speech is not limited to any one particular sphere.

Accordingly, as we should say, in terms current today, that 'Ali's merit lies in the multidimensional nature of his speech, that it is different from one-dimensional works. The all-embracing nature of 'Ali's spirit and his speech is not a recent discovery. It is a feature which has invoked a sense of wonder since at least

one thousand years. It was this quality that had attracted the attention of al-Sayyid al-Radi a thousand years ago, and he fell in love with 'Ali's speeches and writings. He writes:

Of 'Ali's wonderful qualities which exclusively belong to him, nobody sharing in it with him, is that when one reflects upon his discourses regarding abstinence (*zuhd*), and his exhortations concerning spiritual awakenedness, for a while one totally forgets that the speaker of these words was a person of highest social and political calibre, who ruled over vast territories during his time and his word was command for all.

Even for a moment the thought does not enter the reader's mind that the speaker of these words might have been inclined to anything except piety and seclusion, anything except devotion and worship, having selected a quiet corner of his house or a cave in some mountain valley where he heard no voice except his own and knew nobody except himself, being totally oblivious of the world and its hustle and bustle.

It is unbelievable that those sublime discourses on asceticism, detachment and abstinence and those spiritual exhortations came from somebody who pierced the enemy's ranks and went fighting to the very heart of their forces, with a sword in his hand, poised to sever the enemy's head, and who threw many a mighty warrior down from his steed, rolling into blood and dust. Blood drips from the edge of his sword and yet he is the most pious of saints and the most devoted of sages.

Then, after this, al-Sayyid al-Radi adds:

Frequently I discuss this matter with friends and it equally invokes their sense of wonder.

Shaykh Muhammad 'Abduh, too, was profoundly moved by this aspect of the *Nahj al-balaghah*, and it made him marvel at its swiftly changing scenes, which take the reader on a journey through different worlds. He makes a note of it in the introduction to his commentary of the *Nahj al-balaghah*.

Aside from his speech, in general, 'Ali ('a) had a spirit that was universal, all-embracing, and multidimensional, and he has always been eulogized for this quality. He is a just ruler, a devotee who remains awake all night worshipping God; he weeps in the niche of prayer (*mihrab*) and smiles on the field of battle. He is a tough warrior and a soft-hearted and kind guardian.

He is a philosopher of profound insight and an able general. He is a teacher, a preacher, a judge, a jurist, a peasant, and a writer. He is a perfect man whose great soul envelops all spheres of the human spirit.

Safi al-Din al-Hilli (1277–1349 A.D.) says of him:

*Opposites have come together in thy attributes,
And for that thou has no rivals.*

*A devout, a ruler, a man of forbearance, and a courageous one, A deadly warrior, an ascetic, a pauper,
and generous to others, Traits which never gathered in one man, And the like of which none ever*

possessed;

A gentleness and charm to abash the morning breeze, A valour and might to melt sturdy rocks;

Poetry cannot describe the glory of thy soul,

Thy multifaceted personality is above the comprehension of critics.

Apart from what has been said, an interesting point is that in spite of the fact that 'Ali's discourses are about spiritual and moral issues, in them his literary charm and eloquence have attained their peak. 'Ali ('a) has not dealt with popular poetic themes such as love, wine and vainglory, which are fertile subjects for literary expression in prose and poetry. Moreover, he did not aim at displaying his skills in the art of oratory.

Speech for him was a means and not an end in itself. Neither did he intend to create an object of art nor he wished to be known as an author of a literary masterpiece. Above all, his words have a universality which transcends the limits of time and place. His addressee is the human being within every person, and accordingly, his message does not know any frontier; although, generally, time and place impose limits on the outlook of a speaker and confine his personality.

The main aspect of the miraculous nature of the Qur'an is that its subjects and themes are altogether at variance with those current during the time of its revelation. It marks the beginning of a new era in literature and deals with another world and a different sphere. The beauty and charm of its style and its literary excellence are truly miraculous. In these aspects too, like in its other features, the *Nahj al-balaghah* comes closer to the Qur'an. In truth it is the offspring of the Holy Qur'an.

The themes of the Nahj al-balaghah

The variety of topics and themes discussed in the *Nahj al-balaghah* unfolds a wide spectrum of problems that give colour and hue to these heavenly discourses. The author of this dissertation has no pretension to possessing the capacity to do the book full justice and analyse it in depth. I just intend to give a brief account of the variety of its themes, and it is my firm belief that others will come in the future who shall be able to do justice to this masterpiece of human power of speech.

A Glance at the Varied Problems Covered by the Nahj al-balaghah

The various topics found in the *Nahj al-balaghah*, everyone of which is worthy of discussion, can be outlined as follows:

1. Theological and metaphysical issues;
2. Mystic path and worship;
3. Government and social justice;

4. The *Ahl al-Bayt* ('a) and the issue of caliphate;
5. Wisdom and admonition;
6. The world and worldliness;
7. Heroism and bravery;
8. Prophecies, predictions, and eschatology;
9. Prayers and invocations;
10. Critique of contemporary society;
11. Social philosophy;
12. Islam and the Qur'an;
13. Morality and the discipline of self;
14. Personalities;

and a series of other topics. Obviously, as the titles of the various chapters of the present book indicate, this author does not make any claim that the topics cited above are all that can be found in the *Nahj al-balaghah*. Neither does he claim that he has done an exhaustive study of these topics, nor has he any pretension to being considered competent for such work.

That which is offered in these chapters is no more than a glimpse. Perhaps, in future, with Divine assistance, after deriving greater benefit from this inexhaustible treasure, the author may be able to undertake a more comprehensive study; or others may be blessed with the opportunity to accomplish such a job. God is wise and indeed His assistance and help is the best.

¹ This is a reference to the following words of Ali, taken from *Nahj al-balaghah*, (ed. Subhi al Salih, Beirut 1387), Hikam, No 147 "O Kumayl, the mankind consists of three kinds of people: the sage adept in the knowledge of the Divine (alim rabbani), the novice of the path of deliverance (muta'allim 'ala sabili najat) and the vulgar populace'.

² Faqih means an expert in Islamic Law, the Shariah, whose study is called fiqh. Equivalent terms are mufti, mujtahid, and ayatullah. (Tr.)

³ *Nahj al-balaghah*, Khutab, No. 193

⁴ Minbar is a raised platform with steps, the Islamic pulpit. Traditionally as a rule, the function at speaking at mourning gatherings, the majalis, has been performed in Iran by the Mullahs, or ruhaniyyun, as they are called in Iran. (Tr.)

⁵ Husayniyyeh Irshad is a building in Tehran founded by the late Dr. Ali Shariati. (Tr.)

⁶ This is in reference to an Arabic maxim: That which cannot be attained in entirety is not to be abandoned completely.

⁷ Here it is not clear whether al Masudi means that Ali's sermons were recorded in writing, in books, or if he implies that people preserved them by memorizing them, or if he means both.

⁸ al Masudi, *Muruj al dhahab*, (Beirut, 1983), vol II, p. 431

⁹ al Tha'alibi quoted by Muhammad Abduh, *Sharh Nahj al-balaghah*, Introduction, p. 9

- [10.](#) Nahj means open way, road, course, method or manner; balaghah means eloquence, art of good style and communication, rhetoric etc
- [11.](#) Here the author adds that 'till now four volumes of this have been published'.
- [12.](#) The arabic is: fawq kamil makhluq wa duna kalam ul khaliq
- [13.](#) al Jahiz, al-Bayan wa al-tabyin, vol. I p. 230
- [14.](#) Nahj al-balaghah, Khutab, No. 3
- [15.](#) Ibid.
- [16.](#) Ibid., Rasail, No. 22
- [17.](#) Ibid., Rasail, No. 83
- [18.](#) According to my own counting, if I have not made a mistake
- [19.](#) Nahj al-balaghah, Khutab, No. 193
- [20.](#) Abd al Hamid was a scribe (katib) at the court of the last Umayyad caliph, Marwan ibn Muhammad. Of Persian origin, he was the teacher of the famous Ibn al Muqaffa. It was said of him, 'the art of writing began with 'Abd al Hamid and ended with Ibn al Amid'. Ibn al Amid was a minister to the Buyids.
- [21.](#) Asla means someone whose frontal position, portion of the head is bald. Abd al Hamid while confessing the greatness of Imam Ali, mentions him in a detracting manner due to his attachment to the Umayyad court
- [22.](#) The other three being: Adab al kitab of Ibn Qutaybah, al Kamil, of al Mubarrad, and al Nawadir of Abu Ali al Qali: quoted from the introduction to al-Bayan wa al-tabyin by Ibn Khaldun in his Muqaddamah.
- [23.](#) al-Bayan wa al-tabyin, vol. I p. 202
- [24.](#) bid, Vol. I p. 83
- [25.](#) Nahj al-balaghah, Hikam, No. 81. See also al Sayyid al Radi's comment on this aphorism.
- [26.](#) Sasa'ah ibn Suhan al Abdi was of the eminent companions of Imam Ali. When after the death of the third Caliph, Ali became the Caliph, it was Sa'sa'ah who said to him: You [by assuming the caliphate] have given it beauty, while caliphate has not added lustre to your personality. You have raised its worth, and it has not raised your station. It stands in greater need of you than you need it.
- [27.](#) Nahj al-balaghah, Rasail, No. 35
- [28.](#) This anecdote was related by Muhammad Jawad Mughniyyah, a contemporary Lebanese scholar, at the occasion of a reception party given in his honor in the holy city of Mashad.
- [29.](#) Nahj al-balaghah, Khutab, No. 230
- [30.](#) al Jahiz, op. cit., vol. II p. 99
- [31.](#) A poetic form much popular in classical Arabic and Persian poetry. Ghazal is also another poetic form.
- [32.](#) Umru al Qays (500–540 AD) the famous poet of the pre-Islamic era (Jahiliyyah), the author of the first Mu'allaqat. Al Malik al Dillili is his nickname.

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