

Selected Writings by Ameen Rihani

(Chronological Order)

The Self Ecstatic

(from *The Book of Khalid*)

To graft the strenuousness of Europe and America upon the ease of the Orient, the materialism of the West upon the spirituality of the East, this to us seems to be the principal aim of Khalid. But often in his wanderings and divagations of thought does he give us fresh proof of the truism that no two opposing elements meet and fuse without both losing their original identity. You may place the bit of contentment in the mouth of ambition, so to speak, and jog along your sterile course between the vast wheat fields groaning under the thousand-toothed plough and the gardens of delight swooning with devotion and sensuality. But cross ambition with contentment and you get the hinny of indifference or the monster of fatalism. We do not say that indifference at certain passes of life, and certain stages, is not healthy, and fatalism not powerful; but both we believe are factors as potent in commerce and trade as pertinacity and calculation. "But is there not room in the garden of delight for a wheat field?" asks Khalid. "Can we not apply the bow to the telegraph wires of the world and make them the vehicle of music as of stock quotations? Can we not simplify life as we are simplifying the machinery of industry? Can we not consecrate its Temple to the Trinity of Devotion, Art, and Work, or Religion, Romance, and Trade? ...

The intensity and passiveness of the spirit are the elements, whose harmony is only patent on the surface. Consistency is superficial, narrow, one-sided. My ambition is that of the earth, the ever producing and resuscitating earth, doing the will of God, combating the erasure of time; and my contentment is that of the majestic pines, faring alike, in shade and sunshine, in calm and storm, in winter as in spring...

I tell thee then that Man, that is to say Consciousness, vitalized and purified, in other words Thought that alone is real and eternal. And Man is supreme, only when he is the proper exponent of Nature, and spirit, and God: the three divine sources from which he issues, in which he is sustained, and to which he must return. Nature and the spiritual, without this embodied intelligence, this somatic being, called man, or angel, or ape, are as ermine on a wax figure... God, Nature, Spirit, Passion – Passion, Spirit, Nature, God, in some such panorama would I paint the life of a highly developed being. Any of these elements lacking, and the life is wanting, defective, impure...

The Orient and the Occident, the male and female of the Spirit, the two great streams in which the body and soul of man are refreshed, invigorated, purified; of both I sing, in both I glory, to both I consecrate my life, for both I shall work and suffer and die. My Brothers, the most highly developed being is neither European nor Oriental; but rather he who partakes of the finer qualities of both the European genius and the Asiatic prophet.

Give me, ye mighty nations of the West, the material comforts of life; and thou, my East, let me partake of thy spiritual heritage. Give me, America, thy hand; and thou, too, Asia. Thou land of origination, where Light and Spirit first arose, disdain not the gifts which the nations of the West bring thee; and thou land of organization and power, where Science and Freedom reign supreme, disdain not the bounties of the sunrise... I swear that neither religious nor industrial slavery shall forever hold the world in political servitude. No; the world shall be free of the authority, absolute, blind, tyrannical of both the Captains of Industry and the High Priests of the Temple. And who shall help to free it? Science alone cannot do it; Science and Faith must do it.

I say with thee, O Goethe, "Light, more light!" I say with thee, O Tolstoi, "Love, more love!" I say with thee, O Ibsen, "Will, more will!" Light, Love, and Will, the one is as necessary as the other; the one is dangerous without the others. Light, Love, and Will, are the three eternal, vital sources of the higher, truer, purer cosmic life.

Light, Love, and Will, with corals and pearls from their seas would I crown thee, O my City. In these streams would I baptize thy children, O my City. The mind, and the heart, and the soul of man I would baptize in this mountain lake, this high Jordan of Truth, on the flourishing and odoriferous banks of Science and Religion, under the sacred *sidr* of Reason and Faith.

Ay, in the Lakes of Light, Love, and Will, I would baptize all mankind. For in this alone is power and glory, O my European brothers; in this alone is faith and joy, O my Brothers of Asia.

The Hudson, the Mississippi, the Amazon, the Thames, the Seine, the Rhine, the Danube, the Euphrates, the Ganges, every one of these great streams shall be such a Jordan in the future. In every one of them shall flow the confluent Rivers of Light, Love, and Will. In every one of them shall sail the barks of the higher aspirations and hopes of mankind.

I come now to be baptized, O my City. I come to slake my thirst in thy Jordan. I come to launch my little skiff, to do my little work, to pay my little debt.

In thy public squares, O my City, I would raise monuments of Nature; in thy theatres to Poesy and Thought; in thy bazaars to Art; in thy homes to Health; in thy temples of worship, to universal Good-will; in thy courts, to Power and Mercy; in thy schools, to Simplicity; in thy hospitals, to Faith; and in thy public-halls to Freedom and Culture. And all these, without Light, Love, and Will, are but hollow affairs, high-sounding inanities. Without Light, Love, and Will, even thy Nabobs in the end shall curse thee; and with these, thy hammals under their burdens shall thank the heavens under which thy domes and turrets and minarets arise.

Ameen Rihani,

The Book of Khalid, Book the Third: In *Kūlmakān*, Chapter III; The Self Ecstatic, Sixteenth Edition, Librairie du Liban Publishers, Beirut, 2000 (First edition: 1911, Dodd Mead and Co., New York), pp. 239-248/ selected text from pp. 239-240, 241-242, 245-248.

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A Chant of Mystics

(From *A Chant of Mystics and Other Poems*)

I

From the Mist of Arcana we rise,
Through the Universe of Secrets we come,

And we enter the Tavern as Lovers,
Whose features are pale as the false dawn,
Whose statures are lean as the new moon.
Like unto a jar is the body,
And the soul in the jar
Is the silvery voice of the Fountains,
Is the rose-scented breath of the Mountains.

For your sake we have come
In the shape of a jar from the Sea;
For your sake we have come as Disgrace,
But glory incarnate are we.
For the sake of the world we dance
O'er the flame, on the point of the lance.
O, think us not mortal, for we
Are the light on the foam of the sea.

Of a truth, we are kin to the sun,
The infinite source of all splendors;
We are one
With the world's riddles and wonders.
But not of the world nor the sun is the breath
That lingers awhile in the regions of Death.
The dust on our sandals betrays us, we know,
We have travelled afar our devotion to show
To him who is waiting for us at the gate
Of the Garden of Union our longing to sate.

We shall interpret the Truth,
We shall the Secret unveil;
For naked we come, like the dew,
Like the zephyr, we come, and the gale;

Naked, through thorn-bush and grass,
We speak and we pass.

Our garments were burned in the fire of the Mind,
In the world where the Deaf still dispute with the Blind.
We are the Truth.

And into the skies
From the Universe of Secrets we're hurled.

We are the Truth,

And into the skies
From the Mists of Arcana we rise.

II

In the light of the day, in the stars of the night we behold
The Face of the Master, the feet of the Pilgrim of old;
In the sigh of the wind and the voice of the thunder we hear
The plaint of the bard and the rhapsodic chant of the seer.

Without them, alas, we are dumb.

Though not deaf to the flute and the drum.

But the vision is true,

Allahu, Allahu!

They are garbed in blue,

Allahu, Allahu!

They are drenched with dew,

Allahu, Allahu!

And casting the years from their folds and the shame
From their blossoms, they leap in the circle of flame;
They leap, with a flash of their limbs, to the dance
In the tender cares of the Beautiful's glance

...

III

Like the waves of the ocean we rise and we melt into foam
That the Moon's caravan might carry us back to our home.
Like the motes in the sun-beam we dance in the dawn's disarray
That the sun might preserve us awhile from dust and decay;

We are filled with the water that heals; and though sealed, we are free.

Nor Crescent Nor Cross we adore;
Nor Budha Nor Christ we implore;
Nor Muslem Nor Jew we abhor:

We are free.

We are not of Iran or of Ind,
We are not of Arabia or Sind:

We are free.

We are not of the East or of West
No boundaries exist in our breast:

We are free.

IV

Awake, O ye Pilgrims, awake!

O Lovers, arise and prepare!

The drum of departure we hear;

The Driver is come for the fare...

The nightingale sings on the branch

To wake up the blossoms; the creek

Whispers a word to the fern,

Who follows, his favor to seek;

The tulip is begging to go

With the zephyr who kisses her cheek...

Each moment a spirit is sent

With a message of mystery sealed;

Each moment a spirit goes forth
That the mystery might be revealed...
And always the pangs of departure
Are wrought into torches that flare.
Awake, O ye Pilgrims, awake!
O Lovers, arise and prepare.

V

We come as the heroes and slaves of the Mighty, the Dear;
We come as the mind and the soul of the violet Sphere...
For the heart is the bird of a world made holy by song;
'T is the love-lorn and love-guided bulbul the owls among.
The heart is a treasure of gold in the dust-pit of things;
'T is the rebecc of love and of love forever it sings;
'T is the pearl in the sea and the phare on the shore of the Mind;
'T is the ear of the deaf and the all-seeing eye of the blind...

The hour of departure is come,
The caravan's moving. Who ho!
We are bound for a country of wonder,
Sight-seeing with us, who will go?
Wherever we stop on the way
Is a feast for the heart, and a show;
Everywhere, too, is a tavern,
Sight-seeing with us, who will go?
He who has led us thus far
Will lead us still further, we know:
He opens to us every gate,
Sight-seeing with us, who will go?
He is the magnet and we
Are but pieces of steel: Who ho!
Earthward the Magnet is moving!

Sight-seeing with us, who will go?

VI

We are the flowers in his Garden, the lights in his Hall.

The Sign on his Portal, but he, he is all, he is all!

The banquet, the host, and the guest,

The seeker, the sought, and the quest,

All three,

Is he.

The given, the taker, the giver,

Love, the beloved, the lover,

All three,

Is he.

And we, to rejoin him, like torrents, escape through the hills;

No fetters, no walls can restrain us, no welfare, no ills...

Whirl, whirl, whirl,

Till the world is the size of a pearl.

Dance, dance, dance,

Till the world's like the point of a lance.

Soar, soar, soar,

Till the world is no more.

Ameen Rihani,

A Chant of Mystics and Other Poems, from the poem "A Chant of Mystics", The Rihani Publishing House, Beirut, 1970, edited with an introduction by Dr. S.B. Bushrui and Dr. J. M. Munro (First edition: 1921, James T. White, New York), pp. 99-121, selected verses pp. 99-101, 105-106, 108-109, 112-113, 114, 118, 121.

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The Highest Ideal

(From *The Path of Vision*)

The living spirit of the ages is made up of ideals more or less visionary in their inception, more or less unattainable in their plenitude. And in nations, as in individuals, they are subject to the law of growth and decay, the law that governs the seed in the soil, as well as to the law of conservation.

Like matter itself, an ideal is mutable, but indestructible. It does not die; it only undergoes a change. It expresses itself in art and literature and religion only after it has attained a certain degree of common conception. An idealist is ahead of his time only in the sense that he is articulate. The same is true of a nation. For even primitive people, even effete races have a message for those above or below them. The heritage of the Ideal, however small, cannot be exhausted.

That is why in periods of awakening, or cataclysmic change, the light often comes from unremembered and unexpected sources, sources that were thought to be exhausted or barren. The ideals of Greece, of Rome, of the Orient, the ideals even of primitive man, come back to us, in the eternal cycle of the spirit, to leave our own. They often surprise us in moments of depression or exaltation, in our silences, in our subliminal spells, even in our daily grind.

Out of the vague, even vagrant conceptions of the mind an ideal slowly evolves, assumes definite shape and form. Error-bound but truth-directed, we are constantly moving to a certain goal in its unfolding infinitudes. Its fiat is universal, despite its apparent failures. The grocer as well as the poet, at one time, or another, must recognize and accept its circulating medium. Whether they squander it or save it or invest it, whether they profit by it or not, is another question. But they are idealists in that they are both dissatisfied with its purchasing power. We are all idealists in that we are ever discontented with the present state of the Ego and the World...

It is an ideal, which, although obviously material, has in it a spirituality that can revolutionize the world. He sincerely desires to improve his own condition and to give the world better and healthier

children. And this desire, though it is only partly realized in a lifetime, is the heritage of the ideal, which he bequeaths to them...

Indeed, the spiritual springs from materialism intensified, sublimated. It is inherent in the material; and it should inform and illumine and beautify it. True, there is scarcely any evidence of this in the working man of today. But his spirituality, which is thought to be dead, is only dormant. And sometimes it betrays itself in a grotesque, spiritual somnambulism. For the working man still goes to church, despite the atheism, expressed or implied, of the two principal agents of his misery, the labor leader and the capitalist. The one in theory, the other in practice are responsible for his spiritual deformity. His leader tells him not to bother, not to worry about his soul; he even doubts its existence. And the capitalist, by his conduct in business and out of business, confirms, gives additional force to the labor leader's advice.

For what proof have we, it is often asked nowadays, of the existence of the soul and of the necessity, in consequence, of a soul-ideal? I go neither to metaphysics nor to spiritualism for an answer. To those who deny its existence, who make light of the innate divine flame in man, who cannot see anything outside of matter, or anything but matter in matter; to these materialists I offer the perfume of the rose, the light of the sun, the emanation of a firefly, the aura of a planet, to say nothing of the human understanding. Are these materials? Do they, to go back to fundamentals in physics, occupy the same space with the objects from which they emanate? ...

How can your material philosophy explain that quality in personality which is called magnetism and which I prefer to call spiritualism? ... But the person that repels us outwardly, physically, sometimes attracts us by a something he has within, an emanation akin to the light of the sun and the perfume of the rose. What is it? Intellect, intelligence, emotions, social and educational accomplishments? These are not always attractive. Intellect, on the contrary, might even be repulsive. Intelligence is not the heritage of man alone; the dumb beasts have a sagacity that sometimes excels our own. And the art of the bird building his nest, and the bees making their honey-comb, cannot be surpassed by the art of man. What is that mysterious, elusive quality then? Social accomplishments? Charm? These maybe rendered repulsive by selfishness, conceit by an inflated, assertive, aggressive Ego.

What is it, my dear Materialist that draws you in your unconsciousness to me? I heard you once in Madison Square expounding wholesale the negations of the day; I saw you afterwards feeding the birds in the park. And I see you every day, though your name is not trumpeted in the daily press, giving of your mite to charity. There must be a flaw somewhere in your material philosophy. For if you are in yourself a sort of detached cosmos, why take the trouble to establish these little attachments between you and the outside world?

The human personality is a bundle of intellections and emotions. Granted. But this is true, you will concede, of both primitive men, you will also concede, I hope, are more attractive to us than the most developed specimen of civilization... Your bundle of intellections and emotions, your intelligence, your highly developed mind, your passion for truth and justice, these are cold and chilling and unfructifying, if they are not illuminated and warmed by that innate, inherent flame, which is as evident at times in primitive man as well as you and me. This innate light is the spirituality which is manifest in lesser or greater degree in individuals as in nations, according to the recognition it receives, according to the ideal of it that is cherished and upheld.

And this, I maintain, is the highest ideal of an individual or a nation. Complete victory in the struggle to attain it, is not often attained. But no defeat is richer in new possibilities than this of the spirit fighting for the spiritual ideal. And although no complete victory is often attained, social conceived, materially considered, there is no such thing in it as complete failure... No one is ever low enough..., or high enough... to be alone. The ideal itself saves us from this dreary distinction. For we all find someone below us or above us... to afford us a satisfaction and an incentive to make the arduous ascent a pleasant jaunt. If the working man and the labor leader, the capitalist and the politician all recognized this truth and espoused the ideal it connotes, the social and industrial problems of the times would not seem so hopelessly insoluble, without general strikes and revolutions. For legislation alone is, after all, only a form of compulsion. And a man without a spiritual ideal will obey the law when he can't help it, and break it when he can.

Ameen Rihani,

The Path of Vision, from the article "The Highest Ideal", The Rihani Publishing House, Beirut, 1970, edited with an introduction by Dr. S.B. Bushrui and Dr. J. M. Munro (First edition: 1921, James T. White, New York), pp. 34-40, selected paragraphs, pp. 34-35, 37, 39-40.