

**PERSIAN
SUFİ POETRY
AN INTRODUCTION
TO THE MYSTICAL USE
OF CLASSICAL POEMS**

J.T.P. DE BRUIJN

Persian Sufi Poetry

CURZON SUFI SERIES

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Introduction

The title of this book is the same as the working title which was suggested when I was invited to write it. Now that the writing is done, I do not feel the need to look for a more descriptive name because the provisional title, if correctly understood, expresses almost exactly what the reader will find on the following pages. It tells simply, but clearly enough, that poems will be discussed which were written in the classical Persian language on themes related to the mystical tradition of Islam.

If a few words of explanation are still needed, the reason is, first of all, that the subject thus defined is too extensive to be fully surveyed in a concise volume like this. Since the beginning of the eleventh century AD, the date of the oldest specimens known to us, an enormous amount of mystical poems has been composed in Persian. The poets lived not only in present-day Iran, Afghanistan and Tajikistan, the countries where Persian is at home both as a spoken and a written language, but also in other parts of Asia – in particular the Indian Subcontinent, Central Asia and Turkey – where literary Persian was used for centuries as an important cultural language. Certain limits of time and geography had therefore to be drawn.

Although in the course of this almost millenarian period beautiful and interesting mystical poems have been written at all times and in all places, the history of Persian Sufi poetry has known a 'golden era', as it was called by A.J. Arberry, whose

Classical Persian Literature covers the same period as the present survey.¹ The greatest Sufi poets who created the most influential poems all lived during a period roughly corresponding to the European Middle Ages. As a convenient final date 1492 was chosen, the year when Mullā ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān Jāmī died, a great Sufi sheikh as well as a very productive writer, whose mystical poetry provided suitable material to conclude each of the four chapters of this book.

Shortly after Jāmī’s death the Safavids united the greater part of the Persian homelands under their rule. This political incident greatly changed the religious and cultural climate, notably through the introduction of Shi’ite Islam as the national religion of the country we now know as Iran. Classical Persian literature survived all this and, up to the present century, continued to be the most conspicuous element of the Persian cultural identity. It was even strong enough to penetrate the civilisations of other Asian nations. From the sixteenth century onwards Indian and Turkish Muslims participated increasingly in the tradition of Persian poetry, not only by writing in Persian but also by following the examples set by the poets of Persia in their own languages. During the ‘medieval’ period these developments had hardly begun. On the whole, the poets reviewed here were Sunni Muslims and nearly all lived, or at least were born, in the lands where Persian language was the indigenous language.

In its earliest form, the Persian language appears in the cuneiform inscriptions of the Achaemenian Kings of Kings written between the sixth and fourth centuries BC. After the destruction of the Old Persian empire by Alexander the Great, it disappeared from historical records for several centuries until, from the third century AD onwards, it was adopted again as a literary medium (called Middle Persian or Pahlavi) by Sasanian kings, Zoroastrians and Manichaeans. In the seventh century, when the Arabs brought the religion of Islam to Persia, another major break occurred in the continuity of Persian culture. Arabic became the exclusive medium of literary culture in the dominating Muslim community. However, already in the second half of the ninth century, Persian began to be used in writing

again in the eastern provinces of the Abbasid caliphate. Political circumstances which brought rulers of local origin into power, favoured the rapid development of a New Persian language. In many ways it was a typical product of the civilisation of Islam: the script, a large section of the vocabulary and many literary forms were derived from Arabic. Moreover, the latter language remained an important factor in Persian culture, where it continued to play more or less the same rôle as Latin did in medieval Europe. Arabic was particularly dominant in the religious disciplines, one of which was the 'science of Sufism'.

Until the twentieth century, when it was significantly modernised under Western influence, Persian poetry was a highly formalised artistic tradition. To write a poem meant, in the first place, to apply certain unchangeable rules covering prosody, imagery and the use of rhetorical devices. A basic rule of prosody was that each poem should be constructed as a sequence of distichs or *bayts*. The two half-verses of each distich are virtually identical as far as their metrical patterns are concerned. The rhyme is either internal (a-a) or only final (b-a), linking the line with the other distichs of the poem. The former marks the distich as an opening line, if the poem is a lyric; the latter could be used in any other line. In this way, most verse forms current in the tradition can be defined. The most important are the quatrain or *rubā'ī*, the *qaṣīda*, the *ghazal* and the *maṣnavī*. To each of these four verse forms one of the chapters in this book will be devoted.

Initially, this poetry was almost entirely a matter of the medieval Persian courts and therefore essentially a secular tradition. The characteristic form was the *qaṣīda*, which was most often used for poems of praise. When the Sufis began to write Persian poems they adapted many forms of court poetry to their own ends. Sufi poetry retained several traces of this origin; the distinction with secular poetry is therefore sometimes difficult to make. On the other hand, the remarkable expansion of Sufi poetry equally made its impact on the poetry of 'the world' so that eventually the lines distinguishing the two became vague. This caused serious problems for the interpretation of Persian poetry, especially as far as the lyrical genre of the *ghazal* is concerned.

The controversy surrounding the mystical or non-mystical readings of Ḥāfiẓ's poetry is the most typical example.

A mystical trend must have been present in Islam from the very beginning. The English word Sufism, as Islamic mysticism is usually referred to, was derived from the Arabic *taṣawwuf* which, according to the most likely explanation, originally meant 'to don a woollen cloak'. It would then refer to the predominance, during the first few centuries, of ascetic piety, influenced, as it seems, by the practices of Christian hermits in the Syrian desert. Accounts of the acts and the sayings of the early sheikhs are preserved in an extensive hagiographical literature, written in Arabic and Persian. Already in the eighth century (the second of the Islamic era) more reflective books appeared, which mark the beginnings of a rich flowering of Sufi literature in prose and poetry composed over the centuries in every cultural language of the Islamic world. These works cover the various aspects of mystical experience and ethics as well as metaphysical theory as, from the late twelfth century onwards, it developed out of a merger of philosophy and Sufism; the most influential body of mystical doctrine was Muḥyi ad-Dīn Ibn al-'Arabī's theosophy known as the thesis of *waḥdat al-wujūd* the 'Unity of Being'.

The first Sufi poets about whom we have any knowledge were Arabs. Love poetry of great intensity has been attributed to the great mystics, such as the poetess Rābi'a of Basra (d. 801), the Egyptian saint Dhū'n-Nūn (d. 861) and al-Ḥallāj of Baghdad (executed in 922) whom the Persian poets celebrated as the prime example of sacrifice for love's sake under the name 'Maṣṣūr'.² When in the eleventh century Persian Sufis started to write and read poetry, they continued a long-standing practice. The Persians, however, were able to create a lasting and extremely fertile tradition, whereas Arabic literature of later centuries produced few mystical poets of any importance besides Ibn al-Fārid (d. 1235) and Ibn al-'Arabī (d. 1240) who wrote the mystical love poems collected in *Tarjumān al-ashwāq*.³

The size of this volume makes it impossible to include an introduction to Sufism. For this, the reader should turn to one of the works mentioned in the Select Bibliography. The focus of our

attention will be the reflections of mysticism in Persian poetry. Reynold Nicholson's statement that 'Sūfiism has few ideas, but an inexhaustible wealth and variety of illustration'⁴ is no longer tenable since our knowledge of Sufi literature has expanded greatly since the end of the nineteenth century. Yet, there might still be some truth in this claim if we restrict it to Sufi poetry in particular. The mystical concepts one needs to be familiar with in order to understand the words of the poets are comparatively few. Many of them concern general items of religious ethics rather than intricate points of esoteric doctrine. The brief explanations given in the course of the exposition will probably be enough for the reader who has only a general knowledge of Sufi ideas. The translated specimens will also speak for themselves in most cases.

Throughout this survey, the emphasis will be on the poems rather than on the poets. As a rule, biographical information is used to elucidate poetry, not the other way round. Such data are inserted at those places where they best fit in with the main line of argument, which need not be the first instance of mentioning the name of a particular poet. Within each chapter a chronological order is followed. In Chapter 3, on the *ghazal*, which is mostly of an analytical nature, the history of the genre is discussed in a separate section.

Being an introduction, the main purpose of this book is to show the way to the vast literature available to those who wish to acquire a deeper knowledge of the subject. Readers should seek help from the Select Bibliography and the references contained in the Notes.

Notes

1. CPL, p. 450.
2. His name was really al-Ḥusayn ibn Maṣṣūr al-Ḥallāj. On Arabic mystical poetry see in particular A. Schimmel, *As Through a Veil*, pp. 11–48.
3. Edited and translated by Reynold A. Nicholson, London 1911.
4. *Selected poems from the Divāni Shamsi Tabrīz*, Cambridge 1898, p. viii.

Mystical Epigrams

Persian quatrains

Nearly all *dīvāns* of Persian poets contain, besides poems in the great classical forms, collections of shorter poems. Among the latter, some are irregular pieces (at least from the point of view of standard prosody), of various lengths, but usually not longer than a few lines, which are called 'fragments' (*qiṭ'as* or *muqaṭṭa'āt*). Although this term does not necessarily imply that these poems are unfinished or incomplete, they do in fact have a rather informal character. Such 'fragments' often served as occasional poems or epigrams, and are therefore much closer to the day-to-day practice of poetry than the more finished *qaṣīdas* and *ghazals*. Only rarely did they gain more importance, as for instance in the poetry of Ibn-i Yamīn (1286–1368),¹ a court poet of the Mongol period, whose output of fragmentary poems was considerable both in quantity and in substance. His *muqaṭṭa'āt* express philosophical and ethical reflections, mostly based on nothing more profound than worldly wisdom and common sense. However, occasionally mystical ideas can be found as well. Whether this justifies the qualification of Ibn-i Yamīn as a Sufi poet is still a matter of debate, which is complicated by the fact that sometimes his poetry was confused with that of an outspoken mystical poet of the sixteenth century, who happened to be his namesake.

Among the shorter poems another form, the quatrain, played a much greater part in Sufi poetry than the *muqatta'āt*. As far as our present knowledge goes, it was the earliest kind of poetry that was read and written by Persian mystics. Literary history, therefore, indicates that we should begin our survey with the quatrains, but, apart from that consideration, they also provide a good starting point for a discussion of some of the basic features of this tradition.

Persian quatrains are poems of four lines with, most often, a rhyme pattern a-a/b-b-a, although among the earliest specimens known to us the sequence of two internal rhymes (a-a/a-a) also frequently occurs. If it is described in terms of the general principles of Persian prosody, a quatrain of the type a-a/b-b-a can also be defined as a very brief poem of two distichs. Actually, the term *du-baytī* (literally, a poem 'of two distichs') has been in use, but only for quatrains which deviate from the metrical rules for a regular quatrain. Another term, sometimes applied to quatrains, is *tarāna*, properly denoting a 'song' or a 'melody' and referring to the musical use of quatrains. The most common appellation of a Persian quatrain is *rubā'ī* (with the plural *rubā'īyāt*), a derivation from the Arabic numeral *arba'* ('four'). A remarkable feature of this name is that, contrary to Persian prosodical theory, the four lines, or 'half verses', are counted here as separate entities.²

This is not the only deviation from standard prosody. The Persian *rubā'ī* also has a metre of its own, which cannot be fitted into the patterns of metrical theory, although it is, like all other Persian metres, based on quantity, that is the distinction between short and long syllables. The pattern of the *rubā'ī* is a sequence of twenty metrical units, called *mora* in metrical theory. In some places of the sequence only long syllables (equivalent to two *moras*) can be used, but in others one long syllable may be replaced by two short ones so that the actual number of syllables in a line may vary between ten and thirteen. This variety gave the *rubā'ī* a great measure of flexibility, which may have been one of the reasons for its immense popularity.

According to Shams-i Qays, who in the early thirteenth century wrote the most comprehensive exposition of Persian prosody, the *rubā'ī* was invented by the poet Rūdakī (fl. tenth century). He

would have derived its metrical pattern from a rhythmical phrase shouted by a playing child and then adapted it to the rules of classical prosody. Although it gives only a legendary explanation of the origin, the anecdote does betray an awareness of the non-classical nature of the rubā'ī metre. The true origin remains unknown in spite of attempts to prove that the rubā'ī was derived either from Persian popular literature or from early Turkish poetry where quatrains were quite common, although not in quantitative but rather in syllabic metrics. Whatever the case may be, it is very likely that quatrains initially belonged to a literary stratum distinct from the realm of polite poetry which produced the classical forms.

The quatrain is most often an epigram, the terse formulation of a poetical idea, suitable to serve as a brief interruption in a conversation, a sermon or a prose composition. Because of the great variety of its uses, it is impossible to delimit the subject-matter of the quatrain. Rubā'īs deal with any theme that could be treated in classical Persian poetry. Particular to them is a pithy and pointed mode of expression, using wit and striking images in order to enforce and illustrate the poet's statement. To be successful the poem has to express a certain development of thought, for which in many cases the third non-rhyming line is used. It connects the initial idea or image put forward in the first two lines to a conclusion contained in the final line. This structural feature made the quatrain into an important medium for maxims, which may convey mere secular wisdom but also profound religious ideas.

To a certain extent, quatrains are comparable to the individual distichs of longer poems, which often show a similar epigrammatical structure. The difference is, however, that quatrains always stand on their own, without any connection whatsoever to a larger poetic structure. Their actual meaning depended very much upon the context in which the poem was presented. This context could be a literary text as well as oral speech; in the latter case, such contexts usually have left no traces and this seriously limits the possibility of drawing conclusions from quatrains with regard to the ideas they express. This point