

Persian Literature and its influence on Europe and America from 17th Century up to the present time

The late Professor Edward Browne believes that:

the epic, lyric, didactic, mystic, satiric, or pessimist poets of Iran such as Firdowsi, Hafez, Sa'adi, Nasir-Khusrow, Attar, Jallal ad-Din Balkhi (Rumi); Ubayd-i-Zakani, and Omar Khayyam, each in his own different way appeals to some ground common to all mankind. And these are the ones that are known best, outside Iran. (Professor Ed Browne, Volume I)

He calls Iranians:

the most ancient, gifted and original peoples of the world. (ibid.)

From among these the best-known in Europe are Firdowsi, Hafez, Sa'adi and Omar Khayyam. These great-men have inspired the world during the last three centuries and one notices their praise recurring time after time in various literatures of the world.

Out of the different European nations, if we take Germany, France and England into consideration, we notice that in each country one of these poets appealed more than the others. Hafez was appreciated more in Germany, Sa'adi in France and Omar Khayyam in England.

This does not mean that the others were completely ignored but it only shows the national preference in each case. The first country who began to study the Iranian literature and appreciate it were the Germans. The German scholars were in touch with Persian literature and poetry through the translation of Sa'adi's Gulistan and Bustan made by the traveler and scholar Adam Olearius (1671 A.D.).

These had a salutary influence on German literature of the 17th century. This influence continued to be active in the eighteenth century and one of the results of it was the tale of Joseph produced by Grumelshausen under the influence of the story of Yusuf and Zuleikha, as rendered and developed in the Iranian literature.

Thanks to a number of remarkable poet-scholars, such as Herder, Germany acquired a far better appreciation and understanding of the East than France and England. The scholars and poets of Germany who were looking for inspiration from other sources than those offered by Greek classics and Greek mythology, studied with zeal the literature of the East.

Hartmann, Schlegel and Hammer and later Ruckert revealed to poets and writers of the West new and almost unsuspected treasures that were hidden in the Eastern Literature especially that of Iran. This literature entered into 19th century German literature to a degree unparalleled in Europe since the literature of medieval Spain. (Dr. Gibb, The Legacy of Islam)

The most important single work that influenced German literature as well as all the literatures of Europe was Goethe's "West-Ostlicher Diwan."

Goethe, like his predecessors, made it his conscious aim to open a way for the real heritage of Oriental poetry to enter into the poetry of Europe. This great masterpiece of Goethe left a lasting impression everywhere in Europe. Goethe who had just founded his great "Social Philosophy" in which he considered the time as ripe to think of a humane world philosophy irrespective of nationality and creed.

He believed that the East and the West were not really separate from each other and should approach each other. In furthering this philosophy he also envisaged, a world literature and proposed that the door should become wide open so that the greatest poets of the East i.e. Sa'adi and Hafez should become members of it. In a letter about his "West - Ostlicher Diwan" he writes:

My hope and aim is to approach, by means of this work, the East to the West, the past to the present and the Persians to the Germans.

We are told that "West-Ostlicher Diwan" was suggested to Goethe by a translation of the Diwan of Hafez. When Goethe became acquainted with Hafez's Diwan he wrote:

Suddenly I came face to face with the celestial perfume of the East and invigorating breeze of Eternity that was being blown from the plains and the wastelands of Persia, and I came to know an extraordinary man whose personality completely fascinated me.

Then in the late summer of the same year he wrote:

I am getting mad. If I do not immediately start composing poetry, I will not be able to bear the amazing influence of this extraordinary personality who has suddenly entered into my life.

In one place he compares Hafez to a ship and himself to a humble and broken raft and exclaims:

O, Hafez, how can anyone boast to be thy equal...

and he considers the verses of Hafez as:

a miracle of human taste and refinement and a regenerating source of perfection and beauty as well as philosophy and Erfan...

He calls him "Saint Hafez" and "celestial Friend". Goethe was acquainted with Iranian Literature and time and again he talks about seven great Persian poets "Firdowsi, Anvari, Nizami, Mowlavi, Sa'adi, Hafez and Jami". He has even prepared a short biography of these seven Iranian poets.

Goethe, according to Professor Gibb:

found in Oriental poetry first of all a means of escape into the world of imagination from the brutal realities of the age. But he was not satisfied with mere imitation but by taking the art and ideals of Persian poetry with those medieval and romantic elements in the European tradition with which they were in closest harmony, he created a new idiom to express his own thought and at the same time emphasized the cosmopolitanism which it was his aim to express in German literature. (ibid.)

But contrary to Professor Gibb's suggestion, in his Diwan, Goethe really tried to introduce Iranian ideas into German literature and did not use those idioms only to express his own thought. Unfortunately a new rage of nationalism swept over Europe and drowned his magnificent efforts. This combined with the new colonialism and new sense of power and superiority which was attached to it, shattered Goethe's ideal of "Welt literature" even in Germany.

However, once the interest was aroused it could not be completely forgotten. Besides, the other countries of Europe who were just entering into the 19th century romanticism did not want to be left untouched by this new wave that had swept over Germany. So we see, at least a lip-service being paid by other countries to the literature of Iran.

Before leaving Goethe, the great master-mind of Germany we must also speak a word about the effect of Iranian beliefs on his mind. He was attracted by Mithraism and in the last days of his life he confessed to his intimate friend Ackermann that:

Deep down inside me a strong Mithraistic feeling exists. Every time I have seen the Sun I have looked at it with the same respect and adoration that I feel towards the personality of Jesus. Because the Sun is the strongest and the highest emblem of eternal beauty of God that the earthly people can gaze upon. I am praising the creative power of God by worshipping the Sun and the Light that through Mithra "the Radiant" offers to us humans and to all animals and plants of the earth the power of life and action. (S. Shafa, Preface to the translation of West-Ostlicher Diwan)

Fredric Nietzsche also is full of praise for Hafez. He says:

O Hafez thou hast built a tavern of philosophy which is mightier than any other palace in the world, and in it, thou hast prepared a wine full of sweet words that surpasses the power of a world to drink. Who can be the guest in thy tavern but the mythological Simurgh?

It was only through looking at Iranian literature and history that he produced his "Thus Spoke Zarathustra." Although this work has little to do with the prophet of Ancient Iran, still one can find many ideas attributed to Iran from the old classical times as well as many new allegories and ideas he had picked reading Persian literature that was available in German literary circles in his time.

We find the following sentences in Nietzsche's work:

And if the fault were in your ears, why gave He to us ears that heard Him ill? And if there were uncleanness in our ears, go to, who had put it there?

Too many of his works miscarried this Potter that had not fully learned his trade. But in that He revenged Himself on His Pots and creations for that they turned out ill, He sinned against Good taste. (Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra)

Doesn't the above reminds one of Omar Khayyam's verses such as the following:

Why, said another, some there are who tell
Of one who threatens he will toss to Hell,
The luckless Pots he marred in making. Pish,
He's a good Fellow, and t'squo;will all be well."

and:

After a momentary silence spake,
Some vessel of a more ungainly Make,
They snare at me for leaning all awry,
What! did the Hand then of the Potter Shake?

The same can be said about many allegories he uses, as when a snake enters the mouth of a sleeping man, which is well known in Persian verses. Hafez and Mowlavi both have verses concerning the need to create a "Real Man" which could have influenced Nietzsche in talking about Superman and Higher man.

Hafez says:

A real Man cannot be found in our earthly world,
We should make a new world and a new Man.

and Mowlavi says:

Yester night a Sheikh was seeking with a lamp all over the town,
Stating that he was tired of devils and wild beasts and was looking for a Man.
I told him that we have already searched everywhere for him, he could not be found
He said I am looking for that who could not be found.

For a time Persian fashion held the field in Germany. The successors of Goethe and Nietzsche who read and translated their Oriental models for themselves went farther. Some, like Ruckert reproduced and imitated Iranian ideas and images, others like Platen went even so far as using Persian metrical forms. Bodenstedt, with his forged "Lieder des Mirza Schaffy" was able to impress the imagination of the public. (Professor Gibb, opt. cit. p.205)

Heine although did not spare his satire on this Oriental influence, nevertheless, could not keep the Oriental note entirely out of his lyric. One can say with Professor Gibb that:

Persian poets had cast their spell over Goethe and the Germans.

However, the case is different when we consider England.

The first time when the English people seriously began to learn Farsi and to get acquainted with the rich Persian literature, was during the colonization of India. As the late Professor Arberry relates; although the works of Persian authors were worthy by themselves to find their way into English hearts, but unfortunately you cannot reach the heart of the people of Europe, owing to their attachment to materialistic ends, except through profit and trade.

The Court language of the Mughal Kings in India was Farsi (Persian) and therefore the English agents who worked in the East India Company tried to learn Farsi in order to have a direct access to Indian grandees. So, as a result of this obligation to learn Farsi, they became acquainted, indirectly, with the literature of Iran and they began to enjoy reading Sa'squo;adi, Omar Khayyam and Hafez.

After the victory of the Clive over Duplex in the battle of Plassy (1757), India fell into the hands of the English and the East India Co. As in this vast Empire, most of the people in all the provinces, spoke Persian, the governors of the East India Company, found it essential for their English staff to learn Persian.

So they imposed upon their staff the necessity of learning Farsi and soon a number of these English staff who learned Persian for official purposes came in contact with a very great and rich literature and started to study the language for its literary merits as well.

Sir William Jones translated the biography of Nadir Shah by Mirza Mehdi Khan Astarabadi from Farsi into English and has added to this translation notes on Persian history and Persian language. He also translated into English verse, one of the Ghazals of Hafez. In 1774 he issued his Latin commentaries on Asiatic poetry not as a philologist but as a man of

taste, not as an interpreter but as a poet.

For the first time he opened to the classically educated circles of Western Europe the way to appreciate and understand the qualities of Iranian poetry. Before the end of the 18th century, Beckford published his *Vathek* that was on the same lines as *Arabian Nights* and it caught the popular imagination. Then appeared Thomas Moore's "Lalla Rookh" in which he related Iranian tales like a Persian romancer. His stories included "The Veiled Prophet of Khorassan" and "The Fire-Worshippers."

Then came Mathew Arnold's "Sohrab and Rustam" which was adopted from *Shahnameh* of Firdowsi. However, Professor Gibb believes that for France and England, the East continued to serve as little more than decorative background... The place of Orientalism compared to the greater poets is negligible. The East was treated as a color scheme and its claim to have contributed to the spiritual heritage of mankind impatiently waved aside.

However, we see a different picture when we read about those who made an effort to translate Persian poetry into English. According to the late Professor Arberry the translation of Persian verse into English had become a fashion early in the 19th century and the name of Hafez was in everybody's mouth.

It was at this period that Joseph Champion, John Richardson, John Knot, John Hadley and Hindley, Walter Loaf and Richard Le Galienne translated Hafez, and Lady Gertrude Bell spent a great many years of her life to translate Hafez into English verse and finally published her work in 1897. Longfellow translated Sa'adi's well-known poem that begins with this verse.

Bani Adam a'azaye yek-digarand
Ke dar Afarinesh ze yek goharand

in the following way:

All that inhabits this great earth, Whatever be their rank or worth,
Are kindred and allied by birth, And made by the same clay.

And this verse:

Chon ke gol raft-o golistan shod kharab, Bouye gol ra az ke jou'im az gollab.

which was rendered by Shelly as:

Rose leaves, when the rose is dead
Are heaped for the beloved's bed,
And so thy thoughts, when thou art gone,
Love itself shall slumber on...

One notices in these verses the use of the same meter and rhyme as is used in the Persian verse. Shelly became acquainted with Iranian literature by reading the works of Sir William Jones and therefore it is possible that when he brought his name into the last verse of the following poem:

Less oft is peace in Shelley's mind,
Than calm in waters seen.

he is imitating Hafez and other Iranian poets who must mention their names or their pen names in the last verse of each ghazal. George B. Walker reminds us that Browning, like Platen in Germany used Persian meter forms. (The Persian Pageant, p. 83) The late Prof. Arberry tells us the mystic tenets that are intermixed in the poems of Hafez, Ghazali, Jami and even Omar Khayyam is noticeable also in poems of Donne, Blake, Wordsworth and Shelly. All those efforts on the part of the English scholars who became interested in Persian literature by reading the original, were of no avail to reach the mind of English public until Fitzgerald produced his magnificent translation of Omar Khayyam into English. This soon penetrated into the heart of Western poetry. Of course Fitzgerald's translation was not a simple translation but a recreation. It was at once truly Persian and truly English and soon it found its way into every home in England and from there it found its way into all other languages the world over.

As Professor Gibb puts it:

nothing else from the East except the Bible is so well-known and so frequently quoted in all English literature. (Gibb, opt. cit.)

So Fitzgerald for the first time, really introduced Persian literature to the English public, just as in an earlier period Goethe introduced Hafez to Germany. The following Quatrains of Omar Khayyam as rendered by Fitzgerald are quite well known:

Here with a Loaf of Bread beneath the Bough,
A Flask of Wine, a Book of Verse ‐ and Thou
Beside me singing in the Wilderness,
And Wilderness is Paradise enow

and:

Ah, with the Grape my fading Life provide,
And wash the Body whence the Life has died,
And lay me, shrouded in the living leaf,
By some not unfrequented Garden-side.

Fitzgerald introduced not only the Iranian Omar Khayyam to England, but he also introduced Rubaiyyat or Quatrain meter form into English poetry.

Sa'adi was another great poet of Iran who was introduced to the English public several times. Of course in translating Sa'adi's Gulistan into English the translators were faced with a dilemma. The Victorian prudery and affection prevented the translators from making a straight forward translation and they had either to omit parts of the book or change the form or use latin in some cases where actual English translation was not to the taste of the times.

Nonetheless, Arbuthnot translated Gulistan in full. He writes in 1887 in his "Persian Portrait" about Sa'adi, that:

of all the great Persian poets Sa'adi's genius agrees most with that of European methods, and the great beauty of his style is its elegant simplicity.

Sir William Jones says about him:

His life was almost wholly spent in travel, but no man who enjoyed the greatest leisure ever left behind him more valuable fruits of his genius and industry.

Sir Gore Ouslay calls him:

the brightest ornament of Persia, the matchless possessor of piety, genius, and learning.

Vambery refers to him as follows:

This great poet and scholar is an object of veneration, not only to the people of Persia, but to every Mohammedan in the Asiatic world. His "Gulistan" is read with admiration and rapture in the middle of China, as well as on the extremest borders of Africa. European scholars have long since admired the undying freshness of his style, his brilliant language and his witty and telling similitudes.

Jami, the famous Iranian poet calls him:

The nightingale of the groves of Shiraz. (E.F. Arbuthnot, Persian Portrait, pp. 56-7)

In commenting about another Persian book called Dabistan (the first chapter of which was translated by Francis Gladwin in 1789 and the whole book by David Shea and Anthony Troyer in 1843), E.F. Arbuthnot says:

Many of ideas contained in it may be traced in the works of Dante Milton, Voltaire, Volney, Victor Hugo and others.

The description of Heaven and Hell, as given by Arda-Viraf, about 200 A.D. bears a wonderful resemblance to the "Paradiso" and "Inferno" of Dante or the "Revelation of St. John."

Again the author of Dabistan, in his chapter on the religion of the Ilahiah, focuses on the disputes of the people of different religions. A similar chapter or series of chapters, on the same subject will be found in Volney's work written at the end of the last century, and called "The Ruins, or a Survey of the Revolution of Empires." The meeting of the believers in different religions, their ideas, tenets, miracles, prophesies, sacred writings, customs, speeches, and traditions, are as well told in the one book as in the other, and bear a close resemblance.

In "Les Miserables" of Victor Hugo, the story of the good bishop M. Miriel and the thief Jean Valjan will always be remembered. The following is the story as it is told in the Dabistan.

Muhammad Ali of Shiraz was the fellow student of Shah Fattah Allah, and he traced his family to Azar Kaivan. He, however, attained perfection through the society of Farzaneh Bahram, the Son of Farhad, and had also traversed the

seven climes. A thief came to his house one night. Mohammad Ali pretended to be asleep on his carpet. The robber searched the house carefully, but as all the effects were concealed in a secure place, he was unable to get at them.

On this, Muhammad Ali, rising his head, said to him, "I laid myself down to feign sleep so that thou mightest accomplish thy desires, whereas thou art in despair. Be no longer uneasy". He then arose, and pointed out the place where all the things were stored away, In consequence of this generous proceeding the robber repented, abandoned his vile profession and became a virtuous character.

Arbuthnot believed that "From the Dabistan" the modern spiritualists and theosophists could gather and perhaps have gathered quite a harvest of wonders. (ibid.)

Farsi has made its contribution to the vast vocabulary of English, like any other major language. Of the words borrowed either directly or indirectly the following is a selection:

God, azur, lilac, jasmine, narcissus, scimitar, paradise, year, khaki, amber, kaftan, khan, anchor, bulb, bezoar, tutty, yoke, band, balcony, kiosk, tambour, giraffe, rank, taffetta, cheque, shawl, sugar, divan, pyjamas, pistachio, cumberband, tinkal, kibab, crimson, scarlet, thunder, new, houri, medium, soup, camphor, sandal, copper, sear-sucker, salamander, cake, arsenic, hat, hood, checkmate, rook, caravan, carboy, tatar, borax, fairy, and the like...

Besides there is a similarity between the following words owing to a common origin of the two languages:

father, mother, brother, sister, daughter, bad, star, eyebrow, lip, door, new, better, stand, name, cow, etc...

Pierre Jaubert, who visited Iran and wrote his "Travels to Armanistan and Persia in 1821", suggests that the word of "Honor" in English and "Honneur" in French are derived from the Persian word "Honar". (Pierre Jaubert, Travels to Armanistan and Persia)

(It is interesting to know that the Farsi word "barid" or postilion found its way into European languages as Verda in Latin, Paard in Dutch and Pferd in German).

One also notices many similarities in the sayings and proverbs at the two nations.

1.

In the wrestling matches in Iran, the wrestler who has to surrender normally throws his towel in the arena, admitting by this token that he has lost. In modern boxing, in England, the loser's coach throws the towel inside the ring. In both cases "to throw the towel in" has the same connotation.

2.

The same saying "Pot calling the kettle black" exists in both languages.

3.

For the Persian carrying "cumin to Kerman" one finds the following English version: "to carry coal to Newcastle".

4.

When the cook (which normally is a female) makes a dish salty, the Iranians say: "It appears that the cook wants a husband" and in English they say "the cook is in love."

5.

When two people resemble each other very much the Iranians say: "They are like two halves of an apple" and we find in Twelfth Night of Shakespeare the following expression:

One face, one voice, one habit, and two persons. An apple cleft in two is not more twine.

6.

When an Iranian wants to show in his speech that he was excessively ashamed he says: "I wish the floor would have opened and swallowed me up." The same expression is used in English.

7.

For the Iranian saying "to hit two targets with one arrow", there is an English counterpart, "to kill two birds with one stone."

If we looked carefully we could find many other similar sayings in English and other European languages that has an old counterpart in Farsi.

As it was said in the case of England, 19th century France was only interested in Oriental languages to further its own colonial designs. They were interested in Iranian language and literature, so long as they had designs on India, but after the defeat of Duplex from Clive they looked to North Africa and Syria for furthering their colonial plans.

There, they were more in need of Arabic than Farsi. However, the work of Iranian poets that were already known in literary circles in France could not be completely forgotten and they persisted to play their part in the vast French literature of the 19th century. We find still traces of French interest in Iran and Iranian poets, religion and history. But whatever traces there are of Persian literature in the French literature of the period they are not the type of sincere and spontaneous effort one feels present in Goethe's "West-Ostlicher Diwan."

Although Victor Hugo in the preface to his "Les Orientals" states that "all the world was Hellenist, now it is Orientalist" and although he confessed to strong poetic sympathies for the Orientalist art and wrote that "there, all is vast, rich, productive, as in the Middle Ages, that other ocean of poetry was," Professor Gibb believes that:

with all that he states, he was using it for the artistic effect of its glowing colors as De la Croix painted Algerian subjects. The same can be said of almost all the French romantics. (Gibb, opt. cit.)

However, going through the French literature of the 19th century and first-half of the 20th century, one feels that quite a great deal of Iranian literature is gradually finding its way into the French language by the efforts and good offices of individual poets and scholars interested in the East and Iran for its own sake.

For example we see the works of Attar, Nizami, Sa'adi, Hafez and Jami, appear in French. Silvestre de Sacy translated in 1805 Attar's "Pand-Nameh" into French. Several translations of "Gulistan" appeared in France. From 1838 to 1877 Jule Mohl gradually translated Firdowsi's "Shahnameh" into French and volume after volume was published.

This book impressed the literary circles of Europe to such an extent that most of the great writers found it necessary to make their comments on this voluminous and magnificent epic of the Kings of Persia. Ernest Renan called it:

A great document showing the genius and creative power of Aryan race....

J. J. Ampere called Ferdowsi:

One of the greatest poets of the human race...

and in comparing "ShahNameh" with "Nibelungen", "Iliad", "Odysseus" and other similar epics of the Indians, considered it the greatest of them all. Barbier de Maynard translated "Bustan of Sa'adi" in 1880. Renan, in praising the book in the "Journal Asiatique" wrote:

"Sa'adi is not a stranger among us, indeed he is one of us..."

In the study of the religions of old Iran, French scholars have done a great deal. Anquetil Duperron was the first European who spent 16 years of his life to study in India the Zoroastrian texts and finally he published in 1771 his important book called "Zend-Avesta, Ouvrage de Zoroastre. Traduit en Francais sur l'original Zend, avec des Remarques".

Darmesteter followed on his foot-steps and published in 1880 "Ormozd et Ahriman, leurs origines et leurs histoires."

In 1734 already a book had been published by Jean de Bosobere about "the History of Manicheism" and this interested Victor Hugo to such an extent that we are told by Maurice Barres that he was a Manichean at heart.

Victor Hugo in his book entitled "Dieu" recites:

Deux dieux, dit Zoroastre, un desordre normal. L'etre, c'est, le combat du bien contre le mal

In another piece in the same book "Le Manicheism" Victor Hugo expresses indeed his own faith. Jerome and Jean Tharaud published quite a number of poems all based on Iranian literature such as "La Cruche de Khayyam," "Le Poete et Le Roi," "Evangile selon Sa'adi," "La Marchard et le Roi," "La Tombe du poete", "Le Perroquet du Sage", "Une Histoire uncroyable", "Le Sage et le Mongole" and "Le Prince et La Mort".

Paul Fort (born in 1872) one of the celebrated French poets of the present century, who visited Tehran on the occasion of the millenary celebrations of Firdowsi, published for that occasion a poem entitled "Ode en l'honneur de

Ferdousi," in which after praising Ferdowsi goes on to add:

Tout le Choeur des Muses Gauloises,
 Chantant nuage et lueurs,
 Traversant l'azur, tout le choeur,
 de nos sages, de nos soufis,
 de Villon, Ronsard, La Fontaine,
 Chenier, Baudelaire et Verlaine,
 Nerval, Musset, ce La martine,
 cet Hugo dont je ne fais fi,
 Quelques milliers d'autres ma fi!
 où vient sous la lune argentine
 Ce Grand murmure de louanges
 Plus melodieux que vol d'anges
 Ou le concert du Paradis,
 Vers le pur souvenir d'Hafiz,
 d'Omar Khayyam, de Sa'adi,
 de légions d'autres encore,
 Attar, Sehâbi, Qéttali,
 Abou-Said ou Gazâli,
 Chantres d'Ispahan, de Mysore,
 de Chiraz plu doux que l'aurore.

Bien vrai, que depuis tant d'années.
 Muses de France et de l'Iran,
 à se chérir prédestinées, s'entre-guettaient.
 Et l'Orient devant qu'aient bondi les Croisades
 embaumait l'air de l'Occident,
 et faisait, sur nos hivers blancs,
 pleuvoir ses roses en cascades.
 Tant qu'il vint à notre patrie,
 nos arts et nos littératures,
 de la Grèce beauté, mesure,
 de la Perse charm et féerie.

In America the East was taken up by Irving who, greatly familiar with Persian tales, created Sleeper story in Rip Van Winckle. Emerson admired Sa'adi to such an extent that he frequently used his name as a "nom de plume." Omar Khayyam of-course is as much read and enjoyed in the United States as in England. Many various editions of Omar Khayyam have appeared in America. It is one of the books that is indeed very popular with old and young in that continent.

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