



APHORISM

APHORISM, “short sentences drawn from long experience” to Cervantes, “the wisdom of many, the wit of one” to Lord Russell, the terms proverb, aphorism, maxim have evaded strict definition and demarcation one from another. Aphorism in its literal sense, as a “sententious statement of the principles of physical science” ultimately derives from Hippocrates’ medical *Aphorisms*. In this sense, a very early specimen of Persian poetry, part of the *Dāneš-nāma* attributed to the poet Maysarī (Lazard, *Premiers poètes* II, pp. 186-88), is composed of aphorisms. However for the purposes of this article, which concerns the use of aphorisms in Persian folklore and literature, the prescriptive definition offered by John Gross has been adopted. Gross follows a path through “a wilderness of definitions” (*The Oxford Book of Aphorisms*, Oxford, 1983, pp. vii-viii), and arrives at a set of definitive characteristics based on his own experience and on general consensus. To Gross, aphorisms are statements about life that are “permanently and universally applicable;” they are “unlike proverbs” in that they have authors; and they are bits “of literature . . . that bear the stamp and style of the mind which created [them].” Finally, notes Gross, the aphorism “has to stand by itself,” in order to remain in the popular consciousness or to be anthologized, aphorisms have to be terse and witty, avoiding the trite and commonplace and occasionally becoming the vehicles of “a disenchanted view of human nature.” This notion of aphorism corresponds to Amīr-qolī Amīnī’s definition of the term *maṭāl* (plural *amtāl*) in the introduction to his dictionary of colloquial Persian expressions *Farhang-e ‘aw(w)ām* (Isfahan, 1339 Š./1960, p. 1). Amīnī speaks of aphoristic “wit” (*baḍla-gū’ī*); “aphorisms are composed of pithy expressions and pregnant allusions



while at the same time are imbued with wit and humor.” Moḥammad-Taqī Moqtaderī concurs in this definition when he uses the term *matalak* (jibe) to characterize some of the proverbial expressions found in Afghan Persian (*FIZ* 7/1, 1338 Š./1959, p. 5). Terms traditionally used to mean “advice” (*pand/naṣīḥat*) and “wisdom” (*ḥekmat*) can be distinguished formally from *maṭal*. The difference between the terms *naṣīḥat/pand* and *maṭal* is implicit in Sa’dī’s fifth essay “Dar naṣīḥat al-molūk” (Advice for kings): “Never feel safe from anyone who lives in fear of you, . . . ; and proverbs tell us (*dar maṭal ast*): ” To undermine the base of a wall and to remain stationary’ and ” to kill a snake’s young and sit carefree’ are against the counsel of wisemen” (*Kollīyāt-e Sa’dī*, ed. M. ‘A. Forūḡī, p. 82 no. 83). While *naṣīḥat* is straightforward and, at times, prolix leaving nothing to allusion, *maṭal* wisdom is implicit, depending on the efficiency of the *mot juste* and on the stimulus of contradiction for its pleasure and its sting.

In many cases the *maṭal* is a highly compressed form of anecdote; it is the visible edge of a folkloric narrative once current, but long forgotten. Aware of the representational nature of the *maṭal*, modern anthologists of Persian aphorisms, such as Amīr-qolī Amīnī (*Dāstānhā-ye amṭāl*, Isfahan, 1324 Š./1945), Abu’l-Qāsem Enjāvī Šīrāzī (*Tamṭīl wa maṭal*, Tehran, 1352 Š./1973), and Aḥmad Šāmlū (*Ketāb-e Kuča*, Tehran, 1357- Š./1978-) have supplied the anecdotes that support and explain the wisdom they have collected. The fact that the Persian *maṭal* implicates so much local legend and lore has caused researchers to postulate a direct correspondence between proverbial wisdom literature and national character (e.g., see Aḥmad Bahmanyār, “Maṭal,” *Yağma* 1/10, 1327 Š./1948, pp. 433-37). Expansion and explication of the laconic reference in Persian literature, however, predates the systematic work of modern scholars. The Mirror for Princes *Qābūs-nāma* (ed. G-Ḥ. Yūsufī, Tehran, 1346 Š./1967, pp. 208-09) reports that when the Ghaznavid Sultan Maḥmūd threatened to unleash his elephant battalions on Baghdad, the Caliph al-Qāder replied with three Arabic letters: ‘a , lām, mīm. With all of Maḥmūd’s advisers stumped by the riddle of the three letters, a young man who had not even reached the age of courtierhood realized that they were the first three letters of Qur’ān 105:1: “Hast thou not seen how thy Lord dealt with the owners of the Elephant?” This concise counter stopped Maḥmūd from attacking and earned its exegete a robe of honor.

To many cases, the originality of classical poets and prose stylists can be seen in the way they use traditional wisdom literature to suit their own artistic



needs. The *Qābūs-nāma* anecdote illustrates one way in which Koranic citation, in particular, and Arabic sayings, in general, contribute to the aphoristic style of classical Persian literature. Both Koranic verse and the Hadith, according to Badī'-al-zamān Forūzānfar (*Aḥādīt-e Maṭnawī*, Tehran, 1347 Š./1968, pp. v-vi), served as *amṭāl* to the *madrasa*-educated audiences of mystical and homiletic Persian poetry. In his discourse on rhetoric, Neẓāmī 'Arūzī Samarqandī (*Čahār maqāla*, ed. M. Qazvīnī, Leiden, 1910, p. 23) recommends Koranic diction as the ultimate in concise expression and inimitability of sense, the very requirements of a good *maṭal*. The Qur'ān itself, in fact, defines such a *maṭal*: "Seest thou not how Allah coineth a similitude (*maṭal*): A goodly saying, as a goodly tree, its root set firm, its branches reaching into heaven" (14:24). In classical Persian prose and poetic texts, Koranic verse and Hadith are either adopted wholesale to support an *ad verecundiam* argument, as appeals to indisputable authority, or find their way into Persian through translation. To avoid ambiguity and perhaps to increase the aphoristic density of their works, some writers adopt the tedious practice of yoking the Persian translation of a Koranic verse or a Hadith to its original; e.g. (in this case a Hadith), "The tree of the sword, under whose shade is heaven [Persian], for " Heaven is under the shade of swords' [Arabic]" (Šehāb-al-dīn Zaydarī Nasavī, *Naftat al-maṣdūr*, pp. 1, 129). Abundant examples of the use of the Koranic *maṭal* in classical poetry are found in *Taḥlīl-e aš'ār-e Nāṣer-e Kōsrow*, by M. Moḥaqqueq (Tehran, 1349 Š./1970, pp. 1-119).

Another rich source of aphoristic inspiration in classical Persian literature was the so-called "Andarz Literature" (q.v.; see *The Letter of Tansar*, tr. M. Boyce, Rome, 1968, pp. 19-20 and the article by J. P. De Menasce in *Camb. Hist. Iran* III/2, pp. 1166-95). This body of wisdom literature flourished under the Sasanians, and several *andarz-nāmas* bearing the names of Sasanian kings and priests have survived. The poet who relied most heavily on this type of literature and was perhaps most responsible for turning the verities of Zoroastrian wisdom into aphoristic poetry was Ferdowsī. The *Šāh-nāma* mentions the *Andarz-nama* of Anōšīravān (see Dehḵodā, s.v. *andarz-nāma*) and serves generous helpings of Bozorgmehr advice to the Sasanian king (*Šāh-nāma*, ed. Mohl, bk. VI, 1101-1605). According to Dehḵodā's *Amṭāl o ḥekam* (Tehran, II, pp. 623-25, III, p. 1338, IV, pp. 2058-59) the *Šāh-nāma* has contributed more than fifty ways of expressing the notion "life has its ups and downs, so accept both with equanimity" to the corpus of Persian aphoristic literature. Likewise, a traditional adage of *andarz* literature, the idea that death is inevitable, is expressed in some fifty-three *Šāh-nāma* aphorisms



(*Amtāl o ḥekam* I, pp. 150-56). Another notion to which Ferdowsī the aphorist and other classical authors were attracted and that is common to both the Sasanian and Koranic aphoristic traditions, is the misogynist's view that women are men manqué, flawed *ab initio* and therefore neither to be trusted nor obeyed; e.g., "Women, their name is deemed to be so low, for never do they food or sleep forgo," *ibid.*, II, p. 919). On the other hand, a man's good nature, his only legacy, in the aphorist's *Šāh-nāma* rests on his actions, *ibid.*, I, pp. 199-200).

Like Ferdowsī, Sa'dī also made ample use of the simple wisdom of *andarz* in his contributions to Persian aphorisms. The eighth chapter of the *Golestān* (Dar ādāb-e šoḥbat) is devoted to rhymed prose sayings that reflect on generosity, money, life, death, kingship, asceticism, etc. As Moḥammad-Taqī Bahār suggests (*Sabk-šenāsī*, Tehran, 1349 Š./1970, III, p. 111) because Sa'dī was not a court poet, rather an itinerant sage who depended on conducting learned discussions of religion and morality to earn a living, he habitually resorted to the well-turned aphorism in his didactic writings. "Musk is what our nose tells us not what the perfumer sells us" and "So long as gold will well do the trick, to risk one's life would not be politic" (*Kollīyāt*, pp. 280 and 290) are remembered not only because they harbor some universal truth but because they appeal to the ear and acquaint one with Sa'dī's particular view of life.

As with most proverbial wisdom, Persian aphorisms are not free of ambiguity. Commenting on Western proverbial literature, John Crossan writes: "For every 'Two heads are better than one' there is always another 'Too many cooks spoil the broth'" (*Raid on the Articulate*, New York, 1976, pp. 58-59). The 10th century poet Daqīqī qualified "patience shall have its reward" by adding that one needed two lifetimes to realize the truth of the saying (Lazard, *Premiers poètes* II, p. 148). The 14th-century Persian satirist 'Obayd Zākānī exploited this intrinsic ambiguity of simple wit and wisdom to produce his collection of antiaphorisms, the *Resāla-ye šad pand*. In effect, Zākānī turned the goodly tree of *maṭal* upside down so that its roots were in the air and its leaves trailed in the dirt. He turns the commonplace "Honesty is the best policy" into "As long as you can, never tell the truth, so that you do not weigh on people's heart and so that they will not take offense needlessly" (*Kollīyāt*, ed. 'A. Eqbāl, Tehran, 1341 Š./1964, p. 205). Ferdowsī's saws about the inevitability of death in Zakanian dress become "In any event, avoid death, for death has been considered unseemly" (*makrūh*, i.e., doctrinally frowned upon)



(*Kollīyāt*, p. 210). With his devil's dictionary of obscene advice, Zākānī made the process of the aphorization of both *andarz* and Koranic wisdom come full circle and put subsequent adagists on their guard against platitudes.

In Persian literature, then, the successful aphorist would typically convert the raw and plainly-stated wise saying into something both memorable and quotable. Not merely content to sprinkle their works with received bits of advice, the great poets and prose writers were distinguished by their tailoring of traditional wisdom into something original, something that suited their own particular literary needs. This process, known as *tamattol*, has preserved many of the most important lessons taught by the culture of Persian speaking and reading peoples. Anthologies capture instances of *tamattol* and gather them alphabetically or arrange them under traditional subject headings.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

An early example of collected advice in Persian literature, *Pand-nāma-ye Mātorīdī*, was edited and published by Ī. Afšār in *FIZ* 9/1-4, 1340 Š./1961, pp. 46-67. For a detailed look at the syllabus of *‘elm al-amṭāl*, see Šams-al-dīn Moḥammad Āmolī, *Nafā’es al-fonūn fī ‘arāyes al-‘oyūn* I, Tehran, 1377 Š./1957-58, pp. 182-234. The influence and proliferation of Biblical aphorisms in classical Persian texts is documented in *Naftat al-mašdūr* by Šehāb-al-dīn Zaydarī Nasavī (ed. Yazdegerdī, Tehran, 1965, pp. 29, 173-75) and in *Tārīk-e Bayhaqī* (2nd ed., p. 448). A classical text that demonstrates a high degree of Persian and Arabic aphoristic density is Abu’l-Ma’ālī Naṣrallāh Monšī’s Persian translation of *Kalīla wa Demna*, (ed. M. Mīnovī, Tehran, 1351 Š./1972, e.g., see p. 17). The movement of Greek maxims into Arabic is studied and amply documented in *Greek Wisdom Literature in Arabic Translation* by Dimitri Gutas (New Haven, CT, 1975). On Sa’dī’s use of advice literature, see *Ḥekmat-e Sa’dī* by Kaykōsrow Haḳāmanešī (Tehran, 2535 = 1353 Š./1974, pp. 107-17). A discussion of Sanā’ī’s homiletic poetry is found in *Of Piety and Poetry* by J. T. P. De Bruijn, (Leiden, 1983, pp. 164-71). More recent anthologies include: Dehḳodā’s *Amṭāl o ḥekam* (4 vols., Tehran, 1352 Š./1973), a compendium of *amṭāl* and aphoristic poems generally accompanied by short explanations,



‘Abd-al-Raḥmān Ṭāleb Tabrīzī’s late 19th-century translation of the Counsels of Marcus Aurelius (published by the Dār al-Fonūn), and Reżā Amīr Ḥosaynī’s review and partial translation of *The Cynic’s Dictionary of Amoral Advice* by Jonathon Green (London, 1984) in *Našr-e dāneš* 5/2, February-March, 1985, pp. 54-56. The works of M. ‘A. Jamālzāda are also very rich in *amtāl*. See also Mošār, *Fehrest* I, cols. 232-33.

Recently an annotated bibliography of anthologies of Persian aphorisms, “Ketābšenāsī-e dāstānhā wa zabānzadhā-ye Īrānī,” was published in *Dāstānhā wa zabānzadhā-ye Lorī* by Ḥamīd Īzadpanāh (Tehran, 1362 Š./1983, pp. 145-81). Īzadpanāh’s bibliography which was compiled with the help of, among others, Moḥammad-Taqī Dānešpažūh, Moḥammad-Reżā Šafīī Kadkanī, Šādeq Kīā, and Faṭḥallāh Mojtābāī, describes sixty published and manuscript anthologies of advice literature and works on aphorisms, ranging from traditional compilations like *Nawāder al-amṭāl* of Moḥammad Tāškandī Naqšbandī (Paris, Bib. Nat. ms. Suppl. Pers. 1547 [*Cat. Bib. Nat.* IV, pp. 89-90]) to works on folklore such as *Farhang-e ‘awām-e Āmol* by Mahdī Partovī Āmolī (Tehran, 1358 Š./1979). A recent publication that appeared after Īzadpanāh’s bibliography is *Maṭalhā-ye Šūštārī* by Jalāl-al-dīn Emām Jom‘a (Tehran, Bonyād-e Nīšābūr, n.d.).

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