



DAŠTĪ, 'ALĪ

DAŠTĪ, 'ALĪ (b. Karbalā', ca. 1312/1894, d. Tehran, 26 Dey 1360 Š./16 January 1982; [Figure 1](#)), man of letters, journalist, and politician.

Life. Daštī, the son of the Shi'ite cleric Shaikh 'Abd-al-Ḥosayn Daštī, of a family originally from [Dašttestān](#), received a traditional education in Arabic literature and Islamic sciences and philosophy. In about 1918 he left Iraq for Persia, and, despite his family background and education, turned to journalism and politics, becoming the very antithesis of a religious fundamentalist. Throughout his long life his ideals were "freedom," "reason," and "order." He worked first as a journalist in Shiraz and Isfahan but within two years moved to Tehran as an editor of the weekly *Setāra-ye Īrān*. He received his first major political exposure as an opponent of the [Anglo-Persian Agreement of 1919](#). In 1300 Š./1922 he founded the daily newspaper *Šafaq-e sorkò*, which he published, with interruptions imposed by the censors, for more than thirteen years (Šadr Hāšemī, *Jarā'ed o majallāt* III, pp. 75-79). He was a versatile writer, contributing articles on politics, social issues, and literature throughout most of this period. These articles and the contributions of such colleagues as Rašīd Yāsemī, Sa'īd Nafīsī, 'Abbās Eqbāl, and [Mīrzāda 'Ešqī](#) ensured the unique importance of the journal in Persian intellectual life (*Bīst o seh sāl*, tr. Bagley, p. x; Machalski, pp. 133, 139). Many of Daštī's own contributions to this and other periodicals were later reworked in book form (see below).

Daštī's criticism of the 1919 agreement earned him a short spell in prison, the first of four over the next twenty-eight years; he was then exiled to Iraq and received other marks of official displeasure. There are discrepancies in the



record of all these events, particularly of the dates. His second arrest, along with seventy or eighty others in public life, following the [coup d'état of 1299/1921](#) lasted more than three months. During this period he recorded the reflections that eventually formed the first part of his *Ayyām-e maḥbas* and bore the same title (see below).

In the early 1920s Daštī began the serious study of French, a step that opened for him the culture of the West, particularly of the classical world, as well as England and Russia. French and Arabic remained his main languages other than Persian, and he translated such popular sociopolitical writings as Samuel Smiles' *Self-Help* (*E'temād be nafs*, Tehran, 1305 Š./1926; 13th repr., Tehran, 1363 Š./1984), Edmond Demolins's *À quoi tient la supériorité des Anglo-Saxons?* (*Tafawwoq-e Anglo-sākson marbūṭ be čīst?* Tehran, 1302 Š./1923), and Gustave Le Bon's *Lois psychologiques de l'évolution des peuples* (*Nawāmīs-e rūḥīya-ye taṭawwor-e melal*, Tehran, 1302 Š./1923), the latter two from Arabic translations. Although such works were often superficial and naïve, even racist, they had wide influence in Europe, North America, and parts of the Arab world for several decades, and through them Daštī believed that he sensed much of what had made the West so "successful." His attitude to the West was in fact ambivalent. As is clear throughout his writings, he considered himself a patriotic Persian and was deeply resentful of Western colonialism and imperialism. At the same time, however, he saw Western scientific, technological, commercial, and military capabilities and the individualism and sociopolitical attitudes that had supposedly generated them as inescapable facts, to be faced and understood. For him they represented the dark side of forces that in themselves were positive and progressive, forces that Persians had to emulate if they were to be free and self-respecting. Japan and India symbolized classic polarities in their responses to the challenge of the West, whereas Africa was merely an example of the "savage" (*Ayyām-e maḥbas*, pp. 21, 61, 380-81). Yet Daštī (*Ayyām-e maḥbas*, pp. 20-26, 169-70) repeatedly expressed romantic disillusionment with civilization, which he contrasted unfavorably with primitive innocence.

Daštī was among those Persians invited to the Soviet Union in 1927 to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution. Despite vague allegations to the contrary (Banani, p. 49), there is no real evidence that he ever took more than an optimistic liberal interest in the Soviet regime. He prolonged this trip to tour western Europe. In 1307 Š./1928 he was elected to the sixth session of the Majles as deputy for Būšeḥr, the beginning of a seven-



year career as a bold and skillful parliamentary speaker, though perhaps stronger in his ideas than in carrying them to practical conclusions. At the close of the ninth session (1314 Š./1935) Daštī was again arrested for his writings and his newspaper shut down. After three months, a sick man, he was released to a friend's private clinic, still under strict police supervision. Five months later he was allowed to go home, but comprehensive restrictions on his communication with the outside world continued for a further seven months; this period of ten months was the subject of "Taḥt-e naẓar," the third part of *Ayyām-e maḥbas*. Eventually he resumed his parliamentary career and was elected for Damāvānd in 1318 Š./1939 and 1320 Š./1941 and for a Tehran constituency in 1322 Š./1943. He also cofounded the 'Adālat (Justice) party in December 1941; unlike its earlier namesake the party was centrist, particularly concerned with reducing military spending and with social, educational, and administrative reforms (*Dam-ī bā Kayyām*, tr., p. 25).

In the spring of 1325 Š./1946 Daštī was imprisoned for six months because of his opposition to Prime Minister Qawām-al-Salṭana's apparently pro-Soviet policies and wooing of the Tudeh party (see [COMMUNISM ii](#)). After his release in October he paid a prolonged visit to France, which had become a second spiritual home. When he returned to Persia in June 1948 he was appointed ambassador to Egypt, where he served from late 1948 to early 1951. He served as minister without portfolio (*wazīr-e mošāwer*) in the short-lived caretaker cabinet of Ḥosayn 'Alā', which preceded that of Moḥammad Moṣaddeq. After the [coup d'état of 1332 Š./1953](#) Daštī was appointed to the Senate, where he remained active for twenty-six years, until the Revolution of 1357 Š./1978-79. He continued to speak with fire and brilliance undiminished, if somewhat tempered by age and wisdom, and without subservience to the court (see Sa'īdī Sīrjānī, p. 345, for reference to a critical letter addressed to the shah). During this period, in 1963, he also spent a year as ambassador to Lebanon. The final three years of his life are particularly obscure, though by all accounts they were sad. He was virtually predestined by his career and his work, as well as by his temperament, for confrontation with the new Islamic regime. There are reports of imprisonments, beatings, injuries, restraints of various kinds, and even half-hearted attempts at suicide (Sa'īdī Sīrjānī, pp. 347 ff.); in his earlier writings he had often discussed suicide as a theoretical concept and a courageous act (e.g., *Ayyām-e maḥbas*, pp. 71-73). The hopes he had nourished for Persia on the world stage had collapsed with the Revolution. His funeral, three years later, seems to have been attended by only a handful of loyal associates.



Daštī's own writings, as well as his translations and adaptations of foreign works that most deeply impressed him, were the main means by which he propagated his ideas, oratory and negotiation being of secondary importance. He came increasingly under the spell of the writings of Anatole France (1844-1924), whom he resembled in many ways, but his empathies remained at once philosophical and romantic, even religious in an ethical sense. To many he was best known for a series of stories set in the fashionable Tehran of the 1930s and 1940s; they were regarded as anything from frivolous to daring to outright immoral (see below). They seem mild enough now but still deserve serious study as social documents of the period.

Perhaps Daštī's innovative and "personal" studies of the principal Persian classical poets will prove the most enduring of his writings; they broke sharply with traditional Persian literary criticism focused on anecdotes, prosody, and *explication de textes*. Like virtually everything he wrote, they were received with great excitement, coming as a complete revelation to many commentators (Sa'īdī Sīrjānī, p. 337). The poet he ultimately seemed to prefer, on various counts, was Sa'dī (see especially his article "Ferdowsī yā Ḥāfez?" in *Sāya* and the study of it by Wickens). His *Bīst o seh sāl*, on the Prophet Moḥammad, is a unique work, respectful, intended even to be reverent, but limited to early "facts" and orthodoxies, stripped of perceived later accretions of miracles and mystification. Despite constant efforts by both the Pahlavi regime and the religious establishment to prevent its publication, it achieved wide circulation (see below) and may have been the greatest single factor in the troubles Daštī suffered in his last decade.

Daštī's character was both colorful and riddled with paradoxes. His quick temper, frankness, and often reckless courage are mentioned in all accounts; he seems also to have been a kind and loyal friend, though some of his friends were less than loyal to him, especially toward the end. By his own lights he was fair and consistent in all his views. Although not without vanity, he was able to accept criticism of his work, for example, of his overfondness at one period for neologisms and Western terminology (Sa'īdī Sīrjānī, p. 346; Kamshad, p. 73). 'Alī-Akbar Sa'īdī Sīrjānī (pp. 345-46) has stressed his scrupulous care never to use another writer's ideas without acknowledgment. At one period Daštī was something of a dandy, a bon vivant, even a ladies' man; he never married but seems to have adopted a son (Eḥtešāmī, pp. 75-77; Sa'īdī Sīrjānī, pp. 339-40, 347). A few vague allusions to his libertine proclivities resulted, according to Sa'īdī Sīrjānī (pp. 338-40), from his passion for beauty in



all things (nature, art, craftsmanship, humanity, etc.) and a propensity to treat women as social equals. He wrote in support of female emancipation, but his position on these matters was often inconsistent.

Whatever personal fortitude and balance Daštī may have achieved in his later life, in his earlier years he seems to have shared some of the outlook of the typical self-indulgent middle-class intellectual. *Ayyām-e maḥbas* contains two major passages perfectly illustrating these attitudes. In part 2 he repeatedly complained of the hardships attending his journey into exile (see above), part of which he was forced to undertake on foot in hot weather and over bad roads; he marveled at the way the lower classes robustly accepted such hardships as a matter of course (e.g., pp. 143-44). In part 3 he described an incident that took place in the hospital where he was convalescing from his prison experiences in 1314 Š./1935: His rest was so disturbed by the cries of a woman in labor and later by the wailing of her child that he devoted a whole essay to the penchant of the human race for procreation, even citing the new Nazi policy of compulsory sterilization of the “unfit” as the perfect solution to such problems (pp. 217-20, 230-31). Even at his most liberal and democratic, he thought primarily of the literate, the intellectual, the comfortably off, the decision makers. His admiration for the doctrine of the survival of the fittest (*nāmūs-e baqāʾ-e ansab*), as he understood it (pp. 50-52, 231), reinforced his preference for “enlightened” capitalism and a strong but just central government; what he could not tolerate was blatant corruption, the arbitrary and oppressive use of power, and entrenched ignorance and superstition.

Works. It is next to impossible at this time to produce a definitive bibliography of Daštī’s works that would include every article and editorial that he wrote. The preliminary selective list presented here is derived from a variety of sources, as well as from the works themselves whenever possible. The dates of original publication for some items are uncertain, and some items overlap more than one category.

Daštī published several collections of short stories and novellas. *Fetna* (Tehran, 1323 Š./1944; repr. several times) is a collection of short stories depicting the flaws of Persian social life from several points of view, particularly among women. *Jādū* (Tehran, 1330 Š./1951; repr. several times) and *Hendū* (Tehran, 1333 Š./1954; repr. four times) each includes four short stories.

His works of literary criticism are abundant. *Naqš-ī az Ḥāfeẓ* (Tehran, 1336 Š./1957; rev. and enl. ed., 1349 Š./1970; 7th ed., 1364 Š./1985) is an appreciation



of Ḥāfeẓ that broke new ground in Persian literary criticism. Daštī offered little in the way of textual commentary or biographical detail but focused instead on the poet's skillful use of language and his significance in reference to "freedom of thought." He also examined the influence of Sa'dī, 'Omar Ḳayyām, and Jalāl-al-Dīn Rūmī on Ḥāfeẓ's poetry. He dealt with the *gāzals* of Rūmī in *Sayr-ī dar Dīvān-e šams* (Tehran, 1337 Š./1958; enl. 3rd ed., 1349 Š./1970; perhaps a 7th ed., 1362 Š./1983), stressing both the poet's distinctive style and his ecstatic outpouring of mystical ideas. As in his other studies, Daštī's technique is impressionistic, albeit here particularly suited to his subject. In *Qalamrow-e Sa'dī* (Tehran, 1338 Š./1959; 3rd ed. with addenda, 1344 Š./1965; reported 6th printing, 1364 Š./1985; tr. Ş. Naş'at as *Āfāq adab Sa'dī*) he compared Sa'dī's work with that of earlier poets, underscoring his masterly use (*fasāḥat*) of Persian and offering a critical analysis of his religious beliefs. His *Šā'er-ī dīr-āšnā* (Tehran, 1340 Š./1961; 2nd ed. with addenda and revisions, 2535=1355 Š./1976; perhaps a 4th ed., 1364 Š./1985.) is a study of the poet Ḳāqānī Šervānī intended to make his work more accessible, despite the difficulties of his language. About 1,000 lines are included as evidence of his true poetic worth. Particularly important in Daštī's literary criticism is *Dam-ī bā Ḳayyām* (Tehran, 1344 Š./1965; 2nd ed. with addenda, Tehran, 1348 Š./1969; 3rd ed. with minor corrections, Tehran, 1355 Š./1976; possibly a fifth printing, 1364 Š./1985; tr. L. P. Elwell-Sutton as *In Search of Omar Khayyam*, London, 1971), a fresh look at Ḳayyām's poetry, including an anthology of all those *robā'īs* that Daštī thought could plausibly be attributed to him; hundreds of well-known verses were rejected, however. In the second part of the book Daštī presented his personal assessment of the author, his thought, and his *weltanschauung*. Subsequent works in this genre include *Kāḳ-e ebdā'* (originally published in *Yaḡmā*, 1351 Š./1972, and issued separately in Tehran in the same year; 5th ed., 1362 Š./1983), a collection of twelve brief articles in which the ideas of Ḥāfeẓ are analyzed; *Negāh-ī be Šā'eb* (Tehran, 1353 Š./1974; 3rd ed., 1364 Š./1985), a study of the poetry of Šā'eb, with a discussion of the Indian style (*sabk-e hendī*) and some observations on *Bidel*; and *Taşwīr-ī az Nāşer-e Ḳosrow* (Tehran, 1362 Š./1983), similar in approach to Daštī's studies of other poets with inclusion of substantial material from Nāşer-e Ḳosrow's *Dīvān*, with interpretations.

Daštī was also the author of a number of works of religious criticism. *Taḳt-e pūlād*, published anonymously, is an imagined debate between a *mojtahed* (theologian) and his students (Tehran, 1354 Š./1975). *Bīst o seh sāl* (probably Beirut, n.d. [before 1353 Š./1974]; tr. F. R. C. Bagley as *Twenty Three Years*. A



Study of the Prophetic Career of Mohammad, London, 1985; all attributions of this work to other authors are without foundation), published anonymously, was the most controversial of all his publications (see above). *Jabr yā ektīār* (*Waḥīd*, 1350 S./1971) is a short treatise on free will versus predestination; appended to the reissue was *Eblīs dar keswat-e 'erfān*, which he expanded in the final essay of *Parḍa-ye pendār* (*Eṭṭelā'āt*, 18-31 Ordibehešt 1353 Š./8-21 May 1974; 4th ed., Tehran, 1363 Š./1984), a collection of essays on Sufism, particularly focused on its antirational, superstitious, and obscurantist manifestations. In *Dar dīār-e šūfīān*, a sort of pendant to *Parḍa-ye pendār*, Daštī gave greater weight to the positive aspects of Sufism (4th ed., 1363 Š./1984). *'Oqalā' bar kelāf-e 'aql* is a collection of essays on notable instances in which members of the Muslim intelligentsia had adopted “obscurantist” positions (Tehran, 1354 Š./1975; 3rd ed., 1362 Š./1983).

Among Daštī's political memoirs and essays *Ayyām-e maḥbas*, first published in book form in 1303 Š./1924, met with immediate acclaim and was subsequently expanded to include two further sections, “Dar rāh” and “Taḥt-e naẓar.” It has been reprinted frequently. *Panjāh o panj*, a collection of political reflections on the first fifty-five years of the Pahlavi regime (1300-55 Š./1921-76), first appeared as a series of thirteen articles in *Kayhān* (1355 Š./1976) and then in book form twice in the same year. *'Awāmel-e soqūt*, which can apparently be read either as a general analysis of the decline of Persia or as a particularized study of the downfall of the Pahlavi dynasty, appears not to have been published. Three other works, a collection of Daštī's editorials from *Šafaq-e sork* entitled *Sar-maqālahā-ye rūz-nāma-ye Šafaq-e sork*, *Yāddāsthā-ye sīāsī-e Meṣr o Lobnān*, and *Yāddāsthā-ye sīāsī-e zamān-e Reżā Šāh*, have no known printing history but are also said to be “in press.”

Other important works by Daštī include *Sāya*, a collection of what he considered some of his best nonpolitical essays (1325 Š./1946; repr. several times in expanded form and with minor alterations; perhaps a 9th printing, 1364 Š./1985); in the latest edition it is divided among literary criticism, social opinions, impressions, and translations. *Maqālāt-e parākanda* has no printing history but is allegedly “in press.”



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