Published: December 31, 1998
Last Updated: October 16, 2016

ENGLISH II. PERSIAN INFLUENCES IN ENGLISH AND AMERICAN LITERATURE

ENGLISH

ii. PERSIAN INFLUENCES IN ENGLISH AND AMERICAN LITERATURE

Although academic Persian studies may be said to have begun in England in the early 17th century with the establishment of chairs in Arabic at the two leading universities at Cambridge and Oxford, it was not until the late 18th century that the Persian poets began to be read in English translations. This was due to the linguistic and literary skills of Sir William Jones (q.v.) and to the fact that Persian was the official language at the Indian courts. Thus, when Pitt's India Act of 1784 brought the East India Company (q.v.) under direct control of the British crown, a veritable crash program in Persian studies was launched both at home and in India that would soon make the names of the Persian poets almost as familiar to English readers as those of classical Greece and Rome. The importance of India to Persian studies is attested by the fact that Sir William Jones himself, when called to India to head the new judicial system, threatened, as he wrote to Edward Gibbon, to drown his Persian books deeper than plummet ever sounded, for lack of patronage, when he was called to India to head the new judicial system.

Jones's Persian Grammar, his various graceful translations of Ḥāfeẓ and his fellows, his learned discourses on the poetry of Persia and India all served to bring about what he had dreamed of as a young orientalist: that the cultivation of this newly discovered literature would provide English poets with "a new set of images and similitudes and [that] a number of excellent compositions would be brought to light, which future scholars might explain, and future poets might imitate" (Jones, X, pp. 359-60). This was patently a program for the Romantic Age in English literature, even though Jones was a neo-classicist who chose to call Ferdowsī "the Persian Homer" and Ḥāfeẓ "the Persian Anacreon." It was some time before readers saw the Persian poets in their own dress and English poets imitated them.

Most of the poets and poetasters of the Romantic era, as distinguished from Jones and his orientalist associates, had little if any competency in the Persian language, though the temptation was strong to enter the field. William Wordsworth's clergyman uncle wished that the young poet would take up the study of oriental languages. Samuel Coleridge once hoped for a cadetship in the East India service. Percy Shelley, it seems, actually began the study of Arabic, though his little poem entitled "From the Arabic" is more like an imitation of Jones's translations than an original:

My faint spirit was sitting in the light / Of thy looks, my love;

It panted for thee like the hind at noon / For the brooks, my love.

The internal rhyme followed by a refrain captures the music of the ḡazal. R. M. Hewitt points out another ḡazal device in a poem of Shelley's that is not otherwise oriental:

Less oft is peace in Shelley's mind / Then calm in waters seen.

Whether accidental or intentional, this verse has the poet's taḵalloṣ (pen-name) woven into the last couplet of the ḡazal (Yohannan, 1977, p. 33, nn. 110-12).

Walter Savage Landor thought the oriental fad was a taste for the "high-seasoned garbage of barbarians," but apparently he could not resist joining the party with his nine Poems from the Arabic and Persian. Robert Southey had an equally low opinion of the Arabic and Persian imitations and translations, but he based his Thalaba and The Curse of Kehama on fairly wide readings in orientalia. Although Lord Byron nastily called these works of

Southey his “unsaleables,” the fact is that they caught popular fancy. One American reviewer asserted that Southey’s treatment of Persian mythology was superior to Ferdowsī’s (Yohannan, 1977, p. 34, nn. 115-119).

Byron and Thomas Moore were only slightly more authentic in their orientalizing. Byron ridiculed one Robert Stott for having the effrontery to use “Hafez” as a nom de plume, but his rebuke shows him as capable of giving offense as seeing it: “What would be the sentiments of the Persian Anacreon, Hafiz, could he rise from his splendid sepulchre at Sheeraz (where he reposes with Ferdousi and Sadi, the Oriental Homer and Catullus) and behold his name assumed by one Stott of Dromore, the most impudent and execrable of literary poachers for the Daily Prints?”

Comparing Saʿdī with Catullus and burying Ferdowsī next to Ḥāfeẓ and Saʿdī were Byron’s very own bloopers (Yohannan, 1977, p. 40, n. 134). Yet Byron appears to have fooled Jeffrey of the Edinburgh Review into believing that “The Giaour,” one of his so-called Turkish tales, was a genuine translation since it contained words like “kiosk,” “muezzin,” “Palampore,” and “ataghan.” It is possible to judge how calculated all this Eastern coloration of Western Romantic literature was from Byron’s note to Thomas Moore explaining: “The little I have done in this way is merely a voice in the wilderness for you; and if it has had any success that also will prove that the public are orientalizing, and pave the path for you.” (Yohannan, 1977, p. 36, nn. 126-28).

Moore did, indeed, cash in, for he learned one day that his famed Bendemeer’s song from “Lallah Rookh” had been translated into Persian and was being sung in that language on the streets of Isfahan (Yohannan, 1977, p. 35, n. 122).

Yet when all was said and done, the Romantic poets provided a very superficial adaptation of the materials of Persian poetry. Victorian authors had the advantage of a more serious concern for the content of Persian poetry and, thanks to the German orientalists, a more accurate view of the forms in which that poetry was written. Goethe’s enthusiasm for the German translations of Persian poetry by Josef von Hammer inspired not only a major author such as Ralph Waldo Emerson (q.v.) in the United states, but also secondary authors in England such as Clarence Mangan, R. C. Trench, and Monckton Milnes, to produce imitations twice removed, as it were, from the Persian originals (Yohannan 1977, pp. 63-65). The Germans also took more seriously the Sufi mysticism pervading Persian poetry. Edward B. Cowell, the chief advocate of the poetry, would not go all the way with a Sufistic

interpretation, but he saw something more in Ḥāfeẓ than a "Persian Anacreon." Cowell played a major role in bringing a genuine Persian strain into the main stream of Victorian literature through his acquaintance with Edward FitzGerald and Alfred Tennyson.

First it is fitting to turn to the national poet of Persia, Ferdowsī, and to the special appeal that he held for another major Victorian figure, Matthew Arnold. Sir William Jones had once proposed that a proper Greek tragedy might be made of the best known episode from the Persian epic, the Šāh-nāma; namely, the story of the death of the youth Sohrāb at the hands of his warrior father Rostam. Arnold had no knowledge of the Persian original, but he had read a synopsis (not entirely accurate) of the episode in Sir John Malcolm's History of Persia. Later Arnold came upon a detailed review by the critic St. Beuve of Jules Mohl's ongoing French translation of the Persian epic. Arnold's lengthy poem "Sohrab and Rustum," composed in blank verse, had a Homeric tone that he thought would impart classical health and vigor to the dominantly querulous poetry of the age, including his own melancholic verses. As it turned out, Ferdowsī's native fatalism was in perfect harmony with Arnold's melancholy. (Analyses of Arnold's treatment of his sources are provided by Javadi, 1971 and Jewett.)

Tennyson's early poetry in Poems by Two Brothers showed him to be in what might be called the "Sir William Jones phase of orientalizing," but Tennyson's next volumes, according to his friends Hallam and Milnes who reviewed them, revealed a more serious interest in "yonder shining orient." His response to Persian poetry, at any rate, led him to undertake the study of the language, perhaps as early as the late 1840s, certainly by the mid-fifties when, according to his son, Tennyson strained his eyes by peering too long at small Persian script. His mentors were, it would seem, Cowell and FitzGerald. There has been some argument about the extent of Tennyson's involvement in Persian poetry (see Yohannan, 1977, chap. 9, esp. nn. 247 and 255-260).

Unquestionably, the most far-reaching influence from Persian poetry upon the life and literature of England and America came from Edward FitzGerald's *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*. It not only replaced Thomas Gray's "Elegy" as the most popular poem in the English language, but also laid the basis for a philosophical and sociological cult that was determined to liberate the bourgeois European mind from its neo-classical or Calvinist or Victorian restraints. This, in turn, produced an anti-cult that at its most extreme regarded the *Rubáiyát* as a sort of ethical plague that threatened the

destruction of all moral values. The story of the *Rubáiyát* is a history unto itself, that can only be touched upon here. A particularly interesting study is D'Ambrosio's account of T. S. Eliot's youthful "possession" by FitzGerald's translation when he came upon it at age fourteen and his equally strong rejection of it in his maturity (D'Ambrosio; some sense of the dimensions of the cult and anti-cult may be derived from Potter,

BIBLIOGRAPHY

and Yohannan, 1971).

The popularity of this translation was so tyrannous among both general readers and serious critics that it affected the reputations of all other Persian poets in Europe, with the possible exception of Ferdowsī. Ḥāfeẓ, the favorite of the Romantics, came to be regarded as a latter-day Khayyam. Some of his *ḡazal*s were translated into quatrains, as were also some of the didactic verses of Saʿdī. Academic scholars sought to maintain some semblance of balance by stressing the importance of the mystical poets Farīd-al-Dīn ʿAṭṭār, Jalāl-al-Dīn Rūmī, and ʿAbd-al-Raḥmān Jāmī. Reynold A. Nicholson asked: "What should they know of Persia who only Omar know?" He and his successor at Cambridge, Arthur J. Arberry, devoted a good portion of their scholarship to editing and translating the works of Rūmī. Yet it cannot be said that any of the Persian mystics found a FitzGerald who could give the Persian poet the literary standing he deserved, although Dick Davis' *Conference of the Birds* translated with Afkham Darbandi (Penguin Classics, 1984) is a very successful rendering of ʿAṭṭār's *Manṭeq al-ṭayr*.

A Scottish clergyman and Hegelian philosopher did, indeed, hope that his adaptations of some of Rūmī's *ḡazal*s from Rueckert's German versions would demonstrate the moral superiority of Rūmī over Khayyam. But the subtitle of William Hastie's little book of poems reveals that the villain in the piece played a larger role than the hero (*Festival of Springfrom the Divan of Jelaleddin. . . with an Introduction and a Criticism of the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam,* Glasgow, 1903.)

It is perhaps fitting that this survey should end with a familiar complaint about what English taste has done to Persian poets in their English language

dress: “It is characteristic that Omar Khayyam, rather than Firdausi, or Rumi or Hafiz, should be the best known Persian poet in the West; it is characteristic that Khayyam’s own reputation should be based on a translation which is Victorian and in fact very much an English poem of the Victorian temper; and finally, it is characteristic that Robert Graves, the only major English poet who has so far addressed himself to Persian poetry, should return to the well known *Rubaiyat* and not to much greater Persian poets, like Hafiz and Rumi, whose work lies buried under uninspired and unreadable translations” (Yohannan, 1977, n. 643, 704). Not entirely true; not entirely wrong!

(for cited works not given in detail, see “Short References”):

A. J. Arberry, *British Contributions to Persian Studies*, London, 1942.

Idem, *Fifty Poems of Hafiz*, Cambridge, 1947.

Idem, *The Rubaiyat of Jalal Al-Din Rumi, Select Translations into English Verse*, London, 1949.

Idem, *Classical Persian Literature*, London, 1958.

Idem, *Mystical Poems of Rumi, Translated from the Persian*, Chicago, 1968.

Browne, *Lit. Hist. Persia*. V.-M. D’Ambrosio, *Eliot Possessed: T. S. Eliot and FitzGerald’s Rubaiyat*, New York and London, 1989.

L. P. Elwell-Sutton, “Omar Khayyam” in *Persian Literature*, ed. E. Yarshater, Albany (N.Y.), 1988, pp. 147-60.

M. C. Hillmann, *Unity in the Ghazals of Hafez*, Minneapolis and Chicago, 1976.

H. Javadi, “Matthew Arnold’s ’Sohrab and Rustum’ and Its Persian Original,” *Review of National Literatures* 2/1, Spring 1971, pp. 61-73.

Idem, *Persian Literary Influence on English Literature*, Calcutta, 1983.

I. B. Jewett, “Matthew Arnold’s Version of the Episode of Sohrab,” *Orientalia Suecana* 16, 1967, pp. 127-34.

W. Jones, *The Works*. . ., 13 vols., London, 1807.

H. Massé, *Essai Sur le Poète Saadi*, Paris, 1919.

A. G. Potter, *A of the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, London, 1929.

Rypka, *Hist. Iran. Lit.* D. N. Wilber, "Iran. Bibliographical Spectrum," *Review of National Literatures* 2/1, Spring 1971, pp. 161-81.

J. D. Yohannan, "The Fin de Siežcle Cult of FitzGerald's 'Rubaiyat' of Omar Khayyam," *Review of National Literatures* 2/1, Spring 1971, pp. 74-91.

Idem, *Persian Poetry in England and America: A Two Hundred Year History*, Persian Studies Series 3, Caravan Books, 1977.

Idem, "Persian Literature in Translation," *Persian Literature*, ed. E. Yarshater, Albany (N.Y.), 1988, pp. 479-98.