



FREE VERSE

FREE VERSE in Persian Poetry. The term *še'r-e āzād*, Persian for the French *vers libre* and English free verse, entered Persia in the 1940s and immediately began to be used in a variety of senses and applied to diverse subspecies of the emerging canon of *še'r-e now* (new poetry), especially to highlight those features in which this body of poetry was felt to differ from classical Persian poetry and the contemporary practice modeled after it. However, because the new poetry is not uniform in its departures from the classical canon, the term has never been defined with satisfactory accuracy or applied with precision. Since the metrics of the *'arūz* (q.v.) and the strict regularity of rhyme were the most perceptible features of the classical canon, the term *še'r-e āzād* has come to mean all kinds of poetry, written by all self-proclaimed modernist poets, that did not display the metrics and regularity of rhyme visible and audible in classical Persian poetry.

In Western poetic traditions, free verse often refers to poems in which the perception of rhythm and rhyme do not depend on the regular use of strictly measurable patterns. Rather, it arises from the cadence of recurrent words, phrases, images, and the like. Although the history of such verse can be traced to Greek and Roman literatures, it refers primarily to the poetry written roughly in the past century or so. Its principal practitioners are the French symbolists and various strains of Anglo-American modernists, particularly Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot. Since the French symbolist tradition constitutes an important source of inspiration for Nīmā Yūšij and other Persian modernists, *še'r-e āzād* most specifically refers to Nīmā's modernist output and that of his



followers, thus making two other phrases, namely *še'r-e nīmā'ī* (Nimaic verse) and *še'r-e āzād-e nīmā'ī* (Nimaic free verse), synonymous with *še'r-e āzād* (Mīršādeqī, p. 147; Dād, p. 183). Moḥammad-Rezā Šafī'ī Kadkanī suggests that a long poem in fourteen stanzas by Moḥammad-'Alī Ḥazīn Lāhījī (1103-80/1692-1766) can be considered the first experimentation with free 'arūzū in Persian poetry (*naḵostīn tajreba-ye 'arūz-e āzād dar še'r-e fārsī*; p. 551). However, in any but the merely accidental sense, the term must be linked to the emergence of new poetry in Persia in the early part of the 20th century (Karimi-Hakkak, pp. 14-20). Culminating in the work of Nīmā Yūšij, this tradition rests for its visible and auditory qualities on an important redefinition of the role of meter and rhyme in poetry, one that renders the regular use of the fixed patterns of 'arūzū and the unchanging regularity of rhyming words obsolete. As a result, a variety of irregular uses of these constant features begin to connote freedom from the classical tradition's most perceptible systemic constraints.

During the past half century or so, the term *še'r-e āzād* has been used in three interrelated senses in Persian literary criticism. First and most accurately it describes the type of modernist poem which still employs the devices of rhyme and meter, only more sparsely and with greater attention to the internal relations these serve. This usage can be illustrated best by the modernist poems of Mahdī Aḵawān-e Tālet "Omīd," Hūšang Ebtehāj "Sāya," and Nāder Nāderpūr. Secondly, it refers to the poems that strive to privilege the internal music of poetic phrases, at times substituting internal rhyme or alliterative harmony for regular use of rhyme and meter. This usage is most prominent in the early works of Aḥmad Šāmlū "Bāmdād" and, to a lesser degree, Forūg Farroḵzād's poems in her last two collections. Finally, the phrase has been and continues to be used, rather irresponsibly, to refer to poems that are indistinguishable from prose in any external features, relying solely on the use of space (as in the poems of Tandar Kīā "Šāhīn"), the presence or prevalence of poetic images (as in Hūšang Īrānī's poems) to communicate the quality of genuine poetry. More discriminating observers, however, continue to employ the phrase *še'r-e manṭūr*, Persian term for the French "*poème en prose*" and English "prose-poem," to describe this category (cf. Nāderpūr, no. 138, p. 43).

As such, the idea of free verse, like that of two other adjacent poetic concepts translated into Persian from French and English, namely *še'r-e sapīd* (blank verse) and *še'r-e manṭūr* (prose poem), is still evolving in Persian literary scholarship. As Šafī'ī Kadkanī and others have noted, the exact nature and



function of rhythm and rhyme is far from settled in the 20th-century Persian poetry. This is particularly true in the light of ever greater understanding of the importance of Nīmā Yūšij's critical observations, not only as the culminating force in contemporary Persian poetry but also as the guide for poets who followed in his footsteps before each one could find his/her own distinct approach to creating poetic quality.

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