



LĀYEQ ŠĒR-‘ALI

LĀYEQ ŠĒR-‘ALI (Taj. Loiḡ Šeralī, known professionally as Loiḡ/Lāyeq), Tajik poet (b. Mazār-e Šarif, in the region of Panjakent, 20 May 1941; d. Dushanbe, 30 June 2000).

Born into a peasant family, Lāyeq Šēr-‘Ali had his early schooling in Panjakent and then graduated from the State Pedagogical Institute in Dushanbe in 1961, thereafter embarking on a career in journalism. Among the posts he held were editor for literature and drama of the State Committee for Radio and Television (1963-65) and poetry editor of the main journal of the Union of Tajik Writers, *Sadoi Šarq* (1967-75). He joined the Communist Party in 1972. In 1979 he became secretary of the executive committee of the Union of Writers and chief editor of *Sadoi Šarq*. Among the numerous honors he received were the Rudaki State Prize for Literature (1978) and the Iranian Nilufar Prize (1999). Besides carrying out his official duties, he served as a public intellectual who concerned himself with broad issues of literature and culture and Tajik nationhood, and, as the Soviet Union began to crumble in the later 1980s, he spoke out on the shortcomings of the old order.

Lāyeq continually expanded the boundaries of Tajik poetry through his restless urge to experiment, to cultivate new means of expression and new forms. He was forever anxious to free his verse from what he regarded as the restraints and monotony of both the traditional ‘*arūz*’ and the socially engaged poetry of the 1940s and 1950s. In all his strivings he was not unlike many of his young contemporaries of the 1960s and 1970s, who were intent on creating a vibrant Tajik poetry in harmony with both individual artistic aspirations and



the spirit of the times. He wanted in particular to open Tajik poetry to the naturalness of everyday speech as the best means of capturing the mentalities and rhythms of contemporary life. As an innovator Lāyeq drew inspiration from foreign poets whose work he enthusiastically translated, notably Pablo Neruda, Walt Whitman, and Serghei Esenin. As he himself acknowledged, he could hardly have translated *Leaves of Grass* without altering in fundamental ways the structure of ‘arūž. Such problems (and others) led him to advocate “free verse” (*še’ri ozod*) in such poems as “Še’ri safed” and “Tilloi safed” (both 1983). He also regularly expressed his indebtedness to the progressive poets of Iran after World War II, who taught him much about style and phrasing through their Aesopian language under the shah’s regime and their refined metaphors.

Despite his eagerness to innovate, he remained faithful to certain traditions. A number of his poems of the 1980s and 1990s observed the norms of Persian-Tajik poetry, as he wrote *gāzals* and *robā’is* (in his volume *Ruboiyot*), and even before this he had taken the lead in the later 1960s in reviving interest in the *robā’i* genre after decades of neglect. By his own admission, he remained a “lyric poet” (*šoiri ošiq*) from his very first poem, “Nom,” in 1959 to his final poems in 2000.

Lāyeq well merits the epithet “philosophical poet,” because at the heart of his work lies the eternal contest of life and death, justice and injustice, loyalty and deceit. He sought light and virtue, but at the same time he could not but recognize within himself the inherent contradictions of the world and of the time in which he was living (see the appreciation by Gulnazar, *Loiqe un Loiqe*).

Lāyeq was also, in a sense, a psychological poet. From his earliest work he concerned himself with the individual and, sometimes, the extraordinary, even irregular, personality, in whom he discerned the conflict between and, occasionally, the merging of contradictory traits and aspirations. These were individuals striving for good, but, inevitably, he showed, they were burdened by the pervasive lack of harmony of their century. His portrayal of character reflects his abiding interest in each person’s life, which he treats as unique. Such an approach coincided with new trends in Tajik poetry in the 1970s and 1980s, which diverged fundamentally from the representations of men and women in earlier decades, when they were merely cogs in the massive machinery that was transforming society. But for Lāyeq the peasant, for example, was more than a builder of socialism; he was an individual, whom he wished to examine from the inside, as in “Padaram, èy padari dehqonam”



(1975).

He took the same approach in poems about his mother (in “Modarnoma” in his *Kulliyot* I, pp. 263-79). To be sure, he saw her as the eternal keeper of the home, but he made clear that she had a personality of her own and conceived of her life as special. In his first collection of poems, *Sari sabz* (1966), he included a poem, “Ba modaram,” which became famous, not only because in it he treated his mother as a unique individual, but also because the means with which he drew her portrait was new in Tajik poetry. Indeed, everything in the poem was new: the rhythm, the rhyme, and the language. It marked the beginning of his long engagement with experiment and innovation.

Lāyeq explored many worlds. He thought of himself as a poet unbounded by either geography or time, and he was forever reading poets of the world and transforming their words and rhythms into Tajik and, of course, learning languages. Besides Neruda, Whitman, and Esenin, he became thoroughly acquainted with Heinrich Heine and Victor Hugo. He also considered himself part of the greater Iranian cultural world, and throughout his career he paid homage to the classical Persian poets and strengthened relations with his contemporaries in Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India.

Despite his cosmopolitan interests, Lāyeq did not hesitate to identify the center of his personal world and his cultural world as Tajik. He was passionate about discovering the origins of the Tajiks and exploring their spiritual essence, a quest that took him to ancient literary sources such as the [Avesta](#) and to the summits of Persian-Tajik literature, as in his series of poems “Ilhom az ‘Šohnoma” (1968) and in “Rezaboron” (1978). His studies of Zoroastrianism confirmed his sense that the ancestors of the Tajiks (and perhaps his contemporaries) saw nature (and their own fate) as subject to the constant play of creative and destructive forces. He brought his investigations down to his own times. He thus took a leading role after 1990 in re-evaluating Tajik literature and culture during the Soviet era. In particular, in such poems as “Zamini zamoni mo” he denounced the long-term harm inflicted by Stalinism because of its hostility to Tajik self-determination. He also organized a symposium on [Jadidism](#), a current of intellectual and cultural reform among the Tajiks in the early 20th century, which the communists had regularly attacked as nationalist, but which he and his colleagues praised as a pioneering source of enlightenment and modernity.

In the end, it may be that Lāyeq found the answer to his questions about the



essence of the Tajiks in the place where his own life had begun—the village. He himself in the early 1970s had helped revive interest in the village as a fundamental theme of poetry. Drawing partly on childhood memories and partly on intellectual discourse, he identified the village as the preeminent center of moral purity and spiritual wholeness of a nation sorely tested by history.

Works. Numerous anthologies of Lāyeq’s poetry were published during his lifetime. The most comprehensive collection of his poetry is *Kulliyot I*, Dushanbe, 2008. See also recent collections: *Ruboiyot*, Dushanbe, 2012, and *Sadu yak ǧazal*, Dushanbe, 2009. Lāyeq published an anthology in Persian letters, *Kāki vatan*, Dushanbe, 1981. Among Persian editions are *Golčīn-i az aš‘ār-e Ostād Lāyeq Šīr-‘Alī*, Tehran, 1993; *Ruh-e Raḳš: golchin-e aš‘ār*, Tehran, 2000; and *Kolliyāt-e aš‘ār-e Lāyeq Šīr-‘Alī*, Tehran, 2004.

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Essential critical works, which include thoughtful discussions of Lāyeq’s poetry, are: Askar Hakimov, *Dar qalamravi suḳan*, Dushanbe, 1982, and Askar Khakimov, *Ispytanie poeziei*, Dushanbe, 1992. See also: Muhammadalii Ajamī, *Guldoni hafrang: jilvahoi hunar va ma’no dar dubaytihoi ustod Loiḳ Šeralī*, Dushanbe, 2011, and appreciations of his life and work by his colleagues: Usmonjon Ġafforov, *Loiḳ Šeralī*, Dushanbe, 2012; Gulnazar, *Loiḳe un Loiḳe*, Dushanbe, 2000; and Sorbon, *Loiḳnoma*, Dushanbe, 2001.