



‘OBAYD ZĀKĀNI

‘OBAYD ZĀKĀNI, K̄vāja Neẓām-al-Din ‘Obayd-Allāh Zākāni of Qazvin, a Persian poet from the Mongol period (d. ca. 770/1370), renowned above all for his satirical poems which inaugurated the passage from invective *ad personam* sparked by personal motives, a clear example of which can be found in the work of Suzani and of numerous poets of the Saljuqīd period, to those with broader social and political agendas. The main butt of ‘Obayd’s satire was what he conceived of as the ‘new ethics’ (see *maḏhab-e moḳtār* below) of post-Mongol Iran with its politics of tyranny and injustice perpetrated by the exponents in power on the one hand and the falsity and moral meanness widespread in the various social classes on the other. Despite his enormous popularity, ‘Obayd was an author who was neglected for a long time by the traditional compilers of *taḏkera* (passed over in Hedāyat’s *Majma’ al-foṣaḩā*) and also by modern literary critics because of the obscene and provocative contents of much of his work. Only recently has his work finally been the subject of a good critical edition, monographs, and specialist articles, and numerous translations.

Life. Born into a family of erudite state officials, probably before 1319, ‘Obayd was a descendent of a branch, the Zākānis, of the Banu K̄afāja Arab tribe that had settled in the Qazvin region at the beginning of the Islamic period. The historian Ḥamd-Allāh Mostawfi describes him in his *Tāriḩ-e gozida* (1329) as a talented poet and an erudite author of treatises. This comment belongs to the same date as one of ‘Obayd’s first prose-works, written in Arabic and entitled *Nawāder al-amṯāl* (*Resāla-ye delgoṣā*, ed. Ḥalabi, pp. 282-318), a collection of



sayings of prophets and sages in Arabic. The title, *Şāheb-e mo'azzam*, attributed to 'Obayd in some sources, suggests that he must have held an official role (perhaps as administrator or minister) in the chancellery of some prince.

When the central government of the Ilkhanids collapsed, 'Obayd left Iraq and fled to Shiraz to the court of Shah Šayḡ Abu Eshāq Inju to whom he dedicated a large part of his panegyrics (29 *qaşidas*, and a *tarkib-band*) and for whom he wrote his famous *Oššāq-nāma*, a *matnawī* interpolated with *ġazals*. Five of his *qaşidas* and a few of his *qeṭ'as* are also dedicated to Rokn-al-Din 'Amid-al-Molk, the minister of Abu Eshāq Inju. Abu Eshāq himself, his most important patron, was defeated and killed in 1357 by Prince Mobārez-al-Din Moḡammad (d. 1363) of the dynasty of Muḡaffarids who forced 'Obayd to leave Shiraz for a while (his love of Shiraz and for the Fārs region is invoked in numerous *ġazals*). He returned there in the reign of Shah Šojā' (1364-84), an enlightened patron of scholars and poets (including Hafez) to whom the by now elderly 'Obayd dedicated several panegyrics, in particular on the occasion of the recapture of Kermān and Isfahan. Other *qaşidas* and *tarkib-bands* included in his *Divān* are dedicated to Prince Solṡān Mo'ezz-al-Din of the Jalayerid dynasty, better known as Šayḡ 'Ovays (1356-1364) who lived in Baghdad and with whom the poet perhaps passed part of his exile from Shiraz (this would have been at the time of his supposed 'legendary' row with the poet Salmān Sāveji, described with many imaginary embellishments by Dawlatšāh Samarqandi in his *Tadkerat al-šo'arā*).

Other reliable sources, such as the *Šahed-e šādeq* by Šādeq Eşfahāni and *Ķolāşat al-aş'ār* by Tāqi Kāşi, used by 'Abbās Eqbāl in his detailed and documented contribution to the life of 'Obayd (*Kolliyāt*, 1953, pp. *ha' – sq*), maintain that the poet died in 771/1369-70 or in 772/1370-71. That he was still living a few years earlier is confirmed by the existence of an astronomical manuscript copied by 'Obayd in 768/1366 and later inherited by his son.

'Obayd's work, particularly his satirical texts, can best be appreciated in the context of the circumstances in which they were written and with reference to his intended audience. Unlike most authors, he did not appear to concern himself with the survival of his work for posterity, implicitly recognizing its contingent value. However, in contrast to the poet's own apparent indifference, the universal significance and relevance of 'Obayd's satirical achievement have assured it a lasting place in Persian literature, well beyond the linguistic and cultural borders of Persia itself.



Works. ‘Obayd’s output has always been conventionally subdivided into serious works and humorous ones. The serious or sober portion consists of the *Divān* which, in the Maḥjub edition (the standard source of reference in this entry, henceforth referred to as Maḥjub in references), comprises 41 *qaṣidas*, 4 *tarkib-bands*, 1 *tarji-band*, 140 *ḡazals*, 28 *qeṭ’as*, 58 *robā’is*, and 3 *maṭnawis* (two very short poems and the celebrated ‘*Oṣṣāq-nāma*) and the *Nawāder al-amṭāl*, an Arabic prose collection of moral and literary reflections, parables and aphorisms, dedicated to the minister ‘Alā’-al-Din Moḥammad Ḳorāsāni (Maḥjub did not include *Nawāder* in his *Collected Works*, as he found it incomplete in one manuscript and very corrupt in another). The *ḡazals* (1033 *bayts* subdivided in an extremely regular manner into lyrics of 7-8 verses), all on the theme of love interspersed with antinomian (*rend*) inspired elements, constitute the quantitatively more substantial part of his *Divān* and have always formed a section of considerable importance. This importance is not so much in the intrinsic value of his compositions, which do not reveal elements of marked originality compared with the classicism of the dominant canon in 14th century poetry, but because many of the lyrics were composed in Shiraz at a time when Hafez was also active. Unfortunately there are no indications, historical or stylistic, regarding any contact between the poets, but a comparative analysis of their lyrics would undoubtedly be of considerable interest. One of the characteristic artifices of ‘Obayd’s lyrics is the frequent use of the *taẓmin*, i.e. the insertion of borrowed lines from recognized masters (Sa’di, Ḳahir Fāryābi, etc.) into his own compositions.

The ‘*Oṣṣāq-nāma*, written in 1350 and dedicated to prince Abu Eshāq Inju, is a treatise on profane love, in the form of a long *maṭnawi*, and is unquestionably worthy of attention. Composed along the lines of the homonymous work by ‘Erāqi (whose subject however was mystical love) but with a style closer to that of the romantic poems of Neẓāmi, it is strewn with *ḡazals* (two of which were composed by Homām-al-Din of Tabriz). Because of its significance, it was also published independently from the *Divān* by ‘Abbās Eqbāl (Tehran, 1942) and by Sayyid Abu Ḥāšem Usha (Madras, 1952).

The humorous work of ‘Obayd was composed both in prose and in verse, or often in a mixture of both. It can also be divided into works of certain attribution and those with doubtful provenance. According to the Maḥjub edition, the first category includes some obscene poems (among them famous parodies of poems composed by illustrious poets of the past), represented by the so-called *Laṭā’ef* (1 *tarji-band*, 4 short *maṭnawis*, 64 *robā’is*, and 61 *qeṭ’a va*



taẓmins), and his main prose works, for which he is justly famous: the *Aklāq al-ašrāf*, the *Resāla-ye delgošā*, the *Maktub-e qalandarān*, the *Resāla-ye Šad pand*, the *Resāla-ye Dah fašl* and the *Riš-nāma*.

The title and structure of the *Aklāq al-ašrāf* (the ethics of the aristocracy) a prose work mixed with verses composed in 740/1339-40, recalls Naṣir-al-Din Ṭusi's famous *Aklāq-e nāseri*, written about a century earlier, but only at the level of parody. In 'Obayd's work, the virtues accepted for centuries by common consent and normative ethics (*madhab-e mansuk*, the abrogated or discarded doctrine or moral code) are replaced by the new precepts already current and widespread at the poet's time (*madhab-e moḳtār*—the prevailing or currently dominant doctrine or moral code), which prescribe the exact opposite of the abrogated virtues. This work, subdivided into seven chapters, discusses (1) *ḥekmat* (wisdom), (2) *šajā'at* (bravery), (3) *'effat* (decency), (4) *'adālat* (justice), (5) *sakāwat* (generosity), (6) *ḥelm o waqār* (forbearance and dignity or gravitas), and (7) *ḥayā va wafā va šedq va raḥmat va šafaqat* (pudency, fidelity, honesty, mercy and compassion). Each chapter is composed of two quite distinct sections. In the first and usually brief section, 'Obayd describes the value given by the ancients to the virtue being discussed. In the second, longer and replete with anecdotes and in which the ironic contrast with the first is immediately evident, the description of the abandonment and of the distortion of the virtue in question provides ample opportunity for satire. It also contains witty and lively reflections and anecdotes, often obscene, expressing vividly 'Obayd's disillusionment and pessimism. In the first lines of the work, the satirist, with a *crescendo* of irony, expresses the motivation and the aims of his work through which he wishes to provide something useful to the followers of the preferred doctrine, giving an explanation of their conduct and a justification of the fact that he has trodden over the old virtues (Maḥjub, pp. 232-33).

In the *Resāla-ye Delgošā* (The cheer-inducing treatise), his second most important humorous work, 'Obayd collects amusing and licentious stories and anecdotes in Arabic and Persian. The wide-ranging treatise is preceded by an interesting declaration of the author's intentions in which he informs the reader that his satirical stories as well as the obscene ones sprang from the adversities that he had to tackle and how the effect of writing them down dragged him out of the anguish and sense of ruination. The work is divided into two parts: (1) *dar laṭāyef-e 'arabi* which contains 84 Arabic anecdotes, the sources of which have been traced (*Resāla-ye delgošā*, ed. 'A. 'A Ḥalabi, in the



footnotes) followed by their translation into Persian (*tarjoma-ye hekāyat-hā-ye ‘arabi*); (2) *dar laṭāyef-e fārsi* which contains 139 mainly original anecdotes (this is a work with regard to which the editions differ quite notably, see Maḥjub, pp. xlvi-li; Ḥalabi’s edition, for example, contains 257 anecdotes). Many of the stories included are not, overall, of ‘Obayd’s own invention but are made up of the re-structuring and rewriting of previous Arabic material. This does not however turn ‘Obayd into a mere imitator: the material used is simply a starting point for him. ‘Obayd changes the character of these stories and also changes the context and their cultural environment to render his descriptions more familiar to the Persian reader. Another notable aspect of this work is the way it shows ‘Obayd’s extraordinary talent as a translator (every story in Arabic has in fact been translated into Persian). It is possible to recognize in the *Resāla-ye delgošā* the perfect harmony realized between the humor, expressive elegance, and effectiveness of the communication, but it is also of considerable importance as a source of information for the author’s time and the characters with the most varied roles. In particular, his original anecdotes represent his vision of reality as they are rich in concrete references to the cities he lived in, the disposition of their inhabitants, the people he met, and the circumstances he witnessed (emblematic, for example, is the affection displayed for the inhabitants of Shiraz or his feigned alarm at the stupidity of his fellow citizens of Qazvin; Maḥjub, pp. li-liii). *Resāla-ye delgošā* also has a brief foreword (Maḥjub, pp. 257-58) in which ‘Obayd affirms, perfectly in tune with the principles of Islamic *adab*, that it is necessary to find a harmonious equilibrium between the serious and the humorous as an excess of the former induces sorrow and an excess of the latter scorn. He declares then that he wants to put witticisms, pleasantries and little stories into writing, so that the reader may enjoy his work.

Maktub-e qalandarān (The letter of the antinomian dervishes), consisting of two letters, is considered to be a continuation of the *Resāla-ye delgošā*. This work contains another 105 Persian anecdotes (with many quotations in Arabic) that are of the same type as those in the *Resāla-ye delgošā*.

The *Resāla-ye šad pand* (The treatise of a hundred counsels), written in 750/1349, is a collection of aphorisms characterized by bitter cynicism and forceful irony. In the introduction ‘Obayd cites as one of his inspirational sources a testament written by Plato for his pupil Aristotle and, according to ‘Obayd, translated from Greek into Persian by Naṣir-al-Din Ṭusi and appended to his *Aḳlāq-e nāšeri*, as well as other didactic tracts, including the one



attributed to Anušīrvān the Just (Maḥjub, p. 317). The reference to these erudite and regal references enhances the estrangement induced by the reading of the 100 pieces of advice, which invite us to adopt amoral transgressive stances outside every social rule and religious principle. The series of suggestions starts quite innocuously and then grows towards a climax with great parodic effect. The last two recommendations and the conclusion of the work are worthy of note (Maḥjub, p. 324): the ninety-ninth asks us not to condemn satire or satirical authors, the hundredth resumes the serious and erudite tone of the introduction and the work closes with the usual invocation to God.

The *Resāla-ye Dah faṣl* (The treatise in ten sections) was composed in the same epigrammatic tone. 'Obayd divides this work into ten great categories into which he inserts 238 satirical definitions of concepts belonging to the sphere of religion, politics, social, private and family life. Here too we have a world upside-down in which his *vis comica* and biting humor are expressed forcefully. As usual 'Obayd provides a brief preamble in which he pokes fun at belles-lettres and lexicons (*adabiyāt* and *logāt*) as indispensable genres for people of discernment. To meet this need, 'Obayd proposes making his own contribution by drawing up a series of definitions (*Ta'rifāt* is actually the alternative title of this work), which he urges us to learn by heart. Every entry in this pseudo-dictionary, regardless of its etymological derivation, is prefixed by the Arabic article "al-", which, as often underlined by the critics, increases the power of the satirical content of the glosses.

The work entitled *Riṣ-nāma* (The book of the beard; or pogonology) one of 'Obayd's recognized masterpieces, is an undated mixed work in prose and verse, the subject of which is the 'critical' moment in which facial hair replaces the soft down on a pubescent boy's cheeks. The central theme of the work is therefore a typical theme of the classic Persian lyric— the first appearance of the beard to spoil the beauty of the beloved youth. 'Obayd's intention in composing this work is to condemn the moral corruption of pederasty, while recalling the theme and style of an obscene poem by Sa'di (*Kolliyāt-e Sa'di*, ed. M.-'A. Foruḡi, Tehran 1995, pp. 1000-1001). The condemnation of this vice is carried out through the literary expedient of a satirical dispute in which a personified beard defends its own virtues in a lively debate with the poet himself.

Passing to the humorous works of uncertain attribution, 'Obayd's *Collected Works* edited by Maḥjub contains a series of works that, in terms of style,



content, and manuscript tradition cannot be attributed to ‘Obayd, but in all likelihood belong to one of his followers. Maḥjub justifies their inclusion in the *Collected Works* on the grounds that he was compiling together all the works in some way linked to the name of ‘Obayd. A short comic *maṭnawī*, *Mehmāni kardan-e sangtarāš kōdāvand rā az šedāqat*, and the *Ta’rifāt-e Mollā Dopiyāza* with its *molḥaqāt* are omitted despite being found in previous editions. They are late and do not appear in the earlier manuscripts (Maḥjub, pp. xxx-xxxii). Belonging to this set of dubious attribution are however three *Fāl-nāmas*, the *Kanz al-latā’ef*, the *qaṣida* entitled *Muš o gorba* and a few brief stories in Arabic with the corresponding Persian translations (these *hekāyathā* are considered to be apocryphal additions to the *Resāla-ye delgošā*; they appear in Eqbāl’s edition but not in the sources used by Maḥjub).

In the three brief *Fāl-nāmas*, ‘Obayd pokes fun, with various playful and obscene passages, at those who place their trust in auguries and divinatory techniques. The best known of the three, the *Fāl-nāme-ye boruj* is a brief treatise in prose, broken up by quatrains, which describes the elaboration of a horoscope and mocks the prognostications compiled by impostors for gullible customers. The *Fāl-nāma-ye ṭoyur* and the *Fāl-nāma-ye woḥuṣ* describe, in 20 and 30 quatrains respectively, how to make predictions from the sight of 20 different birds and 30 different animals: the first *bayt* in each quatrain maintains a serious tone while an obscene content is inserted into the second.

Under the title of *Kanz al-latā’ef* we have a *monāzera* (disputation) composed in an extremely affected and ornate prose which presents a debate between the male and female sexual organs in which the two organs boast of their own varied talents and well-attested capabilities at each other’s expense. According to Moḥammad-Ja’far Maḥjub, the style and contents of this work differ greatly from ‘Obayd’s other works (Maḥjub ed., 1999, pp. xxxiv – xxxv).

Finally, the work for which ‘Obayd is most famous and which is impressed on the memory of all Persians is a short mock-epic (but with a *qaṣida* rhyme-structure) which does not appear in the older manuscripts of his works, and which is therefore deemed by many critics to be of uncertain attribution but which, despite this, has been translated several times (see bibliography). This is the famous *Manzuma-ye muš o gorba*, a sort of fable that narrates the cruel deeds and hypocrisy of a tyrant impersonated by a cat which torments a community of ingenuous and gullible mice. The cat has always been considered to represent the severe and bigoted tyrant, Mobārez-al-Din (Şafā, III/2, pp. 972-4), under whose unjust and authoritarian power lived both



'Obayd and Hafez who, in his *ġazals*, condemned him with verses of equal force to those of 'Obayd himself, but in a different register.

As regards the editions of 'Obayd's texts, the first printed version of his comic works was published in Istanbul in 1885/86 (*Montakab-e laṭāyef-e Neẓām-al-Din Mawlānā 'Obayd-e Zākāni*), edited by Mirzā Ḥabīb Eṣfahāni and M. Ferté, with an introduction to the author and works by the former, and a foreword to the book by the latter. This publication was based on a single manuscript. 'Obayd's serious writings were first published in Tehran in 1942 (as a supplement to the journal *Armaġān*, issue 22), edited by ['Abbās Eqbāl Āshtiāni](#), who wrote a detailed preface describing the life and works of 'Obayd. The same scholar later published another edition (Tehran 1955), based on a larger number of manuscripts, with a revised preface, and supplemented by a reprint of the comic works published in Istanbul. A subsequent series of reprints did not bring any new elements from the critical and philological points of view. A fresh contribution was made by Parviz Atābaki who based a new edition of 'Obayd's *Kolliyāt* (Tehran, 1957) on the existing Eqbāl edition. On the title page we are informed that the editor had examined other manuscripts, but he does not supply any information about them and the volume has no critical apparatus. However, the edition does offer a detailed annotation of 'Obayd's prose and poetry, highlighting the Arabic and Persian sources for anecdotes and lines of verse. He thus made a historical and literary contribution rather than providing any philological insight. Outside Iran, 'Obayd's works have been published on the basis of the edition by Eqbāl, without contributing to establishing a more reliable text (e.g. *Kulliyoti Muntakob*, ed. by K. M. Mirzozoda, Dushanbe, 1963, supplemented with the reading of manuscript no. 555 from the Tajikistan Academy of Sciences, which is considered to be the earliest – 807/1405; the editor does, however, stipulate that his work is not a critical edition). Several other prints of 'Obayd's individual works, published at various places and times, are not worthy of note.

'Obayd's complete works edited by Maḥjub mark a significant advance in the history of studies dedicated to these texts. Among other things, we have to point out the fact that the comic works are printed in full, without resorting to the use of dots as substitutes for terms denoting sexual organs or obscenities, a common practice in editions of the *hazliyyāt* genre published in Iran, including the works of 'Obayd and Suzani. The recent editions by 'Ali Aṣġar Ḥalabi of *Aklāq al-aṣrāf* and *Resāla-ye delgoṣā* (this last volume also contains



the *Resāla-ye Dah Faṣl*, *Resāla-ye Ṣad Pand* and *Resāla-ye Navāder al-amṭāl*), together with their prefaces and rich and detailed annotations, are a major contribution to the subject.

The nature and significance of ‘Obayd’s satirical works. Conventionally ‘Obayd’s satire is usually divided into religious, political and ethical, and in all these contexts his attacks, which often exploit obscene themes and language, are of extraordinary power. As far as the religious framework is concerned, ‘Obayd criticizes the hypocritical clergy who interfere in people’s lives and in particular arrogate the right to condemn freethinkers. ‘Obayd criticizes irrational faith and confessional intolerance and ridicules pointless theological disputes. What counts for ‘Obayd is the word of God and of the Prophet and the rest is superfluous as the centrality of faith is in the religious spirit and not in the tenuous discourses of preachers and theologians. It is also possible to deduce, for example from reading his *tarj‘-band* on masturbation (Maḥjub, pp. 201-3) and from various tales in *Resāla-ye delgoṣā*, that he took a very negative view of the habits of various Sufis (dedicated to drinking, pederasty and listening to music) and that he had sincere admiration for the *rends*.

In the political framework ‘Obayd condemns the tyranny, cultural provincialism, narrow-mindedness and meanness of many governors and rulers of his time. According to ‘Obayd’s line of reasoning, power exercised in a despotic manner is synonymous with fear and fear curbs freedom of action, expression, and thought. In these conditions, according to ‘Obayd, only the ‘new virtues’ of duplicity, hypocrisy, and falsity can prosper. The inadequate exercise of justice by judges, governors and dignitaries is also the subject of pungent satire and of severe condemnation. The author, highlighting the dire failings of the system in which he lives, implicitly affirms his faith in justice as the root of security and public welfare. Particularly lively is his condemnation of war, instigated by a craving for power and wealth, and creating thousands of innocent victims and leaving behind orphans, widows, and much misery. The *Resāla-ye Dah faṣl* and *Aḳlāq al-aṣrāf* are prime sources for reconstructing ‘Obayd’s bitter and disillusioned view of politics and the role of power.

Ethics, often inextricable from politics and religion, provides a broader territory for satire, ranging over all aspects of life at all levels of society. As far as ethics in the broader sense is concerned, *Aḳlāq al-aṣrāf* is specifically the source which makes it possible to identify the moral values deemed fundamental by ‘Obayd (modesty, temperance, loyalty, compassion, etc.) in a society which claims to call itself civil. Satire targeting the widespread



amorality of the author's times deals with different areas including love, women, and family. In this field 'Obayd's works show strains of great misogyny and deep pessimism regarding women and the marital and family scene in general (*Resāla Dah faṣl*, ch. 9, Maḥjub, pp. 329-30). Women appear as given entirely to lust and greed, love (homo- and heterosexual) an occupation for men without honor or morality, while the maintenance of the family is depicted as a great torment in many men's lives (a crucial contribution to this rooted pessimism appears to have been provided by various personal vicissitudes reported in three *qet'as*, 2, 19 and 20, which contain the poet's complaints about his debts). In this context, one can note that his repeated condemnation of passive sexuality (catamites) is applied to entire social classes, transforming what was a typical tool of satire *ad personam* into an instrument of social satire.

'Obayd's satire does not spare scholars, teachers and intellectuals: Sprachman (1981, pp. 147-96) has observed that *Resāla-ye Dah faṣl*, the *Fāl-nāma-ye boruj*, and the *Resāla-ye Ṣad pand* all share the same trait in criticizing the pedagogic methods of the Islamic scholastic tradition. For this reason, Sprachman uses the definition 'scholastic satire' when referring to these works. From this point of view, the three treatises represent a homogeneous whole: the *Resāla-ye Dah faṣl* uses—in a subversively obscene fashion—the traditional system of taxonomies and glossaries from which 'Obayd draws the structure and method of definition, with the construction of fake lexicons; the *Fāl-nāma-ye boruj* is ironically based on the scientific knowledge of medieval astrology and on the technique of horoscopes (indirectly ridiculing the contemporaneous Mongol princes' blind faith in the reliability of such predictions); and in the *Resāla-ye Ṣad pand* 'Obayd makes fun of the apophthegmatic didacticism of the Islamic schools. In this last work, the work of reconstructing a text inspired by gnomic and wisdom literature through the subversion of its forms and contents, he undermines the entire edifice of the scholastic method of the Islamic *madrasa*. From a stylistic point of view, these three works share the same blend of elegant prose and crude obscenity that is the hallmark of the poet's technique of parody and satire.

In this context, the use of the term *Resāla* in the titles of various works by 'Obayd is highly significant as it evokes a defined structure and a content specifically consistent with a well-established traditional genre. In tune with the genre to which they ironically refer and adhere, these works initially begin with a serious and formal proem, but then the appearance of some jarring



notes induce the reader to rethink their initial impression and immediately afterwards the blatant obscenities of the middle parts of the work arrive, before closing at the end with an apparent return to seriousness. On the other hand, ‘Obayd’s purpose, like that of the compilers of serious *Resāla*, was to educate the readers, providing them with the results of the pragmatic observations of the author gleaned through the years. This literary experiment highlights one of the specific and original characteristics of ‘Obayd’s work, that is, his sense of humor which, combined with his literary genius, expresses itself in moments of great power, such as, for example, his “scholastic satire.”

The techniques ‘Obayd uses for realizing his disparaging intents are the conventional ones and include: (1) the degradation of the subject of the satire through, for example, processes of animalization (the opposite of personification in serious poetry) which highlight only the bestial aspects of the subject (*Muš o gorba*); (2) metamorphosis through which the author changes the form and structure of a certain subject (the parody of the *Šāhnāma* contained in the *Aklāq al-ašrāf*); (3) simulation through which, pretending to be witless and asinine (or wearing the clothes of a person with these characteristics) the author can allow himself to act as the licensed fool and describe the foolishness of certain deeds or the gullibility of some people (the professional fool and court jester *Talkak*, protagonist of numerous anecdotes); (4) the destruction of cultural and religious symbols such as the banner of holy war, the moral prestige of Sa‘di or other respected religious personalities of the period. By attacking hallowed images, the poet demonstrates the already existing misuse of these images for devious purposes by tyrants and impostors, and the damages done to their iconic value in the process; (5) irony, followed often by imprecations and insults; this procedure involves articulating an apparently serious discourse which however hides a great charge of derision, and which, after a slow crescendo, explodes in transgressive language and obscene images (the text of the *Aklāq al-ašrāf* is almost entirely based on this technique).

The manifestation of ‘Obayd’s artistic genius is therefore linked to his effective social criticism. In this sense, his contribution to Persian literature is a singular one, which is powerfully manifested in his rare talent for observation, in his considerable creative power, and in his ability to redraw the existing boundaries of the literary canon. Added to these qualities are the great clarity and effectiveness of his style: concise and terse, and at times pregnant with meaning. The obscenity, crudity and bitterness of his writing



(qualities which have often been the subject of criticism and even of censure) are, in the artist's vision, appropriate to the social conditions that he denounces and to the moral squalor of his times. His satire is in fact of unquestionable moral value as it is intended to sharpen the readers' awareness of the harsh realities around them, first through laughter, then through indignation and finally by urging upon them the need to recover lost values such as a sense of honor, loyalty, generosity, critical intelligence, and good sense. His humor, therefore, as underlined consistently by critics (in particular Ḥalabi) goes beyond pure amusement as it is transformed into a form of criticism and a way of retribution for injustices witnessed by him through the medium of words (the only weapon available to him). The great moralizing intent in 'Obayd's work should always be borne in mind when reading his texts, including his most outrageous and provocative ones.

If the ultimate end of satire for 'Obayd is to denounce vices and prompt the reader to combat them, it is a fundamental requirement that his texts should not offend and displease those who read them. This is where the aesthetic value of 'Obayd's work comes in: this need in fact specifically brings with it the pursuit, by the poet, of refined and elegant expressive forms which were required to balance the violence of the content and mitigate the effects of the explicit insult. His invective, sometimes highly provocative and transgressive, is seen as perfectly appropriate in the historical-cultural context in which it is developed, to draw attention to the injustices perpetrated by the persons or social groups who were the subject of the satire. With respect to that virulence, however, his balanced style, his broad vocabulary, his fluent writing rich in nuances, and the perfect and vivacious architecture of his prose harmonize the serious plane of the text with the humorous one and guarantee an equilibrium which allows the reader to overcome the discomfort provoked by images and words which breach the main taboos, and to continue to read (or listen) without abandoning the text (which in this case would lose its *raison d'être*).

Through 'Obayd's work Persian satire consolidated its aesthetic value: the author used canonic models of serious poetry and prose in a new manner but at the same time also introduced new models and new contents in relation to its specific compositional finalities. Thanks to his extraordinarily sharp language and the absence of verbosity, 'Obayd has been defined as the Sa'di of satire and of humor.

The complexity and richness of 'Obayd's language are also rooted in their



strong link to the previous tradition of satirical Arabic and Persian literature (‘A.‘A. Ḥalabi, 1980, pp. 56-138; R. Zipoli, “Satirical, invective and burlesque poetry,” forthcoming). The social criticism against satire and obscenity had not in fact stopped the flourishing of an extremely rich humorous, satirical and obscene literature in the Muslim world, with the birth of Arabic literature first and then Persian literature. ‘Obayd draws fully on the pre-existing material, especially by recovering anecdotes, stories, personalities, and proverbs. (Talkak, at the court of Maḥmud of Ghazna, who is the protagonist of thirty or so anecdotes of the *Resāla-ye Delgošā*, is again a good example). Among other things, ‘Obayd was a man of letters of great learning, who displayed a mastery and knowledge of Arabic and Persian literature, familiarity with religious sciences, jurisprudence, philosophy and ethics, as well as expertise in astronomy and astrology; and he draws fully on the lexicon, references, concepts and materials of all these fields of knowledge to construct his own satirical work.

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