



ṬĀLEB ĀMOLI

ṬĀLEB ĀMOLI (Taleb of Amol), Sayyed Moḥammad, Persian poet of the early 17th century (b. Mazandaran, ca. 1580-d. India, 1626-7). A precocious talent, Taleb embarked on his literary career in his late teens, composing praise poems to notables in his native Mazandaran and *ḡazals* (lyrics) under the penname Āšub. Beginning a lifetime of constant travel, he soon sought to further his career in the major literary centers of Persia. In Kashan (Kāšān), his maternal uncle held a prominent position as court physician to Shah Ṭahmāsp I, and Taleb began a life-long friendship with his cousin and fellow-poet Ḥakim Rokn-al-Din Masiḥ. During a brief stay in Isfahan, Taleb wrote two *qašidas* (panegyrics) in honor of Shah ‘Abbās I; when these failed to win him entry into the Safavid court, he moved to Merv, where he found a patron in the provincial governor Bektāš Khan Ostājlu around 1606. Under the pretext of attending to family affairs, he left Khorasan in 1608, but rather than returning to Māzandarān, he joined the emigration of Persian merchants, administrators, and scholars toward the lucrative new markets of Mughal India.

Taleb spent the next couple of years wandering between Moltan and Agra before joining the literary circle of Mirzā Ġāzi Tarḵān in Qandahar. This young and brilliant military commander was himself a capable poet under the penname Waḡāri, and under the direction of the poet Moršed of Borujerd, his court became an important transit station for the traffic of literary talent between India and Persia. After Mirzā Ġāzi’s premature death in 1612 at the age of only twenty-five, Taleb again spent several years roaming about



northern India. During his first appearance before Jahangir (Jahāngir), Taleb was left speechless by awe and the opium that he had taken beforehand to calm his nerves (*Kolliyāt*, pp. 146-9), but he gradually worked his way back to the imperial court through his service with Mughal generals such as Čin Qalij Khan in Surat and Firuz Jang in Gujarat. However, it was a chance meeting in Lahore with the poet Šāpur of Tehran (d. ca. 1616) and an introduction to his uncle K̄vāja Ġiāt-al-Din Moḥammad E'temād al-Dowla that opened Taleb's path to the emperor's inner circle. With the support of this influential administrator, Taleb entered Jahangir's service about 1616 and was appointed to the post of poet laureate (*malek al-šo'arā*) in 1619.

For the next several years, Taleb accompanied Jahangir on his frequent journeys through his domains. However, the poet apparently suffered from a mental infirmity during the final years of his life, and the circumstances of his death are unclear. When he died in 1626-7, he left two young daughters orphans. They were adopted by his elder sister Sati-al-Nesā', with whom he shared a deep affection throughout his life; a *qeṭ'a* partially translated by Browne (p. 255-6; see *Kolliyāt*, pp. 122-4) requests leave of Jahangir to welcome her on her arrival in India. After her brother's death, she became a tutor in the Mughal imperial harem, instructing both Jahangir's daughter, Jahānārā Beygom, and Shah Jahān's wife, Momtāz Maḥal, in Qur'an reading and poetry. After the latter's death, Sati-al-Nesā' was appointed as supervisor of the harem and was buried in the compound of the Taj Mahal at Shah Jahān's command when she died in 1646-7. Taleb's gravesite is unknown.

By most reports, Taleb was an amiable man who avoided the bitter personal rivalries that often flared up among the poets of Mughal India. His contemporary Faḡr-al-Zamāni of Qazvin reports that the poet was "good-natured and affable" (*Meykāna*, p. 548), and Awḡadi of Balyāni, who met Taleb in both Isfahan and Ajmer, praises his "joyous" and industrious temperament (*Kārvān-e Hend*, I, p. 776). Such personal qualities help explain the ease with which Taleb moved between patrons and his prolificacy. Although it is uncertain when his works were first collected, full manuscripts of his divan (collected poems) date from only a few years after his death, and many contain well over 20,000 verses. His short *matnawi*, *Qazā va qadar* (one of several works by this name written during the period) tells the fantasy tale of a shipwrecked sailor marooned with a beautiful woman on a desert isle. His other two works in rhymed couplets, also less than 500 verses long, were written for special occasions: one to request leave from Bektāš Khan in Merv



and the other to celebrate an outdoor banquet held by Jahangir. Over seventy *qaṣidas* and dozens of short *qeṭ'as* (topical or occasional poems) provide a full and fascinating record of his professional life as courtier and panegyrist. Like other poets raised in Safavid Persia, Taleb dedicated a number of devotional poems to the Shi'ite Imams. His strophic poems appear to date from early in his career and cover a similar range of topics. However, by far the greatest portion of his *divan* consists of *ghazals* – some 1750 in number – and it is these lyric poems that are largely the basis of his later critical reception.

Though most contemporaries gave fulsome praise to Taleb's originality and creativity, a dissenting voice seems to have had the greatest impact on modern scholarship. Monir of Lahore (d. 1644) reports meeting Taleb and asking him about an obscure verse from the notoriously difficult 12th-century poet Kāqāni; when Monir laughed out loud at the poet's absurd explication, Taleb rejoined, "In India, they only study such verses, while I can write them with my toenails" (Monir, p. 30). Not surprisingly, Taleb is a prime target of Monir's attack on the "fresh style" of contemporary poetry in his *Kārnama*; though 'Ali Khan Ārzu mounted a vigorous defense of Taleb a century later, this anecdote was given new life in an early 18th-century collective biography of poets (*taḍkera*), *Maḥzanal-ḡarā'ib*, and found its way into modern criticism through Šebli-No'māni and Taleb's editor, Ṭāheri Šehāb. Taleb enjoys the dubious distinction of being deemed a "natural genius" whose technical acumen sometimes failed to match the exuberance of his imagination. Even sympathetic modern biographers (Šafā and Šarafi) feel obliged to include a sampling of the poet's "incomprehensible" verses; the broader and more representative selections from Taleb's *ḡazals* by Qahramān and 'Abd al-Rašid Kāvāja give a far more positive impression of the poet's range and capability.

Taleb played a crucial role in the rapid transformation of poetic style at the beginning of the 17th century. His work gave free rein to the tendency toward conceptualism (*kayāl-pardāzi*) in the "fresh style" (later known as the Indian Style) that had begun to emerge a generation earlier in the poetry of Naẓiri and 'Orfi. Like them, Taleb showed his debt to the past by responding to poems by renowned predecessors such as Kāqāni in the *qaṣida* and Sa'di, Amir Kōsrow, and Hafez in the *ḡazal*; at the same time, he gives a new vitality to conventional images and common idioms by exploring their full figurative implications, a procedure Taleb himself revealingly dubs his *ṭarz-e este'āra* ('metaphorical style,' *Kolliyāt*, pp. 447 and 635). His elaboration of two unobtrusive metaphors of everyday speech offer a small indication of how his



imagination works. In the verse *kāna-ye šar' karāb ast ke arbāb-e šalāḥ / dar 'emāratgari-ye gonbad-e dastār-and* ("The house of religious law is in ruins, for the lordly pious / are busy constructing the domes of their turbans,^δ *Kolliyāt*, p. 418), Taleb revives the dead metaphor of "the house of religious law" in a single long noun phrase that exposes the spiritual ruin behind a sartorial façade of clerical ostentation. Paradox, simile, and a neologistic compound all contribute to spinning new meaning from "the thread of life," a tired cliché in both Persian and English: *gereh-zāri-st čon zolf-e 'arusān rešta-ye 'omr-am / ze bas peyvand-e jān bogsast o man bar yek-degar bastam* ("Like brides' coiffures, the thread of my life is a bed of knots / so often has my soul's bond come apart and I've tied it back together,^δ *Kolliyāt*, p. 1115). The festive union of marriage provides both a model for and a contrast to the speaker's exhausted frustration, a visual and tactile image giving form to an emotional state. Such was the verve, inventiveness, and profusion of Taleb's similes and metaphors that the great master-poet of the later 17th century, Šā'eb of Tabriz, praises his poetry without reserve and proudly takes his place as Taleb's heir and successor (see *Kārvān-e Hend*, I, p. 774).

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