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WAṢF

WAṢF, a literary term meaning "description;" but it can carry several other connotations, including "quality," "attribute," "characterization," "distinguishing mark," and "adjective," (Sumi, 2004, p. 5), which are also relevant to the analysis of descriptive poetry in Persian. One has to bear in mind that in a specific context, the poet or the critic using the term may have one or all of these meanings and connotations in mind.

Waṣf passages serve different purposes in different genres and poetic forms. In epic poetry the description has a narrative function. By inserting a descriptive passage the epic poet freezes the narrative moment and draws the reader's attention to other aspects of the story. In several cases, the poet indicates time and setting by presenting a descriptive passage. Such descriptions are frequently about dawn and sunset in a locality, whether a garden in autumn or spring, a desert, or any other place. The epic poet uses a description to add a meditative pause or an embellishment to the story. What is more, descriptive passages commonly reflect physical and psychological aspects of a character. A description can provide an allegory of a protagonist's mental state, reflecting the character's feelings and giving the reader clues on how to interpret a scene. Sometimes the poet gives a lengthy description to distract the reader's attention from what has been told previously, and to draw attention to other aspects of the story (Seyed-Gohrab, 2003, pp. 314-19; Kunitzsch, 1982; Ritter, 1927, pp. 22-27).

In panegyrics (*qaṣida*s), the poet depicts a variety of objects and abstract ideas connected to the military, administrative, festive, and sportive aspects of the

court in his opening lines (*nasib*). The nasib originated as the amatory introduction to a qaṣida; but particularly in Persian literature, the nasib presents a variety of themes, including a dynamic and multi-faceted description of gardens, with panoply of personifications and extended metaphors. Other frequent subjects for the descriptive passages in panegyrics are gardens, wine, love, the beloved, musical instruments, a book, pen, ring, horse, sword, bows and arrows, candle, and several other objects and abstract ideas associated with the court or the more elevated echelons of society. Characteristics of a patron, such as magnanimity, precision, justice, aspirations and ambitions, etc. are also described. Description should not be seen as a definition of a concrete object or an abstract idea: it is usually meant to refer to some quality of the žpraised person' (*mamduḥ*). At the same time, the description is a way for the poet to reveal his virtuosity; and it could also be seen as an intellectual game to entertain the educated public at the court. Poets displayed their verbal talents and sought to outshine both their predecessors and their contemporaries by introducing new ways of depicting familiar courtly objects or ideals.

Descriptions are conventional and the poet had to follow standard poetic rules used by his predecessors and set out in treatises on poetics (Qeys-e Rāzi, pp. 356-60). For instance, when the poet describes a vernal garden, a splendid example of the *locus amoenus* (Curtius, ch. 10), he starts off with the smaller plants in the garden such as the meadow grass, lily, violet, hyacinth, tulip, narcissus and rose, followed by trees such as the cypress, juniper, box-tree, etc. Afterwards the poet describes the singing birds. Flora and fauna have their own standard character-traits, which are repeated in new but familiar images and metaphors. The flowers have their own hierarchy in the garden with the grass as the lowliest and the rose as the queen of the flowers. The poet usually assigns human feelings, gestures, and attributes to flowers, which are then applied to the conditions of a character in the poem's context (Ritter, 1927, p. 8). Through rich imagery and metaphors, the poet associates the colors of trees and flowers with precious stones such as agate, ruby and turquoise, their fragrance to ambergris and musk, and their substance to silk and brocade. Suffice it here to give one example of a vernal garden by Farroḵi of Sistān:

When the meadow covers its face with blue silk,

The mountains cover their heads with seven-colored brocade.

Boundless musk is borne from the earth as from the gazelle's navel-bag,

Countless leaves grow on the willow like the feathers of a parrot.

Last night, at midnight, the wind conveyed the scent of spring.

You would say that the wind had pounded musk in its sleeve,

You would say that the garden had embraced innocent beauties.

The Judas tree had ruby earrings from Badaḵšān;

The white rose possessed peerless pearls on its ears.

As the red cups of wine appeared on the stems of the rose,

The fingers of man stretched downwards from the sycamore.

The garden wore a chameleon dress and the trees revealed chameleons;

The water had the color of pearls and the clouds were laden with pearls.

(p. 175, q. 86, ll. 1-7)

In his description of a garden, the poet shows the unity, harmony, and internal relationships between various elements of the garden. The same technique is used in narrative poetry. In this description, the rose asks the hyacinth to give her the scent. “The wild rose needs the silvery dews of the jasmine to wash her petals. The queen of the flowers, the rose, dares not bloom. As soon as she opens her eyes for the first time in this burgeoning garden, she is overwhelmed by its sublimity; she embarks on her dalliance only when she discovers that she has no match. The petals of the lily are compared to tongues, i.e. to the lover’s eloquence. However, as soon as the lover sees the beloved in the garden, he becomes speechless, an eloquent silence. The lily’s stamen and leaf are likened to a blade” (Seyed-Gohrab, 2003, p. 326). The entire description of the garden is then commonly used to display the feelings of the protagonists in an epic.

In the same way that the description of the vernal garden is joyful, the autumnal garden is gloomy. Autumn as a universal symbol of loss and sadness is used as the correlative of a sorrowful event, the death of a person, or the condition of a forsaken lover. Autumn is commonly personified as a fierce army that destroys the garden, expelling the singing birds such as the nightingale. In his description, the poet illustrates how autumn replaces the

fresh fragrant flowers with dead branches, and the nightingale of a thousand melodies with the crow's raucous caw; the gentle breeze is replaced by cold winds, and the running stream is turned to ice. The colors of dark autumnal clouds are associated with the condition of the lover. While the lover's pale appearance corresponds to the yellow tints of the garden, the migrating birds remind him of separation.

Not all descriptions of autumn are steeped in melancholy, since one of the most celebrated of all Persian festivals, Mehregān, falls in the time of the grape harvest and pressing. The Samanid and Ghaznavid poets have given us the most joyful and animated descriptions of the grape harvest, followed by close descriptions of how wine is made (Hanaway, 1988, pp. 69-80; Moʾtaman, 1943, pp. 106-31). In these descriptions, the grapes are often personified as žthe daughters of the vine' as in the following description:

The grape said to the old farmer:

"The sun has made me pregnant from a distance.

It is almost a hundred and seventy days

Since I have been in the bed of the brilliant sun.

There is neither a pact nor a marriage contract between us;

there has been neither a wedding ceremony nor a wedding feast.

I was not very chaste; no, nor do I claim descent

From a virginal maternal line.

I have become pregnant by the bright sun,

I do not apologize, I do not apologize and I do not apologize.

God has made an example of me in both worlds,

He had made me black, with hanging head, and sorrowful.

In the beginning I was like the creatures of Paradise,

My face was like the garments of the houris.

(Now) God has made my face like the guardians of Hell:

Black, coarse-lipped, dark and afflicted.

God has appointed over me bees

Which continually tear at my skin.

O landlord, I want you that you should, today,

Take a dagger, a large chopping knife,

And with this dagger cut my throat completely,

And put me upon the back of a laborer;

Pound me to pieces under your feet;

Pierce my two shoulders, like Šāpur;

Throw me upside down into the press,

Off of the back of the laborer and the guard of the vineyard;

Kick me on the head three hundred thousand times –

You are the person in charge of doing this –

Throw away my bones, my flesh and pulp,

As well as my veins, fat and peeled skin;

Take my blood – like the juice of the red tulip,

Like a drop of dew, like tears of a forsaken lover –

Pour me into a royal vat,

And watch over this sealed vat for a year.

Perhaps the Lord may be pleased with me

And your efforts for me will be worthy of thanks.

Then bring me out of my vat,

Like the palm of Moses' hand on Mount Sinai.

Then drink of me, toasting the king,

To the sound of harp, flute and lute.

(Manučehri, *Divān*, No. 20, p. 39; tr. Seyed-Gohrab)

Whether objects or ideas belonged to the court or to nature, they are described in terms of jewels, emeralds and pearls. Since the majority of descriptive poetry occurs in court poetry, natural descriptive elements are inspired by the court as well. The following passage, translated by Jerome W. Clinton, not only shows how an object such as an apple is transformed into "something magical and luxurious" in the hands of the court poet Manučehri, but it also shows how the poet describes the apple from the inside (for a similar description of a grape, see Seyed-Gohrab, 2001, pp. 23-26):

The apple like a smooth turned ball of sugar

That has been dyed three hundred times with saffron.

Upon its cheeks are spots of coral hue

An emerald saddle-cloth lies by its stem.

The tiniest of domes fill up its belly.

In each of these there is a Zangi child,

As black as pitch, who's sound asleep.

(Manučehri, *Divān*, p. 154, ll. 2088-90)

Description as a relief. Descriptions in Persian panegyrics can be seen as the verbal equivalent of bas-relief carvings with a political significance. Both are symbols of the ruler's power, freezing an important moment in the patron's life. Persian descriptive poetry, particularly of the Ghaznavid period, highlights many of the insignia of the court, celebrating the ruler as a victorious monarch, such as a horse, sword, lance, and bows and arrows, which also feature on many rock carvings in Persia. Because of this similarity

between a relief and the descriptions in panegyrics, Clinton has referred to the Persian *qaṣida* as a "frieze or bas relief, a work for public display whose purpose was to celebrate the virtues and accomplishments of the artist's patron" (Clinton, 1972, p. 130). When Islamic dynasties modeled their administrative systems on the Sasanian bureaucracy, they were also influenced by the Sasanian way of celebrating an important moment in a patron's public life. By pointing to the close parallel between a poet and his artist contemporary, Clinton shows how Sasanian iconography could function as a source of inspiration for poets. In his view, the descriptions of a garden at the Persian New Year, looked "like paintings done on water-blue-paper." He notes the poet's "fondness for likening the garden to a rich brocade, embroidered with gems and precious metals, and for filling it with the scents of costly perfumes …" (Clinton, 1972, p. 128). Clinton cites the description of a throne from Beyhaqi's chronicle to support his opinion:

… a throne which was like a garden … the seat was made of silver slats woven closely together, and on it thirty golden trees were arranged whose leaves were of various kinds of cornelian … and around these trees were set twenty flower holders and the flowers in them were made of gold and silver and many kinds of jewels, and all about these silver flower holders were set small golden cups, all filled with amber, incense, and camphor … (Clinton, 1972, p. 129; Beyhaqi, p. 396).

Waṣf and riddling poems. Persian descriptive poetry shares many similarities with the genre of literary riddles (*logāz* or *čistān*). In both genres, the poet tries to depict concrete objects and abstract ideas in a vivid way. In waṣf, the poet's purpose is not to make his description puzzling: he is doing his best to be as vivid and transparent as possible. The most important element is the poet's originality in contriving novel and intricate techniques to depict an object or an abstract idea as minutely as possible. In many cases, however, especially in the case of ʿOtËšmān Moḵtāri, the poet's sophisticated imagery and use of metaphors are so rarefied that many of his descriptions, as explicated by the editor of his divān, Jalāl-al-Din Homāʾi, are almost riddle-like in their complexity. Whether they were more immediately accessible and less puzzling to his contemporaries is a moot point.

There is great scope for ambiguity in Persian descriptive passages. This ambiguity regarding the nature of the object described derives partly from the poet's attempt to depict the ideal form of an earthly object, idea or event. The poet was not expected to give a žreal' picture of the object he described; their

expectations were focused rather on how the poet would describe a familiar object through his fantasy and novel imagery. The poet was, therefore, immersed in his imagination, trying to be as original as possible: his attention was turned away from žreality,' focusing instead on images from the ideal world. At the same time, the poet did not want to risk falling into obscurity. He composed poems for an educated, courtly audience who were familiar with poetic rules, and with the way a subject had been treated by previous and contemporary poets. The audience wished to hear a novel description within the boundaries of Persian poetic conventions. The poet faced a hard task to satisfy his demanding audience when he tried his hand at describing a courtly object: he had to avoid both clichés and far-fetched allusions, finding images and metaphors that his audience could decipher and yet appreciate as new. The manner in which something was expressed was therefore much more important than the content.

Persian descriptive poetry, and notably that of Anwari, contains ekphrastic elements, using the term in its literary technical sense as "a verbal description of a work of art, of a scene rendered in a work of art, or even of a fictional scene the description of which unacknowledgedly derives from descriptions of scenes" (Hollander, p. 5). In these descriptions, it looks as if the poet is depicting an art object. To give only one example, in qaṣida number 58, Anwari first depicts a palace and then points specifically to the characteristic features of the palace-complex, describing patterns, motifs and paintings on the palace's wall. The effect is not far removed from a riddle, and the problem is solved when we realize that the poem is not depicting the palace, but the scene in a painting in the palace:

A paradise in quality because, like angels

Wild animals and birds are exempt from eating and sleeping.

Your plants all bear leaves on their branches and trunks

Without any effort to grow.

Your nightingale does not have the talent to sing

Otherwise, it would be always repeating the song of the rose.

Your falcon and partridge haste without movement,

Your elephant and wolf fight without malice.

(Anwari, *Divān*, I, p. 129, qaṣida no. 58, ll. 6-9)

The scene is frozen in motion. Using several rhetorical figures such as feigned astonishment (*taʿajjob*) and hyperbole (*mobālaḡa*), the poet emphasizes that everything in this royal palace is "even more amazing than in paradisiacal gardens: the birds and animals do not need to eat and sleep. The vegetables do not make any effort to grow but are always verdant. The nightingale, famous for its thousand songs, is frozen in time, singing to the rose, so it is at once singing and soundless. The same contrast is repeated in each hemistich of the fourth couplet: the falcon and partridge haste without movement, the elephant and wolf are locked in passionless combat. It is in such scenes that the elements come most clearly to the fore. The poet is applying ekphrastic principles to compare the flora and fauna immortalized by the artist to the real palace, and to Paradise. This is typical of the way poets use ekphrasis." (Seyed-Gohrab, 2006)

Development in descriptive style. The way objects and ideas are described depends entirely on the literary style of the period. Descriptions of palace-complexes of the early Ghaznavid period are concrete and visual, although the poet is always trying to depict an ideal picture of the object he describes. The description of the palace becomes abstract as we enter the late Ghaznavid and the Seljuk (Saljuq) periods. The following depictions of two palaces by Farroḵi of Sistān and ʿOtĔšmān Moḵtāri illustrate the development from concreteness to abstraction:

There was a kingly palace in the middle of the garden

The top of the parapets was situated between two turrets

Within the palace, there were decorated porticoes

Each opening towards a belvedere

One was adorned like Chinese brocade

The other contained pictures as in Mani's *Artang*

In this palace, the images of the King of the East

Were carved/painted in several places:

In one place, he is fighting, holding in his hand a small javelin

In another place, he is feasting, holding in his hand a cup of wine.

(Farroḵi, *Divān*, p. 54, qaṣida no. 31)

Farroḵi's style is straightforward and there is no attempt to depict an žideal,' or imaginative representation of the reality. Actual events painted or carved on the walls of the palace are depicted. In this short piece, the poet refers to the locality of the palace: the palace has four porticos, which are situated in the middle of the garden in such a manner that each portico opens onto a different view. The parapets can be seen from between two turrets. The vaulted porticos are decorated either with motifs to be found in Chinese brocade, or with paintings in the style of Mani. Moreover, the poet juxtaposes the king's two main activities, namely fighting and feasting (*razmobazm*): while in the battlefield, the king holds a javelin, whereas in the feast scenes he holds a cup of wine (for an analysis of this scene see Seyed-Gohrab, 2006; Meisami, 2001).

Descriptions by poets of the late Ghaznavid era are more abstract and the concrete depiction is lost (Seyed-Gohrab, 2006; Meisami, 2001). Moḵtāri's description of a palace built by Arslān Shah (1116-17) does not have the palpability and concreteness of Farroḵiٔs description:

The ancient sphere established the centre of the world's empire

Through this palace, from which Jupiter exercises its heavenly influence.

When the sun saw its parapets from the sky,

It bowed his head to the ground, and its eyes to the threshold.

[When] the virgins of paradise beheld it from their gardens,

They took this palace for gold and paradise as the mine.

They considered the earth insignificant because of its firm structure;

The air in this palace was so fine that the air (outside) was heavy.

The architect used his intellect and soul to design this edifice

through the firmness of his intellect and the grace of his soul.

(ʿOṭmān-e Moḵtāri, *Divān*, p. 51, qaṣida no. 15)

Individual parts of the palace-complex are left unmentioned, and we cannot picture any concrete building. The poet focuses on a transcendent, ideal palace, rather than on a concrete, physical object. The language has lost its concreteness. The only concrete references are to the palace's height and its exclusivity. The description refers to the king's unique position on earth, as one who is appointed by God to order worldly affairs. The physical description is subordinated to the palace as a royal symbol.

In conclusion, descriptions are used for different purposes in various contexts and literary forms. In epic poetry, the description is a useful strategy to add embellishments or a meditative pause to the story, indicating time and setting, and revealing symbolically the psychological conditions of a character. While in epic poetry the poet usually depicts natural phenomena such as dawn and sunset, and a garden in spring or autumn, in panegyrics, the poet usually foregrounds courtly symbols, objects and abstract ideas, emphasizing an aspect of the patron's power. As the poet is expected to be original in his use of images, similes and metaphors, he sometimes loses track of his primary enterprise, i.e. depicting his object of description in a vivid and transparent fashion, and employs enigmatic metaphors that give his description the appearance of a riddle.

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