

## Ventures And Adventures Of The Persian Language

Of all the Iranian languages of Persia, current or defunct, Persian is the only language with a clear pedigree. We know its father and its grandfather. We can even reconstruct its great-grandfather, called Old Iranian. (Perhaps I should say its mother and grandmother, but since their documents were written by men, I hope I am not politically incorrect by calling its antecedents male figures). Other languages are known either in their modern forms, such as Pashto, Kurdish, Baluchi, Lori, Tati, Mazandarani, Gilaki, and the Pamir dialects, or we know only their middle stage through written documents, partly excavated in archeological explorations, as is the case with Parthian, Sogdian, Bactrian, and Khotanese. Yet other languages are only known in their old form, such as Avestan, the language of the holy scriptures of the Zoroastrians, and Old Persian, the language of the Achaemenid inscriptions, 6<sup>th</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> BCE.

### Middle Persian

The focus of this lecture is the Persian language, that is, the state language of Persia today, and I should like to begin with its forebears. Its father is called Middle Persian or Pahlavi. It was originally the language of the Persian tribes who settled in southern Persia and became the official language of the Sasanid state under their rule (224-651 CE). It had begun, however, to take shape much earlier, i.e., towards the end of the Achaemenid period; but its documents appear only with the Sasanid Ardashir's inscription (3<sup>rd</sup> cent.) that reads: "Majesty (*bag*) Ardashir, king of kings of Iran, Son of his majesty Pabag the king, whose origin is from the gods". Some of the early Sasanid kings were eager to make their deeds and exploits known to the posterity and at the same time oblige Orientalist epigraphers! We should particularly be thankful to Shapur I, the second Sasanid monarch, for his long inscription, carved on the walls of a building at Naqsh-e Rostam, near Persepolis, in three languages: Middle Persian, Parthian, and Greek. You may ask why in these languages. Because Parthian was the language of the Arsacids (247 BCE-224 CE) who ruled Persia before the Sasanids for some 500 years, and in early Sasanid times still many people, particularly in Parthia, today's Khorasan and Gorgan, spoke that language, and Shapur did not want them to miss his message; and Greek was a legacy of the

Hellenistic period in Persia which began with Alexander's conquest of Persia in 330 BCE and continued during the Seleucids and, to a certain extent, the reign of the Arsacids. Shapur I's inscription is most interesting and historically extremely valuable, second only to Darius' inscription at Bisotun. He names his father Ardashir, his grandfather Pabag, his ancestor Sāsān, his Queen of Queens Aduranāhid, four of his sons, and the high officials of his court and the court's of his father and his grandfather, but the most important topic of the inscription is the account of his extensive conquests in the Eastern Roman Provinces, which comprised Iraq, Syria, Cilicia, and Cappadocia, and which took place between 256 and 261 in the course of several campaigns. He relates his defeating of two Roman emperors Gordianus and Valerianus (the latter taken prisoner) and his forcing a third one into an advantageous peace agreement. Being a good Zoroastrian, either by faith or expediency, he also mentions all the pious and charitable foundations, namely, fire temples, that he endowed for the peace and happiness of his soul and the souls of his parents and his queen, three of his sons and even some of the dignitaries of his court.

Middle Persian inscriptions, like the legends of Sasanid coins, are written with a script derived from the Aramaic alphabet. The Pahlavi books which date from the 9<sup>th</sup> -10<sup>th</sup> centuries, that is, some three centuries after Islam, but whose contents derive from Sasanid times, are written with the same alphabet, but the cursive form of it, in which most of the letters are joined together. Furthermore, in the course of its evolution several letters merged and assumed the same shape, thus a letter could represent several sounds, for instance, there is a letter that can be read *n*, *l*, *w*, or not at all, and another letter which can be read *y*, *d*, *g*, or the beginning of letters *s* and *sh*. This multi-valence of some of the letters and the joining a number of them together result in the fact that some words can be read in a great variety of ways, sometimes at least theoretically in more than forty or fifty. Consequently the correct reading of the Pahlavi script involves "deciphering" the words with considerable difficulty.

To compound this difficulty is another feature of Middle Persian writing, shared also by Parthian, Sogdian, and Chorasmanian script, and that is the inclusion of a fairly large number of words which are in fact Aramaic words, but are read as their Iranian equivalents. For

instance, a Pahlavi scribe would write *mlk'*, i.e., *malkā*, but would read it *šāh* (*shah*, king); or he would write *ywm*, and it would be read *rōz* (day). This is very much like the ideographic reading of Chinese characters which do not “spell” words, but certain “shapes” represent certain words, or like “\$” or “i.e.”, which are read in English “dollar” and “that is”, respectively. An Iranian reader of Pahlavi normally did not know that the Aramaic words were Aramaic; he only knew that certain combination of letters have to be read in a certain way which has nothing to do with the actual pronunciation of those letters. This was called *huzwāreš* in Pahlavi, and there existed dictionaries (of which one has survived) for instruction. When scholars transcribe Middle Persian into Latin alphabet they write the Aramaic words with capital letters and the Iranian ones in lower case, e.g., *MLK'*-n *MLK'* would be read *shāhan-shah* (notice that the plural suffix after *MLK'* is Iranian, not Aramaic). Arabic script, despite its many defects for Persian, is far clearer than Pahlavi cursive script.

### **Old Persian**

Middle Persian was derived or was in fact a simplified continuation of Old Persian, the language of the Achaemenids (550-330 BCE). Darius the Great had a cuneiform syllabic alphabet invented, which is much simpler than Assyrian, Elamite, or Urartian cuneiforms. He used it for a series of inscriptions, the most extensive of which is the famous Bisotun inscription carved on the face of a sacred mountain near Kermanshah in western Persia in three languages with their respective cuneiform scripts: Old Persian, Elamite, and Babylonian.

He begins first by stating that, “he is king, the king of kings, king in Pars and king of [many] countries”. Then he mentions his lineage, his father and his ancestors as far as Achaemenes. After elaborating on the members of his family who had been king before him, he says that he is king by the favor of Ahura Mazda who has given him the kingdom. Then he enumerates the countries (i.e., the satrapies) over which he ruled: “Persia, Elam, Babylonia, Assyria, Arabia, Egypt, (those) who are beside the sea, Sardis, Ionia, Media, Armenia, Cappadocia, Parthis, Drangiana (Zarang), Aria (north of Afghanistan, around Herat), Chorasmia, Bactria, Sogdiana, Gandara, Scythia, Sattagydia, Arachosia (Rokhkhaj),

Maka (southern shore of Persian Gulf): in all, 23 provinces... They were my subjects; they bore tribute to me; what was said unto them by me either by night or by day, that was done.” Then, he relates how he came to power by unmasking and killing, with the help of a number of noblemen of Pars, an imposter who had called himself a son of Cyrus the Great, when Cambyses was away in Egypt; how various provinces rose in revolt after his accession and how he managed to put down all these rebellions and punish their leaders most severely within a single year. The greater part of the inscription deals with these revolts and how Darius crushed them. In his inscriptions he offers also some advice to his successors, that is, to follow his example and be just and upright, reward the true and punish the false.

Darius never gets tired of reminding his readers that it was Ahura Mazda, the creator of heaven and earth and happiness for men, who favored him and made him king. His major inscription in Susa mentions how men and material from the countries of the empire were brought together to build his palace. His inscription in Egypt mentions the order that he issued for digging a canal between the Nile and the Red Sea.

The language of Achaemenid inscriptions is straightforward with clear grammatical constructions and without embellishment and follows the ancient Middle Eastern inscripational style and tradition.

Old Persian is close to both Avestan and the language of the Rig Veda, the oldest form of the Sanskrit language. All three languages are highly inflected, that is, they use case endings to determine the position of the words in a sentence and their relations to other words. They have also an elaborate verbal system, with aspects, moods, three voices, and a number of tenses. They use three genders: masculine, feminine, and neuter, and three numbers: singular, dual, and plural. Old Persian is less archaic and has a simpler grammar than either Avestan or Vedic Sanskrit. In the later Achaemenid inscriptions it seems to be on the way to the simplifications that resulted in Middle Persian. The use of dual is already rare.

### **The Ancestors Of Old Persian**

As is well known, the ancient Iranians and Indians used at one time to live together and to share a common language, which the linguists call Indo-Iranian. When they separated, one settling on the Iranian plateau and the other in India, their common language gradually gave birth to Old Indian and Old Iranian. From Old Iranian several languages branched off: Avestan, Median, and Old Persian, as well as the ancestors of several Middle Iranian languages, for which we have no document as they were not committed to writing.

Much earlier, the ancestors of Indo-Iranian people had belonged to a community called Indo-European, which included also the ancestors of the Greeks, the Romans, the Celts, the Germanic people, the Slavs, the Albanians, the Armenians, the Hittites, and the Tokharians. The original home of the Indo-Europeans is thought to have been somewhere in Euro-Asian steppes, possibly in southern Russia and around the Caspian Sea. Their common language is called Indo-European or Proto-Indo-European, which has been reconstructed by linguists by means of comparing the most ancient forms of its branches. For instance, by comparing the words for “seven”, that is, Old Indic *saptá*, Avestan *hapta*, Middle Persian *hapt*, Parthian *hft*, Ossetic *avd*, Greek *hepta* (cf. *heptad*, French *hebdomadaire*), Latin *septem* (cf. September = the seven month, septuagenarian), Old German *sibun*, Old English *seofon*, Old Nordic *siau(n)*, Hittite *šipta-* it is concluded that the ancestral Indo-European was *septm* (with *-m* sounding like a nasal vowel). Or by the same kind of comparison of the word for “giving birth”: Avestan *zy-*, *zāta-*, Old Persian *zana-*, Sogdian *z't* “birth”, Parthian and Middle Persian *z'd* “birth”, Persian *zādan*, *far-zand* “son”, *zahdān* “womb”, Old Indic *ján-*, Greek *genos*, Latin *geno* (cf. generation, gender, generate, genealogy, gene, indigenous, etc.), German *kind* “child”, the Indo-European base has been determined to be *genə-*. Or consider the words for “god”: Old Indic *devá-*, Avestan *daēva-*, Old Persian *daiva-*, Latin *deus*, *dīuus* (and *iu-* as in *Iu-piter*), Greek *ἰός*, *Zeus*, Old Nordic *tīvar*, Old German *teiwaz* “god of war”, cf. Old Norse god Tyr, etc. From their comparison the conclusion has been reached that their origin must have been *\*deiuó*<sup>1</sup> “shinning, the sky, heavenly, god”, from the verbal root *dei-* “to shine” cf. Latin *diēs* “day” and Old Indian *divyá* “heavenly”. Incidentally, this word has an interesting history in

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<sup>1</sup> The asterisk before a word indicates that it has been reconstructed.

Iranian languages. From *daēva-* or *daiva-* we have the form *dēw* in Middle Persian, Khotanese *dyū*, and *div* in Persian, however, not in the sense of “god”, but “demon”. The reversal of the original meaning to its opposite points obviously to a religious reform in ancient Iran, whereby old deities were turned into false gods or demons.

### **The Emergence Of Persian**

Coming back to the predecessors of Persian, Old Persian gradually evolved into Middle Persian by shedding its nominal inflection and simplifying its verbal system as well as discarding grammatical gender distinction and the dual. More than four hundred years of Sasanid rule with its centralizing tendency strengthened the case of this language and spread it beyond its original home, Persis or Fārs in southern Iran, overwhelming some of the local languages and replacing them. When the Arab Muslims conquered Iran in the 7<sup>th</sup> century they found Middle Persian a good instrument of communication with all Iranians. It continued its absorption of Iranian local languages, particularly in urban centers.

With the gradual conversion of Persians to Islam an increasing number of Arabic words entered into Persian. Soon the difficult and ambiguous Middle Persian script was given up for Arabic script. The language that was written in this new script and reflected the new religious, social, and political environment generated by the adoption of Islam is called New Persian or Persian for short.

The choice of Aramaic script for Middle Persian needs an explanation. In the international Achaemenid Empire the Arameans, a Semitic people who lived under the Achaemenid rule, had practically monopolized the function of the scribe in Achaemenid administration, a function that was their specialty. When a letter was dictated, let us say, by a satrap to another in Old Persian, the scribe would mentally translate it into his own language, i.e., Aramaic, and write it in this language. When the letter reached its destination, the scribe of the recipient satrap, who was also Aramaen but knew Old Persian, would read the letter, translate it mentally into Old Persian and would pass the message to his patron. Thus Aramaic became the means of correspondence in provinces of the Persian Empire. When the empire crumbled and its Iranian provinces such as Persis, Media, Parthia, Sogdia and

Chorasmia became independent of each other, they continued nonetheless the use of Aramaic script for writing. But in the course of time they replaced most of the Aramaic words by words of their own language, but spelled with Aramaic alphabet. A considerable number of Aramaic words, however, proved persistent and continued their existence. -

For some 200 years Persia was ruled by Arab governors appointed by caliphs or their agents. The conversion to Islam brought the most radical and the most pervasive political, social, and cultural changes in the long history of Iranian peoples as Islam, like Zoroastrianism, does not confine itself to mere spiritual and otherworldly matters, but legislates for all spheres of life. Persia lost its unity as a nation and became part of a great empire unified by a single faith. It devoted its energy and resources to the strengthening and consolidation of this new faith. Through the efforts of the conquered peoples, such as the Syrians, the Mesopotamians, the Egyptians, but more particularly the Persians, Islam was transformed from a faith for the inhabitants of Arabia into a cosmopolitan religion, capable of responding to the needs and aspirations of the non-Arab believers as well as the Arabs.

We have almost no knowledge of what was happening to the literary and artistic life of Persians during those 200 years. No doubt, the country was licking its wounds and trying to cope with and adapt itself to a novel situation, in which Persia had been reduced to a subordinate state. One can surmise that some songs or poems lamented the alien invasion, death of its victims, and the loss of Persian sovereignty, but there is no record of any poems or writings in Persian, except some Judeo-Persian inscriptions and documents dating from the 8<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup>

One would have thought that Persia like Egypt, Syria, and Mesopotamia would give up its Iranian identity for an Arab one and adopt Arabic as its vernacular. But not only this did not happen, the Persian language rose from two centuries of total eclipse with greater vigor and brilliance, as if while Persian scholars were contributing to the enrichment of Arabic-Islamic culture, they were also going through a cultural hibernation, paving the way for a

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<sup>2</sup> G. Lazard, *La Langue des plus anciens monuments de la prose persane*, Paris, 1963, p. 33.

cultural resurrection. This happened in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries under the Saffarids (first phase, 867-1003) and the Samanids (864-1005), Persian local ruling houses. The Samanid court was famous for its patronage of cultural activities including belles-lettres and works of philosophy and history, in both Arabic and Persian<sup>3</sup>. Here we are concerned with their encouragement and patronage of Persian poetry and prose. Their courts were equipped with capable *dabirs* or secretaries, familiar with both Arabic letters and Persian traditions. It was during the reign of the Samanids that an adaptation of the universal *History* of Tabari, the most important chronicle written in the Islamic world, was rendered into Persian. So was the rendition of Tabari's famous *Tafsir* or commentary on the Koran. The Samanid court and those of its satellites were adorned by poets who produced panegyrics, lyrics, and narrative and didactic poems.

Between the fall of the Sasanid empire and the appearance of the first works in Persian, about two centuries had passed and major changes had taken place in Persian society. Language is a social phenomenon; as social circumstances change so does the language. Better than any other medium it expresses the state of a society and the changes it has gone through. When Persian resurfaced in written form and in Arabic script, it reflected the changes that the conversion of a Zoroastrian society to an Islamic one produced. It employed not the stylized language of the Sasanid *dabirs*, but the colloquial form of the language current among its speakers. It showed further simplification compared to Middle Persian, and as it was the product of Khorasan and Transoxiana, it reflected the Persian of these regions — a language which had been originally based on the Middle Persian language as spoken at the Sasanid court (hence, called *dari*, i.e., pertaining to the [Sasanid] court), but had borrowed and absorbed in its lexicon many Parthian and Sogdian words, not to mention the Arabic words which had been totally absent from Middle Persian.

### **Persian Instead Of Farsi**

Incidentally, you may have noticed that I am calling the language under discussion “Persian” and not “Farsi” as some people are recently calling it, regrettably including some

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<sup>3</sup> See Ira Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (Cambridge, 1988), p. 141.

of the Persians. I think this is an unfortunate choice. Dear as “Farsi” is to us when we speak or write Persian, “Persian” in English, and its likes in Western languages, are fairly well known names resulting from the long history of Persia and its political and cultural achievements and its relationships with other nations. One talks of Persian art, Persian miniatures, Persian carpets, Persian poetry, Persian blue, Persian gardens, the Persian Empire, and Greco-Persian wars, not to mention Persian cats. The Bible speaks of “the laws of the Medes and the Persians” as examples of strictly enforced laws. These are all, unless one is a cat hater, pleasant and useful associations. Of course, not all such associations are complimentary. For instance, one talks about the wars of the Greeks and the Persians as the war between democracy and arbitrary rule, reflecting the view of the Greeks who understandably were hardly fond of the Persians. But even Greek histories talk of the might and splendor of the Persian Empire and as the greatest power they knew on earth. By calling the language “Farsi” one loses all these associations. Who would think that Omar Khayyam wrote in “Farsi”, or Goethe, Emerson and Tagore, among many others, praised “Farsi poetry”? Some of the Persians who use the term “Farsi” exhibit a mistaken pride in the usage of a native word in a foreign language. They forget that names of countries and languages are often different in non-native tongues. In English one speaks of German not Deutsch and Spanish not Español. Imagine if the Egyptians asked foreign countries to call their country Misr and their culture Misrian or Misrid. Would Misrid civilization, Misrid obelisks, Misrid hieroglyphs, Misrid mummies make much sense in English? They would, no doubt, do a great disservice to the reputation of their splendid ancient culture and of their history, if they did so.

### **The Emergence Of Persian Literature**

Returning to the discussion at hand, a language is primarily a means of communication between its speakers, but language has other functions and serves other purposes as well. It is the receptacle of the ideas and sentiments of its speakers and serves to record these in inscriptions, manuscripts, books, etc. Language is also the medium of an art, in fact the greatest and the most expressive art of mankind, that is, the literary art. The artistic merit of a language depends on its achievement in this respect. A language is considered great or

brilliant primarily by the extent of its literary accomplishments. So we may ask what have Persians done with their language, apart from using it for communication.

They used it, as I have already mentioned, for writing history, for writing on science, philosophy and on their spiritual experiences, but above all to create a literature, rich in poetry, a poetry that is counted among the outstanding examples of its kind. Had the Persians not been able to use the language for the creation of a splendid literature they would have had no claim to much of our attention.

Scholars like William Jones, E.G. Browne, Reynold Nicholson, Arthur J. Arberry in England, Hotum Schindler in Austria, Wolfgang Goethe in Germany, Ralph Waldo Emerson in the United States, and Tagore in India, and many more like them, were all attracted to this poetry and praised it as great. E. M. Forster, an outstanding critic of English literature and a prominent novelist who had lived in India and was familiar with Persian literature, has this to say, when discussing the merits of English literature:

“If the English nature is cold, how is it that it has produced a great literature and a literature that is particularly great in poetry? Judged by its prose, English literature would not stand in the first rank. It is its poetry that raises it to the level of Greek, Persian, or French.”<sup>4</sup>

It is significant that the four great scholars who held the Sir Thomas Adams chair of Arabic literature during the most brilliant period of British Orientalism, from 1902 to 1969, namely, E. G. Browne, R. A. Nicholson, C. A. Storey and A. J. Arberry, were all without exception drawn to Persian literature and produced their major works in this field.<sup>5</sup>

Persian poetry began in earnest in the 9<sup>th</sup> and the 10<sup>th</sup> centuries at the Samanid court. What is striking about the poems written during these early centuries, notably those of Rudaki (d. 940), rightly called the father of Persian poetry, is that although they look today a little

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<sup>4</sup> E. M. Forster, “Notes on English Character,” *Abinger Harvest*, New York, 1936, p. 7

<sup>5</sup> See E. Yarshater, “The Persian Presence in the Islamic World”, in *The Persian Presence in the Islamic World*, edited by R. G. Hovannisian and G. Sabagh, (Cambridge, 1997), p. 89 for a listing of their major works.

archaic in language, there is nothing archaic about their poetic thoughts, their imageries, and their sentiments. They are remarkably mature poems. Obviously, they had models of Abbasid poetry, to the growth of which the Persians had contributed themselves, but also the reminiscences and the tradition of the Sasanid era. It is a mistake to think that the Persians had forgotten their past on account of conversion to Islam and of their being steeped in Arabic culture. The proof of this is the work of a Samanid poet, Ferdowsi (940-1019 or 1025) who created not only the greatest epic poem in Persian, but also the greatest monument of the Persian language, the *Shahnameh*, or The Book of Kings, in some 50,000 couplets. It ranks with the Indian *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, the Greek *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and the *Nibelungen Saga* as one of the great epics of the world. It relates the traditional history of Persia from creation to the fall of the Sasanids. It contains the Iranian myths and legends, as well as, in its later parts, a romanticized account of the history of the Sasanids. It is arranged under the reign of some fifty kings and queens, from early mythical, civilizing kings who ruled the world and reigned over man and beast, to the last of the Sasanid kings. The *Shahnameh*, however, is far from being a dry or tedious history. It is replete with dramatic events, exciting descriptions, and masterful characterizations. The interminable bloody feud between Iranians and their consanguine chief neighbor and antagonist, the Turanians, and the feats and exploits of Iranian paladins and noble warriors, more particularly those of mighty Rostam, the Persian Hercules, enliven the poem to extraordinary pitches. It also contains a number of highly dramatic tragedies, of which I mention only three.

### **Some Of The *Shahnameh* Tragedies**

One is the life-story of prince Siyavash, ably translated into English by the poet-scholar Dick Davis as *The legend of Seyavash* (London, Penguin, 1992). Sudabeh, the favorite wife of the compulsive and unpredictable great king, Kay Kavus, becomes infatuated with her stepson, the upright and pious prince Siyavash. Rebuffed, she accuses the prince of having made amorous advances to her. An ordeal of fire is set up to test his innocence. He comes through the flames unscathed. Yet, dejected by the unhappy experience and the court intrigues, he volunteers to lead the Persian forces against Turanian Afrasiyab, the archenemy of Iran. Afrasiyab, however, warned by a dream, sues for peace, agreeing to

Siyavash's conditions. When the news of the settlement reaches the Iranian court, Kay Kavus goes into a rage and upbraids his son for having agreed to peace and demands the dispatch of the Turanian prisoners to the capital. Siyavash finds his father's demand against the word of honor he had given to the enemy. Caught between his filial duty to his father and his chivalrous and moral obligation, he allows himself to be persuaded by Piran, the well-meaning Turanian chief general, to leave Iran and settle in Turanian land. Afrasiyab receives him with great honors and being impressed by his qualities he gives his daughter in marriage to him. The favors that Siyavash receives from the Turanian king incite the jealousy of many Turanian courtiers, more particularly, Garsivaz, the evil brother of Afrasiyab, who begins a plot to destroy Afrasiyab's trust in Siyavash and accuses the prince of plans against the Turanian king. In the end, the plot works and Afrasiyab orders the killing of the prince. He is drawn out of his chambers and his innocent blood is shed. When the news reaches the Iranian court, all hell breaks loose; Rostam, who had been a tutor to Siyavash, accuses the king of thoughtlessness, petulance, and ill-nature. He goes to the king's harem, dragging out Sudabeh by her hair and murdering her in revenge. A great mourning starts and the whole country cries out for revenge. The long drawn out feud between Iranians and Turanians intensifies. It is eventually up to Kay Khosrow, the son of Siyavash from Afrasiyab's daughter who had been rescued from Turan by Bijan, a Persian noble warrior, to avenge the blood of his father and destroy Afrasiyab.

The other, arguably the most gripping and most skillfully constructed tragedy in the *Shahnameh*, is the tragedy of Rostam and Sohrab, in which the redoubtable Rostam kills his own valiant son unbeknown to him. The story was rendered into an English verse adaptation by Matthew Arnold (1822-1888) as *Sohrab and Rustum*, and recently translated into English as *The tragedy of Sohrab and Rostam* by the late Jerome W. Clinton (Seattle, 1987).

The third is the battle of Rostam and Esfandiyar, King Goshtasp's heroic young son and heir apparent to the throne who has been promised by his father that if he defeated the Turanian king and freed his two sisters who had been taken into captivity by the Turanians, he will resign in his son's favor. However, when the time comes to honor his promise, the

king is reluctant to give up the throne and asks his son to perform yet one more feat: to go to Sistan, the realm of Rostam, chain and bring him to the court as he has not paid his respects to the king for a number of years. In vain tries Rostam to persuade the young, ambitious and invulnerable prince to break bread with him, after which he would gladly accompany Esfandiyar to the court. Single combat ensues and the brave and accomplished Esfandiyar nearly overwhelms the mighty Rostam by raining arrows on him. The wily Rostam asks for a respite and drags his injured body home, where his father Zal, who had been reared by the miraculous bird Simorgh when he was abandoned as a child in the wilderness by his father who could not bear his child being an albino, calls Simorgh by burning a feather that the bird had given him in case he found himself in danger. Simorgh informs Zal that Esfandiyar is vulnerable only in his eyes and advises him that Rostam should make an arrow from the wood of a special tree and aim it at the prince's eyes. Next day, when the battle resumes, Rostam shoots his arrow the way he had been instructed and blinds and defeats the young hero who takes all his great hopes to the grave. The story is a great tragedy of conflicting loyalties, royal betrayal, youthful ambition, dignity of mature age, and supernatural intervention.<sup>6</sup>

Nor is the *Shahnameh* lacking in tender love stories, didactic discourses, or philosophical contemplations. What is particularly noteworthy about the language of the *Shahnameh* is its dignified, lofty, and eloquent diction which is well suited to the heroic tenor of the epic and is ably sustained throughout the entire work. Ferdowsi employs few Arabic words and has a way of conveying subtle meanings, describing battle scenes, discoursing on moral and ethical considerations and musing about the fickleness of fortune and human vain struggle against fate, that is entirely his own and of highest order of expression. The *Shahnameh* is a living proof that the Persian past had remained alive in the national collective memory and it was only awaiting a genius like Ferdowsi who crystallized it in a poem of unsurpassed vigor and beauty and gave the Persians a monumental national epic and a sturdy pillar of their identity.

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<sup>6</sup> Translated by Jerome Clinton as *In the Dragon's Claws: The Story of Rostam and Esfandiyar from the Persian Book of Kings* (Washington D.C., 1999). The entire epic was translated by Arthur George Warner and Edmond Warner as *The Sháhnáma of Firdausí done into English*, 9 vols. (London, 1905).

Ferdowsi's language, its music and its meter provided the model for the epic poetry of heroic kind in Persian poetry that was imitated by a large number of poets in different ages as late as the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **The Ghaznavids And Persian Letters**

The Samanid tradition of patronizing Persian poetry was inherited and intensified by their successors, the Ghaznavids, who, even though Turkic by race, were brought up in a Samanid milieu. The court of the Ghaznavid Mahmud (998-1030) was exemplary for its patronage of a large number of poets, such as Farrokhi, Manuchehri, and 'Onşori. Their vivid and virile tone, lucid language, and range of imagery exemplify the early classical style of Persian poetry called the Khorasanian style.

Works of prose were also produced. It was under the later Ghaznavids, when they were confined to their Indian territories, that the most remarkable, the most accurate and the most readable of Persian histories, that of Beyhaqi on the reign of the Ghaznavid Mas'ud, was committed to paper. It is a paragon of clarity, trustworthy reporting, careful documentation, and psychological insights. In fact, I venture to say that it is superior to Thucydides in terms of its wider conception of history and its analyses of events and personalities.<sup>7</sup>

### **Persian Literature Beyond Its Original Borders**

I have not yet touched upon the "significance" of the emergence of Persian as a vehicle for the writing of poetry and prose. It soon began to challenge the hegemony of Arabic and gradually achieved superiority in some of the fields that became the particular domain of the Persians, such as mysticism, romances, and lyric poems called *Ghazal*. The latter is a short mono-rhyme of normally between seven and twelve lines that developed in Persia particularly from the 12<sup>th</sup> century and which by the 13<sup>th</sup> century could be said to be the

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<sup>7</sup> I am happy to report that soon an elegant English translation of this important work by C.E. Bosworth with Mohsen Ashtiany will be published for the first time by the Persian Heritage Foundation.

major form of Persian poetry, overtaking long panegyric odes favored by the court patronage.

A particular form of Persian poetry employed for narrative stories, romance, and didactic or mystical discourse, is the *mathnavi*, that is, poems in couplet form – a form that the Arabs did not take to. Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, Gorgoni's *Vis o Ramin*, Nezami's romances, Sana'i's, Attar's, and Amir Khosrow's mathnavis, Rumi's *Mathnavi-ye ma'navi*, Sa'adi's *Bustan*, and Jami's *Yusof o Zolaykha* are all outstanding works in this genre.

Quatrain (*rubai*), made famous in the West by Fitzgerald's free translation and arrangement of a number of Khayyam's *Rubai*s, was another form used mostly for epigrammatic compositions, poems with a punch line, or short amorous or mystical poems that Persians made almost their own and in which they excelled.

However, had this flowering of Persian letters remained confined to Persia and Transoxiana, it could have been no more than a local phenomenon without international import. But this was not the case, and here lies the true significance of the Persian renaissance for the Islamic world. This renaissance, as it is usually termed, coincided with the decentralization and weakening of the Abbasid caliphate, and with the decline, both political and cultural, of the western lands of Islam, comprising the Arab world.

The Arabs, who had given the initial impetus for the development of the Islamic civilization and had its political, administrative and cultural leadership for more than half a millenium, lost not only their political independence, but also sank into cultural inertia and decay. Science and literature declined among them and their scholars spent their time, with some rare exceptions, in commenting on and footnoting the works of their predecessors. Reynold Nicholson in his standard *A Literary History of the Arabs* describes the post-Abbasid state of Arabic culture as follows:

"This is an age of imitation and compilation ... With one or two conspicuous exceptions, we cannot point to any new departure, any fruitful ideas, any trace of

original and illuminating thought... and since the Mongol invasion I am afraid we must say that instead of advancing farther along the old path he [the Arab] was being forced back by the inevitable pressure of events ... and moreover, the Arabic language was rapidly extinguished by the Persian ... nowhere in the history of this period can we discern either of the two elements which are most productive of literary greatness: the quickening influence of a higher culture or the inspiration of a free and vigorous national life."<sup>8</sup>

While the Arab world was thus experiencing cultural exhaustion and fatigue, the Persian language and the Persian literary and artistic culture were rising, prospering, and flourishing. Adopted and patronized by the Saljuqid Turks, the Persian language and its cultural content spread beyond the Iranian borders, more particularly by the so-called Saljuqs of Rum in Anatolia. When the Ottomans conquered the present day Turkey, they found that the language of letters and polite speech was Persian, while the spoken language was Turkish. They adopted the Persian culture to the extent that E. J. W. Gibb, the author of *A History of Ottoman Poetry* in six volumes, has this to say:

"by the 13<sup>th</sup> century the Seljuqs had attained a very considerable degree of culture, thanks entirely to Persian tutorage ... Rapidly the Seljuq Turks pushed their conquests westward, ever carrying with them Persian culture ... So, when some hundred and fifty years later, [the Ottomans] ... penetrated into Asia Minor, they found that although Seljuq Turkish was the everyday speech of the people, Persian was the language of the court, while Persian literature and Persian culture reigned supreme."<sup>9</sup>

He further adds:

"the Turks were not content with learning from the Persians how to express thought; they went to them to learn what to think and in what way to think... They went to school with the Persian, intent not merely on acquiring his methods, but on entering into his spirit, thinking his thoughts and feeling his feelings. And in this school they continued so long as there was a master to teach them ... Thus it comes about that for centuries Ottoman poetry continued to reflect as in a glass the several phases through which that of Persia passed..."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Reynold Nicholson, *A Literary History of the Arabs*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Cambridge, 1929, repr. London, 1969), pp. 422-43.

<sup>9</sup> E. J. W. Gibb, *A History of Ottoman Poetry*, Gibb Memorial Series, 6 vols. (London, 1900-1909, repr. 1958-67), vol. I. p. 10.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13

The penetration of Persian language, and with it the Persian culture, eastwards in India went even deeper. The Muslim invaders of India rose from Persia, Afghanistan or Central Asia, and although generally of Turkic or Tatar origins, they were like the Ghaznavid and the Saljuqids the carriers of Persian language and culture. The courts of the Muslim rulers of India were great patrons of Persian poetry, art, and architecture. Many noteworthy Persian poets left Persia for India from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onward either to escape the Safavid religious repression or to benefit from the generosity of Indian rulers. Soon India became a second home to Persian letters. In fact, there were many more Persian poets in India during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries than there were in Persia. Persian mystics, too, found a fertile ground in India and were instrumental in creating a number of Sufi orders and Sufi hospices (*langars*). Persian became, as in Anatolia, the language of prose and poetry. Mughal emperors were greater patrons of Persian writing than ever were the Safavids of Persia. It was during Akbar's rule that in 1582 a decree was issued making Persian the governmental language for the entire empire.<sup>11</sup> In fact, during the reign of Mughal emperors from the 16<sup>th</sup> through the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century a large number of poets, historians, lexicographers, and mystics in India produced many more works in Persian than was produced in Persia itself. Even in the 20<sup>th</sup> century the great poet and philosopher of Muslim India, Iqbal of Lahore (1877-1938), wrote his major poems in Persian rather than his native Urdu. The style of Persian poetry, which prevailed from about the 15<sup>th</sup> century is called the Indian Style in view of the multitude of Indian poets who wrote in this latest of classical Persian styles, until mid-18<sup>th</sup> century when the style was challenged in Persia by a movement for returning to earlier classical styles. The most popular Persian poet in Afghanistan and the Persian-speaking segments of Central Asia, including Tajikistan, is Bedil (Bidel, 1644-1721), a poet of India and of the Indian Style, whose mother tongue was Bengali.

### **The Two Phases Of Islamic Civilization**

Thus, after the cultural decline of the Arabs, the Persian culture, expressed chiefly through the Persian language, was the vibrant and productive culture in the vast area from the Sea

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<sup>11</sup> J. Marek, "Persian Literature in India," in *History of Iranian Literature*, by Jan Rypka, ed. Karl Jahn, (Dordrecht, Holland, 1968), p.723.

of Marmora to the Bay of Bengal. As the Balkan countries, like the Arab lands, came under the control of the Ottoman Empire, Persian language, Persian literature, Persian art, and Persian thought also affected indirectly some of these countries such as Bosnia, Herzegovina, Albania, Egypt, and Syria. Ahmed Sudi (d. 1598), the famous commentator on Hafez, was from Bosnia, and the fine collection of Persian manuscripts in Cairo dates from the Ottoman days. Significantly, the largest and the best collections of Persian manuscripts are preserved not in Persia, but in Turkey and India.<sup>12</sup>

This period, from the 11<sup>th</sup> through the 18<sup>th</sup> century, constitutes in fact a second phase of Islamic culture. The first phase of Islamic civilization when the Arabs had its leadership lasted some six centuries, at the end of which, the cultural leadership of the Islamic world passed on to the Persians. The *divans* of Turkish poets of the classical period, Turkish miniature paintings, Turkish calligraphy, and Turkish finely woven carpets all belong to this phase as do the Mughal monumental architecture, best represented by the Taj Mahal, Mughal miniatures, and a host of minor arts as well as Mughal calligraphy, which is hardly distinguished from the *nasta'liq* of Persia, not to mention a large number of histories, works of mysticism, rhetoric, and lexicography written in Persian. It is symptomatic of the deep penetration of the Persian language in Muslim India that all the major dictionaries of Persian from *Jahāngiri Dictionary* (1608) to *Nezām Dictionary* (1939) are written in the Subcontinent.

It goes without saying that the outstanding poets of Persia itself, including Rudaki, Ferdowsi, Farrokhi, Manuchehri, Anvari, Mo'ezzi, Omar Khayyam, Naser-e Khosrow, Mas'ud-e Sa'd, Nezami, Sana'i Amir Khosrow, Attar, Rumi, Sa'di, Hafez, Khaju, Salman Savaji, Sa'eb and a host of Persian poets of India all belong to the Persian Phase of Islamic culture, as do the works of Persian painters, architects, historians, and mystics.

### **The Zenith Of Persian Poetry**

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<sup>12</sup> The section on the influence of Persian language and literature in Anatolia and in India is in part taken from my essay on "The Persian Presence in the Islamic World"; see footnote no. 5.

Of the above poets I have already said a few words about Ferdowsi. Of the others at least three need to be mentioned. By the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries classical Persian poetry reaches the zenith of its perfection. Sa‘di, a versatile poet and prose writer of extraordinary ability, presents one of the summits of Persian literature and a master crafter of the Persian language. His love lyrics (*ghazals*) stand out for their vivacity, their passionate expression of feelings, and their elegance of diction. His *Rose Garden (Golestān)*, for many centuries the single most important text for the instruction of Persian in Persia, Ottoman Turkey, and the Indian subcontinent, is the most celebrated work of Persian prose. It chiefly consists of moralizing anecdotes in a cadenced, well-wrought, and often rhyming language and adorned with lines of poetry to strengthen and emphasize the morals of the stories. His *Bustān* or “Fragrant Garden” represents his philosophy of life and his ethical musings. Written in couplet form and in a smooth, expressive language which reveals Sa‘di’s poetic genius, *Bustān* embodies the essence of Perso-Islamic moral and spiritual culture in which honesty, humility, justice, serving the people, helping the poor and the downtrodden, forgiving others’ transgressions, and being resigned to the will of God, form the ideals of human conduct. Being a preacher by profession and by inclination, even his panegyrics are mostly introduced by eloquent admonitions on duties of rulers, their obligation of rendering justice to those under their rules, warnings about reversals of fortune, the insignificance of worldly possessions, the transience of life on earth, the preference of leaving behind a good name rather than golden palaces, and the necessity of remembering God and his commands at all times. Even a goodly number of his *ghazals* contain moral advice and advocacy of virtue.

The same century boasts of another great poet, Jalāl al-Din Rumi. He is called Rumi because he lived most of his life in Anatolia that the Muslims called Rum as it had been the seat of the Eastern Roman Empire. He is considered the greatest mystic of the Islamic world and he spent much of his time in an ecstatic state. He oozed poetry and preached in verse. His poetical genius shows itself to advantage in his large number of lyrics (*ghazals*). They are fired by a passion that borders on ecstasy and intoxication. In his poetry the distinction between earthly and divine love are blurred. He chooses, like other Persian mystics, the language of mundane love to give vent to his mystical raptures. His musicality

is unsurpassed; one can almost dance to the rhythm of some of his lyrics. His best known work, the *Mathnavi-ye ma'navi*, is a long poem in couplet form that expounds his religious and mystical beliefs by illustrating them with the help of a series of stories, anecdotes and parables usually followed by his commentaries on their morals. In general, it could be called a mystical commentary on the Koran and the *hadith*, emphasizing the spirit of religion and its true purport, the core of the Islamic creed, as it were, against the rigid rites and observances of organized Islam. By his unorthodox way of using the language and his sometimes going beyond the conventions of polite speech and classical norms, more particularly by placing emphasis on the meaning rather than the elegance of the words, he succeeded to enrich considerably the Persian language and its poetic idiom.

The 14<sup>th</sup> century produces the most popular of the Persian poets, Hafez. His *Divān* consists, except for a number of *rubâ'is* and a couple of *mathnavis*, of *ghazals*. He lived in a turbulent time, when he saw his beloved Shiraz subjected to violence and change hands several times, yet his melodious, well polished, and inspiring lyrics, have brought peace and tranquility to many a reader. His *ghazals* combine a mixture of love themes, exaltation of beauty, praise of an abstract beloved, wine and drinking motifs and contemplations on life and the universe, with rather biting satire of hypocrisy, deception and double standards among the clerics and the Sufis. Heterogeneous as these themes and motifs are, Hafez's skillful composition of polished *ghazals*, with their melodious meters and smooth rhymes imparts a sense of unity to his lyrics of varied content. If there is one book to be found in a Persian home, most likely it would be a *divān* of Hafez. His poems, however, are too culture-specific and the shades and nuances of his meanings and his deft play on associated ideas of the images are too subtle, rich, and varied to lend themselves to easy translation. Therefore, in spite of numerous attempts since the 18<sup>th</sup> century the most celebrated Persian poet remains basically untranslated.

### **A Fallacy About The Course Of Islamic Civilization**

Now we may ask a very pertinent question, that is, whether a phase of Islamic culture which has produced so many first rate works of art and literature could be called a period of stagnation or decline, simply because the Arab countries, after a period of cultural

productivity and a phase of remarkable creativity, had passed into a period of cultural lethargy and were drifting along, weakened and debilitated, as dependencies of the Ottoman empire? This is one of the fallacies that has resulted from the Arabo-centric orientation of Islamic studies and which has prevailed in Orientalist circles and departmental curricula. Some Orientalists like E. G. Browne, Reynold Nicholson, Von Grunebaum, and more particularly Marshall Hodgson, who were all steeped in Arabic literature, but who were also well familiar with the Persian culture, had recognized the vital contribution made by the Persians, and the countries that came under Persian cultural influence. The fact is that the rise of Persian culture and its spread beyond its original borders, provided Islamic civilization with a second lease of life after the Arab societies ceased to be creative and forfeited the cultural and political leadership of the Islamic world. And yet, few of the successors of those scholars have realized that Islamic civilization has two distinct phases: an Arab phase and a Persian one. If I may repeat what I have said elsewhere on the difference between these two phases, the first phase was more intellectual, the second more artistic; the first more theological, the second more mystical; the first more inquisitive, the second more contemplative.

### **Decline Of Persian Culture**

Persian poetry in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries is like a fountain which rises high in the sky with remarkable élan and exuberance, but it is bound to fall when it reaches its final height. Hafez represents the apogee of Persian poetry and therefore it is understandable that after him a decline of this greatest art of the Persians should set in. There came many poets after him, in fact, thousands, but none could reach the peaks that either he or Ferdowsi, Nezami, Rumi, or Sa'di had conquered, even though a number of later poets such as Jami (1414-92), Sa'eb (d. 1669), Bidil (Bidel, 1644-1721), and Iqbal of Lahore (1877-1938) adorned the Persian literary scene after Hafez. Sa'eb in particular, with his subtlety of his imagination and his ease of making abstract notions palpable by ingenious illustrations, lends credible significance to the Indian style of Persian poetry.

Yet the decline was inevitable. Time is a potent corroder of prosperity and power; as it flows the young grow old, the mighty lose their strength, and the prosperous crumble and

wither away. Not only cultures run their course and eventually weaken and disappear but so do dynasties, ideas, and art forms. Were this not the case, the Sumerians, the Babylonians, and the Assyrians should be with us today and the ancient Greeks, Persians, and Romans should have retained the flourishing cultures of their heyday. Ebn-Khaldun (1332-1406) described cogently in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, long before Spengler and Toynbee, the life cycle of cultures and societies from a primitive and crude beginning to a mature period when arts and crafts are produced, learning progresses and wealth is gathered, to a period when the society, spoiled by ease and leisure, indulges itself in the pleasures of the senses, abandoning discipline and the taste for hard work. In the end it loses its original vigor, initiative and courage, becoming debilitated and lethargic and ends up by becoming the client of an upcoming new power or a new culture.

By mid-17<sup>th</sup> century Persia had exhausted its potentials and entered a period of decline that intensified as the time went on while the European powers at the prime of their strength penetrated the fatigued Middle Eastern societies which had no choice but to become their clients and imitators. The destiny which had earlier enfeebled the Arab societies, and many societies before them, caught up with the Persians too.

### **The “Return Movement”**

I have said enough about the cultural and literary manifestations of the Persian language. I should like to say a few words about the linguistic development of Persian after its revival in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. The language of the early phase of Persian writings, and particularly Persian poetry, is characterized by clarity, economy, and a pleasing balance between word and meaning. The best example of this style is the lucid and stately language of Ferdowsi’s *Shahnameh*, that of the poets of the Ghaznavid Mahmud’s court, and in prose, Bal‘ami’s rendition of Tabari’s *History* (10<sup>th</sup> cent.), the *History* of Beyhaqi (11<sup>th</sup> cent.), and the biography of the 11<sup>th</sup> century mystic of Khorasan, Abu Sa‘id Abu’l-Kheyr (12<sup>th</sup> cent.). As the time went by, the language of writing became more artful and ornate. Persian prose acquired literary quality by the frequent use of rhetorical figures and embellishing devices. Borrowing of words and expressions from Arabic and citations from the Koran and the *hadith* or allusion to them became fashionable and came to pass as a sign of learning and a

ground for latent boasting. In some works, the outstanding example of which is Saʿdi's *Golestān* (13<sup>th</sup> cent.), the addition of rhyme or rhythm or both added to the literary quality of prose, but later, when carried to excess, coupled with a surfeit of metaphors, learned vocabulary, and expressions borrowed from a variety of disciplines, and the concomitant prevalence of word over meaning, the result was that the prose became more and more elaborate and complicated and often ended by being turgid and bombastic. Writers of history and philosophy and other genres tried to dazzle the reader by their skill in the use of excessive metaphors and allusions. During 13<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries a good deal of this kind of prose work was produced. The expression of meaning simply and economically failed to be valued. With the advent of the Safavid in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and their preoccupation with the propagation and enforcement of Shiʿism, the scribal art declined and learned administrators became rare. Good writing was neglected, and the Persian prose became not only turgid, but also lacking in clarity and sometimes even soundness. A measure of wordiness of the Persian prose, which continued into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, may be seen in the epistolary addresses. A grocer or a cobbler or a merchant would be addressed commonly something as follows: “To the presence of the threshold of the highest, the most exalted, the most honorable, the most glorious sir, may God prolong his lofty good fortune, Mr. so and so”, and it would be probably signed “the poor, humble and covered from head to foot by shortcomings, the least of God’s slaves, so and so”.

The excessive subtlety and elaborate artificiality of the Indian style of poetry as well as its often linguistic inelegance created a reaction among a number of the poets by about mid-18<sup>th</sup> century for returning to the lucidity and the elegance of earlier poets. This movement, which was named “the literary return” (*bazgasht-e adabi*), first affected the writing of *ghazals* with an eye on those of Saʿdi and Hafez but a little later, in the early Qajar period the Khorasani style of the Ghaznavid and Saljuqid eras became fashionable among the panegyrists of Fath-ʿAli Shah (r. 1797-1834) and his successor. A similar movement for simplifying Persian prose, ridding it of its excessive features and making it more economical began also under Fath-ʿAli Shah and continued under the Pahlavis, partially as a result of increasing acquaintance with the Western style of writing. As time went by, the matter-of-factness replaced the empty, ceremonial wordiness and the stilted prose of

previous centuries changed gradually into a balanced, well-polished and pleasing manner of writing.

### **Modern Prose and Poetry**

The present style of Persian prose is at its best a follow up of the “return movement”, helped by subsequent political and social transformations. It is best represented by the prose of such scholars or essayists as Sa‘id Nafisi, Ebrāhim Pourdavoud, Ahmad Bahmanyār, ‘Abd-al-Rahman Faramarzi, and in the following generation, Zabihollah Safa, Parviz Khanlari, Gholām-Hosseini Yusefi, and by fiction writers Muhammad Hejāzi and ‘Ali Dashti (the latter also a literary critic and essayist).

Two writers deserve special mention. One is Jamālzādeh (1892-1997), whose pioneer collection of short stories and sketches called *Once upon the Time (Yeki bud, yeki nabud)*, was published in 1921 and introduced for the first time a simple but colorful prose based on everyday speech for fiction. He is a good storyteller and his prose is laced with idiomatic and juicy expressions adopted from colloquial language, and when the subject lends itself to humor, judiciously humorous either by describing a funny situation or else by the use of humorous idioms. The other writer is Sadeq Hedayat (1903-1951), the foremost fiction writer of modern Iran. His prose, again, based on everyday speech, is not particularly elegant, but effective and adequate for his purpose. Original and highly imaginative, he employed Western techniques of fiction writing to treat native themes. He found many followers and continues to influence upcoming writers.

An outcome of familiarity with Western fiction and the “democratization” of literature, when it no longer catered to the taste of the courts and the elite alone, but found the majority of its readers among the ordinary educated people, was the admission of the colloquial language to the novel, the short story and the drama, first with some hesitancy and later with confidence.

The changes wrought in prose as a consequence of social transformations pale before the changes which have occurred in modern poetry. As Persian prose is not bound to strict

rules and formal constraints to the extent that Persian poetry is, changes in it have not assumed revolutionary proportions. Traditional poetry, on the other hand, with its strict prosodic rules and binding formal exigencies, which had remained nearly unaltered for about a thousand years was ripe for a fundamental change once Persian society was altered and modernism was ushered in. The break with the past was loud and thorough.

The poet who had both the aptitude and daring to venture a nearly complete break with the traditional norms of Persian traditional poetry, namely, its meters, its rhyming rules and other formal aspects, but above all its jaded imagery and its conventional patterns of expression, was Nima Yushij (1895-1960) who was familiar with French poetry and gave himself free rein to express sincerely and openly what he felt with fresh images, unaccustomed themes and a fresh language to suit. Some earlier poets of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had already made a dent in the thick armor of traditional poetry, but it was Nima who had the audacity to cut ties with the past. He was followed by a number of younger poets, at least initially, including Naderpour, Farrokhzad, Shamlou and Akhavan, who brought about a productive new era for Persian poetry. Prescribed forms of traditional poetry together with their strict metrical and rhyming rules were given up, even though a measure of musicality and some loose variations of Persian meters were observed by the first generation of modernist poets. But the newly found freedom of poetic expression was gradually pushed farther and farther by some of the modernist poets; not only blank verse and free verse were and are practiced, but in this free for all market of modernist poetry the pages of most of the popular magazines, which consider it their cultural duty to devote several pages in each issue to poetry, poems are published that not only are barren of rhyme and rhythm, but also are bereft of sense, or if they have any meaning it is known only to their writers and possibly not even to them. On the other hand, freedom from their restraining shackles of traditional poetry has made it possible for some of the modernist poets to produce poems of great effect and pertinence, responding to the requirements of the time. Traditional poetry, however, also continues its paltry existence side by side with modernist poems.

### **Impact Of The West**

Needless to say, the most potent factor in the evolution of Persian in modern times has been the contact with the West. Persia began its acquaintance with the West during the Safavid period, particularly in the 17<sup>th</sup> century under Shah Abbas I (1587-1629). Familiarity with the West intensified under the Qajars (1794-1925) and reached its culmination under the Pahlavis (1925-1979). Modernization of Persia began in earnest under Reza Shah (1920-1941) and continued under the reign of his son, Mohammad Reza Shah. Persia was meeting for the first time a culture, the strength of which contrasted sharply with the declining fortunes and cultural decline of Middle Eastern countries. It coincided with the period when Persian culture, after having educated and acculturated many invaders had finally exhausted its energy and had entered a period of decline. Confrontation with the West made Persia aware that it had regressed since its healthier days and was badly in need of a thorough shakeup; Western methods, techniques and sciences were to be adopted if the country were to wake up from its medieval slumber. Rapid changes in the life of the Persian elite and in urban centers began to appear toward the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Such changes were naturally reflected in the language. Not only a large number of European words, representing technical penetration of the West, such as “bank”, “post”, “autobus”, “machine”, “train”, “telephone”, “telegraph”, “radio”, entered into Persian, but also many other words that represented the European material life, concepts, and institutions, such as *card postal*, *poudre*, *mātik* (from *cosmetique*), *eskenās* (paper bills), *cabinet*, *mobl*, *douche*, *fer* (perm), *kot*, *ideh*, *piknik*, *rofuzeh* (one who fails to make a grade), *concours*, *milyoner*, *āmpul*, *system*, *bonyād* (a charitable foundation), *tashkilāt /sāzmān* (an organization), *nahād* (an institution), *nokhost vazir* (prime minister), and recently the jarring *kārshenās-e arshad* for Master of Arts, and many more. Such borrowings, however, have not affected the structure of Persian, as indeed a much larger number of borrowed words from Arabic had been already absorbed and accommodated without making any perceptible changes in the grammar of the language. What has made for greater difference has been the large number of calques from French, and later from English usages that have been introduced into Persian, such as the Persian renderings of “to count on someone” (*ru-ye kasi hesāb kardan*), or “for the first time” (*barā-ye avvalin bār*), or “to take a shower” (*dush gereftan*). Syntactical changes have been less common and essentially transient. One example is a proximate future and a future imperfect employing

the auxiliary verb “to go”, e.g., *miravad ke bebārad* translating the French phrase *il va pleuvoir* (it is going to rain) and *miraft ke bebārad* translating *il allait pleuvoir* (it was going to rain). Introduction of Western punctuations, particularly the comma, the period, and the question mark is another case of adopting a Western usage; the comma has largely replaced the conjunction “and” in a succession of nouns or adjectives, and is sometimes employed to excess.

Under Reza Shah a movement born of intense nationalism proposed to purge the language from its Arabic elements. The Persian Academy (*Farhangestān*) which was instituted at this time, saw as one of its duties to coin a number of words to replace the traditional Arabic ones. No similar attitude towards the influx of Western words was, however, discernable.

Since the revolution of 1979, the language employed in newspapers and periodicals has undergone noticeable changes. The modes of these changes and the reason for them are complex. One factor is the ostensible anti-Western attitude, advocated by the Islamic regime (e.g. *hojum-e farhangi* “cultural invasion”; *estekbar-e jahani* “imperialism”, “Western exploitation”); another is the concession made to the language of the commoners (e.g. *khasteh nabashid* as a form of greeting, lit. “May you not be tired”; and *dast-e shoma dard nakonad* “thank you”, lit. “May your hand be free from pain”); a third is the introduction or revival of Islamic or Arabic terms expressive of the revolution’s mission or suited to its propaganda such as *ommat* (Islamic nation) in contradistinction to *mellat* ([Persian] nation), *ṭāqut/taquti* (idolatrous, anything pertaining to the former regime), *mostaz‘afin* (deprived layers of the society), *ershād* (guidance with an Islamic edge) and the misused *barkhod kadan* in the sense of “dealing violently with, crushing”.

## **Conclusion**

To sum up, after the fall of the Sasanid state and a period of eclipse, the Persian language rose from the ashes of defeat with greater brilliance and fecundity as a potent symbol of Persian cultural identity. Ferdowsi’s monumental epic provided this identity with its strongest affirmation and support. The literature which was produced in the following

centuries spread beyond the confines of Persia and was read and written from the western shores of Asia Minor to the eastern plains of Bengal, carrying with it the thoughts and sentiments of the Persian people, their love of beauty, their fondness of music of words, their contemplative insights, their mystical spirituality, their musings about life, fate and the universe, their moralizing and didactic counsels, and their humor and social satire. Great Persian poets offered their compatriots works of such enchanting beauty that made them proud of their language and kept them firmly attached to their literary heritage as a fountain of pleasure and joy at all times and a source of solace and moral support when adverse fortune struck.