

## Iran in Russian Poetry

---

*Aleksis Rannit, Yale University*

*for Firuz Kazemzadeh*

An interesting aspect of any country's literary history is its debt of inspiration to other national cultures. The poetic vision called *Iran* or *Persia* has affected Russian poets for about one hundred sixty years—a brief period considering the influence Persian poetry has had for one thousand years on the Urdu, Turkish, and Hindu literatures and the fact that the Russians and Iranians are neighbors. The explanation, of course, is that Russian poetry is only about two hundred years old (neither old Russian folksongs nor the *byliny* mention Iran). Apparently Vasilij Žukovskij (1783–1852), the famous poet and translator, discovered Persian verse for Russian letters when he became acquainted with the translations of Firdausi's *Shah-Nama*<sup>1</sup> done by the German poet and orientalist Friedrich Rückert (1788–1866). This vigorous and lofty epic enchanted Žukovskij, and in 1849 he published his own rendering, calling it a “free imitation in the manner of Rückert” (*Vol'noe podražanie Rjukertu*). Structurally the Russian version of Firdausi's monumental work, entitled “*Rustem i Zorab*,” owes nothing to the Persian original, which is written in a meticulous quantitative meter. It is not even rhymed. But for the first time Russian readers became interested in Persian poetry.

Iran and Iranians were first introduced in original Russian works by Puškin and Lermontov. In 1824 Puškin wrote nine poems containing variations on the divine revelations to Mohammed and called “Imitations of the Koran.”<sup>2</sup> Later, on 22 May 1829, Puškin met in the Caucasus a Persian court poet named Fazil Khan, whom he describes in his “Journey to Arzrum” as a “plain, wise, and polite man.” Fazil Khan promised to visit Puškin in St. Petersburg, but whether he actually did or not is unknown. In his manuscript poem addressed to Fazil Khan Puškin wrote: “Blagosloven tvoj podvig novyj, / Tvoj put' na sever naš surovyj, / Gde kratko carstvuet vesna, / No gde Gafiza i Saadi / Znakomy imena” (ibid., III, 160; the last line was not completed, and the last two lines are crossed out in the manuscript). The assertion that the works of Hafiz and Sa'di<sup>3</sup> were known in Russia was probably either an error or a bit of flattery, for neither poet had yet been translated into Russian; the only Russians

familiar with Persian verse were linguists. Persian was not taught at the university in St. Petersburg until 1819, and it was even later that Moscow and especially Kazan' became centers of Persian studies in Russia. It is possible, however, that Puškin had in mind members of the Russian aristocracy conceivably familiar with translations from Persian into French, English, and German.

Iran occupies only a peripheral position in the works of Mixail Lermontov. In one of his poems called "The Dispute" (*Spor*) he speaks of "Teheran slumbering next to the pearl-like fountains,"<sup>4</sup> and in "Demon" he states that "neither the Ruler of golden Iran nor any other earthly king has ever kissed such eyes" as those of Tamara (*ibid.*, II, 508-09). Indeed, with the exception of the pioneer work of the philologist Valentin Alekseevič Žukovskij (1858-1918) and several other Russian orientalists doing research in Persian language and literature, Persia apparently provided little inspiration to most Russian men of letters during the nineteenth century. Sometimes she appears only peripherally, as in a poem by the hussar poet Denis Vasil'evič Davydov (1784-1839) entitled "Seeing Moscow upon Returning from the Persian War."<sup>5</sup> An exception is Andrej Ivanovič Podolinskij (1806-86), who in 1827 wrote a work, *Div and Peri*,<sup>6</sup> consisting of thirty-two poems. They tell the story of Peri, who is imprisoned by fallen angels called Divs and is liberated by Izrafim; the poems enact the struggle between good and evil as elaborated in Zoroastrian teachings. The romantic and elegant work of Podolinskij was admired by his contemporaries, but from today's perspective its importance is secondary.

The playwright, poet, and diplomat Aleksandr Griboedov (1795-1829) probably dealt with Iran and Iranians more than any other Russian writer of the early nineteenth century. He helped prepare the Russo-Persian peace treaty of 1828 and was subsequently appointed minister to Teheran. Griboedov depicts Persia in "The Boy Selling the Hookah" (*Kal'janči*),<sup>7</sup> an excerpt from an unfinished longer poem "The Wanderer" (*Putnik*). Using a true story, the poet tells about a traveler's encounter with a handsome boy who sells him a hookah and recounts the tale of his young but stormy life. The poem is written in a colorful, rhapsodic style. In addition to "Kal'janči" and his diplomatic reports, Griboedov wrote on Persian life only once. In a nostalgic love letter addressed to his wife from Kazvin on 24 December 1828, he describes the wedding celebration of Vizier Mirza Nabi, finding it too fanciful and eccentric for his taste. Certain relevant works by other less-known poets from this period have survived, mostly in popular songs. In one of the "Poems to Sten'ka Razin" by Dmitrij Nikolaevič Sadovnikov (1847-83), the legendary brigand imprisons an Iranian princess, falls in love with her, and then because of the criticism of his companions throws her into the Volga as a "gift from a Don Cossack."

Among the poets from the second half of the nineteenth century whose

work reflects Persian influence, the most outstanding is Afanasij Fet (1820–92), famous for the melodious qualities of his lyrics as well as his technical mastery of the different forms of verse. He demonstrated these qualities convincingly in his twenty-seven translations of Hafiz (“Iz Gafiza,” 1863),<sup>8</sup> among them a number of *ghazals*,<sup>9</sup> introduced into Russian poetry for the first time here. Although Fet did not know Persian and followed what he called “very exact German translations,” his paraphrases of Hafiz are genuine original poetry. Many Russian poets have since attempted to translate Hafiz, but not one of them has been able to produce poetry as pure and vibrant as Fet’s renderings.

Of the important Russian writers who have visited Iran, Ivan Bunin (1870–1953) is best known in the West. Coming from Egypt in 1907, Bunin took a cruise through the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean. He visited the port city of Jāsk, but it is not known whether he went to Shīrāz and other places in Persia. Bunin’s poetry is rooted in the nineteenth-century Russian tradition of the classicists and parnassians, and Symbolism, the art of his contemporaries, had no visible influence on his work. A good example of his style—descriptive, bare, and symmetrical—is his poem “The Roses of Shīrāz,” which utilizes Persian motifs.<sup>10</sup> In 1913 Bunin wrote a variation of the famous poem by Sa’di entitled “The Bequest of Sa’di”: “Bud’ ščedrym, kak pal'ma. A esli ne možeš', to bud' / Stvolom kparisa, prjamym i prostym – blagorodnym.” (ibid., I, 357.) This differs from Sa’di’s idea, which is, “Be free like a cypress tree.”

The complex period in Russian poetry between 1900 and 1917 could almost be called the Persian era of Russian poetry in terms of stylistic affinities. It was characterized by ornate diction, ecstatic praise of erotic as well as Sufi-like<sup>11</sup> mystic love, rhetorical and didactic speech, obscure symbolism, and an involuted, arabesque delicacy of design in structure as well as in iconic ideas which reminds one of Persian illuminated manuscripts. This Russian poetry has a special affinity with Persian miniatures in the sensual pleasure derived from the word as such, from its color, combination of sounds, and power to convey the emotional quality of a situation, to which the elaborate wording and the refined form contribute. The result is a subtle harmony of the intellectual and emotional. Significantly, the *ghazal* became a popular poetic form; it was used with considerable virtuosity by Mixail Kuzmin, Igor' Severjanin, Eduard Bagrickij, Nikolaj Gumilev, and Vjačeslav Ivanov. The structural variations of the Russian and Persian *ghazal* offer an unusual opportunity for a study in comparative poetics. Valerij Brjusov (1873–1924), an epicurean of poetic forms, composed Russian *ghazals* of considerable refinement, grace, and musicality. His “Ghazal: A Poem in the Persian Manner” (*Gazella: Podražanie persidskomu*) is laden with symbols and illustrates his efforts to achieve formal perfection in his verse; he uses, in addition to a highly exact metrical struc-

ture, a complex rhyme scheme consisting of both end and internal rhymes. The repeating end rhyme of the couplets is clear. Note in addition that "peli" (line 1) establishes a repeating internal rhyme in all odd lines while "rjadom" and "ljubil" (line 2) do the same for all even lines.

В ту ночь нам птицы пели, как серебром звеня,  
С тобой мы были рядом, и ты любил меня.

Твой взгляд, как у газели, был вспышками огня,  
И ты газельим взглядом всю ночь палил меня.

Как в тесноте ущелий томит пыланье дня,  
Так ты, маня к уладам, всю ночь томил меня.

Злой дух, в горах у ели, таится, клад храня,  
Ах, ты не тем ли кладом всю ночь манил меня?

Минуты розовели, с востока тень гоня.  
Как будто по аркадам ты вел, без сил, меня.

Пусть птицы мне звенели, что близко западня:  
В ту ночь любовным ядом ты отравил меня.<sup>12</sup>

Brjusov's fellow Symbolist Konstantin Bal'mont (1867–1942) was always attracted by the lore of strange lands and traveled extensively in the Eastern and Western hemispheres. In his book *The Calls of Antiquity*<sup>13</sup> Bal'mont speaks of the "alpine freshness of Iran and of the songs of Zoroaster,<sup>14</sup> full of vigorous fascination." Nine long poems in this book constitute the cycle called "Iran"; they are primarily concerned with the *Avesta*<sup>15</sup> faith and Iranian mythology. Bal'mont praises the Zoroastrians as warriors of God and glorifies their struggle against evil. Selfless dedication, self-control, wisdom, courage, power, glory, sublimity, and the justice of God are the subjects of these odes, written in blank verse. The poetry suffers somewhat from the poet's ecstatic inspiration, for the poems are bombastic and too didactic, even though they display some of Bal'mont's characteristic ease and fluidity.

The poetry of Nikolaj Gumilev (1886–1921), a pupil of Brjusov and a leader of the Acmeists, is precise, concrete, and laconic. One of his poems, "Persian Miniature," reflects the art of Persian illumination, of which Gumilev was an ardent admirer.

Когда я кончу наконец  
Игру в сache-sache со смертью хмурой,  
То сделает меня Творец  
Персидскою миниатюрой.

И небо, точно бирюза,  
И принц, поднявший еле-еле  
Миндалевидные глаза  
На взлет девических качелей.

С копьем окровавленным шах,  
Стремящийся тропой неверной  
На киноварных высотах  
За улетающею серной.

И ни во сне, ни на яву  
Невиданные туберозы,  
И сладким вечером в траву  
Уже наклоненные лозы.

А на обратной стороне,  
Как облака Тибета чистой,  
Носить отрадно будет мне  
Значок великого артиста.

Благоухающий старик,  
Негоциант или придворный,  
Взглянув, меня полюбит вмиг  
Любовью острой и упорной.

Его однообразных дней  
Звездой я буду путеводной,  
Вино, любовниц и друзей  
Я заменяю поочередно.

И вот когда я утолю,  
Без упоенья, без страданья,  
Старинную мечту мою  
Будить повсюду обожанье.<sup>16</sup>

This is a typical ornamental, mosaiclike poem in the Persian style. The images seem as if they had been cut out of colored paper and distributed over the page to make a perfect pattern. It is a poetic fairy garden that the imagination can wander through without ever wearying.<sup>17</sup> Such original poems representing what I have called the Persian era of Russian poetry virtually came to an end with the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. The new expressionist experiments utilized a poetic language, which could not possibly produce the exquisite chamber-music quality or delicate, lacelike ornamentation of such verses. Georgij Vladimirovič Ivanov (1894–1958), a follower of Gumilev, summed up his sense of the lost beauty of the past in a nostalgic Persian poem before he left Russia forever.

Где ты Селим, и где твоя Заира,<sup>18</sup>  
Стихи Гафиза, лютюя и луна!  
Жестокый луч полуденного мира  
Оставил сердцу только имена.

И песнь моя, тревогою палима,  
Не знает, где предел ее тоски,  
Где ветер над гробницею Селима  
Восточных роз роняет лепестки.<sup>19</sup>

In a style not too different from Georgij Ivanov's, two of his contemporaries, Andrej Pavlovič Globa (1888–1964) and Konstantin Abramovič Lipskerov (1889–1954), have written poems utilizing the oriental manner of stylization. Globa is noted for his *ghazals*, Lipskerov for his sonnets called "Imitations of Gulistan," in the collection entitled *Den' šestoj* (1922). Especially masterful is his "For Sa'di."<sup>20</sup> Mixail Leonidovič Lozinskij (1886–1955), a friend of Gumilev and a poet aesthete, found himself isolated in the Soviet Union. Unable to publish poetry in his own style, he gave up original writing and became a translator of classical literature. In connection with the celebration of the Firdausi millenium, Lozinskij translated approximately a fifth of the *Shah-Nama* in a meter as close to the original as possible. The language employed by Lozinskij in his translation of Firdausi is characterized by great clarity, classical order, brevity, and directness. No other twentieth-century Russian translator of Persian poetry has created a similar work of art.

In the 1930's and again after World War II, a considerable number of Russian poets translated classical Persian poetry. For political reasons Persian poets are always referred to as Tadžik or Azerbajdžani poets. A complete translation of the *Shah-Nama*, edited by I. S. Braginskij and S. Šervinskij and accompanied by a tendentious introduction, appeared in

Moscow in 1957. In addition to the unsurpassed renderings of Firdausi made by Lozinskij, other partial translations of this epic work have appeared in periodicals and books; they have been done by S. Lipkin, S. Sokolov, M. Djakonov, V. Deržavin, I. Sel'vinskij, V. Levik, V. Zvegincev, K. Lipskerov, M. Petrov, and others. Nizami has been translated by O. Rumor, I. Bruni, A. Tarkovskij, and V. Roždestvenskij. Hafiz was greatly appreciated in Russia before the revolution and less so since due to his aestheticism. In addition to translations by Fet and Bunin noted above, Hafiz was translated by A. Bestužev-Marlinskij, M. Praxov, A. Krymskij, the academician F. E. Korš,<sup>21</sup> N. de Vitt, N. Lozeev, V. Rafal'skij, I. Umev, V. Belanovič, and V. Tardov. In 1935 the publishing house Academia in Leningrad issued a selection of Hafiz's lyrics translated by Evgenij Dunaevskij. They are conscientiously done, but Dunaevskij was unable to recreate the technical mastery, natural sweetness, melodiousness, and gracefulness of Hafiz's poetry. He also omits all poems rich in Sufi imagery, probably for ideological reasons.<sup>22</sup> Of all Persian poets, Omar Khayyām is the most popular in the Soviet Union, as he is in the Western world, but for different reasons: for his alleged militant atheism and social revolutionary ideas. The best poetic adaptation of Omar Khayyām's *Rubaiyat* is by a Russian emigré writer, Ivan Ivanovič Txorževskij (1878–1951).<sup>23</sup>

In the early years of the Soviet regime Persian motifs occasionally appear in the original work of a few poets, for example, in Velemir Xlebnikov's (1885–1922) "The Trumpet of Gul'-Mulla," probably written during the poet's stay in Iran in 1921.<sup>24</sup> But the most striking poetry about Iran, its landscapes and women, was written by Sergej Esenin (1895–1925). In "Persian Motifs"<sup>25</sup> his fascination with Persia was expressed in an idyllic and melancholy style marked by the sincerity characteristic of all his poetry. Esenin's well-known disillusionment with the Soviet system probably underlies the escapist qualities of his Persian poems. In the simple poetic diction of the virtuoso, Esenin speaks of Iran as "the sky-blue homeland of Firdausi," of "roses silently running in fields," of "the gold of roses," and he describes the rose itself as a "svetil'nik," the ecclesiastical lamp. Names like Shagane or Lala (probably a variation of the Persian Leila or Laléh) symbolize the loveliness of Persian women. The names Sa'di, Khayyām, and Firdausi, of Shiraz and Khorasam, appear as ornamental elements in these poems.

Я спросил сегодня у менялы.  
 Что дает за полтумана по рублю,  
 Как сказать мне для прекрасной Лалы  
 По-персидски нежное «люблю»?

Я спросил сегодня у менялы  
 Легче ветра, тише Ванских струй,  
 Как назвать мне для прекрасной Лалы  
 Слово ласковое «поцелуй»?

И еще спросил я у менялы,  
 В сердце робость глубже притая,  
 Как сказать мне для прекрасной Лалы,  
 Как сказать ей, что она «моя»?

И ответил мне меняла кратко:  
 О любви в словах не говорят,  
 О любви вздыхают лишь украдкой,  
 Да глаза, как яхонты, горят.

Поцелуй названья не имеет,  
 Поцелуй не надпись на гробах.  
 Красной розой поцелуи веют,  
 Лепестками тая на губах.

От любви не требуют поруки,  
 С нею знают радость и беду.  
 «Ты – моя» сказать лишь могут руки,  
 Что срывали черную чадру. (9–10.)

This and other poems in this cycle impress one as poetic documents of real experience. Yet Esenin never visited Persia. In the winter of 1924–25 in Tbilisi he met the journalist Venjamin Popov, who had just returned from a two year stay in Iran. Popov told Esenin many enchanting stories about his life there and loaned him the anthology of Persian lyrics edited by Academician Korš; the same winter Esenin met a quiet, modest Armenian lady named Šaganduxt Tal'jan in Batumi. A striking beauty, she became the poet's Persian "Shagane" or "Shaga"<sup>26</sup> in the imaginary Persian settings of the poems. These various influences resulted in a poetic outburst of complete naturalness. Thus, an indirect contact with Persia underlies the most distinctly Persian poems in the Russian language.

## NOTES

- 1 Firdausi (Abul Qasim Mansur, 941–1021), the national epic poet of Iran.
- 2 A. S. Puškin, *Polnoe sobranie sočinenij* (16 vols. in 20; M.: AN SSSR, 1937–49), II, pt. 1, 352–58.
- 3 Hafiz (Shamsuddin Mohammed, 1326–90), one of the most celebrated lyrical poets of Iran, a professed dervish and Sūfi, his principal work being the *Dīvān*. Puškin's second Persian poem is called "From Hafiz" (*ibid.*, III, pt. 1, 163), although there is no such poem among Hafiz's works. Sa'di (Musharifuddin, 1215–92), the great didactic poet and most popular classical writer of Iran.
- 4 M. Ju. Lermontov, *Sobranie sočinenij* (4 vols.; M.: AN SSSR, 1958–69), I, 526–29.
- 5 Denis Davydov, *Sočinenija* (M.: GIXL, 1962), 122.
- 6 A. I. Podolinskij, *Povesti i melkie stixotvorenija* (2 pts.; SPb.: Tipografija Smirdina & Glazunova, 1837), pt. 1.
- 7 A. S. Griboedov, *Sočinenija v stixax*, ed. I. N. Medvedeva (BP, bol'saja ser.; L.: Sov. pisatel', 1967), 354–56.
- 8 A. A. Fet, *Polnoe sobranie stixotvoreniij* (BP, bol'saja ser.; L.: Sov. pisatel', 1959), 606–21.

- 9 *Ghazal*, a type of lyric poem perfected by Hafiz, which consists of 4 to 14 couplets. It begins with a rhymed couplet; even lines throughout the poem repeat this rhyme, odd lines are unrhymed. In more refined variations of this form there are also internal rhymes. The *ghazal* usually depicts a peaceful, mystical, or erotic mood. Fet, Brjusov, Vjačeslav Ivanov, and Kuzmin are the masters of the *ghazal* in Russian poetry.
- 10 I. A. Bunin, *Sobranie sočinenij* (9 vols.; M.: Xudož. literatura, 1965–67), I, 295–96.
- 11 Beginning about 800 the term Sūfi was applied to Moslem mystics who sought to achieve union with Allah.
- 12 Valerij Brjusov, *Stixotvorenija i poëmy*, 2nd ed. (BP, bol'saja ser.; L.: Sov. pisatel', 1961), 490.
- 13 K. D. Bal'mont, *Zovy drevnosti: Gimny, pesni i zamysly drevnix*, rev. ed. (Berlin: Slovo, 1923). First published in 1908.
- 14 Zoroaster (Zarathustra), the Iranian prophet who founded Zoroastrianism in the sixth century B.C. and wrote the *Gāthās* (see below).
- 15 *Avesta* is the collection of Zoroastrian writings in Old Iranian. There are seven main portions of the *Avesta* in its present form, of which the *Gāthās* are attributed to Zoroaster (630–553 B.C.). According to Pliny, Hermippus of Smirna (3rd cent. B.C.) had listed the contents of two million verses composed by Zoroaster.
- 16 N. Gumilev, *Sobranie sočinenij*, ed. G. P. Struve and B. A. Filippov (4 vols.; Washington: Victor Kamkin, 1962–68), II, 45–46.
- 17 Gumilev was widely traveled, but he never visited Iran. Late in World War I he asked to be transferred to the Persian front, but his request was denied.
- 18 Selim and Zaira: perhaps a reference to Voltaire's tragedy *Zaïre*.
- 19 G. Ivanov, *Sady* (Berlin: S. Ėfron, n.d.), 7.
- 20 K. A. Lipskerov, *Pesok i rozy* (M., 1916).
- 21 The compiler of the posthumously published anthology *Persidskie liriki X–XV vekov* (M., 1916).
- 22 The Sūfi poets, indeed all Persian metaphysical poets, are either forbidden reading in contemporary Russia or are considered unworthy of critical attention. Thus Rumi (1207–73), the great mystical poet of Persia, is virtually unknown to younger Soviet readers.
- 23 *Sovremennye zapiski*, 29 (1926), 189–201.
- 24 Velemir Xlebnikov, *Izbrannye stixotvorenija*, ed. N. Stepanov (M.: Sov. pisatel', 1936), 239–52.
- 25 Sergej Esenin, *Sobranie sočinenij* (5 vols.; M.: GIXL, 1961–68), III, 7–35.
- 26 Nelli Saak'jan, "Šagane ty moja, Šagane!" *Literaturnaja Armenija*, 12, no. 10 (1970), 73–76.