M. Reisner


The use of the symbolic-alegorical method of the Qur'an interpreting called ta'wil [1] as the basis for formation of the norms of esoteric expression in the sphere of mystic practice of Islam is well-known. However, the stages of formation of this specific language and its fixation in the canon of classical Persian poetry, as well as the real contribution of certain authors into this process, which began in the 11th c., has not been studied enough, if we mean the literary, or, to put it more precisely, the poietological aspect of the matter rather than the ideological-religious or predial aspect.

The opposition of the allegorical comments on the Qur'an and the nunna suggested by the Bāṭūmis (ahl al-bāṭin, al-bāṭinyyu [2]) and the literal, historico-philological and jurisprudential interpretation called ta'fīr ("comment", "interpretation") based on the tradition, did not appear suddenly and was not absolute. The method of allegorical interpretation of the Qur’an arose in the 9th c. in the circle of the extreme Ṣuḥiṭ in Iraq, and was later developed by the followers of Isām’s law of all trends, who were the first to be referred to as the Bāṭūmis. As a result of the dispute between the supporters of the literal interpretation of the Holy Book, the Ṣuḥiṭis (ahl al-ṣūḥīṭyūs, al-ṣūḥiṭī) and those who strove to comprehend its "hidden" meaning, the Muslim community split up. With time the medieval Muslim theologians began to rank among the Bāṭūmis, along with the followers of Isām’s law, the supporters of Sufism, as well as the Mu’tazilites [3] and other adherents of rationalistic ideas in Islam. The Mu’tazilites, following other commentators of the Qur’an, divided dīlā into the “clear” (muḥāšār) and “vague” (muḥāshīmah) ones. The latter, which, according to them, disagreed with common sense, had to be viewed as circumlocutions (muqālāt).

It was the Isāmī and Şīfī preachers who introduced the corresponding principles of words' treatment into the literature in the Persian language, including the poetry. Especially intensively Persian poetry developed in the 11th c. in the direction of formation of the “innermost” language. If we speak about the explicitly expressed justifications of the "bāṭinīa" principle of world’s treatment, the most valuable material is contained in the ḡīārāt by a zealous preacher of Isām’s Islam and didactic poet Nāṣīr-i Khusrav (1004—1088). He was a figure typical of the early stage in the development of the mystical-alegorical trend in the Persian poetry: being at the same time a religious philosopher and poet, he acted not only as an outstanding reformer of the Persian quṣūdī, but also as a theorist of poetry, eagerly talking about its nature and purpose in his works themselves.

In Nāṣīr-i Khusrav’s quṣūdīs we can find quite a few statements about the religious aspects of the notion of ta’wil, which in this or that way are projected on the sphere of poetic constructions:

"The body of faith — is the outer [knowledge], while its soul — ta’wil [is inner knowledge — M. R.], // can a body live without a soul in this world?"

If you are alive, why have you died for faith, // unless you heart has been caught in the storm of passions’ [4].

In another text the author talks about the nature of faith even more directly, associating its body with the word of the Prophet (i.e. the Qur’an), and its soul — with the word of his only rightful, according to the Şīfīs’ and the Isāmīs’ successors, the fourth pious caliph ‘Alī:‘

The faith is a palace (mard) erected by the Prophet, // so that each mortal enters it calmly...

‘All and his family are gates to that [palace], // blessed are those who enter this house’ [5].

Apart from the Prophet Muhammad (al-nūṣūṣ, lit. “the speaking”) [6] and his successor (al-walī, al-walī) [7] caliph ‘Alī, other prophets worshiped by the Isāmīs’ successors are also united into such constant pairs. ‘Alī (Šīfī), Šām, Isāmī, Hārūn, Shamsīn (Simon — obviously, Simon Peter, one of the apostles) were considered the successors of the prophets Adam, Nāḥ, Bīramī, Misṣa and ‘Īd correspondingly. Characterizing as ‘All as the innermost knowledge (ilm), Nāṣīr-i Khusrav mentions the successors, who perform the same function of the “gates of faith” as ‘All in the pair with the Prophet Muhammad:

Search for [science] of ta’wil, so for the Jews // it is the word of instruction of Yəḥūḏ ben Nūn [8]

Ta’wil in the dark night is for Christians // the candle and icon-lamp of ‘Īd and Šāmīn [9].

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In the same passage there is also the motive of faith as an erected building (palace, fortress), which we are already familiar with. Alongside the building we can distinguish a group of motives connected with the idea of the finding of the true knowledge: ablation with knowledge, Qur’ān — sea, and its waves. The poet claims that without the innermost knowledge, the Qur’ān will turn into sea water unsuitable for drinking, and that only by using the allegorical method (“day face into the waters of the Jāyīl”) one can come closer to the understanding of its meaning. There are poems in which the author says directly that only by using the way of “spiritual successors” (awrāj) leads to finding the knowledge:

"Good Word" (sukhan-nīt) which the poet traces to the Divine source. According to him the pronounced word, including a poetic word, must point to the hidden essence of things, which must be comprehended by a truly wise one. One of the poet’s qāyāds begins with the following words:

With your inner sight look at the world mysteries, / as the superficial glance does not catch, the hidden.

What is concealed in the world, oh, the noble one? / If you do not see the innermost, you will only see the external [13].

To comprehend the secrets of the universe and deliver them to the listener,udoing him the way of salvation of the soul, the poet must have a special talent, which Nāṣīr-i Khusraw describes as one relating to the prophet:

Refresh the poems the meanings of which have worn out, / as a spring cloud sprinkling pearls [awrāj] the old landscape.

A plain note-book became beautiful due to your Good Word (sukhan-nīt), the note-book due to the good word, and clothes — due to stench.

The wind filled with knowledge does not give rise to any world word expect the beautiful one, / only pure water flows from a clean jug.

What is the synor [14] of speech? — The meaning (unzilul) and the verbal expression (la’f). / Refresh your speech, as the synor flows to you from above,

In your poems do not be afraid to repeat a word, / as it is no sin to repeat a pleasant word.

God’s synor is delicious fragrant, and its colour / was born together with the apple and wild orange, the nutmeg, quince and pomegranate.

Good food you are, the harvest from vine, / though last year and before that it also yielded fruit.

For men of reason the seeds of the Word are wisdom and knowledge, / into the soil of your heart plant, oh, the wiser one, the seeds of the Word.

You’ll become the Chosen one if the Good Word is left after you, / just as this is what the Chosen Prophet [i.e. Muḥammad] left you.

Due to the Word his faith spread in the world, / due to the Word the coelopephore started its movement [15].

The sending down of the poetical talent described by Nāṣīr is closely connected to the idea of prophecy as the mission of communicating the Divine will. In the author’s interpretation his talent to refresh obsolete words received by him from above is associated with certain gustatory senses [16]. This idea of perfect poetry as “sweet”, typical of the literary epoch of the 10th—15th c., thus receives specific author’s development.

Later the description of poetical inspiration in the terms of prophecy finds its continuation in the works of Sufi poets. The picture of the sending down the gift is tinged with the colours of mystical irradiation, however the “gustatory” associations remain stable. Thus, for example, in the ghazals by Jālāl al-Dīn Rūmī (Mawlawī) the taste of poetical inspiration and mystical irradiation is embodied in the image of ḫawwāl. In the end of one of his ghazals, which contains a metaphorical description of the perfect poetical speech sent down from the above, Mawlawī says:

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Be silent, as tonight the shahīd according to the beauty of his face, / this rare substance cooks for us — ḫawwāl, for us ḫawwāl [17].

If we proceed from other concepts in which the word ḫawwāl is mentioned in Mawlawī’s poems, it becomes clear that he speaks about the hidden mystical way — the complete comprehension of the Truth, as in maṭla (the opening boy) of the ghazal with the “food” ḫawwāl he says:

God prepared ḫawwāl for the Shi‘ah, / so they sit in a circle, and in the middle there was ḫawwāl [18].

In the same ghazal there is another bayt which clarifies the mystical meaning of the image:

Step by step the Prophet comes down from the kitchen, / in which the angels in heaven prepared ḫawwāl.

Thus, the “divine ḫawwāl”, like the “divine synor” in the poems by Nāṣīr-i Khusraw leads to comprehension of the Truth and creation of true poetry, in which Mawlawī says in the last verse of his other ghazal:

Do not turn to synesia when you find that ḫawwāl in your mouth, — / bōl, like that pan on fire in which ḫawwāl [is boiled] [19].

According to Nāṣīr-i Khusraw, the creative activity of a prophet poet is directly associated with its divine prototype, the creative activity of God in the moment of the creation of the world, which Nāṣīr-i Khusraw calls “the coelopephore started its movement”). Like the phenomenal world is presented as a metaphor and reflection of the world of divine essences, the creative activity of the prophet is a metaphor of the creation of the world, and constantly tends to its prototype, and, despite the paleness of likelihood is raised to it. For the sake of being fair we must say that the work of a post-poets, equated with any other craft, was, in the end, also interpreted as the aspiration for the comprehension of the “eternal idea” [20].

Transferring his poetry from the sphere of skill into the sphere of prophecy and divine inspiration, Nāṣīr-i Khusraw not only aspires to the “improvement” of tradition (A. Kudelin [21] in his dispute with his predecessors, but also tries, by distinguishing false poetry from true poetry, to raise the rank of the communicating hierarchy of approaching the divine world. The fact that Nāṣīr includes spring seasonal figurativeness in his description of an ideal poet’s work, also serves as evidence to this. It is known that in the traditional Persian literature spiritual renovation of nature is a subtle metaphor of the creation of the world, which is rooted in the system of concepts of the epoch of the predominance of Zoroastrian beliefs. What concerns the autumn seasonal figurativeness, which is also present in the analyzed quotation, being united with the spring one, it, obviously, was but a metaphor of the paradisal garden where, despite the season everything blossoms and gives fruit at the same time. The rudiments of these early beliefs are found in classical poetry of all genres and forms [22], and Nāṣīr-i Khusraw’s qāyāds are no exception. In them the corresponding motives are repeated in a number of contexts connected with the characteristic of poetic work. In the most complete way these motives are represented in the poem describing an ideal qāyād. It begins with the description of divān as a blossoming garden:

May be I will manage to change my life / and make all the best its purpose.

The world blossoms in the month of nīn, / and I will turn my mind into nīn through reflection.

In the gardens and meadows of my note-book (dastfār) and my divān / I will grow hyacinths and basil from poems and prose.

Into fruits and flowers I will turn all [poetic] meanings (mu‘āb), / and from beautiful verbal rebāb (ľojh) I will grow trees.

As a light turns steps into garden, / I will also turn my note-book into a garden [23].

The description of writing poems in the terms of spring blossoming has also been found in the qāyāds by Mas‘ūd-ı Sar‘ī Salmān (1046—1121). Here is a characteristic example:

My art has blossomed, and before it was in decay, / in the garden of praise in your honour I constantly sing songs. Each my melody is such, that this aroused wrath / equates day and night for the sake of [spring] equities.

In the gardens of poetry the necklaces of rose brushes / have become suitable for patterns on the grubs of nu‘n [24].

Let us, however, look back at the text of Nāṣīr-i Khusraw. Further, in the same poem, the author talks about qāyāds as an architectural structure:

I will make my qāyād a palace and in it / in bows I will make the corners and in doors I will make the arches ([dastfār] and arches).

In some [bāls] I will place majestic panoramas, / and make the other spacious and wide as stadiums (ma‘yādūn). And at its doors made of ‘ard (the rarest of rare) / I will put a porter, faithful and smart.


And then I will invite to my palace / wise men from around the world.

So that ignorant ones do not get inside, / as I did not build it for the ignorant.

I will hold such a feast that a sensible man / having tried the food will be puzzled and astounded.

In the body of poetry the example of sense / from beautiful and rare meanings I will make soul.

If you have not seen in words [the features of humanness], / I will display to you in speech the human face.

From beautiful descriptions and well [constructed] narratives / I will make her way be breathless and laughing lips.

I will turn her face that I can / I will hide her under the cover of words [26].

The quoted fragment contains a number of motives which are also found in the purely religious discussions of Nāṣīr-i Khusraw about the essence of belief. Despite the fact that on the whole the author follows the terminology and the concepts fixed in theoretical poems [27], in his discussions we can trace the poets’ aspiration to liken his work to the work of the Prophet who erects the “palace of faith” and “lays down the law”. What is placed inside the qāyād — poetic meanings (mu‘āb) — is food
The poet canonic the attitude towards the word as a sign which not only possesses its immediate lexical meaning, which points at a concrete material object or phenomenon, but also refers to the whole idea, the general notion or the concept behind it, which is not always expressible in words.

Thus, the metaphor of the world of divine essences, which is the primary materiality.

From the point of view of the liturgical tradition succession, the outstanding poet-mystic Sandi Mapjuraq (c. 1048—after 1126) is the closest to Najiri-Khursaw. The character of treatment with the traditional poetic vocabulary in the gurza of Quraq is the idea that the author was well familiar with the experiences of his Ihsan's predecessor [31]. For the sake of being fair for words, let me say that Sandi's belonging to any Shi'i bokharaan reputationly doubtless among many research- ers of his works, however, the fact that the Shi'i interpreted his works as part of their own tradition, is doubtful. In one Sandi's gurza which begins with the description of a perfor- sonality dissolved in the divine substance ("If there can be a person whose strength comes from existence, then I am the one whose personality takes and soul from non-existence") contains quite a characteristic description of the properties of the poetic word:

He [God — M.R.] creates mind, so how can He find room in mind? // [fragments do not find room in letters, although letters are pieces left by finger].

No matter how long mind seeks Him, it fell into despair.

What objects finds room in these hearts, if He throws bears into shiver.

From holy seas has the [rain] cloud came down on the hearts. // He rejoices all wishful hearts....

Meanings and words never get mixed up // like water and butter are different in their weight.

There are no meanings in names, and no names in mean- ings... and if so, you have said what is covered by a veil.

My gain is caused by the fact that I can not tell about what is happening to me, // the penury of speaking makes me weak and powerless in words.

I have many promotions in my heart, and still // as the word does not find room in the heart, it has a tongue as an inter- pretor.

However, when I think, everything becomes good // be- cause the one, who knows this meaning finds soul in medi- cines.

I have made my name divine, and I will connect myself with Him, // while each poet connects himself with this or that person.

Among us one goes the right way, and another has lost his way, and among birds // one eats sweet and another eats bane.

My glorification can not stand anyone from those praised in the world. // [and the fact that] if somebody is stood in my kernel keeper, [we must say that] it is shoeed with the full moon.

[And the fact that] if all existing material and spiritual // he will give for one such bane, indeed he possesses it all gra- tuitously.

Such world can [only] create Common Mind, and if He wishes, // He says something like He is engaged in eternal eternal.

I have said thousands of times, that I will reveal my secret, // but human weakness keeps me silent.

Each time I write poems, they turn out to be elevated, // but my words are not like the highness of verse defects in words.

Also, I can not write the poems I know, // and if I do what will worldly people get from them?

I am not the one who makes you, pretty and mean, // the bearer of these meanings has pledged [no serve].

I am never afraid that I have honey on my table, // when somebody has had his eyes fixed on you.

From the ocean of mind along the joyfulness of meanings // my tongue flies in the direction of the spiritual ark.

Not everyone who has ears will hear these poems, // and not everyone who has tongue will write [nearly] [32].

We have allowed ourselves such a long quotation as in the quoted fragment Sandi's view on the properties of po- etry is expressed explicitly: the poet is the spokesperson of the divine will, who constantly aspires to express in his words the true meaning, but who inevitably fails to approach the Absolute; the poet's words are dictated by his love for God, and this fills him with joy, however, due to its earthly, ma- terial nature ("human weakness") the pronounced word can never be hid and is sent down to the poet as rain from the "cloud of light", but his poems always directly to the divine source of the Word, so they turn out to be "clouds of light" which are pronounced by a true poet // "honey on the table", which many strive after, including the unworthy ("flies"), however only those who were initiated in... and only those who comprehended it; a con- crete earthly man, even of high status and rank, can not be the addressee of the true poetry which aspires after the "spiritual ark". Sandi's discussion about the essence of po- etry is similar to the mentioned statements of Najiri-Khursaw on the analogues theme in their positive (sending down the poetic talent from above, a special mission of the poet, the secret meaning of the true word, etc.) as well as in the negative (disapproval of a poet—paragryphs's service at the ruler's court) aspects. Later the poets' views on the nature and purpose of the word are summed up and fixed in the tradition in the form of theoretical works. As the experi- ence of mystical poets was fairly reflected in the secular poetic tradition, inside Shi'i literary works appeared which filled this gap and touched upon the questions of the words' treatment. In the poetry in the Persian language the work by ghazals, rhymed couplets (1309—1362), a small poem called "Garden of Secrets" (Golddin-i râsid), dedicated to the main doctrinal questions of Sufism and written in the form of novices' questions and mentor's answers, can be consid- ered one of the kind. Forstalling the section about the symbolic understanding of a number of poetic terms (eyes and lips, a lock, face and birthmark, akeragh[33], zmager[34], akh,[35], the author gives an account of the principles, according to which he interprets them:

Each thing which can be seen in the world // is similar to the reflection of another world's sun.

The world is like the sea, the bloom [on cheeks], and the birthmark, and eyebrows [on face], // where they all are beautiful in their place.

Theophany (turn) now merciful beauty, now retentive beauty, // the face and the lock resemble it.

The attributes of God The Most High are mercy and pun- ishment, // the faces and the locks of the idiols have received their share from them.

As these words (olchie) became accessible for cat., // the first is the subject for the sake of the penetrated.

The world of meanings (ma'na) is boundless, // can the word (lajf) see its limits? //

Can each meaning revealed by the feeling of beauty // find verbal interpretation?

When mystics (mahdi) interpret (lajf) the meaning, // they use assimilation (muthanah) for interpretation of meaning.

As the sermon is a shadow of another world, // it is like a child, and that [world] is like a wet-mere.

For me the words are the retelling // of the meaning which came down from the original ascertainment...

What is written in the world of Rea- son, // the words were transferred from there.

The Wiseis anticipated the correspondence // when He descendeded to the word and the meaning.

Will writing, will correspondence is impossible, // so re- search from the side of [35].

In the poem by Mahdynd Shabkiast we can distinguish the same methodological instructions about the treatment of the word as had been formulated in the preceding mystical poetry. As these instructions lies the general concept of universal order and the unified system of ideas about the place of the word in this picture of the world. It is characteristic that the one of Khusraw's interprets directly (divine inspiration of a poet, his mission as the bearer of the utmost Truth, resemblance of his mis- sion of the Prophet's mission) is noted by his followers, which is evidence of the fact that these ideas were rooted in the poetic canon and his method of interpretation of the traditional poetic figurativeness was commonly acknowledged.
(iii) one of the first poets who introduced the ta‘wil principles into the poetic canon of the traditional Persian poetry was Nāṣir-i Khusraw whose experience was later used by the Sufi poets, first of all his direct successors in the genre of the didactic-philosophical and mystical-allegorical poetry. 12th c. — S radi and Khāṣamī.

(iv) originally all religious-mystical connotations of the traditional poetic topics appeared on the level of individual author's initiative. These meanings were reached through interpretation of the traditional images and whole themes immediately in the text of a poetic work with attraction of motifs transferred from non-poetic contexts (the Qur'ān, hadīth, commentators' tradition, tracts and messages, etc.). Partly these connotations were selected by the tradition and were fixed in the semantics of the images and served as a source for further author's transformations as commonly acknowledged ones;

(v) a special, “innermost” language of poetry on the early stage of its formation in the Persian literature was created simultaneously by poets representing different esoteric trends. The Sufi and Ismā‘īlīs, who dealt with different literary genres — qānūn was originally developed by the Ismā‘īlīs, while ghazal — by the Sufis, participated in this process as equals. According to H. Corbin, the period which followed the epoch of Nāṣir-i Khusraw in Persian literature was the time of “accretion of Ismā‘īlī ideas with Sufism”. Then the researcher wrote:

“And this true unit is proved, for example, by the fact that the Ismā‘īlī ta‘wil can be found in the famous mystical poem Golīgān-i rāz ("Garden of Secrets") of Maḥmūd Shabtīz, and the acceptance of the great Sufi tracts by Aṭīr Naṣīf Zadhak (37) al-hājīd’u ("Distillation of the Truths") as one of their books, as well as by the fact that the Ismā‘īlīs consider the outstanding Sufi poet Purdī al-Dīn ‘Aṭīy their correlative i. e. [38].

(vi) apart from theoretical treatises on Muslim esoterism and Sufi explanatory dictionaries, the works containing the motives of the author's self-consciousness can serve as a source for our ideas about the character of the language of the Persian mystical poetry in the 11th—12th c.

Notes

1. Ta‘wil (lit. “return to the source, beginning”) — is a method of rationalistic or symbolic-allegorical interpretation of the Qur’ān. The term itself is taken from the Qur’ān, where in eight cases it, according to commentators, means “interpretation of dream”, and in the remaining nine — “outcome”, “consequence”. For more detail see: A. D. Knysh, “Ta‘wil”, Islam. Ètnichesko-politicel’skii slovar’ (Moscow, 1991), p. 218—9.

2. The Bājlīnīs (ahl al-bājlīn, al-bājlīnīyān from bājlīn — inner, “hādeth”) is the common name of the followers of free, allegorical interpretation of the Qur’ān and the sunna, who were looking for the “hidden”, esoteric meaning in them. See: S. M. Pirogov, Al-bājlīnīyān (Moscow, 1981), p. 38—9.

3. The Mu‘tazilīs, (al-mu‘tazi—“standing apart, separated”), — representatives of the first large trend in the Muslim religious-philosophical concept, kalāt. They supported the postulates of the divine “tarnish” which implied the freedom of human will, and strict monotheism, which not only rejected polytheism and anthropomorphism, but also the reality and the age-old dispositions of the divine beings (including speech, which is the source of their ideas about the “creation” of the Qur’ān). See: Tarīkh Kermān Birgim, A. V. Sagdeev, Al-mu‘tazi, Islam, p. 175—6.


5. Ib., p. 118.

6. The teaching about the “speaking” (nāz‘āt) and the “speechlessness” (mum‘tām) of each epoch was introduced by the “extreme” Sij‘īs Kharjīthīs (about them see: Pirogov, Al-bājlīnīyān, Islam, 277). In accordance with this teaching, in the epoch of Muhammad the “speaking”, All was the “speechless” imām, who, in his turn, became the “speaking” one after Muhammad’s death. The Ismā‘īlīs, who adopted their terminology, became the ideological followers of the Kharjīthīs.

7. Wajf — the executive of the spiritual will. According to the Muslim tradition, “Abd Allāh b. Sāḥib’, All’s consistent supporter, was the first to state that each prophet had his own way. Mīr b. Hādīr, ‘Isa — Shāhīn, etc. In the Shi‘ī doctrine all prophets from ‘Isā to Muhammad have respective pairs. See: Pirogov, Wajf, Islam, p. 47.

8. It is considered that Yūshā’ bēn Nīn in the Muslim tradition corresponds to Joshua Navin, he is believed to be one of Mīr’s associates.


10. Ib., p. 53.


13. Ib., p. 4.

14. In the original the author uses the word ʿaṭbar, which is literally translated as “mourned”, “piled up.”

15. Ib., p. 192.

16. It seems that here we deal with the rudiments of the early concept of the poetic talent as a certain material substance — food or drink. In the Rīvada “cow’s milk” is the synonym of sacrificial speech (see: N. P. Grinser, A. T. Grußer, Stammlerische literaturtheorien vo Marys von dem Grottis vo India (Formation of the Literary Theory in Ancient Greece and India) (Moscow, 2000), p. 164—7), in the early Iceland mythology the poetic talent is associated with the “honey of poetry”, received by Odin (see: M. J. Stiilin-Karmenski, “Kūlariul turism” (“Culture of Iceland”), Trudy po filologii (St. Petersburg, 2003), pp. 48—9.


18. Ib., p. 97.