TEXT AND ITS CULTURAL INTERPRETATION


The study of a literary language of a former era can be conducted in several directions. As this involves linguistic facts of a certain era recorded in written monuments, it is possible to make a linguistic description of the information contained in them. A traditional philological and purely literary description of the same body of written texts will also be just as appropriate. In our case, the object of research is poetic texts in New Persian (dari, فارسی), which began to form as a united literary language in the 9th—10th centuries, and the area of research can be characterized as philological in the wide sense of this word.

The process of the formation of New Persian as a language of refined literature has been studied in Iranian studies at all stages of its development, and so we can limit ourselves to references to authoritative studies of previous decades [1]. The task of the present work is much more modest and narrow: to trace the evolution of ideas about a normative (standard, modern) language in one of the most productive forms of Persian classical lyric — ghazal — on the material of statements by the masters of ghazal of the 11th—17th centuries themselves.

Any poetic tradition developing within a traditional type of artistic conscious forms a list of rules for dealing with language, which is a general guide for everyone who writes in the literary language. This kind of precept exists in the form of theoretical works addressed to the participants of the literary process and directed towards developing skills of poetical “development” of a common language. Besides theoretical and literary-critical means of reflecting ideas about the norm of the poetic language, the opinions of the poets themselves are strengthened in the tradition, as they express directly in the work with the use of figurative speech. We will restrict our investigations in this direction to ghazal, in which the corresponding motifs have quite strict localization and can be easily singled out in the text.

In the Persian classical ghazal, starting from the 11th century, the circle of motifs for describing modern poetic creation gradually forms. By the 13th century, the motifs of authorial self-awareness are fully established in the canon of ghazal and occupy a certain position in its structure, as they are connected with the signature of the poet (saqqali), which traditionally marks the end of each poem of this form. Genetically in the ghazal these motifs, which are one of the components of the self-praise of the poet (fahad) and grouped around the author’s “signature”, come from the corresponding motifs of the panegyric qaṣida, where they frequently overshadowed the request for reward for the poems, which was masterfully inserted into the text. The adaptation of motifs of self-praise to the standard structure of the ghazal, which was originally a form of love lyric and retained love themes for centuries, required their transformation in accordance with the new thematic and stylistic environment.

In court poetic culture, the ghazal was primarily a genre designed to delight, and so in the poetry itself and the theoretical judgements of ghazal, it is ascribed qualities which enable a harmonisation of human nature. The renowned poetry theorist of the 13th century Shams-i Qays al-Razi writes:

“As the aim of ghazal is to calm the thoughts and delight the soul, it should be supported by a pleasant, euphonious metre, sweet smooth words and transparent settled meanings. When composing it, one should avoid ugly words and discordant sounds” [2].

The performance of ghazals at the accompaniment of musical instruments, among which poets mention the barbat, chang, rubāb, tambūr, ‘ud and others, was a stable tradition throughout the classical Middle Ages. This practice was also one of the reasons for a demand in musicality and smoothness in the poetic language of the
The word ғазал is the direct lexical meaning "flowered", "meadow covered in flowers", and is the name of one of the oldest Iranian melodies. If one translates the word literally, the second hemistich could be translated:

What a beautiful bird is Anāšt, who has come into the flowered of the dawn's light.

In any case, the poet is compared with a nightingale, and the verses with its trills. If one accepts that the word ғазал serves as the name of the melody, then its sound is compared with the song of the nightingale, for the writer is a "beautiful bird". At an early stage of development of the poetic tradition in New Persian, in the description of spring in panegyric qudān which were used as congratulations for the New Year, Nawrūz, the motif of birds singing trills composed by court singers during the rule of the Sāsānian dynasty (224—651) was present [7]. Subsequently, this motif, which lost the detail which it had in the qudān (a lot of birds, melodies, names of singers, names of musical instruments) continued to exist in "compressed form" in the ғазал.

Another significant characteristic of ideal, poetic language in the ғазал is its compression with flowing water (variant: with living water found by the mythological Khūr [8]). Here is a typical example from a ғазал by Sa'dī:

His [Sa'dī's—M.R.] poems, like water, poured out everywhere as boats from Fārs sail to Kūhrān [9].

In the mu'ayjī, i.e. the concluding verse, a motif is used based on the two meanings of the word sufiya (1: boat; 2: collection of poems). Similar motifs of the "flowing" of perfect poems are seen in abundance at the ends of ғазалs by Hāfīz. For example, he writes:

Hāfīz, it is unworthy to complain of the whirls of fine: a talent like [transparent] water, and flowing ғазалs are enough for us [10].

Or:

The veil of darkness covered the water of Khīr [i.e. the water of Hāfīz] because it was put to shame by the talent of Hāfīz and his poems like the water [of life] [11].

The examples above give an idea of the criteria for the assessment of the qualities of perfect poetic language, which for the period of the 11th—14th centuries is primarily in the sound of the verse. Concepts of melody and musicality which are comparable with images of bird songs, the sound of playing musical instruments or the babbling of flowing water, above all characterize the phonetic layout out of the poetic language, along with its smoothness and ease in pronunciation, was given the word ғазал by the Persians (lit.: "flowing" [of water], "clear", "expressive" [of speech]). The concept ғазал is also used in theory: as one of the qualities of exemplary poetry it is part of the explanation of the term ғазал, what was given in the 12th century by Rāhīl-al-Dīn Wāsītī:

"Са'ādī means to humble oneself and obey, and poets call verses ғазал when the verses are smooth (ғазал) and natural (мадā'ī)" [12].

Commenting on the statements on genuine, good poetry by another authoritative medieval philologist, Shams-i Qūsī al-Rūzī, N. I. Chalisova writes:

"Verses become good in intention and spirit when the verbal form in them is determined as 'išā — 'pleasure' (in the first meaning this means 'fresh, flowing water that is pleasant to the taste', 'food or drink which easily passes the throat'). In the Arab philological tradition is thought of as a poetic song form, so the characteristics are connected with 'the feelings in the mouth' — when declaring good verses, a person's throat does not become tense, and there is a pleasant feeling in the mouth, as from fresh water. Fresh water (fresh water is always water that comes from a spring) occupies a high position in the system of values of Iran (and more widely Middle East) culture, and this is one of the main joys given to people in their earthly lives" [13].

However, the classification of poetic language in the ғазал ist a mixed bag, or in other words "flowing" (ғазал), can also be applied to its meaning. When applied to language, the word ғазал can also mean "smooth", "water flow", "untangled", "ununderstandable", "expressive". If we look at the statement by Shams-i Qūsī on the nature of the ғазал cited above, then besides "flowing words", the theoretician recommends using the term "untangled, established meanings" and the avoidance of "ugly words and discordant expressions". The requirement of "smoothness" of speech may, in our opinion, not just apply to phonetics, but also in the choice of vocabulary, i.e. poetic stylitics.

The division of poetic genres into high, middle and low, which gives rise to an accurate division of the vocabulary of the natural language in literary texts, was at the basis of the requirement of stylistic unity of the vocabulary of each genre, which is fundamental for any classical tradition. Breaking stylistic harmony in traditional Persian poetry of the 12th—15th centuries was seen as a violation of the norm, a defect in the poem. This is what Shams-i Qūsī al-Rūzī writes, describing one of the types of "deviation from the correct path in poetry":

"It involves the use of ugly word combinations (turšūnī and trie [trich] metaphors, and unpleasant arrangement of prepositions and postpositions, and weak meanings" [14].

To illustrate this, the theoretician gives the following example:

Can there be a barn [of grain] without hungry birds? We are the hungry birds, and you are the barn.

The quotation is commented on as follows:

"The words 'you are the barn', are, in their meaning and their verbal form, a bad metaphor for the person who is being praised and a disgusting combination of words" [15].

It is clear that Shams-i Qūsī is not happy with the writer, particularly noting the high style of melodic (maddā'ī) and goes against the norm of word usage in a panegyric. The same paragraph of the tract contains a number of similar examples which make it possible to talk of an orientation of the language norm in poetry towards a stylistic uniformity of the text.

Another characteristic of perfect poetic language, in the poet's understanding, is its rhetorical correctness, symmetry and balance. The term maddā'ī, which has the meaning of "measured" in theoretical tracts and is used in classifications of poetic language to distinguish it from prosaic language, can be interpreted in two different ways in the figurative language of the ғазал just like the term ғазал. In the first sense, it unidirectionally means another name of the tract concept, but besides this it may also mean poetic harmony as an aesthetic category, which approximately matches the concept of literary taste. Let us examine the concluding boyt of a ғазал by 'Abd al-Raḥīm Jāmī (1414—1492):

The statements of Jāmī are balanced (sunūfī) on the scales of elegance.

If an envious person reproaches them, then it is because of a lack of harmony in his nature [16].

The poet insists on the "balance" of poetry, i.e. its correctness from the viewpoint of a standard definition of poetic language as "well-ordered, conveying meaning, measured, repeating, equal, with Oral karf [17] which are similar to each other i.e. symmetric — M.R." [18].

However, judging the nature of the envious person, the poet calls him nāwsīnīsī, i.e. inharmonious, discordant. Thus, Jāmī gives a broad interpretation of the theme, classifying it as a poetic meaning, as the envious person, evidently, is unable to understand not only beauty and smoothness of poetic metre, but also meaningful harmony of poetry. The same can be said of the word "balanced" (sunūfī), which the poet applies in self-praise. This definition can apply to the phonetic and the meaning aspect of the poem and not only corresponds to the idea of the correctness of its rhythmic structure, but also to the correspondence of meanings in poetic meanings. Here is another example from a ғазал by Jalāl:

Thanks to the description of your figure, the speech of Jalāl was symmetrical on the scales of reason [19].

Judging by the words "on the scales of reason", the poet is not discussing the metre, but the meaning component of the poem. In connection with this, we give N. I. Chalisova's judgment on one of the dominant features of Persian-language poetry:
"The problem of parallelism, and correspondence (simultaneity) and harmony concerns Shāms-i Qaysy throughout the tract. The need for constant concern about the symmetry of "everything with everything" is stressed at each level of examination of the bayān... Summing up the judgement of what good poetry is, Shāms-i Qaysy says:

"In all circumstances, mutual agreement is required between bayān and the hemistiches [of the bayān] and also between meanings (ma'ānī) and their verbal shell" [20].

The idea of correspondences meets the idea about the meaning and stylistic correctness of the poetic text, which is shown by the statement of poets. Hāfiz, for example, talks of his poem as something "corrected":

And it is not forgotten that with your corrections, all the imperfections of which had become correctly translated [21].

The correctness, in its turn, is directly linked with "directness" and "truthfulness", as the word "correct", "truthful" and "direct" in Persian is indicated with the same lexiceme, rást [22]. In the ghazal of Šāhānšāh we read:

Since poetry, oh Šāhānšāh, is impossible to avoid lies [23], let our lyrics walk out from a description [of beauties] with a straight figure [24].

Let us sum up the above: the characteristics of "sweet" style of classical Persian poetry, as it is presented in the sayings of poets, mainly includes qualities connected with the word "rāst"; which really corresponds to theoretical ideas reflected in authoritative treatises of the 12th—15th centuries, such as "The Gardens of Magic in the Subtleties of Poetry" by Rāghīl al-Dīn Wātījī, "List of Rules of Persian Poetry" by Shāms-i Qaysy al-Rāzī and a number of others.

The criteria of "sweet style" predominate until the 15th century. In general, these characteristics are duplicated in the work of the last representative of the "Golden Age" of Persian literature, Abū al-Rahmān Bīnī. However, it is with the "last classic" that the consolidation of stylistic assemblages of the ideal ghazal gives way to a certain transitional state, in which old and new types of description of beauty of poetic exposition are present. The word rāst ("colourful", "flowery") as a description of poetic language is encountered for the first time in the divan of Khánjālī (1126—1199), where it was the only author's epithet, and with slight ironic overtones:

O Khánjālī! Abandon your flowery speech for these searches for nuances do not touch her [25].

After Khánjālī, in the 13th—14th centuries, the motif of "colour" of poetic language in the signature bayān of ghazals is only used in a few cases (it is encountered once in Amīr Khushrau Dihlāwī and once in Hāfiz [26]). Only Jāmi uses it commonly, although its frequency in the three divans of the poet gives way to the canonical variants of the motif of "sweet style". Nevertheless, unlike Khánjālī, Amīr Khushrau and Hāfiz, for Jāmi this is not an isolated motif, but a repeating one, which shows the development of a certain stylistic tendency in his work. Jāmi forms a style, a stylistic unity of poetic vocabulary, which is an indispensable condition in writing an exemplary ghazal, evidently formed at the very beginning and typical in the era of Jāmi. Poets increasingly look for objects of perception outside the limits of the established canonical zone — in the terminology of trades, spoken vocabulary, foreign borrowings, etc. The impeccability of the classical language of poetry, which is strictly divided into genres, is gradually erased. A formation of a new style begins, which in later studies and distinguished from the earlier "Khānjālī" (12th—13th centuries) and "Fārīs" styles (13th—15th centuries). This stylistic gradation of traditional Persian literature was proposed in the early 20th century by Iranian poet and philologist Muḥammad Taqī (Moḥammad al-Durānī) Bāhīrī (1885—1951).

The key characteristic of the new style in the ghazal is the word rāstīn. While in the descriptions of the "sweet style", there was a predominance of "sound" and "taste" images (more rarely "olfactory") — the aroma of aloe, musk and other fragrances, the characteristics of the "colourful style" a preference is given to visual images. For a description of perfect poetic language, poets of the "Indian style" choose epithets, comparisons and metaphors which are designed primarily to create an effect of visual perception. They compare poetic works with a blossoming garden, a naked beauty, festive illumination, etc., and use them from the point of view of symmetry, rhythm, painting, and manuscript book design. However, this does not at all mean that the previous menus of description persisted, which were inherited from the classical period completely go out of usage and die out. For many poets of the "Indian style" they continue to exist with new descriptions of ideal poetry, coming together in a common literary space. As the stylistic evolution of traditional poetry in Persian takes place within a common literary canon, individual elements of the whole system do not use relevance throughout the entire lengthy period of its existence, although they change their position in it, moving to peripheral positions and giving way to others. The preservation of earlier layers of the common poetic vocabulary in the conditions of the formation of a new style, naturally involves a reconsideration of individual forms of a figurative system, and their adaptation to the forming stylistic norm. Thus, the traditional comparison of poetic language with the song of a nightingale gains specific development among representatives of the Indian style in ideas about "artistic words". Šāhīd Tabīrī (1601—1667), for example, says that the beak of the nightingale "is coloured with the blood of songs". In another poem, Šāhīd talks about the "flame of song" as soon as the scratch of Šāhīd's quill grew louder the flame of nightingale trails went out [28].

Shawkāt Bahārī (d. 1695), describes the process of hearing poems towards the sensual images — "On the ear of the rose the mark from the lightening of hearing remained" [29]. In another ghazal, Shawkāt combines auditory and visual perception of poems in one image:

Heed, Shawkāt, the colourful thoughts of my rukn quill, for this is the rukn—quill, the nightingale's flight from the arbour of the bank of my crow [30].

The aspiration to differ from predecessors in assessing the quail of ideal poetry leads authors of the 16th—17th centuries to an adverbial interpretation of familiar motifs. The idea of euphony stops being the main sign of perfection in the ghazal, and poets begin to prefer the image of the quail (qalqūn) on paper to the trial of the nightingale or the sound of strings (see the previous example from the ghazal by Shawkāt). This image is used for the first time by Jāmi:

If the scrape of Mrī's quill reaches heaven
Nihūli [31] will break her qhvng on the ground from envy [32].

The traditional comparison of the quail dipped in ink with a raven (see the example from the ghazal by Shawkāt Bahārī) gains numerous variations in poetry of the Indian style. The cauing of crows becomes the trill of the Indian style, if this raven is a galam in the hand of a poet. At the same time, it should be remembered that in the classical ghazal a crow can be considered a constant antagonist of the nightingale, as for example, in the seasonal lyrics, the nightingale is usually the subject, while the raven (or crow) symbolizes autumn; in love lyrics, the nightingale is a symbol of the beloved, while the raven is a symbol of sadness and separation. With the new stylistic trends, the image, previously surrounded with clearly negative associations, gains the opposite meaning. In its turn, the elements of the traditional system of describing poetry in the ghazal, which involved a "visceral" effect (a quail as a rain cloud, poetry as a flourishing garden, the poet as the masterchèle, i.e. the master of adorning the girl before the wedding, poetry as the dressed-up bride; the poet as the jeweller, his work as exquisitely made items of his craft) gains in the period of the formation of the Indian style a stimulus for further development, for it matches the dominant idea of the beauty of poetry. However, the most consistent expression of the idea of achieving a visual effect in literary art is the comparison of the poet to a quail or a raven, which is characteristic, for example, of the great Persian language poet of India, Mirzā Bīdīl (1644—1721):

A congoled [i.e. established] — M. R. meaning, Bīdīl, may be clarified if the literary form of its broken beaches is written with the paint of the wave [33].

The literary form, in Bīdīl's opinion, clarifies the poetic idea of the author, not simply corresponding to it, but depicting its flowing, "drawing" its movement.

The fundamental criteria of the art of the new style toward looking for new items of poetics and forms of expressiveness in poetry ultimately lead to a removal of strict requirements for observing stylistic harmony, and developing new criteria of embodiment, representation and symmetry. Sophistication (pāqīdāq), expressiveness (bāšīrī), and unusualness (gharbī, bgāhunī), is from now on valued much more highly than euphony and smoothness. Šāhīd expressed this idea as follows:

If you are captured by a desire to hunt for making your lasso in the hand must weave and twist [34].

The lasso in this poem symbolizes a word (la'īf), in which a poetic thought (ma'ânī) must be represented to the poet as complex and sophisticated (weaving and twisting — pāqīdā, bgāhunī). Poets of the 16th—17th centuries find particular charm in poetry in the play of imagination, in bringing images together which are distant both in meaning and style in complete poetic motifs. This attitude which is common for the majority of poets, directly expressed in a poem by one of the recognised masters of the Indian style, Shawkāt Bahārī:

From the thought of the distant [lover] my fantasies become wanderers [strange, fanciful, surprising — qūhī-ī] between the meaning and expression by thousands of farangs [35].

The motif of the unusual and strange in poems, combined with bright, inept, unconscious, landentious expression in Jāmi, embodies the idea of the distance between the poetic meaning (ma'ânī) and the expression of it by the word (la'īf). The feeling of this distance which is overconsumed, and poem, and a certain dimension of measurement of farang, which is equivalent to 6—7 km.

The motif of the alien, unknown and unusual in a number of cases is the conscious concept of something foreign, particularly European. The comparison of writing poetry with painting, for example, gave rise to the image of poetry as a "European house", represented by distant and exquisitely made quail. Shawkāt, we read:

Since I turned my body to writing
The divan of my verses has begun to resemble a European house because of the colourful fantasies [36].

These examples show that the concept of a linguistic norm in the framework of a common poetic canon may change in the process of stylistic evolution. Elements of authorial self-awareness, even with a lack of changes in traditional theory, as well as the expression of a common opinion among participants of the literary process as to the criteria of singling out ideal images of poetic language for each epoch.

The scheme proposed by Bahārī and accepted by leading Iranian, European and Russian scholars on the stylistic evolution of Persian poetry, demonstrating the same three phases in both the Persian and Indian [37], can be qualified by a study of the motifs of authorial self-awareness in the ghazal of the 11th—early
18th centuries. The first two styles, despite the well-known differences, form an indissoluble unity [38], based on the common criteria of assessment of perfect poetic language, and as a result makes up the “swept” style, which we name following the participants of the literary process themselves. This style may also be called “nightingale”, as the dominant metaphor of the poet writing perfect poetry is the nightingale. Starting from the 15th century, new stylistic trends appear in poetry, along with assessments corresponding to them: the “swept” style is replaced by “coloured”, to which the epithet “pavonine” may also be applied, as the perfection of poetic expression is from now on not so much determined by the euphony of the nightingale’s trill, but by the brightness and colour of the poet’s feathers. As an illustration, we will give two variants of the same motif by poets of different periods. The great poet and mystic of the 13th century Jalal al-Din Rumi, best known as Mavlâna, concludes his ghâzal with the following verse:

Be quiet, and in silence fall into contemplation, for the nightingale fell into a net because it sang [39].

In reconsidered form, the same motif can be found in a ghâzal by Mitrâz Bîlî, which says:

The peacock always falls into a trap because of its ornamental feathers, Bîlî, it is not surprising if I end up in a cage because of my art [40].

Based on the description of ideal poetic language in the work by poets of two major periods of development of Persian poetry — the 11th—14th centuries and the 15th—17th centuries — one can reach a conclusion about the existence of two, not three styles in traditional Persian poetry. If one goes from common patterns of the formation of the so-called “styles of the era” in world literature or “great styles” (D. S. Likhachev), then “swept” and “coloured” styles accordingly show signs of “primary” and “secondary” styles. For primary styles, longer periods of development are characteristic, with a tendency for simplicity and verisimilitude, while secondary styles are shorter, and are more decorative, formalized and conventional [41].

Notes


3. Sa'dî Sâ'îrî, Dîwân-i ghâzâlîvîlî, published by Kh. Râhbar (Tehrân, 1996), p. 457, No. 311. Here and below all references to editions of poetic works by Persian authors are numbered according to the page number and ghazal number, if the texts of the ghazals are numbered.

4. Ibid., p. 522, No. 336.


8. Khârî (al-Khârî, al-Khârî) — a popular character in Muslim legends, who according to tradition looked for the source of the water of life. Qur'anic commentators link his name with the story of Mânî and categorize him as a wise companion of the called "slave of Allâh" (18:60—59—63:62). As a mythological image, Khârî is linked with the idea of eternal life and renewal of the natural world (see: M. B. Piotrovskii, Keronitscheskii eskiznani (Qur'ânic Tales) (Moscow, 1991)). He is also portrayed as a wanderer and protector of travellers.

9. Sa'dî Sâ'îrî, op. cit., p. 726, No. 496.


11. Ibid., p. 1268, No. 302.


14. Ibid., p. 188.

15. Ibid., p. 189.


17. In the foreword to the translation of the treatise by Shams-i Qays al-Râzî’s “List of Rules of Persian Poetry”, N. I. Chalûswa characterizes it as follows:
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Plate 1. Qur’în. 47 x 33 cm. Probably Şişān, ca. 648 / 700 — 850 / 1250. London, Sam Fogg Rare Books and Manuscripts, fol. 30v. Courtesy of Sam Fogg.

Back cover: