

Ali Ferdowsi
Professor of History and Political Science, Notre Dame de Namur University.

Introduction

There is a manuscript of the Divan of Sultan Ahmad Jalayer (r. 784/1382 – 813/1410) in the Freer Gallery of Arts, in Washington DC,1 which is celebrated as “one of the great masterpieces of Persian painting” for its eight marginal compositions.2 Mas-

Ali Ferdowsi studied Ali Ferdowsi received his Ph.D. in sociology from the University of Pennsylvania in 1985. He taught in the Department of Middle Eastern Studies at Tokyo University for Foreign Studies in Japan and served as an International Specialist for NHK (Japan Broadcast Corporation). In 1997 he began teaching in the Department of History and Political Science at Notre Dame de Namur University.

Ali Ferdowsi <aferdowsi@ndnu.edu>

1Divan of Sultan Ahmad Jalayir, Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Ms. 32.30-32.37.
2F. R. Martin, Miniatures from the Period of Timur: In a MS. of the Poems of Sultan Ahmad Jalair (Vienna: Printed for the author, 1926), 27. The Swedish art historian and collector Fredrik Robert Martin who purchased the Freer manuscript in 1912, and brought its magnificence to public attention in the first study of it in 1926, writes of his first encounter with the manuscript in Stambul, as the Greeks and Bulgarians were advancing on Constantinople, “... the wonder and beauty of the first page I opened, almost brought the tears to my eyes.” Seeing the manuscript, a Viennese colleague of Martin who had made “the unsurpassed reproductions of the famous prayer-book of the Emperor Maximilian with borders by Dürer” exclaimed “This
The Reluctant Sovereignty of Sultan Ahmad Jalayer

sumeleh Farhad, Chief Curator and Curator of Islamic Art at the Smithsonian Institution, and I are collaborating to prepare this manuscript for publication; and consequently, as part of my tasks in this effort, I have had the mixed pleasure of pouring over this divan, and another copy of it, for hundreds of hours over the past several years. I say mixed pleasure, not only because the Sultan’s poems, as justly pointed out, are “pedestrian at best,” but because of the industrial scale of his production.

However, if we view the divan neither as an object of art, nor purely as a text but as a discursive trace, as an extended utterance submitted to human sciences, then a whole new way of apprising the value of the divan opens up. Of the many things we can say about the divan, once we appropriately position it as discourse, I would like to mention only two, both having to do with its displaced authorship in that the work was produced by a king and not by a poet. First, although Sultan Ahmad was not the first and the last king to produce poetry in Persian, the fact that we are in possession of such a huge body of poetry produced by a king in a period that is poetically vibrant, and yet paradoxically politically unmoored, gives us an opportunity to explore and speculate about a number of political issues that require a supplementary kind of evidence to those one encounters in chronologies, and official documents.

The question to be asked in this regard is: does the divan give us a glimpse, however speculative, of the inner workings, or if you will, the political psychology of sovereignty in that period?

Second, with this authorial displacement, with poetry emanating from the king, as opposed to being addressed to him, which is preponderantly the case in the annals of poetry, what can we learn about the relation between the political and the poetic, beyond the current textual interpretations that emphasize the subservient function of poetry to the interests of the state. If certain activities of the poet may be considered as belonging to the ensemble of labor of legitimacy required of every political act (for the political, unlike the amorous, as Plato already knew, is unable to justify itself in its own terms) then what happens when the legitimating function shifts its directionality from being bestowed, as it were, by the poet, on the king to being ex-

is much finer than the prayer-book of Dürer, for which I almost sacrificed my life.” (28).

7 Divan of Sultan Ahmad Jalayir, The Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts, Istanbul, Ms. 204-6.

“Martin, 1. The word “paradoxically” perhaps is not the right word here, and certainly does not mean improbably, for, history of Persia in this time “shows many analogies with that of Italy of the same period. The same wild despotism, the same cruel persons and deeds paired together with the utmost refinement in arts, pleasures and luxuries of all kinds. The same eternal fights between princes and states, the same constant murders of dictators and leaders.”
pressed by the king himself. How does it manifest itself in the king’s making sense and giving expression to his sovereignty?

Sultan Ahmad, His Time and His Poetry

Here is not the place to dwell on the conditions of the manuscripts and the business of editing them; suffice it to say that the intended divan would have consisted of seven named books, with an overall title of *Haft Peykar*, in tribute to Nezami Ganjavi’s book of the same name.5

I estimate that the final edited version would amount to roughly ten thousand lines: as hefty a tome as the *Kolliyat-e Salman Savaji*,6 the professional poet of the Jalayerid court, and Sultan Ahmad’s tutor, and roughly twice the Divan of Hafez, a poet that Sultan Ahmad admired and with whom kept a sustained poetic correspondence.

It would appear that we are talking of an industrial scale production of poetry by a king who should have had more pressing kingly things to do, particularly considering that during the time he was a king, he was as much on the run, in exile, in custody, or at war as he was in his capitals, and then never securely. He took the reign in 1382; and two years later lost Sultanieh and Tabriz to Timur. His other capital, Baghdad was attacked by Timur in 1393, forcing him to spend the next six years in exile, returning to Baghdad in 1399 to be once again forced to flee the city when Timur attacked and brutally sacked it in 1401. He spent the following four years under arrest by Mamluks in Damascus, and was only released to return to Baghdad when Timur died in 1405. He stayed in Baghdad until his ill-fated war with Qara Yusef in 1410, which ended his tragic life.7 One question, then, is why would Sultan Ahmad produce poetry, and so much of it?

To begin with, poems in the divan are what one finds typical for the second half of the 14th century: celebration of drinking and less explicitly other drugs, lust for tender-bodied boys and maidens (homosexuality was overtly practiced in the Jalayerid court), questioning of *zahed* and *faqih*’s understandings of religiosity, a ceaseless profession of the jargon of love, boastful declarations of *kharabatigari*, a penchant


for display of rote encyclopedic erudition, etc. In short, in the first glance, Sultan Ahmad appears to be nothing other than a poorly talented pseudo-sufi poet, so many of whom dotted the desolate landscape of this *shab-e parishani-ye aalam* (the night of the destitution of the world) as Sharf al-Din Yazdi calls the period just before the sun-like rise of Timur.8

Dawlatshah Samarqandi’s overgenerous characterization notwithstanding, Sultan Ahmad’s poems are of little aesthetic value.9 But once appropriately discounted for its mediocre quality, it is not bereft of a certain quotient of tender and poignant sentiments. I, for one, for instance, find the longing expressed for Tabriz in a qasida, appropriately modeled after the famous poem by Rudaki, quite touching (Freer Ms., 52 v-53v).10

In a sense almost every thing I need to say about Sultan Ahmad’s jargon of reluctant sovereignty may be said through a close reading of this poem. Internal evidence suggests that this *qasida*, an ode to Tabriz, must have been composed from the distance of Baghdad to which Sultan Ahmad was driven, not long after Timur sacked Tabriz in 1382. The poem directly points to Timur by invoking his epithet “Sahib Qiran,” a title he took early in his career, and substitutes the poet’s world-conquering prowess in versification with the real and brutal conquest of Tabriz by Timur, as if the war over sovereignty is commensurate with a contest over talent in poetry. In fact, whether he talks about himself or Timur or both, it appears

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9Numbers preceding a line refer to the sequential place of the line in the poem as a whole. For reasons of brevity, I do not reproduce the whole poems, and only give the citation for the Freer manuscript as it is the one most readily available to the reader.
remarkable that he is reminded of the pointlessness of sovereignty because at the end all turn to dust.

**Acculturation of Sultan Ahmad: “The Republic of Letters”**

One often encounters an imagining of Iranian kings as if they were cut off from the cultural context of their times and held a purely external and instrumental relationship with the dominant views and values of their subjects. But the poem just quoted is enough to show the extent of Sultan Ahmad’s integration in the world around him. By the time we arrive at Sultan Ahmad, the process of acculturation of the Mongol rulers of the Ilkhanid world in Iran has been completed. Sultan Ahmad’s divan is a monument to the phenomenal assimilative potency of the Iranian culture. Sultan Ahmad, as he is manifested in the Divan, is as Iranian as if he had descended directly from the loins of the mythical Iraj, and not his Easterly brother Tur.

There are many registers, in and outside of the divan, in which this process of assimilation of the Jalayerids can be shown to have been completed by the time of Sultan Ahmad. Of all these possible outward and inward registers of acculturation, for which the divan gives us ample material to explore, I would restrict my comments to Sultan’s total immersion in the elite culture of his day, or if you will, his integration in the Persian “republic of letters” of the late 14th century. One can argue that integration into this republic is the highest expression of the kind of cultural assimilation that informs the thesis of the Persianization of an alien conquerer as a civilizing process, to borrow from a famous approach developed by the historical sociologist Norbert Elias.

Restricting ourselves only to poets and artists, divan is replete with references to poets and artists of bygone eras, as well as Sultan Ahmad’s contemporaries and those in the Jalayerid courts. In addition to Nezami, he especially esteems Anvari and Sa’di and his own tutor Salman Savaji, and often boasts that he has surpassed them all in the purity and profundity of the inspiration, if not skills in versification. In a poem,

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11 Obviously, I am using the notion of the “republic of letters” not only anachronistically but also incongruously. However, even if only as an allusion, I believe it serves as a good paradigm for making sense of the communicative world of Persian “men of letters” in that politically fragmented yet culturally unified age. The *Respublica literaria*, as well-known, was a “metaphysical” community that brought intellectuals together across national boundaries in Europe and America in the Age of Enlightenment. See, for example, Dana Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990).

in which he scuffs at sovereignty, he boasts that his poetry is more directly related to the original source of all poetry in the divine realm (Freer Ms., 92v).

In another poem he asks his audience to give a sincere ear to his poetry to reciprocate the sincerity of its inspiration. The poem may have been put to music and, as we shall see shortly, performed in what the divan calls “majles-e khass” (royal private banquet). I quote only the last two lines of the poem (Freer Ms., 36r).

Banquet of Intimates and the Jargon of Love

Of the king’s intellectual contemporaries, four stand out: the poets Salman and Hafez, the sufi and poet Kamal Khojandi, and the musician Abd al-Qader Maragha’ie. Sultan Ahmad was in some sort of direct communication, in person and/or by correspondence, with all four of them, but not them alone. Sultan’s relationship with each of them, brings to light an aspect that is germane to the idea of reluctant sovereignty explored in this study, but, here, in the interest of brevity, I will restrict my remarks only to two of them, Abd al-Qader and Salman.

However, before doing so we need some meta-textual information necessitated by our approaching the divan as a discourse, and not merely a text. Viewed as discourse, there are a number of concerns that have a decisive bearing on the ideological posture and the emotional tenor of the poems and their mode of expressibility. Among them: when and where were the primary stages for their presentation? Who were their immediate intended audience? What were the conditions of their expressibility-cum-sensibility? And how did they function via those conditions given the king’s unique agentative position?

These are big questions. Here, we only have time for a brief expose of a couple of points: the banquet of intimates as their modal context of publication, and associated with this context, the jargon of love as a super-charismatic discourse of legitimacy when traditional discourses of legitimation are fractured and weak.
Although not unique to this period, one of the most important cultural institutions of the time, primarily in the areas ruled by Jalayerids and Muzaffarids was the institution of majles-e ons (the banquet of the intimates), also called “majles-e khash” (royal private banquet), and many other appellations, some more poetic, or mythic, than others, (as is the case for instance with Hafez, for instance, “bazmgah-e kholq o adab” or “tamashagah-e raz”). These royal gatherings of the cultural elites normally functioned as a sort of symposia (and I deliberately evoke the Greek word here), or if you will “salons,” in which artistic and intellectual objects were presented, critiqued and associated topics were discussed. These banquets, a preponderance of evidence suggests, were sustained by an ideology and the rituals of lateral and egalitarian communication, to create, or at least simulate, a cultural oasis for intimate and heart to heart exchange, hence suggesting why my use of the term “republic of letters,” borrowed from an altogether different historical context, is not totally incongruous (Majales-e rawah, evening banquets, something akin to “salons,” that were very common in this period, and have left a huge footprint in the poetry and epistolary literature of the time, typically functioned in the same spirit as did certain khaneqahs, for instance, those in which Kamal published his poems).

The humility that Sultan Ahmad shows in poems that either invite a person to these banquets, or address or speak of a person in such a gathering (and by extension anyone worthy of it) gives divan a tender touch. I quote only one example here (Freer Ms., 251r-251v).

13Jamal Khalil Sharvani, Nozhat al-Majales, ed. Mohammad Amin Riyahi (Tehran: Entesharat-e `Elmi, 1375/1996). Such banquets both pre- and post-date this century. This example, composed sometime between 622/1225-649/1251, served as a kind of “handbook” for such banquets, which the author dedicates to one such royal banquet, that of Sharvanshah.

زبهر مجلس ناشیم ای بن سفینه،ز آنگ
به زرم خرمش گه مگر بادی ز م باشد
ص (۶۸۷ص) ۷۸۶، ص ۶۱

In addition, after a brief interruption under Timur, among his descendants, as richly documented in Zayn al-Din Mahmud Wasefi’s Badaye‘ al-Waqaye‘, ed. Aleksandr Boldyrev (Tehran: Entesharat-e Bonyad-e Farhang-e Iran, 1349/1970).

14Nasrollah Purjavadi, Badeh-ye Eshq: Pazhuheshti dar ma’na-ye badeh dar she’r-e `erfani-ye farsi (Tehran: nashr-e karnameh, 1387/2008), 24, 25 ff, 77. There is, scattered among Arabic and Persian literature, including Sufi writings, and in the European cultural studies, enough indictable evidence for tracing these banquets to the Greek symposion, of which Plato’s Symposium is an early document. Nasrollah Purjavadi, for instance, in his search for mystical wine, comes across such evidence. It appears that love was a central topic of these symposia. For the Greek case see Oswyn Murray (ed.), Symptotica: a Symposium on the Symposium, Oxford University Press, 1990, and for a study of its transformation in the Christian context see Dennis E. Smith, From Symposium to Eucharist: the Banquet in the Early Christian World, Minneapolis (MN: Fortress Press, 2003).
This poem, probably a verse epistle, equivalent to an invitation card, is addressed to a person who is, in spite of the king’s repeated requests, reluctant to attend his bazm-e eshq (love’s banquet), another name for the royal banquet of intimates. It appears that Sultan has not been holding such a gathering for a while, and says that he has been thinking about holding one for some time. Many, if not most, of Sultan Ahmad’s poems, indeed most of the poetry of the period, were not meant to be private, neither were they primarily written for at large publication in the form of books. Before Sultan Ahmad’s poems were collected in a book, they were published in such salon-like settings, whatever their names.

*Majles-e khass*, however, was not a purely frivolous gathering for artists to engage in art for arts’ sake. They served a precise political function, albeit in a round about and convoluted way. They were a major institution for production of a particular kind of legitimacy under the condition where the very discursive formation of legitimation was frazzled. Max Weber makes a distinction between types of legitimation; the point here is their degrees of effectivity, their individual or overall potency in producing legitimacy, a point famously emphasized by Samuel Huntington. None of the ideal-typical discourses of legitimacy, including charismatic rule, that may appear to share in certain aspects with the one I claim the royal banquet to have been the ritualistic site of its performance *par excellence*, was strong enough to produce and sustain operative legitimacy for the splintered political world of the period. Politics as a force field is not always present in the same degree, and at times it nearly disappears altogether, being replaced by brute force and sheer chicanery. In a sense, in this period, politics as such only operated at its zero-degree of effectivity, and needed the buttress of a seemingly non-political discourse: reluctant sovereignty embedded in a structure of intimacy and love.


16Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 1. Huntington is well-known for his controversial theory of “clash of civilization,” but in another of his books he famously makes the point that the “most important political distinction among countries concerns not their form of government but their degree of government.”

The period under consideration, the interval between the end of Ilkhanids and the establishment of the Timurids, roughly a 70 year period, is commonly called “dawran-e fatrat” (Interregnum). The political fragmentation of the period is well-known; what is not sufficiently remarked on is the corresponding fragmentation, and hence the weakening of the discourses of legitimation. None of the discourses of legitimacy during this time, in Iranzamin, especially in its heartland, mustered the potency to create a legitimation base sufficiently strong to form a viable state. None of the traditional discourses of legitimation had the vigor to function as the master discourse in this period. This fragmentation and consequent depletion of the society’s legitimizing resources began with alarming speed and farcical manifestations within days of the death of Abu Sa’id in 1335.18

A major task of poets under these depleted cultural resources of legitimacy was to invent, or otherwise to cobble together out of the ruins of earlier discourses of legitimacy, a scaffolding of legitimation strong enough to halt their world’s total collapse. Poets of the time were deeply invested in this task. A quick glance at almost any of the divans of the period shows the poet grasping at any imaginable legitimating discourse to “manufacture consent.” It is under this fragmented ideological context that a form of magical conjuring of something akin to charisma (but not it in a strictly Weberian sense), demanding unconditional personal loyalty to the sovereign emerged. A whole jargon, or if we follow the cognitive linguist George Lakoff here,19 a framing device, was set in motion to map political loyalty into amorous passion and its dramaturgical schemata.

It is in this context that the banquet of intimates assumed its significance. If it is true, or rather to the extent that it is true, that many of the lyric poems of the period are meant to get their first airing in the banquet of intimates, with the royal person as the object of desire, then it becomes easier to see how this banquet functions as an institutional space in which love and politics, intimacy and power, become com-possible (somewhat like the modern institution of marriage!). The use of ghazal as a vehicle of political panegyric, the invention of which some attribute to Khwaju of Kerman,20

18Charles Melville, The Fall of Amir Chupan and the Decline of the Ilkhanate, 1327-37: a decade of discord in Mongol Iran (Bloomingdale: Indiana University, Research Institute for Inner Asian Studies, 1999), 43-59. Melville we could say “sordid” to describe the events immediately following the death of Abu Said Bahador Khan.
19Any number of Lakoff’s works would do in this regard; I am personally still partial to his early work, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, Metaphors We Live By (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).
requires such a peculiar space of sense-making for it to be expressed. Without such a context the intensely intimate jargon of love would ring hollow, would be insincere, even preposterous, if not outright ridiculous, even perverse. The greatness of the poetry of this period cannot be subtracted from this situation and the historic task that this long night (shab-e dijur) of obscure legitimacy demanded of the poet.21

Abd al-Qader Maragha’ie – With this sketch of the banquet of intimates in mind, the affection and humility that Sultan Ahmad shows towards Abd al-Qader and other poets and artists of his time begins to make sense. Apparently a good number of the poems of Sultan Ahmad are made for Abd al-Qader, some of which as lyrics to be set to music by the latter. Of dozens of such poems, a couple of examples should suffice.

I start with a couplet that explicitly refers to the king’s private banquet, majles-e ma (Freer Ms., 154v).

این‌خواجه‌ی‌ما‌که‌هست‌عبدالقادر
شد‌ماهر‌علم‌ها‌به‌حکم‌قادر
در‌مجلس‌ما‌همه‌پسندیده‌بود
از‌وی‌که‌شود‌ز‌نیک‌و‌بدها‌صادر

In a poem in which the title, in both manuscripts, reads: “Says about the dear companion [yar-e aziz] Kamal al-Din Abd a-Qader,” we see an example, one of many, in which Sultan Ahmad, following Hafez, uses the mythic term moghan (the temple of the Magi) to refer to his own sweet royal banquet of intimates (Freer Ms., 49r).

۱ نغمه‌ی‌عود‌تو‌از‌پنجم‌فلک
۲ زهره‌را‌گیسو‌کشان‌می‌آورد
۳ لطف‌سازت‌زندگان‌شهر‌را
۴ دستگیران‌تا‌مغان‌می‌آورد
۵ آن‌چه‌دارد‌در‌میان‌می‌آورد

Once we grab hold of this performance context of the quoted poems, their immediate site of publication, then we are not far from intuiting the same context in

21This is not, however, to say that this amorous framing of a discourse of legitimacy was restricted to poets, and poetry. The jargon of love, for instance, permeates Mo’in al-Din Mo’alem Yazdi’s Mawaheb-e Elahai dar Tarikh-e Al-e Mozaffar, ed. Sa’id Nafisi (Tehran: Eqbal, 1326/1947). As I have argued elsewhere, as a local member of the republic of letters, Mo’in al-Din Yazdi colludes with other poets of the Mu’azzafirid realm to overwrite Shah Shoja’s blinding of his father, and sleeping with his stepmother. See Ali Ferdowsi, “Oedipus/Shah Shoja/ Joseph: Princely Villainy and Legitimacy in 14th Century Shiraz,” paper presented at the Sixth Biennial Conference on Iranian Studies, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, UK, August 3-5, 2006.
which banquets are not specifically mentioned. I invite you to consider the implied immediate context of the following poem. It seems to me that the internal evidence suggesting the same banquet as the occasion for its performance is quite strong; as an utterance the poem assumes the banquet as its context of sensibility/expressibility. One could imagine the king appropriately humbling himself and honoring his master musician by addressing him in the royal symposium, raising his cup to him as he reads the poem that he has personally, as one member of the republic of letters to another, composed for him (Freer Ms., 32r).

The quatrain I am about to quote does not directly further our understanding of our topic, other than perhaps remotely suggesting that these banquets did indeed create their own sense of affective authenticity. It is reported that years later, with Abd al-Qader in exile, when he learned about Sultan Ahmad’s death, he composed the following lament.

I would not be at all surprised if this robaii, the poetic form of private experience par excellence, was put to music by the man whom Sultan Ahmad has addressed as the “Renewer of the art of music” (Freer MS, 49r).

Salman Savaji – Salman was the poet who hitched his career to the fate of the Jalayerid dynasty and spent much of his life as an insider in their royal courts, of kings as well as queens, and princes as well as princesses, over a time span that covered three royal generations. He taught Sultan Ovays, and was Ovays’s companion and much needed intellectual and emotional support in the affairs of the heart as well as warfare and conquest. Perhaps no one was as instrumental in the Persianization of

22Attributed to Abd al-Qader in Mir Sayyed Sharif Raqem Samarqandi, Tarikh-e Raqem, ed. Manuchehr Sotudeh (Tehran: Bonyad-e Mowqafat-e Doktor Mahmud Afshar, 1379/2000), 41. Needless to say, “قصد تبریز” refers to Sultan Ahmad’s fatal attempt to recapture Tabriz, and gives the year of his death (100+90+4+400+2+200+10+7 = 813).
the Jalayerids as was Salman, thanks ultimately to Queen Delshad Khatun’s strategic decision. It was Salman that inculcated the ideology of reluctant sovereignty in Sultan Ahmad’s young mind.

In a real and touching sense, Salman provided the shoulders on which the king and his family cried; being a patient stone, a sort of a resident psychologist, has always been a requirement of the Persian poet, a function that he shares with the indigenous shaman and even the Catholic priest, but not with the Muslim faqih. The poet participated in the creation and management of the emotional texture of the court. More importantly, he helped make poetry, and arts in general, an equipment for living; a space in which the real of the world was humanized, and rendered legible and livable.

Salman tutored Sultan Ovays’s sons, including Sultan Ahmad. Not surprisingly, Salman’s influence on Sultan Ahmad is pervasive, and covers almost every aspect of the latter’s divan. The prince is brought up according to the divan, or more accurately according to a picture of the world of which the poet’s divan is also a constitutive element. Sultan Ahmad is learning his language of the world, pictorial and emotional, from the poet.

It appears from the following qasida addressed to Salman by Sultan Ahmad, a young prince at the time, that the particular attitude to power I am calling reluctant sovereignty was an emphatic point in Salman’s tutoring of the prince in the arts of Persian poetry and prose. One may imagine the young prince proudly submitting this qasida to his teacher as an assignment to demonstrate his progress as a pupil. It praises the teacher, credits him for his own learning in poetry and prose, vouches his sincerity and honestly, and above all assures the tutor that there is no love of this world and a desire for sovereignty over it in his student’s heart. Rather, in so far as there is an impulse at work in him, it is not a will to power, but a longing that is of the same substance as that pulls the Sufi and the poet. Please note Sultan Ahmad’s claim that he belongs to the “tribe and tradition of poets” (qawm o sonnat-e sho’ara) more so than the ilk of the kings (Freer Ms., 129r-129v).

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به‌یاد لعل دلارام غیبت انگیزم
به‌یاد لعل دلارام غیبت انگیزم

5
نشین به صحبت میخوارگان عالیقدر
تویی که شعر من از فضل تست عالیقدر

8
ضمیر یاک تو نیک به‌شرح می‌داند
که نیست رزب ذره شعر خاصه در انشا

11
تویی که شعر من از فضل تست عالم‌گیر
که نیست رزب ذره شعر خاصه در انشا

12
ز سعی به جهاد من و طاقت احاطت من
که نیست رزب ذره شعر خاصه در انشا
This influence remained active throughout Sultan Ahmad’s life. If anything, although all the elements of sufi-o-poetic worldview are already present in this early poem, it appears (and one threads on thin ice here before establishing a dependable way of dating the poems) that Sultan Ahmad becomes more Sufi-like and more kharabati than his tutor as time goes by, perhaps reflecting the receding of his hopes to ever achieve a modicum of security in this world as a king as first Timur and then Qaraqoyunlu’s stars rise ever higher in the skies of power.

**Reluctant Sovereignty**

All along, we have been discussing the theme of reluctant sovereignty, for it, indeed, formed the “signature” (in Agamben’s sense) of the idea of Persianization in this period. The effective aspect of Persianization, the *civiliš* in its civilizing mission, is this renouncing, Kay Khosraw-like attitude to sovereignty and its hard work of conquest, bloodshed and the mundane task of running the affairs of a harsh world devoid of meaning, authentic or instrumental. Sultan Ahmad’s divan is permeated by this peculiar attitude, this politically unambitious representation of politics, this form of power that exercises itself as it dismisses itself, the paradox, of a sort of legitimation and self-legitimation that proceeds by delegitimizing the very field of its operation.

Nevertheless, it bears re-emphasizing our remarks by gathering them in one place in order to get closer to a phenomenological understanding of this renouncing mode of legitimation, even though my research in this direction is still in its early stages, and hence as yet incapable of organizing such a phenomenology. It however appears clear to me that any phenomenology of reluctant sovereignty would have at least four broad aspects: (1) justification of sovereignty by an ideology of disinterested relation to it; (2) a displacement of the king-subject relation from the domain of

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exterior relations, *siyast-e modon*, to the interior realm of intimacy, that is the schemata of love; (3) the envelopment of these relations in a mystificatory jargon; and (4) the representation of all that in poetic language.

As we just saw in the poem addressed to Salman, the king expresses disinterest not only in sovereignty but also in the world as such. His passion for detachment from the world (*zawq-e tajrid*), is so all encompassing that has left him no room for “care” (*eltefat*) for the world. This attitude is persistently carried out in the divan (Freer Ms., 49r).

It is from the perspective of this poverty that he finds the grandeur of kings ridiculous (Freer Ms., 239v).

Speaking of royal grandeur we may note that as replete as the divan is with names and references to poets, and to some extent sufi saints, kings and khans rarely appear in it, and when they do they do not occupy the highest office in the land, but a place subordinate to poetry. Remarkably, Ferdowsi and his *Shahnameh* are never mentioned, nor are the books great heroes and kings. And it is hard to find the usual moralistic lamenting allusions to them and their passing fortunes, except, of course, for a reader of Nezami, the poor Dara whose mournful name is forever unfavorably yoked with that of Sekandar.

The emblem of sovereignty for Sultan Ahmad is none of the law-givers like Jamshid, or Sekandar or even Genghis, who too is never mentioned, but Ibrahim Adham. In a poem that imitates the form, but not the mood of a famous *ghazal* by Hafez, Sultan evokes the story of this famous early ascetic saint as an extreme way of emblematizing the ideology of disinterested sovereignty. Ibrahim Adham, whose legend, is dramatically narrated in Attar’s *Tazkerat al-Olia*, was an 8th century prince from Balkh who renounced his throne and chose asceticism in a fashion that closely echoes the legend of Gautama Buddha. Sultan Ahmad, in this *ghazal* claims that those who know of the secrets of the heart, and also know him well, know that deep inside he is not defined by worldly sovereignty (Freer Ms., 223r).
The term “asceticism” must here be understood not as passive and general renunciation but as active submission of life to a mode of existence that is founded on the irrational sources of passion and intoxication. Not law of any kind, but love and surrender to the relentless turbulence of the world defines an existence that is lived authentically. As such, sovereignty is juxtaposed not with ascetic renunciation as such, but ultimately with a brothelesque life sanctified as an exercise in something transcendental (Freer Ms., 131r).

In late 14th century, poetry, or any utterance that neared it, vouchsafed the authenticity of the sentiment and the sincerity of its speaker by the very selection of the language. When truth is the truth of the heart, and not that of reason, a certain kind of poetry becomes the privileged language of truth. Understandably, then, the privileged language of the banquet of intimates, and the language of a discourse of legitimacy transposed into a lover’s discourse, were ghazal, and robaii, and to lesser extent qat’ah (occasional poem), and decidedly not qasida that was the form proper to public and official events. It then follows, that by claiming mastery of poetry as the “jargon of authenticity,” the king claims possession of poetry’s ontological ground: love and its intimations of sincerity and purity of heart as he colludes with his companions in denying a will to sovereignty.

In conclusion, a partial reading of pre-modern Persian poetry, very common before the end of monarchy as such, blamed this poetry for its unbridled panegyrics to kings, which supposedly inflated the royal ego to infinite heights, and hence was an accomplice to the ensemble that goes by the name of “Oriental despotism”. Here, we see a different effect: a humbling of the disposition of the king if not his own person, and a sapping or at least a disorientation of royal ambition; in short, the introduction of radical discomfiture and hesitancy inside the very self-regard of regal sovereignty.

SATIRE AND IRONY IN THE WORKS OF SADEQ HEDAYAT
Homa Katouzian